

# Alexander Payne's digestible *The Descendants*; Steven Soderbergh at an impasse with *Haywire*

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21 February 2012

*The Descendants*, directed by Alexander Payne, screenplay by Payne and Nat Faxon; *Haywire*, directed by Steven Soderbergh, screenplay by Lem Dobbs

As the opening credits roll in Alexander Payne's *The Descendants*, a young woman, Elizabeth King (Patricia Hastie), is disconcertingly shown in high adrenalin mode. She is a passenger in a speeding motorboat, whose crackup leaves her in a coma and on life-support. This tragedy provides the scaffolding for the movie.

A voice-over by Matt King (George Clooney), Elizabeth's husband, challenges the notion that Hawaii is an earthly paradise. People there, he points out, aren't "immune to life," their families are no less "screwed up," their heartaches no less "painful." Images of congested highways and high rises crowding the shoreline of the archipelago are a reminder that urban sprawl and social problems have not spared the island state.

The story, however, unfolds in the more affluent and pristine sectors of the islands. Matt is a successful, Honolulu-based attorney, whose ancestry is a blend of both early European settlers and indigenous royalty. He is the trustee of a valuable, undeveloped tract of land in Kaua'i and represents some dozen or so relatives seeking to sell the property to the most financially forthcoming developer. Matt is conflicted about this.

In seven years' time, the family will be mandated to relinquish the land and, unlike himself, many of his cousins are in need of an immediate cash injection. Still, he is haunted by the prospect of handing over such a natural treasure to real estate sharks.

In the past, his preoccupation with business made him an absentee husband and father. Now with his wife in a coma, Matt is the sole carer of his two daughters, 17-year-old Alex (Shailene Woodley) and 10-year-old Scottie (Amara Miller).

As the former "back-up parent," he feels ill-equipped to handle his and his children's unresolved emotional issues regarding Elizabeth.

From an angry Alex, he learns that Elizabeth had been having an affair prior to her accident. This begins a hunt for his wife's lover, even as Elizabeth is being taken off life support. The journey becomes the occasion for a Hawaiian travelogue, as well as for Matt to discover his earth-friendly, offspring-focused inner being.

Although a pleasant, easily digestible film with beautiful cinematography, *The Descendants* is light fare with a few plot holes. It seems unlikely, for example, that Alex's friend, the harebrained Sid (Nick Krause), or as Matt puts it, "100 miles from Smartsville," should be such an integral part the family tableau. He serves largely as a sounding board for Matt in his personal odyssey.

Also improbable is the tirade Matt's father-in-law (Robert Forster) launches against him after learning about the hopelessness of Elizabeth's condition. Similarly, is it likely that the mild-mannered wife of Elizabeth's lover would vent her spleen at her now-deceased rival in the presence of a grieving spouse?

Clooney carries the film with an appealing performance that does not, however, appear to tax the actor. Woodley as Alex is a gem and Beau Bridges as cousin Hugh is a high-energy scene-stealer. Clooney's—and the film's—most touching moment is his final adieu to his wife, who was, as he puts it, his pain *and* his joy.

Unfortunately, the movie, despite its decent intentions, is not an advance for Payne. *Election* (1999), a lampoon of the American political landscape, is to date a high point for the director. The film's central character (Reese Witherspoon), a conniving, ambitious and devoid-of-principles high school student, represents the movie's sharpest edge. Payne has yet to create another character that so captures a particular social type and era.

The son of Greek immigrants who settled in middle

America, the director seems sensitive to the details of American locale. This was particularly the case with *About Schmidt* (2002), set in Payne's hometown of Omaha, Nebraska, as well as *Sideways* (2004), a movie saturated with central Californian splendor. And with *The Descendants*, the filmmaker honors a terrain that has a European and Polynesian mix.

Unfortunately, within *The Descendants* lurks the specter of "family values." While it is understandable that Matt and Alex would be angry about Elizabeth's affair, why should the audience be asked to adopt their standpoint? And why is such a large portion of the film is given over to moralizing about adultery—while the poor woman is in a coma? The filmmakers stack the odds against Elizabeth: how could she break her marriage vows to an attractive, thoughtful man to carry on with an opportunistic bottom feeder?

All this must be qualified by saying that nothing is deeply argued in the film, not even that humaneness should be extended toward all creatures, except apparently Elizabeth. It would help if Payne were more aware of the pressures pushing him to soften/weaken his work.

### Steven Soderbergh's *Haywire*

Steven Soderbergh's *Haywire* is a spy thriller in which the lead character Mallory (Gina Carano) is a highly trained killing machine with a moral compass. She gets double-crossed by her boss (Ewan McGregor), whose outfit subcontracts its services to agencies such as the CIA and MI6. Leaving a trail of bodies in her wake—all justifiable homicides within the film's framework—she trusts no one except her father (Bill Paxton), an ex-Marine like herself and now a successful writer of political novels.

Besides Carano, who is a former mixed martial artist, and McGregor, *Haywire*'s cast includes Michael Douglas, Antonio Banderas, Channing Tatum and Michael Fassbender. Soderbergh always attracts gifted actors.

The plot is too convoluted to describe in brief—and hardly worth the effort. For anyone interested, detailed synopses exist online.

What was Soderbergh thinking in making a work that gives a pass to the intelligence community? In an interview with *Indiewire*, in which the director discusses taking a break from filmmaking, he states: "Maybe since *Che* [the 2008, two-part, 270-minute movie about Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara], my interest and appetite for

'serious' movies, making them, has really dropped ... It's a combination of things. It's feeling out of sync with everything that's going on in the business at every level.

"I could probably deal with that if I really felt that I was evolving into something better. Like I said, I'm better now than I was when I started. I'm better than I was five years ago ... but at stuff that's superficial—craft. You know, filtering, problem solving ... that stuff I'm better at. But in terms of making something that's just off the chart, I'm not. That's not a shift or change that going to take place incrementally. It requires some form of amputation. So I just need to stop for a while."

The remarks are somewhat murky. Soderbergh seems to be suggesting that his interest in "serious" films has dropped, because the latter have not been commercially successful and that lack of success has not been compensated for, in his own development, by an artistic growth.

The latter point is undoubtedly true, but the comment's premise has to be challenged.

*Haywire* exhibits Soderbergh's usual flair for timing, rhythm and complex camerawork, as well as his skillful direction of actors. That he is talented is not in dispute. But his new movie is not just empty. It is worse than that.

Soderbergh wonders why he's at an impasse. It may not be such a mystery. A few years ago he directed a film about Che Guevara that managed, over the course of its four and a half hours, not to say anything significant about a life and career that raises a great many historical and ideological questions. The world of cinema has rarely seen such an exercise in non-committal and *evasive* filmmaking.

At any rate, in *Che*, Soderbergh showed the murderous villainy of the CIA and the military. Now, a few years later, in *Haywire*, US intelligence operatives and assassins are semi-heroes! What is a "serious" spectator to make of that? The director's quandary may have something to do with a cluelessness about the critical events and processes of our time.

His legitimate dissatisfaction with both his Hollywood and independent-cinema sides has been developing for years. After launching a career as an anti-establishment figure, Soderbergh has reached a crossroads, above all, because he has played fast and loose over a long period with big questions of art and social life.



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