

The descendants



The Descendants(R)A Film CritiqueBy Sean CohenFebruary 7, 2012 [1]In my opinion, one of the year's best Oscar nominated films is The Descendants (2011). It's a very humanistic comedy/drama based on the novel by Kauai Hart Hemmings, and adapted for the screen by writer/director Alexander Payne.

Some might say it has more drama than comedy, due to the serious topic of death by euthanasia at the center of the storyline. However, since Roger Ebert says in his review- it has a happy ending: therefore, technically it's a comedy, I guess I'll defer to his cinematic expertise for that insight, although I'm still pretty sure it's an unusual hybrid of both styles. (Ebert, 2011)Next, comes the plot summary. George Clooney plays Matt King, a somewhat frugal real estate attorney, who just so happens to be a descendant of Hawaiian royalty and the beneficiary of 25, 000 acres of pristine, undeveloped land in Kauai. However, instead of cashing in on his inheritance he prefers to live solely off the income of his job. In that way he figures he'll have something left in later years to pass on. You see, King and his extended family made up of mostly cousins have kept a trust overseeing this land and in seven short years, new laws will ensure that the trust will end, thereby- transferring the property rights to the state.

Meanwhile, a boating accident has rendered Matt's neglected wife Elizabeth in a comatose state, which is sadly discovered later to be a terminal condition. Knowing that he is in emotional limbo being that the wife's will to be euthanized in this situation, must be carried out, Matt becomes heavily burdened with the tasks at hand. For one thing this difficult news must be shared with his two growing daughters, 10 year Scottie

(Amara Miller)), and 17 year old Alexandra (Shailene Woodley), whom are each leading very different lives apart from one another. As the story unfolds it exposes challenging moral and ethical dilemmas as shocking new details emerge about Elisabeth's prior exploits and casual affair with a slick realtor named Brian Speer (Matthew Lillard). Somehow, Mr. King must keep his head together, whilst he simultaneously juggles his parental duties with two heart broken daughters, deals with his unforgiving father-in-law- Scott Thorson (Robert Forster) who unfairly blames him for his daughter's condition, hunts down his dying wife's lover- Mr. Speer, deals with daughter Alexandra's smart ass, stoner boyfriend Sid (Nick Krause).

Later he even battles his impatient cousin Hugh (Beau Bridges) on whether or not they should sell the 25, 000 acres of land to a local buyer, if (spoiler alert) ironically it just so happened to be the brother of realtor Brian Speer: a man who would stand to gain a fortune in the deal. Wow! After that summary, I say ??? stop the spinning threads, I want to get off???, right.

(Hugbo)Moving on to the subtext of the film. After reading Roger Ebert's Essay on the descendants I would have to agree with his assessment of Alexander Payne's talent at using the moral complexity of his characters to draw the audience in. In other works by Payne such as Sideways (2004), and About Schmidt (2002) emotionally challenged men also seem to go through this journey of learning to embrace their better natures.

Ebert notes that Payne is quite gifted at applying the essence of an actor to the nature of the character the actor plays In the Case of ??? The Descendants??? (2011) George Clooney was a perfect match for his role because he is convincingly intelligent as an actor, a needed trait to convey

Matt King's adept understanding of all the complex issues involved, so that by the end of the film, an audience can come to the same conclusions about the land that he does. (Ebert, 2011) One person that I vehemently disagreed with as to the subtext of the film was Robert Armstrong- author of the essay *The Descendants*: A loving portrait of the 1 percent. Although he made some good points such as Protagonists don't automatically have to be perfect, or even near perfect in film in order to show us some morality and courage. He then goes on to postulates the ridiculous notion that Matt King represents a loving portrait of the hated 1 percent.

You see, in King's world laws meant to break up generational fortunes are already in place, so his plan must be to circumvent those laws with legal tricks and maneuvers designed to evade taxes with Cayman Island bank accounts before time runs out. Well, I guess that's one way of interpreting it. However if this were truly the case wouldn't the film makers want to demonstrate more of the inequities of rich vs. poor, rather than the inequities of people with cheating spouses, fatal accidents, single parent households with coming of age daughters and of course hard ass father in laws.

I rather doubt as much. For me the implicit meaning of the film *The Descendants* lies in the very connectedness of the film's backdrop with the people who inherit its complicated splendor. In other words, Matt King's family was in metaphor- the very Hawaiian archipelago they inhabited: in that they were all separated, and drifting apart year by year.

Ironically, this exact analogy was mentioned by the internal voice narrative of Matt King, while sitting on a plane that was island hopping early on in the movie. Furthermore, the pivotal character Elizabeth; Matt King's dying wife, was sort of like a sinking island with a volcanic nature. In her final impulsive fling/eruption, symbolized by her reckless affair with Brian Speer and adventurous pursuit of thrills in the waterskiing debacle, the emotional gravity of her sinking life/island would act as the eventual catalyst that brings the family closer together.

Also, going back to the title *The Descendants*, a thought occurred to me that it wasn't the King family that fostered the lands they managed, as much as it was the lands that fostered the family. It is for that reason, in the end Matt King decides not to sell the property entrusted to him and his cousins, but to keep it for posterity, so it wouldn't become corrupted and spoiled (similar to his broken marriage, and neglect of his children). The movie *The Descendants* apart from being a Shakespearean tragedy of sorts; involving a fractured family coping with the loss of one of its pillars, it's also a real life lesson in the importance of conservation. In other words, to those whom much has been given - i.

e. lands/family much will be expected (i. e. be a good gardener/role model), and in the end- the family/lands will take care of you. After Elizabeth's death and cremation, the film's exclamation point to this subtle truth was beautifully articulated when Matt and his two girls; floating in a canoe, released her ashes into the Pacific Ocean at Waikiki beach (the scene of the accident). After emptying the urn, and all of the contents therein

sifted gently into the blue depths; each member dropped their ceremonial lei™s into the water.

Suddenly, The mangled rings drifted together, and for one brief tender moment, from the omniscient point of view of the camera™s lens peering up from below the clear surface of the rippling waters, they resemble an undulating trio of islands. Perhaps this trio symbolizes the very re-birth or renewal of the King family from the sunken ashes of one of their own. In Conclusion, needless to say I was very moved by the emotional journey, the comedy, the sadness and the redemptive spirit of hope for a brighter future this film embodies. In the very last scene (spoiler alert), Alexander Payne leaves us with the main characters Scottie, Alexandra, and Matt huddled together on a couch, eating ice cream and watching March of the Penguins (2005) on TV.

? The voice of that films narrator-Morgan Freeman is then heard saying- ??? Antarctica was once a tropical paradise.??? At this point of this scene Justin Cislo, author of ??? Divorce, Hawaiian Style ??? The Descendants??? Essay??? reminds us what happens earlier in the film, when Matt had taken his family out to look at the land his ancestors had passed down to him. It was there, over looking the beautiful vista of 25, 000 acres of unvarnished Hawaiian landscape, where Matt, holding his children close by his side: says calmly ??? Everything has its time.??? Thus, in his final paragraph Mr. Cislo suggests that the prophetic nature of both scenes are purposefully intertwined, by stating- ??? We all have a limited time here on Earth; we all have a limited time with each other.? ??? Someday, paradise will freeze over.

“To my astonishment rarely have I been so synchronized in my thinking that I just have to say I couldn’t have said it better than that.” So there it is.” “Someday, paradise will freeze over.” (Cislo, 2011) FINWorks Cited Armstrong, S. (2012, February 25). The Descendants: A loving portrait of the 1 percent. Retrieved February 29, 2012, from themovingarts. com: www. themovingarts.

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