THE DESCENDANTS

An Ad Aominem Production / A Fox Searchlight Pictures Presentation
An Alexander Payne Film

Film reviewed by Franco P. Visser

And the nominees for Best Picture are... The Artist, The Descendants, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, The Help, Hugo, Midnight in Paris, Moneyball, The Tree of Life and War Horse... And the winner is... The Artist. However, although not this year’s Oscar winner, it won in the category ‘Best Adapted Screenplay’ and was nominated in the categories ‘Best Achievement in Directing’, ‘Best Achievement in Film Editing’, ‘Best Performance of an Actor in a Leading Role’ and the ‘Best Motion Picture of the Year’, the film The Descendants was chosen by me for review as it has been a while since I have viewed a film that was as surprising, as moving and as entertaining, all at the same time.

Based on the novel The Descendants by Kaui Hart Hemmings the film tells the story of Matt King (played by George Clooney), a Hawaiian lawyer and landowner whose life changes dramatically following a boating accident in which his wife Elizabeth (played by Patricia Hastie) was seriously injured. As a workaholic and uninvolved father Matt is faced with serious decisions in his life. Elizabeth is in hospital on life support with no chances of recovery and his extended family members are pressuring Matt to sell 25,000 acres of unspoiled and undeveloped land on the island of Kauai that the family holds in trust. Matt’s circumstances force him out of his comfort zone as a rich attorney and he has to now attend to his immediate family’s difficulties and his extended family’s wants and wishes pertaining to the land issue, but also with his in-laws and their grief and interpersonal dynamics with him.

Towards the end of the film it becomes clear that they are losing Elizabeth and Matt has to guide the various family members through the process of saying their goodbyes to Elizabeth as he prepares to discontinue her life-support. Matt personally is left with a lot of anger and resentment towards Matt and he blames him for Elizabeth’s misfortunes. Tutu suffers from Alzheimer’s Dementia and she has very little awareness of the unfolding drama in her family’s life. Matt has to deal with not only his immediate family’s difficulties and his extended family’s wants and wishes pertaining to the land issue, but also with his in-laws and their grief and interpersonal dynamics with him.

The Descendants made a big impression on me, especially in part to the frankness or directness in which the various processes and issues are portrayed. The film feels real and far removed from the usual, often glam orous, sometimes fake Hollywood production line. When viewing the film one gets a sense that the people portrayed are ‘real’, with ‘real’ struggles and ‘real’ feelings. Hawaii remains breathtakingly beautiful and the film does not detract from the island chain’s natural beauty and charm. What the film does however is to give Hawaii a ‘realness’ in terms of its inhabitants, its culture and the threats of commercialization that it regularly faces. This is one film that should be on your ‘must-see’ list. Films that make an impact are rare to find lately and this is surely one of them that leaves the viewer with a lot to think about. Until the next review, enjoy!