The Descendants

Screened at Cornerhouse, Manchester

Reviewed by Anne Ryan January 2012

Yet another Oscar nominee hits our shores and this time it is George Clooney's latest work – where Mr Smooth plays a family man facing up to the responsibilities of fatherhood in the idyllic setting of Hawaii.

A man living in paradise with a beautiful wife, two daughters and about to become seriously rich by selling off his family's land to a developer. He is living the American dream and frankly he is decent but a bit dull. Then his life falls apart when his wife is rendered comatose by a water ski-ing accident. He is faced with meeting the demands of fatherhood and the discovery of a secret about his wife. We follow the family's journey across Hawaii and their attempt to re-build their family.

This is Clooney the anti-smoothy, his roles seem to divide into the super-cool Ocean's 11, The Ides of March and the schlubby character of Burn After Reading who is willing to play the fool. And it is difficult for even George Clooney to look cool in a Hawaiian shirt, shorts and flip-flops. He brings real humanity to the role of a man watching his life fall apart and facing up to questions of family and inheritance. The children Shailene Woodley and Amara Miller are

equally good and totally believable. This is an affectionate, but not overly sentimental view of families.

They are matched by Nick Krause who provides the voice of reason in the shape of a stoner surfer. The scenery is, of course, wonderful with a suitably soulful soundtrack. It may not be paradise but on a January day it seems pretty near.

In a similar way to his hit Sideways director Alexander Payne produces an affectionate and entertaining look at human frailties, about the masks we present to the world and the way that real life can kick you in the teeth and make you look a fool. And as in Sideways one really believes in these characters that they have a life off-screen.

Personally I prefer a little more vinegar and enjoyed Payne's earlier films – 'About Schmidt' and the wonderful 'Election'. In these works horrible people did horrible things, in 'The Descendants'

a good man does good things. Perhaps the director has mellowed with age, or perhaps his seven year hiatus is a result of the difficulty of making films for grown-ups in modern Hollywood.

This is not a world-shattering film, but it lingers in the mind and contains some great performances.