

The Descendants

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [January 25, 2012](#) issue

Alexander Payne's film fancies itself a tragicomic story of spiritual redemption. It's about a wealthy but neglectful husband and father who learns about the true meaning of family through three life-altering events: a serious boating accident, an instance of infidelity, and a business decision concerning a valuable parcel of Hawaiian land that has been in his family for generations.

Despite the many characters and subplots employed to help build the tale, it is a house of cards. The shakiness is evident from the opening scenes, which accost us with a seemingly endless voice-over by the protagonist, Matt King (George Clooney), who tells us way too much far too quickly, rushing through a complex back story that deserves to be shown rather than recounted. When the key drama arrives, it is a messy mix of broad humor, sad revelations and tender moments that never find the right tone.

Matt's journey of discovery brings him closer to his two daughters, Alex (Shailene Woodley), an angry teenager with a drug problem, and the precocious but screwed-up ten-year-old Scottie (Amara Miller), who seems to be following in her older sister's footsteps. Matt's mission is to learn to become a responsible parent even as he tries to address a stream of personal problems.

In his previous films, especially the sublime *Sideways* and the underrated *Election*, Payne cleverly combined dark comedy and flawed characters. The combination worked in large part because of dialogue that managed to be both funny and revealing at the same time.

In *The Descendants*, not only is the dialogue weak, but many scenes that should be dialogues end up feeling like monologues. Long speeches and angry tirades abound, giving the film a preachy tone. The panoramic shots of Hawaii are beautiful and the accompanying Hawaiian music is fun, but by the time Matt King discovers who he is and how he needs to change, the tedium has won out.