



Tom Wilkinson and George Clooney in *Michael Clayton*

Dirty Jobs

To a “fixer,” everything looks broken

MICHAEL CLAYTON: Written and directed by Tony Gilroy. Cinematography, Robert Elswit. Music, James Newton Howard. Starring George Clooney, Tom Wilkinson, Tilda Swinton and Sydney Pollack. Warner Bros., 2007. R. 119 minutes. ★★★★★

Though his output implies a wide range of abilities, George Clooney has mastered a particular character type, one I’d describe as a handsome scoundrel who is also a crusader/reformer. (Possible, or rather partial, exceptions are *Good Night and Good Luck* and *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, the two films Clooney

directed.) The degree to which Clooney’s crusaders can succeed is directly related to the amount of mischief they’ve been making: Think of Everett, the ex-con in *O Brother Where Art Thou?*, who pontificates impressively on all manner of subjects but cannot, even in the film’s closing moments, convince his estranged wife to forgive him. I don’t fault Clooney for working the same patch of ground — in fact, I give him credit for his durable persona — but the persona only works in the presence of vulnerability. Danny Ocean, from the *Ocean’s* movies, is invinci-

George Clooney’s performance strikes a fine balance between exhaustion and determination.

ble and therefore uninteresting; Jack Foley, from *Out of Sight*, can’t even get his car to start, which is why Jack Foley is Clooney’s best role to date.

That Michael Clayton (George Clooney) is a sleepy-eyed mess is one of the unexpected pleasures of *Michael Clayton*. Michael has the dirty job (they don’t call him “janitor” for nothing) of keeping the clients his law firm defends out of trouble. In essence, he’s a high-priced chaperone who transitions into “fixer” mode when laws and jaws get broken. As Michael’s personal life unravels due to debts from past mistakes, Alfred (Tom Wilkinson), a senior partner at Clayton’s firm, goes berserk during a deposition and disappears. Complicating matters is Alfred’s friendship with Michael. But of greater consequence is Alfred’s insistence that the firm’s largest client — a pesticide company — is knowingly killing people. Is Alfred crazy or morally enlightened? It’s not Michael’s job to find out, but if he delivers Alfred to Karen Crowder (Tilda Swinton), the wicked head lawyer for the chemical company, she might have Alfred “fixed” for good.

The problem at the core of *Michael*

Clayton — that there exists a higher authority than professional obligation, but sometimes we must stoop before standing straight enough to see it — is fundamentally more interesting than, say, the ridiculous conceit of *The Brave One*, in which good people do terrible things without consequence. Writer and director Tony Gilroy, who wrote the fine *Bourne* series, adds a convincing fall from grace to Michael’s past, a stumble that handicaps him to this day. Gilroy, in his directorial debut, smartly avoids digging too deeply into the pesticide case — this could easily have been a film about tobacco, or anything that’s harmful when applied in high doses — but his real achievement is in coaxing career-defining performances from Clooney and Wilkinson. Clooney looks haggard throughout *Michael Clayton*, and his performance strikes a fine balance between exhaustion and determination. But it’s Wilkinson who steals the show here: He hasn’t been this good since *In the Bedroom*, largely because he’s usually confined to the smaller roles reserved for “character actors.” Wilkinson deserves more, but let’s start with another Best Supporting Actor nomination, which surely he deserves for *Michael Clayton*. Sydney Pollack is his usual pillar of resolve — does anyone play compromised authority figures better? — but Tilda Swinton, unfortunately, is miscast here. Her feline features, tiny and delicate, aren’t right for lead counsel Karen, who emerges as a nasty villain of sorts. Otherwise, this credible and intelligent thriller needs little in the way of fixing.

EW

movie clips

OPENING OR RETURNING:

Dan in Real Life: Poor Dan (Steve Carrel) is an advice columnist with a passel of daughters whose life is further complicated when he falls for his brother’s girlfriend (Juliette Binoche). Also, the brother is played by Dane Cook. PG13. 99 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Darjeeling Limited, The: Wes Anderson returns with this story about three brothers (Owen Wilson, Jason Schwartzman and Adrien Brody) on a journey through India. They’re sort of going to find their mom; they’re sort of going to find something spiritual; they’re sort of going to reconnect. But alas, the train sort of goes nowhere — not that that’ll keep Anderson fans from jumping on for the ride. R. 91 min. Bijou. **See review this issue.**

Halloween Weekend at the Bijou: Friday night, Mood Area 52 plays an original score for *Nosferatu*. Saturday, filmmaker Eric Ostrowski’s *Magnificent Forest* screens; Sunday, Don Haugen performs an original score to *Begotten*. Bijou LateNite. \$5 per night.

Lars and the Real Girl: The remarkable Ryan Gosling (*Half Nelson*) stars as Lars, who meets and brings home Bianca, a life-sized doll he treats as if she were a person. The film’s “daring and delicate blend of apparent irreconcilables will sweep you off your feet if you’re not careful,” said *Los Angeles Times*. PG13. 106 min. VRC Stadium 15.

Mr. Sean’s Cartoon Club: Crazy, weird and old cartoons featuring Betty Boop, Felix, Superman and more. 12:10 pm Oct. 27. Bijou. \$4.

Mr. Woodcock: This oft-delayed film involves a fellow (Seann William Scott) heading home to stop his mother (Susan Sarandon) from marrying his high school gym teacher (Billy Bob Thornton), who was, shall we say, no saint. PG13. Movies 12.

Once: John Carney’s movie takes “lyrical” to a different level with the gentle, engrossing story of two musicians who find an unexpected connection on the streets of Dublin. Threaded with lovely songs composed by the movie’s leads,

Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova, *Once* is an exceptional accomplishment of intimate filmmaking. R. 85 min. Movies 12. ★★★★★ (7/26)

Rocky Horror Picture Show, The: Do the time warp again! Catch the long-term 1970s camp cult classic fave with live performance by Forbidden Fruit. R. Bijou LateNite, Friday-Sunday. \$7.

Saw IV: Jigsaw (Tobin Bell) and his apprentice are dead, but the nastiness continues during the investigation of his last bunch of murders. But if you’re going to see this one, you don’t need me to tell you that. R. 108 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Video Slam: Monthly event invites video artists to submit short videos of up to 10 minutes for a competition that follows the format of the poetry slam. 4 pm Oct. 28. Free. Those wishing to show their work should arrive by 3:30 pm.

Films open the Friday following EW publication date unless otherwise noted. See archived reviews at www.eugeneweekly.com

CONTINUING:

Across the Universe: Julie Taymor (*Titus*, Broadway’s *The Lion King*) puts her ambitious but unsatisfying spin on a love story built around Beatles songs, following a young man (Jim Sturgess) and the girl he falls for (Evan Rachel Wood) amid the tumult of the 1960s. PG13. 131 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

★★★★☆ (10/18)

Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford, The: Brad Pitt stars as the legendary outlaw and Casey Affleck as Robert Ford, a huge admirer of James. “A haunting retelling of one of the enduring outlaw sagas in American culture,” said *Entertainment Weekly*. R. 160 min. VRC Stadium 15.

Balls of Fury: Y’know, there are a couple of scenes in this movie’s trailer that involve Christopher Walken and are actually kind of funny. The rest of it is a

bunch of ball jokes. Plot? Super secret underground ... ping pong tournament! PG13. 90 min. Movies 12.

Bourne Ultimatum, The: “I remember everything,” says Matt Damon’s Jason Bourne in this film’s action-packed trailer. Director Paul Greengrass and the major players (Joan Allen, Julia Stiles) return to the series’ satisfying third installment, which finds Bourne hunting down his past in stunning locations. PG13. 111 min. Movies 12. ★★★★★☆ (8/9)

Comebacks, The: Because there now must be a send-up movie for everything, including inspirational sports movies (don’t those do a pretty decent job of sending themselves up?). You know the drill: Coach, ragtag band of misfits, bad jokes, etc. PG13. 84 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Elizabeth: The Golden Age: Director Shekhar Kapur, star Cate Blanchett and Geoffrey Rush all return in this sequel to 1998’s *Elizabeth*, the movie that confirmed Blanchett as a major star and talent. *The Golden Age* adds Clive Owen as Sir Walter Raleigh, Samantha Morton as Mary Queen of Scots, and takes place against England’s clash with Spain. PG13. 114 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Game Plan, The: The Rock stretches his dramatic skills as a football player faced with a strange challenge: a little girl who claims to be his daughter. PG. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Gone Baby Gone: Ben Affleck steps behind the camera to direct his brother Casey (along with Ed Harris and Morgan Freeman) in this story, based on a novel by Dennis Lehane (*Mystic River*) about Boston detectives investigating a kidnapping. R. 114 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Hairspray: Based on John Waters’ 1988 cult classic, *Hairspray* is about teenagers on a local Baltimore dance show — especially one short, plump, cheery girl who loves to dance. With John Travolta in drag. PG. 117 min. Movies 12.

★★★★☆ (7/26)

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix: The Ministry of Magic is in denial about the return of Lord

Voldemort, Hogwarts get a nasty new teacher and Harry ... Harry’s in one kind of trouble or another throughout the mostly successful and only slightly disappointing fifth HP film. It’s not quite *Prisoner of Azkaban*, but it’s getting there. PG13. 138 min. Movies 12.

★★★★☆ (7/19)

Heartbreak Kid, The: Ben Stiller meets the love of his life! Except ... not really. Wasn’t this movie called *Meet the Parents* a few years ago? OK, OK, so this time it’s the girl who’s the problem. And this adaptation of Neil Simon’s 1972 play is directed by the Farrelly Brothers, who struck gold with Stiller and humiliation comedy with *There’s Something About Mary*. R. Cinemark.

Into the Wild: Star Emile Hirsch bears a reasonable resemblance to Christopher McCandless, a bright, privileged young man who took off into Alaska in the early 1990s, but Sean Penn’s adaptation of Jon Krakauer’s novel doesn’t create an entirely satisfying portrait of the man whose story has been captivating readers for a decade. R. 140 min. Bijou. ★★★★★☆ (10/18)

Kingdom, The: “If Frank Capra had ever made a *Rambo* movie, it would have looked like this,” said Anthony Lane in *The New Yorker*. Peter Berg directs an interesting cast (Jamie Foxx, Jennifer Garner, Jason Bateman, Chris Cooper) in the story of an FBI team sent to Riyadh to capture a terrorist mastermind. R. 110 min. Movies 12. VRC Stadium 15.

Michael Clayton: George Clooney plays the title character, a “fixer” at a law firm. When one of his colleagues seems to snap, sabotaging a major case, Clayton is forced to take a good look at what he’s doing. “A terrifically engrossing, tethered-to-the-real-world drama,” said *Entertainment Weekly*. R. 119 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15. **See review this issue.**

Nightmare Before Christmas, The: Tim Burton’s endlessly entertaining, original Halloween/Christmas fable returns yet again in 3D. See if you don’t leave the theater singing. PG. 76 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

No Reservations: Catherine Zeta-Jones plays a perfectionist chef at a fancy Manhattan restaurant whose world is shaken up by the arrival of her niece (Abigail Breslin) and a new sous chef (Aaron Eckhart) with a style in direct opposition to her own. PG. 105 min. Movies 12.

Ratatouille: The latest animated film from Pixar is directed by Brad Bird (whose *The Iron Giant* is too often overlooked) and concerns a big-dreaming rat who wants to be a chef. When he makes a deal with a garbage boy, the culinary world of Paris gets far more than it ever imagined. G. 110 min. Movies 12. ★★★★★☆ (7/12)

Rendition: Gavin Hood (*Tsotsi*) directs a pretty stellar cast in this timely tale of a woman (Reese Witherspoon) whose Egyptian-born husband disappears from a flight home — and the young CIA analyst (Jake Gyllenhaal) who finds himself in a morally troubling position as a witness to the man’s fate. With Meryl Streep and Peter Saarsgard. R. 122 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Resident Evil: Extinction: Alice (Milla Jovovich) is *still* trying to get rid of that pesky zombie-making virus. For this third film in the series, Alice gets new friends (we suspect they replace those zombieified last time out) including *Heroes*’ Ali Larter and singer Ashanti. R. Cinemark.

Seeker, The: This movie was once called *The Dark is Rising*, for it was once (and ostensibly still is) based on Susan Cooper’s wonderful, award-winning series of books. But her books were steeped in Welsh mythology and were decidedly not about an American pre-teen in a Santa Cruz jacket. Still, powers of light and dark, saving the world, etc. — all good themes for us fantasy fans. PG. Cinemark.

Simpsons Movie, The: Well, our Springfield didn’t get the premiere, but in the film maybe we’ll still see some hints that we are the *real* Simpsons Springfield? Still no idea what it’s about, but does it matter? PG13. 87 min. Movies 12.

Stardust: Matthew Vaughn (*Layer Cake*)

takes a firm and steady hand to the many plot threads of this adaptation of Neil Gaiman’s novel about a fallen star with an attitude and the many characters seeking her. Wicked and charming, sweet and sly, with a stellar cast and a superb sense of humor. PG13. 128 min. Movies 12.

★★★★☆ (8/9)

Things We Lost in the Fire: Susanne Bier (*After the Wedding*) makes her English-language directorial debut with this story of a widow (Halle Berry) who invites her husband’s troubled best friend (Benicio del Toro) to live with her and her children. R. 119 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Thirty Days of Night: Thirty days of darkness in small-town Alaska make the place a haven for things that like the dark in this film, based on the graphic novel of the same name. Starring Josh Hartnett and — ooh! — Danny Huston, who raises the level of anything he’s in. But can he do it here? R. 113 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

310 to Yuma: Russell Crowe and Christian Bale costar in this solid Western from director James Mangold (*Walk the Line*). Based on a short story by Elmore Leonard that was made into a film in 1957, the film follows a vicious outlaw (Crowe) and the Civil War vet (Bale) who’s volunteered to get the thief to the train that’ll take him to trial. R. 117 min. Cinemark. ★★★★★☆ (9/13)

Transformers: It wouldn’t be summer without a Michael Bay film, right? Hot on the heels of those other ’80s toys the Ninja Turtles, the Transformers arrive, bigger and flashier than ever. Earth, it seems, will be the battleground for the war between the Autobots and the Decepticons. With Shia LaBeouf (*Holes*) and Megan Fox. PG13. 144 min. Movies 12.

We Own the Night: Family and loyalty clash in James Gray’s film, in which nightclub manager Bobby (Joaquin Phoenix) hides his relationship to a NYC cop family while also keeping a distance from the gangster who operates out of his club. With Mark Wahlberg, Eva Mendes and Robert Duvall. R. 105 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.