

DVD Select: 'Michael Clayton' a spellbinding legal thriller

by Robert_J_Hawkins

There are certain people with a talent for making other people's problems go away. In one of the hottest movies in Oscar contention this year, "Michael Clayton" (Warner Home Video, 3 stars), that is exactly what the title character does.

'MICHAEL CLAYTON' - George Clooney and Sydney Pollack star in the legal thriller 'Michael Clayton.'
CNS Photo courtesy of Myles Aronowitz. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin Michael Clayton (George Clooney at his most-scruffy Cary Grantish) is a fixer for high-powered law firm Kenner Bach & Leeden. And this day, he has a doozy: ace defense lawyer Arthur Edens (Tom Wilkinson) has gone off his rocker in the midst of a deposition for the \$3 billion class-action suit he's supposed to be repelling as senior litigator.

The client, enviro-charming agra-monster United Northfield, has been accused of being less than green, years earlier, when it allegedly pushed chemicals that grew crops and killed people. Unthinkable. And Edens, in an eerily euphoric state, is running around waving a smoking gun, an internal memo that just might clinch it for the plaintiffs.

High-strung United Northfield CEO Karen Crowder (Tilda Swinton) sees Edens as a serious problem that needs resolution, one way or another. Even the law firm, which has billed United \$50 million in fees for six years of judicial procrastination, is in a panic as its own merger with another major firm looms.

This is a job custom designed for Clayton. Except that he's got a world of personal complications too - especially a \$75,000 loan due to some impatient sharks, from a failed restaurant partnership with his alcoholic younger brother.

It gets messier.

Clayton is a guy who has clearly had his fill of damage control for other people but he soon finds it is his own life that is on the line - and he's not even sure who's fingering him for elimination.

This taut mystery-thriller is written and directed by Tony Gilroy, who scripted all three pulse-pounding "Bourne" movies. While not nearly as nerve-racking or hyper-active as a Bourne movie, "Michael Clayton" has earned Gilroy Oscar nods for writing and directing. Clooney is nominated for leading actor and Swinton and Wilkinson both got supporting-actor nods. James Newton Howard's original score is nominated and the movie is up for best picture of the year.

That's seven nominations. Count 'em. Only "There Will Be Blood" and "No Country for Old Men" earned more - eight apiece.

As for "extras," the DVD offers commentary tracks and a handful of deleted scenes, at least one of which offers some insight into Clayton's buttoned-down character.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"In the Valley of Elah" (Warner, 3 1/2 stars) Oscar-nominated Tommy Lee Jones is Hank Deerfield, a career military man whose son mysteriously disappears upon his return from a tour of duty in Iraq. With the help of Detective Emily Sanders (Charlize Theron), Deerfield tries to penetrate the wall put up by the military. The closer he gets to the truth, the more difficult it is to embrace. Sterling cast also includes Susan Sarandon, Jason Patric, Josh Brolin, James Franco and Barry Corbin. (Jones, Brolin and Corbin also star in the much-nominated "No Country for Old Men.") Paul Haggis wrote and directed. He also wrote "Flags of Our Fathers," "Letters from Iwo Jima," "Casino Royale," "Crash" and "Million Dollar Baby."

"American Gangster" (3 stars) is based on the true story of Frank Lucas (Denzel Washington) a 1970s entrepreneur who fashioned himself into one of the great American success stories - only his product was heroin. Detective Richie Roberts (Russell Crowe) is the nemesis intent on bringing him down. Actress Ruby Dee is nominated for a supporting actress Oscar for her portrayal of Mama Lucas.

"Margot At The Wedding" (Paramount, 2 1/2 stars) Ah, the family gathers for the happy nuptials - scratch that. It might have been happy, for a while, if the neurotic storm known as Margot (Nicole Kidman) hadn't blown in to ruin her sister Pauline's (Jennifer Jason Leigh) big moment. But then, Pauline is planning to marry the dubious prospect Malcolm (Jack Black), an artist of sorts. Noah Baumbach ("The Squid and the Whale") once again shows that into the darkest most dysfunctional family a little humor must fall, even if it is only to relieve the excruciating pain. Good luck.

"Lust, Caution" (Universal, 2 1/2 stars) Set during World War II, a plain young woman (Wei Tang) must transform herself into a seductive lure to entrap a ruthless intelligence agent marked for assassination. If the NC-17 version of Ang Lee's erotic and suspenseful thriller is too much for you, Universal is also releasing an R-rated version.

"Redacted" (Magnolia, 2 1/2 stars) Inspired by real events, the rape and murder of an Iraqi teen girl and her family by U.S. soldiers, this movie will not go down easily with many of us who like to think we're a nation of good people and that our cause is just. Brian De Palma doesn't give us much moral relief in this portrayal of a most shameful event.

DOCUMENTARY ROW

"Kurt Cobain: About a Son" (Shout!, not reviewed) This portrait of the late musician Kurt Cobain is based on 25 hours of previously unaired interviews with journalist Michael Azerrad for his book "Come As You Are: The Story of Nirvana" as well as the music of 20 artists influenced by Cobain. On Feb. 20, Cobain who reportedly killed himself, would have been 41 years old.

"Screamers" (Sony BMG) This film traces genocide and denial as they go hand in hand through history: Armenia and the Holocaust to Cambodia to present day Bosnia, Darfur, Rwanda and more, interlaced with the music of the band System of a Down. The title comes from the exhortation "Never again!"

"Terror's Advocate" (Magnolia) Director Barbet Schroeder constructs a portrait of French lawyer Jacques Verges who has made a career out of defending terrorists like Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie and Carlos the Jackal, Magdalena Kopp and Anis Naccache.

FROM THE VAULTS

The other night on the Warner Brothers studio lot in Los Angeles Warren Beatty was reminiscing about his early days in Hollywood. Back when he was inhaling the sweet smell of success. He'd just starred in the 1961 hit "Splendor in the Grass" with Natalie Wood and yet he knew so little about movies.

At a club party Beatty was jazzed to see Rita Hayworth dancing - but he forgot all about her when he met her partner, the writer-director Clifford Odets ("The Story on Page One," "Sweet Smell of Success") who invited Beatty back to his house for a post-party party. Beatty was a huge Odets fan.

Odets introduced Beatty to his guests, including one large fellow sitting off by himself.

"That's Jean Renoir," said Odets.

"Oh" said Beatty. "Any relation to the painter?"

"His son," said Odets.

"Does he paint, too?" asked Beatty, unaware of Renoir's stature as one of the great French filmmakers.

"Have you ever heard of 'The Grand Illusion'?" asked Odets. Beatty hadn't.

"Have you ever seen 'The Rules of the Game'?" he asked. Again, Beatty said no.

"My, boy," said a patient Odets, "You must see those films."

Beatty did watch the films, both shot in the late 1930s and they had a profound effect on his acting and later film-making career. But that isn't the point of this story.

To watch the movies in the 1960s Beatty had to hunt down 35 mm prints and that took him 2 1/2 exhausting

weeks. "And I'm somebody who really wanted to see these movies!" he exclaims.

His point being, that video technology and the studios which archive and preserve these films have created a world in which any kid with curiosity can watch life-changing classic movies in a matter of hours, or at the worst, days.

On Amazon.com today, for example, there are 43 copies of Renoir's "Grand Illusion" for sale and 62 of "The Rules of the Game." Netflix will send rental copies to you practically overnight.

Beatty loves the fact that Hollywood's great movies are accessible to all. Which is why he was on the Warner Brothers lot. The studio is celebrating its 85th anniversary this year. During 2008, Warner Home Video will restore and debut on DVD, more than 50 films. Additionally, each month the studio will release a themed batch of films - gangster movies one month, Sinatra movies the next, all the Dirty Harry movies, Westerns, musicals, etc.

Among the films will be Beatty's "Bonnie & Clyde" in a specially restored edition during "Gangster Month" (March).

Unfortunately Beatty left before he could hear even more good news: Warner Brothers is restoring and releasing "Splendor in the Grass" this year, too.

MORE DVD NEWS

In the DVD equivalent of the Obama-Clinton battle, online movie-rental giant Netflix has thrown its considerable muscle behind the next-generation, high-definition format Blu-ray - essentially turning HD-DVD

into the Dennis Kucinich of format candidates.

Netflix offers its 7 million subscribers 400 movies in Blu-ray format, among its 90,000 DVD titles.

The choice wasn't hard. Four out of six major studios now back Blu-ray. And while Netflix stocks both formats, customers mostly ask for Blu-ray, the company says. Netflix will acquire no new HD-DVD titles and will phase out its existing stock by year's end.

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