

Movie Review: 'Michael Clayton'

by David_Elliott

'Michael Clayton' is from writer Tony Gilroy, who scripted the similarly named "Dolores Claiborne." Gilroy is best known for smartly padding out his action plots for the profitable Jason Bourne series.

'MICHAEL CLAYTON' - George Clooney, seen here with co-star Sydney Pollack, is a troubleshooting attorney who refers to himself as 'the janitor' in the drama 'Michael Clayton.' CNS Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Now Gilroy gets to direct his padding, around a frail thriller full of murk and menace. He has George Clooney to carry it, though Clooney often visibly sags. He's not at all bad being earnestly guilty and care-nagged, but Clooney's definitive, cocky, almost floating suavity is weighed down by playing Michael Clayton.

Clayton is the nimble troubleshooter for a very big New York law firm ruled by Marty Bach (Sydney

Pollack). Clayton does some dirty work and calls himself a janitor, though the entire outfit is seamy under its granite cladding. This disgusts the weary and mentally dicey partner Arthur Edens (Tom Wilkinson), who starts shedding his clothes and screaming about being the Hindu god Shiva.

After thousands of highly paid hours on a huge class-action suit, trying to cover for a polluting, cancer-causing corporation, Edens is ready to blow away the legal fig leaves. Tilda Swinton, elegantly suited but swinish as corporate legal dominatrix Karen Crowder, gets very ugly to keep secrets hidden, and Edens is sloppy about his scheme. No matter how rattled, British actor Wilkinson has a terrific American accent.

A lot of the movie is standard skulking and sleuthing, following people in cars or overhearing tapped phones. But Gilroy, helped by solemn, power-room imagery, heaps on trimmings as if he were chumming up to Dostoevski, and the dialogue bulges with sinister sidelines and insinuations.

There is thin but busy stuff about Clayton's past gambling and current debts, his connection with criminals, his cop brother, his brainy but motherless son, an alcoholic relative. Jaded fixer Clayton is suddenly spurred toward morality by Edens' wild gambits, but even their core relation is more implied than developed.

Meanwhile, Pollack does his insiders' insider number, very foxily, and Swinton has narcissistic moments with her wardrobe. A Midwestern girl plaintiff is a fragile symbol of wronged innocence. Three horses on a hill seem to represent Clayton's hunger for his lost innocence, or maybe Gilroy's memory of the end of "The Asphalt Jungle."

Toward the end, after noir noodlings of plot, Clooney stops looking sandbagged and we stop wondering about that blemish or dimple thing above his right eyebrow. Suddenly, ambushing the witch Swinton, he's sassy and sure-footed and excitingly in charge: Clooney as star.

And after that, for a very long take, Gilroy holds the camera on Clooney's handsome face. Probably it is meant to be a meditative decrescendo, but it seems like Gilroy is whispering: Thanks, George, for being you.

A Warner Bros. release. Director, writer: Tony Gilroy. Cast: George Clooney, Sean Gullen, Tom Wilkinson, Sydney Pollack, Tilda Swinton, Ken Howard. Running time: 2 hours. Rated R. 2 Stars.

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