

The Director/Screenwriter

ALEXANDER PAYNE CAPTURES THE HUMAN CONDITION

BY JEFFERSON FINNEY

ALEXANDER PAYNE IS THE SCREENWRITER AND DIRECTOR OF *The Descendants*, a highly anticipated film soon to be released by Fox Searchlight Pictures, which is based on the novel by kama'aina writer Kauai Hart Hemmings. *The Descendants* is the first film for Payne since *Sideways*, a now cult-classic tale about male buddies in search of wine, women and themselves during a ramble through California's Santa Ynez Valley, and for which Payne received the 2004 Oscar for Best-Adapted Screenplay.

Dressed in jeans and exuding the comfortable demeanor that seems to accompany well-traveled observers of life and living, Payne arrived at our agreed location for a chat. Following general pleasantries, a splash of pinot noir and a hunk of Queso Manchego, we sat down to talk.

HILuxury: I really enjoyed reading *The Descendants*. I felt sort of voyeuristic at times—annoyed at King for his lack of connection with his kids, empathy for the overall situation, the humor and the realness of it all. Will the film be similar to the book?

Alexander Payne: The shifting sense of identification with the protagonist—one of the great things about books is that books are infinite, the images of the characters, the tone of the narrative—the relationship changes from reader to reader, where you are in your life. The trouble with cinema is that it takes that infinite potential and makes it concrete and finite.



The film will be different than the way people interpret the book. When a book is transformed into a movie it becomes something else, and there is a certain way I interpret the book, and then my ideas are executed in the process of filming. And then there is another way which it blows through me and I watch this thing come to life—the actors, the location, my sensibility and my tone all play a part. One's style and one's tone is oneself and who you are—it's not something you think about—it's just what comes out in the end.

HILuxury: Are there surprises in this process?

AP: There are surprises. It's always interesting how it turns out. I always gear it toward what makes me laugh—even

if it's the type of laughter that isn't laughed out loud. *The Descendants* has more drama in it than I've ever done before—I found directing dramatic scenes, even horrifying ones, to be like comedies. I think it is good to have a certain sprightly comic approach in dramatic scenes—it makes scenes even more dramatic when you are directing a film as if it were a comedy.

HILuxury: When editing, do you find it necessary to clear your head? Do you go for a run, go cycling or take a brisk walk in order to come back with fresh eyes?

AP: I'm so much not interested in having fresh eyes—I'd rather be immersed—it's a concentrated effort. I'll take two weeks off when



"I make the types of films that aren't made a lot in America," says Payne, pictured here on the set of *Cedar Rapids* with director Miguel Arteta.

we're done shooting and then start the editing process—I'll approach the film anew in the editing room and watch it as though I am just an editor.

HILuxury: In making this film, what steps did you take to make sure that the vibe and culture of Hawai'i are portrayed correctly?

AP: First of all, I feel very lucky to have found this project—the characters, the story and the strong sense of place really spoke to me. To make sure Hawai'i is portrayed correctly, I shot in Hawai'i. You are in a place and you turn the camera on and it records time and movement in that place—so hopefully you'll see Hawai'i in the film. Casting? I cast here as much as I could. I asked a lot of questions—mostly of the author Kauai, as the film is based on her novel.

Look, when I made *Sideways*—for me it was a slight little wine movie—I never had any idea that it would have any impact on the wine business—I had no idea. You cannot foresee the outcome. Who knew in 1934 when Clark Gable removed his shirt and revealed he had no undershirt on that undershirt sales would plummet in the U.S.? But they did. (Payne is referring to the film, *It Happened One Night*. In what was considered a racy

scene, Gable removed his shirt, revealing his bare chest, and sales of undershirts were said to have dropped 75 percent)

HILuxury: The anticipation of the film coming out and the reaction to it—are you on pins and needles waiting for the moviegoers' response?

AP: When asked at studio meetings—'whom will this film appeal to?'—my answer is, my friends and me. That's who I make films for, my buddies and myself. Then luck comes in and what occurs to you as being a good movie will also occur to a significant amount of the public so as to enable you to continue making films—like with any artistic endeavor. Many people can be doing art—you can be working in a medium and doing really beautiful, honest, soulful work which never reaches an audience—painters, writers, poets—they are not lesser artists. I think that the fact that I make comedies helps sell my films. I have a good filmmaking sense of what a movie is. That it's cognitively made with a good sense of rhythm. Also, I make the types of films that aren't made a lot in America. Human comedy, not plot driven or easily summarized. Life is not easily summarized.

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photo by Merre Wallace

Director Alexander Payne on the set of *The Descendants*.

AP: I was a teenager in the '70s; films that were adult commercial American Hollywood films are now considered art films or that 'Golden Age of the Seventies.' Films by Francis Ford Coppola (*The Godfather*), George Lucas (*American Graffiti*) Martin Scorsese (*Taxi Driver*), Alan Pakula (*All The President's Men*), Hal Ashby (*Shampoo*), just about all of the films of that whole decade. There is masterpiece after masterpiece. I insist that we can still strive to make these films.

HILuxury: You were raised in Omaha; do you think your unique talent might not have bloomed had you been raised in another environment?

AP: There are many very thoughtful, well-read people in Omaha—people really interested in the world. Omaha is the birthplace of many film luminaries, including Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, Fred Astaire and Nick Nolte.

I like Omaha—it's like *The Little Prince* and his rose.

(Referring to Antoine de Saint Exupéry's most famous novella in which the Prince is compelled by his love for the rose he has left on his home planet). There are many towns in the world, but this one is mine.

HILuxury: What projects do you have lined up in the immediate future?

AP: Projects in the future—I've been sitting on one for a while—it will be the first thing I will direct that I haven't written. It's a father-son road trip film from Billings, Mont. to Lincoln, Neb., passing through Rapid City, S.D. A father and son get waylaid in a crappy (laughing) little town in North Central Nebraska where the father grew up and where his relatives still reside.

Alexander Payne is a keen observer of the human condition and passionate filmmaker. His latest endeavor, The Descendants, is set for release on Dec. 12, 2011. ♦