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Film reviews: George Clooney gets lost in the gloom in Michael Clayton

Last Updated: 12:01am BST 28/09/2007

Sukhdev Sandhu reviews Michael Clayton, Gypsy Caravan and Mr Woodcock

Michael Clayton
15 cert, 120 min

- [Watch the trailer for Michael Clayton](#)

You have to admire [George Clooney](#). The way, at the height of his television fame, he turned his back on ER to venture forth into the uncertain territory of movies.

The candour and intelligence with which he speaks about his liberal politics. His efforts, with director Steven Soderbergh and former eBay president turned social filmmaking production executive Jeff Skoll, to raise the IQ levels of mainstream American cinema. Then there are his good looks, his popularity with male and female movie-goers alike.

The thing is, you sometimes wonder if Clooney himself would prefer to be admired than loved. Without quite saying so explicitly, he often gives the impression that the only reason he makes romantic or caper films such as Ocean's Eleven or Intolerable Cruelty is to give him enough credit with studio bosses so that he can make "real" films like Michael Clayton.

It's a weighty, sophisticated feature - written and directed by Tony Gilroy, who wrote the screenplays for the first two Bourne films, with a quality cast including Tilda Swinton and Tom Wilkinson. But it's so self-consciously adult, so deliberately downbeat. You wonder: does Clooney look down on his abilities as a comic actor?

Here, his character is anything but comic. He's a grizzled and slightly ashen in-house "fixer" at a huge law firm based in Manhattan. When rich people do something wrong, it's his job to make sure no one finds out or that they avoid the kind of sentences that would be meted out to the mere mortals who appear as ant-like dots on the streets below his company's gleaming headquarters.

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Serious business: George Clooney in Michael Clayton

But, for all his no-nonsense muscle, he's heading towards crisis: "I'm not a miracle worker, I'm a janitor," he exclaims, conscious that he's divorced, trying to pay off the debts his addict brother's failed restaurant incurred, 45 years old and going nowhere.

And then, to top it all, he finds himself having to deal with Arthur Edens (Wilkinson), a brilliant litigator at his own company, going nuts, stripping down to his underwear at important meetings, and jeopardising the settlement of a protracted lawsuit with U/North, an agrochemical chemical company.

Rather like Syriana, Michael Clayton has lots of action suspense, thrills and ballistics. And, again like Syriana, it doesn't want to draw too much attention to those things for fear of

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being thought of as corny and generic.

It's a noir film, much of whose action – and a lot of it is opaque and hard to follow – takes place in air-conditioned corporate offices rather than in greasy back alleys and beat-up old dive bars.

A film about high-end malfeasance and the culture of boss-class corruption that doesn't, at least until a brutally edited ending, care very much for identifying the nature or the perpetrator of the crimes. It takes, perhaps cynically, cynicism for granted.

Wilkinson, who I've never seen give a bad performance, is excellent as the lawyer who discovers a secret document proving U/North's bad faith. He keeps us guessing whether Edens is insane or not, imbuing him with a vulnerability that's very much needed to stop him from becoming the kind of cracked, stomping thespian someone like Geoffrey Rush would play him as.

Up against him is Tilda Swinton as U/North's chief counsel, her face the complexion of a dentist's rubber glove, her hair distended like a shirt badly laid out on the end of an ironing board. She is utterly mesmerising, a woman compelled as much by her salary as by her own convictions, to perform to those around her with vicious disdain.

There's a lot to admire in Michael Clayton: Robert Elswit, who was also director of photography on Good Night, and Good Luck, captures the understated beauty of upstate New York's crisp, misted lanes in winter; Gilroy's script, except for one "But what if he wasn't crazy?" outburst, is very strong; one particular murder scene is as sudden and shocking as the Algerian father's throat-slitting scene in Hidden.

And yet, the film, whether by design or not, never really takes off. Clooney is part of the problem: for all his imminent dissolution, he always looks in control, his white shirt and black suit combo as dapper as anything he sports in Ocean's Eleven. He's not dirty or compromised enough, nor is the likelihood of him bringing wrong-doing to light ever in sufficient doubt.

In the end, the film, though it tries to be moodier and less narrative-driven than The Insider or Erin Brockovich, wraps up proceedings in the style of a heist movie, and in so doing contradicts the moral ambiguity it has spent so much time presenting.

Gypsy Caravan: When the Road Bends...

PG cert, 116 min

• **In pictures: Gypsy Caravan**

It's curious how Roma travellers, so often reviled both here and abroad, so often strangers to our imaginations, are anything but strangers to the big screen. Time and again, they have appeared in the films of directors such as Emir Kusturica and Tony Gatlif.

What's more, recently bands such as Beirut, Gogol Bordello and Basement Jaxx, who issued a Balkan Beats compilation, have used and been inspired by the ferocious energy and keening passion of Roma music.

Gypsy Caravan, a fascinating and often very moving documentary by [Jasmine Dellal](#), is a companion piece to her earlier, and equally excellent American Gypsy.

Shot by Albert Maysles, it follows musicians from India, Macedonia, Romania and Spain as they travel through North America on a six-week tour. As they do so, the performers, all of whom have faced terrible hardships and tragedies, exorcise their pain by sharing it with audiences who hear in every note the unconquerable spirit of freedom and fire and joy.

Music, says one of them, is "better than land, wisdom, or being father of a thousand sons".

The tour becomes a kind of homecoming, an opportunity for dispersed peoples to come together and share stories. So long seen as ragged leftovers from an older historical epoch, the Roma turn out to be a modern people who have a lot to teach over-developed societies about what it means to be human.

Mr Woodcock

12A cert, 88 min

Mr Woodcock, a mutant cousin of Meet the Parents, stars Seann William Scott (American Pie's Stifler) as a self-help guru who visits his mother (Susan Sarandon) in small-town Nebraska only to find out that she's dating the gym teacher (Billie Bob Thornton) who bullied him mercilessly at school. He soon ditches his smoothly-couched platitudes about the past being the past and tries to split up the pair.

Thornton does his best with a crass script and a cop-out finale. Scott looks like the kind of guru who would abduct, truss and chop up disciples before he'd nourish them with wisdom. It's left to Amy Poehler, as a ferocious, borderline alcoholic of a press officer, to steal the



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