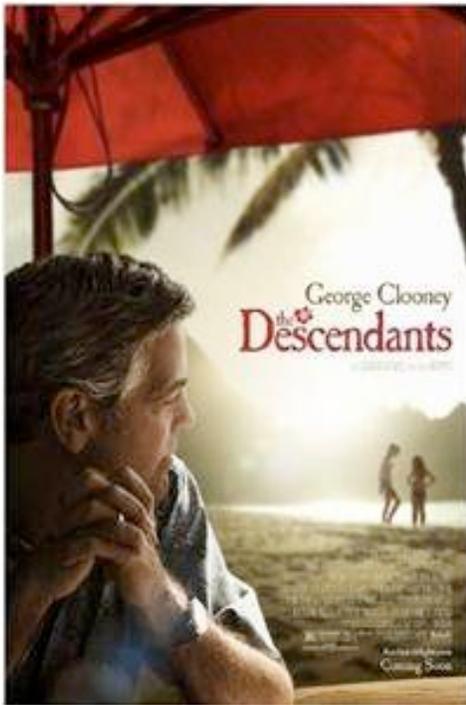


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FEATURES



Shailene Woodley Breaks Through in *The Descendants*

BY JON STEELY

Most actors can only dream of shooting a film in Hawaii opposite George Clooney under the helm of a director like Alexander Payne, and having their performance declared Oscar-worthy by critics, entertainment journalists, and industry insiders. Shailene Woodley is living that dream with her big-screen debut in Payne's latest offering, *The Descendants*, a moving dramatic comedy starring Clooney as a lawyer struggling with his ailing wife's infidelity and impending death, and Woodley as his angst-ridden teenage daughter brought closer to him by these circumstances. "It's all very surreal," Woodley says of her most recent success. "It's the kind of thing that doesn't really hit me until my head hits the pillow. It was such an amazing experience. I learned so much from being around incredible actors and I got to work with one of the best directors in modern-day filmmaking. I'm just so grateful for all of it."

Raised in Simi Valley, California, Woodley entered show business when she was five years old and hasn't stopped working since. "I was taking theater classes and an agent called my mom and said, 'I'm interested in Shai,'" the performer recalls. "My mom asked me if I wanted to go on an audition and try it out. Being five years old and wanting to do everything, I said, 'Sure! Yeah! Let's do it!' I got told 'no' five billion times before I got one 'yes' and got told 'no' another five billion times before I got another 'yes' and so on and so forth."

After three years of auditioning, Woodley debuted at the age of eight with a small role in the CBS TV movie "Replacing Dad" (1999), starring Mary McDonnell. And then things started to click. Commercial work and stints on "The District" (2001-2003), "Without a Trace" (2003), and "Crossing Jordan" (2001-2004) led to the budding young actor's first major break, playing Kaitlin Cooper in the first season of Fox's smash hit "The O.C." (2003-2004). From there, TV gigs continued to pour in with a starring role opposite Marcia Gay Harden in The WB's Julia Roberts-produced TV movie, "Felicity: An American Girl Adventure" (2005), and performances on "My Name is Earl" (2006) and "CSI: NY" (2007).

Woodley's career advanced to the next level in 2008 when she landed the lead role of Amy Juergens on the popular ABC Family series "The Secret Life of the American Teenager." Created by Brenda Hampton ("7th Heaven"), the controversial show follows Amy as she navigates through the trials of both high school and motherhood.

With "Secret Life" in its fourth season, Woodley brings her impressive talents and emotional range to the big screen in *The Descendants* — from the director of *Election* (1999), *About Schmidt* (2002), and *Sideways* (2004) — a film predicted to receive sweeping Academy Award nods and featuring Woodley's most highly praised and critically acclaimed performance to date. "Being on a film set is the core of where my passion lies," she expresses. "But I am very grateful for all of the award season buzz. It's all very new and very exciting. I'm so grateful for what I have right here at this moment, that if nothing else were to happen tomorrow, I'd still be exhilarated."

There is nothing "Hollywood" about Shailene Woodley. In fact, she is disarmingly sensible, spiritual, and down-to-Earth. Not a diva. Not a brat. Not a party girl you'd see stumbling out of a club. She chooses to live with her mom in the Simi Valley area in lieu of a trendy West Hollywood address. ("I get to live outside of the smog, not pay rent, and save money for the day I decide I want to move to Hawaii!")

After a long day of TV interviews and photo shoots, the 20-year-old rising star sits down with Venice for a chat about her method of acting, the advice Alexander Payne has to offer, and what can be learned from playing George Clooney's daughter.

Venice: Do you come from a show-business family?

Shailene Woodley: No. Both of my parents are educators. When an agent was first interested in me, my mom was like, "What is an agent?" My mom was awesome! She took me to my auditions. I was fortunate enough to have a family who never pushed me to act, who knew nothing about the industry, and still really don't know much about the industry except for their experience with me. I'm very fortunate to have a family who always supported me and my passion for this art.

You started working when you were very young. What were the steps that led you to starring in a film with George Clooney?

I did over 60 commercials as a child in the course of eight years. Then I started doing small, little co-star roles and small, little things in movies of the week, and then evolved into guest-star roles, and then evolved into lead roles in movies of the week, and that evolved into "The Secret Life of the American Teenager." And then came *The Descendants*. It's been this really awesome ladder I've been climbing. I don't know if I'll ever feel like I'm at the top of it because every new project comes with new experiences that fuel some other part of my soul. I'm just so lucky to have experienced so many different outlets of this art.

Why do you love acting?

I listen to my physical body and my instincts and that's kind of what I let rule my life. For some reason, when I read a script that I like, I get immense butterflies. I don't know how to express it other than by saying that it's a calling. It's just fun. I get pleasure out of it.

How do you approach a role? What technique do you use to attain believability in your work?

I'm not the kind of actor who approaches a character or a script and thinks, "What was her life like?" "Who is she?" "How can I get myself into this character?" That's not me at all. My approach is reading the lines and submitting myself to the truthfulness of the moment and listening to what the other actors have to say and letting the words evoke the emotion from me. I like to be as present in the moment as possible, without any preconceived thoughts of how the scene or character should be. In "The Secret Life of the American Teenager," I didn't do any research on what it's like to be a pregnant teenager, other than the physical aspects of what it's like to be pregnant. How she would stand. How she would walk. Other than that, I just let the words fuel the emotions. In *The Descendants*, my character's past and her angst and her sarcasm are all just fueled by the tragic nature of the circumstances that she is going through. Alexander Payne's script was so brilliantly written that there wasn't a whole lot for me to do. I just had to have my lines memorized and submit myself to the moment. When George is telling me that my mom is not going to wake up from a coma, the emotion is naturally going to pour out because George is a phenomenal actor, the words are so truthful, and it's a really tragic situation. It was all about investing myself in the truthfulness of the moment and being vulnerable.

Molly Ringwald plays your mom on "The Secret Life of the American Teenager." Are you a fan of her 1980s movies?

I am now, but I didn't know who Molly Ringwald was before I got "The Secret Life." I like to think of myself as a very well educated human, but I'm very uneducated when it comes to the industry. Before *The Descendants*, I didn't know who Alexander Payne was! So when I first started working with Molly, of course, I watched her movies because everyone was saying, "Molly Ringwald is playing your mom!" and I was like, "Who is Molly Ringwald?" [laughs] But yeah, I love *The Breakfast Club* [1985]. It never gets old. Molly has become like an older sister to me. I'm so grateful for her friendship.

Did your experience of working on "The Secret Life of the American Teenager" help you on the set of *The Descendants* in any way?

TV and film are very different. Working on a TV show, you do many scenes a day. You have to have your lines memorized. You have to show up on time. George, coming from "ER" [1994-1999], said that a lot of TV actors have an advantage over straight film actors because they learn the professionalism that a lot of film actors don't learn. They know what needs to be done in order to make something come in on budget and on time.

How did you get involved with *The Descendants*?

It was a standard auditioning process. I went in and I said the lines and I left. Alexander said that he would love to cast me, but he was going to audition every girl in Hawaii and if there was a girl better suited for the role than me, he would personally let me know. And that, to me, was enough! I didn't need to book it. I was just grateful for hearing that from him. A month later, he called me and let me know that I booked it.

Alexander Payne called you?

Yes. He personally calls everyone he hires.

What did you do to celebrate?

I cried for hours. I was so grateful. I was living in New York by myself, so I wasn't around any family or friends.

What were you doing in New York?

"The Secret Life" was on hiatus after its second season. I knew I'd be going back to doing the show, but I wanted to do something different for a few months, so I moved to New York and got a job working at American Apparel. I quit American Apparel when I got The Descendants and moved straight from New York to Hawaii to start filming.

Why were you working at American Apparel?

I applied to a bunch of places and American Apparel was the only one that hired me. [laughs]

Lead actors on current TV shows don't typically work in retail. Did you need a job?

No, but I wanted to work. And it was an amazing experience. I worked every day of the week, full time. I met new people, I got to hang clothes for 10 hours a day, I got to walk to and from work. I loved it!

What was it like to meet George Clooney for the first time?

It was at the table read. I was not at all nervous about meeting him, until he walked in! [laughs] Then I got very nervous! He walked up to me and gave me a giant hug and said, "Welcome, sweetie." And immediately, the intimidation went away. He's such a grounded, humble and generous human being that it's easy to forget that he's a huge, famous movie star. He's one of the most giving people I've ever met.

What have you learned from your time with him?

Philanthropy. Generosity beyond measure. Gratitude. That man is so grateful for his life. And not for the materialism that's involved with his success, but for the ability to give back as much as he possibly can. He embodies the word philanthropy. If he sees a family who is struggling, he'll go up to them and say, "Here's a meal for the next month. Go to this restaurant." He doesn't boast about it. He doesn't talk about it. He just does things out of the bigness of his heart. It's generosity and gratitude. The two G's. He's a G. [laughs]

What kind of notes, advice, or suggestions does Alexander Payne give his actors?

Alexander is really keen on authenticity. The Descendants takes place in Hawaii, so George and I arrived in Hawaii three weeks prior to filming just to get to know the culture of the islands. Alexander wanted this film to be made for the Hawaiians. He wanted the locals to be properly represented. Alexander really gets to know you as a person. The best direction he ever gave me was, "You're not being you. Be Shai." And that immediately resonated with me. He gets to know you so well that he can tell when you are "acting" as opposed to just being yourself within the restrictions and the role of the particular character. At the table read, he said, "I cast you all to

be you, so please don't act at all. I want you to just be you." And I think that's why every actor wants to work with him. He gives you the freedom to be yourself within the guidelines of a particular character.

Do you currently study with an acting coach?

I do. On and off. I'll do it for a few months, take a few months off, do it for another few months. I go to various different acting studios. Right now, I'm studying with Anthony Meindl. He's amazing! I always say that I've learned nothing about acting from my acting teachers, but I've learned a whole lot about myself.

Everyone is very impressed with your work in *The Descendants*. How does watching the film make you feel?

When I watch the film, it brings back so many memories of things that inspired me as a person. The four months I spent in Hawaii were the four months that shaped my young adult life. I learned so much and grew so much as a human being, on a very personal level. I don't really watch the film and think, "Good job on this, Shai, and bad job on that." I do like watching myself, occasionally, because I think I'm my own best critic and I can learn from my performances, but, for the most part, when I watch *The Descendants*, it's like looking through a memory book.

What are your favorite memories from your time in Hawaii?

Everything! Every single day. Hiking, snorkeling, kayaking, climbing up waterfalls, jumping off waterfalls, doing things we never should've been doing! Climbing 10,000 stairs up into the fog. On the set, everyone was so full of positive energy, so happy to be making this amazing piece of art in Hawaii. It was magical!

Who else do you think you'd enjoy working with in future projects?

I'd love to work with Danny Boyle, Terrence Malick, Darren Aronofsky.

Do you think you will always want to be an actor or is there something else you may want to do for a living at some point?

I'll always want to act. It's what gives me butterflies. I want to do it for the rest of my life. And I also want to be an herbalist. So I'll be an herbalist in addition to being an actor. It's a very, very lucky situation. [laughs]

The Descendants is now in theaters. "The Secret Life of the American Teenager" airs on ABC Family.