

Arts & Letters

FILM

[Michael Clayton]

The Fixer Is In

By Steve Sailer

LAST YEAR, “NBC Nightly News” edited a segment to make it appear that I was debating George Clooney over whether moviegoers were interested in his social conscience. As an admittedly biased observer of the dispute, I’d say that Clooney’s roguish charm absolutely crushed my tiresome logic.

Now Clooney’s anti-corporate thriller “Michael Clayton” is one of the best-reviewed films of the year, with critics ecstatically comparing it to their favorite anti-establishment films of the 1970s. And indeed, it is competently made. Yet it has generated little excitement at the box office.

“Michael Clayton” illustrates how dull even natural stars like Clooney and intelligent filmmakers like Tony Gilroy (moving up to direct after writing the “Bourne” trilogy) can be when they set out to make “serious” (self-important) and “political” (leftist) movies. “Michael Clayton” is a domestic “Syriana,” the morose 2005 film about an evil oil company that won Clooney an Academy Award for growing a beard and putting on 30 pounds. (Hey, I did that years before George even thought of it.)

In “Michael Clayton,” Clooney plays a Queens-born lawyer with a Fordham degree working at a top Manhattan cor-

porate law firm otherwise staffed by WASP and Jewish Ivy Leaguers. They won’t make him a partner because he’s outclassed intellectually, but when high finance turns tabloid, only he, a former prosecutor with a brother in the NYPD, can tap the municipal “favor bank.” When a CEO client hits a jogger with his Jaguar and runs off, Clooney/Clayton is brought in as the fixer.

The screenplay, though, fails to exploit the intriguing ethnic angles. Rather, it churns out the same old plot about a murderous multinational rubbing out whomever gets in its carcinogenic way.

Tilda Swinton, so aristocratic and androgynous that she makes Cate Blanchett look like Angelina Jolie, plays the corporate counsel for UNorth, which peddles its cancer-causing herbicide in 62 countries. She pays Clooney’s law firm tens of millions to fight weed-killer lawsuits, but then their lead defense attorney goes all Howard Beale of “Network,” stripping naked while ranting during a deposition about how working for UNorth has put blood on his hands

This sounds entertaining, but isn’t because auteur Gilroy ignores even the ripest targets for satire, such as the plaintiffs’ contingency-fee attorneys, always a colorful subspecies (*Homo avaricious vulgaris*). Instead, he maintains a steady tone of doleful indignation.

Our common law doesn’t work well with cases in which blame can only be assigned statistically. Say the defendant’s herbicide raises the chance of cancer by 50 percent. So one out of three customers who get cancer are victims of the company, while two out of three aren’t. But science can’t tell which is which. The contingency-fee attorneys bring suits from everybody who might

have been harmed, while the defense tries to insinuate to the jury that the plaintiff deserved to get cancer. It’s an ugly but fascinating slice of modern Americana but not one you’ll hear anything about from the one-sided “Michael Clayton.”

Clooney’s fixer has to get the litigator back on his manic-depression medicines so the firm can stiff some more widows and orphans for UNorth. This plunges him into a dark night of the soul, which Clooney portrays by moping around sullenly for two hours. Can somebody please tell George that he’s not an actor—he’s a movie star? If I want to see somebody looking tired, ineffectual, and beaten down by life, well, I’ve got a mirror.

Then Swinton calls in an executive-outcomes firm to murder Wilkinson before the renegade defense attorney spills UNorth’s secrets. Next, she has a bomb placed in Clooney’s car.

Swinton can play over-the-top villains such as the White Witch in “Narnia” and an Archangel Gabriel in league with his former colleague Lucifer in “Constantine.” Here, though, she realistically embodies a common type, the lady lawyer whose biological clock is barely ticking. She’s fine at it, but the authenticity of her performance combined with the absurdity of Gilroy’s plot wrecks the movie because corporate yuppettes don’t kill people.

Only at the very end does Clooney finally turn on the charisma, and that’s just to point out the stupidity of the storyline. He explains to Tilda Swinton that he’s having her arrested because, “I’m not the guy you kill. I’m the guy you buy off!” Good point, George, but it’s a little late to be bringing it up... ■

Rated R for language.

BOOKS

[*Heroic Conservatism: Why Republicans Need to Embrace America's Ideals*, Michael J. Gerson, HarperOne, 292 pages]

The Gospel According to Gerson

By Kara Hopkins

IF YOU RECOGNIZE Michael Gerson's name, it's because he wasn't very good at his job. The second task of a speechwriter is to make an ineloquent boss sound like he's channeling Cicero in his own accent. The first is to disappear.

But Gerson isn't one for the wings. The profile writers' darling wasn't content to script a president; he wanted to shape policy—and claim credit. In the opening scene of his new book, *Heroic Conservatism*, Gerson recalls a November 2002 Oval Office meeting about a plan to spend \$15 billion to fight AIDS in Africa—“the largest health initiative to combat a single disease in history.” Predictably, the money men were opposed, but then the president asked his scribe's opinion. “If we can do this, and we don't,” Gerson recalls himself saying, “it will be a source of shame.” *U.S. News & World Report*—the speechwriter's former employer charitably declined to name its source—published Bush's reply: “That's Gerson being Gerson.”

Gerson being Gerson gushes on about the “humanitarian conspiracy”: “I saw one of the high points of political idealism in modern history: an American president, out of moral and religious motivations, pledging billions to save the lives of non-citizens. ... here was the living, dancing evidence of what ambitious moral, effective government can accomplish.”

His book is an ode to that grand vision, as unencumbered by modesty as the author's White House tenure was. It bids to couple Christianity and conservatism in the service of great good, but in so doing diminishes both.

Gerson seems an unlikely hero: describing Bush, he writes, “He was athletic, outgoing, likeable—I was none of these things.” He acknowledges “a certain seriousness and moral intensity,” “debilitating shyness,” and discomfort with small talk—traits well-suited to the writer's garret but ill-fit for a revolutionary.

He's also an unlikely conservative: his earliest political experience was representing Jimmy Carter in a high school debate, and, when asked by the *New Yorker* to name his favorite president, he praised FDR, Truman, Kennedy, and Wilson before mentioning Reagan—“to some extent.”

But that is what heroic conservatism is about: moral fervor meets global ambition. Perhaps the former senses its prickliness—its tendency to joyless parochialism—and longs to widen its confines. The latter may perceive instability in its enthusiasm and want a tether. Together they make a potent pair—and a dangerous one.

Gerson goes on:

I am convinced that the bold use of government to serve human rights and dignity is not only a good thing, but a necessary thing. I believe the security of our country depends on idealism abroad—the promotion of liberty and hope as the alternatives to hatred and bitterness. I believe the unity of our country depends on idealism at home—a determination to care for the weak and vulnerable, and to heal racial divisions by the expansion of opportunity.

It's easy to see how from the same expansive pen flowed presidential promises to “end tyranny,” “spread freedom,” and “break the reign of hatred.”

Discerning a conservative pedigree is more difficult, for the defining instincts of the Old Right—its preference for

particular community, its caution against chasing utopia, its keen sense of the limits of politics—don't cloud his vision. Not that Gerson is deterred. He avows, as if the saying makes it so, “I am a conservative,” even offering a Burkean rationale that would pass muster with most keepers of the flame: “because I believe in the accumulated wisdom of humanity—a kind of democracy that gives a vote to the dead—expressed in the institutions and moral ideals we inherit from the past.” But then he takes a decidedly radical turn, for the “moral ideals” Gerson has in mind—“liberty, tolerance, and equality”—echo the Jacobins' own, and our pact appears to be with every inhabitant of the planet. “Our nation cherishes freedom, but we do not own it,” he wrote in a text Bush delivered from the deck of the *USS Ronald Reagan*. “While it is the birthright of every American, it is also the equal promise of the religious believer in Southern Sudan, or an Iraqi farmer in the Tigris Valley, or of a child born in China today.”

Thus the villains in Gerson's morality play aren't liberals, for whom government programs are only improved by global scope, but realists. He condemns them for “offer[ing] no millennial goal to pursue in foreign policy—neither international order, nor democratic peace.” But he sees their stock falling. With the zeal of a man who has found his moment, he exults, “After the shock of 9/11, the Republican Party—the party of realism and caution—had become the party of idealism, action, and risk.”

Those wild tendencies allowed the war on terror its global reach, but it was Gerson's brush that simultaneously made it a study in black and white. The worst of worlds combined. Where the exercise of force should have been constrained, we got a crusade, unchecked by just-war dictates or historical implausibility. And where the shadowland of conflicting interests and ancient grievance should have been afforded wide estate, we drew rigid dichotomy instead.

Where Bush begins and Gerson ends is unclear—and inconsequential. They share the same lens.