

Political potboiler 'Syriana' fails to satisfy

By Kam Williams
Special to Sentinel-Voice

George Clooney gets an A for effort for taking a steep salary cut before gaining an unflattering 30 pounds to make this timely political potboiler, especially since his ill-advised decision to handle his own stunts would backfire badly. Staging a fight scene on the set left the dedicated actor crippled by excruciating back pain and severe headaches for which he underwent a couple of corrective spinal surgeries.

So, one would hope that Clooney's commitment above and beyond the call of duty would result in a movie masterpiece that matched his level of devotion to the project. But unfortunately, despite all the early Oscar consideration buzz presently surrounding "Syriana," the film fails to measure up to its hype.

What makes this overly-ambitious espionage thriller even more of a disappointment is the fact that it was written and directed by Stephen Gaghan, 2001's Academy Award-winner for his spellbinding script adaptation of the equally-elliptical "Traffic."

That examination of the international drug trade had lots of loose ends which eventually resolved themselves rather satisfactorily.

This less expertly crafted adventure, on the other hand, is a scatter-plotted brain overload likely to have you scratching your head as you exit up the aisle.

For one can't help but feel cheated after closely following a convoluted fact pattern for over two hours only to realize that you still can't fit the pieces of the confounding, cinematic jigsaw puzzle together. In this instance, don't be surprised to find yourself wondering whether you might have missed a critical clue and, therefore, be tempted to try a second screening to comprehend it all fully.

Whether the result of a design flaw or a deliberate cinematic contrivance, "Syriana's" confusion is further exacerbated by the cumbersome cast of shallow characters who inhabit the murky waters of this hyperkinetic Persian Gulf oil saga of greed and corruption.

From inscrutable Arab sheiks, to back-stabbing double-agents, to misguided Muslim fanatics to shady lobbyists, to bungling bureaucrats, to crooked captains of industry, the dizzying-paced production never pauses long enough to imbue these simplistically-drawn archetypes with enough depth to allow the audience to invest in them emotionally.

So, instead of sorting out the good guys from the bad, "Syriana" stays thickly saturated from start to finish with insinuation and innuendo, pretentiously taking on an air of self-importance, which presumes for itself a never-earned level of sophistication.

Shot primarily on some visually striking locations around the Middle East, the film weaves a complicated web of intrigue revolving around the ruthless competition for control of the region's oil industry.

At the point of departure, we find CIA Agent Bob Barnes (Clooney) in Iran where a bungled covert operation leaves a rocket launcher in the wrong hands. In a neighboring, oil rich country we witness the simmering tensions between Prince Nasir (Alexander Siddig) and his brother, Prince Meshal (Akbar Kurtha), over which of them will ascend to the throne upon the impending demise of their aging, infirm father. Barnes' next assignment is to assassinate Nasir, a reformist who has recently approved a deal assigning lucrative drilling rights to China.

The U.S. wants Nasir taken out, because his Western-oriented sibling would be more amenable to business as usual, namely, placing American interests above that of his own people.

Then there's energy analyst Bryan Woodman (Matt Damon) who must confront an ethical dilemma after his young son dies in a tragic accident during a party thrown by Nasir. Should he accept the blood money, ostensibly offered to make amends, or will that come with strings attached?

Meanwhile, back in the U.S., high-powered attorney Bennett Holiday (Jeffrey Wright) has been hired to induce the Justice Department to approve the acquisition of Killen, a relatively small Texas oil firm, by Connex, a massive conglomerate. Connex wants Killen, which somehow landed permission to drill in the coveted fields of Kazakhstan, even though the company is currently under investigation by the government for unscrupulous practices.

Once the merger is approved, Connex plans to downsize and lay off many migrant workers from Pakistan. But will the

unemployed's disillusionment, diminished dreams and free time combine to make them easy recruits for the jihad movement?

While "Syriana" is certainly effective in its effort to illustrate the interconnectedness of the world economy in

the oil game, its overarching failing rests in its presenting the players in too impersonal a fashion. In the absence of an understanding of anyone's deeper motivations, we are expected to agree, by implication, with the flip, superficial suggestion that it's all

about the oil.

Politically paranoid, if well-intentioned, this disjointed message movie doesn't really do much more than indict the usual suspects.

Good (2 stars). Rating: R for profanity and graphic violence.

Families to change race on new television series

LOS ANGELES (AP) - A Black family learns what it's like to be White, while a White family becomes Black in the six-part documentary series "Black.White," scheduled for broadcast on the FX cable network in March.

Makeup temporarily transforms the two families for the series developed by filmmaker R.J. Cutler and actor-rapper Ice Cube.

"The loud message of the show is that we are a divided nation," said Cutler, who won an Emmy for "American High," an outstanding reality program.

"But we can come together if we're willing to talk about our differences and work to see the world through the eyes of other people."

For the run of the show, the Sparks family of Atlanta and the Wurgel family of Santa Monica share a home in the San

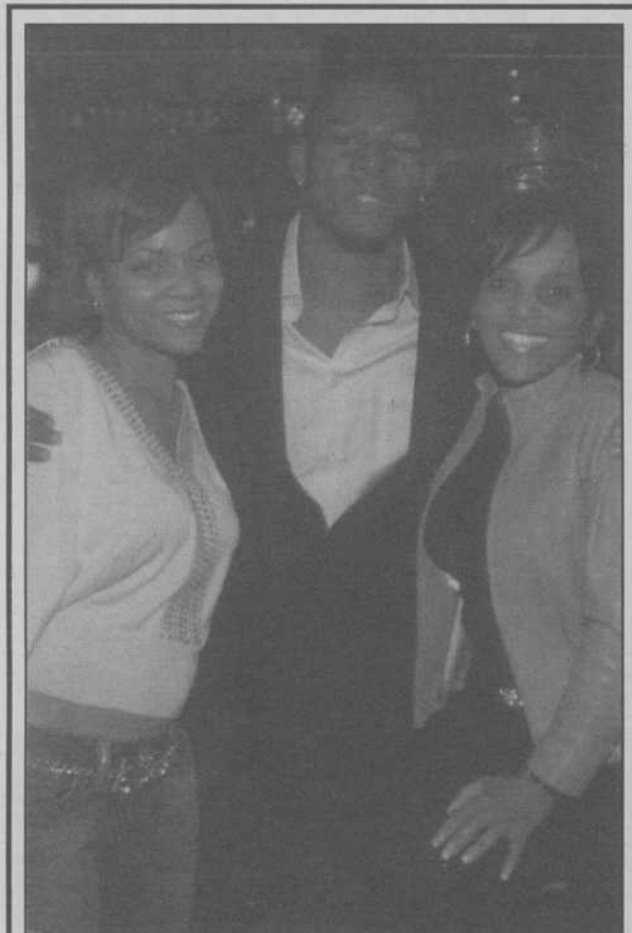
Fernando Valley.

But with makeup, Brian and Renee Sparks and their son, Nick, are transformed from Black to White. Bruno and Carmen Wurgel and their daughter, Rose, become Black. The race-changing makeup, administered by Oscar-nominated artist Keith VanderLaan, took three to five hours per family member.

"We're doing something that has never been done before that advances in makeup technology allow," said Cutler, who produced the Oscar-nominated documentary "The War Room."

The show's creators say the switch changes the families' core values in ways they could not have imagined.

"'Black.White' will force people to challenge themselves and really examine where we stand in terms of race in this country," Ice Cube said.



KING'S COURT

Photo by Marty Frierson

Undisputed middleweight boxing champ Jermain Taylor takes time out to party with the ladies at the Ice House after retaining his title last week in a rematch with Bernard Hopkins at the Mandalay Bay Events Center.

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