

Slinging It

There are two kinds of symbolism: the gilded and the golden. *In the Valley of Elah* exemplifies the first. Writer-director Paul Haggis has followed his successful 2005 effort, *Crash*, with a turgid, foolish film in which he lamely tries to dramatize how the Iraq war is harming us on the home front.

Tommy Lee Jones, his creased face sagging with stoic resignation to time, gravity, and lousy screen-writing, plays retired Army man Hank Deerfield. He lives with his wife (Susan Sarandon sans make-up) in a modest, suburban ranch in Tennessee and is a no-nonsense kind of guy. When he buys a replacement part for his car's engine, he bluntly asks the store owner, "Will it last?" The merchant replies wistfully, "Hank, you've got to trust someone." He doesn't, however. Having spent a good deal of his career in the military police, he knows more than he'd like of human perfidy.

So we're not surprised that Hank distrusts the news of his son having gone AWOL from his New Mexico Army base four days after returning from Iraq. He immediately packs an overnight bag and heads for his car. "That's a two-day drive," his wife warns. "For some," he replies with a laconic stoicism that says more than words ever could.

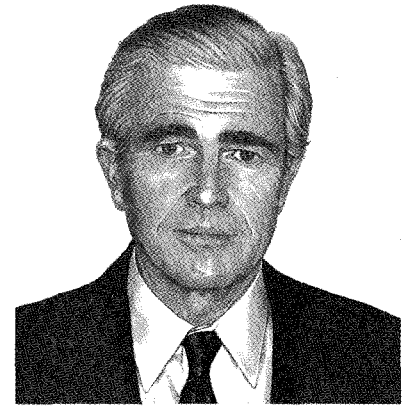
Hank does have time to stop by his son's old school to inform the Salvadoran janitor that the flag is flying upside down. Pleading ignorance of flag decorum, the janitor quickly rehoists Old Glory, stars up. It's just here the film begins to go seriously wrong. In my experience, Salvadorans, legal or illegal, know which side is up among their gringo hosts. But Haggis loves symbolism, and he needs this upside-down flag to signal his intention. I'm all for creative license, but, until this point, the film has been a downbeat, relentlessly realistic observation of ordinary American life as lived by dutiful, patriotic citizens. Haggis, however, has a message to deliver, and he doesn't trust us to get it on our own.

Shortly after arriving at the fictional Fort Rudd, Hank is informed his son has been found stabbed to death and partially burned. When the base officers provide scant details, Hank suspects a cov-

er-up and goes to the local police. There he enlists the reluctant aid of detective Emily Sanders (Charlize Theron, hilariously miscast). From this point, the narrative becomes a police procedural with some chases thrown in for good measure. In one scene, Hank's new buddy Emily chases after a burly Hispanic suspect. Theron's running, I confess, reminded me of Andrea Martin and Catherine O'Hara legging it after desperadoes when they used to play tough policewomen on *Second City TV*. With uncompromising fashion sense, the gals insisted on wearing high heels, which made for ungainly progress through Chicago's littered alleyways. Not unexpectedly, Theron fails to get her man, so Jones takes over. Despite his 61 years, he not only catches this Iraq-toughened veteran but whales the tar out of him for good measure. But don't worry. Haggis keeps things real. Theron and Jones don't engage in a victory cuddle afterward.

By the way, the captured soldier is not guilty; he's just Mexican. The answer to Hank's investigation resides in the scrambled images retrieved from the damaged cellphone found in his son's uniform. As Hank studies these traces of his son's last days, we see on the screen a confusing blur of off-kilter video accompanied by voices shouting hysterically at one another. As Hank replays these images over and over through the film, clues begin to emerge, and we await the final revelation. Unfortunately, it turns out to be infinitely less plausible than the upside-down flag: all symbol and little truth.

In a film that begs to be deciphered, there is one scene that continues to elude me. Having dinner at Emily's one night, Hank offers to read her ten-year-old son a bedtime book. She gives him C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. After reading it silently to himself for a full minute, Hank puts it aside. "I don't understand it," he shrugs and proceeds instead to tell the boy the story of David slaying Goliath in the valley of Elah, making of it a lesson on how we must conquer our fears just as David did his. Afterward, Emily remarks—quite witlessly it seems to me—that the story is not true. Hank insists it is, remarking, by way of proof, "It's



In the Valley of Elah

Produced by Blackfriars Bridge Films
and Summit Entertainment

Written and directed by Paul Haggis

Distributed by Warner
Independent Pictures

Michael Clayton

Produced by Castle Rock

Entertainment and Section 8

Written and directed by Tony Gilroy

Distributed by Warner Brothers

even in the Koran." Well, what sturdier evidence could you want? I might add that some Koranic scholars argue the Islamic version is truer than the Bible's because, 1,400 years after the original telling, Muhammad wisely pruned the story of that nonsense about a boy felling a giant with a sling. But let's not get into exegetical disputes. My question is a narrower one: What is this scene doing in the film? Is Haggis dismissing the Christian sentiment at the heart of Lewis's allegory with its emphasis on sacrifice and redemption? Is he celebrating a Hebraic dedication to vanquishing an evil enemy? Is he covering his multicultural bets and reminding us that, since Muslims claim to share our tradition, we shouldn't be killing them? Since Haggis chose the biblical site of David's victory for his title, clearly there is a lot riding on this moment, but smite me with an ox goad if I know what he means.

In *Michael Clayton*, Tony Gilroy does not display nearly the political ambition Haggis does in *Valley*, but his symbolism unmistakably meets the gold standard.

His narrative hews to one of contemporary film's most honored genres: A big, bad corporation makes obscene profits by mercilessly putting at risk the health

of the little people who have been stupid enough to live in the path of its various toxic spills. Of course, there's a multi-billion-dollar class-action lawsuit against the corporation's chieftains, who, in response, have hired a fleet of exorbitantly paid kamikaze lawyers to strafe the low-rent plaintiffs with barrage after barrage of obfuscations, delays, and bribes in hopes that they will either give up or, better yet, die off. Only those who have somehow not seen a movie for the past 40 years will be surprised by all this.

One of the pleasures of genre fiction is to watch a writer ring changes on a template. The trick is to stick with the satisfying formula but introduce a difference or two for piquancy's sake. Directing his own screenplay, Gilroy does this quite handily. For one thing, it doesn't get ensnared in the workings of the suit itself. He wisely lets them be taken for granted. It's a battle of the heartless against the heartfelt, and that's all we need to know.

The real interest has to do with the formidable but unstable lead counsel defending the corporation, the tellingly named Arthur Edens (Tom Wilkinson) and the man assigned to keep him on track, the eponymous Michael Clayton (George Clooney). Negotiating with the little people for six years, Edens has become convinced that they are right and his client is steeped in pitch. So he quits his manic-depressive medication, goes bonkers, and switches sides. To make good his conversion, he strips naked at the negotiating table, screaming that he is Shiva, the god of death. He is that serious about his rebirth. Later, we find him coming home to his bachelor loft in lower Manhattan symbolically cradling about 20 loaves of French bread under his arm. Enter Clayton to reason him back to the reservation. Edens, however, won't listen. Exasperated, Clayton says, "You want to go with God, go with God." Of course, this is just what Edens is attempting. He also wants to reestablish communion with the innocence embedded in his surname.


Wilkinson is one of those actors who seems incapable of wearing out his welcome. Here he plays the holy fool, a man whose madness makes plainest sense. Whining one moment, hurling thunderbolts the next, he's the prophet scorned in his own land. As Clayton, Clooney has the quieter role, but he convincingly registers the moral disgust of a man who has spent the past 20 years selling his soul at an insulting discount. He's not even go-

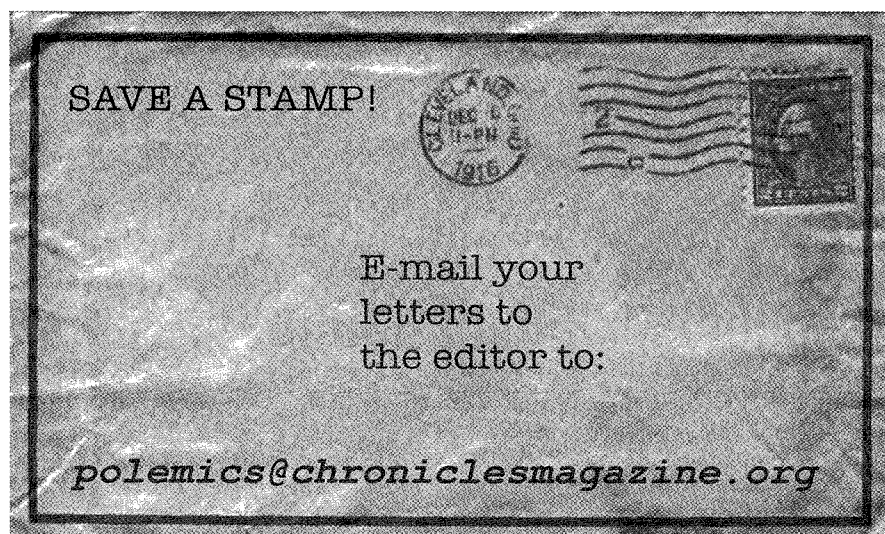
ing to become a firm partner for his humiliation; he lacks the breeding. He's Irish, and his father and brother are New York City cops. He took his undergraduate degree at St. John's University, a working-middle-class Catholic school that has served the sons and daughters of immigrants for 137 years, and, incidentally, employs me. He then went on to Fordham Law. His background and contacts have suited him for what the firm's head calls his niche. He has become the fixer or, as he refers to himself, the janitor who cleans up legal messes. When a corporate honcho commits a hit and run, Clayton knows just whom to call to smother the inevitable police investigation. And when Edens has one of his periodic breakdowns, he is responsible for helping the madman make peace with his demons so he can return to a lawyer's proper duties, chief among which is stealing from the poor to ensure the rich stay that way. Only this time, there will be complications. It seems the corporate client recently hired for its chief in-house counsel the wonderfully named Karen Crowder (Tilda Swinton), a woman with instincts that would shame Catherine de Medici. Learning of Edens' mental difficulties, she outsources an investigation to a private security team. When the lead snooper reports that Edens has acquired the one memo that incontrovertibly proves the corporation guilty, she darkly inquires in transparent legalese whether he can offer an option "I'm not thinking about."

Gilroy, who wrote the scripts for the *Bourne* movies, has eschewed their frenetic editing for a much more considered, even stately style. His film comprises close-up and tight middle-range shots, except for a magisterial long shot at both its beginning and its conclusion in which

Clayton visits a Westchester horse pasture. The camera drops back to reveal in the distance three horses standing silently on a rise. As I watched this strangely serene moment, I was annoyed to notice that someone in the front row had stood up and was walking toward the screen. As his silhouetted shadow broke into the screen's bottom border, I silently cursed the ill manners of today's movie patrons. Then, I noticed that the figure was, improbably enough, climbing the hill in the shot. The film then cut to a closer view, and the figure was revealed to be Clooney struggling across the grass to reach the horses.

What a clever illusion, I thought. Later, I realized it was something more. Clayton's walk into the bottom of this long shot suggests that he has stepped right out of the movie we have been watching, the one filled with suffocating close-ups of people calculating moment by moment how much of their souls they are willing to surrender to the daily hustle of getting and spending. Visually departing from this crowded world of compromise, Clayton enters an uncluttered pasture. The horses snuffle at him peaceably. For an enchanted moment, Clayton becomes Gulliver escaping from all the noisome bleatings of his bustling Yahoo brethren to commune with the preternatural Houyhnhnms, those wonderfully poised Edenic horses. He stares at them in wordless wonder as they regard him with what seems a blessed amusement.

By having Clayton step into the frame as if he had been a member of the audience, Gilroy invites us to follow. It is his call to action. Isn't it time we joined madman Edens? he seems to ask. Isn't it time we resigned from what the world laughably deems sanity? 



A Close Encounter With the Enemy

Following his conversation with Jacinta Ruiz, Héctor took down from its shelf the statue of the Centaur that had been gathering a coat of the fine yellow dust blown in from the Chihuahuan Desert through chinks in the ranch-house walls and put it away in the closet, and he did not visit the Pink House again until after Jesús "Eddie's" return from Belen more than a week later. Even then, he managed to find excuses to hang out at Geronimo's in Deming instead, until Jesús "Eddie," growing impatient, resisted.

"Listen, *hombre*, it is safer drinking in Mexico, away from the interstate where the terrorists are. Did you know that Indians—those black ones from India, not the Apache—own two motels in Deming? Not all Indians are Buddhists, *compadrito*. Millions and millions of them are Islamists, wanting to come here to this country to answer the phones for us! You can smell the curry from one end of the town to the other! Who knows if Abdul Kahn has friends there to watch us, Héctor! Besides—the beer is cheaper at the Pink House, while Jacinta Ruiz—she likes us, *compadrito*!" Jesús "Eddie" finished with a lecherous smirk at his friend, accompanied by a dig in the ribs with his elbow. The fact was, he'd missed the presence of both Contracepción and Jacinta during his sojourn upriver.

So Héctor consented, with acute misgivings, to pay the Pink House another visit. He was in a grudging mood to start with, a reflection in part of his family's simmering resentment at the Juárezes' return to the ranch house. Héctor was too honest a man to overlook the fact that the place was, after all, the property of his friend, or anyway of the Juárez family, and that Jesús "Eddie" and Beatriz had shown the Villas an act of great kindness and generosity in allowing them to hide out here in a time of grave peril. Only, life had been so comfortable in their absence! Contracepción had appropriated to herself the second bedroom and carried the single TV in there, in the face of AveMaría's and Dubya's vociferous protests. (In this dispute, Héctor had taken his daughter's part, inviting his wife's sympathy on behalf of a

preteen girl marooned on a frigid desert in winter and deprived of friends, school, and shopping, while promising Dubya access to Animal Planet for one full hour before bedtime.) It had not helped that the Juárezes had arrived without warning from Belen to find most of Contracepción's wardrobe, including a voluminous assortment of girlish underthings, mixed in with piles of CDs and magazines, spread across the bed and around the room. Though Jesús "Eddie" had been gratifyingly nonchalant about the mess, Beatriz had seemed somewhat miffed. And now the holiday season was coming, with the dismal prospect of the two families having to endure Christmas together under a single (and rather narrow, as well as leaky) roof. As Jesús "Eddie" had reported that Belen continued to be amok with rampaging A-rabs, the chances of their returning home for the holidays appeared less than nothing.

"OK," Héctor agreed, "but only for a couple of beers. I need to be up early to drive to Silver City in the morning. Anyway, AveMaría doesn't like it when I stay out partying until eleven or eleven-thirty at night."

"Beatriz didn't use to, neither," Jesús "Eddie" told him. "Said she expected her husband to stay home nights and talk to her. I said, 'When did I ever do anything when I'm home 'cept drink beer and watch TV?' And what do you think was her answer to that, *hombre*? Said, 'You know, you're right. This way, I get to watch *Seinfeld*, 'stead of having to watch you watch sports programs!'"

Because Héctor's van had just enough gas left to get as far as Deming in the morning and gasoline was at nearly \$3.50 per gallon in Columbus, they took Jesús "Eddie's" pickup. Héctor got behind the wheel, as Jesús's license was suspended for weeks yet. He drove slowly—so slowly that Jesús "Eddie" protested impatiently.

"*Compadrito*, you drive like an old Anglo woman with blue hair! This is a Dodge diesel, not a Buick Park Avenue. I have a thirst, *hombre*! At this speed, we arrive at midnight and have to sleep over!"

Héctor, goaded by even the thought of



such a catastrophe, goosed the engine to 70 mph, so that, less than a quarter of an hour later, the truck rattled across the final cattle guard and was waved through at the border crossing by the sleepy Mexican officer seated before a flickering portable TV set.

"He knows us by now," Jesús "Eddie" boasted. "We could bring a load of guns through here, no trouble—start our own Mexican Revolution! *That* would get the Anglos' attention, *hombre*!"

At the Pink House, Jacinta Ruiz acted very glad to see them again.

"¡Ah, Señor Jesús!" she greeted Jesús "Eddie." "I am glad you are back with us! It is so good to see you again, and now Héctor's wife will not worry when he is out late alone at night!"

There were fewer drinkers than usual in the restaurant, allowing Jacinta—to Héctor's painful discomfort—plenty of time to sit with him and Jesús "Eddie." While being pleasant to both of them, her manner with Héctor seemed special, combining coyness with a feline concentration Jesús "Eddie" failed to observe but that flattered and excited Héctor, in spite of himself. He had never known a woman like Jacinta Ruiz, he thought—at least, such a woman had not shown such interest in him in a long, long time; not, so far as he could remember, since before his marriage. Reminded in this way of his marital vows, Héctor felt very guilty indeed.

To rid himself of the bad feeling, he drank more beer than was good for him and made no protest as Jesús "Eddie" ordered one round after the other. They sat later than usual. It was a quarter to midnight when they told Jacinta good night and wandered out into the cold desert in search of the pickup. Héctor offered to drive, but Jesús "Eddie" said it was all right, he felt sober as the Pope and knew a detour by back road through the desert