

MY (ALMOST) VALENTINE: He loves me....He loves me not....He loves me....He loves me not....Well, probably not.

George Clooney didn't send red roses on Valentine's Day, but he was awfully nice when we met the other day.

It was late. The restaurant was romantically lit with candles. But Clooney and I were at separate tables. I made eye contact, waited until his drink -- vodka-soda, lots of ice -- arrived and I faked a trip to the powder room in order to swing by his party of three.

I melted from reporter to weak-kneed, tongue-tied fan.

"Hi," I offered with a big smile.

"Hi, I'm George," said [George Timothy Clooney] as he smiled back and reached toward me with a solid, warm handshake. "And this is actor [Sam Rockwell] and one of our producers, [Amy Cohen]."

"How are you enjoying Montreal?" I probed. My social dexterity faltered. The skills of flirtation fluttered away.

[Clooney:] "I love it! Everyone is really nice," turning on the small-town Kentucky charm.

[Q.] Hey, how about the Canadian-eh winter?

[Clooney:] "We're managing...so far most days haven't been too cold and we've been shooting indoors a lot...but we? I spend some time outside soon and that will be tougher.?"

[Q.] Which do you like better -- acting or directing?

"I've only been directing for a few days," Clooney said with a laugh and the smile that has turned millions of female fans to liquid.

[Q.] Who has been an inspiration for you?

"The [Coen] brothers," he said after a moment's thought.

Clooney starred in the Coen brothers' quirky 2001 flick, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* so we might conclude that *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, the movie Clooney is in Montreal to direct and act in, will have some of their trademark elements. [Ethan] and [Joel Coen] featured lots of eccentric characters, funky music, sly humour, and colourful speech in *Fargo*, *Raising Arizona* and *Barton Fink*.

For his part, Clooney has been more of an action hero in *Batman & Robin* (?97) (which he has said "wasn't very good" but made him independently wealthy), and the gritty Gulf War drama *Three Kings*, followed by the sensitive, but swashbuckling fishing boat captain in *The Perfect Storm*, (2000). Of late, he's a hit as ex-con [Danny Ocean] in the Las Vegas caper, *Ocean's Eleven*.

Clooney hit the spotlight in a big, big way in 1994 as the womanizing pediatrician in [Michael Crichton's] smash medical TV series *ER*, but he also had a series of gigs on the sitcoms [The Facts of Life] (1985) and [Roseanne] (1988), *Baby Talk* (1991) as well as the police drama *Bodies of Evidence* (1992). The worst scenario was when he played [Chick Chesbro], the cop who rode Harley-Davidsons, in a 1990 clunker called *Sunset Beat*, which was cancelled after only one painful episode. Omigod...How bad could it have been?

Hey! Back to the present. When we met -- all too briefly -- [Gorgeous George] looked like a hard-working guy of 41, tired after a day on the set that finished at 10 p.m., and a little scruffy in a dark T-shirt and jogging pants. He's sporting a [Clark Gable]-style "pencil" mustache -- don't panic, you women who bristle at the thought of facial hair -- it's only for his role in *Confessions*.

Study Clooney stands about 5'11", and maybe because he works out about three times a week, he appears leaner than the chunky, hunky, baby-faced doc on *ER*.

Now he's more mature, an innovative film-maker who's directing about 100 crew and A-list cast members, including the \$20 million woman [Julia Roberts], as well as [Drew Barrymore] and his *Ocean's Eleven* pals, [Brad Pitt] and [Matt Damon].

All this screen action from the guy whose first choice of career was baseball! Clooney once tried out as a centre fielder for the Cincinnati Reds, and tho his batting was acceptable, his throwing didn't make the cut.

O brother! The waiter arrived with Clooney's late supper and he turned back to his friends to talk movie talk.

This is a Hollywood leading man who has been married once ("never again," he has said) and recently loosely linked with [Renee (ACUTE) Zellweger, Nicole Kidman], model [Lisa Snowden], and others.

I guess he loves me not.