

'My Dead Friend Zoe' Review: Sonequa Martin-Green Gives One of the Year's Best Performances | SXSW 2024

Also starring Natalie Morales, Ed Harris, and Morgan Freeman, 'My Dead Friend Zoe' is a hilarious and heartbreaking film.

BY MATT DONATO PUBLISHED MAR 11, 2024



☰ THE BIG PICTURE

- **Kyle Hausmann-Stokes channels his Army background into a feature debut with tremendous emotional strength.**
- **Sonequa Martin-Green delivers what can easily be described as one of the best performances of the year.**
- **Natalie Morales makes for one of the most charming and effervescent performers on the planet.**

Former Army paratrooper and Iraq veteran **Kyle Hausmann-Stokes** co-writes and directs a staggeringly impactful South by Southwest premiere about military veterans dealing with PTSD. [My Dead Friend Zoe](#), adapted from the filmmaker's short, *Merit x Zoe*, is inspired by two of Hausmann-Stokes' platoonmates: Luis Ramirez-Jimenez and Boris Ventura. Suffice it to say, *My Dead Friend Zoe* is an immensely heavy dedication to the soldiers who wrestle with post-traumatic stress, so compassionately told by Hausmann-Stokes alongside co-writer **A.J. Bermudez** and co-storyteller **Cherish Chen**. There are veterans behind the camera, veterans in front of the camera, and veterans on the minds of everyone involved in this project — **Hausmann-Stokes wants to see the military represented correctly by Hollywood.**

What Is 'My Dead Friend Zoe' About?

[Sonequa Martin-Green](#) stars in a powerhouse role as Merit, an Afghanistan veteran who served as a mechanic alongside her base bestie Zoe (**Natalie Morales**). Merit is now home on American soil, struggling with PTSD and plagued by the ghost of Zoe. She attends court-mandated meetings led by Vietnam veteran Dr. Cole ([Morgan Freeman](#)) with other troubled veterans, but refuses to expose her wartime vulnerabilities (as Zoe mocks other attendees). Her once-deployed grandfather Dale ([Ed Harris](#)) is diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's, so she uses the opportunity to serve as his caretaker and escape the world's demands to reveal what's shredding her insides. Merit would rather live with Zoe's memory as a constant reminder of what happened than move on, which as the narrative explores, only leads to madness or worse.

The care and understanding that goes into *My Dead Friend Zoe* is supremely evident, brimming with blunt, on-the-nose dialogue that speaks "military to military." The script addresses multiple generations' worth of PTSD as Zoe butts heads with Dale, Harris' stubborn, leathery Vietnam survivor who tells his niece about "his day," when there was no sympathy for veterans, and they'd get spit on at airports. There's so much to dissect about the way veterans are treated once home, what they're trained to do on the battlefield, and how they feel sequestered from

society, unable to share what the non-serving population could never comprehend.

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My Dead Friend Zoe opens wounds and douses them in peroxide — the immediate sensation stings, but eventually cleanses and soothes.

Sonequa Martin-Green Is Giving One of the Year's Best Performances

Image via SXSW

The logo for SXSW 2024 is displayed in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters 'SXSW' are on the top line, followed by a registered trademark symbol (®) and a large, stylized arrow pointing down and to the right. Below this, the year '2024' is written in a similar bold, sans-serif font.

Hausmann-Stokes handles the ghost story element rather well, considering how supernatural influences could weaken the messages present. *My Dead Friend Zoe* allows Merit and Zoe to be playful about their banter, whether watching *M.A.S.H.* to drinking game rules or remarking about Dale's out-of-order lakeside manor — but this is Merit's story. Her unhealthy decisions lead to hallucinations, and there has to come a time when she stops grieving Zoe's death in isolation. That's not easy, something that a non-combatant can't fathom, but Hausmann-Stokes succeeds in helping someone like myself understand the scenario from a former soldier's perspective. **Martin-Green and Morales are infectious together**, whether belting **Rihanna's** "Umbrella" or fearing for one another's lives, drawing pitch-black humor and tear-soaked admissions out of what are technically imaginary interactions.

Martin-Green herself steals a show that doesn't have an ounce of dead weight, a testament to the actress' ability to become Merit, an escape artist who symbolically goes for mind-clearing exercise jogs away from reality. No matter who she's sharing a scene with, she's always the star. The way she dodges Freeman's questions when Dr. Cole tries to break down her walls in group, or the swelling pride she feels when standing tall next to Harris' grandpa as service members during a 4th of July celebration. **Utkarsh Ambudkar** shows up as a sweetheart of a love interest who softens Merti's guard, which unlocks yet another dynamic to Martin-Green's phenomenally complex performance. The way she handles PTSD attacks in crowded bars, connects with an elder veteran, or reflects on the person she's been and the person she avoids showing people is the kind of meaty role that Martin-Green deserves. **She's no doubt delivered one of the best performances of not only South by Southwest 2024, but possibly of the year.**

'My Dead Friend Zoe' Makes Sure Military Voice Are Heard in This Universal Story

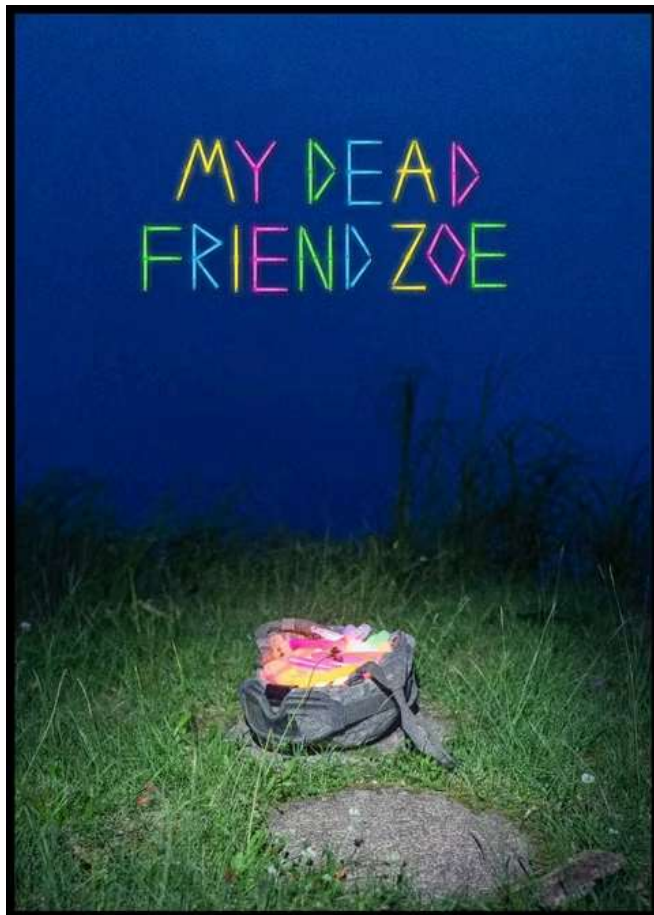
While *My Dead Friend Zoe* is extremely military-centric, it's still a universal story. Merit's inability to confront the causes of her PTSD, at its roots, spotlights a relatable problem with bottling emotions. How she feels when starting to let her calluses heal, the labored sighs of relief, the flow of waterworks might all come from Afghanistan memories suffered and stashed away; Hausmann-Stokes fingers a pulse that beats at the same rhythm of any human heart. *My Dead Friend Zoe* isn't a negatively Army-coded drama that barricades outsiders from feeling Merit's wartorn pains. As I type this review, I can feel my eyes watering again, the tremble of a lip, fighting back tears that I could not for the last twenty or so minutes of Merit's introspective confrontations. **Hausmann-Stokes takes instances of loneliness and abandonment felt by his characters and ensures that active and retired service members have their voices heard** – however, this is still a story for everyone.

I mean it when I throw words like "important" in my reviews. *My Dead Friend Zoe* feels like such an important watch because while many of us have not served the

If you know someone who has or is currently enlisted.

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...makes delicate conversations easier by putting Merit's experiences on screen. *My Dead Friend Zoe* might bill itself as a comedy, and you will laugh — Natalie Morales could make us laugh as the Grim Reaper in an orphanage — but be sure to bring the tissues because **this movie is a heartbreaker in the best, most fulfilling way**. Don't expect a candy coating or padded landing as the film deals with life after war, dementia, or feelings of worthlessness in a world that'll leave you behind without a blink. *My Dead Friend Zoe* is the real deal, and that's why it deserves your utmost attention.



[My Dead Friend Zoe \(2024\)](#)

My Dead Friend Zoe is an astounding character study that bursts with feelings both tragic and rewarding on unheard of levels for a feature debut.

9
10

Pros

- + I can't say enough good things about Sonequa Martin-Green.
- + The entire ensemble is firing on all cylinders.
- + An organic exploration of post-war PTSD made and starring the people who've seen or experienced its effect up close.
- + Cuts right to the heart and soul of the story's issue.

Cons

- Doesn't avoid a few small dramatic tropes.
- You might need to restock your tissues.

My Dead Friend Zoe made its debut at the 2024 South by Southwest Film Festival.