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'My Dead Friend Zoe' Review: Kyle Hausmann-Stokes Film Unveils The Invisible Wounds Of War – SXSW

By [Valerie Complex](#)

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Director: Kyle Hausmann-Stokes Caption: Ed Harris, Sonequa Martin-Green and Natalie Morales in MY DEAD FRIEND ZOE. SXSW

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My Dead Friend Zoe, directed by Kyle Hausmann-Stokes and co-written with AJ Bermudez, weaves a complex tapestry from trauma, memory and the enduring strength of human connection. Starring Sonequa Martin-Green and Natalie Morales in the lead roles, with support from Utkarsh Ambudkar, Ed Harris, Gloria Reuben and Morgan Freeman, this film delves deep into the psychological aftermath of warfare, presenting a narrative that is both intimate and expansive.



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The film opens on the dusty roads of Afghanistan, introducing us to Zoe (Morales) and Merit (Green), two army friends whose camaraderie in the face of adversity sets the stage for the story's exploration of the impact of military service on personal identity and mental health. From the outset, *My Dead Friend Zoe* establishes itself as a film unafraid to tackle the complexities of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the ways in which it infiltrates the lives of those it touches.

One of the film's most striking features is its handling of Zoe as a figment of Merit's imagination—a narrative choice that encapsulates the haunting persistence of memory and the invisible wounds of war. This element not only serves as a poignant reminder of the loss and grief that accompany combat

Merit's journey is one of internal struggle as she faces the realities of life after service, including the onset of her grandfather Dale's (Ed Harris) Alzheimer's and the legal and emotional ramifications of her near-fatal altercation with a coworker. The film's exploration of Merit's psyche is both nuanced and compelling, offering a window into the soul of a woman caught between the past and the present, duty and family, survival and recovery.

My Dead Friend Zoe excels in its portrayal of characters that feel real. The film's authenticity is further bolstered by its attention to the intricacies of military life and the subtle visual cues that will resonate with those who know what they are looking at. This attention to detail enriches the story, grounding the elements of Zoe's apparition in a reality that is unmistakably three-dimensional which is thanks to the intercutting of scenes from Merit and Zoe's deployment with their present-day struggles. This offers a layered understanding of their relationship and the bonds forged in conflict.

Moreover, the film's focus on characters of color and the community that forms around those most affected by trauma are the script's most powerful assets. This film celebrates the power of community in the healing process, showcasing the collective strength that emerges in the face of individual suffering. This aspect shines through due to the standout performances across the board, with Martin-Green delivering a multifaceted portrayal of Merit that captures the full spectrum of her emotional journey. Natalie Morales shines as both the comic relief and a poignant reminder of the cost of war, while Ed Harris and Morgan Freeman further elevate the viewing experience.

While the film occasionally falters in its pacing and could benefit from a tighter focus on the core relationship between Merit and Zoe, these are minor in the context of its overall achievement. *My Dead Friend Zoe* is a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the imperative to provide better support for our veterans. It is a film that challenges its audience to reflect on the collective responsibility to ensure their well-being long after their service has ended.

Title: *My Dead Friend Zoe*

Festival: [SXSW](#) (Narrative Spotlight)

Studio: Legion M/Radiant Media Studios

Director: Kyle Hausmann-Stokes

Screenwriters: Kyle Hausmann-Stokes and AJ Bermudez

Cast: Sonequa Martin-Green, Natalie Morales, Utkarsh Ambudkar, Ed Harris, Gloria Reuben, and Morgan Freeman

Running time: 1 hr 38 min

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