

SXSW

'My Dead Friend Zoe' Review: Complex Veteran Grief Takes the Spotlight with Valiant Performances

The SXSW feature debut comes from army veteran Kyle Hausmann-Stokes, based on real-life experiences with his platoon mates.

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'My Dead Friend Zoe' *Courtesy of SXSW*

Grief is a funny thing — sometimes literally. Much of the best [film](#) and TV on the subject has been told through the lens of comedy; from “It’s a Wonderful Life” to “Fleabag” and everything in between, there is a secret society among the grieving, who know the power of laughing at or through the pain.

In fairness, that's not the only lens through which debut feature director Kyle Hausmann-Stokes frames "My Dead Friend Zoe," the story of a shattered veteran (Sonequa Martin-Green) haunted by the ongoing presence of her deceased platoon mate (Natalie Morales). Hausmann-Stokes, who co-wrote the film with AJ Bermudez, has been vocal about the personal nature of this story — including in the film's post-credits — but even if he hadn't, "My Dead Friend Zoe" is possessed of a realism that has to come from heartbreaking firsthand experience.

The film opens on Merit (Martin-Green) and Zoe (Morales) during their tour, belting Rihanna's "Umbrella" while they wait in a truck — a familiar, ominous set up for any moviegoer, but which does not devolve into flames and gunfire, which most Hollywood directors would be tempted to use as a crutch. Chances are that Hausmann-Stokes — and the team of fellow vets behind-the-scenes or in front of the camera — has seen enough bloodshed, and is astute enough to know that his film's audience doesn't need more of that imagery either.

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In the present day, Merit and Zoe navigate civilian life — except that Zoe is no longer with us, just a projection of Merit's mind. Merit's grandfather (Ed Harris) is showing early signs of Alzheimer's, so she spends some time with the man who inspired her to enter the armed forces, all while running (often literally) from the specter of Zoe and the prospect of talking about her in group therapy (led by a stoic and calming Morgan Freeman).

Merit's day-to-day and intertwining troubles provide a comforting indie-film blanket for the audience, reminiscent of any coming-of-age story where the hero endures minor mishaps while escaping the unbearable. Against that

backdrop, a deliberately erratic build-up of Merit and Zoe's time in the service and how she died, composer Hausmann-Stokes and cinematographer Matt Sakatani Roe mirror the jarring feel of PTSD.

All of this is held together masterfully by Martin-Green, who you cannot look away from. Merit is sharp of mind and wit, cares deeply about her friends and family, but she's also constantly teetering between holding it together and raw, uncontrollable anguish — often instigated by the apparition of Zoe. As a crystallized memory, Morales' role is by design less dynamic, but her performance hits every necessary note of charming, vulnerable, snarky, and at times manipulative (even with extremely limited material in the way of backstory and motivation). Ed Harris is nothing short of a force as Merit's retired Lieutenant-Colonel grandfather, commanding his handful of scenes and pairing mesmerizingly with Martin-Green.

And though “My Dead Friend Zoe” isn't entirely immune to filmmaking cliches of the genre (a rushed resolution feels convenient, more like someone off screen mouthed “Wrap it up!” than Merit earning a point of self-reflection), it's a visceral look at the veteran experience and the kinds of loss we can't easily describe or process, and the isolation that comes with that. That message — telegraphed clearly for and about Hausmann-Stokes' own platoon mates — comes through loud and clear.

Grade: B

“My Dead Friend Zoe” premiered at [SXSW](#) 2024. It is currently seeking U.S. distribution.

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