

OBSSESSED

ALL TV MOVIES REVIEWS HOT TAKES REALITY TV RECAPS



REVIEWS

SEE THIS

'My Dead Friend Zoe' Will Make You Laugh at the Worst Things Imaginable

SXSW 2024

This charming SXSW premiere has everything: unchecked post-traumatic stress disorder, grief, Alzheimer's Disease, and a great sense of humor about it all.

Allegra Frank Updated Mar. 10, 2024 6:46PM EDT
Deputy Entertainment Editor Published Mar. 10, 2024 1:01PM EDT



READ THIS LIST

Swayze 'Road House' Purists Should Hate Gyllenhaal's Version
NICK SCHAGER

Hugh Grant and Kate Winslet Duke It Out on 'The Regime'
FLETCHER PETERS

Ewan McGregor Almost Rescues 'A Gentleman in Moscow' Series
NICK SCHAGER

See 'Immaculate' Just for Its Gruesome, Ungodly Ending
COLEMAN SPILDE

Dear Margot Robbie, Please Let Me Cast Your 'Sims' Movie
LAURA BRADLEY

OBSESSED

TV MOVIES REVIEWS HOT TAKES REALITY TV RECAPS



 SXSW

There are few surprises in *My Dead Friend Zoe*, co-writer and director Kyle Hausmann Stokes' (and executive producer/football mega-star [Travis Kelce's](#)) feature debut. What would be another film's big twist or tearjerker moment is, after all, right there in the title. But what stirred the audience at its March 9 premiere at [SXSW Film Festival](#) was how the story of a grief-stricken woman running away from her problems—at the behest of the titular spectral bestie that continues to haunt her—imbued its familiar formula with a sense of earnestness and charm. It's a film that could easily veer into manipulative territory in lesser

OBSESSED

TV MOVIES REVIEWS HOT TAKES REALITY TV RECAPS



Adapted from [a short film](#)

inspired by Hausmann Stokes' own experiences as a veteran having lost friends to suicide, *Zoe* tells the story of Merit (Sonequa Martin-Green) and Zoe (Natalie Morales), fiercely close, Rihanna-loving, opposites-attract platoonmates—a friendship that we know from the start is doomed. The film shifts between flashbacks in Afghanistan, 2016, during Zoe and Merit's service, and the present-day, where a stony-faced Merit seems to do little but run miles every day, attend therapy sessions, and stew in pained silence alone. Except that she's never actually alone; memories of Zoe—and Zoe herself—continue to haunt her.

**Don't Miss the
Raunchiest,
Sweetest BFF
Comedy of the
Year**



OBSESSED

TV MOVIES REVIEWS HOT TAKES REALITY TV RECAPS



the film something of a ghost story. But Zoe is a funny, friendly ghost, offering biting commentary along the way: at group therapy sessions for fellow veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress symptoms, where Zoe's mockery of other attendees' stories discourages Merit from sharing her own; in Merit's home, dissuading her from taking calls from her mom; and at the hospital to pick up her Alzheimer-stricken grandfather Dale (Ed Harris), bemusedly side-eyeing his lapses in memory.

Morales has spent years honing a knack for playing the likably snarky best friend; here, she adds an impressively dark texture to that trope, as it becomes obvious how badly Zoe is holding Merit back on her journey toward recovery. Merit is at first reluctant to face the pain that Zoe's death causes her, closing herself off from friends

OBSESSED

TV MOVIES REVIEWS HOT TAKES REALITY TV RECAPS



budding romantic interest Alex (the always welcome Utkarsh Ambudkar), who manages the retirement home that Merit's mother hopes to move Dale into —Zoe begins to lash out.

These plot beats can be disappointingly predictable. It feels prescriptive, for instance, that the cute, random stranger Merit quickly turns out to be the guy in charge of the same place Merit's resisting bringing her grandfather to. When Zoe later ruins Merit and Alex's first date out of her deep-rooted fear of abandonment—that is to say, Merit's desire to engage with the real world instead of just a manifested memory—it feels annoyingly rote. Even Morgan Freeman is reduced to a perfunctory role as Dr. Cole, who leads the group therapy sessions Merit neglects to attend, whose presence serves as a progress bar for Merit's mental health. But it's the strong

OBSESSED

TV MOVIES REVIEWS HOT TAKES REALITY TV RECAPS



Homicidal Tamagotchi Hunt for Human Blood in Bogus 'Y2K'



SXSW 2024

Fletcher Peters

A large part of that is owed to its strong cast, with Ambudkar, Morales, and especially Martin-Green as clear standouts. In a just and decent world, Ambudkar would be the ascendant king of rom-coms; his chemistry with Martin-Green is instantly winning. Martin-Green does a great job of navigating scenes in which Merit juggles being present in actual conversations with listening to Zoe's irrepressible sass alongside it. And Morales has never been better than here, especially in the later scenes, where Merit finally confronts

OBSESSED

TV MOVIES REVIEWS HOT TAKES REALITY TV RECAPS



villainizes Zoe a bit toward the end, making the sequence in which we finally learn of the circumstances of Zoe's death hard-hitting.

While *My Dead Friend Zoe* isn't necessarily revelatory in what it's trying to do, its honesty in doing them is refreshing.

Hausmann Stokes dedicated the film to his own pair of "Zoes," close friends from his army days who died by suicide after returning home. And other real-life veterans populate the film's group therapy scenes, which are laden with humor to prevent the film from entering treacly territory. In transforming his intensely personal story about grief and growth into something universally affecting, Hausmann Stokes pulls off something commendable.

Allegra Frank

Deputy Entertainment Editor

X @LegsFrank