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‘My Dead Friend Zoe’ Review: A Veteran’s Creative Take on PTSD Packs the Power of Classic Capra

Executive produced by Travis Kelce, writer-director Kyle Hausmann-Stokes’ solid, well-acted debut serves as a sincere plea for audiences to support returning soldiers.

By Peter Debruge ▼



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“I’ve lost more guys here than I did in Iraq,” testifies a veteran during one of the many group therapy sessions featured in “[My Dead Friend Zoe](#),” [Kyle Hausmann-Stokes’](#) affecting look at mental health

among ex-servicepeople. Two decades of life experience and personal loss have led the filmmaker to this project, which was inspired by the deaths of friends he served alongside during his five-year tour of duty with the U.S. Army. To be clear, most of the movie is spent avoiding the kind of support that vets need — which is kind of the filmmaker’s point.

His main character, U.S. Army veteran Merit (Sonequa Martin-Green), is haunted by the death of fellow soldier Zoe (Natalie Morales), with whom she served in Afghanistan. A phantom version of Zoe hangs around Merit all day, mixing afternoon cocktails and making wisecracks that only she can hear — well, she and the audience, who should appreciate the way Zoe’s spunky attitude and irreverent sense of humor cut through an otherwise serious-minded film.

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This isn’t your typical ghost story. Instead, the film treats Zoe as a manifestation of Merit’s trauma: Her dead friend won’t leave Merit alone until she deals with her guilt, but Merit doesn’t really want Zoe to go — which is one reason she’s reluctant to accept outside help. The director has been in her shoes. He’s dedicated much of his post-military career to making informational campaigns about the veteran experience, which in turn inform his debut feature (the fact that Travis Kelce appears as one of 14 executive producers has drawn attention, though even more meaningful are the hundreds of less-famous names who crowdfunded this Legion M feature).

Smart and sincere but never sanctimonious, the awareness-raising drama doubles as a public service message of sorts. Don’t worry, it’s a real movie, evoking complex emotions — uncomfortable laughter and well-earned tears — en route to its cathartic finale. Just know that the movie exists for reasons other than escapism. Rather than being a cause for skepticism, the presence of such an agenda makes the result all the more meaningful. All involved want audiences to recognize that military service is dangerous, but so too is coming home. Without the proper treatment, people like Merit are at risk of self-harm.

Civilians don’t necessarily understand the burden her character is carrying, which is one reason it was important for Hausmann-Stokes to cast veterans in as many of the roles as possible. Not leading ladies Martin-Green and Morales, nor Ed Harris (who plays Merit’s Vietnam-surviving granddad,

Clay), but practically everyone else who plays a soldier was once a soldier. That includes Morgan Freeman, a comfortingly familiar face who brings buckets of empathy to his role of Dr. Cole, the sage old counselor who oversees the group therapy sessions Merit has been court-mandated to attend. Merit's hardly the first veteran he's seen who has trouble sharing her pain.

It can feel manipulative when a movie holds back a key piece of information — in this case, how and why Zoe died — until the reveal will be most impactful. Here, Hausmann-Stokes punctuates Merit's return to civilian life in Oregon with frequent flashbacks to her service: joking with Zoe, sheltering from snipers, fending off the advances of male soldiers, listening to pop songs on a busted iPod (the lyrics of "Umbrella" have rarely been more poignant: "When the war has took its part ... Said I'll always be your friend").

As edited, these interruptions can be jarring and inelegant, but that seems true to the experience of trauma. Merit can't control how or when she's blindsided by memories of Zoe. As lively as a dead person can get, Morales practically steals the show at times as Zoe. But there comes a point when she starts to become a problem, getting in the way of Merit's responsibilities and interrupting a budding romance with a friendly, if slightly oblivious civilian (Utkarsh Ambudkar).

Lately, Merit has been on leave from work, owing to an accident which might have been more than mere negligence, according to Dr. Cole. He's patient with her, but also strict. He won't sign her papers unless she participates. When Merit starts to skip group therapy altogether, he follows up by phone. He knows that getting through to her could be a matter of life and death. Meanwhile, there's the matter of Merit's grandfather. Her mom (Gloria Reuben) is a white-collar workaholic who doesn't have time to deal with Clay, who's showing signs of Alzheimer's. Seeing an excuse to get out of therapy, Merit drives out to the lakeside cabin where Clay lives to supervise him.

It was Clay who originally made Merit want to enlist. But he comes from a different generation whose response to trauma was to toughen up, so talking with him is hardly the solution to her own turmoil. The movie suggests that society owes those veterans an apology for not treating them better upon their return. More to the point, it feels we know better now and ought to intervene on behalf of the soldiers who went off and did the "things no one wants to do." Clearly, Merit needs to share in order to move on. But she also needs to share for our benefit. Hausmann-Stokes' message is simple, and his movie is a perfect place to start: Take an interest in our veterans.

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