

Review: ‘Blood Stripe’

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Film Critic



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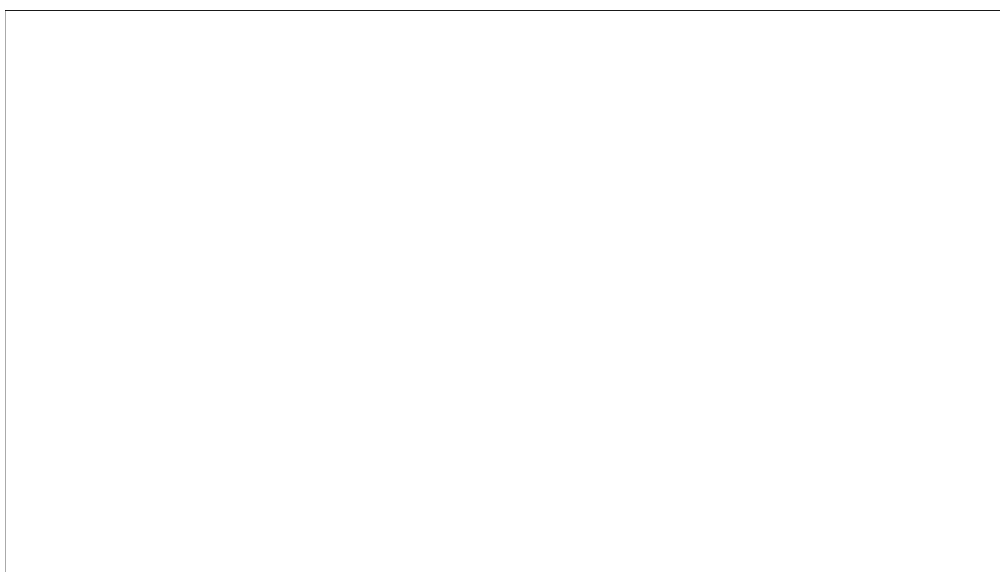
A female Marine veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan combat suffers Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in this LAFF prize-winner.

After U.S. participation in the 20th century’s “Great Wars” turned to participation in some not-so-great, still-debated wars, Hollywood tended to take a few years before offering critical fictive input on those conflicts. But American deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan continues to drag on, whatever happy-face scenarios are offered to the media. While we await the big W.-era propaganda critique of Ang Lee’s literary adaptation “Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk” this fall, “Blood Stripe” delivers a smaller-scale weighing of the “War on Terror’s” toll on average grunts. Veteran actor Remy Auberjonois’ polished feature debut provides an impressive showcase for co-scenarist Kate Nowlin as a career Marine derailed by PTSD upon return to civilian life. This ambitious drama won the LAFF prize for

homegrown narrative fiction feature, though its somewhat awkward vacillation between serious character study and under-realized thriller elements will limit commercial exposure.

A thirtysomething Marine Corps sergeant never actually named here, but half-jokingly, half-respectfully referred to as “Our Sergeant” (Nowlin), arrives back from her latest — and perhaps, it seems, last — deployment to a minimal welcome. She’s picked up late at from the airport by an in-law. At home, burly husband Rusty (Chris Sullivan) does not make a display of conspicuous enthusiasm. They seem to have a somewhat prickly, not particularly affectionate relationship, suggestive of pre-existing tensions that go unspecified.

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Whatever preceded, however, “Sarge” is clearly barely holding it together in this particular return to civilian life: Pounding beers without effect, compulsively jogging, mowing the lawn at midnight and other borderline-manic actions that seem to be keeping some kind of breakdown thinly at bay. At a welcome-home party, a guest’s playful hug triggers drastic over-reaction from her. After that, there’s no further denying she needs help. But she’s sadly aware that appropriate services at a VA Hospital wouldn’t be available for months, sighing, “There’s a wait.”

One day at the tedious municipal road-work job she's gotten, something in Our Sergeant snaps. She gets in her car and drives hours to the site of a childhood summer camp. It's the beginning of the off-season, with seemingly sole remaining employee Dot (Rusty Schwimmer) packing things up for the winter. Having no plan, and not having told anyone where she is, Sarge gets a room-and-board gig that's just what her anxious mind and coiled Marine body needs: Endless, heavy-lifting grunt work.

The two women's quiet camaraderie, the tranquil setting, and the hard physical labor do seem to make Sarge better, relaxing such that she answers admiring Dot's questions about her several Iraq and Afghanistan deployments, in terse but revealing terms. But she's still in a highly fragile state, agitated further by a mixed bag of interlopers to the camp. They include a visiting group of church elders led by gregarious Art (the writer-helmer's father René Auberjonois, still a theatrically flamboyant presence in his mid-70s); his adoptive-son-of-sorts (Tom Lipinski as another nameless figure, dubbed only "The Fisherman"), a fellow moody loner; and some local louts whose lewd menace Sarge's addled mindset may or may not be exaggerating.

It's when these additional characters arrive at midpoint that real-life spouses Nowlin and Auberjonois' script begins to stumble, after a strong buildup. While the director has cited such deliberately dislocating films about various forms of mental illness and PTSD as "Repulsion" and "Martha Marcy May Marlene" as models here, "Blood Stripe" grows more tonally muddled than those singular portraits of escalating trauma. The warm-and-fuzzy church group, Lipinski's conventional Heathcliff-like romantic figure, the poorly integrated thriller elements (a more congruent film would've made those local yokels a constant phantom menace) and a vague, unconvincing climactic catharsis all weaken what had initially seems a tougher-minded film. Then there's the contrivance necessary to keep Sarge from being "rescued" by Rusty, even after she's made a couple panicked calls back home.

On the plus side, "Blood Stripe" is cryptic in interesting ways, most notably in that we never actually find out what "happened to" Sarge: The film forgoes convention in omitting a flashback, or even a monologue, wherein a specific traumatic combat incident "explains all." (At one point, however, we do glimpse dramatic scars on her back, and her automatic-recoil reaction to most physical contact raises the possibility of assault or torture.) That's a refreshing change

from formula, not least because it leaves open the possibility that her PTSD springs from cumulative experience rather than the typical fictive Big Event — a more realistic approach.

Nowlin fully invests in her role, credibly creating a born career-military type nonetheless pushed over the brink — a fully-combat-participatory female soldier relatively new to both U.S. policy and to movies, if you discount the likes of the ludicrous “G.I. Jane.” Schwimmer, Sullivan and Lipinsky are solid in support, even if the latter’s role feels less organic. While its storytelling wavers, there’s nothing unsteady about the movie’s overall packaging craftsmanship, most notably Radium Cheung’s widescreen photography of the gorgeous northern-Minnesota lake country.

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Reviewed online, June 7, 2016. (In Los Angeles Film Festival — competing.) Running time: **83 MIN.**

Production

A Tandem Pictures production, in association with Wakemup Productions. Produced by Schuyler Weiss, Julie Christeas, Remy Auberjonois, Kate Nowlin. Executive producer, G. Mac Brown. Co-executive producer, Christopher Conover. Co-producer, Jeremy L. Kotin.

Crew

Directed by Remy Auberjonois. Screenplay, Kate Nowlin, Auberjonois. Camera (color, widescreen, HD), Radium Cheung; editor, Jeremy L. Kotin; production designer, Cassia Maher; costume designer, Camille Benda; art director, Cheri Anderson; set decorator, Melissa Pritchett; sound, Ben Allison, Ian Morland; supervising sound editor, Ian Gaffney-Rosenfeld; re-recording mixer, Roberto Fernandez; assistant director, Inna Braude; casting, Kerry Barden, Paul Schnee.

With

Kate Nowlin, Tom Lipinski, Chris Sullivan, Rusty Schwimmer, Ashlie Atkinson, Ken Marks, Rene Auberjonois.

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