

Hollywood, Etc.: Strong storytelling is still the key

by Lee Grant

On Jan. 11, "Grace Is Gone," a movie about the death of a soldier killed in Iraq who leaves behind a tormented husband and two school-age daughters, will open, the latest in a thicket of politically charged films set in the current era of the war on terror and U.S military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq.

STRONG STORY IS KEY - In "In the Valley of Elah," Tommy Lee Jones portrays a retired officer (with Susan Sarandon as his wife) who works to find the truth behind his son's mysterious death after he returned from the war in Iraq. CNS Photo courtesy of Lorey Sebastian. Upfront, star and producer John Cusack told New York journalists: "I wanted to make this film after the Bush administration blocked pictures of the dead coming in. ... If people see the human side of war, they'll be so revolted that they'll do more to stop it."

Maybe so. But the movies have to be good. They have to be involving. They have to be memorable. So far, only one of them is - the sensitively told "In the Valley of Elah" about a retired military man (perfectly pitched Tommy Lee Jones) tracking the mysterious death of a second son just back from the war. Based on a true story, it was directed by Paul Haggis, the Canadian who co-wrote and directed the Oscar-winning "Crash."

"Grace Is Gone," meanwhile, shows up after a cinematic year that included "Rendition" (clumsily taking on the issue of torture), "Lions for Lambs" (poorly conceived academic-like diatribe from director and star Robert Redford), "Redacted" (amateurish, pseudo-documentary based on the story of a young Iraqi girl's rape by American soldiers) and "No End in Sight" (a real documentary detailing how a small group of men in Washington, D.C., guided the U.S. into the current miasma).

What the films have in common is negligible box office even though Hollywood's biggest stars participated in many of them: Reese Witherspoon and Jake Gyllenhaal ("Rendition"), Jones and Susan Sarandon ("In the Valley of Elah"), Redford, Tom Cruise and Meryl Streep ("Lions for Lambs") and a well-regarded, though fading, director, Brian De Palma ("Redacted").

There's a reason: Except for "In the Valley of Elah," the movies are neither accomplished nor distinguished, the storytelling is weak, the action dreary, the messages pontifical.

All seem to challenge the American media on its failure to diligently watchdog the Bush administration and its war policies. Both Haggis and DePalma have spoken out. "There is a very big difference between the Vietnam war, where we saw the pictures, and the Iraq war, where we don't," De Palma told Reuters news service at the Venice Film Festival.

"I am very angry because I think this is an important issue. I think the fourth estate has let us down terribly. It's all out there on the Internet, you can find it if you look for it, but it's not in the major media."

Agreed Haggis, whose film also played in Venice: "During the Vietnam war, we had terrific journalists doing their job, reporting on things that we didn't want to hear.

"Now, we don't have that. I think that when that doesn't happen, then it's the responsibility of the artist to ask those difficult questions."

In DePalma's case, it's how you ask those questions, not asking-and-answering them yourself.

Some of the greatest movies about the Vietnam war came years after it ended - Francis Ford Coppola's masterful "Apocalypse Now," Stanley Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket," Oliver Stone's "Platoon." But contemporary filmmakers, in an age of instant information, seemingly want their films and their politics out there now.

So, as weak as the current crop of war-themed films is, a number are still to come - more insightful, hopefully. Among them, Cruise's "The Fall of the Warrior King," based on a New York Times piece about a disgraced Army commander in Iraq whose men caused the drowning of a local citizen; Ron Howard's "Last

"Man Home," about the search for an AWOL American soldier (Howard's next movie, incidentally, is the politically-themed "Frost/Nixon"); "The Invisible World," about a kidnapped female journalist; "Stop-Loss," about a GI (Ryan Phillippe) ordered back to Iraq on the day he was to get out; director Haggis again with "Death and Dishonor," about a father searching for his missing GI son returning from Baghdad. Haggis also will direct a film based on former White House terrorism guru Richard Clarke's "Against All Enemies."

Cusack, meanwhile, who plays a pro-military, pro-war middle-class guy in "Grace Is Gone" struggling to tell his two young daughters that their mom isn't coming home, said to a reporter, "I think these are really dark times in America and really serious times so I wanted to be part of the conversation, hopefully in a constructive way. ..."

"I think it ('Grace Is Gone') transcends a lot of stuff and gets to some of the universal truths about suffering and loss. In a way it's a more powerful anti-war statement because it doesn't preach."

Now, if only filmgoers will venture out to see it. Or "Grace Is Gone," like the season's other war-themed pictures, will be gone.

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