



## COMING HOME

BY STEPHANIE FISCHETTE

With the Iraq war dominating the news, relatives or friends still overseas or home suffering from grave injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the argument is being made in film circles that no one wants to see the war depicted in our theaters. When writer-director Alan Brown completed his feature *Superheroes* in fall 2006 and showed it to an industry contact in Los Angeles, his friend told him bluntly that he should've made the film in 2005 because "they're a million projects in development right now and we're all just tired of it." A.O. Scott's October article in the *New York Times* ("A War On Every Screen") noted the recent flood of films released and begged the question of what sort of "war film" American viewers are willing to see, while box office sales reveal that few in the U.S. are actually watching them, at least in their theatrical releases.

I met Brown at the Woodstock Film Festival where *Superheroes* and my short *Honored* screened. Both films center on the story of individuals who've had the war tear apart their lives. *Superheroes* focuses on Iraq War vet Ben (Dash Mihok) and the fragile friendship he develops with Nick (Spencer Treat Clark), a recent college graduate. Ben is in the throes of PTSD and in constant pain from the five pounds of shrapnel floating around in his body, the result of an IED explosion. Nick, a fledgling documentary filmmaker, volunteers to record an Iraq War veteran's support group at the local VA clinic. The two meet there, and Nick asks Ben if

he can record him for his own documentary project. Ben agrees, inviting Nick to come and film him during his stay at a borrowed house in the Catskills.

Brown had been inspired to write his script after reading newspaper articles about the plight of Iraq veterans. He was particularly drawn to one story about a returned vet whose mother had to remove bits of shrapnel from his back when the metal would re-surface to his skin. It was a ghastly and heart-rending image that stuck with him, and on screen it is equally unnerving.

Brown spoke to a few local Iraq vets and heads of Veteran clinics about his script, but he relied more heavily on psychiatrists who deal with trauma patients for his research. "I didn't want to get too bogged down with any vets looking at the script who'd say, 'This is not how I'd behave,' because there's a million responses," Brown says. "I was more interested in a psychiatrist's point of view of how people with post-traumatic stress disorder behave." Vets and journalist friends of Brown's who've been embedded in Iraq and seen *Superheroes* have said that Mihok nails the Ben character. Viewers see a broken man whose life has physically and emotionally been shattered by the war. A man on the edge whose constant look of sadness and fear in his restless eyes haunts audiences.

Brown anticipated there would be more industry excitement around *Superheroes*, and in retrospect feels he may have been unrealistic. "You have to be unrealistic to make a low-budget indie without any name

stars in it," he says. "Of course, there are wonderful exceptions and those exceptions are what allow you to be unrealistic. Every time you make a film you have to believe that everybody's going to want to see it." Brown's last two films *O Beautiful* (short) and *Book of Love* (feature) played at Sundance in 2003 and 2004, respectively. *Superheroes* was not accepted for the 2007 program, but played Philadelphia, Austin, Woodstock, Hollywood, Santa Fe and won the Feature Filmmaker Award at the New York/Avignon Film Festival. The film also has been invited to Cinequest for 2008 and recently inked a deal with IFC for TV and DVD distribution.

Brown is pleased with the outcome, knowing that theatrical distribution does not always mean an immediate audience. The film's slow pacing and emotional journey makes *Superheroes* "a difficult film to watch," he admits, and the sad ending also doesn't make for much commercial appeal. But it's an experience that rings true for actual veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as vets from Vietnam and World War II, many of whom have approached Brown at screenings. Some of these men also experienced PTSD, but then it was called "shellshock" or "battle fatigue."

More movies about the war in Iraq will be released in theaters in 2008, and it's a guessing game on whether there will be an audience to fill those seats — an uncertainty, one could argue, that is also a reflection of the state of the war itself in American hearts and minds.