

'Badland' prompted by second Bush win

By Martin A. Grove

Oct 26, 2007



Joe Morton in "Badland"

War words: Although television viewers love reality programming, moviegoers have thus far been cool to films about the grim reality of the war in Iraq.

Filmmakers, on the other hand, have been passionate about bringing stories driven by the horrors of the unpopular war to the screen. A case in point is "Badland," written and directed by Francesco Lucente and produced by Olympia Lucente and Jorg G. Neumann. Although "Badland" was one of the first films to tackle an Iraq related storyline, it won't actually open until after a number of other Iraq theme films have come and gone. "Badland" arrives in New York and Los Angeles Nov. 30 via Arcangelo Entertainment and COPEX and will roll out nationwide throughout December and January.

A COPEX presentation, the R-rated drama stars Jamie Draven, Grace Fulton, Vinessa Shaw, Chandra West and Joe Morton. It was executive produced by Claudia Dummer-Manasse, Joseph Bitonti, Gordon Guiry, Michel Shane and Anthony Romano.

"Badland" deals with the aftermath of the Iraq War on a returning American soldier and the family he comes back to. For some insights into how this emotionally charged story reached the screen, I spoke recently to Francesco and Olympia Lucente. The husband-wife filmmaking team has worked together over the years on a number of films, but really put their hearts into this one. Francesco, whose first feature was the 1987 youth comedy "The Virgin Queen of St. Francis High," directed the 1992 drama "The Inner Voice," which premiered at the Henri Langlois Film and Television Festival in Tours, France. Olympia co-wrote "Virgin" and co-produced "Voice" and with Francesco and Franco Ferrini co-wrote the feature "The Challenge," based on the life of Buffalo Bill. With Francesco and Enrico Medioli, she co-wrote the thriller "First You Dream, Then You Die."

"The primary (reason for making 'Badland' was) when Bush won the election the second time I felt quite disconcerted by why the American public had agreed to vote him back into office," Francesco told me. "The war had already started. When he began the war, the American public didn't have much of a choice, I thought. But I figured that by the time the second election was coming around they would think, 'Well, it was a mistake' and they would vote him out. But they voted him back in and I thought that was quite disturbing.

"And then I began to visualize and emotionally sort of sense what it would be like if I were a reservist and had been called up to go to Iraq only to discover that the reasons I had been sent over were completely false. And

that when I came back to realize that and (find) that my world was falling apart. It was falling apart beforehand, but I thought I was going to do the heroic thing and somehow my American dream would come together by being a hero and going over to fight for freedom. So those are sort of the basic reasons that drove me to write and direct the film."

"Another inspiration for the central story in 'Badland' (came) from news reports that started coming out about veterans coming home," Olimpia explained. "Specifically there were the killings of military wives in Ft. Bragg by husbands that returned. I think they had been stationed in Afghanistan. So that really inspired us, as well, to write about what would make a soldier and a husband come back and kill his wife. What would cause him to snap like that? So we investigated and started reading about post-traumatic stress disorder and some of the ways that it impacted these soldiers coming home and how it affected their personal lives."

Were the Lucentes aware of other Iraq related movie projects at the time they began developing their own? "No because we really started developing this idea early on," Olimpia said. "Francesco wrote the script in 2004 and early 2005 and we started filming in October 2005. I think actually we were one of the first to tackle this (although) we've been in post-production a little bit longer. So we really didn't know of any other films that were either in development or that had even been instigated. I think the one right after us was 'Home of the Brave' (directed by Irwin Winkler and starring Samuel L. Jackson and Jessica Biel, released domestically by MGM last year). That was really only the second one that we were aware of. I think it was just something that we were really affected by in the end."

"The way I approached making the film," Francesco added, "was more in the old, old way of doing things where I took my time in the cutting (room). I mean, we cut for about six months on the movie. I know some of these other movies were probably written, shot and completed in less than a year, which I'm not sure if for any movie today is a good thing any more. I think it affects the quality. There are sort of three stages of (writing) a movie. There's the initial writing of the script. The second phase of writing the script is when you're actually shooting it. The third and final phase of writing it is when you're editing and that can take the longest really because like any kind of writing process you can just reduce sequences and you need to have time to let it percolate."

If a filmmaker's rushing to meet a deadline, he added, "you're not focused on the movie, you're focused on the deadline and the release date. But in terms of being in the pack, as we might want to say now because there's so many others coming out (dealing with Iraq), when we started we were kind of the first and then others started popping up. We're independently financed so we didn't have the necessary power financially that the other films had, which are all studio films except for maybe Brian De Palma's movie ('Redacted') and 'The Battle for Haditha' (Nick Broomfield's drama about an alleged massacre of civilians by U.S. Marines in Haditha, Iraq). But otherwise the others are all studio movies."

"I know there have been some articles that haven't been complimentary of us all and I think those are unfair. I think we all have a voice. Each of us as filmmakers want our films to break out and be the one (to attract audiences), but in defense of all of us I think we're all trying to speak our voice and I think they all have a place and they should all be respected for their efforts. I think one thing that sets us apart is that we explore it on a very, very personal level and what happens in the film, which we don't want to reveal, is the heinous act that he commits. None of the other films are exploring (something like this) at all. So that really will set us apart from the rest and I think that's one thing that will have a very dramatic effect on audiences when they see the film."

Asked about his reasons for making the movie, Francesco explained, "For me, I definitely want to have a profound effect on the American psyche in that right now there's no cost to the general American public on any real emotional or financial basis."

"Beyond the military families, which of course are paying a huge sacrifice," Olimpia noted.

"I mean, the financial (cost is huge that) they're going to experience down the road as the credit bill comes in from the National Debt. And it's being built up because of the cost of the war," Francesco said. "But beyond (the military families), the average American is watching it on TV like another TV show. So what I wanted to do is really bring home what I think is the extended if not the overall price of war, which is on the families and the

children because no one really wins in any kind of war. I mean, there are certain wars like World War II which all of us will agree was a just war and we needed to fight it. But I wonder how many other wars (in which) the issues could have been dealt with in a different way other than by committing violence and committing people to battlefields? So I want the film to really have an emotional impact on the average family so that they feel the pain of what war can do to their father or their mother who may have been fighting there because we don't have the draft. I think if we had had the draft -- or if we do have the draft -- like in the '60s, that really mobilized people (who felt), 'Look, I may face death here. Am I really doing this for the right reasons?' So that's really, I think, what I hoped to achieve."

"We really wanted to personalize the effect of this war on families," Olimpia added, "because really they pay the ultimate price and they pay the ultimate sacrifice. I mean, war really changes individuals and (it) also changes individual family dynamics. You can't possibly be the same person. You can't be unchanged by being in the middle of that violence and especially in this type of war where there are a lot of insurgents and you don't really know who the enemy is and there's a lot of innocent lives lost because of it. You hear every day about women and children being the victims of violence in Iraq and Afghanistan. They're the collateral damage and they're just a number, but when you're a soldier and you're involved in that violence for your own self defense and the defense of your buddies you have to perpetrate this violence and then you realize that you've just killed innocent civilians, how does it affect your psyche? How does that affect your soul? And then how do you bring that home with you?"

"We just really wanted to be sensitive to that issue and just on a human level (examine) what it does to a soldier and how does that translate into how you deal with life when you come back and how do you deal with your family? A lot of these soldiers are coming back very mentally scarred and psychologically damaged and for whatever reason they're not getting the kind of support and help they need. Unfortunately, this administration is very wonderful at saying, 'Support the troops. Support the troops.' I feel -- I hope it's not a cynical view -- that they're used as propaganda tools just to further (the administration's) cause. Yet when they actually come home and a lot of them need so much financial support and medical support and mental health support and they're just not getting it. We may say, 'Oh, well, it's really just one or two cases that fall between the cracks' (but) that's really not true. There's a lot more that are falling through the cracks. I think before asking men and women to put their lives on the line we need to take care of them when they come home."

"The film has been getting very profound reactions in Germany from the screenings we've had there where we're planning to do a big release in late February or early March," Francesco pointed out. "One woman made a comment about perhaps why soldiers of today are not dealing with the issues as well as they did in World War II. She said when the soldiers came home after World War II both sides were broken -- not just the soldiers, but the families on this side were also broken because the costs were so high. So it wasn't as isolated as it is now where it's just soldiers fighting and then they come home and (are) being thrust into starting a normal life again. (During World War II) people when they were here waiting for their loved ones to come back were fighting their own battles and they were also being dramatically affected by the war in Europe. So the assimilation or the returning back to normalcy, if that could happen, was much easier, perhaps, because everyone was suffering not just the soldiers."

Nonetheless, audiences have not shown much interest in seeing the films with Iraq War themes that have already come into the marketplace. "I think it goes back to the fact that they have nothing vested in it like they did in the other wars, especially the Vietnam War," Francesco noted. "It's like anything else in life, if you have no pain and you have no suffering you have no compassion, no empathy. So because it's someone else's fight and because there is truly some fatigue over the whole thing with Iraq and since both political parties are actually, in my opinion, completely broken and I don't think they can be fixed, I think the mess over there can't be fixed. I think people just eventually throw their hands up in the air and go, 'There's nothing we can do. We've just got to move on.' But it's something that they will have to face in one fashion or another."

"Again, I hope that our film and the others that are coming out will somehow have an impact. Even if it's a small one, I think that it's an important one and it has to be experienced by the general public. We take a different approach than the other ones. We don't have battle footage. Ours is a very personalized story about a father and daughter and how he tries to deal with the act of violence that he commits and how her sort of belief in God and miracles hopefully redeems him. We don't want to give away what happens. But, again, we're not (doing) the traditional desert footage and war footage and stuff that you see pretty much every day

on the news. We took a completely different approach."

"And, also, the characters really are not discussing things on a political level," Olimpia said. "They're really talking about themselves. It's really a personal journey so they don't ever say (anything about) 'this administration,' they don't really address any of that on a political level. It's really the journey that they're making as human beings and how they're relating to each other."

"The wounds that they have inside their souls as soldiers (are such that) you could put them in the Civil War, you could put them in World War I, you could put them in any war and, I think, that the pain they are experiencing that you witness in the film (is) universal and timeless," Francesco added. "Our backdrop is somewhat about Iraq, but it's really about all wars."

Distribution of "Badland" is being done through several companies, Francesco explained: "One that's handling this is Arcangelo Entertainment and a new distribution company called COPEX. They're a very big fund out of Europe and they're going to be setting up a major distribution facility starting with 'Badland.'"

"We didn't go the traditional distribution route," Olimpia pointed out. "We did go more the private (approach). It's something that we chose because we wanted to be true to the way we wanted the film viewed (and) the message that we wanted in the film."

Francesco puts the film's budget at "around \$10 million" and said its financing "strangely enough came together very quickly in the summer of 2005. I think it took me only about six weeks to put it together. It was through COPEX, who wanted to get into the film business. They are a multi-asset company and are worth like a billion dollars. They wanted to have their feet in the water from production through distribution. So they were the majority funders on the film and then there (also was) some private equity that came in."

Looking back at the greatest challenges during production, Francesco recalled, "Well, first was casting. We had cast (another) girl for the little girl's role and literally about 10 days before we were set to start shooting things fell apart with her. We had to have emergency casting sessions. We were really on the verge of shutting down because the little girl's role was so critical to the film. Just by providence we were able to find Grace Fulton, who is just incredible in the film. She's really wondrous. That was the first big hurdle we had to overcome."

"And then we started shooting late in October in Canada and we were constantly facing the threat of snow. But the only thing we got was severe cold and wind. The characters are walking around basically in tee-shirts. Through the shoot the crew was dressed in parkas like they could be in Alaska but in front of the camera the cast is walking around like they're in the middle of summer. So between shots when we'd yell 'Cut' there'd be like five people running up to them and wrapping them in sleeping bags. That's how cold it was. You'll never know -- you can't tell from the film. But we faced the threat of snowstorms literally every day (while shooting) in Southern Alberta, pretty much where they shot 'Brokeback Mountain' and 'Open Range' and 'Jesse James.' The cold was extreme. And then we had a couple of weeks in a small town (in Alberta called) Ft. McCloud where they had these enormous winds going constantly every day, almost pulling our cameras off the tripods and dollies. The trailers were shaking like crazy."

"And we had a very short shooting schedule," Olimpia added. "So every day was counted. There was never a chance that we could lose a day. That would be disastrous for us so we were praying every day for the weather that we needed."

"We had originally scheduled 35 days," Francesco said. "We ended up shooting 42 days. Hopefully, the sun was matching from shot to shot. There were some special effects scenes (where) because at that of year the sun moves very quickly -- within seconds it can move feet -- so getting shots to match for special effects was a nightmare. But eventually we pulled it off."

Filmmaker flashbacks: From Feb. 2, 1990's column: "With the field limited to only five candidates and with about twice as many directors worthy of being honored, it's no wonder the Directors Guild of America nominations are the talk of the town."

"Clearly, DGA members saw 1989's directorial achievements quite differently than the major critics' groups did. Indeed, none of the directors honored by the critics managed to get into the DGA finals. (DGA nods went to Oliver Stone for 'Born on the Fourth of July,' Woody Allen for 'Crimes and Misdemeanors,' Peter Weir for 'Dead Poets Society,' Phil Alden Robinson for 'Field of Dreams' and Rob Reiner for 'When Harry Met Sally'.)

The distinguished list of DGA non-nominees includes Paul Mazursky, honored by the New York Film Critics Circle for 'Enemies, a Love Story;' Spike Lee, chosen by the Los Angeles Film Critics Association for 'Do the Right Thing;' Kenneth Branagh, selected by the National Board of Review for 'Henry V;' and Gus Van Sant, acclaimed by the National Society of Film Critics for 'Drugstore Cowboy.'

"Of the DGA nominees only Oliver Stone has already tasted victory in competition this season, taking home a Golden Globe for 'Born on the Fourth of July...' Without arguing against any of the DGA nominees, a case certainly can be made on behalf of several directors who were ignored by their peers. In addition to the critics choices, the list includes Bruce Beresford ('Driving Miss Daisy'), Steven Soderbergh ('sex, lies and videotape'), Ed Zwick ('Glory') and Jim Sheridan ('My Left Foot').

"As the media has hammered home, only three occasions since 1949 has a DGA winner failed to also take home the best directing Oscar. It's a pretty safe bet, therefore, that this year's Oscar-winning director will be one of the five nominees in the DGA race

"That, in turn, could have a significant effect on the Oscar outcome. Of all the films worthy of Oscar honors this year, two have emerged as strong front-runners -- The Zanuck Co.'s 'Driving Miss Daisy'...and Universal's 'Born on the Fourth of July...' Since 'Daisy' director Beresford isn't a DGA nominee, he can't win the DGA's award. Given past history, the odds are against him winning the Oscar even if he gets the Academy nomination he truly deserves...'

"What some Hollywood handicappers envision, as a result of the DGA bypassing Beresford, is a scenario in which Academy voters split their tickets to honor 'Daisy' and 'Born.' The high-profile Stone has the edge in the DGA race because 'Born' is currently in release and is very hot. After a DGA win, he'd be the favorite to win the best directing Oscar..."

Update: As anticipated, Academy voters did split their tickets. Oliver Stone, who won the DGA award for 1989 for "Born on the Fourth of July," went on to win the Oscar for best directing. "Driving Miss Daisy" wound up winning the best picture Oscar.

Martin Grove hosts movie coverage on the broadband television channel www.UpdateHollywood.com

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