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## A War Hero's Terror, Tragedy and Rescue

By MATT ZOLLER SEITZ

[“Badland,”](#) a melodrama by the writer and director Francesco Lucente, stands apart from the recent throng of post-9/11 dramas by posing a burning question we haven’t heard yet: Can a mentally ill Iraq war veteran who murdered his pregnant wife and two of his children learn how to love again?

Independent in scale but aggressively Hollywood in storytelling, this overlong, mawkish yet weirdly mesmerizing film doesn’t just invite identification with its tragically unhinged character; it compels it, by piling on biblically horrible misfortunes, weepy confessions and editorializing music. (The soundtrack includes earnest pop songs by [Bruce Springsteen](#), Ray LaMontagne and the supporting actor [Joe Morton](#), as well as a hysterically overblown score by Ludek Drizhal that could be titled [“Ennio Morricone’s Viking Funeral.”](#))

The film’s small-town Marine reservist hero, Jerry (the English actor Jamie Draven, who played the older brother in [“Billy Elliot”](#)), is a guilt-wracked veteran of both Persian Gulf wars who suffers night terrors and nosebleeds. His boss at the general store baselessly fires him for stealing. His wife, Nora (Vinessa Shaw), is a hateful, thieving shrew who responds to his agonized weeping by telling him to be a man. Talk about a quickie divorce: he blows her brains out at the breakfast table.

Jerry takes his 10-year-old daughter, Celina (Grace Fulton), to a new town, where they move into a cheap motel room that he forbids Celina to leave. He then improbably lands a job as a short-order cook for an angelic, blond, smokin’-hot coffee-shop owner named Oli (Chandra West).

Oli soon invites the newcomers into her house and Jerry into her bedroom, and urges Jerry to befriend an alcoholic fellow veteran, Max (Mr. Morton), who turns out to be the local sheriff. Keep your head down, soldier boy.

Three factors mitigate the film’s tone-deaf road-to-redemption clichés. One is Mr. Draven, who badly botches Jerry’s American accent but powerfully communicates the guilt, fear and shame that are eating his guts out. Another is the sense that what we’re seeing onscreen isn’t “real” but the hero’s self-justifying projection of his miserable life — a suspicion confirmed in a coda that appears so late that it feels as if the movie is copping out on its doom-spiral narrative.

The third redeeming feature is Mr. Lucente’s primitivist sensibility, the likes of which hasn’t been seen since Sam Fuller went to that great tabloid archive in the sky. This is the kind of film that communicates the idea of innocence by having Celina dote on a doll, skip everywhere and stridently announce that her prayers will bring her mom and brothers back.

The film, unfortunately, has nothing in common with [Terrence Malick’s](#) 1973 classic [“Badlands”](#) except the title, a fugitive story line and a fascination with lonely landscapes, elegantly framed by the cinematographer Carlo Varini.

*“Badland” is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It has profanity and graphic*

*violence.*

***BADLAND***

*Opens today in New York and Los Angeles.*

Written, directed and edited by Francesco Lucente; director of photography, Carlo Varini; music by Ludek Drizhal; production designer, John Bitonti; produced by Olimpia Lucente and Jörg G. Neumann; released by Copex. Running time: 2 hours 40 minutes.

WITH: Jamie Draven (Jerry), Grace Fulton (Celina), Vinessa Shaw (Nora), Chandra West (Oli) and [Joe Morton](#) (Max).

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