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BADLAND

Rated: R

For movie details, please [click here](#).

Badland is like a post-9/11 *Best Years of Our Lives*. Here, a soldier tries to readjust to civilian life after a tour of duty, but his experiences are much more harrowing than anything that happens in that solemn World War II classic. Director Francesco Lucente means well in his up-close and personal portrait of post-traumatic stress syndrome, though viewers may find large sections of the film uncomfortable to watch.

In Lucente's original screenplay, Jamie Draven plays Jerry, a marine returning from Afghanistan and Iraq and facing extreme challenges. When Jamie reunites with his family at their rural Wyoming trailer home, tensions immediately flare. Jamie's wife, Nora (Vinessa Shaw), complains about their poverty and his unstable behavior. In a moment of rage, Jamie shoots and kills Nora and runs off with his 10-year-old daughter, Celina (Grace Fulton).

While on the lam, Jamie and Celina form an awkward bond, but the wise youngster does not reveal very much of her own pain. The two settle into a new town and Jamie finds work as a short-order cook in a diner. He also makes two friends, lovely Oli (Chandra West) and fellow ex-soldier, Max (Joe Morton). Eventually, Jamie's criminal past catches up with him, but through Celina he gains a renewed awareness and appreciation of life.

Badland's main strength comes from the gritty, gutsy performances of the ensemble. Though Shaw overplays the shrewish Nora, the others are spot-on as their angst-filled characters. Draven is particularly good as Jerry, even maintaining a measure of sympathy for his character after he commits the cold-blooded act against his wife. Morton is reliably solid as Jerry's new and slightly less stressed-out buddy. But it's Grace Fulton who steals the film as Jerry's compassionate daughter. She gives one of the more honest and heartfelt child performances of recent seasons.

Badland might have been truly outstanding had it not run so long (almost three hours). It is also not clear why the film wasn't cut down a bit more—the characters would not have seemed any less dimensional and the plot is so minimal, it doesn't warrant the attenuated running time.

One other problem is purely technical: The cinematography is extremely dark. Even the daylight scenes are difficult to see (at least in the review print), which renders ineffectual any artistic efforts using light and shadow.

Post-traumatic stress syndrome is one of the more underreported fallouts from the conflict in Iraq, and *Badland* takes a step in the right direction by attempting to understand the aftermath of war.

Critic: Eric Monder

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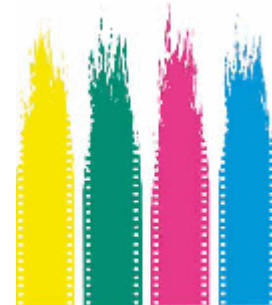
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