



WEDNESDAY JANUARY 2, 2008 Last modified: *Wednesday, December 26, 2007 7:07 PM PST*

War is Hell for Joe Morton in 'Badland'

By *DARLENE DONLOE*

As actor Joe Morton walks down trendy Third Street in Los Angeles, he watches the cars whiz by and remembers why he loves living in New York. "There seems to be a disconnect in Los Angeles," Morton surmises, surveying his surroundings like a dogged gumshoe.

"In New York, I can take the subway and there are hundreds of people I can connect with," said Morton, sporting locks and dressed casually in a blue T-shirt and jeans. "In Los Angeles everyone is in their cars. You don't get to connect with each other."

Spoken like a native New Yorker.

As I would soon find out, Morton shoots from the lip about everything and doesn't bite his tongue when expressing his opinion.



Joe Morton in "Badland"

Since 1968, he has been making his mark as one of the industry's most consistently good actors. For years he has flown under the radar, not quite becoming a big name superstar, but instead gaining respect as a superior thespian.

Whether it's in a supporting role ("American Gangster") or in the lead ("Brother From Another Planet"), Morton, who will next star in "Wherever You Are," has always brought authenticity to his various incarnations.

He was in town to discuss his latest role in the drama, "Badland" (COPEX), currently playing in theaters nationwide. An accomplished musician, not only does Morton act in the film, he also wrote a song for the film called, "The Devil's Lonely Fire."

In "Badland," Morton plays Max, a shell-shocked veteran of the Iraq War who has recently returned to his small hometown where he's finding it extremely difficult to deal with the aftermath of his experiences on the battlefield and to adjust, once again, to civilian life. It doesn't help that he goes back to the job he had before he went to war—the town sheriff!

He meets up with Jerry (Jamie Draven), another war vet who can't shake the war. Already on the edge, Jerry is fired from a pitiful job, has a nagging wife, three children and suffers from post traumatic disorder and nosebleeds.

Max doesn't know that Jerry is a wanted man. You see, one day Jerry snapped and did the unthinkable and unforgivable.

"Badland" is a hauntingly powerful and disturbing film.

LAWT: I watched this film and was deeply disturbed. Is that good?

JM: I think that's the idea. You have two guys suffering from post traumatic disorder. Most of us don't think of ourselves as coming back as damaged, other than physically damaged. You can't see this problem, and that's what this movie is about.

LAWT: Why did you want to do this movie?

JM: We have a tendency to think of war as, one, being over there because we've never had one here. Two, we usually put it in terms of World War II because it was the thing to do. It was patriotic. We have to deal with it; that's important. We think of mental disorders as embarrassing.

LAWT: What do you think of the Iraq War?

JM: It's not any place we should have been. Al-Qaeda wasn't there until we were there. Afghanistan made all the sense in the world to me because that's where Al-Qaeda was. We never proved weapons of mass destruction. The administration put forth this lie about Al-Qaeda, Saddam, and having links with Osama bin Laden. I'm not a big fan of the war, but we have soldiers there. That's always the conflict. I wish they weren't there. But because they are, we have to support them and what they're going through.

LAWT: Is doing this movie your way of protesting the war?

JM: No. This is my way of hoping that people will decide to do something about soldiers coming home damaged physically or mentally. The Constitution says X, Y, and Z. We're fighting, supposedly, a good cause. America is used to being the police of the world—something we never should have gotten involved in. But here we are. In this case, we were wrong and we were wrong in Vietnam as well. We're there for the wrong reasons. The problem is we will not be able to extract ourselves in an easy way.

LAWT: You're very good in this film and you're known for your stage work. Does a good actor have to have done some theater?

JM: Absolutely. It's like becoming a doctor without doing a residency. Theater is going to give you all the tools you need. If you can do a character for six months, eight performances a week and keep it fresh—you can do anything. Actors who do theater, can do film. Actors who do film can't do theater because they never learned to use the whole instrument. I have to reach you if you're sitting in the back of the house.

LAWT: How do you decide which movies to do?

JM: One is artistic. Is it going to feed me? Is it a good story to tell? The other is: is it going to feed my bank account? They have to go hand in hand. I have kids, one is in college. All of that has to be paid for.

LAWT: What do you hope we get out of this film?

JM: The hope is that people will decide there are damaged people in the world like Max and Jerry are and to do something about it.

LAWT: What do you do when you let down your hair?

JM: I drink. I write poetry. My favorite drink is a rusty nail, which is scotch and Drambuie. I work on my music and photography.

LAWT: Do you ever get stupid?

JM: Absolutely. Depends on how much I had to drink. (laughter)

LAWT: Anything you want to talk about?

JM: We have elections coming up. I suppose what I would ask is that people take more time to sort of figure out the world.

LAWT: At the end of the day what do you want people to say about Joe Morton?

JM: He did his best.

"Badland" stars Jamie Draven, Joe Morton, Grace Fulton, Vinessa Shaw and Chandra West. It's written and directed by Francesco Lucente.

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