

## In the Valley of Elah

Let's make it clear, Paul Haggis, a veteran TV writer well into his fifth decade, is on a hot streak. In 2004, he wrote the screenplay for the Oscar-winning *Million Dollar Baby*, then followed it up with *Crash* in 2005, another statuette winner which he both wrote and directed. In 2006, he kept his streak going with screenplays for Clint Eastwood's WWII duo *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Now he has come up with the script and the direction for *In the Valley of Elah*, another searching, sober study of the contemporary American soul. This time he scrutinizes those souls tormented by our most recent heartbreak, the war in Iraq and its aftermath.

The souls here include Hank Deerfield (Tommy Lee Jones) and his wife Joan (Susan Sarandon), concerned for their soldier son Mike (Jonathan Tucker) who is AWOL after returning from the war in Iraq, and Emily Sanders (Charlize Theron), a neophyte detective in the police force near the New Mexico army base where the boy disappeared.

Hank, a dogged ex-military policeman, decides to take up his son's missing person case at the base, only to run into indifference and jurisdictional stone walls. Only Sanders, impressed with Hank's sleuthing skills, gives him credence. Hank's personal investigation is in part driven by the murky, troubling battlefield sequences left on his son's cell phone, imagery which allows him to piece together the agonies of Mike's service. After the mutilated body of the missing soldier is found, the film becomes a police procedural focusing on the other troubled young soldiers in Mike's original unit, an investigation filled with psychological acuteness about what these too-young infantrymen have suffered.

If you are of a nature to find political angles in popular entertainment, you could class *Elah* (the title refers to the spot in ancient Israel where David met Goliath) as an anti-war film. That would be, I think, a facile reading. The film is "anti-war" in that its depiction of a grim ground war (almost all shown tangentially) is forbidding, but what the movie is truly about is the singular, human dimensions of a war's aftermath, and on those terms, it is an impressive work. There is the element of who-what-how-dunnit to keep the pace moving, but the plot is always at the service of character.

Tommy Lee Jones, yet again a laconic, crusty Southerner (from Tennessee this time) with eye pouches the size of egg yolks, might be considered almost too obvious a choice for this kind of role (Haggis wanted Eastwood for the part), but he is, of course, perfect for his display of knowing ways and nearly silent anguish. Theron puts her glamour puss aside and acquits herself well as the novice investigator and single mother with an, at first tentative, then forceful, integrity. It's Haggis's utterly believable script and his calm direction and style (the film seems dipped in a cool blue tint by cameraman Roger Deakins) that deserves full marks. Right now, I would be happy to see anything else this fellow takes on.

*("Elah" is rated "R;" the film's running time is 124 minutes.)*

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