

The Hurt Locker

Before it leaves town, I urge readers who appreciate what serious movies can offer to check out a stunning new film, *The Hurt Locker*, now showing at a few DC-area venues. OK, OK do we really need another film on Iraq and our troops in Iraq? Perhaps not, but *The Hurt Locker* is even more an in-depth and searching character study of a man of action, a man *in extremis*, placed in the backdrop of our Iraqi adventure and under a tension that can give you cold sweats.



The story's structure is the simplest: in the summer of 2004, a three-man bomb disposal team, part of the elite Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) unit, is doing its job in Baghdad, lead by Staff Sergeant William James (the name had no particularly philosophical implications that I know of). James, played flawlessly by James Renner, is

a natural at bomb defusing, a fearless, perhaps manifestly crazy, expert who tackles his grim task with the calm and insouciance of a fly fisherman or a garage mechanic.

His daredevil antics scare his colleagues, Sgt. J.T. Sanborn (Anthony Mackie), rightly concerned about being blown away by Iraqi snipers or bombs, and the young rookie, Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty), who just wants to survive and get home when the unit's duty ends in 38 days. Both men want to avoid being sent to the "hurt locker" where explosions can leave you.

The film, which was actually shot in Jordan, grabs you from the first in opening when a disaster for the squad kills the team leader (a cameo by Guy Pearce) who is replaced by James. He establishes himself immediately by mounting into the massive anti-bomb suit—which looks like a bloated brown-grey NASA spacemen's outfit—and taking care of business. He continues to tackle these high-risk tasks throughout the movie, with each episode ratcheting up the tension, as James pitches in with a heady mixture of adrenalin and heedlessness. The last bomb sequence shown, featuring a flailing Iraqi man completely encased in bombs, is particularly wrenching.

The sergeant isn't just devil-may-care, however. He comes to identify with an Iraqi street kid selling DVDs on the street and eventually aches to avenge the child in a later sequence which causes him to go AWOL from his base. James also lets off some steam by practicing macho moves with his squad buddies, who trade brutal punches to each other's stomachs as a release for all the tension that pervades their daily grind.

Let me note that the laser focus of this film, directed by veteran Kathryn Bigelow, is kept on the few men at arms. Iraqis are figures in the landscape; often, but they are

inscrutable, just as inscrutable as they probably appear to the bomb squad. The film is not dismissive of them, it is just depicting them as the Unknown. They are the ever-threatening aliens for soldiers who live with the hair trigger (there is one hold-your-breath sequence where James confronts a sullen cab driver which just about defines the word hair trigger).

It might seem hard to recommend to some a movie that is steeped in violence, and the threat of violence (it easily rates an “R”), but Bigelow’s command of her material (she has made numerous films featuring macho men, most recently, *K-11: The Widowmaker*) is so compelling and Renner’s characterization is so persuasive that the picture rivets one. Further, cinematographer Barry Ackroyd helps achieve a full, pulsing documentary feel with agile hand-held cameras. Whether you want to or not, you will feel—along with these men—the desert dust in your nostrils and the clammy secretions inside your helmet.

There is, also, a wonderful kicker to this film (which flies by in its 131 minutes). The bulk of the movie covers the last few weeks of the unit’s deployment, but at its end, Bigelow and journalist/screenwriter Mark Boal (who was himself embedded with a bomb unit in Iraq) provide a fabulous transition. We have just seen Sgt. James almost blown to bits, when—without a preamble—we see him all of the sudden with his buzz cut grown out and wearing civvies. He is, for a soldier, in a most alien environment, an American supermarket, trolling the aisles with his family. His amazement at where he is, and perhaps what he has fought for, is priceless cinema.

Photo: Jeremy Renner (left) and Anthony Mackie in *The Hurt Locker*. Courtesy 2009 Summit Entertainment.

(“The Hurt Locker” is rated “R” for combat profanity and violence—and for extraordinary tension.)

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