

AHS Alum gives advice to aspiring actors and others

by Jack Kyser - Entertainment Editor

Austin High School alum Benjamin McKenzie, former star of the popular television drama *The O.C.*, returned to Austin High School on Monday, September 22. He spoke to The Red Dragon Players and the English department, among other organizations on campus, in the Performing Arts Center. His speech was in part to promote the world premiere of his latest film, *Johnny Got His Gun*, a filmed version of the famous Dalton Trumbo play, which premiered later that evening at the Paramount Theatre.

During first, second, and third periods, McKenzie and *Johnny Got His Gun* director Rowan Joseph talked to students about their theatrical backgrounds and the importance of their new film. McKenzie, who graduated from Austin High in 1997, was a football player at AHS - he did not begin acting until after high school, when he attended the University of Virginia.

After graduating from college with a degree in Foreign Affairs and Economics, McKenzie moved to New York City to pursue an acting career. The majority of his post-college acting career consisted of theatrical productions in New York, until his big break came in 2003, when he landed the lead role of Ryan on the hit television show *The O.C.*

He advised aspiring actors to participate in the organizations at Austin High. "You have a lot of resources here at Austin High," McKenzie said. "Take full advantage of them - Debate, Newspaper, Acting, Sports." He particularly regretted not joining The Red Dragon Players during his football off-seasons.

McKenzie and Joseph also stressed the importance of a theatrical background as a necessity for any actor, in film or theatre. "Theatre is the basis for all acting - as a director, we can always tell who has a theatre background," Joseph said.

McKenzie added that theatrical backgrounds clearly differentiate the talented, experienced actors from the pretty faces with limited training who are only looking for a place on the big screen. "It shows," McKenzie said. "The people who make it big in Los Angeles are people who work hard and have talent."

McKenzie considers himself extremely lucky - he was only in Los Angeles for one year and six days before he landed his huge role on *The O.C.* pilot. He emphasized that such luck is not the norm for young actors looking for work.

As for the film McKenzie was promoting, *Johnny Got His Gun* was originally a novel by Dalton Trumbo, the Academy Award-winning blacklisted writer of such film classics as *Spartacus* and *Papillon*. The famous anti-war novel focused on Joe, a young soldier who loses his limbs, ears, nose, sight, and speech in World War I.

In the early 1980s, the book was adapted into a one-man play, completely taking place in Joe's mind and dreams. Actor Jeff Daniels performed an early version of the show, and now director Joseph has adapted the play into a film - featuring 75 minutes of McKenzie alone onscreen in a tremendously relevant war story.

"If you're in theatre, it's amazing to see this," Joseph said. "Ben and I worked for about a month on staging in a studio in Venice Beach. The play also offers interest to English and literature people, and those who like history."

McKenzie had very few prerequisites for performing in the film - but there was one particularly important factor. Although *Johnny Got His Gun* is a classic anti-war text (along the lines of *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Slaughterhouse Five*), McKenzie was insistent that the film not be a "dumping on the soldiers." McKenzie wanted the movie to play as a pro-soldier film that honors the heroes, yet also raises questions about the destruction of war.

McKenzie's other recent film credits include major roles in *88 Minutes* (2008) and *Junebug* (2005). Besides speaking to Austin High students, McKenzie also hosted the World Premiere of *Johnny Got His Gun* at the Paramount Theatre, along with director Rowan Joseph. The film opens for the public at the Dobie Theatre on Friday, September 26.



Director Rowan Joseph and actor Ben McKenzie speak to Austin High School students.