

## ***Johnny Got His Gun***

An Antiwar Manifesto

Joe Bonham Still Needs to Be Heard

Darrel Manson | 11/14/08 |

It was forty years ago I first discovered Dalton Trumbo's book *Johnny Got His Gun*. I was in high school with college in sight. The Vietnam War was at its height. So too was the growing antiwar movement. Trumbo's book became something of a manifesto for American youth who yearned for a more peaceful future.

Trumbo was something of a lightning rod. One of the blacklisted writers for refusing to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Trumbo had been a member of the Communist Party. *Johnny Got His Gun* was published just before the start of World War II in Europe. Until Germany attacked the Soviet Union, American Communists opposed getting into the war. While the book certainly has Communist roots, it remains among the best books for looking at what the human cost of war can be.

In 1971, Trumbo adapted his book into a film starring Timothy Bottoms. It was later adapted into a one person stage play. In 1982 Jeff Daniels won an Obie for his performance. Now the stage version has been filmed with Ben McKenzie playing Joe Bonham, an American soldier who was wounded in World War I.

As with the book, the whole play takes place in Joe's mind. The stage is empty except for a chair and a bench. Joe begins by slowly becoming aware of his injuries. He has lost his arms and his legs. He is deaf. He is blind. He has lost his jaw and tongue and teeth. He is little more than a hunk of meat with a beating heart. But he also has a working mind. That working mind is what causes the problem. Even though they take care of his body, there is nothing they can do for his mind. As he says at one point, "I'm in here forever."

In his mind he remembers the days of his youth – friends, parents, his girlfriend. He can go back and see them and talk with them. But they never stay. It is a challenge for him to keep his sanity. He has no one to talk to and no way to talk to them if they were there.

In time, he tries taping his head in Morse code. Someone catches on and he is asked, "What do you want?" His answer is a stirring call for people to be aware of the human costs of war.

The one person performance and staging work especially well. Joe's memories are at times fun, and often poignant. Even when he remembers his time in the war, he recalls not the misery, but the human, comical side of the trenches. He remembers fishing with his father. He remembers holding his girlfriend. He remembers dawns and the way life would slowly begin in his hometown. He also experiences the attentions of the nurses – or their distress. He feels them putting a cloth over his face and tying it down. He knows it's so the nurses will not have to see his wounds. Back and forth it goes, the good days of life and the hell of his solitude.

The dedication at the end of the film reads, "This film is a testament to the noble sacrifice of those who fight our wars for us and a reminder of the solemn responsibility of those who choose to send them." Every war has its Joes. Maybe the extent of his injuries is a bit of literary license, but so many of those who follow their nation's call to arms come back damaged – both physically and psychologically. Earlier this year Phil Donahue and Ellen Spiro showed us the life of Tomas Young in their documentary *Body of War*. Young is a spiritual descendant of Joe Bonham. The brokenness of these lives needs to be remembered whenever we put out a call to arms. Those who have power need to think of all the Joe Bonhams that will come home (and those who will never come home as well) before they send young men and women to fight.

*Johnny Got His Gun* continues to speak to me after all these years. As a young man the book helped form my understanding of the evil of war. Now that I am older, this film version reminds me of my role in the collective responsibility that sends the Joes of this world out.