

Austin American-Statesman

FINAL EDITION ■ FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2008 ■ 75 CENTS

Austin American-Statesman **MOVIES & LIFE** Friday, September 26, 2008

D5

'DALTON TRUMBO'S JOHNNY GOT HIS GUN' ★★★☆☆



Derek Van Oss

Ben McKenzie stars as a soldier who loses nearly everything but his mind.

Theatrical 'Gun,' with a cast of only one, unfolds on screen as a film of high caliber

By Charles Ealy

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

The lightning-like experience of a great theater production is almost impossible to translate to the big screen. But Austin native Benjamin McKenzie makes a valiant effort to replicate Jeff Daniels' 1982 Obie-winning performance in the one-man movie version of "Dalton Trumbo's Johnny Got His Gun."

Although a novice actor by some standards, the 30-year-old former brooding hunk of television's "The O.C." has chosen to portray, without props, costumes or makeup, a World War I veteran who has lost his arms, legs, ears, nose and eyes in a horrific explosion.

The soldier, Joe Bonham, lies in a hospital and tries to figure out what happened to him. And it's only after a while that he realizes he's physically little more than a piece of flesh.

His mind, however, is working just fine — as long as he can stay sane. That's a big challenge when you can't hear or see and must judge the passing of the days by the heat on your body and the number of times a nurse comes by to turn you over and change the bedsheets.

Much of the horror of the soldier's situation

is interspersed with flashbacks: memories of a mother in the kitchen, of a girlfriend left behind, of father-son fishing trips. Though these moments bring much-needed dramatic relief, there's no mistaking that "Johnny Got His Gun" has a virulent message of pacifism couched in the grim realities of war's grotesqueries.

Director Rowan Joseph originally planned to release a film version of the original Off-Broadway production, adapted for the stage by Bradley Rand Smith, in advance of the presidential elections. But when Joseph and producing partner Shane Partlow viewed the footage at the Lincoln Center Library, they found that the first 20 minutes had been lost during a transfer from VHS to digital format.

So they decided to re-create the stage production with McKenzie, whose boyish appeal suits the role, and open it gradually in major cities across the U.S., with Austin being the first stop. "Johnny Got His Gun" won't break any box-office records. But it should find a small but loyal audience.

cealy@statesman.com; 445-3931

Rating: Not rated. **Running time:** 77 minutes.

Theater: Dobie.