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Film Review: Johnny Got His Gun

Ben McKenzie gives a tour-de-force performance in this one-man show, a challenging adaptation of an anti-war classic.

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In 2007, filmmaker Rowan Joseph, about to direct a national tour of a play adaptation by Bradley Rand Smith of Dalton Trumbo's novel *Johnny Got His Gun*, went to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts to watch a beloved videotape of the original 1982 off-Broadway production with Jeff Daniels. Joseph had seen and loved the play, which had run for 27 performances, and initially viewing the video in the late '80s, he became even more besotted, despite the fact the first ten minutes had no audio. What Joseph discovered to his horror upon re-watching the video in 2007 was that the first 20 minutes had been destroyed when it was transferred from VHS to digital. Devastated by the idea that no full, permanent record of the play existed, Joseph decided to postpone the play and make a video of a new production of it instead. This is the fascinating genesis of what is undoubtedly a labor of love for all concerned.

Trumbo's anti-war novel, which was previously filmed in 1971 with adaptation and direction by the once-blacklisted Trumbo himself, all takes place in the mind of Joe Bonham. He has been injured by an artillery shell on the last day of World War I, which leaves him a quadruple amputee who has also lost his eyes, ears, nose and mouth. His brain, however, is intact, and he devises a Morse code system of tapping his head to communicate his desire to be put on display as an illustration of the horrors of war.

The play is a one-man show, staged with the utmost minimalism and, as such, an audience challenge. Luckily, Joseph has cast it perfectly, with Ben McKenzie (formerly of "The O.C.") as Joe. McKenzie has the perfect boy-next-door looks as well as the physical intensity and ardent naturalism to hold your interest. It's a tour-de-force performance, and Joseph's camerawork is fluid and sensitive, commendably staying well out of the way of his actor, as he emotes a sadly timeless tale particularly germane to this election year.

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