

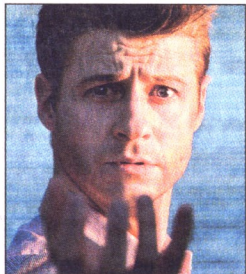
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AT THE MOVIES

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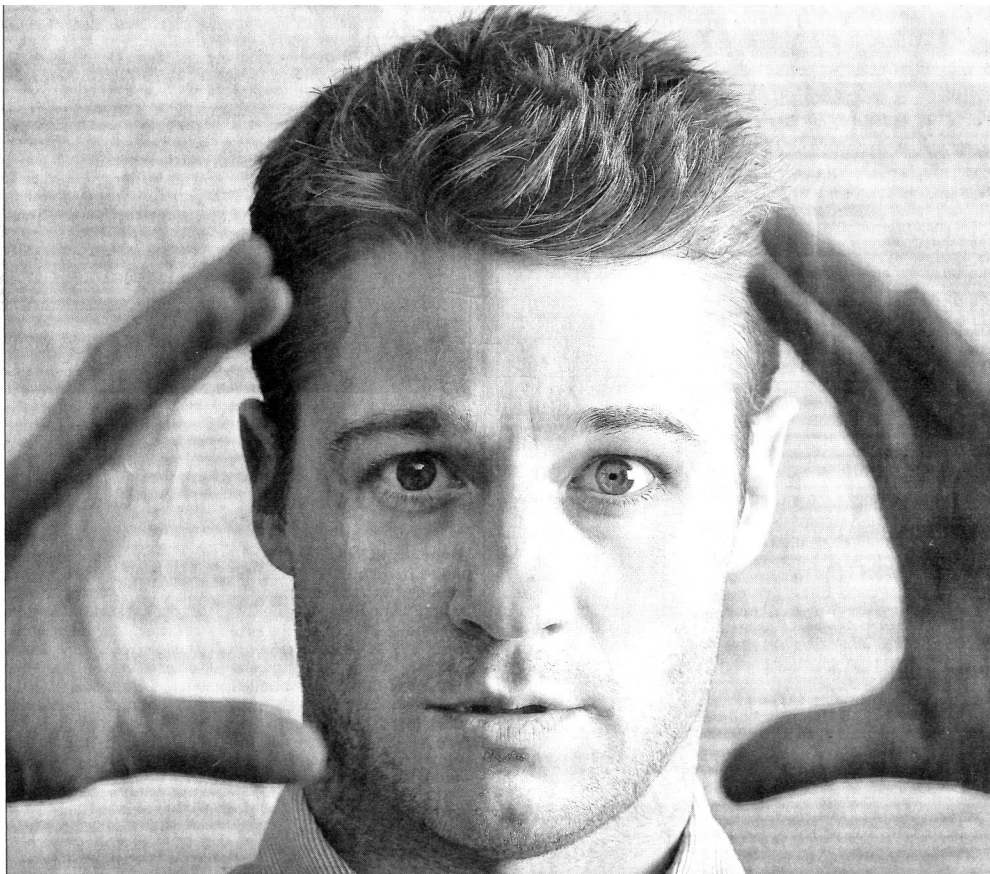


RICARDO DEARATANHA L.A. Times

The Performance: Ben McKenzie goes from the "O.C." coast to a World War I infirmary.

The Big Picture: Fox's Tom Rothman says the studio didn't mess with "Australia."

Scene Stealer: Making Sarah Brightman's eyes for "Repo!"



RICARDO DEARATANHA Los Angeles Times

GET THE PICTURE? Ben McKenzie campaigned for Obama and stars in an antiwar film but isn't a pacifist.

THE PERFORMANCE

In clear focus

'O.C.' heartthrob Ben McKenzie talks war, Dalton Trumbo and his role as a man trapped in his body in 'Johnny Got His Gun.'

MICHAEL ORDOÑA

The casting of "The O.C.'s" Ben McKenzie as a horrifically wounded World War I soldier in "Johnny Got His Gun" might be a nightmarish notion for fans of the TV show, but the presence of this all-American-looking teen idol in a skeletal, heartfelt antiwar drama lends a jarring, current resonance.

"It's a very small, little passion project for a few people; I just hope it adds to the conversation a little bit," said McKenzie on a Friday evening in a cafe on noisy Sunset Boulevard. "Some of the proceeds will go to the Fallen Patriot Fund, which helps out [Operation Iraqi Freedom] veterans. But I don't have any grand illusions that this will spark some kind of national conversation over the Iraq war; we've been having that conversation for some time and this is not going to tip the balance. It's just another little bit for people to think about."

The source material is Dalton Trumbo's revered 1939 antiwar novel, but this film, directed by theater veteran Rowan Joseph, is not a remake of the surreal 1971 movie adaptation.

Rather, it is a "live-on-stage-on-film" presentation of the solo-performance version adapted for the stage by Bradley Rand Smith, a 70-something-minute monologue that helped launch Jeff Daniels' career in 1982.

All the action takes place in the mind of 20-year-old Joe Bonham, who on the final day of World War I loses his limbs and the ability to see, hear and speak.

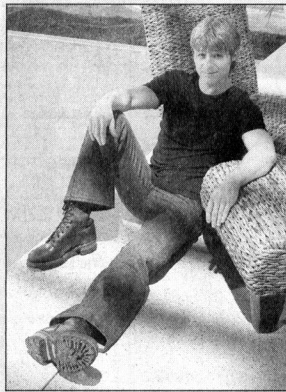
It's a challenging piece for the performer, who must manage the erratic shifts of Joe's pure id without the filter of relating to other people.

"There's a lot of extreme happiness and extreme paranoia, these absolute freakout moments. The challenge was to allow each of them to be where they needed to be, not to shy away from the

Where you've seen him

Ben McKenzie is best known as troubled outsider Ryan Atwood on television's "The O.C." (2003-2007). The stage-trained Austin, Texas, native was seen as Johnny Johnsten in "Junebug" with Amy Adams (2005) and opposite Al Pacino in "88 Minutes" (2007); he also spoke at the Democratic National Convention in 2004. McKenzie is the nephew of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Robert Schenkkan ("The Kentucky Cycle").

— MICHAEL ORDOÑA



ART STREIBER FOX

He gained renown as tough-luck Ryan Atwood on "The O.C."

peaks and valleys.

"It's not my natural state; I'm a much more guarded person," admitted McKenzie. "But this character has no choice; left alone for days on end for time eternal, essentially, who else is he

going to talk to but himself? He tries to remind himself of the good things but can't help being pulled into the bad things."

Although the actor, who had just returned from campaigning for Barack Obama in Virginia, is a great admirer of the late Trumbo's work and solidly against the current war in Iraq, he doesn't support all of the blacklisted Hollywood great's ideas.

"He's a communist, I'm not a communist; he's a pacifist, I'm not, actually, a pacifist," McKenzie said. "I think there are just wars; I don't think Iraq is necessarily one of them. The fact that my grandfather fought in World War II gives me great pride — as it does that anyone fights our wars for us, whether they're just or not. That's something that Rowan and I really talked about. We wanted to have a film that could be both pro-soldier and antiwar."

Still, it's not exactly the big-screen breakthrough project one might expect from a young TV star.

"My manager, at this point, is totally used to it because I've been fairly reticent to do a lot of the things you might do off of ['The O.C.']," he said with a laugh. "To their credit, they said, 'Go for it.' There were no lunches at the Ivy as a result of the commissions from 'Johnny Got His Gun.'"

"I hope the filmmakers get their money back; I'm optimistic that they will, it's gotten very nice reviews. But the nice thing is everybody's there for love. We're all there in the trenches together, no pun intended."

"It is [metaphorically] about Iraq, but it's broader than that. How are we going to look at future wars? I think Obama, as gracefully as he can, will pull us out of Iraq, but there are always going to be future wars. We have to look at the people who are going to be suffering for us."

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