

"But what I was interested in was the humanity of the character; not what has been taken away from him, but the spirit he still has and how he refuses to give up no matter what." — Rowan Joseph, director



BEN MCKENZIE and director Rowan Joseph on the set of the film "Johnny Got His Gun," starring McKenzie in a solo performance. The movie, currently playing in Berkeley, is based on Dalton Trumbo's 1938 anti-war novel.

Dispatch from indie land

Filmmakers on a shoestring budget tackle 'Johnny Got His Gun'

By Pat Craig
STAFF WRITER

IT'S NOT THE MOST high-powered film-publicity juggernaut, but it could be the most sincere.

A three-man team of true believers, the publicist, the producer and the director, are crammed into a booth at Hubcaps cafe in downtown Walnut Creek ordering light (fries, a hot fudge sundae and lemonade) and promoting their movie version of Dalton Trumbo's achingly powerful 1938 anti-war novel, "Johnny Got His Gun," which opened Friday in a limited run at Berkeley's Shattuck Cinemas.

Their campaign marches to New York next, as they roll out the film, one city at a time, before wider distribution.

They're on a mission to introduce a new generation to Trumbo's Joe Bonham, an 18-year-old soldier who lost his limbs and most of his face to an artillery blast on the final day of the war. He remains alive and hospitalized, and fights to find some way to communicate his tale of the beautiful fragility of life and the terror of war.

"We didn't do anything right about making this," says rookie director Rowan Joseph, who comes to film after a long theater career. "We didn't play the festivals because we wanted this out before the election; it's a one-man film. We had everything working against us (including the show's tiny, just-over-\$80,000 budget), yet here we are."

Joseph overstates only slightly. True, an independent film getting picked up for distribution is essentially a one-in-a-million sort of long shot. But the effort is helped by the fact that the novel remains



PRODUCERS USED \$53 worth of dry ice to create illusion of floating on water in the film "Johnny Got His Gun." The film's budget was about \$80,000.

'Johnny Got His Gun'

- **STARRING:** Ben McKenzie
- **DIRECTOR:** Rowan Joseph
- **WHERE:** Shattuck Cinemas, 2230 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley
- **WHEN:** Through Thursday
- **RATING:** Not rated
- **RUNNING TIME:** 1 hour, 17 minutes

timely after 70 years, and, perhaps more importantly, that the one person in the cast is Ben McKenzie, who played Ryan Atwood in Fox's "The O.C." and appeared in "Junebug," another indie film.

"I couldn't resist this," says McKenzie, joining the trio in the booth by phone. "I hadn't read the book, but once I knew the story, I knew it was a great role. And when I read the novel and the script (by Bradley Rand Smith), I realized just how strong the material was."

He was a little daunted by the 50-page script, which was essentially a long monologue. But Joseph simply told McKenzie to work slowly and key the speeches to his various positions around the set, and he'd be fine.

"Rowan did a lot," says McKenzie, "but the big factor was the story — you just

'Johnny'

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had to trust the language."

The film has a surreal glow about it, an intentional look that Joseph wanted, because the solo character is a World War I casualty who's lost his arms and legs, eyes, ears, nose and mouth. He is alive and in the hospital, but unable to communicate with the outside world.

The glow, provided in part by McKenzie's white Henley shirt, which casts a subtle aura, is to remind people that the story is taking place in Bonham's mind as he struggles to express his thoughts and feelings about war and life by finding some way to com-

municate.

Early on, Joseph and McKenzie agreed that they didn't want to turn the film didactic and underline the anti-war theme in huge brush strokes.

"The message is there in Trumbo's words," says Joseph. "But what I was interested in was the humanity of the character; not what has been taken away from him, but the spirit he still has and how he refuses to give up no matter what — that's what's interesting and exciting to me."

And the \$80,000 budget?

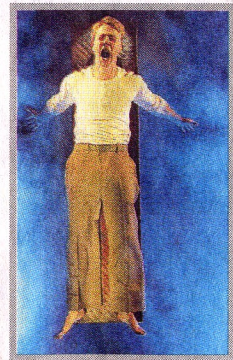
That's Joseph's theatrical background. He had never been around the big-budget movie world, and was perfectly happy with a black-box theater at California State University Los Angeles to film the

show in under five days.

Movie people who took part in the shoot were amazed by the production's thrift. The cameraman, Joseph recalled, was astounded that the whole lighting system was included in the rental of the theater, and when it came time to shoot a scene where Bonham recalls floating down a river, the illusion was created by \$53 worth of dry ice.

"That would have been a \$50,000 shot in a studio," says Joseph. "But the dry ice and everything, that comes from theater. That's where we trust the power of the word — a chair, a bench, an actor; that's all we need to tell the story."

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