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OCTOBER 13-19, 2008

DALTON TRUMBO'S JOHNNY GOT HIS GUN

A Truly Indie release of a Greenwood Hill Prods. presentation, in association with Tres Hermanos Prods. Produced by Rowan Joseph, Shane Partlow, Wesley Horton, Lauri LaBeau. Executive producer, Robin A. Sateriale, John Meindl.

Directed by Rowan Joseph. Screenplay, Bradley Rand Smith, adapted from the novel by Dalton Trumbo. Camera (color, HD-to-35mm) Andrew K. Sachs; editor, Jay Cassidy; art director, Keith Mitchell; costume designer, Denitsa Bliznakova; sound (Dolby SR), Robert Arturo Ramirez; sound designer, Michael D. Mortilla; casting, Chadwick Struck. Reviewed on DVD, San Francisco, Oct. 6, 2008. Running time: **77 MIN.**

With: Ben McKenzie.

By DENNIS HARVEY

An antiwar literary classic reaches the bigscreen (again) via stage translation in "Dalton Trumbo's Johnny Got His Gun." That circuitous route benefits the interior monologue of a soldier robbed of speech, sight and limbs, struggling to maintain sanity in his hospital bed. Aply filmed by veteran stage producer-director Rowan Joseph, Bradley Rand Smith's theatrical script provides a bravura thespian workout for Ben McKenzie. Critical support and the recent docu "Trumbo" might help attract niche attention to Truly Indie's city-by-city, single-screen release before it begins its shelf life as a smallscreen broadcast/educational item.

The Oscar-winning, blacklisted author's 1939 novel has been a classroom perennial, but attempts to film it (at one point, Luis Bunuel was slated to direct) were stymied until Trumbo took it upon himself to bankroll and direct a 1971 bigscreen version.

While it has its defenders, that feature — Trumbo's first and last directorial effort — is in many respects a good illustration of the "unfilmable book equals unwatchable movie" principal, dramatizing the source material's stream-of-consciousness with heavy-handed literalness. Smith's solo stage version preemed Off Broadway in 1981, winning an Obie for thesp Jeff Daniels. Joseph embarked on this first feature upon discovering the sole archival video copy of that performance had been partially, accidentally erased.

On a stage bare but for a bench, oversized chair and occasional back projections, we first meet Joe Bonham (McKenzie) leaving small-town America for WWI service, waving goodbye to loved ones from the train. The war itself passes in a brief blur, ending when he's "hit hard" and believes he's experiencing "stone-cold death."

But amid a subsequent confusion of childhood and romantic recollections, he gradually realizes his actual predicament: bandaged head to toe, his face horribly maimed, all his limbs amputated, unable to move or communicate.

Pleas to be woken from this nightmare, in which he can't even be sure "whether I'm awake or asleep," alternate with more reminiscences, dim perceptions of the hospital world around him and mental games played simply to stop himself from going insane. (It's a thrilling accomplishment when he works out a way to tell how time is passing.) Finally, this 20-year-old, his life for all practical purposes over, discovers a means of making himself heard, tapping head against bedboard in Morse code. But his sole request — to be displayed as an example of war's cost — is decreed "against regulations." Trumbo's pacifist message comes through loud and clear, though in both the text and visuals, pic doesn't end on as strong a note one might like.

"The OC" star McKenzie, so good as Amy Adams' peevish husband in "Junebug," has just the right heartland look. His highly physical performance — illustrating the wandering energy of Joe's thoughts, not his trapped body — nimbly runs this ordinary yet bright and likable character's gamut of emotions.

Though billed as "live onstage, on film," pic was staged for the camera rather than for a live audience.

It's never static, despite the stark design, thanks largely to ace contributions from lenser Andrew K. Sachs, editor Jay Cassidy and lighting designer Leigh Allen.



Ben McKenzie stars in a filmed staging of "Johnny Got His Gun."