



NATALIE MENDOZA IN *THE DESCENT*.

## WAY DOWN UNDER

### *The Descent*

review by Greg Lamberson

In the opening reel of the 1970 British “B” picture *Trog* (Joan Crawford’s final film), a team of explorers discovers an ape man living in a series of underground caves. This is essentially the same concept of the new B film *The Descent*, also of British origin.

Writer-director Neil Marshall’s first film, *Dog Soldiers*, pitted a squadron of Brit soldiers against a pack of Scottish werewolves. It was a fun monster movie, surprisingly devoid of the comic relief that spoils so many domestic fright flicks, and it performed well on DVD and cable TV. In his new film, Marshall sends a team of six thrill seeking female “cavers” underground, where an accident traps them with a race of ravenous, bat-like humanoids. Just as I wasn’t able to tell the soldiers apart from each other in *Dog Soldiers* because of their heavy accents, I was unable to distinguish the heroines of this new effort from each other because they were covered from head to toe in blood, and sent scurrying around dark caverns with nothing but camcorders, torches and helmet-mounted flashlights to illuminate entire scenes.

This is a joyless affair, to be sure, and aside from teenagers and a niche audience (in which I include myself), it’s difficult to imagine who will find it entertaining. But Marshall possesses considerable skill as a storyteller and a filmmaker. I admired that he took the time to introduce his cast of characters and establish their group dynamics before banishing them from sunlight. And it was a brave choice—in this day of rapid fire bumps and scares—to expend

nearly half the running time before unleashing his monsters (comparisons to *Aliens* are on some levels appropriate). He derives maximum suspense from the claustrophobic exploration of the caves, and the monsters are effective and believable, refreshingly devoid of computer generation (although some bats seen early on are about as realistic as Roger Rabbit). The gory battle scenes employ that jittery, sped up camera trickery that so many contemporary action films rely on, and combined with the geysers of blood and spinning camera moves, the total effect is more than a little overwhelming.

Actress Natalie Mendoza fares the best of the talented cast, perhaps because her exotic features make it easy to recognize her despite the bloodshed and mutilations around her. Her character is essentially the same as Burt Reynolds’s in *Deliverance*, and her portrayal reminded me of Michelle Rodriguez’s on the TV series *Lost*.

Sadly, the film collapses in the final five minutes. I attribute this partly to studio interference: the more nihilistic resolution seen in England was deemed unsuitable for American audiences conditioned to happier, sequel friendly endings. Ironically, it’s hard to imagine a coda more depressing than the one that’s been tacked on. But I also blame Marshall; when one character is called upon to pass moral judgment on another, her decision left me feeling as utterly hopeless as I’m sure the film as a whole will leave those seeking escapism.

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A SCENE FROM *THE WAR TAPES*.

## A SOLDIER’S STORY

### *The War Tapes*

review by Michael I. Niman

Buffalo audiences that recently viewed the previews of the locally made documentary *Forgotten City* saw firsthand how amateur video footage can be edited into a first-class film. Though lacking any formal training in filmmaking, the *Forgotten City* videographers did have access to people and communities often unapproachable by the mainstream media. The end result was a compelling glimpse of Buffalo street life—which was an eye-opener for a segregated city where most folks will never experience the poison of impoverished neighborhoods.

*The War Tapes* applies the same formula to the Iraq War. Billed as “the first war movie filmed by soldiers themselves,” *The War Tapes* is made from amateur video footage shot by three New Hampshire National Guard soldiers during a one-year deployment to Iraq. Their images were made into a compelling feature-length film by producer Robert May (*The Fog of War*) and editor Steve James (co-editor of *Hoop Dreams*), and directed by first-time filmmaker Deborah Scranton, a New Hampshire single mother.

The resulting film is powerful and compelling—so compelling that after a few minutes we cease to notice what would otherwise be an annoying, *Blair Witch*-style shaky camera. The difference is that *The War Tapes* cameras are capturing real life, and real life is a shaky thing—especially in Iraq.

As in *Forgotten City*, the filmmakers blaze ahead, vacuuming up data unencumbered by the ethical constraints that may trouble a trained ethnographic fieldworker. The result is alarmingly candid and at times self-incriminating, as soldiers expose their racist views toward Iraqis, whom they term “hajis,” in a pejorative twist on the word denoting a devout Muslim who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

War is ugly. It’s not about liberation or democracy. It’s about killing. Forget that and a soldier could wind up dead. This is the message of *The War Tapes*. It gives us insight into war, at least from

the perspective of an occupying soldier in a foreign land. There are moments where the insanity is unbearable, such as when under-equipped soldiers ask why they are risking their lives to guard Halliburton trucks full of “cheese-cake.” No matter where they sit on the political spectrum, a sickening disgust for war profiteers such as Halliburton seems to be universal in Iraq. That rant is just one place where these citizen-soldier-journalists pepper the film with a running commentary as they examine their own roles in Iraq, their own racism and perhaps the erosion of, or struggle to maintain, their own humanity.

When the filmmakers return from war, the film goes on. It turns out you can never return from war. War follows you. It haunts you. And, in some cases, it destroys you. This is where the filmmakers deserve real kudos—for opening up their own lives, not just as soldiers doing a job but also as husbands, fathers, boyfriends and sons. Ultimately the filmmakers expose their souls to the camera, giving us noncombatants a rare insight into what war really means.

For most viewers, the ultimate shock will be at who is sitting next to them in the theater, as this film has been embraced by both antiwar activists and veterans groups supporting the war. Is it an antiwar film? I’d argue yes. Any film that accurately depicts war, by its very nature, is an antiwar film. Hence antiwar activists want Americans to see what war is—to understand the policies they support through their taxes and silent acquiescence to government policies. War supporters want folks to know what kind of sacrifice our soldiers are making, so that they can empathize with active duty military and veterans, and support them in their struggles to readjust to civilian life or to continue fighting in Iraq.

Ultimately *The War Tapes* is about truth and understanding. During this period in history when truth and honesty is so rare in the American media, it provides something that Americans from all political camps can appreciate.

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