

## A crisis of conscience in the gruesome heart of war

### Casualties of War

Michael J. Fox, Sean Penn,  
Thuy Thu Le

directed by Brian DePalma

Carolina Blue and White  
call for times

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Brian DePalma has never been a man to mince his cinematic words, and his latest effort, *Casualties of War*, is a case in point. The dramatic ground of Daniel Lang's story is laid simply and strongly. From the outset, when the "cherry" private is stuck in a hole and DePalma's camera sweeps slowly down to reveal his legs, under the ground, dangling inside a Viet Cong tunnel, you know you're in capable, confident hands.

It's Erickson (Michael J. Fox) who is stuck Winnie-the-Pooh-like in the hole, and it's Meserve, his sergeant (Sean Penn), who saves his life by pulling him out. The conflict between these two is the film's sharp focus. On a reconnaissance mission, Meserve declares that they are going to take some "portable R&R" with them — a young Vietnamese woman they grab from a local village at the dead of night.

Erickson refuses to believe the sergeant is serious until the plan takes effect. The woman is bound, gagged and taken along on the platoon's extensive hike. Erickson angrily objects. "This is the 20th century," he says. "Jesus, we're supposed to be helping these people." Meserve will not accept the criticism: "She's a VC whore, and we're gonna have a little

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film

fun with her." When the platoon comes across a deserted village, a hut is designated and shockingly, without warning, we're in "The Accused" territory. As he enters the hut to be the first of the woman's rapists, Meserve holds up his gun. "The army calls this a weapon," he says. "But it isn't." He grabs his crotch. "This is a weapon."

The rest of the platoon, willingly or not, has already bent to the sergeant's will. But Erickson refuses to participate in what the rest of his platoon regards as fun, and he finds himself standing alone. Suddenly he's in as much danger from his fellow soldiers as he is from the enemy.

Erickson cannot prevent the rapes, but neither can he let the matter rest. Back at basecamp, he reports to his immediate superior, who claims, "You can't expect anything else in the combat zone." When he takes it higher he is reprimanded. "I'm simply trying to illuminate the terrain in which we currently find ourselves deployed," hisses the tight-lipped Captain by way of explanation.

The beauty of the drama is that the conflict is not as black-and-white as you might expect. Certainly, DePalma comments on the many-times-explored subject of what boys will do in war, but the predicament is specific, the moral dilemma so tight, that the actors can dig deep into their characters to express its complexity. Sean Penn's Meserve, for instance, is not the Devil that was Tom Berenger in "Platoon." "Yea though I



Trying to stop the inevitable, Michael J. Fox confronts Sean Penn in Brian DePalma's 'Casualties of War'

walk through the valley of evil, I will fear no death. 'Cause I'm the meanest mother in the valley!" could have been a Berenger line, but Meserve is also the man who resuscitated a Vietnamese child victim of smoke inhalation, and the man who deeply feels the loss of a platoon colleague. Meserve is knowingly complicated. Penn may be an unpopular actor, but his performance is dazzling.

However, perhaps surprisingly, it is Michael J. Fox who shines brightest. You can see what DePalma was

thinking: the squeaky-clean neighborhood boy flung into the combat zone — who could be more out of his depth in a war-torn jungle than Michael J. Fox? It was a crucial decision and an astounding success. Erickson's battle of conscience as he dares to cross his sergeant is brilliantly portrayed, and his comforting of the rape victim is supremely moving. Fox's performance is worthy of awards.

It is a tight, dense drama that DePalma's assured style suits well.

(Oddly enough, it is one of his least violent efforts — his near-trademark gratuity is absent). At its gruesome heart is the idea that we owe ourselves more than the crimes of war, the horrors of Vietnam; and that perhaps our actions, our conduct, matter more than we think. If you were thinking you'd seen enough Vietnam war films recently, please think again. This gripping, suspenseful film has plenty to say about the tragedy we have yet to fully understand.

### Top 10 Films

Figures indicate current gross

1. *Uncle Buck*  
\$34.7 million
2. *Parenthood*  
\$64.1 million
3. *The Abyss*  
\$40.7 million
4. *Lethal Weapon 2*  
\$131.2 million
5. *When Harry Met Sally*  
\$66.6 million
6. *Turner and Hooch*  
\$57.2 million
7. *Batman*  
\$238.6 million
8. *sex, lies, and videotape*  
\$8.1 million
9. *Relentless*  
\$3.3 million
10. *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*  
\$119.1 million

— Associated Press

## Civil Rights meets the frivolities of sororities

### Heart of Dixie

Ally Sheedy, Virginia Madsen,  
Phoebe Cates

directed by Martin Davidson

Plaza II  
call for times

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**H**eat of Dixie is the story of a University of Alabama sorority girl who decides the civil rights movement is more deserving of her attention than the frivolities of her sorority.

The film's success lies in the way director Martin Davidson, who isn't overly fond of sororities, contrasts the importance of the movement with the skewed visions of Alabama's preciously-Southern sorority sisters of 1957.

Having said this, *Heart of Dixie* is not in any way dynamic. It doesn't have much grit to it — it's told in a

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film

very obvious and ordinary way. The main focus is Maggie (Ally Sheedy) and her two best friends, Delia (Virginia Madsen) and Aiken (Phoebe Cates).

Maggie is all but engaged to Boot (Don Michael Paul), whose father owns a huge plantation of the sort that would put Tara to shame; and Delia, appropriately a modern-day Scarlet O'Hara who must have everything her way, thinks this is a wonderful future and would give anything to have it as her own.

As Maggie's other sorority sisters organize their annual ball, it becomes apparent that they agree with Delia. The most important thing in their lives, apart from their wardrobes, is to get pinned.

Two people, however, encourage Maggie to look beyond all this trivi-

ality. First there is Aiken, a non-sorority friend who delights in unconventional behavior; she wears black clothes, she dreams of Greenwich Village and drinks out of "Colored Only" water fountains.

And there is Hoyt Cunningham, a man whom Boot's father calls a revolutionary and Delia calls a Communist. Actually, he's a press photographer, and he introduces Maggie to the civil rights movement at Elvis Presley's Homecoming Concert when a black couple is forced out of the concert by two racists. When the fighting is halted by police, the black man gets the blame. This event inspires Maggie to take on the University in an attempt to see justice done.

It's all fairly unrealistic stuff. Ally Sheedy's Maggie is impressionable, sure, but she seems to lack the drive necessary of success. Her catalyst, Hoyt, provided her with only the most vague of inspirations ("Do you ever put yourself on the line?"), and Aiken, with whom the film could so easily do without, provides even less.

When it's all over, after Maggie is flung out of school for her efforts, it's difficult to imagine that she would be a successful activist for the movement.

As for her sorority sisters, it's clear their outlook on life is outmoded and irrelevant. I don't know much about sororities, but I only hope they are nothing like that today, otherwise we all have a long way to go.

The only thing worth noting about *Heart of Dixie* as a civil rights drama is that it acknowledges that others are accomplishing real work elsewhere. When Maggie visits the black maid from her sorority, she is taken into a room containing a small shrine with pictures of Christ and Martin Luther King.

"I pray to them," the maid says, "because they will get things done." In a time when *Cry Freedom* and *Mississippi Burning* would have you believe that all the civil rights work was achieved by white FBI agents and journalists, such sentiments are refreshing.