



The Messenger

Screenplay by Oren Moverman and Alessandro Camon

IT'S HARD TO find an Iraq-themed war movie with an angle that hasn't been explored before, but screenwriters Oren Moverman and Alessandro Camon managed to find a fresh one. *The Messenger*, which Moverman also directed, is an intimate drama told from the POV of casualty notification officers, soldiers who show up at the doors of families to inform them that their loved ones have been killed in action.

"Prior to the Vietnam War, this was done by telegram," Camon says. "Now it's a personal, dramatic interaction. It's a tremendously stressful job. We realized there was this very human aspect of the war that was being kept out of sight."

Moverman, an Israeli who'd served in the occupied territories in Lebanon in the mid-1980s, was well-versed with the vagaries of war. Best known as the writer of the indie film *Jesus' Son*, he teamed with producer Camon (*The Cooler*, *Thank You for Smoking*) after Camon brought him the idea for *The Messenger* back in 2005.

At that time, filmmakers were just beginning to explore the subject of Iraq. Three years later, Hollywood box office failures such as *Rendition*, *Redacted* and *In the Valley of Elah* seemed to signal a public weariness regarding the conflict. But Moverman and Canon remained unfazed, convinced their story was a universal one. "We would tell people, it's not

a war movie," Camon recalls. "There's no combat. It's about the people who have to survive."

In the film, Ben Foster plays Will Montgomery, a young soldier who's completed his tour of duty in Iraq. When he returns to the States, he's paired with Army lifer Tony Stone (Woody Harrelson) in the casualty notification department to deliver the grim news that no soldier's family wants to hear. As Will tries to recover from the trauma of war, he also falls in love with Olivia Pitterson (Samantha Morton), a sudden widow to whom he's given the bad news.

After creating a detailed 10-page treatment as a selling tool, the writers garnered interest from producers Mark Gordon and Lawrence Inglee, who eventually brought in another company, Reason Pictures (now known as Good) to commission the script.

With Moverman in New York and Camon in Los Angeles, the script was written through long-distance correspondence. The writers divided up scenes and rewrote each other's work via email, a process that Moverman likened to a cordial type of ping-pong.

Creatively, the writers faced some tough decisions, like abandoning an early subplot of Will investigating the questionable circumstances behind Olivia's husband's death. "It would've become a kind of quest — too distracting, the kind of stuff other movies have

done," Camon says. Then there was the matter of the relationship between Will and Olivia, two wounded people struggling to move beyond the scars left by war. "There was a tremendous temptation to make it a fuller love story, but we came to the revelation that it was the wrong thing to do," Camon says. Adds Moverman, "We debated a lot, whether they should have sex. How does sex change the dynamic, knowing they're not going to end up together in a conventional way? We decided it would be much stronger and much more emotional if they didn't."

Ultimately, the writers were drawn more to the unlikely relationship at the film's core between Will and Tony, whose friendship enables them to confront long-buried emotions, an arc that climaxes with Tony's dissolution into tears on a couch. For Harrelson, it marked the first time he had to cry on-screen. "He was nervous about it, but once he started he couldn't stop," Moverman says.

The Messenger is Moverman's directorial debut but, interestingly, it wasn't intended to be that way. Moverman was attached to another project that he was ready to shoot in Berlin. "I was thinking of *The Messenger* as a responsible co-writer, hoping to get a great director who had the track record to make the film work," Moverman recalls. "I felt that talking about me would be a disruption to that process."

The script underwent rewrites with three different directors, including Sydney Pollack and (briefly) Ben Affleck, each of whom brought a different vision to the story. Ultimately, it was the draft done with the second director, Roger Michell, that adhered most to what became the shooting script.

After Michell became unavailable and Moverman's Berlin film fell through, the producers approached Moverman again and, with Camon's blessing, he agreed to direct. The film was shot in 28 days in New Jersey, aided by approval from an unexpected ally: the U.S. Army. It turned out that Army officers had read the script in L.A., found it respectful and thus granted access to shoot scenes at Fort Dix, along with advisors and even soldiers as extras.

As the film nears release, Moverman and Camon continue to dispel the notion of *The Messenger* as just another downbeat Iraq War movie. "I wouldn't call it upbeat, but it's a very optimistic film," Moverman says. "It's a film that lets you explore the idea that love and friendship are what get us through life." **CS**