

# MY DEAD FRIEND ZOE

## CRITIC REVIEWS



- [Rotten Tomatoes 100%](#)

- [Pull Quotes](#)

### INDEX

[SXSW Award Winner](#)

[Variety](#)

[Collider](#)

[Deadline](#)

[Roger Ebert](#)

[The Austin Chronicle](#)

[Pajiba](#)

[IndeWire](#)

[The Hollywood Outsider](#)

[Film Festival Today](#)

[Screen Zealots](#)

[Fresh Fiction](#)

[The Daily Beast](#)

[Black Girl Nerds](#)

[But Why Tho?](#)

[Latina Media Co](#)

[The Michigan Daily](#)

[Inside + Out](#)

**Cast:** [Sonequa Martin-Green](#), [Natalie Morales](#), [Ed Harris](#), [Morgan Freeman](#), [Utkarsh Ambudkar](#), [Gloria Reuben](#)

**Directed by:** Kyle Hausmann-Stokes

**Written by:** Kyle Hausmann-Stokes & AJ Bermudez

**Producers:** Travis Kelce, Paul Scanlan, Kyle Hausmann-Stokes, Ray Maiello, Terri Lubaroff

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## PULL QUOTES

“A Veteran’s Creative Take on PTSD Packs the Power of Classic Capra.” — **Peter Debruge, Variety**

“A powerful drama with a phenomenal performance at its core and another reminder that Ed Harris is one of our best living actors in its supporting cast.” — **Brian Tallerico, Roger Ebert**

“Weaves a complex tapestry from trauma, memory and the enduring strength of human connection.” — **Valerie Complex, Deadline**

“My Dead Friend Zoe might bill itself as a comedy, and you will laugh — Natalie Morales could make us laugh as the Grim Reaper in an orphanage — but be sure to bring the tissues because this movie is a heartbreaker in the best, most fulfilling way.” — **Matt Donato, Collider**

“Explores the depth of these sorrows in this intimate debut.” — **Lovia Gyarkye, the Hollywood Reporter**

“The strong performances and Hausmann Stokes’ clearly conveyed emotional investment in his storytelling that makes My Dead Friend Zoe consistently engaging.” — **Allegra Frank, The Daily Beast**

“Ed Harris is nothing short of a force.” — **Proma Khosla, IndieWire**

“Sonequa Martin-Green delivers what I will confidently describe as one of the best performances of the year.” — **Mat Donato, Collider**

“The beautifully crafted family dynamics, the messaging about mental health and wellness and the impeccable performances are worth every bit of your time.” — **Jamie Broadnax, Black Girl Nerds**

“As Merit, Sonequa Martin-Green gives what should easily go down as one of the bravest performances at SXSW 2024.” — **James Preston Poole, But Why Tho?**

“Weaving together Merit’s past and present, Hausmann-Stokes effectively explores the ways that we process grief. While the focus of the film is on veterans, the core of the film is accessible to all viewers: We all suffer losses, but we don’t have to suffer alone.” — **Madeline Duncan, The Austin Chronicle**

“As we roll through Merit’s unraveling, Martin-Green crests a mountain of emotion, peaks and valleys abound, delivering her finest performance yet. Up, down, jovial, heartbroken, lost, confused, embarrassed, prideful; every feeling is in her arsenal, and ultimately makes My Dead Friend Zoe one of the best films of the year already. Bravo.” — **Aaron B. Peterson, The Hollywood Outsider**

“It is this seamless integration of form and function that elevates “My Dead Friend Zoe” from a mere cinematic endeavor to a work of profound artistic expression, a testament to the transformative power of storytelling when harnessed by visionary talents.” — **Shahrbano Golmohamadi, Gazettely**

“An uplifting movie about PTSD.” — **Diana Helmuth, Pajiba**

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## Deadline - SXSW Audience Award Winner

[‘Bob Trevino Likes It,’ Dev Patel’s ‘Monkey Man,’ A24’s ‘Sing Sing’ & Dramedy ‘My Dead Friend Zoe’ Among SXSW Audience Award Winners](#) - by Matt Grober

*SXSW organizers on Monday announced the Audience Award winners for the festival’s recently wrapped 31st edition.*

The list includes Tracie Laymon’s dramedy *Bob Trevino Likes It*, which prevailed in Narrative Feature Competition, and the action thriller *Monkey Man* marking Dev Patel’s directorial debut, which dominated the Headliner section. Other notable winners included A24’s *Sing Sing* starring Colman Domingo, which won out in Festival Favorite, **and Kyle Hausmann-Stokes’ dark veteran dramedy *My Dead Friend Zoe*, starring Sonequa Martin-Green, Natalie Morales and Ed Harris, which won in Narrative Spotlight.**

[↑ BACK TO INDEX](#)

---

## Variety

[‘My Dead Friend Zoe’ Review: A Veteran’s Creative Take on PTSD Packs the Power of Classic Capra](#)

*Executive produced by Travis Kelce, writer-director Kyle Hausmann-Stokes’ solid, well-acted debut serves as a sincere plea for audiences to support returning soldiers.*

*By Peter Debruge* Mar 13, 2024

“I’ve lost more guys here than I did in Iraq,” testifies a veteran during one of the many group therapy sessions featured in “*My Dead Friend Zoe*,” Kyle Hausmann-Stokes’ affecting look at mental health among ex-servicepeople. Two decades of life experience and personal loss have led the filmmaker to this project, which was inspired by the deaths of friends he served alongside during his five-year tour of duty with the U.S. Army. To be clear, most of the movie is spent avoiding the kind of support that vets need — which is kind of the filmmaker’s point.

His main character, U.S. Army veteran Merit (Sonequa Martin-Green), is haunted by the death of fellow soldier Zoe (Natalie Morales), with whom she served in Afghanistan. A phantom version of Zoe hangs around Merit all day, mixing afternoon cocktails and making wisecracks that only she can hear — well, she and the audience, who should appreciate the way Zoe’s spunky attitude and irreverent sense of humor cut through an otherwise serious-minded film.

This isn’t your typical ghost story. Instead, the film treats Zoe as a manifestation of Merit’s trauma: Her dead friend won’t leave Merit alone until she deals with her guilt, but Merit doesn’t really want Zoe to go — which is one reason she’s reluctant to accept outside help. The director has been in her shoes. He’s dedicated much of his post-military career to making informational campaigns about the veteran experience, which in turn inform his debut feature (the fact that Travis Kelce appears as one of 14 executive producers has drawn attention, though even more meaningful are the hundreds of less-famous names who crowdfunded this *Legion M* feature).

Smart and sincere but never sanctimonious, the awareness-raising drama doubles as a public service message of sorts. Don’t worry, it’s a real movie, evoking complex emotions — uncomfortable laughter and

well-earned tears — en route to its cathartic finale. Just know that the movie exists for reasons other than escapism. Rather than being a cause for skepticism, the presence of such an agenda makes the result all the more meaningful. All involved want audiences to recognize that military service is dangerous, but so too is coming home. Without the proper treatment, people like Merit are at risk of self-harm.

Civilians don't necessarily understand the burden her character is carrying, which is one reason it was important for Hausmann-Stokes to cast veterans in as many of the roles as possible. Not leading ladies Martin-Green and Morales, nor Ed Harris (who plays Merit's Vietnam-surviving granddad, Clay), but practically everyone else who plays a soldier was once a soldier. That includes Morgan Freeman, a comfortingly familiar face who brings buckets of empathy to his role of Dr. Cole, the sage old counselor who oversees the group therapy sessions Merit has been court-mandated to attend. Merit's hardly the first veteran he's seen who has trouble sharing her pain.

It can feel manipulative when a movie holds back a key piece of information — in this case, how and why Zoe died — until the reveal will be most impactful. Here, Hausmann-Stokes punctuates Merit's return to civilian life in Oregon with frequent flashbacks to her service: joking with Zoe, sheltering from snipers, fending off the advances of male soldiers, listening to pop songs on a busted iPod (the lyrics of "Umbrella" have rarely been more poignant: "When the war has took its part ... Said I'll always be your friend").

As edited, these interruptions can be jarring and inelegant, but that seems true to the experience of trauma. Merit can't control how or when she's blindsided by memories of Zoe. As lively as a dead person can get, Morales practically steals the show at times as Zoe. But there comes a point when she starts to become a problem, getting in the way of Merit's responsibilities and interrupting a budding romance with a friendly, if slightly oblivious civilian (Utkarsh Ambudkar).

Lately, Merit has been on leave from work, owing to an accident which might have been more than mere negligence, according to Dr. Cole. He's patient with her, but also strict. He won't sign her papers unless she participates. When Merit starts to skip group therapy altogether, he follows up by phone. He knows that getting through to her could be a matter of life and death. Meanwhile, there's the matter of Merit's grandfather. Her mom (Gloria Reuben) is a white-collar workaholic who doesn't have time to deal with Clay, who's showing signs of Alzheimer's. Seeing an excuse to get out of therapy, Merit drives out to the lakeside cabin where Clay lives to supervise him.

It was Clay who originally made Merit want to enlist. But he comes from a different generation whose response to trauma was to toughen up, so talking with him is hardly the solution to her own turmoil. The movie suggests that society owes those veterans an apology for not treating them better upon their return. More to the point, it feels we know better now and ought to intervene on behalf of the soldiers who went off and did the "things no one wants to do." Clearly, Merit needs to share in order to move on. But she also needs to share for our benefit. Hausmann-Stokes' message is simple, and his movie is a perfect place to start: Take an interest in our veterans.

 [BACK TO INDEX](#)

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## Collider

['My Dead Friend Zoe' Review: Sonequa Martin-Green Gives One of the Year's Best Performances](#)

BY MATT DONATO - Published Mar 11, 2024

*Also starring Natalie Morales, Ed Harris, and Morgan Freeman, 'My Dead Friend Zoe' is a hilarious and heartbreaking film.*

Former Army paratrooper and Iraq veteran Kyle Hausmann-Stokes co-writes and directs a staggeringly impactful South by Southwest premiere about military veterans dealing with PTSD. *My Dead Friend Zoe*, adapted from the filmmaker's short, *Merit x Zoe*, is inspired by two of Hausmann-Stokes' platoonmates: Luis Ramirez-Jimenez and Boris Ventura. Suffice it to say, *My Dead Friend Zoe* is an immensely heavy dedication to the soldiers who wrestle with post-traumatic stress, so compassionately told by Hausmann-Stokes alongside co-writer A.J. Bermudez and co-storyteller Cherish Chen. There are veterans behind the camera, veterans in front of the camera, and veterans on the minds of everyone involved in this project — Hausmann-Stokes wants to see the military represented correctly by Hollywood.

### What Is 'My Dead Friend Zoe' About?

Sonequa Martin-Green stars in a powerhouse role as Merit, an Afghanistan veteran who served as a mechanic alongside her base bestie Zoe (Natalie Morales). Merit is now home on American soil, struggling with PTSD and plagued by the ghost of Zoe. She attends court-mandated meetings led by Vietnam veteran Dr. Cole (Morgan Freeman) with other troubled veterans, but refuses to expose her wartime vulnerabilities (as Zoe mocks other attendees). Her once-deployed grandfather Dale (Ed Harris) is diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's, so she uses the opportunity to serve as his caretaker and escape the world's demands to reveal what's shredding her insides. Merit would rather live with Zoe's memory as a constant reminder of what happened than move on, which as the narrative explores, only leads to madness or worse.

The care and understanding that goes into *My Dead Friend Zoe* is supremely evident, brimming with blunt, on-the-nose dialogue that speaks "military to military." The script addresses multiple generations' worth of PTSD as Zoe butts heads with Dale, Harris' stubborn, leathery Vietnam survivor who tells his niece about "his day," when there was no sympathy for veterans, and they'd get spit on at airports. There's so much to dissect about the way veterans are treated once home, what they're trained to do on the battlefield, and how they feel sequestered from society, unable to share what the non-serving population could never comprehend. *My Dead Friend Zoe* opens wounds and douses them in peroxide — the immediate sensation stings, but eventually cleanses and soothes.

### Sonequa Martin-Green Is Giving One of the Year's Best Performances

Hausmann-Stokes handles the ghost story element rather well, considering how supernatural influences could weaken the messages present. *My Dead Friend Zoe* allows Merit and Zoe to be playful about their banter, whether watching *M.A.S.H.* to drinking game rules or remarking about Dale's out-of-order lakeside manor — but this is Merit's story. Her unhealthy decisions lead to hallucinations, and there has to come a time when she stops grieving Zoe's death in isolation. That's not easy, something that a non-combatant can't fathom, but Hausmann-Stokes succeeds in helping someone like myself understand the scenario from a former soldier's perspective. Martin-Green and Morales are infectious together, whether belting Rihanna's "Umbrella" or fearing for one another's lives, drawing pitch-black humor and tear-soaked admissions out of what are technically imaginary interactions.

Martin-Green herself steals a show that doesn't have an ounce of dead weight, a testament to the actress' ability to become Merit, an escape artist who symbolically goes for mind-clearing exercise jogs away from reality. No matter who she's sharing a scene with, she's always the star. The way she dodges Freeman's questions when Dr. Cole tries to break down her walls in group, or the swelling pride she feels when standing

tall next to Harris' grandpa as service members during a 4th of July celebration. Utkarsh Ambudkar shows up as a sweetheart of a love interest who softens Merti's guard, which unlocks yet another dynamic to Martin-Green's phenomenally complex performance. The way she handles PTSD attacks in crowded bars, connects with an elder veteran, or reflects on the person she's been and the person she avoids showing people is the kind of meaty role that Martin-Green deserves. She's no doubt delivered one of the best performances of not only South by Southwest 2024, but possibly of the year.

### 'My Dead Friend Zoe' Makes Sure Military Voice Are Heard in This Universal Story

While *My Dead Friend Zoe* is extremely military-centric, it's still a universal story. Merit's inability to confront the causes of her PTSD, at its roots, spotlights a relatable problem with bottling emotions. How she feels when starting to let her calluses heal, the labored sighs of relief, the flow of waterworks might all come from Afghanistan memories suffered and stashed away; Hausmann-Stokes fingers a pulse that beats at the same rhythm of any human heart. *My Dead Friend Zoe* isn't a negatively Army-coded drama that barricades outsiders from feeling Merit's wartorn pains. As I type this review, I can feel my eyes watering again, the tremble of a lip, fighting back tears that I could not for the last twenty or so minutes of Merit's introspective confrontations. Hausmann-Stokes takes instances of loneliness and abandonment felt by his characters and ensures that active and retired service members have their voices heard — however, this is still a story for everyone.

I mean it when I throw words like “important” in my reviews. *My Dead Friend Zoe* feels like such an important watch because while many of us have not served the U.S. military, chances are we know someone who has or is currently enlisted. Hausmann-Stokes makes delicate conversations easier by putting Merit's experiences on screen. *My Dead Friend Zoe* might bill itself as a comedy, and you will laugh — Natalie Morales could make us laugh as the Grim Reaper in an orphanage — but be sure to bring the tissues because this movie is a heartbreaker in the best, most fulfilling way. Don't expect a candy coating or padded landing as the film deals with life after war, dementia, or feelings of worthlessness in a world that'll leave you behind without a blink. *My Dead Friend Zoe* is the real deal, and that's why it deserves your utmost attention.

*My Dead Friend Zoe* is an astounding character study that bursts with feelings both tragic and rewarding on unheard of levels for a feature debut.

*My Dead Friend Zoe* made its debut at the 2024 South by Southwest Film Festival.

 [BACK TO INDEX](#)



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## Deadline

### [‘My Dead Friend Zoe’ Review: Kyle Hausmann-Stokes Film Unveils The Invisible Wounds Of War](#)

By Valerie Complex

My Dead Friend Zoe, directed by Kyle Hausmann-Stokes and co-written with AJ Bermudez, weaves a complex tapestry from trauma, memory and the enduring strength of human connection. Starring Sonequa Martin-Green and Natalie Morales in the lead roles, with support from Utkarsh Ambudkar, Ed Harris, Gloria Reuben and Morgan Freeman, this film delves deep into the psychological aftermath of warfare, presenting a narrative that is both intimate and expansive.

The film opens on the dusty roads of Afghanistan, introducing us to Zoe (Morales) and Merit (Green), two army friends whose camaraderie in the face of adversity sets the stage for the story’s exploration of the impact of military service on personal identity and mental health. From the outset, My Dead Friend Zoe establishes itself as a film unafraid to tackle the complexities of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the ways in which it infiltrates the lives of those it touches.

One of the film’s most striking features is its handling of Zoe as a figment of Merit’s imagination—a narrative choice that encapsulates the haunting persistence of memory and the invisible wounds of war. This element not only serves as a poignant reminder of the loss and grief that accompany combat experience but also highlights the film’s thematic focus on the necessity of confronting one’s demons in order to heal. Merit’s journey is one of internal struggle as she faces the realities of life after service, including the onset of her grandfather Dale’s (Ed Harris) Alzheimer’s and the legal and emotional ramifications of her near-fatal altercation with a coworker. The film’s exploration of Merit’s psyche is both nuanced and compelling, offering a window into the soul of a woman caught between the past and the present, duty and family, survival and recovery.

My Dead Friend Zoe excels in its portrayal of characters that feel real. The film’s authenticity is further bolstered by its attention to the intricacies of military life and the subtle visual cues that will resonate with those who know what they are looking at. This attention to detail enriches the story, grounding the elements of Zoe’s apparition in a reality that is unmistakably three-dimensional which is thanks to the intercutting of scenes from Merit and Zoe’s deployment with their present-day struggles. This offers a layered understanding of their relationship and the bonds forged in conflict.

Moreover, the film’s focus on characters of color and the community that forms around those most affected by trauma are the script’s most powerful assets. This film celebrates the power of community in the healing process, showcasing the collective strength that emerges in the face of individual suffering. This aspect shines through due to the standout performances across the board, with Martin-Green delivering a multifaceted portrayal of Merit that captures the full spectrum of her emotional journey. Natalie Morales shines as both the comic relief and a poignant reminder of the cost of war, while Ed Harris and Morgan Freeman further elevate the viewing experience.

While the film occasionally falters in its pacing and could benefit from a tighter focus on the core relationship between Merit and Zoe, these are minor in the context of its overall achievement. My Dead Friend Zoe is a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the imperative to provide better support for our veterans. It is a film that challenges its audience to reflect on the collective responsibility to ensure their well-being long after their service has ended.





There's also a lot of pain in Kyle Hausmann-Stokes' "My Dead Friend Zoe," but it, too, is foundationally about the importance of friendship. A deeply personal film that comes from Hausmann-Stokes' own experience as a vet, this is a powerful drama with a phenomenal performance at its core and another reminder that Ed Harris is one of our best living actors in its supporting cast. Ultimately, it's telling two stories of memory: A man who is increasingly struggling to remember and a woman who wishes she could forget.

Merit (Sonequa Martin-Green of "The Walking Dead") served as an Army mechanic for eight years, and she's introduced under the weight of PTSD from her time in Afghanistan. She's at a meeting run by Dr. Cole (Morgan Freeman), who refuses to sign her paperwork until she opens up. The problem is that Merit's friend Zoe (Natalie Morales) keeps insisting that Merit stay quiet. Soldiers don't share. Especially not about their feelings. The small problem is that Zoe is dead, appearing only to Merit throughout the film, sometimes as support but usually just as a reminder of how much Merit is stuck in the pain of losing someone so important to her. It's an effective conceit that Hausmann-Stokes goes back to a few too many times, especially in the back half, but Morales is solid in a truly difficult role given she's playing Merit's mental/emotional version of a character more than full-blooded one.

Morales is always a welcome screen presence, but the movie belongs to Martin-Green, who navigates truly complex emotional waters. While managing her own trauma with a friend that no one else can see, she gets stuck managing her grandfather Dale (Harris), a stubborn Vietnam vet who is in the early stages of Alzheimer's. As Merit begins a tentative relationship with the manager (Utkarsh Ambudkar) of a local assisted living facility, her emotional walls begin to crumble. This is a deceptively difficult role, one that could easily slide into melodrama, but Martin-Green grounds it, finding alternating beats of joy amidst the pain in a way that makes both more powerful. And then there's Harris, an actor who always does so much with every single line. There's a scene on a pontoon boat between the two leads that is one of the best I'll see all year, an acting exercise of an incredibly high caliber.

It's inherent a bit in the storytelling that "My Dead Friend Zoe" needs to move away from its title character as Merit finds a way to close her emotional wounds, but I wish it did so a bit more often. It's ultimately most effective as a character study with two excellent performances, and the concept sometimes gets in the way of that character work. It's never too much to derail it thanks to the truth that's clearly embedded in a production that comes from deep in the heart of its creator. You can tell how much he feels it. You will too.

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## The Austin Chronicle

### [SXSW Film Review: My Dead Friend Zoe - A veteran processes her grief in emotional dark comedy](#)

By Madeline Duncan, Mar. 10, 2024

Grab the tissues: Kyle Hausmann-Stokes's directorial debut *My Dead Friend Zoe* is a dark comedy following Merit, a veteran of the Afghanistan War as she navigates life, love, and loss. She's not alone: Her best friend from the Army sticks to her side like glue. The problem? She's dead.

Despite being dead throughout the film, Zoe (Natalie Morales) breathes life into the film, contrasting the narrative's heavy themes with well-timed humor and levity. While she has entertaining moments, Morales' character is the physical embodiment of survivor's guilt, isolating Merit (Sonequa Martin-Green) from the rest of the world.

Merit returns to her grandfather's (Ed Harris) lake house as he struggles with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. A Vietnam veteran himself, Merit's grandfather shares her hesitancy to accept help or talk about their experiences, in and out of war. Zoe follows along, appearing in and out of scenes at random.

The dead bestie functions as a constant visual reminder of Merit's loss. It's unclear the terms of Zoe's presence, but it seems that she exists as a figment of Merit's imagination, an inescapable manifestation of how she imagines Zoe would react to her daily activities.

The film has a few loose ends, alluding to a criminal negligence charge Merit faces as a motivator for her to attend court-ordered Veterans Alliance group therapy with Dr. Cole (Morgan Freeman), but never resolves the case. New love interest Alex (Utkarsh Ambudkar) delivers a charming and funny performance, but the relationship lacks enough screen time to fully take form. However, the raw emotions of the film make these hiccups feel inconsequential.

A veteran himself, Hausmann-Stokes dedicated the film to two platoonmates he lost not during the war, but to suicide. He said he's been working on the project for around 20 years, after his colonel saw his short films and encouraged him to pursue film and tell soldiers' stories. Much of the supporting actors and crew were veterans, including Morgan Freeman, who served in the U.S. Air Force. "There's not that many veteran films and every time we were portrayed, rarely do we get to write or direct it," Hausmann-Stokes said in a Q&A session after the film's Saturday world premiere.

Weaving together Merit's past and present, Hausmann-Stokes effectively explores the ways that we process grief. While the focus of the film is on veterans, the core of the film is accessible to all viewers: We all suffer losses, but we don't have to suffer alone.

 [BACK TO INDEX](#)

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## Pajiba

### ['My Dead Friend Zoe' Is. Improbably. an Uplifting Movie about PTSD](#)

By Diana Helmuth | Film | March 15, 2024

My Dead Friend Zoe is the brainchild of writer-director-producer Kyle Hausmann-Stokes. This is his first feature-length film, and in keeping with his previous work, it focuses on telling the untold stories of modern veterans. A number of service members worked with Hausmann-Stokes both behind and in front of the camera to bring My Dead Friend Zoe to life, and he was eager to express gratitude for their effort and bravery at the SXSW premiere. The themes present in My Dead Friend Zoe are still not spoken aloud very often in the veteran community. To do so opens one up to one of the worst insults one service member can call another: soft. However, the result of all this veteran collaboration is an accessible dramedy about PTSD that ends on an unusually high note. The movie is for veterans, first, yes. But it is also for anyone whose life is being directed by a ghost — and how to reconcile with that ghost in order to be truly free. In other words, this is a story about love (it even has a Morgan Freeman cameo!)

The film follows Merit, a young Army veteran from Afghanistan, played with clean precision by Sonequa Martin-Green. Merit is tidy, disciplined, and humble — on the outside, the spitting ideal of an honorably discharged service member. But there are cracks in the facade. Chiefly, that the only meaningful relationship in her life is with her dead friend, Zoe (Natalie Morales). It's hard to call Zoe's death a spoiler since it's in the title, but the film draws you in quickly anyway by performatively obfuscating when she died — and more importantly, how.

Morales and Martin-Green radiate as best friends on screen. There's no cheese here for me, just pure unfiltered sunshine, so good it almost burns. Morales has played the quippy best friend several times, but this might be her best version yet. This movie passes the Bechdel test so breezily you forget that that's what it's doing. Hausmann-Stokes has said that he drew significant inspiration from his own service record and that experience paired with the writing of AJ Bermudez results in winning dialogue. I'll admit it was also nice to see female service members on the big screen, not constantly fighting for recognition but simply ... existing. You witness Zoe and Merit endure some sexual harassment from their brothers in arms, but unlike most movies that feature modern female warriors, that's not what this story is about. The casual misogyny that the two women face is handled like the rest of the identity-based harassment that all servicemembers face, both from their superiors and from each other, with dagger-sharp rebuttals. This is just one way that the movie welcomes non-service members to enjoy military gallows humor on its own terms. But I really don't think you have to be a woman to get what Hausmann-Stokes was going for between Merit and Zoe. Watching the pair interact makes you instantly think of your best friend. You want to hang out with them all day, even if they're just cleaning toilets.

Back home, Merit is faced with making difficult caretaking decisions on behalf of her grandfather, Dale, a succinct Vietnam veteran played with deft cantankerousness by Ed Harris. Dale and Zoe share a similar attitude towards military service: chiefly, an uncritical one. Their time in the army was great, the US army is great, and anyone who doesn't think so needs to suck it up. The movie never once strays into the political, however. We do not see any veteran struggling with the question of if what they did "over there" was morally right. Instead, the story keeps its feet firmly in the realm of interpersonal relationships. In this way, it quietly reminds us that for most service members, enlisting usually has nothing to do with politics. People often join the military because they were inspired by someone they loved, and what they remember the most about their deployments is who they loved - who got them through it.

Despite all her army-drilled discipline, Merit cannot seem to actually do anything right in regards to taking care of her grandfather, which makes sense because behind her routines and clean shoes, she can barely take care of herself. Dale is too stubborn to understand what he needs to let go of in order to be healthy, and Merit can't convince him, because she actually has the same problem; neither one of them has the ability to face what's actually wrong with them. We watch to see if Merit can help her grandfather, and thereby, perhaps, help herself. Dale goes on a few rants about how the younger generation of veterans is too soft, pointing out that Merit got a welcoming parade when she came home from Afghanistan, and he had to change out of his military uniform in the bathroom of the airport, lest he be heckled by Vietnam war protestors outside. I appreciate that the movie takes the opportunity to generate empathy for America's older generation of veterans. It wants us to see what motivates their bitterness towards the new generation of vets, without brushing them off as stubborn old men.

This is not the only way the film makes, arguably, involuntary points about how much military service can fuck you up. Zoe loves the army because, despite her barbed-wire exterior, she doesn't know what to do unless someone is telling her what to do. Her character could be read as a cautionary tale about the dangers of extolling the military. But although the story circles that point, it never goes as far as to actually make it. This is not *Jarhead*. The thesis in *My Dead Friend Zoe* is not — firmly not — that the military sucks. This is a movie bursting with admiration and empathy for veterans, without a hint of patronization. Nobody ever turns their back on their service record. Because what they did overseas isn't actually what messed them up. It's all about what happened after they came home.

This is not your typical modern warrior movie. It does not end with any star-spangled heroism, nor does it ask us to ponder the dark futility of war. There are two twists in this story that I did not see coming, and I don't want to spoil them. Suffice to say, when Zoe and Merit have their long-awaited confrontation, it did not go the way I expected. Tears filled my eyes, and I was embarrassed until I realized that each person next to me was wiping their eyes, too. The entire theater had been reduced to a sea of sniffles and gulps as we all tried to keep it together and failed. If *Dune 2* comes with a weird sex popcorn bucket, *My Dead Friend Zoe* should come with a tissue box and a little American flag.

The most spectacular feature of *My Dead Friend Zoe* is that it is an honest movie about PTSD that somehow manages to be an upper. If you are a service member, you'll probably appreciate the easy transference of military humor on screen. If you're not a service member, it might feel weird to be laughing at some of what you're laughing at, but that's part of its magic. Do not be fooled into thinking this is a story only for veterans. If you have a ghost haunting you, this movie is going to leave you feeling gutted - and ultimately, lighter, brighter, happier. Like Merit, walking into her future.

'*My Dead Friend Zoe*' premiered at the SXSW Film and TV Festival. It is produced, in part, by Travis Kelce, and is looking for distribution.

 [BACK TO INDEX](#)

### [‘My Dead Friend Zoe’ Review: Complex Veteran Grief Takes the Spotlight with Valiant Performances](#)

*The SXSW feature debut comes from army veteran Kyle Hausmann-Stokes, based on real-life experiences with his platoon mates.* By Proma Khosla - March 10, 2024

Grief is a funny thing — sometimes literally. Much of the best film and TV on the subject has been told through the lens of comedy; from “It’s a Wonderful Life” to “Fleabag” and everything in between, there is a secret society among the grieving, who know the power of laughing at or through the pain.

In fairness, that’s not the only lens through which debut feature director Kyle Hausmann-Stokes frames “My Dead Friend Zoe,” the story of a shattered veteran (Sonequa Martin-Green) haunted by the ongoing presence of her deceased platoon mate (Natalie Morales). Hausmann-Stokes, who co-wrote the film with AJ Bermudez, has been vocal about the personal nature of this story — including in the film’s post-credits — but even if he hadn’t, “My Dead Friend Zoe” is possessed of a realism that has to come from heartbreaking firsthand experience.

The film opens on Merit (Martin-Green) and Zoe (Morales) during their tour, belting Rihanna’s “Umbrella” while they wait in a truck — a familiar, ominous set up for any moviegoer, but which does not devolve into flames and gunfire, which most Hollywood directors would be tempted to use as a crutch. Chances are that Hausmann-Stokes — and the team of fellow vets behind-the-scenes or in front of the camera — has seen enough bloodshed, and is astute enough to know that his film’s audience doesn’t need more of that imagery either.

In the present day, Merit and Zoe navigate civilian life — except that Zoe is no longer with us, just a projection of Merit’s mind. Merit’s grandfather (Ed Harris) is showing early signs of Alzheimer’s, so she spends some time with the man who inspired her to enter the armed forces, all while running (often literally) from the specter of Zoe and the prospect of talking about her in group therapy (led by a stoic and calming Morgan Freeman). Merit’s day-to-day and intertwining troubles provide a comforting indie-film blanket for the audience, reminiscent of any coming-of-age story where the hero endures minor mishaps while escaping the unbearable. Against that backdrop, a deliberately erratic build-up of Merit and Zoe’s time in the service and how she died, composer Hausmann-Stokes and cinematographer Matt Sakatani Roe mirror the jarring feel of PTSD.

All of this is held together masterfully by Martin-Green, who you cannot look away from. Merit is sharp of mind and wit, cares deeply about her friends and family, but she’s also constantly teetering between holding it together and raw, uncontrollable anguish — often instigated by the apparition of Zoe. As a crystallized memory, Morales’ role is by design less dynamic, but her performance hits every necessary note of charming, vulnerable, snarky, and at times manipulative (even with extremely limited material in the way of backstory and motivation). Ed Harris is nothing short of a force as Merit’s retired Lieutenant-Colonel grandfather, commanding his handful of scenes and pairing mesmerizingly with Martin-Green.

And though “My Dead Friend Zoe” isn’t entirely immune to filmmaking cliches of the genre (a rushed resolution feels convenient, more like someone off screen mouthed “Wrap it up!” than Merit earning a point of self-reflection), it’s a visceral look at the veteran experience and the kinds of loss we can’t easily describe or process, and the isolation that comes with that. That message — telegraphed clearly for and about Hausmann-Stokes’ own platoon mates — comes through loud and clear.



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# The Hollywood Outsider

[My Dead Friend Zoe | SXSW 2024 Film Review](#)

By Aaron B. Peterson

When *My Dead Friend Zoe* opens in Afghanistan, 2016, all bets are off on what type of film this will ultimately be. We meet two close friends, Merit (Sonequa Martin-Green) and Zoe (Natalie Morales), stationed together, laughing, and singing, doing everything possible to add a bit of levity to their current situation. We are immediately taken with this beautiful friendship blossoming under the weight of a needless war. But the title says it all, in the present day, we learn that Zoe is dead.

The “what and why” of it all is learned over the course of the film, but Merit is still wrestling with her own PTSD over the events that led to Zoe’s death. So much that she still lives, laughs, and sings with Zoe as a figment of her own emotional trauma. Merit’s struggles putting this behind her have even led her to court-ordered group therapy, led by Morgan Freeman’s Dr. Cole, who refuses to sign off on Merit’s release until she shares why she is there. Something Merit, for reasons we learn as the film rolls on, is unable to do.

Complicating matters more is Merit’s grandfather, Dale (Ed Harris). As the veteran Merit based her career on, Dale helped shape her life without him ever realizing it, and therefore Merit has avoided him since returning from the war. Dale also has the beginning stages of Alzheimer’s, and now it is up to Merit to follow her mother’s wishes (an underutilized Gloria Reuben) and tear him away from his lakeside cabin and commit Dale to an assisted living facility. Which just happens to be run by a potential suitor of Merit’s in Alex (a delightfully charming Utkarsh Ambudkar).

Director Kyle Hausmann-Stokes, working from a script by Hausmann-Stokes and A.J. Bermudez, is a veteran himself. As he stated at the SXSW premiere of *My Dead Friend Zoe*, this is a film devoted to those who serve and that respect comes shining through. Don’t mistake that for yet another film from Hollywood either glorifying or tearing down the military’s every decision. No, this is about the women and men who make the choice to don that uniform, stand for something greater than themselves, and use it as a segue to a better life. It is about what happens to them when they return, the home the military both gives and taketh away, and the sheer lack of true appreciation from an often ungrateful nation. A stellar script handled with the hands of a director who obviously cares passionately for the subject matter.

Full disclosure, I joined the military because of my grandfather, just as Merit did here, and I know countless enlistees who wanted to enlist in honor of their loved ones. It is a sign of honor and respect, and one that is rarely treated as such in the entertainment of today. The truthfulness of this arc, watching the shame on Martin-Green’s face for failing to live up to her grandfather’s standards, or the price in Harris’s eyes at watching his granddaughter stand in unity with him as they celebrate their contributions to their country, is a direct assault on my heart. It is a beautiful relationship that I know all too well, and both Sonequa Martin-Green and Ed Harris capture that primal pride stuffed with monumental regret exceptionally well.

Natalie Morales, whether it be flashbacks or as Merit’s ghostly id, lightens every scene with her effortlessly wry wit, and when things take a dramatic turn in the final act, she crushes that too. This film is a character piece on the relationships forged in the military and the audience needs to immediately comprehend why Zoe is so pivotal to Merit’s existential crisis – a factor Morales handles with ease.

Ultimately, though, this film belongs to Sonequa Martin-Green. Merit is a mess, yet also a woman of devotion and strength. As we roll through Merit’s unraveling, Martin-Green crests a mountain of emotion, peaks and



valleys abound, delivering her finest performance yet. Up, down, jovial, heartbroken, lost, confused, embarrassed, prideful; every feeling is in her arsenal, and ultimately makes *My Dead Friend Zoe* one of the best films of the year already. Bravo.

*My Dead Friend Zoe* is a wild title that immediately brings to mind concepts relating to a remake of *Weekend at Bernie's*. No, that is not this film. *Zoe* revolves around love, loss, redemption, regret, and the ramifications of war. It also happens to be hilarious and meaningful to anyone, whether or not they have ever served.

Deep emotional impact does not happen often on screen these days, but when it does, film can be a transformative experience. I walked into *My Dead Friend Zoe* trepidatious, cautious even, unsure of what this journey could be. I exited the theater wearing tears of both joy and pain, and once again reminded why I still to this day look up at a flag and recall the sacrifices of so many men and women over time. Not only while wearing the uniform, but especially while trying to adapt back into society without it.

The Hollywood Outsider Review Score -9.5

Performances - 10

Screenplay - 9.5

Production - 9

 [BACK TO INDEX](#)

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## Film Festival Today

[SXSW Review: "My Dead Friend Zoe"](#)

Christopher Llewellyn Reed,

Director Kyle Hausmann-Stokes makes his feature debut with *My Dead Friend Zoe*, a poignant exploration of friendship and loss that also examines the many ways that post-traumatic stress disorder (aka PTSD) can manifest. With a strong and diverse ensemble—headlined by Sonequa Martin-Green (*The Outside Story*) and including Utkarsh Ambudkar (*Basmati Blues*), Morgan Freeman (*Going in Style*), Ed Harris (*The Lost Daughter*), Natalie Morales (*If You Were the Last*), and Gloria Reuben (*A Second Chance at Love*)—the movie proves consistently engaging. And even if some scenes descend into predictable sentimentality, the emotions at the end are all genuine.

Martin-Green stars as Merit, who comes from a family proud of both its military service and education. When first we meet her, it is 2016 and she is wrapping up a tour of duty in Afghanistan, alongside her bestie Zoe (Morales). We then jump straight from Zoe begging Merit to please “never go to some PTSD therapy group” to just such a group, post-service. It is both a funny and sad flash forward, as we realize that the movie’s title is a literal one. Somehow (details to be filled in later), Zoe is dead, though Merit can’t get her out of her own head.

Merit has had some recent work issues that have brought her to the group—led by Dr. Cole (Freeman)—but her biggest problem is the guilt she bears for whatever happened to Zoe. Tough as the shame is to endure, she can’t manage to engage with her fellow vets-in-therapy. Nor does she want to help out her grandfather, Dale (Harris), despite the onset of his dementia. Still, dealing with him may prove easier than handling Zoe, and so she finally, if reluctantly, relocates to Dale’s lakeside cabin, urged on by the pleas of her mother, Kris (Reuben). All the while, phantom Zoe tags along, a presence that both nags and comforts.

Dale is also a veteran—in Vietnam—and in fact was an early inspiration for Merit, motivating her desires to sign up. But he has little patience for any talk of PTSD; better to grin and bear it. Perhaps, however, he and Merit can find something to talk about. If not, there is local senior-center owner Alex (Ambudkar), who flirts with Merit, to make the time pass more quickly. Something will have to give, in any case, between Dr. Cole's recurring phone calls, Dale's slow decline, and Zoe's mental intrusions. Hopefully, when it does, Merit will be able to recover.

Hausmann-Stokes handles the different plot elements and competing tragicomic tones with adept cinematic gusto. A veteran, himself—so are many of the other actors, as we learn in the end credits—he approaches the material with appropriate sensitivity, never minimizing trauma while also embracing the humor that makes life worth living. It's lovely to watch the natural performances, too, along with the organic way that Hausmann-Stokes populates his movie with women and people of color in all their three-dimensional glory. Whatever occasional on-the-nose dialogue he gives us in the script, the net result of the entire enterprise is a cathartic celebration of the healing power of love and community.

Christopher Llewellyn Reed is a film critic, filmmaker, and educator, as well as Film Festival Today's Editor. A member of both the Online Film Critics Society (OFCS) and the Washington DC Area Film Critics Association (WAFCA), and a Rotten Tomatoes-approved film critic, Chris is, in addition, lead film critic at Hammer to Nail and the author of *Film Editing: Theory and Practice*.

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## Screen Zealots

By: Louisa Moore 24 Mar 2022

What better person could there be to tell a complicated story about veterans than a veteran himself? That's one of the reasons co-writer and director Kyle Hausmann-Stokes' "My Dead Friend Zoe" works so well. A decorated former Staff Sgt. who served in the Army's Airborne Infantry, Hausmann-Stokes adapted the story from his own experiences, which lends an intimate credibility to his dark comedy-drama.

Merit (Sonequa Martin-Green) proudly carried on a family tradition by serving in the Army, but now that she's back after a tour in Afghanistan, she's haunted by the ghost of her dead friend and platoon mate Zoe (Natalie Morales). Reluctantly in group therapy, Merit is at odds with her mother (Gloria Reuben) after she insists that her ailing and estranged grandfather (Ed Harris) needs to be put in an assisted living facility. Merit moves in to help him out, and their relationship deepens as she finally begins to process the trauma that holds to key as to why her wisecracking dead friend always seems to be hanging around.

It's fascinating that Hausmann-Stokes, a white man, decided to tell his story with two women of color. It's not often you see films like this with two female leads, and Martin-Green and Morales are believable as former veterans. Their onscreen chemistry is natural, as is the humor and drama that arises in the trajectory of their characters. The tangled and rocky relationships that humans so often experience with friends and family create the heart of the story, as well as the very real struggles that veterans face when coping with their return to the everyday world after their military service ends. PTSD isn't glossed over, and neither is grief. Merit is not only haunted by her best friend, but also by the trauma of her military service as well as a tragic event related to it all.

Hausmann-Stokes doesn't reveal what happened until the very end of his film, choosing instead to show bits and pieces of Zoe's story in abrupt flashbacks. He builds suspense, but his narrative bounces around from too

many different directions (Merit and Zoe, Merit and her mother, Merit and her grandfather, Merit and her VA counselor (Morgan Freeman), Merit and her potential new boyfriend (Utkarsh Ambudkar)). These relationships are all well written and meaningful, but there's a lot going on story-wise. A lot of the narrative could've been tightened up a bit, but the scenes with Merit and her grandfather are especially effective.

Of course all of this is highly personal for Hausmann-Stokes, so it's no surprise that the film ends as a Public Service Announcement for ongoing mental health assistance for veterans. It's a noble cause that's extremely important, and "My Dead Friend Zoe" successfully raises awareness of the issue through a more entertaining and less preachy lens than other films about veterans.

 [BACK TO INDEX](#)

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## Fresh Fiction

[‘MY DEAD FRIEND ZOE.’ ‘THE GREATEST HITS’ play the A & B-sides of the grieving process](#)

PRESTON BARTA MARCH 14, 2024

My Dead Friend Zoe stands out from other films that tackle PTSD, offering a unique perspective that avoids the pitfalls of being punishingly heavy or melodramatic. In his feature debut, writer and director Kyle Hausmann-Stokes blends comedy and tender drama like a seasoned pro, creating a film that lands with memorable impact.

As the film's title suggests, we're dropped into a dark comedy-drama about two friends, one of whom is deceased. My Dead Friend Zoe follows a veteran named Merit (a powerful Sonequa Martin-Green of Star Trek: Discovery and The Walking Dead) with complicated family dynamics due to the presence of the titular Zoe (a comedically sharp Natalie Morales of Parks and Recreation and Dead to Me), her dead best friend from her Army days.

Adding to the emotional complexity, Merit's estranged grandfather, portrayed by the great Ed Harris, is at a point where he can no longer care for himself. Merit is torn between helping her grandfather and dealing with her own grief. Will she be able to find a balance, or will she have to make a difficult choice?

One standout aspect of My Dead Friend Zoe is how the film's tone invites many true-to-life observations. Hausmann-Stokes brings his own experience as an Army soldier to the film. But he also understands friendship and the challenges of being on different life paths. A scene about how friends can sometimes grow apart, "see each other once a year and occasionally like each other's Facebook statuses" struck an emotional chord. This is a film where friendship, family relations and heartache are delved into insightfully as the emotional journey goes from raw and tender to rib-ticklingly enjoyable.

None of these words and moments would land with the force that they do if it weren't for the extraordinary cast. Martin-Green is as powerful and commanding as her story progresses to the point where she must stop putting off the inevitable and coasting in neutral. She brings a forceful vulnerability to Merit that captivates, making the audience feel deeply connected to her character's journey.

As Zoe, Morales doesn't leave the film without a short supply of laughter. But she's not there solely to generate laughs. Morales can make viewers think and feel about Zoe's fears and concerns, such as when Zoe shares about the possibility of being forgotten.

Harris, who plays Merit's grandfather, Dale, injects a lot of humanity into the part in nuanced ways. From how Dale handles the waste around his house to overfeeding the fish in his pond, there's a lot on Dale's mind, and Harris makes it heard with and without dialogue.

*My Dead Friend Zoe* is a cathartic and original meditation on loss and forgiveness. Hausmann-Stokes displays incredible innovation by opening up conversations about many aspects of life and making the viewers think and feel with its psychologically astute, witty, and imaginative story.

Grade: A-

 [BACK TO INDEX](#)

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## The Daily Beast

[‘My Dead Friend Zoe’ Will Make You Laugh at the Worst Things Imaginable](#)

By Allegra Frank -Deputy Entertainment Editor

There are few surprises in *My Dead Friend Zoe*, co-writer and director Kyle Hausmann Stokes' (and executive producer/football mega-star Travis Kelce's) feature debut. What would be another film's big twist or tearjerker moment is, after all, right there in the title. But what stirred the audience at its March 9 premiere at SXSW Film Festival was how the story of a grief-stricken woman running away from her problems—at the behest of the titular spectral bestie that continues to haunt her—imbued its familiar formula with a sense of earnestness and charm. It's a film that could easily veer into manipulative territory in lesser hands, but Hausmann Stokes transforms this personal and devastating story into something deeper, sweeter, and funnier than it may initially seem.

Adapted from a short film inspired by Hausmann Stokes' own experiences as a veteran having lost friends to suicide, *Zoe* tells the story of Merit (Sonequa Martin-Green) and Zoe (Natalie Morales), fiercely close, Rihanna-loving, opposites-attract platoonmates—a friendship that we know from the start is doomed. The film shifts between flashbacks in Afghanistan, 2016, during Zoe and Merit's service, and the present-day, where a stony-faced Merit seems to do little but run miles every day, attend therapy sessions, and stew in pained silence alone. Except that she's never actually alone; memories of Zoe—and Zoe herself—continue to haunt her.

Merit sees Zoe everywhere she goes, a status quo that makes the film something of a ghost story. But Zoe is a funny, friendly ghost, offering biting commentary along the way: at group therapy sessions for fellow veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress symptoms, where Zoe's mockery of other attendees' stories discourages Merit from sharing her own; in Merit's home, dissuading her from taking calls from her mom; and at the hospital to pick up her Alzheimer-stricken grandfather Dale (Ed Harris), bemusedly side-eyeing his lapses in memory.

Morales has spent years honing a knack for playing the likably snarky best friend; here, she adds an impressively dark texture to that trope, as it becomes obvious how badly Zoe is holding Merit back on her journey toward recovery. Merit is at first reluctant to face the pain that Zoe's death causes her, closing herself off from friends and family to indulge her imagination. But as Merit starts to open herself up again—both to her grandfather as she moves back into the family lake house to help care for him and budding romantic interest Alex (the always welcome Utkarsh Ambudkar), who manages the retirement home that Merit's mother hopes to move Dale into—Zoe begins to lash out.

These plot beats can be disappointingly predictable. It feels prescriptive, for instance, that the cute, random stranger Merit quickly turns out to be the guy in charge of the same place Merit's resisting bringing her grandfather to. When Zoe later ruins Merit and Alex's first date out of her deep-rooted fear of abandonment—that is to say, Merit's desire to engage with the real world instead of just a manifested memory—it feels annoyingly rote. Even Morgan Freeman is reduced to a perfunctory role as Dr. Cole, who leads the group therapy sessions Merit neglects to attend, whose presence serves as a progress bar for Merit's mental health. But it's the strong performances and Hausmann Stokes' clearly conveyed emotional investment in his storytelling that makes *My Dead Friend Zoe* consistently engaging nonetheless.

A large part of that is owed to its strong cast, with Ambudkar, Morales, and especially Martin-Green as clear standouts. In a just and decent world, Ambudkar would be the ascendant king of rom-coms; his chemistry with Martin-Green is instantly winning. Martin-Green does a great job of navigating scenes in which Merit juggles being present in actual conversations with listening to Zoe's irrepressible sass alongside it. And Morales has never been better than here, especially in the later scenes, where Merit finally confronts Zoe about her anxiety over returning home after their tour in Afghanistan ends. The affection Zoe and Merit have for each other rings true, even as the film—intentionally or not—villainizes Zoe a bit toward the end, making the sequence in which we finally learn of the circumstances of Zoe's death hard-hitting.

While *My Dead Friend Zoe* isn't necessarily revelatory in what it's trying to do, its honesty in doing them is refreshing. Hausmann Stokes dedicated the film to his own pair of "Zoes," close friends from his army days who died by suicide after returning home. And other real-life veterans populate the film's group therapy scenes, which are laden with humor to prevent the film from entering treacly territory. In transforming his intensely personal story about grief and growth into something universally affecting, Hausmann Stokes pulls off something commendable.

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## Black Girl Nerds

[SXSW 2024 Review: 'My Dead Friend Zoe,' Gut-Wrenching Look at the Mental Health of Vets](#)

*Kyle Hausmann-Stokes' poignant dramedy My Dead Friend Zoe is a delicate piece of art about the mental health of our veterans.*

By Jamie Broadnax

The film stars Sonequa Martin-Green as Merit, a vet recently reeling from the loss of her best friend Zoe (Natalie Morales). Merit is suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and undergoes group counseling set up by veteran affairs (VA). The head counselor leading the group sessions Dr. Cole (Morgan Freeman) is frustrated that Merit refuses to open up about her past. The only way she can relinquish any pain from the present is to unleash that history — which she refuses to do.

When Dr. Cole refuses to sign her release form, this also further frustrates Merit who turns to her dead friend Zoe for consolation. She sees Zoe appear everywhere with her, and the two share an exceptional relationship that is to the detriment of Merit's own mental health and well-being. While Merit is dealing with her own mental wellness, her estranged grandfather Dale (Ed Harris) is suffering from cognitive dysfunction. He was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and her overbearing mother Kris (Gloria Reuben) insists that he stay in a nursing home.

Merit's life is further complicated when she meets a man by the name of Alex (Utkarsh Ambudkar). There's an instant attraction between the two, but Zoe is still the third wheel in Merit's life.

Zoe is a free-spirited girl with no scruples. She's funny, charismatic and a loyal friend to Merit. The two served together in Afghanistan, and the film does a great job in establishing how close these two were during their tour together. The narrative is structured in segments of Merit's past in the form of snippets of flashbacks. From there we move back to the present day dealing with her current dilemma of her father's need for care-giving. As the story moves back and forth from past to present, the tension slowly builds for the viewer as to what exactly happened to Zoe.

Merit refuses to uncover what happened to her and Zoe in Afghanistan. As the story progresses and more time is spent with the two during their scenes overseas, you're more engaged in Zoe's fate and why Merit has carried so much guilt around it for so long. And then there is the parallel story happening between Zoe and her grandfather — who is also a veteran. Because he is from a different time, for Dale, bottling up your feelings and keeping what happened during times of war in the past is exactly what a good soldier is supposed to do. But for Merit it's far more complicated than that — too complicated to even articulate to her grandfather what really happened.

SXSW 2024 Review: 'Black Twitter: A People's History' Explores the Power of Black Digital Communities  
This film delivers some incredible performances, most notably from Sonequa Martin-Green and Natalie Morales. Martin-Green, who carries a great deal of this movie, is absolutely flawless in her scenes, and when she gets emotional it is palpable. When she cries on screen, you are crying right there along with her. As for Morales, she is on the opposite side of the emotional spectrum as her character Zoe adds a great deal of levity and humor to the film. There's also a beauty in the fact that this film features real veterans in starring roles that makes the film feel more genuine.

While this film deals with issues of mental illness, it's not ham-fisted with its messaging around it. The filmmaker handles the issue with care and grace from a perspective that allows anyone to empathize with these characters. The core of this film is Zoe and Merit's relationship and how they touched each other's lives in such a significant way. There is a lesson to be learned about how we impact the life of another human being — and we see that in My Dead Friend Zoe.

While there are a number of producers on the roster behind this movie, which is not at all surprising for many films. What you may be surprised about is that Kansas City Chiefs NFL star Travis Kelce is an executive producer. This is his first foray into Hollywood producing. The other executive producers on the film are: Ed Harris, Sonequa Martin-Green, Natalie Morales, Jeff Annison, David Baxter, Brandi Plants, Nancy Masterson, Joe Masterson, and Igor Tsukerman.

The beautifully crafted family dynamics, the messaging about mental health and wellness, and the impeccable performances are worth every bit of your time.

The film is written by Kyle Hausmann-Stokes and AJ Bermudez.  
My Dead Friend Zoe premiered at the 2024 SXSW Film & TV Festival.

 [BACK TO INDEX](#)



## But Why Tho?

### [My Dead Friend Zoe Review](#)

James Preston Poole - 03/11/2024

In the past decade, there's been an ongoing national conversation about mental health. Media in the U.S. more frequently than ever integrates narratives that focus on the everyday battle so many of us face with ourselves. *My Dead Friend Zoe* examines the nationwide mental health crisis through a specific lens: PTSD suffered by veterans. Directed by veteran Kyle Hausmann-Stokes from a script by himself and A.J. Bermudez, *My Dead Friend Zoe* drives home the heartbreaking struggle countless Americans back from war experience upon coming home. Its dubious politics regarding the United States military aside, it carries with it palpable authenticity.

Civilian life hasn't been easy for Merit (Sonequa Martin-Green). After returning from Afghanistan, she struggles to maintain a relationship with her family. She barely makes it to her court mandated support group led by Dr. Cole (Morgan Freeman). Oh yeah, and she sees her deceased comrade-in-arms Zoe (Natalie Morales) everywhere she goes. Merit finds a new purpose whenever her mother Kris (Gloria Reuben) asks her look after her father and Merit's ailing grandfather Dale (Ed Harris) as she attempts to make arrangements for him to move to a nursing home.

A major strength of *My Dead Friend Zoe* is its refusal to sugarcoat or glamorize. Hausmann-Stokes plays the story as a straightforward slice-of-life into the every day experience of a veteran. On a formal level, director of photography Matt Saktani Roe and editor Ali Greer try to make their work as invisible as possible to focus on Merit's story.

As Merit, Sonequa Martin-Green gives what should easily go down as one of the bravest performances at SXSW 2024. Martin-Green carries Merit with a brittle poise, conveying a character trying to navigate the world appearing as "normal" as possible. Meanwhile, a comedic relief-providing firecracker Morales is the voice inside her head encouraging her avoidance. Not to discredit Morales' work at all, but she's merely a tool for Sonequa Martin-Green's bravura work.

You feel Merit's emotional turmoil as she slowly crumbles under the weight of carrying her pain. In a devastating graveyard set scene, she finally lets it all out. The raw honesty in which Martin-Green plays this scene left nary a dry eye at the film's premiere. If I had to wager a guess, a good many audiences will react that way. Nevertheless, what makes her performance stick out is that there are many scenes that allow her moments of tranquility amongst the storm. Her primal release of emotion doesn't work without, say, the calm of a romantic subplot involving nursing home manager Alex (Utkarsh Ambudkar).

Additionally, the subplot involving Merit and her grandfather Dale hits just as hard. Harris has settled well into the role of an old curmudgeon. More importantly, their relationship explores generational trauma given to veterans of different wars. At first, Merit and Dale fail to find solid ground over their very different war experiences. Somehow, though, they come together over a universal feeling of being left behind. Merit feels this from her friend's death. Dale feels this from the realization of his age.

What *My Dead Friend Zoe* fails to thread the needle on is its stance on the U.S. military. Simply put, it doesn't take a position. Sure, the film displays the effects that going to war has on the mind. But it doesn't explore at all what may have caused that beyond war being held. At a time where the military industrial complex faces a great amount of scrutiny, it feels odd to make a film that doesn't comment on the systems that send people to war. Moreover, *My Dead Friend Zoe* doesn't ever ask the question "what were we fighting for?"



Despite this lack of commentary, *My Dead Friend Zoe* still leaves a mark. Hausmann-Stokes has made a film about PTSD from the military, but it feels relevant to those who have suffered PTSD in any form. One of its banes in lack of commentary becomes a strength as, through a restrained direction and Earth-shaking work by Sonequa Martin-Green, *My Dead Friend Zoe* achieves a reflection of an under-discussed aspect of humanity.

*My Dead Friend Zoe* screened as part of the 2024 SXSW Film and TV Festival.

Rating - 8/10

TL;DR: - *My Dead Friend Zoe* drives home the heartbreaking struggle countless Americans back from war experience upon coming home. Its dubious politics regarding the United States military aside, it carries with it palpable authenticity.

 [BACK TO INDEX](#)

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## Latina Media Co

[“My Dead Friend Zoe” Is a Different Veteran Film](#)

by Toni Gonzales March 25, 2024

You don't have to be among the few who caught the film *My Dead Friend Zoe* at SXSW to know that Zoe is dead – it's right there in the title. But what you should know, whether you've seen Zoe or not, is that the film has many friends – including executive producer Travis Kelce, writer/director Kyle Hausmann-Stokes' friends in the armed services, and Legion M's community of fan investors.

*My Dead Friend Zoe* stars Sonequa Martin-Green as Merit and Natalie Morales as Zoe. The film follows Merit as she adjusts to life back home after serving in Afghanistan. While reacclimating for any veteran is tough, Merit's path is made much more difficult by the presence of the aforementioned very dead BFF Zoe. Merit is supported in the film by veteran grief counselor Dr. Cole (Morgan Freeman), grandfather Dale (Ed Harris), her mother Kris (Gloria Reuben), and love interest Alex (Utkarsh Ambudkar).

The cinematic colonel of this project is writer/director Kyle Hausmann-Stokes. A veteran of the Army, he served five years as a US Army paratrooper in Iraq, earned a Bronze Star, was discharged, and then recalled again before finally finishing USC film school.

Focusing mostly on themes from his and his peers' experiences, Hausmann-Stokes co-founded Veterans in Media and Entertainment and in the height of the pandemic, wrote his most personal project to date, a short film titled *Merit X Zoe*. It eventually grew in the SXSW feature *My Dead Friend Zoe*.

The project, based on his personal time in service, needed to be as intimate as possible but with some very deliberate distance for the director. He did that by changing the identity of his two leads.

“I mean, I've never seen a white man decide that his story was best told through two women of color,” said Natalie Morales. The Cuban actress/producer/director who plays Zoe in *Zoe* spoke to us just before the film's premiere at SXSW. “I think it's not like any other movie I've seen,” she continues. “Not only because it's women veterans, which we don't see often, women in service.”

Sonequa Martin-Green (Merit) agreed with Morales at the film's Austin premiere, "Yes, this is his story. This is his life, his experience. And, so I think that it was quite courageous for him to have a Black woman tell his story, to have a Cuban woman, tell part of his story."

The character of Zoe is in honor of two of Hausmann-Stokes' battlemates: SSG "Grizzly" Luis Ramirez-Jimenez and SPC "Chile Verde" Boris Ventura.

By his own admission, the Zoe director consciously chose to focus the story on women because, "the rare times we do see female soldiers or veterans on screen, their characters tend to be defined by their gender or a sexual assault," Hausmann-Stoke says, "While these are of course a reality for so many women who have served, I've heard from so many women veterans that they'd like to be portrayed in other ways as well. For this reason, I crafted Zoe such that Merit and Zoe are not 'women veterans' but just 'veterans.' The story of the film isn't about their gender, it's about their friendship."

Friend Zoe. Writer/director Kyle Hausmann-Stokes with star Natalie Morales. Photo by Michael Moriatis  
"It is a universal story," said Morales. "I think anybody can relate to this, whether you served in the armed forces or not, it's not really about veterans. It's much more about humans and human beings."

"It's so relatable because it can speak to anyone," said Marin-Green. "It definitely is for veterans. But it's also for anyone who's struggling with grief and loss and sacrifice and tragedy and having mental health struggles."

My Dead Friend Zoe not only has a phenomenal story, it is a phenomenal story. On its own, the film is absolutely one of the best of the fest. And while it may only be March, I can safely say this one will be among my favorites of the year. The story, the emotion, the performances are superior. Yes, it will make you laugh thanks in huge part to Morales and her acting. The chemistry on screen between Morales and Martin-Green is effortless and engaging.

When you get a chance to see it, I would strongly encourage preparing with Costco run for bulk-sized Kleenex. I would also encourage you to learn more about the organizations that the film highlights at the end: The Bob Woodruff Foundation, Everytown for Gun Safety, and The Mission Continues.

And I'm not alone in my love for the film. My Dead Friend Zoe was a runaway festival favorite and took home the Narrative Spotlight Audience Award. When something is worth talking about, I don't whisper it amongst my community, I shout it – loudly. So, consider this my call of support for My Dead Friend Zoe from the top of the Hollywood Hills.

 [BACK TO INDEX](#)

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## The Michigan Daily

[SXSW 2024: 'My Dead Friend Zoe' is a moving tribute to the struggles of veterans](#)

by Nicolas Eisenberg May 9, 2024

Representing war and its effects on veterans isn't a particularly easy feat. Some of the worst films in this category, referred to as shoot and cry films, do nothing but perform war crime apologetics. Despite the ways

that this type of filmmaking can go wrong, it is important to bring awareness to overlooked veterans and their struggles with poverty and mental health. This is what director and U.S. Army veteran Kyle Hausmann-Stokes attempts to do through cinema. His debut film “My Dead Friend Zoe” is a powerful feat of filmmaking that tells an emotional story of loss and grief with the intent of providing a voice to a marginalized community.

Merit (Sonequa Martin-Green, “Star Trek: Discovery”) is a veteran of the war in Afghanistan struggling to live her life as she is constantly haunted by her late friend, Zoe (Natalie Morales, “Parks and Recreation”). Upon learning that her grandpa Dale’s (Ed Harris, “The Abyss”) health is declining due to an onset of dementia, Merit decides to reorient her life by moving in with him. Merit and Dale are broken people; Merit is unable to hold down a steady job and has to deal with her deceased friend appearing to second guess her choices, and Dale is a shell of his former self, struggling to maintain autonomy as his dementia worsens. However, the pair find ways to lighten their burdens through comedy and admiring the absurdities of life. The granddad-granddaughter relationship is fully realized and, despite his worsening health, Dale finds a way to be sweet and supportive toward Merit.

Despite dealing with heavy material, “My Dead Friend Zoe” is laugh-out-loud funny; Natalie Morales steals the spotlight as Zoe. The reveal that Zoe is haunting Merit is genius — the friends are seated together at a Veterans Affairs group therapy session, when all of a sudden Zoe gets up and begins ranting about how therapy is exclusively for “rich kids and snowflakes,” and lambasts the social worker before a dramatic cut reveals she’s a persistent audio and visual hallucination for Merit. Zoe is crass, loud and the perfect juxtaposition to Merit’s calm and contemplative demeanor. She follows Merit throughout the film, providing commentary on her dating life and giving her company during long car trips. It’s an atypical representation of a haunting figure, but it represents just how meaningful Zoe was to Merit. Zoe had such a profound impact on Merit’s life that her presence persists, even in the afterlife.

But this relationship is parasitic; Zoe clings to life via Merit in a toxic manner. Any attempt by Merit to express her feelings in a productive way is suddenly overwhelmed with a choking sensation as she remembers a horrible fight she had with Zoe. Zoe is a physical representation of her inability to move on from her life in the military. Merit uses running to clear her mind and it is the only way she is able to temporarily separate herself from Zoe. The film provides a thoughtful and raw depiction of post-traumatic stress disorder that highlights just how hard it is to process grief and to find purpose after tragedy strikes.

What makes this depiction of veteran’s issues so thoughtful and accurate is how personal this story is to Hausmann-Stokes. Merit and Zoe are based on his late friends Boris Ventura and Luis Ramirez, who took their own lives after returning from Afghanistan. At its core, “My Dead Friend Zoe” is a movie with a purpose; to raise awareness about how veterans are at a heightened risk of suicide, financial hardship and mental health struggles. The meaning behind the film gives it undeniable pathos and a strong sense of tragedy, as Hausmann-Stokes expressed at the post-screening interview at South by Southwest that he drew deeply from his own survivor’s guilt. Yet, I think there is something profound in how the director chooses to center women of color to tell his friends’ stories. While Hausmann-Stokes made this casting decision to create a buffer for himself between fiction and reality, this choice also exposes the intersectional issues that women in the military face.

“My Dead Friend Zoe” is, without a doubt, my favorite film from SXSW. It is both hilarious and tear-jerking, and captures just how big of an impact a true friend can have, even after they’re gone. As of right now, there is no distributor or planned release date, but I hope that the world will soon have the chance to experience this beautiful and heartfelt story.

