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## Born from a satirical novel, 'Billy Lynn' becomes a sincere film

Story presents dissonance between public's celebration of warriors, real horrors of war

'Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk,' adapted from the novel by Ben Fountain, isn't so much a satire as an earnest indictment of a complicit culture.

The movie exposes how, as spectators without risk or fear, in the guise of honoring our soldiers we appropriate for our own pleasure the thrill of bloodshed they've tasted.

The film follows a day in the life of Army Spc. Billy Lynn who, along with the other members of Bravo Company, will be redeployed to Iraq as soon as they complete a "victory tour" that culminates in Bravo's appearance in the Thanksgiving halftime show of the thinly disguised Dallas Cowboys.

As in the old World War II films, Bravo boasts a member of every ethnic group (this time also including blacks, Latinos and Asians). Although each member gives a different reason for signing up, a common denominator runs through them all — nowhere else to go.

The impetus for the tour is an

act of Billy's bravery that was captured on camera during an ambush and picked up by news outlets. Once stateside, Billy and the entire company, now small-time celebrities and conspicuous in their uniforms, are bombarded by the thoughtless, sometimes bizarre, intrusions that come with their notoriety.

Earlier in the tour, a stop was made to bury Bravo's fallen sergeant, nicknamed "Shroom" (Vin Diesel). The halftime show

takes place while they are still hung over from grief and alcohol following the funeral.

In flashback we see that Shroom's spiritual, philosophical, essentially maternal leadership



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style was yang to that of the acerbic, protective sergeant Dime's (Garrett Hedland in an excellent performance) yin.

Dime survived to shepherd the men at war and on the road, where they are fragile and out of their element. Navigating the crowded football stadium ramp sparks flashbacks of patrolling a bazaar in Iraq. Civilians are shockingly over-familiar, asking invasive questions ("Did you kill anybody?") and lecturing them

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numbingly on the importance of war to the interests of oil.

We know where they've been and what they are capable of. They can't help but overreact to the fireworks, whirligigs and

jostlings that are inherent to the halftime production. So, as crowds and circumstances casually abuse this battered band of brothers, we silently take odds on which of them will be the first to explode.

The viscous texture of the movie adds to the you-are-there confusion. It was shot in super high definition, at 120 frames per second, although few theaters are equipped to show it in the near virtual-reality format intended for its projection.

Director Ang Lee has been criticized for delivering such a sincere film in contrast to the biting satire of Fountain's book. But Lee has built a large part of his career on pensive, internal films that explore fraught environments. "Billy Lynn" is no exception.

In its energy, the movie resembles other films that acknowledge the disorientation members of insular tribes experience when they spill into the outside world. (A close companion to "Billy Lynn" is last summer's "Captain Fantastic," in which a grieving, motherless family of hyper-trained and dangerously innocent children navigate the materialistic, unbending outside world in the wake of their demanding dad.)

As Billy is asked to choose between the risk of actual death in the Iraqi desert and existential death at home, the audience is challenged to consider the value we place on war and warriors.

Lee confronts us with the dilemma of our own superficiality and then, as with Billy, he leaves us to our choice.