

'Situation' highlights Iraq's complexities

By SUSAN HAIGH
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK
The timing couldn't be better for independent filmmaker Philip Haas. His modest \$2 million movie, "The Situation," one of the first U.S. feature films to focus on the fighting in Iraq, opens this month amid the nationwide debate over President Bush's plan to send more troops to the war-torn country.

Although the drama crafted by Haas and journalist Wendell Steavenson is set in 2004, its message of chaos and misunderstanding, mixed with violence, rings true for Iraq today.

If anything, Haas said, the situation — the innocuous word Iraqis in the film use to refer to the war and all that goes with it — has only worsened.

"In a way, the film has become more timely," said Haas, a New York-based director. "I think it is an unsettling movie because it's very clear about why (Iraq) is so problematic and why there aren't many answers."

The 106-minute movie opens with a group of American soldiers throwing a boy off a bridge in Samarra.

The fictional scene is reminiscent of the real-life incident in 2004 when an Iraqi curfew violator drowned and an Army lieutenant was ultimately sentenced to 45 days in a military prison for his role in the death.

In "The Situation," that act triggers a chain of events that feed on the deep-seated rifts and corruption that permeate Iraq. Connie Nielsen stars as an American



Connie Nielsen stars in "The Situation," a film about war in Iraq. She plays an American journalist. AP PHOTO

journalist who attempts to write about the incident, only to get caught up in the confusion and dynamics of Iraqi tribalism.

Her boyfriend, played by Damian Lewis, is an American intelligence officer living in the fortified Green Zone — complete with a Chinese restaurant and swimming pool — who is trying to win over the Iraqis with promises of hospitals and water-treatment plants.

At the same time, he struggles to figure out whom he can trust.

"There is no truth, you know," Lewis' character, Dan Murphy, tells an enthusiastic young officer who recently arrived in Iraq. "It's not about locking up all the bad

guys. It doesn't work like that. There are no bad guys and there are no good guys. It's not gray, either. It just that the truth shifts according to each person you talk to."

"The Situation" opened in a few New York theaters Feb. 2. It is opening in Los Angeles and Washington on Friday and in hundreds of theaters across the country on Feb. 16.

Liaquat Ahamed, one of the film's producers and Haas' friend for 35 years, said it was difficult to initially secure funding.

Documentaries about Iraq had not done well at the box office, and there was a hesitance in late 2004 and early 2005 to finance a project that could be

seen as critical of the war.

But he said life in Iraq has worsened and support for the war has fallen to the point that "this movie has become part of the mainstream."

Haas said he, too, thought the film might be seen as politically polarizing, viewed as a Michael Moore kind of anti-Bush movie. But he said Republicans, Democrats and even some soldiers have told him that the film is an accurate representation of the chaos that has enveloped Iraq.

"Of the audiences I've spoken with, there is a sense that everyone needs to see this movie because it gives everyone a common ground, sort of a microcosm of what's going on," he said.

For Haas, 54, "The Situation" marks a departure from his past directorial work, which focused on adaptations of novels, including "Up at the Villa" in 2000 and the Oscar-nominated "Angels and Insects" in 1995.

Haas said he didn't make the movie to change anyone's views about the controversial war. The only view he hoped to change was his own. He said making a film about a war that's still in progress was an opportunity for a personal education about Iraq.

Nielsen, who costarred in "Gladiator," said she was drawn to the film for similar reasons.

"I wanted to work out some of the frustration I was feeling from watching the news," Nielsen recently told an audience in New York. "I just felt, oh my God, finally, here is a story that attempts to describe a culture, but a culture that is in a huge state of crisis."

TOP 5 of the week

Television

1. "Super Bowl XLI: Indianapolis vs. Chicago," CBS
2. "Super Bowl Post-Game Show," CBS
3. "Super Bowl Post-Post-Game Show," CBS
4. "American Idol" (Tuesday), Fox
5. "American Idol" (Wednesday), Fox

— Nielsen Media Research

Movies

1. "The Messengers," Sony Screen Gems
2. "Because I Said So," Universal
3. "Epic Movie," Fox
4. "Night at the Museum," Fox
5. "Smokin' Aces," Universal

— Exhibitor Relations Co.

Songs

1. "Late Night Special," Pretty Ricky, BlueStar
2. "Winning the Night Away," The Shins, Sub Pop
3. "Daughtry," Daughtry, RCA
4. "2007 Grammy Nominees," Various Artists, Grammy
5. "Freedom's Road," John Mellencamp, Universal

— Billboard magazine

Actor tries on role more like himself

By DAVE MASON
SCRIPPS HOWARD NEWS SERVICE

He's forever Puddy, Elaine's boyfriend of a few words on "Seinfeld."

Then he saved the day — and kept saving it each week — in the superhero spoof "The Tick" on Fox.

Later this year he'll play the evil Cad in the live-action "Underdog" movie.

But in "Rules of Engagement" (9:30 p.m. Monday, CBS), Patrick Warburton is playing someone he says is closer to himself.

And it's happening in a sitcom he almost refused to do.

"Originally, I said 'no' to the project. I said I don't want to be playing the married guy in a comedy," he said.

But Warburton said the new

sitcom's writing changed his mind.

"I found it's a good comedy, and it's grounded in reality. It's great writing. It tested well (with viewers during screenings), and it's a lot of fun for me."

The sitcom also stars Megyn Price as Audrey, Jeff's wife; Oliver Hudson as Adam, who's engaged to Jennifer (Bianca Kajlich), and David Spade as the single guy, Russell. In that manner "Engagement" tries to represent the various stages of relationships.

Russell envies Jeff and Adam for their happy relationships, and they envy him for his freedom, Hudson said.

"Three guys, two girls; it's more from the guy's perspective," Warburton said. "It's a good balance."

While his "Seinfeld" character Puddy was a man of few words, Warburton said he gets to express more of himself in Jeff.

Jeff and Audrey have been married for a long time, as have Warburton and his wife Cathy. The difference is Jeff and Audrey don't have children.

"I am the father of four (ages 6 to 14). Half of my married life — if not more than half — has been about being a parent," Warburton said.

Like Warburton, Hudson said he's finding he can relate with his character, although there are differences.

"He's seeking approval, something I don't relate to, but this guy is getting married. I just got married," Hudson said. (He married Erinn Bartlett in June.)

And he said he has found other

similarities between his character and himself in the show's situations.

"There's one episode in which I get a new game system, an Xbox, and my wife doesn't want to me to play it all the time (because he isn't spending enough time with her)."

In real life Hudson used to play online poker a lot.

"Rules of Engagement" is the first sitcom for Hudson, the son of actress Goldie Hawn and musician Bill Hudson, and the brother of Kate Hudson.

The series' first seven episodes were taped in the fall at Sony Studios in Culver City, a Los Angeles suburb.

For now, Hudson and Warburton have to wait and see if the ratings will lead CBS to order more episodes.

Osbournes: All tickets to annual Ozzfest will be free this summer

Rock tour scheduled to make usual stop near Indianapolis

By NOAKI SCHWARTZ
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES
It's the most startling news to hit the heavy-metal circuit since Ozzy Osbourne bit the head off a bat.

The wizard of the Ozzfest is going back on the road this summer and this time the tickets to his 25-city tour will be free.

"It's our 12th year and we wanted to shake it up a bit and do something different," said Osbourne's wife, Sharon.

Ticket prices for Ozzfest, which have ranged from \$35 to \$150, were beginning to rise beyond the reach of the rocker's loyal fans, his wife said, and he



Singer Ozzy Osbourne and his wife, Sharon, laugh after unveiling a Hard Rock's Cafe T-shirt last year in New York. Osbourne's Ozzfest concerts will be free this summer.

didn't want that to happen.

"It's not saying that I'm now Mother Teresa or that Ozzy is a saint, but you know what? He's been doing this a long time, and his audience has been really

good to him," Sharon Osbourne said.


"So if he goes out one summer of his life and he doesn't get paid, big deal," she said.

Osbourne has been wooing corporate sponsors to cover the cost of the tour. So far his wife said, six have signed up.

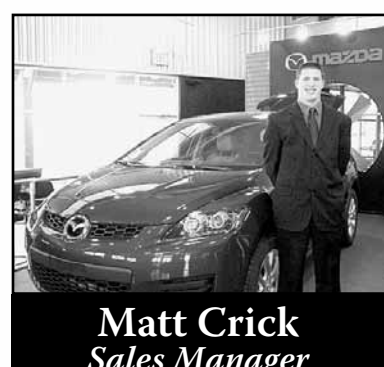
The tour kicks off July 7 in Los Angeles, with stops planned in Indianapolis, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, Dallas, New York, St. Louis and several other cities. A final list of dates and stops is still in the works.

Organizers haven't revealed yet who will be joining Osbourne on stage, but his wife said she hopes it will include numerous special guests who will drop in for one or two shows.

Over the years, Ozzfest has showcased a number of up-and-coming bands, including Linkin Park, Incubus and System of a Down.



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