

**Monday, May 14, 2007**

Last modified Sunday, April 1, 2007 8:44 PM PDT

Documentaries present Iraq war in words of the troops

By: ALEXANDRA DeLUCA - for the North County Times

Two documentary films based on an anthology of writings by service members who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan will be screened locally this month.

"Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience" will be playing April 10-12 at La Jolla Village Cinemas and will also air on PBS on April 16. "Muse of Fire" will have its West Coast premiere on April 28 at La Paloma Theater in Encinitas.

Both films were inspired by the book "Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families." The anthology, published by Random House last September, is the outcome of an initiative launched by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2004 to encourage service members and their families to write about their personal wartime experiences.

The film "Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience" was produced by The Documentary Group, which was founded by the producer and director of the late ABC News anchor Peter Jennings' documentaries. The film features several selections from the anthology read by actors such as Beau Bridges and Robert Duvall, accompanied by images including photographs, archival footage and animation.

Several service members who contributed their writings to the anthology provide commentary throughout the film, as do renowned American wartime writers including Tim O'Brien and Tobias Wolff.

Director Richard Robbins said his goal was "to make a film that focused on the human experience" of war.

Lawrence Bridges, director of "Muse of Fire," said the purpose of his film was to "explore the human, historical and literary" significance of the "Operation Homecoming" initiative, and to examine how the creative process can help service members and all people come to terms with traumatic experiences. The documentary features interviews with prominent American military authors as well as many of the troops whose writing is included in the anthology. The troops discuss their writing processes and read their works directly to the camera.

Both directors said their films do not take on the politics of the war in Iraq.

"There's this way in which politics have become a barrier to listening to the human side of the war," said Robbins. "It amazes me how much people seem to not want to have that conversation. We can't pretend this is not happening."

Robbins and Bridges both said they believe there is a disconnect between service members and the American public because the majority of Americans are not directly affected by the war in Iraq.

"Americans on the whole are insulated from the war," said Bridges. "They don't really know what the impact is."

Bridges said although he believes things have improved since the Vietnam War in that the American public generally supports its service members, he feels the public's reluctance to contemplate the effects of the war in Iraq on the troops and their families "is a great injustice."

"One of my purposes for doing this film is to open that very dialogue, to allow the troops to have a voice, to know there is a willing and understanding audience," Bridges said.

Encinitas City Councilman Dan Dalager, who spearheaded the effort to bring the "Operation Homecoming" book tour to Encinitas last September as well as the screening of "Muse of Fire" to Encinitas later this month, said he feels it is especially important for North County residents to be aware of the human impact of the war in Iraq.

"We need to understand what our friends and neighbors are going through," said Dalager.

Robbins and Bridges said they believe all Americans have a responsibility to listen to what the troops have to say, and that they hope their films will serve to enlighten their audiences as to their experiences.

"We owe it to them," said Robbins. "It's not enough to say 'we support the troops' if you're not willing to listen to them."

"We need to listen to them to understand what it is to be an American now," said Bridges.

"Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience" will be playing April 10ñ12 at La Jolla Village Cinemas, 8879 Villa La Jolla Drive, La Jolla. Call (619) 819-0236 for show times and tickets. The film will also air on PBS on April 16.

"Muse of Fire" will be shown at 7 p.m. April 28 at the La Paloma Theater, 471 S. Coast Hwy., Encinitas. The screening will be followed by a panel discussion with the editor of the "Operation Homecoming" anthology, Andrew Carroll, and "Muse of Fire" executive producer Jan Wieringa. The event is free, but tickets are required. For tickets, call (760) 753-6041.