

The Bomb Squad: Some Suggestions for Your AFI Dallas Film Fest Saturday Sked

By Robert Wilonsky in [Film](#)
Saturday, Mar. 28 2009 @ 11:05AM



Jeremy Renner will be in attendance at tonight's Dallas debut of *The Hurt Locker*, at the Magnolia at 7:30.

Last night at the AMC NorthPark, where he accepted the AFI Dallas Star Award following a screening of *Chinatown*, the film's writer, Robert Towne, spoke of how films were once the place where audiences and filmmakers met to share their stories. In the 1930s and '40s, he said, those who made the movies and those who consumed them shared "a common bond, common values -- you know, give the underdog a break." That disappeared in the '50s and '60s, he insisted, only to resurface in the 1970s -- when cinema had become the opposition, a clenched fist raised against politicians, ideologies, scandals and Vietnam.

At its best, said Towne, "audiences and filmmakers speak to each other," especially at film festivals such as the AFI Dallas International Film Festival: "Audiences and filmmakers come together to learn a common language."

In that spirit, then, these suggested offerings from [today's schedule](#): [Plano native Keith Maitland's *The Eyes of Me*](#), which is, in some ways, the quintessential high-school film full of the requisite angst and hope and despair and joy you'll find in every single hallway and every single locker. But *The Eyes of Me* has its own singular twist: It's a documentary set inside the Texas School for the Blind in Austin, where Maitland gathered hundreds of hours of footage to tell the stories of four wholly distinct subjects who share but a single trait: They are blind. A remarkable

accomplishment, *The Eyes of Me* screens at 12:30 this afternoon at the Magnolia and again tomorrow at 2 at the Magnolia. Here's the trailer:

[RiP: A Remix Manifesto](#), which screens at the Magnolia tonight at 10:45, is a film you'll never see outside of the festival circuit -- chiefly because there's no way Brett Gaylor will ever get the music clearance for his doc about the mash-up culture (specifically, [Girl Talk](#)) and how music, like, wants to be free and shit. The film's terrific for the first half hour -- cinema you can dance to, sweaty and provocative and clever and illuminating, especially a sequence in which Gaylor shows a government copyright enforcer a sequence in which Girl Talk'er Gregg Gillis transforms the familiar into the what-the-fuck and asks her, *Why's that illegal?* But Gaylor eventually loses his way, right about the time he starts comparing Girl Talk's brilliant artistry to the fight over Napster and file-sharing. Below, a scene from *RiP: A Remix Manifesto*.

Speaking of rock docs, fest organizers really dig [Rock Prophecies](#), about concert photog Robert Knight, which screens today at the 4 at the Magnolia. It's easy to see why: The doc's perfectly enjoyable and scored like an afternoon's worth of KZPS, a sure-fire VH1 Classic repeater in years to come full of classic-rock familiars such as ZZ Top, Def Leppard and young'uns who think the blues started and stopped with the death of Knight subject Stevie Ray Vaughan.

But for the day's one can't-miss, I turn now to my *LA Weekly* colleague and friend Scott Foundas, who demands you line up early and brave the chill winds for tonight's AFI Dallas Star Award recipient Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*, which screens at 7:30 p.m. at the Magnolia. Oh, Scott...

Given the box-office fortunes of most Iraq-themed movies that haven't been directed by Michael Moore, I'm not sure if more than 10 people will want to see Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*, about a cadre of U.S. Army bomb experts patrolling the streets of Baghdad. That, however, will be the audience's loss. Bigelow's film may not be, in formal terms, as radical and innovative a work as Brian De Palma's *Redacted*, but it's nevertheless a unique and worthy addition to the canon of cinematic texts about the Iraq campaign -- the first, I think, that really tries to understand what motivates the men (and in Bigelow's army, there are only men) who join a volunteer military in times of war. It also happens to be a first-class piece of visceral action moviemaking.



Written by former *Village Voice* columnist Mark Boal, who spent time embedded with just such a bomb squad, *The Hurt Locker* has already been praised by some in Toronto Venice as an apolitical war movie devoid of preachy message-mongering. But what Bigelow and Boal don't do is considerably less important than what they do: Namely, they give us soldier characters who are neither small-town rubes, do-gooder boy scouts, hyper-aggressive adrenaline junkies, poetry-quoting intellectuals or any other easily reducible war-movie "types." What's more, they allow them to show very real fears. Even the most potentially cliché character, the newly arrived staff sergeant (Jeremy Renner) who saunters in trailing clouds of macho bluster, turns out to be anything but, emerging as a psychologically complex man of war who sublimated his own battlefield anxieties into a kind of dangerous addiction. It's a stunning performance in a movie that frequently rattles the senses.

Bigelow, whose best films (*Near Dark*, *Point Break*, *Strange Days*) have always married an astute psychological dimension to a genre-movie framework, films the day-in, day-out routine of the soldiers with terrific intensity and attention to detail, whether they're defusing a rat's nest of IEDs in a narrow Baghdad alley or aiding a party of British army subcontractors caught in a desert ambush. Together with the masterful British cinematographer (who shot *United 93* and many Ken Loach films) and the editor Chris Innis, she orchestrates several suspense sequences of the sort that can bring audiences to the edges of their seats, but which never feel cheap or exploitative, because Bigelow mines the natural tension from a situation rather than plastering on the kind of contrivances that can only be thought up in a Hollywood war room.

The Hurt Locker saves its most inspired strokes for last, when Renner returns home after his tour of duty and Bigelow, in a 10-minute sequence of pure cinema, creates a more palpable sense of the disorientation experienced by many a combat vet suddenly extracted from the war zone than *Stop-Loss* managed in its entirety. Finally, as Toronto hits the half-way mark, here is another movie worth getting excited about.

So, lined up yet?