

# **RETURN**

## **A film by Liza Johnson**

**USA – 97 mins. – Super 16>DCP**

### **SYNOPSIS**

Back from a military tour of duty, Kelli can't wait to rejoin her old life in the Rust Belt town she's always known. She's ready to experience the feelings of everyday life—the carpet under her bare feet, the smell of her baby's head.

But slowly, her world comes to feel unfamiliar. Her friends love her but seem preoccupied with trifles. Her children need more focused attention than she can give, and as much as she tries, her husband Mike doesn't understand what she's been through. As Kelli's dislocation ripples through her world, she risks becoming an outsider. When she's thrown back on her own resources Kelli has to struggle to find a new way forward.

### **DIRECTOR'S NOTES**

In all my work, I'm interested in the ongoing present, in the atmosphere and texture of everyday life. That is where I've set Kelli's story as she comes home from her military deployment. There are good reasons that the story of the soldier coming home from war is usually marked by traumatic flashback and by heightened psychological crisis—it can be good storytelling, and it also reflects a lot of people's real experience. But for RETURN, I felt that it was most interesting to narrate the blunt textures of how a crisis feels when it's played out in the everyday. Kelli feels the joys and comforts of home, but they now include a measure of distance because they also seem so strange. The place she returns to holds within it no more or less sense of purpose than before she left. The fabric of community there, strained by job losses and drugs, is still an American world of consumption, where people are getting by, trying to move up, and, increasingly, trying to numb out.

I'm not sure whether Kelli suffers from a disorder, like the one we associate with post-traumatic stress, but she has definitely become dislocated. In this sense the film much more resembles other films about dislocated women than it does other films about returning soldiers.

Of course, the story of a woman's return from war is also a new story. The ways that Kelli is expected to channel her emotions is much different from the ways that comparable male protagonists are invited to express their rage. The problems and solutions that are presented by her gender generate a new narrative. As a filmmaker, I'm interested in staying close to her character, close to her point of view. Linda Cardellini is literally in every scene of the film.

RETURN is not a political argument, or at least it is not one in the pro-and-con polemical style that dominates American political conversation. The film doesn't make moral judgments about war or the homeland—it walks a line that makes those judgments difficult, or at least

beside the point. Instead it demands empathetic engagement with a woman in an extreme state of being, grounded in a very particular community, place and time.

My background is in the visual arts, and in the past I have mostly worked with non-professional actors. When I wrote this story, I felt strongly that it needed to be approached as a film that relies upon the craft of trained actors. It was great fortune to be able to cast a performer as fearless as Linda Cardellini in the lead, and Michael Shannon also set an immediate tone on set: rigorous, but funny. John Slattery, Talia Balsam, Paul Sparks, and Louisa Krause, among others, rounded out a fictional world that I felt I could believe in.

I'm reluctant to make a lot of truth claims about the nature of soldiers or of women in the military—the women and men that I've met have been so varied in their experiences that there aren't many generalizations that I'm willing to make. Still, when I was writing I felt that it was important to meet as many women as I could who had been in this situation, and Linda also sought out women soldiers while she was researching the role. The film doesn't try to be representative of all soldier's experience, but it was important to us to render a character who seemed to reflect one singular real possibility, a plausible account.

## **CAST BIOGRAPHIES**

### **LINDA CARDELLINI – "Kelli"**

Linda Cardellini shot to fame in the cult classic television show *Freaks & Geeks*, which launched a generation of actors including Linda, Seth Rogen, James Franco, and writer/director/ producer Judd Apatow. Cardellini's diverse career has allowed her to work with accomplished filmmakers such as Ang Lee in the Oscar-nominated film *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*, for which she shared both SAG and Gotham Award nominations for Ensemble Cast. On the small screen, Cardellini starred as Nurse Samantha Taggart in six seasons of NBC's internationally recognized series, *ER*, and also co-starred in Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana's highly rated CBS mini-series *Comanche Moon*. Her film roles include playing the notable role of Velma in *SCOOBY DOO* franchise and more recently in the independent films *KILL THE IRISHMAN*, *SUPER* and *AMERICAN GUN*.

### **MICHAEL SHANNON – "Mike"**

Academy Award nominee Michael Shannon is a renowned performer on both stage and screen with over 30 feature films to his credit. Starting out as a theater actor in Chicago with several theater companies, including the legendary Steppenwolf Theater, Michael has emerged as one of his generation's most acclaimed actors. He has worked with Sidney Lumet, Sam Mendes, Werner Herzog, Oliver Stone, and Martin Scorsese.

### **JOHN SLATTERY – "Bud"**

John Slattery stars in *Mad Men* as Roger Sterling. Slattery was nominated in 2010 for his third Emmy Award for Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Drama Series for his role in the critically acclaimed AMC series. He also stars, with Matt Damon, Emily Blunt, and Anthony Mackie, in the 2010 drama *THE ADJUSTMENT BUREAU*. Slattery appeared on Broadway in the Pulitzer Prize winning *Rabbit Hole* and *Betrayal and Laughter on the 23rd Floor*. His off-Broadway credits include the original production of *Three Days of Rain* (LA Drama Critics Award and Drama Desk nominated), among others.

## **FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES**

### **LIZA JOHNSON – Writer / Director**

Liza Johnson is a filmmaker, artist and writer. Her most recent short film, *IN THE AIR*, premiered in competition at the 2010 Berlin Film Festival and in the US at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Johnson's short films have been screened in international festivals, including New York and Rotterdam, and in fine arts venues including the Walker Art Center, the Wexner Center, the Pompidou Center, Kunstwerke, LA MOCA, and many others. *RETURN* is her feature film debut.

### **NOAH HARLAN – Producer**

Noah Harlan is a producer of film, television and new media. He is the co-founder of 2.1 Films, a boutique film and media company. He has produced or co-produced six feature films including *APARTMENT #5C* (2005 Cannes Directors' Fortnight), *AVANIM* (2004 Berlin Film Festival Panorama), *PLUM RAIN* (2007 Venice Film Festival, Venice Days), and *TEHILIM* (2007 Cannes Film Festival Competition). He received an Emmy Award in 2008 for his film *A CLEARING IN THE FOG* on PBS and he has produced media projects for numerous brands and television networks.

### **BEN HOWE – Producer**

Ben Howe is an independent producer based in New York. His films have won international awards, premiered at top festivals, including Cannes, Sundance, Berlin and Toronto, and secured international and domestic distribution. Feature credits include Bradley Rust Gray's *THE EXPLODING GIRL*, So Yong Kim's *TREELESS MOUNTAIN*, David Barker's *DAYLIGHT*, and Matt Wolf's *WILD COMBINATION: A PORTRAIT OF ARTHUR RUSSELL*. Upcoming projects include Patricia Benoit's *STONES IN THE SUN* and Matt Wolf's *TEENAGE*.

### **Anne Etheridge – Cinematographer**

Anne Etheridge is an AFI-trained cinematographer whose documentaries have aired on Showtime, HBO and the Movie Channel, and she has also shot many series for the History Channel and the Food Network. She is the DP of many short films as well as the feature film *DUCK*, and she has also shot three short films with Liza Johnson.

### **PAUL ZUCKER – Editor**

Paul Zucker's editorial credits include Harmony Korine's *MISTER LONELY*, Braden King's *HERE*, Joel Schumacher's *TWELVE*, and Scott McGehee's *UNCERTAINTY*, among others.

### **AFFONSO GONCALVES – Additional Editor**

Affonso Goncalves' editorial credits include Todd Haynes' *MILDRED PIERCE*, Debra Granik's *WINTER'S BONE*, Tanya Hamilton's *NIGHT CATCHES US*, and Ira Sachs' films *MARRIED LIFE*, *FORTY SHADES OF BLUE*, and *THE DELTA*, among others.

### **INBAL WEINBERG – Production Designer**

Inbal Weinberg's many credits include Dee Rees' *PARIAH*, Max Winkler's *CEREMONY*, Jesse Peretz's *MY IDIOT BROTHER*, and Derek Cianfrance's *BLUE VALENTINE*.

## **CREDITS**

Fork Films Presents  
A 2.1 Films / True Enough Production  
In Association with Meredith Vieira Productions

Written and Directed by Liza Johnson

Anne Etheridge	Cinematographer
Paul Zucker	Editor
Affonso Goncalves	Additional Editor
Inbal Weinberg	Production Designer
Erica Munro	Costume Designer
Chen Harpaz	Sound Design and Mix
T. Griffin	Composer
Joe Rudge	Music Supervisor

Abigail Disney	Executive Producer
Meredith Vieira	Executive Producer
Amy Rapp	Executive Producer
Noah Harlan	Producer
Ben Howe	Producer
Liza Johnson	Producer

## **Principal Cast**

Linda Cardellini	Kelli
Michael Shannon	Mike
John Slattery	Bud
Talia Balsam	Julie
Paul Sparks	Ed
Bonnie Swencionis	Cara Lee
Emma Rain Lyle	Jackie
Louisa Krause	Shannon
Rosie Benton	Brooke
James Murtagh	Mr. Miller

Downloadable images can be found at: [www.return-film.com](http://www.return-film.com)

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