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Natalie Morales on playing a 'guilt demon' in 'My Dead Friend Zoe'



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Playing a deceased character in a movie might seem to be one of the easiest roles an actor could take on. After all, what is there to do but lie around and be... well, deceased?



Not so for [Natalie Morales](#), who plays the title character in the moving, funny, and very human new film *My Dead Friend Zoe*. At the start of the film, Zoe is just a figment of her best pal Merit's (**Sonequa Martin-Green**) memory and imagination, razzing her at a meeting for military veterans one minute, and then jazzing along with her to their favorite tunes on a drive. But as the movie unfolds, we learn more about the pair, who became close while serving overseas in the Army — and we learn what Zoe was like when she was still in the present tense.



"I think of it as like three different versions of Zoe," Morales tells Gold Derby. "The one you see the most is not a ghost exactly, but we've sort of been referring to it as a guilt demon — just like a manifestation of [Merit's] survivor's guilt. Then you do see her alive during their service — and after. One is a combination and amalgamation of the memories that Merit had of Zoe and her mannerisms and the way she talked and her sense of humor, but it's also slightly exaggerated — and its motivation is to keep her isolated and in this guilt-ridden state. ... The Zoe that Merit remembers is bigger and brassier than the real Zoe could be."

And it's perhaps ironic that Zoe is both surrounded by some legendary actors, including **Morgan Freeman** (as the leader of the survivors meeting) and **Ed Harris** (as Merit's veteran grandfather) — but she couldn't interact with them. But Morales says she turned being "ignored" on set to her advantage. "It makes the part of me that is a little impish excited, because I like to see if I can get a laugh from someone when they're not supposed to laugh," she says. "But yeah, you're used to getting feedback!"

Another reason playing Zoe wasn't just like any other role for Morales is that the story really has a strong message to impart. Based on the real-life experiences of first-time director **Kyle Hausmann-Stokes** (who cowrote the script with **A.J. Bermudez** and **Cherish Chen**), *Zoe* is full of small details and lingo that really immerses audiences in the daily lives of grunts.

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"[Hausmann-Stokes] says it's 93.5 [percent] exactly of what happened to him," says Morales. "He wrote all of us a letter before the film and told us about his story and what had happened to him and the friends that he'd lost." *Zoe*, he explained, is based on two platoon mates he lost, and Harris' grandfather character, Dale, is based on Hausmann-Stokes' grandfather.

"I thought to myself, this guy knows what he's talking about," says Morales, who wore the director's camo pants from the Army during the film. The primary change in his story to the story on camera is the gender flip: This is the story of two women, rather than men, in service.

"He interviewed all these women [before making the film] and he was blown away and also upset that their stories were not broadly told and that they weren't represented as well in media," says Morales. "He wanted his story to be half his and half someone else's."

Morales, who has been appearing in TV shows and films for over 20 years and currently has a recurring role on *Grey's Anatomy*, says she hopes people who watch the film come away with a different perspective about how veterans survive not just the wars they're in, but also survive the peace.

"I see *Zoe* as a character who enlisted because there were not many other options for her," says Morales. "People join the service for all sorts of different reasons, and it's not up to me to judge them or decide what they do is right. What's up to me is to take care of my fellow humans, especially if they're in need and especially if they have physical or mental damage from what we sent them to do. ... There are people trying to help. What we're trying to do with this movie is tell people — veterans or not — that if you're going through a difficult time, there are people who will listen."

My Dead Friend Zoe is now in theaters.

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