

## DVD Review: 'Return' Features Oscar-Caliber Work From Linda Cardellini

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CHICAGO – It's an evening typical of so many American homes. Tom Bergeron's smarmy voice fills the air as televised pratfalls are accompanied by the mechanical laughter of a studio audience. A father chuckles and winces at the mindless spectacle while relaxing on the couch with his children. His wife, on the other hand, remains restless. She fails to find any sense of comfort in the nightly routine.

This scene takes place early on in Liza Johnson's "Return," which is one of the most refreshingly unconventional wartime dramas in recent memory. It observes a female soldier, Kelli (Linda Cardellini), in the days following her return home after a tour of duty. A formulaic script would've culminated in expository revelations about Kelli's traumatic experiences overseas, but Johnson uses behavioral nuances rather than pat dialogue to illuminate her heroine's inner turmoil. It's a character vignette that's spare in all the right places.



DVD Rating: **4.0/5.0**

In the very first shot of the film, Kelli's eyes search through the airport for her family, as her daughter runs in for a hug. The girl is so small that Kelli doesn't realize she's there until her voice is heard, thus causing the woman's fatigued features to suddenly burst with tearful elation. This is the utopian moment from which Kelli is destined to fall throughout the course of the picture. As the days progress, she starts to feel like an outcast in her own home, as the rooms that once felt so inviting prove to be unsettlingly alien. The question of whether she kept her marital fidelity intact materializes on everyone's lips, including those of her husband (Michael Shannon), who promises to be understanding and appears to be harboring his own regrets. She can't stand the thought of returning to her old factory job, and the mundane work quite literally repels her out the door. Much of her time is spent at home, where she remains in a bewildered daze. She can barely muster a happy face for her daughters, who watch helplessly as their mother crumbles before their eyes. Kelli's friends are no help, opting to laugh like adolescents as they watch their troubled pal tempted by the promise of promiscuous sex. Even a compassionate war veteran (John Slattery of "Mad Men") offers little more than fleeting distractions to blot out the miseries of the outside world.



Return was released on DVD on April 24, 2012.

Photo credit: Entertainment One

This is a deeply sad film, but no more depressing than any honest depiction of how war continues to lacerate its participants long after they've left the battlefield. What makes the film exhilarating is the performance by Cardellini, which is one of the first great cinematic treasures of 2012. Her youthful beauty forever immortalized in reruns of "Freaks and Geeks" still radiates through a face lined with life. Cardellini conveys just as much about her character in silences and stillness as she does in scenes with dialogue. The hesitations and conflicting emotions that register on her face in sequences opposite Shannon convey more about their relationship than any of their shouting matches. It's particularly refreshing to see Shannon cast against type as a decent, hard-working straight-arrow whose patience has reached a breaking point. I also must applaud the work of Louisa Krause (as Kelli's boozy friend), who is quickly becoming one of my favorite character actors. In both "Return" and "Martha Marcy May Marlene," she excels as overgrown girl-women hopelessly lost in the reassuring sleaze of an aimless lifestyle. She reminds me of a young Shelley Winters, and her earthy portrayals leave an indelible impression. Less successful is the film's denouement, which feels a bit too predictable in its inevitability, though the final shot is shattering.

"Return" is presented in its 1.85:1 aspect ratio and includes about six minutes of deleted scenes, the most memorable of which reveals an alternate subplot where Kelli finds work at a local chain store. She's approached by an old friend whose attempt at compassionate support just ends up stinging her wounds, thus leading to a near-altercation after Kelli's confronted by a bitchy customer. The tension in the scene is a bit forced, but Cardellini's boiling rage is never less than authentic. The actress is unfortunately absent from the audio commentary track featuring insights from Johnson and cinematographer Anne Etheridge. The longtime collaborators reveal that they previously made a series of shorts together (it's a shame none of them are included as extras). The film's 25-day shoot took place in Newburgh, New York, a location that was chosen because of its resemblance to the director's childhood home of southeastern Ohio. The town's fading beauty and deteriorating industry subtly reflect the decay of Kelli's home life, though Etheridge made the bold choice to not utilize desaturated colors typical of an indie downer. Her emphasis on primary colors in the characters' wardrobe lends an aching warmth to scenes where Kelli's elusive happiness nearly seems to be within her reach.

*'Return' is released by Entertainment One and stars Linda Cardellini, Michael Shannon, John Slattery, Talia Balsam, Emma Rayne Lyle, Paul Sparks and Louisa Krause. It was written and directed by Liza Johnson. It was released on April 24, 2012. It is not rated.*



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By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [14]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

[matt@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com) [13]**Source URL (retrieved on Apr 23 2024 - 3:09am):**<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/18364/dvd-review-return-features-oscar-caliber-work-from-linda-cardellini>**Links:**

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