

## Interview: Writer, Director Neil Burger Follows Iraq Soldiers on Leave in ‘The Lucky Ones’

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CHICAGO – In his short career as a writer and director, Neil Burger has taken on the John F. Kennedy assassination in “Interview with the Assassin” and the mysteries of magic in “The Illusionist,” which starred Edward Norton, Paul Giamatti and Jessica Biel.

With his new film “The Lucky Ones,” Burger tackles the dichotomy between the fighting soldiers in Iraq and a country that can’t equal that sacrifice on the home front during wartime.



Tim Robbins as Cheever in “The Lucky Ones,” which is directed by Neil Burger.

*Photo credit: James Bridges*

In a recent interview with HollywoodChicago.com, Burger spoke about the research he did in understanding the modern soldier, his surprising casting choice of anti-war activist Tim Robbins as one of the veterans and why he chose to relate this story while the Iraq conflict continues.

“What ‘The Lucky Ones’ shows about the situation now is the disconnect between soldiers who have given of themselves selflessly versus the self-centered attitude of the country when they get home,” Burger said.

The story involves three Iraq veterans on leave from the war. Stuck at an airport during a blackout, U.S. National Guardsman Cheever (Tim Robbins) manages to score a rental car to drive to his home in St. Louis.

He agrees to allow fellow soldiers Colee (Rachel McAdams) and TK (Michael Peña) to accompany him and then take the car to their destination in Las Vegas. Burger added: “Tim Robbins has been outspoken. That did give me pause in the sense that I didn’t want anybody to resist the movie.”



Michael Peña as TK and Rachel McAdams as Colee in “The Lucky Ones,” which is directed by Neil Burger.  
*Photo credit: James Bridges*

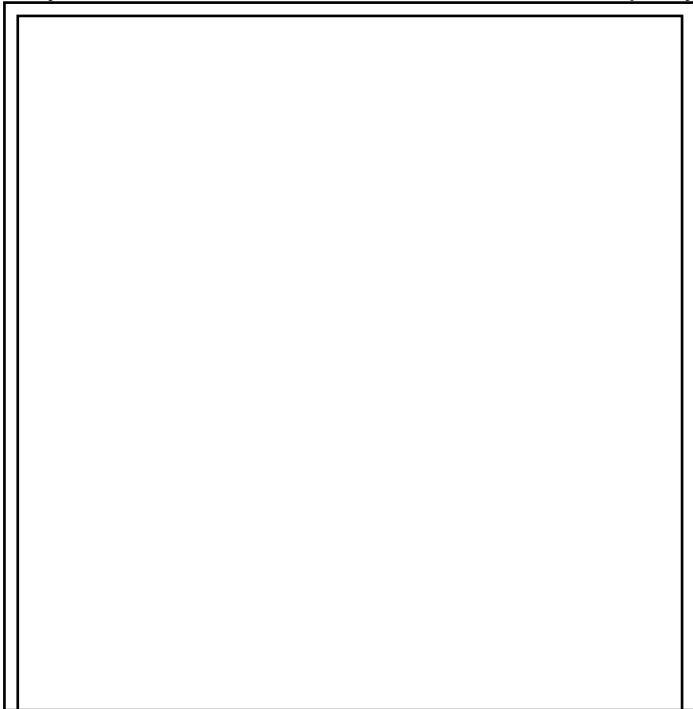


But he quickly interjected: “Tim is anti-war, but he’s also a great patriot. He loves this country and has done quite a bit of outreach with soldiers and their families. Tim liked the character and wanted to be part of the movie.”

The road trip of the soldiers also becomes a journey of conscience. All three people discover the country’s reaction to them and (in the case of Cheever) the dissolution of a marriage. Confrontations in a bar, a strange religious service and a wealthy man’s birthday party are just some of the America they encounter.

There is one particular moment in the film that Burger feels is emblematic of this country’s separated curtain between the war and modern life.

“There was one scene that happened at the wealthy guy’s birthday party,” Burger related. “Tim’s character says they were ‘just trying to stay alive over there’. The reaction from the party guest is: ‘Stay alive? No wonder we’re losing the war.’”







Director Neil Burger on the set of “The Lucky Ones”.  
*Photo credit: James Bridges*

“I actually heard something like that,” he continued. “If the reasons aren’t presented exactly the way they want to hear it, it’s shocking how quickly people who say they support the troops or support the war are willing to condemn or alienate even the good soldiers.”

But Burger was quick to point out that the film isn’t about the physical aspect of fighting the war but the inner conflict of adjusting to the homeland away from the battlefield.

“When these soldiers come home, I learned that their feelings toward everyone saying ‘thank you! thank you!’ – as I depict in the movie – completely rubs them the wrong way,” he explained. “They would rather be told ‘welcome home’ than ‘thank you’. To them, ‘thank you’ implies ‘thank you for doing it so I didn’t have to’. They feel as if there is an emptiness behind it.”

Burger added: “Ultimately, however, the movie and the characters are less about soldiering and more about what they want as ordinary Americans who come home.”

He continued: “[They want] to have a good time and find their families and loved ones. That is when they find they’re strangers in their own land.”

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Even though the subject of the film deals with the Iraq war in the background, it’s more of a mirror to the United States culture that reacts to their soldiers coming back (similar to the World War II-era film “Best Years of Our Lives” and the Vietnam-themed “Coming Home”).

“The movie looks at America now. [It’s] a snapshot of the country now,” Burger said.

He concluded: “We used to have a collective psychology and a sense of national purpose. That has been lost in recent years. The war is a depressing situation and people tend to turn away from depressing things. But this has long-term consequences for the overall moral health of the country.”

*“The Lucky Ones,” which opened everywhere on Sept. 26, 2008, is written and directed by Neil Burger and features Tim Robbins, Rachel McAdams, Michael Peña, John Heard and Molly Hagan.*

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