

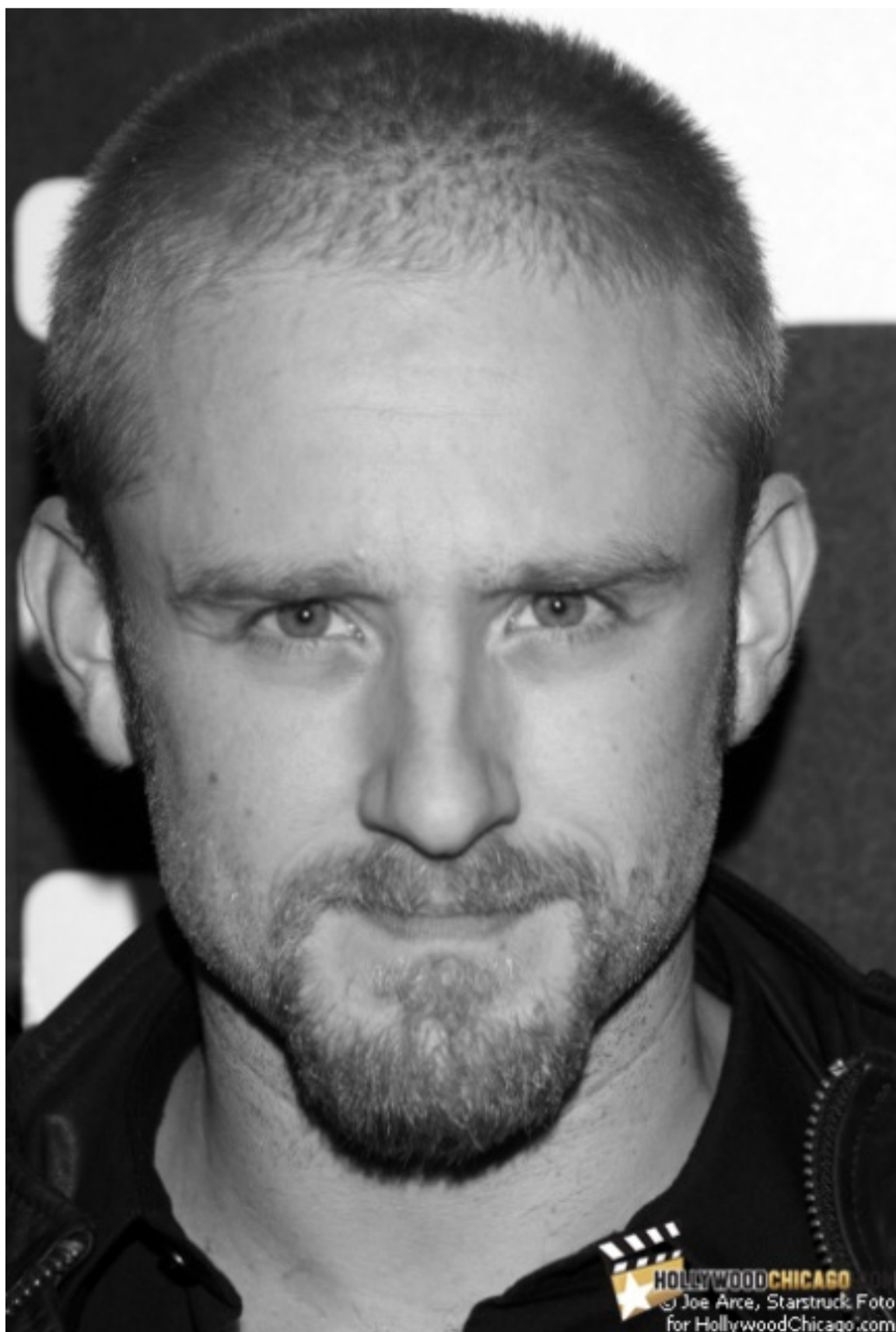
Interview: Ben Foster Brings Humanity to ‘The Messenger’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 19, 2009 - 3:40pm

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CHICAGO – Ben Foster has stolen scenes in works as diverse as “Six Feet Under,” “Freaks and Geeks,” “3:10 to Yuma,” and “Alpha Dog,” but he truly shines in the spotlight of the lead role in “The Messenger,” giving the best performance of his career to date. The young actor was in town for the Chicago International Film Festival and took some time to speak to us about his research for the film, how one leaves such a dramatic work behind, and his love for co-star Woody Harrelson.

Foster stars in “The Messenger” as Staff Sergeant Will Montgomery, a young man returned home from his tour but with a few months of service left. To fill out his time, Will is assigned to the Casualty Notification Office (and partnered with Woody Harrelson’s Captain Tony Stone), the men who inform “NOK” (next of kin) when their loved one has been killed in the line of duty.



Ben Foster on the red carpet for the Chicago International Film Festival premiere of The Messenger.

Photo credit: Joe Arce/HollywoodChicago.com

Will finds himself drawn to a widow played by Samantha Morton, but the film is much more than a typical love story. “The Messenger” is a moving, dramatic examination of loss and how we deal with grief. Naturally, diving into that kind of a part can be tough for someone to leave behind. Foster admits, “I don’t know if I’ve totally shaken it. What’s nice about asking these kind of questions in the form of a film is that it demands a personal rigor to ask yourself these questions. How do we deal with grief? How do we deal with loss? How do we find ways to connect and celebrate what we do have? If that’s hard to shake, that’s fine with me. I like those questions rattling around.”



The Messenger
Photo credit: Oscilloscope Pictures

To help him shake off the ghosts of “The Messenger,” Foster dove right into another project, the poorly-received “Pandorum,” which was released earlier this year. Three weeks after wrapping something as realistic as Oren Moverman’s debut film, Foster was in Berlin, planning to “go to museums and play hard and run around a f**king spaceship. It was a naive concept.”

Foster somewhat talks around the subject of why it was naive but does admit that “...it wasn’t what was presented to me at the time. I think I probably should have taken time off. I’m not saying I shouldn’t have done it, but...You don’t want to start a project if you don’t have anything to give.”

“The Messenger” may be about a very specific job and the character feel three-dimensional but, for Foster, it’s about the universal experience of loss. He explains, “We’ve received those phone calls and we’ve made them. Someday, people will receive them on our behalf. We’re in a culture where we really duck it. We hide it. And, on some level, I believe it’s an unhealthy approach to the inevitable. It’s not morbid if someone is able to feel what they’re feeling - even if it’s scary and hard and recognize the delicacy and the gift that we have of just existing right now.”





The Messenger

Photo credit: Oscilloscope Pictures

To prepare for such a complex role, Foster and the team behind “The Messenger” had the head of CNO on-set every day. Even the extras were actual men and women who had just returned from their tour of duty. Ben, Woody, and Oren spent time at Walter Reade - “We hung out with those kids...missing pieces. It was very sobering. The way that Oren directed us - his strategy was to serve the piece and not ourselves. He set an example and created an environment where we had to listen to each other and honor these men and women. There was no rehearsal for any scene. We never met those we had to notify until we were actually knocking on the door. He would work the camera in a single move and those that would be notified separately. So, when Woody and I would walk up, we were raw nerves. It created this space where we had to really listen to each other. We didn’t know what would happen.”

Even before they got on-set, Ben Foster went to New York two months early to speak to Oren, talk to soldiers, and watch documentaries. Foster says, “We built a shorthand where, by the time we were on-set, his direction, although incredibly insightful, was very simple and subtle. We just built trust. He’s one of those guys - when you meet him...you can smell a liar. You just know that he’s a true humanist.”

A large part of the success of “The Messenger” is due to the interplay between Foster and Harrelson. “I had already been a huge fan of Woody’s for years,” says Foster. “When I heard that he was coming on, I was so excited. Of course, they say never meet your heroes. But it’s one of those rare love affairs. I’m so...I don’t want to say proud...it’s not the right word...blown away to work with him as he’s working on such a deep level. He hasn’t made the choice to do this kind of work often but when he does, he really swings. He’s my brother. I would do anything for Woody.”



The Messenger

Photo credit: Oscilloscope Pictures

Ben Foster has made a wide variety of films in his short career, but is often seen as “an intense actor”. When asked if he wants to do a comedy someday, he jokingly says that he’s called up the Apatow guys looking to do anything - “I really like to laugh. Help me out here. I’ll hold a f**king light.”

As to what draws him to certain projects, Foster says, “I choose each film for a different reason. I’d like to say there’s some grand scheme but it’s really about what shows up and when and where you’re at. I imagine...just thinking of this out loud for the first time...as a writer, if you’re good at what you do, you’re probably only going to be asking one or two different questions. They’re going to be variations on a theme. You’ll have a question that is important to you and you work through the films or the current project to get closer to some kind of answer. I like to be challenged in different ways, but it depends on who I’m working with. I like all kinds of movies. I’m not a movie snob. I like all sorts of genres. Shaking it up and playing with different environments...”

To close out our interview, Foster once again immodestly speaks of his co-stars and director more than himself as to what he learned on the set of “The Messenger” - “There’s such a humility from Samantha Morton and Woody Harrelson to Jena Malone and Steve Buscemi - it’s so impressive to work with people on such a high level. You see that it’s about sacrifice. I suppose it’s not a new thing to learn but it’s something important to keep after - it’s not about YOU, it’s about IT. That kind of commitment and selflessness for something that could be perceived as selfish is inspiring.”

‘The Messenger’ stars Ben Foster, Woody Harrelson, Samantha Morton, Steve Buscemi, and Jena Malone. It was written by Alessandro Camon & Oren Moverman and directed by Oren Moverman. It opens in Chicago on November 20th, 2009. It is rated R.



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