

Web television series *Homecoming*: Everything about America's wars, corporate elite is "rotten" ...

... And two much weaker series, *Maniac* and *Wanderlust*

By David Walsh and Joanne Laurier
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Homecoming is a web television series—based on a podcast of the same title—and a political thriller released on Amazon Video on November 2.

It is important and well done. It points to the corrosive, destabilizing and ongoing impact of American imperialism's neo-colonial wars.

The 10-episode series (each episode is approximately 30 minutes long)—created by Micah Bloomberg and Eli Horowitz and directed by Sam Esmail (*Mr. Robot*)—concerns itself with a facility in Florida, the Homecoming Transitional Support Center, that supposedly helps Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans make a smoother transition to civilian life. The center is owned and operated by the Geist Group, a large corporation.

The series takes place in both 2018 and 2022. In the earlier time-frame, Heidi Bergman (Julia Roberts), a case worker in the "reintegration process," conducts therapy sessions with Walter Cruz (Stephan James), a 26-year-old former US soldier with three tours of duty behind him. Walter wants nothing more now than to lead a "busy, clean life. I don't want to pollute things here with my problems, my stress, or whatever—so I just ... want to put it all behind me."

Four years later, a Department of Defense investigator, Thomas Carrasco (Shea Whigham), locates Heidi—now working as a waitress at a seafood restaurant—and asks about her employment at Homecoming. "We received a complaint about that program." She is irritated, slightly agitated. It's not clear whether she's being deliberately evasive or not: "I worked with soldiers, their mental health. Honestly, I don't remember much about it." Does she recall a soldier named Walter Cruz? "No." But a process has been set in motion ...

Homecoming proceeds along these two parallel lines, until they "meet," as it were, in a shocking manner.

In 2018, Heidi works conscientiously as a counselor with Walter and others to deal with their nightmarish wartime experiences. However, from the start, her aggressive, excitable supervisor, Colin Belfast (Bobby Cannavale), emphasizes the "urgency" of coming up with the "data." As he explains, "I've got that presentation at the DoD [Department of Defense] in six weeks. We need to have everything squared away by then. ... Whatever these men are holding

onto, that's exactly what we need to know." Colin speaks to Heidi by cellphone from various locales, including a laboratory somewhere in Asia and a golf course—generally not where he says he is.

Shrier (Jeremy Allen White), a former soldier from the same unit as Cruz and a fellow client at Homecoming, is dubious about the program. The more naïve Cruz suggests discreetly that his friend could be mistaken in his suspicions. Shrier responds, "Oh, because I'm usually wrong? When I feel like a situation could potentially be fucked up? ... Because they've never lied to us before? ... Look, when's the last time anybody gave a fuck about you? ... All right, all the shit we've been through when we were deployed, people gave a fuck about you?" Shrier falls out of the program, with painful results.

Walter explains to Heidi that he keeps reliving an experience in which another member of his unit was killed. He sees the scene "over and over again." He "just can't leave" the memories. He does have a general, intuitively hostile attitude toward the wars in the Middle East: "I just couldn't even understand why we were there. I mean, no one did. That was the scariest part of it all: just the pointlessness. All I wanted to do was just be done with it, just go somewhere else, you know, do something else."

Walter's mother, Gloria Morisseau (Marianne Jean-Baptiste), has been left in the dark. She doesn't know where her son is, she doesn't know what he's doing. She finds out that his program is being operated by a private contractor, Geist. This is even more incomprehensible to her. As she tells her sister, "They make household products, like shampoo, drain cleaner—laundry detergent and they just want him to talk about his feelings? ... The place that they sent him to. It doesn't make sense. ... Why would a company that makes shampoo and drain cleaner ... ?"

Gloria, angry and concerned, manages to find the facility. She wants Walter to come home with her. In the end, he decides to remain, in part because of his growing feelings for Heidi, whom he trusts.

Thanks primarily to Colin's own comments and actions, the situation unravels. Heidi comes to realize that the therapy and other activities at the center are merely a scaffolding for its real purposes, and she takes drastic action.

Four years on, suffering from some type of amnesia, she has to uncover the truth again.

Homecoming is consistently well-written and suspenseful. There are a number of remarkable performances and moments. For much of the series, Julia Roberts's Heidi and Stephan James's Walter are less interesting than certain of the secondary characters, perhaps because their activity is restricted to the somewhat sanitized therapy sessions.

Shea Wigham's Carrasco is an indelible portrait of the "grey," little bureaucrat-investigator who happens, sadly for the powers that be, to be both curious and thoroughly scrupulous. Such humble, honest figures do exist, even within the American establishment and military. Carrasco simply cannot let the Cruz case go. At one point, he's a single key-stroke away from burying the inquiry, but it's physically and morally impossible for him to do.

He explains his dilemma to Gloria, Walter's mother: "I know what people think. I'm just a ... I'm a cog. And I am. I elevate or dismiss the complaint. But that decision ... that decision is used to turn other cogs, and they turn others. And that's what justice is. And I don't understand why everybody I speak to either obstructs or deflects or ... And all I'm trying to do is establish what happened and who's responsible. And I don't understand why you won't help me."

Cannavale is memorable as the unprincipled, compulsively dishonest Colin Belfast. As noted above, he is almost never where or, for that matter, *who* he claims to be. That almost sounds amusing, charming, but he is not an amusing or charming figure. He is vile, like the conglomerate, Geist, he represents. Belfast is a social type, a parasite who produces nothing, stands for nothing, is only "virtually" present anywhere, who seems to exist only through his relentless bullying and his cellphone.

Gloria Morisseau is a powerful character. Jean-Baptiste (Mike Leigh's *Secrets & Lies*, 1996) gives her the angriest, most abrasive personality in the series. A Haitian working class woman, instinctively she has no love for the American authorities or military. She tells Walter point-blank, "This government doesn't give away nothing for free. ... I know the terrible things that go on over there. But you think the generals and their sons are going to take the blame? No." And then she upbraids Heidi, "If you think that you can protect him, or anyone else, in a place like this, then you're a fool." To her, the war, the Homecoming center, all of it, is simply a "mess," a disaster.

When Roberts's Heidi begins to catch on to the truth, she's transformed. The famed Hollywood movie star, oddly enough, then speaks and acts for the widest portion of the population. Out of naïveté, in her very conscientiousness, Heidi has been part of something terrible. She has been horribly taken advantage of. It's convincing—and, again, somehow reflects a far more general popular condition—when she says simply, "I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of knowing nothing," and, later, "I think I did something ... something wrong, and I don't know what it is."

Finally, when the entire truth dawns on Heidi, she's outraged and appalled, also disgusted with herself. She bursts out at Colin, "Everything you say, everything about you is fucking rotten. ... And you have made me the same." Roberts delivers probably the most meaningful line of her career.

Whatever the actress or the series creators consciously planned to bring out, and their collective public comments in regard to *Homecoming* and its concerns are relatively "moderate" and circumspect, they are delivering a verdict here on decades of the "war on terror" and the greed and depravity of the American financial-corporate oligarchy. "Everything about you is rotten."

Maniac

Based on a Norwegian television series, *Maniac*, created by Patrick Somerville and directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, premiered on Netflix on September 21.

The inventive 10-episode series centers on street-smart Annie (Emma Stone), drug-addicted and paralyzingly guilty over the tragic death of her sister, and stone-faced Owen (Jonah Hill), diagnosed with schizophrenia. Family traumas have caused Annie's father to withdraw into a mechanical isolation tank, sealing him off from the world, while Owen's plutocratic parents have omitted him from a family portrait.

The pair meet as guinea pigs in an experimental drug trial at Neberdine Pharmaceutical and Biotech, aimed at eradicating neuroses by plumbing the unconscious. The study is run by the hapless Dr. James K. Mantleray (Justin Theroux), himself consumed with mother issues. His invention, an anthropomorphized computer, is named GRTA—not so subtly—after his estranged, overbearing mother Greta (Sally Field). James's colleague and former paramour, the intense, chain-smoking Dr. Fujita (Sonoya Mizuno), accuses James of "copulating with software." All in all, this lead scientist in a questionable drug trial is psychologically unbalanced, and his creation, GRTA, has been infected with "emotions" that cause her wires to cross.

The fallout is that the psyches of Owen and Annie become intertwined in their various drug-induced hallucinatory adventures. Some of these are amusing. In one, they play a working class couple in 1980s Long Island who rescue a pet lemur named Wendy from the clutches of gangster furriers. In another, as *film noir* -era con artists, they try to steal a lost chapter of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.

Despite its imaginative, bizarre imagery and Stone as its captivating protagonist, *Maniac*—a title which seems to have relatively little bearing on the storyline—dissolves eventually into the merely banal. To give the creators the benefit of the doubt, it is possible they mean to critique the pharmaceutical industry-promoted notion, to which too many Americans are susceptible, that a pill can be a magic cure-all.

Wanderlust

Starring Toni Collette, *Wanderlust* is a British television series written by Nick Payne and directed by Luke Snellin and Lucy Tcherniak.

Collette and Steven Mackintosh play Joy and Alan Richards, a psychotherapist and English teacher, respectively. Their sex life is in the dumpster and they decide to open their marriage to "sanctioned infidelities." This is a show about middle class sex obsession and our reviewer could barely get through the first of the six-episode series before being gripped with the lust-less urge to wander away from the television screen.

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