

# Movies

By PETER TRAVERS



**HEROES' WELCOME**  
Ryan Phillippe (left) and Channing Tatum return home to Texas after a tour of duty in Iraq.



**LOVE TRIANGLE**  
Tatum, Cornish, Phillippe (from left)

## AWOL in America

A powerhouse look at soldiers who won't go back to Iraq

**Stop-Loss** ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>

Ryan Phillippe, Channing Tatum, Abbie Cornish, Victor Rasuk and Joseph Gordon-Levitt

Directed by Kimberly Peirce

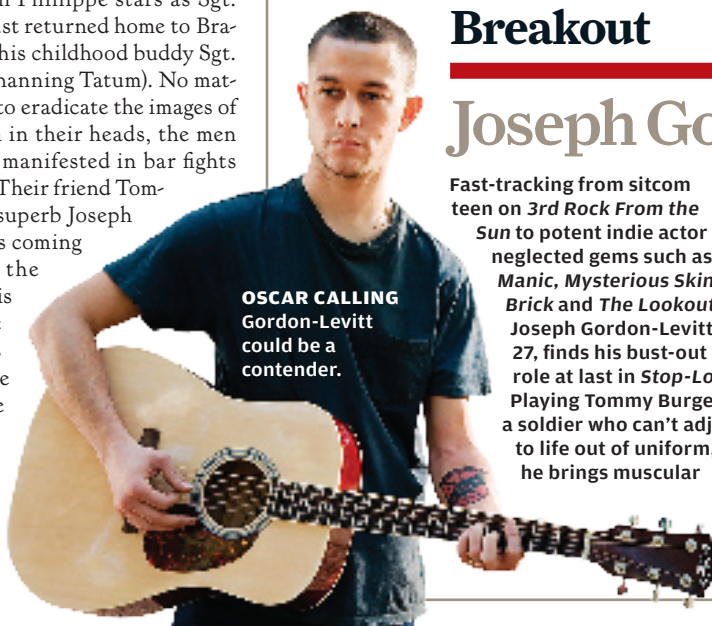
HERE'S THE FIRST MAJOR MOVIE OF THE new year that touches greatness, and damn if there isn't a curse hanging over it. *Stop-Loss*, directed with ferocity and feeling by Kimberly Peirce (*Boys Don't Cry*), is up against the war raging between audiences and films about Iraq. Box-office casualties last year include *Lions for Lambs*, *Rendition*, *Redacted*, *Grace Is Gone* and the unfairly scorned *In the Valley of Elah*.

*Stop-Loss* has the juice to break the jinx. The emotional battlefield on which Peirce paints her canvas strikes a universal chord that transcends politics and preaching. Peirce, who co-wrote the script with Mark Richard, takes us inside the minds and hearts of soldiers who enlisted after 9/11. Why? "To get the people who had done this," in the words of Peirce, whose brother joined a unit attached to the 82nd Airborne. At first, Peirce thought of making a documentary about the trauma faced by men and women in military service who struggle to re-enter civilian life after duty in Iraq. She was struck hard by a story told by her brother about a soldier who'd done his time and been stop-lossed by the Army. The term refers to the involuntary extension of a soldier's enlistment contract. It

turns out nearly 81,000 have been sent back into battle multiple times with no recourse — class-action lawsuits routinely fail — except to go AWOL. Using fictional characters, Peirce decided to craft a film about the lives of soldiers and their families living in a ghost world created by questionable government policy.

Some have already accused *Stop-Loss* of glorifying desertion. Bull. The film is a powder keg with no agenda except the human one. Ryan Phillippe stars as Sgt. Brandon King, just returned home to Brazos, Texas, with his childhood buddy Sgt. Steve Shriver (Channing Tatum). No matter how they try to eradicate the images of ambush that run in their heads, the men find their terror manifested in bar fights and bad dreams. Their friend Tommy Burgess (the superb Joseph Gordon-Levitt) is coming apart without the outlet war gave his violent, alcoholic nature. He opens fire on the gifts he and wife Jeanie (Mamie Gummer) receive at their wedding. Steve is waking up at night to dig a fox-hole, much to

the distress of his fiancée, Michele (Abbie Cornish). And Brandon, living with supportive parents (Linda Emond and Ciarán Hinds), loses it when he's ordered back to Iraq. His decision to desert stuns Steve, as does Michele's decision to aid Brandon in his escape to Canada. The scenes of AWOL soldiers and their families living in an underground that extends across the country are the soul of the film.



**OSCAR CALLING**  
Gordon-Levitt could be a contender.

### Breakout

## Joseph Gordon-Levitt

Fast-tracking from sitcom teen on *3rd Rock From the Sun* to potent indie actor in neglected gems such as *Manic*, *Mysterious Skin*, *Brick* and *The Lookout*, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, 27, finds his bust-out role at last in *Stop-Loss*. Playing Tommy Burgess, a soldier who can't adjust to life out of uniform, he brings muscular

force and hidden pain to a character a lesser actor might have played for vein-bulging pyrotechnics. Instead, Gordon-Levitt burrows deep, letting us see the self-doubt that Tommy was carrying inside long before his tour of duty in Iraq and the disintegration of his marriage. The last image that the film gives us of Tommy, carrying a guitar as his face stiffens with quiet resolve, burns in the memory. Gordon-Levitt reveals secrets the script can only hint at. You can't take your eyes off him.

FRANK MASI/PARAMOUNT PICTURES ("STOP-LOSS," 3)