

Writer-director James Strouse on the set of *Grace is Gone*.



PHOTO *Raul R. Esparza III*  
[Courtesy of Plum Pictures]

# Art and Politics: A Conversation With James Strouse

Iraq is on our minds. As the fighting in the Middle East enters its fourth year and more U.S. troops appear to be on the journey overseas to join the conflict, artists everywhere are finding the war influencing their work. Nowhere was this influence more apparent than at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival.

High-profile documentaries such as Rory Kennedy's *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* and Charles Ferguson's *No End in Sight* (a film that explores the administration's decisions that have led us to our current situation) tackled the topic head-on. But perhaps the most compelling commentary on the impact of Iraq was that in writer-director James Strouse's moving drama *Grace is Gone*.

The film centers on Stanley Phillips (John Cusack), a hard-working patriot whose wife Grace has been serving in the war in Iraq. When Stanley gets word that Grace has been killed, he discovers that he isn't able to break this terrible

to sell at this year's Sundance Film Festival. The Weinstein Co. paid a reported \$4.2 million for the worldwide rights. The movie also received two of the festival's top honors, winning the coveted Audience Award for Drama as well as garnering Strouse the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award.

This wasn't Strouse's first trip to Park City, Utah, however. A few years ago, Steve Buscemi directed Strouse's original screenplay, *Lonesome Jim* (starring Casey Affleck and Liv Tyler), which premiered at Sundance in 2005. The response to *Lonesome Jim*, according to Strouse, was "very disappointing in terms of the critical

me to go on this trip with his two girls to an amusement park in the Midwest. We went to Kings Island in Ohio. There was just this general dynamic between him and his girls that I observed on the trip that I knew I really wanted to turn into a story. He's a very closed off, kinda repressed guy—not very emotive or communicative. His oldest daughter was around 12 at the time of the trip and bursting with emotion. There was this strange undercurrent of a sort of sadness and unresolved issues because he'd recently gotten divorced—and it was a really messy divorce. I had the benefit of maybe having

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news to his two young daughters. Instead, he takes the girls on a spontaneous road trip to an amusement park called Enchanted Gardens. Before they get to their destination, Stanley makes a stop at the home of his liberal brother (Alessandro Nivola)—a visit that ends with the two men nearly coming to blows. As Stanley wrestles with his sorrow and works up the courage to tell his kids about their mother, he finds much-needed comfort by making phone calls home to hear Grace's voice which is still on their answering machine.

The powerful and yet artfully political *Grace is Gone* quickly became the first feature

reception, and we left the festival without a distribution deal.”

So, how did this 29-year-old filmmaker find his way back to Sundance with one of the festival's most poignant, touching and talked-about films? He sat down with *Script* magazine to share how family, politics and the war all played a part.

**Was there a specific moment, or perhaps an idea, that inspired you to sit down and write *Grace is Gone*?**

A couple years ago, my older brother invited

better relationships with my brother and my nieces than they did with each other, so I sort of understood both sides. I knew how much love was there and just how little was being communicated or spoken. That feeling stuck with me and I knew I wanted to turn it into a story. Then, taking that dynamic and putting it in the middle of this amusement park—one of the happiest places in the Midwest—I just thought it was such an interesting paradox. The context [of the Iraq War] didn't come until later. It wasn't like I was straining to see how I could tell a larger story. It just went off like a light bulb.

