

“It’s beginning to look like I’m not gonna get ‘The Tonight Show.’”

— David Letterman, in his farewell performance on “The Late Show” Wednesday, reflecting humorously on his 33 years as a television fixture



Ethos of the modern warrior

Director Andrew Niccol explores isolation of drone warfare in ‘Good Kill’

By ERIC ALTHOFF
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The technology of martial arts in the West has long aimed to increase the distance between attacker and target — from arrows to bullets to gravity bombs. Today, foes can be vanquished from half a world away — with the press of a button.

Such is the case for Air Force Maj. Thomas Egan, the main character of the film “Good Kill,” which opens Friday. From the safety of a military base outside of Las Vegas, Maj. Egan, a fighter pilot, delivers drone strikes on the other side of the planet.

“It’s a new type of soldier we have not seen before that’s going to war ‘at home,’” said Andrew Niccol, the writer and director of “Good Kill.”

Mr. Niccol was interested in examining what long-distance warfare does to the psyche of its practitioners, especially eager pilots like Maj. Egan who must be content operating what amounts to a high-stakes video game.

“What kind of toll does it have on a soldier who is fighting the Taliban for 12 hours by remote control and [then] go pick up his kids from soccer?” said Mr. Niccol, a New Zealand native. “This is the first generation of this type of soldier.”

As portrayed by Ethan Hawke, Maj. Egan misses the action of a cockpit and feels guilt in destroying faceless enemies who do not even comprehend they are about to be annihilated.

“It’s not the war on terror that bothers him, it’s the fact that he’s not engaging in the war,” Mr. Hawke said. “He’s not in



“It’s a new type of soldier we have not seen before that’s going to war ‘at home,’” said Andrew Niccol, the writer and director of “Good Kill.”

danger himself.”

Mr. Hawke said the ethos of the modern warrior has been turned upside down, requiring someone like his character to risk little while inflicting maximum damage on the enemy without ever seeing the battlefield.

“Normally [when] you risk your own

[life], you have the courage of your own convictions,” Mr. Hawke said, “so there’s huge self-respect there” that is missing in the world of the remote-control drone pilot.

“We have always tried to distance ourselves from the enemy,” Mr. Niccol said, adding that he believes a drone is

the “ultimate sniper” weapon. He points out that a recent real-life attempt by the armed forces to reward soldiers for their virtuosity with drones led to backlash from those who serve in the field.

“There was such an outcry from other branches of the military saying, ‘No, c’mon, medals are for acts of valor and courage,’” he said.

In the fictional realm of “Good Kill,” Maj. Egan and his colleagues engineer drone strikes from inside a trailer at their Nevada base at the behest of the disembodied voice of a CIA operator (Peter Coyote), who directs their actions via phone from headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Maj. Egan’s team watches enemies from miles away before pulling the trigger — producing terrific explosions when the ordnance reaches its destination.

Mr. Niccol said that Maj. Egan, being a pilot, would rather fly into the danger zone to unleash his payload himself. “But now you drop your munitions and sit and watch [a monitor] ... And that’s a game. You’re watching in high-def whom you’ve just blown apart,” he said.

“Good Kill” traces the psychological devastation that video game warfare wreaks upon Maj. Egan, particularly in the family life he leads with wife Molly, portrayed by “Mad Men”’s January Jones.

“It’s a complicated Catch-22 for how rattled he’s feeling by not being in danger,” Mr. Hawke said of his character.

Perhaps that is why Maj. Egan forms a special bond with a team of U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, for whom the drone operators act as a sort of angelic presence

as the ground troops engage with enemy forces. Mr. Hawke points to an especially poignant scene in which Maj. Egan “watches” the platoon sleep via the drone’s cameras.

“He feels connected to them,” he said. “He’s actually doing something good he can feel, as opposed to everything else [to which] he has no connection.”

Mr. Hawke and Mr. Niccol first worked together on the 1997 sci-fi drama “Gattaca,” which described a not-too-distant future where parents can genetically engineer their children. Mr. Hawke starred as Vincent, a “God child” conceived the old-fashioned way, who must fool his dystopian society into believing he is a member of the new human race in order to join a space mission.

Mr. Niccol sees a connection between his earlier collaboration with Mr. Hawke and their new film.

“There are real parallels between the drone program and genetic engineering,” Mr. Niccol said, “because genetic engineering can be so beneficial [for] curing things, and yet it can also be ... a ticket to a different place. In [“Good Kill”] it’s the most precise weapon we have, and yet we can also really precisely kill wrong people. It’s just a new technology, and [much depends on] how responsible we are with it.”

Despite strong support from critics, “Gattaca” did only modest business, which Mr. Hawke credits to poor marketing.

“That’s out of our control,” Mr. Niccol added. “I just make ‘em, somebody else sells ‘em.”

Get Out

The week’s pocket picks

By SAMANTHA SAULT

Jazz

Jazz in the Garden

This weekend marks the launch of Jazz in the Garden, a “must do” for anyone spending time in the Nation’s Capital during the summer. Beginning Friday, and running every Friday (weather permitting) through the end of August, the National Gallery of



Art’s Sculpture Garden will spring to life with free concerts featuring local jazz musicians. Bring a blanket and a (non-alcoholic) picnic, or purchase food and beverages from the Pavilion Cafe, including grilled favorites, hors-d’oeuvres, gelato, and wines, beers and sangria by the pitcher. This Friday’s performer is Tom Lagana, a jazz guitarist who played with the Walt Disney Jazz Band before returning to his home state of Maryland, where he frequently performs at bars in Annapolis and festivals across the country. Other highlights include vocalist Juanita Williams on May 29, the DC Jazz Festival concert on June 12, and Speakers of the House, an old-school funk, boogaloo, and rock band, to kick off Independence Day weekend. **Fridays from 5 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Smithsonian National Gallery of Art’s Sculpture Garden, National Mall at 7th St. NW & 9th St. NW. 202/737-4215. Web: nga.gov.**

Wine

Memorial Day Weekend at Paradise Springs

If you’re regretting not booking a Memorial Day vacation, it’s not too late to spend your weekend in paradise — Paradise Springs Winery, that is. Located in Clifton, Virginia, it’s the closest winery to Washington, D.C., though it will surely feel much farther when you’re enjoying an award-winning bottle of red or white in the countryside. This weekend, the winery will kick off a series of summer weekend events including live music every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, as well as outdoor movie screenings on Saturday evenings. Enjoy music and wine tastings on the patio from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Friday, and from 2 p.m. through the evening on Saturday and Sunday. Or, arrive by 8 p.m. on Saturday for a screening of “A Walk in the Clouds” starring a young Keanu Reeves and Debra Messing, free with the purchase of a bottle. All weekend long, rocklands BBQ sandwiches will be available to soak up your tastings. **Friday through Sunday at Paradise Springs Winery, 13219 Yates Ford Road, Clifton, VA. 703/830-9463. Web: ParadiseSpringsWinery.com.**



Concert

National Memorial Day Concert

Since the Civil War, we’ve reserved a day in late May to honor those who have died serving our country, and in 1971, Congress officially named the last Monday in May a holiday for the important cause. If you have the day off on Monday, there’s no better way to spend your Sunday evening than by enjoying a free patriotic concert and remembering those who don’t get a break from defending our freedoms. For the 26th year, the



Pick of the pack

National Memorial Day Concert will honor all members of the U.S. Military with musical performances, dramatic readings, and pomp and circumstance on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol. Hosted by Joe Mantegna (“Criminal Minds”) and Gary Sinise (“Forrest Gump”), the concert will feature Gloria Estefan, Tony Award winner Laura Benanti, and Tessa Chin, winner of the fifth season of “The Voice,” as well as the National Symphony Orchestra and several military bands. The gates open at 5 p.m. for the 8 p.m. concert, and early arrival is recommended to get through the metal detectors and secure a spot. **Sunday at the West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol. Web: pbs.org/national-memorial-day-concert.**

Theater

Zombie: The American

If you can’t wait for “Fear the Walking Dead,” the spinoff of AMC’s hit zombie show, you can get your zombie fix during The Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company’s new production, which premieres Monday. “Zombie: The American” is a political satire set in the year 2063, following the first openly gay U.S. president who faces a slew of challenges ranging from a cheating first gentlemen to zombies in the White House basement. Part of the Woolly Mammoth’s FREE THE BEAST! initiative to produce 25 new plays in 10 years, the play is “a cross between Jacobean tragedy and Dr. Strangelove,” according to playwright Robert O’Hara. Reserve tickets for June 5 or June 12 to enjoy a post-show discussion with zombie experts and aficionados, or June 7 to “zombify” yourself during an interactive pre-show workshop. **Through June 21 at the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, 641 D St. NW. 202/393-3939. Web: WoollyMammoth.net.**

