

Interview: Director Gavin Hood has His ‘Eye in the Sky’

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CHICAGO – The new film “Eye in the Sky” is as contemporary a war film that currently could be made. The overview of drone warfare includes the distant “pilots” on the computer screen, the leaders in their paneled offices, and the target on the ground – which includes the enemy, but also several innocents.

The film features Helen Mirren as a no-nonsense (naturally) military operative who is commanding the mission, which includes Alan Rickman in his last role as her military representative with the British and American leadership. The film has the tension of great battle movies, combined with the morality lessons that must be learned through distant bombing. It is a reminder of an earlier and similar film, “Fail-Safe” (1964) about the impracticalities of nuclear engagement.



Director Gavin Hood and Helen Mirren Set Up a Scene in ‘Eye in the Sky’

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

Gavin Hood is a veteran actor and director. He first drew attention in 1999 directing “A Reasonable Man,” and followed that up with “Tsotsi” (2005), which won the Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards that year. He has a superhero film under his director belt, “X-Men Origins: Wolverine” (2009), and his last effort was “Ender’s Game,” which featured Harrison Ford. Besides having a role as a military man in “Eye in the Sky,” Hood has also appeared in “American Kickboxer” and “Kickboxer 5.”

HollywoodChicago.com interviewed the charismatic Gavin Hood during a promotion tour for “Eye in the Sky,” and he spoke of the morality of

a modern war film, and the reactions of Helen Mirren after a costume fitting.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve directed war themed films before, but this is different than any other war film made before it. What model or type of war film morality did you base what you – and Guy Hibbert – wanted to do in ‘Eye in the Sky’?

Gavin Hood: Truthfully, we didn’t base in on anything else. It’s to Guy Hibbert’s credit that he wrote a fantastic script, that has been around for eight years – people actually thought it was a bit too ‘sci-fi.’ Even when I first read it three years ago, I wasn’t sure it was real. So I did my research, and through connections talked to someone who trained drone pilots. It was down the rabbit hole – I spoke to people in this amazing, strange, rather frightening yet very fascinating world on all sides.

People were willing to talk about it, and it would be a mistake to think the military only has one point of view. There is a great deal of discussion going on about what is the right way to use this new weapon. I prepped for three weeks until I felt ready to go to the producers as a potential director. I wanted to know what I was talking about.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is a cutting edge look at warfare in 2016, with morality and casualty estimates more of a debate of what could happen than what does happen. What moment was most significant for you, as far as emphasizing the philosophy of the film, without giving anything away?

Hood: One of the things I love about Guy’s script is that he looks at a particularly tricky situation by allowing us to bond with the characters that are coming at the situation from different points of views – including the innocent bystander. The girl selling bread in the market has no idea what is happening, and has no idea her life is being debated across the world. It was unusual, in this film’s case, to create tension with a character that was essentially passive. She’s doing nothing, she’s selling bread, but Guy was able to bond us with her.

What drew me to the film is that because we see the problem from multiple points of view, we are continuously presented with new ways to see the argument. The audience is not in anyway told what to think, and I hope it is two things to them. One, a great thriller, and two, an education regarding the world and use of modern warfare. From that, they can make up their own minds about it.



Alan Rickman in His Final Role in ‘Eye in the Sky’

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

HollywoodChicago.com: Much of the film takes place through the “eyes” of the camera, which has become an accessory in everybody’s hand, and on every street corner in a post 9/11 atmosphere. If the Indians thought that the photographic or video image steals a soul, what do you think is stolen from us with so much surveillance on us all the time?

Hood: What you are touching upon with that question is the unintended effect on a population that is under continued surveillance. There is considerable research on the effect of this surveillance on the tribal areas of Pakistan, where drones are in the sky continuously. There is psychological trauma discovered in these studies, as the native population lives in a world of perpetual surveillance – and not just video surveillance, but armed surveillance.

What is that doing from a strategic point of view, as far as the broader war we have to win, which is the ideological war? It’s not just lefty progressives who ask these type of questions, it is people inside the military who internally question the proponents of the drone program. The objective is not to play whack-a-mole, and take out one bad guy as we ‘see’ him, it’s to prevent other moles from popping up.

HollywoodChicago.com: It seems that we’re doing the whack-a-mole strategy right now.

Hood: Yes, and it hampers that ideological war. The 'war territory' is spreading, we're now in seven countries, including Somalia, and there is a dilemma in wanting to see everything all the time. Do we keep terrifying a population, and making them hate us?

There is a propaganda question raised in the film by Monica Dolan's character, part of the British government group making the ultimate decisions. She is against the attack, and we immediately think it to be part of a maternal instinct, but it's not for the reasons we think. She makes the chilling observation that she'd rather have multiple casualties in the potential terrorist attack, and then we would win the propaganda war. Is that cold hearted, or is she right? That is the genius of Guy's script, just when we think we know what is clear, it spins us around to another perspective.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the first thing you thought about, either a story or a moment, when you found out that Alan Rickman had passed?

Hood: Well, I remembered at first I didn't think he'd accept the role – the persona was of a cranky military go-between. But Guy wrote that buying-a-doll scene in the beginning of the film, where we learn that Alan's character is really great at compartmentalizing his important military life against his outside life. What Alan brought to the role was not only his intelligence, warmth and wit, but his ability to make the audience laugh at moments of tension, without any silliness. And that is a really fine line in a film about real questions, and real tension.

I remembered asking him if he needed anything before we got to the set. He just said, 'Gavin, I love the story, and there is so much to talk about in the film, I just hope I don't get in the way of telling that story.' What a humble statement. I don't think he got in the way at all. He gave that character more nuance than many actors could manage, with very little to go on.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've now directed Helen Mirren, Harrison Ford, Alan Rickman and Hugh Jackman. Of this famous group, what question any one of them most surprised you, and what was there reaction when you answered it the way you did?



Director Gavin Hood in Chicago

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Hood: Helen Mirren said to me, 'you really want me to wear this outfit?' Referring, of course, to her olive green camouflage military uniform. I told her yes, and in that perfect Helen Mirren way said, 'then that is what I will wear.' She was just messing with me, of course. But for a few moments I thought I might have problems with her regarding that uniform. [laughs] She wears that uniform with ultimate authority.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since we just saw the Oscars, what is your Oscar story as far as the moment that your film Tsotsi won, and how you personally reacted to it?

Hood: We had been nominated for several awards before the Oscars, and had won none of them. So when we won the Oscar I felt extremely fortunate, that of the five, we were lucky enough to win. When you see the video of my reaction, I was genuinely in shock.

Hany Abu-Assad was sitting next to me, and his film 'Paradise Now' had won the Golden Globe. He said to me at the Globes, 'Paradise now, talk to you later.' [laughs] I gave him a big hug for that. When we won the Oscar, Abu-Assad was the first to hug me. He was a real gentleman.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are part of the superhero legacy as a director, and made a more subtle and interesting entry in the canon. What, in your opinion, will be the tipping point of this genre, as far as when do you believe the interest will wane...or will it ever?

Hood: I can only speak for myself. When I see big movies that are only about good versus evil, and the good guy wins, I only can think we're in a far more complicated world than that. I frankly think that this binary philosophy is actually a dangerous way to look at the world.

When these movies endorse that consciousness into their audiences over and over again, than you're not really challenging them. So when a script like Guy's comes along, and challenges us to look at the gray zone, while considering all opinions, it's refreshing to experience.

HollywoodChicago.com: With the warfare that is depicted in 'Eye in the Sky,' how are the rules of engagement altered in your opinion,

when making decisions in a chair rather than on the ground, and how does your film best express it?

Hood: The question becomes, because we’re remotely far away from the territory we’re about to bomb, does it make it easier to do it? That it is an important question, and the military is asking those questions. And for the people who promote drones as the answer to everything, there is a danger from being distanced from the reality of the ugly mess of war. And to the extent of those who would find it easier to pull that trigger because of the remoteness, it is the question that should give them pause.

“Eye in the Sky” continues its limited release in Chicago, beginning March 18th. Featuring Helen Mirren, Alan Rickman, Aaron Paul, Armaan Haggio, Barkhad Abi and Jeremy Northam. Written by Guy Hibbert. Directed by Gavin Hood. Rated “R”



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