

Film

GLENN KENNY | STREAMING

# A Battle Paved With Ignorant Intentions

Netflix bets on Brad Pitt as a general in Afghanistan.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to win a war? This question is never asked outright in “War Machine,” a new Netflix original movie starring Brad Pitt and written and directed by David Michôd, but it’s a substantial thematic undercarriage of this satire. The movie, which has its theatrical and TV premiere on Friday, May 26, is adapted from Michael Hastings’s 2012 book, “The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America’s War in Afghanistan.” Mr. Pitt plays Gen. Glen McMahon, an arguably brilliant career soldier whose first words on touching down in Afghanistan, where he has a new mission circa 2009, are “Let’s go win this thing!” McMahon approaches the task of transforming Afghan hearts and minds with enthusiasm and boundless ignorance. The terrifying hubris depicted in the movie is ever more pertinent given that President Trump has recently signaled an intention to increase the American military presence in Afghanistan.

Mr. Hastings’s book is about the misadventures of Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, whose brief tenure as the commander of United States and international forces in Afghanistan came to an end after a notorious profile Mr. Hastings wrote for Rolling Stone (in which, among other things, the general and his cadre were quoted making remarks sorely critical of the Obama administration). Mr. Hastings’s book (he died in a car accident in 2013) came Mr. Michôd’s way at an opportune time.

“I had been looking for a way in to a theme: the two modern theaters of American war, Iraq and Afghanistan,” recalled Mr. Michôd, an Australian whose 2010 debut, the intense crime drama “Animal Kingdom,” found an enthusiastic albeit indie-size audience here, and also attracted the notice of adventurous Hollywood deal makers. “I had assumed that given the nature of my first two movies that what I would come up with would be another dark, brutal movie. And I was resisting delving into those depths.” The answer came when Jeremy Kleiner and Dede Gardner, the presidents of Plan B, Mr. Pitt’s production company, sent him “The Operators.”

“It showed me the way in, which is satire,” Mr. Michôd said. “The book has a kind of gonzo levity and a group of characters



FRANCOIS DUHAMEL/NETFLIX

who either by virtue of hubris or the simple insanity of war seem to be larger than life.”

While he wanted to respect the reality of the war, Mr. Michôd also wanted the freedom to be loose with his vision, so early on he made the decision to fictionalize the characters. (One of the few real-life figures

**A Michael Hastings book with ‘a kind of gonzo levity’ inspires a film.**

to retain a real name is the former president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, played here by Ben Kingsley, who portrays him as almost touchingly distracted.)

Mr. Michôd’s film is unusual in many ways. It goes on for almost 90 minutes before a single shot is fired. For much of its

running time, it maintains an almost jaunty tone, steeped in mordant wit; it sometimes plays like the Coen brothers’ “Burn After Reading” crossed with “Dr. Strangelove.” “War Machine” portrays the general’s perspective throughout, as he grouches about modern irritants like “Pizza Kings and Burger Huts” and relies on his I.T. aide to help him use his electric razor. Mr. Pitt comes very close to the margin of caricature, all gruff intonations and chest-pumping, but often General McMahon is not entirely unsympathetic. He has a Candide-like naïveté, which is not altogether charming in an individual who’s in charge of a sprawling military force.

Mr. Michôd deliberately keeps “War Machine” inside General McMahon’s bubble for much of the movie. The Marines that General McMahon commands are flummoxed by their leader’s do-gooder op-

Brad Pitt seeks to win hearts and minds in David Michôd’s “War Machine.”

timism. One corporal, played by Lakeith Stanfield (who makes the most out of his brief screen time with a passionate, grounded performance), bluntly complains about the expectation that he help people who are trying to kill him. In a battle sequence depicting General McMahon’s plan to retake the Helmand Province, Mr. Stanfield’s character breaks out of a pinned-down situation and comes upon a scene that encapsulates the absurd tragedy of the Marines’ endeavor.

“I read somewhere in the vicinity of 50 books, and I’ve lost all sense of what comes from where, to be completely honest,” Mr. Michôd said of his research for the film. “The one defining feature of all I’ve read was just how frequently my reaction was, none of this makes sense. And the question then became, how can I see this while those charged with the expenditure of all this money, and all these lives, do not?”

Mr. Pitt is both the movie’s star and one of its producers, and Mr. Michôd said, “Brad engaged the script quickly and enthusiastically,” adding, “During the shoot, there were conversations every day on where to pitch the performance. I wanted the movie to not just be about madness but to be kind of insane in and of itself.”

Netflix — which also teamed up with Plan B on the coming sci-fi film “Okja,” directed by Bong Joon-ho and starring Tilda Swinton (who has a potent cameo in “War Machine”) — was a partner throughout, reportedly providing the filmmakers with a \$60 million budget, very unusual for a picture of this sort. “Zero Dark Thirty” (2012) was reportedly made for \$20 million less. “We had an enormous amount of freedom — and we needed it,” Mr. Michôd said. “This is a movie that’s tonally complex; it’s unusual and it’s contentious. Traditional Hollywood studios aren’t taking risks anymore.”

“I have to tell you,” he continued, “When ‘Animal Kingdom’ came out in 2010, and so well received in the States, and noticed by so many important people, it was a very exciting time for me. But at the same time, I had this feeling that I was arriving in the film world 10 or 15 years too late. The kind of movies I wanted to make — interesting, bold, strange pictures that had resources and budgets — were not what the studios were interested in. And suddenly this beautiful Netflix window opened up. And brought resources, combined with a desire to take risks.”

J. HOBERMAN | VIDEO

# You Should Still Be Dancing

THE FIRST YEAR of Jimmy Carter’s presidency was extraordinary for Hollywood: “Star Wars” opened in May 1977 and “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” in November, followed weeks later by “Saturday Night Fever,” reissued this month in a Blu-ray director’s cut adding 15 minutes to the release version.

“Star Wars” and “Close Encounters” were excitingly extraterrestrial; “Saturday Night Fever” was aggressively down to earth, set and largely shot in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. But it did offer an accessible vision of outer space, on the illuminated dance floor of the 2001 Odyssey disco, where a 19-year-old hardware store employee, Tony Manero (John Travolta), struts his stuff.

“Star Wars” and “Close Encounters” were largely dependent on special effects. The magic of “Saturday Night Fever” derived almost entirely from the synergy between Mr. Travolta (who was then TV’s hottest high school student, featured in the sitcom “Welcome Back, Kotter,” also set in Brooklyn) and the Bee Gees, a passé pop group converted to disco.

An electrifying credit sequence has Mr. Travolta striding in rhythm through Bay Ridge, pausing to scarf a double slice of pizza, as he bops to the infectious anthem “Stayin’ Alive.” Established as a star even before the movie begins, Mr. Travolta, as Tony, is also a creature of pop culture, his bedroom plastered with posters of Bruce Lee, Farrah Fawcett, Sylvester Stallone (as Rocky) and Al Pacino (as Serpico).

“Saturday Night Fever” originated in a New York magazine article by Nik Cohn reporting from Brooklyn on a new youth culture developed by working-class, mainly Italian-American teenagers. “They are not so chic, these kids,” he wrote. “They know nothing of flower power or meditation, pansexuality, or mind expansion.” (Years later, Mr. Cohn confessed to having invented much of his material.)

Still, a few remnants of the counterculture are visible. Named for the trippiest movie of 1968, the 2001 Odyssey features a light show — strobes, moving beams and a translucent checkerboard dance floor lighted from below — nearly as cosmic as the climax of “Close Encounters.” In addition to the action in the club, “Saturday Night Fever” initially secured an R rating by dramatizing the closer physical encounters in the parking lot outside.

The producer Robert Stigwood, the manager of the Bee Gees and responsible for the filmed rock operas “Jesus Christ Superstar” (1973) and “Tommy” (1975), bought the rights to Mr. Cohn’s story and assembled a package reuniting the writer Norman Wexler and the director John Avildsen, who had collaborated on the hard-hat-versus-hippie scare film “Joe” (1970), although Mr. Avildsen, who had since directed “Rocky,” would be replaced by John Badham.

“Saturday Night Fever” opened at 700 theaters with a saturation ad campaign immeasurably helped by the release of the double-LP soundtrack album that would



PARAMOUNT PICTURES

top the charts for months. The initial reviews were mixed. Variety called the movie “nothing more than an updated ‘70s version of the Sam Katzman rock music cheapies of the ‘50s.” Other reviewers noted the movie’s recycling of elements from “Mean Streets,” “American Graffiti” and “Rocky.”

The most prescient notice was the New Yorker critic Pauline Kael’s. Well before MTV, she recognized “Saturday Night Fever” as a new sort of musical, writing that the “sustained disco beat keeps the audience in an empathetic rhythm with the characters.” Somewhat less sympathetically, the conservative commentator William F. Buckley wrote in The New York Post that “Saturday Night Fever” was “as fascinating as a ritual dance by an aboriginal society, full of feathers, drumbeats, blood and organized lust.”

You should be dancing. “Saturday Night Fever” staggers beneath its melodramatic subplots, but thanks to the percolating score the whole movie feels choreographed. And when Mr. Travolta takes to the 2001 dance floor, he lifts the movie — according to “The Hollywood Reporter Book of Box Office Hits,” the third top-grossing picture of 1977, behind “Star Wars” and “Close Encounters” — into the stratosphere. Inevitably, “Saturday Night Fever” inspired a sequel, “Staying Alive” (1983), reissued by Paramount with less fanfare on DVD. The New York Times critic Janet Maslin opened her review by observing, “Only the presence of John Travolta turns ‘Staying Alive’ from an unqualified disaster into a qualified one.”

Directed by Sylvester Stallone, who also wrote the script with Mr. Wexler, “Staying Alive” picks up on Tony Manero (and his trademark white suit) five years later. Having gone from disco king to aspiring chorus

From left, Julie Bovasso, Val Bisoglio and John Travolta in “Saturday Night Fever.”

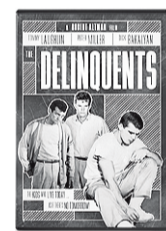
boy, he lives in a world closer to a backstage Hollywood musical like “42nd Street” than “Mean Streets.” Tony’s apotheosis in the heavy-metal dance musical “Satan’s Alley” inspires incredulity; imagining Mr. Stallone delivering the lame wisecracks the script imposes on its star is even more entertaining.

“One of the longest journeys in the world is the journey from Brooklyn to Manhattan — or at least from certain neighborhoods in Brooklyn to certain parts of Manhattan,” Norman Podhoretz began his memoir “Making It.” There would be no third movie following Tony’s odyssey from Bay Ridge to Broadway and beyond. But a murderous acolyte is the subject of the Chilean filmmaker Pablo Larraín’s dark comedy “Tony Manero” (released here in 2009 and available on DVD from Kino Lorber).

Mr. Larraín’s protagonist is an unsmiling 50-ish madman (Alfredo Castro) who, having taken “Saturday Night Fever” as a sacred text, nurtures fanatical fantasies of disco glory — an obsession complemented by a near-total disinterest in human contact. He attends his favorite movie as if it were Sunday Mass and at one point goes berserk upon discovering that the theater he frequents has replaced “Saturday Night Fever” with “Grease.”

Set in the depths of the Pinochet dictatorship, “Tony Manero” has obvious political implications both in its satire of cultural imperialism and its antithesis of megalomania as he steals, betrays and murders in his quest to be Chile’s American idol.

## Newly Released



**THE DELINQUENTS** Newly available on disc, Robert Altman’s independent feature, shot on the cheap in Kansas City during the summer of 1956, capitalized on the fear of rebellious teenagers and starred a young Tom Laughlin (the future Billy Jack) as a youth who falls in with the wrong crowd. (Olive Films)



**DONNIE DARKO** Richard Kelly’s 2001 drama of extreme high school dissociation, the pre-eminent cult film of the early aughts, gets the full fetishistic treatment in this four-disc, dual-format rerelease — including the theatrical and director’s cuts, as well as copious audio commentaries, deleted scenes, interviews and documentaries. (Arrow Video)



**PRINCE MOVIE COLLECTION** A remastered version of Prince’s 1984 pop musical, “Purple Rain,” is packaged with his 1986 gender-blurring, self-directed film maudit, “Under the Cherry Moon” (ripe for re-evaluation), and his more conventional 1990 sequel to “Purple Rain,” “Graffiti Bridge.” Available on Blu-ray and DVD. (Warner Bros.)



**STREETS OF FIRE: COLLECTOR’S EDITION** Rivaling “Purple Rain” as the most florid musical of 1984, Walter Hill’s study in rain, chrome and attitude, rereleased as a two-disc Blu-ray, was promoted as a “rock ‘n’ roll fable,” and stars Diane Lane as a kidnapped diva. Reviewing it in The New York Times, Janet Maslin called it “a stimulating but finally exhausting exercise.” (Shout!)



**THE WANDERERS** An elaboration on Richard Price’s fanciful novel of Bronx youth gangs, Philip Kaufman’s 1979 movie has been restored and reissued on Blu-ray in both its original release version and a slightly longer “preview cut.” Writing a mixed review in the Times, Ms. Maslin praised its “unflaggingly high energy level.” (Kino Lorber)