

ALL PHOTOS: SIDNEY BALDWIN/WARNER BROTHERS

## WITH HIS FUTURISTIC—AND CRITICALLY PANNED—*WILD PALMS*, STON

**Stuart Fischhoff, Ph.D., for *PSYCHOLOGY TODAY*:** *You went from angry young man with no potent way to ventilate to angry adult who can play beastmaster with movies. What sense of self does that provide for you?*

**OS:** I know you're going to have a hard time believing this, but I was one of the shyest guys in school and in the army I could barely talk. I was extremely hidden and wanted to be anonymous, which is one of the reasons why I went to Vietnam. I just wanted to be a number. I didn't want

to have any identity, and part of the reason I became a filmmaker was my perception of it—a filmmaker stays behind the camera and he's anonymous, although that's not the case anymore.

So I think there is a push/pull thing going on; I want to be one thing but somehow my subconscious self wants to be another. But don't ask me to define myself (laughter).

**PT:** *I'll try to avoid that one. You predicted that "the establishment" would ferret out*

*all sorts of dirty stories about you to assassinate your character in order to neutralize the potency of your film JFK. Did they try to do it and how effective were they?*

**OS:** I thought the media were partially effective. My feelings were hurt numerous times and I thickened my reactions as much as I could.

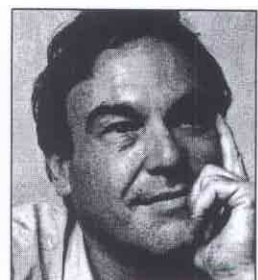
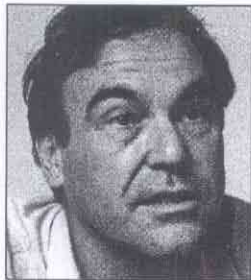
I felt that the film brought up a lot of facts that weren't dealt with. But more space was devoted to saying that I was distorting history than in getting to the specifics of exactly *where* I was distorting.

PT Interview: Major personalities who have influenced the national mind

# Oliver Stone

**He's been** called a tyrant

and a bully and accused of everything from living in the past to rewriting it. And though he disavows an obsession with the Sixties, he doesn't shy away from railing against "the establishment" and advocating legalized drugs. After *JFK*, *The Doors*, and *Born On the Fourth of July*, is Stone our last working hippie, the voice of our national conscience, or just a rebel with too many causes?



E JUMPS OUT OF THE '60S AND INTO THE FIRE.

There was not a keen desire to debate the questions that were raised about the assassination, and that's what amazed me about the whole episode. I thought that cheap shots were being taken.

**PT:** Was there an attempt to sully your reputation?

**OS:** Oh yeah! Many critics wrote that I had a huge ego, that I love controversy. I never started the controversy over *JFK*; I just wanted to get the film out there and get it judged on its own merits. I wrote let-

ters to newspapers and magazines and often would not be published. So much for the right of fair play. But on TV at least I could say my piece; then I was criticized for being on TV too much. "Oliver Stone is an egomaniac, a loud mouth and a blabbermouth."

I was really hurt by that because I felt very strongly that I was defending the attacks against the film. And I was trying to be fair and logical and low-key about it.

*continued on page 64*

**"I'm not so sure that art should be safe. When you enter a theater, it's your choice. You are in danger when you see a film or play."**

## Stone

(continued from page 45)

But it was interpreted as being egomaniacal, as having a love of controversy, a love of argument, which I don't really have.

I'm not that argumentative in my personal life and I try to veer away from arguments on the sets of my films. I very rarely have confrontations. It's been overreported that I'm some kind of angry filmmaker. I think you'd find that many people say I'm pretty soft-spoken on the set.

**PT:** *I think you just eliminated one of my questions.*

**OS:** (laughs) Except for one or two incidents in seven or eight films, there's really been no—I'm not a confrontational director. Michael Douglas said that I confronted him on *Wall Street* and told him he was a lousy actor. But it was a little bit different in reality than in the way he told the story, which is funny. He makes it sound funny.

**PT:** *Is it?*

**OS:** It sets the wrong tone. The reason I confronted him early in the movie was, to be honest, he was doing a terrible job in the first two scenes and I thought he was not up to the levels which the movie had to be. So I confronted him quietly and said we have a problem, we've got to deal with it. Either you're going to get better or I don't know

what we're going to do. Something clicked off in him—I guess no one had criticized him in a while. 'Cause people are not used to criticism sometimes in our business. They get fawned on a lot; a lot of directors are always reassuring the actor, sort of trying to coax it from him that way.

Well I felt it wasn't a coax job anymore. He just wasn't giving me what I wanted and by shocking him with criticism he went into a retreat. Then he came back the next day or two days later and I tell you there was a tremendous difference in the man. He was on the money. He was angry, he was angry at me, but it was a good anger that he took out on me and I tell you there was a tremendous difference the third day as opposed to the first day.

**PT:** *Did he sustain this anger throughout the whole movie?*

**OS:** He got the Academy Award.

**PT:** *But did he still resent you?*

**OS:** Well, that's what he said. He resented me at the time. But now he's my friend. You see, I'm trying to make the point that sometimes confrontation, if it's done well, can be a shock, and a shock can be a stimulus to change.

**“Violence is as American as apple pie. If you're going to kill somebody, show the effect of the killing. Make it powerful, real.”**

**PT:** *Are people afraid to confront you now?*

**OS:** Confront me? On the set? I think my wife confronts me. My child is always insulting me (laughs), demeaning me, which is sort of...I think children exist as funnels of humor. We take ourselves so seriously, and then a child comes into your life and totally undermines all your efforts. They totally undermine

all your seriousness and all your gravity. They have no respect for adult dignity, as you know. They run right over it. Your son comes up and says the most outrageous thing to your face.

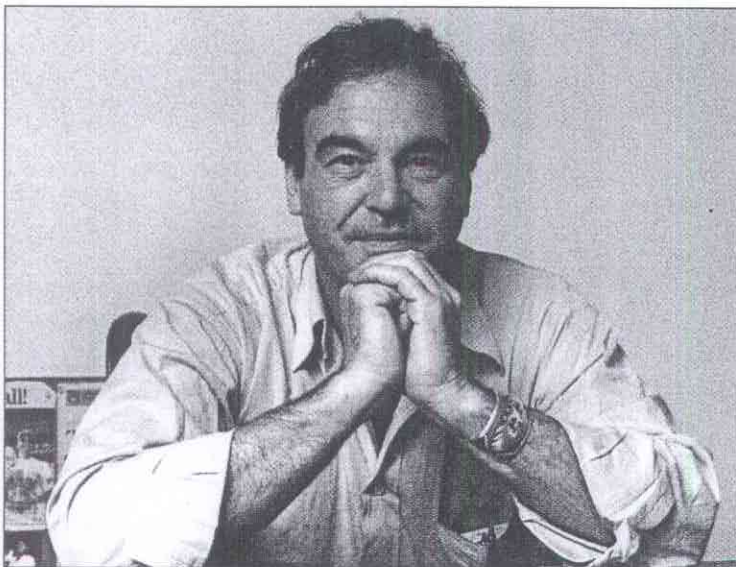
I think that's good. I think that's the clown effect in life. My associates who have been with me long enough will confront me and fight me and yell at me. And I will yell at them. Those people who come on to the film who are new—probably because they don't know me—will not be confrontational at first. But then I try to encourage open discussions. Try to.

**PT:** *How do you deal with going from a Yale dropout to being who Oliver Stone is today? How does your ego stay in bounds?*

**OS:** I try in my head to stay innocent in my approach to new material. I think research keeps you humble. I think field work, going out and talking to people, hearing the dialogue and writing it is a humbling experience because you have a blank page. You're sitting there alone and you have no friends, no allies. You're basically with yourself and you have to put it on the page, and each page is blank. There is no prejudice, no for or against; the page is not carrying you. You have to put it there every day. I think writing is a key to that growth. It's a spiritual growth that goes on throughout your life. It's a lesson that you repeat again and again, it seems to me, until you learn it.

So yes, I'm more secure than I was when I was a kid. Because I have success. I have the trappings of wealth but in my heart I feel that this is still a very insecure business. That each film is a tremendous risk and that you have to go for the risk. You have to gamble all on the film, and if you lose people like me take a big beating. Because there's a lot of people who want to see us fail. Anybody who is successful in

(continued on page 66)



Stone's latest epic, *Heaven and Earth*, is scheduled for release around Christmastime.

#9. Don't repeat *The Great Gatsby*. It did not have a happy ending. Gatsby, remember, did not get the girl. He forced Daisy, the love of his life, to tell Tom, her husband and the father of her only child, that he meant nothing to her and that she had loved only Gatsby, never anyone else.

Resist the lure of invalidating the sweetheart's other important relationships that have occurred during the intervening years. It is not wise (or necessary) to undercut the significance of ex-spouses!

The emotional intensity of separated lovers finally getting what they have long wanted may ignite a childlike wish to undo the loved one's past. Like Gatsby, a long-lost lover might force statements and actions to gain emotional primacy over all others. Such demands are not only childish, they can be disastrous! You can never make up for years of being apart. There were valid reasons for the failure to unite years ago. Mature people understand that they do not have a monopoly on a partner's attachments.

#10. Sweetheart reunions need a warning label. They are poison for "women who love too much" and their male counterparts! A sweetheart reunion can restart a once-uncontrollable obsession successfully put aside by dint of tremendous effort, perhaps even years of therapy. Reunions are not for people who can't get unstuck once they love someone. (Check your track record to see whether this is true of you.) They can reactivate a pattern of making another person, rather than yourself, the focus of your life.

#11. Good things can happen to old flames even if they don't reignite. Even when reunion with an old love is a disappointment, there can still be positive developmental results. While many people carry around the image of a past failed love, for some it fuels a perpetual flame of fantasy that becomes more alluring than the real-life relationship they are in. They make comparisons that disadvantage their everyday relationship and indefinitely postpone making the best of it.

Sometimes the best way to let go of a past unsuccessful love is to go back and have an actual reunion. This process can be a way of closing the circle or writing the last chapter, and thus freeing oneself from a lifelong fantasy. The result can be greatly enhanced enjoyment of present life. Even an unsuccessful reunion can promote wisdom and a sense of completion in one's own life.

By setting up a meeting with an old love you may find out how much you have grown and changed over the years. First of all you can get a look at what your past romantic love is like in the light of today's reality. You may get some real shocks. Physical changes may turn you off. Or when you sit down and talk you may find that what once looked like creativity and imagination can now be recognized as childishness, emotional instability, or actual craziness. Some traits look different with time, others are the worse for wear.

As you get to know one another in the present, big differences in judgment can become clear. What was fondly remembered as insightfulness or analytic skill may now appear to be negativism and bitter-

ness. What flourished as moderate competitiveness may be transmuted by time and outlook into an all-out war between the sexes. Your old sweetheart may feel that contract and negotiation are the *only* bases of connection between the sexes.

In such cases reunions make it obvious that a life together could not have worked. And in the process, you have learned something about yourself.

*THIRTY YEARS AGO, THERE WAS NO CLOSURE with Warren. The resolution for me was having the opportunity to have it happen again. Our capacity to enjoy our new relationship is what gives it a happy ending. Today Warren and I are married and living in California. ■*

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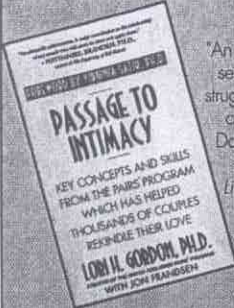
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continued from page 64

America has a lot of envy and jealousy. It's a psychological condition of this country, in part promoted by the media. The writing about successful people is mostly negative unless you're one of their darlings.

**PT:** There's a statement in *Hollywood* that it's not enough to succeed, you have to see your friends fail as well. Is that it?

**OS:** It's best not to think about it.

**PT:** I have one question about the Kennedy assassination for you. If there was a conspiracy to cover up the truth, why are all the news media in on it?

**OS:** I never said that.

**PT:** I know. I said it. I'm puzzled, because it seems to me that there would have to be some sort of collusion among the people who aren't talking about it.

**OS:** I think it goes back to I. F. Stone's line about the press being like birds gathered on a telephone wire. One of them goes away and then they all go away; when one comes back they all come back. There is a sense of laziness, a general consensus that there is no merit, nothing to be earned by going back into that case because it was so disputed at the time.

Dan Rather even said that J. F. K.'s head moved forward instead of back [in response to the fatal gunshot]. He's a joke. He hasn't done anything but benefit from the case for the last 30 years. I went on his show and they grilled me for over an hour. I very studiously went out and fielded every question. By the time the goddamn thing was cut together, they cut me down to 35 seconds of bland bullshit. So if they're really serious why don't they get into the specific stuff?

**PT:** Do you think Dan Rather believes the Warren Commission? Do you think he wants to believe it?

**OS:** I think he is a psychologically disturbed man—you can see it in his eyes on TV every night. The man has got some problem. I can't tell you what his motive is, but it goes to the top of the managing news departments of CBS, NBC, and ABC. All these years they've been kind of weird.

When they came and interviewed me, they were trying to crack me. Every question was to try and get me to make a mistake. And I couldn't believe the way they cut it. They imply that I was a Hollywood fanatic, a little crazy. I'm very aware of that the cutting of this was very Machiavellian. I think it comes down to the editors; CBS, NBC, they never give us the truth. We're talking Pravda and *Isvestia* here.

**PT:** Why have none of the Kennedys ever spoken out on the Warren Commission?

**OS:** I think they're scared. I think when Kennedy was killed there were so many ghosts in the closet that they knew they

would be hurt if there was an investigation done into Jack Kennedy's behavior patterns—not only with sex and drug use, but also what would come out about the Mafia dealings and trying to assassinate Castro. I think there was a lot of dirty laundry.

As often happens in life, maybe the guy was killed for reasons that you would like to seek out but you worry about the other reasons, the

other things coming out, too. I think that certainly motivated Bobby Kennedy, who before he died did say very clearly that he was going to reopen the case.

**PT:** You imply a connection between Bobby's and Jack Kennedy's assassination.

**OS:** Absolutely, absolutely.

**PT:** Same people, same motive?

**OS:** I think so, I think so.

**PT:** Where does all this lead us? What road are we going down, in your mind?

**OS:** I think when you kill presidents—when you kill Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy and you get away with it; when you have J. Edgar Hoover in office for 50 years and he's a raging madman who prosecutes anyone who he sees as subversive to his way of American life; when you have Lyndon Johnson as president; when you have wars in Vietnam that are genocides; when you create a Cold War mentality that breeds defense-minded expenditures of the sums that we had—then there is a corruption that follows.

The fabric of society is warped. It has

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PSYCHOLOGY TODAY

been increasingly warped since World War II and we've locked into it and now we're paying for it. We're paying for it morally and spiritually and economically. Cause and effect. It had to happen. We did not throw the money into the cities, into architectural or spiritual wealth. For this country these things are lacking now.

**PT:** Most of your films are violent. What's your opinion about the alarm over excessive violence and explicit sex in films and TV programming?

**OS:** I always maintain that violence has to be real, as real as possible. Violence is obscene when it's fake. So that's the line you have to be aware of when you see films that are just violent redundantly for the purpose of excitement and sensationalism. I think that's wrong and it demeans human life.

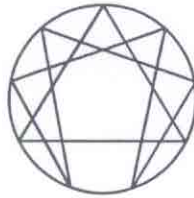
That's not to say sometimes you can't have a sense of humor about it, too. I'm not being a blue nose but I do find films such as [Arnold Schwarzenegger's] *Total Recall*, for example, get ridiculous—you have so much murder that you numb out to it. I'm doing a film about it now called *Natural Born Killers* that I hope if it's good will be a satire—a commentary on violence in America, on murder and what the American media makes of it. But the concept is satire. There will be a filter; you're looking at violence as opposed to celebrating it.

But violence is, as they say, as American as apple pie. I'm not saying we should run from it. There is nothing worse than television violence—people die so easily on TV! They just drop dead. If you're going to kill somebody, show the effect of the killing. Make it powerful, make it real, so that people really understand. Violence per se is a good dramatic tool, it always was. Violence is a good theatrical diversion. It is a necessary conceit to give pity and terror. But it should be used sacredly. Violence should be sacred.

**PT:** But young minds will not be able to easily distinguish between violence with a moral purpose and mindless violence. And one of the things about the tone of your movies—maybe because of your state of mind—is the anger of life. So that somebody could say, "Well, gee, you know you decry violence and yet all of your work addresses it." Maybe you say that you are doing it in the right way, but somebody else would say you're still doing it.

**OS:** In response to that, I'm not so sure  
(continued on page 68)

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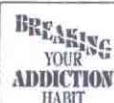
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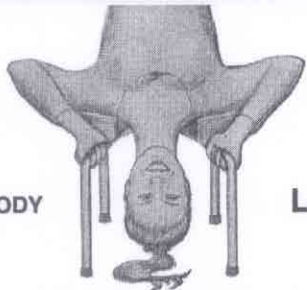
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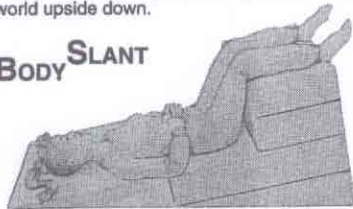
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68

continued from page 67

that art should be safe. I think when you enter a theater, it's your choice. It should not only be sacred, but in the concept of sacred is the concept of danger. You are in danger when you see a film or a play.

**PT:** And a child?

**OS:** If you're going to let your child see a certain film, you have to take that into account. That's a decision between the child and the adult. It seems to me wrong to punish all of society for the sake of children, by saying let's ban all violence. That's a form of censorship. We have a lot of that in America. We have a tendency to let the tail wag the dog. All I can do is make my movies as strong and authentic as I can. I'm aware of the violence.

**PT:** In 1988 you supported the idea of legalizing all drugs to take the mystique and the criminal profit out of them. Do you still feel that way?

**OS:** Yes. Such fear, such compartmentalization of society has been created to the point where prisons are housing so many drug offenders now that the prisons themselves have become breeding cells for more drugs. The ghetto-ization and wreckage of the inner cities—I have a feeling that in some way the government poisoned that well itself. That it wasn't a natural decay. That they poisoned the inner cities.

**PT:** To what purpose?

**OS:** I think a lot of it was political and economic and there was a stimulus to turn over the inner cities to minorities for tax-base reasons, for school reasons, for health and education reasons. And to flee from the cities. There was a natural move away.

I also have to say that it's not just one party at fault. I was in Gary, Indiana, recently and I talked to some local black judges there. Gary was ruined in the late 1960s by a black mayor who came in and so terrorized the white community with his statements that they all fled. That politicization of race occurs in this country whenever people get elected on the basis of

their statements on race, sexism, and morality. It used to be a German phenomenon but now it's an American phenomenon.

**PT:** If you could be the architect of U.S. drug policy, what would it look like?

**OS:** First of all I'd probably reduce the DEA and put the money into education and health care. I would legalize everything and give pharmacy prescriptions on heroin and cocaine. I would return cocaine to medical usage, to kill pain.

**PT:** There's no concern on your part that you run the risk of people turning to drugs?

**“Violence has to be real, as real as possible. Violence is obscene when it's fake. That's the line you have to be aware of.”**

**OS:** (laughs) The falling-down thesis. Which is simplistic. If people are just going to freak out and go to their local pharmacy and buy cocaine for two dollars a pack, fine—I say let them do it. For one night, two nights, six nights, 10 nights. Let them reach their own limits. Let them find out for themselves. That's the purpose of life—to grow, to feel, to sense, to

know. It is good for a person to find his own limits. Individual responsibility.

**PT:** Drugs have been a problem in Hollywood for a long time. To what degree do you think that a filmmaker can be into drugs and maintain his or her productivity?

**OS:** It's a personal matter.

**PT:** But do you think that a productive filmmaker could get into drugs and use them only recreationally?

**OS:** Absolutely, it's been done since the silent-film days. It is a totally personal issue and it has to do with the creative mind, which may find stimulus from letting go of the portals, from significant mental journeys which are undertaken at some risk and during which you are going to delve into the deepest parts of the mind. This is a creative decision, not a governmental decision. The government doesn't mandate what opera we write, what symphony we listen to, what kind of mind we should have.

**PT:** You are a person with profound power. You can create truths for minds that don't read and don't have a basis for com-

PSYCHOLOGY TODAY

parison. They go to JFK and say, "Oh, that's the truth." They go to Platoon and think, "Oh, that's the truth."

**OS:** You give me much more power than I have.

**PT:** I don't think so.

**OS:** If my ideas have any power, I would hope it's only because they strike the public as being valid. Each time I float an idea out there I start from zero. It's a new idea, and I float it. If they perceive it as bullshit, they won't go for it. They know it, they smell it out. I think people are very intelligent, for the most part. You can't get bullshit past them.

**PT:** But if you make a movie that promotes a point of view you believe in, certain people—because of your passion and belief in it—will be persuaded by it.

**OS:** I don't think so, you're talking about the innocent teenager who gets seduced by a film. There is no such thing as an innocent teenager.

**PT:** People when they talk about you ask, "When is Oliver Stone going to get out of the '60s?"

**OS:** I think that's kind of simplistic. I feel I'm living in the '90s and trying to deal with life around me. I think that there's a root to many of our actions that stems back from the '60s because I grew up then. So that's probably the reason.

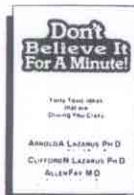
**PT:** Would you rather live in the '60s or the '90s?

**OS:** I'd like to live in both decades and be able to have my '90s knowledge in the '60s, but that would be all screwed up. I like both. The '90s so far, I don't know what's going on. To me the '60s were very hard—my parents got divorced, I went to Vietnam. There were struggles, losses I didn't have a sense of.

**PT:** Spike Lee angrily addresses the problems of blacks and you angrily deal with your issues. Do you have to be angry or regretful to make social-commentary films?

**OS:** No, I don't think you have to be angry, but anger is a health pulse. It's an exorcism, too, and it should be used as such. You have to control your anger and you have to step outside of it, so that you can use it effectively. Anger is a positive tool, not an energy-sapping tool. I think you need a sense of justice for drive and for passion. A passion for justice. ■

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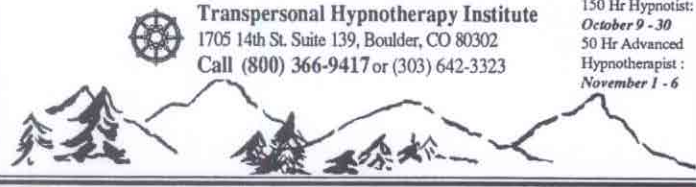
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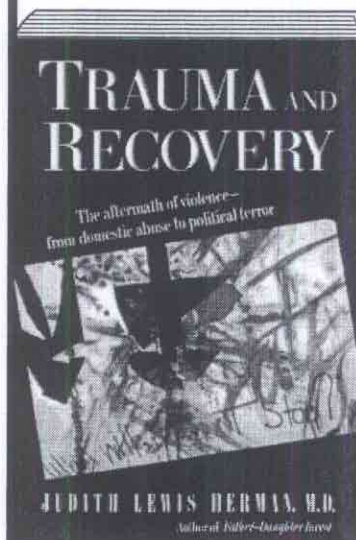
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