

A Most Extraordinary Stone

Sunday Newsday

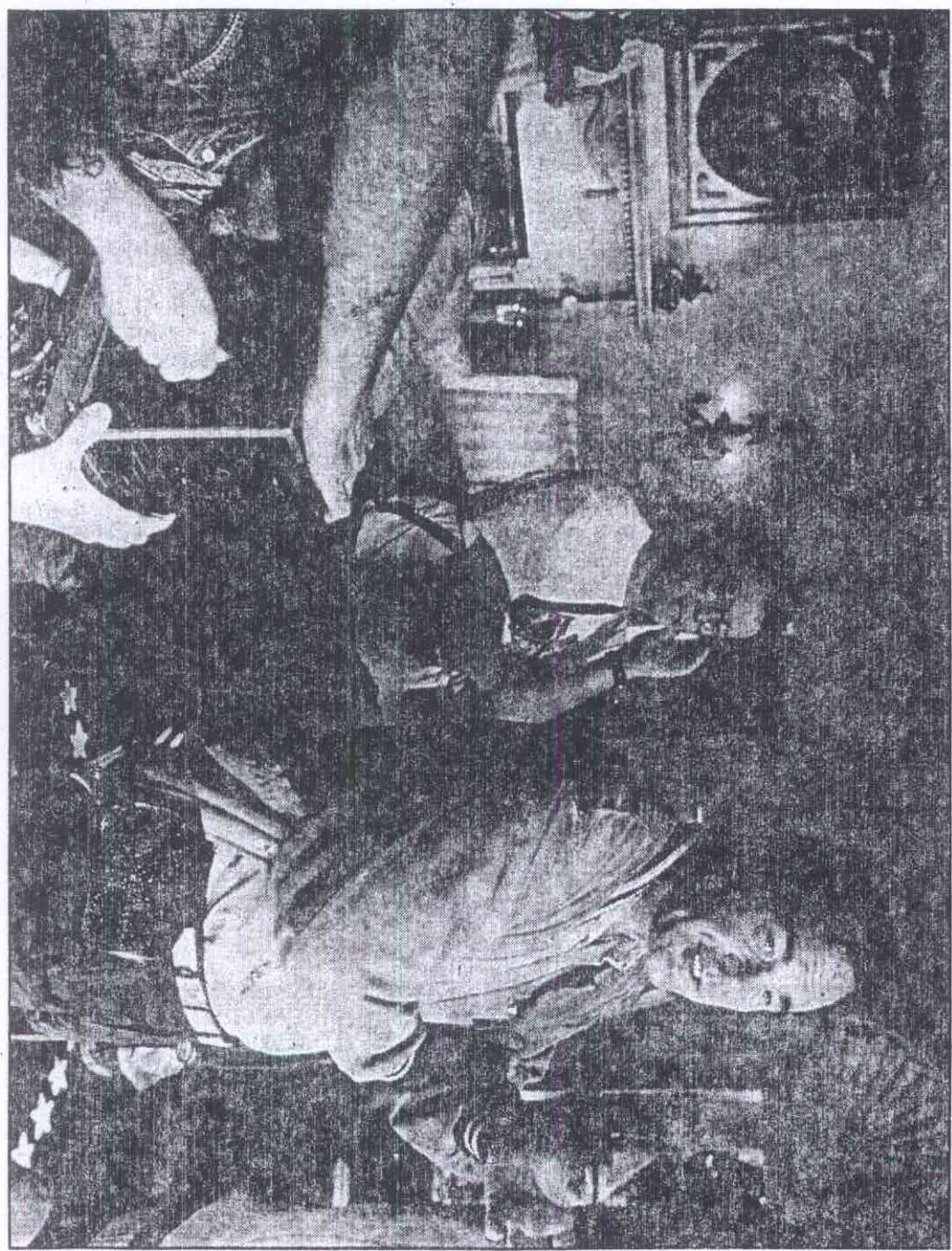
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STONE: The Controversies, Excesses and Exploits of a Radical Filmmaker, by James Riordan. Hyperion, 573 pp., \$24.95.

BY JOHN ANDERSON
STAFF WRITER

OLIVER STONE is a filmmaker whose work speaks for itself, and he should let it: As soon as he opens his mouth and starts explaining things, he invariably comes off as a man whose talent is fueled by paranoid suspicions, or a head full of nesting spiders. It's no surprise that Stone's next film is "Nixon" — or that he is said to take a rather sympathetic stand toward our most conspiracy-conscious president.

It's not much of a surprise either that the director would cooperate with James Riordan on "Stone: The Controversies, Excesses and Exploits of a Radical Filmmaker," especially since Riordan offered to let Stone see and edit his own quotes in exchange for access and connections. In an effort to be forthright, I guess, Riordan explains in his author's note that he retained editorial control but allowed Stone this rather unusual privilege of reading parts of the book in advance, basically because he knew that if Stone wanted to shut him out, he could — and would. Riordan makes the quite valid point that unauthorized biographies are presumed to be sensationalistic, tell-all trash and authorized biographies nothing but fluff. But despite the author's protestations, the reader begins the book with the impression that Stone has been peering over the author's shoulder, and all proffered information is judged accordingly. The information, as tainted as one



The director in action: Oliver Stone on the set of 'Nixon'

thinks, to this day, that his feelings were somehow unique. And that, perhaps, is what separates an ordinary mortal from one who can write and direct films like "Platoon" and "Wall Street" and "JFK" and "Natural Born Killers." All insofar as films, but what's more, and it all ends up on screen: "Platoon" and "Born on the Fourth of July," for instance (and "Heaven and Earth," too, although it's pretty insignificant) are the movies he made because he went to Vietnam: "The Doors" is about what he missed while he was there. "Wall Street" carries spiritual answers on its own. This kind of thing reads like dust-jacket copy and diminishes both the book and its subject, whose epic battles to complete his films are given colorful recountings by Riordan (if you can dismiss the doubts engendered by that author's note). There

could — and would. Riordan makes the quite valid point that unauthored biographies are presumed to be sensationalistic, tell-all trash and authorized biographies nothing but fluff. But despite the author's protestations, the reader begins the book with the impression that Stone has been peering over the author's shoulder, and all proffered information is judged accordingly.

The information, as tainted as one presumes it to be, is largely fascinating. Stone's upbringing, on Manhattan's Upper East Side, is the stuff of a Douglas Sirk film: The son of a Jewish businessman, Lou Stone (nee Silverstein) and a French Catholic, Jacqueline Goddet, William Oliver Stone grew up in shadowed privilege. Like his own father, Lou Stone would eventually lose the family fortune, leaving Oliver as financially bereft as he himself had been. And Lou would also lose his wife: Both Stones phlandered while Oliver studied at prestigious boarding schools (one of which he attended with Tobias Wolff, whose own memoirs of his young education have been vivid and biting) and when the breakup came, the young boy was hung out to dry.

What would follow included a year at Yale, a teaching job in Saigon, obsessive writing, a stint with the Merchant Marine and his near-legendary enlistment in the Army at the height of the Vietnam War. But how this earlier trauma affected the young Stone and influenced his filmmaking is given cursory treatment by Riordan, who sometimes misses the point.

Recalling his self-consciousness as a child, Stone tells Riordan, "I'd walk down the street and feel that people were looking at me, judging me. I felt like I didn't belong, no matter where I went, like I was totally irrelevant to the human race." The interesting thing here is not that Stone felt this way — don't most young people, at one time or another? — but that he

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thinks, to this day, that his feelings were somehow unique. And that, perhaps, is what separates an ordinary mortal from one who can write and direct films like "Platoon" and "Wall Street" and "JFK" and "Natural Born Killers." All imperfect films, but what's perfect? Stone is a major artist — an infuriating one at times, to be sure — mainly because of his single-minded passion and the personal stake he has in his movies. Everything to Stone is personal,

and it all ends up on screen: "Platoon" and "Born on the Fourth of July," for instance (and "Heaven and Earth," too, although it's pretty insignificant) are the movies he made because he went to Vietnam; "The Doors" is about what he missed while he was there. "Wall Street" carries echoes of Dad. All this Riordan makes clear. Would that he could do it without sounding like Stone's publicist.

"Too unconventional for organized religion," he writes toward the end of the book, "Stone has been seeking spiritual answers on his own . . ." This kind of thing reads like dust-jacket copy and diminishes both the book and its subject, whose epic battles to complete his films are given colorful recountings by Riordan (if you can dismiss the doubts engendered by that author's note). There are interesting asides about the actors in Stone's films, too — Gary Oldman's psychic discomfort playing Lee Harvey Oswald in "JFK," for example. No one, however, is quoted without at least some homage being paid to the director.

It's curious that Riordan is also the author of "Break On Through," the biography of Doors leader and dubious '60s icon Jim Morrison. In his film, Stone clearly saw Morrison as the representation of everything he'd missed during his time in Vietnam, as well as the embodiment of the era's liberated/licentious ethos. Did Stone somehow feel some psychic connection, and spiritual paycheck, having the same biographer as his idol? It's not so far-fetched, all things considered.

What Stone gets from Riordan is a friendly, bordering-on-flawing treatment that refracts his life story through the most positive filters. In the end, though, "Stone: The Controversies, Excesses and Exploits of a Radical Filmmaker" asks its own questions: What's a radical filmmaker, for one thing? Is the book about a man who makes radical films? No, the Stone oeuvre is full of conventionally structured movies, albeit with some adventurous subject matter. What's radical is the man, and in this book, he's provided too many apologies and too little of the naked honesty that makes his own art remarkable. ■



Stone with 'Wall Street' stars Michael Douglas, left, and Charlie Sheen, right.

Chicago Pictures