

Oliver Stone Returns To the Vietnam War; Let the Debate Begin

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HOLLYWOOD, Dec. 6 — He's back. Two years after his film "J. F. K." stirred more headlines and editorials than any other movie in a long while, the director Oliver Stone has a new movie that is — big surprise — both provocative and about a subject that obsesses him. In this case, it's Vietnam.

"I've been classified as everything: a Vietnam freak, a 60's nostalgia buff, a conspiracy nut," he said in a recent interview. "I don't seek out controversy. I don't. It comes to me."

Whether Mr. Stone tries to avoid controversy is certainly debatable. "Heaven and Earth," his latest film, is hardly likely to inflame passions the way "J. F. K." did. But the new movie, which is to open on Christmas, is almost certain to provoke the sort of contentious dialogue that is now expected of any Stone film.

The film, which is set in Vietnam and in the United States and stars Tommy Lee Jones and a newcomer, Hiep Thi Le, is an adaptation of two memoirs by a Vietnamese woman, Le Ly Hayslip, "When Heaven and Earth Changed Places" (1989) and

"Child of War, Woman of Peace" (1993). The books recount Ms. Hayslip's harrowing teen-age years in a rice farming village in central Vietnam during the war, and her bleak life in the United States afterward.

"When I read them, I was just moved by the raw, almost naïve emotions," said Mr. Stone, who was seated in a room at an editing facility in West Los Angeles, alternately sipping mineral water and black coffee.

"I loved all the roles she played," Mr. Stone said of Ms. Hayslip, who is now a businesswoman in the San Diego area. "She was a beggar, a prostitute, an American housewife, a traitor, a spy, a rape victim, a mistress to a rich man. She had three children with three different men. All the men were military or police people. All have similar traits in a strange way: very strong on the surface but weak spots."

The same traits could probably be applied, at least in directorial terms, to Mr. Stone himself.

Mr. Stone won Academy Awards for his direction of two other Vietnam War films — "Platoon" (1986) and "Born on the Fourth of July" (1989), a powerful saga about the return

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Jim Wilson/The New York Times

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home of a crippled Marine — and for his screenplay adaptation of "Midnight Express" (1978). Yet his gifts as a film maker are often obscured, perhaps even diminished, by his polemics.

After the release of "J. F. K.," which blurred fact and fiction, claiming that people at the highest levels of the Government were involved in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Mr. Stone spent months defending the film, not against political movie critics so much as political columnists and editorial writers, who said he had been reckless with the facts.

"How has 'J. F. K.' changed me?" the director said quietly. "It's probably changed me for the rest of my life. "It was a place I've never been before in my life. Born on the Fourth of July' was controversial. It was attacked quite a bit. But nothing like 'J. F. K.' It took me to another level. It made me more of a weather vane, more of a political personality as opposed to a film maker. I did not fully understand the implications of that."

From Director to Symbol

Mr. Stone said he had no regrets whatsoever about "J. F. K." But he's also aware the film turned him, at least in the eyes of many filmmakers and critics, into more of an ideologue than a film craftsman. No other top director is burdened with such heavy political baggage.

He's ambivalent about it. "When you become a political personality,

you turn into a symbol, and when you become a symbol, then a lot of the humanity is stripped from you and you're no longer a rounded person but a cartoon, an ideologue," he said. "When you become an ideologue, the perception of you is that you lose touch with your soul."

"There's too much hype, too much negativity, too much hatred up front," he went on. "I guess I am paranoid about it. All I can do is keep my head down and go about my business and make my movies."

Mr. Stone hopes that eventually the perception will change. "As long as I make films that are good, the reassessment will set in," he said. "Eventually people will see through the polemic to the films themselves."

In "Heaven and Earth," a Warner Brothers movie, Mr. Stone apportions the blame. Ms. Hayslip is raped by a brutal gang of Vietcong. But the South Vietnamese and the Americans are often seen as equally violent. And Mr. Stone depicts the Americans Ms. Hayslip encounters in Southern California as grotesque and narrow-minded.

Partly because of Vietnamese officials' antipathy toward Ms. Hayslip's books, most of the film, which cost \$23 million, was shot in Thailand, although some scenes were made surreptitiously in Vietnam by a documentary team working for Mr. Stone.

The part of Ms. Hayslip is played by Hiep Thi Le, a 23-year-old physiology major at the University of California at Davis, who left Vietnam at the age of 9 in a group of boat people. During an extensive talent search in

Another provocative theme for the director.

the United States and Asia, she was discovered at an audition in San Jose, Calif., to which she had originally come simply to accompany a friend.

Mr. Stone recalled: "She walked in, and she just had the light. She just shined. I thought, like, she was spectacular."

Divorce, and Buddhism

At age 46, Mr. Stone is enduring some personal travails. He is in the process of a divorce (he and his wife have two children). He is spending more and more time traveling, mostly in Asia. And he is studying Buddhism.

He is also working at a breakneck pace. He is now in the midst of editing another film, "Natural Born Killers," a satire that also stars Mr. Jones, one of his favorite actors. That movie is scheduled for release in June. Mr. Stone is also intent on making a film version of the musical "Evita." And he has produced or co-produced such successful films as "Reversal of Fortune" and "The Joy Luck Club."

The director, who grew up in Manhattan, has dedicated "Heaven and Earth" to his mother, Jacqueline Stone, who lives in New York and Paris. His father, Louis, who worked on Wall Street, died in 1986. "Wall Street" (1987) was dedicated to him.

His parents, Mr. Stone said, had a strong impact on him. "My mom is French," he said. "She was a war bride. My father was a lieutenant colonel in Paris who picked her up on the street actually. She married a man she hardly knew."

"She's quite a lady," he continued with a smile. "Very intense and far away at the same time. Sometimes very glamorous, an Evita-like presence. Many friends, many parties, and she loved movies. She dragged me to movies, Clark Gable and Cary Grant. I grew up in a make-believe world, very French."

"My father also had a wonderful imagination," he said. "He was a failed playwright. He wrote plays, he wrote poems. He took me to see '9½' when I was a kid. He was also a very strong character."

Mr. Stone's parents divorced when he was 16.

"The family just scattered to the wind," said the director, who has no siblings. To his father's dismay, Mr. Stone dropped out of Yale, joined the Army and went to Vietnam. After returning, he attended New York University's film school in 1971; then he moved to Los Angeles, where he wrote such films as "Midnight Express" and "Scarface" before turning to directing.

Part of the reason that "Heaven and Earth" is dedicated to his mother, Mr. Stone said, is that he had never before made a film where the primary character was a woman.

"My mom always wanted me to make a 'Gone with the Wind' type movie," he said. "This is as close as I can get right now."