

## FEATURES

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There's no let-up for Hollywood's most controversial director — the sequel to 'Wall Street,' a documentary about Hugo Chavez and his most ambitious and personal project to date, the secret history of America

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Oliver Stone is a man's man. Of this I have no doubt before meeting him. Not just because of his status as a sort of latter-day Ernest Hemingway, an action man with a reputation for women and drugs who won the Purple Heart for bravery in Vietnam, and then an Oscar for reproducing his experiences on celluloid. But because the most compelling sequences from his latest film, a documentary called *South of the Border*, show him hanging out with Venezuela's president, Hugo Chavez, chewing the cud about politics and war, talking very much mano a mano.

It's an impression that's reinforced moments before I meet him in his Los Angeles office when the photographer appears and shows me some of the portraits he's taken. They're slightly startling because Stone has a new moustache, a big, bristling, Zapata number, and in the tiny digital frame on the back of the camera, he looks like it's him who really ought to be dressed in military fatigues and running his own small South American regime.

Then he ambles in, distractedly. "Suzie!" he calls to his assistant. "Where are my glasses? I think I've lost my glasses."

We both look at him. He has one pair of glasses on the top of his head. And another pair on a piece of cord around his neck.

"They're on your head," says Suzie.

"Do you think you could go and look for them? They're very valuable to me."

Suzie hesitates and then, having seemingly witnessed this sort of situation before, says: "OK!" and disappears out the room. Two minutes later, Stone puts his hand to his head. "Suzie! I've found them! They were on my head!"

Suzie reappears at the door. "I know," she says. "I told you."

"Did you? Jesus! What, now I can't even hear?"

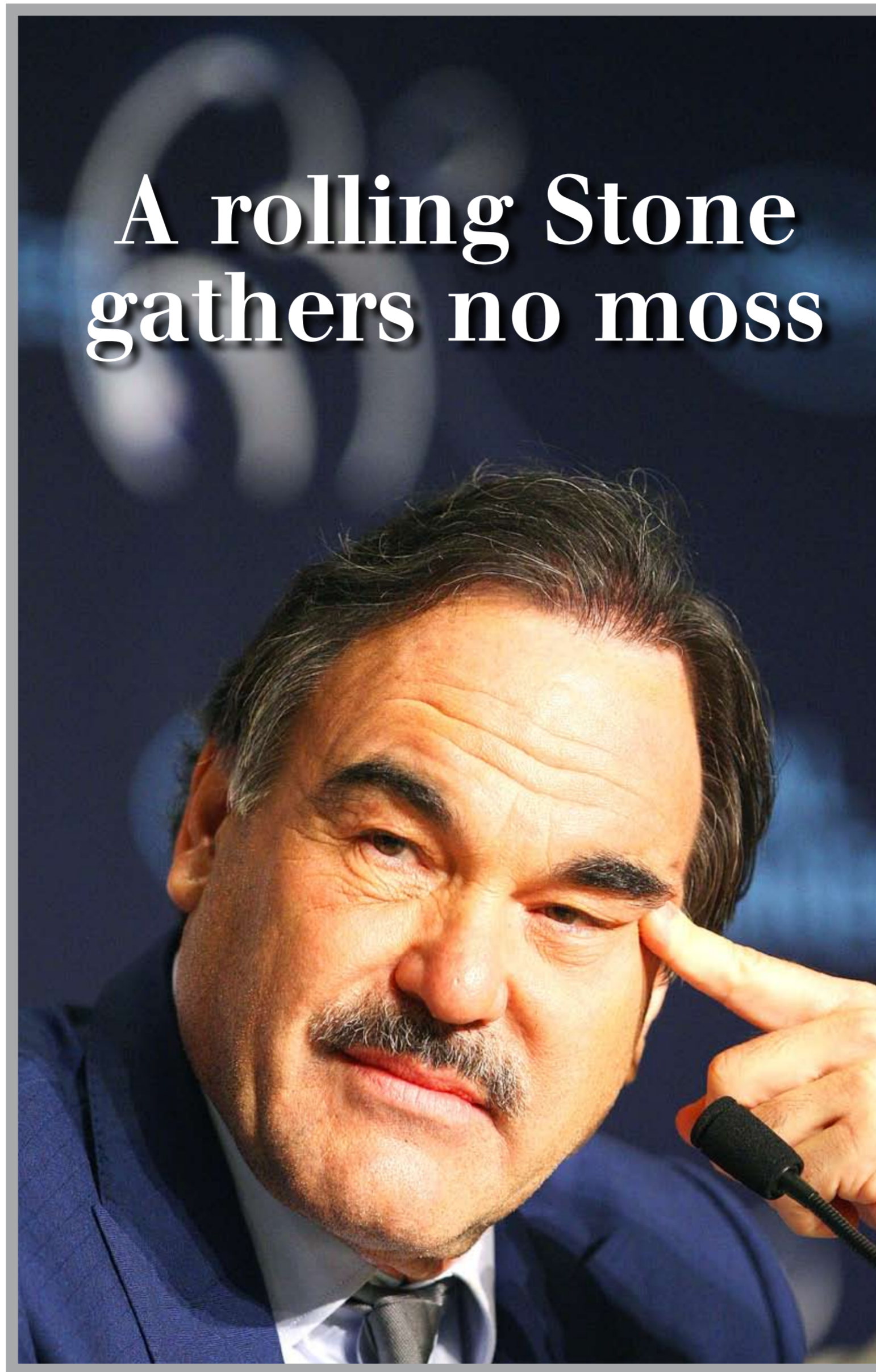
It's a rather nice surprise, this. The bumbling, the self-accusation, the absent-mindedness. On paper, he's so much the alpha male that, as one interviewer put it: "One expects to find antler stubs under his thatch of suspiciously too-black hair." As well as his war record, there are his various arrests for possession of drugs, as well as his well-rehearsed views on monogamy ("unnatural"). But, mostly, there's the work. There seems an almost hyper-masculinity to Stone's oeuvre. He's the director of *Platoon*, one of the most highly rated Vietnam films of all time, a film that was based on his experience. The war spawned a further two films, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Heaven & Earth*. He made one of the most violent and controversial films of the 1990s, *Natural Born Killers*. And he's had a fascination with some of the most powerful men on earth, having made films about no fewer than three American presidents: the Oscar-winning *JFK*, *Nixon* and, most recently, *W*, about George W. Bush.

In the flesh, however, he's more like an amiable professor. There's a sort of otherworldly air of distraction and he reminds me of one of those old-fashioned Marxist academics who have now all but disappeared. Although he's not a Marxist, he has a strictly Stoneist view of the world and to this end he has facts, figures, theses, arguments, names, dates, an entire view not just of contemporary politics but also history.

But one of the most appealing aspects of Stone is the sheer depth and breadth of his interests and ambition. In addition to tackling socialism (and how Chavez has fanned its flames across South America) in *South of the Border*, he has also, this year, taken on capitalism in *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, the much-awaited return this September of Gordon Gekko to a Wall Street where greed isn't just good, it's legal. Two films, two ideological systems, and yet this pales in the face of his next project: a 10-part documentary series for HBO, *Oliver Stone's Secret History of America*.

He's right in the throes of it. "It's my big project. It's something I want to leave behind. And we're now in the third fucking year of it," he says. "It's a war. They're in that room next door working on it right now. It's an ongoing odyssey."

It's a truly massive project, a personal mission, the encapsulation seemingly of all that Oliver Stone has thought and read and felt in the 63 years of his life so far, and by the end of the interview I feel slightly anxious about it on his behalf. After all, Stone's passion projects haven't always ended well. *Platoon* did. It was the film that he had to make, a heavily autobiographical



## A rolling Stone gathers no moss

account of his Vietnam war, "a grunt's-eye view," and won him his second Oscar (his first was for writing the screenplay of *Midnight Express*). But *Alexander*, his magnum opus, a biopic of Alexander the Great that he at one point calls "his life's work," was savaged by the critics.

The reception of *South of the Border* in the US is, I imagine, a small taste of what is to come. If *Platoon* was a grunt's-eye view of war, *South of the Border* is a leftie's-eye view of South America and he's spent the last few weeks fighting off criticism: that he's a patsy; a chavista; that he didn't speak to any of the opposition figures. "But that wasn't what we set out to do!" says Stone. "I let him talk. That way you see him as he sees himself. It's a psychiatrist's technique."

It's interesting that he brings this up. He's been in analysis three times, he tells me later. But the biggest surprise about Stone, and perhaps his greatest contradiction, is that for somebody who is such a doer, who has such a relentless drive to work, who has done and accomplished so much, who started his career writing scripts for *Scarface* and *Midnight Express* and has gone on to direct nearly 20 feature films and several documentaries — is that he's also an introvert, and a self-critical one at that.

He can quote, verbatim, unfavorable reviews he's received years after the event. More than this, there's an introspective aspect to his nature that is quite at odds with the macho persona. And, for all the argument and theorizing, it becomes apparent that Stone is a creature of his emotions. He makes the films he does because he feels he has to. Many of his career decisions seem to be motivated not by good sense, money or the esteem of his peers — he's driven by something far more internal than that.

In an old interview, Stone once said that his films are an "emotional barometer" for him. The

violence of *Natural Born Killers* came out of the anger and sadness he felt when his second wife and mother of his two sons, Elizabeth, left him. So, I wonder, what attracted him to the competing issues at stake in *South of the Border* and *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*?

"My father was a Republican. And he hated Roosevelt. And that's sort of been the battle of my life, I think. You have to understand that I grew up a Republican conservative. I hated Castro. And I put my money where my mouth was because I went to war, but I understood pretty quickly that this was another place, another culture, and we would never fit in there.

"It's the same story in Afghanistan, Iraq and South America. It's white people meeting people they think they are better than. And I feel that this war is the war of my life. I've seen it over and over again and if I can do one thing with what's left of my remaining years, it's just to cry it out and say it, I hope, with enough entertainment that people will want see it."

In this context, *South of the Border* is simply another variant on this, his life's work. What the film makes clear is how much of a bogeyman Chavez is in the US. The first half of the film, a not-altogether-successful Michael Moore-esque homily, features clips from the US news media (or "the missile shield," as Stone refers to it) with Fox News declaring that Chavez is "as big a threat as Osama bin Laden."

It's in the second half that the film comes to life, though, when Stone meets Chavez. "I liked him. He's very warm and very gracious. And he's a bear. I've always said that if he looked like Woody Allen he'd play a lot better with the world press. I think men are threatened by his physicality."

The affection seems to be mutual. At one point, standing on a runway in the dark, Chavez points to a building where he was

imprisoned during a coup and where some of his men lost their lives. "As an ex-soldier I understand," says Stone and Chavez rests his hand upon his shoulder.

Making a documentary "was the last thing I wanted to do," says Stone. "It was Fernando Sulichin, who I worked with on *Comandante* [the 2003 documentary of Stone interviewing Fidel Castro] and who is funding *Secret History*, who suckered me in. And we went and we talked to Chavez and he said, 'Don't just take my word for it; go and talk to these other presidents.' So that's what we did, we went on this road trip." He jaunts off and chews coca and talks socialism with Bolivia's Evo Morales and meets Brazil's Lula da Silva, Paraguay's Fernando Lugo, Ecuador's Rafael Correa and Cuba's Raul Castro. "The result," says Stone, "is this weird little thing. What is it? It's not a documentary."

It is, just not an entirely sane one, with two halves that don't quite fit together, but it's still a fascinating glimpse of Chavez and an overview of a massive popular movement on one of the largest continents of the world.

"I'm not an interviewer, I'm a director. And I go to these places and take advantage of the status that I have as a filmmaker and can treat the person like an equal. And I'm not hostile. I give them face time. We don't even know the names of these guys in the US."

Fundamentally, Stone is doing it his way because he can and because he's spent his life doing things his way. He's as idiosyncratic as they come, jumping from genre to genre, from indie documentaries to studio blockbusters. Hitting spectacularly with some (he's won three Oscars), missing spectacularly with others (*Nixon*, like *Alexander*, was brutally panned). It's always been impossible to pigeonhole him, or predict quite where he'll go next.

There are high hopes for *Wall Street: Money*



▲ Michael Douglas, left, and Shia LaBeouf appear in a scene from *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, directed by Oliver Stone.

◀ A giant among moviemakers, American director Oliver Stone comes across as an amiable professor in person.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG AND EPA

*Never Sleeps*. I reread *Wall Street* on the plane over and enjoy it as much as I did when I first saw it years ago. It's completely of its time — mobile phones the size of breeze blocks, an array of kitchen equipment so dazzling it gets its own special sequence (I give you the microwave and the hand-held blender). But it has stood the test of time.

Released in 1987, it was a brilliant, prescient taste of what was to come: the crash later that year; the insider-trading scandals. I also spot Stone in a cameo I hadn't noticed before. He plays a moneymen, a financier.

"I was playing my father, Lou," he says. And, had the 1960s and Vietnam not blown him off course, it's what Stone might very well have become. It was what he was born to. His father was a stockbroker, who met Oliver's French mother in Paris during World War II. Stone had a privileged, if emotionally austere, upbringing at an east coast boarding school. His mother was often absent and then disappeared altogether: aged 15, his headmaster called him into his office and informed him that his parents were getting divorced.

He went to Yale — he was in the same year as George W. Bush — and it's here that his conventional, bourgeois upbringing breaks down. He dropped out, deciding first to try to write a novel and then to enlist.

I read a quote, I say, where he says that he felt he wouldn't be properly human if he didn't know what war was. "There was something bugging me," he says. "Yale was a problem for me. I was not a happy young man. I didn't feel good in my skin. I'm glad I left but it was very painful at the time. My father thought I was pissing away my life. I was becoming an infantry soldier and I was going to become one of life's unfortunates. I wasn't going to amount to much. He was worried. And frankly so was I."

You've spent the rest of your life proving him wrong? "In a way, although it took me years. Coming back from Vietnam was extremely difficult. My father did, towards the end of his life, believe that Vietnam was a mistake, but we had many, many fights about it."

What would your father have made of the Wall Street of the last few years? I ask. "Look, he was pissed off when we left the gold standard in 1973, although 1973 is actually very interesting. It's a really crucial year, because the income of the average working man flattened out in 1973 and never went up in spending ability. But meanwhile the productivity of America went up like this. Where did that money go? It went to CEOs and stockholders. It went to the banks."

The most remarkable aspect of *Wall Street* was that the villain of the piece, Gordon Gekko, became a hero to a new generation of moneymen. Michael Douglas claims that he's unable to go out for dinner in New York without having a hedge-fund manager slap him on the back and thank him for inspiring him to enter Wall Street.

But if the first film was an old-fashioned, rite-of-passage story about a young man, Bud Fox, corrupted by greed, is there a take-home message from *Wall Street 2*?

"It's a fun movie, an entertaining movie. The first one, I think you'd say, is a morality tale and I think this one is too. In the sense of what is important? Are there more important values than money?"

Was he wary of glamorizing it, given what happened to Gekko?

"It's 23 years on and greed will go on for the rest of times. And envy. Envy plays a big role in this film too. If you pass all the regulations in the world, they'll try and get around that. I have no problem with people wanting to make money. But don't make the banks into hedge funds, which is what they did."

"There's something Douglas says in the movie. He says that in 2008, of the corporate profits in the US, 47 percent were from finance-related companies. In the old America, it was 17 percent. It became the main business of America. We became a giant casino."

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