



A Master Class With Oliver Stone

Your first film.

STORY: Sophie Jarvis

The Djavad Mowafaghian theatre at SFU Woodward's is no stranger to student films. Ever since the school opened its doors in 2010, emerging filmmakers have screened their work here. This past weekend, the Vancouver Biennale presented a special student film. The biggest difference? *Last Year in Vietnam* was directed by Academy Award-winner Oliver Stone.

"I couldn't afford subtitles," he explained when the lights came back on. Stone's highly personal and visceral student film about his reintegration to New York after the Vietnam War is narrated in French, a choice he made to increase the sense of alienation that plays throughout the film. Passionate and funny, he was eager to discuss the beginning of his career with a sold-out audience of emerging filmmakers.

While mostly anecdotal, the advice Stone offered was sound. Screenwriting is his passion, and he believes that a strong script is the most important element to a successful film. So is perseverance—Stone spent five years after film school facing rejection, yet he didn't allow that to change his path. He kept writing, until he finally got a break when a producer read a treatment and then mentored him through the draft, eventually landing him an agent. He reminisces about his early day jobs, as a cab driver and a messenger. He was even fired as a production assistant. "Life is a struggle," he shared. "You never know the curve of the ball."

Martin Scorsese was one of Stone's teachers at New York University Film School. "This is a filmmaker", he said of Stone, after viewing *Last Year in Vietnam*. The high praise was due to the personal quality of the film, a fact that Stone took to heart as today he celebrates his new series, *The Untold History of the United States*. "History gives us perspective," Stone has said. "Don't give them the Disney history. Give them the horror film."

Preceding Oliver Stone, a panel of four local filmmakers discussed their first films. Writer, producer, and actor Taylor Hill and director Gary Hawes of *Leap 4 Your Life* represented the first-feature DIY success story (their film was entirely funded by Hill and her mother). "You're only as good as your crew," said Hawes, making the point that filmmaking is a team effort. Producer and actor Daniel Arnold of *Lawrence & Holloman* provided insight about the importance of finding a producer with funding eligibility. Producer Marc Stephenson discussed the importance of story, and the person behind it: "I'd prefer to receive a passionate email from a filmmaker over a script any day. Show me that you care about your story." Each of them recommended emerging filmmakers take advantage of the independent cinema circles in Vancouver, like the Cold Reading Series (where Hill and Hawes met), or the Celluloid Social Club (where moderator Alexandra Staseson is a producer).

Every filmmaker has a different success story. There is no sure way to follow in the footsteps of greats like Oliver Stone, especially in an ever-changing industry. But there is a common thread between each of these filmmakers in various stages of their careers: relentlessness. They will stop at nothing to tell their story.

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