

Oliver Stone takes on a snowless Vancouver as he announces plans for Snowden film

BY KATHERINE MONK, POSTMEDIA NEWS JUNE 11, 2014 2:51 PM

VANCOUVER — Oliver Stone says he's still in recovery. "When I was young, I was brainwashed by the American history that I learned. It was benign, a Disney version of events," says the three-time Oscar-winning director.

"But now I'm interested in the underside ... and making it accessible."

Stone spent the past five years revising the accepted version of events presented in textbooks and created an entire 12-part series that hacks apart the standardized and sanitized history of the American republic. Called *The Untold History of the United States*, the series spans two centuries and re-examines everything from The Cold War to Obama's campaign of hope with Stone's hawk eye for the great hoodwink.

It's Stone's talent for dissection and questioning the status quo that made him the ideal choice to speak at the Vancouver Biennale this week, according to Biennale founder and president Barrie Mowatt.

"He's a natural fit for us because he's all about opening minds and that's what we're about too," says Mowatt, who met Stone at an event in California and invited him to the arty party.

"Oliver is about critical thinking. And creating a community of inquiry and social engagement is part of our goal ... it's what great art can do."

Mowatt says Stone will kick off the Biennale's newly created CineFest LIVE program with an in-person talk and screening of an episode from *The Untold History of the United States, Bush II & Obama: The Age of Terror* at the Vogue Theatre Saturday night.

For Stone, being part of the Biennale feels positive and pure — almost romantic — because it's about art for art's sake, not popcorn sales. Not that the director of *Platoon* and the screenwriter for *Midnight Express* is anti-populist. He just has a habit of making movies that make people uncomfortable — as his forthcoming project, *Time of the Octopus*, proves once more.

An adaptation of Anatoly Kucherena's as-yet-unpublished novel, the new film looks into the life of whistleblower Edward Snowden — a man close to Stone's heart.

“Art is supposed to wake people up. That’s what Banksy did with his street art, and when I saw the book that Barrie gave me of the (previous) event, with all this art in the streets of this beautiful city, I thought I could share the Untold History with people who haven’t seen it and wake people up.”

Stone says he wasn’t born to bang the rebel gong. “I grew up living in the heart of the American dream in New York City. My father was conservative, and I served in the military and it took several years after that of seeing the world from the point of view of the people who were exploited and abused to change my perception,” he says.

“And my films have also taught me about aspects of life. With Untold History I had the chance to really study and broaden my knowledge of the American past ... and it’s not the bill of goods they sold us in school.”

Stone says he was particularly fascinated by Eisenhower’s warning about the “military industrial complex” and how the industries that make weapons managed to survive, even thrive, after the end of the Cold War.

“Suddenly something happens in our country and we suspend the law. Even break the law. Look at George W. Bush,” says Stone, pointing to the sketchy ballot recount in Florida that made Bush the winner of the 2000 presidential election.

Part of the bigger problem has to do with the misinterpreted history lessons that push for a conqueror — an essential ingredient in the traditional Hollywood narrative.

“The Hollywood blockbuster is based on the idea of the conquering hero and that we are the exceptional nation, the indispensable nation, the rescuer of nations. But it’s a fantasy and people like Obama haven’t really studied their history. They haven’t studied cause and effect,” says Stone.

“Besides, the heroic narrative does not work because everyone thinks they’re the hero and then you end up with crazy heroes around the world trying to be a crusader.”

Yet, at some level, even Stone is a crusader because he is committed to change. “But I have no weapons. I’m educating,” he says in his defence.

But even revisionist lessons can be misunderstood, a sad fact Stone learned after he made Wall Street. Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) was supposed to be a reptilian villain without any hope for redemption. Instead, he was embraced by the vapid, Versace-wearing masses as a role model.

“When I made the movie, I thought greed was NOT good,” says Stone. “But I learned people really like money. They like to make money. They will even admire a villain with money — even when he breaks the law ... And so corruption surrounds us. It’s in every part of the American organism now, from Wall Street to the military, to legislators and politics, it’s endemic.”

Stone says there is every reason to be pessimistic, but he chooses to remain hopeful.

“Another thing the Untold History taught me was change is always coming, and it’s entirely unpredictable.”

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