



LEAVING NO STONE UNTURNED

When the world's most controversial director made a film about the world's most controversial leader, Alexandria Gouveia went straight to the source

They're both 62 years old ex-Yale students who waiver at the 6ft 0ins mark and both seem shrouded by controversy. But that is seemingly where the similarities between the notorious Oliver Stone and former US president George W Bush end.

While Stone built a reputation as an award-winning director and screenwriter, Bush became so infamous for his war on Iraq that at the end of 2008 an angered Iraqi journalist threw a shoe

at his head during one of his final press conferences as America's leader.

Not considered the brightest or most charismatic president to work from the oval office, Bush, who struggles reading cue cards and has less expression than a Botox devotee, fast became the butt of jokes. His so-called stupidity made him an easy character to ridicule. Political comedians such as Letterman, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert forged lucrative careers mocking his many bloopers. ▶



My aim wasn't to change the way people see Bush, but to see him through life

In contrast, Stone is smart and charming with an indisputably inspiring career. Renowned for his movies focusing on American politics, Vietnam and 9/11 it was inevitable that the New Yorker's next movie should be about his antithesis. In some ways *W.* (pronounced Dubya), Stone's biopic satire about George W. Bush, is another war movie as it focuses on the man who contentiously took America to Iraq; an invasion that shocked the world and, some say, lost the president any remaining shred of dignity.

Stone describes his latest offering as a "fair and true portrait of the man." Filmed as a three-part narrative it begins with college boy George in the mid 1960s, his transition to an adult - struggling in his father's shadow, battling alcoholism and the 2004 election - and ends with the war on Iraq.

"It covers three acts in his life: the prodigal son, the prodigal son returned home made good, thinking God is calling him to become president, and the third act, where he became Icarus - he took the wings given to him by his father Daedalus and flew too close to the sun," explains a poetic Stone.

This is the director's third president film, following Nixon and JFK. However, contrary to media hype, it isn't an anti-Bush polemic. "One paper misquoted me as saying Bush was stupid," says Stone, "but I never said that and that is not what the film is about. It questions what Bush represents and how 'super' he is.

"My aim wasn't to change the way people see Bush, but to see him through life."

As a result the film, which highlights many of Bush's cringe-worthy moments including the pretzel-choking incident, isn't short of its comical scenes. "Well, it had to be done with an ebullience and a certain fun, because the guy is goofy,"



This page The intrepid Stone at work

AD

chuckles Stone. "I think he endeared himself to people because he couldn't get anything right... *W.* is a satire." Although the Bush family's black sheep is portrayed as a boorish cowboy, Stone offers an even-handed account. "Bush has a mindset that is reacting to any threat with force. That makes him dangerous," states Stone. "But that is his cowboy mentality and that is what *W.* is about."

What shocks Stone the most about Bush is that he never consulted his father. "I think he regards his father as weak during all his time in the presidency," he says. "He never consulted his father about the war that he launched against the same opponent. That is amazing to me."

Filming such a biopic required extensive research, as such Stone learned more about the presidential joker. "I think he is dull intellectually. He isn't intellectually curious at all," says Stone with a slight hint of disdain. "He reads cues and doesn't seem to convey that he has thought it through. He is just a reader, and not a good reader either. He's arrogant, but also very cunning."

Although the movie portrays Bush as a poor leader who succeeded only in trashing his family legacy, Stone admits Bush will be missed, if only for his unintentional comical antics. He says: "I'll

// I'll miss his speeches because they're hilarious, he's great for comedy //

miss his speeches because they're hilarious, I mean he is great for comedy, but unfortunately he doesn't have a clue about how to rule the world."

Finding someone to fund *W.* proved to be Stone's greatest feat. "We were turned down by everybody, it was humiliating. I don't think I have that bad a track record," bemoans Stone somewhat ironically. He eventually raised a budget of US\$25.1m from Hong Kong, Germany, Australia and independent funding. The movie was shot in 46 days in Louisiana.

The relatively modest budget made the task of finding the right cast more difficult. "A lot of actors turned us down," admits the director. "A lot of it was about money. We ultimately got good actors willing to work for no amount of money. Josh and I set the example. We took nothing. I actually took below the Directors Guild minimum." ▶

AD



BUSHISMS

Let's hope Barack Obama will be more eloquent than his predecessor

- "This thaw took a while to thaw, it's going to take a while to unthaw." On market liquidity
- "Amigo! Amigo!" To former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi
- "One word sums up the responsibility of any governor, and that one word is 'to be prepared'."
- "I know how hard it is for you to put food on your family."
- "They underestimated me."
- "The problem with the French is that they don't have a word for entrepreneur."
- "Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we."
- "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me - you can't get fooled again."
- "I just want you to know that, when we talk about war, we're really talking about peace."
- "Do you have blacks too?" To former Brazilian President Fernando Cardoso.

Below Stone with the film's stars Elizabeth Banks and Josh Brolin

"I think if Bush ever did combat duty he would never have sent troops to go to war in Iraq"

Josh Brolin does a sterling job as the protagonist, but he wasn't first choice. "Originally I went for Christian Bale," reveals Stone. "We did some rigorous prosthetic tests and spent a lot of dough and then Christian said: 'I just don't feel like I can do it.'" After watching Brolin in his award-winning role in *No Country For Old Men*, Stone knew he had found his new Bush. "I think Josh ended up being perfect for the role," enthuses Stone. "He is more American and more of a cowboy. He has that arrogance and swagger that Bush has, but he is also very sensitive." *W*, which premiered during the UAE's lucrative Dubai Film Festival, has received mixed reviews. Some criticise the film for appearing rough around the edges, some moan it's not controversial enough and some complain the characters are more caricatures. Stone is unfazed by the critics. "When critics write for the love of the medium and consumer it's clear, and you listen when they write an analysis," he asserts. Most of Stone's criticisms stem from the conspiracy theories he imbeds in many of his films, and also his distorted portrayal of reality most notably in *The Doors* and *JFK*. More recently Stone and four unidentified individuals agreed to pay US\$6,322,20 to settle allegations of violations of the Cuban embargo that occurred while Stone was working on his next project, a documentary about Fidel Castro between February 2002 and May 2003.

Undeterred by this punishment, Stone's current assignment focuses on South America, this time on Hugo Chavez. "I've been shooting for a long period now," says Stone. "This is not a film, it's a documentary. I find Chavez to be a very interesting character, he's very important to South America. I find him very charismatic and a good leader."

Stone has been a regular visitor to Venezuela since Chavez was elected in 1998. The documentary is said to focus on the opposition Chavez faces at home and abroad. It particularly looks at the Venezuelan leader and the labels he receives from America who consider him a threat to South American democracy. The director's admirable



WORDS: ALEXANDRIA GOUVEIA | IMAGE: CORBIS/GRAPHEAST; GETTY/GALLO IMAGES; SUPPLIED

Top and bottom left *W* promises some laugh-out-loud moments



approach toward Chavez only aids in emphasising his disparity to Bush. While Bush is brash, Stone is bold. Bush spent his career avoiding Vietnam, while Stone's swears his request for combat duty during the Vietnam War made him the man he is today. "I understood more by doing it," he says proudly. "I think I had to go through that to move on with my life. I became another person after that," he continues before pausing for a brief and poignant moment.

"I think if Bush ever did combat duty he would never have sent troops to go to war in Iraq." ■