

Encore!

Powerful 'Fourth of July' sure to hit viewers

By Ken Nolan
Encore Contributor

Leaving *Born on the Fourth of July*, one may feel the same way as having just battled a good case of mononucleosis.

The film affects one's health, tearing down the immunities and heading straight for the heart.

Oliver Stone's films are not meant to be seen as much as they are meant to be experienced. His films enter the body of the viewer through the pores and assault the nervous system.

From the gritty *Salvador* to the Academy Award sweepster *Platoon*, Stone has proved himself as one of the most powerful

directors in America today, and *Born on the Fourth of July* is no exception.

The movie tells the life story of Ron Kovic, a gung-ho American kid with rosy cheeks and a zest for life. He is an all-around athlete who tries his hardest at anything he does. He looks forward to the chance to go to Vietnam and become a man. He goes to the war with images of heroism and bravery in his head.

He leaves Vietnam on a stretcher, his body paralyzed from the chest down by a bullet that severed his spinal cord.

He also leaves Vietnam twice decorated, and, at first, proud of his role in the war. But mem-

ories of his help in the accidental murder of innocent Vietnamese villagers, mostly women and children, and his single-handed involvement in shooting an American soldier come to haunt him.

Kovic becomes embittered

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about the war and his existence in a wheelchair, and later evolves as one of the key protesters of the Vietnam conflict.

He uses the same gusto and fervor which marked him in his high school years and channels it into protesting, while all around him crowds shout

"Traitor!" and policemen brandish batons bloodied by the cracked skulls of anti-war demonstrators.

To Kovic, America had turned from apple pie to sour grapes. He felt cheated of his youth, misled by the system and robbed of his virility.

Tom Cruise plays Kovic from the time he's a high school jock to the middle aged orator and author he is today. Cruise undergoes a metamorphosis, altering physically in a manner which would make Robert De-Niro smile.

Physicality aside, Cruise's performance as the crippled veteran is absolutely convincing. His power, charisma

and electricity in this role are, quite simply, overpowering.

Cruise is the center of every scene in the film, and he gives the audience shot after shot of the anger, anguish and inner-betrayal Kovic experienced after Vietnam. Cruise rivets the audience at every moment of the film's some two and a half hours.

The role of Kovic is Cruise's moment to shine, and his chance to prove an ability not only to handle roles that go beyond good looks, but to portray them with a certain ferocity and energy that will surely be his trademark in films to come.

Born also places Cruise above and beyond the Brat Packers as a serious actor of incredible cinematic charisma and audience appeal. This is a role demanding enough to make veteran actors balk (indeed, the film was slated with Al Pacino in 1978, but the deal fell through), but Cruise barrels headfirst into the screen.

If Oliver Stone is trying to win an award as "Best Damn Director in America," he sure is on his way to winning. Like *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July* is a terse and tightly-woven tale.

In *Born*, every scene, every camera angle is a shock, a jolt, a slap in the face. His camera is in constant motion, throwing the viewer headlong into a wheelchair.

Stone offers grisly shots of Vietnamese huts filled with the carnage of bullet-ridden women and children, accidentally mowed down by the American war machine.

He presents scenes of a veteran's hospital, where a recovering Kovic wheels himself around on floors covered with urine and vomit.

He places the audience dead center in a mid-sixties anti-war rally, and then smacks them over the head with a blunt police billy-club.

Stone's technique in filmmaking is simple: to cram his movie down the viewer's throat sideways, forcing upon the audience one potent and explosive scene after another. And *Born* is no exception. It is an emotional and gritty powerhouse.

Stone also seems to have a clear message in the film to the younger generation of today: One must never underestimate the power of deception, whether it is the deception of our government, or simply of us deceiving ourselves.

Kovic fell prey to both. He deceived himself in believing Vietnam would make a hero out of him, and he later asked for retribution from the government which deceived an innocent schoolboy.

And by using Cruise in the title role, Stone's message is all the more potent. Cruise is one of the biggest audience draws today, bringing in a smattering of American youth. He is the quintessential kid from down the block, and Cruise's place in this film is no coincidence.

The film's message is as potent as its subject matter, and Stone and Cruise handle each with the grace and potency which makes *Born on the Fourth of July* one of the best and most important films of the new year.

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