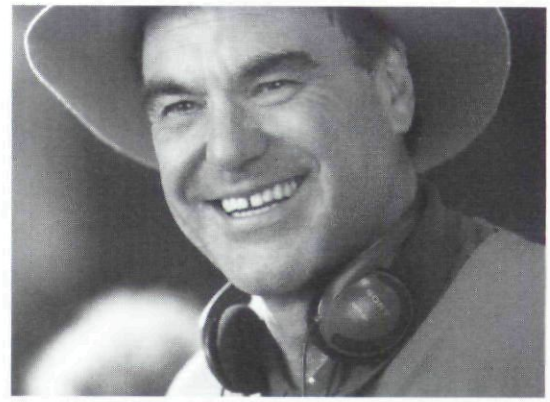
Dramatizing Issues That Historians Don't Address:

An Interview with Oliver Stone



by Gary Crowdus

"I'm quite nervous and anxious about this film," Oliver Stone commented before the start of principal photography on his latest film, Alexander, his first big-budget historical epic. "It's probably the greatest challenge of my life."

Stone had good reason to feel daunted at the prospect of dramatically portraying the fourth-century-B.C. life and times of the Macedonian warrior king, if only because of the extraordinary scope of his accomplishments. In 336 B.C., following the assassination of his father, Philip II, the twenty-year-old Alexander became king of Macedonia, which ruled the Greek city states to the south. The following year he led the Macedonian army on a Panhellenic invasion of Persia and by the age of twenty-five he had conquered ninety percent of the known world. By the time of his death, in 323 B.C., at the age of thirty-two, having led his army on a protracted march of conquest for eleven years, he ruled over an empire that extended from Greece through Asia Minor and the Balkans to India, winning everlasting historical renown as 'Alexander the Great.'

Stone was well aware that few dramatists had ever attempted to tell Alexander's story. Even Hollywood, which for decades has intermittently produced films on ancient Greek and Roman history, not to mention dozens of biblical-era epics, made only one film on Alexander—Robert Rossen's Alexander the Great (1956)—starring a talented young newcomer named Richard Burton—which was lauded for its historical accuracy but generally regarded as dramatically and cinematically uninspired.

A film on Alexander had long been a dream project for Oliver Stone, ever since his college days when he took courses on Greek literature and mythology. His interest was galvanized in 1989 when Stone was approached by another Alexander history buff, German film producer Thomas Schühly, whose lengthy proposal for a biographical film inspired Stone to write his first Alexander screenplay. He rewrote the script several times in subsequent years, but the epic scope of the project always made it impossible to secure the financing.

Following the unexpected box-office success in 2000 of Ridley Scott's Gladiator, film financiers worldwide became receptive once again to films on ancient history. Suddenly, in addition to Stone's screenplay, several Alexander projects were being pursued, including those by Martin Scorsese, producer Dino di Laurentiis and director Baz Luhrmann (whose version would have starred Leonardo DiCaprio), producer Ilya Salkind (who proposed to make a trilogy of films), and Mel Gibson, who was set to direct a ten-part HBO miniseries.

While these competing projects were eventually cancelled or postponed, Schühly joined forces with fellow German producer Moritz Borman to secure the $150 million financing for Alexander. Stone, in the meantime, had been busy picking the brain of his historical advisor, Robin Lane Fox—a fellow at New College, Oxford, specializing in ancient history, who in 1973 had written a highly regarded history of Alexander—in order to complete his screenplay for the film, which began principal photography in September 2003 in Morocco.

Since the goal of a historical film should be to achieve an effective blend of historical accuracy and compelling drama, it must be conceded that Alexander, for all of the filmmaking talent, historical expertise, and fascination with the subject that went into its production, is, at best—considering that it comes from the director of films such as Platoon, Born on the Fourth of July, and JFK—a major disappointment, and, at worst—if you believe the nearly unanimous negative chorus of national film critics—a cinematic disaster. For all its strengths as a historical film—in terms of the conscientious effort on every level to 'get it right,' including some outstanding and memorable battle scenes—Alexander simply fails as a satisfying, much less compelling, dramatic experience. Indeed, Alexander performed dismally at the U.S. box office and generated the most disparaging, even brutal, reviews of Stone's career. So what went wrong?

The heyday of epic historical films running three-and-a-half to four hours, complete with intermission and a souvenir program, à la Cleopatra and Lawrence of Arabia, are, alas, long gone. Stone knew from the beginning the incredible constraints he faced. As he explained early in the process to his historical advisor, "We have two and a half hours, maybe three. I'm going to have to leave out so many events. So we can't do it all—can you live with that?" The film thus recreates only a representative few of the major battles, sieges, encounters, and other extraordinary events in Alexander's life.

Unfortunately, the film's narrative structure shows the strains. In an effort to cram more than thirty years of Alexander's life into the less than three-hour running time, Stone resorted to the expedient but risky narrative device of a "narrator-mediator" to provide exposition and to bridge historical gaps in the narrative. These scenes feature an elderly Ptolemy (Anthony Hopkins), former general in Alexander's army and now, some forty years later, Pharaoh of Egypt, as he ambles stiffly about the Alexandria Library, dictating his historical reminiscences of Alexander. Too often, as a result, we are merely told about events rather than being able to see them. These narrative gaps, in addition, tend to disrupt whatever dramatic momentum or character development the film has achieved up to that point, and the audience must struggle to regain its narrative bearings.

Although the Ptolemy scenes and his running voice-over commentary are obvious story aids and shortcuts, they are nevertheless often dramatically intriguing. Ptolemy is undeniably one of the most important characters in the film, both as a young man in Alexander's story that he is narrating as well as the ageing ruler and historian in the present-day (early third century B.C.) scenes that open and close the film. Ptolemy waxes romantic and cynical about Alexander, revealing as much about his own role as propagandizing 'historian' as about Alexander the charismatic leader of men and his utopian political aspirations.

While Stone has explained that he did not intend Alexander to be merely an "action movie," the time constraints explain to some extent Stone's decision to make his film more of a character portrait than a historical chronicle. As he explained his approach, "It's a great story, but if you go for surface events, it will never work. You have to get into a theme and find the character." Despite his controversial reputation as a political filmmaker, in fact, Stone has always regarded himself as more of a dramatist than a historian or an ideologue, and, as such, he considers his films "first and foremost to be dramas about individuals in personal struggles."

Taking his cue from the fact that Alexander always emulated and tested himself against the fabled exploits of Greek heroes, Stone frames the story with continual references to such mythical figures as Achilles, Dionysus, Oedipus, Prometheus, and Heracles (better known to moviegoers as Hercules). It is also clear from the historical record that both

Alexander (Colin Farrell, right) and Ptolemy (Elliot Cowan) watch as Darius flees the battlefield at Gaugamela in Oliver Stone's *Alexander*.

his parents were significant influences on Alexander. Although he was repulsed by his coarse and abusive father, Alexander was also engaged in a lifelong effort to outdo Philip's historical achievements. His mother, Olympias, encouraged her son in the belief that he was destined for greatness. Stone's portrait of this royal but emotionally dysfunctional family emphasizes what the director calls "Alexander's bargain with his mother," the notion that, like Achilles, it was better to die young but achieve everlasting fame than to live a long life but win no glory.

While classicists and literature majors among the audience will discern the mythological parallels in Alexander's story, many more moviegoers are likely to understand the family's relationships through the more contemporary lens of Sigmund Freud—who attempted to dignify his questionable theories of psychosexual development by naming them after characters in Greek tragedies. In fact, even as a young man, Alexander (Colin Farrell) seems never to have resolved his 'Oedipus Complex,' which culminates in the symbolic slaying of his father through Alexander's drunken murder of the veteran officer Cleitus, who is shown throughout the film as a 'father figure,' and Alexander's wet, sloppy kiss on Olympias's lips and the implied sexual possession of her by his marriage to Roxane, who is suggested to be a sort of maternal doppelgänger.

This mythological cum psychoanalytic interpretation is emphasized throughout either by flashbacks to key events in Alexander's childhood, the long-distance exhortations of his mother via letters, timely hallucinations of his late father, or the voice-over narration by Ptolemy, all of which serve as a running psychological commentary on Alexander. The result, however, is a disproportionate emphasis on Alexander's neuroses. He seems less like Sophocles's tragic hero—who unknowingly fulfills a curse by the gods but whose transformative experiences lead to a sense of self-discovery—than an emotional pawn in a struggle between his parents and someone who repeatedly seems to be weakened, when not incapacitated, by his emotionally sensitive nature. This Alexander too often seems less a tragic protagonist or a world conqueror than a psychological basket case.

While Stone's psychological interpretation of Alexander takes full advantage of dramatic license, the importance he places on Alexander's relationship with Hephaistion hews close to the historical record. Alexander is known to have taken at least three wives and several mistresses and fathered at least two children, but there's no question that Hephaistion, a Macedonian noble whom he had known since childhood, was emotionally—and presumably sexually—the most important relationship in his life. Throughout the film Hephaistion (Jared Leto) serves as Alexander's confidant, the one person with whom he can frankly discuss his self-doubts and political dreams. On a physical level, their relationship is limited to mutual expressions of love and loyalty, romantic endearments ("Alexander, you have eyes like no other"), a brief back rub, and several brawny but clearly homoerotic embraces.

Despite the filmmakers' willingness to portray honestly the homosexual nature and emotional importance of the relationship between Alexander and Hephaistion, the latter's role is rather thinly scripted, his character's primary function not unlike that of the conventional 'girlfriend' role vis-à-vis the straight action-movie hero. He never speaks up in any of the military or political disputes, merely exchanging knowing glances with Alexander, and barely registers in the battlefield scenes. You wouldn't know from the film, for example, that Hephaistion played important military and diplomatic roles for Alexander. Hephaistion's death scene, alas, is also one of the film's major miscues, with his death throes, seen in soft focus, convulsing either the foreground or background of successive shots, while Alexander blithely chatters on about his ambitious plans for world conquest and their future lives together.

It's noteworthy in this regard that the only explicit sexual representation in the film occurs when Alexander and his Bactrian princess bride, Roxane (Rosario Dawson), engage in some comically 'rough sex' on their wedding night, during which the nude and lusciously buxom actress bounces around on the bridal bed. To which we can only say, in the immortal words of Joe Bob Briggs, America's drive-in movie critic, 'Shame on you Oliver Stone…and thank you.'

While the film presents a psychologically complex, and at times quite dark, character portrait, its political take on Alexander is decidedly positive. Indeed, if Alexander *were to be ranked among the many historical and biographical works in the field of 'Alexander studies,' it would be on the highly favorable end of the pro/con spectrum. The film doesn't broach most of the bloodier and more unsavory events of Alexander's military career, and the few incidents that are portrayed—the 'show trial' and execution of Philotas, the assassination of Paremnion, and the execution of the suspected leaders of a military mutiny—are given a* realpolitik *rationale or exculpatory reasoning by way of Ptolemy's voice-over narration.*

Although Stone is widely read on his subject, and is well aware of the more critical appraisals, he has expressed his strong admiration for the work of the most laudatory of Alexander biographers and historians, including William Tarn and Ulrich Wilcken. The film's emphasis on Alexander's utopian dream of blending the cultures of East and West, for example, is largely derived from Tarn's notion that, through his military conquests, Alexander was actually aiming to transcend the national State and to proclaim the "unity and brotherhood of mankind." In addition, as he explains below, Stone adheres to a strict moral relativist position, which refuses to judge ancient historical practices that today would be condemned as particularly savage imperialism.

One suspects that for Stone—as a member of the generation politically and culturally radicalized during the Sixties and whose adult lives have been defined by a sense of alienation from the U.S. Government and most of its political leaders and policies—Alexander functions as a vehicle for his frustrated sense of idealism. He certainly suggested as much in a recent Playboy *interview, in which he explained the personal importance of the project for him.*

"The process helped raise me out of the morass of the present world. It took me back in time to an ancient place where men had higher ideals and strived to execute them. When I decided to make the movie, I thought, What harm can come to me by being associated with that kind of energy for three years. It helped me enormously. It made me more positive, stronger. It may sound ridiculous, but I feel Alexander's spirit helped me surmount huge obstacles."

It's perhaps not farfetched to suggest that many of this ambitious film's flaws stem from the fact that its director and screenwriter, as a serious student of history, was, in a sense, overqualified for the job. Having become, through his extensive readings so familiar with, and personally invested in, the history, the character, the themes and issues, Stone was simply too close to his subject, and thereby as a dramatist lost the sense of perspective necessary to portray him meaningfully for a general audience. Alexander *is a film rich in historical detail, for example, but much of it will be invisible to the average moviegoer or, even when apparent, will lack sufficient dramatic or historical context to be anything other than bewildering for most viewers.*

With the help of the film's Associate Producer, Rob Wilson, we were able to speak with Stone on November 24th, 2004, in New York, on the day Alexander *opened theatrically nationwide, and again briefly in December, via phone from his Santa Monica office, just after he'd completed recording a commentary track for the DVD.* Cineaste *has met and spoken with Stone several times since the late Eighties, and we've always found him to be a lively, articulate, and candid interview subject. He has also always proved to be unusually well informed on the political and historical issues surrounding his films—*Salvador, Platoon, JFK, Nixon*—that we've discussed with him. His passionate conversation with us about* Alexander *was no exception.*

Before beginning production on his latest film, Stone commented that, "If I pull off Alexander, *it'll be the greatest coup of my life." While he may not have won his desired victory, he has certainly stormed the palace in dramatic fashion.*—**Gary Crowdus**

Olympias (Angelina Jolie) and her young son, Alexander (Connor Paolo) in an early scene from Oliver Stone's *Alexander*.

Cineaste: *Many people will be surprised that the director of two critically acclaimed antiwar films,* Platoon *and* Born on the Fourth of July, *has made a film on one of history's most famous warriors. What is Alexander's appeal for you and how do you define his 'greatness'?*

Oliver Stone: The movie is called *Alexander,* not *Alexander the Great,* so the judgment is left up to the viewer, but it's true I've come to admire him the more I know about him. Not only was he a military genius—someone to whom Julius Caesar, Marcus Aurelius, and Napoleon paid homage—but he was also a visionary in the sense that he shook the world to its foundations, and redrew all the borders of the Known World. He was the prototype of the first true mover and shaker, the dreamer who gave a new meaning to the world.

Naturally this sort of personality is going to meet much resistance, but he is far too often underestimated. This is a man who constructed cities that energized the commerce of the world, the first globalist, and I would speculate he probably came to believe in the concept of 'one world, one king'—with himself as the king, of course, as an enlightened monarch, the ideal Greek philosopher-king.

Alexander (Colin Farrell) on his favorite horse, Bucephalas.

In victory, he was magnanimous, often returning territory and including the armies of those he conquered, unlike our own experience in Iraq where we disbanded the Iraqi army. We also underestimate the huge concept that he fused East and West successfully in a gigantic, epoch-altering way, encouraging his army with rewards to give birth to at least 100,000 new East-West children, perhaps as many as 200,000. This new generation, with a new genetic, would serve as the basis of 'Alexander's army,' which could maintain the peace in the new empire. This strategy is certainly founded on a reality, in that Alexander was able to *enforce* the treaties and alliances that he made with those he conquered. Had he been unable to do so, as our modern states have often found to be the case, the moment the alliances begin to crumble, peace crumbles with them. This was never the case in Alexander's successful eleven-year mobile empire. Those who betrayed him met with fierce and overwhelming firepower.

By enforcing these treaties, Alexander created a Hellenic basin stretching from Greece to India, mixing language, currency, and customs. There are so many interesting links in art (the Ghandara sculptures among them), in religion, and philosophy between Socratic, Indian, Egyptian, and Afghani thinking.

Perhaps the most ironic development of all is that Alexander himself became more and more Asian, marrying three wives, bearing two half-Asian children, taking the Persian eunuch Bagoas as a lover, thus making Alexander an explorer of both interior and exterior worlds. He's a man who, if anything, furthered multiculturalism and globalism to a degree never seen before in the history of the world.

What was equally amazing about Alexander was his compassion, which was always noted. He seems to have possessed a softer, feminine side, unknown to kings or generals of the time. It was reported he wept with great remorse for his slain soldiers on his battlefields, and that he reacted with great remorse upon his murder of Cleitus.

Cineaste: *Upon Alexander's death, at the end of the film, you show his generals immediately beginning to fight over his succession, and in a montage and voice-over relate how a series of wars and political assassinations followed, suggesting that many of his accomplishments didn't survive him.*

Stone: There *were* civil wars following his death, but these were political in nature, fought by his generals. Essentially, the Hellenic basin continued at peace for hundreds of years, becoming more prosperous through the nature of security provided by the original Alexander treaties. These trade roads, systems of laws, and enforcement of those laws, were to become the prototype for the Roman Empire with its own 'Pax Romana,' which lasted for hundreds of more years.

In accomplishing this, Alexander propagated the renewal of Hellenic culture, eventually reaching Western Europe during the Renaissance. Those who disrespect him without investigating these facts, also seem to ignore that the world before Alexander was ridden with wars, banditry, breakdowns of treaties because of a lack of central power, and that much of this world was uncharted and without roads. Alexander changed all that, chasing down resistant tribes who had formerly preyed on those who traveled in the Persian Empire. Not to say that Asian corruption was not a continuing problem for Alexander, who generally disdained such materialism.

Too easily, with our twenty-first-century point of view, we also forget that war then was different. Soldiers killed other soldiers; generally, cities and civilians were spared. Alexander was a chivalrous general, a throwback to myths of Homer, who led from the front, suffering eight wounds, one of them near mortal. He severely punished any of his soldiers who raped and plundered; furthermore, he respected his enemies, and allowed them their funeral rites.

But today, war has become such a hideous affair of chemical and biological horror, and remote high-altitude-bombing destruction, wherein populations are destroyed in order to win them over. There is something to be said about letting those who would do battle meet their counterparts eye-to-eye, where the damage in the end is much less. It requires mental discipline to keep Alexander in the context of his time.

Cineaste: *Peter Green, at the conclusion of his* Alexander of Macedon, 356-323 B.C.: A Historical Biography, *has written, "Everyone uses [Alexander] as a projection of their own private feelings, their own dreams and aspirations, fears and power-fantasies." Would you say that's true in your case?*

Stone: Green always used the 'half-empty glass of water' approach, but yes, subject and object often commingle. We know the things that happened during the march, we know generally what kind of character he was. His true inner life we do *not* know. A dramatist has to provide that. I reread the Greek tragedies that Alexander knew well and gained an insight. I probably adapted Ptolemy as a Greek-chorus device in the film. It's interesting not to forget such ancient

Alexander explains his daring tactics for the battle of Gaugamela to his assembled officers in this scene from Oliver Stone's *Alexander*.

devices; I believe one day even '*deus ex machina*' might come back in fashion. So, yes, I did bring to Alexander's life my own view on Greek tragedy, certainly in the sense that his inner life was marked by the effect of his mother and his father, as well as Roxane and Hephaistion. This is a man who, I believe, was *insecure* with these two parents and was looking for the deep bonds of friendship through Hephaistion and Roxane.

There are certainly facts on which to base this dramatic impulse. The parents were both powerful and well-known figures and their civil war was legendary, and certainly I posed it as being at the secret heart of this movie. For this, I think the movie was unnecessarily mocked. I was amazed to find various detractors writing seriously about Freudian impulses when Freud clearly acknowledged that many of his theories were based on Greek myth.

Robin Lane Fox wrote a valuable history in 1973, rigorous in his approach of separating the tabloid Alexander from the real one. What we know of Alexander is *third generation*, based on fragments written by contemporaries that have disappeared, but read by historians, writing more than 300 years later. It was the Romans who reenergized the Alexander story for their own imperial purposes, but his life comes down to us in various other legends, many of them Persian and Arabic, Afghani, and Indian.

Cineaste: *They're not always very favorable legends.*

Stone: No. But for the most part they are. I'm not talking about the Zoroastrian perception, but in other Middle Eastern tales, like *The Romance of Alexander,* written centuries later, there is a picture of a great hero and lover, who flies on magic carpets, who goes to the bottom of the ocean in a bathysphere. He even amazingly appears as a prophet in the Koran. He was certainly admired for marrying an Asian princess, although in so doing, he was politically cutting his own throat.

Cineaste: *Your portrayal of Alexander suggests a lot of ambiguities in his character, although some of the more troubling aspects, such as the razing of cities, are kept in the background.*

Stone: I think we do see the darkness of Alexander—certainly at the mutiny, in the Cleitus affair, and in his behavior throughout with his mother and father. The black marks against him are generally the same—the destruction of Thebes, the burning of Persepolis, the slaughters of India—but again, I don't think Alexander should be held up to our twenty-first-century morality, as it was certainly a far different time and place 2300 years ago, a time with no agreed-upon borders, rules, or United Nations. Yet I believe, in each of these cases, there is a definite motivation.

Alexander and Philip imposed an alliance on the Greeks, and when Philip was murdered, the Greeks broke the treaty with Alexander. His plan was to follow up on his father and invade Persia, but he would probably have been preoccupied for several years dealing with Greek rebellion. By razing Thebes (killing 6,000, enslaving 30,000) he effectively eliminated, with one bold and ruthless stroke, all Greek resistance for the next eleven years, which allowed him to operate freely in Persia without having to worry that the Greeks would turn on his back. What was better in the end? Had Alexander entered into a civil war with the Greeks—something like their Peloponnesian wars of the century before—wouldn't dozens more cities have been destroyed and thousands more lives lost?

The same motivation was apparent at Persepolis. It can be said that Alexander's army, after years of discipline, needed some kind of emotional release, and took it in looting and plundering the major Persian capital that represented everything their revenge was based on; though Alexander later expressed his remorse over this action.

In India, the tribes were certainly slaughtering each other in endless internal wars long before Alexander arrived on the scene. Ironically, although he only partially succeeded in India, he became the role model for Chandragupta, who began, some fifty years later, to unite Western India very much on the Alexander model.

Cineaste: *In regard to these ambiguities, for example, just when you think you've discerned Alexander's ideological rationale for the Persian invasion as a parallel to the latter-day notion of the 'civilizing mission' of a superior culture, he then passionately defends the value of this 'barbarian' culture from the racist criticisms of his own generals. Does your portrayal reflect your own conflicted view of Alexander, or did you simply wish to give viewers more room for their own interpretation?*

Stone: Your question answers itself. Alexander is truly a unique story in that he is the 'proto-imperialist,' according to some people, who goes East in the Greek tradition (i.e., Dionysus, Heracles, Jason, Agamemnon, Ulysses, Achilles, Theseus, Perseus, etc.). The startling difference is that Alexander *stayed* in the East. He did not go back to his home and drain its resources, or bring the queen, the fleece, the glory, and the fame. He stayed in the East because he obviously was on his own path of discovery, such as in his relationships with Bagoas and Roxane.

A further practical consideration was his need to replenish the Army with combinations of Asian troops. It was this new breed of East-West soldiers, Alexander's army, that would presumably have moved into the West against Arabia, Carthage, and Rome, where quite possibly he might have unified the entire Known World under one King—himself. Perhaps a naïve notion to those made cynical by centuries of disasters, but imagine that, as Ptolemy says in the movie, at the infancy of man, *anything* was possible. Who knew then that wars would not work out?

Is it not possible that if you win enough battles you could create an empire that would be secure and strong enough that you would not have more wars, nationalism, or patriotism? So, in answer to your question, the deeper paradox of Alexander is that, as Aristotle says in the film, "The East has a way of swallowing men and their dreams." Alexander, in some way, overreached. I can't tell you when and where and how, but I can point to the questions that might lead to the answer. We will never know the real motivations for his actions because we don't have a living man in front of us.

Alexander, in the end, was probably killed by his own men, in my opinion, because he just had gone too far and there would be no surcease to their own involvement with him. How could they spend their great wealth or exercise their power, except by dividing up this landmass into mini-kingdoms, over which they would fight and murder each other for the rest of their lives. At the conclusion of the movie, Ptolemy says, "The dreamers must die before they kill us with their blasted dreams."

In so many ways, Alexander remains a mystery. We first tried a series of scripts in 1989, when Val Kilmer was in mind for the role. We tried another in 1996, with Tom Cruise in mind, and it's finally been realized now with Colin Farrell. During that time, I've evolved, and at my age I've had a chance to understand more sides of his life, to understand more deeply how one such as Alexander can be so misunderstood.

When I did *Nixon*, for example, I had no particular liking for the man, but for a while I felt as if I was walking in his shoes. Even many people who are critical said that *Nixon* was empathetic, which surprised them.

Cineaste: *Your boldest interpretive step, in a historical sense, has been an attempt at what we might call 'psychohistory,' a psychological analysis of what motivated Alexander's actions. Has that always been one of the more fascinating aspects of Alexander's life for you, or was this approach more of an effort to dramatically involve the audience with the character?*

Stone: I don't believe there's a way to tell this story in linear fashion. I've tried, as did Robert Rossen, who was a great screenwriter—*A Walk in the Sun, All the King's Men, The Hustler*—in 1956. The story of his film exhausts itself in Greece with its thick subplot, so that by the time you reach the Persian Empire it becomes

Having drawn Darius's cavalry out of position, Alexander (Colin Farrell) and his men make a sudden turn left to strike at the Persian king through the gap in his defenses in this scene from Oliver Stone's *Alexander*.

Alexander (Colin Farrell) with his father Philip (Val Kilmer) moments before the latter is assassinated in Oliver Stone's *Alexander*.

a revenge tale, with Alexander exacting vengeance on Darius for the murder of his father, and thus fulfills the Western narrative tradition for the revenge drama. I don't believe this is complex enough for Alexander's life. Only in parallel story can we try to solve this thing.

His life is truly a five-act play by Elizabethan standards, four and a half to five hours. I was seeking to do it in three acts for a modern attention span of two and a half to three hours, and the Empire has to be folded into his Greek origins. I tried various drafts, with many different structural biplays, and have not really settled the issue totally in my own mind. This structure requires a long-term living with.

Cineaste: *Is that why you decided, so late in the film, to flashback eight years earlier to Phillip's assassination?*

Stone: *[Long chuckle]* That is a decision that's come back to haunt me, right? After Alexander's disgrace over his murder of Cleitus, I wanted to kick off the third act with a summation of the power of his father's assassination, to show how it affected him, and to remind the audience of the presence in his life of his father and mother. I think the structure works for some people because it's more of a holding back of the event device. I can understand how others might have preferred more of a linear version, where the assassination occurs earlier, chronologically, and the mother continues to exist as the writer of letters and the father exists as a ghost. It's a question of weighting the balance.

In the DVD version coming up, I'm going to attempt another approach to the same story with a different structure, because I believe it was closer to the original script that I wrote. If this works, it will perhaps be more complicated on paper, but I believe emotionally simpler. The theatrical version will also be reproduced and distributed at the same time. My underlying belief is that both versions can work. I remember mentions of playwrights such as Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller rewriting parts of a play after it had been produced. Composers do the same. Why shouldn't a filmmaker be able to do so on DVD versions and various other formats of the future? It seems that Shakespeare's plays are always being bowdlerized by filmmakers, cut into pieces of their own choice—that's a form of reediting as well. It's quite possible, that given the flexibility of this form, which has moved so quickly from theater to home video, that in five, ten, or fifteen years, if there's any interest, I could make—if I felt so—a third version.

Cineaste: *Olympias spends a lot of time trying to persuade her son to find a nice girl and get married and have a child.*

Stone: When a man entered the public arena at the age of eighteen, he was expected to marry and have children. That's what his mother is telling him—act like a king. The reason she is so adamant about this matter is that although a Greek, she is an outsider to Macedonia—in our version, she has a differing dialect—and realizes that Alexander's very legitimacy to the throne is threatened by her outsider status.

For those reasons, Alexander's decision to take a non-Macedonian like Roxane *ten years later,* as a first wife, is the equivalent of political suicide. Was it love? Maybe. But I have to wonder why he would throw all the chances of his heir away. Unlike the case with Alexander, Philip married Olympias and Alexander was roughly twenty when Philip was forty. By Alexander's calculations, he would have been at least fifty years old when his son would have been twenty, which, considering the way Alexander lived, was highly unlikely.

If I am 'psychodramatizing' the story, as you say, it's because these are questions not answered by the historians. Eleven years go by, but Alexander never brings his mother to Babylon. Why not? The history books don't try to answer those questions. That is where a dramatist can travel, going behind the facts and suggesting questions and perhaps answers that are not normally thought of.

There are three questions I'd like to ask Alexander if I could go back in time—1) What do you know about your father's death? 2) Why did you never see your mother again after his death? 3) Why did you marry Roxane? This makes no political sense, and if his generals did indeed conspire to kill him, one factor would have been

the half-Asian heir that Roxane finally gave him.

Cineaste: *You make it pretty clear that there is some sort of Oedipal thing going on. After he's made love with Roxane, Alexander even has a line, "If only you were not a pale reflection..."*

Stone: "...of my mother's heart." I think that Roxane and Olympias resemble each other in many ways, and then he does 'marry' his mother as Oedipus did, without knowing it, and when he kills Cleitus, he unconsciously is murdering his own father. In point of fact, he sees the ghost of his father in that scene.

Cineaste: *Many critics are hammering you for your portrayal of Olympias. Ironically, although your portrayal is historically accurate—Olympias was beyond 'colorful,' a lot of people considered her quite insane, what with all her Dionysian cult activity, including snake worship—for a modern audience, most of whom haven't read the history, she seems dramatically over the top.*

Stone: Listen, you have to give Olympias her due.

Cineaste: *Admittedly, given the level of court intrigue going on about who would become king, some very primal and frenzied emotions were involved.*

Stone: Those were savage times, not like today, when we basically 'kill' each other, behind our backs, with our tongues. Assassination was a common device and conspiracy was everywhere. By all accounts, Olympias was a colorful character and she was not acceptable to the court. She was a royal Molossian princess whose family claimed descent from Achilles and that's how she raised Alexander. I believe she's the one who emotionally put into his head the notion of living a short life with glorious achievement, as opposed to a long life with no glory. That's why, at the end, Ptolemy says he kept his side of the bargain.

Alexander's mother, Olympias (Angelina Jolie), uses snakes as part of her religious devotions to Dionysus in *Alexander*.

Cineaste: *I realize your portrait of Olympias is true to the historical record, but I would like to have seen her in at least one scene without snakes coiled around her. I thought it was overdone.*

Stone: OK, but I was suggesting that she was a lonely woman, someone who didn't have much company, and they were her solace. Many people have cats, my mom has dogs around her all the time. Bear in mind, there's an historical fragment we know of that claims that Olympias kept snakes *in her bed,* so as to keep Philip away from it.

Cineaste: *Unfortunately it's the sort of thing that, despite being historically accurate, tends to play into movie clichés and stereotypes of ancient history.*

Stone: Actually, I could have gone further. There were Dionysian bacchanals at night, and they even tore wild animals apart.

A French critic told me that the film is like Cecil B. De Mille, which I think is great. It *is* a bit of a throwback. He said, *"C'est vieux, mais c'est moderne."* [It's ancient, but it's modern."], which is a nice compliment. I think we're going to receive a better critical reception overseas than we are in America.

Cineaste: *You seem to clearly imply that Olympias was involved in Philip's assassination.*

Stone: Not really. My take on this is ambiguous. Certainly a lot of people hated Philip and there were many motives. As Olympias says, "It was meant to be." She did however publicly celebrate his death, which must've caused a great amount of scandal. Alexander, who was there, at the *very minimum* had to be suspicious of his mother's involvement—and this is why I pushed the scene where he confronts her after the assassination and asks, "Who murdered my father?" On the other hand, all his passion with her does not work. He cannot in his heart put her on trial or for that matter revenge himself, as Orestes did, by murdering Clytemnestra after she killed his father, Agamemnon, which would have brought the so-called 'Furies' down on Alexander. This is an important concept—the Furies—which I did not go into in the theatrical version, but I will in the DVD version, as well as the 'dust of the Titans' and who the Titans *[the ancient gods]* were.

Darius had a very strong motive for killing Philip because he was about to attack Persia. The Greeks hated Philip as a tyrant. And, somewhat like Oswald in the Kennedy assassination, the bodyguard Pausanias who committed the murder openly had a series of strange connections going back through previous years; and of course there were horsemen waiting at the wall to help him get away. Suspiciously, he was killed by three members of Alexander's inner circle.

Alexander's father was a great, great man who gave him a great army, but, in my view, he was limited by a classic Greek pessimism. In the scene in the cave he says, "No man or woman can become too beautiful or too powerful without disaster befalling them." That certainly represents the darkness of the Greeks and their plays, and it is ironic that Alexander lived out, deeply, the classic Greek trilogy of life as if written by Aeschylus or Sophocles, perhaps even as weird as Euripides. I think of Alexander in some strange way as the 'Last Greek' because he was the last man of that era that we really idolized, who spread that culture as wide as anyone —as if, in the last throes of a dying civilization, he reached down like Prometheus to give man fire. I think of him, although he was religious in front of his men, as a new sort of man who would seek to match and challenge the ancient gods. By doing so, he breaks through the old mindset, and lays open for me a mysticism about himself that has moved many people. Many think of him as a legendary Gilgamesh-type savior in human history, the Arabs pictured him positively in the Koran, and the Persians often saw him as a wildly powerful overlord in their *Romance of Alexander.*

Cineaste: *You often emphasize parallels in Alexander's life with classic Greek mythology.*

Stone: The scene in the cave between father and son sets that tone when we see the myths of Achilles, Heracles, Medea, Oedipus, and Prometheus. Those five play out in one way or another throughout the movie. The boy says "One day I'll be on walls like these," and in following Hephaistion so closely to his death, Alexander kept the vow Achilles made in *The Iliad* to Patroclus. I'm sure he didn't see Heracles coming at him because, after having exhausted himself like this, it's bitterly ironic that the gods rewarded Heracles by making him, in a fit of madness, *murder* his three children! Alexander, by

Alexander (Colin Farrell) engages in a heated political dispute with Cassander (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) in this scene from Oliver Stone's *Alexander*.

turning his back on his son through Roxane, is metaphorically doing the same thing. In a fight with his mother, he says, "You birthed me in a sack of hate."

Nor did he see Oedipus coming in the sense that marrying Roxane was disaster for him. In her unacceptability to the Macedonians, among other similarities, she resembled his mother. In marrying this mother figure, and by metaphorically 'murdering' his father, he qualifies as an Oedipus, with his eyes torn out—"knowledge that came too late," according to his father in the cave. The profound myth on these walls I believe is the legend of Zeus punishing Prometheus because he gave fire to man. The eagle that dominates the film's imagery represents by tradition Zeus, and his mother claims him to be the son of Zeus.

Cineaste: *Eagles were often omens in Alexander's life and you use one here as a cinematic device to give us an aerial perspective of the battle at Gaugamela. The film's battle scenes are particularly impressive, not only because of their spectacular and brutally realistic nature but also because they give the audience a sense of the sheer mass of these armies facing off against one another and provide a clear understanding of some of Alexander's ingenious military tactics.*

Stone: I use the eagle in that scene to represent Zeus's point of view. The eagle at the battle of Gaugamela leads Alexander to victory through its omniscience. Alexander, in his way, senses the bird and has his battlefield instinct of when to shift his cavalry charge and go for Darius. Divine intuition, so to speak. The eagle is seen throughout the film as a good omen, but in the mountains of the Hindu Kush, Alexander says to Ptolemy, "Where has our eagle gone?," implying that their luck is going to run out in India. At the end, when he has won his great glory at the battle of India and has survived and is cheered and loved by his men, his father's ghost appears to him in a loving and approving fashion, which is followed by a vision of the eagle disappearing in the sky.

The next and last time we see the eagle is when Olympias, after Alexander's death, walks to the window and sees the snake fighting the eagle, biting it, and the eagle plunging down to its death—an omen of her son's departure. At that moment, she knows.

Cineaste: *I gather you had a good working relationship with your historical advisor, Robin Lane Fox, but in recreating scenes such as the battle at Gaugamela it must have been frustrating that even such knowledgeable historians and other experts couldn't always give you straight answers on events because they just didn't know.*

Stone: I've read most accounts of the battle of Gaugamela, and I still haven't quite figured out how it happened. For instance, how far out, *if at all,* did Alexander stretch to the right in order to lure the Persian left flank, and then cut back to find the underarm of Darius's center? These are questions that are difficult, especially when you're in the real conditions and riding through all that dust. We tried to give a sense of tactics, especially using the omniscient eagle point of view, and we worked very hard with Buf, a visual effects house in Paris, to create a scale of 300,000 men in a flat, sparse, desert with two civilizations hanging in the balance. But Dale Dye *[the film's military advisor],* Robin Lane Fox, and myself are stretching our imaginations to understand how these things truly worked—and that obviously includes the battle in India where we can only imagine from sketchy accounts of how the Macedonians managed to defeat the Indians and the elephants.

Cineaste: *He often resorted to feinting movements and he used a lot of psychological warfare.*

Stone: Yes, Alexander did this frequently. More than once, he would ride right and then come back left. Given the odds he was facing, you have to disguise your intentions, and Alexander also used an oblique advance as a tactic. It is quite possible that he left a weakened left flank of mostly infantry under Parmenion, which led to a crisis later in the battle, which in turn set up a political problem between the two men later. No question that if the emperor Darius had been captured at Gaugamela, the next few years would have

been of a different nature. Alexander's three-year campaign in Northeast Persia and his arguments with Parmenion's faction grew complex over this issue.

Cineaste: *I wish you had done a bit more with the religious rituals, such as Alexander's slaughter of the bull before the battle of Gaugamela and the priest examining its entrails for favorable omens. A few more such scenes would have made for an interesting comment on the role of religion in warfare.*

Stone: It was strongly suggested to me that the modern audience wouldn't appreciate such scenes. It smacks too much, I think, of the pagan. Another such scene is now in the DVD revision that I'm making, which I think will provoke some interesting reactions. This DVD by the way will be shorter than the theatrical cut, which is interesting, given that the 'director's cuts' are traditionally longer.

Cineaste: *In relation to the second battle, which seems to conflate a couple of Alexander's major battles in India, why did you decide to put it into a forest setting?*

Stone: To do something visually the opposite of Gaugamela. The forest setting would also reduce the huge numbers of extras we'd need. As we know from Kurosawa, we'd enhance the sense of the speed of the horses and elephants when they're seen through trees.

Cineaste: *And you could do a sudden 'reveal' on the elephants that you couldn't do on an open plain.*

Stone: Well, we did have fifteen to twenty trained elephants, with ten more 'B' elephants, so we were really up there. They have a wonderfully rich elephant culture in Thailand, so we didn't have to do much digital, which saved money, although the Moving Picture Company in London did do a great job.

Cineaste: *After Alexander receives a near-mortal wound in this battle, you switch to color infrared stock for the rest of that sequence. What was your intention there?*

Stone: That was Director of Photography Rodrigo Prieto's idea. He wanted to suggest sorts of surreal feelings of Alexander being outside of himself, a prelude to his near-death.

Cineaste: *Were you concerned about featuring only two major battles in the film?*

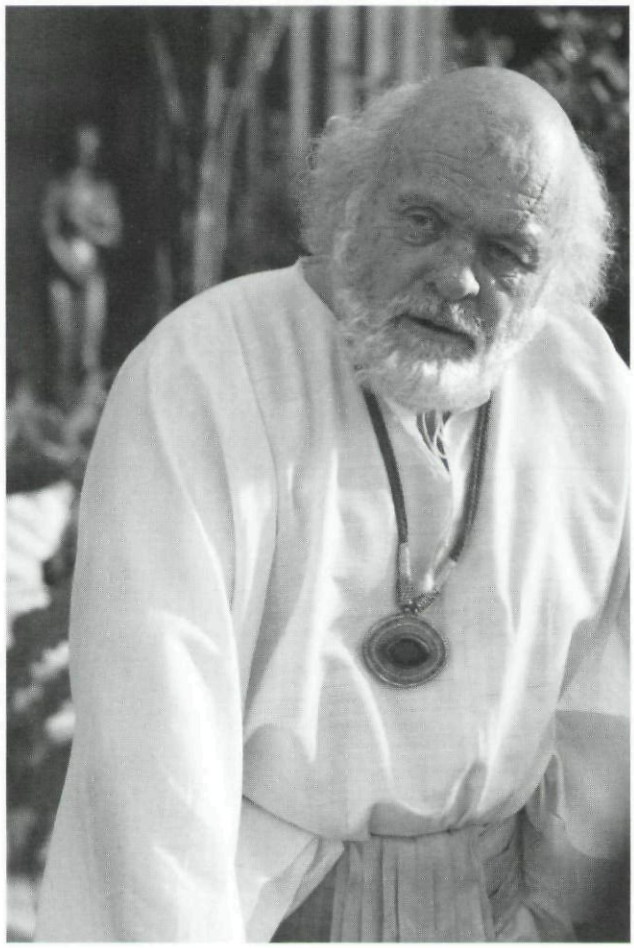
Stone: No, frankly we couldn't afford three battles. At one point the script had three, but I felt that the two battles, towards the beginning and the end, would function as twin pillars for a strong curve of an arch. In the aftermath, in the DVD version, I've significantly altered the structure where the first battle occurs, and moved it up, to make the arch, in a sense, wider.

Cineaste: *Which other battle might you have done?*

Stone: In one version I was going to do Chaeronea.

Cineaste: *That would have seen Alexander getting his first real taste of battlefield leadership at the age of eighteen.*

Stone: That's true, and it was also against the Greeks. The other plan was to do extended guerrilla warfare in the Scythian section. I also wanted to do a real, open-prairie cavalry battle. But, you know, the movie was long and, after looking at films like *Gladiator,* where there was only one real battle, I felt two battles would make a solid movie.



The elderly Ptolemy (Anthony Hopkins), in the Alexandria Library, serves as the narrator for Oliver Stone's *Alexander*.

Cineaste: *I know the scenes with Ptolemy function largely as a narrative device, but I still liked them. In the last scene, for example, he reveals his own unvarnished opinion of Alexander and his dream—"I never believed in his dream, none of us did," and "The dreamers exhaust us"—but then he quickly advises his scribe to record the official, more romanticized version. After all, Ptolemy clearly had his own political stake in perpetuating the myth of Alexander. But did you intend that scene to say more about Ptolemy or more about Alexander?*

Stone: To me, it's about old men looking back at the young man in themselves, the differences between being a dreamer and an idealist, a visionary and a cynic. There's a good deal of ambiguity. Ptolemy admires Alexander, yet at the same time he fears him, and turns on him in the first lines of the epilogue, *suddenly*—"The truth is we did kill him...By silence, we consented...What did we have to look forward to but to be discarded in the end?"

Ptolemy and the others generals all had great wealth by this time, they were the equivalent of millionaires, but here they were on an endless expedition, about to leave for Arabia in a few days. Alexander was onto his Western vision of conquering and exploring Arabia, Carthage, Sicily, Spain, and Rome, and going out the gates of Heracles to the West. It never would have ended for him, whereas these men wanted to enjoy the fruits of their wealth. Many of them, no doubt, resented the fact that they had to split their rewards, with the Asians. Alexander himself was never concerned with this materialism, his mind set on the next frontier to cross. In the mutiny scene, I find him most moving when he cries, "You've fallen in love with all the things in life that destroy men!"

Ptolemy is an enigmatic character, but in the end, by admitting, so ambiguously, to his involvement in the death of Alexander, he confirms his betrayal. And then, of course, as you say, he officially discards this version, telling his scribe, "Throw away all that rubbish. You shall write, 'He died of a fever and weakened condition.'"

I think this is a point of much speculation, and no doubt I am using dramatic license. But through the centuries so many people have wondered about whether Alexander was poisoned by arsenic, strychnine, white hellebore. Poisons, of all natures, were much used in those days, and might well have come from new sources, such as India. The personal history of Ptolemy is another movie, but offers a fascinating conjecture of his motives, for getting rid of Alexander, in association, possibly, with the party of Antipater and Cassander.

Cineaste: *Any historical film, whether or not the director intends it or is even aware of it, will to some extent resonate with contemporary parallels. Our own government is deeply involved in a military adventure in the same part of the world that Alexander traversed, and some would say that many of the same political and economic motives are involved. One line I loved, in this regard, is Ptolemy's voice-over that Alexander would find "Babylon was a far easier mistress to enter than to leave." What's your own take on such similarities? I mean, the film clearly does not push such parallels.*

Stone: It's bizarre that we started making the movie in 1989, as a

Alexander's Macedonian troops must contend with strange new beasts known as elephants in their battle in India in Oliver Stone's *Alexander*.

biography of an incredibly unique man, who changed the face of the world. Then, as the years evolved, and we started to shoot, we found that America was embarking on an Alexander-type mission, to promote, among other things, 'freedom.' But then we are looking at Alexander with twenty-first-century glasses. Alexander was not a materialist, he wasn't, despite any protestations of freedom, seeking to loot the resources of the East, such as oil, and gold, to bring to the West. Alexander is the only conqueror that I know of who stayed with the people that he conquered. To see this multiculturalist as a figure of maniacal proportions staggers me with its cynicism.

Before Alexander, there was a vast landscape of tribes and alliances, in constant warfare, much as it is today, where we have all these nationalisms and patriotisms alive in some sixty or so wars. When will this monstrosity end? Well, under Alexander, this would never have happened, because the point of his wars was to bring all these tribes under one empire—in peace, which in effect happened, because, behind him, Alexander left a system of alliances and forts and cities, that managed, for the most part, to maintain the peace—to build a system of roads, currency, trade, cultural fusion. I think Alexander is much underestimated for this.

I don't think Alexander would have made the fatal mistake Bush did of disbanding the Iraqi army, or of alienating the locals with a lack of central authority and presence. He never wavered in going after a band of robbers or a rebel tribe. He would track down such people for weeks if necessary, even months. He had patience as a commander and he saw the necessity in not leaving an enemy standing behind him. This was his overall policy that was successful through time. I don't think that President Bush ever figured that out. How could we as a nation turn away from the promised chase for Osama Bin Laden, and divert our resources into Iraq? This was fundamentally flawed military policy, which Alexander would have avoided at all costs.

Such questions abound in numerous forms, but I think, more importantly, the film should be seen for what it is. It is another world, another time, another place, in its own way as exotic as *Lord of The Rings* or *Star Wars*. I don't think we should look at it with our twenty-first-century glasses. Leave your baggage and prejudices at the door, and just watch this film, breathe it in, and understand that this was the prototype for the infancy of man, the beginning of a concept of global culture—one world, one king.

It seems so naïve now, but imagine the grandness of that idea then—it was possible. It reminds me, on a grander scale, of the legends of King Arthur.

Cineaste: *The aspect of the film that has received the most press attention is the portrayal of Alexander's bisexuality, which is pretty well documented. This was presumably an effort on your part to be accurate to the historical record, but surely you were aware beforehand of how extraordinarily difficult it was going to be to convey to contemporary moviegoers a sense of the more fluid sexual boundaries of ancient Greece. Alexander's relationships were fairly normal for the period.*

Stone: They were nothing unusual.

Cineaste: *In a very real sense, your film is groundbreaking, especially given that Wolfgang Petersen's* Troy *was very coy about the Achilles/Patroclus relationship. But were you concerned that you might alienate mainstream moviegoers?*

Stone: We adhered to the historical record of Alexander as faithfully as we could. Alexander was not only a conqueror, a builder, but he also had a fascinating blend of masculine and feminine qualities. Many of the Greek heroes were known for their sensuality, for their femininity as much as for their masculinity. Beauty was highly respected, sculpture and esthetics were a part of life, the body was worshipped. They wrestled and ran around naked. Of course, I couldn't do that for public-ratings reasons. But, in principle, we cannot dramatize history through politically correct or revisionist points of view. That's the most dangerous thing.

In terms of sexuality, the word 'gay' really isn't applicable to the

Greeks, they were polymorphous or pansexual. They were certainly more in touch with their bodies. We know Alexander's external record and his achievements, but his internal education is more mysterious. I emphasized his relationship, his search for love, through four people—his mother, his father, Hephaistion, his soul mate, and his wife, Roxane, his Asian princess.

I believe it was in Hephaistion that he found the only person he truly trusted. We sense this from the fact that Alexander was stricken with grief when Hephaistion died. He built a funeral pyre five stories high—I wish I could have filmed that!—and I believe he was so consumed with grief that he never recovered. I do believe Alexander kept his vow, to follow Hephaistion down to the 'House of Death.' Alexander died eight months after Hephaistion, in so doing cutting off his own son's life.

Cineaste: *Did you have to cut any of the homosexual scenes?*

Stone: I wasn't forced to cut anything. There was some Bagoas stuff that we trimmed, but it wasn't crucial and it did distract from the more important relationship with Hephaistion.

Cineaste: *What was the impact on your film of the short production schedule, combined with what seemed to be a race to beat to the screen Baz Luhrmann's competing Alexander project?*

Stone: The biggest obstacle for us was always the script. That is where I spent the most time alone. I really didn't pull the trigger until I felt we had it. I kept writing, of course, even during the editing, but I don't feel we rushed because of the Dino De Laurentiis/Baz Luhrmann project. I believe that their main obstacle was also the script.

There's no question that Alexander's life deserves and could sustain more than one version. It's a shame, but in this business we always have to set one production off against the other, so a lot of people begin rooting for one side or the other to 'win.' It's the uglier

The Bactrian Princess, Roxane (Rosario Dawson, foreground), is first seen performing a dance to entertain Alexander's troops in *Alexander*.

part of this profession. It did hurt us in the long run, in terms of raising financing in this country, but you could also look at it as a force that was impelling us to refine our own project and push it through to its completion.

Cineaste: *What about the short production schedule, which I understand was unusually short for a project of this scope. Was that purely a function of the budget?*

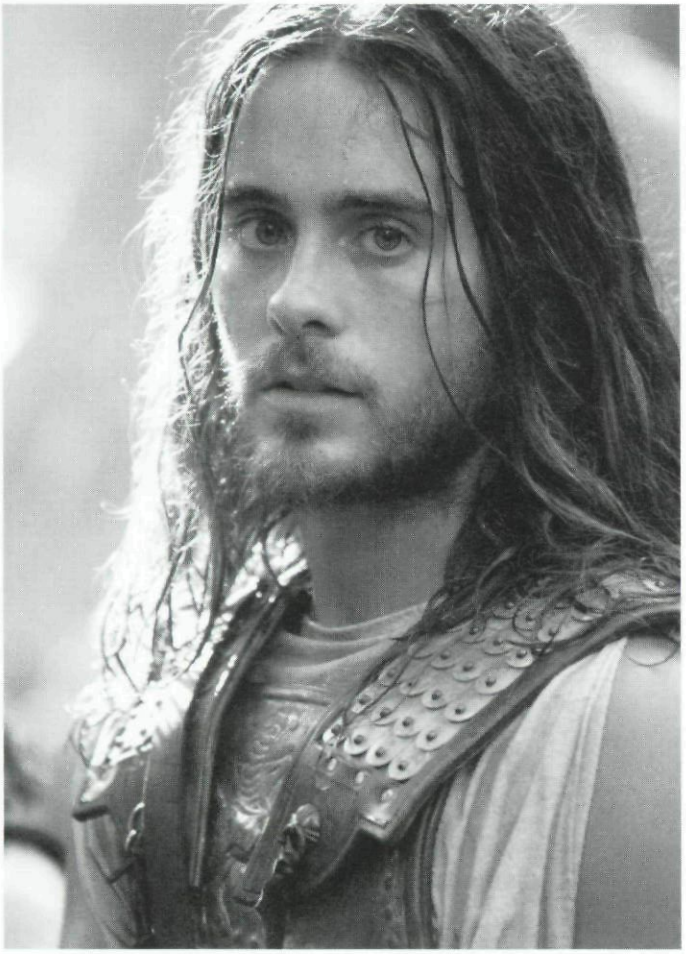
Stone: Yes. Originally I wanted 106 days, which was tight, but I know my pace pretty well. The final schedule was 94 days, and it was tough, and dependent on timing and luck. Ideally, it would have been 110-130 days. The preproduction was the hardest part because we were organizing on the run. We were on four continents and fifty percent of our energy was expended wondering if we'd ever make it through all the financial wheeling and dealing and the other fifty percent was spent trying to concentrate on preparing.

Cineaste: *What kind of impression of Alexander would you like audiences to take away from the film?*

Stone: I think the best kind would be the purest—from the heart—to recognize him as a multiculturalist, a globalist, a man who existed at the infancy of our civilization and gave it a shape. Certainly, one of the most devastating ironies is that the Greeks never acknowledged, in their disrespect for him at the time, that he spread Greek ideas far and wide. In the largest sense, he became the greatest Hellenist of them all. He no doubt read the plays of Sophocles, Euripides, and others, and, with smashing irony that may perhaps not have been conscious to Alexander, he lived them out, and to my mind, became one of the great classic tragic heroes. I hope sincerely that I have done him some sense of justice and homage, and served it up with passion and love.

Alexander's world is gone now, but in its purity, its innocence, its vision of one world, one king, with no borders, peace within that structure, with trade and culture for all, is—cynics to the contrary—powerfully effective, as an ideal that has haunted mankind from the beginning of time. Once we were tribes, hurling rocks at each other. Now, it seems we are again tribes, this time with the capacity of hurling nuclear weapons at one another. How hateful and sad that we have not learned and progressed through these centuries.

I think Alexander would have known and done better. ■



In a breakthrough in gay portrayals, Hephaistion (Jared Leto) is clearly shown to be Alexander's lover and soulmate in *Alexander*.