

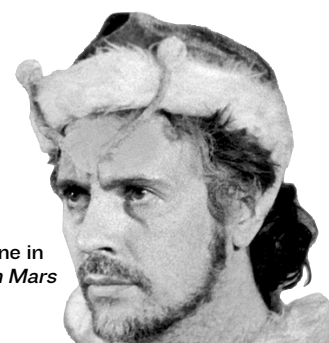
Diversions

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TRAILER WATCH:

What strange, psychedelic mess hath the Flaming Lips wrought? After about seven years in development, three years after shooting wrapped, the band's passion project, *Christmas on Mars*, is set to hit DVD shelves on Nov. 11 with some limited theatrical screenings leading up to the release. The official trailer alludes to sci-fi, Ed Wood-inspired madness with a heavy dose of ... kitsch. Viewers beware: Repeated viewings may lead to some serious contact high.

Wayne Coyne in *Christmas on Mars*



REVIEW | W.

SKIMMING HISTORY, DERAILING THE CHIEF

Oliver Stone's George W. Bush biopic, *W.*, proves neither insightful nor inciting

By ZACHARY HERRMANN
Senior staff writer

It's only fitting the American public should get a simple-minded biopic to match its intellectually handicapped commander in chief.

From its inception, Oliver Stone's President Bush film, *W.* (apparently *Bushwhacked* was already taken), seemed like a losing proposition. With no time left for introspection and even less reserved for editing, the dilapidated look at the president's rise to power and decision to invade Iraq comes out as a second-rate re-creation more than anything else.

This is not so much Stone's seething shot at the titular character in *Nixon* as just a limp trod through all the familiar mile markers we've read about. Stanley Weiser's (*Rudy: The Rudy Giuliani Story*) script has all the telltale signs of topical television drama, pumped out to ensure relevance above all else.

At the heart of Weiser's Bush tale is a lifelong struggle between father and son, apparently the most prominent reason the current president chose to finish Poppy's (Bush Two's name for Bush One) business in Baghdad. While the factual validity is suspect (elsewhere in the film, too), the Freudian battle yields a few of *W.*'s finer moments.

Skirting any inclination toward

Dana Carvey's spot-on Papa Bush, James Cromwell (*Tortured*) delivers the film's best performance. His detached feelings toward George, in preference for the relatively adept brother Jeb, provide the great tension necessary for the whole story (in other words, history as posited by Weiser) to unfold as it did.

Rather than rip Bush (Josh Brolin, *American Gangster*) a new one, Stone tries to paint a psychologically compelling reason for the president's misdeeds. Tackling the incredibly thankless job of playing the lead, Brolin teeters between caricature and a fairly earnest portrayal. If he falls just short of selling the president as a tormented soul, the blame falls harder on the shortcomings of the script.

Close your eyes — or at least squint them a tad — and the resemblance to the real Bush is uncanny. But *W.* loses credibility instantly for surrounding Brolin with a cabinet of failing mimics.

They're all there: Condoleezza Rice (a simply terrible Thandie Newton, *RocknRolla*), Dick Cheney (Richard Dreyfuss, *Signs of the Time*), Colin Powell (Jeffrey Wright, *Blackout*), Donald Rumsfeld (Scott Glenn, *The Bourne Ultimatum*), Karl Rove (Toby Jones, *City of Ember*) and the many others.

Outside of the White House cast, Elizabeth Banks (*Lovely, Still*)

shines through her costars as Laura Bush. All too quickly, though, she recedes into the shadow of her husband's ascension through politics, leaving some pretty compelling marital territory largely unexplored.

While we go through Bush's greatest hits on his path to redemption — from frat-boy alcoholic to governor — Stone takes us back to the sadly inauthentic White House cabinet sessions held from 2002 through the 2003 invasion. In Bush's past we discover very little aside from his laundry list of pre-executive f---ups, all fairly well documented in non-Hollywood channels.

Emboldened by the benefit of hindsight, Stone and Weiser effectively undo most of the pathos they build up for the president with cheap asides and forced Bushisms, none half as clever as anything this side of *The Daily Show*, or even *Saturday Night Live*, for that matter. The utter ridiculousness of the Bush administration circus ultimately loses focus as it lulls into boredom by the second half of the film.

It's not so much of a stretch to see Rumsfeld reduced to a senile coot, Cheney elevated to supervillain proportions or Bush as a man seriously bummed when his re-

sponsibilities become too grave. And maybe that's where *W.* goes wrong. The script plays out roughly as one would expect it to, spiced up here and there with some speculative dream sequences involving baseball stadiums, shattered hopes and an imposing father.

In lieu of giving his audience something they couldn't already anticipate, Stone opts for an inconsistent, off-kilter visual approach. Cinematographer Phedon Papmichael (*3:10 to Yuma*) shifts his focus in and out with an avant-garde touch, often isolating characters (especially Bush) with extreme wide-angle lenses.

Stone and Papmichael have a few worthy tricks up their sleeves. The seamless integration of Brolin into the 2003 State of the Union speech and the notorious "Mission Accomplished" declaration is pretty remarkable. But the gimmick is nothing new (see Woody Allen's *Zelig*) nor a worthy enough cause to carry an entire Bush biopic.

Contrary to the pre-release buzz, Stone has failed to deliver anything too radical or controversial. There's no question about where the director's allegiances go, but cinematically, he's copped out by playing to the middle.

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MOVIE: W. | VERDICT:

