Snowden

Here's a surprise: director Oliver Stone has taken on yet again a politically controversial subject through the medium of biography and—for once—showed restraint in its handling!

In "Snowden," Stone takes on the dramatic story of the national security nerd who outed intelligence agency practices with a massive data dump that left him fleeing the consequences. Edward Snowden, played in a deliberate performance by Joseph Gordon-Levitt, is first shown undertaking Army training—a career he seems to want for himself—before succumbing to injury. Loyal and patriotic, he wants to do right by his country and works as an analyst with the CIA, as a Dell computer expert, and then as a contractor with the National Security Agency, where he becomes witness to the massive surveillance machinations of the Agency after 9-11.

His basically hawkish attitudes are somewhat mitigated by his more radically minded girlfriend Lindsay (Shailene Woodley), who shares with him a quiet domestic life in Northern Virginia. Yet what really gets his attention is the growing NSA reach into everyone's cyber-business, a consciousness-raising that gradually turns to his dramatic decision in May 2013 to flee to Hong Kong and, once there, to inform selected journalists of his data trove. From there, he's a man on the run in a race to outwit his own government.

Again, the surprise is the tenor of "Snowden." Oliver Stone has long been known for his zealous, even feverish, take on political actors (think "Born on the Fourth of July," "JFK," "Nixon," *interalia*), whereas here he tells Snowden's story at a measured pace, with the protagonist slowly, gradually shifting from his patriotic persona to a worried citizen finding his government's actions untenable. This dawning of new awareness emerges most evidently in Snowden's schoolboy face, abetted by his girlfriend's radical bent. Young Wooley does a decent job as Snowden's love interest as the relatively impassioned, earnest foil to Snowden's constrained persona. Characters actors Melissa Leo, Zachary Quinto, and Tom Wilkinson do solid work as the three journalist treated to Snowden's scoop.

Much of Stone's oeuvre, especially in his more political films, had a rushing, pell-mell quality, while with "Snowden" there is time for stillness and moderation, and the slow, almost plodding, reveal of Snowden's monumental decision proceeding at a pace that parallels, in movie time, what might have actually happened to the man. Still, there are moments of Stone's trademark visual flair: for example, in some whirling graphics and imagery blown up from the constantly-present computer screens and consisting often of data streams, models and electronic blips suggesting the almost fantastical world of NSA surveillance files.

While most of "Snowden" was shot on sound stages and sites in and around Munich, the production had some actual location shooting in DC over several days. Locations around the city that give the film some local flavor have Snowden walking on Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House and at Lafayette Square. There is also a shot of the protagonist and his girl walking on the Mall and the inevitable postcard shot of the Capitol (from a distance). Perhaps most surprising is a scene shot on

Roosevelt Island—a site rarely used in Washington movies—but here supposedly standing in as a good place to share clandestine information. One script goof appears that would have been easy to check: Snowden notes at one point that "I'm pretty sure that the State Department doesn't have offices in Virginia," when the agency has for years had all kinds of operations in that state.

(*The film is rated "R" and runs 134 mins.*)

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