Watching The Putin Interviews on the 4th of July

In the late 1990’s, a garish mansion loomed high over Hollywood Boulevard and Laurel Canyon, visible to all in northern Los Angeles. It was said that Oliver Stone lived there, which made sense as the director had just come off a long stream of hit movies. In Hollywood, as in D.C. or on Wall Street, success means money, which in turn means fancy houses, and other amenities. Stone’s films, no matter their aesthetic qualities, usually made plenty of money.

This is to say that when Oliver Stone portrays himself as a Hollywood Outsider, he is anything but. The profit margins on his films reveal him to be a man who not only works in, but has control and influence over the entertainment business. Influence can open impossible doors. Which is why, after six months of non-stop, full-frontal Russia bashing in the mainstream media (MSM), his interviews with Vladimir Putin have been viewed by millions of Americans.

As a Hollywood Insider, Oliver Stone doesn’t just have the clout to go to Russia with a crew and personally interview the Russian President. Better than that: Stone has the power, with a personal brand name, to get his four-part documentary on Showtime. Of course, many of those stuck in the Land of the Free haven’t watched cable for years, but some still do. This means that huge numbers of cable viewers have tuned in to watch Vladimir Putin speak, merely because Oliver Stone is asking the questions. Crucially, Oliver Stone is himself a celebrity, which gives him the opportunity to go on television shows all over the cable/internet spectrum, forcing talking heads, from Charlie Rose to Amy Goodman, to listen to what Putin has to say.

This is a magnificent gift to the American public-at-large.

As last year’s election proved beyond reasonable doubt, the media landscape has changed irrevocably over the past ten years. Interviews that might air once and never be seen again are now permanently anchored on YouTube (or elsewhere), to be watched over and over. It seems that people like me, who dismissed Stone’s early artistic ambitions, were missing the point: The man at his best is a muckracker in the classic American tradition. Stone has made a giant leap for mankind over the gatekeepers of the MSM, and brought Vladimir Putin’s life story into the hearts and minds of ordinary Americans. For all his hits and misses, Stone deserves a Potala-sized Buddhist temple on top of Mt. Everest for what he has done.

Over the last year, many of us watched Bernie Sanders get cheated out of a nomination; We have watched the Russian Federation get accused of hacks (without any proof) that allegedly destroyed our faith in Hillary Clinton’s loveable personality. Some of us encouraged our friends and family to listen to what Vladimir Putin actually says. All of this to little avail, as the national mood went from suspicious to jingoistic on all things Russian.
Once upon a time in the George W. Bush era, there were people who thought that Amy Goodman and her associates actually gave a hoot about democracy and human rights for all people. Sadly, it seems that some human rights matter more than others. Democracy Now! (among other “progressive media sources”) has suffered from a mysterious dearth of information on politically incorrect topics. The Ukraine and Syria are, at best, portrayed in MacNeil/Lehrer-style “both sides are wrong” obfuscation – historical analysis be damned.

In 2014, when the Left was in dire need of unbiased info, DN!’s coverage of the Donbass, Crimea and (worst of all) the Odessa Massacre, was cringe-inducing (and that’s being generous), when it existed at all.

You’d think an alternative news organization would be interested to hear from Syrians or Eastern Ukranians on the ground, especially those not aligned with western spook affiliates or Soros foundations. These days, on DemocracyNow!, you’d be wrong. No doubt this has something to do with the foundations that pay for DemocracyNow! If you seriously believe that “people like you” are funding this media empire, think again. Soros’s Open Society Foundation, widely known for its help in Ukraine’s Maidan square, is alleged to be one of them - and from the way Ms. Goodman talks about Eastern Europe, well, it walks like a duck. In other words, don’t hold your breath waiting for the Saker or Peter Lavelle to be interviewed about Russia on the Amy Goodman Channel.

It was therefore a pleasure to watch Vladimir Putin and Oliver Stone take down these self-proclaimed “Exceptions to the Rulers”, using nothing more than common sense. At the end, Stone even threw a monkey-wrench into their Syria coverage:

AMY GOODMAN: Well, [Putin], like the U.S., is also killing Syrians. I think the U.S., now, -led coalition has surpassed Russia, but they have both been, to say the least, complicit.

OLIVER STONE: Well, I don’t want to get off topic, but, basically, you know, the bombing, the Russian bombing, on the roads against the trucks really destroyed the foundation of the ISIS empire, which is money and oil, shipping through Turkey. He got to the base. Obama bombed for what? Three, four years, didn't achieve anything. He talks about running a hundred sorties a day. The Russians were intense. It seemed to stop the flow, the momentum. As to terrorism—

AMY GOODMAN: Ten seconds.

OLIVER STONE: —you know his feelings, because he comes from a background where there's been a lot of it [terrorism] in Russia.

AMY GOODMAN: We have to leave it there.

Of course, Goodman had to throw in “killing Syrians” -- a specious portrayal of the Russian mission in Syria. Furthermore, Goodman should know by now that Russia,
unlike the United States, was invited to help fend off the Wahabi terrorists by the Syrian Government. In twenty seconds, Oliver Stone revealed Democracy Now’s hypocritical “reporting” on Syria. Whether he intended to do this or not is irrelevant. It’s always wonderful to watch the sharp pin of reality pierce hot air balloons of pomposity. Even better, open-minded viewers saw something they’d never seen before.

To achieve “full spectrum” dominance, Goodman cut Stone short as he was starting to get serious. This was done with the solemn dexterity of a school principal -- If only CNN could do it so well. Nevertheless, the reaction shots on Goodman’s face as Stone moved into “dangerous territory” were priceless.

Apparently, Stone just did the same thing over at Charlie Rose’s PBS emporium. I have not summoned the internal strength to watch, much less listen to Rose’s voice again, so I leave the treasure trove to future explorers. Nevertheless, if we didn’t know it then, we know now: Oliver Stone has guts. It may not have occurred to the MSM, but there’s a large percentage of Americans craving a diet of honest information, rather than fast-food smorgasboards of half-baked perjury.

And the most interesting and honest source is on brilliant display in The Putin Interviews. That is to say, while Stone gives a brave and stellar performance, the real star is Vladimir Putin himself.

It must be said: most Americans have an instinctive dislike for losers. To anyone who’s seen The Putin Interviews, it seems that the last thing the MSM can do with this material is make Vladimir Putin look like a) a loser; b) a humorless despot/”thug”; c) a Fu Manchu villain out to “destroy America” (with giant laser cannon, to be foiled by Inspector Clouseu).

Oh, to be sure, the MSM will try. Rolling Stone just did, in a feeble blog post that reads like bullet points from a millennial on speed with an impossible deadline. And look at the comments below the “article”. As the young ‘uns say: Epic Fail. Faceplant. You can’t stop the music. Putin, in the Interviews, is likeable.

Indeed, Putin, at 5’7”, towers over the entire leadership of the Western Establishment. I hate to break it to the MSM, but the President of Russia has charisma. He looks good on camera. Unlike his Western compeers, Putin looks Presidential. He projects an aura of unflappable self-assurance winningly combined with modesty. You can’t come away from this footage, no matter your political opinions, thinking this man is anything less than a unique and interesting world leader.

For those who don’t know: In his spare time, Putin practices Judo and Sambo and is passionate about wildlife, particularly tigers and horses. He doesn’t drink. He recently took up Ice Hockey, and works out every day. He likes learning languages to
keep his mind in shape. Hell, if anyone can name a single world political figure of the last fifty years who combined these qualities, the Stoli’s on me.

Stone and Putin make a beguiling Odd Couple. Putin, fit as a fiddle, looks Captain-Kirk-confident as he eases back in his chair, to give Stone and his viewers concise lessons on Russian history, world history, the Empire of NATO, and insights about Russian religion and values (Orthodox Christians generally stand up, rather than sit or kneel, in church). Stone, in contrast, looks like he’s been doing an all-night Bukowski saloon tour on Pico boulevard in central Los Angeles. Nevertheless, the two seem to like each other, and their back-and-forth banter never seems forced. (Actually, when Stone starts hyping his recent Snowden movie, jabbing the air with questions about hacking electrical grids, Putin, and viewers, start tapping their fingers in boredom. But this only happens once.)

Stone obviously did his homework. Although his knowledge of Russian history is at first cursory (underscored when he seems to use Warren Beatty in “Reds” as an historical source, and wonders why there’s no Trotsky statue on Red Square), he is willing to learn. There is nothing in The Putin Interviews that hasn’t been said by Putin before, in speeches and interviews going back 17 years. Most of the film follows the Rossiya 1 documentary “Putin President”, which Stone, to his credit, appears to have watched repeatedly. Stone’s unique achievement is to turn an interesting but very complicated story, about nothing less than the history of Russia, into a narrative that outsiders will have no trouble following.

Stone’s film hits all the crucial balls out of the park: Crimea, the Ukraine, NATO expansion, the crisis in Georgia, the war in Chechnya, the Yeltsin Era, the Speech at the Munich Security Conference, Christians and Muslims in the Russian Federation, and the impossibility of survival in a nuclear war.

Most surprising of all are the spontaneous, unprepared scenes. In part 4, for the first and only time, Putin lets Stone take control and “direct” him. Putin plays along, then changes the game around, pretending to be an assistant (known in Hollywood as a “runner”): “Coffee, sir? Sugar?”

It’s a riot. The look behind the scenes in the Kremlin is unprecedented; Stone probably got a lot more than he bargained for.

In another lifetime, Putin could have been a brilliant film director. He certainly knows how to delegate authority and get things done. Perhaps this is why Stone got along with him so well. There are certain jobs that take a certain kind of person, with credible authority, to yell “action” and “cut” and declare things finished.

But finally, it’s the little moments of heart-rending honesty and clarity that offer a glimmer of hope to all earthlings on our dazed-and-confused planet. When Stone talks to Putin about life and death, and whether money can buy happiness, viewers are flung from the madness of politics into the sublime realms of Philosophy and Ethics, which is to say, the stuff that great movies are made of.
On this 4th of July, I encourage all patriots in both Russia and the United States to ponder the scope of what Putin and Stone created together.

The man from the High Castle in Hollywood met the man from the Kremlin. Despite their completely different lives and backgrounds, they found common ground. This message is pure Hollywood storytelling at its finest; delivering the not trite but simple truths: We can have honorable discourse; we can find our common humanity; there is no reason on earth for Russians and Americans to be implacable enemies. Oliver Stone has not only seen this, he’s edited it into a film telling a story that no one on earth can afford to ignore. For the human race, this good news comes not a moment too soon.