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SCRIPTLAND

Writer influenced by Oliver Stone tapped for 'Pinkville'

Mikko Alanne takes on a dark chapter in American history, the My Lai massacre

BY JAY A. FERNANDEZ

Special to the Times

No one polarizes moviegoers quite like Oliver Stone. But he may have found a true kindred spirit in Mikko Alanne, the 34-year-old screenwriter of Stone's next war drama, "Pinkville," about the investigation into one of the darkest moments in the Vietnam War: the slaughter of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai by American soldiers in 1968.

As a teenager in Finland, Alanne was already a history junkie when he had his filmmaking fires stoked in a Helsinki theater by Stone's controversial "JFK." "It really reshaped my thinking about what kind of films could be made and what they could do," Alanne says. "The whole idea that you could, through film, illuminate a hidden side of history and uncover the forgotten heroes and villains of the story -- that hooked me. I entered film school as a very serious political filmmaker."

After acquiring a film and sociology degree at Ithaca College on a Fulbright scholarship, Alanne sent Stone a documentary he had made called "Voice of Dissent," about the 1968 assassination of Robert Kennedy. That got him hired as a researcher for the Oscar-winning director, and from 1997 to 1999 Alanne worked on several unrealized historical projects, including "Memphis," Stone's planned retelling of the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Alanne first broached My Lai with Stone then, and by 2001 he brought Stone a take that would focus on key figures such as the lead investigator, Gen. William R. Peers, and heroic helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson. Stone hired him to write a full-length screenplay, which Alanne did earlier this year with the massacre's 40th anniversary approaching.

"I feel it's mostly a forgotten event," Alanne says. "And while it's a very dark chapter in American history, and probably the darkest hour of the Vietnam War, I also wanted to shine a light on the few heroes that exist in that story that tried to do the right thing and paid very steep costs in their lives."

Though Alanne declines to discuss the story's details, its potential political effect, or Stone's motives, it's easy to imagine why a provocateur like Stone would want to follow up the patriotic "World Trade Center" with a muddier exploration like "Pinkville." The Vietnam War veteran has directed three other films about the war, "Heaven & Earth," "Born on the Fourth of July" and "Platoon," which won the Oscar for best picture and garnered Stone a nomination for his screenplay.

Stone's antiwar politics recently led him to contribute an ad to MoveOn.org's VideoVets project advocating the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. And he bypassed his planned film about the CIA's search for Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan to readdress an event like My Lai in the context of Abu Ghraib and the alleged massacre of Iraqi civilians by Marines in Haditha in 2005.

The director is trying to get the film into production early next year, which would open up the tempting possibility of a release during the home stretch of the crucial 2008 presidential election campaign.