

THE NEW YORK OBSERVER



Stone's Film Shows New York's Heart

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Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* is a spectacular film about New York City, how it wakes up before dawn every day, how millions of people find their way into the city every day—and how it all came to a stop on Sept. 11, 2001. After so much talk about how and why the attacks took place, we now have a film based on the physical collapse of the Twin Towers and the mental horror experienced by the survivors. The film explores the hell that was created when the Twin Towers crashed to the ground.

What makes *World Trade Center* such a powerful film is the way in which it captures both the beauty of New York before the attack, the horror of Ground Zero and the selflessness of rescue workers, who fought horrendous conditions and long odds to save those trapped in the rubble. The crashing of steel, the fires that never stopped burning and the thundering sounds of flying objects combine to create a disturbing experience for the audience, but then it cannot even approach the emotional turmoil and physical pain experienced by those injured or killed at the site.

World Trade Center is really about New Yorkers, and the bridges and buildings—and public servants—that we depend on to keep this city alive. The tranquility of the Hudson River and the grace with which the George Washington Bridge links commuters in New Jersey to the office towers of New York; the packed subways running over the Manhattan Bridge before sunrise; and the cops and firefighters who protect the rest of us even when they cannot protect themselves.

Unlike so many of the television documentaries and magazine cover stories that are now surfacing as we approach the fifth anniversary of the Sept. 11 attack, this film does not focus on the hijacked planes, the words of politicians or the ongoing debate about who should build what at Ground Zero. This is a film that highlights the skills and tenaciousness of the NYPD Emergency Service Unit, the selflessness of the FDNY and the volunteers from all over the

nation who came to New York to help, like the Wisconsin team portrayed in the film who grilled “the best brats you ever tasted” for their fellow rescue workers.

Sept. 11 did more than foster a new sense of connection among New Yorkers. It brought New York into direct contact with the rest of the world in a way no city had ever experienced. The film conveys this when people on every continent, of every race and ethnicity, stop in shock to watch television pictures of smoke and fire from the Twin Towers. Just as New York came to a halt, so did the world. People understood that if terrorists could blow up New York’s tallest buildings, then no place on earth was safe. As Sgt. John McLoughlin (Nicolas Cage) tells his fellow Port Authority cops in the film, “We’re prepared for everything—car bombs, chemical, biological, an attack from the top—but not this. Not for something this size. There’s no plan; we didn’t make it.”

A disaster like 9/11 doesn’t fade away. It has become part of the fabric of this city. In fact, it’s impossible not to feel the pervasive impact of the attacks on daily life in the city. The police cars stationed at the entrance to the Brooklyn Bridge; the harbor patrol boats next to the U.N. in the East River; the cluster of police assigned to the entrances of the Midtown Tunnel; the barriers surrounding the New York Stock Exchange; the massive planters positioned in front of midtown office buildings to prevent truck bombs; the mandatory photo ID to enter an office building; the anxious look when a fire engine comes blaring down the street; the nervous tension when the subway P.A. system announces that there is a “police investigation” at the next station.

And, of course, the absence of the Twin Towers, once visible throughout the region.

So many New York rituals have been generated by the attacks that we already take them for granted. The American flag flies from buildings that prior to Sept. 11 never had a flagpole; baseball fans sing “God Bless America” during the seventh-inning stretch; and no public event is held without a search of bags and packages. At firehouses in most neighborhoods, there are plaques and shrines to honor the firefighters who died in the rescue efforts.

What have we learned, five years after the most deadly attack by a foreign enemy on American soil? The film tells us that in times of stress, New York transforms itself from a city of strangers into a gigantic community mobilized to help those in greatest need. No film has ever done a better job telling that truth about this city and its people.