



Danny Aiello as Jack Ruby firing the fatal shot at Lee Harvey Oswald.

'Ruby': The Likable Loser

By Rita Kempley
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Though rife with audacious conjecture and titillating improbabilities, "Ruby" is far from a clone of "JFK." A wonderfully gossipy biography, it portrays the killer of Lee Harvey Oswald as a has-been Mafia

henchman looking for a way back into the godfather's good graces. It is a curiously warmhearted portrait of Jack Ruby as romantic chump, dog-lover and struggling businessman. That's not to say that "Ruby's" makers don't have their own rather wacky theory on who killed Kennedy.

The way writer Stephen Davis adds up the clues—factual and speculative—the CIA conspired with the Mafia against Kennedy, who was out to dismantle both organizations. He theorizes that Ruby, a bit player with more connections than good sense—simply became a pawn of

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Worthwhile 'Ruby'

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the spooks and the Sicilians by meddling in their dealings. Once a foot soldier in the Chicago mob, Ruby has fallen out of favor when an up-and-coming capo solicits his help in smuggling mobster Santos Alicante (Marc Lawrence) out of one of Fidel Castro's prison camps. After successfully completing the mission, Ruby seems to be in favor with the Cosa Nostra once again, but he is just smart enough to know he's gotten himself into a terrible trap.

Danny Aiello plays Ruby as a highly sympathetic underdog—a Rodney Dangerfield character who gets no respect from the mob dons, the owner of a strip joint who faces unfair competition from the bigger burlesque club down the street. He's tough enough to shoot a man between the eyes, but he still sees himself as a peashooter in a gallery full of high-powered guns. Then he gains a cheerleader in young stripper Candy Cane (Sherilyn Fenn), a pert blonde running from a bad marriage who becomes a headliner at his Carousel Club.

An ambitious kid from Rising Star, Tex., Candy persuades Jack to take her with him to Havana—"Nothing like a fresh broad on your arm to make you look nice," she says—where she is a hit with Santos, who later tries to use her to access the Kennedy bedroom.

But Candy is made of stern Texas stuff. Drawn from a composite of Ruby's acquaintances, she's tough as an armadillo and she isn't about to be used by anybody. Like her friend Ruby, the girl's got a strongly defined sense of right and wrong—even if it's not exactly a biblical one. The love story, a sweetly platonic one, not only spruces up the scene, but also gives Jack a chivalrous side that jibes with his transformation into a sort of good guy.

Aiello and Fenn, who play off each other as comfortably as a father-daughter sitcom team, are surrounded by a fine furtive lot of supporting players. Most notable are Arliss Howard as a maniacally threatening CIA operative and Tobin Bell as the menacing David Ferrie, an anti-Cuban-connected mobster who was ludicrously portrayed by Joe Pesci in "JFK."

"Ruby" is in general far less hysterical than Oliver Stone's drama, perhaps because it was made by Englishmen. Davis's screenplay, which he adapted from his stage play "Love Field," is directed by John Mackenzie, who did the 1980 gangster drama "The Long Good Friday." Mackenzie steers an easy course through the melodramatic plot machinations, which had the potential to be as convoluted as the Warren Commission's magic-bullet theory. In any case, you don't have to believe in the scheme to enjoy this powerful character study cum murder mystery, just as you don't have to believe in horoscopes to read them.

Ruby, at area theaters, is rated R for strong language, violence and adult situations.