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Annals of an Assassin's Assassin

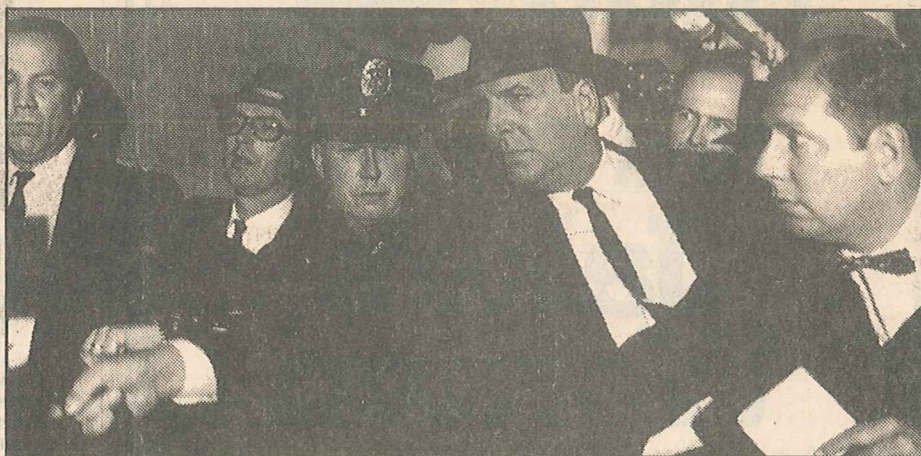
By VINCENT CANBY

AS if heeding the advice of Jean-Luc Godard, who once said that the best way to criticize a movie is by making another, the English director John Mackenzie and the English writer Stephen Davis have concocted "Ruby," which they candidly describe as "speculative fiction."

Unlike "J. F. K.," Oliver Stone's kaleidoscopic consideration of the various conspiracy theories surrounding President John F. Kennedy's assassination, "Ruby" looks at the events in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, from a rather more modest point of view, which is not to say that its imagination doesn't run amok, sometimes deliriously.

With the physically impressive Danny Aiello in the title role, "Ruby" is the story of one of American history's most infamous fringe characters, Jack Ruby, the smallish man who, on national television, shot Lee Harvey Oswald in a Dallas police station two days after Kennedy's death.

"Ruby" doesn't exactly refute "J. F. K." It seems improbable that Mr. Mackenzie and his associates could have seen the Stone film before making theirs. Yet "Ruby" pares down the size of the alleged conspiracy to somewhat more manageable proportions and never overburdens the audience with historical detail. It is an exposé cast in the form of a fever dream. It takes



Triumph Releasing Corporation

An anti-hero enmeshed in conspiracies: Danny Aiello as Jack Ruby.

Ruby

off from truth with the freedom of a poet obsessed with mob literature.

To this end, "Ruby" mythologizes a lot of known facts, which are then mixed with fiction to speculate in ways that suggest the movie has been sniffing glue. As crazy as it is, though, "Ruby" is almost rudely entertaining. It may also indicate that we're

attending the birth of a new movie subgenre, a specific kind of film noir devoted to an event treated earlier as an occasion to prompt sorrow and conventional sentimentality.

Mr. Mackenzie, who made "The Long Good Friday," keeps "Ruby" moving. It's unreasonably watchable from the moment its "Godfather"-like theme music is heard behind the opening credits until Jack's last defiant cry from his jail cell: "You don't

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own me. I'm Jack Ruby!"

Mr. Mackenzie, Mr. Davis and Mr. Aiello attempt to impose a kind of anti-heroism on the Dallas nightclub operator who, in life, was always an outsider, in part because he was Jewish and in part because he was so emotionally unreliable. History's Ruby was known as a groupie to both the mob and the Dallas police, and as a hopelessly self-serving paid informant to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. His tips to the F.B.I. were usually intended to discredit competing club operators.

The film's Jack is a man of psychological stature, flawed, perhaps, but wise in the world's ways and kind to hungry strippers. When he loses his temper, it is because his honor has been questioned. He mercilessly beats up a husky rodeo rider, the husband of his star performer, Candy Cane (Sherilyn Fenn), when the husband calls Jack's Club Carousel "a sleaze pit." Says Jack with authority: "Make that the last time you take out your disappointment with life on Jack Ruby!"

Jack talks like a movie ad. Almost everything he says is punctuated by an exclamation point.

Early in the film, at the bidding of

Ruby

Directed by John Mackenzie; screenplay by Stephen Davis; director of photography, Phil Meheux; edited by Richard Trevor; music by John Scott; production designer, David Brisbin; produced by Sigurjon Sighvatsson and Steve Golin; released by the Triumph Releasing Corporation. Running time: 100 minutes. This film is rated R.

Jack Ruby.....Danny Aiello
Candy Cane.....Sherilyn Fenn
Action Jackson.....Frank Orsatti
Hank.....Jeffrey Nordling
Telephone Trixie.....Jane Hamilton
Diego.....Maurice Benard
Joseph Valachi.....Joe Viterelli
Senator.....Robert S. Telford
Santos Alicante.....Marc Lawrence
Maxwell.....Arliss Howard
Officer Tippit.....David Duchovny
Proby.....Richard Sarafian
Sam Giancana.....Carmine Caridi
Lee Harvey Oswald.....Willie Garson
President John F. Kennedy (Las Vegas)Gerard David
President Kennedy (Dallas)...Kevin Wiggins

the mob, Jack flies off to Cuba to spring a Mafia big-shot from prison. When his Mafia connection orders him to shoot the man just freed, Jack refuses on principle. He shoots the connection instead. In the fictional world of "Ruby," this independent attitude apparently earns him even more mob respect.

Before long, Jack and Candy, whose relationship is platonic (Jack explains that his mind is too full of

business matters to become involved with his stars) are invited to Las Vegas, Nev., to attend a big Mafia pow-wow. Jack is both dazzled by the honor and wired by the Central Intelligence Agency. Sam Giancana and other mob leaders ask him to deliver poisoned cigars to Fidel Castro, while the C.I.A. wants Jack to shoot the Cuban leader with a Government-issue rifle.

Jack, it would seem, is some kind of home-grown James Bond.

It's during the Las Vegas sequences that "Ruby" really goes into orbit. As the movie pictures it, Jack sits at a table in a glitzy hotel ballroom, surrounded by more mob chieftains than have come together since Government agents made their memorable 1957 raid on the Mafia meeting in Apalachin, N.Y. Performing on-stage is a singer who is meant to recall Frank Sinatra. Purely by coincidence, President Kennedy enters and sits with his party on the other side of the room. Almost immediately Candy Cane is invited to join the Kennedy table.

Miss Fenn (who played Audrey Horne on "Twin Peaks") is actually very good as platinum-blond Candy, a fictitious character that evokes several real-life women in succession. When she first meets the President, she seems to be playing a fictional

counterpart to Judith Campbell Exner, whose book, "My Story," tells about her concurrent affairs with Giancana and Kennedy.

A little while later, when Candy is seen performing as a chanteuse in an elegant supper club in Washington, she is a dead ringer for Marilyn Monroe as Monroe appeared when she sang for the President at his televised birthday party. Yet being at the top is no bed of roses for poor Candy. The mob starts to lean on her to take messages to Kennedy, which she adamantly refuses. She's in love.

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"Ruby" is not always easy to follow, especially when it comes to the Kennedy assassination, which seems to be a mob hit carried out with some sort of participation by the C.I.A. The film pretends to an unconvincing discretion as it hints that it knows even more than it can say in all decency.

Officer J. D. Tippit, the Dallas policeman allegedly shot by Oswald shortly after the Kennedy assassination, is pointedly introduced as a Club Carousel regular whose admiration for Candy might have been his undoing. Diego, the bartender at the Carousel, who is Cuban and otherwise uncharacterized, is shown entering the Texas School Book Depository Building on the morning of the assassination in the company of Oswald.

When Jack hears the news of the

assassination, he weeps and moans, "Everything is connected up wrong." He vows "to blow this thing wide open," but he hits Oswald instead.

Mr. Aiello plays Jack as written, that is, with a good deal of energy and passion, though he remains a fringe character even when at the center of the frame. The supporting cast includes Marc Lawrence, who adds a rich antique sheen to the movie as the old Mafia fellow Jack frees from Castro's prison, and Arliss Howard as a vividly creepy C.I.A. agent. Miss Fenn is the movie's principal attraction, but then roles like that of Candy Cane don't come along all that often.

At the beginning of the film, she's just a cheerful, sassy, well-proportioned stripper from Rising Star, Tex. A little later she's playing the mistress of the President. Still later she could be Marilyn Monroe. The character's apotheosis is complete when, at the end, she visits Jack, a broken man, sentenced to death, in his jail cell. Grieving but dressed in haute couture, carrying herself with dignity, Candy suddenly looks like a very blond Jacqueline Kennedy.

The head spins.

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"Ruby," which has been rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian), includes a lot of violence, vulgar language and some partial nudity.