

# 'Ruby': A hit man with low self-esteem

By David Armstrong  
EXAMINER STAFF CRITIC

**T**IS THE season for Kennedy assassination movies. First came the hyperbolic overdrive of "JFK." Now, only three months later, we have "Ruby," a more modest, slightly more successful but flawed film that focuses on the seamy underworld of Jack Ruby, the nightclub operator who plugged Lee Harvey Oswald on live nationwide TV.

Danny Aiello plays Ruby as a fleshy, blustery fellow who wants to make the big leagues but is a god-hit, no-field guy. Running the dumpy Carousel Club in Dallas, he hangs out with hoods and other low-lives — familiar figures from Ruby's youth in Chicago, where Stephen Davis' screenplay puts him as a mob hitman.

Davis, adapting his play "Love Field," characterizes Ruby as a thwarted idealist in reduced circumstances. Then Davis adds a pop-psych overlay: Ruby suffers from low self-esteem. He doesn't feel good about himself. He needs

to prove himself.

Coincidentally, that's just how Ms. Candy Cane ("Twin Peaks" Sherilyn Fenn) feels. Meeting at a streamlined hot-neon bus station eatery late one night, Ruby befriends Candy, who is running from an abusive husband. They go home together, but theirs seems to be a platonic love. He's poppa to her naughty but nice girl.

Fenn, a platinum blonde for the role, gives Candy sexy pouts and confiding smiles, à la Marilyn Monroe, evidently one of the models for her composite character.

The others, I'd wager, are the stripper Candy Barr and the mob moll Judith Exner, with whom John F. Kennedy became — as they say — romantically involved.

But while she's based on real people, Candy Cane is a made-up love interest for Ruby. Amazingly, the filmmakers didn't think the historical Ruby's assassin's role was dramatic enough to drive a movie. But, hey, that's Hollywood.

Davis' and director Jack MacKenzie's dramatic license extends to scenes that depict Candy Cane meeting JFK in Vegas, Ruby rubbing out a mob boss in Havana, and the mob and CIA conspiring to take out Fidel Castro. Eventually, these malignant forces, joined by anti-Castro Cuban exiles — one of whom just happens to tend bar at the Carousel — kill JFK.

The actual Jack Ruby maintained he killed Oswald to spare Jackie and the kids the stress of a trial. The movie Ruby does it because he wants to call attention to the conspiracy that offed JFK. In the end of this intriguing but uneven movie, Ruby is shown as an unwilling medical guinea pig for prison officials who won't allow

## MOVIE REVIEW

### 'Ruby'

► **CAST:** Danny Aiello, Sherilyn Fenn, Arliss Howard

► **DIRECTOR:** John MacKenzie

► **WRITER:** Stephen Davis, based on his play "Love Field"

► **RATED:** R

► **THEATERS:** Kabuki 8, Century Plaza 8

► **EVALUATION:** ★ ★



Danny Aiello as Jack Ruby, second from right, points a gun at Lee Harvey Oswald (unseen) in "Ruby."

him to spill what he knows.

"Ruby's" conspiracy theory is not as over-the-top as "JFK's" — where everyone, including you and me — killed JFK. As such, it's more plausible than its megabuck predecessor.

But the acting in "Ruby" — Fenn's affecting Candy excepted — is as overplayed as anything in "JFK." Aiello, who invested the stick-figure he was signed to play

in "Do the Right Thing" with a smidgen of humanity, isn't as successful with Ruby, despite the script's psychological jargon. Mostly, he rants and raves.

Other touches peculiar to our time throw off the movie, an art-director's fantasy of murky shadows and dream-of-the-early-'60s horn-rimmed sunglasses and vulgar cars. Some of the men wear trendy, '90s-style stubble and baggy clothes

that make it look as though the filmmakers think this is the way the '60s should have been.

More damagingly, Arliss Howard's CIA agent is much too fey, arch and knowing. He's a retro hipster who ensures that his scenes with Aiello-as-Ruby don't ring true. "Ruby," through design or accident, frames the assassinations as stylish entertainment, not complex politics or history.