

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Politics and Thrills

THE other new assassination film—"Executive Action," a fictionalization of how President Kennedy *might* have been the victim of a large-scale right-wing plot—is so graceless it's beyond using even as a demonstration of ineptitude. The failures of "The French Conspiracy" are the result of commercialization and so are instructive; the failures of "Executive Action" might be the result of sleeping sickness. In this account, the big, big businessmen who plot Kennedy's death find an Oswald look-alike in order to frame Oswald—for reasons no one will ever understand. The picture, written by Dalton Trumbo from a story by Donald Freed and Mark Lane, and directed by David Miller (the low-budget Richard Fleischer), ends in perhaps the most ludicrous dénouement in thriller history. We are presented with the faces of eighteen "material witnesses" who, we are told, have died, against odds of "one hundred thousand trillion to one." But the movie has failed to introduce those witnesses into the action; we haven't discovered what a single one of them witnessed or how he happened to get involved, so the end is as flat as the beginning and the middle. It's a dodo bird of a movie, the winner of the "Tora! Tora! Tora!" prize—in miniature—for 1973, with matchlessly dull performances from a cast that includes Burt Lancaster (looking very depressed), Robert Ryan, and Will Geer. "Executive Action" could hardly be called a thriller, and it's so worshipful of Kennedy (while treating him insensitively) as to seem to have no politics. David Miller, whose direction is merely halfhearted traffic management, has made a couple of dozen movies (such as "Love Happy," "Captain Newman, M.D.," "Hail, Hero!," and, with Trumbo, the thickly ironic,

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overrated "Lonely Are the Brave"), so he doesn't even have the freshness of amateurism. His approach appears to be low-key not by choice but by default; he gives no inkling that he has seen what other directors have been doing lately in the political-thriller form. "The French Conspiracy" is bad, but it isn't stone-dead on the screen; it's bad because it's an ersatz political thriller. One can at least perceive what it aspires to be.