

The New York Times

ARTS AND LEISURE

A Shabby Fiction About JFK

By VINCENT CANBY

DAVID MILLER'S "Executive Action," with a screenplay by Dalton Trumbo based on a story by Donald Freed and Mark Lane, suggests flatly (or better, perhaps, states equivocally) that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated not by a single crackpot, who also happened to be an extraordinarily lucky shot, but by three professional gunmen working with the kind of precision that was totally lacking at the Bay of Pigs.

These gunmen, according to the film,

were in the pay of a group of political conspirators—wealthy, influential members of the military-industrial complex who feared that JFK was going to sign a test-ban treaty, pull out of Vietnam and lead a black revolution.

The movie gives these conspirators fictional names and they are played by actors of the stature of the late Robert Ryan, Burt Lancaster and Will Geer. The movie also embraces the "two Oswalds" theory: The real Oswald was a patsy who was set up by a man impersonating him

on several conspicuous occasions, as when the fake Lee Harvey Oswald goes into a gun shop and asks to have his telescopic sight fixed in a hurry. "I may need it any day now," he announces as loudly as he announces his name.

The movie uses a lot of newsreel clips of JFK, before, during and after the assassination, and of Oswald distributing Fair Play for Cuba literature and at Dallas police headquarters, including his assassination by Jack Ruby. It also uses

Continued on Page 37

Continued from Page 1

simulated newsreel footage and employs an actor to play Jack Ruby in those scenes needed to establish the movie's contention that Jack Ruby was linked to the conspiracy.

"Executive Action" doesn't say that this is really what happened. It says only that this is what could have happened, and that what is presented on the screen jibes with accepted facts.

*

However, even to people who are prepared to accept some sort of conspiracy theory, including myself, this manner of fiction simply isn't good enough. In spite of the rather pious, unexciting, low-keyed professionalism with which "Executive Action" has been put together, it is fiction of a gross and shabby order. Because it cannot say that this is true, the only point of the film is to raise the ques-

tion of possibility. Having done that, which it does very quickly, it reduces one of the most turbulent events in American history to the dimensions of routine melodrama. This sort of thing seems very sad, if not reckless. We cut from a newsreel clip of JFK playing with his children, or giving a speech at the United Nations, to a meeting of the conspirators (the sort of men who drink bourbon and branch water), then to a rifle range in some lonely western reserve where the assassins are practicing on wax dummies that have been placed in an open limousine.

In an introduction to the Dell paperback edition of the Freed-Lane novel, Professor Richard H. Popkin of the University of California at San Diego makes a rather fascinating presentation of the reasons why Americans don't want to accept conspiracy theories, why our political as-

sassins are quickly labeled "nuts" and forgotten, although we are endlessly fascinated by big crime conspiracies and can hardly wait to read the latest in-depth study of some thrill killer. It is Prof. Popkin's theory that we don't want to be made uncomfortable by the awful thought that we might, after all, be living in the biggest banana republic of them all, unaware of the people in actual control of us.

He points out, correctly, I believe, that the Watergate revelations may have made many Americans receptive to the idea that conspiracies can and do exist at high levels of power and influence in the United States. But that is hardly justification for the bogus history offered by "Executive Action," the heavily-footnoted novel as well as the over-simplified film.

*

It's worse than the old You

Are There television series. It is, instead, You Are There If It Ever Happened This Way. This is a waste of time considering all of the facts that are available still to be checked out, studied or collated, including a bit of information I'd never known before.

According to the professor,

Aristotle Onassis's ex-butler reported that the Greek financier put a team of private detectives on the assassination case and in 19 months came up with the names of the "real" killers, information that now is locked in an Onassis safe in Greece. The publication of the information was, says the butler, squelched by an anonymous telephone caller who threatened Mrs. Onassis that publication would result in harm to her and her children.

It's one of the pitfalls of this kind of investigation that one gets so easily bogged down in peripheral details. When I read about the butler's story, my first thought had to do with the likelihood of Mrs. Onassis's ever taking anonymous phone calls, and if she didn't take this one, did she receive a discreet note from the butler, in writing or verbally?

*

As many non-essential as essential questions are raised by "Executive Action." It adds nothing of value to our knowledge about the assassination, and in some ways it distorts the time in which it occurred. Could JFK's public statement that he hoped to bring 1,000 men home from Vietnam by Christmas have triggered such a massive conspiracy? Somehow I doubt it.

Another fact-fiction film opened recently, the French-

made "The French Conspiracy," and although it doesn't take the liberties that "Executive Action" does, it's no better as a movie.

"The French Conspiracy" is a botched attempt at the sort of movie that Costa-Gavras has made into his own art. As did Costa-Gavras in "Z," "The Confession" and "State of Siege," Yves Boisset, the director of "The French Conspiracy," has taken a public event, in this case it's the kidnapping and disappearance of Mehdi Ben Barka, the Moroccan leftist opposition leader, from Paris in 1965.

The subsequent investigation revealed that not only had members of the French police and one of the French intelligence agencies conspired with Moroccans in the abduction, but also members of the French underworld, who were on chummy terms with the intelligence people (they attended each other's weddings, among other things).

*

The material is fascinating, but Boisset and Jorge Semprun, who wrote "Z" and "The Confession" for Costa-Gavras, have turned it into hash that is sometimes unintentionally hilarious. It means to take its political points of view seriously, but the exposition is so complicated as to be virtually unintelligible.

One can't even get too excited rooting for the good guys against the bad guys (don't worry why they're good or bad, just trust the movie) when the film is so oddly staged that, in a moment of high drama, when Jean Seberg is telling her man that she loves him, she almost gets her nose caught in the closing of the door of a subway car.