

THE DALLAS DOUBT

Movie's Fact And Fiction Forms a Plot

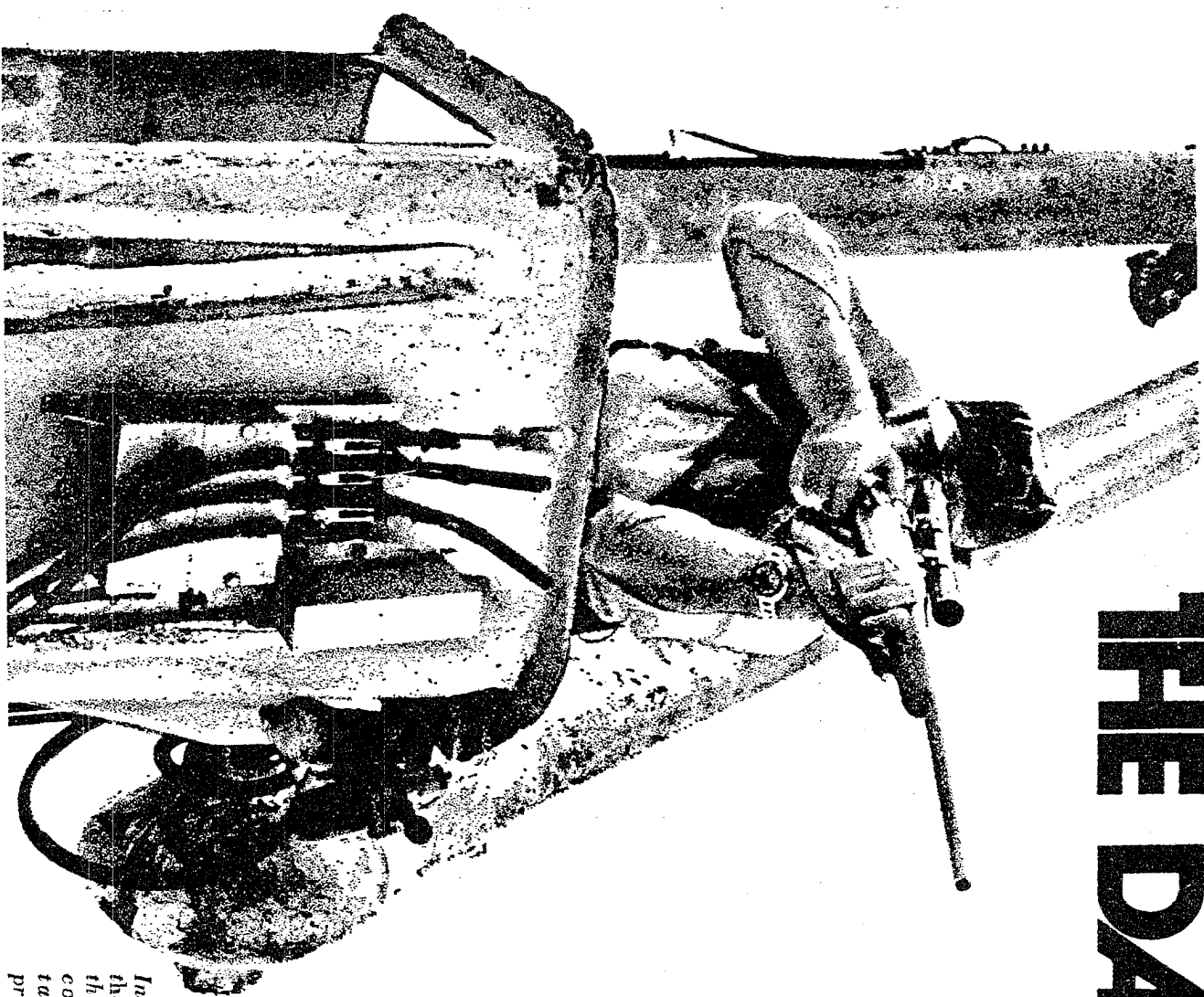
killed Kennedy, doubts have been kept alive by books, articles, endless debate and an officially discredited case brought by James Garrison, New Orleans district attorney. Now, comes "Executive Action," a National General Pictures release opening tomorrow at the Coronet Theater in Manhattan.

The film itself is innovative, creating what producer Edward Lewis considers a new art form by combining documented fact and news footage with dramatized speculation and some fiction. The fictitious conspirators, portrayed as right-wingers of great wealth, power and dignity, are played by Burt Lancaster, Will Geer and Robert Ryan, who died of cancer shortly after the film was completed. The base of their operations is supposed to be a mansion somewhere in Virginia.

"Executive Action" theorizes that the conspirators, whoever they were, feared a Kennedy dynasty, which included brothers Robert and Edward. It was a fear, according to the story, based on the belief that Kennedy policies posed a threat to the conspirators' hold on the economy. The thesis is that Oswald was a patsy and the actual shooting was done by others.

"Though we have fictitious conspirators," Lewis says, "when we talk about intelligence agencies, everything is based on fact. We make no claims that any agencies specifically were involved. However, we indicate that the conspirators have access to the FBI and CIA because they are veterans of those organizations and I think that's very true in real life."

Skeptics may interpret this latest a-conspiracy-did-it venture as an effort to exploit the Watergate climate of official misdeeds and conspiracy—a climate that happens to coincide with the 10th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination. And they may be forgiven a moment's cynicism in light of the fact



In a scene from the film, one of the fictitious conspirators takes target practice.

By Leo Seligson

Ten years after the assassination of President Kennedy, the conspiracy theory will not die.

Despite the Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald alone

saved some of riskiest shooting for last. In Dallas, for example, we 'stole' some important shots at the last minute. We certainly weren't about to go through the Dallas police for clearance."

Nevertheless, Lewis says that he and others received phone threats from anonymous callers during the filming: "One voice said we'd never finish the picture. Another caller warned that the negative would be destroyed. Some of my colleagues said I was paranoid but I've never allowed this film to be left in the lab. It's always been kept in special, unconventional storage."

The publicity value of such statements notwithstanding, Lewis brings to this latest project a record of no-nonsense competence in producing films like "Spartacus," "Lonely Are the Brave," "Seven Days in May" and "The List of Adrian Messenger." Beyond this, great pains have been taken to verify and attribute facts used in the film.

Most impressive is the printing of 5,000,000 copies of an eight-page bibliography to be distributed to theatergoers wherever the picture plays. It gives the source for every factual statement made in the film.

For Lewis and others, the making of "Executive Action" became something of a mission. "For the first time in my career, I took no fee as a producer," he says. "We put everything into the picture to make it a top theatrical release. . . . All the creative people worked for scale—the stars, the director [David Miller]; the screenwriter [Dalton Trumbo] and the crew.

"I saw this as a great chance to make an important statement in dramatic form: That we mustn't take official statements as gospel. I always felt the more pressure there was on people to tell the truth, the better off we'd all be. And the thing here is that we know that the official line was bull.

"There has to have been a conspiracy. It was patently impossible for one man to have done what Oswald is supposed to have done."

Lewis didn't always feel that way. When the material for the film originally was brought to him by actor Donald Sutherland, Lewis says, he was very skeptical. "The idea of a conspiracy seemed childish," he says. After researching the subject, he changed his mind.

Others connected with the picture underwent the same metamorphosis. Lancaster, says, "I

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that "Executive Action" is coming to you from the same folks who brought you "The Second Gun."

That recent documentary presented the view that the bullet that killed Robert Kennedy very likely was fired by someone other than convicted assassin Sirhan Sirhan. Apparently, that film moved nobody but Sirhan's attorney, who moved to reopen the case.

At National General Pictures, a spokesman says that the company is not on a Kennedy binge and that the release of both films within months of each other is a coincidence.

Yet, the company has been accused of sensationalism. All of that may seem unfair to "Executive Action." "I've been baited. It's been said that we're exploiting Watergate but it's not true. Work on 'Executive Action' began before Watergate," says Lewis. In addition to the sniping, there have been other problems, although efforts were made to avoid them by shooting the picture in secrecy.

"We moved around to more than 90 locations," Lewis says. "The shooting schedule, the locations and other details were closely guarded. And we



The film's version of the assassination. Many scenes were shot secretly.

Movie mixes fact and fiction

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struggled with whether I should do this kind of thing or not since I was impelled to want to do it for reasons of being an actor and because it was a very fine, tightly and effectively written script."

He read everything he could on the assassination. "The more I read, the more I discovered there was a very strong probability that [the assassination] was part of a conspiracy and the film was therefore worthwhile in order to give people an opportunity to really address themselves to a problem which had sort of slipped by the American conscience and just lay dormant in the background."

Screen writer Dalton Trumbo initially turned down an invitation to write the screenplay. It was hardly fear of controversy. As one of the Hollywood 10 of the McCarthy era, Trumbo was sentenced to a year in federal prison for refusing to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947.

Reestablished today as a leading Hollywood film writer, he says: "I always felt it was too easy to blame things on conspiracy. Consequently, I'd never put much stock in the notion that President Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy.

"What really convinced me that we had a factual basis for representing a conspiracy was the Zapruder film [eight-mm. film of Kennedy's assassination taken by a spectator and now owned by Time Inc]. The public has never seen the uncut version, which is a shocking convincer. It clearly shows that Kennedy was hit from two different directions. If that's the case, there must have been at least two assassins—hence, a conspiracy.

"Everything we show about Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby is right out of the Warren Commission's evidence. Everything that appears in the film regarding the rifle's inability to do what it

was supposed to have done by Oswald's hand is based on fact. Everything about the lack of security in Dallas is completely factual.

"When we note that the Dallas district attorney claimed that Oswald worked for the FBI, the source of that is Rep. Gerald Ford [vice presidential designee] who has been the CIA's advocate in Congress for a long time."

Other facts came unexpectedly, sometimes at the last minute. "I was stunned," Lewis says, "to find out after the film was completed that President Johnson had never accepted the official version of the assassination. He had made a remark to that effect during a taped interview with Walter Cronkite but it was edited out for airing [at Johnson's request] and became known only after Johnson's death. When we discovered it, we changed our opening narrative and worked it in." (The incident is mentioned in the book "The Politics of Lying" by David Wise. Cronkite and Richard Salant, president of CBS News, objected to the deletion, but interview ground rules gave Johnson the right to censor his remarks.)

In developing the final screenplay, Trumbo leaned heavily on two books: Josiah Thompson's "Six Seconds in Dallas" and "Accessories to the Fact" by Sylvia Meagher. He and Lewis had rejected the original story, written by Mark Lane and Donald Freed, deciding that it went too far. "Many of its statements could not be supported by fact," Lewis says.

Beyond the movie's potential dramatic impact, Lewis thinks it possible that it could rouse the public to demand a reopening of the inquiry into Kennedy's death. "A year ago, our big problem would have been credibility. Who would have believed in a criminal political conspiracy in the U.S.? But the events of Watergate have made us see that this sort of thing is possible."

At the same time, Lewis is readying himself for possible cries of indignation. "I'm bracing myself," he says. "I'll be attacked by both sides. The left probably will say we don't go far enough, that we should come out and say that the CIA did it. The right wing certainly is not going to be happy because we present a right-wing conspiracy.

"Oh, I know I'm going to be attacked. But I hope, at least, that we'll be applauded for presenting a new art form." / III