

NO CONSPIRACY HERE Newsday 4/2/98

Oliver Stone's bio on King and Kennedy sticks to emotions

HERE'S AN academic question to chew over this morning: How should a filmmaker treat an authentic American hero like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? And now, a trick question: How should a filmmaker like Oliver Stone treat him?

The question is tantalizing because, well, we all know how Stone paints his sprawling biographical portraits: a little bit of fact here, a touch of conspiracy theory there, a fabricated scene or two . . . In fact, Stone is developing a King biopic for Warner Bros. — tentatively titled "Memphis" — and there were even reports a couple years ago that Cuba Gooding Jr. would play the lead.

But for now, we must content ourselves with "Assassinated: The Last Days of King and Kennedy," which will air Sunday on TBS (9-11 p.m.). "Assassinated" marks Stone's first foray into the world of TV documentaries — a milestone which, in itself, would be enough to send some TV news purists into red alert.

But rest assured. There are no conspiracy theories here. No fabrications. No hanky-panky. "Assassinated" knits together two of the great tragedies of 1968, King's death on a motel balcony on April 4, and Robert Kennedy's death in a hotel kitchen two months later. Oscar-winning documentary directors Bill Guttentag and Vince DiPersio have assembled on-camera interviews — some extraordinarily moving — of family, friends and associates of both. Viewers will also see plenty of footage, culled from 50 different sources. Overall, the tone is reverential, if, at times, swooning.

Unfortunately, little — if anything — new has been added to these oft-told stories. But then that was the idea. "The first thing we did was to look at all the films that have been done on the last days, and then ask 'what can we add to the history?'" says DiPersio. "I guess we felt that everyone knew the history but didn't know the emotional toll. That became our focus."

But what is King-related off-camera is equally intriguing. This production is a co-venture between Stone's company, Illusion Entertainment, Zaloom-Mayfield Productions, and Turner Original Production, a unit of Time Warner. Early last year, the King family signed a multimedia deal with TW believed to be worth as much as \$50 million. At the time, the deal was harshly criticized by some who believed it was an affront to King's own aversion to personal financial gain. And by signing this deal, the critics also charged, the King family was effectively prohibiting many people — including news organizations — from using the images of King himself, as well as outtakes from his speeches. Hackles were raised over this because — of course

— many people believe King belongs to the ages, and should not be used to fatten the bottom line of the media conglomerate.

All parties say that "Assassinated" is not related to the Time Warner deal. Yet what is amply clear is that Turner, Stone, and the King estate have established a comfortable (and presumably profitable) working arrangement that has been barred to others. Two years ago, the King estate sued CBS News and USA Today for unauthorized use of the words and images of Martin Luther King, which, the estate argued, were copyrighted material; CBS News' "Twentieth Century with Mike Wallace" (which airs on

A & E) had used outtakes from the "I Have a Dream" speech without permission, and the King estate promptly sued. The lawsuit remains in the courts.

And yet another intriguing angle: Phillip Jones, who oversees the estate's licensing agreements, via Atlanta-based Intellectual Properties Management, is also an executive producer of the TBS special.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of this, and the benefit to viewers is obvious: They will see some powerful interviews, particularly with Coretta Scott King, as well as some extraordinary footage, most notably of the speech King gave the night before he was killed.

But one is also left with the unsettling thought that Stone — who is making a movie that will presumably incorporate some of the assassination conspiracy theories that the King family has embraced — is getting preferential treatment, while others — particularly those engaged in more rigorous journalistic pursuits — are getting the shaft.

And yet another question: Did Stone shun journalistic inquiry in this portrait because of his financial ties to the estate? Clearly Stone (who declined to be interviewed) is not a journalist, nor is he trying to be one. Nevertheless, there is not even a suggestion that a conspiracy might have taken place, which was the subject of

a full edition of "48 Hours" two weeks ago (and a recent rebroadcast of ABC's News "Turning Point.")

Jacoba Atlas, vice president and supervising producer for Turner Original Productions, says that "we decided we couldn't pursue those things because we are not a news venue . . ." Stone, she adds, "never wanted to do 'who killed Kennedy or King.' That was never the intent. Even though he's so identified with conspiracy, he's also a history buff. He loves that, and that's what was feeding this project."

Finally, one little irony. "Assassination" makes extensive use of CBS News footage, including news reports of the day anchored by Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather. ■

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Photo courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Library

Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy