

# M.M. & R.F.K.: Dream Affair, or Just

■ **The controversy:** Critics, including Kennedy family members, are lambasting 'Marilyn & Bobby' as reckless, but the executive producer defends his approach.

By STEVEN HERBERT  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Unlike filmmakers of many made-for-TV movies involving real-life figures, the executive producer of "Marilyn & Bobby: Her Final Affair" readily admits that some of the scenes depicted are merely "possibilities" rather than the truth.

And a disclaimer at the beginning of the film, premiering at 9 tonight on cable's USA Network, says, "The following is a fictional account inspired by the public lives of Marilyn Monroe and Robert F. Kennedy."

But that hasn't assuaged critics from lambasting the project as a reckless misuse of the medium that could give millions of viewers a distorted picture of history.

Among them are Kennedy's children, several TV producers and Edwin Guthman, the Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter who served as Kennedy's press secretary during the period that the film covers. Their criticism stemmed from press accounts of the movie, since none had seen the finished product.

"Nothing that has appeared in the quarter-century since Robert Kennedy's death has been so offensive as the outrageous television production that will appear . . . on

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Melody Anderson and James F. Kelly play the lead roles in "Marilyn & Bobby: Her Final Affair" tonight on USA.

## Dreamed Up?

LOS ANGELES TIMES

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the USA Network," said a statement released Tuesday by Kennedy's 10 children.

"... This lie debases the memory of our father. It denigrates the reputation of others who cannot speak for themselves. It despoils history. It corrupts the medium called television."

"They have taken two real people [and] falsely portrayed them in a way that's harmful to their memory," Guthman said. "I think it shows no respect for them, for their families, for history. I don't think decent filmmakers would lower themselves to this kind of thing."

Executive producer Barry Weitz said that he "never went out to do something that was painful to the family or the memories."

To Weitz, the network's use of

the opening disclaimer fulfills its obligations to alert viewers to what they are about to watch. "USA did not go to do this as a documentary," he said. "We went to do it as an entertainment. That's what we hope the audience comes to see."

But producer Zev Braun believes a disclaimer is not sufficient. One of his concerns is that viewers who were born during or after the early 1960s, when the film takes place, will believe that all of the events depicted are true.

"There is a clear and inherent danger in dealing with icons and then saying this is a fictionalized approach," said Braun, one of the producers of a forthcoming CBS movie about the killings of video executive Jose Menendez and his wife, Kitty.

Yet developing fictionalized dramas based on historical figures has been a tradition on stage, including many of Shakespeare's

works. More recently, there were plays on meetings that never occurred between Monroe and Albert Einstein, and between Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

"In the hands of a good writer, it's a wonderful device for getting at certain issues," said Robert Benedetti, a former chairman of the acting program at the Yale Drama School and executive producer of an upcoming, based-on-a-true-story movie for NBC, "Mercy Mission: Rescue of Flight 771."

"It is a way for a writer to be able to embody issues, explore ideas and to sometimes create insights into historical events that couldn't be achieved any other way."

But a television movie on a fictionalized situation involving well-known real people "arouses certain ethical questions that a play doesn't," Benedetti said.

"The camera is much more literal and our relationship to television is much more literal. There's much more of a tendency to ascribe truthfulness to the television image. I think that's partly because our main relationship to television is through the news, and that relationship to the news carries over and influences our relationship to television drama."

"Marilyn & Bobby: Her Final Affair" intertwines Kennedy's criminal investigation of Teamsters Union President Jimmy Hoffa and allegations that the Administration of assassinated President John F. Kennedy employed organized crime figures to kill Cuban President Fidel Castro.

What has drawn the most controversy, however, is a lovemaking scene between Kennedy and Mon-

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roe, and a scene that places Kennedy in Monroe's Brentwood bedroom on Aug. 4, 1962, as she was dying in what was ruled a suicide. Weitz acknowledged that there is no proof that either event occurred.

Guthman said he was with Kennedy the only two times he met Monroe, both at parties.

As for Kennedy's presence on the day Monroe died, Weitz said that screenwriter Gerard McDonald relied on the comments of a now-retired Beverly Hills police detective who said he stopped a car on Santa Monica Boulevard that night carrying Kennedy, Peter Lawford and Dr. Ralph Greenson, Monroe's psychiatrist.

Guthman said Kennedy was staying at a friend's ranch near Salinas, preparing for a speech at the American Bar Assn.



■ **The review:** The 'Marilyn & Bobby' script shamelessly invents a life—and a consort—for the late Robert Kennedy. The overall effect has less sizzle, more fizzle.

By CHRIS WILLMAN  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Author Joe McGinniss has been taking a lot of heat for inventing an elaborate thought-life for bio subject Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.). But, just in time to remind us of the true meaning of fiction, the USA Network has practically invented a life, period, for Bobby Kennedy—and a consort—in "Marilyn & Bobby: Her Final Affair" (premiering at 9 tonight).

It's a TV movie that takes the *docu* out of docudrama.

You almost—almost—have to admire the sheer shamelessness of a script so topically revisionist it has J.F.K. remarking of Hoover, "We can fix that old queer."

It also has a classically campy scene in which a middle-aged man answers the phone in the middle of the night, and says, "It's for you," then rolls over and hands it to his equally paunchy bedmate, who, yes, is the top G-man himself, learning the good news about Monroe's demise.

A lot of this foolishness plays more like a mediocre "Saturday Night Live" skit than history-based tabloid TV, though it couldn't be more straight-faced. The ho-hum idea is that Monroe had to die for the Kennedys' sins, as

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villainous Teamsters Union chief Jimmy Hoffa—under fire from R.F.K. in the famously hot congressional hearings—decides to get at the cocky attorney general any way he can, starting with surveillance and getting worse.

Besides Bobby's investigation into the mob, there's also a Cuban crisis to deal with. But all work and no play makes R.F.K. a dull boy, so he regularly jet-sets out to Hollywood and jumps in the convertible of the world's most beloved actress to tool around L.A., take romps in grassy fields and make kissy-face publicly alongside the pier.

"When I'm with her, she makes me feel like I'm a damn kid again!" Bobby confides to an associate after a weekend at Peter Lawford's place. The big news here, then, is that Kennedy really *did* have some kind of affection for Monroe and wasn't just a cynical horndog. In 1993, this is what passes for respect for our governmental forebears.

The actors all turn in caricatures of varying degrees. James F. Kelly is a pretty terrific Kennedy impressionist; Melody Anderson goes for a slightly less literal take on Monroe, which is wise, since anyone who tries to capture the full measure of her breathiness invariably winds up dehumanizing her.

The various mobsters and feds, meanwhile, are as cartoonish as they need to be. They all converge ludicrously at the climax, in which seemingly dozens of politicians, bad guys, actors and paramedics cross paths as they swarm through Monroe's death site, as if remaking the ship cabin scene from "A Night at the Opera" for conspirators.