

Director Oliver Stone tells why he tackled the big story of his time

In a rare interview during film production — just a week before shooting was to begin on JFK in Dealey Plaza — Oscar-winning director Oliver Stone talked to staff writer Jane Sumner about his decision to take on a subject, the John F. Kennedy assassination, that has consumed researchers for almost 28 years.

Q: The Kennedy assassination is probably the most mythical event of our time. Why did you take on a project of such magnitude and complexity?

A: I suppose it combines the mythic with the whodunit. For me, it was the seminal event of my generation. It shaped the '60s because Kennedy was my godfather. He

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came into office, and he promised change. He was about to deliver it when he was cut down.

As a result of that murder, it's my belief that Vietnam came about. If Kennedy had been in office, Vietnam would not have happened. And as you know, I was swept up into Vietnam, as were many other people. It shaped America as it is today.

In addition to Vietnam, we had in the wake of his death an enormous amount of crime and violence. We had race riots and wars and the hippie protest movement in reaction to the war. We had rebellion all around the world in the '60s — in Czechoslovakia and France.

In reaction, then, we had almost the repression of the '50s return. In a sense, '68 led to Nixon and to his elec-
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The Dallas Morning News: Catherine Krueger

Oliver Stone: shaping history dramatically, hoping to provide a perspective.

Stone says doing 'JFK' revealed a new Dallas

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tion. He promised peace in Vietnam, and he delivered four more years of war. Don't forget also as a footnote that J. Edgar Hoover was in office all those 10 years.

What I'm trying to say is that the '60s was an extremely turbulent decade. It shaped all the forces that are in existence today in the '90s as my generation comes to power. So, basically, it's the seminal event of my lifetime.

In addition to that, it's an unsolved murder with inherent dramatic value along the lines of a Sherlock Holmes whodunit.

Q: Will *JFK* be a docudrama, an entertainment vehicle or Oliver Stone's personal take on what happened on Nov. 22, 1963?

A: Let's just say this. The underlying material starts with Jim Garrison in the '60s, who — somewhat like a Jimmy Stewart character in an old Frank Capra movie — undertakes to investigate something that has been covered up.

He makes many mistakes. He has many frustrations. He has few successes. He is reviled, ridiculed, and the case he brings to trial crashes.

We re-examine some of those incidents he brought to light. In addition, we take the last 20 years of research and go beyond the Garrison investigation. So that what we have here is a vast jigsaw puzzle — layers and layers of facts that have come to light in the '60s, '70s and '80s from a dozen disparate researchers all over the country, mostly private citizens.

Again, emphasizing the Capra-esque aspect of private citizens' doing the research, not official bodies. The bodies have stagnated and produced dead ends, red herrings, scenery. Good scenery, but scenery nonetheless.

I try to take these 12 to 15 bodies of work created by these researchers and put the jigsaw puzzle into some kind of perspective for the American public. Sometimes not knowing everything. Sometimes speculating, and I say that in the film — that this is speculation, at times.

Q: In most of your films, you have felt a very personal connection to the subject matter — say, the soldiers in *Platoon*, Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July* or Jim Morrison in *The Doors*. What's your interest in Jim Garrison?

A: I think Jim is a terrific dramatic protagonist. Somebody you could identify with as an outsider. Somebody who fought the establishment's perception of the crime. He was an underdog.

As I said, he made many mistakes, so he was not a perfect man, by any means. But he was fighting very large odds. He was trying to run an espionage trial essentially in the light of day. You could not do that in the 1960s because people at that point in time were not even willing to admit the existence of the CIA.

In the 1970s, that all changed with Frank Church's investigations and the House investigations and with Watergate. We lost some of our fear of big government. We began to perceive the Orwellian structure of things. We began to understand that politics had a lot of dirty laundry.

I think now we've become awfully cynical about government, and we accept that government is not always telling the truth. We know that, of course, from the Pentagon Papers. We realized that the government had lied to us extensively about Vietnam. We were not going to admit that in 1967 when Garrison started his work on the trial.

I always found Garrison very eloquent in his (September 1967) *Playboy* interview and in his one-half-hour *White Paper* on television. He was ridiculed as a sort of Southern caricature, but he was far from that. He was very well-spoken, a very intelligent and articulate man.

But I want to emphasize that the movie goes beyond his investigation.

Q: The facts of the Kennedy assassination are in perpetual debate. Which sources are you relying on for your version of the "truth"?

A: People from the press ask me, "What new evidence have you uncovered?" And I reply, "None, but I'm examining the evidence that you overlooked 25 years ago." Some of that evidence Sylvia Meagher brought up in some of her investigations into the Warren Commission report's inconsistencies, basic little things that trip it up.

Other private researchers whose work I'm indebted to would include Fletcher Prouty, formerly with the Pentagon in Washington; Jim Marrs, whose book *Crossfire* we also purchased; photoanalyst Robert Groden, (co-author of *JFK: The Case for Conspiracy*), who's one of our consultants.

Larry Howard and Gary Shaw and Larry Harris (all of the JFK Assassination Information Center), who have been so helpful. Again, private citizens who have brought to my attention many people who have stories from Dallas that day. They've covered our Texas connection very well.

Cyril Wecht, the autopsy specialist, has helped us. Tom Wilson has helped us. He's a photoanalyst. I read the books. Anthony Summers (*Conspiracy: A Thoroughly Updated Edition of the Definitive Book on the JFK Assassination*) has helped us. Harold Weisberg (*Post-Mortem: JFK Assassination Cover-Up Smashed!*) in Washington has helped us.

Sylvia Meagher's book (*Accessories After the Fact: The Warren Commission, the Authorities & The Report*), Mary Ferrell's research, Jean Hill (who says she saw a gunman fire from behind the picket fence on the grassy knoll) here in Dallas, Beverly Oliver (the so-called "Babushka Lady" who photographed the assassination). I talked to (homicide detective) James Leavelle, (ambulance driver) Aubrey Rike, Marina Oswald.

How many people have we talked to in the last six months? It's like 40 people, 50 people have each given me their own interpretation of the event. Madelyn Brown, a friend of Lyndon Johnson; a guy named Ron Lewis, who knew Oswald very well. I talked to Lee's

daughter the other day, Rachel.

And I use the words "a vast jigsaw puzzle" because it's so confusing. There are so many layers of interpretation. It's sort of like a *Moby Dick* of American history — the elusive white whale is another theory about Jack Kennedy and why he was killed.

I think "why" is a very important question. I think that people always get off the track with "who" and "how." Of course, "who" and "how" are fascinating dramatically, but "why" Kennedy was killed is an essential question, and the movie tries to deal with that.

If you understand "why" he was killed, then you begin to understand "who" and "how." Like a good whodunit, you're going to ask me who did it, and I'm not going to be able to answer that today because I am making a movie first and foremost. I'm not doing a school lesson here, and I don't have a documentarian's responsibilities. I have a dramatist's responsibilities to an audience.

I consider myself as a person who's taking history and shaping it in a dramatic way. Like Shakespeare shaped *Henry V*. I'm not saying I'm as good as Shakespeare, but I'm using that as an example. I'm trying to put all the facts and all the layers of research beyond Garrison into a coherent and dramatic shape.

Q: Have you spoken to the Kennedy family or other principals? What is their attitude toward this film?

A: I spoke to John Connally in Houston. I went down there to see him. And I think he was amused by the fact that we're doing it. He sort of laughed at the whole thing and sort of suggested that it makes a hell of a good story, why not do it? He was not threatened by the movie in any way.

And I actually shared with him a lot of my doubts about the (Warren Commission report's) three-shot theory and all that. He himself testified that he doubts that he was shot by the same person who shot Kennedy. Of course, he does not accept the fact that (by-stander James) Tague was wounded down at the underpass (by a bullet fragment), so, therefore, there is no fourth shot in John's perception — which makes things sort of difficult. I found him to be relatively open about all these dissonant theories and a strong supporter of the Warren Commission.

Jackie Kennedy, I would believe, is very sensitive about it. Her public position (not to discuss it) has been known for years, so I never approached them. Indirectly, I suppose I was asked by certain people who knew that family, "Why are you doing this? They are going to be hurt by this" — which is the official position.

My response is that he was president of the United States, and this is a much larger issue here than one's personal story. It goes far beyond the Kennedy family. It's of importance to my generation and all generations of Americans.

I was out in Dallas the other night and talking to two young, beautiful girls of 21, 22 — intelligent. They did not know who Jack Ruby or Lee Oswald was. They did not. It's shocking. It's important that we get this history lesson out there.

I think maybe *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Platoon* made younger people aware of what had happened in the '60s. In a sense, the children of the Kennedy family have run from it. . . . The children are like Hamlet before Act I begins. They have not sought to really find out who their father's killers were. Or maybe they know, and they do not want to make it into a public issue.

Q: You worked very hard to obtain access to film on the sixth floor of the former Texas School Book Depository. Why is it so critical to film from the sixth floor, as opposed to the seventh floor, which would have roughly the same sight lines and layout?

A: The perspective from the seventh floor is not that different from the sixth floor, except that the ledge hangs out further than the ledge on the sixth floor. And the relationship to the tree is different. The shape of the window is different.

This means he was right for the script.

Not original script

But I think the more important angle would be from the street. Looking up and seeing the shooter in the sixth-floor window, you know that that's the sixth-floor window. There's no way you would look at the seventh-floor window because you could count the stories. And the windows have to be reshaped on the outside, which we're doing, anyway.

It's a question of accuracy. It's always better to be accurate if you can. It's a battle I would have conceded. If necessary, I would have gone on and shot from the seventh floor, but I really think it makes a difference from the exterior angles.

Q: Were you surprised to encounter such resistance to filming on the sixth floor?

A: I was surprised. It did come up behind me. There were so many other problems to making this movie. You never know where the land mines are going to be. I ran into the conservative elements of Dallas' older guard that were very protective, and I was surprised because we had such open responsiveness from 95 percent of the people we were dealing with — from the county, the police, the sheriff's office.

I was warmed by the 11,000 people who turned out that day for the open (casting) call. People were actually grabbing me and saying, "Right on! Make this movie! It's important that it get made." And these are native Texans. They say, "We want the truth to be known. We're glad you're making it here."

That's where I saw the new Dallas — the Dallas that is progressive and liberal. It's not hiding from that image of 30 years ago. Of course, when you show fear and when you hide from something, then people assume you're guilty. The argument would be that Dallas has moved on.

There's always conservative forces in society. In Russia, there's plenty of people from the old Communist Party trying to slow Gorbachev down. There are certain elements in Dallas who do not want to discuss this thing.

I went in, and we talked to the (Dallas Historical Foundation) board, and I felt we had a good meeting. I felt like a lot of the younger people were with me, with the film company's position. I think it was very close. But I can understand (foundation chairwoman) Lindalyn Adams' fear (that the filming would be disruptive). I don't share in it, but I can understand it.

I'm fine with the seventh floor, and I'm going to make it work. I think it will be to Dallas' credit that it will be known historically that Dallas co-operated completely, that they gave us the sixth floor, too, for the time periods. And they gave us access to the building and to the exterior. And Dallas was open, and it was liberal. It's a counter-image to the '60s.

Dallas was reviled in '63. It was hated around the world. It was seen as bigoted and racist, the murder capital; it killed the president. We know now it goes way beyond Dallas. Dallas was just a shooting zone. It was a battle site. This thing was orchestrated at a much higher level. It wasn't a Dallas affair, particularly.

Q: Have you faced similar resistance from government agencies or historical figures as you researched this project?

A: No, not official resistance. On *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, I had negatives from the Defense Department. They did not like those scripts. So that was official.

We never went to the Defense Department on this one. I have contacts and people who tell me things, and I must say we've had numerous phone calls from weird people asking for meetings, providing us with many alternate theories, such as they were shooting at Jackie or they were shooting at John Connally. I've never heard anyone say they were shooting at Nellie (Connally).

But we've had a lot of strange calls and letters, requests for meetings in various cities and places with new information. Unofficially, I hear that many people inside the government — and that includes military intelligence and the Central Intelligence Agency — are very happy that this movie is being made. There is a younger generation of people that want some element of the truth to come out.

In a sense, it parallels what's going on with Iraq. The (American) military over there was very proud with how they did, and they wanted to put behind them that Vietnam syndrome and military failure.

And I think the younger military people I've talked to in intelligence feel that there was a conspiracy to bring on the Vietnam War as early as 1961. And that Kennedy resisted this, and he created much enmity. There was a strong commitment to a war in Southeast Asia. It came right after the Bay of Pigs in April of '61.

That element would obviously like to make the movie entirely about the beginnings of the Vietnam War. I cannot do that. That's another movie. It's one of the subjects of this movie that I'm trying to bring to the light. But they want it out. They want to know, which is a good attitude. We've got to move beyond the official lie of the last 30 years.

Q: This is the third film you have made in Dallas, so you probably have a pretty good sense of the city. Are you concerned how local citizens will react to your reopening the city's deepest wound?

A: I think I've answered that. Time heals all wounds. Only the most radical conservative people, in my opinion, would want to censor this and stop it. On the other hand, I'm aware of the sensitivities of many people. I've talked to many policemen who feel, "Why is all this fuss being made about something that the Warren Commission in 26 volumes closed out?" I'm aware of the conservative point of view on that.

Just yesterday I was with James Leavelle, who's a great old-timer with a lot of integrity. He's the guy who was holding onto Oswald when he was shot. He's helping, giving us thousands of Dallas police details and views of the events.

I'm trying to listen to both sides, and I'm trying to create justifiable scenarios. In some cases, I'm shooting alternate versions of things, so — in a *Rashomon* way (referring to a 1951 Japanese film) — people can see three or two versions of the same event and be the judge of what seems real.

And in order to stage the official versions, I use official people. We're going to show Oswald shooting per the official version, and we're going to show some other shooters from different places.

Q: *JFK* may be the first case in which the Oscar-winning director of the previous year directs the current best-director winner. Are you ever conscious of this when you're working with Kevin Costner?

A: I think he's terrific. I just remind him I have two directing Oscars and a writing Oscar. (Mr. Stone grins.) I just find him to be so unpretentious, so honest and smart. I find him to be a partner in this movie, and I need one. It's such a huge film. The script is so big. Right now it looks like a three-hour movie.

Often, he has very good ideas as a director. I'm glad that he's there and helping. As an actor, I find him to be a delight because, having directed, he knows the problems that I have. He's empathetic to my problems, and he helps me through this.

He's also just a nice person to be around, unpretentious in his demands. What they call actor's perks, he waived most of them. He doesn't care about a lot of that stuff. Sometimes he's just like a regular guy. I think he was a stagehand about seven or eight years ago, I heard, so he's been on the other side of the camera before. He didn't come to this as a professionally trained actor from the age of 15.

Q: Anything you'd like to say to the people of Dallas?

A: I'm having a ball. I like being in Dallas. I like the people. The extras have been great. The crew has been good. People have been very generous and open. I find the people here to be warm and friendly. I just felt no double-dealing.

It's been fun to work here. I've enjoyed all three films. Each one's gotten to be more fun. *Born on the Fourth* was a hard film physically. I got debilitated being in that hospital, and Tom's being in that chair all the time. That was tough. There's something about it here that I like. I'm only sad that we're shooting just five weeks here, and then we're moving into New Orleans, into the heat. We're also shooting in Washington, D.C.