

MOVIES

OH, WHAT A TANGLED WEB

JFK

Starring Kevin Costner, Sissy Spacek,
Gary Oldman, Joe Pesci, Kevin Bacon
Directed by Oliver Stone
Written by Stone and Zachary Sklar
Warner Bros.

By Peter Travers

JUST A FEW YEARS AGO, IN *Bull Durham*, Kevin Costner played a bush leaguer who declares, "I believe that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone," by way of expressing support for the official story about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Now Costner shows up in *JFK* as New Orleans DA Jim Garrison, who believes the Warren report is a lie. Costner's about-face is only one of the surprises sprung in Oliver Stone's exploratory, compulsively watchable attempt to explain why Kennedy was gunned down as his motorcade passed through Dallas's Dealey Plaza on November 22nd, 1963. For its reliance on a grab bag of conspiracy theories, Stone's three-hour, \$40 million *JFK* is drawing fire from political poobahs:

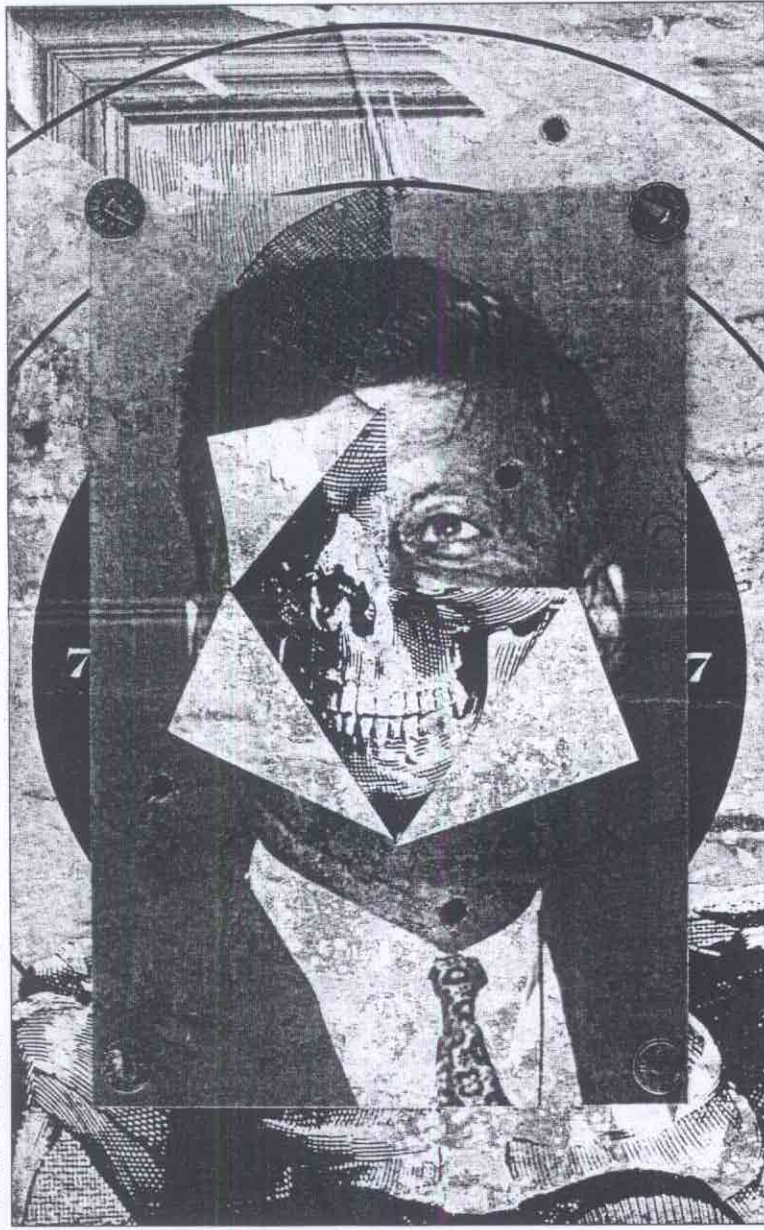
"Paranoid" — the *New York Times*.

"Absurdities" — the *Washington Post*.

"Twisted history" — *Newsweek*.

These aren't exactly money reviews, but the winningly fractious Stone is used to a thrust-and-parry relationship with the press. "The dirty little secret of American journalism," Stone recently wrote, "... is that it's generally wrong. Sometimes just a little, sometimes a lot, but wrong."

Funny, that's also the dirty little secret of Stone cinema. Whenever you watch a Stone war treatise (*Sabador*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*) or a Stone morality tale (*Wall Street*, *Talk Radio*, *The Doors*),



even a Stone horror flick (*The Hand*), it's generally wrong. Sometimes just a little, sometimes a lot, but wrong. Even when his intentions are worthy and backed with skilled technique — as they are in *JFK* — Stone will fudge any fact, hype any situation, pull any stunt to make his case.

JFK is the best and worst of Stone in one volatile package. The movie is often tremendously exciting; Stone and co-writer Zachary Sklar put three decades of frequently conflicting conspiracy research into the mouths of dozens of characters.



Kevin Costner conspires with director Oliver Stone.

Donald Sutherland, as a military deep throat named X, spews out horrific tales at warp speed, with an additional goose from John Williams's pumped-up score. And the information overload continues when Stone mixes in the real (newsreels, photos, the shocking home movie of the murder taken by Abraham Zapruder) with the imagined (reenactments staged on actual sites and shot from different angles and in varying speeds and tints). The camera work of Robert Richardson and the editing of Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia are outstanding, creating a vast cyclorama that sets the mind reeling with possibilities and provocations.

Still, those Sixties pundits who fear that Stone will corrupt the young moviegoers of America with a false view of history seem both hysterical and gallingly patronizing. Those who weren't born until after the assassination can still tell a muckraker from a historian. *JFK* is as much a documentary as *Hook*. Clap your hands indeed if you believe in conspiracy, but look elsewhere for a balanced view.

Stone doesn't balk at simplifying complex issues. The bad guys are the CIA, the Mafia, the Dallas police, J. Edgar Hoover, LBJ, Castro, anti-Castro Cubans, the military-industrial complex and any other faction that wanted to get rid of Kennedy because, in Stone's debatable view, the president was about to withdraw from Southeast Asia, end the cold war and push hard for civil rights and nuclear disarmament. Especially vile is the Warren Commission (Garrison does an ironic cameo as the former chief justice who was its chairman), which Stone believes covered up a coup d'état by reporting that lone gunman Oswald (Gary Oldman in a robotically eerie portrayal) killed Kennedy when evidence points to the involvement

of a cabal of right-wing homosexuals, led by businessman Clay Shaw (a chilling Tommy Lee Jones) and mercenary pilot David Ferrie (Joe Pesci in rare form). Kevin Bacon also shows up in the invented role of a male hustler who joins Shaw and Ferrie in a gratuitous and luridly staged drag orgy that has provoked justifiable ire among gay activists.

The good guys are headed by Kennedy — shown in selective clips as the martyred king of Camelot. Even more saintly is Garrison, the DA who charged Shaw with conspiracy to kill the president. Garrison's reputation as an eccentric careerist who reportedly bribed and coerced witnesses is glossed over; Stone based most of his movie on Garrison's 1988 book *On the Trail of the Assassins*. Casting the heroically soothing Costner as an agitated man who dances with facts is a cunning stroke. Costner puts the audience in Garrison's corner from the get-go.

And Stone is shameless in exploiting Costner's appeal: When Garrison's wife, Liz (a shrill Sissy Spacek), nags him for neglecting his family in favor of bringing evidences to justice, Garrison has a cuddle with his kids on the porch swing, evoking Gregory Peck in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In the final court scene, Garrison becomes a noble Frank Capra hero arguing for a lost cause. The scene's a real barn burner, with Stone's marshaling his evidence persuasively and Costner's underscoring the DA's sincerity with emotion-clogged catches in the throat. It's too bad the scene never happened: Garrison's assistant made the closing argument at Shaw's trial, and the DA wasn't there to hear the swift verdict that cleared the defendant. Stone bathes Garrison in a golden light that befits the lonely warrior. Perhaps Stone bends the facts to achieve a larger emotional truth. But like the Warren report, that dog don't hunt. As speculation, *JFK* is riveting. As proof, it's bunk. Stone has turned what he considers the crime of the century into a disturbing anomaly — a dishonest search for truth. ■

Grand Canyon

MACK (KEVIN KLINE), AN L.A. LAWYER, takes a shortcut home from a Lakers game and nearly gets blown away by hoods; Simon (Danny Glover), a tow-truck driver who rescues Mack, despairs that his sister and her two kids live in a gang war zone; Claire (Mary McDonnell), Mack's wife, finds an abandoned baby girl and wants to adopt her to fill the void left by a son who's growing up and a husband who's screwing his secretary (Mary-Louise Parker); Davis (Steve Martin),

1991 TEN BEST & WORST

LED BY THE BOX-OFFICE CHAMP, *Terminator 2*, 1991 will go down as a year of hysterically overhyped movie mediocrity. From *Robin Hood to Hook*, bulging budgets resulted in middling entertainment. Still, there were enough choice films among the more than 400 released to squeak out a ten-best list and ten honorable mentions.

1. THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS: Director Jonathan Demme's classic thriller also works as a stinging social comment about an FBI trainee (Jodie Foster) in a world of male monsters, none more lethal than a cannibal shrink (Anthony Hopkins, in the performance of the year).

2. THELMA & LOUISE: A never-better Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis turn writer Callie Khouri's tragicomic road movie about two women who've had it with sexism into a fierce parable for the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill era.

3. BARTON FINK: A Jewish playwright (John Turturro) sells out to Hollywood, while a salesman (the underrated John Goodman) teaches him about the common man in the darkest comedy yet from the Coen brothers.

4. BUGSY: A tour de force by Warren Beatty as the hood who invented Las Vegas, James Toback's

potent script and juicy turns from Annette Bening, Ben Kingsley, Elliott Gould and a mesmerizing Harvey Keitel ignite Barry Levinson's high-style gangster epic.

5. BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: Live-action romances paled next to this artfully musicalized fable that ranks with the most transporting of Disney's animated features.

6. PARIS IS BURNING: Jennie Livingston's astonishing documentary probes the world of drag balls, where gay black and Latino men find acceptance and pride by aping a pop culture that rejects them.

7. THE FISHER KING: Terry Gilliam fuses fantasy and reality into a magical amalgam that shows off the protean talents of Robin Williams, Jeff Bridges, Mercedes Ruehl and Michael Jeter.

8. BOYZ N THE HOOD: Despite preachy lapses, John Singleton makes the year's most impressive writing-directing debut with this look at the violent threat to black family life in South Central L.A.

9. RAMBLING ROSE: Marsha Cooledge's beautifully nuanced, beamingly erotic film of Calder Willingham's novel about Depression-era Georgia offers superb ensemble acting from Laura Dern, Lukas Haas, Robert Duvall and Diane Ladd.

10. CAPE FEAR: Despite generating suspense, humor and acting fireworks from Robert De Niro, Juliette Lewis and

Nick Nolte, master director Martin Scorsese took heat for remaking a thriller and escalating the violence. To quote Robert Mitchum's line to Nolte, "Well, pardon me all over the place."

Cheers are also due Mike Leigh's *Life Is Sweet*, Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, David Mamet's *Homicide*, John Sayles's *City of Hope*, Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*, Eric Bogosian's *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll*, Bruce Beresford's *Black Robe*, Albert Brooks's *Defending Your Life*, David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* and Agnieszka Holland's *Europa, Europa*.

For the 1991 dis list, let's avoid the obvious *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* sequel junk and stick to those ten movies that raised expectations only to quash them.

1. HUDSON HAWK: Even in a year of vanity productions, Bruce Willis's \$50 million hymn to his own nonexistent charm takes the crown for wretched excess.

2. THE PRINCE OF TIDES: Director-star Barbra Streisand gives Willis a run for the ego in this turgid dysfunctional-family saga whose plot is as nonsensical as its congratulatory reviews.

3. FOR THE BOYS: Bette Midler's lively performance as a USO performer gets buried in a mountain of phony moralizing about war and peace.

4. REGARDING HENRY: A woebegone Harrison Ford stars in the worst of the yuppie-scum-redeemed movies. Runners-up: *The Doctor*, *City Slickers*, *Dying Young*, *The Butcher's Wife* and *Hook*.

5. THE MARRYING MAN: Kim Basinger and Alec Baldwin ensue smugness in the worst of the Disney comedies. Runners-up: *Scenes From a Marriage*, *Oscar*, *True Identity* and *Ernest: Saved Again*.

6. GUILTY BY SUSPICION: Is Robert De Niro really playing a Communist? Not in Irwin Winkler's botched and cowardly look at the Hollywood-blacklist era.

7. THE RAPTURE: Mimi Rogers is surprisingly good as an oversexed L.A. phone operator who finds God even though Michael Tolkén's film (an inexplicable art-house favorite) is god-awful.

8. BRENDA STARR: Though the long-delayed Brooke Shields showcase was previewed for critics and then never released, there's still a big stink coming from the shelf this turkey is rotting on.

9. JOURNEY OF HOPE: This crassly manipulative Swiss soap opera actually won a foreign-film Oscar. Recount!

10. THE LAST BOY SCOUT: And they said no action flick could fall as flat as *Hudson Hawk*. But Bruce Willis, who bookends our list of bowwows, proves that rampant arrogance will out. — P.T.

