

BEHIND THE SCENES

Scissors and Stone

They were dropping dead from pure fatigue," director Oliver Stone says of the editing staff on "JFK." "We were screening new cuts every three days, working around the clock, amazingly fast."

The amazing thing is that Stone and his editors seem to like this way of working. "Optimum editing: First cut the tape, transfer to film. A room full of flatbeds and lots of warm bodies," says Stone.

"No other director works the way I do — team editing," he continues. "It allows us to explore the boundaries of a film. Besides, what is editing except exploring a thought process?"

For the editors, the payoff is simple: The fast track. Stone likes to promote his from assistants to associates to full editors. With the director's prolific output, that climb can be rapid. David Brenner, for one, had an Oscar for best editing on "Born on the Fourth of July" when he was 27 years old.

Joe Hutshing, 37, had worked on "several films no one's ever heard of, and it's best that way," when he was drafted by Oliver Stone to be an assistant editor on "Wall Street." When the crunch hit to complete the film by an advanced release date, he was promoted to associate editor and given the chance to cut scenes. "It was an endurance race, seven days a week, 24 hours a day." But the payoff was handsome since more Stone films followed. Hutshing, along with Brenner,

Q&A with Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia, editors of Oliver Stone's 'JFK'

was awarded the editing Oscar for "Born on the Fourth of July."

Pietro Scalia, 31, followed Hutshing's footsteps by working as assistant and associate editor on many of the same Stone films. "JFK" is their first co-editing project.

The Hollywood Reporter: Was there an overall philosophy behind the editing of "JFK" that was different from the other films?

Scalia: I knew this was going to be different than anything else I had ever done because of the amount of documentary footage and the variety of visuals to play with. So much work went into the art direction with elaborate sets; vintage cameras were used to re-create footage so you could match original footage exactly. It was exciting.

People are accusing Oliver of distorting history. I don't think that is the case. We didn't manipulate historical footage, but used it to anchor the film in historical context. By looking at it in a different way, we followed Oliver's vision to create a different meaning.

THR: Was it necessary to share Oliver's perspective to do your job?

Scalia: You had to have some feeling that the story was right — that there are conflicting facts in the case — to present the film's case. The film doesn't say, "Believe me." It makes people question what they already believe. It took a lot of courage for Oliver to do it.

Hutshing: I couldn't have worked on the film if I didn't believe it. The fact that we wanted to help Oliver raise these questions helped us make a better film. I remember when Kennedy was shot. I was in the fourth grade. The sense of loss has always been there. When we started this, I wondered if the files could be opened. Maybe we could do that. Then I'd think, "Naw, it's just a movie." Now it looks like that's what we've done. What greater outcome could there be? Even if we open the files and find there is nothing there, we are less a nation of secrets.

THR: Although this is the first

film on which you've worked as co-editors, you've both been part of Stone's editing teams on "Wall Street," "Talk Radio," "Born on the Fourth of July" and "The Doors." Do you like Stone's team approach to editing?

Hutshing: It's sort of necessary with Oliver's films. There is so much to do. It wouldn't be possible for one person to do it all alone.

Scalia: The volume of footage shot for "JFK" [600,000 feet] on so many different formats — 16mm, Super 8, 35mm, Cinemascope, 185, surveillance footage — and 20 hours of stock footage, there was just no way one person could handle it. Just getting the footage together so we could start editing was a massive project. [In addition to the two lead editors, Stone hired an additional editor, Hank Corwin, an associate editor, Julie Monroe, a first assistant, a second assistant, two apprentices, an intern, and an optical supervisor with two assistants.]

Teams are also the result of shorter postproduction schedules. On "JFK," we originally had 11 months from the start of shooting to release. Reasonable. But as we got closer, Oliver decided that a Christmas release would be better for the film. More people would see it then. We debated until the last minute whether we could do it. We, the editors, thought it was right to release it early as well.

There were four months of shooting, ending Aug. 1. We started cutting when shooting began and had the first rough cut by the end of August. It was long



John F. Kennedy's assassination is re-created in "JFK" (left), as is the arrest of Lee Harvey Oswald (below). Editors Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia fused actual footage with the new film for a startling, realistic depiction of both events.

and we had to cut it down from there. The film was released at Christmas.

THR: Were there further cuts after previewing the film?

Hutshing: Oliver doesn't preview his films, except maybe for a few friends, journalists and the studio executives. Nothing for the marketing department.

THR: Explain how you used electronic editing with "JFK."

Hutshing: We needed to use video for "JFK" because we had so many formats and we had to get it all onto one format; to have that be 35mm film would have cost billions of dollars. So, we had it all transferred to three-quarter-inch video and cut on a very simple cuts-only system. It's a very low-tech, Sony off-line system — an RM 450 controller with two three-quarter-inch decks and two monitors. It was very inexpensive and immediate.

Scalia: It was a tool we used to see how the structure would go. The more passes we made on video, the more complicated it became for the assistants to con-

form the film to our work. And that took time, but it was a fabulous tool to get the film started. We did our fine cuts on film.

Hutshing: It was different when we edited "The Doors." Then we used editDROID, George Lucas' system — a random access, laser disk, nonlinear, computer-based editing system that is lovely to work with. "Doors" was a very surreal, liquid film. We needed a lot of dissolves [and] that system could do that. We also had advantages in helping us mock up the multiple camera angles. But, for "JFK" — a jagged, hard-edged film, very gritty — the simpler system seemed more suited.

THR: What about the pitfalls to using electronic editing?

Hutshing: The problem with these systems is just the labor-intensive work of conforming the film to match the video. Most systems spit out an edit decision list that shows first and last frames — assistants do the conforming. We didn't have that for "JFK." So we did the fine cutting on film to speed things up.

I'd use electronic editing



exclusively if there was some way to get to film automatically. It lets you be a courageous editor. If you made as many cuts on film, you'd end up with a taped together mess.

THR: How involved was Stone in the editing process?

Hutshing: We were given a lot of freedom on this picture, more than on any other of Oliver's pictures. We did not have time to do otherwise.

When we viewed dailies, Oliver would tell us what he liked and we'd try to capture those performances. He came in every day, looked at the cuts, made suggestions. Using video allowed us to do several cuts, or versions, of a scene and Oliver could choose exactly the version he wanted; he had more of a multiple choice among his favorite takes. As we got further into the process, and had less

time, we did fewer versions. Finally, just one.

THR: When did you first see the script and get started on the movie?

Hutshing: We saw it from the first draft on when we were still working on "The Doors." Then three or four weeks before we started shooting, we began going through the stock footage, the miles and miles of tape, assembled by postproduction supervisor Bill Brown. Not only was this an integral part of understanding the movie, but we had a lot of playbacks in the movie —



Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia are nominated for Oscars for their work on "JFK."

what you see playing on the television — and all that stuff had to be assembled beforehand.

The TV was an integral part of the first half of the movie. This was the first TV president. The nation was glued to the TV. It was almost another character in the movie. It was a logistical nightmare with at least 20 playbacks. Usually, if there is playback in a movie at all, there are no more than one or two.

THR: Did you have a sense of the particularly critical role editing would play in making this film?

Hutshing: Yes. We knew this was an editor's picture from just reading the script; it was very exciting, fun. We were like kids in the candy store. We had the feeling that there were no rules for how to do this film.

THR: It's noticeable that the dialogue is repeated to you visually and then reinforced in other ways. A very complex story is made understandable.

Scalia: An editor is a story teller. Because of the amount of information — it was a dense film — we discovered that using layers of perception, accentuating pictures with sounds and then music and dialogue, helped people wade through it. Editing is like sculpture. It's three-dimensional.

THR: After "JFK" and the other Stone pictures, I'm sure you have your next job whenever you are ready to take it, right?

Scalia: I don't know if it's that easy.

THR: Do you find yourself married to Oliver?

Hutshing: It's been great for me. Oliver is one of the best people to work for. If he ever decided to be an editor, he would be one of the greats. He has a fresh eye and none of his material is sacred, even to himself. He's always willing to rip it up and try again. The only sin you can commit is to be conventional. "Break through to the core" is one of his favorite phrases.

Scalia: Oliver is always focused on making a better picture, which is wonderful. But, no, he is not the only director we will work with.

— C. Brown

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