

# 'JFK': The Movie

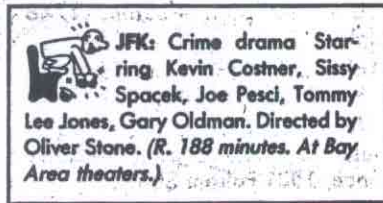
Relax and enjoy it as a skillful murder mystery

By Peter Stack  
Chronicle Staff Critic

Straddling and zigzagging the lanes of fact and supposition with brilliant theatrical panache, director Oliver Stone has fashioned in "JFK" a riveting, dramatic and disturbing look at one of the great whodunits of history. Even if you don't subscribe to the conspiracy theory put forth in the movie, you have to hand it to Stone for his mercurial manner of strewing factual details as well as his narrative skill in developing a story line of inherent fascination.

The three-hour, eight-minute-long "JFK" is never dull, and nothing if not provocative. It may be hogwash, but as a movie it is loaded with raw vitality as it dredges up, with a mixture of cinema verite and sheer Hollywood bravado, the labyrinthine circumstances of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, in Dallas.

Stone based his movie (he wrote the screenplay with Zachary Sklar) on the books "On the Trail of the Assassins" by Jim Garrison and "Crossfire" by Jim Marrs. Both books lay out complicated theories that Kennedy was killed by marksmen working in consort, shooting from several carefully chosen angles near Dallas' Dealey Plaza, and that Lee Harvey Oswald, though also involved, proba-



bly was a patsy set up to take the blame. Stone takes everything a step further to paint a picture of Kennedy as a sort of King Arthur or Julius Caesar killed before his true designs as a great leader and peacemaker had a chance to be played out.

## Not the Warren Line

The books, of course, fly in the face of the official version of what happened — the Warren Commission Report, which says an emotionally troubled, politically radical Oswald acted alone as the assassin.

The film stars Kevin Costner as New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison — many of this conspiracy theory's main characters came from New Orleans. Garrison, who later became a judge, was the prosecutor obsessed with the notion that Oswald did not act alone. In an attempt to prove his theory that CIA operatives orchestrated the murder, which was carried out by several assassins, Garrison unsuccessfully tried to prosecute New

Orleans businessman Clay Shaw as a key conspirator.

The movie's "plot" is essentially Garrison's laborious investigation leading to the indictment and trial of Shaw. Portrayed as a foppish dandy with kinky homosexual habits, Shaw is played by Tommy Lee Jones, who's terrific in the role.

## Spacek and Pesci

The film rises above the rather dull Costner and his droning voice with a tapestry of wonderful characters smartly cast — Sissy Spacek as Garrison's neglected wife and the mother of their five children, Joe Pesci as the gay, toupee-wearing pilot and anti-Castro figure David Ferrie, Gary Oldman as a sourpuss Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Lemmon as nervous informant Jack Martin, Walter Matthau as Senator Russell Long, Ed Asner as a foaming right-wing extremist and former FBI agent Guy Banister, Donald Sutherland as a Pentagon informant, Kevin Bacon as a cocky gay prostitute and prison inmate.

The supporting cast, which includes John Candy and Sally Kirkland, is excellent throughout — and even includes Jim Garrison himself in a cameo as Chief Justice Earl Warren. Each character adds a pinch of life to the proceedings, with Costner's pipe-smoking, ob-



Kevin Costner as D.A. Jim Garrison confronts an angry press corps in Oliver Stone's 'JFK'

assessed Garrison serving as a sort of anchor.

Garrison is not played as a flamboyant type but as an idealistic, driven truth seeker whose investigation draws him into increasingly radical views of the assassination. Although Costner may not be the world's most versatile actor,

he seems somehow right for the part. He comes off as a stubborn zealot rather than a nut case. Costner's biggest fault is that he can't quite make his Louisiana drawl sound convincing, especially in flareups with his long-suffering wife, who harangues him about neglecting her and their houseful of

kids. Spacek, on the other hand, is completely convincing as the wife who sees her husband's obsession as a demon taking over his life.

As always with Oliver Stone movies, "JFK" has a point of view that can only be described as shrill.

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Gary Oldman is patsy Lee Harvey Oswald in 'JFK': an excellent cast of character actors

## 'JFK' Works as Crime Film

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But in this case, the unabashedly political view that Kennedy was killed because he was a threat to the highest levels of greedy, self-serving military and industrial interests only adds to the tale's entertainment appeal. "JFK" works superbly as a taut, fact-laden, political puzzle and murder suspense that is stewed in the juices of actual events about which vast public familiarity exists. And which the public still argues about. These only add to the movie's sense of immediacy, even when the obviously theatrical comes across as striking artifice.

Stone uses Eisenhower's famous speech warning the citizenry to be wary of the military-industrial complex to lead into opening scenes that re-create the awesome day in Dallas. The sequence, in both black-and-white and color, is so powerful that it is like revisiting a bad dream, back to the event that stunned a nation. Later, there are shocking scenes of Kennedy in the emergency room, his brains blown out, bullet holes in his flesh, his corpse to be hastened away.

Stone's blend of black-and-

white footage with color, as if interplaying documentary reportage with fiction, is simply fascinating. The device does not necessarily add to the movie's veracity, but it demonstrates the — perhaps perverse — skill of a film maker in bouncing fact and fiction against one another until distinctions are blurred. Segments of the assassination are sprinkled throughout the film until, in a stunning climax, all the pieces of the conspiratorial version are put together. Key portions of "JFK" were filmed at Dealey Plaza. The seventh floor of the Texas School Book Depository was used (because the infamous sixth

floor is now a museum), as well as other locations in Dallas and in New Orleans.

"JFK" already has been attacked as inaccurate, and its theories about what happened branded as poppycock. There are objections from the gay community to the portrayal of Clay Shaw as a deviant homosexual, and political conservatives have dismissed the film's account of an attempted fascist coup d'etat as liberal hogwash.

Still, for entertainment that stirs you — even if it riles you to anger — "JFK" is a potent piece of work.

## Dallas Fans Think 'JFK' Will Help Image

Dallas

Oliver Stone's "JFK" opened last night before about 1,000 moviegoers, with the director in attendance, and some of them think it will help Dallas' image.

Ann Allison, 48, of Dallas, was among those in the crowd before the show who already leaned toward the theory that Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy, not a lone gunman.

"I tend to find it hard to believe

that one guy pulled it," she said. "Kennedy was as controversial as anyone, and I'm sure his wife wasn't exactly pristine. He made a lot of enemies."

"I think this is going to alleviate those old attitudes of blaming Dallas," said Nancy Cunningham, production coordinator for the North Dallas Film Commission. "It will help to dispel the last vestiges of blame."

Associated Press