

Conspiracy Camelot: 'JFK' gets Stoned

Fact-based drama has
some strong moments,
but it's heavy-handed

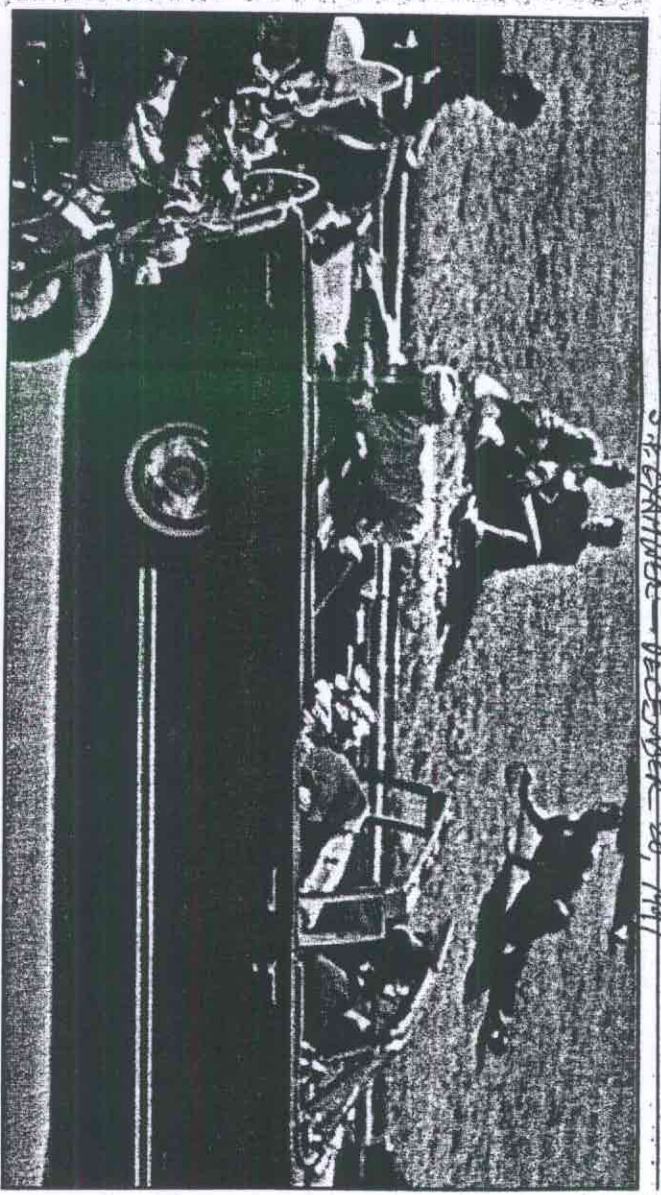
By David Armstrong
EXAMINER STAFF CRITIC

S EERING OLIVER Stone's "JFK" is not unlike having someone read aloud to you all 26 volumes of the Warren Commission report: at very close range after closing time in the corner bar and instruct you, point-by-point, and with great heat, why the report is a cover-up.

The experience leaves you with a great deal of half-digested information, has some moments of undeniable power, is frequently disturbing, suggests more than it proves and, unless you really like up-close-and-personal head-gearing, goes on much too long, even given its important subject.

Stone uses "JFK" as a storytelling vehicle for former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's conspiracy theory of the Kennedy assassination:

Namely, that JFK's murder was orchestrated by very high-level Pentagon and CIA officials, with the connivance of far right-wing Cuban exiles, so that the military-industrial complex could open up the war in Vietnam and scuff



Jackie Kennedy crawls onto the trunk of the limo as John Kennedy's assassination is re-created in Oliver Stone's "JFK."

such liberal challengers as Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. It is a measure of Stone's heavy-handedness that he shows an actor playing Lyndon Johnson drawing to Pentagon brass hats, "Get me elected and you'll get your war."

As Stone himself points out, "JFK" is reality-based fiction, not a documentary, and this creates some credibility problems.

Stone re-creates meetings that he believes took place, creates composite characters, supplies incendiary dialogue, telescopes the research of others into Garrison's legal briefs and asks the viewer to buy into a complex, paranoid theory of history. Bits and pieces of "JFK" work well, but Stone will be hard-pressed to convert anyone who doesn't enter the theater already sharing his views; this is a shaky, often messy, movie.

MOVIE REVIEW

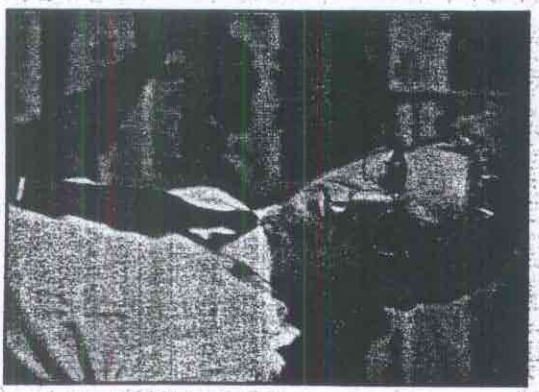
Stone draws Garrison as a familiar Hollywood type: The Last Angry Man, or One Honest Man Against the System" by Jim Marrs

'JFK' (R) is a...
▶ **CAST:** Kevin Costner, Tommy Lee Jones, Sissy Spacek, Gary Oldman, Donald Sutherland

▶ **DIRECTOR:** Oliver Stone
▶ **WRITERS:** Stone and Zachary Sklar, based on the books "On the Trail of the Assassins" by Jim Garrison and "Crossfire" by Jim Marrs

▶ **RATED:** R
▶ **THEATER'S:** Metro, Stonestown, UA, The Movies (Colma)

▶ **EVALUATION:** ★



Kevin Costner as Jim Garrison.

JFK from D-1

Stone's 'JFK' is heavy-handed

tem. Kevin Costner plays the crusading Garrison in competent, steady but bland fashion. He doesn't look much like the fleshy D.A., but at least he's not as flat as he was in "Dances With Wolves" and "Robin Hood."

Few of the other actors have any problem with blandness. Many go well over the top, especially Joe Pesci as small-time hustler David Ferrie. Pesci screams, curses and puffs, leaving no scenery unchewed. It's the verbal equivalent of Stone's visual style, which ricochets between color and black and white, like a TV car commercial, with staccato MTV-style quick-cuts. He shoots New Orleans in preservationists' sepia tones, while conspirators shuffle papers in blindingly white light.

Tommy Lee Jones plays New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw as a mannered gay man who is portrayed (perhaps unconsciously) as distasteful because he's gay, and Sissy Spacek is reduced to playing a reactive role as the tearful, dependent housewife to Costner's implacable lawman. Gary Oldman looks right, though, as the edgy loner, Lee Harvey Oswald.

OF THE major figures, only Donald Sutherland, as the mysterious Mr. X, a disillusioned ex-CIA agent who explains to Costner's quizzical Garrison that JFK was killed to clear the way for the Cold Warriors, comes across convincingly as an actor. Sutherland brings the right mix of frustrated idealism and cool cynicism to the part, even if what his character says in his long speech is debatable. It relies quite a bit on idealized memories of Camelot and JFK as the White Knight — too much so, given what we know about Kennedy's machismo in foreign policy and his links to gangsters.

With all these weaknesses, "JFK" nevertheless has moments of power. The film incorporates snippets of Abraham Zapruder's



Donald Sutherland is the mysterious Mr. X.

home movie of the assassination, and this gruesome footage retains its capacity to shock.

By re-creating ways that the shooting in Dallas' Dealey Plaza may have taken place, and later by deconstructing the Warren Commission's conclusions in a courtroom scene, Stone and his co-writer, Zachary Sklar, shoot the single-gunman, "magic bullet" theory full of holes. The fact that "JFK" was shot on location in Dallas adds to its visceral force.

THE MOVIE convincingly argues that a gunman could hardly load and shoot in just a few seconds, using Oswald's antiquated weapon, and shows how a military-style, triangular shooting arrangement could have worked.

Unfortunately, Stone isn't content to raise reasonable questions about this tragic event. He has to hammer home his belief that the murder was a fascist coup d'etat. So he has Costner make a seemingly endless closing courtroom speech, piles on quotations in a written epilogue, dedicates the movie to the youth of the world.

Had Stone trusted the audience more, and trusted the inherent drama of the subject to drive the story, this sometimes-worthy movie would be more of a contribution. But Stone just can't stop himself, and because he can't, "JFK" unspools long before its 3-hour, 15-minute running time is up.