

More hysteria

CHICAGO
TRIBUNE
12-20-91
Sec. 2, p. 3
Wrote

Oliver Stone's cheap emotional appeal mars 'JFK'

By Dave Kehr
Movie critic

With a running time only 40 minutes shy of "Gone With the Wind," Oliver Stone's "JFK" is the kind of movie that cries out for an intermission—though this time, it isn't the audience that needs to take a break but the director.

Like a hyperventilating child, Stone needs to sit quietly for a while with his head between his knees.

This latest film from the director of "Platoon," "Born on the Fourth of July" and "The Doors" outdoes even its predecessors in terms of hysteria, speediness and manic self-importance.

A barely dramatized essay film that purports to offer the inside skinny on the John F. Kennedy assassination, the film subverts its own best points by adopting a rhetoric so extreme and so manipulative that, by the end, a conscientious viewer can only feel obliged to resist Stone's suggestion that the sky is blue.

Working from a script by himself and journalist Zachary Sklar, Stone mixes three distinct styles, producing the kind of sensory overload more often associated with MTV than sober political reporting.

There is, first, the Capra-esque, little-man-against-the-system theme, in which New Orleans District Atty. Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner, at his most blandly all-American) is drafted as an idealistic Mr. Smith engaged in a heroic, hopeless battle with the forces of evil ensconced in Washington.

Jim's just got to work this Kennedy thing out, even though the political Establishment is against him, the bought-and-paid-for national media is trying to portray him as a dangerous crackpot, and his own wife (Sissy Spacek) is feeling mighty neglected.

"JFK"

★ ★

Directed by Oliver Stone; written by Stone and Zachary Sklar; photographed by Robert Richardson; edited by Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia; music by John Williams; production designed by Victor Kempster; produced by Stone and A. Kitman Ho. A Warner Bros. release; opens Friday at the 900 North Michigan, Webster Place and outlying theaters. Running time: 3:08. MPAA rating: R. Strong language, violence.

THE CAST

Jim Garrison	.....	Kevin Costner
Liz Garrison	.....	Sissy Spacek
David Ferrie	.....	Joe Pesci
Clay Shaw	.....	Tommy Lee Jones
Lee Harvey Oswald	.....	Gary Oldman
Lou Ivon	.....	Jay O. Sanders

"I think you care more about John Kennedy that your own family!" she shrieks at him, in one of the many uncertainly staged domestic battles Stone has tried to use to personalize the extremely abstract proceedings.

The second style is that of a particularly dark and demented film noir, heavy on shadows, strange camera angles and grotesquely bewigged villains.

Most of this material is centered on the anti-Castro "homosexual cabal" that the film identifies, with homophobic frenzy, as the triggermen of the Dallas attempt: New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones, comically limp-wristed), bush pilot and failed priest David Ferrie (Joe Pesci, somehow not convincing as a Southerner), and, as a witness, raving hustler Willie O'Keefe (Kevin Bacon). When they aren't plotting to kill the president, they're putting on drag and posing for pornographic snapshots.

Stone has drafted a long list of Hollywood names to play guest conspirators—led by Gary Oldman (in the film's most magnetic performance) as Lee Harvey Oswald and including John Candy, Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau, Ed Asner, Donald Sutherland, Brian Doyle-Murray and Sally Kirkland.

It's a decision that may add something to the box-office appeal of "JFK," but it's also one that hilariously compromises the

film's credibility—simply because the star personas immediately eclipse the real-life figures they are supposed to be playing. One leaves "JFK" with the confused impression that Johnny La Rue and the Odd Couple have set up Sid Vicious as the fall guy for Lou Grant.

The film's third style is a cutty, aggressive, neo-documentary technique that seems largely derived from Errol Morris' 1988 "The Thin Blue Line." Following Morris, Stone backs away from unified voiceover narration (though the film does conclude with an extraordinarily long summary speech by Costner) in favor of something more impressionistic and emotional.

Various image sources—film and video, color and black-and-white, 35 mm and Super 8—are spliced into a hot-wire montage that goes back, again and again, over the same ground (literally, in the form of Dallas' Dealey Plaza). Some new bit of information or a different perspective is introduced each time, creating a feeling of suspense and gradual enlightenment when, in fact, the filmmaker is simply withholding material for his own rhetorical purposes.

As a form, Stone's montage is zippy, tightly wound and highly charged—as it needs to be to sustain the audience's interest over the course of the film's extremely long haul. But this is an artificial energy.

As frequently as the film invokes the dark threat of fascism, Stone seems unaware of the totalitarian tendencies in his own style, which remains one of physical intimidation and cheap emotional appeal.

"JFK" concludes with a staggeringly pretentious dedication to "our youth—in whose spirit the search for truth marches on." It will be for future generations to judge the "truth" of "JFK"; for now, all one can say is that its aesthetics are a little suspect.