

FILM CLIPS

A look inside Hollywood and the movies.

FLASHBACK

When You Get Right Down to It, the CIA Comes Off Bad Both Times

With all the controversy surrounding Oliver Stone's "JFK," you'd think this was the first time anybody dared to make a movie dealing with the Kennedy assassination or questioning the Warren Commission findings. But in 1973, National General Pictures' "Executive Action" attempted to show how President Kennedy might have been killed by right-wing government conspirators.

At 91 minutes—less than half that of "JFK"—the film, starring Burt Lancaster, Will Geer and Robert Ryan, was a mix of documentary footage and newly shot scenes, a cinematic technique used by Stone with "JFK." Unlike Stone's film, though, "Executive Action" failed to create a stir.

The idea for "Executive Action" (the intelligence community term for an assassination of a head of state) was hatched in 1972 by actor Donald Sutherland, who appears in "JFK." Sutherland, who was to produce and star in the film, hired Kennedy conspiracy expert Mark Lane and Donald Freed ("Secret Honor") to write the screenplay. Lane, who wrote a 1968 bestseller about the assassination, "Rush to Judgment," had reservations about the project from the beginning. "I didn't believe there could be a movie about the subject," says Lane. "There had been so much resistance from the media about 'Rush to Judgment' that I wasn't sure it could really be done the right way."

But Lane and Freed proceeded with their script, which, like Stone's film, implicated the CIA in the assassination of Kennedy. According to Lane, the film was

going to be subtitled "Conspiracy in America," with the first letter of each word highlighted in red—spelling out "CIA."

Unable to secure studio financing for "Executive Action," Sutherland took a role in another film and abandoned the project. It landed in the hands of producer Edward Lewis ("Missing"), who brought in blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo and director David Miller, who had teamed on "Lolita Are the Brave."

According to Lane, by the time Trumbo finished his rewrite, the film's hypothesis—blaming the CIA—had changed. "He didn't have the guts to stay with the position we took," says Lane, whose Kennedy assassination book, "Plausible Evidence," has sold over 100,000 copies. "Ironically, the only organization cleared by the film is the CIA."

Steve Jaffe, the film's associate producer and technical adviser, agrees: "Essentially, Trumbo did a rewrite that neutralized the fundamental conclusion that Lane and Freed had sought to portray in the film."

In addition to the script troubles, Jaffe says it was almost impossible for the producers—because of the film's sensitive material—to get errors and omissions insurance, which protects filmmakers against lawsuits for libel or defamation. Eventually, after the producers submitted a document several hundred pages long that contained all their material about the assassination, Lloyds of London insured the film. Much of this material was published by the filmmakers in a

Please turn the page

Off-Centerpiece



Tim Robbins is the director and star of a political satire now shooting in Pittsburgh.

SAM JONES

Former Steel Capital a Steal for Filmmakers

By BILL STEIGERWALD

PITTSBURGH, Pa.—Director Tim Robbins is running behind an angry mob of New York City yuppies, urging them down Ross Street in this former steel capital, which could be the hottest film-location center in the Eastern Time Zone.

As a phalanx of New York City cops rush a man from 33rd Precinct headquarters into a waiting police car, the screaming yuppie vigilantes surround it, pound on it and rock it violently.

Once again 23-degree Pittsburgh is doing something it's getting a reputation in Hollywood for being pretty good at—standing in for more expensive movie locales.

In this case the cheat is Manhattan, and Robbins is directing a scene for the highly politicized, pseudo-documentary he's written about a successful right-wing folk singer who's running for a U.S. Senate seat in Pennsylvania in 1990.

Robbins, who also plays the main character, Bob Roberts, has described it as a satire with overtones of "This Is Spinal Tap" and "The Manchurian Candidate." It will be titled either "Bob Roberts" or "Times Are Changing Back" and will be released next October during the presidential campaign.

Robbins isn't the only star in town, or even the biggest. And he won't be the last. Because friendly, photogenic, affordable Pittsburgh—where "The Silence of the Lambs" was shot last year and where Danny DeVito and Jack Nicholson are coming in February to make a large chunk of "Hoffa"—has been discovered by Hollywood.

Between February, 1990, when the Pittsburgh Film Commission was born, and next spring, 22 theatrical and television movies will have been made in a city that was averaging fewer than two a year since 1981, when "Flashdance" was shot here.

In one week in early November, Robbins' movie was one of five filming here simultaneously, including Nick Nolte and Susan Sarandon in "Lorenzo's Oil" and Bob Hoskins in Disney's "Passed Away." Jeremy Irons was doing exteriors for "Waterland," and Maureen Stapleton, Jack Warden and Blair Brown also were working here.

The parade of big names won't end with DeVito and Nicholson either.

John Landis' vampress movie "Innocent Blood" begins production next month (with its original New York setting having been changed to Pittsburgh). And a Bruce Willis cop movie called "Three Rivers," which was written about Pittsburgh by locally grown scriptwriter Roddy Harrington, is coming in the spring. Also, James Woods is due in mid-February to make "Citizen Cohn," based on the life of right-wing bad boy Roy Cohn, for HBO.

Why the sudden movie boom in Pittsburgh? Robert Curran, the head of the film commission, says there are lots of reasons. No. 1, Pittsburgh is cheap. Location fees are low. Production money goes far, whether it's paying for hotels and food, hiring extras or employing the city's thriving population of experienced, non-union film workers.

The Hollywood grapevine is small, Curran says, and Pittsburgh has been getting good word of mouth in the industry as a city where movies are enjoyable and convenient to make and where budgets can be met. George Romero, who's been based in Pittsburgh his whole career and shot "The Dark Half" with Timothy Hutton here last year, has seen his secret exposed.

Pittsburgh's well-preserved neighborhoods, stately old buildings and post-industrial funkiness are impressive selling points. So is the government cooperation. Plus, producers love the area's wide variety of easy-to-reach locales that have stood in for everything from small-town Ohio in "The Silence of the Lambs" to turn-of-the-century Los Angeles courtrooms in PBS' "Darrow."

The opening of the Pittsburgh Film Commission office hasn't caused the boom, Curran says. But it has abetted it by serving as an efficient, one-stop shopping spot that can provide Hollywood with whatever information it needs, from crew lists to location photos.

Forrest Murray, the producer of Robbins' sub-\$4-million movie, is so happy with affordable Pittsburgh that he's scheming to himself out loud about wanting to produce a TV series here someday.

"Everything's been better than I expected," the Venice, Calif., resident says, shivering in a doorway watching Robbins direct the yuppie vigilantes.

Murray is pleased with the crew, two-thirds of which he hired locally. A Nation magazine

Please see Page 27

SILENT PICTURES MARATTA

A Warren Beatty Perspective

"BONNIE & CLYDE"	admission	"BUGSY"
\$ 1.50		\$ 7.00
50¢	Soda Pop	\$ 2.25
15	number of gray hairs	3



Beau Gravitte is "The Agent," above, in a video parody that ends by alerting viewers it's not a Times ad.

Continued from previous page  
densely worded, tabloid-style newspaper distributed to moviegoers.

Once the film went into production, Lane and Freed tried to point out certain parts of Trumbo's script they disagreed with, but found themselves barred from the movie set. "We were thinking about what we could do to stop the film from being released," says Lane, "but we figured altogether it was probably better to have it come out and start people thinking about the assassination."

Lane isn't really sure why "Executive Action" created little buzz while Stone's film has everybody talking. He thinks timing is one factor. "With 'Executive Action,' it was too close to the assassination and people weren't ready to talk about it," he says. "It's been almost 30 years since the assassination and there's a whole new generation out there that really wants to know what went on."

"Executive Action" is available on Warner Home Video.

—Andy Marx

IT'S US!

Sure, We Can Take a (Very Small) Joke

A videotape suspiciously similar to the Los Angeles Times Calendar promotional spots that run before feature films in L.A. area movie theaters has been making the rounds in Hollywood.

Titled "The Agent," the spot features an interview with "Fred Ovitz, vice president/radio development at CAA." Ovitz casually explains that "in many ways I feel I am the most important part of the movie-making process. . . .

"I don't make movies. I make phone calls to people who make movies," he continues.

A couple of story editors from the defunct CBS comedy series "Doctor, Doctor" produced the three-minute sendup.

David Blum and partner Jonathan Feldman spent \$4,300 out of their own pockets to produce the video, shooting it several weeks ago on 35-millimeter film with the



assistance of "friends who owed favors." Blum says the video was produced as a "chance to create something unencumbered by the camera." They hope to use it to help sell ideas on longer satires.

But Blum also notes that when they tried to distribute it to local movie theaters, they were flatly turned down. Blum said "they didn't want to take the risk" of alienating The Times.

"The Agent" satirizes The Times' current promotional trailer titled "The Composer." As an agent, Fred Ovitz confides to the camera: "I tell my clients I'm not only their agent. I am also their friend. And luckily, they buy that." Ovitz is played by Beau Gravitte, who was one of the co-stars on "Doctor, Doctor."

Back in 1983, Blum was one of the creators of Off The Wall Street Journal, a spoof on the financial newspaper, which was something of a publishing phenomenon.

In the Ovitz video, Fred has trouble getting his brother Michael to take his call, and is put on hold for the entire day. Finally, as the sun sets outside his office window, the picture goes to black and the stark, white words appear: "Not The Los Angeles Times."

Blum says that when they made the video they were unaware super-agent Mike Ovitz has a brother, TV producer Mark Ovitz. He says he hasn't heard any reaction from CAA.

—John Lippman

HOORAY FOR . . .

A Glamour Capital for Sure, No Doubt

Although many classic movies—"Gone With the Wind" and "The Wizard of Oz," for example—have been made in Culver City, they've always been referred to as products of Hollywood. That's about to

change. Culver City-based Sony Pictures Entertainment will now trumpet at the end of its films that they are made there. The studio's two latest releases, "Bugsy" and "Hook," both identify at which studio the film was made—either Sony Pictures Studios or the nearby Culver Studios—and follow it with the words "Culver City, California."

According to Culver City Mayor Paul Jacobs, it's about time. "Finally having the recognition is important," says Jacobs. "We have always thought that many of the great movies of our time, many of which were made in the city, have never been recognized as being made here."

Peter Wilkes, Sony Picture's vice president of executive communications, says, "This is intended to reflect the fact that we have our world headquarters in Culver City. It demonstrates our commitment to the city."

Some cynics think that the recognition of Culver City by Sony Pictures might be the company's attempt to gain favor with the city for the studio's ambitious expansion plans. "This is in no way, shape or form an attempt to ingratiate ourselves with the city of Culver City," Wilkes insists. "It's simply our acknowledgment of our home base and where we make our movies."

Says Mayor Jacobs, "I don't know what their motives are. They're making a very large commitment to the Culver City site. It seems to me consistent that they add the tag line."

Jacobs hasn't seen "Bugsy" or "Hook" yet, but he and the members of the City Council were given framed versions of the tag line that appears at the end of the films. "I thought that maybe they should also have 'by the courtesy of the Mayor,'" he said.

—Andy Marx

Film Comment

For Years, Nick Nolte Has Been the Prince of Players

By PETER RAINER

A Tom Wingo in "The Prince of Tides," Nick Nolte is playing a character who is trying to close himself off from his own pain. "I was a champion at keeping secrets," he says, but he isn't really. Tom may have the thickened look of a superannuated golden-boy jock, and he may sport his Southernness like a medalion. But his hulky jauntiness can't disguise the stricken look behind his eyes, or the way his face slackens into an aghast mask when the sorrows cut too deep. The truth is that Tom is very bad at keeping secrets, and it's a measure of how extraordinary Nolte's performance is that we pick up on this the first moment we see him.



Nick Nolte as Tom Wingo, a Southern high school teacher, in "The Prince of Tides."

Nolte has often been extraordinary, but his work in "The Prince of Tides" may finally give him the full recognition he deserves. He's currently also on view in "Cape Fear" playing a terrorized lawyer, but it's a far less free-wheeling and resonant performance. "Cape Fear" is emblematic of all the times he has been used by directors as a cog in the machinery. "The Prince of Tides" is a culmination of the best work Nolte has done in the movies.

One of the reasons his work has tended to be overlooked until now is that, unlike so many actors who specialize in playing misfits, Nolte doesn't go in for a lot of beetle-browed flibbertigibbet scratch-and-grunt Methodology. When he plays an over-the-hill football player in "North Dallas Forty" or a besieged Vietnam vet in "Who'll Stop the Rain," or a scraggly bum in "Down and Out in Beverly Hills," he's so far inside these characters that we never spot the technique in back of the performance. Everything he does seems completely in character, almost pre-consciously so. You don't register the outriggings of mannerism, the rehearsed pauses and studied glances. His acting seems to derive from an intense physicality; he provides a link between acting and athleticism—he has a superb athlete's awe for the eloquence of body language. No other actor is as good with the sheer uten-

sils of his trade. Take two of his best performances: the shaggy Expressionist artist in Martin Scorsese's "Life Lessons" mixes his paints as if they were lifeblood; the photojournalist in "Under Fire" works his camera as an extension of his torso.

This physical expressiveness, especially in someone as beefy as Nolte, can provide moments of revelation that the punier actors can't approach. When his characters are in conflict, their agonies take on a larger-than-life proportion: it's as if his body were contorted against itself. In American movies, actors of Nolte's bulk are generally not employed for their subtleties; they're cast as loamy salt-of-the-earth types, lunkhead rampagers, heavies. Actors like Stallone or Schwarzenegger may sometimes play heroic characters but they don't really have a heroic presence; they can't incarnate heroism and they don't have the performing equipment to show its contradictions. That's why they can so easily lampoon their own image. It was never that rich to begin with.

The heroic presence conveyed by Nolte is much more in line with actors like Sean Connery or Richard Harris who, in their performances, appear to have a purchase on something larger than themselves. Their

Please see Page 27