

but their creators stayed put in the back-ground. The designers are Hollywood's un-Judith Shulevitz writes about film for Miroslava and The Village Voice.

Woody Allen made a lot of the best in 1977. How could a director possibly entrust the opening gambit, that all-important first impression, to the hands of a total stranger? Easy. Tiding is literally the last thing a

designer's final cut in hand, the way he would professionals might approach personal shoppers: with no time to spare, and even less cash. That means a title designer's job is not

it, and even if... all in a matter of weeks, sometimes days, and, relatively speaking, for pennies. The fee for designer titles ranges from \$25,000 to \$50,000, a drop in the average studio movie's \$25 million budget. But "many

she tries to lose her life sequence on the emotions she seizes behind a director's words, rather than the words themselves." "She listens to people's body language." Continued on Page 18

# Oliver Stone, Under Fire Over the Killing of J.F.K.

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN

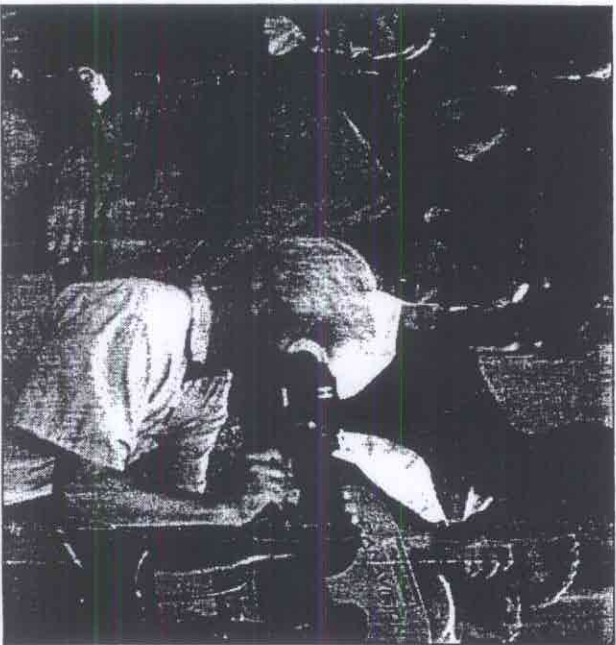
**C**AMELOT PRODUCTIONS' RESEARCH department is on the second floor of a shabby former bus depot on Ammanation Street, a few minutes' drive from where Oliver Stone is filming his controversial interpretation of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The full 26 volumes of the Warren Commission hearings occupy a metal shelf alongside several books that see the President's assassination, on Nov. 22, 1963, as part of a conspiracy, and the Warren report as a Government cover-up. There is a videotape library; there are copies of Congressional investigations, CIA reports, Xeroxed magazine articles from 20 years ago.

Mr. Stone, the writer-director of "Platoon," "Born on the Fourth of July" and, most recently, "The Doors," has suggested a visit to the research department. His purpose is clear.

Months before release of his new movie, written by Mr. Stone and Zachary Sklar—indeed, well before filming is finished—"JFK" has come under assault. There have been articles in The Washington Post, Times, The Chicago Tribune and The Times-Picayune of New Orleans, all arguing that Mr. Stone's film is going to be based on what they called "the far-out fringe" of conspiracy theories.

The theory, specifically, is that of Jim Garrison, the District Attorney of New Orleans in the late 1960's who put a local businessman on trial in 1968 for plotting with Lee Harvey Oswald and others to kill the President. (The jury decided on a not-guilty verdict after less than an hour of deliberation.) Mr. Garrison's hypothesis was "zany" (The Washington Post has charged. The district attorney himself, according to an article in The Times-Picayune, knew that his case amounted to nothing, but he cynically pursued it to get publicity. In short, the accusation is that Oliver Stone doesn't know what he is talking about in his film, which stars Kevin Costner as Mr. Garrison, Gary Oldman as Lee Harvey Oswald and Tommy Lee Jones as Clay Shaw, the accused businessman.

Mr. Stone has been fighting back, answering his critics in letters and articles. And now, in New Orleans, he wants to show that his "JFK" does not spring full-blown out of some paranoid, conspiracy-theory imagination. Every point, every argument, every detail in the movie, he says, has been researched, can be documented and is justified.



Mark Anderson in the New York Times

Oliver Stone, second from left, directing "JFK," above right, a scene from the film's re-creation of the assassination



David Manning in the Cincinnati Enquirer

"I didn't want to make a movie of the Garrison book only," he said. "He is the protagonist, but the book ends essentially in 1968, and I wanted to push the movie into the new ground that was uncovered after 1969 and pre-'68—the autopsies, the bullets, the work of other researchers. So, I've taken dramatic license. It is not a true story per se. It is not the Jim Garrison story. It is a film called 'JFK.' It explores all the possible scenarios of why Kennedy was killed, who killed him and why."

Mr. Stone notes that others have noted before him—that rarely, if ever, has a movie attracted such assault before anybody has seen it, even before most of it had been filmed. Perhaps this is not surprising. For nearly 20 years, the Kennedy assassination has provoked intense debate between those convinced that Kennedy was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone and those who

believe Kennedy was killed as part of a conspiracy—perhaps by agents of Fidel Castro, maybe by anti-Castro Cubans. Some have accumulated evidence supposedly indicating that the Mafia was behind the murder. Others think it was the Central Intelligence Agency, which, the theory goes, wanted to forestall an effort by Kennedy to make peace with Castro and withdraw from Vietnam.

"What actually happens in the movie is that you see different scenarios, different possible conclusions," Mr. Stone said, comparing the movie more to the 1951 Japanese classic "Rashomon," in which the same event is seen from several points of view, than to a straightforward, unequivocal defense of any particular theory. At the same time, however, Mr. Stone makes clear that he himself strongly favors the conspiracy

theory and rejects the Warren Commission findings.

"If the movie is cut the way I think it's going to be cut, and if you are a neutral person, I think you will leave the theater ready to think about things, and I hope, to rethink them, and maybe to go back and read some more and begin to wonder about some of the given, some of the sacred cows, some of the official story," Mr. Stone said. "Because that's what I think the Warren Commission is. It's America's official story."

The negative articles about "JFK" have largely been based on a draft of a screenplay that, he says, has since been revised. Mr. Stone is clearly worried that the advance publicity could lead the public to form a negative opinion of "JFK" before the film, budgeted at about \$40 million, is finished. He says that initially he accepted the conclusions of the Warren Commission and

doubted the conspiracy theories. In the sense, the film chronicles his own reversal of belief.

"I believed that Lee Oswald shot the President," Mr. Stone said. "I had no problem with that." But his view of the assassination changed as his view of many things changed beginning in the late 1960's after his combat duty in Vietnam. "I began to wonder to change the way I looked at the Government," he said. "I stopped believing in what was Watergate and the Pentagon

**Critics have taken aim at the director even before his film on the assassination is finished.**

papers. Eventually, his skepticism extended to the official version of the Kennedy assassination.

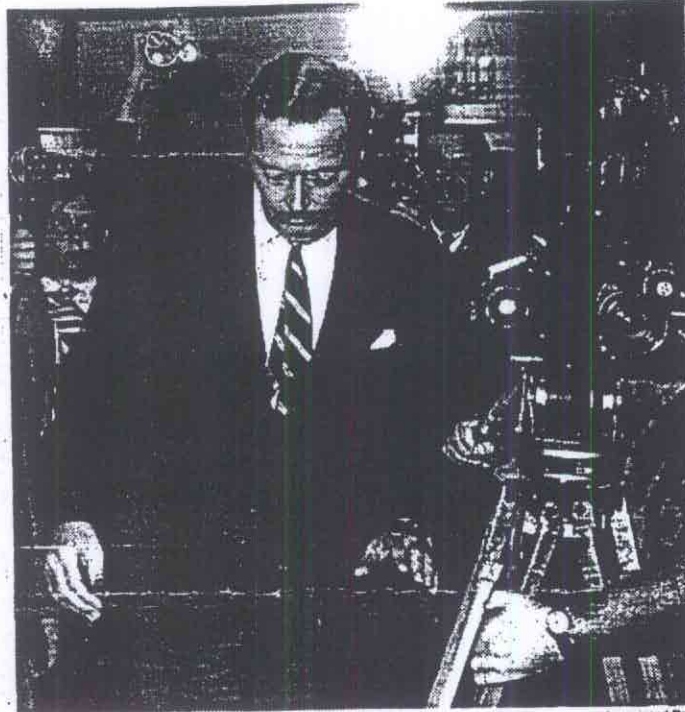
"This was compounded by the House assassination probes, which came up with the idea that it was a conspiracy and that the Government had done a very shoddy job investigating it," he said. The reference was to the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which concluded in 1976 after a long investigation that there had likely been conspiracy to kill Kennedy, though it identified no conspirators. "All during the 1970's and 1980's," Mr. Stone said, "there are these satanic shocks, let's say, and then you hear all kinds of weird evidence coming in here and there, new autopsy reports, new forensic evidence. It just drifted in, but we never got all at once. Time kind of deludes discovery."

What made him focus seriously on the assassination was a 1988 book, "On the Trail of the Assassator" by Mr. Garrison—the only person ever to put someone on trial for conspiracy to murder President Kennedy. The defendant, Clay Shaw, according to some witnesses, had been overheard discussing a plan to kill Kennedy with Oswald and another alleged plotter, David Ferrie. Mr. Garrison believed that the plotters were anti-Castro activists angry at Kennedy for communism. He made either the Cuban missile crisis, he also believed that the operation covered up the truth and, as he built his case, promised he would solve all of it.

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# Stone, Under Fire For 'JFK,' Fights Back



New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison at a 1967 news conference about impending arrests in the assassination conspiracy

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the mysteries about the Kennedy murder. But witnesses were discredited in the trial, and Shaw was quickly acquitted. Mr. Garrison's conspiracy theory lost whatever following it may have had. Mr. Stone allows that, at first, he also put little credence in Mr. Garrison, finding him "a Southern buffoon, a Huey Long type." Eventually, however, he chose to make Mr. Garrison and his unsuccessful investigation the centerpiece of his movie.

"I got 'On the Trail of the Assassins,' and I purchased the movie rights for it immediately," Mr. Stone said. "It read like a Dashiell Hammett whodunit. It starts out as a bit of a seedy crime with small traces, and then the detective gumshoe district attorney follows the trail, and the trail widens and widens, and before you know it, it's no longer a small-

town affair. That seemed to me the kernel of a very powerful movie. The theme is more why Kennedy was killed rather than who did it. It's a whydunit."

But, it is a whydunit that many have long felt was a travesty. Writing in *The Times-Picayune*, Rosemary James, who covered the Shaw trial for the newspaper, asserted in a recent article that Mr. Garrison's investigation was a cynical ploy by which he ruined the career of a man he knew to be innocent to further his own ambitions. "Now," Ms. James concludes, speaking of Oliver Stone, "comes a gullible from La-La Land ... who wants to regurgitate all of that garbage." Mr. Garrison was unavailable to respond to a request to reply to Ms. James's assertions.

Ms. James is joined by other critics, most notably George Lardner, the national security writer for *The Washington Post*. In an article in

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May, Mr. Lardner challenged several elements in Mr. Stone's movie based on the leaked first draft of the screenplay. He points out, for example, that one of Mr. Garrison's key witnesses, an insurance salesman named Perry Russo, who claimed to have identified Shaw and Oswald together, is left out of the script entirely — presumably, Mr. Lardner suggests, because Mr. Russo's testimony seemed ridiculous when it turned out to have been elicited by a hypnotist.

Mr. Lardner dwells on another figure in the alleged conspiracy, David Ferris, who died after being questioned by Mr. Garrison — but before the Shaw trial. In the film, Ferris is murdered by two imaginary Cuban anti-Castro activists named Bull and Indian — who are later spotted in the Texas Book Depository in Dallas, from which Oswald, according to the Warren Commission, shot the President. Mr. Lardner, who interviewed Ferris the night of his death, says in his article that the coroner's report indicated that Ferris died of natural causes.

Mr. Stone acknowledges that there is no character in the movie named Perry Russo, but not because his testimony was embarrassing to the case. A composite character, Mr. Stone says, combines Russo with two others who claimed to have seen the supposed plotters together. As for Bull and Indian, he says: "There is a

**'It explores all the possible scenarios of why Kennedy was killed, who killed him and why,' Mr. Stone says.**

long history of Lee Oswald's association with the shadiest Cubans, the ones who fought Castro." Mr. Stone says that he has "tuned a black-and-white scene that presents the existence of people like Bull and Indian as one hypothesis among others. But, he adds, "JFK" has not been edited. "Who knows if it will even be in the final movie?"

To Mr. Stone the mood of the early 1960's in New Orleans makes a conspiracy to kill Kennedy ever more plausible. New Orleans was the home not only of fanatical right-wing groups but also a center of anti-Communist Cuban activity. There are many in New Orleans who will describe the fury felt by local Cubans, after Kennedy prohibited an attack on the island from American territory.

"It was a time of conspiracy and tension, and murder was in the air," Mr. Stone said. "Assassinations were prevalent. De Gaulle was almost hit three or four times with machine guns at roadblocks. Lumumba got knocked off. Diem got knocked off. You have to live in that period. I don't find it that difficult to accept that conspiracy was in the air."

Back at Camelot Productions' research department is a June 1967 article in *The New Republic* by Fred Powledge, a former reporter for *The New York Times*, who was in New Orleans at the time of the Garrison investigation. The article reflects the seductive power of conspiracy theories, the ideas that can never be proved but can never be fully disproved either.

At first Mr. Powledge is skeptical of Mr. Garrison, and he says he believed the Warren Commission conclusions. But, in his last paragraph, he says: "Now, against my will and my better judgment, I was powerfully tempted to believe Jim Garrison." Some time next year, "JFK" will be on movie screens across America; and audiences can decide for themselves whether to believe Oliver Stone. □