

DALLAS REVISITED

Oliver Stone's movie of John F. Kennedy's assassination stirs old controversies



PAT SULLIVAN/AP

▲ Calling the shooting “the seminal event of my generation,” director Stone demanded authentic details and settings.

TONI MADIA, VICE PRESIDENT OF AN Albion, N.Y., mortgage company, will never forget her visit to Texas last month. Curious about the filming of a new movie, she decided to visit Dallas's infamous Dealey Plaza. She arrived just in time to see the motorcade, led by the open Lincoln limousine, pulling slowly into the line of fire. “You could see Jackie's pillbox hat,” recalls Madia. “And then the shooting started and, my God, it was eerie—very eerie.”

What Madia had stumbled upon was the crucial moment—the re-creation of one of the nation's most searing tragedies, the Nov. 22, 1963, assassination of John F. Kennedy. Once again the young President, visiting Texas to mend political fences, slumps over in the rear seat of the limousine, bleeding profusely from a mortal head wound. Once again his beautiful young wife cradles her dying husband's head in her lap.

This time, though, instead of the grainy footage shot by amateur photographer Abraham Zapruder, which flickers forever in American memo-

ry, the devastating scene is being filmed in high-resolution professional style. Amid mounting controversy, reawakened passions and newly opened wounds, Academy Award-winning director Oliver Stone (*Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *The Doors*), who was all of 17 when Kennedy was shot, is filming *JFK*, his version of the circumstances that surrounded the murder—an event that, Stone has said, “combines the mythic with the whodunit.”

What really happened that day in Dallas? With a \$30 million budget and an all-star cast that includes Kevin Costner, Sissy Spacek, Gary Oldman, Tommy Lee Jones and Kevin Bacon, Stone, 44, has a quirky take on the assassination—that the killing may not have been solved by the blue-ribbon panel that named a lone gunman as the assassin. Like the 1951 Japanese classic film, *Rashomon*, which tells a crime story from varying perspectives, *JFK* explores several versions of the event.

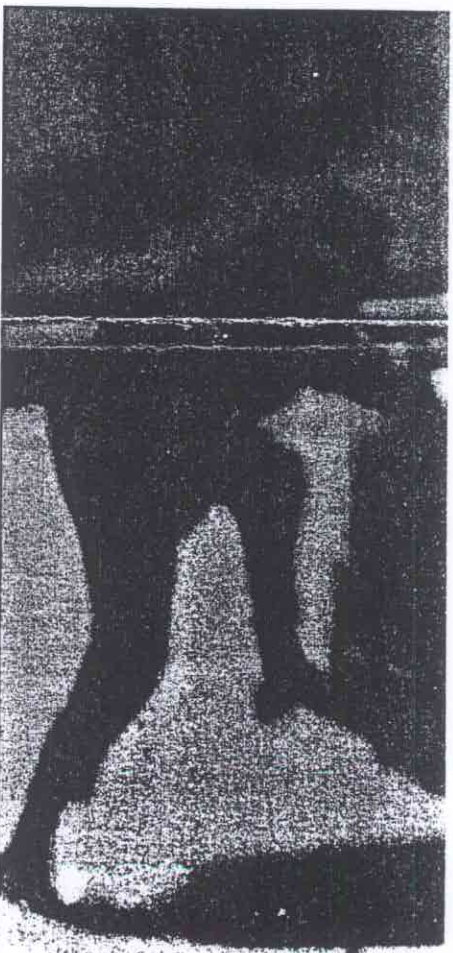
The character of the late President barely appears onscreen. Costner plays Jim Garrison, now 69, the former New Orleans district attorney who tried to convict Clay Shaw, who ran the local International Trade mart and who had murky CIA connections, of conspiracy in Kennedy's murder. Shaw (who died in 1974) was found not guilty by a jury in 1969. It was Garrison's contention that the plot was hatched in New Orleans, and that a tight-lipped ex-Marine named Lee Harvey Oswald was recruited there.

JFK relies heavily on Garrison's 1988 book, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, and on the writings of other critics of the Warren Commission, the official federal panel, chaired by then-Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, which investigated the killing. In its 1964 report, the commission concluded that Oswald acted alone, shooting with a high-powered rifle from the sixth floor of Dallas's Texas School Book Depository.

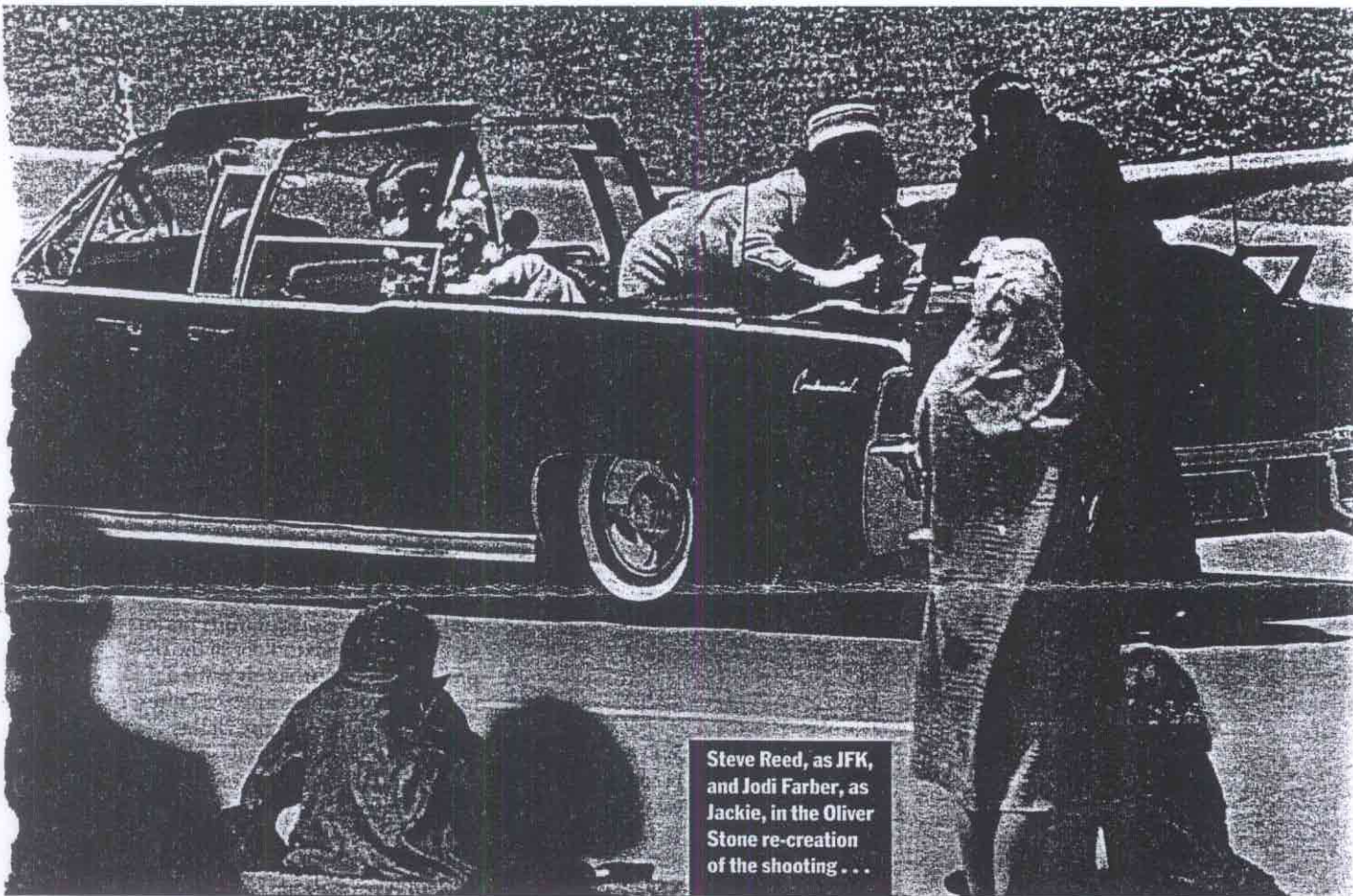
In the years following the murder,



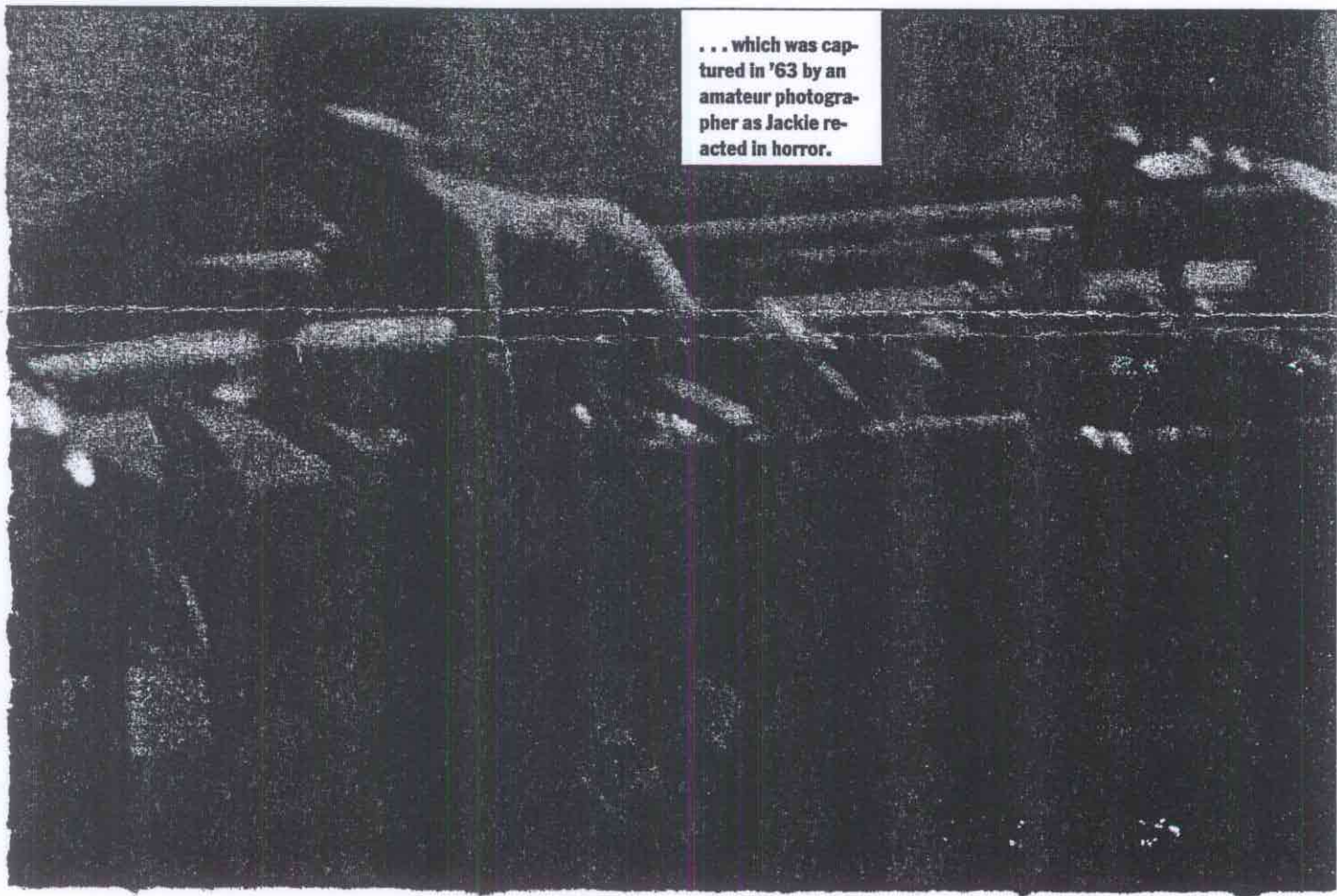
PAUL BUCK/REUTERS



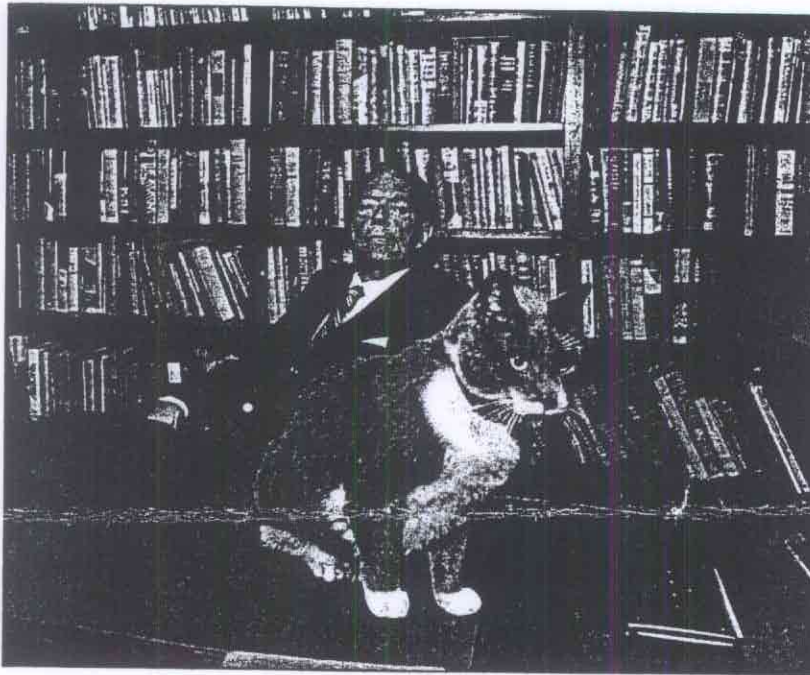
FRAME FROM FILM BY ABRAHAM ZAPRUDER



Steve Reed, as JFK, and Jodi Farber, as Jackie, in the Oliver Stone re-creation of the shooting . . .



. . . which was captured in '63 by an amateur photographer as Jackie reacted in horror.



LOUIS SAHLIC



BOB JACKSON/THE DALLAS TIMES—HERALD

▲ "The truth has been apparent for years," says conspiracy theorist Jim Garrison (in his New Orleans judge's chambers) of the assassination.

◀ "We could have done things different," says detective Jim Leavelle (in white hat) of Oswald's slaying.

however, a variety of conspiracy theories evolved. Garrison became a pivotal figure of a disparate band of dissenters that included radical lawyer Mark Lane and comedian Mort Sahl. Garrison still maintains that the assassination was an elaborate plot by mavericks in the U.S. intelligence community who feared that Kennedy would withdraw from Vietnam and end the cold war.

To try to get to the bottom of the debate—or at least to roil the muck one more time—Stone has enlisted the services of several figures central to the tragedy, including Garrison. Now an appeal court judge in New Orleans, Garrison, ironically, will play a small part, as the late Chief Justice Warren.

Although Stone has muzzled cast and crew, Garrison gives some hints about *JFK*. Stone, he says, has cracked the problem of telling conflicting versions of the same story. In one scene, Garrison says, Stone will show Oswald shooting at JFK, and "in the next he's showing it from another point of view, and you can sense the impossibility of it."

Not everyone is enthusiastic about the enterprise. Sen. Ted Kennedy has declined to comment on the movie about his brother's death. Comedian Sahl, an early champion of Garrison's who has read the script, calls it "prosaic crap. It skirts most of the major issues." Says Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), a Warren Commission adviser, "The commission's findings

have stood the test of time, including the single-bullet theory."

Whatever the version—or versions—that ultimately makes it to the screen, the filmmaker seems to want to be meticulous about historical detail. To uncover nuances of character, Costner intends to visit the ex-DA's office in New Orleans, and he listens to tapes of Garrison's regional accent.

With some reluctance, Dallas is playing its part. For years the citizens have felt victimized by the almost universal blame placed upon the city for the killing. Even though Stone offered up his thanks to the city when he received an Oscar for *Born on the Fourth of July*, which was partly filmed there, county officials balked before granting permission to use the sixth floor of the depository, now a privately owned museum. He got his approval after donating \$50,000 to the Dallas County Historical Foundation.

Among the chilling events of that November weekend more than 27 years ago was nightclub owner Jack Ruby's stunning public execution of Oswald two days after the assassination—a scene captured by live television cameras and rerun countless times. Ruby is being portrayed in *JFK* by Brian Doyle Murray. Oswald was being transferred to the county prison when Ruby broke through a crowd of reporters and shot him. Oswald died without uttering another word.

At Oswald's side was the man immortalized in photographs as "the man in the white hat," Dallas detective Jim Leavelle. Now retired, Leavelle, 70, is a technical adviser on the film. "He was very cool and collected," he says of Oswald. "He kept saying he didn't shoot anybody."

What will *JFK* be like? At this point no one, including Garrison and perhaps even Stone himself, can say what will finally make it to the screen. Only one thing seems certain: The controversy over the assassination is likely to continue. Indeed, Stone may take some solace from the words of a philosopher. History, according to George Santayana, "is always written wrong; that is why it is necessary to rewrite it."

■ KEN GROSS

■ ANNE MAIER, JOSEPH HARMES in *Dallas*

■ RON RIDENHOUR in *New Orleans*