

TV remembers on 25th anniversary

PBS, HBO and CBS



"Who Shot President Kennedy?" which airs tonight on KCET, is one of three crucial specials recalling the JFK assassination.

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The Kennedy nostalgia campaign's in full swing right now, even though we're a full week away from the 25th anniversary of JFK's assassination.

The supermarket tabloids are raking over old gossip about the former president's myriad girlfriends. One is even claiming Jack Ruby is still alive. The bloodied but sadly unsilenced Geraldo Rivera has prepared a two-part series on Kennedy's shooting. It's enough to make sensitive souls want to pull up the bedcovers and emerge when the anniversary's over.

But despite the current tendency to reduce anything — even a presidential assassination — to a form of entertainment, there

of JFK assassination offer not-to-be-missed specials

are at least three crucial Kennedy-related shows on TV that would be folly to miss.

The first, a special from PBS' "Nova," airs tonight at 8 on KCET-Channel 28. "Who Shot President Kennedy?" offers a look at the conspiracy theories behind the killing, and shows how they stand or fall when modern-day technology is applied to them.

"Nova" itself has gotten on the high-tech bandwagon. It uses computer-enhanced graphics to retrace the Kennedy motorcade's last few yards.

It's easy to dismiss conspiracy theories. I've always suspected that they fill a gap in our culture for those who embrace them, by restoring a chilly coherence to an otherwise chaotic world.

And, as the "Nova" special shows, the Warren Commission's

verdict — that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone — could have been right on the money.

Yet some of what happened in Dallas' Dealey Plaza 25 years ago can't easily be explained. It seems harder, not easier, with the passing of time to rest-assured that Oswald was definitely not in cahoots with others. The view from the grassy knoll, you might say, gets increasingly blurry.

A two-hour CBS News special on Thursday called "Four Days in November" does nothing to dispute theories — it simply shows excerpts from CBS news footage from the Friday of the assassination to Kennedy's funeral at Arlington National Cemetery the following Monday.

This is highly gripping televi-

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sign, from the first moments — when an episode of "As the World Turns" is interrupted by a news bulletin from an unseen announcer about the shooting.

We quickly move on to Walter Cronkite reporting on the story from New York. Grim, stony-faced and immensely professional, Cronkite first deals with the rumor of Kennedy's death, and then, taking his glasses on and off, glancing sideways at a studio clock and fighting to keep choking emotion from his voice, confirming the awful truth.

Dan Rather, who hosts "Four Days in November," is seen as an eager, young reporter in Dallas,

showing grace under pressure.

A younger Harry Reasoner delivered an enormously moving elegy, seemingly in part off the top of his head, rightly surmising that people would always remember where they were the day Kennedy was shot.

Mostly, though, "Four Days in November" is simply sounds and black-and-white moving images. TV was different back then; commentators did not feel the need to fill our ears with meaningless babble. The lengthy footage of Kennedy's funeral runs almost without comment — but then, these pictures are so powerful it would be superfluous.

Jacqueline Kennedy swathed in black, Robert Kennedy with his stiff, bustling gait hinting at both sorrow and anger, little John-

John's heartbreaking salute to his father — these are images undiminished by time's passing.

If the nation was in shock over the weekend and the Monday of mourning, then TV helped in the healing process. As Rather points out, Americans could watch these events uninterrupted at great length, and, in the same way that one grieves for a lost relative, could put some closure on their feelings.

"Four Days in November" is essential viewing — especially for history students of junior-high age and older. So is HBO's "JFK: In His Own Words" (repeating Nov. 19, 22 and 25), which, using film footage of Kennedy talking about himself at various stages of his life, illuminates his intellect, wit and magnetism.