

He Looked at J.F.K. Without the Myths

■ Robert Drew's documentaries following Kennedy from the campaign to presidency to his funeral played a key role in pioneering a synthesis of journalism and film.

By KRISTINE McKENNA
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American culture has pretty much gone full circle with the Kennedys. Deified, then trashed, the beleaguered Bostonians are nonetheless a full-service myth that continues to fascinate. The narrative linchpin in a spate of recent motion pictures (the interracial love story "Love Field," Oliver Stone's docudrama "JFK," Clint Eastwood's action flick "In the Line of Fire"): the Kennedys have also been the subject of several recent books, the latest of which, Richard Reeves' "President Kennedy," subscribes to the current revisionist view of Kennedy as a shrewd Cold War powerbroker and prescription drug enthusiast whose skills as a statesman have thus far been largely obscured by the pink fog of the Camelot legend.

Opportunities to observe the Kennedys free of the layers of cultural readings laid on them are few and far between, and that makes the screening of four documentaries shot in the early '60s by *cinéma-vérité* filmmaker Robert Drew a significant event. Showing today, Nov. 16 and Nov. 22 at the Simon Wiesenthal Holocaust Center, Drew's films also played a key role in pioneering a synthesis of journalism

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and film, in a time when the mass media were still in their infancy. Drew will be honored for this work in Los Angeles on Friday, when he is to receive the International Documentary Assn.'s 1993 Career Achievement Award.

"In the late '40s, I began thinking about developing a kind of film journalism that was as flexible as candid photography," says Drew, now 69, who spent much of that decade as a picture editor at Life magazine, working with such photographers as Alfred Eisenstadt.

"At that time most film documentaries were verbally based [relying on voice-over narration], and that creates two problems. First, it's deadly dull, because a lecture on a living medium is always dull," adds Drew, speaking by phone from his home in Upstate New York. "Second, that approach obstructs any dramatic development that has the potential of unfolding. So, I decided to kill the narration and get the candid footage going."

It took Drew about 10 years to achieve that seemingly modest goal, but in 1960, equipped with newly engineered lightweight cameras he'd cajoled Time Inc. into financing to the tune of \$250,000, he hit the road to cover the primary campaign of a then-little-known Massachusetts senator named John Kennedy, who was running against Hubert Humphrey in a bid for the Democratic nomination for the presidency.

"It was an election year, I wanted to do an election story and Kennedy simply appealed to me," Drew says of his first film, "Primary," which screens today. "The first time I saw him stride onto a stage, my heart sank for him—he was this young, thin, inexperienced local politician, and I thought, 'My God, how can he put himself up for President?' After listening to him speak for five minutes, I was on the edge of my chair. He was incredibly compelling, and his charisma was basically rooted in how calm and confident he was—and, of course, he was also very good-looking.

"My impression of Kennedy is a bit different from the currently popular view of him," Drew adds. "He was an idealist and was full of passion, and that he led a life few of us can imagine as far as the physical pain he was in all the time—he struck me as a very brave man. I think he loved his wife and children, despite the peccadilloes that were part of the pattern of the family. I knew nothing about any of that when I



Drew filmed the widowed First Lady at the Kennedy funeral.

was making these films, by the way, and only learned about his womanizing years later when I got to know a lady who knew him. All I can say about that is that she felt he wasn't always a gentleman."

Following Kennedy's victory in the 1960 election but before his inauguration, Drew showed "Primary" to the President-elect and requested permission to make a second film in the White House.

"I told him, 'What we have here is a new form of history,'" Drew recalls. "'When you're in the White House you'll see lots of photographs of people shaking hands, but those pictures aren't going to tell you much about what really went on,' and he replied, 'You're absolutely right. What if I'd been able to observe F.D.R. in the 24 hours before he declared war on Japan?' That led to the second film, 'Crisis,' which screens Nov. 16.

A chronicle of the showdown between Alabama Gov. George Wallace, President Kennedy and Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy over the integration of the University of

Alabama, "Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment" is a powerful evocation of the '60s civil rights movement. Drew's cameras follow students Vivian Malone and Jimmy Hood on the day Wallace blocked their entrance to the university. Included is footage of a landmark speech on racial equality that Kennedy delivered in 1963 and a good deal of footage of Robert Kennedy.

"Bobby was a different character altogether—he was a schemer and a plotter and was a real politician in the sense that he often used force when power would do," Drew says. "I didn't have the same affection for Bobby as I had for John because I don't respect politicians who operate that way, and that's why I completely stayed out of Bobby's presidential campaign. I knew enough about Bobby Kennedy that I had a hard time believing the image of him that was emerging near the end [before his assassination in Los Angeles in June, 1968]. I mean, sure, maybe somehow God reached down and struck his heart pure—but I stayed out of it."

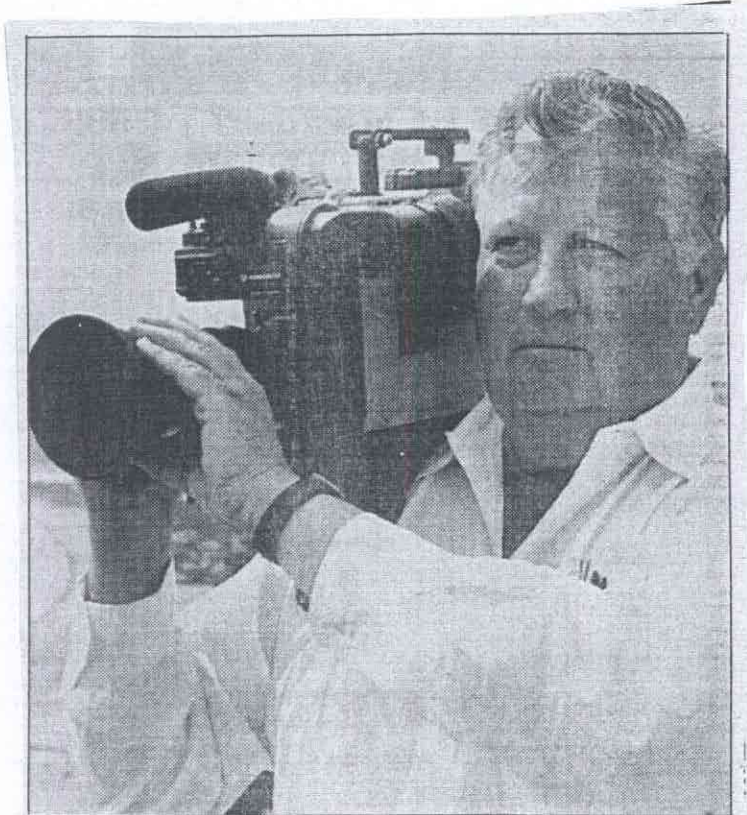
Lambasted when it was first shown in a New York Times edito-

rial that said "to eavesdrop on executive decisions of serious government matters while they are in progress is highly inappropriate," "Crisis" nonetheless was to serve as a prototype for documentary news films that has yet to be improved on. It also functioned as a blueprint for dozens of additional projects for Drew, currently at work on his 52nd documentary film, "L.A. Champions," an essay on young basketball stars in the high schools of South-Central Los Angeles.

Sadly, Drew's final film on Kennedy, "Faces of November," was made at Kennedy's funeral. A devastatingly powerful reminder of the tragedy that befell this country with the assassinations of the Kennedys, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, "Faces of November" will screen—on Nov. 22, the 30th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination—with "Being With John F. Kennedy," a compilation completed in 1985 of Drew's footage of Kennedy.

It's in this compilation film that Kennedy comes most vividly alive. Kennedy could ad-lib with the best of them, and interacted beautifully with the press; his sense of humor was always lurking just below the surface, and when he's asked a stupid question, you can see him struggling to restrain himself from tossing back a witty retort. Also included in "Being With John F. Kennedy" is Kennedy's famous "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" speech and footage involving Khrushchev and Castro (we observe Kennedy as he unknowingly stumbles into the Bay of Pigs debacle).

Summarizing his intentions in the making of these films, Drew concludes that "the ethics of all journalistic work center on the editing process, but the techniques a journalist employs sway those ethics considerably. If you're showing something that's happening in real time, it's a little harder



Robert Drew told Kennedy that film "is a new form of history."

to be unethical than if you're grabbing shots and intercutting them with long, written narrations. In other words, it's harder to do violence to the truth if you have

long stretches of truth to deal with."

Information: the Simon Wiesenthal Holocaust Center at (310) 553-9036, ext. 237.