

TV Preview

'JACK': THE KENNEDY WE HARDLY KNEW

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"Jack," the two-hour documentary CBS is airing tonight, will likely prove the most satisfying of all the Kennedy commemoratives that television has in store for the 30th anniversary of the tragedy in Dallas, partly because it concentrates on Kennedy's life, not on the way it ended.

For the most part a happy marriage of style and content, the film includes color footage of Kennedy and associates that will be new to almost everyone who sees it. This includes film of the inauguration (shot by Navy cameramen and preserved in government archives), which is almost always seen only in black-and-white; home movies of the marriage of John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier; and other unusually crisp color images of Kennedy at work and play.

The film, at 9 on Channel 9, was produced not by CBS News but by

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The familiar and the unfamiliar John F. Kennedy are seen on CBS's "Jack."

CBS's Top-Notch 'Jack'

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CBS Entertainment. The father-son team of Peter and Nick Davis put it together, sometimes with tender loving care and sometimes with too much smart-alecky cleverness. At least they get the worst over with early: The film opens with a gimmicky montage of pop Kennedyana accompanied by a lachrymose country-western tune called "I Know John Kennedy Is in Heaven."

What the Davises seem to be saying is that they are out to find the real man beneath all the layers of myth, to separate truth from hokum. But the sequence has a calculated irreverence that calls too much attention to itself. So the filmmakers are terribly sophisticated, are they? Well, goody-goody for them.

Once the tacky prologue is out of the way, the film proceeds with a nearly seamless fluidity, telling Kennedy's story without narration except as provided by snippets from historic audio recordings or interviews with people who knew him. Some knew him more intimately than others. There among Sargent Shriver and Dave Powers and Tip O'Neill and Pierre Salinger and

other of the usual suspects is one "Susannah M," identified in captions as "anonymous friend."

It is alleged that M was Kennedy's mistress, or one of his mistresses, before and during his brief stay in the White House. She visited him there, she says. Among the other things M says of Kennedy: He never spoke of his mother; he had an apparently lifelong "sense of restlessness"; he was a man "caught in privilege" and without much passion for the underprivileged; and in his relationships with women, "he was looking for a mirror," an image of himself reflected.

The film attempts to analyze both why Kennedy was a great man and what kept him from being a greater one.

As the visuals keep saying over and over, somehow without being redundant, he was the first truly sexy president, at least since the invention of the camera, and when Susannah M speaks of "his radiant ways," even those who never met him will know what she means. "He was a handsome-looking guy," O'Neill says understatedly.

Kennedy brought to the White House and to national life a glamorous

vigor that no president and few public figures of any kind have been able to challenge in the years since. Surely the way a president makes the citizenry feel is an important aspect of the job; here was one area in which Kennedy had no peer. He made us feel good, he made us feel proud, and we loved it.

Some of the most familiar Kennedy public moments are replayed, including his self-effacing announcement "I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris" and his still-stirring "*Ich bin ein Berliner*." These are intercut with more intimate stuff such as Kennedy flubbing his lines during a political commercial, or Jackie saying first "Oh, no" and then "I suppose so" when, in 1956, an interviewer asks if she is in love with him.

Less interesting are rehashes of the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Cuban Mis-

sile Crisis. There are just so many times one can relive this history without tiring of it. Nothing is mentioned of the way Jack and Jackie enriched the cultural life of the country by holding stylish White House galas or simply by making it look so damn cool to be smart and refined.

As filmmaking, "Jack" is for the most part a masterly and intelligent job. As a Kennedy commemorative, it came up short in one particular area: It didn't make me cry. Everybody wants to be cool and hip and do Kennedy without tears. It would be braver at this point to do Kennedy with tears, to investigate the honest feelings of loss behind even the corny country-western song.

Now and then, when it's at its best, "Jack" does touch on those feelings and, on why some of us will carry them with us to the end.