

Television adds its own spin to the Kennedy saga

By Jon Margolis

TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

A month before the 30th anniversary of John Kennedy's death, there was a small announcement out of Hollywood that harkened back to his era while embodying this one.

The news was about a new laserdisc, wide-screen collector's edition of Danny DeVito's 1992 movie "Hoffa," starring Jack Nicholson as the Teamster boss so unbeloved of Kennedy and his brother.

Here was top-of-the-line modern electronic entertainment—the highest quality audio and video, plus an alternative soundtrack with a running commentary by DeVito, plus a behind-the-scenes documentary about making the movie, plus newsreels of the real Jimmy Hoffa, copies of the reviews and a suggested reading list.

All in the service of a lie.

Well, OK, a falsehood. Presumably DeVito and scriptwriter David Mamet first deluded themselves into believing that Hoffa was a champion of the working class instead of just another one of its exploiters, and an uncommonly cynical one at that.

Though the film isn't about Kennedy, it deals with him, making it part of the long, bizarre relationship between John Kennedy and popular culture, expressed either directly or indirectly through television. As candidate and president, Kennedy used television as no one had before. As ghost, Kennedy has been used by television, movies and writers to titillate, misinform and profit.

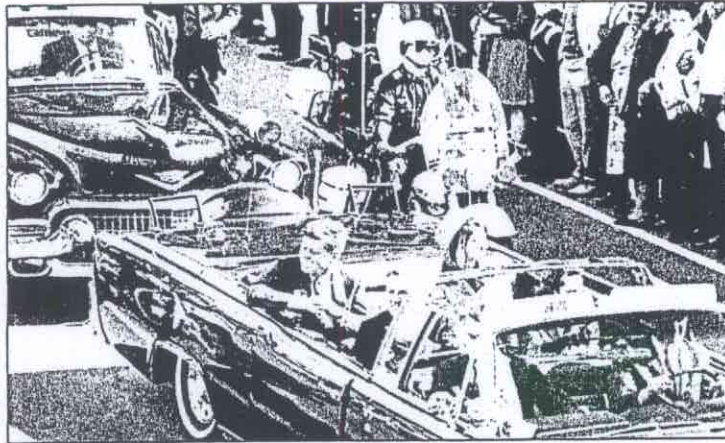
Like "Hoffa," Oliver Stone's movie "JFK," is false, as is "The Men Who Killed Kennedy," the conspiratorial fantasy that the A&E cable network foisted onto its audience in 1991. It will, of course and regrettably, be repeated Nov. 22 through 26.

The saga continues. On Sunday, ABC commences a mini-series based on Nigel Hamilton's "JFK: Reckless Youth." This is a book in which, because so much is demonstrably false, all is entirely unbelievable, even the parts that must be true.

But who cares? It was well-hyped, and in some forums even well-reviewed. That's because standards in the world of so-called higher culture, or serious scholarship, have sunk almost to the level of the standards in popular culture, as exemplified by television, as manifested by television's treatment of Kennedy, still these 30 years after the assassination.

Come to think of it, maybe it was the assassination that caused it.

Television may have elected Kennedy. That



Serious scholarship, as manifested by television's treatment of John F. Kennedy and his assassination, has sunk almost to the level of standards in popular culture.



JFK strolls with "John John" along the White House walkway.

night he debated Richard Nixon for the first time, radio listeners thought Nixon had done better. They had not seen his puffy face, his heavy eyes, his nervous sweat, all in contrast to the calm good looks of the man standing next to him, exuding poise and health.

That, as it turns out, was a bit of a lie, too. Jack Kennedy's vigorous-looking ruddiness came in part from the cortisone and other drugs he used to stay alive despite Addison's disease. Sore knee and all, Nixon was the

healthier candidate that night. Television conveys an image that does not always conform to reality.

Kennedy knew that, and he knew that by presenting the right image he could convey his version of reality. In 1961, he held 19 televised press conferences, presenting his handsome face (however artificially enhanced) and his casual, ironic wit (that was real) through good times and bad. Thanks to television, he made the good times seem better and the bad seem OK.

But if Kennedy was the first president to figure out how helpful television could be when he con-

trolled it, he was also the first to learn that he could not always control it, or its impact.

The explosion of television's power in the Kennedy years transcended his administration. Those were the years when the 30-minute evening network news show began, the years when the first communications satellite was orbited.

On that satellite, the first 10 minutes of the President's July 23, 1962, press conference were beamed to Europe, where financiers heard JFK say that all the U.S. had to do to fix its trade imbalance was "to withdraw its support of our defense expenditures overseas and our foreign aid."

Within seconds, the price of gold on the London markets collapsed.

It went right back up, of course, as soon as everyone realized that Kennedy didn't mean to do any such thing. But there it was—the power of television.

It was there again in 1963 when black Americans started demanding their legal rights from a government whose leader supported their goal, but not always their methods. Quiet, behind-the-scenes negotiation was always JFK's preferred technique. But when television brought into every living room the spectacle of little girls set upon by police dogs and knocked down by firehoses, behind-the-scenes negotiation was no longer possible.

Kennedy sensed all this. He probably had no time to subject it to rational analysis because too soon his life was blown away by the most irrational of acts, an act that has become the subject of, and is arguably the cause of, our society's progressive anti-rationalism.

No element of American life better illustrates that anti-rationalism than television, and television's treatment of Kennedy helps illustrate why. It isn't just TV's casual acceptance of all the mad conspiracy theories about Kennedy's assassination, his presidency and

Continued on page 35

Friday evening

- ericks. 977510
 (11) Wall Street Week: Top toy companies. (CC) 9959
 (20) Ten Thousand Eyes: Professionals worldwide photograph pet projects for one week. 61317
 8 (5) TV-MOVIE: "Staying Afloat" 57171
 (7) Step by Step: Dana secretly dates a guy Karen likes; JT tells Karen. (CC) 5046
 (11) I'll Fly Away: John Morgan and Adlaine hear horror tales; a hooded figure emerges in the probe of a black man's death. (CC) 80423
 (20) The Road to Brown: Attorney Charles Houston's 20-year campaign against segregation paves the way for "Brown vs. the Board of Education." (CC) 60249
 (38) Jerusalem On Line 3046
 (44) Cine 3133
 8:30 (7) Hangin' With Mr. Cooper: Mark doesn't like the way he will be depicted in a TV commercial. (CC) 7881
 (38) The Joy of Music With Diane Bish 5881
 9 (2) Picket Fences: A new dairy campaign model, a battered wife, causes an uproar; Kimberly considers breast implants. (CC) 7713
 (7) 20/20 (CC) 35959
 (11) I'll Fly Away: Lilly asks Forrest's help in finding her missing father. (CC) 77959
 (20) Focus on Britain: Sandy Hill spotlights autos, ships and music. 31249
 (26) Veronica con ... Banda Machos 53997
 (32) News 82423
 (38) Among Friends 1539
 (66) Matlock: Matlock defends the subject of a slain biogra-

pher and learns a disturbing fact. (CC) 9330510

9:30 (20) Destinos: Raquel and Arturo plan to meet. (CC) 69171

10 (2) News 5922572

(5) News (CC) 1666084

(7) News 1651152

(9) News (CC) 39862

(11) The Unforgettable Nat

King Cole: Home movies, recordings, performance clips and interviews with Cole's family and friends profile the singer/pianist. (CC) 5770510

(20) Body Electric 39442

(26) Noticiero 84930

(32) Code 3: Beached whales in Australia: Wisconsin flood rescue. [R] 53084

(38) This Is Your Day 41084

(44) Noticiero 49626

(50) Family Feud 287336

(66) Real Stories of the Highway Patrol 8874133

On the cover



"John John," Jackie, Caroline and John F. Kennedy.

JFK

Continued from page 5

his family. It's also the more benign but equally mindless blurring of the line between entertainment and public affairs, the conquest of the serious by the frivolous, the triumph of image over reality.

So it's no surprise that another TV observance of this 30th anniversary will be a special "Larry King Live" on which the Kennedy years will be discussed by President Clinton, Dan Rather, John Chancellor, Richard Nixon, Chubby Checker, Gerald Ford, Mario Cuomo and . . .

CHUBBY CHECKER????

Well, that's politics, or show business as it's sometimes known.

Flawed as are we all, John Kennedy was not the cultured intellectual his acolytes sometimes claimed he was. His wife liked ballet. He liked show tunes.

Still, he was something of an educated man. He was familiar with the history, the literature and the philosophy of Western Civilization, willing to call for "intellectual and spiritual fitness which underlies the flowering of the arts."

And he was a rational man. Always aware of human folly and sometimes guilty of it, he nonetheless approached life with the ironic detachment of a British man of letters. He may only have enrolled, not really studied, at the London School of Economics (his health had broken down), but he absorbed some of its attitude. How ironic that popular culture now uses him as a foil for all that is inane and inconsequential.

This is Lee Harvey Oswald's final triumph. That day 30 years ago Oswald shot two men, killed one and unleashed a million demons. Kennedy and John Connally, who died last June, have both been buried. The demons are still flying around, making us crazy. If you doubt that, just channel surf.

MARTIN
 TURNS HIS HEAD 360 DEGREES

MIMI
 SWALLOWS A NEON SWORD

ALFRED
 SMOKES THROUGH HIS EYES

AND MUCH, MUCH MORE!

SEEING IS
 BELIEVING

THE INCREDIBLE LIFE AND TIMES OF

Robert Ripley
 Believe It or Not!

FRIDAY NIGHT 7:30

TBS
 ORIGINAL

To Order Cable Call 1-800-CABLE-ME