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LEISURE & ARTS

Dallas 'Conspiracy' Was a Gang of One

By DOROTHY RABINOWITZ

How these things happen no one knows, but there are indisputable signs of a tilt toward sanity in this year's reflections on John F. Kennedy's assassination. In the case of CBS Reports' "Who Killed JFK? The Final Chapter?" (Friday, 9-11 p.m. EST)—one of numerous investigations marking the 30th anniversary of the event—that tilt is a decisive one. This is abundantly clear in the final summary delivered by Dan Rather, who declares that, after decades of exhaustive investigations, the Warren Commission's main findings remain unassailable, and that there is no evidence that anyone but Lee Harvey Oswald was involved in the plot to kill the president.

"Frontline's" ever so long look at the assassin's life, titled "Who Was Lee Har-

Television

"Who Killed JFK?" "Who Was Lee Harvey Oswald?"

vey Oswald?" (Tuesday, 9-12 p.m., on PBS) is in turn content to conclude that the rifle used to kill Kennedy was fired by none other than Lee Harvey Oswald.

No one, to repeat, knows how these things happen, but it's a fair bet that the lack of reverence for scenarios involving multiple plotters—so notably evident in the CBS documentary—owes more than a little to that master plotter Oliver Stone. In Mr. Stone's "JFK" we had, at last, the ultimate expression of the dementia characteristic of the conspiracy theorists and their faithful legions. This film, which implicated virtually everyone in government in a grand design to murder the president, was, in its obliviousness to fact, its primitive malice, its fantasies of multitudes of assassins and co-assassins, finally too much. It may not have been obvious at once, but in due time it became clear that the film might actually do some good. For in its strange way—and mainly thanks to the revulsion and general mockery it inspired—"JFK" may have begun the undoing of the conspiracy theorists.

The CBS program concludes that the younger people are the more inclined they are to believe that the assassination was a large plot. This should surprise no one, and it has little to do with being born after the event. What it does have to do with is the truth that for the young now being ed-

ucated in the schools there are no facts of history—only points of view.

This is, after all, the generation being brought up in the who's-to-say-what's-true? and hey-anything-is-possible schools of history. Go to any campus now and tell students that the government has, these many years, been covering up the fact that the planes that attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, were in fact piloted by agents of the CIA and not a Japanese strike force, and you will find plenty in your audience prepared to agree that this could well be true. Assuming, of course, that there are that many students around aware that something of note happened at Pearl Harbor.

Conspiracy buffs of all ages will not feel deprived, entirely, by the "Frontline" film, which proceeds—after an admirable and dramatic first hour—to plummet into a wild tangle of possible conspirators, plot links and witnesses. So many witnesses. To so little. Former FBI agent and right-winger Guy Bannister's secretary-mistress is here, for one, to attest that Oswald visited Bannister's office. A different authority testifies that she has the wrong address. Someone else tells how he saw Oswald lunching with Bannister. There is a picture of someone who may or may not be Oswald, shown at a barbecue with another right-wing star of the conspiracy follies, namely David Ferrie.

There is more, much more. Then, having endured all this ominous detail, we are informed, by the narrator, that "the relationship between Oswald, Ferrie and Bannister remains elusive." So does much else in the highly atmospheric second hour, which begins by describing 1963 New Orleans as "a city seething with intrigue and paranoia." Among still other witnesses dredged up from this seething, intriguing city are a network of anti-Castroites and their families, including two sisters who say they met Oswald, one father confessor to the two sisters who recalls that Janet Leigh was appearing at a charity at the time in question, and two Australian girls who met Oswald on a bus.

This nattering is fortunately preceded and followed by far better material, particularly the Oswald family portrait. Of their mother, Marguerite, Lee's brother Robert coolly observes that she was much like Lee—a woman who felt circumstances were always against her, and that the world owed her a living. All of her children, Lee included, were dispatched to orphanages at various times in their young lives.

"Frontline" follows Lee's travels from boyhood, in which he skips school, hangs about in zoos, museums and libraries and immerses himself in the fervor over com-

munist spies that was in the air in the early '50s. Every hopeful step forward for him now becomes a bitter disappointment, from the Marines (where he lands in the brig) to a sojourn in the Soviet Union, under the eyes of justifiably suspicious KGB agents, who figure out quickly that this is the kind of spy-defector whose help they can do without.

It is a rich portrait of the emblematic misfit of our age. The filmmakers, who clearly know a telling final judgment when they see it, chose to end this work with Robert Oswald's unanswerable declaration: in short, that the facts of his brother's guilt are clear, despite those who keep trying "to distort those facts."

This eminently sane Oswald may be able to derive a certain comfort from the CBS report, which candidly sets about to dispense with distortions raised by such as the "JFK" film. It is, on the whole, the more coherent and the more dramatic of the two documentaries. Here, for instance, is footage of that eerie personality, Marguerite Oswald, carrying on a self-confident discourse about her son and his days as just a normal chronic truant from school like any other healthy boy. There is old file footage that has not lost its power over time. It includes not only those familiar pictures of the riderless horse and the saluting son, but less-familiar ones, such as that of the reporters who carried Oswald's casket to his burial place because no other mourners were present to do it.

And there are the entirely new pictures of two CBS veterans recalling the murder of a president. "Anchormen shouldn't cry," Walter Cronkite wryly tells Dan Rather even as his voice begins to break, just as it did on-air that long ago day in Dallas.

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