

# TV: 'Ruby and Oswald' on CBS

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

TELEVISION is again venturing into the ultrasensitive format of the "docu-drama" with still another dramatization based on the assassination of President Kennedy. The last effort, carried on ABC, was "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," which pretended that Jack Ruby never killed Oswald. Then it attempted to have public trial establish that Oswald did not act alone but was probably a dupe of other, more powerful conspirators. Mixing facts casually with rumor and speculation, the production was widely criticized for its irresponsible methods.

Tonight at 8:30, CBS will devote nearly three hours to "Ruby and Oswald," an Alan Landsburg Production. Paul Freeman was the producer; the program was directed by Mel Stuart and written in a father-and-son collaboration by John and Michael McGreevey.

Given that the assassination scenario is still being argued in certain quarters, skeptics might wonder about the motives of any dramatizations at this time. Perhaps, they could reasonably conclude, the networks are interested in little more than exploiting an event that remains emotionally supercharged in the nation's psyche.

CBS has been extremely cautious about this production. One network executive even proclaimed that the script was being submitted to the scrutiny of CBS censors for checks on accuracy. Spokesmen for the news division later denied any such involvement in the project. Nevertheless, "Ruby and Oswald" sticks unusually close to verifiable facts.

With a narrator explaining that "every scene is drawn from sworn testimony," the McGreeveys' script concentrates on incidents, nearly always side-stepping interpretation. Scenes are labeled with exact information about time and place. And, despite the two names in the title, the script is really about one man—Ruby. It is through Ruby, and his convictions that Oswald was a "smirking little weasel" acting alone, that this version of those November 1963 events unfolds.

The character of Oswald is presented with calculated sketchiness. He takes a package supposedly containing curtain rods to the Texas Book Depository. We never see who fires the rifle, but the circumstantial evidence against Oswald is massive. He is seen killing Officer James D. Tippett and being arrested in a movie theater. The rest is interrogation, denials and contradictory stories. Possible ties with Cuban groups are mentioned but not explored.

Ruby, on the other hand, is followed with detailed care. His grief over the death of "our beloved President" is seen escalating into a psychopathic preoccupation with everything he has resented in life. He suddenly detects familial similarities between the Kennedys and the Rubensteins—his original family name. Everybody runs out on him, he decides, adding, "You have to fight to be recognized—I'm still just a stupid Jew from the 'ghetto.'"

The McGreeveys interviewed several members of Ruby's family, and much of their material, especially scenes with his sister, carries the stamp of accuracy. Everything leads quite logically to this obsessed character's bizarre shooting of Oswald on national television. Moments later, he doesn't remember doing it. "I did it for Mrs. Kennedy," he says. "I did it for everybody. I did it to show that Jews have guts."

The production uses new film footage, covering President Kennedy's trip to Texas, the Dallas motorcade and the aftermath of the assassination. But

all of these "actualities" are kept in the form of black-and-white television reports. The dramatized portion are entirely in color. There is no unnecessary and objectionable blurring of fact and dramatization.

The "docu-drama" is always forced into the burdensome role of a moving waxworks. Attention is lavished on visually accurate reconstructions of scenes. Actors are chosen on the basis of how closely they may resemble the major figures, and their performances are usually kept within the narrow confines of imitation. There is little room for fresh creativity.

But "Ruby and Oswald" manages to provide a number of splendidly etched performances, most notably from Michael Lerner as Ruby, Frederic Forrest as Oswald, Doris Roberts as Ruby's sister and, in a smaller role, Eric Kilpatrick as Andy, one of Ruby's employees. "Ruby and Oswald" probably comes as close to evenhanded acceptability as a "docu-drama" can get.



Michael Lerner as Jack Ruby in the drama.