

'Ruby and Oswald': Those Single, Blinding

Moments Become a Banal Exercise



Frederic Forrest

By Jeremiah O'Leary
Washington Star Staff Writer

Like Pearl Harbor and VJ-Day, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November, 1963, was one of those mind-boggling moments that etched impressions firmly in the minds of everyone able to absorb the enormity of the event.

I suppose everyone who had reached puberty by the day Lee Harvey Oswald killed Kennedy, and perhaps everyone who saw Jack Ruby kill Oswald on national television two days later, can remember exactly where he or she was when these tragedies took place.

It is an especially sharp memory for me and others who saw Oswald many times in the madhouse that was the Dallas police station, and watched 12 feet away as Ruby gunned him down.

For those reasons, I found myself shaking my head sadly at CBS's three-hour dramatic special, "Ruby and Oswald," to be shown from 8 to 11 o'clock tonight (WTOP-9). I was simply not impressed with what is unquestionably a sincere effort by producer Alan Landsburg to recreate every detail of what took place.

Watching Michael Lerner and Frederic Forrest striving each to become a respective *doppelganger* for Ruby and Oswald, it was impossible for me to find them credible. Perhaps I was too close to the case. But even allowing for that, I found that the whole project just did not come off and herewith are some of the reasons why — having nothing to do with the subjective opinion that the production is too long by a solid hour.

IMAGINE, IF YOU CAN, Henry (The Fonz) Winkler underplaying the role of Oswald and an overweight Jack Weston, if that is not redundant, overplaying the part of Ruby.

Give both of these actors a script that was doubtless well-researched but includes every banal word and deed of the two assassins over a four-day span, and you have a show that comes close to making a bore of even the shootings of Kennedy, Policeman J.D. Tippit and Oswald. Newsreel footage of Kennedy, up to and including the funeral in Washington, is interspersed throughout "Ruby and Oswald" and it is a sorry thing to have to write that these are the only redeeming moments of the long three hours.

I have looked long and hard at the real Oswald and the real Ruby (who has long since died of natural causes), and they were nothing like the two actors have portrayed them. I remember Oswald, as the Dallas police periodically paraded him before us, as a snarling, surly, defiant, tight-lipped man. Whatever he-devils drove him, they never made him so bland and gentle-looking a young man as Forrest plays him.

The night before Oswald shoots Kennedy to death, director Mel Stuart has Oswald greeting his kids as if Lee and Marina were the gentlest of parents, opening doors politely for the family benefactor, Ruth Paine, chatting amiably in Russian with his wife and kissing the children goodnight. Factually, Oswald may have done all these things the night before he committed the crime of the century but the impression is all wrong. Lee and Marina fought and bickered more than they conversed normally and the ex-Marine is not most accurately depicted as a courteous candidate for a part in The Waltons.

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Portfolio

• Amusements

SECTION C **

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 1978

TV TONIGHT

Try Joan Rivers, McNair, Godfrey

By Bernie Harrison
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Historical reenactments have become a commonplace on the tube — and there's still the drama of Martin Luther King Jr., "King," to come, on NBC-4 Sunday, Monday and Tuesday (9 to 11 p.m.) a production embroiled in controversy. Tonight, as Jeremiah O'Leary reports above, the subject is "Ruby and Oswald" (WTOP-9 at 8).

The debate over docu-dramas, meanwhile, goes on. Independent producer Thomas McCann, of Boston, thought he had a winner in the "Eyewitness" series on public TV last year ("The White House Transcripts," "Lee Harvey Oswald: Moscow Diary"), but the magazine series was dropped. Said Peter Levathes, the Corporation of Public Broadcasting's director of program development: "We simply feel that the concept of reenacting the news just did not develop as well as we expected it would." McCann asks: Is it being kept off the air because it's controversial?

FORREST, EXCEPT once in all too rare a while, plays Oswald as either deadpan or dolorous, and obsequious to a fault. Oswald was none of these things, ever. In custody, which is the only place I ever saw him, he was truculent, unafraid, demanding and almost arrogant. Whatever Oswald was, he was not the expressionless creature played by Forrest, an actor who seems to have been undecided whether he was portraying a black

villain, a grievously wronged man of the people or an automaton.

I think the low point of the Oswald-Forrest act is the scene in which Oswald asks his brother, Robert, "What did you think of the baby?" Without doubting that this dialogue took place when the brothers met, I remember Oswald as a man screaming his defiance against a system in which he constantly failed at everything except assassination.

A close second would be the scene in which Police Capt. Will Fritz interrogates Oswald. Looking glum instead of surly, which was his true natural expression, Oswald-Forrest replies bashfully that he had indeed been a Marine. Fritz avuncularly: "Ever win any medals for marksmanship?" Oswald, almost simperingly: "Just the usual."

WHILE FORREST is going the Zombie route, Lerner does Jack Ruby hyperkinetically and comes a bit closer to the mark aided by a superficial physical resemblance to the tough nightclub owner. I saw Ruby hanging around the police station the night Kennedy was killed and all through the next day and night as well. He gave me his card; he'd get you a sandwich in the best tradition of police station buffs across the nation. Ruby positively fawned on policemen and reporters and Lerner catches this facet well.

But the complex character of Ruby was too much for even a solid pro like Lerner to capture consistently. He is shown telling an off-color joke in the nightclub, throwing out a raucous customer, diving like Ahab's great white whale into his swimming pool, crying in his car when the death of Kennedy is announced on the radio and looking thoroughly uncomfortable doing all these things. Lerner catches Ruby best in the vignette of helping newsman Ike Pappas get an interview with the DA and least deftly in portraying Ruby's repeated sobbings over the fate of the Kennedy family.

THE LOW POINT for Lerner-Ruby comes when a family member recalls mildly enough that Ruby's father never

especially cared for his offspring. Lerner-Ruby promptly is sent rushing to the toilet bowl by the director and required to simulate throwing up at the mere thought of being an unloved child. The next lowest point for the Ruby part is demonstrating with laughter how to use a twist board in a Dallas newspaper office while he is supposed to be almost maddened with grief for Jack and Jackie Kennedy.

The shooting of Oswald in the Dallas police station basement is an amazingly good recreation although the ensuing dialogue, while accurate on a technicality, is unreal according to the conditions I remember so well. After they have untangled the dying Oswald from the half dozen cops and Ruby, and gotten Ruby off to one side, Ruby-Lerner is made to say, "What happened?" "You shot him, Jack, you shot Oswald." "I did? I don't even remember doing it."

The best of the recreations may well be the graphic demonstration on the scene of how easy it was for Ruby to get into the garage just in time to shoot Oswald. The commotion at the garage entrance would have been enough to permit Ruby to slip inside even if his well-known face alone had not been enough for the police guards to let him pass.

This production is based on the Warren Commission report and I am sure adheres to the best information available. The writers could work only with what they had. The actors and the director succeeded only in making a bore of a weekend that was as exciting as it was horrible. But if the design was to illustrate the banality of evil, then CBS has accomplished that better than anyone ever has before.

Young Americans, to whom much of that Black November is little-known ancient history, will perhaps be startled that such earth-shaking events could have been engineered by such trivial men. Yet, this is cinema verite, and much about "Oswald and Ruby" was just plain dull excepting their single blinding moments of notoriety. If the film is tedious, it is because Oswald and Ruby were tedious men, marred further by a streak of murderous violence.