

Hey Diddle Diddle, Fiddling With History

In 'King' and 'Ruby and Oswald,' Real-Life Figures Become Comic-Strip Cutouts

By Tom Shales

Dishes are running away with spoons again and the little dogs still laugh. In the week ahead, television networks once more will be having their merry and nefarious ways with recent reality, turning figures both revered and reviled into the comic-strip cutouts of pop melodrama and further endangering the concept of truth as a cultural value.

Both "King," a three-part biography of Martin Luther King Jr. which begins Sunday night on NBC, and "Ruby and Oswald," a three-hour drama special on CBS tonight, intercut actual newsreel footage with questionable



speculative reenactments and thereby tell viewers that on television, fantasy and reality should be regarded as equals.

"King," which is really Hollywood liberal Abby Mann's six-hour love letter to himself, at least manages to pack some dramatic wallop, however parasitically generated, as it traces the history of the civil rights movement from the early '50s onward. In the course of this, however, there are such dubious injections of authenticity as having Ramsey Clark and Tom Bennett play themselves.

You didn't know Tony Bennett had a role in the civil rights movement? Why, he was nothing less than a guest star. When you're stretching the truth, you might as well pull with all your might.

The best protection against a program like "Ruby and Oswald," on Channel 9 at 8 o'clock tonight, may be its own absolute lack of dramatic tension; it ploddingly attempts to depict nearly every waking moment of Lee Harvey Oswald, the accused assassin of President Kennedy, and Jack Ruby, the assassin of Lee Harvey Oswald, during four days in Dallas in 1963.

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"Ruby and Oswald": Frederic Forrest top, as Lee Harvey Oswald and Michael Lerner as Jack Ruby.



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Long before the actor, Jim Casanovi, took the name of Lee Harvey Oswald, Ruby had taken his child-murdering name in the family pool. Viewers are hard to wonder why on earth CBS chose to bring this painful history up again. Certainly not for any worthwhile purpose. The parent program makes—both them wildly debatable—are that Ruby was a lovable punning patriot, not of a "Marty" with a gun, and that a Warren Commission report was merely the last word on the assassination.

The creators of this travesty make it an claim for its credibility. Director Mel Stuart, who already profited from the Kennedy assassination with a documentary called "Four Days in November" in 1965 (the original title for "Ruby and Oswald" was "Four Days in Dallas"), claims that a committee of representatives from CBS News and "network executives" reviewed his film to make certain its details were authentic.

"We had nothing whatsoever to do with 'Ruby and Oswald,'" a CBS News spokesman countered yesterday. "And we will have nothing to do with any of these documentaries. We were never asked to review this show and we never would."

When CBS News President Richard Salant heard of Stuart's statement, he wrote Stuart objecting to it and Stuart wired back that he never made the remark. But about 65 TV critics and editors heard him make the remarking Oswald—a fellow who looks

Company president Alan Landsburg said yesterday from Hollywood that it was never his understanding that CBS News would look at the show but that it would be, and was, reviewed by a "committee," whose composition he was "not privy" to.

"I think it's grossly unfair to ask our company to comment on what CBS did," Landsburg said, re-emphasizing that the "accuracy of all details" in the program has been "checked in every respect."

Stuart also said the Warren Commission report was his "primary" source for the film. A Gallup Poll in December 1976 showed that 90 percent of the American people do not believe the report's conclusion that Oswald acted alone in the killing of the president, however.

So when the time comes for the actual shooting in "Ruby and Oswald," Stuart gingerly cops out. The screen goes into a blurred freeze-frame and we hear three shots fired. The actor

tein diet—is not shown firing or holding a gun.

"I wasn't there," says Stuart, in defiance of his curious evasion. "No one was in that room. I would have to go by circumstantial evidence and that would be wrong."

Stuart concedes that the words put in Ruby's mouth are "a synthesis of what he said in those days" and that he took "a certain dramatic freedom" in the depiction. Yet he maintains that Oswald's dialogue, at least during the lengthy interrogation scenes, is "all verbatim."

That's a particularly inflammatory contention in the eyes of Jeff Goldblum of the Washington-based Assassination Information Bureau. Goldblum says that no transcripts of recordings made by the Oswald interrogations were made by the Dallas Police Department.

The Dallas police widely criticized for their handling of Oswald, come out smelling like roses in the screenplay by John and Michael McGreevey. Stuart says proudly that the Dallas police department "read and ap-

and that he had their "complete cooperation" in filming at Dallas locations. Naturally.

Goldblum saw the program in advance over the objections of CBS. "It's the Warren Commission report set to words and music," he complains. "It is not good drama and it is not good history."

But "Ruby and Oswald" is hardly the first case of selective speculation by TV entertainment producers in the pursuit of almighty Nielsen. The old argument that this technique selectively impairs the public's ability to differentiate between fact and fiction seems to have fallen on a nation—and a nation's capital—of dead ears. There may be no point in repeating it again.

And yet there must be some way to defend ourselves against these trivializing and distorting intrusions into the past. ABC's "Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald" turned the assassination of President Kennedy into a game show. CBS' "Ruby and Oswald" turns it into a cop show. The effect is as tasteless and insensitive as if they were using the same material for a dirty joke.

"Ruby and Oswald" was produced

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company whose previous network offerings this season include tales of rampaging ants on ABC ("It Happened at Lakewood Manor") and merrand spiders on CBS ("Tarantula: The Deadly Cargo"). Perhaps in the assassination of President Kennedy the company saw the stuff of another exploitable thriller. The fact that the program is dramatically a cruder isn't much comfort; millions of people are bound to see it anyway, even if it scores low in the ratings.

The irony is that during the actual four days in November, television brought the agonizing reality of the Kennedy assassination into the national living room with an immediacy that made it a part of every viewer's memory and experience, probably forever. In the ensuing years, however, TV producers have ransacked even history made on television for material the way they ravage comic strips, old B-movies and cheap novels. And so television which has been accused of desensitizing us to violence and desensitizing us to tragedy, now seems to have come full circle. Television is desensitizing us to television.