

Lerner Is Memorable In 'Ruby and Oswald'

CBS' three-hour docu-drama, "Ruby and Oswald", to be shown tonight at 8.00 on Channel 10, is memorable for the portrait of Ruby created by actor Michael Lerner.

For those who have a sense of fatalism, it suggests that the grim tragedy at Dallas may have provided Jack Ruby with the catalyst that enabled him to play the one great moment in an otherwise frustrating and wretched life.

It was as if Ruby had subconsciously been waiting for that bizarre event to lift his life to the great heights he had never been able to achieve. When he pulled the trigger of his revolver, ending the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, that was the crescendo, the supreme moment, in a bizarre ritual that began when Dallas began preparing for the visit of John F. Kennedy.

All his life, Ruby had suffered from a sense of inferiority, of not being able to make things come out the way he wanted them. Adding to his problems was his concern about the public reaction to Jews. In a memorable scene, when Ruby is brought into the police headquarters, dazed after the shooting, a Dallas police official asks, "Why did you do it, Jack?" And Lerner, as Ruby, moves his head slowly and finally says, as if in a trauma, "I wanted to show 'em that Jews are tough, that they're not afraid."

This writer spent a day with the company last summer while this production was being filmed in a sleazy Los Angeles strip joint supposed to represent Ruby's night club in Dallas. His brother, Earl, was a visitor on the



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set. Earl Ruby said that he felt that the script portrayed Jack very accurately and told the story about the tragedy as accurately as anything he'd ever seen.

Earl Ruby said his brother was high-strung and easily flew off the handle. In the scene being filmed, Lerner had physically seized two male customers who had made disparaging remarks about Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy and tossed them down the steps. Earl Ruby said he had been in the club when that actual event occurred.

When Lerner notes a full-page advertisement in the Dallas newspaper critical of Kennedy, signed by a "Bernard Weiss", he immediately suspects a plot. Throughout the drama, he tries to prove his suspicions that "Bernard Weiss" is a fictional creation by a group of anonymous characters. At one point, as Ruby's agitation over the assassination is building, he even encounters a postal official and tries to find out who the Bernard Weiss of the P.O. Box is.

The actual assassination seems to have hastened Ruby's mental collapse. He goes about Dallas as if in a daze—canceling his advertisement in

order to shut down his club in memory of Kennedy, buying great quantities of delicatessen food and taking them to his sister, Eva, then refusing to eat anything. Once he bursts into tears, and asks what's going to happen to those 'wonderful kids'? "What kids?" Eva asks. "Little John and Caroline," he answers, sobbing.

There is no evidence to suggest that Ruby ever knew Oswald or even thought of him as anything but a symbol of destruction of his dream-like concept of the Kennedy family in Camelot. Ruby's own life had been unhappy in Chicago—his father deserted the family. It is as if the Kennedys became a fantasy substitute for Ruby's own lack of family.

Other cast members, including Frederic Forrest, who portrays Oswald, carry out their roles well. But they do not achieve the dimension that Lerner does. The entire drama revolves about Ruby. It is excellently edited and directed. Producers have used videotapes of the real tragedy as background on the TV sets. They are coordinated in such a way to show the Ruby drama developing against the immense bigger canvas. As the Kennedy funeral procession is proceeding down Pennsylvania Avenue on the TV screen, Lerner is shown in lonely misery in a cell in Dallas—his brief moment in the limelight of history over. This is an exceptionally well-done film and it gives actor Lerner (remembered for his portrayal of Pierre Salinger in "Missiles of October" an opportunity to turn in an award deserving performance.