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RFK Film
4/23/75

Off Target

But Troubling

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"Who Killed Bobby Kennedy?" the newspaper movie ads ask. Inside a large question mark is a picture of Bobby, jig-saw puzzle pieces dropping out of his right cheek, like so many falling Vietnamese provinces. "You decide. . . . Is the Sirhan conviction another Watergate cover-up?" the small print urges.

And so today a movie called "The Second Gun" which purports to show that Sirhan Sirhan did not kill Robert Kennedy makes its national commercial bow. Watergate, Who is To Blame in Vietnam?, IRS skullduggery, proliferating CIA investigations, the revival of King and JFK assassination theories. On its face "The Second Gun" seems artfully contrived to catch the crest of the wave.

And, yet, "The Second Gun" points in the wrong direction, misfires, falls on its face, finally squeezes off a round and then spends an inordinate amount of time complimenting itself for marksmanship. Nevertheless, when the house lights go up there is a wound in the target.

The man behind the movie is a heavy-lidded Canadian journalist operating out of Los Angeles named Theodore Charach. In his deep, doom-laden voice that sounds a bit like a try-out for the off-stage voice of God in a high school theatrical, Charach explains that he has spent the last seven years "probing" the Bobby Kennedy assassination. Most men would be a trifle abashed to admit having labored so long in order to turn up so little and some of it irrelevant at that. But not Charach, a man whose intensity is on the fine edge of fanaticism.

THE FILM and its thesis provide numerous instances to make the task of disbelief an easy one. The visuals are appallingly hoked up, the Bobby Kennedy news reel footage is disagreeably maudlin in the context of

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investigative film journalism, the sound track with its glib and constant reminders of Watergate is a grinding assault on human intelligence. On a deeper level, Charach builds his case for a second assassin on eyewitnesses, all of whom, he says—wrongly, by the way—saw Sirhan's gun no closer than two to three feet from Kennedy, even though the autopsy report indicates that the bullet that killed the senator was fired at point blank range, or three inches away from the skull at the outside.

Eyewitnesses are, of course, neither here nor there. The discrepancies of which they are capable, particularly in so finely calibrated a matter as distance, are legendary. However, having established to his own satisfaction that Sirhan could not have shot Kennedy because no one saw him fire at point-blank range, Charach then asks us to believe that the culprit who committed the deed was a rent-a-cop in the Ambassador Hotel kitchen named Thane Eugene Cesar. Why Cesar? Well, because he had a pistol, was a pop-off Wallacite in his politics and was seen to have drawn his gun by one somewhat dubious witness who has now dropped from sight. Well, you can't have both sides of the witness game. If so many are to be trusted in establishing Sirhan's distance from Kennedy, are we then to mistrust them for not noticing Cesar?

No doubt Charach would be better advised to propose questions than to offer solutions, but then that is not in the nature of a man who describes himself as on a "crusade," who now speaks darkly of CIA conspirators within the Los Angeles Police Department. Yet for all the films' primitive overreach, the bullets lodged at the center of this case give "The Second Gun" credibility in spite of itself.

SIMPLY PUT, there is various testimony from three firearms experts, William Harper, Herbert Macdonell and Lowell Bradford, that two bullets allegedly fired from Sirhan's gun which respectively struck Kennedy and a bystander named William Wiesel do not match up in ballistics camera photos — neither with respect to rifling angle nor the number of cannellures or grooves.

Looking at the blown-up ballistics photos of the bullets that struck Kennedy and Wiesel in the company of Lowell Bradford, I am at least persuaded of his dispassionate sincerity in terming it "unlikely" that the bullets were fired from the same gun.

What is central here is that the bullets are available for re-examination and Sirhan's pistol is in working order to the test-fired. While one recognizes the reluctance of the Los Angeles authorities to re-open a case the courts have closed, the fact is

that public opinion, prompted in part by the Charach film, has re-opened the case, like it or not. Moreover, the Kennedy case — alone among its assassination coevals — retains the kind of physical evidence that can conceivably demolish or establish the existence of a second gun.

"TED MISSES the point. He doesn't see the science of it," says Lowell Bradford, shaking his head. "His film doesn't bring things in focus. The point is let's look at the bullets."

Yet, if Charach misses the point, he hits the target. In its way "The Second Gun" is the cinematic equivalent of Oswald, James Earl Ray and Sirhan. Like them, with all their propensity for the botched job, it succeeds. Or then again, perhaps like them, it fails. Sooner or later the Los Angeles authorities will have to tell us which.