

'Private Files'

The 'Tora! Tora! Tora!' School of Filmmaking

By Gary Arnold

Larry Cohen, who wrote, produced and directed "The Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover," must have matriculated at the Tora! Tora! Tora! School of Historical Film Exposition, before taking a graduate course at the Executive Action Academy of Disreputable Documentary Illustration.

His attempt at a debunking biographical dramatization of the career of the late FBI director is a boring chronicle too dull to provoke serious offense among Hoover's admirers or inspire lasting satisfaction among his detractors.

Determined to mention, though not necessarily dramatize, every aspect of Hoover's life that he considers noteworthy, Cohen submits the audience

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Hoover's 'Private Files'

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to a dismal procession of talking-heads sequences. Someone dutifully begins with the formulations "You want me to believe . . ." or "Are you trying to tell me . . ." in order to prepare the way for whatever information or speculation Cohen desires to impart.

This has never been the most sophisticated or compelling of expository methods. It becomes more burdensome because of the time span Cohen is trying to cover. Following a prologue with laughable overtones from "Citizen Kane," in which the camera trundles around Hoover's empty office and staffers feed the "private files" into a shredder, Cohen discovers Hoover in 1916, when he joined the Justice Department as a law clerk, and staggers relentlessly on to 1972, when he dies, finally catching up with the movie itself.

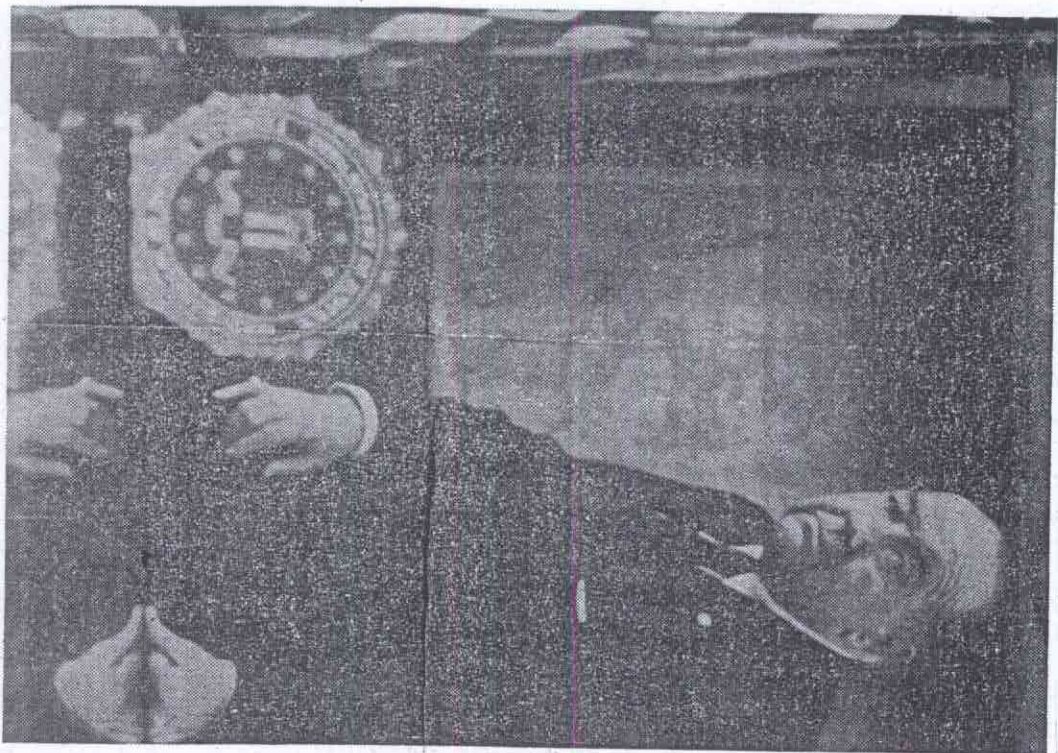
Documentary clips are frequently inserted to hold the talking heads together and endow the scenario with an unjustified illusion of authenticity. While the documentary footage instantly clashes with the fictional footage, it still seems presumptuous for this filmmaker to invoke even a few seconds from recorded history.

Despite assertions as outlandish as "He used his stooges in Congress to spread fear, a fear that would dominate American foreign policy for 20

years" and scenes as scandalous as the sight of Hoover playing the tape of a sexual rendezvous for his private, drunken, guilty gratification, the movie comes closer to tarnishing its cast than its subject. James Wainwright, an actor who never looks anything but middle-aged, has been cast as the "young" Hoover. Broderick Crawford succeeds him sometime during the Prohibition Era and must suffer most of the indignities, including the supreme indignity of the tape sequence, which inspires him to bite his fingers in apparent excitement.

Crawford tries to bring force and conviction to the role, but you simply feel pained watching him slowly navigate his bulk around the screen. When both Crawford and Dan Dailey, cast as Hoover's friend and colleague Clyde Tolson, pretend to have heart attacks, you're not at all certain they're pretending.

Ronee Blakley, the lovely Barbara Jean of "Nashville," turns up in shocking, unrecognizable condition. Squat and bloated and slatternly. Michael Parks may be the most deluded member of the cast. It appears that he conceived his assignment as Bobby Kennedy as a major comeback opportunity. It's just the oddest impersonation in recent memory, a Bobby Kennedy filtered through Peter Falk as Columbo by way of James Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause."



From "The Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover," clockwise from top left: Ronee Blakley as Carrie DeWitt and James Wainwright as the young Hoover; Broderick Crawford, as the older Hoover, closing in on a criminal; and Crawford as Hoover in his Justice Department office.

