Starring in His Own Mystery

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A new kind of Felliniesque entertainment form has sprung to life in America. It is called the "courtroom trial" and any resemblance to life in halcyon days when Judge Hardy sternly reprimanded wayward youngsters in saddle oxfords for flagpole sitting is purely accidental. Trials have become Theater of the Dangerously Absurd, as the Manson circus in Los Angeles has proved beyond a reasonable doubt. The superstars of the new courtroom playbills are characters like the Chicago Seven, the Black Panthers, Candy Mossler and Dr. Sam Shepard—vaudeville acts so bizarre it seems only logical that they should be covered by actors instead of reporters.

James Kirkwood, whose new book *American Grotesque* (Simon and Schuster) covers the klieg-light absurdities of the Garrison-Shaw conspiracy trial in New Orleans, is both. A tall, handsome, quiet-spoken man who looks more like a friendly forest ranger in Yosemite National Park than a performer, Jim has been a doorman at Grauman's Chinese Theater, a sheet metal cowler at Lockheed Aircraft, a radarman in the Coast Guard, a night clerk at the Waldorf Astoria, a nightclub singer, a playwright, a regular on the old Garry Moore television show, and the star for four years of the daytime TV soap opera, "Valiant Lady." When that show went off the air (replaced by a quiz show), he found himself out of work for the first time in 10 years.

"I got panicky," he says, "so I tried writing, where I could be my own boss. I didn't know what else to write about at first, so I wrote about myself."

He had a lot to draw from. The son of movie star Lila Lee, he found the dead body of one of his mother's boyfriends in the hammock of her garden when he was 14. He wrote about the unsolved mystery and the result was a highly-praised novel called "There Must Be a Pony," which he later turned into a play starring Myrna Loy.

"I remember morbid curiosity seekers used to come to our house and take pictures of us behind the hedges. That's why I've always been fascinated by trials, by innocent people trapped by the law and by guilty ones who have gone free." This curiosity led him to the Barnum and Bailey atmosphere of the Garrison-Shaw trial and the result is a hypnotic Kafka nightmare study of legal proceedings that is one of the most penetrating books about the American judicial system I've ever read.

American Grotesque is not about the Kennedy assassination or the Warren Report—it's about a cast of characters so far-out you wouldn't put them into the wildest work of fiction for fear nobody would believe them.

"I tried to write it subjectively," Kirkwood said, "like a mystery story in which I was a character. For two years I've been living in a mountain of notes, documents, files, transcripts, tape recordings, newspaper stories and trial records—checking and rechecking facts and dates for the lawyers. It's taken a lot out of me emotionally. By comparison, acting is dessert."

How did this interest come about? "I had always been crazy about trials, from Leopold and Loeb to Coppolino. One night I got a call from James Leo Herlihy, who wrote 'Midnight Cowboy.' 'Guess who's coming to dinner?' he asked. 'Clay Shaw.' It was right after his arrest by New Orleans D. A. Jim Garrison, who had charged him with conspiring to assassinate Kennedy, and it was all over the news. Like everyone else at the time, I thought, 'Well, maybe this D.A. has something.' Anyway, I was fascinated. Dinner was tense. People kept asking him if he was going to see any shows while he was in New York—you know, small talk. Finally I put down my drink and said 'I'm really sorry, but we're all dying to know—did you really pal around with Lee Harvey Oswald?' From 8 p.m. until 3 a.m. we listened to his incredible tale—and the more we listened, the more shocked

we became.

"So I got an assignment from Esquire to do a profile on Clay Shaw. I had only been to New Orleans once before when I was an actor, singing 'What a car, what a car!' in a General Motors industrial, but I spent two weeks interviewing Shaw's lawyers, enemies and friends, and the more I got into it the more convinced I was that he had nothing to do with any conspiracy. So I got another assignment from another magazine to cover the actual trial, but at the time there were difficulties, so I decided to do a book instead."

Where all this leaves Clay Shaw is still uncertain. He is now up for two counts of perjury. "Usually," says Kirkwood, "if a man is unanimously acquitted, it is the witnesses who wrongly accused him of the crime who are accused of perjury. This time it's the other way around. Meanwhile, Clay Shaw has spent over $400,000 in investigative devices and lawyer's fees and he can't leave New Orleans without permission. I once asked Shaw how he survives with such dignity and humor in the face of all this trouble and he said, 'Well, when you stew an old bird in a pot for four years, that old bird gets tough'."

Kirkwood is working on another novel. If there is a perjury trial, however, he promises he'll "go back with a Swedish nurse and a couple of bodyguards" to give New Orleans another dose of acid from his poison pen. His eyes brighten like flashlights in the dark. "Then I'd like to turn the whole thing into a wonderful movie!" Then he slumps in his chair, disillusioned. "But I guess nobody would believe it."