

# More Like 'Executive' Agitprop

By Gary Arnold

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## Film

If the falsifying techniques used in the new melodrama "Executive Action," opening today at half-a-dozen area theaters, had been practiced by slightly more talented filmmakers, the result might have been an effective and even dangerous piece of cinematic agitprop.

The idea is to juxtapose images of President Kennedy during the last five months of his life with fictional scenes of a group of rich, right-wing conspirators, fearful of civil rights and detente, who plot and carry out the assassination in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

In this context the documentary footage skills for the fictional footage. We're invited to confuse the two, recalling so many fond memories and regrets during the documentary stuff that we neglect to view the fictional stuff with the skepticism it deserves.

Obviously, the device is also suspenseful, or at least potentially suspenseful. We appear to be following the movements of the documentary Kennedy and his movie assassins more or less simultaneously, until their movements fatefully coincide in Dallas. It's a bit like the buildup used in "The Day of the Jackal."

The concept might have proved spellbinding and emotionally devastating in the hands of a director like Costa-Gavras. The saving grace of "Executive Action"—derived from a polemical suspense novel by Donald Freed and Mark Lane—is that it's the work of feeble, butterfingers old Hollywood manipulators. While they obviously want to manipulate us, their devices have grown so transparent and

their craftsmanship so perfunctory that "Executive Action" is likely to fool only those people who believe everything they see on a movie screen or those who still can't look at images of President Kennedy without having their critical faculties numbed by grief.

Producer Edward Lewis, director David Miller and screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, the trio principally responsible for "Executive Action," collaborated 11 years ago on the Kirk Douglas picture "Lonely Are the Brave," an exciting chase melodrama interrupted now and then for Trumbo's inevitable public service announcements, which took the form of sentimental effusions about the demise of the nonconforming American.

Lewis and Trumbo were previously associated on "Spartacus." Lewis and Burt Lancaster, one of the co-stars of

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### EXECUTIVE, From B1

"Executive Action," were previously associated on John Frankenheimer's movie version of "Seven Days in May." David Miller, now 64, began in the movie business back in 1930, and "Lonely Are the Brave" is no doubt the high-point of his career.

In the credit sequence we see the names of the leading actors — Lancaster, Robert Ryan and Will Geer—superimposed over images of, respectively, an oil refinery, a stock exchange and a bank vault. If one approaches this movie in a slightly cynical spirit, it's amusing to ask yourself if these symbols are supposed to represent Kennedy or the conspirators, particularly when the movie fails to follow through adequately on the subliminal suggestions. Ryan and Geer are plutocrats of some sort, but Lancaster appears to be in the employ of an unspecified government agency, presumably the CIA.

Of course, one doesn't need crib notes to catch onto the suggestion the film-

makers want — we credits clearly imply that Kennedy was killed because he was a threat to wealth and privilege. But it's typical of these filmmakers that they can't even put over their own little deceptions in a subtle, credible or consistent fashion.

The fictional scene opens at a country estate somewhere or other where Lancaster and Ryan attempt to persuade a reluctant Geer that Kennedy must be assassinated. The dialogue in this and subsequent scenes makes one wonder if Dalton Trumbo labored without credit on "Tora! Tora! Tora!" He repeats the same ponderous cadences and dry-as-dust expository dialogue, read by actors evidently told they were playing mechanical men.

In addition, Trumbo writes in the responses. After one actor finishes conveying a piece of information, another immediately articulates the reaction Trumbo wants from the au-

dience. It's the most unnatural, unconvincing style of dramatic writing I've ever listened to—like an oratorio with the music omitted—and it's a giant clue to what ails the elder left-wing Hollywood crowd as either would-be persuaders or would-be artists.

Trumbo gives his conspirators what I consider a peculiarly unconvincing set of motives for the killing. He asserts that they act because Kennedy is about to "lead the black revolution, initiate a test-ban treaty with the Russians and pull out of Vietnam." These fears are going to be met with considerable cynicism in a lot of college (and noncollege) towns around the country, but for the moment let's ignore a point that canny filmmakers shouldn't ignore—namely, that history has played some dirty, discrediting tricks on Kennedy's liberal image.

The point is that these motives would make sense only in extreme, desperate right-wing circles, among men so divorced from normal political commerce and influence that they could willfully misconstrue Kennedy's statements and policies. The slip-up in "Executive Action" is that the conspirators are portrayed as insiders to the extent that they're characterized at all. These are rich, powerful men who seem to have impeccable sources in the highest councils of government. Indeed, their information is so good that they pull off the assassination without a hitch.

If they're this well-informed and well-connected to begin with, why aren't they hip to Kennedy's essential conservatism and why can't they get his ear?

Trumbo tries to have his

cake and eat it. He can't resist making the conspirators sleek, sophisticated, worldly types — power figures he seems to envy and admire. At the same time he gives them unworldly outlooks, the outlooks of all the shrill right-wing fanatics who believe the Reds and the blacks will overwhelm White Civilization any minute now.

However, I think the real giveaway in "Executive Action" is the fact that these filmmakers can't envision an assassination plot in which Lee Harvey Oswald was involved. Despite appearances, it is not such a big deal to make a film questioning the verdict of the Warren Commission. If the Gallup Poll is correct, two-thirds of the American public question that verdict, at least to the extent of doubting that Oswald operated alone.

In "Executive Action" Oswald is a poor, unfortunate fall guy, selected precisely for that role by a computer. It's a difficult theory to swallow, particularly when one looks and listens to Oswald again in his brief appearances before history's cameras and microphones. One gets the impression of a devious boy and maybe a schizophrenic boy but not of an innocent boy. However, he could not be anything but innocent to this group of sentimental melodramatists. He is the Little Man who gets victimized by the Big Men. One cliché is unthinkable without the other.

There's no escaping the fact that the release date of "Executive Action" is tasteless in the extreme.

If the men responsible for making and distributing this picture were truly interested in the truth and nothing but the truth, why couldn't they

theory, that theory won't be less pertinent next month or next year. It's difficult to resist the conclusion that the filmmakers were more concerned with the main chance and timed the release in accord with the maximum feasible potential for commercial ballyhoo and exploitation.

have resisted the temptation to release it on the eve of the 10th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination?

It's not as if the reliability of the Warren Commission is an issue that needs to be settled this month. It's an ongoing controversy, and if this movie has a pertinent

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## FILM

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*A sniper in "Executive Action."*

# Will Geer: In Character

Part 11/14/77  
By Jean M. White

The face is familiar: a shirt-caked villain in an old Western, a corruptible Southern senator, the ornery grandfather of "The Waltons," another avuncular role in "The Reivers," and, for those with longer memories, Pistol of Shakespeare, Jeeter Lester on "Tobacco Road" and one of the actors hauled before the House Un-American Activities Committee a couple of decades ago.

So there is that feeling of instant recognition many times over as Will Geer rises in greeting.

"Do you mind if I leave the door open? When I was touring with Minnie Madern Fiske—we played here at the old National in the 1920s in "The Merry Wives of Windsor"—she always put a telephone book in the door when she was being interviewed by a male reporter."

Then he shuts the door with a Grandpa Walton chuckle. There is no need to follow an interview routine with Geer. He's interested enough in other people to ask questions constantly; he's shrewd enough to observe that "show people are always on," as he is; he has long quotes of Whitman, Frost or Shakespeare to drop for nearly every occasion; he has lived long enough to make witty, sometimes incisive, observations on nearly everything from acting and politics to horticulture and obscenity.

You know my daughter Ellen has just written a film about women," he began immediately. She wrote a part in it for me. I'm a hotelkeeper and at one point have to say 'high-class tit.'

Imagine a daughter writing such a line for a father. In 1902, when I was in the womb, I couldn't even have described it as the womb."

At 71, Geer is still a rather trim figure, taller (6 feet 2) than he appears as Grandpa Walton. It seems as if he must have always been 71 or 75 or 78—the fate of the character actor who specializes in such parts.

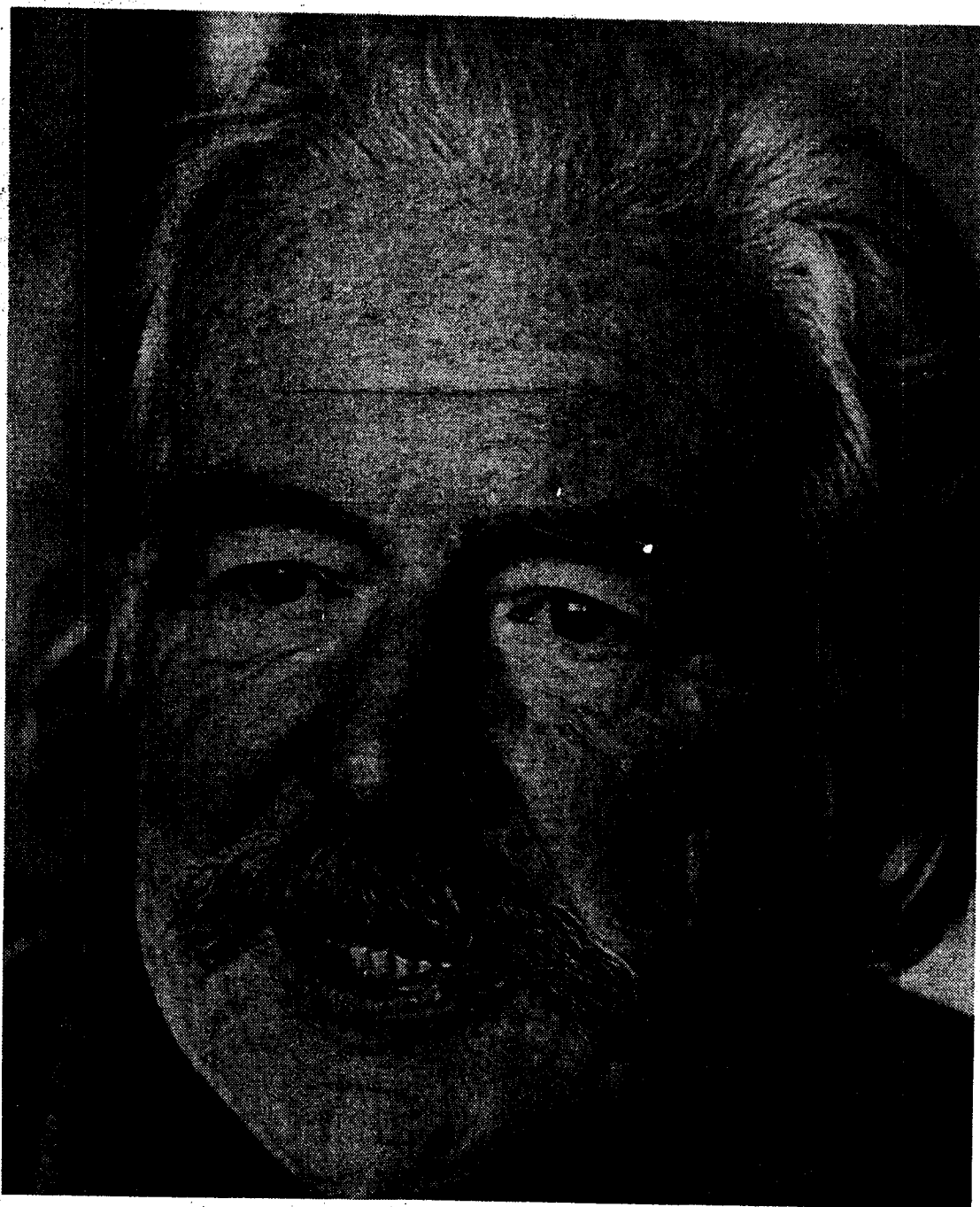
In the film "Executive Action" he is one of three conspirators who plot the assassination of President Kennedy. This time he is a right-wing, crusty old millionaire but the face is the same as that of the Minority Leader in "Advise and Consent" of a decade ago.

Geer was already gray-haired, at 49, with a solid reputation as a character actor back in April, 1951, when he was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in an investigation that was to result in the blacklisting for years of many actors and writers.

"I remember it was the same day that Truman fired MacArthur and we shared the headlines," Geer recalled. "They asked me the one question they ask everyone: In case of war, would you fight Russia? I took out my teeth and observed I was the same age as the chairman. I really was a ham."

As with other actors—and Dalton Trumbo, who wrote the screenplay for "Executive Action"—who appeared before the Un-American Activities Committee in those days of national suspicion and fear, Geer was

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By Douglas Chevalier—The Washington Post

*Will Geer: "I don't feel the film is exploitation."*

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parts."

## Keeping in Character

GEER, From B1

driven from films by the blacklist. But he could go back to his roots in the theater and support himself in Shakespearean roles. He always had a room and food for other actors out of work.

I'm not going to say those days of blacklisting were a happy time. The women somehow didn't age as well as the men—fine actresses like Gale Sondergaard—and couldn't go back to the same roles in 10 or 12 years. There were many economic deaths and real deaths, like that of John Garfield, who died of the strain of deciding whether to answer the committee's questions."

As with any other role he has played, Geer relishes that of an actor emeritus of the American stage, with a career spanning tent shows, live burlesque, theater, si-

lent film, radio, the talkies, and now television.

"When I'm asked what it feels like to have lived this long, I say it is like being a monument, a running brook, or a crock of manure," Geer explained.

In the role of Grandpa in the much-lauded television series "The Waltons," Geer says he has found a "form of retirement."

For his role in "Executive Action," he drew on a composite figure of "millionaires I have known." It was the same when he fashioned his role in "The Senator."

"Then I drew on the gestures and mannerisms of at least four senators that I had known. There was one who looked like a Greek god but had his feet in both pork barrels. He always looked at chandeliers when he entered a room—a chandelier fetish—and I used this in the role."

Geer himself believes in

the Mark Lane conspiracy theory for the Kennedy assassination.

"Ten years ago when I saw Jack Ruby and Oswald on TV news films, I said they were acting. They were puppets and patsies. An actor knows when someone is acting. We're not trying to say it's true in the movie—only that it might have been.

"I don't feel that the film is exploitation. It should make people be concerned to think and be alert."

Co-starring with Geer in the film is Robert Ryan, who was ill and knew that he shortly would die when the movie was being filmed.

"That, dear, dear man. At the end, he said to me: 'Goodbye, Will, we played Shakespeare together.'"

And then Will Geer paused and added:

"Isn't it wonderful to live in the stream of history, even if it is muddy?"