



Max Lerner

Garrison and Shaw

New Orleans, which does nothing by halves, has been giving America two simultaneous shows—the Mardi Gras and the Clay Shaw trial on the charge of conspiracy to kill President Kennedy.

One is a carnival with an edge of sadness, the other a sad affair with a zany edge of carnival. Of the two, the trial is the more grotesque, not only in the compulsive repetitiveness with which District Attorney Garrison's staff has insisted on the showing of the Zapruder death film again and again, but also in the weird parade of prosecution witnesses and the theme of drugs and hypnosis that they have brought into the courtroom.

Through it all Clay Shaw sits, almost a spectator at his own trial, only fleetingly mentioned, the defendant with a very real prison term hanging over him, yet in an important sense only an incidental symbol of a larger historic drama than that of his own fate. I have seen a number of trials whose outcome turned on some theory that the prosecution or defense had advanced. But this is a case where the opposite applies—where the world's acceptance or rejection of a widely mooted theory turns on the outcome of the trial.

I am fairly certain that Jim Garrison sees it that way. How he feels about Clay Shaw I don't pretend to know. But I do know, from a long conversation with him after the Shaw case broke, how obsessed he has been with destroying the Warren Commission's report on Kennedy's death, and with exposing the malignant counter-conspiracy (as he sees it) to keep the truth about the killing from the American people. The trial is his means to that end. He sees himself very much as Darrow saw himself in the Scopes anti-evolution trial and, like Scopes, Shaw is as much symbol as defendant.

* * *

Like Shaw's, Garrison's career and reputation are at stake on the outcome of the trial and on the fate of the anti-Warren theory. My own view of Garrison, for what it may be worth, has gone through several phases. When I talked with him at his home in New Orleans, in the spring of 1967, I started with some skepticism but was bemused and half-persuaded by the theatrical plot he spun for me—as he has since done for a number of others—and by the necromantic skill he showed in weaving unlikely details into a hair-raising pattern of conspiracy. Anyone who has experienced the six-hour lecture from Garrison knows that, like a Merlin, he draws you into his Never-Never world where everything is upside down, and you get the magical sense of a total reversal of reality. You are never quite the same again.

Then you come back into the harsh daylight, and you start wondering. Paris Flammonde, in an intensely pro-Garrison book, "The Kennedy Conspiracy" (Meredith), quotes some of my early articles, including one where I said, "I would not dismiss the possibility that there is a core of validity in the Garrison caper." I still don't exclude the possibility, but it is growing smaller and dimmer all the time as Garrison parades his witnesses at the trial, including Perry Russo, whose pre- and post-hypnosis contradictions grow ever more contradictory, and his new witness, Charles Spiesel, who seems to have been hypnotized by many and sundry agents in the course of an eventful life, and thinks himself the target of more conspiracies than were ever dreamt of, even in Garrison's flamboyant universe.

* * *

Fortunately for my sanity, a new book is being published next week which I have had a chance to read, and which sets the whole Garrison story in a perspective that he won't like at all but that makes sense to me. It is "Counterplot," by Edward

Jay Epstein (Viking), the same Edward Epstein whose earlier book, "Inquest," raked the Warren Commission staff for its sloppiness and haste.

Clearly he is not a Warren Commission apologist, nor can Garrison accuse him of working with the "Establishment" to throttle the truth. But Epstein, after spending some time in New Orleans and making a thorough scholarly canvas of Garrison's evidence and methods, has done a withering review of Garrison's whole position, and concludes that his evidence falls apart, his methods are cavalier in the perspective of the rights of defendants, and his whole approach is that of a dangerous demagogue.

It is a book which has dispelled the last vestiges of the web of plot and conspiracy in which I found myself entangled for a few brief weeks after hearing Garrison. I doubt whether Mark Lane, Richard Popkin, Harold Weisberg, or Paris Flammonde will feel anything but rage at Epstein's work. But I think his will stand after theirs has crumbled. I have one major quarrel with Epstein. My own emphasis would not be on Garrison as demagogue, but on Garrison as an obsessed man, caught in the cocoon he has spun, believing it, and beyond any hope of ever getting free of it.