

DALLAS WARY OF ROLLING STONE

As Academy Award-winning director Oliver Stone prepares to shoot his movie on the assassination of John F. Kennedy, some fear it may again cause America to see Dallas as "The City of Hate."



Mark Graham/Dallas Times Herald

Director Oliver Stone, whose latest work is "The Doors," has become the nation's chief film chronicler of the 1960s.

Director revives dark memories with film

By Mark Potok

OF THE TIMES HERALD STAFF

IN THE fall of 1963, integration of Dallas-area university athletics programs was big news. But if director Oliver Stone had appeared almost 28 years later wanting to make a movie about it, chances are he'd have been met with a large, collective shrug.

Instead, the man who's become the nation's chief cinematic chronicler of the 1960s is making a film about the assassination of President John F.

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Times Herald movie critic David Kronke looks at Stone's movies. Page G-1

Kennedy in Dallas. And even after the passage of decades, some people in Dallas find that deeply troubling.

The reason, Stone said, boils down to a word: "Fear."

In the weeks after the Nov. 22, 1963, assassination, much of America came to see Dallas as "The City of Hate" — a hotbed of right-wingers so virulent that, in the words of busi-

ness leader Stanley Marcus, they made "John Birchers look like raving liberals."

Now, as Stone prepares to kick off five weeks of local shooting Monday on the movie tentatively titled "JFK," some fear that the specter of Dallas' supposed responsibility — the idea that the city fostered a climate conducive to the murder of a liberal-minded chief executive — could be raised once more on celluloid.

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STONE

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"I can't ascribe those fears," Stone said, referring to officials' initial refusal to allow him to film on the sixth floor of the former Texas School Book Depository, from which the Warren Commission concluded Lee Harvey Oswald shot Kennedy.

"It's a subjective thing. Sometimes fear breeds hysteria."

Only after three close votes did county commissioners agree to his request to film around the "sniper's perch," now part of The Sixth Floor exhibit. Stone said that's the only trouble he's had in getting cooperation from local officials.

"The only obstacles I ever had were from The Sixth Floor people, and only from a very determined and vocal old guard," Stone said in an interview.

But he hurried to compliment the city where he has chosen to shoot parts of three of his seven movies. "I found the city very young, very open and warm," Stone said. "I found it progressive, without much knowledge or remembrance of the history."

Last time around, the decision was easy.

After all, it was Hustler magazine publisher Larry Flynt who was asking that one of his staff members be allowed to pose with a rifle in the depository building as Flynt rode by in a motorcade for the 20th anniversary of the assassination. The request was seen as so bizarre that no one seemed to think much of simply saying no.

"He sent an advance man requesting permission," recalled Conover Hunt, curator for The Sixth Floor exhibit. "The gentleman was met by a county deputy sheriff who announced very politely that Dallas County took a dim view of people standing on the top of their county administration building with guns in their hands."

But Stone was different. An Academy Award-winning director, he was taken seriously by county administrators and others. For some, too seriously.

Dallas Times Herald columnist Jim Schutze wrote after the commissioners' final vote: "I think

it's great that Dallas is prostrating itself before film-maker Oliver Stone so that he can make a movie about how rich people in Dallas killed Kennedy."

Stone is making a conspiracy film. He won't say what the plot is, although he does say it will offer alternate scenarios. But it's clear that he is using much of the theory spun by former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, who in the late 1960s unsuccessfully prosecuted a Louisiana businessman for conspiracy to kill Kennedy.

Larry Howard, co-director of the JFK Assassination Information Center, which specializes in conspiracy theories, said Stone, Kevin Costner (who portrays Garrison) and several other actors in the film have been to visit his exhibit. "With what we have to show them, there's no doubt in any of their minds that it was a conspiracy and it was covered up," he said.

That doesn't sit well with Nancy Judy, one of two commissioners who voted against Stone.

"If it were a National Geographic film or a Smithsonian film, it might work," she said. "He's advancing a theory, I guess, and that's fine, but why should we allow The Sixth Floor and the exhibit — which attempts to give an impartial account — to be used?"

Added Martin Jurow, a movie producer and Southern Methodist University film professor: "While we want motion pictures to come to Dallas and appreciate the sums of money that are spent, it is still a little bit of a heartbreak to wonder whether or not Dallas might be accused in some fashion. I just hope we're not hurt."

Stone said his script "doesn't point the finger at Dallas." But he lambasted the Kennedy murder investigation. "Any murdered man in any city would have the right to more investigation than Mr. Kennedy got," Stone said. "And he was the president."

Hunt said Dallas' defensiveness is easy to understand.

"Everybody in the world has a defense against pain, and you're talking about a painful memory," she said. "I don't see any paranoia. It is a flat-out painful memory."

—James Pennebaker, a psychol-

ogy professor at SMU, agrees the assassination was a trauma to Dallas residents — and a "socially unacceptable" one at that.

Dallas learned that soon after the event.

"Families were refused service at restaurants and filling stations [outside of Dallas]," Pennebaker wrote in a 1988 study of the assassination's effects in Dallas. "Long-distance operators disconnected their calls. Schoolchildren threw rocks at cars with Texas license plates. Students from Dallas attending out-of-state colleges were hounded by their peers."

Pennebaker's study, which focuses on the physical effects of repressing painful memories, found several that were not accounted for by other factors:

■ Dallas deaths from heart diseases went up 4 percent between 1964 and 1969, while the number declined by 2 percent nationally.

■ Suicide rates in Dallas increased by about 20 percent in 1964, compared with 4.5 percent elsewhere in the United States.

■ In the aftermath of the assassination, voting patterns grew more liberal, donations to United Way went up and construction of futuristic skyscrapers rocketed — all of which Pennebaker partially attributes to an attempt to erase guilt over Kennedy's death.

City Councilman Al Lipscomb remembers the "extreme, violent" Dallas of the early 1960s but said the city "asked for redemption and is now in the healing process." Still, a little more medicine — in the form of a Stone movie — might be appropriate, he said.

"It's good. We need a good, therapeutic enema to make sure we go forward," Lipscomb said. "It's a purge to make sure there will be no residue of the past."

"Let's face it," added Hunt. "Oliver Stone is an outstanding film-maker. And he has partially made his reputation doing explorations of subjects that are very painful to some elements of American society. It took me two years to get up the courage to watch 'Born on the Fourth of July,' because Vietnam is a painful memory to me."

"For many people, it will be hard to watch Oliver Stone's film on the Kennedy assassination."