

Stone defends 'JFK': 'I've done all my homework'

By JAY CARR

BOSTON (BPI) — "I hope my responsibility is apparent in the work," Oliver Stone is saying. "But the work cannot be prejudged." Stone is talking about a new film, "JFK," that won't be released until Christmas at the earliest.

In fact, he just began editing it. But he's doing an interview about it now because it is already succeeding at one of its goals: It is provoking a further re-examination of the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963 — an event still shrouded in unanswered questions.

According to a recent Washington Post poll, a majority of Americans remain convinced the Kennedy killing was the result of a conspiracy. The House Select Committee on Assassinations found that the most likely explanation: Its 1978 report in effect rejected the earlier Warren Commission verdict that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. Stone, speaking by phone from Washington, where he finished filming last week after shoots in Dallas and New Orleans, said his film will offer several possible conspiracy scenarios.

He has already come under attack for the direction his script has taken. Based on a reading of one draft — the first of six, Stone says — Washington Post reporter George Lardner accused Stone of handling history sloppily.

Lardner's main gripe was that Stone uncritically accepted the con-

spiracy theory of former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison and what Lardner called Garrison's "zany" investigation in the mid-'60s (Lardner covered the early stages of that investigation).

In a subsequent exchange of letters, each in effect accused the other of acting in bad faith.

An earlier article in the Chicago Tribune, like subsequent ones in Time magazine and the New Orleans Times-Picayune, echoed Lardner's skepticism toward the film, which stars Kevin Costner as Garrison, Gary Oldman as Lee Harvey Oswald and Tommy Lee Jones as New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw (Garrison's target), plus Sissy Spacek, John Candy, Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau, Kevin Bacon, Joe Pesci, Ed Asner and — in a cameo appearance as Earl Warren — Garrison himself, now 69 and a Louisiana appellate judge.

The attacks on his film haven't caused him to change anything, Stone said, "but they're debilitating to have to answer to in the 15th or 16th hour of a long day. It's made me aware of how sacred people's beliefs about the Kennedy assassination are to them. I had to rethink everything I wrote. It made me aware of the level of antagonism. I had 10 or 12 advisers constantly scrutinizing the script.

I was clarifying as I went along. George Lardner has an ax to grind. He covered the Clay Shaw trial, and he feels negative about Garrison. He

got hold of a stolen first draft and sees it as a vindication of Garrison. I've taken the license of using Garrison as a metaphor for all the credible researchers. Lardner sees him in autobiographical terms. He narrows the focus of the picture to his enmity for Garrison. He's an all-encompassing figure. But Lardner has chosen to limit the focus to the specific Jim Garrison."

(Reached by telephone, Lardner said, "Is Oliver Stone ever going to shut up? He's just prolonging this controversy to hype his movie. His problem is, it's intrinsically illogical to take a real event, twist it, and describe it as a metaphor for truth. You can't build a metaphor for truth on a pile of falsehoods.")

"I draw certain conclusions through the Garrison character," Stone continued, "but I'd prefer that you see them in the movie. My conclusions are hardly pat. There are a lot of questions remaining. Right now, it's all in pieces. There are four credible scenarios why" Kennedy was targeted.

"There are three or four on Oswald. The problem is that people have received different facts at different times. No one has put the jigsaw puzzle together. I'm trying to take all the credible theories and put

together the argument against the Warren Commission report."

Stone warms to his subject as he recounts the history of incomplete investigations. "The Warren Commission never had access to the CIA and FBI stuff. It was reported to them by Allen Dulles," the former CIA director who served on the Warren Commission.

"He said, 'Believe me,' and they did. The House Select Committee on Assassinations was terribly incomplete as well. For instance," he said, "the committee wouldn't let the Parkland Hospital doctors, who treated Kennedy in the minutes after he was shot, 'see the autopsy photos to verify that the wounds were the same as they saw in Dallas that day. The Parkland doctors unequivocally described a hole in the back of the head. Yet the official autopsy photos show the head intact.'"

Unlike the Warren Commission (which favored the theory that Oswald fired three times) and the House committee (which concluded that it was most likely four shots were fired), Stone's script allows for six shots. This, he said, extrapolates from acoustical research done for the House committee: Investigators found six "impulse patterns" that

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could have represented shots in a tape recording of the shooting. "We have one in Kennedy's back, one in Kennedy's throat, one in Connally — maybe two, but we have one — one that misfires completely, one slightly wounding a bystander named Jim Tague down by the underpass and one that hit Kennedy in the head. Among other things, we're presenting the Zapruder film in a new and hopefully enlightening context."

His reference is to the famous footage of the shooting captured by Abraham Zapruder on his home-movie camera, but Stone is not divulging details of what role it will play in his film.

In fact, he said, to judge any film from the reading of a script, even the draft actually used, is a mistake — camera angles, lighting, framing and editing can influence the tone and even the content of a film as much as words.

One possibility is that the finished film will be color-coded, with different stock for flashbacks, for instance.

"A lot will depend on the editing, what stays, what goes," Stone said. "I'm trying for a three-hour film. It should be a 12-hour film." Either way, Stone said, "You have to composite time, characters and events. Shakespeare took liberties with 'Richard III.' Orson Welles did, too, with William Randolph Hearst in 'Citizen Kane.' I feel I've behaved responsibly. I've done all my homework. I have tried to include all the credible evidence. . . . But we're not doing a documentary. Most of all, I felt a tremendous need to make as many people as possible aware of what really happened that day. For me as a filmmaker, that means doing it cinematically."

Stone said his sources extend beyond Garrison's book, "On the Trail of the Assassins," and he rattles off the names of researchers whose work he's consulted: Mark Lane, Jim Marrs, Sylvia Meagher, Gary Shaw, Larry Howard, Larry Harris, Robert Groden, Fletcher Prouty, Harold Weisberg, Cyril Wecht and Tom Wilson — all this in addition to government documents.

Stone also resists as smear tactics characterizations of Garrison as a publicity hound or conspiracy nut. "My feeling is that Jim Garrison was an extremely courageous individual who took extremely long odds and pointed a strong finger at government coverup," Stone said. "That took guts in the 1960s, when the FBI and CIA were sacred cows. And don't forget he had 23 years of military service, was three times elected district attorney of New Orleans and is now an appellate judge. He's hard-

ly a buffoon. Garrison was the first to see that the JFK assassination wasn't just a matter of trajectories and bullet fragments in Dealey Plaza.

"He called into question the larger issues, especially the government's willingness to lie to the public — and this was before Watergate."

Garrison also has a defender in Costner, who plays him in the film. Interviewed earlier this summer, just before the release of his "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves," Costner digressed to say about his role in "JFK": "I think it's not a dead issue. I think the movie is almost deeper than the issues. It really talks about something you need to believe in, which is our Constitution. It deals with the fact that just because men hold title, it doesn't mean they're honorable men. But we've never really gotten the truth. What is the truth? I don't know. Maybe we'll never know, and it's affected our world. I think Garrison is deadly sincere."

In a way, "JFK" is the fourth and most complex in a tetralogy of films — the others being "Platoon," "Born on the Fourth of July" and "The Doors" — Stone has made about the '60s, the key decade in his life and the one he considers has shaped the rest of the American century.

He was impelled to make this film, Stone said, because "aside from it being a hell of a story, as a dramatist I was fascinated by a crime emanating from a small city, New Orleans, and assuming international proportions. It grows and grows, from New Orleans to Dallas to Washington, D.C. It starts as a whodunit and becomes a whydunit. Underlying the dramatic interest is that the 1960s are a determinant decade for what happens in the 1990s. Our lives have been shaped by this.

"The country would have been different if John Kennedy had been re-elected. We wouldn't have been committed to Vietnam. And the Cold War would have ended sooner. We present that. It also seems like after JFK was killed, every charismatic leader that threatened the establishment was assassinated — RFK, Dr. King, Malcolm X.

"I can understand that some people are concerned that Kennedy's life is being reduced to the assassination only. I feel the film pays respect to the man in flashbacks, in shedding light on why the changes he was effecting were rocking the boat. We respect Kennedy and show our respect for Kennedy. I want to add a point. If I had done a normal film, it would have been a miniseries about a glamorous handsome man played by a handsome actor. I just see it as a much darker story."

Jay Carr is the film critic at the Boston Globe.