

Stone, Writers Debate 'JFK' Fact, Fiction

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■ Movies: In a discussion before a crowd of 1,500, Norman Mailer and Nora Ephron support the director as others charge that the film distorts events.

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

NEW YORK—The national debate over Oliver Stone's film "JFK" reached the stage of New York's venerable Town Hall Tuesday night, as Stone and writers Norman Mailer, Nora Ephron, Edward J. Epstein and Christopher Hitchens argued the movie's controversial blending of history and myth for 2½ hours before a cheering and hissing audience.

To judge from the thunderous applause Stone received when he was introduced, it appeared the majority of the sell-out audience of 1,500 came to applaud the director's revisionist account of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in the current Warner Bros. film. Onstage he received ringing endorsements from Mailer and Ephron while Epstein, Hitchens and others offered substantive criticism and questions in a program entitled "Hollywood and History: The Debate Over 'JFK.'"

Typically, he gave no ground while deflecting criticism and, with the aid of an unidentified researcher seated next to him, threw out arcane names and dates and chronologies to defend now-familiar theories that there was more than one gunman in Dallas, that the military was probably involved in the conspiracy and that Kennedy, had he lived, would never have plunged forward into the Vietnam War.

Dressed for the occasion in a fashionable dark suit, a blue shirt and no tie, Stone calmly lashed out at the media and government, citing the "dinner party parochialism of people in New York and Washington who decide what's good for the world."

But the director was seriously challenged by panelists and members of the audience about his use of deliberate distortions of fact in the film, his iconographic view of Kennedy and his own principles.

The event was sponsored by the American Culture Studies at Columbia University.

It was a night for heavy-duty press bashing, led not only by Stone but by also Ephron, who ruefully recounted the adverse reaction in the press, particularly the New York Times, to the historical accuracy of the 1983 movie "Silkwood" she wrote with Alice Arlen. In a humorous but biting 15-minute speech that amounted to a vote of solidarity with Stone against his critics, Ephron emphasized the pains she and Arlen took to tell the truth about Karen Silkwood and complained: "What the press objects to" in films depicting real people and events "is that you are imposing a narrative and telling a story." Newspaper reporters and editors, she suggested, do much the same thing only don't admit it.

"A docudrama," she joked, "is a movie the New York Times disapproves of the politics of."

But Ephron's most provocative statement of the evening came when she chose to quote novelist E.L. Doctorow to the effect, "There is no fiction or nonfiction, only narrative."

Edward Jay Epstein, who wrote the 1966 book "Inquest," the first major indictment of the Warren Commission Report, took exception to Ephron's remarks and to aspects of "JFK," although he admitted he enjoyed the movie. "I'm in the minority here tonight," Epstein said, "but I'm one who believes there to be a difference between fact and fiction and that it should be respected."

Epstein went on to single out a scene in "JFK" involving the shadowy New Orleans figure David Ferrie that he said was completely untrue based on the historical record. He also said he believes New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison deliberately "fabricated" his conspiracy case against businessman Clay Shaw. The Shaw trial is an important plot element in "JFK," and the film strongly suggests that Shaw was involved in the assassination.

Epstein, a sober, scholarly man, questioned in general the admirable depiction of Garrison in "JFK," offering his own view that Garrison was guilty of "an abuse of justice" that included having three unfriendly journalists arrested at one point.

Stone's heroic depiction of Garrison, played in the film by Kevin Costner, also elicited quibbles from Ephron and Mailer, who otherwise heaped praise on the director.

Mailer, who began his remarks by reading excerpts from an approving piece he wrote about the film for Vanity Fair magazine, seemed to weave all over the map in attempts to locate his feelings about the movie and later parry criticism of it. At different times he called it "a great film" and "a crude movie driven home with primary colors and broad strokes, as all his movies have been."

The author of two of the most

Influential books of the last 25 years combining fiction and non-fiction, "The Armies of the Night" and "The Executioner's Song," Mailer both charmed and annoyed members of the audience with his penchant for grandiose statement. "Why didn't Stone show the real Garrison?" Mailer asked rhetorically. "Because if he had he would have made a movie that would have appealed to one-tenth as many people"—which, he added, was evidence of "how close this country is to fascism."

Defending the liberties Stone has taken with "facts" in "JFK," Mailer intoned, also curiously, "the only way we get rid of one crippling myth is to drive it out with another one." The author called for the formation of a new national commission to re-investigate the assassination.

Christopher Hitchens, the British-born, leftist columnist for the

Nation, referring to the title of the evening's debate, took his position

"on the high ground of history," aiming a long and withering question at Stone that focused on the less-than-glorious past of the Kennedy family and JFK's own less-than-heroic behavior in the White House and the fact that none of this damning evidence was discussed in the press until recently. "The art of media manipulation began with Camelot," Hitchens said, to substantial applause. The biggest myth about Kennedy, he said, "is the Arthurian myth."

Stone responded, "I don't believe you can visit the sins of the father on the son."

But the angriest question fired at Stone came from an audience member who identified himself as a member of the New Jewish Agenda and took the director to task "as a Jew" for using the former Pentagon operative Fletcher Prouty as a key adviser on the film when Prouty has been a member of right-wing organizations and has been accused of anti-Semitism.

Stone quickly joked, "I'm only a half-Jew" before defending Prouty and claiming the anti-Semitic charges against him have never been proved.

Prouty served as the basis for the character in "JFK" known as Mr. X (played by Donald Sutherland), who, as a former "black ops" military officer, reveals to Garrison in a clandestine meeting the logic and logistics of the military's involvement in the assassination.

Epstein also questioned Stone's reliance on Prouty, but for different reasons. Recalling that Prouty has been a source for journalists over the years, Epstein said: "Fletcher Prouty is very accommodating. He is a very accommodating fellow. I've found that he would tell a journalist anything he wanted to know."

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