

# N.Y. meet puts heat on Stone

BY JEREMY GERARD

NEW YORK—With determination, a wealth of research and no small measure of humor, Oliver Stone survived a moderate grilling about "JFK" Tuesday night during a town meeting at Town Hall before a mostly partisan overflow audience.

The occasion was "Hollywood & History: The Debate Over 'JFK,'" in which Stone was joined by writer-director Nora Ephron, novelist Norman Mailer, non-fiction author Edward Jay Epstein and Victor Navasky, editor of the Nation, a co-sponsor of the event, to

Turn to page 26

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## Stone, scribes lead N.Y. town meeting on 'JFK'

Continued from page 1

discuss the responsibility of filmmakers to historical facts.

Mailer jump-started the evening not by discussing anything so mundane as Hollywood and responsibility, but by reading an abbreviated version of his admiring Vanity Fair essay on "JFK." He called the film "a creature in the dream life of America."

Chiding Stone for not offering a more complex portrait of New Orleans prosecutor Jim Garrison, Mailer nonetheless praised the director, sort of, for having "the integrity of a brute—he forages where others fear to go." Mailer said the film is important in a country afflicted with mass apathy and paranoia.

Ephron, co-author with Alice Arlen of the screenplay for "Silkwood," made a distinction between journalism and filmmaking. Ephron recounted the experience she and Arlen had in trying to tell the true story of nuclear plant whistleblower Karen Silkwood, without necessarily worrying about every factual detail.

Then came the articles, particularly in the New York Times, comparing the facts of the Silkwood case with the Mike Nichols film, followed by editorials denouncing the movie.

Citing the attacks on "Silkwood" and "Daniel" (the Sidney Lumet film based on E.L. Doctorow's fictional account of the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg spy case) as well as "JFK," Ephron said, "What the press is objecting to is that you were there at all, have a political agenda and—worst of all—impose a narrative."

Noting that the Times "hates

docudramas," she went on to define the genre as "a movie the New York Times disagrees with the politics of." She asserted, to the crowd's evident approval, that a filmmaker can capture the truth in ways a reporter cannot.

Epstein, who has written extensively about Garrison and other aspects of the John Kennedy assassination, was somewhat more equivocal. "I believe there is a difference between fact and fiction," he said, insisting, "It is not a trivial difference.... When you mix fact and fiction, you don't get a hybrid, you get pure fiction."

Yet he went on to praise "JFK" for being "a work of fiction" that "tries to get at major truths."

### 'Outlaw history'

Finally, Stone had his say, outlining the five areas he had attempted to illuminate in his self-described "outlaw history of the assassination": that Oswald did not act alone; that Kennedy was moving away from the Cold War toward detente; that the intelligence community constituted a fourth branch of the military; that the Mafia is too much a part of American mythology; and that the press colluded in covering up the truth about the assassination.

"The movie touches on two eternal myths," Stone said: "the charismatic prince who renounces war, and the modern myth," a la Capra, of an ethical man "rising to a challenge."

The panel included three invited questioners. Max Holland, a contributor to the Nation, said, "I cannot accept that facts don't matter," and after detailing what he claimed to be several of the film's inaccuracies and distortions, asked Stone if "JFK" wasn't really "a case of wish fulfillment."

Stone rejoined with his own set of facts, demonstrating the house of mirrors such a discussion can become.

Bill Schaap, who also has written about the assassination, wondered whether the film might move people to dismantle the CIA, a notion found wanting by Mailer, whose latest novel, "Harlot's Ghost," is about the CIA.

Finally, Nation critic and bad-boy essayist Christopher Hitchens said that history "synthesizes fact and myth for our convenience," and derided the notion, or myth, that the Kennedy assassination marked the end of American innocence.

After giving a brief, unsavory history of the Kennedy family, he insisted that the real myth was "'Camelot'—a myth that stuck ever since Jackie Kennedy went to a musical."

Though the satire was aimed at Stone, Mailer took up his defense, insisting that for all his flaws, Kennedy had shown a capacity for change, and that "he moved at least to the center from the far right."

The town meeting was co-sponsored by the Nation Institute and Columbia U.'s Center for American Culture Studies, with an assist from the Writers Guild of America East.