

# Reader's GUIDE to ENTERTAINMENT



## Short Ends

L.A. Critic Plus: For those who think the Reader's film reviews usually have everything, here are our printed opinions regarding the movies nominated as JFFK's best by our professional organization, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association (LAFC). In our reviews, we gave high marks to LAFC's selections for Best Animated Film (*Beauty and the Beast*), Best Actor (Nick Nolte: *The Prince of Tides*), Best Actress (Mercedes Ruehl: *The Fisher King*), Best Supporting Actor (Michael Lerner: *Satan Fries*), Best Supporting Actress (Jane Fonda: *Life Is Sweet*), Best Cinematography (Roger Donaldson: *Satan Fries and Monodé*), Best Music (Zbigniew Preisler: *Europa, Europa: The Double Life of Veronique*; and *My in the Field of the Lord*), Best Documentary (*American Dream*), and Best Foreign Film (*La Belle Nocturne*). We also raved about *Boys N the Hood*, whose director, John Singleton, was the New Generation Award. We have always raved about Lifetime Achievement winners Vincent Price and Elmer Bernstein. Only when it came to the Big Dickheads awards — Best Picture, Screenplay, and Director — did our critics differ from their colleagues. The winner in all three categories was *JFK*, which we ranked as bogus; the runner-up was *The Fisher King*, which we liked but were disappointed in. *I'm Dreaming of a Weirid Christmas*. While we're on the subject of awards, we'd like to give some kind of accolade to the Cinema Cafe, whose holiday programming is, at the very least, singular. While everyone else is showing cheemus like *A Christmas Carol* and it's a Wonderful Life, this Hollywood video venue is presenting the obscure *Naughty Scrooge!*, perhaps the least beloved Christmas film. Oshino's touching portrait of Yuletide in a Japanese POW camp, *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, and everyone's traditional favorite, *Die Hard*.

Falls Navidad. A special premiere of *La Pasorale* (The Shepherd's Tale) will be held Saturday at 7 p.m. at the Joan America Theater, 244 S. San Pedro St. This Latino musical version of the shepherds' visit to Bethlehem to see the infant Jesus—who was written and directed by Luis Valdez (Zoot Suit). The cast includes El Teatro Campesino as well as Linda Ronstadt, Paul Rodriguez, Robert Beltran, and Don Novello. *See News/7*. Tickets for this benefit cost \$15 for adults, \$15 for kids. Info: (213) 480-3700. —Andy Klein

26 Los Angeles TIMES/December 19, 1991



Kevin Costner in *JFK*

## Gail Stone

*'JFK'* Is an In-Your-Face, Three-Hour Spellbinder

**JFK.** DIRECTED BY OLIVER STONE. SCREENPLAY BY OLIVER STONE & ZACHARY SKLAR. BASED ON THE BOOK *ON THE TRIAL OF THE ASSASSIN* BY JIM GARRISON AND CHRISTOPHER THE FLOYD THAT KILLED KENNEDY BY JIM MARKE. WITH KEVIN COSTNER, TOMMY LEE JONES, GARY OLDMAN, JOE PESCI, DONALD SUTHERLAND, KEVIN SPACEY, JAY O, SANDRA NICHOLES, MICHAEL BUCKNER, Sissy Spacek, BRIAN DOYLE-MURRAY, LAURENCE FISHBURN, JACK LEMMON, ED ARNOLD, JOHN CASH, AND JIM GARRISON. (AMC CENTURY, BUREAU CONNECTION, HOLLYWOOD GALAXY, GRAND PLAZA, MANN'S WESTWOOD, CUTTERBURN, MARINA MARKETPLACE, COMPLEX UNIVERSAL)

By Andy Klein

With the possible exception of Spike Lee, Oliver Stone is Hollywood's most in-your-face film maker. He wants to coax us into his moral universe, but, if coaxing doesn't work, he is more than willing to knock us down and lecture us. You have to applaud him for taking on important subjects that no one else with clout wants to handle, and you have to applaud louder on the occasions when he does it well.

On the other hand, there is something scary about his messianic arrogance. Most artists want to impose their interpretation of the world on the audience; among them, film makers have to be the pushiest merely to survive professionally in such a high-stakes business. It is a truism that you would rather have a director who makes bad decisions than one who makes no decisions at all.

A child of the upper class, Stone may have converted from the right to the left, but he could never be called a liberal. In some ways, he is reminiscent of the most macho elements of the sixties left — so convinced of the urgency of his particular vision that he barrels on ahead at times when a little more reflection might be called for.

This is not an entirely negative quality. The liberal intellect has the dangerous potential to bleach all shades of morality into indistinguishable grays. Stone, in recent interviews about *JFK*, has often invoked Hamlet, Western culture's leading icon of Action vs. Moral Insecurity, characterizing the boomer generation as "children of a slain leader, unaware of why he was killed or even that a false father figure inhabits the throne."

*JFK* is clearly intended to remind us that the ghost still walks the battlements, that our culture will be forever haunted if we give up the quest for the truth about the central trauma of the postwar era or, worse yet, if we willingly, greedily opt to delude ourselves by accepting the most implausible "official" scenario. Stone is not always the most subtle of artists — heck, let's face it, more than once he has been the least subtle of artists — but the problems of approaching such a massive and controversial story require complex technique and moral passion more than art. On that level, Stone succeeds: *JFK* is a wildly compelling piece of agitprop docudrama.

For the sake of dramatic structure, Stone hangs his arguments on the story of Jim Garrison, the New Orleans D.A. who fronted the only assassination-related criminal prosecution ever to go to trial. He incorporates much additional information that has been dug up in the twenty-odd years since Garrison's original work. He structures the material as a legal detective story, with the D.A. uncovering deeper and deeper layers of conspiracy, coverup, and political meaning.

No critic can neutralize his or her own social and political attitudes when approaching even the most abstract or aestheticized work — nor would it be a particularly good thing to do so. In the case of *JFK*, however, it is particularly



tough to talk about the film as *film art*; all arguments veer quickly from the aesthetic to the political, based on one's own basic take on the Kennedy assassination, the U. S. government, and human nature in general. Which may well be exactly what Stone most wants.

**T**he director packs a huge amount of material into a running time of slightly more than three hours. Three hours may sound forbiddingly long — I'm sure it does to theater owners — but the fascination never flags. Stone uses a lot of shorthand devices to compress the material and create drama — combining characters and attributing other people's insights and actions to Garrison. (In interviews, Stone has been open about taking such license. Still, the film itself could have used a stronger disclaimer, and, impractical as it may sound, Warner probably should have sprung for footnoted supplemental material in the theater lobby.)

This necessary translation also is the basis for the most legitimate criticisms that have already been leveled at Stone. Those who object to the film's central ideological thesis — that the United States was subjected in 1963 to a secret coup d'état, whose

beneficiaries may still be in power — can use the details of the film's choices to cast doubt on its analysis.

Most troublesome is the use of Garrison. Who can say whether he was (or is) an earnest crusader or a wife-beating, ambitious homophobe with psychotic delusions of grandeur? — the latter being just a few of the charges leveled against him at the time by either legitimate critics or government smear specialists, depending, once again, on which side you are inclined to believe.

Stone idealizes Garrison into an unreal figure — Mr. D.A. Goes to Washington. Casting Kevin Costner at this stage of his career — no more *No Way Out* for K. C., no Ivan the Deep Cover Spy — automatically defines Garrison as the Good American. Stone himself says he wanted Costner because the latter has that James Stewart-Gary Cooper quality that made them perfect Capra heroes. Even within the film he deliberately invokes Capes, both in a scene at the Lincoln Memorial and in Garrison's own, final summation (which was actually delivered by someone else).

**T**he closest to a flaw Stone will allow his hero is obsessiveness: His pursuit of the truth threat-

ens to destroy his family. Not surprisingly, the domestic scenes are by far the film's worst moments — clichéd, flat, unnecessary torn baggage. Outside of *Born on the Fourth of July*, Stone, whose main trick is dramatizing (and thus simplifying) ideological argument, has never been strong on family interaction. The only such relationship that rings true in film after film is the alienated son trying to resolve his conflicts with real or symbolic dads. As a result, *JFK* squanders an actress of the talent of Sissy Spacek (as Garrison's wife) in a part that would have been better off cut out altogether.

Stone has an affinity for Good Father vs. Bad Father conflicts. In *Platoon*, it was most blatant. *Wall Street* even had three father figures — good Martin Sheen, bad Michael Douglas, and Stone's tribute to his own real dad, Hal Holbrook. It's perhaps a sign that the director still hasn't settled his filial feelings that Holbrook is the worst delineated, most cardboard character in any of his films — a homily-dispensing Ward Cleaver clone.

In *JFK*, this schema for presenting moral questions reaches its purest, most algebraically abstract distillation: The Good Father is X (Donald Sutherland), the Bad Father Y (Dale Dye). Y is a shadowy figure who embodies the bad guys in Stone's analysis; X is the same on the surface but imbued with moral passion.

There is another way to analyze the White Hats vs. the Black Hats in *JFK*, however, one that makes you wish Stone had chosen a story other than Garrison's (or that he had recast it with fictional personas): Garrison, the straight all-American suburbanite, vs. Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones), the effete, decadent homosexual conspirator. Too much energy is likely to be expended denouncing the portrayal of Shaw and the film's relentlessly evil gays.

While it would be nice to know whether Shaw was guilty or not — the film presents flashbacks from Shaw's point of view that absolutely indict him, while the real evidence has con-

tinued to be ambiguous — it's a shame that Stone has given his detractors this sort of detail to focus debate on. It makes it easier for them to ignore or dismiss the more important points of his case.

**W**here the film succeeds best is in the debunking of the Warren Commission Report. There are numerous ways to attack this bogus palliative of an official report but Stone wisely homes in on its strongest flaws — the blatantly impossible mechanics of the official story — rather than its infinite number of improbabilities.

Costner is appropriately flat as Garrison. The cast is studded with too many celebrity actors: Most of them perform well but the film almost sinks into the *Greatest Story Ever Told* syndrome — look, there's John Wayne as the Centurion swabbing Garrison's wounds. John Candy does a terrific turn as a sleazy hipster lawyer but you can't forget that he is John Candy.

Joe Pesci has the most memorable role, as the weird, hyperkinetic informer David Ferrie, and plays it to the max. Donald Sutherland is almost as memo-

riable in his far less exploitable part.

It is amusing to watch the sarcasm with which *JFK* has already been dismissed in some corners of the mainstream press — are these criticisms valid skepticism or more disinformation? The public debate is already dizzying, which opens up the possibility that *JFK* will only end up falling victim to the "Winter Kills syndrome" and serving the very villains it tries to expose.

In Richard Condon's novel *Winter Kills*, by far the greatest fictional treatment of the assassination, the conspirators know that it is impossible to keep secret a plot involving dozens of people. The only way to hide the truth is to disseminate so many conflicting rumors and explanations that the truth is indistinguishable among them: Investigations will eventually peter out through sheer exhaustion.

**JFK** briefly brings some degree of clarity to this great, shrouded mystery. Whether intentionally or not, the debate it has already engendered may only serve to muddy things again. The horrifying thing about the *Winter Kills* scenario is that it may truly be impossible to combat.

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28 Los Angeles READER December 20, 1991



High Heels

## To Lie in Madrid

■ HIGH HEELS. WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY PEDRO ALMODOVAR. MUSIC BY RUDOLPH SAKRAMOTO. WITH VICTORIA ABRIL, MARISA PAREDES, MIGUEL BOBE, AND FRODOB ATTENS. (GOLDWYN PAVILION, FINE ARTS, TOWN & COUNTRY)

By Andy Klein

Pedro Almodóvar continues to be the most inventive director to arrive on American shores from the thaw of post-Franco Spain. His biggest commercial successes, the frantically inventive comedy *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and the less inspired *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, displayed a weird synthesis of passion and ironic pop campiness.

**H**igh Heels opens with Rebecca (Victoria Abril) waiting to greet her mother at the Madrid airport. A series of sardonic flashbacks fill us in on their relationship. Mom is Becky Del Paramo (Marisa Paredes), a vastly popular entertainer whose romantic relationships and career priorities have made her a neglectful parent. When Rebecca was ten or eleven, she more or less murdered her asshole stepfather, in hopes of winning more of her mother's time.

No one ever discovers the crime, but Rebecca's naughtiness was for naught: Her real father takes over her upbringing and Becky disappears for fifteen years of international touring.

Now Becky is returning to Madrid. Rebecca is still obsessed with gaining her mother's love. At the same time, she has tried to recreate her mother's world within her own life: Not only does she hang out with a female impersonator who mimics Becky's act but she has also married Manuel, one

of her mother's former lovers.

About a third of the way in, the story suddenly shifts gears and the movie swerves from apparent black comedy to weepie melodrama. The rest of the story is like an ironic conflation of a dozen Fannie Hurst novels and Douglas Sirk films, with insane plot reversals and an orgy of noble self-sacrifice.

Abril is at her best here, heartbreakingly sympathetic but a little scary as well. Her transition from stylish professional to lost waif toward the end is strikingly moving.

**H**igh Heels has comic moments but its tone harkens back to Almodóvar's most interesting film, the cross-gender *Law of Desire*. *High Heels* is filled with pleasures, though they are less immediately apparent than in Almodóvar's full-on comedies and less complex than in *Law of Desire*. Still, it has the unfakeable stamp of his singular worldview.

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