

Another crack at Jack



Scenes from a shooting script: above, the assassination, and, right, the moment before Oswald's own murder



against its corrupt governance. Great stuff. But not only did Garrison never say these words; he didn't even sum up at the trial. If he had, maybe the jury wouldn't have acquitted Shaw in just 44 minutes.

If you know that this collation is just juggling with the various conjectures and suppositions, you can ac-

cept this is a form of filmic rhetoric and put it in context. But where were you the day Kennedy was killed? A hundred million Americans were nowhere—they hadn't been born. If they were to regard the film JFK as accurate history, then Oliver Stone has confounded his own altruism and done them a grave disservice. □

Oliver Stone's controversial film JFK, starring Kevin Costner, is a proud but prejudiced success, says IAIN JOHNSTONE

Oliver Stone doesn't just make movies — he makes controversial movies. Cozy narratives are for wimps. Ever since he stuck it to the Turkish prison system with his script for *Midnight Express*, he has attacked his chosen subjects with bias and wayward brilliance. For the most part he has set out to savage what he perceives to be the crimes of the American establishment: its support of right-wing death squads in Salvador; its callous prosecution of the Vietnam war in *Platoon*; its dereliction of duty towards the veterans in *Born on the Fourth of July*; its acceptance of the greed-is-good philosophy in *Wall Street*.

So, what could be more natural than for Stone to descend on the controversy surrounding the shooting of President Kennedy? What controversy, you might well ask. It's hardly a burning topic after nearly 30 years and 600 books. The one Stone himself has deliberately reawakened is the answer, with a script that combines pride and prejudice in equal measure.

Given that 72% of Americans think they have not been told the truth about the Kennedy assassination, 73% think that Lee Harvey Oswald acted in conspiracy with other people, 50% think those other people were the CIA and 48% the mafia (the figures come from a recent, but pre-film, *Time-CNN Poll*), and given that the Warren Commission Report into the assassination is generally regarded as having the validity of Chamberlain's piece of paper, and the Zapruder home movie of the killing establishes the president was shot from different directions, the truly controversial approach to this subject would be to assert that Oswald just went out one day and did it all on his own.

But in *JFK* (Empire Leicester Square et al. 15), Stone has gone for the mega-conspiracy theory: mafia, CIA, pro-Castro Cubans, anti-Castro Cubans, Pentagon, military-industrial complex and — here comes the biggie — LBJ himself. Why else do you think he was in such a hurry to get the body out of the Dallas hospital and press home the Warren whitewash?

Let me distort the film from the "facts" it presents. It is a vibrant, emotionally charged and skillfully compelling piece of work. Such are Stone's artful and persuasive powers that if he had suggested Martians had landed that November day in 1963 and carried out the coup d'état, I think one would have left the cinema convinced. Apart from the pace of his editing (helping the 190 minutes motor by) and the punch of the highly charged individual scenes, he has pulled off a coup. In a supreme act of propaganda, he has taken the one actor in America who is now synonymous with the word integrity and

given him the seminal part of Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney who tried out the conspiracy theory in court.

But this isn't the real-life Jim, whose aides threatened and bribed witnesses, and who found his questionable army psychiatric record leaked by the military when he started causing trouble. No, this is Saint James. As played (quite excellently) by Kevin Costner, a golden aura of honesty and patriotic purity surrounds the lawman, as if transferred from the dead president himself.

Stone has assembled a first division cast to help thump his message home, and the very fact that the acting is so convincing makes his contentious scenario seem all the more convincing as well. Gary Oldman is an edgy, elusive Oswald — preserving the mystery of the man to the last with his plea that he was just a "patsy". Joe Pesci, wearing an outside wig and bearing an outside grudge, is focal in the New Orleans homosexual underworld — the movie finger points at them, too — and even Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau contribute hardbitten cam-

eos as a private eye and a senator.

The story begins with the shooting and ends with the only criminal trial ever brought in connection with the death of JFK. But most of the film is consumed by Garrison's pursuit of the conspiracy. Why would Stone's bizarre bedfellows want to kill JFK? The director says it was because he let down the CIA and the Cubans over the Bay of Pigs (true) and that he was about to let down the military and munitions men by pulling out of Vietnam (doubtful). Some extremists at the time believed this — although I hardly think Johnson was among them. Indeed, LBJ, referring to the way JFK condoned the CIA's marriage with the mafia in its efforts to eliminate Castro, later told a former aide that the president was "running a damned Murder Incorporated in the Caribbean" and that he believed one of those plots backfired in Dallas. It remains the most plausible explanation of the assassination so far.

Stone certainly takes this on board. The CIA/mafia and Cuban elements hum conspiratorially along. The LBJ-military angle is a bit trickier to

dramatise. We get Donald Sutherland — "Call me X" — as a Pentagon pensioner who vouchsafes these allegations to Jim by the Washington monument. His words are based on a 1973 book revealing the inner workings of the CIA by Col L Fletcher Prouty. Prouty, however, never briefed Garrison.

But one of the most persuasive characters in the film is Willie O'Keefe (a wholly convincing cameo from Kevin Bacon), a rent-boy who fingers Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones), the New Orleans homosexual who was the subject of Garrison's conspiracy trial. Only one problem here: Willie never existed. He's a dramatic device and the unwitting author of the huge question-mark underlying this movie; who would buy a thesis from a director who merely creates character?

Artistic licence is the order of the day as fictional footage is interpolated with the real stuff. Garrison is given a concluding courtroom speech that runs to 15 minutes, with Costner movingly and eloquently spelling out how a patriot must defend his country