

The Washington Post

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April 6, 1992

Dear Harold,

FYI. Would you call
this pandering? See p. 48.

At the risk of agitating the grave of Stephen *Sincerely,*
("a pun is the lowest form of humor") Leacock, I'd say ~~his~~ "ilked for all it was
worth.

Apparently you did not notice that Stone said on p. *Stone*
p. 49 about those ^{said Stone} who presented Warhol in The
Doors in a homophobic manner, "These writers should be stopped." Sound like his Outlook
argument?

If you ever got a transcript of what he said at the press club I'd appreciate a copy for
archival purposes.

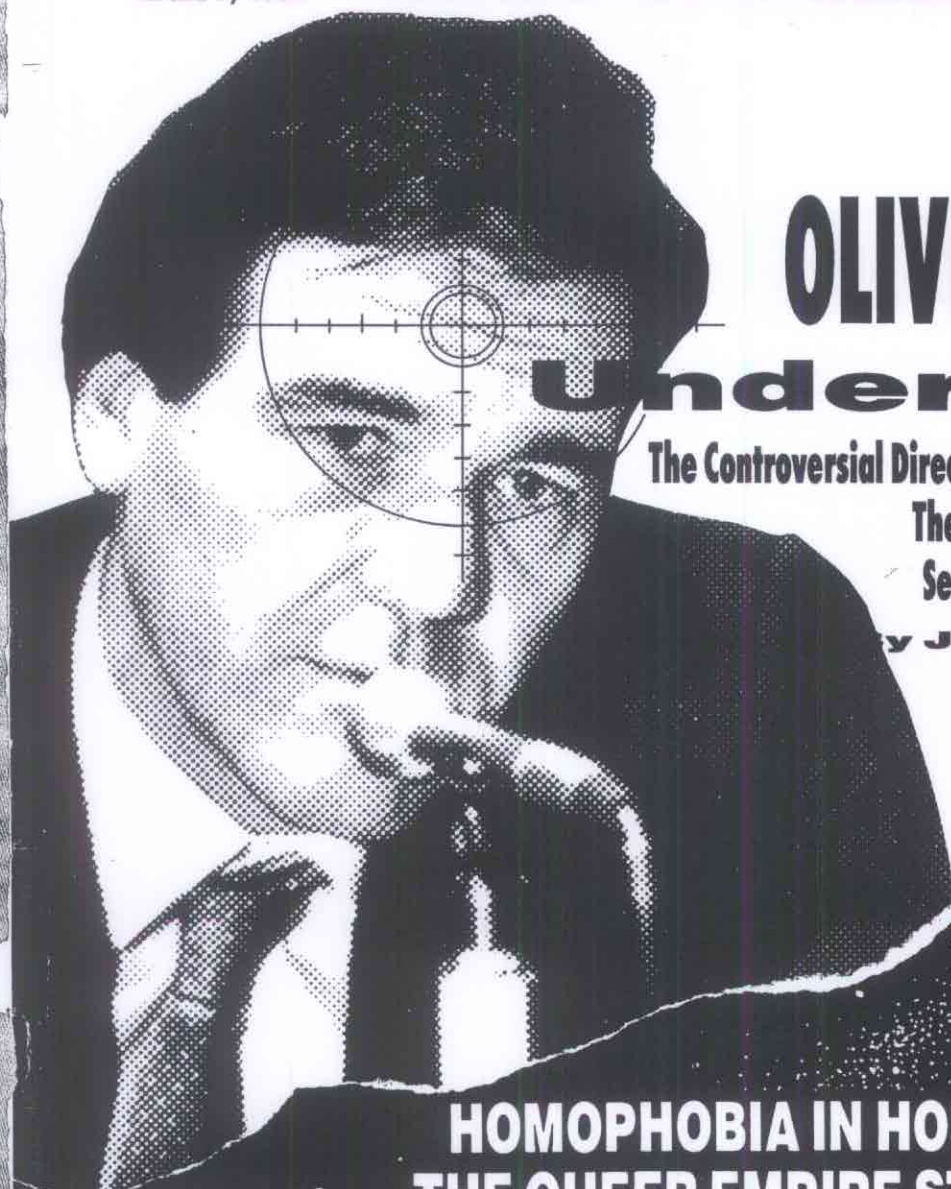
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Harold*

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OLIVER STONE

Under Fire

The Controversial Director on Gay Conspiracies,
The Mayor of Castro Street,
Sex, Censorship, and More

by Jeff Yarbrough

HOMOPHOBIA IN HOLLYWOOD II: THE QUEER EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

By David Ehrenstein



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Heart of Stone

Writer-Director Oliver Stone Opens Up on Sex, *JFK*, and Harvey Milk

BY JEFF YARBROUGH

A

ctor-producer George M. Cohan once told a member of the press, "I don't care what you say about me as long as you say something about me and as long as you spell my name right." Mr. Cohan, meet Mr. Stone.

Writer-director Oliver Stone has, over the last decade, been catapulted to a level of stardom rivaled only by the lead players in his films. Even with actors like Kevin Costner (*JFK*), Val Kilmer (*The Doors*), Tom Cruise (*Born on the Fourth of July*), Michael Douglas (*Wall Street*), and Charlie Sheen (*Wall Street* and *Platoon*), his involvement in a film sometimes renders the actors and their performances unmemorable. Frankly, the star of an Oliver Stone film is Stone himself.

Much of Stone's star status is owed to the press coverage generated by him and his films (some of this status is, of course, owed to his talent). "There's something inside Oliver that forces him to oversell everything," says *Rolling Stone's* senior editor, Peter Travers. "He's like [showman] Mike Todd. He'd go up in a hot-air balloon with signs all over it if he could." Film critic Travers summed up his views on Stone in his review of the 1991 film *The Doors*, writing that Stone is "part poet, part provocateur, part snake oil salesman."

"He's a master of self-promotion," says Michael Sragow, a film critic for the *San Francisco Examiner* and a frequent film reviewer for *The New Yorker*. "But he's not alone. He and Spike Lee both tackle incendiary subjects [in their films], then go out and fan the flames on all of the media's available levels—and all the while offer no solutions to the problems that their films raise."

The key to the media's fatal attraction to Stone is his ability to weave a complex, polemical web in and around almost every film he makes. Forget lame comparisons of Brian De Palma (*Dressed to Kill*) and Kenneth Branagh (*Dead Again*) to master audience and media manipulator Alfred Hitchcock. Stone is the director whose name—much like the Master's—instantly identifies the contents of his films. Hitchcock's name signaled suspense. Stone's signals controversy.

"L.A. is stressville for me," says Stone from behind a mahogany desk at his company's offices in Santa Monica, Calif. "Too much going on..." Indeed, Stone's company, Ixtlan Productions, is at present involved—in some capacity—in over a dozen films. Stone's current film in release, *JFK*, nominated for eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director, has just opened internationally and is doing "spectacular business," according to the *Hollywood Reporter's* international editor, James Ulmer. "*JFK* is a huge hit overseas," he says. "It had one of the strongest openings in Paris ever." Stone, who recently returned from a promotional trip to Europe and South America to boost *JFK's* international profile, says, "We hit ten countries in 21 days. It's doing well everywhere. It's a universal film."

It is also a wildly controversial film. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a film more controversial than *JFK*. Stone has single-handedly brought interest in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, a murder that took place almost 30 years ago, to a state of national—and now international—frenzy. Even Congress, a body of politicians who move on most issues with the grace and pace of a brontosaurus, have been tweaked by Stone's film. In January, an article in the *Washington Post* quoted House speaker Thomas Foley as saying that *JFK* "has renewed demands to unseal [government] files that could add relevant

information" about the assassination. Without Stone's *JFK*, those files may continue to gather dust until 2019.

Like the halls of government, the halls of virtually every media outlet in the United States have also buzzed regarding Stone's film version of the assassination. The *New York Times* said Stone "is not engaged in a fair-minded inquiry." The *Chicago Tribune* wrote, "This is not artistry, it is flimflam. This is not mythmaking, it is exploitation. This is not high drama, it is low propaganda." *New York* magazine printed that "there are more than 100 major lies and omissions" in the film. Most of the film's criticisms concern the fact that Stone has produced a document in *JFK* that will stand as a historical representation for all of those who know little or nothing about the assassination. "Kids are swallowing it whole," says critic Sragow.

At those kids' fingertips are volumes of information on the conspiracy to kill the president. Earlier this month, the *New York Times* Book Review contained two titles in its top-selling 15 that were related to the assassination. On the paperback list, three out of ten best-sellers—including *On the Trail of the Assassins*, written by former New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison (played in *JFK* by Kevin Costner), which was listed at number one—were assassination-related.

Despite all this interest in the film and renewed interest in the assassination, one issue that has gotten little play since the movie's opening is the subject of homophobia and *JFK*. Despite criticisms—mostly in the gay press—of the film's alleged homophobia (*Rolling Stone's* Travers has also referred to certain scenes in *JFK* as "scarily homophobic"), little has been said on the matter by Stone.

Until now.

Last January, Stone was "outraged" by an article written by *The Advocate's* film critic, David Ehrenstein. In "*JFK*—A New



LOS ANGELES TIMES PHOTO BY CON KEYES

Low for Hollywood," Ehrenstein attempted to refute *JFK's* theory that there was "a gay cabal out to kill Kennedy." The article spouts evidence that Ehrenstein feels discredits Stone's version of the events. He quotes from James Kirkwood's *American Grotesque*, a book that attempts to prove that Garrison was on a personal vendetta to get international businessman Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones in *JFK*). *American Grotesque* paints Garrison as unstable and a wife beater—the antithesis of the Garrison in Stone's film. Following the article was Ehrenstein's review of the movie, in which he pronounced *JFK* "the most homophobic film ever to come out of Hollywood." The critic bristled at what he called the movie's "constant contrast between

purer-than-driven-snow straights and slimy, sweaty, whimpering gays."

Following the appearance of Ehrenstein's views in *The ADVOCATE*, Stone started receiving hate mail. Most of this mail expressed outrage at Stone's involvement in the production of *The Mayor of Castro Street*.

Stone is executive producing *The Mayor of Castro Street* for Warner Bros. The film, based on Randy Shilts's biography of openly gay San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk, will chronicle Milk's life, times, and assassination. Stone has been toying with the idea of directing the film but due to the gay activist community's furor is reevaluating that idea. A flier was recently faxed around Hollywood by Queer Nation, a direct-action group, promising "massive

demonstrations" at this year's Academy Awards because of Stone's alleged homophobia in *JFK* and his involvement in *The Mayor of Castro Street*.

And although the flier abounds with misinformation, the activists did, indeed, spell Oliver Stone's name right.

When does bad art deserve censure — not censorship?

I'm against artistic censorship in any form. Once you get into the "politically correct" way of doing things, you are in danger of destroying the concept of art. You're bordering on where the Russian socialists stood regarding their artists' freedom of expression. To be told you cannot portray anything gay, black, or Asian in a negative light

"If an artist is determined to portray homosexuals in a negative light,

is ridiculous. The filmmaker should have—and does have, I might add—the right to do it the way he wants.

So you're saying that the gay community, in these times of employment discrimination, epidemic, and attacks on civil rights by state legislatures, should remain silent regarding something that is felt to be insensitive, gratuitous, and homophobic?

Are you referring to *JFK*?

At this point I'm speaking in generalities. As far as my movie goes, no one with a brain is going to walk out of *JFK* and think that gays are all president killers. The film is about who owns reality. Is it the press? The CIA? Lee Harvey Oswald? To narrow this theme and to focus on these characters' homosexuality is to lose perspective.

How do you respond to the accusations that *JFK* portrays gays in a homophobic manner?

The chief villains in the film are heterosexual. The finger is pointed at the power structure in Washington and its combination of CIA and military intelligence people and/or military, who call the shots. I never said Clay Shaw was the mastermind of this conspiracy by any means. He's a fringe player who knows something about what is going on. I hardly think David Ferrie (Joe Pesci in *JFK*) was a mastermind either. The villains lie in Washington, not in New Orleans.

But Shaw and Ferrie are on-screen a lot more than the Washingtonians. Do you understand that the gay community takes issue with this portrayal of homosexuals as deviants because of the dearth of images in films of gays who are not homicidal, psychotic, or both?

The characters of Shaw, Ferrie, and the composite character Willie O'Keefe were historically gay. You cannot be—at the same time—politically correct and a historical revisionist. They were gay, and they were involved in this conspiracy.

A lot of gay people objected to the scene

in the film depicting those three in drag. Shaw is shown in *JFK* painted gold from head to toe and sniffing amyl nitrite. Is there a historical basis for that scene?

Let me show you a picture. [He calls to an assistant outside of his private office and requests that two photographs be brought to him.] Here [pointing to the photos], there's Shaw, there's Ferrie. Both in wigs. The drag scene was important to the film because I had to make the point that Shaw was lying when he said he didn't know Ferrie. He obviously knew him. The point of that scene was to prove that Shaw perjured himself [at his subsequent trial] over and over on the witness stand.

What does that photo really prove? I have a picture of myself with Madonna.

Many people said they knew each other. Raymond Broshears, David Logan, and Perry Russo, all gay friends of Ferrie's, testified [before the Warren Commission, which investigated the Kennedy assassination] to that fact. Russo's testimony is that which I gave to the Willie O'Keefe character. He said he went to a party with Ferrie and Shaw. At that party he listened while Shaw, Ferrie, and Lee Harvey Oswald talked about a triangulation of fire that would kill a president. He never changed his story in 28 years.

As far as the drag scene goes, we're sitting here looking at [Shaw and Ferrie] in these photographs in wigs. In terms of me showing Shaw painted gold, that came from an FBI document from 1954 which said that Shaw was given to sadism and masochism in his homosexual activities, that he ran a gay club and presided over it with a whip in his hand, and that one year he painted himself gold at Mardi Gras.

In pushing your point that all of these guys knew each other, aren't you verging on a stereotypical assumption—and a homophobic one—that all gay people know each other?

It's not about their being gay, it's about the connections that being gay makes. Jack Ruby may have been gay. I didn't get into that in the film, but several people in Texas told me that he was. He lived with a room-

mate for several years, George Senator, whom I met. Senator says he himself is straight but still leads "a bachelor existence." I believe Garrison. I believe all these guys were peripherally involved. Ferrie had something to do with this thing. He knew Oswald, Shaw, and Guy Bannister—who was running Oswald. I have second and third sources on all of this. *all bad*

So you don't feel that gay is shorthand for villain in *JFK*?

No, I do not.

Do you see that kind of homophobia taking place in other movies?

It may have been used that way in other films. I've never used it that way. I've never considered sex in a psychotic light. If [other directors] use it that way, they're probably making bad films, and hopefully people will take that into account.

I disagree with the controversy over *The Silence of the Lambs*. Maybe that killer was gay, maybe he was not. This whole line of thinking disturbs me because I think what we're really talking about is a form of censorship. A few years ago every killer on TV was a straight white male. It couldn't be a black man—blacks were sensitive about being portrayed as homicidal. That's happening now in films. If this kind of censorship takes hold, we'll have Dan Quayle doing all of the killings.

People in New Orleans suggest that Garrison was on a personal vendetta to get Shaw because he was gay. In light of the jury's almost immediate acquittal of Shaw, what do you make of the personal vendetta theory? What about Kirkwood's book *American Grottesque*, which espouses this theory?

I met James Kirkwood before he died. It is very clear to me that he did not cover the trial with an open mind. He was a friend of Shaw's. Shaw was pictured by Kirkwood in *American Grottesque* as an innocent businessman. Shaw was the head of New Orleans's International Trade Mart and was thrown out of Italy for being on the Permadex board, a fascist organization that included a few of Mussolini's relatives. The

then he should have that right, regardless of what other people say.”

organization was caught handling illegal funds in the assassination of Charles de Gaulle. Shaw was a serious espionage player, a suave, sophisticated international businessman with connections to the CIA.

The judge in the case, Edward A. Haggerty Jr., told Kirkwood shortly after the trial that he thought Shaw was guilty. He was outraged, according to Kirkwood, that the prosecution didn't bring Shaw's sexuality directly into the court proceed-

homophobia but not to censor their views. If an artist is determined to portray homosexuals in a negative light, then he should have that right, regardless of what other people are saying.

A lot of people in the activist community are saying that you shouldn't direct *The Mayor of Castro Street*. Some people in *Queer Nation* go so far as to say that the film should not be directed by anyone unless that person is gay.

the fires of hatred that already exist against me? Robin Williams will probably still star. It's not like I'm dropping out without helping the film. I've already helped.

It wasn't even going to be written at the point at which I came in. I only did it to help [producers] Craig Zadan and Neil Meron. I liked the story, and it seemed like they had their hearts riding on this. I got it done. Now we're on the last half of the journey. We'll get a good director, and we'll get it shot.



COURTESY WARNER BROS.

Left to right: Kevin Bacon as *JFK*'s composite hustler Willie O'Keefe, Best Supporting Actor nominee Tommy Lee Jones as businessman Clay Shaw, and Joe Pesci as nut case David Ferrie

ings and ranted. "Queers know queers! They've got a clique better than the CIA...."

At that time in New Orleans, I bet most of the gay underground knew the others in the underground. As for *American Grotesque*, it was a good read but not even close to reality.

You're upset because people are protesting *JFK*. Isn't the message behind the movie "speak up or shut up"?

Speaking up is a good thing when you're speaking up for the right reasons. I'm on the board of Hollywood Supports, which is trying to make people in Hollywood aware of

It's wrong for them to say that if I wanted to, I shouldn't be able to direct the film because I'm straight.

Will you direct the film?

No. I'm going to drop out at this point.

Why?

Two reasons: the inescapable controversy that would result if I did direct it and the fact that I've just finished a political movie involving an assassination. [*The Mayor of Castro Street*] is very much along those same lines. I feel that many people would support me [if I did direct the film]. I know Randy Shilts does. But why should I feed

Who?

I can't say.

Someone at Warner Bros. told me that if you dropped out, Penny Marshall would step in.

I can't comment on that right now.

You said you got involved because you felt you could help this movie get made. What is it about this film that interests you?

It's not only a story about gayness, it's a story about inner-city politics, about how rainbow coalitions are coming into their own. Also, the theme of Harvey's activism—his coming out—I find fascinating.

"I know that the gay community is extremely outspoken and

The story should not, however, be whitewashed.

Are you saying it might be, regardless of your participation?

Sure. Possibly. Warner Bros. owns the script.

What elements do you think could or would be whitewashed?

There's an element of promiscuity in [Milk's] life that I find intriguing. I'd hate to see that Hollywoodized. Promiscuity was the fashion for many people in the late '60s and the early '70s. I'd hate to see all of that underrepresented by the film.

Speaking of sex, have you ever had a homosexual experience?

Oh, God! [Laughs] Can you please just write "Oliver laughed"? I can't tell you that. I'll be in deep shit—

With whom?

With the government. If I admit to that, then they'll really be on my ass! They're trying to nail me—well, I guess I've already done everything wrong in my life in their opinion.

Then why would it matter?

[Laughs] Maybe you're right!

You won't deny having had a homosexual experience.

I won't deny it.

So you have had sex with a man.

I won't flatly deny that.

I'd like to ask you about the details—You mean which sailors? Which ports?

We can start there. How significant—That's all I'm going to say on this subject.

I wonder if Queer Nation will change its tune after reading that you won't say no to homosexual sex?

They would just call me a closet fascist. They'd see me as the Clay Shaw of this generation. To be serious, I don't think they would care. Radicalism never thinks, it just

destroys. They're a bunch of absolutists, their own worst enemies. Destroying everything around them. They live in a perpetual hell. They get reincarnated in worse and worse forms. Eventually, they'll become ineffective cynics, tired of their own absolutism.

All my life I've been a relativist. I think Harvey Milk is a good example of this. He lived with absolutists, with people who committed suicide, with people who couldn't get on with their lives. I think he was troubled by this absolutism that he saw around him in the gay community.

So the absolutists have won. Their wish is that you not direct this film.

I'm tired of having my neck in the guillotine. These people are loud, vociferous; they don't give up. Radicalism in any society has, in my opinion, always been destructive. Left or right. It's ugly and self-destructive.

You once considered yourself a radical.

Yeah, I was very radical when I was young. Some people still think I am radical. I'm not. I think that mainstream thinking goes farther in the long term. If you can subtly change mainstream thinking bit by bit, you'll go farther. That's what really gets things done.

Queer Nation is neither mainstream nor subtle, but in this case it has, obviously, got something done. You claim you won't direct this movie because of their "loud, vociferous" protests.

Queer Nation is like a Nazi group. They work through intimidation and fear. They send hate mail. I'm not scared of them. But I had to ask myself, "Do I need this?"—especially since I don't think I'm bringing anything ultraspecial to the film if I do direct it. Also, I know that the gay community is extremely outspoken and everyone in it is a movie critic. I don't need that.

People who work in Hollywood tell me that if this film doesn't make money, then there won't be another big-budget gay film made in this century.

That's probably true. *Making Love* with Harry Hamlin set gay-themed films back a

number of years. It didn't live up to the hype. But with the way [*The Mayor of Castro Street*] is written, I think it's going to be a great movie.

This interview is taking place while you're still weathering all sorts of attacks on JFK's credibility as a docudrama. Has all of this criticism of you and of the film taken its toll on you personally?

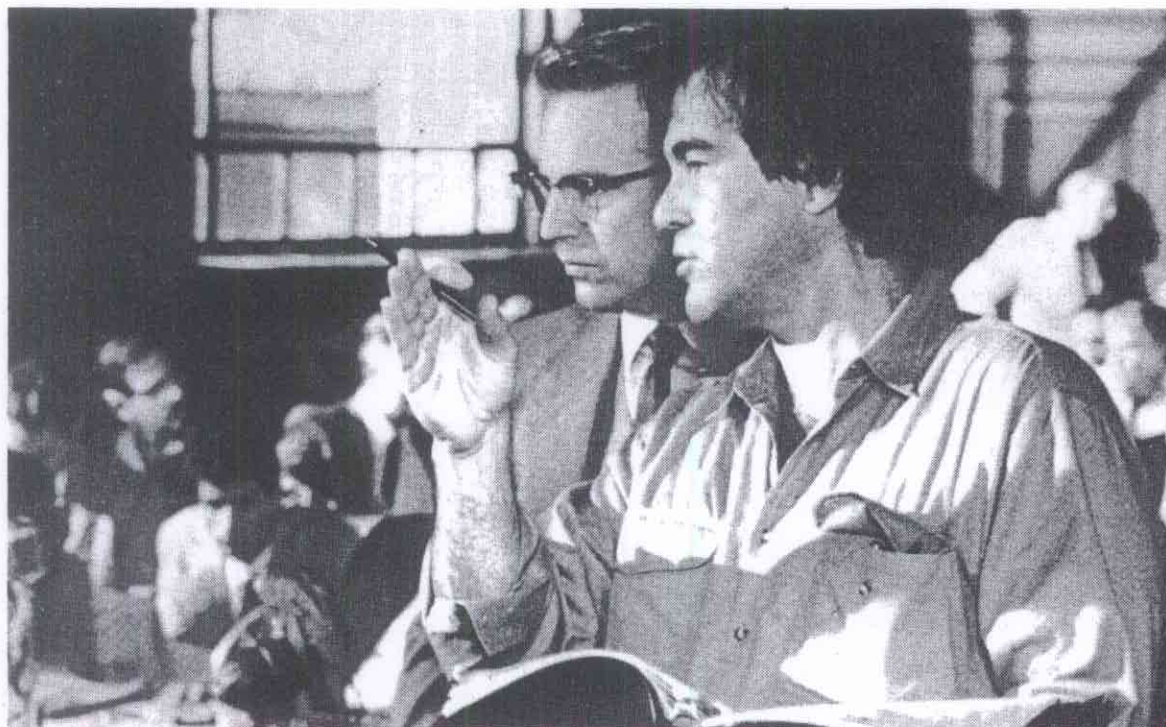
Yes. I don't appreciate the press calling me a liar and having it said that I have no integrity and having it said that I am trying to destroy the youth of America through my filmmaking. The people who say these things are complete assholes and won't address the legitimate issues in *JFK*. There are 36 or 38 issues addressed by this film that have not been dealt with by the press. They're too busy saying, "Oliver Stone made all of this up."

The *ADVOCATE's* film critic, David Ehrenstein, says you made up a lot of things.

He's another absolutist. That man is the worst. While he was writing his piece, he was trying to get a half-hour interview with me. Warner Bros. gave me his number because they said he had specific research questions for me. My chief researcher, Jane Rusconi, who did a lot of the specific work on Garrison, Shaw, etc., called Ehrenstein and introduced herself. At that point he announced, "I have no interest in talking to you. I want to talk to Oliver Stone." Jane explained that she was trying to facilitate that. Then he went into a tirade about how Warner Bros. was giving him a hard time about getting access to me. She repeated that she was trying to help get him get to me by figuring out exactly what it was he wanted to ask, and he said, "I have no interest in talking to you. It's too late, anyway. I've already written my piece." Then he hung up on her. Ehrenstein refused to talk to us—not the other way around. Maybe he didn't like her because she was a woman. I don't know.

You were recently characterized by a newspaper as a sort of career homophobe. An article cited *Midnight Express*

everyone in it is a movie critic. I don't need that."



COURTESY WARNER BROS.

The director at work on the set with *JFK*'s leading man, Kevin Costner, who plays New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison

and *The Doors* as examples along with *JFK* of your insensitivity toward gays. Specifically, the writer charged you with deleting a homosexual love scene from your screenplay for *Midnight Express*. This really pissed me off because it shows how ignorant the people who write about the film business really are about how a film gets made. I wrote *Midnight Express*. It was my first screenplay, and there was no way on earth that Columbia was going to let that scene stay in the script. Eventually, it was whittled away. There was no way they were going to let me do that in a mainstream film in 1977. It was not my decision. I wanted Billy to have homosexual action. [Director] Alan [Parker] suggested [homosexual action] in the film, with camera, but there was nothing concrete.

Has the climate changed? Could you do that scene now?

It would be easy to do that kind of a scene today. Hollywood was homophobic then—and is now to some degree—but I think that's starting to change. I think a film like *The Mayor of Castro Street* will help things to change.

The same article accused you of representing Andy Warhol in *The Doors* in a homophobic manner.

Bullshit. My portrayal of Warhol was not a homosexual put-down. By his own definition he was proud of being freakish. He hung out with drag queens. So what. These writers should be stopped. Talk about grasping at straws.

There is concern that the current version of the script for *The Mayor of Castro Street* has no sex scenes involving Harvey Milk; that there are references to sex and promiscuity, but none of it is actually

acted out for the camera. I know this script's not in its final form, but is this true?

I don't know. I don't know where the script stands on that point right now. But if that's true, that's a very good point to make. Those scenes should be in there.

So you're saying that if you were consulted on this issue, you'd make sure those scenes were included and shot.

Yes. It might be a problem with Warner Bros, though.

You just told me, referring to *Midnight Express*, that it would be no problem to shoot a homosexual love scene in today's Hollywood. Seconds later, you seem to think there is a problem.

Maybe you're right. Maybe there is still a problem. But I'll tell you one thing: That's an issue worth fighting for. ▼