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Annette Bening and Warren Beatty in "Bugsy."

'JFK': History Through A Prism

12/20/94

By Rita Kempley
Washington Post Staff Writer

Whether you buy it or not, Oliver Stone's "JFK" makes compelling info-ganda. Part whodunit, part documentary, part soapbox diatribe, the controversial agit-pic owes as much to the brash style of tabloid television as it does the populist mythology of Capra movies. Focused on a crusading DA's investigation of the assassination, it is a visual and dramatic melding of "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" and "America's Most Wanted," a vivid collage of history, hypothesis and baldfaced speculation in which Stone goes searching for our wonder years.

America, he tells us in no uncertain terms, was headed toward a glorious, pacifistic

■ Analysis: How "JFK" director Oliver Stone conspired to distort the truth. Page D2



Kevin Costner in "JFK."

future when President John F. Kennedy was shot down in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. It was a sunny afternoon and the handsome First Couple, heedless of danger, rode waving at the crowd. Three, four, five bullets later, the torch was doused in blood and the lights of Camelot went out forever. Whatever the evidence to the contrary, that is Stone's fervently held contention and he expresses it with his customary bare-knuckled sincerity as well as a stunning technical virtuosity.

See JFK, D2, Col. 1

Movies

Smashing 'Bugsy'

Beatty and Bening Sizzle in Gangster Masterpiece

By Hal Hinson
Washington Post Staff Writer

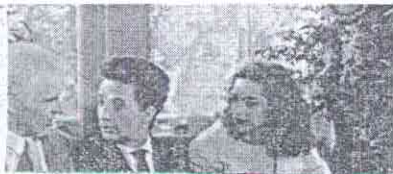
"Bugsy," the exuberantly elegiac new Barry Levinson film starring Warren Beatty and Annette Bening, is a great gangster picture, with all the visceral excitement of a classic mob saga. But that's just its jumping-off point. It's also a salute to old Hollywood glamour, to the genre and the movies in general, and an elegant eulogy for the passing of those glory days. Not since the "Godfather" films has a Mafia movie had this kind of spirited intelligence and depth, or worked on so many levels. It's a lofty, intoxicating achievement, smoothly polished, thrilling and funny.

The movie's opening scenes hit you like an amphetamine jolt; they're jagged and lean, with a greyhound's turf-gobbling pace. And the stylized gangster patter that screenwriter James Toback has given the characters comes spitting out of their mouths like verbal machine gun fire.

Beatty's Benjamin Siegel (don't call him Bugsy) sashes around at the film's center like a beaker of nitro. A Brooklyn-born Jewish dead-end kid, Siegel has a wife, Esta (Wendy Phillips), and a couple of kids in Scarsdale, but he doesn't shrink from the spotlight like his soft-spoken boyhood pal Meyer Lansky (Ben Kingsley); he's a dapper hood with bespoke tailoring, a soft spot for the ladies and a vicious flair for the dramatic.

See BUGSY, D6, Col. 5

■ ALSO PLAYING: Pedro Almodovar plays it straight with "High Heels." Page D7



'Bride': Ring-a-Ding-Ding

By Hal Hinson
Washington Post Staff Writer

One day, George's daughter is in pigtails, shooting baskets in the backyard, and all is right with the world. Hold the man in her life. Period. End of

sweet-natured new comedy starring Steve Martin. The movie, which director Charles Shyer and his wife, Nancy Meyers, have updated from the 1950 Spencer Tracy-Elizabeth Taylor classic, is a panicky catalogue of the nuptial slings and arrows

that come father-son-in-law to make his

Analysis

The Way It Wasn't

In 'JFK,' Oliver Stone Assassinate the Truth

By George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

Oliver Stone knows how to make a movie. It's too bad he doesn't know how to tell the truth.

"JFK," Stone's film on the assassination of President Kennedy, is a powerful, unsettling work that can hold an audience rapt for more than three hours without a break. It is also a skillful piece of propaganda. Stone's purpose is clear. He wants to take history and shape it, his way. He wants it to be our memory of the Kennedy assassination.

"Like Shakespeare shaped 'Henry V,'" he told the Dallas Morning News last spring. "I'm not saying I'm as good as Shakespeare, but I'm using that as an example."

Stone mixes fact and fiction at dizzying speed, stomping on presumptions of innocence, cooking up fake admissions, ignoring contrary evidence, and giving a conspiratorial tone to inconsequential facets of the tragedy that were explained long ago.

Take, for example, a riveting scene in which Stone's hero, former New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison, interrogates his chief suspect, a former airline pilot named David Ferrie, shortly after the real-life Garrison's bizarre investigation of the assassination was disclosed in the New Orleans States-Item in February 1967.

Afraid for his life, Ferrie is installed by Garrison's office at a New Orleans motel and, under questioning, states frantically that he not only knew Lee Harvey Oswald, but that Oswald worked for the CIA, along

with another Garrison suspect, Clay Shaw, and a motley assortment of Cubans.

"Shaw's an untouchable," Ferrie says in the scene. "Shaw, Oswald, the Cubans, all agency."

It is all make-believe. Not even Garrison ever attributed such remarks to Ferrie, who died a few days later.

Baseless claims come like fastballs. At one point, Garrison charges that after the assassination, "President Johnson orders the blood-soaked limousine, filled with bullet holes and clues, to be immediately washed and rebuilt."

In fact, says veteran assassination researcher Harold Weisberg, LBJ had nothing to do with the scrub-down.

"It was immediately washed in Dallas by the Secret Service at Parkland Hospital," Weisberg says. "Before the president was pronounced dead, Johnson was inside the hospital, guarded and incommunicado."

The distortions begin before the opening credits stop rolling, with a Sept. 2, 1963 interview Kennedy gave Walter Cronkite to inaugurate CBS television's first 30-minute evening news broadcast.

Stone's key theme, taken from the Garrison's 1988 book, "On the Trail of the Assassins," is that elements of the military-industrial complex had Kennedy killed to keep him from withdrawing military personnel from Vietnam. A compliant Lyndon Johnson was installed in his place. Stone uses an excerpt from the Kennedy interview to suggest that the president is becoming sour on the war and thinking of pulling out.

"Unless a greater effort is made by the government [of South Vietnam] to win popular support, I don't think that the war can be won out there," Kennedy is quoted as saying. "In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it."

What moviegoers aren't told is that Kennedy went on to say that he disagreed with those who advocated withdrawal of the thousands of U.S. advisers dispatched to Vietnam under his stewardship, building up to a total of some 16,500. "That would be a great mistake," he told Cronkite. "... this is a very important struggle even though it is far away. ... We ... have to participate—we may not like it—in the defense of Asia."

LBJ is portrayed as signing a National Security Action Memorandum a few days after the murder that, according to the film, "essentially reverses Kennedy's new withdrawal policy and gives a green light to covert action against North Vietnam, which provoked the Gulf of Tonkin incident."

The trouble with that is that the NSAM in question, No. 273, did not "reverse," but rather was a continuation of Kennedy's policy, including a planned withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. military personnel before the end of the year. In fact, the memo was drafted on Nov. 21, the day before Kennedy's death, on the assumption that he would sign it, covert action section and all.

"This demolishes the whole argument that Kennedy had decided to pull out, that he would not have continued the war," says William Gibbons, author of a multivolume history of the Vietnam War for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "I don't think there's any question that Kennedy would have signed it. You don't gin up something like that without knowing what he wants. It was all laid out and ready to be done."

The 1,000-troop withdrawal, adds Stanley Karnow, author of "Vietnam: A History," was just "a gimmick."

"They were going to put the guys back in again," Karnow says. "They were taking them out for Christmas. ... It was by no means the beginning of a withdrawal. The evidence is that Kennedy thought Vietnam was the place to be."

As for a military-industrial conspiracy, says Lt. Col. Andrew F. Krepinevich, another Vietnam historian, "the notion of people plotting to make sure we got into Vietnam is really ludicrous. The U.S. military was having enough problems building up conventional forces to meet Kennedy's doctrine of flexible response. And after the Korean War, there was sort of a 'never again' club formed—never again be tied down in a land war in Asia."

On the same day LBJ approved NSAM 273—Nov. 26, 1963—the movie depicts the new president meeting with his military brass and telling them: "Gentlemen, I want you to know I'm not going to let Vietnam go like China did. I'm personally committed. And I'm not going to take one soldier out of there until they know we mean business in Asia." Johnson then adds: "Just get me elected and I'll give you your damn war."

Stone writes in *Premiere* magazine that the last line comes from Karnow's book, which said LBJ actually made the statement to the Joint Chiefs at a 1963 Christmas Eve cocktail party. The filmmaker said "we took the liberty" of transposing the comment to the Oval Office.

But Karnow says he cited the reported remarks as an example of LBJ's assuaging the brass "with promises he may have never intended to keep." On top of that, Gibbons says Johnson didn't even meet with the brass on Christmas Eve, as Karnow has it, or on Nov. 26, as Stone does.

Stone claims artistic license for his work. I don't know who gave him his license, but he ought to be arrested for reckless driving.

George Lardner has covered the Kennedy assassination since 1963.



Holly and Abracadabra the owl in "

TV Preview

Clowning With a Charmer

By David Mills
Washington Post Staff Writer

Those proud executives at McDonald's Corp., who have contributed much over the years to the health fitness of America's children, are now in the business of producing farm-oriented TV specials.

Yes, the people who literally shaped our diet (which came first, I Chicken McNugget or the E McMuffin?) apparently want to feed our minds as well, by bringing animated versions of children's books prime time. "Ronald McDonald's Family Theater" they're calling it. And the first installment, "The Wish That Changed Christmas," airs tonight 8:30 on Channel 9.

Based on "The Story of Holly and Ivy," a popular illustrated book, "The Wish" is as sugary as a vanilla shaft. Still, only a heart hardened by years eating tallow-soaked french fries could resist its simple charms.

The tale concerns a hard-luckphan named Ivy, the only tot in orphanage with no place to go for holidays. Ivy dreams of getting a cat for Christmas, a doll she can hug, squeeze and love. But the orphanage sourball matron gives her a damp box.

Ivy also dreams of finding a saint grandma with whom she can spend Christmas. Alas, she's put on a train, destined for another lonely personal visit to some noisy institution infants.

By a fluke, Ivy winds up lost in

ing, Garrison, Metcalf and Sanders might have just walked out of an old "Perry Mason" episode. Certainly the movie shares with that whodunit a hokey steadfastness and stolid narrative drive.

Stone, however, has as much to say about why it was done as who done it. Find out who would benefit the most, suggests one of Garrison's covert contacts, and you'll discover not only who and why, but also how the assassination was accomplished. "War is the biggest business in America," he points out. And in this version of history, Kennedy threatened the war machine by planning to pull the troops out of Vietnam. But anybody who tries to prove it—Garrison and by inference Stone—is discredited by the insidious shadow government. Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't plotting against you.

Another futile attempt to exorcise the nightmare of Vietnam, "JFK" is Stone's best and most emotional film since "Platoon." Like that brutal elegy—and all his films for that matter—this one yanks our chains as grievously as Marley's ghost. Here Stone taps into a ready-made well of national remorse, showing us images we've seen a thousand times a thousand times more. Some of them are real, such as Abraham Zapruder's home movie. Some of them, especially the autopsy photos, are appallingly graphic. All are seen through Stone's fantastic kaleidoscope, an instrument that reflects and bends the truth with mirrors.

JFK, at area theaters, is rated R for graphic violence.

Oliver Stone's 'JFK'

JFK, From D1

The screenplay by Stone and Zachary Sklar is largely based on the books "On the Trail of the Assassins" by Jim Garrison and "Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy" by Jim Marrs, but also incorporates the findings of other researchers. Quoting everyone from Shakespeare to Hitler to bolster their arguments, Stone and Sklar present a gripping alternative to the Warren Commission's conclusion. A marvelously paranoid thriller featuring a closetful of spies, moles, pro-commies and Cuban freedom-fighters, the whole thing might have been thought up by Robert Ludlum. As far as Stone's many detractors—Gerald Ford among them—are concerned he might as well have.

Kevin Costner's low-key performance as New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison is key to the movie's seeming credibility in that it moderates the director's stridency. Costner's DA is a portrait of a man as obsessed by ghosts as the Iowa farmer in "Field of Dreams." Here as there, his mission is to restore America's lost values—not by building a baseball field in a corn patch



The "JFK" reenactment of President Kennedy's assassination.

but by bringing an alleged conspirator to justice. While he hasn't exactly slipped under Garrison's skin, he is, as he proved in "Dances With Wolves," an actor we can live with for three hours. And having learned to draw, Costner is at home in the French Quarter as he never was in Sherwood Forest.

Besides Costner, "JFK's" cast includes every liberal sympathizer in Hollywood except Jane Fonda. Veterans like Jack Lemmon, Ed Asner, Donald Sutherland and Walter Matthau routinely steal scenes in the roles (respectively) of gambler, gunshoe, undercover operative and wily old politician. Sissy Spacek does what she can with the role of Garrison's wife, whose job it is to remind the protagonist to come to dinner.

John Candy plays a flamboyant lawyer friend of Garrison's, but the flashiest roles go to Joe Pesci, Tommy Lee Jones and Kevin Bacon as a cabal of gay fascists. Homosexual groups have already protested the homophobic portraits, but they will have to get in line with everybody else.

Gary Oldman lends a Billy Budd-like presence as Lee Harvey Oswald, who is acquitted by the evidence—however warped—presented here. Brian Doyle-Murray virtually becomes Jack Ruby, the Dallas mobster who shot Oswald. Unrecognizable as Roseanne's TV sister, Laurie Metcalf is an assistant district attorney who, with Jay O. Sanders as chief investigator, helps Garrison press his cause. In their period cloth-

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