

'JFK' a gripping look at a shattering moment

By Desmond Ryan
Inquirer Movie Critic

In *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, Oliver Stone reopened the still festering wounds of the Vietnam war. With *JFK*, he takes up the terrible day that changed history and our lives and, in a movie that fuses molten rage with cool argument, presents the death of a president as a cancer that has metastasized through the body politic.

Call *JFK* — which may not be quite the best movie released this year but is certainly the most important — paranoid, polemical and distorted. True believers in the bitterly disputed conclusions of the Warren Commission report may use those words if they are feeling polite. But the truth is — and *JFK* is entirely and relentlessly devoted to the idea that

MOVIE REVIEW

JFK

★★★★

Produced by Alex Kitman; directed by Oliver Stone; written by Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar; photography by Robert Richardson; music by John Williams; distributed by Warner Bros.

Running time: 3 hours, 10 mins.

Jim Garrison..... Kevin Costner
Liz Garrison..... Sissy Spacek
Lee Harvey Oswald..... Gary Oldman
Clay Shaw..... Tommy Lee Jones
David Ferrie..... Joe Pesci

Parent's guide: R (violence, profanity, adult themes)

Showing at: area theaters

truth is the first casualty of assassination reports as well as war — that Stone is asking you to leave your
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normal movie-going assumptions and responses in the lobby.

Superficially, *JFK* is a turbo-charged piece of propaganda that, for more than three mesmerizing hours, dramatizes the claims of, among others, former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison that President Kennedy's murder can be laid to a massive, far-flung conspiracy. But at its core, *JFK* is a scenario that forces us to reconsider the seismic political and moral repercussions that still reverberate almost three decades after the shots rang out in Dealey Plaza on Nov. 22, 1963.

For Stone, the aspirations of minorities and the hope of avoiding a tragically wrong war died with President Kennedy on that day. If Watergate destroyed our trust in once-revered institutions, the murder of John F. Kennedy dealt a crippling blow to our faith in the future. The boldest stroke in *JFK* is to entwine these two sentiments.

JFK pivots on the notion of a dual conspiracy. It follows Garrison's obsessive pursuit of those he deemed participants — from the demimonde of New Orleans' gay underworld to the corridors of power in Washington. It depicts the actual plot to gun down the President as a mere prelude to the conspiracy to dupe the American people into accepting that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

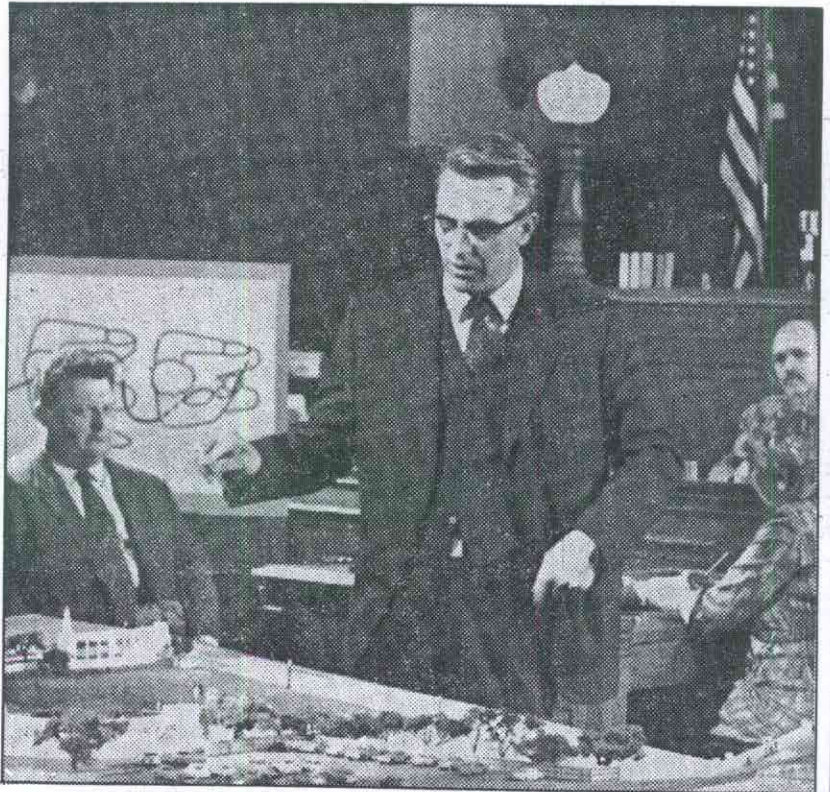
During several exchanges in the film, Stone willingly raises what many viewers will see as a key flaw in his contention. A conspiracy of the dimensions darkly outlined by *JFK* — one that spreads from the Mafia and right-wing Cubans to the upper reaches of the CIA, the FBI and the Dallas Police — is one thing. The idea that, in all the years that followed, everyone who had a hand in it would never divulge the slightest hint is a real test of our credulity.

Further, the structure of *JFK* may allow Stone a powerful platform, but it also involves putting President Kennedy and — more dubiously, Garrison — on pedestals. Stone's is an unsullied vision of Camelot, and his insistence that Kennedy would not have continued our tragic blundering in Vietnam is, to put it mildly, very debatable. And, with Kevin Costner investing Garrison with a charismatic decency, the district attorney becomes a figure of crusading purity that his critics will not recognize.

But, as *JFK* unfolds with a precision and discipline that are new to Stone's already protean talents, this black-and-white twin canonization allows us to ponder the gray and

murky reality. The evidence of what happened in Dealey Plaza and who was responsible is as vast as it is contested by a dizzying selection of theories. Further, suspicions of a hasty whitewash were only compounded by the incredible sloppiness (or was it deliberate mishandling?) of the investigation in the chaotic days after the murder.

To assemble it into a taut, coherent narrative — and this from a filmmaker often charged with incoherence — is a stunning achievement. In the last analysis, it doesn't matter whether you go along with all or part



Kevin Costner as New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison.

of Stone's persuasive version of events. He lays bare the myriad discrepancies in the official story and, while you can dispute his vision of the truth, subsequent history has made it hard to argue with his conclusions about the consequences.

The casting of *JFK* is inspired, with a pleasing blend of relatively obscure actors and stars like Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau enjoying their cameos. They all share an ability to make an impact in a small space — none more than Tommy Lee Jones as Clay Shaw, the target of the Garrison probe, and Joe Pesci, hyper-

ventilating as co-conspirator David Ferrie.

Collectively, the actors and some concise writing by Stone and co-scenarist Zachary Sklar help prevent *JFK* from collapsing under the sheer weight of the facts that have been marshaled.

A Gallup Poll taken last summer found that nearly three-quarters of Americans do not believe the Warren Commission's one-man, one-gun theory. Stone's monumental and deeply compelling film should put the remaining 25 percent in the camp of the skeptics.