

'JFK': History Through A Prism

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



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, six 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.

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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 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 drawl, 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, gumshoe, 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 clothing, 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.