

The tampering and temptations of 'JFK'

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Oliver Stone's *JFK* is 188 jet-

speed minutes of our national nightmare — and a professional nightmare for film reviewers judging it beyond cinematic standards. Let Stone embellish Jim Morrison in a screen bio, and who cares? But embellish a generation's watershed tragedy and here come the sharks.

Cinematically, *JFK* is 90% marvel, faltering in domestic scenes. Historically, it displays enough insidious sleight of hand to put Siegfried & Roy out

MOVIE REVIEW MIKE CLARK

of work. Yet, don't far more Gallup Poll-ees than not call the Warren Commission's findings sleight-of-hand, too?

This is what Stone effectively plays on: our continuing doubts over who or how many killed John Kennedy. His most vulnerable decision is making ex-New Orleans D.A. Jim Garrison the hero, given the notori-

JFK
***½ (out of four)
Kevin Costner Jim Garrison
Tommy Lee Jones Clay Shaw
Gary Oldman Lee Harvey Oswald
Sissy Spacek Liz Garrison
A Warner Bros. release. Produced by A. Kirshen He and Oliver Stone. Directed by Stone. Screenplay by Stone and Zachary Sklar. In theaters nationally. Rated R (offensive, autopsy scene).

ety of Garrison's empty assassination conspiracy case against local businessman Clay Shaw.

For his part, Kevin Costner (as Garrison) gives his most persuasive performance since *No Way Out*. And in casting chutzpah worthy of Otto Preminger, Garrison himself plays Chief Justice Earl Warren.

The film is chillingly seductive, refuting the assertion that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone gunman — or that one so-called "magic bullet" could do so much damage to Kennedy and Texas governor John Connally. Other times, *JFK* feels

like a bill of goods. When someone speculates that a dead Oswald's palm print could have been planted on the fatal rifle, we see someone doing just that. Go easy, Ollie, go easy.

As if Stone ever has — or could, judging it strictly as a movie, *JFK* is provocative, a technical primer and an ensemble treat with unusually well-realized star cameos. It's a provocative near-smash that, like it or not, will endure as a must-see for years.

Oliver Stone's truth



COVER STORY

History his to interpret in new film

Comedian
Mort Sahl,
fired for his
JFK theories,
speaks about
the movie, **3D**

By Jefferson Graham
USA TODAY

HOLLYWOOD — Oliver Stone is on the hot seat.

Accused of rewriting history by *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Esquire* and *Time* during the making of his film *JFK*, he felt the heat intensify this week as *Newsweek* and *Time* took him to task for creating characters that

didn't exist and fictionalizing key elements of the story.

But like a man on a crusade, twice-wounded Vietnam vet Stone, 45, passionately believes that he is right and they are wrong. Detractors, he contends, are members of the East Coast media establishment that reported Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing John F. Kennedy. To support Stone's version would be to admit they erred in reporting.

"I feel obligated to defend my right to interpret history as an artist," says Stone. "I certainly think it's too dangerous to leave to newsmen, who have done such a shoddy job of interpreting" what happened in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

Stone's three-hour version focuses on real-life New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, portrayed by Kevin Costner as a Jimmy Stewart-like good guy who fights the world virtually alone in a quest to prove that the government (CIA, military) killed the president, and that Oswald

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did not act alone — if at all — in the shooting of the president.

Stone's viewpoint is the opposite of the one set forth in 1964 by the Warren Commission, which said a lone gunman did kill the president. That finding has been debated ever since, spawning a cottage industry devoted to various conspiracy theories.

JFK is easily the most controversial film of the year — not surprising, as multiple Academy Award winner Stone is a director who seems to thrive on controversy. His past in-your-face films (*Platoon*, *Wall Street*, *The Doors*, *Born on the Fourth of July*) invited public debate. Viewers either love his films — or hate 'em.

"You don't go unscathed when you step out, and Oliver steps out," Costner says. "He's a forward-motion guy with his subjects and storytelling."

JFK's storytelling already is making waves at previews.

Problem No. 1: Stone paints Garrison as the first — and only — citizen to speak out about the commission. The truth is that Mark Lane's 1966 book *Rush to Judgment* came first, and comedian Mort Sahl's career came to a halt when he attacked the commission on stage. Garrison's case wasn't announced until 1967.

Problem 2: Characters are created and composite situations are invented to make a better case for Stone's contention that the military killed JFK because he wanted to withdraw from Vietnam and they wanted their war.

In a key scene, Garrison goes to the Washington Monument and meets "Mr. X," who tells why JFK was killed. It's depicted as a turning point for Garrison, who then believes, without a doubt, that the government ordered the assassination. Yet in real life, Garrison never went to Washington to meet X; Stone did, in 1988.

Scenes like that have his critics dubbing his movie *Dancing With Facts*.

"What can I say? It's been done in movies," Stone says. "*Missing*, *Reds*, *Silkwood*, *The Killing Fields*, they were all criticized for condensing,

changing facts, shifting things around so it would be a dramatic flow. But I think the essence of all those movies is they gave a real truth.

"It doesn't say at the beginning of the movie that this is a true story," he adds. But doesn't opening the movie with newsreel and TV footage imply that? "No. It sets the tone."

Allan Lichtman, who teaches history at American University in Washington, D.C., says getting history from the movies is one of the worst ways to learn. "Unfortunately, many people pick up their history from the movies and television," he says, "and it becomes uncritically incorporated into the way they view the world."

JFK offers revisionist history. The '60s press portrayed Garrison as a publicity-seeking buffoon, not a Frank Capra hero. Work credited to him in the movie was not all his.

"I used Garrison as a metaphor for all the research that was done in the '60s to the '80s," Stone says. "The point of the picture was why Kennedy was killed, and the only way I could get there was to incorporate other researchers into Garrison's work."

Lane, whose fourth book about the assassination — *Plausible Denial* from Thunder's Mouth Press, has just been published — salutes Stone for putting the issue back onto the front burner. "It just would have been better had he stuck to the facts."

Lane hasn't seen the film, but he read two drafts of the script and met with Stone's people about including *Denial* research claiming the CIA killed Kennedy. But no deal was struck because Stone wanted the right to fictionalize it, Lane says. "I didn't make a deal with Stone, therefore I don't exist in the Hollywood version."

Stone has been labeled paranoid, which irks him. Before the USA TODAY interview, his publicist called to ask the paper's position on the Warren Commission. A few days afterward, Stone — encountered in a hotel — smiled and said, "You're going to write a negative story, aren't you?"

One reason he may be wary:

Four weeks into filming, his first-draft script got leaked to the press. "We had a mini-industry devoted to destroying the credibility of this film before it came out," Stone says. "Instead of spending so much energy saying 'Stone's interpretation of history is fiction,' which it is not, why don't they devote the same energy to asking why Kennedy was killed?"

A May '91 *Washington Post* poll found just 19% of respondents agreed with the Warren Commission; 56% believed a conspiracy killed JFK.

So, apparently, did some in Congress. In 1976, a house subcommittee said there "probably" was a conspiracy; files from that debate have been sealed until 2029.

What does Stone want to happen with *JFK*? For former CIA director George Bush to make some sort of statement?

Says Stone: "He doesn't know. Most of the people who do know are dead. The best thing that can happen is a shift in the consciousness: for the American public, as their Russian counterparts said with the KGB, to say 'Enough. We want to see the files.' With a vote in Congress, they could be opened tomorrow."

For now, the married father of two (his 7-year-old son Sean plays Garrison's son in *JFK*) is looking forward to getting off the battlefield. *The Doors* and *JFK* were filmed back to back, there have been 18-hour days in the editing room and he's looking forward to a vacation — maybe a year. This despite commitments to produce another Vietnam movie, a film biography of slain gay rights activist Harvey Milk and possibly to direct a film about an Asian-American detective.

He's tired of talking ("I think a movie should speak for itself") and looks forward to letting the public, instead of the media, vote on *JFK*.

"My heart is beating," he says, "I'm looking out across the Rubicon there, I see the enemy forces all drawn out. It is the day, and I look forward to battle. There's some blood in store and a lot of hurt, but at the end of the day, the film will get to the other side and stand the test of time."