

ENTERTAINMENT

Long-winded 'JFK' needs a timeout

By Dave Kehr

Chicago Tribune

With a running time only 40 minutes shy of "Gone With the Wind," Oliver Stone's "JFK" is the kind of movie that cries out for an intermission —

though this time, it isn't the audience that needs

to take a break but the director.

Review

Like a hyperventilating child, Stone needs to sit quietly for a while with his head between his knees.

This latest film from the director of "Platoon," "Born on the Fourth of July" and "The Doors" outdoes even its predecessors in terms of hysteria, speediness and manic self-importance. A barely dramatized essay film that purports to offer the inside skinny on the John F. Kennedy assassination, the film subverts its own best points by adopting a rhetoric so extreme and so manipulative that, by the end, a conscientious viewer can only feel obliged to resist Stone's suggestion that the sky is blue.

Working from a script by himself and journalist Zachary Sklar, Stone mixes together three distinct styles, producing the kind of sensory overload more often associated with MTV than sober political reporting.

There is, first, the Capra-esque, little-man-against-the-system theme, in which New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner, at his most blandly all-American) is drafted as an idealistic Mr. Smith engaged in heroic, hopeless battle with the forces of evil ensconced in Washington.

Jim's just got to work this Kennedy thing out, even though the political establishment is against him, the bought-and-paid-for national media is trying to portray him as a dangerous crackpot and his own wife (Sissy Spacek) is feeling mighty neglected. "I think you care more



LINEUP — Backed by his restive assistants, Kevin Costner as D.A. Jim Garrison hectors the press

about John Kennedy that your own family!" she shrieks at him, in one of the many uncertainly staged domestic battles Stone has tried to use to personalize the extremely abstract proceedings.

The second style is that of a particularly dark and demented film noir, heavy on shadows, strange camera angles and grotesquely big-winged villains. Most of this material is centered on the anti-Castro "homosexual cabal" that the film identifies, with homophobic frenzy, as the triggermen of the Dallas attempt: New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones, comically limp-wristed), bush pilot and failed priest David Ferrie (Joe Pesci, somehow not convincing as a Southerner) and, as a witness, raving hustler Willie O'Keefe (Kevin Bacon). When they aren't plotting to kill the President, they're putting on drag and posing for pornographic snapshots.

The third style is a cutty, aggressive neo-documentary technique that seems largely derived from Errol Morris' 1988 "The Thin Blue Line." Following Morris, Stone backs away from unified voiceover narration (though the film does conclude with

an extraordinarily long summary speech by Costner) in favor of something more impressionistic and emotional.

Various image sources — film and video, color and black-and-white, 35mm and Super 8 — are spliced into a hot-wire montage that goes back, again and again, over the same ground (literally, in the form of Dallas' Dealey Plaza).

As a form, Stone's montage is zippy, tightly wound and highly charged — as it needs to be to sustain the audience's interest over the course of the film's extremely long haul. But this is an artificial

energy, one generated by jumping the viewer's nerves rather than anything inherent in the material.

"JFK" concludes with a staggeringly pretentious dedication to "youth — in whose spirit the search for truth marches on." It will indeed, be for future generations judge the "truth" of "JFK"; for no all one can say is that its aesthetics are a little suspect.

"JFK" is rated R for strong language and violence.

★★

★★★★ Excellent. ★★★ Good.
★★ Average. ★ Poor.