

INSIDE



■ Who's who in the cast of JFK, which stars Kevin Costner (left) as embattled New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison. Page 9C

■ How the film will recreate the motorcade and assassination, and which streets will be closed while it's being filmed. Page 9C

■ Theories of a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy still abound. Page 10C

A look back at the people and places of Nov. 22, 1963. Page 10C

If past assassination films are any indication, 'JFK' faces uphill battle

By Russell Smith

Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

It's the whodunit of the century, full of glamour and pathos, dark subplots and tantalizing red herrings, whispers of scandal and cries of conspiracy.

Yet, Hollywood has been strangely reserved in dealing with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. In the 28 years since it happened, only a handful of major motion pictures and TV films have tackled the mys-

tery head-on. That none of them fared well amplifies the challenge that film maker Oliver Stone faces with his Dallas production of JFK.

Novelist Richard Condon attributes some of Hollywood's reluctance to external pressures.

"There's so much back-action in there," he says. "(The truth) is so far beyond embarrassing to the government that it's impossible (to have a Please see FILMS on Page 10C.



Warren Beatty portrays an investigative journalist in *Parallax View*.

Films about JFK have fared poorly

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successful film about it)."

Mr. Condon, who lives in Dallas, is best known as the author of *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Prizzi's Honor*. He also wrote *Winter Kills*, an audacious black comedy that was made into a movie in 1979. Though the story is fictionalized, it's not difficult to figure out who is who in the lacerating fable of power in America.

The movie stars Jeff Bridges as the younger brother of a slain president and John Huston as his eccentric, omnipotent father. A trail of clues and bodies leads, shockingly, to the inner sanctum of the family empire.

It's played as broad comedy, a la *Dr. Strangelove*. Anthony Perkins co-stars as a *Psycho*-esque family aide, and Eli Wallach plays a Jack Ruby type named Joe Diamond. The impressive cast also includes Elizabeth Taylor, Sterling Hayden, Dorothy Malone, Ralph Meeker, Toshiro Mifune and Richard Boone.

During the first weeks of its release, *Winter Kills* "got the most brilliant notices you could imagine," Mr. Condon says. "The reviews were great, business was great, and then it stopped — bang! Obviously, the book had offended the Kennedy family."

According to *The Motion Picture Guide*, funding for the film was pulled during the last week of production, forcing director William Richert to scramble to complete it. The book also reports that "rumors that the Kennedy family was responsible (for the film's problems) seem unfounded."

Nonetheless, Mr. Condon claims that the film's producer, Avco Embassy, had millions of dollars invested in defense contracts and thus was vulnerable to political pressure.

"It's not just the Kennedy family," he says. "It goes right across the spectrum of Washington."

Whatever the reason, *Winter Kills* quickly vanished from the theaters. A couple of years later, Mr. Richert re-released it on his own, to little response.

The most brazen — or at least the most direct — of the JFK conspiracy movies is 1973's *Executive Action*, which takes the tack that the moderately liberal president was killed on the orders of powerful right-wing businessmen.

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The movie's cast of conspirators includes Robert Ryan as the wealthy ringleader, Burt Lancaster as a maverick intelligence operative and Will Geer as an oil baron patterned after the late H.L. Hunt.

Based on a story by conspiracy buff Mark Lane, the film mixes fact with fiction, intercutting real newsreel footage with the faked variety. It casts Lee Harvey Oswald as an innocent dupe, set up for the big fall with the use of a double who's the real trigger man.

The plot is almost as hard to follow as the real thing.

Executive Action was felled at the box office not necessarily by evil forces determined to protect their secrets but by film critics who labeled it shallow and exploitive.

"The movie trivializes national tragedy and leeches off still-painful wounds," wrote *Time* critic Jay Cocks.

Variety magazine called it "a dodo bird of a movie."

Alan Pakula's 1974 thriller *The Parallax View* touches only indirectly on the Kennedy assassination. Warren Beatty portrays a journalist who believes it is more than coincidence when witnesses to a political murder begin dying off — from accidents, suicides and "natural" causes. The story is obviously inspired by the unusually high casualty rate associated with the JFK investigation.

The Parallax View follows the premise that a supersecret assassination network exists within the U.S. government. Mostly, the film is an unnerving study of paranoia — and that, in itself, is a direct legacy of the Kennedy assassination and its host of unanswered questions.

The small screen has hardly been more prolific in exploring the death of the president.

In 1977, an ambitious TV offering called *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald* played a "What if . . . ?" game, with the accused assassin standing trial instead of being mowed down by Jack Ruby in the basement of Dallas police headquarters. In 1978, *Ruby and Oswald* explored — with less than satisfactory results — the relationship between the two men at the mystery's heart.

With the Oliver Stone shoot under way in Dallas, the "definitive" film about President Kennedy's death has yet to be made. Whether JFK will fill the bill remains to be seen. At any rate, Mr. Condon predicts that Mr. Stone's project will cause the usual furor.

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