

Q&A WITH OLIVER STONE

The following is a question and answer discussion with director Oliver Stone on his vision of Dallas and how it will translate into the film "JFK."

Q. Did you expect to find Dallas defensive about the making of your film?

A. Not based on my prior experience here with "Born on the Fourth of July" and "Talk Radio." I found the city very young, very open and warm. I found it progressive, without much knowledge or remembrance of the history. . . .

The audition day, for example, 11,000 people showed up. . . . So many of them came up to me, shook my hand, and said, 'We're glad you're here, we're glad you're making this.' It needs to be told.

I find Texans to be an imaginative people. . . . It's like the Alamo, it's a story they think should be told, warts and all. Let it come, let it rip, that kind of an attitude. I even saw John Connally down in Houston, and he said more or less the same thing, 'Hell, why not?'

Q. So how does the film treat Dallas?

A. The movie is not just about Dallas. It's a tale of two cities, actually three — New Orleans and Dallas, New Orleans mostly, and Washington, D.C. . . . It doesn't point the finger at Dallas. It looks at this in an international scope. . . .

Q. How do you see Dallas in 1963?

A. Dallas was absolutely more rednecky. . . . I never felt there was any kind of countercultural thought process that was going on, so it was macho, it was redneck, it was corrupt to some degree. . . . Over this you have the specter that looms of Lyndon B. Johnson. . . . one of several villains.

Q. What is your vision of John Kennedy?

A. I thought Kennedy had tremendous hubris, in the Greek sense. The tragedies that have struck that family befit a Greek drama. Heavy drama. It's just an amazing unfolding of events, to me. It's like they're cursed. . . . I think that he was an avatar of political change, and I think he was struck down, probably, for those reasons.

Q. You didn't like Kennedy as a young man. How did your views evolve?

A. I went to Vietnam and I went through massive changes. . . . I sort of re-examined my consciousness and felt much more liberal. . . . The killing had always been a weird thing but I'd never examined it closely. I'd heard about all the kooks — I thought they were kooks in the '60s — [conspiracy theorist] Mark Lane, [New Orleans District Attorney Jim] Garrison [who unsuccessfully prosecuted a businessman for conspiracy to assassinate Kennedy] and I thought they were all kind of nutty. And then in the '80s, I started reading some of this stuff, more as a historian, and began to

question [the Warren Commission's findings].

Q. Will the movie tell us who killed Kennedy?

A. I think I'm going to try to present alternate scenarios, visual scenarios, dramatic compositions that can be alternate viewpoints like a "Rashomon" (a 1951 Japanese movie that presents alternate scenarios of a murder, as seen by different witnesses).

Q. What might the film accomplish?

A. I think it would be great if it reopened the case, but I doubt that would happen because so much of the evidence has been destroyed, so many witnesses are dead.

Q. How will it affect a younger generation's view of the assassination?

A. Hopefully, it will make them re-examine not only the books of [conspiracy theorists], but also the whys and wherefores of our democracy, why we allowed a chief executive to be killed, murdered, and none of the most basic legal investigation was carried out. . . . I was with some kids in Dallas the other day, young girls 20 years old, and they didn't know who Jack Ruby or Lee Oswald was.

Movies like "Born on the Fourth of July" and "Platoon" and "Salvador" hopefully teach something. They teach history to the young people because they have to understand what makes this country run, and what they can do about it.

Q. How does "JFK" relate to your other films?

A. What I like about the Garrison idea of the story is a man single-handedly, in the best American tradition, trying to enforce a code of honor, a code of things to believe in, and risking all to do so. Risking his family and himself and his career and his associates, in this sort of insane quest, like Don Quixote, to bring an espionage-type activity to the light, trying to bring the secret government to the light.

So unlike [Jim] Morrison [the '60s musician depicted in "The Doors"], this is more the story of a straighter person along the lines of Jimmy Stewart in a Frank Capra movie. And there is also the polar opposite of Lee Oswald, the darker side. . . . That's what I like about it dramatically, it has an inherent structure. It tells several tales at once. It's an extremely dense movie, the thickest I've ever done, therefore probably the most challenging because there's too much story. . . . It's about three hours long.

Q. How have you incorporated the memories of people who were involved?

A. Every time I meet somebody else, I hear another version. . . . People come in here and lie a lot to me. Not so much in Dallas, more in New Orleans. . . . I take all my instincts through the years and I judge people. And those I believe I incorporate into the story, and those I don't, I don't.

— Mark Potok

What did witnesses who could say anything about the crime who had been tried in Dallas?