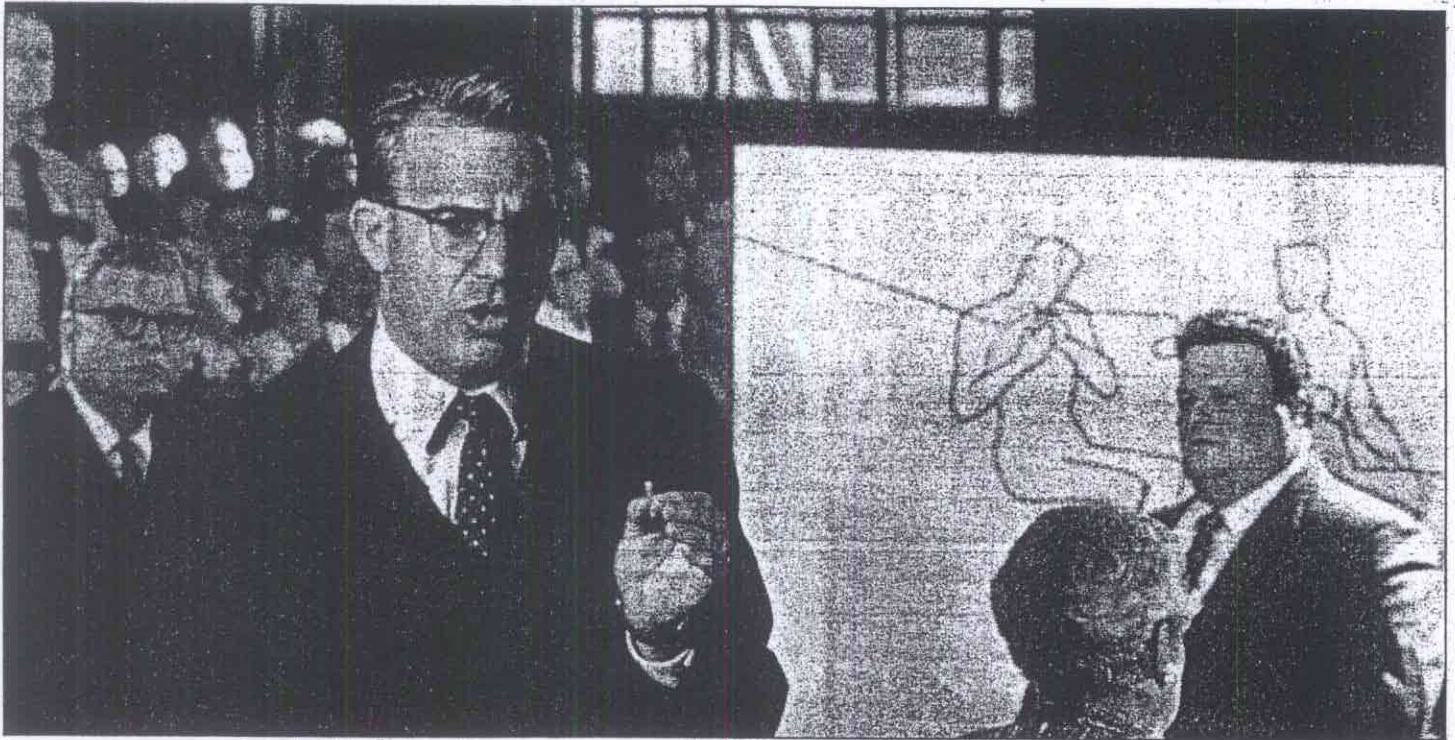


12/20/91

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New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison (portrayed by Kevin Costner) makes courtroom summation in "JFK": A relentless indictment of the Warren Commission.

MOVIE REVIEW

'JFK': Conspiracy in the Cross Hairs

Oliver Stone's Riveting, Controversial Saga of the Kennedy Assassination

By KENNETH TURAN
TIMES FILM CRITIC

Did he or didn't he? Only Oliver Stone knows for sure. Or so he'd have you believe.

Disturbing, infuriating yet undeniably effective, less a motion picture than an impassioned, insistent 3-hour-and-7-minute information barrage, Stone's "JFK" (citywide) is a relentless indictment of the Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin of President John F. Kennedy.

Tailor-made for an increasingly cynical nation by a skillful director working at the peak of his craft, "JFK" provocatively posits a conspiracy so vast the heavens can barely contain it. But in its zealous rush to accuse all and sundry, it undercuts its effectiveness and ends up not playing fair with its audience, finally committing some of the same sins it is so quick to pin on everyone else.

Events like Kennedy's Nov. 22, 1963, assassination, followed two days later by the murder of Oswald himself by Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby, are so fearfully inexplicable and devastating they leave massive rents in

the national consciousness, shredding our will to believe, as Albert Einstein once put it, that God does not play dice with the universe. Trying to mend that tear are a whole range of conspiracy theorists and assassination buffs, writers of upwards of 600 books (not to mention newsletters with names like the Grassy Knoll Gazette), all intent on proving there was a plan after all, if only we had the wit to read the signs.

When we first meet Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner), he seems the least likely person to question the government and join this underground brotherhood. The pipe-smok-

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'JFK'

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ing district attorney of New Orleans, a calm three-piece-suit type who calls his handful of kids "little bugs," Garrison initially gets briefly involved only because Oswald (Gary Oldman) had spent the summer before the assassination in New Orleans, handing out pro-Castro leaflets and consorting with local oddballs like the shifty, untrustworthy right-wing zealot David Ferrie (Joe Pesci).

It's not until three years later that Garrison finally gets around to looking inside the Warren Commission's hefty 26 volumes, and he is instantaneously transfixed. He stays up night after night making notes, irritating his perfect Southern wife Liz (Sissy Spacek), worrying about ignored testimony, leads not followed up, inconsistencies and whathaveyou. Concluding that the truth has never come out and that New Orleans played a crucial part in the story, he galvanizes his small but loyal staff and determines to find out what really happened. Never mind that people keep telling him "This is too big for you" and "You're a mouse fighting a gorilla," he stands foursquare behind his stirring motto, "Let justice be done though the heavens fall."

Clearly, director Stone (who also co-wrote the screenplay with conspiracy buff Zachary Sklar) has based his conception of Garrison on the traditional one-man-against-the-system scenario Frank Capra perfected in films like "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," a point of view Costner's comfortingly straight-arrow presence is made for. Yet once the D.A. begins to go to work, a movie unlike anything Jimmy Stewart ever starred in begins to emerge.

For "JFK," weighing in with more words per square inch than one would have thought possible, much less desirable, is probably the most exposition-heavy film ever made. Exhaustive and exhausting, it so batters and blitzes you with details, incidents and occurrences, like the crank at a party who won't stop bending your ear, that when one of Garrison's minions finally squeals, "I'm lost, boss," there is not a person in the audience who won't know exactly how he feels.

Yet, though "JFK" will surely at least momentarily confuse everyone who is not a card-carrying conspiracy buff, the one thing it never is is boring, and for this one has to give Stone the very considerable credit he's due. He has not



Gary Oldman, Joe Pesci, Brian Doyle Murray in "JFK": Conspiratorial trio.

only cleverly cast reassuringly familiar faces like Walter Matthau, Jack Lemmon, Ed Asner, John Candy and Donald Sutherland in cameo roles, he and director of cinematography Robert Richardson and editors Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia have proved endlessly inventive in coming up with new ways to shoot and cut essentially static material. Nervous, insistent, claustrophobic, "JFK" (at its best reminiscent of Costa-Gavras' "Z") has all of Stone's trademark intensity, and it needs every last bit.

Part of the reason "JFK" holds our attention, obviously, is that it deals with perhaps the most potent event of the last 30 years, and Stone, who knows well its power, returns to it again and again, both in detailed re-creation (he even had the trees in Dallas' Dealey Plaza trimmed to 1963 size) and in repeated viewings of the famous but little-seen Zapruder footage. That 8-millimeter home movie shot by a local dress manufacturer shows the assassination in the most disturbing detail, as does a rather graphic re-creation of (and what appear to be genuine photographs from) the President's autopsy.

More than that, Stone's skill is such (especially in his pinpoint demolition of the controversial "magic bullet" theory) that no one who walks out of the theater will completely believe that the Warren Commission got it right when it said a lone assassin was responsible. But "JFK" (rated R for language) is not the film to be satisfied with that. With increasing breathlessness it further insists that Garrison single-handedly discovered that myriad elements of this country's military-industrial complex (including Ferrie and Tommy Lee Jones as New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw) conspired to kill Kennedy because he wanted to call off the Cold War and put them out of business.

Though pundits galore and even many conspiracy theorists have

taken great delight in shredding this thesis, calling the film "Dances With Facts" and pointing out just for openers that the Garrison that Stone has conjured up bears very little relation to the actual man, from a critical point of view that merely points to another difficulty: Stone, and not for the first time, wants to have it both ways.

On the one hand, he insists that his film is thoroughly researched and totally factual, but when inconsistencies are pointed out, like the fact that certain characters are composites, situations are fudged, conflicting testimony ignored and Garrison's summation (when he finally does get around to bringing Shaw to trial) lengthened to con-

tain information not uncovered until years later, he shrugs and says he's dramatically shaping history, kind of the way Shakespeare did.

But finally, it is not drama that Stone is interested in but rather disseminating his particular vision of the reason Kennedy died. That's why, though Stone has been careful to tell persistent journalists that sections of his film are speculation, "JFK" gives the mass audience that will see it cold absolutely no clue that this is the case, and has the temerity to have Garrison insist over and over that "the truth is the most important value we have." That may well be the case, but you'd end up looking rather silly if you tried to prove it by looking at this particular film.

'JFK'

Kevin Costner	Jim Garrison
Tommy Lee Jones	Clay Shaw
Laurie Metcalf	Susie Cox
Gary Oldman	Lee Harvey Oswald
Michael Rooker	Bill Broussard
Jay O. Sanders	Lou Ivan
Sissy Spacek	Liz Garrison

A Le Studio Canal+, Regency Enterprises and Alcor Films, Ixtian Corporation production, released by Warner Bros. Director Oliver Stone. Producers A. Kitman Ho, Stone. Executive producer Arnon Milchan. Screenplay Stone & Zachary Sklar, based on the books "On the Trail of the Assassins" by Jim Garrison and "Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy" by Jim Marrs. Cinematographer Robert Richardson. Editors Joe Hutshing, Pietro Scalia. Costumes Mariene Stewart. Music John Williams. Production design Victor Kempster. Art directors Derek R. Hill, Alan R. Tomkins. Set decorator Christian Sallis. Running time: 3 hours, 7 minutes. MPAA-rated R (language).