

## MOVIES

# Stone on defensive before film is done

*Critics of "JFK" cite early script in faulting his view of assassination.*

By Elaine Dutka  
*Los Angeles Times*

**A**ubrey Rike is a former funeral parlor worker, the man who, in November 1963, put President Kennedy's body into the casket at Parkland Hospital. Today, he is a Dallas police officer who was recently hired as a consultant on Oliver Stone's latest project, *JFK*, a dramatic exploration of the assassination, which the director calls "the seminal event of our generation."

At one point, Rike recalled, he pointed out a couple of minor errors in the way Stone was setting up a scene: Jacqueline Kennedy had not been in the emergency room at a given time; her clothes were less blood-stained.

"This isn't history, this is movie-making," Stone pointed out. "I'm not setting out to make a documentary."

Rike ultimately conceded the director's point, but others have been more judgmental. For halfway through the film's shoot and six months before it is scheduled to be released by Warner Bros., a number of publications have condemned both *JFK* and its director.

The Chicago Tribune, Washington Post and Time magazine, basing their stories on a leaked early version of the shooting script, criticized Stone for purported factual inaccuracies, including the implication of an orchestrated *coup d'état* and cover-up. And he has been criticized for basing his movie on the accounts of former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, now a Louisiana Court of Appeals judge. The writers charge that Garrison is self-aggrandizing and unreliable, and that Stone legitimizes his investigation into Kennedy's murder and even glorifies it through the casting of Kevin Costner as Garrison.

The controversy has thrown together believers in the Warren Commission Report and conspiracy theorists who have devoted their lives to challenging it. At issue is not only an artist's responsibility

when dealing with a subject in the public domain, but whether critics in the press and elsewhere curtail creative freedom by judging a work-in-progress.

"It's interesting that the Washington Post is applauding the Soviet media for its new openness, its willingness to expose Stalin's mass murders, while impugning my project before the American people can assess it," said Stone, whose edited point-by-point rejoinder ran in the Post earlier this month.

Costner, dismayed at the "body blows" Stone has been sustaining, agreed: "Oliver is one of our most prolific filmmakers," he said, "and to still his voice because people don't agree with his vision is unfair. There are people in back rooms trying to abort this movie. They're trying to trivialize Oliver and make him look cartoonish."

George Lardner Jr., the Washington Post national-security-issues reporter who covered the Garrison investigation in the '60s, defended his May 19 disputation of Stone's thesis. "I'm not denying Stone's right to be heard — just expressing my thoughts as well in the free marketplace of ideas," he said. "My story is a public service, and if Stone were truly interested in accuracy, he should be grateful."

Responding to Stone's complaint that his critique jumped the gun, Lardner said: "If history is being distorted, I can write about it whenever I want, without waiting for a press release."

Stone said he was informed by a Time magazine writer that three senior editors — who Stone alleges are anti-Garrison — weighed in when it came to putting together the magazine's June 10 story. "Let's not be naïve," Stone said. "They're the Establishment Doberman pinschers trained to protect the government."

"This piece was edited in an absolutely normal manner," Time magazine writer Richard Zoglin countered. "It got no special attention from high-level editors. For Stone to automatically question the



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### Oliver Stone's cast re-enacts the Kennedy assassination in Dallas.

motives of his critics is a very feeble way of arguing his case.

"It is unusual to take apart a movie based on an early script but, then, this is an unusual movie," Zoglin said. "It's the first time a fictional film with a major star and a major director has re-created the assassination, [and] it has already been found objectionable by people [who have studied] the subject for 25 years."

*JFK*, budgeted at \$35 million to \$40 million, features Sissy Spacek, Tommy Lee Jones, Ed Asner, Gary Oldman, John Candy, Donald Sutherland, Joe Pesci, Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau, in addition to Costner. Chief Justice Earl Warren is played by Garrison himself.

Stone spent three years digesting material on the subject and — to the consternation of those preparing similar projects — signed a horde of witnesses and researchers to exclusive contracts. He has created composite characters from several real-life figures, and events have been condensed.

Anything speculative, Stone says, is shot in sepia tones to distinguish it from the rest.

"I take a *Rashomon* approach, showing multiple scenarios — Oswald as guilty; Oswald as innocent," Stone says. "It's an inquiry based on both fact and speculation — not 'The Jim Garrison Story,' as some have claimed. Garrison is a flawed man — full of hubris, King Lear arrogance. But in a three-hour movie, there is no time for a character portrait.

"Though Garrison's theories are riddled with mistakes, I admire his argu-

ment and courage. To me, he's the embodiment of the questions Americans still have on the subject and, as such, is a perfect dramatic vehicle. . . . But I'm going beyond Garrison, assembling a jigsaw puzzle of facts that have surfaced since the trial."

Harrison Livingstone, co-author of the 1989 book *High Treason*, which explored the assassination, isn't convinced. "I'm not against the movie," he says.

"But both Stone and Garrison are well-meaning men bringing charges without the evidence."

Chicago Tribune columnist Jon Margolis called Stone a "man who sees conspiracies everywhere."

"There is a point at which intellectual myopia becomes morally repugnant," he wrote. "Stone's new movie proves that he has passed that point."

Such attacks, said Zachary Sklar — who edited the Garrison book *On the Trail of the Assassins* and, with Stone, co-wrote the screenplay — are patently unfair.

"The great majority of Americans believe there was more than one gunman," he said. "A congressional committee in 1979 found that Kennedy was 'probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy.' Yet from day one, Oliver has been riding on the Titanic. Assassination buffs see him as a Johnny-come-lately who hasn't done his homework. The press is forcing him to work in a fishbowl. And giving away the thesis of his film before it's made is like giving away the ending of a mystery book in a review."