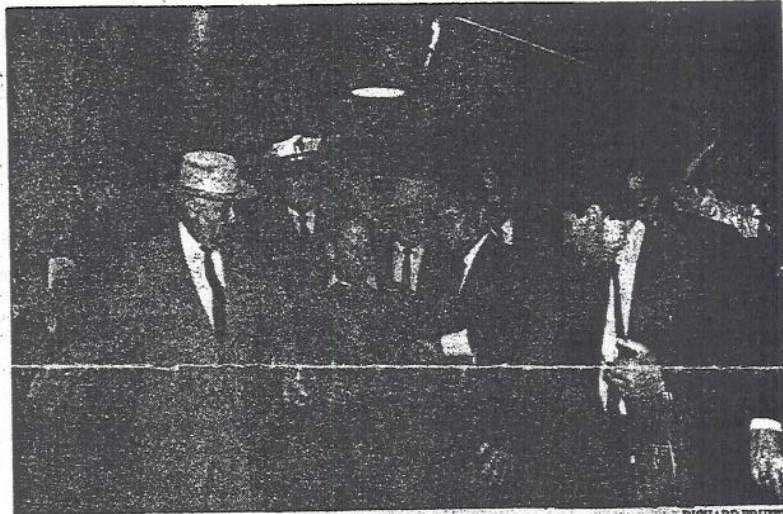


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Off-Centerpiece



RICHARD FRUITT

Danny Aiello as Jack Ruby shoots Lee Harvey Oswald look-alike Willie Garson in "Ruby."

Doing Dallas With 'Ruby' and 'JFK'

By JOE LEYDON

DALLAS—Stroll down the Main Street ramp to the police headquarters basement, step over the electrical cables and ease past the extras and the onlookers, and there it is: The slo-mo black-and-white nightmare of Nov. 24, 1963, time-warped to full color, flash-and-blood life.

If you're of a certain age and remember that long Sunday, you know this dance of death by heart. The anxious hubbub of straight-arrow reporters in dark suits and white shirts, jostling with notebooks and cameras, craning their necks and thrusting microphones at the first glimpse of Lee Harvey Oswald. He appears ridiculously frail for someone who—allegedly, we would say today, but 1963 is a different time—murdered the President of the United States just 48 hours ago. He is handcuffed to one policeman, surrounded by others, and on the way to a waiting car that will take Oswald across town to a more secure cell.

Oswald won't make it.

Out of the corner of the frame, there emerges, as inevitable as the grave, Jack Ruby. Scuttling out of obscurity and gate-crashing into history, he squeezes off a single round from his .38-caliber revolver. Oswald screams. The police lunge. Someone wrestles the revolver from Ruby's hand. But it's too late.

"Cut!" cries director John Mackenzie, the Scottish-born filmmaker who is guiding these players through this moment of historical recreation. The tension dissipates, quickly, with rude remarks and hearty laughter. The actors and the bit players mill about briefly, as the technicians prepare for the next angle. Danny Aiello, somehow even more imposing than usual in Jack Ruby's black suit, shakes hands with fellow actor Willie Garson, an uncannily persuasive Oswald look-alike, as if to say, "Hey, I just shot you—but no hard feelings, OK?"

And then, as if to quietly mock the manufactured reality of the moviemakers, two very real Dallas policemen cut their path, politely but



The Oswald murder as it happened in 1963.

firmly, through the crowd, escorting a very real handcuffed prisoner to the hallway from which Lee Harvey Oswald just emerged.

Yes, this is the real police headquarters basement, the very spot where Ruby silenced Oswald nearly three decades ago. The makers of "Ruby," a small-budget feature produced by Propaganda Films, have the location for just two days during the week they're filming in Dallas. And they're making every moment count.

"I was shaking when I walked in here this morning," admits Garson, an actor heretofore best known for guest spots on television. "I kept thinking, 'This is it! This is the place! See, I was just watching the news footage in the trailer, and I saw this building, this ramp!'"

More important, he saw somebody who looked very familiar.

"Yeah, it's kind of scary," Garson says, grinning almost sheepishly. "I sorta look like [Oswald] . . . The first day I worked on the film back in L.A. was very, very uncomfortable, just because the image is so ingrained in people. Like, I saw people walk up and tell a joke to four

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people standing next to me, and then get to me—and just back off.'

And yet, for all the attention being paid to historical verisimilitude, British-born screenwriter Stephen Davis insists that "Ruby" is a work of speculative fiction, "not a docudrama." It is not, strictly speaking, a biographical overview; the film covers only a year or so in Ruby's life before Ruby gunned down Oswald in front of the TV cameras. But it does touch upon Ruby's formative years as a flunkie for mob bosses in his native Chicago, and his mob-related activities and connections while operating his notorious strip joint, the Carousel Club, during his Dallas years.

Yes, the movie indicates Ruby had ties with the FBI and the CIA. And with John F. Kennedy himself, thanks to a young stripper in his employ, Candy Cane, a fictitious character invented by Davis and portrayed by Sherilyn Fenn, late of TV's "Twin Peaks."

Davis describes himself as "a non-buff" when it comes to Kennedy assassination conspiracies. "I'm not really interested in professional conspiracy theory—or conspiracy theory as a pastime."

Davis insists. Nevertheless, while researching his script for an HBO movie—"Yuri Nosenko, KGB," a docudrama about the enigmatic Russian defector—Davis read enough about Lee Harvey Oswald (whose file Nosenko had supervised during Oswald's time in the Soviet Union) to revive his interest in the alleged assassin and the nobody who murdered him.

"The remarks that Ruby made when he was arrested," Davis says, "always struck me as the most teasing and mystifying of all the statements made about the assassination. He made all these apocalyptic and jumbled statements about, 'If only you knew my motivation. You will never understand the reasons for my actions.' Looking at Ruby as a figure in captivity, it provoked a dramatist's curiosity. Whichever way the story came out, I was interested in how this guy got into this situation."

"Was he a bit player of no consequence who walked onto a big historical scene and threw his wrench into it? Or was he part of a conspiracy?"

Davis first juggled documented fact and fanciful speculation about Jack Ruby in "Love Field," a stage play that premiered in 1987 at London's equivalent of an Off Broadway theater. The play, set entirely in the Carousel Club and named after the Dallas airfield

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where John F. Kennedy made his final descent, was a modest success, and attracted the attention of producer Sigurion (Joni) Sighvatsson, whose Propaganda Films, already successful with commercials and music videos, was then expanding into feature production. (Chief among Propaganda's recent features: David Lynch's "Wild at Heart" and Alek Keshishian's Madonna documentary, "Truth or Dare.") Sighvatsson and his associates saw big-screen potential in Davis' play, and persuaded him to expand it. Four years later, the movie—retitled "Ruby" after Orion laid claim to the title "Love Field" for its upcoming Michelle Pfeiffer project—is rolling on a 42-day shoot, with a budget, according to Davis, "between \$8- and \$9 million."

"Ruby" disputes the Warren Commission assurances that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, and that Jack Ruby was not tied to organized-crime figures. It does other things as well, but Davis and everyone else involved with the film would prefer to leave it at that.

"I have what I believe is a very original analysis of Ruby's motivations for shooting Oswald," Davis says. "I believe that the most important thing in Ruby's life was his connection to the mob. I don't hesitate to suggest that there was a conspiracy to kill Kennedy. I think a great many people believe in their hearts that that is a reasonable analysis of the event."

"It's an emotional exploration as much as a journalistic one. . . . I think that drama is a lie that tells you the truth."

Ruby is the second movie dealing with the John F. Kennedy assassination to film on location in Dallas in recent months. The first, Oliver Stone's "JFK," reportedly offers a much larger canvas, an ambitiously wider focus, in an attempt to present a "Rashomon"-like collage of theories and conspiracies. Both films likely will reawaken memories of the decade or so following Nov. 22, 1963, when Dallas had to endure an international reputation as "the place where they killed Kennedy," a time when, in Robert Altman's "Nashville" (1975), Henry Gibson tried to calm a crowd after a country singer's assassination by shouting: "This isn't Dallas! This is Nashville!"

Oliver Stone made headlines a few months ago when he persuaded the Dallas County Commissioners, who work in and control the Texas School Book Depository, to allow him access to the building during the filming of "JFK."

"Ruby" producer Sighvatsson, director Mackenzie and associate producer Richard Wright claim Stone also did something that got less publicity: They say Stone took steps to ensure that "Ruby"—or any other TV or film project, for that matter—would not have ac-

cess to key Dallas locations, or be able to hire bit players used in "JFK," until long after Warner Bros. released "JFK."

Specifically, the "Ruby" people claim Stone and company signed exclusive contracts with Dallas actors who play John and Jacqueline Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, stipulating that they could not play those historic roles in any other photoplay for at least a year. The "Ruby" people also claim Stone signed a similar agreement with the owner of a building next door to the School Book Depository, so that the owner would refuse to allow any other movie company to "dress" the building, or temporarily alter its facade so that it would again look the way it did in 1963 for filming on location in Dealey Plaza.

Sighvatsson, eager to make a movie about "the first public assassination covered by media," had hoped for cooperation from Stone. And at first, Sighvatsson says, Stone seemed agreeable. But then Richard Wright and co-producer Jay Rowe visited Dealey Plaza on a spring afternoon when the "JFK" crew was prepping the location. They observed, they took pictures, and then they left.

"And after that," Sighvatsson says, "JFK" co-producer Clayton Townsend "called me in L.A., and said we had violated the trust, because we had gone on their set and we had taken pictures. And therefore, they didn't trust us, they weren't going to cooperate with us anymore. And we would just have to be on our own."

"Immediately after this falling out," says Richard Wright, "things started to go wrong."

At one point, Wright claims he learned that Stone's representatives were trying to gain exclusive access to a parking lot that would likely be visible in any-footage shot of the assassination scene in Dealey Plaza.

Oliver Stone, taking a break from his first day in the editing room for "JFK," makes no apologies for trying to tie up various locations—including the Texas Theatre, where Oswald allegedly shot and killed Dallas police officer J.D. Tippit—with exclusivity contracts. He insists that he and his associates have acted in an ethical and legal manner, "defending our uniqueness as a film by signing what locations that we could," preempting their use by, say, a TV-movie that could be rushed into production and aired before "JFK" opened.

Stone is just as rigorous in his defense of signing "those actors who are playing historical personages—JFK, LBJ, Jackie, Connally and Mrs. Connally, I think"—to contracts that would prevent the actors from playing those roles elsewhere for a year.

"Look, we want to make a unique film," Stone says. "And I would ask you: We spent a lot of time and energy finding these people, giving them tests, makeup and hair. I would have to ask what kind of cheeseball movie would even want to sign these same people—except, I think, to trade in

on our supposed success, or our resources.

"I regret that [the makers of "Ruby"] don't have any money. But they have taken an attitude that because we have money that they are owed certain favors. And they have taken that attitude, I gather, in their approaches to the people in Dallas."

What irks Stone the most is an incident that occurred during preproduction of "JFK." After conferring with "Ruby" director John Mackenzie in a personal, filmmaker-to-filmmaker conversation, Stone claims he initially thought it would indeed be proper to cooperate with the Propaganda Films production. But then came the spring afternoon that Stone recalls somewhat differently than Joni Sighvatsson.

"We did an enormous amount of research and art department work around Dealey Plaza," Stone says. "And we invested money, we prepped it. And then these people just showed up and videotaped our movie—our signs, our frontage, our wardrobe, without even asking permission. That set the tone as far as we were concerned for unfriendly competition. . . ."

Fred N. Ciacelli, a Florida-based collector of JFK memorabilia, owns the only known replica of the 1961 Lincoln Continental X-100 limousine in which the Kennedys and Connallys were riding when the gunshots rang out in Dealey Plaza. Ciacelli claims that, after renting the car to Stone's production company for use in "JFK," he was contacted by Stone's production manager and asked not to rent the vehicle to the "Ruby" producers. "At one point," Ciacelli says, "they talked to me [about] the possibility of paying me what I would have gotten from ["Ruby"], for not doing it. And I told them I would absolutely not do that."

Stone—who says he paid Ciacelli \$10,000 for use of the limousine in "JFK"—calls Ciacelli's claims "absolutely untrue."

"I wish them luck, but I think they're desperate for publicity, anything that will bring attention to their film," Stone said. "It's a shame they must do so by attacking our film—which has had its own share of troubles getting made."

The bottom line? "Ruby" has wound up filming what and where director John Mackenzie wanted to in Dallas, within the restraints of a tight budget, but with different actors as the historical characters.

"I can't believe what I'm hearing [about Stone and his "JFK" producers] is true," Mackenzie says. "Although the rumors are coming thick and fast as to how they have attempted to obstruct us."

"But you can't stop a film from being made. It's impossible. Because one way or the other, you get round all the hurdles. It's rather like a gate-crasher can always get into a party."

Just like Jack Ruby. □

Joe Leydon is the film critic of the Houston Post.