



THE LINEUP—Left, John Pleshette, who portrays the assassin on-TV; center, the Texas schoolboy who was born Lee Harvey Oswald; right, the Lee Oswald jailed in Dallas.

Two Views of Lee Oswald

TELEVISION

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BY CECIL SMITH
Times Television Critic

Writers have been poking fictional fingers into redoing history ever since the first wordslinger came along. The most popular method is the "what if" gimmick—such as, What if Napoleon lived between wars and endlessly plotted battles that were never fought?

"The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," the four-hour movie ABC is offering in two parts tonight (Channel 7, 9-11) and Sunday night, is a much more recent "what if" devised by screenwriter Robert E. Thompson from a rather dull play that flickered briefly off-Broadway a decade ago. In this case, what if Jack Ruby did not shoot Oswald in that Dallas police garage after the assassination of John F. Kennedy but instead Oswald was brought to trial for the murder in an old country courthouse in some sunbaked Texas town

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west of the Pecos and presumably removed from the prejudicial atmosphere of the city where the President was slain.

What Thompson, a dramatist, has constructed in this heavy-handed film, directed by David Greene and produced by Lawrence Schiller and Richard Freed for Charles Fries Productions, is a courtroom drama in which all the endless theories and suspicions and speculations about the killing of Kennedy and the doubts that have been raised as to Oswald's participation are aired.

With Lorne Greene in a ponderous performance as Oswald's sleek establishment defense attorney ("The only reason I am in this case is because of direct and persistent pressures from the White House") and with Ben Gazzara as a hard-bitten prosecutor told by President Johnson not to dig too deep into the Oswald case ("He told me that when there was water handy, there was no point in digging a dry well"), this dissipates one of the great tragedies of our nation into a kind of tedious murder trial that Perry Mason did better. Oh, well, I suppose if ABC could turn Watergate into a soap opera, it's not illogical to turn the assassination of President Kennedy into a Perry Mason.

When author Thompson and director Greene deal in real events, particularly in a vivid recreation of the assassination itself on the actual site in Dallas—the presidential entourage, the crowds, the cheers, the shots, Kennedy's head jerking as the bullets crashed into it, Jacqueline Kennedy's hysterical attempt to crawl across the trunk of the limousine—the film is absorbing (though the squeamish should know the scenes of bullets smashing into the Kennedy skull are shown again and again in the trial sequence Sunday).

Tedium in the Courtroom

It's when they try to go beyond the real that they come a cropper. The courtroom drama is so conventional it's tedious, despite a fine, feisty judge (Jack Collins). Oswald is isolated in a glass case. The trial plunges with both feet into all these murky areas that have been endlessly explored, the links between Oswald and the FBI, the alleged CIA tie-in with the Mafia, the anti-Castro Cubans (with a brief but delicious bit by Marisa Pavan as a Cuban aristocrat), the constant accusations that Oswald did not act alone (if, indeed, he acted at all), that he or whoever killed Kennedy was the hit man or men of a massive conspiracy. We've seen it all dragged endlessly through the more lurid press. Much of it can still be quite disturbing—the parade of witnesses sought by the defense who turned up dead, either murdered or suicides; the direction from which the shot that blew off part of Kennedy's head came.

But it is treated in such pedestrian, such mundane style here. One could not help but remember the brilliance of another courtroom drama involving Gazzara, "QB VII," which was to this as Shakespeare is to Mickey Spillane. In true Perry Mason style, ABC's press previews of the film withheld the ending—we don't know whether this kangaroo jury found this mythical Oswald guilty or innocent of the crime of the century. Best bet—wait for the real story in a new CBS film later this season: "Ruby and Oswald."

Plan an Assassination

There's one disturbing factor that Gazzara enunciates clearly: "That a shlump like Oswald who couldn't even hold a job could meticulously plan a presidential assassination." The Oswald of this film is really superb—John Pleshette, an undersized, pinch-faced man with a pouting mouth and a steady, almost hypnotic gaze from clear brown eyes. Pleshette makes you feel this is a man capable of almost anything. When we see him in the Texas School Book Depository building within minutes of the shots fired at Kennedy, he is totally unemotional; he slips away in the screams of the fearful crowd with utter disregard for the tragic proceedings.

Yet he can display enormous charm, as he did in his Russian residence in Minsk when he met the shy, pretty Marina and charmed her into marrying him within a month of their meeting. A young actress named Me Malone does Marina to a turn, not only in the confusion over this strange husband of hers but in her clash over their sex life. One of the neatest scenes in the film offers her watching on TV the Kennedy procession at Ft. Worth before it went to Dallas. She shrugs off Oswald's attempts to make love. He turns the TV off. She turns it on. He turns it off. She turns it on again. There's more than a hint that perhaps the motivation for murder was no more than jealousy over his Russian wife's obvious admiration for the dashing young President.

Some details of Oswald's life are handled well in flashbacks—to Russia, to Mexico, New Orleans, his mother's home. Among the better performances is Annabelle Weenick as his voluble old mother. Notable also are Frances Lee McCann, who seems incapable of a poor performance, as Greene's lawyer aide; William Phipps as the Dallas police chief and Jack Rader as a motorcycle officer.