

# 'The (Tasteless) Trial of Oswald'

By Tom Shales

People used to worry about television de-sensitizing us to violence. Now the big concern is that it may be de-sensitizing us to truth, playing such dangerous games with fact and fancy as to blur the distinction between the two.

"The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," a four-hour ABC TV movie airing in two parts—tonight and Sunday night at 9 o'clock on Channel 7—is beyond question tasteless and reprehensible as a piece of entertainment, so it's only natural to go on to the question of whether the party-game it plays with tragic history represents a threat to the national mental health as well.

TV news is drifting further into showbiz. TV movies and plays are increasingly going the "docu-drama" route in which real people (Caryl Chessman and Karen Ann Quinlan in recent weeks) are dropped into formula potboiler stories—entertaining ordeals. Journalism and escapism aren't just cross-pollinating in television they are cross-polluting.

The "trial" of Lee Harvey Oswald for the assassination of President John F. Kennedy never occurred, of course, since Oswald himself was murdered, and no real purpose is served

by supposing that it did. But by dropping real names as loudly as possible into a script, inevitable if unsavory impact can be added to a story that in this case would have none without them.

At least the creators of "Washington: Behind Closed Doors" had an imposing point to make with their fictionalized Watergate saga, and it was presented as fiction, not fact.

But ABC has bragged of the "Oswald" show that it is "based on historical fact, not speculation or rumor." When, during filming in Dallas last summer, supervising producer Lawrence Schiller was criticized for inaccuracies in the re-staging of the assassination, he responded by saying, "We're here to recreate it emotionally," and, "We should not allow the enormity of the event to overshadow the simplicity of the act."

Schiller, the Dino de Laurentiis of the "graveyard," is also the showman who bought the rights to Gary Gilmore's life before Gilmore's execution. He goes beyond everyday vulgarity with "Oswald." The jury's verdict in the mock trial has been kept a cliff-hanging secret, and ABC will invite viewers to write in their opinions for a poll whose results will be an-

nounced on the Oct. 14 "Good Morning, America" show.

Even from the network that gave us "Let's Make A Deal" and "Soap," this seems an incredibly smarmy project. It certainly refutes those who said that Paddy Chayefsky's satire of television greed, "Network," was too far-fetched to be plausible. Schiller and ABC have made Chayefsky's hysteria look almost namby-pamby.

For what it's worth, David Greene's direction of "Oswald," at least on the first two hours previewed, gives it an unmistakable shimmer of urgency. The re-enactment of the assassination does command one's attention—partly because it seems so visually disconcerting to see Dealey Plaza and the Texas School Book Depository in color—but soon we realize that the creators of this sorry charade have by no means justified bringing the painful subject up again.

A the point in the story where Oswald would have been shot by Jack Ruby, Greene cuts to a blinding glare that is supposed to separate the history from the fantasy. There is reason to believe that so far as matters of truth are concerned, however, television is becoming one continuous blinding glare itself.

Steve Bell  
Correspondent  
Good Morning America

September 29, 1977

Mr. Harold Weisberg  
Rt. 12, Old Receiver Road  
Frederick, Maryland 21701

Dear Mr. Weisberg:

Thank you for your letter of 8 September.

I am forwarding a copy to Woody Fraser with the recommendation that we don't have anyone like De Mohrenschildt on again without consulting someone like you or having you on the program as counterpoint.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Steve Bell".

T of LHO

Rt. 12, Frederick, Md. 21701  
10/1/77

Mr. Steve Bell  
ABC News  
1124 Connecticut Ave., NW  
Wash., D.C. 20036

Dear Mr. Bell,

Thanks for your letter of the 29th. and for forwarding it to Woody Fraser. He is unknown to me but I take it exercises some control over what gets on the show.

Tom Shales' review of ABC's "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald" is modest. He knows less of Schiller than I do. The scheduled 10/14 poll airing may present responsible journalists with a problem similar to that of the nuts who have been aired. By all means take me up on my offer if you have the need or only the desire with regard to this walking and commercializing obscenity it would defame scavengers to call a jackal.

However, I will not go for this purpose or any other to the New York studios. The one experience of not being able to take their word was too much for me. I'd prefer to be able to serve you by phone. As an alternative in Washington. However, as a result of the second circulatory problem, the one that had not been recognized when I did the show in June but had weakened me then, I do not drive to Washington any more. I can't wisely keep my legs down that long. Others now drive me.

I do not suggest that you are ABC or control the show so please do not misunderstand my complaint to be personal. Amy Hirsch and someone else up there promised to repay my costs for cutting the trip I was then on off at Dallas to go to New York. I have written a number of times for the repayment of either the round trip fare to Dallas or what ABC offered, a ticket from New York to LA. I have not had any response. In my last letter I said that if there is not some response I'll take this up with my lawyer.

I had no personal interest in doing the show and declined a number of times until persuaded that I should do it. I received no book promotion or any other kind in return, the norm. I asked for none. I had to give up the work that did mean something to me to do it. I do not intend to be screwed in return.

Schiller, who enticed ABC into an incredible indecency, even ripped Jack Ruby off. He traded on the name of the Kennedy "library and defrauded a number of us and then engaged in incredible dishonesties. There is no way in which his 1966 and 1967 behavior on the JFK assassination was not extraordinarily bad.

I was unable to catch last night's airing but I will see tomorrow's. If one of my friends taped last night's I'll listen to it and be that prepared. If there is a script I'd like a copy to read and for the future, for archival purposes.

I think the false pretense that the show was "based on historical fact, not speculation or rumor," can validate the fairness-doctrine demands ABC will probably receive. My only interest would be to make any such response accurate and fair. So please on behalf of ABC accept this as a request for fairness-doctrine time in the event ABC decides it should respect any such request. If it does not I certainly will not pursue it. My only purpose is to provide a means of ending all this wretched business on the air, the kind expectable from the Schillers of the other side like Lane and Oltmans. In this I would provide you with a larger assortment of visual "new evidence" than the morning show could use. There would also be a chain of evidence, no question about authenticity or origin.

Sincerely,

Harold Weisberg