

The Remaking of a Tragedy in Dallas

BY LEE MARGULIES

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DALLAS—The first police motorcycle rounds the corner from Houston St. onto Elm St. and the crowd begins applauding, adding cheers as the elongated Lincoln Continental swings into view. From out of the past, they are here once again: the dashing President flashing his bright smile; his pretty wife, in a pink suit with a matching pill-box hat, waving to her admirers. Once again . . .

Suddenly, a rifle shot rings out from the sixth-floor window on the corner, thundering across Dealey Plaza. The President lurches forward, then back. Another shot is heard. Another. There is chaos. Spectators on both sides of the street are screaming, running, throwing themselves to the ground. A Secret Service man is racing toward the President's car, where the First Lady is frantically trying to climb out. He pushes her back; the car races into a dark underpass. A few people run helplessly after it. Then . . . nothing. For a moment there is silence, stillness . . . emptiness. He is gone.

Smiling, Laughing, Talking

An observer watching these events unfold from a once-controversial grassy knoll has turned his head away and covered his eyes, gasping in disbelief, unsure what is real and what isn't. The panic, the desperation, the pain—they spring forth anew in the horror of those few moments. Tears begin to well up. One cannot sit here, not *here*, and dispassionately view history repeating itself in such excruciating detail.

Or can one?

"Cut it!" a bearded man named Lawrence Schiller yells into a loudspeaker. And the participants in this tragedy are up and smiling, laughing, talking animatedly, even . . . yes . . . applauding themselves. They're having fun. "You folks were fantastic!" Schiller tells them. "It was right out of 'Spartacus!'"

"Everybody wants to be an actor," Charles Fries would chuckle later after seeing the extras athletically perform



CAMOUFLAGE—An appropriate parade banner is used to hide sign at memorial museum.

their assigned duties again for the TV movie he's making.

Fries is the executive producer. Schiller the coproducer with Richard Freed of "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," a four-hour film which ABC plans to run later this year. They had come to Dallas to use, with the city's full cooper-

ation, many of the actual locations that played a part on that fateful Friday 13½ years ago when John F. Kennedy was assassinated—Oswald's rooming house, the theater where he was captured, the jail where he was held.

For their re-creation of the murder itself they were on the real Elm St. The blank rifle shots were being fired from the sixth-floor corner window of the Texas School Book Depository, the spot from which the fatal bullets are believed to have been fired by what the national media soon began describing as a "small, dark-haired pro-Communist."

There Are Doubters Still

But did Lee Harvey Oswald kill the President, and was he acting on his own? There are doubters still, despite the conclusion of the Warren Commission and its confirmation by other governmental investigators over the years, and that, the producers said here, is the purpose of their film: to air those conflicting points of view in the fictional context of the trial Oswald might have gotten had he lived. Ben Gazzara is playing the prosecutor. Lorne Greene the defense attorney and a little known actor named John Pleshette is starring as Oswald.

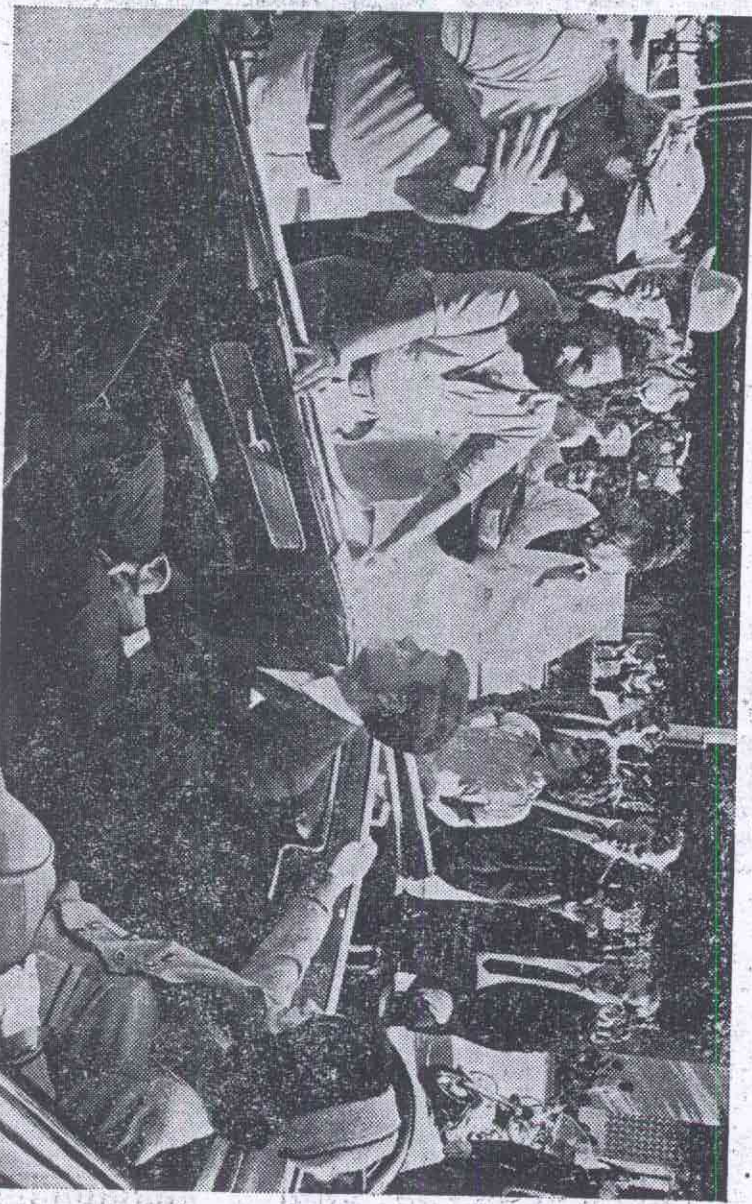
"I think the public is ready," says Freed, who has been trying to mount a dramatic questioning of the one-gun-man, no-conspiracy theory for 12 years. "There's been an increased consciousness and awareness as a result of the things they learned about Watergate and the Vietnam war. They've learned, I think, that things are not always what they seem to be. They are willing to look. They may not be persuaded one way or another, but they're willing to look."

So there the film company was on Sunday, using hauntingly accurate doubles for the Kennedys, Johnsons and Connallys and about 300 extras from Dallas to restage the assassination for national television. Road signs had been removed and replaced with the ones that were there on Nov. 22, 1963, and the trees and bushes had been trimmed

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OFF CAMERA—Don Gazzawdy as Kennedy and John Pleshette as Oswald are in movie.



GRIM REHEARSAL—Director David Greene, left, and Lawrence Schiller discuss death

scene with Kennedy look-alikes Don Gazzawdy and Christine Rose for TV re-creation.

Photos by Phillip Gould

OSWALD TRIAL

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to conform with their appearance in photographs and movie film taken that day. Books and magazines with the pictures were consulted frequently throughout the day.

Supervising the meticulous reconstruction were Schiller, a well-known journalist, photographer and producer—most recently in the news as the man who secured the rights to the story of Gary Gilmore, the killer who was executed in Utah this year—and David Greene, the director whose recent credits include the first three hours of "Roots" and a large portion of "Rich Man, Poor Man."

At one point in setting up the action, the two of them stood over Don Gazzaway, a librarian and part-time actor from Mesquite, Tex., who was chosen to play Kennedy because of a strong resemblance to the late President. They watched his reactions in the Lincoln as Schiller shouted, "Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Greene didn't like the way Gazzaway moved his head. "The first bang is no good. You understand," he said, "books have been written about the head going forward first. It's one of the most important things in the film. The head must go forward first and then back. If it goes stiffly, this whole thing is gone. This whole film is centered on that move. I don't think I'm exaggerating."

Someone ran off to find Gazzaway a back brace to wear in hopes it would help him more closely react as Kennedy had.

Schiller went on to give instructions to a group of extras. "Between the second and third shot I want to see chaos. I want to see you scared. I want you to try to comprehend that people are really getting hit."

And to another group of extras he said, "On the third shot you will realize the reality that the President has fallen—and that reality you should react to."

Preparations beneath the Book Depository had started early that morning. Four hours later, all was ready. Using the loudspeaker to broadcast a numerical count for cueing the motorcade, crowd reaction and gun shots, Schiller orchestrated the assassination scene over and over again under a hot Texas sun for Greene's five camera teams. It looked, over and over again, like the real thing.

"We're being so clinical. We're doing it by the numbers so we can concentrate on getting it right," David Greene, the director, commented during a break in the morning's filming. "That way we don't have to think about it. If I let my emotions get into it I couldn't do it. I mean, I've cried twice already this morning. Can you believe it when she crawls on the back of the car? Doesn't it just send echoes through you? This is the nearest thing I've done to the slave hold in 'Roots.' I very nearly couldn't do that."

For much of the morning, various other members of the

production crew walked around muttering things like, "This is weird." But for the folks in front of the cameras, it was show biz time, a chance to be on TV. The mood was convivial; no one seemed troubled by the tasks being asked of him. Nor from the onlookers who stopped to check out the action did there seem to be much of a reaction beyond a few goosebumps.

"I'd like to give you something really gutsy or emotional," Don Gazzaway, the Kennedy double, said when asked what it was like playing the President being killed, "but to me it's fun. It's interesting. I've wanted to play Kennedy in the past. I feel like it's an honor, certainly an honor. I'm trying to do it with as much dignity and authenticity as possible. I hope it's taken correctly; I hope it won't stir up anybody or revive unpleasant memories. It doesn't for me. I was here and I was as shaken as anybody. I thought about whether I wanted to do this; it felt all right so I did."

To a first-time visitor to Dallas, the atmosphere was disconcerting, to say the least. An acquaintance who lives there suggested that perhaps it was because the visitor's awareness of the city was tied almost solely to the assassination, whereas local residents, dealing with the reality of Dealey Plaza on a daily basis, had long ago made peace with the past.

"As far as I'm concerned," said Bob Etheridge, a Dallas salesman playing Vice President Lyndon Johnson, "there was never a bad reaction here. It was just something that happened here. It could have happened anyplace else. Dallas was a good city then and it's still the best city in the U.S., bar none."

The city's feelings aside, however, the question of why the film-makers needed to create their own replica remains. Wouldn't "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald" be just as compelling without going to the trouble of staging for the cameras one of the worst events in the nation's history? It seems just the trial setting itself, with testimony from a parade of witnesses, would serve well enough to establish the details of the killing for anyone who couldn't remember.

Len Hill, who was on hand representing ABC's programming department, believes the TV duplication is necessary because the film is intended to let viewers judge for themselves what really happened that day.

"By re-creating it, we'll give the audience the chance to see the motorcade and answer for themselves whether a man of Lee Harvey Oswald's marksmanship ability could or could not have done it," Hill said. "The only way you can do that is to put them there, not with words and descriptions but up in the sixth floor window with real pictures. It's sort of a 'You Are There' approach."

Richard Freed, the coproducer, said the sequence will occupy only a small portion of the four-hour film. "We feel an enormous responsibility to treat it faithfully, tastefully and sensitively," he said. "It's painful to us too, you know. We all have our own painful memories. It's a heavy thing to be down here doing this."

Up on the sixth floor of the Book Depository, assistant director Mack Bing sat on a chair shaking his head. He had just finished firing three rounds from a .12-gauge shotgun for another run through of the assassination. He had seen what the assassin presumably saw.

"It's a trip. It's a trip," Bing said softly. "The real weird thing was the first time I did it, seeing those people scramble." He paused, looking out the window at the motorcade reforming below. "I'm just sitting here . . . and this isn't a difficult shot. It isn't a difficult shot. I'm a fair shot . . . and it could be done from here."

Back on the street, Christine Rose, an actress and model, was answering a question about what was going through her mind as she played Jacqueline Kennedy reacting to the slumping body of her husband.

"I'm not thinking about it," she said. "If you think about it, it makes you a little bit immobilized. I'd become too emotional, and she was anything but emotional at that moment. She was in shock, in panic. I don't think I'll ever think about it."

But the actress did have something on her mind. The first time they had played the scene with cameras rolling, Bing's shotgun had jammed and no shots were fired.

"What if that had happened when Oswald tried it?" Miss Rose asked. She added wistfully, "That would have been nice . . ."