



— Staff Photo by Mike Smith



— Staff Photo

John Pleshette and the man he's portraying in upcoming made-for-television film

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Lee Harvey Oswald resemblance provides actor's biggest break

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MCKINNEY — Some think the resemblance is haunting. Others don't see the similarity at all.

But at a distance, for just a split second, John Pleshette could be Lee Harvey Oswald.

There is the same slight build that made Oswald seem almost childlike. The same intense, nervous energy. The same close-cropped, early 1960s haircut that uncovered an abundance of ears and forehead. And, there are the same small, tight mouth, and intense, narrow eyes.

Everything about the as-yet unknown actor/writer Pleshette, tapped to play the Oswald role in ABC's upcoming \$2 million special, "The Trial of Lee Har-

vey Oswald," seems a historical coincidence contrived to create the illusion of President John F. Kennedy's alleged assassin.

Oswald, like Pleshette, stood 5 feet 9. Oswald, like Pleshette, weighed just over 140 pounds. And although at 38, Pleshette is considerably older than the 24-year-old Oswald at the time of the assassination, their faces are marked with similar lines.

When he walks outside the Collin County Court House here to take a break from studying lines and filming, Pleshette draws more stares and comment from gawkers than either of the movie's stars, Lorne Greene and Ben Gazzara. By now, they all know he is the man who sits confined inside the bullet-proof cage while on trial as the

accused assassin of a president. And even though it's only television, a made-up story about what the trial of Oswald might have been, people here still have a strange feeling watching Pleshette walk around the court house freely. It's as if he should at least have on handcuffs or a guard with him.

At 38, after a string of minor movie and television roles, Pleshette is openly

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Oswald link doesn't worry actor

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thrilled with the Oswald part, his first big acting break. He sees the role as one of the best character parts to come along for any actor in years. And if the role also brings the sort of notoriety that has plagued the real-life Oswald family, Pleshette shows little apprehension.

"I really don't think people are going to do anything to me or say anything simply because they connect me with this part," Pleshette said, nervously smoking a cigarette between scenes Friday. "I honestly didn't give it much thought before accepting the part. This was the sort of part I couldn't turn down."

Pleshette said his wife, who is expecting their first child, "kept saying to me before I came down here, 'Don't tell anybody in Dallas you're there to play Oswald.'"

"Actually, we're into the second week of filming here in Dallas, and there haven't been any of the problems you might expect. I know that sometimes television and movie characters run into problems playing this sort of a role, but we haven't had any trouble so far."

Pleshette was chosen for the Oswald part largely because of director David ("Rich Man, Poor Man," "Roots") Greene's immediate reaction upon seeing the actor try out.

"He started yelling, 'This is it! This is it! This is the man who must play Oswald!'" Pleshette recalled. "I'd had my sideburns trimmed for the tryout to try to get more into the hair styles of that period, but I'd never had anyone in my life tell me they thought I looked like Oswald. In fact, everybody always told me I looked like Bobby Darin."

Pleshette's hair is now cropped close to his head, and he says, "My wardrobe is the ugliest in the cast" — mostly string ties, narrow-collared white shirts and non-descript suits with narrow lapels — "although Oswald was actually very fastidious about his appearance."

"To the public, Oswald is still a tremendous mystery man," Pleshette said. "This script offered me a lot of choices about how to play this character. What I'm trying to show is the disintegration of the man. We're avoiding playing Oswald like a crazy. I don't want him to seem separate from everyone else, which tends to happen with characters who are portrayed as insane. The audience has no sympathy for someone who appears truly mad. I want to humanize Oswald, to show him as a person."

Pleshette's interpretation of Oswald is based on his research into testimony from the Warren Commission's Report, reading letters and diary entries Oswald wrote, and studying other persons' impressions of Oswald. He said much of what he read had surprised him.

"I had not really studied the assassination that much before this movie. I didn't realize Oswald had read as much as he had. He was an amazing person, I mean the things he knew about economics and governments for the little bit of education he had and all the moving from city to city he went through while he was growing up.

"There are a lot of things about Oswald I've tried to take into account. The fact he never had a father is important. He was always setting impossible goals for himself, like going into the Marines when he was only 17. He didn't do very well, and it was a tremendous disappointment to him. Then, he studied Russian and tried to defect while he was just in his early 20s. He wasn't sophisticated enough to know that a lot of what he'd read about Russia wasn't actually the way it was.

"But I think he was incredibly gutsy for his age. The last two years of his life everything seemed to accelerate for him — it was like he was maybe driven by demons," Pleshette speculated.

Pleshette spends a lot of time sitting inside the small plexiglas cubicle constructed inside the courtroom at the Col-

lin County Court House. In the movie, it will be described as a bullet-proof witness box to protect Oswald from any attacks during the trial. A microphone has been installed inside, and all Oswald's testimony is done from within the transparent cage.

Thus far, Pleshette said he hasn't felt any emotional strain in portraying Oswald. But in the coming weeks, when filming moves from McKinney and the courthouse to downtown Dallas and the School Book Depository Building, Pleshette said he anticipates that the role will begin to take its toll.

"I think the scenes where I have to go up into the Book Depository window with a gun to re-enact the assassination will really affect me," Pleshette said. "I've already been up there, and from talking to other people about the location, I know that Oswald's best shot at the motorcade would have come while the President's car came toward Oswald. But he didn't shoot then. He waited for them to pass him. I think he couldn't pull the trigger while he was looking the President straight in the face."

Pleshette said "as an actor I have formed an opinion about Oswald's guilt. For the purposes of this role I have concluded Oswald did it, even though he pleads innocent at the trial. But as a person, I have doubts that he acted alone."

Pleshette said the film, scheduled to be released in October in a two-night television special, will be "realistic, almost like a documentary."

"Every line of dialogue Oswald has in this film was either taken from something he actually said or wrote, or is very close to it," Pleshette said.

Although he declined to discuss the outcome of the trial, he said it will not draw a final conclusion about Oswald's guilt or innocence. "That will be up to the audience."