

'Years of Lightning, Day of Drums'

By John Carmody

John F. Kennedy died nine years ago today, and there is a film revival on local TV tonight that may help bring into sharper focus the distance that some of us have traveled since.

"Years of Lightning, Day of Drums" will be seen on Channel 20 (WDCA) at 8 p.m. It was written for the United States Information Agency and that agency's overseas audience in the first surge of grief following the assassination in Dallas.

While the power of that event remains within the film, the title, in retrospect, aptly conveys the overblown quality of its well-intentioned words.

More to the point, however, is the National Bank of Washington's sponsorship of this first local TV appearance of the film. It will not be interrupted by commercials, Channel 20 says, save for opening and closing remarks by NBW's president, True Davis.

It may be remembered that the George Stevens Jr.-Bruce Herschensohn effort was eventually released for showing in commercial theaters in the U.S. by Congress, a first for a USIA film. Embassy Pictures still has the rights to it, and as in the original agreement, most of the proceeds of the tonight's broadcast go to the Kennedy Center.

Channel 20 reportedly paid \$2,000 for this showing, which is being duplicated in at least 10 major cities on

this anniversary, according to a station spokesman.

Stevens, now director of the American Film Institute here, was present at a showing of the film earlier this week. He was wearing his PT-109 tieclasp and was obviously thoughtful after watching the last third of his film, which he had "not seen for several years."

The producer thinks "the spirit of the picture is still sound" and pretty well "shows the hints of change in the country" in the 11 or so years after most of the events shown.

In truth, Stevens has much to be proud of. Yet the "propaganda" devices in the 90-minute film—Stevens and other federal policy-makers divided Mr. Kennedy's White House programs into six quite-arbitrary areas of accomplishment—slow the picture down, in 1972.

Moreover, the steady reliance on President Kennedy's speechmaking now tends to outweigh the personal, sometimes heart-wrenching side of the man and the family that most of us recall.

It would be unfair to criticize the Cold War rhetoric. Too many shared it then. But the repeated bows to the Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps (the other "goals" were the conquest of space, civil rights and the end of the arms race) seem only tedious now.

We can overlook Gregory Peck's arch delivery of such lines as "Pennsylvania Avenue was a proud host" or

"Death, like a thief in the afternoon." The endless shots of Peace Corps volunteers tramping wastelands, could have been edited down (the silences are lovely and sad in places during the film).

But we can't overlook the fact—and this is the basic criticism of the film—that after nine years, too much has been explained away.

The Kennedy children have all but grown up; the major issues have undergone a qualitative change; we are looking at another country.

Yet despite the passage of time and the commercialization, this show tonight is a touching experience. And for people who cared most deeply about Mr. Kennedy, maybe it is something near an obligation to watch.