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Events

Reliving The JFK Assassination

By Walter Blum

■ Twelve years after the tragic events of Dallas, a significant number of people are still kicking around the question of who killed President John F. Kennedy.

By now everyone must be familiar with its most publicized aspects: the crucial Zapruder film of the assassination, the mystery of Officer Tippett, the various theories of conspiracy and multiple killers, of CIA and Mafia involvement and how Jack Ruby got into that basement where he murdered Lee Harvey Oswald.

Yet interest seems to be growing, as witness the fact that on a recent damp, cold night in San Francisco a crowd of some 300 — enough to fill the Starr King Room at First Unitarian Church on Franklin Street to overflowing — has gathered to hear a lecture, watch a play and knock about grim memories of that fatal day.

The speaker of the evening is J. C. Louis, an intense, attractive young man wearing a white shirt open at the throat. Louis, I am told, is one of some half dozen "assassination researchers" flourishing in the Bay Area. Looking around the room, it occurs to me that many of the younger members of the audience couldn't have been more than tots when the presidential shots were fired. But there is also a generous assortment of grayer heads. For them, November 22, 1963 is still festering like an open wound.

The lecture, and a play about Jack Ruby to follow, are being presented by a local group called DNA, which stands variously for deoxyribonucleic acid and the Dreaded Neurological Armv. Assassination

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staccato voice he launches into a recitation of the events of more than a decade ago. Slides show the motorcade entering Dealey Plaza, the grassy knoll, the Texas Book Depository where Oswald had allegedly installed himself. A loud "tsk" spreads through the hall when Louis points out that the motorcade was traveling at a deadly two miles an hour. The audience understands what that means. They know what they have come to hear.

Every detail of every slide is lovingly scrutinized. Leaning forward on hard metal folding chairs, the audience searches for figures and shadows they've been told are there. Everyone is keyed up. The atmosphere of impending doom, of some dreadful force about to erupt out of the past is almost palpable.

Then a large black shadow partly obliterates a slide. A wiry man with a gray beard and a voice clearly audible across the room explodes. "Someone's blocking that slide!" he roars. "Will they please move over." Nothing happens. The man with the gray beard and the loud voice grows even more incensed. "Someone on the right side is in the way. Can't they see that?"

The blockage is finally removed and the man subsides, muttering angrily, in his seat. Louis plows on, firing facts and figures about the limousine's speed, the number of seconds it takes to reload a rifle, pointing out the sixth floor window of the Texas Book Depository where, he says, an object is clearly visible. But gray beard is not convinced.

"Where?" he bellows. "East, north, west, — where?"

Louis refuses to lose his cool. "There," he says as the projector operator tilts the slide. "See? There's an object in that window. The Itex Corporation has determined that that object is a box, which helps give the lie to testimony by the star Warren Commission witness that he saw a gunman looking like Oswald poke a gun out the window. Next slide, please!"

The woman beside me nods. A murmur runs through the audience. The whole thing is strangely reminiscent of a trial, with 300 people sitting as the jury, sifting evidence, studying diagrams and maps, weighing statements and depositions — while in front J.C. Louis, D.A. for the city and county of mankind, sums up the case and points a finger from 2000 miles and twelve years away.

But why keep bringing it back? Is this some sort of annual ritual, repeated regularly to assuage collective guilty? Not so. Ever since Watergate, Louis tells me later, people have been questioning the legitimacy of what the government put to them as fact.

photographer Abraham Zapruder of the assassination, of which it is said that dozens of prints are in circulation around the country. Operating the projector himself, Louis rolls the film, using stop-action to freeze particular frames.

Louis' voice climbs to a peak of intensity. He knows every frame on the film by heart. "Now the car comes out from behind the sign. Zapruder frame 227. Kennedy has been struck in the back. Connally has yet to be hit." Click. "Connally turns." Click. "There is a whole second delay." Click. "Until —" Click, click. "Right there. Zapruder frame 240. Connally is hit by a completely different bullet."

The audience stirs uncomfortably.

Louis' voice lingers on this moment of triumph. "That's too much time for the single-bullet theory," he declares, "and not enough time for another shot from Oswald's rifle. Hence, conspiracy. Two gunmen. Q.E.D."

Questions are flying around the room. Someone wants to know why Jackie Kennedy was crawling around on the back of the presidential limousine. Louis has an instant answer. "The blowups show that the President was hit by such a forceful blow to his head that a piece of it — a piece of his head — was knocked backwards." The audience lets out a simultaneous gasp of horror. "And what Jackie Kennedy was doing, you see, was climbing out on the trunk of the limousine to retrieve that piece."

The warm bodies in the room seem to have become paralyzed. The woman beside me groans. She clutches her handbag, then sinks her head in her hands and looks as though she's going to be sick.

At intermission the audience mills about nervously in the church lobby. Stacks of assassination literature lie on a card table, petitions to reopen the inquiry, bibliographies, copies of the Congressional Record, forms for ordering bumper stickers. A well-dressed woman in a brown babushka tells me that she and her husband are shocked.

Not by what has been revealed here. Oh, no. "We're shocked because the young people seem to be just discovering what we've known for years — that there are conspiracies." Then turning to me full face she says, "It's a vindication of the old radicals." And finally: "Don't you believe it was a conspiracy?" I stumble apologetically back into the hall.

A few days later, Louis is on the phone expressing his satisfaction at the evening's fine turnout.

Because of gatherings like this, he says, and the persistence of critics who still question the Warren Commission, there is a fifty-fifty chance that the inquiry will be