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P. Arnold, GARY
Executive
Action
(original
Arnold)

More Like 'Executive' Agitprop

By Gary Arnold

If the falsifying techniques used in the new melodrama "Executive Action," opening today at half-a-dozen area theaters, had been practiced by slightly more talented filmmakers, the result might have been an effective and even dangerous piece of cinematic agitprop.

The idea is to juxtapose images of President Kennedy during the last five months of his life with fictional scenes of a group of rich, right-wing conspirators, fearful of civil rights and detente, who plot and carry out the assassination in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

In this context the documentary footage shills for the fictional footage. We're invited to confuse the two, recalling so many fond memories and regrets during the documentary stuff that we neglect to view the fictional stuff with the skepticism it deserves.

Film

Obviously, the device is also suspenseful, or at least potentially suspenseful. We appear to be following the movements of the documentary Kennedy and his movie assassins more or less simultaneously, until their movements fatefully coincide in Dallas. It's a bit like the buildup used in "The Day of the Jackal."

The concept might have proved spellbinding and emotionally devastating in the hands of a director like Costa-Gavras. The saving grace of "Executive Action"—derived from a polemical suspense novel by Donald Freed and Mark Lane—is that it's the work of feeble, butterfingersed old Hollywood manipulators. While they obviously want to manipulate us, their devices have grown so transparent and their craftsmanship so perfunctory that "Executive Action" is likely to fool only those people who believe everything they see on a movie screen or those who still can't look at images of President Kennedy without having their critical faculties numbed by grief.

Producer Edward Lewis, director David Miller and screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, the trio principally responsible for "Executive Action," collaborated 11 years ago on the Kirk Douglas picture "Lonely Are the Brave," an exciting chase melodrama interrupted now and then for Trumbo's inevitable public service announcements, which took the form of sentimental, unconvincing style of

mental effusions about the demise of the nonconforming American.

Lewis and Trumbo were previously associated on "Spartacus." Lewis and Burt Lancaster, one of the co-stars of "Executive Action," were previously associated on John Frankenheimer's movie version of "Seven Days in May." David Miller, now 64, began in the movie business back in 1930, and "Lonely Are the Brave" is no doubt the high point of his career.

In the credit sequence we see the names of the leading actors — Lancaster, Robert Ryan and Will Geer—superimposed over images of, respectively, an oil refinery, a stock exchange and a bank vault. If one approaches this movie in a slightly cynical spirit, it's amusing to ask yourself if these symbols are supposed to represent Kennedy or the conspirators, particularly when the movie fails to follow through adequately on the subliminal suggestions. Ryan and Geer are plutocrats of some sort, but Lancaster appears to be in the employ of an unspecified government agency, presumably the CIA.

Of course, one doesn't need crib notes to catch onto the suggestion the filmmakers want — the credits clearly imply that Kennedy was killed because he was a threat to wealth and privilege. But it's typical of these filmmakers that they can't even put over their own little deceptions in a subtle, credible or consistent fashion.

The fictional scene opens at a country estate somewhere or other where Lancaster and Ryan attempt to persuade a reluctant Geer that Kennedy must be assassinated. The dialogue in this and subsequent scenes makes one wonder if Dalton Trumbo labored without credit on "Tora! Tora! Tora!" He repeats the same ponderous cadences and dry-as-dust expository dialogue, read by actors evidently told they were playing mechanical men.

In addition, Trumbo writes in the responses. After one actor finishes conveying a piece of information, another immediately articulates the reaction Trumbo wants from the audience. The result is a flat, unconvincing style of

dramatic writing I've ever listened to—like an oratorio with the music omitted—and it's a giant clue to what ails the elder left-wing Hollywood crowd as either would-be persuaders or would-be artists.

Trumbo gives his conspirators what I consider a peculiarly unconvincing set of motives for the killing. He asserts that they act because Kennedy is about to "lead the black revolution, initiate a test-ban treaty with the Russians and pull out of Vietnam." These fears are going to be met with considerable cynicism in a lot of college (and noncollege) towns around the country, but for the moment let's ignore a point that canny filmmakers shouldn't ignore—namely, that history has played some dirty, discrediting tricks on Kennedy's liberal image.

The point is that these motives would make sense only in extreme, desperate right-wing circles, among men so divorced from normal political commerce and influence that they could willfully misconstrue Kennedy's statements and policies. The slip-up in "Executive Action" is that the conspirators are portrayed as insiders to the extent that they're characterized at all. These are rich, powerful men who seem to have impeccable sources in the highest councils of government. Indeed, their information is so good that they pull off the assassination without a hitch.

If they're this well-informed and well-connected to begin with, why aren't they hip to Kennedy's essential conservatism and why can't they get his ear?

Trumbo tries to have his cake and eat it. He can't resist making the conspirators sleek, sophisticated, worldly types — power figures he seems to envy and admire. At the same time he gives them unworlly, outlooks of right-wing fanatics who be-

lieve the Reds and the blacks will overwhelm White Civilization any minute now.

However, I think the real giveaway in "Executive Action" is the fact that these filmmakers can't envision an assassination plot in which Lee Harvey Oswald was involved. Despite appearances, it is not such a big deal to make a film questioning the verdict of the Warren Commission. If the Gallup Poll is correct, two-thirds of the American public question that verdict, at least to the extent of doubting that Oswald operated alone.

In "Executive Action" Oswald is a poor, unfortunate fall guy, selected precisely for that role by a computer. It's a difficult theory to swallow, particularly when one looks and listens to Oswald again in his brief appearances before history's cameras and microphones. One gets the impression of a devious boy and maybe a schizophrenic boy but not of an innocent boy. However, he could not be anything but innocent to this group of sentimental melodramatists. He is the Little Man who gets victimized by the Big Men. One cliché is unthinkable without the other.

There's no escaping the fact that the release date of "Executive Action" is tasteless in the extreme.

If the men responsible for making and distributing this picture were truly interested in the truth and nothing but the truth, why couldn't they have resisted the temptation to release it on the eve of the 10th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination?

It's not as if the reliability of the Warren Commission is an issue that needs to be settled this month. It's an ongoing controversy, and if this movie has a pertinent theory, that theory won't be less pertinent next month or

continued

next year. It's difficult to resist the conclusion that the filmmakers were more concerned with the main chance and timed the release in accord with the maximum feasible potential for commercial ballyhoo and exploitation.