

DVD Select: Bullets, 'Bobby' and the Hollywood elite

by Robert J. Hawkins

Don't misunderstand me, "Bobby" (Genius, 3 1/2 stars) is a fine piece of filmmaking. Emilio Estevez did a nice job pulling together the cultural and political storms that buffeted society in 1968 and wove them into an engrossing tale of the 24 hours leading up to Robert Kennedy's assassination in Los Angeles on June 4.

But even more engrossing is the actual film footage of Kennedy on the campaign trail that Estevez has salted through his film.

In this day of tightly scripted politicians and political "events," it is staggering to watch Kennedy out there, quite literally, among the people. No filters, no script, no token voters, no electronic signage to tell people how to feel and what to think.

Scene after scene shows Kennedy standing in the back of a convertible reaching out to touch the people, shake hands and offer a cheerful greeting with that charismatic Kennedy smile.

One particularly telling scene shows the Kennedy caravan on a road trip through Appalachia.

Where? You almost never hear about Appalachia these days - that strip of East Coast mountains populated by coal miners, hunger, poverty, pickup trucks and ignorance (back then, at least). And here was Kennedy, son of a Massachusetts self-made millionaire, pulling over in some backwater hollow to talk with the residents, step into their houses and touch their lives.

Compare that to the tightly regulated arenas in which George Bush chooses to operate - VFW conventions, conservative Christian colleges, military industrial plants, military bases, gatherings of oil men and bankers and millionaires ("my base").

Were those simpler times? Hardly. Look at all the idealists murdered before Bobby entered the race: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, John Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King. Those were far more dangerous times - for a political idealist.

'BOBBY' - Emilio Estevez and Demi Moore lead a star-studded cast in the drama 'Bobby.' CNS Photo courtesy of The Weinstein Co.

As the movie portrays it, the June 4 California primary was a make-or-break event for Kennedy. If he lost, which he didn't, he was going to pull out of the race and concede it to Eugene McCarthy. His headquarters was

in the fateful Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, which is where virtually the entire story takes place.

"Bobby" is something of a cross between the old "Grand Hotel" epic and "Love Boat." Estevez has us follow the lives of some 22 characters. Many of them are guests and employees of the hotel, some are campaign workers. And for many of them, their relationship to Kennedy and the assassination isn't really apparent until the closing scenes of the film. And some never make a connection. They are the "Love Boat" crowd.

Rather than honing in on a handful of characters, Estevez chooses to swamp the movie with life stories big and small. There is the philandering hotel manager played by William H. Macy, his racist food and beverage manager (Christian Slater), his wife the manicurist (Sharon Stone) and the hotel's retired greeter (Anthony Hopkins) and a second retiree (Harry Belafonte).

Down in the kitchen the chef (Laurence Fishburne) oversees a crew of blacks and Hispanics who are seething, especially Jose (Freddy Rodriguez) and Miguel (Jacob Vargas), under the pressure of white oppression.

Among the hotel's guests are a businessman and his image-obsessed wife (Martin Sheen and Helen Hunt), and a young couple getting married to keep the groom out of Vietnam (Elijah Wood and Lindsay Lohan). There's a fading alcoholic pop singer and her disabused husband (Demi Moore and Emilio Estevez). Occupying one hotel room is a longhaired hippy drug dealer (Ashton Kutcher) who sells LSD to a couple of young campaign goof-offs (Shia LaBeouf and Brian Geraghty).

The Kennedy campaign team is lead by a multiracial team (Joshua Jackson and Nick Cannon) who seem to transcend race issues in favor of Kennedy idealism, except when it comes to a Czech journalist (Svetlana Metkina) who wants five minutes with Kennedy. Cold War thinking was still alive, even among the enlightened.

Like I said, it's a really long list of stars, but it helps us pass the fateful day and give us ample opportunity to reflect on '60s stereotypes. Then we get down to business - Kennedy's victory speech ("... on to Chicago! And let's win there!") and his fateful trek through the Ambassador's kitchen. That's where Sirhan Sirhan (barely more than a flash in the film, David Kobzantsev) waited with a gun, inexplicably bent on killing the last, best hope for American idealism.

Maybe it wasn't the death of idealism, but notice was served: We kill our idealists. (John Lennon never got the message.)

After Bobby, the realists took over and put a price tag on everything.

The extras on the "Bobby" DVD include the usual making-of feature as well as a poignant panel discussion by a handful of people who were in the Ambassador that night, including United Farm Workers co-founder Dolores Huerta, student coordinator (and later Los Angeles controller) Rick Tuttle and one of the doctors who stepped forward to save lives of victims hit by stray bullets that night.

After being shot, Bobby Kennedy died June 6, 1968.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"The Aura" (Genius Products, 2 stars) An epileptic taxidermist takes his first-ever hunting trip and happens upon the opportunity to fulfill his biggest dream: executing the perfect crime. Spanish with English subtitles. For director/writer Fabian Bielinsky this was a last hurrah. He died of a heart attack in June 2005.

"Flannel Pajamas" (Hart Sharp, 2 1/2 stars) Love in the time of too much information. A couple, Justin Kirk and Julianne Nicholson, meet on a blind date in Manhattan, fall in love and get married but must navigate the gauntlet of critical friends, relatives, career demands, conflicting religions and all those other modern-day stresses.

"Hacking Democracy" (Docurama, 2 1/2 stars) So how did some electronic voting machines end up with negative votes for John Kerry in that election? Voter fraud in the high-tech era. Unsettling? You better believe it. This documentary originally aired on HBO.

"My Father the Genius" (Metro Home Entertainment, 2 stars) Glen Howard Small was a major star in the world of architecture at age 31, sure that he could "save the world through architecture." Thirty years later he faces a life of unfulfilled expectations. He left behind a trail of ex-wives, ex-girlfriends and alienated children. One of them, Lucia Small, turns a critical - but fair - lens on her father.

IT CAME FROM TV

"How William Shatner Changed the World" (Alumination Filmworks, 2 stars) With tongue firmly in cheek, Shatner explores the technological advances that can be traced, in some fashion, to his original "Star Trek" series and its many progeny. You know, flip-open phones, medical diagnostic imaging, virtual reality.

Serial killings: Season one, volume one, of "The Streets of San Francisco" starring a young Michael Douglas and Karl Malden; season one, volume one, of epic Elliot Ness-iness "The Untouchables."

FROM THE VAULTS

"Payback - Straight Up: Director's Cut" (Paramount, 1999) Mel Gibson with a mean streak, how ironic is that? He's a career crook left for dead and stripped of the big wad of cash due him. Revenge will be his, at all costs. Director Brian Helgeland offers an all-new ending.

"Shanghai Surprise: Special Edition" (Lionsgate, 1986) To my knowledge, this DVD does not contain an apology from Sean Penn, Madonna or director Jim Goddard - so I'm not sure why you'd want to rent it.

"Major League: Wild Thing Edition" (Paramount, 1989) Good baseball comedy with Charlie Sheen, Tom Berenger, Corbin Bernsen, Wesley Snipes and Rene Russo. Oh, yeah, and the inimitable but often imitated Bob Uecker.

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin

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