

Jackie (2016)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 40 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 5; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.

John 9:1

*Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.*

Psalms 31:9

*"Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot,
for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot"*

Lerner & Loewe

Chilean director Pablo Larraín's first English-language film is a speculative "true story" about a famous American woman wracked by grief and determined to shape how the tragedy that produced her sorrow is to be told to the world. The director's scriptwriter Noah Oppenheim wisely builds the interpretive screenplay around the interview conducted by journalist Theodore H. White (Billy Crudup) for *Life* magazine at the Kennedy compound in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts just a week after President Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963. This interview anchors the many flashbacks, not just to November 22, but also to the redecorating of the White House; her unprecedented televised White House Tour; the Pablo Casals concert held in the East Room; the planning of the events surrounding the President's funeral; and the packing for moving out to make way for the Johnsons.

Aboard the plane that has brought them to Dallas Jackie practices in Spanish her short greetings, then descends with Jack (Caspar Phillipson) to meet the Connallys and the Johnsons. We are shown the motorcade, but the filmmakers hold off depicting the tragic murder until later. In the interview itself, Jackie exhibits her steely determination to control the story. First, it is she who initiated the interview by calling *Life*. And second, by her sparring with the Journalist (no name is given to this Ted White stand-in, played by Billy Crudup), she seeks to control the results. She tells him that she will edit the article itself, to which he replies that that is hardly likely. Later, when she shares an intimate detail about her feelings, she declares, "Don't think for one minute I'm going to let you publish that." He tells her that some personal details should be included so that the public will see the human wife and mother behind her cool public persona. At the end, while the journalist has stepped out of the room to call a cab, she even looks over his notebook and jots down some notes in it.

Except for that hairdo and unforgettable pink Chanel suit and pillbox hat, Natalie Portman does not really look like Jackie, and yet she is completely convincing. She achieves this through her voice, nailing Jackie's soft, whispery voice and finishing school diction. The actress displays the shock, grief and determination that the real Jackie must have felt on November 22. The latter we see right off when in a daze, she stands by President Johnson as he is sworn in, and then later, when Air Force One has landed in Washington, she refuses to be shunted aside as the widow. An aide has told her that she should exit by the rear door where she will not be noticed. She refuses, insisting that the world must see her amidst her grief. And so, she does leave via the same door as the new President and his wife. (She also had refused Mrs. Johnson's suggestion that she change from her blood-stained suit, saying, "I want them to see what they have done to Jack.")

In the hearse, in which she and brother-in-law Bobby sit by the casket, she seemingly casually asks the driver if he remembers Garfield or McKinley, two other slain US Presidents. The driver says he does not. She asks about Lincoln, and he replies without hesitation that he is the President who freed the slaves. Determining that her husband would not be forgotten like Garfield or McKinley, she has an aide lay out photographs and other materials on the elaborate funeral procession for Lincoln. She decides that she will walk behind the caisson, despite the Secret Service's objections that she could be the next victim of an assassination. Although Oswald was in custody, no one knew whether he was part of a larger conspiracy, so their fears were justified. She also decides that her husband will not be buried in the family plot up in Massachusetts, but in Arlington Cemetery, and thus is driven over to it to examine possible sites.

The scriptwriter's inclusion of snippets of the 1962 network television special, *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy*, reveals the public perception of Jackie as a First Lady concerned mainly with fashion. The black and white scenes are recreated, with Ms. Portman appearing nervous at first, but reassured by her loyal staffer Nancy Tuckerman (Greta Gerwig) standing just off camera. Gaining confidence, Jackie deftly describes the historic significance of the expensive items she has brought back into the White House, especially the items from Lincoln's presidency. She explains that it is important for the American people to see the deep historical connection between the current occupant of the Executive Mansion and those who have gone before. When Jack is introduced at the end of the tour, he admits to his initial skepticism about the redecoration, but now understands his wife's desire to have people understand the history of this house that symbolizes the nation.

There are many other great scenes, such as the one in which she informs little John and Caroline about their father's

death. Of course, the graphic depiction of the murder itself produces the horror of the deed, the hand-held camera showing her huddled over her husband's body and Agent Hill covering her with his own body while the car speeds toward the hospital. Nor will you forget the scene back in Washington that night as Jackie removes her blood-spattered suit, struggles to remove her stained panty hose, and then in the shower washes off the blood from her hair and neck.

Those of us old enough to remember being glued to our television sets at the time will be surprised at some of the events we did not know about, such as, after Oswald's shooting, Jackie was so furious with Bobby because he had allowed no one to tell her about the killing until later, and even more, how this had convinced her to cancel plans for marching behind the caisson because of the danger. Nearly at the last moment she changes her mind, telling presidential aide Jack Valenti (Max Casella) that she and her brothers will walk to the church after all. Valenti tries to explain that it is impossible, but she does not yield. Walk they do, and if you do not blink, you will catch a brief glimpse of the President of France, the tall General de Gaulle, about whom she and Valenti had spoken.

I was surprised and gladdened by the inclusion of a man simply called The Priest (John Hurt) who appears frequently as her spiritual counselor. Her aide and friend Nancy offers valuable support, but the cleric is better equipped to help Jackie deal with her anguished doubts that have shaken the foundation of her faith. In the first scene together, while walking in a park, she states that God is cruel. Knowing where she is going, he half-jokingly replies, "Now you're getting into trouble..." He says, "God is love and is everywhere." With a trace of bitterness, she asks if God was in the bullet that killed her husband, and he answers, "Yes." He speaks about God being hidden, and amidst her anguish she asks what kind of a God takes a husband from his two children, ending with the

mention of her two previously deceased infants.

We find Jackie and the priest together again, Jackie confessing that she wishes she'd had an ordinary job and married an ordinary man. The priest tells her the Parable of the Man Born Blind, suggesting that she is like the blind man. Now she is the one who is blind, blind to what God will say or do through her. During the funeral procession, there is a third flashback in which she confesses that the procession was as much for herself as for Jack. She had written a letter in which she stated that she wanted to die. If a sniper would shoot her, she would consider it a kind gesture. In still another encounter, the Priest asks why she has come to him, and she replies that she wants to die. He asserts that he is not burying her today. He adds that there comes a point in a person's search for meaning when he understands that there are no answers. He confesses that every night at bedtime he asks, "Is this all there is?" So does everyone else, he surmises. The last time we see the priest he is officiating in Arlington at the interment of the two infant Kennedys, whose bodies have been moved from the plot in Massachusetts so they can lie beside their father.

The Priest is a made-up character, a composite of several priests with whom Jackie had corresponded with in the year after the assassination. As scriptwriter Noah Oppenheim has explained, "She did descend into a pretty dark place; she was really grappling with her faith, her will to live, her sense of justice in the world." I think this is a wonderful addition enriching the portrait of a strong woman confronting the darkness with her anguished doubts. It is also a good example of an honest person of faith, a Roman Catholic priest, no less, admitting that there are no "answers" to tragedy. He does not offer the platitudes or bromides we too often hear beside a casket or an open grave. What he does offer is what we also can offer to those wracked by grief, our loving presence, and the belief that is summed up in

“Nevertheless...”

Everything works together in this beautiful tribute to Jackie Kennedy, including the score by Mica Levi, its often eeriness keeping viewers from settling in too deeply into their comfortable theater seats. The scriptwriter takes many liberties in writing the dialogue spoken in privacy, as well as in a fictional sequence during which Jackie in her confusion and mental turmoil tries on dress after dress from her stylish wardrobe. The many close-ups of faces at times made me feel like I was intruding into the privacy that she prized so keenly. Indeed, this would be my complaint about the film, but is a minor one. In a way, the filmmakers are offering their film version of the Kennedy myth. Just as Jackie began the association of her husband's presidency with the Arthurian legend of Camelot, abetted by journalist Ted White's quoting the musical at the end of his *Life* interview, so now will generations of film viewers perceive this courageous (and creative) woman through this film—one made not by an American, but a Chilean!

Note: This film skips over the traumatic events at Dallas's Parkland Hospital, to which both President Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald were taken after they were shot. The little known but excellent film *Parkland* reports on this, focusing far less on the Kennedy's and more on the doctors and nurses there, plus the businessman who shot the 8-mm footage of the murder, the frustration and guilty feelings of the head of the Secret Agent detail and an FBI, and the surviving members of the Oswald family.

Also, there is the interesting *Love Field*, the title named after the Dallas airport where the Kennedys landed. It stars Michelle Pfeiffer as a Dallas beautician so obsessed with the Kennedys that when she learns of the President's death determines to travel to Washington to be participate in the funeral events available to the public, despite the objections of her boorish husband.

See the reviews on this site.

This review with a set of questions will be in the Jan. 2017 issue of VP.