

The Robert Kennedy phenomenon goes unexplored in *Bobby*

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Bobby, written and directed by Emilio Estevez

Emilio Estevez's *Bobby* is an effort to capture the atmosphere of American life at a tumultuous time. The setting is the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles on June 4, 1968, the day of the California Democratic presidential primary, which pit New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy (the "Bobby" of the title) against Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy, both of them by then outspoken opponents of the Vietnam War. Kennedy won the vote, but was fatally shot in the hotel's kitchen shortly after making his victory speech.

Estevez combines archival footage of Kennedy touring and speaking with a fictional narrative that follows the activities of nearly two dozen characters at the Ambassador—hotel guests, employees and Kennedy campaign workers alike—during the 16 hours that lead up to the assassination.

For obvious and ominous reasons, particular attention is paid to relations among the kitchen staff. Miguel (Jacob Vargas), a baseball fanatic, has tickets to see a Los Angeles Dodgers' game, in which pitcher Don Drysdale will attempt to set a record for shutout innings, but the scheduled events at the hotel oblige him to work a double-shift and miss the game. His fellow Mexican-American, José (Freddy Rodriguez), tussles verbally with the black chef (Laurence Fishburne) over race and class issues. Their boss (Christian Slater) is fired for obvious racism by *his* superior (William H. Macy)—who is involved in an affair with a hotel switchboard operator (Heather Graham)—after the former explains that he has no plans to give the staff time off to vote: "They're not gonna vote. Half of them are illegal, they can't vote."

Against her parents' wishes, a young woman (Lindsay Lohan) is marrying a young man (Elijah Wood) she doesn't know very well, in order to keep from him being dispatched to Vietnam. A pair of campaign workers (Brian Geraghty and Shia LaBeouf) experiment with LSD under the guidance of the hotel's resident hippie (Ashton Kutcher). A black Kennedy supporter (Nick Cannon), who tells his colleague, "Now that Dr. [Martin Luther] King is gone, no one's left but Bobby," is invited by the candidate himself for a conversation.

A vaguely unhappy couple (Estevez' father, Martin Sheen, and Helen Hunt) attempt to work out their difficulties. Another pair, alcoholic singer (Demi Moore) and her husband (Estevez), a former musician, seem unlikely to escape their personal misery. The singer tells a hotel hairdresser (Sharon Stone), the wife of the Macy character, that "You know, we're all whores, but only some of us get paid," but then apologizes, "I'm an awful drunk." A Czech reporter (Svetlana Metkina) implores a Kennedy campaign official (Joshua Jackson) for "five minutes" with the candidate. Two older men, Nelson (Harry Belafonte) and John (Anthony Hopkins), a retired doorman, hang around the hotel lobby playing chess.

Unhappily, none of the strands of the story are seriously developed. Some of them go nowhere at all. It remains a mystery, for example, what one is to make of the Belafonte-Hopkins conversations, except that the

two are aging and not pleased about it. Equally, the Sheen-Hunt vignette is peculiar. She seems to find it difficult to assert herself and worries too much about what pair of shoes to wear. Somewhat out of the blue, Sheen gets down on his knees in their hotel room and tells her that "You're more than your shoes, your dress, your purse . . . you're more than these things."

Lohan does well in her brief role, along with Vargas and Fishburne in particular, but the collection of small dramas contributes little to our understanding of the time, the country's politics or Kennedy himself.

Estevez takes as his starting-point an uncritical admiration for Robert Kennedy. Martin Sheen was a staunch supporter of the senator and presidential hopeful, who introduced his son to the latter at the age of six. Sheen has played John F. Kennedy (in the miniseries *Kennedy—The Presidential Years*) and Robert Kennedy in *The Missiles of October*, a television special. Of course, he also played President Josiah Bartlett, a Hollywood liberal's fantasy of a Democratic president, for seven seasons on the television series *The West Wing*.

The gravitational pull of the need to canonize Kennedy damages *Bobby* as an art work beyond repair. With his large cast and "egalitarian" network of interconnected stories, Estevez was presumably influenced by certain of the late Robert Altman's films, *Nashville*, *A Wedding*, *Short Cuts* and others. However, in Altman's films the actions of the various characters are propelled by something embedded in the social-psychological situation. Something disturbing at the center of things, which unifies the given work, however hazy Altman may be about its exact nature, is sending the personae spinning off centrifugally.

Here the characters primarily exist to be set off in relief against the personality and tragedy of Robert Kennedy. In the end, he is nearly everything, and they count for very little. They stand and mourn or weep as the enormity of the event sweeps over them (like spectators, one must say without too much exaggeration, at the Crucifixion), but the focus is not on their lives or subsequent destinies. Life and vitality flows out of them toward the body of the wounded and dying candidate. At the end of the film, the various personae are empty and barren. We know that everything will be downhill from now on, since the decisive event—the assassination—has occurred, sealing the fate of everyone, one is meant to feel, in America. (Is this not the view of Sheen and others?)

Estevez no doubt began with democratic intentions, befitting what he takes to be his idol's outlook, by inventing and displaying his twenty characters. Ironically, he has accomplished the opposite, creating an artistic universe where every public or private action only takes on present and future meaning in relation to the great man's death. It seems evident that Estevez, through and along with his father, remains traumatized by Robert Kennedy's murder, which, following the killings of John Kennedy and King, eliminated from public life the most capable leaders of American liberalism and set the stage for a sharp shift to the right in political life in the United States.

One can feel the anguish of Sheen and Estevez without accepting it

uncritically or pretending that this sentiment is alone capable of generating meaningful artistic work.

To make an insightful and *useful* film about a subject like this, which is certainly a subject that deserves to be brought to the attention of generations that know very little about the history, one needs to have a more serious approach. At the very least, the filmmaker would need to put aside the desire to beatify his or her subject. After all, whatever overall and ultimate conclusions the artist might draw, he or she is not depicting St. Francis of Assisi, but a successful American politician, from a very wealthy and famous family, whose career extended over decades. Isn't it possible that there might be a few black spots on the record? Isn't there reason enough to proceed with one's eyes open? Alas, this is not Estevez's method.

A film is not a history lesson, but what's the point in making a film about history if one's real interest doesn't lie in bringing out its complex and contradictory character? Our film contains two elements: the presence of the saintly Kennedy, on the one hand, and, on the other, a succession of walking clichés: the hippie turning on the unsuspecting to LSD, the drunk singer and her 'kept' husband (complete with lapdog), the wise and tolerant black cook, the "militant" Chicano nationalist who spouts slogans, the philandering hotel manager, etc.

Estevez begins his film with a title explaining that 1968 was a year of great turmoil. We see footage of fighting in Vietnam, riots in the inner cities, mass demonstrations and more. The immensity of the political crisis in America in 1968 is undeniable. (An article published last year on the WSWS, "Eugene McCarthy, dead at 89, played pivotal role in 1968 political crisis", explains this in some detail.) However, very little of the upheaval, with its potentially revolutionary implications, enters into *Bobby*. In the film Kennedy incarnates salvation for the population, whose role is largely left to helping his campaign along or watching admiringly from the sidelines.

In fact, masses of people, especially young people, were horrified by the scale of the murder and destruction in Southeast Asia, as well as the state of American capitalist society itself. In the end, the Kennedy campaign was designed to contain that anger and disgust within harmless, or relatively harmless, channels. From that point of view, the film's portrait of a set of rather tepid personalities in and around the Kennedy camp has a certain accuracy. Unfortunately, Estevez doesn't mean them to be tepid, but rather the boldest and the brightest.

None of this is to suggest that Robert Kennedy had no attractive qualities. Clearly, *Bobby* is meant to contrast Kennedy favorably to the present crowd in Washington, in both the Democratic and Republican parties. This is more or less knocking on an open door. The parallels between the Vietnam and Iraq debacles hardly need to be underscored. The archival footage does hold our interest. The intelligence and seriousness of Kennedy's comments on the Vietnam war (including his paraphrase of Tacitus—"The Romans brought devastation and they called it peace"—and his plea for "No more Vietnams"), on poverty, on pollution, on race and on America itself (citing Jefferson's comment that America was "the last best hope of mankind"), stand in stark contrast to the inanity and ignorance, or worse, that we've come to expect from Washington in our day.

The footage also documents a moment in American history when political events were not entirely stage-managed and embalmed affairs, as they are today. We see crowds, coal miners in West Virginia, African-Americans in the cities, animated by genuine enthusiasm in the presence of a politician. This writer is old enough to remember an occasion during Kennedy's run for the US Senate in New York in 1964 when the candidate showed up on a neighborhood street corner and crowds gathered spontaneously to listen attentively to what he had to say.

As another WSWS essay ("Reflections on the 40th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination") noted, a schizophrenic quality attaches itself to

the Kennedy phenomenon. About John Kennedy, the piece remarked on the duality in both his personal and public lives. In the latter sphere, the president could utter phrases that inspired a sense of idealism, while his administration engaged in the bloodiest conspiracies in various parts of the globe.

Something similar might be said about Robert Kennedy. One of his first significant forays into public life is associated with the infamous figure of Senator Joseph McCarthy. In 1953 McCarthy appointed Kennedy as one of the assistant counsels to the Senate subcommittee on investigations. The latter dutifully red-baiting with the best of them. After the Wisconsin senator's political demise, Kennedy began a crusade against corruption in the Teamsters union: in fact, a thinly veiled anti-union witch-hunt. Under his brother's administration, Kennedy was intimately involved in conspiracies against the Castro regime and authorized the FBI's wiretapping of Martin Luther King. It was that administration, moreover, in which Robert Kennedy played a leading role, that escalated US intervention in Vietnam, leading to a tragedy of vast proportions.

Nonetheless, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Kennedy's turn against the war and against Lyndon Johnson's policy, even while one keeps in mind the longer-term motives and wider political context. Johnson made no bones about his hatred of Kennedy. At a meeting on February 6, 1967, the president reportedly told him, "I'll destroy you and every one of your dove friends. You'll be dead politically in six months." To the contrary, his opposition to the war brought Kennedy immense popularity.

In March 1967 Kennedy raised the issue of morality and the Vietnam War in a speech: "Although the world's imperfection may call forth the act of war, righteousness cannot obscure the agony and pain those acts bring to a single child. It is we who live in abundance and send our young men out to die. It is our chemicals that scorch the children and our bombs that level the villages. We are all participants."

In a television interview later in 1967 Kennedy again returned to the morality of the war: "We're going in there and we're killing South Vietnamese, we're killing children, we're killing women, we're killing innocent people because we don't want a war fought on American soil, or because [the Viet Cong are] 12,000 miles away and they might get 11,000 miles away. Do we have the right, here in the United States, to say we're going to kill tens of thousands, make millions of people, as we have, millions of people refugees, killing women and children, as we have." No one would dare use such language today in mainstream American politics.

Perhaps even more shocking, by contemporary standards, was Kennedy's reaction to a student heckler at the Indiana University Medical Center in 1968, following King's assassination, who demanded to know from where the money was going to come to pay for all the new social programs the Democratic presidential candidate was proposing. Kennedy replied bluntly, "From you. I look around this room and I don't see many black faces who will become doctors. Part of a civilized society is to let people go to medical school who come from ghettos. I don't see many people coming here from the slums, or off of Indian reservations. You are the privileged ones here." The students reacted by hissing and booing Kennedy.

Estevez's *Bobby*, like the overwhelming majority of historical films today, has no right to be so much less fascinating and disturbing and illuminating than history itself.



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