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First lady's private grief becomes public in new Larrain film

Chilean director's first English-language film examines Mrs. Kennedy after JFK's murder

The first English-language feature by 40-year-old Chilean director Pablo Larrain, "Jackie" depicts the days surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Told in flashback from the perspective of Jacqueline Kennedy, this tragic film is more psychological portrait than biopic — although the two are inextricably entwined — and Natalie Portman plays the former first lady with the same dark energy that won her an Academy Award for "Black Swan."

This Jackie is lonely and isolated. The movie doesn't evoke the early 1960s as we have come to remember them, so much as one woman's emotional state — desolate, distant and remote.

Portman takes this brittle character to the brink of a breakdown, as Jackie haunts the halls of the White House anesthetizing herself with wine and cigarettes, stroking her beautiful possessions and

playing Lerner and Loewe's "Camelot" on the private quarters' Victrola.

But despair is a luxury she can't afford, and she pulls herself together in time to shape her husband's legacy.

The movie opens as the widow Kennedy parries with an unnamed journalist (Billy Crudup) during an interview at the Kennedy family's Hyannis Port

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compound shortly after the president's funeral.

She tells her version of events and is unvarnished in her tight-fisted control of the flow of information. (In fact, Jacqueline Kennedy did give an interview to Theodore H. White after the as-



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sassination, which was published in the December 1963 issue of Life magazine and has been credited as the beginning of the Camelot myth.)

Notwithstanding its meticulous replicas of costumes and interiors, "Jackie" abandons atmospherics of the era that many may take for granted. Although the Kennedys' voices are as familiar to us as family members', no one in the

(2006), state funerals have all of the elements of drama backstage — tragedy and grief, pomp and circumstance and factions fighting for dominance in the ensuing vacuum.

The stakes are high — who lives, who dies, who tells your story? While the first film ultimately affirmed the future of the monarchy in the hands of the literal descendants of "Camelot," "Jackie" affirms the allegorical, aspirational ideal of its metaphorical heirs.

That Jacqueline Kennedy would rise from the ashes to shape this legacy was by no means inevitable.

She was denied at every turn by dismissive men who treated her like a child, rushed out of the White House by Lyndon Johnson's minions and dismissed by government officials who argued that the president's accomplishments did not merit acclaim.

It took root because she demanded her husband receive the laurels he deserved — the Lincoln funeral plan, the march of dignitaries and the eternal flame.

Lorrain suggests she did all this to soothe her own sorrow. Perhaps.

But she knew her response mattered. It was up to her to console the grieving nation as well as her own soul.

Her steel was hardened by outrage as well as anguish and her actions in that moment ensured her husband's legacy would endure: "It will not be forgot/that once there was a spot/for one brief shining moment/that was known as Camelot."