

Powerful Parkland



By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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An extraordinary new retelling of the JFK assassination, Parkland takes a closer look at one of the 20th century's most examined events in a unique new light. The film takes a question that defined a generation of Americans: "Where were you when John F Kennedy was assassinated?"- and answers it through the eyes of a group of ordinary citizens who were called upon to do the unthinkable.

Parkland is the ferocious, heart-stopping and powerful untold true story of the people behind the scenes of one of the most scrutinised events in history. It weaves together the perspectives of a handful of ordinary individuals suddenly thrust into extraordinary circumstances: the young doctors and nurses at Parkland Hospital; Dallas' chief of the Secret Service; an unwitting cameraman who captured what became the most watched and examined film in history; the FBI agents who nearly had the gunman within their grasp; the brother of Lee Harvey Oswald, left to deal with his shattered family; and JFK's security team, witnesses both to the president's death and Vice-President Lyndon Johnson's rise to power over a nation whose innocence was forever altered.



Four Days In November

Based on the book Four Days In November, by Vincent Bugliosi, the adapted screenplay is written by award-winning journalist and novelist Peter Landesman, who is making his directorial debut with Parkland.

The idea for the film began in a conversation between actor, director and producer Tom Hanks, producer Gary Goetzman, and actor Bill Paxton. "We were at a baseball game and the Kennedy assassination came up," says Goetzman. "Bill is fascinated by all of the theories about it. He is from Fort Worth and remembers seeing Kennedy speak there on the day of the assassination."

Sometime later, Paxton visited the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza in Dallas, which is dedicated to the assassination and legacy of President John F Kennedy. Watching a film loop of the president's visit to Texas, he was shocked to recognise himself in the background, perched on his father's shoulders.

When he stopped in an airport bookstore later the same day and found a copy of Vince Bugliosi's book, *Four Days in November*, he became determined to find a way to tell the familiar story from a particularly personal point of view. He shared the book with Hanks and Goetzman, who began to see it as a perfect project for Playtone, which has produced a number of award-winning mini-series for HBO based on pivotal moments in American history, including: *John Adams*, *The Pacific*, and *Band of Brothers*.



Investigative journalist Peter Landesman, an award-winning writer, was already at work on a feature script for Playtone about the Watergate scandal and the mysterious whistle blower known as Deep Throat. Approaching him to develop a script inspired by Bugliosi's book just seemed to make sense to the producers.

Through the eyes of the ordinary people

Landesman embarked on a period of intensive research that revealed a complex, multifaceted story he believes needs to be told. "Some people think they know all about it," he says. "But they don't know the story we are about to tell. To experience this film is to experience the assassination for the first time through the eyes of the ordinary people who lived it, people we didn't even know existed, but who played important roles from front-row seats to a true American tragedy. Everyone who read the script had the same comment: 'I had no idea.'"

As he began to condense his narrative, Landesman found himself strongly drawn to one particular thread in the saga. "I looked at the script and asked myself what the engine of the story was. What had no one ever seen before? No one had ever seen what happened inside Parkland Hospital. With that, the rest fell into place."

Landesman knew he would have to go beyond published accounts and conduct his own interviews with those touched by the assassination. "We began developing the script from Vince Bugliosi's majestic book," he says. "But I also went looking for people who had never spoken before. When I was a journalist, I learned that the only people I really wanted to speak to were those who didn't want to speak to me. They are the ones who have the untouched truth. People who are eager to talk usually have an agenda."



"I found the ground-zero stories of the non-celebrities," he continues. "These are the people whose names you don't know, the people who have withdrawn into the shadows of history. When the crisis was over, these people didn't capitalise on the publicity or gain attention from their front-row seat to history. They went back to work."

When the script was completed, Landesman decided he wanted to direct the film himself, an idea that Goetzman and Hanks immediately supported. "Peter had worked so hard on the screenplay and felt so strongly about the material that when he wanted to make this his directing debut, Tom and I did not hesitate," remembers Goetzman.

Long-forgotten sources

In addition to interviews, Landesman searched out sources of information that had been long forgotten: out-of-print books, oral histories, interviews tucked away for decades in drawers. "There are few really important accounts of the Oswald family," he says. "Probably the most valuable was a little-known book by historian Priscilla McMillan called *Marina and Lee*. She was a young American journalist living in Moscow at the time that Lee Harvey Oswald defected to the Soviet Union. She interviewed him while he was recovering from a suicide attempt. After he was killed, she spent many days talking with his widow and her book was the only one that made simple, undeniable sense to me. The Robert Oswald storyline in the movie largely came out of that."

Sinclair compares the film to an opera in its emotional scope. "You couldn't make up the events of those three days," he says. "Lives were forever changed and the story is an accumulation of reactions-surprise and horror, then integrity and great courage." He points to the response of Kennedy's Secret Service team, which suddenly had to shift its efforts from protecting Kennedy to getting his successor, former Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, back to Washington safely. "For Kennedy insiders, it was very hard."

Although the film is released just prior to the 50th anniversary of the JFK assassination, Landesman says the film is not really about the president's murder. "I would say the JFK assassination set off a ripple effect. The aftermath, the test of dignity and strength and grace-that's what the movie's about. Heroism doesn't happen when Superman rips off his clothes and puts on his cape. Real heroism is when people who are not being watched do the right thing under impossible circumstances."

For Landesman, shooting the film in Texas offered a chance to highlight some important truths about what happened there in 1963. "The stories in this movie are by far the bigger drama, the story of what a desperate nation went through," he says. "This movie is about the grace with which the people of Texas behaved and that's why it had to be made here."

Read more about Parkland and other new releases at www.writingstudio.co.za/page1037.html

ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit www.writingstudio.co.za

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