P-COSTA-GAVRAS
SOC4.01.4 STATE OF Siege

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AFI Bars Screening Of 'Siege'

By Gary Arnold

The American Film Institute's director canceled yesterday the scheduled showing of a new Costa-Gavras melodrama about political kidnapping and assassination in a South American country as "an inappropriate choice" for AFI's opening series at the Kennedy Center.

In a prepared statement, George Stevens Jr. described the noted director's "State of Siege" as a "film that rationalizes an act of political assassination" and said it is thus "undesirable" to be the first new film shown at AFI's new home in the memorial to President John F. Kennedy.

The new theater opens Tuesday, April 3, and "State of Siege" had been scheduled for a single showing on Thursday, April 5. The film will open the following day at the Outer Circle and 2 Theaters in Northwest Washington.

Costa-Gavras had been scheduled to appear at the AFI theater. He and the film's screenwriter, Franco Solinas, are still expected to be in Washington next weekend to help launch the commercial opening.

Donald Rugoff, president of Cinema 5 Ltd., the co-producer and American distributor of "State of Siege" (the company also distributed Costa-Gavras' "Z"), responded to the Stevens decision by saying, "We are shocked and appalled at the action taken by the American Film Institute . . . It is quite simply an act of bald censorship. It is the same kind of censorship which resulted in the recent cancellation of 'Sticks and Bones' from a network TV broadcast."

Stevens first came to Washington when he was appointed director of the United States Information Agency's film division by President Kennedy. In that capacity, he supervised the USIA's memorial film to the President, "Years of Lightning, Days of Drums." When the American Film Institute was created in 1965 by the National Endowment for the Arts, Stevens [illegible] AFI director.

Costa-Gavras, born Greek but a French citizen since the mid-'50s, has directed two other controversial political melodramas, "Z" and "The Confession."

One of the great critical and popular successes of recent years, "Z" dealt with the assassination of a pacifist politician by members of a right-wing conspiratorial group. Based on a novel which dramatized an incident in Salonika in 1963, the film was banned in the director's native Greece.

"The Confession," which dealt with a Stalinist purge of Czech Communist Party officials in the early '50s, was banned in every Eastern European country except Yugoslavia.

"State of Siege" is one of several new productions being previewed at the AFI theater as part of the inaugural series. According to an associate, Richard Klein, AFI director Stevens had been aware of "the general nature" of the subject matter of "State of Siege" but became disturbed by the possible implications of a showing at the Kennedy Center when he read a review of the film, which has opened in Paris, in the overseas edition of Newsweek.

Stevens finally saw the film in Washington last Saturday and decided it should not be shown at the Kennedy Center. According to Klein, his decision was supported unanimously by the executive committee of the AFI board of trustees, but it was not clear if any of them had also seen the film.

"State of Siege," made on location in and around Santiago, Chile, is described as a dramatization of a kidnapping and assassination carried out by Tupamaro guerillas in Uruguay in 1970. The victim, Daniel Mitrione, a former chief of police in Richmond, Ind., was officially attached to the Agency for International Development and worked as an adviser to local police authorities. The filmmaker takes a critical view of the Alliance for Progress and the International Police Academy, both of which happen to be Kennedy Administration programs.

Lewis H. Diuguid of the Washington Post reported [illegible] "State of Siege" in 1972 was being severely criticized by both the Communist Party and right-wing press in Chile. For example, a Communist magazine accused Costa-Gavras of making a hero of the Mitrione figure, who is called Philip Michael Santori and played by French actor Yves Montand in the film, and of approving of Tupamaro terrorist techniques, thereby complicating Chilean relations with Uruguay.

Costa-Gavras denied all such accusations: "The Communists have attacked us for being too easy on him. They wanted a Jack Palance character, with a scar . . . the aggressive ugly American. But things are not that way . . . Many of the advisers to the developing countries are very straightforward. But it is the very fact of their presence—the government can use for its own purposes what a sincere man sends back."

In his statement Stevens anticipated the charge of censorship leveled at him by Cinema 5. "I am aware," he said, "that it may be suggested that this represents censorship. But this is not censorship because the film is scheduled to appear very soon in Washington and elsewhere around the country. The American public will have a full opportunity to see it.

But, "The opening of the new film theater represents to us a very special time in a very special place, and this has led me . . . to make this decision."

The statement from Cinema 5 asserted that the cancellation was the result of political pressure and timidity. According to the distributor, "The film does not, contrary to the AFI allegation, 'rationalize political assassination.' Rather, it investigates what our aid dollars have been spent on. The real reason this film has been denied a showing at the Kennedy Center is that it takes a critical look at American foreign aid policy. We note with interest that Mr. George Stevens Jr., who [illegible] for the AFI, will be entertaining Mr. Richard Nixon at an AFI dinner in Los Angeles Saturday night."

[illegible] distributor's assertions, Kline said the AFI would "stick by the phrase 'rationalize political assassination.' That's simply what we believe it does. As for inviting Richard Nixon, yes, he has been invited to attend a dinner honoring John Ford. It's not often that the President attends movie industry events, and we're extremely pleased that he's coming."

A survey of several directors whose works are also included in the opening series revealed a general feeling of concern. Jan Troell, Ed Emshwiller and Jonas Mekas expressed concern about the possibility of censorship precedents being established at the AFI theater and said they would have to contemplate Stevens' decision and study the statements from both sides before formulating a personal response.

The management of the AFI theater also announced that the scheduled showing of "State of Siege" would be replaced by a showing of "L'Amour Fou," a 4½-hour French melodrama that recently had an abbreviated engagement of two days at a local art-house. All 224 tickets had been sold out, and those holding tickets for "State of Siege" may attend "L'Amour Fou" or get their money back.

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