

FILM REVIEW

SPIELBERG'S *LINCOLN*: AN AMBITIOUS PASTICHE

*T*he film *Lincoln*. Steven Spielberg, director; Steven Spielberg and Kathleen Kennedy, producers; Tony Kushner, screenplay. Based on Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. DreamWorks pictures, released October 8, 2012.

Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* is a film geared to the tastes of another time and place. Charged with the herculean task of considering the legacy of "the Great Emancipator," the film is a marathon of rhetoric-laden vignettes that would surely have satisfied the elocution-hungry crowds that gathered for the Lincoln-Douglas debates. The film is not so much a Lincoln biopic as an ensemble-led lesson in crafting legislation in the nineteenth-century United States. While one would perhaps expect a split focus between the public and private personae of Lincoln (and there is plenty of that), it is clear from the onset that the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is, in fact, the central character of this narrative. One of the film's virtues is that it shows that while the end of slavery was all but

assured, the legal status of formerly enslaved persons was by no means certain when the Civil War ended. If the war measures Lincoln took to emancipate slaves were not confirmed by a constitutional amendment, emancipation (at least in a *de jure* sense) could be repealed with a single act of peacetime legislation. The future of former slaves, and those who still remained in slavery as in the border states, would have been uncertain.

Talk among my neighbors in the theater highlighted the impression that Abraham Lincoln himself received less screen time than was expected. While Lincoln is clearly a leader in the cabinet room, the actual heavy lifting of guaranteed emancipation is portrayed as occurring in Congress. The variety-show pacing of set-piece speeches and conversations effectively, if sometimes tiresomely, illustrates the political wheeling and dealing that ran a nationwide patronage system based in the District of Columbia. The film nonetheless has a potent emotional impact through effective use of imagery and a few exceptional individual performances.

Lincoln proved to be a well-executed feat of character acting, both in its portrayals of well-known individuals and in its introductory characterizations of historical also-rans. Daniel Day-Lewis complements an excellent physical resemblance to Abraham Lincoln with a mastery of Lincoln's curious mannerisms and modes of speech to bring the character vividly to life. He makes use of a high reedy voice, a lumbering stoop-shouldered gait, and a seemingly endless store of amusing anecdotes, precisely as the historical Lincoln did. Sally Field's Mary Todd Lincoln is haggard, domineering, and effective from the first shot. Her vitriolic speech and explosive temper is let loose in tempests of alternating rage and sorrow when alone with the president, and in dagger-sharp barbs and invectives pronounced through a forced smile while in public. David Straitharn's William H. Seward is disappointingly overshadowed by his dandyish wardrobe, which was, however, a reflection of how Seward actually dressed. Lee Pace presents a laudable Fernando Wood, the macassar-slicked, arms-akimbo representative of the Democratic Party's opposition to the proposed Thirteenth Amendment. He portrays elegantly a man who, as mayor of New York City, had lobbied for a city-wide secession to maintain trade ties with the Confederacy. Still, highest praise must be reserved for Tommy Lee Jones, who perfectly captures the zeal and foul-tempered public persona of the too-often forgotten Thaddeus Stevens. If nothing else, the film has ensured a revival of interest in Stevens, who may well have been the greatest Pennsylvanian of his or any other generation.

(See the article on Stevens by Christopher Shepard in the January 2013 issue of *Pennsylvania History*.)

The film is broad in its ambitions but falls short in a number of key areas. While battlefield sequences are not necessary to a film centered around events in Washington, DC, the film gives the impression that Lincoln treated the war as a back-burner issue. The historical roles of Seward, an energetic supporter of abolition, and Lincoln, who favored a more gradual and measured approach to the slavery question, are reversed in the film with Lincoln serving a nearly obstructionist role in the peace process and a nervous Seward hoping to end the war at all costs. The treatment of African American characters in the film also bears further scrutiny. With the exception of a USCT enlisted man demanding equal pay and equal rights in the first scene and a brief exchange between Lincoln and his wife's seamstress, Elizabeth Keckley, African Americans only appear on screen when the director wishes to up the emotional ante of a given scene. Lincoln's black butler shows the affection he felt for the president just before he left for Ford's Theater, and African Americans are welcomed for the first time into "their house" to witness the debate on the amendment. One gets the feeling that these characters are largely set dressing. While this does great disservice to the active African American members of the abolitionist movement, it does accurately portray the common use of black bodies and images by white abolitionists who frequently supported the eradication of slavery while not believing African Americans to be their social or intellectual equals.

The film excels in a number of material details. The sets, wardrobe, and makeup are all handled with excellence. The use of gas lamps presents one of the most frequently overlooked aspects of films that take place in nineteenth-century interior spaces: their darkness. Even in the executive mansion, it is clear that most rooms are cold, dim spaces after sunset. The dark and brooding tone created by the period-correct lighting finds counterpoint in the careful selection of clothing and makeup. This is one of few historical films in recent memory that does not compromise historical accuracy by having clothing and hairstyles adapted to modern impression of how they ought to have looked. Lincoln is portrayed in his trademark charcoal grey shawl, a historical detail often left out of modern presentations because it makes him look more like an old woman than the National Executive. In contrast to this, William Seward is arrayed in mink collars, jacquard woven cravats, and a golden silk dressing gown, which elicited numerous incredulous remarks from the audience when it first appeared on screen.

In a scene used to illustrate the character of the Lincolns' marriage, Abraham and Mary are seen conversing in a box at the opera—Lincoln loved opera and found it relieved the burdens he had to bear. Between strains of Gounod's *Faust*, Mary promises dire personal consequences if the amendment should fail to pass and their cumulative worry and effort prove wasted. One cannot help but contrast Lincoln, a man who seems trapped in his own mind as he seeks a legislated end to his troubles, with Faust, the tortured intellectual in pursuit of decidedly less noble ends. The conclusion that both have flirted with "a deal with the devil" is plain.

At its best, the film shows an extended view of the compromises of character and ethics that accompany the personal sacrifices made to accomplish a noble end. *Lincoln* is far from a perfect vision of the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment; nevertheless, its constituent parts are mostly good and occasionally excellent. For many viewers it will not be satisfying fare taken as a whole. However, the provision of those smaller aspects of the film that truly are well done (for instance, the performance of Jones as Stevens, both in his political behavior and personal life) is exposing new audiences to some of the great characters of the mid-nineteenth century American politics. In this regard, *Lincoln*, although no masterpiece, must be regarded as a success.

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