

The physician at the movies

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Daniel Day-Lewis as Abraham Lincoln in *Lincoln*, 2012. Credit: ©Dreamworks/20th Century Fox.

Lincoln

Starring Daniel Day-Lewis, Sally Field, David Strathairn, and Tommy Lee Jones.

Directed by Steven Spielberg. Rated PG-13. Running time 150 minutes.

Being a critic requires stepping outside a film to maintain some distance. The best films are those that draw one back in to the point between maintaining objectivity and being swept along by the narrative. I had read the excellent book *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* by Doris Kearns Goodwin¹ on which *Lincoln* was said to be based, so I had great hopes for the film. The DreamWorks logo with a boy fishing off the sliver of the moon and the dramatic

Twentieth Century Fox theme by nine-time Academy Award winning composer Alfred Newman just added to my anticipation of the opening scenes of what had been ballyhooed as the year's best picture.

Unfortunately, the scenes were so fake and contrived that I was put off and could only reenter the film on a few occasions, all

the while wondering how much of the script was believable. Spoiler alert: If you haven't seen the film stop reading here.

The opening scene resembles a barroom brawl more than a military encounter. It is meant to showcase retaliation by blacks for the massacre by Confederates of their fellow soldiers. The next scene shows Lincoln with a stovepipe hat off to the side of the battle sitting on a dais (think the Lincoln Memorial). He is conversing with four soldiers, two black and two white. The whites are reverential, in contrast to one of the blacks who is preternaturally *au courant*. While admitting that the conditions are now better for blacks—they can, for example fight and get equal pay—he chides Lincoln because blacks are still ineligible for commissions. He complains that Lincoln has not fulfilled the promise to free all the slaves, essentially accusing him of being more talk than action. This is followed by a reading of the Gettysburg address that the white soldier can't finish but the black soldier can. Note to screenwriter: Lincoln's now famous short incidental remarks were overshadowed by the two-hour Gettysburg address of Edward Everett, the day's main speaker, and did not become well known until after Lincoln's assassination.²





Tommy Lee Jones as Thaddeus Stevens in *Lincoln*, 2012. Credit: ©Dreamworks/20th Century Fox.

Spielberg's original concept was to star Liam Neeson and, when he learned of Goodwin's book, to echo the book's illustration of how Lincoln created his cabinet.³ Lincoln included his three rivals in the Republican primary, along with others who represented the spectrum from northern hard-core abolitionists to moderates from Border States who were less opposed to slavery and more concerned with preserving the Union. He melded the team's disparate opinions into a coherent, politically acceptable policy, maintaining a fragile unity of the states that had not seceded.

As the ten years in the evolution of the film's conception passed, Neeson withdrew and the decision was made to center the film on the political struggle to pass the bill authorizing the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, before sending it to the states for ratification. In some respects, *Lincoln* is not the central figure; the focus is diffused over many characters and would have been better titled *The Thirteenth Amendment*, since it chronicles the efforts to turn the votes of five Democrats by horse-trading and some deception on the part of the president. As for its provenance, the film draws from eight of the 754 pages of *Team of Rivals*. These pages barely correspond to what's onscreen, leaving ample room for the screenwriter to pepper the film with imagined and hard-to-verify scenes.

William H. Seward (David Strathairn) deserves better than his portrayal as a "pol." He was the wisest member of the cabinet and has been called Lincoln's indispensable man.⁴ Lots of things are tossed in, such as Sally Field's portrayal of a Mary Todd Lincoln unhinged in part due to the loss of her son Willie to typhoid fever. Noted for spending a lot of money on

furnishings and clothes, she is shown having a hostile encounter with the chairman of the House Ways and Means committee Thaddeus Stevens (Tommy Lee Jones). Even though they were known to be enemies it is still hard to believe that their encounter at a formal presidential reception happened as scripted.

Son Robert, a rather respectful Harvard student, who was itching to join up against his parents' wishes (especially his mother) is shown being slapped by Lincoln to end the discussion. He was allowed to join before war's end and assigned to Grant's staff to minimize the chance of being killed. Robert, who is little known, went on to have an illustrious career. His home Hildene in Vermont is open to visitors and worth seeing. Son Tad is always looking at tintypes of slaves when he is not seeking his father's attention (to Lincoln's pleasure) or shown in some high-spirited antics.

Some heavy-duty issues are lightly visited, such as the suspension of *habeas corpus* and other constitutional breaches, justified given the fragility of the union. Given the shifting focus, the film can be slow moving and stylistically tedious at times.

Among the things I liked about the film included Daniel Day-Lewis' performance. He plays and looks the part and well deserved his Academy award. He manages to convey Lincoln's intrinsic dignity while showing his human side as he tells the folksy stories he was famous for. Most enjoyable was the scenery-eating performance by Tommy Lee Jones as Stevens. However, I found it hard to believe that he took the legislation authorizing the Thirteenth Amendment's preliminary passage home with him (not allowed) to share in bed with his black

housemaid. The film ends with Stanton's line "now he belongs to the ages" and a passage from Lincoln's second inaugural address.

If you've gotten this far, you have seen the film. Now, if you haven't already done so, I suggest you read the book on which it is "based" or listen to it on tape. It's worth the time.

Another viewpoint

In the interest of being fair and balanced, I thought it would be worthwhile to include an excellent review by a friend who liked the film. Don McClarey is an historian and Illinois lawyer. A Lincoln scholar, he makes an annual pilgrimage with his family on Lincoln's birthday to Springfield, Illinois, where Lincoln is buried. This review first appeared on his "American Catholic" blog and is reprinted by permission.

On Saturday November 17, 2012, I went with my family to see *Lincoln* at a theater in Kankakee, Illinois. It is definitely one of the finest screen representations I have ever seen of Lincoln, and it is a worthy tribute to the Great Emancipator. The 12:40 PM showing that we attended was completely packed which surprised me. Throughout, the audience was thoroughly engaged in the film, laughing at the stories that Daniel Day-Lewis told as Lincoln and at other humorous points. Some of the Lincoln stories would have made an ox roar with laughter. I especially enjoyed a somewhat scatological tale involving Ethan Allen, a picture of George Washington and the British. As Lincoln himself pointed out, some of his stories might not have been as nice as they could have been, but his stories were part of the man, and it was enjoyable seeing this part of Lincoln's persona so ably brought out in the film. In an amusing sequence, Secretary of War Stanton (Bruce McGill) yells at Lincoln as he is telling a story while he is waiting for news as to whether Fort Fisher, which guarded Wilmington the last port of the Confederacy, had fallen. This was quite accurate as Stanton, although he came to respect Lincoln, was always quite blunt spoken when dealing with the President and had little tolerance for Lincoln's habit of telling time-wasting, in Stanton's opinion, stories.

The vignette with Stanton was only a small sample of how extremely accurate the film is. For example we see Grant followed by his aide, Colonel Ely Parker, a full-blooded Seneca Indian. The character of Parker has no speaking role, and I appreciated the attention to even minor details that his inclusion demonstrated. During the abortive peace negotiations at Hampton Roads, Lincoln refers to Alexander Stephens, Vice President of the Confederacy, as Alex. It is not brought out in the film, but Lincoln and Stephens had both served in Congress as Whigs and had become friends. It is this type of careful attention to historical veracity that makes or breaks a historical film for me.

Daniel Day-Lewis is simply magnificent in the role of Lincoln. He captures well both Lincoln's role as a far-seeing

visionary and a master of mundane nuts and bolts politics. Day-Lewis portrays Lincoln as he was: a very humane man waging the bloodiest war in our nation's history and trying to lance the boil of slavery that had poisoned and embittered American life for a quarter of a millennium. He conveys well the human toll that all this imposed upon Lincoln.

The film takes place near the end of the War. Lincoln has been reelected and is now attempting to have Congress pass the Thirteenth Amendment. Lincoln is concerned that if the War ends before the Amendment is passed by Congress, the impetus behind it will fade away since it will no longer be regarded as an essential war measure. He is worried that his Emancipation Proclamation, taken as a war measure, might not hold up in peace time, once the former Confederate States are back in the Union, with laws still allowing slavery on their books. The film centers on his efforts to convince enough Democrat Congressmen, by fair means and by foul, to vote for the Amendment.

Tommy Lee Jones is good in the role of Thaddeus Stevens, the grim abolitionist Republican congressman of Pennsylvania, who during the War had butted heads with Lincoln many times and who after Lincoln's death would destroy Lincoln's plan for Reconstruction replacing it with his Reconstruction plan intended to punish the South. For now, they are allies seeking to pass the Amendment.

A very amusing sequence is played out between Sally Field, giving a surprisingly good performance as Mary Todd Lincoln, and Stevens, at a reception. Mary Todd Lincoln utterly despised Stevens who had often criticized her expenditures on the White House and who had suggested, in none too subtle terms, that her loyalty to the Union was suspect due to her Southern roots and her kinfolk fighting for the Confederacy. This was a complete canard as Mary Todd Lincoln was whole-heartedly for the Union and was also anti-slavery. Seeing Mary Todd Lincoln and Thaddeus Stevens exchanging elegant insults in a reception line at the White House in the film warmed my historian's heart!

The film concludes, after Lincoln's assassination, with a stirring rendition of the closing passage of the Second Inaugural:

"Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve



Henry Fonda plays Abraham Lincoln in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, 1939.
Credit: ©Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp.

and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

This is a truly epic film and it should be seen by all Americans.

References

1. Goodwin DK. *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks; 2005.
2. Greydanus SD. SDG reviews “Lincoln.” *National Catholic Register* 11/16/12
3. Podhoretz J. A Lincoln Portrait. *The Great Emancipator Transcends the Material*. *The Weekly Standard* 2012 Dec 10.
4. Stahr W. *Seward: Lincoln’s Indispensable Man*. New York: Simon & Schuster; 2012.

Young Mr. Lincoln

Starring Henry Fonda, Alice Brady, Donald Meek, Ward Bond, and Milburn Stone.

Directed by John Ford. Music by Alfred Newman. B&W.

Running time: 100 minutes.

Seeing *Lincoln* made me want to revisit this 1939 classic that I had not appreciated. On the surface, it seems to be a simple anecdotal recounting of events in Lincoln’s early life. The score incorporates “The Battle Cry of Freedom,” “Rally Round the Flag,” and “Dixie” into vintage Americana. It’s the kind of film about a simpler America whose citizens shared a common history that spoke to patriotic Americans as they stood on the verge of World War II.

The film opens with an excerpt from “Nancy Hanks,” a poem by Rosemary Benét, who teamed with her husband Stephen Vincent Benét as authors of American history poems. The old-time movie scroll sets the scene and presumes that the audience knew who Nancy Hanks was. Her death when Lincoln was nine, along with the death of his brother when he was three, his sister when he was nineteen and the love of his life, Ann Rutledge, illustrates how frequent and early were Lincoln’s losses of loved ones.

If Nancy Hanks
 Came back as a ghost,
 Seeking news
 Of what she loved most,
 She'd ask first
 "Where's my son?
 What's happened to Abe?
 What's he done?"
 . . .
 "You wouldn't know
 About my son?
 Did he grow tall?
 Did he have fun?
 Did he learn to read?
 Did he get to town?
 Do you know his name?
 Did he get on?"

The film opens in New Salem, Illinois, in 1832, and ends in 1839 in Springfield, Illinois, with Lincoln (Henry Fonda) walking into the future as ominous storm clouds appear overhead. Lincoln is shown as a candidate for office at the beginning of his political career slouching in his chair and then ambling to the front of the crowd to give a very short speech in his halting and stammering way. He is shown shyly "courting" Ann Rutledge and then visiting her grave after she dies of typhoid fever. He asks her whether he should become a lawyer and divines that she favors it. Director John Ford used a similarly touching scene when John Wayne as Captain Brittles makes report to his dead wife in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*.

Later the scene shifts to the State Fair at Springfield where Lincoln judges a pie-eating contest, participates in a tug-of-war in which he cheats a little, and wins a rail-splitting contest. The latter shows a prowess that enables him to defuse a lynch mob intent on hanging a man thought to be guilty of murder by daring anyone to take him on. In the film's most powerful scene, Fonda draws on his having witnessed an actual lynching of a black man in Omaha from the vantage point of his father's office. In the film, he comments on how people who are otherwise compassionate and who read the Bible can be hateful and stirred up by a mob to do things they would otherwise condemn.

A novice lawyer—or as he calls himself, a jack-legged lawyer—he defends a young man accused of murder who comes from a family much like his own. The trial looks as if it's not going in his favor, as the judge dozes off and the crowd is raucous, but he cleverly breaks the key witness's account. In a foretelling of encounters to come, he receives congratulations from Mary Todd (Marjorie Weaver) and Stephen Douglas (Milburn Stone), who promises not to underestimate him in the future.

Having heard an account of the film, you may still wonder why this film is considered a classic. It's because the whole is

more than the sum of its parts. Don't take my word; take that of Sergei Eisenstein, one of the great directors of all time. When asked what American film he would like, with the wave of a magic wand, to to be made the author of, he chose this film:

There are films that are richer and more effective. There are films that are presented with more entertainment and more charm. Ford himself has made more extraordinary films than this one. . . .

Nevertheless of all the American films made up to now [in the 1940s] this is a film I would wish most of all to have made. What is in it that makes me love it so? It has a quality, a wonderful quality that every work of art must have—an astonishing harmony of all its component parts, a really amazing harmony as a whole.

You can read the rest in the booklet that accompanies the Criterion DVD.¹

The interactions that Lincoln had with people of all socio-economic strata and classes illustrates why he was, along with Washington, our greatest president. He knew and loved America in all its human faces and places. Coming from a log cabin and making it all the way to the White House, he had seen all the people along the way, their virtues, their vices, their hopes, their dreams. He had drunk deeply of the American experience. He had known victories and defeats, joys and many tragedies. Yet he remained humble and kind. He was truly in Edwin Stanton's words, "A man for the ages."

Addendum

This was the first of eight films Fonda made with Director John Ford. At first, he refused to do the film saying that "playing Lincoln was like playing God." Ford retorted that he wasn't playing the "effing Great Emancipator but a jack-leg lawyer in 1839 Springfield."⁴ This was the first of a series of roles in which he portrayed men who were the soul of integrity and probity. You will get a very interesting analysis of Fonda's life and career in an excellent book, *The Man Who Saw a Ghost: The Life and Work of Henry Fonda*, which I heartily recommend.²

References

1. Eisenstein S. Mr. Lincoln by Mr. Ford. Criterion booklet accompanying Young Mr. Lincoln DVD.
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