

Thirteen Days

The docu-drama in film--i.e., the fictional re-creation of real historical events using performance conventions--got its first real impetus in the post-World War II period. Abundant, on-site war footage accustomed the eye to how real life looked and triggered an interest in the late Forties in true-to-life dramas, especially those produced by Louis De Rochemont (*The House on 92nd Street*, *13 Rue Madeleine*, *Boomerang*, etc.). Commercial television took longer to try it, but, by the early 1970's, the networks were assaying the form. One of the best remembered of these TV docu-dramas was the 1974 production "The Missiles of October," covering the Cuban Missile Crisis. A quarter-century later, that very real drama has been resuscitated and brought to the big screen with *Thirteen Days*.

The time is the period in late October 1962 when the United States first confirmed the presence of Soviet surface-to-surface missiles in Cuba and moved to get them withdrawn by instigating a maritime quarantine. The film traces the gradual escalation of threat and counter threat to the final exchanges when the nuclear superpowers were, in Secretary of State Dean Rusk's phrase, "eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked." It is, understandably, a hermetic movie, which director Roger Donaldson shoots with many tight scenes of older white guys in suits earnestly talking over conference tables about what to many filmgoers could be arcane names and events. For anybody with any sense of recent history, however, it drives you forward as you contemplate What Might Have Been.

Note that I am describing a "fictional" depiction, not a true documentary. History buffs could easily quibble with particulars of this version, chief among them the fact that the titular star of the picture, Kevin Costner, plays a Kennedy Administration political advisor, Kenny O'Donnell, who could not have played so prominent a role in this crisis as is shown in the film. As a drama, however, such punctiliousness is not necessary; given the inherent tension in events themselves, *Thirteen Days* needs plausibility, not hidebound accuracy.

So how are the Kennedy boys, perhaps the true stars of the picture? Very believable, thank heavens. Bruce Greenwood, the dreamy-eyed smoothie recently cast as a sleek villain by Hollywood (*Double Jeopardy*, *Rules of Engagement*), is a lean and sincere JFK, with a underplayed Boston accent and a slightly blank visage that fits his character--because he thus hides his views from his older advisors. Steven Culp is an appropriately callow, edgy Bobby Kennedy, trying to be tough while looking vulnerable (with a face very much like the young Ron Howard). The two actors play off each other sympathetically as international novices under inordinate pressure from skeptical political veterans. Their earnest interplay--together with Costner--is one of the best things about the movie.

Kevin Costner made the project possible, and, in his role of aide O'Donnell, his purpose appears to be that of humanizing the ongoing drama. He is the only Administration figure in the film shown with a family and an outside personal life. His ruminating on his fate and that of his family (wife and five kids) makes him a stand in for all the other citizens worried about whether they would actually have a future in those

troubled times. He is prosaic, but that is precisely what he should be.

Costner has little to do, of course, during the re-creations of the Cabinet room confabs or Oval Office policy arguments--O'Donnell was at best a fly on the wall of such exchanges, not a participant. Beyond the inherent drama, the filmgoer--especially the politically-minded filmgoer--should have fun picking out the players in the crisis. Most of these veteran character actors credibly embody the historical characters they play. For Washington theatergoers, for example, it's fun to see Arena Stage veteran Henry Strozier as the avuncular Dean Rusk. I felt the military advisors (especially Kevin Conway as a barely contained Gen. Curtis LeMay) were a bit over the top, but only one characterization seemed clearly off-base. The poor actor playing Adlai Stevenson (shown reenacting his United Nations challenge of the Soviets) misses badly the qualities of the Illinois governor in both look and tone.

What makes *Thirteen Days* work--and it finally does work--is that the historical action it depicts is--was--so charged with portent for the U.S. and for the world that the story becomes overwhelmingly compelling. As intrinsic, heart-catching drama, it is hard to beat.

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