

## Lincoln

The Hollywood studios' end-of-year prestige pictures often give filmgoers a bounty of serious dramatic effort on screen, the better to chalk up nominations in the upcoming awards season. One of them that will undoubtedly be contending next year is Steven Spielberg's "Lincoln," whose focus is on the president's last-ditch drive to pass major legislation in January 1865. "Lincoln" is, in this reviewer's estimation, a landmark piece of historic cinema and a triumph in the re-creation of an historical period.

The film opens in the gray mud of the battlefield, with vicious hand-to-hand combat in the wallow. But this is not really a Civil War film, and it quickly shifts to the political hand-to-hand combat between the Republicans (Lincoln's party), pushing to get House passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery. This is no standard Lincoln biography but a film all about political process, rather wonkish in fact. This is also no standard presentation of Lincoln as a stalwart paragon, but a film showing an extremely complex soul within a very practical and practiced politician. It makes the business of legislating, the battle for votes and compromises, more compelling than more facile drama.

Director Steven Spielberg and screenwriter Tony Kushner have given us an Honest Abe with warts (and creases), a wry man given to anecdote, a soulful but often uncertain man, a fierce man not above manipulation to get what he wants. Daniel Day-Lewis is all of these things in a towering performance which will probably come to stand for what Lincoln really "is" for many Americans for a long time to come. And beyond the fascinating political facets, Spielberg, Kushner, and Day-Lewis also offer a domestic Lincoln who struggles with his marriage, is tested as a father, and dotes on his sweet son Tad. Day-Lewis is in most scenes and commands them, with a rolling gait, a quavering tenor voice, and that face of a Matthew Brady photograph come to vivid life. It was a role Day-Lewis doggedly studied for a year before filming, and the effort pays off on-screen.

Beyond Day-Lewis, "Lincoln" positively brims with other fine performances. A wonderful surprise is Sally Field, now long removed from her plucky heyday, in a bold display as the troubled and apprehensive Mary Todd Lincoln. Tommy Lee Jones almost steals the show (and most of his scenes) as Thaddeus Stevens, the incorrigible abolitionist from Pennsylvania who fronted much of the effort on the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. A guarded but strong presence is delivered by David Strathairn as William Seward, Lincoln's one-time Republican rival but loyal Secretary of State.

A string of other worthy performances in what must be called a mammoth cast also shine, such as Hal Holbrook as the crusty Preston Blair (of the Blair House family), Jared Harris as a stolid, unforgiving U.S. Grant, and Gloria Reuben in a telling featured role as Mary Todd's maidservant Mrs. Keckley. Not to mention a trio of hustling ne'er-do-wells played by James Spader, Tim Blake Nelson, and John Hawkes, all hired by Lincoln and Co. to round up the necessary votes to pass the amendment. The richness of the casting carries down to some of the smallest roles, such as an outspoken black Union soldier (David Oyelowo).

Screenwriter Kushner has performed an imaginative feat with the source material, Doris Kearns Godwin's 2005 bestseller "Team of Rivals," focusing that book—which covered the entire Civil War—down to the very specific, but well-conceived, fight over the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. He also skillfully took and shaped a skein of appropriate elements of Lincoln's character and times from a tome of over 900 pages.

Two familiar Spielberg collaborators add further luster to "Lincoln." His long-time music collaborator John Williams took on the score, which, befitting the subject, contains a sober and reserved solo piano theme, eschewing the ripe and sweeping anthems that Williams has so long composed for Hollywood pictures. Spielberg has worked with Polish cinematographer Janusz Kaminski since "Schindler's List" (1993), from which film both earned Academy Awards. His camera's tone here ranges from a somber blue tinge through higher contrast moods which hint at daguerreotypes to near monochromatic panoramas, such as when Lincoln tours the Petersburg battlefield early in 1865. While such shifts may sound fickle, the fact is that the images always second the subject beautifully.

Though it takes place in Washington, the filmmakers did no filming in DC. The company did, however, shoot for about two months in our area, specifically in Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia, including studio in the latter city. The film carefully presents a Washington which no longer exists but which looks plausible and right for the time.

With this "Lincoln," you will learn some American history in the best way, presented with compelling intensity and focus.

*(The film is rated PG-13 for some grisly war footage and runs 149 min.)*