

## ***THE LINCOLNS OF HOLLYWOOD***

By **MICHAEL VENTURA**

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In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* (1941), Hollywood mogul Monroe Stahr escorts a European prince around the studio. In those days, only "picture people," as they were then called, were privy to the grit and grind of film production, so even the sophisticated prince of Fitzgerald's story is wide-eyed at everyday studio activity like the commissary.

"Prince Agge drank it in – eagerly. It was gay with gypsies and with the citizens and soldiers ... of the First Empire ... men who lived and walked a hundred years ago. Then he saw Abraham Lincoln and his whole feeling suddenly changed. ... [S]eeing him sitting there, his legs crossed, his kindly face fixed on a forty cent dinner, including dessert, his shawl wrapped around him as if to protect himself from the erratic air-cooling – now Prince Agge, who was in America at last, stared. ... This, then, was Lincoln. ... This, then, was what they all meant to be. Lincoln suddenly raised a triangle of pie and jammed it into his mouth, and, a little frightened, Prince Agge hurried to join Stahr."

Fitzgerald saw that, in Hollywood, Lincoln is Lincoln, Lincoln is not Lincoln, and, above all, Lincoln works for Stahr – or for John Ford or for Stephen Spielberg. No matter what words are put in his mouth, if the make-up is right and the actor is good Lincoln can be made to live in that most powerful of venues: the viewer's imagination.

Lincoln's first significant screen incarnation was in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), in which Lincoln really hasn't much to do but sign the Emancipation Proclamation and get shot. But actor Joseph Henabery was visually perfect. The film premiered just 50 years after Appomattox and overwhelmed the Civil War veterans, civilians and former slaves who were still alive, as well as the Civil War generation's children and grandchildren who'd learned about Lincoln from kin who shared his era.

In *The Birth of a Nation*, freeing the slaves didn't turn out very well for anyone. The movie was cinema's first blockbuster, yet Griffith was stung deeply by the many blacks (and the few whites) who protested his racism.

Like most racists, Griffith did not believe he was a racist. After *Birth*, he gave the issue deep consideration. In 1930, he directed a brilliantly shot sound film, *Abraham Lincoln*. Scripted by the poet Stephen Vincent Benet, the film opens with a slave ship scene that leaves no doubt of slavery's evil. Walter Huston plays a robust, funny, wildcat of a Lincoln, raw, but of considerable intellect. Toward the end, this Lincoln makes a remarkable statement, Griffith's final verdict on the cause for which his Confederate father fought. Lincoln often said that the slave owner was no more free than the slave. Recognizing this, Griffith's Lincoln says: "We've got to win this war. It is a duty we owe the South as well as the North."

Nothing so profound ruffles John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939). Sappy as only Ford can be sappy, Henry Fonda's humble, saintly, silly Lincoln is saved, in performance, only by Fonda's natural dignity and intelligence. Ford's Lincoln has not one thought in his noggin, but (speaking of pies) he does judge a pie contest, stuffing himself with wedges of apple and peach confections. Ford's Lincoln is pernicious for his utter lack of substance, an exercise in cinema's power to drain any subject of its force and meaning.

It is dangerous, it is oh-so-dangerous, to view history through the teary eyes of sentimentality.

But don't tell that to John Cromwell, who directed Robert E. Sherwood's Pulitzer-winning play, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940), in which Lincoln can do no wrong and his destiny is assured. Within that suspect frame, Sherwood takes Lincoln's issues seriously, but actor Raymond Massey, in love with his caramel-and-taffy voice, delivers every line as though reading from the Bible. Ruth Gordon's authenticity as Mary Todd Lincoln exposes the phoniness of the project; the screen comes alive when it is hers, especially when she says, "I thought I could hope to shape him as I knew he should be, and I've succeeded in nothing but breaking myself."

Hollywood didn't approach Lincoln again in a major way until *Carl Sandburg's Lincoln* (1974), America's first miniseries, a six-part effort directed by George Schaefer, starring Hal Holbrook. Holbrook, like Walter Huston, portrayed raw strength and sharp intellect, a Lincoln ready to take on all comers (with the exception of his wife, played with pathos by Sada Thompson). A lively, thoughtful work, but, like the others, this production falls into the trap of inevitability: Lincoln is called to greatness and must be great so he is great, his few agonies quickly overmastered by his unbreakable will.

But where is the man who woke every morning to terrible responsibilities and an ever-gnawing sense that he was not up to the task? The Lincoln who, in the war's first years, was disobeyed and even snubbed by his generals? The Lincoln thought foolish and awkward by half his cabinet and most of Washington, whose erratic wife sold secret documents to newspapers and compulsively spent money he did not have? The Lincoln who understood racial prejudice because he, too, felt it, though he knew it was unjust? The Lincoln crushed by guilt at the war's horrible losses? Fredericksburg: 12,600 Union soldiers dead in one battle. Seven thousand lost in 20 minutes at Cold Harbor. At Antietam, on both sides, 23,000. At Gettysburg, on both sides, 50,000. Approximate total for the war, north and south: 620,000. Where is the Lincoln tortured by deep religious convictions? Where is the Lincoln haunted by premonitions of his own death and almost longing to be punished for leading his country into such a war? Where is Lincoln the human being?

You find him in *Gore Vidal's Lincoln* (1988), the television production directed by Lamont Johnson. Sam Waterston's Lincoln strains at every moment to hold on; he and Mary Tyler Moore, brilliant as Mary Todd, are not inevitably great. *Gore Vidal's Lincoln* is a Lincoln who is great by the skin of his teeth, barely surviving his mistakes and audaciously performing political acrobatics in which he shakily keeps his balance but wins through. This is a man humbled by the history he faces and the history he makes; to borrow a phrase of David Thomson's, this is a man whose "integrity never looks less than hard-earned and desperately sustained."

Why does this Lincoln tell his folksy stories? "Oh, sometimes I say those things without even knowin' I said 'em. When there is so much you cannot say, it's always a good idea to have a story ready. I do it now from habit. In my predicament, it's a good idea to know all kinds of stories, because the truth of the whole matter is now almost unsayable – and so cruel."

And now we have Stephen Spielberg's *Lincoln*, with its brilliant depiction of the struggle to pass the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. The single most important piece of legislation in our history, it welded the Constitution to the Declaration of Independence. To state

legally that blacks and whites are equal before the law was to open the gates for the legal equality of men and women, straights and gays -- everyone. It is a lesson the country needs now, and Spielberg can't be praised enough for teaching it.

But is this Lincoln? Daniel Day-Lewis's statue-come-to-life performance deserves all praise, but Tony Kushner's script gives us a Lincoln who never loses an argument, persuades anyone he confronts, and gets his way in all things, eyes agleam with secretive wisdom. An uber-Lincoln, impossible for a viewer to resist, and I am no exception, but, but...

Go to Alexander Gardner's photograph of Lincoln ([www.150.si.edu/150trav/remember/r313.htm](http://www.150.si.edu/150trav/remember/r313.htm)), taken just days after the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. That face brings to mind dialogue from *Gore Vidal's Lincoln*.

General Grant: "It took too long, but we started in perfect ignorance, both sides."

President Lincoln: "We are not ignorant now. We know too much."

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