

SPIELBERG'S 13TH AMENDMENT

Daniel Day-Lewis rises above the historically cumbersome Lincoln

LINCOLN: Directed by Steven Spielberg. Screenplay by Tony Kushner, based in part on Doris Kearns Goodwin's book *Team of Rivals*. Cinematography, Janusz Kaminski. Editing, Michael Kahn. Music, John Williams. Starring Daniel Day-Lewis, Sally Field, David Strathairn, Tommy Lee Jones, James Spader and Joseph Gordon-Levitt. Touchstone Pictures, 2012. PG-13. 150 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Lincoln, contrary to what its name implies, is not a defining portrait of a man, though Daniel Day-Lewis' performance as Abraham Lincoln is one of his defining roles. Stooped, quiet, introverted, exhausted, brilliant and prone to making his point via stories, Day-Lewis' Lincoln is the calm center to a complex and flawed film about the 16th president — and about the role of politics in America's terrible relationship with race.

Steven Spielberg's film — written by Tony Kushner and based in part on Doris Kearns Goodwin's highly praised book *Team of Rivals* — takes place after Lincoln has been elected for a second term. The Civil War drags on, but the end is creeping into sight, and Lincoln has realized that his Emancipation Proclamation may not hold up once the war is over. His focus becomes the passage of the 13th Amendment, which faces considerable opposition in the House.

The politicians opposing the amendment are largely one-note villains, though Lee Pace's Fernando Wood is a lively orator. *Lincoln's* complexities are more apparent in the character of Thaddeus Stevens (Tommy Lee Jones), who tempers his fiercely abolitionist position in one of the movie's most interesting moments. Reluctantly, Stevens makes a stark moral compromise in the interest of garnering support for the amendment. The film — with the

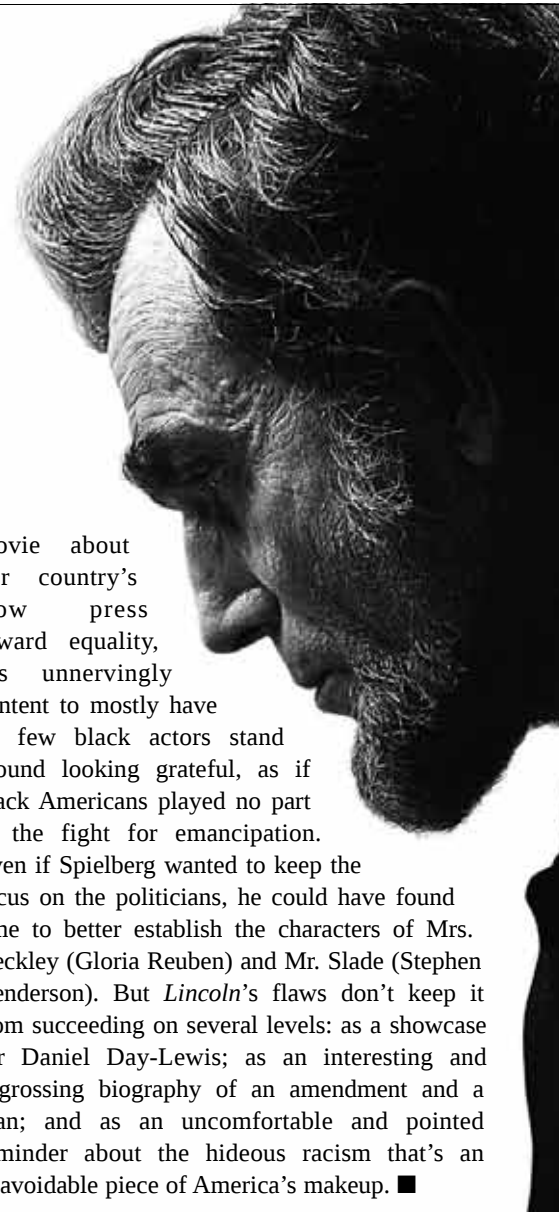
clunking assistance of John Williams' intrusive and inelegant score — plays this as a quiet triumph, a difficult choice made in the service of greater goals.

Lincoln is full of small, ugly moments necessary for the amendment's passage. Lincoln's secretary of state, William Seward (David Strathairn), hires a trio of lobbyists to coerce Democrats into voting for the amendment, and their efforts are inexplicably often played for laughs, the soundtrack taking on a down-home twang as they go about their business. Perhaps this is just meant to lighten the scene a bit, but it's jarring, considering the work being done. But *Lincoln* often stumbles when it steps away from Day-Lewis and Jones. Secondary plotlines involving Robert Lincoln (a miscast Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and Mary Todd Lincoln (Sally Field), and the family's grief over the son who was killed in the war, drag on, heavy with sentimentality. The scene in which Field trades barbs with Stevens does too little to balance out the amount of time she's asked to spend weeping and bereft, the emotional counterpart to Lincoln's stoic, intellectual calm.

This isn't a lionizing movie; it's not a film that presents you with a man and his work and expects you to bask in his brilliance. In quiet ways, it's more nuanced than that. Stevens is as vital to the passage of the amendment as Lincoln; the ugly politics required to push it into being are neither glossed over nor unnecessarily lauded. For the most part, they're presented as simply the lengths Lincoln felt it necessary to go to in order to do away with slavery.

Lincoln is long, occasionally complicated and full of middle-aged white men with impressive facial hair. For a

movie about our country's slow press toward equality, it's unnervingly content to mostly have its few black actors stand around looking grateful, as if black Americans played no part in the fight for emancipation. Even if Spielberg wanted to keep the focus on the politicians, he could have found time to better establish the characters of Mrs. Keckley (Gloria Reuben) and Mr. Slade (Stephen Henderson). But *Lincoln's* flaws don't keep it from succeeding on several levels: as a showcase for Daniel Day-Lewis; as an interesting and engrossing biography of an amendment and a man; and as an uncomfortable and pointed reminder about the hideous racism that's an unavoidable piece of America's makeup. ■



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