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Profound Heroism

Lincoln: A very different angle on slavery



OPINIONATED
JUDGE

BY JUDGE
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Daniel Day Lewis plays President Abraham Lincoln in the Spielberg movie 'Lincoln.' (AP photo)

My list of the best movies of 2012 includes two very different angles on American slavery: "Django Unchained," which I wrote about for the Portland Observer on April 24, and in my last post (opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com), and "Lincoln," which appeared on my list at number 4.

On the surface, "Lincoln" appears an odd and even contradictory choice. It features white Americans almost exclusively and casts them, particularly the one of them who served as president, as the protagonists in the story of the end of slavery in America.

I find some merit in the criticism that director Steven Spielberg and screenwriter Tony Kushner missed some opportunities to shed light on the role that African Americans played in their own liberation. (See historian Kate Masur's op-ed from Dec. 4 in the New

YorkTimes). Nevertheless, for me, Spielberg's "Lincoln" is inspiring in its own way.

Everyone seems to agree that Daniel Day-Lewis's performance is reason enough to see the film. Not only does he render voice, posture, and tone that closely tracks historical accounts of Lincoln, but he captures the sense of a person of tremendous power and historical significance who is also something of an enigma.

Lincoln is the president who held the nation together during a Civil War and who presided over the abolition of slavery -- yet by many accounts, he doesn't appear to have been motivated consistently or primarily (or at all) by a belief in the equality of blacks.

Day-Lewis's portrayal of Lincoln embodies those contradictions: He is bold, yet keeps his own counsel; he is hopeful, yet deeply burdened. His true motives are in

some ways inscrutable. But this is more than a powerful performance. It is a depiction of heroism far more believable and profound than we usually see.

Most movie heroes, even those drawn from history, are implausibly upright, unswervingly and simplistically good against foes that are caricatures of evil. Think Captain America, or Angelina Jolie's character in "The Changeling." Such depictions oversimplify both heroism and its opposite, so that we attain heroism only by deluding ourselves and we are never responsible for the need for heroes.

But in this film, the hero has feet of clay, and we -- that is, Americans with our attachment to commerce functioning as we expect -- create the need for heroism.

The film depicts the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment as an exceedingly messy

process, in which horrifyingly backward arguments are made on the Congressional floor and rather seedy deals are struck in smoke-filled rooms. We know from history that the Amendment will pass, but one is tempted to doubt the outcome even while watching it unfold on screen.

More films should be made in which historically accurate stories of African American heroism are the focus. But there is value to seeing this particular piece of history played out on screen, especially when accomplished with such nuance and complexity.

All actual heroes have feet of clay; true heroism is not unadulterated goodness in the face of caricatured evil. Rather, true heroism often is problematic; it sometimes inspires and repels in the same moment.

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