

## Document Citation

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*Kit Parker 1979*

and grain sway and dance and break and fall and skitter. The closing is across what looks like a harvested or burnt-over area with everything as still as death. Both shots pan to and stop at the log cabin in which Lincoln was allegedly born. Never mentioned is the fact that the scene, however overpowering it might have seemed in 1930, is done by miniature "sand-tabling," with the cabin such an obvious miniature the 1930 audiences must have realized it, while present-day audiences know at once.

Benét's dialogue is really the heart of the film, with Lincoln's homespun humour sounding just right. (Whether it was historically correct would be conjecture, since the best lines are delivered where no living person but those involved could have heard them.) Lines like the charming, courting scene with Anne Rutledge (Una Merkel) wherein Abe has stopped lollygagging to spoon, after saying, "My daddy taught me to work, but he didn't teach me to like it," and then after a kiss, "You taught me how to love, Anne!" To which Miss Merkel pertly replies, "Have I taught you to like it?"

One would have expected Griffith to rise to some pictorial heights for Anne's death and the Lincoln/Douglas debates. They are staged as tableaux in this film, which seems unsettling, particularly when the debaters are shown delivering their lines in medium close shots, the following line by the other debater delivered in a matching scene with the protagonists facing: one slightly in from the left, one slightly in from the right, with no interplay. These scenes do not move. Perhaps Griffith's reverence for the serious material fails to be integrated.

Benét and Griffith tread lightly with Mary Todd Lincoln's mental aberrations. We see her nag, we observe her pettiness over the servant problem. When she leaves the room huffily because Grant is smoking a cigar, Lincoln remarks, "You've given me an idea; I may take up smoking myself!" But generally she is portrayed as a rather high-strung, spoiled Southern lass, although one of the servants says, "Can't say much for her disposition!" An understatement.

As John Wilkes Booth, Ian Keith has some great moments *in the film*. As to his acting *on the stage*, we have to content ourselves with an overheard comment from a jealous husband who

says, "He can't act . . . but the women don't know it."

There is a great deal of dignity, perhaps too much dignity, in this historically important film, although a scene where the Confederates are marching off to war with Aunt Jemimas dancing "pickaninny"-like in the background infuriates me. No one has ever gotten over the reverence for Griffith's immeasurable contributions to American cinema to question his always-irritating treatment of blacks, but I feel it's about time. *DANE WILSON* -GDW



## ABRAHAM LINCOLN

(U.S./1930) 81 minutes \$25.00

Directed and Edited by D. W. Griffith - Screen Adaptation by Stephen Vincent Benét - Dialogue and Continuity by Benét and Gerret Lloyd - Story and Production Advisement by John W. Considine, Jr. - Cinematography by Karl Struss - Settings Designed by William Cameron Menzies - Music Arranged by Hugo Reisenfeld - A Joseph M. Schenk Production for Feature Productions of America - Distributed by Art-cinema Associates through United Artists. Sound quality is fair to good. Players: Walter Huston, Una Merkel, W. L. Thorne, Russell Simpson, Lucille LaVerne, Helen Freeman, Otto Hoffman, Jason Robards, Sr., Gordon Thorpe, Ian Keith, Edgar Deering, Charles Crockett, Kay Hammond, Cameron Prud'Homme, Hobart Bosworth, Henry B. Walthall, Frank Campeau, Oscar Appel, Jimmy Eagle, James Bradbury, Sr. and E. Alyn Warren as both Stephen A. Douglas and General Ulysses S. Grant.

"I don't mind my face—I'm behind it; it's them in front as gets harmed."

One might expect a more sweeping panorama of an early sound film made by D. W. Griffith, but actually he plays this film quite close to the vest. Although there are rapid montages of soldiers in battle, neither dwelt upon nor delineated in dialogue, these scenes come and go as incidental to the focus, which is very much on Lincoln, portrayed by Walter Huston in a photographic double.

Much has been made of both the opening and closing—slow panning shots that sweep across an Illinois field. The opening shot is during a frenzied wind-storm, in which branches and limbs