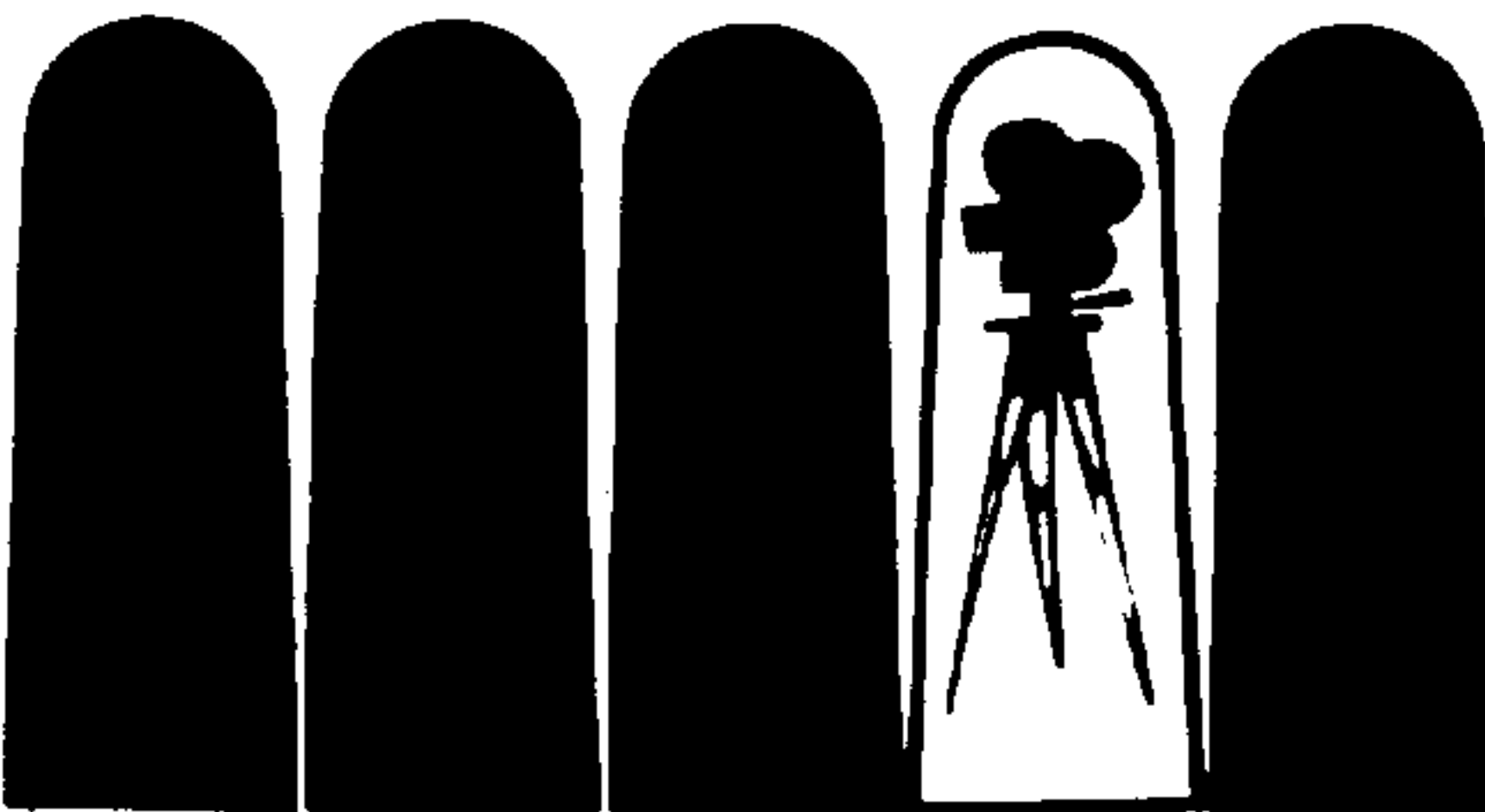


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THE DARTMOUTH



DAILY FILM PROGRAM

1962-1963

ABE LINCOLN IN ILLINOIS (1940)

Abraham Lincoln
Stephen A. Douglas
Mary Tod Lincoln

Raymond Massey
Gene Lockhart
Ruth Gordon

Ann Rutledge
Jack Armstrong
John Brown

Mary Howard
Howard daSilva
John Cromwell

Adapted by Grover Jones from the play of the same name by Robert Sherwood. Screenplay by Robert Sherwood. Photographed by James Wong Howe. Music by Roy Webb. Produced by Max Gordon for RKO.
Directed by JOHN CROMWELL

In the period immediately before American entry into World War II, there were a series of popular biographical films, produced with an apparent aim of showing the American way of life in its best light. Fortunately, most of these chauvinistic exercises are long forgotten, but there were a few great films, one of them ABE LINCOLN IN ILLINOIS.

Robert Sherwood's Pulitzer price winning play was a natural source for the film; in its original dramatic form it had been a great success from the day of its premiere in 1938, and in order to take advantage of this, a large part of the Broadway cast came to Hollywood to make the film. In the final analysis, it was agreed that the film was even better than the play.

The most controversial element of the film was the Lincoln of both Mr. Sherwood and Mr. Massey. We are not presented with the Abe Lincoln of the history books; we do not see a legendary figure of towering nobility nor a man marked for greatness from the cradle. This Lincoln is a completely human figure, tolerant, studious. Most important, he is a composite of latent qualities which have yet to be developed by circumstances, and we see him as an unassertive man who must be pushed by others, particularly his wife, on the road to greatness.

The film, as the title suggests, covers only the early years of Lincoln's life, beginning with the days in New Salem, continuing with his meeting with Ann Rutledge, her death, his flight from marriage with Mary Tod, his voyage down the Mississippi and his return to her, and ending with the sudden burst of white steam in the dark railroad station as Lincoln leaves Springfield for Washington and the Presidency. If some of the historical details are not correct, it is an unimportant fault, for the object of the movie was to depict an element of the democratic tradition in the most lucid style possible.

Mr. Massey was the ninth actor to play Lincoln on film and,

while not the best in appearance, he was certainly not far behind Walter Huston in dramatic ability. However, by some trick of the film medium, his performance is to some extent overshadowed by that of Ruth Gordon as Mary Tod Lincoln. Miss Gordon interprets Lincoln's wife as a sort of goodhearted Lady Macbeth, full of grim determination that her husband will get ahead by her help whether he wants to or not. Her performance was hated by many, but it is a characterization of the first rank in both imagination and dramatic know-how. One of the better moments in the film occurs when she leaves the campaign headquarters of her husband, now President of the United States, turning to the door with a chilling half-smile of cold-blooded determination, for in spite of all odds, she has triumphed perhaps even more than Lincoln himself. The other cast members are excellent, particularly Gene Lockhart as Douglas, and Howard deSilva as the town bully and leader of the Clary Grove Boys.

In the film Lincoln speaks the words he used in his lifetime; there is no pussy-footing to Southern opinion, nor softening of the character. The producers apparently felt that if the North could take GONE WITH THE WIND, premiered the week previously, the South could sit through ABE LINCOLN IN ILLINOIS. It was somewhat ironic to note that despite the high moral aims of the production, Negroes were not allowed to attend the premier in Washington on January 22, 1940.

ABE LINCOLN IN ILLINOIS is now a film classic, but it was never a box-office success. Audiences of today, used to more "cinematic" techniques and faster story action, will probably find it slow and dull in spots. Nevertheless, it is a moving human document clearly depicting an individual's rises to greatness.

David Stewart Hull
revised from the original notes
written for the January 1960
showing.