



Young Mr. Lincoln **By Mark. A. Vieira**

THE STORY: A rawboned young man from New Salem is inspired by law books to become a lawyer, but his newfound knowledge is tested by a lynch mob.

PRODUCTION HIGHLIGHTS: Abraham Lincoln was considered a worthy subject for the screen, even though he had done nothing for D.W. Griffith. "The Birth of a Nation" had been controversial, and his first sound film, "Abraham Lincoln" (1930), had been a failure. In 1938, Twentieth Century-Fox screenwriter Lamar Trotti had just finished "In Old Chicago" and was looking through story department files when he found drafts of "The Young Lincoln," a screenplay that Winfield Sheehan had assigned Howard Estabrook to write before the Fox Film Corporation merged with Darryl F. Zanuck's company in 1935. Trotti showed the Lincoln drafts to Zanuck, who assigned him to create a project based on Lincoln's early years.

Trotti had been a Hollywood censor and before that a Georgia journalist. A trial he covered years earlier bore a resemblance to the Duff Armstrong case. Lincoln won the case by using the almanac to determine the moon's position on the night of a crime. "Lamar Trotti is practically an authority on Lincoln," Zanuck told John Ford, who also admired Lincoln and had made him a character in several of his films. "Everybody knows Lincoln was a great man." said Ford. "The idea of this picture was that even as a young man you could sense that there was going to be something great about him." The actor Ford wanted to play Lincoln was likewise sympathetic.

“I’d been a Lincoln fan, if that’s the way to say it, most of my life,” said Henry Fonda. “Long before I knew I was going to become an actor, I had read Carol Sandburg’s three books on Lincoln.”

It was Zanuck’s who first visualized Fonda as Lincoln. Fonda did not share his vision. “I don’t think I could play Lincoln,” said Fonda. “Lincoln to me was a god. It was just like asking me to play Jesus, or something, you know! Well, they talked me into doing a test.” The test had Fonda in full makeup doing a scene with an actress. When he looked at the edited footage, he was astonished. “It looks like Lincoln!” The illusion was destroyed when he heard himself speak. “I’m sorry, fellows,” he said. “It won’t work.”

Zanuck prevailed upon Ford, who called Fonda to his office and blasted him with a litany of expletives. “He could only talk to me using all the bad words,” recalled Fonda. “What he was doing was shaming me.” Then Ford brought Trotti with him to Fonda’s home and they read him the screenplay.

“Trotti had written a beautiful script,” said Fonda. “I cried and everything.” But he was still unsure of himself. Finally, he remembered what Spencer Tracy said that Alfred Lunt had told him, the secret of his vaunted acting technique. “Learn the lines,” said Tracy. “And try not to fall down or bump into a chair.”

As Ford shot “Young Mr. Lincoln,” first on location at the Sacramento River, and then on the Twentieth Century Fox backlot, Zanuck reviewed the footage. Known as a skilled story editor, he was also a judge of images. “I feel that we should avoid shooting down on Lincoln,” Zanuck told Ford. “Shoot up on him. Not only does it give him height, which is essential, but when you look up at him, he looks exactly like Lincoln and not Fonda. He looks great in a low-camera set-up where you see his whole figure sprawled out or standing. I like best the scenes where his eyes seem dark and deep-set and where you can see the cleft of his chin.”

Following the out-of-town fashion, “Young Mr. Lincoln” was premiered in Springfield, Illinois on May 30, 1939.

CRITICAL REVIEW: “Without a trace of self-consciousness or an interlinear hint that its subject is a man of destiny, “Young Mr. Lincoln” follows Abe through his years in Illinois, chuckling over his gangliness and folksy humor, sympathizing with

him in his melancholy. Henry Fonda's characterization is one of those once-in-a-blue-moon things: a crossroads meeting of nature, art, and a smart casting director. His performance kindles the film, makes it a moving unity, at once gentle and quizzically comic."

-Frank S. Nugent, "The New York Times"

"Young Mr. Lincoln" (1939) was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2003.

This essay is reprinted with permission from Mark A. Vieira from his book "Majestic Hollywood: The Greatest Films of 1939." The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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