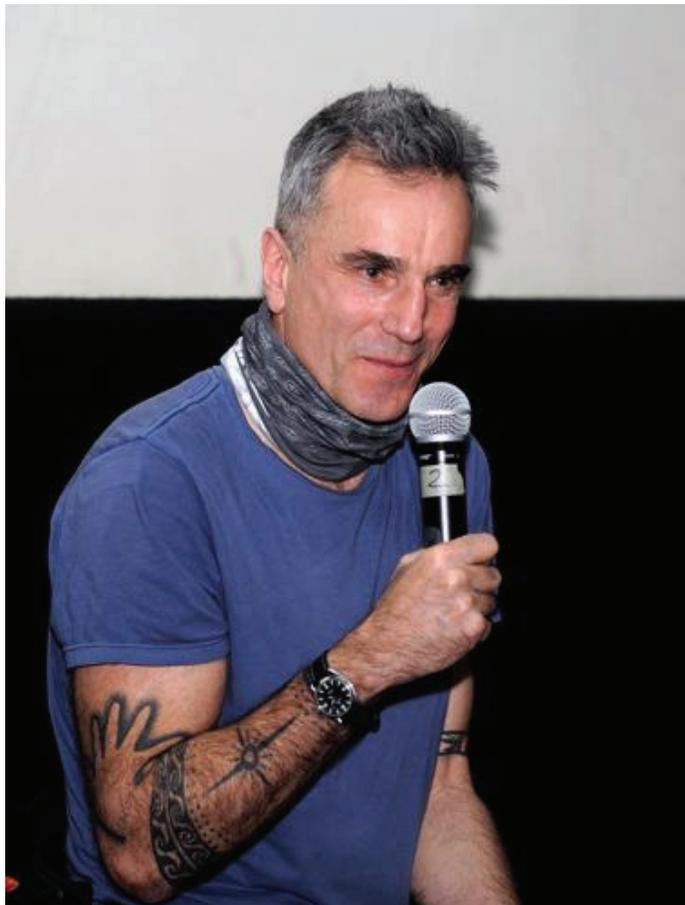


Daniel Day-Lewis shares insights on 'Lincoln' at Bantam Cinema

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Daniel Day-Lewis speaking Saturday afternoon during a special program at Bantam Cinema. Photo by Laurie Gaboardi.

By KATHRYN BOUGHTON

There was definite cognitive dissonance in seeing British actor Daniel Day-Lewis stroll on stage before an attentive audience at the Bantam Cinema Saturday afternoon. The dapper actor, his graying hair neatly trimmed, was clad in red-accented black motorcycle leathers, a far cry from the rumpled, weary figure of Abraham Lincoln that had dominated the screen behind him for two hours and 29 minutes.

Day-Lewis had channeled the 19th century president who preserved the Union—and at the same time purified the meaning of the Founding Father’s vision—in Steven Spielberg’s latest epic film, “Lincoln.” He had accepted the invitation of Sidney Koch to appear after the movie for a question-and-answer session with the audience.

In his performance, Day-Lewis deftly captures both Lincoln’s humanity, and his skill as a politician and a master of men. Unlike the ponderous, sanctified images of Lincoln portrayed in earlier movies by the likes of Raymond Massey and a humorless Henry Fonda, Day-Lewis’ portrayal retrieves from the mists the quicksilver changes in Lincoln’s expressions, the high, resonant voice, the lumbering, stiff tread of a tired president whose size-14 feet always hurt.

Day-Lewis, who previously starred in “The Age of Innocence,” “Last of the Mohicans,” “The Crucible” and “Gangs of New York,” confessed that for British subject he has spent “really a lot of time in 19th century America—and even in the 18th and 17th centuries.” “I don’t know how it happened,” he said.

Lincoln, however, was virgin territory for him when he first received a call from Spielberg asking him to play the president.

“When Steven first called, it didn’t occur to me that I was the right person,” he said. “Seven years later, something in me changed.”

But he had deep-seated concerns. “My main concern was that I would never be able to set foot in this country again,” he said with a grin. “There have been a number of times when I felt that if a given piece of work went down the drain that would be it [for me]. How do you present a man who is so loved by people, even those who may not know that much about him?”

He said everything about Lincoln proved surprising for him “because I didn’t know anything about him. I got a sense that even people from the U.S. have experienced him from a distance—that there is almost a mythologized inaccessibility.”

Day-Lewis’ performance demolishes the marble façade that has been erected around the image of Lincoln. His is an accessible Lincoln, who sits in cabinet meetings whittling, who lowers himself to the floor beside his sleeping child to wake him for bed, and who undoes his wife’s laces at the end of a grueling day. His is also a Lincoln capable of drawing his “Team of Rivals,” so ably portrayed in Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book of the same name, into supporting him in actions they might not completely approve of.

Day-Lewis was asked how he had conceptualized the role. “As I began to contemplate the idea of doing this, it seemed preposterous,” he said. He began by reading, especially Goodwin’s book, “an absolute must” in his opinion for those who would understand Lincoln.

“She carves a wonderfully broad avenue toward an understanding of Lincoln,” he said. “My immediate surprise was how accessible he was. He almost welcomes you in. He had a sense of humor and his parenting was, for his time, very unconventional. He basically didn’t believe children should be disciplined at all. There was often a state of bedlam in the White House. You discover him in this movie when he has already lost two children”

Armed with his reading, he said “all the clues were there” for developing his performance. Drawing on recorded descriptions of Lincoln’s voice as being high, and sometimes, shrill, he began to develop his characterization. “A voice is a deep personal reflection,” he said. “I wouldn’t think of doing it until I was fairly deep into [the character]. I knew that he grew up in Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois—and the sound of those places would be in his speech. And I knew he spoke in a higher register.

“But what I don’t do is try to break a life down into its component parts. I try to allow myself to be drawn toward an understanding, an illusion you create for yourself. The illusion is that these decisions take care of themselves. The only image I have found that comes close to it, is thinking of myself as a vessel and the life of the person [I am portraying] as a separate vessel, both afloat in the ether. As I find points of common connection, it ties us together. Then I start to draw the vessels together. If you are lucky, you begin to hear a voice. If it sits well, I try to reproduce it.”

He said he found Lincoln to be “a strong individual with a highly developed sense of self. That was probably key to some of his finest efforts.”

Because the White House was at the time of the Civil War open to the general public and, because Lincoln persisted in taking his “public opinion bath” by meeting with virtually anyone who wanted to speak to him, Day-Lewis said he believes Lincoln remained in touch with the mood of the country. “Now our leaders are

important because timing was so much a part of the decisions he made.”

Asked how his long immersion in Lincoln’s life and times might have changed him, he modestly said, “I would love to believe some of his qualities have left traces in me. But I am affected in a personal way by all the work I do.

Day-Lewis was asked how he would compare Spielberg to other directors he has worked with. “Each worked in his own unique way,” he responded. “I felt a deep sense of complicity with each one. Steven Spielberg as a director is still a youth and it is remarkable to me when I consider how many films he has made in an industry that will squash the life out of you one way or another. He is still a youthful man with a huge appetite and love of making movies.”

To appreciative laughter, he said there are “many directors I would like to work with—unfortunately, some of them are dead.”

Koch said it was a great courtesy for Litchfield County and Bantam Cinema for Day-Lewis to appear. “He is just a wonderful man. He has a great heart. He could be anywhere he wants and he is just doing this for the Bantam Cinema.”

Day-Lewis received a special presentation at the end of his appearance. Sheila Nevins, president of documentary and family programming for HBO and Cinemax—as well as being married to Mr. Koch—had invited her friend, eminent Lincoln historian Peter Kunhardt.

Kunhardt, great-great-grandson of a Civil War soldier who met Lincoln while convalescing in hospital, is the descendant of a family responsible for preserving many of the pictures that recorded the war. He presented Day-Lewis with a print taken directly from a glass negative exposure of President Lincoln.

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