

New Cinema Release – Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter



Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter.

Hat? Check. Beard? Check. Axe?

What if everything we knew about one of America's greatest presidents was only part of the story? After his mother is killed by a vampire in his youth, Abraham Lincoln devotes his life to training in the art of hunting and killing the undead abomination, at the hands of his new friend Henry Sturgess. From his days as a shopkeeper in Springfield, Illinois, through his law practice and on to the White House, Lincoln constantly faced this immortal menace. You think the Civil War was just about slavery? Think again.

This film has been one of the biggest victims of negative hype in years. Deservedly? Not so much. Yes, it has problems. Of course it does. But are these deal-breakers? No. The script was written by Seth Grahame-Smith, adapting his own novel. This is the man who invented the recent trend of mash-up alt. history with *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (a book I really enjoyed, by the way). The film tracks Lincoln's whole life, inserting the vampires as the unseen motivation behind almost everything he did. The fact that it is all presented with such a straight face makes it that bit more successful. The movie wants to be an actual biopic of Abe, not a parody. For my money, that was certainly a wise choice by Grahame-Smith and director Timur Bekmambetov – the Russian filmmaker who turned James McAvoy into an action hero in *Wanted*.

Lincoln is played here by relative newcomer Benjamin Walker. Better known around New York as a stage actor and occasional stand-up comedian, Walker is very good. He handles both the

oration and the fighting with equal aplomb, throwing that axe (and himself) around like a boss, and he is backed up by a host of rising talent including Mary Elizabeth Winstead as his wife Mary Todd, Anthony Mackie as old friend Will Johnson, and Howard Stark himself, Dominic Cooper as Sturgess. Rufus Sewell is suitably snarly and devious as Lincoln's nemesis Adam, the oldest and possibly even the first vampire. His Louisiana accent slips at times, but since Adam is obviously not a native of the area in the first place, I suppose it can be understood. Considering he had \$70 million to spend though, you'd think Bekmambetov could have spent a bit more money on makeup. Walker gets subtle but effective prosthetics to age Abe through life, but all Winstead and Mackie get are some mild grey streaks in their hair. The vamps look good however, that I have to admit. They are brought to unlife with a combination of makeup and contacts with some CG enhancement. They sort of bridge the gap between the animalistic viciousness of 30 Days Of Night, and the cultured aspect of Underworld. Grahame-Smith plays a bit fast and loose with the "rules" as well. These vampires walk around freely in the daytime with just the mildest application of sunblock (at least they don't sparkle) and there is no mention of stakes or crosses; silver is the only weapon shown to be effective. Oh, but how effective it is.

The biggest problems with the film can be traced back to its ambition. By cramming an entire life into barely 100 minutes – and such a widely-known and eventful one at that – certain things must be sacrificed. In this case, that means anything not directly related to the ongoing forward momentum. For example, Lincoln spends a big chunk of the second act making it known that he is studying law while working in a shop. Then there is one short scene where he sits at a desk behind an "Abraham Lincoln – Attorney at Law" nameplate, and then it's off to Washington we go. Also, using vampires as an excuse for slavery (so the vamps living in the Confederacy can freely buy and sell food) comes off a bit pat, bordering on insensitive,

without the time to explore the idea further. I don't often say this, but I think this story would have been better served had it been split into two or even three movies.

But that's enough about the story, you want to know how it looks. Well, I'm a bit mixed on that score too. There are times when the camera soars out over Washington or the Gettysburg battlefield, and these scenes do not come off as well as they should. The digital extras have a cartoony aspect to them that I thought we had said goodbye to years ago. The smaller, character-driven sequences are much better though. The natively-shot 3D comes off quite effectively when the scene is well-lit but unfortunately the big climactic fight scene is on a train barrelling through the countryside, at night. That the background is little more than a dark grey haze is just unforgivable. The fights themselves are presented very stylistically, with lots of slo-mo and speed ramping, 300-style.

Overall, the film is enjoyable as a period action-horror. Building it around a known person does away with most of the need for character set-up, but it also spoils a certain level of suspense. Of course Lincoln is not going to be bitten, for example, but anyone with more than a rudimentary knowledge of history will know full well which characters are likely to end up in jeopardy. I think the biggest stumbling block for Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter will be the expectations caused by Grahame-Smith's reputation as a humourist. I'll say it again: this is a period action-horror. Nowhere in that sentence – or in the film – does comedy appear. If you go in determined to see otherwise you are likely to be disappointed. Go in with an open mind though and you could well enjoy yourself quite a bit.

The film is [showing at Cineworld at various times.](#)