

Vidal's 'Lincoln' Receives First-rate, Faithful Adaptation

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Gore Vidal's epic historical study, *Lincoln*, was the second of his "American Chronicle" novels. Published in 1984, *Lincoln* spent 22 weeks on *The New York Times*' best-seller chart. It was the talk of the literati for months, and sold 250,000 hard-cover copies.

Then Vidal did what many novelists would consider tantamount to selling one's children to gypsies. He sold *Lincoln* to network television.

Tonight, NBC delivers a surprise that we had scant reason to expect: an adaptation of *Lincoln*, a four-hour drama shot on a frantic, 40-day schedule, that is first-rate in almost every department.

The two-part movie, billed as a miniseries and starring Sam Waterston as Abraham Lincoln and Mary Tyler Moore as Mary Todd Lincoln, airs tonight and Monday beginning at 9 p.m. (on WPTV-Ch. 5 and WSVN-Ch. 7).

Gore Vidal's *Lincoln* was adapted by Ernest Kinoy, a veteran screenwriter whose previous credits include *Roots: The Next Generation*.

The script is a solid piece of writing, as one would anticipate from Kinoy. Taking his cue from Vidal, he examines Lincoln from personal, political and historical perspectives. Kinoy avoids two major traps of miniseries drama: soap opera and dusty history lesson. Gore Vidal's *Lincoln* is neither.

The drama also, happily, is not a rip-the-lid-off, "inside" look at the Lincoln family. Readers of Vidal's book quickly learned that, despite its author's reputation for controversy, *Lincoln* was less a historical breakthrough than a handy compendium of data gathered for the first time in one volume, and beautifully written in the style of a novel.

The TV adaptation adheres to the format of the book. Perhaps because Civil War

miniseries always attract large audiences -- ABC's North and South was awful, yet earned gargantuan ratings -- NBC executives did not feel the need to insert quantities of sex and gore into Lincoln.

And if they had, the NBC brass would have found themselves in a battle of Appomattox proportions. Gore Vidal's Lincoln was directed by Lamont Johnson, who earned an Emmy Award last year for Unnatural Causes. His direction of such other TV movies as Fear on Trial and The Execution of Private Slovik has made him a talent to reckon with. Johnson has a strong will to go with his talent, and, although he was hired late in the production, there is no way he could have been coerced to turn it into a slick, tawdry, commercial property.

Johnson extracted a promise for three weeks of rehearsals from NBC, resulting in performances that are relaxed, and actors who seem at ease in the 19th century setting. The cast of Lincoln doesn't stagger through the miniseries with the waxworks-like awkwardness of the actors in CBS' The Blue and the Gray and ABC's North and South.

"I spent a lot of time scouting locations in Richmond, Va., and I got an excellent cinematographer, Bill Wages, who shot Baby Girl Scott for John Kory and isn't part of the Hollywood establishment," recalls Johnson. "Bill is solid as a rock and couldn't be budged by the incredible pressures we were under."

That's not hyperbole. Wages' camerawork may be the best of its kind, in a film of this length, since John Alcott's Academy Award-winning work on Stanley Kubrick's Barry Lyndon ('76). It's incredible that this was accomplished in 40 days on a meager -- by miniseries standards -- budget of \$7.5 million.

Johnson and Kinoy trimmed 39 pages from the teleplay. Then Johnson cast the project -- carefully, with an eye for talent, not star power. He received a fine collection of performances from his cast, which includes John Houseman (who previously was in Johnson's Fear on Trial), Cleavon Little, Robin Gammell and Richard Mulligan.

"They're mostly stage actors," explains Johnson, "and character actors, as opposed to stars. Cleavon Little came down from New York, where he was appearing in I'm Not Rappaport, to do one day as E.M. Thomas, the black man who meets with Lincoln about the Emancipation Proclamation.

"Richard (Mulligan) was the last one hired, because he replaced another actor as Seward, his secretary of state. He was hired literally on a moment's notice, and he's known mainly for comedy -- which always struck me as odd, since I worked with him on a heavy drama 20 years ago -- but a good actor is a good actor. He did a wonderful job."

Johnson`s biggest obstacle was persuading Moore to take the part of Mary Todd, the president`s paranoid, emotionally disturbed wife, who unravels progressively throughout the drama.

Johnson explains: ``The main thing Mary kept saying was, `How are we going to bridge the gap between people who see me in costume and think it`s a sketch from The Carol Burnett Show, and the drama we`re trying to depict?`

``It was a sensible question. But enthusiasm is often the only tonic an actor needs to inspire him to go to work. I have a lot of enthusiasm, and I honestly felt that for Mary in this part. So she agreed, and it doesn`t really matter that she doesn`t look an awful lot like Mary Todd -- who`s going to know that but history purists, anyway? -- because she conveys what I think she must have been like.``

Gore Vidal`s [Lincoln](#) is receiving mostly favorable press notices, which has pleased Johnson. But the review that delighted him the most, and came unexpectedly as he was polishing his final cut of the film, originated from a notoriously harsh critic.