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Review

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Review by: Nicholas J. Cull

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intertwined existence now diverged into two parallel lives.

Simply put, the Lincoln family lost its father figure so that the nation could gain one. Mary Lincoln made some real contributions to the nation, and the presidency in particular, turning the White House into a symbol of domestic grace and national unity and, in the process, becoming the first "First Lady" to bear that label. The end of the war promised a romantic reconciliation that was never to be: the couple were holding hands at that fateful moment in Ford's Theater. Mary's declining years were indeed tragic, but, in another missed opportunity, the producers fail to analyze the broader fate of Civil War widows who so dominated the nation's domestic landscape once the war ended.

Often compelling and even heart-rending, *House Divided: Abraham and Mary Lincoln* is gracefully written, filmed, and edited, and it is fully realized in dramatic style. Actual quotations from the couple, delivered by Hollywood actors Holly Hunter and David Morse, add an air of both intimacy and authenticity to the story. The production goes far to resurrect this compelling relationship from both myth and obscurity and especially to rehabilitate Mary Lincoln. This is the best documentary to date on the Lincolns' marriage, but important dimensions of this story remain unexplored.

KENNETH J. WINKLE
University of Nebraska,
Lincoln

THIRTEEN DAYS. Produced by Kevin Costner, Armyan Bernstein, and Peter O. Almond; directed by Roger Donaldson; screenplay by David Self. 2000; color; 145 minutes. USA. Distributed by New Line Cinema.

There is an old saying in the British newspaper industry that runs: "Tickle the public and make them grin; the more they laugh, the more you win; teach the public, you never grow rich; you live like a beggar and die in a ditch." Similar wisdom permeates Hollywood, but this has never deterred Kevin Costner. Costner has carved a unique niche for himself as "home-room teacher" to the world. As an actor, producer, and director, he has repeatedly selected "improving" subjects; teaching audiences with an infectious awe about Plains Indian culture, global warming, Wyatt Earp, or some other corner of Americana. He has taken occasional knocks at the box office for his trouble, but he remains a long way from either beggary or ditches. The lesson is never far from the surface in his latest work, *Thirteen Days*, an account of decision making during the Cuban missile crisis. "Take-home" messages include the inherent danger of nuclear weapons and the statesmanship of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

It is impossible to view *Thirteen Days* without recalling Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), in which Costner's character (as crusading New Orleans Attorney Jim Garrison) investigated the Kennedy assassination. Stone's film failed to clarify exactly what the United

States had lost in Dallas that November day, beyond dubious reports of Kennedy's intent to withdraw from Vietnam. In *Thirteen Days* Costner seeks to make up for both that omission and the various historical liberties and outrageous speculations presented in *JFK*.

The screenwriter, David Self, based *Thirteen Days* on an unimpeachable source: Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow's splendid compilation of documents and tape transcripts, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1997). Self took his title from Robert Kennedy's memoir of the crisis (1969). Interviewees for the film included former reconnaissance pilot Bill Ecker, whose low-level flight over Cuba forms one of the most exhilarating episodes in the film, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, whose sympathetic portrayal here will doubtless further advance the rehabilitation of the once-vilified Vietnam War-hawk. The audience watches the drama through the eyes of Kennedy's Special Assistant Kenny O'Donnell (played by Costner). Opinion is divided over O'Donnell's significance in the White House. This film follows Pierre Salinger in placing him as a key advisor rather than accept alternative sources that stress his role as the president's appointments secretary.

Thanks to the taut direction of Australian filmmaker Roger Donaldson, *Thirteen Days* unfolds with the pace of a thriller. Bruce Greenwood delivers a compelling and movingly human performance as President Kennedy. Donaldson and his team work with a stunning attention to period detail and likenesses around the cabinet table. Unlike the hit-and-miss casting of Stone's *Nixon* (1995), the faces of *Thirteen Days* match the photographs of the time with a ghostly accuracy. The action periodically switches into monochrome as the characters drift through poses familiar from Cecil Stoughton's photographs of the time. Such stylistic emphasis on authenticity lends weight to the film's historical position. Unfortunately, although in a different league from most historical films, the film's historical position is on occasion compromised. A charitable explanation would blame necessary "tickling" of the audience, but others maybe tempted to detect old-fashioned bias.

The selection of O'Donnell as the point of entry into the film maybe historically forgivable, but the choice of villain is not. A good film needs a bad guy to generate tension and, not content to rely on the possibility of nuclear war, *Thirteen Days* finds its villains in the ranks of the U.S. military. Air Force General Curtis LeMay was guilty of many things, including a callous disregard for the lives of Japanese and Vietnamese civilians, but there is no evidence that he attempted to trick Kennedy into war during the Cuban missile crisis. LeMay and the other hawks certainly recommended air strikes, but the picture of their maneuvering at climactic moments of *Thirteen Days* owes more to the world of contemporaneous fictions like Fletcher Knebel and Charles Bailey's *Seven Days in May* (1962)

than it does to documented facts. *Thirteen Days* uses the Cuban missile crisis to argue that military men, like nuclear weapons, are inherently dangerous commodities that require vigilant handling.

Other elements of the "take-home" message, however, can be readily documented in the sources. One of the most telling details, taken from Robert Kennedy's memoir, is the president's discussion of *The Guns of August* (1962), Barbara Tuchman's account of the outbreak of World War I, which he had recently read. President Kennedy cites Tuchman's narrative as evidence that miscalculations and pride can allow great states to slip into war. He resolves to avoid the same pitfalls in 1962. That a work of history should be cited at so crucial a juncture is a rare validation of popular historical writing. With his well-publicized screenings of *Thirteen Days* to Fidel Castro and senior political figures in Russia, Costner clearly hopes that this film may serve a similar purpose in an audiovisual age. It is a worthy ambition.

NICHOLAS J. CULL
University of Leicester

BEFORE NIGHT FALLS. Produced by Jon Kilik; directed by Julian Schnabel; screenplay by Cunningham O'Keefe, Lázaro Gómez Carriles, and Julian Schnabel. 2000; color; 133 minutes. Distributed by Fine Line Features.

Reinaldo Arenas (1943–1990) grew up poor in the eastern Cuban province of Holguín, and he supported Fidel Castro and the guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra mountains against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (1952–1959). After the triumph of the revolution, Arenas moved to Havana, where he eventually dedicated himself to writing. Initially, Arenas and other writers and intellectuals shared an optimism about the revolution. The banning in 1961 of Sabá Cabrera Infante's film *P.M.*, about Cuban nightlife, signaled a souring of the relationship between intellectuals and the regime.

In the 1960s, the Cuban government centralized cultural production with the creation of the Cuban National Union of Writers and Artists (UNEAC), which urged writers to produce works that would support the revolution. In 1965, the Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción (UMAP) were established to rehabilitate anyone whom the regime considered antisocial, and homosexuals became one of the primary targets. By the time of the First National Congress on Education and Culture in 1971, the regime extolled the primacy of political commitment over freedom of expression and also adopted a number of homophobic measures.

In the midst of these changes, Arenas was beginning to bloom as a writer. He had published his first novel, *Celestino antes del alba* (*Singing from the Well* [1967]) and had come into contact with many of the great writers of modern Cuba, including José Lezama Lima and Virgilio Piñera. But soon afterwards, he would

begin to have serious problems with Cuban censorship and the military revolutionary ideals. Arenas responded by smuggling his work abroad to be published. The homophobia of the revolution stifled him, but he responded with unbridled sexual activity with men, using, as he later affirmed, "sex as a weapon." Cuban authorities eventually jailed Arenas for molestation of minors and for publishing outside of Cuba; he was released when he signaled that he had reformed his ways. Arenas eventually left the island for the United States in the Mariel boatlifts of 1980. He moved briefly to Miami before settling in New York, where he continued to write until his death due to AIDS (although it was ruled a suicide) in 1990.

Inspired by Arenas's tragic yet exuberant life, director Julian Schnabel has created an ambitious homage to this singular Cuban writer. Employing a historical narrative style, *Before Night Falls* makes use of Arenas's poetry, stunning visual imagery, historical footage, and superbly placed music to shape a cinematographic collage that, although at times unclear, is nevertheless powerful. The film relies on many of Arenas's writings, including his memoir (1993) from which the film takes its title. It depicts many human rights violations in Cuba, but Schnabel is not merely interested in the facts. He has modified some of the historical material and made economic use of Arenas's stories to portray a greater truth: the redeeming nature of art, a theme also developed in his previous film *Basquiat* (1996). This rich production has two shortcomings, however: it does not provide a critical analysis of Arenas's inner world, nor does it give us a broad understanding of the inner struggles of the Cuban revolution.

The creative process and motivation of any artist is difficult to expose, and many films have attempted this with varying success. Recent attempts include the tortured portrayal of Francis Bacon in *Love is the Devil* (1998); Ed Harris's *Pollack* (2000), and Philip Kaufman's *Quills* (2000); the last is dedicated to the Marquis de Sade, with whom many may draw parallels with Arenas. Understanding Rainer Maria Rilke's advice to the young poet, Schnabel intelligently gives us a sense of Arenas's childhood, yet we see little of how his early experience informed his worldview or affected his inner life. The film ends with a Spanish and English version of the poem "Yo soy" that emphasizes Arenas's belief that he would always be "that child 'of always,'" but the significance of these words is not particularly developed throughout the film.

Arenas wrote about history, repression, and dehumanization in the baroque style of the Cuban literary tradition, but he also wrote about sex and how sexuality in Cuba shaped his life. Indeed, he viewed both sex and art as vehicles of redemption. Schnabel deals candidly with Arenas's homosexuality and includes an important scene in which Arenas declares that sex became a way of fighting repression, "a weapon to use against the regime." Yet in the film Arenas's voracious sexual appetite and prolific sexual activity from the