

‘The Conspirator’ Has Lessons That Resonate Today

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 15, 2011 - 5:16pm

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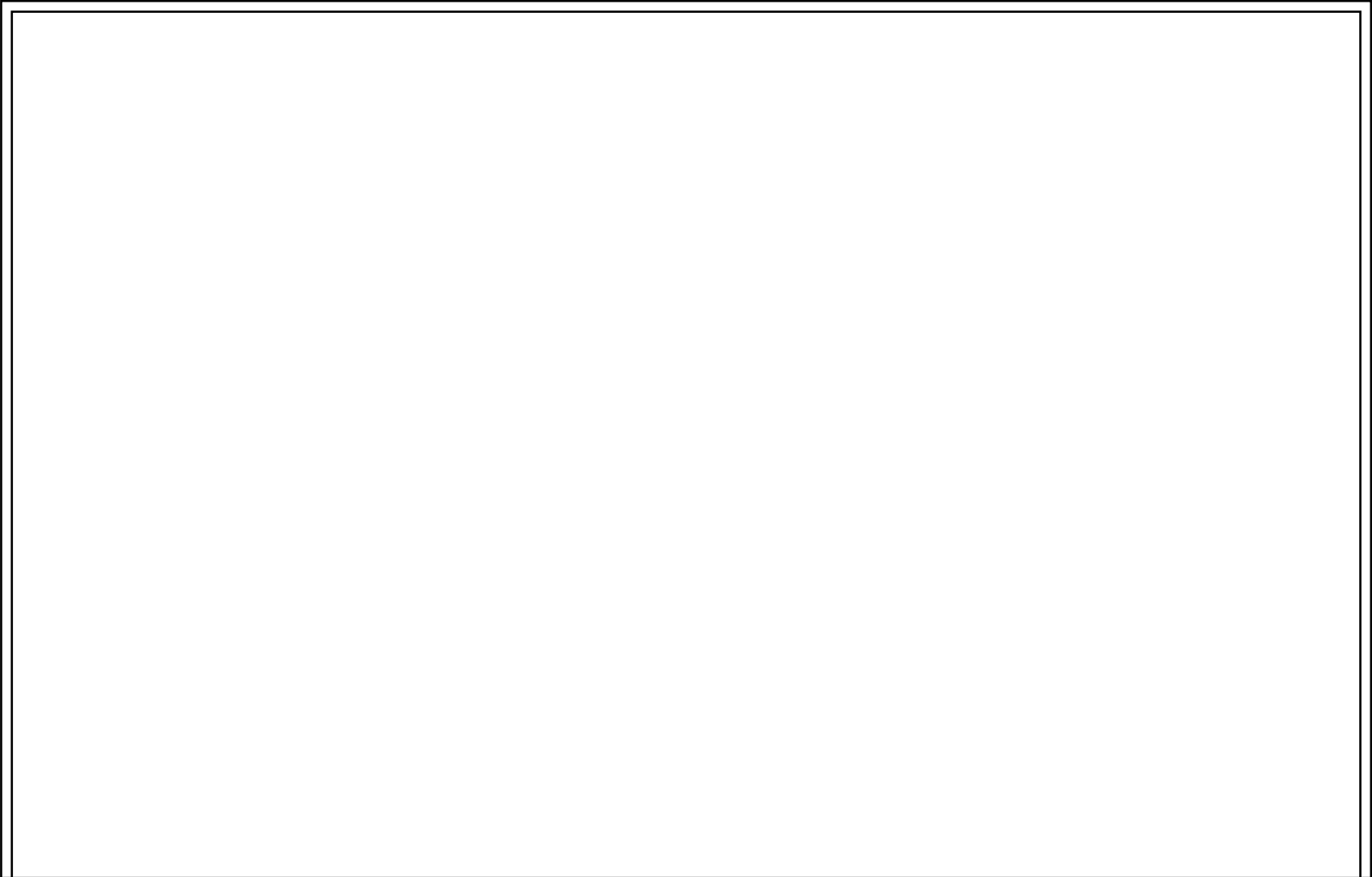
Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The Latin term “Inter arma silent leges.” (There is no law on the battlefield) is coldly stated in “The Conspirator,” directed by Robert Redford. In plain truth, the new film recreates one of the most controversial military trials in American history.

Today, April 15th, is the 146th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s death, assassinated by Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth. This is also the week of the 150th anniversary (April 12th) of the start of the American Civil War. Both these events reverberate to the consequences of trading in our freedoms during wartime, which centralizes power and legitimizes fear. The Conspirator is about Mary Surratt, a southerner who ran a boarding house in Washington, D.C., where the plot was hatched to murder President Lincoln.

The film begins on a battlefield during the Civil War, where two friends lie injured. Frederick Aiken (James McAvoy) insists that his comrade Nicholas (Justin Long) be treated first. Fast forward two years later to April 14th, 1865, the two friends are reunited at a party in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the end of the war only days earlier. A courier interrupts the proceedings to bring the news that President Lincoln has been shot while attending a play at Ford’s Theater right down the street.

Aiken rushes to the scene, and sees the mortally wounded Lincoln being laid in a small bedroom in the Peterson House across from the theater. He also sees Secretary of War Edwin Stanton (Kevin Kline) moving his way through the crowd, to take the reins of government while participating in Lincoln’s death watch. Across town, Secretary of State William Seward is being attacked, but survives, and Vice President Andrew Johnson dodges an assassin’s attempt because the shooter has lost his nerve.





Defense Rests: Robin Wright (Mary Surratt) and James McAvoy (Frederick Aiken) in ‘The Conspirator’
Photo credit: Claudette Barius for Roadside Attractions

Booth and the two other men are part of a plan to murder the upper echelon in Lincoln’s cabinet, but only Booth succeeds. This plot was hatched in the Surratt boarding house in Washington, and Mary Surratt (the overseer of the property, portrayed by Robin Wright) is arrested, along with the other conspirators. Booth is shot and killed while on the lam.

What follows is the trial of Mary Surratt, defended by Frederick Aiken. The war veteran is a young attorney, and he is appointed by Senator Reverdy Johnson (Tom Wilkerson) to defend against what is essentially a railroading of justice. The military tribunal, hand-picked by Stanton for quick prosecution, hears the arguments for Surratt’s innocence – her assertion is that she ran the boarding house but knew nothing of the plot – but the guilty verdict seems forgone.

This is a serious story, and it is given the “serious story” gravity that is often found in historical recreations. But the subject matter is absorbing enough to stand up to a little costumed overacting. At times it seems the actors are self conscious about portraying the Civil War-era icons, especially Justin Long and Kevin Kline (who I suspect watched tapes of Dick Cheney). Robin Wright as Mary Surratt is the best of them, portraying a tragic martyr to post-war hysteria.

James McAvoy is basically the centerpiece of the film, playing a rather conflicted defense attorney. At first, his persona is out of place in the proceedings, but Redford’s direction leads the character into a better place, and McAvoy finds his footing nicely within the apparent travesty of justice. He is particularly effective towards the end, as he desperately comes up with something, anything to make sure that Surratt isn’t executed.

The depiction of the trial, which was held in the old Arsenal Building in Washington, is the most telling and gripping part of the narrative. The guilty verdict for Surratt is a pre-conceived measure, notable because Stanton wanted the justice to be swift to inject fear (understandably) into any other potential Confederate assassins. But the swift sword also cleaves justice in this case, and the prisoners abide in a kangaroo court. The holes in the truth are presented dramatically and effectively.

The look and feel of 1865 America is complete. Redford uses claustrophobic settings to keep the period look clean, and in many scenes has the sun pouring into the cramped courtroom and Surratt’s cell, as if trying to shed light upon the darkness of the ugly proceedings. The recreation of Lincoln’s assassination is stark, especially the tiny quarters of the Peterson House, where Lincoln had to be placed perpendicularly on a simple bed, the large man becoming smaller in death.



Point of Justice: James McAvoy and Tom Wilkerson (Reverdy Johnson) in 'The Conspirator'
Photo credit: Claudette Barius for Roadside Attractions

The aim of Robert Redford in the construction of *The Conspirator* is obviously to parallel the circumstances of the last 10 years, where the fear of terrorism has led to perpetual war and the suspension of highly regarded constitutional beliefs in exchange for an illusion of safety. The debate about that legality in the film consists of the same concerns that takes regarding the Guantanamo Bay detention camps and the politicians who believe that war powers means the suspension of fair trials, privacy and yes, freedom.

Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, ironically could not extend that titular morality to the perpetrators of his demise. It is a sad and almost evil legacy to the events of that horrible Civil War, that still reverberates 146 years later.

"The Conspirator" opens everywhere on April 15th. Featuring Robin Wright, James McAvoy, Evan Rachel Wood, Justin Long, Tom Wilkinson and Kevin Kline. Screenplay by James D. Solomon, directed by Robert Redford. Rated "PG-13"



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