

## ‘LBJ’ is Important American History Brought to Light

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on November 3, 2017 - 9:22am

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The circumstances surrounding the John F. Kennedy assassination on November 22nd, 1963, put a man into the presidential spotlight who never thought he would get there... Lyndon Baines Johnson. The story of that strange time and the man who “would be king” is told in ‘LBJ.’

Woody Harrelson portrays the title character in a surprising piece of casting, but he delivers Johnson so humanely and historically that by the end he is most appropriate for the role. Director Rob Reiner – working from a script by Joey Hartstone – structures the film through the filter of his fascination for Washington, D.C. shown in “A Few Good Men”... that justice can prevail if the right person is there at the right time. In his era, Johnson was rightly vilified in his escalation of the Vietnam War, but in other areas of legislation (the Civil Rights Act, Medicare, Medicaid, the anti-poverty Great Society) LBJ sought to uplift the underclass in this country, based on an empathy that is smartly expressed in the film. The assassination of JFK was a shocking act, and it was Johnson in the aftermath who had to reset the path of a nation.

The date was November 22nd, 1963, in Dallas, Texas. President John F. Kennedy (Jeffrey Donovan) is touring the battleground state of Texas in anticipation of his 1964 re-election campaign, with his Vice President and Texas native Lyndon B. Johnson (Woody Harrelson) also on the trip. As the open-air motorcade parades through Dallas, there are flashbacks to Johnson’s career, including his clashes with Attorney General Bobby Kennedy (Richard Stahl-David).



Woody Harrelson is the Title Character in ‘LBJ’

*Photo credit: Electric Entertainment*

Before joining the JFK administration, Johnson as a Senator was the most powerful compromiser in Congress, and had the foresight to realize that African American Civil Rights was ready to be legislated, despite opposition from Southern Senators like Richard Russell (Richard Jenkins). The shots ring out in Dallas, President Kennedy is killed, and it is Lyndon Johnson that has to calm an anxious nation.

This is a lot of history to digest, but veteran director Reiner knows how to tell a story, and makes complex events seem like a natural progression. His “LBJ” is alive with the human beings behind the men-as-icons, and careful casting allowed that the actors would deliver the humanity in the powerful leaders. Yes, there is LBJ as the crude Texan, and famously talking to his advisers while sitting on the toilet, but there is also Johnson the determined man, that will use his power to evolve a country still divided by a Civil War. His decisions after the assassination were both good and bad, but that defines a man as much as anything.

Woody Harrelson is behind a lot of make-up for his LBJ, and at first glance was a reminder of the look created for the movie “Mask.” But his performance becomes so alive and gutsy, that the artifice of how he looks becomes unimportant. He also has great chemistry with his co-stars, including Jennifer Jason Leigh in the small- but-important role as wife Lady Bird Johnson. His confrontations with Richard Jenkins as Senator Russell are electric, and his frustrations with the Kennedys are completely believable. As it is often said in Fall movie season, but in this case true, it’s an Oscar-worthy performance.





The Swearing in of President Johnson is Recreated in ‘LBJ’  
Photo credit: Electric Entertainment

Rob Reiner does a virtuous job recreating (yet again) the John F. Kennedy assassination. With complete precision, he follows the visual path of the Abraham Zapruder home movie of the killing, which puts a gloss on it, but also is a reminder how gut-wrenching that murder remains. This leads into the second act of the film, Johnson’s not-expected presidency, and the most important speech he has to make – several days after JFK’s burial, to begin healing a nation. The build-up to that moment creates an almost dreaded tension, and makes the end of the movie that much more compelling. Reiner hasn’t had a hit in awhile, but he certainly makes a case for one in this great film.

Whenever I hear the initials LBJ, I always think of a song from the Broadway musical “Hair” (which was developed toward the end of LBJ’s administration in 1968). “LBJ took the IRT down to 4th Street USA/When he got there, what did he see/The youth of America on LSD.” Yes, there were more changes in the wind for Johnson, and often the answers blew around him.

*“LBJ” opens everywhere on November 3rd. Featuring Woody Harrelson, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Richard Jenkins, Bill Pullman, Jeffrey Donovan and Michael Stahl-David. Written by Joey Hartsone. Directed by Rob Reiner. Rated “R”*



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