

MOST WANTED

Spielberg and Day-Lewis; Zemeckis and Washington... Lincoln and Flight team directorial legends with powerhouse stars to produce Oscar-worthy pictures. Total Film talks to the icons.

CLASH OF THE TITANS





Steven Spielberg and Daniel Day-Lewis, together in New York on 8 October, 2012.



LINCOLN

Posse Steven Spielberg (Dir), Daniel Day-Lewis, Sally Field, Tommy Lee Jones, Joseph Gordon-Levitt

ETA 25 January

Wanted for Iconic director and star grapple with a monumental US President? This is the Mount Rushmore of movies...

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

PORTRAIT **NINO MUNOZ**

Ushered into a hotel suite of decidedly un-Presidential proportions, bar the fact that it has nice views over Central Park, *Total Film* is announced to two of the film world's leading statesmen. "Total Film... oh good!" declares Steven Spielberg, striding forth with a warm handshake and beaming smile. Daniel Day-Lewis, tall, rail-thin, with his shirt fastened up to the last button, hangs back at first. Is he not ready to discuss his uncanny, transfixing portrayal of Abraham Lincoln? "I'm actually ready for a nap," he says, suffering a post-lunch slump. Then the two-time Oscar-winning actor erupts with laughter; his two-time Oscar-winning director jokingly orders, "Don't take one now!"

It's clear the two men relish each other's company and, as Spielberg asks an assistant to bring some hot water and "I'll put the teabag in", both settle in to discuss his long-time passion project about America's 16th President. He's been pursuing it for years, via multiple screenplay drafts and initially another actor (Liam Neeson). Doris Kearns Goodwin's biography *Team Of Rivals* and adapter-in-chief Tony Kushner showed him the light: that it was far wiser to reveal a great man through one defining legacy (how Lincoln manoeuvred the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery through Congress against fierce resistance and while still at war) rather than mount a sweeping epic that tried to show *everything*...

Total Film: Being honest, we went in expecting 'Spielberg presents the American Civil War!', with massive set-pieces. But *Lincoln* is a reflective drama about the procedural machinations of American democracy. What gives?

Steven Spielberg: It was a change of direction dictated by an urgent need in me to show people who Abraham Lincoln was as a man and as a great leader. I couldn't do that if I was constantly cutting back and forth from Antietam, Spotsylvania, Gettysburg to the White House. I tried! I tried that in an earlier script, but it wasn't until Doris' >>

book that we decided to focus in on a few events in Lincoln's life that would give us the most opportunity to get to know him as a man, as a father, as a husband and as the President.

Although you insisted it be released after the US election, do you want the modern parallels to be obvious?

Daniel Day-Lewis: It's the same system of government. [Laughs] What are you going to do?

SS: I didn't put anything in deliberately. We didn't bend and twist history to reflect contemporary politics; the reflection is simply the truth.

But it shows a seamy side to democracy in that Lincoln essentially buys votes to get the 13th Amendment passed.

SS: But what he did was not illegal. They were offering jobs in exchange for favouring a yes vote to abolish slavery. It's not legitimate and it's kind of murky but it's also not illegal.

DD-L: He understood that in times of war the borderlines of legality are occasionally moveable. The smokescreen of a good war is a time when, for better or worse, things can be achieved... things which are much harder to achieve with all of the checks and balances that are in place outside of a war.

Do you want people to view Lincoln as a celebration of democracy?

DD-L: Ha-ha, good question! It's both the blessing and the curse of the American system of government that it's really hard to get things done. But it had to be that way because it was in direct response to living in thrall to a dictatorship.

SS: I celebrate democracy because... What did Winston Churchill say? "Democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried."

Can you talk about your approach to Lincoln? In the film, he appears to be a mix of bashful fragility and magnetic power...

DD-L: I think there's a great vulnerability which co-exists with his strength. Quite apart from his own tough upbringing, he had a deep sense of compassion and empathy for people and creatures that remained with him throughout his life. It was his essence that those two conflicting things existed side by side, and they probably gnawed at him in such a way that he couldn't have survived, regardless of the assassination.

Where did your research take you?

SS: I was granted access to the inner sanctum of the Lincoln archive. I held the stovepipe hat, I touched the dress that Mary was wearing during the assassination. It was a beautiful experience. As opposed to it feeling far away, it felt almost within my own lifetime. It was a great takeaway.

DD-L: I didn't get to hold the hat, but I did hold other things: his pen, his letters, his eyeglasses...

Daniel, did you feel the need to cocoon yourself away from modern-day distractions?

DD-L: There may have been a time when I was more rigorous in denying myself 20th-Century

History man: Daniel Day-Lewis leads the cast through the American Civil War.



'I was moved by the reverence to the subject matter on set. It caught everyone's attention' SPIELBERG

life. I don't think it's because I'm lazier now, I just don't feel I need to in quite the same way. But I don't use much technology and my house in Ireland, as Steven knows, is fairly primitive...

SS: Yes, very Lincolnian...

DD-L: It's of the period, actually!

SS: ...and was long before the movie. Very period. When Daniel opens his mail, it's actually something tactile; it's white and has things written on it...

DD-L: [Laughs] And it arrives on a stagecoach. I've got to tell you a funny thing, because of the rumours that I drag with me wherever I go...

I had a wonderful guy called Murray [Day-Lewis' driver] who had heard some of this stuff and was a bit jumpy when we first met. Once it was all out in the open and I'd put his mind at rest, I said, "But we've got to wind them all up. You've got to tell your Teamster captain that I insist - insist - on going to work in a horse and carriage..."

How far did you go? Lincoln's voice for instance: it's quavering, even shrill at times. Did you base it on descriptions of what he really sounded like?

DD-L: I suppose loosely, but the accounts only take you so far. Luckily for me, there is no evidence whereby somebody can say, "That's not what he sounded like."

Yet you've perturbed a faction who clearly feel he isn't being presented in a heroic enough light...

SS: For the record, Lincoln had a high voice. It's in all the descriptions of how he talked. It's the reason that, during the Gettysburg address, on a blustery day, his voice could carry several hundred yards, unlike the voice people expect him to have, like other actors who have played him, from Raymond Massey to Gregory Peck, where you hear the voice of authority.

DD-L: I hate dismembering the work that one does into its component parts, as if somehow you

bolted together the pieces for a car and then turned the key in the ignition and off you drove. Because evidently something else is at work which you're to a certain degree unconscious of.

Without wanting to sound pretentious, my faith is that the voice comes to me for a reason. I'm not suggesting it's like a spiritual visitation but it's something I receive rather than something I impose.

The facial hair is a signature. How was the beard? Did your family find it amusing?

DD-L: We were separated by a distance but I'm sure they found it funny.

SS: It doesn't bother my wife. My beard, not Daniel's.

Can you talk about your relationship leading up to and during the shoot?

SS: Daniel said something that was critical after he'd committed to play Lincoln: he asked for a year before we began production. I could have gone into production within three months of Daniel saying yes but he said, "I would like us not to rush into this." It was the best thing that could have happened as it gave us a chance to get to know each other. By the time we came to Richmond for the first day of

shooting, we had the essence of our bond, between two friends and between an actor and a director.

DD-L: The wonderful advantage about working in that way is that there's nothing more to say once you're on set. Which isn't to say that we didn't speak, but there's an economy of communication then. I think a scene lives or dies according to whether or not people have an unspoken complicity, as opposed to having to reach for something in such a way that it gets described, defined, and essentially stuffed and mounted on a wall before it has any life breathed into it.

SS: I didn't have to make any speeches in this relationship. There was a reverence on the set among the cast, not only because Daniel was raising the bar, but because the history we were recreating caught everyone's attention. I would want to move the camera across the room and I was always amazed that the actors sat there waiting while all this 21st-Century technology was being moved around them. They wouldn't speak... I was moved by the reverence to the subject matter.

Did anything surprise you about Daniel?

SS: I had been an admirer ever since I saw *My Left Foot*. He stands in the highest regard to me. If somebody said, "I'm going to give you an opportunity to go back in time and direct your choice of actors", I would pick James Cagney, Paul Muni, Spencer Tracy, Jimmy Stewart and Daniel Day-Lewis.

Will you work together again?

SS: I don't want to burden Daniel with my dreams, but that is undeniably my next one. **TF**

Lincoln opens on 25 Jan and will be reviewed in a future issue. For more, go to totalfilm.com. Turn the page Zemeckis and Washington... >>

MOST WANTED





Robert Zemeckis and Denzel Washington, together in New York, October 2012.

FLIGHT

Posse Robert Zemeckis (Dir), Denzel Washington, Kelly Reilly, Nadine Velazquez, John Goodman
ETA 1 February

Wanted for The best plane crash since *Cast Away* and Washington on Oscar-baiting form as a drug-hoovering pilot.

WORDS **JAMIE GRAHAM**

PORTRAIT **CAROLYN COLE**

The Four Seasons Hotel on a cloudless LA day. Robert Zemeckis squeezes hands with a nasal grunt. Denzel Washington grips hard, pumps harder. Director and star are here to talk *Flight*, their first collaboration despite a shared screen history spanning 72 years.

Flight is the story of Captain Whip Whitaker (Washington), a commercial airline pilot who executes a miraculous crash landing following a mechanical failure. Anointed a national hero, Whitaker's skill and courage suddenly count for little when it emerges he was high in the cockpit. And so a film that takes off via a white-knuckle spectacle – as you might expect from the director of the *Back To The Future* trilogy – banks towards a purposeful character study, with Whitaker trying to get clean as an investigation looms.

Following mo-cap adventures *The Polar Express*, *Beowulf* and *A Christmas Carol*, *Flight* is Zemeckis' first live-action film in 12 years. It's easy to see why he was tempted back to 'reality': himself a pilot ("I took lessons just to learn about it; I also know everything about steam trains and time machines...") and a recovering alcoholic, it was a script he could mine for meaning. And who better to act as co-pilot than Washington?

Total Film: Bob, *Flight* is your first live-action movie since *Cast Away*.

Robert Zemeckis: You make it sound like I'd retired. I've been making movies!

Did your experiences with mo-cap feed into making *Flight*?

RZ: Well, I think it did, if you look at the roster of actors that I worked with in those 12 years [*Tom Hanks, Anthony Hopkins, Robin Wright, Gary Oldman*]. When you do performance capture, it's just you and the actor. So my performance directing chops were really well honed.

Denzel, you were already on board when Bob signed up...

Denzel Washington: We'd gone through a couple of directors or more, and when I heard he was interested, I was like, "Not too shabby... his first

live-action film since *Cast Away*; he's a pilot; he's been sober for 15-odd years..." It was interesting.

And Bob, how did you feel signing on, knowing you were saddled with Denzel?

RZ: [*Laughs*] I thought: 'perfect'. He's one of the greatest actors, ever.

What state was the script in when you came on board?

RZ: It was magnificent. When I read a screenplay and I am continually excited to turn the page, and when I can't figure out the ending of the movie on page 10, then I'm interested.

So it didn't need rewrites?

RZ: There were endless rewrites.

Why, if it was a brilliant script?

RZ: Well, there's never been a screenplay that I've seen that didn't need rewrites. But that doesn't mean that at its core there isn't a brilliant movie there, with some crippled scenes around it.

You must have been excited by the character, Denzel?

DW: It was like, "Woah... I haven't had that many opportunities to bite down on something this rich."

How did you research playing a pilot and an addict?

DW: I got in a flight simulator. I didn't ask a lot of questions [*of the pilots*] about drinking, because obviously that would have been a very sensitive area for them and I didn't want to get anybody in trouble. But then, you know, drinking too much rears its ugly head in every profession.

Did you meet with alcoholics?

DW: I went online. You can YouTube "drunks" and you'll see every level of it. One guy, all he tried to do for five minutes was get his foot in his shoe [*leans forward and acts it out*]. I remember one of my relatives, years back, and he had a thing where he'd almost hit you, punch you, because he wanted you to agree with him [*leans forward and drunkenly punches Total Film on arm*]. You know? Is there sweetness in it? Anger in it? He's controlling you. It's a wicked drug.

It would be easy to overplay. How do you calibrate the performance?

RZ: I like using the word 'throttle', whereby I ensure the intensity of the performance is within the mosaic.

Some directors ask for different levels of intensity in different takes so they have options in the cutting room. Do you do this?

RZ: No. I know what I've got to have in my vision of the movie. With an actor like Denzel, you're standing behind him going, "Shit, that's good. That'll work."

Denzel, you're a clean-living guy. How do you empathise with a character like this?

DW: You don't judge it.

You smoked and put on weight for the role...

DW: That's a part of it. It was embarrassing some days but you have to let it go. That's who he is. He wasn't going to go to the gym, you know? The cigarettes were herbal. I'd be dead, otherwise.

Did you ever consider shooting in 3D?

RZ: The story tells you whether to make a movie >>



Crash captain: Denzel Washington as Whip Whitaker in *Flight*.

in widescreen, whether it's going to be 1.85, whether it's going to be 2D, 3D, black-and-white, colour... It all depends on what's in the script. In this script, there was no need to make the film in 3D.

Your last few live-action movies have been more sombre, or adult, than your earlier movies. Is that a conscious migration?

RZ: I'm not conscious of it but I think you're probably right, probably because I've grown old. You start getting some life experience under your belt; it's hard to be silly.

Yet people still think of you as a creator of special effects movies. Do people overlook your strengths as a storyteller?

RZ: Yeah. I feel journalists are compelled to [pause] I guess it's their job to keep people in categories and boxes. So I keep you off base.

In your early days, journalists regarded you as Spielberg's protégé...

RZ: Yeah! And I was, I was his protégé. He godfathered my career. Here's the great thing about Steven and I – we've never been competitors. He's never made a single movie I've coveted, and I'm sure he's never wanted to do anything that I've made. We just appreciate each other and it's been a fabulous relationship.

Do you still talk? Did you show *Flight* to him?

RZ: Oh yeah, it's very cool. We'll talk. We'll get together. He'll say, "Shall I make this? What do you think?" It's always great.

Paramount are talking about pushing *Flight* as an awards film...

DW: Let's not put the cart before the horse. We worked hard and Bob fashioned a fantastic film. We'll see what people say.

RZ: I think that any expectation you put on a movie outside of it being a movie you think

'When I read a screenplay and I can't figure out the ending by page 10, then I'm interested' ZEMECKIS

someone might enjoy seeing, I think you're setting yourself up for a disaster. Then you're making a film for 100 per cent the wrong reason. Having said that, getting acknowledged by the Academy is always a massive honour.

Denzel, you're on your A game in *Flight*...

DW: Thank you. You know, in 2010 I went back to Broadway with Viola Davis in the play *Fences*. Working with her, I was, 'Wait a minute, what have I been doing? Because it ain't the same thing she's doing...' I didn't say, "Oh, I'm never going to make movies again" or "Screw Hollywood". That's not what I felt. But I said, "I've got to get back to the work itself. What is my profession? I'm an actor. Do the work."

How do you work, Bob? Do you just do a couple of takes or are you more of a David Fincher kind of man?

RZ: I never got that 70-take thing; when you got it, you got it. Back in the day, you had to do a lot of takes because you had a lot of technical problems. But nowadays you can fix everything digitally. There was that scene with Denzel at the end of *Flight* when [gives away plot point], and it's a very complicated shot, and there was one guy in the back who was reading a book, flipping through the pages... It was phony. So I digitally removed him.

How much of the crash scene was digital?

RZ: A lot of it was done digitally, but that's the benefit of having done the 12 years of performance capture because everything was previz-ed. The whole thing was laid out using the InterSense camera, so we knew exactly what we were going to do.

Does filming a crash put you off flying?

DW: It didn't make me feel any less safe.

RZ: When you're a pilot, you realise air travel is very safe. So the best thing you can do, if you're scared of flying, is take flying lessons.

What's the worst experience you've ever had on a flight?

DW: A bad meal!

Let's finish by touching on future projects. Is *Yellow Submarine* definitely dead?

RZ: That would have been a great one, to bring The Beatles back to life. But it's probably better not to be remade – you're always behind the 8-ball when you do a remake. It gets harder and harder [to make movies]. With the current state of the industry, it's difficult to stay passionate about it. The hardest thing for a filmmaker as he's aging is saying, "How much more of this crap can I take?" It's tough. I can only do it if I have a script to believe in. Like *Flight*.

DW: I'm going back to Broadway in 2014. And I just did a movie with Mark Wahlberg [2 Guns] which is the silliest I've ever been in. I don't know if it's going to be any good. I have no idea. Either it's going to be comedy or a tragedy [laughs]. We ad-libbed a lot. There's a scene with us hanging upside down while Edward James Olmos is pissing on his hands and... I really don't know. **TF**

Flight opens on 1 Feb and will be reviewed in a future issue. For more, go to totalfilm.com