

## ENTERTAINMENT

# The Conspirator



Review by Michael Dennon '12

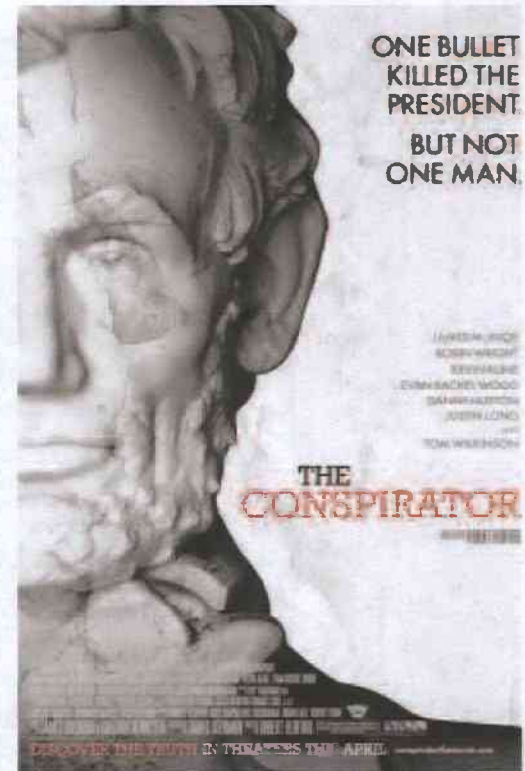
With his latest film, *The Conspirator*, famed actor/director Robert Redford has pulled off something every school student in the country will appreciate: he's made history interesting. Both an authentic, dramatically compelling period piece and a riveting courtroom drama, *The Conspirator* is bound to keep you consistently entertained, even if you're not usually interested in the subject. Although, with some first-rate acting and a finely polished script by James Solomon, it's hard to imagine anyone not becoming invested in this. Regardless, *The Conspirator* is one of the best movies you're likely to see this year.

*The Conspirator* quite literally opens with a bang on that fateful night of April 14, 1865. The infamous John Wilkes Booth (Toby Kebbell) shoots Abraham Lincoln in the head while the Secretary of State is also brutally attacked. From there, a witch hunt to round up all *The Conspirators* involved in the plot is mounted, and this culminates in a trial. The most important conspirator charged, though, is Mary Surratt (Robin Wright), and her conviction is expedited for the sake of the nation. Appointed to defend her is Frederick Aiken (James MacAvoy), a 28 year-old Union war hero who reluctantly takes Surratt's case, as convinced of her guilt as everybody else. But as Aiken begins to investigate the case, the possibility of Surratt's innocence becomes more and more likely to him. Before he knows it, Aiken is desperately fighting to free his client against a system who

may have already declared Surratt's verdict, as well as making sure Aiken doesn't even have a case.

In addition to MacAvoy and Wright, director Robert Redford populates this movie with other seasoned actors, the likes of whom include Kevin Kline and Tom Wilkinson; as expected, they all turn in stellar performances. MacAvoy in particular, who's always been a solid and reliable actor, melts into his role as Frederick Aiken, at once embodying the conviction, desperation and torn allegiance between his duty to his client and his duty to his country. It's a captivating performance, as is Wright's. One of Redford's strengths as a director is that he's able to get the best possible work out of his cast, and Robin Wright in this film is no exception. Mary Surratt is essentially the character whom the plot rides on, so she needed to be sympathetic enough that we can believe in her proclamations of innocence, yet not to the point where it feels like the movie is pouring it on too thick. Thankfully, Wright accomplishes that task. Any scene in *The Conspirator* that shows the actors laying into each other with their words is terrific, but the ones between MacAvoy and Wright when they're alone together have this understated appeal that puts them just slightly in another league.

But as much as the actors carry this movie, the courtroom scenes that comprise most of the film's running time are equally impressive. One thing Redford does with the courtroom scenes here, and something I think works in the film's favor, is that he gives them an



almost stage-like feel in the way they are played out. On display in these scenes is not only the sheer and awe-inspiring talent of Redford's cast, but also Redford's ability to film courtroom scenes that are as gripping and powerful as some of the best scenes of the genre.

But Redford's skills as a director don't extend to just those bits. As I mentioned earlier, he's able to breathe life into an already interesting story and provide a movie that doesn't need to rely on endless profanity, car chases and explosions to entertain its audience. *The Conspirator* trusts that its audience is willing and able to follow a deliberately-paced story and care about both the characters and the implications of their actions.

If anything, *The Conspirator* proves that old-school movie making is still alive and it's one history lesson that feels as if it's told by a lively entertainer, rather than a droning professor.

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