

Cindy's Emancipation Proclamation, or Abraham Lincoln in New York

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"My Life as Abraham Lincoln" opens on Friday, September 28 at [Cinema Village](#).

Running time: 82 minutes; Not rated.

When I was in high school, my ten-year-old sister had an obsession with Abraham Lincoln. Her obsession took

the form of elaborate artwork taking our sixteenth president to outer space, the local swimming pool, a trip on a trampoline, and to the zoo to visit the giraffes. Unlike the lead character in "My Life as Abraham Lincoln," my sister did not culminate her obsession in grammar school by acting out the assassination, complete with top hat and faux beard. There is something undeniably powerful about Lincoln's iconography, his biography as well as the theatricality of his assassination (murdered in the audience of a play by the lead actor, no less) that draws young people to him. For the lead character of this film, Lincoln is seen as a touchstone of grief and unrealized possibility, of the past as well as the present, an American fairy tale with an abrupt and violent ending.

In Shari Berman's confident, briskly paced film "My Life as Abraham Lincoln," a woman addresses her unraveling life through psychoanalysis, flashbacks of a childhood Lincoln assassination acting scene, and the creation of multiple films within her head. Complete with song and dance sequences, Berman uses floating words on the screen, narration, cut-ins of other characters layered over the screen, as well as sound and music to immerse us in the theatrical world of Cindy (Caroline Luft), who may or may not have pushed her fiancé (Trevor Nelson) off of the roof of a building on the day of their wedding. Cindy may or may not be seeing a psychiatrist (Gerry Birnbach) who controls her medications, and she appears to have deeply rooted friendships with a trio of women in their mid-thirties at various stages of relationship angst. As part of her recovery, Cindy attempts to film her friends covertly and to craft a magazine article about "Dating over 35." She also wanders into her very own murder mystery all while wrestling with her own grief and culpability. The word "wanders" is distinctly appropriate for the structure and style of this film, in which Berman chooses to have the same actors and actresses play multiple characters, in which past and present collide in unusual ways. Cindy's own unreliability as narrator culminates in the occasional fugue-like swirl of evidence, theories, ice cream, and introspection, and, her dead fiancé follows her relentlessly. Luft's performance is the highlight, anchoring the film, but multiple supporting roles feature strong performances, as well.

By fracturing reality so completely in her film, Berman presents Cindy's stream of consciousness as a dizzying array of unrealized possibilities and reveals the resulting loneliness. In one scene, she brilliantly skewers the act of going to an institution for help with finding relationships and transitions effortlessly from a film noir scene to a modern medical conversation to a Jewish dating organization without breaking the conversation or switching out the actors or actresses. As a result, Berman's film is never boring and never static, always reaching into Cindy's past, often inserting young actors and actresses into scenes with the thirty-something-year-old adults that they turned into, layering the present with the past in a way that is jarring and resonant. It is that same effect as the one produced when one looks at childhood photographs of someone one knows in adulthood. Did he really look like that? Is the person she was symbolic of the person she is now? How did that child turn into that adult? Additionally, Berman's reverence for film history shines through "My Life as Abraham Lincoln" through the use of Bergmanesque black and white (complete with Swedish subtitles!); film noir conventions, such as the dame in trouble and the tough-talking detective; silent film techniques, complete with intertitles; and tying it all together, Kenneth Lampl's light and evocative score, which isn't afraid to throw in a few riffs from the James Bond theme when appropriate.

A highlight of the film is an interlude involving the worst date ever, the less of which is said, the better. I will single out Brandon DeSpain as Larry, who delivers the great line, "Very few coroners are artists these days." The film transitions to a slow-boiling murder mystery as Cindy turns her focus inward in order to rewrite her own experiences and memories. The last third of the film is heavy, a bit messy, and ends rather abruptly. The film deftly deconstructs conventions of traditional wedding rituals, however, as well as the detrimental effects of unrealistic expectations in relationships. Cindy's Cinderella/Prince Charming fantasy becomes a nightmare as her life spirals out of her control.

The film has a confidence in its own structure that allows it to move fluidly backwards and forwards. Cindy is a confident narrator, as well, referring to Kurt Vonnegut and high school memories with equal aplomb. At times, cinematographer Chris Benker shoots an anxious Cindy smoking in the corners of scenes, empty edges of the

couch visible; he uses color saturation to heighten the greens of a dress, the grass, a background. The decision to focus closely on Cindy and her friends yields multiple medium shots with very little sense of the city background, but this seems totally in line with Berman's vision. At times, some dialogue is a little clunky, and some dream sequences are less successful than others. The three other couples are not always depicted as clearly or deeply as they could have been, and some of the satire falls flat. Yet "My Life as Abraham Lincoln" swirls around, literally on a carousel at one point, in a carnival of color and character. As a character sings, "If that's all there is, let's keep dancing," and I agree. Show me more of director Shari Berman's unique narrative techniques and bold filmmaking.