

Biopic 'Reagan' is a love note to a man who did great things for his country, the world

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The producers didn't plan for the biopic about the life of President Ronald Reagan to open so close to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, but delays caused by the pandemic and an actors strike led to its release on Aug. 30.

It seems easier to portray a historical figure that no living person remembers. In the case of "Reagan," the role would appear especially challenging.

Actor Dennis Quaid, who plays Reagan, is more than up to that challenge.

Mr. Quaid avoids what could have easily been a temptation to portray Reagan as a caricature.

Though he resembles the 40th president with the help of hair enhancement and makeup, Mr. Quaid's performance does not distract from memories of those who lived through his presidency.

The film opens with real news footage of Reagan being shot as he left the Washington Hilton Hotel on March 30, 1981. It includes his now-famous line to Nancy Reagan (played convincingly by Penelope Ann Miller): "Honey, I forgot to duck," along with his quip to surgeons at George Washington University Hospital, "I hope you are all Republicans."

Those two comments endeared him even to many of his political opponents, including House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill (portrayed by Dan Lauria), visiting Reagan in the hospital and elsewhere agreeing to cease talking politics at 6 p.m., when he and Reagan would discuss how to resolve their differences over drinks at the White House.

While recalling his childhood, his early acting career and Screen Actors Guild presidency during the blacklisting of Hollywood actors, writers and others alleged to be communist sympathizers, or members of the party, a good portion of the film centers on Reagan's efforts to reduce the nuclear arsenals of the Soviet Union and United States.

He responded to criticism for not meeting with a succession of Soviet leaders, saying "I would, but they keep dying." Eventually he meets with the reformist Michael Gorbachev, played by Olek Krupa, who bears little resemblance to the man he portrays (save for the birthmark on his head) but who sticks to the historical "script."

Reagan's insistence on pursuing his Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars" to his critics) is rightly credited with contributing to the fall of the Soviet Union during the administration of his successor, President George H.W. Bush.

The film gets Reagan's toughness and convictions right, but it also displays something absent from so much of today's politics . They include his sense of humor (YouTube has a collection of some of his better jokes) and that he treated even his adversaries with respect. One line that isn't in the film but is an accurate depiction of his way of criticizing the beliefs of opponents without calling them names: "The trouble with our liberal friends is not that they're ignorant; it's just that they know so much that isn't so."

Unlike Meryl Streep's portrayal of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in "The Iron Lady" (it opens with her dementia while the Reagan film ends with his in a moving way that ought to bring tears to the eyes — it did to mine), "Reagan" is more of a love note to a man who did great things for his country and the world. There could be no better epitaph for any political leader.

If you are under 40, go see it and learn something beyond what biased historians and the media have said about the man. If you are over 40 and lived through his presidency, go see it and be reminded of what real leadership looks like and how one man, in collaboration with a British prime minister and a pope, helped bring freedom to millions in Eastern Europe and restored the faith of many Americans in their country.

- Readers may email Cal Thomas at tcaeditors@tribpub.com. Look for Cal Thomas' latest book, "A Watchman in the Night: What I've Seen Over 50 Years Reporting on America" (HumanixBooks) .

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