

Killing Reagan (2016)

Cable TV film. Running time: 2 hours.

Our content ratings: Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

*May those who want to take my life
be put to shame and confusion;
may all who desire my ruin
be turned back in disgrace.*

Psalms 70:2

Political junkies who want to escape from the current political sleaze can escape for two hours this Sunday when National Geographic Channel presents director Rod Lurie's *Killing Reagan*, the fourth *Killing* franchise movie based on books by Fox News host Bill O'Reilly and co-author Martin Dugard. The actors playing the President and Mrs. Reagan are marvelous at humanizing what for many are exalted icons, so that even though I believe many of his policies harmed America, especially its poor, I was completely drawn to their side.

Centering on the terrible day of May 30, 1981, the film switches back and forth between the mentally disturbed John Hinckley Jr. (Kyle S. More) and Ronald (Tim Matheson) and Nancy Reagan (Cynthia Nixon). Hinckley wants to make an impression on the young actress with whom he had become obsessed, Jody Foster. He had first seen her playing a 12-year-old prostitute in his favorite film *Taxi Driver*. He first set out to shoot President Carter. (The would-be assassin apparently also got his idea from Scorsese's film—it's disturbed protagonist had tried to shoot a U.S. Senator.) Returning home, Hinckley was stopped and searched in

the Atlanta airport. Upon finding three guns in his luggage, the officers arrested him. With no police record he was let off with a fine and the confiscation of his guns. Back home he resupplies himself at a gun shop. He manages to talk with Ms. Foster over the telephone twice, each time she asking him not to call again before hanging up on him. He even travels to Yale University's campus where the actress is enrolled. Spotting her walking with friends, he calls out, but she either ignores or does not hear him. He tells another student that he does not have the nerve to go up and introduce himself. His parents, worried by his many long absences and his failure to get a job, make him see a therapist, but nothing seems to straighten him out.

Meanwhile Ronald Reagan has been sworn in as president. We meet various aides such as James Baker (Geoff Pierson), whose advice proves crucial in Reagan winning the campaign, and Alexander Haig (Patrick St. Esprit), who becomes Secretary of State. We see immediately the tension among the President's advisers when Haig demands total control of foreign policy. This assertiveness will come to the fore later during the crisis on May 30. Probably the most impressive scenes are those between the President and his wife, making this film as much of a love story as it is a political thriller. They hold hands, kiss, and in one brief scene Nancy sees a note that her husband has left for her before departing for the day. On it he has written over and over "I love, you," the words forming a long column. Clearly pleased, she tucks it in a drawer which seems to contain other such notes.

The events of the fateful attempted assassination rush by Hinckley in the crowd, rushing forward to fire several shots, wounding the President and three others, one of them Press Secretary James Brady. Hinckley had written but did not mail a letter to Jody Foster explaining his action to gain national recognition and thus bring him, he thinks, up to her status so that she will acknowledge him. We hear parts of this

as the tumultuous action transpires—the Secret Service men pushing the President into the car and, learning that he has been hit, changing directions to deliver him to a hospital. The medical staff rushing about getting ready. The Presidential staff in the Situation Room stunned at the news reports, one rushing to inform Nancy. She frantically refusing to stay put but rushing to the hospital because she knew her support would be crucial. Insisting to be admitted into the operation room and reassuring her badly wounded husband that she is there. His famous humor is on display, both his words to her about forgetting to duck and his words to the medical team that he hopes they are Republicans—and their reply that today they all are Republicans. You have to admire a man who can say such things, even if you disagree with him on policies.

There is more, including Haig's unconstitutional statement at the press conference that he is in control—Vice President Bush had not yet returned to Washington from a trip. After leaving the hospital—walking rather than being wheeled out—the recovery is slow but sure. The chief surgeon had warned Nancy that her husband might not regain all his former abilities. (The book apparently emphasized this far more than Eric Simonson's script, the book creating quite a bit of outrage from Reagan worshipers when it first came out.) Determined never to let such a thing happen again, Nancy turns to an astrologer to predict any day that might be bad for him. Baker and Haig are surprised to learn of this when they have to reschedule one of his public appearances.

The docudrama might not be a masterpiece, but it effectively maintains suspense despite our knowing the basics of the story. It adds details to our knowledge, and ought to add to the positive side of the argument that the government should provide more support for mental health care. Except for Hinckley, and possibly Haig, this is a story of people under pressure who act admirably with great dispatch—and in the

President's case, with good humor. You don't have to be a Reagan fan to enjoy this film—indeed, the surgical team got it right, when a fellow human being who happens to be a member of the Republican party has been savagely attacked and is fighting for his life, “We are all Republicans.”

This review with a set of questions will be in the Nov. 2016 issue of VP.