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MOVIE REVIEW

ONE LIFE TO LIVE

Despite a riveting performance by Vincent D'Onofrio, "Steal This Movie" is a 2-D view of Abbie Hoffman.

By [Peter Rainer](#)

Steal This Movie, about Abbie Hoffman (Vincent D'Onofrio), is so hyped up that the filmmakers seem to be competing with their subject. Robert Greenwald, who directed from a screenplay by Bruce Graham, offers a rat-a-tat scattering of Greatest Hits from Hoffman's career as political activist and court jester, and for a long time the film never settles down. The cascade of events has a rough, tawdry gangster-movie quality: the Rise and Fall of Abbie Hoffman. There's a dash of wit in this approach. Hoffman the clown prince who whammied the Pentagon and Yipped the prevailing political orthodoxies and then, pursued by the FBI, went underground is a species of gangster, all right. He's also one of the few authentic folk heroes from the sixties, perhaps because, unlike some of his cohorts at the time, he didn't become a gentleman farmer or a corporate shill or find God or turn neocon. In *Steal This Movie*, Hoffman is portrayed as a sacrificial lamb in a police state, and for those who feel compelled to see him in this light, the film will have the force of tragedy. But Hoffman's life contained more disturbing psychological crosscurrents than the filmmakers' skittering, agitprop style can account for. His life, his demons, were too custom-made for the generalized hero-worshipfulness of this movie.



It ain't me, Babe:
D'Onofrio as Hoffman,
in *Steal This Movie*.
(Photo credit: David
Milne)

Abbie's wife, Anita (Janeane Garofalo), says about Abbie at one point, "Too much is never enough with him," and that seems to be the taking-off point for D'Onofrio's gusher of a performance. D'Onofrio, a marvelous, vastly underacclaimed actor, resembles Burt Lancaster in the way he uses his sheer physicality to heighten the emotions of his characters. In *The Whole Wide World*, he played Robert E. Howard, the Texas pulp writer who created *Conan the Barbarian*, and the young man's inchoate passions seemed to muscle out of him until he himself took on

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the dimensions of a raging hulkster. D'Onofrio understands how the ruinous loneliness of his larger-than-life characters causes them to boil up and become even larger. The people he creates are both more grotesque and more beautiful than anybody, including the characters themselves, might ever have imagined. In a classic horror movie, the monster is always the most awful and the most transcendent image on the screen, and this is the realm in which D'Onofrio excels: He creates sacred monsters.

Unfortunately, the power of his performance as Abbie Hoffman is repeatedly fractured by the filmmakers. Too much is also never enough for D'Onofrio, but Greenwald keeps pulling him back into careful, prearranged patterns: the life-of-the-party prankster and husband, the almost Disneyishly sweet, caring, but absent father. Beneath the scat-style narrative is a standard paean to revolutionary hippiedom and the anti-Establishment mind-set. Satisfying as this anthem may be for those primed for a sentimental journey, it doesn't really take us beyond the shibboleths of those years, and so the film often seems painfully out-of-step and flimsy. What is the point of making a movie about that era that looks like it was made *in* that era, complete with cookie-cutter reactionaries arrayed against Abbie and his sexed-up, life-affirming co-conspirators? Were the filmmakers afraid of being labeled disloyal to the cause? Hoffman is celebrated as a counterculture avatar, which he certainly was, but we don't see enough of the real man in all this hoopla. His story is both weirder and more mundane than the one we're shown here. Abbie Hoffman, the good Jewish boy who begins his activism looking so straitlaced that people mistake him for a narc, ends up hiding out from the Feds in an alternate life where he poses as "Barry Freed" and wins an award for environmental activism from Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The staged freak-outs of his Yippie prime give way to the more horrific mood swings of bipolar disorder; recreational drugs are replaced by lithium; political paranoia becomes personal paranoia and then back again. Such a black-comic jumble of a life, with ironies flashing in all directions, demands a chronicler with less stardust in his eyes. When Abbie declares that he's an outlaw in his own country, we should not be, as we are here, pressed to accept him at his word. He was an outlaw in his own mind. Probably even Abbie Hoffman, with his rampaging, carnal sense of theater, would have balked at such weak-willed hagiography. Stealing for him was a political act, a lark, and a sign of respect for what is being stolen. I doubt he would have wanted anyone to steal this movie.

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