

# The Tall Target

USA | 1951 | 78 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Anthony Mann
<b>Screenplay</b>	George Worthing Yates/ Art Cohn
<b>Photography</b>	Paul Vogel
<b>Editing</b>	Newell P. Kimlin

## Cast

<b>John Kennedy</b>	Dick Powell
<b>Ginny Beaufort</b>	Paula Raymond
<b>Colonel Caleb Jeffers</b>	Adolphe Menjou
<b>Lance Beaufort</b>	Marshall Thompson
<b>Rachel</b>	Ruby Dee

## In Brief

Director Anthony Mann generates suspense from a story that logically shouldn't have any—a New York cop trying to foil an assassination plot against president-elect Abraham Lincoln. Fred Zinnemann should have looked at this before he made *The Day of the Jackal*. Mann understands that mood is more important than plausibility in a thriller, and you could cut the mood here with a knife.

The film is a low budget production by MGM standards but no B-movie; there is great production value here, but with so much of the action on the train, it's saved for city scenes, the train rolling through a period-perfect town bustling with life. Shots of the train, backlit and charging through the night, are magnificent, and unexpected period details.

It was Mann's last noir; he had essentially made the leap from urban crime director to western director with *Winchester '73* and for the rest of the decade, he helped transform Jimmy Stewart from lovable leading man to ruthless man of the west.

One of Anthony Mann's best films and a prototypical modern thriller, *The Tall Target* is a near-perfect exemplar of visual, narrative, and thematic concision. Standing alongside Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* as the great train movie, *The Tall Target* virtually encapsulates Mann's career in a 78 minute epigram, with most of his favourite themes and images compacted within: a rhetorically coherent evocation of a disintegrating society, a hero whose righteousness places him outside the law, clashing brands of fanaticism, intense suffering for a cause, and thriller story that integrates many shades of social conflict and commentary. *The Tall Target*, like Mann's 1949 film *Reign of Terror*, imaginatively transfers the sensibilities of the noir films he'd made in the late '40s into a precisely observed historical milieu. Dick Powell plays a hero trying to avert a presidential assassination, whose name, eerily enough, is John Kennedy, and the plot is loosely based on the true-life vignette of the Baltimore Plot, a supposed conspiracy to assassinate Abraham Lincoln before his inauguration as President early in 1861. Kennedy is the New York detective introduced attempting to convince his disbelieving senior, Superintendent Stroud (Tom Powers) as to the accuracy of his report into a ring of conspirators he uncovered when assigned to Lincoln's security detail during the election campaign, and who are awaiting Lincoln's arrival in that city to shoot him as he gives a speech.

Infuriated by his superior's contemptuous disinterest, Kennedy tosses his police badge and report at Stroud in impromptu resignation, but proceeds nonetheless to catch the night flyer that travels to Washington via Baltimore. He's supposed to meet up at the station with a fellow detective, Reilly (Regis Toomey), but he proves to be missing when Kennedy arrives. Kennedy is compelled to board the train without a ticket, and, lacking any sign of authority or evidence to wield in his favour, has to continually improvise in avoiding being booted off, and to uncover the conspirators he comes to realise must be also on the train. He finds evidence that Reilly has been murdered, or at least bundled away, and his predicament gets even worse when a stranger (Leif Erickson), wearing his overcoat and carrying his ticket, turns up in seat and claims to be John Kennedy. The real Kennedy is lucky that a mutual acquaintance of his and Stroud's, newly minted soldier and bon vivant businessman Colonel Caleb Jeffers (Adolphe Menjou), is on board with his squad of Zoaves. Jeffers vouches for Kennedy's identity and even provides him with a ticket. The stranger makes a move to kill Kennedy, who manages to overpower him before a bullet from Jeffers takes out the assailant. The plot seems to be foiled by a cancellation of the speech in Baltimore, but the cunning concealment of Lincoln as a passenger on the train by Allan Pinkerton (James Harrison) and his agents sparks a last-minute race to prevent a history-altering killing.

Whilst the story has, on one level, an inevitable end, it's still riveting, partly because it stacks the odds so heavily against Kennedy that waiting to see how the oppressive situation will unravel, and wondering what it will cost Kennedy and the people around him, becomes the compelling issue. Mann sets both narrative and train moving with relentless pace, and presents the milieu squarely in one of the least mannered period settings ever filmed. Mann depicts a heady landscape where celebratory bunting and patriotic ebullience, the usual stuff of an inauguration season, are constantly undercut by massing soldiers, protestors, propaganda and vibrant concern. Equivalent



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professionalism is all that stands in the way of chaos: Kennedy's dedication to his job, and that of the train drivers and the flustered conductor (Will Geer). And yet the jams created by complacency and bureaucracy are near-fatal: Kennedy has to sneak about through much of the film contemplating desperate criminal acts, like stealing tickets and guns, and at the film's end it's he, and not the villains, who's sitting handcuffed awaiting in the luggage van. Around him and the central drama, everyone's debating, some abstractly, some with voluble personal feeling, about what's going to happen to the country. The brilliant final shot depicts Lincoln gazing out of the train window, rueing his having to sneak into Washington, with the Capitol Dome still being built in the background beyond. It's an image at once naturalistic, a clever and accurate detail that firmly affixes the time and place, and an emblem of the unfinished narrative: most of the conspirators are still loose, war is still coming, and death awaits Lincoln and many others as the curtain falls.

The sprawl of swiftly introduced characters offers red herrings, political and social context, and a colourful gallery of types all at once. The late Barbara Billingsley appears as a young mother with a gratingly playful son Kennedy has to make deals with, one touch clearly borrowed for Richard Fleischer's subsequent, clearly indebted *The Narrow Margin* (1952). Florence Bates plays Harriet Becher Stowe stand-in Mrs. Charlotte Alsop, who's the epitome of a well-meaning, ardent but barely worldly liberal – she's travelling to Washington for a private audience with

Lincoln where she plans to bring up just about every subject with him, from Emancipation to the nuisances of travel. Many other characters repeat their openness to the notion of Lincoln's being shot, and Mann takes care to illustrate the notion that the hallowed figures of history, and the right choices of conscience, are often the most bitterly contested. Kennedy's decision to risk everything for Lincoln in spite of his own apolitical perspective nonetheless mirrors Lincoln's presidency. The atmosphere, and the historical detail, are excellent, and yet the film resists antiquity, partly because of the resolutely noir structure of the story and the visuals, flooded with chiaroscuro light and shadow rather than the chocolate box Technicolor of other Civil War-era films, and partly because the story resonates with the urgent paranoia and assailed mood of the early '50s. Some of the conspirators, like Lance Beaufort (Marshall Thompson), a West Point cadet supposedly returning home with them to prepare for taking a Confederate uniform, are tribal fanatics, but Jeffers, who proves to be a falsely amicable, secretly oily leader of the conspiracy, is motivated by commercial concerns: a Lincoln administration means too much damage to his business.

The most interesting touch of George Worthing Yates and Art Cohn's script, which fits Mann's preoccupations to a tee, comes in the form of Rachel (Ruby Dee), slave maid to cotton princess Ginny Beaufort (Paula Raymond), introducing a note of subaltern revolt rendered ambiguous by personal loyalty and contradictory truths. Rachel's decent upbringing and treatment in the Beaufort's household makes her ever so slightly wry towards Alsop's incidental patronisation, but also unwavering in deciding to help Kennedy in his efforts, with her riposte to Ginny, whom she was raised with and loves like a sister, nonetheless reminding her shakily that "I should've been born free." Both she and Ginny are placed in an impossible position when it becomes clear that Ginny's brother Lance is the conspiracy's sharpest edge, packing a telescopic rifle for the job. It's an eye-catching role for the very young Dee, and an important one, too, as the historical parable enables early glimmerings of a civil rights-era urge to self-direction to rear its head as a definite subtext. Rachel's conscientious choice to assert herself in spite of her ties and position is brave, and feels both of and ahead of its time, and uncommonly intelligent in the context of this short thriller's haiku-like thematic forms.

The *Tall Target* screws a hell of a lot of tension out of Kennedy's near-impossible position, his anxious determination forcing him to keep trying in spite of every disadvantage and roadblock, up to and including becoming a fugitive from the law he's trying to stick up for. Mann uses the limited space and settings with endlessly inventive skill, emphasising the interior of the train as alternately homey and intimate, and excruciatingly inescapable. The breathing room allowed by the occasional station stops, and the possibilities for calling in outside help, is constantly, cunningly curtailed, in a nocturnal, steam-shrouded world, and, with all the arguing and evocation of a crumbling nation, it seems all the world has been shrunk to the small stage of the train. The difficulties of the train's entrapping space are also, however, a weapon that works in Kennedy's favour, destroying their advantage of numbers and forcing enemies near enough to be brought down with a few eager blows. Kennedy's struggle with Erickson's assassin is a classic Mann moment as the policeman gets the upper hand, and tries to wring details out of the man by holding his head to the rail as the train's great steel wheel gets closer and closer, reminiscent of the tractor scene in *Border Incident* (1949). The finale sports a neat variation on the message written in a sooty window from *The Lady Vanishes*, Jeffers urgently trying to alert Beaufort to Lincoln's presence on the train by writing a message on the outside of the glass, Beaufort bemused by the scribble until he catches the reverse image in a mirror. But Mann's most overt conceit is to dispense with music. Even the opening titles, with the credits crawling up the screen a la *Star Wars*, are scored only by the whistles and chugging of the trains waiting at the station, and this touch, or non-touch, completes the terse, menacing atmosphere. Only right at the end do a few cheery strains swell. *The Tall Target*, like one of the derringer pistols brandished throughout, is small but packs a wallop.

- Roderick Heath

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