

The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln

by

M. Stefan Strozier

(www.mstefanstrozier.org)

ISBN 978-1-934209-36-3
10-digit ISBN 1-934209-36-8

\$10.00

© 2007, World Audience, Inc.

Copyright notice: All work contained within is the sole copyright of its authors, 2007, and may not be reproduced without consent.

World Audience (www.worldaudience.org) is a global consortium of artists and writers, producing the literary journal *audience* and *The audience Review*. Our periodicals and books are edited by M. Stefan Strozier and assistant editors. Please submit your stories, poems, paintings, photography and other artwork or any kind to submissions@worldaudience.org. Inquiries about being a reviewer: theatre@worldaudience.org. Thank you.

The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln

by

M. Stefan Strozier

A World Audience Play

(www.worldaudience.org)

January, 2007

aU
Di
en
CE

audience artist group

New York

The world premiere of *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln* was April 13-May 7th, 2006, Thursdays-Sundays (except Easter), at Where Eagles Dare Theater (347 West 36th Street, NYC).

Characters (alphabetically):

George A. Atzerodt
Asia Booth
Edwin Booth
John Wilkes Booth
Junius Booth Jr.
Mary Ann Booth
Frederick Douglass
Ulysses Grant
General Grant's Aide de Camp
Lucy Hale
David E. Herold
Confederate General Robert E. Lee
Abraham Lincoln
Mary Todd Lincoln
Confederate General Longstreet
Lewis Powell
Northern General Sheridan
John H. Surratt
Mary Surratt

Director	Alan Kanevsky
Assistant director	David Segretto
Dramaturge	John Chatterton
Lighting technician	Leck Dzie
Stage manager/Sound technician	Eliot Lanes
Set design	Jean-Claude Villaréal

Characters/Actors (alphabetically, actor):

Ulysses Grant	Greg Adair
Confederate General Robert E. Lee	Douglas Caine
Mary Surratt	Maureen Chandler
Edward Everett	John Chatterton
Junius Booth Jr.	Robert Cross
Mary Ann Booth	Judeth DeMott
Abraham Lincoln	Justin Ellis
Frederick Douglass	Reginald Ferguson
Edwin Booth	William J. Gowney
Asia Booth Laura	Ida Lamberti
General Grant's Aide de Camp	Sunrise Marks
Lewis Powell	Paul Mischeshin
Confederate General Longstreet	Ross Pivec
Lucy Hale	Katharine Poklemba
Douglass's Understudy	Rob Richardson
Mary Todd Lincoln	Mary Riley
John H. Surratt	Aaron Sandler
David E. Herold	Matt Slavin
John Wilkes Booth	Josh Stamell
Northern General Sheridan	M. Stefan Strozier
George A. Atzerodt	McGregor Wright

Any part of the author's work *may* be reproduced, without permission, provided adequate recognition is given to the playwright.

EDMUND

With defensive dryness.

Perhaps it would be wise to change the subject.

A pause.

You can't accuse me of not knowing Shakespeare. Didn't I win five dollars from you once when you bet me I couldn't learn a leading part of his in a week, as you used to do in stock in the old days. I learned Macbeth and recited it letter perfect, with you giving me the cues.

TYRONE

Approvingly.

That's true. So you did.

He smiles teasingly and sighs.

It was a terrible ordeal, I remember, hearing you murder the lines.

I kept wishing I'd paid over the bet without making you prove it.

He chuckles and Edmund grins. Then he starts as he hears a sound from upstairs – with dread.

Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

Foreword

The most famous assassin in America, arguably, still remains John Wilkes Booth. What motivates a well-respected actor, socialite, and entrepreneur to commit such a heinous crime, an act that he knew would live forever in infamy? To truly understand those motivations one must give up his or her predisposition to accepted history, and come to the story fresh. One will discover that JWB was a true Romantic in every way, not unlike Lord Byron or Shelly.

Strozier gives an even and unbiased view that allows audiences to experience history for themselves and decide whether or not Lincoln's fate was sealed long before his inauguration speech for his second term of office. Was Lincoln a tyrant? The danger for a director of *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln* is underestimating the integral part of all the players. At twenty characters there is temptation to believe only Lincoln, Booth and Mary Todd are to be concerned with. To do so would undermine much of the meaning and motivation of the play. Even some of the simplest and smallest lines have weight, as when Asia Booth remarks, "The snow falls relentlessly. How can anyone survive?" her concern is for someone. That someone may be her husband, as she later speaks of him, while he is not present at a holiday. Another important aspect of this play is its construction. Each scene stands alone, almost removed from the play as a whole. Though each

scene seems independent, there are a number of themes that run throughout the course of the play. As a Director or a Player, one needs to acknowledge and identify those themes. The major themes are: tyranny; the prisoner exchange issue; and, the rights of journalists and ordinary American citizens, and others. Making connections strengthens the play and joins the scenes together.

For actors playing historic roles, there are dangers to avoid. Try to avoid the pitfall of unintentionally creating caricatures. As with any play, fictional or not, the actor must first start with their own instruments. No two actors come to a role with the same background or training. I feel an actor must portray his or her part, initiating it from what comes inside. Then, by breaking down the play, and analyzing a character's needs, wants and desires the actor will have fully realized the role. The back story and traditions are subservient to the main course, that of the script and portrayal of the characters therein. Of course, one must stay true to the time period and style but the one constant is we are all human, and so are the characters being portrayed. People throughout time have the same emotions and basic needs. People's thoughts have been so long inundated with American folklore and legend, this telling of Lincoln's story may not change many minds. Perhaps, over time, that may change. For now, you can decide.

Alan Kanevsky, director, New York 4/5/06

Act I

Scene I

Setting: November 19, 1863, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. There is a speaking platform, with Old Glory bunting. The chief orator, the eloquent Edward Everett of Massachusetts, has just finished speaking, after 2 hours. Mr. Lincoln rises to speak.

Lincoln: Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

[Lights fade to black.]

Scene II

Setting: Battle of Cold Harbor, summer, 1864. Two tables are on stage and the scenes alternates between Grant and Lee.

[Enter Grant, to his tent.]

Grant: I am out of whiskey! How can I run a war without whiskey! Captain! Front and center!

[Enter Aide de Camp.]

Aide de Camp: Yes, sir?

[Exit Aide de Camp.]

Grant: More whiskey! General Lee, we meet for the first time in this long war. It seems you and I slowly dance through this smoking wood, like two youngsters, awkwardly groping, stepping on each other.

[Aide de Camp enters with whiskey. Aide de Camp exits.]

But, you will catch the chill of death when I draw in close, as my bones are colder than yours, general. There is no more escaping me.

[Lights fade on Grant's tent. Lights rise on Lee's tent. He is pouring a drink of bourbon.]

Lee: Finally, a spot of bourbon.

[Enter General Longstreet.]

Confederate General Longstreet: General Grant's corps advances along the entire front, sir.

Lee: What great news! Are you certain it is true?

Confederate General Longstreet: I assure you, sir. The terrain is causing the enemy to bottleneck along a narrow section, here. We are dug in, defensively, and we are stopping them in their tracks, dead. In a short time, we have killed many enemy soldiers.

Lee: A Confederate victory, here at Cold Harbor, with the North bearing down on Richmond, would be very beneficial to the Cause. Perhaps Lincoln might agree to terms.

Confederate General Longstreet: Perhaps. But Grant will continue to fight hard. I urge you to consider remaining on the defensive, General Lee.

Lee: Bold aggression will win this war, general! Boldness – like the qualities of Hannibal. We shall win this Civil War by how we fight, not by winning the most battles. Still, as long as Grant is hurling his troops at us, we shall retain our defensive positions. Would you like a spot of bourbon, General?

Confederate General Longstreet: Yes, sir.

[Lights fade to black. Lights rise on Grant's tent.]

Grant: And, into this malleable sword I will fold the lives of ten thousand souls; and, hardened by death, I will drive this sword straight through you heart, man!

[Enter aide de camp.]

Aide de Camp: Excuse me, General Grant?

Grant: Ah ha!

Aide de Camp: Sir, General Sheridan is here to see you.

Grant: My cavalry general; send him in, at once.

Aide de Camp: Yes, sir.

[Exit aide de camp.]

Grant: This can only be good, or very bad news.

[Enter General Sheridan, followed by aide de camp.]

Ah, General Sheridan, good to see you. Are you busy severing Lee's supply lines?

General Sheridan: We are losing the battle of Cold Harbor, General Grant. We lost seven thousand men in half an hour. I rode hard to get here.

Grant: What are you saying? Give me details on the map.

General Sheridan: It is a particularly bloody battle, sir. Dead soldiers litter the field like fall's leaves. We have suffered an extremely high number of wounded from their artillery fire.

Aide de Camp: The Southern artillery is mobile, even in these dense woods, general.

Grant: I am aware of Southern artillery, captain! Blast it, Sheridan; focus on the tactical details of the battle!

General Sheridan: Yes, sir. Our men are being annihilated as they charge through a narrow ravine, here. With so many dead, the fresh soldiers must surmount the corpses. Many high-ranking officers have been killed. I must relate one story: As I rode along our lines, I spotted an injured Southern officer, whom I think was trying to crawl through the woods to our lines, either to surrender or for medical treatment. I stopped riding, and I have delivered him to my tent. The surgical tents are far away. I have not had the opportunity to question him, sir.

Aide de Camp: The surgical tents are full of wounded soldiers. They are overcrowded.

Grant: Is he your relative?

General Sheridan: He called me, sir, by name. I have not had the chance to speak with him yet.

Grant: He is an enemy soldier, Phillip. You ought to have put a bullet in his brain, as you rode past! This blasted prisoner exchange issue lingers on me like an ingrown toenail! We no longer exchange prisoners of war! I have rescinded the cartel's order. Paroled Southern soldiers simply return to the fight. At this rate, we'll have to exterminate the entire population of the Southern states!

General Sheridan: My only desire was to assist this man in his pain and suffering. I will aid him. He will not be treated like a dog, sir.

Grant: The South is executing our officers because of the colored soldiers! President Lincoln wrote an order to execute Southern officers, in retaliation. You will obey the President's order!

General Sheridan: I understand, sir.

Grant: What of the battle, general!? Our soldiers are dying, as we continue arguing.

General Sheridan: Lee's army crossed from the right, here. They are now dug in deep, against the creek. Richmond lies to their backs.

Grant: In the future, do not waste my time with stories, sir.

General Sheridan: Yes, sir.

Grant: If I order a retreat, our army will rout. Hold! Do not pull back until daylight; and, I will issue further orders then.

General Sheridan: Yes, General Grant.

Grant: You are dismissed, General Sheridan.

[Exit General Sheridan.]

Lee, you have stolen my victory! Ah, this war drags on, incessantly. I will reach Richmond; and, once I have made it into the Southern capital, I am going to destroy it! I am going to burn Richmond to the ground!

[Lights fade on Grant's tent and rise in Lee's tent.]

Lee: General Grant is a bear, which though you keep shooting, keeps advancing, swatting you with his claws. General Sherman is looting and razing our cities outside Atlanta. The populace is beginning to demand the end of war. We are no longer able to secure rations in the countryside. This Civil War is unending. These battles have entered my conscience.

Confederate General Longstreet: Yes, the smoke; the early-evening, red haze over the sun; the sounds of cannon and men fighting and dying; the cavalry charges. War is awesome.

Lee: A debilitating bleakness lingers over cold mornings and bloody fighting; horse corpses, floating down the creek, bloated by hot sun's rays. War is truly beautiful. God have mercy on our souls.

Confederate General Longstreet: Sir, I ask to confide in you something.

Lee: Yes?

Confederate General Longstreet: I have a friend—a classmate at West Point—who was taken prisoner at Fredericksburg. Yesterday, I learned he was executed.

Lee: I am sorry. A friend of mine is still being held in one of the Northern prisons—a classmate of ours, too. The enemy's prisons

are atrocious; the prisoners are tortured and beaten. Lincoln has ordered this treatment. These violations of the Rules of War only replenish my spirit, in our goal of independence. Britain may provide troops soon, for want of our cotton.

Confederate General Longstreet: From Lincoln's point of view, we are simply in rebellion—not a recognized country.

Lee: Lincoln is a strange man. If the South were to assassinate Lincoln, I feel a peaceful and gentlemanly agreement might be reached—if only for my poor friend, wasting away in a cold cell. Time demands bold action, don't you agree?

Confederate General Longstreet: Lincoln worries about being reelected.

Lee: He will be reelected: He is the great manipulator.

Confederate General Longstreet: Without Lincoln in the picture, the war would change dramatically!

Lee: Maintain your defensive positions. Await my further orders. Continue to kill the enemy, as he advances like so many buffalo. God aid our Cause. Be safe.

Confederate General Longstreet: Yes, sir. Goodbye.

[Exit General Longstreet. Lights fade to black.]

Scene III

Setting: 1864, mid-November, Winter Garden Theatre, NY, NY. *Julius Caesar*, by William Shakespeare, is being performed by 3 Booth brothers. Edwin and Junius Booth have blood smeared up to their elbows, and John Wilkes Booth has blood on his hands (Shakespeare's stage directions). Caesar's bloody corpse lay on the ground. John Wilkes Booth carries the same dagger he will wield when he kills Lincoln. Lights rise on John Wilkes Booth.

John Wilkes Booth:

ANTONY

O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!
Thou art the ruins of the noblest man
That ever lived in the tide of times.
Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!
Over thy wounds now do I prophesy, –
Which, like dumb mouths, do ope their ruby lips,
To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue –
A curse shall light upon the limbs of men;
Domestic fury and fierce civil strife
Shall cumber all the parts of Italy;
Blood and destruction shall be so in use
And dreadful objects so familiar
That mothers shall but smile when they behold
Their infants quarter'd with the hands of war;
All pity choked with custom of fell deeds:
And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry 'Havoc,' and let slip the dogs of war;
That this foul deed shall smell above the earth
With carrion men, groaning for burial.

[Lights fade on John Wilkes Booth.]

John Wilkes Booth: Do not lead me so much, Edwin. I was feeding you lines. I should be playing Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, not Mark Antony. I do not appreciate being upstaged by you.

Edwin Booth: How can I possibly upstage the great John Wilkes Booth, whom all the critics call the darling of American theatre—The Son of the South?

Junius Booth: Why are you two fighting? We should be celebrating.

Ewin Booth: Why, you have performed on the boards for the president of the United States, Mr. Abraham Lincoln!

John Wilkes Booth: I performed for a Caesar, an American tyrant, who also belongs on the ground, bleeding. It is he who has let slip the dogs of war!

Edwin Booth: To hell with you, John! If you hate the North so much, why don't you go fight for the South? We live in a neutral state. What is holding you back, cowardice?

John Wilkes Booth: The only reason I have not is mother.

Edwin Booth: Well, why bother? General Grant is bearing down on Richmond.

John Wilkes Booth: I read the Battle of Cold Harbor was a huge Rebel victory! The stakes are even again. Jubal Early's army recently advanced on Washington, and nearly captured the president.

Junius Booth: Mother will be here any minute. I am not going to stop you two from fighting. I am too exhausted from my performance.

Edwin Booth: You are a Southern sympathizer and a supporter of slavery! Any rational man, with a modicum of humanity, rejects

slavery.

John Wilkes Booth: Slavery is written into our Constitution. But, the Civil War is not about to slavery. No, one man orders we fight this Civil War: Abraham Lincoln: the Republican Unionist, whose only concern is restoring the Union. How can you support this tyrant, with the surname of Brutus?

Edwin Booth: Of the Brutus family, our sister Asia is in agreement with me. Junius here, and mother, are neutral. You and Joseph are alone in your twisted beliefs.

John Wilkes Booth: There is an entire nation of proud people with whom I stand. If my family will not tolerate my convictions, I will find my people.

Edwin Booth: Perhaps you should. It might be best for everyone.

Junius Booth: You are tearing our family apart! Stand apart from each other. Hold your conversation in a dignified manner. Edwin, try not to upstage John, please.

Edwin Booth: Oh, and let's not forget your secret love affair with Ms. Lucy Hale, daughter of the U. S. senator!

John Wilkes Booth: She is my fiancée!

Junius Booth: John! You have a fiancée? Have you told mother about this?

John Wilkes Booth: No.

Junius Booth: Will she approve?

Edwin Booth: He does not care about mother or her feelings.

John Wilkes Booth: You are the one who is a cold-hearted fool, Edwin!

[Edwin and John Wilkes Booth fight. Junius is unable to stop it.]

Mary Ann: Hello, gentlemen? May we enter? We would like to see the great actors!

Junius Booth: Mother? Open the door!

[Enter Mary Ann and Asia Booth.]

Hello, mother. Did you enjoy the show?

Mary Ann Booth: Yes, it was wonderful! Oh, I am overjoyed.

Asia: Edwin, have you and John been fighting again? Junius?

Edwin Booth: No, Asia.

Mary Ann Booth: I am so happy to see my three boys performing together again. Your father, Junius Brutus, is here in spirit; and, he is so proud of you three. This is the greatest day of my life!

Asia: I thought Edwin was a little better than John tonight.

Junius Booth: Asia!

Edwin Booth: Thank you, sister.

Mary Ann Booth: Well. We are all going to celebrate with a fancy dinner, in a fine restaurant on Broadway. Hurry up and change. We shall meet you outside.

John Wilkes Booth: I have to meet some people, mother. I will join you later.

Mary Ann Booth: Very well; but don't take long, John.

[Exit Mary Ann and Asia Booth.]

Junius Booth: Your childish bickering is wearing on mother's health. Do not argue in her presence! I insist you apologize to each other.

Edwin Booth: What?

John Wilkes Booth: You are right, June.

Junius Booth: Edwin?

Edwin Booth: Why must I go first? All right. John, I apologize for my rash statements, which, though, while I do not dispute their validity; I recognize and admit their hurried nature.

Junius Booth: Apologize correctly, Edwin!

Edwin Booth: I am sorry, John.

John Wilkes Booth: I am sorry, Edwin.

[Edwin and John Wilkes Booth embrace. Lights fade to black.]

Scene IV

Setting: Lincoln is alone in the White House, winter, 1864. Enter Mary Todd Lincoln.

Mary Todd: Hello, Abraham. Have you eaten dinner?

Lincoln: No, I have not and I am not hungry. I am meeting with Frederick Douglass.

Mary Todd: Is something the matter? Tell me what is wrong.

Lincoln: There is nothing the matter. Only good news arrives these days.

Mary Todd: Abraham, I should like to buy more drapes for the White House. We will be living here another four years. I should like a new wardrobe, as well.

Lincoln: Mrs. Lincoln, as we have discussed, our personal finances are in a state of disrepair.

Mary Todd: I will not live in this depressing house without decent clothes and fine-fabric draperies!

Lincoln: Please, Mary Todd.

Mary Todd: I am tired of war! Are you listening to me? The smell of gunpowder eternally wafts into this city. The sky is perpetually grey, the sun obscured by haze of combat. I feel as if I am a jailed prisoner in this White House. I no longer read newspapers, Mr. Lincoln, because I can write them myself. Here is how one, such as me, can be a journalist: One simply writes, 'today there was death; many thousands of soldiers died. The dying is will continue tomorrow and the next day and the next – the end!' Wait! There is one more thing the papers say: 'Lincoln is a tyrant who jails journalists'.

Lincoln: The end of the war is in sight. Where is little Tad?

Mary Todd: He runs amuck, causing trouble. Spare the rod and spoil the child.

Lincoln: What time is it? I must meet with Mr. Douglass.

Mary Todd: We are not done talking!

[Exit Mary Todd.]

[Enter ghost of John Wilkes Booth, cloaked, moving about the room, with the same dagger he will have when he kills Lincoln.]

John Wilkes Booth: The war will be lost, Mr. President. You will die.

Lincoln: What? Who is here, in my house? Come out of the shadows.

John Wilkes Booth: I am your guest. Don't you recognize me?

Lincoln: I am sorry; I do not see you clearly. I have many guests. Approach, so we can see each other, eye to eye.

John Wilkes Booth: Oh no, I cannot. Not yet. I remain your humble prisoner.

[Ghost of John Wilkes Booth exits. Lincoln kneels to the ground, overcome with emotion, though he does not necessarily understand why. Enter Frederick Douglass, from opposite side of the stage. Douglass puts his hand on Lincoln's shoulder.]

Douglass: I am here, Mr. President.

Lincoln: What? Ah, Mr. Douglass, it is good to see you again. Thank God you are here. I was only lost, for a moment. How was your journey? Are you busy canvassing for the 54th in Massachusetts?

Douglass: Free Negro men wish to become Union soldiers, Mr. Lincoln. But sir, the obstacle remains the prisoner issue. Negro men are aware they may be turned over to Southern slave-masters, beaten and enslaved again – or, executed, all without even a fair trial.

Lincoln: Well, freed Negro people are not taking up arms, despite out-numbering white people in the South.

Douglass: Sir, you must understand, as I do, to be a slave is to live in constant fear. The very concept of rebellion is foreign to a slave. The Southern slave-masters are aware of this fact.

Lincoln: Blast! This prisoner issue stems from the Emancipation Proclamation, which you insisted I issue! General Grant has stopped the prisoner exchange. Rebels refuse to turn over a Negro soldier for a white soldier. They do not consider Negro men soldiers. Now, the Rebels are murdering both Negro and white Union soldiers, and officers – or, torturing them, in retaliation. 54th Massachusetts and other colored units are proving to be a far greater strategic liability than tactical value!

Douglass: The 54th has fought with honor, sir! We must fight this Civil War with integrity. We cannot allow our prisons to become medieval torture chambers. We must not stoop to the level of this evil Confederate nation.

Lincoln: The South is not a nation!

Douglass: They have existed as a nation for four years.

Lincoln: Do not refer to the Rebels states as a nation again! I apologize, Frederick. This subject wears on me, like a case of consumption. Have you read of the atrocities of Andersonville? I have issued a written order, to execute Southern officers, for each officer of ours they kill.

Douglass: The prisoner issue is escalating. Perhaps, there is a wiser

path. Both of my sons are in the 54th now. They are fine soldiers. I worry about their well-being, as their father.

Lincoln: As soldiers, your sons are bearing this additional burden. Their sacrifice is indeed high. During the Black Hawk war, I was a captain. I certainly understand what it means to be a soldier. I was mustered into service three times. One time, my unit bivouacked along the side of a wide and deep ravine, during the middle of a harsh Illinois winter. My soldiers captured me one morning; and, put me into a large wooden barrel. I was still groggy-eyed. They rolled me slowly up to the edge of the slope and I could hear them shouting, 'one, two three!' Then, my men pushed me over the edge and my wooden barrel slipped and sledged, all the way down the icy ravine! I was rolling for a good twenty minutes, at a minimum. I must have been traveling very fast. I became very nauseous. I felt as if I was being hurling over Niagara Falls. Oh, what a ride it was.

Douglass: Mr. President, do you feel this Civil War is necessary?

Lincoln: We must win this Civil War, at all costs, Frederick. The Union must be restored. It is critical for all humanity. American is a Union!

Douglass: The South cannot last much longer. I urge you to continue working toward your goal of permitting black men suffrage. Slavery will exist long after this Civil War is over, Mr. Lincoln. The trade of slaves may end; but the treatment of Negroes in America as second-class citizens will not end for many years. The issue is economic and social and legal.

Lincoln: Well, you are the leader of the abolitionist movement. It is up to you to insure the Underground Railroad keeps its gears well-greased. Are you meeting with other dignitaries in Washington?

Douglass: Yes, sir.

Lincoln: Very well, then; it has been a pleasure.

Douglass: Goodbye, Mr. Lincoln.

[Exit Douglass. Lights fade to black.]

Scene V

Setting: Mary Surratt's boarding house in Washington, D.C. (The Surratt tavern, in Surrattsville, MD, is mentioned.) It is spring, 1865. Conspirators dress in drab clothing.

Atzerodt: I'm gonna be rich and famous! They'll sing songs about me!

*I wish I was in de land ob cotton,
Old times dar am not forgotten;
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.*

*In Dixie Land whar I was born in,
Early on one frosty mornin,
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.*

*Old Missus marry "Will-de-weaber,"
William was a gay deceaber;
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.*

*But when he put his arm around'er,
He smiled as fierce as a forty-pound'er,
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.*

*Dar's buck-wheat cake an 'Ingen' batter,
Makes you fat or a little fatter;
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.*

*Den hoe it down an scratch your grabble,
To Dixie land I'm bound to trabble.
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land*

Ah, perhaps I shouldn't be singing Dixie in Washington.

[Enter Mary Surratt.]

Mary Surratt: You need to lower your voice! I can hear you all

the way downstairs!

Atzerodt: Bah! Hey, I'm running out of beer. When are the others getting here?

[Enter Powell and Herold.]

Powell: Good day, Mrs. Surratt.

Atzerodt: 'Bout time ya'll arrived. I've had to deal with this woman all day long.

Mary Surratt: Hello, Payne; how are you, David? How was your ride from Baltimore?

Powell: It was fine, ma'am. Can you bring us a bottle of bourbon?

Mary Surratt: Yes, Lewis. How is my son?

Powell: He's doing Fine. He and John checked on our things at Surrattsville Tavern. They'll be along.

[Exit Mary Surratt.]

Herold: George is drunk again. George: When you're drinking, your mouth wags like a speaking dog. Your last slip with your brother – the federal marshal – nearly blew up our plans.

Atzerodt: I have decided I am no longer a part of this here plan.

Powell: You ain't going anywhere. We stick together or hang together.

Herold: I despise having to come to Washington, even if Mrs. Surratt is a gracious host. This city has more spies than rats.

[Enter Mary Surratt, with bourbon and glasses on a saucer, which she places on the table.]

Mary Surratt: He's been drinking all afternoon—and singing Dixie.

[Enter Booth and Surratt.]

Hello, son! How are you?

John Surratt: I am fine, mother.

Mary Surratt: My heart is filled with joy. Gentlemen: This is the hope of a Southern nation: a people of boundless youth and vigor.

Powell: Hello, John.

[Enter John Wilkes Booth.]

John Wilkes Booth: Hello, Lewis; it's good to see you again. Mrs. Surratt: ma'am.

Mary Surratt: Hello, John. How are our horses, George?

Atzerodt: The horses stabled at Pumphrey's.

John Wilkes Booth: Good.

John Surratt: John and I checked the pistols and Spenser carbines at Mary's tavern in Surrattsville, along with the handcuffs, field glasses, change of clothes, and food box. Everything is set.

John Wilkes Booth: I have just returned from meetings with high-ranking Confederate agents in Montreal. We will capture the president, during one of his solitary rides to the Soldier's Home, commandeer his buggy, and take him to Richmond. He will be held in exchange for the release of Confederate prisoners of war.

Powell: When are we doing it? Did the agents tell you when?

Atzerodt: Yeah, we keep talking about all these different plans to kidnap the president; but we never take action.

Herold: George: You keep your mouth shut! A lot goes into these plans; plenty of important people are involved.

John Surratt: The Confederate government in Richmond and the generals in the field are informed.

Mary Surratt: The Catholic Church stands behind us.

John Surratt: Lincoln is not a popular president. People in the north don't like him. The newspapers despise him. He keeps jailing journalists and citizens without any reason. He ain't got to have any reason, because he's suspended the Writ of Habeas Corpus.

Atzerodt: I am getting out of this operation, Mr. Booth. I have to go back to making buggies and earn some money. I am flat broke. John Surratt still owes me one hundred dollars.

John Wilkes Booth: I am not releasing anyone from their duty to the Cause! I remind each of you: witnesses, letters, written and verbal statements, and the like, implicate you in this plot.

Powell: What do you want us to do, John? Is Lincoln riding to the Soldier's home this weekend?

Atzerodt: I understand this job is our duty. I ain't arguing it. I am simply stating I don't like all of this talk. I am in full support of our purpose. I want to aid the Cause and help our boys fighting in the field or stuck in prison.

John Surratt: Southern spies have told me about Northern prisons. The Northerners will hang a Southern prisoner, to try and scare the rest of 'em. Then, they leave the body swinging in the wind, the whole day, and march the rest of 'em out to the field to see. But, our boys ain't scared. Northerners beat and torture our boys, and don't feed or care for them. More than ten thousand of our boys have died in Northern prisons.

Mary Surratt: It is just deplorable. Northerners are barbarians. I remind you gentlemen, we are fighting for what is right, and for the greater good of our Lord God in heaven. We mustn't waver in our convictions!

John Wilkes Booth: The South must keep fighting for its independence.

Herold: There ain't no other way. If we don't get independence from the North, we'll wind up being slaves!

Mary Surratt: We have to protect our country's way of life. We are no longer similar to Northern people. We've lived independently for too long. General Lee and his armies will keep fighting in them woods. The longer we keep fighting and surviving, the closer our nation comes to independence. Capturing Mr. Lincoln will change everything.

John Surratt: We have to take action, help our boys, fighting in the field. We ain't having as many victories as last year. The war is being won by the North. Once we take Lincoln prisoner, we can demand independence!

Powell: We can make Lincoln pay for what he's doing to our prisoners. Once we got him in his buggy, and we're riding to Richmond, how about we stop somewhere and beat the tar outta him? I'll beat him good. I hate politicians.

Atzerodt: Now you're talking! He's a lawyer too.

Powell: Oh, he's in real big trouble.

Atzerodt: What do you say we hog-tie the president, and drag him from behind the buggy? We can shout at him, 'Where're your generals now?'

John Wilkes Booth: No! We have a change of clothes and food for Mr. Lincoln to eat on the journey to Richmond. He will be treated with respect. We are going to show Lincoln we can treat our prisoners fairly. We will meet here again Sunday night. I must go to New York City. I ask all of you to swear an oath of loyalty to our mission. Look me in the eyes and swear. To the Cause! To the South!

[All toast. Lights go black.]

Scene VI

Setting: John Wilkes Booth and Lucy Hale enter a hotel room in Washington. They become intimate. It is spring, 1865.

Lucy Hale: What is the matter with you, John? Your mind is somewhere else, since I last saw you.

John Wilkes Booth: I want you to have this necklace, Lucy. Keep it always, promise.

Lucy Hale: Pearls, how beautiful! Will you put them on my neck?

John Wilkes Booth: Yes, just a moment.

Lucy Hale: I promise to keep them forever.

John Wilkes Booth: There.

Lucy Hale: You must stop being so mysterious, John. Where have you been? I haven't seen you for several weeks. I have been concerned for you.

John Wilkes Booth: Do not tell me I am being mysterious. I am conducting business with my very profitable oil drilling company in Pennsylvania, and doing other things. Do not ask me again about my travels or who I meet.

Lucy Hale: John, would you like to come to see President Lincoln's inauguration speech with my father and me? You may bring a few guests, if you like.

John Wilkes Booth: Yes! But, is your father aware of my politics?

Lucy Hale: Why, all of Washington is aware of your politics, John! It's the biggest secret in town! But I don't love you for your politics. I feel the Civil War is ending, and we might all be happy again. Wouldn't it be nice to not have to worry about war

anymore? I still wish you would share what is bothering you. You are traveling often and not acting anymore.

John Wilkes Booth: I will come and go as I please!

Lucy Hale: Do not become violent.

John Wilkes Booth: Wait! Please do not abandon me, Lucy. Stay by my side, to my end. I am doing something very important, which will be remembered forever, and become a part of the ages. I cannot say more.

Lucy Hale: John, I swear my heart to you; and, I promise I will keep anything you tell me secret. I am on your side; but not unless we are one. I want to have children with you, and raise a family. But, we cannot be husband and wife, if you do not let me into your heart. I do not care about money. I love you, John, now and for all time. Please tell me.

John Wilkes Booth: I love you too, Lucy. I am weary from my journey.

Lucy Hale: You look tired and forlorn, as if you've just fought a battle.

John Wilkes Booth: Do you see the comet streaking across the sky?

Lucy Hale: Yes, it's been there all weekend.

John Wilkes Booth: Shakespeare says in *Julius Caesar*, 'When beggars die, there are no comets in the sky. The heavens only announce the deaths of princes'. Do you believe in me, Lucy?

Lucy Hale: Yes, I do, very strongly.

John Wilkes Booth: I feel it is sometimes necessary for a man to take action, when he believes he is right.

Lucy Hale: Only you can decide what is right. But, once you have made your decision, you must stick by it. Just ask President Lincoln. He feels the Union must be restored, at all costs.

John Wilkes Booth: There is right and wrong in this world, Lucy. Evil and tyranny must be crushed. Good men cannot stand by and do nothing.

Lucy Hale: Both sides, fighting this Civil War, feel they are right and the other side is wrong. Time will judge everyone. I don't want this war to disrupt my life, or people in my family. My state is the most important state.

John Wilkes Booth: This war is about more than states' rights.

Lucy Hale: This war is about too many things, and we are all a part of it.

John Wilkes Booth: I must meet some people.

Lucy Hale: Please remember: I will not divulge your secrets. I promise. I love you.

[Exit Lucy Hale.]

[Booth suddenly falls backward, to the ground.]

John Wilkes Booth: Go away and leave me alone! You have no idea what I will soon accomplish. I will become a hero! The South will be freed from Lincoln's tyranny! Lincoln has freed the slaves! Lincoln would give them full citizenship and even grant them voting rights. Tyrannicide is humanity's necessary evil. I will kill President Lincoln! I am Brutus, father! I am Brutus!

[Lights fade to black. Intermission.]

Act II

Scene I

Setting: The White House, spring, 1865. Mary Todd enters.

Mary Todd: Abraham, who left muddy boots in our living room?

[Enter Lincoln.]

Lincoln: Secretary Stanton, I believe. Give them to Mr. Forbes, to return to him.

Mary Todd: This is our house. Inform your guests to take their boots with them when they leave. How did he get home without boots?

Lincoln: I lent him a pair of mine. Secretary Stanton, or Seward, or any other guest, must be comfortable in our home, and feel they are free to come and go as they please. I have to maintain access to all of my political contacts, and my generals. It is no different than Springfield, when politicians visited us.

Mary Todd: Abraham, today our maid was spring-cleaning the room upstairs, where little Willie died of fever. Tucked in the bed boards, she found this object.

[Mary Todd produces a bow tie, which is thoroughly wrapped.]

Is this yours? Why is it wrapped like this?

Lincoln: It is my tie. I left it one night, by his side. He has wrapped it for me. Oh, my little boy!

Mary Todd: We must try again to contact him on the other side. The psychic medium Margaret Ann Laurie and her daughter can bring little Willie's spirit back, so we can communicate with him.

Lincoln: No, Mary Todd. Cease this talk. I do not want any more séances in this White House. I want peace in my soul, and for the soul of my buried child.

Mary Todd: But you have seen the messages, the visions in the mirror.

Lincoln: I want to let our boy rest in peace. Will you allow me this one wish? It is best we leave the forces, which lie beyond the veil, alone.

Mary Todd: You must never, ever leave me, Abraham. Never, ever leave me. I have lost Willie and Edward. Robert fights in war. I can erase the death of our children from my memory like a bad dream. But, I love you. I cannot live without you.

Lincoln: I love you too, Mary Todd. I must focus on winning the Civil War. The South will not relent. We are coming closer to victory. You must support me. We must fight! All the men, who have died fighting for our Union, weigh heavily on my heart. They must not have died in vain. We must press through to victory. Even the losses on the enemy's side I think about. They are still our brothers; indeed, some of them are your family. Do all of these fallen soldiers walk among us too, as spirits? If so, it is because they are troubled. If we do not finish this war, there will be no closure; no side will be declared victor or loser. Wars are not fought to settle with terms; wars are fought to win!

Mary Todd: I love you dearly, Abraham. I will leave you alone.

Lincoln: Thank you, Mary Todd. I must write my Inauguration Address. I will be in my study.

Scene II

Setting: Tudor Hall, home of the Booth family, in Maryland, in the country, near Baltimore. The Booth family has gathered at the mother's request. Present are: Mary Ann, Junius (eldest son), Edwin, John Wilkes, Asia. It is spring, 1865.

Mary Ann: I am so happy you are all here. Seeing all of your bright faces brings me great strength. Junius. Edwin. John. I love you. We are going to enjoy a nice meal, as a happy family, despite war and politics. Asia and I have everything set. Who would like something to drink? Well, you can all get it yourselves, on the table.

Edwin Booth: I would like to propose a toast: To Union victory!

John Wilkes Booth: The Union is going to be crushed!

Mary Ann: Will you please stop arguing about politics and war in our home! Did you hear me? If you do not stop arguing, I swear to Sweet Jesus, I will sell Tutor House and move to a neutral state. I will find a state not under martial law!

Junius Booth: Mother, please, be calm. They are just getting carried away. They will stop.

Asia: John, we are all worried about your political obsession with Lincoln. Why do you care so much about politics? Have you lost your mind?

John Wilkes Booth: Where does this concern arise?

Junius Booth: Stop it, John!

John Wilkes Booth: Do not order me, Junius! Worry for Edwin; he is the one who dined with President Lincoln and Secretary of State Seward, in the White House. Did you ask Lincoln why he unilaterally suspended the Whitt of Habeas Corpus? Did you talk about Seward secret police force? Thousand of free citizens, Northerners and Southerners, are rotting in Northern prisons, not charged with any crime and denied a fair trial. Is how justice works in America?

Junius Booth: This argument has already gotten out of control. The Civil War is dividing our family apart. Mother, are you all right?

Mary Ann: Oh, sure, I am doing just fine!

Edwin Booth: Journalists who are editorializing and printing lies, in support of the South, deserve to be jailed. Citizens who are stirring dissent and causing insurrection must be silenced. It has worked! The North has almost won the war.

John Wilkes Booth: Advantage in the war sways violently, month to month, like Poe's pendulum over the pit. America has become a militaristic, totalitarian state, ruled by a despot; it is no different than Napoleonic France – or, Caesar! And, what of Southern war prisoners, in Northern prisons? They are being tortured.

Mary Ann: Asia: How our hams?

Asia: Which hams? Edwin, are you in contact with President Lincoln?

Edwin Booth: Yes, why?

Asia: Tell Mr. Lincoln John will perform *The Fool*, in *12th Night* for him.

Edwin Booth: Your South's Andersonville prison is so rotted with evil; it has become a maggot-infested carcass. It would seem our

country has a dubious record of prisoner care.

John Wilkes Booth: Is Lincoln a tyrant? Not my political rival – is he a tyrant?

Edwin Booth: Lincoln is no tyrant. This country is at war. His actions are entirely warranted.

John Wilkes Booth: Lincoln is a tyrant! He has ordered the execution of Southern officers simply because we return slaves to their rightful masters – slaves who were Union soldiers. Have you heard of the 54th Massachusetts, the Negro regiment?

Junius Booth: John and Edwin, please lower your voices at once.

Mary Ann: Junius?

John Wilkes Booth: Lincoln has suspended the Writ of Habeas Corpus, for God's sake!

Junius Booth: Yes, mother?

John Wilkes Booth: What do you think, Asia, is Lincoln a tyrant?

Mary Ann: Tell them to lower their voices.

Asia: It is true; all the newspapers call Lincoln a tyrant. Even my husband says Lincoln is a tyrant.

John Wilkes Booth: Then he belongs in the same grave as Caesar.

Asia: John, there are Federal agents everywhere! They could be listening.

John Wilkes Booth: I will not live in fear of government spies. I will live free!

[Pause.]

Asia: Oh my word! John, what has become of you?

Edwin Booth: Ah ha! My brother is delusional! John, I am afraid Shakespeare is fantasy – the Civil War is reality. Learn to distinguish.

John Wilkes Booth: In fact, Shakespeare is the only one who speaks the truth. I should break your nose. You're lucky mother is present.

Edwin Booth: We can take it out back! You never cared about Mother's feelings.

Mary Ann: Oh!

Junius Booth: Enough! You two should go outside!

Mary Ann: I wish Brutus were here right now. There was never this kind of fighting when he was alive. Tutor House is still the theater of the 'Great Tragedian'. My husband's influence still lives!

Junius Booth: There was no war raging in our backyard when our father was alive, Mother.

Asia: Oh, mother, I am so happy to be home; my heart sings like a whooping crane – whoop, whoop! Watch me!

Edwin Booth: Mother: I must reveal John is engaged in a scandalous love affair with Lucy Hale, who is the daughter of Senator Hale, the abolitionist.

Mary Ann: What? John, why are you conducting this liaison? What is the purpose of it?

John Wilkes Booth: Mother: I can explain. I love her.

Edwin Booth: I find it ironic a Southern sympathizer is engaged to the daughter of an abolitionist U. S. Senator! You, sir, are a

hypocrite!

Mary Ann: Oh! I must sit. Please get me some water, Junius.

Junius Booth: Here you are, mother. Please be calm. Sip it slowly.

Mary Ann: Thank you, dear. I am fine. Children: I have had a premonition, a dark dream. I have seen ghosts, emanating from a lone house, on top of a hill. The sky filled with red and the ground was caked with dried blood. Even in my dreams, I could feel the presence of another being, a powerful being, close at hand. Spirits moved in the air. The wind whistled through the trees and everywhere the land was desolate. Then, a monster awakened from the land: I could not entirely see its face, as a vile liquid obscured its face. Armies of the Southern and the Northern nations were clashing on battlefields with terrible fury and explosions and meanness. The victors massacred the vanquished; the prisoners were all killed or mutilated. This is my vision of America! Oh, may Lord God in heaven save us!

Asia: Oh, this is awful! We must remain strong, mother.

Junius Booth: I am taking charge of this situation. I have heard enough! I insist on a moratorium on all political discussions in mother's house. John and Edwin: You can argue in some other location; but this home is off-limits to your insensitive diatribes! If America is a free country – and this applies to both North and South – then we are all free; and, we have a choice of who and what we listen. As mother says, she may move to a neutral state, if she wishes. There are several to choose from, and this family does not have to remain in Maryland. Does everyone understand me? John, let this serve as a warning: We are all concerned for your well being.

Edwin Booth: John, you have been associating with some unsavory people. With each passing month, you have further distanced yourself from the stage. One can put two and two together. We are all worried about you. I will not permit you to

drag our family down to the dregs, with your corrupted beliefs. Look at yourself: You are no longer an artist; you have become a politician. You cannot translate art into life, brother. You can only imitate life with art. Do you understand? This Civil War is causing you to lose your mind.

Asia: And, you are constantly traveling, from city to city, though not acting. Your oil business in Pennsylvania has failed. You invested a lot of your friends' money in that endeavor. You lost all of it? Have you paid them back? I am very sorry for you.

John Wilkes Booth: I don't want to listen to any of you anymore! I am leaving! Mother: I am sorry for the inconvenience. Asia: You must insure the papers I have given you are locked in your safe. Do not tamper with those papers, they are most important. Goodbye.

[John Wilkes Booth exits. Lights dim to a tableau and Booth addresses his family.]

My family has abandoned me. I am not an outcast! They are so quick to pretend as if I am dead. It doesn't matter. They do not understand me or what I have planned. I will take action and put an end to the fighting. My family will see, by my actions, who is right and who is wrong! I will succeed.

Scene III

Setting: Lincoln and Grant speak, following a cabinet meeting in the White House. There is the sound of cheering and reveling in the streets, from celebrations. It is evening, April 13th, 1865.

Lincoln: I recently returned from touring Richmond, General Grant. The Southern capital lay in ruins. I sat in Jefferson Davis's chair. We have turned the corner. Listen to the revelers outside. It is a joyous time.

Grant: I feel as if a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders, sir. Everyone is relieved. The Civil War is all but ended.

Lincoln: I had the same strange dream last night I had prior Antietam, Bull Run, Stone's River, and Gettysburg. It was of a fast-moving ship, crossing over a vast ocean. This is a good portent, a most favorable omen. This dream has always arrived prior to victorious Union battles.

Grant: Sir, Stone's River was nothing close to victory for the Union.

Lincoln: Nevertheless, it was the same dream as appeared prior to the other battles, general.

Grant: These battles are happily drawing to an end.

Lincoln: It is hard to believe we are having this discussion.

Grant: Yes, sir.

Lincoln: Will you tell me about Lee's surrender?

Grant: I will, with pleasure, Mr. President. The room at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, is a small one. Lee seemed rather stiff and might have taken offence to my cigar. We chatted about his army and my army for several minutes. He was curious

about how our side had fared at several battles, and he seemed intrigued by the information I provided. General Lee agreed to my terms. He tried turned to over his weapons; but I refused. I allowed him and his cavalry to keep their side arms, and their horses, for farming purposes. It was over. At the end of it, I could see sorrow cross his face, and he turned white as a ghost. He searched my eyes like a guilty thief. He fought it; but there was no hiding his deep-felt sadness. I feel he was relieved, as we are now. It was good to finally meet him in person.

Lincoln: Congratulations, General Grant. I commend you in your victory.

Grant: Thank you, Mr. President.

Lincoln: Rebel officers refusing to denounce their oaths to the Confederacy, in writing, shall be executed. The Writ of Habeas Corpus will remain suspended, and the citizenry silenced, or jailed. Secretary Seward's secret police force is still active. Southern spies move among us. In uncertain times, as these, such harsh action is required.

Grant: Yes, sir.

Lincoln: Well, your description of Lee reminds me of a story.

Grant: Please, tell me.

Lincoln: I was once challenged to a duel by a rival politician – I do not recall for what. His real motive was to eliminate the political threat I posed. I was well aware of the fate of Alexander Hamilton, who was shot by Aaron Burr. I, being the acceptant of the duel, had the right to choose the weaponry, in accordance with ancient customs. I chose Broadswords! And, for our ankles to be chained together. On the designated morning we met, I took my four foot long sword and sliced down some of the willow tree over his head – he declined to duel on the spot – the coward!

Grant: What a great story, Mr. President. You used a shrewd combination of weaponry and bravado to outsmart the enemy. It is no wonder we have won this Civil War.

Lincoln: Thank you, general. Mrs. Lincoln and I would like to request your presence at Ford's theater, tomorrow night. Mrs. Lincoln sends her condolences for canceling our previous engagement.

Grant: Sir, my wife and I have every intention of going straight home, to spend time with family. I regret, we will not be able to attend the play with you and Mrs. Lincoln.

Lincoln: Well, I wish you Godspeed. I will tell Mrs. Lincoln.

Grant: Goodbye, Mr. President.

Lincoln: Goodbye, General Grant.

[Exit Ulysses Grant. Lights fade to black.]

Scene IV

Setting: Booth goes to Mary Surratt's boarding house and knocks on the door. Powell wears a double-breasted coat and a beaver hat. The rest of the conspirators wear fine clothing. It is April 14th, 1865.

Powell: Who's there?

John Wilkes Booth: John.

[Powell opens the door. Enter John Wilkes Booth.]

Powell: Are you feeling well, John? You look pale.

John Wilkes Booth: I am fine! Where are the others? What time is it?

Powell: Seven thirty. They will be here any minute.

John Wilkes Booth: Look: I've brought good things: cigars, bourbon – here are some cards; we will play a game of cards.

Powell: Let me pour you a glass of bourbon, John.

John Wilkes Booth: Drink.

Powell: The war is over, John. Have you seen the Rebel army marching through the city – being taken to prison? They are kicking up one hell of a dust storm. You can see it, clear from the other side of town.

John Wilkes Booth: Yes, I saw them. It as though I no longer have a country. It was a wretched spectacle.

Powell: General Lee surrendered in Virginia. Without Lee, the war must be close to its end.

John Wilkes Booth: The war is not over, Lewis! General Joe Johnson still fights Sherman in Atlanta.

Powell: Richmond has been burned to the ground. The papers said Lincoln toured Richmond with his son Tad, in the flagship *Malvern*.

John Wilkes Booth: Lord God, the man is insane! Look how quickly he must run there, to gloat, like a ruthless dictator! He is without honor. No, Lewis, we will greatly aid the South by our actions.

Powell: John: Whatever you need me to do, I'll do it. I am a soldier in the Confederate army.

[Knock at the door.]

Powell: Enter.

[Enter Atzerodt, Herold, Surratt.]

Atzerodt: I am physically sick. I am going to vomit at any moment. Can we talk about the plan some more?

Powell: Here, have a drink. Sit. Do not vomit in Mrs. Surratt's boarding house, you dog.

John Wilkes Booth: How are you, John?

John Surratt: I am fine. I made a very long journey to get here.

Herold: Washington is lit with electric lights, in shapes spelling words such as 'peace' and 'love' and 'victory', in the 'Grand Illumination'. There have never been so many drunken soldiers and sailors and whores in one town. I hate this town.

Atzerodt: Yeah, and did you fellas hear General Grant has ordered the North back to exchanging prisoners? What's the

reason for killing the leaders of the Union now? Why don't we go back to our plan to capture the president? – seems rather prudent. Hell, the North has won the Civil War!

Powell: Shut up, George! I ought to take you outside.

Atzerodt: I'll knock your block off, you big ape!

John Wilkes Booth: Stop it! Here, who would like a cigar? Mr. Lincoln and General Grant will be at Ford's Theater tonight. I have a horse stabled in the alleyway. I will proceed to the theater and assassinate Lincoln. Secretary of State Seward is injured and in his house. Lewis and David and John, you will simply walk in his front door and kill him. After the act, you will skedaddle out of town.

Powell: We're going to win it for the South, John. This is an important job! The president and the others must die. The Northern government will be in chaos.

John Surratt: The tyrant must die! The south will finally have its revenge, its victory!

John Wilkes Booth: Here is the gun I will use to kill the president. I should have killed Lincoln at his inauguration speech in March. George, you are going to execute the Vice-president, in accordance with our plan.

Atzerodt: Pour me another drink, Payne – a double.

Powell: Get it yourself, you fool.

John Surratt: Here, George. Who else would like another drink? John?

Herold: I am honored to do this job for the South. I am happy it is all coming together.

Atzerodt: What if this Civil War ends America, for good? What is the point of killing off the North's government if we ain't leaving nothing – except, chaos? You look at a man like John Brown: he died with conviction. He was no great man in life – I mean, he was an abolitionist. But, he died a great man. So what about Lincoln? You kill him; and, you're making him a great man, a martyr.

John Wilkes Booth: George, this whole thing has gone far beyond prisoners and politics. We must act, for the sake of humanity. I was there when they hung old John Brown. He wasn't crazy; he was fearless. Northerners don't care about honor, not the way *we* honor the Cause – except, for old John Brown. His eyes looked straight through you, deep, into your soul. He walked right up to his rope; his steps right and true. He didn't shake; he moved proud, confident. The executioner had enough mind to wrap the rope around John Brown's neck quickly, tightening it, stepping back; perhaps, out of fear, sensing a power stronger than evil hanging in the air. Wa-boom! The floor dropped and the old son-of-a-bitch went straight down and his neck snapped. John Brown died with honor. Don't question me about greatness! I understand what it means to die with conviction! I will defeat the tyrant Lincoln. I won't die like a criminal, though I have no fear. I will be a hero! This evil tyrant must be destroyed.

[Pause.]

John Surratt: I'll wager old John Brown drank whiskey. A commoner drinks whiskey. A gentleman sips subtle Southern bourbon. Is war in America's blood – war, fire, death, which only harsh whiskey can ease; or, is our country peopled by gentlemen, their nerves soothed by smooth bourbon?

Herald: War is how this nation began and it will be how it ends. You men must realize we are going to put an end to the Civil War tonight! John, assuming we get across the Potomac River, where we going next?

John Wilkes Booth: We will go to Mexico. I will reward you all with money from my oil business.

John Surratt: Archduke Maximilian has an open invitation to Confederate agents. He will provide us money. He is supported by France and the Roman Catholic diocese. My mother has been working closely with the church. The Catholic Church has said it will provide shelter to any of us, if we're on the run.

Powell: But, we ain't going to be on the run! Our actions are going to turn this whole war around, once and for all. Now, we have had many meetings and everything is set. I am confident our plan will work!

John Wilkes Booth: All resting between the bullet in this gun, and the death of the President of the United States of America, is time! Lincoln will understand the true nature of Shakespearean Tragedy! I shall take Brutus's bloody dagger and raise it high, shouting 'thus always to tyrants'! The South shall be avenged, my friends!

Powell: Break a leg, John.

John Wilkes Booth: I must lie down; I feel suddenly faint. You all may stay or leave, at your leisure.

[Booth lies down. Lights fade to black.]

Scene V

Setting: Lights rise and Lincoln crosses to the living room, where Mary Todd is writing in a diary. Lincoln is humming or whistling *I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy*.

Lincoln: Good evening, Mary Todd.

Mary Todd: Hello, Abraham.

Lincoln: General Grant and his wife will not be able to attend *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theatre tonight. He sends his regrets; but says he must be returning home, to spend time with his family.

Mary Todd: Ulysses is very unreliable. I do not trust him. Is the war over?

Lincoln: General Grant has defeated General Lee, though many armies remain in the field. Why don't you read the newspapers?

Lincoln: I understand you are doing all you can to restore the Union. We must try to be as happy as we can during these unhappy times. Otherwise, we will be driven mad by depression. The theatre is a nice diversion.

Lincoln: I would rather be watching MacBeth; but the date is already set. The tragedies of Shakespeare are the best Theatre.

Mary Todd: You must see to it this Civil War comes to its final end, Abraham.

Lincoln: This war has become part of life and you must accept it.

Mary Todd: All war is madness! And, there is another aspect to it: manliness! This Civil War lingers on forever because of men, who have no compassion or love, and you are their leader, or their enemy. We look to you to quell our confusion. Perhaps, you do

not have enough manliness to end the war!

Lincoln: Why must you always be so troubled?

Mary Todd: Because I am sick and tired of war! And, you do not seem to be doing a thing about what the journalists are writing about you. You do not even seem to care. No, I will not continue living like a prisoner in this house, for another four years. Something must change. You will not sit there, staring at me, and not speaking to me!

Lincoln: Our home is like a battlefield! I go from one war to the next.

Mary Todd: It is up to you to stop all the wars!

Lincoln: Mary Todd, I love you deeply; but you are a difficult woman.

Mary Todd: I am simply pointing out another line of thought. No one else will; they are all frightened of you. But I will speak my mind to you. We are a team. I greatly admire your strong ambition. Mr. Herndon was nothing special.

Lincoln: Ah, Herndon; now's there's a name I haven't heard for a long time. Do you ever miss Springfield?

Mary Todd: Springfield seems so far away. I do not miss the humid summers; but the people were nice. The summer lightning storms were a spectacle.

Lincoln: Do you believe what the journalists write about me? Do you feel I am a tyrant? Frederick Douglass seems to think too many Americans have died, because of my actions. He seems to believe the South will not change, even if they loose. Have I only caused war, when it was not necessary?

Mary Todd: You have done what must be done, to restore the

Union. Dying is part of war. I only want the war to end. I cannot stand it anymore. I do not care who dies, so long as you stay by my side.

Lincoln: I am tired right now, after my meetings. I would like to nap before we go to the Theatre.

Mary Todd: You may rest. I will find Tad and we will find where he is with his studies. He will be at the theater.

[Exit Mary Todd. Lincoln prays.]

Lincoln: Lord God, help me with these weights upon my heart. I am exceedingly tired. I implore you to send me your love and kind mercy, to ease my burdens. My God, I trust in you; ease my troubled heart. Please care for my son, Lord.

[Lincoln sleeps.]

Scene VI

Setting: Lights rise partly. Enter John Wilkes Booth, who carries a dagger or a large knife. Lincoln wakes up with a start and stands.

Lincoln: Hey! What? Why are you here?

John Wilkes Booth: I am listening to the secrets of your mind.

Lincoln: There is a ghost in my home! Satan's Devil, leave my house!

John Wilkes Booth: Listen: I will share one of your secrets. You are a weak man, Mr. President; and, your coward heart eats away at you. Only in dominating those around you in tyranny, do you siphon off the bile of your spleen.

Lincoln: You are the actor, John Wilkes Booth.

John Wilkes Booth: Yes. You finally recognize me. We are brothers, you and I. I hold your soul prisoner.

Lincoln: I face you with courage. God is teaching me a lesson. Wars kill men. Wars continue to kill, after wars end. God has made this all too clear to me. I must save the Union! I must save the Union! No, perhaps war is not always right. The future will see rebirth to America; but I am not part of the future. I will forever remain in the past, in this Civil War of America. Like all men, this war has destroyed me.

John Wilkes Booth: You see the truth.

[John Wilkes Booth exits. Lights fade to black.]

Mary Todd: Abraham, wake up, dear. It is time to go to the theatre.

Lincoln: Get away from me.

Mary Todd: Abraham, you are covered in sweat.

Lincoln: I have seen a ghost. It is my self.

Mary Todd: I am here with you now. We will be all right. Rest now, in my arms.

[Lights fade to black.]

Scene VII

Setting: Ford's Theatre, April 14th, 1865. Lincoln and Mary Todd enter the theater and wave at the actual audience. They take up their seats to the side of the stage. *Our American Cousin* is being performed on the stage. The actors in *Our American Cousin* stop acting to clap and watch, as Lincoln and Mary Todd take their seats. Lights dim and John Wilkes Booth enters. John Wilkes Booth begins prowling in the dark, carrying a gun and knife.

Actor 1 (Asa): I am aware, Mr. Trenchard, you are not used to the manners of good society, and that, alone, will excuse the impertinence of which you have been guilty.

Actor 2 (Trenchard): Don't know the manners of good society, eh? Wal, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal—you sockdologizing old man-trap!

John Wilkes Booth:

[John Wilkes Booth shoots Lincoln in the back of the head.]

Mary Todd:

[Mary Todd let out a piercing scream. [John Wilkes Booth jumps to the stage, holds his dagger high.]

John Wilkes Booth: Sic Semper Tyrannis!

[John Wilkes Booth confidently strides across the stage. People sitting in the audience slowly stand, confused.]

The deed is done.

[John Wilkes Booth exits. One person chases Booth out of the theatre.]

Scene VIII

Setting: John Wilkes Booth has been chased to a barn, which is surrounded and slowly burning. David Herold is with John Wilkes Booth in the barn. Dog barks are heard. Booth wears a low hat and his left leg is professionally splinted. Their clothing is damp.

Voice of Detectives: John Wilkes Booth: You are surrounded. Come out with your hands raised! You must surrender!

John Wilkes Booth: David!

Herold: I am still here, John. They have set the barn on fire.

John Wilkes Booth: Come over here, David.

Herold: I am here.

John Wilkes Booth: Take this. It is the pistol I used to kill Lincoln. I think I have done well, though I am abandoned, with the curse of Cain upon me, when if the world knew my heart, that one blow would have made me great, though I did desire no greatness. I had put the gun close to the back of his head; I thought any of them might hear me approaching. I shot. He died—his head bent over. I made my jump over the railing. I was proud of myself for doing the thing. Then, and now, I feel melancholy. My soul is not at rest. I have killed the president. It all seems like a dream.

Herold: This barn is one fire! We will burn alive!

John Wilkes Booth: Lincoln and I have only searched for the good and what is best in man. Lincoln may be the one who saves the honor of America. I feel he has won and I have lost.

Herold: The papers say Lincoln died on Easter morning, April 15th, in the manner of a martyr.

John Wilkes Booth: He is no hero! I acted to end Lincoln's tyranny. I am the Tragic Hero; I am Brutus.

Voice of Detectives: The papers are calling you a coward, John Wilkes Booth, for shooting Lincoln in the back. Come out like a man!

John Wilkes Booth: Wait, David! Don't leave me, my friend. Wait a moment longer.

Herold: John, I cannot see anything. Come outside with me. I only hear the voices. Leaving you here like this is wrong. I will miss your face, alive with passion. Even now, I can see it, from the light of the flames. I will be hung, I am certain. George and Powell will hang too. The North will hang everyone. I am ready to accept my fate.

John Wilkes Booth: I have too great a soul to die like a criminal, my friend. O may He, may He spare me; and, let me die bravely. I cannot surrender, David. I will burn first. I will burn. Lincoln has died on Easter Sunday. I am to die without my mother near me. Will you tell my mother I love her? Tell my mother I have done it for my country. We have fought for what we felt was right. We both fought for our countries, believing in the nobler things in life. He has won. I have lost. The North has fought with no honor, dignity. We have been cheated. Yet, I still believe in the Cause.

Herold: Goodbye, John. I can't breathe. I am leaving. Come outside, John! Goodbye, my friend.

[Herold exits.]

John Wilkes Booth: I bless the entire world. I have never hated or wronged anyone. My action was not a wrong, unless God deems it so. And, it is with Him to damn or bless me. It is useless, useless.

[Booth stands. Gunshot is heard. Booth grabs his neck, falls, dead. Curtain. The end.]

Notes on Directing

by M. Stefan Strozier

I'll pretend for a moment I am writing to an audience of mostly American actors and this will allow me to lighten up for a bit. And since you're actors, I'll share a secret: When I write, I imagine how the audience is going to react to what I write, first and foremost. Then—or, simultaneously, I reach a point where I imagine each of the characters reacting the same way to each other as I do to them (plus, I throw other things into the mix). Next, I escape all the way into the characters; but manipulate the audience's feelings (by changing the characters' words) in ways I imagine audience will react to the characters, and the thing has come full circle. In other words, the audience goes (as I am writing and rewriting) from reacting to me, the playwright, to me, the characters I have created. Writing a play is a journey of release, not one of attainment. So, I imagine I can do or say anything I want to you, because somehow, you, the actor, understand all this.

I have only directed 4 plays, though they ran for respectable runs and were well-reviewed, successful, and profitable. I have learned a lot about directing and found some things I am good at, and others needing work. I have new respect for the job of a director; but I still feel a director's impact on a play has its limits. A play is

basically a concoction of one part actor, one part playwright. I feel rather confident as a playwright right now, because I feel like I have just ran through the first leg of an intense obstacle course, and shredded it. Yet, I still cannot get my plays produced; unless, I do it all myself, and even the directors of my plays are getting tired of me and not returning my phone calls. But, actors have always stood by my side and still do.

The actor is not an inanimate object and he or she is quite capable of thinking independently. In America, directors are God-like because we, as a country, are very uncertain and timid about the meaning of art, and even culture. If you don't believe me, simply take a look at our best playwrights. We've been living in this land over 400 years; granted, things were rough at first; but another country might have established a strong tradition in the arts by now. Our greatest playwright is O'Neill, whose 2 greatest plays; *Long Days' Journey into Night* and *The Iceman Cometh* are about Irish drunks (such as, formally, yours truly), who are drinking very heavily during the plays. Next, we have Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, both of whose output of great plays can be measured on one hand. And, Miller is a bit suspect in the "great playwright" category, in my opinion. Then, we have—not a boatload—but a few stragglers in the third ring: Albee, Mamet, Wilder, Kushner, and Shepard. (This is Harold Bloom's list, from his introduction in *Long Days' Journey into Night*, which must be purely about plays; excluding, for example, Neil Simon and

Steven Sondheim—technically, Simon (who is a playwright) should replace Miller, below Williams.

Finally, we have the present day; and, there are no “great playwrights” out there, unless I am mistaken. Realistically, we have not had a “great playwright” in America for a long, long time, if we ever did have one. We certainly have a lot of people writing plays, some of those plays are good; but none of them “great.” Almost all modern plays are amazingly bad. Unlike in politics, the media can’t lie and pretend a bad play is “great.” The audience is the lion’s share of decision-making of whether a play is good or bad. And, one cannot deny that no one is recognized as a “great playwright” in 2006. This is due, in part, to the egalitarian philosophies of the 60s generation, which presently exerts an iron fist over the arts in America. Egalitarianism is a good thing; but it fails in the world of art and culture—it fails miserably. Part of being “great,” which also means “professional,” is to be consistently very good or excellent.

But, nowhere in our list of Americans do we find a “great playwright.” We have no Shakespeare (clearly), Chekhov, Ibsen, Sophocles or Euripides, Moliere, de Vega, Verga, Giacosa, Pirandello, or De Filippo. (de Vega, and the group following him, I just pulled off the Internet by typing ‘Spanish playwrights’ and ‘Italian playwrights’, respectively; I don’t know anything about them.) Our list pales in comparison to these playwrights. If you

take America's best playwrights, they fall in the fifth or ninth circle, on a worldwide rating system. And, I am being generous—or, polite (our playwrights are probably closer to the sixteenth or thirtieth circle). In harsh reality, American playwrights are minor players on the worldwide stage. Other countries do not appreciate our plays or our messages. Somehow, our best plays are just so-so, no matter how hard the critics and academics try to push the plays and their playwrights uphill, for political reasons.

Even our list of artists in other fields is a bit lightweight, with a few stars, such as Twain, Poe, Fitzgerald, Emerson, and Hemingway (I guess). Even Whitman and Dickinson are somewhat overrated, and not so popular outside of America. And, though I am no expert in painting, American painters did not get much respect before Abstract Expressionism in the middle of the 20th century.

But, again, we have no Tolstoy, Homer, Dante, Keats, Dostoevsky, or Cervantes. Those American writers I list are limited because they are focused, with the exception of Poe, though he and Fitzgerald both died in their early 40s (and Hemingway faded in those years). If we look at modern, living, so-called great writers, the media and academia have listed Morrison, Roth, and Updike. I recently read these three are “Grand-masters.” What a joke. And, this is perhaps part of the reason my plays keep getting rejected by American publishers,

who tell me I am an “excellent” and “gifted” writer; but my plays are too dark, and American youth should not be exposed to plays like *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln*, because (and I quote), “It would cause too much controversy.” At this point, my patience has reached its end. I will be leaving as soon as the state department gives me back my passport. (I’m not joking.)

To try and answer why America has not produced great artists would take longer than these notes; and, I have written other essays on the subject. But, briefly: America, in its heart of hearts, is a political nation, devoted primarily to the production of war. Thus, we survive on propaganda. It is hard for the artist and art (truth) to survive in this environment (the profession of actor is, by far, the highest paid artist). Those few artists, who do survive, tend to dominate the playing field, because there is so little competition. Thus, those who dominate are often mediocre in talent. Playwrights are already few and far between, by nature of their profession.

What this means is the American actor has had to shoulder the burden of Theatre in this country for centuries. And, the American actor has pulled it off, marvelously. From the Booths to Charlie Chaplin to Marlin Brando, we’ve had plenty of greats. These actors have had nominal use for directors; they were able to see for themselves how to grow and adapt words to art. Indeed, the list of great American directors is even smaller than the list of

great playwrights; and, most great directors are in film, which is a fully different (at present, atrophying) species in the evolution of film and Theatre. (Ironically, film believes it is leeching off of Theatre, though precisely the opposite is true.) And, the great directors in Theatre were actually acting coaches, after all, such as those in the Group Theatre.

The interaction between playwright and actor is a magical one. Bearing in mind the job of director is a very new function to Theatre (in terms of geological Time) I will pretend we're making Theatre like they did in the old days. Who was in charge?—The playwright. Did Shakespeare have a director?—Of course not. Scholars contend Richard Burbage, Shakespeare's go-to actor, was also his director—scholars can't even agree who Shakespeare, the man, was. But, actors understand Shakespeare could not possibly have been anything other than an ordinary man. Otherwise, how did Sir Francis Bacon's plays make it to the stage? Needless to say, scholars like to insist on being absolute about things—perhaps Bacon did author a few of Shakespeare's plays, and things got a bit jumbled. In fact, Shakespeare, the playwright, is really an amalgamation of things and people, which are the magic of writing plays. However, I feel Shakespeare was one of the greatest collaborative playwrights ever, which enabled him to manipulate things, and to create such wonderful plays. Of this magic, I can speak (to a small degree), authoritatively.

The magic occurs between the words and the actors. It is a way for the two kinds of art to edit each other, like grooming baboons. If this concept seems foreign, it is. We take turns grooming. First, the actor reads the words the playwright has written (for the first time) and the words do not sound like a character. So, the playwright goes back and revises his words, based on the actors' art. Without this feedback of the character being fleshed out, it would be impossible to move the play to the next level. The actor finds little glitches too: misspellings; action, which does not fit logically; or, strengths and weaknesses. Eventually, the playwright is finished writing words. Then, the actor (perhaps, with a director's help) adds nuances, existing between the lines. If the playwright has created a worthy script, the subtleties are ripe. The untalented actor misses all these opportunities; or, relies on a director to hold his or her hand, and still does not see the light. The talented actor finds the rhythm of the sentences (if there is any), the meaning, the subtext of the meaning, applies movement to the meaning, and reacts to the words of fellow actors. There is much more the actor does with the words. These two ways of creating art make a play. Anything else matters next to nothing. The set is as unimportant as the music played, while the house sits down in chairs. The costumes are similarly minor in importance to an audience.

The best way to write a play is by this interaction of playwright and actor. There is a clock ticking for the playwright, and he must

time his writing to correspond with the incarnation of performance of the play. And, when it is over, the playwright must go back and edit his play yet again, based on the other important source of feedback: the audience. It is vital to a play's success for the playwright to listen what audience members say about his play.

In 2006, New York City Theater is jam-packed with workshops, acting schools and coaches; or, programs on directing, play writing, set designing, dramaturging, etceteras. With the exception of acting, all of these things are worthless at enhancing art. In the case of the writing plays, such programs are detrimental to the playwright. For the actor, anything can be used as a tool, in his or her development; but they are, ultimately, only tools. But let's imagine, for a moment, a playwright sitting in the middle of a workshop of dramaturges, as things are done these days. The play is written by committee; the members of the workshop inform the actor how to write his or her play. The workshops have political (Liberal) incentives, and the advice their members tell the playwright is of a political nature i.e. 'you must delete this section, because it will offend this group of people, who support us with cash'. Dramaturges are tied to academia, which understands even less about what makes plays work. In the dramaturge's mind, the play must follow a very specific format, as writers do with movies in Los Angeles. For example, the dramaturge tells the playwright to write a nice story, in a one-act

play, with 3-5 characters, and various rules, which will enable the playwright to get his or her play produced, and possibly made into a movie, if the playwright follows the dramaturge's rules and calls up the dramaturge's friends.

The best directors, then, are playwrights or actors who are real artists. And, the best way to form a play is by playwrights and actors smashing into each other like two hydrogen atoms. Ideally, this reaction is never-ending; there are only new plays being created, and this is what must happen on Mount Olympus. But, since we're mere humans, once this interaction is over, there is only an "old play" and the actors and the director must bring the play back to life. The way the director brings it to life is by creating a similar atmosphere to the one where it was formed. So, if a writer's words trend to anger in a certain scene, this rise must be captured, not just the individual hostile lines. If a writer has inserted humor, this must be highlighted. The director becomes the playwright again, and re-creates what the playwright has already created. The director of a play, therefore, must have some concept of how the play came to life. The director must also understand everything else about directing, such as blocking, subtext, lighting or sounds. Since a director is not an artist, there is no point at which he can receive feedback. There is only his experience, both successful and unsuccessful. The director is not hired to be an acting coach, or even a mentor. The professional actor creates art, which is a painful adventure. The director

manipulates the words and the acting, until he has found the magic within their interaction. If the actors cannot endure this procedure, then they are not professionals and must be immediately replaced by real actors. Similarly, the director should scrutinize a script for quality before agreeing to direct it. And, a director should recognize an inability on his part to create magic from an old, canonized work.

Again, the most important aspect of directing is how the words interact with the actors. Another way to consider this is to examine how non-speaking actors are reacting to a play's words. If a line says, "You will sit down on the sofa" and the listener shakes his head 'no', or smiles wryly, subtext has been created. This is entirely acceptable, because it is not altering the playwright's words at all; but it is creating depth to them.

Finally, the director, like an artist, should not take the easy path. It is easy to inset some whistling, dancing, skipping—or, whatever, into a play, to make it seem "fun." Artists do not labor to make Hallmark cards. Artists create things with passion, drawn from intense emotions of love or hate, or anything in between. The director must honor this, honestly.

M. Stefan Strozier (www.mstefanstrozier.org) lives in New York City. He is the founder and artistic director of La Muse Venale Acting Troupe (www.lamusevenale.org). His plays, *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*, *The Whales*, and *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln* were performed in lengthy runs, off-off Broadway, and in the Midtown International Theatre Festival. He has directed four plays and produced ten, all off-off Broadway. His stories, poems, non-fiction have been published in many literary online and print ezines, in magazines and newspapers.

La Muse Vénale Acting Troupe!



www.lamusevenale.org

