

Abraham Lincoln Must Die

By Larry Mitchell

A Comedy of Sorrows, in two acts;

Or perhaps:

An Epic Melodrama, in two acts.

Or,

A two-act play about sacrifice.

March 10, 2008

Larry Mitchell

mygrandadsname@gmail.com

(620) 340-7322

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

ABRAHAM LINCOLN: Exactly who you think it is. He should be tall, smart, and ugly as hell; but most of all, he should be absolutely gentle. This is his greatest strength. It is also, perhaps, his greatest fault.

MARY: Mary Todd Lincoln. Stout. Rigid. Desperate. She should have a touch of the madness that she is infamous for, but not be overpowered by it. What should strike us first and foremost about her is her devotion to her husband. Not the ideals, but the Man. She says nothing until the end of the second act that is audible, but her non-verbal communication throughout the play should be more than present, more than evident, and more than visible. It should be palpable.

RATHBONE: An accidental guest of the Lincolns. Wiry, not the cleverest cat by any measure, but certainly lucky to have inherited fairly noteworthy status as a military officer and diplomat, but mostly known now as one of the two other people in the box with the Lincolns. Though he dresses in the garb that a man of action might wear, he is anything but. However, he anxiously awaits his opportunity to fulfill his obviously invented self-image as a man of action.

CLARA: Rathbone's accidental fiancé and also half sister. She is markedly younger and not at all interested in marrying Rathbone, mostly because she's not interested in being married, period. She is all things characteristic of youth and frivolity. She is gorgeous, though also, dumb as a post.

BOOTH: The actor who shot Lincoln. He is short and determined to a fault. He is a rationalizer, sly, but always convincing himself that his choices are the best not just for him, but for his country. He is jealous of his brother, scheming in fact, for his own place in history.

MUSICIAN: An accordion player at Lincoln's prophetic and completely self-imagined funeral. He is a Clown who sometimes dons the tone of a man more akin to a Magician.

WARDRICH: Lincoln's most trusted bodyguard, the only man who knew of Lincoln's prophetic dream before his actual death. He is a gentle giant, though not in the thoughtful way that this same quality manifests itself in Mr. Lincoln. Wardrich is more connected to the idea of simplicity than Lincoln who is more tied to the intellectual ideal of pragmatism. He is round, and always smiling.

EDMOND: Skinny as a rail. Downright sickly. This man has no business playing this character. But, he must. This man has no business protecting the president. But he must. This is Wardrich's ex-partner and sometime substitute.

NINE DOCTORS: Nine doctors, all dressed alike, akin to the Keystone Cops in look and mannerism. All individually the peak of excellence in their fields, though together, they are nothing more than an inept, sputtering, clueless, dumb machine.

Note: If you don't have nine actors to play the doctors, use six, use three, use two. If you want, and you can, use 12, 15, 30. Thirty might be pushing it. Let's say, more than one, but less than 30. I think nine is funniest. It seems to me the lowest number that

BOY: An angelic 12 year-old boy who briefly appears.

Note: If you don't have or want to have a twelve year-old boy at your disposal. One might record this character's dialogue and impart some visual metaphor as a replacement, or any number of ideas that I haven't the will to go into at the present moment.

SETTING

TIME: Good Friday, April 14, 1865, evening

PLACE: Ford's Theatre, Washington DC

A showing of the play, "Our American Cousin."

The mind of Abraham Lincoln.

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AT RISE, a funeral. There is a coffin center stage, closed. Elsewhere on the stage is a man with an ACCORDION, the FUNERAL MUSICIAN. HE plays, "What a Friend we have in Jesus."

There are others on stage, not visible to the audience: the funeral party. They exist only in the minds of the MUSICIAN and LINCOLN. Conversely, they are NOT aware of the presence of LINCOLN or the PLAYER.

If one were so inclined, one might find a way of representing the

ENTER, LINCOLN. HE walks into the room just far enough to be, "in the room," and stops, frozen. He has no idea why he is here or what, "here," even is, for that matter.

MUSICIAN

Evenin', Mr. President.

LINCOLN

Good evening to you, young man.

LINCOLN continues walking past the MUSICIAN to greet the "funeral party," half-ignoring the MUSICIAN'S greeting, trying his best to seem presidential and in-the-know.

LINCOLN (cont'd)

Mr. Rathbone! Yes, hello there.

Pause

LINCOLN (cont'd)

(In a hushed tone)

Mr. Rathbone, good evening.

Pause, no answer

LINCOLN (cont'd)

Might you be able to fill me in on why we find ourselves here?

No answer... "RATHBONE" is walking away with "MS. HARRIS" before LINCOLN can finish his sentence.

LINCOLN (cont'd)

I beg your pardon, sir?!

Pause

Where are you going?

"THEY," are well out of earshot at this point.

Mr Rathbone? Ms. Harris?

No answer...

Is this a game? For, if it is I, too, am game enough to play along.

LINCOLN laughs at his own joke.

LINCOLN (cont'd)

Though, I must admit, games and funerals seem like an unhealthy mix. A lack of propriety, you know... Well? Where have those two young lovers gone off to? Seemed to me the young lady had little interest, if any in the man.

MUSICIAN

They can't see you, Mr. President...

MUSICIAN begins to tear up... Stops playing for a moment. LINCOLN hands HIM a handkerchief.

MUSICIAN (cont'd)

I'm sorry, Mr. President. You must, pardon my emotion at such a time as this.

*MUSICIAN sobs into the handkerchief,
then blows his nose.*

MUSICIAN (cont'd)

I've played hundreds of these things. I've played *this song* hundreds of times... I'm letting you down. Ain't I? I know I am. I'm so sorry, sir.

*MUSICIAN pockets the handkerchief...
Goes back to playing. Still fighting through
the tears, but committed to his charge.*

MUSICIAN (cont'd)

I should be able to contain myself. I am ever so sorry. I hope you can forgive me, sir.

LINCOLN

Not at all. This is the time for emotion, for grief, for sadness. A life is a precious thing, dear player, and worth every tear.

*Now the MUSICIAN begins sobbing
obscenely, uncontrollably.*

MUSICIAN

Oh, Captain! My Captain!

LINCOLN

It is good, man. Yes... Do not feel wrong. You must have loved this man to weep so openly. And, you a professional.

MUSICIAN

Yes! Yes!

LINCOLN

But, pray you, young player with a sleeve of hearts: Why do they play as if they cannot see me. Am I here, or am I not?

MUSICIAN

Oh, you are here, sir. You are here. The room is pregnant with you...

(Choking back tears)

twice, no thrice over.

LINCOLN

Then why do they play this game?

MUSICIAN

They are too stricken with grief to know that you are right here, in this very room with them. Isn't that the silliest thing you ever heard?

LINCOLN

Perhaps...

SFX: MARY's cry of mourning

Though we can all hear "HER," she only appears on stage, again, in the minds of LINCOLN and the MUSICIAN. THEY see "HER", and follow "HER", as she approaches the coffin

Mary! Oh, Mary! What are you doing here? You never go to funerals. It isn't right for you to see this. You haven't the temperament for such things, Mary.

MUSICIAN

She can't see you either.

LINCOLN

What? Mary? Not see her soulmate? We would know each other's faces through the bars of Hell's gate...

HE reaches for "HER" as "SHE" walks away, and recoils as HIS hands go through "HER," body.

This "passing through," must be a gesture that communicates such a thing to the audience, as, "SHE," is not really there.

SFX: The mourning cry fades out as "SHE" "exits."

LINCOLN (cont'd)

Mary! Are you not here? Mary?

No answer.

MUSICIAN

You are dreaming, sir.

LINCOLN

Dreaming?

MUSICIAN

Yes. It's just you and me, Abe, for the moment.

MUSICIAN sobs again. But is still playing the same song, which has surely repeated itself several times by this point.

MUSICIAN (cont'd)

Oh Captain!...

(Struggling)

My Captaaaaaaiiiiiin!

LINCOLN

Get a grasp on yourself. You are a professional, boy! These people need you!

MUSICIAN

But, *these people* cannot hear me. They cannot see me. This is a command performance of one for one. And, this is not *my* dream, sir.

LINCOLN

Why would I dream of the death of your Captain? What bonds this man to me?

MUSICIAN

Everything, sir. Everything.... Oh, must I tell you straight?

LINCOLN

Yes, of course. Who is this Captain? What was his ship?

MUSICIAN

Our Captain, he sailed the ship that bore him, and the steering, it done wore him to the bone. But that is not why he died... Please don't make me say it. It is better if you know, but better still for me if you know yourself.

LINCOLN

If it be better that I know, then say you must.

MUSICIAN

Perhaps if you just took a peek.

LINCOLN

A peek?

MUSICIAN

Yes. A peek... In the coffin.

LINCOLN walks to the coffin, lifts the lid. The music stops. The coffin falls flat like the box of a magic trick. It is empty, save for a HAT that matches LINCOLN's exactly.

MUSICIAN is now a magician. He is stoic, no longer affected by emotion. He dons the top-hat.

MUSICIAN (cont'd)

Ta-da!

SFX: Flourish... Cheers from the audience...

LINCOLN

This is all for a trick? Am I the unwitting butt of someone's joke.

MUSICIAN

Oh, no, far from it, Mr. President. This is a metaphor.

LINCOLN

What is the meaning of this?

MUSICIAN

How should I know? I'm an accordion player, not a philosopher.

LINCOLN

Though, apparently, a magician, as well.

MUSICIAN

Oh, no!
It's you that is responsible for this.
And, you for me.
For, You Are Me.

This is your dream.
You *are* the captain. you!

LINCOLN

Me?... What Say?
Am I to sail so short?

MUSICIAN

You've not sailed short!
You *sell* yourself too short.
You *sailed* us straight and true,
Fought seas of red and grey
to keep the blue intact;
saved all of us from our oppressive selves;
repaired our ship,
Then righted her mast, hard and taught,
And aimed her up, To sail herself alone.
And, now that is our charge:
Our bearings set,
And future now secure:
We only wait for air to fill the sails,
The sails you've built for us.

LINCOLN

Do you mean to say that I am dead?

*MUSICIAN takes off the top-hat, and
returns to playing the accordion.*

MUSICIAN

Not quite.

LINCOLN

Not quite?

MUSICIAN

This is a premonition.

Pause

This is a dream.

LINCOLN

Well, I suppose it must be.

MUSICIAN

Aye, and more importantly, this is to be your last.

LINCOLN

It cannot be.

MUSICIAN

But it *is*. The next time you lie to dream, you will not wake. The next time you lie to dream. It will be your last. So, actually this would be your second to last dream. Sorry.

MUSICIAN begins weeping, again.

LINCOLN

Please, sir. You must compose yourself, or we will accomplish nothing.

MUSICIAN

What is there to do, but wake and wait?

LINCOLN

So, I am not dead, but meant, instead, to die?

MUSICIAN

Aren't we all?

LINCOLN

Yes, but this happens today.

MUSICIAN

It happens *tonight*.

LINCOLN

And, I suppose such a thing is would be of my hands at this point.

MUSICIAN

You would suppose wrong, sir. You are not dead, yet. It is only your destiny.

LINCOLN

So, this isn't my last dream, after all.

MUSICIAN

Oh, that's not for me to say.

LINCOLN

But, didn't you *just, say?*

MUSICIAN

I did, but, again. I am you, and you are me. This is all your show, sir. Even my weeping is not my own. But one cannot mourn themselves, I suppose.

LINCOLN

I suppose not.

MUSICIAN

Yes, you are meant to die, and it is now your duty to fulfill that destiny.

LINCOLN

Is it, then?

MUSICIAN

I think that's what I'm here to tell you. I think so, Captain.

LINCOLN

What of my duty to the people?

MUSICIAN

I suppose this all must be some part of that.

LINCOLN

But we all die, you've said so, yourself.

MUSICIAN

Again, sir, *we* said so. *You*, are conflicted.

LINCOLN

Conflicted?

MUSICIAN

Yes, what do we do? Do we lie down and let the stars unfold, or do we fight destiny?

LINCOLN

Well, I think I speak for the both of us when I say I don't want to die anytime soon.

MUSICIAN

Indeed, who does? But, this seems to be our path.

LINCOLN

What good can come of this?

MUSICIAN

Oh, I think you know. But, if not, one would hope the events of this evening might shed some light into this cavern of secrets. But, we won't know anything until you choose to wake.

LINCOLN

Am I sleeping?

MUSICIAN

When else do you dream?

LINCOLN

Of course. And this, this thing, this event... It happens today?

MUSICIAN

Again, it happens *tonight*, This evening, during an oddly inappropriate lack of appreciation for the fourth-wall.

LINCOLN

Fourth wall?

MUSICIAN

I say too much, sir. The less you know, the better, one might think.

LINCOLN

How so?

MUSICIAN

Well, I assume we've decided to let nature take her course with us?

LINCOLN

Have we?

MUSICIAN

I think we must, sir. No point in fighting the dying of the light if it means we must steal it from others.

LINCOLN

Excellent point, sir.

MUSICIAN

This is all a necessary part of becoming a legend, becoming immortal, I suppose.

LINCOLN

This was not my aim! I meant only to serve.

MUSICIAN

I know, but it is your destiny. Would you deny your country a proper martyr?

LINCOLN

Well, no. I suppose not. But I do object to the use of the term, “martyr.”

MUSICIAN

Well, sir, no offense, but of course you do. However, the fact remains that in order to be reborn one must first, perish. The Phoenix didn’t get to skip a step.

LINCOLN

Our minds are one.

MUSICIAN

Never was a truer word spoken, sir.

LINCOLN

So, what am I to do?

MUSICIAN stops playing, abrupt.

MUSICIAN

You, wake up.

MUSICIAN snaps, LINCOLN drops to the floor like dead weight.

The MUSICIAN is dumbfounded.

MUSICIAN (cont’d)

(To the audience)

Well, this isn’t how that was supposed to happen at all. Suppose it makes a bit of sense, however. Waking from a dream would leave one asleep, one would think, in his or her respective dream. What to do?...

Pause

MUSICIAN (cont'd)

Hmm...

MUSICIAN walks over to the top-hat, picks it up, put it on, thinks...

MUSICIAN (cont'd)

Aha! Exposition! Yes... or better yet, *reverse* exposition! Or sooth-saying.

HE is a MAGICIAN again, this time taking the role full on as he explains the, "trick," to the audience. Perhaps there is a flourish of music and lights.

MUSICIAN (cont'd)

Ladies and gentlemen! Boys and Girls! What we have for you this evening is a performance of astounding proportions. What you are about to witness is infamy incarnate. Tonight, you will witness a man fulfill his own destiny, as you witness an event you are all too familiar with... Or *are* you? Yes, Ladies and gentlemen, tonight we gather to ask the question, "What would Lincoln do?" Yes, Let us assume that this man had full knowledge of his impending doom. Well, not full knowledge of course. What would be the fun in that? Let us assume that Lincoln knew he was going to die prematurely. That he knew of his own assassination...

By god what is wrong with us, tonight. We forgot to tell ourselves it was an assassination.

MUSICIAN snaps his fingers again. LINCOLN is awake, still in the dream.

LINCOLN

What? Where? What happened?

MUSICIAN

I have brought you back into our dream, though only briefly, as it seems we forgot to mention that we would be assassinated.

LINCOLN

Assassinated?

MUSICIAN

Assassinated, sir.