

LINCOLN LORE

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SHERWOOD'S ABE LINCOLN

Fact and fancy, the natural environments in which historians and playwrights orient their characters, have united to a remarkable degree in the realistic dramatic presentation of "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" by Robert E. Sherwood.

A careful recorder of events, tenaciously searching for biographical data through dusty or musty archives, often fails to recognize his correctly delineated personage when cast ready for the drama. Emerging from some mysterious realm where unbridled poetic license has moulded the erstwhile historical figure into a saint or a sinner—usually a sinner—there is little left to identify him with his former self. This is not true with respect to Sherwood's Lincoln, who retains most of his well-established characteristics.

All of the honor for the remarkable success of Sherwood's production should not, however, go to the playwright. Both Raymond Massey who plays Abraham Lincoln and Muriel Kirkland who plays Mary Todd Lincoln, by a sympathetic interpretation of these characters, contribute much to a more appreciative understanding of Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln than the reading of the score reveals. One finds himself less apt to criticize Sherwood's rather harsh interpretation of Mrs. Lincoln as the part is played by Miss Kirkland, and even the wholly unhistorical episode in which Lincoln curses his wife is made less objectionable by the repentant attitude which Mr. Massey, as Mr. Lincoln, immediately assumes after speaking the strange and unnatural line. (p. 67).

While it is believed that historians as a group have applauded the Sherwood play, they have, of course, been able to point out some episodes aside from the cursing scene which are not true to fact. Mr. Sherwood states in the interesting epilogue in the printed text that in dealing with Lincoln "a strict regard for the plain truth is more than obligatory; it is obviously desirable" (p. 190). He thus invites a critical review of the historical accuracy of his work, especially as it relates to Abraham Lincoln.

Great injustice is done to all the Lincolns and Hankses back of Abraham Lincoln. Although none of them appear as characters in the play, they are associated with the "riff-raff", as Sherwood calls them (p. 55). Lincoln's maternal grandmother was not named "Betsy" and she did not die in Indiana as alleged (p. 11). Both grandmother and her daughter, Lincoln's mother, are recalled as women of bad reputation which is not in keeping with the actual evidence about them (p. 57).

Sherwood makes Lincoln complain about the roving propensity of his father which caused Abraham as a child to recall that they were continually moving. The fact is that up to the time the President was twenty-one years of age he could have recalled moving but once, and when his father migrated to Illinois, Lincoln left the old home after helping him to get settled (p. 9). The implication that his father was continually failing at everything is far from the truth (p. 8).

The manner in which the whole Ann Rutledge episode is portrayed is especially refreshing after so many ridiculous attempts to dramatize the romance. The inaccuracies which do appear are of no great consequence although Lincoln's mental attitude after Ann's death may be exaggerated. Possibly it should be said that Ann was not descended from the aristocratic family of Rutledges in South Carolina as implied (p. 18, 55).

It is difficult to understand why Sherwood would persist in telling again the old traditional wedding story which has long been discarded as fiction by all dependable historians (p. 99). He does, however, seem to handle the preliminaries which led up to January 1, 1841 with fine understanding, and some of the events of that day may also be correctly presented.

The chronological development of the drama with respect to the accuracy of historical incidents seems to be quite correct with one glaring exception. The Duff Armstrong trial is moved forward about eighteen years with the result that in 1840 the alleged murderer was a small child and the able criminal lawyer, Abraham Lincoln, had been practicing but three years (p. 90). Speaking of Lincoln's early law training reminds one that Lincoln did not find the Blackstone "in a barrel" but bought it at Springfield (p. 34).

Some liberties are taken by Sherwood in choosing the words which Lincoln is alleged to have used with respect to the mulatto population, but of course it is in harmony with the modern viewpoint to include a few risqué lines for the loose-tongued patrons to talk about between the acts (p. 136).

Mr. Sherwood should not be excused for leaving an impression that liquor was used in the Lincoln home which he must have known was absolutely untrue. There is no fact about Lincoln's home life in Springfield more positively established by Lincoln's own written words than the absence of all form of intoxicants in his house. Lincoln never invited his guests to have "something stronger" even if they did prefer it (p. 158).

The playwright admits in the epilogue to the written text that he has taken some liberties in building up the character of William Herndon. There seems to be far too much emphasis placed on the little influence which Herndon may have had on Lincoln's thinking. Herndon apparently had little contact with Lincoln until 1844 when he was taken into partnership by the man ten years his senior. The letters which passed between Lincoln and Herndon do not imply that the junior law partner was moulding the character of the more intelligent Lincoln. Most certainly as early as 1840 Herndon was not lecturing Lincoln on his duties to the country.

Possibly the same objection might be raised with respect to the influence of Mary Todd over her husband's political aspirations. He had been elected to the Illinois legislature for three terms before he met her and had already become the outstanding Whig leader in Illinois. That she did encourage him to a very great extent in his subsequent political efforts must be admitted.

The play as a whole, however, is the most satisfactory Lincoln drama thus far presented from the viewpoint of historical accuracy and the ability of the playwright to interpret the real Lincoln.

Mention should be made of the printed text which has the added advantage of a compensation which will be greatly appreciated by historians. Not many playwrights have been frank enough to advise the reader of instances where it has been of advantage and some time of necessity in the movement of the play to depart from the actual historical setting. The historians would not be so apt to find fault with what is termed a historical drama if such comments were available with each dramatic presentation. Mr. Sherwood is one of our first Lincoln playwrights who has shown much respect of history.