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*Dramatic Publishing*



# MR. LINCOLN

A Full-Length Play  
By  
**HERBERT MITGANG**



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY



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(MR. LINCOLN)

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*Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history.  
We of this Congress and this administration  
will be remembered in spite of ourselves.  
No personal significance, or insignificance, can  
spare one or another of us.  
The fiery trial through which we pass  
will light us down, in honor or dishonor,  
to the latest generation.*

A. Lincoln  
Second Annual Message  
December 1, 1862

MR. LINCOLN  
*A Full-Length Drama  
for One Man*

*INTRODUCTION*

In writing *Mister Lincoln* for the theatre, I decided from the start that a one-man play would be ideal for my subject and concept. I was aware that this form had been evolving in recent years; that what had to be avoided was a feeling by the audience that it was watching a play with a lectern at dead center for high-minded speeches. I had seen most of the current one-man plays and found that those I admired were most dramatized, most theatrical.

Why, I wondered, did some personages — political or literary — work better than others in a monodrama? I felt that it had to do with language rather than actions; that the theatre is still a self-contained area of eloquence where words count. The words have to come first; without them the finest actor must falter.

Lincoln, whose life I had studied for many years, happened to have been the best writer who ever occupied the White House. And I believe that we can place him in the front rank of American writers outside the White House, too. Who else could say: “They are blowing out the moral lights around us” or call upon Americans “to bind up the nation’s wounds”? Measured against modern presidents, it is important to realize that his words were hand-fashioned without a single ghost writer or pollster to guide his pen or thought.

It struck me that the one-man form could serve as a concentrate for Lincoln’s language without distillation or distraction. It would mean that the dialogue of everyday life, the hesitations

and doubts, could also advance the character portrait in a human way. I still wanted to achieve the Aristotelian unities of action, time and place; I aimed to do so by making thematic connections between life-incidents. As in a novel, one can plant certain ideas in early chapters — the first act — that can be called to mind and pay off at the end — in the second act.

And so, as the play took shape in my mind, I was forced to think harder on Lincoln and the centrality of his life than I had ever done before as a Lincoln biographer or film documentarian. The central theme that emerged was his own evolving stand on slavery that led to the Emancipation Proclamation. “If I ever get a chance to hit the Institution,” he says in Act I, “I’m going to hit it hard.” With his Proclamation in Act II as a high moment, he does. Although it is difficult for some people to realize it today, slavery, not civil rights, was the issue in the Civil War era. There were men, women and children — families — in bondage, bought and sold as chattels. This straightforward, horrible fact helped to structure the forward motion that *Mister Lincoln* would take in its serious elements.

There were other things I wished to say about Lincoln’s mind and main positions. I particularly felt great admiration for his stand against the Mexican War — he was a “dove” and blamed the invasion on the Americans, not the Mexicans — which was unpopular with his Illinois constituents and friends. Because he was against that war and against militarism — “that attractive rainbow, rising in showers of blood” — he was denied a chance to run for Congress a second time. That took guts, and foresight, for a man too often branded a mere politician. For our own age of military domination of the national budget and therefore of our lives, I wanted to underscore Lincoln’s antimilitarism dramatically.

Although the one-man form appeared ideal to get across the

Lincoln character and literature, I found myself at war with my own knowledge. Biography is not drama; drama is not necessarily biography. To Lincoln scholars, daily events and specific incidents are of vital importance. Perhaps that is why the great Lincoln biographers — James Randall, Benjamin Thomas, Allan Nevins, Carl Sandburg — never attempted to write a play about him. Yet a man's stage life differs from his biographical life. Time is shortened and heightened in the theatre; the clock and the clockworks run differently.

To avoid that old lecture-platform look, I had to leave out significant parts of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. I had to omit one of my favorite events, Lincoln's Cooper Union speech in New York, that helped to get him the nomination for president. Lucky for the country, unlucky for me, the great Second Inaugural Address came too soon after the great Gettysburg Address. Something had to give or the stage would turn into a textbook; it was I who gave through selection.

That is why I made sure to include an Author's Note in the original theatrical playbill that reads: "This is a dramatization of Lincoln's life and mind. Artistic license is necessarily taken in narrative reconstruction, but all the events and ideas in the play are rooted in historical records and personal discoveries. Certain dialogue is newly created; it is based on informed *interpretation* of Lincoln's character and of the times in which he lived. Some of the set pieces and language of the literary Lincoln are not necessarily in chronological sequence, but reflect his spoken or written views faithfully."

I did not want to be drummed out of the vast Lincoln Union of Scholars.

The structure of the one-man form of necessity forced me to create language of my own for Lincoln to speak in the first person. No one was present when he spoke intimately to his wife.

No one recorded conversations with his physician. Even some of the main incidents of his presidency, such as his cabinet meetings and visit to the captured capital of the Confederacy, depended on the recollections of others, sometimes long after the events. Lincoln himself was no diarist.

How much of the language is Lincoln's and how much is mine? I have not attempted to measure the play, line by line, since I was more concerned with revealing personality and incident by weaving words and ideas seamlessly. Perhaps the best answer to the question can be found in Brooks Atkinson's defense of Robert Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* in 1939: "To say that some of the best lines are Lincoln's and not Sherwood's seems to me a microscopic objection. Out of all the mass of Lincolniana, Mr. Sherwood has discovered exalted thoughts that flow naturally into his portrait of one of the world's great men and that illuminate and clarify men's minds at this troubled moment in history. It is very much to Mr. Sherwood's credit that he has assimilated the character of Lincoln so thoroughly and had the wisdom to distinguish the immortal parts of it from the transitory. What was Mr. Sherwood to do — rewrite Lincoln? No, this objection puts playwrighting on a purely sportsmanship basis with the implication that it is not cricket to use lines not invented by the author for the occasion."

I could not offend the spirit and tone of Lincoln's language even though it did not disturb me one whit that I knew — and the audience and reader would know — that Lincoln never said certain words in the play. For example, after General Grant allows General Lee's defeated officers and soldiers to take home their horses and mules for spring plowing, as a means of bringing about reconciliation, Lincoln says: "It was a time to plant seeds, not men, in the American soil." Lincoln never said it; but that was the idea. I wished to punctuate the ending of the Civil War

and hint at what Reconstruction might have been like had Lincoln lived.

There is a cabinet meeting in the play that is used not as exposition but as a revelation about Lincoln's firmness. Did such a cabinet meeting actually take place as I have written it? I doubt it, though participants have recalled certain lively cabinet meetings. However, a similar cabinet vote, where Lincoln was in a minority of one, presumably involved a conscription bill. Conscription bills were highly complex and contradictory during the Civil War; they included the use of substitutes and financial inducements for enlistment. Such an issue would have required too much explaining – the biographer's role. I decided to change the subject of the meeting to habeas corpus. I wanted to show that Lincoln, a lawyer who had invoked the doctrine himself in criminal defense cases, suspended habeas corpus while president – a contradiction in his libertarian views. It allowed me to use a double metaphor of revealing Lincoln's main goal – saving the Union under the Constitution even if it meant violating one of its precepts during a rebellion – and disclosing his toughness as president and commander-in-chief. I did not want to portray him as a wooly-headed, soft figure or as a larger-than-life president in granite but as a human being.

In "The Intent of the Artist," Thornton Wilder wrote that despite directors, actors or other collaborators in the theatre, fundamentally it is the playwright's vision that must prevail: "The gathered audience sits in a darkened room, one end of which is lighted. The nature of the transaction at which it is gazing is a succession of events illustrating a general idea – the stirring of the idea; the gradual feeding out of information; the shock and counter-shock of circumstances; the flow of action; the interruption of act; the moment of allusion to earlier events; the preparation of surprise, dread, or delight – all that is the author's and his alone."

The one-man form has broken away from the lectern of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, or the simple readings and elocution lessons, and grown into a play. Although I like the word monodrama, it does not describe *Mister Lincoln* or other challenging dramatizations in this form. For what some of us have tried to do is create many characters through concentrated language and performance by a skilled actor who can command a stage alone. The aim for the audience is to see the unseen, to let its imagination soar beyond time in that lighted place at the end of the theatre.

*Herbert Mitgang*

*Mister Lincoln* had its world premiere at the Citadel Theatre, Edmonton, Canada, starring British actor Roy Dotrice, and thereafter played at the Hart House Theatre, Toronto. It opened in the United States at Ford's Theatre, Washington, D. C. The play's New York premiere was at the Morosco Theatre on Broadway.

*Mister Lincoln* toured in western Australia, playing at His Majesty's Theatre, Perth, and at the Opera Theatre, Adelaide.

*Mister Lincoln* was presented as the first Hallmark Hall of Fame drama on the Public Broadcasting Service in the United States.

*Mister Lincoln* opened in a fourth country, Great Britain, at the Fortune Theatre, London.

THE ADVOCATE

*The Time, The Scene:*

At the beginning, it is that fateful moment in the land when, in Whitman's words, "lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd, and the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night." Then, suddenly, it is daylight, in the early life of Lincoln and of the Republic, and a respite and recollection, spanning his maturing and presidential years: the fiery trial.

In the First Act, he is mainly in Illinois, an advocate; in the Second Act, he is in Washington, a liberator.

The scene remains the same in both acts. The R side of the stage is for legal and official business; the L side for relaxing at home, changes of dress, comings and goings; C for public events and speeches; and downstage for direct address to the audience.

The set and props are best left simple; the authenticity derives from the dialogue. At most, the set can include a table, revolving chair, rolltop desk and railing at R; an easy chair, newspaper rack, hallstand with mirror at L; a bench DC; a podium fronted by a bookshelf with well-worn leather-bound volumes of legal and constitutional history UC.

There are a number of places for moves and moods: easy chair for feet-up relaxing at home in Springfield or in the White House private quarters; rolltop desk for his law office; table for doctor's office, Oval Office, cabinet meeting; podium for major speeches, campaigns, debates, inaugurals; bench downstage for audience confidences.

Lincoln commands the stage alone in both acts, but there are scores of other characters, private and public, he encounters in the play. They are only visible in the audience's imagination.

(He steps on the bench.)

I earned my first pair of trousers splitting rails. “Say, Mrs. Miller! If I split some rails for you, will you give me some yardage of brown jeans? You will? How many for how much? Four-hundred split rails for one yard! Mrs. Miller, with my altitude, I doubt if there are enough rails in Illinois to construct my pantaloons!”

So many people had commented about the length of my legs that I began to wonder, how long should a man’s legs be in proportion to the rest of his body? Thinking it over carefully, I delivered myself of a learned opinion: A man’s lower limbs, in order to preserve harmony of proportion, should be at least long enough to reach from his body to the ground!

(He hangs up his jacket at the hallstand, then goes to the bookshelf.)

When I came of age, I didn’t know too much. Oh, I had a little formal learning in a “blab school” — education by repetition. I was interested in grammar and the English language — the only language, unfortunately, that I ever learned. I could read, write and cipher to the rule of three, but that was about all. Any advance I now have on this store of learning, I picked up under the pressure of necessity.

Back in the village of New Salem, anybody who gave me a book became my best friend. I was a diligent student of Shakespeare: To know the Bard can be a liberal education. And, among other poets, Robert Burns is my inseparable companion — a people’s poet.

(He takes a small book of Burns’ poetry from his coat pocket, but

recites from memory, and puts the book away as he speaks.)

“Give fools their silks, and knaves their wine,/ A man’s a man for all that./ For all that, and all that,/ Their tinsel show, and all that;/ The honest man, tho’ e’er sae poor,/ Is king of men for all that.”

I find it very hard to scratch anything on this brain of mine but almost impossible to rub it out once it gets there.

Over the years, I collected a number of anecdotes, or “Lincoln stories,” as my neighbors call them. Mind you, I didn’t make the stories mine just by telling them. I was only a *retail* dealer. But I needed them sometimes to disarm an opponent or as a labor-saving device to save a long-winded argument, and I needed them to get me out of my occasional bouts of melancholy. Oh yes; I have them, too. And I always found a story most effective when I told it against myself.

Now that reminds me of a story. I was over in Decatur, listening to a gentleman-banker lecture on the virtues of the banking system. He went on and on, freely giving away words of advice, without charging one penny interest. When he finished, I heckled him and he asked my name. “Oh, so you’re Abraham Lincoln,” he said. Well, I had to admit I was. “They tell me, Mister Lincoln, that you’re a self-made man.” I confessed what there was of me was indeed self-made. “Well, Mister Lincoln, in that case, all I have to say is, it was a damn bad job!”

(He picks a journal from the rack near the chair.)

You know he wasn’t the first, and by no means the last, to criticize me and my appearance. I remember many years later when I was in the White House that Edward Dicey, a journalist

from England, wrote an article about me in the *London Spectator*, in which he said, "Mister Lincoln wore an ill-fitting suit of black, creased and soiled and puckered up at every salient point in the figure."

(He crosses up to the hallstand, folding the journal as he goes. When the audience reacts, he turns to them.)

Oh, so you agree with Mr. Dicey. Well, then let me read you this verse, one of my favorite pieces of poetry. It was composed by a Southern minister. "Abraham Lincoln. His cheek bones were high and his visage was rough,/ Like a mid'ling of bacon, all wrinkled and tough,/ His nose was as long, and as ugly and big/ As the snout of a half-starved Illinois pig."

Well, you can tell he was a minister; why, that just reeks of the Lord's charity.

(He puts on a hat and coat from the hallstand, then picks up his umbrella. He moves left of the bench which now becomes an auction block.)

You know, all men and women have certain turning points in their lives, flashes of wisdom buried deep in their minds. I have often wondered what turned Abraham Lincoln against slavery in his youth. Thinking back on it, I believe it was the slave auctions I witnessed with my own eyes when I was working as a flatboatman, poling a raft of goods down the Mississippi River. Near the riverbank in New Orleans, I saw dealers in human degradation, selling men and women like so many hogs.

On the block was a beautiful girl called Eliza. A Frenchman from New Orleans bid one thousand, two hundred dollars for her but his bid was topped by a young Methodist minister. The

auctioneer pulled the dress from Eliza's shoulders, exposing her breasts, and said: "Who's gonna lose a chance like this?" The sweating Frenchman bid one thousand, four hundred and sixty-five dollars, and once again the young minister outbid him. The auctioneer lifted Eliza's dress, baring her body from her feet to her waist, slapped her on the thigh, and said: "Who's gonna win this prize?" The Frenchman bid one thousand, five hundred and eighty dollars. The auctioneer raised his gavel. The girl looked at the minister in terror and pleading. He bid one thousand, five hundred and eighty-five dollars.

(He strikes the handle of the umbrella against the bench like an auctioneer.)

The gavel came down, and the girl fell in a faint. The auctioneer said: "Well, sir, you got her damn cheap. What are you gonna do with her?" The young minister, whose name was Fairbanks, and who was one of the leaders of the anti-slavery movement in Ohio, said: "Free her!"

I have since learned that Fairbanks has spent seventeen years in the state penitentiary for his anti-slavery activities. Mind you, he was one of the lucky ones. In the Southern states, leaders of slavery revolts could and had been hanged.

(He sits on the bench.)

I saw a "gentleman" who had bought twelve Negroes in different parts of Kentucky, taking them to his farm in the South. Each Negro had an iron clevis around his left wrist, which was fastened by means of a short chain to the main chain, so that every slave was strung up. There they were like so many fish on a line. And in this condition, they were being separated forever from their parents, from their wives, from their children, going

into perpetual slavery, where the lash of the master is ruthless and unrelenting.

I learned another lesson during my youth in New Salem — that Abraham Lincoln was not cut out to be a professional soldier.

Well, would you believe I was a military man once? Oh yes, sir, I fought, bled and came away unscathed. I didn't break my sword, because I had none to break, but I bent my musket pretty badly.

(He twirls his umbrella, imitating the manual of arms.)

I became a military man for the reason that has inspired many an enlistment in the name of patriotism — I had nothing better to do. You see, there was some trouble between the Indians and settlers in northwest Illinois. I volunteered for thirty days. The Clary's Grove boys, back in the Village of New Salem, elected me captain — an honor that gave me more satisfaction than any other subsequent success in my life.

They were no easy bunch of boys to drill into obeying orders. And I was an amateur myself. I remember one occasion, I just couldn't think of the order to pass two platoons endwise, two by two, through a gate. So I yelled out: "This company is dismissed for two minutes — then it will fall in again on the other side of the gate!"

But my brief experience running that company enabled me to see the cruelty of war. Chief Black Hawk had come across the Mississippi with five hundred warriors in search of food. And who could blame them? They had been pushed off their homelands. Many a war has been started for lesser reasons. Marching home, I saw the remains of a skirmish at Kellogg's Grove. There I came across the first dead men I had seen. They lay

together, Indian and white, their blood mingled in death. The light of the rising sun streamed upon them, painting everything red. It was grotesque. I helped to bury those men. But I could never bury that memory.

(He sits at the desk.)

I willingly gave up the life of a soldier and returned to New Salem, serving as postmaster. What I liked best about the job was that it gave me a chance to read the newspapers before I delivered them. Once, as postmaster, I received a letter, asking for the financial rating of one of my neighbors, from a big bank in New York City. I answered: . . .

(He takes a letter from the drawer of his desk and reads.)

. . . "Sirs, I am well acquainted with him and know his circumstances. First of all, he has a wife and baby. Taken together, they should be worth fifty thousand dollars to any man. Secondly, he has an office in which there is a table worth one dollar and fifty cents and three chairs worth, say, one dollar. Last of all, there is in one corner a large rat hole, which will bear looking into. Yours respectfully, A. Lincoln, Postmaster."

(He returns the letter to the desk drawer.)

One day at an auction in Springfield, I bought a copy of Blackstone's *Commentaries*. And day after day, month after month, I read and reread the principles of the English common law. At first I practiced on my good neighbors — we both took our chances. But I really gained my knowledge of the law by riding the judicial circuit, from courthouse to courthouse.