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Dramatic Publishing

KEEPING MR. LINCOLN

By

SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER



Dramatic Publishing

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(KEEPING MR. LINCOLN)

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For my husband, Harvey Asher,
with love and much gratitude
for the insights that guided me
toward this grand character.

IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

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NOTE: The events and a great deal of the language of this play are based on Abraham Lincoln’s own speeches and writings, newspaper reports of the time, and the words of those who knew him and wrote or spoke about him during his lifetime or after his death. Artistic license has been taken for the sake of economy and stageworthiness. Although the playwright’s intent is to be true to the facts and to the spirit of the people portrayed, the play is not meant to be a documentary, but a celebration of a remarkable life.

Keeping Mr. Lincoln was commissioned by the Lexington Children’s Theatre, Lexington, Ky., as a tribute to President Lincoln on his 200th birthday. It premiered there in February 2009 under the direction of artistic director Vivian Snipes. The producing director was Larry Snipes. Associate artistic director, Jeremy Kisling, served as dramaturg.

CAST:

Matthew Ancarrow as Dennis “Denny” Hanks, Young Adult Lincoln, Willy Lincoln, Civil War Lincoln, Member of White House Staff

Robert Shryock as William “Billy” Herndon, Youngest Lincoln, a Vandalia Villager, Clary Gove Boy, Citizen of Washington City, Member of the White House Staff, John M. Bullock

Kristen Smiley as Nancy Hanks Lincoln, “Sallie” Johnston Lincoln, Sarah Lincoln, a Vandalia Villager, Jack Armstrong, Mary Todd Lincoln, Tad Lincoln, Member of the White House Staff, Postmaster Blair

Brian C. Gray as Tom Lincoln, Adult Lincoln, a Vandalia Villager, Jack Armstrong, Citizen of Washington City, Member of the White House Staff, Petitioner, Confederate Soldier

Scenic Design Kiersten E. Moore
Assistant Scenic Design Jennifer Herbert
Costume Design K. Moriah Smith
Light Design Carolyn Voss
Sound Design Daniel Nation
Stage Manager Kacy Johnson
Fight Choreography Robert Shryock
Production Stage Manager Anne C. Meacham

A second production by the Open Eye Theater, Margaretville, N.Y., in February and March 2009, was extremely helpful in continuing the play’s development. It was directed by producing artistic director Amie Brockway and featured the following cast:

Actor One.....Nat Thomas

William “Billy” Herndon, Lincoln Two, Villager 4, Citizen of Washington City, Member of White House Staff, John M. Bullock, Petitioner

Actor Two.....John Exter

Lincoln One, Tom Lincoln, Villager 3, Citizen of Washington City, Member of White House Staff, Confederate Soldier

Actor Three.....William Tari

Dennis “Denny” Hanks, Villager 1, Willy Lincoln, Lincoln Three, Member of White House Staff

Actor Four.....Amie Brockway

Nancy Hanks Lincoln, Sarah “Sallie” Johnston Lincoln, Neighbor Child, Villager 2, Lincoln Four, Mary Todd Lincoln, Tad Lincoln, Member of White House Staff

Set, Light and Sound Designer Adrienne Brockway

Stage Manager Patricia Brannen

Light and Sound Operator Laura Battelani

Set Construction Erwin Karl

KEEPING MR. LINCOLN

CHARACTERS:

Four actors play all of the following roles without regard to age, gender or ethnicity. For the purposes of consistency in the script, the first three are male and the fourth is female, but the roles played by FIRST ACTOR lend themselves to being played as males by a female actor. WILLIAM HERNDON, for instance, was considerably younger and smaller in stature than the adult Abraham Lincoln.

FIRST ACTOR, also plays

WILLIAM "BILLY" HERNDON

LINCOLN ONE (youth)

VILLAGER 4

CITIZEN OF WASHINGTON CITY

MEMBER OF WHITE HOUSE STAFF

JOHN M. BULLOCK

PETITIONER

TAD LINCOLN 2 (no lines)

SECOND ACTOR, also plays

LINCOLN TWO (adult)

TOM LINCOLN

VILLAGER 3

WILLY LINCOLN (no lines)

CITIZEN OF WASHINGTON CITY

MEMBER OF WHITE HOUSE STAFF

CONFEDERATE SOLDIER

THIRD ACTOR, also plays
DENNIS “DENNY” HANKS
VILLAGER 1
LINCOLN THREE (adult)
MEMBER OF WHITE HOUSE STAFF

FOURTH ACTOR, also plays
NANCY HANKS LINCOLN
LITTLE SARAH (no lines)
SARAH “SALLIE” JOHNSTON LINCOLN
VILLAGER 2
LINCOLN FOUR (adult)
MARY TODD LINCOLN
TAD LINCOLN 1 (no lines)
MEMBER OF WHITE HOUSE STAFF

OFFSTAGE VOICES, as noted

TIME: 1809 - 1865.

PLACE: Various locales significant to the life of Abraham Lincoln, each indicated by simple set pieces and props. A “home” area may serve this purpose from Kentucky to D.C., an “office” area may adjust from Springfield to D.C. with minor changes, and neutral space serves for all other scenes.

NOTE: The script assigns roles to particular actors, but roles may be assigned differently at the director’s discretion. For a larger cast, roles may be assigned to as many additional actors as desired. Costumes should suggest the time, but be neutral, so that character changes can be accomplished quickly by the addition or removal of a hat, a shawl, etc. Each actor playing LINCOLN may assume that role by wearing or carrying a coonskin cap for scenes from his youth or a stovepipe hat for later scenes. HERNDON may be identified by a specific vest and/or a meer-schaum (clay) pipe.

KEEPING MR. LINCOLN

AT RISE: *MUSIC*, upbeat, patriotic. *ACTORS* enter one after another, each reading a newspaper. *MUSIC* fades under dialogue.

THIRD ACTOR. UNDERDOG WINS!

FIRST ACTOR. ABRAM LINCOLN, OF ILLINOIS, NOMINATED FOR PRESIDENT!

FOURTH ACTOR (*noticing the error*). Abram? (*She trades papers with someone else and searches for confirmation of the candidate's name as OTHERS go excitedly on.*)

SECOND ACTOR. Chicago, May 18, 1860. The work of the convention is ended.

THIRD ACTOR. The youngster who, with ragged trousers and bare feet used to drive his father's oxen and spend his days in splitting rails, has risen to high eminence.

FIRST ACTOR. Abram Lincoln, of Illinois, is declared its candidate for president by the National Republican Party.

FOURTH ACTOR. Abram? (*Trades for another paper and continues to check the error curiously as OTHERS read on.*)

THIRD ACTOR. The city is alive with torchlight processions, music and noisy demonstrations.

FIRST ACTOR. The newspaper office has a large transparency over the door: “For President, Honest Old Abe.”

FOURTH ACTOR (*tries this version on for size*). Abe. (*Poking at newspaper.*) It says here his name is “Abram.” I’d heard it was “Abraham.”

FIRST ACTOR. Abram or Abraham or Honest Old Abe—this fellow bears watching. He’s nominated for president!

THIRD ACTOR (*reading from newspaper*). Great inquiry has been made this afternoon into the history of Mr. Lincoln.

(MUSIC. ALL express approval of this inquiry. FIRST ACTOR collects newspapers and puts them aside. SECOND, THIRD and FOURTH ACTORS step into office area and take positions, all as LINCOLN. SECOND ACTOR sits at desk, puts his feet up on it, takes up a book and reads. THIRD and FOURTH ACTORS stand close by, also representing LINCOLN. As each of the three LINCOLNS speaks, the other two employ the same gestures and facial expressions, setting the ground rule that the role of LINCOLN will be shared. FIRST ACTOR enters scene as WILLIAM HERNDON and busies himself with work. After a moment, SECOND ACTOR closes the book, weighs it in his hand, then shakes his head. MUSIC fades.)

SECOND ACTOR as LINCOLN. I have no confidence in biographies, Billy. You don’t get a true understanding of the man.

FIRST ACTOR as HERNDON. Mr. Lincoln, you are running for the presidency. People need to know more about you.

FOURTH ACTOR as LINCOLN. This biography you have shown me is like all the others—not only misleading, but false. (*SECOND ACTOR gives book to HERNDON.*) The author is so lavish in praise that one is almost driven to believe the subject never made a mistake in his life.

HERNDON. A few words about yourself, your early years—

THIRD ACTOR as LINCOLN. We were poor. That was all and that was everything.

HERNDON. You will be written about, willing or no. Better the facts you provide than stories others make up for themselves. (*SECOND ACTOR as LINCOLN takes a sheet of paper out of his stovepipe hat and hands it to HERNDON.*) What's this?

FOURTH ACTOR as LINCOLN. The facts, Billy.

HERNDON (*reading*). “Born, February 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky. Education... (*shoots LINCOLNS a displeased glance*) ...defective. (*LINCOLNS nod, amused.*) Profession, a lawyer. Have been a captain of volunteers in the Black Hawk war. Postmaster... (*another exchange of looks*) ...at a very small office. Four times a member of the Illinois legislature, and was a member of the lower house of Congress.” (*Another look at LINCOLNS, who grin mischievously.*) The newspapers have asked for an autobiographical statement. This...is somewhat less than expected, I imagine.

SECOND, THIRD & FOURTH ACTORS as LINCOLN. I think it will do.

(*SECOND ACTOR as LINCOLN tucks the paper back into his hat, dons the hat, taps the brim toward HERNDON as a “farewell”—all gestures simultaneously done by THIRD and FOURTH ACTORS. ALL THREE exit. HERNDON shakes his head, bemused, as he watches them go, then steps out of the scene and speaks to audience.*)

HERNDON. My name is William Herndon. Mr. Lincoln took me on as junior partner in his law firm in 1844. We remained partners until he left Springfield for Washington, D.C., in 1861. I called him Mr. Lincoln; he called me Billy. (*Beat.*) He expected to rejoin me at the end of his presidency, but he did not live to serve out his second term. Soon after his assassination, I determined to gather up all the facts of his life—truly, honestly and impartially—and to give those facts to the world. It seemed to me imperative that we keep all we could of Mr. Lincoln. (*Beat.*) But how to capture a “true understanding of the man,” as he put it? Especially *this* man!

(*SECOND and FOURTH ACTORS enter. SECOND ACTOR carries the stovepipe hat. FOURTH ACTOR carries a coonskin cap. HERNDON observes and agrees with them.*)

SECOND ACTOR. He was wise.

FOURTH ACTOR. He was ambitious.

SECOND ACTOR. He was reserved.

FOURTH ACTOR. He was impetuous.

SECOND ACTOR. He was kindhearted...

FOURTH ACTOR. And cutting.

SECOND ACTOR. Strong...

FOURTH ACTOR. And gentle.

SECOND ACTOR. Funny...

FOURTH ACTOR. And morose.

SECOND ACTOR. Outgoing and friendly...

FOURTH ACTOR. Awkward and ill at ease.

SECOND ACTOR. He loved his family...

FOURTH ACTOR. But he lived for his work.

(SECOND and FOURTH ACTORS exit.)

HERNDON. Even those who knew him well could not claim to know him completely. How to capture the greatness of the man? How to avoid a false image of perfection? How to verify facts when there are so many opinions? Perhaps the task was and always will be impossible. And yet, he was a grand character, so good and so odd, how could I not study him? *(MUSIC: A lively country tune, at a distance. HERNDON smiles at the sound, as if recalling it.)* Whenever I met a man or woman who knew anything—good or bad—and was willing to tell it, I took notes of what was said about Mr. Lincoln.

(THIRD ACTOR enters in another area of the stage as DENNIS HANKS. He is getting up in years and leans heavily on a walking stick. He speaks to audience and has a heavy, rural Kentucky accent.)

DENNIS. Want to know what kind o' boy Abe Lincoln was? Well, I reckon I'm the only one livin' that knowed him that early.

HERNDON (*indicates DENNIS*). Mr. Lincoln's cousin,
Dennis Hanks. (*He exits. MUSIC fades.*)

DENNIS. Knowed him the day he was born, an' lived with
him most o' the time till he was twenty-one an' left
home for good.

(*SECOND ACTOR as TOM and FOURTH ACTOR as NANCY enter another area of the stage, arm in arm. NANCY carries her Bible. FIRST ACTOR enters as young LINCOLN ONE. When he is in scene with NANCY still alive, LINCOLN ONE plays himself at appropriate younger ages; at other times, he narrates his earlier years from a teenager's point of view. He now takes a book out of his pocket, finds a comfortable spot near NANCY's rocking chair, and reads.*)

Tom an' Nancy Hanks Lincoln lived on a farm 'bout
two miles from us. She was pretty as a picture an' smart
as you'd find 'em anywhere. My aunt Nancy knew her
Bible!

FOURTH ACTOR as NANCY (*reciting the words, while TOM listens*). "For ye shall go out with joy, and be led
forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break
forth before you into singing and all the trees of the field
shall clap their hands." (*She sits, smiling at TOM.*) The
prophet Isaiah. (*She puts down Bible and takes up needlework, singing as she works. TOM and LINCOLN ONE listen for a moment, then join in.*)

COME, THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING,
TUNE MY HEART TO SING THY GRACE;
STREAMS OF MERCY, NEVER CEASING,
CALL FOR SONGS OF LOUDEST PRAISE.

NANCY, TOM & LINCOLN ONE (*joining in*).
TEACH ME SOME MELODIOUS SONNET,
SUNG BY FLAMING TONGUES ABOVE.
PRAISE THE MOUNT! I'M FIXED UPON IT,
MOUNT OF THY REDEEMING LOVE.

(*ALL THREE exchange a warm smile, then get back to chores or reading.*)

DENNIS. Most affectionate woman I ever saw. Never knew her to be out of temper. She seemed immovably calm. "All that I am," Abe said, "or hope ever to be, I get from my mother. God bless her."

(*He puts away cane and straightens up as a younger version of himself. NANCY puts down needlework, picks up "baby." TOM covers her with a blanket. DENNIS still speaks to audience during the following—*)

I recollect Tom comin' over to our house, one cold mornin' in February an' sayin' kind o' slow an' sheepish—

TOM (*steps out of scene with NANCY and speaks to DENNY*). Nancy's got a boy baby. (*He exits.*)

DENNIS. Mother got flustered an' hurried up her work to go look after the little feller. But I didn't have nothin' to wait for, so I just run the whole two miles to see my new cousin. Nancy was layin' there in a pole bed lookin' happy. Tom'd built up a good fire, an' set little two-year-old Sarah on the bed. (*He enters scene with NANCY. They now relate to each other as they speak.*)
What you goin' to name him, Nancy?

NANCY. Abraham. After his grandfather that came out to Kentucky with Daniel Boone. He was mighty smart an' wasn't afraid of nothin'. That's what a man has to be out here to make anything of himself.

(She offers "baby" to DENNIS, who shyly accepts. Cradling the "baby," DENNIS speaks to audience.)

DENNIS. Folks are always askin' me if Abe was a good-lookin' baby. Well, now, he looked just like any other baby, at first—like red cherry-pulp squeezed dry. An' he didn't improve none as he growed older. *(He laughs at his own joke.)* But he was mighty good company, interested in everythin'.

(DENNIS returns "baby" to NANCY, who places baby in cradle, then moves cradle out of scene. Lively MUSIC underscores following exchange of dialogue. To audience—)

Couple years later, Tom Lincoln moved his family to a new cabin, up on Knob Creek. Near the Cumberland Trail, runnin' from Nashville, Tennessee, to Louisville, here in Kentucky.

LINCOLN ONE *(stands and puts book in his pocket; speaks to audience)*. Covered wagons rolled by, bearin' folks headin' north, south, east and west. Pioneers!

NANCY. Peddlers brought pots and pans for cookin' and pretty notions for sewin'.

DENNIS. By horse, by wagon, and on foot they came.

LINCOLN ONE. In rags they came...and in chains.

NANCY (*picking up her work and exiting scene, sashaying in mimic of high society*). And some in fancy dress and fine carriages.

DENNIS. Lawyers and judges, bound for the courthouse. Congressmen and legislators. (*Exits, mimicking pomposity.*)

LINCOLN ONE (*amused by OTHERS, but serious about his interest; to audience*). I wanted to know who they were, where they were comin' from, and where they were headed, these folks who toiled not by the strength of their backs, but by the strength of their words. (*Beat.*) Travelin' folks, singin' their songs; educated folks, tellin' their stories. And arguin' politics, arguin' religion, arguin' ideas. (*A pause. MUSIC fades.*) They built me the world with their words. I never tired of listening.

(*DENNIS enters with an ax, hands another to LINCOLN ONE, and motions for him to get to work. SOUND of wood being chopped. DENNIS speaks to audience and continues chopping as LINCOLN ONE joins him.*)

DENNIS. Looks didn't count in them days, no how. It was strength an' work an' daredevil. A lazy man or a coward was just poison. Choppin' trees, an' grubbin' roots, an' splittin' rails, an' huntin' an' trappin.'

LINCOLN ONE. Fishin' in the crick, settin' traps, followin' up bees to find bee trees.

DENNIS. Didn't leave Tom no time to put a floor in his cabin. Nancy was terrible ashamed o' the way they lived. She kept urg'in' Abe to study. Marched him and Sarah two miles down the road to the schoolhouse, when she could.

LINCOLN ONE (*stops chopping, speaks toward audience*).

There were some schools, so called. No qualification was ever required of a teacher beyond readin', writin', and cipherin'. Stranger come to town knowin' a bit o' Latin, folks thought he was a wizard. (*Puts away ax, takes up book and a stick, and begins copying letters from the book into the sand with the stick.*)

DENNIS (*stops chopping, wipes his brow; SOUND stops*).

Abe learned them ABCs out of Webster's old spellin' book. Then he took to writin' on the floor, the fence rails and the wooden fire shovel with a bit o' charcoal. When Tom got mad at his markin' the house up, Abe took to markin' trees an' writin' in the sand at the deer-lick. It pestered Tom a heap to have Abe writin' all over everything thataway, but Abe was just wrapped up in it.

(*NANCY enters, performing some new task. She hears LINCOLN ONE's next line and approves of his writing.*)

LINCOLN ONE (*pointing to the sand with his stick*).

Denny, look at that, will you? ABRAHAM LINCOLN! That stands for me. (*Beat, as NANCY and DENNY examine writing.*) Don't look a blame bit like me!

(*ALL laugh. Lively MUSIC. SECOND ACTOR enters as TOM LINCOLN and ALL get to work rearranging "home" area slightly to become the cabin in Indiana. LINCOLN ONE finds a new place to sit and read, with his feet propped up, preferably. NANCY sits in her rocker and resumes her work. Elsewhere, TOM prepares wood for sawing. DENNIS speaks to the audience from a new spot. MUSIC fades.*)