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# Lincoln and the Lively Arts Part II

(Continued from the October 1963 issue) The stage soldiers would join him in the chorus. Tad (Lincoln) attended several performances of this play and was greatly taken with it; the fairy tinsel, fanciful costumes, bright and pretty scenery, appealed to him with more than usual interest. One night he induced his father to come. While Mr. Lincoln was engaged in watching the performance Tad quietly stole out of the box and upon the stage. He went to the wardrobe and obtained an army blouse and cap, much too large for him, and when McDonough's song was ready for the chorus, there was Tad at the end of the soldier line, clad in his misfit uniform, and singing at the top of his voice. The President had a bad quarter of a minute of shock at the sight, but the humor of the situation quickly restored him, and he laughed immoderately.



From the Ostendorf Collection

Felicita Vestvali's real name was Anna Marie Steggemann. She was born in 1829 and adopted her stage name in 1853. In this photograph she is portrayed in the male role of "Orpheus." Lincoln attended three of "The magnificent Vestavali's" performances during the winter of 1864 when she appeared at Grover's Theatre.

"Nobody in the audience had the remotest idea that the President's son was taking part; he was accepted as an important factor in the scene, a sort of genus of patriotic young America. McDonough caught the spirit of the opportunity, walked over to the end and placed the American flag he had been waving, in Tad's hands. Tad promptly rose to the occasion, took the initiative, slipped a little in front of the line, and waving the flag to the music, began to sing with all the might of his childish treble the refrain:

> "We are coming, Father Abraham Three hundred thousand more Shouting the battle-cry of Freedom."

Lincoln appeared "much charmed" with Felicita Vestvali's performances at Grover's Theatre. On January 28, 1864 the Lincoln family saw the actress-singer in "Gamea, or the Jewish Mother." The following evening the Lincolns returned to witness her performance of "The Brigand." Five days later, February 3, 1864 the Lincoln family attended her sensational performance in "The Duke's Motto." The theatrical career of Vestvali has been adequately treated in David C. Mearn's delightful book *Largely Lincoln* in a chapter entitled "'Act Well Your Part': Being the Story of Mr. Lincoln And The Theatre." Lloyd Ostendorf was the first author to publish Vestvali's photograph in an article entitled "Faces Lincoln Knew — Photographs from the Past" which appeared in the Winter 1962 issue of the *Lincoln Herald*.

In discussing President Lincoln's interest in the theatre, Leonard Grover stated that "He often came alone, many times brought his little son Tad, and on special occasions, Mrs. Lincoln. So far as I know, he was never accompanied by any other



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

On April 8, 1864 President Lincoln and wife accompanied by Secretary Seward and family visited Ford's Theatre to witness Edwin Forrest's "grand impersonation of King Lear."



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Charlotte Saunders Cushman (1816-1876) was best known for her role as the tragic queen in "Macbeth." In the 1860's she appeared on several occasions for the benefit of the Sanitary Commission. Lincoln witnessed her performance as Lady Macbeth at Grover's Theatre on October 27, 1863. This photograph was taken in New York City in 1875. 2

members of his household. Mr. Nicolay and Mr. Hay, his secretaries, made frequent visits together, but did not personally accompany the President. The tutor of Mr. Lincoln's younger boys, (Alexander Williamson), occasionally came with Tad, but never with the President. Robert was away at Harvard. It was evident that Mr. Lincoln came to be alone. At times he invited me to sit in the box with him, when such conversation as took place was always about the theatre." On one occasion Lincoln said to the theatre manager, "Mr. Grover, I really enjoy a minstrel show." Grover did not forget this statement and engaged Hooley's minstrels to follow after the regular season had closed.

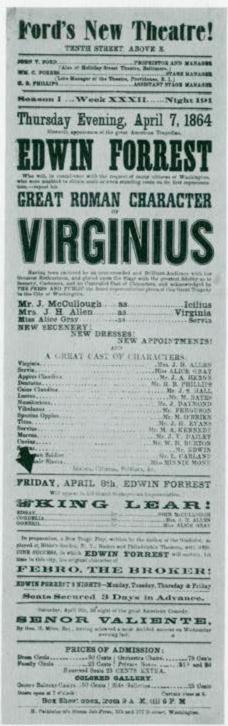
Of special interest is the fact that Tad and Williamson were witnessing "Aladdin! or the Wonderful Lamp" presented by Mr. Koppitz and his company, at Grover's Theatre the night that Lincoln was assassinated at Ford's Theatre.

A great many theatrical people visited Lincoln at the White House. Some of these visitors were Herman, the Magician, The Hutchinson Family Singers, Tom Thumb and wife, Lavinia, James E. Murdoch, Miss Charlotte Cushman, the midgets Commodore Foote and Eliza Nestil, James E. McDonough, and James H. Hackett.

Lincoln did not attend the theatre to make himself conspicuous. Usually he sat in a box curtained off from the rest of the house, so that only those in his party and those on the stage knew of his presence. While the audience was considerate of the President, this was not always true of the actors. Whereas James H. Hackett, an enthusiastic admirer of Lincoln, once upon entering the stage as Sir Pertinax MacSycophant, paused and made a respectful obeisance, such was not the case with Edwin Forrest. This actor did not hold views in accord with Lincoln's in regard to the war. On one occasion when Forrest played Richelieu in Bulmer-Lytton's drama of the same name, he made his entrance without the least recognition of the President. When the time came for him to speak the line, "Take away the sword; states may be saved without it," he deliberately altered the text while glaring at the President, and said. "Take away the sword; states must be saved without it." During the winter of 1864 when Forrest returned to Ford's, Mr. Lincoln attended his performances "three or four times."

Also in February of 1865 Lincoln witnessed twice the performance of the engaging comedian John Sleeper Clarke. This is of particular interest as Clarke married Asia Booth, the sister of John Wilkes Booth and, of course, Edwin.

Toward the end of his administration, Lincoln's theatrical taste became more sophisticated. His favorite play was "Macbeth." Falstaff was his favorite Shakespearean character, and he liked the soliloquy of Hamlet's Uncle on the murder of his brother, beginning, "O: my offence is rank, it



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation A Ford's Theatre playbill advertising (see arrow) Edwin Forrest's appearance on April 8, 1864 as King Lear. Lincoln witnessed this play on the above mentioned date. The cast of characters of both "Virginius" and "King Lear" lists a Miss Alice Gray. When John Wilkes Booth was captured, after the assassination of Lincoln, six carte-de-visite photographs of attractive young women were found on his person. A photograph of Alice Gray was one of the six.

smells to heaven . . ." better than Hamlet's soliloquy "To be or not to be . . ."

Lincoln became personally acquainted with James H. Hackett, the actor who wrote a book titled Notes and Comments on Certain Plays and Actors of Shakespeare, with Criticisms and Comments which was published in the year 1863. Hackett, knowing Lincoln's interest in the subject, presented him with a copy. Lincoln had seen Hackett play the role of Falstaff in the play *Henry IV* on March 13, 1863 when he paid "a spontaneous visit to the Washington Theatre." Acting upon Hackett's request Lincoln returned to see a second performance on March 17th. This led to some correspondence between the two men and Lincoln's "small attempt at criticism" proved to be his last and only venture into this field.

Lincoln's attendance at theatres presenting Shakespearean plays increased his understanding of the comedies and tragedies in actual production. When he witnessed John E. McCullough in the role of Edgar in the play King Lear, he was so pleased with the actor's performance that he asked him to come to the box between acts. McCullough, clad in his fantastic costume of rags and straw, received great praise from the President.

The following paragraph from "Lincoln's Favorite Poets" by Harkness and McMurtry reveals Lincoln as an ardent theatre patron and Shakespearean critic:

"At the new National Theatre, afterwards Grover's Theatre, Lincoln saw Othello with E. L. Davenport and J. W. Wallack in the leading roles. At Ford's Theatre he first saw Edwin Booth as Shylock in The Merchant of Venice. Among others, he saw James H. Hackett in two consecutive performances as Falstaff in Henry IV, Parts I and II, and then on the third night, in The Merry Wives of Windsor. He later attended a performance of Edwin Forrest and McCullough in King Lear. The President was very fond of Edwin Booth and usually went to see him perform when the actor was in Washington. Once after the presentation of The Merchant of Venice, Lincoln remarked: 'It was a good performance, but I had a thousand times rather read it at home if it were not for Booth's playing'."

While Lincoln was fond of Hackett's performance of the role of Falstaff, he criticized his interpretation of certain lines. Lincoln thought Hackett misread one of Falstaff's lines by placing the emphasis on the wrong word. The actor read the line "Mainly thrust at me" which Lincoln contended should have been "Mainly thrust at me." Lincoln became so interested in the lines of Falstaff that he took his two secretaries to Ford's to see the play Henry IV. While there, they noted Hackett's inflection on the wrong word. It was also the President's opinion "that the speech of Hotspur in the play was an unnatural and unworthy thing." Lincoln believed a comedy was best played and a tragedy best read.

Of all the Presidents Lincoln is most closely associated with the theatre — largely because of his assassination at Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865. Lincoln's attendance at theatres was often criticized by biographers and other writers, who attempted to in-

terpret for the nation the reasons for his untimely death. William C. Gray in his biography "Life of Abra-ham Lincoln" published in 1867, devoted a section of Chapter XVIII of his book to "The Theatre." Calling the theatre a "house of iniquity" Gray made the statement that if "Mr. Lin-coln had boldly taken position with Christ's disciples, and consistently adhered to the precepts of the Gospel, he would not have died in the theatre, and might not have fallen at all at the hand of an assassin." Of course, biographer Gray did not explain why William H. Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State, was violently attacked the same evening at home in bed by one of John Wilkes Booth's henchmen.

Gray wrote that "we may charitably suppose that Mr. Lincoln visited the theatre as a momentary relaxation of his overtaxed mind, and an opportunity to cast aside his cares and re-lieve himself from his anxieties;" however, the biographer then stated that others could not do the same and remain innocent, because there was evil in the gaslight, music and pantomime of the stage.

Despite the criticism Lincoln had a sense of the dramatic as evidenced by his ability as a mimic and by his flair for story-telling. It was the artist-biographer Francis B. Carpenter who, after witnessing Lincoln read Shakespeare, made the statement, "I was not sure but that he had made a mistake in his choice of a pro-fession . . ." (See Lincoln Lore No. 928, "Was Lincoln 'Hopelessly Stage-Struck'," January 20, 1947).

### OUR AMERICAN COUSIN

OUR AMERICAN COUSIN Editor's Note: "The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson," published by The Century Com-pany in 1890 devoted a portion of Chapter VII to Tom Taylor's play "Our American Cousin" which it will be remembered President Lin-coln was witnessing on April 14, 1855, at the time of his assassination. Many students who have read this play have been unable to un-derstand why it was so successful and en-joyed such a long run in so many metropoli-tan cities in this country and abroad. Perhaps Joe Jefferson, who played the role of "Asa Trenchard" in the play, has best evaluated the quality of its elements that made it a huge success. His comments follow:

"During the season of 1858-59 Miss (Laura) Keene produced Tom Taylor's play of 'Our American Cousin,' and as its success was remarkable and some noteworthy occurrences took place in connection with it, a record of its ca-reer will perhaps be interesting. The play had been submitted by Mr. Taylor's agent to another theatre, but the management failing to see anything striking in it, an adverse judgment was passed and the comedy rejected. It was next offered to Laura Keene, who also thought but little of the play, which remained neglected upon her desk for some time; but it so chanced that the business manager of the theatre, Mr. John Lutz, in turning over the leaves fancied that he detected some-thing in the play of a novel character. Here was a rough man, having no dramatic experience, but gifted with keen, practical sense, who discovered at a glance an effective play, the merits of which had escaped the vigilance of older and, one would have supposed, better judges. He gave me

the play to read. While it possessed but little literary merit, there was a fresh breezy atmosphere about the characters and the story that at-tracted me very much. I saw, too, the chance of making a strong character of the leading part, and so I was quite selfish enough to recommend the play for production.

"The reading took place in the green-room, at which the ladies and gentlemen of the company were assembled and many furtive glances were cast at Mr. Charles W. Couldock and me as the strength of Abel Murcott and Asa Trenchard were revealed. Poor (E. A.) Sothern sat in the corner looking quite disconsolate, fearing that there was nothing in the play that would suit him, and as the dismal lines of Dundreary were read he glanced over at me with a forlorn expression, as much as to say, 'I am cast for that dreadful part,' little dreaming that the character of the imbecile lord would turn out to be the stepping-stone of his fortune. The success of the play proved the turning-point in the career of three persons - Laura Keene, Sothern, and myself.

"The dramatic situation that struck me as the most important one in this play was the love scene in the opening of the last act. It was altogether fresh, original, and perfectly natural, and I notice that in this important phase of dramatic composition authors are conspicuously weak."

(Here the author digressed with a two paragraph dissertation regarding dramatic love making on the stage.)

"It was the opportunity of developing this attitude of early love, particularly love at first sight, that at-tracted me to the 'Cousin.' Simple and trifling as it looks, Mr. Tom Taylor never drew a finer dramatic pic-ture. The relation between the two characters was perfectly original. A shrewd, keen Yankee boy of twentyfive falls in love at first sight with a simple, loving English dairymaid of eighteen. She innocently sits on the bench, close beside him; he is fasci-nated and draws closer to her; she raises her eyes in innocent wonder at this, and he glides gently to the farthest end of the bench. He never tells her of his love, nor does she in the faintest manner suggest her affection for him; and though they persistently talk of other things, you see plainly how deeply they are in love. He re-lates the story of his uncle's death in America, and during this recital asks her permission to smoke a cigar. With apparent carelessness he takes out a paper, a will made in his favor by the old man, which document disinherits the girl; with this he lights his cigar, thereby destroying his rights and resigning them to her. The situation is strained, certainly, but it is very effective, and an audience will always pardon a slight extravagance if it charms while it surprises them. The cast was an exceedingly strong one Laura Keene as the refined, rural bell, and Sara Stevens as the modest, loving, English dairymaid. Both looked and acted the parts perfectly. The *Abel Murcott* of Mr. Couldock

was a gem, and the extravagant farce and humor of Mr. Sothern's Dun-dreary, the fame of which afterwards resounded all over the English-speaking world, is too well known to need any comment, except perhaps to men-tion one or two matters connected with it of a curious nature.

"As I have before said, Sothern was much dejected at being compelled to play the part. He said he could do nothing with it, and certainly for the first two weeks it was a dull effort, and produced but little effect. So in despair he began to introduce extravagant business into his character, skipping about the stage, stammering and sneezing, and, in short, doing all he could to attract and distract the attention of the audience. To the surprise of every one, himself included, these antics, intended by him to injure the character, were received by the audience with delight. He was a shrewd man as well as an effective actor, and he saw at a glance that accident had revealed to him a golden opportunity. He took advantage of it, and with cautious steps increased his speed, feeling the ground well under him as he proceeded. Before the first month was over he stood side by side with any other character in the play; and at the end of the run he was, in my opinion, considerably in advance of us all. And his success in London, in the same character, fully attests, whatever may be said to the contrary, that as an extravagant, eccentric comedian in the modern range of comedy he was quite without a rival."



The Ford Theatre playbill for April 14, 1865 Keene, the popular actress in the role of Florence Trenchard in "Our American Cous-in." Miss Keene was the only member of the original cast to appear in this play on the evening of Lincoln's assassination.

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Selections approved by a Bibliography Committee consisting of the following members: Arnold Gates, 289 New Hyde Park Road, Garden City, N. Y.; Carl Haverlin, 2 Masterson Road, Bronxville, N. Y.; E. B. Long, 708 North Kenilworth Ave., Oak Park, Ill.; Kenneth A. Barnard, Boston University, 725 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston 18, Mass.; Wayne C. Temple, Lincoln Memorial University, Harrogate, Tenn.; Ralph G. Newman, 18 E. Chestnut Street, Chicago 11, Ill.; William H. Townsend, 310 First National Bank Bidg., Lexington 3, Ky.; and Clyde C. Walton, Illinois State Historical Library, Spring-field, Ill.

Richard F. Lufkin, who served several years as a member of the Bibliography Committee, died on July 11, 1963.

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### UNITED STATES

1963-31

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