

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN SEES HACKETT PLAY FALSTAFF

Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to James H. Hackett on August 17, 1863 in which he said: "The first presentation of Falstaff I ever saw was yours here last winter or spring. Perhaps the best compliment I can pay is to say, as I truly can, I am very anxious to see it again." This privilege came to the President during the week of December 14 as revealed in the following news item from the *Washington Chronicle* of December 18 referring to Hackett's interpretation of Falstaff:

"The audiences he has attracted the last four nights have been very large and select, and the applause bestowed upon the performance has been most cordial and generous. Among those who have apparently derived great pleasure from Mr. Hackett's acting is President Lincoln who has attended four nights in succession."

On Hackett's former appearance in Washington, he had observed in his audience on the evening of March 17 the President of the United States which caused him to send to Mr. Lincoln one of his books entitled *Notes and Comments on Certain Plays and Actors of Shakespeare*. It was this pamphlet which caused Lincoln to write his acknowledgment to Hackett as mentioned above and in this same letter the President inquired, "Will you not soon visit Washington again?" and then extended this invitation: "If you do, please call on me and let me make your personal acquaintance." On October 1863, Hackett advised Lincoln that he was booked to appear in Washington in December and outlined a tentative list of plays in which he would appear and hoped "it may happen to be convenient to Your Excellency to attend."

Upon Hackett's arrival in Washington he immediately visited the President and spent Sunday evening, December 13 with him. Some of the conversation must have centered about Mr. Lincoln's previous letter to Hackett in which the President had made some personal observations about Shakespeare's plays. Hackett had indiscreetly made these comments available in printed form to friends and eventually the press publicized them which caused some editors to unduly criticize the President. This brought apologetic letters from Hackett, but Lincoln in his characteristic manner replied:

"My note to you I certainly did not expect to see in print; yet I have not been much shocked by the newspaper comments upon it. Those comments constitute a fair specimen of what has occurred to me through life. I have endured a great deal of ridicule without much malice and have received a great deal of kindness not quite free of ridicule."

The following night December 14 Hackett opened at Ford's Theatre and the Washington press carried this display advertisement:

"First night of the celebrated Shakespearean comedian Mr. Jas. H. Hackett in his initial delineation of Sir John Falstaff in the tragedy entitled *Henry IV* which ends with the Battle of Shrewsbury and *The Death of Hotspur*."

On the following day the *Chronicle* gave this account of the opening night performance:

"Probably the largest house of the season (certainly the most distinguished—as it included the President and family, several members of the cabinet and most of the two houses of Congress) assembled at Ford's Theatre last evening to witness Mr. Hackett's personation of fat Jack Falstaff. Nearly a thousand seats were secured

during the day, and at night the rush was so great that the manager announced, 'nothing but standing room' at an early hour. Hundreds were turned away."

The largely attended performance called for a critical review of Hackett's interpretation of Falstaff on the editorial page of the *Chronicle* the morning following the first night production. The critic prefaced his argument with this observation: "We do not think a more brilliant audience ever welcomed a performer to the city of Washington. The President of the United States occupied a private box." Although the editor's criticism extended for half a column, two or three sentences give the gist of his conclusions.

"The Falstaff of Shakespeare is a creation which stands alone in the drama. It is quaint, rich, overflowing, unctuous, complete in all its parts; so life like and true that we can almost fancy the man lived and that we knew him. . . . Mr. Hackett is the best representative of the man Falstaff, the heavy, fat, swaggering, coarse, vulgar, and cowardly tavern orator, upon the stage. So far as these traits enter the delineation of Shakespeare, Mr. Hackett rises to a full conception of the part, and plays it as no living actor can play it. Beyond this he does not go. His Falstaff is inferior to the Falstaff of the closet, that we see on these painted pages of Shakespeare, who philosophizes among his rugged countrymen. . . . It is, perhaps, too much to ask from any actor a complete embodiment of Shakespeare's genius. Mr. Hackett is certainly not so in Falstaff, but he comes nearer to it than any other actor living."

We have observed from one of the press notices that Lincoln attended the performances for four consecutive nights. At the first presentation of *Henry IV* he was accompanied by his family. On the second night when *Henry IV* was repeated John G. Nicolay and John Hay were his guests, according to Hay. On Wednesday and Thursday nights instead of seeing Falstaff in *Henry IV* the President had the pleasure of observing Hackett as Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Preliminary to his coming to Washington, Hackett had sent Lincoln a book entitled *The Man of the World or the Politician* by C. Macklin. This play, which was produced on Friday night, Hackett may have put on especially for Lincoln, but we know the President was engaged elsewhere that evening. On Saturday the papers announced, "The final performance of the great Tragedy *Henry IV*."

The sequel to the Lincoln-Hackett acquaintance had an unpleasant ending. Hackett was then sixty-three years of age and apparently at the close of his career as an actor. Noah Brooks, one of Lincoln's assistant secretaries states, "going to the President's on a summons from him very late at night, I noticed this prominent comedian (Hackett) waiting alone in the corridor outside the President's door." When Mr. Lincoln learned of his presence he seemed very much displeased and said "that the little courtesies which had passed between them had resulted in the comedian applying to him for an office." Brooks continued his story of the incident with this observation: "Lincoln almost groaned as he said that it seemed impossible for him to have any close relations with people in Washington without finding that the acquaintance thus formed generally ended in an application for office."