



Lincoln Lore

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Lincoln and the Lively Arts

Leonard Grover, a Washington, D. C. theatre proprietor, made the statement in his *Century* magazine article published in April of 1909, that Abraham Lincoln, during the four years of his administration, visited his theatre probably more than a hundred times. While it would be incorrect to state that Lincoln was "hopelessly stage-struck," he did frequent concert halls, theatres and "academies" whenever the opportunity presented itself. He was in no sense a drama critic, except in regard to some Shakespearean plays, but was "satisfied with being entertained and amused and to have his mind taken from the sea of troubles which awaited him elsewhere."

Lincoln's first real contact with the theatre and theatre people probably occurred shortly after Springfield became the capital city of Illinois. One authority has suggested the date of 1839. This contact came about with the erection by McKinzie and Jefferson (the elder Joseph Jefferson) of a playhouse measuring ninety feet deep by forty feet wide. Unpainted and without ornamentation, its simple lines resembled a large dry goods box with a roof. It was probably in this theatre that Lincoln witnessed John Howard Payne's drama, "Clari the Maid of Milan," and heard for the first time the playwright's song "Home Sweet Home," sung by Mrs. Jefferson.

Art Hemminger, in his article entitled "Mr. Lincoln Goes To The Theatre," which was published in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* December, 1940, has suggested that other plays presented that winter season were Payne's "Therese, the Orphan of Geneva," George Boker's "Francesca de Rimini," and Bret's "Metamore." This led to a series of Indian plays, some of which were "Sassacus, or the Indian Wife," "Kairissah," "Oroloosa," "Outlassie," "The Wigwam" and "The Indian Prophecy."

The Jefferson Theatre, called by more pious folk "The Devil's Workshop," fell upon evil days. The city fathers prevailed upon the town council to draft a prohibitory license fee upon theatres. It was Lincoln, a member of the town council, who represented the Jeffersons in opposition to such a tax and who was successful in getting the measure repealed. This incident was proudly related in Joseph



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Joseph Jefferson (father of Joseph Jefferson of Rip Van Winkle fame) who according to folklore was assisted by Abraham Lincoln in defeating a prohibitive license fee on theatres in Springfield, Illinois.

Jefferson's (III) "Autobiography," published in 1889 by The Century Company. However, because of a lack of corroborative evidence, this incident is considered by many to be nothing more than Illinois folklore.

While traveling the Eighth Judicial Circuit, Lawyer Lincoln became interested in the Newhall Players, a concert troupe of six members who presented lyceum programs in churches, theatres and town halls. The featured entertainer was Mrs. Lois Hillis who was described as most attractive and with a winning personality. The Newhall troupe traveled in Illinois, Indiana and Michigan. During the Illinois tour, there were occasions when the theatrical circuit coincided with the legal circuit, so that both Lincoln and the troupe of show people sometimes stayed overnight at the same inns. As a result, Lincoln attended several

performances of the Newhall family in different Illinois cities.

At times the lawyers would enjoy a social hour with the Newhall Family. According to Carl Sandburg, one such event took place at the Macon House in Decatur. After the professionals had made their artistic contributions to the gaiety of the evening, it was resolved that it was time for the attorneys to sing a song or render a poem. Someone suggested that Lincoln could sing. His fellow lawyers bantered Lincoln about his singing voice, all the while knowing that he could not carry a tune or read a note of music. The Newhalls, especially Lois, insisted that Lincoln sing, even to the point that she agreed to accompany him with a melodeon. Lincoln was adamant. He would not sing. Instead he recited a few stanzas of William Knox's poem, "O Why Should the Spirit of Mortal Be Proud." With this turn of events, the bantering came to an end.

Years later, when Mrs. Hillis published her reminiscences, she stated that the above incident took place in a Springfield hotel. According to her at that time Lincoln knew neither the author of the poem nor its title. Mrs. Hillis having never heard the poem before and being enamored of it, was pleased to receive a laboriously transcribed version of it from Lincoln. According to Lois Hillis, she never again saw Lincoln.

During Lincoln's one term in Congress (December 6, 1847 to March 4, 1849), he continued his interest in theatrical entertainment. According to the *National Intelligencer*, one evening (between January 6 and January 19, 1848) Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln attended the performance of the "Ethiopian Serenaders" at Caruso's Saloon. It was also his usual custom as a Congressman to listen to a Marine Band give concerts on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons on the White House grounds.

In his book, "Life On The Circuit With Lincoln," Henry C. Whitney revealed that Lincoln was dazzled in Danville, Illinois by a magic lantern show presented there in 1854. One evening Lincoln was absent from the group of lawyers and did not return until midnight. He then related to his friends that "I have been to a little show up at the Academy" and he



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Joseph Jefferson III whose "Autobiography" published by The Century Company, 1889 and 1890, relates the episode of Lincoln's defense of his father's Springfield, Illinois theatre. Young Jefferson played in children's roles in this theatre which Lincoln may have attended.

gave a vivid account of "all the sights of that most primitive of country shows, given chiefly to school children." The next night he attended a second show and saw a different set of slides from the magic lantern or, as it was erroneously called, an "electrical machine."

With the United States Circuit Court convening in Chicago on Tuesday, July 7, 1857, Lincoln, his associates and other notables who practiced before that Court, were registered at the Tremont House. On the following evening Lincoln, accompanied by O. H. Browning and his partner, Nehemiah Bushnell, both from Quincy, went to the Metropolitan Hall. They saw William Evans Burton, the English comedian-playwright, play "Toodles," a role he himself had created. The three lawyers considered themselves lucky to have seen Burton who made infrequent middlewestern appearances. They considered his acting excellent. Browning wrote in his Diary, "His (Burton's) acting is fine — that it does not appear like acting at all — He is much the finest comedian I have ever seen."

Again on Monday, July 13th, Lincoln and Browning saw Burton in the character of Captain Cuttle in the play, "Dombey & Son." Browning commented in his Diary that "This is very admirable — Mrs. Burton did Susan Nipper, the black eyed one very well — the others were hum drum."

The newspaper, *Illinois State Democrat*, published in Springfield, provides an interesting account of Lincoln's attendance at a performance at Concert Hall in the Illinois capital city on the evening of December 2, 1858. On this occasion Eloise Bridges gave, among other dramatic readings, "Nothing To Wear: An Episode of City Life." This was a piece concerning Miss Flora McFlimsey who, in her efforts to appear fashionable, had

nothing to wear. As to Lincoln's attendance, the following quotation is of interest: "The Hon. A. Lincoln was one of the audience and had become deeply interested in this latter poem and was leaning his head upon his hand *a la Juliet*, his whole soul apparently wrapped up in the story. When Miss B. came to that part of the poem descriptive of the quarrel between Miss Flora and her lover he could hardly contain himself, and at the words 'perhaps a Hottentot,' he could not control himself, and 'O. Yes' escaped involuntarily from his lips. The earnestness and innocence of his manner, upon a deeply interested audience, can be better imagined than described."

William H. Herndon later recorded in his biography that "Lincoln's 'explosive guffaw' . . . startled the speaker and audience, and kindled a storm of unexpressed laughter and applause. Everyone looked back to ascertain the cause of the demonstration, and was greatly surprised to find that it was Mr. Lincoln. He blushed and squirmed with the awkward diffidence of a schoolboy. What prompted him to laugh (to exclaim) no one was able to explain. He was doubtless wrapped up in a brown study, and, recalling some amusing episode, indulged in laughter without realizing his surroundings. The experience mortified him greatly."

Sometime during the month of March 1860 Lincoln went to see Rumsey & Newcomb's Minstrel Show in Chicago. Lincoln was attending the sessions of the United States Court representing his clients in the *Johnson v. Jones and Marsh* (Sand Bar Case) litigation. The account of this entertainment of which Lincoln was inordinately fond is revealed in a letter which Henry C. Whitney wrote to Jesse W. Werk:

"In the latter part of March, 1860, I remember Mr. Lincoln was in Chicago attending the United States Court, where I met him. It was less than two months before the Convention which nominated him for President. Three Tickets to Rumsey and Newcomb's Minstrels, a high toned troupe having been presented to me, I hunted up Lincoln and asked him if he would like to go to a 'nigger show' that night. He assented rapturously exclaiming: 'Of all things I would rather do to-night that is certainly one.' He and I witnessed the performance and I never saw him enjoy himself more than he did that night. He applauded as often as anybody and with greater animation. The non-descript song and dance of 'Dixie' was sung and acted by the troupe, the first time I ever saw it, and probably the first time it was sung and acted in Illinois. I can remember well the spontaneity of Lincoln's enthusiasm and the heartiness of his applause at the music and action of this rollicking and anomalous performance. Little did we think that this weird and harmless melody would ere-long be transformed into a fierce battle-cry by whose inspiration

slaughter and carnage would be carried into the ranks of those who bared their bosoms to save the nation's life. Little did we think of this as he clapped his great brawny hands in true rustic heartiness and exclaimed in riotous enthusiasm: 'Let's have it again! Let's have it again!'"

Lincoln's recreation along theatrical lines probably ceased during the presidential campaign of 1860. However, as President-elect, he took advantage of at least one opportunity to attend a concert. Perhaps his first attendance at a theatre after his election was in New York City on February 20, 1861 while enroute to Washington. With Judge David Davis and Alderman Cornell, a local official, Lincoln arrived late at the Academy of Music, located at Fourteenth Street and Irving Place, for a performance of Verdi's new opera, "Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masquerade Ball)." On this occasion Lincoln shocked the city's elite because he wore black gloves. The black kids, in contrast to the red velvet box seats, prompted a Southern man to remark that "I think we ought to send some flowers over the way to the Undertaker of the Union." White kids vs. black kids became more of a topic of conversation in New York's polite society than the fate of the nation then hanging in the balance.

Lincoln may not have appreciated Giuseppe Verdi's opera which was sung in Italian by an Italian com-



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

On Monday evening, July 13, 1857, Lincoln and Orville H. Browning saw William E. Burton portray the character of Captain Cuttle in the play "Dombey & Son." This photograph depicts Burton in the role of Captain Cuttle.



From the Ostendorf Collection

On May 28, 1862 Lincoln stopped by Ford's Theatre where Mrs. Lincoln and party were attending a concert by Opera star Clara Louise Kellogg.

pany. Carl Sandburg, in his monumental "War Years," suggested that Lincoln may have thought at the time of the yarn about Rufus Choate who told his daughter to "interpret for me the libretto lest I dilate with the wrong emotion." At any rate Lincoln returned to his hotel after the second act. Apparently, the Lincolns later became patrons of the opera, because Leonard Grover made the statement in his *Century* article that "Mrs. Lincoln was fond of the opera, and during the weeks in which I gave the opera they were almost nightly in attendance."

After Lincoln's inauguration as President no record of his attendance at a Washington theatre has been found for the critical months of 1861. One reason for Lincoln's lack of interest in the theatre during the early months of his administration was the death of his son Willie in February, 1862. Also, during that period, there were not many show houses in Washington given over to the "legitimate drama." Mr. Lincoln did not enjoy vaudeville and was said to have visited the Canterbury Hall, the variety house, on only two occasions.

As the legitimate theatre enjoyed boom times during the Civil War, two new theatres opened for business. The one theatre already an established institution in the city was the Washington, located on Eleventh Street near C. It was usually crowded and uncomfortable, and it was noted for its indifferent productions. John T. Ford opened a theatre called the Washington Athenaeum on Tenth Street near E, which was destroyed by fire. Out of the ruins of the Athe-

naeum he built the new Ford Theatre which opened its doors on August 27, 1863.

During the Buchanan administration the Old National Theatre burned, and out of its rubble sprang the New National Theatre on Pennsylvania Avenue (near Willard's Hotel) which opened for business on April 22, 1862. This new theatre was managed by Leonard Grover.

As the Civil War slowly wore on and as Lincoln found the theatre relaxing, his attendance increased. Some of Lincoln's visits to the theatre, or references to his attendance while he was President, have been chronicled by the editors of "Lincoln Day by Day." Other references have been obtained from the book, "Largely Lincoln," by David C. Mearns who devoted a chapter to Lincoln and the theatre.

1862

January 23 — Attends opera at Washington Theatre, 11th and C St. NW., with Mrs. Lincoln for performance of "Il Trovatore."

May 28 — Stops by Ford's Theatre, 511 10th St. NW., where Mrs. Lincoln and party are attending concert by opera star Clara Louise Kellogg.

1863

February 24 — Occupies private box at Grover's Theatre, E St., bet. 13th and 14th Sts. NW., for performance by Barney Williams, blackface minstrel and Irish comedian.

March 13 — Lincoln attends Washington Theatre to see James H. Hackett as Falstaff in "King Henry IV."



From the Ostendorf Collection

On April 11, 1863, in company with Noah Brooks Lincoln attended the Old Washington Theatre and saw Mrs. John Wood in John Broughman's travesty "Pocahontas."



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On February 24, 1863 Lincoln occupied a private box at Grover's Theatre for a performance by Barney Williams, the blackface minstrel and Irish comedian.

March 25 — Attends Grover's Theatre to witness performance of "Hamlet" starring E. L. Davenport.

April 11 — In evening attends Washington Theatre for performance by Mrs. John Wood in "Pocahontas" and "laughs some."

April 22 — Lincoln writes Sen. Sumner (Mass.): "Mrs. L. is embarrassed a little. She would be pleased to have your company again this evening, at the Opera (Washington Theatre, Bellini's "Norma"), but she fears she may be taxing you . . . but if it will not, consider yourself already invited."

June 4 — President, accompanied by Mrs. Lincoln and party, attends recitation from Shakespeare at private residence near Chain Bridge.

October 6 — Attends opening night of new Grover's Theatre and sees performance of "Othello."

October 27 — Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln, Tad, and William O. Stoddard occupy the lower stage boxes of the National (Grover's) Theatre to witness a performance of "Macbeth" for the benefit of the United States Sanitary Commission. Charlotte Cushman played the role of Lady Macbeth, supported by Messrs. Wallack and Davenport.

October 30 — President and Mrs. Lincoln visit Ford's Theatre on occasion of Maggie Mitchell's benefit in performance of "Fanchon, the Cricket."

November 9 — Presidential Party attends performance at Ford's Theatre starring John Wilkes Booth in "The Marble Heart."

December 14 — President and family visit Ford's Theatre to see J. H. Hackett play Falstaff in "Henry IV."



From the Ostendorf Collection

On October 30, 1863 President and Mrs. Lincoln attended the Maggie Mitchell benefit at Ford's Theatre to see her performance of "Fanchon the Cricket." This photograph depicts Miss Mitchell in the role of Fanchon.

December 17 — Visits Ford's Theatre to see "Merry Wives of Windsor."

1864

January 2 — In evening Lincoln occupies private box of Col. James D. Greene at theatre.

January 23 — Secures "a box at Grover's Theatre for benefit performance of Tom Taylor's 'The Ticket of Leave Man' on Saturday night, in aid of the Ladies' Soldiers' Relief Association."

January 28 — The President and his family saw the lyrical tragic artist Felicita Vestvali appear at the National (Grover's) Theatre in "Gamea or, the Jewish Mother."

January 29 — The Lincolns attend Grover's Theatre to see Vestvali in her great impersonation of Alessandro Mossaroni in the musical drama of "The Brigand."

February 3 — President Lincoln and wife were present for a third Vestvali performance at Grover's entitled "The Duke's Motto."

February 8 — At the Washington Theatre at Eleventh Street, the Lincoln family saw Miss Laura Keene in the spectacular drama of "Sea of Ice or the Mother's Prayer."

February 19 — Attends evening performance by Edwin Booth in "Richard the Third" at Grover's Theatre.

February 25 — President and Mrs. Lincoln visit Grover's Theatre for performance by Edwin Booth in role of Brutus in "Julius Caesar."

February 26 — President occupies regular private box at Grover's Theatre to see Edwin Booth play two roles, Shylock and Don Caesar de Byzan in "Merchant of Venice."

March 2 — With family visits Grover's Theatre for Edwin Booth's appearance in "Hamlet."

March 4 — President and family visit Grover's Theatre to see Edwin Booth play "Richelieu."

March 7 — Attends Grover's Theatre for performance of Edwin Booth in "The Fool's Revenge."

March 10 — With Mrs. Lincoln visits Grover's Theatre for performance of "Richard III," last night in series of Shakespearean dramas featuring Edwin Booth.

March 28 — Lincoln went to Ford's Theatre to see Edwin Forrest as the Duke of Gloucester in Richard III.

April 2 — President, Mrs. Lincoln, and Mrs. Grant attend performance of "Faust" at Grover's Theatre.

April 4 — With Mrs. Lincoln visits Grover's Theatre for performance of Wever's "Der Freischutz."

April 5 — Lincoln, accompanied by Mrs. Lincoln, visits Grover's Theatre to hear Flotow's opera "Martha" sung by Orion Society with Grand Orchestra of Academy of Music, N. Y.

April 8 — The President, with Mrs. Lincoln and Sec. Seward and family, will visit Ford's Theatre this evening to witness Edwin Forrest's grand impersonation of King Lear.

June 8 — Attends Grover's Theatre in evening alone.

June 19 — Accompanied by John Hay, visits Ford's Theatre for sacred concert.

November 15 — Attends Grover's Theatre to see E. L. Davenport in role of Hamlet.

December 5 — President, with Mrs. Lincoln and Sec. Seward, attends Grover's Theatre for performance of Gounod's "Faust" by Grand German Opera Company. ("Robert Le Diable" was postponed.)

December 9 — Lincoln attends theatre accompanied by Sen. Sumner (Mass.) and others.

December 19 — Attends promenade concert at Ford's Theatre.

1865

January 7 — Accompanied by Mrs. Lincoln and Tad, visits Grover's Theatre to see Avonia Jones in "Leah."

January 31 — O. H. Browning and J. W. Singleton arrive at White House as President leaves for theatre. They arrange meeting for following day.

March 15 — President and Mrs. Lincoln, accompanied by Clara Harris, daughter of Sen. Harris (N. Y.), and Gen. James G. Wilson, visit Grover's Theatre for performance of opera "The Magic Flute."

March 21 — President and Mrs. Lincoln attend performance of Boieldieu's opera "La Dame Blanche" at Grover's Theatre.

April 14 — At approximately 8:30 P.M. President and Mrs. Lincoln, accompanied by Clara Harris and Maj. Henry R. Rathbone, enter Ford's Theatre for performance of "Our American Cousin" featuring Laura Keene.

This chronology should not be considered complete as many of Lincoln's appearances at Washington theatres were not reported by the press and have not been recorded in *Lincoln Day by Day A Chronology 1861-1865*, or in other studies relative to Lincoln and the theatre.

Noah Brooks, in his book "Washington In Lincoln's Time," mentioned a delightful evening (April 11, 1863) which he spent with the President at the old Washington Theatre where they saw Mrs. John Wood in John Brougham's travesty of "Pocahontas." Brooks wrote that "the delicious absurdity and cracking puns of the piece gave the president food for mirth for many days hereafter." "Pocahontas" was an extravagant burlesque which marked the end of the Indian melodramas that Lincoln may have witnessed in Joe Jefferson's theatre back in Springfield.

According to Grover, Lincoln saw John McDonough in a spectacular extravaganza entitled, "The Seven Sisters." The theatre proprietor described the fabulous nature of the production: "The Seven Sisters . . . being represented as banished from Heaven and as having returned to Earth to find suitable companions to accompany them in their doomed trip to the Inferno. As the play admitted of the introduction of modern episodes and local topics, McDonough, who was very patriotic, had interpolated an army tableau in which he sang a song that had great vogue, entitled "Rally Round the Flag."

(Continued to the November 1963 issue)



From the Ostendorf Collection

President Lincoln saw James H. Hackett appear in numerous Shakespearean roles and his correspondence with the actor led to the President's embarrassment when Hackett made public his comments on Shakespeare's plays.