

"The Play is the Thing"

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Due to some bad decisions and poor choices I made in my long ago and misspent youth, there are some people who think that I know something about drama and the theater. I don't. I have been in a few plays, seen a few more, and even read some, but that is where it ends.

I know that there are a few plays that have attained the vague and nebulous status of "classics" that have earned them inclusion in a number of high school and college anthologies (usually in the last chapter of the text) such easily recognizable titles as "The Glass

Menagerie", "Our Town", and "Sunrise at Campobello", but the title on which I want to comment on tonight has never attained such status. Indeed, if not for its one major footnote in American history, it would probably be no more remembered than some of its contemporary works such as "Lydia's Lament" or "Still Waters Run Deep".

The play to which I refer is, of course, "Our American Cousin", the mid-19th Century comedy remembered mainly as the play President and Mrs. Lincoln, along with two guests, attended at Ford's Theatre in Washington City on Good Friday, 1865.

The Lincolns were frequent patrons of the Washington theatre scene. The president during his first administration visited Ford's at least ten times. A new theatre opened in Washington in the spring of 1865. On that particular Good Friday, Tad Lincoln attended a production of "Aladdin" with a friend. The resident once wrote, "Some people think I do wrong to go to the opera and the theater, but it rests me. I love to be alone and yet with the people. I want to get this burden off; to change

the current of my thoughts. A hearty laugh relieves me, and I seem better able after it to bear my cross.”

The April, 1865, cast at Ford’s Theatre consisted of seasoned, capable and competent professionals including Philadelphia-born character actor and comedian Harry Hawk, playing the title character, and who was the only actor on stage when the president was shot. The production ran like clockwork, that is, until the second scene of the third act. Award-winning actor E. A. Southern was appearing in a minor role, against his wishes, but Miss Keene allowed him to “pad” his part with ad-libbed lines and to prance around the stage in a highly amusing way, garnering much laughter and applause. Actor Edwin Brink noted later that he spotted the handsome actor John Wilkes Booth standing and watching the play from behind the last row of chairs in the dress circle near the end of the first scene of act I. He thought nothing of it, knowing that Booth regularly had his mail forwarded to Ford’s. Actress Helen Muzzle later recalled seeing Booth as well from the stage during scene 2 as she delivered her exit line, the cue for Hawk’s line that always got the biggest laugh of the play. Booth knew well that there would be a tremendous peel of laughter following Hawk’s response, and he counted on it hiding the sound of his derringer firing. Hawk uttered the line in response to the exiting Miss Muzzle (“Don’t know the manners of good society, eh? Well, I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal, you sockdologizing old man-trap!”) The word “sockdologizing” was new to the vernacular, a surprise to the audience who responded loudly as Booth knew well they would.

Many contemporary individuals question attendance at a theatre on Good Friday. There were no such taboos in predominantly Protestant Washington City in 1865. Indeed, the management of Ford’s was probably not even aware that it was a Holy Day. They were simply delighted to announce the plans of the presidential party in that it was a

great boost to what had been a mediocre sale of tickets for that evening's performance. Approximately 1,500 people were in the audience that night.

“Our American Cousin” is a three-act farce that tells the story of an awkward, boorish American who inherits a British country estate from his gently impoverished British relatives. It is a case of “slobs versus snobs” laced with mistaken identities and a dialogue full of puns. A happy ending eventually ensues of course.

“Our American Cousin” was written by Tom Taylor, a British playwright, biographer, and journalist who also served for many years as a member of the British civil service, in 1858. Born in England in October of 1817, Taylor enjoyed a successful dual career as civil servant and a journalist including a stint as the editor of the highly successful British magazine “Punch”. Following a successful London run, British actress and entrepreneur Laura Keene brought the play to New York where it ran for a record-breaking 151 performances.

Laura Keene, born Mary Frances Moss, in an obscure English village in 1826, was one of the most successful women of the 19th Century. She first appeared on the London stage as Laura Keene in 1851 in a production of “Lady of Lyons”. Bright and beautiful, the talented Miss Keene appeared in Shakespeare plays as well as in contemporary comedies and dramas on both sides of the Atlantic. In a time when very few women enjoyed careers outside the home, Laura Keene was a theatre manager owning her own theatre company at the Laura Keene Theater in New York. The Good Friday performance of “Our American Cousin” was slated as the final Washington performance of the play and was billed as a benefit for Miss Keene, meaning that she would receive the evening's take at the box office.

Miss Keene had just made her exit when the tragedy struck. She somehow made her way through the large and hysterical crowd to the presidential box carrying a large pitcher of water. Miss Keene cradled

the president's head as doctors probed the wound. It was Miss Keene who formally identified the assassin as John Wilkes Booth and it was she who led the procession bearing the president's body across the street to the Peterson boarding house where he died the following morning. She later gave her blood-stained dress/costume to a relative and it was passed around for years before being dismantled and sold in pieces to museums and private collectors. A four by seven inch swatch of the floral silk skirt sold in the early 2000's for \$120,000!

Miss Keene continued to work in the arts, for a while editing an arts magazine, before dying in 1873 in New Jersey.

President and Mrs. Lincoln's theatre guests on that good friday evening did not escape tragedy either. Major Henry Rathbone and his fiance, Miss Clara Harris, daughter of New York Senator Ira Harris were a part of the Washington social scene. In addition to being engaged, they were also step-siblings, the widower Senator Harris having married Major Rathbone's widowed mother. The major was seriously wounded by a knife held by assassin Wilkes Booth as the Maryland-born actor jumped from the Lincoln's box seat to the stage below. Miss Harris and Major Rathbone were married in July of 1867 and he was assigned to the American consulate in Germany. Three children were born to them. Major Rathbone continued, however, to be haunted by the assassination, at times becoming delusional and violent. At Christmas, 1883, he murdered his wife and attempted suicide. The suicide attempt, however, was unsuccessful and Major Rathbone was confined to a German mental hospital until his death in 1911.

Due to a lack of visitors or attention, the graves of Major and Mrs. Rathbone were "reused" in 1952.

According to family lore, Mrs. Rathbone hanged her dress from the assassination night in a closet in the family's summer home in Albany, New York, and had the closet door bricked up.

Ford's Theatre itself was built in 1833 as the First Baptist Church. That congregation merged with another in 1859 leaving the building vacant until Baltimore-based theatrical entrepreneur John T. Ford leased it and opened Ford's Theatre. A former church member predicted "a dire fate for anyone who turned the former house of worship into a theatre."

In December of 1862, a fire destroyed the building and Ford and his brother rebuilt a larger and grander facility opening on August 27, 1863.

Following the events of April, 1865, the theatre was closed by the War Department as a crime scene. Matthew Brady's photographic studio was allowed to photograph the interior which proved valuable during the reconstruction of the facility. The federal government leased the building from the Fords for \$1,500 a month. Its interior was remodeled so that it did not in any way resemble the former theatre. For a number of years, it served as the National Medical Museum, once even hosting an exhibit that claimed to contain part of the backbone of John Wilkes Booth.

In 1893, tragedy again struck Ford's when 40 feet of the fourth floor collapsed and crashed into the two floors below, killing 22 people and injuring another 65.

The facility was soon restored and housed the Division of records and pensions until 1931.

In the late 1920's, Congress shifted management of the building from the War Department to the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks.

In 1927, U.S. Representative Henry Riggs Rathbone of Illinois presented a bill to the 69th Congress to establish a National War Museum and Veterans' Headquarters. He continued to lobby until his death in 1928. He was the son of Major and Mrs. Rathbone who had accompanied the Lincolns to the theatre in 1865!

During the 1940's and 1950's, the theatre's first floor served as a

Lincoln museum attended annually by thousands of visitors. The theatre was again closed for additional reconstruction in the 1960's and reopened as a working theatre in 1968.

The building received further reconstruction and in 2009 on Lincoln's birthday reopened as a working theatre and interactive, interpretative museum welcoming nearly 500,000 visitors each year.

Revivals of "Our American Cousin" have been virtually nonexistent, but American composer Eric Sawyer did debut an opera in 2008 in Northampton, Massachusetts, the plot of which revolved around the events of April, 1865. It featured a composite of music from the mid-19th Century and the contemporary world.

And so what is there to glean from an examination of this work? Its literary merits are few. There is no great moral or theme. It simply serves as reminder of a time long gone and of the many individuals whose lives were connected and forever changed as a result of their association with "Our American Cousin".