



Spring 2009

Abe's Return Engagement

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Recommended Citation

Steele Brokaw '71, Nancy (2009) "Abe's Return Engagement," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol18/iss1/2>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Abe's Return Engagement

A group of theatre artists, many with Wesleyan connections, combine talents to bring Lincoln back to Bloomington one more time.

Story by Nancy Steele Brokaw '71

Photos by Marc Featherly



Professor Robert Bray and alumna Nancy Brokaw (above) collaborated on the script for *Lincoln's In Town!*, performed in February.

CoffeeHound, Bloomington's cozy, downtown coffee shop. That's where, two years ago, Robert Bray popped the question. Was I interested in collaborating with him on a play about Abraham Lincoln's relationship to McLean County?

Bob, an English professor at Illinois Wesleyan and a highly regarded Lincoln scholar, had been appointed to the McLean County Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission. He had proposed that one of their celebratory projects might be to select and help fund a play, a "dynamic record," as he put it, which would be performed and recorded on Lincoln's 200th birthday.

The script Bob had in mind for us to submit would be an original telling of young, beardless Lincoln's sojourns in Bloomington, set in pre-presidential years, roughly 1838 to 1860. Bob's idea, loosely based on his knowledge of Harold Sinclair's *American Years*, a novel about Bloomington in the time of Lincoln, was that the town of Bloomington would function as a character in the play.

Bloomington, in many respects, was Lincoln's "second hometown." It was here that he practiced law, made friends, occasionally got his hair cut and gave speeches, most

This is the story of how a play came to be. It's a long journey from the germ of an idea to the final curtain call so, for the purpose of explaining all this, let's imagine, hmm . . . a play.

Act One is full of promise. Act Two is the muddy middle. Act Three? Well, you'll have to read on.

ACT ONE

Scene one. My role begins in The

notably the “Lost Speech.” The speech, delivered on May 29, 1856, in Bloomington’s Majors’ Hall, put Lincoln on the map and, some say, launched the Republican Party. A record of the speech itself doesn’t exist, but Bob thought we could make a great scene by using themes and quotations from Lincoln’s other speeches at the time as well as people’s recollections. This would be an example of what he called “imagined history but not history re-imagined.”

As we considered these elements of the play, we also anticipated the challenges. Problem number one: Lincoln himself.

There are over 14,000 biographies of our 16th President. And he has never ceased to fascinate: this complicated, evolving, inspiring, part human/part myth; this working lawyer from Central Illinois who went on to hold our Union together and became one of our greatest leaders. Everyone has their own Lincoln, and watch out if you step on a truth they hold to be self-evident. Their idea is truer than yours and they know it because they read it in a book.

On the other hand, here was a chance to help create a history of Lincoln in McLean County, our county. Taking on the challenge, we rolled up our sleeves and got to work.

Scene two. Bob’s scenario included scenes with Lincoln’s early Bloomington friends, including Jesse Fell and David Davis; barber William Florville; Asahel Gridley, the city’s richest man; frequent political foe Stephen A. Douglas; assorted quilting ladies and many more. I began reading my way through a knee-high stack of Lincoln books. Bob just had to look inside his head.

We began writing scenes. He’d choose one, I’d choose another, and we’d get together every few weeks at the CoffeeHound to read aloud, discuss and select the next scenes to write.

This was a pretty good system for cobbling together a rough draft. We polished it up a bit and submitted it to the commission. They selected it and came up with funding. We’d made it! We were now at square one.

Scene three. As far as a production goes, the script is only one piece of the puzzle. Next we needed a producer, director and production staff.

Marcia Basolo, executive producer of the Bloomington production company Holiday Spectacular, is an intrepid soul. Her company (for which I’ve written for seven years) typically does enormous Christmas and Fourth of July shows with lots of singing and dancing, casts and crew in the hundreds and audiences in the thousands. Marcia and her board said yes, they would produce the show we were now calling Lincoln’s in Town!

Marcia, Bob and I wanted to work with Director Lori Adams, who formerly taught in Illinois Wesleyan’s School of Theatre Arts and is now part of Illinois State University’s

faculty. The same is true of her husband, John Stark, a terrific set designer we hoped we could snag as well. They both came on board and we were ready to set sail.

ACT TWO

Scene one. Middles of shows are often difficult. The initial burst of energy has dissipated and there are so many things to be decided, rethought and decided again.

As the summer of 2007 rolled around, Lori was asking for revisions. Bob and I decided that I would work on making the script stage-ready while he provided historical backup and prepared the program notes.

We were trying to do a show that would appeal to Lincoln aficionados as well as to people who knew little beyond their third-grade textbooks. Illinois Wesleyan had agreed to print a keepsake booklet containing Bob's in-depth, scene-by-scene, program notes. That would appeal to the Lincoln buffs.

To relate the play to a more general audience, I developed two onstage storytellers. "Grandpa" was played by Ron Emmons, an adjunct professor at Illinois Wesleyan and husband of IWU Physics Professor Linda French. His "grandson," Sawyer, was a role written expressly for Bloomington actor Sawyer Henderson, age 11. The show opens with the pair sitting outside a recreated Bloomington railroad depot, waiting for Lincoln's train to arrive. As night turns to dawn, Grandpa tells Sawyer his stories of the President. Each story (actually a scene) was like a chapter in a book and they were turning the pages. Grandpa and Sawyer added a narrative tension to the show, too. Where was that train? Why was it taking so long?

Scene two. Polishing up the words took much of the summer. "Forthright, rhythmic, muscular, beautiful but never pretty" — that's how Newsweek arts editor Malcolm Jones describes Lincoln's writing style. We wanted the style of the play to feel like that, too.



Actor John Fischer portrayed a young, beardless Lincoln in the days before his presidency.

Grandpa got a speech I really loved. It talked about Lincoln's circuit-riding days in Central Illinois and how they gave him deep roots and mettle, like the prairie grass. For good measure I threw in some poetic language about jars of put-up peaches in a root cellar. I loved the poetic image of those peaches lined up on a shelf, the way I imagined Lincoln's Illinois experiences were stored inside of him, helping develop the skills he needed to save the Union.

Lori and I sipped cold drinks on my back porch and read scenes aloud. We'd decide on changes, sometimes just a few lines here or there. But fixing a few lines, at this juncture, took hours. The words needed to sound just right in the actor's mouth and Bob needed to verify content changes.

One day, as the apples were beginning to drop from our tree, Lori arched her eyebrow and said, "We've got a script."

Scene three. Marcia, in the meantime, was setting production wheels in motion, booking the venue, working with The Pantagraph on a logo, devising budgets and more.

Lori needed to cast the actors. Who would play Lincoln? She wanted John Fischer, a tall, trained actor with an intelligent, thoughtful face. He said "No" and later "Maybe" and finally "Yes."

That was huge.

Scene four. Lori went after some of the best stage-production people in town and we got them. We needed 31 actors in addition to Lincoln. Again, she went after the best — including Chris Bohne, a Wesleyan theatre arts major from the class of '81 — and we got them. There was something special about working on this show, as we heard again and again.

Another Illinois Wesleyan graduate, Jeannie (Walker) Breitweiser '72, took on the task of props, with help from A. Gridley Antiques in Bloomington.

State Farm Insurance, always a good neighbor to education, agreed to film the production and make DVDs for distribution to McLean County schools and libraries.

We rehearsed scenes in October and November and then gave it all a rest in December when many of us were putting up the Holiday Spectacular Christmas show. In January, rehearsals began again. Grandpa and Sawyer, both wonderful actors, developed a bond. Lincoln grew ever more Lincolnesque.

Costumes arrived from Chicago in late January. The men looked handsome and comfortable in suspender pants and frock coats. The women looked beautiful and uncomfortable in corsets and hoop skirts.

The production crew found more ways to breathe life into the story. Sound designer Aaron Paolucci wove together tracks with a train's hissing steam engine, crickets in the night, fiddle music, battle sounds and crowd noises. Julie Mack, the lighting designer, crafted May sunshine, late afternoon sepia light for Lincoln's Lost Speech and, at the play's end, dawn rising and the light of the steam engine pulling Mr. Lincoln's train.

Jeannie came up with dozens of authentic mid-19th century props: a barber's brush, whiskey glasses, a cake stand, spectacles and more, all carrying the heft and craftsmanship of another century. John Stark's set design was spare, evocative and matched the language.

The actors got better every night; that's what actors do. Some of the stage business was tricky. For example, while delivering lines, Billy the Barber had to give Asahel Gridley a haircut and a shave.

All these ways of telling the story were stitched together. Hopefully, the production would appear seamless to the audience.

Scene five. By early February, everyone was tired. Lori cut my lines about the peaches in the root cellar; good poetry doesn't necessarily make good dialogue. Several people had serious health problems. Bob had to keep readjusting the program to reflect changes. We often rehearsed and then met long into the night despite day jobs.

We also worked hard at promoting the show; doing radio and print interviews, putting up billboards, wearing buttons and cajoling our friends. The Pantagraph ran big ads in its news pages.

We needed to sell seats for three performances at the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts (BCPA). Would anyone come?

ACT THREE



Lincoln meets with his friend Judge David Davis, played by local actor David Flanders.

Scene one. One week before the show opened, we moved into the recently-restored, 1920s-era BCPA. It was a lovely venue for the show. Every night we filled the backstage green room with food, laughter and conversation. In a sort of meta-narrative, the cast became the tight-knit community offstage that they portrayed onstage.

That's not to say that there weren't occasional kerfuffles; everyone was trying hard but there was so much left to do. Scene transitions are notoriously

tricky and had to get worked out during this final week. We needed costumed cast members to move set pieces while windows and walls were flying in and lights were shifting and sound design was playing. Marcia made a 5 a.m. run to Chicago. I had to recalibrate some lines. Jeannie had last-minute set dressing. Bob went to Springfield for a formal Lincoln dinner attended by President Obama. Lori kept us all on track, figuratively and literally.

At the end of the show, Mr. Lincoln's train arrives and the entire cast lines up along the railroad track, dawn rising, their faces illuminated in train light. It's actually Lincoln's funeral train (in theater-talk, a "reveal"), pulling into Bloomington for the last of its stops before reaching Springfield, where the President was laid to rest. We had to get that right — not mawkish, but reverential and respectful, hopefully packing an emotional punch.

At last, it was Friday the 13th of February: opening night.

Scene two. Lincoln's in Town! played to three nearly sold-out audiences and won standing ovations. People were talking, laughing, thinking, even crying, and saying this was a Lincoln they didn't know so well before; this early Lincoln who walked among our forefathers here in Bloomington.

I saw Bob in the hallway after the final performance with a smile on his face. I was smiling, too. "Congratulations," he said. "Congratulations," I said back.

We had done what we set out to do. Lincoln was in town, one last time.

Curtain.