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Faculty and Alumna Bring Lincoln to Town

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Celebrations marking the 200th birthday of Illinois' most famous adopted son will dot the nation's map this week, but here in Bloomington, Ill. Abraham Lincoln is getting star treatment in an original play co-written by an Illinois Wesleyan University professor and alumna titled *Lincoln's in Town!*

Sponsored by The McLean County Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, the production is one of several events to be held in refection of Bloomington's unofficial status as the 14th President's second home. "There's a big difference between Lincoln slept here and Lincoln worked here, had friends here, and launched his presidential bid here," said Nancy Steele Brokaw, a 1972 Illinois Wesleyan graduate, who wrote the play with Illinois Wesleyan R. Forrest Colwell Professor of English Robert Bray.

Lincoln's in Town!, which dramatizes a young, beardless Lincoln's numerous sojourns to Bloomington, will hit the stage at the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts at 7:30 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 13. Two more performances will run on Saturday evening at the same time and Sunday afternoon at 2 p.m.

The play draws on local events from 1838 to 1860 and is narrated by a grandfather, played by Illinois Wesleyan adjunct instructor Ron Emmonus, speaking to his young grandson as the pair waits for the President's train to arrive in town once more. Many of Lincoln's closest supporters lived in Bloomington, notably Jesse Fell and David Davis. As a circuit lawyer, Lincoln developed connections with Illinois Wesleyan founders Linus Graves and William H. Holmes. Another founder, Peter Cartwright, became his political rival for the House of Representatives in 1846.

"Lincoln and Bloomington are historically intertwined," according to Bray, a noted Lincoln scholar. Most significantly, on May 29, 1856, Lincoln announced his candidacy for President at the old Majors' Hall on the corner of East Street and Front Street downtown, while delivering a speech dubbed "The Lost Speech" because no transcript of it exists. Lincoln lore says that the speech was so powerful it transfixed the audience in a way that made it impossible

for anyone to take notes, though many scholars actually believe that the campaign suppressed its record because it was too divisive an indictment of slavery.

The Lost Speech figures prominently into the play, and Bray took dramatic license to create it using themes and platforms from Lincoln's other speeches. "We're taking a chance and using parts of the House Divided speech he gave two years later. It's hardly something that everyone accepts," said Bray, "but I doubt we will hear many gasps from the audience."

According to Brokaw, what Bray has accomplished is "history imagined not imagined history." A local playwright and former student of Bray's, Brokaw has helped organize Holiday Spectacular, Inc. shows in the past, but said that *Lincoln's in Town!* is a special challenge. "We wrote the play to appeal to a wide audience. For those who want scholastic depth, Bob has an encyclopedic knowledge of Lincoln and that's reflected in the program notes," she said. The free souvenir booklet, provided by Illinois Wesleyan Printing Services, goes into detail about the historical legacy of Lincoln and history of Bloomington.

For audiences looking for a satisfying theatrical experience, Brokaw said the play is more than a history lesson. "I didn't know a lot about the facts of Lincoln's life going in, so I've learned a lot. But Lincoln has always been in my DNA, and I think what the play really captures is what it means to be from this area, and how our 'prairie sense' gave President Lincoln the mettle to keep this nation together," she said.

For additional information about *Lincoln's in Town*, visit The Bloomington Cultural District Web site. Tickets are \$19 for adults and \$10 for children 14 and under, and can be purchased online at the Web site or by phone at (309) 434-2777.

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