

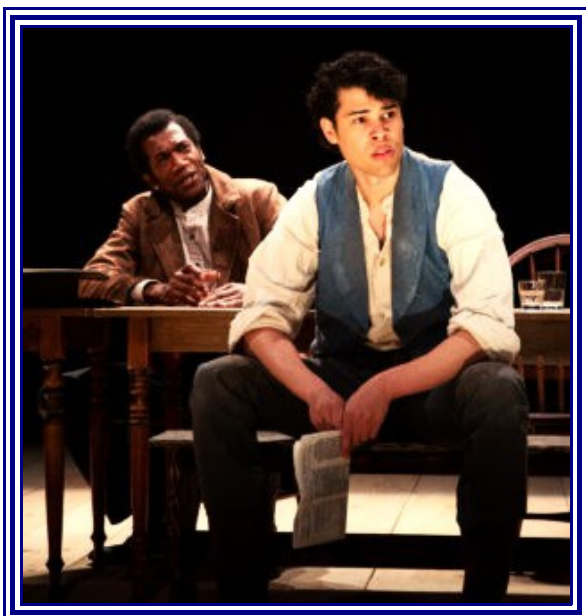
Berkshire Theatre Group, Stockbridge, MA

Abe Lincoln in Illinois by Robert E. Sherwood. Directed by David Auburn.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“I leave now with these new whiskers. . .of which I hope you approve.”

In 1938 the role of Abraham Lincoln in Robert E. Sherwood’s play “Abe Lincoln in Illinois” made Raymond Massey, a film character heavy, into a bonafide Broadway star. The next year, thanks to Sherwood’s insistence, the same role made him a true Hollywood star. This year director David Auburn has given that role to three different actors (one for each act of the play) and the impression is something quite different from the author’s intent. While the author saw his character as three different aspects of a man with a fourth about to emerge, this director sees the man as totally different in different stages of his growth.



Robert G. McKay, Brandon Dial as Abe 1;
Photo: David Dashiell

In fact, Auburn’s picture of pre-Civil War America is uniquely his own and doesn’t reflect the time period of the play in any significant, historical way. In Lincoln’s time Black Men didn’t exist in any meaningful way. The new Republican party wouldn’t have it any other way. Perhaps Mr. Auburn is making his own political statement in this production, one meant to prove the awful irrelevance of today’s Trumpian Republicans, a far cry from that of Lincoln’s fledgling party.

They say, in our time, we need to be both color-blind and gender-neutral when it comes to live theater (not so in film or TV, though). In this production it becomes essential. Young, tall, white male Brandon Dial plays the youngest Abe who loves, loses and fights back his tears. He plays the role very well. In Act Two, young, tall, handsome, female Kelli Simpkins assumes the role and gives it a strong masculine twist as Abe suffers through indecision about life choices and once again runs away from his destiny. Act Three brings us middle-aged, tall, Black, male Robert G. McKay as an Abe who accepts his reality and



Julian Tushabe, Kelli Simpkins as Abe 2;
Photo: David Dashiell



Rebecca Brooksher, Corinna May, Robert G. McKay as Abe; David Adkins; Photo: David Dashiell

works to make it real in spite of himself. Like his two former Abes, he delivers a fine, well developed picture of Lincoln at a time of his life in which he defends choices that define the man he became as our 16th President.

Director Auburn delivers decently although his ultimate mistake is holding back Abe 3 which diminishes the emotional effect of Sherwood's script. He delivers well in the Lincoln-Douglas debate scene (with an extraordinary Corinna May as Stephen Douglas) but leaves out the emotional stress of Abe's departure by train for Washington, leaving behind all of the fine though difficult people in Illinois who have supported him for so long. The speech is too controlled and calm and is addressed to the audience rather than to his friends which reduces the emotional impact of the ending of the play far too much.

The eleven member company undertake thirty different parts and handle them very well. Audience favorite David Adkins plays Lincoln's brother-in-law Ninian Edwards beautifully with just the right touch of cynicism in his voice. Sean Fagan delivers a sincere Billy Herndon, Abe's devoted law clerk. Isadora Wolfe gives Ann Rutledge a diffident importance in the first act and Lynette R. Freeman is a perfect Elizabeth Todd Edwards in the second act.

Too pretty and too tall for Mary Todd, actress Rebecca Brooksher creates the woman who forced Abe Lincoln to become the man we know and revere. We can feel her heat and her drive in her performance. We know and understand who Mary is and what she needs to complete her life as she has dreamed it. When Brooksher lets loose her agony and anticipation she is the firebrand Mary became, the woman who drove herself mad toward the end of her life. This is commanding performance, an unforgettable rendition of a role. One could almost re-christen the play "Mary Todd in Illinois."

The production is a fine one with scenic pieces designed by Bill Clarke, perfect costumes readied by Amanda Roberga and lighting designed by Seth Reiser. Isadora Wolfe also acted as Movement Director and the highly choreographed scene changes were excellent.

The key and the core of this show is Robert E. Sherwood's wonderful play which not only takes us on a trip through history but also puts us into a very contemporary mindset as our modern day politics soar around us. This was an extremely timely take on today's exploding political scene especially as Lincoln was our first Republican Head of State and we can leave the theater thinking about the next one. .

.perhaps. Lincoln was a gentle, self-effacing man who wanted to be liked, but he was assassinated by political rivals. Lessons learned and relearned as we watch a life emerge and board a train to that inevitable ending we know about before we see the play.



Lynette R. Freeman, David Adkins, Robert G. McKay, Shawn Fagan, Julian Tushabe, Evan Dibbs; Photo: David Dashiell

+ 06/15/2024 +

Abe Lincoln in Illinois plays at the Berkshire Theatre Group's Unicorn Theatre, 6 East Street, Stockbridge, Massachusetts through July 14. For information and tickets go to: BerkshireTheatreGroup.org or call 413-997-4444.