

culture

HISTORICAL ATTRACTIONS MUSEUMS BOOKS SIGNINGS ART OPERA LITERATURE SYMPHONY THEATER

Music, Civil War come together in 'Reunion'

By LUCIA ANDERSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

WASHINGTON—"Reunion" is neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring, as the saying goes. It most closely resembles a griffin or another of those mythical beasts composed of disparate parts cobbled together.

Part historical narrative, part music hall parody, "Reunion" is billed as "a musical epic in miniature."

Author Jack Kyrieleison was inspired by Ken Burns' public-television epic on the Civil War. Like Burns, Kyrieleison uses real diaries, letters and newspaper dispatches to tell the (considerably condensed) story. To these, he has added popular songs of the period and framed the whole thing as a vaudeville act being presented on the 25th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's assassination.

True to the sensibilities of the period, the show is mawkishly sentimental and thunderingly melodramatic. It is consciously manipulative, and dang if it doesn't work a good percentage of the time.

One particularly effective play: The actor-manager of the fictional vaudeville troupe is the historical actor who was onstage at Ford's Theatre when Lincoln was shot. Watching him recount the events of that evening in

WANT TO GO?

WHAT: 'Reunion'
WHEN: Through May
WHERE: Ford's Theatre, 511 Tenth St., N.W., Washington
HOW MUCH: \$27 to \$43
INFORMATION: 202/347-4833

the space where they occurred is just plain spooky.

Unreconstructed secessionists might want to skip "Reunion": the show is written entirely from the Union point of view. It focuses first on Lincoln's ineffectual search for a competent leader for his army, then picks up on the slavery issue after the Emancipation Proclamation. Along the way it touches on patriotism, political ideals and the war's wanton waste of human lives.

All of the characters in the play are portrayed by six actors.

The ringing gospel tones of Harriett D. Foy and the rich baritone of James Stovall add luster to such traditional songs as "Wasn't That a Wide River" and "Steal Away."

Whitney Webster is particularly effective in her portrayal of a volunteer nurse in "Somebody's Darling," a poignant song about a sol-



STAN BAROUH

'Reunion, A Musical Epic In Miniature,' a musical story about Union men and women, stars (left to right) Whitney Webster, Joe Cassidy, Harriett D. Foy, James Stovall and Ric Ryder.

dier's death. Her crystalline soprano is put to good use in a number of other sentimental ballads as well.

Tenor Ric Ryder plays the generic foot soldier, among other roles, and does very well, particularly in "Grafted into the Army" and "Tenting on the Old Camp Ground."

James Judy is mostly taken up with playing Gen. George McClellan, and Joe Cassidy is similarly occupied with the

character of Lincoln's secretary, so they don't get to sing as much, but do a competent job with the acting.

The set is very simple, reminiscent of William Shakespeare's Globe Theater, with a little central stage and balconies above. Its versatility works well for an episodic play like "Reunion."

The use of "magic lantern"

slides illustrating the spoken material adds visual impact.

"Reunion" has a problem deciding whether it's going to be a depiction of the horrors of the Civil War or a parody of 19th-century theatrical traditions. Still, it will probably be a great addition to all those high school tours poised to descend on the Capital City.

Kyrieleison has constructed a comprehensive Web site at www.civilwarmusical.com for those who want more information about the show.