

EXTRA

A&amp;E

# Great 'Reunion' at Ford's



Stan Barouh

Whitney Webster (front) sings a song during "Reunion, A Musical Epic in Miniature," as James Judy (back, left), Joe Cassidy and Ric Ryder look on.

By ROGER MEERSMAN  
Journal theater critic

Producing artistic director Frankie Hewitt has done herself and Ford's proud by presenting a show which seems to have been fated to play this historic theater in which President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated on April 14, 1865.

With a book by Jack Kyrieleison, story by Kyrieleison and Ron Holgate and traditional music arranged by Michael O'Flaherty, "Reunion: A Musical Epic in Miniature" is vastly entertaining, deeply moving and intellectually fascinating.

Kyrieleison weaves together historical fact and material taken from actual speeches, comments, letters, diaries, newspaper accounts and discourse of the people who lived the Civil War with the music of the day, which gives a popular vision and response to the calamitous events. By the time the evening is over, you not only have been captivated by the superb performances, songs and Holgate's staging, you have painlessly absorbed more knowledge and information about the Civil War than you

## CITY STAGE

### 'Reunion: A Musical Epic in Miniature'

★★★★

"Reunion: A Musical Epic in Miniature" at Ford's Theatre, 511 Tenth St. N.W., in Washington through June 18. Call (202) 347-4833.

ever thought imaginable in so short a time.

Kyrieleison allows the people of the time to speak for themselves, both in prose and music through the guise of Harry Hawk's Company, a troupe of performers which has arrived here, April 14, 1890, as one of the traveling features of the Lyceum Circuit, which provides entertainment, lectures, exhibits, etc., to

Please see REUNION, E32

# Ford's 'Reunion'

## REUNION from E4

various cities for both entertainment and enlightenment.

Hawk (James Judy) reminds us that it has been a quarter-of-a-century to the day, in fact, almost to the hour, that he found himself on "center stage, in the tragic drama that shook the Republic to its very foundations." And it is true that Hawk was on stage at Ford's in "My American Cousin" (a comedy) when John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln. The emotional impact generated by sitting in Ford's, looking at the very box where Lincoln was shot, while the scene, later in the evening, is being re-created for us, cannot be experienced anywhere but here. It truly is a great moment in theater.

Hawk continues to explain that his company has fallen on hard times, and instead of the usual large number of performers you expected, he could only afford to bring himself and five others — Augustin Lovecraft (Joe Cassidy), Cassie Drumwright (Harriet D. Foy), Tom Trudgett (Ric Ryder), Hannibal Drumwright (James Stovall) and Cordelia Hopewell (Whitney Webster). And to substitute for the elaborate scenery, he has brought that modern marvel, the Magic Lantern, which will project pictures at the top of the stage.

The evening then takes off at a gallop as Hawk announces the company's production of "REUNION!! The American Iliad!" The play covers the time from Lincoln's election to his death, focusing on the war. We never see Lincoln, but what he has to say is communicated by his young secretary, played by Lovecraft. Lincoln's main concern is trying to find a general who will fight, especially since General McClellan, played by Hawk himself, will not take his Army of the Potomac into battle. Finally, after going through a number of generals, Lincoln ends up with the successful Ulysses S. Grant.

The role of McClellan is the most

complex and dramatically viable character in the musical, although a number of famous and important people are portrayed, as are ordinary folk. The production demands an incredibly versatile cast who must act a number of different characters, perform a variety of dances and sing both solo and ensemble.

Because the source of the prose is not always identified by author or is the Hawk Company performer identified by name, it is difficult to assess justifiable praise to individual members of the cast. They all are as fine as you could wish.

Amazingly, thanks to Holgate's staging, O'Flaherty's distinctive musical arrangements, the visual projections high on the back wall and the extraordinary vocal ability of the cast, even the most familiar of the 27 then-contemporary, traditional songs take on enhanced meaning in "Reunion." Each song bears a direct relation to the spoken material, either by reflecting on what is being said, by intensifying the emotional thrust of the spoken line or situation or by providing a rhythmic counterpoint to the action, especially in the intricate march numbers. Songs of which you may be very familiar — such as "Home Sweet Home" (Foy) and "Beautiful Dreamer" (Webster and Ryder) sound new now and take on a new meaning and significance.

Certain songs speak directly to the personal pain felt by those involved in the Civil War. You cannot help but be touched by the poignancy of Foy's and Stovall's rendition of "Wake Up Nicodemus" and "Steal Away," or by the stirring sense of patriotism and pride emanating from "May God Save the Union" (Company), "Marching Along" (Judy, Company) and the Company's performance of "Battle Cry of Freedom/Heaven Bound Soldier."

A well-deserved cheering, rousing, standing ovation has been greeting "Reunion" at each performance. Why not go to Ford's and join in the excitement? You won't be disappointed.