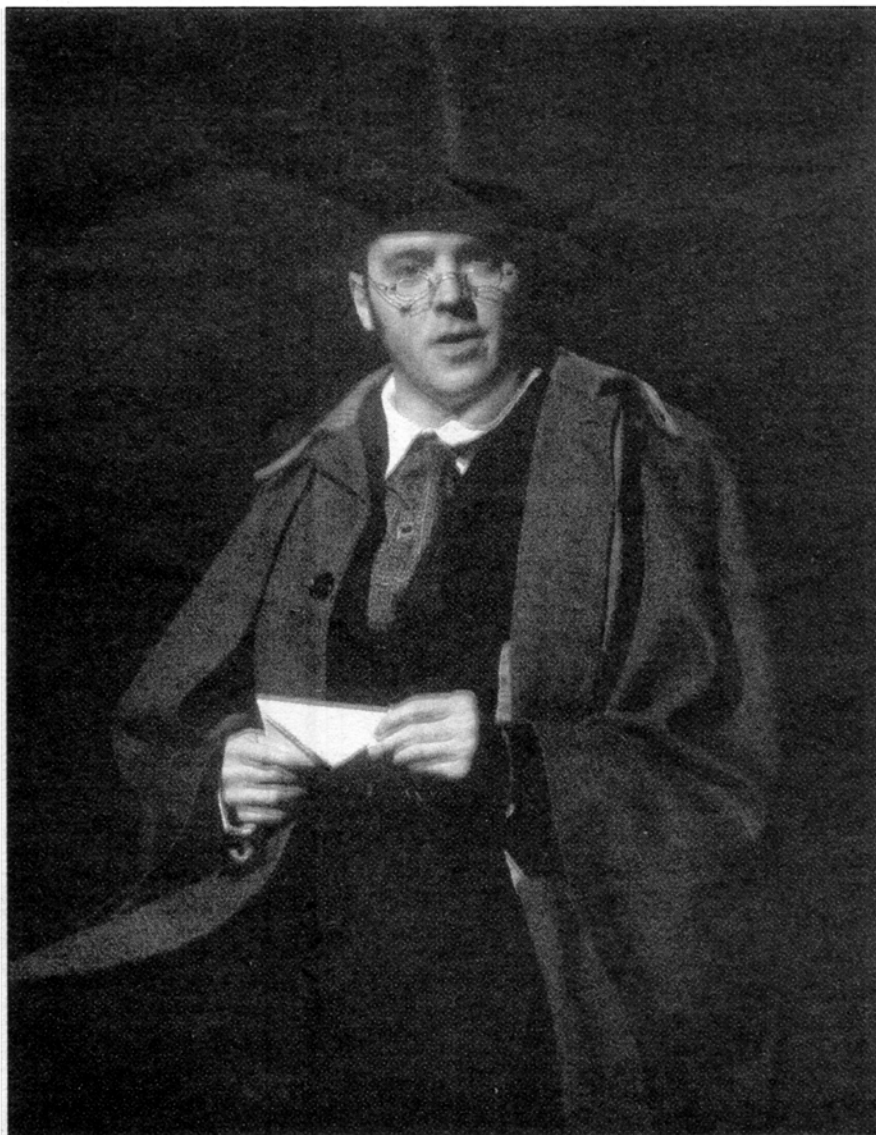


On Stage

THEATER • DANCE



Joe Cassidy plays Lincoln's secretary in "Reunion."

BY STAN BAROUH

In Lincoln's Shadow

"Reunion"
Ford's Theatre

Through June 18
Tickets: 703/218-6500

KENSINGTON playwright Jack Kyrieleison's musical "Reunion" centers on the Civil War, using a six-member vaudeville troupe to resurrect the letters, diaries, speeches and songs of that profoundly divisive era. But its commander in chief and most famous personage is never seen.

Abraham Lincoln's words are spoken by a character identified as his secretary (a composite of three men who served the president). An empty chair stands in for the man who saved the republic. The reason for keeping the main character out of view, says Kyrieleison, is that a legend like Lincoln can never be convincingly impersonated. People know too much about him already and are emotionally attached to their fantasy of the man.

"The moment you trundle an actor out there in a stove-pipe hat, either he meets the audience's expectations, he exceeds them or he falls far below them," says Kyrieleison. "He's such a huge character—either an amiable yokel or a very crafty politician, either very homely or tremendously attractive. We bounce ourselves up against the audience's expectations, and this play moves too fast for that." Kyrieleison says the solution he reached (at the suggestion of his wife) was to

leave Lincoln to the audience's imagination and use the figure of his secretary—played by Joe Cassidy—as a stand-in for the public, "reacting to Lincoln as we might have," he says. "He's frustrated at times, then grows to like and respect him." But though Lincoln is left to the mind's eye in "Reunion," he is very real to the playwright, who researched and wrote this production over a number of years.

"I do find it easy to conjure up his presence," says Kyrieleison, describing the slain president as "absolutely able to focus on his objective, whatever it happened to be, and to subjugate his ego to it."

And while it may seem a cliché, he says Lincoln did in fact embody the very best of what distinguished this young country from the Old World. He was the archetypal American, the man who rose from simple beginnings to lead the nation—another reason that depicting him onstage would be a tricky endeavor. "First and foremost he revered the individual," says Kyrieleison. "Unlike in Europe, in this country there were no restrictions on how high a man could rise. The individual was paramount here, and I think he was the prime example of that."

— Sarah Kaufman