

Style

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Theater

Civil War Musical Resonates At Ford's

'Reunion' Offers an
Affecting History

By NELSON PRESSLEY
Special to The Washington Post

If documentary filmmaker Ken Burns ever wrote a musical, it might look and sound a lot like "Reunion," the new Civil War show at Ford's Theatre. Burns's methodical, scholarly style is all over "Reunion," which makes it peculiar theatrically. But the musical sometimes manages to be captivating anyway as it uses archival material—writings from at least 75 named sources, plus period songs—in its sweep from the war's beginnings through Lincoln's assassination.



BY STAN BAROUH

The play's Civil War vignettes feature period music and other archival material.

What to call such a piece? Docu-musical seems right, but "Reunion" creator Jack Kyrleison subtitles it "A Musical Epic in Miniature," the "miniature" referring to the show's small scale. Six versatile singer-actors play the six versatile singer-actors of a scrappy late-19th-century traveling troupe led by Harry Hawk, the real-life performer who happened

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BY STAN BAROCH

Jack Kyrleleison's theatrical hybrid is as intriguing as it is unusual.

At Ford's, a Return to the Scene of the Crime

THEATER, From C1

to be onstage at Ford's in "Our American Cousin" the night Abraham Lincoln was shot. Hawk tells the audience that his company has fashioned a show about the war using the words of people who were there. In music hall style, off they go.

It works like this: The actors enact newsy scenes composed from newspaper reports, letters from soldiers, etc., and then sing traditional songs arranged by Michael O'Flaherty (and played by musical director Robert Lamont's small pit orchestra). Kyrleleison, who wrote the show's book (he shares story credit with director Ron Holgate), stitches snippets of letters, diaries, speeches and so on through much of the music.

For instance, "Comrades, Fill No Glass for Me" was a stern teetotaling anthem of the time; between the verses, Kyrleleison's performers (or Hawk's, if you like) recite from letters testifying to the serious drinking problem among Gen. George McClellan's troops.

Likewise, the patriotic march "We'll

Fight for Uncle Abe" is intercut with a hot exchange of insults between Lincoln and McClellan, who were in such opposition about how to conduct the war that McClellan challenged Lincoln for the presidency in 1864.

James Judy plays Hawk, who—since it's his company—portrays the pompous general. McClellan is, by default, the starring role; Lincoln is never seen, and his words are delivered by a smart young character known as his secretary. The secretary is played by the Hawk company actor Augustin Lovcraft, who is played by Joe Cassidy.

This Chinese-box effect can be disorienting, you may often wonder precisely who is supposed to be speaking or singing, since there aren't many clearly delineated figures on the stage other than McClellan and the secretary. The identities of the 19th-century actors are terribly vague—irrelevant really, except for Hawk—and the company is oddly devised (the notion that an 1890 acting company would be racially integrated particularly strains credibility).

The consequence of having an invisible main character and a wash of anonymous faces is that Kyrleleison's show never fully harnesses the power of drama, and it's a palpable limitation. Instead he takes what power he can from his great dramatic subject, the war. Kyrleleison wisely restricts his focus, concentrating mainly on two of the North's major problems: whether Lincoln can find a general capable of beating the South, and whether the North really knows what it's fighting for (to save the Union, or to end slavery?).

The performers are models of professionalism and efficiency. James Stovall brings a rich voice and a strong presence, as does Harriett D. Foy. Ric Ryder and Whitney Webster prove to be bright and adaptable, and the entire cast is kept in brisk motion on the largely open stage by Holgate (who won a Tony Award in 1969 for his supporting performance in a very different historical musical, "1776").

There are times when the creative team does terrifically inventive things with this nonfiction material. Late in the second act, Webster appears like an angel on the

platform above the stage (an area used by set designer Douglas Huszti mostly for projecting headlines and old photographs) and sings a painfully gorgeous version of "Beautiful Dreamer." Meanwhile, a soldier (Ryder) who is losing his leg tells his harrowing tale on the ground below.

There is also the unnerving spectacle of seeing John Wilkes Booth on Ford's stage, performing in something called "The Apostate" (the title couldn't be richer, given Booth's view of Lincoln) and glaring up at Lincoln's box. For anyone who has ever sensed Lincoln's presence at Ford's—a good long look at his box above the stage, which remains as it was on April 14, 1865, usually does the trick—that brief moment is a haunting glimpse into history.

Reunion: A Musical Epic in Miniature, book by Jack Kyrleleison, story by Jack Kyrleleison and Ron Holgate, musical staging by Karen Azenberg, traditional music arranged by Michael O'Flaherty. Lights, Jeff Crother, costumes, Ian Fimmel, orchestrations, Andrew Wilder. Through June 18 at Ford's Theatre, 511 10th St. N.W. Call 703-218-6500 or 1-800-955-5566.