

and Arts Entertainment

SECTION D

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Photos by Maya Alleruzzo/The Washington Times

"Reunion," the play by Jack Kyrieleison (above), centers on Harry Hawk, the actor on stage at Ford's Theatre when President Lincoln was shot.

Play at Ford's Theatre is union of fact, fiction

By Michele Reaves
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

More than a century after the assassination of President Lincoln, Harry Hawk — the actor who witnessed the historic shooting from center stage — returns to Ford's Theatre.

Hawk is resurrected in playwright Jack Kyrieleison's "Reunion: A Musical Epic in Miniature," playing through June 18 at Ford's.

"When I researched the assassination, I found a playbill from 'Our American Cousin,'" says Mr. Kyrieleison, a Kensington resident. "I learned the actor onstage was Harry Hawk. The moment the assassination occurred, he delivered his last line, which was the punch line. It turned into a footnote."

A narrative of the Civil War, this play within a play, introduces Hawk — portrayed by James Judy — as the manager of a vaudeville troupe. The show, performed in 19th-century theater style, uses posters, magic lanterns, music-hall and minstrel tunes, and melodrama to re-enact the Union's struggle for victory as seen

through the eyes of its key players.

Initially, "I was trying to come from both [the Union and the Confederate] sides. The first draft reflected that," Mr. Kyrieleison says, recalling the mammoth size of his original manuscript.

But the Union's struggle to win amid changing generals and other weaknesses drew the rookie playwright to tell the story from the Union's perspective, he says.

"I'd like [the audience] to understand how unlikely it was that the Union would prevail, how close the Union came to falling apart," Mr. Kyrieleison says.

Diaries, letters, memoirs and books written by more than 75 eyewitnesses, including Union Gen. George McClellan, black leader Frederick Douglass, writers Nathaniel Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott, and abolitionist Harriet Tubman, serve as the base for the dialogue.

For three years, Mr. Kyrieleison scoured libraries across the country for these firsthand accounts.

A longtime actor before he wrote

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James Judy (left) is Harry Hawke, the manager of a vaudeville troupe, in "Reunion," which also stars Ric Ryder (center) and Joe Cassidy.

assassination of Lincoln, Mr. Kyrieleison says. "Out of deference to Edwin's feelings, [Hawk] wouldn't say anything," he says.

Inspired by documentary filmmaker Ken Burns' "The Civil War" series, Mr. Kyrieleison began this project to fill a void in modern theater. "Just the sheer volume of things being bought about the Civil War [shows] there is a vast audience [interested in it], but not a lot [is offered] in theater," he says.

The enterprising actor also wanted to generate more work for himself by creating a two-man show. "I set my sights small, and it became big," says Mr. Kyrieleison, whose show now boasts six roles and 26 songs. "I just thought it would be nice to be paid for the acting and writing at the same time."

Life on the stage was not his original career goal. A graduate of Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, he planned to join the suit-clad professionals in the District. Landing the lead role in a play at his alma mater, the University of Maryland, changed his perspective, however.

"I tried out for a play and got the lead and detoured from my life as a political scientist" on his way to joining a legion of Washington lawyers, Mr. Kyrieleison, 49, says.

Cultivating his skill in the original company at now-defunct Harlequin Dinner Theatre in Rockville, he met his wife, Michele Mundell, a



Photo by Maya Alleruzzo/The Washington Times

James Stovall (right) is Hannibal Drumwright in "Reunion: A Musical Epic in Miniature."

local film and video makeup stylist. He met Tony Award winner Ron Holgate, "Reunion's" director, while working the theater circuit in New York. "Ron and I had worked together on probably a half-dozen shows over the past few years," Mr. Kyrieleison says.

Doubting his ability as a writer Mr. Kyrieleison asked Mr. Holgate to read his rough draft. "The Battle Cry for Freedom," the play's origi-

nal title, formed from their collaborated revisions.

The play was produced under the original name, but Mr. Kyrieleison decided to change the name to clarify its message.

"The Battle Cry for Freedom" gave an erroneous idea of what the play is all about," he says. "[The Civil War] was not a monolithic black-and-white situation."

Mr. Kyrieleison says he always wanted the play to be staged at Ford's Theatre, but it nearly missed the chance.

"We had somehow gotten the misimpression that Ford was not interested in doing anything around the assassination," he says.

A New York newspaper's positive review, appearing the day after the show closed in Manhattan, brought the play to the attention of Ford's staff.

"They saw it, called the show's commercial producer and negotiated for the rights," he says.

WHAT: "Reunion: A Musical Epic in Miniature"

WHERE: Ford's Theatre, 511 10th St. NW (www.fordstheatre.org)

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, except tomorrow; 1 p.m. Thursday, except next week; and

2:30 p.m. Sunday. Through June 18

TICKETS: \$27 to \$43

PHONE: 703/218-6500, 800/955-5566 (or www.itsickets.com)