

THEATER / Julie Hyman

It is April 14, 1865. Harry Hawk, lead actor in the evening's performance at Ford's Theatre, is speaking. A single shot rings out. A mustachioed man, dagger in hand, leaps from a balcony and runs toward Hawk, who backs away. The man flees backstage and disappears.

From the president's box, a female voice cries out over and over in the ensuing silence.

This moment is re-created to eerie dramatic effect in "Reunion: A Musical Epic in Miniature" at Ford's Theatre. The 135 years since President Lincoln's assassination seem to melt away as Hawk, played by James Judy, paints the fateful night in action and words.

The scene is the climax of the performance, and a worthy one. "Reunion" chronicles Lincoln's presidency and the way he, and the country, struggled through the Civil War.

Playwright Jack Kyrieleison cleverly weaves together songs of the day along with spoken excerpts from Civil War-era letters and speeches written by Lincoln, Louisa May Alcott, Gen. George McClellan and Frederick Douglass, as well as reminiscences of less well-known citizens who lived through the war.

The play is set 25 years after John Wilkes Booth shot the president. Mr. Hawk now acts and sings with a traveling band of actors performing "Reunion, The American Iliad." The six players in the troupe take on varying roles throughout the

Cast members (from left) Whitney Webster, Harriett D. Foy, James Stovall, Joe Cassidy and Ric Ryder tell the stories of Union men and women during the Civil War.

'Tragic event at Ford's revisited Reunion' puts Lincoln's assassination in context

performance, though Hawk's chief role is as Gen. McClellan. Actor Augustin Lovcraft, played by Joe Cassidy, frequently portrays Lincoln's secretary, and his observations about the war and its chief figures are particularly insightful.

The "epic in miniature" character of "Reunion" — both the frame play and the play-within-a-play — is revealed quickly. The performance has a frantic feel, since there's so much to communicate in a short time. But that doesn't take away from the play; rather, it shows how harried

and uncertain American society was during the 1860s.

The set is like a large grandstand, with a "magic lantern," or screen, that shows slides of newspaper headlines and pictures of people such as Lincoln. A smaller stage glides out from curtains in the center, and it is there that periodic pageants take place.

In the first of these, Mr. Judy, Mr. Cassidy and Ric Ryder sing "Darling Nelly Gray," as the other actors recite passages from "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

As the play progresses, it focuses on the tension between McClellan and Lincoln. The general, while popular with his troops, does not act quickly or forcefully enough against the Confederates to please the president. Mr. Judy's exaggerated facial expressions, both as Hawk playing McClellan and as Hawk himself, are quite comical. He plays the general as a blustering, overblown figure.

As Lincoln's close staff member, Mr. Cassidy is likewise effective, delivering the secretary's sharp social commentary with panache. Mr. Ryder is a soldier for much of

the performance, a wide-eyed young man unprepared for the horrors of war. Mr. Ryder and Mr. Judy are the main providers of comic relief, but the performance swings drastically from comedy to drama to burlesque.

Those swings of emotion seem to reflect the atmosphere of the day. Picnickers rode out to Manassas to watch the Battle of Bull Run. As the Confederacy threatened on the other side of the Potomac, theaters and houses of ill repute in Washington were brimming. The nation was desperately trying to cope during a time of conflict. But it gave in to its

melancholy at times as well. "Wake Nicodemus," a spiritual, showcases Harriett D. Foy and James Stovall, playing Cassie and Hannibal Drumwright. These black performers give a higher purpose to the play, bringing home the goal of eliminating slavery, even when the era's society was not wholly in favor of it. The duo's interpretation is full of yearning for freedom and weariness with slavery.

Miss Foy's voice is especially powerful, as she illustrates in "Wasn't That a Wide River," a jubilant celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation. She sings along with the company, highlighting another strength of the

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play — its harmonizing. Whitney Webster, playing Cordelia Hopewell, rounds out the cast, whose members all have fine voices.

The second act focuses on the war itself, showing how the country became weary of civil strife. Finally, the conflict comes to a turning point with the arrival of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant.

There's a lot of history to be crammed into 2½ hours. But Mr. Kyrieleison, and director Ron Holgate, keep the narrative clear and engaging as they draw the audience in with the drama of the Civil War. The setting — Ford's Theatre — lends another dimension, to the performance, especially in the riveting assassination scene.

★★★½

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, 1 p.m. Thursday and 2:30 p.m. Sunday
TICKETS: \$27 to \$43

