

Preface

Inscribed on the north wall of Lincoln's burial chamber at his tomb in Springfield, Illinois, are the words, "*Now he Belongs to the Ages*," uttered by Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton at the moment of Lincoln's death. A play-on-words of that phrase was chosen as the title of this book. Those words are not only remarkably prophetic, since more books have been written about Abraham Lincoln than about almost any other subject; but they seem to suggest that future generations the world over (including the present one) can benefit from an understanding and appreciation of Lincoln's life and legacy.

In his personal character, Lincoln embodied what Americans could be at their noblest, at their best. In his message to Congress, delivered on the 150th anniversary of Lincoln's birth, poet and historian, Carl Sandburg, described Lincoln as the physical manifestation of pure democracy. "In his bones he carried it," was Sandburg's remark. More recently, Dr. Thomas Lowry, author of *Don't Shoot That Boy!: Abraham Lincoln and Military Justice*, has nominated Lincoln as the "Man of the Millennium." According to Lowry there were two criteria that a potential candidate for this honor must have demonstrated throughout their lifetime, Endurance and Universality.¹ Lincoln's belief in and his commitment "to the proposition 'that all men are created equal,'" as embodied in the Declaration of Independence, epitomized what Lowry referred to as the "central idea;" the notion that every person is entitled to the opportunity to rise, and its corollary, every person should have a chance, regardless of sex, race, nationality, previous condition or geographic location.² Although Lincoln did not write the Declaration, he redefined its meaning in his "*Gettysburg Address*," and defended it against an armed rebellion, whose purpose it was to replace the notion of freedom with slavery and social inequality. The right to rise was, and still is, both enduring and universally appealing, as illustrated by the Freedom Riders of the 1960s, the lonely Chinese youth confronting a tank in Tiananmen Square and most recently, the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue by jubilant Iraqi citizens in Baghdad. Thus, Lincoln seems deserving of the honor, "Man of the Millennium."

Whether or not Lincoln is ever bestowed with the title "Man of the Millennium," makes little difference. He is regarded by many as America's greatest president. It stands to reason then, that Lincoln's birthday should be commemorated. Despite Lincoln's seeming popularity; sadly, as Lowry points out, the generic "Presidents' Day" holiday falls far short of the mark. Americans have become so complacent and apathetic about freedom that they would rather take a winter vacation with their children than encourage them to learn about their heritage. Ironically, it is in countries where the struggle to be free is still opposed and often severely punished, that Lincoln is celebrated—if only in the privacy of an individual's heart. He is revered in foreign lands more than in his own home.³

Americans will soon have a golden opportunity to honor the memory of Abraham Lincoln and to recommit themselves to the principles he stood for. 2009 marks the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth. It is hoped that in some small but meaningful way, this collection of plays can be used to help commemorate the Lincoln Bicentennial.

April 14, 2005 marks the 140th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination. The ways in which Americans mourned Lincoln have been recounted several times since; namely in the state funerals provided for Presidents Kennedy and Reagan. I was not alive to witness the outpouring of grief and

sorrow that Americans demonstrated in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, but in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, I can now begin to appreciate what the people alive in November 1963, and those of April 1865, experienced. Understanding history is not only about avoiding the mistakes of the past; it is also about taking comfort in the knowledge that we are not alone in overcoming national calamity. America has been through trying times before and we have survived.

The collection of plays assembled in the succeeding pages of this book has been ten years in the making. Ironically, I began my career as a historical dramatist by writing about the circumstances surrounding Lincoln's death in a play I entitled: "*Beware the People Weeping*." I was inspired by a trip a friend (Dustin Hookom) and I made to visit Ford's Theatre, on the 130th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination. I have always been fascinated by both historic events and by the dates on which they occurred. In 1995, April 14th was Good Friday, an event that only occurs once in a great while. I wanted to be there to place myself as close to the actual event as I could so as to experience almost first-hand what it was really like. In that, I was not alone. There were other people gathered outside Ford's Theatre that had the same idea I did. I decided to put on paper the story I had come to know so well—to give others a similar opportunity. Ten years, four plays and many performances later, that story has grown to its present dimensions.

Teaching history to students has always been a passion of mine. In order to make that history come alive for them, I have used my plays as a means to get them involved in the action; to put these students in the shoes of the people they are studying, and let them walk around in those shoes. In doing so, these students came to realize that great events are made up of ordinary people doing extra-ordinary things. More importantly, these students realized that they too could affect the future. I have personally witnessed many students involved in these plays gain a sense of self-confidence (some for the first time) in their own abilities. Part of it comes from being on stage, but I believe that Lincoln's faith in the right of people to rise affects a student's self-image as well. Such a sense of empowerment is the highest form of success for any teacher. I am proud to offer this collection of plays as a useful educational tool. Lincoln served as a positive role model for me growing up; in these plays, I have tried to stress the values that shaped his character—values of honesty, fairness, courage and a commitment to the American experiment in self-government.

Within the play, there are numerous stage directions indicated by *[italics]* to aid in direction of each production. They are age-appropriate for middle school, high school and community drama organizations. Complete citations are contained in the endnotes so as to make the book scholarly as well as user-friendly. A full bibliography and collection of Lincoln-era photographs completes the volume. It is hoped that *Lincoln for the Stages* will become an important addition to the drama collections of educational institutions all over the nation.

—BOS