

The Lincoln Summation

a one act play

by

Tom Flannery

anthracite@rocketmail.com

570 262 8485

copyright 2009

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

CAUTION: Professionals and amateurs are hereby warned that performance of *THE LINCOLN SUMMATION* is subject to a royalty. It is fully protected under US and International copyright laws. All rights, including professional and amateur stage rights, are strictly reserved. The stage performance rights to *THE LINCOLN SUMMATION* are controlled exclusively by Tom Flannery. No professional or non-professional performance of the play may be given without obtaining in advance the written permission of the author, and paying the requisite fee.

A NOTE ABOUT THE LANGUAGE:

What to modern ears may sound slightly...well...pretentious.....was largely the rhetorical style of the day, especially among the educated. You must remember that the principle speaker at Gettysburg, noted orator Edward Everett, spoke for what seemed like an insufferable 2 hours, committing his entire written text (for whatever reason) to memory. This type of long winded oration was the norm for the time, and was not in any way considered unusual. What WAS shocking though, was Lincoln's brevity that November day in Gettysburg. Less than 300 words. Even the priest who delivered the invocation spoke longer. Yet make no mistake. His words were not carelessly tossed out there. He labored on what he called his "little speech".

So if the characters in this little play do not speak as we are used to hearing the spoken word, don't let it get you down....or, heaven forbid, bore you. These people were, in a way, in less of a hurry, and more interested in making themselves understood, than we may be used to.

I prefer to luxuriate over words than dabble in them, which is why this was so much fun.

(Evening of November 18th, 1863. President Abraham Lincoln, weary after his long train journey, enters his room for the night in the house of prominent Gettysburg lawyer David Wills. The room is small and spare. A bed. A small writing desk. Not much else)

LINCOLN: Well, a bit small perhaps....at least compared to my usual accommodations (laughs). But it is good to be humble, especially when nobody expects you to be. Young Mr. Wills has been apologizing all evening....but.....well....there's many coming into town who won't get a bed at all I'm told. Expecting quite a crowd tomorrow.....(walks towards the window).....I hope the weather holds it. It's so late in the year for these kinds of things.

(He sees and hears the crowd gathering outside)

Oh, they'll want a speech surely. It's best not to address them unprepared. I've found the only way to avoid saying something foolish is to say nothing at all, which is why (he fumbles through his pockets for a rough draft of what he's been working on) I've labored so much over my little speech for tomorrow.

But where words can heal, they can also inflame, especially when there are too many of them. (laughs) Mr. Everett I suppose can be counted on tooccupy us....for a few hours at least. A wonderful man, but in his business once must act like both he and his audience has no other pressing engagements. He may need to be reminded that there is a war on. (laughs).

With that being the case, I think I should have mercy on the throng and finish quickly. Brevity on such a solemn occasion seems appropriate somehow. What explanation of the dead can I give?

(Lincoln moves to the writing table with his notes)

If you can focus your mind while riding on a train you are a better man than I. Some may see the scribbled notes of my text, the letters jumping around the page as if they had hind legs, and say, "see, he wavered.....he was unsure of himself." But such will never have traveled from Washington to Gettysburg on the Hanover line (laughs). It is nice to have something under my feet that does not move for a change.

(Stands up, stretching his long legs)

But still it is good to get away. I'd taken to hiding under my desk to avoid the crush of office seekers.....as they have still not realized that there are too many pigs for the tits. I will not be the one to lock the front door of the White House.....it is not mine to lock after all, being but a tenant, but I fear the day will come when such a policy will have to be addressed.

(suddenly weary) But later for all that.....later.

I do worry about Mary though. She so much wanted to come. But Tad is not well, and Mary is dreadfully afraid after.....well.....Willie.

But again....later for all that. I suppose one cannot stop being a husband and a father even in the midst of such.....goings on. I did receive a telegram this evening saying that Tad's fever has broken some....so I may be able to rest with one less thing pressing on my chest. Good news is so rare these days that to receive it seems somehow....unreal. Dream-like even. I had to read the telegram twice.

But still, my burdens, heavy as they are, certainly pale in comparison to those who fell here. North and South alike. They did not invade our soil. (suddenly furious) The whole *country* is *our* soil!

(quiet for a time, composing himself)

I've noticed....before this way it was "the Unites States *are*". It was put just that way....as if we're no more than a random collection of fragments or so many loose ends. But no....we are ONE nation....we will not see the day when the great state of Virginia is recognized by Europe as the capital of yet another sovereign power. But as I said, if this war has done nothing else, is has forced the words "the Unites States IS" from clenched teeth. So much suffering, to go from an "ARE" to an "IS".

(beat)

And yet....well.....this is where the Almighty wills us to be. We must push forward as best we can. I wear out my knees praying that such pushing may stop, so that we can collectively take normal breaths again.....deep ones that do not sear the lungs. It seems I've passed from a young to an old man in too few years. I would like the tired spot to be swept away by the beauty of hills such as these.....hills not destined to be overrun by trinket gatherers and ghosts and tears. But still, we must use the tools we have, yes?

And tomorrow I have....what? Words alone. I trust they will scour. I must somehow make this war about what I *say*.....without glossing over the reality of what it has *become*. It sounds harsh and perhaps heartless, but I must *sell* it....knowing that the suffering *will* continue. Such sacrifices cannot have been made in vain.

(he jots down a few notes on the scraps of paper on the writing desk)

It's all very much like a trial, and at times like this I still feel the prairie lawyer, willing to give up 6 points so that I might successfully argue the 7th, which would render the 6 superfluous before the other side even noticed. I do feel like my job now is very much like it was then, although I will admit that my words carry a bit more weight than they used to in those hot dusty courtrooms in Illinois. (laughs)

But still.....once the presidential taste gets in the mouth, it's hard to wash out.

(wanders over and lays down on the bed, which is obviously about a foot too short for him)

The perils of being 6 foot 4 when the average man is 5 foot 9. Poor Mr. Wills took one look at me and knew what I was in for. But one gets used to anything after a time. Even war....right?

(stands up, wanting to practice his speech)

I must address my jury in the morning. And they will come from all facets. I can ignore no segment. I must win over all 12.

So...my summation (posing as a lawyer addressing the jury)

Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, to sum up, I suppose it's best to start at the beginning....

"Four score the seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent....."

(One of the "Jurors" rises from the jury box, and as she begins to speak Lincoln, as if listening to her, works on his speech at his writing desk)

ELDERLY WOMAN: Eighty-seven years old I am. Four Score and seven? Isn't it easier to just say "87"? But there's the way politicians talk, and then there's the way the rest of us make ourselves known.

No need to tell me I don't look my age though....no matter how you want to say it.

In 1846 this place had a plague of locusts. They ate everything....picked the farms clean. Had one in 1829 too. So they figured it'd come every 17 years. Well, that's 1863. Now. Guess they got it right again.

Born here in Adams country. Lived here all my life. Suspect I'll die here unless the smell drives me out. Lots of....well....peculiar things about war, and one of them is that it smells real bad. Like a darned tannery around here when the wind be right. They took thousands of boys and laid 'em out in the fields where they got all bloated and turned dark colors.

They tell me my grandson was out there somewhere but, well, never could find him. Maybe I didn't look as hard as I should have, but it's not like it would have changed much if I'd found him. What's dead is dead. Bodies. Souls. And hearts. And if God's watching any of this he's not a very interested observer. I don't think among those lines. Unless he wants to come and do a Lazarus on my grandson, it all seems pointless to me. Maybe that's the age talking. I'm not afraid of anything anymore. I've seen the good and the bad, and the in between, which takes up much of our days.

His mother....well....she thinks different thoughts. Figures he's gonna show up at the door one day....making liars out of the War Department. Not that the sons of bitches ain't been lying all the time. You do realize we're into year 3 of the 30 day war right?

Oh, everybody running off to enlist....wanting to get in on the turkey shoot before the poor thing ended. Politicians stood up on the stump and made it seem like a holy crusade, which after all is what a 200 pound congressman bursting out of a 180 pound suit gets paid for. War's a different thing when you ain't doing the killing or the dying, and you're fortunate enough to not be related to them that are.

And then you got the girls spewing spittle over any lad smart enough to actually question whether he wants to get his legs blown off to keep some cracker from Alabama in a tent he don't want to be in. Jimmy told me one time in a letter that it was easier to go than not to go, which I suspect Pickett's boys were thinking before marching across a mile of open ground and getting plowed under like seeds.

I mentioned the smell right? You might have noticed. You get used to most things but not the smell. They laid all the broken boys in our front parlors, bleeding all over our rugs with nothing but books for pillows. I recall I gave one boy the bible, but he never noticed. Had himself a nasty head wound and one book was as good as any other to lay on. Might as well get some practical use out of the thing anyway is what I say.

I tried it the normal way.....sure it brought the President here...and that's mighty nice. But surrounded by lumps in the ground, I'd have preferred he stayed in Washington and the rest of you never heard of this place. I fear it's destined to become something against it's will, and I can't think of nothing worse befalling a place, can you?

I won't live to see the worst of it even. Real estate speculators already bought up much of the battlefield.

"Four score and seven years ago". Killing then, and killing now. My grandson Jimmy laying somewhere out there...nobody but a few knows he was ever born, much left that he lived....same as Lincoln or Meade.....the kind that get passed down to others the way Washington and Jefferson were passed down to us. Marble statues. I hate marble. Pigeons always be shitting on marble. Maybe they understand war more than we do.

(she looks at Lincoln at his desk)

But still, Old Abe. I think he feels the lash on someone else's back. And that's gotta count for something these days.

Doesn't it?

(she exits, and Lincoln rises from his desk, ready to continue his "summation" to the jury)

LINCOLN: “.....a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.”

(another of the “Jurors” rises from the jury box, a young union soldier, and as he begins to speak Lincoln, as if listening once again, returns to his desk and his speech)

SOLDIER: I always wished for my final resting place to be....well....somewhere different.

A nice town to visit and all that, don't get me wrong. But it still doesn't come up to home in my eyes. And I don't quite feel “hallowed” right now.....(to Lincoln)....no disrespect to you Mr. President but “hallowed” is that kind of word that people who don't have to fight in wars use.

Darndest thing though. There I was on the first day, not even sure how to load my musket, and suddenly it seems to be raining rebels. The devils were coming out of the ground I tell you. And so I got to thinking.....”well, this is not a good place to be”, you know what I mean?

But nobody wants to run.

Well, let me put that another way. We all *want* to run, it's just that nobody wants to get caught doing it. Campfires can be a brutal place. The whispering starts and doesn't stop...and everyone who gets the story adds another little piece to it, and suddenly you're about as welcome around the regiment as a case of the clap.

Plus, the General would shoot you hisself at the drop of a hat, and he'd drop it himself.

So, you're just better off all around to stay there and take your medicine like a man. It's an army full of boys, but it ain't ever fought that way.

But there's a difference between a skedaddle and a proper retreat you understand. Makes no sense to stand there like some cow when the twister is coming. But nobody wants a

bullet in the back....'cause then you got all that darn explaining to do, assuming of course you're still around to explain anything to anybody.

Well, over by the railroad cut I see our color bearer go down. Colonel says to me, "Private, pick up them colors". You know, like he wanted me to pick up his handkerchief or something. The guy who was holding 'em is laying there with no head. Blown off completely by a shell. You know....on the hallowed ground.

(pause....lets this sink in)

Anyway....an order's an order right? So I run over and pick up the colors. Now, in case you don't know, holding the colors is just short of suicidal. You're like a walking bull's-eye for the rebels. And they're pretty good shots even when you're trying to make yourself small.

So I'm backing up slowly, waving the colors so the boys can rally 'round 'em. By this time, I don't mind telling you, this war seemed to be getting awfully personal. Things are getting pretty warm. But moving backwards, I can't see where I'm going....see? And I end up tripping over a body. Guy looked dead but I never did stop and ask him. So now I gotta get up....and in gathering my bearings I turn my back to the guns....for about....what?.....2 seconds? And wouldn't you know it....that's when I get it. A ball in the spine. Smack dab in the middle. Probably cut the thing in two. I can't feel nothing. My legs, I gotta look down to see if they're still there. And through the smoke I look up and see the General....he's laying behind a dead horse....and he's bleating like a sick sheep....chewing on his fingers until there's blood coming out of his mouth.

Then something kicked in....and he sees an rider less horse coming past, and he jumps on it and turns towards the rear, but not before looking down at me and screaming...."you goddamn coward!" And then he's off, no doubt to get bronzed and adorned with medals.

And that's how it goes. It may indeed be "fitting the proper that we do this", but all is not always, or even usually....what it seems.

I know you can't come right out and say something like that....not and get re-elected at the same time....but I got nothing left to lose and figured you should know.

(he looks toward Lincoln, who is still busy as his desk....then the soldier walks off. Lincoln rises from his desk, ready to continue his "summation" to the jury)

LINCOLN: *".....It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom...."*

(another of the “Jurors” rises from the jury box, a well dressed, very “proper” looking middle aged woman, and as she begins to speak Lincoln, as if listening once again, returns to his desk and his speech)

WOMAN: It would be best for a man or woman of color to address you now but...well..they would be denied entry to such ahallowed place as this. And in such distinguished company.

And none I know of would be very willing to subject themselves to yet another indignity.

I don't wish to sound grandiose, but if these men have not indeed died in vain, it will because they set others free. Disguise it as you will....”union”....the legality of secession, free navigation of the Mississippi, or simply the vanquishing, once and for all, of the English inspired aristocracy that Washington and his rag-tag army bled for all those years ago.

No. Today men die, even those loathe to admit it, to set others free. As you yourself has said Mr. President, men who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves. You are peerless in turning a phrase. I would not want to face off with you verbally. But a “new birth of freedom” can only mean one thing, and one wishes that on such a momentous occasion you would say so.

But...I do understand the political implications of NOT hiding behind exalted rhetoric. Only a fool misses such realities. Jefferson himself described slavery as like holding a wolf behind the ears. You didn't like it, but you didn't dare let it go. But the “peculiar institution”, as he called it, remains.

Your recent emancipation proclamation is surely red meat for future historians, but it is somewhat cheeky to issue a decree that becomes law only in places where we are utterly unable to enforce it. It unlocks not a single chain sir.....but as you states, this war must be about more than the grisly arithmetic.

If that arithmetic could be faced, the North could win with a hand tied behind it's back. But perception becomes reality....especially when newspaper editors with too much time on their hands become involved.

And tomorrow, I believe a *new* reality needs to be brought forward.

And I simply fear that as the father of the nation you'd be amiss to not speak of what I can plainly see etched in your brow.

(long pause....)

I know a freed man. He's called Walters. He worked 11 acres outside of time. A soft spoken man. It had gotten to where we'd exchange familiar pleasantries. He addressed

me as Miss. Wilkins. Would always remove his hat. I thought of it later, but never did the name “Mr. Walters” pass my lips. He was just “Walters”. A negro after all.

I never knew his first name. He had a wife and 7 children.

And this I witnessed with my own eyes.

An Irish soldier from New York took a fancy to the shirt that Walters was wearing. It was so white it gave the rest of him the look of a cannonball. And somehow this struck the union soldier sent to Pennsylvania, who was clad in something resembling rags, as too much for a honest white man to bear. So he reached out with a meaty hand and ripped the shirt from Walter’s back....exposing a bare back of ghastly raised scars too numerous to count. Whippings. Like he was an truculent animal.

I was some distance away, and of course dared not intervene. But the sudden horror of it all was seen even by the Irishman....a race who at that very moment were tearing through the streets of New York City hanging every negro they could catch from the closest lampposts....and in one case deciding that the cause of liberty would be advanced by torching a colored orphanage and killing many of it’s occupants. They were infuriated at the thought of being drafted you see. So what better way to vent than to kill nigger children?

But this soldier, while I’m certain he had no spiritual conversion at that moment, was surely changed in some small way. At the very least, he would not think twice about ripping the shirt off the back of another negro.

And.....perhaps....that’s the speed at which this change must take place. Maybe it really needs to be one soul at a time....(to the President).....and what you say on the morrow will not matter worth a damn.

But then again, perhaps it will move things along nicely.

Perhaps soon....MR Walters will be as welcomed here as you were.

(she looks toward Lincoln, who is still busy at his desk....then silently walks off. Lincoln rises from his desk, ready to continue his “summation” to the jury)

LINCOLN: “.....and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

(another of the “Jurors” rises from the jury box. She is a nurse. Young perhaps, but weary looking, and as she begins to speak Lincoln, as if listening once again, returns to his desk but now he appears to be done tinkering with his words. He just wants to listen now....to learn....to know more)

NURSE: I am a tired woman. Sometimes I feel like the tiredest woman on earth.

It's the kind of weariness that bores holes in you. Sleep has no real effect....as I've seen so much that closing my eyes no longer chases things away.

I'm told that we dream in color. Not sure how this was determined, but I recall the person saying so sounding quite sure of himself. Sometimes that all it takes to get something over.

But in my case....at least.....he got it wrong. Dead wrong. I see the vivid color of blood, and nobody can tell me it's not red.

I'm a nurse, and I came to this town because it's where I was most needed. The armies move along, but the dead and the dying stay behind. And almost literally overnight, the 2000 residents of the town had 10 times that number to care for. Ten broken men for every man, woman, and child.

Clearly....well.....this could not happen.

"Of the people, by the people, for the people".....the words may roll off the tongue like butter, but they require rolled up sleeves, plenty of bandages, and hack-saws.

I tell you....I've always considered myself ready for what comes my way. But...well....no. I've seen things that would turn you off war for 1000 years. When you hear a boy....hundreds of miles from home, burning with fever, covered in both his own blood and others.....calling out over and over for his mother....well, it doesn't harden the heart. It tears it in 2. And then 4. And then 8.....until it's nothing more than 1000 pieces floating free....with nowhere to go.

I want this union preserved. But at what cost? (to the President) Is this all worth it sir?

But I can still say I have something left. "Hope" is not the proper word. It's more than that, and if you'll oblige me, I'll tell you why. I know you are a busy man sir, but it will only take a moment.

For 10,15, 20 hours at a stretch, doctors did nothing but hack off limbs. Some chloroform if some could be spared, and then a quick cut. The leg or arm would literally be tossed out a nearby window, where it laid in a pile that would be picked up every few hours by a man with a cart.....taken away and burned.

Outside against the wall were rows of legless men. And as I was passing through the area to get more bandages, a cart happened to be making a pick-up. A negro woman, a girl really....she was volunteering. She must have lived in the town. She saw a boy trying to lift himself....to stand. He wanted to see if his leg was among the pile. But he was having a hard time staying up. And so this girl went over to him and he braced himself on her, and was able to go through the cart. He didn't say a word. His face told the girl that his was not in the pile, so she silently led him back to where he was sitting....bracing him the

entire way. He managed a smile....and said simply, "thank you". She smiled and then went about her business.

That was it. The entire scene could not have taken more than 30 seconds.

But it wasn't until I saw it.....that this war made a certain kind of wicked sense. And I knew there was only one way the good Lord would allow it to end.

I could then remember.....it came back like a wave....all of these things....these non-verbal things.....just the look of the eyes.

And so now....I do not believe there is any danger that the better angels of our nature will be overcome.....or that Mr. Lincoln is standing at the head of a government destined to perish from the earth.

(Lincoln slowly.....wearily.....prepares to settle in for the night)

It's late (moves over to the window). Everybody must have found a bed. I do hope it's more....fitting than mine (laughs)

I cannot predict the future...although my re-election may indeed hinge on my ability to do so. I must somehow convince myself that I can.....and only then can I do the same to all those who gather tomorrow. My words must soothe surely, but they must also be vindicated. The world will not long remember what I say here.....and indeed.....if we lose this war, they may forget that I came at all. I wish I had more to give them than rhetoric.

I would gladly die to preserve this union, and would actually much prefer death than be force-fed the alternative. We must not be enemies. We must be friends.....again.

I'm not sure what makes me think of this now, but of the many things that pass my desk, it's the proposed executions of soldiers who deserted....who ran in the heat of battle....it is these pieces of paper I remember most. I've always thought the poorest use of a soldier is to shoot him. So I never signed one. Not a one. Officer's and their requests must be treated with kid gloves for sure, if for no other reason that many of them act like children themselves, so to treat them in any other way would only confuse them.

Yet.....I lay my head down every night, knowing that a single word from me could end this killing. There would be no more dedicating pieces of ground that could very well be fought over again.

I cannot bear the thought that some who lived to see the union born may also live to see it fall.

I cannot bear the thought that a single soldier died for something not worth dying for.

I cannot bear the thought that the promise of freedom for the Negro has been made, yet cannot be kept.

I cannot bear the thought that those who toiled for the dead and the dying may find that the blood they wiped away was somehow stained with the alloy of hypocrisy.

I am a sinner. I am not half the man some claim me to be....but I endeavor to do my best. Tomorrow. And the rest of my days.

I trust it will be enough.

Good night.

LIGHTS