

Transcript from "Around Town" Critics Roundtable, PBS TV, Thursday, April 13, 2000

ROBERT AUBRY DAVIS: "APRIL 14TH MARKS THE ANNIVERSARY OF A SAD DAY IN AMERICAN HISTORY. ON THAT DAY, 135 YEARS AGO, PRESIDENT LINCOLN WAS ASSASSINATED AT FORD'S THEATRE. THEIR LATEST PRODUCTION COMMEMORATES THAT EVENT AND CELEBRATES THE MAN CONSIDERED BY MANY TO HAVE BEEN OUR GREATEST PRESIDENT. IN THIS SCENE FROM "REUNION," GENERAL MCCLELLAN WRITES TO HIS WIFE ABOUT HIS NEW APPOINTMENT AS HEAD OF THE UNION ARMY.

[FILM CLIP]

ROBERT AUBRY DAVIS: Peter, this worked on so many levels for me. There are so many things you and I could talk about on this. One of them is the fact that we've lost the tradition in schools of learning great American song writing.

PETER FAY: Well, the other thing that's interesting is they use virtually almost all of the real civil war songs here. And "Hard Times Come Again No More," to finish this piece is a tremendous thing. There are slow spots. The story of McClellan becomes too much of the story and it could be tightened up. But this is a very very strong piece. I saw it with a bunch of high school kids who were visiting from out of town, most of whom, I must say were mesmerized by it. The interesting thing about the piece is that it has a lot of real strength in it. Those letters from civil war kids, generals, nurses, the people living through this story, very well woven together. I think the piece is — the strange word I'm going to use to describe this piece and it's one that you might shy away from — but it was sweet.

ROBERT AUBRY DAVIS: At one point I looked over and I had a whole crew of high school kids and during the death of Lincoln, they were weeping, including the boys. I think this is a very good thing for America to have young people see something like this and feel it in their hearts.

JANE HORWITZ: And to be sitting in Ford's Theater and to look up at that box seat where it happened. Also, one of the things I must say I admire about this is that it is unashamedly from the Union side. Back before it opened, I interviewed this fellow, Jack Kyrieleison, who got the idea for this and said, have people told you they think it's kind of one sided and he said, a few people have said to me and my answer to them was, "well, I felt that way about GONE WITH THE WIND." It's definitely about — that slavery was the one thing that made war worth fighting and it's great.

JOE BARBER: The cast is wonderful, largely made up of local actors, they are crackerjack. I saw them on a Sunday afternoon, three weeks into the run, and they were working every bit as hard as they were opening night. But that's one of the great things about this show, Jane — is about race. It makes it very clear that for a lot of people in the Union, they didn't care about slavery. They wanted to preserve the Union and if they could do it without freeing the slaves, they would happily have done it. This show is very honest, direct about the overarching issues of the war. I think it should become a show in residence for Ford's Theater.

ROBERT AUBRY DAVIS: That's the point where General McClellan runs against Lincoln as a guy who's going to end this war and make the union North and South Korea, basically.

BOB MONDELLO: I missed this when it first opened, because I was out of town, but I wasn't real anxious to see it for a variety of reasons and audiences may be feeling the same thing. And if you've been avoiding this, because you think it's not going to be your cup of tea, you may be very surprised. It took me unawares. I wasn't expecting it to be as intriguing as it is.

JANE HORWITZ: There are songs that we used to learn in school, like Stephen Foster songs. Nobody teaches Stephen Foster any more, because we discovered he was apparently a virulent racist. But the art and the artist are sometimes separate things. But there's a scene where a woman in an upper level on the stage sings "Beautiful Dreamer," and on stage there's a man who's about to have his leg amputated. And I guess it's from his journal or a letter he wrote about what the experience was like and how they put him out chloroform. At least he was at a part of the war where they were finally able to anesthetize people before they operated. It's quite a moving moment.

ROBERT AUBRY DAVIS: And Jack, of course, is one of our regional people. "REUNION" RUNS AT FORD'S THROUGH JUNE 18TH. FOR INFORMATION ON SPECIAL EVENTS HAPPENING THIS WEEKEND, YOU CAN CALL FORD'S AT 202-347-4833.

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