

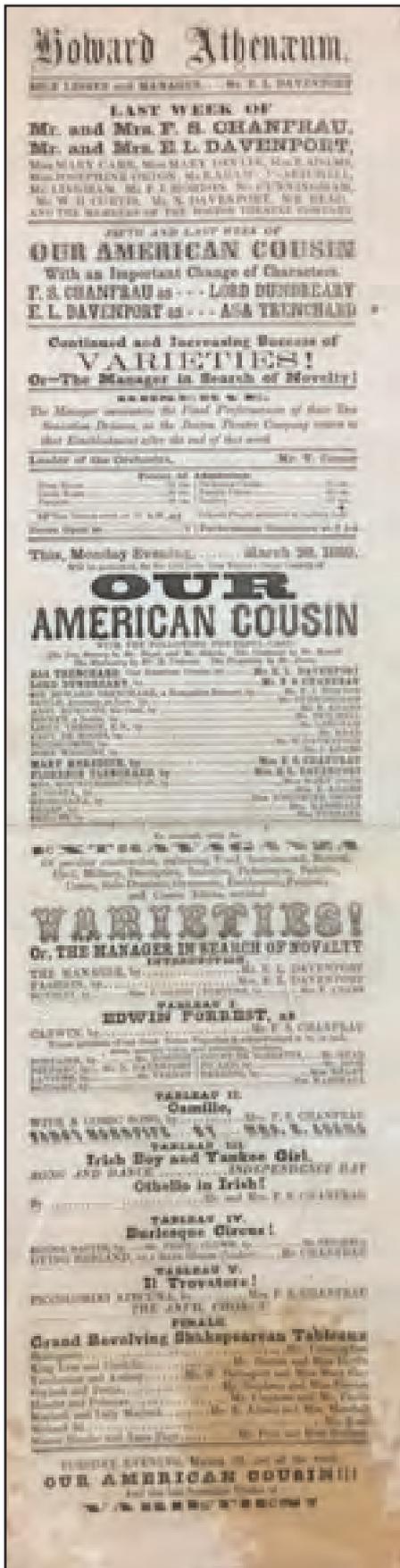
The Lincoln Collector #5

By James M. Cornelius

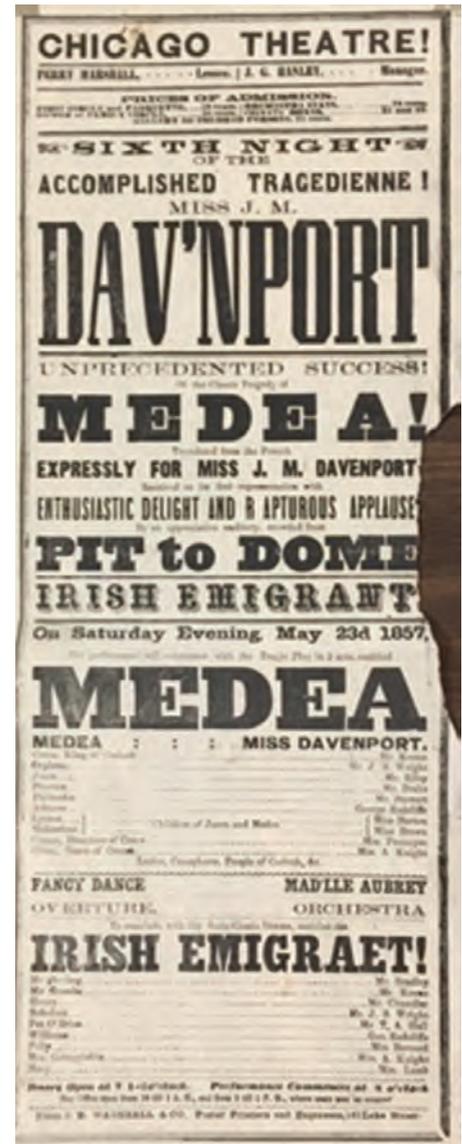
Oh, the Drama!

The mind of the theatrical producer is ever spinning, and Mr. Lincoln's election, then his inauguration, and then war, gave much to spin. What luck that a moderately successful play of 1837, *The People's Lawyer*, a.k.a. *Solon Shingle*, by Joseph Stevens Jones, was available as fodder in 1861. A playbill in the Library of Congress explains that the redoubtable Joseph Jefferson played the eponymous attorney on April 13, 1861, at the Washington Theatre (which closed later that year, after 3 years of breathing life into our culture). In case anyone thought that the new president's problem of "democrats" firing upon the collectively paid for, federally managed coastal fortresses was a serious matter, the night continued with two additional laughers, "Toodles" and "Slasher and Crasher."

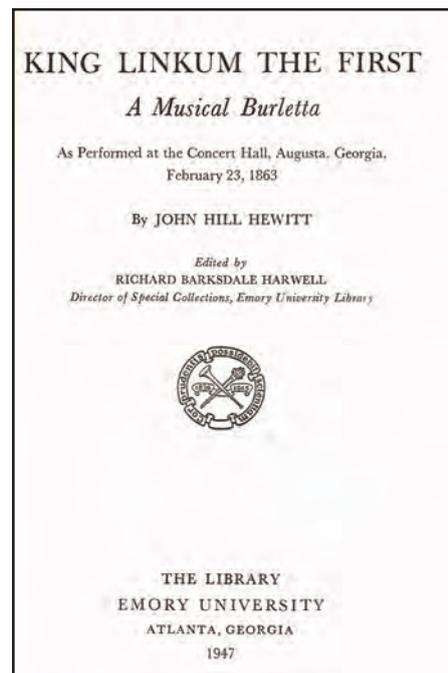
The trio of comedies had opened in the week after Lincoln's inaugural. Its 4th smash week must have continued into at least 5, given the influx of people to the District.



Boston, 1859: original playbill

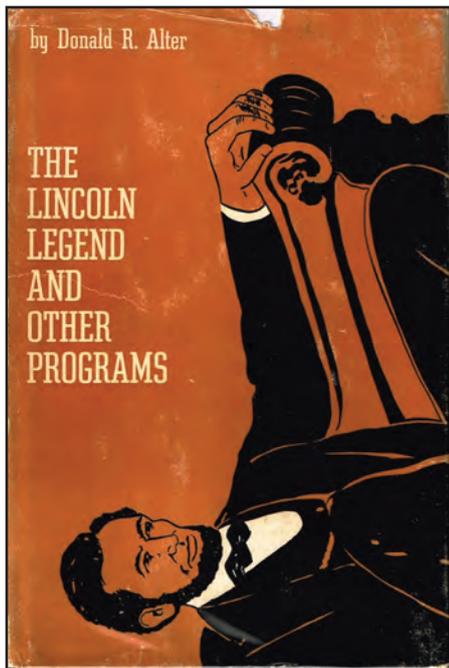


Chicago, 1857: original playbill, unrecorded



The 1863 play is available only in a 1947 reprint; image of playbill, inside, announces a "Serio-Comic Opera in Two Acts."

A few copies of Stevens's play are in big libraries, mainly the 1856 printing and a very few of the 1865 printing, a year when suddenly the public viewed Lincoln more as a 'Solon' than a 'Shingle.' Today you can more readily acquire a print-on-demand copy from India, or even London. But the playbills? Unlikely. Excepting perhaps "Uncle Tom's Cabin," no on-demand market exists for old playbills. The rare originals are for the deeply committed pocket-emptiers. Each of the two shown here, at hundreds of dollars, has a Lincoln angle. The traveling attorney was in Chicago that 1857 night. Though he was quick to sucker-punch the Irish with mimicry



Professor Alter of Eastern Illinois University compiled historical programs for radio, stage, and classroom.

and insult, he was not known to quote much Greek. That is, we do not know if he attended the shows or not. The sad night at Ford's Theatre in 1865 was often reprised later, but here we see how it had been 'pre-primed': a playbill

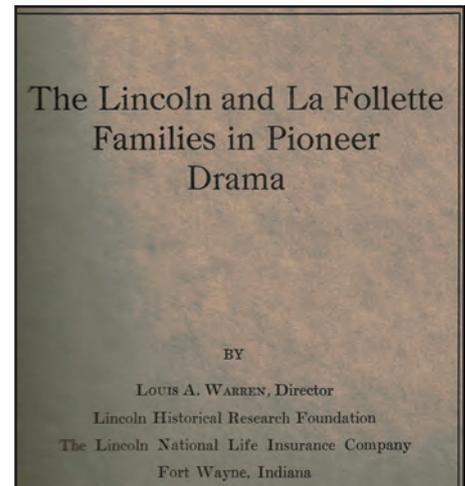
from its opening run in the U.S. in Boston, 1859. Abraham and Mary saw it at least twice each, in Washington.

Southerners 'liked' Lincoln too, as object of derision. "King Linkum the First" drips with bile amidst the 'comic' scenes. It killed 'em in Augusta, Georgia, in February 1863, when able-bodied male actors were still available. An original copy of Hewitt's play is not available. The 1947 printing of the play with the original playbill from Emory University pictured here, is \$15 or \$20, and still comical when it is not appalling.

An often finer breed of drama surged in the 1910s-1960s, with radio dramas and school-room one-acts about Lincoln and other historical fun. One in the book pictured here allows for various readers, plus a narrator. Who would not wish to launch into this opener-poem "1809" by Lulu Thompson: "With flintlocked guns and polished stocks, / Knee breeches and long homespun socks ..."

Memorization of one's rhyming lines was as much a part of our educational past as listening to professionals on stage or radio. Does your personal lesson plan include such drama?

N.B. In our last column, the



In 1929, historian Warren traced the "drama" of parallel migrations by two famous families.

mention of silver Peace Medals given in 1862 by President Lincoln to native chiefs drew this update from Wayne 'Doc' Temple: "Some of those coins were buried with a deceased chief. And some of those were later stolen by tomb-robbers." Press the seller on the provenance if you ever see one. 

James M. Cornelius is a Lincoln student and bibliophile in Springfield, Illinois.



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