

*Steve Hendrickson delivers a sterling performance as Lincoln in “Abe Lincoln and Uncle Tom in the White House,” Carlyle Brown’s meaty and ingenious one-act at the Guthrie Theater.*

Daniel Day-Lewis won an Academy Award for his indelible portrayal of America’s 16th president in “Lincoln.”

On stage in the Twin Cities, actor [Steve Hendrickson](#) is keeping company with the multiple-Oscar winner.

Hendrickson delivers a sterling performance as Lincoln in “Abe Lincoln and Uncle Tom in the White House,” Carlyle Brown’s meaty and ingenious one-act that premiered Saturday at the Guthrie Theater.

Hendrickson has the president’s visage, gestures and deliberative mien down pat. He also has the dry wit. The actor is not as tall as his the man he plays, but his high-waisted pants (Clare Brauch designed the period costumes) tricks the eye into giving him more height.

In his portrayal of Lincoln, Hendrickson is at once measured and stately. He also gives us Lincoln’s repressed torment and his emotional detachment from Mary Todd Lincoln (Jodi Kellogg), who has been grieving their dead son.



The drama opens with crashing thunder and blood-red lightning bathing the White House (C. Andrew Mayer did the sound design, while Mike Wangen did the lights). In the midst of this storm, we hear a ghostly boy’s voice saying “Father?” It is the ghost of Lincoln’s son.

When the tempest subsides, lights come up on the president, eyes closed, sprawled on a sofa, one foot on the floor and one hand covering his heart, as if taking an oath. He has reasons to be weary. It is Sept. 22, 1862, just five days after the terrible loss of life at the Battle of Antietam. Lincoln is considering signing the Emancipation Proclamation, something that will free slaves in the South even as it may inflame and prolong the Civil War.

Suddenly, the doors to Lincoln’s office swing open. In steps Uncle Tom, the fictional title character from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famed anti-slavery novel, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin or Life



among the Lowly.” Uncle Tom has come to influence President Lincoln. What follows is a crafty conversation, based on an absurd setup, on freedom and slavery, on war and faith.

Brown, who also produces the play, is a master of this type of interrogation of historical figures. He brought humor and light to Simon Cato, the jockey who bought his own freedom in “Pure Confidence.” He elucidated minstrelsy in “The Little Tommy Parker Celebrated Colored Minstrel Show.”

In “Abe Lincoln,” he shows the historical power of Uncle Tom (the sympathy-drawing character) even as he attempts to rescue him from being a byword for betrayal. This Uncle Tom is a man of providence and progress who arrives suddenly and, like a ghost, disappears.

Brown, who also directs the play, could scarcely do better in casting than James A. Williams as Uncle Tom.

Williams is an actor of overwhelming dignity and majesty. Formally attired and delivering in unhurried cadences, his Uncle Tom is a figure of grace, a man of faith, not a too-faithful servant.

Kellogg is excellent as Mary Todd Lincoln. She bursts into the Oval Office, overwhelmed by pain and seeking succor from her husband, so burdened with the weight of soldiers dying and the fate of the nation that he is unable to care for his wife. Kellogg takes us into the depths of her grief expertly, drawing pathos without being pathetic.

India Gurley plays Elizabeth Keckley, the one-time slave who is now Mrs. Lincoln’s confidante. The small role shows us not only companionship across racial lines but also Elizabeth’s keen hunger for reunion and family.

Together, they all make this “Abe Lincoln,” which packs a punch in 75 minutes, excellent work that is not to be missed.