

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2023 – Mrs President examines Mrs Lincoln

The memory of President Lincoln is widely revered – there is even statue of him in Edinburgh – but the First Lady who supported him through the Civil War is forgotten in Scotland and reviled in America.

A new play, which has its international premiere at the Fringe reassesses the life of Mary Lincoln and allows her – rather than her enemies – to tell her story for the first time.

The American Civil War Statue (also known as the Scottish-American Soldiers Monument), in Old Calton Burial Ground, dates back to 1893 and commemorates Lincoln and the Scots volunteers who fought and died in the brutal Civil War that succeeded in ending slavery.

Emphasising the strength of the links between Scotland and America, this was the first statue to a US president outside the country's borders and the only one to commemorate the Civil War.



Honouring Presidents' Day in Old Calton Cemetery where there is a statue of Abraham Lincoln PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter

The play Mrs President takes audiences into the world of Mary Lincoln who was highly active in rallying support for her husband, and was sitting hand-in-hand with him at the theatre when he was shot in the head by an assassin.

Her life was torn by tragedy and mental ill health. She was tormented by the death of her children, grief stricken after staying by Abraham's side for hours as he died and later tormented by cruel accusations. Sadly, her place in history is as one of America's most reviled First Ladies.

Mrs President, by writer and artist John Ransom Phillips, tells the story as Mary enlists celebrity photographer Mathew Brady – whose images of Abraham Lincoln helped win him the Presidency – to recast her image and silence Washington.

This was a man of immense influence – his battlefield pictures defined the American Civil War and his wider work helped forge the USA's national identity. Tensions rise as subject and artist clash over creative control.

Mrs President explores identity, agency, and the power of representation – of narrative – and ultimately of legacy. It gives Mary her own voice for the first time.

Phillips says: “Mary Lincoln is the most vilified First Lady in American history. The Edinburgh Fringe is the ideal place to take a fresh look at her story and to begin changing her place in history.

“There are powerful connections between Edinburgh and the Lincoln presidency, with Scots having volunteered to fight to help end slavery. And the city is home to the greatest performing arts festival in the world.

“This play shows Mary as a woman in the grip of profound grief – she had buried three sons, saw the assassination of her husband and was then betrayed by her remaining son.

“Viewing her through modern eyes, and through Mathew Brady’s outdated lens, holds lessons for us. Controlling your image is precarious, and Mrs. President shows us just how hard it can be.”

Director Lily Wolff said: “Mary Lincoln haunts me. Her brilliance and depth of feeling meant she didn’t fit in the box society assigned her.

“Sadly we still perpetuate dehumanising narratives about this First Lady, failing to recognise the terrible losses she endured. Mary’s life was full of ghosts.”

Mrs President plunges audiences back into an era which continues to affect American politics and the Culture Wars which divide contemporary society.

Born to a wealthy slave-owning Kentucky family Mary was a devoted supporter of her husband. Of their four sons only one outlived her, with two dying as children and one at 18.

In later life her behaviour became erratic, she was briefly confined by her remaining son to an insane asylum. Deeply depressed Mary tried to take her own life and endured worsening physical health. Rather than being understood as vulnerable she was damned as “crazy”.

The play takes audiences into Brady’s studio where Mary traverses her life story. Under his focus, she is forced to

explore who she truly is, regardless of history's limited view.



Pictured in Edinburgh's Old Calton Burial Ground (and with the Lincoln statue) are LeeAnne Hutchison as Mrs Mary Lincoln, and Christopher Kelly as celebrity photographer Mathew Brady whose images of Abraham Lincoln helped him win the presidency. The show continues until Sunday 27th August, Photography from: Colin Hattersley Photography



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