

The Triumph of Abraham Lincoln

John Drinkwater's life as a playwright

Susie Self

Sometimes in the life journey of an artist an exceptional situation in history, combined with the artist's sensitivity to the Zeitgeist, can lead to a moment of unexpected success. This, then, was how it happened that John Drinkwater, a provincial actor, poet and playwright in Birmingham, stepped into the centre stage of his career. His play Abraham Lincoln caught the imagination of post-First-World-War Britain to the extent that it was chosen for performance by Nigel Playfair, director of the Lyric Hammersmith, subsequently ran for a year in London, drew crowds to line the streets as the King and Queen arrived to see it, and finally received overwhelming validation from the country of Lincoln's birth.

"So the uncounted spirit wakes
To the birth
Of uncounted circumstance
And time in a generation makes
Portents majestic a little story of earth
To be remembered by chance
At a fireside"

The two Chroniclers, Abraham Lincoln: John Drinkwater

A background knowledge of JD's motivation and passion for creating Lincoln is vital to understanding how such an unusual subject won through.

"My purpose is that of dramatist, not political philosopher. The issue of secession was a very intricate one, upon which high and generous opinions may be in conflict, but that I may happen to have or lack personal sympathy with Lincoln's policy and judgement in this matter is nothing. My concern is with the profoundly dramatic interest of his character and with the inspiring example of a man who handled war nobly and with imagination."

JD: Forward to Abraham Lincoln, Far Oakridge, 1918

It has never been publicly clear why John Drinkwater didn't fight in the First World War. Although he had a legitimate excuse for not going, as he was married, his lack of action seems at odds with his loyal Englishness. The truth is almost certainly that he was secretly a pacifist. This is well supported by the philosophical evidence in his poetry, which concentrates on cherishing life and seeing the good in everything. When the war came he must have been plummeted into a terrible inner conflict: no doubt he would have felt it heresy to openly declare his beliefs. Then there was the fact that conscientious objectors were regarded as social outcasts, so much so that after the war job advertisements often included: "no conscientious objectors need apply". During the war JD continued to work at the Birmingham Repertory theatre, with Barry Jackson as director. Although greatly reduced in numbers, the company's work continued and every Sunday the men went to make shells at Birmingham Aluminium Works.



Birmingham Repertory company at the Aluminium Works, 1915

JD sits in the second row on the left with gloves and apron, to the right of him (standing) is Barry Jackson.

It is a rare person, though, who can successfully repress their true beliefs and so bit by bit JD daringly, almost unconsciously, revealed his real self through his work. Perhaps he was inspired by a work by another Dymock poet, Lascelles Abercrombie's talkative verse drama "The End of the World", which he directed at Birmingham in 1914. As the war was drawing to a close in 1917, JD's first play on the subject of war, "X= Nothing", played in Birmingham. Its candid dialogue between two soldiers from opposing sides who end up realising the futility of fighting won him simultaneous praise and contempt from the press. Some accused him of betraying the war effort: he was already sailing close to the wind.

Lincoln is here speaking to Mrs Blow, a high society lady who is in favour of the war. Here he shows the great cost to himself at having created a war in order to fight the even greater injustice of slavery.

Lincoln: "I accepted this war with a sick heart, and I've a heart that's near to breaking every day. I accepted it in the name of humanity, and just and merciful dealing, and the hope of love and charity on earth. And you come to me, talking of revenge and destruction, and malice, and enduring hate. These gentle people are mistaken, but they are mistaken cleanly, and in a great name it is you that dishonour the cause for which we stand- it is you who would make it a mean and little thing..."

Abraham Lincoln: John Drinkwater

Abraham Lincoln was first performed in Birmingham in 1918 and it immediately hit a resonant chord with the post war audience. News of its popularity reached Nigel Playfair, director of the Lyric Hammersmith who set out to see it for himself.

"I went off to Birmingham to see it, and (in a certain sense more important than seeing the play itself) to see an audience faced with it. I was very unlucky: I had an uncomfortable journey, my train was late and I got no dinner--which would be enough to set any man against a play. I did not arrive, as a matter of fact, at the theatre till the last act; but I saw what I came to see- what I subconsciously expected to see- a house plainly very moved and expressing its enthusiasm in a most certain manner"

Nigel Playfair "The Story of the Lyric Hammersmith"

Playfair decided that the play should come to London, although he admits it was a crazy gamble. Hammersmith has always been regarded as a theatre out in the suburbs and low audience figures today continue to support this view.

“I still realised that the risk I was taking was very considerable, for one does not need more than a superficial acquaintance with theatre to discover that one’s own likes and dislikes by no means pre-suppose identical likes and dislikes on the part of the public...the theme of Mr Drinkwater’s play was historical, but the sentiment (the moral, I might almost say) was, whether historical or not, modern. The play hit exactly the right moment; three months earlier or later the gamble would have been desperate”

Nigel Playfair



Nigel Playfair, John Drinkwater and H.G. Wells

The first London performance, on February 19th, 1919, was reasonably well received but not deemed an overwhelming success. Audience figures were low. Then a curious act of fate occurred: William J. Rea, the renowned actor playing Lincoln, mysteriously announced that for one night he had to go away on private business. This threw JD into a turmoil of uncertainty about Lincoln’s understudy, who he felt wasn’t up to the job. So it was agreed that JD himself would play Lincoln. News travelled fast and the public imagination was inflamed by the appeal of a playwright playing his central character. The evening attracted its first full house, and JD’s performance had an enormous impact even though he had to discretely use a script disguised as a book. On the strength of this peculiar event an enthusiastic audience poured in nightly to see a

play that evidently touched them with its candid frankness and disarming simplicity. Playfair writes in detail explaining why he felt this play resonated with a nation coming out of the war. People had lost their bloodthirsty attitude and it seemed that it was no longer the thing to hate one's enemies but to hate war. This is beautifully expressed in the play.

"It was a play of noble sentiments which were just coming in to fashion; and there is nothing for which the plain man better likes a poet than for saying what he is beginning to think himself. All Lincoln's speeches, his attitude towards reprisal, towards the condemned sentry- all these things contained ideas at which the general public was beginning to arrive for itself."

Nigel Playfair

What strikes me about the construction of the play is not only the heroic portrayal of Lincoln's determination to abolish slavery at whatever cost, but the interface of this with scenes of a far more personal nature. Lincoln meets two ladies of opposing views about the war: Mrs Otherly, opposed to war and grieving for her son who has been killed, is in sharp contrast to Mrs Goliath Blow, who although in favour of the war, hypocritically recoils at Lincoln's suggestion that he could find her husband a commission.

Lincoln to Mrs Goliath Blow:

"Ma'am, I too believe war to be wrong. It is the weakness and the jealousy and the folly of men that make a thing so wrong possible... This appeal to force is the misdeed of an imperfect world. But we are imperfect. We must strive to purify the world, but we must not think ourselves pure above the world."

Abraham Lincoln: John Drinkwater

Other intimate scenes such as the one between Lincoln's servant, Susan, and Custis, a black slave, and the touching penultimate scene between Lincoln and the young sentry who fell asleep on duty underpin the honourable weight of Lincoln's character. The audience is presented with a complex man who is able to contemplate within himself the unsettling reality of opposing views. It is no surprise that the contents of JD's play are still relevant today: my researches via Google reveal that it currently forms part of the model of training in the school of "Aesthetic Realism" in New York, and that it was performed by the Kabuki Theatre in Tokyo in 1946.

Ultimately though, I feel the enduring success of Lincoln rests on JD's vision as a poet. The weight of his subject would have felt wooden if it had simply been expressed through realistic dialogue. JD's stroke of genius was to use the device of two chroniclers as a form of Greek Chorus. The sheer beauty of their poetry gives voice to JD's inner muse, that of the poet who came from the enchanted woods of pre- First World War Dymock.

"Lonely is the man who understands.
Lonely is vision that leads a man away
From the pasture-lands,
From the furrows of corn and brown loads of hay,
To the mountain-side,
To the high places where contemplation brings
All his adventurings
Among the sowers and the tillers in the wide
Valleys to one fused experience,
That shall control
The courses of his soul,
And give his hand
Courage and continence."

The two Chroniclers: Abraham Lincoln: John Drinkwater

So the physical Triumph of Abraham Lincoln was that it continued to run for a year at the Lyric Hammersmith to packed houses. Playfair had to hurriedly construct an impromptu Royal Box for the King and Queen, who drew wondering crowds to the streets

of Hammersmith. The play went on to further success in the USA, which was no mean feat for a writer who was not American. Rumour has it that JD made a considerable fortune out of the play, which would help account for how a humble poet from a working class background in Leytonstone was able, for a while at least, to live at the Grove in Highgate with nine servants, one of whom was his personal valet!

Abraham Lincoln continues to have a life. It was revived in Birmingham in 1923 and 1952 and recently at the Kentucky Repertory Theatre in 2008. The future potential of this play continues to live and breathe, not least through the influence of Barack Obama who has on many occasions drawn similarities between himself and Abraham Lincoln. But most of all there is the enduring quality of JD's direct heartfelt language. After ninety years it still speaks to us in a surprisingly contemporary language. In the words of Martin Luther King: "I have a dream...". John Drinkwater showed that by following his true passion he too touched the world by manifesting a timely kernel of truth.



JD at Lincoln's House, Springfield, Illinois, USA.