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Lincoln and Lee

A Play in One Act
Commissioned by David Madden and the
Louisiana Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission

by
John Patrick Bray

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Lincoln and Lee

by John Patrick Bray

SETTING:

A lawyer's office in Washington, D.C. shortly before the Civil War.

CHARACTERS:

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
COLONEL ROBERT E. LEE

ETC.:

Lincoln and Lee, originally titled *A Meeting between Abraham Lincoln and Robert E. Lee*, was performed as a staged-reading at The Louisiana State Archives in Baton Rouge in February, 2009; and at the Old State Capitol Building in Baton Rouge, LA in April, 2009. The reading was co-directed by John Patrick Bray and David Madden. The cast was as follows:

LINCOLN..... Jay Dardenne
(Louisiana Secretary of State)
LEE..... Cliff Deal

PLAY SYNOPSIS

A speculative look at what may have happened if President Abraham Lincoln had met with Colonel Robert E. Lee to ask him to lead the Union Army. In history, President Lincoln had wanted Lee to be his general, but was turned down shortly before Virginia entered the Civil War. Lee and Lincoln had only communicated via third-party correspondence.

Lincoln and Lee

by John Patrick Bray

(AT RISE: LINCOLN is discovered in an office. It is not the Oval Office; it is an old law office in Washington, D.C. There is a chalkboard on the back wall with random notes. And papers and files all over a desk. There is a KNOCK on the door.)

LINCOLN

You may enter.

(LEE enters.)

LEE

Mr. Lincoln?

LINCOLN

Colonel Lee! *(LINCOLN approaches LEE; THEY shake hands.)* So good of you to come. Pray take off your jacket and hat. Would you care for a whiskey?

(LEE hangs up his coat and hat on a rack as he speaks.)

LEE

Whiskey - I like it, I always did, and that is the reason I never use it.

LINCOLN

I don't care much for the stuff. But the wife likes to keep it around. *(Wryly)* For guests, she says. For guests. She thought that given the nature of our conversation today—

LEE

Very good of her, sir. Very good of her.

LINCOLN

Yes. *(Beat)* You must know my reason for inviting you?

LEE

I have my ideas. This is all a bit secretive, meeting in an old law office rather than...well, I'm sure you have your reasons.

LINCOLN

A friend in town allowed me to use it for this evening. I wanted to avoid the press.

LEE

The local papers tend to favor you at least.

LINCOLN

Is that so?

LEE

Were you to travel a little ways south from here, on the other hand.

LINCOLN

If I were to try to read, much less answer, all the attacks made on me, this shop might as well be closed for any other business. I do the very best I know how - the very best I can; and I mean to keep doing so until the end. If the end brings me out all right, what's said against me won't amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference.

(LINCOLN pours himself and LEE each a glass of water.)

LEE

Dark days ahead.

LINCOLN

An Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words: 'And this, too, shall pass away.'

LEE

Quite so. *(Beat)* I know of the attacks in South Carolina, and the secession of course.

LINCOLN

Your thoughts?

LEE

It's a revolution.

LINCOLN

And you have no sympathy with the revolutionaries?

LEE

With those who cry war against their own country? For Heaven's sake, no.

LINCOLN

You do understand, I am trying to hold this country together, I am not actively seeking war.

LEE

What a cruel thing is war: to separate and destroy families and friends, and mar the purest joys and happiness God has granted us in this world; to fill our hearts with hatred instead of love for our neighbors, and to devastate the fair face of this beautiful world.

LINCOLN

Now, war may not be avoidable. I would ask for your help.

LEE

My help, sir?

LINCOLN

Colonel, I wish to rely on you, should this revolution occur, to be my right hand. And to lead the Union army.

LEE

That...that is an honor, sir. (Beat). I cannot help but think...

LINCOLN

Yes?

LEE

I'm thinking of Alexandria, Virginia. The town where I was raised. Boasting the best of coastal industry, while maintaining a quiet charm. We have a town hall, and a beautiful library. Most of all, we have our first President, George Washington, laid to rest in our most glorious cemetery.

LINCOLN

Indeed you do.

LEE

And what an honor it is. It's as if you can feel his spirit in the hearts of all free Virginians. My belief is that God has bestowed us with the gift of the first President as a humble reminder that we are one union, indivisible. I shall never bear arms against the Union. (*Beat. LINCOLN smiles.*) But it may be necessary for me to carry a musket in the defense of my native state, Virginia, in which case I shall not prove recreant to my duty.

LINCOLN

(*Beat*) Is not Virginia part of the Union?

LEE

It is.

LINCOLN

If Virginia were to secede?

LEE

It shan't.

LINCOLN

But if it should?

LEE

It shan't.

LINCOLN

But if it should? (*LEE looks at him with a slight smile.*) I would ask "but if it should" again, but I have a feeling I'd know your answer.

LEE

In Alexandria, if someone were to knock your hat off by mistake, it would be a Carter, from my mother's side. And if a Samaritan were to pick it up for you, it would be a Carter as well.

LINCOLN

Very well. (*LINCOLN stands and paces a bit.*) There are those who say this will be a war solely based on the issues of slavery.

LEE

But what an issue! The doctrines and miracles of our Savior have required nearly two thousand years converting but a small portion of the human race, and even among Christian nations what gross errors still exist!

LINCOLN

You are opposed to slavery, then?

LEE

Morally, yes. (*Beat*) But while we see the course of the final abolition of human slavery is still onward, and give it the aid of our prayers, let us leave the progress as well as the results in the hands of Him who, chooses to work by *slow* influences, and with whom a thousand years are but as a single day.

LINCOLN

You oppose slavery, but you will not fight to end it?

LEE

We can always set the example, rather than try to enforce. I, for one, have started freeing my slaves.

LINCOLN

Indeed?

LEE

Indeed. My man William Mac Lee stays with me. Willy is now my cook.

LINCOLN

By his own choice?

LEE

Certainly. I could not ask for a better confidant and friend.

LINCOLN

This is beautiful!

LEE

I do not boast of it. The right hand should not know the deeds of the left.

LINCOLN

And you follow then that the Union should not uphold the immorality of slavery?

LEE

Of course. But give it time. People will come around. Government intervention may just strengthen the opinions of those who disagree.

LINCOLN

I do not mean to say that this government is charged with the duty of redressing or preventing all the wrongs in the world; but I do think that it is charged with the duty of preventing and redressing all wrongs which are wrongs to itself.

LEE

That is sound logic. *(Beat)* But as you said, were we to be at war within our states, it would not be due to slavery.

LINCOLN

Not entirely.

LEE

Slavery is tied to the economy. You do recognize that.

LINCOLN

Yes.

LEE

And you do remember it is legal?

(LINCOLN smiles.)

LINCOLN

Of course it is. But legality and morality make strange bed fellows. I should know, I was a lawyer. And a good one. (*LINCOLN and Lee smile.*) The old general rule was that *educated* people did not perform manual labor.

LEE

Then we are a nation of fools.

LINCOLN

They managed to eat their bread, leaving the toil of producing it to the uneducated. This was not an insupportable evil to the working bees, so long as the class of drones remained very small. But *now*, especially in these free States, nearly all are educated--quite too nearly all, to leave the labor of the uneducated, in any wise adequate to the support of the whole. It follows from this that henceforth educated people must labor. Otherwise, education itself would become a positive and intolerable evil.

LEE

You are self-educated?

LINCOLN

Yes.

LEE

And you have never owned a slave?

LINCOLN

I have not. One of my father's reasons for moving us out of Kentucky was due to the slavery issue. That was one of the issues. My first glimpse of slavery was in an open-market in Louisiana. I was a very young man then. I would see it again in 1841, returning from Joshua Speed's homestead. Mr. Speed was and still is a very close friend of mine. We were on a Steam Boat from Louisville to St. Louis. On board a boat from St. Louis, I saw something quite remarkable. A gentleman had purchased twelve Negroes in different parts of Kentucky and was taking them to a farm in the South. They were chained six and six together. A small iron clevis was around the left wrist of each, and this fastened to the main chain by a shorter one at a convenient distance from the others; so that the Negroes were strung together precisely like so many fish upon a trot-line. In this condition they were being separated forever from the scenes of their childhood, their friends, their fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, and many of them, from their wives and children, and going into perpetual slavery where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and unrelenting than anything else. And yet amid all these distressing circumstances, as we would think them, they were the most cheerful and apparently happy creatures on board.

LEE

Mankind – all of mankind – is born with a sense of hope.

LINCOLN

Yes. I had remarked at the time, 'How true it is that "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb," or in other words, that He renders the worst of human conditions tolerable, while He permits the best, to be nothing better than tolerable.' However, these conditions, if "tolerable" should, in the name of decency not be tolerated. That sight was a continued torment to me: the idleness of the master and his whip, and the industry in the hands of the oppressed. Mr. Speed agreed with me.

LEE

He seeks the end of slavery?

LINCOLN

On the contrary, he boasted of its practicality.

LEE

Like so many educated drones.

LINCOLN

Indeed. He would rather see the Union dissolved than see the end of slavery in all states. Like so many in the south. But you...you have been freeing your slaves.

LEE

It is the Christian thing to do. Though, there are many Southern men who declare that their slaves are better off than hired laborers in the north. The examples they give are plentiful: miners, servants, -

LINCOLN

And the beggars that wonder the metropolitan streets, I'm sure. How little they *know*, whereof they *speak!* There is no permanent class of hired laborers amongst us. There is the mobility.

LEE

Just because a man is free does not guarantee mobility.

LINCOLN

Mr. Lee, Standing before you is a poor young man from Illinois.

LEE

I thought you said were from Kentucky?

LINCOLN

Illinois will always be my home. It is where my heart rests. Ambition has led me thus far, Mr. Lee. Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men,

LINCOLN, *Continued*

by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition, is yet to be developed.

LEE

You make friends of enemies.

LINCOLN

And I hope never to make enemies of friends. (*Beat*) My final thoughts on labor verses slavery is thus: free labor has the inspiration of hope. Pure slavery has no hope.

LEE

On that we are agreed.

LINCOLN

Then you agree that slavery is a sin before God and our fellow man?

LEE

Yes, sir.

LINCOLN

We are agreed that we are witnessing the stirrings of a revolution which must be made to stand down?

LEE

Yes, sir!

LINCOLN

And that, most importantly, we remain a union of these United States, even if it means going to war, brother against brother?

LEE

I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than the dissolution of the Union. It would be an accumulation of all the evils we complain of, and I am willing to sacrifice everything but honor for its preservation.

LINCOLN

Then, it is settled!

LEE

I should say so! (*LINCOLN grows quiet. He turns from LEE.*) Mr. President?

LINCOLN

Then it only remains for me to tell you...

LEE

Yes?

LINCOLN

You must know...Virginia has declared its intention to join the Confederacy. (*Long pause*) It is only fair to tell you. I am sorry that I have kept it from you until this moment. Virginia is now part of that very revolution that you and I detest. (*Pause again*) Colonel Lee?

LEE

(*Praying*) Help me to be, to think, to act what is right because it is right; make me truthful, honest, and honorable in all things; make me intellectually honest for the sake of right and honor and without thought of reward to me. (Beat). It's a prayer. I recite it every day. Right now seemed the best moment for it.

LINCOLN

I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side.

LEE

Which side claims the Lord's side, Mr. Lincoln? Where is the right here?

LINCOLN

With war there is never an absolute right.

LEE

I'm not talking about a war! I'm talking about this, this trial by fire! I tell you that I am against slavery. That I am of the Union. I tell you I will not raise a hand against Virginia. These three principles make me the man I am. How can I budge on any of these three, let along the most important?

LINCOLN

It is your decision to make ultimately.

LEE

Is this why you bring me here? To rake me over the coals?

LINCOLN

Certainly not!

LEE

I'll grant you, obedience to lawful authority is the foundation of manly character, but as a man...you cannot ask this of me.

LINCOLN

You are my Colonel!

LEE

No, sir, I cannot be!

LINCOLN

Your record in battle, your service at West Point. You were the only man in your class was not once given a demerit. They called you the Marble Man. Who else can I turn to but a man of your caliber?

LEE

NO, SIR!

LINCOLN

What are your feelings of Jefferson Davis?

LEE

He is not my president!

LINCOLN

And am I?

LEE

Yes, sir.

LINCOLN

And yet?

LEE

And yet I WILL NOT RAISE ARMS AGAINST MY HOME!

LINCOLN

THIS ENTIRE UNION IS YOUR HOME! These United States of America! If Virginia leaves, you have no home. No state is a country unto itself. It is part of the Union, or it is part of the revolution, ultimately, it will be brought back, you must see that.

LEE

Then it will be brought back without me!

LINCOLN

See how many points which with we are agreed. (*LINCOLN draws a t-square on the chalkboard.*) Both against slavery. Both on upholding the Constitution. Both believers in our forefathers; as you can see, I am drawing a Benjamin Franklin-styled T-square, which I am sure is not lost on you. We have so many points in common, and yet this...if Virginia becomes part of the revolutionary, suddenly, you throw this away? Our Union? Our principles? Listen to reason!

LEE

Reason! Kill my kin and desecrate the land of my mother, the Carters, and for what? In the end it's for slaves, and if I have to choose between treacheries—

LINCOLN

How could you choose?!

(LEE wanders to the board and rights "VIRGINIA" and underlines it in the second column. He drops the chalk and turns to LINCOLN.)

LEE

I'm beginning to feel like your Mr. Speed. *(Beat)* Mr. Lincoln, you have spoken of the constitution. It is legal in many states to keep slaves. You in fact supported the amendment allowing free states to remain free, and slave states to remain slave states. Why the change of heart?

LINCOLN

(Tense; quickly) My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause.

LEE

Have you any paper?

(LINCOLN reaches into the desk, and hands him a roll of paper. LEE spreads it out, and uses a dip pen to write. LINCOLN watches, tensely. LEE hands the paper to LINCOLN. LINCOLN reads it.)

LINCOLN

"With all my devotion to the Union and the feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home. I have therefore resigned my commission in the Army, and save in defense of my native State, with the sincere hope that my poor services may never be needed, I hope I may never be called on to draw my sword..."

LEE

Is this treasonous? An act of a revolutionary? Read it. Is it so unlike the Declaration of Independence? In this moment, I must choose freedom for myself, for my family, for my home. And I must ward off any that would bring violence to my very door. Isn't that what the revolution was for, sir? What would you have me do?

LINCOLN

What would I have you do? (*Pause; considers*)

This is Not the End of the Play
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