



RICK TELLER

The Rivalry

Peter Cormican, left, and Christian Kauffmann at the Irish Repertory Theater.

Great Debate Of '58: Lincoln Vs. Douglas

The elections last year might have seemed unusually rife with issues and substance, what with the economy, the war and the general historic significance of several candidacies. But to feel truly on the brink of something momentous, try a trip back to 1858, when Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln debated both the survival of the nation and the very nature of humankind as they battled for a United States Senate seat.

**THEATER
REVIEW**

**NEIL
GENZLINGER**

"The Rivalry," a play by Norman Corwin, uses excerpts from those debates and the barest minimum of side plot to turn history into compelling theater. The play was seen on Broadway in 1959, when the words of Lincoln and Douglas had all sorts of relevance to the emerging civil rights movement. Now, of course, they have whole new layers of resonance, and the staging of the play by the Vincent Dowling Theater Company and the Irish Repertory Theater lets you savor them through a pair of fine performances.

The play, directed by Mr. Dowling, focuses on Douglas more than on Lincoln, and Peter Cormican is just what you want in that role: evenhanded, letting Douglas's sometimes jarring words speak for themselves. (The rants about racial purity are especially unsettling today.)

But Christian Kauffmann's Lincoln is ultimately what makes the play work. Mr. Kauffmann's characterization grows on you, much as Lincoln must have grown on the public as a leader: he lost that 1858 election, but two years later he was chosen for what was certainly at the time the most difficult job in the world.

"The Rivalry" continues through July 5 at the Irish Repertory Theater, 132 West 22nd Street, Chelsea; (212) 727-2737, irishrep.org.