

You can't debate a good play

By FRANK SCHECK

SEEING as "The Rivalry" depicts impassioned debates between two ambitious politicians, you'd be excused for expecting the Obama-Clinton face-offs. But Norman Corwin's play — which had a brief Broadway run half a century ago — concerns two other great debaters: Abra-

THEATER REVIEW

THE RIVALRY

★★★

Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St.; 212-727-2737. Through July 5.

ham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, who butted heads in 1858.

Much more than a history lesson, "The Rivalry" is a powerful reminder that politics matter, even if the level of discourse has been dumbed down.

In case you've forgotten, the Lincoln-Douglas debates were held in Illinois, where both men were running for the US Senate. Although Lincoln lost, his reputation grew, thanks largely to the debate transcripts he had published, and he won the presidency two years later.

The playwright provides large portions of their speeches, including Lincoln's declaration that "a nation divided against itself cannot stand."

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The play really comes to life when it depicts the debaters' personalities, and in the tender scenes in which Lincoln and Douglas' loyal wife, Adele ("I don't trust Republicans," she declares), develop a warm friendship.

The lanky Christian Kauffman, looking uncannily like Lincoln, beautifully conveys the future president's mixture of homespun humor and powerful convictions. Peter Cormican effectively suggests the famed charisma of Douglas ("the Little Giant"), and Mary Linda Rapelye is quietly moving as the devoted Adele.