

ENTERTAINMENT & CULTURE

REVIEW: THEATER | By Terry Teachout

Listening to Lincoln

MOST EDUCATED Americans have heard of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, but how many remember anything about them beyond the fact that they were about slavery? Even if you're not in need of a refresher course, I suggest you pay a visit to the Irish Repertory Theatre's revival of "The Rivalry," Norman Corwin's 1959 play about seven debates that changed a nation's course. Yes, it's a history lesson, but a painless one that, unlike most latter-day docudramas, sticks surprisingly close to the truth.

Mr. Corwin, who turned 99 last

THE RIVALRY

Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St. (\$55-\$65), 212-727-2737, extended through July 19

OUR HOUSE

Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. (\$65), 212-279-4200, closes June 21

month, is a near-forgotten giant of golden-age radio, the author of "The Plot to Overthrow Christmas" and the man on whom CBS called in 1945 when it wanted to commission a play to celebrate V-E Day. After TV put an end to radio drama, Mr. Corwin turned to other pursuits, writing the screenplay for "Lust for Life," Vincente Minnelli's marvelous 1956 biopic about the life of Vincent Van Gogh. Three years later he took a shot at the legitimate stage with "The Rivalry," which ran for only 81 performances on Broadway but has since had a vigorous afterlife in regional theaters around the country.

This is, so far as I know, the first time that "The Rivalry" has been given a professional revival in New York, and I can't see why it took so long. To be sure, it's more a pageant than a play—most of the running time is given over to the debates themselves, and Mr. Corwin has made only a token attempt to place them in a larger dramatic con-



Mary Linda Rapelye and Christian Kauffmann in 'The Rivalry.'

text—but the inherent drama of the encounters between Stephen A. Douglas (Peter Cormican) and Abraham Lincoln (Christian Kauffmann) is powerful enough to hold your attention without superfluous theatrical

embellishment.

A short primer for readers with rusty memories: In 1859 Lincoln was seeking to dislodge Douglas from his Senate seat, and the two men appeared jointly throughout Illinois

that summer and fall, arguing over whether the citizens of U.S. territories should be allowed to legalize slavery by popular vote. Douglas supported the doctrine of "popular sovereignty," while Lincoln believed slavery to be a "monstrous injustice" that stood in glaring contradiction to the belief that all men are created equal. At stake was the future of the Union—Southern states were already threatening to secede over the issue—and so the debates attracted nationwide attention and were reported in close detail by every major newspaper in America. Though Douglas retained his Senate seat, the resulting press coverage made Lincoln a celebrity and put him on the road to the White House.

To present even one of the original debates on stage would be hopelessly undramatic, since each encounter consisted of an hour-long address by the first speaker, a 90-minute response by the second speaker, and a 30-minute rebuttal by the first speaker. Instead Mr. Corwin has compressed the transcripts into a series of compact scenes, editing the rebuttals in such a way as to create the impression that Lincoln and Douglas interrupted one another at will. While that didn't happen—the format of the debates didn't allow for direct interaction between the two men—Mr. Corwin has otherwise given a fair impression of what was said on the platform. Not only is Douglas allowed to have his say, but no attempt is made to conceal the awkward fact that Lincoln, opposed as he was to slavery, still believed that blacks were inferior as a group to whites: "Certainly the Negro is not our equal in color—perhaps not in many other respects."

So why not just stay home and read the transcripts? Because, among other things, you'll be depriving yourself of the chance to see Mr. Kauffmann impersonate Lincoln. Not only does he bear a close physical resemblance to the man he plays, but his homespun, humorous acting is utterly plausible. Unlike the secular saint portrayed by Henry Fonda in John Ford's "Young Mr. Lincoln," Mr. Kauffmann's Lincoln is recognizably human, and even when he's flinging

great shafts of rhetoric across the platform, he still seems like a small-town lawyer who has been ennobled by fate. Mr. Cormican's Douglas is more conventional—he plays the "Little Giant" as a strutting, overly self-confident bantamweight pol—but no less effective, and Mary Linda Rapelye is straightforward and strong as his anxious wife.

To watch Vincent Dowling's pleasingly old-fashioned staging of "The Rivalry" is to be catapulted back to an unimaginable time when attention spans were longer and politicians more articulate. Indeed, it's downright startling to hear the kind of language that was thought suitable to a public debate a century and a half ago. Lincoln and Douglas spoke not in easy-to-digest sound bites but in tightly woven webs of logic, and their listeners returned the compliment to their intelligence by hanging on every word. That, too, is one of the most compelling reasons to see "The Rivalry," for it turns out that the best way to appreciate the extent to which political discourse has changed since 1859 is to take it in through the ear. I came away from "The Rivalry" asking myself a thoroughly discomfiting question: Are we dumber than our great-great-grandparents, or just lazier?

Theresa Rebeck's latest play is yet another toothless satire about the mindlessness of pop culture. "Our House" invites us to sneer at the nefarious activities of a TV executive (Christopher Evan Welch) who decides to boost the sagging ratings of one of his network's news programs by ordering its sexy anchorwoman (Morena Baccarin) to cover reality TV as if it were real news. What follows is a minor miracle of mediocrity, a play in which no one says or does anything unpredictable. Ms. Rebeck has spent much of her career working as a TV writer and producer, and it appears that she learned her lessons too well.

Save money: Rent "Network."

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