

December 11, 2008

THEATER REVIEW | 'A CIVIL WAR CHRISTMAS'

## A Nation Divided Stands Throughout the Holidays

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#)

NEW HAVEN — History lessons and holiday warmth sit cozily alongside each other, like adjacent squares stitched together on a handmade quilt, in “A Civil War Christmas,” an ambitious, richly detailed and beautifully mounted new seasonal offering at the [Long Wharf Theater](#) here.

The show, subtitled “An American Musical Celebration,” was conceived and written by [Paula Vogel](#), the [Pulitzer Prize](#)-winning author of “How I Learned to Drive” and many other plays. To create a holiday entertainment grounded in historical fact, Ms. Vogel weaves a complex tapestry of plotlines that include numerous celebrated figures along with several fictional or composite characters.

Performances of period-appropriate holiday songs — “Silent Night,” “O Christmas Tree” — are smoothly integrated into the fabric of the show, as are some less well-known marches, hymns and spirituals, all under the musical supervision of Daryl Waters. The director, Tina Landau, contributes some of her finest work in recent years, bringing a serious but never somber tone to this comprehensive pageant of American experience, set on a chilly Christmas Eve in the latter days of the conflict that threatened to divide the country for good.

The year is 1864. [Abraham Lincoln](#) has just been re-elected to the presidency, but the national mood is dark as the war continues to claim lives in its fourth year. As night falls, [Robert E. Lee](#) and [Ulysses S. Grant](#) are hunkered down with their exhausted troops. In the White House the distraction of choosing a Christmas gift for his wife momentarily eases the president’s burden, while Mary Todd Lincoln roams the streets in search of more fripperies to sate her fashion hunger, and maybe a Christmas tree, a novel custom recently imported from Bavaria.

Other historical figures playing small roles in the story include [Walt Whitman](#), who comforts wounded soldiers in the hospital; Clara Barton; Lincoln’s chief of security, Ward Hill Lamon; and the conspirators he senses working their evil designs in the shadows, led by John Wilkes Booth.

Ms. Vogel has researched the period thoroughly and is at pains to include all strata of society and a variety of religious and racial backgrounds in her cast, resulting in a very full stage. Among the fictional or composite characters are Decatur Bronson, based on two African-Americans who received the Medal of Honor for service in the war, who works as a blacksmith for the Union Army and mourns the kidnapping of his wife by Confederate troops; Hannah, an escaped slave who is desperately trying to make it to Washington with her young daughter, Jessa; and Moses

Levy, a sensitive Jewish soldier wounded in battle who receives a bedside visit from the first lady.

Remarkably, Ms. Vogel manages to humanize most of her many characters in a few crisp strokes of dialogue, so they come across as full-blooded people, glimpsed clearly if quickly, rather than talking statues in a historical diorama. Still, there are so many people (and a few horses and mules) crossing paths that the narrative takes a long time to gain any momentum and eventually becomes unwieldy as characters continue to be introduced well into the second act.

Scene-setting and contextual commentary are supplied by members of the cast, who pivot easily from playing characters to acting as narrators. But the constant need to bring us up to date (“On the south side of the Potomac Hannah and her daughter, Jessa, march toward freedom”) tends to clutter the proceedings. Further complicating matters are the occasional flashbacks.

Trimming some of the less integral story lines would also help slim down the two-and-a-half-hour running time. “A Civil War Christmas” is the rare holiday entertainment that brings intellectual nourishment as much as it entertains — and it goes easy on the sweets to boot — so it should be made as accessible as possible for children and young adults.

The actors move easily among dozens of roles. Diane Sutherland gives a touching performance as an impulsive, emotionally frail but warm-hearted Mrs. Lincoln, whose friendship with her African-American seamstress, Elizabeth Keckley (Ora Jones), is given particular emphasis. Jay Russell moves with a stately gait suggesting Lincoln’s towering size but also reveals a sardonic side to temper the nobility. (It is mildly confusing, however, when the same actor in the same facial hair makes a brief appearance as Whitman.)

Marc Damon Johnson imbues the grieving Bronson with a stoic integrity that almost but does not quite succumb to the need for vengeance. All of the performances are suffused with a specificity that helps etch the characters cleanly on our consciousness, even if they have but a few minutes of stage time.

The rough-hewn wooden set, by James Schuette, allows the action to move swiftly between scenes set on various platforms. Toni-Leslie James’s period costumes stick to sober, earthy colors, although the dresses for the women are sumptuously detailed. Scott Zielinski’s lighting similarly bathes the production in hues that don’t stray far from the basic black-and-white of period photography.

But the muted tones make way, at the climax, for the entrance of a big Christmas tree trimmed from top to bottom, gleaming with red and gold. The whole cast gathers around it to sing a final farewell, ending on a joyous note that is satisfying without being saccharine. All that has passed before has made amply clear that the potential for conflict in the jumble of American society is a painfully persistent part of our history. And so the moments of reconciliation, of peaceful companionship and communal hope, must be cherished all the more ardently.

A CIVIL WAR CHRISTMAS

## An American Musical Celebration

By [Paula Vogel](#); music supervised, arranged and orchestrated by Daryl Waters; directed and choreographed by Tina Landau; music director, Andrew Resnick; sets by James Schuette; costumes by Toni-Leslie James; lighting by Scott Zielinski; sound by Josh Horvath; dialect design, Amy Stoller; hair, wig and makeup design by Wendy Parson; stage manager, Lori Lundquist; dramaturge, April Donahower. Presented by the [Long Wharf Theater](#), Gordon Edelstein, artistic director; Joan Channick, managing director. At the Long Wharf Theater's Mainstage, 222 Sargent Drive, New Haven; (203) 787-4282. Through Dec. 21. Running time: 2 hours 30 minutes.

WITH: Guy Adkins (John Wilkes Booth, [Robert E. Lee](#), William Tecumseh Sherman), Justin Blanchard (Chester, Manton Saunders, Hay, John Surratt), Susannah Flood (Raz, Anna Surratt), J. D. Goldblatt (Ely Parker, Silver, Frederick Wormley, Moses Levy), Brian Tyree Henry (Willy Mack, Walker Lewis, Jim Wormley), Marc Damon Johnson (Decatur Bronson, James Wormley), Bianca LaVerne Jones (Hannah, Rose, Aggy), Ora Jones (Elizabeth Keckley, Mrs. Thomas), Drew McVety (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, [Ulysses S. Grant](#), Ward Hill Lamon), Jay Russell ([Abraham Lincoln](#), [Walt Whitman](#)), Rachel Shapiro Alderman (Nicolay, Mary Surratt, Clara Barton, Widow Saunders), Diane Sutherland (Mary Todd Lincoln, Secretary of War Stanton), Scott Thomas (Lewis Payne, Mosby Raider), Faith Philpot and Malenky Welsh (Jessa, Little Joe).

Copyright 2008 [The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)