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# With a smile on his face

ADAM I. P. SMITH

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Richard Wightman Fox

LINCOLN'S BODY

A cultural history

416pp. Norton. \$28.95.

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Harold Holzer, editor

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Fred Kaplan, editor

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Tom Taylor was the author of the play that Abraham Lincoln was watching when he was shot. At least, he'd written the original script. Taylor had written a rather stilted comedy of manners in which a straw-sucking Vermonter called Asa (the "American Cousin" of the play's title) turns up in an English country house and by turns shocks and amuses everyone with his rustic ways and homegrown sincerity. But the production first staged by Laura Keene in New York in 1858, which then toured the United States during the Civil War, had been transformed through improvisation. By the time Lincoln saw it on April 14, 1865 at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC, *Our American Cousin* was a hilarious farce in which satire mixed with slapstick, melodrama with on-stage mayhem. When one of the company, the British comic actor Edward Askew Sothorn, grumbled that his character, Lord Dundreary, was too small a role, his friend Joseph Jefferson was said to have responded with one of the great thespian aphorisms: "there are no small roles; only small actors". Sothorn took the advice to heart; by upstaging everyone else and cavorting around like a Victorian Mr Bean, Sothorn turned Dundreary into the star of the show: a foppish, lisp-ing fool with the best of intentions but a brain the size of a pea.

So a play that, in Tom Taylor's original, was designed mainly to contrast American innocence with English sophistication became, in Keene's production, an opportunity for Americans to laugh at English aristocratic pretensions. The character of Asa, intended by Taylor to be a figure of fun, became, by the time Lincoln saw the play, the voice of homegrown American good sense. His wisdom was gleaned from real life rather than a classical education but he could outsmart the English (and win the girl, naturally). Asa dressed in backwoodsman's jeans and a felt hat, just as Lincoln had in his youth, when he split logs and worked at odd jobs as he made his way in the world.

The character of Asa, played on April 14 by Harry Hawk, was the only one on stage when



Lincoln was shot. "The play was going off so well, Mr and Mrs Lincoln enjoyed it so much", he later recalled. At the end of Act III, scene ii, Hawk's character had a confrontation with Mrs Moutchessington, played by "the old lady of the theatre" (as Hawk called her), Helen Muzzy, in a style that, I imagine, anticipated the entire basis of Hattie Jacques's career. In withering tones she told him he didn't know how to behave properly and stalked off stage. "Don't know the manners of good society, eh?" Hawk called out to her ample retreating figure. "Well, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal - you sockdologizing old man-trap". It was the most famous line of the play: the honest American telling the pompous Englishwoman how it really was. Hawk's line was the cue for John Wilkes Booth, also an actor, and a very good one, to burst into the Presidential box, and shoot Lincoln in the head.

As Richard Wightman Fox drily observes in his perceptive study of Lincoln's body in American culture, "has any other martyr in history been dispatched while a thousand of his admirers were bent over in stitches?" Harry Hawk, who at least had the advantage over the audience of knowing for sure that the gunshot was not part of the play, later told his father in a letter reproduced in Harold Holzer's collection, *President Lincoln Assassinated!*, that he looked up and saw a man jumping from the President's box to the stage.

He slipped when he gained the stage, but he got upon his feet in a moment, brandished a large knife, saying "The South shall be free!" turned his face in the direction I stood, and I recognized him as John Wilkes Booth. He ran towards me, and I, seeing the knife, thought I was the one he was after, ran off the stage and up a flight of stairs. He made his escape out of a door, directly in the rear of the theatre, mounted a horse and rode off.

In those moments ("the space of a quarter of a minute" according to Hawk) the audience struggled to comprehend what they had just seen: their "glee" at Hawk's hilarious line "slowing down their perceptions", as Fox puts it.

The disorientation of the audience anticipated the disorientation of everyone else as the news of the tragedy spread. Lincoln was shot just five days after General Lee's surrender at Appomattox had, in effect, ended the Civil War. The North was jubilant. "The city only the night before was illuminated, and everybody was so happy", wrote Hawk. "Now it is all sadness."

In a culture where Puritanism was still widespread, it was deeply regretful to many that the President had been shot in a theatre, a notoriously ungodly place. But he had been slain on Good Friday; to thousands of ministers in hurriedly prepared sermons that Sunday, the symbolism could hardly be more obvious: Lincoln had given his life so that the nation might live.

Fox describes in great detail Lincoln's death and the drawn-out funeral procession, by rail from Washington back to the President's birthplace, Springfield, Illinois. All along the way, people wanted to view the body, to touch and see Lincoln for themselves just as, in life, only two weeks earlier, African Americans had pressed in on him to touch his coat and his hands as he toured Richmond, Virginia, after the Confederate government had evacuated it.

The Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, who had tried and failed to make Lincoln take more seriously the threat of assassination when he was alive, micro-managed the President's physical body after he was dead. Stanton over-

ruled the undertakers, who wanted to make the corpse look as much as possible like "the portraits of the president so familiar to the people" with the "broad jaw" and a "placid smile on his lips". Stanton told them instead to retain the ugly bruises beneath Lincoln's eyes that had developed through the long hours of unconsciousness and laboured breathing between Booth's shot and the President's final breath at 7:22 the following morning. They were the marks of suffering on his body that testified to the nature of the death "which this martyr to his idea of justice and right had suffered", as the *New York Herald* put it. Many thousands of pilgrims viewed the open coffin and those bruises; the "rolling funeral" lasting three weeks was part of Lincoln's story. And the body, deeply embalmed, turned gradually blacker as the funeral train proceeded.

Fox's book adds to a sizeable pile already written about the image of Lincoln in American and global culture. For those who have an interest in such things, some of the material here will be very familiar. For at least a century after his death, he was ever present in American culture. Places associated with his life - "Lincoln Shrines", as the 1950s tour guides called them - became major tourist attractions, places of pilgrimage. As Fox writes, Lincoln "exemplified, more fully than anyone before him, the ideal republican life course: self-improvement in youth, public service in adulthood, and sacrifice for the people at the peak of his powers".

*Lincoln's Body* is an elegantly woven account of the way the physical Lincoln has been remembered, reimagined and reconstituted - in bronze, stone, animatronic technology, or by Daniel Day-Lewis. Fox does more than just document Lincoln's impact; he explains why he has mattered. Lincoln's lanky frame and dark eyes, his "homely" face and ill-fitting clothes became emblematic of American manners, thoughts and ideals.

If Lincoln was an icon, he was a rumpled human icon: his sad eyes and hollowed cheeks testifying to his personal suffering, and his lack

of refinement to his authenticity. This was why even Marilyn Monroe could say of Lincoln, "he was the only famous American who seemed most like me, at least in his childhood". As Fox puts it, "Lincoln's body had its own story to tell".

Tom Taylor understood this. A prolific journalist as well as a playwright, he was a contributor to *Punch* and had written many supposedly amusing verses satirizing Lincoln as a buffoonish ignoramus. In the first issue of *Punch* after the shocking news of Lincoln's death reached London, Taylor, rather startlingly, addressed some stern words to himself in verse, reprinted in Holzer's collection:

You lay a wreath on murdered Lincoln's bier,  
You, who with mocking pencil wont to trace,  
Broad for the self-complacent British sneer,  
His length of shambling limb, his furrowed face,

His gaunt, gnarled hands, his unkempt, bristling hair,

His garb uncouth, his bearing ill at ease,  
His lack of all we prize as debonaire,  
Of power or will to shine, of art to please.

Taylor must have known that Lincoln spent his last hour laughing at his play. Did that give him on some level a sense of personal responsibility, even of complicity? Whether or not that was a conscious feeling, that Taylor moves so swiftly in this elegy to Lincoln's hands, hair and bearing reinforces Fox's argument: Lincoln's presence in people's imagination was inseparable from his body.

The reformer Jane Addams, who set up a settlement house in Chicago in the 1890s, recalled her father weeping at the news of Lincoln's death. According to Fox, Addams took inspiration from Lincoln even while realizing that he had lived and died in a different era before the battles between labour and capital that came to dominate her adult life. Addams used to walk to Lincoln Park to sit with "the marvellous St Gaudens statue . . . to look at and gain magnanimous counsel, if I could". The memory of Lincoln, she wrote, came to her "like a refreshing

breeze from off the prairie". Her presence the material re-creation of Lincoln's physical body was a necessary part of her sense of connection to him. Addams's is one of many accounts in Fox's book that suggest how Lincoln's person was engraved into American minds along with his words.

For Addams, the words of Lincoln meant most to her came from his second general address: "with malice toward none, charity for all". But that phrase, especially of context, is just an eloquent way of expressing sentiment with which few could disagree too, Lincoln's appeal in his first inaugural address to the "better angels of our nature". What politician would ever admit his appeal to the dark angels? Not even Lincoln.

What is interesting about re-reading Lincoln's writings in the fine new Folio edited by Fred Kaplan is to be reminded alongside his lawyerly obfuscations and beautiful poetics, he could be disarmingly direct. In his very last public address on the day before the Friday on which he was shot, Lincoln responded to a critic who attacked him for not being clearer about his plans for Reconstruction. "I have purposely forborne any public expression upon it", Lincoln said.

In that same speech, he indicated for the first time that he would support giving the vote to at least some black people ("the very intelligent and those who serve our cause as soldiers in the army and navy, and those who, while engaged in the war, have shown exceptional courage and who, by the example of their good conduct, have inspired the confidence of their fellow-citizens in the maintenance of our republican institutions").

In doing so, Booth unwittingly laid the foundation for the transcendence of Lincoln: in a more physically present in death than in life, he did something else as well that was quite fitting for a man whose homespun appearance resembled the quintessential Yankee. Taylor's play. By choosing "sockdologizing old man-trap" as his cue, Booth ensured Abraham Lincoln's last conscious expression in life was to laugh.



Cleaning the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, 1999