

'Sockdology' deals with historical events from a new perspective

Theatre Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

Jeffrey Hacker's new play "Sockdology," about the death of President Lincoln in 1865, joined the repertory at Alabama Shakespeare Festival last week to run through the end of the season. This is the first time the play has been given, although Mr. Hacker is an experienced playwright, working mostly in regional theaters.

To get the title out of the way first: the term is a comic coinage, probably from boxing, meaning a "knock-out punch" ("sock" to hit plus "doxology" a prayer). The American language loves blends, like "Splitsville," for divorce, or big words like "sesquipedalian." It's too bad, though, for the play that "sockdology" is not in more popular usage, for many people distrust words they don't know.

At the time of the assassination at Ford's Theater in Washington, a story we all know, Lincoln was watching a popular comedy of the time "My American Cousin." An American character in the play (Rodney Clark) says about his British cousins: "Wai, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal — you sockdologizing old man-trap!" In context the line is meant to get a laugh (the American will triumph over the English woman), but it is somewhat meaningless to a modern audience.

But it's at exactly this moment in the play that Lincoln is shot. Edwin Stanton, Lincoln's Secretary of War, who is investigating the incident, has a conspiracy theory about the line (We know all about conspiracy theories in presidential assassinations). Stanton has the line repeated throughout the play, because he is convinced it gave the "cue" to John Wilkes Booth to fire the shot (Booth was an actor and known to the other actors). Thus one strand of Mr. Hacker's play is a public one, and Stanton (played with authority by Phillip Pleasants), with more development, might have been the main character in the play.

The theory, however, doesn't hold up. Stanton finds no evidence for conspiracy, and he is reduced to interrogating all members of the theatrical troupe about their personal histories. Gradually the public concerns are replaced by private ones, as the essential shallowness of the theatrical world is revealed.

Mr. Hacker is good about 19th century stage practice. Outside of the principal American cities, only the main actors in a play toured, and the rest of the cast was supplied by a local manager, thus a joke about replacing an actor with a boy who happens to be on hand (Noel Etienne Valez). The troupe's leader is Laru Keene (Greta Lambert), who has changed her name to suggest she's a member of the famous acting family. Her one specialty is "Our American Cousin," a play she's developed and in which she's appeared a thousand times (like a TV rerun — even she is eager to switch to Camille). Lincoln had seen her before, and had come to the theater that night only at the instance of his wife (neither of whom is depicted in the play).

So by centering on the play-within-the-play and the theatrical company, Mr. Hacker gives the assassination a more personal context. The play is short on plot, however, because Stanton's theory comes to naught and the subsequent history of the acting company is not very consequential. Although the dialogue gives us taglines from

Shakespeare, it is not really witty or funny. The attempt at period acting styles seems stilted, except for Mr. Pleasants. And some may find the play hard to follow. After a confused start, the second and third scenes take place before the first. This fact is in the program, but the transition is not very clear, even in the script.

Yet this is the most interesting of the new plays ASF has given us, as it tries to deal with a major historical event from a new perspective.

ASF had good news at the recent Tony theater awards in New York. Although "Nothin' But The Blues" (seen here last winter and now at Lincoln Center) was nominated in four areas, it did not win the award for best musical. Instead, Crossroads Theatre, the black production company in New Jersey where it originated, won the Tony for outstanding regional theater. This is the first Crossroads show to make it to New York. The show was co-produced in New York with Crossroads, the San Diego Repertory Theater, and ASF.

The new community group called "a theatre" has found a home under the aegis of Theatre AUM, whose Professor Mike Winkelman is on the group's board. The arrangement is a good one, for it allows "a theatre" access to performing space and production assistance, while giving Mr. Winkelman's students more experience.

Unfortunately, except for "a theatre's" first play "Steel Magnolias," the group has been plagued with unpopular repertory. The latest production, which closed over the weekend, was the 1986 play "Prelude To A Kiss," directed by Don Johnson in his debut effort here. The surprisingly large cast seemed composed of newcomers (that's what community theater is all about), and Auburn is to be commended for supporting the project technically as a part of its community outreach. The production was a smooth one.

The play, however, failed to attract an audience. In twenty scenes, it attempts to tell a brittle love story about Peter and Rita (Christine Lee and Don Sellers), likeable enough urban young people. Halfway through, though, the play segues into a psycho-thriller. An uninvited guest at Rita's wedding (Van DuBose) kisses her and manages to take on her personality, eventually wooing Peter himself. The play may be based on one of Sigmund Freud's case histories, but it has a disturbing edge of science fiction and homosexuality. Despite a subsequent murder threat, the play ends happily. Again I say, surely some faculty member at AUM has better ideas about plays appropriate for community theater. "a theatre" badly needs a literary advisor.

Do try to see Irving Berlin's "Annie Get Your Gun" at Faulkner University Dinner Theatre. Friday and Saturday evenings and Sunday matinee. The musical closes this weekend, but it might be extended if there's enough demand, so keep trying for reservations at the new number, 386-7190.

The show is definitely worth it, if only to see Genia Bashore, a local teacher, in her remarkable first appearance at Faulkner. She has

natural voice placement and stage presence, just like Ethel Merman who originated the role. Combined with durable Marilyn Swears at the piano (backed by a small orchestra), real music-making takes place, not always the case with amateur musicals.

The male lead, another Faulkner regular, Terry Brown, has rarely

been this good. LaVerna Brown is Dolly Tate, Lee Bridges plays a skinny Buffalo Bill, and Caleb Smith as the wild-west show manager has a lot of zip. C.D. Cover, who patiently plays walk-on parts in Faulkner shows, finally comes center stage and has his moment of glory as an affectionate Sitting Bull.

The whole show is directed by newcomer Sam Wallace, who has recently joined the Faulkner faculty. Producing these shows has been too much for one person, and he is badly needed. I had an unusually good time and so will you.