

## Civil Union: "The Chronicles of Lincoln & Grant," at the District Theatre through May 26

Written by Thom White  
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The District Theatre's *The Chronicles of Lincoln & Grant* is an historical account of the Civil War from the perspectives of two of the country's leaders: President Abraham Lincoln and General Ulysses S. Grant. However, instead of discussing events from the actual war (though they occasionally do), the characters in this two-person play mostly share stories of their personal experiences leading up to, during, and following the war.

Lincoln, for instance, tells of the time he met his future wife Mary at a dance, and of his son's participation in (or rather, protection from) combat. Grant, meanwhile, recalls the writing of a letter to General Charles Ferguson Smith's family, and his addressing the nation after the man's death. And while I'm not generally drawn to historical tales – and did have to keep my mind from wandering a few times during Friday's *Lincoln & Grant* performance – I did learn some things about these men, and enjoyed the character profiles of them as leaders of a nation at war.

Daniel Ferguson Haughey doesn't seem to shape a specific character in his portrayal of Grant, and delivers his lines in the actor's normal voice (as confirmed during the Q&A period following the show). But he does speak with passionate inflections, effectively adding tinges of sadness to his vocalizations while recalling Smith's sacrifice, and mixing in strained concern as his Grant searches for the right words – the most honorific title, even – for his speech to the nation.

Tom Swenson, on the other hand, creates for Lincoln a personality different from his own. While

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I can't, of course, speak to the accuracy of his portrayal, I can say that Swenson fashions a believable figure through his speech patterns – especially in the way he uses pauses, taking breaks mid-sentence as though Lincoln is constantly contemplating each word he utters. Swenson, too, notably ages his Lincoln as the play progresses, which is evident in his voice, but also in the way his walk gradually turns into a lumber as the man relies increasingly heavily on a cane. The progression of time is clear in Swenson's portrayal, which is helpful, because the story spans numerous years in less than an hour.

It's fortunate, however, that the play is so short; directed by the two actors, who also wrote the piece, there's very little "action" to see beyond Swenson walking with a cane and Haughey writing with a fountain pen. (The production, though, does incorporate a dozen or so images from the Civil War era, which are projected on a screen above the stage, and effectively add interest to the tales being shared.) In general, *The Chronicles of Lincoln & Grant* reminded me of being at a family reunion, one in which the older men tell stories of past experiences. There's a natural flow to the script, and despite the actors being in period costumes, the play feels as though all of us, the audience included, were just sitting in a room together and visiting while listening to recounted memories and looking at photographs. While it was hard to hang on every word spoken, there were still enough interesting tidbits in the play's tales for me to walk away with a smile, and with new knowledge of the men who told them.

*The Chronicles of Lincoln & Grant runs at the District Theatre (1611 Second Avenue, District of Rock Island) through May 26, and tickets and information are available by calling (309)235-1654 or visiting [DistrictTheatre.com](http://DistrictTheatre.com).*