



Civil Wrongs & Civil Rights

War, chaos and redemption erupt in Paula Vogel's *A Civil War Christmas* at the Northlight Theatre. **By Robert Loerzel**

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel thinks of the Civil War when she hears all the yelling and screaming in American politics. “We are factionalized as a country and so extreme right now,” she says. “I really feel like we’re still fighting the Civil War.”

The bitter divisions between conservatives and liberals were on Vogel’s mind when she wrote *A Civil War Christmas: An American Musical Celebration*, which makes its regional premiere at Northlight Theatre in Skokie. If the insults flying on today’s cable-news channels make you feel like the country is at war, try to picture what America was like in the 1860s, when actual bullets were flying. “You can’t imagine what that loss must have been like for families going through the Civil War — families that were sold from each other, families that were destroyed,” Vogel says.

But when Vogel wrote *A Civil War Christmas*

after 10 years of historical research, she wanted to depict more than hatred, argument and violence. She also wanted to show how common beliefs — a common sense of humanity — tied together all Americans, whether they were Northerners, Confederates or slaves. The winter holidays are a time of year when many people keenly long for that connection with the rest of the human race, so Vogel set her story in December 1864.

The play follows the Christmas Eve activities of Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Walt Whitman, Clara Barton, John Wilkes Booth, black Union officer Decatur Bronson and others. The Northlight production features two of Chicago’s leading actresses, Paula Scrofano as Mary Todd Lincoln and Felicia P. Fields as the First Lady’s dressmaker and confidante, a freed slave named Elizabeth Keckly. Will Clinger plays President Lincoln.

“The country was on the verge of resolving the Civil War, but it was still very much a country that was divided. There was a lot of anger,” director Henry Godinez says. “We are definitely confronted with those dark elements in this play. But as with *A Christmas Carol*, there is a cathartic, transformative journey. You have to go through the darkness to appreciate the light.”

Godinez, an Evanston resident who teaches at Northwestern University, should know — he directed Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* at the Goodman Theatre from 1996 to 2001. “I grew up appreciating the values and dreams that this country can offer people,” says Godinez, who came to the United States in 1961 as a 3-year-old refugee from Cuba.

A Civil War Christmas is not a traditional stage musical, but it does have lots of music: Christmas carols, spirituals and Civil War ballads. Vogel says she felt lucky to work with arranger Darryl Waters on the show. “Darryl makes us hear things that we’ve heard thousands of times as if we’ve never heard them before,” she says.

Vogel, who is chair of the playwriting department at the Yale School of Drama in New Haven, Conn., is spending time in Skokie to help bring *A Civil War Christmas* to the stage for the first time here in the Land of Lincoln.

Northlight’s artistic director, BJ Jones of Evanston, says he has been eager to get the rights for *A Civil War Christmas* since it was first performed in 2008 at the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven. “In many ways, it’s exhilarating,” Jones says. “From that terrible crucible, which was the Civil War, came a new nation.”

A Civil War Christmas almost seems like a play by a different writer, as Vogel herself acknowledges. “It’s a different part of my voice,” she says. Vogel says she wants children as well as adults to see this play, and she hopes children walk out of the theater with a more optimistic feeling about what lies ahead. “A sense of hope,” she says. “A sense of common ground, in terms of how they’ll make this country in the future.”

A Civil War Christmas: An American Musical Celebration runs Nov. 11-Dec. 19 at Northlight Theatre, 9501 Skokie Blvd., Skokie. Tickets are \$35-50 for previews and \$45-\$55 for the regular run. (847) 673-6300. www.northlight.org 