

La Jolla Playhouse's '3 Summers' to offer more human look at Lincoln, Douglass

The world premiere musical by Joe DiPietro, Daniel J. Watts and Crystal Monee Hall will feature contemporary music and movement



Telegraph tap dancers Alaman Diadhiou, left, and Evan Ruggiero, right, work with co-choreographer and co-lyricist Daniel J. Watts, center, in rehearsal for La Jolla Playhouse's world-premiere musical "3 Summers of Lincoln." (Rich Soublett II)

By Pam Kragen
February 16, 2025

Doris Kearns Goodwin, the famous historian and biographer of Abraham Lincoln, has said that only Jesus has been written about more than our 16th president over the past 165 years.

As a result, Americans have very specific ideas about Lincoln as the serious, dignified and solemn figure preserved in statues, paintings, museums and history books. But that's not the man they will meet in "3 Summers of Lincoln," the world premiere musical now in rehearsals at La Jolla Playhouse.



Quentin Earl Darrington as Frederick Douglass, left, and Ivan Hernandez as President Abraham Lincoln in rehearsal for La Jolla Playhouse's world premiere of "3 Summers of Lincoln." (Rich Soublet II)

Yes he will be heroic, brilliant, bold, honest and forward-thinking. But he will also be a flawed man of flesh and blood.

"This musical has an intense affectionate admiration for what he accomplished, but Lincoln is absolutely fallible," said Christopher Ashley, the Playhouse's Tony Award-winning artistic director, who is also directing "3 Summers of Lincoln." "There were so many blind alleys he took us down to get to that place. He was figuring it out as he went along ... He's not a person who was perfect in every way."

The mostly sold-out musical, which opens in previews Tuesday and runs through March 30, features a book by two-time Tony-winner Joe DiPietro, a modern R&B/gospel/rock/jazz-infused score by Crystal Monee Hall and lyrics by Daniel J. Watts and DiPietro. It will also feature high-energy, contemporary choreography by Watts and John Rua.

The musical was inspired by the three times Lincoln met in person with the famed Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass in the summers of 1862, 1863 and 1864. During those tête-à-têtes — which no one else witnessed but both men wrote about extensively — Douglass pressured Lincoln to free the slaves. The rule-bound Lincoln resisted Douglass' pressure because it would violate the Constitution. But as commander in chief of the Union Army during the Civil War, he realized, with Douglass' help, he could issue the Emancipation Proclamation to destabilize the Confederacy and end the war.

DiPietro said audiences will see how Lincoln and Douglass clashed, then grew to respect and influence one another. Lincoln is gradually radicalized to act and Douglass learns how to moderate his message to sway politicians.

Watts, who first worked with Ashley and DiPietro in 2009 on their Tony-winning, Playhouse-born musical “Memphis,” described Lincoln and Douglass as necessary adversaries.

“They’re like Batman and Joker in the grounded sense that if Lincoln is the Batman and Frederick Douglass is the Joker, there’s something that’s happening and (Douglass) is hitting a nerve,” Watts said. “That man is a vigilante but he’s for the law. But the way he’s going about it is not as lawyerly as you would like. They need each other to tap into the true sense of themselves.”

The beginnings

“3 Summers of Lincoln” was born during the pandemic, when theaters were closed and theater artists were desperate for work. DiPietro got a call from producers who wanted to commission a musical about Lincoln. He was happy for the work but daunted by the task.

Then, after a great deal of reading and research — including consultation with Kearns Goodwin herself — DiPietro narrowed his focus to the three summers concept. And he conceived an opening scene that would immediately force the audience to rethink what they think they know about Lincoln and see his humanity.

“I wanted him to enter in a state of agitation,” DiPietro said. “The show starts in 1862, the third to last summer of his life. The war has been raging for a year. There’s so much pressure. So much agitation. He’s not the typically pensive, quiet, stuffed-head guy we know. He comes in angry and hot.”

DiPietro then shared his script outline with Watts, who was looking for a project after filming his off Broadway solo show “[The Jam: Only Child](#).” Watts said he was intrigued because “3 Summers” would spotlight many unsung Black voices, including Douglass’ children, seamstress-activist Elizabeth Keckley, Lincoln’s butler William Slade and many Black battlefield assistants who lost their lives in the war.

Watts said he worked up some spoken words and song lyrics, then traveled to DiPietro’s home in Connecticut with the goal of maybe co-writing lyrics for a song or two. Instead, seven songs poured out in a matter of hours. It was Watts who suggested [Crystal Monee Hall](#) as the composer who could set their words to music.

“Crystal’s music is exciting and modern. It’s not emulating ‘Hamilton.’ The first time I heard it, I knew she was the one,” Watts said, adding that in rehearsals at the Playhouse she is constantly innovating. “We can’t get ahead of her. We never know when we send lyrics over what we’re going to get back. She’s pushing herself forward.”

Making Lincoln sing

Hall has had a successful career as a singer/songwriter, touring artist, Broadway performer and musical arranger. But nothing has challenged her as much as “3 Summers of Lincoln.”

“This is the most ambitious thing I’ve ever done,” she said. “I feel super lucky with this massive undertaking to have been surrounded by such absolute legends and gurus in the game, my fearless leader Joe DiPietro and Chris Ashley ... They like a clean story and the story always wins.”

Hall said that when Watts and DiPietro approached her with the project, she felt uniquely suited to the task. She grew up in Richmond, Va., the capital of the Confederacy during the Civil War.

"Growing up in Richmond, we'd go to Monument Avenue and see these statues of all the people who lost the war on huge pedestals," Hall said. "This is a story I've been steeped in my whole life. I feel I know how to tell it because it's about who we were then and who we are now and how we're still making a country that is coming into being."

Instead of starting out writing music for Lincoln and Douglass, Hall said she first wrote the ensemble music to create the grounding "bed on which these two huge forces have to sit."

And what is that musical bedrock? It's the propulsive, pounding intensity of war. "It's not just soldiers on the field. It's not just battles and blood. It's families torn apart," she said.

To create this vocal landscape, Hall said she explored the music of the South in the 1860s. This included early American music forms, marches, spirituals, field hollers, work songs and African rhythms, as well as their musical descendants, like jazz, blues, gospel, country and rock 'n' roll.

Then came finding Lincoln's voice. She drew on the musical's book and her knowledge of the man to discover his sound, which she described as "the duck feet under the pond."

"Lincoln is measured, methodical and pressed down. He's got to appear to have it all very much together, but there's a who lot going on underneath," she said.

And where she sees Lincoln as a covered pot of boiling water ready to explode, Douglass is the pot whose lid has already blown off.

"He comes in big. He comes in hot and he stays that way," she said. "He knows what he's fighting for. He's undeterred, pressing forward and critical of Lincoln."

Not all the songs are for Lincoln and Douglass, though. The musical's energetic opening number, "90-Day War," is sung by the Union's Commanding General George B. McClellan, who was loved by his troops but reluctant to fight. And the song that opens the second act, "In Each Letter," is sung by Mary Todd Lincoln about the letters the soldiers write home.

"It's such a human story," Hall said. "They're not just heads on a bust or faces on a page in a textbook."

To the stage

To bring the story to life, DiPietro reached out to his close friend and frequent collaborator, Ashley. This will be their eighth show together, and their sixth (and last) at the Playhouse, since Ashley will leave at the end of this year to become artistic director of New York's prestigious Roundabout Theatre.

When "3 Summers of Lincoln" was first announced last summer, Lincoln was going to be played by Brian Stokes Mitchell, the Tony-winning Black actor who grew up in San Diego. Mitchell had to withdraw from the production a few months ago and he was replaced by Hispanic actor/singer Ivan Hernandez, who played the title role in La Jolla Playhouse's 2006 "Zhivago," and whose TV credits include "Claws," "Scandal" and "Devilous Maids."

Ashley said he was excited at the opportunity to cast the role of Lincoln with a non-White actor because "it asks a lot of questions of the audience, and one of the things I'm interested in is not answering them but opening up the subject. I hope people will figure out what to do with it themselves."

Also featured in the cast are Broadway veterans Quentin Earl Darrington ("Ragtime," "Memphis" and "Cats")

as Douglass; Carmen Cusack (“Bright Star,” “Wicked”) as Mary Todd Lincoln; and Eric Anderson (“Waitress,” “Kinky Boots”) as George B. McClellan.

Lincoln became president just eight months before the telegraph replaced the Pony Express and he was obsessed with the technology. Unlike his predecessors, Lincoln could receive in-the-moment battlefield reports and instantly relay orders and strategies to his generals.

The telegraph will serve as a thematic through-line in “3 Summers of Lincoln.” With the help of a drummer and the musical arranger, Watts said audiences will hear the tapping of the telegraph keys in the first act. And in the second act, two tap dancers — Evan Ruggiero and Alaman Diadiou — will tap out the sounds of the telegraph with their feet, in some cases performing the Morse code used in the wire messages.

The musical will also have a very muscular and fluid dance language, co-created by Watts and Jon Rua. Watts and Rua met in New York years ago when they both auditioned for Lin-Manuel Miranda’s “In the Heights,” then they both performed in Miranda’s “Hamilton.” Watts praised Rua’s unique approach to dance.

“Jon lives in a contemporary style,” Watts said. “His approach is always what is the story we’re telling?”

The first song-and-dance number, “90-Day War,” is about the frustration McClellan and his soldiers feel 430 days into a war that was only expected to last three months. Watts said the highly physical, masculine and gestural choreography will reflect that tension.

“There’s exhaustion, heat, boys who want to be men, women passing as men, a lot of testosterone being put forth, agitation, frustration, sensitivity and tenderness,” Watts said.

“They didn’t have a language for shell-shocked at the time, but that’s what’s happening.”

Ashley said another important element of “3 Summers of Lincoln” is its modernity. Producing a musical about events in the 1860s will have no resonance with audiences unless it can speak to what Americans are experiencing today.

“We are living through times of turbulence and division in the world right now,” Ashley said. “This really spoke to us about how you accomplish extraordinary change in a world of deep division.”

DiPietro said audiences will recognize moments in the musical that are eerily similar to today. One song in the score was inspired by a letter McClellan wrote to his wife saying he was “sent by God” to lead the Union Army. That same rhetoric was used in a 2022 campaign ad by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.

“What’s interesting is how history keeps echoing. But we’ve come through this before,” DiPietro said. “Doris Kearns Goodwin is brilliantly optimistic. She said every time the country has gone through a troubled era it has come out stronger in the end.”