

Transcript

April 18, 2004

Interview by Chris Small

with Dr. Dan Bassuk, President

Association of Lincoln Presenters

2004 Convention - Vandalia, Illinois

(Dan's Last ALP Convention)

- C For the tape, just to get it down, we are here on April the 18th, 2004, talking with Dan Bassuk, who is our esteemed president of the Association of Lincoln Presenters. So now we can just talk, but I had to get that on there.
- D Yes, very good.
- C Um. Now I want to get to other things like we were discussing last evening about the actual process of being Lincoln, but I would be curious too to hear a little bit of your story about how you got into doing Lincoln, and then, how the ALP started.
- D Okay.
- C I've heard some of that, but I don't know that I've ever heard the whole story.
- D Well, I'll be longwinded, but I'll be glad to share with you. Way back in 1970, I grew chin whiskers, and, um, gradually it dawned upon me that people recognized that I had a resemblance to Abraham Lincoln.
- C Okay.
- D And started calling me things like Honest Abe, 'Hi Abe,' and, uh, gradually I came to realize through their eyes that I bore, uh, quite a resemblance to the 16th president.
- C Now what did your, what did your family think? I know your wife . . .
- D Oh, I, at that time, uh, it was just beginning to dawn on me, and I, uh, I didn't talk about it at all, cause I was just thinking about it. It amused me.
- C Understood.
- D And at that time I lived in the South. I actually was living and working and raising a family in Florida. And I was working at the University of South Florida, which I worked at for a long time.

C Were you teaching there?

D Yes, I was teaching there.

C You know, I don't know what your specialty is.

D Well, my doctorate is a combined program of literature and world religions

C Oh, tremendous!

D Yeah.

C That sounds very much up my alley.

D Very good. So, um, very gradually I decided That's right. In 1979, I was awarded, um, a fellowship to study at Yale. And coming north to Connecticut, more people seemed to realize that I bore this resemblance to Lincoln, and, um, I had a year off from my university, but I had no money. I had no salary. This was just a year off without salary. So I had a very small, low-paying job at a community college, and, um, I decided at some point that I would rent a Lincoln costume and see if I could make some extra money . . . I, um . . . I, uh . . . anyway that I possibly could. And so I rented a Lincoln costume from a costume shop, and I started, um, greeting people in stores and at restaurants and at taverns. And it was okay for a while, and I made a couple extra dollars, and it was nice until somebody said to me one night in a bar, "If you're Abe Lincoln, then I'm John Wilkes Booth." And he put somewhat of a damper on me that I could possibly be in danger.

(Laughter)

C What happened then?

D Well, so I toned it down a little bit, and I realized, you know, better be careful. But I returned the next school year to Florida instead of doing the public. I began to read and study about Abraham Lincoln. And picked up all the ordinary common books about Lincoln, and happened to have purchased the book on Lincoln by Carl Sandburg.

C Was this the full volume or the . . . ?

D Just the one volume print, yeah, book on Lincoln, biography on Lincoln by Sandburg, and, of course, Sandburg had, in my opinion, truly absorbed a lot of the flavor of Lincoln and being a Lincoln biographer and poet, he captured a lot of the essence of the spirit, the spirit, of Abe Lincoln, and it rubbed off on me. I began to realize, you know, I had . . . I didn't know anything about Lincoln except that he was the 16th president. But through

Sandburg's eyes and writings, I came to realize that maybe this man was an exceptional individual, that I oughtta learn more about. And I got interested in it, and one book led to another book, and to more and more and more and I began to realize some interesting things, one of which, in the early days, was . . . I happened to be a Quaker, Society of Friends, and I also happened to have noticed certain things about Lincoln, um, that he had meetings with Quakers in the White House, and various things, and I even . . . I even read something that Lincoln heard that he might have had Quaker ancestors, er, I don't know. So, I got interested. From interest it went to fascination. I was quite . . . got more and more interested in this man, and then . . . then in 1983, um, I decided two things, that my, uh, marriage was going sour, and I decided to leave my university position in Florida and move north. And my family was going to separate, and my wife went off and I went to, uh, a school in New York for a year. We divided, and we kinda stayed close because we had three children, and I stayed with one child so he could finish high school, and, but, but, going or living in New York in 83, um, I got more and more interested in Lincoln in New York state. And, um, I began to, uh, in my time off from my job, I used to scout the antique shops all around New York, Connecticut, looking for Lincoln.

C A-ha.

D And started to develop a lot, uh, not only a Lincoln library, but all kinds of things. I actually found a Civil War flag by accident – paid a few dollars for an authentic Civil War flag that was under a plant. And, I still, I use that flag, that was a find, I use that to this very day. And I also, uh, started going crazy about Lincoln. I went into an antique store in Connecticut and I noticed that somebody had, some artist had made soft sculptures. There was Charlie Chaplin sitting in a chair, and there was other actors and actresses. And I said, “Who made those?” and she said, “Here, you can have a business card. This person makes these soft sculptures.” And I called this lady and I said, “Can you make me Mary Todd Lincoln?” And she said, “Yeah. You have photographs?” “Sure.” “Alright.” So for several hundred dollars, she made a Mary Todd Lincoln doll which I use in every show that I ever . . . that I ever, uh . . . and my kids thought I had lost my mind.

C (Laughter) What do you with the Mary Todd Lincoln soft sculpture in your program?

D Well, I do understand that they're, you know, they're, uh, lifesize. They look . . . they look pretty real. And I use them because I, because my shows, my Lincoln storytelling shows are really family-oriented. So I am president Abraham Lincoln in the White House, with a wife, Mary, and two children, Willie and Tad. That was in '83, '84. The following year, I also hired the same soft sculptress, uh, artist, to make, uh, I decided to go forward, and I asked her to make the sons of Abraham and Mary, Willie and Tad Lincoln, which, for another couple of hundred dollars, she did, with photographs, and they look very realistic.

C Fascinating.

D And, uh, I take them with me on all shows, and I'll explain that. I tell, in my shows, which is primarily, almost exclusively, for elementary school children grades K-6. Sometimes 7th and 8th. I tell stories about the Lincoln family, including the children. And I take these soft sculptures of Willie and Tad and put them on my knee. Actually hold them while I'm telling a story. I tell a story, for example . . . and all these stories, I have to mention, all of these stories that I tell, I have written myself. They're mine. But I got them from reading hundreds of books. I tell a story of how a Tadpole freed a turkey. The Tadpole is my son Tad Lincoln and he frees the Thanksgiving turkey. And I love to use props, so I have a turkey that when you squeeze it hard, it goes 'gobble, gobble, gobble, gobble.' That's the punchline of the story, that's the last line of the story. The kids don't know what's coming, but at the end of the story, the turkey does its gobbling and the kids really like it. It's a lot of fun. It only takes about four minutes. My stories are short stories because in a world of television today you got to be fast. So I tell I lot of stories. The shows that I have developed over 20 years are, consist of – for Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, and sometimes 3rd grade – that show is 45 minutes long and consists of about six stories. For the older children in grades 3, 4, 5, 6, the show is an hour long and it consists of about seven stories. There's a little bit of overlap because some stories can be used for the younger and the older, but not always, because some of my stories for the older kids have a little feeling of boy & girl interaction, which I don't do for the little ones. And also the older show has some mighty scary stuff – kids love to be scared! One of my props, for example. . . . I tell, I tell a ghost story. And I love to use student participation, so for this ghost story I'm joined by two students who are boys. One plays the ghost of Abraham Lincoln, the other plays the ghost of Martin Luther King. My costumes. Before they say their short lines, I, believe it or not, turn around and flip a Lincoln ghost mask with a big stovepipe hat over my head. Which I bought years ago in a mask store. It's pretty ghostlike. When the kids see me they all gasp. It's pretty scary. I don't do this for the little kids. So, uh, that's the kind of thing I do.

C: OK.

D: And it has evolved over the . . . from 1979 up to 2004, that's 25 years.

C: I think we left you in the mid-80's. You were getting into the Lincoln thing, your kids were. . . .

D: Yes, well, by New York State, getting more involved in the Lincoln stuff. Somehow or other, I discovered there was a Lincoln magazine or journal. It's called the *Lincoln Herald* and it comes out of Tennessee, Lincoln Memorial University publishes it four times a year. Somehow or other I got a copy of it and I decided I enjoyed reading it. I thought I could learn more and I subscribed. And as I read the *Lincoln Herald* I noticed in the back in every issue that they would talk about Lincoln events where Lincoln

impersonators or Lincoln presenters or something, um, spoke at events. And gradually over the years I realized that there are quite a few of us. No organization of course, but just a few of us. And as I was reminded at this convention, in 1986 I invited two of these Lincolns to meet me. I wanted to meet them. And I met Jeanette and Robert Taylor [spelling uncertain] from Tulsa, Oklahoma, in New Jersey where I lived. And they were among the first that I actually met. And I thought, 'boy, they're neat, and I can learn from them. I'd like to meet more. I'd like to know more about the Lincolns.' So in 1990, um, I realized there might be 30 of us. There might be 2 dozen or 3 dozen, who knows how many of these Lincolns there are. By this time, I had done, I was doing shows in elementary and junior high school. Mostly ad lib. I was just getting up on the stage. You know, for a few hundred dollars, I was willing to . . . suffer . . . for an hour. Telling them about my life, Abraham Lincoln. And I didn't, I really did not have a script. I could just talk for an hour about Lincoln.

C: Why do you use the word 'suffer'?

D: Oh, because standing in front of a group of two hundred squirming kids for an hour and trying to hold their attention telling them about Abe Lincoln – ah! – was hard work! And I thought, 'Why am I doing this?' I mean if I, I mean the money was very nice, to have the additional money so I could get more stuff for my children. But, I thought, if I keep doing this, you know, I could end up with a heart attack. This is hard work. By the end of an hour, I was wringing wet. But there were payoffs. One day I did a show in the public library in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, for adults. There must have been 2 dozen adults there. After the show was over some strange man came up to me, and he said, 'Lincoln, would you like an agent?' An agent? Yeah. Yeah, sure, get me work. Yeah, sure. Well, the truth of the matter is, he didn't get me any work, but it was very interesting to see he wanted to sponsor what I was doing, and that felt good. So it kept feeling good and the money was good. Gradually came to realize, well, I began to meet several Lincolns and watch what they did. And then, in '85 I moved from New York to New Jersey. My son had graduated from high school, and went on to college. I was free, pretty much, family, except for expenses. And I moved to New Jersey and I got a job in New Jersey, yeah, at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary as their librarian [indistinguishable]. And in New Jersey, uh, I joined the New Jersey Storytelling League. And I began watching amateur storytellers. And even though they said don't memorize stories, let them flow out of you, I did not accept that. I began writing down stories about Lincoln. Especially, the original one that I loved was Lincoln with Grace Bedell. Eleven-year old Grace Bedell and how she suggested that he grow a beard. I wrote a mighty good story, I thought, in fact I submitted it for an award and I was told I won, and then somebody complained I plagiarized it – which wasn't true – they took the award away, and I don't care about that. But it was a good story and I used it for 20 years. What's good about it is that I get and 11-year old girl or a girl from the school, and I get her to wear a bonnet, and antique bonnet and a wonderful t-shirt with Lincoln saying 'A house divided against itself cannot stand' which I bought at the Lincoln Museum in Indiana. And a tell the story with her

standing next to me holding an American flag – and it’s a winner! The kids love to see Lincoln connected with another child who they know, and it’s an adorable story, and she touches [?] my beard, and I throw her a kiss, and it’s a great story. And that was one of my first stories, and, uh, it went. . . . And then I realized, but that story but that story takes 9 minutes, and I have an hour. So, you know, it’s not easy, but it can be done. So gradually over the years, I added, uh, why have these dolls of Willie and Tad if I don’t use them? And I read, I bought and I read a lot of books about Lincoln’s children. Not there are so many available, but I got everything I could. And I read about it, and just gradually I got the story of How a Tadpole Freed a Turkey and my story with Willie Lincoln is A Civil War Catastrophe, which is supposedly about *his* cat called ‘Tastrophe. And it’s not catastrophic at all. But when I announce I’m going to tell A Civil War Catastrophe, they think something major is coming and it really isn’t. The only thing major that’s coming is laughter. And that’s, I think that works well. And I think humor is very, very important. Especially with. . . .

C: Especially with children.

D: And Lincoln. And it’s appropriate for Lincoln, because we have to recognize how Lincoln was really a humorist and a very funny man. Very serious and very funny. He said, ‘if I didn’t laugh, I would die.’ And he was very funny. He had his ways of humor. So I use that. And I think we all should since laughter is so important to human beings.

C: ‘Doth good like a medicine.’

D: Laughter is my medicine.

C: Yes.

D: Your reminding me of that, Chris, is good, because, uh, as I’ve said, I’ve been working with Lincoln since ‘79 and that’s 25 years. In the last 6 or 7 years, a new thing that has occurred or evolved is that I’ve written, my wife and I – this is my second wife; I’m very happily married – my second wife and I developed a two-person theatrical show. It’s a short one. It’s 45 minutes long and it’s called *Star-Crossed Lovers of the Theatre: Abraham Lincoln and Laura Keene*. As you know, Laura Keene was the actress that Lincoln went to see on April 14th, 1865. When he was assassinated, he was watching her. Not that he had a thing for her, but that she was the leading comic actress of the day, and she was quite famous in her time. And my wife looks like Laura Keene.

C: Ahh.

D: And furthermore, luckily, we found a costume in a costume shop, for Laura Keene, that is a knock-out. And we bought it. They didn’t want to sell it, but we bought it. We paid for it and we bought it, even though they didn’t want to let it go.

- C: There's my hat story.
- D: Yes. Good. So, um, with a lot of help, and with a lot of professional help from directors and producers, we – this show evolved after three years of hard work. It started out pretty bad. We got a lot of really, we got professional advice. We paid people from Lincoln Center in New York to help us. We got, we got really good help. Yeah. 'Cause, I have to say, my wife is somewhat of a perfectionist. She would not perform for people if the thing wasn't really good. And, ah, it was hard to convince her to do anything, but when we got help, she realized that it was really good. And it is very good. This is our fourth year of doing it and we did it last week. This is not for children. This is quite serious. Lincoln dies in the show. And she goes on to tell what happens in her life. But this is for historical societies, senior citizen centers, and we did it for Branchburg [spelling uncertain] Senior Center, a hundred people, last Thursday. Very good. And it is a good show. And we like – and it's a couple of [undistinguishable].
- C: How do you run the . . . Lincoln dying in the show? How do you pull that off? Does he die onstage, offstage, how does that work?
- D: Well, this show takes place on Lincoln's last day in the White House. Laura Keene comes to deliver him a message. In actual history, she sent someone to tell him to stay after the show for a piece of music that her music director had composed for him. That's historically correct. But in our show, we changed it a little bit, when Laura Keene comes herself to deliver the message. And then, at the end of the show, Lincoln says, 'I will attend your play tonight. Nothing can keep me away. And it will be good to see you again.' And I turn my back to the audience and walk to the presidential desk and freeze. And then [indistinguishable] a dirge on the piano for Lincoln for two or three minutes, and then rapidly changes her costume and comes on and gives her final monologue about what happened at Ford's Theatre when Lincoln was there that very night. And that's the end of the play. She has a long monologue and explains what happens to him, Booth, and her afterwards. And that's the way the play ends. 45 minutes long.
- C: So you die by turning away from the audience.
- D: That's right. I don't fall. I just stand there. I freeze.
- C: In that moment in the play, what do you think and feel?
- D: Thank God, I got through the play without forgetting any lines! And it comes to me whether it has been very successful and very good. And our interaction [indistinguishable]. The play, of course, is just full of irony and a bit of humor, and shows how destiny – of how Laura Keene knew Edwin & John Wilkes Booth and how this amazing thing happened – that it's, you know, it's like destiny it's happening, it's

amazing. With a lot of, including, a good amount dealing with Lincoln's dreams, that he kind of saw things happening in his dreams. I mean, it's an interesting, it's quite interesting. And at the end I'm. . . .

[interruption/tape turned off and restarted]

Yes. Where were we? OK, so that's *Star-Crossed Lovers of the Theatre*.

C: Right.

D: We've done it for four years. My wife happens to be a little bit older than I am and she's ready to retire. And she says, now that we're moving, 'I'm going to sell the costume.' And I said, 'Do me a favor. [Indistinguishable, something about keeping the costume.]'

C: Something to have, at least.

D: Well, you know. . . . Tell you a secret. We're planning, of course, to have the 15th [ALP] Convention in the bicentennial year of 2009 in Washington D.C., and, you know, it's a kind of a fantasy dream, it would be amazing, amazing, to perform this play at Ford's Theatre.

C: Wouldn't that be wonderful.

D: So I'm glad she's not going to sell the costume. We'll be kind of old in five years, but maybe, who knows. . . .

C: We talked a little bit about getting into the ALP and you told me you met these folks from Oklahoma.

D: Yes, they came out.

C: How then . . . I assume you met others. . . .

D: I did.

C: . . . and started putting this organization together.

D: Gradually I did meet others. I met Bruce Hanks from Minnesota. In my back yard – Abe Francisco [not sure if correct name; need confirmation] came at the same time, his wife was alive in those days – we had a barbecue and I met Lincolns. And more and more Lincoln became meaningful to me. Just a gradual evolution, nothing amazing, it just kept evolving. I kept reading, I kept learning, and the more I, of course, the point of it all, is that as I learned about Abraham Lincoln, I gradually came to realize that this is a

remarkable individual. I didn't know that. Here I was already 50 years old and I didn't realize, I'd never been taught. I admit, I was really not a history major. I don't know whether that's good or bad, but I wasn't a history major, I was more literature. However, before I left the University of South Florida in '83, an interesting thing did happen. We started a graduate club. The Department of Religion developed a club for graduate students in the department. And they began over a couple of years in the early '80s to have meetings and they wanted something exciting to do. And one student who I remember quite well said, 'Well, why don't we get some of our faculty members to debate one another?' And from that. . . .

[interruption]

Ah, the suggestion was, let's get the faculty to debate one another. Somebody else said, 'Well, why don't we get them to do it in costume?' Two of us were foolish enough to say, 'We'll try.' I was one of those. So believe it or not, in '82 and '83. . . .

[end of tape's first side/break while tape turned over]

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So, uh, this colleague of mine and I decided we would see what we could do. We, interestingly enough, decided that from two different perspectives we would kind of share our views on Jesus. And he took the position of St. Paul – in costume, very good, very good, with the robes and sandals, and he was a biblical archeologist. . . .

C: Aha. He knew his stuff. . . .

D: . . . and I was teaching eastern religions, so I took a Hindu saint, 19th century Hindu saint called Rama Krishna. Again, in costume. It was wild. And for an hour we debated how we both appreciated Jesus, but from different points of view – I looked at him as a god-man and he looked at him as the Messiah or Savior. And we debated this, both positive views. And the students really liked it. They liked it so much that we got the notion of 'why don't we take this show on the road?' [laughter] And we did. He had a lot of connections with churches. And we started in St. Petersburg/Tampa. Then we started going around. It was easy, made a few bucks, and we went all over Florida. Like, almost every other Sunday morning we would be invited to a church and we'd give them a show.

C: Did you do this for the service or for the Sunday School period or . . . how did that work?

D: After the service, I think. Yeah, yeah. And I gradually came to realize this can be fun. That was kind of an introduction, that was like the first thing I did, ever. I'm not an actor. But it was in costume and it was good. You know, you had to be sharp, because Jim was

very sharp. But, it was good. We could do it and it became enjoyable. So anyway, when I left the university, I didn't have that anymore, and I found my way into Lincoln. And I've told you about how it evolved – reading, meeting people, and, and everything is a matter of gradual evolution.

C: What about the Association? What steps did it take, and how long did it take, to get this going?

D: Well, as I said, I remember that in the year 1990, I said to my wife, we were driving home from a vacation, I think, and I said, 'You know, I'm reading about all these Lincolns performing all over America.' I said, 'But, it would be, it would be, I think I really would like to form some kind of organization bringing them all together.' She said, 'Dan, there aren't enough of them. It'll never work. Never work.' And she bites her tongue about that today. She says it's amazing how it's happened. But in those days, I thought there might be about 40 Lincolns. I thought I recognized the names of perhaps 40 Lincolns. And, uh, in '90 and '91, uhm, I decided to contact as many as I could and tell them that I'm starting an organization to link the Lincolns together. And they said, 'How much [a year? Yeah.] \$25? Here it is.' And we started, we started something, and it started to grow. People started to say, 'yeah, we want more and more of this, let's do it.' So we did. And we grew and grew. We grew in '90 and '91, we incorporated . . . incorporated . . . well, incorporated somewhere in there too. But in 1995, or 1994, Jim Sayre of Kentucky said, 'Dan, I think we need to have a convention and bring everybody together at one place, and get to know each other. Without it, it's all telephone, we don't see each other, you know, we don't become friends – let's have a convention.' And I said, 'If you want it, all right, let's try it, see if it works.' So we actually held our first convention, I think it was January . . . of '95 in Lexington, Kentucky. And it was very good. It was very good. We must have had about 30 Abraham Lincolns and an assortment of Mary Todd Lincolns, a few. And of course we visited the home of Mary Todd Lincoln in Lexington. So, it was good, and it started things off and they wanted annual meetings. And so, now there have been, as of this weekend, there have been ten. Each year in a different place and different states. And at this point, as you know, we are about 160 Abraham Lincolns and approximately 40 Mary Todd Lincolns, and about 40 Patrons. And the regulations and the bylaws state that you can become a member as a Patron or as a presidential, no, a White House resident performer.

C: That's why we have a couple of Washingtons and a Roosevelt, or something.

D: Certainly. That's right, we do. And it has just grown in numbers, but it's grown also in feelings.

C: Oh, very much so.

- D: And, uh, recognition that, you know, our admiration for the man and his family spills over and returns to us. It's a good, it's just a give and a take that's quite amazing.
- C: Where would you like to see the Association go professionally or with its public image?
- D: Well, I don't have visions of glory. I don't want us to be in Hollywood or anything like that. I think it is growing. I think it's growing in terms of depth and in terms of sharing. I mean, we have some of our members who are highly professionally trained. We have had some wonderful workshops where certain members have shared their professional training in acting techniques and, of course, with this very convention, we have had professional historians share with us their research. So we are growing in terms of information and knowledge about the Lincolns and the era in which they lived, and the times. As well as how to be better presenters of Abraham Lincoln to children and schools and the public in general. And that's a lot of growth. That's a lot. And of course, in terms of the future, this is the tenth successful convention. Five years from now is a big thing because it's the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth. And we're really starting to roll with plans for that. In Washington, D.C., of course. And, you know, that's going to take a lot of work because we'll be very much in the spotlight. It's going to be tricky to organize it, but with a national committee and a local committee, and connecting up with the Lincoln group of the District of Columbia, it's going to be very good.
- C: I'm looking forward to that year. The others are good too, but that's going to be something special, as you say.
- D: And next year in Michigan, and the year after that, 2006, in Cincinnati, Ohio. We're spreading ourselves in various states. Within the last year, one of our members came in from the State of South Dakota, so we're in about 35 of the 50 States. And we're spreading out, going deeper, getting better – it's wonderful.
- C: What about finding new Lincolns? What would you say to me about that?
- D: . . . It's a good [question]. About two months ago, I got an e-mail – oh, our website is also developing, nicely. And that is, I'm not that proficient on the computer, but with the help of Ralph and others, the website is growing, and so we're reaching out to the World Wide Web. It's great, it's good. I got an e-mail about two months ago from a man who said, 'I was searching the web and I came across your wonderful website, and I have a friend who really admires Lincoln and I would like to tell him about you guys, but I have a question: Do you permit any African Americans? Because he is one. And do you have any?' And I was delighted to receive this e-mail and I said, 'We would, we welcome people interested in Lincoln, Lincoln presenters, of every race. We don't have – we're not exclusive and we would like very much for your friend and you to join.' And he said, 'Thank you for responding' and 'I'm going to tell him about this and I hope that he will answer you,' and I was really looking forward to it, and I still am! It hasn't yet matured

and come into being, but I'm going to keep trying. And I would like to see that. We had, at the Hodgenville convention a few years ago, we had an African American woman, Sandra Walia [spelling uncertain], who has remained my friend ever since, and she is an impersonator of Elizabeth Keckley, and she's read my manuscript, and she's an awfully wonderful woman. So, um, yeah, I'd like to see us cross racial barriers. I really would. I hope it will happen.

- C: Do we have anybody overseas? Do you see this ever becoming an International . . . ?
- D: Yes, yes. But I've kind of lost track of Brad Lay. Brad Lay of California is a member and, believe it or not, he helped to establish an Abraham Lincoln school in Albania. When my friend Gordon Vincent was alive, we were able to contact him over the internet and now the foreign relations secretary . . . I think we've lost contact with him. But he was really doing a Lincoln thing in Albania.
- C: Interesting. I've seen on the internet, there are the Civil War regiments overseas, in a number of different countries, so I thought, 'Surely there's got to be some Lincolns as well.'
- D: Some of our members have taken Lincoln to various European countries, even behind the old country of Russia, and done Lincoln Presentations in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in Europe. But my travels to Europe have shown me that often they don't really know enough about our history to really know – I was recognized in Italy as an Abraham Lincoln, without any costume, of course. But they weren't sure – they knew I was Lincoln, but they couldn't distinguish much between Lincoln and Washington, and they don't know a whole lot. They really don't. One college graduate in Prague didn't realize that Lincoln was our great President. So they don't seem to know a lot, but. . . .
- C: A wide open field for education.
- D: Oh, yeah!
- C: One of the things I'm interested in as I do the research, particularly, is the process people are using to—I guess, to use a more theatrical term—to 'get into character,' if you will. Can you articulate any of that for me?
- D: Yes, I'll try. Um, to get into character for me, first of all, I automatically get into character by getting dressed as Lincoln. That starts it. Then, if I'm doing a show, to set the stage, to set things up, which takes me the better part of an hour. Oh, I did forget to tell you, my story-telling shows I'm, is accompanied by slides. I use slides. I use almost 60 slides. And I use a remote control. And I've come to do it so often that, um, my stories are illustrated with slides. Yes, color slides for children. It's like television for them. To set the stage with Mary and Willie and Tad and slides and 36 Lincoln books with

Lincoln's picture on the cover and all of this, it takes me the better part of an hour. And by the time I'm dressed as Lincoln, which I do before I get into my horse and buggy . . . so I'm dressed as Lincoln, I set the stage, by that time I'm ready to be Lincoln. Yes. Of course all my stories, at this point, of course, they're totally memorized, so when I'm introduced by the principal of the school, I'm ready for Lincoln. I am Lincoln.

C: Are there particular moments in Lincoln's life that you think of as you're setting up to get into character? Anything about Lincoln that moves you perhaps?

D: Well, being that I'm dealing with these doll, these lifesize dolls of his wife and his children, that tells me that I'm going to be a family Lincoln. And I'm thinking about that. I'm not going to be a depressed or sad, melancholy Lincoln. I'm going to be a loving Lincoln, who loves children, and it's all about loving and sharing with children. That's what it is.

C: Have you performed Lincoln in other places where you take a different tack on his character, where you maybe are the . . . melancholy Lincoln?

D: Well, that's what I do with my wife, you know, our two-person show. There Lincoln is not with children, there Lincoln is telling her how much he enjoys going to the theatre and the plays of Shakespeare. She says, 'Well, what plays have you seen?' 'Macbeth. Lear. Julius Caesar. And have you, by chance, seen the Booth brothers perform in Julius Caesar.' 'Oh yes,' she says. And they're talking about Shakespeare, how she loves Shakespeare, and he loves Shakespeare, but he loves the tragedies and she loves the comedies! So, yeah.

C: He would like the tragedies.

D: He really likes the tragedies that deal with leaders of countries who have, because of their pride, have fallen. Fallen and been murdered. His favorite, he says, 'But nothing equals Macbeth.'

C: The 'Scottish play.'

D: I recite a couple of lines about how [indistinguishable]. So it's very different. Yes, it takes, yes, to get into that spirit, one has to . . . moments before the show, I'm putting myself in the mind of Lincoln on his last day and that's with humor. That's a fated day. One has to get into the spirit of that.

C: Now, a lot of the Lincolns that I've talked to present Lincoln on that last day of his life.

D: Powerful. Yes.

- C: Ah. If you were to pick a different day, is there any particular day that otherwise would stand out for Lincoln, as powerful?
- D: Well, Chris, I'm very fond of Lincoln's meeting Grace Bedell at the train station in Westfield, New York. And, uh, I think she brought him a bouquet of flowers or something and he said to her, 'You are a little rosebud.' And then the whole business about the beard. . . . That I think is a wonderful opportunity. . . . I'm sure there are plenty of others. Fred uses a doll in his shows for children, who he calls Jack. We know that the Lincoln boys got Abe to pardon the doll.
- C: 'The doll Jack.'
- D: Yes. So he uses this as a prop. What we're saying perhaps is, uh, you learn and then you use your imagination and you try to be as creative as you can, using whatever you have that will really work for your audience. That's what I think we're after.
- C: Have you ever performed Lincoln in a spot where Lincoln actually walked or did something?
- D: Very good. I, uh, some amazing things always happen, if you're open. I gave a talk to a genealogical society in New Jersey once, and I was talking about – in western Monmouth County [spelling uncertain] one of the Lincolns is buried. Deborah Lincoln's stone used to be there. And after the talk was over a very old lady came walking up there with a cane and she said, 'I own that land.' I mean things do happen. They always happen – they do happen.
- C: What are some of the other memorable moments that spring to your mind?
- D: . . . Many things have happened over the years. . . . But they're not coming through quickly right now.
- C: We won't force anything, but if something does come up, I'd be curious. [Interruption] Last year briefly, as we were walking in the cemetery . . . we talked briefly about the Gettysburg Address. . . . I think at that point I was reading, is it White's book, on the Second Inaugural, where he talks about 'the greatest speech.' And you said, 'No, I think Gettysburg is the greatest speech.' Tell me a little bit about why you think that and maybe if there's anything that you've read of Lincoln's that you think is better than Gettysburg.
- D: Well, I think that the Gettysburg Address is marvelous. I think that the Second Inaugural is marvelous. And I think the first Inaugural is great. And I think if you understand the lackluster Emancipation Proclamation, it's good too. It doesn't compare in language skills to any of the others, but I think it's very, uh, it's written, I think it's also very

important. It's not, it's written in legalese, it's a legal document, not a splendid, eloquent speech. But I think it's equally important, if not more so. Personally, I think that White, who is a minister, finds that the Second Inaugural is so-called 'the greatest' perhaps because he has a religious persuasion. I'm not convinced of that, but I don't think it's really too important which is really the very greatest. They're all very good. They're all very good. And it's a matter of, ah, studying and learning just how good they are.

C: Do you use the Gettysburg in your presentation?

D: [interruption] I do use the Gettysburg Address in my shows. Not for kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, or 3rd graders, but yes for 4th, 5th, and 6th graders. But no, not the entire Gettysburg Address. I reward students who know what's coming and who are paying close attention. And they are. They do. For my show, they do. Anybody, ah, I introduce it that I'm heading in November 1863, I've been invited to go to Pennsylvania to give a speech, and anybody who knows what that speech is called gets a reward from me. And then when that's over with—and it's the Gettysburg Address—anybody who knows how that address begins also gets a award, and the award that I hand out is a copy of the Gettysburg Address with Lincoln's picture and signature on it, which is appreciated. And this is for grades 4, 5, & 6. And then I do not recite the entire Gettysburg Address. I find even though it's only two or three minutes long, that's too long. I only recite the first and the last sentences, which takes under a minute, but it does—for me—it does the trick.

C: Have you found that people, maybe more in the adult show, expect you to give the Gettysburg?

D: Yes, they do. Sure they do.

C: Why do you think that is?

D: Many adults come up after the show and take pride in saying that when they were in the fifth grade it was required to memorize. Sure. It's part of an American tradition. And it is kind of expected. Yeah. To leave it out is to leave out something that's fairly essential. You know, you don't even have to recite the whole thing, even mentioning it, but to omit it entirely, would be perhaps an oversight. Yeah. It used to be a tradition that 6th grade teachers used to require the memorization and many senior citizens look back fondly on that. Sure.

D: I'm sure you've had, like I have, people are always—when you give the Gettysburg—people say it with you.

D: Yes. That's right. Sure. Sure. And why not? It has such a cadence and such a rhythm, it's so easy to — it's almost like a song. It's great, wonderful. [Chris says something indistinguishable.] Yes, yes. He has the language which he learned in his early youth of

the Bible, the lyricism of the Bible and of, uh, and then, later on, Shakespeare. He could, that man just naturally could write, and think. He's pretty, very amazing.

C: Very articulate.

D: I have, in my 25 years of studying Lincoln, I have not grown tired or bored with him. I don't think I will ever get tired of studying Lincoln. The more I read, the more I learn, and the more I'm fascinated. It's endless.

C: What would you say to other Lincoln presenters or anyone who may get 'ahold of this research at some point, about what it means to portray Lincoln?

D: Well, the best thing I would imagine, is that you get into it and it becomes really meaningful, even magical, to you, then it's right for you. It's not going to work out to well if it's forced, or like artificial, and you have to do it, but rather if you kind of, like, fall in love with it, get, and discover that has got meaning and is enjoyable, and it's meaningful, and, um, it takes on some form of *meaning*, then it works and it gets better and better and better. If it's forced and you're not interested, don't force it. Natural is better. I'm turned on these days, at this time, over, over the situation of, the racial situation in America, and Lincoln's relationship to race. Because. We have a racial divide in this country, and the book that come out in 1999 by Lerone Bennet is helping to separate the races, and I don't think Lincoln would have wanted it that way. I think Lincoln was trying to unite the races. And Bennet has turned Blacks to hating Abraham Lincoln and this is bothering me a great deal. So my research and my writing is making a small effort to, uh, show that there's another view.

C: How do you find, when you come into contact with African Americans, as you're portraying Lincoln, what kind of reactions do you find?

D: Well, Gordon, my Lincoln buddy of years past, used to talk about this, and we both came to realize that poorly educated Black people in America very often, when they saw Lincoln in a public place, they would turn away. They didn't care for it. But well-educated, better educated Blacks often came up to a Lincoln, he or I, and would want to shake our hands and thank us [Lincoln] for what we did for their race.

[At this point, the tape runs out, and our interview is concluded after just a few more words of conversation.]