

ARMIES OF THE POTOMAC

by

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ARMIES OF THE POTOMAC

TIME

1867, late in President Abraham Lincoln's second term, two years after John Wilkes Booth's failed assassination attempt.

CHARACTERS

There are 16 speaking roles, plus 9 non-speaking roles, all of which can be played by a cast of 12 (See "Doubling" below).

White Males (9 characters played by 7 actors)

ABRAHAM LINCOLN (age 58) 16th president of the United States of America

ROBERT LINCOLN (24) his elder surviving son

TAD LINCOLN (14) his younger surviving son

NOAH WADE (30s-40s) the president's chief of staff

LUCIUS REXROTH (30s-40s) a political pundit

GOVERNOR SHELBY "BULL-ROARER" BLAKE (40s-50s) governor of a Southern state not yet readmitted to the Union

SEN. ZEBULON HARKNESS (40s-50s) a Lincoln ally and friend

DETECTIVE SERGEANT CLEMENT OTT (30s-40s) a state police officer

RANDALL TARR (30s-40s) a citizen and a disabled veteran

White Females (3 characters played by 2 actors)

MARY TODD LINCOLN (49) the First Lady

ADA SAMS (late 20s) a "straw pollster" and political consultant

MRS. PERCY (40s-50s) a midwife

Black Males (3 characters played by 2 actors)

CAPTAIN LUTHER JOHNSTONE (20s) Pres. Lincoln's aide, Sallie's husband and father of her children

ISOM BOOKER (30s-40s) a former slave and servant to Governor Blake

REV. EZEKIEL BARNES (30s-40s) a Lincoln ally and minister

Black Female (1 character)

SALLIE JOHNSTONE (20s) a former slave, wife of Luther and mother of two

Non-speaking Roles

TALL MAN (20s-40s) a male listener, white

HUSBAND (30s) a male listener, white

SINGLE MAN (30s-50s) a male listener, white

STREET URCHIN a boy, white

WIFE (30s) a female listener, white

SINGLE WHITE WOMAN (30s) a female listener in a crowd, white

DEMOCRATIC DIGNITARIES, male and female, white

SINGLE BLACK WOMAN (30s-50s) a freed woman, black

SOLDIER (30s-40s) a bodyguard, black

Doubling

Each of the following role combinations may be played by a single actor:

- * Abraham Lincoln / Tall man
- * Lucius Rexroth / Husband
- * Gov. Shelby "Bull-Roarer" Blake / Single Man
- * Robert Lincoln / Randall Tarr
- * Isom Booker / Rev. Ezekiel Barnes
- * Noah Wade / Clement Ott / Soldier
- * Mary Lincoln / Wife
- * Ada Sams / Mrs. Percy / Single White Woman
- * Sallie Johnstone / Single Black Woman
- * Tad Lincoln / Short Man / Street Urchin

ARMIES OF THE POTOMAC

Act I, Scene 1

White House grounds, June 1867, night. MARY TODD LINCOLN enters. Her voluminous and boldly colored dress is excessively adorned with lace and ribbon trim that seems to encase her in a rigid formality. ABRAHAM LINCOLN sits in an arm chair in a position reminiscent of the familiar pose of the Daniel Chester French statue.

MARY

Mr. Lincoln, is that you? No, no, don't get up. I don't wish to disturb you. I've only come out for a breath of air to clear my head. I find myself in particular need of relief tonight. Not that you would understand. You're oblivious to displays of social ineptitude. I'm referring to that awful Julia Grant, of course. I don't care if her husband is a military genius, that's no excuse for her atrocious behavior at dinner. One would've thought she was announcing the general's triumphant entry into Olympus the way she served up his battlefield accomplishments like a *sorbet* between courses. The woman has no sense of decorum. Anyway, she needn't have bothered. You're the true War Hero. I've always thought that. You can retire with more honor than any battle veteran.

LINCOLN

(Rising to join her.)

Ah, Molly, I wish the night air brought me ease. But the truth is, the honor of a soldier in the field is undeniable, whereas that of his commander in chief is ever subject to challenge.

MARY

It will soon be over. Once you follow General Washington's example into retirement, you can escape your persecutors.

LINCOLN

But not my failures. I fear they will last forever.

MARY

Hush, you're too modest. That is your most appealing weakness, but a weakness nonetheless. You underestimate your legacy, which comes under greater attack the longer you remain in office. You might think of schemers like Grant as nothing more than insects flitting about your head, but even lowly moths can destroy the finest merino eventually.

LINCOLN

I respect General Grant's motives.

MARY

Well, you shouldn't...*Écoutez*. Just listen to me: I'm telling you that humbleness can get itself elected, but history is not so easily seduced. That's why I prefer to cement your accomplishments with a suitable monument. General Washington's can serve as a scale model.

LINCOLN

I have all the obelisk you need abed, Molly.

MARY

Why is bawdiness the only immodesty you can muster?

LINCOLN

It's better received; your smile confirms it.

MARY

And you wonder why your repute is so important to me. Is it not patriotic to want heroes for your country? Well then, the fact that my husband is the only exception to the moral and intellectual Tom Thumbs in this desolate swamp we call our nation's capital is no grounds for a charge of bias. I am simply pointing out the obvious.

LINCOLN

And I love you for it.

MARY

Merci. I arrived at that opinion all by myself. Lord knows that you have a most curious laziness when it comes to defending yourself against your supposed friends. I sometimes wonder whether you simply don't care about your stature or if by not responding to your detractors you hope to raise them up to be worthy adversaries.

LINCOLN

I never heard of a bear-baiter who died of old age. I have learned to give my opponents plenty of space.

MARY

I swear, Mr. Lincoln, you are a most frustrating politician. You take your friends and your enemies for granted. Where does that leave me and the boys? Yes, I know you love us, that is beyond dispute. What I don't know is how a politician can play politics with family. When the newspapers ridicule my wardrobe, as if it were unimportant for the wife of a head of state to look the part, you remain silent. And when the Democrats question my household budget, as if it were a frivolity to lay out in your office a floor-cloth that doesn't bear the 30-year-old bootprints of Andrew Jackson, you shush me and hide the expenditures elsewhere. I sometimes think your love is no more than a suit of clothes to you--to be worn rumpled and short at the cuffs when only a little bit of attention now and then would keep it elegant.

LINCOLN

Racing silks can't make a thoroughbred out of plow horse.

MARY

I'm sorry you see it that way. I have tried to make my public actions a benefit to you. On its editorial page, *The Independent* calls me "First Lady," but the name does little to convey my multiple responsibilities. Not only am I counselor, guardian, and ambassador at large, I also am hostess, manager, and nanny-in-waiting. It is quite wearing, I'll have you know. At times I think I could not be more tired if I were one of those eight-armed Hindu goddesses.

LINCOLN

It pains me to see you suffer under the national eye.

MARY

Please don't take my admonishments as complaint. You know how completely I supported you when we left Springfield. No, I would not have it otherwise: I will be First Lady to the last.

LINCOLN

And a paragon for presidents' wives forever.

MARY

You flatter me, Mr. Lincoln, but I will not tell you to stop. ...Look. Mars has risen. You can see it there, above the stables. How funny that the ancients thought to name another world for the god of war when he is so at home on this one. I don't think I shall ever be rid of the memories of war. Even now, more than two years after Appomattox, when the wind blows across the Potomac, I hear muffled curses and the clink of metal gear. I smell campfires. I imagine they are out there still, an army of spirit soldiers waiting patiently for those who sacrificed them to be drafted into similar service. It is thus for all the dead...So many dead. I sometimes think that their ghosts must be so numerous by now as to crowd the living into the streets. Mother--dead. Father--dead. My dear sister Elizabeth, our sons Eddie and Willie--all dead. And then you yourself nearly killed by an assassin!

*LINCOLN guides MARY to the bench
and sits with her protectively.*

LINCOLN

Don't trouble yourself about that host of memories, Molly, those legions are unarmed. Here, sit with me.

MARY

It is not acceptable, death. And yet we encourage and condone it. We are trained to do so. And what grooms us most for the loss of life? Love. Love does not negate death; love empowers it. Without love, death would simply be the final boardinghouse.

LINCOLN

We trade gains and losses every day in this life. And the end is certain: Loss is the last thing we shall know. We resist the truth, of course, for as long as we can, clinging to the precipice as death dislodges our fingers one by one.

MARY

I realize that, but it will come as no surprise, Mr. Lincoln, to hear that the attempt on your life forced me finally to admit that love's invoice cannot be ignored. Forget nosegays, forget party gowns, forget infatuation. One might as well wear black everyday in recognition of the inescapable truth that without death we would place no value at all on love.

LINCOLN

Or duty. Molly, I must confess that the incident at Ford's Theatre has forced me to look at my circumstances in a different light. The good fortune that redirected Booth's bullet and saved me has led me to wonder what to make of my extended life.

MARY

You might simply relish it in serene retreat.

LINCOLN

That's tempting. And yet I suspect that my lucky reprieve carries an obligation. That I'm meant to use my gift of extra time to test myself in some unforeseen way. And so I try to imagine what new orders await me.

MARY

--Oh, no, please...

LINCOLN

Enough for now. You're shivering, Molly. Let's retire.

MARY

There, it's out--you agree with me. You will retire.

LINCOLN

You know my meaning, and you know I am unenthusiastic about a third term. We won't settle that tonight.

MARY

Then I will sit here in protest of your cruel procrastination.

LINCOLN

(Sighs affectionately.)

Of course. Let me get something to keep you warm.

*LINCOLN exits. After a moment
NOAH WADE appears opposite.*

NOAH

(Speaking to someone O.S.)

I was right, Robert, she's out here.

ROBERT LINCOLN enters; NOAH exits.

ROBERT

Tell me it isn't true. Tell me you haven't pressured Father to give up his office.

MARY

Me? Powerful enough to order the President around? I had no idea you held me in such high regard. *Je suis flatté.*

ROBERT

My mother--ever the innocent.

MARY

My firstborn--ever the cynic. Before the cord was cut, you were voicing your outrage over my perceived betrayal.

ROBERT

And neither one of us has let up since. You by nature and me by necessity.

MARY

Have you seen Tad? He's eager to show you his new toy.

ROBERT

Don't change the subject. We're talking about the welfare of the nation, which is in need of another four years of Lincoln.

MARY

Then why don't you run? You seem to have the vigor for it.

ROBERT

Why do you mock me, Mother?

MARY

Because against a bombardment of appeals for compassion, you are an ironclad. Anyway, he says he hasn't made up his mind. So you are still free to argue against his best interests.

ROBERT

His best interests are the same as the country's.

MARY

He saved the Union, what more do people want of him?

ROBERT

The job is not done.

MARY

Then let someone else do it. For your information, the public are not in agreement about the value of your father's continued service.

ROBERT

He will do what he wants, and damn the public.

MARY

Surely you're not accusing your father of arrogance?

LINCOLN enters, hearing this.

LINCOLN

No matter if you do, Robert, for I consider myself to be above such a petty conceit.

ROBERT

Father, I would never...

MARY

Nonsense. You were just about to.

LINCOLN

To what?

MARY

Question your nerve for refusing a third national campaign.

LINCOLN

Go ahead then. Tell me what you think, Robert. I would be crackbrained to disvalue your counsel.

ROBERT

I...I was dismayed. I am dismayed to hear that you're not sure you'll run for re-election again.

LINCOLN

Well, it's true that this job is perfectly fulfilling. Every man knows how to do it better than I, and therefore, it is impossible for me not to live up to their expectations. But many days I weary of entertaining the masses with my incompetence. Then I wonder if it's time for me to step aside and let them outgovern me.

ROBERT

There is still much good you can do from here.

LINCOLN

With a constant horde of aggrieved citizens at the door, maybe the best thing to do from here is leave.

ROBERT

But at least you're protected here. Your enemies won't rest until they crush you. Ford's Theatre was but a rehearsal.

MARY

Robert!

LINCOLN sits to comfort her.

MARY (CONT'D)

What a wretched thing to say! Oh!

LINCOLN

That's enough, Robert.

ROBERT, ignoring her distress, kneels beside his father.

ROBERT

Mother, you must convince him that he has a further obligation. Unlike Cincinnatus, he can't quit after re-establishing the Republic's supremacy. He must continue as president. The country is still broken.

MARY rises abruptly.

MARY

This is too much! Comparing your father to a dictator.

ROBERT

You know that's not what I meant.

MARY

I know that what you meant is to be mean. I am used to public attacks, but I cannot bear a son's disloyalty.

LINCOLN rises as MARY exits, sniffing. They watch her go.

ROBERT

Father, you must continue. Too many people depend on you.

LINCOLN

I'm reminded of a ferryman who was asked to pole his craft across the river at the end of a full day's work...

ROBERT

Oh, God...

ROBERT slumps on the chair.

LINCOLN

...At first the ferryman refused, but as more travelers appeared and the line of people demanding passage grew, he allowed himself to be persuaded to make one more crossing. Unfortunately the extra-large crowd of passengers, combined with his fatigue, caused the ferryman to misapply his pole to a rock, which pitched the entire boat into deadly rapids, where all were lost. Robert, I have to question whether I have the strength to wrestle this ship of state on one last trip.

ROBERT

Of course you do. The Cabinet will assist you. Let me help!

LINCOLN

Your offer is most appreciated. As is your assessment of the nation's peril. I promise to weigh it in my final decision.

ROBERT throws up his hands.

LINCOLN (CONT'D)

And with that vague promise your humble servant must withdraw to attend to the injured bystander. Please excuse me.

NOAH enters, watching LINCOLN exit opposite before advancing.

NOAH

How goes it, Robert?

ROBERT

I don't suppose you can persuade my father not to retire.

NOAH

Lord knows I've tried. His retirement means my own.

ROBERT

Perhaps you'd consider working for me.

NOAH

Do I sense a condition in that proposal?

ROBERT

Well, my clients--good businessmen all--tell me they can't expand in the South without industrial transportation. Government must invest in the railroads.

NOAH

Your clients can't get the states to put up the money?

ROBERT

The states are broke. And my clients don't believe the federal government is prepared to help them out.

NOAH

Your father is convinced that we must first guarantee unencumbered labor. Without it, the plantation system will prevail no matter how many miles of track are laid.

ROBERT

And you support that policy?

NOAH

I'm paid to defer to the President's judgment.

ROBERT

That explains why you encourage my father's rustic morality tales. I had to sit through another just now.

NOAH

(Chuckles.)

Unfortunately, people love his bunkum. If anything, I wish he told fables about talking animals, but that's not his style.

ROBERT

You should be ashamed to advocate such crass manipulation.

NOAH

Ah, shame is one thing I'm not paid for...Look, Robert, there may be a way to influence your father in your favor. You know the value he places on public opinion.

ROBERT

He told me once that a jackass won't go but where it's headed.

NOAH

Then suppose we show him that standing for another term is his only course of action? Would that convince him?

ROBERT

It may. But where's the evidence?

NOAH

I know someone skilled at gathering opinions like straws in the wind. For a price, she can quantify public sentiment in ways that fortify our case.

ROBERT

Let's engage her then. The more we delay, the more time my mother has to sway my father's mind.

Lights down on ROBERT and NOAH.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

LUCIUS REXROTH steps into a spotlight.

TALL MAN, SINGLE MAN, WHITE SINGLE WOMAN, and SHORT MAN stand to the side, reacting favorably to what they hear. During the speech, RANDALL TARR joins the listeners and SHORT MAN exits.

LUCIUS

Good evening, this is Lucius Rexroth, speaking to you in the prison cell we call America. It's no lockup of brick and iron. No cramped jailhouse, no squalid bastille. On the contrary, the view on all sides is breathtaking...

(Reverently intones.)

"I love thy rocks and rills, Thy woods and templed hills,
My heart with rapture thrills, Thy name I love..."

And yet...and yet, we cannot celebrate the natural beauties of our hard-won land. That's because we no longer possess that one jewel that allows us to enjoy all others. And that stolen treasure, my friends, is liberty. For, despite the sacrifices of our founding fathers, despite our near-century as a self-ruled republic, we are now under the yoke of a brutal pharaoh.

Is that too-harsh an assessment? Look truth in the eye, Southerners: One man has billeted his soldiers where you live. One man has assumed veto power over your states' constitutions and judicial appointments. One man has demanded that you swear allegiance to him before you can cast a ballot. One man has yanked the long-established protection of *habeas corpus* from you as if it were a ball of yarn to tease a cat.

Let's be honest. What would you call the man whose armies savagely separated two generations of valiant Southern defenders from their arms and legs? I call that man The Great E-limb-inator. What do you call the man whose occupying forces systematically strip upstanding property owners of their holdings? The Great Emasculator. What do you call the man whose unstable and corrupted mind is on display with his every abrupt utterance? The Great Ejaculator.

(A double take, then with feigned offense.)

Oh, please. If that meaning came to mind, then you are the perfect vassal for our Republican Caesar, easily distractible and basely entertained. I fear for you, my fellow Americans, I really do. Despite all evidence to the contrary, you are willing to allow King Lincoln to hold America by the throat for the satisfaction of his authoritarian lust.

Do you believe he doesn't seek a third term? Oh, of course that's not what he says. He is a slippery devil. A linguistic contortionist, the Great Equivocator, who allows you the self-delusion that he will one day take your captive civil rights from storage and return them to you in good condition.

(MORE)

LUCIUS (CONT'D)

(As if quoting.)

Then the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and they shall sup together on Boston baked beans and South Carolina Johnny Cake....Really...

(Putting his wrists together as if accepting handcuffs.)

This is Lucius Rexroth, truth-monger, speaking to you in chains, bound but unbowed in the stockade known as the Benighted States of America.

Lights down on LUCIUS and listeners.

ACT I, SCENE 3

Lights up on the president's office antechamber. TAD LINCOLN is on a settee, playing deftly with a wooden yo-yo. CAPTAIN LUTHER JOHNSTON enters.

TAD

Oh!

LUTHER

Hello. I didn't mean to startle you. I'm Captain Johnstone.

TAD

(Splitting his attention.)

You're new.

LUTHER

Yessir, as always, it seems.

TAD

What do you mean?

LUTHER

I have been new so often, I think it must be my usual condition. Cotton picker, orphan, student, runaway, prisoner, fugitive, soldier--Almighty God has reborn me so many times I suspect that little of the original Luther Johnstone remains.

TAD

And what are you now?

LUTHER

One of your father's aides.

TAD

He needs a bodyguard more.

LUTHER

How do you know that's not one of my duties?

TAD
What else?

LUTHER
I can "walk the dog."

TAD
We used to have a dog. We don't any more.

LUTHER
Let me show you.

*LUTHER takes the yo-yo from TAD
and demonstrates the trick.*

TAD
How did you do that?

LUTHER
Did I mention yo-yo master among my accomplishments?

TAD
Let me try.

*LUTHER hands the yo-yo to TAD,
who begins practicing eagerly as
GOV. SHELBY BLAKE enters. LUTHER
takes a protective stance before
BLAKE.*

GOV. BLAKE
Where's Lincoln?

LUTHER
Please announce yourself, sir.

GOV. BLAKE
As I told the Sunday soldiers outside: I'm Shelby Blake--
Governor Shelby Blake--and I'm here to see Lincoln.

LUTHER
Is the President expecting you, Governor?

GOV. BLAKE
I don't need an appointment, damn it. You ever hear of states'
rights?

LUTHER
I'll see if President Lincoln has a moment for you.
(A long beat, considering...)
You'll have to remove your hat.

GOV. BLAKE
I don't take my hat off to no nigger.