

Mrs. President: A visit with Mary Todd Lincoln

When MaryAnne Mathews was cast as Mary Todd Lincoln in the 2012 Ken Jones' production of "A. Lincoln: A Pioneer Tale" in Spencer County, she concedes to only having surface knowledge about the woman.

That changed rather quickly.

"I began researching Mary's life for that role and became very interested in telling her story from her point of view," says MaryAnne, 60. "She was a woman outside of her time. I believe she would be better appreciated today. Perhaps she would be a CEO. She did not mince words and told people where they stood with her."

From that premiere role at the Lincoln Amphitheatre, MaryAnne claimed the persona of Mary Todd Lincoln as her own. Through her MAMathews Productions, she wrote and performs a one-woman play whereby Mrs. Lincoln reflects on key moments in her life from the viewpoint of her later years spent in Springfield, Ill. where she eventually died.

In her research, MaryAnne, who resides in Carmel, says she found conflicting accounts of Mrs. Lincoln regarding her life and marriage. "I wrote the play and then began to concentrate on character traits or characteristics that she had," she says, adding that those include "her headaches, her accent, her vehemence against disloyalty."

MaryAnne's primary resource has been her niece Katherine Helm's biography of Mrs. Lincoln.

"She was one of the first of the presidents' wives to have an active public persona," MaryAnne says. "She also saw that the White House needed to be a showcase to the world and have a role to play in diplomatic relations. Later



Photo by Donna Cronk

MaryAnne Mathews interprets Mary Todd Lincoln during a recent program she gave at the Pendleton Community Library.

the White House again fell into disrepair but she had made every effort to make it a place where international visitors would be impressed."

MaryAnne thinks that perhaps the most admirable thing about the First Lady was her egalitarianism, seeing past her husband's rough exterior to the potential within. "As a pampered society belle, one would have expected her to aim for wealth and manners, but she preferred substance over style."

The interpreter says other positives about Mrs. Lincoln include her devotion to her sons and her treatment of African American women as equals.

As for least admirable traits, MaryAnne says we can't blame her for her mental illness, however, "she was supremely self-

absorbed a great deal of the time."

While MaryAnne is interested in portraying other historical women, right now her focus is Mrs. Lincoln and in booking as many performances as possible. She has a play version for adults and a shorter one aimed at younger audiences. She is also open to being a historic presenter at events such as fairs.

Born and reared in Chicago, she has lived in Evansville, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Illinois. MaryAnne has a journalism degree from Northwestern University and a master's in special education from West Virginia College of Graduate Studies. She has worked as a newspaper reporter and editor, as a teacher and freelance writer in addition to sharing history

programs through songs and stories.

"I love the stories of people in history," MaryAnne says. "I think it's important for us to see our ancestors as human beings, with flaws, likes and dislikes, and moments when they shine and moments when they fail. I like taking a character and imagining their emotions and beliefs and acting from that core."

She can be contacted at mmathews404@gmail.com or by calling her at 812-760-3369. Her website is www.mamathewsproductions.com.

"I think we can both be entertained and educated at the same time. I want my audiences to leave with more questions than answers and be interested in finding out more."