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Insight into a Homespun Patriot

By WALTER LAZENBY

Under the auspices of EIU's Lincoln Studies Program, guest actor Richard Blake will appear in Dvorak Concert Hall again tonight and tomorrow night in "A Look at Lincoln."

Not to be confused with Blake's re-enactment of the Charleston Lincoln-Douglas debate tomorrow afternoon at the Fairgrounds, this theatrical performance is billed as "a drama in three acts."

Not a drama at all, it is rather an extended monologue somewhat in the manner of Henry Fonda's impersonation of Clarence Darrow on television earlier this week.

The monologue consists of Lincoln's jokes (often at his own expense), pointed

anecdotes, letters, supposed musings, and bits of speeches (the "House Divided" speech, the Second Inaugural), as well as the uncut Gettysburg

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Address.

The preponderance of stories gives the impression that Lincoln was irrefragable as a yarn-spinner and jokester even in his most serious moments, for he often made his points clear through a story and laughter evidently was therapeutic to him.

The more private ut-

terances reveal him as high-principled lawyer, only briefly as husband and father, and as a sensitive man, unable even to cut a chicken's head off, agonizing over the unhappiness and bloodshed of the Civil War.

Each "act" is introduced by comments of two narrators (Dr. Jack Rang and Mary Ruth Rang), which seem largely irrelevant except as they acknowledge sources for the other material, true to the scholar's impulse.

Refreshingly, Blake's performance does not attempt to aggrandize Lincoln or produce an audience reaction of hushed reverence. The first words he utters come across in a somewhat strained, high-pitched voice conveying young Lincoln's lack of ease and

polish. Gradually, however, Blake's characterization takes on dignity, still without the use of an orotund style or flourishes of delivery. Thus he maintains the essential homespun quality of the Illinois patriot. And his non-declamatory recitation of the Gettysburg Address has a quiet ring of authenticity.

Perhaps the freshest insight the script offers comes just at the end, when it seems to be building up to a heavily significant line in which the doomed leader anticipates an evening at Ford's Theatre. Instead, in a quieter, better curtain speech, he muses that he would like to be remembered as a man who plucked a thistle and planted a flower where he thought a flower would grow.