

## **BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE**

**MEETING – March 3, 2020**

**“NOW WE STAND BY EACH OTHER ALWAYS”**

**SPEAKER: Derek Maxfield and Tracy Ford**

Why plays and why not just speakers at our Roundtable? With two plays in recent months, why do we watch plays (which generally portray fiction) while history (we hope) studies what actually happened, a chronological look at facts. What can a play do that plain speaking cannot? Plays and fiction both offer a measure of emotional comprehension, an appreciation of the feelings experienced by the participants in history. As with so much in history, the experience of one human being may contradict the feelings of an entire culture, yet that does not invalidate individual reactions. Even with so called “facts” seen from different angles, facts can seem as fluid as water which strengthens the appropriateness of emotions in history. Put another way, when the generals stepped out of character they explained the genesis of their play emanated from the stubborn recalcitrance of college students to learn history. Fortunately, what works for 18-year-olds works for their elders, too.

Basing their dialogue on the historical events and summaries of the three meetings between Grant and Sherman in Vicksburg (1863), in Cincinnati (1864), and in Goldsboro (1865), Derek Maxfield (also known as General Grant) and Tracy Ford (also known as General Sherman) filled in the missing richness of experience between these two men, a richness often lost in the pedestrian list of dates for battles, meetings and decisions. Each act was introduced by Jesse Sherman, dressed in period costume and expertly setting the scenes.

First, the play develops the genuine friendship between these two men. Second, in spite of the fact Sherman steals the show between the two generals, a true sense of the art of winnowing men for the right job comes through Grant’s sedate, restrained performance. In some ways, his verbal ruminations on who would get what command and running commentary on the strengths of his generals echoed the thoughtful course of his written memoirs. But general officers do not just move men around like chessmen and the play succeeds yet again in conveying the melancholy of war. Sherman reports the death of one of his officers, General

McPherson, and in the somber silent moment Grant and Sherman agree, “He was a good man,” a tribute we should all hope to earn.

Not much for props - a couple of chairs, a fake camp fire, a camp tent - the sparse chairs and several flasks and bottles provide a skeletal framework for the audience to leave Ft. Caswell for war time. Decanters become a sight gag in every scene as Sherman swigs the booze and leaves the dregs for Grant. In fact, at one point after gulping a whole glass of liquid fortification while discussing an army rival, Sherman picks up Grant’s glass and empties it into his own. The alcohol in every scene comes calibrated so that General Sherman grows incrementally verbose and grandiose as each lubricated scene proceeds. Not to be outdone, Grant, too, has his moments when they meet in Cincinnati after his promotion to Lieutenant General. Returning from Washington, DC, he avers, “Too much ‘show business’ in that town.” Politics 150 years ago looked remarkably the same as it does today.

The great appeal of this play remains its insights into the heart. Though often ignored, Sherman earned part of his reputation for insanity by early on predicting it would take years (and not 90 days) and thousands of lives to win the war. A long diatribe in our three-act play gives life to Sherman’s antipathy for the horrors of the war. Nonetheless, the final meeting in Goldsboro throws Sherman on the opposite track as he gleefully describes his army’s morale on their long march to the sea, “They ate the heart out of Georgia.” After so many Union defeats, victory remains sweet.