

DETAILED VIDEO SCENE DESCRIPTIONS

Scene 1) “The Argument.” This first domestic scene of a husband/wife argument shows the sexual and racial politics of the day. Mary Todd Lincoln discovers that the President’s Mansion is not a private home, but is open to the public every day. As such, it is not even clean and is badly in need of repair. She is frightened and anxious, declaring to her husband, Abraham Lincoln, “We cannot live here!” The president handles her distress and prevents her from walking out by promising her a big budget for remodeling the White House, the money to do it, and fame. Their argument resolves with the duet, “I Believe in You.”

Scene 2) “Mary Todd’s Bargain.” Elizabeth Keckley, a successful Negro dress designer, arrives at the White House and insists that she is permitted to enter by the front door, not the trades entrance. Sam, Lincoln’s White House aide, is confused about what to do since the woman is Black. Mrs. Lincoln says, “Let her in!” She recruits Elizabeth not only to make her gowns, but also to redesign the entire White House. The women strike a bargain. Elizabeth will find out, when at other women’s houses making their dresses, what the women of Washington are saying about Mary Todd and the President. In return, Elizabeth will receive “good pay and much fame.” They decide to begin immediately on the redecoration.

Scene 3) “The Cabinet Meeting.” Abe Lincoln is seen playing on the floor with his two sons when VP Johnson and Secretary of War Stanton arrive. They report that an historic moment has arrived: The South has made the first move to secede from the Union. In this cabinet meeting, civil war is declared because the Confederates (Southern soldiers) have taken Fort Sumter. Lincoln states his dedication to preserving the Union and having a cabinet of men similarly dedicated, even if some of them ran against him for President in the last election. Mary Todd and Elizabeth Keckley enter, excited about their plan to redecorate the White House, and the men declare their plan to begin a civil war. The spheres of men and women are clearly differentiated. Conversation quickly shifts and dissolves into the niceties of proper etiquette as all say, “Farewell.”

Scene 4) “First Meeting.” Frederick Douglass, preeminent abolitionist, arrived at the White House on a hot day in August 1863 without an appointment. He was a black man on a mission at a time when the country was torn by Civil War. Douglass wanted an immediate meeting with President Abraham Lincoln. He was not sure he would get in. He saw Lincoln as an ally in the fight to end slavery and believed the Civil War was being fought over slavery and nothing else.

Lincoln admitted Douglass to the White House. Lincoln presented the war as an insurrection that must be put down to preserve the Union. Douglass saw the war as the unfinished business of America, ever since the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution left out mention of slavery. Lincoln saw slavery as a legal struggle to be managed as each new state in the west entered the Union. New states could not be “slaveholding,” Lincoln declared. Douglass was a man of pure moral principle. While Lincoln saw slavery’s demise as inevitable, he didn’t see himself leading the march to its end. Douglass insisted that the President put the slaves in

uniform to help fight the Civil War. They both ended up feeling regret that they didn't begin a friendship at this time.

Scene 5) "The Gala Ball." The result of Mary Todd Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckley's hard work on the White House remodel is unveiled at an extravagant social occasion to which all of Washington's elite is invited to wine, dine and dance all night. Mary Todd is worried about their two sons, who have been very sick, and questions whether she should have cancelled the Ball. Lincoln assures her all will be well.

Frederick Douglass obtains an invitation to the Gala Ball through an abolitionist senator and decides to integrate the celebration. This is a White House first, as a Black guest has never been to a White House social function before, and all the servants are free Blacks. He is welcomed warmly by the President and Mrs. Lincoln, but he immediately asks them, "Where is Elizabeth?" They look uncomfortable as they indicate that she is downstairs with the all-Black staff. Frederick goes to her. Elizabeth is bitter at not being invited and sings, "Someday They'll know It Was Me."

Meanwhile, VP Johnson and Secretary of War Stanton are revolted at the excess of Mrs. Lincoln's budget, which has more than doubled, while soldiers, during this same period, are going without proper socks, shoes and blankets to fight the war.

Lincoln's aide announces the last dance of the evening, the White House Waltz. When the dance is over, the guests sing "Farewell" and depart. Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln exult over the evening's success, but their joy is suddenly interrupted by a scream of horror ...

Scene 6) "Mourning in Washington." Sam Everyman, Lincoln's aide, has lost his brother, a Rebel soldier, in the War. Elizabeth's only child, a son, has been killed fighting for the Union and passing for white in a white regiment. Abe and Mary Todd's son, 11-year-old Willy, has died of typhoid fever (the reason for the scream at the end of Scene 5). Mary Todd is in a near catatonic state of grief and won't see anyone but Elizabeth. Abe asks Elizabeth to tend Mary until she recovers by staying with her full-time at the White House. Elizabeth agrees and asks Lincoln for funds for her foundation to help Blacks begin businesses. They sing the duet "Black Dresses," referring to how many people are wearing the color of mourning. Elizabeth reminds Abe that Mary Dines' gospel choir has prepared a concert for them that evening after dark at the secret campground.

Scene 7) "The Campground Gospel Choir." The Lincoln boys' nanny, Aunt Mary Dines, has told the president that on her night off she goes to a secret forest campground and teaches songs to the homeless men and women there who, traveling the underground railroad, have nowhere to go, no jobs and no food. Abe said he loves to hear gospel music and she has invited him to come and hear her choir.

That night Mary Dines brings a lantern to guide Abe, Frederick, Elizabeth and Sam to hear a special concert in the woods near Washington. The president is deeply moved by the spirituals they sing. In fact, historical accounts report that "Lincoln wept." Abe sobs so hard that Sam and Frederick must support him back to the White House and to his rocking chair.

Scene 8) “Sam’s Letter.” Sam writes to his mother about how the President doesn’t treat Black people any differently than white people in the White House. Sam tells his mother he has changed his mind and he now sees Black people as being just like him, good soldiers who fight bravely like his brother. He asks her: “Please pray for the President,” because “Abe Lincoln feels like family to me.” Sam sings “Akin to Abraham.”

Scene 9) “This Moment Yearning and Thoughtful.” President Lincoln laments (in the words of a Walt Whitman poem) the pain he feels in his leadership role as head of state. He dreams of the end of the war, of a shining city in which love and fellowship reign. Abe sobs, “Ah! I can’t lose another son!” He pauses, knowing that The Moment has come. He moves to his desk where the Emancipation Proclamation sits waiting, and he signs it. Then he takes his seat in a chair that resembles the Lincoln Monument Chair while music swells and it seems to grow bigger and bigger. He is transformed.

Scene 10) “The War is Over.” People gather excitedly at the White House as the news that General Lee has surrendered spreads around Washington. Even Mary Todd has come out to experience this moment of joy. They call for the President to speak. Lincoln makes an extemporaneous speech congratulating all soldiers: “Today is a glorious day for the Union.” He says that not only is slavery dead, but that he will ask congress to grant suffrage to Negro soldiers and men of education. Mary Dines’ gospel choir joyfully sings “Every Time I Feel the Spirit.” Lincoln then asks to hear “that captured tune, ‘Dixie,’” and the crowd disperses to its lilting strains.