



**RISE UP AND HEAR**

**AN EVENING OF POETRY  
HONORING ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S LEGACY**



## ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND POETRY

Lincoln loved poetry. It was his political primer. It salved the wounds of war. It helped him express grief at the loss of loved ones. Years after the deaths of his mother, his sister, and his first love Ann Rutledge, Lincoln found the words of William Knox's *Mortality* expressed what he could not. He noted, "I would give all I am worth, and go in debt, to be able to write so fine a piece as this is."

Throughout his life, Lincoln wrote his own poetry, though with less frequency in his later years. His earliest known verse, written between the ages of 15 and 16, appears in his arithmetic book and demonstrates his self-deprecating humor:  
*Abraham Lincoln/his hand and pen/he will be good but/god knows When.*

Despite his lack of formal education, Lincoln saw poetry as a way to understand the world. He learned politics through Shakespeare and his favorite play, *Macbeth*, taught him the consequences of overwhelming ambition. His private secretary, John Hay, recalled that the president often read Shakespeare aloud at the White House and the Soldiers' Home.

Lincoln's life and words have inspired poets over the years, beginning with his contemporary Walt Whitman who often saw the president while serving as a volunteer nurse in Washington. Later generations of poets like Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg drew upon Lincoln's prairie image. Lincoln's legacy of equality of opportunity is heard in the works of Langston Hughes.

As we approach Lincoln's bicentennial in 2009, the arts are an avenue to understanding Lincoln. New plays, music, and fine art will be commissioned nationwide to honor the 16th president. Ranging from new pennies that fit in one's pocket to large public rededication concerts at the Lincoln Memorial, all are a call to reflect on Lincoln's legacy.

Perhaps the "prairie-lawyer" who said he was willing to give all that he had to compose a poignant poem would be pleased that many consider his Gettysburg Address "poetry in prose." Lincoln understood the power of words. Tonight we honor his love of language and his legacy in poetry.

—Eileen R. Mackevich

*Executive Director, Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission*

—Jennifer Rosenfeld

*Deputy Executive Director, Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission*

# RISE UP AND HEAR

## AN EVENING OF POETRY

### HONORING ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S LEGACY

SEPTEMBER 22, 2008

## PROGRAM

Welcome

Dana Gioia, Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

John Barr, President, Poetry Foundation

Shawntay Henry, 2008 Poetry Out Loud National Champion

Robert Pinsky, U.S. Poet Laureate (1997–2000)

Kevin Young

Joan Allen

Sam Waterston

## PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

Actress **Joan Allen** has enjoyed an acclaimed film career, including three Oscar nominations for *The Contender*, *The Crucible*, and *Nixon*. She most recently appeared in *Death Race* and *Bonneville*. Equally successful onstage, Allen won a Tony for *Burn This* and is an ensemble member of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company. She returns to Broadway this spring in *Impressionism* with Jeremy Irons.

**John Barr** is president of the Poetry Foundation, publisher of *Poetry* magazine. He has published six collections: *The War Zone*, *Natural Wonders*, *The Dial Painters*, *The Hundred Fathom Curve*, *Centennial Suite*, and *Grace*. John Barr has served on the boards of Yaddo, The Poetry Society of America, and Bennington College, and taught poetry in the graduate writing program at Sarah Lawrence College.

Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, **Dana Gioia** is an internationally acclaimed poet, critic, educator, and former business executive. He received a B.A. and a M.B.A. from Stanford University and a M.A. in Comparative Literature from Harvard University. Dana Gioia began his term as the ninth chairman in February 2003, and in December 2006 he was confirmed for a second, four-year term. He is best known for his 1991 book *Can Poetry Matter?* about the role of poetry in contemporary culture. His collection of poems, *Interrogations at Noon*, won the 2002 American Book Award.

A junior at Charlotte Amalie High School in the U.S. Virgin Islands, **Shawntay Henry** is the 2008 Poetry Out Loud National Champion. Henry is also a cheerleader, a student at the Caribbean Dance School, and a junior angel at the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands. A partnership between the NEA, the Poetry Foundation, and the state arts agencies, Poetry Out Loud is a national arts education program that encourages the study of great poetry through a dynamic recitation competition for high school students.

**Robert Pinsky's** most recent book of poetry is *Gulf Music* (2007). His prose works include *Democracy*, *Culture and the Voice of Poetry* (2002), and *The Life of David* (2005). He is also translator of *The Inferno of Dante* (1995). As United States Poet Laureate from 1997 to 2000, he founded the Favorite Poem Project.

Award-winning actor **Sam Waterston** is best known for his portrayal of district attorney Jack McCoy on *Law & Order*. An avid Lincoln enthusiast, he has portrayed the 16th president in Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*, starred in the Lincoln Center production of *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, and provided the voice of Lincoln for Ken Burns' *The Civil War*. Waterston also serves on the Advisory Committee of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.



**Kevin Young** is the author of five poetry collections, including *For the Confederate Dead*. Young's poetry and essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Callaloo*, and many other journals. The Atticus Haygood Professor of English and Creative Writing at Emory University, Young lives in Atlanta, Georgia.



The **National Endowment for the Arts** is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts, both new and established, bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Arts Endowment is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases. For more information on the literature programs of the National Endowment for the Arts, please visit [www.arts.gov](http://www.arts.gov).

**The Poetry Foundation**, publisher of *Poetry* magazine, is an independent literary organization committed to a vigorous presence for poetry in our culture. It exists to discover and celebrate the best poetry and to place it before the largest possible audience. For more information on the Poetry Foundation, please visit [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

Congress established the **Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission** to plan the nation's celebration of the 16th president's 200th birthday. The Commission works to engage the broadest range of individuals and groups in the commemoration. Through education programs, public forums, and the arts, the Commission provides an opportunity to re-examine Lincoln's legacy in our 21st century democracy. Its members, who are appointed by the president and congressional leaders, include political leaders, jurists, historians, and collectors.

Special thanks to the U.S. Department of the Interior and the National Park Service for making this event possible.

Visit [www.abrahamlincoln200.org](http://www.abrahamlincoln200.org) for more information on events in celebration of Abraham Lincoln's bicentennial.