



AFTER BIRTH OF A NATION

by David Robson

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“I not only use all the brains that I have, but all that I can borrow.”

—Woodrow Wilson

Characters

WOODROW WILSON—*Caucasian, 50s, 28th President of the United States*

(COLONEL) EDWARD HOUSE—*Caucasian, 50s, Advisor to the President*

MARGARET WOODROW WILSON—*Caucasian, 20s, First Daughter and Acting First Lady*

DAVID WARK (D.W.) GRIFFITH—*Caucasian, 40s, Motion picture director*

CLARENCE FIELDS—*African American, 30s, White House servant*

REVEREND RICHARD GAMBLE—*Caucasian, 30s, Presbyterian minister*

CORA GAMBLE—*Caucasian, 30s, Wife of minister*

EUGENY DEMIDOV—*Caucasian, 50s or 60s, Russian Ambassador*

Setting

The action takes place in the Green Room of the White House, Washington, DC.

Note: The script calls for the characters of Woodrow WILSON and MARGARET Woodrow Wilson to bear a strong physical resemblance to one another. This requirement is grounded in the vivid photographic evidence of the time and can best be achieved on stage either through the use of make-up, the casting of similar-looking actors, or both. Equally important are the mannerisms and subtle inflexions of tone and voice that the actors playing the roles can develop during rehearsals to accentuate the likeness between father and daughter. Most importantly, have fun!

Another Note: At the top of the show, the character of FIELDS appears to be an offensive cinematic/theatrical stereotype, a throwback to a time in which African American performers were relegated to playing butlers and maids, and appearing as lazy, shuffling, and stupid. FIELDS cleverly uses these stereotypes, and the expectations of the play's other characters, to mask his true intent. The actor playing FIELDS should make the distinction between the servile stereotype and the real man precisely and clearly.

Lights rise on the Green Room of the White House. The room contains two heavily draped French doors, left, through which falling snow can be seen. Center is a set of large double doors. Right, is a servant's door.

*The room is decorated as if for a gala. Red, white, and blue streamers and banners help create the festive mood. The room also contains food and refreshment tables, cushioned benches and chairs, a small bar, a telephone stand and telephone, and a small array of decorative handguns on the wall. Prominent is a large promotional poster for the film *The Birth of a Nation*, portraying a masked clansman on a bucking steed.*

Left, MARGARET stands looking out the French doors, her back to the audience. HOUSE stands center. WILSON is entering as lights rise.

WILSON: Is she coming or not?

HOUSE: She won't budge.

WILSON: We can't just keep the guests waiting.

HOUSE: You should talk to her.

WILSON: You think she'll listen to me?

HOUSE: Doesn't she usually?

WILSON: These days, she has a mind of her own.

WILSON: Perish the thought!

HOUSE: Perhaps she needs to marry.

WILSON: She'll have no one—claims marriage is for fools. Anyway, who would want her at her advanced age?

HOUSE: Her options *are* quite limited at 29...

WILSON: I just don't know what to say to her anymore.

HOUSE: Maybe don't *say* anything? Take a moment and listen to *her* for a change.

WILSON: Ha! That's funny, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

HOUSE: I'll stall Mr. Griffith for as long as I can.

(HOUSE exits. WILSON approaches MARGARET, whose face remains either turned away or not fully seen during their conversation.)

WILSON: The guests are waiting, my dear.

MARGARET: I'm not coming.

WILSON: But you love moving pictures.

MARGARET: My throat is sore. *(She coughs for effect.)*

WILSON: This is becoming serious: always taken to bed, then wandering the halls in the middle of the night.

MARGARET: It is serious; I don't know what I might do to myself.

WILSON: What you might do is eat from time to time—you're too thin, and that can't be good for your constitution. Now, I'll fetch the doctor in the morning, but until then—

MARGARET: I received three more marriage proposals today.

WILSON: Oh...?

MARGARET: What if I run off and elope, like Nellie and Jessie?

WILSON: Is that what you want?

MARGARET: You know what I want.

WILSON: This again...? Your singing is but a hobby, my dear.

MARGARET: No, it's my future career.

WILSON: Women don't have careers, Margaret, they have husbands. Now, let's have a look at those proposals of yours.

MARGARET: I'm not interested in marriage!

WILSON: I see. Well, a singing career is out of the question. Show business simply isn't a proper vocation for a woman.

MARGARET: And you get the final say?

WILSON: A child's duty is to obey.

MARGARET: A daughter's duty, you mean—and a wife's!

WILSON: What I mean is that at this moment your singing is neither here nor there. Tonight, the White House needs a hostess. Years ago, you see, a friend's kindness set the course of my career, and now I must return the favor. But I can't do it alone. I need you; the nation needs you; and duty to country sometimes requires great sacrifice.

MARGARET: They elected you, not me.

WILSON: Be that as it may, without you, my child, all is lost.

(GRIFFITH enters holding a glass of champagne.)

GRIFFITH: Where's that little Margaret Wilson I've heard so much about? Let me take a look at you, dear girl!

(MARGARET moves out of shadow; she and WILSON bear a striking resemblance to one another. In fact, they look almost identical. GRIFFITH is taken aback.)

GRIFFITH: Ah, the spitting image of your...your... *(He looks back and forth at father and daughter.)* late mother—beautiful!

WILSON: Margaret, I'd like to introduce you to Mr. David Wark Griffith, America's most famous motion picture director.

MARGARET: Pleased to meet you, Mr. Griffith.

GRIFFITH: Mr. Griffith was my pappy's name. Call me D.W. Your father tells me you love the pictures.

MARGARET: Oh, yes.

GRIFFITH: Well, let me tell you, this here picture we're showing tonight has everything: romance, battle scenes like you've never witnessed.

WILSON: And to think it all came from my old friend Tom Dixon's novel.

GRIFFITH: Genius begets genius, I like to say. *(To MARGARET)* My picture is the epic tale of two families—one from the North and one from the South. This is a tribute to the Lost Cause and the War of Northern Aggression: the bloody battles; the virginal, white heroine; the vile black menace.

MARGARET: Oh.

GRIFFITH: But that's only the first part. Then we get to Reconstruction: economic depravity, dang-blasted carpetbaggers, traitorous scalawags, and lazy, shiftless Negro legislators. Oh, and let's not forget the ever-present threat of miscegenation.

WILSON: The dreaded mixing of the races!

GRIFFITH: It climaxes with those hooded heroes, the Klan, galloping into town on their mighty steeds, vanquishing their darkie foes, and preserving the purity and supremacy of the white race. What do you say about that?

MARGARET: I do enjoy Miss Gish's acting...

GRIFFITH: Oh, then wait until you see Lillian in this. She's fantastic! I, uh, hear tell that you're a performer yourself. Is that right?

MARGARET: Why, yes.

GRIFFITH: You like to sing.

MARGARET: I love to sing!

GRIFFITH: Then what do you say that we go out there and warm this place up with a song?

MARGARET: You want me to sing? Tonight?

GRIFFITH: We got the band out there to play along with the picture, so why not give them a little practice with a genuine star.

MARGARET: I'm no star.

GRIFFITH: Trust me, Maggie—may I call you Maggie? I know charisma when I see it.

MARGARET: But I haven't prepared.

GRIFFITH: The sign of a true professional is being able to think—and sing—on your feet.

MARGARET: That's how I usually sing: On my feet.

GRIFFITH: Then you've got nothing to worry about. Come on!

(MARGARET turns to her father for his approval; he tacitly gives it. GRIFFITH offers his arm; MARGARET takes it; and they begin to exit.)

GRIFFITH: You need a little glass of liquid courage first?

MARGARET: Oh, I don't drink alcohol.

GRIFFITH: You mother raised you well then. Only hags, whores, and suffragists put their lips to a glass of alcohol.

MARGARET: What have you against suffragists, Mr. Griffith?

GRIFFITH: Just about everything you can think of, little lady! Now, right this way. Wait! We have to make our grand entrance. Try this!

(GRIFFITH half-raises his arm in a "pope-wave" pose. He nods to MARGARET to follow suit. She does. They exit slowly and grandly through the double doors, as HOUSE and FIELDS enter.)

HOUSE: Mr. President, this is Clarence Fields; he's filling in for Malcolm this evening. Apparently, Fields has long been in the service of the vice president.

WILSON *(To FIELDS)*: You work for Tom Marshall?

FIELDS: Yas, suh.

WILSON: Haven't talked to that shifty son of a bitch in three months.

HOUSE: Fields tells me that nearly all the guests have arrived.

FIELDS: Yas, suh, only waiting for da Chief Justice and his wife.

(Sounds of applause, offstage.)

FIELDS *(Cont'd)*: Maybe dat's dem now.

WILSON: The applause coming from the East Room is for my daughter, Margaret. She's agreed to sing a ditty before the picture begins. We should probably get out there.

HOUSE: I need a moment; something's come up. *(To FIELDS)* That will be all, Fields.

(FIELDS exits through the servant's door; HOUSE closes the double doors.)

WILSON: What is it, House?

HOUSE: The festivities will have to wait.

(The band begins playing "Beautiful Dreamer" by Stephen Foster, off.)

WILSON: Whatever for?

HOUSE: There is war in Europe, Mr. President!

(MARGARET sings offstage)

MARGARET *(Singing)*: "Beautiful dreamer, wake unto me,/Starlight and dewdrops are waiting for thee.

WILSON: And what am I supposed to do about it?

HOUSE: You're supposed to take an interest. Our allies are depending on us for help.

MARGARET *(Off)*: "Sounds of the rude world, heard in the day,/Lull'd by the moonlight have all pass'd away!"

WILSON: You know my policy, colonel: When it comes to the war, the United States shall remain "impartial in thought as well as in action."

HOUSE *(Overlapping with WILSON)*: "Impartial in thought as well as in action," yes, yes. But you must see that our neutrality makes us look weak.

WILSON: Don't use that word.

HOUSE: I only meant that—

WILSON: I don't like that word.

HOUSE: You should know that as we speak, the Russians are pinned down in East Prussia. If arms and reinforcements don't arrive soon, they'll be slaughtered.

WILSON: Not my problem.

HOUSE: Meanwhile, German U-boats are threatening the entire European continent.

WILSON: You know as well as I do the Germans are harmless.

MARGARET (*Off*) (*Singing*): Beautiful dreamer, queen of my song,
List while I woo thee with soft melody...

HOUSE: But, sir, what if they attempt to sink a commercial liner like the *Eastland* or *Lusitania*?

WILSON: Take it from me, the *Lusitania* will sail the seas for a hundred years!

MARGARET (*Off*) (*Singing*): "Gone are the cares of life's busy throng,
Beautiful dreamer, awake unto me!
Beautiful dreamer, awake unto me!"

HOUSE: What you don't seem to grasp, sir, is that Germany has one of the world's most formidable fighting forces—

WILSON: Listen to yourself, colonel: You speak as if the Germans are a nation of Jew-hating goose-steppers with a taste for blood.

HOUSE: Well, if the shoe fits...

("Beautiful Dreamer" concludes, followed by loud applause.)

WILSON: Anyway, if God truly wanted us to go to war in Europe, he'd have told me by now.

HOUSE: God speaks to you directly, does he?

WILSON: Naturally! I'm the President of the United States, after all; I'm the chosen one.

HOUSE: But how do you know when he's calling you?

WILSON: Sometimes it's a little whisper in my ear; other times I see his image in a piece of toast or coffee cake. Mostly, though, his signs come like a bolt from the blue.

(The double doors suddenly open and GAMBLE escorts MARGARET through them.)

WILSON (*Cont'd*): Just like that!

GAMBLE (*To MARGARET*): My dear lady, what a glorious introduction to your work!

MARGARET (*To GAMBLE*): Thank you ever so much.

GAMBLE: Our congregation's choir has long sung your praises, but they greatly underestimated your gifts.

WILSON: Reverend Gamble, so good of you to join us. Margaret, this man is pastor of the same church in Augusta, Georgia, that my father—your grandfather—led when I was a boy.

MARGARET: How nice to meet you!

GAMBLE: The pleasure is all mine. I am simply ravished—spiritually speaking, of course. In fact, I do believe that Miss Wilson's sterling success calls for a toast. I raise my glass to the angelic Margaret Wilson! The most eligible woman in Washington!

HOUSE: Oh, well now...

GAMBLE: Indeed, in the country!

WILSON: Here, here!

GAMBLE: Whose velvet trilling fills the meadowlark with envy!

(GAMBLE bends to kiss MARGARET's hand as CORA enters.)

CORA: Here you are, dear.

GAMBLE: Here I am! May I introduce my wife: Cora.

(CORA extends her hand; WILSON lightly kisses it.)

WILSON: Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Gamble.

CORA: Thank you, Mr. President.

WILSON: This is my aid, Colonel House.

CORA: How do you do?

HOUSE: Charmed, madam!

CORA: And who is this elegant young lady.

WILSON: This, dear woman, is my eldest daughter, Margaret.

MARGARET: Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Gamble.

(MARGARET curtsies to CORA.)

CORA: Well, aren't you just the sweetest thing...?

(GRIFFITH enters.)

GRIFFITH: Who started the party without me?

GAMBLE: It is a great honor to meet you, Mr. Griffith. I've seen all your films.

GRIFFITH: You don't say!

CORA: Richard loves the pictures.

GAMBLE: *The Perfidy of Mary* and *The Painted Lady* remain two of my favorites. And *Judith of Bethulia* is simply a masterpiece. I couldn't be more thrilled to be here for the premiere of your latest tour de force.

HOUSE: Perhaps we should get things started then.

GRIFFITH: I couldn't agree more. Mr. President...

(GRIFFITH motions for WILSON to lead them out.)

WILSON *(To CORA)*: May I escort you to your seat, Mrs. Gamble?

CORA: Thank you, Mr. President.

(CORA takes WILSON's arm and they exit.)

GAMBLE: Miss Wilson...?

MARGARET: Oh, certainly.

(MARGARET takes GAMBLE's arm and they exit; FIELDS enters through the servant's door.)

GRIFFITH *(To FIELDS)*: Do me a favor, boy: lock the door this time. The Green Room is off limits until after the picture.

FIELDS: Yas, suh.

HOUSE: Clarence, if we receive any more telegrams this evening, make sure they come to me immediately.

FIELDS: Yas, suh.

(GRIFFITH and HOUSE exit. After they're gone, FIELDS moves to the telephone, right. He picks it up and waits for the White House operator.)

FIELDS *(Into phone)*: Yas, ma'am: I needs an outside line: Impotent presidential bidness. The number I'm calling is Linville 4787. *(He listens and waits.)*

GRIFFITH *(Off)*: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Please make yourselves comfortable.

FIELDS (*Into phone*): Hey, it's me. What? Where do you think I am? I said I was going to do it; I did it, no thanks to you.

GRIFFITH (*Off*): Tonight, I reveal to you the fruits of my great labor...

FIELDS (*Into phone*): They bought the phony letter from the vice president.

GRIFFITH (*Off*): The greatest motion picture ever made!

FIELDS (*Into phone*): Yes, technically that was your idea, but...

GRIFFITH (*Off*): It's a tribute and testament to a simpler time...

FIELDS (*Into phone*): Then why did you chicken out...?

GRIFFITH (*Off*): ...a time in which homespun values mattered, in which brotherhood stood above the baser instincts of avarice and cynicism.

FIELDS (*Into phone*): Listen, there are times in a person's life when you've either got to put up or shut up.

GRIFFITH (*Off*): Tonight, friends, you are witness to the glory and spirit that is the Lost Cause!

FIELDS (*Into phone*): No! Griffith's a racist, and his picture's nothing more than a recruiting campaign for the Klan.

GRIFFITH (*Off*): The return of grace, goodness, and honor that was lost in the South's defeat in the Civil War!

FIELDS (*Into phone*): That's why—

GRIFFITH (*Off*): Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, you are witness to the birth of a nation!