# **THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN BRIGADE:**

# **THE FIRST DESEGREGATED AMERICAN FIGHTING FORCE**

# A Play

# By Iago Macknik-Conde, 10th grade (age 16)

# **Act 1, Scene 1**

# A New York City Radio Station, 1938

# A 1930’s radio station, furnished with a small table and chair. A middle-aged *REPORTER* leans into a microphone.

# REPORTER: Good evening and welcome to the news on WJZ New York City. Today is August 3rd, 1938. As our listeners will recall, civil war has been ravaging Spain for the last two years. Franco’s rebel forces, aided by Hitler and Mussolini’s armies, now control over half of Spain. Western powers still abide by the nonintervention agreement, which Germany and Italy continue to brazenly ignore by sending troops of their own to the fight. The legitimate, democratically elected Spanish government has mounted a last-ditch assault on the shores of the Ebro River. The battle is not going to plan, and optimism for the future of democracy in Spain is waning as the initial assault has given way to the attrition style warfare that veterans of the Great War will be familiar with. Even so, the democratic government is making good use of the International Brigades. These are the foreign volunteers, coming from over 50 countries to fight the rise of fascism in Spain—and possibly, the world. Among these volunteers are some 3,000 Americans that make up the “Abraham Lincoln Brigade.” As we close tonight, our thoughts are with our fellow citizens fighting for freedom across the ocean.

*(Transition to battlefield)*

**Act 1, Scene 2**

The Ebro Front, Spain, 1938

Two soldiers crouch down in a trench, *observing a battlefield. SERGEANT WILL is Black and around 30 years of age. JOHN is white and about a decade younger.*

# SERGEANT WILL: Alright Johnny, you know what we’ve got to do. The element of surprise is gone, and the fascists know we’re here! They’ll be back for a counterattack.

# JOHN: No problem for us, SERGEANT. We’ve held them off before and we’ll hold them off again, just like last time.

# SERGEANT WILL: I don’t know how, Johnny. We’re low on ammo, water, and the machine gun’s broken down. *(Looks through binoculars)* It’s not looking good. Our resupply team just got blown to bits!

# JOHN: Do you see any friendly artillery coming to support us?

# SERGEANT WILL: No, they’re retreating, everyone’s retreating! We’ve gotta go, before we’re overrun!

*(Explosion)*

# JOHN: What was that? Tanks! *(Points)* We’ve been cut off, Sergeant, what do we do?

# SERGEANT WILL: *(Puts down binoculars)* We can’t cross, or we’ll be mowed down. But if we stay, we’ll still be shot.

# JOHN: I won’t go down without a fight, sir.

# SERGEANT WILL: Easy there, son, take a step back. Let’s wait and see if they send any reinforcements.

*(Both SERGEANT WILL and JOHN switch to a relaxed position, SERGEANT WILL still looks out at the battlefield with his binoculars)*

# JOHN: *(Bouncing his foot)* I always hated this part of the fighting, just waiting for something to happen. I’m tired of burying my friends, I’ve had lice for as long as I can remember, and I don’t know the last time I had a warm bath. *(Stops bouncing his foot, pauses, turns to SERGEANT WILL)* So, what were you up to, before fighting in Spain and all that?

# SERGEANT WILL: *(Puts binoculars in pocket)* Well, I lived just outside of New Orleans. My grandparents were slaves, and even though my parents were born free, life wasn’t much better for them. They even worked on the same plot as my grandparents did. I wasn’t about to follow down that path. So, one day, I packed a bag and took a train to Detroit.

# JOHN: So, what’re you doin’ over here?

# SERGEANT WILL: Man, on one of my first days in Detroit, I saw this one fella I thought was a preacher standing on the curb, yelling and passing out books to anybody who’d listen. Now, I never heard my pastor preach anything like that, so I go up and take a book, and it says right there on the cover, “The Communist Manifesto.” I read it in one night, and it just made sense. I mean, my family never had a patch of land to call their own, and I realized that whoever controls the land controls the world. Then, in ‘35 Mussolini invades Ethiopia—an independent African nation. When war started here in Spain, I couldn’t watch it go by. So here I am. What about you?

# JOHN: I was up in Brooklyn, livin’ in a Hooverville since the market crashed. Now, I was never really much of a communist, you know that-

SERGEANT

There’s still time for you to repent.

*(Laughter)*

# JOHN: Yeah, I just knew that I didn’t like where the world was headed. Especially after that Hitler took power. When I saw what the fascists had in store for this place…. It made me so mad that our government wasn’t helping Spain, I mean, we’re a democracy, shouldn’t we help other people defend democracy too? So, I boarded an ocean liner to France, and smugglers helped me cross the Pyrenees. Doesn’t seem like it meant much in the long run, though. I mean—do you really think we ever had a chance at winning this war?

# SERGEANT: I did at first. I thought for a long time, “any day now, France or England will send troops, or stop Germany and Italy from helping Franco.” But no. Everyone’s still following that damn non-intervention pact.

# JOHN: France and England think that if they give up Spain, Hitler won’t come for them too. But they’re too blind to see that Hitler will never be satisfied.

# SERGEANT: The Western powers won’t get involved unless it affects their bottom line. That’s the whole reason they won’t help us, you know. They’re scared of what we believe in. Scared that the average Joe will find out there’s a way out from under the heel of the rich.

# JOHN: But surely fascism would never stand a chance in America, Sergeant. We’re not like them.

# SERGEANT: That’s where you’re wrong, John! And quit calling me Sergeant, you know my name’s Will. It’s because people tolerate oppression that fascists think they can win. This war isn’t even about Spain, really. It’s about showing the world that the common people are done getting stepped on, even if we have to fight for our rights.

# JOHN: Do you ever regret you came?

# SERGEANT: I know it’s not right to say, but sometimes I wish this war would never end. *(Stands up)* If I go back to America, it’ll be back to the bottom for me. I just got a letter from home—my friend was killed by the KKK, and the sheriff didn’t do anything. This is the first time in my life that I’ve been treated as an equal, like I’m more than the color of my skin.

# JOHN: *(Stands up)* Did you know I was in the machine gun company under Oliver Law?

# SERGEANT: Man, I still can’t believe we lost him in Mosquito Hill, but what a sight to see! Back home I’d have never dreamed of seeing a Black commander leading white troops into battle. For me, that alone made it all worth it.

# JOHN: If we make it back home, we’ll make them all see. That our battalion was filled with people from all across America: from the South, the North, East and West, from the city and the countryside, black and white, Jewish and Christian, we all fought together.

# SERGEANT: How many times in history have people come to fight in a foreign land, not for personal gain or because they were threatened, but because they believed in the cause they were fighting for? We all picked up our rifles because we all knew in our hearts that it was the right thing to do. The Abraham Lincoln Battalion is the first desegregated American Combat Unit. I can’t get over how grand that is.

# JOHN: You really think people will remember us?

# SERGEANT: We won’t let them forget it, John. And even if we do lose here, we’ve still got battles to fight back home! The fight for equality for all races, the fight for freedom against fascism and oppression is global and eternal.

# JOHN: Wait, do you hear that?

# SERGEANT: They’ve breached our trench; they’ll find us in no time! Grab your rifle, John. You were asking for a fight, well it’s coming!

JOHN: Even if we don’t make it out, Will, it was an honor to fight the fascists with you.

*(Transition back to the radio station)*

**Act 1, Scene 3**

# A New York City Radio Station, 1949

# Eleven years have passed, so some of the objects and decorations have changed. The *REPORTER* has not.

# REPORTER: Good evening, and welcome back to the news on WJZ New York City. Today, April 1, 1949, marks the tenth anniversary of the end of the Spanish Civil War. As our listeners may recall, the Spanish Republic, withdrew all International Brigades in 1938, hoping that Franco would follow suit and stop accepting military help from Germany and Italy. Of course, that never happened, and Franco’s fascist dictatorship has ruled Spain for the last decade. Experts agree that, had the Spanish Republic won the war, it could have been a crucial ally to both Britain and France in their war against Hitler.

The Abraham Lincoln Battalion lost a third of its members in Spain, and few escaped injury. After the Spanish Civil War, many veterans fought in World War II, defending our own republic against the fascist forces of Europe and the Empire of Japan. But their road was never easy: they were labeled “premature antifascists” and denied frontline service, they lost jobs due to government harassment, they had to prove themselves over and over again. Stateside, the Lincoln veterans are the perennial activists that continue to fight against discrimination based on color, race, religion, and national origin—and progress has been made. Just last year, President Truman signed executive order 9981, finally desegregating the United States military.

Today, the actions of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion remain controversial: Were they communist insurgents or fearless freedom fighters? Selfless heroes or dangerous revolutionaries? Though time will tell, supporters and detractors may agree that, during the Spanish war, something extraordinary happened. For the first time in history, the world witnessed the formation of International Brigades to help save democracy in a country under siege. To paraphrase the words of Spanish activist Dolores Ibárruri, the Spanish people from Jarama and Guadalajara, Brunete and Belchite, Levante and the Ebro, will forever sing of the courage, the discipline, the daring, and the sacrifice of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

**END**