

REMINDER OF RESPONSIBILITY: '1776' resonates 240 years after signing of Declaration of Independence

Some readers may be spending the summer in Wilmington and not Manhattan. So, like everyone else in the country who don't have tickets to see the Tony-winning rage that is "Hamilton," Opera House Theatre Company has thoughtfully provided the best alternative: "1776," Peter Stone and Sherman Edwards' musical about the Declaration of Independence.





GOVERNING FACTORS: *Sam Robison plays John Adams in the political musical "1776," about the founding of the United States.*
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Poor John Adams (Sam Robison) is frustrated with Congress. This sensation is one with which many people can sympathize, but for John Adams in 1776 it is personal. They will not even debate his proposal of independence from England as heard in "Sit Down, John!", sung by the other delegates from the colonies, including his fellow Massachusetts delegate John Hancock (Jim Bowling), president of the Congress. As both he and the audience are constantly reminded, as long as Adams proposes independence, it will go nowhere because he is disliked (looks like not much has changed in politics in the last 240 years). Lucky for Adams, Ben Franklin (Tony Rivenbark) is better at playing the game and is on the side of independence. In the song "The Lees of Old Virginia," Franklin hatches a plan to get the much-loved Southern delegate, Richard Henry Lee (Jason Aycock), to introduce the debate about independence to the Congress. It is a very fun song that showcases Aycock's wonderful dancing talent and all three of the performers' love of comedy; they are simply infectious.

Boasting aside, Lee does come through and with the motion introduced by someone outside of Massachusetts, debate begins in earnest. Hancock as president of the Congress casts the deciding vote and here Bowling flexes his Hancock muscles: We start to see multiple struggles—to be fair to all parties in the Congress—to not betray the cause of independence and try to think beyond the moment to the ramifications of their decisions. It is the counterbalance to the show: Though the audience watches with knowledge of hindsight, the actors onstage are tasked with creating real people who are muddling through decisions in the moment.

Perhaps what makes "1776" such a successful show is how Stone and Edwards don't place these discussions far away in the mist of time, but makes them relevant to life in America in the late 1960s (when the show debuted). More so, it's still relevant today. They use the specificity of 1776 to bridge the distance of time to look at the modern world. "Momma, Look Sharp"—the haunting song of a dying young soldier watching his mother search for his body—draws obvious parallels with Vietnam. Frankly, it still represents the endless state of conflict America seems to have embraced. Blaine Allen Mowrer sings it beautifully. Combined with his angelic face, he melted my heart.

"Molasses to Rum"—South Carolina delegate Edward Rutledge's (Jeff Phillips) indictment that the traders in the North are just as complicit in slave trade as the plantation owners of the South—is another moment that stopped my heart. Phillips is a big presence onstage—one impossible to ignore. It brings forth the stark realization that we are very much in this moment in our country, still struggling with long-term ramifications of what the song embodies. More so, that we are sitting geographically in North Carolina makes it all the more unsettling and a poignant moment of art pricking modern life.

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Every hero needs a villain to fight against. In this case the leader of the opposition to independence, John Dickinson (Jason Hatfield), is the object of struggle for John Adams. Dickinson wants reconciliation with England. Hatfield is a tall man whose charisma and determination push Dickinson to be a natural leader. In the minuet, "Cool, Cool, Considerate Men," he leads the other members of opposition in a number that evokes the rise of the modern conservative movement: "Most men with nothing would rather protect the possibility of becoming rich than face the reality of being poor." But everyone sees themselves as the hero in their own story, and Hatfield carefully plays Dickinson as such so well, I almost wanted to root for him.

In the meantime they have recruited Thomas Jefferson (Eric Johann) to draft the Declaration of Independence. Mind you, young Jefferson is pining for his wife, Martha (Mary Stewart Evans). When John and Ben meet her ("He Plays the Violin"), they are equally charmed. Johann captures the dichotomy of Jefferson well: a man who doesn't talk much but writes with an eloquence that echoed down the ages. A slave owner, he struggles with a belief in freedom for all people. Coupled with Aycock's Lee, they present a fun-loving, lusty image of the South in opposition to the cold, puritanical nature of Robison's John Adams.

If anything, Robison does a wonderful job showing us the dark hole a person can descend into when they have struggled for years toward a goal that becomes increasingly more difficult to achieve. How telling that like the rest of us in that position, he fails to notice his friends are laboring on his behalf? He is lonesome, misses his wife, Abigail (Amy Tucker Morgan), and seems to be perpetually taking two steps backward for every one forward. Robison is so believable in his stressed-out despair I wondered how he would make it through all of this. Were it not for the comedic foil of Franklin, the great spiderweb spinner of intrigue, he probably wouldn't.

Rivenbark is a delightful Ben Franklin and embodies Franklin's earthy, iconoclastic spirit that lifts the mood every time he is onstage. He's so three dimensional as Franklin that when he gets down to the tough work of talking delegates around to voting in favor of independence, his seriousness is just as believable as his antics.

"1776" remains one of my favorite musicals. Thank you to Opera House for reviving it at a time we need to remember our founders were mortals, flawed and like us trying their best with the limited information we all traverse this world holding. The entire ensemble make the show a delight to watch and work through questions we still struggle with. Their presence in the moment and concern about thoughtful response is a good reminder of the responsibility each of us bears while walking into the voting booth. It is a privilege to be able to participate in a discussion many laid down their lives that we might be here today and reflect upon where we have been and where we want to go as a nation.