

Revolutionary Gentleman

book, music and lyrics by Steven W. Rodgers
additional lyrics by Carolyn Tracy and Wendy Christopher

JULY 1801. LONDON, ENGLAND. THE HOME OF BENEDICT ARNOLD. Benedict Arnold, once the greatest general of the American Revolution, is now a feeble, broken man. Ghosts from his not-too-distant past wander through his room during his inglorious final moments on earth, condemning him for having betrayed his nation.

The general is now convinced he will go down in history as the most infamous traitor the world would ever know. A chill wind blows ominously through his room and it begins to snow. In his mind, he is now back in Colonial America, in the early years of the Revolution, where seemingly against all odds, General Arnold—resolute and patriotic—would strive at any cost, to bring freedom to a young, struggling nation. Benedict Arnold is so revered that George Washington is about to name him second-in-command of the Continental Army—his fervent dream—when Arnold is wounded in battle. Thus, instead, Washington temporarily appoints him military governor of Pennsylvania.

This, however, puts him on a collision course with the civil leader of the colony, Joseph Reed, the peevish President of the Philadelphia Council. Intensely jealous of Arnold, Reed, along with his sassy sidekick, Josephine, plot against him at every turn. They try to convince Washington that Arnold is a traitor, entertaining the English in his home and marrying Peggy Shippen, daughter of a loyalist judge. What's more, they add, during the English occupation, Peggy had had an affair with the young, dashing, British officer, John Andre. Washington will have none of the scandal, and Reed drums up charges on General Arnold so trivial as that he had used an old army wagon to bring home some new furniture, accusing him of “theft of government property.” Incredibly, General Arnold is found guilty, forcing Washington to re-think his plans to promote Arnold—now fully recovered from his injuries—to second-in-command. Arnold is devastated, and wonders why he should continue risking his life on the field of battle for the very people who are conspiring to defeat him.

Peggy and John are happy to see Ben’s change of heart, and they urge him, not to resign, but to accept the new position that Washington has offered—commander of the federal arsenal at West Point. That way, when the British “attack,” Ben can claim to be outnumbered, surrender the fort and turn Washington over to the British for trial, thereby effectively ending the war. Ben reluctantly agrees to go along with the scheme.

While John is secretly meeting with General Arnold, Americans attack John’s ship, and he is left to his own devices, traveling on foot through enemy territory—there he is captured *en route*, and General Arnold’s signed papers implicates *him* in the plot as well. Arnold discovers that Washington’s men are on their way to get him, but when he runs to tell his wife, she promptly faints in his arms. With seconds to spare, General Arnold lays her on the bed, and escapes through an open window. Only when he is safely aboard a British ship bound for New York, does he write Washington a letter, pleading on Peggy’s behalf, and asking Washington to send him the two-and-a-half weeks’ back pay he has coming.

When Washington arrives at the Arnolds' home, Peggy is relieved to discover that he views her merely as an unwitting pawn in her husband's conspiracy with the British. Her happiness is short-lived, however, when she discovers that John Andre has been captured, and is soon to be executed as a spy.

Arnold meanwhile, discovers that he is not to receive a fraction of the money that he had been promised. Even more devastating is the fact that none of the British soldiers will work under his command. He is a traitor, after all, they tell him. No one knows who he might turn his back on next. As the realization of his fate creeps ominously over him, the ghosts of his past return, and General Arnold comes to realize at last that no one will remember his as the greatest hero of the American Revolution.