



Theater Review: 1776

By L.A. Weekly Theater Critic Steven Leigh Morris

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GO 1776 Events of June and July in the American Continental Congress of 1776 are laid out in Peter Stone and Sherman Edwards' 1969 musical with droll wit that recalls Stan Freberg Presents the United States of America: The Early Years, Volume 1, a comic musical history for radio released in 1961. Firebrand John Adams (Bruce Ladd), wise old reprobate Ben Franklin (Larry Lederman, in a lovely, crusty turn) and Thomas Jefferson (Ben Hensely) are the centerpieces here for the saga of Adams' frustrated attempts to persuade a very reluctant congress to declare independence from Great Britain, while a Redcoat armada is en route to New York and General George Washington keeps sending despondent military dispatches from the field. The musical is a glorious dissection of democratic ineptitude, of the clash between self-interest and unity. Franklin finally pleads that Adams yield to South Carolina's Edward Rutledge's (Stephen Van Dorn) demand that the institution of slavery remain intact in the new nation, in exchange for revolution against Britain being endorsed by the entire Deep South. In the play, Jefferson says he's going to release all his slaves, to which Rutledge sneers in contempt, and so we get an easy template for the liberality of our Founding Fathers versus a stubborn, inhumane South. In fact, it was Rutledge who freed his slaves immediately after the congress depicted in this play, whereas Jefferson freed his slaves years later, only after his death (in his will), and only a small number of them. This is one instance where the truth is actually more interesting than the legend. There are some thin voices, but Richard Israel's staging of the fine ensemble is sprightly and tart, Allison Bibicoff's choreography comes filled with good humor, and Johanna Kent's musical direction has a tenderness that's just right. Crossley Theater, 1760 N. Gower St., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2:30 p.m.; thru March 16. (323) 462-8460 or www.actorsco-op.org. An Actors Co-op production. (Steven Leigh Morris)