

1776

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By Les Spindle

This Tony-winning 1969 musical is a stirring paean to patriotism, offering an intriguing portrait of the political wrangling preceding the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Sherman Edwards' fine score includes goofy vaudevillian turns and lovely ballads, and Peter Stone's libretto is a powerful ode to our nation's floundering founding fathers. As much a play as a musical, *1776* is abundant with rich characters, requiring accomplished actors. Despite a few uneven singing efforts, director Richard Israel's handsome-looking revival is consummately acted and **artfully staged**, working beautifully in this intimate venue.

The primary setting is the chamber and anteroom of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, between May and July 1776. While colony delegates quibble over mundane issues, John Adams of Massachusetts (Bruce Ladd) and Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania (Larry Lederman) face an uphill struggle in convincing their colleagues -- some apathetic, some self-serving -- to launch a revolutionary war against England. A committee is formed to draft the Declaration, and the contentious struggle to enable the birth of America commences.

Ladd offers a splendid characterization as an intensely driven statesman called "obnoxious and disliked" while fiercely pursuing compassionate policies on human rights. This is a highly bombastic role, and on opening night, Ladd's singing was compromised by intermittent hoarseness. Lederman is a droll and thoroughly captivating Franklin.

Tim Farmer is superb as the severely ailing Caesar Rodney. Bravura characterizations and **showstopping solos** come from Mark Kinsey Stephenson as the boisterous Richard Henry Lee, Stephen Van Dorn as ruthless Southern slave owner Edward Rutledge; and Matt Lutz as the Courier, delivering the galvanizing "Momma Look Sharp." Leslie Spencer Smith sings gorgeously and delivers a winning portrayal as Adams' lonely wife, Abigail. As libidinous Martha Jefferson, Erika Whalen is spirited, but she sometimes swallows lyrics in the rousing and slyly suggestive "He Plays the Violin."

The large ensemble is uniformly excellent, including standout work by Gus Corrado as the outspoken clerk, Ben Hensley as love-struck Thomas Jefferson, Michael Mulligan as fiery Irish delegate Thomas McKean, and Don Robb as the sage Stephen Hopkins. Music director Johanna Kent and a four-piece backstage combo serve the lovely score well, and **choreographer Allison Bibicoff's dances add zest to the proceedings**. Designs (Stephen Gifford's set, Lisa D. Katz's lighting, A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's costumes) are exemplary. The powerful document-signing tableau at the conclusion elicits a lump in the throat, richly earned in this heartfelt rendition.

... **and LA Times Critic's Pick !!!**

* *** Critic's Pick ***