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'1776'

Camelot production a fun-filled historical, political musical

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Camelot Theatre Company presents "1776," featuring David Gabriel as John Adams, top, Paul Jones as Benjamin Franklin, left, and Tyler Ward as Thomas Jefferson. Photo courtesy of Steve Sutfin

By Roberta Kent

For the Tidings

Posted: 2:00 AM June 26, 2012

Just in time for the Fourth of July, in the midst of the political jockeying of another presidential election year, Camelot Theatre gives us a rousing, rollicking production of the big Broadway musical "1776."

From the opening musical number, "For God's Sake, John, Sit Down," you know this is not going to be a reverential take on our Founding Fathers.

Back in politically tumultuous 1969, a young singer-songwriter named Sherman Edwards was obsessed with writing a musical about the creation of the Declaration of Independence.

Yeah, let's do a musical about a bunch of pompous white guys, locked up in a hot, fly-infested, Philadelphia meeting hall, trying to find a governing solution for 13 disparate regional units loosely knit together by being English and on the same continent.

But, of course, history is more complicated — and more interesting — than that. Even without taking the dramatic license that Edwards used to condense time, place and character, the arguments for and against the American colonies banding together and declaring independence from England are relevant to what brings us together and draws us apart as a nation today.

"1776," with its book by Peter Stone and Edwards' stirring music and lyrics, is a real-life look at the process — and a lot of fun besides.

Camelot's artistic director Livia Genise and her excellent cast and technical crew do a great job of bringing this off. "1776" is a grand piece of theater. There are 26-plus speaking roles with 13 musical numbers over seven scenes. Genise has the knack of casting the right actors for the major roles and using practically every other actor in the Rogue Valley for the supporting cast. There is a seven-piece orchestra, complete with violin, cello, piccolo, flute, trumpet and harpsichord, along with keyboard and percussion.

The three lead characters — all passionate about independence — are John Adams (David Gabriel), Benjamin Franklin (Paul R. Jones) and Thomas Jefferson (Tyler Ward). Their political maneuvers are opposed by the imperious royalist John Dickinson of Pennsylvania (Don Matthews) and the pro-slavery Edward Rutledge of South Carolina (Bob Jackson Miner), who see no reason to overturn the economic applectart.

Adams, as played by David Gabriel, is described as "obnoxious and disliked," a refrain repeated over and over. Gabriel does a grand job of offering Adams' commitment and passion, softened by scenes with his wife, Abigail (Presila Quinby). Their letters, filled with love, longing and the minutiae of family and farm life, are acted out in song, and they provide a welcome depth to Adams' character. Quinby, as always,

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gives an elegant and lyrical performance as Abigail, an equal match to Gabriel's complex Adams.

Jones is always amusing as Benjamin Franklin. Whether grimacing with gout, leering at Jefferson's young wife or slyly baiting Richard Henry Lee to bring over Virginia to independence (in a delightful turn by Heiland Hoff as the strutting aristocrat), Jones gives Franklin wit and intelligence. He is a pleasure to watch.

"1776" portrays Thomas Jefferson as young, awkward and newly married. It's probably not a historically accurate picture of the Jefferson of the time but it's an effective dramatic counterpoint to the sassier portrayals of Adams and Franklin. Ward is a relative newcomer to the Rogue Valley and to Camelot Theatre, and he is sweetly convincing as the long-suffering Jefferson, pining for his young wife (Kendra Taylor). And when the ravishing Taylor sings her slyly suggestive description of Jefferson's wooing ("He Plays the Violin"), we understand his dilemma.

The "villains" of "1776" are Dickinson and Rutledge. Firmly against independence, they are skillful at the political maneuvering to postpone even debate on the issue. (Ironically reminiscent of the filibuster tactics used effectively in today's Congress by the Republican Party.)

Matthews' Dickinson has a deliciously ironic number, doing a lock-step minuet with his other conservative, status quo, anti-independence colleagues ("Cool, Cool Considerate Men"), proclaiming "always to the right, never to the left." Matthews gives Dickinson a properly haughty demeanor, bullying his wavering colleagues to keep them in line.

Peter Wickliffe as the hapless courier from Gen. Washington is hauntingly poignant in his delivery of "Momma, Look Sharp," describing a dying soldier calling for his mother.

Miner, as Rutledge, nearly steals the second half of the show with his dramatic performance of "Molasses to Rum," reminding his New England brethren that they shouldn't be so sanctimonious about slavery since much of their shipping wealth is founded on the trade triangle of New England ships, African slaves and Caribbean molasses and rum.

Of course, we all know how it ended and the big finale to "1776" is the roll call of the signers to the Declaration, nicely punctuated in this production with video designer Brian O'Connor's slides of actual portraits of the men. O'Connor's additional slides of paintings of historic events offer satisfying commentary on the action onstage.

Don Zastoupil's spare set design of the meeting room at Independence Hall, Breena Cope's lovely period costumes and Virginia Carol Hudson's subtle wigs effectively add polish to the production.

Hmm. Let's review — the Continental Congress was given to partisan bickering, obstructionist tactics, filled with bluster and pointless oratory and always eager to go on vacation. Apparently, things haven't changed all that much. Hopefully, we can — like the Founding Fathers — find a way keep this country together.

Roberta Kent is a freelance writer living in Ashland. Reach her at rbkent@mind.net.

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