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CTC's '1776' finds fun in U.S. political theater

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By **Bill Varble**

for the Mail Tribune

It's the long, hot summer of 1776, and things don't look good. John Adams can't get the Continental Congress to approve a declaration of independence from England, George Washington is sending depressing messages about the military situation, and old Ben Franklin is generally being a pain in everybody's butt.

What's an a-birthing young nation to do? How about the minuet? Scoffing at firebrands and moderates both, conservatives, led in their opposition to American independence by John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, (played with withering hauteur by Don Matthews), sing a self-congratulatory paean to their implacable obstructionism, "Cool, Cool Considerate Men," and dance in lock-step.

Wince-worthy as it sounds, it is absurdly funny on the stage.

It's one of many such moments in Camelot Theatre's hugely entertaining revival of Peter Stone's and Sherman Edwards' 1969 musical "1776." The original show about (yes, really) the Declaration of Independence was a surprise smash on Broadway, even beating out "Hair" for the big New York theater awards that year.

It seems an unlikely, corn-pone subject for a musical, with that iconic document at its center and all those characters from a founding myth dear to grade-school history books. And some of your worst fears are wellfounded. Franklin, Adams and Thomas Jefferson do a song called "The Egg" that uses the image as a symbol for the new nation and speculate as to what kind of bird the egg will hatch into (quick, kill that metaphor!).

And there are groaner sex jokes. Lonely, young Thomas Jefferson's wife is brought in so that his creative juices will flow again, wink-wink, nudge-nudge, and he can write that declaration thing. The scene requires Kendra Taylor, the striking young singer playing Martha Jefferson, to sing a tune called "He Plays the Violin," a series of silly double entendres about her husband's foreplay techniques.

But as the elements of the show come together, a funny thing happens on the way to independence: The sausage-making of the political process gathers narrative momentum and becomes hugely entertaining. With all the silliness, the story takes us behind the grade-school stereotype of a homogeneous bunch of patriots acting in unison. While seeming to be just goofing around, it accurately if cartoonishly sketches the founders as an unruly assembly representing an olio of viewpoints.

David Gabriel, who is a lights-out singer, gives Adams an earnest obnoxiousness employed on behalf of his objective of independence. The equally passionate loyalty to the English crown of the antagonist, Dickinson, reminds us that maybe 1 American in 5 opposed the revolution — but we still want to jump up and smack him.

Paul Jones is an uncanny Benjamin Franklin, a pragmatic patriot who plays cooler head to the pushy Adams and isn't above a little deviousness to get what he wants. And he's funny. Suffering from gout, he interrupts an Adams diatribe to say, "Your voice is hurting my foot." When the deterioration of the troops' situation comes with lurid rumors of drinking and whoring, he makes an enthusiastic beeline for the door.

Tyler Ward is a long-suffering Jefferson whose amusing trios with Franklin and Adams manage to sound like barbershop harmonies. There are also the pro-slavery forces led by Edward Rutledge (Bob Jackson Miner), a motley assortment of shilly-shalliers and those worried about the convention's rum supply holding up, or just keeping the flies out.

Most of the songs are funny and move the plot, although you probably won't hum them in the shower. "Momma Look Sharp" is a moving elegy sung by a dead soldier (Peter Wickliffe).

In "Molasses to Rum," a fiery Miner delivers a show-stopping but chilling account of the slave trade as he pleads with the delegates to strike Jefferson's anti-slavery clause from the Declaration. The scene is historically unjustified but a helluva theatrical moment.

The handsome set and period costumes, by Don Zastoupil and Breena Cope, fit the tone of the show, an irony-free zone in which what satire there is comes from character. The spectacle of an assembly of Americans charged with leading but winding up at loggerheads seems at least as spot-on now as it did in 1969.

This is a big (26 actors, a seven-piece orchestra), strapping musical. There is a five-minute patch at the end that scraps momentum for anti-climax, but it's a sort of tribute and nobody's about to cut it. There were perhaps more than the usual number of opening-night line jitters. But the show makes three hours seem like half that time by pulling off the improbable feat of making not only history but politics fun.

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