



Theater review - '1776' brings history to vivid life

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By John Staton StarNews Staff

It was almost too hot to breathe in Wilmington last week. In other words, it was the perfect week to open "1776," the musical that's set during a Philadelphia heat wave and is about the hard-won creation of the Declaration of Independence.

Opera House Theatre Co. is staging a tight, compelling rendition of "1776" under the direction of Ray Kennedy at Thalian Hall through July 24. And while the top-notch cast can't get around a couple of lame songs that serve to date the 1969 show, the non-musical parts of the drama are very well-written. Everyone in the theater knows how this story ends, so it's impressive that the show is able to conjure some tension and suspense as it builds toward the end of a three-hour run time that feels closer to two.

The cast is led by an excellent Sam Robison as John Adams, who's determined to get the Continental Congress to consider the matter of independence from England. He's like the angry, insistent liberal on your Facebook feed, except there was no way to block anyone back in the 18th century.

At one point, when the compromise he's worked so hard to forge threatens to fall apart, Adams explodes -- "This is a revolution, dammit! We're going to have to offend someone!" -- and Robison makes his character's indignant impatience admirable.

Despite Adams' irascibility, Robison plays well with others and shares lovely duets ("Till Then" and "Yours, Yours, Yours") with the golden-voiced Amy Tucker-Morgan as Abigail Adams. He also shows an easy chemistry with Tony Rivenbark -- who gives Adams' sage ally Ben Franklin a sly, whipsmart likability -- and with the strong-voiced, well-cast Eric Johann, who imbues Declaration author Thomas Jefferson with a gentle, intelligently millennial sensibility.

Jason Hatfield's conservative Pennsylvania lawmaker John Dickinson proves a worthy adversary to Adams, and Hatfield expertly works his character's arc, from the smug assurance of the song "Cool, Cool Considerate Men" to an ending where he's taken aback by his own defeat.

The cast is universally strong, with Jim Bowling the picture of decency as John Hancock, John Markas sporting a fine Scottish accent as Col. Thomas McKean, Richard Bunting stealing scenes as the boozy Stephen Hopkins and Maxwell Paige showing great comic timing as New York abstainer Lewis Morris. Jeff Phillips as South Carolina's Edward Rutledge sings "Molasses to Rum" like a mesmerizing fever dream direct from left field, and the song gives body to the controversy over slavery that roiled the Continental Congress while serving as a reminder that Adams' bitter compromise would ensure the despicable institution would persist for nearly a century more.

Inspired by the success of Broadway smash "Hamilton," which mixes old-timey costumes with contemporary styles, in "1776" Kennedy blends modern haircuts with Selina and Juli Harvey's period costumes while taking on a "color-conscious" casting scheme that has African-American actors playing characters who were originally white. (One thing that doesn't change is the male-heavy cast. The only two female characters are Tucker-Morgan and Mary Stewart Evans, who as Martha Jefferson sings sweetly on "He Plays the Violin.")

The welcome updates serve to freshen "1776" but in some ways the show hasn't aged well. The lyrical symbolism of the "The Egg" is pretty clunky, and "The Lees of Old Virginia," delivered by a jaunty Jason Aycock as Richard Henry Lee, while intended to be a little ridiculous, would easily make any list of the most irritating Broadway tunes of all time.

Music director Lorene Walsh is plenty able, but with her keyboard stuck in harpsichord mode for much of the show the tunes can feel rather brittle when

the cast isn't singing in full throat (as on "For God's Sake, John, Sit Down," a highlight). Still, the music has its moments, none more powerful than Blaine Allen Mowrer's powerful delivery of the delicate "Momma, Look Sharp," which tells the story of a soldier's death that's as relevant today as when it was written to evoke the Vietnam War.

Terry Collins' set, with its vertical panels, gives a dynamic frame to the action, while Dallas LaFon's lighting shows plenty of nuance despite running into some glare issues against a window at the back of the set.

Probably the best thing "1776" does is to inspire curiosity and fascination -- about how our country was founded, who the founding fathers really were and how it all relates to today. It actually made me want to go back and read the Declaration of Independence for the first time in years, if that tells you anything.

Unlike the founding fathers, however, I will be reading the Declaration from the comfort of my air-conditioned home.

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