A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

1776
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Synopsis: 1776

This stirring musical begins on a sweltering day in Philadelphia, May 8, 1776. The Second Continental Congress is in session, and John Adams, the Massachusetts representative, is enumerating his grievances against King George III and lobbying for independence. The other delegates, already divisive and annoyed by his arguments, demand, in the song “Sit Down, John” that he be quiet.

Frustrated that his views have not prevailed Adams seeks out Benjamin Franklin, who is having his portrait painted. Franklin reminds Adams that no colony ever successfully broke away from its parent country. He also notes that because the members of the Congress dislike Adams he might find someone else to present the idea of independence.

Richard Henry Lee, a delegate from Virginia, arrives at Franklin’s request and offers to secure a proposal from the Virginia legislature himself. When his ability to do this is questioned, Lee explains that his illustrious family history makes him perfect for the job.

When Lee returns from Virginia with the proposal for independence the Congress is once again thrown into roiling debate. Some members, led by John Dickinson, oppose independence and favor simply petitioning George III with their grievances. Adams and Franklin lead the charge toward independence, arguing that it has been a full year since the bloody battles of Lexington and Concord and therefore too late to reconcile with England.

Finally, after much argument, the proposal for independence is put up for vote—with Dickinson’s stipulation that the vote must be unanimous. At this point Adams and Franklin suggest that a declaration be written, prior to the vote, which clearly details their goals. This also serves the purpose of delaying the decision while they attempt to gain more votes in favor of their cause Adams, knowing that he has few supporters in Congress, suggests that someone else write the declaration. Other members of the Declaration Committee pass the task of writing the declaration (with threats of physical force, if needed) to more popular and eloquent Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson accepts, but is soon frustrated by writer’s block and is unable to concentrate on completing the document. Adams and Franklin determine that Jefferson’s “problem” is that he misses his new bride, Martha, and is unable to focus. Adams arranges for Martha to join her husband in Philadelphia, and they celebrate their love in the song “He Plays the Violin.” Soon after her arrival Jefferson is able to complete the first draft of the document, which Adams and Franklin pronounce as a work of genius.

Congress, however, is quick to find numerous problems with the document. After much debate and frustration, Jefferson agrees to all of the recommended changes, but draws the line when Edward Rutledge of South Carolina passionately opposes the abolition of slavery. With half of the Congress threatening too walk out with Rutledge, Adams and Jefferson concede on the slavery issue and win back the two Carolinas.

After more debate the final vote is cast by James Wilson, who votes in favor not so much because of his own belief in the cause, but because he does not want to be remembered in history as “the man who prevented American independence.”

The play closes as one by one the delegates gather together to sign the Declaration of Independence. In the background, as the curtain falls, the Liberty Bell tolls loudly.
Characters: 1776

John Hancock: President of the 1776 Continental Congress, John Hancock, put the first and largest signature on the Declaration of Independence.

Dr. Josiah Bartlett: A New Hampshire delegate, Dr. Josiah Bartlett sides in favor of independence.

John Adams: A Massachusetts delegate, John Adams is the leading voice for separation from England and the Declaration of Independence. Unfortunately his tendency toward fiery rhetoric makes him generally disliked by other Congress members.

Stephen Hopkins: A Rhode Island delegate, Stephen Hopkins is given to indulgence in alcoholic beverages.

Roger Sherman: A Connecticut delegate, Roger Sherman sides in favor of independence and is on the committee to write the Declaration.

Lewis Morris: A New York delegate, Lewis Morris abstains from the original vote.

Robert Livingston: A New York delegate, Robert Livingston is a member of the committee assigned to write the Declaration.

Reverend John Witherspoon: A New Jersey delegate, the Reverend John Witherspoon, argues for, and wins, the inclusion of the Supreme Being in the Declaration.

Benjamin Franklin: A Pennsylvania delegate, Benjamin Franklin is urbane and cool-headed. His logic often prevails where the emotions of other fail. He and Adams lead the charge for independence.

John Dickinson: A Pennsylvania delegate, John Dickinson leads a group of Congress members who favor petitioning King George III with their grievances rather than declaring independence from England.

James Wilson: A Pennsylvania delegate, James Wilson casts the final vote to approve the Declaration, not because of his own belief in the cause, but because he does not want to be remembered in history as “the man who prevented American independence.”

Caesar Rodney: A Delaware delegate, Caesar Rodney works hard for independence, despite the fact that he is suffering from skin cancer.

Colonel Thomas McKean: A Delaware delegate, Colonel Thomas McKean is Scottish and very vocal.

George Read: A Delaware delegate, George Read is opposed to independence and sides with Dickinson.

Samuel Chase: A Maryland delegate, Samuel Chase always seems to be eating. He initially sides with Dickinson.

Richard Henry Lee: A Virginia delegate, Richard Henry Lee is selected to make the argument for independence to the Congress, as Adams is having little luck.

Thomas Jefferson: A Virginia delegate, Thomas Jefferson, in spite of his many protests, is selected to pen the Declaration of Independence.

Joseph Hewes: A North Carolina delegate, Joseph Hewes sides with Rutledge on the slavery issue, demanding the Declaration allow slavery.

Edward Rutledge: A South Carolina delegate, Edward Rutledge is opposed to the Declaration of Independence because of his passionate opposition to the document’s call for an end to slavery.

Dr. Lyman Hall: A Georgia delegate, Dr. Lyman Hall initially sides with Dickinson.

Charles Thompson: The secretary of the Congress.
Andrew McNair: The custodian and bell-ringer.
Abigail Adams: Wife of John Adams, her communications with John tell some of the story of the Declaration and much of the story of her and John’s love and life.
Martha Jefferson: The young and beautiful wife of Thomas Jefferson, Martha Jefferson is brought to Philadelphia to help dispel Jefferson’s writer’s block.
A Leather Apron: A leather worker.
A Painter: An artist who paints Benjamin Franklin’s portrait.
A Courier: A young messenger for Congress.

About the Playwrights
Sherman Edwards and Peter Stone
By Steve Yates
From Insights, 2003

Sherman Edwards, the composer and lyricist for 1776, was born in New York City in 1919. He was educated at both New York University and Cornell, where he was a history major. After a stint in the Air Force during World War II he served on the front lines of the public school system as a high school history teacher. During this time he also pursued a career as a songwriter and occasionally dabbled in acting. His interest in history, however, was what spurred him to research the idea for what eventually became the musical, 1776.

For several years Edwards tinkered with his idea of a musical comedy dealing with the behind the scenes aspects of the events leading to the creation of the Declaration of Independence. It was not until his fortieth birthday that he made the decision to leave his salaried position in academia to pursue the project full time.

For the next six years Edwards devoted himself to his project. As a songwriter, his only interest was in creating the songs for the show. Early on he realized that for the project to ever find its way to the stage he would need to find a playwright to flesh out the characters and story of the work. His quest for a librettist was met with continual rejection and frustration. Every writer he approached flatly rejected the idea of a musical depicting the creation and signing of the Declaration of Independence as patently absurd.

In spite of continuous rejection, discouragement, and a rapidly dwindling savings account, Edwards forged ahead. If no one would write the libretto for him, he would do it himself. Edwards spent the next several months researching the historical context of 1776. His historical data was culled from the Rare Manuscript Room of the New York Public Library, Pennsylvania Historical Societies’ libraries, and his own extensive personal library of American history. Five years later, Edwards emerged from his library with a manuscript for 1776 tucked under his arm. The story’s journey to the stage, though, had just begun.

For two more years, Edwards was met with rejection after rejection from skeptical producers. In addition to the same old arguments that he had heard years before—that the play could not possibly have any “modern” relevance or interest—the escalating Vietnam War had also thrown a wrench into the mix. Student protest movements and social unrest during the years of 1967 and 1968 had created a climate of political distrust and an atmosphere where the idea of patriotism was regarded by many as nothing more than a curious relic from a dead era. How could a story celebrating independence, patriotism, and the birth of such a now-troubled nation possibly succeed at the box office?

Producer Stuart Ostrow, however, caught the vision. He saw the spirit of rebellion and
anti-Establishment sentiment portrayed in 1776 as actually being perfectly suited to the troubled '60s and agreed to produce the show. Ostrow did feel that to be successful a more stage worthy version of Edwards' work would need to be written.

Once again a librettist was sought. Ostrow went to Peter Stone who, interestingly enough, had been approached many years before with the same task and had rejected it as undoable. This time Stone, caught up in Ostrow's enthusiasm and taken by Edwards's songs, saw that the times indeed had changed and perhaps now the time was indeed right.

He accepted the project and re-wrote the libretto.

Peter Stone may have been the perfect choice to be 1776's librettist. No stranger to the world of theatre, he was born in 1930 to the late film producer and writer John Stone. After earning his bachelors of art degree from Bard College in New York, and later his master's degree from Yale, he spent the next twelve years in France writing for stage, screen, and television.

By 1961, Stone had already breached the Broadway ramparts with his libretto of Kean, a musical based on a play by Jean-Paul Sartre about the nineteenth century American actor Edmund Kean. In 1962 he earned an Emmy for his work on the television series, The Defenders and in 1964 took home an Oscar for his screenplay, Father Goose.

The challenge of writing a historically-based work like 1776, according to Stone, "is to make it accurate and interesting; the truth and drama aren't necessarily compatible." ("Peter Stone's Declaration," Blake Green [Newsday, August 13, 1997], 8). Stone's task of creating a historically acceptable, yet dramatically satisfying, stage production was no doubt made at least somewhat easier by Edwards's "copious research into the various personalities" (Green, B10) of the play's characters. Admittedly, both authors took some minor liberties with certain aspects of the tale, but largely they stand by the historical veracity of the overall work. (The Penguin edition of 1776, A Musical Play [Penguin Books, Ltd., 1976] includes a more in-depth discussion by the authors on historical aspects of how they developed the story of the creation and signing of the Declaration of Independence in the absence of detailed transcripts of the actual proceedings.)

At last, after a long and convoluted journey, 1776 was pronounced complete and ready to hit the stage.

In initial pre-New York runs of 1776, audience turn-out was marginal and disappointing at best. No major stars in the cast and all of the other pitfalls predicted by skeptics seemed to indicate that 1776 would become just one more soon-to-be-forgotten musical. As it turned out, nothing could have been further from the truth.

The musical opened at the 46th Street Theatre on Broadway on March 16, 1969 to rave critical reviews and tremendous attendance. For over three years, 1776 packed the house--not only on Broadway, but also across the country when a touring company took the show on the road in April of 1970 to visit some of America's larger cities. Response was so overwhelmingly positive to the tour, that a second company was organized that September to tour the country's smaller cities.

After an impressive 1,217 performances, 1776 finally closed on Broadway on February 13, 1972. During its first season, the musical received the Tony and New York Drama Critics Circle awards for best musical. Additionally, Sherman Edwards was given a Tony Award for best music and lyrics.

A film version was later written by Stone and released in 1972. Like the stage version, it received enthusiastic critical praise. In celebration of the United States bicentennial, 1776 went on the road again, touring forty-six American cities between 1975 and 1976. Most
recently the musical enjoyed a successful revival--only slightly revised by Stone--at New York’s Roundabout Theatre in 1997.

Sadly, Sherman Edwards died in Manhattan of a heart attack on March 30, 1981, and was unable to see the revival of his most cherished work. He was 61. In addition to 1776, Edwards is remembered by the musical community for a dozen top-ten songs that he wrote, as well as numerous songs written for five Elvis Presley movies. He also worked on several television shows and other Broadway musicals.

Peter Stone continues to write for Broadway. His musical adaptation of Titanic, which first opened in 1997, was his fourteenth Broadway production. Other Broadway credits include the musicals My One and Only, Sugar, Two By Two, and his collaboration with Erich Maria Remarque on the play Full Circle. Stone is the author of more than two dozen feature films, including The Taking of Pelham 1-2-3, Mirage, Arabesque, Sweet Charity, Skin Game, Who’s Killing the Great Chefs of Europe? and most recently Just Cause. He has been president of the Dramatists Guild, the national society of playwrights, composers and lyricists, since 1981.
The Function of the Songs in 1776

By Christine Frezza
From Insights, 2003

A musical would be nothing without songs, people say, yet 1776 has a very strong story, the debate which led to the creation of the Declaration of Independence. One might think that music would be superfluous, but Sherman Edwards, composer and lyricist, has written music which comes from the same sources which inspired John Phillip Sousa and Aaron Copland, music with a recognizably frontier and patriotic flavor, and music which serves to enhance the story and, occasionally, to become part of the plot.

The first song, “Sit Down, John” pits John Adams against the Congress, showing the two forces in opposition by alternating Adams’s solo verses with a repeated chorus sung by the Congress, both insistent in their own way. The song cleverly and artistically takes care of the usually difficult task of the playwright—delivering an exposition necessary to explain the back-story and viewpoints of alternating forces, but relying on words, rather than action to get its message across. “Sit Down, John” gives the audience a protagonist with which they can sympathize since the soloist, John Adams, gets a story to sing, while the Congress is reduced to repeating the instruction “sit down.”

This first number segues immediately into “’Til Then,” sung by both John Adams and his wife, Abigail, counterpoising domestic longing against civic duty. This song will come back several times throughout the play to remind us that Adams is sacrificing his real life for American liberty. The song is brief, and quickly interrupted by “Sit Down, John” to drag Adams back to political necessities.

“But Mr. Adams,” written for the five men charged with creating a Declaration of Independence puts forth the idea that the document must be written convincingly enough so that the states agree to it unanimously. Three of the five committee members refuse to write it, singing in comic rhyme (for example, Connecticut and predicate) of their reasons, while John Adams, as chorus, reiterates as his excuse that he is “obnoxious and disliked.” Thomas Jefferson is the man, and his excuse of being newly-married is trumped by Adams who pleads his own longer separation from his wife. Jefferson’s reluctance is echoed by the shape of his verse, which exchanges the comic rhythm and tempo of the preceding members, and slows to a wistful lover’s lament, quickly capped by a reprise of the comic choral movement at the top.

When Adams and Franklin bring Jefferson’s wife to him in the hopes it will encourage his writing, the joy with which they greet each other inspires a full-length love-song from the Adamses, “Yours, Yours, Yours” to which “’Til Then” now becomes a coda. The “old” love of John and Abigail transforms next to the “new” love of “He Plays the Violin” sung primarily by Martha Jefferson, with small parts by Adams and Franklin—the one real dance number in the show.

The production takes a serious turn with “Momma Look Sharp,” a modal soldier’s lament, sung by the courier, an anguished reminder of what everyday people, soldiers and their relatives, will sacrifice for liberty, not only marital happiness, but life itself. The tempo is slow, the melody plaintive, a tragic lullaby, and the composer resists the temptation to build the song into the triumph of the Revolution, recognizing that national victory cannot always vanquish individual agony.
In Scene 6, the action is back in Philadelphia, as the three backers of the Declaration of Independence squabble over selecting the national bird. “The Egg” is a song of vigorous determination for the eagle (on Adams’s part) which will “crack the shell of the egg that England laid.” It is as much his wit and wordplay as his conviction which wins over Franklin and Jefferson to his choice. Faintly, the words of the Declaration can be heard for the first time.

Argument over the new Declaration reaches a climactic point with Rutledge’s singing of “Molasses to Rum” which is both a lament and an outburst of anger at the insertion of a clause abolishing the slave trade. He accuses the northern states of hypocrisy in their willingness to profit from the output of slaves while decrying the existence of slavery. Musically, “Molasses to Rum” is the most powerful song in the play; its savage, lyrical rocking motion, gives a feel of the lash, the ships carrying slaves. The melody line sounds like an auctioneer, and the change to a percussive accompaniment reflects the rapping of his gavel on the block.

John Adams’s reverie “Is Anybody There,” sung near the end of the show, expands a phrase in George Washington’s latest dispatch, and translates it to renewed commitment. The song builds to a paean of liberty “I see all nations free forevermore” and becomes the musical equivalent of the Declaration of Independence itself.

Wisely, the composer doesn’t try for a big musical ending in “Finale,” but underscores the singing of the Declaration with the ringing of the Liberty Bell, leaving the audience to reflect on the struggles and the sacrifices these Americans made to ensure our future.
1776:
Justice for John Adams
By August B. C. March
From Midsummer Magazine, 2003

At last—justice for John Adams!
He was our country’s first vice president and its second president who was resoundingly
defeated for re-election because he was the most hated man of his time. But now he is the
hero of 1776, the long-running New York musical hit being presented this summer at the
Utah Shakespeare Festival. After all, it was Adams who prodded the wavering Continental
Congress to the decision to declare the American colonies independent of England.

It was grudgingly acknowledged in those days of 1776 that Adams was the chief force
in getting the divided colonies to agree on independence and the primary force is get-
ting Thomas Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence. But even among those
Founding Fathers he was regarded as a bothersome man, a nag, and a bore. He could not
be ignored, however, and so he became vice president under Washington and then presi-
dent for one term until he was defeated for a second by his old comrade of 1776, Jefferson.
Infuriated, Adams left Washington without attending the inauguration of Jefferson—and he
never returned.

Peter Stone, author of the libretto for 1776 has not tried to cover up Adams’s personal
thorniness while making him the hero of his tale. In fact he has rather a bit of fun with
it. The first song in the show is a rousing chorus by assembled members of the Congress,
adjuring Adams to “Sit Down, John,” when he wants to make another speech insisting on
an end to dawdling over the question of independence.

Some months after the stirring events in Philadelphia, Adams wrote with understand-
able jealousy, “The whole history of this Revolution will be a lie, from beginning to end.”
He knew that Benjamin Franklin and George Washington would become figures of legend,
and that the histories would say “Franklin did this, Franklin did that, Franklin did some
other damned thing. . . . Franklin smote the ground and out sprang George Washington,
full grown and on his horse. . . . Franklin then electrified him with his miraculous light-
ning rod and the three of them—Franklin, Washington, and the horse—conducted the entire
Revolution by themselves.” Stone found those lines among Adams’s personal papers and let
his character speak them verbatim and with some irritation in 1776. The Franklin of the
play listens to him contentedly for a moment, contemplates this portrait of himself for pos-
terity, and smilingly responds “I like it.”

Adams felt particularly annoyed over the way all the huzzahs were going because it had
been he who originally proposed Washington as commander of the Colonial Army—as a
political gesture to bring lagging Virginia (Washington’s home colony) into a more aggres-
sive policy toward England.

In 1776 Adams is pictured as the fiery patriot who more than anyone else stirred the
colonies to independence. He is shown to have Franklin as an ally in this cause, an ally
more patient and more politically astute who must cool Adams off. At one point he says
“John, why don’t you give it up—you’re obnoxious and disliked,” and he persuades Adams
to let someone else less irritating to the Congress make the motion for independence. For
the sake of his cause and his emerging country, Adams agrees.
It is also interesting that in the musical it is Adams who, in admiration of Jefferson’s “happy talent for composition and remarkable felicity of expression,” insists that Jefferson should write the Declaration--against Jefferson’s wishes, since he is eager to go home to see his wife. Franklin fixes up that problem by arranging for Mrs. Jefferson to come to Philadelphia to keep her husband loving company.

Yet Adams and Jefferson, so aligned in 1776—in the musical and in history—became the most violent adversaries when Jefferson defeated Adams in 1800.

Vilified and defeated, Adams retreated to his home in Quincy, Massachusetts. But his unpopularity did not extend to his son, John Quincy Adams, who became the sixth president of the United States in 1824, the only instance, until just recently, of a son following the footsteps of a father to the Presidency.

Adamses have continued to be prominent in public life down to this day. John’s grandson, Charles Francis Adams, was the American ambassador to England during the difficult years of our Civil War, his great-grandson Henry Adams was the brilliant mediaevalist and author of The Education of Henry Adams, his great-great-grandson Charles Francis Adams II was the secretary of the navy in President Hoover’s cabinet, and others of this family have been called to responsible public service over the years.

The forebear of them all, John Adams, at last receives justice in 1776: he’s the hero of the show!