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# Life, liberty and the American musical: Delegates declare independence through song in Milburn Stone's "1776"

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The Founding Fathers come to life again in Milburn Stone Theatre's production of "1776."

The show, which begins this Friday and runs through June 30, is a musical based on the events surrounding the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It was written to celebrate the bicentennial of the United States and turned into a film in 1972.

The story centers on John Adam's fight with the Second Continental Congress to discuss independence.

Although most of the action takes place inside the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia, the story is also told through love letters between Adams and his wife, Abigail, and letters from George Washington, who writes from the frontlines of the Revolutionary War.

It is rare that community theaters are able to put on such a production because of the large male cast, said S. Lee Lewis, director of the show. Only two of the 27 characters are women.

There are also the period costumes and the musical calls for an orchestra.

“I never thought I would get to do it,” said Lewis, who first saw the film version of “1776” in his high school history class.

Milburn Stone is able to pull the production together due to a growing pool of local male talent and successful fundraising campaign, he said.

Lewis said he has a deep respect for the musical, so when directing the cast he decided to tell the story without putting his own twist on the show.

Cast members, who work around jobs to attend rehearsals, were also excited to be part of such a rarely done musical.

The chance to be in “1776” is such a rare opportunity that Ken Kemp, who plays John Adams, drives 88.5 miles to rehearsals from his home in Gaithersburg.

“I have waited a dozen years to do this part,” said Kemp, who, when not in the theater, works at his graphic design firm, Scriptoria.

Kemp described his character as focused and driven.

The musical opens with the song “Sit down, John,” where Adams encourages the Continental Congress to vote for independence.

The Continental Congress, however, begs for him to sit down and is more concerned with opening up a window to help them through a hot, Philadelphia summer.

The sets, costumes and orchestra provide a special experience for Milburn Stone patrons and performers.

Orchestras rarely accompany musicals nowadays because of the expense and availability of backtracks, but Milburn Stone staff decided “1776” was such a unique musical it deserved the extra touch.

To raise the money for the orchestra, Milburn Stone used a Kickstarter campaign, an online funding platform frequently used to raise money for the arts, for the first time. The fundraiser brought in \$3,062.

Another special touch on the musical is the set, which is donated from the Ford’s Theater in Washington, D.C. The Ford’s Theater put on their own production of “1776” in March.

The fundraiser and donated set also freed up money that could go toward costumes. The costumes – rich brocade, flowing skirts and wigs – all came from a Baltimore company specializing in opera costumes.

Having the costumes and set help enliven the characters on stage. The cast, which is smaller than the actual Continental Congress, has gotten to know each other by their characters, said Scott Mason, who portrays John Dickinson.

Dickinson is sometimes seen as the villain of the story because of his heated debates with Adams, said Mason, who works as an administrator at the University of Delaware. At one point, Adams and Dickinson begin sparring with their walking sticks.

Dickinson is only trying to show his perspective and feels strongly connected to his British heritage, Mason said.

Dickinson is a vocal character and makes his point known throughout the musical, which follows the events in Philadelphia from May 8 to July 4.

The performances fall at the perfect time of year, right between Flag Day and the Fourth of July. In fact, Mason spends every Fourth watching the film version of "1776."

So, with two weekends full of "1776" performances and months of rehearsals, will he still watch it this year?

Of course, he said.

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