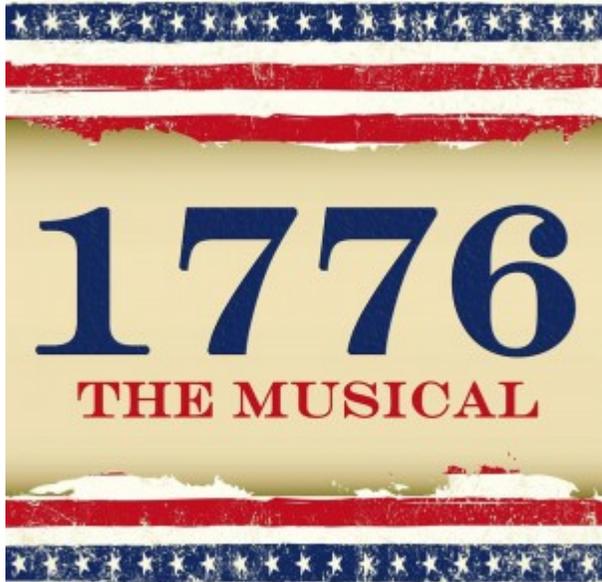


# 1776: You'll Laugh, You'll Cry, You'll Learn Something



With the presidential race heating up, the rhetoric and insults are reaching a fever pitch. But, Ocean State Theatre Company's current offering, the musical *1776*, charmingly shows that such bickering and heated exchanges are nothing new to American politics.

Detailing our founding fathers' efforts to achieve independence from the British crown, OSTC, under the direction of managing producer Joel Kipper, presents a smart, clever and laugh-out-loud look at one of the seminal events in American history. And, despite its comedic overtones, the production is also very informative and educational, a must-see for history buffs or theater lovers.

With a cast of 21 men, two women and three teens, Kipper maintains a nice pace, with characters always coming and going, but the quick and witty dialogue keeps the audience engaged. On several occasions, audience members call out their own responses to the back-and-forth occurring on stage. They also clap enthusiastically when members of the Continental Congress come to an agreement on some hotly contested issues.

While the musical relies on none of the sappy patriotism and patriotic music one might expect, it does surprisingly feature quite a bit of sexual innuendo and double-entendres, but it is delivered in a very tasteful and clever manner, often serving as a precursor to compromise.

Early in the production, Abigail Adams, proving once again that behind every great man is a great woman, expertly threatens to deny her husband John of his manly needs unless he sees to her womanly needs - sewing needles for all the ladies! John ultimately relents and thus the art of striking the right deal through compromise highlights the true genius of our founding fathers. There were several RI politicians in attendance on opening night, most notably Lt. Governor McKee — let's hope they were taking notes!

The performances from top to bottom are fabulous, not an easy task with such a large cast, but the

musical pretty much revolves around John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Dickinson, Edward Rutledge and Richard Henry Lee, who debate some of those most contentious issues. It is fascinating to watch the divide between the north and south regarding the country's quest for independence.

The south, led by Dickinson from Pennsylvania, fears the American army cannot defeat the British army, and seeking independence will be their death warrant. Whereas the north, dogmatically represented by Franklin and Adams, makes passionate pleas for sovereignty, though Adams is continually reminded by other members of congress that he is "obnoxious" and disliked. In fact, the musical opens with the funny number, "For God's Sake, John, Sit Down," a request repeated throughout the show.

Rutledge, from South Carolina, also opposes independence due to the north's insistence on abolishing slavery in the Declaration of Independence. Played by Joe Depietro, he delivers a deliciously chilling "Molasses To Rum" pointing out the north's hypocritical views on slavery. Depietro shines in several pivotal scenes that help pave the way for the Declaration's signing.

As Adams and Franklin, Lou Ursone and Marc S. Cartier serve as congress's Abott and Costello. But the two are perfectly suited for another, using humor and intelligence to propel their agenda. There are many priceless exchanges between them. While trying to persuade Thomas Jefferson to author the Declaration, Jefferson abruptly leaves to be with his wife to which a shocked Adams asks, "They're going to [do it] in the middle of the afternoon?" Franklin dryly replies, "Not everybody is from Boston!" a nod toward the city's puritanical nature.

OSTC favorite Christopher Swan presents a very convincing Dickinson as part of Pennsylvania's fractured delegation (with Franklin and James Wilson in favor of independence). He certainly has the best singing voice among the men, leading a very cool and calculated "Cool, Cool, Considerate Men." This being one of two very impressive ensemble musical numbers. Later, Cartier, Ursone and Roger Reed (Jefferson) combine for a delightful "The Egg," arguing over whether the dove, eagle or turkey should be the national bird.

One of the musical's most stirring moments occurs just before intermission when teen actor Grant Whitney delivers a haunting "Momma Lock Sharp," a piece recalling the horrors of war. There were very few dry eyes in the near capacity house when the lights came up.

But Alison Mahoney (Abigail Adams) far away possesses the show's most alluring singing voice displaying remarkable range and control in "Yours, Yours, Yours," with Ursone struggling to keep pace, and again in a fine solo number, "Compliments."

Ethan Paulini provides much of the early comedy as a somewhat flamboyant Richard Henry Lee in "The Lees of Old Virginia," a funny romp where he continually emphasizes the -ly (pronouncing it "leeeee") at the end of every word. He is also pretty nifty with a hand whip.

As the congressional secretary, Andrew McNair, Patrick Mark Saunders has many fine moments delivering some of the musical's funniest lines in a dry, deadpan manner.

And, do not fear, for RI is well represented in the Continental Congress by Stephen Hopkins, played hilariously by Tom Gleadow. While other congressional members debate the heady issue of independence, Hopkins appears far more concerned with where his next cup of rum is coming from!

*OSTC's production of 1776 runs through March 13 at their Jefferson Boulevard theater. For tickets or*

*additional information, visit [oceanstatetheatre.org](http://oceanstatetheatre.org).*