

SVCT's "1776" is a view of a courageous move for freedom

by Camille Bounds | May 4, 2019 [Published online May 4, 2019](#)



The Second Continental Congress debates American Independence in South Valley Civic Theatre's "1776: The Musical," which runs until May 12. Photo Courtesy Elizabeth Mandel

South Valley Civic Theatre's latest production, "1776: the Musical" opens with John Adams (well played by Peter Mandel) spouting off with frustrated indignation that "one useless man is called a disgrace, two are called a law firm- and three or more became a Congress." From that point on we are transported to a hot sticky, fly ridden State Hall now known as Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where the second Continental Congress is debating whether to declare independence from England.

Intellectual and diplomatic Benjamin Franklin (Jon Reed) and an obnoxious John Adams convince a reluctant Thomas Jefferson (Michael Lee Lund) to write the Declaration. As we all know the rest is "history." These brave enlightened men gave us our freedom while giving up their families, their lives, fortunes and properties with their signature on the Declaration of Independence, the historic document we are trying to somehow keep in place today.

Colleen Blanchard directs this huge cast, all who are on stage for most of the performance. Not an easy job, which she handled with a fine aptitude. Terry Sodergren leads a well coordinated orchestra. Songs

were few and far between that usually brought a point home. Chorography was humorously slipped in here and there with the cast delivering clever coordinated routines by Christine Carrillo. I haven't noted individuals, since the cast is huge and all are super in their roles.

The last song at the end of the first act is "Momma, Look Sharp" and it's sung by an exhausted, depressed courier gave a deeply touching moment.

Sherman Edwards created the music and lyrics with the book by Peter Stone. It opened on Broadway in March of 1960 and won five Tony nominations winning three, which included the Tony for Best Musical. It was made into a movie in 1972 and was revived on Broadway in 1997.

SVCT's "1776" is entertaining and gives us moments of thoughts as to how close are we to those politically agitated old days today.

'1776' captures suspenseful time in history

By Morgan Hill Times Staff - April 30, 2019

<https://www.morganhilltimes.com/2019/04/30/1776-captures-suspenseful-time-in-history/?fbclid=IwAR2IVvdm8ghPuSWSUMOFJYvgK9oUzxr93SvNUh0zEhf3CJclvXblATOQ8>



Photo: Elizabeth Mandel

The monster hit musical “Hamilton” has spurred interest across a wide swath of the American public in the earliest days of the republic. “1776,” a musical by Sherman Edwards and Peter Stone, precedes “Hamilton” by several decades — it premiered on Broadway in 1969 — but is a worthy vehicle for refreshing one’s memories of the Founding Fathers.

In this case, it’s John Adams at the forefront as the Second Congressional Congress tries to bring representatives from the 13 colonies into agreement on declaring independence from the king. It’s a rocky, uphill road as Adams, the “obnoxious and disliked” delegate from Massachusetts, hectors, arm-twists and harangues his fellow delegates toward a Declaration of Independence.

One of the show's tricks is that, even though we all know how things turned out, it's able to sustain suspense. Will the southern colonies secede at the get-go? Will New York ever vote at all? Will the absent General George Washington win a battle?

South Valley Civic Theatre reprises a production last presented in 2006, and even calls up some of its 2006 cast for the same roles, most notably Peter Mandel as Adams, Tami Piper as Abigail Adams, and the rangy Michael Lund as red-haired Thomas Jefferson. Jon Reed was John Hancock in 2006 and is an avuncular Benjamin Franklin this time around.

Mandel frets and fusses over the snail's pace of the delegates, his frustration amply demonstrated in "Piddle, Twiddle," in contrast to his relationship to his wife, Abigail. The two communicated only by letter during the months of the Second Congressional Congress, but their loving relationship shines through as the two of them sing some lovely duets together, coming close but never touching. Piper has a pretty voice and a smile to match.

Lund's Jefferson is frustrated in a different direction from the crawl of the political process. He too is unwillingly separated from his wife, Martha (Sierra Shirley-Reuter), but his pain is more acute because they are newlyweds. A scene in which the Jeffersons reunite for a weekend is quite funny.

A particular bright spot in the production, directed by Colleen Blanchard, is the number of gifted younger men in the cast. Travis Blanchard as Pennsylvania delegate John Dickinson and Daniel McDonald as South Carolina delegate Edward Rutledge bring plenty of fresh energy to their roles. And Gannon Janisch's beautifully sung report from the battlefield, "Momma Look Sharp," brings into stark relief what's going on outside the congressional chambers.

Music director Terry Sodergren ably leads the pit orchestra, and the cast is nicely costumed by Kathy Tom in powdered wigs, breeches and elaborate coats. The action plays out mostly in the congressional chambers, designed by Blanchard and Larry Tom.

"1776" focuses neatly on what happens when the fervency of revolution gives way to the hard and frustrating work of actual government. Times change, and yet some things remain constant.

"1776, The Musical." Music and lyrics by Sherman Edwards, book by Peter Stone. South Valley Civic Theatre. Reviewed April 26. Additional performances May 3-5 and 10-12 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse, 17090 Monterey Road, Morgan Hill. www.svct.org; 408-842-7469.

This article was written by Susan L. Rife for South Valley Magazine.



South Valley Civic Theatre's '1776' is a musical journey through history

by Marty Cheek | Apr 26, 2019 | [Gilroy Life](#)

America's founding story has message for today's world



Photo courtesy Elizabeth Mandel

Before there was "Hamilton," there was "1776."

Like the hip-hop musical that's now packing in New York City theater-goers, "1776" was considered by critics a longshot when it premiered a half century ago. Who would have ever thought back in March 1969 Broadway audiences would want to see a story of the Founding Fathers of America debating through song and dance the writing and signing of the Declaration of Independence? It turned out plenty of people did. The musical "1776" ran for 1,217 performances in its original run, gathering three Tony Awards including "Best Musical."

The South Valley Civic Theatre opened "1776" April 26 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse as part of its 50th-anniversary year season. Local residents who catch the show might wish to focus on the

gentleman on the stage wearing a bleach-white wig and carrying a silver-tipped cane who sits at the Pennsylvania delegates table between Ben Franklin and John Dickinson. That would be yours truly playing the small but pivotal role of Judge James Wilson.

One Saturday morning a couple of months ago, at the encouragement of several friends I tried out for the role of Dr. Lyman Hall, a delegate from Georgia in "1776." Hall's balanced habit of looking at both sides of an issue seemed to fit my character. At the audition, the musical's director Colleen Blanchard asked me to read lines spoken by Judge Wilson at the climax of the story when it's uncertain where the vote for independence might go. Despite an initial reluctance to take on the character of Wilson, I found myself agreeing to play this part. Thus began the journey of many nightly rehearsals where I've been practicing my lines, attempting to sing thanks to the patient instruction of vocal director Terry Sodergren, and minueting on stage along with the prim and proper conservative delegates to "Cool, Cool Considerate Men" (choreographed by the talented Christine Carrillo.)

It was in my high school years when I first saw the film version of "1776" on TV. It changed my perspective of how to view our nation's story. American history isn't about memorizing dates and the signing of parchment carrying documentation no one bothers to read anymore.



Photo courtesy Elizabeth Mandel

"1776" showed me history is about people. It tells the story of the flesh and blood humans who engage in the drama of their age to change the world. After watching the film, whenever I felt bored of the teacher's droning in my U.S. history class, I would step in my imagination into the world those leaders inhabited. Through the magic of my mind's time machine, I discussed with historic figures the dilemmas of their day. I might find myself chatting with John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin, debating the long-shot odds of the colonies winning a revolutionary war with Britain, the world's mightiest military power. Or I might converse with President Abraham Lincoln, seeing him carry the heavy weight of the Civil War's dead for a noble cause of ending slavery.



Photo courtesy Elizabeth Mandel

The theme that marches throughout American history is the pursuit of freedom for all. We've come a long way with our nation's quest for liberty. We still have far to go. And theater and film can help us better understand the people who have come before us and truly appreciate their struggles. But beware of taking theater as the literal truth. Sherman Edwards and Peter Stone who developed the show "1776" took some dramatic license with the facts and the development of the characters. The most obvious is that a theater stage would not have been able to practically hold all 56

delegates who were present at the Second Continental Congress that contentious summer in Philadelphia. The delegates are reduced to less than half that number, with many becoming composites of several historic figures.

Despite the liberties taken, the show can serve as a launching point for more exploration of the humanity of these astonishing men — and women (Abigail Adams and Martha Jefferson come into the story in short scenes) — who play parts in the American origin story. In researching the character of James Wilson, I found a man of incredible intellect and imagination who rarely is mentioned in the history books and yet played a pivotal role in our nation’s founding. Wilson later played a role in the creation of the U.S. Constitution, promoting the radical idea of popular sovereignty, exemplified by the three bold words of that legal document: “We The People...”



Photo courtesy Elizabeth Mandel

I encourage South Valley families to bring their middle-school and high-school aged teens to see history come alive in “1776.” My hope is some of the themes of the show might ignite conversation on the political issues we face today.

The SVCT’s production of “1776” is a fun way to discover our nation’s history and get a glimpse of the humanity of many of the men and women who shaped the document that gave birth to our nation — including “wimpy Wilson,” played by yours truly.

Details

What: "1776: The Musical"

When: 8 p.m., Friday, May 3 and May 10; 8 p.m. Saturday, May 5 and May 11; and 2:30 p.m. Sunday, May 5 and May 12

Where: Morgan Hill Community Playhouse

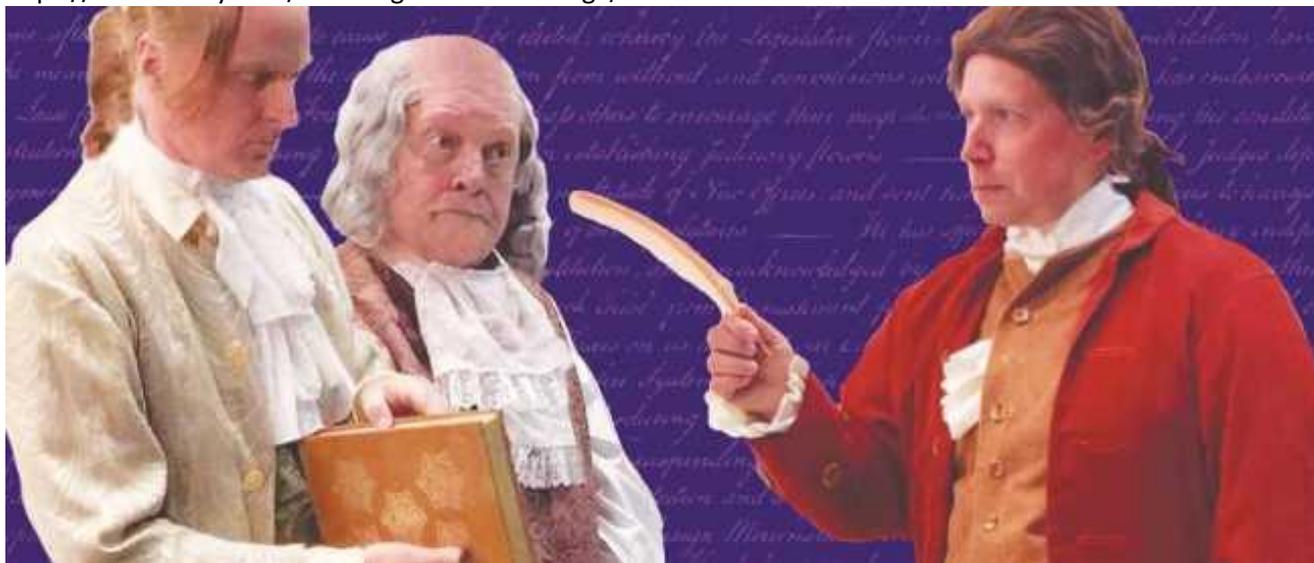
Tickets: www.svct.org

South Valley

Founding Fathers on stage

South Valley Civic Theater presents award-winning musical

<https://southvalley.com/founding-fathers-on-stage/>



BUILDING A NATION Michael Lund (left) as Thomas Jefferson, Jon Reed as Benjamin Franklin and Peter Mandel as John Adams star in South Valley Civic Theater's 1776.

South Valley Civic Theater last presented the musical *1776*, about the politically tricky process of writing the Declaration of Independence, in 2006.

Then came Lin-Manuel Miranda's huge Broadway hit, *Hamilton*.

But rather than divert attention from the 1969 musical, with music and lyrics by Sherman Edwards and book by Peter Stone, *Hamilton* seems to have sparked more interest in all things Founding Fathers.

"This show was one of Miranda's inspirations," said Kathy Tom, who is producing the show as part of SVCT's 50th anniversary season. "He loved this show. He felt if someone could write about the entire Declaration of Independence, why not about one life?"

1776, which won three Tony Awards, including Best Musical, will open April 26 for a three-weekend run in Morgan Hill. Two performances for area Title I schools are also planned.

Peter Mandel stars as John Adams, Jon Reed as Benjamin Franklin and Michael Lund as Thomas Jefferson. All three appeared in the 2006 production.

“It’s the only show where I’ve felt a chill (of emotion) at the end,” said Reed, who plays Franklin, the most senior of the Founding Fathers at age 70. “So many things during the Revolution that could have gone a little bit differently,” he says, might have led to a different outcome at the Second Continental Congress.

And even knowing how it turned out, audiences sometimes sit on the edge of their seats, said Tom.

For Mandel, Reed and Lund, the passage of more than a decade since the last production has given them a chance to study their characters more thoroughly. Recent biographies of the Founding Fathers have allowed actors to take deeper dives into the Founders’ lives and motivations.

“We all talk about what was the person like,” Lund said.

His character, the red-haired and shy Jefferson, is the most elusive.

“No one’s ever been able to nail that guy down,” he said.

“The other element is, Adams can be played very one-dimensionally,” Mandel said. “The running joke is that Adams was obnoxious and disliked. But he had a very loving relationship with his wife, a very loving relationship with his kids. He’s an interesting person.”

The show is historically instructive, in that it highlights the disagreements, arguments and compromises necessary to the Declaration of Independence, which ultimately was signed by 12 of the 13 colonies (New York abstained).

“They found their way through it,” said Mandel, who sees parallels between the struggles of the Founders and the current political polarization. “Hopefully we can get back to that.”

In fact, when *1776* opened in 1969, the nation was deep in turmoil over the Vietnam War, civil rights, women’s rights and Woodstock.

“It is an amazing musical,” Mandel said. “It’s been one of my favorites since childhood. I think people will come and enjoy it wonderfully.”

1776 runs April 26-May 12 at South Valley Civic Theatre, Morgan Hill Community Playhouse, 17090 Monterey Rd, Morgan Hill. Tickets \$16-\$25. (408) 842-7469; www.svct.org.