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STAGE VIEW

STAGE VIEW; Making the Founding Fathers Sing and Dance

By Barry Singer

TAKE AWAY ITS MUSIC, ADMIRERS have suggested, and "1776" would still be one terrific dramatic disquisition on the Founding Fathers and their Declaration of Independence.

True enough. But the obverse is even more impressive. Take away the Founding Fathers and the historical detail, and "1776" remains an object lesson in the nearly forgotten art of fashioning a well-written musical.

The point is easy to overlook as "1776" defies the odds on Broadway yet again. On Wednesday, a Roundabout Theater Company revival that opened in August to unanimous critical praise reopens at the Gershwin Theater, directed by Scott Ellis and starring Pat Hingle as Franklin and Brent Spiner as Adams.

Twenty-eight years have passed since this unlikely musical's first go-round at the height of (and very much in the face of) the 1960's. "How, pray, do you get a musical" out of the signing of the Declaration, wondered Walter Kerr in 1969, as he nevertheless urged New York Times readers to see "1776" "instantly." It was easy then to lose sight of the show's musical-theater artistry in the unexpected richness of its patriotic subject.

It is just as easy now to overlook the craftsmanship of "1776." The book, music and lyric writing are of such superior quality that, on the page, even Disney's majestically capering critters, to say nothing of the sinking keels and cruising street lowlifes by which Broadway achievement is measured today, hardly merit comparison.

How does one write a musical of such ingeniousness? By taking the time, the show's history suggests, and truly wanting to. For Sherman Edwards, the composer, lyricist and instigator, "1776" was a first. So it has always seemed as if he and his creation materialized out of nowhere in 1969 to conquer Broadway. That the author spent nearly 10 years writing and rewriting "1776" puts to rest only part of this misimpression.

Edwards was, in fact, a Tin Pan Alley veteran who had absorbed the formulas of songwriting technique, even in its waning years, that the Alley song industry thrived on.

A skilled pianist, he also evinced impressive jazz roots, having worked early on with Roy Eldridge and Benny Goodman, among others. Edwards had also been an accompanist and arranger. He had written hits ("Wonderful! Wonderful!") for Johnny Mathis and even film scores for Elvis Presley ("Kid Galahad," "Flaming Star" and "G.I. Blues"). Musically, he had put in his time.

But Edwards, once a high school history teacher in New York City, was also a passionate student of American history. The idea for a musical about the second Continental Congress seems to have consumed him for some time before he finally decided, on his 40th birthday, to really commit to it. He approached a number of prospective librettists, including a screenwriter turned musical book writer named Peter Stone. All rejected the project out of hand.

Because of its weighty subject and setting, a reliance on the spoken word and notable lack of chorines, "1776" has always seemed unconnected to Broadway musical-theater tradition. Yet another misconception, as it turns out. For who proves to have been the show's principal behind-the-scenes champion during Sherman Edwards's long, lonely march? Only the most masterful Broadway musical-theater insider of them all: Frank Loesser, creator of "Guys and Dolls," "The Most Happy Fella" and "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying," among many other shows.

"FRANK CALLED ME ONE DAY," recalled Flora Roberts, the longtime agent to a host of Broadway musical-theater legends, including Stephen Sondheim and, following Loesser's call, Sherman Edwards. " 'Flora,' he said, 'for two years now I've held an option on the most uncommercial musical you've ever seen. And I cannot, for the life of me, figure out what to do with it. Tomorrow, I'm sending you the guy who wrote it. Do something for him, for God's sake.' "

For Peter Stone, Frank Loesser was also something of a catalyst in his reintroduction to "1776." "I studied at the feet of Frank Loesser," Mr. Stone said.

"Frank Loesser knew everything there was to know about musicals and one of the things he would say was: 'Level. Level is everything in a musical, when everybody is on the same level -- composer, director, actors, audience -- the show will work. When they're not, I don't care who's involved, it just won't.'

Mr. Stone continued: "In February of 1968, I got a call from Stuart Ostrow, a young producer who had started his life in the theater working for Frank. 'Please come down and listen to this score,' Stuart said to me. 'I think you'll like it.'

"This wasn't the first time Stuart had called me about this particular show and, honestly, I was sick of the calls. But I said O.K. And I went down to a little office in the Paramount Building, where I found this most improbable man, quite stocky and very gruff, very few social niceties about him, not rude but very direct. Sherman Edwards. Who then sat down and played the opening song of '1776' -- 'Sit down, John, sit down, John, for God's sake, John, sit down!' -- with very little art in it, very rough. And the moment I heard it I knew exactly what the show was. A level was established: a kind of disrespectful affection.

"They weren't cardboard, these Founding Fathers, they were going to be real people. And I knew exactly what I had to do."

It would take just about a year. Edwards had written 26 songs; by opening night they would be winnowed to 10, plus one composed during previews out of town -- an unusually compact score for a musical.

Within each song, Edwards's characterizations were so strong and clear, his dramatic sense so sure, his lyric writing so polished, his research so meticulous that, Mr. Stone said, he was able to use them as a guide to the characters' humanity, borrowing plot lines and even material for entire scenes from the songs -- a reversal of standard musical-theater practice in which librettos typically get plundered for suitable song matter.

"I had never before worked first from a completed score," he observed. "And I never did again."

Though Mr. Stone would write the books for a number of Broadway musicals, including that of the current "Titanic," Sherman Edwards, who died in 1981 at the age of 61, would complete only one Broadway show. But that one went on to win three Tony Awards, including best musical.

The ins and outs of the second Continental Congress did prove a fine metaphor for the art of musical-theater collaboration.

A gathering of disparate personalities, all certain of their individual points of view, who finally unite, almost to their own amazement, for a cause greater than themselves. A crazy definition of democracy, celebrated. A perfect subject for a musical.

Photos: FATHER FIGURES Brent Spiner, standing left, as John Adams and Pat Hingle, seated center with cane, as Benjamin Franklin in the Roundabout Theater Company revival of "1776" moving to the Gershwin Theater, where it reopens on Wednesday. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times); THE INSTIGATOR Sherman Edwards, who developed "1776," in 1969. (Ben Ross)(pg. 6); PATRIOTS Howard da Silva, left, and William Daniels in 1969 in the original production of "1776," now in a revival on Broadway. (Martha Swope/Time Inc.)(pg. 8)