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'1776' - De**bunker's** View of History

By WALTER LAZENBY

CHARLESTON — In the spirit of the late Sixties, when they wrote, Peter Stone and Sheldon Edwards undoubtedly intended to "tell it like it was" in their musical "1776," currently playing at Eastern and continuing next week-end.

Clearly, they took a debunker's view of the events leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, in the manner of G.B. Shaw presenting Julius Caesar as a tired executive or John Osborne interpreting Martin Luther's struggles with conscience and the Pope in terms of his constipation.

Admittedly, they wanted to show the vanities and vagaries,

the foibles and fears of the men caught up in historic debate over American independence, as well as the economic and philosophic differences between the states and their pride

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in their individual heritages.

To an extent they succeeded. They considerably humanized such idealistically venerated patriots as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. They reminded us that

there were flies in the too-hot debate chambers, that rum was consumed on the premises, that delegates succumbed to various calls of nature, that there was open petty squabbling, that arm-twisting and maneuvering went on behind the scenes, and that issues were not always decided on a high level of philosophical contemplation.

And they managed occasionally to turn out bits of genuinely witty dialogue in exchanges between Franklin, Adams, and John Dickinson (the latter played sturdily by Steve Griffin).

But surely the conventions of musical comedy sometimes prevailed over the original conception and stereotypical

notions entered into character portrayals, partially destroying the effect.

For instance, in presenting Richard Henry Lee (played with farcical abandon by B.J. Heft) as an utter buffoon, didn't they fall victims to the Senator Claghorn stereotype? Didn't certain details in the presentation of John Adams creep in because Bostonians have come to be known as exceedingly proper? Aren't characters like Andrew McNair included purely for theatrical effect, i.e. cheap-shot laughter? Isn't the drum-roll accompanying references to George Washington needless satire?

The music seems to me not in the least memorable, though it was certainly wellperformed

by the orchestra under Delbert Simon's direction. Yet one song, "Melasses to Rum," has a significant dramatic value which was ably conveyed by Steve Zehr as Rutledge.

Before mentioning the gratifying aspects of the local production I might as well register my disappointment that two of the University Theatre's six major shows of the year should focus on the same character, John Adams.

As the Adams of "1776" James P. Kleckner maturely accepts the challenge of this change of pace (after McMurphy in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and Conrad Birdie in "Bye, Bye, Birdie") and turns in a vigorous, convincing performance. He is

seconded by Hillary Nicholson's accomplished singing and acting as Abigail.

The other woman's role, that of Martha Jefferson, receives a charming interpretation from Patsy Hayes; but perhaps "powerful" is a better adjective than "charming" to describe her voice.

Richard Schneider, nearly a look-alike for Benjamin Franklin, handles his role with aplomb.

In fact, the show is surprisingly well-cast, considering that it requires twenty-five males, most of whom symbolize the far greater number of delegates who sweated through a certain summer in Philadelphia and actually signed the Declaration.



James Kleckner as John Adams.