

Graham Northrup is John Adams in ACT's '1776'

News [FOLLOW NEWS](#) | November 4, 2010

Stewart Oksenhorn
The Aspen Times
Aspen, CO Colorado



Rustin Gudim/The Aspen TimesGraham Northrup stars as John Adams in Aspen Community Theatre's production of "1776."
ALL |

ASPEN – Graham Northrup has witnessed the power of argument – even when the arguments in question involve trivial matters, become needlessly contentious, and bring out our nastier sides.

As a teenager in Littleton, Colo., Northrup had one such argument with his mother. He doesn't recall the point of contention – it was silly, he said – but his reaction was a bit severe. "She said, 'You're so dramatic, you should join a drama class,'" Northrup reflected. He did just that: As soon as he could, Northrup, then a freshman at Littleton High School, tried out for the Cole Porter musical "Anything Goes." He landed the role of the steward on an ocean liner.

The part had three lines – which was plenty to hook Northrup into a life centered around the stage. Though he took a detour for several years, earning a master's in instructional technology and working two years in that field, Northrup is now back in the theater. Early this year he moved to the Roaring Fork Valley, to become director of education and outreach for Theatre Aspen. This past summer, the 34-year-old made his local debut, appearing in Theatre Aspen's musical revue, "Defying Gravity."

Northrup's latest role is one that demonstrates again, quite dramatically, the power of argument. He stars as John Adams in Aspen Community Theatre's production of "1776," Sherman Edwards' musical about the founding of the United States. Boiled down to its essence, "1776" – which earned the Tony Award for best musical when it opened on Broadway, in 1969 – is one long, drawn-out argument, played out over a month against the backdrop of a broiling Philadelphia summer. The issue: whether the 13 American colonies should declare their independence from Britain and its monarch at the time, King George.

The main agitator is the lawyer from Massachusetts, Adams. The musical focuses primarily on Adams as he cajoles, strategizes, bluffs and manipulates his fellow members of the Continental Congress to vote for American independence. Such behavior does not make Adams a popular figure; the musical's opening number, and most recognizable song, is "Sit Down, John," in which the Congress agrees

on one thing: that Adams should sit down and shut up. But Adams has none of it: hours later (in stage time) and a month later (in real time), he is still standing and shouting.

“He gets to be the thorn in everyone’s side in pushing for independence,” Northrup said. “It’s something he believes in strongly, and he’s committed himself to it. When people are saying, ‘It’s too late, there’s no chance,’ he keeps using that word – commitment.”

In the end – and I trust I’m not spoiling the ending here – Adams’ effort, and incidental obnoxiousness, is rewarded. The Declaration of Independence – written, reluctantly, by Thomas Jefferson, only after being bossed around by Adams – is unanimously adopted by the 13 colonies, and the U.S.A. is born. (Adams would become the country’s second president.)

Given the current state of affairs in the U.S., and perhaps most especially in its Congress, “1776” seems to focus on a timely historical moment. Congress is faulted for being stagnant and small-minded, unable to accomplish anything of significance as its members are polarized and fixated on inconsequential matters. “1776” serves as a reminder that outsized passions and personalities, like those exhibited by Adams, are sometimes necessary to kick-start a stalled undertaking.

“Often in politics today, there’s extreme rhetoric on many sides,” Northrup said. “But it’s these extreme positions that make us think about the compromises that need to be made to move forward on something.”

Northrup points to the second song in “1776,” “Piddle, Twiddle and Resolve,” which illustrates what Adams is up against, and why he needs to be so impassioned. “These indecisive grenadiers of Philadelphia, they can’t decide on what is right or wrong/ ... I’m convinced the only purpose this congress ever had/ Was to gather here specifically to drive John Adams mad!” he sings of the Continental Congress’ obsession with such matters as matching uniforms and testing the quality of a factory’s yeast.

“John Adams indicts this Congress as people who will twiddle their thumbs while a war is going on. They talk about things of little importance,” Northrup said. “Congress now has one of the lowest approval ratings ever. You should never get your education from a Broadway musical. But this does tell you, it takes people who are passionate and people who are willing to put their heads together and work for a solution. And compromise.”

What makes “1776” worthy of being on stage – and not a story relegated only to history books – are the other sides of Adams, and what he does in those moments when he is not arguing. In the final vote on independence, Adams triumphs not so much because of his strident rhetoric, but because he knows when to back off. The yea vote on independence is achieved only after Adams agrees to delete from the Declaration of Independence a section about the abolition of slavery. It is a subject dear to Adams, but he eventually recognizes, with no small amount of anguish, that democracy is neither an efficient nor perfect process. And it is certainly not a winner-take-all game.

“That’s the whole premise of the show – not only that it takes passion to get things done. He has to overcome his own personality drawbacks, parts of his character that are less than desirable,” Northrup said (adding that his own research of the real-life Adams revealed a person who was actually highly respected by the Congress).

Rounding out the on-stage Adams is abundant humor. “1776” actually plays out as more historical comedy than historical drama, with Benjamin Franklin – played by Aspen Community Theatre veteran Jeff James-Schlepp – getting most of the laugh lines, and Congress populated by drunks, egomaniacs, wise-crackers and people indifferent to the cause of independence entirely. When the statesmen use their ability for rhetoric toward humor, the language can be quite funny.

Adams is further fleshed out by an awareness of just how much of a pain in the neck he can be. The action in Philadelphia occasionally cuts away to scenes between Adams and his wife, Abigail (Julie Maniscalschi, one of the few women in a male-dominated show), that center around their letters to each other.

“It’s one of the most touching moments. When everything is falling apart – all those against independence walk out, and even those in favor are losing faith in the cause – he writes to Abigail: ‘Why am I like this? Why is this happening?’” Northrup said. “And her responses give him a second wind to go forward and continue despite the seemingly insurmountable odds. It’s a neat moment in the play, a turning point in his actions. After that, he’s a little more humble. He makes compromises that he’s loathe to make, but he makes them to move the process forward.”

••••

That bit part as a high school kid in “Anything Goes” convinced Northrup that his place was the stage. By his senior year he had gone from being an anonymous steward to starring as Nathan Detroit in a production of “Guys and Dolls.” As an undergrad at Brigham Young University, he studied theater education – “to teach other kids the joy of theater, the benefits you get in all facets of life,” he said.

But then Northrup made his own compromise, and earned a master’s in instructional technology from Utah State. For two years after that, he worked at designing Internet-based educational programs. But he kept a foot in theater, directing and appearing in community projects in San Antonio.

While directing an original Christmas show, “Our Star,” he had a pivotal experience. The production was a nightmare come true: The music for the finale wasn’t written until three days before opening night, a lead actress sprained her ankle, and the production problems piled up one on top of the other.

“Just crazy,” Northrup recalled. “I was laying awake one night, thinking about all these issues – and I realized I loved it. I realized I wanted to get back into it, because it’s my calling in life.”

Northrup went to school for a second master’s, this one a master’s in fine art, in directing, from Baylor University. He also ran the theater department at Waco High School, in Texas. Wanting to have experience with a professional company, he applied for the job at Theatre Aspen.

Northrup doesn’t appear to have much of the haranguing quality of John Adams. Married, and the father of four daughters, he comes across as reflective and moderate. Still he sees a bit of the stage version of Adams in himself.

“Not that I’m a passionate firebrand,” he said. “But he believes in something strongly, and wants to accomplish it. He’s not sure he can pull it off, but with his family and friends, he can do it. I identify with that.”

••••

Aspen Community Theatre’s production of “1776” runs through Nov. 14 at the Wheeler Opera House. Evening performances are Friday and Saturday, Nov. 5-6, and Thursday through Saturday, Nov. 11-13. Matinee performances are Sundays, Nov. 7 and 14. Tickets for the Sunday, Nov. 7 matinee are free for grade-school children.

The musical is directed by Pat Holloran and produced by Jody Hecht and Rita Hunter. Additional production staff are musical director/conductor David Dyer, scenic designer Tom Ward, costume designer Kathleen Albert, lighting designer Loren Wilder and sound designer Gordon Wilder.

In addition to Graham Northrup, the cast features Julie Maniscalchi as Abigail Adams, Jeff James-Schlepp as Benjamin Franklin, Brian Keleher as Thomas Jefferson, Gary Daniel as John Dickinson, Mike Monroney as Richard Henry Lee, Scott MacCracken as Edward Rutledge, Kim Nuzzo as John Hancock, Franz Alderfer as Charles Thomson and Luke Seamans at the Courier.

Rounding out the cast are Jeff Bestic, Wayne Ethridge, Andy Godfrey, Anthony Hall, Jerome Hatem, Bill Hodges, Ken Johnson, John Keleher, Warren Klug, Oskar Okicic, Ned Sullivan, Jim True and Tripp Watts.

stewart@aspentimes.com

Support Local Journalism

Readers around Aspen and Snowmass Village make the Aspen Times' work possible. Your financial contribution supports our efforts to deliver quality, locally relevant journalism.

Now more than ever, your support is critical to help us keep our community informed about the evolving coronavirus pandemic and the impact it is having locally. Every contribution, however large or small, will make a difference.

Each donation will be used exclusively for the development and creation of increased news coverage.

DONATE

For tax deductible donations, [click here](#).

