

# The time is right for '1776'

## Musical can 'remind people what this country is all about'

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By [Christopher Blank](#) ([Contact](#))

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There's nothing like a contentious presidential election to turn regular Americans into quarterback historians, lobbing the wisdom of the forefathers in whichever direction will score points for the team.

And that, declares executive producer Jackie Nichols, is why Circuit Playhouse is opening its season with the great American musical, "1776."



Rory Dale

The "1776" cast has Megan Stein (Martha Jefferson), Michael Detroit (John Adams) and Dave Landis (Ben Franklin).

"We want to remind people what this country is all about," he said when the season was announced.

The 1969 musical takes place in Philadelphia as a motley assembly of wealthy, educated, white men -- a.k.a. Congress -- debate the decision to "solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States...."

Director Robert Hetherington, head of the University of Memphis theater department, says that while the musical is, for the most part, historically accurate, it dispels the notion that the founding of our country was an Enlightenment love story.

"Everyone in the audience comes in knowing the ending," he says. "But halfway through the show, you start to wonder if they're going to pull it off. It's a real nail biter. By the end of the show, you don't think they're actually going to sign the Declaration of Independence."

The pace of Congress hasn't changed much since 1776. Nor have the conditions under which the government operates. Hetherington sees similarities between then and now, including so-called "culture wars."

"We're still debating the economy, taxes and race in the middle of a very ugly war," he said. "In this play, the third rail is the issue of slavery. It nearly derails the country being born. I would argue that the most divisive issue today is abortion. It comes up in every election."

Since "1776" debuted, it has sparked discussions about the founding fathers' intentions. Some people may take exception to the idea that liberal minds incited the Revolution.

President Richard Nixon, reportedly a fan of "1776," notoriously intervened in the release of the film adaptation in 1972. He told studio head Jack Warner to cut the musical number "Cool, Cool Considerate Men," which remains in the stage version.

The song contains the lyric: "To the right, ever to the right/ Never to the left, forever to the right."

"We don't know why Nixon didn't like the song," Hetherington said. "But remember, it was written as the Vietnam War was ramping up."

The director says that some lines of dialogue sound like they were written for 2008.

As Congress debates the language of the Declaration, a conservative legislator says, "That clause has got to go, we live in times of terror."

Ben Franklin replies with his famous quote, "They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety."

"1776" has resonated for years with Shelby County Commissioner Steve Mulroy, a former civil rights lawyer and current U of M law professor. He watches the film every July 4 with his family.

Mulroy jumped at the chance to be in the production. He's playing Lyman Hall, a pro-slavery Congressman from the South.

"On a personal level, I think that playing against type can be good for the soul," he joked.

He added that timing makes this production a valuable civics lesson.

"The show asks, how can we unite as a country? The logrolling and horse-trading that goes on now was happening in 1776. These guys were dealing with the same issues -- liberty versus security -- which is something that tends to come up a lot when you teach Constitutional law."

**-- Christopher Blank: 529-2305**

**PREVIEW**

**"1776"**

Through Oct. 19 at Circuit Playhouse. Shows are 7:30 Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m Sundays. Tickets are \$15-\$30. Call 726-4656.