

# '1776' cast is equal to the historic challenge

by Peter Filichia/The Star-Ledger  
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Photography by WESTURA Kevin Melendez and Stephanie Regina portray John and Abigail Adams in New Jersey Youth Theatre's production of "1776" in Newark. **1776. Where:** New Jersey Youth Theatre, Victoria Theater, New Jersey Performing Arts Center, 1 Center St., Newark. **When:** Friday at 1 and 7 p.m., Saturday at 7 p.m., Sunday at 2 p.m.

Here's the annual miracle that **Cynthia Meryl** brings to the Victoria Theatre in Newark.

Each summer since 1998, Meryl, the artistic director of the **New Jersey Youth Theatre**, has staged a classic musical at the intimate playhouse in the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. Though she had astonishing success two years ago with "Ragtime" and delivered a mesmerizing "Carousel" last July, this year she raised her personal bar by choosing "1776."

Casting the two female roles in the 1969 Tony winner wouldn't be a problem: Dozens of girls and women are found in any amateur theater group. High school boys and collegiate men, however, are usually in short supply. So how could Meryl hope to fill no fewer than 25 male roles? What's more, most of the characters are middle-aged men, and some are senior citizens. Is there any way young people ages 14 to 24

could pull this off?

Almost without exception, the cast is first-rate. They sing Sherman Edwards' score with brio and clarity. Better still, they bring passion to Peter Stone's book, arguably the best in the history of musical theater.

After all, an audience comes in knowing that the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4 -- so how much suspense can there be in wondering if the Continental Congress will ratify it? But Stone establishes that the 13 colonies must be unanimous if they're to split from England. Yet, on July 1, with 72 hours to go, only six colonies are in favor of revolution. More to the point, delegates from Pennsylvania and Delaware aren't budging an iota in their resolve to stay loyal to King George III.

Kevin Melendez is a dynamic John Adams, unapologetically showing his single-mindedness. His big number, "Is Anybody There?," is structured to be interrupted, to prevent applause. At Sunday's matinee, the audience forced the show to stop so he could be rewarded with well-earned handclaps.

Christopher Georgetti offers a peck of folk wisdom as Benjamin Franklin, and, as Thomas Jefferson, Robert Kalman suavely exhibits mens sana in corpore sano (sound mind in a sound body). Matthew Robertson manages to make the cocksure Richard Henry Lee endearing, while Eli Rose gives Thomas McKean a spot-on Scottish accent. As John Hancock, Shabazz Green conveys an authority as large as his character's famous signature.

Among the naysayers, Shayne Kennon has a smooth delivery as Edward Rutledge, and maneuvers easily through the score's most demanding song. Joseph Christiansen offers haughty elegance as Pennsylvania delegate John Dickinson, the show's biggest villain (at least from the American perspective).

And the women? Jennifer Kujawski has the better soprano as Martha Jefferson, but Stephanie Regina has great warmth as Abigail Adams.

This "1776" may be a little late for a Fourth of July celebration, but such a winning production would be welcome any day of the year.

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