

"1776": Commemorating September 11 Through Time Travel

Written by Jill Walsh

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Ryan Riewerts thought the best way to mark the one-year anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks would be to travel 226 years back in time. Not really, of course. But he wanted to recognize and celebrate the beginning of America's freedom as a country, and to relate that experience to the uniting of Americans in response to the events of last September 11. He decided the closest thing to time travel would be to use the medium of theatre, two local drama groups, and a musical called *1776*. A Riewerts-directed production of that play is scheduled for September 11 through 14 at Davenport's North High School.

1776 is a period piece that explores American life on the eve of the Declaration of Independence. But it's not just a bunch of old white guys sitting around discussing politics and such – though that does take up a good portion of the first few scenes. Rather, the show is an exploration of how the question of independence affected relationships, the lives of America's political leaders, and their families. Much like the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the independence movement of 1776 prompted Americans to appreciate the freedom their country represented.

On stage are some familiar personalities from history classes – a young Thomas Jefferson, John and Abigail Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and others who represent the colonial Congress. But this musical is more exciting than a typical history class because it gives the audience a chance to see these characters come to life and interact with each other.

The musical seems a natural choice for a tribute to America, but Riewerts said during an interview that his love for *1776* dates back to his sixth-grade year, during a field trip to Washington, D.C. "I bought the soundtrack from the musical after we had toured colonial Virginia and D.C.," he said. "Being in the places where our country's independence had begun was so wonderfully overwhelming that I immediately fell in love with this music, because it represents the incredible efforts people put forth to finally gain an entire country's independence from Britain."

The music is powerful, as well as passionate and funny. But hearing the music isn't enough; Riewerts decided the story had to be told on stage. "I wanted to give voices to September 11, to show audiences why we're free – where we originated. The way the play talks about

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independence and shows the intense struggle we sometimes take for granted today – those are things I feel passionate about, the actors feel passionate about, and we want the audience to feel the same way.”

To stage such an elaborate production, Riewerts turned to two local theatre groups: FONZ and Ghostlight.

Ghostlight Theatre originated in 1995, through the ambitions of Jeff Ashcraft and Jason Gabriel. The creators’ goal was semi-professional theatre – to be able to pay actors, directors, and designers whenever possible. Even though the men who gave the group its start have left the area, Ghostlight continues to present musicals and plays, such as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Godspell*, and most recently Steve Martin’s *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*.

College students Jason Holden and Riewerts started FONZ in 1996. FONZ, like Ghostlight, wanted to give theatre opportunities to younger and inexperienced people. And this version of *1776* does include some fresh talent. Riewerts, for example, has never directed a semi-professional show, and a few of the actors are still high-schoolers.

But just because there are some new faces doesn’t mean the show doesn’t live up to professional-theatre standards in the QC area. From what I saw of the first three scenes at the dress rehearsal on Friday night, the large cast must have had quite the costume designer, because all the lace, tights, and three-corner hats add nicely to the professional quality of the show as a whole. The set is just as impressive; the large pillars look like they’re straight out of early colonial America. And the acting has a professional sheen, too. The performers are businesslike, passionate, and effective, yet there’s a light, easygoing quality to the acting style.

I like the storyline of *1776* because it gives the audience a wonderful sense of life that can’t be captured in textbooks and lecture halls. The history of our country is much more involved than we usually care to think about; in the midst of the revolution, the men in Congress were not just concerned with writing a Declaration of Independence but also thinking of loved ones.

For example, Thomas Jefferson (played by a fiery young Tristan Tapscott) is discouraged by the duty of writing the Declaration, because his original plan had been to meet his young bride at their home in Virginia. And John Adams (Mark McGinn) writes home to his wife in a sentimental song about the day he will finally return home. These touches make the characters easier to empathize with.

1776 opens beautifully, with a full-cast musical number that introduces a spirited John Adams, who is constantly harping about immediate independence. Yet many of the older members of Congress are content with separate colonies remaining separate, and with leaving the larger issue of independence alone.

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Most of the moments that awed me involved musical numbers, in which the actors are accompanied by a full orchestra. The music emphasizes the power of the subject matter and the passion the characters are expressing.

In relation to the events of September, *1776* works, too. This show, among many other events that will mark the one-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks, should give its audience a renewed appreciation of the independence and freedom that Americans enjoy.

1776 is sometimes slow, but it is above all things forceful and passionate. It should be an effective reminder of the struggles our country's founders endured.

Ghostlight and FONZ theatre groups will present 1776 on September 11 for a price of \$17.76. All proceeds for the September 11 show benefit the American Red Cross. For performances September 12 through 14, tickets are \$12 for adults and \$10 for students and seniors. Shows are presented at in the auditorium of Davenport North High School. Pre-show events including local political leaders will begin at 7:15 each night; the show starts at 7:30.