

COLUMBUS DISPATCH
COLUMBUS, OH.
PM CIRC. 299,881

OCT-16-97

For a chance to play Adams, Stefano jumped back onstage

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

John Stefano is too busy to perform often. Only a few musicals attract him enough to justify a break from his demanding schedule as chairman of Otterbein College's Theater Department.

"I perform in musicals only once every four or five years," said Stefano, who came to Columbus and his post in 1992.

Stefano's central Ohio debut as an actor-singer will be in the guest Equity role of founding father John Adams in *1776*. Although he acted earlier this year — in Stuart Pimsler Dance & Theatre's *The History of Before* — his last significant role came in *Murder Ordained*, a CBS miniseries in 1987.

"I feel like I was born to play this role," Stefano said. "I fell in love with *1776* the first time I heard it, and have always wanted to play John Adams.

Otterbein begins its 91st season tonight with the musical, by author Peter Stone and composer-lyricist Sherman Edwards. Stone and Edwards won the 1969 Tony for their portrayal of events leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

"It's a reasonably accurate representation of a period in history that saw the beginnings of democracy in this country," Stefano said.

Stefano, 51, will play Adams at 41. "A good characterization has much less to do with the makeup you wear than with how characters relate to one another," he said.

Until he began researching the pivotal role, Stefano knew more about Thomas Jefferson than Adams. "Jefferson was certainly one of the driving forces behind the writing of the Declaration of Independence, but Adams played an important role, too," Stefano said.

He said Adams was "obnoxious and disliked" and

"obsessed with independence" but the musical builds sympathy for him. "Adams had a great sense of humor and a deep love relationship with his wife."

As part of his research, Stefano read many of the hundreds of letters that Adams and his wife, Abigail, wrote to each other. Their correspondence began when they first met in Quincy, Mass. He was in his early 20s; she was a teen-ager.

The history is serious, but many of the songs are humorous. Adams "takes God to task" for the politics of Congress in *Piddle Twiddle and Resolve*, and Adams is the butt of an extended joke in the opening number, *Sit Down, John*.

With a Broadway revival that opened recently to rave reviews, *1776* is receiving renewed attention.

Although much of the musical is accurate, some dramatic license is taken, Stefano said. "Overall, *1776* captures the spirit of the time."

He said the musical makes the reason for the Declaration clear: "The founding fathers wrote a statement of principles, based on English history, to explain to the rest of the world why they had to separate from the mother country."

As a theater professor, Stefano's credo is that theater can entertain and educate. He believes *1776* does both well.

"It offers some great lessons about how human beings have to come together to make momentous decisions. There have to be compromises, but there also has to be drive and will.

"We sit around and complain about our government all the time, but would we rather go back to the Egyptian pharaohs, who made all the decisions, or live under Mao or Stalin? Ours is a noisy form of government, where people get angry at each other, but it's how we muddled through as a country."



John Stefano

Acting is no sweat

Compared with directing, John Stefano finds acting a relative relief.

"For once, I get to be irresponsible onstage while Ed Vaughan directs."

At Otterbein College, Stefano teaches acting, theater history and arts management; he also directs plays and musicals.

For Stefano, an offstage bonus of playing John Adams in *1776* has been the forging of deeper relationships with his students.

"I've been free and playful in rehearsals with them, and so have they with me," Stefano said.

He has "a lot of experience to share about what it takes to work on a role, and what you need to bring to rehearsal. They get to see me work and sweat."

Controversy grows over role of Guest Equity Artists

This weekend, during Otterbein's homecoming festivities, I ran into one of my favorite professors. We had a nice chat; updated one another about the going-ons-on. When I told her that I was to review "1776" for the *Tan and Cardinal*, she expelled a big sigh, and gave me a somewhat disgusted look. She liked the show, thought that it was well done, but had one complaint.

"Why is there suddenly this trend to bring in guest artists for parts that students could play just as well?" Hmm...it's an interesting question.

As I thought about my own stance on the matter, I began weighing the different arguments. In the case of "1776," the chairperson of the theater department, John Stefano, played the central character, John Adams. This was a monumental event for theater students as we have never seen Stefano perform before, unless you count his numerous renditions of Hamlet's soliloquy in "Introduction to Acting." It was a trial by fire for him and we were all anxious to see the result.

On the other hand, there is Professor Ed Vaughan, whom has starred or co-starred in many Otterbein shows. Our audiences love to see Vaughan

on stage, and the department often bows to that demand.

Are the roles so difficult that a student would not give as professional a performance?

One of the points the professor made was that it is beneficial to audience members to watch students grow and excel over time.

Sometimes larger parts are given to students. For example, Atticus Finch in "To Kill a Mockingbird" was played by Sam Jaeger, a sophomore at the time. In "Sweet Charity," Katherine Smart played the title role, and quite well, I might add. Audiences will always talk about watching Jaeger and Smart early in their careers.

One of the major highlights of working with guest artists is the experience of working with people who are currently earning a living in theater. Guest Equity actor Phil Kilbourne, who played Polonius in last year's "Hamlet," was not only a fine performer, but a great role model for the rest of the cast and crew. He will be returning this year to direct "The Miser" and many students are excited about the

experience ahead.

Sometimes, though, the experience is not as positive, and the decision to bring one person or another becomes the subject of Otterbein lore for many years.

This summer, Otterbein alumnus Tim Gregory was hired to play Valmont in "Les Liaisons Dangereuses." He was given the script in March, yet he had not memorized his lines by June, and five days before opening night, he quit the show. His work in rehearsals had been rumored to be terrible, and his work ethic was lacking. What example does this set for students?

The upside to that story is that instead we were fortunate enough to work with Vincent O'Neill, artistic director and founder of The Irish Classical Theatre in Buffalo, N.Y. He was great for the part, easy to work with, friendly and interested in the students of the company. It was too bad that the department had not found him earlier in the process!

The one major criticism that I had about "1776" and the casting of Stefano was that the show was, at times, imbalanced. Student cast members are just that: students. Many of

them did not have the stage presence or confidence of their elder cast mate. His diction, presence and character was so strong that few of the others could appear to be on the same level.

What this leads to is the fact that audience members and *The Columbus Dispatch* critics tend to forget this is a training program. No matter how professional our productions are, we are still vulnerable to the results of experimentation.

When we keep using guest artists and professors in shows, we are opening our program to criticism that is usually reserved for more experienced companies.

I'm not saying the theatre department is not professional. But if the focus is placed on the polished product, few will give credit to the process.

One can equate this situation to that of a school football team. If the team loses a game, the fans will not always see the improvement of individual players.

I am not really sure where my vote would be cast. I have enjoyed working with many guest artists and have cursed others. It is a matter that only the theatre faculty and students could answer.



JENNIE
KEPLAR

From
the
Mezzanine

Arts

EFS BRIEFS BRIE

- The Campus Programming Board will sponsor "Horror Movie Night," when they show the movie "Fright Night" in the Campus Center Oct. 31, Halloween, at 9 p.m. Students arriving in costume will win a prize.

- The Westerville Civic Symphony, directed by Peter Stafford Wilson, will perform in Cowan Hall on Nov. 1 at 8 p.m.

- The Otterbein Cardinal Marching Band will play selections from this year's halftime shows in Cowan Hall at 3 p.m. on Nov. 2.

- The Otterbein Artist Series will present jazz artists Cleo Laine and John Dankworth on Nov. 6 at 7:30 p.m. in Cowan Hall. Tickets are free to students with an i.d. Call Ext. 1600 for more information.

- The Tuba Shop Quartet featuring Harvey Phillips will perform at 8 p.m. on Nov. 7 in the Battelle Arts Center. Music professor Gary Tirey will host the event.

Otterbein's spirited '1776' celebrates gridlock of congresses past

By Scott Phillips
For The Dispatch

Congress is a messy institution, run by committee, built on compromise and often thoroughly ineffectual. Otterbein College Theatre's production of *1776*, which opened last night, provides at least one valuable history lesson: Politics hasn't changed much in 200 years.

Set in the chambers of the Continental Congress, *1776* chronicles the legislative duel between the revolutionary John Adams of Massachusetts (Equity actor John Stefano) and his political nemesis, the arch-conservative John Dickinson of Pennsylvania (Sam Jaeger).

Adams and his allies, Benjamin Franklin (Brent Tomer) and Thomas Jefferson (Jesse Wilson), face a daunting task: to cajole a do-nothing Congress into supporting independence in the face of military difficulties, principled opposition and the stifling heat of a Philadelphia summer.

When the musical, by Sherman Edwards and Peter Stone, premiered on Broadway in 1969, many thought it was a risky venture. After all, a musical about Congress was not exactly the stuff of box-office boffo.

Fortunately, Edwards and Stone portrayed the founding fathers not as plaster saints but as flesh-and-blood men — quirky, flawed and utterly human. In this

THEATER REVIEW

1776, Otterbein College Theatre's student production of author Peter Stone and composer-lyricist Sherman Edwards' 1969 musical. Directed by Ed Vaughan.

John Adams.....John Stefano
Abigail Adams.....Marianne Timmons
Benjamin Franklin.....Brent Tomer
Thomas Jefferson.....Jesse Wilson
John Dickinson.....Sam Jaeger

Politicians on parade

Being presented at 8 tonight and Saturday, and 2 p.m. Sunday — and Oct. 23-25 — at Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$12 and \$14. Call 823-1109.

version of American history, Jefferson despairs of completing his declaration until Adams brings Mrs. Jefferson (Susan May Zimmerman) to Philadelphia for a conjugal visit and a creative boost.

Congress does not lack for colorful characters. Rhode Island's vulgar, profane Stephen Hopkins swills buttered rum by the gallon, and the eminent Franklin devotes most of his energy to whoring about Philadelphia and sleeping off the effects.

Director Ed Vaughan, musical director Beth Bradstreet and Otterbein's cast take a difficult piece and, for the most part, make it work. Stefano, chairman of the college's Department of Theatre & Dance, adds professional heft to the show's most demanding role. Jaeger, too, rises above the rest of the cast in a strong, well-motivated performance.

Much of the ensemble, however, lacks the vocal precision of Stefano and Jaeger, and that poses a problem for a show so dependent on the dramatic sensibility of 18th-century parliamentary debate and oratory.

At times, the dialogue is difficult to hear, an annoyance that is particularly pronounced midway through the first act, when the script is long on debate and short on music.

But the cast shines in many numbers. As Abigail

Adams, Marianne Timmons excels in *Till Then* and *Yours, Yours, Yours*, both bittersweet musical missives between Adams and his homebound wife. Jaeger acquits himself admirably in *Cool, Cool Considerate Men*, in which he leads the conservative faction in a right-wing minuet — elegantly choreographed by Stella Kane.

The biggest show-stopper belongs to Chris Sloan, whose portrayal of South Carolina's pro-slavery delegate Edward Rutledge prompted the most applause at Wednesday's student preview. In the haunting *Molasses*

To Rum, Rutledge taunts abolitionist Adams over the North's hypocrisy in colluding with the slave trade.

David Hammand's set nicely suggests the paneled chambers of Independence Hall but remains appropriately unobtrusive. Marcia Hain's costumes provide an interesting visual contrast between the drab attire of the dour New England delegates and the bright colors of the Southern conservatives.

1776 may be politics as usual, but it's a patriotic and melodic alternative to C-SPAN.