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# Rick Sincere News and Thoughts

**Political notes and cultural commentary from a gay, libertarian, Catholic, Republican author and theatre critic....**

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## About Me



Rick Sincere  
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"One of the smarter blogs is the libertarian-leaning collection of Charlottesville posts put up by Rick Sincere..." -- Bob Gibson, The Daily Progress, May 8, 2005

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Sunday, March 27, 2011

## An Interview with 'Liberty Smith' Composer Michael Weiner

*Liberty Smith* is a new musical having its world premiere at [Ford's Theatre](#) in Washington, D.C., beginning next week. Here is an interview I did for *The Metro Herald* with the composer of the show's score, Michael Weiner.

**Bringing Early American History to the Musical Stage:  
An Interview with 'Liberty Smith' Composer Michael Weiner**  
Rick Sincere  
*Metro Herald* Entertainment Editor

After he spent part of his childhood and teen years acting on iconic TV shows like [The Wonder Years](#), [Beverly Hills 90210](#), and [Hanging with Mr. Cooper](#) - with a brief recurring role as the earnestly clueless Kellogg "Cornflake" Lieberbaum on [Fresh Prince of Bel Air](#) - Los Angeles native [Michael Weiner](#) went on to study history at UCLA, a choice that prepared him well for his current job as composer of the score for a new musical about America's founding era.

Once at UCLA, however, his love of music took over. He had started playing piano at age 7 and by the time he reached high school, he was practicing every day and beginning to compose music. Upon leaving college, he knew he wanted to write music fulltime.

His acting career behind him, Weiner is now in Washington working on the world premiere of the musical play, [Liberty Smith](#), which previews at Ford's Theatre on March 23, leading to an official opening night on March 30.

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- ▼ 2011 (13)
  - ▼ March (3)
    - An Interview with 'And the Curtain Rises' Playwrig...
    - [An Interview with 'Liberty Smith' Composer Michael...](#)
    - Josh Radnor Talks About 'happythankyoumoreplease'
    - February (5)



Co-creators of *Liberty Smith*: Marc Madnick, Adam Abraham, Michael Weiner and Eric R. Cohen. Photo by Mark Ramont. Courtesy of Ford's Theatre.

With a book by [Adam Abraham](#), [Eric R. Cohen](#), and [Marc Madnick](#), lyrics by Abraham, and music by Weiner, *Liberty Smith* is set during the American Revolution and tells a behind-the-scenes story of the nation's founding.

As Weiner explained in a telephone interview with *The Metro Herald*, "Liberty Smith is about a guy who grows up being friends with George Washington, who is the 'forgotten founding father.'"

The big names - Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Franklin - are people we all remember, said Weiner, "but under them were all these other names who had major roles. This show is about one man who sets out to do something great with his life and, although he doesn't get credit for it, he achieves it."

The theme of the show, he added, is that "everybody can be Liberty Smith, because they have the potential to achieve their dreams. What matters are the journey and the dream."

That, he said, is "how America was founded. It's about achieving a dream."

### Long creative process

Weiner and Abraham discovered the original script for *Liberty Smith* in the mid-1990s, when they were working as readers for a Hollywood studio. (That is, they reviewed screenplays for movie producers and made recommendations.)

"It had been floating around Hollywood but had never been made as a movie," he explained.

When they first saw the unproduced screenplay, he said, "it originally was seen as an animated movie musical," since it had been circulated "around the time of [Beauty and the Beast](#)."

He and Abraham, however, "always thought that it would be great on stage."



That was because "it had a couple of components we thought would be great

- ▶ February (3)
- ▶ January (5)
- ▶ 2010 (101)
- ▶ 2009 (211)
- ▶ 2008 (257)
- ▶ 2007 (187)
- ▶ 2006 (200)
- ▶ 2005 (317)
- ▶ 2004 (19)

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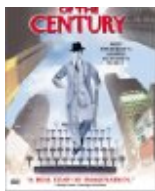
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for a musical: a strong central character with a clear goal,” plus “it has a great love story” as well as “a palette of music we don’t get to see very often in the theatre,” the kind of songs heard in the 18th century, he noted.

Weiner thought that, by translating *Liberty Smith* into a stage musical, he could “explore more musical styles.” The period of the show, he said, “can be musically colorful and the 18th century can be portrayed on stage in a very theatrical way.”

To write the show, Weiner and his collaborators “went on research trips to Colonial Williamsburg, Monticello, Boston, Philadelphia.”

He collected and listened to recordings of colonial music, he said, because “I wanted the show to feel true to that era and take it back there as well, but also appeal to today’s audience, so it doesn’t feel like museum piece.”

The aim, he said, was “not to create something so faithfully,” that it would seem stale and dated, but to get the feel of the 18th century while bringing a “contemporary edge to the music.”

The process of taking *Liberty Smith* from original concept to its debut at Ford’s Theatre was a lengthy one, Weiner explained.

“Musicals take years” to create, he said, especially original musicals.

Unlike recent Broadway successes - *Hairspray*, *The Producers*, *Billy Elliot* - *Liberty Smith* is “not based on a hit movie. Original musicals are really challenging. There’s no road map.”

After first reading the screenplay in the mid-’90s, Weiner and his collaborators spent nine or ten years working on it off and on, “as a secondary job to other projects.” Since 2006, however, they have focused on it almost exclusively and, in the past four years, it has taken the shape the Ford’s audience is going to see.

### ‘Eye-opening experience’

Although two of the leads are New York-based actors, most of the cast members - whom Weiner describes as “phenomenal” - come from the Washington area and their names (and faces) will be familiar to D.C. theatergoers: **Gregory Maheu** as George Washington, **Christopher Bloch** as Benjamin Franklin, **Donna Migliaccio** as Betsy Ross, as well as **Drew Eshelman**, **Tracy Lynn Olivera**, **Harry A. Winter**, and others.



Working with the cast during rehearsals has been “an eye-



opening

Geoff Packard will play the title role in the world premiere musical *Liberty Smith*, at Ford's Theatre, March 23-May 21, 2011. Photo by Scott Suchman.

experience,” Weiner said.

The rehearsal period, which began about six weeks ago, has been “a great time to see material up on its feet for the first time,” Weiner explained. “We get to see how the pacing is working,” for instance.

Or not working: “We cut a song in rehearsal process that we thought wasn’t moving the story forward,” he pointed out.

“Seeing [the actors] on their feet, moving around, oftentimes we see something is overwritten” - too many lines to get an idea across - and it becomes clear “the audience is going to get it” without having it explained to them, Weiner noted.

Rehearsals are an eye-opener, he said, “because you’re able to make changes right away” and the cast “can implement them” on the spot.

One of the things Weiner learned as the musical took shape on stage is that “probably the most surprising thing is seeing things you write on the page in a way that you least expect.”

For instance, he said, “you might write a scene but decide that the actor’s look or move expresses things the way they need to be expressed” and that words are not necessary at that point. The effect of rehearsals is “learning to clarify and economize the writing [because] when it’s all up there on stage,” it makes more sense than it does alone on the page.

*Liberty Smith* is a good fit for Ford’s Theatre, Weiner explained, because it’s a show about American history. It is also, one might say, a good fit for the erstwhile UCLA history major, composer Michael Weiner.

Directed by [Matt August](#), the world premiere production of *Liberty Smith* plays March 23 through May 21, 2011 at Ford’s Theatre, 511 Tenth Street, N.W., in downtown Washington, D.C. Tickets can be purchased by phone through Ticketmaster at (800) 551-SEAT (800-551-7328) or online at [Ticketmaster.com](http://Ticketmaster.com).



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Posted by Rick Sincere at 1:47:00 AM

Labels: 18th century, American Revolution, composer, Ford's Theatre, history, interview, Metro Herald, music, musical theatre, theater

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