

Cinderella LIBERTY

Making the leap from screenplay to stage



The late, great Larry Gelbart used to say that if Hitler is alive, he hoped Der Fuehrer was out of town working on a new stage musical. That was not only funny but smart: The agony of birthing a never-before-seen tuner, as anyone who's tried it knows, is directly proportional to the joy the show can bring to audiences. If it actually ends up working, that is. Either way, the agony is real.

Take that fact, multiply it by 20 years and four collaborators, and you'll sense how remarkable it is that the

musical *Liberty Smith* is about to make its gala debut at historic Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. March 23, 2011 after two decades of labor pains, encouragements, and letdowns. If you've ever wondered whether your dream project will get off the ground, take heart from the

saga of Marc Madnick, Eric R. Cohen, Michael Weiner, and Adam Abraham, who never gave up. (Madnick, publisher of this magazine, felt that the story of *Liberty's* amazing creative journey would inspire others to never give up on their own writing dreams.) It all began—not

inappropriately for a tale told in this magazine—with a screenplay idea.

"I love stories like *Ragtime*, where you take people and put them into history," says Madnick, and he conceived the notion of a plucky young man who would



Left to right: Adam Abraham, Michael Weiner, Marc Madnick, and Eric R. Cohen

Geoff Packard
as Liberty Smith



PHOTO: SCOTT SUCHMAN

interact with the Founding Fathers and play a role in their accomplishments. (Think *Forrest Gump* meets *1776*, though this project pre-dates Gumpmania by several years.) Madnick and Cohen wrote it as a wacky, *Airplane!*-like screen comedy, and “It got optioned here and there, and everybody wanted to meet Eric and Marc,” Madnick reports.

“It got sent all over town,” Cohen adds. “Everybody said it was the funniest thing they ever read. But it was a period piece and a tough sell; nobody bought it. We wrote lots of things after that, but nothing had the same buzz.”

Around 1995, Abraham and Weiner were doing coverage at Turner Feature Animation, and were captivated by the idea of *Liberty Smith* as an animated cartoon. Unbeknownst to Madnick and Cohen, they prepped four songs on spec, at which point Turner brought the four men together. “Animation isn’t the best medium for it,” Abraham believes, “because there you want fantasy and magic and genies, and the American Revolution doesn’t have that. We convinced Marc and Eric that we should all work on this together as a stage musical.”

As East Coasters originally, Cohen says he and Madnick “had been around musical theatre a lot. We’re both emotional guys, and I remember getting really choked up at one of the songs ... Michael writes these beautiful melodies, and Adam’s lyrics are so insightful.”

Says Madnick, “I got my dad on speakerphone and told him, ‘Dad, Rodgers and Hammerstein just walked into my office.’”

“*Liberty Smith* seemed right for the medium,” Abraham explains. “It made me laugh super-hard, but at the end, it didn’t have that ‘something extra,’ and maybe the something extra is the musical element to pick up that comic spark and temper it. It’s like sweet and sour, hot and cold. With the musical elements added, it feels like a complete whole.”

To Weiner, “It always had some of the key elements you want in a musical, one being a



Weiner, Abraham, Madnick and Cohen

great world that we hadn't seen on the stage before. (There was *1776*, but that was set in a room.) It had a strong central character: a man with a dream, an active goal he'd be achieving throughout the entire show. And the names—George Washington, Paul Revere, Thomas Jefferson, Betsy Ross—these are the most famous names in the American language; this is our country. There hadn't been a show that touched on all that."

Ordinarily, as the credited songwriters, Weiner and Abraham would control all music rights. But an unusual legal agreement was entered into, specifying that all four would share equally in any proceeds that came out of anything with the *Liberty Smith* brand. "At the time, it was a financial thing," Madnick says, "but in reality, [it was] what kept this project going, and helped us make the right decisions along the way. We are as one."

"From that point on, we were all developing it as a unit. We're all co-authors of this show," Weiner confirms.

"Can you imagine what would have happened if The Beatles had done that?" asks

Cohen. "We always thought that no one part was more important. There's probably not been one word that all of us haven't signed off on."

So, why did it all take two decades? Weiner explains that "the hardest thing about writing this particular musical was tone. The jokey [screen] version is so appealing because it's so funny. Ultimately, though, it does leave you a little flat, and it doesn't feel like you're getting as much as you can out of the characters.

"We actually tried a version of this musical—and there are probably, I think, four distinctly different scripts and scores—that was more true to the original screenplay."

He describes the reading process in which "you present your work, actors read and sing the songs in front of an audience. Ultimately, in this reading we did of the joke version, while people were laughing some of the time, the response that came back was that nobody wanted to see the Founding Fathers skewered in that way. People were almost offended by making Washington a womanizer, by making Paul Revere a complete drunk. Audiences really didn't respond well to that." Throw in the

collaborators' perception of the inspirational potential (a part of every great musical) in an average fellow who takes a hand in the great events of the burgeoning nation—an idealistic patriotism that simply didn't sit well with farce—and it's clear why the work, and the revisions, went on.

In no sense were the years occupied by *Liberty Smith* alone. Madnick and Cohen worked at Final Draft, Inc., where Madnick now serves as president and CEO, while Abraham wrote and directed the multiple award-winning feature *Man of the Century*. Weiner, composer of numerous published scores and songs, was collaborating with Rupert Holmes on a forthcoming stage tuner of *Secondhand Lions*, and oenophile Cohen is now a partner in two wineries in the Napa Valley.

Madnick charts a total of 10 readings over the years, always accompanied by regional theatre interest. "What kept us going was that anytime anyone saw it, they'd say, 'You've really got something here.' We got a lot of encouragement, and it was just a matter of finding that one right place that would do it."

In fact, Ford's Theatre expressed initial interest five years ago, but "it died," Abraham wryly reports. "It died and was resuscitated like a zombie on many occasions."

"We listened to their notes in 2006, and they were not wrong," says Weiner, and a complete 2008 rewrite finally captured the heart of America's most famous playhouse.

The team couldn't be more knowing, or candid, about their shared process. Says composer Weiner, "Deep down inside, we knew that the material wasn't ready for production in 2002 or 2003. Sometimes things happen when and where they're supposed to happen. The long wait has actually helped the piece." Cohen agrees, "There's no doubt the encouragement we got helped.

"But what happens is that a lot of writers write that first draft, and they really believe it's produceable. Then they get a little bit of discouragement, and they move on. For

whatever reason, this one never went back into the drawer. If you truly, truly believe you've got something there, it's important to not give up on it too quickly. Those first five drafts are probably not going to be good enough. We've all evolved as adults over 20 years, and the piece is so much richer for it."

Abraham believes "it's more timely and appropriate now than ever before. We were writing in the mid-90s, but maybe it would have been a flop then. I feel that now is a better time because we collectively need it.

"The reason that the publication of books on the Founding Fathers continues is that as our country moves forward in time, we yearn for its more-innocent origins. We sense that America was founded on principles that were valuable—maybe they have something we can use. Why do you read history? Why do you read literature? Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington will inspire us to be better than

we are, and I think *Liberty Smith* can contribute to that, to look back at this early period and reevaluate it. It's a funny, zany show, but it reminds you of actual people who were alive, who sometimes were confused but were grasping at something—something worthwhile."

"To me, Broadway is so much cooler than being on the screen anyway," Madnick adds, fully certain of the show's ultimate fate.

We'll all know in March whether this first full production strikes a blow for *Liberty Smith*, and what the next stop on its unique Freedom Trail is going to be. ✦

***Liberty Smith* plays at Ford's Theatre March 30 to May 21, 2011.**



BOB VERINI has written stage-plays and screenplays and holds a directing M.F.A. from Indiana University. He is a freelance film reporter and Los Angeles-based theatre critic for *Daily Variety*.

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