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Washington meets ‘Liberty Smith,’ the forgotten Founding Father



By: Fiona Zublin

Thomas Jefferson took less than three weeks to write the Declaration of Independence. It took Marc Madnick, Eric R. Cohen, Adam Abraham and Michael Weiner more than a decade to write “Liberty Smith,” their musical about the Founding Fathers that is now playing in its world premiere at Ford’s Theatre.

The production is the tale of Liberty Smith, a fictional Founding Father, forgotten by history, who Forrest Gumps his way through the American Revolution. According to the plot, he’s the guy who really warned the colonies that the British were coming and the guy who really designed the American flag. Peopled by real-life figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Betsy Ross, it’s a story about filling in the cracks in history and having fun with our national myths. But it’s also an original musical, and those never come easily.

“It’s not uncommon for musicals to take a really long time,” says Weiner, the composer. “It really is an original musical; there’s no source material that was successful to draw on. So we were figuring out what is the right way to tell this story. And that takes a long time, that takes a lot of development and readings, and you go down different paths until you find what really feels right.”

To be fair, Jefferson was able to draw heavily on the existing Virginia Declaration of Rights when he sat down to write the Declaration of Independence. But “Liberty Smith” didn’t spring from thin air either.

Sometime in the early-to-mid-1990s, Madnick and Cohen wrote a weird, pseudo-fictional screenplay about Liberty Smith. They had just co-founded a company called Final Draft that sold screenwriting software — now one of the most popular programs in the industry — but the objective was to write screenplays themselves. The screenplay had a lot of buzz, but no traction — no one really knew what to do with it.

Abraham, the lyricist, discovered the script for “Liberty” while working at an animation company that was interested in developing the project. He and Weiner decided “Liberty Smith” should be a musical.

“It was full of these larger-than-life figures that could be great onstage,” Abraham says. “And we essentially convinced Marc and Eric that they should not be making a movie of it, but making it into a play. And somehow they said yes.”

Cohen recalls that he and Madnick originally refused the project. Abraham and Weiner wrote four songs for it anyway. “I remember getting really teary-eyed about a song,” Cohen says. “And that was the first moment that I thought, ‘Yeah, this could totally work.’ ” That song has since been cut.

The four continued to work on the screenplay, holding readings in Los Angeles and New York. In 2000, the play was selected for the National Alliance for Musical Theatre’s Festival of New Musicals, and in 2005 it showed up in the New York Musical Theatre Festival. Which, Cohen says, is how Ford’s discovered it. Two readings followed: one in 2006 and another, extensively reworked, in 2008.

“In 2006, they basically didn’t like it,” Abraham says. “Everyone always saw potential, including me. I read a screenplay and said, ‘This thing has potential if there’s a way to crack it — if there’s a tone, if there’s a voice, if there’s a style.’ ”

“The people at the theater, they just got the show,” Weiner says. “They supported it, they understood what we were going for, and they provided us with an environment over the last couple of years to develop it . . . and really do the kind of work that we needed to get it ready for a production.”

When it comes to writing musicals, there’s no magic formula. “Virtually every great, magnificent, wonderful individual or team of composer-lyricists have had huge flops, shows that never even made it to Broadway, or ran three performances, or never got out of previews,” says Mark Eden Horowitz, a senior music specialist at the Library of Congress. “No matter how talented anybody is, they can screw up — there are just so many elements. If somebody knew how to make a successful musical every time out, then they would, but nobody does.”

It helps to have recognizable property — whether that’s a composer, a star or a major motion picture or classic novel to draw from. Well, it helps with fundraising, anyway. But, in fact, the best musicals don’t often come from stories that have already been artistically successful as something else. For every “West Side Story,” you can point to the Broadway version of “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” which featured Mary Tyler Moore and a book by legendary playwright Edward Albee but still ran only four previews in 1966 before disappearing from history. Or how about “Lolita, My Love,” a 1971 atrocity that forgot how important Vladimir Nabokov’s stylish prose had been to the genius of the novel?

Of course, the American Revolution has been musicalized before — in “1776.” That musical, written by former high school history teacher Sherman Edwards, tells the claustrophobic story of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. “Liberty Smith” is a historical fantasy with epic qualities, expansive and entertaining, but not a surefire hit. As Abraham puts it: “We’re basically telling something that is at once true and false. And that’s crazy.”

Weiner understands the dilemma. “In tougher economic times, producers want less risk,” he says. “The funny thing is, statistically, I don’t think the jukebox musicals have been any more successful than original musicals. But it feels safer; you know what you’re getting. With an original musical, everything is up for grabs. There’s so many things to change and there’s so many things to work on during the rehearsal process.”

But new is also exciting for an audience. New means you don’t know the ending when you walk in. Many of the great musicals of the past decade have had original plots, including “Next to Normal,” which won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2010 and took 11 years to go from 10-minute play to Broadway hit.

“Liberty Smith,” of course, is edging toward the 20-year mark. And in 20 years, Abraham says, it has never gotten boring. “It’s always been like this fascinating hobby.”

“It’s one of those projects where we’ve always felt that it had some merit because there’s always been interest in it,” Cohen says. “Someone will invariably say, ‘Whatever happened to Liberty Smith?’ And we always say, ‘It’s still there.’ ”

“There’s a reason we never gave up on it to go work on something else.”