

DEAR ABIGAIL/DEAR JOHN: AN INCANDESCENT MATCH

A PLAY FOR TWO VOICES

**BY
JOHN DAVID WESTBY**

*Adapted from the letters of
John and Abigail Adams
1774 - 1776*

John David Westby
Telephone: 630.442.9910
jwestby330@gmail.com

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DEAR ABIGAIL/DEAR JOHN: AN INCANDESCENT MATCH

SUMMARY

Through the urgent, witty, and deeply personal letters of Abigail and John Adams from 1774 to 1776, *Dear Abigail/Dear John: An Incandescent Love Story* captures a marriage tested by distance, revolution, and loss while revealing how private devotion and public duty intertwined in America's first power couple on the eve of the nation's birth.

TIME AND PLACE

This play explores the relationship of Abigail and John Adams using their extensive correspondence written between 1774 to July 4, 1776. Abigail is primarily in Braintree Massachusetts and Boston area. John is in Philadelphia Pennsylvania.

CHARACTERS

ABIGAIL ADAMS, 29, intelligent, energetic, determined, absolutely capable, a force behind her husband as well as moderating influence. She can be any age and any ethnicity.

JOHN ADAMS, 38, dedicated, bossy, officious, obnoxious and disliked, rubs people the wrong way - constantly, an uncanny ability to see the future. He can be any age and any ethnicity.

SETTING

This play can be done bare bones with only two music stands and two great actors to "live" the experiences.

Depending on theatre resources, the creative team might add projections to set the scenes and add more visual interest. This technique was used in the original streaming production where each actor was seated at a desk or standing by their desks while projections of "place" added some visual variety. Feel free to add props as well.

Sound is important. There can be distant cannons, church bells, night sounds, etc. The creative team can use music cues as well.

Underscoring with music would be appropriate as well. Depending on resources, a production might include singers of American Revolutionary period songs and orchestral music.

NOTES ON PERFORMANCE

This script works best when actors sustain a strong connection to each other, although they are never in the same location in real life. For example, they never address each other directly, though they are in dialogue. They look out to address their correspondent beyond the walls of specific locations. They are together in their imaginations.

**DEAR ABIGAIL/DEAR JOHN: AN INCANDESCENT MATCH
A PLAY FOR TWO VOICES**

TIME: 1774 thru July 4, 1776.

Darkness. Projections of images: quill pens, paper, the Adams farm at Braintree, a Philadelphia street.

A flame lights candle.

Voices in the dark repeating Abigail and John's salutations. A cadence. Insistent, wanting to be heard.

<p>ABIGAIL (VO) My dear . . . Dear one . . . Dear friend . . . Dearest friend . . . Husband . . . My dearest friend . . . John</p>	<p>JOHN (VO) My dearest friend . . . My dear . . . Dearest friend . . . Wife . . . Dear one . . . Hello Dear Abigail . . .</p>
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A moment of silence. Dark.

Then . . .

Lights up on ABIGAIL, Braintree farm. She is all business.

*Projection: Braintree Farm,
Massachusetts Colony, 1774*

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

(writing)

Braintree, August 15, 1774 . . .

Oh, my dearest friend. I know not where this will find you.

JOHN spotlights, he is traveling. He looks out as if speaking to her.

JOHN

Each day I look for a letter from my Portia!

ABIGAIL

Your "Portia" writes you every day, but I do not know whether you are on the road or have reached Philadelphia. Where ever you might be, I write you as I promised.

JOHN

We have not yet arrived in Philadelphia. The journey continues.

JOHN goes dark.

ABIGAIL

These heavy days we are burnt up with drought. My poor cows will certainly petition you speedily and inform you that they have been deprived of their ancient privileges to-to- be watered at will--

(She smiles to herself)

Well, no matter. Your task is a difficult and important one; no doubt you know what attends you at all times and in all places: the most affectionate regard of your Portia, Abigail Adams

ABIGAIL looks out.

ABIGAIL goes dark.

Musical interlude.

JOHN spotlights.

*Projection: Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania, 1774*

JOHN

Misery.

ABIGAIL spotlights.

ABIGAIL

Vexation.

JOHN's quills scratch in annoyance.

JOHN

Can you believe that so soon after the bay was afloat with--

ABIGAIL

Tea. In the harbor.

JOHN

--And soldiers afloat in Boston streets--

ABIGAIL

--It has become a tide of red, John.

JOHN

(pulls out another paper to
read)

I have just received a letter today. A wonderful letter.

ABIGAIL

The occupation has placed the population in misery.

JOHN

This letter shows the way. A remedy is at hand.

ABIGAIL

At last.

JOHN

Yes, at last. It reads, "it is highly expedient and necessary that a meeting of the several colonies of this continent be had to consult--"

(laughs)

Consult?! There has never been more than two men in the same room at a single location who can communicate within and among each other. It's already an impossibility--

ABIGAIL

John! Your correspondence!

JOHN

Ah. Yes.

(picks up the broadsheet)

Yes, here it is: "to consult upon the miseries to which they are reduced by certain coercive and intolerable --"

I like that. I like that very much. "Coercive and intolerable, which have closed Boston to merchant shipping and established formal British military rule" - And there is no other word, Abigail, no other word.

ABIGAIL

Yes, yes, John, go on. I am as anxious as you.

JOHN

Yes, all right. "formal military rule in the City of Boston and Commonwealth of Massachusetts, made British officials immune to criminal prosecution in America, and required Englishmen to quarter those troops!" Imagine! Englishmen required to relinquish their homes to--to--

ABIGAIL

Troops! We have seen nothing of this in Braintree, thank heavens.

JOHN

I have waited for this.

ABIGAIL

I know you have, John.

JOHN

There is no choice now, Abigail.

ABIGAIL

I would expect not.

JOHN

This is to be a Congress. Not mere conversation but a Congress at last.

ABIGAIL

At last!

JOHN

Imagine: a school of political prophets. One that will . . . incubate... incubate?

ABIGAIL

Incubate, yes.

JOHN

Incubate a nursery of statesmen. A hitherto unknown breed of "American statesmen." Yet, there I find myself - well I will not burden you.

ABIGAIL

Stop.

JOHN

Yes?

ABIGAIL

My dearest friend-

JOHN

Abigail?

ABIGAIL

Tell me.

JOHN

Why, when you already know. You always know.

ABIGAIL

Your letter can explain what lies in your heart, John, when your voice cannot.

JOHN considers.

JOHN

All right . . . I confess that I feel myself unequal to this business. This gathering.

Who am I? What am I to think myself a part of this?

ABIGAIL

You are John Adams of Braintree, Massachusetts.

JOHN

You make jokes.

ABIGAIL

I do not.

JOHN

I have four children. What is worse I have one client, whom I neglect. While every lawyer in the land grows rich on the side of the crown.

And I? Well, I spend my time engaged on these matters without remuneration and neglecting my family.

ABIGAIL

You are where I would expect to find you now. In these times.

JOHN

I fear we have not men fit for these times.

ABIGAIL

We do. We have John Adams.

JOHN

And I am . . . I am . . .

ABIGAIL

Pause yourself and gather your will.

JOHN

I am melancholy for the public's future and, yes, I am anxious for my family. To be gone for weeks or months leaving all of you.

ABIGAIL

Weeks - even months - will be tolerable.

JOHN

The dangers here are great.

ABIGAIL

If you were not there, the dangers will be worse, will they not?

JOHN

And I will confess I am at a loss what to do here in Philadelphia.

JOHN looks out for a beat.

JOHN goes dark.

Musical interlude.

Slight shift with ABIGAIL. Perhaps she blows out the candle.

A new day.

ABIGAIL spotlights.

ABIGAIL

John! I feel not a little agitated with the accounts I have this very day from Boston.

It seems there is a plot--there can be no other word for it - a plot which the King's General Gage has employed to seize our province's stock of powder.

JOHN spotlights

JOHN

I have just heard this news in Philadelphia.

ABIGAIL is agitated and looks off as if to see General Gage himself.

ABIGAIL

This has so enraged our people that great commotions have arisen.

JOHN

Our people lead the resistance.

ABIGAIL

I am told that General Gage is mounting cannon upon Beacon Hill, digging entrenchments, throwing up breastworks there as if for a great siege.

JOHN

Even here, we push and cajole more than any sons of liberty to enlist the aid of our fellow colonies.

ABIGAIL

Will there be a siege?

JOHN

We must have representation from all the colonies here in one place.

ABIGAIL

The soldier's presence has grown so across the colony. The rumor here is that the people will establish a citizen's militia to resist them.

JOHN

They continue to arrive, these Sons of Liberty, from as far away as South Carolina.

ABIGAIL

This resistance grows as well the dangers. Will it be a contest upon Beacon Hill or Bunker? It is not known.

JOHN

They come post haste with fixed opinions of everything. And, so far, it seems no one will speak the word.

(whispers)

Independence. It is as unpopular as the Stamp Act.

ABIGAIL

John, I am impatient to hear what you will do there.

JOHN

I believe we will agree on a protest, the non-importation of British goods. Which is a lawyerly way of cutting off our noses to spite our faces.

ABIGAIL

I am impatient to receive a letter from you. It is most anxious these times. You may have heard—

Slight shift for them both at some news!

Perhaps lights shift.

Cannons sound in the distance.

JOHN

Outrageous!

ABIGAIL

I have heard the guns.

JOHN

The bombardment of Boston?!

ABIGAIL

It seems this was the Royal Navy's bluster but not much more.

JOHN

We have but a confused account of this catastrophe.

ABIGAIL

Dearest friend. Everyone I see is inquiring after you and when did I hear the news from Philadelphia and what is happening.

JOHN

Here we have learned that no blood was spilled, but General Gage--

ABIGAIL

All my intelligence is from the newspaper and not from you. Do you not write me?

(looks at him across the distance)

Five weeks have passed and not one line have I received.

JOHN

My wife, my dearest friend, and babes are never out of my mind!

ABIGAIL

General Gage has taken away the provincial powder from Cambridge.

JOHN

Let us eat potatoes and drink water rather than submit to tyranny.

Beat.

ABIGAIL

We are all well here, John.

JOHN goes dark.

Musical interlude.

ABIGAIL rearranges herself. Perhaps puts a shawl on.

Is it the chill of November?

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

Sunday evening there passed by here about two hundred sons of liberty and marched down to the powder house, from which they took the powder. The reason was that we had so many Tories here they dare not trust us with it.

The church parson thought they were coming after him and ran up to his garret; they say, another Tory jumped out of his window and hid among the corn.

(beat)

Things of importance may happen here as well.

(beat)

I hope you will find means to convey to me. Some. Intelligence. I await your letter.

JOHN joins the spotlights.

JOHN

I wish I could write to you a dozen times a day.

ABIGAIL looks out at him. Goes dark.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Abigail! Well, I would wish it so.

These last few days I have had the characters and views of fifty gentlemen -- total strangers to me -- to study and the policy talk of a dozen provinces to learn.

But I come here to this paper. And you. And with you my mind occupies itself with my heart.

(turns back)

I have many pamphlets, newspapers and letters to read, plans of policy to consider. It is most serious work.

Yours affectionately. John Adams.

ABIGAIL spotlights quickly! Excited.

ABIGAIL

They met me at the door with your letter, John!

JOHN

One pamphlet is on agriculture and husbandry.

ABIGAIL

It really gave me such a flow of spirits you cannot imagine.

JOHN

Another on . . . coinage.

ABIGAIL

I found myself re-reading and re-reading your letter so much that I was not disposed to sleep till one o'clock!

JOHN

Another on manufactures.

ABIGAIL

Alas I now await your next letter and the next. I urge all haste!

Beat as JOHN makes a change.

JOHN may be in the chamber.

JOHN

At last! The Congress assembles again.

ABIGAIL

I trust you will delight in sending me some of the gossip and goings on among the delegates. Your Portia enjoys your sardonic character portraits. I long to consider who is what and where and what is said in your chamber.

JOHN

The Congress already marks a milestone in tedium. When it first met, a motion was suggested that it should be opened with prayer, which was opposed because we were so divided in religious sentiments. Some discussion of an hour and a quarter ensued.

ABIGAIL

What is the point of meeting with 50 gentlemen and having no gossip to share?

JOHN

But finally, the motion was carried. Next morning it was an Episcopal clergyman who read the sermon for the day. Upon which some grumbling was heard from the corner where the Baptists sit.

ABIGAIL

(opens a Bible, reads)

"O Lord, fight against them that fight against me. Stop the way against them. Let them be confounded, let them be turned back--"

JOHN

Such wonders in these parts! Why, an Episcopal clergyman was tasked to read prayers! Such things the world turns on in Philadelphia.

ABIGAIL

"Let them be as chaff before the wind And all my bones shall say,
Lord, who is like unto thee?"

JOHN

I cannot but remember the sermons your own father, Reverend Smith,
gave in those days. How he held the congregation spellbound.
Although his daughter had eyes for only one--

ABIGAIL

John!

JOHN

Well, it is true.

ABIGAIL

These "things" you call them may not be of great import but
establish customs and traditions that come from the blessings of
the Lord.

JOHN

So speaks the daughter of a minister.

ABIGAIL

Does it surprise anyone?

*JOHN makes a shift, a new day of
Congress.*

JOHN

Ah, business commences here.

ABIGAIL

Of course.

ABIGAIL goes dark.

JOHN

In this Congress there is a collection of the greatest men upon
this continent. Fortunes, abilities, and eloquence equal to any;
here is--

JOHN looks around the chamber, amazed.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Here is a diversity of religions, educations, interests, such as
would seem impossible to unite in another location, but here,
here, they are of like minds on the . . . non-importation of
British goods.

And where are you, good lady?

ABIGAIL spotlights.

ABIGAIL

Boston. I called here to see this much injured town.

JOHN

And how fares it?

ABIGAIL

John, it is invaded with fleets and armies; the courts of justice shut; our commerce totally ruined, thousands reduced to want. Are we not subjects of this same King?

ABIGAIL goes dark.

JOHN still in chamber, bored.

JOHN

(looking left and right shaking
his head)

This chamber . . . this chamber is but half again as wide as it is long. It is cold. Or hot. Tedious. But temperamental. The voices vary in pitch but not in singularity of monotony. And the smells! All are highly pungent.

ABIGAILS voice is heard.

ABIGAIL

Dearest friend. . .

JOHN

The debates proceed. If one can call them such. Fifty jealous strangers argue the minutia of their trade. Bushels of this, barrels of that. The cost. The cost. The cost.

JOHN goes dark.

ABIGAIL spotlights.

ABIGAIL

Did you receive the letter from little John Quincy? He was most intent on writing to you as well as he can. He strives to improve daily, but I told him, "no matter!" His duty to you can be expressed in poor writing as well as good.

(ABIGAIL shifts.)

Many have been the anxious hours I have spent these last . . . months. Can it be so? Yes, months.

(beat)

John.

I feel as if the curtain has just drawn across the first scene of the first act. That more will come. But what?

Will we know whether the end will be tragical - or something else? Something bold? Something glorious?

John. . . John. Be kind to John Quincy in your reply. He worked so hard to give you something that might please you.

JOHN spotlights

JOHN

Attended committees. Spoke.

ABIGAIL

At length or not?

JOHN

Would you believe I spoke briefly?

ABIGAIL

Astonishing!

JOHN

The duration was a good one and fit the topic.

ABIGAIL

Well, you cannot be nor do I wish to see you merely an inactive spectator.

JOHN

These committees!

ABIGAIL

I see.

JOHN

Fifty men and fifty opinions on every topic known to man.

ABIGAIL

Well, there is nothing to render men more fractious than living without females about them for an extended period.

ABIGAIL goes dark.

JOHN shifts, perhaps to a tavern, a cup of ale in his hands.

JOHN

(writing)

Here is a journal entry for you, sweet Portia:

This "assembly" is like no other that ever existed. Every man in it is a great orator, a critic, a statesman.

Oh yes. There are fifty such. And upon every question each must show his oratory and his criticism and his political abilities. Yes, every one.

If it was moved that two and two make twelve, we would be entertained with logic, law, history, politics, and mathematics - and yes! animal husbandry - for two whole days in support of the motion.

(drinks)
And then pass it unanimously.

JOHN goes dark.

ABIGAIL spotlights.

ABIGAIL
(trying the right salutation)
Dearest friend.
(Doesnt like)

Dear friend.
(doesn't like)

John.
(awful)

John Adams.
(even worse)

Mr. John Adams.
(start over!)

My much loved friend.
(much better)

I dare not express to you how . . . ardently . . . ardently .
. . I long for your return.

*ABIGAIL moves from the desk and
possibly away and then returns.*

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)
The idea plays about my heart and awakes all the tender sentiments
. . . that years have . . . increased. The whole collected stock
will break forth and—

(Takes a breath)
If you think that I venture to write most anything in these
letters, and I do, it is only because I know the man who will bear
them to you. I envy him that he should see you before I do.

(thinks about it)
You will burn these letters lest they fall from your pocket!

JOHN'S voice is heard.

JOHN
My dear!

ABIGAIL
-- and expose your most affectionate friend! Abigail Adams.

ABIGAIL goes dark.

Musical interlude.

JOHN spotlights.

JOHN

This was one of the happiest days of my life! There was no idea of submission to Royal tyranny in this assembly! America will support Massachusetts or perish with her!

(picking up a sealed letter)

Oh, I see you have sent me a letter.

(Going back to writing his letter)

In any case, the Congress is finished for this session, and it is very likely that I shall never see this part of the world again!

(picks up a bag of coins)

Oh, and you will be pleased to know that I have earned 12 shillings a day for my efforts -- a delegate's pay I am told.

(puts the coins into a box. Adds his notebook)

I am determined to avoid any - and all - public affairs from this point forward.

ABIGAIL spotlights.

ABIGAIL

Will you not return there?

JOHN

Never again. I have neither fortune, leisure, nor genius for it.

ABIGAIL

Then you will be coming home at last?

JOHN

I shall. I would rather chop wood and mend fences on my little farm like Cincinnatus in Rome than ever to return to Philadelphia!

JOHN goes dark.

ABIGAIL goes dark.

A shift in time.

Musical interlude.

ABIGAIL spotlights.

ABIGAIL

It is war they say! And you are now gone back to the place you said you would never return.

JOHN spotlights.

JOHN

It has come to this. The King and the Royal Navy and the dragoons!

ABIGAIL

I endeavor to be very heroic but any certainty is precarious. What is to become of Massachusetts - our home? My heart feels like lead to think what will transpire.

JOHN

I know now the union will hold because I look at these delegates--

ABIGAIL

Here there are farmers with muskets and pitchforks in hand to dig in, to stop a Royal Brigade? I scarcely comprehend the folly of it.

(now serious)

It is said that the British have a list of all those they call "obnoxious--"

JOHN

Well, my name must be first, then.

ABIGAIL

They and their effects are to suffer destruction.

JOHN

Steadfast. Steadfast dearest friend. Hold my babes.

ABIGAIL

There is much to do here even under the threat of war.

JOHN

I trust you are well and the children, too.

ABIGAIL

I have written to Dr. Warren, the president of the provincial assembly to recommend your brother Elihu for a position in the Continental Army.

JOHN

Yes, I know he is anxious for it.

ABIGAIL

But, John!

JOHN

Yes, Abigail?

ABIGAIL

Is this not a turning point then? This rush to battle?

JOHN

The news is that there are ships in the bay. There are troops investing the city. It has already begun. We have much to do here.

ABIGAIL

Our house has been in confusion, the militia recruits coming in for lodging, for supper every which way.

And now there are refugees from Boston streaming by seeking asylum for a day a night a week. You can hardly imagine how we live.

JOHN

You can hardly imagine how I live here upon my return here. The flies are as loud as the delegates and twice as fat. And that is saying much.

ABIGAIL

I want to know how you do, how you stood your journey back. How are your eyes? You strain them so.

JOHN

I have found this Congress like the last. Our business hazardous. Our deliberations long. Tedious. Tendentious. Did I say long? Very long.

ABIGAIL

Health? Your health?

JOHN

I have had miserable health. And blind eyes. Yet no matter.

ABIGAIL

(looking at a letter. It is just
two lines)

Hmmm . . . look to this, John Adams. Although my letters have less merit, they certainly have more words. Many, many more words.

ABIGAIL goes dark.

JOHN

Many of weak nerves are here now. Moderate Mr. Dickinson of Pennsylvania must now very moderately propose a new moderate petition to the King, who is not moderate at all.

This is nothing more than a measure of immoderate imbecility.

I dread these moderates like death.

(noticing something)

Oh! Colonel Washington of Virginia today appears in uniform. He wears it well. As if. . . Well as if it is not already apparent that he is our soldier! This bodes well.

(returning to the letter)

I know my brother is very desirous of being in the army. My mother is against it. Neither he nor I will tell her that he is trying for a place.

We are fearful of the lady's displeasure still as if we were schoolboys traipsing muddy boots across her white-washed floors.

ABIGAIL spotlights with news!

ABIGAIL

John! General Gage's proclamation was posted.
(reading))

"The infatuated multitudes have long suffered themselves to be conducted by certain well know incendiaries and traitors . . ."

JOHN

Incendiaries?! Traitors!?

ABIGAIL

"In a fatal progression of crimes."

JOHN

And yet we moderately propose a new petition to the King.

ABIGAIL

Incendiaries and traitors, John.

JOHN

The case of Massachusetts is the most urgent, but it cannot be long before every colony must follow and all what do we do? We urge a new petition?? A petition to this King?

When the sword is drawn, throw away the scabbard my friends!

ABIGAIL

What will you do? What will we do here?

JOHN assumes a speaking pose as if in the chamber.

JOHN

The first step is to recommend to every province to seize on all the crown officers and hold them as hostages, for the security of the people of Boston.

ABIGAIL

Will you propose it?

JOHN

They must institute governments for themselves, under their own authority. This is how we show the Royal authority that they must come to terms.

ABIGAIL

The entrenchments on Bunker Hill are provocations and I fear the British will take them by force.

JOHN

Then we here must immediately adopt the army in Cambridge as a Continental army and appoint a general and take it upon ourselves to pay subsistence and munitions for the troops—

ABIGAIL

To gather force where there was one, now there are many.

JOHN

--and finally to declare the colonies free, sovereign, and independent states -

ABIGAIL

It is where the road has led, hasn't it?

JOHN

--And to inform Great Britain, and our King, that we are willing to seek the friendship of her enemies, France and more!

Beat.

JOHN is less than impressed by the impression he's made in Chamber.

ABIGAIL

And what did they say, John? What?

JOHN

Well, my dearest friend, I saw horror and consternation on those faces where before I had only seen the irritation of constipation and gout.

ABIGAIL

But it is started then?

JOHN

Yes.

ABIGAIL

Good.

JOHN

Good.

Beat. ABIGAIL gets up, returns holding a letter with childish scrawls.

ABIGAIL

Nabby sends you a letter. Excuse the writing. She has a sore thumb.

JOHN

Sweet Nabby. Her pretty letter gave me much pleasure both as a token of her affection and of her improvement in handwriting. Kiss her injured thumb for me.

ABIGAIL

You would laugh to see them all running towards me when they see I hold a letter from you. Like chickens when the hen clucks. And Charles with his open mouth begging me to tell him, "what did Pa say, what did Pa say?" And at the end when your words have run out, he says "Did he not write no more?"

JOHN

Ah my babies . . . Nabby, Johnny, Charles, Tommy . . . to think of you rushing to my arms. The kisses I would give you!

Long beat. As the worry returns.

JOHN (CONT'D)

I must. Go.

JOHN goes dark

Musical interlude.

ABIGAIL changes something on her desk, lights a candle perhaps.

ABIGAIL

From here I send news. Refugees stream into all the towns. They bring rumors and fear. I know not which is true or no.

They expect the sea coasts to be ravaged. Every sound gives a start now. What will happen next?

I know we have courage, I see it daily. But I hope our conduct matches our courage.

What would help most is powder. From where will that come?

Once invaded, has any kingdom regained its liberty without bloodshed?

ABIGAIL shakes her head. Goes dark.

JOHN spotlights

JOHN

With the dangers that surround us, I am astounded, just astounded that we are delayed so. Delayed by the motion to approve the second petition to King George.

And now we contend with the Southern party here, which will not support a New England Army under a New England General. To settle it, I proposed the illustrious George Washington, Esquire, a modest, virtuous, and brave Virginian.

The motion was promptly . . . tabled.

JOHN makes some move, indicating a change.

JOHN (CONT'D)

I am worn out, Abigail, with scribbling for my bread and my liberty and must leave others to wear the laurels.

Oh to be a soldier! A man of action and bravery. Perhaps I will be so. I am reading a great stack of military books!

JOHN shows the book. JOHN goes dark.

ABIGAIL spotlights.

Gradually through this passage the sound of cannon fire grows louder.

ABIGAIL

The day was clear and bright. I spent an hour with the fruit trees. They promise well but the caterpillars come apace.

I returned to the house for breakfast. Then there was such a clatter in the road, I ran to see streams of people leaving the city!

They say Charlestown is in ashes, the battle began on Bunker's Hill. The constant roar of cannon is so distressing to us we cannot eat, drink or sleep.

I have heard that our dear friend, Doctor Warren is no more. He fell in the fighting.

JOHN spotlights.

JOHN

An old friend, Doctor Warren.

ABIGAIL

He fell on the hill, rousing the men.

JOHN

I thank you for your letter and the news.

ABIGAIL

The numbers of dead. The people who are no more.

JOHN

I know, dearest friend.

ABIGAIL

My grandfather - my grandfather's grave lies in waste, consumed by fire, and not one stone remains one upon the other.

We stand astonished that our people were not all cut down. Their numbers did not exceed eight hundred. The reinforcements were not able to reach them, and they had not half ammunition enough.

The town is in flames around them, the heat from the flames was so intense as scarcely to be borne. The wind blowing the smoke outward reaching us even here and other towns. The acrid smell of war and death.

Our friend Warren was thrown into a grave with many bodies over him.

(Small beat)

John? Does every member there feel for us? Do they understand what we suffer?

JOHN

You must realize -

ABIGAIL

Your second petition to the King pleases, forgive me, it pleases only the timid and the weak!

JOHN

I know, dearest friend. I know.

ABIGAIL

All the destruction they made has not wounded me as much as the death of our friend Warren.

JOHN

Even though they burn our seaport towns, what then? The King will be no nearer his mark. Not even after he has burned a beautiful town and murdered thirty thousand people.

ABIGAIL

It is time to bury the dead and nurse the injured.

Resigned ABIGAIL goes dark.

JOHN

Courage my dear one. Courage. I must close now. We will vote today.

JOHN goes dark.

Musical interlude.

JOHN spotlights.

JOHN (CONT'D)

I will tell you in future a complete history of the behavior of my compatriots here, but you shall keep it a secret. For now I confide to my journal.

It is a tale told of sloth and venality and self-dealing. They tread as if stuck in molasses when the times require nimble action.

However, there is news you will want to know: the day was broken by the arrival of a new Virginian, an ingenious member called Mr. Thomas Jefferson. I must say, unabashedly, that he seizes upon my heart.

ABIGAIL spotlights.

ABIGAIL

(Looking at a letter,
perturbed)

I have paper from you. Yes, it is paper for certain. It has quill marks, Sir, but not nearly enough.

It appears all is in haste. The paper and quill marks tell me you exist, but not how you exist.

(counting the lines)

This paper contains, yes, six lines!

I would you had time to cover more. How would my letters to you be received with barely six lines?

JOHN

Oh, I receive your letters most favorably. Eagerly. They contain more particulars than any other letters I receive and, my dearest, I revere them.

ABIGAIL

Hmmm I wonder.

JOHN

All this time away, apart—

ABIGAIL

And I would want some sentiment. A few sentimental effusions of the heart. Or are the effusions meant for me consumed by the public?

JOHN

No, Abigail.

ABIGAIL

Being a part of that public, I claim a greater share to your sentiments than I have had.

JOHN

My anxieties about you and the children as well as the country have been extreme.

ABIGAIL

Six lines?

JOHN

Within every word lie a thousand others, and a million anxieties in each stroke of my pen.

ABIGAIL

Is that so?

JOHN

Of course.

ABIGAIL

I must not grumble like this. I know your time is not your own. But I yearn for . . . More.

JOHN

As do I. As do I.

Affectionately yours, John Adams.

Short beat. JOHN goes dark.

ABIGAIL

Now as to Boston, they say that their provisions are low. The beef is gone, all the fresh supplies are obliged to go to the sick and wounded. I hope famine will not be added to war on our doorstep as well.

Did you know, next Wednesday is thirteen weeks since you went away this second time? I do not feel easy for more than two days without writing to you. To seek to know how you do.

I have often heard that fear makes people loving. Do you think it true? Adieu, "Portia"

ABIGAIL goes dark.

JOHN spotlights, he is gathering his things.

JOHN

We have been adjourned until September!

We have taken measures for the powder which I hope to share with you in person.

We ought to have established a government for this country, a treasury, but ... nothing.

ABIGAIL spotlights. Urgent.

ABIGAIL

John!

JOHN

A legislative -

ABIGAIL

I have news, Dearest Friend.

JOHN

A judicial branch-

ABIGAIL

I bring you sad news, which will afflict you.

JOHN

Is it . . . Elihu?

ABIGAIL

Yes.

He lies dangerously sick. His life is despaired of. Your mother is with him and in great misery.

JOHN

Elihu. . .

ABIGAIL

Your return, dearest friend, would be a pleasure I could not express. If only you were here.

JOHN

Elihu . . .

ABIGAIL

John, it cannot be borne! They had not half the ammunition they needed.

JOHN

There are only three powder mills in this province and only two in New York, but they have no nitrate. I wonder cannot Massachusetts prepare both?

ABIGAIL

Not half what was needed.

Lights change.

Music interlude.

JOHN stands. ABIGAIL stands.

JOHN

I followed my youngest brother as they bore his body to the grave. He had commanded a company of militia outside Boston and there taken with dysentery --

ABIGAIL

It is epidemic in that camp.

JOHN

He leaves a young widow and three children.

ABIGAIL

Greatly lamented by all.

JOHN

And none so more than by me.

ABIGAIL

You knew the excellence of his heart, John. We all did.

JOHN nods. Slight beat.

*JOHN adjusts and seems to change.
ABIGAIL too.*

*JOHN returns to Philadelphia and ...
politics and writes of his leaving.*

JOHN

Politics are a path among red hot coals. Who then would run about barefoot among them?

ABIGAIL

Well, John, someone must.

JOHN

I must study politics and war that my sons--

ABIGAIL

And daughters!

JOHN

That my sons -- and daughters - may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons -

ABIGAIL

And daughters!

JOHN

--and daughters ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, commerce, and agriculture to give their children a right to study painting, poetry and music.

ABIGAIL

Yes.

JOHN

Yes. I seemed to want to delay.

ABIGAIL

Yes.

JOHN

The longer time spent with you the better for me.

ABIGAIL

And for me and your children.

JOHN

I waited until I could wait no more to go.

ABIGAIL

It was a heavy day for leave taking, John.

JOHN

That day was too soon.

ABIGAIL

Is there a dearer name than friend? Think on it and tell me.

JOHN

I will, my dearest friend.

JOHN goes dark. Beat.

ABIGAIL marks a change, vexed now.

ABIGAIL

John! I have met with some very ill treatment. In this day of distress for our Boston friends.

George Trott--you remember Mr. Trott? He and his family have had to remove to Braintree because of the fighting.

Trott asked me if he could have use of the house next door so that his family might have shelter. As you know your tenant, Mr. Hayden, has temporary residence there.

I sent for Mr. Hayden, to request him to move. I am mortified to say, Mr. Hayden refused! I have moved my things from that place to accommodate the Trott family, and still Hayden refuses to move anything at all.

He said, "you are turning me out of doors, Missus," and that if you "the Mister" were here, well, you were more of a gentleman.

He positively tells me he will not move despite the distress of the Trott family, the fighting, the trouble! All the art of man or woman will not move this obstinate man!

ABIGAIL exasperated, gets up, paces.

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

I had hard work . . . to suppress my temper. I now must ask you to give me orders whether his things may be removed into the other part of the house --whether Hayden consents or not.

I will be much ... much mortified if you do not support me. I told the old man that you will support me and he - he-replied that cannonballs shall not move him!

ABIGAIL looks out, possibly at Mr. Hayden, returns.

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

To think what distress the people of Boston endure yet this, this, wretch will not remove just a few of his things for this refugee family—

ABIGAIL takes a breath.

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

I feel too angry to make any more of this business in this letter. I am most sincerely yours, Abigail. Adams.

ABIGAIL underlines the signature.

ABIGAIL goes dark.

JOHN spotlights

JOHN

My dearest friend. . . my dear . . . you will not believe what I encountered when I arrived in this town once more.

I saw Mr. Dickinson on the street. And he . . . cut me. Yes, it seems I am not to be on speaking terms with him or others of his friends.

JOHN reflects.

JOHN (CONT'D)

The King in his majesty has caught our delegates much like I would catch a pony, by holding out an empty hat as if it were full of corn!

Independence is a frightful thing to some. Dickinson shows that. It throws delicate persons into fits to look it in the face.

ABIGAIL spotlights

ABIGAIL

I read the news -- if you can call it news.

JOHN

Do not imagine from all this that I am in the dumps. I am... far otherwise.

ABIGAIL

(reading a letter)

I too have my correspondents. "I saw this profound and enlightened patriot walk our streets alone--"

That is you is it not? "alone, an object of nearly universal detestation--"

JOHN

(shrugs almost in enjoyment)

Well, if they say so -

ABIGAIL

How is it to be borne?

JOHN

All great changes are irksome to the human mind. We must allow for a great deal of the ridiculous, much of the melancholy, and yes, some of the marvelous. Is not that true?

ABIGAIL

Should I chance to meet this Mister Dickinson from Pennsylvania, I shall cut him the same!

JOHN

Thank you, my dear.

ABIGAIL

(back to her original appeal)

And you must order Mr. Hayden to remove his things!

ABIGAIL goes dark.

Beat. JOHN has a change.

JOHN

(holding up his journal)

I keep this journal as you know for the eyes of my dearest friend alone. That is, you, my Portia. Just small things I note and I know that when you read them, a secret smile may flicker across your face--

ABIGAIL's voice is heard.

ABIGAIL (VO)

My dearest friend . . .

JOHN

Here is one entry to delight you --

(Reading)

"An English gentleman was with us, you might call him a man of discernment and refinement - "

ABIGAIL spotlights.

ABIGAIL

I must tell you there is sickness here.

JOHN

And this penetrating, discerning, refined gentleman thought Mrs. Adams - yes, Mrs. Adams he said so specifically --

ABIGAIL

Our house is a hospital in every part. First our farm boy, Isaac, was unwell with a dysentery. Two days later I was seized with it.

JOHN

Mrs. Adams was the most accomplished lady he had seen since he came out of England.

ABIGAIL

(retelling with sorrow)

Then our little Tommy. And he lies terribly ill now. Then cousin Patty was seized. And Mr. Trott and one of his children--

JOHN

And heartily agreed with him! There is no finer or more discerning!

ABIGAIL

(more)

Mrs. Randall, you remember the Randalls from nearby but a mile, she has one child that is not expected to live out the night. And Deacon Armstrong too.

JOHN

These compliments are well so deserved; I know vanity may show its head, but it is delightful to here. Down vanity.

ABIGAIL

Now Cousin Patty is ill. Dr Tufts tells us he has sixty and seventy patients now sick with this disorder. I can only see that it was brought here by the evacuation of Boston--

ABIGAIL goes quiet.

*JOHN looks through his letters.
Nothing.*

JOHN

I have not received one missive, my friend, not one, from anybody. As always in these absent lines my anxieties grow.

(change)

And as to the ill treatment you received from our farmhand, Hayden, it is not to be endured. I sent a warning to him to go out of the house immediately.

Slight beat.

ABIGAIL

So sickly and so mortal a time the oldest man does not remember.

JOHN

Tell him I mean it. It shall not be tolerated!

ABIGAIL

My letter will be only a bill of mortality. Mrs. Randall has lost her daughter. I know of eight this week who have been buried in this town.

Eighteen have been buried in the other parish since you left us, three and four funerals in a day for many days.

JOHN

I have spent the day, believe it or not, proposing in our chamber. A motion to prepare plans to intercept British sloops which are on their way to our shores with arms.

ABIGAIL

My dear. . .

JOHN

It was tabled.

ABIGAIL

Our Patsy is bad, she cannot keep anything down that she eats or drinks. Two of the children, John and Charles, I have sent from the house to keep them away from the sickness. Precautions we are taking. Every one.

JOHN

They called it the maddest scheme ever imagined. From me! Now I am mad as well as obnoxious!

Someone said, talking of taking on Great Britain at sea would be "quixotism." Ah, an aficionado of Senor Cervantes.

ABIGAIL

So much illness. So much. And now with scarcity of medicines.

JOHN

My time is spent upon the seacoast. I have a confident opinion of our seamen.

ABIGAIL

My heart is heavy, my dearest friend. I know not what other calamities will befall us.

Your sister-in-law lost her youngest child last night with this disorder. She did not keep herself to her house and rooms, but nursed the sick, as I do.

JOHN

Abigail, think of it: if our sailors were let loose upon the ocean, they will begin naval operations to the relief of our country's wants as well as the distress of the enemy.

ABIGAIL

Where are you, my dearest friend? We live in expectation that our dear cousin Patsy will not continue many hours.

JOHN

I am here employed upon a need to create - yes create-

ABIGAIL

I know not how to say it, but . . .

JOHN

A navy!

ABIGAIL

--we cannot bear the house now. We must keep it washed, constantly cleansing with hot vinegar on the floors and doors.

JOHN

Think of it, Abigail, this day will be remembered as the true origin of the American Navy.

We must now turn our efforts to securing gunpowder! We must make it! And I am determined never to have it out of my mind as it must be had.

JOHN goes dark

Slight beat.

ABIGAIL

Tis allotted to me to go to the sick and almost dying bed of my mother and stay twelve hours with her and then return home to cousin Patsy who is now become so putrid a mass as scarcely to be able for anyone to do their duty towards her.

John? I am alone, my dearest friend.

ABIGAIL makes a change.

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

I have just now come from attending Patsy to the grave. She has lain five weeks, the most ghastly object my eyes ever held, so loathsome and pitiable. She made the fourth corpse that was this day committed to the ground.

Oh, my dearest friend, I am weary. I pray the whole land shall be cleansed of this sickness!

ABIGAIL makes another change.

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, John. How can I tell you, oh my bursting heart, that my dear mother has left me. This day about five o'clock she left this world. Blessed spirit, where are you?

ABIGAIL goes dark.

Beat.

JOHN spotlights

JOHN

I received your letter and hope that Patsy is soon to recover. I never had the least intimation that any of my family was ill. I thought of setting off immediately for Braintree and determined the distance and time needed would make my help futile.

The state of public affairs.. these debates . . . and gunpowder. The need is immediate and incessant.

We have contracted for the manufacture of powder, by which they will make a profit of twelve thousand pounds, without any risk at all!

Such a rage for profit here, it begs my understanding. When this cause is the best idea of man why must profit prevail?

JOHN finds a letter. Opens the seal.

Reads a few lines.

JOHN looks out. Bows his head.

JOHN (CONT'D)

This letter, from our neighbor Willoughby.

(starts to speak, stops))

Your mother I fear has left us. So many deaths I read of here. So many. Please send to me the news of you, my dearest friend.

ABIGAIL spotlights

ABIGAIL

John. I have not been composed enough. Scarcely enough to write to you since last Sabbath, when in the bitterness of my soul I wrote a few confused lines.

It was that morning I went into my mother's room with a cup of tea in my hand, raised her head to give it to her, she swallowed a few drops, gasped, and fell back upon her pillow, opened her eyes with a look that pierced my heart. It was the eagerness of the last look which I shall never forget.

JOHN

I fear you are in much pain and your fond companion is here a prisoner of neither moving forward nor going back.

ABIGAIL

I pray to find a reason for the Lord, who has allowed one wound to heal yet makes another to bleed afresh in just six weeks.

Six weeks, six weeks, John, I count five of my near connections laid in the grave.

JOHN

My best friend. . . my dear one . . . oh to be with you now. But that is not to be.

Slight beat.

ABIGAIL

(rallying herself)

Your aunt died at Milton about ten days ago with the dysentery.

JOHN stops. Listens.

Remembers his aunt and the others who have died.

JOHN

Why so is it that we are born to live long ourselves that we must bury our parents and many who are younger. I have lost. . . lost a parent, a child, a brother and now an aunt. They have gone before me. Our lives are not in our own power I see.

ABIGAIL

Oh, to be near you again.

JOHN

I hurt for the loss of your mother - for nobody more than my children. She was the example I have forever relied upon in my own mind for the education of our little swarm. Our children are the better for the hand of their grandmother.

ABIGAIL

It makes my heart ache to see my father.

JOHN

Your mother had a clear and penetrating understanding, and a profound judgment, as well as an honest, and a friendly, and a charitable heart.

ABIGAIL

He said to me the other day, Child, I see your mother, go to what part of the house I will.

JOHN

Her talents and virtues brought happiness that will be cherished in our children.

ABIGAIL

"Yeah, though he slay me I will trust in Him."

JOHN

I pause to think what must be ahead. Whatever He is preparing for us, dear friend, let us receive.

ABIGAIL

I shall think never to be wedded to the world, so uncertain are all its enjoyment

JOHN

We have no security against calamities here.

ABIGAIL

No, dear friend, we do not.

JOHN

This planet in its region is all we have.

ABIGAIL

Is all.

JOHN

Good night, dear friend.

ABIGAIL

Good night. Good. Night.

Music interlude as JOHN blows out candle.

ABIGAIL blows out her candle.

Then . . .

JOHN spotlights.

JOHN

Government.

ABIGAIL spotlights.

ABIGAIL

Boston has been delivered!

JOHN

It is time. It is time to think upon it.

(taking out paper)

We should have none of Kings and Courts and sycophants. Kings have wronged, but have not the mob as well?

ABIGAIL

If I could but come to you now. I feel your mind at work, but on what endeavor.

JOHN stops. Shakes his head.

JOHN

The time here comes crashing down with trifles or weighty war matters. Agriculture to shipping to Indian affairs and each requires debate and resolutions and more debate.

And I had thought the time was right for independence.

ABIGAIL

Almost 12 months. You know this costs us.

JOHN

But it comes in dribbles and drabbles and time, treasure, and blood.

ABIGAIL

Time and distance. Twelve long months, John.

JOHN

But by heaven we must come to it at last. I know it. Independence. I know it.

ABIGAIL

And I know that those of us who love you, long to see you.

JOHN

If you only knew what goes on here.

ABIGAIL

Or you, here.

JOHN

The hot work continues with war. And government.

ABIGAIL

I do so want to see Boston now. But there is smallpox there.

JOHN

I must ask you to keep us acquainted with everything that you need - men, money, arms, tents, forage--

ABIGAIL

(answering each)

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

JOHN

And the state of the smallpox.

ABIGAIL

I fear it.

JOHN

(back to his treatise on government)

The most dangerous part is to glide from under the old government into a contented submission to new.

Is the subject too dry? I should hope not. To me, no romance is more entertaining.

ABIGAIL

This I know too well. It is your heart's desire.

JOHN

(writing earnestly)

"Thoughts on Government."

ABIGAIL

Your thoughts. Abundant as we know.

JOHN

Kings have done much wrong, yes, but I should say the mob not less--

ABIGAIL

(tossing down her quill)

Oh, to tear down this distance and to stand before you once again, sitting with you as you write.

JOHN

Abigail?

ABIGAIL

Yes, John?

JOHN

(slightly annoyed)

My thoughts. You asked me for my thoughts.

ABIGAIL

I did so, yes. But it is evening here--

JOHN

Shall we agree and allow this truth, that all men . . . that all men --
--bear a ferocious monster within their passions when unrestrained.

ABIGAIL

And how so?

JOHN

We have evidence everywhere that they will murder like weasels for the pleasure of murdering.

ABIGAIL

I long to hear--

JOHN

Let government act as bridles for them!
(likes that, underlines for emphasis)

Bridles!

ABIGAIL

(astounded)

John!

A Beat.

A change to night.

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

On this night, at this far distance, on our farm, in our Massachusetts, I long to hear that you have declared an independency--

JOHN

As we wrangle and debate, we come to it, inch by inch.

ABIGAIL

And you speak of government now?

JOHN

Yes, my treatise. I shall send--

ABIGAIL

Well then, remember. The. Ladies.
(underlining)

The. Ladies.

JOHN

We imagine here a legislative, an executive, and a judicial power to comprehend the whole government.

ABIGAIL

You must be more generous than your ancestors. Do not put such power into the hands of husbands.

JOHN

It is by balancing each of these powers against the other two that the tyranny in human nature can alone be checked.

ABIGAIL

Check tyranny, yes. And with it the tyranny of husbands. What better--

JOHN

If we arm a power above it and below, both able to say when it grows mad, "Maniac! Keep within your limits!"

ABIGAIL

That your sex is naturally tyrannical admits of no dispute, but if attention is not paid to the ladies we are determined--

JOHN

No matter how determined -

ABIGAIL

We are determined to foment a rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no representation.

JOHN

The people the representative assembly should be in miniature an exact portrait of the people at large.

ABIGAIL

And thus, I desire you, John, to remember the ladies who themselves make up a portrait of the people at large.

JOHN gathers up papers into a collection.

JOHN

I am delighted to send you these many pages of my thoughts, my many thoughts, on government. Some ten sheets.

ABIGAIL

Write me. Write ME. I dine on your letters and savor your words.

JOHN

This work shall be set to type and sent to all our provinces I am told.

ABIGAIL

I long to read your thoughts and how you have honored the ladies--

JOHN

Well, as to your code of the women. . .

ABIGAIL

Yes?

JOHN

We are told that our struggle has loosened the bands of general order everywhere--children disobey, students trouble their elders, and now I hear of the ladies and their discontent.

ABIGAIL

You know as well as I that while the husbands are thus away and occupied in such great things, it falls to the women to make things work. And women will make them work, John. It's in our natures.

JOHN

Revolution in the household, by God, what next?

They both finish their letters.

JOHN goes dark.

Musical interlude.

*ABIGAIL picks up her quill again.
Looks about a quiet house.*

ABIGAIL

A quiet night, no alarms. No cannon.

Sound of the night outside seeps in.

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

Nabby is sick. With the mumps.

*ABIGAIL looks off. Rises, exits.
Then rushes right back.*

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

Johnny has the mumps.

*ABIGAIL looks off. Rises, exits.
Then returns quickly.*

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

Charles, too. Has the mumps.

ABIGAIL picks up her sewing.

A few stitches. Puts sewing down.

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

I know not what the reason, but I have had no letter from you.

ABIGAIL waits, possibly expecting a letter to drop from the sky.

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

My days are full of sickness. As you know. My nights. My nights are tortured.

I fear you may be sick and unable to write. Are you sick and unable to write?

(beat)

No, our kind friends in Philadelphia would surely send me word. Write me, John, write me. Your letters are my food by day and my rest by night.

ABIGAIL goes dark.

JOHN spotlights.

*It is early morning in Philadelphia.
It has been a long night.*

JOHN

My dear, I concluded to borrow a little time from my sleep and have written--

(counting the papers)

--six, seven, eight, nine, ten sheets about government!

(looking at the handiwork)

If I may be so bold, I might offer an opinion of this prodigious work.

Of course, I would only venture that opinion to you, my dearest friend.

(looking the sheets)

I think it right and proper and well said. If I say so myself.

What will come of this, time will discover as it goes under the typesetters and will be distributed to North Carolina, New Jersey, Virginia, of course, and other provinces.

JOHN addresses the packet of sheets, makes an edit, and puts it aside.

JOHN goes dark.

ABIGAIL spotlights.

ABIGAIL

At last, you rouse yourself to write me. And send not of your health, not tender words, but a pamphlet . . . of government.

I am astonished that in these many pages with many recommendations of our laws and government you have forgot one thing.

JOHN spotlights.

JOHN

You may notice that this set of recommendations--

ABIGAIL

One thing.

JOHN

--neglects your small suggestion.

ABIGAIL

The ladies are nowhere within.

JOHN

They are not.

ABIGAIL

I tell you this as your dearest friend, this will be seen as a disservice to those who are patriots like as well as you but who still have no voice.

JOHN

Be that as it may -

ABIGAIL

Do we not suffer as the men? We may not fight but we suffer cruelly, nonetheless.

JOHN

Abigail -

ABIGAIL

Why are the ladies ignored?

JOHN

We are already told that our struggle loosens traditions, the bands of community everywhere. Your letter was the first intimation that another tribe among us are discontented.

ABIGAIL

The ladies, John--

JOHN

I think on it and I am aghast.

ABIGAIL

If not now, when? The country is uprising and we are to set up our own world as we like it. If not now for the ladies, when?

ABIGAIL goes dark.

JOHN

Too much seems to happen here. Twenty things at once and none are the great subject of independence.

Musical interlude.

Then, ABIGAIL spotlights!

ABIGAIL
(definitively)

Smallpox.

JOHN

Independence . . . it is whispered more openly now, but delay and then more delay prevents its discussion.

ABIGAIL

It is smallpox again. The fear of it, John.

JOHN

Our time here is consumed with trifles!

ABIGAIL

Several in town have broke out with it. Only one thing will prevent me from going to Boston to be inoculated against the disease with our children. And that is smallpox.

JOHN

I was ripe for explicit declarations twelve months ago. But still, we debate on naval arrangements, revenue, coins and currencies, manufactures--

ABIGAIL

I should run you in debt for it for these new inoculations.

JOHN

--But come it must -- though this body nibbles and quibbles and dribbles and wastes time, treasure and blood. Come it must!

ABIGAIL

You promised to come see me in May. Or June. Or was that July? It was so long ago.

JOHN

I live a life of a man in a barrel spiked with nails. Was anyone so vexed and misunderstood?

ABIGAIL

The children ask, "when is Pa come home?" I have no answer.

JOHN

I know. I yearn to hear your voices.

ABIGAIL

But then why?

JOHN

Government!

ABIGAIL

Yes, government.

JOHN

Every colony must institute a government! I say this in all clearness. All must be confederated together in a solemn contract. They must be declared free and independent states!

These things once finished, I shall think I have answered the end of my creation. And I may go freely to my home!

ABIGAIL

A year it has been. The idea of it dissolves my philosophy!

ABIGAIL goes dark.

JOHN

Today we have lost a delegate to the smallpox. He would not be inoculated. It is unbelievable his temper was so set against what has proven so useful. He said he must take it in the natural way. Meaning the pox itself. And so, risk death. And so, he died. Send word.

Musical interlude.

ABIGAIL spotlights. She is up and about.

ABIGAIL

John! I write from Boston where I yesterday arrived. I and all four of our little ones inoculated for the smallpox.

Many stopped to watch and wondered at all of us being inoculated at once, even the children. I know others had the courage to do so as well.

JOHN

Parliament again insults us with the American Prohibitory Act!

ABIGAIL

We wait for the breakout. They say it is a small thing.

JOHN

Despite our supplications, this odious act signed by the King, casts the thirteen colonies out of royal protection. With these words they throw our harbors open to attack by foreign powers.

ABIGAIL

I dread it but I know this inoculation is nothing to the disease.

JOHN

My God, think of it, this act makes us independent!

ABIGAIL

It is upon me. A most excruciating pain in my head and every limb.

JOHN

I stay on tenterhooks to know how you fare, dearest friend. And the children.

ABIGAIL

Now pain free. With all my sufferings I had but one eruption—the very model of the inoculation. Johnny has it exactly as one would wish. Nabby's eruption was trifling. Tommy has dozed out and is very joyful.

JOHN

Well, I rejoice for this news.

ABIGAIL

I cannot get the smallpox to operate upon Charlie.

JOHN

I feel, dear friend, like a savage for being here, but I cannot leave when the time for Independence grows so close.

ABIGAIL

I have had the inoculation repeated on Charles.

JOHN

News at last to cheer you!

I find through all the colonies they have plans resembling my thoughts on government. The colonies are turning their eyes to it.

ABIGAIL

I pray you take the inoculation and preserve your health.

JOHN

The question comes now to a declaration. How to put it into words. I return to the fray, but you cannot make thirteen clocks strike precisely alike at the same second.

ABIGAIL finds a packet of letters as she returns to the farm.

ABIGAIL

Your packet of letters, John!

JOHN

We have established a committee to write the declaration. Myself, Dr. Franklin, Mr. Roger Sherman of Connecticut, Livingston of New York and the noble Jefferson, who I have never heard utter more than three sentences together this whole of congress.

ABIGAIL

A profusion of blooms!

JOHN

Mr. Jefferson has the reputation of a masterly pen. And it is true.

ABIGAIL

I read your words with a voracious hunger only acquired after months of bread and water.

JOHN

However, Mr. Jefferson desired me to make the draft, which I declined forthwith. You may think me foolish—

ABIGAIL

Your pen is mighty, too, John. Do not forget that.

JOHN

But I declined for the obvious reasons: he is a Virginian and I from Massachusetts; that he was a southern man and I a northern one; and truly, I had been so obnoxious for zeal in promoting the measure, that any draft of mine would undergo more censure and criticism than any one of his.

ABIGAIL

Your reasoning makes sense, let the main part come from Virginia.

JOHN

But the main reason, truly, is that I hold the elegance of his pen in high regard.

I insisted, without hesitation, and Mr. Jefferson took the committee's notes away and within two days produced. . . a masterpiece!

ABIGAIL

First, I read your letters for news. That fine voice I know so well.

JOHN

I have read and reread the draft. My dear, it is brilliant.

ABIGAIL

Then I re-read your letters for detail and gossip, after all I am not there to see and hear so you are my eyes and ears.

JOHN

And now every post rolls in with "Independence" in their hearts.

In Pennsylvania, committees from every county vote for independence. And others. But in New York, not so much as a dram of independence.

ABIGAIL

Then I read again to savor just for myself alone.

JOHN

Now turn all the wheels towards liberty!

JOHN goes dark.

Musical interlude gathering steam.

ABIGAIL looks through letters.

ABIGAIL

I follow the news you send letter by letter.
(picks up a letter; scans it;
calls out)

A resolution for independency!
(reading further)

Oh, only to be debated . . .
(reading further; calling)

No, no, there has been a resolution made--
(notices something)

But . . . it was referred to the committee of the whole congress.
(reads another letter)

Here it is then! Here it is! . . . Oh, it is postponed until the first of July.
(looking among the letters,
not finding it at first)

John, you do not finish the project? Does our new ship founder?
(finds the July 1 letter)

Ah, here it is!

July first, 1776.

This morning was assigned for the greatest debate of all . . .
. to take up the declaration.
(reading)

"Mr. Dickenson of Delaware, who remains against independence, was first. His speech combined all the reasons against the resolution in one burst of eloquence. I do not agree with him, but Dickinson sets a fine example for statemen. When no member rose to answer him. I silently prayed 'don't divide, don't divide.' Then, after waiting// in hopes of someone less obnoxious than myself . . ."

JOHN picks up her words.

JOHN (VO)

(over ABIGAIL)

--in hopes of someone less obnoxious than myself, I rose at last to speak.

ABIGAIL goes dark.

JOHN spotlights

JOHN (CONT'D)

(standing in chamber)

The American cause stands upon the character of the people. The decree has gone forth and cannot be recalled that a more equal liberty than in other parts of the earth must be established in America.

I am aware of the toil and blood and treasure that will cost us to maintain this declaration. Yet through all the gloom I see the rays of ravishing light; posterity will triumph in this day's decision!

Before God, I believe the hour is come. My judgment approves this measure, and my whole heart is in it.

All that I have, and all that I am, and all that I hope, in this life, I am now ready here to stake upon it; and I leave off as I began, that live or die, survive or perish, I am for the Declaration. Let the choice be unanimous.

Musical underscoring here.

ABIGAIL spotlights.

Faint bells then louder throughout.

ABIGAIL

John! I went into King Street to hear the proclamation for independence read from the balcony of the State House. It was beautiful. With tears I heard it. The children clapping.

JOHN

(standing, reading)

"In Congress July 4th 1776 the unanimous Declaration of the thirteen United States of America"-

ABIGAIL

Think of that. A unanimous declaration. Think of this day!

JOHN

"When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another . . ."

ABIGAIL

Yes, that is right and proper to assert for the world. But do not leave out the most wonderous words, the dearest words.

JOHN

"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal"

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal"

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

I shall remember hearing those words for the first time!

And John, the King's arms were toppled! Every vestige of him burnt. Thus, ends royal authority and all the people shall say, Amen.

JOHN

Amen.

ABIGAIL

The celebrations lasted till nightfall.

JOHN

And it will be celebrated, by succeeding generations, as the great anniversary festival, as the day of deliverance. With all the pomp and parades--

ABIGAIL

And shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other.

JOHN

It is done at last!

Musical interlude, church bells, etc.

Several days later. JOHN packs his papers ready to leave.

JOHN (CONT'D)

I wish to be relieved from Philadelphia forever. Go home I will even if I leave our Massachusetts delegation without a member.

ABIGAIL

We will make a feast to welcome you!

JOHN

I am determined to go home even if I must give a random man a pension out of my own private funds to take my place. But I will go home!

ABIGAIL

Oh, my absent friend, my heart yearns for a true meeting at last!

JOHN

While it is necessary for Congress to be sitting, it does not need me.

ABIGAIL

An apparition was seen one evening this week hovering about this house, which very much resembled you.

How it should ever enter the head of an apparition to assume a form like yours, I cannot divine.

JOHN

I vow to give you as many kisses and as many hours of your company after nine o'clock as I please. You may charge them to my account.

ABIGAIL

Certainly, it would not be out of character to say, my thoughts are often . . . well... often.

Musical interlude.

Lights on both ABIGAIL and JOHN.

JOHN

My dearest friend, I ask you special favor, to tell posterity one truth for me.

ABIGAIL

Aye, friend, what is it?

JOHN

It is this: I love my wife and I have left her to serve my country, where I do not find anybody I like so well.

ABIGAIL

What shall I say to that, but . . . remember me, dearest friend.

JOHN

Posterity! You will never know how much your freedom cost the present generation.

ABIGAIL

They must make good use of it. But will they?

JOHN

If not, I shall repent it in heaven that I ever took half the pains and toils I have.

That we took . . .

ABIGAIL

I wish for peace and tranquility. All my desire and all my ambition are to be esteemed and loved by my partner, to join with him in the education and instruction of our little ones, to sit under our own vines in peace, liberty, and safety.

JOHN

And the war presses in on all sides. I was born to be in such times but I feel I am not made for them.

ABIGAIL

Not true, John. You were born at the right time.

And made for these times. And the times were born for you to make of them what will be.

Music up.

Lights change.

For the first time, Abigail and John are together.

ABIGAIL (CONT'D)

--Your most affectionate, Abigail Adams.

JOHN offers his arm.

JOHN

--Yours, John Adams

ABIGAIL takes his arm. They stand in the light.

Voices as at the opening, repeating, repeating...

"Dearest, dearest friend, my dearest friend, dear friend..." Fade out..

END OF PLAY

See epilogue following

This epilogue describes what happens to John and Abigail after 1776.

Can be projected or perhaps spoken or put into a the production's program.

EPILOGUE:

Congress sent John Adams to France in 1777, where he joined Benjamin Franklin and others in the successful effort to enlist France in the cause of American Independence.

John and Abigail remained devoted to each other and continued their correspondence through their long marriage and many separations.

John Adams was elected the first Vice President of the United States and the second President of the United States.

He lost his re-election in 1800 to the man who drafted the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson.

Abigail and John were the first residents of the newly constructed President's Mansion (the White House).

Abigail hung her laundry to dry in what is now the East Room of the White House.

Abigail died October 28, 1818. John lived another eight years without his beloved wife.

John Adams died July 4, 1826.

John lived to see his oldest son, John Quincy Adams, become the sixth President of the United States.

Abigail and John left behind a trove of correspondence, books, and other writings.

It was, indeed, an incandescent match!