

## “Gunpowder Joe”: Envisioning the Play

From middle January until early February 2017 the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble (BTE) performed a new play by Anthony Clarvoe entitled, “*Gunpowder Joe: Joseph Priestley, Pennsylvania, and the American Experiment*”. At the symposium following the January 22 performance those involved in the play assembled on stage to answer questions from the audience. In a similar fashion, the playwright, director and four of the artistic collaborators were asked to describe their vision for the play.



BTE cast\* for *Gunpowder Joe*, January 17 performance



Collaborators\*\* and cast at January 22 symposium.

**Anthony Clarvoe** (playwright): "We knew we wanted the play to reflect at least some of Priestley's many groundbreaking achievements. So the script was built in part around the presence of chemistry and electricity demonstrations, a sermon, and his political writing. We also made the decision to build the characters as three households: Joseph and Mary Priestley and their friend Thomas Cooper; John and Abigail Adams and their colleague Timothy Pickering; and Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. The final structural principle was to reflect the scandalous journalism of the time by having two opposing newspaper editors, William ‘Peter Porcupine’ Cobbett and Benjamin Franklin Bache, supply conflicting and often libelous narration."

**Laurie McCants** (director): "Anthony and I made what seemed to be a sort of arbitrary choice as we began our research to focus on Priestley's time in Pennsylvania. At first, that felt like the wrong choice, considering that most of his scientific discoveries happened while he was in England. But then we began to realize what an incredible time it was in American history. It was an eye-opener to see how Priestley got completely embroiled in those seminal fights between his friends Adams and Jefferson, how both founders vied for Priestley's support, and how threatened Priestley was under the Alien and Sedition Acts. I always knew I wanted a ‘contemporary feel’ to the style of production. I had no idea when I first embarked on this project how contemporary the issues Priestley faced in coming here would be! They're the exact same issues we face now as Americans—What are American values? Who will we welcome and whom will we exclude? What are the roles of science and religion in a democracy? How much dissent can a democracy withstand?"

\***BTE cast** for *Gunpowder Joe*, from left: Andrew Hubatsek as John Adams; Jubilith Moore as Abigail Adams and William Cobbett; Richard Cannaday as Benjamin Franklin Bache; Elizabeth Dowd as Mary Priestley and Timothy Pickering; James Goode as Joseph Priestley; Irene Combs-Cannaday as Child; Daniel Roth as Thomas Jefferson and Justice of the Peace; Amber Williams as Madison and Sally Hemings and Eric Wunsch as Thomas Cooper.

\*\* **Collaborators** for production of *Gunpowder Joe*: Anthony Clarvoe is an award winning playwright from Berkeley, CA. The play will soon be published by Broadway Play Publishing, Inc. Laurie McCants is a founding member of BTE. Steve Gilliland is a musician and artist from Bloomsburg. Kelly Knox, Elaine Williams and Paula Davis are professors in the Theatre and Dance Department of Bucknell University. Heath Hansum (lighting) is a member of the Theatre and Dance Department of Bucknell University. Lena Miskulin (design) and Eli Raeker-Jordan (static electricity machine) are Bucknell University students; J. Victoria Nation (projection design) is a Bennington College intern. Melissa Matthews (properties) and Jerry Matheny (stage manager) are on the staff of BTE



The musician is on stage as the cast sing (left) and dance (right) during the January 17 performance of *Gunpowder Joe*.

**Steve Gilliland** (composer/sound designer/musician): "Some of the musical content of the production was pulled directly from Joseph Priestley's time period and then reimagined in a contemporary style. Using a live-looping style musical element, we tried to capture Priestley's perpetual desire to experiment and pull order out of chaos. A lot of the darker and more dissonant passages were inspired by the overall friction of that time period, and the clashing worldviews exemplified in the show."

**Kelly Knox** (choreographer): "The movements were based on themes recurring in Priestley's life and in the play—whether it was gestures to represent thinking, working in the lab, or reference to the printing press to name a few. The actual walking patterns the actors used were based on late 18th century colonial dances and the geometric patterns they followed, taking advantage of the beautiful octagonal base and levels of Elaine Williams' set design."

**Elaine Williams** (set designer): "The octagonal platform was the first conceptual idea for movement and staging. The central platform, the lower platform, and the floor level adjacent to the octagon created three planes of concentric movement. The sides of the upper octagon suggested doorways, windows, walls without requiring actual physical objects. Three projection screens above the upstage sides repeated the shape. Projections suggested locale, place, and context for each scene through collage of documentary sources. The geometric pattern and warm stain colors of the parquet floor established the period style and gave beauty and order to the scenic environment."

**Paula Davis** (costume designer): "The costume designs for *Gunpowder Joe* were very much inspired by the time period and the real life characters portrayed in the play. The exciting challenge for this play was to create costumes for the actresses who played both male and female characters to be both period yet fluid in ability to transform the characters. This transformation was achieved through creating a base costume of vest, pants, and boots for all the characters, whether male or female and then actors who had to change just switched out coats for front opening gowns."



Standing on octagonal platforms with projection screens above, actors use hand gestures to simulate the printing process. .



Female actors are costumed in pants, vests and front opening gowns to transform into male roles.

Photographs of the January 17, 2017 performance of *Gunpowder Joe* courtesy of Bob Rush.