

Ben Franklin Invents America

By Will Huddleston

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this play to Gayle Cornelison who asked for it, and to Charles Shoemaker who was the first "Big Ben."

STORY OF THE PLAY

Ben Franklin has gathered his apprentices together to make a play that is the story of his life and how it parallels the beginning of a new country. The apprentices are inexperienced but very eager. One of the apprentices will get to play Ben as a boy, "Little Ben"; another will be the young and daring "Middle Ben." And of course, "Big Ben" will be played by Ben himself, who will also take a few other juicy roles. The great moments of Ben's life are enacted: the creation of "Silence Dogood," a fictional female who steals the heart of Ben's own brother; and "Poor Richard" who becomes an archetype that brings character to the people the world will come to know as "Americans." *Ben Franklin Invents America* illustrates Ben's career as printer, writer and publisher, as the most famous scientist of the century, and finally as the diplomat whose brilliant work saves the infant country that will come to be known as the United States of America.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

This play was first performed at the California Theatre Center in March 2006 (as *The Life and Times of Ben Franklin*) with the following cast:

Ben Franklin: Charlie Shoemaker

Apprentices: Ken Boswell, Justin Croninger, Stefan Fisher, Robbie Gay, Catherine Johnson, Katherine Reynolds

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Ensemble of 7 - 20+ actors

BIG BEN

6 APPRENTICES: George, John, Molly, Patience, Abigail, Sam.

ABIAH: Ben Franklin's mother.

JOSIAH: Ben Franklin's father.

UNCLE BENJAMIN: Josiah's brother.

FRANKLIN CHILDREN: Any number up to 17, including James, Josiah Junior, and Little Ben (played by Apprentice Abigail).

COTTON MATHER: Influential Puritan minister.

JOHN CHECKLEY: Controversial Puritan minister, played by Apprentice George.

SILENCE DOGOOD: A fictional woman.

MINISTER

DEATH

MIDDLE BEN: Played by Apprentice George.

WILLIAM BRADFORD: American Revolutionary printer.

DEBBIE: A lady in Philadelphia, later Ben's wife.

KEIMER: Printer in Philadelphia.

GOVERNOR KEITH: Played by Big Ben.

ASSOCIATES ONE and TWO Gov. Keith's associates.

SERVING GIRL

JOHN READ: Debbie's father (can be offstage voice).

TITAN LEEDS: Publisher of a popular almanac.

TOADY ONE and TWO

POOR RICHARD: The almanac character.

BRIDGET: Poor Richard's wife.

BILLY: Ben Franklin's young son.

SPENCER: Early scientist who demonstrated electric currents.

4 FRENCH INTELLECTUALS: Un, Duex, Trois, Quatre.

GEORGE III: Reigning monarch of England.

THREE PARLIAMENTARIANS

GENERAL GAGE: English general who loses the Battle of Concord.

SETTING /PROPS

The stage is a collection of barrels, benches and chairs arranged to suggest an 18th century print shop. Lines can be brought in on which to dry freshly printed news pages. There is a small elevated platform in the middle for presenting “tableaux” and other scenes of heightened theatricality. Included on the platform is a cloth door. Please see end of script for a complete list of props.

IMAGES

Performances of this show can be greatly enhanced with period images rear projected on a screen backing the little stage. A complete list of suggestions can be found at the end of the script. For your convenience, a ready-made CD of PowerPoint images is available from Eldridge Publishing, HiStage.com.

MUSIC / SOUND EFFECTS

Performances of this show also can be greatly enhanced with music selections at points noted in the script. Classical music, mostly by Handel, can be found from many sources. Modern music used in the premiere performance came from The Penguin Café. The “jawharp” solo from the 1978 French movie “Moliere” used during the Poor Richard's Almanac sequence worked very well too. For a complete list, please see the end of the script.

SFX include thunder, explosions and musket fire.

Scene 1 – Little Ben

(AT RISE: IMAGE #1 of Ben Franklin is projected. MUSIC CUE #1. The style of acting in the first scene should be very amateurish and presentational. APPRENTICE GEORGE appears. He is very formal, and very nervous. MUSIC OUT.)

APPRENTICE GEORGE: Benjamin Franklin. Ben Franklin was born in the year 1706. It was the beginning of a new century. That new century would be called the “Age of Enlightenment,” an age in which logic and reason would become as revered as religion. In America the Age of Enlightenment can be summed up in two words: Ben Franklin. *(IMAGE #2 of sky.)*

BIG BEN: *(Popping his head through the cloth door.)* Hello!

APPRENTICE GEORGE: Hello.

BIG BEN: I just happened to be passing by.

APPRENTICE GEORGE: *(In a wooden rhetorical style.)* Upon my soul, you bear a striking resemblance to the subject of my demonstration, the celebrated philosopher, Benjamin Franklin.

BIG BEN: I am Benjamin Franklin, indeed.

APPRENTICE GEORGE: But how can that be? Benjamin Franklin has been dead for over two hundred years.

BIG BEN: *(Indicating the audience.)* The world in which these young people live is part of my creation. Therefore, I can never be completely dead.

APPRENTICE GEORGE: The metaphysics of your statement staggers me. Will not this kind audience regard your philosophy as sentimental poppycock?

BIG BEN: I hope they do. Indeed, I confess that I've been devoured by worms for many a year now. However, we shall ignore that fact and I shall now seize upon this opportunity to present to the world one final invention.

APPRENTICE GEORGE: What invention would that be, Mister Franklin – the electric battery – a new stove?

BIG BEN: Those are my old inventions. This will be a new one. I'm going to make a play.

APPRENTICE GEORGE: Plays were invented two thousand years ago!

BIG BEN: This play will be presented in a new style – the American style – as straightforward and honest as a Quaker's chair. As I am a man of advanced years, I shall require some assistance in this endeavor. Including you, I have signed on these six apprentices. *(IMAGE #3 of apprentices.)*

(The APPRENTICES eagerly enter and line up.)

BIG BEN: *(Cont'd.)* Say hello, lads and ladies.

APPRENTICES: Hello, lads and ladies.

BIG BEN: American humor. Now, my apprentices, you are going to assist me in a play which will be the story of my life.

APPRENTICES: That we will, sir. And a very good play it is, too.

BIG BEN: Thank you.

APPRENTICES: You're welcome.

BIG BEN: *(To audience.)* We shall begin by re-creating my family. Music, please.

(IMAGE #4 of birthplace. MUSIC CUE #2. UNCLE BEN enters and mimes playing the violin. The set is arranged to indicate the parlor of Little Ben's house. A family tableau is created.)

BIG BEN: *(Cont'd.)* I present to you the Franklins, Puritan family of Boston. *(Referring to image.)* The house in which I was born.

ABIAH: It is a nice evening we are having at home, my dear husband, Josiah, father to Ben and my 16 other children.

JOSIAH: It is, indeed, Abiah, my dear and very prolific wife. And hello to you, Uncle Benjamin, after whom I named my son for a reason that I can no longer recall.

UNCLE BENJAMIN: Hello. *(HE stops playing his fiddle, though the music continues.)*

End of Freeview

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