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THE PLAY

Complicated, passionate and difficult, **John Quincy Adams (JQA)** was a brilliant diplomat, ineffectual one-term president and a congressman known for his eloquence, arrogance and integrity.

This unique, highly-theatrical play imagines key confrontations between JQA and some of America's most dynamic figures: **George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln**, his own father, **John Adams** and more.

At once provocative, haunting and hilarious, this power play challenges the way we think of our country, our government and ourselves.

JQA is generously sponsored by the **David Bruce Smith Foundation, Sue Henry and Carter Phillips** and **Susan and Steven Bralove**, and is the recipient of an **Edgerton Foundation New Play Award**.

WORLD-PREMIERE POWER PLAY

JQA

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY **AARON POSNER**

KOGOD CRADLE | MARCH 1 – APRIL 14, 2019

"I am only working so hard because there is so much work to do! And for reasons past my understanding, it has fallen to me to do it, and do it I shall! I will not fail my country, my colleagues nor myself." - JQA

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



AARON POSNER

“Part of what’s amazing about being able to look back at history isn’t really about the history but about how it speaks to today.” — Aaron Posner

Aaron Posner is an award-winning playwright, director and teacher. Posner grew up in Oregon, regularly seeing plays at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. In fourth grade he played Oberon in an adaptation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Though he first thought he wanted to be an actor, he discovered directing would give him the types of challenges he wanted.

Posner majored in performance studies at Northwestern University and attended the graduate program at Southern Methodist University. Ultimately, the SMU program was not a good fit for Posner, and he dropped out and moved to Philadelphia.

There, Posner, Terrence J. Nolen (a fellow Northwestern alum) and Amy Murphy founded the Arden Theatre Company in 1988. The first show produced was *Who Am I This Time?*, an adaptation by Posner of short stories by Kurt Vonnegut.

Posner has directed more than 150 productions at major regional theaters across the country. His Helen Hayes Award-winning play *Stupid Fucking Bird* was one of the 10 most produced plays in the country in 2015. Other plays include *Life Sucks* and *No Sisters* (both re-inventions of Chekhov), *District Merchants* (inspired by Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*), *The Chosen* and *My Name Is Asher Lev* (adapted from Chaim Potok). He currently lives outside of D.C. with his wife, actress Erin Weaver, and daughter.



Imagine that Arena Stage commissioned you to write a Power Play. What or whom would you write about? Write a pitch for your play, including a synopsis and why it would be an important contribution to telling the story of America

FROM THE DIRECTOR’S NOTEBOOK

In addition to being the playwright, Aaron Posner also serves as the director of this world-premiere production. While Posner has written many award-winning adaptations, *JQA* marks Posner’s first completely original play. Here he speaks to the challenge of simultaneously creating the narrative while crafting the production.

“We fight fairly often, the playwright and the director. Well, we don’t fight, but we do have to do some negotiating. What I’m looking at right now: there’s a scene that I think is a very good scene, but I’m not quite sure how it fits with the play and I’m not quite sure how to stage it. So, the director and I are having conversations. ‘Well who has to solve it?’ Do I need to solve this with my director hat on or am I solving it as a playwright?”



Photo of Joshua David Robinson, Jacqueline Correa, Phyllis Kay and Eric Hissom by C. Stanley Photography.

HISTORY ON STAGE

The life of John Quincy Adams sprawls across eight decades, spans major moments in U.S. history and brings Adams in contact with key American figures. How does a playwright and director distill this and make it engaging for audiences? In *JQA*, we see a multitude of characters played by only four actors of different ethnicities and ages. All of the actors remain onstage the entire time and each plays Adams at different moments. Scene and character shifts are indicated by the changing of costume pieces and specific actors stepping up onto the playing space in the center of the stage.

THE POWER OF POWER PLAYS



Photo of Joshua David Robinson, Phyllis Kay, Jacqueline Correa and Eric Hissom by Tony Powell.

Washington, D.C. is one of the most powerful and political cities in the world. Citizens from all over the globe travel to Washington, D.C. to examine and understand what it means to be American. In this rich political, cultural and historical landscape, Arena Stage Artistic Director Molly Smith has chosen to focus on power and politics with a major commissioning project called Power Plays.

When a theater commissions a play, it hires and pays a playwright to write a new play for the theater. Over 10 years, Arena Stage will commission 25 new plays and musicals – one for each decade of American history. These plays explore the people, events, culture and ideas that have shaped American identity. Power Plays are written by emerging and well-established playwrights, who represent the diverse fabric of America.

Power Plays fall into five categories or cycles:

- Presidential Voices
- African-American Voices
- Insider Voices
- Musical Theater Voices
- Women's Voices

JQA, which focuses on the life and conversations of the sixth U.S. president, John Quincy Adams, is part of the Presidential Voices cycle.

Other Power Plays have included *Camp David*, *The Originalist*, *Snow Child* and *Sovereignty*.

John Quincy Adams grew up during the American Revolution and watched the Battle of Bunker Hill from atop a nearby hill. He married Louisa Catherine Johnson in 1797, and they had four children. For 60 years Adam kept a diary that provides a detailed look at his life and the development of the United States.

BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN QUINCY ADAMS



John Quincy Adams was a diplomat, the secretary of state, a U.S. congressman and the sixth president of the United States. He was known for being cold and serious, but also as a skilled public servant who disliked strict party politics and aspired to be “a man of my whole country.”

Adams was born on July 11, 1767 in Braintree, Massachusetts. His parents were John Adams, the second U.S. president, and Abigail Adams.

Growing up, Adams traveled with his father on diplomatic trips to Europe, and later studied in European universities, where he became fluent in seven languages. He later studied at Harvard and set up a law practice in Boston. In 1790, Adams began writing a series of articles called *Discourses of Davila*, which, in part, defended President George Washington's policies. These articles earned him Washington's attention and resulted in Adams becoming the **U.S. Minister** to the Netherlands.

Adams was elected to the Massachusetts State Senate in 1802. Due to his growing dislike for party politics, he resigned from politics in 1808 and became a professor at Harvard. However, President James Madison appointed him the first U.S. Minister to Russia in 1809. When war broke out between Britain and the United States in 1812, President Madison appointed Adams as the U.S. Minister to England. Adams helped negotiate the Treaty of Ghent, which helped to end the War of 1812. Adams became secretary of state under President James Monroe in 1817.

In 1824 Adams was elected president. For the first time in U.S. history, none of the five candidates who ran for president received a majority electoral vote. Andrew Jackson won the electoral vote, but not by a wide enough margin. The 1824 election, then, was determined by a vote in the House of Representatives. Adams won. Because of this, Adams's presidency was marked by hostility from his opposition, who accused him of bargaining and corruption.

As president, Adams proposed a network of roads and canals to connect the growing country. He wanted the U.S. to become a leader in the arts and sciences by establishing a national university and astronomy observatory. However, he was not able to accomplish much. He lost his second run for the presidency to Andrew Jackson.

He was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1830, where he served as a congressman for Massachusetts for the remainder of his life. He continued to support freedom of speech, oppose slavery and advocate for universal education. His strong stances earned him the nickname “Old Man Eloquent.” In 1848, Adams had a stroke on the House floor. He died two days later.

U.S. Minister – a diplomat or representative to another country

CHARACTER GLOSSARY



ABIGAIL ADAMS, the second first lady and JQA's mother, was a well-read, intellectual woman. The extensive correspondence between her and her husband showed that she was a trusted and influential confidante. She was an early advocate for women's rights and the abolition of slavery.



LOUISA ADAMS was born in England to a wealthy family that later lost its fortune. She married JQA in 1797, though none of their parents approved of the match. She accompanied her husband to all his international postings. Intelligent and cultured, she was a popular hostess, but also suffered from depression and poor health.



JOHN ADAMS, JQA's father, was a diplomat, the first U.S. vice president and second U.S. president.



HENRY CLAY, JQA's secretary of state, was the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. Hailing from Kentucky, Clay was known for compromise. He ran for president against JQA in 1824. When that close election came to a vote in the House, Clay gave his support to JQA to keep Andrew Jackson from being elected. JQA then appointed Clay his secretary of state, which opponents called a "corrupt bargain."



FREDERICK DOUGLASS, one of history's greatest civil rights figures, escaped from slavery in 1838. Douglass became a prominent writer, speaker, activist, statesman, a leader of the abolitionist movement and an advocate for women's rights.



ANDREW JACKSON narrowly lost the 1824 presidential election to JQA though he won the popular vote. He soundly defeated JQA in the 1828 election and became the seventh U.S. president. Jackson was known for his military career, supporting state's rights and the expansion of slavery into the new U.S. territories, and enacting the forced migration of Native Americans (the Trail of Tears).

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!

RESOURCES

"Aaron Posner's Many Hats"
American Theatre | <http://tinyurl.com/aposner>

"Abigail Adams"
National First Ladies' Library | <http://tinyurl.com/aadamsbio>

"Frederick Douglass"
History.com | <http://tinyurl.com/fdouglassbio>

"Henry Clay"
Dept. of State: Office of Historian | <http://tinyurl.com/hclaybio>

"John Quincy Adams"
History.com | <https://tinyurl.com/jqabio>

"John Quincy Adams Biography"
The National Parks Service | <http://tinyurl.com/parksjq>

"John Quincy Adams"
Britannica.com | <http://tinyurl.com/britbiojq>

"Louisa Adams"
Britannica.com | <http://tinyurl.com/britbioladams>

"Past Presidents"
The White House | <http://whitehouse.gov>

"Working as a Director: An Interview with Aaron Posner"
Scholar Works | <http://tinyurl.com/aposnerinterview>



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Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What makes a good president or public servant?

2

What is the purpose of government?

3

How do you decide which battles are worth fighting?