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My Dearest Friend

A play about John and Abigail Adams

By
PETER MANOS

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(MY DEAREST FRIEND)

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My Dearest Friend was first produced on July 2, 2025, by the Bodwin Theatre Company at the All Saints Episcopal Church in Cleveland and was dedicated to the memory of Bodwin Theatre Company managing director Kevin Cronin.

CAST:

JOHN ADAMS Peter Manos
ABIGAIL ADAMS Sandra Manos

PRODUCTION:

Director Peter Manos
Incidental music Eli Manos & Joshua Fadenholz

My Dearest Friend

CHARACTERS

JOHN ADAMS
ABIGAIL ADAMS

CASTING NOTE: Performers will play ages from 20s to 80s throughout the course of the play, and therefore could be of any age without restrictions. And, while these are real historical figures, actors of any ethnicity are welcome to portray them.

SET: There are no set requirements except two sitting-room chairs that are comfortable and well-made but not elaborate or opulent, suggesting that which might be in a well-appointed sitting room in 18th-century New England. There may be a hat stand nearby with various wigs, bonnets and hats to be taken and replaced as needed.

TIME: 1750s-1820s

To Sandra Manos, my dearest Friend.

My Dearest Friend

ACT I

(Lights up on two 18th-century chairs, comfortable for use in a sitting room of a well-to-do household in New England—not fancy but well-made.

Marquee displays the year “1815.”

JOHN ADAMS is old and lacks his characteristic energy, though this has somehow concentrated itself into a fierce and thoughtful stillness. ABIGAIL ADAMS’ old age has made her frail but somehow more energetic than before, as if she is conscious her days on Earth are few, and she wishes to fill them more than ever before.)

ABIGAIL. Listen to me, John, because I do not know how much time I have left.

JOHN. None of us do, madame. What is your will?

ABIGAIL. Our finances.

JOHN. Oh yes. Those. I hope my last gasp on Earth is about quarterly returns.

ABIGAIL. You make fun, but we have the future of our family to think of.

JOHN. Our future rests with John Quincy. It is in capable hands.

ABIGAIL. Johnny is like you, John. He holds money in his hands as if it was water.

JOHN. Well, madame, and then what do you suggest? Mittens?

ABIGAIL. What I think, John, is that 1816 will be a good year to invest, now that the war is over.

JOHN. War of 1812. Was ever a war with so pedestrian a name so extraordinary in its imbecility. Baltimore bombarded. Washington, D.C., destroyed. Madison's First Lady, Dolly, having to sprint out of the executive mansion with George Washington's portrait under her arm to save it from the flames. We shall see the end of this democratic experiment yet.

ABIGAIL. The war was bad, but our victory at New Orleans will put a positive cap on it.

JOHN. Yes. We always call ourselves winners after wars have already ended. 1815. How have we lived so long, I wonder? Not much longer, I am sure.

ABIGAIL. That is why 1816 and 1817 are so important, John. If we sell some of the property around Braintree to John Quincy and take the proceeds to invest in the Ohio lands—

JOHN. Are you fond of me, Abby?

(This stops her cold, confused.)

ABIGAIL. John. What a curious question.

JOHN. When I first met you, I did not think you fond.

ABIGAIL. 1760? You did not think me fond?

JOHN. 1759. You were not.

ABIGAIL. I rather thought you arrogant, I think, in 1759.

JOHN. Do you now?

ABIGAIL. No.

JOHN. So here it is 1815, married fifty-one years, and you have just told me your first lie.

ABIGAIL. Only the first you have ever detected, I think.

JOHN. Well, there is a difference between being arrogant and being right all the time.

ABIGAIL. Yes.

JOHN. And I was right all the time.

ABIGAIL. Especially in being fond of me.

JOHN. I wasn't fond of you at first. I felt you were not candid.

ABIGAIL. You were always candid enough for the both of us. And arrogant, which was reassuring.

JOHN. Reassuring, madame?

ABIGAIL. If that arrogance is founded on useful talents.

JOHN. So I have been useful.

ABIGAIL. You have been in my service and I in yours. I would say that is the secret to being "fond." Now more than ever. You know I am dying, don't you, John? I will probably not last the year.

(JOHN makes sounds of disapproval.)

ABIGAIL *(cont'd)*. Oh don't sulk. You wanted candor.

JOHN. Not this kind. Stop it.

ABIGAIL. That is why I am talking finance. It has never been your strong point.

JOHN. You mean I have never been as crooked as you are.

ABIGAIL. What you call "crooked" I call entrepreneurial.

JOHN. Being entrepreneurial nearly ruined Nabby's husband and drove our son Charles to drink and early death. I would see less of the entrepreneurial spirit in this family.

ABIGAIL. You may still nurse the reputation of a disinterested gentleman of good government, but I have a family to look after. Speculation in bonds and in land, even George Washington did that. Make me a crook of his stripe, and I would be glad of it.

JOHN. Crook he was. He stole all the credit for the Revolution. He and Franklin between them. As if they smote the ground and this country sprung up new formed.

ABIGAIL. You forgot to mention Jefferson.

JOHN. He is a friend again, so I will not speak ill of him.

ABIGAIL. There is no reason to speak ill of him.

JOHN. Well, he is not tired of saying he penned the new country into being by writing the Declaration of Independence. All by himself. Without any help.

ABIGAIL. Behind the scenes everywhere was John Adams. Intelligent Americans will remember that.

JOHN. “Intelligent Americans” has become an oxymoron. I am doomed to obscurity.

ABIGAIL. Well, John, I am fond of you. And while my body caves in on itself, my breath will always be in your ear whispering “us” to eternity, my dearest friend ...

(She turns her back to the wall. JOHN comes out front.

Marquee displays the year “1818.”)

JOHN. November 10, 1818. Abigail Adams has died. I had never expected her to be the first. I was to hold the door of paradise open for her. This ... is too hard. Well, I will go soon as well ... oh ... but ... 1759 ...

(Marquee displays the year “1759.”

He turns around and is young again. ABIGAIL sits knitting, also young.)

JOHN (*cont’d*). Well then, parson’s daughter, will you allow me to steal kisses?

ABIGAIL. Well then, lawyer, you will steal them anyhow and then litigate.

JOHN. I shall see you in court, then. (*He kisses her.*)

ABIGAIL. Your mother forbids this. She would have you marry a princess. Not me.

JOHN. My mother will be the focus of my litigation. I will win. I always do.

ABIGAIL. Except when you don't.

JOHN. Either way I get paid. *(He kisses her again.)*

ABIGAIL. But less hired when you lose. And now you will ride off on your circuit, and I shall not see you before the first frost. No doubt three towns and three cases in, you will have changed your mind about me.

JOHN. And the scores of suitors tumbling through your door and drinking your father's Madeira will grapple for Cupid's arrow while I am forgotten, off in the cold making an honest living.

ABIGAIL. I will hold them off. But only if you write. Often.

JOHN. Every day. And you will write me. I will expect a new missive waiting at each new courthouse.

ABIGAIL. Amid the thieves and vagabonds?

JOHN. You speak of my meal tickets. Thanks to Eve's apple, I have plenty of business.

ABIGAIL. Thanks to Adam's bite, you mean.

(Lights dim on ABIGAIL. JOHN looks out, legal wig on his head, addressing a court with fury.)

JOHN. And now I ask the gentlemen of the jury to look outside this window. There! There is the object of this frenzied squabble. An old nag that could not carry a twig, much less the ample posterior of the respondent. This is the article for which he wants ten pounds ninepence from my client when ninepence without the poundage would not even suffice! This is not breach of contract, for my client purchased a mare to ride, not one to make into glue. This is a swindle!

(JOHN freezes briefly. Lights rise on ABIGAIL.)

ABIGAIL. I suppose he is a suitor. John Adams has one fault.

He will never stop talking. That is also his one virtue—most of what he says is worth hearing.

JOHN (*from the darkness*). Most?

ABIGAIL. All. (*Quietly.*) Much of the time.

JOHN. I heard that.

(Lights dim on ABIGAIL and up on JOHN, still addressing the court.)

JOHN (*cont'd*). So please the gentlemen of the court of the Fifth Circuit. May I remind his honor that he is in breach of the statute he himself wrote into law not five years ago?

ABIGAIL (*lights fade up*). I would not say he is stout. He is ... compact. And without his wig, his head is as round as the moon and twice as shiny when he is in a passion, which is often.

JOHN (*trying to contain his anger*). Well, ruling upon the suit of your own brother-in-law might raise a few hackles here and there, don't you think, your honor?

ABIGAIL. He will always be moving. He will never stay still. But he always moves in a positive direction. He will be going places, and if he asks me, I will follow him.

JOHN. Yes, your honor, I would gladly try the case in your stead if you will lend me that infernal stork's nest you are wearing on your head.

ABIGAIL. He is an honest man, a farmer at heart who likes to dirty his hands in the fields. But he is better fighting with words over plowshares, if you ask me.

JOHN. This case is completely out of order. Here is my walking stick and my hat. I will walk out this door and straight to the king's magistrate. You will either have a fair

trial now in relative secret or a mistrial later in full view of the governor and all the pamphleteers who will gleefully howl at the nepotistic corruption of your court.

ABIGAIL. His father gently forced him to go to Harvard. He did not want to go. But he did. Well, he does not know it, but I will gently nudge him toward even greater things, if he will make me the companion of his life.

(Marquee displays the year "1764.")

JOHN *(his wig off, a bridegroom now)*. The bridegroom approaches! Well, Abigail— *(He reaches out his hand to ABIGAIL, who is a bride now.)*

ABIGAIL. Well, John. *(She takes it.)*

JOHN. Promise never to interrupt me when I am speaking?

ABIGAIL. I would never promise that.

JOHN. Just the girl for me.

ABIGAIL. Schoolmaster, then lawyer and probably politician.

JOHN. I do love to talk.

ABIGAIL. A superb writer too. I could barely keep up with him. All my letters I had to learn on my own at home.

JOHN. Enough to read and think as well as any scholar in the country—for a woman.

ABIGAIL. You had to add that.

JOHN. I, for one, do not find the term “woman” derogatory.

ABIGAIL. Society does.

JOHN. I am not “society.” I am John Adams, and I will one day shape society or will explode trying. And you, my dearest friend, when you are keeping me from exploding, will be the secret to my success.

ABIGAIL. Or failure.

JOHN. And so are we tied together. (*To an unseen pastor.*) I do.

ABIGAIL (*to the same*). I do.

JOHN. Do I kiss the bride?

ABIGAIL. You do.

(They kiss. A bride and bridegroom no longer.)

ABIGAIL (*cont'd*). And from that kiss came Abigail Jr., whom we call “Nabby.” And from that kiss came John Jr., whom we call John Quincy. The future president. And Charles and Thomas. And ... Suzanna—

JOHN (*pained*). Don't.

ABIGAIL. Named after John's mother.

JOHN. Don't.

ABIGAIL. We lost her as a babe.

(Pause as they look at each other, the pain very real between them. But she is not a woman to dwell too hard on such things.)

ABIGAIL (*cont'd, prompting him*). So. Anyhow, John—

JOHN. So. Anyhow. Yes. So anyhow, I rode the circuit with the judges from town to town trying cases. Horse thieves, robbers, swindlers. A shilling here. A shilling there.

ABIGAIL. A good living.

JOHN. Not enough. But then came March of 1770. A row at the Boston Custom House.

ABIGAIL. A massacre. The Boston Massacre, said Paul Revere and Sam Adams, and so it has been called by posterity.

JOHN. Massacre—pooh! Five rioters killed in a mob of hundreds throwing rocks and swinging sticks at a handful of scared recruits, fresh off the boat from their tiny villages in England.

ABIGAIL. Who had no right to be here taking jobs from our workers and violating the respectability of our women.

(Marquee displays the year "1770.")

JOHN. Abby, I have been contacted by the governor. I am defending the British soldiers in court.

ABIGAIL. You are *what*?

JOHN. Nobody else would take the case.

ABIGAIL. John. It will ruin you! It will destroy your standing. Your hard-fought honor—

JOHN. Nobody else would take the case.

ABIGAIL. For good reason.

JOHN. We are better than that, Abigail.

ABIGAIL. Ruination, John.

JOHN. Perhaps. But we are not rabble. We are a country. We are a civilization. And in a civilization, all persons deserve a representative in court.

ABIGAIL. Well, yes. But does it have to be you?

JOHN. It does. It does. Tell me you are on my side in this. My dearest friend.

ABIGAIL. Oh, John. Oh, John.

JOHN. Tell me you are on my side in this.

ABIGAIL. I am always on your side.

JOHN. I know.

ABIGAIL. But I hope you lose.

JOHN. I never lose.

ABIGAIL. Except when you do.

JOHN. Except when I do.

(JOHN puts on his legal wig and steps into court.)

JOHN (*cont'd*). I am for the prisoners at bar. The soldiers. These eight young soldiers beset by a mob of four hundred. A sentry was clubbed to the ground by an angry mob and his gun went off accidentally. Then came the yell for “Fire!” “Fire” could have been shouted from anywhere by anybody, especially by one of a motley mob with clubs and sticks and balls of ice and oyster shells sharpened into knives. Soldiers quartered in a populous town will always occasion *two* mobs where they prevent *one*! They are wretched conservators of the peace. And here the peace was shattered. The rabble pelted them—“Kill them! Kill them!” That soldier knocked down with a club, rising again, hit again. Do you expect he should behave like a stoic philosopher, lost in apathy? Self defense is a law of nature! Facts are stubborn things. Whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, the dictums of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence. Taxation without representation is hard. The presence of hated troops in our midst is hard. But blame not the innocent. Blame not the soldiers. Blame exists higher up, to be sure, but not here. We are a civilized people, and it is better that many guilty persons escape punishment than one innocent person should be punished. Well, these soldiers are eight innocent persons. Any man in this courtroom would have felt and acted the same, had a mob come down on him with all fury. These men are innocent, I say! Gentlemen of the jury, do your duty!

(He turns downstage, grimly but with satisfaction.)

ABIGAIL. And so they did. Not guilty. I was in the gallery watching. People said John Adams had been paid handsomely by the royal Exchequer to defend these men. How wrong they were. A paltry eighteen guineas was all he ever made from the case.

JOHN. The most exhausting case I ever undertook. I suffered the loss of half my practice. But one of the most gallant, generous, manly and disinterested actions of my whole life. The king is to blame for setting these boys in our midst.

ABIGAIL. You don't have to explain it to me, John. It may have hurt us financially with little Charles waiting to be born a few months after.

JOHN. Yes. Yes. That was another thing. I took all this on while you were with child. Oh, Abby—

ABIGAIL. Don't. It raised us up as well. You got elected to the Massachusetts legislature, a man of integrity. A quality in short supply in that body, if you ask me.

JOHN. I can't help but think of Charles and his failures later on.

ABIGAIL. A son does not drink himself to death because he was in the womb while his father battled his friends against our enemies.

JOHN (*reproving her*). Oh now, Abigail.

ABIGAIL. I am still on your side, John, even when it was the wrong one. What happened next though. Oh, John, the danger. 1773 ...

(Marquee displays the year "1773.")

JOHN (*bounding in, excited*). We have done it, Abby! All that blessed tax-stinking tea is thrown over the side of the ships and is flavoring Boston Harbor! They are calling it the Boston Tea Party! (*Attempts to make a native Mohawk war cry sound.*)

ABIGAIL (*shocked*). John. What on Earth is that?

JOHN. Mohawk, I think. That's how Sam's people were dressed when they attacked the tea. A statement. Nothing more American than a Mohawk! Nothing more free than an American Indian! Say it with me, Abigail—"American."