

A DISTANT LOVE

SONGS OF JOHN AND ABIGAIL ADAMS

Music Theater for baritone, soprano and chamber ensemble

Libretto by TERRY QUINN

Music by GARY FAGIN

PROLOGUE

JOHN ADAMS IN AMSTERDAM: A Song for Abigail

ABIGAIL IN THE COLONIES: A Song for John

EPILOGUE

A Note on the Libretto

In the summer of 1774, John Adams left wife, children and family farm for Philadelphia and the First Constitutional Congress, surely expecting the separation to be a relatively short one. Yet except for intermittent visits home, he and Abigail would not be reunited for nearly eleven years. *A Distant Love* attempts to render the flavor of this extraordinary couple's time apart.

The first major section, "John Adams in Amsterdam: A Song for Abigail," is set during the two-year period (1780-1782) when the future president left a frustrating effort at diplomacy in France in order to become our first ambassador to the Netherlands. Only after many months of excruciating loneliness, and resistance from the Dutch, did he at last succeed in securing, from the authorities at The Hague and the bankers of Amsterdam, the treaties and five million guilders in loans that would prove so crucial to the outcome of the American Revolution.

The work's second section, "Abigail in the Colonies: A Song for John," all but spans, in retrospect, the length of our nation's conflict with England, from the Battle of Bunker Hill in June of 1775 to the eve of the Treaty of Paris, which Benjamin Franklin, John Jay and Abigail's long-absent husband negotiated and signed.

The libretto and score of *A Distant Love* are certainly designed to give a sense of the historic tumult that marked two critical decades in the life of an emerging nation. Yet composer Gary Fagin and I were at least as intent on fathoming the passions, hopes, doubts and anxieties of John and Abigail Adams – their complexities and half-hidden emotions, their most intimate thoughts. The extensive correspondence of these two "dearest friends" gave us all the guidance we felt we needed in making the necessarily presumptuous leap to dramatic representation.

Terry Quinn

PROLOGUE

JOHN

All stands ready, Abigail.
Mr. Bass has saddled both the horses.
Fair skies to the south horizon.
Johnny, Tom and Charles, darling Nabby, kissed and comforted

with words I know not whether to believe:
“It may not be too long, this separation ...
not too long ... too long ... ”

ABIGAIL

It's time, John ... It is time.

JOHN

... Though still once more I say,
I shall not leave against your will.

ABIGAIL

I'll ask you to recall, John Adams,
that once in ancient Rome there lived a couple
often pried apart by duty,
ah, but no less bound by love than you and I –
the civic-minded senator, staunch Brutus
and his Portia ... his faithful Portia.

JOHN

Never would I leave against your will!

ABIGAIL

I say do as you must, dearest friend,
assured that all the while you hold the heart,
and *are* the very heart, of your Portia.

JOHN

May this not last too long, this separation ...
too long.

JOHN ADAMS IN AMSTERDAM A Song for Abigail

PARIS

Abigail, Abigail, I am free!
At long last, Portia, free!
Free, dearest friend, free, free ... of the French.

A boon to me, I swear it.

Yet who would have thought.

A grace, a blessing to flee the fabled gates –
to flee, ah flee the ochre walls – of Paris.

Jefferson will laugh, I know it.

And Franklin. Franklin thinks me mad, I know it.

Ah Portia, I know it.

Mad, and lacking in – what? ... *politesse*.

What feathers – what pretty, pretty feathers –

I ruffled at the court, he will smooth.

Oh smooth in his way, Ben Franklin.

Let *him* pacify the Comte de Vergennes.

Let him expiate my sin. To wit:

I did not find the French friend enough,

not nearly friend enough, to America.

And made that known. Clearly.

Does this surprise my Abigail?

Tell me, do ... Yes? ... No.

I see you ... I see you smiling now, dearest friend,
and am not lonely.

I see ... I see the image of your smile.

No pale memory ... a living *image* ...

Fantasy, perhaps. But ah,

if only for a heartbeat, Portia,

I am not alone.

And we are not apart.

No, no, I am *with* you! ... I am *with* you! ... with *you*!

HOLLAND

Abigail, this country where I am, this Holland,
it is the greatest curiosity in all the world!

I say that as a child might:

In all, in all, in all the world, the greatest curiosity!

A nation not known anywhere –

not even by its neighbors. And Dutch,

a language spoken only ... well ... by the Dutch.

They converse, dearest friend, with no one –
no one with them.

The English scorn this country for its size.

The French will scarcely speak of it.

And yet, throughout all Europe

one will not find a people more worthy of esteem.

... In proportion.

Here in Leyden, Amsterdam, The Hague,

they cherish learning and the arts.
Here they value industry, economy.
Here there is less talk than elsewhere, Portia,
of Conquest ... Glory ... Dominion.
In these low lands I'll find the friend we seek.
It may take time ... may take time ...
But here I'll find an arm
to help us splinter Britain's yoke!
To splinter, then shatter, Britain's yoke!

AMSTERDAM

The air of Amsterdam is not so clear
as that of France, but I shall guard my health.
Our two boys study at a Latin school, while I –
a private citizen, unfettered by our Congress –
I sit patient on this floating isle.
This city laced with bridges,
five hundred tiny bridges.
This marvel wrested from the sea.
I stare at bell-shaped gables
mirrored in the Brouersgracht –
wondering who will condescend to see me.
I dream, dearest friend, dream ... of loans!
Oh yes – of loans.
And I shall wait five years if this will save us.
And I shall wait *ten* years if this will save us.

Abigail, Abigail ... let me confess a fear to you:
That set adrift from home, as I am,
I shall lose all chance to be
a man of importance.
A man of importance in the world.
That set adrift, as I am,
I shall ever be deprived of life's
most honest pleasures –
which only lie, for me, at the foot of Pens Hill.
When, oh when, shall I see those fields?
Or see again that rugged mountain?
And when shall I see them ...
with you? ... with you?
When shall I see them again ... with you?

SUMMER

In this earnest land, Abigail,
men are much addicted to coin collecting,
whittling wood – their “hobbyhorses,”
as we might say.

Lief-hebbery these nags are called
in the language of the Dutch.
Fishing in streams, mushroom hunting –
most wholesome exercise.
And here they live to great, great ages
on the strength of it.
Would I had the time for *lief-hebbery*. Ah ...
 (“Ah, would you had the *temperament*,”
I all but hear you say.)

But ride we do, my country hosts and I.
We mount *real* horses every day to fend off fevers.
The summers here are cold and damp, Portia –
perilous, in a word.
Shaking on horseback is the remedy they favor.
Shaking on horseback keeps us healthy, spry and fit.
Tomorrow I shall recommend this regimen
for the boys. ... Yes, dearest friend, yes, yes –
shaking on horseback!

WINTER

Not mid-December, Portia, and the ice is universal.
All Amsterdam glassbright with ice,
glassbright with ice!
A city of stone and snow – aglow, aglare,
under a fitful sun.
A city gaily ribboned with ice!

And skaters all, the Amsterdammers –
man and child alike.
They skate the morning through,
the winter-shortened afternoon.
And in the twilight, Abigail ... they skate.
Skate, skate, skate.

Ah, it is a fine art here, a fine art.
And those who would perfect it
strive not for mere velocity, but grace.
Twice this month I've walked the limits of this city –
from Haarlem Gate to Utrecht Gate –
and seen one thousand skaters on the Singel's broad
expanse!
A vision of vitality.
Hale bodies. Staunch souls.
A vision, dearest friend, a vision of grace.

THE HAGUE

“*Mynheer Adams!*” “*Mynheer Adams!*”
The halls, the lanes, the slickened cobblestones
of Amsterdam now ring with this unlikely phrase –
“*Mynheer Adams!*”
No one, *oh no one*, it would seem,
of such importance as – yes! – your humble servant.

... Again I see you smile.
But know I am now listened to, good friend.
My pleas at last are heeded.
Our country’s cause has found an ear
throughout The Netherlands! And as a sign,
the farthest provinces resound with the phrase
“*Mynheer Adams!*” “*Mynheer Adams!*” “*Mynheer
Adams!*”

A week from now, three ministers
receive me at The Hague –
with great fanfare, with awful pomp,
if I am to believe the praise I hear.
And yet ... and yet ...
since the day we parted, Abigail,
I never can foresee – by one scant hour –
what will happen to me. Never!
What triumphs, disasters,
what blandishments or ... humiliations await.
Not ever. Not by one scant hour. ... No.

LONGING

Oh when shall I see my dearest friend, oh when?
All in good time, I chide myself each morning.
And when my dear blue mountain?
When my beloved Pens Hill?
Ye reign sublime in my imagination!
At your blessed foot will I while away
the days of my old age –
if any should be given me –
in philosophic retrospect upon the roil
and turbulence of politics.
Upon the sickening chaos of war.

Yet mark this Portia: I have come to love the Dutch.
I shall recall The Hague and quiet Leyden
more fondly than our Philadelphia.
And closer, far closer to my heart than Paris
shall lie this small yet open-hearted city.

This font of tolerance. This fast believer in America:
... Amsterdam.

REUNION

Abigail, Abigail, I must go to you,
or you must come to me.
I cannot bear much longer this solitude of life
amidst the courts ... the camps ... the crowds.
For solitude it is – wretched solitude.
No, I must go to you, dearest friend. Or you ...
you must come to me.

Tonight I dine with a duke, a duchess,
four ambassadors –
in all The Hague’s accustomed luxury.
But how much more luxurious would it seem to me
to sup upon roast beef with Parson Smith ...
and Dr. Tufts ... and Norton Quincy.
Or better, share with no one but my Abigail
a simple dish of rusticate potatoes.
Oh hi ho hum, darling Portia and her daughter!
Oh hi ho hum, darling Portia and her sons! Hah!

Oh wife, good wife ... may I confess a fear to you?
That set adrift, as I am,
I shall ever be deprived of life’s most honest
pleasures –
which only lie for me at the foot of Pens Hill.
When, oh when shall I see those fields?
Or see again that rugged mountain?
And when, dearest friend, shall I see them
with you? ... with you? ...
When shall I see them again ...
with you?

ABIGAIL IN THE COLONIES

A Song for John

LETTERS

And now to France again, John? With talk of an appointment to London after that? What is the view of Congress in this matter? Do the members not deem your service in Amsterdam – and before that Paris, and before that Philadelphia – price enough to pay in the cause of securing America's- ...

And now to Paris once more, dearest friend? I know the necessity of it, and am made proud indeed by your having been chosen to negotiate our terms of peace with a humbled England. As ever, I see the wisdom that inspires this commission and exhort myself not to complain. But oh that I could annihilate space! And oh that I could somehow persuade the Almighty to undo time and grant me back the untitled man to whom I gave my heart, eighteen years ago! ...

... Tonight I celebrate that span so marked by trials and enduring bliss ... so long assailed by a test of separation that has only brought us closer. Tonight, good husband, I look back upon the copies of a decade's-worth of letters I have sent you. ... Back, far back, John, to the earliest days of this infernal conflict that only now draws to a close. ... Back even to the time when the children and I first tasted the strangeness of life apart from you

WAR

The bright-jacketed soldiers of the British!
They march upon us, John ...
swarm down like locusts on a standing field.
In Concord, Bridgewater, Somerville, Boston,
no one knows where to turn.
The rocks and quicksands lie on every side.
Our hated Governor prepares for war:
orders cannon mounted on Beacon Hill,
has entrenchments dug upon the Neck.
He fears we shall attack – as well he may!

This Sunday morn at six o'clock I woke to beating drums.

The frantic peal of Weymouth bell, the blast of three alarm guns.

Since then it's dire reports: Warnings, rumors.
Mothers hoarding goods, whisking children from the streets.

All males from fifteen to sixty hauling muskets
to the training ground.

Livestock scattered, farms neglected, lives in disarray.
Our once so placid lives in disarray!

One cutter and four sloops have now dropped anchor
just below Great Hill.

Three hundred more of the enemy on our soil!
Refugees from Boston seek asylum at the house.
Women, children flock down from the iron works.
Try to imagine, husband, how we live!

Charlestown laid in ashes ... a battle raging on the slopes

of Bunker Hill now longer than a day.
None can tell how many men have fallen.
None can sleep for the din of constant shelling.
Yet I shall tarry here as long as I am able.

The British offer clemency, should we cease to fight.
They know not who we are!
Once we have cut them down – like grass before the scythe –

then yes, we shall cease to fight ...
Only then shall we cease to fight.

Word has it that our enemy will soon quit Boston
and march south to New York.
If so, the sword above our heads is lifted, John,
and we shall breathe ... ah, breathe.

The nights are tranquil now – no cannon, no alarms.
And all the afternoon, from my perch atop Pens Hill,
I watched the English sail from our bay.
Two hundred masts – a moving forest.
All was calm, dearest friend ...
soughing breezes ... blackbirds chattering in the trees.
Above, below, the sky and harbor waters gleaming blue.
Ah, pitiless illusion ... illusion ... of peace.

INTERLUDE

You will forgive your Portia for saying, John, that you were hardly an ideal correspondent in those difficult days. I know that great labors burdened you and your colleagues in Philadelphia. Even so, at times a month or more would pass before I received so much as a line from you. I would gladly have paid a dollar then for a letter by the post, though I should have been constrained to eat but one meal a day for the weeks that followed.

Nor can I say that I regard you now, dear friend, as sufficiently reformed. You write of your dealings with the grandees, bankers and ambassadors of Holland, yes – of loans secured, of commerce treaties signed and others in the offing. Naturally I applaud all such tidings, John. Yet I crave as well some softer words ... some sentimental effusions of the heart. For alas, dear, my own heart aches. And there is no remedy to be had for this affliction, other than a letter from you. ... The *right sort* of letter from you

WOMEN

Spent the day with Mrs. Cranch, my “Sister Delegate.”
... I trust you are not smirking now, John Adams.
Why should we women not assume your titles,
 having given up our names?
Keep us in mind – the ladies – when fashioning the
nation’s laws.

Treat us more fairly than your forbears did
 and limit husbands’ powers.
Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could.

We are not vassals of your sex, but partners
 in this time of strife.
Allies whose stout spirit none shall conquer.
And if our men are all drawn off, and we should be
attacked,
our common foe would find a race of Amazons in its
path!
No clutch of shuddering wives –
 a race of Amazons in America!

LONELINESS

If you should lie awake and call my name
I know I’d hear you in the night.
I’d listen breathlessly till morning came
and brought the sun’s unwelcome light.

Some afternoons I’ll stare at lush Pens Hill
and count the times we walked its leaf-strewn ways.
Lost in a trance, I’ll hear no blue bird’s trill –
just sit recalling brighter days.

Wishing never made a flower bloom.
Dreaming never, ever brought a lover any closer –
a lover any closer, closer ...

And so I lie awake and call your name.
I pray you’ll hear me in the night.
I close my eyes as in some children’s game
and hope to God with all my might ...
you’ll somehow hear me in the night.

INTERLUDE

Be thankful that you are not here for the weather,
John. I’ve told you that we were burnt up with the
drought most of last July and August. Now, though
we’ve not yet reached mid-winter, the bay is frozen
so hard that people have been walking, riding or
sledding over it to Boston. And this past Tuesday, a
storm wind blew like a hurricane for twenty hours,
leaving mountainous drifts of snow that have made
the roads impassable. I gaze through an upstairs
window and fancy I am in Greenland.

All is chaste, white, utterly silent. And I have more
reason than ever, good husband, to call myself “the
nun”

SCARCITY

Pins, John, pins!
Have Mr. Bass convey to me, I pray you, pounds of pins --
 here so scarce and dear.
The bundle one could buy for seven shillings,
eightpence just last month
 is fetching twenty shillings, six today. Twenty
and six!

Pins! ... The very key to your Portia's livelihood,
 for I can sell them widely.
I can market pins in all the towns surrounding – *and I shall.*
Do order Mr. Bass to cram that oaken trunk of his
 with every blessed pin on sale in Philadelphia.
Then bid him steer for Braintree I must have pins!

Coffee, sugar, pepper – all but gone now, John.
The same for cotton, flax and wool, for mutton, lamb and-
 Oh, chocolate ... chocolate!
We make our soap, brew our medicines, the other wives and I.
We strip lead from the windows, thin our broths
 or do without. Gladly do without.
Tea is a distant memory. And I'm as pleased with a bowl of milk
as once I was with my drafts of Souchong by the morning fire.
Well ... almost as pleased.

I blush to tell you what the merchants ask: rye eleven shillings, John.
Corn is gold, gold! Four dollars for a bushel.
And linens twenty the yard – hard money!
While you debate, we barter, barter, barter.
Strangers, relatives, neighbors, friends all barter.

You would not recognize your town, John Adams – its humble folk, the streams and fields that ring it.
For all has changed in the noisome roil of war –
 changed in our trials of disease and want –
all except my boundless love for you.
All except your children's adoration, and my love ... my love for you.

FAMILY

Nabby, Johnny, Charley, Tom – all send their duty, dearest friend.
How you would laugh to see them rush to me
 at the glimpse of a letter.
Like chickens vying for a crumb while the hen cluck-clucks.

And yet the boys have not been well this season.
I took them, two weeks past, to Boston for inoculation.
They're sick now with distemper: troubled sleep,
 morning puking, inflammation of the eyes.
It cuts me to the heart to see them writhe and whimper.
Poor Tommy suffers fits – from knots of worms, we think.
Send Carolina pinkwood, John, as soon as ever you can.
The wormseed I've been using does no good.

Even so, we have been spared the worst.
Dr. Tufts has sixty smallpox patients,
 Dr. Bullfinch forty-three.
I quake to say that, since you left, eighteen children
 have been buried – just in the neighboring parish.
And few days here in Braintree pass without a funeral rite.
Thus do the blameless reap what soldiers sow ...
 thus does pestilence march in the rear of war.

ENEMIES

Let us separate from the British, John – and *now*.
They are not worthy to be thought our brethren.
 Not worthy of our least regard.
Why does the Congress dither? Why does it dawdle so?
Is there one among your number who has not the stomach
 to denounce these villains to the world?
Let us beseech Almighty God to blast their counsels.
To bring to naught all of their black devices.
Satan himself, when driven from the realms of bliss,
 lashed out with no more malice than the English.
They sit coldly by while our wounded bleed ...

While our young fall prey to war-borne illnesses
or reel with hunger.
And this is storied Britain?
Oh blush, America, blush ...
that ever you derived your origin from such a
race!
And blush that you should harbor craven Tories in
your bosom.

Citizens who, each Sunday, fill the pews of our
Church of England
and dare pray for the King!
A man whose boot heel presses on their necks! For
the King!

At times I fear we've something of the spaniel in us –
so often spurned, yet eager still to fawn.
I, for one, disclaim such cowardice ... such poverty of
spirit.
Enough, I say! Let us stand free! Let us stand
free!

SLAVERY

And *all* of us ... That we might *all* stand free ...
Oh were there not one slave in this province, John.
Oh how I would rejoice should every colony
renounce
the sin of bondage.
We don our righteous armor, yes, to fight for what?
For a godly gift we snatch away from souls
whose very bodies we have bought ...
Whose labor we daily plunder.
We'll vow to die before we cede our freedom,
then turn and clap another's wrist in chains.
What do you call this, husband? I call it shame ... I
call it shame.

What if the arm of violence and treachery now lifted
over us
should be but Heaven's punishment for brash
hypocrisy?
We trumpet to the world our store of virtue,
and in the shadows fritter it away.
For shame, I say. ... For shame.

AVOWAL

So many seasons now have passed
since last I held your hands in mine.
Summers marred by war and drought,
winters rife with heartless winds
that scatter shingles all about
and weight the soul with fearsome doubt,
the more they lash and whine.

But John, you would be wrong to think
your Abigail bemoans her fate.
This time apart will surely end.
These somber skies are bound to clear,
that we might live as one again.
And yes, believe me, dearest friend,
I am content to wait ... content to wait ...

For I know who you are,
and all you need to do.
So I keep deep inside what it pains me to hide,
and I won't ever plead with you –

“Come home, my love, come back to me.
The stars above await you no less faithfully.
God speed your way across the sea.
Come home, home, my love.”

Can winter's snows withstand the warmth of spring?
Can summer's heat deny the gift that autumn breezes
bring?
And just as day must ever make the pall of night take
wing,
a change will come ... a change ...

Oh I know who you are.
I know all you need to do.
So I keep deep inside what it pains me to hide,
and I won't ever plead with you –

“Come home, my love, come back to me.
The stars above await you no less faithfully.
God speed your way across the sea.
Come home, home, my love ...
Come home, come home, my love.”
Come home

EPILOGUE

Every hour I consider the momentous task that awaits you in Paris, John. I will say only this: You have earned honor and reputation at home and abroad. Oh, may an inglorious peace not wither the laurels you have won!

The candle burns down and I tire. ... Only think, we have seen near a score of years roll over our heads. The hymeneal torch was lighted at the altar of Love, and it burns yet. Burns with unabated fervor. Old Ocean has not quenched it, nor Old Time smothered it in his bosom.

And now good night, friend of my heart, companion of my youth, husband and lover. ... May angels watch thy repose.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The portion of *A Distant Love* titled “John Adams in Amsterdam: A Song for Abigail” was commissioned as a separate work, in 2004, by the John Adams Institute. It received its premiere performance at Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw on April 13, 2005, with Queen Beatrice of the Netherlands in attendance. In that production, the role of John Adams was created by baritone Richard Lalli. Two subsequent productions were mounted at St. Francis College’s Maroney Theater in Brooklyn Heights (2006), and at the Brooklyn Historical Society (2007).