

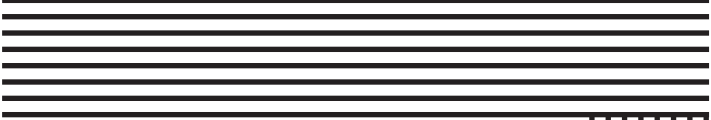
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JQA

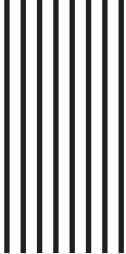
A SERIES OF FICTITIOUS ENCOUNTERS
BETWEEN JOHN QUINCY ADAMS AND
SUNDRY FAMILY MEMBERS AND
POLITICAL ASSOCIATES ON THE
SUBJECTS OF LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE
PURSUIT OF A MORE RATIONAL
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOVERNMENT

BY

AARON POSNER

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DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
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I am deeply and eternally grateful for Maisie Ann Posner and Erin Elizabeth Weaver, my chieftest teachers in All The Things; for my father, Michael Ira Posner, and my mother, Sharon Marsha Blanck Posner, for all they have given me, and all the insights I have gained from knowing them all my life; for Molly Smith and all the folks at Arena Stage who called this project into being; and for this impossible, flawed, fantastic country I was fortunate to have been born into.

JQA was originally commissioned and produced by Arena Stage (Molly Smith, Artistic Director; Edgar Dobie, Executive Producer), Washington, D.C., in March 2019. It was directed by Aaron Posner, the set design was by Meghan Raham, the costume design was by Helen Huang, the lighting design was by Jesse Belsky, the sound design was by Karin Graybash, and the production stage manager was Hethyr (Red) Verhoef. The cast was as follows:

JQA/LOUISA ADAMS/
ABRAHAM LINCOLN Jacqueline Correa
JQA/JOHN ADAMS/HENRY CLAY Eric Hissom
JQA/GEORGE WASHINGTON/
ABIGAIL ADAMS/LOUISA ADAMS Phyllis Kay
JQA/ANDREW JACKSON/
FREDERICK DOUGLASS Joshua David Robinson
CITIZENS Jordan Lee, Jake Owen

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

E. J. Dionne, George Lakoff, Molly Smith, Naysan Moigani, Jocelyn Clarke, Victor Vazquez, Seema Sueko, Anna'le Hornak, Jenna Duncan, Linda Lombardi, Biko Eisen-Martin, Meghan Raham, Helen Huang, Jesse Belsky, Karin Graybash, Red Verhoef, Phyllis Kay, Joshua David Robinson, Eric Hissom, Jacqueline Correa, the students of my JQA Workshop Production at American University, Kadah and Phil from next door for all the clippings and interest, and ALL THE ACTORS AND ARTISTS who did various readings and workshops of this play in various stages of development and so generously brought their insights, wisdom, questions, and issues to the table to help it grow.

CHARACTERS

The play is built for four actors of various ages, genders, and ethnicities. Each actor plays JQA in turn as he ages and moves through his life and career. The role is passed from actor to actor interstitially. There may well be other ways of doubling or dividing things up. This is what has been done so far, where each version of JQA is played by the actor nearest to him in age. But I am open...

Actor A

Woman, 20s or 30s

plays

JQA, Younger Louisa Adams (LOU), Abraham Lincoln (ABE)

Actor B

African American Man, 30s or 40s

plays

JQA, Andrew Jackson (JACK), Frederick Douglass (FD)

Actor C

Man, 50s

plays

JQA, John Adams (ADAMS), Henry Clay (CLAY)

Actor D

Man or Woman, 60s or 70s

plays

JQA, George Washington (GW), Abigail Adams (ABBY), Older
Louisa Adams (LOU)

THE SETTING

A simple, flexible space that can easily be transformed for the various scenes. The set, like the costumes—and the language, for that matter—should be some version of both historical and contemporary. What balance you wish to strike is up to you. In the original production, we used two “citizens” who played tiny roles and helped with the transitions, both costume changes and furniture changes, and two crew members. These could easily be accomplished by the cast members alone, or on a unit set, or...

THE HISTORY

Simply put, while the play is not historically *accurate*, it is largely historically *feasible*. The personalities of the characters are consistent, I believe, with history as I understand it. The meetings imagined here *could have* taken place, though many of them never did...and if they did, I can only imagine that they were quite different than anything depicted here. The goal has never been historical accuracy, but rather evocation, provocation, and to prompt discussion about where we are *now* and maybe a bit about how we got here.

THE ACTING STYLE

This play’s aspirational godparents are Shaw and Brecht. Therefore, the acting needs to be deeply personal, intellectually and morally passionate, emphatic, and aggressively energetic. It can never sit back and contemplate...or you are doomed. The ideas need to be discovered, then activated. Everyone in the play is fierce about their beliefs and perspectives. Every scene is charged. *Intentionality is essential.*

“To be good, and to do good, is the whole duty of man...”

—Abigail Adams

“If there is no struggle, there is no progress.”

—Frederick Douglass

JQA

Prologue

A bare platform or stage, perhaps surrounded by dressing tables and the furniture that will be used for the various scenes. Or not. Four actors enter onto the stage. They look right at the audience...

- A. What you will witness here today...*never happened...*
- C. As far as we know.
- D. Though, of course, none of us were there.
- B. We're not pretending to be *historically accurate*...we're just *pretending*.
- D. This is not *historical fiction*...but *fictional history*.
- B. So, if you didn't know...now you know.
- C. JQA:
 - A. "A Series of Fictitious Encounters between John Quincy Adams and Sundry Family Members and Political Associates on the Subjects of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of a More Rational Relationship with Government."
 - B. "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." Frederick Douglass.
 - D. "To be good, and to do Good, is the whole duty of Man." Abigail Adams.
- C. Okay. Let's go...

Music plays. Lights. Shift...

1. What Did You Do?—1776

B. Autumn 1776. The Adams Family Home in Braintree, Massachusetts.

D. We are in the library of Mr. John Adams,

C. age forty-one,

D. who has recently returned from the Second Continental Congress.

B. His eldest son,

A. John Quincy Adams...is nine. And a quarter.

B. It is rapidly approaching dusk...

Lights shift again. The play is underway...

ADAMS. John Quincy?

JQA answers from outside the door of his father's study...

JQA. Yes, Father?

ADAMS. Would you kindly step in here, please?

JQA. Yes, Father.

JQA comes in and stands before his father, scared and intimidated...

ADAMS. Have a seat.

He gestures to an empty child's chair...

JQA. Me? (*Realizes this is obvious.*) Oh. Yes, Father, of course.

He sits. A tense moment or two passes...

ADAMS. (*Beat.*) Do you know what government is?

JQA. *Government?*

ADAMS. Yes.

JQA. (*Confused...*) What government...“is”?

ADAMS. Yes. A straightforward query. What is “Government”?

JQA. Ummm...

ADAMS. You are very nearly ten years old—very nearly a young man.

JQA. Uhhh...

ADAMS. You are familiar, surely, with the term “government.”

JQA. I am.

ADAMS. Then tell me. What is it? What IS Government?

JQA. Well...it's the ones...it's those people that, that run the country that—

ADAMS. No.

JQA. It's *democracy*. It's the system you want / to put in place

ADAMS. No.

JQA. Oh.

ADAMS. A Government might be those things. A Government might be a democracy or an Oligarchy or a Monarchy...but that's not what "government" *is*. "Governments" run cities and states and countries, but that is still not what "government" IS.

JQA. Oh.

ADAMS. No, sir, GOVERNMENT is, strictly speaking...*self-management*.

JQA. Oh.

ADAMS. It is control. It is *restraint*. Government is the careful marshaling of resources. If you're physically sound, you have the *government* of your body. If you're mentally sound, you have the *government* of your mind. If you are spiritually / sound—

JQA. Oh...

ADAMS. Yes?

JQA. No, I...I understand.

ADAMS. Individuals require Government. Just as cities and countries require Government.

Good Government makes everything better.

Good Government makes everything positive in our lives possible.

Am I making myself understood?

JQA. Yes, Father.

ADAMS. Excellent.

JQA. Is...is that all, then?

ADAMS. (*Going right on...*) History tells us, son, that we were once wilder and far more *savage* than we are at the present time. Dissension ravaged the earth. But then an extraordinary thing happened. A remarkable thing. Do you know what it was?

JQA. No, Father.

ADAMS. *Civilization.*

JQA. Oh.

ADAMS. *Civilization* happened.

JQA. I see.

ADAMS. Civil societies emerged. We chose to make *codes*...then *rules*...then *laws*. We decided to create better ways to live with the express intent of making our lives *better* and *safer* than they would have been if left to our own...*dangerous impulses*.

JQA. Uh-huh.

ADAMS. *We CHOSE civilization.* Isn't that remarkable?

JQA. Ummm...

ADAMS. And Civilization leads inevitably to the creation of Governments to codify and maintain that civilization. A Civil society is only ever possible if we develop effective Government. A civilized citizenry is only possible if we exercise effective self-government. You understand?

JQA. Yes, Father. I do.

ADAMS. Good. I'm very glad... And now...
Do you know why I am telling you all this?

JQA. No, Father.

ADAMS. No idea whatsoever?

JQA. No, Father.

Beat...

ADAMS. Someone has set fire to the cat. Again.

JQA. Oh.

ADAMS. Yes.

JQA. Oh...

ADAMS. I cannot believe that this is a...*natural phenomenon*.
No, someone has engaged in this deliberately *uncivilized* act.
And I wish to know who has done this.

Beat...

Government, John Quincy, GOVERNMENT cannot be allowed to fail. When government fails, we are set adrift in the world, with no sure compass.

That way lies heartbreak and humiliation...death and destruction.
JQA. Oh.

ADAMS. So, now I wish to know: Who has set fire to Mr. Fuff-Fuff's tail?

Whose *internal government* has failed him?

I expect you to tell me, John Quincy...*now*.

NOW!

Lights. Music. Shift.

2. Just Do It!—1794

JQA and President George Washington, age 62, in a park in Boston drinking coffee from paper coffee cups... They are not very far into their conversation. There has mostly been small talk thus far. JQA is uneasy about why the visiting president has invited him out for a walk-and-talk...

B. Early May 1794.

A. John Quincy is now twenty-seven years old.

B. He is unmarried, practices law, attends the theatre enthusiastically, reads voraciously, and writes daily in a journal that will run to fifteen thousand pages by the time his pen is stilled.

We are in a tidy, sunlit park in the bustling metropolis of Boston, Massachusetts—population: just under twenty thousand. Young Mr. Adams is deeply engaged in figuring out why his father's boss would call on him at this particular moment, entirely unannounced...

GW. So tell me!

JQA. Good, I think...

GW. Yes?

JQA. Absolutely.

GW. I'm glad to hear it.

JQA. *Though...*

GW. Yes?

Quick beat...

JQA. No no no, it's all going quite well, Mr. President.

GW. Good!

JQA. At least—

GW. Yes?

JQA. No, it's good, it is.

GW. Talk to me, John. I want to know. Your father will inevitably ask me how you are when I return to Philadelphia, and I'd like to be able to offer some small insight...

JQA. Well... (*Lying, somewhat...*) Many of my cases—while not, perhaps, of world-shaking consequence—have a multitude of engaging and...quite curious features...

GW. Such as...?

JQA. I'm sorry?

GW. The curious and engaging features. These would include...?

JQA. Oh. Emmm...property lines. Property damage. Stolen property. The...emm...proper disposition of property... Mostly property, I guess...

Beat...

GW. Sounds rewarding.

JQA. Oh, it is.

GW. "Property." Land...!

JQA. Precisely...

GW. Land is important.

JQA. It is.

GW. And speaking of land...may I propose...the Netherlands.

JQA. How's that?

GW. The Netherlands. You're familiar?

JQA. Yes of course.

GW. Your father took you when you were a boy, yes?

The play doesn't end here...

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