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'American Primitive' - A Timely Drama

By WALTER LAZENBY
CHARLESTON — Eastern's Theatre Department is opening its Bi-Centennial season with a reader's theatre performance of a timely script by William Gibson, better known for his authorship of "The Miracle Worker." The show goes on again tonight at 8 and tomorrow at 3.

Called "American Primitive," it is both the story of a marriage, that of John and Abigail Adams, and the story of a birth, that of the United States.

The script consists of bits of the Adamses' correspondence and other writings, with added commentary, evoking such background events as meetings

of the Continental Congress, battles of the Revolutionary War, and negotiations with France for aid but focusing on the actual human cost of the struggle for freedom, in terms of separation from loved ones, anguish over un-cooperativeness in the Congress and incompetence in the army, sickness, grief over deaths of friends and relatives, etc.

Gibson's inspiration for putting it together may well have been one of Adams's most anguished utterances: "Posterity! You will never know how much your freedom cost the present generation; make good use of it."

This "sequence for the

theatre" is most effective when occasionally two juxtaposed letters, seemingly discordant in mood or "out of phase" with each other in content, actually resolve into a melodic phrase in

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the overall Song of the Struggle.

The text tries to develop the curious paradox of a man willingly becoming slave to the cause of freedom, but it fails to prove that John Adams

altogether gave up pursuit of individual happiness (Might he not have had some of the ambition he disclaimed?).

However, Randy Arney, despite one or two awkward transitions, goes a long way toward substantiating the character's sincerity, especially in Adam's insistence to posterity (!) that he loved his wife. Instead of being a handicap, his youthful appearance agreeably destroys a perhaps common image of Adams as a bewigged patriarch; thus he gives the role a certain vitality.

In the capable hands of Joan Allen, Abigail Adams comes across as more endearingly human than her husband. The characterization calls for fine

shading in a variety of moods: nostalgic remembering of youthful coquettishness, playfully advocating laws good for women, maternal concern, yearning for the return of her husband, disappointment, grief, fear, noble resolution to endure hardship. Miss Allen is successful in suggesting the dignity of Abigail's passionate love and her over-all strength.

Perhaps in a smaller theatre the background map would have more nearly assumed the importance the author specified, and perhaps the choral speeches at one or two points could have had tighter continuity, but on the whole I found the production rather moving.