

Citizen Paine is a tribute to a Great Humanitarian

by Irwin Spiegelman

The Iron Age Theatre of Philadelphia traveled to Iona College in New Rochelle NY on March 29th for a performance of *Citizen Paine*, by Bill Hollenbach. Adam Altman was superb playing Thomas Paine in a one-hour monologue which touched on many dramatic moments in Paine's long and adventurous life and on his memorable writings. The play is a reminder of what a remarkable life Paine led and how we are still grappling with the problems he addressed so ably, such as war and peace, poverty and the attainment of a truly democratic society.

The scene is set in New Rochelle as Paine waits to hear if he will be able to vote in the 1806 city election. Paine engages in a kind of 'stream of consciousness' series of reminiscences while refreshing himself with drafts of rum and water. Space is limited, but here are some highlights from our perspective.

Right off, Paine exclaims that the vote in a representative government (democracy) is the most fundamental right from which all other rights are derived. Ironically that is the right he is being denied! He exclaims that he fought for a world where there are no "betters."

Paine recalls that he led the fight in the French National Convention to prevent the execution of Louis XVI, opposing the death penalty, but making a strong case that it was sound politics to exile Louis Capet. The final vote, for execution, was extremely close.

His memory jumps back to his youth as an apprentice staymaker and how he ran off to join the crew of a privateer, *The Terrible*, commanded by Captain Death, but was saved from a disastrous voyage by his father, though he later did sail with another privateer.

Then there was the Silas Deane Affair, in which Paine, as whistle-blower, prevented America from paying—as Deane had arranged to his personal advantage—for arms and supplies which France had donated. Gouverneur Morris, sided with Deane and accused Paine of being ignorant of grammar. Morris and John Adams were harsh critics of *Common Sense* and both favored an American government ruled by elites. It was Morris, as ambassador to France, who refused to claim Paine as an American and free him after his imprisonment during the Reign of Terror. Paine escaped death by luck: the marks made on the outside of cell doors indicating the occupants to be executed were made, in error, on the *inside* of his cell door, therefore, because his door was closed late at night, the marks were not seen by the executioners when they came around next morning.

On theology, Paine sums up by saying all we need to know about God is found in his "Creation." When Paine returned to America in 1802 the Federalists and their newspapers repeated with great regularity that Paine was a lying, drunken, infidel and they used his deistic religious beliefs as their pretext to oppose his writings calling for economic justice.

Agrarian Justice is brought front and center as Paine refers to the wretched of the earth who are worse off than they were before civilization began. He states that reform is possible because the earth was given to all of mankind, and those who are



landlords owe a tax on their holdings to be used to ease poverty through old age pensions, payments to the disabled, stipends to youth starting out in life and education for all.

Paine recites from *Rights of Man* (part 2, chapter on "Ways and Means") one of the most familiar passages on what is a "good society":

When it shall be said in any country in the world, "My poor are happy, neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them, my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars, the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive; the rational world is my friend, because I am a friend of its happiness."— when these things can be said, then may that country boast of its constitution and its government.

After the play, a panel convened, consisting of Mr. Altman, Mr. Hollenbach, and John Doyle, the play's director, plus two Thomas Paine Friends members, Frances Chiu and Karen Thorsen, as well as Gary Berton, coordinator of Iona's Thomas Paine Project. Thomas Donnarumma, theatre arts professor, moderated.

A lively discussion, with audience questions and comments, ensued. Panelists were asked, among other questions, who today most closely resembles Thomas Paine. After some thought, several agreed that the Occupy Wall Street movement as well as the documentary film-maker Michael Moore best fill the bill. The Iron Age team of author, actor, director also made the point that for them Paine has conspicuous appeal as a man who speaks to our time and all times.

It was gratifying to see a large and enthusiastic audience at Iona's Romita Auditorium. Several TPF members were present: Alice Perlmutter, Mariam Toubia, Irwin and Martha Spiegelman, and Andy and Barbara Rogers—the Rogers all the way from Snohomish WA (they were visiting in the area and pleased to see Paine Cottage and to attend the performance). We are certainly indebted to Iona College for presenting a free performance of *Citizen Paine*, a most inspiring experience.

[About the TPF member panelists. Ms. Chiu is an assistant professor of literature and history at the New School where she has taught a course on Paine and organized a colloquium in 2009 marking the 200th anniversary of Paine's death. She is on the TPF Board of Directors. Ms. Thorsen is an award-winning writer and film maker. One project, now in preparation, is a PBS documentary, *Thomas Paine: Voice of Revolution*, coupled with a multi-media museum exhibit.]

