

PERUSAL SCRIPT

# LIGHTNING ROD



A PLAY BY TIM SLOVER

“This is an age of experiments...”

- The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin



Salt Lake City

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## **LIGHTNING ROD**

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## **CAST OF CHARACTERS (2M 3W 2olderTeenMales)**

***BENJAMIN FRANKLIN (69)**, loose, long hair, portly, bifocal glasses, affable and charming.*

***YOUNGER BEN (24)***

***TEMPLE FRANKLIN (18) BEN's grandson, WILLIAM's son**, handsome, kind, intelligent, absent-minded and, uncharacteristic of a FRANKLIN, unsure of himself.*

***WILLIAM FRANKLIN (45) BEN's son -- a YOUNGER version of his father**, though more elegantly dressed and grave. He has the same intensity of purpose about everything*

***YOUNGER WILLIAM (16)***

***ELIZABETH DOWNES FRANKLIN (41) WILLIAM's wife -- a charming, fashionable beauty without domestic accomplishments, but with an English accent***

***DEBORAH FRANKLIN (68) BEN's wife -- has the fretful quality of a woman who, having bustled all her days, is suddenly unable to***

***YOUNG DEBORAH (23)***

***VOICE, SOLDIER's VOICE** (can be done by anyone who is offstage, or can be recorded)*

**LIGHTNING ROD** a play by Tim Slover 2M 3W 2olderTeenM About 120mins. What is the price of Liberty? For Benjamin Franklin, it was flesh and blood. Widely lauded for his role in giving birth to a new nation, Franklin's role as a father to his own children remains largely a mystery. This work commissioned by the Fulton Opera House & Franklin and Marshall College, as part of the international celebration of Franklin's 300 Birthday, in 2006, examines the origins of Franklin's character and how nothing could divide him from his beloved son, William, except a revolution. **Order #3117**

**Tim Slover**, Assistant Professor, directs the playwriting and London Study Abroad programs for the University of Utah Department of Theatre, where he also teaches dramatic literature and script analysis. His plays have been produced off-Broadway and in professional regional and university theatres all over the US and in Canada. Tim's writing awards include the Grand Prize in the 65th Annual Writers Digest Writers Awards; the Christopher Brian Wolk Award for Playwriting Excellence (Abingdon Theatre); a Cine Golden Eagle; a Freedoms Foundation George Washington Honor Medal; a Hopwood Award for Best Play; an American Screenwriters Association Award, two Association for Mormon Letters playwriting awards, and he was also a finalist for a Television Arts and Sciences Community Service Emmy. His plays are published by the Samuel French Co., Encore Performance Publishing, Leicester Bay Theatricals and Zion Theatricals. Other of his writing has appeared in the National Biography of American Theatre, Sunstone Magazine, and been published by Signature Books (Proving Contraries) and Silverleaf Press. Tim earned his BA in English at BYU and his MA and PhD in English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan.

The Fulton Theatre in Lancaster, PA, commissioned and premiered two of Tim's plays, **TREASURE** (2004) and **LIGHTNING ROD** (2006). In 2006 he was appointed writer-in-residence at nearby Franklin & Marshall College. In the fall of 2008 his play, **JOYFUL NOISE**, received a staged reading at the Hampstead Theatre's Michael Frayn Space in London. **DESPISED**, his screenplay of **JOYFUL NOISE**, is optioned by Slickrock Films. His new eight-part radio drama, **THE CHRISTMAS CHRONICLES**, aired December 2009 on KBYU FM.

His newest play, **VIRTUE** was written in association with the Penn State University School of Theatre, and further developed in the New Plays Workshop of the University of Utah's Department of Theatre and writers groups in Salt Lake City and Provo. (Thank you, everyone!) **VIRTUE** was also given a staged reading in London, June 2008 as part of the Arch 468 Projects Series.

ACT 1 – *The Past*

**SCENE 1 -- Salon in London: 1775 -- Governor's Mansion in Perth Amboy, NJ: 1775 -- BENJAMIN**

*FRANKLIN comes on stage. He is 69 years old and the picture of the FRANKLIN we know: loose, long hair, portly, bifocal glasses, affable and charming. He walks to the front of the stage, beams benevolently at the audience for a moment. He may even polish his glasses. He is entirely at ease.*

**BEN:** Good evening, gentlemen. I'm delighted so many of you could attend my demonstration. I trust you will be enlightened as well as entertained. But wait a moment.

*(He peers out into the audience.)*

What's this? Do I perceive that ladies are also present? Excellent! All company is immeasurably improved by the addition of the fairer sex. They look better than we do. They smell better. And, occasionally, they act better.

*(smiles charmingly)*

Ladies, you are most welcome. Now. As most of you know, I am Benjamin Franklin. I am here in England as an agent for my country. But as I also dabble in science, the Royal Society has invited me to exhibit one or two of my experiments in the movement of electrical fluid. And that you may be the more edified, I shall enliven my demonstrations with doses of moral philosophy. Don't look so glum. The old cannot help instructing the young. And as I am now in my 70<sup>th</sup> year—the very prime of my senility—most of you look mighty young to me.

*(He calls upwards.)*

Are you ready, Temple?

*(TEMPLE'S voice comes shakily from above, out of sight. He has a well-bred English accent.)*

**TEMPLE:** *(OFF)* Probably. That is, I hope so.

**BEN:** *(speaking to unseen assistants)* Lower away, then, boys.

*(BEN rummages around in a box, and takes out a yard-long velvet bag. TEMPLE FRANKLIN, 18, is lowered from the fly. TEMPLE is handsome, kind, intelligent, absent-minded and, uncharacteristic of a FRANKLIN, unsure of himself. But his chief characteristic is simple sincerity, untouched by irony. At the moment, he is lying face down on a pallet suspended by silk cords.)*

Here you see my grandson, William Temple Franklin, who has just come to live with me at Craven Street. Tonight he has consented to be my assistant.

*(BEN removes from the bag a yard-long glass tube and a buckskin cloth.)*

Good evening, Temple.

**TEMPLE:** Good evening, sir.

**BEN:** Which would you prefer, Temple? To be electrified straightaway? Or to hear some genuine Ben Franklin gems of wisdom first?

**TEMPLE:** Um...I think some gems, sir.

**BEN:** You see, ladies and gentlemen, the young will listen to the old, if the alternative is sufficiently alarming. Very well, Temple. Ladies and gentlemen. Attend. To the unmarried I advise: keep your eyes wide open before marriage, and half shut afterwards. Ladies, always remember that one good husband is worth two good wives; for the scarcer things are, the more they're valued. Gentlemen, take note: generally, women

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study to be good, only when they cease to be handsome.

*(TEMPLE laughs.)*

Oh, the lad likes that one. Buck up now, Temple, your time has come.

*(to the audience)*

This glass tube is positively charged. On the other hand, my grandson here is negatively charged. In all things, Nature seeks a balance. So, as Temple is not grounded, when I bring my positively charged tube close to negatively charged Temple ...

*(FRANKLIN passes the wand close to TEMPLE'S hair, which stands on end.)*

**TEMPLE:** Ooh, that's a funny feeling.

**BEN:** He fills up with electrical fluid. Now, just extend your fingers, Temple.

**TEMPLE:** Wait. How about another wise saying?

**BEN:** You're not frightened, are you?

**TEMPLE:** Oh no, sir. Just, um, in need of more moral instruction.

*(pointing out to the audience)*

I'm sure they feel the same.

**BEN:** Very well. Extend your fingers and I shall call up one of my best. Come on.

*(TEMPLE does so, apprehensively.)*

Temple, ladies and gentlemen, beer is living proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.

*(TEMPLE guffaws and BEN puts his own fingers close to TEMPLE'S, drawing sparks from their ends.)*

**TEMPLE:** Hey!

**BEN:** And now Temple is discharged.

*(Applause.)*

**TEMPLE:** That didn't hurt a bit.

**BEN:** Of course not.

*(He looks up again.)*

All right, boys.

*(TEMPLE is let down a bit too fast.)*

**TEMPLE:** Ow. *That* hurt.

**BEN:** Thank you, Temple. If you'll just fetch my battery.

**TEMPLE:** Yes, sir.

*(A bit disoriented, TEMPLE starts off in the wrong direction.)*

**BEN:** That way I think, Temple.

**TEMPLE:** Right.

*(He exits in the other direction.)*

**BEN:** My good lady wife is not altogether reconciled to electricity. Whenever it discharges into our lightning rod at home in Philadelphia, she complains that it rattles the dishes. I miss my Debbie. I am sorry that America's business keeps me from her side.

*(TEMPLE comes in, wheeling the battery on a gurney. A wire lead comes off one end.)*

**BEN:** Ah. And now my final dose of moral philosophy. At this very moment English soldiers sent by Parliament insult, abuse, and confine the people of Boston. Why? Because they threw some illegally taxed tea into the harbor. But our good king is a friend to America.

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*(displays a royal document)*

He has demonstrated this by granting me an audience. I have no doubt, when I acquaint him with our grievances, he will redress them. And so I urge you, ladies and gentlemen: be a friend to America. Because she resembles my electrical battery here. If you abuse her, you're bound to get a nasty shock. But if you honor her, she will reward you with energy and wonder. Temple?

*(Using a handkerchief as insulation, TEMPLE touches the wire to the snifter and the brandy lights. BEN blows out the flame, to applause. He picks up the snifter, raises it to the audience.)*

Ladies and gentlemen, your very good health.

*(He drinks. Applause. BEN bows)*

Now. Who would like to assist me at our next salon by demonstrating my new urinary catheter invention? Temple?

**TEMPLE:** Absolutely not.

**BEN:** *(He looks out at the audience.)* No volunteers? Well, good night, then, ladies and gentlemen. Good night.  
*(He turns and is alone with TEMPLE.)*

**TEMPLE:** That was good, sir.

**BEN:** Thank you, Temple. You were very brave.

**TEMPLE:** A letter's come for you, sir. I've been meaning to give it to you.  
*(BEN eyes TEMPLE as he opens the letter TEMPLE offers him.)*

**BEN:** Your waistcoat does not seem to complement your frock coat.  
*(TEMPLE looks down, realizes.)*

**TEMPLE:** Oh. Right. I seem to have lost the one that goes with it.

**BEN:** There is a curious antipathy between your person and your clothing. They are like electrical charges opposing each other.

**TEMPLE:** The letter seems to be from my Father.  
*(BEN opens it eagerly.)*

**BEN:** From Billy? It's about time. It's been months.  
*(WILLIAM FRANKLIN, 45, appears. He is at the Governor's Mansion, Perth Amboy, NJ. WILLIAM is a YOUNGER version of his father, though more elegantly dressed and grave. He has the same intensity of purpose about everything. If he lacks any of the characteristics of his father, it is BEN's easy humor. He is precise and highly organized. Also present is DEBORAH FRANKLIN, 68. DEBBIE has the fretful quality of a woman who, having bustled all her days, is suddenly unable to. In her illness she is attended by ELIZABETH DOWNES FRANKLIN, 41, WILLIAM's wife, a charming, fashionable beauty without domestic accomplishments, but with an English accent as elevated as TEMPLE's.)*

**WILLIAM:** Father. I have learned that London is no longer safe for you. Lord Dartmouth hints at danger. Your enemies promote the false rumor that you are in league with the hotheads who destroyed the tea at Boston.

**DEBORAH:** Where's Ben? Where's my Ben?  
*(ELIZABETH comforts her.)*

**ELIZABETH:** Shh, shh. Mother Franklin, William's writing to him.

**BEN:** Oh, dear.

**TEMPLE:** What is it, sir?

**WILLIAM:** Also, it grieves me to report that Mother has suffered a paralytic stroke. I've brought her to stay

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with us in New Jersey. Dr. Bond is not certain of her recovery.

**TEMPLE:** I'm so sorry.

**WILLIAM:** I am increasingly alarmed by the rebellion in Boston.

**DEBORAH:** I need me the jakes.

**ELIZABETH:** Let's find a servant girl to help you.

*(ELIZABETH helps DEBORAH leave. Meanwhile:)*

**WILLIAM:** I need you in America, Father. There is a task which only you can accomplish here. Mother needs you, too. Surely you have done all you can in England. Will you not come home?

**TEMPLE:** Is there anything else?

*(WILLIAM draws forward, confidentially.)*

**WILLIAM:** I pray you, when you come, bring Temple with you. It's time my son began his life in America.

*(TEMPLE is pleased and excited.)*

**TEMPLE:** Really? He's called for me?

**BEN:** See for yourself.

*(BEN hands the letter to TEMPLE.)*

**WILLIAM:** Temple may be introduced as the child of a poor English relation. Someone whose parents have asked me to stand godfather to him.

*(WILLIAM disappears. TEMPLE is keenly disappointed, and BEN sees this.)*

**BEN:** Temple?

**TEMPLE:** I suppose you'll be taking ship immediately.

**BEN:** My audience with his Majesty is not for another month.

**TEMPLE:** Quite.

**BEN:** If I leave now, I've accomplished nothing.

**TEMPLE:** Hardly nothing, sir. Your scientific work, your academic honors—

**BEN:** Chaff in the wind. But this audience finally gives me the means to benefit my country.

**TEMPLE:** What of Mrs. Franklin?

**BEN:** Yes, there is that. But Debbie is made of stern stuff. She will recover her health.

**TEMPLE:** My father mentions danger.

**BEN:** Pish. Your father worries too much.

**TEMPLE:** But I should hate for anything to happen to you, sir.

**BEN:** Your tenderness of heart does you credit. I value it quite as much as I deplore your frequent absence of mind.

**TEMPLE:** Thank you. I think.

**BEN:** I've decided. We shall hang on here until the audience, I'll persuade the King to put down Parliament, and then we'll bolt home as fast as we can. You'll like America, Temple.

**TEMPLE:** Oh, I'm not going, sir.

**BEN:** Of course you're going.

**TEMPLE:** No, I'll give it a miss. London's my home.

**BEN:** But your father calls you to America.

**TEMPLE:** It can't be that important to him. He hasn't clapped eyes on me since I was a baby.

**BEN:** For a solid month—ever since you joined my household—you've told me you wish to meet your father.

**TEMPLE:** So I did. But not now. Not if he won't be my father. Not if he wants to pass me off as some poor

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relation.

**BEN:** He urges that arrangement because he loves you.

**TEMPLE:** Rot.

**BEN:** Temple!

**TEMPLE:** I mean, fair enough. I wasn't "got 'tween the lawful sheets," and all that. And a bastard's a bit awkward for a Royal Governor, I suppose. But if my father doesn't acknowledge me his son, he doesn't love me.

**BEN:** That's how you see it.

**TEMPLE:** That's the only way to see it.

**BEN:** What is your age at present? Nine? Fourteen?

**TEMPLE:** (*indignant*) I beg your pardon. I'm almost eighteen.

**BEN:** Pray, don't be offended. The old do not make such a large distinction between year and year as do the young.

**TEMPLE:** (*incredulous*) Nine?

**BEN:** I should have told you sooner. This has been a grave *erratum* on my part. I apologize.

**TEMPLE:** Told me what?

**BEN:** About your father. About me. About your family, Temple.

**TEMPLE:** I know all about my illustrious family, sir.

**BEN:** I don't mean the story we tell the public.

**TEMPLE:** Sorry. I'm not sure I'm following this.

**BEN:** I propose a scientific experiment. I will demonstrate to you that all your father has done—and does now—is proof of his affection.

**TEMPLE:** That's hardly likely.

**BEN:** And, if I prove your father's love to your satisfaction, you will take ship with me to America. Agreed?  
(*He pauses as TEMPLE hesitates.*)

Temple, don't you want to know the truth about the Franklins?

**TEMPLE:** Yes. I do.

**BEN:** Good. Now then. It's a pleasant enough day. What do you say we perambulate back home? We can talk as we walk.

**TEMPLE:** All right, then.

(*He puts on a cloak, notices TEMPLE has none.*)

**BEN:** You've misplaced your cloak. Naturally.

**TEMPLE:** It's a comfort to me to think that others must benefit from my losses.  
(*BEN swings his own around TEMPLE's shoulders.*)

**BEN:** Yes. You're a one-man charitable institution. Now then. We'll have to begin by going back in time a bit.

**TEMPLE:** How far back?

**SCENE 2 -- Salon in London, 1775 -- Deborah Read's Parlor, Philadelphia: 1730 --** The actor playing WILLIAM enters as YOUNGER BEN, 24. He encounters DEBORAH, now 23. She has a large pot of what

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*looks like white paste, which she is beating and stirring with a heavy pestle; also a number of small tins. BEN walks into the scene. He addresses TEMPLE.*

**BEN:** Oh, an impossibly long time to someone of your age. Forty-six years. But it was an important day in the life of us Franklins. My Debbie was just 23 then. Which means I must have been 24. Good God, was I ever that young?

*(BEN bows to YOUNGER BEN, who returns the bow. BEN leaves the scene to rejoin TEMPLE.)*

**YOUNGER BEN:** Miss Read.

**DEBORAH:** Mister Franklin.

**YOUNGER BEN:** You are industrious this morning.

**DEBORAH:** Ain't I industrious every morning?

**YOUNGER BEN:** Yes, to be sure.

*(She continues to mix vigorously.)*

Miss Read.

**DEBORAH:** Yes, Mr. Franklin?

**YOUNGER BEN:** I have come with an important matter to put to you. Good Lord, what is that offensive odor?

**DEBORAH:** 'Tisn't an offensive odor! It's Ma's Itch-Away ointment. It makes cash for Ma and me. Here. You can put it in the tins.

**YOUNGER BEN:** I'm happy to help.

*(He uses the spoon DEBORAH provides to apply ointment to a tin. He continues filling tins as he talks.)*

**DEBORAH:** Not too much. Now what was you saying about an important matter? I don't usually see you this early in a day.

*(BEN pulls out his schedule.)*

**YOUNGER BEN:** And I have only until 10 o'clock if I am to remain on schedule.

*(She snatches it from him.)*

Miss Read!

**DEBORAH:** "Nine-thirty. Propose marriage to Deborah Read. Ten o'clock, compose type for next issue of *Gazette*."

*(A bit of an awkward pause.)*

**YOUNGER BEN:** Well, that has sped matters along.

**DEBORAH:** Keep filling them tins, please. I got a schedule to keep, too.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Miss Read. Deborah. When I left you eighteen months ago. I was a poor man—

**DEBORAH:** You never wrote me but one letter the whole time you was away!

**YOUNGER BEN:** But now, I begin to prosper in the printing trade and have begun a newspaper. I find also that I write tolerably well—

**DEBORAH:** And that was to tell me how much you was enjoying yourself!

**YOUNGER BEN:** Yes. That was an *erratum* which I now wish to correct.

**DEBORAH:** A what?

**YOUNGER BEN:** Mistake. I find it does not sting so much if I use the Latin.

**DEBORAH:** How's that moral perfection experiment progressing, Mr. Franklin? What week are you on now?

**YOUNGER BEN:** Week Eleven. Lust.

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*(TEMPLE stirs at this.)*

**TEMPLE:** You set out to achieve moral perfection, sir?

**BEN:** It was a thirteen-week course of my own devising.

**TEMPLE:** And?

**BEN:** I gave it up. I found it made me ridiculous and discouraged my friends. Now attend.

**DEBORAH:** We're poor since Pa died. You'd get no bride-price by marrying me.

**YOUNGER BEN:** I have considered that.

*(He pulls out another piece of paper.)*

I have made a list of pros and cons—you know, as we used to do—on the subject of marrying you. May I acquaint you with it?

**DEBORAH:** You can't fill tins while you're reading.

**YOUNGER BEN:** "Pro. She is a handsome woman, with all goodly parts."

**DEBORAH:** Pray, go on.

**YOUNGER BEN:** "Con. She will bring no dowry."

**DEBORAH:** I told you that.

**YOUNGER BEN:** "Pro. She is frugal, as am I, and so will not cost much. Con. She will bring no dowry. Pro. She is industrious, and so will be my helpmeet in business affairs, especially the shop."

**DEBORAH:** You have a shop?

**YOUNGER BEN:** I will. We'll sell everything to do with printing: paper, ink, bills of lading, sealing wax—

**DEBORAH:** —Ma's Itch-Away ointment?

**YOUNGER BEN:** Certainly. We could have a prospering trade. And that's only the beginning. I believe a man of tolerable abilities can accomplish great affairs if he forms a good plan and sacrifices to achieve it. When we've made enough money, I'll apply to the crown for a royal position.

**DEBORAH:** What's your con?

**YOUNGER BEN:** "She will bring no dowry." As you can see, the pros far overtop the cons. And so, Deborah I'm asking you—

**DEBORAH:** Wait.

*(She pulls out a piece of paper.)*

I done my own list.

**YOUNGER BEN:** You did?

**DEBORAH:** "Pro. He's clever and he works like the dickens."

**YOUNGER BEN:** That's true enough.

**DEBORAH:** "Con. He thinks well of himself and never comes down off his high horse."

**YOUNGER BEN:** Well—

**DEBORAH:** "Pro. He's a steady fellow, even if he ain't too handsome."

**YOUNGER BEN:** That's a pro?

**DEBORAH:** "Con. He ain't too handsome."

**YOUNGER BEN:** I want a wife who'll work beside me.

**DEBORAH:** And I want a husband who'll give me babies. I mortal love a baby with their sweet breaths and all. My first husband, may God find and punish him, he wouldn't give me none before he took off into the blue. Though I expect he gave other women some.

**YOUNGER BEN:** We'll do my father one better. We'll have eighteen.

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**DEBORAH:** Lord. I don't want a militia. Two or three'll do me if they're good ones. Ben, do I really suit you? I ain't clever, I got no education, and I'm awful plain-spoken. Could you like me, Ben? All your days? I couldn't stand another husband running off.

**YOUNGER BEN:** I could and I will.

**DEBORAH:** I'll never wear a dress I don't like, just because you do.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Done. I'll not have you spending money we don't have.

**DEBORAH:** Why would I ever do such a thing?

**YOUNGER BEN:** Oh, I do like you.

**DEBORAH:** Well, then.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Well, then, what?

**DEBORAH:** Ain't you going to ask me?

**YOUNGER BEN:** Will you be my wife, Debbie?

**DEBORAH:** No, Ben.

**YOUNGER BEN:** No?

**DEBORAH:** Of course not. You're forgetting my husband.

**YOUNGER BEN:** I thought he was dead. Some brawl in the West Indies.

**DEBORAH:** I got no proof of that. And the law's mighty hard on having two husbands. I inquired. Thirty lashes.

**YOUNGER BEN:** That is harsh.

**DEBORAH:** And jail for life.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Well.

**DEBORAH:** I'm sorry, Ben. I'll just take them tins now.

**YOUNGER BEN:** I'm not a church-going man.

**DEBORAH:** There's another con. Atheism.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Oh, I believe in God. And I support all the churches. At least those with printing work to be done. But I don't believe God wishes us to be unhappy when we can be otherwise.

**DEBORAH:** Are you saying something?

**YOUNGER BEN:** I'm saying, we don't need to go to a church. If you put your hand in mine and say you'll have me, then before God we are married. Right now.

*(He puts out his hand to her.)*

**DEBORAH:** I'll have you, Ben.

*(She starts to put her hand in his.)*

**YOUNGER BEN:** Then I have one other item to mention. You said you want babies. I already have one. Or will in a month or so. Its mother doesn't want it, and she and I have made a financial arrangement. It was an *erratum* on both our parts, one that is, I promise you, concluded. But I want the child, Debbie. Girl or boy, I want it reared as a Franklin. Will you take it in? Will you treat it as your own?

*(She stands shocked, with her hand still outstretched. BEN and TEMPLE walk through the scene.*

*YOUNGER BEN and DEBORAH disappear.)*

SCENE 3 -- London Street: 1775 -- Franklin Press, Philadelphia: 1736

**TEMPLE:** And that baby was my father?

**BEN:** Yes. Like you, not got 'tween the lawful sheets.

**TEMPLE:** Who...who knows about this?

**BEN:** Everyone. And now, finally, you.

**TEMPLE:** And you never ... well, you know, sir ...

**BEN:** Blushed to acknowledge him? No. I have always been proud that Billy is my son.

**TEMPLE:** As my father is not that I am his.

**BEN:** He took great care that you were reared by kindly, intelligent people. He paid for your fine Kensington education.

**TEMPLE:** But he won't call me son!

**BEN:** That is a token of his affection.

**TEMPLE:** It's a token of his discomfort. He is ashamed of me.

**BEN:** Be calm. Listen. Our experiment has just begun.

*(DEBORAH comes on, now 29, too overwhelmed with shock and grief to cry. She clutches some small object in her hand which we can't see. She stares before her.)*

**BEN:** Debbie reared Billy dutifully, but always hoping, hoping for a child of her own. When little Frankie came at last, her joy was unbounded. As was mine.

*(YOUNGER BEN, now 30, comes on, very pleased. He doesn't notice DEBORAH's mood because he's so jubilant.)*

**DEBORAH:** You're back.

*(YOUNGER BEN kisses DEBORAH briefly.)*

**BEN:** One day I returned from a buying trip.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Look what's come in the post. Debbie! It's happened.

*(He shows her a handsome parchment. She doesn't respond.)*

I've been appointed Postmaster for Pennsylvania! See, here's his Majesty's own signature. I'll set Billy to tracing it so he'll learn to write in the King's own hand.

**DEBORAH:** *(disgusted)* Billy.

**YOUNGER BEN:** *(puzzled)* Yes.

**DEBORAH:** You favor inoculation, don't you, Ben?

**YOUNGER BEN:** Of course. Inoculation prevents the pox.

**DEBORAH:** Then when was you going to get Frankie done? When you steal a moment from your fooleries with Billy? When you tear yourself away from showing Billy the King's handwriting—and your press and your stove and God know what all?

**YOUNGER BEN:** Frankie will be inoculated the moment he's over the flux. I've said.

**DEBORAH:** It's too late.

**YOUNGER BEN:** What's happened? Debbie, what's happened?

**DEBORAH:** *(She shows what is in her hands.)* Look. Here's his little toy horse I made him. He won't never play with it no more now. Not never.

*(She drifts off in pain. YOUNGER BEN comes forward directly to the audience.)*

**YOUNGER BEN:** "To the Pennsylvania Gazette. It has been wrongly circulated that my son Francis died of an

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inoculation against smallpox. Inasmuch as some may by that report be deterred from that beneficial practice, I do hereby inform the public that this is not true. Frankie died in the common way of infection. I urge all to protect their little ones, as I did not.”

**SCENE 4 -- London Street: 1775 -- Franklin House: 1746 -- YOUNGER BEN** walks off, heartbroken. At the same moment we discover **BEN** and **TEMPLE**. They sit on a bench. **BEN** is lost in the thought of his dead son and does not speak. **TEMPLE** prompts him gently.

**TEMPLE:** Sir?

**BEN:** Let’s rest here for a moment, shall we?

**TEMPLE:** Certainly.

**BEN:** Frankie’s death still brings a pang to my heart.

**TEMPLE:** I’m sorry.

**BEN:** But the change it made in Debbie.

*(sighs)*

She longed for children of her own. We had two. Poor Frankie, and then a daughter—my lovely, good Sally—your aunt—

**TEMPLE:** Well. Half-aunt, actually.

**BEN:** You place a good deal of importance on bloodlines.

**TEMPLE:** I’m ... English.

**BEN:** Debbie’s heart sparked toward our Sally. It always has. I think it did toward Billy, too, until Frankie died. But after that ... Do you understand, Temple? This is very important. She resented him for being alive when her own child was dead.

**TEMPLE:** Yes, sir.

**BEN:** We had agreed that we would wait to tell Billy his real parentage until he was older. Then one day Debbie found she could not wait.

*(BEN gestures for TEMPLE to enter the scene.)*

Your father was just about your age.

**TEMPLE:** Me, Sir?

**BEN:** Yes.

*(TEMPLE picks up a couple of books and bridle and makes to walk past DEBORAH, now 39. He is now YOUNGER WILLIAM, 16. He hopes to get past DEBORAH without being stopped.)*

**DEBORAH:** William!

*(But this stops him cold.)*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Yes, Mother.

**DEBORAH:** Where are you gadding?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I’m not gadding, Mother. I’m going out to set the Latin Mr. Hall has assigned me.

**DEBORAH:** Since when do you scribble your Latin out-a-doors?

*(WILLIAM decides to be charming.)*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Since I found the air does wonders for my conjugations.

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*(He kisses his mother on the cheek.)*

Vale, cara bella mater!

**DEBORAH:** Don't you be saucy with me!

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I'm not! All I said was--

**DEBORAH:** And does it take a bridle and bit to scribble? You're sneaking off to ride Duchess, ain't you?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Only after I do my conjugations, I promise.

**DEBORAH:** There's a hundred tasks to set your hand to. But you don't see that, do you? You just see pleasures and fooleries.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I work hard, Mother. I work at the press, I work at the shop, I work at home. And I work at school. You ask Mr. Hall.

**DEBORAH:** Have you separated the linen rags?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Yes.

**DEBORAH:** Have you sorted the post?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Yes.

**DEBORAH:** Have you done your house chores? Have you brought in the wood?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Yes.

**DEBORAH:** And the shop?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Sally's minding the shop. It's her turn.

**DEBORAH:** Always leave the toilsome work to your sister.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** It's her turn! I've seen to the shop three days in a row.

**DEBORAH:** Well, one of those days was the Sabbath, so that ain't true.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** You never let me alone! I do all my work. I just want to ride Duchess. She's my horse.

**DEBORAH:** You shouldn't have that mare, at all. It's pride. What other tradesman's son's got his own horse?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Father gave her to me!

**DEBORAH:** Don't I know it.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** It isn't fair.

**DEBORAH:** Well. Lots of things ain't fair. I guess I know that as good as any woman living. Now, you're going to make yourself useful, cutting and folding these pamphlets.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I have to do my Latin. Mr. Hall--

**DEBORAH:** Tradesmen's sons don't need no Latin. Nor a horse.

*(She gets up.)*

Sit.

*(He does. She gives him a pile of printed papers.)*

Now cut and fold. I'll just take this bridle till you're done.

*(She starts to leave. WILLIAM is furious. He stands up and hurls the papers to the ground, along with his book.)*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** That bridle is mine! You have no right to take it. Give it back.

**DEBORAH:** Never dare give me orders, boy.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** You always ruin everything. Always. You're hateful.

**DEBORAH:** You ain't got no right to speak to me that way!

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** At least I know how to speak properly!

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*(This is too much for DEBORAH. She impulsively slaps him across the face.)*

**DEBORAH:** You ain't getting this bridle back. Maybe that'll teach you to curb an unruly tongue.

*(She turns again to go.)*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I wish you weren't my mother!

*(She turns back.)*

**DEBORAH:** Well, I ain't! There. That make you feel better? I ain't your mother. Now you know. Every time I see your face I think of my Frankie, as should have lived. You ain't mine. You're just a cuckoo in our nest.

*(They just stare at each other. WILLIAM almost breaks down. DEBORAH doesn't budge an inch emotionally. After a moment, WILLIAM breaks and runs offstage. He is on his way to the Philadelphia Wharf. DEBORAH looks after him. Without emotion, she picks up the things WILLIAM has spilled and exits.)*

**SCENE 5 -- Philadelphia Wharf: 1746 --** Sea sounds. **YOUNGER WILLIAM**, cloaked, sits on a barrel.

*YOUNGER BEN*, now 40, comes swiftly on after him. He has been looking for his son. There is not a trace of scolding—or even reproach—in *YOUNGER BEN*'s tone.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Ah! Here you are. I should have known.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I'm going to sea.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Of course you are. All young men want to go to sea. May I?

*(He plunks himself down next to his son.)*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Don't try to stop me.

**YOUNGER BEN:** I wouldn't dream of it. Any particular vessel you have your eye on?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I'm sailing with Captain Lane.

**YOUNGER BEN:** A privateer. Excellent choice.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I want to fight the French. I want to serve the king. He is our royal father, and we subjects are his children. I know he cares for all his children.

**YOUNGER BEN:** A noble sentiment. King George is, indeed, the best of monarchs. Of course, on the other hand, your real father also cares for you.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** No, you don't. I'm a cuckoo in your nest.

**YOUNGER BEN:** I beg your pardon.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** That's what she said.

**YOUNGER BEN:** A cuckoo?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Yes.

**YOUNGER BEN:** In our nest?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Apparently.

**YOUNGER BEN:** That was an unkind remark. I'm sorry your mother made it. You must have been terribly provoked.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I was.

**YOUNGER BEN** I'm sure you were. And with cause.

*(unable to suppress a laugh.)*

Oh, dear.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Why are you laughing?

**YOUNGER BEN:** (*imitating the bird through his laughter*) Cuckoo! Cuckoo!

(*This drives WILLIAM to his feet.*)

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** That isn't at all humorous!

**YOUNGER BEN:** No, you're right. I do apologize. Forgive me.

(*gazing up at him.*)

Good Lord, you've got tall. I think you're becoming more of a stork than a cuckoo.

(*another outburst*)

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I'm leaving!

**YOUNGER BEN:** Billy, listen to me. Who you are is my son. That's what matters.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** But not hers.

**YOUNGER BEN:** No.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** So, what she said was true.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Yes.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Why didn't you tell me? Why did I have to hear it from her?

**YOUNGER BEN:** I didn't want to burden you. But I was wrong to put it off. I'm sorry. Do you doubt my affection? Do you?

**YOUNGER BEN:** She has none for me.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Love your mother, Billy. Find a way. Else your soul will canker. And I would not have that.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** She said she thinks of Frankie when she sees me.

**YOUNGER BEN:** I believe she thinks of Frankie whatever she looks at.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** How can I love her?

**YOUNGER BEN:** By thinking on this. She has mended your clothes and put food in front of you and cared for you when you were ill, for sixteen years. Do you not find that admirable?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I don't want to be a printer.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Good. You set type worse than anyone with two hands I've ever seen. Now, I want to show you something.

(*He takes from a pouch a hollow glass ball, and gives it to WILLIAM.*)

A curious thing has resulted from all our thrift and industry. We no longer need to be so thrifty and industrious.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** What does that mean?

**YOUNGER BEN:** I am retiring from trade. I intend to devote myself to public usefulness.

(*WILLIAM holds up the globe and peers at it.*)

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** By turning gypsy and reading fortunes?

**YOUNGER BEN:** If you rub that globe with a sheepskin it gives off sparks. I bought it from Dr. Spencer after his lecture at the State House. Electricity, Billy! It's opening up new realms. I know it has a usefulness to mankind yet unguessed. Let's discover its secrets together.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I still want to serve the king.

**YOUNGER BEN:** You shall. I promise you. They call us middling people, Billy. The rich. The nobly born. Because we make our living in trade and craft. Well, middling people can make a difference in the world. You'll see.

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*(WILLIAM turns away.)*

Billy, you would hate serving on a privateer. The food is awful.

*(He puts his hands on WILLIAM's shoulders, turns him gently around, speaks directly to him.)*

Come home. Endure your mother's crotchets. And let us be Franklin and Franklin together. What do you say?

**SCENE 6 -- Governor's Mansion, Perth Amboy, NJ: 1775 -- DEBORAH, again 68, and ELIZABETH split the scene as YOUNGER BEN and YOUNGER WILLIAM disappear. DEBORAH is clutching a bolt of heavy brocade cloth, some of which trails behind her. She seems to be trying to keep it away from ELIZABETH, who pursues her onstage.**

**DEBORAH:** No! Just leave me be! Whoever you are.

**ELIZABETH:** Mother Franklin, it's me. It's Elizabeth. Your son's wife.

**DEBORAH:** Don't talk to me like I'm simple. I ain't simple.

**ELIZABETH:** No, no, of course not. Why are you out of bed, Mother Franklin?

**DEBORAH:** I got to work quick as I can. Ben sent me this brocade from London ages ago. He wants curtains in our bedroom.

**ELIZABETH:** But this can't be the cloth he sent you, dear. This is expensive, fashionable material. It's left over from when we did up our house.

**DEBORAH:** Your house?

**ELIZABETH:** Yes. You're in New Jersey, remember? You're in our house.

**DEBORAH:** If this is your house, where's your little boy?

**ELIZABETH:** We didn't manage to have children, I'm afraid. You know that.

**DEBORAH:** None, at all?

**ELIZABETH:** This is rather a painful subject for me.

**DEBORAH:** *(proudly)* I got me a fine boy.

*(DEBORAH suddenly grabs ELIZABETH's arm. She's weathering a mini-stroke. The pain is internal. Everything just stops for a moment.)*

**ELIZABETH:** What's wrong? What's wrong?

**DEBORAH:** I can't move my arm.

**ELIZABETH:** *(calling out)* William! Oh, dear. William!

*(ELIZABETH hurries off in search of her husband. DEBORAH remains onstage. In a moment she will be 45.)*

**SCENE 7 -- London Street: 1775 -- Franklin House, Philadelphia: 1752 -- BEN and TEMPLE walk through the scene.**

**BEN:** Billy and I became inseparable, Temple. We did everything together--campaigned, speculated,

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postmastered. And together we embarked on the endeavor which baptized our partnership in fire.

**TEMPLE:** Your experiments.

**BEN:** Yes. Franklin and Franklin became electricians.

*(BEN and TEMPLE disappear. YOUNGER BEN, 46, joins DEBORAH, now 45. He is carrying a kite.)*

**DEBORAH:** Wear your cloak and hat; I don't want you going out without them.

**YOUNGER BEN:** It's June, my dear.

**DEBORAH:** It's storm season. I don't like you going out, at all. But you don't pay no heed to me.

*(BEN puts down the kite and suffers himself to be bundled up.)*

**YOUNGER BEN:** It's perfectly safe.

**DEBORAH:** None of your electrical fooleries—

**YOUNGER BEN:**—experiments—

**DEBORAH:** None of them ain't safe! You near as killed yourself dead when you sent a jolt through that turkey.

**YOUNGER BEN:** I was merely tenderizing the meat.

**DEBORAH:** But going out-a-doors when everybody's scurrying in. Why do you have to be so reckless and dangerous?

**YOUNGER BEN:** I've waited for them to complete the steeple on Christchurch, but they dawdle. If the electricity in the clouds won't come to me, I must go to it.

**DEBORAH:** Lightning bolts is God's judgment. Don't you mind how a bolt struck that cathedral in France. What's that if not God's judgment on Catholics?

**YOUNGER BEN:** My dear, lightning has also struck the church spires of Methodists.

**DEBORAH:** Well, that was the Devil's work. And don't you think if God strikes Catholics and the Devil strikes good Methodists, one or the other'll strike you, too?

**YOUNGER BEN:** I don't think I have an answer to that.

**DEBORAH:** Because there ain't none.

**YOUNGER BEN:** *(consulting his watch)* Where is Billy? He should be here by now.

**DEBORAH:** That's another thing. It ain't so bad you wasting time thinking up ways to kill yourself. You're a lazy man of leisure now.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Lazy?

**DEBORAH:** But your son is of age. And what's he done with them twenty-two years of his?

**YOUNGER BEN:** A great deal. He's fought the French. He's served as Secretary to the Assembly. He's begun to learn the law—

**DEBORAH:** The point is, he ain't married.

**YOUNGER BEN:** I believe he's working on that, too.

*(YOUNGER WILLIAM, now 22, joins them, having come from his own lodging.)*

Ah, Billy.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I observed some thunder-gusts as I came along. They appear threatening.

*(BEN tries to encourage a little mother-son affection.)*

**YOUNGER BEN:** Look. Here's your mother come to wish us luck.

*(But it falls flat. The two remain stiff and formal.)*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Mother.

**DEBORAH:** William.

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*(BEN waits for some further exchange; there is none. He puts an arm around both of their shoulders.)*

**YOUNGER BEN:** Well, this is jolly.

**DEBORAH:** Ben, please don't go out there. What if you're wrong about all this foolery?

**YOUNGER BEN:** There's nothing wrong with being wrong, my dear.

**DEBORAH:** Well, that's just double talk.

**YOUNGER BEN:** No, no.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** It's all right to be wrong?

**YOUNGER BEN:** Of course. In science, there's nothing wrong with being wrong. It's simply the first step to being right.

**DEBORAH:** It's the first step to being dead!

**YOUNGER BEN:** Debbie.

**DEBORAH:** Oh, all right. When did I ever talk you out of something? But if you get killed by a bolt, just you remember who told you it was foolery.

*(She stalks off. BEN gazes fondly after her.)*

**YOUNGER BEN:** Best of wives. I have mated fortunately, Billy. May you do as well.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Else I were in a very hard case.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Billy!

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Sorry.

**YOUNGER BEN:** She has a shrewd tongue, it's true, but she scolds for me, not against me.

*(WILLIAM picks up the kite.)*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Mother has a point. This is exceedingly dangerous.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Oh, pish. Our kite will sail gracefully up into the heart of the storm. It will gallantly ask a thunder cloud to dance a minuet. Then when the cloud least expects it, this pointed wire

*(shows it at the apex of the kite)*

will tickle it, and it will discharge its electrical fluid harmlessly before it can build up into an angry bolt.

Down here on the ground, the twine will electrify. I shall bring my thumb near this key, a spark will appear, and I shall experience a mild buzz. That's all. Then we'll put lightning rods on every building in Philadelphia.

*(A roll of thunder.)*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Are you certain? Perhaps we should wait a little.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Ahem. "Never put off till tomorrow--

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Sorry. I forgot I was talking to Poor Richard.

**YOUNGER BEN:** I was going to ask you something today, but as you're in such a hesitant mood...

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** What?

**YOUNGER BEN:** No, I'll leave it for another time.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Father, tell me.

**YOUNGER BEN:** When you're feeling bolder.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I shall break this kite in half.

**YOUNGER BEN:** That is a scientific instrument.

*(YOUNGER WILLIAM starts to bend it.)*

All right! I haven't told your mother yet, but the Assembly wants me for its agent. I'm to represent the

colony before our good King George.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** In England?

**YOUNGER BEN:** That's where they keep the king.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I see. You wish me to manage your affairs while you're away.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Debbie will manage my affairs. Between ourselves, she's far better at it than I am.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** But can she spare you, do you think?

**YOUNGER BEN:** After twenty-one years of my being underfoot? She'll be relieved to have me gone for a season or two. But I'm wondering, son. It's a lot to ask. Would you care to complete your law studies in London? You could be a great help to me. I don't know where things stand between you and the Graeme girl--

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** When do we leave?

**YOUNGER BEN:** Then you accept? Just like that?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Never put off till tomorrow. You know I would go to the ends of the earth with you, Father.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Good. I'm so glad.

*(Thunder.)*

But. Now. Will you go fly a kite with me?

*(YOUNGER WILLIAM disappears with the kite.)*

*Scene 8 -- Governor's Mansion, Perth Amboy, NJ: 1775 -- DEBORAH, more debilitated now, and ELIZABETH come on. YOUNGER BEN turns and is WILLIAM.*

**DEBORAH:** Sally? I need Sally to help me.

**ELIZABETH:** Your daughter isn't here, Mother Franklin. Do you see, William? Call for Doctor Bond.

**WILLIAM:** He's in Burlington, I'm afraid. Will you try to move your arm, Mother?

**DEBORAH:** I miss my little Frankie. I miss him every day.

*(ELIZABETH comforts her.)*

**ELIZABETH:** I know you do, dear. I'm so sorry. It must be very hard for you.

**DEBORAH:** *(turning on her suddenly)* What do you know about it? You ain't even a mother. You never had yourself one child.

**WILLIAM:** I will not have you speaking to Elizabeth that way.

**ELIZABETH:** No, please, William. She's not in her right mind. It's the stroke.

**DEBORAH:** Did you write to him? He's coming home, ain't he?

**WILLIAM:** *(A little irritation shows.)* Yes, Mother, yes. I'm sure he is.

*(to himself: the thought escapes from him)*

But what will he find when he gets here?

**ELIZABETH:** William? You're being enigmatical.

**WILLIAM:** The Massachusetts Assembly has declared it won't pay for the tea. The Sons of Liberty are on the rampage again.

**ELIZABETH:** (*alarmed*) Who are they?

**WILLIAM:** Rebels. They're burning records. Threatening citizens loyal to the Crown.

**DEBORAH:** Oh, where's Ben?

**WILLIAM:** Where, indeed? We all need him here.

**ELIZABETH:** What's happening? How bad is it?

**WILLIAM:** Be calm, my dear. I've upset you both. Forgive me. I should learn to hold my tongue.

**DEBORAH:** I got to make my curtains. Right away.

*SCENE 9 -- Mrs. Stevenson's Lodging: 1775 -- Franklin House, Philadelphia & Mrs. Stevenson's Lodging, London: 1757-1761 -- WILLIAM, DEBORAH, and ELIZABETH disappear as BEN and TEMPLE come on. They have just arrived at their Craven Street lodging. They take off their cloaks.*

**BEN:** (*calling out*) Mrs. Stevenson! We're home! On our arrival in London, Billy and I settled here. It's a convenient location, close to Westminster and not too far from Billy's law studies at Middle Temple.

**TEMPLE:** Middle Temple? I was named for Father's law school?

**BEN:** Didn't you know?

**TEMPLE:** Middle Temple. It could have been worse I suppose. I could have been named Middle.

**BEN:** And then began one of the great delights of my life: my correspondence with Debbie.

*(DEBORAH comes on, now 50, carrying a bolt of brocade silk, much different from the bolt she carried in the previous scene. What she is saying is a letter she has written to BEN.)*

**DEBORAH:** (*LETTER*) "Dear Ben. Thanks for the pretty brocade. It'll make real fine curtains for our bedroom. That lightning rod you put up is working good, though I mortal hate the clanging the bells make when the jolts come. Anyway, people all over town want to own one. I've set the blacksmith to making 'em by the dozen."

*(YOUNGER BEN, now 51, comes on, burdened with many official documents. TEMPLE takes out a letter and becomes Young WILLIAM, now 27. So the effect is two men absorbed in reading intently. They collide. YOUNGER BEN rubs his head.)*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Sorry, Father.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Billy, when did your head get so hard? What are you looking at?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Letter to you from Mother.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Are you in the habit of reading other people's correspondence?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** (*handing it over*) She never writes to me.

**DEBORAH:** (*LETTER*) "Don't worry none about your business. I'm taking care of it for you.

*(She ticks them off.)*

Only I don't like collecting debts when people don't want to pay. It makes me feel quite low. Ben, when are you coming home?"

*(A letter from YOUNGER BEN arrives in DEBORAH's hand, which she opens and reads. Over the course of the following correspondence, four more years pass.)*

**YOUNGER BEN:** (*LETTER*) "Dear Debbie. Remember, my dear, as Poor Richard says, a low mood denotes

an unclean soul. I'm sure yours is not an unclean soul. Resolve every morning to be good-natured and cheerful. Meanwhile, I hope you approve the items I have sent: new gowns and petticoats for you and Sally. Mrs. Stevenson, our excellent landlady, helped me pick them all out. She says they are the very height and depth of fashion."

*(DEBORAH answers directly, though by letter. The two continue their correspondence as a stylized conversation.)*

**DEBORAH:** *(LETTER)* "Dear Ben. I ain't sure you should be picking out petticoats with your Mrs. Stevenson. I'm sorry you ain't coming with the summer ships. I thought you was. When can I expect you?"

**YOUNGER BEN:** *(LETTER)* "Dear wife. Be satisfied that I shall do nothing unworthy the character of a loving and dutiful husband."

**DEBORAH:** *(to herself)* See that you don't.

**YOUNGER BEN:** *(LETTER)* "I haven't seen the king yet, so I cannot come home. Billy excels at his law studies. He would welcome a word from you. Mrs. Stevenson sends along a Book of Common Prayer with large print. She hopes by it you will be reprieved from the use of spectacles in church a little longer."

*(DEBBIE whips off her reading glasses.)*

**DEBORAH:** *(to herself)* She hopes by it to tell you I'm getting old!

*(LETTER)*

"Dear Ben. Tell Mrs. Stevenson she can take her large print and stuff it--"

*(She masters herself.)*

"Dear Ben. Thank your landlady for her kind gift. All your gifts is a blessing, I'm sure. But after three years of living on my own, I wonder when I shall procure the blessing of you coming home."

**YOUNGER BEN:** *(LETTER)* "My dear Debbie. There's only one thing for it. You must come here. I'll arrange your passage. Because, alas, I may have to be here some while longer--another year, at the least. As you seemed to favor Mrs. Stevenson's gift so much last November, she sends along one she says you'll like even better: a pretty new pair of reading glasses in silver and tortoise-shell."

**DEBORAH:** *(to herself)* Damn Mrs. Stevenson.

*(DEBORAH looks around to see that no one is looking, drops the glasses on the floor and crushes them underfoot. LETTER:)*

"I won't come to England, Ben. I mortal hate the sea, and I won't go on it. You know that. When are you coming home?"

**YOUNGER BEN:** *(LETTER)* "Billy has completed his law studies. You might just write and congratulate him, Debbie. Now. See how I love you! I've sent you a marvelous new mechanical invention. It will soon be indispensable in every housewife's kitchen. It turns large turnips into small ones."

**DEBORAH:** Oh, Lord!

**YOUNGER BEN:** *(LETTER)* "I've enclosed with it some saucepans from Sheffield and a pair of silver gilt cups I know you'll favor. Your affectionate husband, B. Franklin."

*DEBORAH puts this last letter down.*

**DEBORAH:** Oh, Ben, it ain't your London fooleries I want. BEN and TEMPLE have come discreetly on.

**TEMPLE:** Sorry, sir, this, um, this really has nothing to do with me, does it?

**BEN:** Didn't you note how eager Billy was for Debbie's letters?

**TEMPLE:** And did she ever...?

**BEN:** Not once in five years.

**SCENE 10 -- Mrs. Stevenson's Back Garden: 1762 --** *The chirp of birds and sunshine alert us to the fact that we are outdoors. YOUNGER BEN, now 56, comes on in work clothes. A work table appears with a lightning rod stretched across it. The rod is iron, about ten feet long, and BEN's task is to sharpen its ends to a point, using a metal file. He hums or whistles, happy in this work. For the first time, he is wearing glasses. BEN indicates that TEMPLE should enter the scene. He helps him on with a fancy frock coat. TEMPLE goes upstage and "enters" from there as YOUNGER WILLIAM, as though coming from out of the house. He is now 32.*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Thank you, Mrs. Stevenson, yes. I see he's out in the back garden. What's wrong, Father? Are you ill? Are you injured?

*(BEN hears him, quickly puts away his glasses, not wanting WILLIAM to see them.)*

**YOUNGER BEN:** Injured? Of course not.

*(indicating the lightning rod)*

What do you think, Billy?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I receive an urgent message to leave a meeting of the Board of Trade—

**YOUNGER BEN:** It's our newest lightning conductor.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I practically kill a hackney driver getting over here at breakneck speed—

**YOUNGER BEN:** We'll attach the grounding wires when they're all in place.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** All the while sick with worry about what might have happened to you—

**YOUNGER BEN:** Billy, what do you think of the lightning rod?

*(WILLIAM sighs, picks the end up.)*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Why is it so large? No house requires this length.

**YOUNGER BEN:** It's not going on a house.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Where, then?

**YOUNGER BEN:** We have been appointed by the king-the king, Billy!—to supply lightning rods for the gunpowder magazines at Purfleet.

*(WILLIAM doesn't grasp the significance of this.)*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Have we?

**YOUNGER BEN:** He chose us over Dr. Watson—Parliament's darling.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Parliament's dunce. His rods don't work. They're blunt.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Parliament favors politics over the laws of nature. But not the king. The king prefers those noted colonial yokels, Franklin and Franklin. We're sure to get an audience now.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Congratulations, Father.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Congratulate yourself, Billy.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** What do you mean?

**YOUNGER BEN:** Well, there is just one other matter. One other tiny reason I called you away from the Board of Trade. As I recollect, you wished to serve the king.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** So I do.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Well then, Billy Franklin, you son of a yokel, you get your wish. You're appointed Royal

Governor of New Jersey!

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** What?

**YOUNGER BEN:** The first American-born Royal Governor. And the youngest.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** It isn't possible.

**YOUNGER BEN:** It is if the Earl of Bute is impressed by pointed conductors.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** You secured an audience with the Earl of Bute?

**YOUNGER BEN:** He secured one with me.

*(posh English accent)*

Ah, Franklin. The very man. Sink me, but I love your lightning rods. Pointed. That's the ticket. Listen, Franklin, the Crown is recalling Governor Hardy. The man's an ass. His Majesty wonders. Who might you recommend?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** And you recommended me.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Well, I told him I was otherwise occupied. But he could still get a genuine, if lesser, Franklin for the job.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** *(posh English accent)* By Gad. Stap me vitals. You've done it, Franklin.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Billy, all these Englishmen running our colonies: they don't give a tinker's dam about America. To them, it's just stepping stones to higher rank—

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I want no higher rank. Oh, Father, thank you. Here's my destiny at last. To serve the king and the people.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Now, we've a lot to do. You sail for home just as soon as you've kissed hands and received your commission.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** And had the wedding.

**YOUNGER BEN:** The what?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** The wedding. I've got engaged. To be married.

**YOUNGER BEN:** When?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** As soon as possible, now, certainly.

**YOUNGER BEN:** No, when did you become engaged?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** This morning. Before the Board of Trade meeting.

**YOUNGER BEN:** But I knew nothing of this.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Well, I wasn't getting engaged to you.

**YOUNGER BEN:** To whom are you engaged, Billy?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Her name is Elizabeth. I meant to bring her here and ask your blessing. But events have sped ahead of my intention.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Of what family?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Downes.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Downes. The father owns sugar plantations in Barbados?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Yes.

**YOUNGER BEN:** She's English.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** We're in England. Who was I going to meet?

**YOUNGER BEN:** And a toffee-nose.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** This is why I didn't mention her before. Not all aristocrats are without good qualities. Don't be a snob, Father.

**YOUNGER BEN:** That's how we middling people are. Did you at least do a pro and con list on the girl?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Of course.

**YOUNGER BEN:** And?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** It came out all pros.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Billy, no one is all pros.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** You'll like her, Father. She's witty and charming, and she knows such a lot of things!

**YOUNGER BEN:** What things? Business? Housewifery?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Well...

*(ELIZABETH, now 28, appears separately, beautifully dressed in the up-to-the-minute height of fashion. She addresses the audience as though it were YOUNGER WILLIAM. She speaks in great excitement and enthusiasm at exactly two miles per minute.)*

**ELIZABETH:** Dear, dear William, you mustn't wear those pumps with that coat. You mustn't. And your breeches are last season's. People who know are wearing the fawn-colored now. You must open your eyes, silly. I do love your eyes. I hope their color never goes out of fashion. Did you like Lady Penelope's phaeton in the Mall? I like it exceedingly. William, William, I adore what dear Robert Adam is doing at Syon House. We must go there. You must see it. It's all so modern and Italian and white. Not like all that fustian rococo one sees.

*(She makes a face.)*

Ugh. Horrible, horrible rococo.

*(Her excitement and not pausing for breath makes her wheeze asthmatically as the lights go out on her.)*

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** She's asthmatical, I'm afraid.

**YOUNGER BEN:** The woman wheezes?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** In a very refined way. It's quite engaging, really.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Billy. The daughter of a toffee-nose who wheezes? Will she be a good helpmeet?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** She's dear to me, and I love her. She has hidden depths.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Whenever a besotted male says a woman has hidden depths he means she has a deep bosom and a quivering thigh. Does she?

*(YOUNGER WILLIAM can't help but smile.)*

You're lost.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** And exceedingly happy to be so.

**YOUNGER BEN:** What of Temple? Have you taken thought for your boy?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Temple shall stay here. I'll make arrangements. Now that I'll have income, I can give him the finest home and education.

**YOUNGER BEN:** If this girl will not marry you because you have a son, she is not worthy of a Franklin.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** She doesn't know.

**YOUNGER BEN:** You haven't told her?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** You've never informed Mother I have a son.

**YOUNGER BEN:** That's different. Debbie, while a queen among women—and a genuine helpmeet—remains sensitive on the subject of illegitimacy.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** I do know that, Father.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Yes, I suppose you do.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** And how if Elizabeth is the same? I would not have Temple suffer the coldness of a mother who cannot love him because he is not her own.

**YOUNGER BEN:** Now, Billy, your mother–

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** –has shown me nothing warmer than indifference all my life. I’m sorry to say it.

**YOUNGER BEN:** *(sighs)* I’m sorry you’ve had to feel it.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** When Temple is older, I’ll bring him to America. And I’ll give him every advantage. Father, will you watch over him here?

*(YOUNGER BEN takes out a pair of glasses.)*

**YOUNGER BEN:** Here. Look through these.

*(He gives them to YOUNGER WILLIAM.)*

I’ve had a glass maker put those magnifying sections in. I use them now when I read or do close work.

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** *(examining them)* Ingenious.

**YOUNGER BEN:** The point is, I’m not so young as I was. Am I really the right person to be rearing your son?

**YOUNGER WILLIAM:** Governesses and tutors will rear him. I just want you to look in on him. Make sure he’s a Franklin. Anyway, you’re immortal. Plymouth Rock will pass away before you do.

**SCENE 11 -- Mrs. Stevenson’s Parlor, London: 1775 -- Older BEN has joined the scene.**

**BEN:** Temple?

*(Without shifting, YOUNGER WILLIAM transforms to TEMPLE. He is contemplative.)*

**TEMPLE:** Who was my mother?

**BEN:** I never met the lady.

**TEMPLE:** I should like to.

**BEN:** Alas, you cannot. She died soon after you were born.

**TEMPLE:** From having me?

**BEN:** No, Temple. In the common way. From the pox.

**TEMPLE:** Oh. Like Frankie.

**BEN:** Something like, yes. I’m sorry.

**TEMPLE:** No, it’s just... I always thought that one day, I should meet my mother.

**BEN:** Well, now my long tale is at an end.

**TEMPLE:** Did you never go home, sir?

**BEN:** Soon after William did. I stayed in Philadelphia just long enough to build a new house for your grandmother.

**TEMPLE:** My step-grandmother.

**BEN:** If you like. If bloodlines are that important.

**TEMPLE:** They are to me.

**BEN:** Why? We’re men, not race-horses.

*(He sighs, experiences a moment of depression.)*

We scarcely moved into the house before I was called back here. And now year has followed year and I’ve

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grown old flattering pompous ministers, cajoling drunk politicians. Wooing fickle public opinion.

*(Older DEBORAH, again 68, comes on separately. She is carrying the bolt of brocade and a pair of shears. Meanwhile:)*

But now at last, I make my case before the king.

**TEMPLE:** You place more faith in him than do many Englishmen.

**BEN:** I haven't the luxury to doubt. And now, Temple, surely I have proved my proposition. Your father left you only to spare you the heartache he experienced.

**TEMPLE:** I accept that's what he believes.

**BEN:** With all his heart. But do you believe it?

**SCENE 12 -- Governor's Mansion, Perth Amboy, NJ: 1775 --** DEBORAH *is having trouble with the shears. More debilitated, she is unable to make her cuts. She calls for her daughter.*

**DEBORAH:** Sally!

*(to herself)*

Where's my daughter? Sally!

*(ELIZABETH, again 41, enters.)*

**ELIZABETH:** *(sees what DEBORAH is doing)* Oh, you mustn't! I was going to have that made into a gown!

**DEBORAH:** I need my daughter. I can't make these shears go. Sally!

*(WILLIAM comes on.)*

**WILLIAM:** Mother?

**DEBORAH:** I don't want you. I want Sally.

**WILLIAM:** Sally is in Philadelphia. You're in New Jersey, Mother.

**DEBORAH:** All right. I'll do it myself. I can do it.

*(She tries to cut with the shears, but is unable to coordinate them.)*

**WILLIAM:** Here, let me help you.

*(He leans down to help, but she lashes out at him.)*

**DEBORAH:** I don't want no help from you! You can get out of my house. And take that barren woman with you.

**WILLIAM:** Mother!

**ELIZABETH:** Let's just go. Please.

*(She begins to guide WILLIAM out of the room.)*

I'll bring you some tea in a moment, Mother Franklin. I have such a pretty cup for it. I'm sure it will ease you.

*(ELIZABETH hurries out of the room. WILLIAM lingers for a moment, then goes. DEBORAH never looks up. She struggles to cut the material with her shears. BEN comes on separately. He is in fancy court dress, looking at a paper. DEBORAH looks up from her work.)*

**DEBORAH:** Where are you, Ben? I'm holding on for you. But you got to hurry. Will you hurry, Ben?

*SCENE 13 -- Ante-room, St. James's Palace -- Franklin House, Philadelphia: 1775 -- TEMPLE hurries on to join BEN. He brings a fancy, ceremonial hat. DEBORAH disappears.*

**TEMPLE:** Here's your hat, sir.

**BEN:** Thank you, Temple. I can't think how I could have forgotten it.

**TEMPLE:** Oh, it's easy, actually.

**BEN:** The king is right through those doors.

**TEMPLE:** Yes, sir. But why is your audience here? At the Cockpit? Isn't this a place for trials?

**BEN:** Not just trials.

**TEMPLE:** No, but--

**BEN:** (*referring to his paper*) Will you listen to this, Temple? And give me your opinion?

**TEMPLE:** Of course.

**BEN:** Debbie always encourages me to boil down my ideas for easier digestion.

*(glances at his paper, then recites:)*

Your Majesty, I urge you, on behalf of all the colonies, to re-call your forces, re-pair the damage done to Boston, re- peal Parliament's taxes, and then re-joice in a happy re- conciliation.

*(WILLIAM comes on separately. He is in Philadelphia, at his mother's house. He has just come from DEBORAH's burial service. He sits quietly.) What do you think?*

**TEMPLE:** Oh, it's very good, sir. Re-ally.

**BEN:** I wish Billy were here to share this hour.

**TEMPLE:** I'm just wondering. The wording on the royal summons. Does it actually say you'll meet with the king? I mean, you know, himself?

*(We hear a cultured courtier's voice calling for BEN to enter the Cockpit.)*

**VOICE:** The Agent for the American Colonies, Dr. Benjamin Franklin.

**BEN:** Temple. What is your intention? Do you sail with me to America?

*(TEMPLE shakes his hand warmly.)*

**TEMPLE:** You're called for, sir. Good luck.

*(The sound of a raucous crowd is heard as a "door" opens. BEN goes through it and disappears. TEMPLE follows and peers through the door, doesn't like what he sees.)*

**TEMPLE:** Oh, dear.

*(Sound out as TEMPLE disappears and ELIZABETH comes in, stands behind WILLIAM and puts her hand on his shoulder.)*

**ELIZABETH:** Are you all right?

**WILLIAM:** Thank you for coming. Mother wanted to be buried in Philadelphia.

**ELIZABETH:** It's strange being in her house. She kept all your Father's things out, just as though he lived here.

**WILLIAM:** She was a remarkable woman. All things considered.

**ELIZABETH:** And you loved her.

**WILLIAM:** I did. If only for Father's sake. He asked me to, and I never can say no to him.

**ELIZABETH:** Dear William, you're wrong, you know.

**WILLIAM:** Often. About what this time?

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**ELIZABETH:** You didn't love your mother because your father told you to. Oh, maybe at first. But that can't last forty years.

**WILLIAM:** No?

**ELIZABETH:** No, silly. You loved her because you're good. That's why anyone really loves anyone, you know. Once we're grown up.

*(He takes her hand affectionately.)*

**WILLIAM:** That must be why you love me.

**ELIZABETH:** I honestly can't think of any other reason.

*(WILLIAM kisses her hand. He would go further, but, at this moment, BEN bursts through the front door. He's wearing a traveling coat and carrying a small piece of luggage or two.)*

**BEN:** Billy, my boy, what are you doing in my house?

**WILLIAM:** Father! When did you...? How did you...?

**BEN:** Aren't you pleased to see me?

**WILLIAM:** Pleased to see you?

*(They embrace.)*

Yes! Oh, yes!

**ELIZABETH:** Welcome home, Father Franklin.

*(TEMPLE staggers in, laden with luggage, wearing mismatched shoes and no coat.)*

**TEMPLE:** It's bloody cold out there!

**BEN:** Ah. Here is the young man you sent for.

**WILLIAM:** Yes. Of course.

*(TEMPLE drops as much luggage as he can and smooths his clothes. He and WILLIAM take a long look at each other.)*

**TEMPLE:** I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance, sir.

*(He bows.)*

**ELIZABETH:** Who is this young man, please?

*(BEN looks around.)*

**BEN:** Where is Debbie?

*(CURTAIN.)*

*23 more pages make up Act Two*

REVIEW

## 'Lightning Rod' reveals flashes of the man behind the icon

Susan E. Lindt Staff | Updated Sep 11, 2013

The premiere of "Lightning Rod," an original play by Tim Slover that opened Thursday at the Fulton Opera House, chronicles Franklin's personal life and times. And it's not a pretty picture.

Sure, Franklin gave us electricity, independence from Britain and the urinary catheter, but Slover shows an eerily cold man who put those pursuits above his wife and son, William.

The play's pace is interesting. The first half shows a jovial, likable Franklin, full of the quips we know him for, such as: "Beer is living proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy."

He accepts his illegitimate son and asks his common-law wife, Deborah, also to accept him. He is a good father.

But in the second half, Franklin is older and has been living in England for more than a decade. And even when his now-grown son asks him to return to the colonies because Deborah is close to death, Franklin puts his politics first. Deborah is dead by the time he arrives at his son's New Jersey home.

Slover's lengthy research also shows Franklin's neglect of a son he fathered with Deborah might have contributed to the boy's death.

But we don't have to like Franklin to appreciate "Lightning Rod."

Actor Jim Van Valen is excellent playing the dual roles of a young Ben Franklin and William. And Slover's best character is William's illegitimate son, Temple, who is denied by his father as a "secret bastard" for nearly two decades.

Actor Jerry Richardson's charming Temple gives welcome comic relief to the Franklins as well as the audience.

Also a standout is Dana Acheson as William's wife, Elizabeth, whose introduction to the audience and her father-in-law drew deserved applause as she spouted drivel nicely punctuated with the word "rococo" at the end. She is delightful onstage and one of the kindest of the play's characters.

Slover's second act is the better, with the real crux of revolution surfacing and a kicked-up pace. William and Benjamin are diametrically opposed, with father supporting revolution and son supporting peace.

Director Michael Mitchell promised William's stance would be a noble one, in spite of how history played out. And Slover delivered that. It didn't hurt that William handed the olive branch to his father in spite of their differences, citing blood being thicker than water.

Astonishingly, the brilliant Franklin, who gave a new nation so much, turned away his own son -- and that's how they went to their graves.

The set, a giant configuration of pulleys and wooden cranks arranged over the stage, was intriguing but seemed out of context with the story. Beth Dunkelberger's costumes were right on, as always.

Mitchell also promised that audiences would like all five characters onstage. This is where "Lightning Rod" did not deliver. But that's not a bad thing.

As with Slover's last historical drama, "Treasure," I found the women in the shadows of their famous male counterparts much more honorable as Slover wrote them.

This time, I expected to come away from "Lightning Rod" more in awe of Benjamin Franklin, a man who so thoroughly conquered science, politics and business in his time.

**PERUSAL SCRIPT -- Lightning Rod** by *Tim Slover*

Instead, Slover's Benjamin Franklin and his shame-filled son were weak, lacking sense and compassion, and cold in spite of their obvious intelligence and influence. And that's OK. Slover's telling is, perhaps, the truth rather than the icon the history books have painted.

In short, these forefathers are disappointingly similar to today's lawmakers. And that might be the most important message to come from "Lightning Rod" in a time of war.