

# Declaring Our Independence



**Corinne Brown**

## Tips for Rehearsing Reader's Theater

By Aaron Shepard

- Make sure your script doesn't hide your face. If there is anyone in the audience you can't see, your script is too high.
- While you speak, try to look up often. Don't just look at your script. When you do look at the script, move just your eyes and keep your head up.
- Talk slowly. Speak each syllable clearly.
- Talk loudly! You have to be heard by every person in the room.
- Talk with feeling. Your voice has to tell the story.
- Stand or sit up straight. Keep your hands and feet still if they're doing nothing useful.
- If you're moving around, face the audience as much as you can. When rehearsing, always think about where the audience will be.
- Characters, remember to be your character even when you're not speaking.
- Narrators, make sure you give the characters enough time for their actions.

## Tips for Performing Reader's Theater

By Aaron Shepard

- If the audience laughs, stop speaking until they can hear you again.
- If someone talks in the audience, don't pay attention.
- If someone walks into the room, don't look at him or her.
- If you make a mistake, pretend it was right.
- If you drop something, try to leave it where it is until the audience is looking somewhere else.
- If a reader forgets to read his or her part, see if you can read the part instead, make something up, or just skip over it. Don't whisper to the reader!
- If a reader falls down during the performance, pretend it didn't happen.

# Declaring Our Independence

## Characters

**Narrator**      Thomas Jefferson  
**Roger Sherman**      Mrs. Dunlap  
**John Adams**      Robert Livingston

## Setting

This reader's theater takes place in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and is based on actual events.

## Act I

**Narrator:**

In May 1776, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania is filled with excited people. Spring is in the air. The flowers are blooming. Leaders from 13 colonies are here for a meeting of Congress. There are no hotels in the city. The leaders rent rooms in private homes. Roger Sherman, a Connecticut lawyer, is staying at the home of Mrs. Dunlap.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

Good evening, Mr. Sherman. You had a long day.

**Sherman:**

There was a lot of work to do in Congress.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

Are you hungry? I cooked chicken and potatoes.

**Sherman:**

That sounds wonderful, Mrs. Dunlap.

**Narrator:**

Sherman sits at the table. Mrs. Dunlap places his dinner before him. She prepares a plate for herself and joins her guest at the table.

**Sherman:**

This is very good, Mrs. Dunlap.

**Mrs. Dunlap:** Thank you. I'm glad someone likes my cooking.

**Sherman:** I'm sure your husband does.

**Mrs. Dunlap:** He never comments on it. All John talks about is work, work, work. He is working on a big job tonight.

**Sherman:** That reminds me of something I need to tell Mr. Dunlap. The Congress is going to use his printing services again.

**Mrs. Dunlap:** He'll be happy to hear that. What do you want him to do?

**Sherman:** Print the Declaration of Independence.

**Mrs. Dunlap:** Oh, no! King George won't allow it.

**Sherman:** We no longer care what the British king thinks.

**Mrs. Dunlap:** That's a crime, Mr. Sherman!

**Sherman:** I am afraid so.

**Mrs. Dunlap:** There'll be a war.

**Sherman:** We are already at war, Mrs. Dunlap. The British captured Boston last year. In March, the Patriots ran them out. But I fear they will return.

**Mrs. Dunlap:** George Washington will stop them.

**Sherman:** I do pray that is true. Many of our hopes are riding on General Washington.

**Mrs. Dunlap:** He is a great man. I am glad he is on our side. Oh, Mr. Sherman, you ate your dinner very quickly!

**Sherman:** I guess I was very hungry.

**Mrs. Dunlap:** Would you like some apple pie?

**Sherman:** Mrs. Dunlap, I cannot say no to any food you make. But please wait a few minutes. I'd like to jot down some ideas that I have for the Declaration.

**Mrs. Dunlap:** Are you going to write it?

**Sherman:** I am one of five men Congress chose to do so.

**Mrs. Dunlap:** This is what I like about America. You, the son of a shoemaker, can grow up to do great things.

**Sherman:** Then you agree with what I am doing?

**Mrs. Dunlap:** Agree is not exactly the word I would use. What I will say is that I trust you, Mr. Sherman. You are a smart man. I know you will make the right decisions for our country.

## **Poem: Answering the Call**

### **Act 2**

**Narrator:** Congress chooses Roger Sherman, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Thomas Jefferson to write the Declaration. The men talk about the things they want to say in the Declaration. Then they ask Thomas Jefferson to write it.

Philadelphia is very noisy. Jefferson finds it hard to think. So he moves to the countryside where he rents a room in the house of Jacob Graff, a bricklayer. Jefferson writes several versions of the Declaration. On June 28, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin visit Jefferson. They read what Jefferson wrote and suggest a few changes. Two days later John Adams returns with Sherman and Livingston. The men ride horses from the city to Graff's house. They are greeted warmly in the living room by Thomas Jefferson.

**Jefferson:** Gentlemen, it's so good to see you again. Thank you for coming all the way from the city.

**Sherman:** We enjoyed the ride. The countryside is so beautiful in the spring. The mountain laurels are in bloom. Pink flowers are everywhere. I saw my first ruffed grouse.

**Livingston:** What a pretty bird!

**Adams:**

There seem to be more deer now than two days ago. All the fawns are being born.

**Jefferson:**

Now you understand why I did not want to stay in the city. I like to work in a natural setting.

**Sherman:**

Show us what you have done.

**Jefferson:**

Here it is. I was hoping that Benjamin Franklin would be here so I could show him the changes.

**Sherman:**

Mr. Franklin did want to come. But he felt sick this morning.

**Livingston:**

I think he works too much. The man is 70 years old. He is still very active in politics.

**Sherman:**

Too active if you ask me. And he is always working on a new invention.

**Jefferson:**

That's what makes him happy. And a man has the right to be happy. That is one of the reasons why we are declaring our independence from Britain.

**Sherman:**

May I read the Declaration?

**Jefferson:**

Certainly, Mr. Sherman.

**Narrator:**

Jefferson gives Sherman a paper. Sherman looks at it and nods his head. Then the men sit on wooden chairs and listen as Sherman reads aloud.

**Sherman:**

Sometimes people feel they have to break the ties with their leaders. They can then become separate and equal as nature and God wanted them to be.

**Livingston:**

That's a great start, Mr. Jefferson. You got right to the point.

**Narrator:**

Adam and Sherman nod. Sherman takes a sip of water before continuing.

**Sherman:**

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that their Creator gave them certain rights; that among these are life, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness.

<b>Adams:</b>	The women are not going to like this.	<b>Sherman:</b>	Is that “no” you will not answer my question—or “no” it does not apply to black women?
<b>Jefferson:</b>	Let us deal with one issue at a time.	<b>Jefferson:</b>	It does not apply to black women.
<b>Adams:</b>	Mr. Jefferson, there are women who want to be a part of this. My wife . . .	<b>Sherman:</b>	So black women can work outside the home. In fact, they must work outside their homes if they are to serve their slave masters.
<b>Jefferson:</b>	Is a smart woman. But not all women have her good sense.	<b>Jefferson:</b>	That’s the way things are.
<b>Livingston:</b>	Mr. Jefferson is right. Men are better at taking care of things outside the house. Women are better at taking care of things at home.	<b>Sherman:</b>	How can you hold this view while speaking of freedom and the pursuit of happiness?
<b>Sherman:</b>	Does that apply to black women?	<b>Jefferson:</b>	You’re missing the point, Mr. Sherman.
<b>Jefferson:</b>	Only a northerner would ask that question.	<b>Sherman:</b>	And you are missing my point, Mr. Jefferson. My point, if you will hear it . . .
<b>Sherman:</b>	Please answer my question, Mr. Jefferson.	<b>Livingston:</b>	Do we have to?
<b>Jefferson:</b>	No.		

**Sherman:**

I am insisting that you do.

**Livingston:**

Very well. You have our full attention.

**Sherman:**

We cannot speak of freedom while we take away the freedom of slaves.

**Jefferson:**

The South is not ready to free slaves.

**Sherman:**

Benjamin Franklin thinks they should. He and I have talked about the matter. Mr. Franklin says that he will do everything possible to free slaves.

**Adams:**

I know that to be true. Ben and I have had many such discussions.

**Livingston:**

Gentlemen, we picked Mr. Jefferson to write the Declaration because he is from the South. He knows how southerners think. He knows what they want to see in the Declaration. If the South does not agree with what we write, they will never vote for independence.

**Sherman:**

That may be true, but we could try to change their minds.

**Jefferson:**

Mr. Sherman, we cannot change the South in one day. Let us do one thing at a time. We must prove to King George and Europe that there are good reasons why we seek our independence. We also have to show that we can govern ourselves. If we fail to make our points, no European country will support us. Then the freedom of women and blacks will do us no good when we are tried for treason in King George's court.

**Narrator:**

The men decide that Jefferson is right. But they still offer ideas on how to make the writing better. The men go back to the city. Jefferson sits in the living room and works on a special lap desk he made. The next day he is finally happy with what he has written.

### Act 3

**Narrator:**

On July 2, 1776, Congress schedules a vote on the Virginia Resolution. Roger Sherman is nervous.

**Sherman:**

Good morning, Mrs. Dunlap.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

Good morning, Mr. Sherman. I have never seen you up before dawn.



**Sherman:**

This is a very important day. I want an early start.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

You men are turning my house upside down. I have to get up so early to make your breakfast and lunch.

**Sherman:**

I didn't ask you to do that.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

I had to do it for my husband. He feels that Congress is going to pass the Declaration today. So he is trying to get all his jobs done. He ran out of here so fast, he forgot his lunch. I'll have to take his lunch down to his shop.

**Sherman:**

I can drop it off at the shop on my way to Congress.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

You will, Mr. Sherman? Oh, thank you very much.

**Sherman:**

It's no problem. Mrs. Dunlap, how do I look?

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

Like a great gentleman.

**Sherman:**

I am so nervous.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

There is no need to be nervous if you are doing the right thing.

**Sherman:**

You are correct, madam. I am doing the right thing. Thank you for your support during all of this.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

I'm so glad to be of help. Most men don't like it when women try to help them.

**Sherman:**

They're wrong. If only they knew how much easier life would be if men allowed women to do more things.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

Tonight will you tell that to my husband? I offered to help him in the shop. But he says that it is no place for a woman.

**Sherman:**

I'll talk with Mr. Dunlap. Do you really think I look all right? This jacket doesn't look straight.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

Oh, Mr. Sherman! I have never seen a man take so long to dress.

**Sherman:**

I want to be at my best today. If I look good, then maybe the men in Congress will believe me when I tell them they should approve the Declaration.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

They'll believe you. You are a good speaker.

**Sherman:**

John Adams is a much better speaker.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

I've heard that he can go on and on.

**Sherman:**

He does talk a lot when he believes in something.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

I am glad that I won't hear it. The last thing I want is to hear someone talk my ears off.

**Sherman:**

Mrs. Dunlap, you're so funny. Mr. Adams is not all that bad. He just wears people down until they agree with him.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

Then you can listen to him. I have dinner to cook.

**Sherman:**

I'll leave you to it.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

Don't forget the lunches.

**Sherman:**

Thank you, madam. I guess I'm still nervous.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

What are you really afraid of?

**Sherman:**

We are committing treason. If we fail, many people will die.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

You will not fail. George Washington is on your side.

**Sherman:**

They're talking about making him the first president.

**Mrs. Dunlap:**

President! So we're replacing the king with a president? I'm sure Mr. Washington will be a great president.

**Sherman:**

So do I.

## Act 4

**Narrator:** John Adams and Roger Sherman walk to Congress together. Adams is very excited when Livingston joins them.

**Livingston:** Mr. Adams, I'm so sorry that I cannot vote with you. There is still no word from New York.

**Adams:** But I am sure they want to be rid of the king, too.

**Livingston:** That may be so. But until they say that I can vote that way—I cannot.

**Adams:** Oh, no! I wanted this to be a unanimous vote. Oh, well—at least the other colonies are on our side. That's still true. Right, Mr. Sherman?

**Sherman:** Yes, Mr. Adams. South Carolina has decided to stand with us. So will Pennsylvania. Now we have the support of twelve of the thirteen colonies.

**Adams:** What an exciting day! America will always remember the second day in July. In the future it will be celebrated as the great Anniversary Festival.

**Narrator:** Congress discusses the Declaration of Independence. John Adams explains the key points. Thomas Jefferson says nothing. But he does take notes. The next day Congress votes in support of the Declaration. Livingston and the other men from New York do not vote. John Dunlap prints 28 copies of the Declaration and takes them to Congress. John Hancock, the president of the Congress, is the first person to sign the Declaration of Independence.

**All:** Today, Americans remember these important events with a celebration on July 4 instead of July 2 as John Adams predicted. The day is called Independence Day. Fifty years after America declared its independence, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both died on July 4, 1826.



**Song: America the Beautiful**

