The Guide
A theatergoer’s resource edited by Milo Petruziello for the Education and Outreach department at Portland Center Stage

BEN FRANKLIN: UNPLUGGED
Written & Performed by Josh Kornbluth
In collaboration with Director David Dower

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Gazing into the bathroom mirror one morning while shaving, Josh Kornbluth realizes that he looks remarkably like the guy on the $100 bill. Like any good Jewish son, he immediately calls his mother. When his Aunt Birdie recommends that he writes a piece for himself to perform as Ben Franklin he dives deep into Ben’s life, hoping to score a gig at MSNBC. From there he becomes obsessed with what it means to be a founding father, especially when your own father/son relationship (Ben had an illegitimate son named William who was a British loyalist during the Revolutionary War) is more than a bit strained. His obsession brings him in contact with multiple unusual characters from the crazy Franklin-ophile at the bookstore to the elusive Franklin Scholar in Connecticut. Before long, Josh Finds himself strutting his stuff around Manhattan dressed up like old Ben and buried under primary source documents at Yale’s Franklin archives. Part “History Detectives” and part embarrassingly hilarious autobiography, Kornbluth’s resulting investigation of the man behind the famous spectacles will take you from the hallowed halls of academia to Kornbluth’s richly comic interactions with his mother Bunny and Aunt Birdie, sharing along the way his discoveries about America’s history, family foibles, and the surprises beneath the surface of even our most familiar American tall tales.
Josh Kornbluth was raised by Communists in New York City, then worked as a copy editor at a series of alternative newspapers before moving to San Francisco on May 11, 1987. While supporting himself as a temp (at his peak he typed better than 80 words per minute, with very few errors), he performed at open mikes around the Bay Area and was completely miserable. Then, in 1989, he opened his first autobiographical monologue, “Josh Kornbluth’s Daily World,” at Enrico Banducci’s hungry id in North Beach. Since then he has created and performed several more solo shows, including “Haiku Tunnel,” “The Mathematics of Change,” “Red Diaper Baby,” “Ben Franklin: Unplugged,” and “Love & Taxes.” He has also appeared in several films: the back of his head was seen briefly in “Searching for Bobby Fischer”; the front of his head (and little else) was seen for a minute or two in Francis Ford Coppola’s “Jack,” in which he played the pivotal character of “Cigarette Pack Man”; in addition, he had slightly more extensive parts in Lynn Hershman Leeson’s “Teknolust” (he was seduced by Tilda Swinton) and Jonathan Parker’s “Bartleby” (no seductions whatsoever). In 2001 a feature-film version of “Haiku Tunnel,” starring Josh and co-directed by Josh and his brother Jacob, was selected for the Sundance Film Festival and then released nationally by Sony Pictures Classics; it is now available on video and DVD, and is priced to move. In 2002 Josh collaborated with the San Francisco Mime Troupe on their summer show, “Mr. Smith Goes to Obscuristan.” A concert film of “Red Diaper Baby,” directed by Doug Pray, debuted on the Sundance Channel in 2004. Josh can also be seen in the feature films: “Strange Culture,” “Faith,” and “The Darwin Awards.” A book titled “Red Diaper Baby,” collecting three of Josh’s early monologues, has just come out in a second edition. Josh hosted an interview program on KQED-TV, cleverly titled “The Josh Kornbluth Show” from 2005 to 2007. He lives in Berkeley with his wife and son.
Busy jokester Kornbluth marks ‘Joshtoberfest’
onstage, screen
By Jane Ganahl
San Francisco Chronicle, Wednesday, October 20, 2004

Josh Kornbluth huffs into the greenroom of the Swedish American Hall, carrying two plastic bags stuffed with secondhand videos. Peeking through the carry handles on top are some “Star Trek” titles. For his son, he hastily explains. He’s already nerdy enough, for crying out loud. “You’ve been so busy!” exclaims author Joyce Maynard, giving Kornbluth’s shoulders a squeeze. “Oh, that’s right -- you get my e-mails,” he says, blushing a bit beneath his round spectacles. “Yeah, things are a little crazy right now. But busy is good. Very good.”

The comic monologist-actor-author is at the beginning of a whirlwind stint of Bay Area appearances -- on both stage and screen -- but he seems relatively unhurried. Tonight, he is on tap to tell a six-minute story at the Porch Light monthly series, along with nine other authors. Would he like a drink, he is asked by an organizer. “Well, I don’t drink. But yes, I think I will.” Beer, wine? “I don’t know -- whatever you think,” he smiles cheerfully.

Onstage later, Kornbluth salutes the cheering audience at the Swedish American Hall. “Thank you, Swedish Americans! I love your Bergman, your ABBA!”

Tuesday. It’s enough to make an artist weep -- with both exhaustion and joy at his blossoming good fortune. “I’m calling it Joshtoberfest,” he grins. “I’m hoping I survive.”

“Red Diaper Baby” was directed by doc-maker Doug Pray (“Scratch” and “Hype”), and produced for the Sundance Channel by Brian Benson, who also worked on Kornbluth’s film, “Haiku Tunnel,” an indie charmer that managed to have a decent theater run despite its accursed premiere date: Sept. 11, 2001. “Red Diaper Baby” is a concert film reminiscent of Spalding Gray’s “Swimming to Cambodia,” with a close-up immediacy that makes a movie theater audience want to applaud right along with the one in the film. Of course, being a Kornbluth production, it has an array of eccentric characters, picaresque adventures and random bits of serene absurdity: Jewish hootenannies,
workshops for terrible writers, crocheted oboe cases, Russians who crave chewing gum and Levis more than revolution, Beanie the humping dog and “the Gertrude Stein conundrum of oral sex.” Kornbluth delivers it all with endearing innocence -- and at lightning speed.

But tonight he is not in a rush, content to enjoy the work of his colleagues. He takes the time to talk to young author-producer Kirk Read about his stellar turn onstage that evening and how he should consider a one-man show himself. And he chats with the other authors in the greenroom.

When the night is over, Kornbluth sets out on foot, forgetting his bags full of videos. Then he returns, when no one is left but the cleanup crew, to retrieve them. “I got all the way to BART before I remembered,” he pants. “I didn’t want to tell my son I forgot them.” He departs, huffing as he had arrived.

A few days later, he is onstage again -- this time with no competition from other writers -- and throwing a mock-diva fit. “I can’t work this way,” he sputters as a tall ladder goes rolling through the center of the stage at the Magic Theatre, causing him to step out of the way. “I can’t work this way!” Kornbluth cracks up at his own silliness.

This is a new mounting of “Ben Franklin: Unplugged,” with a fancy new set approximating the spartan apartment Kornbluth lived in when he first started imagining this one-man show, which was dubbed by the Washington Post “a detective story, a revenge story, a show-biz saga, and a poignant and hilarious father-son story.”

Kornbluth was drawn to Franklin’s story not just because “I was looking in the mirror when I was shaving one day and realized I looked him,” but because his relationship with his own eccentric father (a New York Communist who is the main focus of “Red Diaper Baby”) had led to sharp divisions and disappointments.

“Franklin had an illegitimate son that he was terribly fond of,” explains Kornbluth, on a rehearsal break. “In fact his autobiography was addressed to him. But during the Revolution, his son remained a Loyalist, and eventually, the references to his son went from ‘you’ to ‘he.’ They became enemies.” He pauses. “Also, I was raised to lead a revolution, and Ben Franklin actually did.” Kornbluth is pleased that the show has gotten a great reception in its tour around the country -- both by critics and by those who knew Franklin best: scholars and Franklin’s family. “They told me, ‘You really got who he was,’ ” he says proudly.

A young man walks into the theater space unrolling a huge movie poster for “Red Diaper Baby,” which features Kornbluth’s moon-shaped face in an expressive moment that’s hard to define.

“You look ... terrified?” offers David Dower, artistic director of Z Space Studio and director of “Ben Franklin.” “Terrified is my natural emotion,” says Kornbluth, studying the poster, which is, of course, all red.

Then he grins broadly, realizing he is fondling the poster of his new movie while onstage for his new theater gig. “Look! My other thing is encroaching on this thing.”
January 17 will be the bi-century of the birth of Benjamin Franklin. Papers eulogistic of his greatness are the order of the day. One editor says of Franklin in a prefatory note: “He remains more than Washington or Patrick Henry, or even Lincoln or Grant, the typical American.” Considering the standards of greatness prevalent, this is high praise, indeed. But it is worthy the man. Franklin, scientist, inventor, philosopher and statesman, was a many and great minded man. He was versatile without being superficial; active without being strenuous; a genius without being an ego-maniac.

Born amid Puritanical surroundings, he personified the most liberal culture of the world of his time. Karl Marx, in one of those luminous and profound foot-notes to Capital (P. 629), for which he is justly renowned, names Franklin as one of the great men who originally studied political economy, in contrast to the “revered scribblers,” like Malthus, who followed them. Says Marx: “Originally, political economy was studied by philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, Hume; by business men and statesmen, like Thomas Moore, Temple, Sully, De Witt, North, Law, Vanderlint, Cantillon, Franklin; and especially, and with the greatest success, by medical men like Petty, Barbon, Mandeville, Quesnay.”

To have one’s name mentioned among such names by a man like Karl Marx, is a tribute to greatness of the highest order.

And Marx, in another of his admirable foot notes, on the discussion of the nature of value (P. 19), pens these very complimentary words: “The celebrated Franklin, one of the first economists, after Wm. Petty, who saw through the nature of value, says: ‘Trade is general being nothing else but the exchange of labour for labour, the value of all things is... mostly justly measured by labour.’ (The works of B. Franklin, &c., edited by Sparks, Boston, 1836. Vol. II., P. 267).” This penetrating contribution of the foremost “typical American” to the basic economic doctrines of Socialism will, perhaps, jar those who otherwise venerate him. But it is not alone as an economist that Franklin ranks among the great, and is so recognized by the greatest among them,—it is as a sociologist as well. Lewis Morgan, the great American ethnological writer, discussing
the property career of civilized nations (P. 552, Ancient Society), declares that “The time will come, nevertheless, when human intelligence will rise to the mastery over property, and define the relations of the state to the property it protects, as well as the obligations and the limits of the rights of owners. The interests of society are paramount to individual interests, and the two must be brought into just and harmonious relations. A mere property career is not the final destiny of mankind, if progress is to be the law of the future as it has been of the past.” Franklin anticipated Morgan by a century, when he declared “Private Property is a creature of society, and is subject to the calls of that society whenever necessities shall require it, even to its last farthing; its contributions, therefore, to the public exigencies are. . .the return of an obligation previously received, or the payment of a just debt.” This radical communistic exaltation of the social welfare—of human life—above property, will add to the jar the reverential worshippers of Franklin will perhaps receive from his contributions to the basic economic doctrines of Socialism.

Whether it does or not, the economic and sociological contributions of Franklin to the world’s progress, will add to his stature and raise him above the bourgeoisie he so well served.

All honor to Benjamin Franklin, genius of his age, and, like all genius, in advance of it!

I CONFESS that I do not entirely approve of this Constitution at present; but, sir, I am not sure I shall never approve of it, for, having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged, by better information or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that, the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment of others. Most men, indeed, as well as most sects in religion, think themselves in possession of all truth, and that wherever others differ from them, it is so far error. Steele, a Protestant, in a dedication, tells the pope that the only difference between our two churches in their opinions of the certainty of their doctrine is, the Romish Church is infallible, and the Church of England is never in the wrong. But, tho many private persons think almost as highly of their own infallibility as of that of their sect, few express it so naturally as a certain French lady, who, in a little dispute with her sister said: “But I meet with nobody but
myself that is always in the right.”

In these sentiments, sir, I agree to this Constitution with all its faults—if they are such—because I think a general government necessary for us, and there is no form of government but what may be a blessing to the people if well administered; and I believe, further, that this is likely to be well administered for a course of years, and can only end in despotism, as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so corrupted as to need despotic government, being incapable of any other. I doubt, too, whether any other convention we can obtain may be able to make a better Constitution; for, when you assemble a number of men, to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. From such an assembly can a perfect production be expected? It therefore astonishes me, sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does; and I think it will astonish our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear that our counsels are confounded like those of the builders of Babel, and that our States are on the point of separation, only to meet hereafter for the purpose of cutting one another’s throats. Thus I consent, sir, to this Constitution, because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best.

The opinions I have had of its errors I sacrifice to the public good. I have never whispered a syllable of them abroad. Within these walls they were born, and here they shall die. If every one of us, in returning to our constituents, were to report the objections he has had to it, and endeavor to gain partizans in support of them, we might prevent its being generally received, and thereby lose all the salutary effects and great advantages resulting naturally in our favor among foreign nations, as well as among ourselves, from our real or apparent unanimity. Much of the strength and efficiency of any government, in procuring and securing happiness to the people, depends on opinion, on the general opinion of the goodness of that government, as well as of the wisdom and integrity of its governors. I hope, therefore, for our own sakes, as a part of the people, and for the sake of our posterity, that we shall act heartily and unanimously in recommending this Constitution wherever our influence may extend, and turn our future thoughts and endeavors to the means of having it well administered.

On the whole, sir, I can not help expressing a wish that every member of the convention who may still have objections to it, would, with me, on this occasion, doubt a little of his own infallibility, and, to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument.
Ben Franklin was America’s first international celebrity. His groundbreaking discoveries in the science of electricity in the late 1740’s and early 1750’s catapulted him from obscure scientific amateur to status as the most famous American in the world. Franklin’s fame thrust him onto an international stage and made possible his pivotal role in the American Revolution.

England awarded Franklin the prestigious Copley Gold Medal in 1753—equivalent to today’s Nobel Prize. And when Franklin later moved to London as an agent of the Pennsylvania Assembly, he was invited to join the British Royal Society, awarded honorary degrees at Oxford, Cambridge, and St. Andrews in Scotland and welcomed as a guest at the homes of some of England’s leading intellectuals.

However, it was in France that Franklin achieved his greatest celebrity. When Franklin first arrived in Paris in 1776 as America’s first Minister to the French court, his presence was hailed by people at all levels of society. The 250-mile trip from the port of Nantes into Paris was like a triumphal procession. He was wined and dined by scientific and literary notables on the way and his entry into Paris caused a sensation. Poems were written in his honor, souvenirs were sold with Franklin’s image on them, and pictures of him were everywhere. Franklin scholar H.W. Brands reports that one writer from the period recorded that everyone had “an engraving of M. Franklin over the mantelpiece.”

In our own day, Franklin would have appeared on television talk shows and magazine covers, but in an age before mass media, his celebrity was astonishing. John Adams wrote ruefully about Franklin, the superstar: “His reputation is greater than
that of Newton, Frederick the Great or Voltaire, his character more revered than all of them. There’s scarcely a coachman or a footman or scullery maid who does not consider him a friend of all mankind.”

Franklin’s fame was due not only to his scientific reputation, but also to the French rage for what philosopher Rousseau called “the natural man.” H.W. Brands commented, “There was a vogue for things American in France at this time. Many French intellectuals looked to America as a new world, as a fresh world, as a world where human nature was closer to its natural origins than the human nature that one found in the confines of Europe.” And Franklin, of course, was more than pleased to oblige the French expectations. When he arrived in Paris, he was wearing a little fur cap to keep his bald head warm. To the French, the hat was the embodiment of the rugged American frontiersman and proof that Franklin was a true “natural man.” In fact, Franklin sent back to America for a large supply of the caps, which he wore everywhere around Paris.

Even to Franklin, all of this attention was surprising, yet he was flattered and wrote to his daughter, “My picture is everywhere, on the lids of snuff boxes, on rings, busts. The numbers sold are incredible. My portrait is a best seller, you have prints, and copies of prints and copies of copies spread everywhere. Your father’s face is now as well known as the man in the moon.”
Supplemental Links & Resources

Josh Kornbluth
http://www.zspace.org/about_collaborators_kornbluth.htm
www.joshkornbluth.com

Socialist Labor Party of America
www.slp.org

Benjamin Franklin
http://www.lexrex.com/enlightened/writings/franklin_on_const.htm
www.pbs.org