

EIR Culture & History

‘THE BIG KNIFE’

Hollywood’s Classical Drama! Robert Beltran Revives Odets

by Harley Schlanger

Theater-goers in Los Angeles during November and December had the privilege of seeing a live demonstration of one of the leading principles emphasized in numerous recent discussions by Lyndon LaRouche: that of the power of an effective presentation of a Classically-composed tragedy, to move an audience. Well-known stage, screen, and television actor Robert Beltran produced an excellent presentation of Clifford Odets’ 1948 drama, *The Big Knife* in which Odets provided a penetrating insight into the socially corrupting effects of the onset of “Trumanism” in America.

Serving as producer and playing the lead role of Odets’ character Charlie Castle, Beltran brought to the drama a highly-refined sense of both the historically-specific context of the play, and the principles of Classical tragedy. The result was a gripping journey back to the period following the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, providing a prescient sense of the tragedy which accompanied the ascent of Harry Truman to the White House—the consequences of which we still face today.

The timing of the play is notable, as it was written during the period when the “Red Scare”—a central feature of Trumanism—was being launched to silence opposition to the emerging Cold War, and to the post-war economic collapse precipitated by Truman’s rejection of FDR’s anti-Depression national economic development policies. Among the first victims of the Red Scare were screen writers, ten of whom were sent to prison for their refusal—during their testimony before the House Un-American Affairs Committee, the infamous

HUAC—to “name the names” of “Communists” working in Hollywood. Many of these writers, and others brought before HUAC, were known by Odets. In *The Big Knife*, there are several references to the politics of the wife of the leading character, with the implication that she might be contributing to pro-Communist causes.

Odets’ play tells the story of a popular, yet demoralized actor, who came to Hollywood with the dream of producing great works of art which could improve the world. Instead, he finds himself the captive of the “studio system,” which asserts total control over what he can and cannot do in films. The story is autobiographical, as Odets came to Hollywood after establishing himself as a dramatist in New York City theater, where he began his career as a member of the experimental, leftist Group Theater. He had hoped that, given the positive changes which had occurred during the Presidency of FDR, he could use his writing skills to produce films which would inspire audiences to pursue the ideals of social and economic justice which he believed to be the basis of American greatness.

Murder of a People’s Highest Ideals

We see these idealistic beliefs in his main character in *The Big Knife*, the actor Charlie Castle, in the beginning of the play. Charlie, who we later learn is a World War II veteran, is being interrogated by an influential gossip columnist, who is probing for salacious material to feed to her millions of hungry readers (some things never change!). While poking



Clifford Odets' (right) unusual and incisive play is a tragedy written on Classical principles in 1948, warning audiences of the degenerating American character at that very time of "Trumanism." Producer and actor Robert Beltran played Odets' autobiographical Charlie Castle, shown in Act I being sold a studio contract by his agent Nat Danziger, superbly played by John Apicella, director of Los Angeles' Classical ensemble the Antaeus Company.

the buck reproduce itself.”

The drama is full of this kind of dialogue, as Odets uses these characters to demonstrate the depth of corruption in the whole society—his society. This is difficult for a dramatist, as it is much easier to make such truthful comments about times which are in the past. Yet Odets faced his society with courageous truthfulness, with pungent observations.

For example, Odets takes on the obsession in post-war America with being “popular”—what Lyndon LaRouche often refers to as “wishing to be overheard as having the right opinion.” When one character states that the eagle is the symbol of America, Charlie’s friend Hank/Horatio suggests that this is an “old-fashioned” view. “Of course,” he adds, the symbol of America today is “the cocker spaniel, paws up, saying ‘Like me, like me, I’m a good dog, like me.’”

There are repeated sharp references to the way Hollywood is a corrupting influence to society at large, destroying the artists who went there with hope and ideals.

around to find out if he and his wife have separated, or if she is contributing funds to questionable causes, she says, “The first time we met, all you’d talk about was FDR.” Charlie replies, “I believed in FDR.”

Thus, from the outset, Odets conveys to the audience that an actual historical event—the death of FDR—is a matter of central concern in the drama. For Charlie, as for much of the nation, FDR’s death became a metaphor for the death of idealism, of hope for a better future. Charlie returns to this theme often, as he is sinking ever deeper into a seemingly inescapable trap, one set largely by his own embrace of the corrupting influence of Hollywood.

This is seen, for example, in an intense argument with the one character who seems to stand up to the corruption, Hank Teagle, who serves as Horatio (Charlie’s nickname for him) to Charlie’s Hamlet. When Teagle challenges him to fight to return to his ideals, Charlie says that is no longer possible: “When I came home from Germany, I saw most of the war dead were here, not in Africa and Italy. And Roosevelt was dead, and the war was only last week’s snowball fight; and we plunged ourselves, all of us, into the noble work of making

As Charlie realizes he is trapped in a web of his own making, he sees himself as Macbeth who, “one by one . . . kills his better selves.” But, he argues—in an effort to escape his own part in his downfall—this is the result of the system (the studio system of Hollywood, under which he had become rich and famous). “Why am I surprised by them?” he asks. “Isn’t every human being a mechanism to them? Don’t they slowly, inch by inch, murder everyone they use? Don’t they murder the highest dreams and hopes of a whole great people with the movies they make? This whole movie thing is a murder of the people. Only we hit them on the heads, under the hair—nobody sees the marks.”

Sins of the Baby Boomers’ Fathers

The real menace exposed by Odets was not that represented by Hollywood, though he made it clear that he had had his fill of it. Rather, there are repeated references to the subtle, but unmistakable results of Trumanism, which, in the hands of a skilled dramatist, provide truthful insights into how the generation of World War II veterans capitulated, due to fear and venality, to the overall corruption of the society—to the

point that they gave birth to today's degenerated Baby Boomer generation.

This was brought out beautifully by the collaboration of Beltran and director Tonyo Melendez. It is expressed in the "Director's Note" which Melendez wrote for the playbill. *The Big Knife* is a cautionary tale written as a deeply felt reaction to the political and social trends of America immediately after World War II. Clifford Odets senses a cataclysmic paradigm-shift that profoundly disturbs him. Today, more than half a century later, his vision of America seems prophetic. At the very moment America is at its mightiest, Odets points to its flaws. Not a popular view, then or now."

Beltran brought out the paradoxes posed by Odets in a stunningly powerful portrayal of Charlie; but his understanding of Odets' intentions in this play is reflected in the performances of all the actors. Prior to the production, Beltran and Lyndon LaRouche had a lengthy discussion of the drama, and of LaRouche's conception of tragedy.¹

Most importantly, in this production, Beltran demonstrates that he fully shares what LaRouche has stated to be the essential commitment of Classical tragedy—to historical specificity. *Real history* is brought alive by the portrayals on the stage, a history that you may see only in part—as in Odets' use of his Hollywood, or Shakespeare's use of the royal court, as the setting—but the slice of the society that you see on stage, portrays truthfully what exists in that society as a whole. The pragmatism and corruption which ultimately brought down Charlie Castle were pervasive throughout post-war American society.

LaRouche has addressed this recently during his Presidential campaign, in his polemic on the "three generations," discussing how the demoralization and eventual corruption of his generation—the World War II generation—directly led to the general immorality of their children, the Baby Boomer generation; and how this must be overcome if we are to prevent the final act of this tragedy from being played out today; i.e., the destruction of the United States by Cheney, Ashcroft, and the band of neo-conservative fanatics bent on reviving the most dangerous aspect of Trumanism, the American "right" to launch pre-emptive nuclear strikes.

The Classical Principle Works

The final paragraph of Melendez's "Director's Note" shows that this principle of Classical drama can be brought back to life today—ironically, in this case, in Hollywood: "A great dramatist, Odets frames all these questions within the context of an American film star's fall from possible greatness. He skillfully weaves a Hollywood web of deception and despair that has become all too familiar to modern audiences.

1. In addition to his ongoing dialogue with LaRouche on Classical drama, Beltran is applying those principles in his work coaching members of the LaRouche Youth Movement, primarily in the works of Friedrich Schiller and William Shakespeare.

The Classical Principle: LaRouche Remembers Odets

From a cadre school discussion, Nov. 26, 2003: I haven't seen it, but a professional actor and friend of ours in California, Robert Beltran, has produced a play from the 1940s by Clifford Odets. Clifford Odets is a writer of plays, dramas, which are well known to people of my generation, from the 1930s and 1940s. He went on to Hollywood, and he had a tragic life, in the sense that he allowed himself—in the play, which is autobiographical—he allowed himself to be corrupted by adapting to Hollywood, and then realized he'd adapted to evil; and then committed suicide as a result of seeing his life as futile, and the outcome hopeless, that he'd gone too far. That was wrong. But nonetheless, it gets the point across.

So therefore, in this case of Odets and his drama, which is produced by professional actors—and is rather moving, as I understand—you have a case of the Classical principle of drama being used in a modern setting. Because the reality was, that from the period from the end of the war, World War II—from the Summer of 1944, where a decent vice-president, Henry Wallace, was replaced by the Democratic Party, through the nomination of a bad, very bad, vice-president, Harry Truman—and thus, the sickness and death of Roosevelt led to the evil which took over the United States in the post-war period. Roosevelt was no longer there, and Truman went over to the other, Utopian side.

During this period of evil, I saw a transformation of my fellow soldiers and similar people, who in the main had been fairly good in their attitude about the post-war world, when I knew them during times of military service. But immediately at the end of the war, the United States made a right-wing turn; and what we called McCarthyism later on, was actually Trumanism, which began in 1945-46. It began essentially with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Iron Curtain speech by Churchill and Truman's endorsement of it. We had a right-wing terror, police-state terror, in the United States. This produced a transformation in the U.S. population. It turned people

An American playwright at the height of his powers, Odets educates, enlightens, entertains. Could we ask more? We hope the metaphor continues to live in your imagination long after you leave the theater."

Having seen this production three times, and watching its

who had been my friends, into pigs, who adapted to the terror, out of what they perceived to be their self-interest. They turned against each other like animals. So, what Odets presents in this drama, as presented by these actors, is that situation.

So here we have a truly Classical tradition in drama, by a person who might be figured a minor dramatist in the Classical tradition, but a skilled one, who presents a very anguished picture of the horror, the corruption which seized so many people in the United States in the immediate post-war period. We look back at early history, and we see that. And that kind of understanding into ourselves, is the understanding of what we need to know to determine how we're going to respond, in terms of the effect of our decision on not only the society around us now, but on honoring the past who made us possible, and providing a basis for the hope of the future for those who come after us. That is what is essentially necessary. There's no other drama that's worth doing, and there's no other way to perform Shakespeare, or to perform Schiller.

From a pamphlet prologue written Nov. 30, 2003:

All which deserves the name of Classical drama is a reflection of an impassioned reach toward a certain specific time and place in real history, and to be a special way of reviving a notable experience of that culture at that time, especially an experience which has radiated its effects across the intervening processes of human development, to the present time of that playwright, those actors, and that audience. It must, so to speak, bring a Socrates truly to life on the present living stage of the imagination of an audience. It must bring Julius Caesar to life, in the actual time and circumstances, which that audience must experience within its own mind and passions—the acts of his assassination and death-agony, in that actual time and place in which those events occurred.

The principle which governs, absolutely, the requirements for the composition, performance, and witnessing of Classical drama, is what theologians have sometimes identified as “the simultaneity of eternity.”

Take the case of a certain play by Clifford Odets. I have not witnessed the . . . performance of that play, but I have enjoyed a meaningful discussion of the problem the play represents, and the authentically Classical intention of the director of the performance.

I reference this case, in large part, because of the appropriateness of my recollection of the relevance for the effect on today's Baby Boomers and also their offspring, of the real history which Odets' drama brings back to life. I recall Odets from radio productions of his [plays], performed during the 1930s and later, and because I have relived the times, the experience, and the historically specific relevance of that drama's subject for today's living population, and also generations which followed, and will follow yet.

The essence of that drama could not be grasped, or performed, unless the performance transported the audience into the period from the 1932 election of Franklin Roosevelt, through the growing optimism of the late 1930s and June 1944, and the subsequent moral decline of the U.S. and its people from Summer 1944 to the present. There is no audience today, which, wittingly or not, does not have what Odets' play represents, embedded within them. The moral degeneration of the American people in general, can not be understood without taking into account what the particularity of the drama epitomizes about the American experience of nearly a century, to present date.

We lived through the Depression, the rise to optimism under Franklin Roosevelt, and the great betrayal known variously as the despicable Roy M. Cohn's “McCarthyism,” and, more accurately, as “Trumanism.” To understand the American today, one must be able to recognize those experiences, and the transmission of the effects of those experiences, across more than three living generations, to the present moment.

Such a case as that of Odets and his relevant tragic play, exemplifies the essential meaning of both history and dramatic Classical artistic composition, both wrapped in one for their functional importance for what people do and feel today.

I have adopted that as an illustration here, because it is a bridging of the principal events of world history during my actual lifetime to date. People who do not know that set of connections, that process of unfolding development over this period as I do, really know almost nothing about themselves today. For that reason, any Classical drama whose chosen subject is specific to the period of Odets' play, must not attempt to move the significance of the events portrayed from the immediate time-frame in which the drama is situated. To move it to the 1960s, or the 1970s, or today, would be a damnable lie.

evolution and development under the creative guidance of Beltran and Melendez, the author can attest that this intention was fulfilled, that the tragedy of America due to the advent of Trumanism remained in the imagination of the audience. Classical works, well-written, and performed to meet the ex-

pectation of the gifted dramatist, can move audiences even in the jaded America of today.

We will now await, with great expectation, the fulfillment of the post-production promise by Robert Beltran to stage Shakespeare's *Othello* in the near future.