
V. Culture and History

IN MEMORIAM

Ed Asner, Actor and Defiant Opponent of Injustice

Edward Asner, a much-honored American actor, who was a civil rights and anti-war activist, passed away August 29, at 91 years old. As president of the Screen Actors Guild in the mid-1980s, his role in leading the fight to expose the “Iran-Contra affair,” the dirty war in Nicaragua directed by then Vice President George H.W. Bush, led to his blacklisting in Hollywood for nearly two decades, which did not deter him from continuing to speak out boldly on many issues. In later years, he re-emerged as a character actor, with many film credits.

Asner became familiar with the LaRouche movement in the early 2000s, beginning with his expression of interest in our fight to expose the corruption of the Bush-Cheney administration during the Enron deregulation crisis in California in 2001. He also was very supportive of the role of the LaRouche Youth Movement (LYM) in the fight against the 2003 recall of Gov. Gray Davis and the campaign against his replacement with Arnold Schwarzenegger.

He attended two town meetings in Los Angeles sponsored by the LaRouche movement and participated in several of the weekly drama workshops conducted with LYM members under the direction of fellow actor Robert Beltran. In several meetings with Lyndon LaRouche, Asner expressed his great admiration for the Schiller Institute’s fight for a cultural Re-



Ed Asner

CC/Gage Skidmore

naissance. The meetings with LaRouche were spirited and delightful dialogues, full of mutual sharing of ironic observations about the world, covering a full range of issues, from the evil of the policy of “endless wars”—which were just beginning—to the ongoing degeneration of contemporary civilization, to Ed’s joy at discovering their common enthusiasm for Shakespeare and the Yiddish Renaissance.

Never corrupted by Hollywood, he remained devoted to the cause of freedom and justice for all. Though his health was in decline in recent years, he recently gave a dramatic

reading of the Declaration of Independence at a Schiller Institute conference.

—Harley Schlanger

Ed Asner, Robert Beltran, and Lyndon LaRouche— A Dialogue on a Life Fulfilled

The following dialogue took place as part of The LaRouche Organization’s weekly town hall, Saturday, September 4, 2021, among host Dennis Speed and guests Harley Schlanger and the actor Robert Beltran, on the life of Ed Asner. The video can be seen [here](#).

Dennis Speed: We have a short [video](#) from a concert performed on April 9, 2018, in which Diane Sare is conducting. This is “Rally ’Round the Flag” [“Battle Cry of Freedom”]. It is introduced by an associate of ours, the late Ed Asner, who passed away on Sunday, August 29. He is reading from Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. Harley Schlanger will then have a few things to say about him.

Ed Asner (video): The time, 1865, the conclusion of the America Civil War. President Abraham Lincoln declares:

If God wills that this war continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said over 3,000 years ago, so still it must be said, “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

[Schiller Institute NYC Chorus performs “Battle Cry of Freedom.”]

Speed: Harley, why don’t you say something here about our relationship to Ed Asner. And this is important: People may have noticed that he had a narration that he did concerning Lincoln. We’ve been talking about Lincoln’s role as a President, and his role in the idea of statecraft. But we were able to show, here, why we try to emphasize that, and that Diane’s job, in particular, is to show that music and poetry and politics are all part of statecraft.

Harley Schlanger: Ed exemplified what a citizen should be. He grew up at a time in Hollywood, when people were being thrown in jail and careers destroyed with the blacklist during the McCarthy period. Ed was just trying to establish himself in theater. He was obviously terrified and frightened, as so many were, not because they were Communists, but because they saw the McCarthy era as the threat to the promise of liberty and the ability to speak freely. The First Amendment, the right to have your own opinion, this was being threatened by attacks on anybody who didn’t go along with the policy of preparing for war



Courtesy of Harley Schlanger

“Ed had the courage and willingness to break with tradition and popular opinion, and stick with what he knew was right.” Here, Ed Asner with Harley Schlanger.

with the Soviet Union.

Ed said that this caused him for a while to hold his tongue, to not speak. But when he became President of the Screen Actors Guild in the early 1980s, he felt compelled to speak out, and he did. He spoke out against the dirty wars in Central America, starting with what was being done in El Salvador, and then later, what became known as Iran-Contra. And he paid a price for that. He was somewhat blacklisted—there’s some question as to how official it was, but he didn’t really have the choice of jobs that he should have had, as having been the most decorated television actor of the time. To this day he has received more Emmys for his acting on television than any other actor. But he was committed to exposing the corruption involved in Iran-Contra, including the drug running, including the role of the Bush machine, and so on.

Now, we began a dialogue with him—actually, I met Ed in 2001, and had an opportunity to spend quite a bit of time with him. Ed also had a chance to meet with Lyndon LaRouche and became a supporter. It wasn’t an easy process. There was a dialogue; there were times of great disagreements, especially on the green policy, because Ed still said he thought we needed to do something about nuclear power. But even on that, after an argument with Lyn, he said, “Well, you know more about it than I do, but I’m not sure I’m ready to change, yet.”

On a number of issues, he worked with us to expose the importance of getting back to Glass-Steagall, and in his opposition to the role of the Bush machine in directing the Iraq war and the wars that became the “endless wars.”

One of the things he did in that period was come to hear Lyndon LaRouche speak. There was one time, in particular, where there was a reporter present, a stringer for the weekly press in California, who came to a LaRouche presentation. It was near the Burbank airport and there were 300-400 people at the event, and this reporter was planning on writing a slander against LaRouche, but was shocked to see Ed Asner sitting in the front row.

Why was he shocked? Because the image the media had of LaRouche was that he was a right-winger, and the image they had of Asner was that he was left-winger—so what was Ed doing at a LaRouche event? The reporter went up and asked him, and Ed said: “Well, I found that presentation very interesting, didn’t you?” And the reporter replied, “But you know, LaRouche was thrown in prison, he was convicted of crimes,” and so on. And Ed said, “Yes, that’s what makes me more sympathetic to him, because I know the people who carry out these kinds of judicial attacks.”

That was characteristic of Ed Asner.

As he came into his eighties, and was in somewhat failing health, he took on a project which partly was related to his dialogue with Lyndon LaRouche. He did a one-man play called *FDR*, based on a play written by Dore Schary, which was a very significant effort on his part, to show how Franklin Roosevelt, with the physical problems of polio, was still able to provide the kind of leadership to get us out of the Depression, and to direct the nation during the war. And this exemplifies, this play in particular, to me, what Friedrich Schiller meant when he said that with a good Classical drama, people leave the theater better than they were when they went in. Anyone who saw Ed’s performance in *FDR* felt that way afterwards, that they were uplifted by what they saw: Ninety minutes onstage, as a one-man drama, presenting the story of one of the great American Presidents.

Now just a final note on that: One of the last performances that Ed did was in Purcellville, Virginia. He came there in particular because he wanted to make sure Lyndon LaRouche could see him perform it. You should know that in Purcellville and Leesburg, that general area, there were a lot of attacks over the years on Lyndon LaRouche, especially from so-called Dem-

ocrats and liberals. They came to see the play. Imagine their shock, afterwards, at the end of the play, that Lyndon LaRouche was called up to the stage by Ed Asner and was embraced by Ed. In fact, I think Ed kissed him on the cheek. That’s the kind of courage, the willingness to break with tradition, break with popular opinion, and stick with what you know is right.

To me that’s what I’ll always carry with me in my memory of Ed Asner. I have to say, I was very saddened to hear last Sunday of his passing away, but so eternally grateful to have gotten to know him. I hope that people will have an opportunity through this discussion to come to know what he represented.

Speed: Harley, we also got something from the actor Robert Beltran, another associate of yours. You might want to set this up. I think we’ll play this now, because it’s most appropriate, but if you could say a bit about Robert, and his relationship to this process. He does refer to Ed and his own relationship with him in his statement.

Schlanger: Robert Beltran is someone who was having a relatively successful career, from his first movie, through his role in *Star Trek Voyager*, the fifth series incarnation [of the *Star Trek* franchise].

Robert came to know us during that same period of time, and worked with the LaRouche Youth Movement on drama, classical tragedy. We had extensive discussions with him about it at the time; he did wonderful work with the young people on the West Coast, and actually also on the East Coast at times, and through that, Robert and Ed deepened their relationship. Robert had met Ed earlier, but through his association with us, he and Ed had an opportunity to have more discussion, more work together, and Ed got to see Robert in this play that he did, which is an incredible play, Clifford Odets’ play, *The Big Knife*, which exemplifies what happens when you compromise, when you make compromises. Robert brought out in a very powerful way, the ultimate destruction of character that occurs when you compromise. So, I think people will find his discussion of Ed very moving.

Robert Beltran (video): I’m happy to have this opportunity to say a few things about Ed Asner, who was a friend of mine, and I’m honored that I’m able to call him a friend. The first time we met was after the screen-

ing of a film that I did, called *Latino*, which was about the American involvement in the Iran-Contra affair. Afterwards, Ed came up to me and was very kind and very complimentary.

That was my first experience with him.

Later, as he started working with, or at least associated with the LaRouche movement, and getting to know Lyn, was about the same time I think that I did, around 2001. It was great to see him around, and we became re-acquainted, often with Harley, at luncheons and sometimes in Ed's office or even one time after a production of a performance of *The Big Knife*, which I did back in 2003.

Ed was the president of the Screen Actors Guild for four years. He was the best thing that ever happened to the Screen Actors Guild. He fought so hard for actors, he fought for their wellbeing, their tough benefits, their wages. And he was eventually ousted. As far as most of the actors were concerned, he could have been there as long as he wanted to, but I think the producers had a different idea. They needed to get rid of him, and so they did. And they tried everything they could to keep him from ever coming back as the president, because he was so effective in working for the actors that he represented, that voted for him.

So, we all appreciated that about him. Shortly after he was ousted—I think I can say fairly that he was ousted—the Screen Actors Guild was never the same. It went steadily downhill; the producers got more and more power, and wages went down, and in general most of the actors suffered because of someone like Ed not being in the position to help out.

Not only was he a great actor, which he was—there's something you have to understand: Ed was a *great* actor. Not a good one, not a competent one: He was *great*, in comedy, and in drama.

He once asked me if I had ever been physically abused, when we were talking about my stepfather and his father. And I said, "No, no, I was never physically abused, because my mother wouldn't let him put a hand on me," my stepfather. And I asked him, "Were you?" And he said, "Yes, I was abused. My father was pretty tough, pretty tough on me." And I said, "Well, that's probably why you were so great as the abusive father in this TV program called *Rich Man, Poor Man*." It was a mini-series, and he won an Emmy award for it. His performance is so brutal, so honest, and it's true for everything that he did, including comedy. He brought a reality that went way beyond one-dimensional—it just

always brought so much subtext to his characters, even in comedy.

At 91 years old, his knees were really bothering him. One of our best conversations together was when I walked him to his car, after a LaRouche Youth Movement conference in Burbank. We were walking to his car, he was limping pretty badly, and I was trying to help him, and he wasn't too happy about needing help. But the funny thing is, we had one of our best conversations, ever. It lasted about two hours, and I was worried about him, because he was standing. He wouldn't sit in his car. But we had a great time.

So, you know, losing someone, losing someone like Ed is irreplaceable. It's very much the same what I felt about Lyn: They come around once in a while and you miss them terribly when they're gone. And you just hope that what you learn from them—what you learn from them can be used effectively to continue the fight that they fought so valiantly and relentlessly and effectively. And I think about Lyn, a lot. I've had Ed on my mind a lot.

I want to leave with a sonnet, that I think is about special people like them, like Lyn and Ed. And so, I'll just do this sonnet. I think Ed would appreciate it, because he loved language and beauty and Shakespeare. And so, this [Shakespeare's Sonnet No. 30] is for Ed:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's
waste:

Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd
woe,

And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight:
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoan'd moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restor'd and sorrows end.

Good-bye, Ed, for now.

Speed: I want to take the opportunity, both for those of you on the panel, and also at home: just stop and think about what just happened, what you've just

heard, what you've just been told, about the relationship of someone who was thought about as being merely a popular actor, a TV actor, a dramatist in that sense; to Lyndon LaRouche individually, the LaRouche movement generally, the LaRouche Youth Movement in particular; and why we wish that this idea of tragedy, is the subject of today's meeting. And I just wanted to say this much: I know normally we wouldn't do it this way, and I wouldn't be speaking, but I just wanted to state that this entire section, what we're doing here in terms of the discussion, is the same as our political discussion.

Now, that's not the way that parties practice things. That's not the way that factions practice things. And that's not the way that ideologues practice things. That's the way that Lyndon LaRouche taught us to practice our politics: the idea of politics as art; it's the core of why the Schiller Institute organization was formed by Helga Zepp-LaRouche.

Lyndon LaRouche on Politics, the Presidency and Classical Culture

The following reading from Lyndon LaRouche, and the following transcript of a video of LaRouche speaking on Shakespeare's Hamlet, were presented at the same LaRouche Organization meeting of September 4 as the In Memoriam for Ed Asner above, moderated by Dennis Speed.

Dennis Speed: We're going to show you a video of LaRouche addressing the question of the Presidency from the standpoint of classical culture. But before we do that, we're going to refer to a [work](#) he wrote in 1982 called *The Toynbee Factor in British Grand Strategy*. He was referring to British intelligence agent and historian Arnold Toynbee who, back in the 1950s, '60s, and so on, was a major presence in American academic life. LaRouche wrote:

In a properly ordered republic, as the forces around Benjamin Franklin and George Washington understood this point correctly, the greatest single source of potential danger to the republic is the very sort of estrangement of the citizen

from rational comprehension of national policy-issues which prevails in the United States today.... The most essential thing for a republic is to develop the citizen into an adult with the qualities of a true citizen. These qualities subsume the ability of the citizen to focus upon and to comprehend in a rational way the great issues of national policy.

The entire history of modern civilization demonstrates that such qualities of citizenship can be cultivated in a people in only one manner. That manner is a teaching of classical literary culture, classical musical culture, classical principles of plastic arts' composition, and classical principles of scientific thinking, all situated within the frame of reference of a comprehension of national and world history as a process of universal history....

When the proper acquaintance with Shakespeare was ripped out of our schools' curricula, what our nation lost was persons adequately developed to become future citizens of this republic. Without Shakespeare, Milton, and Shelley in our secondary schools, those schools will produce chiefly eternally adolescent functional illiterates or worse. This importance is not because of the fame of those authors as such, but because these works represent a distillation of those aspects of our English-speaking culture by means of which true citizens are produced.

We're going to be showing you in our video, Lyndon LaRouche discussing the American Presidency, but from the standpoint of William Shakespeare, and in specific, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Lyndon LaRouche (video): A President is not really much. A President is only the chief executive officer of the United States, which is a very important position; but that's not the cure-all for anything. The question is, having become the chief executive officer, what is he going to do? Is he going to be a leader of a nation, or is he going to be a guy holding on to a prize called the Presidency, as something he won in a raffle called a national election?

Because he's like Hamlet. Hamlet could have saved the nation of Denmark, but he failed to do so. So, the story is not a story about how Hamlet failed or succeeded in becoming successful. He wanted to die—he