

SYMPOSIUM

Classical Drama & Historical Specificity

# *The Big Knife:* Hollywood's Classical Drama!

Robert Beltran Revives Odets

by Harley Schlanger



Playwright Clifford Odets

Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

Theater-goers in Los Angeles during November and December 2003 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 Presidency—

the consequences of which still haunt us today.

The dating 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 Activities 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 innuendoes about Charlie Castle's wife, with the implication that she has contributed to pro-Communist causes.

In Odets' play, Charlie Castle is a popular, yet demoralized actor, who came to Hollywood with the dream of

# The Classical Principle: LaRouche Remembers

I haven't seen it, but a professional actor and friend of mine in California, Robert Beltran, has produced a play from the 1940's by Clifford Odets. Clifford Odets is a writer of plays, dramas, which are well known to people of my generation, from the 1930's and 1940's. 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 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 drama-

tist 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 cadre school discussion,*  
Nov. 26, 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

# Odets

his, performed during the 1930's 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 1930's 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 1960's, or the 1970's, or today, would be a damnable lie.

—*from a campaign pamphlet prologue,*  
*Nov. 30, 2003*

producing great works of art that 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, where he had begun his career as a member of the experimental, leftist Group Theatre. He had hoped that, given the positive changes which had occurred during the FDR Presidency, he could use his writing skills to produce films that would inspire audiences to pursue the ideals of social and economic justice which he believed to be the basis of American greatness.

We see these idealistic beliefs in Charlie Castle at 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 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." And 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.

We see this, for example, in an intense argument with the one character who seems to stand up to the corruption, Hank Teagle, who serves as an explicit 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 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 past. Yet Odets faced his society with courageous truthfulness, and pungent observations.

Thus, Odets takes on the post-war American obsession 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, adding that, "of course," 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 on society at large, destroying the artists who go there with hope and ideals. 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 deny his own role in his downfall—that this is the result of the Hollywood studio system, which has made him 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, owing to fear and venality, to the overall corruption of the society—so much so, that they proceeded to raise 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, principles which Beltran is applying in his ongoing

ing drama coaching in the works of Shakespeare and Friedrich Schiller with members of the LaRouche Youth Movement.

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 bring down Charlie Castle were pervasive throughout post-war America.

LaRouche has addressed this during his Presidential campaign, in his polemic on the "three generations": how the demoralization and eventual corruption of his own World War II generation, led directly to the general immorality of their children, the Baby Boomers; 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 "prerogative" to launch pre-emptive nuclear strikes.

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. 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 watched its evolution and development under the creative guidance of Beltran and Melendez, this author can attest that their intention was fulfilled, and that the tragedy of America brought on by the advent of Trumanism remained in the imagination of the audience. Classical works, well written, and performed to meet the expectations of the gifted dramatist, can move audiences even in the jaded America of today.

*Harley Schlanger examines the historical roots of Clifford Odets' Classical approach to drama, in part three of the Symposium, "The Big Knife' and Trumanism," which appears on page 78 of this issue.*