

SYMPOSIUM

Classical Drama & Historical Specificity

Approaching Classical Tragedy In American Life

An Interview with Robert Beltran



EPHNS/Brendan Barnett

Robert Beltran coaches West Coast LYM on performance of Friedrich Schiller's *William Tell*.

"The LaRouche Show" Internet audio broadcast for Dec. 20, 2003, featured a discussion with actor, director, and Lyndon LaRouche collaborator Robert Beltran, after the end of the run of his production of Clifford Odets' "The Big Knife" in Los Angeles. The dialogue on "Trumanism and Tragedy" was moderated by Harley Schlanger, and included questions and discussion from LaRouche Youth Movement organizers Freddy Coronel and Vicky Overing—currently also students in Beltran's Classical drama workshop—and others listening by phone and Internet around the country.

Harley Schlanger: Our topic, and our focus, is going to be on the question of Classical drama, and how you move a population that otherwise is subjected to non-stop bombardment of propaganda—between CNN and Fox-TV, MTV, modern Hollywood, and so on. It's very hard for people to actually have time to sit back and reflect, and realize that they are living in contemporary history.

Our special guest today is someone who has just taken on a project—and I might say, performed it brilliantly—as a way of demonstrating the relevance of Classical drama and tragedy. How you can change a population by

presenting a play which gives a real understanding of the actual history of its time?

I'm talking about Robert Beltran, who is familiar to many of our listeners. He is an actor, a director, and now a producer. He recently put on a brilliant performance of *The Big Knife*, a 1948 play by Clifford Odets, which we'll be talking about with him.

Robert is probably best known for his role on *Star Trek: Voyager*, in which he was "exiled" for seven years, on the *Voyager*. But he's a Classical actor, one who has Classical training, but whose actual passion and love is for the way in which Classical drama can affect an audience, and change them. So, Robert, welcome to the show.

Beltran: Thank you. Good to be here.

Schlanger: The first question that struck me, when we'd been talking for quite a while about your desire to get back into theater, and I was hoping you'd do *Othello*—several years ago, you directed and starred in a production of *Hamlet* out here in Los Angeles—I was a little disappointed at first, when I heard you were going to be doing a play, *The Big Knife*, which I was not familiar with, by a play-

wright with whom I had some vague familiarity. How did you happen to choose *The Big Knife* as your project?

Beltran: Well, it was really a choice between *Othello*, and something else! Because I had pretty much made up my mind that I was going to do *Othello*.

However, it had been a few years since I had been on the stage; and I thought, maybe I should do something prior to tackling *Othello*, which is a monstrous role, and a monstrous play to perform and to put up, as a total production.

So I was looking around for other things to, possibly, do, when I remembered *The Big Knife*, which was a play that I had always loved, and first read in college. And in re-reading it, the relevance and the timeliness, with where we are in our country today, paralleling what Odets was writing about in 1948, it just seemed so glaringly obvious and necessary, probably because I saw the larger metaphor more clearly in *The Big Knife*. I was still searching, and am still searching for that huge metaphor for *Othello*.

So the play was clearer in my mind, as to what I could do with it, and what I wanted to say with it.

Schlanger: Now, when you say, the relevance and timeliness: What was it about Odets' play *The Big Knife*, that you saw as relevant and timely for the present audience?

Beltran: Well, it goes back to what I had been listening to, and absorbing in Lyn's various speeches, about Classical drama, the relevance, and the way to approach Classical drama. I was hoping that I could find a way to demonstrate that, because I believe wholeheartedly in everything that Lyn has said about that.

Think of Charlie Castle, when you read the play, as the United States, in that he is fabulously wealthy, has virtually anything that he needs at his disposal, and yet, he's profoundly unhappy. The very core of his soul is sick.



Courtesy of Robert Beltran

This play is one of those fossils that you find in an archeological dig, that validates what Lyn has been saying about the rampant corruption that happened to that generation, and has been developing to the present day. That's why the play is so relevant now, because it's based on a truthful current of thought about ideas that took hold of our society.

Schlanger: And Lyn has written quite a bit about, in a sense, the backdrop to the play. Perhaps, in a moment, you can tell people a little about the play. But, what struck me, the first time I read it, and then when we started talking about it, is that it leaps off the pages: He's writing about what Lyn calls "Trumanism"! The post-World War II destruction of the optimism that came out of the victory over Nazi Germany. The sense

of optimism about getting out of the Depression, which was associated with Franklin Roosevelt. And then, immediately after the death of Roosevelt, Harry Truman became President, and there was a complete transformation.

So, I assume that was something that leaped off the pages for you as well.

Beltran: Yeah, it did. And it's not stated explicitly in the play, that this is a reaction to Trumanism. But it is quite clear that it's a reaction to the way the country shifted, after the great buildup and optimism before and during the war, the Roosevelt policies going into effect, and the

great optimism that that caused in the population. And then, the complete turnaround in the opposite direction, that the country went into the paradigm-shift, as Lyn describes it—that's exactly what Odets was writing about.

The fact that Charlie Castle—

Robert Beltran plays actor Charlie Castle, in the recent production of "The Big Knife."

who is the protagonist in the play—

Schlanger: That's the character that you played.

Beltran: Yes—saw very clearly what was happening to him, and what was happening to the rest of the country, but couldn't find a way out. Couldn't find the way to deal with it. In fact, the whole play is about—if you want to think of Charlie Castle as the metaphor for the country itself, America itself—you saw the corrupting elements that were slowly killing him.

Schlanger: Now, just so that people know a little bit about this (and I would actually recommend that, if people can find this—because it's not that easy to find, it's not in most of the Odets anthologies): The play is called *The Big Knife*, it was written in 1948, and it's about a character, Charlie Castle, who's a very well-known and famous actor, who is, in a sense, an indentured servant to "Hoff Industries," Marcus Hoff, the studio chief. And in this sense, when you say he's a metaphor for the society, how does this unfold in the play?

Beltran: Well, if you think of Charlie Castle, when you read the play, as the United States, in that he is fabulously wealthy, has virtually anything that he needs at his disposal, and yet, he's profoundly unhappy. The very core of his soul is *sick*. And he knows why. And yet, he's juggling so many—so many people are living off of him, and making the golden goose lay his eggs, and as long as the golden goose is laying those golden eggs, everybody is happy, except for him.

So, everybody is living off of this man, and feeding off of him. And they're not at all concerned with the fact that he's slowly dying, and that they are contributing to his death.

Schlanger: Now, the scene is set right at the beginning, when he's talking to a gossip columnist who's trying to get a story—typical gossip columnist, trying to find out what's happening with his marriage—but it's really a telling thing, because you're less than two minutes into the play, and she says to him, "The first time we met, all you'd talk about was FDR." And he replies, "I believed in FDR."

Beltran: Right. I think—she's referring to when he first came to Hollywood, the idealist stage actor who came with all these ideas about how he was going to carry on his ideals into the movie industry, and make movies that meant something, and said something.

Schlanger: And you would say this was autobiographical for Odets?

Beltran: It's autobiographical for Odets, and possibly me! [Laughs] But for Odets, definitely. Odets was very good friends with John Garfield, and I think a lot of the story

was drawn from John Garfield's personal experiences with Warner Brothers—with Jack Warner.

We understand that Charlie Castle came to Hollywood as a different person. He's become something exactly opposite to how he first came to Hollywood—full of idealism, full of the political enlightenment of the Roosevelt policies, and what Roosevelt stood for and was trying to implement in the country. These were things that he believed in.

Schlanger: And there's even the shadow at the very beginning, and again, in an elliptical way—what Lyndon LaRouche said in the discussions we had with him—almost out of the corner of your eye; the Trumanism. When he's asked by the gossip columnist about his wife's contributions to political parties.

Beltran: Right. It's a veiled threat, in that she's trying to get gossip about his failing marriage and the impending divorce, and he's reluctant to give her that information. She threatens him with possibly revealing his wife's affiliation with reprehensible political organizations, possibly Communism, I think that's what's implied in the play, that she gave some money to a Communist group.

Schlanger: And it's interesting that the play was written just about at the time of the "Hollywood Ten," with the beginnings of the Red-hunts out here on the West Coast. . . .

We have two panelists who are members of the LaRouche Youth Movement, who we'll bring on in a bit. They're also students of Robert Beltran in the work he's been doing with the LaRouche Youth Movement and the Schiller Institute. So we'll hear shortly from Vicki Overing and Freddy Coronel.

Now, on this question then: In a sense, we're titling this show today, "Trumanism and Tragedy." What is the tragedy, then? What do you see that is the trap? And how does this fit the description of Classical tragedy, in that it mirrors the whole society? Because, after all, we're talking about a rich, handsome, powerful movie actor. So how does that have an effect on the audience, most of whom are not handsome, rich movie actors?

Beltran: Well, I think what the audience is meant to see, is how Charlie Castle is trying to save himself. And he is still trying to rise above the mediocrity, and the mercenary qualities of all the people who are around him.

For instance, he tries to have a meaningful discussion with his agent, and his agent says, "Charlie, you and your wife are two beautiful humans, and you can't settle one little problem—your marriage." And Charlie says, "Well, maybe that's why empires have fallen, Nat, because just like me, millions can't settle one little problem." And his agent says, "Who's got time to worry about empires? I just want to live in peace, and please my clients." And

Charlie says, “How do we know that America isn’t dying of trying to please its clients? Did you ever think of that?” And he replies, “No, I never did, actually.” And Charlie says, “Don’t you feel it in the air? Don’t you see them pushing man off the Earth, and putting the customer in his place?” And his agent says, “That’s a very intelligent remark. By the way, getting back to this contract . . .”

So nobody wants to— This is a man who’s *dying* to live a life that is consistent with his ideals. But nobody is interested. The bottom line for everybody is, how much money can you make for me? How can we keep the *status quo*? You are a commodity. We don’t want the commodity thinking too much, because the commodity might see just how miserable he really is. And that’s what Charlie’s beginning to see.

Schlanger: Now there’s an interesting problem that comes up for the audience. Because Charlie’s wife appears to be relatively sympathetic, the person who’s the noble sufferer. And it was interesting, for people who I know who went to see it, they were somewhat confused by the character of the wife. How did you see the character of Marion? And how does this fit in with the question of the draining of any remaining morality? Because he does say that she represents his idealism. So, how did you see that?

Beltran: The wonderful thing about this play is that everybody is deeply flawed. Everybody is sick in some way, or dealing with a huge problem at their very core. The wife was complicit in the—the play hinges on a car accident that happened before it starts. Charlie Castle was drunk with a woman in his car, a woman he was having an affair with, and he accidentally ran over and killed a young child; and then he had his best friend take the rap for him, and go to jail for him. This is the great secret, and the great blackmailing event, which the studio has over him, which is why he’s basically a blackmailed, indentured servant. But the wife was complicit in that. She didn’t fight that plan to send his friend to jail in place of Charlie.

But, she has come to the conclusion that they cannot live this way anymore, and she begs him to leave Hollywood. Not to sign the new contract that Hoff is threatening, blackmailing Charlie to sign, to keep him there in Hollywood for 14 more years. She’s threatening to leave him, and she says, “Just leave it. Leave it all! We’ll go back to New York. You can go back and do theater. And we’ll live a relatively fine life, you can make a nice living in the theater still.”

So she is not so angelic—he calls her “Angel” all the time, and I think it’s kind of ironic. Because at one point in the play, after he’s decided that he’s got to sign the contract, and commit himself for 14 more years in Hollywood, she decides to kill the young baby that—she’s

pregnant at the outset of the play, and she decides to have an abortion, because he’s decided to stay in Hollywood for 14 more years. And she doesn’t tell him. She doesn’t discuss it with him, she just does it on her own.

Schlanger: And he doesn’t even know that she’s pregnant.

Beltran: That’s right.

So, all of these people are deeply flawed, and I think they’re meant to be, not in any kind of simplistic way, but I think they are meant to be indications of a society at large, the general society, American society at the time. All of them—the agent, the wife, the best friend, the journalist, the studio head, the studio head’s right-hand man—all of these people are a microcosm of the society as a whole.

Schlanger: Well then, here’s the question that many people have about tragedy. Some of the people here—some of the LaRouche Youth members who first saw it—said, “It was depressing, it wasn’t uplifting.” And the purpose of tragedy is to actually change the audience, force the audience to rethink their own assumptions. How does that work in this play? And in tragedy in general?

Beltran: Well, yes, I don’t think that when you go to *Hamlet*, you leave ready to have a party. It’s meant to stimulate and provoke thought, and thinking about what actually happened on stage, and what is the playwright trying to convey? And so, when you have these events that happen in the play, this onslaught of terrible events, one after the other, that finally end in suicide, I think it’s meant to provoke the audience into thinking, “How could he have saved himself? What could have possibly happened to change the course of events, and what were, really, the causes? What really caused this suicide?”

And *that’s* where the Classical principle takes its effect—making people think about how things could have changed, how the outcomes could have changed. What happened, why did these events happen, and how they relate to people individually, and to our society as a whole?

That’s the Classical principle. The Classical principle is not that everybody comes away happy, but that everybody comes out *thinking*, which is a validation of ourselves as human beings, as opposed to the animals that go to a rave or a hip-hop concert, and just dance away in some kind of flagellant hysteria. The Classical principle is that you go and you sit and absorb the events of the play, and you think about it afterwards.

Schlanger: Now, in the discussion that you and I had with Lyndon LaRouche before the play first opened, one of the things that you talked about with Lyn was the importance for you, of reading the *Journal of Odets* from 1940. What did you get from that?

Beltran: Well, Lyn said it beautifully. He said, “Ah, you’re

I don't think that when you go to *Hamlet*, you leave ready to have a party. It's meant to provoke the audience into thinking, 'How could he have saved himself? What could have possibly happened to change the course of events, and what were, really, the causes?'

Hamlet confronts his mother Queen Gertrude, while King Claudius looks on, in a 1971 stage performance.



getting into the mind of the creator of the play.” And he was exactly right, because in studying the Odets’ *Journal*, you really got to read what he was concerned about. And so the play takes on special significance, because what you understand, is that the play came from these

deep, deep questions that he was asking himself about the nature of our country: Where are we going?

He was deeply concerned. The *Journal* takes place in 1940. He wrote it for one year. And the prescience that he showed in the *Journal*, was that he saw clearly what was happening even before the war. He saw clearly what was happening to our society. And eight years later, it came to fruition in this play. And I think he was able to see it even more clearly, because he had eight years to watch what he had seen developing in the country. He had had eight years to see it come to fruition. And that’s exactly what he wrote in the play.

All of those ideas and events that were happening before the war, during the war, and after the war, are exactly what he wrote about in the play.

Schlanger: And there’s an interesting sub-theme here, on this question of popular opinion, consumption, people who are looking out for their own pleasures—which we associate, more often than not, with the Baby Boom generation. But it’s clearly one of the points about the corruption in the World War II generation. How does that come through?

Beltran: That’s one of the great things about the discovery of this play. It’s almost as if Clifford Odets had gone to a national Schiller Institute semi-annual conference, and listened to Lyn, and then decided to write a play.

What I had always caught from Lyn, was the importance of that paradigm-shift after the war, the beginning of “Trumanism.” Although I had no— That’s a problem with a lot of people. You have LaRouche talking about something, and you ask, “How can I validate this? How can I verify that this is exactly what happened?” And this play is one of those tools that you have, to see. And this is one of the things that Lyn said to me, when we were having our discussion together, that he was not the only one to see this.

Clifford Odets clearly saw what was going on. But this play is one of those fossils that you find in an archeological dig, that validates what

Lyn has been saying about the paradigm-shift that happened. The rampant corruption that happened to that generation, and has been developing to the present day. And that’s exactly why the play is so relevant now. Because, it’s based on a truthful current of thought about ideas that took hold of our society. And Odets saw it clearly. And this play, I think, is like a valuable fossil, that is a piece of the puzzle which helps to see the bigger puzzle.

Schlanger: The way Lyn put it to me, in a discussion, is that from this slice of what is American “royalty”—Hollywood—you can see the corruption that, in fact, was in your own family, in your own generation, for the Baby Boomers to see it. And all the talk from Tom Brokaw and others, about “the greatest generation”—and it’s true, the sacrifices and everything else, from the Depression, through the war—and yet you also see the acceptance, after the war, of mediocrity, in the mass media. . . .

I’d like to introduce our LaRouche Youth Movement panel. We have with us Vicky Overing and Freddy Coronel, two members of the LaRouche Youth Movement, who are very heavily engaged, right now, in the 2004 Presidential campaign. But they’re taking a few

minutes to join us today. Both of them are in the drama class that Robert does here at our Los Angeles office on a regular basis. Freddy and Vicky, welcome to the show. Does either of you have a question for Robert?

Vicky Overing: Yeah. I was just wondering, what was the development process, or change, that you saw in the characters that worked with you in the play, and if it had a huge impact on them? What was their response to it?

Beltran: Are you talking about the actors, my fellow cast members?

Overing: Yeah.

Beltran: The cast was very, very united in the purpose of the play. And I know that one of the things that helped was Harley coming, very early, to one of our rehearsals, and discussing Trumanism. It was a wonderful discussion that we had with the entire cast, for about two or three hours. And what it did was open up the society—American post-war society—and it made clear what Odets was really saying.

And so, once the actors are all on the same page, concerning what the playwright is trying to say, then it makes the message clearer. It makes the goal of the entire production that much clearer. And everybody is working towards the same goal.

Schlanger: Well, I think also—and Vicky, I know the question that you're asking is one that you, as a budding young actress, are also experiencing, as you're getting deeper and deeper into the *Julius Caesar* that we're doing with Robert. But, I had a chance to meet and talk with some of the actors, and there really was a change, throughout the period of the almost three months that Robert was working with them. To the point that, I remember one of the last discussions that we had with someone, the first thing he said was, "Before we go in to talk, let me check to see if I'm still wired." A not-so-subtle reference to John Ashcroft.

But I think also, Robert, that this was a tribute to you. Because it was your vision, in bringing to life the idea of Classical tragedy, which had the impact.

Beltran: Well, definitely. You know I've been studying LaRouche for a good two-and-a-half years now, and I've really been chomping at the bit to implement those things that I have learned, and believe in, as far as how to present Classical principles on stage. This play gave me that opportunity. As I said, it's almost as though Odets had gone and listened to one of Lyn's speeches.

It was a great way for me to try to demonstrate the Classical principle in drama.

Schlanger: I'm not a critic, but I saw the play several times, from the beginning of rehearsals, and I think it

performed that function brilliantly.

One interesting thing is the tragedy which became Odets' own life, after this play.

Odets was one of the people who got caught up in the web of McCarthyism, which is Trumanism extended through Sen. Joseph McCarthy. Odets' name was presented to the infamous HUAC, the House Un-American Activities Committee. And then he himself went before the Committee, and testified, and gave some names. I think this makes very clear what Lyndon LaRouche has been saying on this: That the tragedy is, that out of a whole generation, even the best people—even someone who was conscious of this process himself—under the relentless pressure of the "let's get on with" society, "let's not try to improve things," "let's be practical," "let's be like cocker-spaniels, paws up, saying 'Like me, like me,'"—as Odets says in the play—unfortunately, most of the generation went through that corruption.

Beltran: As I said, Harley, that was always a theory in my head listening to Lyn's speeches, with him emphasizing this over and over. It became clear to me when I started working on the play, and reading Odets' *Journal*. Because Odets, in the *Journal*, quotes, and writes of extended conversations that he had with other luminaries of the time—people like Steinbeck, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and so many people around Hollywood and New York at the time, in those circles. So, a lot of people were discussing those things, and a lot of ideas were being tossed around. Odets was prescient enough to see all of this happening, and was able to distill it into the thoughts that he presents in this play.

Schlanger: But unfortunately, not strong enough to avoid being a victim of the same corruption.

Beltran: Yeah. In the play, Charlie Castle always sees himself as half a man, and that is directly from the *Journal*. Odets says, he's got to become a whole man, that he's only a half a man.

Schlanger: On that topic, we have an e-mail question here, we don't have the name of the questioner, but they ask you: "Can you elaborate on what it means to you when Hank Teagle"—who is Charlie's, maybe one of his few friends in the play—"tells Charlie, 'You still know that failure is the best of American life?'"

Beltran: To me, it meant that, even if Charlie were to leave everything, public opinion would clearly see him as a loser, someone who failed, someone who was taken from his lofty perch and thrown down into the mud. But yet, it's that acceptance, it's that willingness to fail—The failure, in American life, is the person who may not necessarily reach his goal, but has, at least, striven to get there, and strives to get there with a clear conscience and a clear idea of what he would like to accomplish.

And that, I think, is really true of what's the best in American life.

Schlanger: So in a sense, the fact that Odets, though he himself never achieved the bright promise that he may have had in the 1930's, his play left with us an ability to reflect on that, so that we can improve. What Lyndon LaRouche talks of as the "simultaneity of eternity." Odets' words came to life through that presentation of the play, which now is living in the minds of everyone who saw it.

Beltran: Well, look at some of the people who, probably, we would classify as failures. Is John Kennedy a failure? Was Roosevelt ultimately a failure, because the society turned right around as soon as he died? Who's a failure, and how to you define failing? Surely Odets meant it to be a person who strives, and may not, ultimately achieve what he was hoping for. But, it's the example of that person striving, which remains behind, and is the best of American life.

Schlanger: That's the interesting irony at the end, where Hank Teagle—who is called, during the play, by Charlie, "Horatio," and actually performs the same role that Horatio performed in *Hamlet*—

Beltran: He says, when Charlie kills himself—and Hoff's right-hand man says that he's going to "spin" the story, and call it a heart attack, and that his good friend and associate Hoff was there at his bedside, his doctor, his little son, his wife; it was a nice death that Charlie had, just a heart attack; he's going to completely whitewash the fact that Charlie committed suicide, cut himself in three places—Hank Teagle says, "No, that's not going to happen. I'm going to tell the truth. He killed himself because that was the only way he could live. You don't recognize an act of faith when you see it."

That's exactly what Horatio does in *Hamlet*.

Freddy Coronel: One question, in seeing the play: It seems as though the development of the entire play had "two personalities." From one standpoint, it was holding on to that which was moral. And then, from the other, it was like you could see, more and more, a giving in to the whole Hollywood scene, and just a whole paradigm-shift that was taking place. I know there were certain points in the play—I remember a particular one, where you were drunk, just sloshed, and even though, in that state, you were telling this one woman, who was just a whore, "No, I'm not like you, I'm different!" And it seemed like you were just kind of fighting.

In acting, having the audience be able to recognize that fight, within that one personality, or within that one actor that's presenting these two personalities—the difficulty in doing that, and the challenge of just performing the same

play—how many times, you played it four nights a week?

Beltran: Five nights.

Coronel: For how many months?

Beltran: It was five weeks.

Coronel: The challenge in being able to do that every day, to keep it new for people. You yourselves, as actors, being able to keep reliving, I would assume, something new, so that it can stay fresh—I'd like to have some discussion on that.

Beltran: I think that question comes up a lot in our drama classes: How do you keep something fresh after having rehearsed it for so many weeks, and performing it night after night? Really, the only thing that keeps it fresh, is to know it better, and better and better, so that you're always investigating, and trying to broaden and deepen it, give it more breadth, give it more depth. That's how you find the spontaneity in it.

Because in a great play—and I think that this qualifies as a great American play. Calling it a great "American" play is a qualifier, in itself. But within the context of American literature, it certainly is one of our great plays. You find the little nuggets that are there, the more you keep searching, the more you really try to find the crux of each scene, and the crux of the relationships of the characters. That's how you keep it fresh.

And also, the fact that you believe in the play. You respect the playwright. You respect what his intention was. And you give yourself over to the intention.

Schlanger: You approached this as a mission-orientation, then.

Beltran: Definitely. For me, it was. The reason why I did this play—besides the fact that I love it, and it's a wonderful play—it has the capability to wake people up. It has the capability to provoke thought, and possibly touch one or two, or maybe more people in the audience, and make them think, "You know, that's exactly what's happening today, and that's why we cannot allow this to go on."

Schlanger: In that light, we have an interesting e-mail question for you, Robert, or anyone else on the panel, from Matt, in Wichita, Kansas. He says, "I'd like to hear anyone's feedback regarding the situation in Iraq and the issue of tragedy, and what it can teach us—especially in light of the current, triumphalist feelings in the United States, after Saddam Hussein's capture."

Beltran: What if Paul Bremer, all of a sudden, decides to walk into his bathroom, and sees his razor there—he's going to shave—and all of a sudden, he has a catharsis? And the catharsis is, he cannot continue this sham, and he decides to commit suicide?

Or, what if he walks into his bathroom, sees his razor

If you cannot read a play like Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, or *The Big Knife*, or *The Crucible*, and see a larger metaphor, then you're missing a crucial element. Playwrights like Miller, and O'Neill, and Odets—even though they didn't always achieve greatness—in certain plays, they did. And they achieved the status of a tragedy.

Lee J. Cobb plays Willie Loman (center) in a 1947 production of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman."

there when he's going to shave, and he looks into his mirror and says, "I cannot continue this sham, I'm leaving, and I'm going to do anything I can to stop the occupation in Iraq"? Paul Bremer has that choice. If he came to see this play, he would see himself in the person of Charlie Castle.

That's what I mean. People came to see the play, and I think that Odets was hoping that people would see themselves in Charlie Castle. And even on a larger scale, they would see their country in the person of Charlie Castle.

Schlanger: On the conference line, Angela would like to ask you a question.

Angela Vullo: Hi, Robert, this is Angela from LaRouche's campaign office in Virginia. I'm presently reading a newly released biography of Arthur Miller*—who, as you know, wrote tragedies in the same period as Odets, the most well-known being *Death of a Salesman*—and Miller has referred to *Death of a Salesman* as a Classical tragedy. He has compared it to *King Lear*. But he's been criticized, people have said, "Well, Willie Loman, he wasn't a king, or a

JFK, or an FDR, or even a Charlie Castle. So, he didn't fall from any great height."

I'm curious what you think about "the tragedy of the common man," and if you think that *Death of a Salesman* was a Classical tragedy?

Beltran: Yes, I think so. I think it's so simplistic to think that tragedy can only happen to kings and queens. If you think of the sovereignty of each individual human mind—we're all equal, and we all have the capacity to fall from a great height. Any time a human being contemplates taking his

life—to exit this life, and this gift that we have, of being alive and being able to accomplish things for our fellow-man—once you start actually considering exiting, by your own hand, the world that you live in—that's tragic. That's a subject for tragedy.

And I think that if you cannot read a play like *Death of a Salesman*, or *The Big Knife*, or Miller's *The Crucible*, and see a larger metaphor, then you're missing a crucial element. And that is the element of the large metaphor. And I think great playwrights like Miller, and O'Neill, and Odets, even though they didn't always achieve greatness, in certain plays,

they did. And they achieved the status of a tragedy.

Schlanger: To follow up Angela's question, then: Do you think, as someone who's acted in Hollywood, who's done a number of movies, you've been on television—besides *Star Trek*, you've done a good bit of other television—do you think that the current mass media have destroyed the potential for someone to write tragedy today? Or do you think it's possible that we could still have great writers of tragic drama, who live contemporaneously with Hollywood, and the networks, and cable?

Beltran: I think that what has to happen is that—the society is what produces individuals; and the ideas that prevail in a society are what creates individuals. So, yes, I think so. I think that maybe, there may be a budding playwright or two in the LaRouche organization. I hope



* See Book Review, page 121, this issue.

so. I think that should be encouraged.

The mass media are a money-making machine. They're totally at the mercy of making money, and the bottom line is, how much can you make? And that's one of the wonderful lines that Charlie Castle has, one of the great revelations that he has. He says, talking about the studios and the whole movie industry, "Why am I surprised at them? 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 nation with the movies they make? This whole movie thing is a murder of the people, only we hit them on the head under the hair, nobody sees the marks."

That's what we're fighting. The media have such a grip on our society, that we really have to nurture those people that can see through it, see beyond it, and rise above it. And nurture them into helping them create. And go beyond prolonging all of this mediocrity in pop culture, and try to nurture them into creating something greater and more worthy, closer to the Classical principle.

Schlanger: To ask a question about the work you're doing with teaching, working with younger people: You see the same kind of problem when you hear the way people speak; and also, just as important, the way people listen, or rather, don't listen. How do you deal with the domination of this kind of media culture, with the "up-talk," and everything else, to get people to start reciting Shakespeare, so that the actual Classical intention, and the beauty of the language, come through?

Beltran: It really boils down to listening and hearing: How acute is your hearing? And you can develop that. My struggle with the students, is trying to get them to hear acutely, and to develop that.

Schlanger: When you say, "acutely," you're basically talking about hearing with their "inner ear."

Beltran: You're hearing intention; and you're giving back intention. And going back to Freddy's question about "keeping it fresh": As long as you're continuing to study the scene and trying to find things, once you start finding new things, it's because you're hearing something new. And when you hear something that you hadn't heard before, it stimulates something in you that causes a spontaneous reaction. Even if it's minutely subtle, it registers with the audience. And that's how you keep spontaneity. You keep it by the way you hear it. You keep hearing it freshly; you don't hear it the same every night.

And so, I'm talking about acutely hearing what you're reading off the page. It starts there. Acutely hearing how you prepare your scenes. I'm always asking the actors to pare down the thought to a concrete thought—you're

emphasizing too many words; pare it down to the absolutely essential thought. And until you can hear the superfluousness of certain words, that are clouding the thought—until you can hear that, you're not quite there.

And that's what I mean. The essential thing is, how are you hearing? How acutely are you hearing?

Schlanger: So, to use the language of Lyndon LaRouche, acting, and drama, take place in the complex domain, rather than in the realm of the senses.

Beltran: Last night, Harley, I was auditing a production of *King Lear*. And it was amazing to me to go through being totally caught up in the play, because of the truthfulness of what was happening, and then be taken out of it by certain actors who, for whatever reason, destroyed the illusion. And suddenly I was back in this little barn of a theater, I was back looking at the interesting choice of lighting colors that they used, and taken out of the play. And then, how I would be sucked back into the play, back into my imagination, when the truthfulness was resumed.

That principle is absolutely essential for everyone to understand, especially the actors who I'm working with. That, as long as you're on that line of truth, the audience is with you. When you stop acting as a human being within the context of the play, then the audience is taken completely out of it, and they're thinking about what they're going to eat after the performance.

Schlanger: This hour has gone by quickly. I had some questions for you on how you present a historical period. One of the things that struck me very much, in seeing the play, is that your set really resurrected the late 1940's, complete with—one of the actors said—the bar "serving as a kind of altar around which people engaged in worship." We've got a little more than a minute: Can you give a little sense of how you presented that? Also, I noticed you did the whole play. The movie version leaves out sections. That was a deliberate decision on your part?

Beltran: Oh, yes. I wouldn't have cut anything from this play. If we were to compare it to a piece of music, I would say it's comparable to a great symphony by Shostakovich, maybe. Is it a Beethoven symphony? I don't think so. But in listening to Shostakovich, I note there's rigor there, there's an intention that is there. And this play deserved all the respect. You just don't go ahead and cut stuff from a play like this. It's pretty thoroughly composed. There aren't any loose ends.

Schlanger: I've really enjoyed having this opportunity, and I'm sure the listeners have, to discuss *The Big Knife* tragedy by Clifford Odets, with Robert Beltran. Thank you, Robert.

Beltran: You're very welcome.