

Robert Beltran on *The Big Knife*

The play, *The Big Knife*, was—now less of—an obsession, but was quite an obsession with me. I felt that I had to get some actors together to produce the play, and do it. And, I was lucky to get a very good cast together, very good director, and we got to work on the play. We started rehearsals, and in the rehearsal process—I was playing Charlie Castle, who is the central character in the play—in the process of rehearsal, several times, Charlie hears the doves outside the window of his house in Beverley Hills, and it wakes him up, he can't get a good night's sleep. And several times in the play, he mimics the sound of the doves that he hears. There is a scene where he is with his agent, and he hears the doves in the middle of his conversation, and he says,

“Those damn doves, those mourning doves,” (mourning, m-o-u-r-n-i-n-g, those mourning doves), “they woke me up this morning.”

He hasn't been able to sleep. And he mimics the sound of the doves, he goes—I have them outside my house, too, so I know it quite well—mimicking the doves, he says,

“Coo-Coo-*Whoo*, Coo-Coo-*Whoo*.”

And he has to do this three times in the play.

So, my director, once, when we were rehearsing these scenes, had the disconcerting habit of coming up to you, and saying, “Hmmm, what's that really about?” And I said, “Well, it's mourning doves, you know, *mourning* doves, they're *grieving*, they're grieving over Charlie Castle. They see that he's dying.” And he just looked at me, and he says, “Is that all?” [Laughter] So, a few days later, I'm still rehearsing these scenes, and I have to do that sound, in the middle of a scene—“Coo-Coo-*Whoo*, Coo-Coo-*Whoo*.” And he comes up to me after we had run through the scene a couple of times, and he says, “Robert, uh, what is that? What do you think that is?” And I wanted to scream, I said, “Damn it, it's the *mourning doves!* Don't you get it, they're mourning for Charlie Castle!” [Laughter] That's what I said to him. And again, he said, “Is that all? Is that all?” [Laughter]

So, the next couple of days we were rehearsing, and then one morning he came into our rehearsal smiling,

and he says, “Robert, have you looked at how Odets spells the ‘Coo-Coo-*Whoo*, Coo-Coo-*Whoo*?’” And I said, “Yeah, yeah.” He said, “Have you *really* looked at it?” “Yeah!” He says, “Well, look,” and so he showed it to me. It's spelled “C-o-o—C-o-o—W-h-o-o-o.”

So, we both smiled very broadly, and said, “Yes, that's it, “Whoooooo.”

Who?

That's what is waking Charlie Castle up. That's why he can't get sleep. The mourning doves, all those billions of mourning doves, are waking him up out of his sleep. “Who—Who—*Who?*” And if you take the question further, the question is, “Who are you, really? Who? Who are you really, Charlie Castle? Who have you become? Who were you, and who have you become? Who are you, really?”

And then later, the big question is, “Who, if not *you*? *Who*, if not *you*? ”

So this, of course, opened up the whole play for me, really, and the character of Charlie. He's got everything, he's a fabulously wealthy, successful movie star, money, fame, all the luxuries of success, but he's miserable, and his wife is miserable, their marriage is in shambles, and during the course of the play, we find out why.

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Lights fade. End of play. So the audience goes home, and now that you know something a little bit more about Clifford Odets, I think it's very clear that embedded in this play was that question, “Who? Who?” To every one of those audience members, and, in the larger sense, the nation. “Who are you, really? Who will you become?” And then, the biggest question, the one that's meant to startle you out of your sleep at night, not let you sleep, the way it was startling Charlie Cass, “Who, if not you?” All those billions of mourning doves asking that question to you, individually, and to our country, “Who? Who, who, who, who, who, if not you?”

—Robert Beltran,
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