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Devil's Advocate

Donald Freed · Thursday, April 14th, 2011

Guest column by Donald Freed

The project that was to become the play *Devil's Advocate* began with a telephone call from the legendary American director Robert Altman. Bob's aim was to introduce me to the Academy Award-winning film producer Barry Spikings. They had been riveted by the United States invasion of Panama on Christmas Eve 1989. President George H.W. Bush had woven together a tissue of lies and provocations to justify bombing and occupying, temporarily, a sovereign nation, Panama, in order to make what appeared to be a drug bust.

The target of this cosmic sting was General Manuel Noriega, the Panamanian strongman who had worked for the Central Intelligence Agency since 1960. The General's sin against Washington in the 1980s was to refuse the demands of the Ronald Reagan administration – that Panama allow itself to be used as a forward staging base for the so-called Contra forces in their U.S.-backed terror campaign against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

What Robert Altman and Barry Spikings wanted to discuss was how to dramatize, for stage and film, the suspenseful capture of the “Narco-tyrant” Noriega. The world knew the General had slipped in to the Vatican Embassy in Panama City, there to meet, he thought, secretly with a diplomat of the highest rank who would be representing the Vatican. This eminent personality was none other than the Archbishop LaBoa, who was – and these are his official titles – the Devil's Advocate and the Grand Inquisitor. Believe it or not, these terms still exist in today's Rome. Archbishop LaBoa, a famed Jesuit luminary, was the hunter whom Washington and Rome were counting on to entrap, capture and deliver Noriega to American authorities so that he might stand trial in Miami, not as a Head of State, but rather as a common drug thug.

We all agreed that this Dostoevskian cast of characters would provide a world-wide fascination if we could, somehow, invent and reconstruct what went on between the General and the Archbishop during that long night of the soul that ended with the tyrant meekly marching out of the Papal residence and into the official U.S. plane that would take him to Florida, trial and continuing incarceration.

What interested the three of us was what might be called the politics in the play, as over against the politics of the play. In the play versus of the play. The politics in the plot of the United States versus the drug lord Noriega was available to any reader of official or semi-official North American media: U.S. Special Forces using shock and awe bombing raids to trap the diabolical, mad dictator in the church residence and proceed to play rock 'n roll at ear-splitting levels

throughout the night, alternating with “psychological warfare” propaganda over an echoing P.A. system until the monster and former North American agent collapses and crawls into captivity. Thus, the myth of the great victory in Panama.

Those are the politics and the plot of the Washington scenario, known to all news readers and listeners of some 20 years ago. But plots and politics come and go from Athens to Elizabethan London to the adventures of the Reagan-Bush dynasty.

What endures, abides is the narrative of the protagonists in an historical event such as this. The narrative of the play and the politics of the play have to do with the human condition and the deep and secret conflicts of characters the size of the General and the Archbishop, the Devil’s Advocate and the Devil.

Over the years and down to this hour the endeavor has been to build on the facts of the plot a platform from which to launch the truth of the narrative. Only in America is the adjective “political” used to distinguish a serious anatomy of a major public event from the fiction of the official propaganda of the state. This is the price we pay for our failure of nerve during the witch-hunts of the 1950s.

Image: Tom Fitzpatrick and Robert Beltran in Devil’s Advocate. Photo by Ed Krieger.

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