

Broad Street Review



Widdall: Quest for maturity.

New City's 'RFK' at the Adrienne BY: [Robert Zaller](#) 10.20.2012

Jack Holmes's *RFK* is a play for our political season, but also a sympathetic and sometimes searching portrayal of Americans' last political icon. Russ Widdall's performance is a *tour de force*.

RFK. By Jack Holmes; Ginger Dayle directed. New City Stage production through November 5, 2012 at Adrienne Theater, 2030 Sansom St. (215) 563-7500 or www.NewCityStage.org.

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Bobby Kennedy's unfinished (and uncertain) legacy

Robert Francis Kennedy is the last of our political figures to have entered popular mythology. Few Americans in public life have been as controversial, and none, except Lincoln, has left behind a comparable sense of unfinished legacy.

I had some very harsh things to say about both Jack and Bobby Kennedy in my own play, *Who Killed Jimmy Hoffa?* But I was speaking through the mouthpiece of their presumptive assassin, whose viewpoint could hardly be objective.

In Jack Holmes's *RFK*, Bobby speaks for himself. Indeed, aside from his satiric assumption of the voices of J. Edgar Hoover and Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, Bobby is the only person we hear from in this two-act, one-person show. In other words, the portrayal is literally subjective— an account of how a monologuing and public-speaking Bobby might present himself before an imaginary bar of history.

Obama's lesson

RFK covers the post-Dallas period from 1964 to Bobby's own assassination in Los Angeles following his victory in the 1968 California primary, when he seemed poised to capture the Democratic presidential nomination and restore the Kennedy dynasty. We meet Bobby fuming about being passed over as Lyndon Johnson's running mate in 1964— clearly a payback for Bobby's unsuccessful effort to thwart LBJ's bid for the vice presidency four years earlier. Bobby recognizes the irony in this, of course, but he is no less outraged in his sense of entitlement.

He would go on to upstage LBJ at the 1964 Democratic convention, but, as Barack Obama would learn after his own rhapsodically received speech at the same convention 40 years later, applause doesn't necessarily translate into enduring support. Bobby was left to make a half-hearted run for a New York Senate seat that fall, and, also like Obama, to discover in the Senate's hidebound ways a prison rather than a stage for his ambition.

Ruthless enforcer

As Holmes's play makes clear, both Bobby's hunger for power and his ultimate ambivalence about it derived from an insecure childhood in which he was groomed, if at all, to serve the dynastic interests represented by his two elder brothers.

Joe Kennedy Jr.'s death in World War II laid the mantle on Jack's shoulders, and Bobby found his niche (and his special talent) in running his brother's campaign for the Senate in 1952 and for president in 1960. Bobby was going to be Jack's personal SOB, the ruthless enforcer with a single-minded will to win. In between, he honed his skills as the lead badger of Joe McCarthy's investigative committee, a turn for which many liberals never forgave him.

Jack rewarded Bobby with the attorney generalship, a post from which he carried on a personal vendetta against Fidel Castro, who had almost derailed Jack's presidency at the Bay of Pigs. Bobby was a world-class hater, and although Holmes passes over his various assassination schemes against Castro, he gives us enough sense of Bobby's rancor to fill in some of the blanks. After all, this is Bobby on Bobby, and we can't expect a man to dish it all about himself.

What about Marilyn?

Still, *RFK* provides more than a whiff of whitewash about certain matters, especially Bobby's womanizing. We get a gee-whiz account of his dancing with Marilyn Monroe, but no mention of his (or Jack's) actual relationship with her.

A similar veil is cast over Bobby's rumored relationship with Jackie after Jack's death. Holmes's Bobby waxes enthusiastic over his wife Ethel, the mother of his 11 children, but the subtext of his attraction for the very different Jackie is left for the audience to make. All Bobby will confess to, apart from his paternal prowess, is a liking for the company of women; even this, however, he immediately qualifies by attributing it to growing up with several sisters.

Holmes is very good at contrasting Bobby's success in managing Jack's campaigns with his uncertainty and flat-footedness in waging his own. A humorous sequence shows him trying to make a commercial for his Senate race against the Republican Kenneth Keating, and we see his protracted, Hamlet-like indecision about whether to challenge Johnson for the 1968 presidential nomination.

The Mob connection

Clearly, Bobby's killer instincts didn't apply to his own case. Guilt over Jack's assassination, plus a deep sense of personal unworthiness only partly masked by a tough-guy exterior, made him equivocate until Gene McCarthy's near-upset of Johnson in the New Hampshire primary steeled his resolve.

If or until we learn more about Jack Kennedy's assassination (Bobby's response to the Warren Report in *RFK* is a tight-lipped "No comment"), we won't fully understand Bobby's own subsequent career. At one moment in *RFK*, an anguished Bobby wonders why Jack was hit instead of him— "I was the one they hated"— but the question perhaps suggests its own answer if, as many suspect, organized crime was involved in the assassination.

Of course, Holmes is silent about the Kennedys' mob associations, which peep through only in a question addressed by Counsel Bobby to a subpoenaed McCarthy committee witness, "Mr. Giancana." That would be Sam Giancana, the mob boss of Chicago who later pimped for the Kennedy White House.

Holmes's specific allusion to Giancana can't be accidental, but he takes it no further. But Bobby played a dangerous game with the rackets, and if vengeance was to be taken it had to be against Jack.

Final maturity

Up to this point, Bobby is a tragic but not (except from his own perspective) very sympathetic figure. He seems to have played a moderating role in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and to have belatedly endorsed the Civil Rights movement. As a senator, he was a bust.

What brought him finally to maturity was the Vietnam War and the violence of the inner city rebellions of the later '60s. He began to see in these events the connection that Martin Luther King strove tirelessly to make, and in the agony and crisis of the country a mirror of his personal darkness. He felt guilt here too, because Jack had given hostages to fortune in Vietnam and Bobby had dissed and (as *RFK* dutifully notes) wiretapped King.

By whatever alchemy of character and circumstance, Bobby had emerged as a leader in 1968. Even in his final campaign, he viciously elbowed aside Gene McCarthy, who infuriatingly refused to make way for the Crown Prince's accession; but, as Bobby would remind us, politics ain't touch football.

The crowds that responded to him and endowed him with a charisma he could only have wondered at were genuine. The Bobby of those days was a slight, shy figure who, passing his hand through his cowlick in an almost feminine gesture, seemed deeply vulnerable. As indeed he was.

Lincoln and FDR

One of the merits of Holmes's play is that it can show that vulnerability as it always existed but was so long masked in public. It is, on the deepest level, something we require in our political leaders no less than strength.

Lincoln wouldn't be the icon he is for us without the humbleness of his roots, his own family tragedy, and the pain that etched itself across his face during the Civil War years. Franklin D. Roosevelt's physical paralysis was the underside of his jaunty confidence, rarely acknowledged but always present. I saw Robert Kennedy's face in the days of 1968, and in it a pain that wasn't merely his own.

For that, he can be forgiven much. There is no telling what kind of president he might have made.

Actor's *tour de force*

Kevin Rodden, New City's dramaturge, speculates as to how Bobby might have reacted to America's own current bewildered moment. Would he have challenged a disappointing president who seemed to have abandoned the remnants of the liberal tradition, as Ted Kennedy did with Jimmy Carter in 1980? It's a parlor game question, but perhaps one worth asking.

Russ Widdall as Bobby is a triumph of style over size, for Widdall is a large man whose features and physiognomy bear scant resemblance to his subject. He has Bobby's accent and mannerisms down well, though, and he's able to play small when projecting insecurity and anguish.

In a performance of this sort, one wants to pitch one's character in a certain way, but Widdall leaves plenty of room for nuance and even contradiction. We understand Bobby as a backroom guy forced out on the public stage, and always wincing as if in anticipation of some blow even while landing haymakers of his own. We understand him too as the small boy negligently but still sternly raised— a quality that women obviously responded to.

Shame and courage

Some of Widdall's most effective moments occur when he calls out to Jack as a little brother to his big one; and his rendering of the speech in Indiana when Bobby had to announce Martin Luther King's assassination caught exactly the mixture of shame, embarrassment and courage of which it was compounded.

Altogether, this performance is a *tour de force* that must rank among the best of the past several seasons. Clear credit also goes to director Ginger Dayle.

In a play of this sort, on a sparse and minimal set, sound and lighting are of particular importance. These were both effective, although I could have done without the touch of Samuel Barber's *Adagio* near the end (even if it was played at RFK's funeral).

Ren Manley, who did the sound, also put together the screen projections that were a critical part of the show. Some clips offered a very funny and slightly wicked look back at the fashions and foibles of the '60s, but the very end showed the mourners who lined the tracks of the funeral train that brought Bobby home. The silent grief and stricken patriotism in the newsreel footage was unmistakable. Nothing more needed to be said. ♦

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