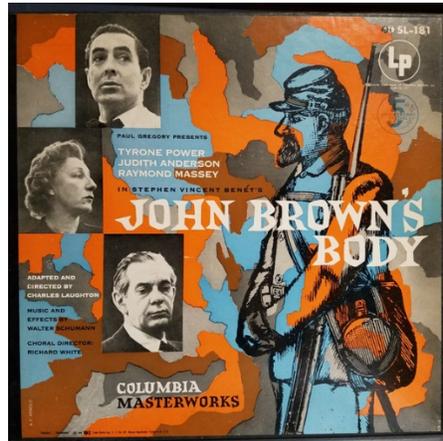


“John Brown's Body”--Tyrone Power, Judith Anderson, and Raymond Massey, directed by Charles Laughton (1953)

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Essay by Gary Grieve-Carlson (guest post)*



Original album cover

Best known for his film roles such as Henry VIII in “The Private Life of Henry VIII” (1933), for which he won an Academy Award for Best Actor, Captain Bligh in “Mutiny on the Bounty” (1935), and Quasimodo in “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” (1939), Charles Laughton launched the first professional Readers’ Theater production, George Bernard Shaw’s “Don Juan in Hell,” with producer Paul Gregory, in February 1951. Laughton directed the production and played the role of the Devil. The three other actors were Charles Boyer, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, and Agnes Moorehead. Readers’ Theater differs from typical plays in that there are no stage sets or costumes. In this production, the actors wore evening clothes and sat on stools, with the text of the play before them on lecterns. Without sets, costumes, movement, or musical accompaniment, the actors’ voices and the audience’s imaginations did all of the work. “Don Juan in Hell” received enthusiastic reviews and was very popular with audiences: nearly half a million people attended productions in a wide variety of venues in 52 cities in 42 states.

While still touring with “Don Juan in Hell,” Laughton began working on adapting Stephen Vincent Benét’s long poem “John Brown’s Body” for Readers’ Theater, cutting the 336-page poem to around 80 pages so that it could be done in a two-hour performance. Laughton directed the production, and cast Tyrone Power, Judith Anderson, and Raymond Massey as the major actors. Like the cast Laughton had put together for “Don Juan in Hell,” these three were accomplished performers: Power was a matinee idol in the late 1930s and early 1940s, but had also starred in the London production of “Mister Roberts,” which ran for 23 weeks in 1950. Anderson had won a Tony Award for Best Actress in 1948 for her role as Medea in Robinson Jeffers’ version of that play. Massey had been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor in 1940 for “Abe Lincoln in Illinois.” Power played the roles of the two major fictional characters, Union soldier Jack Ellyat and Confederate Clay Wingate. Anderson played the fictional female characters, and Massey played the roles of Lincoln and John Brown, whom he had played in the film “Santa Fe Trail” (1940).

As in “Don Juan in Hell,” the actors wore evening clothes and sat on stools with their scripts on lecterns, but in this production each actor took on several different roles, and at times they moved about on stage. There was also a chorus of 20 with speaking and singing parts, and a musical accompaniment composed by Walter Schumann. But as with “Don Juan,” the actors’ voices and the audience’s imaginations carried the weight of the performance.

The production opened in California in November 1952 and closed in El Paso, Texas, in January 1954. During that time there were two tours of 80 performances each, in 40 states and three Canadian provinces. The group played in major theaters as well as high school auditoriums, and for many in the audiences, the production offered their first exposure to professional actors. The first tour closed with 65 Broadway performances from February 14 to April 11, 1953.

In general, critics have preferred the earlier “Don Juan in Hell” to “John Brown’s Body.” A review in “Time” (December 22, 1952), for example, stated that “John Brown’s Body” lacked the “artistic distinction” of “Don Juan in Hell.” The public, however, was enthusiastic about both productions, and a number of critics shared that enthusiasm: Brooks Atkinson, for example, wrote, “‘John Brown’s Body’ is a work of art not only in print but on the stage. It refreshes the whole conception of theater.” Columbia Masterworks released a complete recording of “John Brown’s Body” in a two-record set in January 1953. These recordings are available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ozgxkm1BfY>.

The play has been revived regularly. For example, Curtis Canfield, Dean of the Yale School of Drama, staged it at Yale and off-Broadway in 1960. In 1989, it was produced at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in western Massachusetts, and, in 1997, it was staged at the Lobero Theater in Santa Barbara, California, where it had premiered back in 1952.

Stephen Vincent Benét’s “John Brown’s Body” was published in 1928, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1929, and was Doubleday’s most profitable title between the time of its publication and 1934. For many years it was a common feature of high school curricula, though its readership has dwindled in recent years. In this ambitious poem, Benét weaves together several plot lines, both historical and fictional, as he tries to tell the story of the Civil War without bias toward either side, or as Lincoln put it, “with malice toward none, with charity toward all.” The book’s popularity suggests that he largely succeeded. Benét honors the courage shown on both sides, and tells a story in which suffering, sacrifice, and destruction become redemptive and purposeful. The Union is restored, and North and South are reconciled. Both Bruce Catton and Henry Steele Commager praised the poem as among the best books ever written on the Civil War. Benét tells his story well, juxtaposing powerful, moving images and vignettes; for example, when Grant sees that the Confederates have lit bonfires to celebrate the birth of General George Pickett’s son, he orders his own troops to do the same, then sends Pickett a silver service to congratulate him on his son’s birth, shortly before attacking the Confederate position.

Benét is sufficiently clear-eyed to acknowledge the War’s enormous destruction, as well as the industrial, mass society with its great extremes of wealth that emerged in its aftermath. Near the poem’s end, he calls the society that will grow out of the War: “*The great, metallic beast / Expanding West and East,*” and a few lines later, “*The genie we have raised to rule the earth, /*

Obsequious to our will / But servant-master still, / The tireless serf already half a god.” Yet he refuses to stake out a position on the War’s results, insisting that “[i]f you at last must have a word to say,” you should call the War and its effects neither “accursed” nor “blest,” but say only, “*It is here.*”

Yet this laconic “just-the-facts” version of history is overrun by the poem’s fictional storylines and characters, such as the Union soldier Jack Ellyat, the Confederate soldier Clay Wingate, and the runaway slave Spade, each of whom endures great suffering but eventually finds happiness: Ellyat and Wingate survive the war and go home to marry the girls they love, while Spade finds work and a home on the Pennsylvania farm of Union veteran Jake Diefer, who has lost an arm in combat and needs Spade’s help to run his farm. These fictional storylines turn the War into the story of redemptive sacrifice that most Americans, perhaps especially in the early years of the Cold War when Laughton brought Benét’s poem to the stage, want it to be. In the early 1950s Americans wanted an exceptional America, a nation that had suffered in order to redeem itself from the sin of slavery, the nation that Lincoln had called “the last best hope of earth.” “John Brown’s Body” gave them what they wanted.

Gary Grieve-Carlson is Professor of English at Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Pennsylvania. He was a Fulbright Junior Lecturer in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1987-88, and is the author of “Poems Containing History: Twentieth-Century American Poetry’s Engagement with the Past” (Lexington, 2014).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.