The Year of Revolutionary Change

The 2012 plays engage in deep dialogue about the hard work of change—both personal and national, historical and present.

By Lydia G. Garcia

(Above) Young Lords at a 1969 press conference. Left to right, front: David Perez, Minister of Defense; Felipe Luciano, Chairman; Juan González, Minister of Education. In rear, Pablo “Yoruba” Guzmán, Minister of Information.

(Right) January 28, 1964, the White House. President Lyndon Johnson meets with civil rights leaders. From left, Roy Wilkins, NAACP executive secretary; James L. Farmer Jr., cofounder of the Committee of Racial Equality; Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., president of the Southern Leadership Conference; and Whitney Young, executive director of National Urban League.
“Politics is war without bloodshed, while war is politics with bloodshed.”
—Mao Tse-tung

Well, it is an election year.
Peruse the listing of plays in OSF’s upcoming 2012 season, and you may quickly find that the subject of politics, war, leadership and power will feature prominently in the kaleidoscopic mix of stories we will be staging. Plays like Shakespeare’s Henry V and Troilus and Cressida, Robert Schenkkan’s All the Way and UNIVERSES’ Party People directly explore the art of governing, the conduct of civic affairs, the overthrow of political systems and radical and pervasive changes in the social structure of a nation.

Band of brothers
Over the past two seasons, we have witnessed Prince Hal’s transformation from prodigal son to monarch in Henry IV, Part One and Part Two. In the midst of the comic antics of the Eastcheap tavern crowd and the battlefield clashes with Northumberland’s rebels, Hal learns the cold lessons of political necessity, even as he carouses with the politically naive Falstaff. Falstaff’s good-natured “Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world” in Henry IV, Part One is met by Hal’s chilling reply, “I do; I will,” a retort that jovial old Falstaff may or may not hear. In Part Two, the ominous promise of kingly self-control becomes overt rejection: “I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.” As Hal moves closer to the crown, he must put aside private feelings, desires and friendships to become a public man.

In Henry V, that transformation is fulfilled as Prince Hal—now become King Henry—takes the reins of power fully in his hands at a time when the course of English history and the worth of English heroism are at stake. Where Richard II and Henry IV were both plagued by civil wars, Henry V heeds his dying father’s advice in Henry IV, Part Two: “Be it thy course to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels, that action, hence borne out, / May waste the memory of the former days.” Henry V succeeds in doing what neither of his predecessors could: turning inward conflicts outward toward external enemies. Part of the impetus for the war against France is domestic economic policy, as the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely propose the foreign excursion to distract the young king from his plans to tax church lands. Part of the motivation is personal offense, after the French Dauphin haughtily insults Henry with the gift of the tennis balls. Whatever the justification, war will be the crucible in which Henry’s qualities as a leader are tested.

If war in Henry V forges a true political leader, in Troilus and Cressida, it reveals the moral impurities and political fractures of two mighty powers, the Trojans and the Greeks. Shakespeare’s dark comedy is set during the mythic Trojan War, “the great model of heroism in Western culture and Western literature, the model of heroic behavior, the source of archetypal examples of what it meant to be a hero, a king, a statesman,” according to Marjorie Garber in Shakespeare After All. This epic legend, told with heroic grandeur in the Iliad and the Aeneid, becomes a story of disillusioned idealism and debased honor in Shakespeare’s telling.

Love and war are inextricably joined in the play, with tragic results for both. As the Prologue succintly lays out, the Trojan War is set off by the abduction of Helen, Menelaus’ wife, by the Trojan prince Paris, and the Greeks’ consequent siege of Troy to reclaim her. Now seven years into an intractable war, both sides have lost countless lives in a struggle that has been drained of meaning. The Greek camp, led by Agamemnon and Menelaus, is chaotic, with the lower ranks openly ridiculing the nobles, military commanders questioning the necessity and conduct of the war, and heroes like Achilles refusing to fight out of pettiness and slighted vanity. Exhortations of honor and order are sneeringly wielded by Ulysses as rhetorical weapons to manipulate his fellow Greeks for his own ends. The Trojan camp led by Hector functions only marginally better as its heroes loll about indolently, congratulating themselves for their old-fashioned ideals of honor, bravery and chivalry.
Under these inauspicious circumstances, the romance between Troilus and Cressida—whose fame rivals that of Romeo and Juliet—is sullied and transformed into a mercantile transaction of sexual desire brought about by the maneuverings of Pandarus, a seedy go-between who bawdily eggs them on and gets his own vicarious pleasure from arranging the tryst. But no sooner are they coupled than they are torn apart by an exchange of war hostages that sends Cressida to the Greeks and far from Troy. Cressida’s heartfelt vows of fidelity to Troilus are quickly discarded as she finds herself alone in a camp of sexually deprived Greeks, forced to use her sexuality as a means of survival. So much for true love.

Can there be honor in war? Troilus and Cressida reaches a far different answer than Henry V. This deeply cynical play questions the possibility of principled leadership in the midst of an utterly futile war, ultimately sounding the depths of disillusionment about everything from sex to war. Director Rob Melrose’s production of Troilus and Cressida will be set during a contemporary war in an unnamed Middle Eastern country (see interview on page 12). This will no doubt create tremendous discussion and resonances with our current international situation.

From ancient kings to the “Master of the Senate”
Robert Schenkkan brings the focus on politics, government and war into the 20th century with his new play, All the Way, commissioned by OSF as part of the Festival’s American Revolutions: the United States History Cycle. The play is a dramatic exploration of the first 11 months of Lyndon Baines Johnson’s presidency. The play begins in a moment of profound national crisis: November 22, 1963. President John F. Kennedy has just been assassinated in Dallas, and newly sworn-in President Lyndon Johnson is returning to the Capitol to address a shocked and grieving nation. Poised between the exhilarating days of JFK’s Camelot and an uncertain political future, what kind of leader will LBJ prove to be?

All the Way looks into the halls of power in Washington in the 1960s: the House and Senate floors where historic speeches were delivered, the shadowy cloakrooms where the real political deals were made and broken, the Oval Office where LBJ bullied and cajoled legislators into passing the sweeping Grand Society bills—the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts; the Social Security Act; Medicare and Medicaid; and advances in education, environmental protection and the arts—that would benefit generations of Americans and transform a nation. The characters

At its heart, All the Way is a meditation on power: Who has it? Who doesn’t have it? How do you keep it? What do you want out of it? What are you prepared to sacrifice to have it?

and conversations depicted in the play largely correspond with the historical record, giving us an intimate perspective of events that would revolutionize the American social and political landscape.

Schenkkan deftly portrays LBJ as a contemporary Shakespearean character, full of life and contradictions, tremendous gifts and tremendous faults. Like King Henry V, LBJ’s political strength lies in his personal charisma and his strong sense of political necessity.

“His political career was a love affair with people,” recalled Robert L. Hardesty, one of LBJ’s speechwriters, in an essay written to commemorate the president’s 75th birthday. “He needed people. He needed to touch people and interact with them. When he told a funny story, he needed to hear people laugh. When he talked about the plight of the poor or the sick or the elderly, he needed to see tears in people’s eyes.”

LBJ’s need for people has a dark side, however, growing into a desperate yearning for approbation. “Just a little . . . respect. Love. That’s all I want,” Schenkkan’s LBJ laments. “Is that too much to ask for?”

LBJ’s masterful use of the bully pulpit enfranchises second-class citizens and lifts millions out of poverty. At the same time, his blatant lies about the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam will tear the country apart, inflicting wounds that will never fully heal. At its heart, All the Way is a meditation on power: Who has it? Who doesn’t have it? How do you keep it? What do you want out of it? What are you prepared to sacrifice to have it? LBJ transforms himself from a nobody—a boy born in a small Texas farmhouse—to the youngest and most effective Senate majority leader in history to a president whose profound understanding of the legislative process allowed him to accomplish the seemingly impossible, a true man of power. Perhaps the greatest tragedy for this tremendously ambitious man was that, though he had always aspired to become president, the way he attained the cherished office—through assassination—left him feeling as if he had not truly earned it. King Henry (both father and son) would certainly empathize.

The revolution has come
Far from the grand corridors of the White House and the Executive Office Building—in poverty- and violence-wrecked neighborhoods like East Harlem, Lincoln Park and Oakland—politics, government, war and power take on a different significance as they are regarded from the perspective of America’s communities of color. Like All the Way, UNIVERSES’ Party People (also an OSF American Revolutions world premiere) examines the turmoil of the 1960s. This time, however, it’s through
the collective memory of veterans of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords, whose social movements in the 1960s and 1970s left a profoundly complicated legacy.

For communities of color—African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and many others—the period of greatest political and social revolution in the United States spanned the 1960s and 1970s, with the rise of activist groups like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords parties. The Black Panther Party, a revolutionary leftist African-American organization active from 1966 to 1982, was founded on the principles outlined in the Ten-Point Program platform statement: “Land, Bread, Housing, Education, Clothing, Justice and Peace.” The Panthers instituted “survival programs” to alleviate poverty and improve health among inner city black communities such as the Free Breakfast for School Children program, clothing distributions and free medical clinics.

Similarly, the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican nationalist group founded as a human rights movement in 1968, protested police brutality and the abusive eviction of Puerto Rican families while championing health care, tenants’ rights and education for Latinos. The scale of the social transformation that the two parties undertook on behalf of their historically neglected communities was massive and radical.

However, the Black Panthers’ and the Young Lords’ work to support community improvement was quickly overshadowed by both parties’ often confrontational, militant and violent tactics against “civil” authorities. As the violence escalated, provoked by both party members and the police, the parties were targeted and infiltrated by FBI Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) forces under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover (a character in All the Way), who once described the Black Panthers as “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country.” The social movement spearheaded by the Panthers and the Lords was sometimes angry and violent, yes, but it was also joyous and exuberant. It changed over time. Ultimately, what causes a group to evolve from serving free breakfast to children to stockpiling guns?

Most of UNIVERSES’ collective work—which fuses theatre, poetry, jazz, hip-hop, blues, boleros and movement—deals with politics and social activism. For example, their recent piece Ameriville explores issues of race, poverty, politics, history and government through the lens of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

Three members of the group—Steven Sapp, Mildred Ruiz-Sapp and William Ruiz (a.k.a. Ninja)—are currently traveling across the country, interviewing leaders and rank-and-file members of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords to create composite characters who weave together many stories. Their work asks: How do we use revolution to transform our country? What compels ordinary people to take a stand and change a system?

Revolution everywhere
While Henry V, Troilus and Cressida, All the Way and Party People may take issues of power and social upheaval as their direct subjects, we can find traces of politics and revolution in just about every play we will see in 2012. After all, what is “politics” if not the aggregate of relationships of people in society, especially those relationships involving authority or power (ruler/subject, parent/child, etc.)? What is “revolution” if not a sudden, complete or marked change in something?

Look beneath the riotous surface of Animal Crackers (written right before the Wall Street Crash of 1929), and you’ll find a pointed social critique of wealth disparity, the fragility of privilege, social pretensions and conventional mores. In Seagull, Treplyov yearns to start a revolution in art by creating new dramatic forms. As You Like It begins in the shadow of a violent political coup. The Very Merry Wives of Windsor, Iowa joyously throws open social definitions of marriage and love. The community of Romeo and Juliet is upended by the death of the entire generation of young people. The three eponymous characters of Medea/Macbeth/Cinderella set out on a shared quest for love, social ambition and political power. And in The White Snake, an immortal being will rebel against heaven and earth, defying time and space to be with the man she loves. What could be more gloriously revolutionary than that?