

Time Traveling with RFK

Jan Cohen-Cruz (excerpt from a longer essay-in-progress)

Attending *RFK in EKY* as a spectator and a writer, I felt like I was time traveling, back and forth, between 1968 and now. This experience might be expected for those cast in the performance; it was noteworthy for drawing everyone present into its world as a participant, snapping us back into the present, and then reeling us back 36 years again. We all, cast and audience, got a glimpse of the bad and the good of '68: Appalachia a backwater, dirt roads, dire poverty; RFK wanting to insert the testimony of people living that life into the public record, trying to make the war on poverty more effective, and local people making themselves heard. (We don't, of course, have a war on poverty now; imagine living in a time when there's even such a program to critique.) Then suddenly we'd be back in 2004, jumping into someone's car to drive to the next site of testimony, part of a real motorcade with real police holding back other cars so we could stay together. And talking, talking, talking, politics, gossip, observations, for three days straight.

Even as two times were set in relationship to each other, so were two people, characters and portrayers, present in each performer. That is, what the person portraying the part was going through was as important as the character's journey. Some people performing seemed quite affected by the words they said, especially those portraying idealists, like a ritual where saying the words makes them part of you. This was a significant strategy for a performance to make a difference in the lives of cast members and spectators. Other people, especially large audiences of young people that had to attend and didn't seem to have bought into it, struck me as downright bored. Why, I mused, wasn't everyone impacted in some way by co-existing in 1968 and 2004?

We began the descent into this dual time/ dual selves on Wednesday evening, when current political leaders, project directors, and special guests put RFK's 1968 visit to Eastern Kentucky in historical context. We re-emerged on Saturday afternoon, squarely in 2004, at a presentation by people at a local Headstart. *RFK in EKY* was in the realm of a collective experience rather than a performance per se. The immersion, over time, that it provided seemed to test the hypothesis that, just as we need compelling experiences in our lives in order to shake up and challenge our world view, so might a performance stretched over time function as a potentially opinion-altering experience.

Travel Notes

On Thursday I meet a local guy who was cast because of his involvement in Civil War reenactments. In this performance he's worried about learning his lines. He says civil war reenactments are a lot different, with every detail down to the last button having to be authentic. We get to talking about politics and he says eastern Kentucky is republican now because of the religious values they preach.

I ask him about the separation of church and state and he pauses. And I think that this moment is only possible because 1968 brought us together in 2004.

At a one-room school house in Vortex, I speak with a woman who was one of the kids there when RFK visited. She's in a photograph with RFK, taken that day at this school. She's happy to see this moment replayed. She says that some women in the community felt it was a slight that RFK came here, as if it was the poorest, worst place, but she is glad he paid attention to them.

My view of RFK starts to expand. His wanting to hear directly from the people experiencing the conditions – what we in community-based performance call first voice accounts – moves me. It's both heartfelt and savvy, to bring back to Washington eastern Kentucky issues like poverty, job scarcity, and absentee coal company owners through local voices rather than through his own alone.

Almost every performer in *RFK* is local. Some are used to public address; the man playing RFK is a lawyer active in community theater. For some of the others, being trained to speak publically reminds me of poor people of color being prepped to speak before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. People who had never spoken their mind to whites, to those in power, or in public, were rehearsed so they could do all three, to help bring emotional closure to apartheid. But there's one important ingredient missing here, the power that the real RFK represented. I think this performance is trying to build up grass roots power.

Part of the reason for mixing up 1968 and 2004 is so today's related issues can be freshly addressed. One of the most hopeful sites of that address is Headstart, the only program still in existence from the War on Poverty. The Bush administration wants to redistribute the monies to states, rather than continuing to fund local communities. Listening to people who'd gone through the program as kids, who have kids in it now, and who teach there, I am convinced of the importance of local control and parental involvement. The teachers know the families firsthand, and tailor their program to fit their needs. They underline the power of the vote to help keep Headstart intact: "We starve during republican administrations and flourish during democratic ones." *RFK in EKY* assists these Headstart supporters in their own political organizing to keep that program flourishing.

The three days with *RFK in EKY* are a little like watching *West Wing* on tv; feeding my desire for and memory of more idealistic leaders. The bored student audiences do not have a visceral memory of RFK and MLK and Malcolm, nor of a time when idealism was a regular part of the national discourse. For those of us who lived through that time, the memory of RFK is hotwired to our own youthful idealism. I worry about how the piece could have a more profound impact on younger people who did not live through 1968.

So here we are with RFK and the testifiers at the front of a school gym, hundreds of kids on bleachers along the side, and the rest of us in chairs in the center. The kids in the bleachers look unengaged by the testimony. Some couples take the opportunity to cosy up and no one seems to mind missing class. Then the high school kid playing Johnny Duff, also a high school student, who cut class in 1968 to testify before RFK at a neighboring school, speaks out, and the room changes temperature. Suddenly the kids are all ears, and cheering. The young man talks passionately about what high school kids need and want from their education, and his peers howl with approval.

Later I am part of the admiring throng surrounding him. I ask how he came to deliver his part so strongly. He says it was hearing the tape the RFK crew played for him of the real Johnny Duff – “I learned how he built a fire in the room, not just in himself.” He says he loves learning about the history of his own region. For him the two times meet; 1968 fuels him in 2004, and he, for a moment, fuels others.

A Final Word on the Politics of Time Travel

Ritual generates power in a community that recognizes a common past, shares a common present, and aspires towards a similar future. Like ritual, RFK in *EKY* fused past, present, and future, evoking RFK’s visit as a past moment of hope, establishing its relevance in the present (Vietnam and Iraq siphoning federal funds abroad, and ongoing poverty at home), and suggesting grassroots activism, local community reliance, and responsive federal leaders as ways to move into the future. The problem is, it’s only a ritual for those with familiarity of that past and a view towards finding a way to move toward that future. For *RFK in EKY* to reach its full impact, it needs to teach that past and encourage participation in working towards that future. The RFK re-enactment is but one stage in a process of transformation, but what a glorious phase it is, and what a relief that the *RFK* team is continuing its work in eastern Kentucky.