

# Ambitious, deeply flawed

## Cradle Will Rock, written and directed by Tim Robbins.

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*Cradle Will Rock*, an ambitious new film written and directed by Tim Robbins, takes place in the US in the late 1930s, at the peak of the Great Depression. Unemployment is high and breadlines are long. As part of its New Deal, the Roosevelt government administers the Works Project Administration (WPA), which runs architectural, public works, and arts projects, and creates jobs in these areas. Part of the WPA is the Federal Theater Project, employing out-of-work performers, directors, composers, playwrights, stagehands and others involved in theater work. The Federal Theater, despite its fumbling and stumbling, is a creative hothouse, with a good many left-wing productions being staged.

Robbins' film basically comprises four concurrent events: the struggle to mount a production of Marc Blitzstein's "labor opera" *The Cradle Will Rock*; the attempts by a right-wing congressional committee led by Martin Dies to shut down the Federal Theater Project; Nelson Rockefeller's hiring of revolutionary Mexican artist Diego Rivera to paint a mural in the newly built Rockefeller Center; and the secret collusion between American capitalists and fascist Italy.

As Orson Welles, the young director fresh from triumphs in theater and radio, tries to stage Blitzstein's work, Dies' committee is hearing testimony from right-wingers and disgruntled WPA employees. They level charges at the Federal Theater that it employs communists and encourages interracial dating. When the head of the Project, Hallie Flanagan, tries to speak in front of the committee, Dies cuts her short and walks off.

At the same time, as the film shows, the production of *Cradle* is having problems of its own, mainly because of the drunken, boorish behavior of the egotistical Welles (more on this depiction of Welles later). Over in Rockefeller Center, Nelson Rockefeller is shocked to find that Rivera has included Lenin in his mural celebrating progress; Rockefeller insists that Lenin be removed, and when Rivera refuses, the entire mural is taken down with jackhammers. And as *The Cradle Will Rock* is being staged, with its action set in "Steeltown, U.S.A.," a real strike is breaking out against the steel company owned by Gray Mathers, who—together with William Randolph Hearst—is making a deal with fascist Italy.

The Dies committee successfully cuts the budget of the

Federal Theater and WPA guards surround the theater. A new home must be found for *Cradle*. Fortunately, a vacant theater is available, 20 blocks down Broadway, and a festive crowd of hundreds makes its way there. However, because of union regulations, the actors cannot appear on stage and the musicians cannot perform. So Marc Blitzstein, from his piano on stage, starts playing, reading off the stage directions and singing all the parts. Then, from the audience, the actors, one after another, get up to perform their parts.

Robbins weaves this all together, showing a country whose fabric is being ripped apart by class warfare—what happens on the stage mirrors what is occurring in the factories and throughout the land. The intentions here are good, but the results, unfortunately, are heavy-handed. The film tries to tie together the various elements and the different levels (the film and the play-within-the-film), but it is done crudely. At times the action seems to take place only to make a political point. Many characters are flat creations, and too often buffoons.

What are we to make of the pathetic ventriloquist, played by Bill Murray, who joins a right-wing anti-WPA committee solely to seduce its repressed chairwoman? He (true to the hoary cliché) takes his dummy everywhere and lets it say the things he would never utter. He ends up, in his last desperate performance, having the dummy sing the "Internationale" while he stays silent, lips unmoving. Vanessa Redgrave, in a remarkably silly role, plays the steel industrialist Mathers' dilettante wife. She toys with theater and the left, and ends up helping stage the production of *Cradle* and cheering it from the audience rather than going to a costume ball.

The costume ball itself, toward the end of the film, underlines the obviousness of the writing and direction. The industrialists are dressed as bewigged aristocrats of pre-revolutionary France, with Hearst as Cardinal Richelieu. They are celebrating the destruction of the Rivera mural, the offensive against the steel workers, and the trouncing of the Federal Theater Project. They are also gleeful at a deal they have struck with Mussolini whereby in exchange for secretly funding his regime they are given priceless Italian paintings. This last point would seem to imply (along with the earlier statement in the film, "All artists are whores") that the only pure, unbought art is a proletarian art, such as that in the Federal Theater and Rivera's desecrated

mural.

The film comes to life toward the end, in the performance of Blitzstein's work. *The Cradle Will Rock* is a forgotten gem, rarely done anywhere. It sounds a good deal like the work of Brecht and Weill of that period (especially Weill's *Johnny Johnson*), breaking out of the mechanical agitprop constraints of much of the theater of the 30s. Entire sections and individual pieces, such as "The Nickel Under My Foot," have a haunting beauty that stays with you for days afterward. I hope that this film generates interest in Marc Blitzstein, the neglected talent who was later responsible for the immensely popular American adaptation of Brecht and Weill's *Threepenny Opera* in the 1950s.

*Cradle Will Rock* ends with a small coffin bearing the ventriloquist's dummy, representing the Federal Theater Project, being carried onto Broadway. But it is the present-day Times Square, overbearingly garish and festooned with the animated signs of huge electronics corporations and media giants. Real art is dead. It was killed by the right-wing congressmen, rich industrialists and tawdry commerce.

Along with its simplistic confusion over what killed art (if it is indeed dead), *Cradle Will Rock* represents a nostalgia for the New Deal and the Popular Front politics of the 1930s. To Robbins, this period spawned a pure art, a people's art untouched by the ruling class. (This nostalgia for the New Deal can also be seen in the current enthusiasm for Norman Rockwell, the sentimentalist magazine illustrator. In what appears to be revisionism in some corners of the art world, his work is being reconsidered seriously by art critics and curators and a major show is touring the US.)

However, mixed in with the longing for the New Deal/Popular Front politics of the 30s is the healthy yearning by those who made this film for a National Theater in the US putting on vital, uncompromising plays and musical theater, unfettered by government or commercial interference. I think *Cradle Will Rock* was made as a protest against the recent attacks by both capitalist parties on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the independence of artists.

At the beginning of the film, we see Blitzstein (Hank Azaria) struggling to create his labor opera. He is visited at times, ludicrously, by both the shade of his dead wife (dressed in white) and a sarcastic German man with little spectacles and closely shorn hair, who we assume is the spirit of Bertolt Brecht. At other times, he is inspired to write by being caught in a police raid on left-wing speakers in Union Square. Clearly, he is untouched by the corrupt hand of capitalism.

As to the depiction of Orson Welles, he is, I presume, meant to be an example of corrupt capitalism getting in the way of art. Welles is portrayed (by Scottish actor Angus MacFayden) as a high-living, alcoholic loudmouth, full of fakery and self-aggrandizement. He is continually bickering (true, according to many accounts) with producer John Houseman, shown as a superficial homosexual with a fake English accent. But *The*

*Cradle Will Rock* gets staged despite Welles.

What is wrong with this picture? It is far from the truth. Orson Welles, by this time, though remarkably young (22), had made his mark as an acclaimed actor and director, as well as an adapter of Shakespeare and Marlowe. He was a celebrated innovator in the theater and on radio, and was only a few years away from going to Hollywood and making his great film *Citizen Kane*. In the short period covered by Robbins' film, he was directing two plays in two separate theaters in New York City as well as developing new projects and doing significant work acting and directing on the radio (not just acting in the radio serial *The Shadow*, as the film snidely notes). As Welles remarked in an interview with director Peter Bogdanovich, in a period of high unemployment: "I was so employed I forgot how to sleep."

There seems to be an open season on Orson Welles lately. This insulting portrait comes only a month after *RKO 281*, a made-for-cable film on the making of *Citizen Kane*, depicted him as a self-promoter of little talent but much ego, as loathsome in his own way as his adversary William Randolph Hearst.

The only fair portrayal of Welles recently is in Tim Burton's *Ed Wood*. Wood, a visionary maker of absolutely awful films, runs into Welles, a visionary maker of great films, in a bar. In this invented meeting, they commiserate with each other about being thwarted by Hollywood. Welles is beautifully played by Vincent Donofrio, and it is a memorable, sympathetic portrait of the now constantly maligned and misunderstood director. It says something about our cultural scene that Welles after his death can be both monumentalized and trivialized.

(It is worth noting that in 1985 Welles himself planned to make a film about the staging of *The Cradle Will Rock*. It was to be called *Rocking the Cradle*, with a script by Ring Lardner, Jr. that Welles heavily rewrote. Rupert Everett was to play the young director. But, as with so much else that Welles set out to do in Hollywood, the financing collapsed.)

*Cradle Will Rock* is deeply flawed, but one of the rare films that dares tackle politics in a way that doesn't minimize what the working class faced in the 1930s. It shows how broad sections of intellectuals and the middle class tried to join them in a fight for full employment, social justice and art that would tell the truth.



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