

Kennedy Center awards: Hollywood, theater ‘lefts’ rub shoulders with Bush

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There is perhaps no reason to be shocked by the decision of longtime left-wing stalwarts of the theater and film world Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee to accept Kennedy Center Honors in the presence of George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, but that doesn't make the spectacle any less repugnant. For decades actor/playwright Davis and actress Dee, married for more than half a century, were closely associated with the American Communist Party.

The pair, along with Hollywood “left” Warren Beatty and soprano Joan Sutherland, singer-composer Elton John and composer John Williams, received the honor this past weekend in Washington, at a State Department dinner Saturday night, a White House reception Sunday afternoon and a gala tribute at the Kennedy Center Sunday night. No press account indicated that Dee or Davis—or Beatty for that matter—offered the slightest gesture of protest in the presence of a number of the world's leading war criminals.

At the Kennedy Center, the honorees were seated in a box near the Bushes. One Associated Press photograph captures Davis and Dee standing next to the president and his wife, applauding one of the other honorees. The ceremony went off without a hitch, in an atmosphere of cordiality. Leading Democrats also attended the event, including Senators John Kerry, John Edwards and Edward Kennedy.

The *Washington Post* reported that “Davis and Dee couldn't help but note the irony” of their presence at the State Department dinner. The newspaper, quoting Dee, continued: “‘Have they read my dossier?’ Dee joshed quizzically about the old blacklisting days and those times the FBI tailed them and those years of manning the intellectual barricades in the nation's cultural and civil rights skirmishes even as they acted and wrote and broke down barriers. ... ‘It's a very affirming thing about the country,’ says Dee, a diminutive woman who nonetheless towered amid the adulation of Saturday night.”

At that same dinner Kerry and his wife, Teresa Heinz Kerry, “found themselves sharing hugs with Beatty, the legendary Democrat, and his wife, actress Annette Bening.”

Beatty, director of *Reds* and *Bulworth*, once claimed to be something more radical than a “legendary Democrat,” but he seems to have settled comfortably into that role. Justifying his presence, Beatty told a *Post* reporter, “The election is over, and that has to be respected. The honor of being here is not diminished.”

The only meaning one can derive from this somewhat cryptic *non sequitur* is that Beatty is not about to let a little thing like the election—much less the Iraq war, which he didn't see fit to mention—stand in the way of his being feted by official Washington.

The chumminess between “left” performers and the Bush administration officialdom apparently reached its high (or low) point Saturday night at the State Department gathering, when Powell, speaking from the podium, told Beatty—who played a rapping politician in the film *Bulworth*—“I want you to know you're not the only rapper here tonight, my man.” According to the *Post* account, the retiring secretary of state then launched into “a nerdy, gut-busting rap” that evoked “a raucous ovation that filled the chandeliered ballroom.”

Words nearly fail one.

At issue is not the worthiness of Davis and Dee, 86 and 80 years old, respectively—along with the others—to receive honors for their artistic efforts. Davis has a half-century in the cinema and theater behind him, having acted in, written and directed films, plays (including *Purlie Victorious* in 1961) and television films. Dee has appeared in more than 20 films, and given many notable stage performances, including a leading role as Ruth in Lorraine Hansberry's ground-breaking play *A Raisin in the Sun*, which she later reprised in the 1961 film.

Nor was the pair the first with a history as “fellow travelers” of the American Stalinists to be so honored—Arthur Miller (under Ronald Reagan), Harry Belafonte (the first George Bush) and Pete Seeger (Bill Clinton) have all had the Kennedy Center award bestowed upon them.

However, in terms of the overall impact of the awards ceremony on public opinion, timing means a good deal.

Coming in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of a major Iraqi city, an event with few precedents since the Nazi conquest of much of Europe, and the Bush election victory, the decision by Dee and Davis to show up and accept their honor can only be seen as a sign of the prostration and impotence of this liberal-left milieu. It is one of the most public means possible of throwing in the towel.

Refusing such an award or openly conflicting with Washington's power elite is not unheard of, even in the annals of the American film and music industries. At a Washington reception in January 1968, singer Eartha Kitt confronted Lady Bird Johnson, the wife of the president, and denounced the Vietnam War as "a war without explanation or reason." Kitt was unofficially blacklisted in the US as a result.

Marlon Brando famously refused to accept his Academy Award in 1973, sending a representative who denounced Hollywood's treatment of the Indians and the massacre of American Indian Movement activists at Wounded Knee in South Dakota carried out by federal law enforcement agencies and the National Guard.

It can safely be said that years and years of Stalinist politics, a mix of pro-Democratic Party opportunism and vaguely black nationalist ideology, have eroded whatever powers of resistance Dee and Davis might once have had.

Davis, born in Georgia in 1917, the son of an illiterate railroad construction worker, attended Howard University and had early ambitions to be a playwright. He suggests in various interviews that a transforming moment occurred in 1939 at the famous concert given by Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial before 75,000 people, after the singer had been refused permission by the right-wing Daughters of the American Revolution, on account of her race, to sing at Constitution Hall.

Davis explains, "When I heard Marian Anderson sing, those elements in my personality that were formed in the South as a protective shield to keep me from being lynched—the subterfuge by which I lived—fell away. Her performance created a bond between me and my people, me and my history. I had a sense of certainty that no matter how dark it is now, one of these days it'll change."

His account is no doubt honest and legitimate, but it is telling that Davis, who came to study Marx and Marxism, sees an episode involving racial pride and identity as the decisive experience in his conscious life. The Stalinization of the Communist Party led it to adapt itself in varying ways to racial politics, from the period when it called for self-determination in the so-called "Black Belt" (the regions of 12 Southern states in which African-Americans made up more than 50 percent of the population) in the 1930s, to its uncritical support for the middle-class leadership of the civil

rights movement in the 1950s, to the emergence of Angela Davis as a leading party spokesperson in the late 1960s and beyond.

In an interview, Davis described his and Dee's attraction to the Communist Party in relatively narrow, populist terms: "Ruby came from Harlem, and in Harlem the Communists were looked upon as very friendly, because in many instances people would have their stuff set out on the sidewalk by the landlord, and the Communists would come along and put it back in! The stigma of being a Communist came later. People felt freer to express themselves any way they wanted to. The Depression had sort of broken down the old political assignments, then World War II had come along."

Dee added, "We felt the excitement of our times, and we were asked—both of us, before we knew each other—we were asked to join [the CP]. But we weren't joiners; I don't know why. But many of our friends were, you know ..."

Dee and Davis were associated with many left-wing causes over the years, from the defense of the Rosenbergs, to opposition to the McCarthyite witch-hunts, to anti-Vietnam war activity, to support for civil rights and, most recently, opposition to the Iraq war. Even as they became more and more entrenched in liberal Democratic Party circles, they continued to associate openly with Stalinist circles and activities.

It apparently caused no embarrassment to Bush—or, rather, his aides, the president being largely ignorant of all such complexities—that the couple standing next to him last Sunday hosted a memorial service in New York City a little over a year ago for the Communist Party's longtime leading theoretician, Dr. Herbert Aptheker.

Such a juxtaposition of ceremonies need not be viewed as "ironical" or "paradoxical." It indicates the general trajectory of the Stalinist periphery and petty-bourgeois left toward the right, particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and, more specifically, the general political discouragement and exhaustion of figures such as Dee and Davis. However it is explained, their silence, i.e., acquiescence, in the presence of Bush and Cheney is inexcusable.



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