

A revealing comment and reaction

Oscar-nominated actor Timothée Chalamet dismisses opera and ballet

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Recent remarks by US actor Timothée Chalamet (*Marty Supreme*) suggesting that opera and ballet were obsolescent art forms reveals something about the crisis and decline of culture more broadly.

Chalamet, who has been nominated for the Best Actor at this year's Academy Awards scheduled for March 15, made his ignorant comments a few weeks ago at a town hall featuring actor Matthew McConaughey and sponsored by CNN and *Variety*. "I don't want to be working in ballet, or opera, or things where it's like, 'Hey, keep this thing alive, even though, like, no one cares about this anymore. All respect to all the ballet and opera people out there,'" Chalamet said as the crowd at the event laughed along with him.

Chalamet's statement went viral on social media, and provoked an immediate backlash. Some noted the fact that the actor's mother, grandmother and sister had all had professional ballet careers, dancing with the NYC Ballet.

The Metropolitan Opera and other companies, including London's Royal Ballet and Opera, highlighted the fact that their performances are attended by thousands. Some companies sarcastically invited the actor to sample their offerings.

Well-known award-winning actor and comedian Whoopi Goldberg, on the television daytime talk show *The View*, put Chalamet in his place, rejecting his half-apology: "Be careful, boy ... Don't apologize when you've insulted. It doesn't sound right. ... You can't say, 'Oh, this is dumb, no disrespect.' That's absolute disrespect."

Another host on the program quite accurately described Chalamet's remarks as "vapid" and

"shallow." He might just as well have dismissed Shakespeare, Beethoven or any number of other giants of civilization.

Chalamet's appearance with his former co-star on the 2014 science fiction film *Interstellar* was part of an expensive and intentionally antic and attention-getting campaign being waged by the producers of *Marty Supreme* as part of the annual Oscars season culminating in the television broadcast of the awards ceremony. It is somewhat in keeping with the film itself, which, as we noted, called attention to style rather than substance, was characterized by a frantic pace at the expense of more serious concerns, and above all held up the title character as a kind of role model for a dog-eat-dog capitalism that was taken for granted. It appears Chalamet has taken on a bit too much of his unpleasant character's "hardboiled," thoughtless personality and approach.

In the days approaching the announcement of the Oscar winners, there has been some idle speculation as to whether Chalamet's comments might backfire, alienating some Academy voters and costing him the Best Actor Award. In fact, voting on the awards closed on March 5, before his remarks were widely publicized. In any event, more important issues are raised.

The performing arts in America, including ballet and opera, are facing an undeniable and serious crisis, but it is not because "no one cares," as Chalamet flippantly observes. There are many thousands of creative artists and performers who are intensively engaged with these art forms. There is an audience, and a far greater *potential* audience. The crisis has to do both with content, not of the art forms themselves, and the state of American social life.

Both ballet and opera are hundreds of years old. They have endured through the development of new content, which reflects changes in social life in the final analysis, content that has driven the continuous development, renewal and transformation of the forms. To the extent that the art forms have something to say, something to offer that connects with the living experience of the audience, they will attract a following.

The WSWS has often addressed this cultural crisis, most recently in connection with the deepening fiscal crisis of the biggest arts institution in the US, the Metropolitan Opera. As we noted at that time, “The growing political reaction that has engulfed American society over the past half-century has taken a devastating toll on culture. The assault on living standards, the decimation of public education, the relentless coarsening of public life—all have contributed to a growing indifference toward the arts.”

The indifference—or active hostility—comes from the top, from a ruling class that imprints its values, its priorities, on all of culture. What the oligarchs require is repression, austerity and war. There is less and less room for celebrating and developing the cultural conquests represented on the opera stage and at the ballet. Education that goes beyond the surface appearance to learn from and develop the cultural heritage of humanity has been cut to the bone. It is both a wonder, and a testimony to the potential, that under these circumstances there is still a hunger for the fine arts and the performing arts.

The first half of the 20th century saw a flowering of many of the art forms. Opera did not attract audiences of the same size as film or popular music, of course, but it was still widely celebrated and widely presented even on prime-time American television. In the past half-century in particular, however, the growing crisis of the profit system has created all the conditions for the rapid decline of culture: the encouragement by turns (or simultaneously) of a bland conformity and a degraded backwardness, alternating with special effects and “spiced up” with identity politics.

The elevation of the bottom line as the determining factor in what gets funded and produced, the glorification of competition and the encouragement of tribal divisions over race and gender to obscure the fundamental issues of inequality and the class

struggle—all this is what finds its limited but nevertheless revealing expression in the comments of Chalamet, who, unfortunately, seems to enjoy pandering to the lowest common denominator rather than using his talent to tap into more significant, humane and universal issues.

The renewal of social struggle will create the conditions for new content and the development of art forms, including opera and ballet. Masses of working people will turn to the past conquests of humanity and will in that way develop these cultural conquests as well.



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