

Did It Really Happen

I am fascinated by history and those who shape it. To Movies and plays that focus on historical events. History plays have a long history. From ancient Rome and Greece we have Seven Against Thebes by Aeschylus, and 'Octavia' by Seneca - about the emperor Nero, Nero's divorce and exile of his wife. Dramatization of history probably goes even further back than to the Greeks and Romans. To a greater or lesser extent, all of us are interested in our history.

The most performed history play is probably Shakespeare's Henry V. It chronicles Henry (known in the play and popularly known at the time as 'Harry') and his campaign in France. Only 3 have commanded a successful invasion across the English channel. William the Conqueror, Henry the Fifth and Eisenhower. Henry was one of last English Kings (and the most successful) to actually command troops on the field of battle.

Shakespeare's play focuses on two battles. In September of 1415, Henry lays siege to the walled French city of

Harfleur. A breach has been made in the wall but the troops have not yet broken through. Discouraged, they must try again. Listen to the King, rallying his troops:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead.

In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility:

But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger;

Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,

Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage;

Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;

Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,

Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit

To his full height. On, on, you noblest English.

Dishonor not your mothers; now attest

That those whom you call'd fathers did beget you.

Be copy now to men of grosser blood,

And teach them how to war. And you, good yeoman,

Whose limbs were made in England, show us here

The mettle of your pasture; let us swear

That you are worth your breeding; which I doubt not;
For there is none of you so mean and base,
That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.

I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:

Follow your spirit, and upon this charge

Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'

That pretty much touches all the bases. And then we get to the climactic battle at Agincourt on the 25th of October, 1415. St. Crispin's day. The English are outnumbered - the play suggests by 5 to 1. On the night before the battle, Harry's troops are again fearful, discouraged. Listen, once more, to the King:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;

For he to-day that sheds his blood with me

Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,

This day shall gentle his condition:

And gentlemen in England now a-bed

Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,

And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks

That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

Shakespeare's play has inspired the English people since it was first performed in an Elizabethan playhouse in 1599 - with scaling ladders propped against the balcony at the rear of the stage, for use in enacting the siege at Harfluer. It's popularity peaked when English spirits needed a boost during the darkest days of the second World War. But did things really happen as Shakespeare tells us? The battles did occur. Harry (Henry) was the King and he must have been an inspiring and popular commander. He was on the field at Harfleur and at Agincourt; the English were probably out-numbered at Agincourt. And that victory did establish England as a great power of Europe.

But did Henry talk to his men like this: "Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide. Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit to his full height' Did he tell the troops at Agincourt: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers?" Sounds more like Shakespeare doesn't it? But so what. You wouldn't change a single word. So this begs the question: what, if any, are the rules; what are the guidelines the guidelines and limitations for a history play.

In the prologue to Henry V, Shakespeare, who in the first performance is said to himself have spoken these lines himself, states his aspirations. He tells the audience:

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!

Tonight I want to talk the limitations, rules, if any, and the problems with regard to a history play. If ascent to the brightest heaven of invention is the goal, it seems necessary to play with reality and make up a lot of what people actually said; even some of what they did. History plays are not documentaries. They focus on significant events and the larger than life characters who dominate them. But they are drama. They require tension, conflict and a good story. In a play, history is compressed, actions and conversations tweaked. But the story must still ring true. There is certainly more leeway when the history is ancient and no one knows how the characters spoke or what they said. Like in Henry the Fifth. Where events occurred two hundred years ago it is very different

from a play where the audience brings its own experience to the theater and has conceptions about the events and characters.

In a play set relatively recently there is less freedom to play with events and scenes. Take, for example, the 2014 Tony winner, "All the Way" about Lyndon Johnson's effort to enact Civil Rights legislation. There is a ton of material - virtually a library of books, film clips, and periodical pieces about Johnson. In fact so much material that a major challenge lies in what to select and what is truly germane to the story and to the conflict between the characters. But when dealing with recent material, that provides a lot of help to give the characters a more authentic voice. (not talking about impersonation). Just a voice that fits how the audience remembers the character.

But even in a play about more recent events, what really happened must be changed. Chronology may be compressed and altered to serve the story. Events must be compacted. Settings must be created. But all of these changes should ring true to what the audience knows. The play will be damaged by having the cat bark and that kind

of stuff. Showing Johnson, for example, as a humble servant, graciously showing great respect to those who stand in his way.

The goal is the illusion of truth. To provide a fly on the wall experience; an inside look at what really happened rather than to reenact what really happened.

With these thoughts in mind I'd like to share, and invite you to think about, the material I've been working on for a play that is still in the development stage. Two characters are: President John F Kennedy and his brother, Bobby. The conflict is between them and FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover - supported by his - ah um - intimate companion? - Clyde Tolson. More about the Hoover-Tolson relationship later.

This play is tentatively titled 'The Price of Power.' Kennedy knew a lot about Hoover, wanted to fire him. Kennedy's problem with Hoover went back to when Kennedy was an Ensign in the Navy in his early 20's and Kennedy thought he was in love with Inga Arvad, the Swedish woman who had also stolen Hitler's Heart. Inga Binga, Kennedy called her. But she didn't steal the heart

of papa Joe Kennedy, who saw her as a threat to his son's future. Joe turned to his old friend Hoover to break up the relationship. Hoover got an item in the column of his buddy, Walter Winchell: 'One of Ex-Ambassador Kennedy's eligible sons is the target of a Washington gal's affections. Pa Kennedy don't like.' Hoover had taps on Kennedy and mikes under his mattress.

None of this broke up the relationship, so Hoover had to pull some strings to get Kennedy re-assigned to the Pacific theater of war and out of Washington.

After that Kennedy's distaste for Hoover grew. He didn't approve of the way Hoover used the FBI to gain influence over Congressmen and high level government officials. So, as President, Kennedy would have liked to get rid of Hoover. But how do you fire God? (actual quote from JFK). And how do you fire a man who has you threatened by a file case full of scandalous material?

J. Edgar had an equally low opinion of Kennedy; considered him immoral, a light-weight, and soft on Communism. Hoover had helped LBJ in the fight for the nomination, much preferred Nixon in the general election.

He didn't want to see Kennedy re-elected but he had to be wary, because Kennedy might win and if Hoover pushed too far Kennedy would then fire him. Hoover knew Kennedy could hide behind the Federal mandatory retirement age - which hit Hoover near the end of Kennedy's first term. Hoover's goal was to get Kennedy to waive that.

What Hoover had in his files was a big reason why Kennedy wanted his brother to be AG. Hoover had dominated previous AGs but Kennedy felt that Bobby would actually be strong enough to be Hoover's boss. Bobby could keep an eye on him. A good thing too. because Hoover's ammunition got significantly more potent during the Kennedy presidency.

The struggle between the two turned into a not-so-subtle game of cat and mouse. "Mr President, this has come to my attention and I felt you would want me to do what I can to prevent it from being problematic." Letting Kennedy know what Hoover could do to him if he had to. Letting Kennedy know how much he needed Hoover.

Kennedy and Hoover played this game under a genteel veneer, evident in hindsight but not really understood at the time. Kennedy lauded Hoover in public but in their private meetings, used his considerable political skills to keep Edgar ill at ease and off balance - never sure of whether Kennedy would force him to retire. Hoover spoke highly of the President in public and, though still a good friend of the columnist Walter Winchell, refrained, mostly, from leaking the ammunition he was accumulating to gain leverage over Kennedy. He did, upon occasion, use Winchell to insert items that would let Kennedy know that it was time for Kennedy to invite Hoover into the oval office for one of their man-to-man talks.

To provide a feel for the relationship and how it played, I have to bring in an offstage, but significant character - Sam Giancana the boss of the Chicago mafia. You have to use off-stage characters in plays. In real life, there are thousands of characters; in a biography, everyone the author wants, in movies less, but still quite a few. But if you put more than six characters on stage in a

play, the cost will cause most theater companies to take a pass. So you have these off-stage characters, who must be made real to an audience by the on-stage characters. In the Kennedy-Hoover conflict a principal off-stage character is the Chicago mob boss, Sam Giancana. Giancana had a relationship with JFK's father, Joe (another offstage character). But Bobby Kennedy was hell bent on investigating Giancana, putting the mobster behind bars.

This ticking bomb was made much more explosive by a couple of facts. Giancana had been engaged by the CIA, during the Eisenhower administration to assassinate Fidel Castro. He failed, but considered himself a patriot, entitled to be spared from Bobby's persecution. Giancana, at the request of papa Joe, had helped JFK get elected - had delivered votes in Chicago, raised money at the request of Joe. He felt betrayed. Giancana was threatening to tell all if Bobby didn't back off.

Onto this bonfire, JFK, himself, poured gasoline. He plunged into a fairly long affair with Giancana's mistress, Judith Campbell. Judith Campbell had been introduced to

Kennedy by Frank Sinatra, a mutual friend of Kennedy and Giancana. Hoover had a log of some 21 calls between Kennedy and Judith Campbell, and he had a file on Campbell's visits to the White House. Hoover saw the potential for Giancana - who had domination over Campbell - to use her for leaking purposes, to craft and get out a devastating story. Here's an 'actual fact' which helps to see this off-stage character, Giancana. It is from an FBI wire tap on a Giancana operative. The tap describes how Giancana dealt with an informant. Giancana had the informant strung up on meat hooks in a Chicago warehouse. Used a cattle prod on his genitals, then put a blow torch to them. Ran an electric drill up his rectum and beat the man with a baseball bat for three days until he finally died.

All of the above was made-to-order to give Hoover leverage over the President. Hoover sent a shot across Kennedy's bow by getting Winchell to include an item in his column: "Judith Campbell of Palm Springs and Beverly Hills is topic number one in Romantic political circles." This got the attention of Jack and Bobby, earned Hoover a

one on one with the President in the Oval office, where Hoover's goal was not only to alarm Kennedy, but to convince Kennedy that Hoover was the only man who could save him.

In that meeting, Hoover lays out the danger and applies the screws. He shares another FBI agent's report with Kennedy - this from an agent who was tailing Giancana and had followed him into the mens room of a Chicago restaurant. The agent: "He put his head right up under my chin and said, 'You fucking cocksucker! Who do you think you are? I could have Butch come in here with his machine gun and take care of you right now! Fuck John Kennedy. Why aren't you investigating the Communists? I love this country and I would sacrifice my life for it. And I've proved it. Listen, I know all about the Kennedys and one of these days I'm going to tell all.'"

If you are Kennedy, this is terrifying. But - and this is one of the things that make the conflict between Hoover and Kennedy fascinating - JFK never lets Hoover feel the power he has - never surrenders his 'cool.' In fact, Kennedy succeeds in making Hoover feel that these

threats don't worry him (they did). Kennedy also wonder to Hoover, on whether Hoover's efforts to 'protect' Kennedy are as genuine as Hoover claims. You could conclude that Kennedy was insanely reckless. Because he was. For example, he accepted an invitation to spend a weekend at Frank Sinatra's Palm Springs villa. Bobby found out and confronted his brother: What if Giancana shows up while you are there? 'Good point', JFK calmly acknowledges. He decides not to go.

Relevant to this struggle between the President and his FBI Director, there are a number of threads that give context and substance to the conflict. The challenge is to weave them into a play.

These start with appointment of Bobby as AG. Jack did this, in significant part, to give protection against Hoover. This suggests a question of raging current interest - should the AG be loyal to the President or to the country and the Constitution. A President who wants an AG who will have his back, a President who needs to be rescued from the trouble his sexual drive gets him into - does that bring anyone else to mind? The comparison

demonstrates the need to show the complexity of the Kennedy-Hoover struggle. Because notwithstanding this superficial similarity, Kennedy and Trump are quite different characters. With a different Intellectual curiosity, world view, quite different voice and different values. Is the loyalty of Bobby to protect against the Hoover threat the same as seeking cover for abuse of power? There was also an aspect to the appointment of Bobby that makes it different from the appointments other Presidents have made to their Cabinet. Kennedy wanted Bobby in the room. He knew that as President, a crisis would surely come. He wanted someone in the room that he could later consult and be totally unguarded, open and honest with. In a way he couldn't with anyone else in his cabinet. The Cuban missile crisis provides the best example. Bobby turned around foreign policy experts going back to Roosevelt and Truman, confronted the Joint Chiefs and negotiated with the Russian Ambassador. He was the key figure in resolving the crisis. Having his trusted brother as AG is, it can be said, different from any other President-AG relationship. The Kennedy-Hoover battle, of course,

has nothing to do with Trump, but I bring this up because there Trump is, lurking behind the action in the play. I feel pretty sure he would feel this play to be about him; see it as justification for what he wants in an Attorney General.

Another off stage character has to be included in a play about the Hoover-Kennedy relationship. Martin Luther King. Hoover hated King, was determined to destroy him. He fed dirt to King's wife. He pressed Bobby to authorize taps and when Bobby resisted, Hoover saw and exploited a political advantage. The Kennedy's failure to go after King could be useful because King was not popular, even in the North. Kennedy had carried southern states to win a close election. And Bobby was not only resistant to Hoover's persecution of King, but he was pressing his brother to do more for King and for Civil Rights.

Papa Joe Kennedy is yet another off-stage character who must play a part in the conflict. Joe was a domineering father, had insisted that Jack make Bobby his AG. (probably for motives that do come closer to those of Trump) Joe was also a long time friend of Hoover, had a

long standing relationship with the Director and had once tried to hire him. Indulge here a fact-based aside. When Hoover called to congratulate Joe on his son's election, Joe's response was 'I have lost a son but have gained a nation.'

Papa Joe also had a relationship with Giancana, and Hoover knew a lot about that. Joe and Giancana both had interests in a Lake Tahoe resort. Giancana, at Joe's behest, had helped during the campaign. And, Giancana (thru Sinatra) sends threats to the Kennedys about Bobby's persecution, and presses Joe to stop it. Joe fumes, calls Bobby an idiot, demands that Bobby back off. Joe now feels that making Bobby AG was the worst idea he ever had. But Bobby remains doggedly passionate in pursuit of the Mafia (including Giancana), and Jack (though seeing the risks) does not ask Bobby to back off. This could have turned into a disaster, but when Joe had his stroke that eliminated Joe as a tool Hoover could use.

The personal relationship between Bobby as Attorney General and Hoover opens up another thread - a how could he element into the plot. In spite of the damage

Hoover could do; in spite of Giancana's threat; in spite of all that Hoover has in his files, Bobby makes Hoover's life miserable. Here I need to introduce another - albeit minor - off-stage character. Brumus, Bobby's beloved, big, black and ugly Newfoundland dog. Described as drooling and the size of a pony. Bobby brought Brumus to the office because, as Bobby explains, 'Brumus likes the attention he gets from the pretty secretaries. Brumus once urinated on Hoover's carpet. Hoover was proud that his own dogs had license tags, 1,2, and 3 in D.C. Bobby saw to it that Brumus, and Bobby's other dogs would get tags 1,2,and 3. Bobby brought his rampaging brats to the office on weekends, allowed them to run loose, even sit at Hoover's desk and in his chair. Bobby would call the FBI Director 'Edgar' in a somewhat demeaning way that indicated who was the boss. He he did this in front of FBI agents. Bobby had a hot line installed between himself and Hoover, which Bobby insisted that Hoover personally answer. 'There is only 'one voice I want to hear when I call,' Bobby told Hoover. Bobby scolded Hoover for not protecting the Freedom Riders and for not reigning in Bull

Connor in Birmingham Alabama. Hoover took this abuse in silent resentment. Bobby's abuse of Hoover is fascinating because - although Hoover has this power to damage President Kennedy, Bobby does not curry Hoover's favor. The President would tell Bobby, "you gotta get along with the bastard," but he never asked Bobby to back off. One must wonder why anyone would go to such lengths to enrage a man who had the power to destroy the Administration. The answer might have been to keep Hoover off guard; remind Hoover who was in charge. To keep Hoover, despite his files, from getting the leverage over Kennedy that Hoover wanted. And Hoover never did get the leverage he later managed to get over Lyndon Johnson - the leverage he had accumulated over so many in Congress. Maybe the Kennedy style - brushing off Hoover, rather than pleading or negotiating with him - was the right one. Maybe Bobby was the perfect accessory to his brother. Maybe he gave teeth to Jack's nonchalance with Hoover, to Jack's innate self-composure - I think the French word for it is 'sangfroid fraw.'" And maybe the brothers, working in tandem,

confronted Hoover with something Hoover had never faced in his bullying of Congressmen, high-level Washington insiders, former AGs and even Presidents.

Or maybe it was just Bobby. Maybe Bobby was - as Clyde Tolson believed, a person who couldn't contain his instinct and incredible ability to piss people off.

Then there is the relationship between Hoover and Clyde Tolson. I think Tolson must be an on-stage. He gives Hoover an ear to Hoover's complaints and a partner in developing strategy. He is needed to develop the complexity of Hoover; to keep him from being a cardboard character. Tolson has insights on the best way to deal with the Kennedys.

But their relationship is a touchy subject. These two rode to the office together, ate lunch together, took vacations together, went to the race track together, often had dinner together at Hoover's house and then repaired to Hoover's 'Blue Room' to watch dirty movies that the FBI had confiscated. Hoover's will left almost all of his 550,000 estate to Tolson. Hoover and Tolson were as married as many couples and much has been written

about this relationship. Some of it pretty extreme - cross dressing, interest in boys etc. It is tempting to run with that material because it is titilating and because Hoover made such a point of being anti-homosexual. Rooting out homosexuals in government. But the titilating aspect of the Hoover-Tolson relationship was not widely known to the public during the Kennedy presidency. And, though the Kennedys knew about it, they were careful not to use this to bait Hoover. So it seems to me the best take on the Tolson-Hoover relationship is to leave ambiguity. Juicing up the Hoover-Tolson relationship, I think, undermines the essential conflict in the play and diverts attention from it.

Finally, there is the assassination. There is evidence that Hoover was alerted to a Mafia contract to have JFK killed. Hoover did not report that to the Secret Service as is required, if the information is credible. The information was that Carlos Marcello, the mob boss of New Orleans, had put out a contract on the President. That was picked up by an informant and confirmed by wire taps. A lot has been written about this, including "Act of Treason" by Mark North, a book of 660 pages entirely devoted to accusing

Hoover of treason. And to support for the premise that the mob orchestrated hit on the President. Hoover did destroy evidence and block avenues of investigation following the assassination.

There is evidence to support the proposition that the Mafia did kill Kennedy. A second House Committee investigation into the assassination (conducted long after the Warren Commission) came to the conclusion that the Mafia could not be ruled out as bringing off the assassination - though the Committee decided there was not enough proof to conclude that the Mafia did so.

But whether they did or didn't and whether Hoover was complicit or not, the assassination did give Hoover his victory. Hoover was glad to be out from under Bobby's harassment and that harassment pretty much stopped after Lyndon Johnson became President. Johnson was no fan of Bobby and Hoover had leverage over Johnson.

When Hoover was informed that Kennedy had been shot, he reported this to Bobby on the hot line and said he would report again when he knew more. In the second

call Hoover simply said, 'the President is dead,' and then hung up. Pretty cold.

Hoover quickly got that hot line out of his office. "Put that back on Miss Gundy's desk where it belongs," he told Tolson. Hoover, with LBJ's concurrence, pushed the investigation of Kennedy's assassination to a hurried conclusion, cut off lines of investigation. Hoover knew he had LBJ's backing to run the investigation. But was Hoover guilty of treason? Who killed Kennedy? More topics best left ambiguous. As indeed the evidence leads to that conclusion.

I hope this gives an idea of some of the considerations that come into doing a history play, and in particular one about the Kennedys and J. Edgar Hoover. This is a lot to cover on stage in ninety minutes.

There will be public readings of 'The Price of Power' at the Riffe Center on February 7 and February 8 by a CATCO cast. I hope that many of you will come.