

In the Spirit of Martin Luther King: Revolting Children Inspire Joyous Rebellion

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“Our problem is civil obedience,” said the people’s historian Howard Zinn.

I kept thinking of this issue of obedience and disobedience as I was watching the musical play [Matilda](#), based on the book by the impish writer Roald Dahl, at the University of Massachusetts. I kept thinking of how easily people are induced to obey authority figures, legitimate or illegitimate, and how servile and boot-licking many people are even when such passivity humiliates them and renders them accomplices in their own servitude. Even when they have a small moment here and there where they stand up to authority figures - usually in insignificant matters - the tendency is to retreat quickly back into the social cocoon of insouciant subservience. Fear seems to dominate so many people’s lives, fear of those they have elevated to be their social masters.

It takes an inner core of spiritual sustenance to maintain a rebel’s stance throughout one’s life, as did MLK. Dostoevsky said it this way:

But the foolish children will have to learn some day that, rebels though they be and riotous from nature, they are too weak to maintain the spirit of mutiny for any length of time.

But there are exceptions.

Naturally I couldn’t help thinking of Dr. Martin Luther King since my play-watching was occurring on the weekend when his birthday is celebrated with a national holiday, while his death day disappears down the memory hole. Across the country - in response to the King Holiday and Service Act passed by Congress and signed by Bill Clinton in 1994 - people will be encouraged to make the day one of service (from Latin, servus = slave). Etymological irony aside, such service does not include King’s commitment to protesting a decadent system of racial and economic injustice or non-violently resisting the warfare state that is the United States. Government sponsored service is cultural neo-liberalism at its finest.

This is lost on too many people who buy into the illusion created by the very government that killed MLK.



Didn't Dr. King say that 'Nothing is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.'

For these are the enemies that the young girl Matilda, the play's central character, must fight - a battle that resonates very powerfully from the Bowker Auditorium stage with this inspiring production. It is hard to believe that it is produced by an amateur theater company, so fantastic is the staging, the sets, the choreography, and the performances. One comes out of this production mesmerized, head swirling, a swing in one's step as one realizes that Matilda is right:

If you sit around and let them get on top of you

You might as well be saying it's okay

And that's not right

So rebel against injustice.

Sometimes a musical can entertain and simultaneously send a powerful social message far more effectively than a thousand political tracts or the repeated admonitions of a teacher. Oscar Hammerstein's countless lyrics come to mind. Enchanted by Richard Rodgers' music, the listener is instructed by Hammerstein's words: "You've got to be taught to be afraid/Of people whose eyes are oddly made/ And people whose skin is a different shade/You've got to be carefully taught."

Matilda is filled with such captivating lyrical moments.

"We're told we have to do what we're told, but surely sometimes you have to be a little bit naughty," sings Matilda, as she leads her schoolmates in an uprising against the abusive headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, a sadistic monster who hates children. Matilda's parents are equally horrible morons who hate books and watch the "telly" constantly for their "reality," as they mock Matilda's interest in reading and deep thinking. They wish she were never born and refuse to recognize that she is a girl, not a boy, because of her brilliance and love of learning. She fights them also, knowing that "nobody else is gonna put it right for me."

She is sick of them all. She is thoughtful, introspective, philosophical, and an avid reader. She has gumption, is fearless, and stands up to illegitimate authority figures. She is an exemplary heroine for our historical moment when ignorance and functional illiteracy have become the norm and American society has devolved into a cacophony of stupidities flashing across electronic screens as cruelty and violence dominate the news.

Watching this play I felt I was taking a redemptive bath. As I left the theater, I felt cleansed and hopeful, filled with joy that revolt against ignorance and cruelty is possible and children can teach us this.

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness,” said Dr. King, “only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

To say I loved this performance is an understatement. It blew me away.

The entire large cast put on a rousing performance that is lively, funny, disturbing, sad, and deeply moving by turns. Love and rebellion filled the theater.

As in life itself, there are characters that are menacing and demented, dishonest and repulsive, sexist and shallow, timid but good, sparkling and spunky, fearful and brave.

But as so often in life, their bravery is evoked by that of a leader who rouses them to defiance, in this case the child Matilda, who leads them in revolt against Miss Trunchbull and her horrific parents, the latter an especially hard task for a child. Sometimes one’s enemies reside at home, the place where servility often is born.

At the heart of this production is the play’s star, the 11-year-old Sophie Michel, who gives an incandescent performance as Matilda, one that brought a lump to my throat. The voice, the acting, the stage presence by Ms. Michel sent me out of the theater flying on a cloud. She gives a luminous and dazzling performance, and whenever she takes center stage, I was transfixed. She is spectacular.

And that she is my granddaughter fills me with gratitude and hope.

In these dark times, here is a beautiful production of a play that entertains, instructs, and sends the message that we need: Be naughty and revolt.

Or else, as Matilda reminds us:

You might as well be saying that you think it’s okay

And that’s not right

I think MLK would applaud.

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