

INTERVIEW

'In working with these young people, I can become part of this Renaissance'

Robert Beltran,
Actor and Director

It is a given among literate people, that Hollywood abounds in pretentious narcissists, who practice their crass materialism in a fantasy world made possible financially by an ignorant, fawning public, whose appetite for the details of the sexual peccadilloes of these "stars" is seemingly endless.

There are exceptions to this rule, however; Robert Beltran is one.

Beltran is a successful actor and director, who has appeared in more than 25 films, including Oliver Stone's "Nixon," and "Scenes from the Class Struggle in Beverly Hills" and the title role in "Eating Raoul." He is perhaps best known for his work in television, most notably for the role of Chakoty in "Star Trek: Voyager," which he played for seven years. He will soon be appearing in a new film, "Luminarias," and in "Broken Sky," a PBS made-for-TV movie.

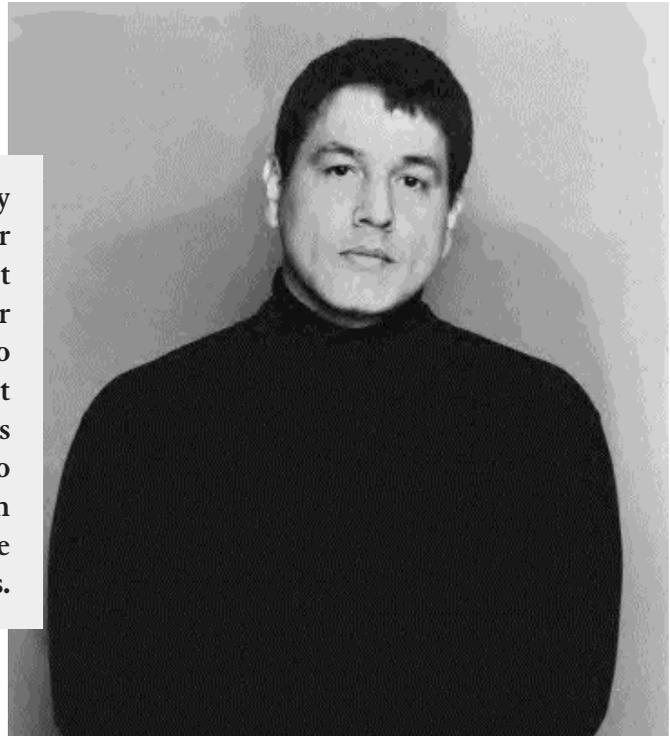
As reported in the following interview, Beltran's first love has always been the theater. He founded and serves as co-artistic director of the East L.A. Classic Theater Group, and belongs to the Classic Theater Lab, with which he co-produced a 1997 production of William Shakespeare's "Hamlet," to excellent reviews. Beltran directed this production, and played the title role.

Robert Beltran began his active association with the Schiller Institute and the LaRouche Youth Movement (LYM) follow-

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ing his participation in a panel at the Schiller Institute's Labor Day Conference in 2001, during which he recited passages from Shakespeare's history plays to illustrate the development of the concept of the nation-state. He subsequently began directing a weekly drama workshop with members of the LYM in Los Angeles, in collaboration with Harley Schlanger and Leni Rubinstein. These workshops have used performances of scenes from Schiller's "Wilhelm Tell" and Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" to develop the skills required to communicate profound ideas through Classical drama.

Harley Schlanger conducted this interview for Fidelio on March 18, 2003.



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Fidelio: Robert, what was your intent when you first agreed to work on drama with members of the LaRouche Youth Movement?

Robert Beltran: The intention I had was, to somehow get more actively

involved in the LaRouche organization, and because I have a certain amount of experience as an actor and a director in the theater, I felt that this would be the best way for me to contribute, because of that experience.

Fidelio: At our recent Presidents' Day National Conference, the young members presented the famous Rütli Oath scene from Friedrich Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, which you worked on with them over the recent months. How would you describe their progress?

Beltran: They are making great progress. I think the performance at the Conference was not quite as effective as some of the previous performances, such as the one at the cadre school in San Pedro [August 2002–HS], and at the Schiller birthday celebration [November 2002–HS]. We are terribly hampered by the lack of time—once a week for two hours makes it difficult to truly master Shakespeare and Schiller. With all of their activities, in the organizing, the classes, etc., they have very little time on their own to investigate the dramas, and do the homework that I ask them to do.

It has only been recently that I've insisted that they memorize scenes, even if it's only a short section of a scene.

Fidelio: What are the benefits gained from memorizing scenes?

Beltran: When you memorize, and know what you are saying, and what the scene is about, then you are freed to really start to work. As long as you are still on the page, you haven't thought through enough to digest the thoughts of the author fully, to be able to get off the page, and look the other actor in the eye, and really listen acutely, which is one of the things that they are beginning to learn is crucial, the importance of an active, truthful listening process that is necessary in drama.

Fidelio: What effect does serious work in great drama have on people who are not professionals?

Beltran: This is one of the reasons I wanted to work with the LaRouche youth organizers, to test this out, because my only previous experience has been with other actors. The actors I know who have done a lot of work with Shakespeare, seem to me to be more facile actors, and, I think, more perceptive, because I think working with Shakespeare forces you to be. You cannot do a play, like *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, or any of his great plays, without having to think deeply about the play—Shakespeare forces you to, because these are such complex plays.

So, if you are going to work on Shakespeare, you have to really think about what it means: you are forced to think deeply about what the play is about, what the dramatist is saying in writing the play. If you have the experience of doing these plays over and over and over, you become accustomed to thinking deeply in this way, and that can only help you as a human being.

You also discover, very quickly, from this kind of work, that there is an obvious, huge divide between a great playwright like Shakespeare or Schiller, and

virtually every other dramatist.

Fidelio: You've become an outspoken critic of popular culture in the United States. Since you've participated in some of it, you know it from the inside. You've also directed and acted in performances of Shakespeare. What are your thoughts on the problem of modern popular culture?

Beltran: (*Laughs*) Well, the awful thing about being a serious actor in the U.S.—and probably all over the world—is, that

When I was working on *Hamlet*, before I met the LaRouche organization, I had come to the realization that we had to present the court as a decadent society, a society in which the people, as Lyn has stressed, were just 'going along to get along.'



Courtesy of Robert Beltran

Robert Beltran as Hamlet, in a 1997 production he directed.

to make a living, you have to perform in these mediocre, formulaic television dramas and films. They seldom offer a challenge to a serious actor, intellectually or in any other way, and they offer nothing of value to the viewer.

It does have the effect, however, of duping people into thinking they are seeing something great. I know this first hand, having been in *Star Trek* for seven

years. I don't know how many people have gone on and on, in discussion with me, rapturously, about the *Star Trek* "ideology and philosophy," Gene Roddenberry's "vision." Had I not studied Shakespeare, and other great playwrights, I might have been sucked into believing I was doing some great humanitarian work on *Star Trek*! The truth is, that anyone who really believes that about *Star Trek*, has a serious education problem, a problem with their perception of drama, literature, and art.

When I go to a *Star Trek* convention, it is interesting to see that, if I say something negative, and ask the participants, "What is this ideology, really?"—if we really have a discussion about it, in private conversation, they will often say afterwards, "You're right, some of these fans are crazy, they need to get a life, they are brainwashed by this." They always pass it off as a problem which affects others!

But, it's not just *Star Trek*. It's the whole dumbing-down of culture.

Fidelio: You mentioned that you see this as a problem of education. Do you see this problem reflected, in the writers, and other actors, the lack of a Classical education, which would, for example, connect drama with the study of history?

One of the reasons I was so attracted to the LaRouche movement, is that Lyn makes no bones about how important Classical drama is to society.

Beltran: I think so, I think that is apparent. The last three years on *Star Trek*, I was not very popular with our writers, because I got sick and tired of the stuff they were giving us to perform. I was complaining about it. My feeling was that they seemed to have little depth. With *Star Trek*, you had, at best, a

chance to do a one-hour morality play every week. It was not great art.

Fidelio: So, you don't think that three hundred years from now, people will look back at *Star Trek* as great drama?

Beltran: No, if we ever get to the point of re-introducing a truly positive education, one which emphasizes Classical culture, then *Star Trek*, and virtually everything in our present culture, will be looked at as an aberration.

Fidelio: You have attempted to bring Classical drama to young people in Los Angeles, setting up projects, for example, at an Hispanic cultural center. What do you think it will take to restore the Classical tradition in theater and drama in the United States?

Beltran: That was one of the reasons why I started working with the people in the LaRouche Youth Movement. I wanted to have an experiment. I've always believed that correct exposure to great literature—Shakespeare, especially—is key. The reason I say “correct” exposure is because, when we first started working on Shakespeare, and Schiller, I felt that the organizers' perceptions of the plays were rather shallow, and lacking in depth. They were not digging deep, for example, in Schiller, to see what he was asking us to investigate.

As we started working on the scenes, I would point out things they were missing in their performance. Then, they would start seeing a whole new world open up to them, as to the possibilities of drama. Then, they would begin to see the importance of it.

One of the reasons I was so attracted to the LaRouche movement, and Lyndon LaRouche himself, is that Lyn makes no bones about how important Classical drama is to society. For me, as a serious actor, it is great to hear one of the great men of this century, and the last century, speak so eloquently about this.

So, once the organizers saw just how important this project is, and saw the great beauty, and the great depth of these plays, their work started to get better and better.

Fidelio: You raised this question about an “experiment.” What you are dealing with, in most cases, with these youth, is very bright young people, who have had a terrible education. If they have read Shakespeare, they don't remember it. They certainly have no experience

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with Schiller. Yet, coming from this background, they now have developed a sense of purpose for their lives. I assume that is what you mean about this experiment, that you are demonstrating the relevance of Classical drama to a higher mission in life?

Beltran: Yes. First I had to see what they knew of Shakespeare and Schiller. I was surprised that, when we began work on it, that many of them had not read *Wilhelm Tell*—in fact, I hadn't, because my exposure to Schiller was really negligible. I only started reading his plays because I wanted to work with the youth. Now, I'm a huge fan of Schiller.

Fidelio: Since you have been studying the dramas, and the related writings of Schiller, what effect has this had on your identity as a creative artist?

Beltran: It has inspired me to seek more artistic truthfulness and depth as an artist. It has also taken my intellectual pursuit of Shakespeare to a higher level. I no longer think of the plays in the same way. It has had a profound effect on me, it has made me ask more of myself as an artist.

Fidelio: Schiller is profoundly personal.

Beltran: Yes, I think we are blessed to have Schiller's writings, that he wrote extensively about his plays, and his philosophy of life and drama. Too bad we don't have that from Shakespeare. And,

it's too bad that so many present-day playwrights *do* take the time to give us their thoughts!

I just worked with a well-known, very popular American playwright on a workshop—very bright, but what a shallow concept of drama, and its potential impact on society. I was really



Robert Beltran as First Officer Chakotay, in the television series “*Star Trek: Voyager*.”

disappointed with that experience.

Fidelio: Lyn has written extensively recently on the importance of tragedy as a means by which a population may gain insights into the flaws in its thinking, so that leading individuals may change the way they think, allowing them to act to prevent the unfolding destruction of the nation. To what extent has LaRouche's work on tragedy influenced your thinking on this?

Beltran: Well, specifically, when I was working on *Hamlet*, before I met the LaRouche organization, I had come to the realization that, in order to get to the full tragedy of the play, the state of the society within the play must be presented to the audience. I felt very strongly that we had to present the court as a decadent society, a society that had completely sold out to the new king, that was not interested in asking questions, in which the people, as Lyn has stressed, were just “going along to get along.”

So, when I began to read LaRouche's writings on tragedy, it just

confirmed what I had thought about *Hamlet*. Now it is very obvious to me in other plays.

Fidelio: You recently began working on *Julius Caesar* with the youth. You have been emphasizing that, to understand the interplay among the characters, you must understand, right from the beginning, that the mob, and the question of “*vox populi*,” are central features in the play.

Beltran: One of the first questions I

asked, after we had read the play, was, “Who is the antagonist in the play?” A couple of them said, very perceptively, “The people, the citizens.” I was hoping they would see that. Some might say Cassius, but I think the real antagonist is the “*vox populi*.”

Fidelio: What first inspired you to take up acting as a profession, being a product of California public education?

Beltran: Yes, East Bakersfield, California public education! I would have to say that I went to the theater with my sister and my mother once, when I was quite young, and we went to see the movie *Ben Hur*. I remember being moved, by seeing the audience crying at the end, when the mother and sister of Ben Hur are cured of leprosy. What a wonderful thing, I thought, to be



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able to move people that way.

Then, several years later, when I saw the Franco Zeffereilli film of *Romeo and Juliet*, that really moved me. In high school, I read *Romeo and Juliet*, which I remembered from the movie, and I just devoured it, and I found I liked the play even more than the

movie. I next read *Merchant of Venice*, which I thought was an amazing play, then *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. I just loved this beautiful language, and these amazing thoughts. Later, my appreciation deepened, but I always appreciated the beautiful language, and the dramatic profundity.

Fidelio: Lyn has been discussing recently the importance of developing the imagination, that it is through cognitive imagination that new ideas are developed. Do you have some thoughts about this? In our contemporary culture, everything is so explicit. In contrast, there is the opening Chorus of Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, where there is a direct appeal to the imagination of the audience.

Beltran: This goes back to exposing the modern audience to the Classical tradition. It becomes a great revelation to them that they can actually think! It’s true! I had the good fortune of being able to tour Shakespeare around California, when I was first starting as an

actor—that was one of my first professional jobs, performing scenes in high schools and colleges. I got to see, in workshops for students, that there was a transformation in their perception of Shakespeare.

At first, there was indifference. But, once they found that they can understand it, they can grasp it, they got excited. So I know that through exposure to Shakespeare,

along with some positive help to give them some tools to understand it, they can respond, and be moved by great drama.

Fidelio: So, you would advocate much greater emphasis on Classical drama in the curriculum to improve our education system?

Beltran: I think that’s absolutely needed. My experience, in working on this experiment with the young organizers here, validates it. I am seeing the transformation. I didn’t have much doubt

that I could be helpful. So, I'm convinced that, even at an early age, people can begin to appreciate, and benefit from, the depth and beauty of the works of Shakespeare and Schiller. You just have to have teachers who know something about it, and can effectively present it in a way which inspires students. Unfortunately, we seem to have too many teachers today who don't know how to do that, or have given up.



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Fidelio: And you, yourself: How has working with these young people affected you?

Beltran: It's the same thing that happens when you direct a play. You go back to school, in a way, because you are forced to put yourself in their shoes. We use our time as a "science laboratory," in analyzing a play, a scene in a play, how you speak, how you gesture—it takes me back to school, to rethink how to most effectively convey the ideas in the scene. The scene becomes illuminated to me, and I begin to see new possibilities in the scene.

Since I first started working on Schiller, my own perception of what is on the page has changed, and I have been forced to ask more of myself, to really get what Schiller offers in the play. It makes me a more rounded actor, and a more rounded human being.

Fidelio: Let me ask you about what Lyn criticizes as the "Laurence Olivier school" approach to acting, the "Look at me! Look at me!" school. I assume you find that, given our culture, and its obsession with self, that this is a problem for beginners in drama. How do you get people beyond that?

Beltran: (*Laughing*) A few of the youth had some drama class experience in college, even some private classes. There are so many here in Los Angeles, drama classes, there are literally store fronts on every corner in which some guru is extorting money from these poor souls.

One of the great things in working with the LaRouche Youth is that we have developed a similar vocabulary. I



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can say, "Look, this whole Olivier school of acting, and the method school of acting, is romantic crap. It's not about investigating a play. It's not about getting the ideas to the audience. It's about making the audience have sexual fantasies about you. That's not the purpose of drama. It never has been, and never should be."

So, when I see, in the scenes we are doing, someone approaching the scene in that way, I can ask them, "What does this have to do with this scene in the play?" The Olivier philosophy inundates acting now, all the drama schools are modelled on the Lee Strasberg school, which is all about, "How can I make this play a great experience for me?" That is, treating the play as psychotherapy for me! The audience is secondary. What is most important for actors today, is, "If I can do a play, will this help me get a film?"

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That's unfortunately what the acting profession has become. There are still other actors who think as I do, but most of them do not.

Once I can make the young people see that the choice they are making, in the way they play a scene, does not help the play, then they are forced to re-examine their character in the context of the whole play, so they can give the audience a truthful illumination of what the play is about, not how they may feel about the character at any particular moment. That's how you get rid of all the unnecessary false emotions at the

beginning. If you are concentrating on illuminating the play to the audience, the chaff can get swept away easily. And I think they are getting that.

You can often tell a method actor by the way they over-gesticulate. That was one of the problems I saw with the National Conference performance. It looked to me as though the “No Future” generation was trying to fly away from

all their problems, there was so much arm flapping!

Fidelio: We should leave the arm flapping to the “Chickenhawks!”

Beltran: Yes, exactly. We are working now on eliminating the redundant gesturing in a scene. And it is working well. When they cut it out, it allows their communication to become that much more powerful, because it is not

that it was through beauty, that people could be brought to truth. Do you see your work, both with the LaRouche Youth Movement, and more broadly, as part of the process of bringing beauty to what is an ugly, broken-down culture—as a way of transforming this culture?

Beltran: Exactly. I truly believe what Schiller has written about this, about the crucial role the artist, and art, play in improving society. LaRouche’s emphasis on this is very important—I take it to heart. In working with these young people, with this in mind, I can become a part of this Renaissance that I hope we can achieve in this country, and worldwide. This hope inspires me, and really offers me an opportunity, as an artist, to dedicate myself to a higher ideal.

I believe this is what Schiller meant in his famous quote about the “littleness” at the time of the French Revolution: that the common man must have the tools available, in the form of great ideas, if he is to rise to the occasion presented by a “great moment” of opportunity for change.

Artists definitely have to see their place in the context of history. There are some who are happy, as an “artist,” to make *Rambo, Part VII*, and collect the money. But for beneficial change to occur, *some* must dedicate themselves

to a higher goal, to do their part to reach people, with the most powerful ideas. I can do that by performing great drama, or in helping people achieve a competence, so that they can perform it. In doing this, I can help keep this great literature alive, by keeping it in the consciousness of society, in hopes it will inspire future generations to become “bigger” people.

A workshop with Robert Beltran on Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar,” done at an LYM Cadre School, can be heard on the website of the West Coast LaRouche Youth Movement, at theacademy2004.com, under the subhead, “Drama.”



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diffused by unnecessary gesticulation.

Fidelio: In closing, I’d like to come back to the question of the role of art in culture, and, in particular, the role of the artist. This is a moment of great crisis, of political and social turbulence. Schiller, in writing of the lost opportunity of the French Revolution, wrote that a “great moment had found a little people.” He wrote



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