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REMEMBERING LUCASVILLE:

A Review of Staughton Lynd's *Big George*

Among the approximately 200 people currently sentenced to death in Ohio are five who participated in what was very probably the longest prison rebellion in US history, the 1993 Lucasville "riot": Keith Lamar, Jason Robb, Siddique Abdullah Hasan, Namir Abdul Mateen, and George Skatzes. If ever there were a tale of mere criminal mischief, the story of the Lucasville insurrection is not it. Instead, the uprising at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility offers glimpses of the "Not yet, which someday will be." That is, on a smaller scale it exhibits many of the utopian impulses of other suppressed revolutions, such as the Paris Commune of 1871. Under seemingly adverse or even prohibitive conditions, the Lucasville rebellion set in motion a provisional Rainbow Coalition of the oppressed. This dimension of the rebellion makes its repression necessary for the state. Likewise, it is the utopian moment of the rebellion which makes its recollection—the task of Staughton Lynd's play *Big George*—necessary for us. The state would like to sentence the spirit of the Rebellion to oblivion: as Rev. Daniel Berrigan writes, "In Hell they say/Heaven is a great lie" (123). Lynd's play affirms that utopia is not a lie, even (or perhaps especially) in prison, and *Big George* remembers the Lucasville prison revolt in ways which offer focus and motivation for struggles against what has become known as "the prison-industrial complex."

The background of the "riot" depicted in Lynd's play is this: in the midst of extreme overcrowding, abuse and murder of convicts by guards, a spectacular act of deadly inmate violence against a teacher working in the prison, community outrage about that killing, and increasing desperation among prisoners, a new warden was assigned to the Lucasville prison in 1990. His job was to oversee Operation Shakedown, a crackdown on the Lucasville inmates. Recognizing that "Luke" was a powderkeg, and fearing conflict between united prisoners and the jail administration, Warden Tate deliberately exploited racial tensions among the prison population. In particular, the divide-and-conquer prison administration attempted to ensure mutual animosity among the Aryan Brotherhood, Gangster Disciples, and Muslims. The warden also went to great lengths to assert Luke's total control over its prisoners. For instance, Muslims objected, on religious grounds, to unnecessarily invasive tuberculosis testing, but the prison paid no heed.

In fact, it was Luke's attempts to overcome Muslim resistance to the tests that triggered the uprising of April, 1993, which lasted eleven days and left nine prisoners and one guard dead. The rebellion took shape in multi-racial unity, among prisoners, against prison administration, and the state's efforts to quell the uprising and then punish the rebels were consistently motivated by its understanding of where such a coalition might lead. The prosecutions which followed the settlement between rebel prisoners and the administration did not proceed on a foundation of confessions or physical evidence; instead, convictions were based on the "snitch" testimony of other prisoners (which the state obtains in exchange for lesser sentences or for freedom). Moreover, prosecutions focused less on the murder of two prisoners and a guard than on the challenge to prison authority and "order" epitomized by the rebellion. Particular

attention was paid to the prosecution of rebel leaders, including "Big" George Skatzes, an Aryan Brotherhood member who had become perhaps the revolt's most outspoken advocate of biracialism, avoidance of bloodshed, and public outreach.

On behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio, activist, attorney, and historian Staughton Lynd has submitted to the Court of Appeals a friend-of-the-court brief contesting Skatzes' conviction. Lynd emphasizes three points: (1) the prosecution's appeal to George's affiliation with the Aryan Brotherhood, (2) its use of out-of-context fragments of George's statements during the uprising, (3) and its failure to establish motivation for the murders allegedly committed by Skatzes.

As noted above, Lynd has also written an eighty-page play in two acts, *Big George: A Docudrama About the Lucasville Rebellion*. Lynd's drama traces the sources of the uprising, the negotiations among prisoners and between prisoners and the state, the prosecution of leaders of the insurgency, and the causes of Skatzes court conviction. The play concludes without endorsing either a classically tragic or satirically tragi-comic interpretation of Big George's potential martyrdom. Instead, the story's outcome is left open, without thereby becoming indeterminate or incoherent. Rather than being content to bear witness to the injustice of the jury's verdict, Lynd puts the audience in the place of the jury, asking the spectator/reader to overturn the court's verdict. That is, rather in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht, Lynd encourages the audience to intervene in—rather than merely interpret—the world represented by his story.

Indeed, "epic," critical realist, demythologizing—in a word, Brechtian—approaches to representation are characteristic of *Big George*. For instance, Lynd avoids placing overwhelming emphasis on the character or fate of his individual hero. In this sense, Lynd's play is quite different from recent dramatizations of the lives and times of figures such as Karl Marx and Sojourner Truth. Big George Skatzes is the drama's protagonist in title only: the subtextual protagonist of this narrative is the militant multiracial character of the rebellion; this is what Big George represents, and what so antagonizes the state. Practically no attention is paid to his internal conflicts and moments of decision, for instance, for *Big George* is no *Huck Finn*-style exploration of the conscience of a race traitor. Instead, Lynd's *Docudrama About the Lucasville Rebellion* is more concerned with the dynamism of public events—the "riot" and ensuing trial.

Consider a major turning point of the story, the moment in which Big George begins to articulate the demands of prisoners, both black and white, to the prison authorities. This happens only moments after Skatzes assumes that he is in the midst of a race riot, and that he should devote himself to the safety of his fellow "solid whites." There are hints that Skatzes' memories of the 1968 prison rebellion in Columbus, Ohio, play a role in his behavior, and there are also clear suggestions that in this instance the overdetermining power of material conditions of shared oppression outdoes that of racism. At the same time, Lynd's clear sympathy for Skatzes' own characterization of the miraculous power that "came into" him at the beginning of the uprising expresses a formidable faith in mystical forces of spiritual self-redemption. The fascinating gaps within and tensions among these different accounts of Skatzes' character are left unresolved in the play, despite Lynd's discussion of these and related issues in a thoughtful and provocative article titled "Overcoming Racism." For the kinds of speculation that Lynd engages in so well elsewhere would run counter to the spirit of *Big George*.

Indeed, what is perhaps most distinctive about Lynd's play, aside from the inherent urgency of a work addressed to the state's threat to kill another man, is not its approach to characterization. What is more striking about the play is its generically-mixed form—or rather, Lynd's mixing of genres toward a particular end. Part courtroom brief/part documentary history, part narrative/part analytical commentary, part expose of prison administration and courtroom practice/part anthology of statements by prisoners and their allies—Lynd always pays scrupulous attention to factual detail. For instance, *Big George* features 48 footnotes, through which he explains and comments on his use of sources ranging from trial transcripts and official correspondence to personal letters and interviews. Lynd's rhetorical commitment is to

documentation, not to a style, formal technique, or genre.

Lynd's choice—or is it refusal?—of genre enables him to draw selectively from the repertoire of aesthetic techniques which have been used in recent dramatizations of historical events and characters. For instance, Lynd does not (in the manner of, for instance, Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*) tend to propound big ideas via his characters. But neither is he content simply to detail a sequence of events. Instead, *Big George* is somewhat in the tradition of Luis Valdez's musical *Zoot Suit*, an interpretation of the causes and consequences of events surrounding the 1943 Los Angeles riots which is based in large part on eyewitness accounts. Even more does *Big George* resemble Daniel Berrigan's the *Trial of the Catonsville Nine*. Berrigan's production of a "factual theater," which was intended both to build opposition to the US war against Vietnam and to justify the protesters' willful destruction of government property, involved translating the trial record into verse. Similarly, Lynd insists on exposing, and providing opportunities to reflect on, the causal nexus of specific, documentable events.

At the same time, he demythologizes the representation of those events in the official transcript of winner's history. Thus, for instance, the play concludes with an affidavit not heard by the courtroom jury. (This technique is similar to that employed by the Hollywood Ten, in their attempts to build wider public support for their appeal and opposition to anti-Unamericanism; see Kahn, *Hollywood on Trial*.) Likewise, Act II, scene 5 pointedly skips Skatzes' trial, showing the selection of what's known as a "death-qualified jury" instead. Why? Because it was the Court's legal obligation to reject potential jurors opposed to the death penalty which was most decisive in Skatzes' prosecution and sentencing. As Lynd notes in his stage directions, the trials of the Lucasville Five became essentially "a formality with a predetermined outcome." By using classic "courtroom drama" narrative techniques in this way, Lynd's play reveals the structures underlying the narrative; it thereby critiques, rather than affirms, the law's claims on its own behalf.

In sum, *Big George* is very highly recommended for all who are concerned by what's going on in and around prisons, comparable in many ways to the recent outpouring of extraordinary writings by prisoners themselves (such as the *Celling of America*, *Prison Legal News*, or Mumia Abu-Jamal's *Live from Death Row*). What remains to be seen is how Lynd's well-crafted script will adapt to the stage, and minor revision of some long monologues may be needed. The play has yet to be publicly performed in its entirety, though plans for a spring 2001 Northern Ohio premiere are underway. As a practical matter, *Big George* is intended primarily for low-budget/low-tech, church basement or union hall performance. But this approach is also, in my opinion, particularly appropriate aesthetically and politically. For instance, there are any number of sophisticated and "realistic" ways in which one could attempt to "bring to life" the beginnings of the riot, including Disneyesque imagineering or the "action-adventure" techniques of Hollywood or Hong Kong. Lynd rejects all such alternatives, employing instead an epic separation of dramatic elements; that is, he darkens the stage, uses effective dialogue and sound effects, and invites the audience to exercise its intelligence and imagination. On the strength of numerous scenes such as this one, I am confident that Lynd's *Big George: A Docudrama about the Lucasville Rebellion* will indeed live up to its subtitle: that it will document and dramatize the Lucasville Rebellion, both on the page and on-stage.

Regrettably, *Big George* has not yet been published. However, a copy of the typescript is available for \$5.00 Pay Staughton Lynd, 1694 Timbers Court, Niles OH, 44446.

A campaign to overturn Skatzes' conviction in the Lucasville case is being coordinated by George's sister, Jackie Bowers. Write P.O. Box 1591, Marion, OH 43301-1591. George Skatzes, #173-501, can be contacted at P.O. Box 788, Mansfield, OH 44901.

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