

The American World of Stephen Vincent Benet

A One Man One Act

by
David Garrett

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CASTING

1M: One actor plays the role and says all the words

Open Space.

The ghost of twentieth century American author Stephen Vincent Benet. (John Brown's Body, The Devil and Daniel Webster.) Visits a theater where he has been told by his wife Rosemary that a speaker will lecture on Benet's life and work. Benet begins chatting with the audience and soon realizes that, in fact, he is the speaker. Benet tells his story and that of his era, 1898 to 1943 that included the roaring twenties, the depression, the rise of fascism, and World War II.

About 60 minutes.

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*(The Stage is dark; a cigarette lighter's flame suddenly fires illuminating a face as a man lights a cigarette while sitting in an armchair SL. The man is in a black three-piece suit; he is 44, but looks a little older. He is balding, hair parted in middle, has a trim moustache, tortoise-shell, granny-type glasses; flame goes out; SPOTLIGHT on chair. There is a podium CS and a small table with books to the right of the podium. **Passages in bold type are Benet's own words.**)*

What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost! Don't be alarmed.

If you knew how often you are surrounded by ghosts, you wouldn't think twice about it. After all, every memory is a ghost and every ghost is a memory.

If you look at it that way, we're not quite so frightening ... let alone unfriendly.

If you're wondering what I'm doing here, well, it's my hundredth birthday and ghost or not, you tend to pay attention to these things, and visit - if you'll pardon the pun - the old "haunts."

Seriously though, there are quite a few mysteries to you folks that get a little less mysterious when you get into my position. Of course, even we ghosts don't know the whole story yet; we're waiting to see the rest of eternity just like you are; although we do have a little more insight into the nature of things. We do realize that there's a plan behind all of this history we've had and are still making. The infinite plan doesn't always make sense in your finite present. But that's in earth time. I can tell you that the eternal clock is another matter entirely.

Yes, us ghost folks hang around quite a bit ... for "millions and millions of years" as my old Yale classmate, Thornton Wilder, kept saying in his books and plays.

Speaking of which, his play *Our Town's* had quite a run.

*(Picks up actor's edition of *Our Town* from table.)*

In Our Town, when the Stage manager says - and of course that's Thornton getting philosophical - when he says that there's something that lasts forever - he means something in the human spirit. Well, that part seems truer to me now than it ever did ... *(slyly.)* for obvious reasons.

Of course, the way Thornton says it, he brings us ghosts down to earth a bit, and brings you earthly citizens a little in our direction - I suppose that we can say "heaven" - that word will do metaphorically. And that's what writers do by the way ... we - if I may coin a phrase - we "metaphorize" life into words and get to tell about all kinds of things symbolically. We take the particular and make it universal so that most anyone can recognize it.

Keep in mind, that's not as complicated as it sounds; when you get right down to it, writers are just gossips. Don't get fooled by any high-falutin' intentions; no matter how serious a writer thinks he is, he's really only motivated by a tremendous urge to tell somebody how he feels about what he knows.

(An aside, leaning into the audience to share a private thought.)

And just because we're ghosts doesn't mean we don't listen to gossip ... or make some. I could tell you some real stuff about some of the other ghosts in my neighborhood ... Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald ...; *(Pauses.)* I could ... *(Slow smile.)* but I won't.

I will say that our old Yale club, Thornton Wilder, Archibald MacLeish, and I, talk quite a bit about our standing - or lack of it - down here in what you call the real world. I'm afraid we don't get a lot of credit nowadays even though some of our fellow ghosts among the old literary critics liked us well enough when we were all alive in our bodies on earth. It seems that since the end of World War II, it has been held against us that we tried to be liberal public activists before the war and during it. *(Aside.)*

(Of course, Thornton and Archie kept doing it after the war as well; I didn't get a chance to, having entered my present condition in 1943.)

Back in those times, it was all right to be an artist who was also a patriot and loved his country ... and that also meant raising a little Cain about what your country was doing wrong.

That's what we get to do in America ... praise what's good, but we have the choice to speak out about what's not so good. That's why we fought World War II, to preserve that ideal.

Today, people are a lot more cynical about that word patriot. Well, it's a different world than mine was. You've had a tough time of it ... President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Vietnam, Watergate ... and all of it coming right into your living room on that television. I'd say that television business has really changed things around since my day. For the most part, you ought to blow up the darn thing ... except for Sesame Street and Masterpiece Theater.

Today, when somebody starts waving the flag, it seems like you duck first and then ask yourself: "Now what's he up to?"

(Pause, wry smile as Benet looks out at audience.)

And speaking of liberal ... there's a word that's been kicked around lately. Don't know why. Liberal comes from the word liberty which means freedom from oppression.

(Another wry pause.)

Anybody here against freedom ...

(Looks searchingly into the audience like a stern schoolmaster.) ...

I didn't think so.

During the depression, then the rise of fascism, and finally World War II, Thornton, Archie, and I, like millions of other Americans, had our say about those issues, but because we were public figures as writers, more people heard us. I knew our outspokenness might be criticized and I once said during the war, **if what I am writing today ... will hurt my eventual reputation as a writer - very well, then let it.**

That may be what happened, but I don't regret a single word I wrote. When your country is in hard times, it is the duty of all citizens to pitch in; writers just happen to pitch in a little more publicly.

(Looks into audience at one place.)

I see a hand raised out there.

(Cups his hand to his ear to hear in the same direction.)

Yes, young fella, do you have a question?

(Nodding as if listening.) Oh I see. *(Laughs to himself.)*

The young man says he doesn't think he's old enough to remember me and wants to know what kind of "stuff" I wrote. And how old are you?

(Listens.) Twelve ... that's a great age for the imagination.

(To the "young man".)

I wrote poetry, novels, short stories, plays, even the words for an opera based on one of my stories.

(Ponders.)

How about you older folks? Do you know some of my work?
Can I see some hands?

(Likely response is few hands, but Benet can react accordingly with a brief, improvised line such as: "not too bad", and then continue.)

Well, I suppose it doesn't help that since I left my earthly body in 1943 - and I was just 44-years-old - kind of young I guess - I didn't get the chance to keep writing into the 1950s, '60s, or '70s. That might have helped my staying power a little bit.

Well, there's supposed to be some fellow coming around here tonight to talk about me. That's why we came to visit. But since he's not here yet and for the young fella's sake - as well as the rest of you who didn't raise your hands I'll tell you a little about myself and my writing until that speaker shows up.

There was a time, if you don't mind me saying, when my "stuff" was as popular as any writer in America. I tried to write from the heart for a populist audience and get them to think about some of the social issues of those times. I'd say that my work influenced many during my earthly stay, and later, it was continuously read in the years right after the second world war. Maybe it will help if I mention some of the people who were inspired by my writing.

For example, Margaret Mitchell, who wrote *Gone With the Wind* in 1936, greatly admired *John Brown's Body*.

In case you're not familiar with it, *John Brown's Body* is my book-length poem I wrote about the Civil War, ... And, I might add, I was fortunate enough to win the Pulitzer Prize for it in 1929 ... Yes, indeed, I recall that Miss Mitchell ...

(Interrupts himself and jerks his head suddenly to stage right, hand to ear again listening.)

What's that dear?

(To audience.)

End of Freeview

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