

**THE
GREAT
SOCIETY**

PART II OF THE LBJ PLAYS

**BY ROBERT
SCHENKKAN**



**DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.**

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THE GREAT SOCIETY was commissioned by Seattle Repertory Theatre and developed by Oregon Shakespeare Festival's American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle.

The world premiere of THE GREAT SOCIETY was co-produced by Oregon Shakespeare Festival (Bill Rauch, Artistic Director; Cynthia Rider, Executive Director) and Seattle Repertory Theater (Jerry Manning, Artistic Director; Benjamin Moore, Managing Director), opening on July 23, 2014. It was directed by Bill Rauch; the scenic design was by Christopher Acebo; the costume design was by Deborah M. Dryden; the lighting design was by David Weiner; the video design was by Shawn Sagady; the original composition and sound design was by Paul James Prendergast; the dramaturg was Tom Bryant; the fight direction was by U. Jonathan Toppo; the voice and text direction was by Rebecca Clark Carey. The cast was as follows:

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON Jack Willis
PRESIDENT APPEL/
RICHARD DALEY/GEN. WHEELER Denis Arndt
DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. Kenajuan Bentley
STOKELY CARMICHAEL/JOHN LEWIS Wayne T. Carr
BOBBY KENNEDY Danforth Comins
J. EDGAR HOOVER Richard Elmore
HUBERT HUMPHREY Peter Frechette
GEORGE WALLACE/
RICHARD NIXON/JOHN McCONE Jonathan Haugen
EVERETT DIRKSEN/DEKE DeLOACH Michael J. Hume
BOB MOSES/HOSEA WILLIAMS/
MARQUETTE FRYE Kevin Kenerly
CORETTA SCOTT KING Bakesta King
LADY BIRD JOHNSON Terri McMahan
ROBERT McNAMARA/WILBUR MILLS Mark Murphey
PAT NIXON/MURIEL HUMPHREY Rachael Warren
RALPH ABERNATHY/
ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR. Tyrone Wilson
JAMES BEVEL/JIMMIE LEE JACKSON Tobie Windham
ADAM WALINSKY/GEN. WESTMORELAND Rex Young

THE GREAT SOCIETY was developed in part with assistance from the Orchard Project, a program of the Exchange (www.exchangenyc.org)



CHARACTERS

PRESIDENT LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON

VICE PRESIDENT HUBERT HUMPHREY

SEN. EVERETT DIRKSEN, (*GOP*), *Senate Minority Leader*

SALLY CHILDRESS, *secretary to LBJ*

SEN. BOBBY KENNEDY

ADAM WALINSKY, *aide to Senator Kennedy*

REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *SCLC president*

REP. ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR., (*D*)

J. EDGAR HOOVER, *FBI director*

CARTHA “DEKE” DeLOACH, *FBI deputy director*

ROBERT McNAMARA, *Secretary of Defense*

BOB MOSES, *founder and head of SNCC*

STOKELY CARMICHAEL, *SNCC organizer*

RALPH ABERNATHY, *MLK’s close friend, SCLC*

SHERIFF JIM CLARK, *sheriff of Dallas County, Alabama*

REV. JAMES DOBYNES, *minister in Marion, Alabama*

JIMMIE LEE JACKSON, *church deacon in Marion, Alabama*

CORETTA SCOTT KING, *wife of MLK*

GENERAL WILLIAM WESTMORELAND, *head of American forces
in Vietnam*

PRESIDENT APPEL, *American Medical Association*

LADY BIRD JOHNSON, *First Lady*

SHERIFF’S AUXILIARY, *white woman volunteer for Sheriff Clark*

HOSEA WILLIAMS, *SNCC organizer*
JAMES BEVEL, *SCLC organizer*
JOHN LEWIS, *SNCC organizer*
STANLEY LEVISON, *SCLC organizer*
COLONEL AL LINGO, *head of the Alabama State Police*
GOV. GEORGE WALLACE, *governor of Alabama*
SEYMORE TRAMMELL, *aide to Governor Wallace*
JOHN McCONE, *head of the CIA*
GARDNER ACKLEY, *Council of Economic Advisors*
MURIEL HUMPHREY, *wife of Hubert Humphrey*
REPORTERS 1–3
CHICAGO REPORTERS 1–4
MARQUETTE FRYE, *former U.S. Airman*
CHP#1
CHP#2
FEMALE RIOTER #1
MALE RIOTER #1
MALE RIOTER #2
MAYOR RICHARD DALEY, *mayor of Chicago*
RICHARD NIXON, *former Vice President*
REP. WILBUR MILLS, *(D), Chairman, House Ways and Means Committee*
NORMAN MORRISON, *Quaker anti-war protester*
LYNDA BIRD JOHNSON, *daughter of LBJ and Lady Bird Johnson*

CHARLES ROBB, *a Marine*

NEWSCASTER

GENERAL WHEELER

CLARK CLIFFORD, *Secretary of Defense*

VARIOUS AIDES, TROOPERS, CROWD, MARCHERS,
RIOTERS, BLACK MOURNERS, etc.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Same setting as for *All the Way*. A wooden raked playing area. On both sides are “bullpens,” slightly recessed areas with wooden benches, chairs, props, costume pieces, etc., where the acting company, the witnesses, waits in full view of the audience until they enter the playing area.

The witnesses are not “in character” while they wait but they are very much attentive to the action of the play until they enter the scene. Witnesses may play several parts, except for the actor playing LBJ.

Upstage center is an enormous screen divided into several smaller screens, as if you had stacked a series of televisions one on top of the other. This is the electronic TALLY BOARD for votes as well as a screen for live images broadcast directly from the stage, archival newsreel footage, statistics, maps, supertitles, etc.

Through the course of the action, the set should be broken down and “damaged.” By the very end of the play, ideally a set of stairs or risers stage center should have been constructed out of the debris of the original set.

Scenes should always move quickly, flowing one into another, and never stopping to settle.

THE GREAT SOCIETY

ACT ONE

Spot up on LBJ standing center stage. The witnesses enter, chanting, "All the way with LBJ!" The chant builds to a crescendo, and cuts off. LBJ speaks directly to the audience.

LBJ. One year when he was feelin' flush, my daddy took us all to the rodeo. Boiled peanuts, big dill pickles the size of your fist and pink cotton candy for the kids; for the adults, Shiner beer topped off with a snort of homebrew from a pocket flask. There were rope tricks and clowns and barrel races and bronc bustin' but the thing everybody came for, the thing everybody wanted to see, was the bull ridin'.

Beat.

You could get up close in those days. I stood right there by the gate, my eyes as big as saucers, as they led the biggest, ugliest, meanest-looking bull I had ever seen in my life into the chute. Then this good ole boy, more balls than brains, carefully climbed on board. He shoved his one gloved hand under the rope around the bull and worked it this way and that, checkin' his grip till he got it just right. The bull snorted once and every muscle on his body twitched. The good ole boy took a breath. Nodded at his friends and said, "Here we go." They released the gate and twenty-seven hundred pounds of horns, hooves, and hate EXPLODED into the arena, twistin' left and right, buckin' up and down.

Beat.

Everybody gets thrown. Everybody. Sometimes you come down so hard you break your back. Sometimes the bull comes back and gores you and stomps you while you're lying there until they drive

it away. Sometimes you don't ever get up. Why would you do that? Why would anybody do that? Well there was one moment in his short ride when I could see that good ole boy's face and maybe it was a trick of the light but there was such a look of joy. Of triumph.

Beat.

Check your grip. Take a breath. *Here we go.*

Lights shift. Congress. As LBJ moves to the podium, each witness he passes addresses him:

WITNESSES. Mr. President. Mr. President. Mr. President.

Tally board: "January 4, 1965. State of the Union Address. Vietnam: 435 American dead. 1,278 wounded."

LBJ. *(To Congress.)* The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all! It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice. We need a program to ensure every American child a quality education. We need a national health insurance plan for our seniors. We need a national effort to improve our inner cities, and we need the elimination of every remaining obstacle *to the right and the opportunity to VOTE!*

Congress applauds. Lights shift. Oval Office with Vice President Humphrey and Senator Everett Dirksen, Senate Minority Leader.

LBJ has three TV sets going at all times (one for each network), a ticker-tape machine for immediate news releases, and several national newspapers, all of which he consults constantly.

DIRKSEN. One hundred and four bills?!

Tally board: List of all the bills proposed.

LBJ. Everett, I don't want to start out fightin', 'cause I'm not runnin' for reelection here...

DIRKSEN. ...No, you're running for Santa Claus! Medicare. Education. Poverty programs...

LBJ. ...We're a great country but we can be better. And we can't do it without Senator Everett Dirksen.

DIRKSEN. And the butcher's bill?

LBJ. We're sittin' on the greatest economic expansion in the history of the Republic!

HUMPHREY. The money is there.

DIRKSEN. This is not just a Republican issue; the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee is also unhappy about the cost.

LBJ. When was the last time you saw Wilbur Mills happy about anything? Man was born with a lemon in his mouth.

DIRKSEN. Do not come to me for a tax increase.

LBJ. There's plenty of fat in the budget and I'm goin' after it with a tomahawk! Hell, we got military bases we haven't used since World War I.

DIRKSEN. (*Slightly worried.*) None in Illinois, I trust.

LBJ. (*Vaguely threatening.*) Still in the process of sortin' that out.

DIRKSEN. Even if you magically find the money, these new programs of yours are rife with burdensome regulations.

HUMPHREY. (*Skeptically.*) "Minority hiring policies"?

DIRKSEN. Why is the federal government always the solution? At the very least, if you're gonna insist on your little "social experiments" they should be managed by *local government*.

LBJ glances at Humphrey.

LBJ. Sometimes local government is the problem.

HUMPHREY. Certainly that's true in Selma, Alabama.

LBJ. You read Governor Wallace's latest?

LBJ hands Dirksen a newspaper. Spot on Wallace in Witness Box.

WALLACE. These demonstrators in Selma, many of whom have been cited by the Justice Department as subversives, are part of this left-wing monster which sets "Civil Rights" as supreme to all! In reality, it's a conspiracy to destroy our freedom and our liberty!

Spot out on Wallace.

LBJ. (*Drily.*) They're demonstrating for voting rights.

DIRKSEN. Look, I certainly don't carry water for Wallace but this breakneck pace of agitation by Dr. King is not reform, it's revolution, and revolutions have a way of devouring their own.

HUMPHREY. These new programs are simply tied to the standards set in the '64 Civil Rights bill.

LBJ. A bill you made possible.

DIRKSEN. Passing a bill is one thing; *funding* it is another. It's not just Mills; many Democrats share my concerns.

LBJ. South of the Mason-Dixon line?

DIRKSEN. You still have Democrats there? Aside from Wallace, I mean.

LBJ. If I were you, I'd be less worried about what the South needs and more concerned about what Chicago wants. Mayor Daley is *extremely* interested in these bills and the federal funding that comes with them, but maybe I should just let you and Dick work that out.

LBJ's secretary, Sally Childress, runs in.

SALLY CHILDRESS. Dr. King is here. And Senator Kennedy is on line one.

DIRKSEN. Your election victory was impressive, Mr. President. The problem comes when you begin to act as if your mandate was from God and not the American people.

LBJ. We're gonna make history here, Everett. Join us and a hundred years from now school children will only know two names, Abraham Lincoln and—Everett Dirksen!

Dirksen laughs and leaves. LBJ presses Speaker Phone but signals Humphrey to remain quiet. Spot on Senator Bobby Kennedy and his aide, Adam Walinsky. Bobby indicates to Walinsky that he, too, should remain a silent listener.

Senator Kennedy!

KENNEDY. Mr. President, congratulations again on your victory!

LBJ mimes masturbatory gesture to Humphrey re Kennedy.

LBJ. It's not a victory of party or person, it's a tribute to the program that was begun by your brother *and it's a mandate for Unity*. Our nation needs to forget petty differences and stand united before the world. We gotta lot of work to do!

KENNEDY. You know you can count on my support.

LBJ. I know I can.

LBJ hangs up; turns to Humphrey. Kennedy turns to Walinsky.

KENNEDY.

You hear that, Adam? "A mandate for Unity." That means "My way or the highway!"

WALINSKY.

You think that tiger was gonna change his stripes?

LBJ. Treacherous little shit.

KENNEDY. Backstabbing son of a bitch.

LBJ.

Loyalty is everything, Hubert.

LBJ.

You hear that? Not a fucking word of thank you! He never would have won New York without my help.

HUMPHREY. (*Diplomatically.*)

I think it was implicit in what he said.

KENNEDY.

Never had an ounce of loyalty in him.

Lights out on Kennedy/Walinsky.

LBJ. Any Committee openings, I want Johnson men who will kiss my ass in Macy's window and say it smells like roses. And tell all the chairmen I want them to get their hearings goin' right NOW! Medicare is Number One! I'll go a hundred million or a billion on health. I'll spend the goddamn money.

HUMPHREY. The AMA is putting up a very stiff fight.

LBJ. I'll deal with those sons of bitches. Education?

HUMPHREY. Powell can't get it out of committee.

LBJ. He can, he just won't. (*Yelling to Sally.*) Sally, get me Adam Clayton Powell on the phone! And send in Dr. King! (*Back to Humphrey.*) Powell's got his panties in a twist over some bullshit staffing supplement. That man is more crooked than a dog's hind leg.

MLK enters. LBJ shakes his hand warmly.

Dr. King. Good to see you.

MLK. And you, Mr. President. I came as soon as I could but our voting rights campaign in Selma has reached a critical point.

LBJ. That's exactly what I want to talk to you about...

Sally steps in.

SALLY CHILDRESS. ...Representative Powell on line one!

THE GREAT SOCIETY

by Robert Schenkkan

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The minute you gain power, you start to lose it. In his second term of office, LBJ struggles to fight a war on poverty as the war in Vietnam spins out of control. Besieged by opponents, Johnson marshals all his political wiles to try to pass some of the most important social programs in U.S. history. *THE GREAT SOCIETY* depicts the larger-than-life politician's tragic fall from grace, as his accomplishments—the passage of hundreds of bills to enact reform in civil and voting rights, poverty, and education—are overshadowed by the bitter failure of the Vietnam War. *THE GREAT SOCIETY* is complemented by its companion piece, the Tony Award-winning *All the Way*, depicting LBJ's first term in office.

“As THE GREAT SOCIETY churns through the four years of Johnson’s troubled full term as president, Mr. Schenkkan doesn’t need to draw any diagrams to make us feel how relevant the issues it explores remain. ...it’s impressive in its scope, surprisingly energetic and shines a bright, clear light on a pivotal moment in American history...”

—The New York Times

“...Schenkkan’s propulsive intertwining of historical cause and effect is masterly... Implicit parallels are drawn between the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, the polarity in Congress then and now, the state of civil rights in the ’60s and today. And it’s hard not to leave the theater asking, what progress have we really made?...Few recent American dramas bite off as much as Schenkkan’s LBJ plays do, or make you think as hard. And few are as enlightening, and disturbing.”

—The Seattle Times

“Rich, complex and dramatic...THE GREAT SOCIETY is both triumphant and tragic, an insightful look at history and the morality of power.”

—The Daily Courier (Grants Pass, OR)

Also by Robert Schenkkan

ALL THE WAY
FINAL PASSAGES
HEAVEN ON EARTH
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