



THE TUG OF WAR

BY DAVID RAMBO



DRAMATISTS
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INC.



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For Mary Harden

THE TUG OF WAR was commissioned and first produced by L.A. Theatre Works (Susan Albert Loewenberg, Producing Director; Vicki Pearlson, Managing Director). The premiere performances were recorded live at UCLA's James Bridges Theatre beginning May 25, 2017. It was directed by Brian Kite; the sound effects artist was Aaron Lyons; the music supervisor was Ronn Lipkin; the editor was Wesley Dewberry; the recording engineer, sound designer, and mixer was Mark Holden for The Invisible Studios, West Hollywood; the researcher was Nick Fanego; the production manager was Katie Friessen. The cast was as follows:

THE PRESIDENT Josh Stamberg
ROBERT KENNEDY Matthew Floyd Miller
ROBERT McNAMARA Seamus Dever
DEAN RUSK David Selby
McGEORGE BUNDY Rich Sommer
JOHN McCONE/TV FLOOR MANAGER James Morrison
LLEWELLYN THOMPSON/FIRST REPORTER/
CAPT. MIKHALEVSKY Matthew Arkin
GENERAL TAYLOR/NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV John Vickery
VICE PRESIDENT JOHNSON/
AMBASSADOR DOBRYNIN Hugo Armstrong
TED SORENSEN/GENERAL LEMAY/
SECOND REPORTER Nick Toren
JACKIE KENNEDY/EVELYN LINCOLN/
OPERATOR/MORNING SHOW HOSTESS Jules Willcox

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

The Tug of War was commissioned by L.A. Theatre Works as an audio play, to be broadcast, streamed, and downloaded. But I couldn't write it with that in mind; I had to write it as if it were being fully staged.

As a result, I think it works in either form. You can hear the energy between the play and the audience in the recording of the premiere performances in Los Angeles (available from the L.A. Theatre Works website). And after those shows, a frequent audience comment was, "I'd love to see this fully staged."

Me, too.

I encourage directors to think outside the box of a "men around a table" play. Be diverse in casting. Embrace the theatricality of impending nuclear disaster. Pay great respect to the fact that these characters are thinking creatures—they absorb, reason, and consider implications of every decision with astonishing breadth. Their thoughts and actions don't come from the mind of a playwright—this really happened. Much of the dialogue is drawn from White House recordings made during those thirteen days in October 1962 of what would be called the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, a group that continues to be a critical resource for presidential decision-making.

The play couldn't have been written without the generosity and helpfulness of the archivists at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. They are the keepers of the annals of Camelot. As the son and grandson of librarians, I'm grateful that such places actually still exist, and this is one of the best.

CHARACTERS

THE PRESIDENT

ROBERT KENNEDY

ROBERT McNAMARA

DEAN RUSK

McGEORGE BUNDY

JOHN McCONE

LLEWELLYN THOMPSON

GENERAL TAYLOR

VICE PRESIDENT JOHNSON

TED SORENSEN

AMBASSADOR ANATOLY DOBRYNIN

NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV

JACKIE KENNEDY

EVELYN LINCOLN

FIRST REPORTER

SECOND REPORTER

OPERATOR

GENERAL CURTIS LeMAY

TV FLOOR MANAGER

MORNING SHOW HOSTESS

CAPT. NICHOLAS MIKHALEVSKY

POTENTIAL DOUBLING

JOHNSON/DOBRYNIN

McCONE/TV FLOOR MANAGER

TAYLOR/KHRUSHCHEV

SORENSEN/LEMAY/SECOND REPORTER

THOMPSON/FIRST REPORTER/MIKHALEVSKY

One actor plays all the women

The reporters and TV Floor Manager can be pre-recorded

NOTE ON SOUNDS

Many scene transitions are indicated with sound effects, but these need not be the effects used. A sharp lighting shift and staging can do the trick, as long as the momentum of the play is constant.

THE TUG OF WAR

ACT ONE

The President speaks to us—and the world.

THE PRESIDENT. All Americans, as well as all of our friends in this hemisphere, have been concerned over the recent moves of the Soviet Union to bolster the military power of the Castro regime in Cuba. Information has reached this Government in the last four days which establishes without a doubt that the Soviets have provided the Cuban Government with a number of anti-aircraft defensive missiles with a slant range of twenty-five miles.

There is no evidence of any organized Soviet combat force in Cuba, of the presence of any ground-to-ground offensive missiles, or of other significant offensive capability either in Cuban hands or under Soviet direction and guidance.

Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues will arise.

It continues to be the policy of the United States that the Castro regime will not be allowed to export its aggressive purposes by force. It will be prevented by whatever means may be necessary from taking action against the Western Hemisphere.

Whatever means may be necessary.

The sound of a U-2 plane cutting through the atmosphere at 70,000 feet changes the scene.

Attorney General Robert Kennedy enters.

ROBERT KENNEDY. That was barely six weeks ago. Before we discovered—

THE PRESIDENT. —the sons of bitches lied.

As Robert Kennedy joins the President.

ROBT KENNEDY. (*To us.*) Tuesday, October 16th. The Oval Office.

THE PRESIDENT. Khrushchev, Dobrynin, Gromyko—

ROBT KENNEDY. After all their denials that the weapons in Cuba weren't offensive—

THE PRESIDENT. Well, they *are* offensive. Offensive *nuclear* weapons.

ROBT KENNEDY. Shit...

THE PRESIDENT. Ground-to-ground medium range missiles. The CIA analysts identified them in U-2 photography from Sunday—the same day we had Mac Bundy on TV assuring everybody any Soviet assistance down there was solely for Cuba's defense.

ROBT KENNEDY. Which was what our intelligence—

THE PRESIDENT. Our intelligence was mistaken.

ROBT KENNEDY. Shit. (*Punching his palm.*) Shit. Shit. SHIT.

THE PRESIDENT. Khrushchev gave me his word he wouldn't do anything to embarrass me before the midterms.

ROBT KENNEDY. He lied.

THE PRESIDENT. You see Eisenhower's quote on the front page of the *Times* this morning? That I'm weak on foreign policy?

ROBT KENNEDY. We ought to put out a reminder that the Bay of Pigs mission was a leftover from his administration.

THE PRESIDENT. No, no—he had doubts about it, too. I'm the one who signed off on it. I'm the one who took the CIA's word and the Chiefs' that if we trained those exiles and got them back to Cuba, the resistance would be waiting for them, and Castro would be thrown over. Christ, now it sounds—

ROBT KENNEDY. Only because it failed.

THE PRESIDENT. —naive.

And a hundred good men are dead and twelve hundred more in prison...

Hell, if I were Castro, I'd want Khrushchev's missiles in my mountains, too.

ROBT KENNEDY. What are you going to do?

THE PRESIDENT. I'm going to put Caroline on her pony.

Wally Schirra is bringing his family over to see the White House. Caroline loves the astronauts, and wants to show him her pony. So I'm going to put her on it and watch her ride.

We're going to stick to our schedules and not raise any suspicions. We're not going to cause panic. I cannot have another Bay of Pigs. This time, we're going to look at the situation from all sides, and hash out every option—strengths and weaknesses, and every possible outcome—before I make any decisions.

Evelyn Lincoln, the President's secretary, knocks quickly and enters.

EVELYN LINCOLN. Excuse me, Mr. President. Captain Schirra is approaching the South Entrance.

THE PRESIDENT. Thank you, Mrs. Lincoln. I'll be right there.

She exits.

I have Mac Bundy convening a national security committee. The cover is we're reviewing the defense budget. So, tell your office you're working here all day on that. I'll join everyone in the Cabinet Room soon as Caroline's out of the saddle.

And Bobby...

ROBT KENNEDY. Yeah?

THE PRESIDENT. If you haven't said your morning prayers yet, now would be a good time.

As he exits—

McGeorge Bundy enters. Robert Kennedy joins him.

McGEORGE BUNDY. (*To us.*) Tuesday, October 16th. The Cabinet Room. McGeorge Bundy, National Security Adviser.

ROBT KENNEDY. Morning, Mac.

BUNDY. Bobby.

ROBT KENNEDY. Who else is coming?

John McCone, Lyndon Johnson, Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, General Maxwell Taylor, Llewellyn Thompson, and Ted Sorensen enter. This group will become known as the ExComm,

the National Security Council Executive Committee.

JOHN McCONE. (*To us.*) John McCone, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

(*To Bundy.*) I had the U-2 photos blown up so everyone can see—

As he places blow-ups of air surveillance photos on easels—

VICE PRESIDENT JOHNSON. What in hell are we looking at there—chicken coops?

McCONE. No, Mr. Vice President, those are missile trailers.

JOHNSON. Look like chicken coops.

(*To us.*) Lyndon Johnson, Vice President of the United States.

DEAN RUSK. (*To us.*) Dean Rusk, Secretary of State.

ROBERT McNAMARA. (*To us.*) Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense.

GENERAL TAYLOR. (*To us.*) General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

As the President joins the group, they ad lib greetings. Then—

LLEWELLYN THOMPSON. Morning, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT. Good to have you here, Tommy.

THOMPSON. A pleasure.

(*To us.*) Llewellyn Thompson, former Ambassador to the Soviet Union.

TED SORENSEN. (*To us.*) Ted Sorensen, Special Adviser to the President. There are fourteen of us here, all told—the Treasury Secretary, Mr. Dillon. And George Ball, Under Secretary of State—a very wise fellow. The Deputy Secretary of Defense. And Paul Nitze, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security. And, of course, the adviser the President trusts more than anyone else in the room—

ROBT KENNEDY. (*To us.*) Robert Kennedy, Attorney General of the United States.

Picking up McCone's briefing in progress—

McCONE. Over the last months we confirmed shipments of Soviet IL-28 bombers to Cuba—which, because their design is so nearly obsolete, we concluded were for defensive purposes. Our intelli-

gence now confirms that there are MiG-21 aircraft on the airfields down there as well, which can transport nuclear bombs. These are of greater concern now with this photography taken Sunday morning.

This photo shows a medium-range ballistic launch site and two new military encampments near San Cristobal, southwest of Havana. You're looking at fourteen canvas-covered missile trailers...four deployed probable missile erector launchers...vehicles, tents...one building under construction.

Here, about five miles away, there are no launcher erectors, just missiles.

THE PRESIDENT. How do you know that's a medium-range ballistic missile?

McCONE. The length. We compared it with data on missiles dragged through the streets in the Moscow parade and estimate this has a range of one thousand one hundred miles.

THE PRESIDENT. As far as Washington.

McCONE. Or St. Louis, Little Rock, Austin. And with the megaton yield, it could impact New York, Chicago—

THE PRESIDENT. John, is this missile ready to be fired?

McCONE. No, sir.

THE PRESIDENT. How long before it can be fired?

McCONE. That depends on the ground support for the missile. Mr. McNamara?

McNAMARA. John, would you care to comment on the position of the nuclear warheads?

McCONE. We can find nothing that would spell nuclear warheads in terms of any isolated area or unique security.

McNAMARA. This is not fenced, I believe, at the moment?

McCONE. No.

McNAMARA. This is important, as it relates to whether these, today, are ready to fire, Mr. President. It seems almost impossible to me that they would be ready to fire with nuclear warheads on a site without even a fence around it.

McCONE. We do not believe they are ready to fire.

THE TUG OF WAR

by David Rambo

10 men, 1 woman (doubling)

In October 1962, the nation's young president, John F. Kennedy, learns the Soviet Union is building military bases in Cuba—only 90 miles from the U.S. coast. Despite Soviet assurances that the build-up is solely for Cuba's defensive capability, Kennedy learns that the Soviets have been lying. Their Cuban installations comprise a nuclear missile force capable of wiping out most of the continental United States.

In an act of brilliant courage, Kennedy resists his urge to bomb the installations immediately. Instead, he assembles a committee of the best and brightest minds to debate what action the U.S. should take. As the stakes rise by the day...the hour...the minute...the second...the president weighs conflicting counsel from his national security team, the military, and his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. But the clock on human survival is ticking...and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev is behaving more and more erratically.

Drawn from White House Cuban Missile Crisis files and recordings, THE TUG OF WAR is a heart-pounding battle of intellect and hubris, when two rival leaders held the fate of the world in their hands.

Also by David Rambo
GOD'S MAN IN TEXAS
THE ICE-BREAKER
THE LADY WITH ALL THE ANSWERS

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