



THE  
FEATURES DRAMA  
INTERVIEW

*Features Drama Editor John Sullivan with Lawrence DuKore*

**FOTD:** *Right off the bat, I need to say that Fleas on the Dog feels privileged to publish your play, "If Men Were Angels". Your writing and characterizations are remarkable and the play's core issues are crucial to understanding much of the ideological strife and the personal ambitions behind the political posturing that currently roils much of the west.*

**LD:** I was a young actor in Hollywood, San Francisco and New York. All my acting teachers had been working steadily on Broadway and in the film industry. They were teaching because they'd all been blacklisted. My "hero" had been Elia Kazan until I found out that he was an "informer." I wanted to speak out, shout out, for my teachers and their families.

**FOTD:** *So why did you write “If Men Were Angels”? What were your sources of passion and focus during this project?*

**LD:** The title came from James Madison. “What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary ... (but) must first enable the government to control the governed and in the next place oblige it to control itself.” During the height of the McCarthy Era, the federal and state governments were “controlled” by McCarthy and his followers.

**FOTD:** *Your deep familiarity with details of making a production, general cast and rehearsal dynamics, acting technique, general working conditions in Depression era theatres – the entire enchilada de teatro – show that you’ve spent some time doing research but also that you’ve probably been more directly involved in the nuts and bolts of playmaking. Could you tell us something about the time you’ve spent in learning your craft as a playwright, and any other roles you’ve played in the dramatic process? And how have these experiences shaped your perspective on writing for the stage?*

**LD:** The direct source, the direct influence on all my playwriting were my years as an actor in San Francisco, Hollywood and off Broadway. During those many years, I was also taking classes in “Method Acting” but it was the preparations and the rehearsals – the changes in a script day by day, the moment to moment to moment of working with actors that prepared me for searching for the dramatic event, the theme of what would have to be why I was working on the text in the first place. Play- writing is a moment-to-moment process without losing sight of “the dramatic event” and being logical to the story line and the characters.

**FOTD:** *The influence of the Group Theatre – or at least, the ideas expressed in the segments set in the 1930’s – seems to be part of your play’s DNA. Did the careers and beliefs of Group members such as Harold Clurman, Stella Adler, Clifford Odets and, of course, John Garfield influence your efforts to develop the characters, situations, and ensemble dynamics portrayed in “If Men Were Angels”? Were you ever personally involved with an ensemble that attempted to project a vision of social justice in their work, and functioned as a consensus democracy?*

**LD:** Absolutely! I was a child of The Great Depression. My heroes and heroines had all been part of The Group Theater. I discovered them in Hollywood movies. When I was in high school, I saw every play that Kazan directed and every movie that he made, not knowing that he named names to start his film career.

**FOTD:** *Your protagonist, Demi, is a curious fit for a socially conscious collective like the Proletarian Theatre. His instincts as a director gravitate toward control rather than consensus. He calls the group his Proletarian Theatre, not ours. He seems to always have one foot out the door looking for a better opportunity to make his name and more money. He takes funding from the Party but refuses to acknowledge their role as fiscal producer, and won’t accept any of their rewrites, or advice on productions. Why is he working in that context, and how does this figure into his sense of self-worth and his ongoing grudge against his roots and station in life?*

**LD:** He didn't have a grudge against his roots nor in his "station in life." He embraced his roots. He was a self-serving realist who was proud of his rise to the top.

**FOTD:** *"If Men Were Angels" begins with this epigram excerpted and abridged from James Madison's writing in The Federalist Papers (#51):*

*"If men were angels no government would be necessary ... [but] you must first enable the government to control the governed, and in the next place, oblige it to control itself."*

*While hardly a recipe for Anarcho-Syndicalism, or anything remotely radical – beyond the very idea (now, almost ancient) of self-governance with no king necessary – this statement might generate some controversy over the entire idea of control: as in who controls whom and why and when. And how agendas and ambitions of the controllers affect outcomes in the worlds they control: as in theatre, the state of the union, and the world. Could you comment on how the resonance of Madison's ideas may have guided your work in defining themes and shaping your characters and their actions in your play? Would you like to see this excerpt displayed on the program or playbill for your show as a seed idea, or not?*

**LD:** Be my guest! A local, state or federal government that serves the public; the common good, is what Madison and his colleagues sought; albeit for the landed gentry. I'd like to think that we've come a long way ... but that we have a long way to go.

**FOTD:** *Demi certainly has problems accepting external authority, shown in his conflicted relationship with party functionary, Ben Myerson. His relationships with women, fellow actors, seem mostly instrumental. He's permanently seething with rage and bitterness at the perceived indignities of his Harvard experience where he's forced to pay his way with "work-study" money he gets to fetch & carry for privileged bluebloods who offer him no respect in return. Though he's actually attending Harvard and may one day be part of that elite – but always suspect because of his hardscrabble origins. One phrase popped out for me in terms of embodying his passion to succeed despite any costs to his personal relationships: "I was the game ... and I'm still the game. And ... I always win the game." Could you share some of your thoughts on the complexities of the immigrant experience as filtered through Demi's experience, and how that drives both his passion to win and his inability (perhaps actual distain for) close, loyal, bonded, trusting relationships?*

**LD:** Demi is in "the game" for himself; nobody else. Donald Trump is the perfect example. Trump could play Demi. Trump is Demi.

**FOTD:** *What structural, thematic and / or character purposes does Demi's bare stage apologia in the opening and closing scenes serve in your play? They make a nice bookend but I'm sure there's a lot more going on.*

**LD:** That's a good way to end a play.

**FOTD:** *Finally, what would you like your audience to take away from a performance of your play? Are you looking for a catharsis? A trigger for later action in the world? Something political or personal (or both)?*

**LD:** I don't want polemics to be in any of my plays. I would only hope that an audience thinks about what they experience, talk about the play with family and friends, talk to their students (if they're teachers) but mostly I would hope that my audience would walk away feeling that they'd been eavesdropping and seeing something meaningful even if not immediately understood.

**FOTD:** *Thanks, Lawrence for sharing your time and insights with the FOTD audience. That audience is spread across the continent, so please let us know when and where your play is slated for production.*