

## **End Cultural Isolationism by Dudley Cocke**

It sounds like a joke, but when the east Kentucky theater company that I direct performed in Sweden in 1981, audiences came expecting to see Jed and Ellie May Clampett from the *Beverly Hillbillies* in the rape scene from the movie *Deliverance*, all set in the Texas of J. R. Ewing's *Dallas*. In fact, with one exception, our theater's European tours to Sweden, Denmark, England, Wales, and the Czech Republic have been received by audiences who had trouble believing that something like the real Appalachian story exists in America.

The one exception was the theater's tour of Welsh coalmining valleys. That 1989 tour was co-sponsored by the British Labour Party at the height of Thatcherism, and the Welsh working people had no trouble empathizing with our drama: their mines were either being closed or privatized, and if privatized, the new owners were likely to be the same absentee corporations that owned our central Appalachian coalfields. As in Appalachia, dissenting oral narratives arising from suppressed histories are part of the Welsh culture – as they are for many cultures in the world.

If it is fair to generalize from our theater's experience that the typical European has limited understanding of the complexity of U.S. social reality, then one can appreciate what must be the almost total lack of comprehension of this reality among people in those countries and regions of the world whose only contact with western culture is the stories, images, and themes broadcast by commercial television, pop music, and Hollywood films. If these were *your* only sources of information, imagine what the U.S. would look like to you.

All of this relates to the terrorist attacks of September 11 and ensuing events which have brought home to us the fact that the U.S. is hated by many in the world. A lot of this hatred is based on an ignorance that allows the hater to perceive the United States only in monolithic terms, as a heartless materialist and imperialist state. In the longer term, our war with terrorism will be an ideological contest – if this was not the case, the terrorists would have surrendered immediately in the face of our overwhelming military superiority. To fight this war, the United States will have to step-up its international cultural exchange programs.

Our cultural policy has been taking us in the opposite direction for the past 20 years. The Reagan administration's withdrawal from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1987 announced our isolationist intentions to the world, while on the homefront, the administration began re-focusing national arts policy on a few select western European traditions. Evidence of the effect of this narrowing domestic policy is the fact that the U.S. not-for-profit professional theater presently draws 80 percent of its audience from the top 15 percent of the U.S. population measured by income, and it follows that in the rare instances when international exchange now occurs, it is usually between elites. The result: people outside the U.S. have little or no chance

to witness the cultural – and spiritual – diversity that energizes and propels the United States. And now we at home are struggling to sustain this diversity and its energy.

The events beginning with the September terrorist attacks make it clear that it is now in our national interest to end cultural isolationism and replace it with a policy that secures the role of the not-for-profit arts in international exchange – and links that exchange to a domestic arts policy that values our own national diversity. In this way, there will be the framework for the arts at home and abroad to develop common goals. These goals should include broadening public participation, telling the stories the commercial cultural industries don't tell, and supporting the efforts of communities to solve their problems in a just and democratic way.

In their pursuit of meaning, relevance, and beauty, the arts have a unique capacity to do all of these things and more in a manner that builds bridges of empathy and understanding across the boundaries and borders that divide people and nations.

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