



O'Neil 'Scopes' An Early Career

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FLYMF March 2005, The One Year In The Shit Issue, Volume 2 Issue 3

While Eugene O'Neill is universally considered to be the father of American theater, being the father of American theater doesn't put food on the table by itself. O'Neill had to support himself through numerous odd jobs. One of his lesser-known jobs was that of a court reporter in Tennessee, where he worked under an assumed name, Edmund Slade. In celebration of fifty years after his death, his version of court documents have been released into the public record. If you look carefully, one can see the development of a craft that would eventually win O'Neill a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936, the only American playwright to earn the honor. The following are excerpts from one of many "trial of the century's," The Scopes Trial....

Scene

A Dayton, Tennessee courtroom on a hot summer day in 1925

In the center of the courtroom is the bench where JUDGE RAULSTON presides over the courtroom filled with spectators, newspapermen, and religious zealots alike. The bench is made of old mahogany; a wood favored by judges throughout the years and the same type that adorned Raulston's baby carriage many years past. Behind the judge is an American flag, one that was carried by a third cousin of the Judge in the Civil War. It has a bullet hole in the northern quadrant on the left hand side between the third and fourth stripes. The hard-working hands of the Irish built the floor of the courtroom and it shows in its construction. The floor creaks in the same places regardless of whether or not the foot-bearer is innocent or guilty.

The judge is a hardened man of middle age, though his looks pass him off as ten years younger. He has been clearly marked by the stress of his profession. He does not abuse his power, but he is strict and always fair. Then bench he rests on gives him a power over the people in his courtroom and hides the fact that he is only five foot nine. His robe shows the signs of many trials and many hot days like this one. The most haunting parts of the Judge are his hands; though the only tool they openly use is the gavel, they give the impression of a man who knows his way if something should ever breakdown.

The heat comes in primarily from the window that is to the right of the judge and casts, at times, a spotlight on the witness. To the judge's left is the witness stand. At rise, WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN sits in the stand. Bryan shows signs of balding on the top of his tanned head, but has a thick ream of hair wrapped from ear to ear. The lines on his face, especially the middle line coming from his left eye, show a man with an unfaltering belief in God and the cleft in chin is that of a man who has a complete disregard for that of common sense and practicality. His clothes are plain, but so is he. They are common clothes and he wears them to show God that he is humble.

His questioner, CLARENCE DARROW, is a tall and imposing man of six foot two and one third inches, weighing approximately one hundred and ninety-five pounds. Darrow has never even so much as coughed before in his life, he is of such solid makeup. His father was known for killing buffalo barehanded on the plains of Kansas.

The man is a stoic combination of raw energy and nerves; nerves hardened by poverty in his middle teens and a reluctant addiction on women of the night. He feels no pain and only sleeps five hours a night and awakes with a daily breakfast of raw chicken and grape juice.

A bottle of whisky sits on the judge's bench, another in the witness stand, and yet another on Darrow's desk.

RAULSTON

With an attempt to show everyone who the real God of this courtroom is.

If you ask him about any confidential matter, I will protect him, of course.

DARROW

On scientific matter, Col. Bryan can speak for himself.

RAULSTON

Ignoring the challenge to his rule, but it goes duly noted with a glass of whiskey.

Mr. Bryan, are you not objecting to going on the stand?

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BRYAN
Defiantly.

Not at all.

RAULSTON
Obediently following the rules of the court set forth by the forefathers of the country.

Do you want Mr. Bryan sworn?

DARROW
No.

BRYAN
Protests fiercely.

I can make an affirmation; I can say, 'So help me God, I will tell the truth.'

DARROW
Challenges with a laugh and pours a full glass of whiskey.

No, I take it you will tell the truth, Mr. Bryan.

He finishes the drink and pours another.

You have given considerable study to the Bible, haven't you, Mr. Bryan?

BRYAN
Proudly.

Yes sir, I have tried to.

DARROW
He takes long strides across the courtroom being careful not to show the limp caused by a sore left hamstring pulled on a midnight run the night before.

The Bible says Joshua commanded the sun to stand still for the purpose of lengthening the day, doesn't it, and you believe it?

He pours another whiskey and Raulston follows his lead.

BRYAN
With the confidence that Joshua could damn well do it again if he wanted to.

I do.

DARROW
Can you answer my question directly?

Darrow raises he glass to drink but suddenly realizes that this could be a long day and sets it back down. Raulston does not see this and has himself another drink.

If the day was lengthened by stopping either the earth or the sun, it must have been the earth?

BRYAN
Answering as if that four is the only answer to the puzzle of two plus two.

Well, I should say so.

DARROW

Going on; he knew what the answer would be. He's toying with this poor man.

Now, Mr. Bryan, have you ever pondered what would have happened to the earth if it had stood still?

BRYAN

Snapping indignantly.

No. The God I believe in could have taken care of that, Mr. Darrow.

He pours himself a full glass of whiskey and shoots it.

DARROW

He walks back to his drink, gives a look of disgust to the judge and another one of amused frustration to Bryan. He shoots down his whiskey. He won't be out drunk by a man of faith. In his haste, he shows some of the limp that he tried so hard to cover until this point in the proceedings.

Or ever thought about it?

BRYAN

Smugly

I have been too busy on thinks that I thought were of more importance that that.

DARROW

Even more smug. He raises his hand and points his index finger to his temple.

What do you think?

BRYAN

I do not think about things I don't think about.

DARROW

Slurring his words with the effects of the alcohol.

Do you think about things you do think about?

BRYAN

Confused. His mind hasn't felt this clouded since reading about dinosaurs. His mind goes back to the time he was asked by a young boy if dinosaurs were real. It works for this situation.

Well, sometimes.

Laughter erupts in the courtroom. Raulston stumbles with his drink midway up to his mouth. He spills some while he grabs his gavel and pounds the bench. Darrow faces the audience and raises both arms up in bewilderment. He pours another drink. Raulston wipes up the spilled booze with his robe and with no one noticing, he squeezes the few drops of life juice into his glass. In the commotion, Bryan openly swigs from the bottle and loosens his constricting tie.

DARROW

Great applause from the bleachers.

BRYAN

Stands and points at Darrow accusingly

From those whom you call “Yokels.”

DARROW

His manner becomes defensive as he raises his arms to his chest.

I have never called them yokels.

BRYAN

Applauding the courtroom. Showing his drunkenness, he misses his hands more times than he actually claps them together.

That is the ignorance of Tennessee, the bigotry.

He puts his right hand back on the chair and ever so slowly he lowers himself back down on the stand. He leans his chin on his outstretched hands. The audience applauds back to him.

DARROW

With a kick-in-the-groin type assertiveness.

You mean who are applauding you?

BRYAN

Slow and deliberately

Those are the people whom you insult.

DARROW

Exploding. He snaps his head at Bryan like the head of a snapping turtle, not unlike the one he had when he was a young boy of thirteen. The turtle was named Moses, ironic considering the current situation.

You insult every man of science and learning in the world because he does not believe in

He slows down to match Bryan's intensity.

your fool religion.

RAULSTON

Coming alive with fury at what Darrow said. He stands up like Zeus on Olympus. Raulston preferred Roman mythology to Greek, but never knew where Jupiter would stand on.

I will not stand for that.

He sits.

DARROW

For what he is doing?

RAULSTON

Concealing his rage – with a smile. A smile that doesn't hide that he had an accident in his pants after that last outburst.

I am talking to both of you...

DARROW

He holds out seven fingers to the courtroom, looks at his hands and discards one finger. With the remainder of his fingers he pours another drink.

Do you think the earth was made in six days?

BRYAN

Sniffs the air and chugs the bottle, then grins a drunken smile while Darrow brings his drink to his mouth.

Not six days of twenty-four hours.

Darrow spits out his drink.

RAULSTON

Nervously squirming in his seat.

Are you about through, Mr. Darrow?

DARROW

He looks the judge right in the eye. With a shrug of the shoulders.

I want to ask a few more questions about...

Darrow suddenly drunkenly realizes that it was Bryan who took his younger sister to her prom decades ago and brought her home an hour late. His mother never recovered from the scare and it left Darrow scared forever. He gets nose-to-nose with Bryan.

The creation.

RAULSTON

He pours a giant glass from his bottle, which nearly finishes it off. He looks down at himself and speaks – vaguely.

I know. We are going to adjourn when Mr. Bryan comes off the stand for the day. Be very brief, Mr. Darrow.

The inadvertent mention of the word 'brief' makes him remember the accident he had in his 'briefs' mere moments ago. The same accident that is soon to become public humiliation in minutes. For Raulston, death cannot come faster.

Of course, I believe I will make myself clearer. Of course, it is incompetent testimony before the jury. The only reason I am allowing this to go in at all is that they may have it in the appellate court as showing what the affidavit would be.

DARROW

Turning away from Bryan, hoping that Bryan wouldn't recognize the young boy that stood horrified by his mother's side while she waited for her daughter to come home; the same boy who watched his mother become a morphine addict in a matter of hours because of the selfishness of the man who sits on the stand before him. As he turns, with his back to the judge, Darrow catches a whiff of what's brewing in Raulston's pants.

Mr. Bryan, do you believe that the first woman was Eve?

BRYAN

Squarely but dignified but insulted but revolted but injured but resentfully but drunkenly.

Yes.

DARROW

Remembering his mother's pain as she went upstairs to take more poison as he was helpless to do anything about it. He was only twelve, he has to remind himself.

Do you believe she was literally made out of Adam's rib?

BRYAN

Like before but more intentional.

I do.

He finishes off Raulston's bottle. The judge doesn't even notice; he's lost in his failings as a judge and more so as a human being.

DARROW

Where she came from you do not know.

He realizes the error in what he just said. He pours himself another glass and drinks it down. Bryan squints his eyes at Darrow accusingly. The image of his sister crying at the bed of their mother motivates a change of tactics.

All right. Does the statement, "The morning and evening were the first day," and "The morning and the evening were the second day," mean anything to you?

BRYAN

The shock forces him to recoil in his chair. His little puppy, Wise Dog, was trampled by horse ridden by his uncaring father. Bryan watches in horror while the horse stomped on the puppy, on the second day Bryan owned him.

I do not think it necessarily means a twenty-four-hour day.

DARROW

Begrudgingly; the pain of signing the papers that would take his mother to the sanatorium erupts from deep within.

What would you consider it to be?

BRYAN

Sardonically, like when he pleaded to his father to buy him a new puppy, to which his poor father vehemently denied the tears of an innocent boy.

I have not attempted to explain it. If you take the second chapter – let me have the book.

Raulston nonchalantly tosses the book down, like he would wish God would simply toss away his last breath to be forgotten about forever.

The fourth verse of the second chapter says: "These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth, when they were created in the day that the Lord God made the earth and heavens."

Visualizing a heaven in which Wise Dog plays at the side of St. Peter, greeting everyone at the pearly gates with a friendly bark, the thought of that is too much. He breaks down in tears but continues.

The word "day" there in the very next chapter is used to describe a period. I do not see that there is any necessity for construing the words, "the evening and the morning," as meaning necessarily a twenty-four-hour day, "in the day when the Lord made the heavens and the earth."

DARROW

Having no idea what was just said, the image of a mother in a straitjacket permeates, he bellows.

All right, Mr. Bryan, I will read it for you.

He snatches the Bible from Bryan, catching another breeze from the Raulston's nether regions.

BRYAN

Snatching the Bible back like it was the childhood that was taken by a prideful father.

Your honor, I think I can shorten this testimony. The only purpose Mr. Darrow has is to slur at the Bible, but I will answer his question. I will answer it all at once, and I have no objection in the world, I want the world to know that this man, who does not believe in a God, is trying to use a court in Tennessee...

DARROW

He retreats into the sour defeats he felt after throwing money at hookers, trying to dull the pain of the loss of a mother.

I object to your statement. I am exempting you on your fool ideas that no intelligent Christian on earth believes.

RAULSTON

Fearing that another gastro-intestinal explosion is on its way and knowing what must be done.

Court is adjourned until nine o'clock tomorrow morning.

He retreats to his quarters while Bryan and Darrow both have a final drink. From the judge's quarters, a single gunshot is fired and justice dies with the body that hits the floor offstage. Bryan and Darrow remain without emotion and lower their drinks.

CURTAIN

THE END