

## **RFK in EKY: FAKING IT**

I put on the dress.

The dress was old, of cotton, long. Being the actor that I am, I couldn't help but supply some kind of back story, while at the same time wondering if I really knew enough about the experience of someone in Whitesburg in 1963 to play the part convincingly. I decided it didn't matter. I became a woman with four kids and a husband on disability. My imagination was captured and I was, like all actors, two people now: the character and the actor who is playing the part.

We walked to the courthouse. On the way there, I fleshed out some more of the story in my mind. I had begun to be involved in my community. People were organizing to get out the vote. I had heard about the hearings on poverty and had some friends who were going to testify. I had reached a point in my life where I could not sit back and let political events unfold. I had to participate.

Wait, Was it the actor or the character who had made that decision?

The high school band was playing some great old rock tunes, and the day was sunny. We lined up across the street from the courthouse. A woman came around and told us to try and touch Bobby Kennedy, to run towards the cars when they arrive, to try to get as close to him as possible. Now I was the actor again, thinking like an extra in a movie. And then two cars pulled up. I ran into the street. I saw two or three men and I got confused. Which one was Bobby? One had silver hair and was a bit portly. The other was slim with curly hair. But he was not behaving in a way that said he was the main event.

"That's Bobby Kennedy. There he is, Bobby Kennedy"

The woman pointed to the man with silver hair. I had my doubts. But the woman in the dress who was me, was running forward and yelling "Bobby, Bobby". I was trying to touch him and I did. I touched him! And in that moment, I was overcome with a deep longing; for men of principle, for values of justice and equality as a driving force in political discourse, for hope, and for the belief that things could change. I touched him and felt elated and tearful. I hung onto his words and felt, finally, recognized.

He spoke, thanking everyone, making jokes and talking about how unacceptable poverty such as we have is, in this country of affluence. Everything he said made so much sense and revealed the person behind the public persona; someone who obviously cared about me and my community. He seemed to know what he was saying, and say it from his heart. I was surprised at how easy the words came, and how natural it all felt. He was so not Bobby Kennedy, and yet he was as real as he could possibly be.

Democracy is precluded in the notion that we as a people can hold multiple realities together in the same hand, that we can embrace multiple perspectives and distinctive points of view. Watching *RFK in EKY*, I was aware that I was challenged to embody the very notion of democracy in its most fundamental form. I was the woman from the past, in my imagination layered onto the woman in the present that looked back on her real experience of those years. My mind was analyzing the performance at the same time as I was swept away into a hope for the future of the past that I knew had become this present I was standing in. I was always aware of the difference between then and now: this present moment where politics reaches no deeper than middle class values and no wider than the mainstream. Then it seemed different. And I wanted like anything for it to be different again.

In the gym at Fleming Neon I was no longer the woman in the dress. I wore the dress, but now I watched as an actor. The people who testified moved and amazed me. "Bobby Kennedy" amazed me as I saw the conviction of the man behind the character, and the collective wish that we could be this noble, this compassionate and this socially responsible again. Somehow, watching it enacted I felt it was possible in a way that no other recent public discourse has inspired.

I cried. Both of us cried. The woman in the dress, with the four kids and the actor, who was me, in this present day world of cynicism and greed. It may be that what I was experiencing was a deep nostalgia for lost values and dreams, or the awakening of something long asleep in me as an American: hope.

*RFK in EKY*, like the real Bobby Kennedy, was not just about a man of principles who is a hero and does the right thing. It was about the stories of each individual who comes in contact with that person, and how they are affected and changed. History lesson, political group therapy on an epic scale, site specific performance art, forum theatre; the uncharacterizable power of the performance had to do with the many places it happened and the elegance of its concept. It started in my body wearing a dress, went to my head, my heart, to the street, to the courthouse and school gymnasium and the conversations during the miles of driving in between. The most beautiful conceptual part about it was that it was all so fake, it was real.

Louise Smith