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The Cradle Will Rock. Tim Robbins.

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If you haven't had the opportunity to see the new Tim Robbins movie, *The Cradle Will Rock*, it is well worth the effort. It is an important and troubling film about the uses and misuses of history. The film is not a cinematic version of Marc Blitzstein's wonderful 1937 labor musical. Rather, it is a sort of Ragtime-esque historical pastiche/docudrama about the production of *Cradle*, the politics of the Federal Theater Project, and the politicization of culture in late '30s NYC. Blitzstein's *Cradle* is the story of a union organizing drive in Steeltown, an industrial city controlled by the bloated plutocrat, Mr. Mister (who "owns steel and everything else too"). The Mister family's influence extends through organized religion (it's the major supporter of the preaching of Reverend Salvation), the arts (Dauber the Artist and Yascha the Violinist are proteges of Mrs. Mister), medicine (Dr. Specialist is employed by Mr. Mister's steelworks), the university (President Prexy, at Mr. Mister's prompting is pushing military training for undergrads), and the press (Editor Daily finds that Mr. Mister is "the owner of your famous paper since this morning"). Those whom he can buy off, he brutalizes. Opposed to Mr. Mister and his Liberty Committee is Larry Foreman, union organizer. (Mr. Mister had organized the abovementioned respectables to oppose the union. A particularly dumb cop accidentally arrests them, thinking that they are radicals). Foreman and the Liberty Committee find themselves in night court, waiting to be bailed out. The action of the show centers around Foreman showing the ways in which the respectables had prostituted themselves to the Misters is the basic theme of the piece ("they won't buy our milk white bodies, so we kind of sell out in some other way [...] to Mr. Mister"). All in all, the original show was (and still is) a wonderful kind of Left political cartoon, with Blitzstein's wonderful music and witty lyrics. The show was sup-

posed to be produced by Orson Welles's Mercury Theater, which at that time was working under the patronage of the Federal Theater Project. Welles and his producer, John Houseman, both appear in the film. For those who don't know the story, the Federal Theater Project, a division of the WPA, came under fire from the political right (the Hearst papers, the Dies/House Un-American Activities Committee, &c.) for its experimental and frequently leftwardly-tilted productions. The crackdown—in the form of massive budget cuts—came on the eve of *Cradle*'s opening (which also coincided with the peak of the CIO's organizing efforts against "Little Steel"). Needless to say, it was a political hot potato, particularly because, unlike other WPA efforts, it was going to be produced on Broadway and would, in consequence, have high visibility. On the eve of its opening, the theater was padlocked—ostensibly because of agency cutbacks. Welles went ahead with the opening anyway—in another theater, with Blitzstein playing piano on a bare stage. (All the props, costumes and scores that they had originally planned to use were locked up). The show became an overnight classic—both a theatrical and political coup. *Cradle*—the movie—tells this story, with a number of sideplots added in, notably the story of Nelson Rockefeller and the commissioning (and subsequent destruction) of the Diego Rivera mural at Rockefeller Center. Though really extraneous CRADLE story, it is cleverly woven into the movie—and the actors playing Rivera and Rockefeller are wonderful. (It's also great to see the recreation of Rivera's mural, the original of which Rockefeller had destroyed with jackhammers!). Much as I enjoyed the spectacle—and the too few and too short snatches of Blitzstein's songs—, I found Robbins's political perspective elusive. The movie ends in a peculiar way, moving from the finale of the triumphant against-all-odds production of the show to a nighttime view of Times Square in the 1990s (this is

shot as if one were walking out of the 1930s theater into the 1990s Great White Way, with its huge billboards and theater marquees all aglow). <p> Is this mere cleverness? Is Robbins trying to tell us something—good or bad—about government support for the arts? What are we supposed to make of what we know of the subsequent careers of characters like Blitzstein (best known today for his translation of the Brecht/Weil <cite>Threepenny Opera</cite> and for his sad end, rendered in Tennessee Williams’s play, <cite>Suddenly Last Summer</cite>), Welles, and Houseman (you’ll know him as the autocratic law professor in <cite>Paper Chase</cite>, if not from his many other notable achievements on stage and screen), Rivera, Rockefeller. <p> Then, of course, there are the more disturbing resonances involving the American left of the 30s and the extent to which, in its naivete, it allowed itself to be used by Stalin. The film makes much of the fascist influence on the American right (Hearst is shown as being on Mussolini’s payroll and assorted capitalists and shown selling strategic materials to Germany and Italy). But I can’t imagine that audiences in our time could avoid thinking about the reality of the Communist penetration of unions, universities, and the arts during this period—not to mention the murder of millions by Stalin. <p> My inclination is to peg Robbins as essentially apolitical and to see his playing with his-

tory as a peculiarly decadent kind of post-modern referential exercise. He does play the resonances effectively—but to what end? Is he telling us that politics are futile? That all artists, regardless of their professed ideals, are prostitutes—if not to Mr. Mister than to Comrade Mister? <p> Ultimately, I wonder what people who don’t know the historical particularities and who don’t know anything about the original show are likely to make of the movie. <p> As a pink diaper baby, I grew up in the household in which Blitzstein’s lyrics were household anthems, where the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the Spanish Civil War were historical touchstones as familiar as the American Revolution and the Civil War. EB White’s famous New <cite>Yorker</cite> poem on the destruction of the Rivera mural (which ends with Nelson Rockefeller saying: “well, after all, it’s *my* wall./We’ll see if it is, said Rivera”) was as familiar as the Battle Hymn of the Republic. <p> Richard Jenses’ forward about growing economic inequality reminds us that the issues that concerned the American left (and, for that matter, American progressives since the 1880s) remain to be addressed. But Robbins’s movie, like today’s NYTimes op-ed warns us that younger Americans—brought up in the era of Republican Revolution and market subservience—may be incapable of grasping the dilemmas of inequality and the possibilities of achieving a just society.

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