

Theatrical Interlude 2

András Szántó: Please take your seats. While you're getting comfortable, I just want to say that at the end of this panel, since we didn't really have a time for a discussion on disability issues, since we kind of ran over in the actual presentations, we ask you that you hold onto your thoughts and your questions and we'll try to make sure we have some time at the end of this panel, and preceding the all-important wine-and-cheese panel down the hall, for discussion of all issues that remain crucial as we wrap up this extraordinary day on Randolph Bourne. I think that you all agree, I hope, with me that we're learning a tremendous amount about this amazing man, and I think we have to thank Allan Jalon yet again for all of his efforts today. And also we have to thank the technology gods for once not letting us down. But probably I shouldn't have spoken so soon. In any event, the Philolexian Debating Society is hereby called to order.

Allan Jalon: OK, ladies and gentlemen, I've been sanctioned by the Philolexian Society, to which Randolph Bourne belonged when he was a student here at Columbia. He was a prized debater—I should say he *is* a prized debater. And today Mr. Bourne is going to be debating with his professor, John Dewey, who at one point was his mentor, but as he wrote a series of articles in the *New Republic* in 1917 taking certain positions that Bourne found a little controversial, shall we say, Bourne has taken issue with him. And we've invited him here today. Mr. Bourne, please join us on the dais.

"Randolph Bourne": Oh, yes, there's something really quite astonishing I'd like to say about my essay "The Handicapped." I believe it must have had some sort of an effect. I've been walking up and down Broadway this afternoon re-experiencing it again. And there's been news. Evidently there's a gentleman that, as I see, became handicapped later in his life, and had done some extraordinary things for the handicapped in the few years that he had been handicapped (which is, as I—my estimation—I believe it was about eight to nine years). He'd had some sort of an accident on a horse, I believe. And not only that, he had done some extraordinary things in relation to science and spinal-cord injury, and in my estimation someone like that is some kind of a super man.

But it is a great pleasure for me to debate with my once, once mentor, Mr. John Dewey. Good afternoon, Mr. Dewey.

"John Dewey": Good afternoon.

"Randolph Bourne": You seem in your usual rather patient state.

"John Dewey": A task has to be accomplished to abate an international nuisance, but in the accomplishing there is a prospect of a world organization and the beginnings of a public control which crosses nationalistic boundaries and interests. It is not, in my opinion, fair to say that these aims are as yet immediate actualities. Too much remains to be done. But it is ridiculous to say that they are mere idealistic glosses, sugar coatings of the bitter pill of war. They present genuine possibilities, objects of a fair adventure. And almost any day, the shifting course of events may give them an engrossing actuality. If that day comes, the fervor of the crusader in

behalf of the heart's desire will add itself to interest in a workmanlike performance in behalf of a necessary task.

"Randolph Bourne": The intellectuals whom the crisis has crystallized into an acceptance of war have put themselves into a terrifyingly strategic position. It is only—it is only, Mr. Dewey—on the craft, in the stream, as they say, that one has any chance of controlling the current forces for liberal purposes. If we obstruct, we surrender all powers for influence. If we responsibly approve then . . .

"John Dewey": I am not questioning . . .

"Randolph Bourne": We retain our power . . .

"John Dewey": . . . the importance of social solidarity, of union of action in war times, as with the soldiers so with the civil population, there is demand for closed ranks, for mass formations, for lining up with eyes right and forward by platoons. Some surrenders and abandonments of the liberties of peacetime are inevitable. Men pay more for flour and beefsteak; ask whether they like it or not. Moreover, the needed cohesion in action is best attained along with intellectual and emotional unity. Without a certain sweep of undivided beliefs and sentiments, unity of outer action is likely to be mechanical and simulated . . .

"Randolph Bourne": Let me ask you, Mr. Dewey, is there no place left and . . . what is that noise? There's an odd noise, I've never heard anything like that. Mr. Dewey, as I was saying, Is there no place for the intellectual who can not yet crystallize, who does not dread suspense, and is yet drugged, absolutely drugged with fatigue? Mr. Dewey, the American intellectuals in their preoccupation with reality, they seem to have forgotten that the real enemy is war, rather than imperial Germany. There's work to be done to prevent this war of ours from passing into popular mythology as a holy crusade.

Allan Jalon: All right, stop please, this debate is over. Quite frankly, Mr. Bourne, I think you've gone quite far enough at this point. The debate is over.

"John Dewey": Who wins?

Allan Jalon: Who wins the debate?

"Randolph Bourne": Yes.

Allan Jalon: Well, nobody wins. This is a debate that everyone loses. In fact I would say they lose, but you, Mr. Dewey, you go on for years and years, for decades, your hair grows white and you write a lot on art and political science, the nature of government, all varieties of philosophy. And you [Bourne], well, you write much of one last important essay that people forget. Well, most of it. They forget most of it, except for a few famous words.

"Randolph Bourne": "War is the health of the State."

Allan Jalon: That's right. You write that essay, and before you finish it . . .

"Randolph Bourne": I die. It was 1918, it was not too long after this debate. I've never seen water like this, bottled. It's a very odd thing. Do people pay for this? What has our society become? My, we have so many things to write about, yes. But it was 1918. It was a very extraordinary time. I had had a very dear friend of mine, a Mr. Carl Zagrosser, and Mr. Zagrosser and I had been roommates right across the promenade there in Hartley Hall. And he and I had disagreed on opinions and had a big fight, and the last time I saw him he was marching down Columbia, like so many thousands of other young Americans, in his doughboy uniform, off to war. Well, he had written me, and he was coming home, and I was so excited to see him. And not only that, I had fallen in love. Well, that was not the first time, but it was the first time someone actually had fallen in love with me. Her name was Esther Cornell. She was the most beautiful woman—flowing, flowing red hair. And as I said, it was a day very much like today. It was late in November, and I was walking home down Charles Street in Greenwich Village. I lived at 16 Charles Street. And I started, I remember having gotten off the subway, and watching thousands of New Yorkers walking up the street, and they appeared as like ghostlike figures because they were wearing masks over their face for fear they would catch the flu. There was a horrible flu about. It was a pandemic. It's now known as the very famous 1918 influenza. It actually had killed more people than the war. And as I walked down Charles Street I began to notice that I was having a bit of trouble catching my breath. I walked up the steps to the third floor of my beautiful apartment that looked out over Charles Street, and down to Greenwich Street in the Village, and I could tell that there seemed to be an infection, and as I had read in the papers, this particular pandemic, this flu, was infecting the lining of the lungs.

Well, I became very, very ill. And it had gotten so I was so weak I could hardly walk. And my dear friend Agnes De Lima and Esther Cornell, they came and moved me out of my beautiful apartment on Charles Street to West Eighth Street to take care of me. And it was there on West Eighth Street—surrounded by my books, and on the grayest day, imagining my life ahead, and to be married to my beautiful Esther Cornell. And it was on December 24, 1918. They were in shifts. Esther would spend 12 hours with me, Agnes 12 hours. My beautiful Esther had gone to sleep in the other room, and Agnes was setting with me. I felt myself getting weaker and weaker. I looked out the window onto Eighth Street and I felt the cold, saw the cold, gray night coming on. The next day was Christmas in New York City. And Agnes began to tell me about the extraordinarily—oh, my—beautiful wedding dress that she would be wearing, and told me it was the color of yellow, my favorite color. And then she said, she asked me if I would like a drink. And I said, "I would like an eggnog." And she said, "You're a sick man, you can't have an eggnog." And I said, "But I would like an eggnog." And she brought me the eggnog, and I was too weak to hold it on my own. I balanced it on my chest. And I looked down at the eggnog; it was yellow, and I was thinking about the wedding dress of my beautiful Esther. And then it spilled onto my body. And as I looked at the yellow eggnog on my body—my body that I knew finally was my body—I said, "Yellow. It's such a beautiful color, yellow." And then I died.

"Alyse Gregory": Hello, my name is Alyse Gregory, and I was a close friend of Randolph Bourne's. And what I'm going to read is a memoir, it's part of a memoir that I wrote. It's called "Days Gone."

"The only thing that could break in upon this spell was the fact that Randolph was

ill. I hurried 'round to see him. He looked strangely pitiful in bed. 'I don't want to die,' he said, speaking with difficulty, but the words were imbued with his wanted irony, and so deeply involved was I with my love that I couldn't realize how serious was the threat to his life." I have to add that, at the time, I was in a passionate love affair with another man at the time of Bourne's illness and death, and this was the December of 1918.

"Pierre was waiting in my rooms when I returned late that afternoon and we decided to have dinner out. And as we were turning the corner of Tenth Street, I saw a woman coming towards us and recognized her as the woman who'd been with Pierre. She stopped; I looked in her face. She was unusually plain and past middle age. She shook hands effusively with Pierre and he introduced me to her. When we'd managed to extricate ourselves he said, 'C'est une femme bien ennuyeuse. I'm always running into her. I got caught with her that night I wanted to surprise you. Tell me, ma petite, where were you that night?' He'd asked me that question before. He stopped in the middle of the street with people passing all around us in a tone half serious, half playful, he said, 'Si je croyer que tu me tromper, je me tuerai' " Now I don't speak French, but . . .

"The next afternoon I left my office early. It was late in December, but the sun was shining brightly and I felt the anticipation of the coming hours stirring my pulse. I made a glowing fire in my grate and then I prepared tea, but when Pierre arrived the tea was forgotten. And it was during our lovemaking that the telephone began to ring. And I thought at first I would disregard it, but it became so disturbing that I at last took down the receiver, and it was a message to tell me that Randolph had died. And I put back the receiver and returned to the arms of my lover. My dearest friend was lying dead on one bed, and I was making love on another. Only after our lovemaking was over did I plead a headache and ask to be left alone. And Pierre looked at me with surprise, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him of Randolph's death.

"I hastened over to my dear friend Agnes, the noblest woman I have known, and learned that Randolph had died as she raised him up in her arms. Yet it was still my love that absorbed me. What if Pierre didn't come back? What if he never came back? I went to his rooms but he wasn't there. My anxiety gathered force. What if he was angry? I went to his rooms and left a note asking him to come to me at once. My clock beat out the seconds, each hammer stroke thrusting deep in my listening nerves. And at last I heard a step. He entered without speaking, seating himself on the edge of a chair as if he didn't mean to stay. 'Vous allez mieux?' he asked politely. I burst into tears. 'Tu m'aimes, tu m'aimes,' and he caught me in his arms.

"I went to Randolph's funeral three days later and sat through the service without shedding a single tear, yet I have suffered in the whole of my life but one loss more important to me than the loss of this friend. Our perceptions were miraculously attuned; our quality of humor was almost identical. We were stirred by the same indignations, open to the same influences. Living in an age when youth flung itself into causes, he'd hardly begun to draw upon his most original gifts, as Mr. Van Wyck Brooks has intimated in his beautiful appreciation of him contained in *The History of a Literary Radical*, and as his posthumous works would seem to bear out. It was well within his scope to have been America's Jean Jacques Rousseau.

"He is dead. Never shall we hear his voice again or look into his eyes or touch his living fingers. Yet each person who has been dear to us changes us in some indefinable manner, and in carrying into the grave so much of our life, leaves with us so much of himself, of what we loved and honored in him, that it's as if in abandoning us he'd first inscribed across our spirits an enduring message of consolation."