

Mural

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battles between capitalism in need of profound reform and communism holding out the promise of working-class utopia.

So impressed was the Ford family with Alrawi's research that their initial caution turned quickly into a resounding endorsement after reading an early draft of the play.

Perhaps the Fords recalled the hackneyed characterization of Henry Ford in Meadow Brook's 1995 production, "Camping with Henry and Tom," a story about a fictitious camping trip gone awry, involving Ford, Thomas Edison and Warren Harding.

"Ever vigilant to preserve the Ford Family's reputation, 'Gift of Glory' is considered to reveal the deep humanitarianism of Edsel Ford," said John Miller, president of the Edsel and Eleanor Ford Estate in Grosse Pointe Shores.

"We're hoping that this is the beginning of Edsel Ford being considered as a courageous and heroic figure," he said.

Indeed, Alrawi compares the Ford family to Italy's Medici family, who supported works by Donatello, da Vinci, Michelangelo and Botticelli.

Dramatic question

A stack of books on Detroit's first family rests on a file cabinet in Alrawi's first-floor office beneath Meadow Brook Theatre. By now, the broad details of the lives of Henry, Edsel and Eleanor Ford are no longer drawn in pastels, but deep hues.

Alrawi is quick to cite Edsel's generosity in subsidizing Ford Hospital in the 1920s and 1930s,

paying the bills of the poor, and funding medical research. All the while, he noted, the Ford Family's support for the DIA was integral to the development of one of the country's finest museums.

In addition, Alrawi points out that it was Edsel Ford who established the Ford Foundation, one of the world's largest philanthropic nonprofit organizations.

For the playwright, there's a certain pride in talking about Ford, as if perhaps Alrawi is a distant relative since his father worked as an engineer and his mother was employed as a secretary for Ford Motor Company.

Regardless of Alrawi's admiration for both Ford and Rivera, the dramatic question at the heart of "Gift of Glory" is why would one of the world's wealthiest, most powerful men pay a \$20,000 commission to a renowned communist, albeit the world's preeminent muralist?

Compassionate portrait

Through "circumstantial speculation," Alrawi offers the motivating reason that Ford funded the mural, then maintained his unequivocal support for Rivera despite criticism about the artist's communist background.

In March of 1931, a few weeks before Rivera arrived to look over the mural site at the DIA, a hunger march at the Ford Rouge Plant turned violent. As laid-off workers marched outside the factory demanding to be employed, Ford Motor Co.'s security officers — under the direction of Ford's Chief of Security Harry Bennett — opened fired on the crowd, killing five and wounding 30.

At the time, Edsel was president of Ford, and resoundingly blamed for the incident. "By many accounts he was sickened by what occurred," said Alrawi.

As a consequence, the playwright contends, the significance of Rivera's interpretative mural of the "working man" became a means of redemption for Edsel Ford.

The collaboration, in Alrawi's view, grew into a symbol that transcended the painting. Typically, Rivera would complete a sketch for the mural, then show it to Ford.

When Rivera expanded the idea for the mural to include the upper part of the walls, Ford responded by doubling the commission.

Alrawi among others contend that Rivera's compassionate portrait of Ford in the mural reflects the artist's affection for the billionaire turned collaborator.

From an assembly line

Many of the characters in "Gift of Glory" are familiar personages. In addition to Rivera, Henry, Edsel and Eleanor Ford, the story includes Bennett (Ford's ruthless head of security), Father Coughlin (the Royal Oak preacher whose nationally aired radio programs railed against what he saw as anti-American), and William Valentiner, the far-sighted DIA director.

Much like the grandeur of Rivera's mural, Alrawi has constructed mythic-like characters playing out a drama of honesty versus deception, and compassion versus profiteering.

The play opens as Ford's chief of security Bennett, who Henry Ford called "his second son," looks back at one of the defining moments in the history of Ford Motor Co. — the 1930s, and particularly, the controversy surrounding Rivera's mural.

While Bennett was hardly a supporter of Rivera, he does prove to be an appropriate foil to gauge the lasting power of the mural.

In the light of history, Alrawi's "Gift of Glory" suggests that Rivera's mural serves as a metaphor whereby the mechanical assembly line was transformed into a union of sweat-and-blood laborers.

That Alrawi manages to distill such a grand theme into a play essentially about the painting of a mural demonstrates the scale of the playwright's own storytelling gifts.



On location: Dan Kremer (left) as Edsel Ford and Paul Hopper as William Valentiner. Above them on the mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts are the same people they play.

Events

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ed two tickets to Ireland compliments of Kay Tours.

"My parents went back to Ireland for their 25th wedding anniversary and saw where my dad grew up," said Costello. "Now I'll have the opportunity to research and explore my family history. I'm looking forward to going there to meet my relatives."

On Friday she and her court will paint a shamrock in the middle of Michigan Avenue. In front of the Gaelic League to establish the start of St. Patrick's Day festivities in metro Detroit.

If you can't make it downtown to the parade, tune in the Irish Hour on the radio, WNZK-AM 6.90 — 1:30-3 p.m. Sunday. Costello and her court will be on the show.

Irish concert

On Sunday evening, Liz Carroll, two-time All Ireland fiddle champion and Green Linnet recording artist will present a concert at the Hellenic Cultural Center in Westland with Larry

Nugent and Jim Dewan.

Nugent, six time champion of the All-Ireland flute championship has appeared with the Chieftans and Green Fields of America and recorded two solo albums with Shanachie Entertainment Corp. Dewan will provide guitar and vocals. Doors open 6 p.m. and the concert will begin at 7 p.m. with dinner available 6-7 p.m.

"I thought it would be nice to have a traditional Irish concert in metro Detroit," said presenter Mick Gavin of Redford. "These performers are very well known on the Irish music scene, they're well known on the Irish music scene — they're top of the line."

Local step-dancers will also perform including 1998 World Champion Paul Cusick of Plymouth, 1999 All-Ireland Champion Mike Belvitch also of Plymouth, and Pat Quinn, also an All-Ireland Champion. Cusick and Belvitch have both been accepted to join "Riverdance."

A warm-up group of young musicians will perform during

the dinner hour.

Irish Fest

On Wednesday, Gavin is hosting the 14th Annual Irish Fest which features over 60 local Irish entertainers including Cusick and Belvitch at the Hellenic Cultural Center from 4 p.m. to about 11 p.m.

"There will be corned beef and cabbage dinners, snacks, food for the kids, pop, beer, it's not your regular pub outing," said Gavin. "We get people of all ages. We're beginning to get calls already. People know about it."

Gavin began the event to offer families a way to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. Jeremy Kittel, a 14-year-old fiddle prodigy from Saline, will perform with Tyler Duncan on uilleann pipes and Sean Gavin, Mick's son, on flute and whistle.

"There are a lot of young people interested in the Irish arts," said Gavin. "We're a little bit behind Chicago and Boston, but we're slowly catching up. These kids are excellent."

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