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Al Filreis' email to me regarding Kenny G performing for Obama,

by LINH DINH • MAY 5, 2011

posted here with Al's permission:

Hi, Linh:

I don't disagree with you about war, that's certain, but obviously I do disagree about what Kenny has specifically said yes to. Michelle Obama has been doing a few good things in the arts, but this project (series) unfortunately hasn't so far been one of them; her people asked the usual suspects (e.g. Billy Collins) and someone in her office had the fairly unusual idea of trying something different, aesthetically, and so Kenny, who must have pondered the down sides of accepting, decided on balance that helping to provide some poetic range was a good thing to do. Goldsmith is no Brecht (in mode or intention) and so I don't expect him to refuse in a manner that presumably Brecht would have, even in your imagined analogy; and while Obama has been to me and many others I admire (including you, by the way) a disappointment (and, in war policies, worse than that), I don't consider him a Hitler (I've thought about totalitarianism a good deal). A better analogy might be Robert Lowell and LBJ, but much as I admired Lowell at moments overall I thought his politics superficial.

You and I have talked on and off about your contempt for the state of American poetry, and I really do understand your point of view. I'd just note that most of Kenny's efforts in the last few years, and those of other writers I like, have been to write for and speak to a nonacademic audience. Kenny's in fact done that more than most. *Traffic* is a pretty good example of that--and that's the book, in fact, that apparently caught the attention of Michelle Obama's staff. So far as I know, Kenny will read some of that work along with Walt Whitman and Hart Crane.

As for Sharon Olds refusing George Bush - there's more apples-and-oranges-ishness about that analogy. It's not as good as Lowell/LBJ if you want to criticize Kenny, because LBJ was by that point a domestic liberal whose foreign policy was stupid and heinous. In the Olds/Bush case, you have Laura Bush organizing "arts" events - very different, to my mind, from what Michelle Obama is doing and stands for. Her efforts are worth affirming (and possibly improving through affirmation) and it's she who invited Kenny and the others, notwithstanding the symbolism involving the president, which you rightly point out is problematic.

Yours,

- Al

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[I've written about Obama quite a bit, but here's a recent essay.--Linh]

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