

DR. BOB JOHNSON--"CRY OF THE WILD RAM"/1980

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Narrator: Dr. Bob Johnson
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[Tape opens with BJ speaking. Initial conversation is inaudible.]

...I think you do have to face the fact that Aleut families did starve because their providers were out hunting sea otter instead of hunting for their families. And the priests do bring this out. They bring it out in an angry fashion. I think there are things like that that could be a little more realistic and not detract from the situation. Probably I heard you say a rewrite should be done to make it a little more honest. I think those kinds of things might strengthen it without detracting from the fact of the power and the ingenuity of the man, the leader.

Q:/MER I think it also would help an awful lot in relationships with the Orthodox church.

A:/BJ Yes. The "Parable of the Sticks."

However, the Orthodox Church was as much a problem in the development of this country under the Russians, I think, as well as was the Imperial Navy.

Q:/MER How do you mean?

A:/BJ Just as much of a problem.

Q:/MER Because they were more intent on conversion than on development?

A:/BJ Yes, indeed. They were zeroing in on their particular task, which was conversion, development of Christianity and all this sort of thing, which was most of the time at odds with what Baranof was trying to do, which is to provide a decent life for the hunters and make sure they don't have a lot of animosity between the Natives and live by the Aleut rules, allow intermarriage, or whatever you call it.

Q:/MER Yeah, whatever you call it.

A:/BJ Well, it was no different than today's commitments--probably more binding, the system the Aleuts used and are using today in modern society. All it takes is two people deciding to live together and make some kind of temporary verbal commitment and it's okay in the eyes of the law and presumably in the eyes of God, but it depends who's looking. I think you're talking about the same kind of conflict.

The Orthodox Christianity is a very rigid religion and very symbolic and very colorful and very ritualistic and very solid and dependable. It's been all of those things. Just go to a service in a Russian Orthodox church and you get a sense of eternity and solidity and you know here is something you can hang onto. You can

get the feeling how nice it would be to identify with this great rock of belief. Anyway, it is rigid and then it's rigidity is the secret of its success, I guess.

Q:/MER Well, and it's also its downfall. The split between the Orthodox and Roman churches--I've studied this a lot--I grew up in the Roman Catholic Church....

A:/BJ But you can say that about any church almost no matter how rigid it is. Initially, that's how it began. The Orthodox Church was rigid and some people didn't believe in it, and they formed the Western Orthodox Church, which is the Roman Catholic.

Q:/MER That's not how it got formed. There were the two centers; there was Rome and Constantinople and it started in Constantinople but there were so many Christians they decided they better have another center of Christianity, so they put a Bishop in Rome and there was a Bishop in Constantinople, another in Antioch, another in Alexandria....

A:/BJ Yeah, but isn't basically what happened....

Q:/MER They didn't get.... There were a whole lot of troubles with communications. They literally couldn't travel the distances and then finally they could. There was a period of a hundred some odd years when they did not speak to each other because they could not.

A:/BJ So they grew separately?

Q:/MER They grew up separately and then they got back together and talked and the Roman Church....

A:/BJ The one stayed the way it was and the other had evolved?

Q:/MER Yeah, that's it. The Orthodox Church stayed very strict, you know, this is this, this is this, this is the way our fathers did it and until we can get a group again....

What they did usually, whenever there was a problem, the Apostles used to get together and they'd decide altogether. If he disagreed and everyone else agreed--went along with it--which is something the Roman Church did. Since the Orthodox Church couldn't get a grouping together, since they couldn't get all the Bishops together since they couldn't reach Rome, they all stayed the same. Rome had all of these pressures on it. There were all these people and they had a different cultural background so they changed and they didn't have a choice about it. When they finally did get together again, they spoke different languages, they didn't mean the same things and they used the same words and it just went wrong.

A:/BJ In essence, then, the initial church was as the Orthodox, the Eastern was?

Q:/MER Um hmm. It has just never changed. Almost two

thousand years.

A:/BJ That's the point. That's what gives you that sense, I think, the symbolism in the Orthodox continues through even. However, they are changing now.

Q:/MER Well, they still haven't changed because not all the Bishops have gotten together and said we should change this.

A:/BJ But the rock, the sturdiness of it is the fact that they haven't changed. Whether that is good or that is bad, it still has that sense of enduring immortality, eternity, whatever. "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be," "and unto ages of ages"--the sayings all perpetuate the idea that it never changes, that here is something you can depend on, here is something that won't change as the whims of man's morality change or as whatever changes.

The changes that occur are changes that we induce, hmm?

Q:/MER What do you mean?

A:/BJ The changes that we, as human beings--man--induces by his inventions, by his ingenuity, his knowledge, his manipulative ability, manipulative of the environment. And so we are creating, if you will, an artificial environment, in one sense.

Q:/MER You mean away from nature?

A:/BJ Yeah, if you want to say that.

Q:/MER I'm not quite sure I know what you're talking about.

A:/BJ Well, the things are natural for us, but prior to the existence of us who have minds capable of manipulating the environment to our own ends--prior to that time, if you want to consider that state more natural, than this state...

Q:/MER Untouched and touched?

A:/BJ Yeah. Unmanipulated and manipulated, see? And that's why we can live in the Arctic. So in a sense we're creating an artificial environment and it depends entirely on our continued existence in order to continue to make it work.

Q:/MER Okay, I see what you're saying.

A:/BJ And that is what is contributing to changes. We keep adapting to the changing of our environment. And in each human soul there seems to be a longing for something that won't change, that somehow man can't change by his ability to manipulate. And that's where something like this serves a purpose whether you consider it rigid or unchanging. Anyway, I can see today why the move back to fundamentalist religion. I don't believe in fundamentalist religion personally but I understand why, the psychology, the need to be able to depend upon something

that says "This is the way it is, is now, and ever shall be." If it's too false, even if it's harmful, it's dangerous, if it's destructive I would fight it, but if it isn't, I understand it and can accept. Okay, that's a whole different subject.

Q:/MER You were saying that the Orthodox Church, because of its rigidity, was actually harmful to the development of this country.

A:/BJ In that context, the Orthodox Church was a big problem for Baranof. In the earlier scene it's pretty well stated in a sense. I think it's developed in the play that the church with its treatment of Baranof's carefully worked out negotiations with the Native people as sinning is totally disruptive. These are powerful, verbal and convincing robed, traditional characters with all the power of the church behind them and he had a hell of a time with them and I think that has to be shown.

But, amongst them there are those, as there are today, who are caring and understanding and warm and loving and Father Herman is supposed to exemplify that.

Q:/MER He's pretty idealized in that, too. I mean, didn't they try to kill him three times? Baranof and his men tried to kill him three times.

A:/BJ Father Herman?

Q:/MER Yeah. And that's why he moved off to Spruce

Island, because they wouldn't accept him in the community.

A:/BJ Interesting.

Q:/MER [Unintelligible] speaks about it. I talked to them about those things, "So you're in 'the Ram', huh?"

A:/BJ Well, now, if we don't idealize something we're not going to be able to do anything for the church. I think it would be nice to make Father Afanasi and Father Nector not so angry, more righteous indignation. And there's a fine point there. They come across angry there, and it comes across good, it comes across powerfully and it gives you a reason to react. They're really in there and they're pounding on you. The fine point between righteous indignation and anger is difficult to achieve and I think it could be achieved with appropriate direction.

Q:/MER In their own way, they were very, very concerned for Anna and the rest of the Aleut women. They loved them in their own way.

A:/BJ If that could show a little bit.... If their concern could show and the righteous indignation could show...but that's hard to do. And to give you a reason to react, too.

Q:/MER Well, that scene is so short, too. There was more than just that three minute spot that convinced Anna

that she had to go and put away her sins, literally. They had her for hours and hours....

A:/BJ Oh, sure, but you can't do that in a drama. [Inaudible.] There was so much in that original play; it was a four hour play to begin with. Okay. The "Parable of the Sticks."

Q:/MER What do you mean about the "Parable of the Sticks?"

A:/BJ It's a little speech by Baranof which he apparently really gave in which he brought a bunch of sticks out and he put them in his hand. And he took one, I've forgotten the exact words, and he showed that one broke very easily and then when he put a bunch of them together he showed they didn't break. He couldn't break them. He was illustrating that people, when they cooperate, have much more strength than if they are not cooperating, basically. This was the thing that helped him convince his people they should get together and work together. Ingenious leader, I think. I read Bancroft, supposed to be one of the classics--very dull. He cut all the otter skins and seal skins and fox skins that everybody caught [inaudible]. But this guy had faith and courage.

Anyway, I think it's a good play. I think it's an interesting history. I would like to see it rewritten and redirected and be straightened back into an episodic

drama, which means what I was talking about earlier-- bringing those high moments up and playing it like a symphony that it can be and strengthening the group scenes to look real where they aren't all [unintelligible]. And they aren't all that way. There is some pretty good interaction that's spontaneous due to the people that are trying to do it that way.

I'd like to see some real Indians up there, not just girls dressed like Indians. I'd like to see enough of them up there. We did one year.

Q:/MER I'd like to see some honest to God natives.

A:/BJ We'll probably never get that again. That was the way things were done.

Q:/MER You mean when Frank Brink wrote the play?

A:/BJ That was the way things were done when Alexander Baranof was here. The Indians didn't count for much.

Q:/MER But they had a fair amount of involvement in this whole thing--they had their own uniforms, but right now the parts....

A:/BJ You could do a little bit to strengthen Storyteller because Storyteller was quite a guy. He was a storyteller and he was verbal as hell.

Q:/MER He didn't call himself Chief Storyteller, Baranof did.

A:/BJ He was a manipulator. It was because of his

capacity to verbalize and that could be handled differently. Basically, what's happening here is what happened in history--the Native was used and they used every means to use them that was at their disposal. Sure, they paid them, but what would pay mean to them? What does pay mean? Pay means nothing. It doesn't help them with their lifestyle. They took more away than they ever gave. The Indian really didn't count for anything and he really doesn't count for much in the play. You can show the Indian point of view but I think then you have to tell another story--tell the story from the Indian point of view. If you make the story from the priest's point of view justified, which it is--it is justifiable--and you justify the Indian's point of view, which is eminently justifiable, and the Navy's point of view, which is eminently justifiable. The Navy was the ranking authority in Imperialist Russia. The merchant wouldn't come anywhere near that and never would. It's unheard of. And so, the Imperial Navy has a point of view which is just, was just then. So you take these four points of view together and put them together and you have a pot-pourrage. You're not emphasizing anything.

Q:/MER But I think it can show a little bit more character.

A:/BJ I agree--a little bit, maybe not to be under-

standable. It may be understandable to the intellectual theater goer, but I don't think it would be understandable to the fisherman and whoever else goes to this kind of thing.

[REMAINDER OF INTERVIEW NOT USEABLE]