

Jeffrey Alexander, Huffington Post Blog

Laughing Man and Choir Boy

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Last night, Paul Ryan played the choir boy. Blue eyed and innocent, pretending to be a flowing font of sympathy for his fellow citizens' pain, seeming guileless, all he wanted to do was help Americans get a job and speak God's truth.

Joe Biden laughed his head off.

Paul tried telling his story of sincerity and concern. Joe sat in the back of the class, grinning, smirking, and grunting his amusement, often shouting out incredulous disbelief: You're kidding us, right?! Hey, we're in on the fun. We know it's a joke. It is a joke, right Paul? You don't think we're going to take this guff seriously, do you? It's all a bunch of malarkey!

Every school kid in American knows how this trick is played. Some fakey student siting in the front row raises his hand, stands up, and drones on and on, trying to get on the teacher's good side. You and your friends glance at each other and start snickering in the back row. You don't have to say anything, but you steal the show. The attention of the class is diverted, and turns to you.

Biden played the joker, but he wasn't being funny. Like Shakespeare's fools, there was method to his apparent madness. As Ryan said his lines, our attention was pulled away by the audacity, the sheer riskiness, of the Vice-President of the United States acting out in public. With his comic antics, Biden took himself outside the text, but not off the stage. He ended up front and center. His subversive tactics gave us permission to be snide about Ryan's performance too.

Of course, dramatic plots can have only one hero. In the performance of American politics, that's the president. But every hero has a side-kick, a spear carrier who passes the ammunition, takes a pratfall for the team and always comes up good natured and smiling from (but one step behind) in the end. The job description is to make the big guy look good. The Lone Ranger and Tanto, Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon, Superman and Jimmy Olsen, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Last night, Biden and Ryan auditioned for this secondary role.

For Ryan, this meant keeping the recently scrip-doctored Republican story going. The Democratic standard bearers are not heroes but whimpy failures. They're listless, don't care about America, have lost their purpose and energy. We Republicans are fighting ready. The Democrats portray us as wolves, but we actually are moderate democrats in disguise. It's we who are on the people's side; the Democrats are on the side of the state.

Biden's task was to engage in a blocking maneuver. He aimed to stop the surging Republican performance of competence and caring by showing it to be just that - a performance. Not by reasoning but by gesturing. In a dramatic language more powerful than speech, he suggested Republicans are telling a just-so story that's too funny for words, and that it's okay to laugh!

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Blocking Ryan's story, Biden gave Obama a chance to rewind his own. The president lost last week's debate by playing the prissy Explainer-in-Chief who would rather reason than fight. He listened politely, allowing Romney to pivot and tell the new Republican story.

Last night, Obama's side-kick gave the would-be hero a swift kick in the behind. Joe pulled Barack up off the ground, told him to stop being a doormat, to take off his shirt and flex his muscles and take back the role of partisan fighter who can throw a punch.

He did this by getting in the choir boy's face. Paul played the studious nerd, the sincere, blue-eyed innocent trying to please the teacher by knowing all the facts. Big Old Joe called him out, continuously interrupted, gave no quarter, controlled the debate.

Joe sat in the back of the room and laughed. He was a holy fool and a brilliant bully. If he didn't deliver a knock-out, he certainly blocked the pilgrim's progress. He set the stage for the return of the hero next week.