

## Ed Asner as 'FDR': Actor sees echoes of the 1930s in today's recession

[By Karen D'Souza](#)

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Unemployment spikes. The stock market zigzags. Fear mounts for the future. A malaise spreads across the land.

Maybe it's time for a fireside chat?

Hearing echoes of the '30s in today's headlines, Ed Asner thinks now is the time to revisit the lessons of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The prolific character actor is bringing "FDR," his homage to the 32nd president of the United States, to San Jose Repertory Theatre for its only Bay Area stop, July 14-18.

Based on the 1958 Broadway hit "Sunrise at Campobello," Dore Schary's one-man play charts FDR's life and times from the bread lines of the Great Depression to the chaos of World War II.

Asner, who is 80, was born just two weeks after the Wall Street crash of 1929 and has always admired Roosevelt. He believes leaders today lack the guts that made FDR a legend.

"The conditions we live in today and having a president I wish were more like FDR motivated me to do this show," says the always-frank Asner, who has been touring with the show for the last few years. "I admire the qualities FDR brought to the office, his eloquence, his dynamism, his positivity. He was crippled from polio yet he became president and he wasn't afraid of a fight. He stood tall for the American people."

In the opening moments of the 90-minute piece, Asner wheels himself onstage in an old-fashioned wooden wheelchair. Wearing a white wig, he channels the president looking back on everything from his political career to his marriage to Eleanor (whom he called Babs).

Reviewers uniformly praise Asner's charisma onstage but also note that the text contains historical references that may be lost on younger audiences. The stocky actor also admits that he bears little resemblance to the tall, patrician FDR, but that doesn't hold him back.

"I've been very gratified because people have told me, 'When you began, I was hearing FDR, but by the time you finished, I was seeing him,' " says the actor, beloved by one generation as the pugnacious newsman Lou Grant and by another as the voice of Carl in Pixar's hit movie "Up."

For his part, Asner hopes theatergoers will not only be entertained but also make connections between the nation's past and its present.

"We are perpetuating a schism between the haves and the have-nots," the actor says. "We are still mired in this recession and we're still stuck in this oil spill and I don't see us getting out of either. If there's a recovery, it isn't happening for the poor. There ain't no jobs."

Certainly, coming of age during the hardscrabble years of the 1930s shaped his view of life. He grew up in Kansas City where his Eastern European immigrant parents ran a junkyard amid the stench and blood of the meatpacking district.

"The Depression kicked the hell out of everybody," he says in that unmistakable gravelly voice. "Mom and Dad ran a junkyard and they supplied the bootleggers with whatever they needed. They built stills at night and they washed bottles in the daytime. That's how they eked their way through the Depression."

Even so, Asner says he never thought of himself as poor. "We never felt that we wanted for anything. Of course, everyone was poor and you saw suffering everywhere."

He attended the University of Chicago and served in the Army Signal Corps before launching a career that made him famous for characters with gruff voices and hard noses. Over the years, the actor has won seven Emmy awards and five Golden Globes.

He is also noted for his outspoken political views. Former head of the Screen Actors Guild, he once suggested that politicians, like NASCAR drivers, should wear uniforms emblazoned with the logos of their corporate sponsors.

FDR also famously sparked controversy over his crusade to reform the system.

"He believed in taking on the corporate interests and greed that were some of the major factors that brought down the world's economy," notes S.J. Rep artistic director Rick Lombardo. "Sounds eerily familiar to me."

Indeed, while Roosevelt's enemies branded him "that man in the White House," his fans hailed him for saving the country.

UC Berkeley historian Richard M. Abrams says one of FDR's greatest achievements was "restoring morale in a stricken population by demonstrating that government can be effective, benign and empathetic."

That's the spirit Asner hopes to capture in his one-man show — FDR's legacy of courage in the face of uncertainty.

"People turn out for this show because they believe in the same thing," Asner says. "They are moved by the song of Roosevelt, his words, his emotion, his philosophy."

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772.

"FDR"

Starring Ed Asner, written by Dore Schary

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

When: July 14-18

Tickets: \$45-\$74, 408-367-7255, [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com)

## PLAYING ROOSEVELT

The production: In a show

at the San Jose Repertory

Theatre, Ed Asner, at left in

costume, portrays Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the 32nd president of the United States.

The actor on FDR: "He was crippled from polio yet he

became president and he wasn't afraid of a fight. He stood tall for the American people."