

Justice, Interrupted

by Thomas Brennan

I am not an attorney. But I am co-owner of a company that specializes in a profession that has its own set of laws. That profession is public relations. From my vantage point of expertise, when those laws are brutalized and abused, I feel compelled to call attention to this abuse. Call it the same impulse that would lead someone in the tobacco industry to whistle-blow if, say, pure cyanide is sprayed on cigarettes as they are rolled.

What disturbs me in the Winona Ryder case, and should disturb all professionals in my field and all American citizens who care about their own rights, is the summation by Beverly Hills Assistant District Attorney Ann Rundle. She quoted from the movie "Girl, Interrupted" starring Winona Ryder. The quote was from Winona's fictional character in the movie, written by a screenwriter, not Winona Ryder, alluding to shoplifting. So, in other words, just because Winona Ryder portrayed a character who at some point talks about shoplifting within a fictional creation, that can be used against her in the Real World.

Of course, LA DA's have traditionally suffered from proximity to Hollywood and grandstand to further their own careers, but Rundle's deliberate blurring of the line between fiction and reality, is a dangerous and ugly precedent. If this stupidity becomes the standard, our civil rights become diminished that much more.

I worry for my clients. Many of them are authors, intellectuals, and other professionals who have published many best-sellers. If they are now involved in any lawsuit, can the written and recorded words of their fictional creations be used against them? If Rundle's ugly and Un-American approach is condoned, yes, this is the case!

It doesn't take much imagination to see how out of control this situation could become. For example, shouldn't Robert Blake's attorneys now show footage of "Baretta", the TV program where he played a cop, and use the argument, "If Winona's a shoplifter because of her fictional work, should not Blake be considered a cop because of his fictional work?"

Sounds ridiculous, yes? But this example is no less ridiculous than the bizarre argument fostered by Rundle.

Where does this leave all the rest of us? All Americans are affected by this. We all consume the products of our favorite artists in every medium! Those of us who work in this international

communications medium of public relations have a responsibility to the clients who pay us and also their families, that they can and should never be subjected to the invocation of fiction as a foundation of Guilt!

If creators are to be examined for every utterance of their fictional creations, Democarcy will become a thing of the past. If indeed this sounds alarmist, remember when the first screenwriters were called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, the media then saw nothing particularly alarming about it. In fact, that coverage had the same tone as the Winona Ryder Coverage: this just proves that Hollywood People aren't above the law. Just around the corner then was McCarthyism.

Yes, it might seem a big leap invoking the specter of McCarthyism. But Rundle's tactic is McCarthyism Incarnate, the seemingly truthful reference that ruins lives.

We in the media industries, should also acknowledge, that as much fun as it is making up headlines like "Shoplifting Interrupted" and "Winona Scissorhands" that Winona is a flesh and blood human being. Her plight might bring snickers of derision now, but it should remind us those snickers could be visited on anyone if the Rundle Way becomes the norm.

If your son plays a drunken Falstaff in a school play, and then rumors that he drinks circulate around campus, can the words of Shakespeare be used against him? If your daughter plays Maria in a school production of "West Side Story" and there's a gang incident near the campus, will she be considered culpable, somehow?

This blurring of fiction and reality is a phenomenon usually attributed to people in the sticks. Those among us who have Elvis pump their gas or are taken aboard UFO's . But when an Asst. DA in one of the world's media centers uses it as a legal argument, something really smells bad.

One of Winona Ryder's forgotten works is a screen version of Arthur Miller's "The Crucible". That was a powerful allegory about witch-hunting in the early American Colonies. Once again, but not in a way that could be easy for her, Winona Ryder has thrown some light on a new kind of witch hunt. We wish her, and all of us, the Best!