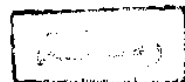


An M.A. Thesis



**SOCIAL CRITICISM IN THE DRAMATIC
WORK OF CLIFFORD ODETS**

By
EVENIS ADIB AZIZ

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FACULTY OF ARTS,
TANTA UNIVERSITY.*

Supervisor
PROFESSOR DR.
MOHAMMED MOHAMMED ANANI
AND
DR. MOHAMMED EL-SHAER

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INTRODUCTION

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Clifford Odets (1906-1963), born in Philadelphia and reared in the Bronx of New York, quit school at fifteen to become an actor. After acting with the Theatre Guild, he became one of the founders of the Group Theatre and was catapulted into fame by their production of his first play WAITING FOR LEFTY (1935) dealing with a taxi strike. This success was followed by the production of AWAKE AND SING (1935) and the one-act play TILL THE DAY I DIE (1935) about the struggle of the German communists at the beginning of the Hitler regime.

These plays brought Odets reputation as the leading proletarian playwright in America at that time, although he was less concerned with the problems of the worker than with the fraud of middle-class civilization, deprived by its economic insecurity of its former status and becoming aware that most of its cherished ideals no longer correspond to realities.

Further realistic plays written for the Group Theatre are PARADISE LOST (1935); GOLDEN BOY (1937), about a young Italian-American violinist whose desire for wealth and fame leads him to become a pugilist, and who dies in an automobile crash having attempted to find an escape in speed from the loss of his inner security; ROCKET TO THE MOON (1938), portraying a Bronx dentist who attempts to find happiness in a belated love affair, but fails because his

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will has been weakened by the meanness of his past life; NIGHT MUSIC (1940) the love story of a lower-middle-class couple in New York; and CLASH BY NIGHT (1941), a love triangle.

His later plays are THE BIG KNIFE (1948) about an idealistic actor corrupted by money easily earned from motion pictures; THE COUNTRY GIRL (1950) about an alcoholic actor's marriage; and THE FLOWERING PEACH (1954), a retelling of the Noah tale.

Odets had always possessed a passionate awareness of soul-suffocating conditions and felt it was time now to speak out against a system that had given birth to the rows of bleak tenements in the Bronx and allowed depression to settle over the land. Odets felt people's poverty and suffering and as a result he was full of anger and frustration and his strong feelings could find a way out in his early plays written during the first years of the 1930s.

This thesis focuses on the revolutionary spirit of Odets's drama. Odets believed that people should have fuller and richer lives. Throughout his life he maintained the same position. His characters are obliged to burst the bonds that restrict them in their middle-class milieu, to avoid being tied down by family and tradition, to seek their own place under the sun. This concept was repeated often in Odets's works.

In Odets's early plays WAITING FOR LEFTY and AWAKE AND SING, he suggests answers to the ills of a troubled society. There is

often a call to action of some sort in the early plays, and the action suggested is usually affirmative in nature. However, in GOLDEN BOY, BOCKET TO THE MOON, CLASH BY NIGHT and NIGHT MUSIC there are strong overtones of negation, which suggest that Odets is struggling with himself, trying to find answers but unable to do so. THE COUNTRY GIRL and THE BIG KNIFE do not contain the affirmation of the early plays.

The second chapter leads us from Odets's "revolutionary" drama to his interpretation of human nature and the general humanistic attitude of his plays. We have here his famous successful play GOLDEN BOY as an example. Although, GOLDEN BOY is orthodox enough and didactic enough to satisfy the Marxian conscience of the author, it is, at the same time, capable of engaging the interest of a spectator little concerned with political agitation. The action would as a matter of fact remain meaningful even to those who had never heard of the economic interpretation of character. It belongs to dramatic literature as a whole rather than merely to the political party of which its author happens to be a member.

The third chapter discusses the originality of Clifford Odets as a proletarian dramatist. It points out his new way of expressing intense feelings and its great effectiveness. Clifford Odets has achieved a paradoxical combination of detachment and participation. He observes like an outsider, reproducing with vivid and humorous truth manners and habits which an outsider could thus set down yet at the same time it is plain enough that his detachment is purely intellectual and artistic.

Emotionally he is still close to the people he is writing about and he understands them from the inside out.

Chapter four is a conclusion which shows what sort of dramatist Clifford Odets is to the new generation. While no new generation can ever recapture the precise ideological set of an earlier one, Odets has much to say to us because our social dilemmas have not changed in kind. In all his plays, Odets has something universal to say to all people at all times.

CHAPTER ONE

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CLIFFORD ODETS A REVOLUTIONARY PLAYWRIGHT

Clifford Odets (1906-1963) was known primarily as the leading proletarian playwright in the United States of the 1930s. In his own day, he was a man with a mission, and his plays burned with furious intensity. He gave vitality to the theatre of an era and established a memorable place in American dramatic history.

Odets's own family was decidedly middle-class. He was born in Philadelphia. During his early childhood, his father Louis, a Jewish Russian immigrant, held various jobs selling newspapers and selling salt, and his mother worked in a factory. When he was six, the family settled in the Bronx, where his father rose from a position as feeder in a printing plant to become the owner. The family lived in one of the first apartment buildings in the Bronx that had an elevator, and they owned a Maxwell automobile, two sure indicators of financial success. They later returned to Philadelphia, where Louis Odets became vice-president of a boiler company and owned an advertising agency, which he sold upon his retirement for two hundred thousand dollars. This means that as a child Odets was financially secure but in spite of this, "Odets claimed to have been a melancholy kid probably resulting from

his stormy relationship with his father, who had plans for his son to enter his advertising business, but from an early age, Odets wanted to become an actor"¹. Because Odets considered it a waste of time he dropped out of Morris High School in 1923 after two years and tried to write poetry. Anyhow, "Odets recalled in an interview that on one occasion his father, furious with his son's rebelliousness, smashed his typewriter. Later of course, his father replaced it, and eventually gave his permission for Odets to attempt a career on the stage"².

Odets had during the next seven years, a series of minor jobs in the theatrical world. He acted with the Drawing-Room players, a neighborhood company which presented one-act plays in the Heckscher Theatre. He also worked as an announcer for a small radio station in the Bronx, wrote radio plays, gave performances as a roving reciter specializing in the poems of Rudyard Kipling. At the age of twenty he acted in Mae Desmond's Stock Company, which performed primarily melodrama, but he apparently was not particularly talented as an actor. His first association with the Broadway stage came in 1929. Then, a member of the cast introduced Odets to the Theatre Guild, which led

¹ John MacNicholas, ed, Twentieth-Century American Dramatists (Vol. VII of Dictionary of Literary Biography; Michigan Gale Research Company, 1981), p. 127.

² Ibid.

him to join the Group Theatre in 1930. This event marked the actual beginning of Odets's career.

The ten-year history of the Group Theatre has been chronicled in Harold Clurman's THE FERVENT YEARS (1975). It was an organization of actors and directors founded by Clurman, Lee Strasberg, and Cheryl Cramford as a collective theatre, a group of individuals whose plays would reflect their values and attempt to change the society of which they were a part. They wanted the Group Theatre to be a training ground for actors, in which a unified method would be used by the directors to mold the actors into a single organism; because the production itself was most important, there would be no "stars". Although the Group Theatre occasionally failed to live up to its ideals and was periodically plagued by internal disputes, it was vigorously applauded by critics and has had a lasting impact on the American theatre. There is no question that it had an overwhelming influence on Odets who "was one of the leading figures of the Group Theatre, foremost among its writers...and frequently one of its most generous contributors in terms of funds"³.

³ Jean Gould, Modern American Playwrights (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1966), p. 194.

Meanwhile, as the depression continued and Odets found it increasingly difficult to survive (he lived with several other members of the Group Theatre in a large poorly heated apartment), he sought the solution to the problems of the suffering masses in the communist party, which he joined in 1934 and left after eight months. In 1952, testifying before the House Un-American Activities committee, Odets explained his feeling during the 1930s.

Literature was passed around and in a time of great social unrest many people found themselves reaching out for new ideas new ways of solving depressions or making a better living, fighting for one's rights...the rights to be steadily employed for instance. I believe at that time there were perhaps fifteen or sixteen million unemployed people in the United States, and I myself was living on ten cents a day...They were horrendous that none of us would like to go through again...[I] finally joined the communist party, in the belief, in the honest and real belief, that this was somehow out of the dilemma in which we found ourselves⁴.

From the certainty of WAITING FOR LEFTY (1935) to the uncertainty of THE FLOWERING PEACH (1954), Odets has organized his plays to make a specific point about human possibility; he has

⁴ John MacNicholas, ed., Twentieth-Century American Dramatists, pp. 127-128 .