

Clifford Odets's Dog of Betrayal: *Awake and Sing!* in Performance

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From the early agit-prop *Waiting For Lefty* to the last parable *The Flowering Peach*, a look at Clifford Odets's work for the stage over two decades reveals one theme whose appearance could be called an obsession. This unifying theme is the key to understanding Odets as a writer and, equally important, is of great use in directing Odets for performance. Examining how it operates so forcefully in his greatest play *Awake and Sing!* provides guidance for the director who must concretize the stage images which are necessary if Odets's pervasive and propulsive thematic concern is to move and touch modern audiences. I refer to what I call (adapting Mr. Prince's phrase in *Rocket to the Moon*) "the quiet, biting dog of betrayal." In this essay, I shall explore how betrayal is at work in *Awake and Sing!*, and how a recent production sought to reflect that theme in performance.

". . . [T]he life of New York," wrote Robert Warshow in his famous 1946 essay "Clifford Odets: Poet of the Jewish Middle Class," "can be said at this particular stage in the process of acculturation to embody the common experience of American Jews. Clifford Odets is the poet of this life."¹ It is Odets's audience (as well as his subject) which is noted in Warshow's title, and its preoccupation with "getting along" within the competition of daily life that became the psychological place from which Odets began his investigations of personal and political relationships. What prevents us from "getting along"? What assists us? The same (if partial) answer to those questions always surfaces in Odets's theatre, at once limiting and energizing the stories of his characters. And, of course, to those who know the story of Odets's career, the

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betrayal he felt and so often participated in is a crucial, even central aspect of a troubled, notorious and frequently unwholesome life.²

From first to last, no play of Odets exists without raising the theme of betrayal. We need only look at the four plays of 1935, the year of Odets's extraordinary playwriting debut in New York, for evidence of this. Whether the union goons in *Waiting For Lefty* will betray the rank and file, whether Lefty has betrayed his comrades (as Clayton, the labor spy has), whether Edna will betray Joe as she threatens, or whether lab assistant Miller will betray his scientist colleagues as he is asked,--these are just a few of *Lefty's* stories which are joined by his common theme. Ascertaining the truth of Ernst's sellout of the anti-fascist resistance is the entire dramatic interest of *Till The Day I Die*, one of several Odets plays that end in a suicide provoked by betrayal. In *Paradise Lost*, betrayals or suspicions of them appear throughout the play, from Libby's betrayal of Ben with Kewpie, Katz's betrayal of his workers and of his partnership with Leo, and, in the largest sense, America's betrayal of its 150-year-old revolutionary vision as related in the alcoholic reminiscences of Leo, Pike and Gus in the crucial drinking scene at the end of act one. And, as I shall try to make clear, betrayal is the organizing idea of *Awake and Sing!*

The issue of betrayal, which Harold Cantor in his book on Odets describes somewhat differently as the "sell-out," is the place where Odets's own psychological turbulence, artistic yearning and political ideology met. Many critics have remarked upon the importance of integrity Odets professed to require of artistic endeavor and personal relationships, as well as the attraction he felt for the supportive environments of family, collective, and cadre. The psychological, artistic, or geographical movement between engagement and detachment in Odets's relationships to his women, his family, his colleagues in the Group Theatre, or his country, truly describes the erratic course of Odets's work. Without doubt, the primary component in this movement is the fear of being betrayed or the terror of betraying oneself. In this view, Odets's life and work intersect at the precise place where personally, socially and politically speaking, we are all most vulnerable.

The places of betrayal in his dramatic texts supply not only exciting moments of conflict, but crucial motivation for his characters as well. Those characters are drawn to reveal the frustrations and occasional satisfactions of "getting along," and most are aware and wary of the compromises and risks that behavior entails. In situations of danger, they can either betray or be betrayed in any of the numerous ways Odets describes: sexually, financially, spiritually or politically, to name a few.

Concerning the quiet, biting dog, Odets's *Awake and Sing!* is something of a paradigm.³ In actions small and large, the characters jostle each other for advantage in the ruthless world which Bessie Berger describes in her final confrontation with her son Ralph. It is noteworthy that the disappointment and disadvantage all the characters experience precedes the changing "conditions" of economically depressed America. Bessie's thirty-year struggle

to make and keep her family respectable and secure has seen setback and gain, and left her as it has left Moe, Morty, Hennie and (for a time) Ralph, filled with a resentment that comes from a lifetime of fending off hardship. But her insensitivity to her family's distress (Hennie's pregnancy, Ralph's girl friend) is a product not only of economic deprivation or social dislocation. It is more truly a result of her own deflected ambition and desire. She has set aside her own needs for those of her children and, when it appears that her last hope for a modest share of financial well-being is taken from her with the loss of Jacob's insurance, she explodes with a passion provoked by a generation of self-denial. She realizes, as Hennie says more explicitly a few moments later, that all her life she has waited for that moment, and she has been betrayed by its failure to be realized. (Ralph later decides to give his mother the \$3,000 inheritance, not too high a price to pay now that he has his own room.) At the end, with a directness unmatched by her actions anywhere in the play, Bessie reveals the source of her anguish and, with the unburdening, achieves a degree of resigned acceptance to her life's struggle.

But I'll tell you a big secret: My whole life I wanted to go away too, but with children a woman stays home. A fire burned in *my* heart too, but now it's too late. (III)

The point of interest here is Bessie's description of how she believes life has betrayed her. Facing a bleak future without hope of financial stability or social reputation, she has lost both of the emblems of success her striving nature has sought after. "She'll go on forever, Mom," says Moe, but the truth of the statement is somewhat overstated. Nonetheless, the image we remember, one we have heard and seen throughout the play, is asserted by Bessie's vulgar brother Morty: "You made a cushion--sleep." With its idea of giving and getting, of negotiating and trading, Odets is talking to us about the facts of the urban Jew's precarious life.

In *Awake and Sing!*, Odets's dog of betrayal is taken out for a walk in various places: in Moe's war hospital and Morty's showroom floor, on the playing field and at the dining room table. Moe's years of bitterness, the result of a degraded and unhappy childhood and an amputated leg (lost, with sad irony, the day before the Armistice) cannot be neutralized by either a good day at the races, a medal from Uncle Sam's army, or a closet full of wooden limbs. The animal power of Moe's personality, exciting and dangerous as Hennie Berger well knows, results from the frustrations of his unhappy life which he sees as one of victimization and betrayal. In his final scene, in a fury over his perceived betrayal by his family, and his country and its leaders, he turns to the only woman he loves who then rejects him (initially) because Moe had betrayed her several years before.

Life for the Berger family is a trade-off, and each member attempts to secure the best bargain. Of course, "bargains" may turn bad, as Bessie notes

about Sam Feinschreiber, after quieting his fear of betrayal by Hennie in act two: "She's a girl money can't buy," she assures the misfit who began his brief courtship of her daughter with the gift of a "weekend special" of Loft's candy, "two for thirty-nine." Grandpa Jacob has traded his ambitious dreams of revolution for an unfulfilled barber's life, but he urges Ralph to carry on the visions of a better world through the radical actions he failed to carry out. To free his grandson, he trades his life for the insurance money that will be his final gesture of rebellion against his family's entrapment and his own weak will. Morty, the most skilled and unscrupulous trader in the family, is a dress manufacturer whose wealth has bought him both security and anxiety while leaving his vulgarity unimpaired. His American dream of a duck quacking in every pot is shaken by his worry over striking workers and fickle weather. But, by his (and Bessie's) standards, he comes out on top of life's trade-offs, primarily because he has neither the sensitivity nor the compassion to sense any deep loss and yet acts with energy and shrewdness to make his own way.

The idea of the trade-off expresses the theme of betrayal. It appears most strongly at the end of *Awake and Sing!* Moe implores Hennie to escape with him to Yama-Yama Land. He refers to the worst trade in his own life, the double betrayal of his ideals and his body: "The Doctor said it--cut off your leg to save your life! And they done it--one thing to get another." And Hennie, deciding not to spend the rest of her life in a coffin, gives *one thing to get another*: she leaves her baby and the unendurable Sam for the chance of a romantic escape from a life of "getting on" in the Bronx. Ralph, too, has taken up the trading metaphor. Earlier, he had joined financial terminology to the language of sports which Odets used so brilliantly to give his characters specificity and color, as when he described the "team" he plays on at the warehouse where he works. Later, when Moe imagines and rejects a "swap" for Ralph ("I wouldn't trade you for two pitchers and an outfielder"), both men understand life's odds as well as baseball's.

In a performance of *Awake and Sing!* many opportunities are presented to make the idea of the trade-off visually explicit.⁴ Odets specifies the first occasion in act one when Moe answers Jacob's request "for a cent a cigarette." The penny passes back and forth between them until Moe finally disposes of it, an exchange concluded between friends without winner or loser, betrayer or betrayed. A moment of trust is established, although stakes are small.

On three other occasions the opportunity is presented for the director to underscore and *dramatize* Odets's image of trading to survive. 1) Moe returns with Myron's winnings (plus a box of cake) and asks Bessie for change, which Bessie provides. Shortly after, Moe returns the "two bits" to Hennie so she can "spit in his eye," and Bessie picks up the quarter as a gesture of "buying" Moe for her daughter. The offer is rejected but remembered later when Moe offers the coin to Myron as a match or *trade* "for anything you got," by which he means Hennie. 2) Jacob, in the second act, urges on Morty his

insurance policy, whereupon they engage in a brief but meaningful exchange of the envelope. 3) Ralph, in the final act, asks for his grandfather's "suicide note" from Moe, which is then passed between them until Ralph decides what his relationship is to the piece of paper. After that, it can be disposed of.

At these times (and others) the gesture of trade can be made visually explicit; bound up with each is the complicated playing out of the theme of betrayal. My favorite moment presents itself a few minutes before the final curtain. Earlier in the play, Hennie was given a prop invented for this production and later sat at the dinner table sewing her child's toy, in this case a small beanbag with buttons for eyes. After her decision to run off with Moe, she goes to retrieve her coat from Bessie's bedroom bringing back with her the toy which represents the incomplete nature of her break with the Bronx. But Moe, knowing her break (and betrayal) of her family must be complete, takes the toy from her and tosses (pitches) it to Ralph who catches it and stands, unbowed and *untraded*, watching the couple escape to a land where personal fulfillment has a greater chance of success (or so they believe), and no baseball teams.

Thematically and theatrically, what is at stake here is the playing out of the trades we make in life, or at least the attempts we make to increase the odds in our favor so that the trades will not betray us. "Gimme a buck, I'll run it up to ten," Moe says to Hennie in act three. One danger for the Bergers, as for all of us, occurs when their winning depends on someone else's losing, in particular someone they know. Thus, the positive side of the trade of Hennie's marriage (finding a father for Hennie's child and, to a lesser degree, Ralph getting his own room) has a negative side too (Hennie's terrible unhappiness with Sam). Of course, Ralph's need for privacy, as he explains, is only one deprivation he suffers in a life which, though young, has betrayed all his expectations. The list of Ralph's sacrifices includes skates, black and white shoes, dancing lessons, birthday parties, privileged use of the telephone and steam in the warehouse. And when Hennie does marry, Ralph loses again: Moe gets Hennie's room, although not Hennie, yet. Only when Jacob dies does Ralph assume his spiritual-intellectual legacy, that allows him to trade up with great (although perhaps temporary) satisfaction. He gives up dollar bills and in return acquires a small library of (unread) books and a room of his own to read them in. One thing to get another.

Most important for the movement of plot in *Awake and Sing!* are three crucial events of deception and trade-off: the entrapment of Sam and Ralph's discovery of it; the deception of Ralph by his parents and uncle concerning Jake's insurance money; and the abandonment by Hennie of her family, the effects of which we don't see in the play. These are the explicit incidents in what I have called the action of betrayal. But in countless small ways, trust is destroyed in the characters' lives in a way which produces an *environment* of betrayal. Moe cuts Skyrocket's winning odds from 15-to-1 to 12 1/2-to-1 and adjusts the amount of his government pension. Bessie adds two years to

Hennie's age increasing the pressure on her daughter to marry, and she lies to Ralph about Blanche's phone call. Even Mr. Wimmer, the Berger's landlord, fails to honor his promise to repair the apartment. Odets's intention is to describe a society where the facts of life prove the untrustworthiness of both information and expectation, a situation which encourages the human need to improve the odds against which survival is measured.

Of Odets's characters, the weakest and most vulnerable are those who combine the least guile with the most idealism. We cannot be sure that Ralph, advised several times in the play to make up his mind and "do," will be able to find a successful career as a warehouse revolutionary. His ultimate success will depend on whether he can maintain energy and commitment to the humane vision vouchsafed to him by Jacob. His future causes us doubt throughout the play, squeezed as he is between the crass pragmatism of his mother and the dreamy ineffectuality of his father. In the second act, through Myron's slip of the tongue, Ralph learns about the family's betrayal of Sam in getting him to marry Hennie. ("You make me sick," he tells Jacob for participating in the cover-up, and his remark is a definite cause of the grandfather's suicide.) A week later, Moe reveals to Ralph the family's plot to deny him the insurance money and Ralph, alerted to this next scheme in the ongoing network of betrayal, at last is roused to the kind of action Moe and Jacob predict for him. Morty sees the change immediately when Ralph enters the dining room from Jacob's room: "What's the matter, Ralphie? What are you looking funny?" Ralph's valedictory declares his *trust* in himself ("we've got arms") and his hope for a better life for everyone. We credit his optimism less to experience than to youthful passion and the rhetorical intoxication of his rightful inheritance. As Gerald Weales points out in his splendid book on Odets,⁵ the play's ending works "as a theatrical fact" despite the contrary conclusion we would draw from our contact with this relentless environment of betrayal.

The ending of *Awake and Sing!* works because Ralph has found courage in himself and in others in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary in human affairs. His decision to give Bessie the money *and* to stay at home is a rejection of trading for selfish advantage, and it has our emotional support more than our rational acceptance. (There is irony in Blanche's belief that Ralph has betrayed *her*.) Without any possessions to speak of except Jacob's books, lacking even a "ten-cent nailfile," and wanting little more than a bigger lamp to read by, he appears to have overcome his history of betrayal. For one perfect moment Odets, himself no stranger to selling-out, was able to create a character who is attached *and* free and who has the best of both worlds. Later in the 1930s, exactly this victory was denied the "unconnected" Joe Bonaparte of *Golden Boy* or the too-connected Ben Stark of *Rocket to the Moon*, both protagonists whose lives are ruled by the terror of betrayal of self or betrayal by other.

Further, Ralph is one of the few Odets characters whose trust of others gives others courage (Tokio in *Golden Boy* and A.L. Rosenberger in *Night Music* are two others). "Do it," he tells Hennie, pleading with her to leave the apartment life and claim her freedom, and with the advice he passes on to her his own version of the counsel given him by Jacob and Moe. Ralph's remaining behind to play on the warehouse team makes it easier for us to bid a glad farewell to the couple heading for the land of citrus and indolence. Filled with optimism for the future as well as with the sadness of his past, he recalls his father's failure ("May I die like a dog, if I can't get more from life") and charts his own course for "getting on." Moe's dream, in a cynical contrast, has less bite or bark: "In the next life I wanna be a dog and lie in a fat lady's lap." Hennie, "big in the tangerines," agrees to join this fantasy, trading in her bitter urban past for a lazy tropical future. In the background Jacob's records ironically spin: "O Paradiso."

Finally, Odets writes his play with a very special concern for his characters' hands and feet, for even they play a crucial role in the concretizing of the theme of betrayal. (Hands, of course, are at the center of Joe Bonaparte's struggle in *Golden Boy*.) He has, to push the point, gone out on a limb. In producing *Awake and Sing!*, as with any production, attention must be given to the physical details of gesture for the purpose of supporting the play's theme. In the recent production I have been referring to, Moe's hands were powerfully used, for example, crushing apples in act one as a substitute for hurting people. Moe is street smart and knows his destructive strength; at various times in the play he threatens Ralph, Morty and Hennie with violence. (He also is an agile card player.) We know he seduced Hennie by grabbing her arms, and betrayed her (using his own brutal metaphor and accompanied by an appropriate gesture) by cutting her up like a herring in a Greek salad. His assessment of Ralph at the end of the play, "He's a fighter," is a high compliment; his assessment of Myron as "punchdrunk" is a harsh though regretful rebuke.

Hennie's hands are "like raw potatoes," and she massages them through the play. Their deteriorating condition parallels her own. Morty, with a fastidiousness his ample money can buy, worries about where he left his gloves, whereas Shlosser the janitor, always the laborer, worries about the fatigue in his arms. For Odets, associating the hands and arms with work is a natural connection to make for, consistent with his political ideology at the time (and a rebuke to it in his later Hollywood days), there is nobility, even joy in working with one's hands in productive labor. This applies to Jacob's cutting hair "to fit the face" with hand not electric clippers, as well as to achieving the vision of the better future the old man articulates: "spit on your hands and get to work."

Hands and arms, then, express both character and theme in *Awake and Sing!* by either showing trust or destroying it. In the hands of an expert such as Bessie, both can be shown simultaneously. In fact, whenever someone was

taken into another's arms, fundamental relationships of trust and betrayal were revealed. For example, Bessie's embrace of Hennie forgiving her sexual indiscretion (I), Jacob's comforting embrace of Ralph after Blanche's phone call (II, 1), Myron's helpless embrace of Ralph in his belated attempt to express love for his son (II, 2), Hennie's cowardly embrace of Sam after she lies about her affection for him (III), Myron and Bessie embracing during her confession about how she is the real head of the family (III), Hennie and Moe embracing to affirm their decision to leave the Bronx for Yama-Yama Land (III), and the several embraces among parents and siblings at the conclusion of the play were all crucial visual moments deserving special care. In creating these visual moments we learn much about the Bergers, and we come to know how the members of this family find fear or favor in the arms of others, measuring the trust and betrayal which are the true thematic preoccupation of Clifford Odets.

Concerning the characters' feet, there is one image, created by sound (the radio playing in act two) as well as sight, which summarizes so much of the play's meaning. It owes its power to the mixture of the exotic and the bizarre, the graceful and the awkward glimpse of beauty and the betrayal of it.

HENNIE: What do you want, Moe, what do you want?
 MOE: You!
 HENNIE: You'll be sorry you ever started--
 MOE: You!
 HENNIE: Moe, lemme go-- (*Trying to leave*) I'm getting up
 early--lemme go.
 MOE: No! . . . I got enough fever to blow the whole damn
 town to hell. (*He suddenly releases her and half
 stumbles backwards.*)

Here, Moe and Hennie, are passionately struggling in a dancers' embrace, he of the wooden leg and she of the battered arms. The dynamic image they create is financially if not choreographically precise, a desperate attempt at Moe's desire to "tango on a dime."

It is, of course, the texture of image and language in Odets's great plays which works as the vital carrier of his preoccupation with the precarious nature of existence whose economic and social underpinnings, never really secure, were now in an advanced state of chaos. The Bergers and their Bronx neighbors live the details of their lives in the hard context of economics, which is to say of buying and selling, of trading and negotiating, of seeking profit and avoiding loss. These are ancient skills, turned to advance whenever possible, but never guaranteed of success. "But the Bergers," wrote Warshow a generation ago "are important. The luckiest is not out of sight of them; no

consideration of the Jews of America can leave them out; in the consciousness of most of us they do in some sense stand for 'Jew'."

The themes of *Awake and Sing!*, so specifically Jewish are, of course, universal. The one that we seized touched everything in our production. So pervasive is the theme of betrayal in all Odets's work that even when he describes opportunity for human endeavor, he can't escape the image of human failure. In *Awake and Sing!*, Tootsie the Berger's real dog is never referred to after it dies along with Jacob in the beginning of the fall of the House of Berger. In this play, Odets's overriding concern with the sell-out "dogged" our production as it did the playwright's whole life. It is the defining theatrical and thematic aspect of the play, its "silhouette of meaning" in Peter Brook's phrase. It became the key to understanding whether our dreams of success can soar like the Boston mail plane or fall to earth on the slippery evening we take them for a metaphorical walk on the rooftops.

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Notes

1. In *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Anchor Books, 1964) 23-4.
2. The standard biography is Margaret Brenman-Gibson *Clifford Odets: American Playwright* (New York: Atheneum, 1981).
3. Note Marcus Hoff's comment in *The Big Knife*: "I myself, if I had the nose of a dog, how many people I'd bite in the dark."
4. I refer specifically to the production of *Awake and Sing!* that I directed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in November, 1986.
5. *Clifford Odets: Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1985).

Research, Plays, and Books

