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THE GROUP THEATRE:
A REFLECTION OF THE THEATRE IN THE THIRTIES

Abby Ruth Eiferman

April 29, 1972

Sing us a song of social significance
Or you can sing until you're blue
Let meaning shine in every line
Or we won't love you. [1]

This snatch of lyrics, sung in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union revue Pins and Needles of 1937 captures an important aspect of the literary spirit of the 1930's. This decade was marked by a tendency of artists towards political and social commitment, a time when the reconstruction of American society and the menace of Fascism was a cause celebre to which artists could rally. American artists had always been interested in changing society, or at least exposing the evils they perceived, but the 1930's saw a new kind of commitment and dedication. The economic breakdown caused by the depression had invoked a search for social alternatives much more intense than the complacency of the prosperous 1920's had witnessed. To many writers of the twenties, the social enemies were straw men, the Puritans and the Philistines, and not, significantly, the system which had nurtured them. To those writers who were disgusted by the emptiness they perceived in American during this decade, escape lay simply in flight to the bohemianism of Greenwich Village or the cultural richness of Paris. The only time the twenties had witnessed a consolidation of the artistic-intellectual community was the rally to defend Sacco and Venzetti. But the disparate elements brought together were

dispersed after the execution of the anarchists, not to converge again until the middle of the next decade.[2] By this time, the writers had realized that their pens could be formidable weapons, and remained at home to fight.

The economic collapse of the depression years finally gave many writers an opportunity to attack the system they had so long realized to be rotten, and gave them an attentive public. Everyone knew that something had gone wrong in America and that something disturbing was happening in Europe. The writer's job was to point out the mistakes and aid in constructing a better society.

The voice of the time speaks best in explaining the new sense of a writer's obligation. In 1937 Eugene Holmes wrote that the writers of the previous decades

> could not see the roots which both produced and nourished the evils they attacked . . . We are more fortunate. Today there is no one, if he but will, who may not <u>see</u> and comprehend the root causes of war, fascism, injustice, the distortion of the human being, and all of the inter-relationships of all of the subsequent complexities and contradictions.
>
> Because we can see more clearly our social obligation is greater. So also is our artistic obligation. [3]

This sense of duty, of the necessity for fighting to achieve a better world, gave the writers of this period the possibility of finding meaning in commitment. There was a "sense of living on the crest of history--of being a vital element in the age to which one is born . . ."[4] The literature of this period, specifically the significant dramatic literature, reflected the writer's feeling of social obligation.

The social and political dramatic literature took a decidedly left-wards tone in this period. During the thirties many liberals turned left, for they saw no other way to go.[5] In a sense, the depression had served as a radicalizing force. And with the search for a new social order, many writers looked toward Communism, for they were witnessing a period of dynamism and intellectual growth in the Soviet Union. The Communist doctrine regarded the aestheticism of capitalism as a peculiarly vicious form of decadence and proclaimed not the freedom of art, but that art was a "weapon."[6] The artist's commitment, thus, was fundamental to the change of society. To those who could not swallow Communism's dogmatic artistic tenets, the Popular Front against Fascism, established in 1935 was a practical solution, in which non-radical and anti-fascist intellectuals could unite. By 1935 the Communists who had slowly been alienating earlier intellectual converts now openly sought the support of those non-radical, anti-fascist intellectuals. Although the trend toward radicalism had been partially soothed by the New Deal, the fascist menace grew throughout the decade. The doctrine of the Popular Front, declared by the Comintern in 1935, no longer viewed all capitalistic states as equally imperialistic. All could unite to oppose fascism. The commitment to the Popular Front, furthermore, was pragmatic, rather than totally ideological. Adherents of the Popular Front simply accepted certain Marxist tenets, while disregarding others.[7]

But the Communist idea of drama as a weapon had taken hold

on the young playwrights of the time. The intellectual climate of the thirties found expression in the social drama of the period. To students of the drama during the thirties, this social and political preoccupation seemed natural and logical. In 1935 an article read before the American Writer's Congress stated:

> The fact that all drama, great, near-great, or merely time filling, is social drama, in that it reflects and influences the conventions, moods, and actions of various social strata, is, by this time generally recognized. 8

Another contemporary student held that, "A vital theater . . . calls for plays which furnish commentary, interpretation, illumination and criticism of that epoch."[9]

The recognition of the value of plays dealing with contemporary issues led to the belief that the stage could do more than expose, it could attempt to effect reform through intense involvement with the national scene.[10] The new theatre movement which developed during the 1930's encompassed plays written from various leftist political points of view. It was not until the late 1920's that much effort had beem made to use the stage as a soap box, and the new conception of theatre as propaganda "developed chiefly as a result of that hardening of political convictions which the depression produced."[11]

The new social theatre, or theatre of the left, or propoganda theatre which arose did not, importantly, dominate the stage. Most plays produced from 1930-1941 were not social dramas, but the common Broadway fare of romance and comedies. But if the

significant drama of the thirties is considered; that which had the greatest survival value and the most critical attention, an overwhelming preoccupation with social issues is evident.[12]

This critical concern is apparent in the proliferation of Marxist criticism which appeared in organs like New Masses and The Daily Worker, and even seeped into the more "bourgeois" papers like The New York Times. The critical thrust was centered on what was being said in the plays rather than the aesthetic quality.[13] This was due perhaps, in part, to the growing respectability and popularity of Marxian aesthetics, but the general social awareness of the thirties played a more substantial part in determining critical standards of a decidedly issue-oriented nature.

While the theatre of the left was becoming embroiled in issues, an easthetic mission was not forgotten. The enemies were not only the evil of fascism or capitalism, but the organization of the entire realm of "Show Business." By the early thirties, due to the practice of theatres being converted to movie houses, the "road" had been reduced to a few key cities and the number of Broadway theatres and productions were beginning to shrink.[14] With the diminishing number of theatres available for production, the production of plays became viciously competitive with significant aesthetic results. Anita Block, a contemporary dramatic critic viewed this competition with disgust, maintaining, "'Show business' is first, last, and always the cynical exploiter of audiences and the most sinister obstacle in the way of a vital theatre."[15] The plays which had the greatest financial success, she believed, were those which

offered escapist entertainment, for "life all along the line is a worrisome and frightening affair, and frightened people consciously or unconsciously seek escape from the reality which oppresses them," and this escape found expression in plays which represented life as the audience would like it to be.[16] Financial success, it was implied, could not be found in plays which painfully explored the reasons for oppression and disillusion.

The typical Broadway fare of amusement or entertainment was mirrored by its most serious competitor, Hollywood. The large movie studios controlled the production of films, attentive mainly to the box office. The movie industry, furthermore, had two overwhelming advantages over the legitimate stage. Another equally appalled contemporary dramatic critic, Eleanor Flexner, expressed her frustration with Hollywood's power of making "available inferior entertainment at low prices, thus attracting the theatre audience and ruining its taste."[17] The astronomic salaries offered in Hollywood, Ms. Flexner maintained has also "drawn away from the theatre a large proportion of its talent."[18] The impact of the financial power of Hollywood only enhanced the trend for plays to be devoted to comedy, romantic drama, farce and musicals,[19] in order to successfully compete.

The set up of the entertainment industry, coupled with the problems urgently pressing on American society, led to a perceived necessity for dramas dealing with the economic, social, and political problems of the time. To the critics cited above, show business was causing the theatre to stagnate. The

new social plays produced during the decade offered these concerned people some hope. Eleanor Flexner beleived that with all its shortcomings, the new movement on the stage had enriched the theatre with a vast new field of subject matter, novel and vital forms, and above all, brought to the public a consideration of social problems a positive and dynamic view, which, when coupled with first rate craftsmanship yielded superb theatrical results.[20] The "vital theatre" that Anita Block envisiond as a result of the new concern would have an integral position in society. The drama, these critics implied, should wrestle with hard societal facts, and should direct aestheticism and craftsmanship toward a concrete, perhaps utilitarian position in society. The drama should not be made simplistic for mass consumption, but should single out significant issues in order to deal with them artistically and effectively. The social drama which did arise to challenge the "Show Business" ethic and attack and mirror the realities of the time reflected these concerns, both in subject matter and form.

The twenties had witnessed several plays dealing with social themes which were expressionistic in style.[21] The most notable of these was Elmer Rice's <u>The Adding Machine</u> of 1923. The main character, Mr. Zero, reflects the ordinary, dull, and hopeless condition of the American working man, frustrated in every endeavor. But the expressionistic style of the play, while admired by intellectuals and aesthetes, could not be suitably understood by the average person, the audience social drama hoped

to capture, the audience most affected and imprisoned by the social system. Instead, the social dramas of the thirties were more realistic in style, mirroring another play dealing with a social theme also by Rice; Street Scene, produced in January, 1929. This play is intensely mimetic. The set of an old brownstone in New York City looks exactly like the model[22], the dialogue is straight off the streets, the characters are the lower middle class of the city. In this play Rice was a pioneer in the new attempt at verisimilitude, Street Scene was the first play to record city noises and amplify them throughout the performance.[23] The renaissance of American drama seen in the twenties, with the search for new modes of expression, was directed into a radically different channel in the following decade. The experimentation of the twenties seemed frivolous to the serious social dramatists of the thirties, so in that period "American drama was concerned with centering its attention on what it had to say, rather than on the means of dramatic statement."[24]

The prevailing realistic form of the social drama of the thirties naturally led to the melodramatic mode. A melodrama generally operates first and foremost on the assumptions which the audience brings to the theatre. These assumptions cover the wide range of common cultural experience, emphasizing traditionally accepted moral values. To heighten this association with common values, the social dramas of the thirties capitalized on the social, political, and economic problems shared by the

depression audiences. This was effected by using average middle class people as major characters who spoke in the peculiar vernacular of the time. The generalized use of mimetic sets served to intensify the commonality of experience depicted on the stage, emphasizing the bond between the audience and the actors. The ephemeral nature of the social dramas of the thirties further attest to the reliance on audience assumptions; although the moral issues are comprehensible to the reader in 1972, the particularized social, political, and economic atmosphere is best understood through reference to a history book.

The melodrama is also characterized by a complete reliance on emotions. Gut reactions are called for in response to the problems presented in the plays. Complex issues are reduced to an easily recognizable emotional struggle between good and evil, the evil usually being the capitalist system with its myth of success, the good being the hapless character fighting to rid himself of the myth in order to rise to true human fulfillment. The complexities of the depression era are generally simplified for mass consumption, an intellectual grasp of the total situation is never an assumption of these dramas. Instead of the growth of perception in a complex situation like that in King Lear, for example, the melodramatic form of the social dramas does not widen understanding, but carefully channels audience reactions into a predictable dichotomy of approval and rejection. This is not to imply, however, that the social

plays denied richness in characterization or complexity of plot, but that reaction to both the characters and situations could only be on an emotional level. No heightening of understanding the problems faced by humanity is reached, in a purely intellectual sense. The intention of these plays was simply to win the audience over to a particular way of regarding society, which could be accomplished most efficiently by appealing to emotions. The purpose of this appeal was to raise the social conscsiousness of the audience and to provide them with an emotional experience which would hopefully widen understanding and evoke sympathy for a radical viewpoint.

The perceived mecessity for plays dealing with contemporary issues and accompanied by a particular social message; coupled with the demonstrated inadequacy of the regular channels of "Show Business" led to a new movement on the American stage. Unlike the twenties when New York had only two minor companies which produced plays dealing with social issues, the Worker's Drama League and the New Playwright's Theatre, the thirties witnessed a burgeoning of many more social theatres in New York, the capital of the American stage. These new theatres set out to attract a new audience--poor workers who could not afford a Broadway ticket and their wealthier sympathizers.[25]

One of the most distinguished of the groups arising from the thirties was the Group Theatre, whose existence spanned the decade from 1931 to 1941. One critic has summed up the Group's achievement in this manner, "the record of American

dramatic accomplishment in the thirties is very largely the record of the Group Theatre."[26]

The Group Theatre was born in the spring of 1931 when three employees of the Theatre Guild--Harold Clurman, a play reader, Cheryl Crawford, a casting director, and Lee Strassberg, an actor, organized a company of 28 actors to rehearse a play for eventual Broadway presentation.[27] The three founders became the directors of the Group until 1937 when Clurman was the sole director. Through a permanent company of professional actors united by a common point of view and trained in a single method, the directors hoped to "give the most expert and complete dramatic expression" to plays that dealt with "the essential moral and social preoccupation" of the time.[28] The Group Theatre was not conceived as a propaganda organ, but a theatrical organization whose aim, in the words of Harold Clurman, "was not and never had been to become a political theatre, but to be a creative and truly representative American theatre."[29]

The founders believed that in order to be representative of American life, a new acting method should be used to create a greater theatrical realism than had been possible previously on the American stage. This new method was derived from Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre, and consisted of scene improvisations and "the excercise of affective memory," in which an actor was asked to recall emotional details from an event of his own past, producing a certain mood. These excercises set the mechanisms of the emotions in motion, preparing the actor to do a scene calling for a particular emotion.[30] The

new method of acting was to complemented by an upgrading of all aspects of theatrical production. Clurman asserted:

> There were to be no stars in our theatre, not for the negative distinction of avoiding distinction, but because all distinction--and we would strive to attain the highest--was to be embodied in the production as a whole. 31

After the Group's first production of The House of Connelly on September 28, 1931, Clurman attested to the success of the Group's endeavors:

> The value and importance . . . was not that it had better actors or even a better director, not that it was composed according to a more serious method or took more time to prepare, but that its technique and intention were aimed toward the creation of something different in kind from the usual production . . . The Group had succeeded in fusing the technical elements of their craft with the stuff of their own spiritual and emotional selves. 32

The Group's concentration on raising the quality of production resulted in theatrical practices unusual on the Broadway stage. Actors' salaries, for example, were not dependent on the size of their roles, but fixed by the directors for the entire season. The Group produced an average of two plays per season, and an actor would receive the fixed sum (which was generally a substinence wage due to the Group's continually precarious financial position), regardless if the actor had no part at all in the productions for the season. The actors and actresses who comprised the Group Theatre, therefore, were concerned mainly with their craft, not their fame or salary, and were fiercely loyal to the Group's ideals. Many endured poverty, and refused to be lured away by juicy offers from Broadway or

Hollywood. The attempt to foster a spirit of communalism attested to the Group's radical position as a producing organization. Through communalism, each actor could strive to improve himself as an artist, rather than a competitive commodity. In an article addressed to The New York Times on January 25, 1933, Clurman described the unique operational procedures of the Group:

> The Group began its career during a period of severe economic depression, and, therefore had to go about its work without the benefit of a subsidy or patronage of any kind. This means it had to present its plays on practically the same basis as any other producer. But what the Group Theatre aimed to do was fundamentally different from Broadway, and its position as a competing organization was entirely irrelevant and even injurious to its aim.
>
> . . . When you choose your scripts not as commercial bait, but for the pertinence of what they have to say, when you know beforehand that some of the scripts chosen are by no means perfect . . . when you do not cast strictly according to the "type" system, which not only managers but many playwrights and even reviewers insist upon, when you have undertaken to sustain a permanent acting company which does not limit itself to the customary four-week rehearsal period; when, finally, the number of so-called good plays is alarmingly small in any event persistance in pursuing the ordinary course of theatrical production becomes folly . . . 33

The position of the Group as a different kind of producing organization is reflected in the plays chosen by the directors to put on the stage. In considering the body of the Group's plays as a whole, it must be remembered that the choice of plays was strictly defined by the output of contemporary playwrights, for the Group did no revivals with the exception of plays they had originally produced. Clurman believed that a good play for

the Group to produce was:

> one which . . . is the image or symbol of the living problems of our time. These problems are chiefly moral and social and our feeling is that they must be faced with an essentially affirmative attitude, that is, in the belief that to all of them there must be some answer, an answer that should be considered operative for at least the humanity of our time and place. 34

The concern for contemporary moral and social issues with an accompanying affirmative attitude is best illustrated in the notable rejection of Maxwell Anderson's Winterset. This play is a parable about the Sacco and Venzetti case, in which the son of an unjustly executed man seeks revenge for his father's death. The play has an interesting Elizabethan poetic quality, but ends with the murder of the son and his young lover whose brother's false testimony had led to the original execution. When Clurman first read the script he "could not make myself comfortable in its atmosphere of an 'Elizabethan' East Side."[35] Although Clurman later regretted the decision not to produce Winterset, the actors were shocked at this change of view. They had "felt no immediacy, no true life in the play, only a filtering of these matters (Justice, Sacco and Venzetti) through a sentimental and literary imagination."[36] A more tangible reason for dissatisfaction with the play, I believe, is due to the the fact that the villains murder the young heroes, even though the old father asserts in the end, "And these, who were yet children, will weigh more than all a city's elders when the experiment is reckoned up in the end."[37]

Although the old father speaks in the voice of wisdom, it is painfully evident that the justice of the young man's revenge was not fulfilled. In none of the Group's plays is there this marked attempt at tragedy for the righteous, in all the plays the oppressed triumph to some degree. The optimism of the plays reflect in a large measure the ritual optimism of the political left.[38]

Another indication of the Group's commitment to optimism was the changing of the ending of the first play produced, Paul Green's The House of Connelly. This, perhaps, set the tone for the future. The play deals with the last scion of a degenerating Southern family during the turn of the century and his love for a young tenant farm girl. The play points out the futility of continuing the Old Southern order, and upholds a belief that the love between Will Connelly and Patsy can bring society "out of this death and darkness--into the light!"[39] In the original version Patsy is murdered by two Negro women who serve as a kind of Chorus. Clurman though the ending to be false:

> a stock device to round off a rather somber play. It struck us as historically and humanly untrue and in conflict with what we thought to be the theme of the play. . . The resistance of the black servants was something that had to be overcome through Patsy's firmness, rather than yielded to through a memory of Fates in literary drama.
>
> . . . Our own sense of the perfectability of man, or at least, the inevitability of the struggle against evil, not only made us impatient with the play's violent ending, but roused Paul's own verve and decision in our direction. [40]

In the revised version, Patsy is not murdered and is allowed to triumph. This gives the play a rather lopsided quality, for the two Negro women loom ominously through the first two acts, in the revised last scene they are shuffling, silly, stereotyped Negroes.

The optimism portrayed in the Group's productions occassionally took a decidedly practical political turn (the call to strike in Waiting For Lefty, the organization of the unemployed in 1931--), but generally the optimism was expressed more vaguely in a less politically orthodox manner. Like many sensitive people in the 1930's, the young actors of the Group (the average age of the company at its inception was 27), were attracted towards the political left. During the Group's second summer of rehearsal Clurman noted that a "sudden preoccupation with social, economic, and political matters was like a fever running through our camp."[41] With the financial success of Sidney Kingsley's Men in White in 1933, Clurman realized the conscience of several of the actors

> was troubling them over the fact that we, the first to have spoken of a theatre with social significance, were making money with a play that to our more intimate critics was on the level of a Saturday Evening Post story, while downtown the Theatre Union had alreadyput on Peace on Earth, an anti-war play, and were preparing Stevedore, a rousing play on the negro problem. [42]

The result was that the "actors began to question themselves, their work, their theatre. They seemed to hanker after barricade dramatics, a sense of being in the fight, rather than on the side lines."[43]

With this agitation, the directors still maintained firm control over the selection of plays, upholding the original critereon of creating a "tradition of common values, an active consciousness of a common way of looking at and dealing with life . . ."[44] This view obligated the directors not to commit themselves to a particular political philosophy. Clurman admits:

> my education and inclinations had been chiefly aesthetic. Besides this, however, I had always had a reluctance to delve into problems while they still remained outside the range of my actual experience. [45]

And Clurman's standards prevailed, good drama was given preferance over outright propaganda. Lately scholarship has made much of the testimony of Group members Clifford Odets and Elia Kazan before HUAC in 1952. Odets reported that of a total of 35 members in the Group, four or five were connected to the Communist party, Kazan claimed a membership of nine.[46] But the point is not whether the agitation in the Group was inspired by Communist infiltration, but that the members of the Group Theatre were responding to the pulse of their time. The record of the plays produced by the Group Theatre, nevertheless, show a marked preoccupation with social issues in response to the search for common values.

Of the Group's published[47] productions up to 1939 (when plays were responding to a decidedly different historical circumstance), only Men In White did not respond to a particular issue. But Men In White did conform to another dominant motif

of the majority of Group productions; its hero was young and idealisitic, these two words seemingly inseperable in the Group's plays. Young Dr. Ferguson in Men In White faces a choice between love and duty, and he chooses the more concretely ideal duty. The fulfillment of his love must wait until he has fulfilled his scientific duty. Dr. Ferguson's choice is upheld by the older and wise Dr. Hochberg; the wisdom and guidance of youth by elders being a familiar melodramatic convention. This guidance by elders is repeated most notably in Clifford Odets' Awake and Sing! with the relationship between Jacob and Ralph.

Most often, however, the young heroes of the Group's plays stand alone to defend their ideals. In two plays, The House of Connelly and Night Over Taos, the young oppose their elders and eventually triumph, signifying the inevitability of a new order. Although the older people in these plays are presented sympathetically, the societies they are valiantly striving to maintain are static and decadent compared to the dynamism and egalitarianism of the new, youthful order. The implication of this situation is that the old American society has proved to be no longer viable, and should surrender itself to the revisions offered by a newer conception of society, a conception best understood by the young.

A variation of this theme is evidenced in the plays portraying idealistic youth thwarted by contemporary societal values. The necessity for a secure financial position before love can be consumated in marriage is explored in a play like 1931--

when the unemployed Adam complains to his girlfriend,"Christ, why do they make us want what we can't afford, why do they make us love and have kids . . . when we can't get the money to make themdecent,"[48] and in Success Story, when the central character remarks to the woman he loves, "love's not bread and butter, it's champagne, fine for them that can afford it."[49] The intrusion of societal demands into the personal life is one way in which the sprawling pervasiveness of an unhealthy society is explicated, for a barrier to sexual consumation is certainly destructive to human fulfillment. Another aspect of this motif is found in a play like Melvin Levy's Gold Eagle Guy. The strong, young, Guy Buttons expends his energy in building up a financial empire, and loses his innocence, the love of his wife, and ultimately his life. Success Story also is based on the loss of innocence of Solomon Ginsburg, its youthful protagonist. Sol's keen intelligence and vigor can only find meaningful expression in ruthless financial acquisition. Sol had wanted, "Something real--either make money or else. . . work for somethin' I believe in."[50] Society had prevented him from securing a viable outlet for his energy, and Sol, who had turned from socialism to the dominating capitalism, is destroyed, like Guy Buttons, by money.

The belief implied by these dominant thematic structures is that man is a victim of socio-economic forces. The determinism of this view is, however, overruled by the more important optimism. While deploring the society which prevents or perverts

human aspirations, the plays of the Group assert that change is possible, inevitable, and desirable. The degeneracy of Sol Ginsburg and Guy Buttons serves to expose the false values of middle class society, a step necessary for the re-ordering of middle class values. The decadence of polite middle class society is explored in John Howard Lawson's Gentlewoman. The female protagonist in this play slowly realizes through the tutelage of her young radical lover the gamut of the viciousness and vacuousness of her society. Although Gwyn realizes that she is lost due to her complete involvement with middle class standards, she cheerfully accepts the departure of her lover Rudy to join the struggling workers in the West. Her only hope lies in Rudy's child, which she carries. Gwyn expresses her predicament by stating, "I'm afraid. . . perhaps I can make a child who won't be afraid, he'll take sides and die--but there's always a chance he might live and make a new world."[51]

The new world for which Gwyn yearns is the subject of most of the Group's plays. It is implied as being the opposite of the one which destroyed Sol Ginsburg and Guy Buttons; it is deliniated in 1931-- when Adam joins an uprising of the unemployed. All the central characters seek a better order, a world in which love will be fulfilled, a society in which everyone will have a chance to discover and creatively explore their own potentialities, unhampered by the rigid and false structures of the present order. Yet this better life is

never concretely deliniated. Most of the plays end on a hopeful note, with the main characters bravely facing a new future after enduring a crisis of faith, such as Gwyn's intellectual conversion to radicalism. This failure to present the revolutionary order in complete Marxist detail often infuriated Marxist critics, who hurled the epithet "confused" at these ambiguous social dramas. Non-Marxist plays displeased the Communists because they were not sufficiently revolutionary, dramas that implied a class struggle were not explicit enough, and the Marxian dramas did not clearly depict a triumphant, united working class.[52] But this "confusion" can be understood best as part and parcel of the melodramatic mode. The melodrama, essentially emotional, is not equipped to intellectually solve the problems it presents. Instead, dilemmas which are buttressed by and built upon the audience's assumptions are thrown back to the audience at the conclusion of the play. The plays are fundamentally aiming to channel audience assumptions into a radically different social perspective, in which traditional moral values will operate better in an improved social organization. The audience after viewing a social drama must choose between the old order in which values are subverted and the implied new order in which values are allowed to flourish. The playwright has done his duty by presenting the old, with moral frustrations that are identifiable by the audience, amd merely hinting at the new, which is the audience's obligation to consider.

The playwright of the Group Theatre who best represents both the weaknesses and strengths of social drama is Clifford Odets, whose plays run the gamut from the angry-political Waiting For Lefty to the intensely personal psychological drama of Rocket to the Moon. Contemporary critics enthusiastically responded to the young playwright. Richard Watts wrote in the Herald-Tribune of March 31, 1935, "it is pretty clear by now that Mr. Odets' talent for dramtic writing is the most exciting thing to appear in the American drama since the flaming emergence of O'Neill . . . ."[53] Anita Block also compared Odets to O'Neill, saying, "Both are essentially concerned with the inner conflicts of the individual, with his struggle for fulfillment against external forces that dominate and crush him."[54] Odets' greatest accomplishment as the social dramatist par excellence lay in his ability to fuse a social critique with psychological penetration of his characters. In the preface to the Modern Library collection of his first six plays, published when Odets was 33, the playwright points out that:

> Much of my concern . . . has been with fashioning a play immediately and dynamically useful and yet as psychologically profound as my present years and experience will permit. [55]

Odets was one of the original members of the Group acting troupe, who later discovered his talent did not lay in acting, but writing. But the philosophy of the Group Theatre, for which he had strong affections, is evidenced in his work. It is only natural that Odets was concerned with the social

problems which his brother playwrights confronted, and that he brought to his plays an optimism which characterized the social plays of the Group. But most important, Odets was the good friend of Group director Harold Clurman, who helped shape the aesthetic quality of Odets' work, refining drafts and slaving with Odets to produce an artistically balanced finished product. The viability of the Group Theatre itself, no doubt, left its mark on Odets. It certainly provided a stimulating environment in which a young artist could explore his potentialities.

In his work, Odets dealt mainly with the middle class, confident in its inherent virtues, deploring the economic and social conditions which he saw perverting this class. Odets perceived his hero as "the entire American middle-class of liberal tendency."[56] In his plays he tried to encourage the liberal tendency of the middle class, and attempted to point out the debilitating effects of society to his heroes.

Waiting For Lefty, Odets' first play produced by the Group, is a unique piece of American Theatre. In it, propaganda is merged with the fullest exploitation of the possibilites of the stage. Tension throughout the play is kept at a maximum; the flashbacks portraying emotion-charged moments of conversion are interspersed with action in the present on the stage, climaxing in the exposure of a strike-breaker. Odets planted actors in the audience who got up and yelled at the stage, the henchman of the villainous Harry Fatt, who is trying to subdue the strikers, even points his gun at the audience, who, in the

context of the play is the audience at the union meeting. Every aspect of the play contributes to the ending, in which the audience joins with the actors in demanding "Strike! Strike!" after learning that Lefty, the head of the strike committee has been murdered.

Waiting For Lefty was written as an entry in a contest sponsored by the left wing New Theatre League, which was looking for one-act plays of a revolutionary theme which might be easily produced. The play was written in three days and nights, won the contest, and was produced at one of the New Theatre League's Sunday night benefit performances by members of the Group Theatre on January 5, 1935.[57] The performance was witnessed by Clurman who described its reception:

> The first scene of Lefty had not played two minutes when a shock of delighted recognition struck the audience like a tidal wave. Deep laughter, hot assent, a kind of joyous fervor seemed to sweep the audience toward the stage. The actors no longer performed; they were being carried along as if by an exultancy of communication such as I had never witnessed in the theatre before. Audience and actor became one. Line after line brought applause, whistles, bravos, and heartfelt shouts of kinship.
>
> . . . There were very few taxi-drivers in that first audience, I am sure; very few indeed who had ever been directly connected with such an event as the Union meeting that provided the play its pivotal situation. When the audience at the end of the play responded to the militant question from the stage: "Well, what's the answer?" with a spontaneous roar of "Strike! Strike!" it was something more than a tribute to the play's effectiveness, more than a testimony of the audience's hunger for constructive social action. It was the birth cry of the thirties. Our youth had found its voice. It was a call to join the good fight for a greater measure of life in a world free of

> economic fear, falsehood and craven servitude to stupidity and greed. "Strike!" was Lefty's lyric message, not alone for a few pennies wages or for shorter hourse of work, strike for greater dignity, strike for bold humanity, strike for the full stature of man. 58

Although Clurman was perhaps a little too carried away by the play, it is evident that Waiting For Lefty did answer a need in the thirties. The middle class, to which the appeal of this play was essentially directed, is represented in its widest spectrum, from the lower-middle class young hack and his girl and the battling Joe and Edna, to the professional interne and lab assistant. The moment of crisis is captured swiftly and succinctly. As each man in the flashbacks is humiliated by some form of societal injustice, and as his values are threatened, the bonds placed on human fulfillment by society are made apparent.

On closer scrutiny it seems that while Waiting For Lefty operates on issues most pressing during the thirties, it exploits the melodramatic mode with incredible effectiveness. Each character in the flashbacks has an integrity which can be admired, for they stand for such assumed middle-class virtues as honesty, hard work, professional integrity, and family loyalty; as opposed to the decadence of the stereotyped Harry Fatt. The characters truly come alive in the flashbacks, as well as in the exposure of the strike-breaker, in which the agonized voice from the audience materializes as a man on stage who finally declares, "Boys, I slept with him in the same bed, sixteen years. HE'S MY OWN LOUSY BROTHER!!"[59]

The moral dilemmas faced by the central characters are quickly ascertainable, and the audience's sympathy is immediately aroused. The people are average, industrious, the boy-next-door. Emotional identification is the only possible response, and it is carried to its logical conclusion. Waiting For Lefty is not merely an intruiging historical artifact, it is viable and fresh today. The issues with which it deals are not simply relics of the past, but a yearning for a better life. Waiting For Lefty is propaganda raised to its utmost. Although not really a drama in the traditional sense, it captures an emotional plateau probably unequalled on the American stage. For this, it is to be admired.

Unfortunately the quality of Odets' propaganda is not sustained in his next play, Till the Day I Die. This short piece was written as a companion for Waiting For Lefty in the Group's production, for the Group decided to produce it themselves after the initial success at the New Theatre League. Till the Day I Die concerns the persecution of Communists in Nazi Germany and demonstrates the conflict between party loyalty and family fealty. The Nazis are mercilessly caricatured--not only is the Nazi Captain vicious, brutal, and slimy, he is also a homosexual. The German Communists are simple, charming, and idealistic. These stereotypes do not work very well, perhaps the foreign situation detracts from the immediate appeal of a play like Waitng For Lefty. Till the Day I Die is a very ordinary play.

The quality of Odts' writing is significantly raised in his next play produced by the Group, Awake and Sing!. This play had been written before Waiting For Lefty and originally titled I've Got the Blues. [60] The change in title gives an indication of Odets' aim in the play. Odets himself explained in a New York Times interview in 1935 that:

> I understood clearly that my intent was not in the presentation of an individual's problems, but in those of a whole class . . . the task was to find a theatrical form with which to express the mass as hero. [61]

The Berger family of Awake and Sing! presents a character analysis of the lower middle class, each character representing some aspect of the class, and a particular search for meaningful life values. The central conflict of the play araises from the desire of Bessie, the mother to be "respectable" in a middle class way, forcing her daughter to marry a man she does not love because she is pregnant, and probhiting her son from romancing a poor girl; and Jacob, the gradfather, whose Marxist sentiments and desire for a better life removed from the artificial constraints that determine Bessie's actions lead to his suicide. Through suicide, Jacob leaves Ralph, the son, his insurance policy, his Marxist ideals, and gives him a chance to leave home. The play ends with Jacob's ideals triumphing--Hennie is about to desert her husband and baby to run off with a man who promises better things from life, and Ralph also is about to leave home, summing up the conflict in the play by saying:

> Did Jake die for us to fight about nickels? No! "Awake and sing" he said. Right here he stood and said it. That night he died, I saw it like a thunderbolt! I saw he was dead and I was born! 62

The power of the play stems primarily from the search for meaningful life values, and is enhanced not so much by good characterization, but by the dialogue which is fresh and, at times, poetic. Although the reason for Ralph's final conversion is extremely hazy, he expresses himself powerfully and dramatically when he asserts, "We don't want life printed on dollar bills."[63] This kind of poetic, but vernacular speech characterizes the play. Each character announces himself through his dialogue, there is little action in which the character can be revealed. The vernacular speech creates a bond with the audience, the heightening of the speech creates an admiration as it reflects intensified perceptions on commonplace themes powerfully expressed. Odets said that "all of the characters in Awake and Sing! share a fundamental activity: a struggle for life amidst petty conditions."[64] The dialogue expresses the struggle brilliantly.

The resolution of the play presents difficulties. By running away Hennie is shirking the enforced value of responsibility, and her husband, like all the characters in the play, is not evil, but misguided. Ralph's departure is too ambiguous to present a definite solution. Even Jacob, whose ideals have such strong effect on Ralph and Hennie, had never actually done anything until his suicide. He had admonished Ralph,

"Do what is in your heart and you carry in yourself a revolution. But you should act. Not like me. A man who had golden opportunities but drank instead a glass of tea."[65] But while the intellect may be dissatisfied by the ending of the play, the emotions have found a definite release, enhanced by the tense last act. Odets in 1955 upheld that all his plays, "deal with one subject; the struggle not to have life nullified by circumstances, false values, anything."[66] This statement is a key to the contradictions of the ending of Awake and Sing!. Ralph starts out fresh, purged by the contradictions he saw around him; Hennie can start to discover life unhampered by forced circumstances. The young people are not caught in the same societal values of their parents, whose age makes it difficult to change. The familiar tone of salvation through youth is continued in Awake and Sing!. The depression environment of the Berger home serves to set the play in its historical background, the hope is characteristic of its time, but it captures a vividness and struggle that can be appreciated today.

Paradise Lost, Odets' next play produced by the Group does not capture this vividness. The theatrical form in which Odets had presented the mass as hero in Awake and Sing! had been basically allegorical. The Berger family had represented the problems facing the lower middle class. In Paradise Lost the Gordon family presents the dilemma of the middle class. They are not on the defensive, like Bessie Berger. Yet the Gordons lack the vitality of the Bergers. The vernacular is polished

and abstracted, the situations in the play are formalized, the characters symbolically exaggerated, while the Bergers more successfully convey a real-life intensity.

Odets has chosen in this play to portray the degenerating impact of society on the middle class in the abstract. This rather overt social theme works against the symbolic nature of the piece. The symbolism is far from subtle; the unscrupulous partner of Lou Gordon is impotent and beats his wife, one of the Gordon sons has sleeping sickness but talks continuously of the stock market, the other son can find no place in society and is killed as a gangster. In these obvious ways, the effect of the nefrarious capitalistic ethic is explored. The abstract quality, furthermore, detracts from the emotional immediacy of a play like Awake and Sing! or Waiting For Lefty. Leo's dramatic conversion at the end of Paradise Lost is more logical than the departure of Hennie and Ralph, for throughout the play he questions those societal structures which eventually ruin him financially, while Ralph and Hennie complain in a more personal way. The abstract nature of Leo's questioning and conversion, and his advanced age serve to detract from the emotional, albeit hazy conversions of Hennie and Ralph. The intellectualized nature of Leo's final realization rings a bit false, for as the detached though honest observer of those around him, Leo seems somehow not to be emotionally involved with the situation until the end of the play. Then he suddenly becomes intensely involved with his fellow men as he envisions a

new world, phrasing his vision in high-flown rhetoric:

The new world which Leo sees after his family has suffered financial ruin points to the inability of Odets to fashion a truly viable alternative. Leo rhapsodizes at the end:

> Oh yes, I tell you the whole world is for men to possess. Heartbreak and terror are not the heritage of mankind! The world is beautiful. No fruit tree wears a lock and key. Men will sing at their work, men will love . . . the world is in its morning . . . and no man fights alone! 67

The title of the play implies that there is a paradise to be regained. Odets makes it clear that the paradise has been lost, but the new one remains the dream of a man ruined by the circumstances of a severe financial depression. This makes Paradise Lost more ephemeral than Awake and Sing!. Although the failure to define a practical alternative is characteristic of the social drama of the thirties, and the emotional appeal of Leo's final speech characteristic of the dominant melodramatic mode, Paradise Lost has indeed lost sight of the fine emotional intensity of Odets' earlier work. In Awake and Sing! the emotional struggle carries the play to the conclusion, in Paradise Lost the sensationalized conclusion runs counter to the intellectualized abstractions of the rest of the play. Leo's emotions at the end seem artificial, perhaps Odets can only envision an abstract world when he portrays the present so allegorically. Awake and Sing! manages to capture a commonality of emotional experiences, its hazy conclusion squares with the actuality of an emotional struggle. Paradise Lost does not have this emotional immediacy,

nor is it truly an allegory. It falls uncomfortably between the two.

Many of the contemporary reviewers disliked this play. Odets was angered at the reception of this, his favorite play. So in 1936 Odets went to Hollywood, where he received a salary of $2500 per week, certainly a contrast to the substinance wage he had been accustomed to receiving in the Group. He remained in Hollywood, separated from the Group and the roots of his New York radicalism until the following year, when he returned with Golden Boy.[68]

This play reflects Odets' Hollywood experience in two significant ways. The style of the play with its pat plot, prize-fighting subject matter, short scenes and fadeouts, reflect the movie technique[69], a departure from the one set of his previous full length plays. The theme of Golden Boy, an allegory dealing with the emptiness of financial success like Gold Eagle Guy and Success Story, reflects Odets' personal struggle between the glittering but phoney allure of Hollywood and the more satisfying but difficult road to fulfillment he found as a Broadway playwright. The hero, Joe Bonaparte, is an artist who eventually sacrifices himself to the cause of fame and fortune.

The allegorical implication of Golden Boy is clearer than Paradise Lost. Odets has once more returned to simple but effective plain speech, and more realistic characters. His favorite position as critic of middle class values is maintained.

All the characters demonstrate to some degree the effect of societal values on the individual. Odets stated in an interview after the opening of the play that he had tried to place his hero

> in his true social background and show his fellow conspirators in their true light, (to) bring out the essential loneliness and bewilderment of the average citizen, not (to) blow trumpets for all that is corrupt and wicked around the little Italian boy, not (to) substitute a string of gags for reality of experience, (but to) present genuine pain, meaning, and dignity of life within the characters. 70

The characters in this play, as is typical of Odets, seek meaningful life values. It is this search, in the context of society, which perverts then destroys Joe. He feels he must make some mark on the world, and can do this only through the barbaric world of the prize-fighter. Although Joe believes, "playing music . . . that's like saying, 'I am a man. I belong here.'"[71], he must find some other way to keep up with the world, maintaining:

> You can't get even with people by playing the fiddle. If music shot bullets, I'd like it better--artists and people like that are freaks today. The world moves fast and they sit around like forgotten dopes. 72

Joe realizes too late that he was wrong, he is not truly a fighter, but an artist who must remain on the fringe, finding satisfaction in himself and his art.

Golden Boy is essentially a condemnation. Odets again fails to affer any real alternative, although he attempts to contrast Joe with his brother Frank, who uses violence to better society by working for a Union. Frank alone has found a satisfactory compomise with society, he is "at harmony with millions of others."[73] But Frank is a minor character. In

the character of Lorna, the woman Joe loves, Odets repeats the Utopian view of Lou Gordon. Lorna hopes "to find some city where poverty's no crime!--where there's no war in the streets --where a man is glad to be himself, to live and make his woman herself!"[74]

In Golden Boy Odets once again regains emotional immediacy. The quick pace of the play, the sharp dialogue, the variety of characters serve to make the play interesting and involving. Although the slick language of some of the characters and outmoded manners of expression date the play, and the issue of a false success is no longer so absorbing today to the American public, the play remains vigorous. It is interesting that the melodramatic assumptions of the nature of average people are extended to the gangster Eddie Fuseli and Joe's manager Tom Moody, characters made familiar by the movies. The audience also was probably aware that Joe was doomed from the start, and a mixed emotional satisfaction is gained by his demise. The public enjoyed Golden Boy, it was one of the Group's more financially successful productions. But in Golden Boy the indictment is individualized in Joe's peculair nature, it does not have the stirring ring of propaganda of Waiting For Lefty and Awake and Sing!. Although the moral implications of the allegory are fairly obvious, the play may be taken as merely a good show portraying a familiar dilemma. The story of the golden boy had become a recognizable American myth, the opposite of the usual rags

to riches motif. Although this makes for an interesting plot and absorbing characters, Golden Boy's effectiveness as a protest against society is partially reneged by its concentration on the idiosyncracies of its protagonist and the inevitability of its destruction. In this way Golden Boy illustrates the old homily that money can't buy happiness.

Rocket to the Moon, Odets' next play, moves away from the specific social allegory. It is more concerned with deep psychological penetration into the characters than exposing societal injustice and delusion. It is perhaps one of the most complex of Odets' plays and the most fragile. The contemporary setting of the play gives it a social context, but in Rocket to the Moon Odets is really concerned with the search for love.

Each character's search typifies a particular psychological nature. The most easily recognizable type is Mr. Prince, Ben Stark's father-in-law. Prince is the man whose money cannot buy love. The types become more fuzzy in the characters of Ben and Cleo who are given more psychological depth than Prince or his daughter, the nagging frustrated housewife. Although Odets displays some skill in these characters, they are not sufficiently well-defined. Much of the author's personal concern finds outlet in these characters, as opposed to an explicitly social focus. The deeply personal nature of the play offended such critics as Thornton Wilder, who remarked, "I am not interested in such ephemeral subjects as the adulteries of dentists."[75] Another critic believed the play "was too much

a reflection of his (Odets') personal problems to be a thorough-going work of art."[76]

Much of the difficulty in the play lies in the definition of love it tries to present. Essentially love provides, for the two central characters, an escape from the unexciting confines of their lives. The conflict between this rather unhealthy view of the nature of love and love as an unescapable reality, provides the crux of the play's conflict. The philosophical Frenchy articulates Odets' view of the nature of love:

> Is it something apart, love? A good book you go to in a spare hour? An entertainment? Christ, no! It's a synthesis of good and bad, economics, work, play, all contacts. . . it's not a Sunday suit for special occassions. That's why Broadway songs are phoney . . . Love's no solution of life! Au contraire, as the Frenchman says--the opposite. You have to bring a whole balanced normal life to love if you want it to go! 77

None of the characters have a "whole balanced normal life." The source of their imbalance stems both from the societal values they have accepted and their own peculiar psychological composition. Although Odets announces what he believes love should be, he cannot demonstrate it in the play, just as in the social plays an alternative was merely vaguely hinted.

The melodramatic mode often operates successfully on an announced pretext, if the announcement is of a familiar nature. Although Frenchy's statement certainly is familiar, it is contradicted by the play itself. The audience is brought to a point of sympathy with the growing love between Ben and Cleo,

regardless of its faults. When Cleo leaves in the end to search for "a love that uses me, that needs me,"[78] it is almost an inexplicable let down. The emotions of the audience had been led in opposite directions, with no attempt at synthesis. The form of the play itself, lively in the first act, dragging in the third, points to Odets' inability to reconcile these two divergent points of view, for Ben is left with no alternative. At the end of the play declares, "Yes, I, who sat here in this prison-office, closed off from the world, for the first time in years I looked out on the world and saw things as they really are . . ."[79] This is not a satisfactory conclusion, for "things as they are" have not been successfully probed. Ben must return to his wife, he would not have done that if Cleo had remained. Ben's resignation is indeed hollow.

It is defficult to depict frustration without being frustrated. Odets, in Rocket to the Moon has relegated the social situation to the background; on the canvas of the depression he depicted the search for love, a search that has occupied artists through the ages. But the frustration of love in this play does not indict a society full of contradictions, it rails at human weakness, but is resigned. The young social playwright had shown skill in psychological depiction of characters, but seemed not to know what to do with them after he had removed them from a purely deterministic setting.

Before considering Odets' final play with the Group, Night

Music, it is necessary to look at the historical circumstances which were changing the pattern of social drama, reflected in those produced by the Group from 1939 to 1941.[80] Two significant facts had changed the intellectual climate of the United States; the Nazi-Soviet pact and the war in Europe in 1939. The Nazi-Soviet pact disillusioned many artists of left-wing sentiments, while the war in Europe shook the pacifism that had characterized the Left. The depression itself had called up the New Deal which soothed many liberals. Issues which had been fought in the earlier years of the decade had either been won or forgotten. And the imminence of war served to bring together many artists and subdue them.

The attitude towards war is the most obvious indication of the change in the Group's plays. In 1936 Paul Green's Johnny Johnson portrayed the insanity of war, in 1939 Robert Ardrey's Thunder Rock exhorted intellectuals to become commited and fight for the preservation of freedom. Thunder Rock's depiction of the disillusioned artist escaping to a light house reflects the return of many artists-intellectuals to their ivory towers in the latter part of the decade. Besides showing a changed attitude towards war, thus, Thunder Rock makes it clear that the social commitment of the artist was retreating, and had to be prodded to return again to its rightful position of social concern.

The form of Thunder Rock is more fanciful than the earlier

Group plays. The plays of 1939-41 no longer had the striking verisimilitude of their forerunners. They were more personal, lyrical, and literary. The characteristic optimism remained intact, but it was of a different nature. Instead of forecasting the imminence of a better social order, these plays displayed an abiding faith in the tenacity, integrity, and essential goodness of the average man. This faith was wistful in a play like Irwin Shaw's The Gentle People. In the preface to the play Shaw states, "This play is a fairy tale with a moral. In it justice triumphs and the meek prove victorious over arrogant and violent men. The author does not pretend that this is the case in real life." The Gentle People is a very gentle, moving play. But its impact lies not in the exposure of the injustice of society, but in a faith that little people can conquer large evils like organized crime and fascism. The two old men in the play find satisfaction in a simple thing like fishing in the evening off Coney Island and playfully arguing and complaining to each other. This play is not so much a protest against a society that produces a character like the gangster Goff, but an affirmation of a society of quiet little people free to seek their simple pleasure.

The position of the United States at this time was insecure. The simple pleasures upheld in The Gentle People reflect this insecurity, for they were being seriously threatened by world events. And the murder of Goff by the two old men is not malicious, it is protect a quiet way of life. One of the

men had explained to his friend before the murder:

> Finally . . ., if you want peace and gentleness, you got to take violence out of the hands of people like Goff and you got to take it in your own hands and use it like a club. Then maybe on the other side of violence, there will be peace and gentleness. 81

My Heart's in the Highlands also upholds an unobtrusive way of life. It is the story of the artist struggling to survive in a society where he cannot earn money to buy the groceries. But the artist in the play is not militant, he contents himself with enjoying nature and his fellow men. He generosity reflects the largeness of his soul. And the play affirms the artist's unremitting will to exist and enlighten humanity.

The softening of tone, and the broadening of social concern is reflected well in Odets' Night Music, a play about loneliness and homelessness. Rage over social issues is reduced to a minimum. Instead there is pathos, humility, quiet love. Clurman noted that Odets had captured the spirit of the time in this play:

> History was marking time. Progressive thought and action seemed to stand in shadow, tired and disheartened. Everyone seemed to be waiting. Everything was in question, and all the old answers rang a little false beside the darkening reality. The tone of the play was gentle and melancholy, as if the clarinet the play's hero tooted was his only weapon to combat the featureless chaos of 1940. 82

The difference in tone of this play and one of Odets' earlier social pieces, Awake and Sing! is evident in the character of Rosenberger, who, like Jacob, conveys the wisdom and experience of an older man. Instead of envisioning a Marxist revolution as an alternative and using this to guide the younger

people like Jacob, Rosenberger upholds life itself as an answer. He says, "Where there is life, there is hope, in my humble opinion. Only the living can cry out against life."[83] In this play, Odets moves out into the streets of New York to look at life, to capture the sad but determined spirit of an insecure generation. For a dramatist so sensitive to the social mood, Odets' heightening concentration on personal problems is a clear indidcation of the change of tone as the thirties became the fourties.

Odets' social view had mellowed, not only due to the playwright's personal maturation, but to a change he perceived in the nature of society itself. Night Music was not enthusiastically received by the critics. Clurman noted:

> Odets takes for granted that we all recognize our homelessness, that we all believe the rootlessness and disorientation of his hero to be typical, that we all know that most of the slogans of our society are without substance in terms of our true emotions. Perhaps Odets gave his audience too much credit in assuming that it would feel as he had hoped. 84

Clurman's statement demonstrates that with a change in the nature of society, the social dramatist's duty was to find a new set of assumptions with which to operate. Due to the subdued and insecure nature of society during the early 1940's, plays could no longer operate on the bravado assumptions of earlier years, but had to capture a different spirit. In 1940 it was difficult to determine what that spirit should be. The optimism of Night Music like the other later Group plays is fragile, no longer

assertive. The cry in Night Music is to "Make this America for us!", a hope born out of confusion and despondency. Earlier the cry had been, "We don't want life printed on dollar bills!", a militant demand. While the earlier plays had exposed life-as-it-should-not-be, the later ones wistfully portrayed life as it should be. Night Music, too, looks at America to find something worth saving, and it found the oldest of all solutions; love.

At this time, Odets was unsure of what he wanted, frustrated by the adverse reaction to a drama he had though to be "the best play and finest production in New York."[85] Clurman realized that Odets:

> wanted to run with the hares and hunt with the hounds; he wanted to be the great revolutionary playwright of our day and the white-haired boy of Broadway. He wanted the devotion of the man in the cellar and the congratulations of the boys at "21." He wanted the praise of the philosophers and the votes of Variety's box-score. 86

Odets was tired of the Group and felt it was constricting him. He had his next play, Clash By Night produced elsewhere.[87]

Odets' departure from the Group signalled the end of that organization. Through its existence, it struggled in the competitve Broadway world, and as Clurman said, "as no individual can exist alone, no group can exist alone."[88] Apart from this consideration, the social drama which the Group had consistently presented was no longer filling a need. Clurman perceived that:

> in the thirties there developed to a high point of consciousness the hunger for a spiritually active world, a humanly meaningful and relevant art. However, the peculiar social-economic development of the

> thirties, successful at first, only to lead to a crisis in the outbreak of war, brought about the dissolution of that movement of which the Group Theatre was one of the outstanding voices. [89]

After the production of Irwin Shaw's Retreat to Pleasure, the ~~cultivated~~ collectivism of the Group Theatre dissolved, as each member left the fold to find satisfaction somewhere else. The Group had been composed of young, volatile actors and actresses, each with a particular opinion and desire. Any collection of this type of people is uncomfortable at best, and Harold Clurman did a magnificent job in keeping everyone together. But the task of maintaining such an explosive collection of people strained him to the end, and when the collapse of the Group seemed imminent, Clurman leashed his pent-up frustrations, telling the actors, "if anyone else . . . could make a Group Theatre with or without me, I begged him to do so."[90] The actors protested, Clurman grew angry, and Luther Adler, a Group member, wryly remarked, "Harold wants a divorce."[91] But Clurman had finally realized:

> My will and the collective will of my fellow workers were not sufficient to establish a Group Theatre that might endure the jungle life, the drought and famine, of the Broadway theatre in the early forties. [92]

But the record of the Group Theatre remains impressive. It gave a complete voice to the new concerned generation of artists and brought intelligence and skill to its performances. The radical idea of a theatre collective enmeshed with the radical ideas presented in the collective's plays. The Group Theatre was a daring enterprise, maintained by the youth and

commitment of its members. These young artists were attracted by the new type of theatre the Group hoped to form and maintain, and stuck to their commitment through financial uncertainty and even hardship. And the plays to which these people lent their voice reflected a young, poineering, definitely romantic spirit. One recent critic has remarked that "socially slanted theatre has always been a theatre of the young."[93] The hope presented in the Group's plays make it easy to dismiss them as childish or naive. But in a time of severe crisis, new ideas, a new romance was needed to bring the country back to its feet and to look life in the eye again. More than social reform, the plays of the Group attempt to reaffirm the dignity of man in society. Clurman points out that the aim of the artistic movement of the thirties:

> could not be summed up or conclusively defined in a few political-social reforms. The end was man and his relation to the world or life itself on all the planes that the concept implies. 94

The assumptions of the social playwright of the thirties, that progress is inevitable and the old order must die, are the most easily dismissed in this more cynical era of nuclear weapons and existentialism. The simplicity of stating problems in relation to a very complex socio-economic fabric further enhances the naivite of the social drama of the thirties. But the ability of the social dramatists to capture an age of collapse and infuse it with hope, to record the speech of an uncertain but strong new generation desperately searching for a remedy for society's ills provide a vital historical record

that should not be forgotten. Although the social dramatists did not write plays of the highest literary quality, they gave voice to the desire for a better life that has sparked the vitality of a reforming nature.

But the larger question is whether the social plays were effective in aiding the reform they cherished. Here they are tangled in both the advantages and pitfalls of the primarily emotional melodramatic mode. By aiming for an essentially emotional reaction to the problems presented, it is possible to raise consciousness on social issues by fostering emotional identification with the characters on the stage. These characters are caught in the dilemma of false societal values, although they are basically honest, conscientous, and even admirable. But the emotional level often blots out an intellectual comprehension of the total situation. By attempting to alter opinions, the social dramatists, furthermore, were forced to confront the nature of opinion formation, a hazy mixture of family background, financial situation, personal experience, manipulation by news media, and the realm of personal insecurity with its attendant defense mechanisms. In the melodrama, the social dramatist could select only one situation and try to evoke the impact of society on particular individuals. Although the audience could sympathize with these characters, once out of the theatre they again confronted the real world, to shake their heads over the laziness of the unemployed, worry about their business and family, and generally pursue their own aspirations.

The experience in the theatre could be easily forgotten as an enjoyable emotional release. One play is not really sufficient to significantly alter an individual's world-view, although it is possible that the beginning of a new understanding could result from an experience in the theatre, making a viewer more receptive to radical ideas.

Some of the Group's plays are more effective social tools than others. It is certainly conceivable that Waiting For Lefty could cause a strike vote at a Union meeting similar to the one it depicts. It is also conceivable that a person in the Broadway audience at the same play could cross a picket line the next day with no scruples. The effect of a play like this depends primarily on the attitude brought to the theatre; a Union sympathizer would have his beliefs reinforced by the play, an anti-Union person could quite possibly be offended by the character of Harry Fatt. To those who were uncommitted, the play could offer a new perspective, leading to a possible conversion.

Most propaganda operates on the level of emotions. When an art form like the drama strives to reconcile didacticism with aestheticism, certain inconsistencies are inevitable. Art searches for a complex understanding of the nature of man, propaganda searches for a very strictly constructed understanding, whether it be a Marxian dialectic or simply a more moderate socialistic view. The social playwright as an artist could seek to make his characters psychologically complex, then push them summarily toward a doctrinaire view of society and mankind

as a propagandist. By using the melodramatic mode, the playwright can attempt to reconcile these divergent tendencies. Emotional identification can lead the audience toward consciousness-raising a propagandist aim; emotional identification can also lead to an awareness of the complexity of emotions of which man is capable, an artistic confrontation with man's complex self. The "artsy" or "intellectual" play prohibits this identification, making consciousness raising more difficult. The social dramatists of the thirties wanted their plays to be understood immediately by every member in the audience, they wanted moral dilemmas to be clear cut so the effect of society could be brought into conflict immediately with the moral values of the individual. In the best plays of the Group, this is exactly what occurs. In Awake and Sing! the emotional vitality of all the Bergers works in some way to bring out the societal values which they are striving to embrace or overcome.

The limitations on the social drama are complicated further by the nature of the theatre, for the theatre presents two hours of fleeting impressions. It is not an encounter group. The audience is passive, having no chance to respond to a play or question its objectives fully until the performance is over. And what people expect from a play is as varied as human nature itself. One critic maintains that "not ideas, but characters will remain in the memories of the audience when the curtain falls. If ideas are recalled, it will be those voiced by a living character."[95]

The theatre is not and should not be a news broadcast, a political platform or debate, or a college seminar; it is an art form with attendant ambiguities. But the theatre should strive, as an art form, to provide its viewers with a challenge to their assumptions, some new insight into the realm of human experience. The melodramatic mode of the social drama, which draws on the audience's assumptions, is never able to fully escape them. It is caught in the cultural definition of the "good life" as it tries to define that good life in its fullest sense. The social dramas did not attempt to explore the limitations and potentialities of the human being in the most complete artistic way. King Lear is a social play in that it deals with political injustice, but moves from there to explore the human possibilities, breaking through cultural assumptions into universality.

This is not to suggest that the plays of the Group Theatre should be derided as "failed tragedies." They did not attempt to be tragic in the classic sense, but in a very contemporary sense. They deplored the limitations placed on the human being by society, but never tried to totally separate man from society (like Lear on the heath), to discover exactly what man is. The wanted to discover how man and society could operate in harmony, and naturally became concerned with the cultural assumptions of the day. The societal problems could not be ignored by this committed generation of playwrights, and it became impossible to divorce man from the crisis environment

of the depression years. The urgency of their message found intense emotional expression in the melodramas they produced. As a social comment, the plays of the Group Theatre capture a moment of struggle in our history, and articulate the frustration of a generation. Although most of the Group's plays are justly relegated to literary obscurity, the best of its plays, Odets' Waiting For Lefty and Awake and Sing! are remembered not only as important historical artifacts, but as the best of that peculiar genre of social drama.

APPENDIX

The following is a listing of all the Group Theatre's productions, including date of opening, playwright and title of play, and number of performances.[96]

28 September, 1931. Paul Green. The House of Connelly. 91.

10 December, 1931. Claire and Paul Sifton. 1931--. 12.

9 March, 1932. Maxwell Anderson. Night Over Taos. 13.

26 September, 1932. John Howard Lawson. Success Story. 121.

17 January, 1933. Dawn Powell. Big Night. 7.

26 September, 1933. Sidney Kingsley. Men in White. 351.

22 March, 1934. John Howard Lawson. Gentlewoman. 12.

28 November, 1934. Melvin Levy. Gold Eagle Guy. 65.

19 Febraury, 1935. Clifford Odets. Awake and Sing! 185.

26 March, 1935. Clifford Odets. Double Bill, Waiting for Lefty; Till the Day I Die. 136.

30 November, 1935. Nellise Child. Weep for the Virgins. 9.

9 December, 1935. Clifford Odets. Paradise Lost. 73.

13 March, 1936. Erwin Pascator and Lena Goldschmidt. The Case of Clyde Griffiths. Translated, Louise Campbell. 19

19 November, 1936. Paul Green. Johnny Johnson. Music, Kurt Weil. 68.

4 November, 1937. Clifford Odets. Golden Boy. 250.

19 February, 1938. Robert Ardrey. Casey Jones. 25.

24 November, 1938. Clifford Odets. Rocket to the Moon. 131.

5 January, 1939. Irwin Shaw. The Gentle People. 141.

13 April, 1939. William Saroyan. My Heart's in the Highlands. 44.

14 November, 1939. Robert Ardrey. Thunder Rock. 23.

22 February, 1940. Clifford Odets. Night Music. 20.

17 December, 1940. Irwin Shaw. Retreat to Pleasure. 23.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Quoted in Morgan Y. Himelstein, Drama Was a Weapon (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 78.

[2] Gerald Rabkin, Drama and Commitment, Indiana University Humanities Series, No. 54 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 23-24.

[3] Eugene Holmes, "A Writer's Social Obligations," The Writer in a Changing World, Ed. Henry Hart, (Equinox Cooperative Press, 1937), pp. 172-173.

[4] Rabkin, p. 21.

[5] Ibid., p. 27.

[6] Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918 (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 229.

[7] Rabkin, pp. 25-28.

[8] Michael Blankfort and Nathaniel Buchwald, "Social Trends in the Modern Drama," American Writer's Congress, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), p. 128.

[9] Anita Block, The Changing World in Plays and Theatre (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1939), p. 7.

[10] Harold Clurman, "Theatre of the Thirties," Tulane Drama Review, 4 (1949), 11.

[11] Krutch, pp. 226-227.

[12] Rabkin, p. 28.

[13] Ibid., p. 31.

[14] Himelstein, p. 3.

[15] Block, p. 413.

[16] Ibid., p. 418.

[17] American Playwrights: 1918-1938 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), p. 5.

[18] Ibid., p. 8.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., p. 290.

[21] Krutch, p. 290.

[22] Photograph of set in frontpiece of Elmer Rice, Street Scene (New York: Samuel French, 1929).

[23] Edmond M. Gagey, Revolution in American Drama (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), p. 149.

[24] Rabkin, p. 31.

[25] Himelstein, p. 25.

[26] Rabkin, p. 91.

[27] Himelstein, p. 25

[28] Quoted in Himelstein, p. 156.

[29] The Fervent Years (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), p. 127.

[30] Ibid., p. 40.

[31] Ibid., p. 32.

[32] Ibid., p. 56

[33] Quoted in The Fervent Years, pp. 103-104.

[34] Quoted in Rabkin, p. 74.

[35] The Fervent Years, p. 147.

[36] Ibid.,

[37] Maxwell Anderson, Winterset (Washington: Anderson House, 1935), p. 197.

[38] Gerald Weales, "The Group Theatre and its Plays," American Theatre, eds. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, Stratford-Upon Avon-Studies, No. 10 (London: Edward Arnold Lt., 1967), p. 147.

[39] Paul Green, The House of Connelly, in The House of Connelly and Other Plays (New York: Samuel French, 1931), p. 63.

[40] The Fervent Years, p. 44.

[41] Ibid., p. 85.

[42] Ibid., p. 121.

[43] Ibid., pp. 123-124.

[44] The program of 1931--. Quoted in Rabkin, p. 73.

[45] The Fervent Years, p. 46.

[46] Rabkin, p. 76.

[47] Three Group plays are unpublished, and remain outside the scope of this study. They are: Dawn Powell, Big Night (1933), Nellise Child, Weep for the Virgins (1935), and Erwin Piscantor and Lena Goldscmidt, The Case of Clyde Griffiths, translated by Louise Campbell (1936).

[48] Claire and Paul Sifton, 1931-- (New York: Farrar and Rinehardt, 1931), p. 11.

[49] John Howard Lawson, Success Story (New York: Farrar and Rinehardt, 1932), p. 86.

[50] Ibid., p. 140.

[51] John Howard Lawson, Gentlewoman, in With a Reckless Preface (New York: Farrar and Rinehardt, 1934), p. 35.

[52] Himelstein, p. 180.

[53] Quoted in Rabkin, p. 170.

[54] The Changing World in Plays and Theatre, p. 278.

[55] Six Plays of Clifford Odets (New York: The Modern Library, 1939), p. ix.

[56] Quoted in R. Baird Shuman, Clifford Odets, Twayne's United States Authors Series, No. 30 (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962), p. 19.

[57] Rabkin, 170.

[58] The Fervent Years, pp. 138-139.

[59] Waiting For Lefty, in Six Plays of Clifford Odets, p. 25.

[60] Shuman, p. 25.

[61] Quoted in Shuman, p. 25.

[62] Awake and Sing! in Six Plays of Clifford Odets, pp. 100-101.

[63] Awake and Sing!, p. 95.

[64] Ibid., p. 37.

[65] Ibid., p. 75.

[66] Quoted in Shuman, p. 40

[67] *Paradise Lost*, in *Six Plays*, p. 230.

[68] Rabkin, p. 191

[69] Ibid., p. 195.

[70] Quoted in Shuman, p. 82.

[71] *Golden Boy*, in *Six Plays*, p. 263.

[72] Ibid., p. 264.

[73] Ibid., p. 318.

[74] Ibid., p. 316.

[75] Quoted in Shuman, p. 99.

[76] Shuman, p. 100.

[77] *Rocket to the Moon*, in *Six Plays*, p. 404.

[78] Ibid., p. 416.

[79] Ibid., p. 418.

[80] *Retreat to Pleasure* (1940) by Irwin Shaw is unpublished and remains outside this study.

[81] *The Gentle People* (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 149.

[82] *The Fervent Years*, p. 245.

[83] *Night Music* (New York: Random House, 1940), p. 168.

84 Quoted in Shuman, p. 109.

85 Quoted in Clurman, The Fervent Years, p. 246.

86 The Fervent Years, p. 249.

87 Shuman, p. 33.

88 The Fervent Years, p. 263.

89 Ibid., p. 265.

90 Ibid., p. 255.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid., p. 256.

93 John Gassner, Theatre at the Crossroads (New York: Nolt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 48.

94 The Fervent Years, p. 274.

95 Joseph Mersand, The American Drama Since 1930 (New York: The Modern Chapbooks, 1949), p. 147.

96 List taken from Weales, "The Group Theatre and its Plays," p. 66.

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