

## ANALYSIS

### *Waiting for Lefty* (1935)



Clifford Odets

(1906-1963)

“*Waiting for Lefty* is ingenious and forthright rather than impressive as play writing. The stage is assumed to be the platform at a labor union meeting, and the audience to be the assembled members of the union. A proposed strike of taxi drivers is under discussion, ‘plants’ in the audience arise to interrupt or protest, and flashbacks present scenes from the lives of various persons concerned. Word finally comes that the ‘Lefty’ for whom all are waiting has been killed, and the action ends with the cry of ‘Strike! Strike!’ Characterization is in simple black and white, much of the didacticism is crude as well as blatant; but at least *Waiting for Lefty*, unlike most plays offered as ‘weapons,’ might actually serve effectively as such. It was perhaps a recognition of this fact that aroused enthusiasm for the new author.

*Awake and Sing* exhibits virtues of quite a different kind. It is said to have been begun before its author’s conversion to Marxism, and to have been hastily provided with the concluding scene in which a ‘revolutionary’ moral is drawn.... After the outbreak of the Second World War, most radicals, including finally even the members of the Communist Party, became convinced that it was advisable to form with ‘capitalism’ a ‘united front’ against the axis powers [after Stalin signed a pact with Hitler in 1939]. One result was an effective dampening of their enthusiasm for revolutionary social criticism, and the ‘revolutionary theatre’ as a recognizable entity rapidly dissolved.”

Joseph Wood Krutch  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1327-28, 1330

“The talent of Clifford Odets burst dramatically onto the American theatrical scene in the middle of the Depression era. In a single year, 1935, he wrote four plays and won a reputation as the outstanding member of the new left-wing school of young American dramatists. Odets is still remembered today for these 1935 plays, especially *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing*....

*Waiting for Lefty* (one-act) consists of six ‘Episodes’ plus a number of incidental scenes, all played on a bare stage without benefit of scenery. The sequence of action is outwardly disconnected and the general mood is fantastic, suggesting the Continental expressionistic drama of Kaiser and Wedekind and the similar American experiments of O’Neill and Rice. The action is concerned with a strike of New York taxicab drivers during the Depression, and approximately half the scenes take place in a drivers’ meeting in which the theatre audience is addressed over the footlights as though it were the membership of the meeting.

Retorts, heckling, and comments are frequently heard from this audience, thus effectively breaking down the conventional barrier between stage and theatre-goer.

The play opens as Harry Fatt, a corrupt union leader who actually serves the capitalistic bosses, tries to persuade the drivers not to go out on strike. Flashback scenes then show typical incidents in the lives of the strikers. The driver Joe is exhorted by his wife Edna to strike to provide food for his starving children, and the young Sid tells his fiancée Florence that he cannot marry her until the drivers' wages are increased. Meanwhile the drivers await the arrival of Lefty Costello (symbol of aid from the international workers' movement), the one leader they trust and respect.

When news comes that Lefty has been found dead, murdered by the bosses' police, the workers turn into a howling mob which chants, 'Strike, strike, strike!' as the curtain comes down. In addition to its interest as an extreme example of proletarian drama, *Waiting for Lefty* is important as one of the first American plays to utilize the bare-stage technique and the breaking down of the audience barrier which were later used in such important dramas as Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938)."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 382-83, 385-86

"This play, Odets' first, deals with a taxi drivers' strike. Using an impressionistic flashback technique, Odets presents six episodic scenes showing the lives of the people involved in the strike. At the climax the news that the committeeman Lefty has been murdered rouses the men to decisive action. Although the play is too violently propagandistic to have much lasting value, Odets displays here his amazing gift for dialogue, more fully developed in later plays. *Waiting for Lefty* was one of the best known of the proletarian plays of the 1930's."

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

"When Clifford Odets died during the summer of 1963, editorial obituaries contained an air of nostalgia, evoking the turbulent 1930s. Throughout his creative life, Odets was characterized as the angry young man of the Depression decade, a handy but oversimplified label which he understandably came to resent. Born into a middle-class family in Philadelphia, Odets grew up in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods in the Bronx. Like many successful American authors, he never attended college. After eleventh grade he found acting jobs on the radio and then drifted into work in small local theatre companies.

Odets's acting career was making little progress when in 1930 he became involved with the Group Theatre, a new and dynamic organization which was just beginning its influential decade in New York. After a number of minor acting roles with that company, he decided to try writing a contemporary family drama for them; his script was the genesis of *Awake and Sing* (1935), his first full-length play. The early draft of *Awake and Sing*, however, was rejected by the managers of the Group, and Odets put his script through extensive revisions before the play was eventually performed. In the meantime his rapidly written short play, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), made him an instant theatrical celebrity.

*Waiting for Lefty* is notable as the only one of Odets's plays to employ such devices as direct address to the audience and placing actors in the auditorium. Both are well-adapted to this material. Odets uses the techniques for a somewhat different purpose than Wilder or Brecht. Rather than reminding the audience that this is some sort of 'make-believe,' Odets works hard to create an illusion of a strike meeting in a union hall. His aim is to blend the theatre and life, the imitation and the actual, so that the audience is never quite certain which is which.

A certain amount of theatrical mythology has grown up around the composition of *Waiting for Lefty*. It was, in fact, first produced in a small union hall; it was probably not, on the other hand, written in three nights or written as an entry in a contest with a \$50 prize. It was quite clearly written in response to the urging of Odets's Communist friends (Odets had joined the party for his brief dalliance in the fall of 1934). More important about the play is the emotional heat which the young playwright was able to convey as

well as the theatricality of the presentation. In part because it is a blatant 'message' play which can be presented without the benefit of an elaborate stage or scenery, within a few months *Lefty* was being produced all over the country. The reception was predictably enthusiastic in almost every city where it was presented. Even when the play was condemned as mere propaganda, it managed to create enough of a stir to enhance the young playwright's reputation. The mood of the Thirties was in itself a major contributing factor in this instant fame. Odets's timing was exactly right.

Thus the Depression and the Group Theatre were the two formative factors in Odets' career as dramatist. It is hard to imagine Odets's successes at any time other than during the Depression. To the left-oriented, often militant American writers like Odets, 'The theatre is a weapon' was a rallying cry. Yet the author of *Waiting for Lefty* went on to write for films, to marry a glamorous Hollywood movie queen, to live comfortably in Beverly Hills, to enjoy the nightlife of Las Vegas, and to speak openly about Communist infiltration of the arts when he testified in 1952 before the *notorious* [notorious to liberals who supported the Communists; italics added] House Un-American Activities Committee. These are only a few of the contradictions apparent in Odets's life.

His subsequent plays, the most popular of which are *Golden Boy* (1937) and *The Country Girl* (1950), demonstrate a mature craftsmanship. Some, like *The Flowering Peach*, even show a calm mood unexpected from the firebrand who wrote *Waiting for Lefty*. Yet Odets's reputation will probably rest heavily with the rich colloquial family drama, *Awake and Sing*, and the angry, experimental *Waiting for Lefty*, his first two produced dramas.... His direct influence on playwrights like William Gibson and Arthur Miller is evident. Always the idealist rather than the doctrinaire leftist, Odets is best characterized not by the 'Stormbirds of the Working Class' speech at the conclusion of *Waiting for Lefty*, but by the line he directed to the younger generation in *Awake and Sing*: 'Go out and fight so life shouldn't be printed on dollar bills'."

Michael J. Mendelsohn  
*The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2*  
(D.C. Heath 1990) 1629-30

Michael Hollister (2015)