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| Group Theatre (1931-1941) |
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| Founded in 1931 by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg, the Group Theatre was conceived as a company dedicated to staging socially relevant plays, with a permanent ensemble of actors trained in a new, shared technique. Its legacy can be located in the contributions it made to modern American drama, particularly through the works of member-playwright Clifford Odets, and through its practise of the Stanislavsky System, which revolutionized American acting, developing into a psychologically realistic approach widely known as ‘the Method’. |
| Founded in 1931 by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg, the Group Theatre was conceived as a company dedicated to staging socially relevant plays, with a permanent ensemble of actors trained in a new, shared technique. Its legacy can be located in the contributions it made to modern American drama, particularly through the works of member-playwright Clifford Odets, and through its practise of the Stanislavsky System, which revolutionized American acting, developing into a psychologically realistic approach widely known as ‘the Method’.  File: Founders.png  Figure 1 Group Theatre founders Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, and Cheryl Crawford, Brookfield Center, Connecticut, 1931  Source: New York Public Library. Online order form at [nypl.org/permissions](http://nypl.org/permissions). Please paste the following information into the online order form:  Image ID: ps\_the\_2691  Title: Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, and Cheryl Crawford, Brookfield Center.  Photographer: No Credit  Please contact [permissions@nypl.org](mailto:permissions@nypl.org) or 212-930-0091 w/ any ordering questions  The Group had no manifesto, but Clurman articulated the founders’ shared vision in fervent oratory. Damning the commercialism, poor material, and inadequate acting of the moment, Clurman declared ‘America has as yet no Theatre’ (qtd. in Smith, 4), and he talked young artists into creating one. Unity of production was a key goal, with all elements—acting, directing, writing, and design—creating a coherent, meaningful whole. The Group’s modernist influences were many; Clurman and Strasberg were widely read, inspired by artists like Jacques Copeau and Edward Gordon Craig, and most powerfully influenced by Konstantin Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre, whose work they had seen onstage, and whose theories they studied at the American Laboratory Theatre.  With actor training a chief priority, the ensemble spent summers in the country, experimenting with exercises and improvisations while rehearsing plays. Paul Green’s *The House of Connelly* (1931) marked their Broadway debut; they also staged works by John Howard Lawson and Maxwell Anderson, among others. Sidney Kingsley’s *Men in White* (1933) was an early success, widely praised for its realistic portrayal of doctors against Mordecai Gorelick’s abstract hospital setting.  File: Men in White.png  Figure 2 The Group Theatre’s production of Sidney Kingsley’s *Men in White,* 1933  Source: New York Public Library. Online order form at [nypl.org/permissions](http://nypl.org/permissions). Please paste the following information into the online order form:  Image ID: 1607291  Title: Scene from the stage production Men in White.  Photographer: Vandamm.  Please contact [permissions@nypl.org](mailto:permissions@nypl.org) or 212-930-0091 w/ any ordering questions  The Group’s mission reached its apotheosis in 1935, when it began to stage Odets’s plays. Most members were political progressives who lived and worked together, sharing meals as well as ideals, and the collective found its voice in Odets. *Waiting for Lefty*, set at a taxi drivers’ union meeting, unfolds in episodes in which characters enact their struggles in the depths of the Great Depression. The play’s final, climactic moment legendarily brought the audience to its feet, crying, ‘Strike!’, and the Group’s medium and message became one.  File: Waiting for Lefty.png  Figure 3 Elia Kazan in the Group Theatre production of Clifford Odets’s *Waiting for Lefty*, 1935  Source; Source: New York Public Library. Online order form at [nypl.org/permissions](http://nypl.org/permissions). Please paste the following information into the online order form:  Image ID: psnypl\_the\_4323  Title: Scene from the stage production Waiting for Lefty  Photographer: Vandamm. Please contact [permissions@nypl.org](mailto:permissions@nypl.org) or 212-930-0091 w/ any ordering questions  Odets’s other Group plays include *Awake and Sing* (1935), *Paradise Lost* (1935), and *Golden Boy* (1937). He captured the lives of the lower middle class, and of Jewish families in New York in the 1930s; embracing leftist politics, he brought new subjects and structures to modern American drama.  File: Awake and Sing.png  Figure 4 Poster for the Group Theatre’s production of *Awake and Sing!* by Clifford Odets, 1935  Source: Source: Museum of New York, available at: <http://collections.mcny.org/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult_VPage&VBID=24UAYWPXZMU8&SMLS=1&RW=1425&RH=724>  Economic pressures and internal disputes led to the Group’s 1941 demise, but its influence continued through its individual members. Notable names include teachers Stella Adler, Bobby Lewis, Sanford Meisner, and Lee Strasberg; actors Lee J. Cobb and Karl Malden; and director Elia Kazan. The Group Theatre emblematized the spirit and struggle of the thirties, and ushered in a new era of American drama on stage and screen, performed by a new kind of actor. |
| Further reading:  (Chinoy, Reunion: A Self-Portrait of the Group Theatre)  (Chinoy, The Group Theatre: Passion, Politics, and Performance in the Depression Era)  (Clurman)  (Odets)  (Smith)  (Strasberg) |