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| **Odets, Clifford** |
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| One of the foremost American playwrights of the first half of the twentieth century, Clifford Odets is best known for his social realist plays and screenplays, of which *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), *Awake and Sing!* (1935*), Golden Boy* (1937), and *Rocket to the Moon* (1938) have attained canonical status. A committed leftist and briefly a member of the Communist Party, his meteoric trajectory from actor in the experimental Group Theatre in New York to Hollywood screenwriter has been narrated, first by Harold Clurman in *The Fervent Years* and then by generations of subsequent critics and biographers, as the tragedy of a tormented and politically ambivalent visionary who struggled to reconcile his radical beliefs with the rapid celebrity that took him to Hollywood. During his later life, his reputation was tainted as a result of his voluntary if ambivalent testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee in the McCarthy inquisitions. Odets’s importance to theatrical modernism rests on his first play *Waiting for Lefty*, which enacted the cultural politics of the Popular Front by absorbing the militancy of agitprop in the social humanism of dramatic realism. |
| File: Clifford Odets 1935.jpeg  Figure Clifford Odets  Source: <http://acertaincinema.com/media-tags/clifford-odets/>  One of the foremost American playwrights of the first half of the twentieth century, Clifford Odets is best known for his social realist plays and screenplays, of which *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), *Awake and Sing!* (1935*), Golden Boy* (1937), and *Rocket to the Moon* (1938) have attained canonical status. A committed leftist and briefly a member of the Communist Party, his meteoric trajectory from actor in the experimental Group Theatre in New York to Hollywood screenwriter has been narrated, first by Harold Clurman in *The Fervent Years* and then by generations of subsequent critics and biographers, as the tragedy of a tormented and politically ambivalent visionary who struggled to reconcile his radical beliefs with the rapid celebrity that took him to Hollywood. During his later life, his reputation was tainted as a result of his voluntary if ambivalent testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee in the McCarthy inquisitions.  File: Waiting for Lefty Publication.jpeg  Figure 2 The first publication of Waiting for Lefty in New Theatre, Feb. 1935: 13-20.  Source: L.W. Conolly Theatre Archives, McLaughlin Library, University of Guelph  Odets’s importance to theatrical modernism rests on his first play *Waiting for Lefty*, which enacted the cultural politics of the Popular Front by absorbing the militancy of agitprop in the social humanism of dramatic realism. The play begins as a strike meeting of a taxi drivers’ union, and the agitprop narrative frame leads to short realist scenes that flash to the moments that radicalized the workers. The play ends with a mass exhortation that famously brought the audience to its feet to join the call to strike. As Michael Denning suggests, the opening of play, as text and event, in January 1935 announced the arrival of the cultural front as a mass movement of radical democracy. As Odets himself rhapsodized after the first production, ‘The proscenium arch disappeared. That’s the touchstone, the key phrase: *the proscenium arch disappeared*’(qtd. in Brenman-Gibson 316). In their respective writings on the play, John Howard Lawson and Harold Clurman both used it to map the political urgency of workers’ theatre onto the domain of dramatic literature in the canonical tradition of American drama.  *File: Waiting for Lefty Staging.jpeg*  Figure 3 Waiting for Lefty as staged by Vancouver’s Progressive Arts Club at the Dominion Drama Festival, Ottawa, 1936.  Source: [Photo by Yousuf Karsh, available through L.W. Conolly Theatre Archives, McLaughlin Library, University of Guelph]  In the year following its premiere, Odets excised the most explicitly communist scene and the play was taken up by workers’ theatre troupes around the world, for whom it provided a theatrical transition from agitprop to the realist drama of the professionalized Popular Front theatres. |
| Further reading:  (Odets)  (Odets, Waiting for Lefty)  (Odets, Three Plays)  (Brenman-Gibson)  (Clurman)  (Denning)  (Lawson)    (Levine) |