

WAITING FOR LEFTY: ODETS' CLARION CALL FOR ACTION

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ABSTRACT

Waiting for Lefty (1935), a play by Clifford Odets, is considered a prime example of a genre known as revolutionary theater. Despite being written in 1935, this play continues to speak to modern day audience. It examines the role of severe economic recession on human lives. The characters are clearly identified by class and these classes are presented in vivid opposition to each other. These characters are not frozen in the time in which they were written. In fact, they stare down the bleak future that looks very much like our present unless they fight their way out of this trap. On the one hand, we have the virtuous and long-suffering members of the working class; on the other, the greedy, inhumane capitalists who exploit them at every turn. Every character in the play is caught in some situation. This very situation forces them to fight, to strike, to struggle, to set things straight.

Waiting for Lefty is an overt work of propaganda that tells the story of the working-class struggle, intended to promote a socialist revolution. It is not only one of the best working-class plays that have been written but also one of the most dynamic dramas of the times. It was not written for the ages to stand as an immortal work of art but for a specific time and culture to advance particular social and political aspirations. As Wendy Smith writes:

Waiting for Lefty was more than a play; it was a historic event: actors and audience literally tore down the walls between theatre and real life, performer and observer, artists and ordinary people, asserting for one thrilling moment a unity of emotion and belief that is the greatest joy the theatre can offer. (423)

In this play, Odets uses the interesting technique of spotlighting individuals in the mass and allows the basic conflict to evolve through their separate stories. The emotional playlets depict the effects of capitalism not in intellectual abstractions but in stark human realities, as individuals ranging from blue-collar workers to salaried professionals are each destroyed by the same, heartless system. Each finds the same answer in mass action against the bosses.

Harold Cantor aptly observes that, “*Waiting for Lefty* deals with the class struggle between the corrupt, bigoted, indifferent rich and the hungry, decent, exploited poor” (10).

The crowd scenes which bring them together are staged to make the audience feel that they, too, are part of the strike meeting. Presumably, they will also be caught up in the final call to “Strike” and feel the thrill and power of collective participation. As Herr observes, “*Waiting for Lefty* was more than a bitter condemnation; it was a militant call to create a new world” (71).

Although this play deals with the economic issues of the Depression, yet it addresses more universal issues of materialism, survival in adverse circumstances, economic insecurities and above all honesty and loyalty in interpersonal relationships. This play doesn’t limit its boundary to the various scenes and characters, rather it goes beyond. People are so engrossed in the ever-flowing stream of materialism and competitiveness that they are totally unaware of the moral values.

We meet various characters in the play who have been trapped in this materialistic world and also various characters who remain idealistic although. As the play opens, we are introduced to a corrupt union leader, Henry Fatts. He is the play's most obvious villain and the primary focus of its outrage— a stereotypical fat cat, driven by a ruthless greed and a hunger for power. He is unmoved by the desperate poverty of the workers he claims to serve. He is purposely exaggerated, a constant force of pure evil. Odets intended the audience to see him as an ugly menace, hovering over the lives of all the characters. Though Fatts pays lip-service to democratic principles and rails against the anti-American nature of communism, he is a tyrant and racketeer, imposing his will on the union by force and intimidation.

Fatts appears to be well fed and openly secure about his circumstances and his position in the union as the leader. He intends to make sure that the union members’ need to improve their lives does not interfere with the life he has come to enjoy. In the opening scene, he is trying to dissuade the union membership from striking. Suddenly, a voice calls out from the audience, “Where’s Lefty?” The rest of the members join in together, “That’s what I wanna know. Where’s your pal, Lefty? You elected him chairman—where the hell did he disappear? We want Lefty! Lefty! Lefty!” (6). Nobody knows where he is.

Lefty Costello is the title character who never appears on stage. He is a heroic figure, in direct contrast to Fatts’ villainy. He is the embodiment of honesty and loyalty. A dedicated union organizer and presumably a communist, he enjoys the confidence of the workers and seems to be their true leader, the driving force behind the stake effort. He has been elected chairman of the strike committee and his absence in the meeting is troubling. It seems that the members are counting on his leadership to stand up to Fatts and make the eagerly awaited strike a reality. He recalls other heroic, martyred organizers of union lore. Though their loss is deeply felt, such figures are never considered irreplaceable, for their cause is one of mass action. Though all the workers have depended on him, they do not need a leader to give them power; they need only seize the collective power they had always had, by standing together in defiance. Being loyal to his union members, what he has achieved. Death! This is the plight of a loyal man in this society. If he raises his voice, he has to suffer.

In the play, Joe, a member of the strike committee, is the first to rise and speak in Lefty's place. He also knows it’s time to take action. He is not motivated by political abstractions but by the hard facts of life: the hopeless poverty that engulfs his family and the families of his fellow workers. It’s all about life and death. People aren’t striking for trivial issues. They’re fighting for

their lives as modern man is doing nowadays. Every individual has in him the cosmic burden of the world.

As Joe begins to speak in favor of an immediate strike, the lights fade and a spotlight picks up a scene in which Joe and his wife, Edna Mitchell, are talking. They are in their bare apartment and Joe has just been informed that the furniture has been taken away because he has not been able to meet the installment payments. Joe is disheartened because his earnings as a taxi cab driver amount to only six or seven dollars a week, scarcely enough to pay for any living expenses beyond rent. Edna, beset by the problem of how to meet the rent which will fall due the following day, looks at Joe peculiarly as he snaps:

JOE. Don't look at me that way, Edna.

EDNA. I'm looking through you, not at you. . . . You're a four star-bust! . . . Who's the man in the family, you or me? (8-9)

Joe, emasculated by the effects of continued poverty and defeat, is only able to say: "Tell me what to do!" He can only retreat into a retrospective reverie which causes him to say, "I wish I was a kid again and didn't have to think about the next minute." But Edna is stronger than Joe and will not permit him this meditative retreat; she demands action with the words, "For God's sake, do something, Joe, get wise. Maybe get your buddies together, maybe go on strike for better money" (9). But Joe is not persuaded. He feels that strikes don't work and that during a strike no money comes in.

Joe is the little man caught in a trap between two encompassing walls of evil: on the one hand the capitalist, using the little man as his pawn as he pursues his course toward greater wealth; on the other, the labor leader of whom Joe says, "You know they're racketeers. The guys at the top would shoot you for a nickel. . . . Don't you wanna see me alive?" Edna thoughtfully replies, "No . . . I don't think I do, Joe. Not if you can lift a finger to do something about it, and don't" (10).

When Edna tries to persuade her husband to strike, she points at their inability to buy fruit as an indication of their failure to achieve the dream promised by consumer culture: "Sure, I see it in the papers, how good orange juice is for kids. But damnit our kids get colds one on top of the other. They look like little ghosts. Betty never saw a grapefruit. I took her to the store last week and she pointed to a stack of grapefruits. 'What's that!' she said. My God, Joe—the world is supposed to be for all of us" (10). Edna's words have the desired effect on Joe and he finally rises to action. The scene shifts again to the union hall, where Joe utters the words, "We gotta walk out!" (13) and returns to his seat. He has found a short-term solution, one which might conceivably precipitate reform.

Odets has not suggested more than a beginning towards the solution of the problem as it exists but Joe is ready, at least to take action and to stand firm in the protection of his family's rights as well as his own. Here Odets realizes that the inner conflicts of the individual are caused by the social conflict and this, in turn, is conditioned by the economic struggle. Odets interprets, therefore, even the most personal problems of his characters in the light of this social conditioning, thus placing himself in the general category of social dramatist.

Odets attempts to stir up the weary American public of the 1930s by providing examples of everyday people who, with some coaxing, rise above the capitalist mess they have inherited and take control of their destinies. In his work, Odets paints the common man as honest, sacrificial and exploited, while the big businesses and the government are portrayed as the proletariat's enemies, anonymous corporations of rich men intent on shattering dreams.

In the play the audience is brought face-to-face with the capitalist in the person of a manufacturer of poison gas, Fayette. Miller is a taxi driver who has been fired from his former job as a research assistant because he has ideals which will not permit compromise. Miller is about to receive a promotion to a new post which will require him to spy on Dr. Brenner, an eminent chemist, as desired by Fayette. Fayette, the industrialist, is a man who thrives on strife between nations. Miller, an idealist, lost a brother in the war as well as two cousins. Fayette tells him that “The world is an armed camp today. One match sets the whole world blazing in forty-eight hours. Uncle Sam won’t be caught napping”! Miller, speaking for the proletariat, muses distractedly, “They say 12 million men were killed in that last one and 20 million more wounded or missing.” Fayette’s answer, shocking in its brutality and frankness, is specifically intended to portray the typical captain of industry as he appears in the eyes of the proletariat: “That’s not our worry. If big business went sentimental over human life there wouldn’t be big business of any sort!” (15). Miller finally refuses to do Fayette’s bidding, saying he would “Rather dig ditches first!” (16). Fayette replies, “That’s a big job for foreigners” (17).

Big businesses are portrayed a heartless machine that gradually squeezes the life out of its workers for its own gain. In this play, big business is represented by nearly anonymous figure such as Fayette. Miller’s reaction expresses the sentiments of the audience, “But sneaking—and making poison gas—that’s for Americans?” Fayette, unruffled, asks, “No hard feelings?” and Miller, chafing from what he has just heard, strikes out with the last speech in the scene – “Sure hard feelings! I’m not the civilized type, Mr. Fayette. Nothing suave or sophisticated about me. Plenty of hard feelings! Enough to want to bust you and all your kind square in the mouth!” (17). He does this and the scene is blacked out.

Miller speaks simply and truthfully, that he lives in a simple world and that the other man’s world is made up of fancy talk that isn’t true. Fayette feels he can expound large principles whether they’re right or wrong. Here, we see a parallel between capitalism and idealism which are still prevalent in the society. Big businesses are totally corrupted. There are no morals, no principles, no mercy. A man can go to any level in order to grind his own axe.

Miller’s basic concern here is his relation to his fellow men. How can he, as a scientist, pursue a course of action which will lead to an undesirable end for mankind? How can he, as a man, degrade himself by spying on another scientist? How can he, for money and security, sell to the capitalist his own inner soul? His fist smashes through the chrysalis within which he is secure; with his gesture of punching Fayette’s jaw, he frees himself as a human being. His gesture puts him out of a job at a time when jobs were very scarce. Miller’s role is consistent with Odets’ philosophy that man must be able to make his living in such a way that his own ideals are not compromised. However, having left one job because he would not compromise, he is now trying to avoid compromise in yet another job by supporting the union in its claims against the taxi company. Odets would appear to be indicating that it is very difficult indeed for man to find a way to survive without sacrificing some of his idealism.

The Labour Spy Episode is also used effectively to emphasize the climate of distrust which oppresses the worker from every side at a time of crisis. It also points out that those who are apparently union supporters and sympathizers might very well be unworthy of the trust of the union membership and might represent a very real threat to the people with whom they seemingly ally themselves.

Thus, in the play, we see the length to which the big business houses are willing to go to protect their incomes at the expense of the poor. Odets hits hard by compounding the lying with

the family betrayal, setting up an environment where a man won't just sell out his fellow man for a buck, he'll sell out his own brother. This brief episode brings up a situation touched on before labor spies. They were a real problem for unions, employed by businessmen to sabotage unions from inside. What this episode does is play the idea of the union as a family against the biological family. The man in the audience understands that his true brothers are his fellow taxi drivers, not his strike-breaking brother.

In the present play, we find a parallel between fantasy and reality, a theme very much prevalent in the society. Odets gives an unsentimental boy and a very sentimental girl. What makes them so compelling is earnest clash of sentiment ability and honesty. These characters need more than money. Money alone can't save them. Florrie needs the illusion of love and romance. If you take that away, you kill her. These people get killed by their romanticism.

Here Odets is concerned with two young people in love- the most ephemeral thing in the world. Sid is a hack driver whose girl, Florrie, lives with her mother and brother Irv. Irv is afraid that Florrie and Sid will marry, have children and then turn to him for aid in supporting their offspring. He points out towards a problem of the Depression-era when he tells his sister, "This ain't no time to get married. Maybe later—" ; he follows this statement with, "Nowadays is no time to be soft. You gotta be hard as a rock or go under" (18). Sid is basically an acceptable suitor for Florrie. Irv has no objection to him as a person but he can see no future for the pair, who have been engaged to be married for three years in which time ". . . we never even had a room to sit in somewhere." This theme of homelessness recurs in some other plays of Odets as well. Sid is convinced that ". . . the cards is stacked for all of us. The money man dealing himself a hot royal flush. Then giving you and me a phony hand like a pair of tens or something. . . . Then he says, what's the matter you can't win-no stuff on the ball, he says to you." He finally concludes: "If we can't climb higher than this together-we better stay apart. . . . We got the blues, Babe-the 1935 blues" (21-22). The problem here is clearly an economic one for which there seems no immediate solution.

A strike might conceivably offer hope. Sid and Florrie have nothing to lose by a strike, for their situation cannot be much worse than it is now. Odets presents them as lovable, sympathetic characters, caught in a vies between grasping labor leaders and avaricious capitalists lacking a social conscience. Sid lives in the stark reality. Florrie lives in her fantasies. Their two worlds can never get together. It's a conflict of elements and character. It's difficult for Florrie to face facts with him. Odets is not saying Florrie is the only one trapped. He says all girls are trapped.

This scene contains the crux of the play. Irv is trying to pitch to Florrie the reality of the situation but she is a dreamer, unwilling to face the truth of the Taxi Strike and how it is affecting the entire family and her future. When Sid finally arrives, disheartened himself, they try to escape together into a world where such hardship is not real. Unfortunately they cannot avoid the situation. Sid tries to rationalize their position with stories of his brother and his world but they just exemplify his lack of faith in himself. Without his strength, Florrie cannot be strong enough and she crumples at the idea of losing Sid, who, in turn falls to his knees seeing her pain and his own.

The play focuses on the problem of material greed, which is, in fact, eating at the fabric of society. It has now become the sole aim of the society. This play is not only an attack on capitalism but as a study of the bewildered common man groping in a world where morality has become a shifting quicksand. Scene V is very important in the play as it brings up such problems

through the characters of Dr. Benjamin and Dr. Barnes. Dr. Benjamin has had a hospital residency and has gained seniority at his hospital, an institution which deals chiefly with charity cases. His immediate superior and very close personal friend is Dr. Barnes, a non Jew, with whom Benjamin, a Jew, has always felt on equal terms as a person. Naturally, when Benjamin is informed that he is to be dismissed from the hospital staff, he turns to Dr. Barnes for an explanation. Barnes hints darkly that anti-Semitism is the pretext for Benjamin's dismissal. Benjamin is to be replaced in the operating room by Dr. Leeds who is "... incompetent as hell." Dr. Barnes, who realizes that this is the case, reminds Dr. Benjamin that "Doctors don't run hospitals" (25-26).

Indeed, Dr. Barnes makes his statement in more general terms when he says: "Doctors don't run medicine in this country. The men who know their jobs don't run anything here, except the motormen on trolley cars" (27-28). This sentiment had received widespread acceptance in the 1930s and one must always bear in mind that Odets is often repeating widespread sentiments which, if they are repeated often enough, become truth in the minds of those who are repeatedly exposed to them. The author's intent here is to reveal that everybody is a victim of the corrupt society. Stella Adler, in this connection, rightly observed, "If you're in it too long, you acquiesce. If you're young, you can break through" (132).

As the play enters its last scene, Agate rises and directs a barrage of criticism about the Union at Fatts. But by this time the other members are aroused and Fatts' calls to order go unheeded as Agate makes his complaint. He rants: "This is your life and mine! It's skull and bones every incha the road! Christ, we're dyin' by inches! For what? For the debutant-ees to have their sweet comin' out parties in the Ritz! Poppa's got a daughter she's gotta get her picture in the papers. Christ, they make' em with our blood. Joe said it. Slow death or fight. It's war!" (30). A high pitch of emotion is reached as Agate says, "... the man who got me food in 1932, he called me Comrade! The one who picked me up where I bled—he called me Comrade too! What are we waiting for. . . . Don't wait for Lefty! He might never come" (31).

At this point a man enters and announces that Lefty has been found with a bullet through his head. The response is tumultuous:

AGATE. Hear it, boys, hear it? Hell, listen to me! Coast to coast!
 HELLO AMERICA! HELLO. WE'RE STORM- BIRDS OF THE
 WORKING-CLASS. WORKERS OF THE WORLD. . . . OUR
 BONES AND BLOOD! And when we die they'll know what we did
 to make a new world! Christ cut us into little pieces. We'll die for
 what is right! Put fruit trees where our ashes are! Well, what's the
 answer?

ALL. STRIKE!

AGATE. LOUDER!

ALL. STRIKE!

AGATE and OTHERS on Stage. AGAIN!

ALL. STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE!!! (31)

Although vague, the call for action at the end of *Waiting for Lefty* is nevertheless insistent. At that time, the taxi strike became synonymous with the overthrow of the economic exploitation of the masses and with the downfall of labor bosses, of poison gas manufacturing, of racial and religious discrimination and of an over-all condition of unemployment. The product of the widespread discontent was a class conscious working class, its forces augmented by the

oppressed members of the professions. Odets makes his point clear that in order to survive in the cut throat world, one must bond with others, make necessary sacrifices and live for oneself, not for a paycheck or in a deluded fantasy-state.

What is at stake in much of this play is increased material comfort. Odets recognizes that the testing ground of the new marketplace is the human body. Agate Keller's willingness to be cut into little pieces is more ironic in the light of Edna's withering remarks. So Keller's final plea for a strike, though moving and rhetorically powerful is complicated by the ambivalent nature of the imagery it employs. The paradise Keller imagines is the same one that Edna reads about in the papers, full of fruit trees but the only way to enter its gates is to sacrifice oneself for the material pleasures it promises, to be cut into little pieces.

The people who saw this play were obviously not the people whose day- to-day existence was being jeopardized by the Depression. People who went to the theater in the Depression era might have been feeling the economic pinch of the Depression but they were not living the marginal existence of the cabbies in this play. The first performance of this play became, as Harold Clurman describes it, a defining moment of the times as well as a landmark performance in the history American theater:

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 actors had become one. (147)

The social forces of Odets' age, the strong call of workers to unite, the search for answers to social problems in socialistic and communistic political groups, did much to shape the young playwright's thinking. The climax is a defiant call for the union to strike. Clurman reports that the first performance of *Waiting for Lefty* was a significant moment in the history of the American theater:

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 even 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. (148)

It is true that this play echoes the sounds of the 1930s, still we find its relevance in today's competitive world. Self-interest and self-advancement are more important than social interest. Materialism is taking precedence over humanism. This play is in fact a continual search for an inviolable truth about human character and behaviour. The task is to distinguish between those elements which are external and inessential and those which are definitional.

Every character in the play is trapped in some difficult situation. The Young Hack and His Girl are caught in a world they can't get out of. Fayette has something he's preserving that is heading toward war. Fatts is trying to preserve the world in which he can be a racketeer and dominate the trade union. There's a war- everyone is in it for a reason. The action for all of them is to fight their way out of the trap.

The situation forces each one of them to act in order to change the world around him. They need to fight, to strike and struggle through to victory. The other side needs to control, to manipulate, to hold them in place. That's the conflict. It's not a conflict of the individuals or of the 30s. It's bigger and universal. This is exactly what the polemic of the play says, you've got to strike to make a better world.

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