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Clifford Odets (1906-1963)

Clifford Odets was born to Jewish immigrant parents in Philadelphia, PA, on July 18, 1906. He was raised in New York City, but dropped out of school at 17 to become an actor. He worked in small repertory companies throughout the 1920s before becoming one of the original members of the New York City-based, avant-garde, left-wing ensemble Group Theatre, founded by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and method-acting guru Lee Strasberg. The Group, now considered the most influential American theater troupe, was committed to radical revolutions in theater; they would focus on, and possibly affect, pressing social issues of the day while ridding their original productions of the artificiality that had consumed Broadway. They also shunned celebrity and made their productions true collaborations, following the views espoused in their plays.
In the midst of the Great Depression, the group found no shortage of pressing social issues, but they would have to wait until Odets discovered his true calling as a playwright before exploding on to the theatrical scene. After joining the American Communist Party in 1934, Odets used a taxi drivers' strike from that year as the inspiration for his first play, *Waiting for Lefty*, produced in 1935. The play borrows heavily from Communist ideology and promotes unionization as the only means to tip the scales of power away from big business and toward the worker. The play, starring future legendary film director Elia Kazan, was a huge success, thrilling its audience to the point of pandemonium. Odets also perfected the group's ambition to write plays in the authentic language of its working-class characters; his crackling, pitch-perfect dialogue brought an unprecedented level of social realism to the theater.

Odets quickly followed the success of *Waiting for Lefty* in 1935 with what many consider his masterpiece, *Awake and Sing!* and also *Till the Day I Die*, one of the first anti-Nazi plays produced on Broadway. With the production of *Paradise Lost* that same year,
Odets was hired to write screenplays in Hollywood, where he met and married actress Luise Rainer. He had numerous affairs with such actresses as Frances Farmer and Fay Wray before he and Rainer divorced in 1940. He later married theater actress Bette Grayson.

Odets's romantic dalliances did not prevent him from writing. *Golden Boy*, produced in 1937, became his and Group Theatre's biggest success. It turned out they would need it, as the ensemble was hemorrhaging money and decided to take on Hollywood actors as a last-ditch resort to attract audiences. Nevertheless, it dissolved in 1941, but not before Odets was able to put on *Rocket to the Moon* (1938), *Night Music* (1940), and the group's last production, *Clash By Night* (1941).

Odets's radical politics made him an obvious target for Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee's Communist witch-hunt in 1953. However, Odets maintained that he was never directly influenced by the American Communist Party, but that his plays stemmed from his sympathy with the working class. Not blacklisted like many of his fellow Communist artists, Odets wrote more screenplays,
including the adaptation of the novel *The Sweet Smell of Success*, a classic investigation into the cutthroat world of fame. He also found time to write the stage plays *The Big Knife* (1949) and *The Country Girl* (1950).

Odets died from cancer on Aug. 18, 1963, shortly after leaving the television show *The Richard Boone Repertory Theater*, for which he had signed on to be executive story editor. The model for the idealistic titular playwright in the Coen brothers' 1991 film *Barton Fink*, Odets is considered the defining American playwright of the 1930s and revered as one of drama's greatest crusaders for social justice.

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