

Looking Up at Down: Plays from the Great Depression

WAITING FOR LEFTY

by Clifford Odets
directed by Andrew Tsao⁺

February 18-21, 2010
Jones Playhouse

CAST

Fatt	Andrew Tsao ⁺
Joe	Trevor Marston*
Edna	Monique Robinson*
Miller	Scott Abernethy*
Fayette	Matthew Giampietro*
Irv	Gavin Reub
Florence	Sarah Loveland*
Sid	Stephen Levall*
Clayton	Carl Kennedy*
Agate Keller	Phil Kruse*
Dr. Barnes	Jason Sanford*
Dr. Benjamin	Robert Anderson
Gunman	Jacob Reynolds

*Indicates member of Professional Actor Training Program (MFA).
+Indicates member of UW Drama Faculty.

END OF SUMMER

by S.N. Behrman
directed by Mark Jenkins⁺

February 25-28, 2010
Jones Playhouse

CAST

Will	Robert Bergin*
Mrs. Wyler	Kayla Lian*
Paula Frothingham	Marissa Lichwick*
Leonie Frothingham	Amy Frear*
Sam Frothingham	Patrick Cullen*
Dr. Kenneth Rice	Noam Rubin*
Dennis McCarthy	Mike Rash*
Dr. Dexter/ Boris, Count Mersky	Jeffrey Fracé ⁺

*Indicates member of Professional Actor Training Program (MFA).
+Indicates member of UW Drama Faculty.

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Special Thanks To:

Sarah Guthu, Jim Gregory, Jessie Kindig, Andrew Hedden, Tom Lynch, Trevor Griffey.

Waiting for Lefty and *End of Summer* are produced by special arrangement with Dramatists Play Service, Inc.

The Looking Up at Down Reading Series is produced by UW Drama in collaboration with UW Department of History, Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies and the Simpson Center for the Humanities. The reading series is part of the Great Depression in Washington State project. For more information please visit: <http://depts.washington.edu/depress/>

CREW-LEFTY

Design & Stage Manager	Markie Miller
Asst. Stage Manager	Jacob Reynolds
Light Board Operator	Jocelyn Maher
Sound Board Operator	Tiffany Krusey
Run Crew	Rachel Brun Zoe Kim Hope Rubinkowski Brittany Wane

CREW-SUMMER

Stage Manager	Conner Rich
Asst. Stage Manager	Margaret Kammer
Light Board Operator	Taryn Pearce
Sound Board Operator	Rachel Brun
Run Crew	Jin Hee Lee Chunxi Sun Rebecca Lane Alexis Ramsey

THE GREAT DEPRESSION IN WASHINGTON STATE

The Great Depression in Washington State Project is a multimedia web project based at the University of Washington in Seattle. It represents a collaboration between faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and community members. The Project provides an accessible and teachable resource for exploring the vast changes in Washington State during the Great Depression. It also encourages us to think about the relationship between past and current economic crises and the opportunities for history making that can follow.

For more information about The Great Depression Project visit:

<http://depts.washington.edu/depress/>

*Blood on the Streets of Seattle.
Riot on Skid Road, May 1st, 1930
The Great Depression, by R.D.Ginther*



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directed by Paula Bennett
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book and lyrics by
Keythe Farley & Brian Flemming
music by Laurence O'Keefe
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Looking Up at Down: Plays from the Great Depression

Waiting for Lefty

Some of the most influential theatre artists of the twentieth century, men and women who were instrumental to the development of theatre and film in America, passed through or were once associates of The Group Theatre. The Group was a new idea when it formed: a rag-tag collection of talented young thinkers and artists, living together and making theatre collectively, and involved talents like Harold Clurman, Stella and Luther Adler, Lee Strasberg, Elia Kazan, Franchot Tone, Sanford Meisner, and a playwright named Clifford Odets. Odets made his first big splash in 1935, when two of his best plays opened. One was a full-length play called *Awake and Sing!* and the other was a little one-act piece about a taxi drivers' strike, *Waiting for Lefty*.

Lefty is a landmark in the history of American theatre and continues to be produced today, despite its blatant pro-union propaganda and the distance time has placed between the unique lyric of Odets' dialogue and contemporary speech. Like many legends, the story of *Lefty's* conception is one of inspired artistic productivity. As Clurman tells the story in *The Fervent Years*, his memoir of the Group Theatre, Odets came to him one night with an idea for a one-act play that he'd been mulling over, about taxi drivers trying to decide whether or not to go on strike. Hearing that the New Theatre League was looking for plays, Odets wanted feedback and Clurman encouraged him. However much preparation Odets may have already invested into the play is a matter of some speculation. In Clurman's narrative, however, Odets set to work immediately—and emerged three days later with *Waiting for Lefty*.

The play borrows its structure from a popular American theatre tradition – employing the central “host” structure (utilizing the entire troupe) and the vignettes (played by just a few members of the troupe) of the minstrel show. *Lefty* begins at a union meeting of taxi drivers; the members are waiting for their missing leader, the aptly-named Lefty, to show up. A corrupt union boss lurks at the edges of the stage, smoking a cigar, and trying to dissuade the workers from striking. As various members of the union argue about their reasons for striking, vignettes show the hard life that low wages and long hours create for taxi drivers and their unfortunate families. The play builds to a fever pitch as the scenes of outrageous and unfair conditions build, and when the unionized drivers learn at the end of the play that Lefty isn't coming and has been killed, they rise up in anger and call for a strike, encouraging the audience to join them.

The play was a hit. Opening January 5, 1935 at the old Civic Repertory Theatre on Fourteenth Street in New York City, Clurman recalls that within minutes the audience was laughing with knowing delight: taxi drivers in New York had gone on strike the previous February. It was a magical night in the theatre. Clurman remembers that “the actors no longer performed, they were being carried along as if by the exultancy of communication such as I have never witnessed in the theatre before. Audience and actors had become one.” At the end of the play, when the actors called from the stage, “Well, what's the answer?” the rapt audience answered “Strike! Strike!” “It was the birth cry of the thirties,” Clurman wrote, “Our youth had found its voice.” *Lefty* moved to Broadway later that spring, opening at the Longacre Theatre on a double bill with another Odets' piece, his less-successful, anti-Nazi *Till the Day I Die*. The Group offered tickets ranging from 50 cents to \$1.50, drastically reducing prices so that *Lefty* would be accessible to the very masses it represented and spoke both for and to. Odets took the role of Dr. Benjamin in the Broadway production, and admiring audiences hailed him on opening night with an ovation.

Lefty is Communist propaganda par excellence. As Joseph Wood Krutch observed in his review for *The Nation*, “the pace is swift, the characterization is for the most part crisp, and points are made, one after another, with bold simplicity.” Krutch also recognizes that the simplicity that powers *Lefty* meant that its characters were caricatures, and its dramatic world was strictly black-and-white. And yet, Odets managed “soap box oratory” deftly, creating such a powerful, brief impression that many would construe the politics as Odets' own (memoirs from Group members at the time agree that Odets was actually torn in his politics and ultimately unable to commit to the Communist cause, despite his idealistic appreciation of its utopian visions for the future). The force of Odets' writing is that, while it was openly acknowledged as propaganda, not art, his characters were nevertheless irresistibly real, and their plight raised the ire of many an audience as productions of *Lefty* proliferated across the nation. Drawn into sympathetic identification with the strikers, even Krutch, who acknowledges the lack of subtlety in Odets' characters in *Waiting for Lefty*, nevertheless proclaims that the strikers were “so real . . . that when the play is over one expects to find their cabs outside.”

-Sarah Guthu is a doctoral student in Theatre History and Criticism at UW Drama.

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End of Summer

S.N. Behrman's 1936 play *End of Summer* is a comedy of upper-class manners revolving around a wealthy heiress and her daughter, and their search for love. While Behrman's plays were never overtly political or imbued with social messages, his plays illuminate the society of the American rich in the pre-World War II period.

Paula brings her radical working-class boyfriend Will and his blunt college friend, Dennis, to the family summer home in Northern Maine to meet her mother Leonie. Meanwhile, Leonie has invited some of her male admirers up to the house as well: a moody Russian aristocrat, Count Mersky, in exile since the Communist Revolution, and a sinister and mysterious psychoanalyst, Dr. Kenneth Rice. Also on hand is Sam, Paula's father, who has come to finally file divorce papers, as he would like to remarry. While visiting, Will proposes to Paula, but she soon realizes that her wealth poses a huge dilemma: it could provide the necessary funds for Will and Dennis to publish their radical newspaper, but at the same time, the economic boon would ruin Will's credentials as a voice of the working masses. Paula has other worries too: Kenneth is wooing her mother so that he can use the family fortune to support his own research, while simultaneously expressing his sexual attraction to Paula. Paula tricks Kenneth into confessing his readiness to throw Leonie over for her within earshot of her mother. Kenneth is ejected from the house, but not before he angrily denounces the family for their weakness in a monologue that seems to suggest that Kenneth is a fascist. Leonie and Paula ruminate on how their wealth makes it difficult to find real love and true interpersonal connection. The play ends when Leonie sends Paula off to New York, to follow real love and mend her relationship with Will.

Behrman's play was produced by The Theatre Guild, and opened in Hartford, Connecticut on January 30, 1936 after much advance anticipation. It played one night in Hartford, then one night in New Haven, moving to the Colonial Theatre in Boston on February 3, 1936, and finally to the Guild Theatre in New York City on February 17, 1936. *End of Summer* ran for 153 performances, and was revived the next year. The piece was received favorably for its "sparkling dialogue" and its comic pacing. Brooks Atkinson, writing for The New York Times on February 18, 1936, called the production one of Behrman's "tolerant, witty, gently probing essays in modern thinking," praising the production for "a fluent and sunny performance" and thanking Behrman for "a civilized evening." *End of Summer* was even one of five finalists considered for the Critic's Award, an annual award recognizing the season's best Broadway play, given by the New York Drama Circle.

However, there was some question, in subsequent years, regarding Behrman's seemingly apolitical plays—it no longer seemed appropriate not to take a political stand as the war in Europe raged on. Behrman, with his Harvard and Columbia education, wrote plays about the Depression and the onset of World War II, but through the lens of the privileged class, whose wealth—as Leonie tells Paula in *End of Summer*—had become a burden, making their lifestyle uncomfortably conspicuous. Behrman's trademark convention in his plays was to bring together characters with opposing views about the world and let them talk through their positions, though these philosophical conversations are frequently separate from the action of the play (for example, in *End of Summer*, Kenneth's monologue, which smacks of fascism, has little to do with the events of his failed marriage plot).

Yet Behrman's plays are not completely devoid of political message. Characters like Kenneth Rice and other fascistic "Strong Men" are meant to be unpleasant and unsympathetic characters, even if Behrman stops short of condemning or punishing them in his plays. Writing for the journal *College English* in 1950, Charles Kaplan describes the politics of Behrman's plays as "confused," and claims that the reason for the "uneven" feeling of so many of his plays lies in the conflict of Behrman's comic sensibility with his "powerful social consciousness." Kaplan suggests that Behrman's conscience would be better satisfied if the playwright wrote satirical plays, yet describes this unevenness as an accurate representation of the incongruities of American thought during the period. Not all Americans were, like Will and Dennis, fired with a pure radical leftism. The value of Behrman's play today—and all those rave reviews that thanked Behrman for being "civilized" and "keeping his temper" in an angry time—is that it records the ambivalence and uncertainty that characterized the political and social consciousness of the Depression era's privileged class. To retain and revisit such a script today widens the scope of understanding of America in the 1930s.

-Sarah Guthu is a doctoral student in Theatre History and Criticism at UW Drama.