

CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS AMERICAN PLAYS BY CLIFFORD ODETS AND OTHER PLAYWRIGHTS DURING 1930s

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Received: 31 Mar 2018

Accepted: 04 Apr 2018

Published: 07 Apr 2018

ABSTRACT

American Plays had a tremendous response during 1930s and several genre of plays were staged at all corners of America and the Americans were fond of enacting and viewing the plays. The genre of plays will vary based on the American people mindset and the political situations. Several playwrights followed Hollywood techniques for writing their scripts. The role of playwright was found to be more vital than the role of an actor or the Director or the Production Company. The contribution of the playwrights during 1930s was considered to be a trend setting period in changing the roles of a writer from technician to becoming an artist.

KEYWORDS: Playwright, Writer, Script, Actor, Play, Drama, Theatre

INTRODUCTION

During the 1930s, the playwrights followed Hollywood's technique for paying writers for their scripts. Theatres such as Group Theatre and the Theatre Guild supported this idea to consider writers as autonomous artists whose function was very important than any other member of the company. The scripts were sold on the basis of their value, but they were written without the specific actor, particular director or any theatres in mind. Thus the Star System of Pre-World War came to an end, by giving importance to the playwright. A playwright was more important than actor, director or Production Company. The audience of the 1930s saw the talents of different playwrights such as George S. Kaufman for his comedies, Moss Hart for his musical dramas and family dramas and William Saroyan for his sentimental comedy. They also enjoyed the genius of Maxwell Anderson, Lillian Hellman, and Clifford Odets. The thirties was an important period in changing the role of the writer from technician to artist.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHTS PREVALENT IN 1930s

The playwrights of the thirties provided a cornerstone and paved the way for subsequent writers and brought the American drama into the Modern period. Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was an Irish American playwright and was a Nobel Laureate in Literature. He was the first man to introduce the techniques of realism into American drama. Some of his popular works include *Anna Christie* (1920), *The Emperor Jones* (1920), *The Hairy Ape* (1922), *The Great God Brown* (1926), *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933), *the Iceman Cometh* (1939).

Susan Keating Glaspell (1876–1948) was an American playwright, actress, novelist, and journalist. She along with her husband established the Provincetown Players, the first modern American theatre company. Susan served as the Midwest Bureau Director of the Federal theatre project in the WPA. She contributed nine novels,

fifteen plays, nearly fifty short stories and one biography of American Literary Field. She was a pioneering feminist writer and America's first important modern female playwright. Susan Glaspell's plays deal with psychological insight, whereas Clifford Odets plays deal with social dimensions of that period.

Elmer Leopold Reizenstein (1892–1967) took an active part in the American Civil Liberties Union, the authors' league and the dramatists' guild. He was the first Director of New York office of the Federal theatre project. His famous works include *the adding machine* and *the street scene*. He was ranked as the playwright for the drama of the social protest like Clifford Odets.

Paul Green (1894–1981) was the first playwright from South to gain the National and International recognition. He received Pulitzer Prize for *In Abraham Bosom* in 1927. He was recognized as one of the leading regional voices of American theatre. Group Theatre chose his play, *The House of Connelly* for its inaugural production. He was greatly attached to Group Theatre like Clifford Odets.

James Maxwell Anderson (1888–1959) was an author, poet, journalist, and lyricist. He was one of the few modern playwrights to make extensive use of blank verse. He received Pulitzer Prize for his political drama, *Both your houses* in 1933. Like Clifford Odets, Maxwell Anderson also focused on individualism in the characters of his plays.

Lillian Hellman (1905–1984) was a writer and screenwriter. She was blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) at the height of the anti-communist campaigns of 1947-52. Lillian Hellman and Clifford Odets were two of the most influential playwrights of the 1930s, which was a decade of economic instability and political unrest in the United States. They exposed the fundamental economic, social, and political issues of the 1930s through their plays. They both satisfied the broad agenda of the Popular Front.

George S. Kaufman (1889–1961) was a playwright, theatre director, producer, humorist and drama critic. He won the Pulitzer Prize on drama for his *you can't take it with you* in 1937. He had also won the Tony award as a director. He started his career as a journalist and drama critic. He became the drama editor for *New York Times* from 1917 to 1930.

George Kelly (1887–1974) was a playwright, screenwriter, director, and actor. He started his career in Vaudeville as an actor and sketch writer. His important works included *The Torch-Bearers*, *The show-off* and *Behold the bridegroom*. Like Clifford Odets, he deployed Ibsenesque techniques to focus on money, political power, social class and foolish idealism.

Langston Hughes (1902–1967) was a poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist. He was regarded as one of the innovators of the new literary art form Jazz poetry. He was the renowned leader of the Harlem Renaissance.

S.N. Behrman (1893–1973) was a playwright, screenwriter, biographer, and writer. He was considered as one of the Broadway's leading authors of high comedy. He worked in Theatre Guild when Clifford Odets played small roles in Theatre Guild.

Sidney Coe Howard (1891–1939) was a playwright and screenwriter. He had received the Pulitzer Prize for the drama *They knew what they wanted* in 1925. He was a prolific writer and a founding member of the Playwrights' Producing Company along with Maxwell Anderson, S.N. Behrman, Elmer Rice, and Robert Sherwood.

Robert E Sherwood (1896–1955) was an American playwright, author, editor, screenwriter, and historian. Sherwood was six feet and eight inches tall, one of the tallest playwrights during that period. *The Petrified Forest* was ranked as one of the sixteen famous American plays as that of Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*.

Thornton Niven Wilder (1897–1975) was a playwright and novelist. He had received three Pulitzer Prizes Apart from being a playwright, he had served as Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army force, Africa and then in Italy until 1945. Like Clifford Odets, he too dominated the American theatre in the first half of the twentieth century.

William Saroyan (1908–1981) was a playwright, novelist and a short story writer. He had worked on the screen play of the Clifford Odets' play, *Golden Boy* in 1939. He was awarded Pulitzer Prize for the drama titled *The time of your life* in 1940.

Clifford Odets was one of the major American playwrights with the strong sense of social consciousness which is developed during the Great Depression in America that determined his work. He was an interpreter of the American ethos, which is proved by the personality and artistic approach of his plays. Odets had the responsibility of producing serious American plays that reflected the contemporary American society with all its problems and social turmoil. Odets was considered to be a successor of Eugene O'Neill. Odets had the influence of the playwright Anton Chekhov. Critics considered Odets as the Jesus of the Proletarian theatre. Clifford Odets was born in Philadelphia in 1906 to Mr. Louis .J. Odets and Pearl Geisinger Odets. His family name was only Odet but his father Louis Odets was issued a Union card by name Odet's'. He did not correct the mistake as this card was given to him in order to get a job. If he could correct the mistake, he felt that he would lose his place in the line of aspirants applying for jobs. This is how Odets was added's' at the end of his original family name Odet. This came out as a play named, "Mr. Odets Regrets: A Social Drama in One Act" (Weales 17).

In 1908, Odets' family went to the Bronx. Odets' father, Louis .J. Odets, a printer by profession owned a printing shop in the Bronx. Then his father became a direct mail agent in an advertisement. Afterward, he became a merchandizing counselor. Later, his father became the vice president and then as the general sales manager in a boiler company located in Philadelphia in 1927. Clifford Odets was brought up in the Bronx where he attended Morris High School from 1921 to 1923. He was a worker's son until the age of twelve. He left his schooling at the age of fifteen when he was at the beginning of the third year in that school, as he felt that high school was a waste of time. He waited for some time to support himself. Then, Odets earned little money by reciting poetry in the local radio channels. Then, he organized a number of radio melodramas by having a team of like-minded members. He joined in Harry Kamp's amateur poets' theatre. Later, he joined as a member of Mae Desmond's stock company which presented a varied collection of dramas and other works such as operas, songs and dramatic pieces in Philadelphia, Camden and New Jersey. Generally, Odets had roles in dramas as old men and middle-aged people.

Odets had gained a greater level of experience in dramas as his company was having a large collection of dramas. But Odets said that he did not learn a thing playing stock. By these two varying statements, one thing is clear that he was not saving any money but he gained a lot of literary experience which he felt personally by writing letters to his friends and by checking the carbon copies of letters to value and estimate his progress artistically. While his company staged plays in Philadelphia, Odets lived at home and spent his nights in writing. But his father Louis J Odets did not like his son Clifford Odets writing for the company and spending his late nights in writing. He wanted his son to be an advertising writer.

When the company of Mae Desmond got closed, Clifford Odets went to Theatre Guild. In 1931, he and a group of thirty people left the Theatre Guild to form the Group Theatre. The Group Theatre included the members such as Harold Clurman, Franchot Tone, Elia Kazan, Stella Adler, J. Edward Bromberg and Mary Morris.

Odets' earlier plays were introduced in Group Theatre which gave him better identification and experience. It took five years to introduce his plays in Group Theatre although he had writing experience in Mae Desmond's stock company. First, Odets got the chance of an actor who played various roles such as Arthur Weldon in *Midnight* (1930), Ruben in *The House of Connelly* (1931), Houghton in *Men in White* (1933), Audrey Rikin *they all come to Moscow* (1933) and Burns and Jolais in *Gold Eagle* (1935). The members were communistic in nature. Clifford Odets was the person responsible for changing the image of the Group Theatre as far-left, red tainted.

Clifford Odets first produced the play, *Waiting for Lefty* which was opened to the public on 5 January 1935. It became a great success. The play dealt with communism. The play ended with the shout of Strike. He became very familiar and got permanent fame because of such an end in his play. On February 1935, another play titled *Awake and Sing!* Followed *Waiting for Lefty*. He portrayed the frustrations and problems of a lower middle-class Jewish family.

In March 1935, *Awake and Sing!* was followed by Odets' third play, *Till the Day I Die* which is said to be the first American anti-Nazi drama. *Paradise Lost* (1935), *Golden Boy* (1937) and *Rocket to the Moon* (1938) were some of his plays that expressed social pressures during the depression. It improved the reputation of the Group Theatre. Then the play *Night Music* was staged, which dealt with the story of young lovers. After that, Odets went to Hollywood.

CONCLUSIONS

The contribution of Clifford Odets and the other playwrights towards framing the setting the stage for American plays during 1930s were remarkable. The playwrights showcased their talents in their own way. The local Americans enjoyed all the plays that were found to be apt of their time and era.

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