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Clifford Odets: Writing Around Jewishness

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Abstract

Playwright Clifford Odets was a second-generation Jewish American. He is commonly regarded as a sell-out to Hollywood who never fulfilled his artistic promise. This dissertation argues that societal pressure to assimilate was a major factor contributing to his problematic career.

The context in which Odets developed as an artist was conflict-laden. He grew up in a mixed Bronx neighbourhood amidst an exchange of racial epithets. The *Yiddishkeit* homes of relatives and friends nourished him, and his father's interdict against Yiddish customs in the family home caused an inner rift within the boy. This binary affected Odets' personal relationships and, progressively, his work. He wrote his first full-length play, depicting the Depression struggles of a Bronx Jewish family, in a distinct Jewish idiom. Insecure about "writing Jewish," he then attempted to write his way toward centrality. Play- and screenwriting served as performative exercises in the creation of an assimilated persona. Odets spent the greater portion of his professional life in Hollywood, though he always considered himself primarily as a New York playwright. His Group Theatre training resulted in an unconventional working method that informed his plays as well as his finest screenwriting and directorial work in Hollywood.

Odets' controversial testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1952 reflected a characteristic lack of decisiveness. He felt he had defied the Committee despite naming former colleagues as Communist Party members. Others judged him more harshly. Odets sought resolution in once again writing in an ethnic mode. But his last finished play, *The Flowering Peach*, is overlaid with stock Yiddishisms. The process by which it came to fruition was fraught with discord. On his deathbed he expressed profound regret for not having been "more of a Jew." The American assimilation process had exacted the fee of authenticity.

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For my father



Figure 1: Clifford Odets in 1935. Courtesy of Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images, and Google Images.

A long time ago I noted in Sean O'Casey a certain problem. He wrote a vivid 'parochial' drama at first, proletarian life in Ireland. Naturally he was not content to keep repeating these genre pictures and wanted to move out into the wider world ... This shift ... must be watched very carefully, for it is possible that in transit the whole talent may fall off the moving van. ... And if I am not careful it will happen to me too. I don't want to continue writing about Jewish life exclusively if I can help it ... It is so easy for the reality of the work to go ... These problems, with all of their ramifications, are now [my] problems, and [I] had better tread warily.

– Clifford Odets, 1940

Introduction

To become un-Jewish involves no pretense. The pretense lies in the delusion that, having ceased to be a Jew, you have become something else. (B. Hecht 381)

Actors often encounter Clifford Odets for the first time in scene-study class. Scenes from *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), *Awake and Sing!* (1935), and *Golden Boy* (1937) have become staples of American Method training. They were written specifically for Odets' Group Theatre colleagues, acclaimed masters of the technique. They needn't be acted: like an incantation, they pull the actor out of the confines of self and into the pulse of a scene. References to the "Odetsian line" are commonplace in theatre and film criticism. A line written by Odets is quirky, instantly recognisable. Walt Odets has said that his father's written dialogue mimics the way he spoke (Sung). The playwright's particular talent was to inject Jewish-American urban working class culture into his work. He transformed street talk into poetry.

The majority of Odets' plays are multi-ethnic. Several, however, draw mostly on the family dynamic and speech patterns of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. My father customarily spoke in what has come to be known as "Odetsian vernacular." A second-generation American¹ like Odets, my father was born of Eastern European immigrants drawn to the United States in search of safety and a modicum of comfort. Like Odets' father, mine changed his surname to one more "American" for the sake of his family's security and prosperity: he originally had the name of a Russian Jew. Odets was raised in an acculturated American household, but he craved and enjoyed Jewish customs and food in the homes of relatives and friends. My father, by contrast, was raised a Protestant of undetermined denomination and later became a Catholic, ostensibly in order to marry my Polish-Catholic mother. He was never a regular churchgoer. As Karl Jay Shapiro writes, "to be a Jew is to be in a certain state of consciousness which is inescapable. As everyone knows, the Jew who becomes an atheist remains a Jew. The Jew who becomes a Catholic remains a Jew" (ix). Perhaps my father, too, surreptitiously identified with and enjoyed the cultural fruits of Judaism. At home my mother customarily cooked Eastern European dishes. When guests were invited, it was roast turkey or basic Italian-American fare. Odets was conflicted about, but never denied, being a Jew. My parents mutely took to their graves the fact that their daughters were half Ashkenazi Jew. Within the last decade, access to the burgeoning databases of genealogical websites has produced documentation regarding my grandparents' emigration from Kiev in 1913. In part, this dissertation is an attempt to

¹ There is no consensus as to the definitions of first- and/or second-generation American. Both terms are ambiguous. This dissertation will use "second-generation" to indicate children born of naturalised citizens of the United States.

glimpse my father behind his mask of acculturation, and to understand his motives for secrecy.

On a less personal note, this study provides a new perspective on the widespread assumption that Odets' failure to live up to his early promise was that of a Hollywood sellout or a one-trick playwright. Odets marks a turning point in American theatre history; several of his plays are classics of the American stage. His appeal is periodically rediscovered. The past five years have seen a nationwide revival of his plays as well as major productions abroad. A 2006 revival of *Awake and Sing!*, produced by Lincoln Center and directed by Bartlett Sher, kicked off the centenary of Odets' birth. It garnered a Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play. Later that year Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven produced a well-received *Rocket to the Moon*. The 2008 economic crash gave new relevance to his Depression plays. Productions of *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing!* continue to appear in regional theatre listings. *Paradise Lost* was given a major revival by American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2010. London's Royal National Theatre produced a well-received *Rocket to the Moon* in the Spring of 2011.

The plays Odets wrote in a pronounced Jewish idiom prompted this study. The central query of this dissertation arose from the observation that only Odets' first and last full-length plays, written twenty years apart, are explicitly Jewish. *Awake and Sing!* (1935) and *The Flowering Peach* (1954) were written in the midst of drastically different personal circumstances, and radically divergent, though equally trying, historical times. Odets' interim work often includes marginal Jewish characters, but his other nine plays represent a determined effort to move away from Jewish family dynamics toward issues of mainstream American culture. Still, Odets framed his playwriting career with works that telegraphed an unmistakable Jewish sensibility. This dissertation posits reasons for this pattern.

Criticism of Odets' work tends to focus on his radical leftwing politics and his idiosyncratic use of language. He is primarily remembered as a spokesman for the proletariat, despite the fact that he dropped his overtly Marxist stance by the time he wrote *Golden Boy* (1937), a mere two years after he first came to international attention. In the early- to mid-Depression years, radical socialism seemed to many a viable alternative system for the democratic United States. In her history of communism in the United States, Vivian Gornick stresses the term "romance" (Gornick), apt for Odets' brief political involvement. His work has also been discussed extensively in light of his Jewish cultural heritage by critics such as Ellen Schiff and, most notably, R. Baird Shuman. This study aims to satisfy a related area that is noticeably absent in examinations of Odets' career. The progressive acculturation of his work has been taken for granted as normative. Assimilation was viewed as a positive social goal during Odets' formative years and his years as a professional writer.

Driving immigrants toward that goal were the forces of racial hatred and discrimination. No previous study has looked at Odets broadly in relation to anti-Semitism in the United States. Additionally and importantly, the evolution of ethnic consciousness among Jews and awareness of inimical forces in Central Europe affected their performance of self in the New World, as well as their portrayal on the stage. The continuum of this evolution is traced herein through Odets' life and work. This dissertation interweaves previously unavailable biographical sources with an examination of societal pressures of the time. These pressures were intensified by unprecedented immigration to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Odets, who became famous in the mid-Depression years as a young socialist/proletarian Jewish playwright, was compelled by social and economic concerns to adopt a lifestyle inimical to his authentic core identity as a Jewish-American male.

Odets' most formative years, those during which he worked with the Group Theatre, were his most fruitful artistically. The Group was dedicated to the basic tenets of the Stanislavsky System as incorporated into teacher/director Lee Strasberg's acting "Method." Strasberg's technique teaches the artist to access his or her personal history and experience in order to imbue a character with emotional truth. Strasberg and the Group provided Odets' only formal training as an actor and he subsequently became America's first Method playwright. It proved easier for Odets to work with Strasberg's technique as a writer than as an actor. He was never able to relax sufficiently to access his emotional resources and utilize his inner conflicts physically on the stage. Writing, however, suited him as a means of expression that did not demand the naked emotionalism of an actor. Odets successfully adapted many of Strasberg's precepts to his own play- and screenwriting techniques. He did not consider screenwriting an art form, but rather a craft. Seldom could he claim sole authorship of a screenplay; the industry's infrastructure passed along draft scripts in assembly-line fashion. When Odets did receive sole credit, it was generally for an adaptation from a novel or similar work. His conflicted feelings about writing for the screen versus the stage remained unresolved.

From the early days of cinema into the nineteen-fifties, the parameters of film were prescribed by studio moguls who were frequently Jewish and hypersensitive to alienating a paying audience. They forbade anything but the most subtle suggestion of Jewish ethnicity in order to deflect attention from themselves as Jews, and (in their opinion) to protect the Jewish community as a whole. Odets' formative years and most of his writing career coincided with the most virulent period of anti-Semitism the United States had yet seen. Jewish film artists became enmeshed in the gossamer of the American Dream as spun by the studios. For first- and second-generation-American writers, directors and actors, contributing to that mythology served as a performative exercise toward cultural

assimilation. As Odets' time in Hollywood increased, so did his difficulty in writing plays that satisfied his concept of "art." He became embroiled in the assimilative process, taken for granted by many as a positive social imperative. This dissertation will illustrate the impact of the assimilation process on a seminal, Jewish-American theatre artist.

Odets has been the subject of seven major studies, the last of which appeared in 2003. All acknowledge the futility of separating Odets' life from his work. They concur with Gabriel Miller's assessment that "Odets' work was never, in any real sense, reformist. It might be more accurately termed personal ... an examination of the self ... His work emerged from a peculiar sensitivity to external pressures placed upon the individual spirit" (G. Miller, 14). These prior studies include in-depth analyses of his theatrical oeuvre, with differing emphases. None focuses on Odets' identity as a Jew and its inherent conflicts. He struggled with these conflicts throughout his life and they are saliently reflected in his work and career.

R. Baird Shuman's study, *Clifford Odets* (1962), the first to appear, rightly stresses the allegorical intention in the majority of Odets' plays. Shuman thereby seeks to broaden critical understanding of Odets' later works in particular. He defends the later plays as socially conscious within their contemporary context, just as the more blatantly proletarian plays of the mid-Depression period treat the economic cataclysm of that time. Shuman lays a heavy onus on the "critical chaos" surrounding the later plays, asserting that critical animosity went a long way towards stifling the playwright's productivity. Written during Odets' lifetime and reviewed by him, it can be assumed that Shuman's study presents no biographical information or viewpoint at serious odds with those of the playwright.

The next comprehensive work to appear takes a more deconstructive approach, in keeping with nineteen-sixties' critical practice. Edward Murray considers three of the plays produced by the Group Theatre in 1935, *Waiting for Lefty*, *Till the Day I Die*, and, rather perversely, *Paradise Lost*, as unworthy of analysis. Structure, character, language and theme in the remaining eight plays are Murray's main concerns. His stated intention in *Clifford Odets: The 'Thirties and After* (1968) is to "reveal Odets' mastery of form" (vi), emphasising its importance over theme. Murray's opening chapter, "Odets and the Thirties," and a subsequent chapter, "After the Thirties," construct a framework of basic biographical and historical information. Odets' Jewishness is taken as a given and not an issue. There is reference to the playwright's "infantile neuroticism" and the part it may have played in the arc of his career. Murray states, somewhat mysteriously, that, "Odets' failure in self-knowledge ... was to plague him throughout his life" (15). However, Murray does not conjecture as to the root causes of Odets' difficulties. He (rightly) passes the baton by stating, "until we possess a definitive biography of Odets ... the origins of his neurotic illness will remain largely concealed behind the few well-established facts of his early years"

(5). In short, Murray ascribes Odets' "deep inner conflict" (118) to reverberations of the charged political atmosphere of the nineteen-thirties. He attempts to debunk lingering notions of Odets' failure to fulfil his promise as a playwright with his analyses of the individual plays, and the cryptic statement, "Odets was capable of writing better than he knew or intended" (220). I have found appropriate application of Murray's statement in relation to Odets' screenwriting in Chapter Three.

The following year, Michael Mendelsohn's *Clifford Odets: Humane Dramatist* (1969) appeared. Mendelsohn was favoured with much correspondence and a lengthy interview with Odets in 1961, which he published as an article in 1963. Subsequent studies draw heavily upon this interview, as it contains in-depth discussion of Odets' evolution as a playwright. In the book, Mendelsohn treats the three plays omitted by Murray, though he acknowledges the inferiority of *Till the Day I Die*. Mendelsohn's section on *Paradise Lost* begins with a discussion of Chekhovian influence on Odets (33), also mentioned by Shuman and Murray. There is no discussion of suggested ethnicity in *Paradise Lost*; the subject is taken up in this dissertation. Mendelsohn emphasises Odets' craftsmanship, with particular emphasis on Odets' skill with dialogue. He points up likenesses to Sean O'Casey's Dublin plays in Odets' early works. Mendelsohn devotes several sentences to Odets' "lack of roots, lack of family" (101), but refrains from delving into Odets' "sense of alienation," skirting the subject with the remark that Odets shared this sense with "virtually every American playwright of [the twentieth] century" (101).

Gerald Weales, on the other hand, is the first biographer/critic to discuss Odets' personal conflicts and their impact on his career. In *Clifford Odets, Playwright* (1971), Weales writes in an engaging, colloquial New York style. He employs a fair amount of biographical material not included in the prior studies. Aware of Odets' proclivity to revise his own biographical data to suit the occasion (18), Weales felt compelled to do primary research, such as contacting one of Odets' former high school teachers. He is the first to mention Odets' several suicide attempts and his early stabs at playwriting, such as *910 Eden Street* (1931) and *Victory* (1932). *910 Eden Street*, in particular, contains important clues regarding Odets' self-image as a young artist. Weales mentions *910 Eden Street* only as an historical fact, but with the important addendum of a quotation from the Mendelsohn interview: "[*Victory* and *910 Eden Street*] were very painful attempts to ... find my identity" (Mendelsohn, "Center Stage" 71). *910 Eden Street* is discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation as an important milestone in Odets' playwriting and personal development, particularly in relation to lines addressing Jewish identity during the intensely anti-Semitic years of the early 'thirties.

Weales also includes more historical context than the prior three critics. Odets' significance in the history of American theatre is best established by Weales up to this point,

and his analysis of Odets' dialogue is cogent and extensive. He presents the most balanced view of Odets' work thus far: "Odets's plays have a way of being less than what the perfectionist in us wants them to be, but they are a great deal more than they seem to the jaundiced eye" (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 189). Weales is also the first to consider Odets' entire oeuvre, including his films and the three television episodes he wrote for *The Richard Boone Show*. Others, such as Gabriel Miller, follow suit.

Harold Cantor acknowledges a particular debt to Weales and Mendelsohn in *Clifford Odets: Playwright-Poet* (1978), though he finds fault with their sequential approach to the plays. Cantor takes a more formalistic approach, de-emphasising what he calls "improper emphases of the legend which surrounds [Odets]" (4). Cantor is critical of the general lack of credit given Odets in terms of his influence on Jewish-American writers who, during the 'seventies, were receiving extensive attention. Cantor's stated preoccupation is with "the richness of the language and dramatic excitement of the plays themselves" (5). He nonetheless begins with a chapter on "The Thirties" that, while primarily contextual, reiterates biographical information presented by his predecessors. Two 80-page chapters follow; each relates the plays to Odets' life, despite Cantor's stated intention to avoid this approach. "Themes and Motifs" traces three of Odets' primary thematic preoccupations throughout his work: the family, selling-out, and "the crisis of love." Structure, "symbolic clusters," and Odets' use of language are discussed extensively. It is Cantor who first points to Odets losing his "accuracy and bite" (161) with his move away from a Jewish idiom. Cantor traces Yiddish-English constructions throughout Odets' oeuvre, but does not go into why Odets might have abandoned or reintroduced them. In brief, Cantor plunges deeply into symbolism, metaphor, linguistics and "verbal strategies" but does not treat Odets' career issues and the possible impact of societal forces on his life.

The next major study published was that of psychoanalyst Margaret Brenman-Gibson. She was able to complete but one of three projected volumes of a psychobiography before her death in 2004. Her *Clifford Odets, American Playwright: the Years 1906-1940* (1981) is definitive for those years, but Odets lived until 1963. This first volume offers a profusion of information not available to the previous biographer/critics. It contains new and invaluable insights into the playwright's life and work, through his years with the Group Theatre. Dr. Brenman-Gibson undertook the task as part of an umbrella project on the nature of creativity, supported by her colleague Erik Erikson. She was a close friend of Odets along with her husband, playwright William Gibson, during the last decade of Odets' life. Brenman-Gibson was thus in a unique position to procure interviews with family members and close friends of Odets. Walt Odets, the playwright's son and himself now a clinical psychologist, entrusted Brenman-Gibson with his father's personal papers after his death. As Walt Odets recounts in the Preface to his father's 1940 journal, *The Time is Ripe*,

published in 1988, the playwright's papers amounted to an entire moving van packed with steamer trunks (*viii*). All subsequent studies are dependent on Brenman-Gibson's nearly 800-page biography. I have drawn from her work principally for its biographical content and not her critical comments on Odets' work, most of which lean heavily in the direction of Freud and are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Gabriel Miller's 1989 study, *Clifford Odets*, is the first to take a serious look at *910 Eden Street* and *Victory*, in a brief chapter entitled "Early Self-Portraits." Miller correctly finds significance in these pieces relating to Odets' "conflicts with himself and with his identity as a writer" (20). He touches on the protagonist's tortured sense of himself as a Jew, but puts the issue aside with the comment, "In Odets's finished plays there is little evidence that he thought much about his Jewish identity" (20). Like Cantor, Miller organises his study by theme rather than chronology, substituting the term "vision," *i.e.*, "The Chekhovian Vision," "The Tragic Vision," "Visions of Romance," "The Melodramatic Vision," and "The Political Vision." In the last chapter, entitled "The Final Testament," Miller discusses Odets' last finished play, *The Flowering Peach* (1954). He likens the Jewish family setting of the play to *Awake and Sing!* and *Paradise Lost*. He attributes Odets' choice of a Biblical setting to a "logical extension of his usage of the theatrical setting in *The Country Girl*" (1952). Miller sees the Old Testament context as an apparent preference on the part of the playwright late in his career "to confront his social and psychological concerns in more controlled environments ... for the exploration of his own moral and aesthetic dilemma, as well as his continuing inquiry into the place of the self in the world" (203). This dissertation, on the other hand, examines the characters' interactions in *The Flowering Peach* in light of Odets' actual writing and rehearsal process, supported by newly available biographical information.

The most recent of the major Odets studies is *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre* (2003), by Christopher J. Herr. Herr cites Odets' "near-obsession with the idea of the marketplace—which deals in people as well as commodities" (2) and takes it as his central theme. Ethnicity is given passing mention, insofar as it relates to Odets' early family life, immigration issues, and the economic context of the time.

In contrast to these preceding studies, this dissertation chronicles a Jewish-American playwright's struggle to find his identity through his work. It illuminates Odets' lifelong conflict regarding his Jewish ethnicity, fuelled by the anti-Semitism of the time, and the effect of that conflict on his artistic growth. Various plays and films spanning Odets' career are examined in that light.

The research process was facilitated by the timely bequest, in 2008, of a portion of Brenman-Gibson's papers to Columbia University's Butler Library. The papers now

archived at the Butler contain materials invaluable to the study of the middle period of Odets' life and work, along with additional materials omitted from the existing Volume I. The archive includes transcripts of interviews with members of Odets' family, friends and professional colleagues. There are many reel-to-reel tapes that have yet to be transcribed or put into digital format. These materials were unavailable to previous Odets researchers. Additional materials gathered from Brenman-Gibson's home after her death, relating to Odets' late period, were given to the Butler in early summer 2011. They are in process of inventory and are not yet available to researchers.

The other two main repositories of Odets manuscript materials are the Lilly Library at Indiana University in Bloomington, and the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, in New York. The bulk of Odets' correspondence and notes; a number of diaries, including four that he kept during his years with the Group Theatre; and working drafts of many of his plays and films, are at the Lilly. Two research trips were made to Bloomington. Most accessible was the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, which contains eleven diaries along with many more drafts of plays and film scripts, as well as photographs additional to those at the Lilly.

The following five chapters respectively treat Odets' formative years within their historical context, his playwriting years with the Group Theatre, his time in Hollywood, his controversial testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), and his last play, *The Flowering Peach* (1954). Except in the instance of the early, unproduced works, *910 Eden Street* (1931) and *Victory* (1932), parenthetical dates following play titles indicate date of first production, not date of completion.

Odets' artistic output failed to fulfill the expectations of critics and audiences. Nonetheless, his life and work reflect, in many ways, the history of over two million Eastern European Jews who emigrated to the United States between 1881 and 1914, and the many artists among them. Those "mockies" who arrived after World War I and before passage of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 are also represented. The continued appeal of Odets' plays and several of his screenplays demonstrates that the struggles of a melting-pot nation reverberate within the collective consciousness of American society. In 1933, the year Odets finished writing *Awake and Sing!*, critic John Corbin wrote, "For the Jew of modern Broadway there is no ... humble and pious returning. He dies as he lived, successful and unrepentant. And yet—*ein Yid bleibt ewig ein Yid* ['A Yid remains forever a Yid'] ... He has gained the whole world but, as he would be first to admit, he has lost something. What is it?" ("Drama and the Jew" 297).

The following five chapters address that question.

Chapter One
“Becoming Odets”

Judeophobia is a psychic disorder. As such it is hereditary and, as a disease transmitted for two thousand years, it is incurable. (Pinsker 3)

In August 1963, the fifty-seven-year-old playwright raised a weak but defiant fist and addressed himself: “Clifford Odets, you have so much to do!” (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 4). Close at hand was film director Elia Kazan. Kazan never forgave Odets for “selling out” to Hollywood, a still common judgement. Kazan, although himself a Hollywood director, felt that his friend should have written only for the stage even if that meant financial insecurity (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 13; Kazan, *A Life* 663-65).

In the end, so did Odets. Two years before his death from stomach cancer, he proclaimed himself “the foremost playwright manqué of our time, perhaps of all time” (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 7, 13). During his final two weeks, he referred to “the last sixteen wasted years” (3). In those years he had produced but three finished plays. He considered seven feature films, two of which he directed; three scripts for a television series, of which he was story editor; and numerous uncredited film scripts unworthy of including in the tally.

Early success maimed him professionally. His first two produced plays, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) and *Awake and Sing!* (1935), were ethnically vibrant and resolutely Marxist. They sprang from conditions wrought by the Great Depression. When he departed from proletarian protest, his public and critics felt betrayed. He had been elected spokesman of the ‘thirties, and was expected to keep the spirit of that decade alive. John Gassner comments, “It is not fair to make esteem for the work of a writer’s ardent youth a lien on his entire life” (129). An American artist is expected to produce, not according to inspiration or the urgings of creative growth, but for the marketplace. Those who refuse to conform to public expectations are punished. Few are spared. That is the American way.

This chapter will introduce the argument that Odets’ failure to complete the plays he intended to write was not due to lust for Hollywood gold. Making money was necessary. He did not lack energy, inspiration, or drive. Odets’ failure to complete the numerous plays he had outlined and begun to write was rooted in an identity struggle. His strongest and most critically-acclaimed work had sprung from personal, ethnic sources. He knew he was a Jew; yet he wrestled with what that meant to him. The anti-Semitism of the time was ubiquitous. He was alternately proud and ashamed of being a Jew. He did not raise his children as Jews. He sought to discard or at least dilute that identity in the public forum for much of his life. Internalized anti-Semitism impaired him artistically and in his personal life. He was stymied by self-hatred manifesting as self-destruction.

Odets was a second-generation American, an acculturated Jew. He was born in 1906 in Philadelphia, of a Russian-Jewish father and a Romanian-Jewish mother (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 18). They relocated to the Bronx when he was six years old (31, 38, 615). The young boy quickly became popular due to his elocutionary talent (33). In 1916 they moved around the corner. This placed them in a mixed Irish-Jewish neighborhood. There the ten-year-old Odets developed a life-long fight-or-flight response to epithets such as “kike,” “sheeny,” and “Jew-son-of-a-bitch” (38).

He began his theatrical career in his late teens. As a young repertory actor, he became fascinated with the paraphernalia of disguise, such as false noses and wigs (99). Coincidentally, though less deliberately, he wore a disguise throughout his life. It was given to him by his father. “Odets” was a pseudonym.

His father, Lou, concealed the fact that “Odets” was derived from “Gorodetsky.” He sought to obliterate his Russian-Jewish origins with determination typical of a turn-of-the-century immigrant fixed on survival (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 622). He also changed “Lou” to “L. J.” Odets’ primary biographer, Margaret Brenman-Gibson, interviewed L. J. after the playwright’s death.² She contends that the senior Odets was not trying to pass as a gentile. He simply had a “desperate craving to ‘belong’ in America—a craving internalized by his son” (22-23). Although L. J.’s father had been a Talmudic scholar (Sung; Brenman-Gibson, “Creation of Plays” 252), L. J. forbade the use of Hebrew or Yiddish in his marital home. Yiddish was the principal language of American Jews into the late 1920s (Steinmetz 17).

L. J. Odets read only “American” newspapers and attended synagogue only on the high holy days, and in the expensive seats (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 22-3). He claimed to have been born not in Russia but in Philadelphia (47).³ Confronted late in life with the name change, “he screamed and pounded the furniture.” He became “almost apoplectic,” going so far as to threaten Brenman-Gibson if she revealed his secret (622). Regardless of intent, the “sanitizing” of an ethnic name is a rejection of one’s identity at birth; it is not a replacement but an alias. It imposes a veil, a dual identity, upon those bearing the fabricated surname. It is an act of psychic violence toward past alliances, an effacement. It erects a barrier between one’s offspring and one’s ethnic legacy. L. J.’s late-life hysteria reveals a man backed into a corner: to be perceived as a Russian Jew would

² Dr. Brenman-Gibson was an eminent psychoanalyst and was herself Jewish. She was married to the playwright William Gibson. They became close friends of Odets in the latter decade of his life. She died in 2004.

³ According to Brenman-Gibson, it is unclear whether Odets was ignorant of his father’s actual birthplace as late as 1938, when he was still repeating the myth to interviewers. By 1961 he was telling the truth (*Clifford Odets* 47).

still, to his mind, sabotage his position and way of life. Yet L. J.'s sole source of financial support since the mid-1930s had been his son; he was content to live on his son's earnings from about the age of fifty (C. Odets, *Character Notes*). L. J. expressed his appreciation of his son's subsidies by taking a trip around the world (Brenman-Gibson, "Creation of Plays" 257). He was, in a sense, living according to traditional, Orthodox behavior, which dictates that a patriarch be supported by one's wife and children (Yeziarska). Odets capitulated to this tradition without acknowledging it. He supported both L. J. and his second wife, albeit resentfully and with occasional remonstrance (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 564; Hendler 6). L. J. thus shifted opportunistically between his Old and New World identities. Such role-modelling was confusing, and Odets grew to maturity within a web of mixed signals.

Dr. Walt Odets, the playwright's son, was at one point certain his father had never been informed of the name change:⁴

My father never told me about [it] and I have an idea this is something he would have told me. He was very conflicted about his father, especially very angry, and he critically described his father's ambition to be a 'successful American,' meaning money and social conformity and acceptance. So I think he would have told me about the name change. I never heard of it until Margaret [Brenman-] Gibson told me. ... people asked me about the name constantly as a child, either because they recognized it or because they didn't and wondered what 'kind' of name it was. I'm sure I related that to my father and he would have explained it. People usually thought it was Irish, as in O'Donnell, etc.⁵ When people ask me about it now, which still happens, I explain Gorodetsky and my grandfather's ambition. (Email, 6 Jul '08)

Walt's father was indeed aware of the name change. He had scribbled on an envelope, "I may seem like Odets to you; to myself I am Gorodetsky" (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 163fn). While he evidently accepted and incorporated, to some extent, L. J.'s desire not to be perceived as a Russian Jew, he was conflicted. On the one hand, he publicly revealed his Jewish descent in his first plays. Only one who had lived in close proximity to the Yiddish language and dynamics of Yiddish culture (*Yiddishkeit*)⁶ could have plausibly written *Awake*

⁴ Walt Odets is a clinical psychologist, photographer, pilot, horologist and inventor in the San Francisco Bay Area.

⁵ It is doubtful that the Irish gangs in Walt's father's Bronx neighbourhood thought he was Irish, despite confusion over the ethnicity of the surname. Irish-Jewish neighbourhoods were notoriously tense, as chronicled by the novelist Henry Roth, among others. Odets belonged to an informal Jewish gang who called themselves "the Beck Street Boys."

⁶ In her article about Lillian Hellman, Bonnie Lyons loosely defines *Yiddishkeit* as "a particular way of experiencing and reflecting the world," including a sense of the Jews as a people with a distinct uniqueness, purpose, and calling; immortality defined as survival of the group rather than the individual; a world view deeply and pervasively social rather than individual; a downplaying of

and Sing! (1935). Yet Odets withheld knowledge of the name change from his own son, Walt. He made a conscious choice to continue the family fiction.

He had been Odets from birth, but he claimed to live the emotional reality of Gorodetsky. When this was pointed out to Walt, he replied:

I'm not really astonished by this. I just felt that if my father had known, he would have mentioned it to me. So, I'm more curious that he didn't mention it to me. He certainly made no secret ... of being a Russian Jew—he told me on several occasions that I was [one], and often prefaced the phrase with 'brooding.' (Email, 8 Dec '08)

L. J. boasted to Brenman-Gibson of being “taken for an Irish-born American” (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 21). Although she maintains that L. J.'s identity as a Jew was important to him (22), he nonetheless raised his son with the implicit message that to be mistaken for an Irish immigrant, if possible, was preferable to being recognized as a Russian Jew. L. J. was not without reason. More than any other ethnic group apart from Africans, Jews were perceived as a challenge to the American way of life (Dinnerstein 77).

While America was a relative haven for Jews, an undercurrent of hostility threatened any imagined security. During Odets' childhood and early adulthood, Jews were still considered a separate race. In 1915, when Odets was nine, a young Jew named Leo Frank was murdered by a lynch mob near Atlanta, Georgia. Frank had been convicted of raping and strangling an adolescent white girl of Irish descent. He was lynched in the same year as the release of the immensely popular white supremacist film, *Birth of a Nation*. Frank's lynching coincided with and reinforced the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan (Jacobson 57-68, 118; Kuhlman 49). The Klan preyed on Jews, Catholics, and foreigners as well as Blacks (Porter 215). White supremacist beliefs were supported by spurious racial sciences. Jews were considered by some prominent scientists to be “overly sexual” (Brunius 167). Jewish men were believed to prey lasciviously on gentile women (Erdman 98; Gilman, *Self-Hatred* 8). Eugenics theories grew in popularity and acceptance (Jacobson 77-92). The Johnson Act of 1924, strictly limiting immigration, was eugenically-motivated (Jacobson 90; Brunius 57). Eugenics research programs were funded by state governments. Eugenic sterilization of “undesirables” “became a legal practice in at least thirty ... states, and a surreptitious one in others” (Brunius 357). In its early stages, the Nazis' massive eugenics program was based on American precedent (278). Such incidents and government directives exemplify the tenuous position of American Jews during most of Odets' life.

conventional heroism; glorification of intellectual pursuit as a route to God, a means of understanding; a devaluation of the world of nature, manual labor, and all solitary or physical pursuits. “While the intellect, the ability to understand, is honoured, the *sine qua non* is compassion” (Lyons 107-08.)

“Jew” was considered by many to be synonymous with “Bolshevik.” In 1918-‘19 numerous articles appeared in popular magazines supporting this notion. “Yiddish agitators” from the Lower East Side were alleged to be instrumental in stirring up “chaos in the Soviet Union.” The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, published in 1920, gave Henry Ford’s anti-Semitic *Dearborn Independent* additional fodder (Dinnerstein 79-80, 81). The 1930s were “more virulent and more vicious than at any time before or since” in terms of anti-Semitism (Dinnerstein 105). Father Charles Coughlin’s pro-Nazi radio program attracted millions of listeners, including L. J. Odets (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 101). White Anglo-Saxon Protestant American backlash culminated in the hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in the late ‘forties and early ‘fifties. In the Shoah’s shadow, the hearings were felt by many to be distinctly anti-Semitic (Navasky 109). Odets was subpoenaed by HUAC in 1952 (U.S. Congress (unpubl.) 1). His life was circumscribed by an era of ethnic tumult and violent transition.

As a second-generation American, Odets was but one step removed from the *shtetl*. His early artistic and social influences were of the Old World rather than the New. They were the Philadelphia households of his Tante (Aunt) Esther and Uncle Sroul Rossman, and Dr. Morris Vladimir Leof (né Lipschitz). In 1931, while living in New York and about to embark on his decade-long tenure with the Group Theatre, Odets wrote to Theatre Guild director, Phillip Moeller: “Jew and youth alike, I am sick with not being Home and do not forget the Jerusalem of my boyhood years” (C. Odets, Letter to Moeller).

Odets visited Philadelphia frequently long after he settled in New York. The Rossman household nurtured the child and adolescent, miserable in the home of his nuclear family. It sustained him as an adult. Tante Esther cooked the Jewish food that Odets loved (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 100). He considered “Tante” his “real second mother” (C. Odets, Letter to Hayden). “Uncle Rossman” was a would-be cantor reduced to fruit peddling when he arrived in Philadelphia from Russia. He filled the Rossman house with Yiddish and Hebrew songs (Herr 6). Odets assumed their mortgage payments and supported them financially in their old age (Insurance, Philadelphia; C. Odets, *Time Is Ripe* 1, 164). Their home served Odets as a refuge until Tante died in November 1953 (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 108-09; Brenman-Gibson, 1953 11). In his later years, Uncle Rossman referred to his nephew as, “This, my dear friend in the whole world” (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 29 - Draft* 1819). His nephew considered him “narrow and illiterate, but ... the single most eloquent human being I’ve ever met” (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 31). Odets transferred the essence of the Rossman’s domestic life to the stage, with *Awake and Sing!* (1935) and *The Flowering Peach* (1954). These were his first and last produced, full-length plays. His playwriting career was book-ended by the spirit of the Rossmans’

Yiddishkeit.

The Leof household served as a counterpart to the Rossmans'. There, the cultural gatherings were conducted in a European, salon-like setting. They served as a transitional space in which the young Odets came face-to-face with people about whom he had read. At the Leof home he met the Yiddish writer and playwright Sholem Asch; the investigative journalist I. F. Stone; the Yiddish tragedian Jacob Adler, and the Adler children (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 124).⁷ Throughout his life Odets returned to the Leofs' for pre-production readings of his new plays. Dr. Leof "extolled the Jewish traditions of intellectual values, humanitarian service, and the 'oneness of humanity,'" all absent from Odets' father's ethos (122). One Leof son recalled,

It was obvious to all of us that Clifford looked to my father as a substitute father. It plagued and obsessed him that his own father thought of him as an idiot, a lazy bum ... When Poppa [came] in[to] the living room—always warm, intelligent—Clifford would mutter that he was not 'a stupid bastard' like his own father. (qtd. in Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 123)

Odets dedicated his play, *The Big Knife* (1949) to "M. V. Leof, M.D., in his seventy-eighth year, with love" (C. Odets, *Big Knife* 3). In a 1951 letter, Leof addressed him as "My dear young Lion." (C. Odets, Correspondence 1951, Jul-Aug) Odets said of the Leof's home, "You could breathe freely there" (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 124).

With his indelible Gorodetsky self-concept and two Russian-Jewish foster homes, Odets' life-long assimilative quest was only partially successful; it might even be said the quest was half-hearted. As a youth, Odets expressed admiration for Israel Zangwill's controversial play, *The Melting Pot*. In this seminal work, Zangwill depicted intermarriage as the ideal vehicle for assimilation.⁸ *The Melting Pot* was not well-received in New York in 1908. By then, Manhattan's Lower East Side had the highest concentration of Eastern European Jews outside of Europe. They were perceived by newly-affluent German Jews, who had arrived in the mid-nineteenth century, and the white Protestant majority, as an economic and social threat. In her study of Zangwill's plays, Edna Nahshon reports that "two of [New York City's] seven dailies posted negative notices that crackled with nativism and anti-Semitism, mixed in with aesthetic comment, e.g., 'rhetorical excess' ... 'Yiddish hysteria' and 'Semitism run rampant'" (Zangwill, *From the Ghetto* 245).

Odets himself did not transgress the injunction against marrying gentiles. To observant Jews, intermarriage is a religious and racial issue as well as a social one. It is

⁷ Adler progeny Stella and Luther would, along with Odets, become founding members of the Group Theatre in 1931.

⁸ Zangwill was himself married to a gentile (Zangwill, *Ghetto* 221).

strictly forbidden, even if the gentile partner agrees to raise the children as Jews. Orthodox Jews regard “marrying out” as tantamount to death. A person of either gender who marries a gentile is mourned during the seven days’ ritual of *shive*. They are considered dead to the family and the community. The nineteenth century’s burgeoning schools of psychiatry introduced a profound dilemma as to the wisdom of this ancient exclusionary practice. Prominent psychiatrists, including Richard von Krafft-Ebing, agreed that “the Jew was inherently degenerate” by virtue of “a great predisposition to insanity ... explained ... [by] the fact that the Jews intermarry very often in close family circles” (Gilman, *Inscribing* 123-24). Sander Gilman emphasises that “the implicit charge of incest stood at the center of the understanding of [what was considered] the pathology of the Jew” (*Inscribing* 125).

Odets chose not to marry out, despite his non-observance, ample opportunities, and familiarity with psychological concepts of the time. Nor did he truly “marry in.” He married three times. Official details of his first, tragic marriage, at the age of twenty-two, have proven untraceable. He confided the incident only to a few close friends. The young woman, named Roberta, apparently became pregnant and Odets felt obligated to marry her. When Odets was away, Roberta shot their infant daughter, and then herself. Scant, oblique mention is made in his journals and correspondence (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 135-37). It is thus unknown whether Roberta was Jewish.

Announcements of his other two marriages were published nationwide. Both were to women born to Jewish parents, Austrian in one case, German in the other. Neither woman was noticeably Jewish, according to contemporary stereotypes, nor were they religiously observant. Both were brunettes. According to Brenman-Gibson, Odets became sexually indifferent to both his wives soon after marriage (*Chapt. 29 - Draft* 1871).⁹ He believed that marital sex—but not pre- or extra-marital sex—jeopardized his creative energy (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 645). Marital sex with wives who happened to be Jewish was perhaps especially threatening, or unappealing. Both marriages ended in divorce.

Walt Odets goes so far as to describe his mother’s family, the Lippers, as “anti-Semitic” (Email, 5 Nov '09). Since the eighteenth century Jewish Enlightenment, German and Austrian Jews assimilated to the extent that they absorbed Christian anti-Semitic attitudes (Gilman, *Inscribing* 56-57). German Christian culture was stalwartly anti-Semitic. The Catholic Church had encouraged anti-Semitism from its inception. Protestants received their anti-Semitic views directly from Martin Luther (Gilman, *Self-Hatred* 58-59). Vienna became known as the most anti-Semitic city in Central Europe (Gilman, *Smart Jews* 103). In 1904, Franz Wittels, an Austrian-Jewish physician and psychoanalyst, contended that German Jews “who choose assimilation into German culture ... have the capacity to become

⁹ Odets’ ostensible second wife was the Austrian actress Luise Rainer. Walt Odets’ mother, Odets’ third wife, was the actress Bette Grayson, née Lipper.

‘anti-Semitic’ Jews.” He hypothesised that “those Jews who accept the value systems of German society are condemned to self-hatred” (qtd. in Gilman, *Self-Hatred* 293).

Nor were these attitudes confined to the Continent. There are copious accounts of German-American Jews treating newly-arrived Eastern European Jews as *treyf* (unclean). German Jews had largely preceded those from Eastern Europe. Assimilation into the anti-Semitic American culture had a no less deleterious effect on self-esteem than assimilating into German culture. Odets spoke of his “acidulated low self-esteem” (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 71). The writer Meyer Levin describes the lingering effects of living in proximity to German Jews in Chicago. His experiences colored his encounter with Otto Frank, the father of Anne Frank:

... although Otto was entirely unpretentious, something of the aristocratic manner remained, despite even the experience of Auschwitz—and nasty as this seems ... there arose in me a faint doubt as to his view of me, a doubt that I once suppressed with shame, as being due to my early Chicago prejudices against German Jews, who persisted in their superiority-attitude toward us *Ostjuden* from Poland or Russia ... I cannot rid myself of the feeling that I am seen by them as a Yid. (Levin 42)

Sroul Rossman had a personal anecdote regarding his own treatment by German Jews in Philadelphia. “Big shots! Dey’d say, ‘You’re a Russian Jew, a hateable Jew.’ I didn’t know vat it means.” A Jewish woman called him “a Russian pig” in German. Rossman “... turned his backside to her, and invited her ... to ‘keess mine ess, pless’” (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 20).

Odets married into the purportedly anti-Semitic Lipper family in 1943, five years after *Kristallnacht*. Hitler’s Final Solution to the centuries-old “Jewish Question” was well underway, and by that time well-known. Bette Lipper, Odets’ third wife, used the stage name “Grayson.” To his Bronx friend, Carl Heilpern, she appeared to be a *shiksa* (female gentile) (Heilpern). Odets introduced her to Jewish food, with which she was entirely unfamiliar (C. Odets, *Time Is Ripe* 11). They had two children, Nora, born in 1945 and Walt, born in 1947. The family customarily celebrated Christmas with a tree (C. Odets, *Diary, 1960*). This cannot be ascribed entirely to the Lippers’ influence. Odets himself began sending out Christmas cards while in his late teens, even to a cousin, another Jew (C. Odets, *Letter to Fabian*). Walt Odets confirms that “my father also had some of L. J.’s aversion to a certain aspect of Jewish culture” (Email, 5 Nov ‘09). When asked to elaborate on the “certain aspect,” he ambiguously replied, “the relentless part” (Email, 27 Jan ‘10). According to German-Jewish philosopher Otto Weininger, “whoever detests the Jewish disposition detests it first of all in himself” (Weininger 304).

In marrying women of Austrian- and German-Jewish descent, Odets maintained an equivocal position. Throughout his sexually active years, the “Semitic” Odets was attracted particularly to “Nordic” types, although he also courted Jewish women. He self-consciously endeavored to transfer a Northern European, gentile identity to himself through association. He called this “the search for the lost part of me” (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 146). In a 1931 letter to a childhood friend, he wrote:

When I got here [Brookfield Center, Connecticut, with the Group Theatre] I began to think about the girls. There are four or five of them here to stir my Hebraic blood ... Nordics, blonde, cool, well mannered, finishing school . . . having most everything that, I am sorry to say, we Jews wished we had. It is so! Only in my choice of desirable women do I betray that I’m a Jew.
(Letter to Kobland)

Odets indicates that he is aware of a particularly slanderous ethnic stereotype, *i.e.*, that Jewish men lust after, and pursue, “Aryan” or “Nordic” women. Thinking himself recognizable as a Jew “only in [his] choice of desirable women,” described as Nordic (*i.e.*, “other” than himself), affirms his aspiration to “pass,” along with a sense that he was successful in doing so. In fact, Odets himself was often described as having blonde, or golden, hair and blue eyes, particularly in his youth (Kozlenko; Earle). He described himself to a girlfriend as a “twisted-headed Jew boy with blue eyes and a mouth and arms to love you” (Brenman-Gibson, 1953 264).

The German-Jewish writer, Jakob Wassermann, wrote in the 1920s, “I have known many Jews who have languished with longing for the fair-haired and blue-eyed individual. They knelt before him, burned incense before him, believed his every word; every blink of his eye was heroic.” Wasserman contends that the response of these Aryan-worshipping Jews is to “feel disgust for their own body” (Gilman, *Jew's Body* 178). Wasserman’s argument implies that an “Aryan-worshipping” Jew who consequently feels disgust for his/her own body is likely to project that disgust onto the bodies of fellow Jews, both male and female.

In the quoted correspondence, Odets evokes the image of Janus, “a twisted-headed Jew boy with blue eyes,” who faces simultaneously in opposite directions. The statement can also be interpreted as proof of Odets’ awareness that his focus was contorted, *i.e.*, contrary to what is natural, or conventional—in essence, twisted. While maintaining his own sense of being a Jew (“to myself I am Gorodetsky”), he was able to acquire and utilize a Nordic mask through association with women of Northern European extraction. Harley Erdman points out that, “increasingly after 1920 ... performing Jewishness in mass culture ... required varieties of masking” (8). While Erdman refers to the performance of Jewishness in a theatrical context, the performance of ethnicity—or its absence, or negation—

in a social context is implicit. Odets, a thoroughly theatrical person, maintained a highly public profile from 1935, when he was 29, until his death at 57. Clurman remarked, “Clifford ... was acting in his life, he was acting all the time” (Interview 1966).

Yet, as late as 1953, Odets could state his ethnicity, both as Russian and a Jew, as immutable. He was then working on *The Flowering Peach*, a play laden with *Yiddishkeit*. He wrote to the ballerina Melissa Hayden, herself of Russian-Jewish parenthood, “All Russians hate Germans and I am a Russian and a Jew when I'm not an American ... Germans, may they burn in hell, or in the ovens in which they burned Jews!” (Brenman-Gibson, *Main Chron* 82). Here he distinguishes between being a Jew and being an American. According to this statement, one could simultaneously be a Russian and a Jew, but not a Russian-American, a Jewish-American, or a Russian-Jewish-American. He also identifies his Russian and Jewish (or Russian-Jewish) identities as the wellspring of visceral emotion, in this instance, hate. The categories “Russian” and “Jewish” stood in polarity to “American” in his mind, at least at the moment of writing. The statement to Hayden proclaiming his heritage indicates the profundity of Odets’ internal bifurcation. In his 1940 diary he wrote, “How many men and women have been murdered simply by a contradiction in their natures?” (*Time Is Ripe* 221).

Odets was concurrently dating a young, gentile actress and writer named Juleen Compton while conducting his affair with Hayden. Compton subsequently married Harold Clurman (Clurman, *All People* 280). Afterwards, Odets described his affair with the Jewish, albeit assimilated, Hayden as having gone “from furnace to Frigidaire in six easy lessons” (Brenman-Gibson, 1953 12). Odets was equally prone to going “from furnace to Frigidaire” with so-called Nordic women. His affair with the golden-haired actress, Frances Farmer, contributed substantially to her complete breakdown. Farmer fulfilled Odets’ criteria of “having most everything that, I am sorry to say, we Jews wished we had.”

Farmer, a Seattle lawyer’s daughter, was by all accounts an extraordinary young woman. She had distinguished herself as a writer in her teens, winning a nationwide writing contest with a pro-rationalist essay, “God Dies.”¹⁰ She proceeded not to finishing school but to the University of Washington, where she received some Stanislavsky training (Smith, 321). In 1935, returning from a trip to the Soviet Union, she stopped in New York, hoping to launch a stage career. Her dream was to work with the Group Theatre. Stunningly beautiful, she was spotted by a Hollywood talent scout. She signed a seven-year contract with Paramount Studios in 1935. With her third film, *Come and Get It* (1936), Farmer garnered critical acclaim. She married fellow actor Leif Erikson (né Bill Anderson), who

¹⁰ According to Brenman-Gibson, Farmer wrote the essay and garnered the prize at age fourteen (*Clifford Odets* 579-80). Smith says she was seventeen, which seems more likely.

also longed to work with the Group. Eventually, both did. Clurman negotiated with Paramount to give Farmer leave to star as Lorna Moon in Odets' *Golden Boy* (1937) (Smith 310-11).

She first met Odets in 1935 in New York, at social and political gatherings involving the Group. In her words, she was "immediately attracted to him" (Smith 311; Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 339). He didn't notice her at the time. But by October 1939, after she appeared in *Golden Boy* and became a Group member, she and Odets were living together. He was still technically married to his second wife, Austrian actress Luise Rainer. Rainer, in turn, was on an extended European sojourn with an Englishman (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 577). When Rainer returned to New York, Odets besieged her room at the Waldorf and demanded that they resume relations. She refused. She asked him, "What of Frances Farmer?" The affair had been publicized. He responded, "So, what of it?" Rainer was appalled. He followed his remark with a note to Farmer, saying, "This affair is now ended as my wife has returned from Europe." Farmer's understanding had been that theirs was a committed relationship, since Rainer had already filed for divorce. The incident motivated Rainer to finalize the divorce, which was long in the making (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 578).

Farmer later claimed that Odets had "mesmerized" her. She described his behavior during the run of *Golden Boy*:

He ... insult[ed] me in front of everyone, belittling my performance, and ... was satisfied only when he had reduced me to tears and sent me sobbing to my dressing room. ... There were times ... he would force his way into my dressing room ... and then ... tear off his clothes and scream his love and need for me ... threaten[ed] to take his life and mine, unless I loved him ... His sexual behavior was a complicated maze of weird manipulations ... He was a creature who pried open the psyche with the intention of sticking it with pins. (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 578-79)

Many in the Group attributed Farmer's breakdown to Odets' behavior towards her. She acknowledged that the affair was a significant factor. She was also distraught over the Group's imminent demise and the failure of the Hollywood studios to give her roles worthy of her talent and intellect. The breakdown ended her career (579).

Odets' dismissive attitude toward Farmer is evident throughout his published 1940 journal, *The Time Is Ripe*. Not three months after terminating the affair, his January 13th entry indicates that he was already involved with actresses Fay Wray and Bette (Lipper) Grayson. He describes Farmer as an "[u]nhappy, stiff, rude and uncontrollable girl, but with a real purity." The following day, he writes, "[Billy Rose says that] F. Farmer is refusing to play in the Guild show ... She says she is sick, mentally unable ... is really near a nervous

breakdown” (*Time Is Ripe* 2-3). In May, while musing about women, he writes, “More and more I see the powerful place a man takes in a woman’s life—it is almost everything! Thinking about this problem I made many notes a few months ago, particularly about F. Fr. [Frances Farmer]” (*Time Is Ripe* 164). Odets’ tendency to regard the women in his life as ancillary leans toward misogyny. His ambivalence and frequent disdain towards women weaves itself throughout his plays and journals, and was commented upon by friends such as Kazan (Kazan, Interview 3). This hostility is amply evidenced in his work for the stage, beginning with his first full-length play. In *Awake and Sing!* the otherwise benign Jacob advises his grandson, Ralph: “Remember, a woman insults a man’s soul like no other thing in the whole world” (C. Odets, "Awake!" 48). In the same play, the racketeer Moe Axelrod expresses his own feelings: “What I think a [sic] women? Take ‘em all, cut ‘em in little pieces like a herring in Greek salad. A guy in France had the right idea—dropped his wife in a bathtub fulla acid” (56).



Figure 2: Luther Adler as Moe Axelrod in the original production of *Awake and Sing!* 1935. Photo by Alfredo Valente, courtesy of Valente estate and the Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Odets’ last play done by the Group, *Night Music* (1940), was in the early rehearsal stages when he abruptly terminated the affair with Farmer. The debutante Jane Wyatt was given the female lead (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 584). Odets describes Wyatt as “competent, very Catholic ... a woman with clarity.” He notes that she “comes from the American aristocracy.” He admits to “yearning to see her legs ... finally, her skirt lifts high enough ... I quickly turn my head away, I can’t look” (602). Here he reverts to “the twisted-headed Jew boy.” He continues: “I am a dastard! Several times I found myself talking to Jane Wyatt about Jews, trying to show her how objective and impersonal I was about the problems of Jews; really trying to disavow being a Jew if the truth must be told” (596). Characteristically, Odets coped with his attraction to a gentile woman by presenting an alternate, “twisted” persona, an inauthentic visage—a mask—in a bid for acceptance.

A mask affects not only the onlooker. The masked person, essentially an actor, becomes empowered in an archetypal way: the persona represented by the mask infiltrates the personality of the one wearing it. “Masks block ... out mundane reality to reveal archetypal substrates” (Rogin 20). Odets could channel the power summoned by means of this “Nordic” mask. He could thereby acquire a new, superior sense of himself personally and socially. He could put on and remove the mask at will. It was a performative undertaking.

Odets was attracted to the theatre from early adolescence. He was not athletic; he fulfilled the Jewish stereotype of having “the fabled Jewish flat feet” (Gilman, *Jew's Body*, 44, 56). His feet pained him throughout his life (W. Odets, Email, 27 Jan '10; C. Odets, *Time Is Ripe* 178). Foot and visual problems contributed to his rejection by the military in 1940, when he attempted to register for the draft (C. Odets, *Time Is Ripe* 282). He thought he might like to go to “dramatic school” upon graduation from elementary school. This notion was shelved as “impractical” after discussion with his father (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 58). He went on to high school and participated in the Junior Dramatics Club, in which he was “clearly the most gifted” (60). Encouraged, he predicted, “One day I will write [plays], star in them and direct them” (61).

By 1929, at the age of twenty-three, Odets was performing professionally with the prominent Theatre Guild, in New York and on tour. He wrote to Group Theatre founding director Cheryl Crawford, when they were still both with the Theatre Guild,

Personally, I am not one to be bothered with nostalgic aches and groanings ... Particularly this is true of the Jew who has always been a homeless thing anyway. It cannot matter much to those people whether home is here or there. ...

I had forgotten, incidentally, that I am a Jew until this week when a gentleman (one who is really a nice person) went below his skin and dragged up the furious invective, ‘You dirty Brooklyn Jew’.¹¹ ... However, it didn't matter. I've never lived in Brooklyn. (Letter to Crawford, 14 Dec '29)

Odets' assertion that he forgot that he was a Jew is extraordinary, if it can be taken at face value. Regarding his Jewishness as a regrettable fact, as he here depicts it to be, reflects ambivalence if not disdain toward his background. He speaks dismissively of Jews, referring to them as “things.” He denies his ethnicity by calling Jews “those people.” To call his defamer a “really nice person” sarcastically mimics the characteristically Christian

¹¹ A carryover from the *shtetl*, it was common to stereotype Jews as being dirty by inclination. This was particularly the case in the early days of immigration, when they were ghettoized and impoverished.

response of turning the other cheek, arguably bordering on masochism. Adopting a defensive stance when “accused” of being a Jew might imply to Crawford, a gentile, that he was immutably Jewish. It was thus to be avoided even though she clearly was aware of his ethnicity.

Here he also mentions the homelessness of the Jews, a fact of the diaspora. Homelessness was a feeling of which he often complained: “I am homeless wherever I go, always lonely” (Lahr, “Stage Left”; Murray 5). He was in good company: Freud never felt at home in anti-Semitic Vienna, despite living there from the age of three, until as an old man he fled the Nazis (Gilman, *Self-Hatred* 259).¹² Jews were proverbially homeless from the fifth century B.C.E. (Hooker).

Odets continued on his theme of ethnic self-justification to Crawford. “I must (oh must) justify this Jew: I really want to write to Cheryl Crawford ... Other times, in other ways, I will recommend myself to your attention as a juvenile of fire, élan and intellect” (Letter to Crawford, May ‘30). Crawford was at this time a casting director for the Theatre Guild (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 141). Odets, in distancing himself from his Jewish identity, is presumptively expressing an oblique wish not to be typecast as a Jew for stage purposes.

Odets’ ethnic charade with Crawford typifies Gilman’s description of the articulation of self-hatred. Gilman observes, “Even as one distances oneself from this aspect of oneself, there is always the voice of the power group [here represented by Crawford] saying, Under the skin you are really like them anyhow [sic]. The fragmentation of identity that results is the articulation of self-hatred” (*Self-Hatred* 3).

It was around this time that Odets became aware of the essential nature of writing as a performative process. During the dark year following the 1929 Crash, he was struck with the realization that writing must come out of the emotional state of the writer (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 155). This new awareness was a turning point for the young Odets. It prepared him for yet another pivotal moment: The following year he became a founding member of the Group Theatre, as an actor. By 1935 he had devoted himself solely to writing plays. His time acting with the Group afforded him a thorough grounding in Lee Strasberg’s adaptation of the Stanislavsky System. This became known as “The Method.”¹³ Strasberg’s approach provided bedrock training for Odets, the developing playwright, as well as Odets, the actor.

The Method was of Russian origin. Its fundamental techniques were developed by

¹² Freud spent the last year of his life in England, having fled the Nazis.

¹³ Robert Lewis quoted Strasberg in an interview with Brenman-Gibson. “Lee said, ‘I don’t teach the Stanislavski Method, I teach the Strasberg Method’” (Lewis Interview).

Konstantin Stanislavsky to support a theatre based on modernist principles, such as ensemble acting and emotional truth (Houghton 52-54). Stanislavsky's teaching and those of his disciples, particularly Yevgeny Vakhtangov, his foremost interpreter (Pitches 383), was revolutionary. Subsequently, Strasberg's Method provided American actors with a technical basis for the exploration of a character's psyche through the actor's personal experiences.¹⁴ Insistence on psychological and emotional realism contributed to the breakdown of theatrical, and consequently, societal stereotypes.

Odets' acting abilities were considered negligible by his fellow Group members, particularly by the directors (L. Adler; Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 29). Strasberg told Brenman-Gibson, "We didn't think he was quite the actor he thought he was" (Strasberg, Interview Nov '63). "He was considered second-from-the-last in acting ability" (Brenman-Gibson, "Creation of Plays" 254). Close friend Peter Kass described Odets' acting as "hammy" ... dreadful" (Kass).¹⁵ Robert Lewis¹⁶ felt that Odets realized it himself (Lewis). Odets wrote to the writer Waldo Frank in late 1934, "Did you know I'm going to stop acting shortly and work only on writing? Yes, the acting thing is poor nonsense along side [sic] good writing" (Letter to Frank). It was his failure to garner substantial roles that compelled him to write plays (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 27). The Method places primary emphasis on an actor working from his/her "center," the repository of personal experience. Odets' inner turmoil may have blocked easy access to the depth of emotional truth famously demanded by Strasberg. Odets himself admitted, "Myself I cannot give easily to another thing, person or situation ... This comes from (or makes in me) a very unyielding quality" (*Time Is Ripe* 41). He told an interviewer, regarding his acting abilities, "I was too tense; I couldn't relax" (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 26, 28). Nonetheless, Odets did acquire a thorough working knowledge of the technique. He was able to utilize it successfully in his playwriting, directing, and teaching.¹⁷ It enabled him to break through standard ways of depicting ethnic characters and work beyond stereotype and its emotional limitations. As a playwright, he could place his personal conflicts at one remove, into his characters. His own issues could be enacted by others, safely circumscribed by the proscenium. He could use the Group

¹⁴ Clurman stresses that there was an interim step in the development of the Method: "... [the Group's] theatrical method ... applies to the American actor the basic precepts of the Stanislavsky system especially as developed and enriched by the Moscow Art Theatre Studios under Vakhtangov ..." (orig. appeared in the *Daily Worker*, 3 Oct 1933). ("The Group Theatre." *Collected Works* 1022).

¹⁵ Kass directed the first (try-out) production of *The Country Girl* in New Hampshire, and acted in the Broadway production (1950). He became a noted director and acting teacher. He has been called "a holy madman of the theater, whose whole point was that there is no limit to what the actor can do" (Weber, "Peter Kass ...", Obituary).

¹⁶ Robert Lewis is commonly referred to by theatre people as "Bobby" Lewis, as he was during his life.

¹⁷ Odets was considered an inspiring teacher as early as the mid 'thirties when he taught downtown at the Theatre Union (Smith 156-57). He also taught playwriting at the Actors Studio in the early 'fifties (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* xi), where he was highly esteemed. It was here that he met William Gibson, and subsequently developed a close friendship with both of the Gibsons.

actors, all of whom he knew well, “as a mask for one or another of his own warring identity-elements and fragments” (Brenman-Gibson, “Creation of Plays” 267). As the artistic originator, he could initiate resolution. Playwriting was a form of personal, and, consequently, by virtue of the audience, social exorcism.

Sander Gilman dispels the assumption that Jewish stereotypes were formulated solely by gentiles. The eighteenth century *maskilim*, the followers of the Enlightenment in Germany, delighted in texts written in play form. These pieces were not intended for the stage. Their sole purpose was to satirize Jews considered by the *maskilim* to be unenlightened:

The purpose of these texts [written for the *maskilim*] was the creation of a double for the negative image of the Jew found in Germany, a *double* [emphasis added] onto which all the negative qualities of this image could be heaped ... It was from that context that the quintessential Jewish literary persona, the *schlemiehl*, appeared (Gilman, *Inscribing* 53).

Odets served as his own double, projecting back onto “Gorodetsky” his negative feelings regarding “the relentless” sense of his *Yiddishkeit*. Paradoxically, it was Gorodetsky from whom he felt inseparable. He was trapped in a hall of mirrors.

Odets embodied a number of prevalent Jewish stereotypes, including *schlemiehl*. Louis Harap defines a *schlemiehl* as “the fallible human character who seems to court misfortune but never loses hope” (40). Odets’ post-Group career was riddled with mixed-to-negative reviews of his plays, yet he was rebuked for not producing more on Broadway. After the lukewarm success of his last play, *The Flowering Peach* (1954), Odets repeatedly claimed to have at least four plays in the works and “shortly ready for production” (Wagner 7; Funke “Funke Interview”). As his career faltered, his projections for a theatrical future became grander, to no avail (Kass; Kantor).

Odets also fulfilled the roles of: ethereal intellectual, sybarite, hysteric, communist revolutionary, wandering Jew, parvenu, social chameleon, scoundrel, military reject, and, conspicuously, serial predator of gentile women. All of these stereotypes were long-standing in anti-Semitic discourse. The self-hater, according to the German-Jewish psychoanalyst Fritz Wittels, a follower and biographer of Freud, is “one who embodies all of the essential negative qualities ascribed to the Jew.” Wittels, along with Weininger, “created a subclass for the psychology of the Jew which points toward self-hatred as the marker of the Jew most closely identifying with the double bind inherent in Western culture” (Gilman, *Self-Hatred* 294). Gilman defines this double bind as, on the one hand,

... the welcome to share in the power of the reference group *if* [orig. emphasis] [the marginalized Other] abides by the rules that define that group

... On the other hand is the qualification ... 'The more you are like me, the more I know the true value of my power, which you wish to share, and the more I am aware that you are but a shoddy counterfeit, an outsider.' (*Self-Hatred*, 2)

The internalization of this societal double bind could lead to hysteria, another attribute “scientifically” attributed to Jews. Odets fell into this category as well. He was prone to depression from a young age. He attempted suicide three times (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 146-47, 357; Hethmon 187). He was known in both his personal and professional lives for his emotional volatility, already described in his relationship with Farmer (Smith 104-05). As will be seen in Chapter Five, the actor Menasha Skulnik filed suit against him for abusive behaviour during rehearsals for *The Flowering Peach* (Ziegler Assoc.).

Odets' appetite for gentile women had particularly negative connotations. Early twentieth-century racialists labeled such yearnings as perverse. A sociologist “had written of the Jew's penchant for cross-racial perversion—sparing the Jewess but pursuing the Gentile.” The editor of Atlanta's most influential newspaper wrote of Leo Frank, the young Jew who was lynched in 1915: “Here we have the typical young libertine Jew ... [with] a ravenous appetite for the forbidden fruit—a lustful eagerness enhanced by the racial novelty of the girl of the uncircumcised.”¹⁸ Matthew Frye Jacobson emphasizes that “Frank's racial status as a Jew and his criminal status as a ‘pervert’ were inseparable” (Jacobson 65-66). Odets' predilection for Nordic women was not necessarily pathological. It did, however, drive him sexually, despite—and perhaps because of—potential rejection. Talullah Bankhead was a quintessential yet powerful blonde who played the female lead in *Clash by Night* (1942). She held him in contempt. Sabina Leof told Brenman-Gibson that Bankhead regarded him “as a nobody, a cheap Jewish upstart” (Leof). Whether this was Odets' or Leof's interpretation, or it had been verbalized by the actress, is not made clear.

Associates remarked on Odets' attitude toward women. His late-life friend, Hank Hendler remarked, “He felt women were for his enjoyment; he wasn't for their enjoyment” (Hendler 6). In confirmation, Odets wrote in his journal, “Now if only I had a wondrous, beauteous woman who stayed in the closet and stepped in and out as wanted and not wanted!”¹⁹ (*Time Is Ripe* 106); and, “I need a woman who can take me out of myself to be more myself ... I need, I need, I NEED!” (36). Finally, as if to deliberately fulfil the stereotype of the licentious Jewish predator: “I must warn you, girls—I am fickle—I eat up girls like a Moloch. This goes for all kinds ... Nobody knows what a lonely man can do!”

¹⁸ Tom Watson, the editor of the *Jeffersonian*, used the Frank conviction as a basis for reviving the Ku Klux Klan (Kuhlman).

¹⁹ In fairness to Odets, he then goes on to say, “How brutal this is to a woman, and yet it is true to [my] nature, fight it as [I] will till the end of [my] days. Women in other men's windows are most exciting to me—that is because they represent pure desire in men with no need of responsibility towards them” (*Time Is Ripe* 106).

(Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 26 - Draft* 1683).

His relationship with his mother contributed to the push-pull dynamic with women. Pearl Odets was a chronically depressed woman who, he felt, withdrew her affection and support when he was quite young. He was never able to bond with a woman to the satisfaction of both parties. He anticipated abandonment and reacted with a combination of parasitic need and hostility. Female characters in his plays are often depicted as fickle and unsupportive of their lover or partner. Some are, tellingly, “commodified” (Herr 8) –lusted after, and expendable. They are primarily sexual objects unworthy or incapable of commitment. Prime examples are Lorna Moon in *Golden Boy* (1937), May Wilenski in *Clash By Night* (1941), and Dixie Evans in *The Big Knife* (1949). Lorna Moon was the role originated by Frances Farmer. Those female characters who are devoted spouses, such as Marion in *The Big Knife*, Georgie Elgin in *The Country Girl* (1950), and Rachel in *The Flowering Peach* (1954), are taken for granted as ultimately submissive. They are treated adulterously or slanderously.

Odets’ ethnic insecurity clearly contributed to his hostility toward women. Harold Clurman, his Group Theatre colleague and confidant, commented on Odets’ and Strasberg’s sense of themselves as Jews. Clurman and Strasberg were brought up in Yiddish-speaking households on the Lower East Side. Clurman, apparently excluding himself, remarked, “these poor Jewish boys ... have a real inferiority complex ... about their Jewishness” (Interview, 19 Mar ‘66).

Galili Shahar discusses the Jewish inferiority complex in terms of the artist. In “The Jewish Actor and the Theatre of Modernism in Germany,” Shahar echoes Clurman’s opinion regarding Strasberg and Odets: “According to [the German writer Arnold] Zweig, the inferiority complex of the Jewish actor is stronger than that of other, non-Jewish, actors ... the anthropological experience of the Jews builds upon a system of desires that finds its expression in the theatre: the Jew is the modern actor” (Shahar 219). Shahar makes a number of observations that apply not only to the German stage but to the American theatre of the time as well, particularly in relation to Jews. He emphasizes that “Modernism created a new and radical way of understanding the question of identity” (Shahar 225):

The theatre [was] ... a unique arena in which the tropes of the ‘Jewish body’ were paradoxically employed ... [It] used the negative stereotypes of the Jew ... in an affirmative, but also in a revolutionary manner, thereby giving the old images a new and critical meaning ... In anti-Semitic writings the Jews were blamed for holding a double identity, a civil one alongside an old, hidden religious one. Now, the civil identity of the Jews was perceived as a mask, as a ‘theatrical’ device hiding their ‘real’ identity. (217)

The “real” identity of the Jews in the age of modernism lay in a hitherto unexplored territory. Historical circumstances and psycho-emotional pressures demanded an arena in which this evolving identity might formulate itself. In the first half of the twentieth century Jews, like all other people, found themselves negotiating ever-accelerating trends. Three major revolutionary movements originated with the Jews Marx, Freud, and Einstein. Emigration imperatives in Eastern Europe forced an already “homeless” people to further widen the diaspora and once again redefine themselves according to new host cultures. Daniel Itzkovitz writes that

Jews, it was commonly claimed, were a ‘chameleonic race’ whose veins course with what one magazine termed ‘strange chameleonic Jewish blood’... Jewish fluidity emerges less as an enviable trait than as one to be feared ... the fear that behind the performance there was no authentic kernel of difference. (38, 43)

Jews’ stereotypical fluidity and moral depravity were perhaps inadvertently emphasized in one of the Group’s early productions. It had a marked effect on the nascent playwright. *Success Story* (1932) was written by John Howard Lawson, another Jew with a paternally invented surname (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 644). Erstwhile Yiddish Theatre stars Luther and Stella Adler played Sol Ginsberg, the protagonist, and his girlfriend, Sarah Glassman. Odets understudied the role of Sol Ginsberg. Unhappily for Odets, Adler never missed a performance. The frustrated understudy was left stranded in the wings (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 242; Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 56).

Success Story depicts the ruthless rise of a “venomously aggressive East Side Jew” (Atkinson, “Pushing Ahead”). With anti-Semitism rampant at the time (Dinnerstein 105), the play seems a peculiar choice. Both Lawson and the Group directors seemed to overlook the fundamentally anti-Semitic character portrait in favor of the play’s anti-capitalist message. Their intention was likely similar to Shahar’s description of the use of “negative stereotypes of the Jew ... in an affirmative, but also in a revolutionary manner, thereby giving the old images a new and critical meaning,” as cited above. But the portrayal of a young Jew as a radical socialist turned money-grasping conniver played directly into anti-Semitic expectations. The anti-hero devolves from stereotype to stereotype. He discards his radical beliefs in favor of displacing the agency’s owner, the “Nordic” Raymond Merritt, both in business and in bed (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 222). The office and the boudoir were sacrosanct in gentile American values of the time. The prospect of Jewish incursion into these areas stirred up visceral reactions, not the least among Jews themselves (Corbin, “Drama and the Jew” 300). Sol seeks to redeem himself morally with a melodramatic flourish at the end. But the damage is irreparable in terms of negative portrayal of a Jew.

The Jewish Lee Shubert was backing the production. He insisted that Lawson temper Sol's arrogance along with his more conspicuous Jewish attributes (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 238-39). The production prompted John Corbin to write a notorious article for *Scribner's Magazine*, "Drama and the Jew." In general, it deplores the Jewish dominance of the American theatre.

In "Success Story" John Howard Lawton [sic] (whose name, like that of Elmer Rice does not mislead us) shows a character development roughly similar to that of the old Bowery plays²⁰ ... By hook and by crook, especially by crook, [the protagonist] wrests control from his easy-going Gentile employer and rises to a position of enormous and unrighteous power in the world of capitalism ... [*Success Story*] depicts the tragic danger of contact with, and absorption in, the larger life of the Gentile world. (Corbin, "Drama and the Jew" 299-300)

Corbin continues, "The reaction in Jewish circles was significant. There was of course resentment that a Jew should have given to the stage a character of the Shylock type ... If race prejudice is to be overcome, the prime requisite is racial self-criticism (300)." Corbin implies that Lawson and the Group were to be applauded for depicting "a Shylock type." He seems to accept Lawson's stereotypical characterization as an acceptance by Jews of its accuracy.

Nonetheless, critics, while praising the production, were critical of Lawson's play. But their criticism did not relate to the unsavory depiction of the protagonist. The critics seemed to feel that the scope was too narrow to speak to the general public. As Wendy Smith notes, "reviewers didn't feel Jewish problems were American problems" (108). The reviews succeeded in keeping audiences away. In fact, Lawson intended to convey "that Sol had betrayed everything that was best in himself during his brutal climb to the top" (97). He reflected with hindsight that he had been grappling "with the Jewish aspect of my personality ... I could not be American without also being Jewish" (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 223). Lawson's deeper intent eluded the critics, as did this state of amalgamation.

Odets named Lawson as a primary influence (Mendelsohn, "Center Stage" 67). "John Howard Lawson, from him I took approach & style" (Brenman-Gibson, *Main Chron* 44; Lahr, "Stage Left"). But he objected to what he considered the negative theatrical effect of Lawson's toning down the Jewishness of *Success Story*'s characters: "a false note has crept in somewhere." He could also see that Strasberg had altered the direction of Adler's performance, softening it considerably (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 238-39). He deplored the bastardization of the original script, which he regarded as driven by the conflict between idealism and commercial gain. It motivated Odets to write about a blatantly Jewish

²⁰ Lawson and Elmer Rice were both Jewish.

lower middle-class Bronx family named the Bergers. In 1932 Odets was still young, poor and anonymous. At this point in his life he could play with very high stakes.

Odets had put himself in the business of creating imaginary beings from a young age, as an actor. He studied as many different kinds of performances as he could. Although a frequent moviegoer (Hethmon 177), he was particularly moved by stage productions. His childhood buddy Herman Koblanov describes Odets' fascination with Max Reinhardt's 1924 production of *The Miracle*, which Odets managed to see "dozens" of times (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 76-77). It is unclear when he began to attend the downtown Yiddish theatre.²¹ He had seen Yiddish stars Sara Adler and Joseph Buloff perform (J. Adler, 8-9; Buloff). He enjoyed frequenting the Second Avenue cafés where the Yiddish actors were known to congregate, and loved Jewish food. Ratner's was a particular downtown favourite (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 163; C. Odets, *Time Is Ripe* 11). He was well-versed in the standard Jewish theatrical stereotypes of the day.

Shahar writes,

in the performances of popular Jewish theatre, the body of the actor became a medium through which stereotypes of civil or ethnic identities were examined and challenged in destructive contexts ... the 'Jewish body' became a dialectical image: a subject of acting and a construct of self-performance. (227)

Odets wrote cryptically to Clurman in 1932, "Walking around Philadelphia, meeting often horrible people (their intellect only a foreskin to hide their sex), I have had actually these last weeks to make a mark on my hand with merchurochrome [sic], a red mark to be a sign on my hand like our elder Jews with their boxes and binding of straps" (Letter to Clurman). At the age of only twenty-six Odets was boasting to a fellow Jew of needing a totem to remind himself that he was a Jew. On the other hand, he may have been referring to membership in the Group, rather than tribal membership. Regardless, it is significant that he uses two distinctly Jewish images. He mentions "often horrible people" using their intellect as a "foreskin." This might imply that the "horrible" people were gentiles. More probably, he was referring to them simply as "other," *i.e.*, not Group members, in the way that Jews refer to the uncircumcised as other. Here Odets is equating belonging with being Jewish, contrary to his usual construct. The second image he uses, that of *tefillin*, or phylacteries ("boxes and binding of straps"), refers to the leather boxes that contain scrolls of Torah passages. Orthodox Jews bind these to their arms and forehead at prayer time.

²¹ Walt Odets does not recall hearing his father speak of the Yiddish theatre (Email, 3 Nov '09). Most of Odets' Yiddish theatre attendance, however, predated his son's birth by decades.

According to his wife, Russian-Jewish stage designer Boris Aronson considered Odets “one of his few real friends in the theatre world” (L. Aronson). He felt that Odets was in touch with, but tried to deny, his *Yiddishkeit*: “With [Odets], it was so much [a] part of him. He had a certain kind of ... combination of warmth, tenderness and emotionalism mixed with a certain cynicism ... an American-Jewish tradition” (B. Aronson 3, 6). Peter Kass worked with Odets on several incarnations of *The Country Girl* (1950). He lived with Odets and Bette Grayson periodically in New York and Hollywood. Alluding to Odets’ predisposition to depression, Kass recalls him often lying on his back crying—or eating Tante’s *latkes* (potato pancakes) (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 80; Kass). Kass remarked, “He paid homage to the old man, Uncle Rossman. They were his roots, they redeemed him as a nice Jewish boy. That’s when Clifford was Clifford: an ingenuous, warm, nice Jewish boy, most vulnerable” (Kass).

To others, he did not give an impression of any awareness of his Jewish identity, of knowing any Yiddish, or anything of Hebrew ritual (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 187). Characteristically, he vacillated. For each report there is an anomaly. Walt Odets never heard his father use Yiddish words or expressions (Email, 5 Nov ‘09). Hank Hendler was a neighbor and friend when Odets was living on Linden Drive in Los Angeles with the two children. Both were single fathers, widowers with two children each. Both were Jewish; neither was religious, nor did they discuss religion. Nonetheless, Hendler felt he brought out Odets’ Jewishness: Odets called him *bubule* (“dear one”). Hendler felt that Odets “wasn’t sure of where or who he was ... was confused and insecure” (Hendler). Jack Adler, of the Yiddish theatre dynasty, said that Odets never discussed religion. “He didn’t believe in it²² ... [but] I could talk Yiddish to him and he’d understand it, [though] he didn’t speak it” (J. Adler 8-9). Philadelphia crony Sidney Kay related that Odets tossed grass onto Tante Esther’s casket. This ritual signifies, “in Jewish lore ... the last thing I can do for you” (Kay 112; 6a-7). Among Odets’ papers and unfinished plays (e.g., *910 Eden Street*) there are scattered references to Jewish rituals, such as saying *kaddish* and lighting a *yahrzeit* candle on the anniversary of a family member’s death (C. Odets, *Char. Notes*). Carl Heilpern, a Bronx buddy, said that Odets phoned him in the late ‘forties or early ‘fifties. Odets wanted to come with Bette for a Passover seder. Heilpern’s parents were “very orthodox.” Heilpern told Brenman-Gibson that “[Clifford] loved the ceremony and asked a lot ... my father wanted to explain everything” (Heilpern). Odets reports in his 1940 journal that he attended an orthodox *seder* with Lee and Paula Strasberg at the home of Strasberg’s parents (*Time Is Ripe*, 129). There is no consistency in the perceptions of his friends, or his son, regarding

²² Adler’s assessment contradicts Odets’ statement to Michael Mendelsohn that he believed much of what is in the Bible (Mendelsohn, “Odets at Center Stage” 66).

where Odets stood in relation to his heritage. He fluctuated according to what he deemed appropriate, necessary, or to satisfy urges prompted by nostalgia.

In 1953, he typed out a character note: “Feeling herself to be Jewish brass, she tried to gold-plate herself with gentile friends, particularly well bred and wealthy” (*Char. Notes*). The note indirectly describes L. J. Odets. It also describes his son. The process of denial, of masking, of re-creation and self-performance, was one of exemplar and disciple.

In playing ethnic hide-and-seek, Odets was seeking to minimize his marginality. Jack Nusan Porter states, “emancipation from the ghettos of Western Europe in the 18th century and from those of Eastern Europe in the 19th century ... confronted [Jews] ... with the problem of accommodating to two cultures—the Jewish culture and the host culture” (Porter ix). Porter points out that “marginality can be viewed positively as a source of creative tension” (xi). Had he received a more traditional religious education, Odets might have made a choice more artistically productive than assimilation, i.e., “integration.” Integration would have entailed “combining the best [original emphasis] elements of traditional religious culture with those of modern secular thought” (Porter x). Odets lacked a solid foundation in this regard. Growing up, he did not even know precisely what L. J. was eliminating from the household. He partook of Jewish ritual only in extraordinary circumstances, such as Tante’s funeral. His father had had ersatz photos taken in order to commemorate the non-event of his *bar mitzvah*. Thus Odets’ coming-of-age ritual amounted to the production, by his father, of faux *bar mitzvah* photos: another mask, a palimpsest of Judaism. Retaining an acute sense of *Yiddishkeit* without a clear sense of orthodoxy, Odets suffered “the anguish of outsider status” (Porter xi) to his culture of origin. Porter maintains such a state “can be excellent grist for one’s artistic mill” (xi). But Porter is referring to the status of outsider to the host culture, not one who has become an outsider to his ethnic source. Odets was essentially an outsider to both cultures.

In *Staging the Jew*, Erdman emphasizes the fluidity of ethnic identity. He discusses, in a performative context, “the fluctuating expectations gentiles have had of Jews and Jews have had of themselves, as represented by the performances of the commercial stage” (4). This fluidity came to be seen by gentiles as characteristically Jewish. It was dictated by diasporic necessity. But no less was the definition of the term “American” in a state of flux in Odets’ lifetime. What first- and second-generation Americans aspired to in terms of assimilation was amorphous at best. Finding one’s way to a defining core of such an ambiguity presented a painful conundrum.

In Odets’ files there is an undated application for inclusion in the publication *American Jews—Their Lives and Achievements*, published by The American Jewish Literary Foundation. Odets partially filled out the form, but never completed it. However, he

retained it in his file. He was perhaps conflicted about being categorized with other prominent American Jews.²³ He was able to commit only to being, as Henry Bial puts it, “not not-Jewish” (18).

The fastest route away from marginality—or core identity—is language. Gilman writes that “Jews were ... always forced to show that they could both speak an acceptable language and speak it better than their non-Jewish contemporaries” (Gilman, *Self-Hatred* 18). Odets excelled in this regard. He plumbed the canon of world literature from a young age (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 42, 62). Hutchins Hapgood, in his watershed work, *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), observed, “The Jews are at once tenacious of their character and susceptible to their Gentile environment, when that environment is of a high order of civilization” (10).²⁴

Odets was always acutely sensitive to what Hapgood called a “high order of civilization,” both gentile and Jewish. He devoured all things secular—literature, music and art in particular. He read Emerson in his twenties (Letter to Frank). He embraced Whitman, and later named his son Walt Whitman Odets. A 1959 inventory of his personal library reveals Odets’ eclecticism. It was compiled when he was living in California, where he spent his last eight years. The inventory does not include the contents of his Manhattan library. The 27-page catalogue is remarkably extensive for one whose formal schooling ended after two years of high school (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 64). A minute sampling of authors includes: Shakespeare, Proust, Stendhal, Dickens, Kipling, Waugh, Bowen, Bishop, Strachey, Cather, Lawrence, Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, O’Neill, Joyce, Yeats, Kafka, Chekhov, Moravia and Andrei Bely. There are biographies of Keats, Byron, Flaherty, Twain, Whitman, Dostoevsky, and Gogol. Biographies of other artists and historical figures include Mozart, Beethoven, Elizabeth the Great, Napoleon, Lincoln, Jefferson, Hamilton, Lord Melbourne and Hitler. There are histories of ancient Greece and Rome. Economists and philosophers are amply represented. There are books relating to Odets’ pet hobbies and habits: philately, graphology, hypnosis, astronomy and astrology, cooking, smoking, golf, gambling, and aquarium fish. There are over a dozen books on the painter Paul Klee, and numerous works on other painters.

Of note are myriad works by and about psychologists, psychoanalysts and psychiatrists. Two titles appear to relate to Odets’ 1952 testimony before the House

²³ Application—*American Jews, Their Lives and Achievements*. Clifford Odets Papers, B. 44, f. 10. Lilly Library, Bloomington, IN.

²⁴ “This first book-length profile of Yiddish New York originally appeared between 1898 and 1902 as a series of separate articles in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, and other Boston and New York quality magazines and newspapers. [It] stands as the first authentic study by an outsider of the inner life of an American immigrant community, devoid of stereotype or sentimentality, sympathetic yet sober and realistic, intimate yet judicious and restrained” (Intro. vii).

Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC): *The Compulsion to Confess*, by Theodor Reik; and *The Art of Cross-Examination*, by Francis L. Wellman. Odets was highly analytical, as much of himself as of others.

Religious titles abound. They include primary Judaic and Christian texts as well as *Buddhism and Zen*. He collected life stories of religious figures such as Saint Paul and Martin Luther.

Apart from his Old Testament studies, there is scant representation of Jewish writers. They are Isaac Babel, Bernard Malamud, Nathanael West (né Nathan Weinstein), Morris Raphael Cohen, Irwin Shaw, and Philip Roth. There is an anthology entitled *Wisdom of Israel*, and a text, *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, by Joseph Klausner. Conspicuously absent are translations of Yiddish giants Sholom Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Prominent contemporaries such as Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Delmore Schwartz, Henry Roth, and Arthur Miller are missing. Again, these writers may have been represented in his Manhattan library. Many of his salient early influences, such as Hugo, Ibsen and O'Casey apparently stayed in New York. Perhaps he did not feel it necessary to live with them, nor the above-mentioned Jewish writers, in the last eight years of his life. His children were therefore growing up without his early influences at hand. Nor were they introduced to the great Yiddish and Russian-Jewish writers. However, Odets often declared his intention to return to New York and make it a permanent home.²⁵ Though he continued to keep an apartment in New York and listed it as his permanent residence on documents (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 456), he was unable to commit to that, either.

During his final period of New York residency, he was called before HUAC. He had no choice but to commit to a moral position. He chose to “name names.” Odets betrayed former associates and rendered them vulnerable to prosecution and imprisonment. It has often been remarked that his 1952 testimony marked the decline of his creativity. Odets’ HUAC testimony will be discussed in Chapter Four.

The Flowering Peach (1954), begun shortly after his appearance before HUAC, was the last of his plays produced in his lifetime. It is often seen as a *cri de coeur*, a *mea culpa* for his testimony. In *Naming Names*, Victor Navasky describes the ancient Jewish precept transgressed by Odets:

‘And for the informer may there be no hope.’ Jewish law requires reporting the informers to the Jewish legal authorities (the Beth Din) and forbids telling the non-Jewish authorities. Penalties for the informer range from

²⁵ According to Walt Odets, during Odets’ final eight years in Hollywood (1955-’63), he moved himself and the children almost annually into rented houses. (The children’s mother, Bette [Lipper] Grayson, died in 1954.) Dr. Odets attributes this to his father’s being “always about to move back to New York” (Baitz 29).

flogging and imprisonment to branding the forehead, cutting out the tongue, cutting off the hand, banishment, and, most frequently, death. (xii)

Navasky then relates an anecdote involving Zero Mostel, who also was called before HUAC but refused to cooperate. “Mostel was called in by the producer of a play in which he was appearing and told he had to clear his name. Mostel, the son of a rabbi, explained that he couldn’t inform, because ‘as a Jew, if I inform, I can’t be buried on sacred ground’” (xii).

It is banal to say that Odets betrayed himself as well as former comrades. But violating Judaic law as well as a societal taboo placed him in a state of irrevocable spiritual exile. According to the Talmud, he was now unacceptable by any definition of Judaism. He had been hoisted with his own petard; his self-hatred could only have been augmented. There was no mask that could supplant the label “squealer” (Sung; Canby). In a final, symbolic effort, he ordered what he called a “life mask” to be made (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 11; Strasberg 5).

Odets came of age in the first quarter of the twentieth century, when anti-Semitism in the United States was rife. The animus did not abate until after World War II. Full realization of the end result of Nazi racial policies led to Jews finally being accepted as Caucasian, rather than a separate race (Jacobson 187-88). But the fervor of Zionism and the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 compounded the confusion as to the racial origins of Jewishness. Israel’s Law of Return, instituted in 1950, states: “For the purposes of this Law, ‘Jew’ means a person who was born of a Jewish mother, or has converted to Judaism and is not a member of another religion.”²⁶ The first part of this definition does not imply that Jews are not Caucasian, but it does reinforce the concept of Jews as being forever apart from other Caucasians. As German Jews discovered during the Third Reich, assimilation by choice is a chimerical, and ultimately futile, quest.

In his study of the performativity of Jewish identity, Erdman summarizes:

By the middle decades of the century...[Jewish] presence had become a seeming absence in popular culture, cloaked under other types of bodies, as what had once been a grotesque visibility gradually transformed itself into a generalized invisibility. In the era of the melting pot, these stage types performed and created new ideals of Jewish-American assimilation, resulting in a decades-long popular-culture disappearing act. (160)

Odets contributed to this “popular-culture disappearing act” as a celebrity and as an artist. In 1935 he enraptured Jewish and gentile audiences alike with *Awake and Sing!* Brenman-Gibson was in the audience. She writes:

²⁶<<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Facts+About+Israel/State/Acquisition+of+Israeli+Nationality.htm>>. Accessed 20 Jan 2010.

Odets had helped those of us who felt we did not belong in our country ... feel ... less estranged, more at home, more real, and assuredly more hopeful that we could yet collectively take our place in a larger, more unified, and freer design than our individual lives promised. As we sat in the dark, intent on the framed, lit space of the proscenium stage, we, in astonishment, recognized ourselves and knew we were at last being recognized. ("Creation of Plays" 240)

But Odets' next produced play, *Paradise Lost* (1935), was intended to be ethnically ambiguous. For the next twenty years, Odets deliberately moved away from ethnic depiction in his plays, save for a few minor characters who could be said to perform the function of token Jews. At the behest of the Hollywood studios, he worked on scores of film scripts that supported the whitewashing of American culture. In 1954 Odets suddenly returned to the stage with a play in a recognizably Jewish idiom. Even then he was reluctant to commit fully. He gave the starring role of Noah's wife, Esther, to Yiddish theatre star Berta Gersten, but he cast young gentile women in the lesser female roles against the urgings of a fellow playwright, prominent critic and friend (Day Thacher Kazan).

Odets' conflicts with his ethnic and religious background placed him in the mainstream of Jewish life of the time. It was not until the 1960s that "ethnic pride" reversed the assimilative trend. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the subsequent Black Power movement elevated ethnicity to a badge of honor rather than a sign of shame. Paradoxically, the 1960s' Civil Rights struggle reconstituted and reinforced the white/black binary of the post-Civil War South in the public mind (Jacobson 244-45). But Jews were being better absorbed into the white world.

The conflict between his ethnic roots and the host culture to which his father, and then he, aspired, is emblematic of Odets' life and work. The keenly felt "lost part" of himself, which paradoxically impelled him toward gentile women, was his core ethnic and religious identity. He had briefly entertained becoming a rabbi in his early teens, despite failing at Hebrew lessons. He prepared for a *bar mitzvah* that, in the end, never occurred (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 47-8). On his deathbed he felt a nagging guilt that he did not raise his son "as a Jew" (12). Internalized anti-Semitism imploded within him, resulting in a self-destructive paralysis that confounded him as a playwright. In the opinion of his close friend Clurman:

There are people who are able to maintain an inner equilibrium within insecurity, but Odets was not one of them; he was constantly torn by the conflicting tensions of his own nature. In many artists, such a state can often be the source of special insight and creative power; to a degree, this was also true of Odets, but he could not live with it for very long. It killed

him. (*All People* 162-63)

Despite his own painful ambivalence, Odets produced seminal stage works that typified the immigration experience of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The influence of internalized anti-Semitism on several of Odets' works will be examined in Chapter Two.



Figure 3: Death mask, Clifford Odets. Courtesy of the Lilly Library.

Chapter Two
“Playing Odets”

I write not what I see, but what I am. (C. Odets,, Note on back of envelope)

“I dread the idea of a production because I know it will be done by people who have really only one standard left, that of Broadway success ... To have an ideal now, except as a slogan ... is to confess oneself a fool” (Biggsby 16). Thus, in 1940, Eugene O’Neill confirmed that even Nobel laureates are susceptible to Broadway’s commercial undertow. Twenty years later and a decade after his last hit play, Odets exhorted audiences at UCLA to “consider the cases of our best writers—all of them swift and gifted at twenty-five or thirty, and at forty or fifty ... curators of the museums of their pasts” (“Why Be a Writer”). Elsewhere he wrote, “Here Theatre exists only as small islands of hit plays surrounded by outer darkness and the whispers of defeat” (“On Broadway”). He was then in his mid-fifties. He would be dead within three years.

It was not the first time Odets found himself in the company of O’Neill: in the ‘thirties he was considered the heir to O’Neill’s erstwhile position as the American theatre’s “Great White Hope.” Cultural popularity followed the changing demographic: Just as Irish immigrants preceded the even greater wave of Eastern European Jews, O’Neill’s influence waned as Odets’ rose. By 1940 O’Neill was no longer in fashion. Fifteen years later, Odets found himself relegated to the same gloomy chasm.

Odets sustained more failures than he enjoyed successes, and he disparaged the artistic merits of the latter. Only one of his eleven plays produced on Broadway is certain to have made money: *Golden Boy* (1937) extended the life of the financially beleaguered Group Theatre by two seasons (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 197). Even the plays that won Odets instant celebrity in 1935 received mixed reviews. He remarked as early as 1940, “A humiliating life, this one of writing in and for the theatre” (*Time Is Ripe* 43). Lee Strasberg told Brenman-Gibson, “I am convinced Clifford would have kept writing in a different theatre. He was scared always of financial failure ... Clifford is an outstanding example, like Saroyan, of how everything is measured by the box office” (Strasberg, Interview 4).

The vagaries of Broadway and cultural taste affect not only Jewish playwrights. But Odets occupies a unique niche in the history of American theatre: He was the first playwright to raise the Jewish-American immigrant experience to universal appeal. He did this partly by melding it with an economic cataclysm that touched nearly all Americans, and ruined many. Alluding particularly to *Awake and Sing!* (1935), Michael Mendelsohn summarises: “Odets addressed himself to the total Jewish experience, concentrating on the heart of the matter, the Jewish family and its dominant matriarch, much as O’Neill did throughout his career in working with the Irish family” (*Humane Dramatist* xiii). Yet Odets

accomplished this in one, or perhaps two, plays. They launched him as the “poet of the Jewish middle class (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 77). But he quickly abandoned the ethnic territory he had claimed.

This chapter will show that societal pressure to abandon ethnicity constricted Odets creatively. Though he moved away from overt, centralized portrayal of ethnic issues and culture subsequent to *Awake and Sing!*, he was aware where his strength lay. The deliberate ethnic neutralisation of his plays parallels Odets’ plummeting reputation as a playwright, and his increasing difficulty in writing plays. In January 1940, five years after he abandoned writing in a Jewish milieu, Odets wrote, “I have not the slightest capacity for happiness” (*Time Is Ripe* 6). Novelist and screenwriter Michael Blankfort rightly ascribed this despondency to “two traumatic cleavages of intent, which ... ran through [Odets’] entire life and work.” The first was “the struggle between the outside and the inside, the reach to excite an audience and the need to be one’s own man” (Blankfort). The second, parallel cleavage conforms with what Hana Wirth-Nesher calls “the paralyzing ambivalence of the Jewish immigrant writer in America” (“Mother Tongue” 443).

He continued to introduce peripheral Jewish characters into his plays with the sole exception of *The Country Girl* (1950). But Odets always expressed disdain for that play, and his next and final work for the stage, *The Flowering Peach*, returns to an obvious Jewish idiom. *The Flowering Peach*, discussed in Chapter Five, is based on the Old Testament story of Noah and his family. A contextual examination of several of Odets’ early plays will illuminate the impact of this binary on his writing and his artistic growth.

Odets was a founding member of the Group Theatre, organized formally in 1931. His pre-Group journals and correspondence reveal little interest in dramatic literature. He discusses fiction, quotes Romantic poets, composes haiku, refers to painters and architectural styles, talks about composers, and mentions philosophers. He alludes to writing a novel. Even his letters to Theatre Guild director Philip Moeller are mostly composed of personal confidences and literary and musical allusions. Except for casual comments regarding productions in which he is acting, theatrical references are rare. He was an artist without the mooring of a coherent vision. He regarded himself primarily as an actor, an interpretive artist. John Howard Lawson wrote to Brenman-Gibson, “When I first knew [Odets, in the early Group Theatre days], [he] was searching for commitment, for something he could use to sustain his art and life—and searching is very different from finding” (Letter, 6 Jun ‘64). Odets gravitated to Clurman’s erudition and Strasberg’s insight, and to the passion of both. The Group’s focus was precisely what the young Odets craved. It required him to concentrate his energies.

He wrote prose and poetry from a very young age, and began writing plays out of boredom and frustration. A mediocre actor, he was cast only in minor roles, and sometimes not at all. While observing rehearsals, he instinctively transposed Strasberg's teachings on the craft of acting to that of writing for actors. He broke ground with two early plays, *910 Eden Street* (1931) and *Victory* (1932), neither of which has ever been produced. "The plays of this time show how far he was from finding any such unifying or creative path," Lawson observed. These and the four subsequent plays, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), *Awake and Sing!* (1935), *Till the Day I Die* (1935), and *Paradise Lost* (1935), were written before he relinquished his position as a third-string actor with the Group. He went on to write an additional seven plays, all produced on Broadway.²⁷ Four were made into films.²⁸

Clurman and set designer Boris Aronson spoke after Odets' death about his lack of craft. Aronson felt that "[Odets] was not a real good craftsman, except instinctively" (B. Aronson). Clurman's statement that "he had no craft" (Interview, 19 Mar '66) is extreme. It is true that Odets' strength lay not in structural formulation, but in injecting individual scenes with an unparalleled life force. This skill is what eventually made him one of the highest paid writers in Hollywood (Hill). Clurman's statement is particularly unfair given the situation in which the young playwright found himself. While slapdash technique is evident in the early, unproduced plays, it might be better said that the autodidact playwright was continually experimenting with form. Form and definition became preoccupations not only in his work, but in his life as well. "When you say an artist died still looking for his form ... you mean he died still looking for his reality" (C. Odets, *Time Is Ripe* 22, 30, 38, 183). His 1940 ruminations proved prescient. His deathbed remark to Blankfort about being "more of a Jew" reveals a hindsight recognition that Jewish practice and ritual could have served as a means to self-definition. Living according to Judaism, or to any codified system, provides an innate sense of structure that Odets apparently lacked.

Meanwhile, he was faced with the challenge of defining himself in a new and glamorous milieu. With his debut plays, *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing!*, Odets suddenly found himself not only in the national limelight but sought after by the Hollywood studios. He was, in a sense, always scrambling to learn the craft of playwriting. A self-taught, twenty-nine-year-old playwright, he was abruptly forced by circumstances to adapt to writing for a different medium. But the Group had become dependent on him for his tailor-made scripts and the box office value of his celebrity. Film director Peter Bogdanovich

²⁷ This tally does not include *I Can't Sleep* (1935), a "monodrama" performed by Morris Carnovsky at a left-wing benefit. Brenman-Gibson reports that it was widely "anthologized as one of the best pieces of writing of the 'thirties'" (*Clifford Odets* 353).

²⁸ *Golden Boy* (1937), *Clash By Night* (1941), *The Big Knife* (1949), and *The Country Girl* (1950) were subsequently made into films.

interviewed Odets not long before he died. He wrote to Brenman-Gibson,

[Odets] was very bitter about the Group Theatre, insisting that he was never allowed to perfect a play because the Group would come to him and say they were going broke and would he please give them his play now so they could put it on. ‘They made money on my plays so they could produce a bunch of flops.’ As far as he was concerned, the plays were never in shape for production when they were put on. (Letter, 23 Apr 1965)

In an earlier letter to Brenman-Gibson, Bogdanovich wrote, “I think he’s the most talented playwright America has produced, and the most underrated” (Letter, 13 Mar 1965). Leif Erikson, a late joiner who arrived in 1937 with his wife, Frances Farmer (Smith 310-11), elaborated on the responsibility placed on Odets by the Group. “Actually, [Odets] *was* the Group. He was the great light—the hopes of all were pinned on him—for the future ... from him would flow the wherewithal for the realization of a purity and goodness for creative survival ... [He was] under great pressure to *produce* [original emphasis], to make the Group viable” (Erikson). The nascent playwright was, upon emergence, overtaken by responsibility.

Even at the height of his success, Odets relied on his personal history and his actor’s instincts as honed by Strasberg’s teaching and direction. Though he later became an influential teacher of playwriting at the Actors Studio (Mendelsohn, *Humane Dramatist*, 107, 108), these remained Odets’ fundamental tools. He was America’s first Method playwright. Odets augmented whatever command of craft he developed with an actor’s visceral urgency. The early plays in particular were performative for the playwright. He improvised them as an actor would; improvisation was an important tool in Strasberg’s technique. Odets verbalised lines as he wrote them, acting out the scenes. Physicalising the characters posed no challenge as he was writing with specific Group actors in mind. The plays written for the Group are thereby eminently performable. But Odets never successfully recaptured the intensity and improvisational quality of these early plays.

Brooks Atkinson noted in 1939, when Odets was still with the Group,

Mr. Odets has a style that is flexible and adaptable. It depends less upon a neat arrangement of plot, like Ibsen drama, than upon the individual vitality of the characters. Instead of squeezing out the pith of characters between the jaws of a plot, Mr. Odets whirls it out of them centrifugally. The creative impulse seems to come not so much from his mind as from his instinctive understanding of people and ... response to the flare of human

life. (“Group Theatre Plus Odets”)²⁹

Stella Adler, known as a meticulous technician, concurred with Atkinson. She admired that Odets was “theatrical instead of [striving for] an attempted aesthetic ... a steady sense of this—He’d start with a character and he’d burst with that—He’d always start with people and people had other people” (S. Adler). But the young playwright was also hampered. Lawson was one among many who cite Odets’ psycho-emotional conflicts as primary factors in his failure to realize his potential as a playwright after the demise of the Group:

I think the technique and organization of Clifford's plays reveal a great deal about his emotional life—as well as his social attitudes ... Clifford was never able to explore the inner conflicts of character in his characters [sic]—and in himself—because he saw it as sordid ‘reality’ versus an impossible dream (*Rocket to the Moon*) or corruption versus ‘idealism’ (*Golden Boy*). (Lawson, *Correspondence B-G 2*)

Odets freely admitted, “I am Cleo Singer [in *Rocket to the Moon*] and the other characters of my plays” (*Time Is Ripe* 215).

Lawson was troubled about his own Jewish identity (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 223). He never wrote an explicitly Jewish play, though he wrote Jewish characters whose marginality provides the central conflict. Sol Ginsberg in *Success Story* is one. Lawson’s father had changed the family name from Levy to avoid such a marginal position. Lawson was thereby able to attend elite schools such as Williams College (644). Clurman, who had championed Lawson early on, felt that Lawson’s repression of his “Jewish conscience” had a deleterious effect on his playwriting just as it did on Odets’. “When [Lawson] lost the conflict, he lost his talent and, from then on, behaved like a converted Christian” (Clurman, qtd. in Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 223). Though Lawson claimed to have been conflicted regarding his Jewishness, his Marxist beliefs superseded any religious or ethnic sensibility in his work.³⁰ Odets’ own conflict regarding his Jewishness eventually resulted in a similar artistic stunting. Art is best produced from a fundamentally agonistic source; if the conflict is repressed, creativity is stifled. As did many others, Lawson, and briefly, Odets, were able to use the anchor of Communism to avoid the deeper waters of identity conflict.

But Odets quickly realized he was more humanist than ideologue. He had joined the Party in the fall of 1934, and resigned within eight months. He became disillusioned by the criticism of Communist theatre critics and a Party-directed junket to Cuba, only

²⁹ Paula Strasberg believed that Odets was gifted with extra-sensory perception, which, she told Brenman-Gibson, frightened him (Strasberg, P. Interview 11/2/63, Butler, 7, f. “Interviews – Strasberg”).

³⁰ Lawson was one of the “Hollywood Ten,” discussed further in Chapter Four.

nominally headed by Odets, that resulted in nothing but immediate deportation. He felt deceived and used (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 296, 302, 66; Bentley, *Treason* 516-17). His primary concern became the thwarting of humanity's spiritual and artistic potential by commercialism (Harvey 206-07). But, having put down the cudgel of communism, he never succeeded in proposing a plausible solution for such a broadly defined issue. His personal life offered him no safe harbour. In contrast, Lawson enjoyed a long-term marriage, founded the Writer's Guild of America, and became a Party functionary, eventually heading the Hollywood branch (Navasky 78). Though Lawson's writing may have suffered for it, he completely submerged his Jewish persona beneath a political one (Lawson, Letter 6 Jun '64), and enjoyed the stability of a long-term marriage. As an active member of the Communist Party, Lawson worked within a preset structure and for a concrete, codified cause.

Odets' cause—his religion—became the Group. The company's patriarchal configuration was similar to that of a traditional Jewish community. Odets, continually tossed on the tumult of his personal life, finally felt he had found a home, exclaiming in the Group's 1931 communal diary,

I am done! Done with chasing my febrile self down the nights and days ... I believe—as I have wanted to believe for almost ten years—in some person, idea, thing outside of myself ... I who cried from out my inverted wilderness for strong roots with which to fasten to the swarming sustaining earth have found them at last in 'The Group.' ("From the Group's Daybook (1931)" 4)

Odets flourished within the security of the Group's orthodoxy. He even associated the organisation with the Catholic sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance: "I have begun to eat the flesh and blood of the Group. I partake of these consecrated wafers with a clean heart and brain" ("Group's Daybook (1931)" 4). High regard for his Group colleagues enhanced his sense of belonging and self-worth. Strasberg, Clurman, and Crawford functioned as authority figures, despite the Group's professed egalitarianism. Strasberg was referred to as "the Rabbi" and Clurman functioned as his minion (Hethmon 184; Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 274). Though a gentile from the mid-west, Crawford was regarded much like a resourceful Jewish mother, handling the business aspects while not particularly encouraged to engage in the male-dominated artistic, quasi-religious forum of esthetics (Smith 40-42). The Group actors met amongst themselves and then presented their views to the directors for discussion in regular company meetings.

Odets' family of Group actors inspired his playwriting for the greater part of a decade. He asserted as late as 1961 that his plays "were written specifically for the Group company to perform. And they could not have been done better by anyone else"

(Hethmon 197). But his commitment to the ensemble's ethos was apparently not absolute. Odets offered major roles to two outside artists, probably unbeknownst to the Group, and apparently unknown to Brenman-Gibson. Not only did he invite Yiddish theatre star Joseph Buloff to join the Group in its earliest incarnation, he also offered Buloff a role in one of his plays (Buloff).³¹ Alla Nazimova was a highly-regarded Russian-Jewish actress instrumental in popularizing Ibsen in the United States. According to her biographer, "[in 1933] ... Odets sent Nazimova *I Got the Blues*, the first draft of *Awake and Sing!*. Odets ... hoped that Nazimova would play the Jewish mother. But as her diary records, she decided against it: 'Excellent, but not for me'" (Lambert 331). That Odets approached Nazimova, who had become a Hollywood star, indicates the encroachment of commercial concerns on Group consciousness as early as 1933. The ensemble began losing actors to Hollywood almost from its inception. By 1937 Odets was demanding that Clurman get "the best cast money could buy" for *Golden Boy* (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 195). As a result, Clurman procured Frances Farmer from Paramount Studios (Smith 310-11). The ensemble became increasingly transient. Clurman and Odets cast outsider Jane Wyatt as the female lead in the Group's final production, *Night Music* (1940) (C. Odets, *Time Is Ripe* 9-10).³²

Odets' work for the stage began to founder along with the Group's stability. He was summoned to Hollywood shortly after his first explosive season as a playwright (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 392-96, 616). He subsequently wrote the hit *Golden Boy* (1937), and the less successful *Rocket to the Moon* (1938). *Night Music* (1940) was the last play he wrote for the Group; it ran a mere 20 performances (Demastes 45). The Group disbanded after Odets' withdrawal of *Clash By Night* for consideration by the Group (2). *Clash By Night* was produced instead, in December of that year, by songwriter and impresario Billy Rose. Strasberg directed, and Tallulah Bankhead starred. The production was lambasted by critics and saw only 49 performances (23).

The critics never failed to set up hurdles for Odets. They were also hard on the Group. The critics did not move along with current artistic or political trends as swiftly as did the theatre artists. The realities of the Depression in concert with Stanislavsky's teachings moved the Group through the final transitional stages of theatricalism to their emotionally

³¹ As Buloff gives no dates, it is unclear from the interview whether Odets was referring to a part in what became *Awake and Sing!*, or a role in *910 Eden Street*. It was most likely the former.

³² According to Ruth Eliot, fellow Group member Eleanor Lynn initially went into rehearsal in the female lead in *Night Music* (Eliot, Letter).

grounded, more realistic style.³³ Clurman and Stella Adler's personal encounters with Stanislavsky in Paris in 1934 reinforced the Group's dedication to his approach, if not to certain aspects of the technique as developed by Strasberg³⁴ (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 129-30; Smith 179-80). As generally happens with revolutionary artistic movements, they were regarded with suspicion and came under critical attack. As explained by Wendy Smith, "The idea of theatre as a public arena for social commentary and intellectual debate wasn't just foreign to Broadway reviewers [in the 'thirties]; it was anathema ... they judged a play's value by its ability to entertain" (109). The Group's fifth production, Lawson's *Success Story* (1932), proved controversial. As discussed in Chapter One, Luther Adler's feisty portrayal of a young Jewish usurper of gentile privilege provoked Jews and gentiles alike, including the prominent critic John Corbin.³⁵ A survey of Corbin's critical remarks on Jewish influence in the New York Theatre will exemplify the context in which Odets' theatrical life evolved.

Corbin's career as a critic roughly spanned the first third of the century. He reviewed variously for *Harper's Weekly*, the *Sun*, and the *New York Times*. The tenor of his criticism in relation to Jewish themes and characters evolved along with popular sentiment toward New York's Eastern European Jews. At the turn of the century, the (Lower) East Side, where most immigrants first settled, was still viewed by many as exotic. Henry James described his 1903 Yiddish theatre experience on the Bowery as leading him "apparently, through depths of the Orient ... I should clearly take my place with an Oriental public" (James 195).

Corbin visited the Bowery theatres the same year as James. He compared Yiddish theatre productions favourably with the season's more restrained uptown productions. He defended Yiddish theatre's pandering to popular tastes: Yiddish impresarios such as Boris Thomashevsky and Jacob Adler frequently interjected facets of Jewish immigrant life into the classics, including Shakespeare. The Harvard- and Oxford-educated Corbin was a

³³ The Moscow Art Theatre toured the U.S. during 1923 and into 1924. Two members, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, stayed in New York and founded the American Laboratory Theatre, where they taught the Stanislavsky System. It was at their school that Strasberg, Clurman, and Stella Adler were first exposed to the technique that would permanently alter and dominate their professional lives. All three travelled to the Soviet Union on theatre tours, as did Cheryl Crawford. Stella Adler was the only American actor to receive direct tutelage from Stanislavsky. They worked together in Paris in 1934 (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 129-30; Smith 176, 178-80).

³⁴ It was in these famous meetings that Adler learned that Stanislavsky no longer endorsed the sacrosanct "affective memory" exercises emphasised by Strasberg and which she deplored. These working sessions with the Master became the foundation for Adler's own branch of the technique, and prompted her to start her own acting conservatory, in 1949.

³⁵ Corbin was an influential drama critic for the *New York Times* in 1902 and the *New York Sun* 1905-07. He again served as the *Times* drama critic from 1917-19, and editorial writer from 1919-26. He thereafter contributed many articles and book reviews to the *Times* and other periodicals, such as *Scribner's*, through 1940.

Shakespeare scholar. He nonetheless proclaimed in 1903, “The more one learns about Broadway, the more highly one appreciates the Bowery!” He justifies Yiddish adaptations against the criticism of Professor Leo Wiener, author of *Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century*. Corbin wrote, “In its naïve and unabashed expression of the popular taste[,] the Yiddish plays of the Bowery are on the precise plane of the plays that delighted the Bankside under Elizabeth” (“Drama of the Bowery”).

Sixteen years later Corbin couched his opinions in a less enthusiastic mode, deliberating issues of religion and race, rather than theatrical effect and audience reception. The 1919 article, “The Jew as a Dramatic Problem,” is equivocal. In the first paragraph he states, “Of course, Woman is a problem, and so also, no doubt, is the Jew. But in both cases, it would seem, the result of posing the problem is exaggeration and futility” (“The Jew as a Dramatic Problem”). The article is not anti-Semitic *per se*; it examines contemporary feeling regarding religious sectarianism and miscegenation, and alludes to women’s issues. It reflects the charged societal atmosphere following the First World War. Attitudes towards immigration had soured since Corbin’s 1902 paean to Yiddish theatre. Two years after Corbin wrote the article, Congress passed the first Immigration Restriction Act (1921). Corbin maintains a balanced viewpoint in the 1919 article: “Many men who are spaciously tolerant in religion still cherish race prejudice as something in the nature of a virtue ... Where religious and social liberties exist race ceases to be a problem of peoples and becomes a ... problem of individual character.” He deplores “the bitter problem of racial antagonism.”

In 1923 Corbin wrote another *New York Times* article, academic in tone. In “How Comic Was Shylock?” he states, “In the whole range of esthetic criticism, no problem is as difficult as this, or as fundamental in the proper interpretation of, not Shylock alone, but many of the great Shakespearean characters” (“Shylock”). He compares Shylock with Marlowe’s baldly malevolent character, Barabas, in *The Jew of Malta*. Corbin settles the issue as a matter of differences in Elizabethan and modern sensibilities. He looks at Shylock solely as a fictitious character, from literary, theatrical and historical standpoints only. He makes no comment on Jews in contemporary American society. He does not mention that the producer of the production under discussion, David Belasco, was a Jew (Erdman 99). He considers the cruder Barabas essentially a figure of “low tragedy mingled with low comedy.” Corbin argues that Shakespeare’s intention, like Marlowe’s, could not have been solely tragic. In Elizabethan times, Jews were regarded as essentially comic characters, along with drunks and the insane. Though Jews had been banished from England in 1290, in Elizabethan times there was in London a small community of *conversos*. These Jews had been forced to convert to Christianity by the Inquisition and emigrated from the Continent. They began to arrive in England from about 1532, when Henry VIII separated from the

Church of Rome. A number of them secretly continued to observe Jewish law (Brooks 38-39).³⁶ It was a very small community, and the Elizabethan audience remained largely unfamiliar with the race, religion and culture of Jews. The seedbed was therefore fertile for the nurturing of stereotype. Corbin gives Shakespeare due credit for humanistic empathy toward Shylock. He allows that part of Shakespeare's greatness was the occasional ability to transcend contemporary prejudices. He cites Ben Jonson's, "He was not of an age but for all time" (Jonson). Corbin makes the point that Elizabethan consciousness, and the medieval sensibilities from which it evolved, allowed for far more juxtaposition of comic and tragic elements than did the snowballing contemporary trend toward realism. "The purely tragic [interpretation of] Shylock throws the dramatic composition quite out of kilter" (Corbin, "Shylock"). By implication, so would a purely comic one. Corbin therefore upholds a balanced, and, therefore, to some extent, sympathetic interpretation of Shylock, the archetypal stage Jew.

In this 1923 discussion of interpreting Shylock onstage, Corbin avoids mention of the legendary 1903 performance by Jacob Adler. Adler's interpretation proved so popular it was imported to Broadway in 1905. In this, his only Broadway appearance, Adler played Shylock in Yiddish with an English-speaking supporting cast (Rosenfeld 347-50). Ignoring this milestone, Corbin cites Shylock as interpreted by David Warfield (né Wohlfelt), a highly successful Jewish actor who went to great lengths to neutralize his ethnicity. Warfield converted to Catholicism before he died (Erdman 3, 112-13). His Jewish heritage is not mentioned in the article. Corbin was just possibly unaware of this fact.

Corbin takes special care to maintain a critical distance when discussing Shylock. He refers to Shakespeare's audience as "our ancestors," clearly alluding to his own Anglo-Saxon ancestry. He emphasises what side of the ethnic fence he is on. He also makes clear by this reference that he is not catering to Jewish readers. Or perhaps he chooses to ignore them. The year after Corbin wrote the Shylock article, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act (1924), the most stringent legislation restricting immigration to date. The new laws based immigration quotas on country of origin (Dinnerstein 96). The countries most discriminated against were those of Southern and Eastern Europe, whence had come the majority of Jews.

Fourteen years after his dispassionate examination of Shylock, Corbin's tone altered drastically. It was 1933. Hitler assumed power, headlines lengthened, and Odets finished writing a play about a Jewish family in the Bronx. It was eventually entitled *Awake and Sing!*³⁷ On the worldwide stage, the timing was inauspicious for a young Jewish playwright

³⁶ *Conversos* had been forced by the Inquisition to convert to Christianity. They were nonetheless still considered Jews, regarded suspiciously and ridiculed by the English. (Brooks 38-39).

³⁷ *Awake and Sing!* was not produced until 1935. Herein all parenthetical dates accompanying play titles refer to production dates.

living in a country that unofficially supported the Third Reich:

The political implications of the Nazis' image of the writer as the mouthpiece of the Jews can be seen in the first list of Germans whose citizenship was revoked. On 23 August 1933 this list appeared ... Indeed, in all the lists of those who had their German citizenship revoked (which continued until 1939, with more than 8,000 individuals listed), the proportion of writers was extraordinarily high. (Gilman, *Inscribing* 214)

As noted in Chapter One, it was in 1933 that Corbin published a notoriously anti-Semitic article in *Scribner's Magazine*. "Drama and the Jew" stands as a paradigm of prevalent attitudes. Corbin now views Jews in the performing arts through this lens. The preamble queries, "The Jew has come to dominate the dramatic art of Broadway. Corrosive, vitriolic, animated by the spirit of a separate minority, the intellectual theatre has now given itself over to the drama of acid intelligence. Is this a reason for the present state of the theatre in America?" (Corbin, "Drama and the Jew" 295). Corbin cites Jewish predominance in both the artistic and business areas of theatre in what he considers a deplorable state of affairs. He sprinkles the article with backhanded compliments to the New York Jewish community and its theatre artists, apparently to give his article a semblance of fairness. He refers to Yiddish theatre immortals Jacob Adler and Bertha Kalich as "these Yids," at the same time calling them "artists of power and distinction" (295).

The Group, two of whose three directors were Jews, had at this point produced five full productions, including Lawson's play (Smith 430). In "Drama and the Jew," Corbin voices the mounting xenophobia not only among theatre reviewers of "the older stock" (296), but in the world at large. The fear of theatrical takeover by Jewish syndicates dated back to the turn of the century when the Shuberts and other Jewish families began monopolizing uptown commercial concerns (Erdman 94). Corbin implies that a major theatrical venture, in which he was involved as literary director ("Corbin of New Theatre Sees 'the Earth'"), failed due to Jewish influence. The New Theatre sought "to do for the English classics and for the better sort of modern plays what the Théâtre Français [sic] has so long done for dramatic art in France." He emphasises that the New Theatre was championed by "leaders in society who had developed the Metropolitan Opera." In Corbin's opinion, "a single salient contrast tells the whole story." The fact that the Washington Square Players became, in a subsequent incarnation, "an institution universally acknowledged to be the foremost of its kind in the English-speaking world" does not sit well with him. He contends that they were, in contrast to the New Theatre sponsors, "a group of amateurs almost exclusively Jewish." This "group of amateurs" went on to found the eminently successful

Theatre Guild.³⁸ Corbin strongly implies that the failure of the New Theatre within two short seasons (1909-11) was due to lack of support, or even subterfuge, by the predominating Jewish theatrical management (“Drama and the Jew” 296). Corbin did not mention the New Theatre’s failure nor his involvement in any of his previous articles relating to the Jewish presence on Broadway. His resentment apparently festered for twenty-two years. For whatever reason, he felt that 1933 was the appropriate time to vent his spleen. It was also the year that Odets finished writing his quintessentially Jewish play.

Only months after Corbin’s scurrilous article appeared, the novelist Theodore Dreiser joined

... his fellow *American Spectator* editors Sherwood Anderson, George Jean Nathan and Eugene O’Neill, among others, to publish a supposedly whimsical treatise on the subject of the Jews and the ‘rising question of a Jewish homeland.’ Dreiser argued that Jews ... formed an ‘unassimilated racial group that threatened to overrun America.’ ... The world’s quarrel with the Jew,’ he said, echoing Twain, ‘is not that he is inferior, but that he is superior.’

Nathan belittled Jewish poetry and music (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 646). It was not generally known that Nathan, a prominent critic, was of Jewish descent (Howe 598).

O’Neill proposed a homeland in Africa. Dreiser expressed his conviction that Jews should be deported (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 646).³⁹

Corbin distinguishes between “Jews of the elder migration,” referring to German Jews,⁴⁰ and Eastern European Jews, whom they called “kikes.” According to Corbin, “the newly arrived Jews of the East Side have only a thin admixture of Semitic blood, being mainly Slavic” (“Drama and the Jew” 296). He felt no urgency to make this spurious point in 1903, when it had, even then, already been the case for twenty years.

In “Drama and the Jew,” Corbin voices a complaint absent from his 1902 article praising Bowery theatre. He now points to Yiddish theatre’s lack of “Victorian scruples,” at the same time upholding the early Yiddish theatre’s love of Shakespeare. He cites Jacob Adler’s acclaimed performance in Jacob Gordin’s *Der Vilder Mentsch* (*The Wild Man*) (1893). Corbin refers to the scene in which the lead character, played by Adler, “lusts for his

³⁸ In an interview a few years before his death, Odets described the Theatre Guild as having “created the American theatre” (Hethmon 180).

³⁹ Dreiser’s views did not prevent Odets becoming a close friend in the early ‘forties. They frequently played cards. Odets was known to send Dreiser flowers. (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 26 - Draft*). He worked on a screenplay version of *Sister Carrie* in 1944 (C. Odets, “Sister Carrie”) (In fairness, it should be noted that Lawson, a Jew, and Chaplin, allegedly Jewish, were fellow confrères of Dreiser. “Clifford and Chaplin and I were the three closest friends of Theodore Dreiser—we often met at Dreiser’s house” (Lawson, Interview)).

⁴⁰ The majority of German Jews migrated to the U.S. in the mid-19th century, roughly 1830 to 1870, as part of a larger migration that also included German Christians fleeing political turbulence and economic hardship.

adulterate young stepmother and murders her in a sadistic orgy, the scene being acted downstage in a glare of eroticism” (“Drama and the Jew” 295). According to Adler’s granddaughter, it was this play that established him as the greatest star of the Yiddish theatre (Rosenfeld xvii).

The formerly meticulous Corbin in 1933 becomes careless about accuracy. He credits the Theatre Guild, rather than the Group, with the recent production of *Success Story*, referring to the Group as the Theatre Guild’s “junior organization.” He was apparently under the misapprehension that the Theatre Guild was still partially underwriting Group productions. The Guild did contribute \$5,000 to each of the Group’s first two productions, *House of Connelly* (1931) and *1931–* (1931) (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 54, 58-60, 64). But their sponsorship did not extend to the third and fourth productions, *Night Over Taos* (1932) and *Success Story* (1932) (Smith 430). In fact, on February 19, 1932, there was an announcement in the *New York Times* that the Group Theatre had become an “independent organization” (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 73). Corbin also describes Luther and Stella Adler as “grandchildren” of Jacob Adler (“Drama and the Jew” 300). They were his children.

Corbin does not oppose the commercial takeover of New York theatre by Jews; he expresses admiration for their business acumen:

The significant fact was that the Jews had had the astuteness to recognize first a transformation in business conditions and, amid all their personal bickerings, were able to build up and maintain a collective control which was not only quite legal but thoroughly in accord with the prevailing tendency toward ‘big business.’ In brief, they were already proving themselves superior to Americans of the older stock in both the art and the business of the theatre. (“Drama and the Jew” 295-96).

It is the Jews’ alleged complete artistic control of Broadway to which Corbin objects. He attacks the (according to Corbin, Jewish) Theatre Guild for not producing enough of the classics, particularly Shakespeare. While he credits the Theatre Guild with “[doing] its [sic] best,” and “several achievements, notably plays by Eugene O’Neill,” he then negates his already lacklustre praise by referring to O’Neill’s plays produced by the Guild as “untraditional if not un-American” (296). The Guild subversively passes over the English classics in favour of “un-American” plays. He further declares:

The fact of primary importance is that, not only in the Guild Theatre but on Broadway in general, the predilections of playwrights, producers and audiences alike are those of a people who find themselves cut off, or have cut themselves off, from the main stream of American thought and feeling. Instead of a sympathetic and well-informed interpretation of our life as a whole, one is all too liable to find a prejudiced distortion or at best an

acidulous criticism of it. For years now, Jewish playwrights have repeatedly attempted ... the indictment of the American people entire. ("Drama and the Jew" 297)

The implication is that "the 'American' people entire" does not, by their own design, include the Jews themselves.

Corbin vilifies the Theatre Guild's production of Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* (1912) by citing an anecdotal source. He claims to quote "a Gentile who happened to be present at rehearsal ... [who was] moved to protest that what Shaw intended was a martyrdom and not a pogrom of Christians" (298). To accuse the Theatre Guild of inspiring a religious pogrom, even in the metaphorical sense, reflects the extent of anti-Semitic suspicion rampant in 1933 and recalls the longstanding blood libel of the Jews.

In his less reactionary vein of 1919, Corbin wrote, "Some day our playwrights will cease posing 'the Jew' as protagonist in a racial problem and give us many Jews who are human beings. Then, and not until then, the bitter problem of racial antagonism will be on the way toward a solution" ("The Jew as a Dramatic Problem"). The Group's production of *Awake and Sing!* was yet two years away from making an historic stride in this direction. Many in the Group had been culled from the ranks of the Theatre Guild. This factor, along with Corbin's criticism of *Success Story*, make it probable that his 1933 indictment was well-known to the Group; the Group was certainly implicated. To his credit, and to the benefit of the American theatre, Odets chose to fly in the face of Corbin's hostility and resentment.

Odets began his first play, which treated Jewish issues directly, when he was twenty-four. Clurman dismissed *910 Eden Street* (1931). "I hardly thought of it as a play, or of its author as a potential playwright. It was a personal document" (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 63). As such it provides important signposts regarding Odets' internal struggles. Though dismissed as juvenilia, this first exercise was nonetheless written with deliberation. Odets' characteristic empathy toward his characters is already evident. He spoke to Michael Mendelsohn about his early efforts: "They were very painful attempts to not only find my identity—not only to locate myself—but to write down the nature of neurotic illness, to try to come to some clear objective sense of myself and my inability to handle and deal with life" (Mendelsohn, "Center Stage" 71). *910 Eden Street* thus offers a virtual sonogram of the young playwright's first stirrings.

Mark Berke, a young Jewish poet, serves as Odets' *doppelgänger* in *910 Eden Street*. Mark wrestles with his Russian-Jewish identity, concealed by a name change. Whether Odets knew as early as 1931 that his father had altered the family surname is unknown. Regardless, in his first attempt at writing for the stage, Odets reveals his feelings on the

subject:

MARK. ... And me all the time refusing my heritage, what is me, the Jew. Trying to refine myself. I mean the way sugar cane is refined to white crystals.⁴¹

NICK. I'm a son of a gun, is this Mark Berke?

MARK. Yes, Mark Berke . . . nee [sic] Berkowitz . . .
(C. Odets, *910 Eden* Act II, sc. 1 (insert), 15)

As Gabriel Miller notes:

[Mark's] dedication to his art and his ability to produce it . . . are frustrated by his search for love and his inability to reconcile himself to his past, his father, and his Jewishness. Odets hints at, but never openly explores the possibility that the division within Mark may have been caused by the rejection of his Jewishness that is symbolized by the name change.

(G. Miller 20)

Mark Berke embodies two of Odets' most central, lifelong issues: failure to establish a stable relationship with a woman, and self-contempt arising from ethnic alienation. It is hardly surprising that the twenty-five-year-old playwright was unable to defuse these core conflicts within the structure of his first play. These issues continued to manifest themselves in his mature works.⁴²

When Irma, who lives in the same boarding house as Mark, calls him a "filthy, unprincipled Jew," according to the stage directions Mark laughs it off. He replies several lines later, "I will go back where I came from" (*910 Eden* Act II, sc. 1, 12). This exchange recalls Odets' 1929 letter to Cheryl Crawford, cited in Chapter One. In the letter, Odets copes with being called "a dirty Brooklyn Jew" with after-the-fact sarcasm. Mark, assigned Odets' own biographical details, seeks to escape his ethnic identity:

MARK. All the time I run away from myself and hate people who are like myself . . . My father was Russian and my grandfather was Russian and they come down to me in the blood. I am all of them and more. And then I come here and play at being an American, a civilization I don't understand and believe in. Here I was born in Philadelphia and I feel all the time a Russian Jew . . . And I make believe I am a poet and have beautiful thoughts and speak good English. I change my name . . . and love white Gentile women with cold eyes and skin because the others, my kind, make me see what I am. (*910 Eden* Act II (insert), 20)

⁴¹ Note allusion to Jews, by a Jewish character, as "not quite white" (Brodkin 103).

⁴² Miller only notes that, "Odets is simply writing himself here, exploiting his own conflicts of identity: his family name had been changed, from Gorodetsky . . ." (21). Miller presumes with no supporting evidence that Odets knew of the name change as early as 1931.

This speech presages Odets' 1953 letter to Melissa Hayden in which he makes clear his belief that the Russian-Jewish and American aspects of his identity were irreconcilable (Letter to Hayden, 29 Jul '53). It may have been this speech of Mark's that led Miller to assume that Odets knew of his original family name at the time of writing *910 Eden Street*. Early drafts of *I Got the Blues*⁴³ also mention name change, as does the *The Big Knife* (1949) (C. Odets, *Big Knife* 8). But the changing of surnames was common during the tidal wave of Eastern European immigration. It often occurred involuntarily at Castle Garden and later at Ellis Island.⁴⁴ A clerk or an official could only guess at times at what an exhausted immigrant was trying to convey when asked for his or her name. A garbled or abbreviated facsimile would thus be entered onto official papers. Sometimes a judgment call would be made, the official taking it upon himself to decide whether the ethnic name "was a disadvantage" (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 629, n. 3.7). Whether by circumstance or design, an immigrant's name change served as a disguise. A character in *910 Eden Street* who has not submitted to surname alteration is Tiny Manishevitz. But the desirability of "passing" is on his (as on the playwright's) mind. In a line crossed-out by Odets, Tiny asks a young gentile acquaintance, "Would you know I was a Hebrew, Linda?" (*910 Eden* Act I, sc. 2, 21).

Among all of Odets' written characters, Tiny Manishevitz alone is a Zionist. His approach is hardly intellectual, but his fervor foreshadows characters soon to appear in Odets' hallmark plays, those that espouse Marxism:

TINY. Please excuse me, Russia is right with the world.

IRMA. Nonsense!

LINDA. I'm horribly interested in Russia.

TINY. That won't help Russia, Dollink. And the Jews farming in Palestine, that's also--

IRMA. So you're back to Zionism! (Act I, sc. 2, 22)

Odets avoided mention of Zionism after *910 Eden Street*, despite that during the next two decades it became a dominant issue for Jews worldwide, if never for Odets. There is scant mention of it in his personal papers. In the view of Jewish-American novelist and journalist Maurice G. Hindus, "Unless he can sublimate his Jewishness into an ideal, a vision, or a cause, the modern Jew must be prepared to bear it as a cross that often lacerates the soul even while it leaves the body unharmed. But radicalism promises to relieve him of this cross" (qtd. in Porter 11).

⁴³ Ralph... I met Eddie Lipschutz.

Myr... What's the young man doing?

Ralph... He changed his name to Lipton—Eddie Lipton. He plays the Roxy next week! (C. Odets, *I Got the Blues* 8.)

⁴⁴ Located at the southern tip of Manhattan, Castle Garden was the New York State processing station for immigrants until 1892, when that function was transferred to the larger Ellis Island station.

The only radical philosophy Odets ever espoused was Marxism. Yet his identification with Marxism was more emotional than academic, and his Communist Party membership was short-lived. Edward Murray notes that this pattern was not unusual in artists of that period (Murray 15). Odets' move away from Communism, and his disregard for Zionism, denied him any relief such as that described above by Hindus. Blankfort, who reviewed for the left-wing newspaper *New Masses* in the mid-'thirties and became a friend, remarked:

I [am] talking about an identification which comes with some participation in the community of Jews. Not religious necessarily ... but rather a participation in one of the thousand actions which are open to concerned Jews. ... I felt that [Odets] did not care; more, that he had a violent antipathy ... he could not see himself as a Jew among Jews. (Blankfort)

Odets expressed his longing for connection through Tiny Manishevitz:

TINY: Sometimes I get such a big feeling to be near people. I can't get close enough to them. I'd like to open their mail and find out what their private lives is about [sic]. I wanna tear it open, every time I see a strange letter, and read every word. (*910 Eden* Act II, sc. 1, 1)

Arthur Hertzberg states, "The Jewish true believers in Marxism had no doubt that the revolution required that they sever all allegiance to the Jewish community and abandon their own group identity" (Novick 40). First- and second-generation Americans may well have felt conflicted. Some chose to abandon the grand cause rather than their heritage. Some abandoned both.

During the period when Odets became infatuated with Marxism and joined the Party, he wrote plays replete with *Yiddishkeit*. *910 Eden Street* heralds the unabashedly Jewish *I Got the Blues*, the title given to the first drafts of *Awake and Sing!* Odets reveals his profound identification with Yiddish sensibility and conversation in *910 Eden Street*:

TINY. Cigarettes used to taste different. *Hut nicht kin tomm* . . . no taste. (*910 Eden* Act. 2, sc. 2, 1).

Another Jewish character, Saul Berenson, owns the drugstore downstairs, and comes to Mark's apartment to collect money Mark owes him:

I couldn't believe a Jewish boy would do such a thing. But I know, I know, he's a Goy. He's ashamed anyone should speak a Jewish word to him in the store. I say '*Noo, voos machsta eppis, Berke?*' Notice, I don't call him Berkowitz. Berke I call him. But you think he answers? *A nechtaka toog*. He makes believe he don't understand. ... I tell you I'm ashamed for his father. It's a '*mitzvah*' a father should have such a son—a blessing! NOT! (*910 Eden* Act II, sc. 1, 3)

The Group shrank from uttering Yiddish onstage. Erdman relates:

... in an era of pronounced anti-Semitism, Jewish visibility in the performing arts had to be negotiated in ways that satisfied the expectations of gentile audiences without offending the sensibilities of Jewish ones. For those like David Warfield [mentioned above in conjunction with Corbin's "Shylock" article], who used their power to negotiate new performances of self, an ethnic mobility became possible that played out the problems of Jewish-American assimilation. (95)

Ethnic mobility was much on the minds of Jewish Group actors by the mid-'thirties, when a number of them were already working in Hollywood.

910 Eden Street foreshadows characters in future plays. Purcell's wooden leg, acquired during the war, would be reassigned to Moe Axelrod in *Awake and Sing!*:

PURCELL. ... a noble government perspires [sic] to send me a hundred and twenty a month for my erstwhile distal limb.... (*910 Eden* Act II, sc. 1, 2.)

In *Awake and Sing!*:

MORTY. ... The rest of your life Uncle Sam pays you ninety a month. Look, not a worry in the world.

MOE. Don't make me laugh. Uncle Sam can take his seventy bucks and — (*Finishes with a gesture.*) Nothing good hurts. (*He rubs his stump.*) (63) (C. Odets, "Awake!" 63)

Tortured artists like Mark Berke are a type favored by Odets. They appear as Pearl and Felix in *Paradise Lost* (1935), Joe Bonaparte in *Golden Boy* (1937), Charlie Castle in *The Big Knife* (1949), and Frank Elgin in *The Country Girl* (1950). Noah's sensitive, questioning son, Japheth, in *The Flowering Peach* (1954), also derives from this type.

910 Eden Street remains Odets' most self-reflexive piece of writing, apart from journals and correspondence. It highlights his need to exorcise personal encounters with anti-Semitism, such as he experienced as a child (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets*, 38):

TINY. (to Tom, Dick and Harry, party revellers): Did you know it, I was a Jew, Tom? Ha ha ha.

TOM. That's just too bad.

HARRY. Let's have a pogrom.

DICK. Kill the Hebrews, kill the Hebrews.

TINY. Kill the Hebrews? Pooh! You're newspapermen? let the Hebrews kill the Gentiles. Then it's news! Yes! Yes! (*910 Eden* Act II, sc. 2, 2-3).

He writes a self-deprecating exchange between Jews:

MARK. (to Tiny): (Furiously) Oh for Christ's sake! ... You're always

feeling something, you big fat Jew. Go sit in a corner and wag your tail.
Christ, such people! (*910 Eden* Act I, sc. 2, 26)

Odets' "exploitation" (as Miller puts it) of his own conflicts in this early play arises from the need to explore and then reinvent himself through his characters, as his father reinvented himself in order to fulfil his concept of a successful American. The family atmosphere in which Odets grew up was itself a drama. Odets repeated and rewrote the pattern set before him. Never again did Odets write so baldly of himself to the extent that he did in *910 Eden Street*. The play remains unpublished and unproduced.

Taking to heart Clurman's dismissal of *910 Eden Street*, Odets turned to another project. "I've begun to think about the Greenbaum family play. I have much feeling for that sort of thing and could really do something with [it].... As I thought before I began the Brant play [*Victory*], the Greenbaum thing is much nearer to the truth of my own feeling and reality (1932 Diary).⁴⁵ The Group initially refused to do *I Got the Blues*. Strasberg loathed it. Clurman told Brenman-Gibson, "One of Lee's objections to [*Awake and Sing!*] from the beginning ... which I don't believe he ever gave up ... was this play was 'too Jewish'" (Interview 19 Mar '66). Strasberg denied this in an interview. He told Brenman-Gibson that the Group agreed unanimously that *Awake and Sing!* was the best first script ever submitted to them. The objection was that it would pose too much of a financial gamble (Strasberg). But in a later interview, he reverted, admitting that he believed *Awake and Sing!* did not succeed at the box office because it was too Jewish (Strasberg). Clurman remembered the Group's reaction differently, and maintained that he had to defend Odets' script: "This is a play of New York ... it's a typically American play. The nuances are Jewish" (Interview 19 Mar '66). By most accounts the Group members voted to override Strasberg's objections, to which he held, in late 1934. It was the first Group production not directed by Strasberg, which seems to lend credence to others' recollections. Consequently, *Awake and Sing!*, the final version of *I Got the Blues*, served as Clurman's directorial debut (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 135-36). The play opened on February 19, 1935 with "favorable but restrained" reviews (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 60). The critics writing for the Jewish radical left-wing papers gave *Awake and Sing!* only qualified praise. They disapproved of the emphasis on Jewish middle-class family relations at the expense of social politics and economics. By the same token, it has often been remarked that the rousing Marxist endings of *Awake and Sing!* and *Paradise Lost* seem gratuitously "tacked on" to the family drama (Mendelsohn, *Humane Dramatist* 30; Atkinson, "Paradise Lost"). Despite these cavils, the play established Odets in

⁴⁵ Odets had been working on "the Brandt play," which he called *Victory*. It was inspired by the life of Beethoven (Demastes 1; Brenman-Gibson 227). "Greenbaum" was changed to "Berger" in the final versions of *Awake and Sing!*

the pantheon of American theatre. Nonetheless, *Awake and Sing!* was never profitable for either the playwright or the Group (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 143).

Odets' first full-length play marks a milestone in American theatre and, more particularly, a seminal achievement for Jewish-Americans in a highly public forum. Ellen Schiff calls it, "the earliest quintessentially Jewish play outside the Yiddish theatre" (*Stereotype* 33). Odets juxtaposed the travails of assimilation with the ordeal of the Depression. Testimonials describing the play's galvanizing effect on New York audiences are legion. The mundane struggles of a New York City minority group were catapulted to the universal. Author and critic Alfred Kazin declared, "Sitting in the Belasco, watching my mother and father and uncles and aunts occupying the stage ... by as much right as if they were Hamlet and Lear, I understood at last. It was all one, as I had always known. Art and truth and hope could yet come together ... Odets convinced me" (*Starting Out in the Thirties* 82). Arthur Miller, arguably "the most eminent Jewish playwright who ever lived" (Novick 47), asserts that after *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing!*, "An Odets play was awaited like news hot off the press, as though through him we would know what to think of ourselves and our prospects" (A. Miller, *Timebends* 232).

Awake and Sing! opened a path for Jewish-American writers of all genres. Kazin publicly expressed his lasting gratitude to Odets (*Starting Out in the Thirties* 81). Within the first two months of 1935 the third-rate actor became an internationally celebrated playwright. He had achieved a level of artistry he was never able to match, but that many playwrights emulated. According to Marion Seldes, "Paddy Chayefsky,⁴⁶ who felt competitive with Odets ... told an interviewer, 'There isn't a writer of my generation, especially a New York writer, who doesn't owe his very breath—his entire attitude toward the theatre—to Odets'" (Seldes 26). At the age of twenty-seven Odets had reached an artistic apotheosis the source of which he spurned for nearly the rest of his life.

Yet *Awake and Sing!* failed to achieve a synthesis within the playwright himself. Murray Rosten contends, "The depiction of the Jew tells us more about the latent emotional patterns of his creator than about the historical circumstances of the contemporary Jew" (qtd. in Schiff, *Stereotype* 29). On the surface it would seem that Odets' impulse toward ethnic depiction in *Awake and Sing!* was in obeisance to earlier advice. Odets had shown Clurman another early play (*Victory* (1931)), based on the life of Beethoven. He advised Odets to write instead from observations of familiar people and places (*Fervent Years* 88). Odets' creation of an onstage domestic milieu so explosively and unmistakably Jewish was a public reclamation of an identity that the majority of Jews of his generation were striving to

⁴⁶ According to Ellen Schiff, the enormously successful Chayefsky, another Bronx Jew, came to be known as "the Odets of the 'fifties" (*Awake & Singing* 327). The title is complimentary to both writers, but less so to the still professionally active Odets.

dilute beyond recognition. Kazin claimed, “Odets pulled us out of self-pity” (*Starting Out in the Thirties* 81). Despite his redemptive effect on contemporaries, throughout his life Odets would vacillate between an assimilated persona and a distinctly Jewish one, described by Jonathan Krasner as “his visceral attraction to Jewish ethnic culture coupled with his conviction that personal success was dependent on overcoming or transcending his heritage” (Krasner 3). Later in life, Odets tried once again to depict the heart of the Jewish family. Having strayed so far from it, his ambivalence translated into caricature. He could only write around the essence of what he was trying to express.

Even in his seminal works, Odets did not necessarily avoid stereotypical character traits. On August 23, 1932 he wrote in his diary, “I have bitterness and almost hate for [the Greenbaums] and what they stand for” (1932 Diary). The grasping materialism of Stella (later Bessie) and her brother Morty would no doubt repel a budding Communist. In her original incarnation, Stella/Bessie was written as a greedy harridan with few redeeming qualities. There was considerable revision between the time of the above journal entry and the Group’s abrupt acceptance of the final version in late 1934 (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 135-36). The Greenbaums had by then evolved into the Bergers.

In *910 Eden Street* Mark Berke has the line, “I despise people who make compromises with life” (*910 Eden Act I, sc. 1, 14*). This authorial sentiment again manifests in *Awake and Sing!*, though tempered with Odets’ characteristic empathy. His feelings toward the characters are explicit in the descriptions immediately preceding the play text. It is the only instance in which Odets included such finely drawn character vignettes. They are a gift to actors, at the same time evocative and precise. But, in *Awake and Sing!*, the playwright’s largesse toward such flawed personages as Moe Axelrod and Hennie Berger helps tip the balance of tension, thus contributing to the momentum of the play.



Figure 4: *Awake and Sing!* 1935. Standing, left to right: John Garfield as Ralph; J. Edward Bromberg as Uncle Morty; Morris Carnovsky as Jacob; Art Smith as Myron; Sanford Meisner as Sam Feinschreiber; Seated: Stella

Adler as Bessie; Luther Adler as Moe Axelrod. Photo by Alfredo Valente, courtesy of the Valente estate and the Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

The primary compromisers in the play are the ineffectual Myron Berger, and Jacob, the Marxist grandfather. Both are benign losers who effectively retreat into the past. Myron borders on the pathetic. Odets describes him as “a born follower,” and “brokenhearted without being aware of it” (C. Odets, “Awake!” 37). He is a quintessential nebbish. Myron left law school after two years (95) and now works in a haberdashery (41). He defers to his wife Bessie in all matters and calls her “Momma” throughout the play. Myron has acquiesced completely to the assimilation process. He proudly states to his son Ralph, “I’m not foreign born, I’m an American.” Moe Axelrod sabotages the boast by calling attention to Myron’s Lithuanian-Jewish roots: “You’re breaking his heart, Litvak” (86). The only other clue that Myron is Jewish is that he is a member of the Berger family.

Myron is a portrait of emasculation caused by ethnic rootlessness. He is concerned about his baldness (85). “The moment I started losing my hair, I knew I was destined to be a failure in life . . . and when I grew bald I was. Now isn’t that funny” (86-87). Odets, too, was obsessed with losing his hair (*Time Is Ripe*, 33, 282; Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 366). Baldness was a symbol of deracination. Myron is the Jew who has stopped questioning; he no longer interprets, he blindly accepts. The newspaper has become his Torah. “The papers tell the truth—they do” (C. Odets, “Awake!” 73). He is hardly a father, existing primarily as Bessie’s husband, straight man to a force of nature. His son regards him as a fool. Myron “cries like a baby” when faced with the crisis of Hennie’s pregnancy (54). His memory goes back no farther than the presidency of Teddy Roosevelt, whom he idolizes and quotes repeatedly. Myron thrives on externals. Reading the newspaper, he remarks on Sophie Tucker’s weight loss in the same breath as “fearful business with Japan” (44). The line, “I get so bitter when I take a drink, it surprises me” (68) reveals how deeply he has repressed his self-loathing. Repression is essential to the role he plays within the family, particularly in relation to Bessie. As the playwright notes, “he is brokenhearted without being aware of it” (37). He is an acculturated Jew, satisfied with the portion of an American identity he has received for the complete sacrifice of his Jewish culture.

Jacob, on the other hand, is ever mindful of his, and the society’s, failures and disappointments. The dethroned patriarch, he is the second primary compromiser. Conversation is his substitute for activism. He allows himself to live at the mercy of his daughter, Bessie. Odets calls him “a sentimental idealist with no power to turn ideal into action” (38). When he hurls the accusation, “Don’t live. Just make success” (66) it is directed not only at American materialist society but a specific stereotype of Jews. “The Jew in late nineteenth-century American caricature forfeits his claim to humanity by expressing an unlimited willingness to commodify everyone and everything around him” (Wonham 29).

Jacob castigates the family not only for submitting to the ethos of the American Dream, but, indirectly, for embodying a damaging stereotype. While Jacob suffers under the hand of Bessie and is verbally abused by his big-shot son Morty, he serves as a unifying factor and a key element in the plotline.



Figure 5: J. Edward Bromberg as Uncle Morty in the 1939 Group Theatre revival of *Awake and Sing!*. Photo by Alfredo Valente, courtesy of the Valente estate and the Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Jacob is the sole character in the play grounded in history. He is able to look simultaneously to the past and the future. Julius Novick describes Jacob as having

reconciled his ‘two souls,’ his ‘warring ideals.’ Through him, Odets suggests a harmony, a connection, a continuity between the two ethical systems, between the Jewish past and the universal future—an admirable ideal, all too seldom discernible in the real world, though perhaps to be found, divested of its apocalyptic, revolutionary dimension, in the proponents of *tikkun olam*, the Jewish imperative to ‘repair the world.’ (Novick 40)

Ethical compromise would come to haunt Odets. From 1936 on, he was dogged by accusations of selling-out to Hollywood commercialism. Chapter Four will examine what was undoubtedly the ultimate compromise of his life, his testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. However, when he wrote these early plays, Odets was as yet untouched by ethical complications of celebrity and success.

Jacob’s daughter, Bessie, never compromises. She is Jacob’s antithesis and his nemesis. Bessie looks only to higher rungs in the social ladder. When Odets spoke of having “bitterness and almost hate for [the Greenbaums] and what they stand for,” Stella/Bessie may well have been foremost in his mind. Bessie is the play’s most strident

character, but the base cruelty of her “Stella” persona from *I Got the Blues* has been significantly muted.⁴⁷ In *I Got the Blues*, Stella’s verbal abuse of her father is brutal:

MRS. [Stella] [to Jacob] Go lock yourself in your room. Die! You got insurance—you’ll get a good funeral. We’ll bury you with Caruso and the books together. . . . Choke! (C. Odets, *Blues* 3)

To create Bessie, Odets diluted Stella’s venom. This allayed the Group’s objections, primarily those of Strasberg (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 135). In spite of redaction, she remains a dynamo who holds her wise but ineffectual father in the same regard as she would a housefly.



Figure 6: Stella Adler as Bessie Berger in the original production of *Awake and Sing!* 1935. Photo by Alfredo Valente, courtesy of the Valente estate and the Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Schiff posits that Bessie is the prototype of the *Yiddishe momma*, whom she defines as “that gorgon of subsequent American-Jewish fiction” (*Stereotype* 33). Novick places Bessie in a general historical context as “one of the most tremendous incarnations in literature of that legendary figure, the Jewish Mother” (Novick 37). In this respect, Odets rendered Jews both a literary favour and a social disservice.

Bessie is also the family’s arbiter of assimilation, undermining her son Ralph’s courtship of “an orphan” (C. Odets, “Awake!” 65). In *I Got the Blues*, she refers to Blanche as “a *shiksa*” (female gentile) (C. Odets, *Blues* 7). Bessie apparently draws the line at marrying out. She sees economics, not miscegenation, as the avenue toward the American Dream. The girl, Blanche, would be a hindrance to Bessie’s vision of success. Blanche has

⁴⁷ Bessie first appears in a 1933 draft: on p. 17 “Stella” is crossed out, and “Bessie” is inserted. (Clifford Odets Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York, B. 4, f. 1)

neither a dowry nor prestige. Bessie impulsively coerces her pregnant daughter, Hennie, into marrying Sam Feinschreiber, a purblind immigrant, in order to legitimize Hennie's unborn child. Accepting Sam into the family is a major set-back in terms of status. Sam Feinschreiber is but a boat ride from the *shtetl*. He is non-assertive, entirely in Hennie's thrall. Sam is pure emotion.



Figure 7: Phoebe Brand and Sanford Meisner as Hennie Berger and Sam Feinschreiber in the 1939 Group Theatre revival of *Awake and Sing!*. Photo by Alfredo Valente, courtesy of the Valente estate and the Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Odets ascribes to Sam his own passion for flowers (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 7, 117): “He approaches his wife as though he were always offering her a delicate flower” (C. Odets, “Awake!” 39). Bessie resents Sam as much as Hennie does. “Second fiddle. By me he don’t even play in the orchestra” (82-83). Ironically, Sam tries to relate to the family as though they were still in the old country, calling Bessie “Mom” (82).

Sam is sometimes played as a comic character, a misguided choice. Representations sometimes border on anti-Semitic.⁴⁸ While Sam does not discuss religion, he represents a Jewish way of life in which devotion to family is primary. It is this devotion that links Sam with Bessie, apart from her manipulation and deception of him. Traditionally, the matriarch holds sway in the household, and Sam respects this. Odets writes Sam as a sympathetic character, a reflection, in part, of himself. According to Brenman-Gibson, Feinschreiber

⁴⁸ London’s Almeida Theatre produced *Awake and Sing!* in 2007, directed by Michael Attenborough. Sam Feinschreiber was portrayed as a fool worthy of the ridicule heaped upon him by Hennie and Bessie. This superficial interpretation of Sam as a clown dissipates much of the tension among the characters, and upsets the balance of tone. Presumably it was a vain attempt to interject unnecessary comedy where poignancy is called for. The choice was either in disregard of, or insensitivity to, Odets’ character description.

means “fine (or effete) writer”⁴⁹ (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 252). Sam is “a lonely man, a foreigner in a strange land ... at night he gets up and sits alone in the dark. He hears acutely all the small sounds of life” (C. Odets, “Awake!” 39). By the early ‘thirties Odets was well-entrenched in his life-long pattern of chronic insomnia and day/night reversal (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 71). In his 1940 journal he records being “lugged” out of bed by a friend “at six in the afternoon” (*Time Is Ripe* 201). He, like Sam, often sat “alone in the dark.”

Sam is referred to as a “mockie” (C. Odets, “Awake!” 43), *i.e.*, a greenhorn. The family reviles him for being their dupe. Sam serves a Shadow function, the recent arrival in whom the more assimilated recognise their recently cast-off selves. Psychological necessity compels them to shun him. In the microcosm of the play, Sam exemplifies the position that Jews have always served in society at large. Most importantly, Sam is the Russian-Jewish persona that Odets both cherished and obscured. The playwright revealed his own insecurity, and even contempt, regarding his Jewishness by placing Sam in the role of victim. An excerpt from Arthur Miller’s *Incident at Vichy* serves to explain:

LEDUC. Part of knowing who we are is knowing we are not someone else.

And Jew is only the name we give to that stranger, that agony we cannot feel, that death we look at like a cold abstraction. Each man has his Jew; it is the other. And the Jews have their Jews. (*Incident at Vichy* 66)

Sam Feinschreiber is the Berger family’s Jew. He relates the story of an attack on his father by Cossacks, an intended prank:

SAM. ... One day in Odessa he talked to another Jew on the street. They didn’t like it, they jumped on him like a wild wolf ... They cut off his beard. A Jew without a beard! ... I remember like yesterday how he came home and went in bed for two days. He put like this the cover on his face. No one should see. The third morning he died ... From a broken heart. ... I could die like this from shame. (C. Odets, “Awake!” 78-79)

The incident dramatises the confusion and potential emotional impact of abruptly imposed acculturation. According to Bial, “A Jew without a beard it still a Jew. His parents or grandparents or neighbors might consider him a bad Jew, and strangers might assume he is a Christian, but he is still a Jew. Moreover, he may still be visually identifiable as a Jew, depending on who’s looking at him” (Bial 19). In Sam’s father’s world, such ambiguity did not exist; a male Jew of the community would have a beard. To be mistaken for a Christian would brand him as the Other, and would be an insult to his God. Played bearded or

⁴⁹ This is an oft-repeated “translation” that is not confirmed by any online dictionary or translation service available to this writer. It might be taken as an extremely loose translation with a heavy lacing of poetic licence.

beardless, Sam Feinschreiber, like his father in the old country, is robbed of his dignity and marginalized by the family, who no longer consider their inherited culture as central to their lives or even worthy of respect. In creating an unmistakably empathetic portrait of the derided Sam, who, it is understood, *must* assimilate if he is to survive, Odets revealed his own divided relationship with himself.



Figure 8: Odets at work. Photo by Alexander Kahle. Courtesy of the Lilly Library.

When Odets scribbled on the back of an envelope, “I write not what I see, but what I am” (C. Odets, Note), he was not merely referring to self-portraiture. Transforming the raw, quasi-Yiddish text of *I Got the Blues* into *Awake and Sing!* was more than an act of capitulation to the Group’s desires. He was reenacting an atavistic process in relation to Jews and language. According to Hana Wirth-Nesher, “As early as 1918, the Yiddish literary critic Baal-Makhshoves argued that the mark of Jewish literature is its bilingualism.” By bilingualism Baal-Makhshoves “means not only the literal presence of two languages but also the echoes of another language and culture detected in the prose of the one language of which the text is composed” (Wirth-Nesher, “Mother Tongue” 443-44). Such is the case in the evolution of *Awake and Sing!*

Jews have of necessity been bilingual since the beginning of the diaspora and before, due to the proximity of other tribes and cultures within ancient Palestine. The Jews have been a hyphenated people, Russian-Jewish, Polish-Jewish, etc., for millennia. By incorporating Yiddish phrases into *910 Eden Street* and *I Got the Blues*, Odets was instinctively continuing this bilingual tradition. Although, according to Clurman, he did not use Yiddish phrases accurately, it was Odets’ way of trying to work through the final historical phase of Jewish bilingualism. Faulty Yiddish was the only other language he knew, apart from five terms of high school Spanish, a language for which he had no

affinity (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 69). Clurman, who was brought up in a Yiddish household, remarked,

CLURMAN. One of [my] objections to *Awake and Sing!* when I first read it was not that it was too Jewish [but] that it was phony Jewish ... he used Jewish phrases ... without any relevance to the actual language spoken ... like a *goy* ... One day he said to me he feels very limited ... he finds all his characters are Jewish characters and maybe that's a great limitation ... he didn't know that his talent really extended beyond the particular environment in which he grew up ... to me all that Jewish life business is not Jewish life, it's American life ...

BRENMAN-GIBSON. ... I am impressed with how deep in Clifford's roots this whole conflict [is embedded] ...

CLURMAN: It's very strong. (Interview, 19 Mar '66)

The poet Delmore Schwartz credits growing up in a bilingual environment with increased language sensitivity:

To be the child of immigrants from Eastern Europe is an important [experience] to an author. He has heard two languages through childhood, the one spoken with ease at home [for Odets, at the Rossmans' and homes of friends], and the other spoken with ease in the streets and at school, but spoken poorly at home.... To an author ... [this dual experience] may give a heightened sensitivity to language, a sense of idiom, and a sense of how much expresses itself through colloquialism. (qtd. in Howe 586)

Though Odets' use of Yiddish was perhaps inaccurate, it formed the core of his linguistic sensibility. As seen in Chapter One, his father denied members of Odets' nuclear family the *Yiddishkeit* to which the boy was drawn. In Ashkenazi (Middle and Eastern European Jewish) culture, Yiddish was considered the language of the home, a feminine language (*mame-loshn*), the language of speech as opposed to writing (Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English* 6, 8). Yiddish and its inflections clearly suggested home to Odets. And, although he could neither read nor write it, Jack Adler maintained that Odets understood spoken Yiddish (J. Adler 8-9).

Odets could only approximate the bilingual Jewish tradition via the technique he employed in the final version of *Awake and Sing!* While finally omitting nearly all Yiddish words and phrases, he successfully maintained the underpinning of Yiddish in the cadence of the characters' speech. His achievement is that the Berger family's

speech is not dialect, nor is it pidgen English.⁵⁰ The language used in *Awake and Sing!* is a lyrical, fabricated form of what is sometimes referred to as the conglomerate “Yinglish” (Cantor 155). Gerald Haslam calls Yinglish a “sub-dialect” and prefers the hyphenated form, “Yiddish-English,” stressing that it is

an interim, transitional form of English. It was in so deftly reproducing this particular moment in linguistic development that Odets leapt to the heart of his audience ... The second-generation Jews in the audience were hearing, in a single stroke, the non-native inflections of their first-generation parents; the transitional Yiddish-English spoken in first-generation homes aspiring to acculturation; and their own, college-acquired but still street-wise, colloquial speech. (Haslam 161)

The dialogue in *Awake and Sing!* successfully renders an impression of bilingualism without using Yiddish directly.⁵¹ Odets delimited the Greenbaum’s Yiddish propensities to transform them into the more acculturated Bergers, much as he attenuated his own *Yiddishkeit* in pursuit of his vision of success. He acted as agent of assimilation to his characters. He thereby enacted—and accelerated—his own editorial process in regard to his Jewish identity. The evolutionary process of *Awake and Sing!* served as a rite of passage for the young playwright. In one stroke he “came out” as a Jew and began to efface that same identity.

Awake and Sing!’s Kiev-born set designer, Boris Aronson, heard “always Cliff [sic] talking thru the people—‘in his own handwriting’” (B. Aronson). The language in *Awake and Sing!* is nonrealistic, rhythmically calibrated, lyrical. Gerald Weales, among others, supports this thesis: “[Odets’] lines are studied, as artificial as those of Maxwell Anderson” (Weales, “Clifford’s Children” 7). Clurman adds, “lower middle-class poverty ... is conveyed in language based on common speech and local New York (including Jewish) idiom, but it is not precisely naturalistic speech, for Odets’ writing is a personal creation, essentially lyric” (“Typical American Plays” 402). William Gibson refers to it as “urban hard-boiled lyricism” (qtd. in Mendelsohn, *Humane Dramatist* 107). Gabriel Miller, on the other hand, refers to Odets’ dialogue as “unsurpassed in the naturalism of its tone, texture, and rhythm” (G. Miller 14). There is no consensus as to classification of Odets dialogic style. Those who call it realistic, or even naturalistic, while using formalist classification, are responding

⁵⁰ Here I disagree with Michael Mendelsohn, who refers to Odets’ use of “the New York Jewish-American dialect” (Mendelsohn, *Humane Dramatist* 102).

⁵¹ Coincidentally and concurrently, Henry Roth used a similar device in his classic Lower East Side immigrant novel, *Call It Sleep*. Twenty years later Arthur Miller followed suit in *A View from the Bridge* (1955). He uses dialect for the characters who are Brooklyn natives, but not the Italians. The Brooklynites thereby sound less refined/civilised than the Italians, despite that the Italians are just “off the boat.”

viscerally to the organic nature of the speech, arising from the heart of the characters, their environment, their situation, and from the playwright's most profound sensibility.

Paradise Lost (1935) topped off Odets' most momentous year. He placed the *Yiddishkeit* between the lines of this transitional play. There was controversy, especially among the Group, as to whether the Gordon family were Jewish at all. The characters are crypto-Jewish, or "encoded," to use Henry Bial's term (16-17). The family around whom the play transpires are not blatantly Jewish; neither are they *not* Jewish. Nonetheless, R. Baird Shuman, Odets' first critical biographer, considers it unquestionably one of Odets' "Jewish" plays (Shuman, "Jewish Background" 226). *Paradise Lost* inches Odets out of an explicitly Jewish milieu. "Gordon" is the family's ethnically ambiguous surname. It was coincidentally the surname adopted by the other branch of the Gorodetsky clan (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 22), possibly indicating that Odets was aware of his father's name change.⁵² The playwright was attempting to mask the ethnicity of his characters.

Odets began writing *Paradise Lost* in the summer of 1933, when Clurman and Strasberg first rejected *I Got the Blues*. He intended *Paradise Lost* to be "a neutralized, deracinated version of *I Got the Blues*" in order to placate Strasberg. He began it half-heartedly by his own admission, with "too 'intellectual' a feeling about it instead of an emotional one" (qtd. in Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 274-75). The young playwright already sensed that, in Leslie Fiedler's words, "works influenced by pseudo-universalizing lose authenticity and strength" (qtd. in Novick, 48).

Paradise Lost is an experiment in form by a young playwright. The ambiance is aquatic. As with *Awake and Sing!*, the sole set is the interior of the family home, in this case Leo and Clara Gordon's house. Rough waters are negotiated, with the characters subsequently becoming engulfed and ever more sluggish. They allow themselves to be acted upon, as if by natural forces. Elder son Ben Gordon evokes water images: "Life goes like the river" (C. Odets, "Paradise Lost" 176). He and his tough-talking buddy, Kewpie, share the memory of a childhood friend drowning in a skating accident. "We're still under the ice, you and me—we never escaped! ... The three of us under the ice with our skates on and not being able to get him out" (202). "All the way over to the new bridge, I walked. Stood there for a long time looking in the water" (203). The Chekhovian passivity in *Paradise Lost* has been discussed extensively elsewhere. Suffice to say that it is Odets' first, and arguably most important, experiment in form. Even Stella Adler, once again consigned to the "old

⁵² Brenman-Gibson indicates in her rough draft of Chapter 30 that Odets knew of the name change by 1945. She refers to Odets' note, "I may be Odets to you, but to myself I am Gorodetsky" as existing in a file of Odets' labelled "Moi" dated January 1945. (*Chapt. 30 – Draft* 2028). This researcher has to-date been unable to locate that file.

lady” role, in this instance Clara Gordon,⁵³ expressed great admiration for the play, considering it “*avant garde* for America” (S. Adler).

Despite the experimental qualities of *Paradise Lost*, “Jewishness” once again became an issue among the Group, indicating awareness of contemporary anti-Semitism. Boris Aronson, who designed the set, felt that Odets erred in straying from a Jewish idiom:

I saw the writing on the wall—when ‘they’ told me that *Paradise Lost* is not about Jews, but about the middle-class ... When this denial is organic it’s a different thing ... With [Odets], it was so much part of him ... the combination of a warmth, tenderness and emotionalism mixed with a certain cynicism ... an American-Jewish tradition. (B. Aronson 3, 6)

Odets was aware of potential pitfalls in moving away from depiction of Jewish life. He still pondered the issue years after abandoning the idiom:

Sean O’Casey ... wrote a vivid ‘parochial’ drama at first, proletarian life in Ireland. Naturally he was not content to keep repeating these genre pictures and wanted to move out into the wider world ... This shift ... must be watched very carefully, for it is possible that in transit the whole talent may fall off the moving van. ... And if I am not careful it will happen to me too. I don’t want to continue writing about Jewish life exclusively *if I can help it* [emphasis added] ... It is so easy for the reality of the work to go⁵⁴ ... These problems, with all of their ramifications, are now [my] problems, and [I] had better tread warily. (*Time Is Ripe* 87)

In terms of *Paradise Lost*, he apparently could not “help it.” Despite his efforts and denials, at best he achieved “double coding ... the specific means and mechanisms by which a performance [or script] can communicate one message to Jewish audiences while simultaneously communicating another, often contradictory message to gentile audiences” (Bial 3). To anyone familiar with *Awake and Sing!* or even remotely acquainted with Jewish culture, the Gordons would surely seem Jewish.

At the time of production, however, the issue remained unsettled. Robert Lewis, who played Mr. May, “the firebug,” felt that Odets was trying to write non-Jewish characters, but that he simply wasn’t able (Lewis 5). Clurman, who directed the play, felt that Odets was not trying to mask their Jewishness at all. When Brenman-Gibson told him that Odets himself had said that he *was* trying to write “less Jewish,” Clurman deferred, but he remained unclear on the issue. He told Brenman-Gibson,

I said listen, it will be obvious that these people are Jewish. ‘Take a piece of

⁵³ As a Yiddish theatre star, Adler was accustomed to a glamorous lifestyle and being cast in age-appropriate roles. She disliked the communal life of the Group, and resented being consigned to roles for older women (Smith 75).

⁵⁴ Odets here equates “Jewish life” with his reality.

fruit.’ That’s a Jewish kind of way of talking ... I wanted it to be a play about the middle class. The fact that they were Jewish-middle-class would be obvious from the language, but the next-door neighbor was an American-German and he would be friends with these people. They would all be part of a community. (Interview, 19 Mar ‘66)

The Gordon’s world is more permeable than the Bergers would ever allow.

It was not easy for Odets to abandon what he knew best. Reconstituted character elements from *Awake and Sing!* appear throughout *Paradise Lost*. Clara Gordon is Bessie Berger recycled. She possesses similar traits of practicality and *chutzpah*, but with an underlying tenderness Bessie lacks. Like Bessie, Clara is a fighter; many of Clara’s exchanges could be interchanged with Bessie’s:

CLARA (*angry*): Don’t start a fight about nothing, Katz. Go upstairs.

...

SAM. To insult a man behind his back is nothing by you?

CLARA. You should be locked up! ... The next time I’ll knock out his teeth.

LEO. My dear, he’s a very unhappy man.

CLARA. I’ll still knock out his teeth! (“Paradise Lost” 163)

...

CLARA. Do yourself a personal favor—listen to me: don’t trust him for a nickel. (164)

Clara’s worldliness counterpoints Leo’s naïveté, reminiscent of Bessie and Myron:

LEO. My dear, don’t you trust anyone?

CLARA. My dear, I wasn’t born yesterday. (164)

Clara’s all-purpose mantra is “take a piece of fruit” (161, 66, 80, 97), or, less frequently, “eat a few nuts” (194), an hospitable invitation as well as a temporary distraction from fraught moments. As noted by Clurman, “take a piece of fruit” is a characteristically Jewish gesture, similar to the English or Irish offer of a cup of tea as a panacea. Clara’s “Answer what I asked” (214) is an unmistakably Yiddish construction. Also typically Jewish is the caged canary Clara carries in the opening scene. Irving Howe describes the bird as one for which first- and second-generation Jews had a special fondness. “Many [Jewish] kitchens were graced with canaries” (Howe 176). Leo has ordered the canary removed from the household. For unspecified reasons he associates the bird with Hitler.⁵⁵ Leo’s proactive antipathy towards Hitler is another obvious Jewish signifier.

⁵⁵ Interestingly, there is a young adults’ book by Sandi Toksvig, published in 2006, entitled *Hitler’s Canary*.

Leo Gordon is Myron Berger with a backbone. Clara, in typical Jewish mother fashion, presides, but Leo is able to take a moral stand in opposition to his business partner, Katz, who threatens to hire scabs if their employees strike. It is Leo who assumes Ralph Berger's ideological function by finally "seeing the light" and waxing Marxist at the play's finale. Leo combines elements of Myron, Jacob and Ralph. To Odets' credit, Leo nonetheless has a personality distinct from his prototypes in *Awake and Sing!*, as does Clara.

Kewpie, the wisecracking, taxi driver cum gangster, functions much like the cynical Moe Axelrod in *Awake and Sing!* He cuckolds the ingenue's husband, as does Moe, who runs away with Hennie Berger at the expense of husband Sam and infant. Odets lifts a line almost verbatim from his character description of Bessie in *Awake and Sing!* He gives it to Kewpie: "When you're in a jungle, you look out for the wild life" (C. Odets, "Paradise Lost" 175).

Author and critic Mary McCarthy commented on Odets' borrowing from himself in her January 1938 review of *Golden Boy*, entitled "Odets Deplored." "*Golden Boy* again demonstrates the lesson of Odets' *Paradise Lost*: that this author appears to be psychically glued to the material of his first play. He cannot advance beyond *Awake and Sing*: each new play seems a more shocking caricature of the first." While McCarthy castigates the simplistic theme of *Golden Boy*, "which in the last century would have been stated as Money Does Not Bring Happiness" (McCarthy 9, 11), she points to a more profound issue. Odets' attempted suppression of Jewishness and Jewish issues in his plays would sometimes result in a leakage, rather than a transformation, of the same. It was not entirely within his control. Something within him could not let go.

The character of Mr. May, the professional arsonist, initiates *peripeteia* for Sam, and, unexpectedly, for Clara. Both are tempted by May's proposal of arson for the purpose of collecting insurance money. There was a belief among gentile business owners, which proliferated just after the Civil War, that Jews had a tendency toward arson (Dinnerstein 36-7). This belief often resulted in Jewish businesspeople encountering difficulty obtaining insurance. With a businessman father, it is unlikely that Odets was unaware of this discriminatory practice. Mr. May, with his "faint Swedish accent" (C. Odets, "Paradise Lost" 208), is introduced to Leo Gordon by Sam Katz. Leo is appalled by May's veiled suggestion that "fires happen like that." When he learns that May has acted as agent for fifty-three insurance-backed fires (210), Leo orders May out of the house. May leaves behind a business card that subsequently catches Clara's eye. Clara finds May's suggestion of arson viable and attractive. "Leo, we live once..." (217). Leo is appalled, telling Clara to rip up May's business card. She defers to Leo with great reluctance, but nevertheless confirms him as head of the Gordon household (217). His periodic befuddlements do not disqualify him as patriarch, particularly in regard to moral issues.

But order in the Gordon household begins to crumble with this revelation of Clara's tragic flaw. In a confrontation scene that is an actors' dream, Sam admits to Leo that he has embezzled all of the business's money, hence his desperation to tempt Leo with deliberate arson. Additionally, Katz, who is publicly abusive to his cowering wife, is revealed to be impotent. Bertha Katz herself turns the tables, revealing that it is Sam, not she, who is responsible for their childlessness. Sam cries at night and calls her "Momma" (215). The scene is powerful. At the same time it is perhaps one of the most offensive instances of Odets' dipping into anti-Semitic cultural consciousness. In one turn, Sam becomes the emasculated, feminized Jew (Gilman, *Inscribing* 22; Erdman 36-8),⁵⁶ and the avaricious sheeny with "an unhealthy, debased, and sexualized relationship to capital" (Erdman 36). Sam Katz cannot produce children by spending his semen. Undermining his partner and spending his money renders him temporarily potent.

SAM. Eighteen cigars I smoked yesterday. I don't care . . ." (C. Odets, "Paradise Lost" 214)

In this case, a cigar is more than just a cigar. Bertha is an undercover *Yiddishe momma* to her brash but feeble husband. She maintains connection with the life force by retaining the ability to conceive, despite an unspecified illness. Bertha offers their savings to Leo in retribution for Sam's larceny (215), thus usurping Sam's power completely.

Brooks Atkinson called *Paradise Lost* "the most significant and progressive drama of the season" ("Paradise Lost"), at the same time acknowledging the plethora of negative reviews. The reasons for *Paradise Lost's* critical and box office failure abound. Clurman claimed that Odets "did almost no work on it and I did it almost as it was written . . . except for cutting . . . and perhaps we didn't cut enough. . . . The set wasn't right . . . a lot of things weren't right" (Interview, 19 Mar '66). He went so far as to call it, "a fuzzy piece of a wool-gathering quilt" (*Fervent Years* 156). Odets and the Group embarked on an epistolary crusade, inundating critics with pedantic explanations of the play even before it opened. Many critics took offense. *Paradise Lost*, with its sub-aqueous ambiance, lacked the energy audiences had come to expect from Odets. In 1935 they wanted more of the same dynamism presented in *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing!*. Odets was never forgiven for not being the playwright critics and audience wanted him to be.

Odets went on to write a number of worthy plays. But turning away from his instinctive treatment of issues that were of profound importance to him, such as those in *910 Eden Street*, was to turn his back on his richest resources. His audience was eager to continue on the same road. He never matched the *succès d'estime* or popularity of *Waiting*

⁵⁶ Citing Gilman, Erdman points out that "seventeenth century folk belief held . . . that Jewish men menstruated" (Erdman 36; Gilman, *Inscribing* 139).

for Lefty and *Awake and Sing!* How an artist chooses to engage with elements of their personal lives becomes their distinguishing factor. Twice Odets wrote plays expressly to appeal to the box office. Both times he succeeded. But commercial success did not give him the satisfaction he sought through his work in the theatre. He considered *Golden Boy* (1937) and *The Country Girl* (1950) lesser works of little consequence (C. Odets, *Time Is Ripe*, 263; Meisner). Walt Odets refers to *The Country Girl* as “the one potboiler he wrote for [commercial success]. *The Country Girl* is as Gentile as you can get” (W. Odets, Email, 13 Nov ‘09). Odets’ process of self-redaction through his artistic choices was deliberate, and detrimental to his career. “My writing is a product of Clifford Odets, but Clifford Odets is also a product of his writing. Ponder, dear chap!” (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 30 – Draft* 2029d). Odets’ compliance with the demand that he remove overt Yiddish references from *Awake and Sing!* set a course to which he held steady for the next twenty years. It was a statement as well as a transformative exercise using, in Erdman’s phrase, “performance as a strategy for ethnic mobility” (Erdman 113).

O’Neill is quoted as saying, “The critics have missed the most important thing about me and my work—the fact that I’m Irish” (Bowen ix). Much of O’Neill’s work can be seen as an attempt at public exorcism of what he felt to be a troublesome reality. Like O’Neill, Odets’ early work is grounded in, though not always a depiction of, his personal experience of the dynamics of immigrant homelife. As immigrants became absorbed into a society in which acculturation was the ideal, playwrights who treated ethnic issues fell out of fashion. Odets was determined to remain ethnically ambiguous, or at best, non-committal. He did include characters with Jewish names and the occasional self-reference in some of his later plays. Others were encoded. He did not return to writing about Jewish mores and family life until after his testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The irreversible consequences of that event left him frantically searching for signposts of his former authenticity, as will be discussed in Chapters Four and Five. Meanwhile, from early 1936 on, he exercised his “ethnic mobility” on assignment in Hollywood, as will be seen in the following chapter. The Jewish studio moguls made it easy to rationalise: they required it. The point was simply not to be Jewish anymore. Though they, like Odets, were not far removed from their Eastern European roots, they were now playing a new role in American culture. They were, in fact, creating it.



Figure 9: Odets at the home of Jean and Dido Renoir, Los Angeles, 1957. Photo by Frank Silvera, 1957. Courtesy of the Lilly Library.

Chapter Three

“Odets in Hollywood”

It is an exile here. (C. Odets, *None But . . . Notes*)

Odets’ first Broadway failure was his favourite play (C. Odets, “Preface” vii). As discussed in Chapter Two, *Paradise Lost* (1935) was a deliberate attempt to move away from characters that might be considered “too Jewish.” It was also an experiment in form. Shaken by the play’s negative critical reception (C. Odets, “Playwright Triumphs” 85), Odets sought solace in westward adventure.

There were also practical reasons for going to Hollywood. The Group’s dwindling coffers cried out for replenishment. He hoped to extend *Paradise Lost*’s languishing run with Hollywood money and didactic letters to the press (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 162; C. Odets, “Playwright Triumphs” 86). But Brenman-Gibson cites family concerns as Odets’ primary motivation for going to Hollywood. He had personal obligations; he was already supporting his father and sisters.⁵⁷ (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 393, 97). Of particular importance was “maintaining the reversal of roles in which his father was now dependent on *him* [original emphasis]” (393). A good Jewish son takes care of his parents. Upward

⁵⁷ Pearl Geisinger Odets died in May 1935 (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 616).

mobility would garner the paternal approval he craved despite his conflicted feelings. He also found the Group's unrelenting idealism wearisome. Fortuitously, the twenty-eight-year-old playwright had been inundated with film offers as early as *Waiting for Lefty*'s original production in February 1935 (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 111; C. Odets, "Playwright Triumphs" 85). He needed funds and, as a young artist, he needed "to sin" (Smith 250; Clurman, *Fervent Years* 159). Money could also play "a very powerful role in the whitening process" (Brodkin 37). Moving into the economic middle class would dilute his identification as a Marxist Jewish playwright, a label he found artistically constricting. In the midst of the Great Depression, Odets and everyone else knew where the money lay.

Michael Mendelsohn explains, "While there is no certainty that a Hollywood contract automatically carries an attached rider demanding a debasement of artistic standards, many Broadway people have treated the idea as axiomatic" (*Humane Dramatist* 142). Odets internalized this dichotomy of art versus commerce early in his artistic life. He told an interviewer in 1961 that he "fell into that American moralistic trap. If you are on Broadway doing a play, this means you are a man of spiritual elevation. If you are a technician doing a picture in Hollywood, you are whoring" (Hethmon 198). When *Waiting for Lefty* shot him to international fame (Lahr, "Method Man" 91) he had already been a show business professional for ten years (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 83). He was tempted not only by Hollywood's promise of glamour and financial gain: The young "Playwright of the Proletariat" (Frick 123) jejunely hoped to bring socially relevant works to a broader audience (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 110). He needed to continue his experimentation with dramatic form; with *Paradise Lost* he had moved into an expressionistic mode, more appropriate to film than the stage. Challenging himself in a rapidly evolving idiom was appealing (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 393). And, presumably, studio strictures against blatant reference to Jews would exorcise his tendency to make his characters sound Jewish.

He went to work for Paramount Studios in February 1936 for a flat fee of \$20,000 for eight weeks work⁵⁸ (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 397; D.W.C.). The mirage of artistic freedom quickly melted away. He found that the studios had scant interest in artistic explorations or social statements (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 111-12). Film was a commercial enterprise. Odets became increasingly conflicted regarding his work and intentions during his Hollywood years. He was unable emotionally to reconcile the art of playwriting with the craft of screenwriting, despite desultory proclamations to the contrary. He always considered playwriting his vocation (Bentley, *Treason* 499; Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 397), contending that screenwriting and film directing were forced on him by

⁵⁸ According to Weales, Odets overshot his agreed timeframe with his very first screenplay, thereby setting a life-long pattern (111).

economic necessity. He told an interviewer, “It seemed to me to be really immoral to write a play for money” (Mendelsohn, “Center Stage” 88). Nonetheless, as early as 1937 his newly-acquired skills and exposure to the Hollywood ethos would facilitate his writing plays motivated by commercial gain: *Golden Boy* (1937) and *The Country Girl* (1950) proved to be his two biggest hits. He considered them his least favourite plays.

It was not writing for Broadway lucre that branded him a sell-out but his “defection” to what was considered the lesser medium of film (Nugent; D.W.C.). Contemporary pretension held it respectable to profit on the East Coast with one’s art, but not in Hollywood with one’s craft. But much of Odets’ Hollywood work belies elitist opprobrium and his own misgivings. His most notable screenplays, written either solo or in tandem, include *None but the Lonely Heart* (1944), *Humoresque* (1946), and *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). Though he declined to be credited, he contributed substantially to the screenplays for the controversial *Blockade* (1938), written in tandem with John Howard Lawson; *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945) (Berch); *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946); and *Notorious* (1946). A 1955 film adaptation of his 1949 play, *The Big Knife*, lent it additional status. Directed by Robert Aldrich, it is now considered a *film noir* classic.

Following his HUAC testimony in the early 1950s, Odets began writing for television. The experimental potential of the relatively young medium excited him; he felt it would “hone me sharp” and lay “down gleaming tracks for my future more serious work” (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 5). He wrote a script in 1953 for the Ford *Omnibus* series⁵⁹ entitled “The Nursery” (Brenman-Gibson, *Main Chron.*). It was never produced (Saudek Assoc.). The same script was submitted to the Screen Writers Guild for a TV series projected for 1960-61), but that project never got off the ground either. Shortly before his death in 1963, Odets began working in television. Script-supervising and writing for *The Richard Boone Show* engaged him at the end of his life⁶⁰ (Mendelsohn, *Humane Dramatist*, 87, 92-93). He felt it gave him “integrity of purpose” (C. Odets, Letter to W. Gibson). But friends and critics considered his television work in Hollywood even more degrading than doctoring other writers’ screenplays (Clurman, *Divine Pastime* 235).⁶¹ He was finally

⁵⁹ The Ford *Omnibus* series ran November 9, 1952 until 1961. *Omnibus* originally aired on CBS, and later on Sunday evenings on ABC. The program finally moved to NBC in 1957, where it was irregularly scheduled until 1961.

⁶⁰ Harold Cantor suggests that the prospect of writing for the Boone show’s permanent company appealed to Odets, who had done his strongest work writing for the Group actors (201).

⁶¹ Odets himself was profoundly ambivalent about his script doctoring. A “work copy,” dated September 18, 1945, of Ben Hecht’s “Final Script” for *Notorious* was reworked by Odets (Clifford Odets Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, B.19, f. 5). Cover page says “Screen Play by Ben Hecht” after which Odets’ added, in his own hand, “& A. B. Clifford.” The Internet Movie Data Base lists Odets, as “Clifford Odets,” in “Additional Credits” as an uncredited scriptwriter having written “dialogue and love scenes” (<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038787/fullcredits#writers>>. Accessed 2 Feb 2011). Odets also made revisions to stage directions, and, most notably, extensive revisions to Hecht’s character motivations as written, with the possible implication that Odets was sought after for

dismissed as a failure, despite having been, according to some, the most expensive ghostwriter in Hollywood (Hill; H. Hecht). Upon his death, the first *New York Times* obituary to appear harped on “his failure to outgrow the adjective ‘promising’” (*Times*, Special).⁶² Worldwide renown garnered at the age of twenty-nine was held against him. Indeed, Clurman wrote that, within a year of his international success, “Odets was now his own greatest problem” (*Fervent Years* 174). A decade later Odets noted, with an air of premature defeat, “Every ‘success’ brings a man to the threshold of a new failure. And every liberation is the beginning of a new servitude” (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 30 - Draft* 2029d).

With the exception of *None but the Lonely Heart* (1944), Odets claimed to derive little satisfaction from his Hollywood achievements. He told Mendelsohn, a year before his death,

... in some ways [the absence of a film industry] would be much better for me, because I might have been more productive in the serious aspects of my work instead of the mere craft aspects ... I would have ... gotten out from under this big tent and pitched smaller tents in many a wild and strange terrain. And good would have come out of it, more good than has come out of my present way of life. (Mendelsohn, “Center Stage” 73)

Conversely, it is possible that Odets actually took screenwriting more seriously than he cared to admit. James Hill, with whom Odets worked on *Sweet Smell of Success*, claims that Odets took enormous pride in his work; Odets would sometimes write “the same scene eight times before he’d let you read it.”⁶³ Odets readily and repeatedly stated that working on film scripts had taught him a great deal about plot construction. But he was caught in a binary: “art” was religious, “craft” was not. His mental construct mimicked traditional Judaic separation of labour, i.e., daylong Torah study undertaken by men, with financial and domestic concerns allotted to women. After fame struck in 1935, Odets found it more difficult to commit to the more monastic life of a Broadway playwright. Opting for the “secular” choice of chasing funds in Hollywood, he placed himself yet another step away

Method-related contributions (Hecht, for example, had never been an actor). *Notorious* is widely considered one of Alfred Hitchcock’s greatest films. IMDb also lists Hitchcock (uncredited) as having contributed to the script. *Notorious* was nominated for an Oscar (1946) for Best Original Screenplay by Ben Hecht *only*. It was named one of the Ten Best Films of 1946 by both the *New York Times* and *Film Daily*. Possibly the accolades persuaded Odets to allow script work to eventually be acknowledged.

⁶² The *New York Times* obituary, sans byline, was clearly hastily written with no great sense of importance, accuracy, or respect. It refers to L.J. as Odets’ brother, and Stella Adler as Stella “Cedler.”

⁶³ In contrast, the enormously successful Ben Hecht, who continued to write plays and publish prose throughout his film career, considered “movie writing as an amiable chore ... that required no more effort than a game of pinochle ... a source of easy money and pleasant friendships. There was small responsibility. Your name as writer was buried in a flock of ‘credits.’ Your literary pride was never involved” (B. Hecht 466-67).

from traditional Jewish values. Hollywood also removed him further from the more ethnic Jewish community wherein he grew up. Walt Odets maintains that his father hated Hollywood.

For a time, fading into the ethnic whitewash promulgated by Hollywood was personally—and even artistically—liberating, as well as financially rewarding. However, he grew less and less settled internally. He could never quite decide how he felt about his achievements; he considered film by turns superior and inferior to theatre. In 1948 he left Hollywood for the Broadway production of *The Big Knife* (1949), an excoriating account of the corruptive potential of the movie industry. It was his first play to be produced in seven years. During this final extended stay in New York, he returned to writing in a Jewish idiom. For Odets, the East Coast represented authenticity: in New York City and Philadelphia he knew Jews who acted like Jews rather than figments of their own filmic creations. In New York he was once again able to claim his identity as a Jewish playwright. Studio strictures against ethnic depiction most often frustrated Odets' innate impulse to enact the Jewish principle of *tikkun olam*, to heal the world. But his moralistic comedy about Noah and the Flood, *The Flowering Peach* (1954), failed at the box office. Financial concerns sent him swiftly back to Los Angeles. Three years later he wrote an extraordinary screenplay, *Sweet Smell of Success*.

In his dissertation, *The Interaction of American Drama and Film, 1914–1961*, Richard Thomas Hayes makes the point, “Odets’s career was not destroyed by Hollywood, nor was he sidetracked by film work.” Hayes presumes to argue that Odets actually loved Hollywood, and that “the failure in [his] career was not that he did not stay in Hollywood but that he returned to the theatre: Odets did not recognise where his talent lay” (167). This is an overstatement. But Hayes does have a case: Odets denigrated the value of his screenwriting efforts, much as he did *Golden Boy* and *The Country Girl*, which he wrote expressly for commercial appeal.

Odets' film accomplishments are often overlooked by others as well. In Hollywood he was delivered from the proletarian legacy of his early plays. This chapter will look at three of Odets' screenplays: *The General Died at Dawn* (1936), *None but the Lonely Heart* (1944), and *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). Each was, in its own way, emblematic of his Hollywood career. *The General Died at Dawn* proved him capable of transitioning from theatre to screen. Odets' mid-career film, *None but the Lonely Heart*, which he also directed, stands as his greatest achievement up to that time. In it he realised a synthesis of his theatre art with his filmic craft. *Sweet Smell of Success* is a tough-minded exposé of the newspaper business, more mature and nuanced than his vituperative play, *The Big Knife* (1949). Through the 'forties and the mid-'fifties Odets did his best work behind a celluloid scrim.

At the time of writing his dissertation, Hayes did not have access to biographer Margaret Brenman-Gibson's papers, which give evidence of Odets' increasing inability to write to order. His decline from being one of the highest paid Hollywood scriptwriters (Milestone; Hill; H. Hecht) to one unable to control length or scope of a script was marked, adding to his misery in Los Angeles. A year before his death in 1963 he confided to playwright William Gibson that he was "unable at present to even find a movie job" (Letter to W. Gibson). He felt exiled in Hollywood. In the last decade of his life he failed to complete a single work for the stage.

In the 'thirties and 'forties, with film still in its formative stages, screenwriters who had previously worked in what were considered more serious, publishable media were often labeled pejoratively as "sell outs." No account was taken that, even at the height of his Broadway fame, Odets, "the proletarian Jesus" (Frick 123), struggled to support himself and his extended family. He arrived in Hollywood early in 1936 "almost penniless" (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 392). He was accused of venality for seeking to supplement meagre earnings from his plays by writing and doctoring screenplays.

Odets' son states, "My father didn't need an excuse to get out of Los Angeles. He always hated it there" (Email, 2 Nov '09). Nonetheless, his father chose to spend most of his professional life as a screenwriter in Los Angeles, grappling with the conviction that by doing so he was compromising himself artistically. His was a common dilemma. In her book on the Garden of Allah, the hotel that accommodated many of the East Coast literati during their Hollywood sojourns, Sheila Graham queries,

Why did they do it? No one forced them to go to Hollywood and write and suffer. No one put a gun to their heads. Most of those who went had begged their agents to get them there. I saw them at the Garden [of Allah] lolling around, enjoying the lazy life while hating the producers who made it all possible and, meanwhile, despising themselves. (221)

Graham mentions that Odets joined the party at the Garden of Allah with Bette Grayson, his second wife, during the war years (205). John Schultheiss traces the attitude toward the studio moguls as pimps, and screenwriting as a form of prostitution, to the first migration of Eastern writers to Hollywood, roughly between the years 1919-1922 (13-14). Schultheiss quotes Robert E. Sherwood's 1921 *Life* magazine column: "The eminent authors who were lured out to Culver City (Cal.) [sic] by the seductive scent of the Goldwyn gold ... have frantically attempted to justify their motives in devoting themselves to this new and somewhat more lucrative form of literary endeavor" (14). Odets was similarly negative by the time he went west. "I thought going to Hollywood was the most immoral thing I could do" (C. Odets, "Playwright Triumphs" 85-86). He always regarded money as immoral, but

when he had it he gave it away freely and enjoyed it himself. Walt Odets describes him as “incompetent about money” (Baitz 27). Clurman found him “generous to the point of improvidence” (Clurman, *All People* 163).

Soon after the New Year of 1936 the young playwright decided to commit his sins in Hollywood, where they could be rationalised, and in good company. Writer/director William C. DeMille, elder brother of the more famous Cecil B., observed, “[Eastern writers] regarded their studio experiences as literary slumming and delighted to talk about the ‘prostitution’ of their art ... the most their literary honor [sic] would concede was that, for gold, they would lie awhile with this new Caliban” (158-59). Still, Odets’ decision to “defect” to Hollywood was fraught with guilt, despite the fact that he, too, regarded it as temporary during all his Hollywood years. Remarks even more disparaging than Sherwood’s, by prominent New York critics such as George Jean Nathan and Edmund Wilson, fuelled Odets’ conflict (Schultheiss 18).⁶⁴ His fellow Group members felt betrayed by those who accepted film assignments, though as time went on many of them followed suit (Smith 246-48; Clurman, *Fervent Years* 88, 162).

Odets was hardly the only respected writer who defected to the West Coast, and not the only one remembered primarily for his original milieu. The roster included F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Robert Sherwood, Robert Benchley, Ben Hecht, and Nathanael West. Fitzgerald, Faulkner and West are remembered as novelists, not screenwriters. Many remember Hecht primarily as co-author of the highly successful play, *The Front Page* (1928). Lillian Hellman made a successful adjustment to film by adapting many of her own plays (Schultheiss 39-40). Four of Odets’ plays were adapted to the screen: *Golden Boy* (1939), which had four credited screenwriters; *The Country Girl* (1954); *The Big Knife* (1955); and *Clash By Night* (1952), which was also adapted for television. He adapted only one of his plays for film, but his screenplay for *Night Music* (1940) was never produced. He did write a screen treatment for *The Big Knife*, but it did not progress beyond that preliminary stage.⁶⁵ Apart from these disappointments, he avoided bridging the perceived artistic chasm between his own stage and screen work. *Awake and Sing!* was for a time under contract as a possible United Artists film. Before going to jail as one of the Hollywood Ten in 1950, producer Adrian Scott wrote to Odets elaborating the timeliness and wisdom of making the picture (Scott). Odets responded to Scott’s advice by requesting, in a letter to United Artist executive Joseph Foster, that the studio return the contract to him. He added, “Of course I shall feel free to go ahead with such a movie when and if I have the enthusiasm and freshness of mind to tackle it myself” (C. Odets, Letter to Foster). That time

⁶⁴ Schultheiss is careful to point out that Nathan and Wilson were particularly alarmed by “the adulteration and sometimes abandonment of the writers’ non-movie literary production” (18).

⁶⁵ Clifford Odets Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library. B. 6, f. 6.

never came. It was not for lack of ability: he deftly adapted Richard Llewellyn's 1943 novel, *None But the Lonely Heart*. The screenplay was included in Best Film Plays–1945.⁶⁶ He later adapted Ernest Lehman's novelette, *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), an exposé of Hollywood press agents and gossip columnists. The film precipitated change in the newspaper industry. *Sweet Smell of Success* received several award nominations and garnered a BAFTA⁶⁷ award for Tony Curtis. It remains a popular *film noir* classic.

While in Hollywood, Odets was always expected to somehow uphold to Marxist concerns he expressed in the 'thirties. He tried, as will be seen in the discussion of his first film, *The General Died at Dawn* (1936). He made clear his anti-fascist feelings in his plays *Till the Day I Die* (1935) and *Clash by Night* (1941). According to a Group colleague, in 1934 Odets kept a photo of Hitler "affixed to his closet door and which became the repository for whatever stray pins he could lay his hand on" (Gordon 2). What he receded from was political activism or any depiction of Jewish life. Ben Hecht, on the other hand, "turned into a Jew"⁶⁸ (B. Hecht 517), as well as a Zionist, a decade before the studios dared to treat the subject. He "felt the most deeply shamed by the silence of the American Jews. Around [him] the most potent and articulate Jews in the world kept their mouths fearfully closed." He referred to "Hollywood's top Jews" as carrying "a grief hidden like a Jewish fox under their Gentile vests" (519-20). Odets preferred to speak out more broadly, as a humanist. He struggled between activism and inertia. He died in Hollywood, regretting not having raised his son more "as a Jew" (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 12).

Odets was outspoken, however, in his criticism of Hollywood, though at times he back-pedalled. When his remarks were hostile, he was attacked by the press for biting the hand that fed him. His vituperations against Hollywood failed to silence the recriminations of his fellow Group members. Many of his financial pressures were incurred by the Group itself; they looked to him as their Great White Hope for more than scripts. According to Brenman-Gibson, "gradually, the legend would evolve that, of them all [in the Group], only Odets had been so divided and so lacking in purity that he had succumbed to the temptations of the film industry. Many hid that they had even gone to Hollywood." (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 29 - Draft 1874-75*). Ironically, their inability to make the adjustment from stage to screen served in a way to preserve what they considered their artistic integrity. Some found work in Hollywood and chose to stay; others had some success but chose to return to New York. Franchot Tone paved the way west in 1933 (Smith 114, 348); John Garfield and Luther and Stella Adler followed in the second wave of Group defection in the late 'thirties

⁶⁶ Gassner, John and Dudley Nichols, eds. New York: Crown, 1946. Print.

⁶⁷ BAFTA is the acronym for the British Academy of Film and Television Arts.

⁶⁸ Hecht describes himself, prior to 1939, as having "been only related to Jews. In that year I became a Jew and looked on the world with Jewish eyes" (517). It was "the German mass murder of the Jews, recently begun, [that] had brought [his] Jewishness to the surface" (517).

(Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 515; Smith 297, 300). When the Group folded in 1941, a contingent arrived in Los Angeles and formed the Actors Lab, which thrived for nearly ten years.⁶⁹ Hollywood film work was now taken for granted. Even Clurman came to Los Angeles, “entreating Odets to write a screenplay for him to direct” (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 29 - Draft* 1874). Odets obliged with the script for *Deadline at Dawn* (1946) (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 157). It was the only film Clurman ever attempted.

Odets continued to serve as scapegoat for the artistic conflicts of other Group members in Hollywood. Their accusations added to his entrenched guilt. Yet, in spite of this, Odets did well in Hollywood for most of the time he was there. Producer/director Lewis Milestone told Brenman-Gibson that Odets’ standing was “always of the highest. I think he was getting 100-125 grand for a script; very few get that. All wanted him” (Milestone). Milestone was noted for his sensitivity, taste and liberal politics, making him an ideal lure for the young Odets, who admired his film, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 397). Milestone recruited Odets during the neophyte’s first trip to Hollywood and directed Odets’ first screenplay, *The General Died at Dawn* (1936), for Paramount. Milestone’s is but one of the many conflicting opinions surrounding Odets’ Hollywood career.

Milestone was a Jew, as were many of the Hollywood elite when Odets arrived in 1936. Clurman writes that, “shortly after *Paradise Lost* ... Odets was [still] seeking a home, a sure footing in a society of whose intimate soul he was indeed an eloquent spokesman, but in which he still felt no protection, no warm, secure ties” (*Fervent Years* 170). Odets was driven toward Hollywood by a desire for a more secure social niche as well as money. He followed the first westward wave of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, those who essentially created the cinematic version of the American Dream. Neal Gabler, in his history of Jews in the motion picture industry, quotes a bitter F. Scott Fitzgerald, who “characterize[d] Hollywood carpingly as ‘a Jewish holiday, a gentiles [sic] tragedy’” (*Empire* 2). “The [undated] anti-Semitic pamphlet ‘Jew Stars over Hollywood’ charged, ‘the motion picture industry has become a Jew industry run by and for Jews’” (Rogin 16).

Steven Carr provides data that challenges the accuracy of the presumption that Jews were virtually in control of the motion picture industry. To cite one instance, John Hay Whitney was chairman of the board of Selznick International Pictures, Inc. (Carr 198).⁷⁰ In 1935 Archibald MacLeish, then an editor at *Fortune* magazine, was assigned to a study of

⁶⁹ By 1945 the executive board of the Actors Lab included Virginia Farmer, J. Edward Bromberg, Roman Bohnen, Morris Carnovsky, Phoebe Brand, Ruth Nelson and Art Smith. Pressure from HUAC, which deemed it a communist organisation, caused it to disband in 1950 (W. Smith 413-14).

⁷⁰ John Hay “Jock” Whitney was a descendant of John Whitney, a Puritan who settled in Massachusetts in 1635, as well as of William Bradford, who came over on the *Mayflower*. He served as U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom, and was publisher of the *New York Herald Tribune*.

American Jews at the time when Nazi atrocities were beginning to come to light. Focusing on economics, MacLeish reported, “only three of the eight principal [film] companies are owned and controlled by Jews.” He added, “Though Jews do not monopolize the industry moneywise, they do nevertheless exert pretty complete control over the production of pictures” (qtd. in S. A. Carr 188). The issue of Jewish control of Hollywood is a complex one and beyond the scope of this dissertation. It is, however, established that, through the film industry, Jews subtly shed their centuries-old designation of “non-white” and decisively became “white.”⁷¹

Instrumental in redefining Jews as white were two milestone cultural events, twenty years apart. The first was the release of the first talking film, *The Jazz Singer*, on 6 October 1927, when Odets was twenty-one. In *The Jazz Singer*, the character Jack Robin, born Jakie Rabinowitz, aspires to be a ragtime music hall performer. He makes the bigtime in a Broadway review when he sings in blackface. The Jewish actor Al Jolson, as the assimilated character Jack Robin (formerly Jakie Rabinowitz) applies blackface, thus emphasising the black/white binary. Irving Howe writes, “A considerable tradition of blackface entertainment preceded the rise of the Jewish performers, but by about 1910 they had taken it over almost entirely” (Howe, 563), and used it to their own end. *The Jazz Singer* achieved the apotheosis of blackface performance: In one stroke Jolson demonstrates that he, a Jew, Jack Robin, the performer, and Jakie Rabinowitz, the cantor’s son, are definitively not black—nor do they inhabit an ambiguous “grey” area. They are undeniably white. In *The Jazz Singer*,

Blackface frees the jazz singer from his ancestral, Old World identity to
make music for the American stage ... Blackface placed racial division at

⁷¹ Definition was achieved by means of two principal factors: financial power in the industry to an extent unprecedented among America’s immigrant population, and through the performance device of blackface.

The use of blackface dates from Jacobean times. Ben Jonson’s first court masque in 1605 utilized blackface at the request of Queen Anne. Michael Rogin emphasises it as a product of European imperialism (19). It subsequently became a tool of American white supremacy (30). The practice of white actors (first Irish, then Jewish) portraying blacks by covering their faces with burnt cork and enacting racial stereotypes was popularized in America by means of minstrel shows (30). Cultural theorist Manthia Diawara writes, “What is absent in the blackface stereotype is as important as what is present: every black face is a statement of social imperfection, inferiority, and mimicry that is placed in isolation with an absent whiteness as its ideal opposite” (Diawara). Blackface performance, a form of cross-dressing, provided an important sociological stepping stone for first- and second-generation immigrants. As discussed in Chapter One, the largest groups of nineteenth and early-twentieth century immigrants, the Irish, Italians and other Mediterranean groups, and Jews, were initially regarded as non-white. Howe notes that, when they took over the conventions of ethnic mimicry, the Jewish performers transformed it into something emotionally richer and more humane. Black became a mask for Jewish expressiveness, with one woe speaking through the voice of another.” “Blacking their faces seems to have enabled the Jewish performers to reach a spontaneity and assertiveness in the declaration of their Jewish selves” (Howe 563). For an alternate perspective, see Alexander, Michael. *Jazz Age Jews*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.

Rogin underscores the downside of Jewish blackface performance: “The image of Jews as breaking down boundaries and as insidiously protean energized anti-Semitism” (69-70).

its center. It also enacted the feature that, together with racialism, defined the exceptionalist character of American nationality: the power of subjects to make themselves over. (Rogin 58, 49)

Matthew Frye Jacobson concurs that “laying claim to whiteness through a deployment of contrasting blackness was certainly one of the things [blackface minstrelsy] accomplished” (121). Through motion pictures, Al Jolson and Clifford Odets sought to “make themselves over” in a multi-frame, high-speed version of the assimilation process.



Figure 10: *The Jazz Singer*, 1927: Cantor Rabinowitz castigating the young Jackie for singing “raggy-time” music in a bar. Courtesy of Google images.

The Jazz Singer portrays a Jewish family ripped apart by the forces of assimilation. A young man on the Lower East Side is expected to become a synagogue cantor, like his father. He chooses instead to be a “raggy-time” entertainer and his father disowns him. When he returns from years abroad and presents himself to his parents as a success, his father again throws him out. Rogin stresses that the *character’s* conflict (as opposed to the social issues involving Jews performing in blackface) is primarily religious. He must choose between loyalty to his mother and his *shiksa* (gentile) girlfriend, and, on the other hand, between his father, who represents the synagogue, and the stage. The film defines show business, or, more fundamentally, creative expression, as antithetical to religious observance. Symbolically, Jack does not don blackface in the film until the dress rehearsal held before sundown on the day of the solemn observance of *Yom Kippur*. Blackface, essentially burnt cork mixed with lubricant and applied to the face, becomes equivalent to ashes of shame and atonement. Jack Robin, formerly Jackie, learns that his father is dying. He is torn between abandoning the dress rehearsal of the Broadway review and chanting, in his father’s absence,

the opening prayer, *Kol Nidre*,⁷² with a clean, white face.



Figure 11: *Kol Nidre*, from a 19th century *machzor*, or prayer book. The *Kol Nidre* is written in Aramaic. Courtesy of <<http://www.centralsynagogue.org>> (Public domain photo).

In an expressionistic moment, the conflicted Jack Robin, already in blackface, looks in his dressing room mirror and sees an image of his father at holy services. Therein Jack “sees” his innermost self (white). Soon after, his mother and Moishe Yudelson, a close family friend, enter the dressing room to beg Jack to come to the synagogue. Seeing Jack in blackface, Yudelson remarks, “He talks like Jakie, but he looks like his shadow.” Jack’s mother and Yudelson leave unsatisfied, but after the dress rehearsal Jack suddenly appears at his father’s deathbed; the performance has been cancelled. Jack and his father reconcile, and Yudelson convinces Jack to chant *Kol Nidre*. Cantor Rabinowitz hears Jack singing, in the synagogue across the street, and dies happy. The film ends, however, with Jack Robin resuming his newer identity as an entertainer and singing in blackface (i.e., masked) on the Winter Garden stage (Rogin 80). Both his mother and girlfriend are in the audience,

⁷² Translation of *Kol Nidrei* prayer by Philip Birnbaum from High Holyday Prayer Book, Hebrew Publishing Company, NY, 1951: “In the tribunal of Heaven and the tribunal of earth, by the permission of God—praised be He—and by the permission of this holy congregation, we hold it lawful to pray with transgressors.

“All personal vows we are likely to make, all personal oaths and pledges we are likely to take between this *Yom Kippur* and the next *Yom Kippur*, we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established. Let our personal vows, pledges and oaths be considered neither vows nor pledges nor oaths.

“May all the people of Israel be forgiven, including all the strangers who live in their midst, for all the people are in fault.” <http://www.centralsynagogue.org/index.php/worship/kol_nidre_prayer/>. Accessed 6 Mar 2011.

beaming approval (*Jazz Singer*).⁷³ Jack Robin has at once reclaimed his identity as a Jew, a Jew as a white man (by removing the blackface to return to his father's Lower East Side synagogue), and a second-generation American well along the road to assimilation and professional success. He is now in control of his transmutable identity, no longer defined by the superficial judgements of others. Jews had now been shown to be white, while blacks would forever remain black. Rogin marks the film as the end of blackface as an accepted form of entertainment (Rogin 118-19). It had exhausted its sociological purpose.

Odets had seen minstrel shows; he claimed to have used them as a structural model when writing *Waiting for Lefty* (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 132). He likely performed in blackface when he played a minor "Negro" character in the Group Theatre production of Paul Green's *House of Connelly* (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 25). As an avid moviegoer from childhood (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 55, 64), and an actor, playwright and Jew, Odets was well-aware of the nuances of masking in order to both hide and define identity. He now had *The Jazz Singer* as a prototype. He became adept at hiding professionally behind an assimilated persona. The mask was assumed by writing, at the studios' behest, de-ethnicized screenplays and living the lifestyle of a highly paid Hollywood screenwriter, in spite of his idealistic grumbling.

Two decades later came the second major breakthrough in the cinematic treatment of Jews in American society. By the watershed year of 1947 Odets was well-established in Hollywood. The event was twofold: the release of the films *Gentlemen's Agreement*, based on the novel by Laura Hobson, and *Crossfire*, based on Richard Brooks' novel, *The Brick Foxhole*. As Leonard Dinnerstein notes, both films "unmasked those who tried to hide their bigotry under the guise of gentility and conformity" (Dinnerstein 152). *Gentlemen's Agreement*, directed by Odets' close friend Elia Kazan, received the Academy Award for best picture of the year. *Gentlemen's Agreement* and *Crossfire* were both produced and directed by gentiles: respectively, Darryl F. Zanuck and Kazan, and Adrian Scott and Edward Dmytryk. The screenplay for *Gentlemen's Agreement* was written by Moss Hart, a Jew. The films' general impact, however, did not necessarily create an integrated, philosemitic society. One of Dmytryk's assistants on *Crossfire* is reported to have said, "There's no anti-Semitism in America. And if there were, why is all the money in America controlled by Jewish bankers?" Moss Hart related that a stagehand on the set of *Gentleman's Agreement* "decided that he would never again be rude to a Jew 'because he might turn out to be a Gentile'" (Dinnerstein 153). The public was leaning toward more

⁷³ The play by Samson Raphaelson, upon which the film is based, ends with Jack abandoning the opening night performance and singing the *Kol Nidre*. The ending is ambiguous as to whether he will resume his Broadway career or assume his inherited role as cantor of his father's synagogue. (Raphaelson 150-53). The added scene in the film offers an ideal example of Hollywood's power to push along the concept of assimilation—and the American Dream—in giving Jack the ability to "have his cake and eat it, too."

liberal attitudes towards Jews, but long-held suspicions regarding Jewish conspiracy and chameleonism proved difficult to eradicate.

Avoiding controversial Jewish issues posed no challenge to Odets in his first film, *The General Died at Dawn* (1936).⁷⁴ Adapted from a suspense story by Charles G. Booth, the film is set in China during the warlord era of 1916-1928. It distinguishes itself from other suspense films of the period by its superior cinematography⁷⁵ and dialogue stylistically stamped by Odets.



Figure 12: J. M. Kerrigan, Porter Hall, Gary Cooper, and Madeleine Carroll in *The General Died at Dawn*, 1936. (Courtesy <<http://www.doctormacro.com>>)

The story takes place during the most recent era of the Chinese warlords, roughly 1916 to 1928. The film opens to credits inscribed on the sails of Chinese junks cramming a harbour. O'Hara, the hero, is played by Gary Cooper. O'Hara has pledged to help General Wu, who is struggling to lead a revolt against General Yang, a notorious oppressor of the local peasants. The bulk of the film comprises a struggle over arms money with which O'Hara has been entrusted. He loses the money to Yang, due to the machinations of a beautiful young woman and her father, acting as Yang's agents. Predictably, O'Hara and the girl, Judy, fall in love before O'Hara discovers that she and her father have set him up. Judy regrets her betrayal of O'Hara. She is given an opportunity to win back his affections in the eleventh hour: she offers to disclose to Yang the location of the money in exchange for O'Hara's freedom. Yang senses that Judy doesn't really know the location of the money, and calls her bluff. Now dying of a bullet wound inflicted during a scuffle, Yang orders all

⁷⁴ According to numerous sources, the main character, O'Hara, is based on the real-life Anglo-Canadian Jewish adventurer Morris Abraham "Two-Gun" Cohen. During the early 1930s, Cohen ran guns for various warlords in mainland China.

⁷⁵ Victor Milner received an Oscar for Best Cinematography, and the film received two more nominations: Akim Tamiroff for Best Supporting Actor, and Boris Morros for Best Musical Score.

captives aboard his junk, all “white flesh,” to be executed. O’Hara is called upon to do some Odetsian fast talking:



Figure 13: Akim Tamiroff as the dying General Yang in *The General Died at Dawn*, 1936. Courtesy of <<http://www.doctormacro.com>>).

YANG. Slowly my life ... fall out in my hand. You make me so much trouble, you die one by one.

O’HARA. Yang, I asked you who chopped you up and you didn’t answer me ... (*aside*) It’s easy to see that his own guards betrayed him, knifed him. ... What a laugh!

YANG. Lie, lie, you hear me, *lie!* ...

O’HARA. Tell it to Sweeney [sic]. ... Where were your tootsie boys who were supposed to give up their lives for you?

YANG. My men faithful.

...

O’HARA. Why, they’re alive and kicking while your singing days are over. When you die here ... they’ll go where another general will give them rice and put silver in their pockets.

...

YANG. They lose face—they shoot each other.

...

O’HARA. You must think we’re out of a nuthouse to believe a story like that ... who will know it if [your guards] die with you? ... Someone must be left, Yang . . . who has seen this last glorious page in the history of General Yang’s life.

(*Guards seize Judy and prepare to shoot her.*)

...

YANG. You ... tell story? (C. Odets, *General Died*)

O'Hara promises Yang to spread word of his greatness even to "gentlemen in clubs," and Yang's guards shoot each other in an effort to preserve their honour. The film ends with O'Hara and Judy on the deck of Yang's junk, side-by-side, in profile. Romance is intimated by wisps of mist and a symphonic crescendo (*General Died*).

Understandably, critical tendency is to dismiss the film as melodrama. But the film marks a developmental leap for Odets. The assignment forced the young writer away from domestic drama. He was required to put aside his artistic qualms and high-minded aspirations to execute a technical exercise with high stakes. Adapting a novel set in China preempted any chance of the characters sounding "too Jewish." But the streetwise poetry of the language is recognisably Odets'. For the first time he was writing dialogue for actors unknown to him. And though he maintained that Paramount "fine-tooth-combed the script, for traces of radicalism" (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 112), some distinctly Leftist lines were allowed to remain. Paramount even included in the film's promotional material some of Odets' references to the plight of "the oppressed peasants," according to Gerald Weales (111). Odets' proletarian hand is evident in the following exchange between O'Hara and Judy, early in the film:

O'HARA. A certain honourable tootsie roll named Yang thinks he has
the right to control the lives of tens of thousands of poor Chinese
... military dictatorship, taxes, you put—he takes. You protest—he
shoots. A heart breaker, a strike breaker, a head breaker,
altogether a four-star rat ...
You ask me why I'm for oppressed people? ... What's better work
for an American than helping fight for democracy. Do *you* know?
JUDY. No, I don't. But you believe all that?
O'HARA. That's like asking if I'm alive ... (*General Died*)

Such lines prompted Representative Martin Dies, head of the first incarnation of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, to start a dossier on Odets (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 408).

Odets' radicalism did not affect production values such as casting: the major Chinese characters are played by Caucasians.⁷⁶ Though it is doubtful that any rookie screenwriter would be consulted in the casting of his first motion picture, Odets certainly participated in the prevalent racial myopia, as a writer. In one instance, a white man addresses one of Yang's guards as "Sambo." When it came to ethnic issues, Odets could be as purblind as the censors.

Despite the sprinkling of Marxist sentiments, the *New York Times* review of *The*

⁷⁶ Dudley Digges plays Wu, and Akim Tamiroff plays Yang.

General Died at Dawn was famously entitled, “Odets, Where Is Thy Sting?” It set the tone for much subsequent criticism of Odets:

Somehow we have a notion that Mr. Odets will be made to pay for this. Possibly he will be drummed out of New Theatre [sic],⁷⁷ for he is as promising a script-writer as he is a dramatist. His adaptation of Charles Booth’s novel ... is vigorous, colorful and human ... and we do not hesitate to recommend it, even though it is no crackling problem play with a social conscience. Let us be charitable about his Hollywood interlude and merely say, ‘Odets takes a holiday.’ (Nugent)

Nugent’s back-handed kudos invoke charity towards Odets while castigating him with the article’s title, which would be invoked time and again.⁷⁸ But *Time Magazine* applauded Odets for his technical development. The *Time* article is appreciative of the playwright’s successful transition from stage to screen:

If plaintive radicals were inclined to inquire last week ‘Odets, where is thy sting?’ sophisticated cinemaddicts [sic] were less surprised at the speed with which Hollywood had apparently caused Playwright Odets to modify his creed, than at that with which Playwright Odets had obviously acquired Hollywood's technique. Directed in somewhat over-ostentatious style by Lewis Milestone, *The General Died at Dawn* remains a first rate melodrama, vividly penned, performed and photographed. (“Cinema: The New Pictures”)

Whether or not it ultimately pleased Odets, his collaboration with Lewis Milestone was the beginning of a substantial Hollywood career.

⁷⁷ By “New Theatre” the reviewer was referring to the left-wing *New Theatre Magazine*, under whose auspices *Waiting for Lefty* was first produced as part of a benefit for the publication.

⁷⁸ Brenman-Gibson cites a prior magazine article by Robert Garland as having the same title (*Clifford Odets* 408). Weales cites a review of *Waiting for Lefty* by John Anderson in the *New York Journal*, 11 February 1935 (*Odets, Playwright* 112).



Figure 14: Odets and Luise Rainer, circa 1937.
Courtesy of <<http://www.fanpix.net/gallery/clifford-odets-pictures.htm>>.

Following his “holiday” of ten pressured weeks writing a screenplay under contract, Odets married Luise [sic] Rainer, one of Hollywood’s biggest stars, in 1937. The marriage cemented his Hollywood celebrity. Due to her Oscar-winning portrayal of Anna Held in *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936), Rainer overshadowed Odets’ own fame, especially on the West Coast. She was the first actor to win two successive Oscars; the second was for her 1937 performance in the film adaptation of Pearl S. Buck’s novel, *The Good Earth*. But Rainer did what Odets was constitutionally unable to do: she turned her back on Hollywood early in her career. She longed for her theatre days in Vienna and Berlin, where she worked with the celebrated director Max Reinhardt. Reinhardt had enormous respect for the craft of acting and the creative capabilities of the actor. After the death of the sensitive and sympathetic Irving Thalberg in 1936, Rainer felt that MGM, with whom she had a seven-year contract, treated her as chattel rather than an artist. She begged the studio to dissolve her contract, to which they eventually acceded in the fall of 1938 (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 520, 78). She and Odets remained married for two tempestuous years.

Odets joined Rainer in deploring studio commercialism. The vacuity of most Hollywood films incensed him. He felt that the amount of censorship applied to *The General Died at Dawn* left him with “a set of clichés” (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 113). Then, upon the positive reception of *Golden Boy* in November 1937, he sent a typically conflicted article to the *New York Times* in which he dubbed cinema “the folk theatre of America” (C. Odets, “Democratic Vistas” 1). Comfortably wrapped in the cloak of a Broadway success, he felt comfortable enough to praise the film industry for its impact on

society at large. At the same time, he challenged playwrights to undo the effects of Hollywood's vapid influence. "A playwright might follow the movie trend of themes with great profit, but in each he would have to tell the truth where a film told a lie" ("Democratic Vistas" 2).

Golden Boy (1937), his next finished play after the filming of *The General Died at Dawn*, did indeed tell of Odets' deepest truth. It remains one of his more popular plays. The story of Joe Bonaparte's struggle to choose between pugilism and his violin exemplifies Odets' primary theme throughout his work and his life: the lure of material success away from one's own essential being. Having dispatched *The General Died at Dawn*, Odets was now better able to handle a more complex plot structure with multiple settings, not evident in his earlier plays. Structurally, *Golden Boy* is more cinematic than theatrical, moving from scene to scene with increasing speed as the play progresses. Hayes points out that Odets' use of fade-outs between *Golden Boy*'s scenes shows direct filmic influence (141-43). The fade-outs, some "Quick" and others "Slow," orchestrate the rhythm of the play. Drafts for the unproduced *The Silent Partner* (1936) also evidence Odets' new interest in settings other than the home. In 1959 he told an interviewer, "What the critics don't realize is I picked up half my technique here [in Hollywood] ... The movies are a brilliant training school for a dramatic writer" (Hyams).

Movies would continue to be at the center of Odets' working life until his final years. He darted from coast to coast between 1940 and 1943, finally settling in Hollywood for a five-year period. In a January 1944 letter, the novelist Waldo Frank referred to his friend's "lethally dangerous existence." "You have no right to be spending your time in Hollywood," wrote Frank. "It eliminates the long, slow, painful self-confrontation by which alone an artist in our day can survive and can grow" (Letter to Odets). Despite Frank's warning, Odets achieved the culmination of his film work during that same year. He also bolstered his image in the eyes of the studios and derived some satisfaction from his labours.

As with most aspects of his life in Hollywood (and perhaps anyone's life in Hollywood), reports differ dramatically as to how Odets came by his most successful film project. According to most accounts, Odets adapted *None but the Lonely Heart* from Richard Llewellyn's rambling 1943 novel at the bidding of RKO's biggest star, Cary Grant (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 155; Agee 114). Pauline Kael and Graham McCann concur that Grant enthusiastically bought the rights to the book and insisted that RKO sign Odets, whose plays he admired, to write the screenplay as well as direct (McCann 161; Kael 637). Marc Eliot, another of Grant's many biographers, contradicts Kael and McCann. He reports that Odets went to his agent "looking for a fat paycheck before being drafted into the army" (227-28). Since Odets had been rejected by the Armed Forces in 1940 (Herr 109), this

seems unlikely. Eliot also erroneously states that Odets had “never before set foot in Hollywood” (228). *Time Magazine* reported that “young Producer David Hempstead called in Clifford Odets to do the screen play” (“Cinema: The New Pictures”). Critic Harold Cantor maintains that *Odets* “convinced” *Grant* to do the project (Cantor 52). A *New York Times* article claims that Odets initially turned down RKO’s offer, based on Llewellyn’s description of the late-adolescent protagonist: Grant was forty. The article claims that RKO’s generous terms brought about Odets’ change of heart. Odets is also described as having lapsed “into Brooklynese, his native accent” (Berch), indicating a cavalier attitude toward accuracy. Brenman-Gibson is usually the most reliable source based on the thoroughness of her research and her personal relationship with Odets. She reports that Odets was flattered by Grant’s attention, and further attracted by the fact that RKO afforded artists more creative freedom than any other studio. That he was to make “twenty times the earnings for the year from his plays” (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 29 - Draft 1873*) was certainly a factor. Odets himself said that he came to write and direct the film “through a series of accidents” (“Coming Home”). Whatever the actual circumstances of the project’s inception, while not a moneymaker, *None but the Lonely Heart* proved artistically and personally rewarding to both Grant and Odets. They became close friends. Grant, like many others, fell under Odets’ charismatic combination of passion and erudition. Jack Haley, Jr. is quoted as saying that Grant had “a wonderful love of writers ... It was extraordinary the way he put his career on the line to give all those guys their first shot” (qtd. in McCann 162). Odets, the boy from the Bronx, was flattered by the attentions of America’s preeminent matinee idol (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 29 - Draft 1865*, 68-71). Adding to their mutual sympathy was the commonality of their working class origins. Both were known for their charm. A woman who worked as script girl on the film told Brenman-Gibson that Odets was, especially in relation to actors, “so gentle and kind” (Speer). The relationship between Odets and Grant helped create a positive artistic environment that resulted in outstanding work on the part of both writer/director and star, as well as the rest of the cast.

As Awake and Sing! is Odets’ masterpiece for the stage, *None but the Lonely Heart* is his hallmark screenplay. The two works are related in spirit and tone. Odets’ ‘thirties tough idealism is revived in the film. It is based only loosely on Llewellyn’s novel, which served as a springboard for Odets’ creativity. Working with Grant’s formidable looks, maturity, and a personal history similar to his own, Odets created a protagonist of greater complexity than Llewellyn’s. Despite his devil-may-care attitude, Ernie Mott, as written by Odets and played by Grant, is a fundamentally good person, though inclined to avoid commitment or responsibility. Living hand-to-mouth, he wanders unannounced into his mother’s shop and home every few months or so, only to disappear and repeat the cycle.



Figure 15: Odets and Ethel Barrymore on the set of *None but the Lonely Heart*, 1944.
Photo by John Miehle, courtesy of the Lilly Library.

Tension and resentment have accrued between mother and son. The first scene between Ernie and Ma, played by Ethel Barrymore, transpires in a setting often selected by Odets: the kitchen. It is morning. When Ma comes out of her room she spots Ernie's dog, Nipper, outside Ernie's bedroom door. She goes downstairs and grudgingly prepares breakfast. When Ernie finally comes down and seats himself at the breakfast table, they converse:

MA. Where 'ya been, Ernie?

ERNIE. Oh, knockin' around up north a bit, all over the shop. What's up?

MA. Why?

ERNIE. Well, you're standin' there lookin' like I jabbed ya with your own hatpin or something.

MA. What d'ya come back home for, son? (*sarcastically*) Miss me?

ERNIE. (*lights cigarette*) Can't say I did, Ma. You know me, duckie, tramp of the universe. Anything in the shop need mending, Ma?

MA. None of it needs *your* help, (*sarcastically*) Ernie sweets. 'Sides, it's Sunday.

ERNIE. Painting? Polishing? Doing a spot of gardening? Mean to do my best by you, Ma luv.

(*He moves to embrace her. She slaps him.*)

ERNIE. (*Bitterly*) Happy couple, aren't we?

MA. A bit of proper respect is what's needed. I get no more from you than I got from that father of yours.

ERNIE. And that's that.

MA. That's that. So you got your choice.

ERNIE. What choice?

MA. Stay or get out. Take hold here and do a man's job, or don't come back. Stay put so I hadn'ta keep frettin' my fat about ya. What call ha' you to go wandering about the country year in and year out, like a breath a' homeless wind? Don't I treat ya right, or what?

ERNIE. Okey doke. I'll be off in the morning. (C. Odets, *None but the Lonely Heart*)

It goes without saying that Ernie does not leave as promised.

However, Ernie's appearances invariably please Aggie, a musician and remarkably liberated young woman who lives across the street. Played by Jane Wyatt, Aggie represents a milestone in Odets' depiction of women in her self-reliance and depth of perception. She and Ernie apparently have a casual sexual relationship. Intuition tells her the surest way to maintain Ernie's affection is to accept his roaming ways.

Ma comes down with terminal cancer and needs Ernie more than ever. Ike Weber, a pawnbroker and Ma's lifelong friend, discloses the illness to Ernie. Ernie is shocked into an emotional about-face. He sits Thames-side to contemplate the situation. An odd little man named Henry Twite approaches him. Twite, played by Barry Fitzgerald, serves a Jiminy Cricket function in the film. Twite gently advises Ernie, largely by tossing out aphorisms. Ernie resolves to be supportive and mind the shop. He becomes affectionate, and Ma is gratified. She is unaware until the end that he knows of her illness.

In the meantime, Ernie has fallen in love with Ada, a beautiful attendant at the local arcade, where Ernie particularly enjoys the shooting gallery. Ernie is by turns a cracker-jack horologist, prizefighter, sharpshooter, play-by-ear musician, piano tuner, gadget fixer, juggler, amateur philosopher, and, later in the film, thug. Mordinoy, a racketeer who happens to be Ada's ex-husband, is impressed with Ernie's skills and swagger. But when Ernie takes up with Ada, whom Mordinoy still covets, Mordinoy buys the arcade in order to keep a closer eye on her. Ernie, tired of being at the bottom of the heap, joins Mordinoy's gang. Ada is deeply disappointed that Ernie has joined forces with Mordinoy, and repels him. He experiences another reversal. After a robbery he feels ashamed, and refuses to go with his cohorts afterwards. Mordinoy's gang members subsequently pick Ernie up in a car. They get into a chase with police. The car crashes, and the thug driving the car is killed. Ernie and the surviving gang member are taken into custody; Ike Weber posts bail for Ernie. Meanwhile, Ma has gotten herself in trouble by fencing stolen goods in order to raise money for Ernie's legacy. Ernie comes home to discover that Ma has not only been arrested, but is in the penitentiary hospital on her deathbed. A wrenching scene between the two of them

ensues, one of the few starkly emotional scenes of Cary Grant's career.⁷⁹

There is no death scene; Ma's demise is implied. Ernie then receives a note from Ada via Henry Twite. She sees no other resolution than to go back with Mordinoy. Walking along the Embankment, Ernie and Twite hear aircraft overhead. Twite charges Ernie and his generation with making a better world, adding, "sometimes it takes a war." Ernie is chastened and bereft, but with a new Odetsian resolve, to "fight with the men who would fight for a human way of life." Solemnly, he walks home. He hears Aggie playing the song, "None but the Lonely Heart" on her cello. Ernie opens Aggie's unlocked door and enters her house unannounced as the film ends.

The process by which Ernie evolves is dramatically well constructed. The key events both involve Ike Weber. The burglary that shames Ernie takes place in Ike's shop. Ike is its victim. Notwithstanding the studios' interdict against overt Jewish reference, Ike is clearly meant to be Jewish. It is a noteworthy characterization, particularly in regard to Odets. Jack Nusan Porter and Ben Hecht, among others, have remarked that by 1944 [the year in which *None but the Lonely Heart* was made], "there was such a whitewash" (Porter 113) that there was virtually no mention of Jews in American fiction, onstage, or in films (B. Hecht, qtd. in Howe 567). There are two characters in the film version of *None but the Lonely Heart* who quietly but unmistakably signify as Jewish.⁸⁰ This differs from Llewellyn's novel, which contains three blatantly Jewish characters conforming to the "sheeny" stereotype of melodrama and music hall. One, predictably, owns a pawnshop (Llewellyn 286). Ernie confides to his pal Twite, "I can't like sheenies" (Llewellyn 393). One is named "Ike" (short for "Isaac"), one of "a handful of Jewish signifiers" used theatrically in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Erdman 33). Llewellyn's sheenies are miserly latter-day Shylocks, one "with grease patching one side of his mouth, wiping his fingers, looking at [Ernie] proper screw eyed, as if He [sic]⁸¹ called twice for the rent" (Llewellyn 286).

In the screenplay, Odets conflates two of Llewellyn's sheeny characters, the pawnbroker and another shopkeeper, and retains the name Ike but changes the surname from Buzgang to Weber. Ike has an assistant named Mr. Lesser. There is no overt reference to Jews in the film. Ernie, however, quotes a well-known Jewish proverb passed on to him by Ike: "Old Ike Weber, a friend of my Ma's, told me this: As I was out walking, I saw in the distance what seemed an animal. I come [sic] up closer and see it was a man. Come still closer and see it was my brother" (C. Odets, *None but the Lonely Heart*). Ernie, as befits a character played by Cary Grant, is respectful of Ike, whom his mother trusts. Ike is an agent

⁷⁹ The only other film in which Grant is seen to weep is *Penny Serenade* (1941) (McCann 153), produced and directed by George Stevens. In some versions, such as the one cited, it is edited out (Platinum DVD, Silver Screen Series).

⁸⁰ Thinly disguised Jewish characters also appear in *Humoresque* (1946), which Odets co-wrote with Zachary Gold.

⁸¹ Throughout the novel, when referring to Ernie Mott, Llewellyn idiosyncratically capitalises "He."

of Ernie's *anagnorisis*, his moment of recognition, when he tells Ernie of his mother's terminal illness. The errant Ernie consequently stays to care for his mother and tend her shop. The motivational tables turn for Ernie when he finds himself involved in a heist of Ike's shop. Mordinoy orders his two cohorts to physically attack Ike and Lesser, while Ernie stands by and watches. He is distraught over taking part in the burglary and not preventing the violence, though he lashes out at the attackers when he sees Ike's bloodied pate. His guilt is compounded when Ike bails him out of jail. Ike thereby also provides Ernie's *peripeteia*, or reversal. Ernie is propelled into activism, intent on improving the state of the world. The ending suggests that he will enlist as a soldier in the coming war.

In his criticism of the film, Manny Farber describes "the blunt, journalistic treatment" of the attack on Ike Weber as seeming "as accurate as anything I have seen for catching the kind of skilled barbarism the Nazis practice—I don't think the movie calls the victim Jewish but it portrays him beautifully that way" ("Rich Creamy Lather" 205). Depicting a Jew as a positive moral force, albeit a subtle one, during the fraught years of the Final Solution was a strong ethnic and political statement, particularly for Odets. It seemed to effect a temporary integration within him, and perhaps in Grant as well. Grant took greater acting risks than ever before, or that he ever would again.

Odets was applauded for an impressive directorial debut (Kael 638). The director Jean Renoir felt that Odets, "was also a brilliant film director. His film *None but the Lonely Heart*, with Cary Grant, is in my humble opinion a masterpiece" (Renoir 261). The film garnered an Oscar for Ethel Barrymore, and nominations for Grant, composer Hans Eisler, and for Roland Gross's editing. "I am very pleased with *None But the Lonely Heart*. So are they," wrote Odets to Clurman in September 1944 (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 29 - Draft* 2018). According to Brenman-Gibson, offers poured in for Odets to write and direct more "high class" and "artistic" films at top fees. However, he dismissed them all as being "schematic" (*Chapt. 29 - Draft* 1879b).

Like Odets' plays—and in fact, all the Group Theatre's productions—*None but the Lonely Heart* has been unfairly judged against a standard of realism.⁸² Attempts were made to make the production values as realistic as possible (McCann 161), but the allegorical tone of the film is unmistakable. Much of the film is shot in a haze of smoke and fog, suggestive of ambiguity and romance. Farber's criticism is apt: there is "an essential lack of the evil, hardness, hunger, loneliness and frustration that seem to be what the film was interested in" ("Rich Creamy Lather" 205). Odets' notes on the film contain an early draft of the voiceover prologue. The draft, more lengthy than the version used in the film, shows that

⁸² "All Group productions were 'stylised,'" writes Clurman in *The Fervent Years*. "The Group's basic style consisted in forming a conception of the material at hand and so presenting it so that it would appear consistent with the quality of reality mirrored in the play's text" (234-35).

Odets' initially meant to make the film a fictional account of Britain's Unknown Warrior of the Second World War:

NARRATOR. Early in the brisk November morning of November 11th, 1937, a certain Ernie Mott, citizen of London, was moving thru [sic] the streets of the city, homeward bound, after five weeks' absence. When it happened by accident that he looked that night at the tomb of the Unknown Warrior, he little realized that he, Ernie Mott, *would some day be* [emphasis added] the Unknown Warrior of the Second World War ... One day soon millions of people [would wonder] what sort of man lay under the second bronze slab in Westminster Abbey ... and he would become soon a misty legend to other boys and youths,⁸³ themselves on the way to strange lives or deaths seemingly willed by governments and high governors who told them nothing of their plans and secrets ... would lay wreaths above the dust. High destiny for humble Ernie Mott. (C. Odets, *None But . . . Notes*)

The prologue used in the film indicates only a possibility of Mott becoming the Unknown Warrior. The ambiguity reinforces the allegory:

NARRATOR. When Ernie Mott, humble citizen of the city of London, saw for the first time the tomb of the Unknown Warrior, he little realized that he, Ernie Mott, *might* some day soon *become* [emphasis added] the Unknown Warrior of a second world war. Yes, some day soon he might become a glowing legend ... (*None but the Lonely Heart*)

The prologue device is Odets' invention; there is no mention of the Unknown Warrior in the novel (Llewellyn). And Odets' characteristically upbeat ending to both versions gives the film the feeling of a parable. Lines like "worked so hard to line his pocket with a bit of brass!" and "seeking a whole, a free & noble life in the second quarter of the 20th century" could come straight out of Robin Hood or the Arthurian tales with slight period adjustments. Despite pains taken with details on the working set, the film cannot to be interpreted as strictly realistic. Like much of Odets' work, it is romantic—or symbolic—realism.

Though Farber's review, originally published in *The New Republic*, is generally negative, taking Odets to task for his lack of realism and, in his opinion, a jumbled plot line, he does mention "some excellent things" ("Rich Creamy Lather" 205). Farber continues, "The movie is most firm and good when it is dealing with Jews, night clubs, penny arcades and gangsterism, which Odets knows about, and achieves with them a successful, peculiar

⁸³ That Odets originally wrote "other boys and girls" could indicate that he began working on the screenplay prior to knowing that the forty-year-old Grant was to play Mott. The hero of Llewellyn's novel is in his late teens.

synthesis of New York East Side and faint Englishness” (206).

Along the same lines, James Agee, arguably the most influential American film critic of the 1940s, gave *None but the Lonely Heart* qualified praise. He describes the film as “unusually sincere” and “almost-good.” Agee quibbles with Odets’ tendency to overwrite, giving the phrase ““dreaming the better man”” as example. He notes that Odets “suggests his stage background as well as his talent by packaging his bits too neatly.” The lushness of “light, shade, sound, perspective, and business” was also not to his taste. But Agee sees Odets becoming a good director “even if he doesn’t get rid of such faults.” Agee attributes the film’s strength to Odets being “more interested in filling his people with life and grace than in explaining them ... or using them as boxing gloves” (115). Hermine Rich Isaacs, of *Theatre Arts Magazine*, praises the acting, and “the experiments Odets and Eisler have made in the flexible interplay of music, sound effects and words” (qtd. in Deschner 173).

Despite the mainly positive reviews, *None but the Lonely Heart* met with lukewarm box office success (McCann 163). According to biographer Graham McCann, the lack of enthusiasm “depressed Grant profoundly, because this was probably the most personal project that he would ever be involved in. Made expressly at his instigation, the story... became a gesture toward his own roots” (160). Grant typically made between two and five films per annum. He now took the longest break of his career, not making another film for over a year.⁸⁴ He and Odets remained friends, but, as Kael puts it, “Odets’ passion no longer fired Cary Grant to make business decisions” (640). Nonetheless, Marc Eliot reports that it was Grant who initiated a mid-‘fifties project that he wanted Odets to direct as well as write, a film adaptation of Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and His Brethren*. The project failed to go forward. Producer Jerry Wald claimed that Odets was unable to produce a finished screenplay after numerous lengthy drafts, though James Hill contends that the screenplay was complete (Hill). Whatever the case, Grant, apparently undaunted, yet again approached Odets, to write “the story of a brigadier general who commits suicide” (Eliot 297). This project, too, died inchoate. Kael writes that Grant stopped returning Odets’ calls when the latter “was trying to set up picture deals and needed him as a star.” Still, she contends that this did not affect the Grant/Odets relationship. Each understood the behavioural codes of Hollywood business dealings (640).

One ostensible reason for the box office failure of *None but the Lonely Heart* is the public’s lack of desire to see Grant play against type. In a nation of former colonials and immigrants, wrote Ralph Ellison, “the Declaration of an American identity meant the taking on of a mask” (Ellison 53). With World War II still raging, it threatened the public’s much-needed iconography to see Grant *unmask* himself. In the film he became the working class

⁸⁴ Grant’s second marriage, to Barbara Hutton, collapsed during this time. The hiatus might partly be ascribed to Grant’s resulting emotional state.

itinerant he once was. “I was usually cast as a well-dressed, sophisticated chap ... This time I was an embittered cockney. In many ways the part seemed to fit my nature better than the light-hearted fellows I was used to playing” (McCann 161). Audience members still assimilating preferred to project upon Grant their fantasies of what they themselves had become, or could become. They needed their fantasy intact.

Grant’s Anglo-patrician persona was indeed a fantasy. Conjecture has long surrounded Grant’s possible Jewish background. Grant was born in Bristol, England, and christened Archibald Alexander Leach. His working-class parents were Elsie and Elias James Leach, though for years he inexplicably said his mother’s name was Lillian. Charles Higham and Roy Moseley report in their 1989 biography that in 1948 Grant “donated a considerable sum of money to the new State of Israel in the name of ‘My Dead Jewish Mother’” (Higham 3). The fact of Grant’s circumcision would seem conclusive, but in the U.S. the procedure is frequently performed solely as a health precaution. Grant’s parents were distraught at the loss of his older brother due to illness. Nonetheless, prophylactic circumcision was uncommon in Britain among working class families at the time of Grant’s birth in 1904. When performed outside of Judaic ritual, it was overwhelmingly among the rich and highly-educated.⁸⁵ Graham McCann, writing six years after Higham and Moseley, feels the issue will never be laid to rest. In sum, “Grant gave some people the impression that he was Jewish and others that he was not” (14). Grant never committed to either a Jewish or gentile identity. Like Odets, he preferred publicly to skirt the issue or simply ignore it. If the uncertainty regarded possible Irish or Italian heritage, by mid-century it would likely have gone without mention. Clearly Jewish identity was still an issue to Jews and gentiles alike.

Grant’s cultural ambiguity is echoed throughout the film. The use—or rather the disuse—of Cockney dialect and accent is obtrusive. The novel is written in a pronounced dialect. But the accents used by some of the actors seem erratic stabs at a kind of stage Cockney. Only the English June Duprez, playing Ada, approximates convincing Cockney inflections. Others are inconsistent and surprisingly ineffective, given the technical skill of actors such as Grant, Barrymore, and Jane Wyatt. Odets’ fellow Group member, Roman Bohnen, manages a convincing, or at least consistent, accent. Grant’s own distinctive “neither West Country nor West Coast, neither English nor American, neither common nor cultured, strangely familiar yet intriguingly exotic” (McCann 5) accent occasionally breaks through, despite his best efforts. Grant’s “normal” accent was itself a mask that, by 1944, the former Archie Leach was unable to remove. As Kael points out, “A movie star like Cary Grant carries his movie past with him” (Kael 639). The ineffectual attempts at Cockney

⁸⁵<http://www.historyofcircumcision.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=category§ionid=7&id=72&Itemid=51>. Accessed 13 Mar 2011.

accents paradoxically accentuate the masking effect. They are self-defeating; they continually draw attention to the film's artifice. Grant's Cockney inflections, when he uses them, are unrealistically thicker than those of his mother, played by Barrymore. Yet this discrepancy has gone without comment, either by critics holding Odets to realistic standards, or, presumably, by the director himself during the making of the film. It seems odd that the Method-trained Odets would consider such a detail insignificant. His lack of concern for linguistic verisimilitude further points to the concept of the film as an allegory.



Figure 16: Odets directing Cary Grant and Barry Fitzgerald in *None But the Lonely Heart*, 1944.
Photo by John Miehle, courtesy of the Lilly Library.

If the film is a parable, the character of Ma verges on the archetypal. She is a single mother, managing on her own. She is admired in the community, where she enjoys a network of support. She never entirely loses faith in her wayward son. She feeds him no matter what. She is receptive to and grateful for his turnaround; she takes pride in, and rewards, his good behaviour. She risks everything so that she can leave behind for him more than she herself ever had. She suffers punishment on his behalf. Barrymore's Ma would have held a special attraction for both Grant and Odets, as both had mothers who withdrew emotionally when their sons were yet young. As played by Barrymore, Ma's strength and secret inner tenderness could only have affected a form of healing, a sense of completion and resolution, in director and lead actor alike.

Odets was apparently encouraged by having so much artistic control in the making of *None but the Lonely Heart*. He discussed the Hollywood situation with German poet, playwright and director Bertolt Brecht, who had fled Germany in 1933 and arrived

circuitously in Hollywood in 1941. Brenman-Gibson reports:

Brecht and Odets agreed that a serious playwright could learn a great deal in the film capital about the craft of visual storytelling and scene-making, and the two men did not exchange apologies for being there. Indeed, Odets told Brecht that while collecting his munificent salary from RKO for *None but the Lonely Heart* he was also working on several plays (only partly true) and would shortly return with them to New York, which he still considered his permanent home and where he ‘still paid rent.’ They agreed an ideal arrangement would be one which permitted a playwright to earn his living working half the year as a craftsman on ‘good’ films, and during the other half, writing ‘serious’ plays. (*Chapt. 29 - Draft 1875-75a*)

Odets discussed such a deal with Charles Koerner, production chief at RKO and reportedly signed a “term deal” with the understanding he would graduate to the six-months in Hollywood, six in New York plan. He began to tackle a screen adaptation of Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, among other classics (*Chapt. 29 - Draft 1876-76a*). According to Brenman-Gibson, “Odets longed for the creative ease and joy in writing the screenplay of ‘Carrie’ that Dreiser told him he had had in writing the novel ... Odets had experienced such transcendent creative periods in writing his plays” (1885). He wrote draft after draft, only to abandon the project. Odets’ utopian arrangement with RKO fell by the wayside. Budgetary concerns overrode his vital working process, detailed by director Alexander Mackendrick, with whom Odets worked on a later film, *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957).

Odets worked on another stillborn screenplay, entitled *The Way West*, for the production team of Hecht-Hill-Lancaster in 1956-’57.⁸⁶ It was interrupted by another, more fruitful adaptation for the same triumvirate. Producers Harold Hecht, James Hill and actor Burt Lancaster formed one of the most innovative production companies of the 1950s, the decade that saw the demise of the Hollywood studio system.⁸⁷ In 1955 they enjoyed enormous success with their multi-Oscar-winning film version of Paddy Chayefsky’s television play, *Marty*. They were able to pay Odets \$5,000 per week for the first two years he worked for them, making Odets, in Hill’s view, one of the highest paid writers of the time (Hill).⁸⁸ Though Odets’ work on *The Way West* was never completed, with Hecht-Hill-Lancaster he wrote *Sweet Smell of Success*, arguably his most mature work for stage or

⁸⁶ *The Way West*, adapted from the novel by A. B. Guthrie, Jr. by Ben Maddow (a.k.a. Mitch Lindemann), was eventually produced by Hecht in 1967.

⁸⁷ In 1948 the Supreme Court ruled against the lucrative film distribution and exhibition practices of the studios, initiating the era of independent film production.

⁸⁸ Ben Hecht claims that, however, that \$5,000 a week was his base salary, if working by the week. MGM paid him \$10,000 per week in 1949. David Selznick once paid him \$3,500 per day (Hecht 436).

screen. He was called in when Mackendrick, the director, rejected the first submitted script by Ernest Lehman based on his own novelette (Naremore 33). Lehman developed health issues, and, according to Hecht, didn't want to do any rewriting (H. Hecht). Odets restructured the story and rewrote most of the dialogue (Mackendrick 123). His language is pungent and clipped, like staccato jazz. James Naremore describes it as "gutter poetry ... of a sort that was never actually spoken in New York ... [I]n an era before profanity was allowed on the screen, [Odets'] language has sting and shock, combining quasi-literary patter ... with brutal references to sadistic violence" (40). Scenes are peppered with lines such as, "I'd hate to take a bite out of you—you're a cookie full of arsenic," and "Watch me run a 50-yard dash with my legs cut off" (*Sweet Smell of Success*). Brisk, New York-style pacing rescues the film from the brink of melodrama. Mackendrick believed it "intrinsic to the genre that the characters and performances should be exaggerated, verging on the grotesque" (Mackendrick 120). It is *film noir* of the first order.

Set in midtown Manhattan, *Sweet Smell of Success* is infused with frenetic urban energy enriched by Odets' intimate knowledge of the Broadway world. The central character of J. J. Hunsecker is, by all accounts, based on columnist Walter Winchell. Winchell was a grandchild of Baruch Weinschel, a Russian Jewish rabbi. "Weinschel," in Yiddish, means "sour cherries" (Gabler, *Winchell* 4). Coincidentally, Winchell was the originator of the gossip column, which he often used to sadistic ends. Lehman, author of the novelette, was himself a press agent who once worked under an associate of Winchell's (Mackendrick 119; Kashner).



Figure 17: Caricature of Walter Winchell by Al Hirschfeld.
Courtesy of <<http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/caricatures/winch.htm>> .

With his syndicated column and radio broadcasts, Winchell wielded enormous power from the 'thirties to the late 'fifties. Over fifty million people—two thirds of American adults—read Winchell's syndicated column and listened to his Sunday-night radio broadcast in the late '30s. In Ben Hecht's opinion, "Winchell wrote like a man honking in a traffic jam" (B. Hecht). Sam Kashner, in his article, "A Movie Marked Danger," describes Winchell as having been "more powerful than presidents." Winchell's politics swung from Left to Right

during the course of his career. An avid McCarthyite in the early 'fifties, he was not above applying the indelible epithet "communist" to destroy an enemy, regardless of political persuasion. Odets was socially acquainted with Winchell. In his 1940 journal, seventeen years before the making of *Sweet Smell of Success*, Odets ponders "how a human being could have so little sense of other human beings: he is a vortex of vanity ... not a fresh perception in a month" (*Time Is Ripe*, 153-54). Winchell held court at Table 50 of the Stork Club, on East 53rd Street. In the words of former *New York Times* editor Ralph D. Gardner, who also knew Winchell, "Fed by press agents, tipsters, legmen and ghost writers, he possessed the extraordinary ability to make a Broadway show a hit, create overnight celebrities; enhance or destroy a political career. J. Edgar Hoover supplied scoops and favors in return for Winchell's support." Gardner adds that Winchell precipitated his own downfall by his "virulent support of Senator Joseph McCarthy" in the early '50s (Gardner). In Neal Gabler's opinion, *Sweet Smell of Success* subsequently set Winchell's demise in stone (*Winchell* 500). By the late 'fifties, Winchell was off the air. He finally dropped from public notice when his home paper, the *New York Daily Mirror*, folded in 1963.



Figure 18: Burt Lancaster as J. J. Hunsecker in *Sweet Smell of Success* 1957. A partial profile of Tony Curtis, as Sidney Falco, can be glimpsed at the right-hand edge of the photo. Courtesy of Google Images.

In his rewrites of Lehman's script, Odets put his own stamp on Winchell/Hunsecker. He enlarged Lehman's character (Naremore 39), enhancing Hunsecker with the essence of his sleaziest stage character. Eddie Fuselli, from Odets' *Golden Boy* (1937), is recycled, intensified and refined, with Odets' characteristic theatrical flourish, through the filter of Winchell's personality. Pauline Kael writes of "the tough spirit of the thirties that came after the thirties were over ... in *Sweet Smell of Success* ... but the ambivalence [in *Sweet Smell of Success*] is harsher, grimmer, more artistically 'serious' than it was in the thirties" (Kael 261). By "more artistically serious," Kael means that there is no propaganda; there is no utopian vision or redeeming social message. Characters either manipulate or are mercilessly

manipulated. Hunsecker's façade of unlimited power, public and private, is slightly chipped in the end, when his sister denounces him and leaves their apartment. But this personal defeat does not affect Hunsecker's professional status or puissance. In the end, the protagonist, Sidney Falco, is seriously pummelled—not by the forces of Good, but from Hunsecker's agent, the corrupt police lieutenant Kello. Hunsecker, an emotional isolationist, uses Falco as a scapegoat for his own sins. The film is an allegory of the HUAC/McCarthy/Cold War era, a nihilistic romp of character assassination for the purpose of achieving political and personal ends.

Many of the scenes take place in the public conduits of streets and alleyways, signifying either constant or restricted motion. These scenes were, of necessity, filmed between midnight and dawn (Naremore 35). Mackendrick claims that the film was one of the first to use actual night shots of New York City streets (Mackendrick 121). The claustrophobic indoor scenes were shot in Hollywood, some on facsimile sets of the Broadway hangouts Toots Shor's and the "21" Club, the latter of which stands in for Winchell's Stork Club haunt. Cinematographer James Howe Wong meticulously recreated the ambiance of Manhattan nightclubs. The walls of the sets were oiled for a gleaming effect (Kashner). Kashner quotes director Richard Blackburn's description of another of Howe's methods: "Sets were built two feet off the ground and smoke pots placed underneath, so that Howe could 'light the smoke.'"



Figure 19: Tony Curtis as press agent Sidney Falco in *Sweet Smell of Success* 1957. Courtesy of Google Images.

The film is driven by press agent Falco's lust to cadge a share of newspaper columnist J. J. Hunsecker's ruthless power. Hunsecker's obsessive control of his sister, Susan, gives fuel to Falco's motivation. Lancaster's portrayal of Hunsecker epitomises the destructive capabilities of absolute ego. His unctuous flag-waving is a direct reference to Winchell's McCarthyism; even his speech patterns are evocative of Winchell's. Howe took great pains in filming Lancaster, with a wide-angled lens in close-ups. Bespectacled at Mackendrick's

insistence, Lancaster also had a hard spotlight placed above his eyes to achieve a shadowed, sinister look (Naremore 61). Mackendrick sets Hunsecker as a stationery character, either seated or standing; the action revolves around him. All power in the film emanates from Hunsecker. When in motion, Hunsecker is measured, deliberate. Lancaster wisely chose to suggest rather than imitate Winchell's broadcasting style. Actor Stanley Tucci portrayed Winchell in a 1998 HBO film. He found "picking up Winchell's machinegun style ... exhausting. [Winchell] did ... 238 words a minute."⁸⁹



Figure 20: "Match me, Sidney." Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis in *Sweet Smell of Success* 1957. Courtesy of Google Images.

The obsequious Falco's purpose is Machiavellian. As played by Tony Curtis, Falco is in constant motion. He tells his secretary, "Hunsecker's the golden ladder to the places I want to get." Later in the film, Falco expresses regret over a shameful favour he once did for Hunsecker. But residual shame does not stop him from doing another, equally or more insidious. Hunsecker has charged Falco to instigate the demise of his sister's boyfriend. Hunsecker lives with his nineteen-year-old sister, Susan, in a midtown high-rise; incestuous undertones rumble through the film. Marty Milner, who plays Steve Dallas, Susan's musician boyfriend, represents the untainted opposition to the destructive forces surrounding her life. When Hunsecker asks, "What's this boy got that Susie likes?" Falco answers, "Integrity—acute, like indigestion. I never thought I'd make a killing on some guy's 'integrity.'" At Hunsecker's bidding, Falco arranges to plant marijuana on Dallas, and then for the young musician to be thrashed by the corrupt Kello, Hunsecker's law enforcement lackey.

The making of *Sweet Smell of Success* involved its own sort of brutality. According to Hecht, Odets already had a reputation for "not finishing anything" (H. Hecht). Odets, whose last Broadway play, *The Flowering Peach* (1954), had failed at the box office three years

⁸⁹ <http://articles.cnn.com/1998-12-09/entertainment/9812_09_winchell_1_herman-klurfeld-walter-winchell-gossip?_s=PM:SHOWBIZ>. December 09, 1998, Column "HBO". Accessed 11 April 2011.

before, felt ashamed to go to New York for the shooting of the outdoor scenes. He told Hill, “For Christ’s sake I can’t go to New York! I can’t face those people!” Hill understood him to mean his former Group colleagues (Kashner), some of whom he had named before HUAC in 1952. He stayed at the Essex House, on Central Park South, with the shades drawn, taking lunch and dinner in his room. Curtis told Kashner that the producers had actually locked Odets in to force him to write. Hill told Brenman-Gibson that during this time Odets was withdrawing, increasingly on his own, and seeming more and more the Jewish rabbi, with a shawl around his shoulders (Hill; H. Hecht).

Odets rewrote literally as the cameras rolled; every scene was rewritten multiple times (Naremore 35). They were always but one scene ahead of the camera (Hill). The Lilly Library at Indiana University houses twelve versions of the script. According to Mackendrick,

Very little of [Lehman’s] script was left in the end ... What Clifford did, in effect, was to dismantle the structure of every single sequence in order to rebuild situations and relationships into scenes that had much greater tension and dramatic energy. Disastrous as this process was from the point of view of the production, the truth is that for me personally it was an experience that taught me a staggering amount ... [W]ithout this work done by Odets, it would have had none of the vitality you see. (123)

The vitality described by Mackendrick is devoid of ethnic reference. Lehman’s novelette included Falco relating to members of his Italian family, but Odets removed this backstory. There are but two mentions of ethnicity in the film. The first is used divisively (as is generally the case) to denote who is on the power side:

KELLO. *Buena sera, commendatore. Come sta.*

HUNSECKER: Italian, Sidney. That shows that Lieutenant Kello likes your people.

KELLO: It’s my Brooklyn background, J. J.— I’m good on Yiddish, too.

Kello’s mentioning Yiddish is likely an inside reference to Curtis’s (né Bernard Schwartz) ethnic background. One critic, aware of Curtis’ Jewishness, commented on Falco’s “eruptive irritations” and “Yiddish bravado” (Naremore 52).

Odets’ input exceeded that of adaptor and scriptwriter. He offered directorial advice to Mackendrick:

Clifford explained to me, ‘My dialogue may seem somewhat overwritten, too wordy, too contrived ... Play the situations, not the words. And play them fast.’ When it came to the highly stylized, almost preposterous lines the actors had to speak, I found this to be a marvellous piece of advice.... it reinforced my understanding of dialogue in film ... A line that reads ...

implausibly on the printed page can be quite convincing and effective when spoken in a throwaway or incidental fashion. (121)

Here Mackendrick seems unaware that Odets was advising him to follow a basic Method tenet. Mackendrick was born in Boston, but brought up in Scotland. He worked for most of his career in London, where actors were still, for the most part, classically trained. “Playing the verb,” rather than the text, is particularly emphasised in the branch of Method technique devised by former Group member Sanford Meisner. The advice to “play it fast” may well have been inspired by Winchell’s familiar rapid-fire speech patterns.

Odets gave acting tips to Curtis, with whom he shared a special connection. Like Odets, Curtis was a Jewish boy from the Bronx. “He used to call me ‘boychick,’” Curtis told Kashner. Odets advised, “Don’t be still with Sidney. Don’t ever let Sidney sit down comfortably. I want Sidney constantly moving, like an animal, never quite sure who’s behind him or where he is” (qtd. in Kashner). Mackendrick concurred, suggesting that Curtis be like Mosca, the devious servant in Jonson’s *Volpone* (Naremore 48). Curtis especially appreciated Odets’ contributions. He discovered Odets in the prop truck during a midnight shoot, tapping away on his typewriter. “Come here, kid. I want to show you something. Look at what I’m writing.” Curtis saw that Odets had just typed Falco’s line, “The cat’s in the bag, and the bag’s in the river.” Curtis said, “It took my breath away, right from his brain to my brain.” “In all the films I’ve done, I’ve never lost Sidney. And I don’t want to lose him” (qtd. in Kashner).

“Corny as the film is,” Mackendrick writes, “it has real vitality throughout because Odets constantly provides glimpses of subsidiary conflicts and tensions” (Mackendrick 120). It is a highly crafted, multi-layered piece of writing. In his book, *On Film-making*, Mackendrick describes Odets’ process at length:

Odets’s process was his extraordinary method of building the dramatic mechanisms of a scene. It often required him to produce a number of drafts of dialogue that were progressively dismantled and then cannibalised into subsequent versions. In early drafts the dialogue was heavily weighted in favour of one of the characters who would be permitted lengthy and even cumbersome exposition, quite simple and one-sided explanations of attitude. These were often very near to being overt expressions of internal thought. The next stage might be Clifford’s examination of the reactions to such monologues. Much of what he had written would then have to be revised because ‘He wouldn’t be able to say that because She wouldn’t let him get away with it—She’d interrupt him by pointing out that ...’ Odets was well aware that ... it would need to be compressed and cut down. But that was the point.

A particular line of dialogue that was important or expressive of a significant idea might have to be eliminated from the speech of one of the characters. But it was sometimes possible to retain it by transferring it to one of the other characters (though not necessarily in the same scene). Implausible as a direct statement, it would work fine as an attribution in someone else's mouth. Complex and sophisticated characters are apt to be unwilling unable or reluctant to explain their feelings and purposes, particularly in situations of conflict. (125)

Mackendrick's description sheds light on why Odets repeatedly produced over-length drafts. It explains why adhering to a strict production schedule was often impracticable, and makes clear why producers, essentially businessmen, could become impatient and toss an unfinished Odets draft to another scriptwriter. Odets' Group Theatre training taught him to work as an artist, not as a scriptwriting machine. He insisted on exploring the viscera of his characters, and creating a structure that rises organically from those characters' relationships.

As is often the case with breakthrough work, *Sweet Smell of Success* had a varied reception among the critics. Kashner blankly states, "the public hated it." Mendelsohn does not even include it in his discussion of Odets' film work, granting it no more than "routine interest" (Mendelsohn, *Humane Dramatist* 89). Nonetheless, the film made *Time Magazine's* and the *New York Herald Tribune's* 10-best lists for the year. Kael lauds the fact that "Odets, even in late work like his dialogue for *Sweet Smell of Success* ... managed to convey both hate and infatuation. Love-hate is what makes drama not only exciting but possible" (Kael 107). Love-hate is the irresistible pull of Falco's attraction to Hunsecker and the power he wields.

Manny Farber rails, in a 1957 article, against a genre he calls the "New York film." He includes *Sweet Smell of Success* in this category. In Farber's view, the New York film "presents a clever, racy surface, peppered with enough technical smash and speed to make any spectator suspect he is in the presence of a disturbing original talent ... nothing is explored in depth" ("Hard-Sell Cinema" 113). Farber considers Odets' work on the film "fancy dialogue that bounces Clifford Odets into Damon Runyon and Molly Goldberg ... spill[ing] out of realistically mannered mouths before you expect it." In Farber's opinion, Lancaster's "frozen-lipped delivery of repartee makes [him] look like a pompous orangutan" ("Rich Creamy Lather" 479-80). But time has overwritten Farber's words. *Sweet Smell of Success* continues to gain in popularity; Naremore wonders if it hasn't become over-praised (Naremore 102). Regardless, Mackendrick maintains that "much credit must be given to the gutter-poetry quality of Odets's melodramatic lines" (120). The film supports Edward Murray's contention that "Odets was capable of writing better than he knew or intended"

(Murray 220).

Like *None but the Lonely Heart*, *Sweet Smell of Success* was a financial flop (Hill; Mackendrick 119). As the public had objected to Cary Grant playing an East End thug, they rejected the counter-casting of Curtis and Lancaster. Like Grant, the two actors had always played unambiguous heroes. Kashner posits that Mackendrick was fired from a subsequent Hecht-Hill-Lancaster project, *The Devil's Disciple* (1959), as a scapegoat for *Sweet Smell of Success*' financial failure. Hill's interview with Brenman-Gibson bears this out; Hill blamed Mackendrick for the film's lack of box office popularity (Hill). A more positive outcome of the production is that Curtis was able to break through his pretty-boy image and achieve recognition for his versatility. He wished that Falco had been the role that introduced him as a film star (Kashner). Odets' work on the film reveals his ability to elicit strong emotions without the contrived sentiment often found in his later plays. In this latter part of his life, in Hollywood, he continued to grow as a craftsman and an artist. He proved himself to be moving with the times. The film has lodged itself so firmly in the cultural consciousness that it reappeared as a Broadway musical in 2002. Directed by Nicholas Hytner, the show was nominated for Tony Awards in seven categories. John Lithgow won the award for Best Actor in a Musical for his portrayal of Hunsecker.

Sweet Smell of Success chronologically follows Odets' last finished play, *The Flowering Peach* (1954). As will be discussed in Chapter Five, *The Flowering Peach* (1954) is often seen as Odets' *mea culpa* for his HUAC testimony. But *The Flowering Peach* merely bandies moral issues through the fable of Noah and the Ark, ending in acquiescence. *Sweet Smell of Success* makes a statement far stronger than an *apologia*. According to Kashner, Odets felt that *Sweet Smell of Success* gave him a way of striking back at the public humiliation he suffered as a result of HUAC.⁹⁰ Odets helped strike a decisive blow against partisan demagoguery in helping, through his craft, to undermine the ruthless, right-wing Winchell's career and reputation.

Whether Odets liked Hollywood is moot. What is certain is that in Hollywood he expanded his artistic parameters. That his films continue to grow in popularity reveals that Odets, rather than being "dated," was, in some respects, ahead of his time.

Like his friend Kazan, arguably the most influential director in the history of Hollywood, Odets worked from his Group Theatre ensemble experience. This and Strasberg's Method training gave him insight into scenic dynamics available to few Hollywood screenwriters. Mackendrick affirms,

I had nothing but admiration for [Odets'] skill in scene construction. His

⁹⁰ Kashner does not make clear if this is conjecture; he does not cite a source. However, it does seem more than likely.

adeptness in this kind of dramatic carpentry was quite extraordinary and is something we can all learn from. As I examined Clifford's version of the scene, I realised that its strength was in the ensemble structure he had constructed. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that at any given moment each of the five characters present is involved in some way with every one of the other four. (130)

James Hill agreed that Odets "could write scenes better than anybody in terms of ... vitality, life, dramatic climaxes." Hill and Lancaster had read Odets' script for *Joseph and his Brethren* prior to hiring him for their projects. Although his screenplay never came to fruition, they felt that Odets gave "one of the most brilliant analyses of a relationship between a man and a woman" in the relationship between the Zuleika and Potiphar (Hill). Odets synthesised his stage and film experience more thoroughly than he seemed able to appreciate.

Culminating with *Sweet Smell of Success*, Odets moved well beyond the Jewish idiom of his early plays, and his final play, in his film work. After the apotheosis of *Awake and Sing!*, the further he removed himself as a writer from a Jewish idiom, the better he seemed to write. For the artist it was liberation; for the man, perhaps it was a betrayal. Though Odets did not equate his film work with art, it removed him from the environment of his inner conflict—the New York/Philadelphia area. But the successes in film failed to serve as an antidote for his conflicts. In 1948 he returned to New York for Broadway production of his last three plays. As will be seen in Chapter Five, Odets' last completed play, *The Flowering Peach* (1954), cannot compare in conceptual sophistication or structural artistry with either *None but the Lonely Heart* or *Sweet Smell of Success*. It is rarely performed today.

But skill and even artistry are only components of a career. It became well known in Hollywood that Odets had difficulty completing screenplays. His agent Irving ("Swifty") Lazar said that Odets "refused to accept the confines of pictures" and "wrote screenplays of 700 pages, when in point of fact they can never exceed 150 pages" (Lazar). As early as 1944, the year Odets made *None but the Lonely Heart*, the *New York Times* reported,

Odets was commissioned to write the original screenplay of [*Rhapsody in Blue*], with a time limit of six months, but when the deadline came around he was only three-quarters through. 'What do we do now?' the producers wailed. 'Your time is up.' Odets was unconcerned, *too excited about the job he was doing to watch the calendar* [emphasis added] ... 'Who said I was the man to revolutionize the business, anyway?' (Berch)

If Odets is accurately quoted above, by the mid-'forties he had, at least in theory, accepted Hollywood's limitations and no longer expected to turn the industry on its ear. He had

matured.

Odets' tendency to overwrite was, Lazar felt, due to his ego. One of his eleven drafts of *Joseph and His Brethren* ran to over five hundred pages.⁹¹ Producer Harold Hecht complained about Odets' incomplete script for *The Way West* in the late 1950s. According to Hecht, Odets' participation in the project ended with him throwing the 500-page script into Hecht's lobby. Hecht also complained that Odets "took out more advances than he delivered" (H. Hecht). But Hecht's partner James Hill felt that Odets was never trying to cheat them (Hill). There were numerous film projects on which Odets worked that were shelved at an advanced stage, costing producers dearly.⁹² But his massive drafts were likely due to his unconventional work process, one that frequently produced extraordinary results.

Odets' next picture after *Sweet Smell of Success* was *The Story on Page One* (1959), which he wrote and directed. It was his only screenplay that was not an adaptation. Hill felt that producer Jerry Wald "watered it down," though critic Michael Mendelsohn finds some admirable qualities in the film (*Humane Dramatist* 91-2). It was not popular with either the public or the critics of the time. The last screenplay credited to Odets was *Wild in the Country* (1961), another adaptation starring Elvis Presley. Odets' imprint is vague, mostly evidenced in the sensitivity of the young hero and the core values of the film. It is an obvious vehicle for the young star.

Odets came to be regarded as an egotistical has-been (Lazar). He grew increasingly defensive about his work in Hollywood, which he couldn't afford to refuse as a single father of two, one with special needs. The *New York Herald Tribune* quoted him as saying, in 1959, "There is no prostituting of talent in writing for movies and any one who says so is guilty of phony morality" (Hyams). But the following year he wrote his friends, William and Margaret [Brenman-] Gibson:

Sometimes I think I'm at an all-time 'low and loath' [sic] of spirits with this movie business—it is like being held up to the knees or waist in the suck of quicksand and it would seriously worry me if there were not inside such flare & resentment against the whole thing. My self-anger ... insulates me ... [which] must & will work for me rationally when I begin to write plays again in another six or eight months. (Letter to Gibsons)

Clurman reports that when "Kazan asked him if he really intended to write more plays [after *The Flowering Peach*] Odets answered, 'I can't! I really can't'" (*All People* 166). Shortly before his death, Odets clipped Sidney Skolsky's *New York Post* column, "Hollywood Is My Beat." He circled Skolsky's comment, "Odets should write a play for Broadway and stop

⁹¹ Eleven drafts of *Joseph and His Brethren* can be found in the Clifford Odets Papers at the Lilly Library, B. 20, f. 6-16.

⁹² In contrast, Ben Hecht states in his autobiography that he wrote "more than half of his sixty screenplays in two weeks or less," and never spent more than eight weeks on a script (467).

with those movie scripts.” Beside it Odets scrawled, “AMEN!”⁹³ (Skolsky). It was wishful thinking.

Odets was unable to enjoy his multifaceted career. Films never proved for him a satisfying substitute for the theatre, in spite of the admiration of film professionals like Mackendrick. He never forgave himself for going to Hollywood, no matter how well or poorly his career there went. He never ceased to voice his conflicted feelings. Weales refers to Odets’ penchant for “pseudo-biography” (*Odets, Playwright* 11). Hayes similarly describes Odets’ “desire to mythologise his own life” (Hayes 167). He refused to accept credit for many screenplays on which he had made a substantial contribution, such as *Blockade* (1938) and *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945). He maintained that he did not want his name ascribed to films that were subsequently reworked by other writers (Berch). He periodically attempted to adjust his public persona and self-image via *New York Times* articles and interviews. He struggled to fit a preconception of himself that reality did not uphold. He revised his autobiography to suit moment and mood. Rather than achieving greater social integration in Hollywood as the years went on, he became, as Clurman puts it, “homeless” within himself (*All People* 162). Criss-crossing the country, keeping a Manhattan apartment in which he seldom resided yet insisting that New York was his home (Hamill), he was re-enacting the exilic model of his parents, and of all Jews for over two thousand years. His New York/Hollywood dichotomy reflects a second-generation immigrant’s struggle to establish himself in a still-alien culture. After HUAC, when he had betrayed his ideals, he remained in New York and wrote *The Flowering Peach*, a play filled with *Yiddishkeit*. He wanted to follow it with yet another Old Testament play, about Saul and David (Brenman-Gibson *Note*; Mendelsohn, “Center Stage” 66). In his 1940 journal, Odets wrote,

I don’t want to continue writing about Jewish life exclusively ... but great care must be observed while I move to other fields. It is so easy for the reality of the work to go, so easy to find ... you have been handling dead life and straw characters instead of the real and impulsive life which was indigenous to your own nature and feeling ... (*Time Is Ripe* 87)

More than a decade after writing these words, he still sought, through his work, a solid sense of identity. But, neither creativity nor assimilation is a linear process. Chapter Five will demonstrate the circularity of Odets’ playwriting career.

Hayes notes that, in his early plays, Odets refers to the movies “as being representative of a ‘system’ against which the individual vainly struggles” (Hayes 115). For Odets, Hollywood also represented an individual wrestling with himself. He often wrote of “his longing ‘to live in conformity with one’s own Nature’ ... to write, as he put it, ‘out of a total

⁹³ Clifford Odets Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center, B. 51, f. 1956-62.

state of being” (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 29 - Draft* 1885). He was never able to achieve such a balance. Accounts of Odets’ teeter-totter behaviour abound with discrepancies. His life was fraught with tensions of living and writing from behind the scrim of an assimilated identity. His struggles, artistic, ethical, economic, and otherwise, must be seen in relation to the underlying definition of Jews as non-white, or “not quite white,” as Davida Bloom and Karen Brodtkin have put it (Bloom; Brodtkin 103). Like Jack Robin in *The Jazz Singer*, Odets came to resemble his shadow rather than a fulfilled human being. Financial gain lured him away from where he professed to want to be, but this was understandable. Odets was also a victim of circumstance. His first child, Nora, was born in 1945. She had special medical requirements that were extremely expensive (Baitz 30). He never made a living from his plays. Odets’ contemporary, Dalton Trumbo, elaborates:

It’s the getting married and having kids that really corrupts [writers]. They haven’t got time to hold down a studio job and write at the same time because all their off-studio hours are taken up, by choice, wondering at their children and enjoying the company of their wives ... that’s why I haven’t written in the last year or two ... everything I’ve ever published has been tossed off, so to speak, after hours. (Trumbo 4)

According to Odets’ tax lawyer, conflicts with the Internal Revenue Service increased financial pressure which further dictated his career decisions. “You can analyze the terrible situation Cliff got into by simply looking at his tax picture. The Federal government is what boxed him in to a point of no return (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 30 - Draft* 2019). A year before his death, Odets wrote hopelessly of his Hollywood prospects to William Gibson, “Now, as for myself, I am tired & miserable and my soul & all its works follow behind two children and their needs ... And, willing to drudge for the mere living of it, I am unable at present to even find a movie job. Fate, both the inner and outers, certainly thumbs its nose at me” (Letter to W. Gibson).

It must be emphasised that economic success in the early- to mid-20th century was not merely a means of survival, but a means of social advancement beyond the status level of blacks. It embodied an impulse toward more decisive racial definition in the white world. Hollywood was created mostly by Jews and they employed many others, such as Odets. They all contributed to the myth of a uniform society based on the assumed ideal of white Anglo-Saxon culture. Brenman-Gibson confirms,

a part of Odets shared Louis B. Mayer’s aspiration to erase the images of an immigrant America and to substitute for these the more accepted, more palatable images of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who had been in America a long time and had forgotten why they had come. But another part of him longed to celebrate his Tante Esther and his proud uncle Israel, the

‘songer,’ who wouldn’t ‘kiss no one’s ess for not’ing’ and who knew full well why they had come. (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 411)

The pressures to assimilate were legion. Even Stella Adler, *prima donna* of the Yiddish stage, capitulated to a Hollywood makeover. She submitted to rhinoplasty; her studio-inflicted film name was Stella “Ardler.”

Odets’ sense of artistic and personal guilt was compounded by grappling with the aftermath of his HUAC testimony. He reinforced former colleagues’ likelihood of being blacklisted by publicly naming them as Communists or former members of the Communist Party. Try as he would to side-step this issue, the fact remained. The following chapter looks at the attempt by the House Committee on Un-American Activities to demonize Hollywood’s predominant, albeit self-whitewashed, Jewish element. By the early ‘fifties, the majority of Jews had submitted to—or embraced—various stages of assimilation. Now they had to pay with not only the last kopeks of their ethnic pride, but they had to endure the humiliation of being publicly unmasked. Odets, even in what is usually construed as his cooperation with the Committee, was among the victims.

Critics have harshly judged Odets for his life choices at the expense of undervaluing his filmic contributions. He might have written to the *New York Times* as Trumbo wrote to the *Saturday Evening Post* on September 14, 1961: “I date all of my trouble from the day I first began to sell. That was in 1936, when the *Post* published my first short story. So the whole damned mess is your fault. Since I’m thus established as your baby, if you can’t be proud, at least be merciful” (Trumbo 551). In Odets’ case, the press never obliged.

Visiting Odets in Hollywood, critic and fellow New York Jewish writer Alfred Kazin waxed prescient:

I sat with Clifford Odets and the Irish actor Barry Fitzgerald one Sunday afternoon on the patio of Odets’s splendid rented house ... Odets’s face always tried to be a mask ... but relapsed into a battlefield; in the white beams of California sunshine ... every feature was spotlighted; every facet of skin worked against every other facet of skin. There was no rest in that face. There would be no rest for Clifford Odets in this life, not even in Hollywood. (*New York Jew* 102-03).

And so there wasn’t.



Figure 21: Odets in Los Angeles, 1962. Courtesy of the Lilly Library.

Chapter Four
“Odets in Washington”

Unfortunately, it goes this way: one wants to save one's self, no matter what it costs the other and, at the same time, keep not only the esteem of the other but self-esteem, too! A painful, diseased little complexity, this one! (C. Odets, *Character Notes*)

This chapter examines the impact of Odets' 1952 testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC).⁹⁴ Odets has been widely criticised for finishing but one play after the Broadway success of *The Country Girl* (1950). The play was *The Flowering Peach* (1954). Following his HUAC testimony, it is surprising that Odets was able to write at all.

Hallie Flanagan was director of the Federal Theater Project (FTP), instituted in 1935 under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) (Nightingale 109). Flanagan wrote to Odets on 16 October 1935, when he was enjoying the first flush of his success. She invited him as “an unqualified authority in the theatre,” to be a member of the Federal Theater Project's National Committee.⁹⁵ “It would mean, in general, that you approve of the project and that you would be free, at any time, to suggest improvements or personnel, report deficiencies, or to advise me as to how the project could more effectively serve the theatre in general.” Presuming his acceptance, she enclosed a list of Committee members on which his name had been included. He was placed in the company of Brooks Atkinson, Harold Clurman, Marc Connelly, Cheryl Crawford, Martha Graham, Sidney Howard, and Eugene O'Neill, among others (Flanagan). Odets accepted the position by letter of 28 October 1935 (Letter to Flanagan).

The Federal Theater Project existed from 25 August 1935 to 30 June 1939, when it was terminated by Congress (Bentley 7; Gustaitis 22). Its purpose was to generate projects for out-of-work theatre people. Like the directors of the Group Theatre, Flanagan wanted to present “productions dealing with contemporary issues,” and “topical presentations she called the ‘Living Newspaper.’”⁹⁶ Flanagan intended that the FTP be “free, adult, and uncensored” (Gustaitis 19). The FTP produced Shakespeare, Shaw and O'Neill (Gustaitis 22), but some more left-wing program choices proved controversial. One of its first New

⁹⁴ Victor Navasky comments that HUAC is considered by some to be “a pejorative acronym for the House Committee on Un-American Activities used only by critics of the committee when ‘HCUA’ is correct sequentially” (*vii*; fn). However, HUAC is commonly used and therefore easily recognised.

⁹⁵ This might be regarded as flattery and mild opportunism on the part of Flanagan. Odets was a mere 29 years old, with productions of only two one-act plays and one full-length play to his credit. Due to the impact of those plays, however, he was, at the time, one of the most famous people in America.

⁹⁶ The term “Living Newspaper” has been used by a number of other theatre practitioners, most notably Joan Littlewood in England. It has been argued, however, that Flanagan originated the term, making it “a truly American contribution to the stage” (Perry, “The Living Newspaper”).

York productions was denounced as “communistic.” Called *Triple-A Plowed Under*, it criticised a Supreme Court ruling against New Deal policies (Gustaitis 19).

The FTP produced several of Odets’ plays, *Waiting for Lefty*, *Awake and Sing!*, and *I Can’t Sleep* (“Odets - Fed. Theatre”). His work inspired other plays that were, in the eyes of some Congressmen, inflammatory. Marc Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937) incited the anti-Communist contingent in the WPA to bar the production from opening. Blitzstein’s pro-strike musical was widely recognized to have been influenced by Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty* (Gustaitis 19). *The Cradle Will Rock* echoed *Lefty* in tone, characterization, structure, and ideology.⁹⁷ Odets and Blitzstein both hailed from Philadelphia (Gustaitis 17) and were acquaintances (C. Odets, *Time Is Ripe* 16).⁹⁸

The FTP was the first WPA program to be eliminated (Gustaitis 22), and one of the first casualties of the HUAC investigations. According to Eric Bentley,

victimization began before the Committee actually met—namely, in July 1938, when Congressman J. Parnell Thomas [a Republican from New Jersey] announced that both the Theater and the Writers’ Project were hotbeds of communism ... ‘Practically every play presented under the auspices of the Project,’ said Thomas, ‘is sheer propaganda for Communism or the New Deal.’⁹⁹ (*Treason* 3)

Roosevelt’s New Deal was as much a HUAC target as was the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). Thomas, and others on the Committee, considered both to reek of subversion.

Flanagan was brought before HUAC on 6 December 1938 (Bentley, *Treason* 30). As an FTP National Committee member, Odets was, by implication, under suspicion by HUAC from its inception.¹⁰⁰ As discussed in Chapter One, he had briefly held membership in the Communist Party, from 1934 to ‘35 (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 296, 302).

HUAC was established in May 1938 under the chairmanship of Representative Martin Dies of Texas. Dies was known for his particular suspicion of labour unions and New Deal agencies, such as the FTP (Gustaitis 22). He was supported by the Ku Klux Klan and the German American Bund. Those organisations looked to him for deliverance from

⁹⁷ *The Cradle Will Rock* opened in defiance of the WPA’s ban. Orson Welles, the director, and John Houseman opened a bare-bones production in a different venue. Actors Equity, acquiescing to the WPA, prohibited its members from performing in the show. The actors, barred from performing it onstage, sang their roles from the audience (“Steel Strike”).

⁹⁸ Alger Hiss told Brenman-Gibson that “Marc Blitzstein’s parents ran a full-time intellectual salon and [Odets] was in and out of there in his early years.” (Butler, B. 7, f. “Interviews – H”).

⁹⁹ Note that Thomas equated Communism and the New Deal.

¹⁰⁰ As stated in Chapter Three, Odets had already come to the attention of the Dies Commission in 1936 due to Marxist lines in his first screenplay, *The General Died at Dawn*. He was also under suspicion as a “premature anti-Fascist” as the author of *Till the Day I Die* (1935).

“Pres[ident] Rosenfeld, the Communist Jew” (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 513). Dies referred to a possible Hollywood investigation “as early as 1938” (Goodman 202). However, when Dies took it upon himself to go to Hollywood in 1940 (Gabler, *Empire* 353-54), he gave the industry “a clean bill of health concerning revolutionary activity” (Gladchuk, 8).¹⁰¹ He did not consider his Hollywood investigations worth mentioning in his memoirs (Friedrich 298).

The Committee languished during the war years. It was resuscitated in 1946 by Mississippi Congressman John Rankin (Gladchuk 70), a Southern Democrat and an outspoken racist. The brazenness of Rankin’s bigotry is noted by HUAC’s defenders as well as its critics (Meeks 5). Rankin was aided by the salient support of Representative J. Parnell Thomas, who had been instrumental in the demise of the FTP. Both Rankin and Thomas were boisterous anti-Semites. Rankin was one to whom

to call a Jew a Communist was a tautology ... ‘Communism is older than Christianity,’ he would explain ... ‘It hounded and persecuted the Savior ... inspired the crucifixion, derided him in his dying agony, and then gambled for his garments at the foot of the cross.’ In ... Congress he called Walter Winchell ‘a little slime-mongering kike.’ (Goodman 173-74; Gladchuk 137)

The term “slime-mongering” is relative.

President Roosevelt died in 1945, and the Republicans gained control of the House and Senate in the November 1946 elections. Thomas, a Republican, was named chairman of the Committee (Gabler, *Empire* 1). While Rankin remained “HUAC’s voice and conscience” (Gabler, *Empire* 355), the post-1946 HUAC became known as the Thomas Committee. Thomas was chairman in 1947 during HUAC’s most notorious hearings, those involving the “Hollywood Ten” (Navasky 79).

Since its inception, HUAC had vocal critics as well as supporters. The Committee exercised unprecedented power. Robert K. Carr, a prominent political science and civil rights scholar, commented in 1951:

At ... times the Committee has moved forward one step through the traditional law-enforcement process and has regarded itself as having a grand jury function. This view of its role is to be seen in certain of its public hearings where it has listened to evidence suggesting wrong-doing by an individual—evidence usually gathered and presented to the Committee by members of its own staff—has then given some sort of opportunity to the

¹⁰¹ The reason for Dies’ assessment remains somewhat of a mystery. Gabler suggests Dies had either “reaped all the publicity he was likely to get, or that he had simply exhausted his evidence” (354).

suspect to explain away the evidence against him, and has subsequently ‘indicted’ or cleared him in a printed report ... Representative Rankin (D., Miss.) has been fond of calling the Committee ‘the grand jury of America.’ (R. K. Carr, 602)

Journalist I. F. Stone traces the “grand jury” concept to Rankin’s predecessor, Martin Dies: “Dies at the very beginning of it made clear that he conceived of the House Un-American Activities Committee as a kind of roving grand jury, acting not in traditional secrecy but in the full blaze of publicity to punish by defamation those radicals who could not be reached by criminal prosecution” (203).

Conversely, there has been a recent resurgence of critical support for HUAC, bolstered by two significant events. The first, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early ‘nineties led to

an effort [by Boris Yeltsin] to discredit his communist predecessors ... [I]n the mid-1990s he opened the archives of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]. They included the historical records of the Comintern, the international organization headquartered in Moscow through which the Soviet government exercised control of various national communist parties around the world. The Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) was a loyal member of the Comintern until its dissolution during World War II. (Meeks 1-2)

Second, in 2001 Congress made available to scholars previously sealed HUAC records. Based on these events, two recent doctoral dissertations seek to substantiate credibility of HUAC’s methods and intent. Jack D. Meeks claims that he is “the first to draw extensively on these newly available documents in an effort to reevaluate the HUAC’s [sic] Hollywood probes” (Meeks, “Abstract”). Similarly, Nancy Lynn Lopez argues that,

During its first year [1938], Dies’ goal was seemingly to undermine the New Deal by claiming that the Roosevelt Administration and various New Deal agencies were riddled with Communists.

Examination of the Committee’s records suggests strongly ... in many instances its claims of Communist infiltration of New Deal agencies and the CIO were true. (“Abstract”)

Yet John Joseph Gladchuk reinforces the prevailing liberal viewpoint:¹⁰²

This work sets out to place the Committee in the context of the Red Scare environment as a means of demonstrating what is possible, even in the world’s cradle of liberty, when an ultraconservative governmental institution

¹⁰² Gladchuk’s book was issued in 2007, based on his doctoral dissertation of the previous year.

is allowed to operate within the confines of an ultraconservative societal atmosphere. (vii-viii)

There is one point on which there seems to be agreement: the number of Communists or former Communists in the film industry at the time of the investigations was relatively small. The Committee issued a list in 1952,

of everyone in Hollywood who had ever been identified as (not proven to be) a past or present Communist ... [and] the grand total came to 324 employees or wives of employees in the movie industry ... in a work force of more than thirty thousand ... even if the term ‘important’ be extended to encompass second-rate directors and mediocre screenwriters, scarcely two or three dozen communists could be said to have any importance whatsoever. (Friedrich 300)

Even archconservative William F. Buckley puts the total number at 300. He devotes a mere four sentences to the Hollywood investigations in *The Committee and Its Critics: A Calm Review of the House Committee on Un-American Activities* (107-09). Nonetheless, Meeks insists that the CPUSA was, in fact, a driving force in Hollywood (2), and that HUAC was therefore performing a vital function.

The term “un-American” inspires many interpretations, and each in turn incites debate. It can simply mean one not native-born. I. F. Stone considers the term “vague enough to cover any person or idea the committee may consider objectionable” (44). A half-century’s post-HUAC scholarship has accomplished little towards settling the controversy. The polarity of opinion, past and present, exemplifies the untenable position in which anyone called to testify before the Committee found themselves. Regardless of what HUAC may have accomplished in terms of national security, it permanently divided a nation. The epithets “unpatriotic” and “un-American” continue to be popular today during presidential campaigns among politicians and adherents of the Far Right.

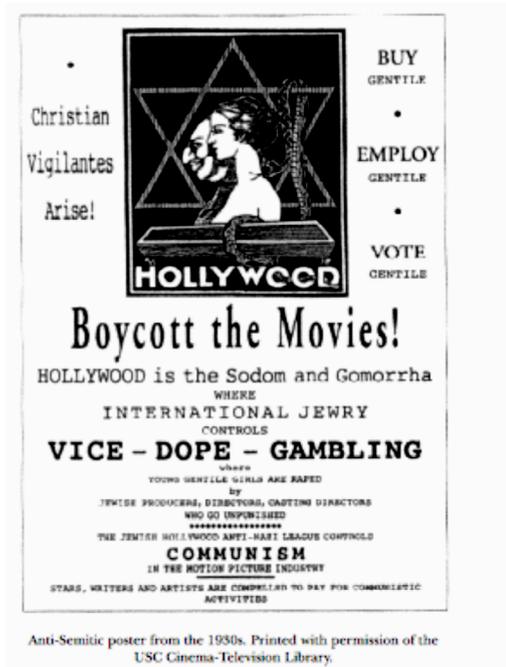


Figure 22: Anti-Semitic poster from the 1930s.
 Courtesy of <<http://www.gutenberg-e.org/langdon/chapter2.html>> .

Many considered HUAC’s Hollywood hearings to have a manifold intent: an anti-Semitic witch-hunt; conservative revenge for New Deal policies; and sensational publicity for the Committee’s members (Gladchuk 99, 162; Navasky 109; Lardner 108). The first alleged objective had a direct impact on Odets. Harold Brackman asserts that, “A vituperative ethno-cultural critique of alleged Jewish domination and degradation of the entertainment industry has been a constant on the modern American scene” (1).¹⁰³ Michael Freedland points out that Dies had spoken early on of invoking the 1918 Sedition Act because, he said, there were too many Jews in Hollywood:

What is undeniable is that HUAC took advantage of the 1918 Sedition Act to attack Jews. The Act allowed the government to declare that anyone who was foreign-born, even if subsequently naturalized, could be declared a non-citizen. A number of the blacklisted writers and some of the actors had sought refuge in America from Nazism, and some of the older ones from Tsarist pogroms in Russia. (Freedland 217)

The major Hollywood studios had been founded in the early part of the century by Eastern European Jews (Gabler, *Empire* 1; Howe 165-66). The studios continued to be dominated by these Jewish moguls and their families through the ‘forties. A large percentage of film executives, screenwriters and actors were also Jewish (Lardner 108). Congressman Rankin accused the studios of “insidiously trying to spread subversive propaganda, poison the minds of [American] children ... and discredit Christianity” (Brackman 5). Rankin was implying

¹⁰³ In *The Committee and Its Critics*, William F. Buckley does not address this common critique.

that the studios were (somehow) preaching both Judaism and the even more insidious doctrine, atheistic Communism.

It had long been held by the Right that the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) was driven by Jews. It was, in fact, the case that “many Jews were or had been in the socialist movement” (Navasky 111; Rogin 62). Socialism had been an integral force for raising the standard of living on the Lower East Side (Brodkin 108-23). Socialist immigrants, particularly from Eastern Europe, founded the first trade unions, which had sprung from sweatshop conditions (Howe, 308). The Communist Party had helped to acculturate Jewish immigrants by founding a network of Yiddish-speaking social and cultural institutions (Howe 342). Socialism and Communism came to be, if not equated in the public mind, considered an inevitable progression: a Socialist was a budding Communist. Socialists and Communists did indeed work and reside in Hollywood, but the Hollywood chapter of the CPUSA was based on social concern rather than revolutionary activities. It was relatively ineffectual and hardly posed a threat to the security of the U.S. government (Gladchuk 1, 8). Nonetheless, while it did not necessarily lend credibility to the HUAC proceedings, targeting Hollywood celebrities drew attention and lent glamour. Navasky quotes Edith Tiger, a director of the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee: “They were our royalty and if you want to scare a country you attack its royalty” (Navasky 79). The Thomas Committee was more than prepared to take up the cause (Goodman 189).

The Hollywood hearings began in October 1947. In the Spring of that year nineteen Hollywood scriptwriters, directors and producers were subpoenaed (Lardner 115, 18). Of these “Unfriendly Nineteen,” eleven were given definite hearing dates, one of whom was the non-national Bertolt Brecht. Brecht returned to East Germany shortly after he testified (Cook 174). The others became known as the “Hollywood Ten”¹⁰⁴ for challenging the Committee’s right to ask questions relating to political affiliations, based on the First Amendment (Navasky 82). They were primarily screenwriters. Six of the Ten were Jews (113). All were indicted for contempt of Congress. They received jail sentences in 1950 following an unsuccessful appeal to the Supreme Court (Gladchuk 151; Lardner 127).¹⁰⁵

With the hearings now in full swing, Rankin “indulged in one of his periodic racist

¹⁰⁴ The Hollywood Ten were Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner, Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Robert Adrian Scott, and Dalton Trumbo. Biberman, Dmytryk and Scott were also directors and producers.

¹⁰⁵ A year following the Ten’s convictions, Thomas himself was convicted of “conspiracy to defraud the government” (Gabler 382) by “putting nonexistent workers on the government payroll and appropriating their salaries for himself” (Lardner 10). He served his sentence in the federal correctional institution at Danbury, Connecticut. He was there when two of the Hollywood Ten, Ring Lardner, Jr., and Lester Cole, arrived in 1950 (Navasky 84, Friedrich 426). The irony was not lost on the writers, Lardner in particular. While Thomas was assigned work in the prison’s chicken yard, Lardner, a Princetonian, did stenographic work in the parole office. Thomas reportedly feared that Lardner would sabotage his chances of parole (Lardner 9-10).

harangues” (Navasky 369). It was directed at Representative Helen Gahagan Douglas, who “asked which films members of the committee really believed were helping the Communist party” (Freedland 215). In response, Rankin offered the following:

They sent this petition to Congress [on behalf of the Hollywood Ten] and I want to read you the names.

One of the names is June Havoc.

We found out ... that her real name is June Hovick.

Another name was Danny Kaye, and we found out that his real name was David Daniel Kaminsky. ...

There is another one who calls himself Melvyn Douglas, whose real name is Melvyn Hesselberg ... (Navasky 369)

Melvyn Douglas was Representative Douglas’ husband. Richard M. Nixon, then a young Congressman and HUAC member, “decided this was a perfect moment to condemn his colleague ... ‘Helen Gahagan Douglas is pink,’ he declared, ‘right down to her underwear’” (Freedland 215). Rankin continued, “There are others too numerous to mention. They are attacking the Committee for doing its duty in trying to protect this country and save the American people from the horrible fate the Communists have meted out to the unfortunate Christian people of Europe” (Navasky 369).

Evidently Rankin’s fact-finders failed to discover that Odets’ “real name” was Gorodetsky (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 622). Apparently still feeling some measure of safety, he denounced the Thomas Committee as “a disgrace to the United States” in a letter published by *Time* magazine on 1 December 1947. However, he backpedaled in the final paragraph, taking pains to speak of “the Communists” as apart from himself: “In conclusion, I get damn tired of hearing crackpots here and in Washington constantly ascribing anything really human in films to the Communists alone. Why do they keep giving the Devil all the good tunes?” (C. Odets, “Good Tunes”). Expressing his political convictions while, at the same time, attempting to shield himself became Odets’ characteristic manner of dealing with the Committee.

Dinnerstein notes that, “By 1943 hostility toward Jews in the United States had grown enormously and had assumed ‘unprecedented proportions.’ ... A 1943 Office of War Information report indicated widespread animosity toward Jews in half of the 42 states it surveyed and described intense anti-Semitism and ‘unreasonable hate’” (Dinnerstein 136). While anti-Semitism escalated during World War II, it reportedly abated somewhat afterwards (Dinnerstein 150), possibly due to the Nuremberg Trials (1945-46) (Chametsky 73). Nonetheless, in 1946 there were nearly twenty cases of anti-Semitic vandalism reported in Los Angeles (Friedrich 364), when Odets was living in Hollywood. HUAC succeeded in stoking the fire. Navasky cites Arnold Forster, general counsel of the Anti-Defamation

League at the time of the Hollywood hearings: “There was an evident quotient of anti-Semitism in the McCarthy wave of hysteria. Jews in that period were automatically suspect. Our evaluation of the general mood was that the people felt if you scratch a Jew, you can find a Communist” (Navasky 112).¹⁰⁶ A *Fortune* magazine survey taken in late 1947 “asked whether various groups were ‘getting more economic power than is good for the country.’ Nearly 40 percent answered that this was true of the Jews” (Friedrich 364). The Jews who did in fact still enjoy an immoderate amount of power were the studio moguls.

While initially resistant, the studio heads were ultimately responsible for instituting the blacklist. They were fearful that the hearings, in particular the obstreperous behavior of the Hollywood Ten, would adversely affect box office sales. Among the Ten were some of the most prominent screenwriters in Hollywood; the moguls were among the richest men in America. “By the mid-thirties nineteen of the twenty-five highest salaries ... went to film executives. Louis [B.] Mayer earned more money than any other individual in the country – well over \$1 million, even in the depths of the Depression. No one else in any industry approached Mayer” (Gabler, *Empire* 316). Even so, the looming 1918 Sedition Act and the 1940 Smith Act threatened those studio heads who were naturalized citizens.¹⁰⁷ Bending to pressure from their financial backers and managers in New York, the producers decided that “unrepenting Communists would no longer be considered suitable for employment in the movies.”¹⁰⁸ “Unrepenting” meant those who would not “name names.” “Protestations of loyalty were often considered insufficient ... The only real proof of orthodoxy was the ritual of naming other past and present sinners” (Friedrich 378). The dictum against employing anyone suspected of being a Communist was first proposed, in an about-face, by Eric Johnston, president and spokesman for the Motion Picture Producers Association (Goodman 217). Johnston had said not long before, “Tell the boys [the “Nineteen ‘Unfriendly’ Witnesses] not to worry ... There’ll never be a blacklist. We’re not going to go totalitarian to please this committee” (Friedrich, 310). The first names on the blacklist were those of the Hollywood Ten (Goodman 217-19).

The Ten’s method of dealing with the Committee had backfired. By refusing to answer the Committee’s questions, they had hoped to point to the unconstitutionality inherent in the hearings (Lardner 119). Instead, branded by the Contempt of Congress citation and sensational news coverage, they appeared to many merely as insubordinate

¹⁰⁶ Senator Joseph McCarthy first made his allegations that Communists had infiltrated the State Department in 1950. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested that year on espionage charges.

¹⁰⁷ The Alien Registration Act of 1940 is usually called the Smith Act because the antisedition section was authored by Representative Howard W. Smith of Virginia.

¹⁰⁸ It will be shown later in this chapter that Odets, given his unorthodox testimony, fell into a nebulous zone of definition in terms of the blacklist.

Reds. “The dismissal of a few politically obnoxious employees seemed [to the studio heads] a cheap price for the protection of an entire industry” (Goodman 218). No doubt they had a clear recollection of the Hollywood strikes of 1945 and 1946 against Warner Brothers studios (Humphries 62). Adding urgency to the economic situation, the studios were beginning to feel adverse effects from the burgeoning, ever-more-threatening presence of television (Friedrich 343).

It did not trouble the moguls that, in large measure, the blacklist would discriminate against fellow Jews. Most of the studio heads had shed religious sentiment on the train trip from New York to Hollywood (Gabler, *Empire* 283-84). They considered assimilation a small cost of success. Their Lower East Side origins were concealed beneath a veneer of lavishness. Some indulged in ersatz philanthropy for the status it would convey (289). Many were, in fact, actively anti-Semitic themselves. Assimilation was enforced on a large scale: no star was allowed to have a Jewish name or “Semitic” characteristics. Gabler says that a Jewish studio executive of the ‘thirties was reported to have said, “Jews are for killing, not for making movies about” (300). No overt religious or cultural references to Judaism were allowed in scripts until the 1947 breakthrough films *Crossfire*, directed by Edward Dmytryk (one of the Hollywood Ten), and *Gentleman’s Agreement*, produced by Darryl F. Zanuck (Rogin 213). Both Dmytryk and Zanuck were gentiles.

It was in this atmosphere that Odets, the erstwhile “Poet of the Jewish Middle Class” (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 77) strove both to make a living and maintain his self-respect.

Odets had been living and working in Hollywood steadily since 1943 (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 616-17). Brenman-Gibson reports that “by 1945-46 he was preparing himself for interrogation relating to his former membership in the Communist Party. Odets began to search obsessively for hidden microphones in his home” (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 30 – Draft* 2028). In fact, FBI files indicate that they had been watching him as far back as 1931 (Groman 70).¹⁰⁹ In October 1947, a month before Rankin’s “real names” diatribe, Odets was named by HUAC as the first of seventy-nine “active in Communist work in [the] film colony” (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 617; Lawson). At this point there exists some confusion as to whether Odets had ever been blacklisted. Friedrich writes that Odets had been reported as having been subpoenaed as early as 1947. He also takes care to mention that rumour was rife at the time (Friedrich 298). Accordingly, there is an unsubstantiated report by Edward Dmytryk that Odets spent several months at Mill Point prison in West Virginia in 1950 for contempt of Congress (Dmytryk 135). No evidence has

¹⁰⁹ Groman contradicts himself by citing an FBI memorandum dated 1/14/52 that states: “Bureau files fail to disclose that Odets has been the subject of investigation by the Bureau ...” (71). The seeming contradiction may lie in interpretation of the term “investigation” which differs from mere “surveillance.”

been found to date indicating that Odets was ever blacklisted, or that he served time at Mill Point.

Odets apparently started pulling away from identification as a Communist playwright as early as September 1935. The cast list of the Group's September revival of *Waiting for Lefty* indicates the omission of a scene that was included in the Group's first Broadway production in March of that year.¹¹⁰ It was included in the first published edition of Odets' plays, which consisted of *Awake and Sing!*, *Waiting for Lefty*, and *Till the Day I Die*. The scene is omitted in the later *Six Plays* (1939). It takes place in a producer's office and gives voice to the typical Depression woes of a young actor. It ends with the Stenographer, who suddenly addresses the actor as "Comrade," pressing on the confused young man a copy of *The Communist Manifesto* (C. Odets, "Young Actor" 36-42). This 1935 version also includes "Production Notes" (53-54) by the playwright that are not included in the 1939 collection. In these notes Odets states, "Fatt, of course, represents the capitalist system" (53). He also makes a pro-Communist statement relating to anti-Semitism. He proposes a "voice coming out of the dark" that might randomly project slogans. He includes the suggestion, "Such a voice might announce at the appropriate moments in 'The Young Interne's [sic]' scene that the USSR is the only country in the world where Anti-Semitism is a crime against the State" (54). It is unknown on whose directive "The Young Actor" scene was cut from the September 1935 production and subsequent versions of the play. Odets evidently did not insist that it remain in the production, and neither the scene nor the "Production Notes" appears in versions of the play published after 1935. He was already beginning to step away from volatile issues. In December of this same year of 1935 the Group produced *Paradise Lost*, Odets' first attempt to neutralise his Jewish characterizations.

Odets did, however, write another labour play involving a strike. In 1936-'37 he worked on *The Silent Partner*. It was ultimately considered too flawed to merit production by the Group. He was deeply disappointed; he had been anxious to demonstrate that he had not "abdicated his social responsibility" (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 571). Despite that it was not produced, *The Silent Partner* did not escape notice of the House Committee (Bentley, *Treason* 500).

¹¹⁰ The first production of *Waiting for Lefty* was not done under the auspices of the Group, although Group actors participated. It was presented at the Civic Repertory Theatre on 14th Street as part of a program sponsored by *New Theatre* magazine. Odets and Sanford Meisner directed the production.



Figure 23: Typical setting of a HUAC hearing. Courtesy of Google Images.

Odets was finally subpoenaed by HUAC in 1952, fourteen years after Flanagan. In his testimony, he cited six former Group Theatre colleagues as members of the Group Theatre's Communist Party cell (Bentley, *Treason* 501-2), and for this he was vilified by the Left.¹¹¹ The Group Theatre had disbanded over a decade before Odets testified in open hearings on 19 and 20 May 1952. From 1942 to 1948 his time had been spent primarily in Hollywood writing—or doctoring—screenplays, many of which never saw production (500). He had been married and divorced twice. He was the father of two young children. His 1949 comeback play, *The Big Knife*, was not well received. He had written and directed *The Country Girl* (1950), a critical and popular Broadway success. He himself considered that play hackwork; he wrote it to make money. By the time of his HUAC hearings, his self-esteem as an artist was on a downward curve.

Odets was conflicted before testifying, and bewildered afterwards. In his autobiography, his life-long friend Kazan described Odets as generally “naïve.” Kazan observed that, whereas naming former colleagues during his own testimony “gave me an identity I could carry ... I don't believe [Odets] was ever again the same man ... [he] was distressed not because of hurting other people but because he'd killed the self he valued most” (Kazan, *A Life* 124, 34-35). L. J.'s repeated “jests” that his young son was afraid to fight (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 37) would have reverberated from childhood, particularly in comparison with the Hollywood Ten. Kazan and others date the marked deterioration of Odets' career from the time of his testimony (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 181; Herr 120). Odets was, Kazan recalls, accosted in the street and blatantly snubbed in Hollywood restaurants (Kazan, *A Life* 134-35). Writing to a girlfriend, the ballerina Melissa

¹¹¹ In the open hearing Odets named J. Edward Bromberg, Lewis Leverett, Phoebe Brand, Art Smith, Elia Kazan, and Tony Kraber. Sid Benson (a/k/a Ted Wellman) whom he also named, was not an actor, and not officially affiliated with the Group (Bentley, *Treason* 501-02).

Hayden, Odets describes a particularly painful moment when former Group members and close friends Luther Adler and his wife, Sylvia Sidney, turned their backs on him at Barbetta's Restaurant in midtown Manhattan (Brenman-Gibson, *Main Chron* 51).¹¹²

Clurman felt that *all* the former Communist Group Theatre members were naïve:

I did not follow [Garfield's] appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee.¹¹³ I couldn't take seriously any of the [HUAC] 'cases' involving my friends and acquaintances. I knew the truth: Communist Party members or not, they were sentimentalists with little practical understanding of any political issue. For each of them, being a Communist was like belonging to a club in aid of the poor, the downtrodden. They were all on the side of the good. The committee made being a Communist seem a heinous sin, something to be ashamed of—and the 'kids' were frightened: frightened that they would have great difficulty finding jobs, frightened that they would be ostracized. That is why nearly all of them behaved as if they were indeed guilty: 'If I were not guilty,' they felt, 'would I be up here being investigated?' (*All People* 159)

But the usually dispassionate Clurman could also be censorious. Citing Garfield's steadfast refusal to implicate others, Clurman continues:

Others co-operated with the committee: they named names, causing themselves a certain distress but causing others incalculable hardship ... The more prominent and talented among them were rich and could certainly have made a living working in the theatre. They named names because they could not bear the black mark against *their* names ... Men who are bent on getting ahead will stop at nothing.¹¹⁴ (*All People* 160)

John Garfield's refusal to point the finger, despite the threat of being blacklisted, would have disturbed Odets.¹¹⁵ Garfield was a former protégé and close friend (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 276, 335). In turn, Odets' testimony could not have pleased Garfield, who died of a heart attack the day following Odets' open hearings. Towards the end of his life,

¹¹² Hayden would not have been aware of a much earlier incident, which caused Adler and Sidney to sever relations with Odets. Odets inexplicably (to them) dismissed Luther Adler and Adler's wife Sylvia Sidney from the cast of *Clash By Night* (1941). (Brenman-Gibson Intvw. S. Sidney, cited in *Chapter 26* "Draft" 1641). As it happened, [Odets] was responding to an ultimatum by [Billy] Rose, the producer, to get bigger stars than Adler and Sidney (e.g., Tallulah Bankhead) in order to ensure a financial success. Adler and Sidney severed relations with Odets, with whom they had been very close. They suspected that money was the root cause of the falling out (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapter 26* "Draft" 1641) (C.f. Brenman-Gibson. Interviews - S).

¹¹³ John Garfield was called to testify, though he never belonged to the Communist Party. He suffered a fatal heart attack the day after Odets finished testifying (Friedrich 382, 384-85).

¹¹⁴ Lardner refutes that the theatre was, at that time, a viable option (qtd. in Bentley, *Treason* 191).

¹¹⁵ There are discrepancies in reports as to who was and was not on the blacklist. Friedrich contends that Garfield was not officially blacklisted (Friedrich 381, 383), while Gabler, *Empire* (384) and Navasky (340) report that he was.

Odets himself regretted opting for a promise of financial security (Mendelsohn, *Humane Dramatist* 83).¹¹⁶

Odets' naïveté and confusion may have sprung from the prodigious acclaim he had won at a callow age. He had been held up as the representative of a generation (A. Miller, *Timebends* 232). *Waiting for Lefty* had given new hope to "stormbirds of the working class" during the bleakest days of the Depression (C. Odets, *Six Plays* 31). Now he was under suspicion for belonging to a subversive organization allegedly determined to undermine the country that he intended to reveal unto itself.¹¹⁷

The HUAC open hearing proved an invidious milestone for Odets. While he left scant evidence of his own inner struggle prior to the hearings, friends and professional associates have revealed confidences he shared at the time, along with observations of his behaviour. It becomes clear that he did not consider himself a cooperative witness. It is debatable whether the Committee considered him one, either. However, the majority of his former friends and show business colleagues did.

Odets traveled down to Washington from New York twice. He appeared in executive (closed) session on 24 April 1952 ("House to Hear Odets"), and gave public testimony 19-20 May ("Odets Says He Joined Reds"). Both closed and open hearings were held in the Old House Office Building (U.S. Congress (unpubl.) 1; Bentley, *Treason* 498). At the open hearing, a mass of reporters, photographers, radio commentators, newsreel crews, and spectators greeted him, along with his dour interrogators. It would have been much the same scene for any of the more sensational hearings, such as that of the Hollywood Ten (Lardner 1; Gladchuk 109). The transcript of the open hearing records Odets' sometimes diffident, sometimes challenging responses. He became more confident when what was for him the most consequential line of questioning, was over: he had publicly identified former Group Theatre colleagues as Communist Party members.

The hearing opened with innocuous questions, typically asked of every witness, regarding Odets' personal and professional histories. Questions pertaining to his membership in the Communist Party abruptly followed, with an implied reference to Kazan's testimony of a month before:

¹¹⁶ It should be noted that Odets was rarely in the black financially, either before or after the birth of his children. He was notoriously inept at managing money (Baitz 27; Sung, *Awake and Respond*).

¹¹⁷ "I will reveal America to itself by revealing myself to myself" (Frontispiece, Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets*).

MR. TAVENNER.¹¹⁸ Mr. Odets, there has been testimony before the Committee that you were at one time a member of the Communist Party. Was that testimony correct?

MR. ODETS. Yes, sir, it was. (Bentley, *Treason* 500)

Having answered that question about himself simply and directly, Odets then became evasive. He was clearly reluctant to name other members. When asked how he was “recruited into the Communist Party and by whom,” Odets rambled,

Of a total Group Theater [sic] membership of perhaps thirty-five, there were *four or five people* [emphasis added] who were connected with the Communist Party. Literature was passed around, and, in a time of great social unrest, many people found themselves reaching out for new ideas, new ways of solving depressions or making a better living, fighting for one’s rights ... The right to be steadily employed, for instance. There were perhaps fifteen or sixteen million unemployed people in the United States, and I myself was living on ten cents a day. Therefore, I was interested in any idea which might suggest how I could function as a working actor who could make a living at a craft he had chosen for his life’s work. These were the early days of the New Deal, and I don’t think that one has to describe them. They were horrendous days ... On this basis, there was a great deal of talk about amelioration of conditions ... and in line with this there was a great deal of talk about Marxist values. ... There were a lot of penny and two-cent and five-cent pamphlets. I read them, along with a lot of other people, and finally joined the Communist Party, in the honest and real belief that this was some way out of the dilemma in which we found ourselves.

MR. TAVENNER. You have not told us the exact circumstances under which you were recruited into the Party.

MR. ODETS. Well, you read some pamphlets, you listened to someone talk, and finally a person would ask you if you didn’t want to join the Communist Party ...

MR. TAVENNER. Who was the individual who made that suggestion to you?

Now cornered, Odets answered the question: “This would be an actor friend of mine named J. Edward Bromberg” (Bentley, *Treason* 501).¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Frank Tavenner was, at the time of Odets’ testimony, the Committee’s chief investigator and general counsel (Navasky 119, Bentley 498).

¹¹⁹ Bromberg had died five and a half months prior to Odets’ testimony. Goodman calls his death a suicide; other sources say it was a heart attack. (“J. E. Bromberg, 47, Is Dead in London”; Goodman 303).

Tavener then asked if Odets had been assigned to “a particular cell or group.” Odets responded that it “would be connected [sic] with *those few people* [emphasis added] who were in the Group Theatre.” It would seem that Odets was hoping that the Committee would satisfy themselves with the names supplied in Kazan’s testimony a month before, rather than continue along this line of questioning and force him to reiterate them publicly. He failed in the attempt. He was forced to deal with the inevitable:

MR. TAVENNER. Who were the other persons who were members of the cell?

Again, Odets seemed to allude to Kazan’s testimony. Odets took special care to point out that these people had already been named. He also emphasised that during the earlier, closed session, names had been proposed to him by the Committee, *e.g.*, Art Smith. This was apparently Odets’ operative rationalisation.

MR. ODETS. Well, *they have been mentioned here* [emphasis added] as Lewis Leverett, ... Phoebe Brand, and an actor *about whom you refreshed my memory the last time* [emphasis added] I was here named Art Smith. And then from my reading of the *New York Times*, a couple of other members were mentioned that I have no memory of, as I told you.¹²⁰

MR. TAVENNER: Elia Kazan? Was he a member of that group?

MR. ODETS. Yes, Mr. Kazan.

...

MR. TAVENNER. Tony Kraber?

MR. ODETS. He [sic], too. (Bentley, *Treason* 502)

With the naming of his fellow Group members behind him, Odets became more loquacious. Nonetheless, when asked about other Party members and operatives, he would often respond with a hazy recollection:

MR. TAVENNER. Were you acquainted with a person by the name of Andrew Overgaard?

MR. ODETS. Yes, I met him.

MR. TAVENNER. Under what circumstances did you meet him?

MR. ODETS. In some way that I wouldn’t remember ... I would guess that he was introduced to people ...

MR. TAVENNER. Did you recognize him as a functionary of the Communist Party?

MR. ODETS. This would be my good guess.

¹²⁰ Presumably Odets was referring to the transcript of Kazan’s 10 April testimony of the same year, released on 11 April. Kazan testified in executive session only; Bentley speculates this was to protect Kazan from hecklers (Bentley, *Treason* 482). Kazan named two Group members not mentioned by Odets: Morris Carnovsky and Paula Miller (486).

...

MR. TAVENNER. Do you know whether Overgaard was connected with any Communist trade-union organization at that time?

MR. ODETS. There was some such talk ... But what exactly it was I am not sure. (Bentley, *Treason* 503)

Odets then related that Overgaard successfully advised the Group cell on how they might gain rehearsal pay by seeking the intercession of Actors Equity Association, the nationwide actors' labour union.¹²¹ He took care to mention that "this small group within the Group Theater did get, for every actor in the United States, rehearsal pay. That is, we were the beginning of such a movement" (Bentley, *Treason* 503). Odets thereby credited Overgaard, a Communist Party agent, with masterminding an historic achievement. This could not have ingratiated Odets with the Committee. He continued similarly throughout the remainder of his testimony, with statements such as, "There are Communist Party tactics which are exclusively their own, and there are Communist Party tactics which are shared typically by many politicians;" "Some of these [Communist] people are rascals, but on the other hand some of them were people of high seriousness and integrity in their feelings"(Bentley, *Treason* 522); and "one of the finest human beings I had ever met. That is Adrian Scott" (529). Scott was among the Hollywood Ten, cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to cooperate with the Committee, and all of whom received jail sentences in 1950 (Lardner 128). Ironically, it was the Hollywood Ten who set a precedent for refusing to answer questions posed by the Committee, citing the First Amendment (Navasky 82). It is therefore odd that Odets would publicly applaud Scott's integrity—unless he did in fact believe that he, too, was not cooperating with the Committee.

After much contentious discussion, Odets did manage to sway the Committee in one regard. They were initially insistent that positive reviews of Odets' plays in Communist Party newspapers indicated that he had written the plays according to Communist precepts, particularly *Waiting for Lefty* (1935). Odets was adamant that he never wrote according to Communist principles, that he wrote from his own experience. He also asserted that his plays had repeatedly received very bad notices from critics of the Left, particularly those writing for Communist newspapers:

MR. ODETS. Well, I can only say that, from the very first play, *Waiting for Lefty*, on until my plays of a year ago, the criticisms were sometimes good and sometimes bad, shockingly bad. I dislike being called a hack writer, but [for] my last play I was called a hack writer in the *Daily Worker*.¹²² I don't

¹²¹ Actors' Equity was founded in 1913.

<<http://www.actorsequity.org/AboutEquity/aboutequityhome.asp>>. Accessed 02 Oct 2009.

¹²² Odets' most recent play would have been *The Country Girl* (1950).

know how you would categorize this sort of criticism, but I call it very severe and very shocking.

MR. TAVENNER. What was the purpose of the criticism, do you know?

MR. ODETS. The purpose, I would think, would be to say, 'This man has gone off the track, and while he has talent we mourn his loss,' so to speak, 'We wish we could get him back.' ...

MR. TAVENNER. ... did you gain the impression that the type of criticism which your plays received constituted an effort on the part of the Communist Party to direct you in your course of writing?

MR. ODETS. I would say that some of the criticisms were open to that interpretation, but most of them took me to task for what they called my defections.

...

MR. TAVENNER. And they attempted to direct you in that course of writing? ... did you follow the suggestion?

MR. ODETS. I am afraid I never did ... I didn't respect any person or any party or any group of people who would say to a young creative writer, 'Go outside of your experience and write a play.' ... I couldn't be given a theme and handle it. It was not my business. It meant to me ... a loss of integrity. And so I persisted in going along on my own line and writing what did come out of my true center. And whenever this happened, I got this violent opposition in the [Communist] press, and I became further disgusted and estranged.

MR. TAVENNER. And you rebelled against that type of Communist Party discipline?

MR. ODETS. By then I had ... no connection with them ... I was much more apt to be interested in what a critic like Stark Young would say in the *New Republic* or Brooks Atkinson in the *New York Times*. (Bentley, *Treason* 515-17)

Tavener continued to split hairs regarding "technical" criticism Odets had received from the Left. He quoted from numerous reviews dating from the mid-'thirties. He emphasised that even when structural flaws were cited, many Leftist/Communist critics, particularly John Howard Lawson, did not question Odets' "outstanding significance, his skill, vitality, and honesty rarely found in the current theatre" (519).¹²³ Tavener pointed out

¹²³ Lawson was the first president of the Screen Writers' Guild, the head and cultural manager of the Hollywood branch of the Communist Party (Navasky 293), and one of the Hollywood Ten. His play, *Success Story*, was produced by the Group Theatre in 1932 (Smith 430).

that Lawson, “predicts for you a great future. Well, that certainly is not a severe criticism of your work from the standpoint of the Communist party.” Odets replied,

A Marxist believes that if you would straighten out your ideology in terms of Marxist orientation ... you will no longer have structural flaws. So to say that something has structural flaws means that this young writer must attend more Marxian ideology and Marxian study. ... Lawson very thoroughly believes that. I do not. (Bentley, *Treason* 519)

Tavener pressed the point that there had, in fact, been positive criticism of Odets’ plays by Communist critics, citing examples. Odets continued to counter with the argument that multiple, often conflicting reviews published by the same newspaper represented a specific Party tactic:

One reviewer would go to see a play. He might write a favorable review and then someone else in the Communist Party would say, ‘... This play demonstrates dangerous tendencies and we must send somebody to review the play and point out the dangerous tendencies to our readers.’ Or it might go the other way around. The first review was bad and they said, ‘Wait a minute. Don’t drive this young playwright away. Let us send a second reviewer.’ (Bentley, *Treason* 521)

Tavener seemed intractable on the subject of Leftist support for *Waiting for Lefty*. He pointed out that, at the end of the playscript, it stated that no production of the play could be presented without Odets’ permission. He was implying that Odets had many times given Communist organisations permission to produce the play. Odets replied,

I didn’t know about copyrights when the play was written. But I would doubt that in my entire life I earned one thousand dollars out of that play. People just did it. It was kind of [sic] public property. As a matter of fact, one of the few times permission was asked for that play was from the United States Army. They did it in Japan just after the war. (Bentley, *Treason* 523)

Tavener skirted the fact of a U.S. Army production of *Waiting for Lefty*. Instead, he conceded the issue with, “This would all seem to confirm your statement that the criticism made of your play was done for the purpose of influencing you in your future writings” (524).

He then proceeded to question Odets’ continued support of Communist-front organisations after officially leaving the Party. Addressing his alleged attendance of the Congress of American Revolutionary Writers in 1935, Odets became nonchalant. “I have no memory of that, but I would have been glad to have been there in 1935” (525). When queried about the duration of his membership in the League of American Writers, an affiliate of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, Odets said, “It might have been a year.

I began to have quarrels with them in public ... This kind of made me *persona non grata*, and resulted, finally, in a real cooling off between myself and most of these people” (525-26).

Tavener then steered Odets in a direction he almost seemed almost to relish. It is from this point forward that Odets could be construed as having been “uncooperative.” Tavener confronted Odets with a 1939 statement, allegedly circulated by the Communist Party, entitled, “In Defense of the Bill of Rights.” Odets’ signature appeared on the statement. Tavener’s interpretation of the statement was that it was a defense of the Communist Party and known Communists. Odets pointed to where the statement said, “we are not Communists and we are not concerned at this moment with the merits or demerits of the doctrines advocated by the Communists.” Here Committee member Harold H. Velde took over the questioning:¹²⁴

MR. VELDE. Mr. Odets, do you believe now that the Communist Party has been interested in preserving our Bill of Rights and the Constitution?

MR. ODETS. I would think that the Communist Party was interested in preserving its existence.

MR. VELDE. And what do you deem as the program of the Communist Party in this country?

...

MR. ODETS. Well, my opinion is that the Communist Party is interested in preserving itself as a minority political party. I believe, sir, that that is their right under the United States Constitution ... One of the elements that made me leave the Communist Party was secrecy. I saw no reason to be conspiratorial in the United States. I believe in free speech. I believe in open political practice. I advocate these things.

...

MR. VELDE. Then, do you believe that the avowed purpose of the Communist Party in the United States is not to overthrow our form of government, our Constitution, by force and violence?

MR. ODETS. I don’t think that is their purpose.

MR. VELDE. Even in view of the fact that it was proven to be true in the case of the trial of the eleven Communists?¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Velde was a Republican Representative from Illinois and, at this time, Chairman of the Committee <<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=V000082>>. Accessed 02 Oct 2009; Navasky 119).

¹²⁵ Velde is referring to the 1949 trial and conviction of eleven CPUSA leaders for conspiracy under the Smith Act.

MR. ODETS. Well, sir, if I may say so, you have a split of opinion about that, even in the Supreme Court of the United States. I frankly agree with the minority opinion of Justice Douglas and Justice Frankfurter. (Bentley, *Treason*, 526-27)

In the prior, closed session Odets stated this even more strongly:

MR. JACKSON. Is it your feeling that the trial was not a fair trial?

MR. ODETS. My feeling, sir, is that the trial was not a fair one, and I think that that opinion is shared by ... Supreme Court Justices, three of them. (U.S. Congress (unpubl.), 36).

Odets did not waver in his defense of the Communist Party's right to exist, nor for the need of a Liberal party. Tavenner, resuming the questioning, asked for a second time, "Do you maintain that Communism is just a political party, as distinguished from a conspiracy to overthrow the Government of the United States, directed from a foreign country?"

MR. ODETS: If I may say so, Mr. Tavenner and Mr. Velde, you have me here in a rather singular position. You have me here defending communism. I am not here for that purpose.

MR. TAVENNER: I only asked you the question to explain your very loose use of the term 'political party.'

MR. ODETS. I understand that the Communist Party is a legally recognised minority political party in the United States. Am I correct about that, sir?

MR. TAVENNER. No, this Committee has never considered it a political party. It considers that it is a conspiratorial group.

MR. ODETS. Well, then, I think that recommendation should be made, if I may be so bold as to say so, to have this party declared illegal, because at the moment my best knowledge is that this is a legal political party in the United States. (Bentley, *Treason* 527-28)

Odets then went so far as to defend the Hollywood Ten. Tavenner presented Odets with a copy of a telegram he had sent the National Council of Arts, Sciences and Professions on the occasion of a town rally to free the Ten. It said, "I believe that yours is truly the American way and salute you all in the name of your convictions and courage." Tavenner asked Odets if he remembered sending the telegram. Odets replied, "My best guess would be that I did send this telegram."

MR. TAVENNER. Did you send the telegram because you believed that the Hollywood Ten were not in contempt of Congress?

MR. ODETS. I, by the way, did not agree with their stand. But I felt that it was very American to fight for what you conceived to be your constitutional rights, and I felt impelled to send this wire.

MR. TAVENNER. Then why did you send this telegram praising them so highly for the stand they were taking?

MR. ODETS. I thought they were making a good fight... (Bentley, *Treason* 529)

The further he got from the moment of naming names, the more emphatic Odets became regarding his beliefs. However, for Odets to applaud the Hollywood Ten for fighting for their constitutional rights, and then say that he did not agree with their stand, is contradictory. Defense of their constitutional rights was precisely what the Hollywood Ten were after, specifically citing the First Amendment.¹²⁶ John Howard Lawson, Dalton Trumbo and others were not allowed to read their statements before the Committee in open hearing, depriving them of their right to free speech (Gladchuk 139). By saying he did not agree with the Ten's stand Odets was, in effect, sanctioning HUAC's existence and methods. It is on this issue, perhaps as much as naming former friends as Communist Party members, that Odets betrayed his own ideals. In contradicting himself, he revealed the flimsy nature of his rationalization, that to identify those who had already been named by Kazan was to do no further harm. To sanction HUAC's methods was tantamount to condoning the blacklist.

The Committee finally embarked on the line of questioning that ostensibly had brought Odets to Washington: whether he had intentionally used his function as a Hollywood scriptwriter to inculcate the American public with Communist propaganda. He responded,

I go to Hollywood to make an honest living, writing entertaining scripts. I have never gone to Hollywood as a propagandist. I think nothing gets by anybody in Hollywood. I don't think Hollywood has ever made a movie with left propaganda in it. And I think the whole matter of social messages from Hollywood [is] something that really cannot happen. All scripts are carefully written and rewritten and gone over with fine combs [sic] in Hollywood, and I never in my life had any intention of going to Hollywood and making a two-million-dollar picture which was a propaganda picture.

¹²⁶ The First Amendment states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." In this sense HUAC was in itself unconstitutional. <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html>. Accessed 3 Oct 2009. Bentley succinctly summarises the First Amendment: "You were free to believe what you chose, and the Government had no right to pry into this choice" (531).

MR. WALTER.¹²⁷ Isn't the screening so thorough it would be an utter impossibility to slant a picture? There are so many people that examine it for that particular purpose? (Bentley, *Treason* 530)

It seems odd for a Committee member to pose a query in this manner, seemingly contrary to the stance of the Committee. Indeed, it would seem to contradict the alleged basis for the Committee's Hollywood investigation. It was an argument put forth by many screenwriters called before the Committee. In fact, Walter was known as being more liberal than other Committee members. His subsequent assumption of the Committee chairmanship, in 1954, gave liberals a ray of hope (Goodman 365). With his phrasing of the question, Walter was inviting Odets to emphasise his point. "You are right," Odets agreed. "There is nothing less possible in Hollywood" (Bentley, *Treason* 530).

Ring Lardner, Jr. relates how, during the first week of the Hollywood hearings, "friendly" witness Jack Warner¹²⁸ cited a line of Odets' dialogue from *Humoresque* as an example of subversive "stuff" he had vigilantly eliminated from a Warner Bros. film. He was proud to have spared the American people propaganda he somehow detected in lines such as, "Your father is a banker. My father lives over a grocery store" (Lardner 120). This instance is characteristic of how minutely Hollywood executives censored the films issuing from their studios.¹²⁹ It also illustrates how fearful the studios were of being seen as having Socialist or Communist sympathies.

Tavenner returned to the question of Odets' continued support of Communist-front organisations after renouncing his membership. Odets addressed the issue with what was arguably his most ingenuous response, and served as his final statement:

Well, Mr. Tavenner, the lines of leftism, liberalism, in all of their shades and degrees, are constantly crossing like a jangled chord on a piano. It is almost impossible to pick out which note is which note. I have spoken out on what I thought were certain moral issues of the day, and I found myself frequently on platforms with Communists that I did not know about then but evidently are now known Communists. ... They have picked up some of our most

¹²⁷ Representative Francis E. Walter, a Pennsylvania Democrat, served as chairman of the Committee during the 84th-86th Congresses (from 1954 until his death in 1963). He tended to be more liberal than his predecessors, Thomas and Harold Velde.

¹²⁸ Along with his three brothers, Warner was at the helm of Warner Bros. Studios for forty-five years. He was HUAC's first high-profile "friendly witness." His 1947 testimony "spawned the evolution" of the blacklist "and the subsequent purge of progressivism within the film industry" (Gladchuk 133). Lardner adds that Louis B. Mayer, who testified after Warner, "was ... nervous about a *private* blacklist ... He called for 'legislation establishing a national policy regulating employment of Communists in private industry'" (Lardner 121).

¹²⁹ Michael Rogin, though writing from a pronounced leftwing viewpoint, challenges this. He cites as an exception *Body and Soul* (1947). "If any film gives credence to the hallucinatory charge that a Communist conspiracy was seizing control of Hollywood ... this is the one ... *Body and Soul* was a creature of the Popular Front" (Rogin 211-12).

solemn and sacred American tunes and they sing them. If I as an American liberal must sometimes speak out the same tune, I must sometimes find myself on platforms, so to speak, with strange bedfellows. I have never wittingly, since these early days, joined or spoken on an exclusively Communist program or platform. I see that one must do one of two things: One must pick one's way very carefully through the mazes of liberalism and leftism today or one must remain silent. Of the two, I must tell you frankly I would try to pick the first way, because the little that I have to say, the little that I have to contribute to the betterment or welfare of the American people could not permit me to remain silent. (Bentley, *Treason* 531)

These were not the words of a capitulator. "Liberals" were at best viewed askance by the Committee.

Velde then asked: "Mr. Odets. Would you, if you had this to do over again—that is, join all of these Communist-front groups—would you do it at the present time? Would you sponsor the same things that you call liberalism and so forth?"

MR. ODETS. I do not think I would sponsor many of them. I would pick very carefully and would be careful where I put my signature ... if there were organizations that stood for what liberals stood for, if they were Communist dominated or controlled, I would like to wrest away from the Communists their control ... I do not know right now to what extent an organization like the Arts, Sciences, and Professions Committee or Council is Communist dominated, because it is a valuable organization, but with many fine, outstanding citizens in it, I would like to wrest control of it away from the Communists.

MR. VELDE. But do you still support it in its present constituency?

MR. ODETS. I mean honestly to go back to New York City and make an earnest and sincere investigation of the organizations, particularly in regard to that one organization. ...

MR. VELDE. Until you do make that investigation, you are going to continue to support the organization?

MR. ODETS. I am going to make the investigation immediately.

MR. WOOD. Any further questions, Mr. Counsel?

MR. TAVENNER. No, sir.

MR. WOOD. Any reason why the witness should not be excused from further attendance before the committee?

MR. TAVENNER. No, sir, I think not.

MR. WOOD. Very well. It is so ordered. The committee will stand in recess until 2:30 this afternoon. (U.S. Congress 3512)

In contrast to this dismissal, Kazan was thanked profusely by the Committee chairman at the conclusion of his testimony: “Mr. Kazan, it is only through people such as you that we have been able to bring to the attention of the American people the communist conspiracy of world domination. Thank you, Mr. Kazan, we are very grateful” (Freedland 223).

It is not difficult to see why the Committee did not thank Odets. But neither was he deprived of the means of making a living via the blacklist. He was deprived “merely” of his self-esteem. Both are a form of amputation. In *Naming Names*, Victor Navasky includes a chapter entitled “The Informer as Victim” (Navasky 371-83). According to Navasky,

Informers endured three types of penalty. First, some—but not most—of them suffered the same sort of employment discrimination visited upon those who refused to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee. Second, most—but not all—of them suffered a loss of self-esteem. And finally, virtually all of them were subjected to a variety of social penalties, some of which persist to this day. (371)

One social penalty that persists has been visited upon Odets’ son, Walt. He recounts his struggle growing up with a sense of shame relating to his father’s testimony. He feared looking into the subject until he was well into adulthood. He is still occasionally confronted with such questions as, “How does it feel to be the son of a squealer?” (Sung). In a more public forum, Vincent Canby reviewed the 1994 National Actors Theatre revival of *The Flowering Peach* in the *New York Times*. He referred to Odets as, “The once passionate voice of left-wing idealism in the American theatre [who] had become a squealer” (Canby).

Odets arguably suffered all three forms of penalty inflicted on informers. The latter two are biographically evident. The first is less obvious. Indeed, it cannot be said that Odets suffered from overt employment discrimination to the extent suffered by his blacklisted colleagues in Hollywood. Instead, Odets inflicted this penalty on himself. He had identified himself to the Committee twice as primarily “a playwright and a theatre director” (Bentley, *Treason* 499; U.S. Congress (unpubl.) 2). He was a markedly ambivalent witness, and had been acknowledged as such by the Committee. While ostensibly exonerated by them, he was left with the guilt he felt at cooperating with them in naming his friends from the Group Theatre. Though not religiously observant, cultural ties may well have made him familiar with the Judaic taboo forbidding informing against another Jew on pain of death (Vitello). Bromberg, Brand and Carnovsky were Jewish. By the same token, in his testimony he had done exactly what his opportunistic father would have done. Harboring this double-barrelled guilt, he suffered a partial artistic shutdown. It was exacerbated by public reaction. He had

given what he believed was, under the circumstances, a strong, defiant performance. The reviews were negative.

The first full-length study of Odets' life and work appeared in 1962 (Shuman, *Clifford Odets*). It was written with Odets' cooperation and assumed approval.¹³⁰ The book provides selected biographical details, including Odets' family background. Mentioned are his first marriage to Luise Rainer and their divorce, and his second marriage to Bette Grayson—but not their divorce in November 1951. The evolution of his political inclinations and his brief affiliation with the Communist Party are recounted. His testimony before HUAC is tellingly omitted. Odets was attempting to rewrite his own personal history by censoring his biographer.

Odets had given Clurman a strong impression that he had intended to defy the Committee. Clurman was a man with whom Odets had been extremely close and for whom he had prodigious respect. Nonetheless, he withheld from him the fact that he had already named Group actors in closed session.

[He] was going to tell them off. He practically informed them that he was going to hold out and not say any of the things which he finally did say... *almost a day before he went down there* [emphasis added]. ... When he came back, apparently one night at Robbe [sic] Garfield's he ... burst into tears and said he had not fully conveyed his thought or fully represented his feelings.¹³¹ *In other words, he hadn't satisfied his presentation of himself and his convictions. He had muffed the opportunity* [emphasis added] ... I also know that he kept on sending a printed version of the Hearing to various friends. (Clurman, Interview 1963)

In a taped interview with Brenman-Gibson, Sidney Davis, Odets' attorney prior to the Hearings, corroborates Clurman's statement that Odets meant to defy the Committee:

DAVIS. [He] came to see me; I was his general lawyer and had done a lot of work representing people before HUAC. Clifford wanted me to go to Washington with him. I couldn't, [I] was trying a case. I called Gene Gressman to represent him. I talked to [Odets] 3-4 hours. He was hostile to HUAC and in a rage about the subpoena and wasn't going to go at all. I told him he could [be] arrested and ... jailed if he didn't go. I advised him as to

¹³⁰ Shuman writes, "Grateful acknowledgment is made to Clifford Odets for his many courtesies to me during the course of this study" (Acknowledgments). Odets sent a copy of the book to the Gibsons not long before his death (Shuman, *Clifford Odets* xi). He was thus familiar with its contents.

¹³¹ Robbe (Roberta) Garfield was the wife of former Group actor John Garfield. Garfield died of a heart attack on 21 May 1952, the day after Odets' finished testifying, and following his own testimony before HUAC. Garfield was blacklisted despite never having belonged to the Communist Party. Following Garfield's death, Robbe married the attorney Sidney Cohn, quoted later in this chapter.

the law; he had to comply with the subpoena. I outlined the alternatives: he could take the Fifth, the First, or could testify. *If he admitted his membership in the Communist Party he would have to name names* [emphasis added]. I didn't go into details of his testimony in advance with him. A mercurial fellow, unpredictable. I didn't know what he would do. He was breathing fire all the time we talked. Very upset about it and seemed ready to go to hell.

BRENMAN-GIBSON. How did he change his mind?

DAVIS. I don't know that he did, really. (Davis)¹³²

Kazan, however, takes a different view. He had a direct influence on Odets' decision to name former comrades, and later he was sorry for doing so. By this time Kazan was the most sought-after director in New York or Hollywood (Smith 416). He was called before the Committee several times. He initially refused to give names. The Committee increased the pressure with each meeting. He and Odets had dinner prior to Kazan's final testimony in another closed hearing on 10 April 1951.¹³³ Kazan asked Odets' permission to name him. *If Odets withheld permission, Kazan said he would defy the Committee.* To Kazan's surprise and relief, Odets also wanted his friend's permission, in turn, to name him. Odets was therefore as responsible for Kazan's own capitulating testimony and statement as he was his own. Kazan published a statement in the *New York Times* by taking out a full-page ad the day after his testimony was reported. He wrote,

The question will be asked why I did not tell this story sooner. I was held back, primarily, by concern for the reputations and employment of people who may, like myself, have left the party many years ago.

I was also held back by a piece of specious reasoning which has silenced many liberals. It goes like this: 'You may hate the Communists, but you must not attack them or expose them, because if you do you are attacking the right to hold unpopular opinions and you are joining the people who attack civil liberties.'

I have thought soberly about this. It is, simply, a lie.

...

Liberals must speak out. (qtd. in Bentley, *Treason* 483)

Kazan and Odets each supported and named the other as well as former Group members in the Group party cell; each bore a double responsibility. Kazan felt this pact and its

¹³² Odets must have decided by 24 April, the date of the closed hearing, to which Gressman accompanied him as counsel.

¹³³ Kazan never testified in open hearing. Bentley says that, "The Committee handled Kazan with kid gloves ... no doubt to preserve Kazan from hecklers" (Bentley, *Treason* 482). Testimony from his 10 April closed hearing was released to the press the following day.

consequences caused Odets “to die before he died” (*A Life* 462-63). Kazan’s story would appear to be true. Having met with Kazan prior to 10 April, the date of Kazan’s final hearing, Odets evidently decided to name his former comrades at least two weeks in advance of his first appearance before the Committee, in executive (closed) session, on 24 April.

The unpublished transcript of Odets’ closed hearing on 24 April 1952 indicates that it served as a screening process. It also served as a rehearsal for both the Committee and Odets. Odets was far more deferential with an audience limited to Committee members and his attorney. In the absence of reporters and spectators, there were no contentious flourishes as the hearing progressed. As in the public hearing, Odets took pains, when he “named names,” to emphasize that he was merely following in Kazan’s footsteps. Odets was clearly nervous. Tavenner initially had to prod his witness:

MR. TAVENNER. Now, who were the members of the Theater Group [sic] with whom you conferred, as I understood, as the last step of your recruitment into the party?

MR. ODET. The only one with whom I have any memory of meeting is Mr. Bromberg. Later I met a few of the persons that Mr. Kazan mentioned in his testimony.

MR. TAVENNER. Who were they?

MR. ODETS. I met Mr. Kazan. *Right off I don’t know if I can remember any of the names* [emphasis added]. I met a man named Leverett.

MR. TAVENNER. Lewis Leverett?

MR. ODETS. *Yes. Maybe you can refresh my memory* [emphasis added].

MR. TAVENNER. You can try to refresh your memory about the names and then I will refresh your mind, if you are unable to.

MR. ODETS. I met Mr. Kraber.

MR. TAVENNER. Tony?

MR. ODETS. *Yes. I know from reading the New York Times that Mr. Kazan mentioned Morris Carnovsky* [emphasis added]. I don’t remember meeting him as a member of the Communist Party. Yes, I remember meeting the woman who became his wife later, Phoebe Brand. The two names that I don’t remember at all that Mr. Kazan mentioned are Mr. Carnovsky and another woman named Paula Miller, who is now Mrs. Strasberg. These two people I didn’t meet.

(U.S. Congress (unpubl.) 10-11)

Later Odets was asked about numerous other show business personalities both belonging to and outside of the Group. Luther Adler, Paul Robeson, Jose Ferrer, Uta Hagen, Burgess

Meredith, Sam Wanamaker and John Garfield were among the many names mentioned. He had, he said, never met any of them in a Party context, except the writer/director Abe Polonsky (U.S. Congress (unpubl.)) Polonsky was already blacklisted at this time, having refused to testify before the Committee in 1951. The Committee did not bother to mention any of these people in the subsequent open hearing. There would have been no sensational value in Odets *not* confirming names.

Comparison of the transcripts from the closed and open hearings illuminates the nature of the open hearings: HUAC was theatre. Odets had a month between the two hearings in which to review and polish his performance. The ambience of the hearings stimulated Odets' actor's instincts. Conflicted about publicly naming his former Group Theatre friends, he was able in the intervening month to augment what he perceived to be a resistant stance. Unhappily, his "rewrite" was not effective. It was panned by those critics he cared about most. The reception of the producers was lukewarm at best; they did not express their appreciation of what he had sacrificed and what he felt he stood for.

As Clurman mentioned, after the open hearing Odets sent transcripts of his testimony to friends as evidence (he believed) of his good intentions. His own interpretation of his testimony clashed dramatically with that of many others, some of whom had been intimate friends. Others, such as Charlie Chaplin, felt he had behaved, if not honourably, at least as best he could under the circumstances (Chaplin). A crucial fact further confusing the issue was that the Committee did not thank Odets for his testimony. "Thanking" cooperative witnesses was not a mere nicety. Martin Gang, a defense attorney for informers, "worked out a routine with the [C]hairman, who would excoriate the resisters but always closed by thanking the adequately penitent. *The closing "thank you" quickly took on operational significance when there might otherwise have been a question as to the adequacy of a witness's contrition*" [emphasis added] (Navasky 101). Odets was pointedly not given this codified benediction (U.S. Congress 3511-12). Odets may have taken this as recognition of his intended insubordination. However, neither was he blacklisted. The Committee had delivered a mixed message.

Clurman pinpoints Odets' dilemma:

Odets asserted, veering to a position that would show his former comrades that he was no turncoat, there were still good arguments (or, as he put it, 'good tunes') for Socialism. But none of this hair-splitting counted in the view of his left-oriented or politically neutral colleagues, who blamed him for listing the names of the members of his party 'cell.' The irony is that in doing this he did not even satisfy the committee, since he had not declared an emphatic opposition to his early radicalism, and the committee did not

thank him for his testimony, as it did in all cases when the witness was clearly ‘friendly.’ (Clurman, *All People* 162)

Odets’ testimony placed him in a perpetual moral limbo. Names had been named by the man who wrote the line, “Half-idealism is the peritonitis of the soul” (C. Odets, *Big Knife* 58). All those named by Kazan and himself were blacklisted. While the blacklist was a specifically Hollywood institution, it sullied the professional reputations of all those listed on both coasts. Many were deprived of a livelihood even in the theatre. Many were forced to live and seek work abroad. Marriages fell apart; suicides occurred. There was no question that Odets’ confirmation of their names was a contributing factor to the destruction of their lives.

It is indicative of the depth of Odets’ personal conflict that he named in his testimony J. Edward Bromberg. Bromberg had been subpoenaed by the Committee a year before. Odets and Bromberg had remained close friends well after the demise of the Group. Bromberg had even been included in Beck Street Boys’ reunions. Odets’ childhood friend Carl Heilpern tells of a reunion, in 1949 or 1950, that included Odets, Bromberg, “Julie” Garfield, Bette Grayson Odets (his second wife), himself, and several others of the Beck Street clan (Heilpern). Bromberg had been in the original productions of *Waiting for Lefty*, *Awake and Sing!* and *The Big Knife* (1949). A story current at the time, according to Zero Mostel, was that Odets asked Bromberg’s wife, Goldie, “Do you think Joe would mind if I named him?” Odets then “told [Bromberg] he was gonna name him” (Mostel). Mostel’s wife, Katie, went on to state that for those who, in effect, worshipped Odets and Kazan, it was a “nightmare ... like finding out your mother is an axe-murderer” (Mostel).¹³⁴ Whether or not with their permission or foreknowledge, by naming Bromberg and other Group colleagues Odets was not merely denouncing them politically but also repudiating all that the Group had stood for. He effectively abandoned his artistic and moral principles.

Bromberg appeared before the Committee in open hearing on 26 June 1951, nearly a year before Odets (“Bromberg Silent”). He was distinctly uncooperative; in fact, he was belligerent. He died of a heart attack less than six months later, on 6 December 1951, alone, in London, at the age of 47. He was in London to rehearse a new play by Dalton Trumbo (Friedrich 381), one of the most prominent of the Hollywood Ten. Odets delivered a eulogy at a memorial service for Bromberg at the Hotel Diplomat later that month (“Memorial to Bromberg”):

Men are growing somehow smaller, and life becomes a wearisome and

¹³⁴ Implicit in this statement, and in statements of others, is that Odets’ testimony contributed to Garfield’s death by a heart attack on 21 May 1952, the day following Odets’ final appearance before HUAC. This feeling prevailed despite that under oath Odets said he had no knowledge of Garfield being a Communist (Bentley, *Treason* 523). Garfield met Odets when he was 18 years old. It was Odets who introduced Garfield to the Group (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 243-44); he was considered a protégé of Odets.

sickening bore when such unnatural deaths become a commonplace of the day, now that citizens of our world are hounded out of home, honor, livelihood and painfully accreted career by the tricks and twists of shameless shabby politicians banded into yapping packs. (qtd. Friedrich 382)

It can thus be inferred that Odets publicly blamed HUAC for Bromberg's death.¹³⁵ Five months after delivering the righteous eulogy, Odets himself named Bromberg as a Communist before the Committee in executive session, and a month later in the open hearing (U.S. Congress (unpubl.) 10; Bentley 501).

Eugene Gressman, the attorney to whom Sidney Davis referred Odets and who accompanied him to both hearings, confirms Kazan's account: "Once [Odets] decided to talk about publicly identifying members of the Communist Party starting with himself, we couldn't help him much." After the fact, in a letter dated 21 August, 1952, Odets indicated to Gressman that he was very depressed. He pointed out that the Committee did not thank him. But he did not say that he was sorry for anything (Gressman).¹³⁶

One can fairly condemn Odets for his actions, but not for his turmoil. Sidney Cohn was a liberal New York attorney who counseled prospective witnesses toward "working with" the Committee in order to circumvent the blacklist system (Navasky 157, 161) while not compromising oneself morally.¹³⁷ Although he did not represent Odets before HUAC, he was familiar with his case. He told Brenman-Gibson that Odets was not like rest of the "friendly witnesses" at all, and that was why HUAC did not thank him: "Tell me, why are people spitting on me—turning their back[s]?" Odets asked him (Cohn).

Interpretations of what constituted a "friendly" witness varied. The Communist Party considered anyone an informer who answered any of the Committee's questions directly, whether or not s/he "named names." To the Party, saying who one *didn't* know as a Party member was tantamount to saying who one *did* know (Navasky 158). Evidently the Committee itself did not feel Odets had been particularly cooperative, demonstrated by withholding their thanks. Some friends, such as Charlie and Oona Chaplin, who were close with Odets at the time, felt his stand had been admirable. Chaplin reviewed Odets' testimony in 1972. Even with hindsight—or perhaps because of it—he told Brenman-Gibson: "This is really very good—remarkable ..." (Chaplin). It seemed to the writer Benjamin Appel, an alumnus of Odets' playwriting class at the Actors Studio, "that two different men had testified before the Committee. A defiant Odets, who eloquently upheld the constitution

¹³⁵ Goodman contends Bromberg's death was a suicide (303).

¹³⁶ (*i.e.*, either naming names or having been a member of the Communist Party).

¹³⁷ Navasky reports that Cohn's theory was "You play the game. Go in quietly, work with the Committee, but challenge it in a legal fashion" (Navasky 161).

and the bill of rights. And a confused, worried Odets who eventually revealed the names of friends and associates who had once been communists” (qtd. in Groman 73).

Upon reading his father’s testimony, Walt Odets was relieved. As a clinical psychologist as well as a son, he is in a uniquely qualified position to form an opinion. He confirmed Clurman’s view of Odets’ naïvete in a recent radio interview. “My father was actually not a very political person. His relationship to Communism ... in the ‘thirties, in the United States, was much more out of a kind of secular humanism than political interest” (Sung). He accepts the rationalisation that naming people already named by Kazan did no further harm. His interpretation of his father’s testimony is that “he constantly confronted the Committee” (Baitz 30).

Re-naming, however, also inflicted damage. Every time a person was named as being or having been a Party member, their name would appear in newspapers across the country, and be broadcast on news programmes. Attention would once again be drawn to them, keeping their affiliation (whether true or not) fresh in the minds of the public and professional colleagues. If naming lengthened the blacklist, re-naming reinforced its authority and perpetuated it. Odets continued to comply with the Committee’s methods. He was interviewed by the FBI on 3 June 1957, five years after he testified, and it appears he was again cooperative (Groman 71).

Odets, a deeply conflicted figure at all times, found himself in the vortex of a highly-charged political situation wherein the stakes were extremely high for all concerned. He was widely known to have been a member of the Communist Party; he therefore could not deny it. As Gressman tells it, “Once you conceded you were a member of the party, you [had] to go ahead and tell it all or risk being cited for contempt and going to jail.” When asked by Brenman-Gibson if Odets was considered a friendly witness, Gressman responded, “In one sense, yes—that he talked at all—but he wasn’t the kind that really helped them by giving them a list of names to check into. They didn’t learn anything new from him, and he wasn’t about to give them anything new.”

After the fact, Gressman had the impression that Odets particularly wanted to combat newspaper characterisations of his appearance before the Committee. Columnists had written of his “wild hairdo” and “pink shirt”¹³⁸ (Gressman). Newspaper accounts were unflattering and frequently inaccurate. Odets, as always, was intent on turning the critical viewpoint in his favour. Prior to the hearing, he told Zero Mostel, “I will appear before the HUAC and name names so that I can then attack them.” After testifying Odets insisted, “You can’t judge me by what you read in the paper, you must read my testimony. If I had not cooperated with the committee, I could not have attacked them as I did.” Mostel found

¹³⁸ If indeed Odets wore a pink shirt to a hearing regarding his Communist affiliations, he did it thoughtlessly. It would indicate the extent to which he was distraught.

this reasoning spurious (Mostel). Mostel was himself named by another witness and blacklisted (Navasky 178).

Playwright John Howard Lawson was blacklisted and jailed in 1950 as one of the Hollywood Ten. Prior to Odets' debut as a playwright in 1935, Clurman had considered Lawson "the hope of our theatre" (Smith 96). The Group had produced two of his plays (Smith 430), one of which, *Success Story* (1932), is a forerunner of Odets' vernacular-style dialogue (Smith 104). Lawson provided a gracious assessment regarding dedication to and defection from the Communist Party within the Group: "I don't think anybody ever betrayed anybody. Lots of mistakes were made; I've made a very large share ... The issue in the Group was very simple: the young actors, particularly those who were Communists, wanted to have a real collective." Lawson continued,

In July 1947, a conference on Thought Control was held at the Beverly Hills Hotel. ... There [was] a long list of about fifty prominent people who ha[d] been accused of Communism 'in recent years and months.' ... In the long list, the following names appear: 'Euripides, Clifford Odets, Garson Kanin, Walter Winchell ...' In that order writers tended to view Clifford as a prominent cultural figure who had no strong ties—and certainly no identification—with the Left.¹³⁹ (Lawson, Interview)

Nonetheless, Odets clung to a Leftist identity. A mere month after the 1947 list referred to by Lawson was published, Odets wrote J. B. Neumann, an art dealer with whom he was in steady contact, "When you see Picasso, give him our admiration and tell him that I am the left [sic] playwright of the U.S." (Brenman-Gibson, 1947).

What was generally interpreted as Odets' capitulation to HUAC—whether a fair analysis or not—irreparably damaged his reputation. While some, like Clurman, did not shun him, Odets did not escape repudiation by a wide circle of now former friends. Bromberg's widow considered it "a matter of self-preservation" to cut off all communication (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 13). That he had not been deprived of making a living in Hollywood provided only material consolation. Many, like Kazan, dated Odets' artistic decline from the time of his HUAC testimony. Zero Mostel made known his "opinion that Odets had been one of America's great artists whose testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee ... had ended his creative capacity" (13).

Odets was always highly sensitive to criticism that he was an artistic "sell-out." The accusation first came from the left-wing critics when he took his first trip to Hollywood in 1936. In his open hearing testimony he referred to an article in the *Daily*

¹³⁹ Garson Kanin and Walter Winchell were stalwart anti-Communists. Winchell was a McCarthy supporter.

Worker in his HUAC testimony, “I am misquoted all the way through there ... it very sneeringly refers to me as a man who gave up his career and went to Hollywood to make his gold”¹⁴⁰ (Bentley, *Treason* 530). A month after he was “listed” in 1947, he wrote to Clurman, “mostly it is silence around me (or malicious, hateful gossip)” (Letter to Clurman).

At the time of his testimony, Odets had spent the principal portion of sixteen active professional years working on film scripts rather than plays. Nonetheless, the opening lines of his testimony in both the closed and public hearings are salient:

MR. TAVENNER. What is your occupation?

MR. ODETS. *I am a playwright and a theatre director* [emphasis added].

MR. TAVENNER. Have you also engaged in the acting profession?

MR. ODETS. I have in the past been an actor. I have written and directed for movies. (Bentley, *Treason* 499)¹⁴¹

At the time of his testimony Odets had directed only two plays professionally: the original production of *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), together with Sanford Meisner, and *The Country Girl* (1950). Identifying himself publicly first as a playwright and theatre director, then an actor, and only lastly as a screenwriter and film director can be read as a declaration of his self-concept. Later in the open testimony he stated, “I go to Hollywood to make an honest living, writing entertaining scripts” (Bentley, *Treason* 530). This statement is markedly less emphatic than, “I am a playwright and a theatre director.” Acutely aware of others’ opinions, Odets refused to accept the epithet of “sell-out” so commonly applied to him, either in an artistic or moral sense. But the issue nagged.

Gressman disagrees that Odets’ motive in his testimony was materialistic. “He didn’t strike me as one out to guard his economic future. Maybe he covered that up. Doesn’t fit in with his position. No impression it was for that” (Gressman). Gressman does not speculate what Odets’ motive might have been. Walt Odets contends,

the personal issues behind [my father’s testimony] were related to my sister who was born with brain damage ... and my father was taking care of her ... about \$2,000/week in medical care. This was in the ‘fifties; this was a huge amount of money ... If he had been blacklisted he would have had no source of income. So he had two children and he made a choice to do this [confrontational] and extremely uncooperative testimony. (Sung)

¹⁴⁰ Article in the *Daily Worker*, 23 Aug, 1937, 7.

¹⁴¹ Clurman felt that Odets “never was a good director, any more than he was a good actor, but he could never be convinced of that. He thought he was a great director” (Clurman, Interview 3/19/66, 19).

There were, however, other options. Blacklisted screenwriters, and directors worked under pseudonyms; many went abroad. It was more difficult for actors. Despite the considerable difficulties, many survived and gradually came out of the shadows with their integrity intact. Some, such as Zero Mostel, eventually flourished.

Bertolt Brecht, who had testified at the same time as the Hollywood Ten (Cook 174), said that he, like many other radicals, “was shocked by Odets’s testimony.” But he tempered his response with the empathy of a fellow-artist. He and Odets had become friendly, in Hollywood, in 1944 (Brenman-Gibson, *Chapt. 29 - Draft* 1875a). Clurman relates, “On my 1956 visit to Brecht in Berlin ... there were some stray remarks about ... Clifford Odets ... ‘Tell Odets to write a play about [his testimony],’ Brecht said. ‘A defense, if he likes. Anything. He doesn’t have to have the play produced. Let him write it for himself. It’ll do him good, it will help him’” (Clurman, *All People* 140). Brecht was unaware that Odets did, in a sense, “write a play about it.” Produced in 1954, Odets called it *The Flowering Peach*.

Chapter Five

“*The Flowering Peach*”

A mask tells us more than a face. (Wilde 995)

In the aftermath of his HUAC testimony, Odets began working on a comedy. When the play was sketched in the Spring of 1953, he and producer Robert Whitehead went on a theatre excursion scouting for actors. *The Fifth Season*, a farce by Sylvia Regan, featured Yiddish theatre star Menasha Skulnik in his English-language debut¹⁴² (Zolotow, “Skulnik Uptown”). Skulnik claimed to have performed in fifteen hundred shows (Ross 23), and to be the highest paid Yiddish actor of the time (Gelb). He showed himself to be a major draw uptown as well as on Second Avenue, and *The Fifth Season* enjoyed an eighteen-month run. Odets and Whitehead returned four times to watch his performance (“Programme Notes”). The casting of Skulnik as Noah in *The Flowering Peach* (1954) was announced a year later (Calta). An accomplished comedian, Skulnik believed that “the tragic hero is the truly funny character ... The best laugh is when it comes with a tear” (Gelb). Casting Skulnik as a Biblical personage would prove a coup as well as a catastrophe.

The *New York Times* announcement, released over a year after the Broadway casting foray, states that rehearsals were to begin in September 1954, with an expected mid-October opening. The author would direct the play. But the opening was postponed until late December, and rehearsals had already been stalled for the better part of a year. When rehearsals were finally underway, the show remained confined to the studio for two months, double the normal rehearsal period for a Broadway show. The production played out-of-town for an additional two months, prompting massive rewrites. Odets’ theatrical swan song was born of a stressful process. Before the show opened, Skulnik pressed charges against Odets, generally known for his empathy toward actors, for abusive behaviour.¹⁴³ Relations between Odets and Whitehead also began to fray. Nor was Odets at peace with himself.

Juleen Compton, a young actress with whom Odets was involved at the time,¹⁴⁴ observed,

Every word was like cutting a piece of flesh from himself to make a child ...

He would stay in, living on cough drops and cigarettes. Going to his

¹⁴² In his move uptown, Skulnik joined such Yiddish-to-English crossover stars as Stella and Luther Adler, Paul Muni, Jacob Ben Ami, Rudolph Schildkraut, Molly Picon, and Joseph Buloff.

¹⁴³ A letter from the Jules Ziegler Agency informed Odets in November 1954 that charges had been lodged against him for mistreatment of Menasha Skulnik, to wit, “insults and humiliating remarks made when [Odets] came to his dressing room between the first and second acts of the performance on Thursday evening, November 25, 1954, at the Shubert Theater in Washington, D.C. ... It is therefore understandable that for the remaining period of rehearsals before the opening in New York that it is next to impossible for him to take direction from you and the purpose of this letter is to advise you of our action so that you can make the necessary arrangements” (Clifford Odets Papers, Lilly Library, Odets Mss. Corres B. 5, f. 1954, Nov.).

¹⁴⁴ Juleen Compton later became Harold Clurman’s second wife.

apartment was like coming in[to] a tomb. He never went out. He was rude to people ... didn't want to see anyone. I think he was trying to use every ounce of energy to 'fight for his life.' (3-4).

Compton's "tomb" image is apt. Odets was undertaking his first major writing project since his HUAC appearance. The life struggle referred to by Compton was in relation to Odets' sense of himself. As John Frick maintains, "no loss ... was more significant to Odets than the loss of identity that resulted from the sacrifice of one's ideals" (131). Frick points out that Odets explored this theme years earlier in *Golden Boy* and *The Big Knife*. It was central to who he was. Frick continues, "As depicted in *Golden Boy*, Joe Bonapart[e]'s Faustian bargain to sell his ideals (as embodied in his artistry) for dollars and fame [i.e., security] represented to Odets the most serious and pitiable type of loss, one that could only be redeemed by death, and one that Odets's biographers say haunted him personally" (131).

Thus Odets book-ended his playwriting career with his two most Jewish plays out of personal necessity. What he had lost as a result of naming former colleagues before HUAC was, as Frick puts it, irredeemable. Odets' "search for the lost part of me" (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 146) became increasingly urgent in his maturity, as his sense of personal and temporal loss increased. This final chapter will further the argument set forth in Chapter Two, that Odets' inability to commit to a Jewish identity and ally himself with Jewish causes fostered an inner struggle that hampered his art. In 1940, in reaction to a *New York Times* article announcing further restrictions on German Jews, he wrote in his private journal,

Rarely do I feel my Jewishness as a separate quality of the personality, but when I read such an article there is a sudden inner flare-up and I think, 'You ought to sign your name from now on, "Clifford Odets, Jew.'" But that is *untrue* [emphasis added], sensational, exclusionizing, even though it appeals to something in the spirit. More painful (I think) to write, yet so much more correct, so ample and free, is 'Clifford Odets, American.' (*Time Is Ripe* 238)

Twelve years later, his decision to name former colleagues in the Communist Party before HUAC tested what it meant to be "Clifford Odets, American." But he could never bring himself to sign his name "Clifford Odets, Jew." His inability to commit to a definition of self impeded his development as a playwright. The HUAC events were unalterable. But the State of Israel had been founded in 1948; never before was it so felicitous to embrace his Jewish identity. His failure to commit wholeheartedly to Judaism or Jewish culture manifested in a lack of authorial decisiveness in *The Flowering Peach*. As he had progressively removed all traces of Jewish reference from his plays, so now did he scramble to reclaim a sense of *Yiddishkeit*. Yet a fissure, a distancing, remained. *The Flowering Peach* was apparently cathartic, even in its failure, as he never finished another play.

The years between the success of Odets' penultimate play, *The Country Girl* (1950), and the production of *The Flowering Peach* (1954), were among the most calamitous of his life. The collapse of his second marriage late in 1951 was followed by a Congressional subpoena in the Spring of 1952. As seen in Chapter Four, his testimony before HUAC provided a dubious escape from the blacklist. It sparked a maelstrom of hostility from without and self-castigation from within. He would forever be known as a stool pigeon. Then, in February 1954, with the still-inchoate script of *The Flowering Peach* months overdue, his ex-wife, Bette Grayson, the mother of his children, died. He was now bereft, a single father undergoing psychoanalysis, ill-equipped to be the sole guardian of two young offspring, one of whom was brain-damaged. Rehearsals began, in the wake of these events, for what would be Odets' last Broadway show.

He began thinking about the supporting cast several months after watching Skulnik's performance early in 1953. He wrote in his diary, "Get snapshots—Joan McCracken, Leo Penn, Mart[in] Ritt, Leo[n] Janney, Joan Lor[r]ing" (Brenman-Gibson, 1953 81). Penn had been blacklisted for refusing to name fellow Communist Party members before HUAC. Neither Janney nor Ritt, a former Group colleague, had been subpoenaed, but both had been blacklisted, on hearsay. That blacklisted actors would consider working with an informer exemplifies the desperation for work among show business professionals during that fraught period. Ritt and Janney were eventually cast. Janney, a friend of Odets' (Brenman-Gibson, *Short Chron.*) stated in an interview that he did at one point confront Odets for naming names (Janney). However, Janney's political beliefs and status did not stop him from accepting the role of Noah's wayward son, Ham. Two blacklisted actors being directed by a HUAC informer could only have guaranteed an undercurrent of tension.

Friends sympathetic to Odets' HUAC dilemma were consulted about casting. Molly Day Thacher Kazan, a fellow playwright and the wife of his close friend, Elia Kazan, wrote to Odets,

Can't get out of my mind a phrase you used about casting 'nice average American' girls in THE FLOWERING PEACH [sic] ... Romantic, attractive young girls can't be Jewish??? [sic] There's a sort of reverse-of-the-coin of anti-Semitism in this bloody (unspoken) tradition ... [of] casting non-Jewish girls to beg the question of whether they're Jewish or not. In this play of all plays, YOU SHOULD HAVE AN ADORABLE JEWISH GIRL [sic] ... And then a funny but WINNING AND RECOGNIZABLE YOUNG JEWISH MATRON [sic] ... I'm telling you, as a *goy*. I think you discount the *goyishe* audience: your Jewish audience is used to making a sort of rough translation (from denatured casting) to what they know is the

reality¹⁴⁵... That's not good. But it's better than the rest of the audience can do. (Day Thacher Kazan)

Odets was still fencing with his own ethnic shadow, even in treating a story from the Pentateuch. As written, *The Flowering Peach* is his most Jewish play. Reviews indicate that *Yiddishkeit* was in every way emphasised in performance. Nonetheless, he waffled in the casting of Jewish actresses. Rehearsals were finally scheduled to begin in September 1954, and by July of that summer agents were sending Odets casting suggestions. He also received unsolicited letters from actors, many unknown to him, begging for auditions.¹⁴⁶



Figure 24: Barbara Baxley (standing) as Goldie, and Janice Rule as Rachel in the original production of *The Flowering Peach* 1954. Courtesy of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Odets cast Berta Gersten, another Yiddish theatre luminary, to play opposite Skulnik as Noah's wife, Esther. She and Skulnik had performed together many times on the Yiddish stage (Kalb). Gersten was tall and often described as regal. She did not find working in English easy, though she had performed in English once before, in Chicago, without much difficulty. But the struggle of working in English in Odets' production "brought on black days and an inferiority complex." According to a *New York Times* article, her impediment drove Odets to tears; he sent her to a psychiatrist (Kalb). Despite Day Thacher Kazan's chiding, Janice Rule and Barbara Baxley, young gentile actresses, were cast as Rachel, the wife of the second son, Ham, and Goldie, the prostitute. But Odets cast Shem and his wife Leah with Jewish actors, Ritt and Osna Palmer. Shem is the merchant son obsessed with material security. Though it is in a director's best interest to cast a play with whoever seems right for the part, the choice of Jewish rather than gentile actors in the grasping, mercantile

¹⁴⁵ Day Thacher here offers an excellent example of "encoding" per Bial.

¹⁴⁶ Clifford Odets Papers, Lilly Library, B. 5, f. 1954 "Correspondence-July".

roles could be interpreted as ethnic typecasting. The issue would not arise if the entire play had been cast with Jewish actors. It was as though Odets were attempting non-traditional casting but could not commit to it wholeheartedly. As he was both playwright and director, it can be assumed that his casting choices shed light on his feelings about the play.

Hollywood had accustomed him to making “nice, average, American” choices. Despite its trappings and two Yiddish theatre stars at the helm, it was to be an Americanised version of a Biblical story.

But before casting decisions could be finalised, the play had to be written. The years 1953 and 1954 were particularly difficult for Odets. His Tante Esther Rossman, on whom Noah’s wife is eponymously modeled, was diagnosed with cancer in 1953. Odets’ friend Sidney Kaye described her as being “like a queen, a tall woman with piercing eyes—like a biblical character. She spoke with an accent, could hardly write her name, [but was] highly intelligent about human nature” (Kaye). Odets wrote to ballerina and love interest, Melissa Hayden, “This afternoon was my last session with the analyst ... and most of the session was taken up with my aunt who is dying in Philadelphia. It feels an urge in me to go to my Aunt Sunday or Monday and stay there a while with her and ‘baby’ her. She is my real second mother” (Letter to Hayden, 29 Jul ‘53). When she was sent home to die, he sent her money for a “Negro maid by-the-day” (Brenman-Gibson, *Short Chron.* 11). By August 1953 she was in hospital, with Odets visiting her frequently. He nonetheless managed to finish a first draft by September, as well as a television script for the Ford *Omnibus* series (Rowe 11). Tante Esther died on 19 November 1953 (Brenman-Gibson, *Main Chron.* 78), a significant personal loss.¹⁴⁷

Brenman-Gibson dates the actual writing of the script from April 1953, roughly a year after Odets’ debacle in Washington.¹⁴⁸ He had, by that time, mentioned the play to the Gibsons, and publicly to the *Berkshire Eagle*. Some pages are dated “4/16.” On 17 May, a *New York Times* item reported that he was working on the play (Funke, “Rialto Gossip”) that became the second great trial of his life. The article states that it was expected to be ready “by the end of July.” Sporadically the work went well. Even when Tante Esther was in hospital in August 1953, he was able to write to Hayden, “The work on the play, happily, is no longer simple ... taking on some richness and complexity ... Noah and his wife are

¹⁴⁷ Odets was bereft at the death of his Aunt Esther. According to Freda Rossman, Odets’ cousin, “Tante never opened her mouth after Clifford left; he stayed two weeks when he heard she was dying. To Clifford she talked, and never again after he left.” “After Tante’s funeral [Odets] came back here to the house. ‘My Tante was *just* laid in the ground and all these people are eating. I would throw up.’” Freda said that he refused all food and drink and stood around brooding (Papers of Margaret Brenman-Gibson, B. 4, Notes, 1953).

¹⁴⁸ Christopher J. Herr cites the summer of ’53 for Odets’ commencement of writing the play (120). That summer is when Odets began writing in earnest.

gradually becoming my aunt and her husband” (Brenman-Gibson, *Short Chron.* 80). The euphoria was short-lived, however. Only two days later, on the 17th, he wrote, “I am wrestling with myself as only Jacob wrestled with the Angel ... a big night is 6 to 8 pages ... Girded and gutty, I am walking a tightrope. One must will the writing and yet one cannot will an artwork into being ... Meanwhile, I sleep as badly as in my entire life, waking up almost on the hour” (Brenman-Gibson, *Main Chron.* 80). In contrast, *Waiting for Lefty*, albeit a one-act, was written in three nights. The full-length *The Country Girl* was written in a feverish burst of “sixteen days and nights” (Norton). Former fellow Group member, Sanford Meisner, recalled that Odets

pooh-poohed [*The Country Girl*, and] said, ‘I just wrote this play to make money.’ He described to me the labor [sic] pains he had in every line of *The Big Knife* [1949]—which wasn’t a good play ... and then he did something which was very characteristic of him—he explained how [*The Big Knife*] was a great play because of the ... struggle and the labor pains that he had to endure in order to write. I said, ‘The most awful thing about you, Clifford, is that you have no trust in your own talent ... You think just because you wrote [*The Country Girl*] ‘off the top of your head’ that it’s *ipso facto* no good—but if you struggle like Goethe and Beethoven[,] *that* makes it good.’ (Meisner)

By this criterion, *The Flowering Peach* would be an indisputable masterpiece. Janney felt that “[Odets] as director was ruthless to [Odets] as playwright” (Janney), no doubt a factor in the two-year, rollercoaster work process. Knowing in advance that he would direct *The Country Girl* apparently worked to his advantage. In the instance of *The Flowering Peach*, it did not. He was at loggerheads with himself, often resulting in a deadlock at the typewriter and the rehearsal hall. He was writing a play about Jews, and therefore making a statement as a Jew, about Jews.

Janney also perceived Odets’ general dissatisfaction [with] his background and “a desire to divorce from it.” Given this, Janney found it peculiar that Odets chose to write a play reflecting his origins (Janney). Odets noted, in the autumn of 1953, “A real art work is always made only out of the ‘logic’ of one’s own nature. It does not look outside for logic, sequence, style, structure or materials” (Brenman-Gibson, *Main Chron.* 84b). Clearly the “logic” of Odets’ own nature did not follow a linear trajectory nor was it necessarily coherent. He once again felt in control on 1 September, writing to Hayden, “Now I’m just where I want to be, in the grip, flux and toss of ... this play. And I do love ... this full and steady connectedness ... no longer thinking consciously about it but nevertheless absorbed and possessed by it whether awake or asleep ... It’s the life and I love it, Oh, yes I do! (Brenman-Gibson, *Main Chron.* 87).”

The extremity of Odets' reactions to every fluctuation in his writing process is unusual for a man of his experience. He had enjoyed considerable Broadway success but a few years before, and his craft had continued to evolve in Hollywood. Technical control should not have been an issue. He wrote *The Country Girl* solely to be a hit, and it was. At this point in his life, emotional investment in the material seemed to work against him. Several weeks after finding himself "just where [he] want[ed] to be," he engaged in self-analysis:

The DEFENSIVE SELF [sic] devitalizes & CONTROLS [sic] the shaping, the depth, direction, meaning & content of the writing ... traced back to something of prime importance in the personality of the writer, for it obviously means that he is unconsciously or consciously ... relating to an audience ... in TERMS OF HOW HE WANTS THAT AUDIENCE TO SEE HIM [original emphases].

No writer of real talent must settle for this (or let it settle him!). He must burst thru [sic] it with all his strength! (Brenman-Gibson, *Main Chron.* 91 (Entry 9/17/53))

The implication is that, absent breaking through this perceived psychological barrier, it was crucial for him, on a profound psychological level, to be perceived by others as a Jew. He needed to feel and to appear in touch with Jewish family life and customs. He was playing to the audience. But because he could not define what it meant for him to be a Jew, he encountered a roadblock rather than an avenue to his roots. He struggled to "burst thru with all his strength." It was not a propitious state from which to be writing a comedy. Nonetheless, by the end of September he had finished a first draft of his play (Brenman-Gibson, *Short Chron.* 11).

Sanguine, Odets immediately began revising. He reported to his father that the final script would be finished by the end of October. Based on a production contract to be signed the following day, the *New York Times* announced on the 9th of October that *The Flowering Peach* would go into rehearsal around Christmas 1953 and open late in January or February in the new year (Zolotow, "New Play by Odets"). On the 24th of October he wrote to Brenman-Gibson that he felt it would go more smoothly now that he had interrupted his analysis (Brenman-Gibson, *Short Chron.* 12). Be that as it may, *The Flowering Peach* did not open until nearly a year later, on 28 December 1954. During the Washington tryout late in 1954, with the Broadway opening only weeks away, Odets complained to Whitehead, "You want poetry and I have ashes in my mouth" (Whitehead).

Despite his vicissitudes, Odets managed to inject broad comic strokes into his play. Once Skulnik had been cast, he had no alternative. There is little doubt that writing the part

for Skulnik influenced the play's content and style.¹⁴⁹ Odets sent Skulnik drafts of the script for comment. Skulnik responded on 25 August 1954, shortly before rehearsals were finally to begin. He offered some "honest & perhaps 'brutal' opinions" (Skulnik) on the first five scenes of the play.¹⁵⁰ Skulnik objected overall to the most recent (fourth) draft; he felt that the prior draft, "the 3rd draft [original emphasis], is without doubt a thousand per cent better than the 4th." Skulnik elaborated, criticising Odets' plot, character and structural changes. Most of all, Skulnik objected to Odets making Esther "a common matchmaker" with an "illegitimate distast[e]ful scheme for divorce" suggesting "to her oldest son marriage to a prostitute & [sic] Japheth to take the wife who was married for 7 years to his older brother? It is a sacrilege & in bad taste" (Skulnik). Skulnik's pre-rehearsal criticisms set the tone for his further collaboration with Odets.

If casting Skulnik did not induce harmony in the rehearsal hall, it was a hopeful move toward ethnic authenticity onstage, along with the casting of Gersten. Like Tante Esther and Uncle Rossman, Gersten and Skulnik were Eastern European immigrants whose primary language was Yiddish.¹⁵¹ Their English rode atop Yiddish cadence. Like most Yiddish actors, their training had been on-site: in Skulnik's case, first the circus, then the Yiddish theatre.



Figure 25: Young Menasha Skulnik (second from left) with parents and sisters in Poland, 1903. Public domain photo (Wikipedia).

But these veterans of the Yiddish stage did not share the Stanislavsky-based working vocabulary of the director. Techniques used by Group alumni were not within their working

¹⁴⁹ Skulnik told *The New Yorker* that, prior to seeing him in *The Fifth Season*, Odets had been considering Fredric March or Spencer Tracy, both gentiles, for the role of Noah (Ross 23). The show would have had quite a different flavour had March or Tracy been cast.

¹⁵⁰ It is unclear whether Odets sent Skulnik *only* the first five scenes, or if Odets had trashed the remaining scenes as drafted and was writing them anew. If the latter were the case, it would indicate the amount of difficulty Odets was having, as they were on the cusp of the rehearsal period.

¹⁵¹ Skulnik and Gersten came from Poland. The Rossmans came from Russia (Sroul), and Galicia (Esther), which has been partly incorporated into Poland.

ambit, at least not in codified form. Odets did, however, have some experience directing non-Method actors in *None but the Lonely Heart*.¹⁵² Ritt, another former Group member, had done some directing in television. He occasionally took over the directing to allow Odets time for rewrites, and to act as intermediary between Skulnik and Odets. It is possible that Gersten’s “inferiority complex” (Kalb) was compounded by the underlying Method sensibility of the two directors. She came from a different theatre world. But it was the adversarial nature of Odets’ relationship with Skulnik that caused the most grief.

Odets was not inclined to write to specifications of the leading man of a pickup company. The rehearsal hall resounded with unscripted drama. Skulnik wanted more jokes written for him. Odets was often in a “towering rage,” eyes bulging when he shouted at Skulnik, “You *will* do it as I say!” A typical response of Skulnik’s was “Jokes you write? *Shit* you write!” (Janney). Such aspersions harkened back to Lee Strasberg’s remarks of twenty years earlier when confronted with early drafts of *Awake and Sing!* (Clurman, *Fervent Years* 136). Odets was now above accepting such criticism. Skulnik finally filed abuse charges against Odets in November (Ziegler Assoc.). From that point on, Skulnik took Odets’ direction through Ritt. Ironically, the querulous relationship between Odets and Skulnik, director and actor, replicated those of Noah and God, and Noah and his son, Japheth, as Odets wrote them.



Figure 26: *The Flowering Peach*. Publicity shot of an early rehearsal.
 Left to right: Janice Rule, Barbara Baxley, Menasha Skulnik, Odets,
 Berta Gersten, and producer Robert Whitehead.
 Courtesy of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

It was not only Skulnik who was unhappy with the script well into rehearsals. Odets had to contend with criticism from Whitehead and other professional friends. Whitehead described his “realization” at the Baltimore tryout,

¹⁵² The cast of *None but the Lonely Heart* included former Group members Roman Bohnen and William Challee.

of really how much wasn't there and we'd put together [what amounted to] a third act with a piece of tape ... Kazan arrived to help as a friend, [commenting,] 'After the second act, we begin to cease to know what's happening' (He was very direct ...). Three of us [Kazan, Odets and Whitehead] sat a long time that night in a hotel room. [Odets] listened—we wanted to stop him from directing and get onto the writing. I agreed completely with [Kazan] and I went up with a great sense of hope (we still had two weeks in Washington and two in Boston). [Odets] said he'd think carefully about it and next morning said he ... disagreed with it all and would never invite Kazan again. (Whitehead Interview 4)

Odets was always hypersensitive to criticism. By this time he was also a prominent teacher of playwriting, and yet he had laboured over this play for a year and a half and it still had serious flaws. Insecurity plagued him. Skulnik continued his demands, the rehearsal budget had been overrun. Clurman attended a try-out performance in Wilmington, Delaware.¹⁵³ He reported that Odets had a great deal of trouble controlling the length of the script, which was too long and needed cutting. "[Odets] turned to the producer, and said to him, 'I know what you are thinking: it is terrible.' [Whitehead] didn't say anything ... but [Odets] was absolutely right ... I did speak to him once ... about cutting it, which he never did sufficiently" (Clurman). Odets was apparently well aware of the play's shortcomings. He did not allow its publication during his lifetime, as he always intended to revise it (Brenman-Gibson, Letter to P. Hunt; Letter to P. Stone), but never did.

In the end, the production received strong praise from two particularly distinguished reviewers, Eric Bentley and Brooks Atkinson. Bentley called Skulnik "the gentlest of actors, and one of the best" (Bentley, "Theatre"). Atkinson proclaimed it Odets' "finest" play, and Skulnik's a "virtuoso performance" ("Family Life"). John Gassner lauded Skulnik's "real artistry" (153). Even in the eyes of reviewers who didn't like the play, Skulnik ran away with the show. Woolcott Gibbs called the play "a very wan little affair." He nonetheless declared Skulnik "one of the most technically accomplished actors of our time" (Gibbs 64). Clurman wrote a forgiving review, gently passing over the play's faults while concentrating on its humanistic strengths ("Theater"). Looking back in 1961, Clurman mused, "At the end of the play Noah must choose between living with either his 'radical' or rich son. He chooses the second because with him he will be 'more comfortable.' We were all a little like that in the fifties" (Clurman, "Frightened Fifties" 444).

Turning to a Biblical theme after a time of extreme trial is not surprising. There is

¹⁵³ Clurman also attended the Baltimore tryout. On that occasion he generously commented, "No matter what's wrong, I feel enriched by the evening" (Whitehead Interview 4).

comfort in tradition. The immediate post-war, newly nuclear period produced a number of Biblically-based plays. These include Christopher Fry's *The Firstborn* (1946), which features Moses and transpires in Egypt prior to the Exodus. There is a centuries-old tradition of theatre works based on stories from the Hebrew Bible, particularly the story of Noah and the Deluge. Whitehead saw Odets' impulse to use the Noah tale as "an expression of his legendary sense of folklore" (Whitehead). As seen in Chapter Two, Odets kept an extensive library of religious and philosophical texts. In an interview with Michael Mendelsohn shortly before he died, Odets affirmed, "I like to read the Bible. I would like to read it more. I believe much of what's in it" (Mendelsohn, "Center Stage" 66). Mendelsohn is certain that Odets was fully acquainted with the history of the Noah plays (*Humane Dramatist*, 77), beginning with the Mystery pageants. These sketches were sponsored by medieval guild members and performed by them and other townsfolk. They continued to be popular until they were banned by Elizabeth I (*Chester Mystery Plays* ix). The pageants depicted Old and New Testament events, sometimes giving Christian attributes to stories from the Old Testament. The Wakefield *Noah*, for example, mentions the Christian concept of the Trinity (*Wakefield Mystery Plays* 91, 94). Thus there was actually historical precedent for Odets to mix old and new, gentile and Jew.

The Wakefield, Chester and York plays differ in subtle ways. Their depiction of Mrs. Noah serves as example. At her best, she is a contrary wife. In the Chester and Wakefield plays, she is a comic shrew. The Wakefield and York plays present the married Noahs in an almost slapstick manner. It is understood that Mrs. Noah will get a beating. Maurice Hussey comments, "Mrs. Noah ... first gave rise to much of the literary satire upon her sex in the Middle Ages" (*Chester Mystery Plays* xviii). Ellen Schiff notes that, since Old Testament characters are not considered saints, there is more licence in their stage treatment than characters from the New Testament (*Stereotype* 39). There is no wife of Noah mentioned in Genesis. The tradition of Mrs. Noah's recalcitrance is entirely fabricated and can be traced to Eve's disobedience and Eastern legend, according to the editors of the York plays. Both Eastern and Judeo-Christian tradition blame the reversal of the natural order (i.e., God's intention) on Woman ("The Flood" 21).¹⁵⁴

Odets retains this contentiousness on the part of Mrs. Noah, but not the onus. Esther's character contributes importantly to the family subplot. In *The Flowering Peach*, Noah and Esther's relationship also runs, coincidentally, according to tape recordings Odets made of Tante Esther and Uncle Rossman's verbal interaction. But, unlike the harridan in the Mystery plays, Odets' Esther retains the dignity of a matriarch. She is much loved and respected by her husband and their family. The marital jibes in *The Flowering Peach* are playful, and Esther holds her ground. The Rossmans appear onstage as Odets describes them

¹⁵⁴ Such cultural accusations grow into cultural assumptions, which give birth to stereotypes.

in diaries and journals, and as they reveal themselves in the transcripts of the recordings. Like *Awake and Sing!*, *The Flowering Peach* emphasises the importance of the nuclear family, and especially the central figure of the matriarch, during a time of crisis. In times of great personal need, Odets reverted to the Jewish reverence for the sanctity of family life as a theme. If he could not achieve it in his personal life, at least he could create it onstage.

The family dynamic is also central in Andre Obéy's influential play, *Noah* (*Noë* in French), which had an impact on Odets (Obey). Obey's *Noë* was originally written in French and produced in Paris in 1931, directed by Michel Saint-Denis, nephew of Jacques Copeau. Copeau had reformed French acting, much as Stanislavsky revolutionised Russian acting at the Moscow Art Theatre (Berthold 603). Obey's *Noah* was thus a noteworthy theatrical event on both sides of the Atlantic. The highly praised English-language version, also directed by Saint-Denis, opened in New York in February 1935, during the same week as the Group's production of *Awake and Sing!*.¹⁵⁵

Obey also worked from the Mystery plays. Odets borrows a number of Obey's innovations, such as the dispute between Noah and his son Japheth regarding a rudder for the Ark, and the use of anachronisms. The attack on Noah by hostile villagers also originated with Obey. Though not fully developed characters, the sons are individuated. Cham is the primary antagonist in Obey's play. Odets makes Japheth, the youngest and best-loved son (*Flowering Peach* 8), the principal antagonist. Overall, Obey's play contains less conflict than *The Flowering Peach*. Obey's Mrs. Noah is docile, even simpering, in contrast with the empathetic authoritarianism and sharp humour of Odets' Esther. Obey's Noah is an unquestioning servant of God, whereas Odets' Noah, while ultimately acquiescent, begs God to relieve him of his terrible assignment: "If you spoke to me, Lord, I don't want it! I'm too old everybody should laugh in my face! I ain't got the gizzard for it—No, sir! ... All I do is cough an' spit. Pass me by—pass me by. Please" (*Flowering Peach* 11).

The Noah story comprises only a small portion of another mid-century play that reflects the Mystery plays and influenced Odets. Marc Connelly's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Green Pastures* (1930)¹⁵⁶ is important in the line of Noah treatments. Like the Mystery plays, Connelly's covers a cycle of Biblical stories, rather than the single incident of Noah and the Flood. Connelly's primary influence, Roark Bradford's 1928 collection of stories, *Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun*, is told from the perspective of Louisiana blacks. The New York production of *The Green Pastures* was groundbreaking and controversial: it featured the first all-black cast ever to appear on Broadway, using black dialect. It enjoyed a five-year run (Brown 87) during the time that Odets was most active on the New York theatre scene. *The Green Pastures* was still running when Odets' breakthrough plays were

¹⁵⁵ <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,754567,00.html>>. Accessed 23 May 2011.

¹⁵⁶ *The Green Pastures* was also made into a film, in 1936.

produced. There was a highly praised Broadway revival in 1951 (Atkinson, “First Night”). The revival moved critic John Mason Brown to reassess Connelly’s play as “a masterpiece” (88). Brown does not mention Connelly’s flagrant use of racial stereotype, understandable if not excusable given the historical context. Mendelsohn and Gabriel Miller cite *The Green Pastures* as Odets’ inspiration for the dialect humour in *The Flowering Peach*. Noah’s predilection for alcohol, implied in Genesis and a recurring theme in Odets’ version, was first given dramatic treatment by Connelly (Mendelsohn, *Humane Dramatist*, 77; G. Miller 204).¹⁵⁷ That Odets’ Uncle Rossman shared the same proclivity in real life was a convenient coincidence for the playwright.

The most salient similarity between *The Green Pastures* and *The Flowering Peach* is ethnic motif. Both are fanciful; it is unknown whether Noah and other Biblical personages were black. What is certain, however, is that Noah and his family were not Jewish. As pointed out to Odets by a rabbi who attended the show, Judaism began with Abraham (Seidman) who post-dated Noah by many generations. The Mystery plays were decidedly Christian, intended to be instructional within a Christian milieu, and were often performed to complement the liturgical calendar, usually around the time of the feast of Corpus Christi (*York Mystery Plays*, Gen. Intro x). The majority of the Mystery plays thus treat New Testament subjects, and Old Testament characters were not depicted as Jews. Jews had been officially banished from England by Edward I in 1290, though some remained clandestinely. Jews were portrayed onstage as objects of derision. To portray Noah as such would have been counterproductive to the purpose of the Mystery plays. Besides, God favoured Noah and his family, so, according to medieval Christian logic, he would at the least not *appear* to be Jewish. Obey’s *Noah* is ethnically non-specific. In Connelly’s play, all the characters are black. Odets departed from his predecessor Noah influences in one crucial respect. It is Odets who makes Noah and his family unmistakably Jewish.

Odets was evidently preparing to write a play based on the Rossmans by 1949. During that year he tape-recorded and transcribed (or had someone else transcribe on his own typewriter)¹⁵⁸ conversations with Tante Esther and Uncle Rossman. Had the tapes been made solely as mementos, it seems unlikely that Odets would have had them transcribed, or transcribed them himself. No journal entries or correspondence have been found to date explaining why Odets felt he needed closer study of Jewish-American idiom. *Awake and Sing!* had long ago earned him the title “Poet of the Jewish Middle Class,” though he had not written in that capacity for nearly two decades. Perhaps, having recently spent six

¹⁵⁷ Genesis 9:20-21 relates that Noah grew grapes and apparently made wine, and became “drunken.”

¹⁵⁸ Odets had a typewriter custom-made with only uppercase letters. Depressing the shift key would produce a larger uppercase letter to indicate initial caps.

consecutive years (1943–‘49) engaged with others in Hollywood whitewashing, he felt moved to renew his own authenticity. Friend and colleague Peter Kass confirmed that the Rossmans “were his roots, they redeemed him as a nice Jewish boy ... As soon as we left [them], [his] facade would return” (Kass 7).

The Rossmans’ interaction as recorded in the transcripts provides a basis for much of the dialogue between Noah and Esther in *The Flowering Peach*. Character attributes and plot elements also appear. Odets taped Tante Esther talking about the extended family. She expresses concern that her nieces and nephews make good marriages, one possible source for the matchmaking subplot in the play.

TANTE. One Daughter married and she’s got a very very nice husband.
There is one between ten thousand (C. Odets, *Tante About Harris* 6)

...

Clifford, she is a beautiful girl. And nice is no name to it ... She would never come here if she wouldn’t bring a box of candy ...

So [Harris said] awright we gonna get married, we gonna go to the Peace of the Justice [sic], just in City Hall. (*Tante About Harris* 1)

The women in his life, and the characters whom Odets holds in highest esteem, find definition in marriage and fulfillment in nurturing their husbands and families. In his 1940 diary he wrote, “I needed a woman who will [sic] help me become more [sic] an artist, whose life is devoted to that task. No other woman” (C. Odets, *Time Is Ripe* 169). Noah attempts to diminish Esther’s power within the family structure by habitually calling her “sister” and “tuchter” (daughter).¹⁵⁹ Noah is given back his youth, leaving Esther behind in old age and which causes her great distress (*Flowering Peach* 47, 61). If Noah should lose interest in her she would be shamed and without a function, a traditional outlook among Orthodox women. Even Odets’ younger, non-ethnic wife characters, such as Marion in *The Big Knife* and Georgie Elgin in *The Country Girl*, share with Odets’ long-suffering mother, Pearl, his Tante Esther, the caustic Bessie Berger, Clara in *Paradise Lost*, and Noah’s Esther, marriage and home as their primary focus. As Bessie Berger saw *any* partner for Hennie preferable to her grandson being born out of wedlock, so does Esther contrive to rectify an unhappy marriage situation by encouraging the shuffling of partners between two brothers, though in a more sympathetic manner than does Bessie.

Permeability of sexual boundaries has ample Biblical precedence. In Genesis, marriage between half-siblings and other forms of incest was not yet seen as taboo; explicit

¹⁵⁹ In his article on the Biblical story of Abraham and Sarah, Phillip Lopate discusses in depth the psychosexual implications of Abraham’s passing off his wife as his sister. According to one of Lopate’s theories, inspired by Freud and Karen Horney, renaming a wife “sister” or “daughter” could be seen as an attempt to rekindle a sexual relationship. It is, however, doubtful that Odets’ Noah calls Esther “tuchter” and “sister” for this purpose.

laws regarding intermarriage were not handed down until events described in Leviticus, the third book of the Hebrew Bible. According to Genesis, Lot's daughters seduced him in order to conceive, for lack of male survivors after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were half-brother and -sister, according to some interpretations.¹⁶⁰ Abraham offered Sarah to three different rulers under the guise of his sister in order to guarantee his own safety (Lopate). Odets enjoyed serial partners throughout his life, though within the bounds of convention. He was not averse to adultery, as seen in Chapter One. He was not above serious flirting with fiancées and wives of close friends (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 163; C. Odets, *Time Is Ripe* 226-27). Ham's loss of interest in Rachel mirrors Odets' experiences with his two wives. But, as R. Baird Shuman emphasizes, Odets was not seeking to reproduce the Biblical Noah, nor was he making a statement regarding marital mores. He was simply using a well-known Old Testament story as a springboard for his own purposes (Shuman, *Clifford Odets* 137). Genesis relates the early history of the Jewish people and comprises the first book of the Torah; Christianity is based on both the Old and New Testaments. Audience association with Jewish customs and attributes could be assumed through familiarity with the Old Testament, as well as by social interaction. Odets could thereby assert a certain amount of Jewish sensibility without tackling contemporary Jewish issues, and also be guaranteed audience familiarity with the context of the play. Treating a Biblical tale was a safe bet.

Odets takes liberties with specifics of Jewish culture within the play, and anachronisms are of no concern to him. As always, he found the flavour of Jewish life principally in the language of Jewish-American immigrants. Hannah Wirth-Nesher summarises the broad influence of Yiddish speech patterns on Jewish-American writers of Odets' generation:

Jewish American literature offers testimony of multilingual awareness not only among immigrant writers where we would expect this to be the case but also among their descendants who have retained attachments to languages other than English, at times despite their meager knowledge of them. In fact, the mere sound of the language ... has often been sufficient to trigger powerful feelings of belonging or alienation. (*Call It English* 3)

Michael Blankfort called this reaction "nostalgia Jewishness," which he felt Odets used as a convenient replacement for Jewish activism (Blankfort). But in *The Jew in American Cinema*, Patricia Erens suggests that Blankfort's activism was the exception, with Odets

¹⁶⁰ "And also, indeed, she is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife" (Genesis 20:12). Some scholars do not take this passage literally, as Abraham is here rationalising with the ruler Abimelech, in whose land he and Sarah have sought and enjoyed refuge.

reflecting a trend prevalent among writers, particularly Jewish writers, in Hollywood at the time.¹⁶¹ “The dominant aspect at the end of the ‘forties is a sentimental attitude toward Jews, as reflected in film ... And it is this attitude, for better or worse, which is carried forward into the ‘fifties” (196). *The Flowering Peach* emanates from Odets’ romanticized yearnings for his beginnings. In the play Noah’s family are observant Jews, unlike his family of origin. The timbre, cadence and flow of Yiddish discourse could serve to carry him back not only to his actual past, but to an idealized past replete with the ritual and meaning of *halakhah*.¹⁶² Besides, Yiddish was considered a “female” language, *mame-loshn*, the “mother” tongue, the language of the home (Wirth-Nesher, “Mother Tongue” 458). Odets was mourning the immediate death of his second wife, in spite of the divorce, and that of his cherished aunt. He was calling them back with the music of language.

It seems from the transcripts that Odets understood some spoken Yiddish, supporting Jack Adler’s statement quoted in Chapter One (J. Adler). The transcripts contain translations from Yiddish spoken on the tapes, e.g., “(In Yiddish) I sit in the kitchen, cooking up coffee and it stands two jars pickles” (C. Odets, *Tante about Harris* 4). It is unclear whether it was Odets who transcribed the tapes, but it is likely, as his own typewriter was used.

Sander Gilman uncovers a darker aspect of second-generation infatuation with Yiddish, or, more specifically, with “Yinglish.” Speaking historically of “the ancient western tradition that labels the language of the Jew as ... the sign of the inherent difference of the Jew,” Gilman elaborates,

The Jews’ language reflects only the corruption of the Jew and his or her discourse, a corruption that is made manifest in the essential Jew’s language from the eighteenth century to the present—Yiddish. It is against this view that the Jewish writer (Jewish because he or she internalizes the label of ‘Jew’ present in the society in which he or she dwells) must establish his or her dominance over the language and discourse of the culture in which he or she lives ... [T]he idea of a ‘Jewish’ language and discourse is central to any self-definition of the Jew. (*Inscribing* 298)

Thus a sense of inadequacy, guilt, fear or self-revulsion could accompany the use of Yiddish or Yiddish-derived American-English words, or even the inflections of Yiddish. Such feelings could inspire an authorial distance, evident in *The Flowering Peach*, even at the same time one is invoking a beloved milieu.

In *Call It English*, Wirth-Nesher discusses novelist Philip Roth’s “repeated disavowal

¹⁶¹ Blankfort was a prolific left-wing screenwriter, novelist and active Zionist. He served as president of the Writers Guild of America West for two years.

¹⁶² Observance of Jewish law and custom as dictated by the Torah and the rabbis.

of accent” in his speech or writing. She refutes his claim, asserting that

not knowing a language is not an indicator of its influence, since it may be harder to abandon what cannot be grasped ... Given that [Roth] found himself ‘dumb’ with respect to both the passage away from Yiddish and the rite of passage toward Hebrew, it is not surprising that muteness, stammering, and accent will haunt his writing, not because he has no command of these languages but because he is disturbed by the notion that he should know them. (4-5)

Odets was caught in a similar binary. He felt compelled to redefine himself as a Jew when his HUAC testimony destroyed forever his image as a left-wing rebel. Averse to religious observance, he grabbed the only avenue left him, a public statement of sorts. At least Jews were associated in the public mind with socialism; it would be an indirect way of reclaiming that definition. In *Awake and Sing!* Yiddish cadence flowed from him naturally; but twenty years on, he had, deliberately, accumulated a thick veneer of acculturation. Like Roth, he was neither literate nor conversant in Hebrew or Yiddish, stricken “dumb” by his linguistic ignorance and his conflicted feelings aroused by association with those languages. Japheth, the character with whom critics invariably identify Odets, becomes “almost stammering mute” (*Flowering Peach* 15) when taunted by his brothers, and he sometimes stutters (33). Odets’ description of having to “burst thru” a near paralysis in order to write *The Flowering Peach* describes a similar state.

Gilman cites Primo Levi’s emphasis on the *sound* of Yiddish in his novel, *If Not Now, When?* Detectable in his protagonist’s accent, Yiddish inflections were the primary identifying factor used against him (*Inscribing* 300). Neither was Odets himself devoid of telltale traces of his immigrant upbringing. His first biographer and comprehensive critic, R. Baird Shuman, points to Odets’ own Yiddish speech patterns, evident in recorded interviews.

Such patterns came through ... where a sentence like, ‘I want to show in David, who is pursued by a psychotic Saul, a young poet,’ illustrates a basic structure and cadence of Jewish-American speech. This phrase structure of indirect object followed by direct object, while common in some instances in Network Standard English where the preposition of the indirect object is omitted ... is uncommon where the preposition is expressed and is a speech pattern characteristic of many Jewish Americans. (“Jewish Context” 86)

Odets’ own Yiddish speech patterns were unalterable, yet, except for his Philadelphia visits, he lived as removed from Jewish social context as he could manage, a life-long exercise in identity-denial.

Two years after recording Esther and Uncle Rossman’s conversations, Odets made notes on the Noah story, clearly intending to write a play. “It should all be humorous, dry

and sad, ironic and caustic ... Everything that humans have—jealousy, competitiveness, ‘business acumen,’ authority, husband and wife troubles, affairs, questions of who is subordinate, super-ordinate and co-ordinate, etc., a real human microcosm. What style?” (Notes on Noah’s Ark, May ‘51). Initially he conceived the piece as an opera, to be written in collaboration with Aaron Copland (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 173; G. Miller 202). The decision to write a comedy may have arisen from the dynamics between his Aunt and Uncle. As early as a decade before, in his posthumously published 1940 journal, Odets wrote a vignette of Esther and Sroul Rossman that identifies them as the progenitors of Esther and Noah (C. Odets, *Time Is Ripe* 71-72). The transcripts reveal that Odets’ Uncle Rossman and Odets’ Noah share preoccupations that have held humans in thrall since antiquity: income, alcohol, and the ravages of age.

L. [a cousin]. No, heh. You don’t wanna drink no more. Your old lady don’t wanna let you.

U[NCLE]. She’s no bargain! She’s boss over me? Oh, nooo, boyelee.

TANTE. I’m the boss.

U[NCLE]: See, I’m [sic] been with Uncle Sam for fifty-four years.

(*Holding up his hands*) See them bones? ... When I take a drink, I don’t make a independent living. But I still make enough to pay my drinks, am I [sic]?

TANTE. Sayroul, sit and eat.

U[NCLE]: You see them bones?

TANTE: Sayroul, sit and eat ...

U[NCLE]: NOW DON’T GIMME NO BACK TALK!!

TANTE. Don’t git [sic] too fresh!¹⁶³ (C. Odets, *Tante & Uncle* 12)

Rossman’s preoccupation with the bones in his aging hands is directly transposed to Noah, who says,

NOAH. ... it’s up to Him to gimme what I need to do his work ... (*Holding out his hands.*) See them bones? That ain’t hands no more, it’s bones! (*Looking upward.*) ... (... *his communication with God immediate and direct.*) (C. Odets, *Flowering Peach* 39)

When God miraculously transforms Noah into a younger man, according to the stage directions, “He sees his firmly-fleshed hands ... and feels one hand with the other” (42).

Sroul’s drinking was an issue in the Philadelphia household, just as Noah’s drinking is harped upon in the play:

ESTHER. Hey, don’t you get so fresh or I’ll go over an’ give you a slap in a minute.

¹⁶³ Clifford Odets Papers, Lilly Library, B. 8, f. 18-38.

NOAH. Maybe I'll take a drink.

ESTHER. Don't take a drink, you drink too much.

NOAH. (*Belligerently.*) Who drinks too much?

ESTHER. (*Flatly.*) You drink too much. You think it's still a secret you drink too much? ... He pours and pours, just like a pig.

NOAH. (*Loftily.*) You should be satisfied that I drink, otherwise I'd leave you. (*Flowering Peach 6*)

In *The Flowering Peach*, Noah's habitual drunkenness before and during the Deluge was inconsequential in the eyes of God, who apparently discounted it when considering Noah and his family exceptions to mankind's rampant corruption. According to Genesis 9:20-21, Noah did not become a "husbandman" with a vineyard until after the Flood, when he was found, drunken and naked, by Ham. Ham bragged of this to his brothers. Shem and Japheth brought a robe to Noah's tent and respectfully covered him. Noah blessed them, but Ham's son Canaan was cursed by Noah to be "the servant unto servants," and to serve Shem and Japheth.¹⁶⁴ Odets used Noah's fondness for drink, a lapse with serious consequences in the Bible, as a comic device, and to memorialise his Uncle Rossman. This irreverent treatment of a Biblical source provided another instance of questionable taste in the minds of some clerics, critics and audience members.

Odets portrayed a dying breed in Noah, with all his imperfections. Noah recalls the *shtetl* patriarch who ruled absolute in moral and spiritual matters, but held a modicum of authority in the home, the mother's domain. In his 1940 journal Odets describes his Uncle as

a real soul, a real heart, a poet in the old and rare sense. He sat there singing old Jewish dirges to himself. He is not taken too seriously around the house—my aunt and cousin laugh and poke fun at him. But he rocks himself into a silent sharp peering edge from which he emerges occasionally to make some caustic remark about the state of the world. (*Time is Ripe 73*).

Noah is portrayed similarly in Scenes 1 and 2 of *The Flowering Peach*. Esther calls him "a lunatic" (8). Initially, only Japheth takes Noah seriously regarding the dream in which God has spoken to him. In Scene 2, Ham, the middle son, says about Noah, "I'd lock him up—he's been *raving* for years! ... the law says lock him up if he's nuts and *he is nuts!* [original emphases] (14). When Esther proves skeptical about the dream, Noah, like Uncle Rossman, "rocks himself a little, as an old Jew does, in sorrowful musing, to comfort himself" (10). Later, "Noah ... has drawn into himself, rocking himself in his chair, face on open hand, breaks [sic] into full and open lamentation" (16). Odets elevated his old, immigrant uncle to

¹⁶⁴ King James version <<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis%206-9&version=KJV>>. Accessed 2 June 2011.

the mythical level of Noah, God’s ultimate exile. Noah, in turn, becomes humanized with Rossman’s humour and passion. However, in drawing from life so closely, and allowing Skulnik to run away with the show, Odets often failed to successfully straddle the line between inspiration and sentimentality. Despite his best intentions, in the end the play smacked of the popular, more banal family dramas found on Second Avenue.



Figure 27: *The Flowering Peach* 1954: Shabbos prayers, end of Scene 2.¹⁶⁵ Left to right: Janice Rule as Rachel, Martin Ritt as Shem, Menasha Skulnik as Noah, Berta Gersten as Esther. Courtesy of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

The most genuinely Jewish aspect of the play, partly inspired by Odets’ uncle, is spiritual rather than cultural. Noah, like Rossman, “has broken out in prayer or song, no matter where or when, at will, as it suited his inner mood” (16). *The Flowering Peach* is more deeply Jewish than *Awake and Sing!* in that engages directly with the special nature of Jews’ relationship with God. This direct relationship dates back to when Abraham pleaded with God to be merciful with Sodom. Irving Howe describes the singularity of this relationship, which differs from the Christian use of clergy as intermediaries:

He was a plebeian God ... Toward him the Jews could feel a peculiar sense of intimacy: had they not suffered enough in His behalf? ... Because the east European Jew felt so close to God he could complain to him freely, and complain about Him too. The relation between God and man was social, intimate, critical ... The Jewish God, to whom one prayed in Hebrew and with whom one pleaded in Yiddish, had been humanized through experience with His people. (11-12)

¹⁶⁵ Odets departs from orthodoxy in that it is the woman of the household who is supposed to light the shabbos candles and intone the prayers, though judging from the photo it is possible that Esther intones the customary prayers *sotto voce*, with Noah speaking over her.

In “singing old Jewish dirges to himself,” Uncle Rossman, and his theatrical counterpart, could find comfort in knowing that God was empathetic towards the sound of plaintive Jewish voices. In his first prayer, Noah is querulous. The Almighty has charged him with an untenable responsibility. He asks God,

What do I know about boats? Ast my Esther an’ she’ll tell you; when was I near water. Bread is bread, I know it—a pickle is a pickle ... but boats? ... You’ll have to help me, ‘cause they’ll lock me up for a noisy old man. ... You’re talking a total destruction of the whole world an’ this is something terrible—! ... Am I awake or am I asleep? I’m awake, but I wish I was dead. (*Flowering Peach* 11-12).

Journalist and educator Max Lerner commented on the first five scenes, as sent him by Whitehead, around the time that Skulnik sent Odets his responses to the fourth draft. Lerner addressed this singular familiarity between Jews and God, in which he locates the central conflict in the play:

Must one accept orders from on high with implicit obedience, or does one have the right to argue the matter? This central issue is paramount ... Although [Noah] refers to himself ... as ‘an independent man,’ he has no basic independence where God is concerned. ... JAPHETH [sic] arrives at his obligatory scene, in which he asserts man’s responsibility ... to everyone’s astonishment the Lord Himself chooses JAPHETH as the best expression of his own will. (Lerner)

Lerner is referring to the issue of the ark’s rudder, which Japheth insists is essential to the voyage, and which Noah has forbidden as not having been specified by God. Noah insists that God himself will steer the ark, not Man. When Noah disappears for nine weeks on a drinking binge (*Flowering Peach* 68), Japheth defies Noah and uses the rudder to steer the ark away from potential destruction. God expresses no displeasure, and Noah finally defers to Japheth’s wisdom.

In identifying this central conflict, Lerner also points to the crucial weakness of the play. The conflict is philosophically acute but essentially undramatic. The play becomes, as Clurman put it in his review in *The Nation*, “a protracted *musings* [original emphasis] in which the author appears to be trying to take some measure of himself. ‘What am I now?’ he is asking himself” (Clurman, “Theater” 57). Edward Murray also notes that Odets “tends to play down the resolution” (Murray 212). As there is no dynamic central conflict, there is no satisfying resolution beyond the charm of the younger characters leaving the Ark with their desired mates. Moments of recognition and reversal are treated sluggishly throughout the play because the central issue fails to supply a strong impetus. Even Bentley, in his initial euphoria, describes the play as “quiet and slow moving” (Bentley, “Theatre”). The nine-

scene, railroad-car structure fails to buttress a dramatic arc. Nor does the arbitrary interval demarcation after Scene Five, that delineated unspecified “acts” in the original production, contribute toward a discernable crescendo. Here Odets was overtaken by an old *bête noir*. In Kazan’s opinion, and that of others throughout his career, Odets “could write great scenes; he never mastered the architecture of the play” (Kazan, Interview). Gabriel Miller notes that *The Flowering Peach* “opens on a note of negation. Noah’s first word is ‘No!’” (206). Yet it fails to end with a similarly emphatic “Yes!” as do the earlier, political plays. Rather, it trickles away into a muddle of the mundane.

The Flowering Peach ends with a sigh. Noah accepts a life of comfort with Shem and Leah (83), rather than living with the questioning activist Japheth and his new wife, Rachel. The only real resolution is provided by the wife-swapping scheme, repugnant to Skulnick and others.¹⁶⁶ It originates with Noah and Esther’s alarm that Japheth does not have a wife. Knowing that the Flood is imminent, Noah presses him to find one, as the family has been charged with repopulating the earth when the waters subside. Japheth is not inclined to do so, nor is he even willing to embark with the family when it begins to rain. Japheth prefers to perish with the rest of the population if the God he was taught to worship is so cruel as to drown everyone (*Flowering Peach* 29-30, 50, 52). Japheth is at once humble and righteous. Torn in his conflict of reason versus faith, he is the only one of the young people who is a fully realised character. In Scene 4, Japheth returns from town with a prostitute named Goldie, whom he claims saved his life (34). It is implied that Goldie and Ham, the carousing, adulterous son, have previously met in a licentious manner. Odets never addresses why God deems Ham, not to mention a prostitute, worthy of being saved from the Flood, since they, too, could be judged as corrupt. The lack of logical congruity further distances the play from its Biblical sources.

Ham’s neglected wife, throughout most of the play, is the deferential Rachel. It is obvious to Esther that Rachel is unhappy; she is temperamentally better suited to Japheth than to the worldly Ham, who treats her poorly. Most importantly to Esther, Rachel and Japheth love each other. When Japheth brings Goldie home with him, Esther hatches a plan to rearrange the couples. In stereotypical Yiddishe mama fashion, Esther’s primary interest is not religious, but that her children be happy and well. She accordingly proposes her scheme to Noah, who vehemently opposes defiance of God’s laws. Esther prevails, but only posthumously, when Noah says, “Go better now every husband should kiss each wife, as Mother wanted. And I’ll go kiss mine and close her eyes . . .” (*Flowering Peach* 81).

¹⁶⁶ Peter Kass was another of Odets’ friends who openly criticised the play. He asked Odets, “What happened to this play? It has turned into a dirty joke—shit in the hold of the Ark—people screwing around, etc. The scenes are so actable—and the total structure is faulty and weak” (5). Waldo Frank “didn’t know if he liked [the play] or not. Couldn’t swallow Menasha Skulnik as Noah—sees Noah with more dignity and dimension” (Interview 3).

Bentley accurately described the “family romance” as the main plot when he reviewed the production. He includes Noah’s conflicted relationship with Japheth. As in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, all parties are finally reunited with their true love, except for Noah, of whom Death deprives Esther. Noah and Japheth are reconciled. Without this family romance element, the play would have scarcely moved beyond a vaudeville impersonation of Obey’s play, which Bentley, despite his renowned predilection for European theatre, calls “empty,” though “amiable.” He states point blank that Odets’ play “knocks André Obey’s *Noah* into a cocked hat” (“Theater”). With hindsight, however, Bentley modified his initial praise of the production (“Afterthoughts”).¹⁶⁷

In his 1971 critical biography of Odets, Gerald Weales suggests that a future production might deemphasize the “too extended” wife-swapping plot¹⁶⁸ and the ideational debate, in favour of the “clown show” (*Odets, Playwright* 179). Weales’ reference to clowns comes from Odets’ description at the top of Scene 2: “*This, then, is Noah and his troupe, each of them awry and clownish in some way—assorted clowns and acrobats*” (*Flowering Peach* 13), an obvious nod to Skulnik’s style and his circus background. Weales observes that Noah and Esther become “much closer to vaudeville Jews than the Bergers in *Awake [and Sing!]* ... It seems clear that what Odets wants to do ... is to work from generic stereotype” (*Odets, Playwright* 174). Ellen Schiff agrees, calling the play’s Jewishness “cliché-bound” (*Stereotype* 42). Weales also accurately points out that Noah’s quasi-buffonery in the first two scenes undercuts the character when he must wield authority later in the play (*Odets, Playwright* 174).

Odets’ stage directions are typically explicit, specifying some of the physical comedy. It can therefore be deduced that the “shtick” is not just Skulnik’s invention, though it is possible that Odets incorporated into the script some of Skulnik’s contributions in rehearsal. Noah “snuffles” (*Flowering Peach* 10). “Noah sighs deeply, sniffs, wipes his nose with the back of his hand” (7). He “bristles fantastically” (8). “He stands, forlorn, comic and deeply touching, tears in his eyes ...” (39). He speaks “with dainty cockiness and precision” (9). “He backs away from [Esther] with a typical snarl (9). “He tilts his head a little and his nose twi[t]ches like a rabbit’s (11). “... cocking an eye, he looks around him, wondering if he actually is awake or asleep. He leans his cheek on an open hand, and, whimpering a little, draws delicately into himself” (11-12). “Noah, with one listening ear cupped” (15). “Sheepishly ducks behind the housing” (77).

¹⁶⁷ Bentley later back-pedalled from his original review, claiming he had been entranced by Skulnik’s acting “and the best of the writing.” “I scarcely bothered to notice, for example, what the directing was like—namely pretty dull and defensive. The production would have gained another dimension if, say, Mr. Kazan had worked on it” (“Afterthoughts” 459). The irony is obvious in light of Kazan’s comment about Odets’ focusing on the writing, cited earlier in this chapter.

¹⁶⁸ Bentley (“Afterthoughts” 208) and Gassner (*Theatre at the Crossroads* 154) agree that the extent of the wife-swapping subplot further diffuses the play’s thrust.

Gibbs' view supports Weales':

The stature of the protagonist as a man of some ethical significance in troubled communion with his God is almost fatally diminished by the fact that he is simultaneously a baggy-pants vaudevillian; the humor not only is generally out of key with lofty pathos but often, since a lot of it is concerned with divine omnipotence as opposed to mortal frailty, has the faintly embarrassing effect of presenting the Almighty as an accessory clown in a blackout sketch ... [Odets] hasn't invented much that is of any genuine dramatic interest, and the cruise is for the most part so placid that when it is reported that its director has been lying drunk below decks for upward of nine weeks, one finds it easy to attribute this lapse to simple boredom. (Gibbs 64)

Despite his admiration for Skulnik's technical skills, he was one critic who was not so dazzled by the actor as to be blinded to flaws inherent in the script.

Skulnik's lack of appreciation for Odets' jokes may have been prompted in part by Odets' use of language: the jokes are *about* the language itself. The comedy derives from satirising Yiddish-American speech patterns, and thus, indirectly, satirises Skulnik. In fact, given Shuman's observation about Odets' subtle tendency to use Yiddish constructions in his own conversation, Odets was also, perhaps unwittingly, satirizing himself. This put him in a double bind. Satire attempts to remove the satirist from the subject. Here Odets was following the example of the eighteenth century *maskilim*, as described in Chapter One. The *maskilim* wrote plays not intended for performance, but as satirical pieces poking fun at unenlightened Jews (Gilman, *Inscribing* 53). They were a form of elitist, armchair entertainment. A primary tool employed in these send-ups was the use of *mauscheln*. Gilman defines *mauscheln* as "the use of altered syntax and bits of Hebrew vocabulary and a specific pattern of gestures to represent the spoken language [i.e., Yiddish] of the Jews" (139). The origins of *mauscheln* date as far back as two hundred years earlier, to the late sixteenth century. Gilman reports that by that time, "the language of the stage Jew had become a mock Yiddish, quite often an invention of the playwright" (*Self-Hatred* 76). For emphasis and ease of reference, the following quote, cited in Chapter One, is reiterated:

The purpose of these texts [written for the *maskilim*] was the creation of a double for the negative image of the Jew found in Germany, a *double onto which all the negative qualities of this image could be heaped* [emphasis added] ... It was from that context that the quintessential Jewish literary persona, the *schlemiehl*, appeared. (Gilman, *Inscribing* 53)

By the late nineteenth century the *schlemiehl* was universally understood to be a standard Jewish type. Playing the *schlemiehl* was Skulnik's speciality. "I play the

schlemiel—the little guy—against the world,” he told Arthur Gelb of the *New York Times*. A *schlemiel* is also an incompetent, a bungler, a dolt. “I have a million tricks ... I get laughs before I open my mouth, and that is why the language I play in makes no difference” (Gelb). As no video recording exists of the original production, it is impossible to tell to what extent Skulnik played up the physical comedy along with the Yiddishisms, though reviews indicate that it was extensive. Skulnik therefore worked in concert with Odets to reproduce a theatrical convention that stemmed from an eighteenth-century anti-Semitic practice. It is testament to Skulnik’s skill that his performance transcended his own *shlick* and managed to be moving, by all accounts, as well as amusing.

It is also possible that, post-HUAC, Odets felt a bit of a *schlemiel* himself. He was working hard to reestablish himself as a Broadway playwright. By creating a theatrical *doppelganger* he could perform a kind of exorcism, by “heaping” onto Skulnik’s *schlemiel* what he, Odets, perceived to be his own undesirable qualities. As Gilman emphasises, “The Other within each of us inscribes itself upon the text in spite of all our conscious intentions” (*Inscribing* 316). In using “generic stereotypes,” Odets as playwright is able to retain his identification with his Jewish characters, while at the same time, disowning them. He had himself become a product of Hollywood. To advocate the use of extreme stereotyping is in itself a form of whitewashing. It presents the stereotyped character as eminently undesirable, worthy of ridicule and therefore of elimination.

The majority of American Jews had assimilated by 1954 and the Yiddish theatre was on the wane. Few spoke Yiddish on a daily basis, if at all. The primary Jewish entertainment was the newly popular form of stand-up comedy. The entertainment center was no longer Second Avenue or even Broadway, but in the Catskills, at the mega-resorts of the Borscht Belt. Grandchildren of first-generation immigrants were disinclined to travel to Broadway to see a show that seemed to be an uptown version of what had amused their grandparents on Second Avenue. It was old hat. In light of this, it is unsurprising that Skulnik strove to play up the comedy.

The jokes, verbal and physical, reflect influences of vaudeville and stand-up. Much of the humour is delivered in what are essentially one-liners, e.g., Noah insists that Goldie and Japheth “should git married! She’s in one room—he’s next door—it’s not nice! It gives the ark a bad name!” (*Flowering Peach* 61). The situation with the manure, in Scene 6, typifies Odets’ methodology here. The ark is tilting dangerously. After a six-page buildup, it is discovered that Shem and Leah have been making and hoarding manure briquettes for use and sale after the Flood. The weight of the manure is throwing the ark off balance. Ham accuses Shem of intending to sell it to the family, as it will be the only dry fuel available. Noah says, “On the holy ark he’s makin’ business! Manure! With manure you want to

begin a new world?” (64). This sub-scene serves three purposes: to provide laughs, to point up Shem and Leah’s (stereotypical) avarice, and to demonstrate the extent to which Esther, who mediates the situation, will go to keep peace in the family. As written, it is in questionable taste and effective only in the latter respect.

Rabbi Aaron B. Seidman of B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundation in Washington, D.C. wrote Odets, stating that the play “seems at variance with religious taste” (Seidman). Some reviewers agreed with Rabbi Seidman. Robert Coleman of the *Daily Mirror* wrote, “The Belasco Theatre’s new tenant has many amusing moments and some tender ones, but much of the humour is likely to offend the devout. For the author, in our opinion, has taken a story of power, told with poetic beauty, and turned it into a wise-cracking burlesque. Frankly, we were embarrassed on occasions” (Coleman).

Burlesque has long relied on ethnic stereotypes. Stereotype identifies and at the same time distances the subject. Having contributed substantially to the “decades-long popular-culture disappearing act” (Erdman 160) that culminated mid-century, Odets needed to re-emerge in the public eye as a Jew. *The Flowering Peach* could not have been written by anyone other than a Jew, yet it stands as a caricature of Jews by a Jew, a modern day *maskilim*. Odets was unable to fully own his Jewishness because, from 1935, he had decisively deconstructed Jewishness in his work. By the time he commenced work on *The Flowering Peach*, Odets was trapped in his insecurity. He reverted to writing stage Jews. Shem and Leah “act Jewish” in 19th-century Shylock mode:

SHEM: (*Despairingly*) ... *but what am I without my money?!* [original emphasis] (*Flowering Peach* 37)

Japheth insists that Shem give up the keys to his storage cellar to the tax collector who is requesting them. A fist fight ensues. Japheth knocks Shem out, much to Noah’s horror, as violence is one of the Almighty’s pet peeves. Japheth gets the keys and surrenders them to his father. The stage directions state, “Leah is at Shem’s side and Ham had brought her water. Shem is groaning and trying to get up. Noah asks, “What, he’s saying something? Rachel responds, “He says, ‘Get a receipt’” (38).

The cynical, adulterous Ham, and Goldie, the prostitute, embody the “lecherous Jew” stereotype. Esther is, of course, the archetypal Jewish mother. Despite his divine appointment, Noah, particularly as played by Skulnik, is thoroughly a *schlemiel*. He can be identified in no other way simply because he talks like one. Japheth and Rachel are the nice Jewish boy and girl. Rachel is, to borrow Erdman’s nomenclature, the “belle juive,” admirable and desirable to Japheth, who longs for her though she is married to his brother. Japheth is, in essence, a Maccabee, a David, a brave Jewish warrior who upholds what he knows to be right, even if it defies Divine edict. He is willing to die for his causes.

These stereotypes harken back to a style popular early in the century. In this sense, *The Flowering Peach* is arguably the most dated of Odets' plays. It is seldom revived. It might have been more popular at the time if it had been written in Yiddish and produced on what remained of the Jewish Rialto. In fact, the *New York Times* praised a Yiddish version produced by the Folksbiene in 1986.¹⁶⁹ The Second Avenue style did not, in the end, serve Odets, nor did it serve the play. Mendelsohn states that the play was "one of the most expensive 'prestige failures' in many seasons" (*Humane Dramatist*, 75).

Despite all its flaws, *The Flowering Peach* was chosen by the Pulitzer Prize jurors as Best Play of 1954. In the end, the Advisory Board overruled the jurors' decision in favour of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Weales, *Odets, Playwright* 173). It has been widely stated that this was not known until after Odets' death (Weales, *Odets, Playwright*, 121; Herr 121; G. Miller 218), but Brenman-Gibson's chronological notes for 1955 include the entry, "In April [Odets] learns that the Pulitzer Prize committee almost awarded *Peach* (Brenman-Gibson 1955).

As with all Odets' works, there is no critical consensus. The majority of academic critics, such as Shuman, praise the play. Edward Murray considers *The Flowering Peach* "one of the most impressive plays in the American theater" (218). Murray's views, it must be said, tend to the unorthodox: he considers "*Golden Boy* and the late *The Flowering Peach* [as] probably ... the two best plays Odets wrote in his twenty years as a major American dramatist" (219). Similarly, Gabriel Miller aligns himself with Atkinson's view that it was possibly Odets' greatest work (218).

The Flowering Peach is clearly more dependent on production values than most plays, making it difficult to evaluate as a piece of theatrical literature. Odets infused the relationship of the central couple with the living warmth of his Aunt and Uncle Rossman, and any production would ride on the presentation of their humanity. However, the serious and comic elements split and then muddy the play's focus, a structural flaw not easily overcome. Odets failed to synthesise a holistic viewpoint. The play proved most popular in 1970 in a musical adaptation, *Two by Two*. Starring Danny Kaye, it ran two and a half times longer than Odets' original play. The musical is revived from time to time. Perhaps Gassner best summarised the play's lack of success: "It was in the nature of Odets' method here not to move toward a strong conclusion. Such a conclusion would have required taking a stand for or against something, while Odets was apparently in no frame of mind to take a stand on

¹⁶⁹ The website of The National Yiddish Theatre – Folksbiene states that they are "the longest continuously producing Yiddish theatre company in the world and one of only four international Yiddish theatre companies in operation today. Founded in 1915 ... the Folksbiene is the sole survivor of fifteen Yiddish companies that played to enthusiastic audiences on the Lower East Side in the Golden Age of Yiddish Theatre in the early 20th century"< <http://www.folksbiene.org/history.html> >. Accessed 5 July 2011. They are located in New York City.

anything” (Gassner 154). The last thing he could take a stand on, particularly at that point in his life, was who he wanted to be.

Odets is one of many playwrights who distanced himself from core Jewish issues in mid-century America. In the instance of *The Flowering Peach*, Odets used the mask of comedy. Others used strategic avoidance. Some critics, such as Rhoda Koenig and, long before her, Mary McCarthy, noted the Yiddish locutions of Willy and Linda Loman’s lines in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) (Koenig, xiv-xv; McCarthy). It was not made public by Arthur Miller until 1999 that the play is about a Jewish family so deracinated that they have come to represent the all-American family (Bial 58; Novick 50). Miller did not feel comfortable addressing the issue until the 50th anniversary of the play’s debut. Odets identified with Miller’s play on a deep level. When he saw it in Philadelphia with his life-long friends, the Leofs, he wept. “I should have written that play,” he told Sabina Leof. “But I couldn’t have done that to my father” (Leof 5).¹⁷⁰ Henry Bial notes that, “for an audience that knows the [ethnic] codes, Willy Loman is more than a man who doesn’t know how to act; he’s a man who doesn’t know how to act Jewish” (Bial 58). By the mid-‘fifties, Odets, as a writer, was caught in the same conundrum.

Despite the brief run of *The Flowering Peach* and consequent financial loss, Odets apparently derived some satisfaction from “writing Jewish” again. The Gibsons came to see the play, and Odets joined them in a cab afterwards. As they rode to the Algonquin Hotel, Odets asked William Gibson, “Do you think it would be a mistake to follow [*The Flowering Peach*] with another Jewish play?” (Brenman-Gibson, Handwritten Note). Nearly a decade after *The Flowering Peach* and shortly before he died, Odets spoke to Mendelsohn about a projected play based on the story of David and Saul. Though he didn’t know “what tone it will be in,” he was certain it wouldn’t be “in the street language” (Mendelsohn, “Center Stage” 66). His concept this time was apparently non-ethnic. He wanted to “show how the young poet becomes a very successful man ... I want to show the life of Man from the time he is a poet until he dies an old man, unhappy, but somehow still a poet gnawing at his soul. ... so that you see what happens to men of big success and how they meet the conflicting situations of their lives (66).” In other words, he wanted to write, once again, about his inner life. There is no evidence among his papers that he drafted such a work.

In his analysis of ethnicity in American literature, William Boelhower states, “The whole process of ethnic seeing is as much an act of the imagination as it is an act of recovering lost origins” (83). There is no doubt that *The Flowering Peach* is a formidable imaginative exercise. But, as a “Jewish play,” which is how Odets regarded it, *The Flowering Peach* stops short. It is a cartoon in both the artistic and comedic sense. It is a

¹⁷⁰ This statement is yet another admission by Odets that he derived his art from his life.

sketch for a more profound work. It represents the shards of Odets' late-life concept of Judaism and of Jewishness. He imagined both anew, rather than rediscovering them within a synagogue or the Jewish community. His Broadway career began and ended with his most ethnically Jewish plays, in a theatre named for the great Jewish playwright and impresario, David Belasco. If *The Flowering Peach* has an arc, as Vincent Canby states, it is "that of Odets' professional life" (Canby).

Conclusion

In 1954 Clifford Odets wrote, “A writer never arrives but rather is in a constant state of ‘becoming’” (Letter to Mendelsohn). He was rarely granted the benefit of this truism. Odets was burdened with having written two acclaimed masterpieces at the start of a lengthy career, the one-act agitprop *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), and the full-length Jewish-family drama *Awake and Sing!* (1935). He continued to develop as a playwright and screenwriter, but American audiences, always preferring a predictable product,¹⁷¹ expected him to uphold his titular positions of “playwright of the proletariat” and “poet of the Jewish middle-class” (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 336-38). Odets’ political and personal philosophies naturally evolved over time, yet he was forever expected to adhere to his youthfully fervent views. He quickly became disillusioned with the Communist Party, renouncing his membership in less than a year. Not long after his breakthrough plays were produced, he joined scores of other leftwing East Coast writers in the flight to the Hollywood studios. A screenwriting contract served as a lifeline in the difficult Depression years. But because of his high profile as a left-wing Jewish playwright of prodigious talent, Odets was singled out as a turncoat who betrayed his leftwing ideals in favour of the mores of the Hollywood establishment.

But his plays live. There are periodic Odets revivals. Major productions commemorated the 2006 centenary celebration of his birth, and the 2008 global economic crisis renewed their relevance (See Appendix). But superficial assumptions concerning Odets the writer and Odets the man are still promulgated in programme notes and reviews of these contemporary productions.¹⁷² He was indeed a playwright of the ‘thirties, but his influence and contemporary appeal have been proven. The cynical lashing of an “Odetsian line” is unmistakable, reverberating in the work of such playwrights as Paddy Chayefsky, David Mamet and Tony Kushner, to name but a few.

Odets was hardly the first Jewish-American playwright to be produced on Broadway: David Belasco, S. N. Behrman, Edna Ferber, George S. Kaufman, Moss Hart, Samson Raphaelson, Elmer Rice, Ben Hecht, and John Howard Lawson, among others, preceded him. Lillian Hellman was a contemporary. But Odets was the first to treat a Jewish family centrally, with candour, humour, understanding and compassion. He was among the first to treat fascism onstage, especially in relation to its anti-Semitic precepts.

¹⁷¹ Hence the popularity of the television sitcom. C.f. Chapter Three, “Odets in Hollywood.”

¹⁷² The following typical remark refers to a recent production of *Golden Boy*: “Here [Odets] turned inward to work through his heartburn about selling out to Hollywood” <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/blogs/artsdesk/theater/2011/04/27/boxing-on-d-c-stages-a-critical-and-pugilistic-inquiry/> Accessed 12.08.11. Odets is customarily regarded as a special case, yet Elia Kazan told Brenman-Gibson that the deadly art-versus-commerce conflict of the 1937 *Golden Boy* expressed “what all of us felt at the time” (Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets* 466).

The “Interne [sic] Episode” in *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) and the entirety of *Till the Day I Die* (1935)¹⁷³ deal with these issues head-on. Unfortunately, he was working at cross-purposes with the United States government. As a radical “premature anti-fascist” he was rejected by the armed forces at the start of World War II (Odets’ “Coming Home”). Celebrated as a revolutionary playwright at the age of twenty-nine and reviled as a “stool pigeon” in his mid-forties, Odets lived and wrote under stringent public scrutiny from 1935 until his death in 1963.

Odets always struggled uphill against critical odds, artistic and political. His own Group Theatre directors, with an eye to the company’s survival, served as first-stage censors of his work. Despite their characteristically bold, topical approach, the Group directors opted to keep a low profile with respect to Jewish issues. The courageous impulses of Odets’ early plays were progressively stifled by critical opprobrium, commercial exigency and increasing hostility toward Jews as World War II approached. Marxist and socialist political issues were commonly associated with Jews, and Odets chose to move away from these in his work. His final play, *The Flowering Peach* (1953), was an attempt to bring him full circle to a sense of holistic purpose. He sought to recapture the spirit of the Lower East Side and thereby his own ethnic roots. But critical and cultural forces ultimately subverted his intention. The process of assimilation demanded by his father, reinforced by the Hollywood studios, and dictated by the culture at large had distanced him from his original sources. Though a few influential critics gave the play warm praise, it upset rabbis as being irreligious, and was dismissed by others as a mere cartoon. *The Flowering Peach* had a modest run, and Odets and the producer lost substantial funds. As John Lahr summarily states, “Odets didn’t lose his talent; he lost the attention of his audience” (Lahr). His play was overlaid with the veneer of adopted attitudes. The playwright had lost the ability to present deeply human Jewish characters. Playing it safe with Jewish ethnicity had become a habit.

Odets is not blameless in popularising Hollywood’s values, a major tenet of which was to avoid Jewish issues. As a screenwriter and script doctor, he contributed substantially to Hollywood’s idealised melting-pot image of American life. He participated in the studios’ mandate to treat sensitive issues with a light touch, if at all. A film contract assured him a certain amount of money; Odets was known to spend freely and lend generously. Screenwriting suited Odets in a number of ways, though he considered it a craft and not an art form. Despite his vacillating disdain for screenwriting, the apex of his work in any medium is, arguably, *Sweet Smell of Success*. The 1957 film shows a technical sophistication far beyond that which he commanded as a playwright. His unmistakable gift for dialogue drives the

¹⁷³ *Till the Day I Die* was written as a curtain raiser for *Waiting for Lefty*’s Broadway run. Both were one-acts, neither long enough to sustain on its own an expected full evening of theatre on Broadway.

film, elevating it beyond the typical *film noir* genre. And, though an adaptation of another writer's novelette, *Sweet Smell of Success* strongly reflects Odets' contempt for the ruthlessness of the capitalist system. It was Odets' misfortune that both he and the American public failed to identify him with his film work as readily as they identified him with the stage.

Screenwriting failed to satisfy Odets for an additional reason. His unconventional working method, derived from his Group Theatre Method training, was ill suited to the constrictions of Hollywood production schedules. His artistic hunger grew keener even as his professional life progressed, but he became progressively muddled in his intentions. Odets was riven in a way that film could not unify. During the last ten years of his life he longed to complete another play but found it impossible. He wished to continue with Old Testament themes, but his voice had disconnected from his authentically Jewish roots. His former ethnic certainty had dissolved into the social conformism of the immediate post-war period.

Odets clung to New York as his spiritual home, maintaining a Manhattan apartment throughout the Hollywood years that constituted the greater portion of his professional life. New York was the centre of Jewish-American culture, and Hollywood was the centre of the Jewish-American remake. Film stars who began with names like Meshilem Meier Weisenfreund and Jacob Julius Garfinckle could cement identities as Paul Muni and John Garfield. Odets felt he belonged in New York, but chose to remain in Hollywood. Working behind the scenes as a screenwriter, Odets' own Jewish reflection was easily obscured. He became acclimated to Hollywood's standards yet still wished to be in New York writing plays. Unable to commit fully to either coast, Odets developed a lack of assertiveness in treating controversial topics, Jewish or secular. This habit of safe positioning contributed to his disastrous testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He felt he stood up to the Committee, but his testimony was more commonly regarded as a betrayal of former colleagues as well as of his own ideals. The mixed messages he delivered to the Committee followed a binary pattern with which Odets struggled in all facets of his life. It was the common pattern of immigrants caught between their ethnic origins and the demands of a newly adopted host culture.

Assimilation is an alternative method of dealing with political and societal pressures. It is a form of submission. Assimilation loosens the fetters of old associations and carries the promise of eradicating the stigmas of ethnic origin. The process can also repress or adulterate an artist's most original voice. Thus it was with Odets. And so it was with many writers, including Odets' contemporary, the novelist Henry Roth, who commented extensively on the subject. Only months before the breakthrough productions of *Waiting for*

Lefty and Awake and Sing!, Roth's novel of Jewish immigrant sensibility, *Call It Sleep* (1934), was published to lukewarm reviews. Odets and Roth struggled with creative blocks resulting from their identification as Jewish writers; Roth's was immediate, while Odets' surfaced in middle-age. Roth's fiction is largely autobiographical and his fifty-year writing block is a complex issue. But he became certain that his own anti-Semitic feelings, directed at himself, contributed heavily. Moving from the ethnic microcosm of the Lower East Side to multi-ethnic Harlem proved disastrous to the eight-year-old Roth's sense of himself. It abruptly ended his beloved Hebrew studies, at which he excelled:

As long as I lived on Ninth Street, in the Lower East Side, I thought I was in a kind of ministate of our own. It never occurred to me that the world could be any different. But moving into this Irish-Italian neighborhood [of Harlem], for my type of kid anyway, was a terrible shock. I came to believe that we were all the things the goyim called us ... My world fractured. My mystique went to pieces" (Roth, *Shifting Landscape* 66).

As discussed in Chapter One, Odets bore taunts of Bronx-Irish neighbours. Both writers sought a sense of community as members of the Communist Party. Yet literary critics in *New Masses* and other left-wing radical journals were hard on both. Leftist critics considered the writers' personal revelations irrelevant to Marxist dialogue. *Call It Sleep* was attacked for this reason (Roth, "Introduction To 'Where My Sympathy Lies'" 48), as was *Awake and Sing!* and *Paradise Lost*.

In *Shifting Landscape*, a collection of interviews and short published writings, Roth could be writing about Odets as well as himself. Roth regretted abandoning

the very sources that gave rise, that gave vitality to ... writing ... the give-and-take ... the dynamics of living among your own people that continually feed you. And in doing so, comes an immobilization. ("Interview" 110)

Roth and Odets became exiled from their sources during a time of tremendous confusion for young Jewish American writers whose parents came, literally, from another world. Roth exiled himself in Maine and New Mexico. By spending most of his working life in California, Odets, like Roth, cut himself off from the coalescing group of postwar New York Jewish writers who became known as the "New York Intellectuals." These writers routinely discussed problems of being a Jewish writer working within the Anglo-American tradition (Bloom).

A comprehensive investigation of how other mid-twentieth century Jewish-American playwrights responded to forces of anti-Semitism and assimilative pressures is essential for a broader understanding of American Theatre trends. Alexander Bloom's study of New York Jewish prose writers and poets in *Prodigal Sons: the New York Intellectuals*

and their World is exemplary. There are areas of Odets' career that beg for analysis within this and other, broader, contexts. For example, it is not presently known how actively Odets pursued television work during "the Golden Age of Television." From the late 1940s until about 1961, teleplays made the reputations of many, such as Paddy Chayefsky. It is a curious lacuna in Odets' career. The burgeoning field offered many opportunities for playwrights. Anthology drama series such as *Alcoa Presents*, *Philco Television Playhouse*, and *Goodyear Playhouse* presented teleplays that were often adapted from novels and stage works. As shown in Chapter Three, adaptation was among Odets' strengths. According to Brenman-Gibson's notes, Odets submitted only one television script, to *Ford Omnibus*, in 1953 (Brenman-Gibson, 1953 11).¹⁷⁴

Odets was finally to embark on his first television series, as script supervisor of *The Richard Boone Show*, when he died at age fifty-seven on 18 August 1963. He claimed to be excited by the prospect of a new beginning. According to his copious notes, he intended to write a piece concerning "the American Negro."¹⁷⁵ Ten days after Odets' death, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his *I Have a Dream* speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The country was on the cusp of the promise of a more positive view of ethnicity, as an attribute rather than a source of shame. Writing about another racial and ethnic group might have served as a means of resolving Odets' own ethnic conflicts. His demise before he could undertake such an exercise was his ultimate misfortune.

¹⁷⁴ When made available, the most recent bequest of Brenman-Gibson Odets materials to the Butler Library (June 2011) will be an invaluable aid toward a deeper understanding of Odets' later life. Volume III of Brenman-Gibson's unfinished psycho-biography was to be based on these materials.

¹⁷⁵ There is no indication for what medium he envisioned the "Negro" piece.

APPENDIX

The below list is representative of the number of productions of Odets' works within, roughly, the last decade. It does not purport to be comprehensive.

	COMPANY	LOCATION	PRODUCTION	YEAR
1.	Zephyr Theatre	West Hollywood, CA	<i>Golden Boy</i>	1999 July
2.	Pacific Resident Theater	Venice, CA	<i>Rocket to the Moon</i>	2004 June
3.	Lincoln Center Theater Company (Belasco Theatre)	New York City	<i>Awake and Sing!</i>	2006 Spring
4.	Long Wharf Theatre	New Haven, CT	<i>Rocket to the Moon</i>	2006 Fall
5.	Almeida Theatre	London UK	<i>Awake and Sing!</i>	2007 Fall
6.	Bernard B. Jacobs Theater/Shubert Organisation, Mike Nichols, dir.	New York City	<i>The Country Girl</i>	2008 Spring
7.	Gamm Theatre	Providence, RI	<i>Awake and Sing!</i>	2009 early
8.	Oregon Shakespeare Festival	Medford, OR	<i>Paradise Lost</i>	2009 early
9.	Staff Players	Sunnyvale, CA	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	2009 early
10.	Angell Blackfriars	Providence, RI	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	2009 early
11.	Théâtre de l'Opis	Montreal, Quebec	<i>Awake and Sing!</i> (French trans.)	2009 early
12.	Aurora Theatre Company	Berkeley, CA	<i>Awake and Sing!</i>	2009 Sept
13.	Soulpepper Theatre Company	Toronto, Ontario	<i>Awake and Sing!</i>	2009 Jun
14.	A Noise Within	Glendale CA	<i>Awake and Sing</i>	2010 May
15.	Intiman Theatre	Seattle, WA	<i>Paradise Lost</i>	2010 Spring
16.	American Repertory Theatre	Cambridge, MA	<i>Paradise Lost</i>	2010 Spring
17.	Richmond Theatre	Richmond, London, UK (transferred to West End)	<i>Country Girl</i>	2010 Aug
18.	Keegan Theatre	Washington, D.C.	<i>Golden Boy</i>	2010 Fall
19.	Your Theatre Inc.	New Bedford, MA	<i>The Flowering Peach</i>	2010 Fall
20.	Theatre West	No. Hollywood, CA	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	2010 Fall

21.	California Repertory Company	Long Beach, CA	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	2010 Fall
22.	Emerson Theatre Collaborative	Colchester, CT	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	2010 Oct
23.	South Camden Theatre Company	Camden, NJ	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	2011 Jan
24.	New Jewish Theater	St. Louis, MO	<i>Awake and Sing!</i>	2011 Spring
25.	ShawChicago	Chicago, IL	<i>Paradise Lost</i>	2011 Spring
26.	Royal National Theatre	London, UK	<i>Rocket to the Moon</i>	2011 Apr
27.	Valley Community Theater	Santa Ynez, CA	<i>Awake and Sing!</i>	2011 Jun
28.	American Blues Theater	Chicago, IL	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	2011 Fall
29.	Ensemble Theatre	Cleveland, OH	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	2011 Fall
30.	American Century Theatre	Arlington, VA	<i>The Country Girl</i>	2011 Sept
31.	Art of Acting Studio Theater	Los Angeles, CA	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	2011 Fall
32.	Ensemble Theater	Cleveland, OH	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	2011 Fall
33.	Stella Adler School of Acting, 6 th Annual Harold Clurman Festival	New York City	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	2011 Fall
34.	Road Less Traveled Productions	Buffalo, NY	<i>The Big Knife</i> (benefit; staged reading starring Alec Baldwin)	2012 Jan
35.	The Agency	Chicago, IL	<i>Paradise Lost</i>	2012 Spring
36.	Theatre Tulsa	Tulsa, OK	<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	January 2012
37.	PowPAC Theatre	San Diego, CA	<i>Awake and Sing!</i>	March 2012

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