

Reamus Youth Theatre

WAITING FOR LEFTY

By Clifford Odets

Directed By
Joanne Lawler



7 – 22 May, 2021

All Tickets: \$18

Bookings: mrt.org.au or 0466 332 766

Maitland Repertory Theatre, 244 High Street

THE SETTING

Written and set in 1935 amid the American Great Depression, Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* captures a meeting of New York taxi drivers ready to strike. The corrupt union head does everything he can to discourage a decision to strike, but as they wait for their leader Lefty Costello to arrive, members of the workers committee step forward to tell heart-wrenching tales of the conditions that have brought each of them individually to the point of no return.

With families they cannot feed, a society

fraught with injustice and no future in sight, they are determined to fight to the death for the right to live like a man; a whole, fully realised person, in a world in which success – “your name in the papers”, “fame and fortune” – is God.

The strike is not about a few extra pennies in their pay or shorter hours of work but a strike for a greater dignity, for a bolder humanity; a strike for the full stature of man.

THE CHARACTERS



Harry Fatt
Thomas Lonsdale



Joe Mitchell
Matt Scoles



Edna Mitchell
Meg O'Hara
(also plays Man from Outside)



Fayette
Richard Rae



Miller
Jasmine Donaldson



Florence
Maddison Lamb
(also plays Doc Barnes)



Irv
Luke Bell
(also plays Clayton's brother)



Sid
Joseph Manning



Tom Clayton
Brendan Dennerley



Doc Benjamin
Alex Simpson



Agate Keller
Joshua Buscombe



Gunman
Robert McKinnon

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

I have been the leader of Reamus Youth Theatre since 2017, running weekly workshops to develop and train young aspiring actors between the ages of 16 and 25. My approach has been to use our annual Shakespeare productions as a training ground for developing our members.



This approach has been shaped by my own experiences training in the United States with American actor Robert Beltran, and in turn influenced by the likes of Harold Clurman and the Group Theatre.

To use the words of Clurman, it is so often taken for granted *“that every actor was ready to perform as required, but the actor’s individual problem as a growing craftsman was neglected... In our group, we would pay careful attention to the actor’s development. Rehearsals themselves would constitute a schooling. Moreover... we expected to bring the actor much closer to the content of the play, to link the actor as an individual with the creative purpose of the playwright. In most theatres the actor is hired to do a part; he was expected to make it live on stage, but as an individual he stood outside the play or the playwright’s vision... In our belief, unless the actor in some way shared the playwright’s impulse, the result on the stage always remained somewhat mechanical.”*

The playwright Clifford Odets was fostered as an artist by the environment of the Group Theatre. I have studied his plays in the past along with having read several works by Group Theatre founder Harold Clurman. Over 10 years ago I had toyed with the idea of putting on a production of Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty*, but that had become a long distant memory.

When our annual Reamus production was moved forward from August to May, I went looking for something shorter than a Shakespeare play

and suddenly *Waiting for Lefty* came back to me. It was the perfect training ground for Reamus; a short but powerful drama steeped in real life events. All roles were of a similar size which meant all cast members could be equally challenged throughout the process. They would have the added challenge of developing a New York accent, and it appealed to the many politically active / socially conscious members within the group.

In November 2020 we made the decision to produce the play, in December we began workshops to study the history of the Group Theatre, Clifford Odets, the 1930s Great Depression and we began working on New York accents. After a short break over Christmas we began workshoping scenes from the play and in early February we held auditions.

Already knowing the skill set of the members of our group I advised them that I would not be casting according to a role I thought would suit them, or one I thought they could easily handle, but rather I would be casting them in roles that would challenge and stretch each of them individually.

I set the stakes high and advised the cast from the start that I was going to push them as much as possible along the way. I set the stakes even higher by laying down the challenge to reach the quality of a closing night performance before the show opened on May 7th because I wanted to see just how far they could soar!

And week by week, rehearsal after rehearsal each actor has stepped up to the challenge. They have worked hard to embody the play, the playwright’s vision, and the historical period that it represents.

The level of passion and commitment I have seen from this cast is far greater than any other show I have directed. And I could not be prouder to see how far this group has come.

JOIN US

We’re always looking for new, active members. To find out how to join, visit the ‘Get Involved’ page of our website: www.mrt.org

1934 TAXI STRIKE NEW YORK CITY



Excerpt from Untapped New York

The roaring '20s were a great time to drive taxis in New York City, but the industry suffered during the Great Depression. The driver market was flooded with desperate men looking for work just as the rest of the population was seriously cutting back on expenses. Taxi salaries plummeted, and drivers' frustration boiled into a strike. On February 5, 1934, the strike spiraled out of control, leading to violent confrontations across the city between drivers and police.

Even during the Depression, taxis remained an important part of the New York economy. In 1930, New Yorkers spent as much money on taxis as they did on all of public transit combined. Unfortunately, drivers didn't benefit, as they had little leverage against fleet owners, with more than four willing drivers for every cab. Some owners demanded expensive daily leases, while others took a high percentage of the fares. Either method resulted in a long day's work that might net only a few dollars. Some drivers resorted to illegal activity, like renting their backseats to prostitutes, to make ends meet.

During the 1933 election, Fiorello LaGuardia campaigned for the taxi driver vote by denouncing the existing nickel tax on rides, which the courts helpfully got rid of just as he took office in 1934. Even with an ally in City Hall, though, driver grumbling continued over how to distribute the

nickel tax refunds, culminating in a decision to strike on February 3.

Striking taxi drivers was nothing new—the first strike took place in 1908, a year after the first taxi company was founded. But this strike had a hostile energy to it, as strikers went hunting for scabs to punish. As one driver put it, “the bastards that was scabbin’, we pulled the doors off their cabs.” Independent cab owners, who had nothing to gain by striking, had their windows smashed by blocks of ice and passengers thrown from their cabs. Police who tried to restore order had their tires slashed and marbles thrown under their horses. By February 5, angry crowds of driving were brawling in the street with the police and torching independent cab cars.

In a move that makes Bill de Blasio look like Rudy Giuliani, LaGuardia insisted that striking drivers had First Amendment rights and took away cops' billy clubs to prevent police violence. Other than brief truces, the protests carried on for months. In 1937, the state legislature passed the Haas Act, which created the modern-day medallion system, stabilizing the number of city-issued medallions under 14,000 (a percentage of which went to independent owners), which allowed steady wages for the remaining drivers. This framework served drivers well until the 1970s.

CLIFFORD ODETS



Clifford Odets was born to a working class family in 1906 in Philadelphia and was raised in the Bronx, New York. He dropped out of high school to pursue an artistic career, much to the disgust of his father who wanted him to continue in the

family printing business. After jobs ranging from Broadway understudy to camp counselor, he was invited in 1931 to join in the founding of Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg's Group Theatre.

It was during his time with the Group Theatre that he began to write and in 1934 over a period of only three nights, he penned *Waiting for Lefty*. The play was taken up by the Group Theatre and performed for the first time on January 5, 1935 at

the old Civic Repertory Theatre in New York as part of a benefit for the taxi-drivers union.

“The first scene of Lefty had not played two minutes when a shock of delighted recognition struck the audience like a tidal wave. Deep laughter, hot assent, a kind of joyous fervor seemed to sweep the audience toward the stage. The actors no longer performed; they were carried along by an exultancy of communication such as I had never witnessed in the theatre before. Audience and actors had become one.” Harold Clurman continued, *“The audience I say was delirious. It stormed the stage. People went from the theatre dazed and happy: a new awareness and confidence had entered their lives.”*

As word spread of the Odets sensation, new theatre societies were formed all over the country

to perform the Odets play.

In 1935 Odets wrote several other plays in quick succession and in a single year four of his plays were being performed simultaneously across the United States; *Waiting for Lefty*, *Awake and Sing*, *Till the Day I Die* and *Paradise Lost*.

Group Theatres shot up like mushrooms; in Chicago, Hollywood, New Orleans, San Francisco. All in all *Lefty* was being performed in some sixty towns which had never before witnessed a theatrical performance.



THE GROUP THEATRE



*Excerpted from PBS Broadway's Dreamers:
The Legacy of the Group Theatre*

In the summer of 1931, three young idealists, Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg, were inspired by a passionate dream of transforming the American theater. They recruited 28 actors to form a permanent ensemble dedicated to dramatizing the life of their times. They conceived The Group Theatre as a response to what they saw as the old-fashioned light entertainment that dominated the theater of the late 1920's. Their vision was of a new theater that would mount original American plays to mirror — even change — the life of their troubled times. Over its ten years and twenty productions, they not only met these goals, but altered the course of American theater forever.

The Group Theatre was a company based on an ensemble approach to acting. First seen

in the work of the Moscow Art Theater, the ensemble approach proposed a highly personal and cooperative method. That individual actors played individual parts was no longer important. The focus was on a cast that was familiar and believable as a whole. If the actors had relationships off-stage, then the relationships on stage would not only seem, but be more “real.” As the members of the ensemble grew to know each other, this familiarity was successfully reflected in their work.

The Group Theatre believed what they were doing to be of great political significance. While disregarding the calls for individual fame in an embrace of cooperation. It was not, however, until Clifford Odets, then an actor in the group, wrote “Awake and Sing!” that they found their full voice. His highly charged plays, which were often expressed in the language and circumstances of working-class characters, mirrored the essence of what the group wanted to be and do, fulfilling the dream of a theater speaking to and for its audience. Both audience and critics responded enthusiastically, and such works as “Awake and Sing!,” “Waiting for Lefty,” and “Paradise Lost” were among the most memorable productions of the decade.

By the late 1930's however, the cohesiveness of the group began to crumble. The chronic

financial problems and long-simmering disputes about “the method” began to chip away at their solidarity. An attempt to solve their financial problems that sent many of the actors to Hollywood (where some stayed) ended in the resignation of both Lee Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford. As a last resort, Harold Clurman decided to take on Hollywood stars in an attempt to enhance box office appeal. To many long-time members this seemed a compromise of the fundamental ideals of the group. Even the financial success of Clifford Odets’ “Golden Boy” in 1937 was not enough to halt the decline, and in 1941 the group dissolved.

Despite its relatively short life span, The Group Theatre has been called the bravest and

single most significant experiment in the history of American theater, and its impact continues to be felt. Many of the group’s members went on to become leading acting teachers and directors, passing on to subsequent generations the spirit and principles that motivated them. Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, Sanford Meisner, and Robert Lewis have counted among their students actors, directors, and playwrights such as Marlon Brando, James Dean, Paul Newman, Meryl Streep, Gregory Peck, and David Mamet. To this day institutions such as the Actors Studio, founded by Cheryl Crawford, Elia Kazan, and Robert Lewis continue the tradition of the Group Theatre.

HAROLD CLURMAN ON THE GROUP THEATRE

Excerpt from The Fervent Years, by Harold Clurman



In the books I read, in the painting I see, in the music I hear, in all conversations, I am aware of the presence of the world itself, I detect a feeling for large issues of human concern. In the theatre these are either absent or

diluted, frequently cheapened. The composers and the painters are searching for new words, so to speak, new forms, shapes, meanings.

Aaron Copland tells me he wants to express the present-day, he wants to find the musical equivalent for our contemporary tempo and activity. Where is the parallel to all this in the theatre? There are little avant-garde

performances here and there; Copeau speaks seriously about the theatre. Of course, the greatest poets of the past wrote for the theatre.

Yet, despite all this, what I actually see on the boards lacks the feel of either a significant contemporaneity that I get from even the lesser of concerts of new music - not to mention the novels of Gide, Proust, D.H. Lawrence – or the sense of a permanent contribution to my inner experience that I get from some things at the Louvre, from the finale of Beethoven’s Ninth, or even from the simple reading of certain classic dramatists. Where is the best thought of our time in the theatre, the feeling of some true personal significance in any of its works? Either there is something inferior in the theatre per se or there is something wrong about the practical theatre of today that escapes me. I can’t live without the theatre, but I can’t live with it. The theatre gives itself lofty graces, claims a noble lineage, but has no more dimension than a bordello!

PRODUCTION & DESIGN

Director: Joanne Lawler

Production Manager: Ian Robinson

Costume Design: Kadisha Patterson

Lighting Design: Miles Punch

Set & Sound Design: Joanne Lawler

Stage Manager: Lisa Agnew

Properties: Dimity Eveleens

Tech Team: Miles Punch, Coldan Kirkman, Joanne Lawler

Photography: Joerg Lehmann

Publicity: Meg O’Hara

Set Construction: Ian Robinson, Danny Shaunessy, Dimity Eveleens, Alex Comber

DONATE

All donations of \$2 and above are tax deductible. To find out how to donate to Maitland Repertory Theatre please visit the 'Get Involved' page of our website.

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Earnest

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Audience members are reminded to please turn off mobile telephones once in the theatre.
No photographs can be taken inside the theatre.

