

SYMPOSIUM

Classical Drama & Historical Specificity

Drama As History
Clifford Odets'
The Big Knife
And 'Trumanism'

by Harley Schlanger



Following the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, President Harry S Truman arrives at the Potsdam Conference, July, 1945.

In his keynote address to the conference yesterday, Lyndon LaRouche warned that we face the most profound crisis in the history of civilization, and we discussed this over the two days: The deepening global depression, the spread of war, the danger that this will continue to spread under the Cheney doctrine, and also we've talked about a new dark age, something that LaRouche has been discussing for many, many years. And which, for many years, we have also discussed in the organizing.

And, I think, too often it has become a catch-phrase, or a slogan, as opposed to really understanding what we mean by a dark age, a new dark age. What LaRouche said yesterday, very strongly, is that what humanity faces

Harley Schlanger is Western States spokesman for Lyndon LaRouche's Presidential campaign, LaRouche in 2004. This article is adapted from a panel presentation on "The Big Knife' and Trumanism," at the ICLC/Schiller Institute Presidents' Day Conference, Feb. 15, 2004, in Reston, Virginia. An excerpt from Robert Beltran's remarks at the panel appears on page 84 of this issue.

today, is something much worse than what we faced in the 1930's, with the Depression and fascism.

Now, there are still some people who don't get that point. They say, "Isn't Lyn exaggerating? I don't really see that." I would call to their attention events that we here on the West Coast know very clearly from last year. We had an event which occurred last year, which was the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger. This is a picture of our famous leaflet [SEE illustration]. We discussed with Lyn how to bring home the horror of the Recall election, in which a bad actor, a product of steroids and special effects, was about to become the Governor of the largest and wealthiest state in the country, which, in the past anyway, proclaimed itself to be the sixth-largest economy in the world, if it were a nation.

How did Schwarzenegger become Governor of California? This should tell you something about the cultural crisis we face today. What have the voters of this country become, and what will we tolerate? The idea of man seeking pleasure, a pleasure-seeking society, a post-industrial economy, an entertainment culture: Isn't this exactly what preceded the takeover of Hitler in Nazi Germany?

What we saw in the 1920's, nihilism, pessimism, the

philosophy of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Nazi philosophers, who promoted the idea of man as a beast. This was the cabaret society of Berlin in the 1920's. And yet, what do we have today, in 2004? What characterizes our popular culture today? Janet Jackson's famous moment at the Super Bowl. And, if you look closely at that, how is that different from the movie *Cabaret*? [SEE illustrations] I would say it's worse in many ways.

So, we are in a tragedy, we face a dark age. And we've come to a moment of *punctum saliens*, a moment of decision, as in Classical tragedy, where we are all on the stage of history—or, as Lyn has been saying, we are in the arena of the Colosseum, and either we make the right decision now, or we face one of the darkest tragedies in history.

The Problem of 'Trumanism'

Now, LaRouche recently, in the "Tariffs and Trade" paper,¹ took up this question. He asks, "What is tragedy? It is the failure to meet the challenge of the future; it is the failure to bring forth today, that which the small mind deems a 'seemingly impractical' action, but an action on which the possibility of existence of an acceptable tomorrow depends."

If we are to survive today, we require two "seemingly impractical" events. The first is to elect Lyndon LaRouche President of the United States. Which is, seemingly, impractical. But second, as part of that same process, especially through the work that is being done by



LaRouche in 2004 leaflet: Arnold Schwarzenegger and Adolf Hitler—both "Beast-Men."

the LaRouche Youth Movement, we want to launch a renaissance in the United States, and worldwide, which would sweep away today's all-powerful culture of fast food, fast sex, fast money—the culture of decadence which all of us have grown up in.

Now, we got a glimmer of that over the last

two days with the two youth panels—the potential for a renaissance in the United States, one which includes scientific discoveries and breakthroughs, by looking at the time of the American Revolution, the precedents for the American Revolution, and the antecedents, rather, of Leibniz, Franklin, Gauss, the work in science.

We see the same thing on the cultural side: Germany's Weimar Classical period, built upon the work of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, as well as the literary-dramatic side, Shakespeare, Moses Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Schiller. Now, there's an interesting question, if we look at this 250-year cycle, the one which we have come to the end of: The United States did emerge as the one alternative to an otherwise unbroken era of oligarchical domination, an era of men as beasts, men as animals. The United States demonstrated, through the work of Hamilton,



Popular culture today replays the 1920's prelude to Nazi takeover. Above: Liza Minnelli stars in "Cabaret." Right: Janet Jackson at the Super Bowl.

SUPER BOWL GOES OUT OF BOUNDS



Franklin, Washington, courageous leaders such as Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, that a republic will work, a republic can function. The question, then, is, what about the culture that is necessary to sustain a republic? Why have we had no cultural renaissance in the United States?

Helga Zepp LaRouche gave us part of that story in her presentation this afternoon on the Congress of Vienna²: the deliberate deployment of what were essentially fascist, police-state tactics, to destroy the potential among the young to reap the benefits of the great work of the Weimar period of Schiller, Beethoven, and others. A deployment to impose an anti-human culture of pessimism on the population.

But, what about the United States? What's the problem *here*?

We had the great fortune on the West Coast this last year, to be in a sense in the middle of a production by Robert Beltran of a play called *The Big Knife*, by an American playwright, Clifford Odets.

For me, Odets was a name I knew, but I couldn't place, and I knew none of his plays. But, by working with Robert, having the chance to meet with some of the actors, and to participate in some limited way in a discussion around the play, and then the discussion with Lyndon LaRouche, when he was here last September and he and Robert had a very productive session, and then the continued indirect discussion back and forth, we got a new insight—yes, it can happen, even amongst Boomers, to develop a new insight!—into “Trumanism.”

But, not just into Trumanism. And not just into the tragedy of the life of Clifford Odets, which I'll be covering in a few moments. Because the play, *The Big Knife*, although somewhat autobiographical, is also metaphorical. *The Big Knife* is also a Classical tragedy, which combines those elements which are essential to Classical tragedy.

One element is the question of historical specificity, which is really the true issue of drama as history. And Lyn wrote about this most recently again in his paper on the journal *Maritornes*, where he said,

I have recently and repeatedly expressed my delight at the news of the then-coming production of that Clifford Odets play, *The Big Knife*. This delight was prompted by my recognition of the great value of that play for providing younger generations of today an insight into the causes of the widespread moral failure, by omission or otherwise, since about 1946, of most representatives of their parents' and grandparents' generations. . . .

This was a valuable experience, because the experience of that play helps us now to make something of importance clear to today's Generation X, and 18-to-25-year-old young adults. That play, and similar work, point attention to the

source of that corruption, generated during the Truman years, which was passed down over subsequent successive generations by the young adults of that former time, to produce the horror which threatens the world of the young adult of today. . . .

The beauty of Odets' theme in that play is that it expresses a typically Classical artistic approach, one of exemplary historical specificity toward understand an awful downward turning point in the 1944-52 history of our United States. This drama thus expresses the same principle of *prescience*, which is to be found as the controlling principle of composition in Plato's critical view of the Classical Greek tragedy of his time, and the plays of Shakespeare and Schiller.³

Prescience in Classical Tragedy

Now, this question of prescience with Odets: Odets was on the scene in 1947-48, at the beginning of Trumanism. And in this play, he wrote with precision of the tragedy which was only then unfolding *as he was writing the play*. And this raised for me an interesting question.

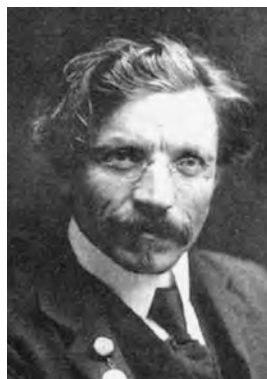
First, where did Odets come from? And I don't mean Philadelphia, which is where he's from (which is interesting in itself, he was the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants), although he spent many of his early, formative years in the Bronx—and, by the way, he dropped out of school at age 16! But the question: What produced Odets? Where did Odets come from? How did we have this playwright, who I'll think you'll see from the discussion tonight, was a great American dramatist? How did he come about, and why don't we know of him?

Well, he came from another seemingly impractical movement. That is, something which was launched by Moses Mendelssohn in the middle of the Eighteenth century in Germany, a lifelong campaign by Moses Mendelssohn, to emancipate the Jews of Germany, and by so doing, to emancipate Germany itself. And it was Moses Mendelssohn's work, along with his close collaborator, Gotthold Lessing, which created, or laid the basis for the work of Schiller. And Mendelssohn and Lessing served as a bridge between Leibniz and Gauss, partly through a collaborator of Lessing's named Abraham Kästner.

The issue for Mendelssohn and Lessing was always the nature of man: That man is not a beast; that man has a distinct difference from the animal kingdom, and that society must be organized around that difference, the difference of the creative potential of each human being. And so, even for the Jews of Germany, who at that time were not citizens, had no rights, who lived largely confined in ghettos—both physical ghettos, and also their own mental ghettos—Mendelssohn approached them

with an optimism, going to the most downtrodden population to uplift them.

His movement first went to the Jews of Germany, and it was to bring to the Jews of Germany German culture and the German language, as a way of breaking them out of the self-imposed ghetto, which was the tradition of the Jews in the European diaspora. And second, in connection with this, was the recognition of the validity of the scientific and cultural discoveries of the world outside the ghetto, to enrich the Jewish population. Not to give up the 4,000-year history, but to enrich it, through contact with the developments of their time.



The Yiddish Renaissance was based on the efforts of Moses Mendelssohn (below) to uplift the Jews of Germany. Clockwise from far left: Authors Mendele Mocher Sefhorim, I.L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem.



The Granger Collection

This had a profound effect in Germany, which goes beyond the scope of our discussion tonight. And, it also had a profound effect on the Jews in Eastern Europe. It was a little different being Jewish in Russia or Poland than in Germany, largely because Poland and Russia at the time were much more backward, difficult countries to live in.

Rather than develop this emancipation movement in the Russian or Polish language, a decision was made by a handful of writers, the most famous of whom is Sholem Aleichem, but there are two others, I.L. Peretz and Abramowitz—his pen name was Mendele Mocher Sefhorim, “Mendele the Book Peddler”—who are well worth reading, who decided to develop a literate language, to transform Yiddish, which was the language of the home, the mother tongue (largely because it was the language that the mother used to tongue-lash the children!), to develop a literary language, consciously modeled on what Dante did for Italian with the *Commedia*, and what Cervantes did for Spanish with *Don Quixote*. And, to introduce with it a culture of hope, and most importantly, a culture of change. To take on the axioms of oppression, the axioms of self-slavery, with humor, with irony, with paradox, to give them the potentials of the modern world, and help them break the chains of ancient tradition.

The Yiddish Theater

Simultaneous with the development of Yiddish as a literate language, was the creation of the Yiddish theater. This began in 1876 in Romania, and quickly spread to

Russia. In 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated. He had been known as the “Tsar Liberator” because he had freed the serfs, but he was also the collaborator of Lincoln during the U.S. Civil War, and had given a measure of independence and freedom to Russia’s Jews. But, after he was assassinated, in the midst of the ferment of the beginning of the revolutionary movements in Russia, his successor enacted anti-Jewish laws. There were pogroms.

In 1883, an order was issued forbidding the Yiddish theater from continuing. Between 1880 and 1910, between one-third and one-half of the Jews of Eastern Europe emigrated, most of them coming to the United States, and a large number of them coming into New York City. And so the Yiddish theater was transplanted from Eastern Europe and Russia, to the Bowery in New York City, which was quite a bit different from the Bowery you might know if you are a Baby Boomer who travelled in New York in the Fifties and Sixties.

There were two tendencies in the Yiddish theater. One was a vaudeville tendency, slapstick, or, if you went to the summer resorts in the Catskills, you would probably call it “slapschtick.” Melodramas, family stories, attempts to give people a little bit of lightness and humor in their lives. But gradually, and importantly, there was the development of serious tragedy. And this was centered around a towering figure of the Yiddish theatre, a man named Jacob Adler. This is a handbill from the Yiddish theater, the play *Hamlet*, and you can see the language, the writing, is in Yiddish, with Hebrew characters



Jacob Adler worked to expand Classical performances in the Yiddish theater. Far left: Handbill from a Yiddish production of “Hamlet.” Left: Adler as Shylock in Shakespeare’s “Merchant of Venice.”

Now, Adler wrote about this principle of emancipation, the *Haskalah*, or Enlightenment, as it was called in Hebrew. He said that, “If the world would not break the wall of the ghetto down from the outside, the Jews must break it down from the inside. Education—secular education—was the tool that would break the wall. Free, no longer isolated, the Jew would take his place in science, in art, in political action, in every great endeavor of the time.”

[SEE illustration]. For those of you who don’t know, Yiddish is a Germanic language, but it is written in the Hebrew alphabet.

So, the plays were done in Yiddish. Occasionally, they changed them: For example, there was a Jewish *King Lear* done, a Yiddish “*Kenig Lear*,” in which, at the end, the king, who is really a Jewish businessman, gives his belongings to his children, moves to Palestine, things don’t work out, and he comes back blind and poor, and says to his children, “*Kinder*, I forgive you”—so everyone leaves the theater “happy.” But they also did serious tragedy and drama, as in the case of this *Hamlet*. The next picture shows Jacob Adler in one of his most famous roles, that of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* [SEE illustration].

Adler was born in Odessa, Russia. In 1883 he came to London, and in 1889 he came to New York. And here’s what he said about the change, the development in the Yiddish theater: “To live forever with jest and song was hardly my idea. The time had to come when our theater would touch on the deeper side of life, when plays of a more serious kind would have a place on our stage. And this task of deepening our theater, of, so to speak, ‘tragezicizing’ it, fell in large measure, to me.” He became known in London for his playing of Karl Moor in Schiller’s *The Robbers*, which to the day of his death was his favorite play. He played Nathan the Wise of Lessing repeatedly, he played Shylock, he played Iago, and he played Hamlet.

Adler was a profound admirer of the works of Schiller. He wrote of the “heroic epoch of Schiller, which would endure on the Yiddish stage for some 25 years, and which began in London with his masterpiece, *The Robbers*. Whatever the reason,” he wrote, “the great Schiller seems to have as many ‘patriots’ among us Jews, as in his own German public. I do not know why this is so. I believe it must go back to the time of Moses Mendelssohn and his Enlightenment.”

Now, it was not just Schiller, but also Shakespeare, as you saw from that handbill. Adler wrote that “the Yiddish public would thrill to Shakespeare. Then how could they not respond to the playwright who, they say, begins



Funeral procession for Jacob Adler, New York City, 1926.

where Shakespeare leaves off! The great Schiller, the thinker and historian, who was, God forbid, no plagiarist, but Shakespeare was his school, and he learned from him with a passion that still smokes on the page.” So you get an idea of passion from Adler.

Adler died in 1926, and just as was the case for Sholem Aleichem nearly a decade earlier, there was a large funeral procession in New York City, and not just of Jews, but of all the population [SEE illustration].

One interesting play that Adler did— his performance of Shylock was so powerful. He played Shylock, not as a monster or a comic figure, but as a bitter, angry character bent on revenge, but nevertheless proud, in a way that showed that it was not just Shylock, but all the Venetians who were corrupt: the principle of tragedy. Adler understood that. And Adler was playing Shylock in the Yiddish theater, and people from uptown came down to see it. And they organized to have him perform on Broadway in the *Merchant of Venice*, where the performance was in English, with the exception of Adler, who spoke the lines of Shylock in Yiddish. The New York theater-going public loved it, it was the smash hit of 1903. So, as you can see, when he died, it affected the whole city.

Jacob Adler had a profound effect on the theater in the United States, not just the Yiddish theater. In the photograph, Jacob Adler is the elderly man on the right [SEE illustration]. The little girl who is second from the left is Stella Adler, who became one of the great actresses and teachers in the United States, until she died at the age of ninety.

Stella Adler married a man named Harold Clurman, who I will tell you about in a moment, and Clurman was the founder of The Group Theatre, and was the mentor of Clifford Odets. So Odets is directly connected to the Adler tradition. In fact, the fourth person from the left in the photograph is Jay, or Jake Adler, whom Odets described as “my adopted brother.” And there are scenes or stories in one of the Odets biographies, of how Odets, when he would go over to see the Adlers, Sarah Adler, the wife of Jacob, who herself was a great actress, would put some *challah*, the Jewish bread for the Sabbath, on the table, and Odets would devour the whole loaf. And so they said that Odets got everything he could from the Adler family.



Jacob Adler (right) with family. Actress and teacher Stella Adler is second from the left; Jay Adler, Odets' "adopted brother," fourth from left.

Beyond the Yiddish Theater

Now, Harold Clurman, the man who became the husband of Stella Adler, first got interested in the theater when, at six years old, his father took him to see Jacob Adler playing Shylock. The question for Clurman was, Could we move from the Yiddish theater to a national theater?, as advocated by Schiller, for instance, in the piece, “Theater Considered as a Moral Institution,” in which he writes, “If we could witness the birth of our own national theater, then we would truly become a nation.” And as he closes that essay, Schiller says, “the goal of this is to become truly human.”

Clurman said this was his goal in launching The Group Theatre: To establish a national theater which would help the people of the United States to become truly human. Clurman wrote, in a *New York Times* essay about the founding of The Group Theatre, that his goal was “spreading hope and love of life to combat despair . . . and the way I have chosen to do it, is through the great art of theater.” He wrote that, for him, the purpose of the theater is “to affect men’s hearts, to change their lives in matters of aspiration, sentiment, conviction. I wanted . . . a play to make men more truly alive.”

But there was a paradox in the 1920’s, which Clurman was very aware of. The United States, seemingly, was very wealthy, the way that the United States was again in the 1990’s. So, with all of this wealth, why was there no culture? I’d like Robert Beltran to read Clurman’s discussion of this in a book he wrote called *The Fervent Years*,

Robert Beltran on *The Big Knife*

The play, *The Big Knife*, was—now less of—an obsession, but was quite an obsession with me. I felt that I had to get some actors together to produce the play, and do it. And, I was lucky to get a very good cast together, very good director, and we got to work on the play. We started rehearsals, and in the rehearsal process—I was playing Charlie Castle, who is the central character in the play—in the process of rehearsal, several times, Charlie hears the doves outside the window of his house in Beverley Hills, and it wakes him up, he can't get a good night's sleep. And several times in the play, he mimics the sound of the doves that he hears. There is a scene where he is with his agent, and he hears the doves in the middle of his conversation, and he says,

“Those damn doves, those mourning doves,” (mourning, m-o-u-r-n-i-n-g, those mourning doves), “they woke me up this morning.”

He hasn't been able to sleep. And he mimics the sound of the doves, he goes—I have them outside my house, too, so I know it quite well—mimicking the doves, he says,

“Coo-Coo-*Whoo*, Coo-Coo-*Whoo*.”

And he has to do this three times in the play.

So, my director, once, when we were rehearsing these scenes, had the disconcerting habit of coming up to you, and saying, “Hmmm, what's that really about?” And I said, “Well, it's mourning doves, you know, *mourning* doves, they're *grieving*, they're grieving over Charlie Castle. They see that he's dying.” And he just looked at me, and he says, “Is that all?” [*Laughter*] So, a few days later, I'm still rehearsing these scenes, and I have to do that sound, in the middle of a scene—“Coo-Coo-*Whoo*, Coo-Coo-*Whoo*.” And he comes up to me after we had run through the scene a couple of times, and he says, “Robert, uh, what is that? What do you think that is?” And I wanted to scream, I said, “Damn it, it's the *mourning doves!* Don't you get it, they're mourning for Charlie Castle!” [*Laughter*] That's what I said to him. And again, he said, “Is that all? Is that all?” [*Laughter*]

So, the next couple of days we were rehearsing, and then one morning he came into our rehearsal smiling,

and he says, “Robert, have you looked at how Odets spells the ‘Coo-Coo-*Whoo*, Coo-Coo-*Whoo*’?” And I said, “Yeah, yeah.” He said, “Have you *really* looked at it?” “Yeah!” He says, “Well, look,” and so he showed it to me. It's spelled “C-o-o—C-o-o—W-h-o-o.”

So, we both smiled very broadly, and said, “Yes, that's it, “Whoooooo.”

Who?

That's what is waking Charlie Castle up. That's why he can't get sleep. The mourning doves, all those billions of mourning doves, are waking him up out of his sleep. “Who—Who—*Who?*” And if you take the question further, the question is, “Who are you, really? Who? Who are you really, Charlie Castle? Who have you become? Who were you, and who have you become? Who are you, really?”

And then later, the big question is, “Who, if not you? *Who*, if not you?”

So this, of course, opened up the whole play for me, really, and the character of Charlie. He's got everything, he's a fabulously wealthy, successful movie star, money, fame, all the luxuries of success, but he's miserable, and his wife is miserable, their marriage is in shambles, and during the course of the play, we find out why.

* * *

Lights fade. End of play. So the audience goes home, and now that you know something a little bit more about Clifford Odets, I think it's very clear that embedded in this play was that question, “Who? Who?” To every one of those audience members, and, in the larger sense, the nation. “Who are you, really? Who will you become?” And then, the biggest question, the one that's meant to startle you out of your sleep at night, not let you sleep, the way it was startling Charlie Cass, “Who, if not you?” All those billions of mourning doves asking that question to you, individually, and to our country, “Who? *Who, who, who, who, who*, if not you?”

—Robert Beltran,

excerpted from the conference panel on
“*The Big Knife*’ and Trumanism,”

Feb. 15, 2004

which is about the founding of The Group Theatre:

This was a fantastic world we were living in, electric with energy, feverish with impulse, gigantic with invention. It was a world full of sharp curiosity, quick assimilation, enormous activity, mountain-high with reward. But it was a meaningless world, just the same; a downright silly world. It was terribly attractive: had the fairest flesh, the most resplendent contours, the most bedizened dress imaginable. But it had no insides; it was empty. Or if it wasn't empty, its contents were in such a perpetual boil that nothing emerged from it except an eruption of brilliant particles that turned cold and dead when they hit the earth. Nothing tied the fast-moving forces together, no governing principle, no aim, no deep and final simplicity. The gyration and tremor made it all an overwhelming burden that no human spirit could survive. Everything had been rendered both too easy, and too difficult. One was rushed giddily through brightly bursting substance that had no real texture; it ended by making one tired as if one had been struggling with a colossus. The American man was alone, and he made his woman, who clung to his neck as he twisted and whirled, equally lonesome and more hysterical. There was no quiet here. Man couldn't find himself. He was perpetually on the go to a place he didn't know for a pleasure he couldn't enjoy, for a purpose he didn't seek. Man no longer understood his own nature, his own dreams, even his own appetites. And despite the fact that he was constantly agitated, he was actually passive. He let everything be done to him. His consent was his habit, not his choice. He was dizzy with his own jitteriness. He could not rest, stop, or feel his own motion, for it had become identical with life. If the motion were to cease, it would be as if all were to cease. He was prepared for nothing else. . . .

I'm sick of this dervish dance they've got us doing on steel springs and a General Electric motor. When it stops—as it must—there will be disillusion and devastation; everything will become as frightfully blank as today everything is fiercely congested. Perhaps to rush out of line is to invite disaster. If so, let it come. If enough of us try to form another line according to our true nature, ours may become the right line, one which others may follow and walk on more peacefully and gracefully. We

must help one another find our common ground; we must build our house on it, arrange it as a dwelling place for the whole family of decent humanity. For life, though it be individual to the end, cannot be lived except in terms of people together, sure and strong in their togetherness.

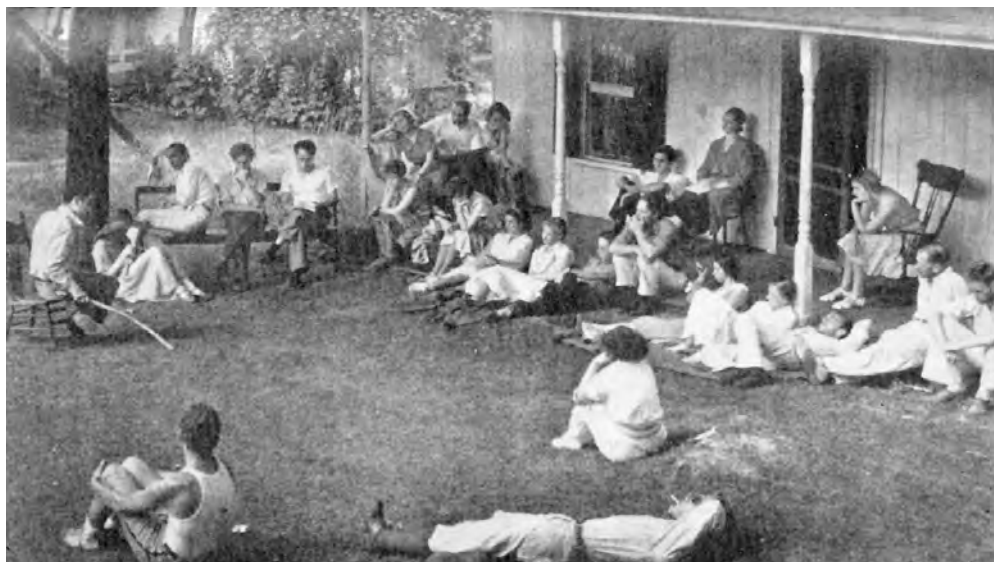
I think that shows some prescience also, the discussion in the Twenties, that things are coming to an end.

Now, Clurman said that his idea of theater was to demonstrate “the perfectibility of man, or at least, the inevitability of the struggle against evil.” In 1931, he and two others, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg, founded The Group Theatre. I won't discuss The Group Theatre as a whole, because there were some problems with it, but they had an idea: If you've got people together who looked at acting and drama as a way of conveying a higher conception of man, and it was integrated with the audience, then perhaps you could change the country.

Note the similarity in the photo between their activity and ours [SEE illustration]. It looks a little like a cadre school, doesn't it? At least, on the West Coast. Clurman is the man sitting with a stick, and the person in the lower left-hand corner, all hunched up, that's the young Clifford Odets.

From the beginning, they had problems with The Group Theatre. The typical problems that Robert can tell you about in chapter and verse today. Problems with money. A concern for the box office: “Will people like it?” And from the beginning, Odets said, “We must not cater to public opinion.”

In 1932, Odets became close friends with Clurman. The year 1932 was the real bottom of the Hoover



The Group Theatre in discussion, Harold Clurman at far left, Clifford Odets, bottom left corner.

Depression. A very cold winter. Many people died on the streets of New York City. And Odets and Clurman walked those streets, trying to soak in something from this, from the Depression. And Odets was developing his philosophy at that time. He said that what he believed in, was that it's a profound and universal human need to be part of something, to believe in something beyond one's fragile, mortal self. He was looking for that in the theater. He had written several plays, one-act plays. Short plays. Clurman, who was not prescient in this case, said of Odets, "Why are you trying to write, you're terrible. Give it up." But Odets stuck with it, partly because he was not a very good actor, by his own description.

The Courage of the Young

In 1932, there was a shift: Franklin Roosevelt was elected. There was a change, there was hope. This is typified by a statement Roosevelt made to a college graduating class shortly after he was elected. He said, "We need the courage of the young. Yours is not the task of making your way in the world, but the task of re-making the world." That was from Franklin Roosevelt. This inspired many of the younger people, and Odets at that time said, he's going to write, even if people don't like it. And, he also wrote at that time of his philosophy, "We need convictions, not opinions." And he quoted Heine, to the effect that, why did they build Gothic cathedrals hundreds of years ago, while today we produce ugly buildings and shacks? He said, "They had convictions, *we* have opinions."

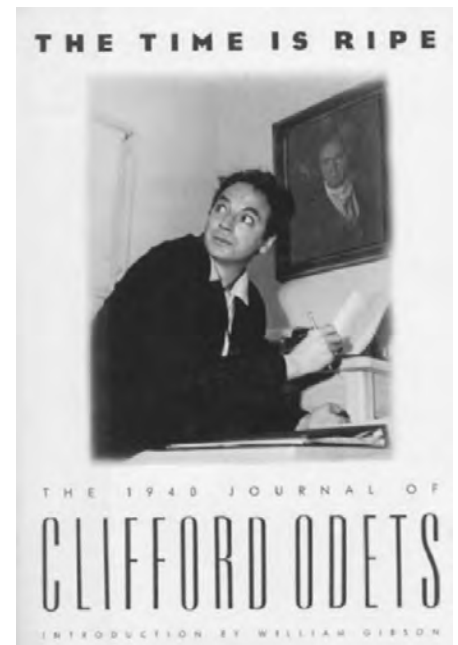
Nineteen thirty-five was the crucial year for Odets. At the age of 29—he had been a voracious reader; it's not clear yet, I haven't researched it enough to know how much he actually read of Schiller—he wrote an essay, an outline for a story on natural law acting through a crane. Sound familiar? But Odets, at the age of 29, emerged in 1935 as the playwright who was changing history. He had a one-act play called *Waiting for Lefty*, which has been denigrated by people who haven't read it as

a piece of communist agit-prop. That it seems like it is just something to organize people to go out on strike—which, in fact, is what it was, but that's not why he did it that way. In fact, here's Clurman's description of this play when it first opened. There had been a taxi strike in 1934, and Odets used it as a setting for this play. Clurman writes,

The debut of *Waiting for Lefty* [became] the birth-cry of the Thirties. Our youth had found its voice. It was a call to join the good fight for a greater measure of life in a world free of economic fear, falsehood, and craven servitude to stupidity and greed. "Strike!" was Lefty's lyric message, not alone for a few extra pennies of wages, or for shorter hours of work, but strike for the greater dignity, strike for a bolder humanity, strike for the full stature of man.

This play was a phenomenon. But it was a one-act play, so it was paired with a second play he wrote that year, called *Till the Day I Die*, which—and this was 1935—was an anti-Nazi play. Later on, when he was being investigated for being a communist, Odets said, "I made the mistake of being a premature anti-Nazi." That is, anyone in the mid-Thirties who was considered anti-Nazi, *must* have been a communist. In fact, the *New York Times* was still praising Adolf Hitler in the mid-Thirties!

That same year, Odets also wrote two full-length plays



Left: Odets on the cover of *Time* magazine, 1938. Above: Odets' 1940 journal, "The Time Is Ripe."

that were presented by The Group Theatre, one called *Awake and Sing*, and another called *Paradise Lost*. So he had four plays in one year, and at 29 years old, he was the new voice of a new, happier America, looking for something to come out of the Depression, to change the nation, and hopefully, to bring about a new theater which could move the nation.

Paradise Lost is an interesting play. It's about a family, a small shopkeeper, who is losing everything, a family which is losing absolutely everything. And yet they are trying to get by. This play infuriated Bertolt Brecht, who was an enemy of Schiller. Brecht was an opponent of Schiller's idea of the beautiful. Here is what he said about Odets' *Paradise Lost*: "Do you wish us to feel sorry for them?," referring to the people going through the Depression. The hero in that play was trying to keep his workers employed, even as the business was losing money. Brecht, in fact, wrote a letter to a guy named V.J. Jerome, who was the dogmatic cultural "commissar" of the Communist Party of the United States, demanding that the Communist Party take up Odets' "deviationism," his "middle-class sentimentality."

So, you had Brecht, who at that time, by the way, was himself going to Hollywood. Nineteen thirty-five to 1937, when Odets was emerging as a playwright, was the period when Hollywood was invaded by people like Brecht, Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, and others, who were trying to use Hollywood to create the culture we have today, the brain-dead culture, with no conception of the dignity of man. But they had a lot of money. So, many people from The Group Theatre, including Odets, decided to "check out" what was going on in Hollywood. And Clurman pleaded with the people in The Group Theatre to stay, and here's what he wrote to them:

If you feel that you really are represented by what you write for pictures then—forget the theatre. But if you feel there's something more, something beyond, something essentially different that you want to say . . . if you feel that not enough of your imagination, your invention, thought, or sentiments is being used in the pictures, then you must write for the theatre—carefully and patiently, since today the theatre needs the best you can give. If your need is as strong in you as it has proved to be in us, Hollywood will not tempt you;



President Harry S Truman with Winston Churchill, en route to Fulton, Missouri for Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech that launched the Cold War.

you will have to return to work ever more actively in the theatres of your own choice. . . . But there is room today only for the determined.

This was a very large battle going on. Odets decided to stay in New York City and continue to write for the theater. In 1938, he had a play, *Golden Boy*, which was another smashing success. And, if you look at the photograph [SEE illustration], you'll see something you rarely see these days—an appearance in popular culture of a dramatist: Clifford Odets on the cover of *Time* magazine. Odets had struck a nerve in the country. And among the intellectuals, there was discussion: Can there be an art that will change our nation? Can we come out of the Depression a better nation? And we see this debate continue in Odets' 1940 journal, which Robert drew on heavily for his work on *The Big Knife*, *The Time Is Ripe*, the one year for which he published a journal [SEE illustration]. And you'll note in the photograph, over his shoulder, the famous portrait of Ludwig van Beethoven. The post-war hopes, because after this 1938-39 period, we had a war.

The Big Knife

When we came out of the war, Odets and Clurman and others were making plans. But those plans were shattered with the death of Franklin Roosevelt. In *The Big Knife*, the very first scene—*The Big Knife* was written in

1947, 1948—in the very first scene, a gossip columnist is trying to get the goods on Charlie Castle, a Hollywood actor, and the gossip columnist says, “The first time we met, all you’d talk about was FDR.” And Charlie responds, “I believed in FDR.” And here you see this question of historic specificity. This was a play about “Trumanism.”

Trumanism was centered around the fear of communism. This is a picture from 1946, Churchill and Harry Truman in Fulton, Missouri [SEE illustration, page 87]. A little, small, ex-KKK-er, Harry Truman, standing next to Winston Churchill, who, now that Roosevelt was dead, had figured the time was ripe for an extension of the British Empire. In March 1947, Truman enacted something called Executive Order 9835, which established an Ashcroft-style Federal Employees Loyalty and Security program. You had to take a loyalty oath if you were a Federal employee, supposedly for fear of communism. And one of these writers said, “We have the smallest Communist Party in the world, why do we pay so much attention to it?”

There were three million people investigated in 1947 and 1948 by the FBI and HUAC, the House Un-American Activities Committee. In 1947, the investigation



Former State Department official Alger Hiss testifies before HUAC, August 1948.

spread to Hollywood, and ten writers, who became known as the “Hollywood Ten,” were sent to prison for refusing to answer the question before House hearings, “Are you, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?” In November 1947, the studio chiefs met, and they acted to ban communists from the motion picture industry. Now, I’d like Robert to read Clurman’s reflection of this period. This was written in 1955; it’s an epilogue to *The Fervent Years*:

The theater was as much a business in 1925 and 1935 as it is today, and people then were not morally superior or aesthetically more refined than they are today. What is lacking now is a sense of purpose, of an ideal—something to be achieved over and above a smash hit, a fat salary, rave notices, more fulsome billing and more frequent mention in the columns. . . .

The answer to my queries you may think is that with the passing of the Roosevelt regime and the temper it reflected a sharp reaction set in which made everything that smacked of a departure from the *status quo* more than a little suspect. There is considerable truth in this.

The political constriction which began to make itself felt around 1947 and which mounted in frightening tempo to reach a sort of climax in 1953 made almost everybody disinclined to commit themselves to any opinion that suggested anything specific beyond “loyalty.” . . . But what began as a kind of political terror inducing a political hush gradually deteriorated to cessation of all serious discussion of any kind whatsoever and to a large extent even of thinking. There was nothing left, it seemed, but for us to drop dead. . . .



The “Hollywood Ten,” 1947, included writers Dalton Trumbo, Alvah Bessie, and Ring Lardner, Jr. All were later blacklisted.

What happened to most of us was that we came to desire nothing more than to be inconspicuous citizens, with no other thought than to “get on,” no other ideal than celebrity or success—and in this area, one kind is as good as another.

Clurman could have been speaking for Odets, because that practically comes out in the pages of *The Big Knife*.

So, this is when *The Big Knife* was written, in the midst of this Trumanism, in the midst of this anti-communist scare. And so, we see the tragedy of Clifford Odets, someone who is talented, someone humane, someone obsessive, someone who is working with Clurman, coming out of the Yiddish theater, out of the Mendelssohn-Schiller tradition, to try to create a new tradition in the United States. And this was the tragedy of Clifford Odets. Someone who saw his life, as we see in *The Big Knife*, as a metaphor for post-World War II America. He was trapped between the lure of the world of his senses—that is, Hollywood—and the hammer of the Synarchists, Trumanism. This destroyed his sensibilities as an artist; his humanism was overwhelmed, and he was unable to live up to his ideal as an artist.

‘Sacrificing for Art’

I want to finish by telling you briefly about this ideal that he had. It was an ideal that he got from his study, his intense, sometimes obsessive, study of Ludwig van Beethoven, whom he loved above all others. When he first met Clurman, and he was interviewing for a position in The Group Theatre, Clurman said, “Well, what is your idea of acting?” And Odets said, “Well, if you listen to much music, my idea of acting is like Beethoven quartets. That kind of polyphonic interweaving.”

Odets had more than a love of music, he communed with the great composers. “Would you believe,” he wrote, “that Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Schu-

mann are as alive to me as almost anyone I know?”

He commented on Beethoven in his art, and on this, he said, “I’m too normal”—he had to overcome being “normal.” And he said of Beethoven, “He sacrificed completely the man to his art, so greatly, as no man before or since has done. All of his life and feeling and thought, swept before him to come through and be retained forever in his divine art. That is what Ludwig did. It was necessary that he serve her, art, physically and spiritually, at all times, and he did. Now I realize, poor Clifford Odets, the full implication of the saying, ‘He sacrificed himself completely to his art.’”

The Big Knife, which was written mostly in 1947 and came out in ’48, was really the last quality piece by Clifford Odets. Sixteen years later, in 1963, on his death bed, dying from stomach cancer not too far from here, Odets, in a moment of lucidity—and this was one of the last moments he had—sat up in bed and said, “I may fool all of you. You know, I may live. Then, perhaps, Clifford Odets will do something to redeem the last 16 wasted years.”

Now, our battle today, is a battle to create a culture where “normal” will mean to become creative geniuses. “Normal” will mean to aspire to the highest that man can offer, as opposed to “going along to get along,” or even preparing the crappy culture we have for those who want to “go along to get along.” This is why we must have a renaissance in Classical culture and, especially, in Classical drama. This is part of the battle in this 250-year period of history. It’s a battle that we can win, and I think that we are seeing, with the work of the LaRouche Youth Movement, that we have a generation today, which will take up this battle.

1. Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “On the Subject of Tariffs and Trade,” *Executive Intelligence Review*, Feb. 13, 2004 (Vol. 31, No. 6).
2. Helga Zepp LaRouche, “Let’s Have a Second American Revolution!” *Executive Intelligence Review*, March 26, 2004 (Vol. 31, No. 12).
3. Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “The ‘Maritornes’: A Tavern of Fascist Prostitutes,” *Executive Intelligence Review*, Jan. 9, 2004 (Vol. 31, No. 1).

FOR FURTHER READING

Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage* (N.Y.: Applause Books, 2001). Recollections written by Adler during 1916-1919, with an introduction by his daughter, Stella Adler.

Margaret Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets, American Playwright: The Years from 1906 to 1940* (N.Y.: Atheneum, 1981; reprinted Applause Books, 2002). Contains very useful quotes from Odets’ letters and essays.

Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre and the ’30s* (N.Y.: Da Capo Press, 1975). Excellent source not just on Odets, for whom Clurman was a mentor,

but as a social/intellectual history of the 1930’s.

Clifford Odets, *Six Plays of Clifford Odets* (N.Y.: Grove Press, 1979). Includes plays from 1935, *Waiting for Lefty*, *Awake and Sing!*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Till the Day I Die*; as well as *Golden Boy* from 1937, and *Rocket to the Moon* from 1938.

_____, *The Big Knife* (N.Y.: Dramatists Play Service, 1975).

_____, *The Time Is Ripe: The 1940 Journal of Clifford Odets* (N.Y.: Grove Press, 1988).