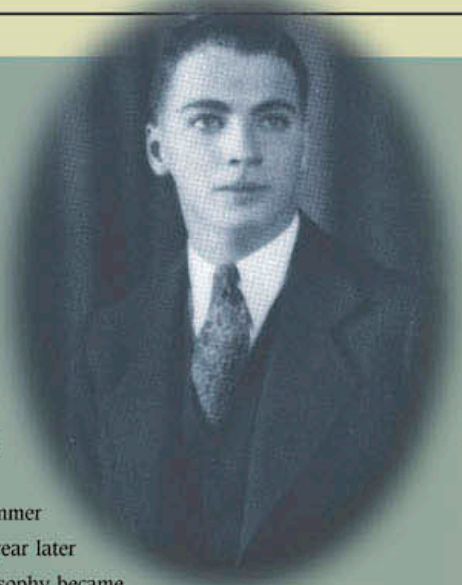


Clifford Odets: Life & Work



Clifford Odets was born in Philadelphia, on July 18, 1906, the son of a working-class Jewish family made good. Louis Odets, his father, had been a peddler, but also worked as a printer for a publishing company. In 1908, Louis Odets moved his family to New York City, where, after a brief return to Philadelphia, he prospered as a printer and ended up owning his own plant and an advertising agency, as well as serving as a Vice President of a boiler company. Odets grew up in the middle-class Bronx, not the Berger's Bronx of tenements and squalor. Still Odets described himself as a "melancholy kid" who clashed often with his father. Odets quit high school after two years.

When he was 17, Odets plunged into the theatre. He joined **The Drawing Room Players** and **Harry Kemp's Poets' Theater**. He wrote some radio plays, did summer stock, and hit the vaudeville circuit as *The Roving Reciter*. In 1929, he moved into the city because of a job understudying Spencer Tracy in *Conflict* on Broadway. A year later Odets joined the nascent **Group Theatre**, having met Harold Clurman and some of the other Group actors while playing bit parts at the **Theatre Guild**. The Group philosophy became the shaping force of Odets' life as a writer. Clurman became his best friend and most perceptive critic.

Odets wrote the first version of *Awake and Sing!*, then called *I Got the Blues*, in 1934. But not until after the unexpected success of Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*, staged as a benefit for *New Theatre Magazine* in winter 1935, did the Group produce Odets' first full-length work. When they did, the company found its voice and Odets found his home. Odets wrote six more plays for the Group before it closed in 1941. But Odets was a hot commodity after having four plays produced on Broadway in the same year. Before the decade was out, he was profiled by *Time* and *The New Yorker* as the flaming voice of class revolution and he went to Hollywood, worked on films, and married movie star Luise Rainer.

After the Group closed and Odets and Rainer divorced, Odets moved between Hollywood and Broadway, writing plays, and films, and occasionally directing his own work. His second marriage to Bette Grayson in 1943 produced two children, Nora, born in 1945, and Walt, born in 1947 before a divorce in 1951. After having been named by the House Un-American Activities Committee as "active in Communist work" in 1947, Odets was called before HUAC in 1952. Friends observed that his creative force was considerably drained after his testimony. He took up permanent residence in California in 1955, after *The Flowering Peach* failed on Broadway.

In the spring of 1963, Odets fell ill with what he thought might be colitis. He had accepted a contract for NBC to write twelve teleplays for T.V. star Richard Boone just the year before and had finished three of them. At the time, he said felt a new beginning coming on and he was planning new stage plays too. He died of cancer on August 14, 1963.



Plays by Odets—*At the Water Line*, radio play (1925-26), *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), *Till the Day I Die* (1935), *Awake and Sing!* (1935), *I Can't Sleep* (monologue) (1935), *Paradise Lost* (1935), *Golden Boy* (1937), *Rocket to the Moon* (1938), *Night Music* (1940), *Clash By Night* (1941), *The Russian People*, adapted from a play by Konstantin Simonov (1942), *The Big Knife* (1949), *The Country Girl* (1950), *The Flowering Peach* (1954).

Screenplays by Odets—*The General Died at Dawn* (1936, dir. Lewis Milestone), *None But the Lonely Heart* (1944, dir. Clifford Odets)—Cary Grant and Ethel Barrymore won Academy Awards for their performances in this film, *Deadline at Dawn* (1945, dir. Harold Clurman), *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957, dir. Alexander Mackendrick), *The Story on Page One* (1959, dir. Clifford Odets), *Wild in the Country* (1960, dir. Philip Dunne)—starring Elvis Presley.

A note on unproduced screenplays: Odets also wrote many screenplays that were not produced, or that were produced only after revision by other authors. Notably, Odets wrote the first versions of both *Blockade* (1938, dir. William Dieterle) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946, dir. Frank Capra). Odets' screenplay *The River is Blue* was rewritten by John Howard Lawson and Lillian Hellman to become *Blockade*. Many writers reworked his screenplay *The Greatest Gift* before it became the holiday classic starring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed.

Originally Produced by the Group Theatre

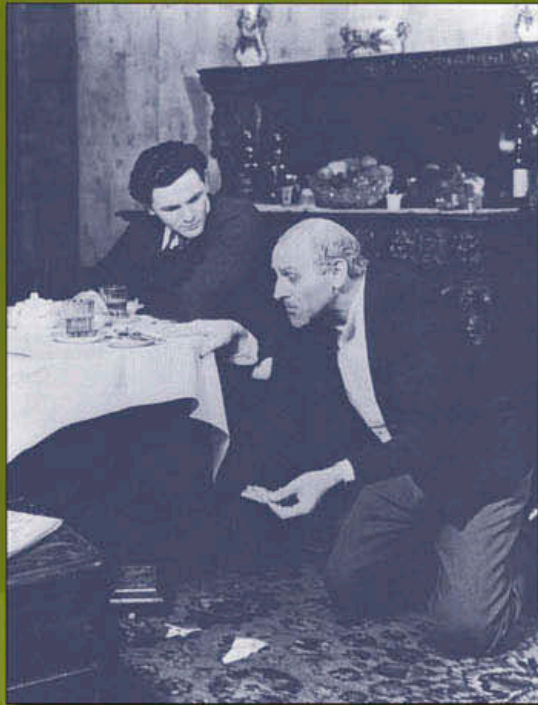


Photo Captions: *Awake and Sing!*, with John (Jules) Garfield and Morris Carnovsky (above). *The Three Directors*, Summer 1932. From left to right: Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, Lee Strasberg (above right).

Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg founded the Group Theatre in the summer of 1931. They invited a group of 28 actors, including Clifford Odets, to a summer camp in Brookfield Center, New York. There, in a series of intense workshops led by Strasberg, the group forged an ensemble-based approach to acting and theatrical production meant to repudiate the techniques of commercial theatre acting which depended on a star system and old-fashioned business. The "method" of acting around which the Group built its ethos was an American interpretation of the teaching of Konstantin Stanislavsky, the turn-of-the-century Russian actor and director who co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre and produced Chekhov's greatest plays. Stanislavsky's students and MAT performers Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya settled in New York after the MAT toured the United States in 1924. They offered classes at the American Laboratory Theatre in the 1930s, which Strasberg attended.



Stanislavsky's system emphasized observation, emotional memory, and authenticity of performance. Strasberg and the Group pushed the system into a method that strove to break down the difference between living in life and acting on the stage: their goal was for the actor to actually feel the emotion his or her character felt in every moment of the play. In addition to Strasberg, the Group's original membership included Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, and Robert Lewis, artists who have trained successive generations of actors in American theatre and film, including Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Al Pacino, Meryl Streep and many others.

In the 1930s, the Group Theatre considered themselves to be both artistic revolutionaries and social reformers. Their method demanded that they portray real life, the troubled life of their times: its issues, its conflicts, its dreams. The Group insisted on showing the daily life of ordinary people in new plays that dared to rage against suffering and yearned to hope for a more just society. In Clifford Odets, their goals found the greatest written expression.



Two Al Hirschfeld drawings immortalize the Group Theatre's production of *Awake and Sing!* and *Rocket to the Moon*.

LEFT: Art Smith, the father in *Awake*, consoles himself as the dentist in *Rocket*. Morris Carnovsky, the husband in *Rocket*, tries to prevent his own suicide as the grandfather in *Awake*.

RIGHT: Morris Carnovsky, Stella Adler and John (Jules) Garfield in *Awake and Sing!*.



Cast List from the Original Production

- Myron Berger..... Art Smith
- Bessie Berger..... Stella Adler
- Jacob..... Morris Carnovsky
- Hennie Berger..... Phoebe Brand
- Ralph Berger..... Jules Garfield
- Schlosser..... Roman Bohnen
- Moe Axelrod..... Luther Adler
- Uncle Morty..... J.E. Bromberg
- Sam Feinschreiber..... Sanford Meisner

The First Review

The New York Times.

LATE CITY EDITION

"All the News That's Fit to Print."

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 20, 1939

THEATRE REVIEW: "AWAKE AND SING!"

By BROOKS ATKINSON
Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES

NEW YORK, FEB. 20—After experimenting with scripts from several different hands, the Group Theatre has found its most congenial playwright under its own roof, Clifford Odets, whose "Awake and Sing!" was acted at the Belasco Theatre last evening. He has been for some time one of the Group actors and he is the author of "Waiting for Lefty," the dynamic play in one act which has been done several times at specific performances this winter. Now he is writing in three acts a vigorous and closely mated drama of Jewish life in the Bronx, and nine members of the Group Theatre play it with stunning power. Having considerable power in his own right, Mr. Odets has written a drama that is full of substance and vitality; he is not afraid to tackle a big job. But it is necessary to add that he does not quite finish what he has started in this elaborately constructed piece. Although he is very much awake, he does not sing with the ease and clarity of a man who has mastered his score.

The home-life of his Bronx family is volcanic. His characters are drawn in several directions. Having brought up her family by force of her own character, Bessie Berger is a tyrant whose one

ambition is to preserve her home. Under her roof she harbors a husband who is an amiable bungler and an aging father who is a student of revolution and a lover of the great arts. Her daughter is an unhappy and rebellious girl who creates the first crisis in the play by confessing that she is pregnant by a boy whose identity she will not reveal. Her son is a scatter-minded lad whose impulses are thwarted by his mother. For good measure, there is also a bitter neighborhood racketeer who is in love with the daughter and rebels against all his own impulses. These are the main characters. They are all excitable, restless, and at loose ends; and they are generally flying at one another's throats.

Although Mr. Odets has a story to tell, his method is to infuse it with the development of his characters; the story cannot be dissociated for a moment from its people. In other words, he means to be a dramatist rather than a playwright. In this instance the defect of the method is the lack of clarity and simplicity in his writing. Although his dialogue has uncommon strength, his drama in the first two acts is wanting in the ordinary fluidity of a play. For two acts it is turbulent—packed with noisy, lunging humanity. In the last act, Mr. Odets comes to at least two conclusions, and the daughter and son who have been dwelling in the dust awake and sing the melody of free people. When he succeeds in loosening the play from the bonds of his tense craftsmanship, Mr. Odets has the

fervor and the skill in direct assertion that are the admirable qualities of "Waiting for Lefty." He may not be a master yet, but he has the ability to be one.

The Group Theatre actors play as if they felt at home inside Mr. Odets's Bronx saga. As the lonely, dreamy old man Morris Carnovsky plays with endearing gentleness; he is an actor of artistic eminence. Jules Garfield plays the part of the boy with a splendid sense of character development. As the daughter Phoebe Brand gives her most attractive performance, Stella Adler as the overbearing mother, Luther Adler as the half-malignant cigar-store lounge, J.E. Bromberg as a braggart garment vendor, Art Smith as the footless father and Sanford Meisner as a bloodless son-in-law give clearly imagined performances. Although Harold Clurman's direction seems to this reviewer to be overwrought and shrill, no one can complain that it is lacking in conviction.

So the Group Theatre batters its way on. To this student of the arts "Awake and Sing," in spite of its frenzy, is inexplicably deficient in plain theatre emotion. There is something unyielding at the core of the play. Charge that comment off to the higher criticism. The pleasant news is that the Group Theatre has found a genuine writer among its own members and knows how to set his play to rattling the boards.



A scene from Group Theatre production of *Awake and Sing!*. Left to right: John Garfield, J. Edward Bromberg, Stella Adler, Morris Carnovsky, Art Smith, Sanford Meisner and Luther Adler.

Despite Atkinson's mixed reaction on first viewing of *Awake and Sing!*, by the time it was revived by The Group in 1939 he was praising it as an unjustly ignored classic: "When Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing!* burst in the face of an unsuspecting public four years ago, some of the misanthropes complained that it was praised too highly. Misanthropes are always wrong. For it is plain after a glimpse of the revival last evening that *Awake and Sing!* cannot be praised too highly...When it was first produced, it seemed febrile as a whole and dogmatic in conclusion. It does not seem so now; it seems thoroughly normal, reasonable, true."

The Fervent Years

“Odets became the central figure of the so-called Left movement in the theatre. But the relation of this work to Marxism or Communism was of a special sort not to be understood in terms of glib political commentary. The Marxist drift of the thirties no more “caused” *Lefty* or *Awake and Sing* in January and February of 1935 than *Lefty* and *Awake and Sing* caused the organization of the CIO in November of that year. All these phenomena, including also the NRA and the later acts of the New Deal (the National Labor Act and so on), were an outgrowth of and a response to a common dislocation that convulsed our whole society.”

—Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years: The Story of the Group Theatre and the Thirties*



Group Theatre Company at Green Mansions, Warrensburg, New York



Key scene from *Waiting for Lefty*; at center, arms raised, Elia Kazan.

testimony of the audience's hunger for constructive social action. It was 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, strike for greater dignity, strike for bolder humanity, strike for the full stature of man.”

The 1930s were literally the fervent years for the labor movement in the United States, precisely because of the material gains made for workers. In the 1930s, laws were passed protecting the rights of laborers to join a union and use the union to negotiate with management. The challenge of the decade was to guarantee that workers could exercise those rights.

In 1934, John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers put legislation to the test by battling the mine owners of Pennsylvania. Then in 1936, thousands of workers at a General Motors plant in Michigan sat down on the job and stayed there, protesting for the right to join the United Auto Workers. Two days later, the workers in a Chevrolet plant also sat down. Fifteen more plants sat down and soon 140,000 workers weren't making automobiles, halting GM's production schedule. After 44 days, GM gave in. Not all strikes were successful, but the notion of “sitting down” on the job had caught on. *Time* magazine's book on the 1930s has a feature called “Everybody Sits,” showing workers in all types of jobs—from soda counters to mattress stores—sitting on their countertops and mattresses and demanding a better deal.

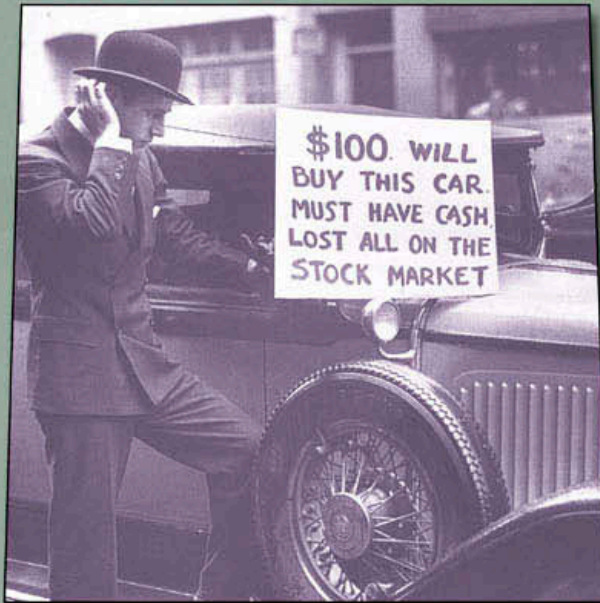
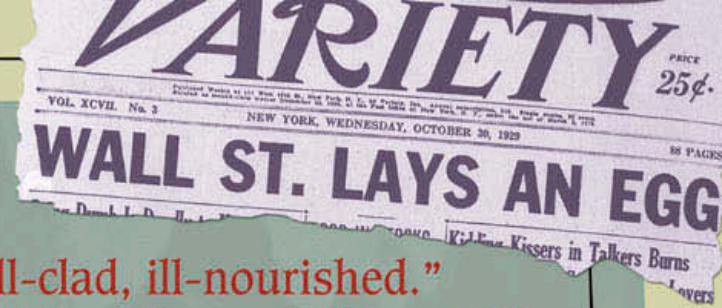
At the end of the fervent decade of labor politics, 22,658 strikes had been called and union membership had hit an all-time high of 7.7 million people. Though often violent, labor's struggles with management finally brought contracts guaranteeing wages, hours, and safety provisions for the average worker.

Clurman on the opening of *Waiting for Lefty*—
“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 being carried along by an exultancy of communication such as I had never witnessed in the theatre before.

(...)

When the audience at the end of the play responded to the militant question from the stage: “Well, what's the answer?” with a spontaneous roar of “Strike! Strike!” it was something more than a tribute to the play's effectiveness, more even than a

The Great Depression



Easy come, easy go. Ready cash was the name of the game for this young investor who was just \$100 away from bankruptcy.

Popular Culture in the 1930s tried to provide escape from the tough times. Radio was the dominant form of entertainment and some of the popular shows of the decade were *Amos and Andy*, *The Shadow*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, *Little Orphan Annie*, *Cavalcade of America*, and *Jack Armstrong, All American Boy*. Hollywood, meanwhile, was in its "Golden Age," earning its title as the nation's "dream factory." Major releases of the decade included *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz* and Walt Disney's first full-length animated movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Eleanor Powell sings Cole Porter's *Swingin' the Jinx Away*, in the 1936 movie musical *Born to Dance*.

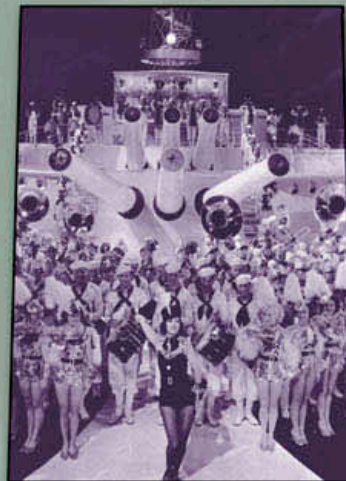
"I see one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished."

—President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his Second Inaugural Address, 1937

After the United States Stock Market crashed in 1929, a confluence of worldwide economic crises caused the Great Depression, the deepest and most prolonged economic downturn in modern history. Widespread unemployment coupled with droughts that caused the dustbowl in Oklahoma meant that the 1930s were a decade of deprivation: food and jobs were scarce, many people found themselves homeless, living in shantytowns called Hoovervilles. Economists and business leaders argued about how best to address the effects of the Depression. For the first part of the 1930s, non-interference was the preferred mode. But, between 1929 and 1932 the income of the average American family was reduced by 40%, from \$2,300 to \$1,500.

Only after Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president in 1932 did the United States government sponsor direct programs to combat poverty and unemployment. The New Deal, "that vast, quite unplanned aggregation of relief and reform measures," was FDR's achievement. Its policies won FDR the support of common voters and restored many people's hope for economic justice. The New Deal spawned an "alphabet soup" of agencies including the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the National Recovery Administration (NRA), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), where many writers and artists who were Odets' contemporaries found employment as part of the Federal Art project or the Federal Theatre Project.

A Sampling of Average Depression Prices, 1932–1934:



New Pontiac Coupe	\$585	Used Ford '29	\$57.50
Women's Cloth Coat	\$6.98	Silk Stockings	\$.69
Leather Shoes	\$1.79	Men's Wool Suit	\$10.50
Silk Necktie	\$.55	Stetson Hat	\$5.00
Bath Towel	\$.24	Wool Blanket	\$1.00
Electric Washing Machine	\$47.50	Electric Coffee Maker	\$1.39
Mahogany Coffee Table	\$10.75	Three-piece Bedroom Set	\$49.95
Cigarettes	\$.15	Gallon of Gasoline	\$.18
Tooth Paste	\$.25	Coty Face Powder	\$1.50
Desk Typewriter	\$19.75	BB Air Rifle	\$.79
Sled	\$1.45	Pound of Sirloin Steak	\$.29
Pound of Sugar	\$.05	Pound of Onions	\$.03
Quart of Milk	\$.10	Pound of Butter	\$.28
Pound of Bananas	\$.07	Modern House in Detroit	\$2,800
Roundtrip Airplane Flight	\$86.31		

Awake and Sing!



Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead.

—Isaiah 26:19

One of the projects of more recent scholarship about Clifford Odets is to reclaim him as not only one of the great voices of American theatre, but also as a great American-Jewish playwright. Essayist and researcher Elaine Schiff pinpoints several aspects of *Awake and Sing!* as fundamentally Jewish: the Yiddish-infused rhythms of Odets' language, the power of the family matriarch, the mobilization of Jewish stage types ("the restless *belle juive*, the mild husband bewildered by 'life in America,' the sybaritic moneyman, the socialist grandfather, the bitter racketeer, and the discontented young hero"). Yet as Schiff herself notes, between the first draft of his breakthrough full length play, then titled *I Got the Blues*, and the version of *Awake and Sing!* the Group Theatre performed, Odets "stripped" from the play "much of its original Jewish explicitness." Schiff argues he did this to persuade the Group to produce the play, though many of his Group Theatre colleagues were themselves Jewish.

Some of the major changes between *I Got the Blues* and *Awake and Sing!* include:

- The translation of Yiddish phrases into English: for instance, Morty originally said "*schmekht gitt*" about Bessie's cooking. In the final version he says "smells good."
- The removal of specific references to Jews and Judaism. In the first draft of the play, Jacob refers often to "the Jew Bible." In *Awake and Sing!* these references are largely replaced by the avowal of socialist ideas. Schiff notes that Moe's promises to Hennie originally referred to a fulfillment experienced by "the kid who stood in the synagogue while the Rabbi sang sad songs."
- Perhaps most important, Odets alters Bessie's objection to Ralph's girlfriend. In the later play, Bessie rejects Miss Hirsch as too poor, without a family. In *I Got the Blues*, however, the problem is that she's a gentile. In the original script, Bessie describes Blanche not as a "girl with no parents" but "a *shiksa!*"

For further development of these ideas, see Ellen Schiff's introduction to *Awake and Sing!* in the anthology *Seven Classic Plays from the American Jewish Repertoire*, edited and with an introduction by Ellen Schiff, Mentor Books, 1995.

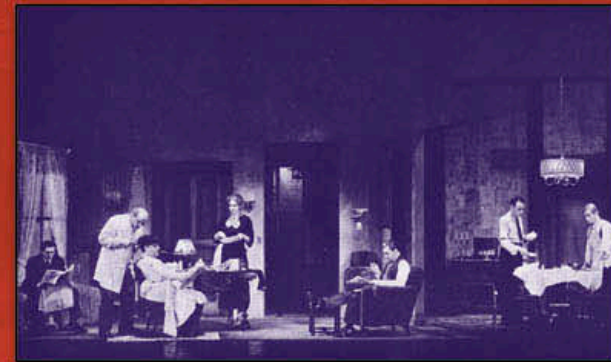
Some examples of Odets' "Yinglish," or English influenced by the cadences, non-sequiturs, and vigor of Yiddish:

Bessie—"You gave the dog eat?"

Morty—"Why not? I shtupped him a ten-dollar bill. Everything's hot delicatessen."

Sam—"Please, I'm making a story? I fell in the chair like a dead."

Jacob—"Boychick, wake up! Be something! Make your life something good. For the love of an old man who sees in your young days his new life, for such love take the world in your two hands and make it like new. Go out and fight so life shouldn't be printed on dollar bills."



Above Left: An early influence for Clifford Odets, his mother Pearl Geisinger Odets.

Above: A scene from the Group Theatre production of *Awake and Sing!*