

American Utopianism

"There is no one so bitter as a disappointed idealist, no mockery so sharp as that which springs up in the breast of a frustrated utopian."

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

"We cancel our experience. This is an American habit."

—Leo Gordon, *Paradise Lost*



The United States has been an exceptionally fertile soil for utopian projects, religious and secular. Protestant religious sects and communities thrived. From the earliest Quaker and Shaker settlements to the Mormon pioneers, the United States has offered sufficient space for groups to attempt their projects in living. Between 1841–1847 prominent transcendentalists, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, attempted and ultimately failed at a communal-living project at Brook Farm, in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. Between the mid-18th Century and the early 20th Century, there were waves of new religious (mostly Protestant) Christian sects. These three Great Awakenings, as they came to be known, seem to have been unique to the United States, which already was more religiously diverse than most countries. They not only informed religious life but also championed such moral and political tenets as abolitionism, prohibition of alcohol and the women's suffrage movement. The third Great Awakening saw the creation of religious-political organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association and secular-social organizations such as Jane Addams' Hull House. Americans have a long history of exploring and supporting religious and social projects.

Some historians see President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's response to the country's economic crisis in the form of such social programs as the Works Progress Administration and Social Security as offshoots of such optimistic programs.

The Group Theatre, with its tight-knit community and focus on the ensemble, was a similarly utopian theater project.

The Group Theatre: Utopia And Its Discontents

Directors Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford organized the Group Theatre in 1931. It was so-named because the three directors had been holding weekly meetings to discuss theater with their group of actors since November 1930. Notable members included Clifford Odets, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Elia Kazan, Howard Da Silva, Paul Green, Lee J. Cobb, Morris Carnovsky and Franchot Tone. One of the company's guiding principles was that the plays were ensemble driven and no individual actor's performance was to outshine the meaning of the play. There were no stars, and the playwright and director were not superiors in the production of a play.

As the Great Depression wore on, Odets and other members of the Group Theatre became increasingly socially aware. For a time Odets joined the American Communist Party but found it artistically restricting and abandoned it, though his desire to address social issues remained the driving force of his plays throughout the 1930s.

However, Odets' writing was finely attuned to the two-edged sword of American optimism and failure. He crafted plays in which dreamers promote utopian projects even as their personal and familial dreams are being destroyed. In *Paradise Lost* Leo says, "We cancel our experience. This is an American habit." It reflects not only the American failure to remember history so as to avoid repeating mistakes, but also the American power to hope for and to strive for a new future in which society will learn from its past mistakes—much as Leo suggests in his final monologue. Odets offers self-reliance in one hand and loss in the other, which is perhaps what makes him such a uniquely American playwright.

The utopian theater experiment began unraveling in the late 1930s as infighting, ever-present financial problems and the departure of various members for Hollywood took their toll. In 1937, after a harsh critique of their skills from a committee of Group actors, Strasberg and Crawford resigned. In spite of the financial success of Odets' *Golden Boy*, the financial burdens of producing subsequent seasons and the increasing pressure to cast outside actors already had started a downward slide for the Group Theatre, and it dissolved in 1941.

Photos clockwise from top: Group Theatre directors Lee Strasberg (from left), Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crawford at Brookfield Center (uncredited); *Waiting For Lefty* with Elia Kazan at center, arms raised (Theatre Collection, Museum of the City of New York); Group Theatre taking a movement class at Dover Furnace in 1932 (photograph by Ralph Steiner, courtesy Caroline Steiner).

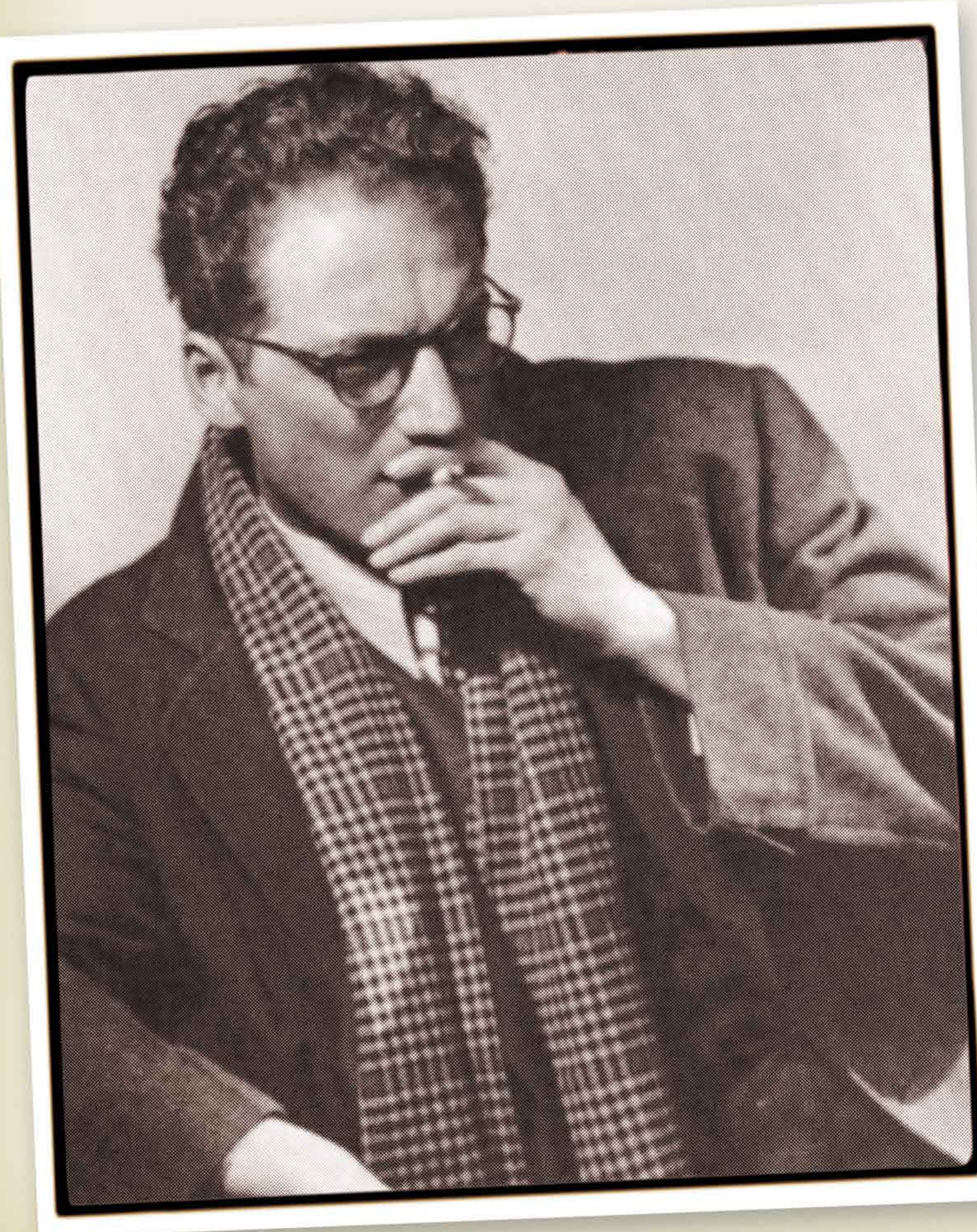
The Group Theatre

- * **1930**
Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford begin holding meetings with a large group of actors to discuss the future of theater.
- * **September 29, 1931**
The Group Theatre produces Paul Green's *The House of Connelly* as its first production.
- * **March 9, 1932**
The Group Theatre opens *Night Over Taos*, by Maxwell Anderson.
- * **September 26, 1933**
The Group Theatre opens *Men in White*, by Sidney Kingsley.
- * **1934**
Clurman, Strasberg and Stella Adler visit the Moscow Art Theatre; on the return trip Adler studies acting with Konstantin Stanislavski in Paris.
- * **December 9, 1935**
The Group Theatre opens *Paradise Lost*, by Clifford Odets.
- * **July 1936**
In response to general discontent, the Group Theatre reorganizes, creating an Actors' Committee to represent the views of the ensemble.
- * **April 1937**
After criticism from the Actors' Committee, Strasberg and Crawford resign from the theater.
- * **February 1940**
The Group Theatre opens Odets' *Night Music*.
- * **December 17, 1940**
Irwin Shaw's *Retreat to Pleasure* opens, directed by Clurman. It will be the Group Theatre's final play.
- * **May 18, 1941**
Clurman publishes an obituary for the Group Theatre in *The New York Times* writing, "our means and our ends were in fundamental contradiction."

"Dear American friend. That miserable patch of event, that mélange of nothing, while you were looking ahead for something to happen, that was it! That was life! You lived it!"

—Clifford Odets, 1963

American Dreamer: Clifford Odets



Clifford Odets was the son of Eastern European, Jewish immigrants. He was born in Philadelphia on July 18, 1906. His mother, Pearl, who suffered from tuberculosis and bouts of depression, was often remote and emotionally inaccessible when he was a child. His father, Lou, was both an ambitious businessman and womanizer who had high expectations for his son.

Lou Odets was obsessed with the American dream, and, as he grew more successful, he distanced himself from his immigrant past. The family was forbidden to visit his mother's grave for fear they would see the family name, Gorodetsky, on the gravestone. After moving to New York City, he added the initial "J" to his name and expanded his first name to Louis. He also began claiming he had been born in Philadelphia.

Caught between the emotional distance of his mother and the severity and ambition of his often-absent father, Clifford Odets was a bookish child who craved approval and a family.

He grew up living upstairs from an aunt and uncle in Philadelphia, then in a series of increasingly expensive apartments in New York City. They were in social neighborhoods, and Odets, always seeking family, was often in the homes of his neighbors, observing their lives with his prominent blue eyes.

Odets' childhood journals are filled with precocious and self-conscious accounts of his dreams of becoming an actor or a writer. Early successes in theatrical performances in grade school and high school cemented his desire to act.

His father, however, did not appreciate his son's artistic inclinations and refused to send him to college, hoping instead to train him in his printing and copywriting business. Odets was not a success in his father's business and drifted from job to job before finding like-minded actors and writers with whom he shared ragged apartments paid for by bit parts in plays and, occasionally, financial contributions from his mother.

Throughout this time, Odets suffered from depression and entertained thoughts of suicide, even as he worked to educate himself in the theater, art and music.

After a performance in a small role with the Theatre Guild, Odets met Harold Clurman, who invited him to meet with a group of actors and directors who were holding weekly meetings to discuss the state of theater, the need for more training and rehearsal time, and the method of acting pioneered by Konstantin Stanislavski. These meetings would ultimately grow into the Group Theatre, and Clurman would become Odets' friend and the director of many of his plays. It was the Group that, for a time, offered Odets a family and artistic home.

Photo: Clifford Odets (photograph by Alfredo Valente).

Odets: Early Aspirations

- * **July 18, 1906**
Clifford Odets is born in Philadelphia.
- * **1912**
Odets' family moves to New York City.
- * **1923**
Odets drops out of high school.
- * **1923–1929**
Odets acts with various small theaters and occasional parts with the Theatre Guild.
- * **1929**
Odets understudies Spencer Tracy in Warren F. Lawrence's *Conflict* on Broadway.
- * **1930**
Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford begin holding meetings to discuss theater. Odets is among a number of actors attending these gatherings, which would become the basis for the Group Theatre.
- * **1934**
Odets joins the American Communist Party. He leaves the party a few months later.
- * **1935**
Odets' play *Waiting for Lefty* is performed as a benefit for the Group Theatre. It is later remounted and performed with his anti-Nazi play *Till the Day I Die*, with great critical success. *Waiting for Lefty* wins the George Pierce Baker Drama Cup and the Yale University and New Theatre drama awards.
- * **1935**
The Group Theatre performs Odets' plays *Awake and Sing!* and *Paradise Lost*, both directed by Clurman.
- * **1935**
Odets, as a representative of the League of American Writers, is among a group of artists who make a protest trip to Cuba, to investigate the treatment of students under Fulgencio Batista. He is arrested and deported.

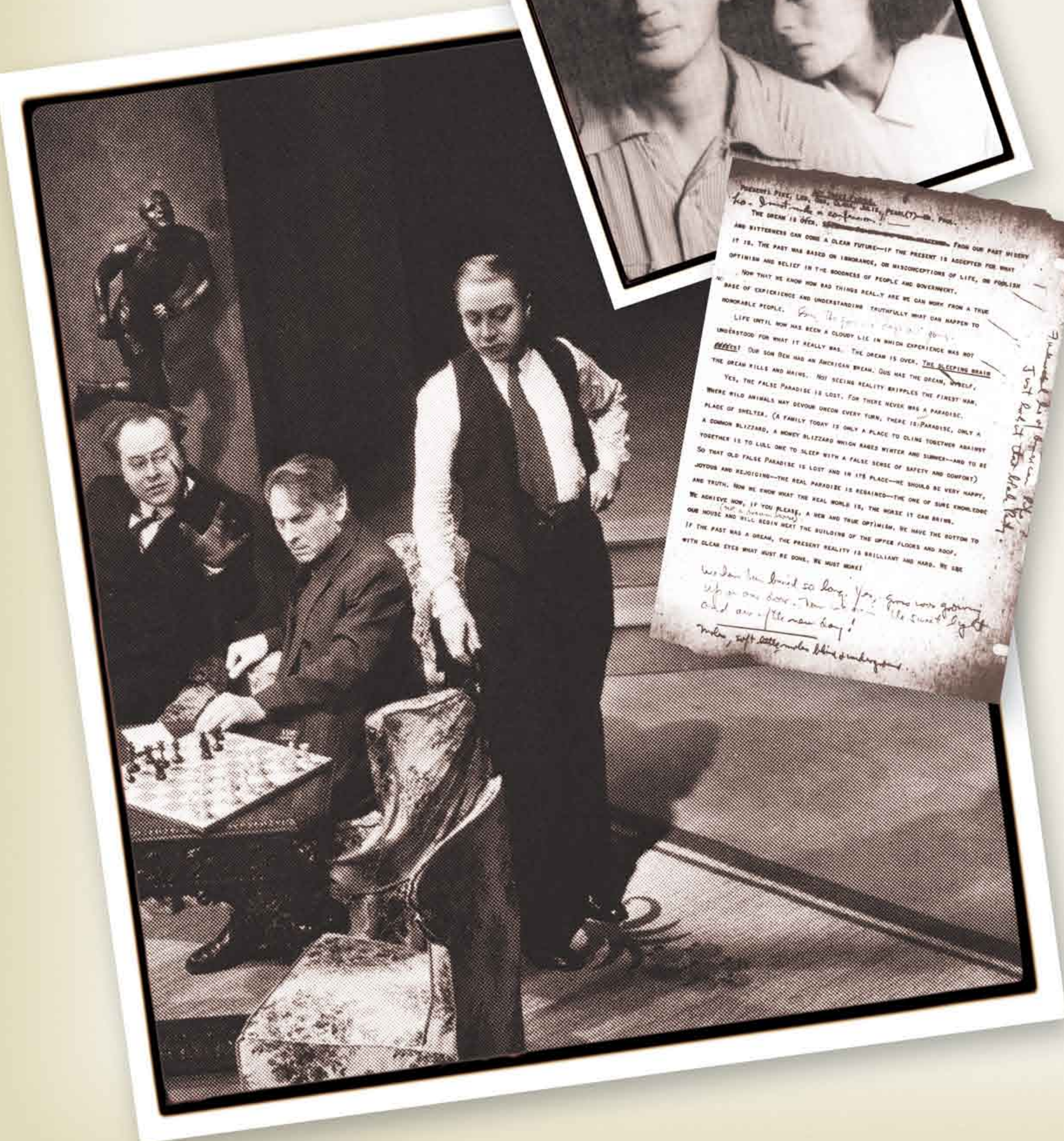
"I will reveal America to itself by revealing myself to myself."

—Elia Kazan

American Tragedy: Paradise Lost

"The tragedy of our times in the theatre is the tragedy of Clifford Odets."

—Clifford Odets



In 1935, the Group Theatre and Odets were flush with the success of *Awake and Sing!*.

Odets had been offered writing contracts in Hollywood but still clung to the Group Theatre's ideals and found it his artistic home. He also was struggling through multiple revisions of *Paradise Lost*, afraid the play would seem like a pale shadow of *Awake and Sing!* with the references to the family's Jewish faith removed.

In fact, he was striving to find a balance between the naturalism and street language of his other plays and a more allegorical style that might speak to universal themes. The play still features the slangy language Odets heard from his father—whose favorite slang, always monetary, was "a million bucks"—but at the same time he also used poetic, symbolic language.

The title of the play, a reference to John Milton's epic poem of the same name, suggests this shift to a more metaphorical landscape. Milton's poem retells the story of the angel Satan as he overreaches himself in attempting to become a god and is cast out of paradise by God. He returns to tempt Adam and Eve to their fall. While Odets draws on language that references Milton—there are images of fruit, fire, sickness, death and failed ambitions—the world of the play is a decidedly fallen one. Odets described *Paradise Lost* as "about a man, Leo, who was trying to be a good man in the world and meets raw, evil, and confused conditions where his goodness comes to nothing."

In spite of some praise, the play struggled financially, and Odets decided to go to Hollywood in order to help finance it. He experienced his own "fall" as New York critics and some in the Group Theatre called him a "sell-out." He surprised his critics by returning to the company with 1937's production of *Golden Boy*.

It would not be the last time Odets would be accused of compromising his ideals. A 1938 article in *Time* magazine was heralded by a photograph of Odets on the magazine's cover with the André Malraux quote as a caption, "Down with the general Fraud." Attacking the general fraud was a task Odets openly set for himself. With his earliest plays, critics praised him as a voice for social reform, but even in 1938, the *Time* article pointed out the paradox of Odets' financial success, allying him with the middle-class fraud he sought to attack. By 1953, however, Odets, like his friend Elia Kazan, would name names in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Safe from blacklisting, Odets wrote for film, television and the stage. Toward the end of his life, Odets frequently told others of his plans for another play, but *The Flowering Peach*, produced in 1954, would be his last.

Photos clockwise from top: Clifford Odets and Luise Rainer, circa 1937 (photograph by Carl Van Vechten); manuscript page of *Paradise Lost* (New York Public Library); *Paradise Lost*, with Robert Lewis as Mr. May (from left), Morris Carnovsky as Leo Gordon and Luther Adler as Sam Katz (Robert Lewis).

Odets: Rise and Fall

- * **January 8, 1937**
Clifford Odets marries actress Luise Rainer.
- * **August 23, 1937**
Harold Clurman returns from Los Angeles to direct Odets' *Golden Boy* for the Group Theatre; it becomes the theater's most profitable play.
- * **1938**
The Group Theatre produces Odets' *Rocket to the Moon*.
- * **December 5, 1938**
A photograph of Odets appears on the cover of *Time* magazine with the André Malraux quote as a caption, "Down with the general Fraud!" The *Time* feature claims, "Odets defines the general fraud" because of his Cinderella story and rise to affluence.
- * **1939**
Six Plays of Clifford Odets is published. The plays are: *Waiting for Lefty*, *Awake and Sing!*, *Till the Day I Die*, *Paradise Lost*, *Golden Boy* and *Rocket to the Moon*.
- * **1941**
Odets writes *Clash by Night*. He and Luise Rainer divorce.
- * **May 14, 1943**
Odets marries actress Bette Grayson.
- * **1953**
Odets is called before the House Un-American Activities Committee as a "friendly witness." He disavows communism and names fellow communists.
- * **1954**
Odets writes *The Flowering Peach*, and it is produced on Broadway. Bette Grayson dies.
- * **1961**
Odets receives the Award of Merit Medal for Drama from the American Academy of Arts and Letters for his body of dramatic work.
- * **August 18, 1963**
Clifford Odets dies in Los Angeles of stomach cancer.

American Depression

"Whenever people talk to me of the advantages of America, I think of all these broken middle-class lives which I know so well."

—Clifford Odets, 1940

"No one talks about the depression of the modern man's spirit"

—Lucas Pike, *Paradise Lost*



It is difficult to understand the juxtaposition of the Roaring '20s with the Great Depression. The change from economic security to financial duress happened within a few years, or even a few months, for many families.

As Harold Clurman wrote in *The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre and the Thirties*: "Between 1921 and 1927, society's headlong rush looked as if it would never end. Between '27 and '29, a slowing down became perceptible, notes of doubt, fear, loneliness, stole into the picture."

A set of government case studies on the unemployed between 1921 and 1929 compiled by the Unemployment Committee of the National Federation of Settlements suggests that this anxiety was growing well before the stock market crashes of 1929. The chapter of the government study titled "Effects on the Spirit" suggests that, "The man who, with the loss of his job, has lost his sense of belonging, and with it his place in the scheme of his own household, is on new and unsteady footing. Under the emotional upset of fathers and mothers is the sense of trying to build on quicksand. ... If you have been hungry, you may build up when you get food. But your whole outlook on life changes when you have been discouraged too often or too long."

At the height of the Great Depression in 1933, nearly one quarter of the population was unemployed, according to the Franklin Delano Roosevelt library.

Clifford Odets and other members of the Group Theatre saw and experienced the economic reality of the Depression. These hardships proved to be the catalyst Odets needed to drive his playwriting.

The Plight of the Middle Class

In the book, *The Two Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Mothers and Fathers are Going Broke*, and in numerous interviews with the media and before Congress, Harvard Law Professor Elizabeth Warren and her co-author Amelia Warren Tyagi have pointed out some startling facts about the current American middle class, not least of which is how two incomes are now necessary to come close to the lifestyle that one income offered a generation ago. The study shows that the reasons for 87 percent of all bankruptcies are job loss, a medical problem, or a separation or divorce. In addition, research for the book found that the pressures on families are what they always have been: a sudden job loss and the cost of health care, raising a family, owning a home and assuring a good education. Warren, a bankruptcy expert, clarifies 10 misconceptions about the current middle-class family:

10 Reasons America's Two-Income Families Aren't What You Think

1. Two-income families today make 75% more in inflation-adjusted dollars, but have less money to spend than one-income families did 30 years ago.
2. Two-income families today spend: 21% less on clothing, 22% less on food, and 44% less on appliances compared to one-income families a generation ago.
3. Every 15 seconds an American family files for bankruptcy.
4. This year, more kids will live through their parents' bankruptcy, than through their parents' divorce.
5. 1.6 million families will file for bankruptcy this year; 9 million more are already in credit counseling.
6. Home-mortgage foreclosures are up more than three-fold over the last generation and car foreclosures have hit record levels.
7. More than 62% of families say that they worry about making ends meet.
8. The average family spends 69% more in inflation-adjusted dollars on their home mortgage than their parents spent a generation ago.
9. The average family spends 61% more on health insurance, than their parents spent a generation ago.
10. Credit-card default rates are at a record high.

Source: Harvard Law professor Elizabeth Warren, on the PBS program NOW, June 25, 2004.
<http://www.pbs.org/now/politics/middleclassmyths.html>

Photos, from top: 1930 bread line (New York Public Library); Roosevelt campaign (New York Public Library).

The Great Depression

- * **October 24, 1929**
The stock market crashes; it came to be known as Black Thursday.
- * **October 29, 1929**
Five days later, there is a second stock-market crash. Soon known as Black Tuesday, this crash causes widespread panic. Most historians now believe these crashes were symptoms of the Great Depression, not the cause.
- * **1931**
Banks suspend operations by the end of the year.
- * **November 8, 1932**
Franklin Delano Roosevelt defeats Herbert Hoover and is elected the 32nd president of the United States.
- * **1933**
American unemployment rises to nearly 25 percent.
- * **1933**
President Roosevelt commences his plan to alleviate the economic privations of the Great Depression with a series of legislation, creating social and public-works programs that would collectively be known as the New Deal.
- * **1935**
Legislation to create the Works Progress Administration, which would ultimately include the Federal Art, Music, Theatre and Writers' Projects, is passed by Congress. The Group Theatre's work was a forerunner to this only American attempt to develop a nationalized theater program in the form of the Federal Theatre Project. Many Group actors work for the Federal Theatre Project, and the style of acting pioneered by the Group Theatre would strongly influence Federal productions.
- * **June 25, 1938**
The Fair Labor Standards Act passes, creating a minimum wage.