



Amplification of 'Agit-Prop' in Clifford Odets' *Waiting For Lefty*

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Abstract

Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) that created a great sensation is a remarkable play with its agit-prop ending and depicts the struggles and uncertainties of a group of harassed men and women in a depressed economic system in New York during 1930s. As the drama is a suitable means to awaken and make realize the people, he wrote this play. Odets has brought 'agit-prop' technique into the mainstream of American Drama. Odets' one-act play presents a struggle between the corrupt leaders of a union of taxi drivers and the ordinary workers who are in need of a genuine leader or representative. This is the story of cabdrivers' heart-rending economic situation and the series of actions, some of them are in the form of flashbacks that lead them to go on strike. From the beginning to the end, scenes of their meeting alternate with scenes of their private lives show why they have become taxi drivers and why they are in need of higher wages than they are drawing now. When they came to know that their leader, Lefty was dead with a bullet wound in his head, they selected another leader, Agate and called for a strike. This play is mainly concerned with the general question of man's ability to survive economically. An agit-prop play generally deals with labour problems or unemployment, and this play has the above features.

Key Words – Clifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty*, agit-prop, suitable weapon, union, unemployment.

Odets' first play, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), which created a great sensation, was the first play produced by the Group Theatre and became a landmark in his career. This is a remarkable play with its agit-prop ending, "Strike, Strike, Strike!!!" (Odets, 1979: 31), and depicts the struggles and uncertainties of a

group of harassed men and women in a depressed economic system in New York during the 1930s. As 'drama' is a suitable means to awaken and make people realize, he wrote this play. That's why perhaps Gerald Rabkin remarks, "Clifford Odets scrawled his name across the page marked 1935 in American

dramatic history.” (Gerald Rabkin, 1964:170). Through this play, Odets has brought the ‘agit-prop’ technique into the mainstream of American Drama. H. Morgan analyses this technique and says, “... Odets, while using the format of the agit-prop, moved it totally into the professional theatre by adding degrees of realism, political subtlety and theatricality unknown in the earlier agit-props.” (Hammerstein Morgan, 1972: 426-435). Agitprop features draw our attention at the beginning when the play opens, we are informed that “the curtains go up and we see a bare stage” (Odets, 1939:197). This play is an amplification of the form of drama, known as “agit-prop”, as it agitates and propagandizes to secure an emotional rather than an intellectual response. This form was developed by Russian workers’ troupes and introduced to America during the 1920s by the Communist Journalist Michael Gold. As mentioned by Brown “The term agitprop developed after the establishment of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda in 1920 by the Soviet Communist Party” (Brown, 2013:5).

This form of drama is meant only to pop up the audience with an awareness of the imperative need to fight against social evils. It was Odets who could endow the form with flesh and blood, with a play like this. “Ostensibly, *Waiting for Lefty* deals with the class struggle between the corrupt, bigoted, and indifferent rich and the hungry, decent, exploited poor. Viewed from a political perspective, its characters seem close to caricatures and its premises native. what has never been sufficiently emphasized is that the play is a middle-class playwright’s attempt to arouse a middle-class audience.” (Herald Cantor, 1978:18). Since the purpose of agitprop is for the theatre of the labouring class, it necessitates convenience and facility for staging. Availability of ‘simple setting’ and bare stage arrangement provides “simple scenic requirements that could be performed in a hall or large room without a special stage or curtains” (Pal, 2010:

4). Agitprop plays can be staged and performed easily to contribute to realize their aim for effective propaganda to mobilize people. All these efforts primarily aim at reaching the uneducated masses. As the audience of the agitprop theatre is ordinary man who has no certain aptitude for drama and an adequate educational background, plays must be made up of short sketches, which should not exhaust those who are addressed. Although *Waiting for Lefty* was “inspired by the New York taxi strike of 1934” (Cashman, 1998: 377), it is hard to construe it into this single event as a sole motivation for Odets to write his landmark play. America in the early years of the 1930s was characterized by poverty, unemployment, and frustration due to the crises caused by the Great Depression. Government authorities strived to solve the problem, but they failed; banks and businesses collapsed, and millions of people fell out of work. In *American Culture and the Great Depression*, Levine’s depiction of the misery summarizes macabre circumstances from which people suffered during the decade, “People were hungry and crops rotten in the field. Children went without clothes Americans bewildered by the rapidity of events and what appeared to be the completeness of the destruction of their plans, their expectations, and their certainties” (Levine, 1985: 199).

This one-act play presents a struggle between the corrupt leaders of a union of taxi drivers and the ordinary workers who need a genuine leader. This is the story of the cabdrivers’ heart-rending economic situation, the series of actions, some of which are in the form of flashbacks, leads them to go on strike. From the beginning to the end, scenes of their meeting alternate with scenes of their private lives show why they have become taxi drivers and why they need higher wages than they are drawing now. When they came to know that their leader, Lefty, was dead with a bullet wound in his head, they selected another leader, Agate, and called for a strike. Most of the play analyzes the difficulties during the depression

and capitalistic evils found in a wide spectrum of society. The traditional young leader of the poorly organized union members, Agate, in the end, draws the drivers together for an overwhelming strike vote, in spite of the pressure from the officers to keep them at their work. Here, Agate is the leader only because of the absence of the better-known Lefty - such is the significant nickname of the Chairman of the strike committee. That is why only Lefty gets such significance throughout the play, despite his absence. Thus, the entire play, with five episodes forming the core of the play, reveals the strength of Odets at his best. The opening performance of this play revealed Odets as an outstanding spokesman for the perplexed young people of the depression years so much so that at the end of the play the audience rose in the theatre and joined in with the characters in the play, who are the militant members of the labour union, in a cry of 'Strike!'

In this one-act play, the theatre becomes a meeting hall of the taxi drivers' union, and it is about to take a strike vote. At the meeting, Harry Fatt, the head of a union, the other officers and racketeers have taken the time to belittle the membership's strike talk, as Lefty, the members' militant representative, has not yet arrived. Harry Fatt, though he is the head of the union, is working for the interests of the management. Now he is trying to persuade the strike committee and members who attended that it would be foolish to go on strike. On the stage, the committee members are seated, and Fatt addresses the audience. Actors are found throughout the house, deliver catcalls and arguments to Fatt's gunman, who is at the corner of the stage and rouses himself whenever a member appears to be hostile. Therefore, from the beginning, the audience has a sense of involvement either from Harry Fatt's direct remarks to them or from the answers he receives from the actors seated among them. At that time, voices from the audience are asking for Lefty, the newly elected leader of the committee for strike, who has not come for the meeting. As

their leader has not yet come, Fatty angrily asks whether he has run out. Finally, the members of the committee, one by one, come forward to speak, and they give their reasons for go on strike, and each reason develops into an independent scene. As they talk, flashes of their lives appear behind them. Odets was able to establish a rapport with the audience, who had already become familiar with the methods adopted to break intended strikes, including the role played by the gangsters. As the episodes were close to the lives of the people, many of them could perceive everything that took place in the play.

In this play, Odets dramatizes five scenes, which are five episodes that depict the poverty of a taxi driver and his wife; a lab assistant who is asked to spy on his superiors; a young cab driver who can't get married due to economic reasons; a labour spy in the meeting, and prejudice against a Jewish doctor. The title of the play is very significant and apt, as the title itself indicates that somebody is waiting for 'Lefty', the unseen union leader throughout the play. At every stage, there is a reference to Lefty, and the dialogues reveal that they are waiting for him. Though there are different protagonists in various episodes in the play, viz. Joe, Miller, Sid, Voice (Clancy), Benjamin and Agate, all of them represent a part of the total personality of Lefty, who has not at all appeared in the play.

In the very first scene, Joe is seen to come home in an exhausted mood, only to find a dismal atmosphere there: a displeased wife, children who have just gone to bed without dinner, and complaints by his wife because of the unpaid lodging money and confiscated property. Joe speaks to his wife Edna, in a flashback manner on the stage, of their financial difficulties, and their final resolve to take a stand in favour of the strike in spite of the hardship it will entail. In this episode, Edna encourages Joe to participate in the strike in order to get financial benefits for their family, and they discuss their financial problems. As they have

not paid their installments, all the furniture has been taken away. Because of their financial difficulties, they are unable to provide their children with sufficient food. At the same time, they are unable to purchase even shoes for their children to send them to school. Edna, in order to make the children forget things like these, let them sleep. In this crisis of financial difficulties, they are unable to pay their house rent. Edna finds fault with the union because they have not taken any initiative for a strike to solve their problems. She does not hesitate to say that it is a rotten union. She does not leave even his boss without criticizing, as he has not been giving proper payments. As Joe is unable to be persuaded by her, she threatens to leave him. She asks whether he remembers her boyfriend, and at that time, he was earning a lot. So she wants to go to him, leaving him and the kids. Finally, Edna encourages his husband and his co-workers to go on strike for better wages and conditions. At the end of her speech, Joe is convinced to go into action and seen to rush out for the union to persuade his friends, too.

The second episode is the Lab Assistant Episode, where Miller, a lab assistant, narrates his story in the same way as Joe did, and it can be understood what has brought Miller to the cause of the strike committee. Fayette, an industrialist, is seen conversing with Miller in his office. Fayette both appreciates Miller out of his studies and informs him about the nature of the work he will carry out under the observation of chemist Dr. Brenner. Miller, who seems to be very delighted for the pay rise at the beginning, becomes dissatisfied when he learns the details of his job: Not only will he work to produce chemically poisonous gas for military purposes but he also will spy on Dr. Brenner. Miller, who lost his brother and cousins in the First World War, refuses to work and be paid in exchange for such an occupation. As a result, he is fired and makes his way to the strike committee.

In the third episode, the story of a young couple, Sid and Florie, is narrated. They have been engaged to be married for three years,

but are unable to get married because of their financial difficulties. In this 'the Young Hack and His Girl' episode, the emotional aspect of the practical problems in life is brought out. Before Sid's arrival, Florence and her brother Irv discuss her intention to get married. Irv does not accept his sister's wishes for marriage as their mother, who is bedridden, needs their assistance. After Sid arrives, he brings up the subject, and he regrets to say that though he strives much, he cannot afford enough money for their marriage, and even if they somehow could marry, unfortunately, they would not be happy due to his deteriorating financial situation. Sid also opens up his brother's present condition: though he is a college graduate, he had to join the army and head for Cuba due to the widespread unemployment. He reasons that magnates aggravate the conditions of downtrodden people and make them work even harder so that they can maintain their affluence. Sid finalizes his speech that they must separate or else they would not be able to survive together.

In the Labor Spy Episode, the audience is again brought to the union meeting where Fatt still tries to convince workers out of the strike idea, and this time he introduces Tom Clayton, who is allegedly a failed striker in Philadelphia. While Tom Clayton strives to discourage cabdrivers, a symbolic Clear Voice from the crowd accuses Clayton of being a strike-breaker, a spy to fail the efforts of cabdrivers for the chance of equal pay. The last episode, 'Intern episode', just like the previous episode, the weakest in the play, dramatizes the pervasive oppression in the form of anti-semitism. Dr. Benjamin, the hospital intern, learns a few facts about the society he wants to serve that only because of political or financial influence, even the doctors can get the right professional opportunities. Dr. Benjamin complains that he has been replaced by an incompetent doctor, who is a Senator's nephew. But, Dr. Barnes informs Dr. Benjamin that he is to be suspended from his job due to some

regulations concerning his department and necessary budget cuttings. Although Dr. Barnes acknowledges that Dr. Benjamin is a victim of anti-Semitism, he can do nothing. Meanwhile, the telephone rings and Dr. Barnes has to inform Dr. Benjamin about what he has just been told on the phone: a young and incompetent doctor, who has replaced Dr. Benjamin's position, cannot cure one of his patients, and the patient died on the operating table. After a fight between them, Dr. Benjamin decided to get his livelihood by driving a cab. In the last part of the play at the union strike meeting, Agate, one of the workers, speaks of his experience when he was eleven years old while working in a factory. He lost his eye and got a glass eye. But the union in the factory did nothing. Harry Fatt, the head of a union, and a gunman have tried hard to control Agate, who is now trying to instigate a strike. He further states that they have only two options: to choose either to die slowly or fight. He continues his speech and "Don't wait for Lefty! He might never come." (Odets, 1979:31). Then, a group of workers interrupts him, and informs them that Lefty was found dead with a bullet in his head. All the workers triumphantly shout aloud "strike" while the curtain falls.

An agit-prop play generally deals with labour problems or unemployment. Odets used the structure of that play, giving the episodes more of a focus by incorporating them in a frame plot in this play. The play had as its central theme a proposed strike of a group of taxi drivers. At the end of the play, a militant question was asked, of course, among the actors, expecting replies from them. But the answer to the question came from the audience, not from the stage. There was a spontaneous outburst of "Strike! Strike!" This typical Odetsian masterpiece has symbolic significance in the title itself. All the members are waiting for Lefty to make a major decision. But he does not come, and he becomes the symbol of what they are waiting for. The symbolic significance of Lefty strikes home with full impact when they come to know that his dead body has been discovered.

Gerald Weales points out and explains how the influence of the agit-prop form is evident in Odets' characterization. The names have been given symbolic significance to the characters like Fatt and Lefty. He remarks: "His characters are not their realistic figures but thickened out agit-prop cartoons. This can be seen in his use of significant names: what are 'Fatt' and 'Left'?" (Gerald Weales, 1971: 48).

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