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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

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"A More Rooted Togetherness":

The Group Theatre and the Great Depression

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"A MORE ROOTED TOGETHERNESS":
THE GROUP THEATRE AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

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This paper grew initially from my own love-hate relationship with a small local theater. In my own experience, I found myself continually dissatisfied with the company's productions, in spite of the deep commitment and energy of many of its members. The so-called "popular" Broadway theater that constituted most of its material seemed empty to me. I constantly wished for the company to perform more political pieces, and to focus more on what I vaguely defined as the "social relevance" of its plays.

The Group Theatre attracted me as a subject of study because, in my first impression, it had forged a path between politics and theater. I first saw the company as a Group of brave intellectuals, living in a time of political and social upheaval, at the forefront of the radical theater movement. To me, the Group embodied the political commitment that my own small company lacked.

Yet a number of difficulties immediately arose with this vision. First, I found that the Group's own history contained only a limited political focus or activity. The growth of communism in the Group was strictly limited, and the political activity of its members occurred on a sporadic, issue oriented basis. Second, I found that almost without exception, the communist press was highly critical of the Group. Finally, I discovered that the Group's own plays varied widely in political content and focus, frequently seeming to omit this focus altogether.

My initial impression of the company as a group of fiercely
political artists thus began to seem romantic and inaccurate. In its place arose new questions. What motivated these artists to separate themselves from the traditional Broadway stage, and to form a separate theater? Why did they choose the type of plays that they did? Where did the political questions that they did address fit in their work? In answer to these questions, I found that the Group grew quite naturally from the social and artistic conditions of the 1920's. Its work appears most coherent as a natural growth of artistic traditions of the twenties, rather than as a bold leap into radicalism. Yet at the same time, the company confronted political themes and questions with a newfound vigor and clarity, and a heightened awareness of the social relevance of its work that came from the social conditions of the 1930's.

Other questions remained, then, about the reaction to the Group itself. Why did this company receive the attention it did as the leader of the revolutionary theaters? Why did Clifford Odets become, for a year, America's foremost revolutionary playwright? How did the Group itself respond to this particular characterization? To these questions, I found various answers, including the changing nature of American communism, the Group's visibility, and the Popular Front. The growing threat of war in Europe motivated the Communist Party to broaden its standards of acceptance, and to look for support in circles that it would have earlier condemned. The Group's fame as a revolutionary theater was relatively short lived and occurred in perfect coincidence with the birth of the Popular Front. In addition, the company's
decision to remain on Broadway ironically added to the popular impression of its radicalism. Its audience remained one of affluent Broadway theatergoers and critics, to whom it appeared all the more daring.

Yet to envision the Group as an essentially traditional theater is to miss the heart of its energy and commitment. The company, many of whom would easily have been successful and affluent on other Broadway stages, chose years of financial hardship, sporadic success and community turmoil, instead. What vision spawned this commitment? What desires fueled this effort? The Group finally makes sense as a theater only against the backdrop of the New Deal itself. The achievements and limitations of the theater mirror with surprising clarity the achievements and limitations in the political changes of the 1930's. And as the social unrest of the thirties gave way to the growing preoccupation with the Second World War, so the Group's plays reflected this preoccupation before it too came to its final rest.

In the first section of this paper, I have placed the Group against the artistic backdrop of the 1920's, and traced its growth from these roots. In the second, I have examined the company's early work, its varying political content and recurrent political themes. Third, I have examined the work of Clifford Odets, whose prominence in the Group's history merits special attention. In examining his work, I have placed particular emphasis on its changing political content and the limits to that content. Fourth, I have briefly examined the works
of the Group's last years, their continuing social concerns and growing preoccupation with war. Finally, I have placed the theater's history in a broader context, noting its relationship to the politics of the 1920's, the Popular Front, and the New Deal itself.

In undergraduate history course, I have often been told that historians bring to their subjects certain political attitudes and beliefs that we must recognize. At this point, I find that my own political beliefs remain undefined and unsure. Yet if I bring any assumption to the writing of this paper, it is that the struggle to be true to one's own art is worthy of the deepest respect.
Birth of the Group Theatre

In many ways, the Group Theatre, born at the end of the 1920's, continued and expanded on the theatrical traditions of that decade. Many of the Group's central ideas, such as its conception of itself as an artistic community and its belief in the importance of the integration between writer, actor and director, had roots in the American theater of the 1920's. The Group's social concerns and its vision of itself as a consciously American theatre also reflect ideas of its theatrical predecessors. The Group shared a final similarity as well with the theater of the 1920's: at its inception it was deeply apolitical, with specific political issues subordinated to its philosophical and artistic concerns. By the end of the decade, it had yet to respond to a new political dimension that began to interest other theater artists. At the same time, though, the Group showed a coherence and directed program that were largely absent in the theater that preceded it. With this added focus and direction, its social vision stretched further than that of its forbears, and surpassed that of many of its contemporary theaters.

The 1920's brought a new and consciously American theater movement to light in the United States, one out of which the Group would grow. This movement was generally apolitical, but at the same time its concern with social themes and its belief that American theater should be taken seriously left the soil fertile for a new politicism. Prior to 1900, Americans had...
regarded their theater largely as a "useful" art, one subservient to popular taste. Yet the end of World War I saw the beginnings of a New Theatre movement that broke away from this subservient tradition. At the head of this movement were two east coast groups, the Washington Square players and the Provincetown Players, but the New Theatre movement itself was widespread. It included attempts to establish experimental little theaters in Chicago, Boston, Cleveland and Detroit, as part of a broader vision of the creation of a "vital modern theater in the United States."  

The theater of the 1920's was innovative in a number of ways. First, it concentrated on the development of American playwriting. For instance, the Provincetown Players, which would eventually nurture Eugene O'Neil, came to be regarded as a "playwright's theater," a place for serious literary artists to see their work produced. The Washington Square Players, reborn as the Theatre Guild later in the decade, also relied heavily on American drama, that of O'Neil, Elmer Rice, Robert Sherwood, Maxwell Anderson and Phillip Barry, for example. Secondly, with this growing emphasis on American playwrights and plays, dramatists began to regard the works more seriously as literature in their own right. The plays gradually became a vehicle by which to express social and artistic concerns of their decade, not merely pleasant entertainment. The vision of theater as a social force was not a wholly new one. As one theater historian notes,

"The American stage was consciously political and social
virtually from the beginnings of the republic, when the Tories and the Revolutionists exchanged insults in their amateur stage productions. Yet the growing sense of theater as serious literature gave new weight to its social potential. Thus, the Provincetown Players found in their midst such political figures as the writer Floyd Dell, and the radical journalist, John Reed. However, this vision of the theater as somehow socially relevant remained largely undefined and unrealized. The theater of the 1920's was in fact deeply apolitical, fragmented, and concerned primarily with artistic questions, a theater of "seriousness without doctrine." Harold Clurman reflects this apoliticism in his memoirs:

"I suppose the labor organizations after the depredations of the Palmer raids and the late Wilson reaction, were regrouping themselves in out of the way corners, but from where I stood they were invisible. No one in my circle of acquaintances ever mentioned them." Although often concerned with social injustices, playwrights of the 1920's shared a deep lack of faith in political solutions. In Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine, the Pulitzer Prize winning play of 1924, the protagonist is portrayed as a condemned object, and the playwright's social critique of his situation is "ill defined because the playwright could not as yet offer a political alternative." Instead of politics, playwrights of the 1920's were often concerned with their art itself—with its form and its
development. As a result, many rejected realism as a viable writing form. They were more interested in experimentation in "attempts to reorder experience through new techniques." As one example, John Howard Lawson, later one of the Group's most political playwrights, wrote Professional in 1927, a play that dealt with the Ku Klux Klan and with class war, yet in a deeply apolitical fashion. In this "pre-didactic" piece, he used expressionism to try and capture "the wild disorder of contemporary life and the emotional exasperation which it produces." Harold Clurman, recalling the reactions of the theater community in New York to the play, remarks, "we thought of the play only from the viewpoint of its artistic style...we never dreamed of saying, 'This is our world, and it bodes no good.'" This trend toward experimentation characterized not just a few select playwrights, but the little theater movement in general, which showed "a vast curiosity toward life and art and a remarkable willingness to conduct experiments."

The dominant trait of the theater of the twenties was, perhaps, its intense individualism. This trend was clear in the realist drama of the decade, which concentrated on psychological themes. But it was also clear in the varied experimental forms of the decade. Through expressionism, artists saw themselves as able to communicate the individual's experience of "confusion and disillusionment." Clurman, in fact, describes the whole theatrical period as "a time of boisterous individualism. Everything and everyone whizzed by on an isolated and trackless course." He recalls gatherings of theater
professionals that brought together such diverse figures as scientists, writers and political leaders, popular performers, with no common ground for discussion, no criteria for entrance besides individual fame.

Thus, the individualistic, experimental and apolitical theater of the 1920's showed little coherence, definition or program. "Nothing tied the fast moving forces together, no growing principle, no aim." Yet by the end of the decade hints of a growing politicism in the theater had begun to appear. The clearest of these was the New Playwright's Theatre, founded in 1928 by leftist writers John Howard Lawson, John Dos Passos, and Mike Gold. Still, this new trend remained undefined. Clurman who was present at the theater's first rehearsal, remembers that "the director addressed the company as follows: 'This is a theatre of the Left. Don't ask me what that means, but let it go at that.'" All the same, the growth of political theater after 1929 was regarded as a distinctly new occurrence.

In this environment the Group Theatre was born, and while its roots were firmly planted in the theater of its time, it also strained beyond these. Many of the most important figures in the Group came directly from New Theatre and Broadway stages. For instance, Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strassberg, the three directors of the Group, all worked first for the Theatre Guild, formerly the Washington Square Players, before forming their own company. Other important figures in the Group had also been successful on the Broadway stage before joining, such as Franchot Tone, Stella Adler, Morris Carnovsky and Sanford
Yet the artists drawn to the Group were generally dissatisfied with their previous stages. Clurman is perhaps the clearest example of this. His dissatisfaction with his early theater training came from the sense that it lacked a contemporary and true human significance. Clurman wanted to regard the theater in connection with "the social world that generated it and in which it operated." He had come to develop a deep feeling that "large issues of human concern" were "absent or diluted, frequently cheapened" on the Broadway stage. He had looked to other traditions, such as that of the Yiddish theater, and had seen in them more of the social relevance that he desired:

"...to the immigrants in the early years of the century the theatre was the one center of social intercourse. Here, the problems of their life, past and present, could be given a voice; here, they could get to know and understand one another." Strassberg too felt dissatisfied with the Broadway stage. His grounds of criticism differed from Clurman's, though. Strassberg had completely committed himself to the craft of acting, and felt that in a traditional Broadway environment the actor had no way of improving his art. The Broadway stage was geared toward production and profit, with the actor's skills subordinated to the needs of the producer. Strassberg wished to develop the technique of acting without being subject to these restrictions.

Thus, in a sense Clurman and Strassberg were complementary
and allied in their dissatisfaction. Strassberg himself drew a distinction between his own concern with theater and Clurman's concern with "literature." Yet the two shared a deep desire to reach beyond the limits that the traditional Broadway stage had imposed upon them, and during their years at the Theatre Guild in the mid 1920's, they searched for alternatives. In particular, they were fascinated by the techniques of Russia's Moscow Art Theatre, directed by Konstantin Stanislavski. The "method," as this technique later came to be called, combined exercises in "affective memory"—the use of remembered emotion— with improvisation techniques. It offered the directors a new means to advance an actor's skills, and at the same time to root those skills in life experience. Clurman and Strassberg both studied at the American Laboratory Theatre with Stanislavski's own students, Boleslavski and Ouspenskaya. Strassberg started teaching classes himself at an amateur theater, the Chrystie Street Settlement. Finally, Clurman, Strassberg and Crawford were all drawn as well to other ethnic theaters in New York, where they found an intensity they felt lacking on their own stage. They frequented the Chinese theater in the Bowery, and the Sicilian theater, in which they saw a "violent emotional acting that positively stunned us."27

This dissatisfaction of the directors-to-be took on a solid form in 1928 when they began to hold a series of meetings to discuss the possibility of the creation of a theater. The meetings allowed the participants to begin to develop a set of theatrical goals and values distinct in some ways from those of
their predecessors. First, a dominant idea in these talks was the idea of the theater as a unified community. Clurman saw the future Group as a community based on "unity of background, of feeling, of thought, of need, among a group of people that has formed itself consciously or unconsciously from the undifferentiated masses." This communal notion contrasted markedly from the sharp individuality of the theater of the 1920's, and Clurman saw the need for it as "symbolic to me of the need for more communication between Americans generally." On a more personal level, he remarks "we clamored for a more rooted togetherness."

A second guiding principle of the theater was to be its more explicit connection to the society around it. In Clurman's words, "...our interest in the life of our times must lead to the discovery of those methods that would most truly convey this life through the theatre." Here, again, the directors felt they were suggesting something new for the American theater. If theater in the 1920's had been unduly concerned with itself, or with individuals, the Group would move beyond this self-centeredness. A text that they produced would be valuable, "not alone as literary material for its own sake, but at the very least as a vehicle for human meaning." The Group Theatre would found its art on "life values."

These concerns of the Group were not only to be social, but moral. Clurman opens his reflections with a quote of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's:

"We are beginning to wipe out the line that divides the
practical from the ideal, and in so doing we are fashioning an instrument of unimaginable power for the establishment of a morally better world."\textsuperscript{32}

The Group too followed this search for moral ideals. The directors made it clear in these early meetings that they wished to base their selection of plays not simply on standards of literary and artistic excellence, but also on "what is fitting—that is, humanly desirable—for a particular audience." In all their works, they intended to express a continuing faith in "the perfectability of man."\textsuperscript{33}

In contrast to the deep moralism of these early talks, though, was their equally great apoliticism. In their moralistic outlook, the directors carried over, to some degree, the traditions of individualism in the theater that preceded them. With this focus on individual moralism, the company would have no interest in performing for purely political ends. They would have "no intention of using the theatre as a party weapon or of performing primarily for proletarian spectators,"\textsuperscript{34} as New York's communist theater would. Yet this view of the individual as the dominant concern remained "indirectly rather than dogmatically stated, an attitude and a sentiment rather than a platform."\textsuperscript{35}

Clurman notes the Group's lack of political awareness at this point, noting that he himself was "totally apolitical....The facts about our society...came to me accidentally, as it were."\textsuperscript{36}

The embryonic Group reflected this lack of politicism in its decision to stay on Broadway, where prices alone would limit the audiences for its plays and exclude the working class. The
Group's early self-definition in these meetings thus placed it in a sort of middle ground. Artistically, it both continued and rejected theatrical traditions that had preceded it. Professionally, it both rejected the traditional Broadway production system, yet continued to address a Broadway audience.

Its early productions reflected the tension that resulted from the company's position in this middle ground. Its first production efforts were marked by a financial struggle that it would not be able to escape during its lifetime. Yet at the same time its efforts also revealed an underlying commitment to struggle against financial restrictions and to place its own artistic values first, before all other considerations. This first period also saw the formation of the physical pattern of the Group's existence. Its summer rehearsal communities, its egalitarian salary structure and its integration of acting and teaching would all continue throughout the life of the theater. Finally, this first period saw the beginnings within the Group of interpersonal tensions that would grow later.

The Group's first productions underline its continued struggling reliance on traditional sources of financial backing. Its first chance to produce a play came in 1929, when a real estate broker with theatrical leanings, Sidney Ross offered to consider backing a production. He wanted to be shown a play, and the Group prepared Balloon, which it showed successfully before an invited audience. However, Ross decided not to back the production, and the actors found themselves without the financial resources to produce the play. They were forced to scrap the
project. For its second attempt, a Soviet play entitled *Red Rust*, the Group received backing from the Theatre Guild, and it gave the play in a special Sunday performance under the Guild's auspices, in 1929.

The company's ability to receive financial backing for a Soviet play benefited from its continuing apoliticism. *Balloon* was, in Clurman's words, "a delicate fantasy of the big world of success, and the small world of the poet's heart." *Red Rust*, on the other hand, was a post-revolutionary Soviet play. Yet the directors chose this play not out of ideology, but for its exuberance and novelty. A focused political viewpoint remained far from their minds, and their awareness of political issues in general was vague and diffuse. For instance, Clurman remembers "not only I but none of my colleagues ever spoke of the crash at the time. None of us was apparently directly involved." 37

If the company was limited in its productions, it was less so in its ability to create the type of artistic community that it desired. In November, 1930, the directors began regular organizational meetings for a separate company, and by the spring of 1931 they were preparing for a first summer's rehearsal period. Twenty eight actors attended the first summer rehearsals at Brookfield Center, Connecticut. This system of rehearsal in an isolated community would remain intact during the Group's lifetime, and it reflected many of the basic values that guided the theater at its inception. First, the summer rehearsals combined teaching with play preparation. This teaching took place on a practical level, in various classes, and also on a
theoretical level, in a series of talks given by Clurman. In these talks, he continued to stress the social emphasis and vision of the theater, and the importance of its incorporating the "life questions" of the actors themselves. Yet he also continued to stress the intense individualism of the theater's philosophy, the combination of its "higher" goals with "respect for the individual." 3)

The summer rehearsal periods also defined the financial organization of the Group. Financially, the structure of the theater was highly egalitarian and community oriented. The actors were paid according to need rather than to the parts they had, and the directors themselves were only in the middle of the salary bracket. 40 The salary structure of the theater was also designed to lead toward its final goal of financial independence. The larger part of any profits made was to be placed into a "sinking fund" for the growth of the Group itself. 41 The Group's pay structure reflected its ideals in spite of its financial precariousness. While the established Theatre Guild paid its actors an average of $300 per month, Group actors received $30 to $140. 42 The Group's financial structure reflected a deep commitment to a company of equals. The actors' communal living arrangements in the summer were not the only reflection of this ideal. They also rejected the traditional "star system" in their plays. Clurman notes that "there were to be no stars in our theatre," and the actors even demanded that playbills list their names in simple alphabetical order as a matter of policy. 43

Yet the first summer also reflected internal tensions in the
Group that would later become more explicit. Clurman notes that "our chief problem that first summer was the unification of our people."

Already, conflicts began to appear between some Group members. Franchot Tone, an important actor, came from a more affluent background than many of the Group members, and he began to feel alienated, thinking himself harshly criticized because of this background. Tension also grew between Lee Strasberg and the Group actors, as he became increasingly domineering during the summer. Political tensions in the Group hardly existed, however. The apoliticism of the Group's early meetings was reflected in the early life of the company, itself, according to Clurman. He remarks that "...there was very little political discussion among us. Of radicalism there wasn't a spark." At one point in the summer, Clurman rehearsed a Soviet play, *The Man With the Portfolio*, but he paid no attention to its political relevance.
The First Years

In its first four seasons of production, the Group remained at a distance from both the popular Broadway theatre and that of the Left. It showed a slowly growing concern with contemporary political themes and issues, both in its work and in its community. Yet the Group continued to focus on issues other than overtly political ones, such as psychological conflicts in many of the plays' characters, and on the artistic training of its company. If the Group's relative apoliticism continued to distance it from the Left, so did its commitment to its own ideology and values distance it from the traditional Broadway stage, as the preparations for its first production illustrate. This commitment added immediately to the Group's financial strain. A supportive Theatre Guild had pledged $1,000 and the rights to Paul Green's The House of Connelly at the beginning of the summer. Yet in rehearsal, the directors argued with Green over the tragic ending of the play, and finally convinced him to rewrite it. Clurman remembers:

"Our own sense of the perfectability of man, or at least the inevitability of the struggle against evil, made us impatient with the play's violent ending."  

In need of more backing at the end of the summer in order to produce the play, the Group returned to the Guild. But the Guild would only agree to provide more financial support with the original tragic ending restored. The Group directors immediately rejected this offer and organized a campaign to raise the funds.
themselves. They succeeded, and *The House of Connelly* opened to wide critical success on September 23, 1931. The play itself dealt with "the regeneration of a Southerner, gentleman and his plantation through the love and work of the daughter of a tenant farmer."² Yet it was the production, and the emotional force, that impressed the popular press more than the content of the play itself. As the *New York Times* noted, "Like a fable, it is too easily stated." The reviewer argued that playwright Green "may not have a dramatist's command of his subject." Yet the same reviewer praised Green for his passion and for the integrity of his characters, and praised the ensemble nature of the production: "For once a group performance is tremulous and pellucid, the expression of an ideal."³ The popular press responded to the play without viewing it politically. One reviewer did note that the central conflict of the play "is a conflict not only between the new South and the old, but also between aristocracy and poor whites."⁴ However, another noted with praise, the lack of political content in Green's own view: "Instead of defending the old or championing the new, either of which would be the ordinary dramatic point of view, he recreates the emotional torment in terms of characters."⁵ The Left press, in contrast to the popular press, ignored the play altogether.⁶ Radical intellectuals were attracted to what they saw as the Group's "progressive tendencies," but largely discounted the play, feeling that Green had sentimentalized the South.⁷

Indeed, the play shows little of the political emphasis that
arises in many later Group plays. What political overtones it does have are far from radical. The play's central conflict is that between a decaying Southern aristocratic order and a new, more democratic order arising from its ashes. The decaying order takes various forms throughout the play. It is seen in the physical decay of the Connellys and of their mansion. The walls are "yellowed and cracked," the pictures faded. The same physical decay is present in the characters themselves. Uncle Bob, the elder Connelly, is a "run down old Southern gentleman of sixty-five or seventy--dressed in moth eaten evening clothes." Mrs. Connelly, the house matriarch, is crippled and dresses only in black. Even Will Connelly, the young protagonist, appears at first hunting "with stooping shoulders," unable to shoot even a dove. This old aristocracy shows signs of moral and economic decay as well, reflected in the sexual history of the house. The Connelly men are known for sleeping with slave women on their plantation, and then with the daughters of tenant farmers. Will's own father, General Connelly, has had his own illegitimate son hung years before. Economically, the Connelly plantation is overgrown, no longer productive. A few tenant farmers still live there, but most of the young have left, and the family is deeply in debt.

Yet the play also romanticizes some of the strengths of this older, decaying order. At the same time as it denigrates the past, it longs for the strength and order of the old system. This dual attitude is seen in the playwright's note: "For now the grace of hospitality is gone, the jovial host is gone, gone is
the slave." Even more clearly, Will Connelly remarks that "the great Connellys are all dead. The fools and the weak are left alone." This lost strength of the aristocracy is saddening even to the tenant farmers, such as old Tate, who remarks, "The old General Connelly was a ripsnorter. Things moved around him." If the play's view of the old aristocracy is not completely negative, neither is its view of the farm laborers wholly sympathetic. On one hand Patsy Tate, the tenant farm girl with whom Will falls in love, embodies all the energy and ability that he initially lacks. She is the one who shoots the birds that he misses early in the play, and later she tells him,

"I could help you. And you could help me. You'd be running like a coward if you left. You'll do it. I'll help you--we'll do it--work--work--together. I know how to work with the earth. I know her ways. I could teach you."

The tenant farmers as a whole show this same energy and life. On Christmas Eve, their jubilance contrasts with the decay of the Connelly house. The playwright also hints at the restorative power of this energy when Patsy, alone, confronts the Connelly family portraits in the hall. She tells them, "Oh, you look mighty grand. But you don't scare me one bit."

Yet at the same time the tenant farmers as a group are undirected, and at times appear lazy and irresponsible. When Will calls them to a meeting and demands to know what is wrong with the estate, they avoid his glances. Thus, he answers for them, "We ain't been working. Year after year we've lived from hand to mouth. " His meeting with the tenant farmers implies that they
have suffered too long and hard to be able to take the roles of leaders. He declares, "I'll see who deserves to eat and who don't." In this sense, *House of Connelly* remains somewhat anti-democratic. Patsy herself reflects an acceptance of this authoritarian attitude in her declaration of love for Will:

"I want to belong to you. Then I think about you and there's always the farm and I want to rule over everything--make it great and beautiful. I'm all mixed up inside. I want to obey you, be your wife, have your children."

In spite of its social themes, this play shows little political focus, and clearly no hint of the political radicalism that would characterize the work of some other Group playwrights. In producing the play, the interests of the directors were likewise apolitical. Harold Clurman described his view of the play's importance in aesthetic terms. "The Group people had succeeded in fusing the technical elements of their craft with the stuff of their own spiritual and emotional selves. Finally, the play shows no concern at all with racial issues. If the tenant farming whites are barely recognizable as a struggling group in the play, blacks are not at all. The two black servants in the play are fantasy creations both inhuman and mythical. They are "huge creatures, sexual and fertile, with round moist roving eyes and jowled faces smooth and hairless as a baby's." Mythically, "the mark of ancient strength and procreation still remains in their protruding breasts and bulging hips." Their action in the play gives no indication at all that they may suffer from the economic hardships that plague the whites, not to
mention from the effects of racism. In fact, the play affirms their status as an underclass. In its final scene, Patsy Tate asserts her newfound authority by dominating them both with a fireplace poker.  

The Group's second play, Paul and Claire Siftons' 1931, while much more political than House of Connelly, was by no means a radical work. Set during a strike in the year of its title, the play recounts the downfall of a struggling workingman, an everyman named Adam. The play was more directly based on current social themes than House of Connelly, or than other plays of the time. In fact, Harold Clurman called it the "first Depression play." The Left press was not impressed, though. While they took notice of it, their reaction was unfavorable for they found the work vague and unfocused. A reviewer for The New Masses listed the "lack of conscious political leadership" as one of the play's serious shortcomings.  

The play's text itself reveals this lack of political focus. Although its action concludes with a workers' uprising, it is not specifically revolutionary. The final stage direction ambiguously calls for the chanting of a song vaguely like the "Internationale."  

Even the politicism that the play did express bothered the Group directors in the same fashion as it bothered the popular press. The program notes reflect the largely apolitical intentions of the Group in presenting the piece. The play's aim according to these notes, reflected the company's broader ideals of "the creation of common values, an active consciousness of a common way of looking at and dealing with life." Yet the
popular press found the play needlessly doctrinaire, and accused
the Sistons of being "pamphleters, not dramatists." Clurman,
too, was bothered by the script, because of a similar resistance
to "reportage and journalist in the theatre."17

Yet at the same time the play's new social concern and class
consciousness struck a responsive chord with its audience. On one
level, the New York Times found the Group courageous:

"They are bringing fresh minds to bear upon the old, moribond
art of the theatre, and they have the courage to produce an
unpleasant play that has only the remotest chance of being
commercially successful."13

On a more direct level, the play's theme of unemployment was
emotionally resonant. The New York Times review went on to note
that,

"...at the present moment a play about unemployment touches
us more deeply than the tawdrily bedizened effigies of amour
that are forever dangling above the footlights and
afflicting theatregoers with boredom. 1931- is the now and
here of the life we are leading."19

As further evidence of popular interest in the play, Harold
Clurman noted that the lower priced balcony seats, while
insufficient for a successful run of the play, did a vigorous
business during its few performances.

The Group's final production of their first season, Night
Over Taos, was even more limited in its political content than
1931-. The play's political implications were much nearer to
those of the Group's first play, House of Connelly, and showed
little sign of radicalism. The play describes the final downfall of the Montoya monarchy, in Taos, New Mexico, 1847. Like House of Connelly, its story is one of changing orders, as Don Montoya must face an imminent American invasion as well as the betrayal of his two sons. In some ways, the play shows a strong progressive perspective. The Montoya family has ruled with complete control over Taos, but the era of that control has come to an end. Taos is about to fall to the Americans, and Montoya's family rule is about to give way to a more democratic state. The young American republic repulses Montoya, but attracts his young son, Felipe. The woman whom Felipe loves, Diana, is a Northerner herself, and at the same time an idealization of honesty and love. For Felipe and Diana, the North is an ideal, "To think and act...To love as one wills." According to the priest, Martinez, who confronts Montoya, the coming democracy is not simply an ideal, but an inevitability:

"The peasants look around and see the free Americans, and wonder why one class of men, or men out of that class, has it all his own way."

Martinez goes on to say, "Things are not as they were. From now on you'll listen to more than yourself."20

In contrast to this new and growing democracy the old order appears decadent and ineffectual. As in House of Connelly, the playwright expresses this decadence of the old order in terms of sexuality. Don Montoya casually leaves his wives for younger women, and he plans to marry young Diana. He hints at this decadence on the eve of his wedding, as he tells Martinez, "the
laws of the church run backward for me this evening, and I am to be married at midnight." Felipe bristles at this decadence in his country. He tells Diana,

"...here a girl goes where she's sent by her father, and when she's chosen by an old man who can pay for her or who has her at his mercy, she's his, and a slave, and all the women are slaves here and all the men are slaves."¹²¹

Beyond this general decadence, Montoya adheres to a whole set of authoritarian values that no longer function in his changing society. He still sees his race as a race of rulers, distinct from the common people of Taos. He tells an American captain,

"...in your country it may be that the dogs are better than their masters, but not here." To Montoya, the North can never succeed in its social leveling, and this leveling poisons his own state.

He declares that "the North itself attacks us from within."

Montoya's world is one of survival of the strong and adherence to honor above all else. In his code, "A woman goes to the stronger, as land and nations go to the stronger." I have heard it said here and there that Spain is old and I am old....We come from an old proud race. We are either lords and masters of ourselves, or we die."²²²

Yet these values no longer serve to keep Montoya in power. His son Federico remarks, "We're a broken end of an empire, here, cut off and dying." In fact, Montoya's values lead directly to his own demise. He wishes to fight a bloody, clearly unwinnable war against the American army, rather than surrender in dishonor. Father Martinez himself tells Montoya that he has lost his people
because "you abandon them to keep your pride." Fernando states what Montoya cannot see: "It's true they govern us now. If they find us unworthy to die for, why should they die for us? And they won't do it." Even Montoya, as he poisons himself at the end of the play, declares, "In all Taos there's only one man who could not surrender and live, and his heritage is darkness." As he dies, he whispers, "This is what death's for—to rid the world of old fashions."  

The play is not wholly critical of Montoya and the old order, though. The aging monarch has an extraordinary vitality, an almost superhuman power. The stage notes describe him as "a solid, burning-eyed man of sixty, his hair grey, his face intent." As he first enters, Montoya immediately detects and uncovers a serious conflict between his sons in spite of their attempts to hide it from him. Montoya also appears as a more sympathetic character in contrast to the actions of his son Federico at the beginning of the play. Federico, thinking his father dead in battle, wishes only to maintain his own comfort, and he attempts to surrender to the Americans only for this purpose. He is selfish and uncommitted. In contrast, his father is a model of commitment. As Montoya says himself, "For wisdom and justice one must depend on the young; for madness in devotion to a cause, for all madness, one must go to their elders."

Felipe, the younger son, becomes a new sort of leader at the end of the play. Wedded to Diana of the North, he is a synthesis of old and new orders. In his own words, he is a "son of Taos," but also a "rebel at heart."
Thus, the Group's first season was marked by plays of varying political content, and sharply limited radicalism. The critical attention that the Group received largely applauded its discipline and cohesiveness as a company, but at the same time proved mixed in reaction to the social themes in the Group's plays. Even Night Over Taos, one of the Group's less political works, received criticism for being overly ideological. The New York Times wrote, "what makes it a little chilly in the theatre is the predominance of idea over emotion." The Left press paid the Group little attention at all.25

The Group's productions over the next three years repeated many of these same patterns. The plays varied greatly in their political content, while rarely treating political themes explicitly. Although the Group's reputation in the popular press continued to grow, its reputation among the Left remained weak. The most successful production of the theater's second season, John Howard Lawson's Success Story, had some strong political themes, but its main focus remained away from political issues. The play concerned the rise to power of a young working class man, Sol Ginsberg, in the advertising world, and the personal price of Sol's success. In its depiction of Sol's decay, the play reflected a growing radicalism in its author. Sol appears initially in a highly class conscious light. His language is rough, and we quickly learn that he is from the same East Side tenement as the company director's secretary, Sarah. He immediately clashes with Jeffrey Halliburton, a recent Yale graduate who is much less competent, although much better
educated than Sol. In fact, the play often judges its characters in terms of class. Merritt, the company president, and his lawyer both combine material success with personal decay. Taylor, the lawyer, is a womanizing alcoholic, and Merritt himself has fallen into a cynical apathy. He tells Sarah, "I'm pretty much at sea...if you knew me you'd like me and maybe feel a little sorry for me." He mocks Sol's own drive for advancement, and tells him, "maybe you'll get almost rich and then you'll think that everything's a joke." Beyond this class awareness, the play presents more explicitly radical views. Sol and Sarah have a shared dream of revolution that Sol's financial success and personal decay betray. They have gone to workers' meetings regularly and, as Sol says, the pair is "chock full of Marx and Lenin." When Merritt questions Sarah about her guiding ideals and beliefs, she tells him she is moved by "a kind of ideal you couldn't dream of." The single-minded pursuit of financial success that destroys Sol also destroys his revolutionary dream. He has no faith in revolutionary answers, and when Sarah demands that he be patient, he cannot wait. He tells her, "There's no future without money. I must get it....I been waiting for a break ever since I was born." As he becomes increasingly successful, he also becomes increasingly bitter toward his old revolutionary ideals. He cynically remarks, "Workers of the world, unite, you got nothin' to lose but your chains—and all you got to gain is bologna!" Finally, Sol becomes so critical of his old radicalism that he attacks Sarah. He asks her, "...tell me, are they still at it? Do
they still sweat at those crowded meetings? And we here, where the air is clear, we never hear a whisper! Yet Sol's loss of his dream and his own self-loss have gone hand in hand. Looking at his life, he sees that, "I live in a series of continuums, like pictures in the funny papers." Finally, he must ask Sarah to kill him, an act he cannot accomplish himself, as a final release.27

Yet if Success Story showed a growing politicism, its political stance was by no means coherent or well defined. The main focus of the play remained highly personal, and psychological considerations tended to outweigh political ones. For instance, Ginsberg's jealousy of Merritt erupts through his political views when he tells Sarah,

"Sometime I'll get my mitts on that bow and when he comes up for air he'll be all bloody, and then I'll bust up the whole place 'cause it smells of money...break up those little partitions that shut off one fool from another fool...to Hell with 'em. Yours for the revolution, signed, Solomon Ginsberg."

In fact, Sol's revolutionary zeal is a part of his fierce, egocentric energy. As one character tells him, "You're a revolutionist...you want to change the whole world in the image of your own ego--you want to stand on a platform amid millions of faces--alone!"28

If the play's focus was more psychological than political, it was also primarily philosophical. Harold Clurman described the work's theme as "what happens to an idealistic force when it finds no effective social form to contain it."29 Indeed, Ginsberg
is profoundly idealistic. He tells Sarah, "there's pure beauty blooming in my mind." Even as he is first introduced by the playwright, Sol is "full of undigested ideas and impressions." Yet he is trapped, unable to express this idealism. His wild vacillation between self-disgust and his furious drive for success reflects this inner desperation. As he clings to Sarah for his only love, they both long for an almost religious release. She begs him, "drown me with thorns, burn me with kisses, tear me down limb from limb." Sol compares himself with Christ, as well. Yet this passion and energy has no outlet, and quickly slips back into depression and bitterness. Thus, more clearly than a conflict between classes, the play presents a conflict between love and things, between material and ideal, and it presents this conflict within the minds of only a small number of characters.\(^1\)

The political limits of the play were reflected in both the Left and the popular press. The Daily Worker denounced the play, claiming that "the audience is asked to weep over problems of a finance capitalist swindler."\(^1\) The popular press reacted more favorably to the play but found the work's political overtones unimportant. According to The New York Times, Ginsberg's "impulse would be no less malevolent if he were battering down a social regime."\(^2\) The popular press, Clurman notes, chose to interpret the play as "boy makes good, only to find that his victories are vain and bitter."\(^3\) Once again, they were mainly impressed with the emotional force of the piece.

The Group's greatest popular success during its first four
seasons, Sidney Kingsley’s *Men in White*, was one of the least political of the company’s plays. The political content of the play, small as it was, was also grafted uncomfortably onto a hospital melodrama. The play describes the crisis of a young intern, Dr. Ferguson, as he must choose between financial success and a selfless devotion to medicine. As a subtext, the play presents a vague case for socialized medicine and criticizes the corporate hospital-for-profit in which Dr. Ferguson works; but these last themes fit uncomfortably onto the melodrama that characterizes most of the play. For example, another doctor, Levine, has come to Dr. Ferguson for his wife’s ill health. He and Dr. Ferguson discuss the possibility of socialized medicine calmly as they await a series of crucial x-rays that may reveal an incurable lung disease in Mrs. Levine. Again, at one point Dr. Ferguson’s mentor, Dr. Hochberg, reflects bitterly on the wealthy industrialist who controls the hospital board: “...till hospitals are subsidized by the community and run by men of medicine, we’ll continue to need our wealthy friend.” Yet these discussions occur almost as afterthoughts and bear little relation to the personal dramas that unfold around them.

The principal conflict that Kingsley explores is not one of political systems or attitudes, but is again a personal and philosophical one, between the selfless devotion to an ideal and the immediate pursuit of material rewards. In a conversation with Dr. Ferguson, Levine rages: “East Side! Tenements! Fifty-cent patients! Poverty! Dirt! Struggle! Why do we kill ourselves for it?” Dr. Ferguson responds, “My dad used to say, ‘Above all else,
humanity." In contrast to this ideal, we meet Dr. Cunningham—a callous, uncaring professional, who has achieved his success at the price of his humanity. Dr. Ferguson narrowly saves a young girl from Cunningham's incompetence. Yet Ferguson himself wavers at the thought of his future: "...one begins to wonder where in Heaven's God and what the Hell's it all about, and why on earth does anything make a difference." Only old Dr. Hochberg can present a kind of answer. He tells Ferguson that they are looking for "a kind of success the world out there can't measure. Maybe it's a kind of glory. George." 25

Again, for this play the Group received strong praise in the popular press and criticism from the Left. While the Daily Worker praised the Group's collective organization, it criticized the company's apoliticism: "...we hope that the Group Theatre, having found a modicum of recognition for its methods, advances toward an increasingly important employment of them." 36 The New York Times, in contrast, praised the production itself, saying that it "represents the theatre fully aware of its varied arts." 37 The Times review made no mention of social themes, but rather stressed the compassion and selflessness of the doctors as the play's most appealing qualities, and noted the work's intelligence. Men in White won the Pulitzer Prize for 1934.

The plays of the Group's first three years, then, were marked by a critical reception from the Left, a mixed but supportive reception in the popular press and, throughout, a shifting and only vaguely defined political content. This conflicted condition grew naturally from the Group's own conflicting impulses toward
and away from political theater. On one hand, the Group's own financial situation was constantly bleak, even when they found critical success in these early years. Explicitly political plays fared badly with Broadway audiences. In 1931, the company's most explicitly political play in the early years and the only one dealing with the working class in the Depression, closed after only 9 performances. While other political plays, such as *Success Story*, fared somewhat better, the Group's audience for much of its "socially relevant" theater remained small.

In addition, the Group had, from its inception, committed itself to working in the heart of the Broadway theater community and as a result it was unable to capture an audience it might otherwise have had for its political work. The Group charged more than twice the prices of the younger and more overtly political Theatre Union, for example. Clurman noted that in performances of 1931, the company was surprised by the success it had in lower priced balcony sales. More broadly, the company continued to function within the traditional economic system of Broadway production, and had to appeal to likely backers for each new endeavor. As a result, the theater could never begin to build toward its goal of financial autonomy. Even in the relatively successful *Men in White*, the Group controlled only 22 1/2% of the play's profits. The Group struggled to produce then, and its work became subject to the judgement of its would-be backers. Marketability and potential profit were criteria that these producers used. The results of this constant struggle were clear and bleak, financially. The Group suffered for its ideals. During
the company's second season, at least half the actors shared "a ten room flat near the railroad tracks at $50 a month." Financial pressures affected every aspect of the theater's life. During its second season, the directors had to allow twelve of their thirty actors to accept outside work in order to live. For their third summer retreat, the company had to perform four shows a week as rent on their cottages. Even at the height of Men in White's success the top salary in the theater was $200 a week, far below the normal pay on Broadway. 

If the financial pressures of these first years made the traditional path to success appealing, the growing political concerns of many of the company's members pushed them farther from this path. In the Group's second summer, Clurman recalls that the "sudden preoccupation with social, economic and political matters was like a fever running through our camp." This growing political consciousness took many forms in the second summer. According to Elia Kazan, a "communist cell" had established itself within the Group, with one goal to turn the theater into a "communist mouthpiece." One debate that interested communists, along with other members of the company, was that over the nature of the Group's government, and many sought to gain a more powerful voice for the actors themselves. The company also became more interested in Russian theater which, according to Clurman, appeared less "mystical" to them on account of the concrete fact of the Russian Revolution. The actors began to import political figures to their retreat as well, such as Ernest O'Malley, an ex-IRA high officer.
This growing politicism took various forms during the company's second and third seasons. Some actors became involved in political reform of their profession itself. A group of them were involved in the creation of the Actors' Forum, which brought about political reforms in Equity, the actor's union. Others worked with new, more political theater troupes, such as the Theatre Union and the Theatre Collective. Group Theatre actors watched as those organizations produced highly political pieces, such as the Theatre Union's anti-war play, *Peace on Earth*, in 1933, and the racially oriented *Stevedore*, in 1934. Group members occasionally performed experimental work at workers' clubs, and some spawned a documentary film company, Frontier Films. This growing politicism also further colored the Group's art in various ways. For example, Lee Strassberg wanted to play one of the characters in *Success Story* unsympathetically because to him she represented a "retrogressive social type." The company's growing politicism was echoed as well in the political themes of the playwrights associated with them. For example, *Success Story* reflected a growing political awareness in its author, John Howard Lawson. The piece stood in marked contrast to his earlier *Processional*. The Group also produced *Gentlewoman*, an even more explicitly political piece of Lawson's, in its fourth season. Finally, the Group's political convictions led to new tension within its own ranks. The actor Franchot Tone became the first member to leave the company as he felt a growing need for personal success, and a growing alienation from the politicism of the others.
The Group was thus pulled in opposite political directions, and its own actors appear to have been of two minds. Internally, some demanded more radical political theater. Yet the company resisted the growing politicism of the actors through a structure that they agreed upon. Although some members argued for a more democratic structure in the Group, the directors maintained the primary decision making power. An Actor's Committee instituted in the third summer hardly functioned, and Clurman insists that "there was no question of superceding the directors' authority." As a result, the company's plays continued to reflect the directors' general belief that specific political goals were not the theater's concern. Clurman argued in a forty page paper to the Group that "our aim was not and had never been to become a political theatre, but a creative and truly representative American theatre." He himself felt highly critical of the actors' political sentiments, noting that the "neophyte radicals wanted to fix everything." As evidence of this continuing limited politicism, the company followed Gentlewoman with a play written by a resigned member of the Communist party, Melvyn Levy. The play, Gold Eagle Guy, presented a "not wholly sympathetic portrayal of a robber baron capitalist." The Daily Worker condemned the work for its lack of clarity.

Externally, the demands of the market called for work more palatable to the Group's audience. Yet while the Group continued to resist increasing political pressure from its own members, it also held firm against the temptations of Broadway commercialism.
One root of this consistency was the continuing commitment of the company as a whole to their initial artistic goals. This commitment is clear in their continued pursuit of theater education. During the second summer, artistic questions of theatricality and clarity of interpretation remained the company's main focus. Again, in the third summer, Group members shared their own growing skills—in acting, voice and playwriting classes, for example. And beyond this artistic commitment, the actors remained committed to the consolidation of the community. Members tried to plan a Group restaurant, and saw themselves as "the humblest expression of a way of life that would later produce its own new magazine, school, concerts, art gallery, picture house, lecture platform, publishing establishment and what not." This community consciousness was completely foreign to the Broadway world around the Group. The theater answered critical reviews of its plays with letters of defense. It searched for various means of funding that would preserve the community, even taking contributions from some of its own wealthier members. And it continued to support those members of the company not involved in various productions.
Clifford Odets

The year of 1935 saw a marked increase in the overtly political content of the Group’s plays—a seeming sharp contrast with much of its earlier life. At the heart of this growing politicism stood the Group’s own actor playwright, Clifford Odets. Both of Odets’ first two plays for the Group, Waiting for Lefty and Awake and Sing, contained explicitly stated communist viewpoints, voiced either by certain characters or as themes in the plays themselves. Both plays also focused on contemporary urban settings—a New York tenement and an industrial strike. Odets’ plays brought him immediate recognition in both the popular and the Left press, and brought the Group new financial success as well. Over the next two years, the company produced two more of his plays and became firmly identified with the young playwright. Yet Odets’ general identification as a playwright of social protest demands careful scrutiny. Although his early work states or implies clearly communist viewpoints, he moves away from those in his later plays. In addition, Odets shared the Group’s general emphasis on broad philosophical issues, and on psychological conflicts in his characters.

Waiting for Lefty was perhaps the most explicitly radical of Odets’ plays. The drama unfolds during a union meeting about a possible taxi strike. The piece is structured as a series of vignettes which place the strike question in a broader context of
class conflict and worker exploitation. The form of the piece itself reflects Odets' politicisrm. It is written in agit prop fashion, in which the audience actually become fictional participants in the meeting. Its ending demands the audience be the ones to take up the call for a strike. In using agit prop techniques, Odets used a traditional theater device of political groups in Europe. In fact, he initially wrote the play for the New Theatre League, a mobile political theater. The play referred, as well, to a specific political event—the New York taxi strike of February, 1934. Odets' political viewpoints are lar in his own notes. He mentions, for example, that the corrupt union leader, Fatt,

"...of course, represents the capitalist system throughout the play. The audience should be kept constantly aware of him, the ugly menace which hangs constantly over the lives of all the people who act out their own dramas." 3

In Waiting for Lefty, Odets spelled out the political message in the action itself. The presence of class exploitation and the need for action overshadow all other aspects of his characters' lives. For instance, a poor cabdriver and his wife debate the strike in the first act. Their love itself is threatened by their poverty. The driver's wife tells him that she may leave him for a man who can provide for her, and when he accuses her of avoiding the subject of their poverty, she explodes.

"This is the subject, the EXACT SUBJECT! Your boss makes this subject. I never saw him in all my life, but already he's putting ideas in my head a mile a minute."
Again, in a later scene, two young lovers are unable to marry because of their poverty and decide to part. The young woman tells the young man, "Something wants us to be lonely like that—crawling alone in the dark." 4

In fact, the central pressure on the characters throughout the play is one of divisiveness. Most explicitly, during the meeting an out of town worker who argues that struggle is futile is revealed as a company spy in disguise. At the scene's climactic line, the audience learns that the faithful worker who turns in the spy is his own brother. Employers and capitalists often consciously nurture this divisiveness. Fatt red-baits the more vocal of the taxi drivers repeatedly, and in another scene a wealthy industrialist promotes a lab assistant to an important position in order to have the man spy on fellow employees. The final attempt to divide the workers provides the play's climax; Fatt has had the most militant worker, Lefty, killed in order to create the illusion that the organizer has sold out his colleagues.

In spite of this constant divisiveness, Odets' workers respond with clear purpose and unity, and the end of each scene, and of the play itself, affirms this sense of purpose. The divided couple in the first scene affirm their commitment to continued struggle as it ends. Again, the wealthy industrialist, Fayette, when he tries to bribe his lab assistant, receives this response:

"I'm not the civilized type, Mr. Fayette. Nothing suave or sophisticated about me. Plenty of hard feelings. Enough to
want to bust you and all your kind square in the mouth."

This sense of unity and purpose finally becomes an explicit call to action, one with communist overtones. In a final scene, one character tells another, "One dollar buys ten loaves of bread, Mister, or one dollar buys nine loaves of bread and one copy of the Communist Manifesto." As the play ends, the cries become deafening. The new leader of the workers, Agate, cries, "HELLO AMERICA! WE'RE STORMBIRDS OF THE WORKING CLASS. WORKERS OF THE WORLD...OUR BONES AND BLOOD!"

Yet in spite of his fervor, Odets' politics remained vague and unformed. While the calls to action and the paths to the future were left primarily undefined, Odets concerned himself primarily with the emotional and value conflicts in his characters. Capitalism, in Waiting for Lefty, opposes the humane and moral values that the workers embody. When Miller, the lab assistant, questions the value of poison gas production, Fayette responds, "That's not our worry. If big business went sentimental over human life there wouldn't be big business of any sort."

Again, in a casting office scene a producer tells a young actor, "Nobody interested in artists, here. Get a big bunch for a nickel on any corner. We protect investments." Capitalism erodes humanity and morality, to Odets. The casting director reflects this in his own character. He jokes, "And Jesus Christ himself couldn't play in this show, with all his talents," then ironically crosses himself in repentance. And capitalism continues to pit itself against human love, for Odets, dividing
husband from wife, brother from brother.

If this play seemed strikingly political, the limits of Odets' politicism became clearer in his next work, *Awake and Sing.* One reason is that in this second play Odets moves out of the workplace and into the family. Another is that he creates more varied and conflicting voices and viewpoints. The only articulate political figure in the play is the grandfather, Jacob, a "sentimental idealist." Odets is actually clearly critical of Jacob's limitations in the play. Jacob states, "If this life leads to revolution it's a good life. Otherwise, it's nothing." Yet as his later suicide proves, the old man is unable to live by this rigid, action oriented philosophy. In fact, Odets even casts doubt on Jacob's understanding of his own ideals. The leftist writings that line the old man's shelves all remain unread.

Odets continues to stress the material roots of the Berger family's troubles, as he did in *Waiting for Lefty.* Their poverty constantly oppresses them. Myron, the father, has lost hours at his job, and his son, Ralph, has just taken a wage cut. Ralph's love for a poor girl is stifled by his family's criticism, and by his own belief that he cannot marry her in his poverty. The setting itself is bounded by poverty. The Bergers live in cramped quarters, only a curtain between the living room and dining room. Their landlords turn down the heat earlier and earlier each night, and the family must even walk its dog on the roof. Also, as in Odets' earlier play, here the figures of wealth and power are spiritually corrupt. Uncle Morty, a wealthy businessman,
tells Ralph that "common sense is thicker than love." While Ralph cries at the knowledge that he cannot marry, Morty laughs at the funnies, oblivious. In addition, as in his first play, Odets here alludes to the economic roots of the First World War. The crippled war veteran Moe, who boards with the Bergers, argues with Uncle Morty. When Morty claims that businessmen don't steal from the poor, Moe responds that the poor fought the war in the interest of big business, saying, "buy yourself a fife and drum—and go fight your own war." Finally, Odets voices, through Ralph, a need for unity of purpose among the working class, as he did in *Waiting for Lefty*. Jacob has urged Ralph to be the doer that the old man is not, and Ralph takes up the gauntlet at the end of the play. He declares,

"Get teams together all over. Spit on your hands and get to work. And with enough teams together maybe we'll get steam in the warehouse so our fingers don't freeze off. Maybe we'll fix it so life won't be printed on dollar bills."

Yet in contrast to his first play, here Odets characters do not define a clear and unified political viewpoint. Many aspects of their characters do not fit into any clear political scheme. For example, both Ralph and his sister Hennie are intensely romantic. When Hennie leaves her husband at the end of the play, in spite of his financial security, he laments, "I make a nice living from the store. But it's no use—she looks for a star in the sky." Ralph dreams that his own girlfriend "is like French words." Even their father, Myron, reminisces,

"There's no more big snows like in the old days. I think the
whole world’s changing...No one hardly remembers any more when they used to have gaslight and all the dishes had little fishes on them."

Odets’ deepest focus is on this intense spiritual dissatisfaction, aggravated by the Berger’s constant poverty. None of them are quite sure what they have lost, or how to find it. Even Jacob, in his zeal, shows this romantic despair. He declares, "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust, and the earth shall cast out the dead!" Then anticlimactically, he wonders, "It’s cold out?"

Although Odets’ first two plays received immediate attention from the Left, the reaction was mixed. Waiting for Lefty gained popular notoriety, performed by both the Group and others. It was suppressed by the police in at least seven eastern cities, and performed in "some sixty towns that had never before witnessed a theatrical performance." A reviewer for *New Theatre* praised the Group’s "continually maturing revolutionary convictions." Yet *Awake and Sing* received much the opposite reaction. The *Daily Worker* treated it lukewarmly. It noted that the play’s "social blues" were "affecting," but also declared that "the play lacks a guiding idea to make the whole thing significant." Another writer spoke of the "simplicities of Odets’ communist panaceas." Yet *Awake and Sing* enjoyed popular success and ran for 209 showings in New York.

For his final work of the season, Odets wrote a bitter anti-Nazi play, *Till the Day I Die*. Like *Awake and Sing*, this play was politically charged, but presented no clear position. It centered on the fate of two brothers in the communist underground
in Germany, one of whom is captured by the Nazis, then released again as bait. On one level, the play was an explicit call to political action. In one scene, a repentant Nazi officer tells the captured brother, "'Red Front' I can't say to you... But 'United Front'—I say that. In every capitalist country in the world this day let them work for the United Front." The death of the captured brother, Ernst, at the end of the play, is itself an image of sacrifice to a higher political cause. Ernst tells his brother that although he is to die, "you're alive. Other comrades are working. The day is coming and I'll be the final result... In that dizzy dazzling structure some part of me is built. Other political themes also stand out in the play. Odets implies the connection between capitalism and fascism, for instance, in the conversation between two stormtroopers. When one suggests that Hitler may become a new Napoleon, the other answers, "we learned all that stuff in school, Napoleon and all that stuff, but it didn't help in business. When I was in business we didn't talk about Napoleon. We just talked about how much." Finally, Odets' ideal political vision is again one of unity. As in Waiting for Lefty, the rulers attempt to divide and conquer by creating mistrust in the resistance, labeling Ernst as an informer. They literally divide brother from brother. Yet Ernst's own final vision reaches beyond this divisiveness. He declares, "A man who knows that the world contains millions of brothers and sisters isn't afraid." Again, his brother declares, "There is no brother, no family, no deeper mother than the working class."15

Yet Odets remains detached in his political focus in this
play. As in *Awake and Sing,* his chief concern is the conflict between his characters' intense search for love and the other demands placed upon them. For instance, Ernst's lover, Tilly, tells him, "It is true our work comes before our personal happiness. But we must try to wrest some joy from life." Love becomes a restorative force for Ernst and Tilly, "One window looking out in a world of clear light." In contrast, the Nazis become anti-love figures. They play cards in front of suffering prisoners, oblivious. The two chief Nazi figures are also homosexuals with an implicitly sadomasochistic relationship.¹⁶

*Till the Day I Die* received the mixed reviews that characterized the response to Odets' work. On one hand, the play helped affirm Odets' place as a "revolutionary" playwright, and the Group's status as the premier revolutionary theater in New York.¹⁷ Yet at the same time the play's politics remained weakly developed, and the Left press did not respond well to what they termed the "melodramatic celebration of the human spirit and a painfully naive endorsement of the move towards consensus left-wing politics."¹⁸ The popular press, for its part, was harshly critical of the play. One reviewer noted, "If you want to register an emotional response against Nazi polity, Mr. Odets requires that you join the communist brethren."¹⁹ The Group itself had seen the relevance of the play as political, but not as a specifically anti-war piece. To them, it was "one of the first serious anti-Nazi plays to reach the New York stage."²⁰

During the next two years, the Group produced two more of Odets' plays, *Paradise Lost* and *Golden Boy.* These plays showed
him less politically concerned than before, while he concentrated more fully on other concerns. *Paradise Lost* paradoxically contains some of Odets' most articulated political writing, but is also less prescriptive than his earlier works. The play incorporates some of the political attitudes that Odets had voiced earlier. Again, here, he expresses the clear belief that his characters cannot escape the material fact of the Depression. The middle class Gordon family is haunted by it on all sides. It costs them their house, destroys their business, and finally sends one of their sons to crime and death. Beyond this general contemporary reference, Odets creates in Pike, the furnace man, a clear voice of political criticism. Pike despairs, "This system! Breeds war like a bitch breeds pups! Breeds poverty, degrades men to sentimental gibberin' idiots." When Clara Gordon, the mother, tells him that wealth and poverty are natural divisions of society, he responds, "It's not natural for men to starve while the means to produce food are close at hand." Pike confronts these middle class characters with realities that they wish to avoid. He tells Clara about dead men found starved at the city garbage dump and she responds, "it looks like something that happens only in a foreign country." When a family friend, Gus, suggests that the answer to continued unemployment is a new administration, Pike responds "Don't be a medium sized rabbit, Gus." Pike also articulates Odets' criticism of World War I. Having lost children in that war, he rages at Armistice Day patriotism: "Monkey dust! Gibberish! What do we do when we hear some old bat outta hell say she is ready to give over every fine
boy to be blown to hell in another obscene war?"  

In addition to this clearly drawn political figure, Odets populates his play with other political issues and figures. The father, Leo, a small business owner, must decide whether he will raise the wages of his workers with money that he doesn't have or face a strike. Gordon is shocked to hear his workers describe their situation—a situation reminiscent of those in *Waiting for Lefty*. The workers tell him of corrupt union meetings, gunmen hired by the company, and a corrupt union lawyer who "don't work for the workers."  

The local democratic politician, Foley, is similarly corrupt. He holds a "prosperity party" on the block, and when the Gordons are evicted, he has their furniture carted away from the street outside their home so as not to mar his image.

Yet Odets has forsaken any clearly communist perspectives in this play. Unlike his earlier works, this piece contains no "communist raisonneur." When Pike, the most clearly vocal political figure, is red-baited by the politician Foley, he responds, "you call me a Red and I'll break your goddamn neck."  

Harold Clurman, the play's director, himself remarked that the chief destructive factors operating on the Gordon family are not so much political as they are "human failings"—the disease of one young son and the embezzlement of Leo's business partner.

In fact, in this play Odets gives voice to a longing and despair separate from the family's economic struggles. The characters continually wrestle with the feeling that they have valued things that aren't really important, and that they have
suffered a loss which they cannot articulate. Pike says, "No one talks about the depression of modern man's spirit, or his ability to have a full and human life." The Gordon daughter, Pearl, responds more concretely with the same longing: "I'm homesick all the time. For what?" Again, when Pearl's fiancée remarks bitterly, "The best things in life are free. What lies we believe," she responds, "I dream at night." Son Ben, an ex-track star, voices the same undefined longing as he looks at an old trophy and remarks, "I used to think it meant something...the proud possession." For Odets, in this play, there is no final message of political action. The final growth of the Gordons is one of realization of the spiritual void in their lives, and a vague hope of future unity. Leo declares:

"For the first time in our lives—for the first time our house has a real foundation...Men, men are understanding the bitter black total of their lives. Their whispers are turning to shouts! They become an ocean of understanding! No man fights alone."

In *Golden Boy*, Odets subordinates political issues even farther in his writing, and concentrates on the question of identity in his young protagonist, Joe Bonaparte. Joe must decide between artistic success as a violinist and financial success as a prizefighter. The political issues that concern Odets in earlier plays are expressed here more as allusions than as developed themes. Joe's brother, Frank, a CIO organizer, makes a brief appearance, and criticizes Joe's commitment to prizefighting. He tells Joe's manager, "I'm not fooled by a lotta
things Joe's fooled by. I don't get autos and custom made suits. But I get what Joe don't ...The pleasure of acting as you think... at harmony with millions of others." Also, the Depression acts as a constant force in the lives of the Bonapartes. Joe's brother-in-law, the cabdriver Sigge, longs for a cab of his own to free him from the constant abuse of the company foreman. Joe's own musical dreams must face the constant reality of the Depression. His fighting backer, Roxy, tells his father, "Five hundred fiddlers stand on Broadway and 48th street, on the corner every day, rain or shine, hot or cold. And your boy dares—!"26

Yet the material conditions of Joe's life are not his only limitation. His own drives also trap him. Clurman describes the play's theme as "The struggle of an individual ego in a society that tries more and more to dismiss the subtleties of man's subjective needs as the concern of 'forgotten dopes.'"27 Joe grows to reject these subjective needs in the play. He instead searches for happiness in sports success and in wealth. He tells his father, "Do you know there are men who have wonderful things from life? Do you think they're better than me? Do you think I like this feeling of no possessions?" As a result of this longing, Joe turns to boxing success with obsession. He buys an expensive car that he describes as "poison in my blood. When you sit in a car and speed you're looking down at the world; Speed, speed, speed..." His furious ambition finally leads him to give up all concern for his hands, and he breaks them in the ring. Joe's rejection of his own creativity finally leads to an
implicit rejection of life, itself, as he kills a fighter in the ring during his final bout.28

Yet in contrast to this drive for success, Odets created his clearest alternative in this play, and it is an intensely personal one. Joe's father, Mr. Bonaparte, tells him, "whatever you got ina your nature to do is a not foolish." One night, in the park Joe himself declares, "With music I'm never alone when I'm alone....Playing music... That's like saying, 'I am a man. I belong here.'" Lorna, the woman with whom Joe falls in love, later reminds him of that image, saying; "You wanted to conquer the world...But it's not the kings and dictators who do it. It's that kid in the park." She dreams of leaving with Joe, of living in a land where "poverty's no shame."29

A number of aspects of this play distinguish it from Odets' earlier work, even from Paradise Lost. First, Odets gives less credibility to the intellectual political figure in this play than he does in the others. Mr. Carp, the intellectual family friend, is as effete as Jacob in Awake and Sing, but he is also devoid of vision and insight, as his name suggests. When he sees an argument between Sigge and his wife, Mr. Carp vaguely remarks that it is "the first step toward fascism."30 When Joe leaves to become a fighter, Mr. Carp is unable to console Mr. Bonaparte, and can only ineffectually quote Schopenhauer. Second, in contrast to the earlier plays, this piece ends with no vision of social salvation or unity. Joe chooses, and he must live with the consequences of that decision (and finally must die with them). The play's final image is one of shock and despair, as the other
characters learn of Joe's death. Finally, this play confronts its characters with no specific economic crisis. Although the Depression is a constant presence, it has not crippled the Bonapartes as it has the Gordons and the Bergers. Even the economic struggle of a career in violin may not hinder Joe, for he has won the all-city violin competition. Thus, the politics and economics of the play are pushed even farther into the background.

Clifford Odets embodied a broad tension in the Group between the pursuit of "social drama," with its own set of requirements, and the Group's commitment to its own artistic priorities. Odets, himself a member of the Communist Party until 1935, became an overnight celebrity as a revolutionary dramatist, and the Group's sole playwright for the remainder of the season of 1935. Yet after Waiting for Lefty, his works give little indication of any committed revolutionary position. As John Gassner notes, left-wing theater of the 1930's generally required a "conversion ending." Yet in Odets' work, this ending either didn't occur, or was mitigated by "predominantly realistic observation" such as Hennie's abandonment of her husband and child in Awake and Sing. In addition, Odets concerns himself very little with the working class. His later plays show that "their author, the 'white hope' of the thirties and the left wing theatre, was a middle class, rather than a 'proletarian' writer." Finally, as Harold Clurman notes, Odets' epithets and slogans were "never fully integrated into his work." The substance of his plays rarely gave a clear meaning to the revolutionary ories of many of
his characters, such as those of Ralph at the end of *Awake and Sing*. The Left press consistently noted Odets' shortcomings as a revolutionary dramatist although they treated him gently. Reviewing *Paradise Lost*, for example, the *Daily Worker* argued, "If *Paradise Lost* is mysticism, then all poetry is mysticism." Yet at the same time, the reviewer argued that Odets' characters were "not wholly applicable or wholly clear" as political archetypes.\(^{35}\)

Rather than political, Odets' chief goals were dramatic, and "it was his dramatic, not his revolutionary voice that the Group cherished." As Morgan Himelstein notes, Odets was more intent on "creating a group of vivid characters and on depicting the comic and pathetic elements of their lives than on propagandizing the revolution."\(^{36}\) In addition to this dramatic focus, Odets' awareness of his characters was primarily emotional, and his social vision arose largely from this emotionalism. In Harold Clurman's view of Odets' work,

"There was a fervor that derived from the hope and expectation of change and the desire for it. But there was rarely any expression of political consciousness in it, no deep commitment to a coherent philosophy of life."\(^{37}\)
The Final Seasons

In its last years, the Group continued to produce plays by authors other than Clifford Odets. Two major political themes arose repeatedly in these plays. First, the plays became increasingly concerned with the growth of Fascism and the threat of war in Europe. As with other political issues that the Group addressed, they found no clear answer to the question of interventionism versus isolationism in their art. The plays varied in their attitudes towards American involvement, and in the degree to which they recognized the question at all. Second the Group continued to voice its concern with socioeconomic issues of its time, the Depression and class struggle. The Case of Clyde Griffiths, produced in 1938, was the Group's last play to voice explicitly Marxist views. However, the company's social concerns continued to arise in less explicit fashion in other plays.

Paul Green's Johnny Johnson, produced in 1937, contrasted markedly with the Popular Front ideology of Odets' Till the Day I Die, produced only a year before. In Johnny Johnson, a naive and idealistic young man discovers the horror and absurdity of war. The play echoes some of the Group's earlier radical works, but only weakly. For instance, the Sergeant who recruits Johnny says, "The big blighters back home don't want it to end. Who'd they sell their munitions to if we have peace?" In one scene, the guns themselves chant with political overtones,

"Masters, masters,"
Deep Dark 'n earth as iron we slept,
Masters masters,
Till at your word to light we leapt."

Political overtones appear again in the relationship between Johnny and his romantic rival, Anguish. Anguish avoids conscription, and as a result he becomes a political and financial success in his home town. His mineral water company profits from use of its products in war hospitals. In the face of these economic roots of war, Green mocks the platitudes that justify it. An orator tells Johnny, "We must be prepared to offer these sacrifices on the alter of freedom," and he responds, "The more I hear of this freedom the less I like it."

Yet Green's criticism of war is more a study of the failings of human nature, itself, rather than one stemming from particular political or economic roots. The chiefs of the allied high command argue like children over who can sacrifice more soldiers to the war effort. The French premier declares, "If England gives her hundred thousand dead, La Belle France, my native France, can do the same." Johnny himself berates them for "making up your thousands dead and dying like cold figures on a blackboard." He tells them, "There's something black and evil got into you."

However, all who haven't fought share the ignorance of the high command. As the play begins, the declaration of war interrupts the dedication of a peace monument in Johnny's home town. With absurd ease, the mood of the citizens turns from one of isolationism to passionate interventionism. The song of the townspeople turns from "America must stay out" to "It's victory
or die." Even Johnny goes to war in the blind faith that, like Wilson said, it will "end all wars," and will also allow him to impress his sweetheart in the bargain. She herself cloaks the war in romantic imagery, telling him "At night I'll think of you there on the battlefield—under the vast and starry sky."

In fact, Green often mocks political solutions in the play. Johnny actually reaches the allied high command and extracts a peace treaty from them after administering laughing gas to the whole room. Yet the generals' absurd dance under the effects of the gas underscores the futility of Johnny's effort. He is soon arrested and committed to a mental institution for the following ten years. The asylum itself becomes a metaphor for political futility. Along with the other inmates, Johnny founds a League of World Nations, while the asylum staff watches with indifference and amusement. In the face of this political futility, the only possible redemption that Green envisions is a personal one. Johnny last appears as a toy salesman, outside of a stadium filled with a ferocious and patriotic crowd. Turning his back on the political harangue from the stadium, Johnny raises his own voice, and his Barker's cry is the play's last image.

Clifford Odets' last play for the Group, Rocket to the Moon, reflected his own growing emphasis on the individual, subjective lives of his characters. The backdrop of the Depression is less immediate here than in any of Odets' earlier plays. This play concerns a New York dentist who flirts with the idea of leaving his overbearing wife for his young receptionist. The dentist, Ben Stark, and his office-mates suffer the constant effects of the
Depression in muted form. Ben's own career has fizzled after a brilliant start in research, and he now can hardly pay his rent. His office mate, Dr. Cooper, in even worse condition, laments, "Why can't they fit me in. a man of my talents. The sick ones walk the streets while the doctors sit at home." Cleo, Ben's young receptionist, is desperate to escape the squalor of her working class background, the bedroom she must share with her five brothers and sisters.

Yet the Depression images are far removed, compared with those of Odets' earlier work. Regardless of their economic circumstances, Odets' characters here share a burning sense of isolation and a search for love. Cleo, realizing that Ben will finally not leave his wife, begs him, "Don't let me be alone in the world, Ben... Don't let me be alone." Ben himself suffers less from his poverty than from his own desperate need for his wife, who for personal reasons will not allow him to accept a loan in order to improve his practice. Even Ben's father-in-law, the affluent Prince, sees his own life as lonely and futile. He tells Ben that he feels he has earned his fortune to be "the richest man in the cemetery." He continues, "My wife is dead. I'm an old man who missed his boat."

Like Golden Boy, Odets' last play for the Group also lacks any conversion ending. The characters' perceptions of their society are undefined or metaphorical even in the end. They share a vague sense of dehumanization that Cleo voices strongly. She cries, "Nobody loves me! Millions of people moving around the city and nobody cares if you live or die." Again, describing her
family, she says, "they're washed out, bleached . . . everybody forgets how to dream." Dr. Cooper shares this vision: "They coddle germs in laboratories—they feed white mice twice a day . . . . Why don't somebody coddle me?" Even Prince remarks that the live in a "regular insect society." Only Ben's neighbor, Dr. Jensen, has a vaguely political awareness. He tells Ben, "A man can't be both a lover and a banker, enchanter and provider."5

In the Group's later years their own plays continued to receive a reaction that placed them at a juncture between the Left and the mainstream Broadway community. At the same time, their own political activity remained moderate and unfocused. Pocket to the Moon came under harsh criticism from the Left press as a result of its lack of Popular Front awareness, and Odets was criticized for being "behind the times."6 Others in the company shared this lack of radical political focus, and some even asked that Odets be commissioned to write a third term propaganda piece for Roosevelt. At the same time, the actors themselves criticized the political shortcomings of many of the plays. Some claimed that Odets had betrayed his revolutionary roots in Rocket to the Moon, and they attacked the melodrama of Irwin Shaw's Gentle People.7 The Group came under particular fire from the Left press for producing William Saroyan's My Heart's in the Highlands, a prose-poem that reflected "wistful, almost desperate optimism."8

On the other hand, hints of the Group's more radical impulses continued to arise. The Case of Clyde Griffiths, a dramatization of Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy, was the
Group's most Marxist play, aside from those of Odets. An Odets script that Clurman also seriously considered showed some of that playwright's earlier radicalism. Dealing with a strike in an industrial area, the play showed "an old order of benevolent capitalism that had grown lame, a new order of monopolistic capitalism that was growing vicious (or fascist), and a still unorganized and spiritually unformed working class." The Group also supported the highly political Federal Theatre Project, and a number of Group actresses took part in a protest against the Project's dissolution.

Yet even this politicism, as it did before, received criticism from the popular press and from the directorship of the Group. Broadway critics perceived The Case of Clyde Griffiths, for example, as drama "with a pointer" - a play of instruction written to demonstrate a thesis. Rather than defending their play, as they had in previous instances, the Group directors published a letter disclaiming responsibility for the politics of their playwrights. Clurman had a similar reaction in rejecting the script for Odets' Silent Partner. He felt that the play's radical political "mood and plot had been rendered inappropriate by New Deal legislation." Clurman rejected the play in spite of his own admission that it did have contemporary significance: "some of the more brutal scenes of Silent Partner were to be enacted during the coming spring in the Chicago Memorial Day Massacre."

In their work and in their political life, the Group continued to show an overwhelming concern with the rise of
fascism. This concern moved them increasingly toward an interventionist stance. This movement was visible in two of the Group's plays in particular, Robert Ardrey's Thunder Rock provided a metaphorical attack on isolationism. In the play, a frustrated and cynical activist moves to a remote lighthouse on the Great Lakes. There, he peoples his retreat with ghosts, but "they haunt him with their own retreat from past social ills," ills since answered and solved. The play, while not explicit in its political content, reflected a clear shift from the earlier isolationism of Johnny Johnson. Shaw's Gentle People, again in metaphor, reflected a clearer call to action against fascism. The play concerns the decision of two New York shopkeepers to murder a hoodlum who has been extracting money from them. Shaw stressed the allegorical nature of the play by subtitling it "A Brooklyn Fable."

The rise of fascism also concerned the Group outside of their plays themselves. The growth of Nazism was immediately apparent to the Group. Their summer camp in Lake Grove, Long Island, was located near a Bundist camp, and Group actors had altercations with Nazi supporters. In addition, Group members involved themselves in anti-axis and anti-fascist activities. The company gave a series of Sunday performances in order to buy ambulances for Spanish democrats. The Chinese struggle against Japan also became a Group cause, and two of its actresses received publicity for wearing lisle stockings in support of a boycott against Japanese silk.

In the midst of this political controversy the Group
continued to show a community and artistic commitment that remained constant. The company remained largely immune to attacks from Broadway reviewers or criticism from the Left. For instance, although both Saroyan's *My Heart's in the Highlands* and Shaw's *Quiet City* were unlikely to be financial successes, the Group staged them. Clurman recalls that "we entertained no idea that they had commercial possibilities. We simply believed them proper material for our theatre." In addition, actors who were able to command more traditional success continued to choose the Group instead. Luther Adler and Elia Kazan, both well known performers, chose to forego lucrative opportunities at the opening of the 1936-37 season in spite of the fact that the Group play in which they were appearing was not ready for production. Finally, the Group's continued commitment to the growth of its community remains clear. For example, in 1937 the actors responded to a management crisis by creating a committee that completed a detailed analysis of the theater's problems. Their community activity was often more tangible than this, as well. One actor with a serious drinking problem actually appeared drunk on stage, and the Group actors responded to this problem by sending him to a sanatorium, and paying for his care with bi-monthly performances. He later rejoined the Group.

The Group Theatre's dissolution in 1942 finally saw the constant economic pressure on the company take its toll. These crises had been a constant force in the Group's life. In 1935, *Awake and Sing* had proven a surprise hit as the Group seemed near financial dissolution. After the successful season of 1935-36 the
Group had again faced financial crisis, and even disbanded for six months while Harold Clurman worked in Hollywood along with several other company members. Clurman himself credits the Group's final disbanding to this economic struggle, which he calls the "fundamental problem of the Group's whole existence....There was no ground for a Group Theatre in New York. There never had been."
The Political Roots of the Group

The Group's own artistic history mirrors with surprising clarity the motivations and values of the New Deal, itself. Beneath the overt politicism that surfaced periodically in the actors and in the plays, the Group and its art reflected many elements of the New Deal in its assumptions and in its organization. The political values of the theater rested more here than in radical movements of the time. In addition, the Group's political values grew in large part from political traditions of the 1920's.

The Harding administration, then those of Coolidge and Hoover, all defined political values that would remain strong in the Group's formation. Most apparent was the focus, under the Harding administration, on "developing cooperative harmony under expert leadership." As Ellis Hawley discusses, Harding brought powerful organizational intellects, such as Herbert Hoover and Charles Evans Hughes, into his organization. Under Hoover, new organizational agencies sprang up in transportation, radio and agriculture. Internationally, Hughes oversaw an analogous effort in the Naval Limitations Treaty, the Four Power Treaty and the Nine Power Treaty.¹

For these leaders of the 1920's, the associative state by no means conflicted with the growth of capitalism, but in fact harmonized with it. The large growth in mergers between 1920 and 1928 reflected a growing faith in corporate capitalism, for example. The Commerce Department, under Hoover, became in large
part a guide for private organization: "the aim was to reinforce private ordering mechanisms with governmental power or approval." By the late 1920's, the organizers of associational action were creating a kind of "associational state," responsive to their needs but partly financed by public funds. The growth of this associative state combined centralization with a strong commitment to individualism. Trade and industrial associations grew, and new managers were often graduates of business or technical schools, who stressed organized, rationalized management. The trade and industrial associations, occasionally pre-modern in ideology, stressed a combination of "corporate consolidation" and "entrepreneurial independence." Coolidge himself strongly reflected the traditionalism of this new associational state. He became a "symbol of integrity and simplicity in an age of organization, extravagance, and threatened change."2

The early Group Theatre vividly reflects the impulses and tensions in this associational vision, in its art and in its organization. The company, as Clurman observes, "clamored for a more rooted togetherness." The associational vision was at the heart of the Group's structure. Integration of all the elements of the theater, from the actor to writer to director, remained the Group's highest ideal. Even the summer camps throughout the Group's years reflected a community integration unique at that time in popular theater. Yet even at its inception the Group, like the business and political organizations of its time, continued to stress centralized authority. And if the authority
of trained managers was paramount in the economic world, the directors retained that authority in the Group.

The Group's earliest plays reflected this associative vision. Both *House of Connelly* and *Night Over Taos* stress community integration as an essential ideal. In *House of Connelly*, Will Connelly succeeds economically by creating a new order that includes tenant farmers in a new cooperative relationship. *Night Over Taos* similarly stresses the need for a new cooperative order. The older ruler, Don Montoya, finds that he can no longer live as a monarch and that a new state must include all its members as active participants. Yet at the same time both of these plays continue to appeal to a strong centralized, and in some ways a traditional and pre-modern, source of authority. Will, in the first play, uses his position as traditional plantation head to guide the rebirth of his farm. His drive and commitment are associated with his dead grandfather, whom even the tenants grudgingly admire. Don Montoya's son, as well, becomes the hero of *Night Over Taos* by combining elements of the old order with the new. He is unsatisfied with the old order, but, unlike his brother, he retains his father's sense of honor and passion, and thus becomes a new sort of leader.

The Group also showed a growing dissatisfaction with this associative vision, though—a dissatisfaction with both cultural and economic roots. In spite of the apparent prosperity of the 1920's, poverty remained widespread, with six million families earning below $1000 per year in 1929. Class divisions had begun to grow sharper as a "large pool of unskilled or casual workers"
continued to grow. Agriculture, in particular, suffered from new technologies, capital intensive farming and shrinking markets. As of 1928, as well, the government was unable to cope with a deepening economic crisis. Hoover was not yet concerned with the "market riggers, corporate plunderers, and protectors of inefficiency who were operating behind the associational facade." In his reliance on the private sector, he had "stopped far short of the state corporatism urged by some businessmen and politicians." As the Depression worsened, his response was limited, designed not to "destroy business confidence" with too much government. In addition, cultural discontent with the associative state grew. In both leftist and rightist perceptions, "the institutions being built by the New Era capitalists and administrators were incapable of meeting man's need for a wholesome community life." As signs of this discontent, new themes in popular culture grew, such as youth rebellion, urban issues, and "the trials and triumphs of a machine age." The Group's own life as a community attempted to fill the gap left by this cultural insufficiency, and their art frequently examined the insufficiency itself. Clurman's description of the company's dreams for a broad community clearly reaches beyond the technical plans for a theater. It envisions a Group restaurant, lecture platforms and other community organizations. In addition, the Group's art reflects this broad discontent, particularly as it begins to focus in on the Depression. Both 1931- and Success Story deal explicitly with the insufficiency of outmoded values in an increasingly competitive society. In Success Story, the
successful advertiser, Merritt, finds himself ruined at the hands of the mercenary Sol Ginsberg. Similarly, the young factory worker Adam, in 1931, loses his own innocence just as the archetypical Adam does, but here in the bitterness of a strike. Even the more conservative House of Connelly and Night Over Taos portray characters who cannot face a changing order that renders their values meaningless.

Thus, the Group found itself in acceptance of many political values similar to those of the Harding, Coolidge and Hoover administrations, but at the same time it challenged these values. This posture of half-rebellion occurs again in the company's relation to modernism. This artistic movement was often one of rebellion. According to Ellis Hawley, it became associated in the 1920's with "sensitive individuals repelled by traditional society, yet unable to find satisfying and respected places in a world of mass production, impersonal relationships and bureaucratic orders." Clifford Odets' characters often fit this description with striking accuracy. Ralph in Awake and Sing and Leo in Golden Boy both find themselves at odds with the modern world, yet unsatisfied with traditional goals and desires. Both of them are furiously at odds with their more traditional families, yet neither can find a satisfying alternative. Still, the Group remained uncommitted to this modernist vision as a guiding principle in its work. In Men in White, for example, the bureaucracy and technology of the hospital form an unquestioned backdrop to the melodrama that takes place within.

Both artistically and politically, then, the Group continued
to adhere to much of the conservative thought of its contemporaries. In this light, it is no wonder that political radicalism in the company was limited so strictly at first. As the Depression began, the radicalism in the Group was limited in much the same fashion as it was limited outside the Group. The membership of the Communist Party USA had fallen from an early peak of between 50,000 and 60,000 to only 10,000 in 1929.7 Partly, this limitation arose from the party's own rigidity. The Comintern in 1928 had proclaimed the advent of a Third Period, "an era of capitalist decay and revolutionary ferment." This period called for a more firm and aggressive policy, as seen in the party's internal activities. Party leader Jay Lovestone was expelled for his high estimation of the resisting power of American capitalism. In fact, by the end of the decade the party suffered from a shortage of capable leaders, "and they were rushed around the country to fill particularly gaping holes, after leaving large vacancies to be filled somewhere else." The party's political intolerance extended to intellectuals. For instance, economist Scott Nearing was expelled after objecting to the denial of permission to publish one of his works. Mike Gold, editor of The New Masses, received harsh criticism in 1928 for allowing Nearing and Upton Sinclair to publish reviews in the paper.8

The Group's own set of financial and artistic priorities was completely incompatible with this strict ideological discipline. Even in its subject matter the company strayed from radical political ideals. If the Group can be said to reflect any class
background, it is surely middle class, and certainly not "proletarian." The company's art shows many connections with these class roots. For instance, Irwin Shaw, in his work, reflected "the troubled conscience of a middle class that cannot quite reconcile itself to its life in a distraught world." Maxwell Anderson, author of Night Over Taos, was part of a group of older, successful playwrights of the 1920's who exemplified "the best expression of the traditional middle class attitudes of Broadway" and "had a reluctance to give up the values of the past, even as they tried to understand the present." In Clurman's view, the theme of compromise in much of the Group's work "was connected in many ways with the breached consciousness of sensitive middle class Americans in the two decades between the wars." This background further separated the Group from the Communist Party, for the party "clearly pointed the path to a middle class Theatre Union, but the Group went its own confused way." Not only its middle class background, but its status as a theater for the middle class made the Group less susceptible to party influence. As Clurman notes, "The theatre is in the very heart of the marketplace, where a feverish and fabulous exchange of goods seems the essential drama." In spite of all the Group wished to accomplish, it remained within this marketplace, and the consumers were almost exclusively members of the middle class. Thus, by the season of 1940 the Group still had difficulty finding scripts that suited its viewpoint: "Somewhat to the left of liberalism, but not so much as to eliminate the Broadway audience."
In its values, the Group in fact bore a striking resemblance to the Roosevelt administration, itself. First, if the New Deal was, as Paul Conklin argues, an "exceedingly personal enterprise," the Group relied similarly on personal, centralized leadership. For instance, in responding to a crisis of mismanagement, the directors easily agreed that centralized leadership was essential, and made Clurman sole managing director in 1937. The Group also reflected a certain optimism in Roosevelt's own values. Roosevelt rooted this optimism himself in his belief in God, which "gave assurance of a meaningful universe in which human effort had cosmic significance." The Group's own commitment seems to mirror this faith. As Gerald Rabkin argues, "If the Group possessed one generic political assumption it was that all social problems were soluble." In a sense, the Group also mirrored Roosevelt's own views in its lack of specificity. As Rabkin continues, "beyond a general affirmation of the feasibility of political action, the directors of the Group affirmed no overt political commitment." Roosevelt himself, in his grounding of "unarticulated beliefs," remained similarly undefined politically. Finally, Roosevelt reflected a disciplined morality in his own character that the Group echoed remarkably clearly. In his childhood on his family estate, Conklin remarks, Roosevelt lived a "patterned, almost regimented tempo of life"—a life that stressed "such Victorian virtues as duty, honesty and fair play." This disciplined morality seems to perfectly characterize the Group's own creed. Their summer retreats followed the same rigorous tempo, and "the company's plays--even
More striking than these broad similarities is the way in which the Group reflected the achievements and limitations of the New Deal, itself. First, the Group mirrored New Deal achievements in a number of striking ways. As William Leuchtenberg remarks "Above all, one needs to recognize how markedly the New Deal altered the character of the state in America." The New Deal created a new federal presence in the country. The Government threw new weight into unionization with the Wagner Labor Relations Act. The NRA wiped out sweatshops and removed 150,000 child laborers from the factories. In housing, which had been "exclusively within the private orbit," the New Deal saw the birth of the Home Owner's Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Authority. In banking, Roosevelt created new centralized control in the FICA. Businessmen no longer acted as "equal partners" with the government under its influence, and began to be held increasingly responsible for their actions. At the same time, the New Deal "showed unusual sensitivity toward jobless white collar workers, notably those in the aesthetic field." The Government actively supported the arts in the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers Project, and the Public Works of Art Project. Finally, this "vast expansion of government" concentrated a much greater amount of power in the presidency, and Roosevelt assumed a role akin to that of chief legislator.

The Group reflected this commitment to a strong governmental presence in a number of ways. First, its own government strove to be similarly all encompassing. As Clurman notes, "The Group's
all inclusive philosophy adumbrated a cosmos; therefore, the Group’s function, even its duty, was to become a cosmos. It had to provide what society itself failed to provide. By providing its actors with continuous employment, free from fluctuations in demand, the Group created the continuity for this vision. In its summer rehearsal periods and communal living situation, it formed the community, and in the creative and organizational authority it gave to its directors, it created the government itself. At the same time, Group actors showed their democratic consciousness in their own union, in their support for Roosevelt and in their aid to the Spanish loyalists, for example. As Gerald Rabkin notes, "It was the purpose of the Group to assert the artist’s role as citizen not only within the theatrical collective itself, but also within the context of the artist’s larger societal obligation." Most explicitly, however, the Group showed a growing belief in governmental authority and organization in its art, itself. Theatrical triumphs such as *Men in White* and *Golden Boy*, highly praised for their discipline and ensemble performance, reflected the troupe’s success with an carefully structured and guided theater method.

Yet the Group also reflected many of the limitations of the New Deal. Barton J. Bernstein notes that "The liberal reforms of the New Deal did not transform the American system; they conserved and protected American corporate capitalism, occasionally by absorbing parts of threatening programs." Thus, many of the reforms of the New Deal remain limited. For instance, Roosevelt chose bank relief over nationalization of the banks. In
labor, the provision for collective bargaining in the NRA was a "disappointment to most friends of labor," and the act provided for "minimum wages and maximum hours." Even the Agricultural Adjustments Act benefitted large owners mostly, while ignoring tenant farmers and sharecroppers. The New Deal excluded various groups from its benefits. For instance, unwilling to "risk a schism with Southerners' ruling committees, Roosevelt capitulated to the forces of racism." Thus, blacks received few benefits. Migratory workers, farm laborers, slum dwellers and unskilled workers received a similar lack of attention under New Deal legislation. Roosevelt's reforms served in part to stifle a growing discontent and attraction to radicalism during the Depression, the evidence of which surrounded him. For instance, Upton Sinclair won the democratic gubernatorial nomination in California on a program stressing a cooperative society. In response to this, New Deal reforms served to "disarm the discontent" rather than to alter any balance of power.26

The Group reflected these limitations of the New Deal itself. Its art reflected a strict limitation of radicalism. Only five of its plays contained specifically Marxist correctives,27 and many others seemed to echo more conservative elements of the New Deal. For example, in Men in White the discussion of socialized medicine remains completely undeveloped. In House of Connelly and Night Over Taos large private ownership in agriculture and ruling elites both appear in sympathetic lights. In addition, the Group's lack of specificity came under fire from both Marxists and its own militants.28 Yet director Clurman
responded to this radicalism much the same way Roosevelt did and in ways was unsympathetic. He saw the urge to make a political use of the theater as a passing fancy, and refused to act politically. He referred to the Group's militants as "our neophyte radicals." If the New Deal was limited, then, in its lack of structural change, so was the Group. The theater's continued commitment to its Broadway audience left it linked to business interests that it could not escape, and it could never realize its final goal of a permanent company.

Given this background of limited radicalism in the theater, an important question remains: why did it come to be regarded as one of New York's premier radical theaters? Popular perceptions of radicalism within the Group were extreme. For instance, a Time magazine article on Clifford Odets in 1935 "conveyed the impression that from its inception the Group had nurtured the idea of making propaganda for a radical political philosophy." Part of the identification between the Group and radical political thought grew from those points at which the Group succeeded with genuinely radical theater, such as Waiting for Lefty. Yet surprisingly often the Group chose radical works largely because of a lack of performable scripts. Odets' plays filled this gap, as did 1931's Gentlewoman, and The Case of Clyde Griffiths. The Group's appearance of radicalism was heightened by the popular attention given their own internal ferment. For instance, after Clurman became sole director, the Left press demanded more actor control of production and greater political content in the plays.
Yet the chief factor contributing to the Group's appearance as a radical theater was the growth of the Popular Front. At the beginning of the decade, the Communist Party had shown a great deal of rigidity in organization and doctrine, and this rigidity isolated it from "bourgeois" intellectuals and artists. As communist writer Kenneth Rexroth remarked, "we are not an organization to bring in big names." Yet growing tensions in Europe changed this situation. In the words of Harvey Klehr, "Bourgeois culture and its creators suddenly became respectable as the Communist Party searched for allies in the struggle against fascism." Acting in 1935 to gain this broad acceptance, the communists abolished the John Reed clubs of the early decade, and with them the cry of "culture is a weapon." In their place, they formed the more prestigious American Writers' Congress. Writers such as Upton Sinclair, earlier dubbed "social fascists," now became accepted members on the basis of general achievement. Given this conciliatory atmosphere, Gerald Rabkin notes that "it was not unusual, therefore, to find the Marxists bending over backwards to affirm the revolutionary intentions of the Group's theatrical code."

In addition to the urgency of the Popular Front, American communist ideology itself became more reconcilable with the Group's own beliefs. Under Earl Browder, as Maurice Isserman notes, new communist leaders of the 1930's "instinctively Americanized their message." They "abandoned or downplayed the more sectarian aspects of the party line when they could." For Browder, a new formulation arose—that revolution would not come
from the outer fringes, but from workers active in traditional political organizations as their sense of power slowly grew. Thus, Issersman notes, "Western communism in 1936-39 was a strange hybrid of democratic and authoritarian beliefs." This synthesis reflects the Group's own tension between liberal individualism and a stricter radicalism. Set against the painful irony of the human weaknesses that Johnny Johnson must confront in Paul Green's play is the fierce call to revolution of the young Clifford Odets. 33

As I end this essay, the Group's relationship to the political thought and action of its time seems less straightforward to me than it did when I began. I had imagined a group of determined artists, bent on fusing their politics, no matter how radical, with their art. Instead, I found discord, and at times an almost anti-political outlook in the Group. In its formation, the Group drew artists attracted to the notions of community, of seriously pursuing their art, and of somehow connecting it more concretely with the world around them. Their early plays and their own widely varied political activity showed just how many political forms these Group goals could take. Even Clifford Odets, who shined briefly as the Group's dominant radical voice, faded just as quickly. His work, taken as a whole, reflects more passion than political conviction.

Yet at the same time, the Group hardly existed in a political vacuum. By virtue of its commitment to see life more
fully, to make the present more real, it ventured into political territory that few of its contemporaries dared explore. The Group put the lives of the working class on the Broadway stage, including the political dreams and frustrations of that class. Moreover, the Group's concern with the life around it led it to reflect many of the political themes and values of that life. The New Deal, with its broad cooperative vision and its limitations appears reflected in the actions and art of the company. So too does the Popular Front. Even the character of Franklin Roosevelt seems to emanate from the company's work.

If I have erred in portraying this theater, it may be in having understated the political activity of its members and their radicalism. Harold Clurman's account of the theater's history is similarly biased; but during the early 1930's, and into the beginning of the latter half of the decade, its members were extremely active politically. Yet perhaps it is both a virtue and a failing of the company as a whole that its first commitment was to its art, and all else followed.
Endnotes

Part I


3. ibid., p. 19.


5. Gassner, p. 19.


11. ibid.


16. Krutch, pp. 244-5.


18. Krutch, p. 9; Clurman, p. 29.

19. Clurman, p. 16.


21. C.W.E. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century
American Drama, Volume One: 1900-1940 (New York, 1982), p.159; Clurman, p.11.

22. Rigsby, p.159.
30. *ibid.*, p.34.
31. Rabkin, p.73; Clurman, p.12.
32. Clurman, overleaf.
33. *ibid.*, p.33; Bigsby, p.160.
35. Clurman, pp.34-5.
40. *ibid.*, p.58.
41. *ibid.*
42. *ibid.*, p.57.
43. *ibid.*, p.35.
44. *ibid.*, p.51.
45. *ibid.*, p.47.
46. *ibid.*, p.52.
47. ibid., p.50.


Part II


4. ibid.


8. ibid., pp.148,152.

9. ibid., pp.147,149,159.

10. ibid., pp.160,166.

11. ibid., pp.120,163.

12. Clurman, p.60; Green, p.146.


15. ibid.


17. Clurman, p.69.


19. ibid.


21. ibid., pp.63,128.
22. ibid., pp. 57, 75, 86, 114.
24. ibid., pp. 54, 69, 127.
27. ibid., pp. 38, 39, 81, 88, 196, 228.
28. ibid., pp. 40, 183.
30. Lawson, pp. 16, 219, 238.
33. Clurman, p. 100.
35. ibid., p. 43, 95, 114.
38. Bigsby, p. 143.
40. ibid., p. 103.
41. ibid.
42. ibid., p. 125.
43. ibid., p. 129.
44. ibid., p. 91.
46. ibid.
47. Clurman, p.42.

48. ibid., pp.92-3.

49. ibid., p.131.


51. Clurman, p.96.

52. ibid., p.102.

53. ibid., p.122.

54. ibid., p.136.

55. ibid., p.140.

56. Himelstein, p.165.

57. ibid., p.163.

58. Clurman, p.87.

59. ibid., p.139.

60. ibid., p.95.

Part III

1. Clurman, p.141.

2. ibid., p.148.


4. ibid., pp.61,69,108.

5. ibid., pp.22,42,52.

6. ibid., pp.19,40.


8. ibid., pp.61,69,108.

9. ibid., pp.31,81,90-1.

10. Clurman, p.156.
13. Clurman, p. 150.
15. Clifford Odets, Till the Day I Die, in Six Plays of Clifford Odets, p. 46.
16. ibid., p. 52.
17. Himelstein, p. 199.
20. ibid.
22. ibid., p. 185.
27. Clurman, p. 214.
29. ibid., pp. 263, 316.
30. ibid., p. 247.
32. Gassner, Foreword to Drama Was a Weapon, p. xvi.
33. ibid., p. xv.
34. Clurman, p. 151.
36. *Ridlin*, p.79.
37. Clurman, p.150.

Part IV
2. ibid., pp.7,10,35,111,119.
4. ibid., pp.117,123,135.
5. ibid., pp.115,119,126,127.
8. ibid., p.33.
11. Clurman, p.185.
12. ibid., p.219.
13. ibid., p.174.
14. ibid., p.176.
15. ibid., pp.192,255.
17. Clurman, p.256.
18. ibid., p.219.
19. ibid.
20. ibid., p.232.
21. ibid., p.187.
22. ibid., p.193.
23. ibid., p.173.
24. ibid.

25. ibid., p.257.

Part V


2. ibid., pp.77,84,93,103.

3. ibid., pp.89,89,104.


5. Hawley, pp.139,167.

6. ibid.

7. ibid., p.132.


18. Rabkin, p.74.

19. ibid.

21. ibid., p.2.

22. Himelstein, p.179.


24. Clurman, p.211.

25. Rabkin, p.73.


27. Rabkin, p.78.

28. ibid., p.74.

29. Clurman, p.159.

30. Himelstein, p.316.


32. Rabkin, p.77.


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