CLIFFORD ODETS IN THE DEPRESSION ERA Vidya Dass,

The first half of the Twentieth Century in America was an era of great social, political and moral upheaval. Seldom was a period in history so demarcated as the 1930's to be bracketed by a major catastrophe which shook the entire world. On October 24, 1929, the day of The Great Crash, the bottom dropped out of the stock market ending the get-rich-quick dreams of millions of Americans. The Crash was a result of many factors that had fermented through the post-war decade. One of the important factors was over-production which turned men in to paupers. The hard times of The Great Depression forced thinkers and writers to ponder on the social ills of the decade which marked a rapid development in literature. Literature, pre-eminently a social art proved to be a very powerful means to express the concerns of The Depression Era. The bitter protestors of the depression economy were the proletarian dramatists. According to Bamber Gascoigne: Most of the plays (of the twenties) accepted implicitly that there was nothing to be done, certainly nothing specific. It was essentially a theatre of inaction, a negative theatre. [...] What was new in the thirties was the way in which individual authors began to use the stage as a soap-box, from which they shouted their own personal solution contemporary problems. (Mishra 13) These dramatists highlighted the blemishes of capitalism, glorified the 'little people' and proclaimed the ultimate triumph of the proletariat. Drama virtually became a weapon in the struggle. One among the dramatists who were deeply concerned with the socio-economic and political issue of the people was Clifford Odets. He started his playwrighting career at the peak of The Depression Era. Evidently, the social and economic forces of the 1930's were basic to his outlook as an artist. Being a victim of the economic disaster in a land of plenty, he well perceived the fear, anxiety and insecurity of the masses. Clifford Odets, a Philadelphian was born on July 18, 1906 in a lower – middle–class family. He was the first child of a twenty year old Russian immigrant, Louis Odets and Pearl Geisinger, a nineteen year old Austrian. Even as a boy, Odets showed interest in acting. He acted in all the plays staged in his school. He was also a member of the literary club in school. At the age of seventeen Odets dropped out of formal education because he thought "high school was a waste of times" (Mishra 52). Odets in an interview with Arthur Wagner says: I had always wanted as a kid to be both an actor and a writer. For a while thought I would be a realist or musician, but when I became a professional actor, my mind naturally began to take that form of the plays as a means of saying something. (202) Odets began his career like any other great playwright before him. Like Shakespeare and Ibsen, Odets also started as journeymen in the theatre. He felt it to be a form of climax to his career later when he became an actor, playwright and director. He worked on other subjects like the Jewish immigrant experiences and communalism. He was thoroughly a professional man of theatre and never had to strain to use innovative techniques in his work. Not only did Odets depict the suffocations of the society but also the belief in every human to have the potential to change the circumstances that oppressed him. Hence Odets' outlook was basically optimistic. Odets in an interview about the label of 'Optimism' pinned on him says: Optimist? I would say that I have a belief in man and his possibilities as the measure of things. [...] I would say that I have shown as much of the sunny side of life as any other playwright of twentieth century. (Mishra 95) Odets' career as a playwright was often divided by critics into three phases. The first and the most important of these encompass his efforts as a proletarian dramatist. Waiting for Lefty (1935), Till the Day I Die (1935), Awake and Sing! (1935) and Paradise Lost (1935), his early plays, are said to have been "Written in Anger". He wrote these plays immediately after he joined the Communist Party in 1934 and staged them all in 1935. These plays confirm the leftist principles, which declare in archaic values of middle–class America. The second phase of Odets' career includes plays involving personal relationships rather than direct social criticism. His plays Golden Boy (1937), Rocket to the Moon (1938), Night Music (1940) and Clash by Night (1941) are his middle plays, usually called as plays written in 'Moderation'. These plays are all romantic love stories, which focus more on the plot and dialogue than on characterization and social commentary. The final phase of Odets' career as a playwright comprises of semi autobiographical dramas with psychological overtones. The play The Big Knife (1949), The Country Girl (1950) and The Flowering Peach (1954) are known as the post-war plays, which depict the 'Maturity' of the playwright. Social commentary is nearly non-existent in these late works. Odets was in Hollywood for a year and a half writing screen plays for the Paramount Pictures production. He was now and then oscillating between playwrighting and screen playwrighting. Some of the screenplays that he wrote were The Russian People (1942), Humoresque (1946), Sweet Smell of Success (1957), The Story on Page One (1960) and Wild in the Country (1961). All these were an adaptation from the novels and plays written by various other writers of the time. A secondary influence on Odets than needs a special mention is music. He always loved good music. In fact, at one point of time he thought he would become musician. Perhaps his interest was more in acting and playwrighting but music certainly took on significance in a great number of his produced plays. It is also clear from his diary entries and notes that Odets identified himself closely with Beethoven until his death in 1963. Odets as a playwright makes a thorough study of the positive and negative traits of his characters. He achieves his dramatic goal not through dilection or through emotionally tinted materials but by the hope of the individual. According to Mendelsohn Odets proves to be much more than merely "the little Jesus of the proletarian theatre". All his plays do not speak much about Odets' characteristics but portrays the concerns of man who tries to find a place in a competitive and chaotic society. His plays thus remain valid because they deal with the universal. Bibliography Mishra, Kshmanidhi. American Leftist Playwrights of the 1930's: A study of ideology and technique in the plays of Odets, Lawson and Sherwood. 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