ANTON CHEKHOV AND CLIFFORD ODETS:

A STUDY OF DRAMATURGY

by

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A detailed analysis of the dramatic structure used in The Cherry Orchard and The Three Sisters reveals the comedy of Chekhov's dramas which is often denied by directors and critics. A similar analysis of Paradise Lost and Awake and Sing! reveals a depth of perception in Odets' early dramas which has been overlooked in the proletarian interpretations to which the plays have been limited.

The comparison of methods used by these playwrights exhibits a similarity which is explored, not to suggest a Chekhovian influence, but to enable a more perceptive interpretation of Odets.

Both playwrights were primarily concerned with character, and their plays are constructed by the fusion of various individual plots. As the characters are frustrated in their separate hopes, the impact of the dramas is heightened. Close analysis reveals that the characters gesture verbally and physically, but their gestures are inappropriate to their situations. In the end, the characters are responsible for their own failures. Thus character development is achieved

by incongruous dialogue and action. Serious and comic aspects of life are juxtaposed throughout the plays suggesting reality and necessitating objective viewing.

Odets has been too often identified as a proletarian writer whose only concern was to reveal the economic conditions of his era. Unlike Odets, Chekhov created his dramas with no direct reference to historical setting. A just evaluation of both playwrights is possible only if character rather than historical setting becomes the major concern of director or critic. Through characterization, the plays achieve universality.

This abstract of approximately 250 words is approved as to form and content. I recommend its publication.

Signed _____
Professor in charge of thesis

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Among European playwrights of the past century, probably no one artist has assembled a larger number of disciples among aspiring young writers, or amassed a larger volume of verbose commendation from the critics than Anton Chekhov. Simultaneously, perhaps the work of no other recent European playwright has encountered such diverse and conflicting analysis or interpretation than that of Chekhov. Praise is plentiful; but among his admirers understanding and appreciation for his mode of dramatic expression is conspicuously lacking.

This can perhaps best be explained in terms of history and time, though (paradoxically) Chekhov, to be fully appreciated, must be read and produced in a setting of timelessness with little or no historical reference. All too often critics of the theatre look upon a play only as a portrayal of the particular era in which the play was written and fail to realize that the human qualities and the truths brought to light by our greatest artists are those realities which are present in all generations. Though Stanislavsky can be justifiably

held responsible for much of the incorrect interpretation given to Chekhov's plays, he did recognize that "Chekhov is inexhaustible because, despite the everyday life which he appears to depict in his plays, he is really talking all the time not of the accidental and specific, but of the Human, with the capital 'h.'"[1]

Not only are plays too often interpreted by strict historical reference, but also the average playgoer tends to see in the works of all playwrights those attributes most evident in writers of his own era. Chekhov consequently suffers the fate of being read and interpreted by two generations of people whose theatrical exeprience has been a steady diet of social propaganda, diatribes against our cultural and sexual habits, and weak portrayals of newly discovered psychological phenomena. Understandably, but unfortunately, therefore, a hasty appraisal of Chekhov will lead to the conclusion that he, too, is condemning a particular society for its injustice to humanity which leads the citizens of that era into tragic circumstances and induces a decay of their moral and cultural fibre. This is not Chekhov.

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[1]Elisaveta Fen, "Introduction," Chehov Plays (Harmondsworth, 1959), p. 7.

Chekhov lived in a world of revolutionary ideas; he saw and experienced hunger, deprivation, and pain. Yet he never lost sight of the basic characteristics of man and his existence; these he chose as material with which to amuse and enlighten his audience, not the sordid, tragic consequences of a changing social order. Consequently his ideas, his characters and his situations are those of a universal significance. His plays become not a call to arms nor a portrait of pathos; not in content, but rather in dramatic form was Chekhov the self-appointed leader of a revolution. An analysis of The Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard should substantiate this argument and simultaneously acquaint the reader with Chekhov's method of developing a drama--a method also used by Clifford Odets.

The writer is well aware of the truth in the following statement by Stark Young: "To compare a drama to Chekhov drama is not necessarily to say anything, since a button may have the general method followed in a shield at Marathon."[2] This thesis, none the less, seems worthwhile. The name of Clifford Odets is often associated with that of Chekhov, but in a superficial and meaningless manner. Shallow comparisons have been made and, as Young predicted, have said nothing.

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[2]Stark Young, "Quite Worth Your Thought," New Republic, 85 (December 25, 1935), 202.

Merely external comparison is easily accomplished, and, again in Young's phraseology, "takes the place of some closer critical discernment of the work of art immediately in hand."[3]

The following study was not undertaken simply to illustrate similarities; neither was it undertaken to show that Odets was definitely influenced by Chekhov, a seemingly impossible and, for all practical purposes, useless thesis. Certainly, research and writing which serves a purpose other than the further understanding of an artist's contribution to the world of literature is literary small-talk. In the following study, plays by Chekhov and Odets are analyzed, showing similarities in structure and techniques. These similarities are noted for one purpose only--a fair and perceptive interpretation of Odets.

Clifford Odets was hailed as a starling young playwright when Awake and Sing! was produced, and the same man was assailed by the critics with the arrival of Paradise Lost, a play which was to remain one of his favorites. In much the same manner as Chekhov's Cherry Orchard was misinterpreted, Paradise Lost escaped the director and the critics. In both cases, a failure to

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[3]Stark Young, 202.

comprehend the methods and attitudes of the artist prevented a consummate production of the drama at hand. A work of art, complete in itself, contains all the essentials for expressing the artist's conceptions. The discovery of these essentials, however, must be left to the public to which the contribution is made. A failure to discern the fundamentals inherent in the art can result only in an incomplete, and therefore, not totally satisfactory experience. This was obviously the case when Paradise Lost was presented to its initial audience. The following study should allow the reader to appreciate the play as conceived by the playwright more adequately.

Chekhov is treated individually in the first portion of the paper. A brief biographical sketch is followed by a compilation of critical commentary. The fourth chapter details Chekhov's method of developing a drama. Chapter V briefly considers the playwright's attitude toward his work, his audience, and the future.

Odets' life is surveyed in Chapter VI, and an indication of the critics' judgment of his work appears in Chapter VII. Chapter VIII, the nucleus of the thesis, is devoted to a thorough analysis of Paradise Lost and Awake and Sing! with emphasis upon Chekhovian style and techniques. Chapter IX summarizes the basic attitudes of Odets, and in Chapter X the study is abstracted and concluded.

CHAPTER II

ANTON CHEKHOV

Anton Chekhov was born in Taganrov, an old seaport, January 17, 1860. His father, who purchased his family's freedom from serfdom by hard labor and deprivation twenty years before the emancipation, was a fanatic in the Greek Orthodox Church. Life for the freed serfs was difficult, and by 1876 his father had gone bankrupt and lost his grocery store. The family moved to Moscow, leaving Anton behind to work his way through school by tutoring. Three years later he joined his family in Moscow and became a medical student at the university. Anton began writing humorous pieces for a magazine in order to help support the family and pay his university expenses. Young Chekhov wrote more than four hundred short stories, sketches, novels, one-act plays, fillers, jokes, law reports, picture captions, one-line puns, and half-page tales, until at the age of twenty-four he graduated from the medical college. He worked in a hospital his first

summer; thereafter there was less talk of medicine, and, as far as is known, he never practices medicine officially.[1]

Chekhov travelled from place to place and eventually married Olga Knipper, an actress with the Moscow Arts Theatre. He married in 1901, though he had been seriously ill with tuberculosis since 1897. This illness, however, did not cause him to lose his sense of humor or his sense of optimism, any more than his unfortunate childhood had. One need only read his own letters and comments from friends such as Tolstoy, Gorki, Stanislavski, and others to witness this.

Though he had written some unsuccessful plays previously, about 1895 he began taking his playwriting seriously, and interspersed plays among his continual production of short stories.

His first major plays, The Sea Gull, Uncle Vanya, and The Three Sisters were well received and the public, along with members of the Moscow Arts Theatre, anxiously awaited what was to be his final play. The play was finally finished on October 12, 1903, and sent to Moscow. Stanislavski immediately interpreted the play as a tragedy of social history, and despite the

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[1]Information has been gleaned from the various biographies listed in the bibliography.

fact that Chekhov attended rehearsals, the actors could not be convinced that the play was a comedy, and, in parts, even a farce.

On January 17, 1904 the play opened. The opening date coincided with Chekhov's forty-fourth birthday, and there was a joyous celebration to honor both him and a very successful production. Though cheers and honors were bestowed upon him, Chekhov realized and stated that his final contribution to the theatre, as produced, was not his. He had intended no pathos, no tragedy.

Six months later, on July 2, Chekhov died, still convinced that he had written dramatic comedies. Though his life had been filled with tragedy, loneliness, and frustration, he had been able to see in life the comic and the laughable. He had captured this element of man's existence, but, for the majority, his humor would remain indiscernable and ambiguous.

CHAPTER III

CRITICAL RESPONSE

As previously stated, Chekhov's plays have been widely misinterpreted, both by directors and theatre patrons. Many reasons might be given for this misfortune, and yet the simplest and most obvious explanation is the fact that Chekhov expressed his feelings and conceptions in an original fashion. Rather than using dramatic action to develop his drama, Chekhov chose the routine actions of daily life. Consequently, the obvious points of his dramas escape the reader in much the same fashion that the average individual fails to comprehend the significance of his own daily life and measures his success or failure, his happiness or gloom, his worth or relative unimportance, in terms of the unusual or dramatic activity which in reality constitutes a very small portion of the average lifetime. Relative to this, is the fact that Chekhov perceived in life certain truths which had previously eluded the majority of people, and, as indicated by the varied responses to his dramas, continue to baffle audiences and critics alike.

Chekhov once said, "I will describe life to you truthfully, and you will see in it what you have not seen before, what you have never noticed before: its divergence from the norms, its contradictions."[1] Though he devised a new form for doing so, and was quite articulate in his details and delineation of these perceptions, for the majority, Chekhov still remains ambiguous; readers, directors, and critics refuse to accept his plays as the comedies they are.

Stanislavski has reiterated a point evident in much of Chekhov's personal writing. Though Chekhov admitted The Three Sisters was in parts gloomier than he had intended, the playwright could not agree that it was a serious drama of Russian life. "He was sincerely convinced that it was a gay comedy."[2]

In reference to Stanislavski's original direction of The Cherry Orchard, in which he saw the pathetic destruction of a Russian era and its inhabitants, Chekhov wrote, "One thing I can say: Stanislavsky has ruined by play for me."[3] Chekhov was aware, moreso than most

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[1]Jacqueline Latham, "The Cherry Orchard as Comedy," Educational Theatre Journal, 10 (March, 1958), 22.

[2]"Stanislavski's Legacy," Theatre Arts, 42 (December, 1958), 50.

[3]David Magarshack, Chekhov: A Life (London, 1952), p. 382.

critics, that Stanislavski had left an indelible tragic mark on his masterpiece of comedy. The playwright had been unable to persuade Stanislavski to the contrary, and perhaps because of this Chekhov continues to be for many critics a writer whose plays are filled with social history and dominated by pathos. Many writers have expressed much stronger feelings about the tragic and pathetic in Chekhov, but Kappo Phelan will serve as a representative of this school of thought.

> To present Chekhov as an excuse for a number of out-loud laughs is to abuse him. Surely his technique . . . is essentially to establish rapport between the play and the audience rather than the actor and the audience--so that when his people laugh on the stage we must; when they weep, that is our cue. Nothing else is demanded. It is true that the quality of pathos is the most perfectly difficult to achieve on the stage and its results can never be outright amusement at all, but rather a sort of catch-in-the-throat, a musing laughter, a smile. Certainly to laugh at this play rather than with its characters is to find these people merely queer, stupid, capricious; it is to leave the theatre long before the end.[4]

To indicate further the various types of arguments presented against a comic interpretation of these plays, one other critic should be mentioned. Henry Popkin in 1952 presented a theory that Chekhov was being ironic, even in talking about his plays. Popkin suggested that the author's reluctance to discuss the matter was simply

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[4]Kappo Phelan, "The Cherry Orchard," Commonweal, 39 (February, 1944), 420.

a means for keeping alive the most ironic joke of all: the idea that plays which turn on foreclosed mortgages and wasted lives could in any sense be considered comedies. When questioned about this, Chekhov would reply, "It's all in the play." Thus Popkin believes "for his private amusement Chekhov fostered this ambiguity and reserved for himself the role of ironic spectator."[5]

Some critics have been reluctant to verbalize a definite attitude toward Chekhov's work. James Brandon suggests that a middle-view of Chekhov offers a better approach for producing "artistically and dramatically valid Chekhov" than either a comic or tragic approach. He suggests that the middle view rests upon two main considerations: first, a realization that the plays are both tragic and comic, and both at the same time; second, the characters must be thought of as "being essentially normal, if exceedingly complex. . . . To conceive of them as eccentrics because we have not discovered the keys to their behaviour is not a solution . . . we have failed in our analysis and must try again."[6]

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[5]Henry Popkin, "Chekhov--the ironic spectator," Theatre Arts, 36 (March, 1952), 80.

[6]James Brandon, "Toward a Middle-View of Chekhov," Educational Theatre Journal, 12 (December, 1960), 275.

William Gerhardi and John Howard Lawson support a somewhat similar middle-view approach. Gerhardi comments, Chekhov "excels in humour; but it is compassionate humour. His stories are tragedies, but they are humourous tragedies."[7] For Lawson, a projection of the interplay of people and their environment suggests "the subtle light and shade of human existence, which is both comic and tragic because it is life itself."[8]

Richard Hayes has perhaps stated most simply the feelings of all those who would deny Chekhov his wish that the dramas be played strictly as comedy. Hayes says, "I would prefer to call the plays comedies of persons and tragedies of society."[9]

Fortunately, Chekhov does not stand entirely alone in his belief that the plays are comedies. Daniel Gerould, after a detailed study of The Cherry Orchard, concludes, " . . . we can say the action of the play is purely a comic one and one of the most perfect comic plots ever created."[10] However, an intriguing question arises; it

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[7]William Gerhardi, "The Unpassing Moment," The Listener, 63 (January 21, 1960), 121.

[8]John Howard Lawson, "Chekhov's Drama," Masses and Mainstream, 7 (October, 1954), 24.

[9]Richard Hayes, "The Cherry Orchard," Commonweal, 63 (December, 1955), 224.

[10]Daniel Gerould, "The Cherry Orchard as Comedy," Journal of General Education, 11 (1958), 113.

must be ascertained why there are such conflicting interpretations of such contrasting natures. One reason might lie in the public's failure to perceive, as Joseph Wood Krutch has, "that certain tragic patterns have repeated themselves so frequently and so futilely in this particular society as to have become comic at last."[11] Gerhardi has pointed out that "owing to the almost entire loss of idiomatic humour in translation, the misreading has been most involved."[12]

Another possible reason for misinterpreted productions is given by Lillian Hellman in the introduction to her collection of Chekhov's letters. In writing about Madam Ranevsky, Hellman describes her as a "woman who has dribbled away her life on trifles." She is, none the less, a complex character "because foolishness is complex." Rather than attempting to portray this character as conceived by the playwright, it is easier "to ignore the author's aim, or to change it."[13] An understanding of Chekhov's character development would in most cases prevent such action.

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[11]Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Tragic-Comedy of Chekhov," Nation, 128 (May 22, 1959), 627.

[12]Gerhardi, 121.

[13]Lillian Hellman, "Introduction," The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov (New York, 1955), pp. xiv-xx.

Chekhov's method of dramaturgy is complex, primarily because of its originality and consequently the necessity for a somewhat original approach. References to The Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard should illustrate the essential characteristics of so-called "Chekhovism" and consequently lead to a justified interpretation of these plays, an interpretation which many critics, unfamiliar with the essence of "Chekhovism," would deny.

CHAPTER IV

CHEKHOVIAN STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUES

The playwright, in order to manifest man's existence as he saw it, needed a new form to give the necessary illusion of reality, and the form was, as John Mason Brown states, " . . . new in its approach and revelations; new in the poetry it possessed though masquerading as prose; and new in its style and dimensions."[1] Just as Chekhov was forced to create a new form for his drama, a new attitude toward his method of expression must be established. Immediate recognition must be given to the fact that "Chekhovism," as used in contemporary criticism, is simply the perception that an insidiously effective drama can be created by means other than a bold, clear story line. Chekhov was able to create that drama by what N. Brylion Fagin calls the "subtle interactions of dissonant strains." He further explains, "His plays were groups of plays with no individual protagonist and antagonist and no well defined single plot divided into problem, complication, and neat

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[1]John Mason Brown, "The Sea Gull and the Phoenix," Saturday Review of Literature, 37 (May 29, 1954), 22.

resolution. Instead each character is involved with himself as well as with others in a multiplicity of conflicts, situations, tensions and it is only through the superb craftsmanship of Chekhov that this diversity of dramatic elements somehow emerges as a unified play."[2]

A superficial reading of The Cherry Orchard might indicate that the real concern of the characters (and the playwright) is the ability of these personalities to prevent the sale of the cherry orchard, which has been a part of their lives for so long. A similarly shallow reading might suggest that the primary problem for the three sisters is their frustrated desire to reach Moscow. However, the artist wanted his audience to realize all the implications of these situations, and was undoubtedly as concerned with Dunyasha's romances and Andrey's "professorship" as he was with the seemingly major issues.

In both plays there is a continuous though unobtrusive development of several plots. In The Cherry Orchard there are the romantic complications of Dunyasha and Yepihodov (later Dunyasha and Yasha), Lopahin and Varya, Trofimov and Anya; Yasha's desire to escape his mother; Ranevsky's attempt to forget her lover in Paris; Pishchick's need for constant employment; Firs' desire

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[2]N. Brylion Fagin, "In Search of an American Cherry Orchard," Texas Quarterly, I (Summer-Autumn, 1958), 133-4.

to escape his own emancipation, etc. Chebutykin, in The Three Sisters, needs to find meaning in life; Natasha must gain control of Andrey's home just as desperately as the unseen Protopopov must infiltrate this society; Toozenbach's desire for Irena's love is as intense as Soliony's determination to destroy any rivals for her love.

Chekhov could not immediately introduce these various plots and then set about solving them individually. It was necessary to devise a means by which the various complications could be brought before the audience, subtly yet clearly. Consequently, the various plots are developed in a segmented fashion, and this accounts for the apparent irrelevancies in action and dialogue, which tend to suggest a formlessness in structure. Interestingly enough, it is through this apparent formlessness that Chekhov achieved strict form. He works with a highly unified action, but presents it, as Eric Bentley perceives, not in Sophocles' or Ibsen's centralized and simplified manner, "but obliquely, indirectly, quasi-naturally. The rhythm of the play is leisurely yet broken . . . his method is to let both his narrative and his situation leak out, so to speak, through domestic gatherings,

formal and casual. This is his principle of motion."[3] Chekhov's method of introducing and developing plot can be illustrated by the opening scenes of each play.

As The Cherry Orchard opens Dunyasha is heard revealing Yephihodov's proposal. (Names from The Cherry Orchard are spelled according to Yarmolinsky's transliteration.) This conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Madam Ranevsky and her coterie, but not before Lopahin has revealed his feeling of servitude to the owners of the estate. With the presence of nearly all the characters there is opportunity to reveal their emotional and mental characteristics which appear to be individual and yet very similar; all seem sentimental and somewhat isolated. Yet all have definite problems which they will eventually reveal in private conversation with one or two others, these conversations being interspersed among the numerous group scenes.

The three sisters begin their drama with reminiscences of the past and reveal their long-held vision of a future in Moscow. Their private conversation is soon interrupted by the arrival of Toozenbach and Soliony, and from this time on there will be only short periods of time in which such a small group of characters

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[3]Eric Bentley, In Search of Theatre (New York, 1953), p. 353.

will be allowed confidential intercourse. However, it is in these short scenes that the major action is developed, the various plots advanced, and, in fact, resolved. This is not to suggest, however, that the intervening scenes serve no purpose. As Robert Hogan has pointed out, the seemingly verbose interludes on seemingly trivial subjects, and the frequent and abrupt changes of subject matter are actually neither pointless nor trivial. They function "rather like a Greek chorus, and we must distinguish between these choral scenes and those dynamic scenes between two or three people which develop the action."[4]

Perhaps the best example of Chekhov's use of the ensemble to comment upon the situations developed in the scenes involving two or three characters can be found in Act II of The Three Sisters. It is appropriately introduced by Vershinen's comment, "Well, if we can't have any tea, let's do a bit of philosophizing." (280)[5] Thus a cycle heard at various times in Act I begins again. In an escape from the present, these characters

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[4]Robert Hogan, The Experiments of Sean O'Casey (New York, 1960), p. 22.

[5]All quotations from The Three Sisters are from translation by Elisaveta Fen, Chehov Plays (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1959).

rehash their predictions about the future and simultaneously justify their unfortunate predicaments.

Vershinen explains that what they are living for now is to create a future happy life and their only happiness will come from reaching for that goal. Masha laughs quietly, and Toozenbach counters with the statement that "Life doesn't change, it always goes on the same; it follows its own laws, which don't concern us, which we can't discover anyway." (281) Masha, however, feels that ". . . a human being has got to have some faith or at least he's got to seek faith. Otherwise his life will be empty, empty." (282) Later she says, "'It's a bore to be alive in this world,' friends, that's what Gogol says," indicating that she is obviously not seeking. (282) Toozenbach, who also finds little or no happiness in his present life, explains that he is giving up the military life. "What kind of a soldier do I make anyway? I'm not even good-looking." (282) In the presence of the ensemble Fedotik presents Irena with crayons and a little penknife. A bit embarrassed, she responds, "You treat me as if I were a little girl." And indeed she is; this becomes obvious when she joyfully takes them and says, "They're awfully nice." (283) Chekhov needed no further explanation of Irena's failure to succeed, nor

for the others'. They all express what they consider to be profound philosophic truths about the future and their own existence and then immediately indicate why they will never act according to their philosophies. As Hogan suggested, the ensemble scene is thus used by Chekhov as "ironic commentary on the action, as [a] receptacle to indicate theme, for exposition and for characterization."[6]

The extensive use of alternate ensemble and duet scenes is indicated in the following statement by Hogan, who feels that The Three Sisters is in many respects Chekhov's most formal play. "This surprising number of at least twenty-two duets indicates the qualities of Chekhovian structure: the action is much more complex than the action of a traditional structure, and Chekhov rarely uses a long and dramatic scene developing a single action or topic, but short scenes, each one on a different topic. The ensemble scenes may even be broken up into a series of these short scenes."[7]

In order to develop a drama in this segmented fashion, the playwright must exhibit mastery of the use of seemingly realistic material and be able to transcend the world of materiality and factuality in order to make

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[6]Hogan, p. 22.

[7]Hogan, p. 24.

lucid the imagination and thought. Chekhov's ability to capture the realistic elements of our existence is obvious, even in a surface reading. The reader is immediately conscious of the fact that the little action which does take place on stage is that action which is the least dramatic action of daily life and yet is the action which occupies the majority of our waking hours. The women apply their make-up and adjust their apparel; there is sporadic eating and drinking; people wander in and out and occupy their free time with cards, reading, or simple daydreaming. There is no definite action taking place, yet these people are alive; dull and routine their actions may be, but the audience is swept up in the illusion that this is life, realistically portrayed. It is so realistic, in fact, that one is often unaware of the significance of these seemingly trivial actions which reveal the character, attitude, and stature of the various personalities. Grenville Vernon emphasized that what is hinted at in Chekhov is often the most important. "It is the color, the diapasonic undertow, which is the secret of Chekhov's genius, and to obtain this a director must deal with intangibles. Chekhov must be produced in the manner of a mosaic. Each line,

each bit of business must be fitted in, so that incomprehensible as much of it may seem at first, the final result is crystal clear."[8]

The irrelevant and seemingly trivial action is fortunately not as bewildering, however, as one's initial contact with the playwright's somewhat rambling and incoherent dialogue. When one hears Gayev complain of the inefficient railway management and Charlotta responds, "My dog eats nuts, too," (535)[9] he is perhaps more aware that something has gone wrong, than when he sees this same character eating a cucumber as she muses about her lack of identity. (553) Yet, both are excellent devices for developing the character of Charlotta.

While the sisters and Vershinen discuss their philosophies with Toozenbach, Chebutykin chimes in, "Balsac's marriage took place at Berdichev;" later, while Irena and Fedotic use a card game to predict their future, Chebutykin comments "Tzitzikar. Smallpox is raging . . ." One is quite aware that these comments have nothing to do with the action and discussions

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[8]Grenville Vernon, "The Three Sisters," Commonweal, 31 (October 27, 1939), 14.

[9]Quotations from The Cherry Orchard are quoted from translation by Avrahm Yarmolinsky, published by Viking Press, 1947.

taking place, and yet they are very significant. They illustrate Chebutykin's complete isolation from the life for which he is seeking meaning.

Apparent irrelevancies such as these are constantly employed in Chekhov's plays. However, they cease to baffle the audience when it is realized that several plots are being developed simultaneously. Each line of dialogue and each unobtrusive action is serving to develop character; at the same time it is very realistic. As Grenville Vernon suggests, speech does not follow speech in the method of the theatrical logician, and "that is what makes Chekhov so hard to produce--it is life we are attending and not an exhibition of theatrical expediencies."[10]

As was stated earlier, Chekhov needed a means by which he could transcend the factual and reveal imagination and thought. The incongruous dialogue was an original and effective technique; however, he was no doubt aware that this alone would be too subtle for the average playgoer. Ironically, in his desire to remain realistic, he preserved the soliloquy which had been arrogantly discarded by the Western realists. His characters are not allowed to confide in the audience, but they do think aloud, and they are allowed to speak

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[10]Grenville Vernon, "The Three Sisters," 14.

freely. They address the whole world as they talk about themselves, ignoring what others are saying; in so doing, they explain and expand their character. This technique is, in Bentley's estimation, "Chekhov's notorious idea;" it not only expresses the isolation of people from one another, but at the same time, "brings the fates of the individuals before the audience with a minimum of fuss."[11]

Trofimov philosophizes about the future, the need for change and advancement, and the need to escape the past as he reveals he is a perpetual student; his past, present, and future are within the bounds of the university. The three sisters are given full rein in expressing their feelings, their ideas, their desires, and at the same time they reveal to the audience why they will never activate their ideas or reach their goals. Thus the tirades or soliloquies which Chekhov uses are one of the chief means by which he develops his plots. This extension of his content is one of the chief means by which the author escapes from naturalism into the broader realities that only the imagination can manifest. The characters in a Chekhov play are immersed in facts and buried in circumstances, and yet they are aware of the realm of ideas and imagination; this is best revealed in their soliloquies.

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[11]Eric Bentley, p. 355.

One might question the plausibility of characters speaking at length about themselves. However, Chekhov presents the soliloquies in such a way that the audience does not question his realism. For example, in Act II of The Three Sisters Andrey reveals, in Ferapont's presence, his complete boredom, his realization that he will never become more than a member of Protopopov's council despite the fact that he dreams every night that he is a famous professor at Moscow University, a professor of whom all of Russia is proud. When Andrey concludes, Ferapont explains that he doesn't hear well, and Andrey admits he would not be revealing these thoughts if he could. During the fire offstage, Chebutykin enters dazedly intoxicated and speaks at length about himself, unaware that there are others onstage. Thus the playwright makes his soliloquies plausible and uses them to develop the complexity of his characters; at the same time, he affords himself an opportunity to probe beyond the immediate and specific. Consequently, his drama, though more attentive to exact detail than any other in history, could handle the largest and most comprehensive universal problems. As Bentley states, "Chekhov was a master of the particular and the general--which is another sign of the richness and balance of his mind."[12]

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[12]Eric Bentley, p. 356.

The fact that the various characters tend to reveal their numerous thoughts and aspirations is especially significant in light of the fact that there is an assortment of personality, occupation, and intellect represented by the sundry individuals who occupy Chekhov's stage. In The Three Sisters Andrey represents the pseudo-intellectual, Olga the professional teacher, Masha the housewife, her husband the administrator, Toozenbach the nobility, Irena the common clerk, Chebutykin the doctor, Soliony the soldier. In The Cherry Orchard Trofimov is representative of the intellectual, Lopahin the business man, Firs the emancipated slave, Yepihodov the average citizen, Madam Ranevsky the landowner, Charlotta the servant, Gaev the aged citizen, and Anya the youthful. No one character's actions or no one series of events is emphasized sufficiently to become a main plot. The fusion of all of the individual actions provides a synthesis which embodies the author's intellectual purpose, or his theme; at the same time, the different actions offer divergent points of view on the central problem. Likewise, the various lengthy speeches do not further the action, but rather, as Hogan suggests, they set forth the "opposed abstractions that will be synthesized into the theme at the end of the play."[13]

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[13]Hogan, p. 25.

Hogan refers to the development of Chekhov's plays as a "second structure," which he says, "might be called Chekhovian because Chekhov was the first person to use it fully and brilliantly."[14] He believes the chief device of the "second structure" is "the ironic juxtaposition of the comic and the pathetic or the grotesque and the sublime."[15] A Chekhov play, he says, has a "more inclusive breadth, subtler and more startling juxtapositions, and tremendously more complexity than most plays."[16] It is predominantly the complex juxtaposition of the serious and the comic which has baffled the critics in their interpretation of this playwright. They oftentimes find it impossible to discern the laughable when Charlotta interrupts her apparently heartfelt loneliness to munch a cucumber, or when Gaev haults his attempt to justify, or if possible evade, the inevitable with an "I'll play it off the red in the corner," (accompanied with the appropriate gestures). Probably no playwright has demanded from his characters more tears or more smiles. Some are seen crying while others laugh and some do both in a matter of seconds; finally one is forced to agree with Chebutykin, who states in

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[14]Hogan, p. 16.

[15]Hogan, p. 10.

[16]Hogan, p. 21.

the last scene of The Three Sisters, as he sings to himself, "Let them cry for a bit. . . . What difference does it make?" (329)

Though one is forced to disregard the emotional display of the various characters in a final objective and intelligent interpretation of the play, these exhibitions of sentiment are invaluable to an assessment of character. By resorting to sentimental outbursts, accompanied by idle gestures, these characters can escape the reality of the life around them. They exert so much effort in flaunting their emotions that there is no time or strength for exercising their mental capacities; consequently the more tears they shed, the more absurd their character becomes. As Freud has perceived, "In the case of a mental function . . . it becomes comic if the other person has spared himself expenditure which I regard as indispensable. . . . A person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, he makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones; it cannot be denied that in both cases our laughter expresses a pleasurable sense of the superiority which we feel in relation to him."[17]

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[17]Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, (New York, 1963), p. 195.

Since Chekhov's plays are primarily character plays and since it is through his characterization that he achieves much of his humor, this sentiment is an indispensable element of his plays. It is further indication of what Henri Bergson calls "mechanical inelasticity,"[18] a major problem for all of Chekhov's characters.

For instance Madam Ranevsky's inelasticity is obvious from the very opening of the play. She returns from Paris, and her first words upon entering the house are: "The nursery! . . . The Nursery! My darling lovely room! I slept here when I was a child . . . And here I am like a child again." (535) Throughout this speech, of course, fall the tears of sentimentality. She is unable to cope with the reality of her situation. Returning from Paris because of financial conditions, she continued to order meals beyond her means; she continues now to give money to others merely as a mechanical reaction; she is persistent in her refusal to accept the fact that the orchard must be divided into villas if she is to save her home. Her continual self-pitying, self-dramatized outbursts of sentiment represent a comic rigidity on a psychological level. She can weep tears

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[18]Henri Bergson, "Laughter," Comedy ed. by Sypher, (New York, 1956), p. 67.

on the slightest mention of past losses or the possible loss of her orchard, and yet when approached with realistic solutions, she remains in her isolated dreamworld. In Act II, when Lopahin pleads with her to decide once and for all what is to be done, she replies, "Who's been smoking such abominable cigars?" (555) On the very day of the auction she has planned a ball; in profound understatement she says, "It's the wrong time to have the band, and the wrong time to give a dance." (569)

Her inelasticity is obvious to the very end. Although when the play opened she refused to look at a telegram from her lover who had helped squander her money, she is seen reading the telegrams in the second act, and in the end she is going back to Paris. As the play closes, she sobs, "When we're gone, not a soul will be left here," but in the same moments she indicates that these tears are not motivated by any sense of loss. Despite her tears she is able to profess, "Yes, my nerves are better that's true. I sleep well . . . I'm going back to Paris. I'll live there on the money your great-aunt sent us to buy the estate with--long live Auntie!" (587)

Thus with continual juxtaposition of the grotesque and the sublime, accompanied by Madame Ranevsky's

mechanical reactions, Chekhov delineated the character of this woman and simultaneously added a depth of perception and much complexity to his drama.

Two of the minor techniques which Chekhov uses to great advantage are the offstage sound and the appearance of the silent character who is separated from the other actors by the depth or width of the stage. Sounds are heard at opportune moments throughout the plays: violin playing, singing, accordian playing in the street, passing fire wagons, a gun shot, a military band fading into the distance, the sound of a broken string, the strokes of an ax. These sounds often tend to carry symbolic significance, and, at the same time, they create the appropriate moods for the action on stage.

Occasionally dialogue is heard from the wings. Though the lines are obviously part of another conversation, they also serve as commentary on what is being said onstage. An example of this is found in the opening scene of The Three Sisters. Olga says, "I felt such a longing to go back home to Moscow." Offstage Chebutykin says, "The devil you have!" and Toozenbach adds, "It's nonsense, I agree." From time to time these men interrupt an otherwise serious and somewhat pathetic scene with laughter. Finally, Toozenback is heard saying, "Really you talk such a lot of nonsense, I'm tired of

listening to you." Almost immediately the sisters are interrupted by the entrance of the men. These off-stage sounds as well as the silent observers which appear from time to time are important techniques in Chekhovian drama. As Hogan explains, "Such business is a double-edged weapon of irony and simultaneously a method for breaking up the flow of sustained development or of fully realized action."[19]

Mention should also be made of some repeated stage direction by the playwright. Soliony constantly sprinkles himself with scent. Chebutykin stuffs newspapers inside his coat, jots down news items of insignificant value, and constantly combs his beard. Yepihodov stumbles into furniture, Gaev continually plays billiards and eats candy, and Lopahin continually glances at his watch. These actions are of value in developing character, and when continually repeated, they tend to capture the essence of these individuals.

Thus with the fusion of relatively simple techniques, some original and some age-old, Chekhov created memorable characters and used them to breathe life into dramas which continue to baffle many critics and at the same time inspire many actors, directors, and playwrights. Elia Kazan has admitted that his admiration for Chekhov

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[19]Hogan, pp. 25-6.

stems from the fact that he offers "relative liberation to the actor and director; he offers a freedom of interpretation not granted by Shakespeare or Shaw."[20] In the same vein, Richard Hayes has noted that Chekhov is "the least marmoreal of writers, the least august; he 'represents' nothing, quietly declines grandeur and the pleasure of sybilline authority. There is indeed about him a certain almost intolerable closeness and privacy of perception, and the texture of his work is . . . spiritually immediate. . . . his subtleties seem to us capable of infinite dilation and expansion."[21]

Chekhov's plays are for Hogan more moving and convincing than most traditionally structured plays. Several plots are used to exemplify the action, and, as Hogan suggests, ". . . the audience cannot escape the meaningful fusion of all of the separate actions. . . . When the tones of the plots--some pathetic, some melodramatic, some grotesquely humorous--are ironically juxtaposed against each other by Chekhov, their very differences suggest to the audience that the whole world has gone awry."[22]

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[20]Robert Brustein, "America's New Culture Hero," Commentary, 25 (February, 1958), 126.

[21]Richard Hayes, "The Expense of Spirit," Commonweal, 64 (April 20, 1956), 75.

[22]Hogan, p. 26.

Much of what Hogan has suggested is true; yet he finds within the The Three Sisters "the defeat of aspiration and idealism, a frighteningly grim theme."[23] Chekhov obviously intended no grimness for his audience and was not extensively frightened by what he saw in human nature. This is manifest in the attitude he held in relation to his characters and the future.

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[23]Hogan, p. 26.

CHAPTER V

ATTITUDES REFLECTED IN THE PLAYS

Chekhov realized that his audience would be unable to laugh at the humor in his plays if they became too involved in the characters' superficial desires to obtain their goals. Consequently he built into the structure and dialogue adequate means for developing complete objectivity on the part of the audience. He allowed his characters to discuss their goals openly, but they made no definite attempt to reach them. The results are illustrated in Jacqueline Latham's comment about The Cherry Orchard: "Their essential indifference to the fate of the estate is shown in the absence of practical measures to preserve it. They dramatize, pose, and make unreal gestures, but they have protested too much; in the end they have forfeited their claims to our sympathy."[1]

This same statement is equally meaningful in terms of The Three Sisters, for it is a fact that the characters

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[1]Jacqueline Latham, "The Cherry Orchard as Comedy," Educational Theatre Journal, 10 (March, 1958), 24.

simply talk; they do not act. Irving Deer points out that with his dialogue, Chekhov "has hit upon a perfect means of making objective the constant struggle his characters have between their desire to act realistically and their desire to daydream in one form or another in order to avoid their problems."[2]

The characters in Chekhov's plays assume masks by which they attempt to hide their real selves. Ironically, in so doing they reveal or expose themselves entirely. Robert Corrigan refers to Gaev's famous ode to the bookcase as illustration of this point. ". . . when Gaev makes his pathetic speech to the bookcase, we feel extreme pity that he could be so deluded. Our sympathy mounts and suddenly Gaev himself [plays] off the red with his billiard cue, admits the rhetorical ludicrousness of the speech, and our sympathy is shattered. We once again view Gaev with a kind of detached objectivity."[3] Freud uses the following quotation to explain our innate desire to laugh objectively at this point: "Laughter naturally results only

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[2]Irving Deer, "Speech as Action in The Cherry Orchard," Educational Theatre Journal, 10 (March, 1958), 31.

[3]Robert Corrigan, "Some Aspects of Chekhov's Dramaturgy," Educational Theatre Journal, 7 (May, 1955), 112.

when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small--only when there is what we call a descending incongruity."[4]

While discussing means of "throwing a wet blanket upon sympathy at the very moment it might arise,"[5] Bergson suggests that comedy utilizes a method which is briefly summarized in the following sentence. Instead of directing our attention to actions, which are in exact proportions to the feeling that inspires them and consequently worthy of sympathy, our attention is directed to gestures, which are the attitudes, movements, and language by which a mental state expresses itself outwardly without aim or profit. These gestures prevent our taking matters seriously.

Certainly the audience cannot become emotionally involved with the characters in these plays. As M. P. Willcocks wrote, ". . . we find just a group of people circling round and round like goldfish in a bowl, saying always, 'I can't get out, I can't get out.' The invocation which called these fools into a circle is a

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[4]Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, trans. by James Strachey (New York, 1963), p. 146.

[5]Henri Bergson, "Laughter," Comedy ed. by Sypher, (New York, 1956), 64.

self-suggested attitude of mind. For they are not in a bowl like the goldfish, they are in a cage--and the door is open."[6] Later Willcocks stated, "Chekhov's people live in hell, the hell of purposelessness, and like many of us, find it on the whole not so very intolerable. . . . In Chekhov each comfortable slipshod soul carries about with it all the customary expedients for avoiding definite action."[7]

And so, contrary to Hogan's belief, there is no "defeat of aspiration and idealism," no "frighteningly grim theme."[8] Aspiration involves more than desire; it demands ambition. Idealism, without a striving for perfection is merely wishful thinking. Chekhov's characters are not ambitious enough to seek their goals wholeheartedly. Therefore, they are not defeated; they simply remain at the end of the play as they were at the beginning--desirous of a goal but unwilling to work for its achievement. To labor in vain is sad and sometimes even tragic; not to labor at all is stupid, and correction of our least intelligent errors can perhaps best be provoked by laughter. One must hasten to add, however, that this need not be disdainful laughter.

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[6]M. P. Willcocks, "Tchekov," English Review, 34 (March, 1922), 208.

[7]M. P. Willcocks, 210-11.

[8]See page 36.

Henry Myers in his book titled Tragedy, A View of Life, suggests that when the comic poet is amused by someone or something that he dislikes, the result is satire; when he is amused by someone or something that he likes, the result is humor."[9] There is no indication that Chekhov intended anything other than humor when he was writing his plays. As Joseph Wood Krutch states, "He is merciless in his exposure of every character. . . . No one else ever stripped his characters barer than he, but no one else ever held helpless victims up to a kindlier ridicule."[10] Regardless of their various interpretations of Chekhov, the majority of critics would agree that one of the unique undertones of Chekhovian drama is the attitude inspired by the playwright that people--"however misguided, silly, and ineffectual--are still lovable."[11]

Coordinate with this apparent compassion for his characters is the glimmer of hopeful optimism which, though it be often obscure, is continually present. In

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[9]Henry Myers, Tragedy, A View of Life (New York, 1956), p. 126.

[10]Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Greatness of Chekhov," Nation, 127 (October, 1928), 461.

[11]Elisaveta Fen, "Introduction," Chehov Plays, (Harmondsworth, 1959), p. 7.

The Three Sisters Chekhov contrasts Vershinen's optimistic idealism with the pessimistic realism of Chebutykin. In The Cherry Orchard Trofimov's optimism is evident throughout the play and is eventually adopted by Anya. Firs is pessimistic about the future and realistically so. The presence of both elements is essential to a complete understanding and portrayal of these segments of life. Though the so-called major characters do not acquire their goals, while less likable characters such as Lopahin and Soliony meet with some success, there is still hope, regardless of how naive it may seem, that the other characters will eventually cease their meaningless existence and come alive. Anya says gaily to Madam Ranevsky, "A new life is beginning." (587) Olga recites hypnotically, "No my dear sisters, life isn't finished for us yet! We're going to live." (329)

And thus, ironic as it may seem, through defeat Chekhov expresses optimism, through ridicule his compassion. In a complex style he has brought to the reader the simplest of characters, the most ordinary of circumstances, and the most common human characteristics. By juxtaposition he has reminded his audience that, as David Krause has stated, "all aspects of life are fair

game for the artist . . . the sublime with the absurd, the heroic with the hilarious, the poetic with the profane."[12]

And finally, the following statements by Rosamond Gilder should serve to indicate the effectiveness of Chekhov's technique. At the same time, the statements should separate the plays from any revolutionary era and put them into their proper perspective. Though written in review of a 1943 production of The Three Sisters, the following statements might equally be applied to The Cherry Orchard which is considered by many to represent the culmination of Chekhov's artistic prowess. "Chekhov's The Three Sisters is a modern classic and to many people one of the great plays of all time. . . . The people he created in his Yalta retreat . . . live on a New York stage today with arresting intensity. Though half the world separates them from the place where they were born, though social revolution and two world wars have altered the very foundation of their way of life, yet the poignant, human truths that Chekhov crystallized in them remain inviolate."[13]

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[12]David Krause, Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work (London, 1960), p. 51.

[13]Rosamond Gilder, "Three Sisters and a War," Theatre Arts, 27 (February, 1943), 73.

CHAPTER VI

CLIFFORD ODETS

Born the son of a Philadelphia newspaper vendor and salt peddler, Clifford Odets was shuttled between Philadelphia and the Bronx until the age of six, when his family finally settled in New York where they were to find new opportunity and wealth in the printing business. Soon after his arrival in New York, the young Odets was given a leading role in an elementary school production of Cinderella; from this time forth the theatre would be his solitary concern. Though he spoke of his childhood as "melancholy" and his education as a "waste of time," he had no desire to share in the financial opportunities afforded by his father's new business. Rather he joined various neighborhood theatre groups, played vaudeville, and worked in various capacities with a radio station.[1]

In 1925 he formed his own company of actors and wrote much of his own material for radio programs which were well received. He then turned to doing stock

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[1]Biographical information is compiled from Clifford Odets by R. Baird Shuman and The Fervent Years by Harold Clurman.

company work and remained with this group until the company became financially insolvent, at which time he returned to Philadelphia where his family had settled in a fashionable section of the city. He became associated with a local stock company and continued to write radio scripts, some of which were successfully presented by Philadelphia and New York stations.

The long-awaited "break" came for Odets in 1929 when he was given the opportunity to understudy Spencer Tracy in the Broadway production of Conflict. He became associated with the Theatre Guild, played the juvenile lead in the road company of Midnight, and in 1930 joined the Group Theatre as a charter member; this association was to become the most important single activity in the life of the playwright. The philosophy of the Group Theatre, which was fundamentally that there were to be no stars and all distinction was to be embodied in the production as a whole, would affect the young artist's attitude toward the theatre and the scripts he would soon write.

The sensitive young man was still very much aware of the plight endured by most members of the middle class and he was unable to forget them; consequently, much of his free time was spent in gloomy and confused contemplation of their situation. His early writing,

particularly 910 Eden Street which was never produced, according to Harold Clurman showed that "His perception was disturbed because everything was seen in relation to his hurt . . . something in his past life had hurt him."[2] After the failure of his first serious attempt at writing for the stage, he continued to play minor roles and turned to writing a novel about a gifted young pianist who lost his hand in an accident. The novel never reached completion, but it was strong evidence that Odets still maintained an intense interest in music and had not stopped regretting a lack of musical training. He later began writing a play about Beethoven, but realizing he lacked knowledge of this subject he turned to writing about those things he knew better--the working class and their hardships.

In 1934, when Odets himself was struggling under financial strain and the other working members of his society were in more serious trouble than ever before, he became a member of the Communist Party. This affiliation lasted for eight months, during which time Odets discovered that the pressures of the party were stifling his artistic talents. However, he had not yet finished searching for a panacea for the hardships of

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[2]Harold Clurman, The Fervent Years (New York, 1945), pp. 67-8.

the working man and was still willing to act when there were possible answers to be found. In 1935, having already been acclaimed for his three plays, Waiting for Lefty, Till the Day I Die, and Awake and Sing!, Odets headed an investigatory commission determined to visit Cuba because he and the others were opposed to financial and industrial domination of these people by American interests. The commission, however, was met at the pier in Havana and returned to the United States. They publicly criticized the United States Embassy in Havana and lodged formal protests against the American policy in Cuba. Odets was so fired up with indignation of the situation that he determined to write a play calling the public's attention to the situation. The play was never produced. These incidents, however, are indication of Odets' interests in and sympathy for the masses--an interest which he attributed to his first reading in 1918 of Victor Hugo's Les Miserables.

After the success of his first three productions, Odets returned to work on Paradise Lost which he had begun in 1934. The play was finally produced, but, as feared by many, it was not enthusiastically received and Odets accepted an offer from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to go to Hollywood and do screenwriting. This was to be a financially successful excursion, but it brought diatribes

from critics and supporters of the theatre. For many, Odets was now finished in theatre; he had sold himself to "sin." However, he would return a year later, with his newly married wife, and write for the Group Theatre his most financially successful play, Golden Boy. This play strengthened the now-weakening foundation of the Group Theatre and in the eyes of the critics was evidence that Odets had "repented" and was back to a wholesome life with the theatre. He soon wrote Rocket to the Moon and was now considered to be America's leading dramatist; Random House, in an unusual move, published the young artist's first six plays in one volume. Odets had captured the critics, the publishers, and the public.

Success was not to be enjoyed for long however. His next two productions, Night Music and Clash by Night, were not well received, and eventually the Group Theatre was dissolved; thus ended a most influential institution in the development of the playwright.

Odets returned to Hollywood where he did screen writing and also directed None But the Lonely Heart. He met his second wife during this stay in Hollywood and became the father of two children. Late in 1948, he returned to Broadway with The Big Knife, which received generally good reviews. However, the playwright was unable to escape the past; critics looked upon his new

efforts primarily as a contrast to his earlier, more fiery contributions. He revived Golden Boy under his own direction and then successfully directed his next work, The Country Girl. Influences of the Stanislavski school of acting became quite obvious in his work as a director. His chief concern was with the character behaviour; "I don't lay out plays," he said, "I lay out characters."[3]

Odets' last play to reach Broadway was The Flowering Peach, which received mixed reviews. Some critics considered it to be one of America's best plays while others thought it poorly written and dull. The playwright returned to California where he continued to write and found much satisfaction in painting and music. He was apparently at work on several plays and was doing television and motion picture writing when he died of cancer, August 14, 1963. As disclosed following his death, Odets was unaware that The Flowering Peach had been chosen by the Pulitzer Prize jury to receive the award in 1955. The jury's recommendation was over-ridden, however, by the Pulitzer advisory board, and the prize was awarded to Tennessee Williams for Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

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[3]Lorenzo Semple, "After Fifteen Years," Theatre Arts, 34 (December, 1950), 30.

At the time of his death, Odets was still a somewhat controversial figure for the theatre critics. His influence and great theatrical moments were without denial; however, his critics felt many times that he had never reached the peak which had been predicted for him by those who witnessed his earliest efforts. In a recent article published in Commonweal, Catherine Hughes points out that the New York Times obituary expressed the typical sentiments of most critics: Odets suffered from his "failure to outgrow the adjective 'promising.'" Hughes goes on to write,

> Since Odets was not a great writer--since indeed it is doubtful whether he was anything too far beyond a capable and occasionally exciting one--the eulogies proclaiming the "tragedy" of his wasted talent are more nostalgic than accurate. Like all ground-breakers, or all who achieve the reputation for having been such, his initial reputation was at least partially undeserved; also like them, his subsequent work was frequently unfairly and harshly judged against the background of what was thought--or hoped--to be rather than what was. . . .
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> While this may not be an altogether flattering assessment of Odets the Dramatist, it may well be that it is a considerably more valid one of Odets the Man. While it is a truism that "some are born great and some achieve greatness, many others, incapable of either are more the victims of their supporters' and detractors' aspirations than of their own defection from them. The "tragedy," if such it be, lies in the fact that one can never be sure. It is, of course, also the saving grace. For Clifford Odets, this tragedy was not in the fact of having missed greatness, but in the very norms

> and standards of the peculiar thing we insist on calling American culture, where "good" is never good enough, where it is indeed a dirty word.[4]

Though one may disagree with the preceding evaluation, Catherine Hughes has pointed to one of the major problems one must overcome in assessing the talents of the playwright. Each drama must be considered individually, without reference to plays which preceded or followed it. Awake and Sing! need not be compared to Waiting for Lefty, and neither this play nor Paradise Lost should be interpreted only in light of Odets' initial contribution to the theatre. It cannot be denied that Odets continued to be a proletarian writer; more important, it need not be denied. However, to consider him only as a champion of the people when discussing his early plays is to limit his work to proletarian drama and label the playwright as an historian rather than the artist he aspired to be. If it can be shown that Odets' early works were artistically conceived under pressure of proletarian influences, and if it can be shown that the perceptions expressed in these plays are timeless and universal, then the doors will have been opened for further analysis and evaluation

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[4]Catherine Hughes, "Odets: The Price of Success," Commonweal, 78 (September 20, 1963), 558-60.

of the entire work of the playwright--an evaluation which should lead to an honest and complete appraisal of the man as a dramatist, the artist he endeavored to be.

CHAPTER VII

CRITICAL RESPONSE

In the preface to the first publication of his early six plays Odets wrote, ". . . the talent represented in these plays is essentially synthetic, not analytic . . . most of them have bones in them and will stand up unsupported."[1] Odets was expressing here a firm faith in his work, one which this study will eventually justify. Otis Ferguson, writing for New Republic, stated in 1939, "Odets can do just what he wants to, because he has the right eye--what he has seen makes a storehouse of vivid people and things and action from the immediate world--and because he has theatrical genius . . ."[2]

A later discussion of the methods and techniques used by Odets will reveal the "theatrical genius" which Ferguson suggests, but the opinions of other critics

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[1]Clifford Odets, "Preface," Six Plays of Clifford Odets (New York, 1939), p. ix.

[2]Otis Ferguson, "Pay-off on Odets," New Republic, 100 (September 27, 1939), 216.

should first be considered. Since Odets maintained that he wrote character plays, critical evaluation of characterization will be considered first.

In an interview, Odets stated, "In one sense, any man is like all men; in another, any man is like some other men; and in a third, any man is like no other man. To write something that's true, that has meaning, you have to put all three levels on the stage at once. It's not easy, but there's your problem. And if you do manage to achieve it, there can't be any question of separating theme from character."[3] Obviously, this type of understanding and portrayal of character necessitates a complexity of characterization not often achieved by the average artist. "Mr. Odets' people," according to Grenville Vernon, "are at once primitive and intelligent, and it is this antimony which imparts to them their color and variety. Neither of these qualities are hurt by the fact that their emotion is not strong enough to conquer their intelligence nor their intelligence deep or keen enough to kill their emotion. It is this struggle of emotion with intelligence which is the basis of much of the great drama of the world . . ."[4]

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[3]Lorenzo Semple, "After Fifteen Years," Theatre Arts, 34 (December, 1950), 30-31.

[4]Grenville Vernon, "Clifford Odets," Commonweal, 29 (December 16, 1938), 215.

Vernon thus finds in the characters a universality not often accorded Odets despite the fact that his characters are very much alive. John Gassner writes, "His portraits are externally vivid and inwardly volcanic. The characters are not only as a rule people seen in the round but they are naturally dramatic personalities because they are treated with intense concern regardless of their contradictions and eccentricities which may even give rise to slightly deprecatory laughter at their expense."[5] Similarly Joseph Wood Krutch has stated that ". . . Mr. Odets demonstrates his ability to create vivid and passionate individuals and he does not seem to have lost that interest in the study of human character . . ."[6] Later he wrote, "No one that I know can more powerfully suggest the essential loneliness of men and women, their inability to explain the varied forms assumed by the symbols of their desire, and the powerlessness of any one of them to help the other."[7]

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[5]John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York, 1954), p. 692.

[6]Joseph Wood Krutch, American Drama Since 1918 (New York, 1957), p. 267.

[7]Joseph Wood Krutch, p. 272.

Writing in 1938, Vernon found the ideas of Odets pretty confused and his structure melodramatic, but he admitted that "the characterizations and the dialogue have a bite and an originality of turn which set them apart from the somewhat pallid characters and dialogue of most modern plays."[8] As if to support this, Krutch wrote, "Whatever . . . Odets' . . . opinions may be, those opinions are shared by many, while he reveals a characterization and a gift for incisive dialogue unapproached by any of his Marxian fellows and hardly equaled by any other American playwright."[9]

Allan Downer has pointed out that Odets had "an absolute ear for human speech,"[10] but as Eric Bentley suggested, "this is the merit of the parrot and the tape recorder. . . . The real merit of this author . . . is a matter of the imaginative use of dialect, which in turn is a matter of the poet's inner identification with the people who speak that dialect."[11] Odets obviously identified with many of his characters; it was this identification which allowed for complete

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[8]Grenville Vernon, 215.

[9]Joseph Wood Krutch, p. 276.

[10]Allan S. Downer, Fifty Years of American Drama (Chicago, 1951), p. 61.

[11]Eric Bentley, "Theatre," New Republic, 132 (January 10, 1955), 21.

understanding and a more realistic portrayal. Joseph Wood Krutch, writing for the Nation in 1942, emphasized that Odets' best characters "are still persons to whom lack of money is recurrently the dominant fact in life, but he has grown less and less interested in demonstrating this fact as a fact, more and more interested in picturing from the inside the tragedy of men and women who are victims of passion no less than economics. Many of them have, like Odets himself, the gift of compassion, but suffering and frustration generate an egotism which overrides even compassion . . ."[12]

Characters in his plays continuously find themselves in serious situations, and Odets allows his characters full freedom in verbalizing this fact. Robert Brustein writes, "O'Neill's and Steinbeck's proletarian heroes are often characterized by their lack of verbal coherence, but Odets's heroes are singular for their extreme verbosity. Rather than being speechless in the face of their dilemma, they never stop talking about it."[13] Freedom of expression for the characters in any drama can lead to problems for the playwright, but, as Gassner has indicated, ". . . when he is at his best, his words

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[12]Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Unbeautiful People," Nation, 154 (January 10, 1942), 46.

[13]Robert Brustein, "America's New Culture Hero," Commentary, 25 (February, 1958), 124.

rise naturally from his characters and possess a highly dramatic, explosive quality. Moreover, he is an accomplished polyphonist; his characters speak at cross purposes, sometimes at the same time, and their lines match only polyphonically or contrapuntally."[14] Ferguson has commented in a similar fashion, "Very few playwrights have so consistently managed the explosive comment, the juxtaposition of varied types, the rising expectation, the unexpected in a flash. . . . He simply has the gift: his imagination goes in all directions at once, and his selective dramatic sense tells him which of the ways can be brought together to the most effective cross purpose."[15]

Edith Isaacs has pointed out that although the characters in the plays speak freely and act quite naturally, there is little change in the characters: ". . . his characters except in Golden Boy and Till the Day I Die, end as they begin, in spite of violent changes in the circumstances surrounding them. There is, to be sure, almost always one character who sees the new light and expresses it at the end of the play in

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[14]John Gassner, p. 692.

[15]Otis Ferguson, "Pay-off on Odets," New Republic, 100 (September, 1939), 216.

a tag line or a grandiose speech; but even that man's light always carries its shadow before. The other characters are what they are, and what happens in the play makes little difference."[16] This is not to suggest, however, that Odets was pessimistic about the future, nor is it to suggest that his plays were filled with gloom. Catherine Hughes even accuses him of being a romantic who "possessed little subtlety. If the ending was not happy, it was at least hopeful. . . ."[17] Eric Bentley wrote, ". . . there was always more jazz and punch in Mr. Odets than there was 'socialist realism,' less of Karl than of Harpo Marx. All of which is to repeat that he is a poet of the theatre."[18]

What has been suggested thus far indicates that Odets wrote realistically, and yet his plays cannot be considered as pure realism. Krutch has suggested that Odets possessed a power that few of his contemporaries enjoyed to an equal degree, the power to make things seem real, but he emphasizes that this has no necessary connection with realism and is, in fact, "identical with

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[16]Edith Isaacs, "First Chapters," Theatre Arts, 23 (April, 1939), 260-61.

[17]Catherine Hughes, "Odets: The Price of Success," Commonweal, 78 (September 20, 1963), 558.

[18]Eric Bentley, 21.

what ought to be the primary meaning of the word 'imagination' or the power of creating imitations of reality which seem like reality itself." The characters "are merely so completely realized that their existence is independent of either the actuality or the convention with which it is possible intellectually to connect them."[19] In his book American Drama Since 1918, Krutch expands upon this thought by stating that Odets exhibits "the gift for a kind of literal realism which makes his characters recognizable fragments of reality, and the gift for endowing these same characters with an intensity of life which lifts them into another realm. They are immediately recognized and accepted, but the sense that one has met them before is soon succeeded by the realization that the full force of what they are and what they imply is here thrust for the first time upon an awakened awareness."[20]

As these general criticisms of Odets reveal, the critics clearly voiced their admiration of his obvious talent in writing dialogue and realistically capturing the middle-class character. Specific references to Awake and Sing! and Paradise Lost reveal, however, that

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[19]Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Unbeautiful People," 45-6.

[20]Joseph Wood Krutch, American Drama Since 1918, p. 276.

their admiration was somewhat limited to these aspects. Allan Downer has admitted that Awake and Sing! was an astonishing achievement for the artist's first full-length drama, "Yet," he writes, "it has its limitations. The motive behind the writing was propagandist, and the characters and situations are thus carefully selected to illustrate this theme. The result is a rather special picture of family life in the city, a kind of case history with a moral."[21] Brooks Atkinson, similarly disappointed, wrote in the New York Times, "Probably he intended Awake and Sing! as a revolutionary drama, and perhaps that is what it is, but the thinking in the play does not measure up to the frenzy of its emotions."[22]

Though the critics qualified their praise for this drama, there was obvious indication that they were anxiously awaiting another contribution from Odets. The playwright was equally optimistic. Paradise Lost was not well received by the critics, however, despite the enthusiasm of the Group theatre and the playwright himself. On the eve of the premiere performance, Odets announced that the hero of Paradise Lost was "the entire American middle-class of liberal tendency." He went on

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[21]Alan Downer, p. 63.

[22]Brooks Atkinson, The New York Times (March 10, 1935), p. 8.

to say, "The characters are bewildered. The best laid plans go wrong. The sweetest human impulses are frustrated. No one leads a normal life here, and every decent tendency finds its complement in sterility and futility. Our confused middle-class today, which dares little, is dangerously similar to Chekhov's people. Which is why Awake and Sing! and Paradise Lost (particularly the latter) have what is called a 'Chekhovian quality.' Which is why it is so sinful to violate their lives and aspirations with plot lines. Plots are primer stuff, easily learned."[23]

No doubt intended as a helpful hint for the critics and audience, these statements only tended to confuse the situation. Immediate appraisals of the drama were concerned more with the statements than with the play itself. Rather than drawing attention to the finer points of the play, the statements focused attention upon what the critics considered its weaker points.

Edith Isaacs, writing about the characters, suggested that ". . . while they may be American citizens, [they] are not in any sense representative of the middle-class, nor is there anything in their thinking or acting to indicate they are liberal. They are

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[23]"Theatre," Time, 26 (December 23, 1935), 31.

the dregs of the social system, money-loving, money-starved capitalists who have gone rotten through spinelessness and the frustration of their golden longings. No revolution would help them. They are too old--every one of them, but especially the young ones."[24] Robert Garland qualified his criticism, but had expected more from the playwright. "In spite of Clifford Odets' flair for dialogue, his gift of swift humor, his self-confessed 'Chekhovian quality,' Paradise Lost is uneven, confused, and overwrought. Admitting that much of it is brilliant, this is not the great American play Mr. Odets may some day give us in a made-to-measure modern medium."[25]

Joseph Wood Krutch, less gentle with his remarks, stated that the play ". . . seems like nothing so much as an improbable burlesque of Awake and Sing! Apparently the idea was that if a play about a somewhat neurotic family in the Bronx was good, then a play about a madhouse similarly located would be very much better. And if this theory is accepted, then Paradise Lost must certainly mark the uttermost reach of the author's genius."[26]

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[24]Edith Isaacs, "At Its Best," Theatre Arts, 20 (February, 1936), 96.

[25]Robert Garland, "New Play by Odets," Theatre Arts, 20 (June, 1936), 466.

[26]Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Apocalypse of St. Clifford," Nation, 141 (December 25, 1935), 752.

Richard Lockridge, writing for the New York Sun, also suggested that the play was somewhat overwrought. He characterized the play as a mixture of caricature and shrill melodrama. He went on to suggest that one might "suspect the author of symbolism," if the play were less realistic.[27] As Shuman points out in his study of Odets, this was perhaps the basic cause of the misunderstanding of the play. Odets obviously would not question the incredibility of the numerous misfortunes which occur in the Gordon household. Despite the realism with which the play is presented, it must be taken symbolically.

In his statement preceding the opening of Paradise Lost Odets, probably unintentionally, invited a comparison with Chekhov--a comparison which tended to confuse many critics and at the same time equip them with ammunition for volatile denunciation. His comment was doubtlessly an aftermath of the suggestions made by the critics following their analysis of Awake and Sing! As the following quotation from John Mason Brown indicates, it was not Odets who originally suggested the similarity of the two artists. "If his method is Chekhovian in its pauses, its sudden and meaningful

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[27]Quoted by R. Baird Shuman, Clifford Odets, (New York, 1962), p. 72.

usage of what appear to be irrelevancies, its autobiographical outbursts, its seeming indirection, its amplitude, its pathos and its shrewd eye for the smallest characterizing details--all one can say in fairness is that, when it is re-used as well as Mr. Odets re-used it, the Chekhovian method continues to be a rich and engrossing one."[28]

The critics originally suggested a comparison with Chekhov; the playwright's statements encouraged such a comparison, and the result was confusing rather than enlightening. As Harold Clurman stated in his introduction to this play, "The name of Chekhov has been brought up in connection with Awake and Sing! The reference is flattering, of course, but perhaps a little misleading."[29] The critics were unprepared to comprehend the comparisons which they sensed.

Mary Colum, writing for Forum, suggests the complexity of trying to draw superficial parallels between the two artists and trying to suggest unqualified

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[28]John Mason Brown, Two on the Aisle (New York, 1938), p. 219.

[29]"Appendix," Six Plays of Clifford Odets (New York, 1939), p. 421. Clurman suggested that a comparison with Sean O'Casey might be more helpful. A study of this comparison would undoubtedly help to further an understanding of Odets' dramaturgy and the author had originally intended to include such a study. The amount of material involved, however, seemed to warrant separate study.

influence of the Russian playwright upon the newly discovered Odets. Several areas of "battleground" upon which the critics could quibble about the presence of or lack of Chekhovian traits were immediately apparent.

> . . . Chekhov is a very great name, and the attempts at comparisons that some of Odets' admirers have made are misleading. A few modern dramatists, as a compensation for having to work in prose have been able to create symbols that can stir the imagination of their audience and readers. Ibsen did it; Chekhov did it. There is not much sign of such poetic power in this dramatist at present.
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> Then too, when you see a Chekhov play or read one, you have not only the present situation of the characters but their past, their connection with the landscape, their lives, behind the immediate situation. All that Odets is able to put over, at this stage of his development, is the immediate situation of his characters.[30]

The preliminary pre-opening statements further obscured an honest appraisal of the play, however, because the reference to Chekhov immediately suggested to many people that Odets felt he had written the American Cherry Orchard. This was obviously distant from the playwright's thoughts. He did not say he had rewritten Chekhov, but many people misconstrued his statement to indicate this; consequently, they were disappointed. N. Brylion Fagin, writing in 1958, was still suffering from this misconception: "Odets believed the American middle class had arrived at bankruptcy; it had lost its

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[30]Mary Colum, "Life and Literature," Forum, 94 (December, 1935), 359.

paradise. . . . [he was] wrong about its bankruptcy, wrong about the paradise it was supposed to have lost, and, above all, wrong in believing that in constructing a didactic allegory embodying these ideas he was creating the American Cherry Orchard. Nothing was more abhorrent to Chekhov than didacticism and sentimentality--and in practice, the two are, of course, closely related. . . ."[31]

The most obvious means of separating Odets' play from any second-class imitation of The Cherry Orchard is to note how each playwright relates his play to its historical setting. "In the Cherry Orchard," as Stark Young points out, "the application to the Russia of its epoch is clear enough, but it is all held strictly within the contents of the play, which would be moving and perfect if we had never heard of any epoch or social states of mind. The impliactions are subtly implicit. In Paradise Lost the application of the scene to the spiritual and financial uncertainty of this present day is repeatedly recalled to you."[32] Depicting the plight of his characters during their specific era was Odets' primary concern. Odets must have realized that

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[31]N. Brylion Fagin, "In Search of an American Cherry Orchard," Texas Quarterly, I (Summer-Autumn, 1958), 139.

[32]Stark Young, "Quite Worth Your Thought," New Republic 85 (December 25, 1935), 202.

he could not imitate Chekhov. Such an imitation would necessitate little or no reference to a historical era, Odets' primary concern.

Though there is reason to doubt the truth of this statement, Odets reportedly stated, following comparisons to Chekhov's masterpiece by the unappreciative critics of Paradise Lost, "You have my word for it that I intend to read The Cherry Orchard tonight for the first time in my life."[33] Whether Odets had familiarized himself with The Cherry Orchard prior to completing his play is, for the purpose of this study, irrelevant. The play can best be understood, both as intended by the playwright and as Chekhovian drama, if there is little or no attempt to parallel the basic situations of the plays, despite the fact that they seem to invite this comparison even in their conclusions. Both playwrights were primarily concerned with character; the structure and methods used to develop their plays indicate this basic concern.

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[33]Joseph Mersand, The American Drama, 1930-1940 (New York, 1941), p. 84.

CHAPTER VIII

CHEKHOVIAN STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUES IN ODETS

As we have seen, Chekhov's plays are built upon the fusion of various individual, though related plots. A brief synopsis of Awake and Sing! and Paradise Lost will show a similar development. The basic problem in both plays is the economic situation, but Odets heightens the impact of his dramas by the correlation of the various problems the individual characters must face.

Awake and Sing!

Bessie Berger must serve as father and mother to a family about to experience financial hardships, but her immediate concerns are her unwed pregnant daughter and her dissatisfied son, who is presently seeking her permission to marry a girl not of the Jewish faith. Myron, her husband, suffers from complacency and is hopeful that some good luck will halt the financial crisis settling upon his family. Her son, Ralph, is anxious to get "to first base" in his endeavors to become financially independent so that he can live where and with whom he desires. Hennie is in search of a man

she can love and will willingly remain an unwed mother until that man appears. Jacob, Bessie's father, quite aware that he is no longer able to give financial support to his daughter's family, is none the less anxious to assist them--primarily by the propagation of his high ideals. Uncle Morty is faced with the continual decline of assets and sales in his dress-making business. Moe Axelrod, a disabled veteran and friend of the family, is primarily concerned with his desire for Hennie. Sam Feinshcriber, a lonely immigrant, wants to find a home and establish a self-sufficient pride, while Schlosser, another immigrant, is concerned only with keeping his job as maintenance man in the apartment house in which the Bergers reside.

These various problems are not immediately obvious to the audience, however. It is only after a series of rambling conversations, some rather intimate dialogues, and the appearance of Uncly Morty and Sam in Act II that all of the individual plots are fully revealed. The audience witnesses dinner conversation, the coming and going of various members of the family, duets between Jacob and Moe, and Jacob and Ralph in Act I, and Morty's trimming of Jacob's hair in Sam's silent presence in Act II before they are aware of the complexity of the plot.

The playwright slowly and deliberately reveals the various plots and in so doing subtly exposes the personalities of his characters. Bessie, exhausted and desperate, indicates the extent to which she will go in order to maintain the family respect, when she suggests *that Sam be led unwittingly into marriage with her* pregnant daughter. Myron's complacency is indicated by his lack of concern when Hennie's condition is made known, and his somewhat emasculated character is manifested in the tears he sheds when Hennie mentions a song reminiscent of his younger years. Ralph reveals his strong desire for advancement in the opening lines of the play, but his feelings are more poignantly expressed in conversation with Jacob, and his desire to defy his mother is obvious in his clandestine removal of a dollar-bill hidden from his mother in a book and his concern that she not see him in a clean shirt. Hennie laughs at the candy Sam has sent, tries to send her parents out for the evening and refuses any help or advice from other members of the family, indicating a desire to be self-sufficient until she finds a man who can support her.

Moe Axelrod, the most outspoken member of the cast, uses no uncertain terms to reveal his "yen" for Hennie. His constant concern because there are no

oranges in the house, his resorting to cake to pacify his intense disgust when he is told that Hennie is to be married, (similar to Gaev's method of escaping reality), and his vicious spinning of the coin at the close of Act I indicate contrasting characteristics: he is passive when faced with disappointment, but he indicates a vicious desire for revenge.

Jacob is defeated economically, and Bessie makes no qualms about reminding him of this. His few but poignant remarks during the opening conversation--"That's what you want, Ralphie, your name in the paper." "If this life leads to a revolution it's a good life. Otherwise, it's for nothing." "If it rained pearls who would work?"--indicate his concern for the family's moral and spiritual well-being. (41-43)[1] The fact that Hennie had first revealed her pregnancy to him and the fact that Ralph confides in him during their duet indicate the children share with him a mutual concern and respect. Jacob's constant playing of the Caruso records indicate the desire for a romantic escape from his situation; his ability to face up to reality is obvious, however, when he displays his disgust for Bessie's plan to "con" Sam into marriage.

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[1]Quotations are taken from Six Plays of Clifford Odets, Random House, 1939.

Schlosser's entrances with the garbage can and his concern about the dog coupled with Bessie's rather bitter treatment of him indicate the somewhat defeated, yet conscientious, temperament of his character. Sam Feinschriber does not appear until the second act, but the audience is prepared for his rather ineffectual personality by the comments of Myron and Hennie. His silence in carrying out the duties which he has been assigned indicate his obsequious nature.

Odets used the first act and Scene I of Act II to develop for the audience the basic personalities and conflicts of the various characters and in the remainder of the script endeavors to show what these individuals will do in order to relieve their situations. Again Odets uses a variety of duets and group scenes to bring the story to his audience. The various plots are continued step by step.

Bessie temporarily solved the problem of Hennie's fatherless child between Acts I and II, but in Act II she is still in combat with her son's marital desires. When Blanche calls for Ralph, she refuses any information and later denies that Blanche tried to reach him. Later in the act, when Sam reports that Hennie has told him he is not the father of her child, Bessie tries to get him to laugh it off by explaining that she always was a

stubborn child and has been rather upset lately. Later Ralph again asks for the right to bring Blanche into the home and Bessie flatly refuses. As Jacob stands silently by, she enters his room and breaks his Caruso records.

Myron appears in the second act (in Bessie's apron), completely emasculated and relegated to the kitchen. He wanders into the presence of the others, only to question, "Why'd I come in here?" (62) Later in the act he attempts to regain his position as head of the household by attempting to talk with his son. This is to no avail, as Ralph interrupts, "You never in your life had a thing to tell me." (84)

Ralph's financial position is further weakened by fewer hours of work per week and, in addition to his mother's refusal to condone his marriage, he is faced with the sorrow of seeing his girl sent away to Cleveland by her adopted parents, in hopes that she will marry a millionaire. He is willing to fight the world alone with her, but she refuses. Ralph, who is slowly adopting the attitudes which Jacob has fostered, is quite upset when he learns the facts surrounding Hennie's marriage. He rebukes his parents and at the same time berates Jacob for not having intervened.

Hennie met her mother's demands in marrying Sam, but Sam's learning the truth coupled with Hennie's sullen presence during most of Act II indicates that she is extremely unhappy in her present situation. A duet between her and Moe reveals that Moe has every intention of regaining the intimate relationship he once had with her.

Jacob opens the second scene of Act II with a conversation with Ralph in which he encourages Ralph to do something about his future plans. ". . . you should act. Not like me." (78) Later he tries to comfort Sam, but when he sees the way Bessie skirts the truth with her son-in-law, he exits quietly. He is about to fulfill his family obligations, by walking the dog, when he is caught up in Ralph's rebuke. He recites the key lines, (indicative of Odets' optimism as discussed in Chapter IX), "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust, and the earth shall cast out the dead." (83) Following Bessie's untempered disparagement and the breaking of his records, he quietly exits. Schlosser later reports that he "schlipped maybe in de snow . . . Your fadder fall off de roof." (88) By suicide Jacob has escaped.

Act III finds Bessie and Morty anxious to see the agent and settle Jacob's insurance. However, Moe, who had overheard Jacob say that Ralph was his beneficiary,

informs Ralph of this. He is suspicious that Jacob had jumped from the roof and prodded by Moe's statement that he found a note under Jacob's pillow, Ralph refuses to see an agent "when there's still mud on the grave." Morty and Bessie attempt to discourage him, but when Moe mentions the note, Morty leaves quietly, apparently suspecting that he and Bessie had driven Jacob to suicide.

Hennie suggests to Sam that he might go home and take care of the diapers. Hennie and Moe have two duets, and finally Hennie admits she never loved Sam and has been waiting for an escape. As Moe constantly attempts to persuade her to leave with him, she hides behind her wishes by saying he is "hurting my arm." (99) Ralph, however, has overheard Moe's proposal and encourages Hennie to leave. In Myron's silent presence, she gets her coat and exits with Moe.

Myron remains silent throughout the act except for a few comments which he uses to break embarrassing silences--"Yesterday a man wanted to sell me a saxophone with pearl buttons." (94) He tears a page from the calendar before going off to bed with Bessie, "draggin' after her like an old shoe." (96) Later he returns to eat an apple and discuss Teddy Roosevelt while his daughter walks past him and out of his life.

Ralph fully assumes Jacob's philosophy in Act III as he expresses to his mother, "We don't want life printed on dollar bills, Mom." (95) When Blanche calls for the last time, he hesitates, and she hangs up. He later says, "No girl means anything to me until. . . . Till I can take care of her. . . . Till we can take the world in two hands and polish off the dirt." (96) He plans to read Jacob's books. When Moe gives him the supposed note which Jacob left under his pillow, it is blank, and Ralph is elated. He encourages Hennie's flight and then proudly explains that Bessie can have the insurance money because, "Did Jake die for us to fight about nickels? No! 'Awake and sing,' he said." (100)

And thus the play ends. Moe has finally succeeded in capturing Hennie and she is no doubt happy about it. Sam is left to care for the child, much like Schlosser who, according to the character descriptions, cares for the tenement house after suffering similar circumstances. Bessie will get the insurance money and this will partially relieve her situation. Myron will be able to continue his present existence complacently, and together they will no doubt assist Morty. Ralph has new inspiration and will try again "to reach first base."

A glance back at the characters in the play will reveal that they have actually changed very little. Things have happened to them, but they have not acted in their various capacities to improve either their character or their situations. Bessie is still the mother and father in the family. Her basic concern was to retain the family's respectability; she has succeeded only in destroying it by conniving to make Sam the supposed father of Hennie's child and by provoking her father's suicide. In the eyes of the public she has perhaps remained respectable, but she has lost the respect of her family. Though she has the insurance money, she is still head of the household and the household situation is even worse.

Her husband, Myron, still believes in luck at the end of the play, and one feels that it is fortunate that he does; nothing less than a miracle will bring about a notable change in his character, nor restore the self-respect that Bessie has stolen from him.

Hennie leaves with Moe, still dreaming that there is a paradise somewhere with orange trees and flowing champagne, complete with a lover. When she discovers that this paradise does not exist, she will no doubt leave Moe for another lover. Love seems to be her only

hope, her only desire, and yet she has proven herself incapable of giving it to another, or of accepting it when offered.

Moe has succeeded in capturing Hennie by elaborate promises; he managed to steal Sam's only real possession, in order to satisfy his own sensual needs. This is consistent with his philosophy, however, because as he has said, life is nothing more than a "racket."

At the end of the play, Ralph eloquently phrases what all hope to do, make something of himself. However, the audience has seen that he had a chance to leave with Blanche and would not do so, even after Jacob's insurance money would have permitted such action. He has adopted Jacob's idealism, but somehow the audience senses that he too will simply talk about the ideas and never take the necessary steps to make them vital and meaningful. He encourages Hennie to leave, simply because this is action. Yet, this is not the kind of action the idealism seems to suggest, anymore than suicide was the kind of action Jacob's thinking should have motivated.

". . . strong as iron you must be. . . . Look on the world, not on yourself so much." (45)

Through these characters Odets has managed to show the plight of an American family caught up in the economic depression of the thirties. However, a close

look reveals that these are not only Americans of the thirties, they are all people of all ages who have strong desires to do something, and yet have not the means and willingness to accomplish their goals. This is not indicated so much by what they do, because they do very little. It is made obvious, however, by the little everyday routine actions and statements, which are subtly present throughout the play. These subtle gestures will be elaborated later in the paper as will the other techniques which Odets used to bring the mood and situation of the characters to the audience.

Paradise Lost

A synopsis of Paradise Lost also reveals that each individual is involved in a plot of his own. However, the goals of these characters are more peculiar than those of the Bergers. There is also a more definite delineation of character and action by the playwright.

As mother of the family, Clara Gordon is reminiscent of Bessie in many ways as she attempts to assist her family with their social, economic, and emotional problems. Leo Gordon is in many ways as unaware and ineffectual as Myron, but he does take a more active part in his family's problems than Myron did. Pearl, an accomplished pianist, desires, as did Hennie, a man whom she can love, but at the same time

she must have a chance to exploit her artistic talent. Julie, the younger son, is anxious to become a successful stock broker, but he must first overcome a severe case of encephalitis. Ben Gordon, the one member of the family who has achieved both financial and social success, and has ultimately experienced self-pride and the laurels of victory, is faced with accepting the fact that his original source of triumph must now be replaced with some new fountainhead of prosperity, for a weakened heart prohibits further participation as an Olympic runner.

Sam Katz, Leo's business partner, is faced with financial difficulties, but in addition he must accept the overwhelming fact that he and his wife will remain childless.

Gus Michaels, a one-time successful tradesman, has been forced out of business and widowed. He must learn to accept his fate as he occupies his time with a stamp collection and looks forward to the happiness of his daughter, who is infatuated with the charm and good fortune of Ben, though she has experienced the love of Kewpie, whose cab-driving and underground activity

finance her whims and purchase her necessities. Kewpie has no intentions, however, of letting this support go unrewarded.

Mr. Pike the furnace man, who becomes the political spokesman in the play, is concerned, as are Foley, the shop delegation, and the sponsors of the Prosperity block party, with the most immediate problem, a continually vexing financial crisis.

These characters reveal their situations and their own idiosyncrasies in a series of duets and group scenes which are highlighted not so much by dramatic action or profound statement as by trivial, oftentimes humorous, verbal and physical gesturing. The most dramatic action in the first act and, in fact, the entire play is the melee in which Kewpie slaps Libby's face and later knocks Ben to the floor. The argument is precipitated by Kewpie's comments to Libby that he would have been a better husband and his suggestions that he will someday take her from Ben with whom he pretends to be the best of friends. The only other fast-moving and dramatic action takes place when the newlyweds arrive home followed by the newspaper men. The pictures taken aboard Gus's motorcycle motivate considerable action which is accompanied with trivial conversation concerning the childhood diets of the newlyweds and the fact that Libby was a seven months' baby.

Prior to these scenes, Pearl has appeared on stage long enough to indicate that she wants no one touching her piano, especially Gus, who pretends to be "an expert about everything." (159) Since he is not allowed to tune the piano, Gus fixes the radio and hints that he would like to borrow money in order to get started in business again. However, Clara informs him that they can offer him nothing more than fruit, which she does several times, apparently hoping to make him forget his more important needs. Leo and Clara announce that they have admonished Ben not to marry Libby until he has adequate financial support, but Gus beams that it is different with Ben, a "champeen in every muscle. . . . How like a god . . ." Clara reveals her sense of realism with the comment, "If 'God' don't get a job soon. . . ." (162)

Leo has revealed his simple, naive patriotism by attempting to give to Sam Katz and his wife the Gordons' canary because it is of German ancestry, but if the bird is not good enough for the Gordons, it is not good enough for the Katzes, and Sam promptly returns it, indicating his similarly simple patriotism.

Julie is a silent observer for much of the action, but he does reveal the profits he has been making "on paper," since he has no money to invest in stocks.

Lucas Pike comes to play chess with Julie and brings with him a sketch of a man found starved to death in the dump. His entrance is followed by Foley, Chairman of the Nemo-Democratic Club, who suggests that Clara is looking dark under the eyes and needs grapefruit juice to bring her back to normal, "the way the Democrats will bring the whole country back to normal!" (167) In an exchange of confused political commentary it is revealed that Leo doesn't vote because "one side is as bad as the other." (167) Foley accuses them of being "red," but Pike denies the accusation honestly enough but with less sense than sensibility, by insisting that his two sons died in the war. He carries their pictures in his watch, just as Gus carries his wife's picture. Gus is attempting to turn back the time when he says, "I love when the night time comes for then I can wind my watch . . . and I love to wind my watch." (169)

The rest of the action preceding Ben and Libby's arrival consists of incongruous dialogue which tends to underscore Leo's statement, "The world has a profound dislocation." (161)

After Libby and Ben decide to attend a movie, paid for by Mrs. Gordon, they leave for the first night of their honeymoon. Their future is indicated by Libby's statement "I swear to God I don't understand

you half the time," (173) and Ben's revelation that he is no longer capable of athletic competition but is confident of a big break on Wall Street.

Julie expresses the belief that he will never recover from his sleeping sickness and then begins playing cards with Gus. Felix arrives to talk with Pearl and reveals that he is going to Chicago to find a job. Having been engaged for two years, Pearl would prefer marriage and in fact work all her life to support them. However, when Felix explains that he must find a market for his musical talent, Pearl can only offer, "Don't smoke cigarettes in bed," and he leaves. (183)

Sam Katz enters just prior to the arrival of the shop delegation which comes to demand better conditions and higher pay. Despite Leo's belief that their demands are sound, Sam implies that conditions will remain as they are so long as he is in charge, and there is no room for both him and Leo at the top.

When Sam leaves, Leo promises to start anew the next day: "In life we must face certain facts." (188) Gus attempts to explain the world situation in terms of two conflicting principles--"male and female." Leo explains, ". . . we want to hug the world in our arms," (190) but Pike admonishes them, insisting that they cannot sit idly by while Idealists bring about another

war for this country, "the biggest and best pig-sty in the world." (191) Gus then explains that he tried to do something constructive for the nation by inventing a new clothespin, but when he discovered that it cost twelve cents to make he "let my brains fall right back in my head and I ain't used them since." (192)

The first act ends very quietly as Pike and Gus exit, saluting Ben's statue. Leo remains alone on stage, completely self-absorbed, and Pearl's playing is heard off-stage.

Act II begins eighteen months later. Julie's physical condition indicates that he is failing. Gus, who has been living with the Gordons since the marriage, has not returned home this evening because of a false charge that he molested a girl on the subway. Ben is now working as a toy salesman. He hints that he would like to borrow money for a haircut, massage, and manicure, but hasn't the time because Kewpie is coming with some work for him. Leo warns him against dishonest endeavors, but Ben explains that he really doesn't care what kind of work it is, so long as it means money. He attempts to sell Mrs. Katz some toys and she replies, poignantly, "If I had a boy I would buy gold toys." (197)

A rather static scene follows, suggesting the uneasiness of the household. The children walk aimlessly

about, Pike makes notations from the newspaper, Leo figures his checkbook, and Ben, impatient for Kewpie's arrival, drinks a beer. Pike and Pearl have a duet in which it is revealed that Pearl is not really concerned with the "so-called class war," (199) but simply with herself.

Kewpie finally arrives. After Gus tells him that he no longer wants his financial support, he asks Kewpie to stay away from Libby. A later duet between Kewpie and Ben reveals that Kewpie has replaced Ben as Libby's husband and Ben is completely defeated. Kewpie then gives him a gun, which Julie sees, and informs him of the job to be done. As they leave, Ben spits in the face of his statue and Kewpie wipes it clean.

Following a conversation in which Pike, Gus, and Leo discuss the unfortunate domestic situation in America, Sam arrives with Mr. May who attempts to sell them fire insurance for the business. It is understood that a fire will "happen" and the business will be more than adequately covered by the insurance. Leo refuses the offer and Katz loudly denounces Leo for his refusal in light of a dissolving family, a dying son, etc. Julie again is a silent observer. Mrs. Katz enters at this point; her presence inspires Sam to reveal his feelings that because he married a "baldy" woman he has been

denied children. His wife, however, explains that it is not her fault. "For seven years Sam Katz didn't sleep with a girl," despite the pills and medicine which they have purchased. (215)

Later Clara attempts to persuade her husband to buy the insurance, but she is unsuccessful. Julie later asks his father not to let Clara know that he overheard Katz say that he was dying. As they prepare to retire for the night, Kewpie calls and Leo understands only that "Ben got something on Lincoln Avenue." (218) The parents are optimistic that it might be a job, but Julie who had seen the men leave with the gun, hides behind a newspaper. As the parents say good-night, they mention the need to make some household repairs "tomorrow." Pearl's piano playing off-stage builds to a furious section of the sonata, and Julie hugs the statue of Ben to keep from breaking up.

A year and some months later the curtain rises on Act III. Julie is now confined to a wheelchair and as the act begins, his mother is clipping his toenails and telling him the story of Moses. An absence of the usual furnishings indicates that the family is being dispossessed. Leo returns announcing that there is no hope for a home loan. He is followed by Foley who demands that their furniture be removed from the sidewalk for the block prosperity party.

Kewpie enters later and offers the family financial assistance, but the Gordons refuse help from the man whom they feel killed their son. Kewpie attempts to explain, "He stood there soaking up cops' bullets like a sponge--A guy with fifty medals for running. Ben Gordon wanted to die!" (223) He leaves his money with them, but because they are too proud to keep it, they decide to pay off some of the men from the business. Gus contributes the money he received from selling his cherished stamp collection, and they attempt to give it all to the men. However, the men refuse to take it; they attempt to belittle Leo for his belief in democracy, Emerson, equality, etc.

Julie mumbles some words about the dog. Clara breaks into tears as she attempts to do something for him, and Leo ends the play with a lenghty soliloquy in which he explains that they have lived in a dream, but this is real, and now that they truly understand their situation, they will begin to live. He is now confident of the future in which "no man fights alone." His only regret is that life is so short. Clara embraces him and he raises the window as if to breathe in the future: "Let us have air." (230)

And thus this drama is ended. Again there is little indication that these characters have experienced a change in their basic personalities. Things again happen to the characters, but they do very little. Ben is literally destroyed, but he was destroyed the day he became a "god" in the Berger household and only his physical destruction was left for the playwright. Julie is nearing death as the play ends, but he has known that he was dying for several years and continued to dream of his brokerage. Pearl cannot express her emotion at the end of the play when her piano is taken away, but she was already insensitive when Felix left. This was indicated by her inability to express anything other than advice for his safety. Gus has lost his stamp collection, but concerning the future, his hopes and desires died with his wife. Bessie momentarily considered the plot to salvage their investment by burning the business, but she soon resumed her basic character, that of standing rather helplessly beside her husband. Her devotion was similar to that of Mrs. Katz who tried as long as possible to cover up for her inadequate husband. Leo is the only character who experiences a profound change in character, but one has reason to doubt that his proclamation will lead to definite action. Similar to Ralph in Awake and

Sing!, he proclaims a new future, but has given no indication in the play that he is capable of completing his announced plan.

The synopsis indicates not only a lack of change in character, but also a lack of dramatic action. With the exception of the marriage pictures and the fight that followed, there is no definite action on stage. The motion of these characters consists primarily of seemingly unimportant, unobtrusive trivial gesturing. However, as this study will later indicate, with this trivial, ineffectual action which was often as incongruous as the dialogue, the playwright fashioned a microcosm of man's existence.

Structure and Techniques

As we have shown, Chekhov's duets served to further his plots. Ensemble scenes were interspersed to comment upon the situation of the characters and to relate the individual plots to the basic goal in each play. In a similar fashion, Odets devises duets and trios in which the characters reveal their individual desires, plans, and failures. Group scenes are used to reveal the general economic conditions which prevail in the nation; the characters' attempts to understand and if possible solve the economic dilemma in these larger

scenes are symbolic of the endeavors of each individual in his own peculiar situation. For example, Myron is unable to discuss intelligently the world situation with Morty, Jacob, and Moe just as he is incapable of comprehending and solving his family difficulties. When the Gordons attempt to discuss politics with Pike and Foley, Gus reveals that he does not vote. One is reminded at this point that he is equally negligent in his business and family duties; he sits back and allows Katz to run his business despite Clara's admonitions to stand up and be heard. Myron takes no definite action to maintain his family's social and economic status until his son is killed in criminal action and his family is being dispossessed. Moe reveals in an ensemble discussion that he believes life to be nothing more than a "racket." In his duets with Hennie, he proves his belief in this philosophy. In an ensemble scene, Ben admits that he is incapable of financially supporting his wife but he hopes for a break. In his duet with Kewpie, he proves that his ambitions have been based solely on hope and he has failed to take constructive action in order to preserve his pride.

Though there is a spokesman who emerges at the end of each play to express hope for the future, there is within the plays no specific protagonist or antagonist.

The plots surrounding each character are of equal significance when fused together to show the impact of the depression.

Odets, like Chekhov, uses the seemingly irrelevant dialogue and action. Moe's constant concern about oranges and his resort to cake in order to appease his emotions were mentioned previously. In Act II of Awake and Sing! Hennie sits quietly putting on hand lotion. This is certainly an unobtrusive action, and yet it not only indicates her concern for her physical appearance but seems to suggest that she will clean her hands of the present situation. In Act III the stage action consists primarily of three incidents. Bessie turns on the alarm; Myron tears a page from the calendar and then returns to peel an apple. Certainly these are not profound actions and yet the alarm awakens no one, time passes, and still there are no oranges in the house.

In Paradise Lost Pike's entrances were accompanied by the gesture of whisking the dust from his apparel, indicative of the depths to which he has fallen, socially, economically, and spiritually. Gus's continual winding of his watch which contains the picture of his wife is indicative of his desire to live in the past rather than face the present and future. Leo continually carries

and pretends to read a newspaper, but it is obvious that he is not really aware of nor concerned with the world about him. The continual handling of and bowing to the statue of Ben indicates the desire of the various characters to also assume the role of a "god," by playing a game rather than running the race of life. Simply the continual coming and going of the various characters, many of them silent, indicates the instability of their various characters as well as the instability of the families.

Act II of Paradise Lost ends with Leo's suggestion that Clara have the backdoor fixed and she responds "tomorrow." This is as common a conversation as one might find in daily life and seemingly irrelevant to the general story, provided one does not realize that the Gordons have continually been putting off until tomorrow the household "repairs" necessary for maintaining their family. When Felix arrives to announce his departure for Chicago, Pearl's first major comment is, "What ugly hands I have." (181) This is a completely irrelevant comment until one realizes that Pearl's piano playing is not marketable and consequently she has nothing to offer as financial assistance if they should marry. As he leaves she advises, "Don't smoke in bed," and "Don't be sentimental," indicating that she has lost

all ability to express emotion; yet when first uttered, these statements no doubt seem rather trite and insignificant. Many more examples could be given of these seemingly incongruous statements which in the end have great significance in the development of character and plot.

Chekhov used soliloquies often and effectively. Odets does not use this technique to the extent that Chekhov did, but he does allow his characters to speak at length about their feelings at certain opportune moments. In conversations with Ralph, Jacob elaborates the beliefs and ideals which other members of the cast would refuse to hear. Near the end of the play Ralph rephrases these same ideals. Leo Gordon seems to address the world as he walks back and forth across the stage in the concluding speech of Paradise Lost. (See page 26).

It is a fact that Odets' plays were constructed around the family, the most important unit in society. Within the families, however, including friends with whom they are involved, there is a variety of characters similar to the various types of individuals represented in Chekhov's plays. The cast of Awake and Sing! is limited, but one finds here the clerk, the business man, the immigrant worker, and the veteran who is

simultaneously representative of the socially irresponsible element of society. In Paradise Lost there is a greater representation of the various segments of society. The laborers appear, and political extremists express their opinions. Within the family itself Pearl represents the artist, Julie the capitalist, Ben the "All-American Boy," Leo and Sam the industrialists, Mr. May the entrepreneur, and Pike the tradesman. With these characters Odets can show the influence of the economic depression upon the various occupations. When each representative meets with decay and eventual defeat, the implications are overwhelming.

When Robert Hogan discussed his so-called "second structure," he expressed the idea that the chief device used by those who would develop their plays in this way is the ironic juxtaposition of the comic and the pathetic or the grotesque and sublime, "a juxtaposition practiced also by Jonson, Chekhov, Congreve, Charlie Chaplin, and Clifford Odets."[2] A rapid review of some of the stage direction in Paradise Lost will substantiate Hogan's reference to Odets.

In the opening seconds of the play, Gus's indirect expression of uselessness is interrupted by the

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[2]Hogan, p. 10.

two wives carrying the canary which has been evicted from the Gordon household. Foley's elaboration of the physical ailments of the nation's citizens and the need for political salvation by the Democrats is interrupted by a belch. Gus's reminiscence of his deceased wife is interrupted by Ben's noisy entrance with the kicking and laughing Libby under his arm. Pike's censuring of the American "system" is accompanied throughout by his cracking of nuts which dribble to the floor. In the midst of the revelation that Sam has been embezzling money from the business and, in fact, the business is near collapse, Leo is overcome with a nosebleed. Clara's Biblical story to her ailing son, who is leaving shortly for the hospital, is followed by Gus's elaborate physical rendition of the "Toreador Song" from Carmen.

Not only are actions of contradictory nature juxtaposed; there is also continual juxtaposition of serious and comic lines. As Clara admonishes Leo to exert more influence when dealing with Katz, Gus asks, "Is goldfish again becoming popular?" In the midst of the commotion surrounding the pictures of the newly married couple, Gus cannot resist mentioning that he owns the best motorcycle in town, and that his daughter was a seven-months' baby. Non-sequiturs such as these are found throughout the play, serving the obvious purpose

many times of showing character isolation. As these lines reveal the real thoughts and consequently the character of those persons speaking, they simultaneously relieve the tension for the audience and give a more complete portrayal of the lives being portrayed--indicating at once the simplicity and complexity of existence. Of Odets' dialogue, Otis Ferguson writes, ". . . there is a sense of humor which makes as delightful an encounter in the theatre as it does in life. This is rarely used purely for gags, and it is never segregated to the chronic buffoon or the comic-relief scene. His people have a jumping appreciation of image that is as natural to them in pain or anger as in horseplay, and is therefore a better seated humor. It is possible that some of the vitality on his stage as a whole comes directly from this vivid trick of living speech."[3]

Two minor techniques of Chekhov which were discussed earlier are the use of silent observers and the off-stage sounds. In Awake and Sing! Jacob is silently present through much of the action and his silent presence is powerful as the audience reviews the entire play and his suicide. Other characters sit silent through much of the action; their presence makes much

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[3]Otis Ferguson, "Pay-off on Odets," New Republic, 100 (Sept. 27, 1939), 216.

of the dialogue more incisive as it relates to them and simultaneously characters such as Myron reveal a relative unconcern for what is happening. In Paradise Lost Julie is silently present at opportune moments so that he can hear his death predicted and also see Ben receive the gun. At other times his presence seems to haunt the cast and from time to time they send him on errands to escape his presence. Mrs. Katz tacitly follows Sam about, indicating her continual pity and devotion. She occasionally interrupts a conversation with a quick entrance and exit, and in so doing makes herself available to comments reminding her of her lack of children. One hears airplanes flying overhead as Ralph considers his future. With a similar significance, Julie listens to the sounds of the night as he dreams of a future. In both plays accompanying off-stage music sets the mood and highlights much of the action. At the end of Paradise Lost Pearl's piano artistry is significantly replaced by the brass band in the street.

Thus it has been shown that Odets used in these two plays a similar structure and also techniques similar to those used by Chekhov. However, as stated in the introduction, an exercise of this type is of relative unimportance unless it leads to a better understanding

of a particular work of art. The value of the preceding information, then, should lead to a more meaningful interpretation of the two plays.

Proletarian and Universal Interpretations

The proletarian interpretation is obvious to even the casual observer of these dramas and has been widely stated. Odets showed in Awake and Sing! the possible effects of a financial crisis in the middle-class family. In Paradise Lost he used a wider variety of characters to represent the various elements of our society and the possible effect which the depression would have upon them.

Leo Gordon is seen as the honest, trusting middle-class liberal, who dreams of the future as a less honest associate takes advantage of his trusting nature and embezzles what little capital is left. He is determined to improve conditions for his workers, though this will eventually lead him to bankruptcy. Despite the loss of everything except his idealistic hope, he retains his ideals and at the very end looks to a brighter future. "The world has a profound dislocation," but "no man fights alone."

Sam Katz also symbolizes the industrialist, but of a nature diametric to that of Gordon. Sam, impotent both as a husband and businessman, does not have the idealistic hope nor compassion exhibited by Leo and would destroy the present: his wife, by inhuman treatment; his business, by fire. He sees no possible way to create a future and tries every means to destroy any indication of his personal failures.

The wives of these two men are more similar than dissimilar. Both accept their economic situation bravely. Both love their husbands despite their failures in the business world. Mrs. Katz's love and feelings become more poignant than those of Clara Gordon; despite her husband's impotency and in spite of his harsh treatment, she expresses a pity and compassion for him. These women are caught up in the dilemma and yet stand bravely beside their husbands giving them a support not evident in the world outside their homes. At one point Clara is nearly overcome by the situation, and the audience fears that she might go to extremes to preserve her respect, as did Bessie Berger. However, she soon realizes the virtue in her husband's decision to ignore the insurance salesman.

Pearl is a gifted pianist in love with another musical artist, but there is no employment for the artist

and consequently no money for marriage. Pearl, as an artist, was probably at one time the most sensitive individual in the play, and yet as she met with various disappointments, she became incapable of feeling. At the end of the play she expresses no emotion about the loss of her piano which at one time she would not even allow Gus to touch.

Ben Gordon, the one-time all-American youth and Olympic champion discovers that because of a heart ailment he can no longer run. He has known nothing but glory and honor as a child and when faced with the responsibilities of adulthood he is unprepared. The times offer him no assistance. He must borrow money on his wedding night, but has hopes for a glorious future. When these hopes fail to materialize he cannot accept his new position in society; he loses all self-respect and turns to the underground life of Kewpie, unaware that Kewpie is destroying him as an individual and assuming his position as Libby's husband. The all-American youth is slowly destroyed and at the end has not even the desire to escape the bullets of the policemen, but in fact, stands there "soaking them up."

Julie, the youthful business tycoon in the play, lives in complete unreality as he dreams of the future. He is bodily ill with encephalitis, just as the

capitalistic world he pretends to inhabit is slowly decaying. His presence in the Gordon household is a constant reminder of this decay, and Julie stays with them until the very end, indicative of their failure either to escape or to heal the worsening economic condition which has grasped them.

Gus Michaels represents the very small business man who was the first to be destroyed by the depression. He remains now with the Gordons, who support him. He, however, has not lost all sense of hope or responsibility, and when necessary he forfeits his only possession, the stamps, to assist the Gordons.

His daughter, Libby, because of the situations surrounding her childhood (the loss of her mother and defeat of her father) has very little understanding and respect for the spiritual or material. Consequently, she seeks only good times of a storybook nature.

Kewpie represents the petty gangster who because of the economic conditions has been able to infiltrate the ranks of the hitherto highly moral middle-class. This undesirable element in their society serves as a catalyst for their eventual destruction symbolized by Kewpie's destruction of Ben. Regardless of how it was attained, Kewpie has money, and this alone enables him to enter and inhabit freely the lives of people in financial distress.

Pike has now been relegated to furnace man, but seems to understand at least the force of the dilemma surrounding him if not the actual cause and possible solution. Consequently, he becomes the philosopher and expresses the Marxian solution for the country's ills, which he admits may not solve the situation completely, but is at least some answer to their problems.

These characters are juxtaposed throughout the play in such a way and with such force that the cast as a whole represents the entire middle-class attempting to come to grips with the problems forced upon them. They speak loudly, they bear their pain, and in the end Leo, his wife, and some of the workers (including Pike) have strength to stand up and say they will start agin. Odets has captured for his audience the unhappiness, the sorrow, the distasteful results of a nation's economic collapse. Odets managed to accomplish his first and foremost goal, and this alone justifies the play's conception. However, the real test of art is its ultimate timelessness. If the play contains or imparts basic human existence, the emotions and thoughts of people of any age, and presents them artistically, then presumably it is of value to all generations and indeed a work of art.

Odets apparently felt that he captured within Paradise Lost more than a particular era of our nation's economic history. In his preface to the first edition of his early plays he wrote, "Paradise Lost, poorly received as a practical theatre work, remains my favorite play in this group. . . . Paradise Lost shares with Rocket to the Moon a depth of perception, a web of sensory impressions and a level of both personal and social experience not allotted to the other plays here." He admitted that the other plays were more "immediately useful," but he was firm in his favoritism. He apparently felt that this play, more than the others approached what he had been attempting to create, "a play immediately and dynamically useful and yet as psychologically profound as my present years and experience will permit."[4]

The writer is mindful of what Joseph Wood Krutch stated so succinctly: "Literary 'experiments' deserve scant praise unless they are successful and to say of a writer that he 'means well' is to damn him utterly as an artist whatever compliment to him as a man may be implied."[5] Yet Odets must be credited with attempting

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[4]Clifford Odets, "Preface," Six Plays of Clifford Odets (New York, 1939), p. ix.

[5]Joseph Wood Krutch, Drama Since 1918, p. 277.

to go beyond his well-earned reputation as the angry young playwright and attempting to manifest the "artist" in his character. He apparently felt that he had succeeded in transcending the immediate with something more universal; the writer is of a similar opinion.

Unlike his first triumph, Waiting for Lefty, there is in these dramas less of the angry Odets and less of a plea for action than his immediate critics apparently realized. In Awake and Sing! it is the attitudes of the characters that receive the brunt of the playwright's criticism rather than the capitalistic system of government. In Paradise Lost Pike becomes a spokesman against the American "system," but he remains a minor character and his vitriolic attacks are widely spaced in the drama, intrinsic evidence that Odets was endeavoring to create more than a dramatic tract against the capitalistic system. The subtleties of the drama, which are revealed in off-hand expressions and trivial action, eventually become the most important elements of the play. They not only permit, but in fact demand, a more universal interpretation of the drama.

The various characters of Paradise Lost are individual and they experience thoughts and emotions similar to those experienced in any society. In a seemingly endless and yet realistic series of entrances

and exits these characters parade before the audience their hopes and dreams, their disappointments, their humanity. There is frustration, there is comedy; there is tension, there is congeniality; there is lack of feeling, there is understanding; there is silent observation and boisterous expression--there is in fact life and impending death. All of these opposites are juxtaposed, showing the artist's well-balanced conception of reality and revealing for the audience the truth of their existence.

In a variety of gestures and conversations, continually flowing and yet often incongruous, the various characters reveal themselves. The father pretends to read the papers, speaks optimistically of the future, and voices idealistic hopes. He reads books, professes an average amount of intelligence, doesn't like some of the ways his government is handled, and yet he doesn't vote. Still he feels he may someday do something to change the situation and is able to relax in his comfortable living-room chair and drift away into thought, seldom expressed and then almost totally ineffectually.

The mother loves her children, yet she refers to them as "lunatics." She feels her son is too young and unprepared for the responsibilities of the marriage he has made; yet she makes him a loan, "written on ice,"

and sends him off to the movies, a dubious means of making him face reality. She goes off to play cards with the ladies, but not before prodding her husband to stand up and be a man and expressing a quiet love for her ill son.

Their daughter has perfected her piano talents, and yet as a woman, would forfeit her chances for concert work if it were available, in order to marry the man she loves. She is content to keep playing after he is gone, unwilling to admit to anyone that what she needs more than the opportunity to perform as an artist is the opportunity to perform as a woman, a wife and mother.

Their son Ben has known only the glories of childhood competition and success. He has won his races, and if his heart had not weakened and life were not more than a game or contest, he would go on happily enjoying life and its laurels. However, totally unprepared for the realities of life, he marries Libby almost impulsively and is quite confident that all will be well. He is really only a child trying to become a man without the training and guidance necessary for making this transition.

Julie, unfortunately striken with illness, dreams of the day he will be well and a Wall Street success; at

the same time he senses that he will never recover. He hears the sounds of the night and dreams of opportunity as he eats an apple and goes off to bed.

Gus, who has lost his business, still pretends to be an expert at everything despite the fact that he knows he is just "an ordinary person." He is proud of his daughter, and can see only good coming from her marriage to Ben, despite the fact that they admittedly do not understand each other. Not only do the young couple have no financial basis on which to build, but no emotional nor intellectual basis either.

Pike, the son of a missionary never understood his father's religious convictions, but neither will he completely forget them. He will go on working and denouncing war, confident that America is going somewhere and yet feeling he would like to escape it all "at the bottom of the ocean."

Life, when described in these terms, seems almost unbearable, hardly worth the effort. And yet within the trivial one finds humor and (ironically) within the <u>routine</u>, variety. These two elements in life are capable of buoying up an existence which would otherwise soon be submerged by an overpowering pessimism. An argument about keeping a canary can soon make Gus forget that he

has outlived his usefullness to society. Keeping fruit on the table and doing the usual household chores can make Clara forget that her family is being financially, socially, and spiritually destroyed. Leo has a house to come home to, and this house serves as a barrier against the outside world. He can rest here, forgetting about his responsibilities to his government, and remain unaware of the difficulties his employees suffer until they come inside his "walls" and remind him. Pike must whiskbroom the dust from his clothes before entering a middle-class home, and yet by orating at length against the evils of the government and hurling his empty wine glass against the radio, he avoids any responsibilities he might have for preventing the dreaded war. Though Kewpie is "sore on my whole damn life," he can justify it by his philosophy: "every man for himself nowadays, and when you're in the jungle look out for the wild life." Consequently, seeking satisfaction for his masculine instincts, he can conquer others and escape the reality of his own misfortune.

Odets was first and foremost concerned with depicting the economic dilemma of these people and its effect upon their lives. At the same time, however, he has revealed a depth of character and society which is complex. As Robert Garland comments, ". . . the hero

in Paradise Lost is the 'American middle-class of liberal tendency.' The enemy is 'unseen, nameless, but constant and deadly.' Chekhov and double Chekhov."[6] Indigenous to this statement is an understanding that from this play one gains an understanding of character and society which cannot be limited to any historical or economic occurrence. It is in this respect that Paradise Lost becomes more than a proletarian contribution of the 1930's; it is in this respect that the play becomes a work of art, relevant to all ages because its people, its feelings, and its essence is that of all generations. These people are not so much victims of the economic conditions surrounding them as they are victims of their own natures and characters which are, to say the least, very realistic, very human.

Artistic Achievement a Box Office Failure

Spaced between the previously quoted statements which Odets made concerning his fondness for Paradise Lost is the following statement which is indicative of the subtle sarcasm Odets often used in reference to his critics. The statement, however, is more perceptive in its analysis of the box office failure of this play than

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[6]Robert Garland, "New Play By Odets," Theatre Arts, 20 (June, 1936), 466.

the majority of critics would be willing to admit. Odets wrote, "While not unmindful of its harsh and ungracious form, I must be permitted to say that our modern audiences, critics included, still must have their plays, like salt-water taffy, cut to fit the mouth."[7]

The critics had made optimistic predictions for the young playwright following his earlier successes. With the opening of Paradise Lost they expected a drama built upon the gusto revealed in his earlier plays and yet much more far-reaching in its implications. When they found the gusto lacking, they refused to set aside their pre-conceived notions about the drama and evaluate their experience intelligently. As Joseph Mersand has suggested, "The play was attended with expectations which only a master dramatist could have fulfilled. It is embarrassing to be called the White Hope of the American Theatre before one's thirtieth birthday. . . . Paradise Lost was by no means a failure. Rather was it not the masterpiece his admirers were led to expect."[8] These rather unfortunate expectations of the critics were coupled with an apparently inadequate interpretation on the part of the director, and consequently the play was condemned before it reached its audience.

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[7]Clifford Odets, "Preface," ix.

[8]Mersand, American Drama, 1930-1940, p. 85.

One cannot refute the fact that there are dangers involved in attempting to criticize the direction of an unseen production. Yet statements made by Harold Clurman in his published introduction to this play, when linked with critical commentary by such accepted authorities as Stark Young, have led this writer to judgments which cannot be avoided. Clurman described the form of this play as "unpredictable, wandering movement," and of the characters he wrote, "Paradise Lost is a poetic play in the sense that the author's point of view creates real characters that are virtually symbols in the formal meaning of the word." He implied, however, that these characters lacked the individual development of Chekhov by stating that "Though Chekhov's characters are 'universal' they are always conceived as individuals."[9]

Obviously, the interpretation suggested in this study and apparently intended by Odets could not be dramatically created upon the stage if the director maintained the attitude these quotations suggest. The characters must be individually developed, primarily through their stage action and presence. Though the action might initially lead one to sense an "unpredictable, wandering movement," the director must be alert to this

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[9]Six Plays of Odets, p. 425.

fact, and, as Grenville Vernon wrote of Chekhov, "Each line, each bit of business must be fitted in, so that, incomprehensible as much of it may seem at first, the final result is crystal clear."[10] Direction other than this can only lead to the unsatisfying evening of theatre which Stark Young experienced.

> I understand well enough what the dramatist is trying to do here in the first act of Paradise Lost. That wandering, unexpected and irrelevant talking and coming and going is meant to give the domestic quality and an impression of that home financially and spiritually driven in upon itself by the times. But in the performance that coming and going was monotonously spaced; it seemed endless and seemed crowded. It was false to the dramatic style involved, because the style rests on endless variation and fluency, unpredictable, but once done, recognized as inevitable. [italics are supplied by this author]
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> . . . something more luminous and continuous inwardly is necessary. A reflective, sainted and profound life does not consist in mussing yourself up, making mum philosophical faces and moving about amidst the furniture and exits.[11]

Harold Clurman attempted to dismiss comparisons between Odets and Chekhov as misleading because ". . . the whole quality of . . . Odets . . . is active, impulsive and rather lusty, as compared to the thoughtful, delicately tempered and objective art of the man who

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[10]See page 24.

[11]Stark Young, "Quite Worth Your Thought," New Republic, 85 (Dec. 25, 1935), 202.

wrote The Cherry Orchard."[12] In reference to this statement, Stark Young wrote, "The parallel of any new dramatist with Chekhov lies, first, in his use of the method of the seemingly irrelevant. Speech and emotion follow one another without surface connection. The scene is made up of dialogue that now answers itself from person to person, now arises, speech by speech, as if from hidden depths, more really relevant because more individual and more penetrating."[13]

Unlike Young, however, Clurman failed to realize that regardless of the social importance of Odets' dramas, they were, like The Cherry Orchard and The Three Sisters, primarily character dramas, and ironically his characters were not so much defeated by the "system" as by their own actions or so-called inaction. Clurman could not accept what Young perceived concerning the structure of the dramas nor their Chekhovian development. Young realized, ". . . it can do Mr. Odets no harm to say that his plays could never in the form they are now have existed without Chekhov."[14] Clurman was so anxious to refute a Chekhovian influence that

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[12] Six Plays of Clifford Odets, p. 421.

[13] Stark Young, "New Talent," New Republic, 83 (May 29, 1935), 78.

[14] Young, "New Talent," 78.

he failed to perceive that whether or not Odets had been consciously influenced by Chekhov is immaterial. The important fact is that a successful production of Paradise Lost and an even more rewarding performance of Awake and Sing! rests upon the realization that similar techniques and a similar structure were used by both artists.

CHAPTER IX

ATTITUDES REFLECTED IN THE PLAYS

As stated earlier, there is no need to deny that Odets was first and foremost a proletarian writer. Despite the far-reaching implications of his drama, his primary concern, particularly in these early plays, was the plight of the middle-class. This is obvious in his personal statements, previously quoted, and obvious in the plays. Odets was upset by the conditions surrounding himself and his fellow citizens and this despair is manifest in his writing.

To state, however, that he was a proletarian writer, is not to dismiss Odets as a relative unimportant figure in the history of drama. A survey of this history will show, as Joseph Mersand has noted, "that its leading figures have almost invariably been moved by the miseries the injustices and the hypocrises of life. . . . Every generation must have its Odets to open the eyes of the dull and sentimental."[1] Arthur Miller has suggested why playwrights cannot avoid their social

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[1]Joseph Mersand, pp. 68-9.

situations: "Society is inside of man and man is inside of society, and you cannot even create a truthfully drawn psychological entity on the stage until you understand his social relations and their power to make him what he is and to prevent him from being what he is not."[2]

Odets was well aware of the history as well as the inevitability of the dramatic expression of social injustice and inequality. In a recent interview, he stated, "Theatre in its profoundest sense . . . has come in periods when the plight or problem expressed by the actors was completely at one with the plight and problems and values or even moralities of the audience. . . . the artist . . . is not someone apart [from] and inimical to his audience, not a man in opposition to the values he is expressing, but one who is completely at one, who shares organically the very values of the audience for whom he is writing."[3] Because Odets could not separate himself from the society for which he wrote, he could not be completely impersonal in his creativity, as

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[2]Arthur Miller, "The Shadow of the Gods," Harpers Magazine, 217 (August, 1958), 39.

[3]Michael John Mendelsohn, "Clifford Odets: A Critical Study," Boulder, 1962, unpublished dissertation.

Chekhov attempted to be. However, a certain amount of objectivity is required by the artist and fortunately Odets achieved this necessary distance between himself and his characters.

Joseph Wood Krutch, referring specifically to Awake and Sing!, made the following comment which at once suggests the objectivity and compassion inherent in the plays. "What Mr. Odets has done is to achieve a paradoxical combination of detachment and participation. He observes like an outsider, reproducing with vivid and humorous truth manners and habits as they could be observed and reproduced only by one who could stand off and look. Yet at the same time it is plain enough that this detachment is purely intellectual and artistic. Emotionally he is still close to the people he is writing about, and he understands them from the inside out."[4] Writing several years later, Krutch added, "Odets . . . has the power of communicating a special sort of compassion peculiarly his own . . . Mr. Odets has been occasionally a preacher, but never a sentimentalist or a decadent, and at his best he is none of these."[5]

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[4]Joseph Wood Krutch, "Drama," Nation, 140 (March 13, 1935), 314.

[5]Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Unbeautiful People," Nation, 154 (Jan. 10, 1942), 46.

In summary, then, Odets wrote about his own people because he wanted his audience to share his sympathy--a sympathy he could not hide, but which he subdued when his artistry demanded. With this in mind, one must finally consider Odets' attitude toward the future and if possible, determine whether he felt his plays would eventually bring about the desired sympathy and consequent amelioration of his middle-class heroes.

Like Soliony and Yasha in the Chekhov plays, Kewpie, the most disreputable character in Paradise Lost, is the most economically successful. Moe Axelrod is the only character in Awake and Sing! who achieves his goal--a seemingly unworthy goal for an unworthy character. Although the less deserving characters achieve their desires, this (faint) indication of pessimism is overshadowed by the optimistic proclamations which end each play. Admittedly somewhat unrealistic (see Footnote 7 below), these speeches proclaim a hope for the future which is the real essence of the drama of man. History will show us that all generations have experienced the love and marriage, the sickness and health, the champion and the defeated, the juxtaposed tragedy and comedy in character and action. Out of these experiences which seem to lead only to decay have come new realizations,

new sources of inspiration, new eras--each time a new "paradise" to replace the one which was "lost." Although one may question the ability of Leo Gordon or Ralph Berger to lead this rejuvenation, Odets believed that eventually someone would rise to the occasion. Critics have, however, questioned this element in Odets' writing. While seeking the help of all the bourgeoisie in overcoming their dilemma, he portrayed his characters as having been so decayed by their circumstances, that one might justifiably question their ability to assist in recreating an inspiring and salubrious environment. Kenneth Burke has suggested, however, that this objection is justified, "only if one does not believe in the Odets formula for redemption, remembering only the ashes and not the Phoenix that arises from the ash."[6]

Odets has been assailed for his seemingly unrealistic endings and he has admitted, "sometimes my critics are correct when they say that the optimistic note has been tacked on."[7] Nonetheless, as stated earlier, history will support these otherwise questionable conclusions, and though they may be artistically invalid they are certainly humanly possible. Odets obviously

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[6]Kenneth Burke, "By Ice, Fire, or Decay," New Republic, 86 (April 15, 1936), 283.

[7]Mendelsohn, dissertation, 174.

believed this. When recently questioned about his optimism, he stated succinctly, "I would say that I have a belief in man and his possibilities as the measure of things . . ."[8]

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[8]Mendelsohn, dissertation, 174.

CHAPTER X

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Chekhov, widely recognized as a major influence on twentieth century drama, continues to baffle numerous individuals because he insisted that his plays were comedies. An understanding of Chekhov's method of play development is necessary for perceiving the comedy and the depth of his dramas. Chekhov's plays were developed by fusing various character plots. Though each plot is uniquely individual, a similar solution is necessary. Definite action would enable each character to solve his problem, this action would simultaneously alleviate the problem which serves as a focal point in each play. The various plots heighten the impact of the major failure or frustration in the plays, and at the same time, explain why the failure is humorously inevitable. Verbal and physical gestures reveal strong wishes but weak characters. With incongruous dialogue and action, Chekhov juxtaposed the serious and comic aspects of life. He created an atmosphere for his characters by

surrounding them with silent observers and off-stage sounds. He loved his people, but he laughed at them, confident that they would survive and eventually escape their self-imposed dilemmas.

Clifford Odets was welcomed on the theatrical scene with praise and confidence. His initial contribution indicated his great concern for the financially depressed middle class and his determination to inspire amelioration of their hardships. He continued to write with this primary purpose in mind, but he added to his creations a depth of perception which escaped the majority of his critics. Like Chekhov, he simultaneously developed several character plots by alternating ensemble scenes with scenes involving one or two characters. He used a variety of characters to symbolize the various segments of society which were similarly affected by the economic conditions. Using the same techniques employed by Chekhov, he created characters whose uniquely individual frustrations were complicated not so much by external conditions as they were by the lack of internal motivation. Like Chekhov's people, the Bergers and the Gordons failed to act according to their expressed intentions, and they remained at the end of the plays very much as they were at the beginning. Odets could not completely dissociate himself from his characters and

portray them as objectively as did Chekhov, but his compassion for the middle class, whom he championed, did not prohibit an honest and artistic portrayal. His characters were greatly hindered by the collapse of their nation's economy, but their spirit had also collapsed and this was the result of their own weaknesses--weaknesses the playwright was convinced they would eventually overcome.

Both Chekhov and Odets were basically concerned with character as they developed their dramas. An adequate interpretation of either playwright's work can only be achieved by complete analysis of character. This analysis will result in the realization that these characters are not only representative of a particular historical era, but in fact, they are people of any era--individual in personality, but universal in humanity.

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