III

ODETS, RICE AND SHERWOOD AND THE EMERGENCE OF A
SOCIALLY COMMITTED AMERICAN DRAMA.

Today man must conquer, not the gods, but the
chaos of the social world. Today a vigorous
theatre must dramatize the deep-going social
conflicts of our time, the economic, emotional,
and cultural problems that confront the majority
of the people.¹

The overriding concern for the welfare of their fellow
men during a time of economic and political crisis
compelled socially committed dramatists of the thirties to
urge immediate social change. Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice
and Robert E. Sherwood, among others with similar
concerns, clamoured for an indemnification of perceived
social injustices, in an attempt to wrest Anglo-American
drama from the domain of the economic and social elites
and bring it within reach of the common masses.² This
chapter places Odets’s, Rice’s and Sherwood’s

¹From a Theatre Union advertisement for Peace On Earth,
File Folder, "People’s Art Theatre," B54-1 to B 54-48, dated
between Nov. 10 to July 31, 1935. The Elmer Rice Collection,
Humanities research Center (HRC) University of Texas, Austin.

²Other socially committed playwrights were Paul Green,
John Howard Lawson, Michael Gold, Maxwell Anderson, Art Smith,
Elia Kazan, Peter Martin, Paul Sifton, Olga Shapiro, Jack
Shapiro, Claire Sifton, John Bonn, Sidney Kingsley; W.H. Auden
and Christopher Isherwood (England); Erwin Piscator, Bertolt
Brecht, George Sklar (Germany).
participation in Anglo-American theatre within the context of critical national and international events.

In the 1920s, Rice and Sherwood began to develop a style of drama that had, as its aim, social commentary and change. Rice, in particular, opposed the superficial entertainment theatre of the 1920s and its excessively profit-oriented motivations. By the time of the Depression, Rice and Sherwood had clearly moved away from 1920s Expressionism and light comedy toward a serious, socially motivated optimistic drama. Odets, who started his dramatic career in the thirties concentrated on themes relating to the Depression.

More than Sherwood, Odets, and to a certain degree, Rice, addressed specific problems facing the middle and working classes by using the Marxian dialectic to urge a humanitarian form of social reconstruction. Nonetheless, inspired by the new socialist order abroad, all three playwrights, during the thirties, developed a drama geared toward social improvement.

By 1934 and 1935, Odets’ Group Theatre productions, Sherwood’s Theatre Guild productions, and the staging of Rice’s plays represented a new high point in socially committed American drama. In particular, Odets’ League of Workers’ Theatre production of Waiting For Lefty in 1935, a synthesis of realist and agitprop techniques,
constituted a breakthrough in American theatre. It offered, on the American stage, a socially committed alternative that directly and effectively introduced Marxist ideas to achieve humanitarian ends.

By the late 1930s, Rice and Sherwood further expanded their drama to protest war, Fascism, and government censorship by allying themselves with the international Popular Front. In this way, they sublimated the Socialist content of their work and developed more nationalistic themes, clearly emphasizing their American heritage.

Towards the end of the decade, Odets and Rice were clearly deviating from the Communist Party line—yet continuing their socially committed drama with an aim toward enhancing a more peaceful and just American society. All three continued this effort at least until the early or mid 1940s.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, American theatre depended largely on dramaturgical ideas from England, Germany, France, and other European countries. The indigenous theatre concentrated on comedy, farce, and superficial themes. Not only was American drama devoid of intellectual and thematic originality, but it was also poor in style, presentation, and expression.
Despite their interest in the development of the theatre, the leading playwrights such as David Belasco, Edward Sheldon, and William Vaughn Moody, paid little attention to theatre's role in social affairs. Emma Goldman alluded to this vacuity when she lamented that "[u]nfortunately, we in America have so far looked upon the theatre as a place of amusement only, exclusive of ideas and inspiration." The theatre was, as a matter of fact, "either given over to escapist entertainment or to an art so pure as to exclude its potential as a political force and a social irritant." Horatio Winslow in The Masses contended that the most noble function of drama was to present, beyond its mere theatricality, social problems related to contemporary life. He regretted the fact that American theatre was far from presenting the same. He observed:

There is no vehicle better suited for the presentation of real problems than the theatre. But we attend a play nowadays to see only the sentimentalities of a hundred years ago threshed out. The playwrights do not touch the intimate affairs of our lives--they deal in candied

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3William Vaughn Moody's The Great Divide, considered the best play at that time, is also a sentimental melodrama.

4Emma Goldman, The Social Significance of the Modern Drama (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1914) 5.

emotions and present to us the histories of a people who are conveniently remote and social forces which rarely force their way into our existence."

The early twenties, largely speaking, produced a feckless and socially feeble drama that reflected the character of a highly materialistic society, revelling in the false hope of eternal prosperity. The devastating consequences of the war were overshadowed by the "great self-created illusion: that the problems of life could be solved by the acquisition of money." The drama of the period, which was patronized by materially rich audiences, manifested this attitude. Expressing his consternation with the state of the theatre Elmer Rice stated:

For the most part, the patrons upon whom the manager depends are idle and frivolous amusement-seekers. They regard play going merely as an entertainment: a temporary refuge from an ever-impending boredom or a brief respite between drinking-bouts. They arrive late and leave early. They come to see and be seen, and are more concerned with displaying their pretty clothes . . . than with what is happening on the stage . . . . They are interested only in what is trivial, shallow and artificial, in romantic nonsense, in hollow sentiment, in empty jokes and easy titillation of the senses, in prettified portrayals of the habits and foibles of their class . . . . [T]hey reject whatever is alien to their own narrow and

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"Horatio Winslow, "Grandma and Drama," The Masses (November 1911) 3.

unproductive way of life and turn their backs upon whatever does not glorify and justify the status quo.8

Apart from this, critics placed a high value upon playwrights like Eugene O' Neill, who, influenced by modern psychology, wrote plays that dealt with the human psyche. Consequently the public mostly saw one aspect of human attitudes and relationships such as that presented in Desire Under the Elms.

The deep involvement of the playwrights of the twenties with expressionism was another factor that hindered the growth of a significant socio-political drama. Interest in experimentation, as in Elmer Rice's The Adding machine and John Howard Lawson's Roger Bloomer, sometimes made the social content of the plays secondary.

The main difference between drama of the twenties and that of the thirties was the growth of serious socio-political drama in the latter decade, deriving from the Depression and other political happenings. Some playwrights, however, had shown some concern in the twenties with existing social and political problems and their effect on humanity. They addressed the savagery of

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war and hoped to lead a way out of the dramatic doldrums, reaching out to the masses by delineating their problems. Elmer Rice, John Howard Lawson, Paul Green, Michael Gold and Robert Sherwood made several efforts of this kind. Lawson, Rice, and Sherwood showed signs of initiative in plays such as The Adding Machine, Marching Song, and The Road to Rome respectively. However, since the problems of the twenties drowned in the decade’s prosperity and were less grave than those in the following decade, these playwrights limited their social concern to exposing or satirizing the intellectual limitations of society.

As Morgan Himelstein says, "the intensity and explicitness with which the Depression playwrights dramatized their political beliefs" was missing in these plays. This obstructed the development of a drama with specific aims of motivating society to improve social conditions. According to Bamber Gascoign, "[m]ost of the plays accepted implicitly that there was nothing to be done--certainly nothing specific. It was essentially a

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theatre of inaction, a negative theatre."  

Economics clearly was a major factor that impeded the development of a true committed people's theatre in the 1920s. In a decade preoccupied with individualistic pursuits and pro-business activity, the theatre regarded itself as a potential money-making institution. Being a commercial enterprise, it was subject to the same pressures as any other industry and catered to the ethics of high profiteering. There was no widespread system of subsidy that could make the theatre accessible to the masses, and the producers based the selection and performance of plays on commercial potential, rather than artistic considerations or social relevance. Producers encouraged only the materially rich who could afford to produce plays. An example is Padraic Colum's Balloon, a play which could not be produced simply because The Group Theatre did not have enough funds to stage it and Broadway producers were not interested in it. Speaking of the state of the contemporary theatre in America, Rice commented:

The theatre . . . is the property of a real-estate investor or speculator; the capital . . . is the property of the producing manager . . . .

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10Bamber Gascoign, Twentieth Century Drama (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1962) 24. Gascoign, however, makes a distinction here, pointing out that there were exceptions such as O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms (1924), The Great God Brown (1926) and Lazarus Laughed (1928) and Shaw's Saint Joan (1924) and The Apple Cart (1929).
[They] are not artists; they are businessmen. Nor are they likely to be interested in the drama as an art . . . . [T]hey are rarely interested to the extent of wilfully jeopardizing their capital investments . . . . The Theatre owner and the manager are engaged in the business of investing in (exploiting) the talents of the dramatist and of the actors in a way that they believe will assure them the greatest possible profits . . . .

[I]n our theatre the price which the dramatist must pay, not only for success, but merely for a hearing, is an acceptance of the manager's conception of what the public wants: the "public" in his estimation being confined to a small, and . . . socially unimportant group . . . .

[I]t must be obvious that the artist who accepts the philosophy of a decaying society, or panders to the taste of the ruling class can produce only decadent art.11

The "Great Depression of the early thirties with its attendant scar of widespread unemployment, [and] the hopeful attempt to remedy this bitter condition which ensued," became, according to Harold Clurman "the effective causes for the abrupt and drastic change"12 in American drama. Deeply affected by the Depression, and fearing the outbreak of another apocalyptic war, Odets, Rice and Sherwood felt compelled to produce a drama that engaged social, economic and political reality and served as an inspiring hope for suffering humanity. They sharply

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examined the enervating social conditions and presented, through their plays, complaints of, and solutions to contemporary socio-economic and political issues. In this way, their drama had its finger on the pulse of society. Through anti-capitalist, anti-fascist and anti-war drama these playwrights attempted to make people aware that they were on the precipice of important social change. They intended to arouse, in all classes, a desire for the rehabilitation of social and political stability, making their drama an operative means of compelling the public to question the inequities of the system.

Socially committed drama not only expressed disillusionment with the Depression and war and their social consequences but also showed an optimistic faith in society's regeneration. According to John Gassner, this optimism, however, "was also the other side of despair and the alternative to a passiveness disgraced by the appeasement policies of the governments." Gassner believes that as the Depression worsened and fascism in Italy, Spain, and Germany intensified, a great fear of having evaded social responsibility seized artists and intellectuals. At this juncture, he says, "[e]ngagement to a cause [for writers and intellectuals] became a guilt-

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enforced virtue that was to lead to some kind of activism such as signing a petition or a protest, marching in a parade, and writing a story, poem or play of so-called social consciousness. Thus enthusiasm . . . became a ferment in the depressed nineteen thirties.¹⁴ From this ferment emerged the playwrights' search for alternative answers to existing problems. This is because the age demanded politically conscious dramatists to seek solutions and look for possible alternatives to a system which the depression had vilified, and one they believed was responsible for war. Merely exposing these issues seemed to them an incomplete task.

The myth of Russian success and the new found faith in Marxism further strengthened playwrights' optimism in a time of despair. The optimism that it generated pervaded the plays of Odets, Rice, and Sherwood. Odets, in particular, found great appeal and meaning in Marxian thought. For him, this doctrine diagnosed the nation's problems and also suggested solutions for their eradication. In the April 9 entry of his 1940 Journal, Odets stated:

Today there is Marx and a party which has been arousing in American intellectuals (workers

less, I think) a new sense of how a living world can be made. . . . this party has yet had deep and extraordinary influence on every aspect of cultural life in this country. It has even been the dynamo for organizations and new patterns of thought many times removed from its radical core. It has given writers like myself a reason and a way of life. [and because of the influence of Marx, Engels and Lenin, it has shown] new inroads . . . into American life . . . .\textsuperscript{15}

Though Rice never turned communist, the socialist concept of a planned economy made a deep impression on him also.

However, while Odets and Rice applied some Marxist and socialist ideas to their plays, they were not necessarily inclined to join the Communist Party or to adhere to the party dicta. For instance, Odets' action of joining the Party in the hope of achieving social justice shows that even those "who actually tried to adhere to Marxist doctrine or to some segment of the 'Party line,' chiefly desire[d] . . . to relate their work to the tensions and aspirations of their times."\textsuperscript{16} Despite their politics, their zealously expressed protest was personally motivated.

After the 1917 Revolution in Russia, theatre in the U.S.S.R. became a strong influence as a powerful propaganda agency. The literary "Shock Troupes," who were

\textsuperscript{15}Odets, \textit{The Time is Ripe} 109.

\textsuperscript{16}Gassner, "Foreword. Politics and Theatre," \textit{Drama Was a Weapon} xiii.
stimulating ideas of community among the illiterate peasants and workers in Russia struck socially committed playwrights, including Odets and Rice, as "successful participants in the task of socialist reconstruction."17

Inspired by Soviet initiatives, Odets and Rice visualized similar ventures in the United States. The Soviet theatre's influence by 1935 permeated their works through dramatic theories such as "agitprop" and "socialist realism."18 Impressed with the Soviet theatre after his return from a two month sojourn in Russia in 1932, Rice wrote that Russian plays appealed to him because "in them one finds not only the expression of the new spirit in Russia but also a vivid illustration of the importance of the theatre as a social institution and of its vital functional relation to the body politic."19 Consequently, a drama infused with ideals of social reform and a spirit of protest, replaced the non-political

17Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left 154.

18The American Communist Party originally imported the agitprop from Soviet Russia to serve as a campaigning agency in the elections of the early 1930s. In Russia it was being used to teach illiterate peasants and backward people about the new socialist way of life. By 1930, agitprop had wide appeal in Germany and Czechoslovakia. The agitprop play, Vote Communist, was written for a political campaign of the early 1930s in the U.S.

19Elmer Rice, "The Theatre in Russia," TMsc., nd, 15 pp., Box F 75-21 HRC, The Elmer Rice Collection, University of Texas, Austin 7.
and experimental drama of the twenties. According to 
Bigsby, the new drama was "to be stripped for action: 
reduced, like the Russian and German theatres, to its 
essentials. It was to lose its embellishments, its 
romantic posturing, its excessive concentration on the 
individual . . . ." 20 As a result, a discernable change 
from the drama of the preceding decade occurred to what 
Gascoigne calls a "theatre of action." 21 According to 
Morgan Himelstein, this drama was a new movement on the 
American stage. For "[u]nlike the nineteen-twenties," he 
contends, "when New York had but two minor companies 
devoted to the social drama--the Workers' Drama League and 
the New Playwrights' Theatre--the thirties saw the 
creation of many more social theatres." 22

Since the political and economic events of the 
thirties had caused great ferment in England and Germany 
as well, playwrights in Europe also established a 
connection between Marxism and literature under Soviet 
influence. This happened when they heard the Soviet 
Writers Congress' definition of the Party line on 
literature at the first exhibition of the Writers

20Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century 
21Gascoign, Twentieth Century Drama 25.
22Himelstein, Drama Was a Weapon 4.

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International Congress in August 1934: "in an epoch of class struggle there is not and cannot be a literature which is not class literature, not tendencious, allegedly non-political."\(^{23}\)

Marxist and Soviet ideas emerged most clearly in the works of W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood. Auden's play, The Dance of Death, is an elaborate example of "a parable of Marxist economics"\(^{24}\) in dramatic form. The central theme of the play, the inevitable decline of the bourgeoisie, clearly represents a concept that is central to Marxist theory. The first speech of the play itself explicitly defines this theme:

> We present to you this evening a picture of the decline of a class, of how its members dream of a new life, but secretly desire the old, for there is death inside them. We show you that death as a dancer.\(^{25}\)

The dance conventions that the play presents symbolize the Marxist view of the middle class: an existence both aimless and inane. Sun-bathing routines project leisurely


\(^{24}\)Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation 129.

bourgeois dreams, their excessive individualism and social irresponsibility. Each routine features a dancer as leader, who dies in the last scene while a mock-chorus sings a ballad of economic history. The dancer represents fascist leadership that is destroyed when Karl Marx enters the stage. The lyrics of the choral music conveys the political message:

O Mr. Marx, you've gathered  
All the material facts  
You know the economic  
Reasons for our acts.

In response, pointing towards the dancers, Marx replies: "the instruments of production have been too much for him. He is liquidated."26

The dancers' destruction at the hands of the new Marxian economic force implies that fascist leadership is futile and cannot survive for long. The dancer represents the Marxist conception of "the ultimate Truly Weak Man, the expression of the neurosis of his class . . . ."27 The important force is the one about which the chorus sings--

26Auden, The Dance of Death 38.
27Hynes, The Auden generation 129.
economic determinism and control of the instruments of production.

In The Dog Beneath the Skin Auden presented the political awareness of the two playwrights through a well-painted picture of a Europe tormented by the fascist crisis. In the Ascent of F-6 Auden and Isherwood consolidated the various strands of the focal year 1936, which witnessed the ugly reality of the civil war in Spain. And in On the Frontier the two playwrights focussed on the dilemma of a European nation divided into two opposing camps--fascist and communist.

Such a message, indeed, reveals the state of mind of British literary writers at the end of 1933, when political and social conditions had forced their attention upon politics. According to Samuel Hynes, "This [political awakening] was more than simply a new political awareness; it was a transformation of consciousness, by which one set of preoccupations had been replaced by another." Julian Bell summarized this transformation in a letter to the


31Hynes, The Auden Generation 129.
New Statesman in December 1933:

As far as an interest in literature continues it has very largely changed its character, and become an ally of Communism under the influence of Mr. Auden's Oxford Group. Indeed, it might, with some plausibility, be argued that Communism in England is at present very largely a literary phenomenon. . . .

In the United States, the transformation of drama was most clearly visible in the works of dramatists who had previously concentrated mainly on experimentation and whose social leanings were earlier unspecified. This change was most evident in the plays of John Howard Lawson. He candidly admitted that it was his "aim to present the Communist position, and to do so in the most specific manner." His prompt abandonment of his experimentation with expressionism in the Depression play Success Story (1932) testified that he was now channelling his protest into specific political directions. S.N. Behrman, who was earlier writing comedies, demonstrated, in 1932, his involvement with contemporary issues, in Biography.

A change was also observable in the plays of Elmer Rice, whose We, the People (1933) recorded his awakening

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33Quoted in Himelstein, Drama was a Weapon 60.
to the social conditions of the thirties. Through this play, Rice exposed corruption in the American social system and proclaimed an imminent need for social reform and restoration of equality for everyone. Maxwell Anderson, who concentrated mainly on writing historical verse drama, also became increasingly involved in the thirties with themes of liberty and rebellion in such plays as *Valley Forge* (1934), *The Masque of Kings* (1937), *High Tor* (1937), *Second Overture* (1938), and *Key Largo* (1939). Robert Sherwood replaced his efforts at comedy in *The Road to Rome* (1927), *The Queen’s Husband* (1928), and *Reunion in Vienna* (1931), with the world of social commitment in *The Petrified Forest* (1935), *Idiot’s Delight* (1936), *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1938) and *There Shall Be No Night* (1940).

According to Emory Lewis, with the establishment of this new drama, the thirties became "a time when [American] theatre was at its most exciting, when the nation’s deepest spiritual values were revived and strengthened on stage."

This development in theatre, of a new concern with social reality, resulted in new theoretical forms of

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dramatic production. A number of the early plays of the socially efficacious theatre, such as Dimitroff by Art Smith and Elia Kazan (1934), and Newsboy (1933), adapted from a poem from V.J. Jerome) had adopted the agitprop—a dramatic form that the German speaking Proletbuhne and the Workers Laboratory Theatre (WLT) introduced with a view to addressing their social concerns with greater effectiveness.35 Agitprop was a Marxist theatre form that constituted a short play written for the purpose of agitation and propaganda. It was loosely constructed of episodes and offered satirical caricatures instead of real characters. It featured actors who spoke directly to the audience from the stage and called for audience participation in the show. There was no restricted venue for its performance. Agitprops could be staged at street corners, factory gates, parades, picnics, parks, strike headquarters, picket lines and workers clubs.36 Activist playwrights adopted it in order to make the propagation of their radical ideas more effective to illiterate and ignorant workers. Because of the form’s direct agitation and propaganda, these troupes could easily present the

35 These were amateur theatres created by the Communist Party.

36 Ira A. Levine, Left-Wing Dramatic Theory In the American Theatre (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Press, 1985) 93.
Marxist critique of the capitalist system, and thereby attempt to arouse the workers for collective action to replace the system. Its mobility attracted socially committed playwrights, who viewed this feature as a viable means of reaching the masses, instead of having the latter go specially to a theatre to watch a play. Mobility also made the agitprop inexpensive, as it did not require a formal stage for presentation. Its producers simply used home made props and street corners for a stage, a setting where the actors could deliver their lines in a straightforward manner. In this way, the worker who was not accustomed to the complexities of the theatre could easily comprehend the message of the play.

The agitprop form had immense appeal for those socially aware playwrights who found it an effective way of dramatizing their revolutionary ideas. Hence, Michael Gold presented *Strike*, the first agitprop play in America, and Art Smith and Elia Kazan presented *Dimitroff* (1934), which showed the growing economic conflict between the working class and the rich elite. By presenting America’s class struggle on the streets or stage, producers of the agitprop drama intended to create a proletarian audience.

Agitprop’s acceptability increased ultimately and it became popular even with non-communist artists like Hallie
Flanagan (director of the Vassar College Experimental Theatre and later head of the Federal Theatre). Seeing it as a useful forum for the expression of social ideas, she encouraged the production of three agitational plays on the college stage in 1931: Miners are Striking, We Demand, and Can You Hear Their Voices?

Agitprop, however, suffered from serious flaws and limitations. It proved to be less efficient than its proponents estimated. The ideas that it disseminated to the public were dogmatic; it repeated revolutionary slogans and was often boring in its presentation of stereotypical characters. Furthermore, it often confused the workers with subtle symbolic representations. For instance, a character wearing a silk hat and symbolizing a capitalist could also mean a rich person, someone the workers might admire as a symbol of reward for hard work, frugality and self-service. This limited agitprop’s appeal to only the militant and already converted audience, thus defeating the socially committed theatre’s purpose of spreading the message of protest among an audience that included the middle class and the Depression-afflicted upper class. To have such a mixed audience was crucial for the growth of this theatre. The

37For details see, Stephen Karnot, "From a Director’s Notebook," New Theatre (June 1934) 13.
importance of having a varied audience is evident from Odets' remark in his Journal on January 23, 1940:

\[\text{[I]}\text{n my opinion, an attempt to reach as broad an audience as possible should always be taken into consideration. I thought once that it would be enough to play in a small cellar, but I soon saw that those who would come to the cellar were not the ones in need of what I could say.}^{38}\]

Therefore, it was important to find another -- more objective -- dramatic form which would hold the viewer's interest as well as convey the playwright's message. Moreover, since the playwrights were concerned chiefly with the effective dissemination of their humanitarian message to the public, they did not want their works to sound like propaganda--a risk that the agitprop obviously posed. Therefore, playwrights were eager to abandon it. They did not mind a variation in their style of presentation as long as they could get their point of view across to the audience.

Realizing the importance of the change to a more professional theatre, the League of Workers Theatre\(^3\) confirmed that indeed the agitprop's dogmatism, sectarianism, repetitive slogans, stereotyped

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38Odets, The Time is Ripe 15.

3The League of Workers Theatres was formulated in 1932 at the first national conference of Workers' Theatres to coordinate various left-wing theatre groups.
characterization and confusing symbolism appealed only to converted workers. In fact, at the 1934 Workers Theatre Conference, Mark Marvin hinted at this flaw when he remarked that as in "the Proletarian novel and short story of this country, there is too much stylization, too much abstract speech, too little variation in theme, and a too quick development of characters."40

For this reason, a change occurred in the style of presenting social drama. From the amateur agitprop, playwrights now shifted to a professional form of drama with theatrically advanced techniques emphasizing realism. Realism evoked audience involvement by presenting a strong illusion of reality on stage. The technique helped workers to identify with characters who appeared to be impersonations of themselves. Writers and producers intended this identification to arouse indignation towards social injustices. The professionalism of this technique emerged from the weaving of socio-political ideas to a realistic plot.

The League also decided to include in its policy the establishment of stationary theatres such as the Theatre Union, which had as their purpose the production of plays that dealt with economic problems in a professional

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manner. By doing so they hoped to bring into the theatre a discontented middle-class audience and others who were directly concerned with those problems. By accomplishing this objective, these theatres also sought to distract American theatregoers from the commercial theatre.

This policy of professionalization produced the desired result. The Theatre Union, the first professional stationary theatre established in 1933 in New York, drew a large crowd of people at its presentation of George Sklar’s and Albert Maltz’s *Peace on Earth* on 29 November, 1933, and subsequent plays that depicted "economic and social problems experienced by the majority of Americans." It also attracted a large audience by establishing a price scale that was affordable to viewers.

As a result of this process of professionalization, in 1934, the Workers Laboratory Theatre (renamed the Theatre of Action) reorganized itself on a full professional basis to produce realistic plays to be performed indoors. Soon, it offered realistic dramas such as Peter Martin’s *Daughter*, and his 1935 production of *The Young Go First*. Martin also worked in collaboration with George Scudder and Charles Freidman. The Workers

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Laboratory Theatre also produced the realistic agitprop Newsboy.

The swing towards Realism had actually occurred before 1934 when the Theatre Collective, a subdivisional organization of the WLT, had decided to stage realistic plays in the manner of Broadway, while working along the Communist Party line. In 1933, it had produced Paul and Claire Sifton’s 1931 . Yet, this conjunction of agitprop and realism had been amateurish. Nathaniel Buchwald, the critic for New Theatre, complained after the Theatre Collective’s presentation of Olga Shapiro, Jack Shapiro and John Bonn’s Marion Models that “the play was an unhappy marriage of realism and the agitprop. While the bosses and the model were human . . . the slogan-spouting union organizers were not.” The Theatre Collective’s similar unsuccessful ventures, such as the revival of scenes from Odets’ Till the Day I Die in 1935 and Albert Maltz’s Private Hicks in 1936, led to its demise.

After 1934, however, the change to realism became more professional. In order to sustain this professionalism, in 1934 the League announced a playwriting contest through its magazine, New Theatre. In this advertisement, it expressed its penchant for

“Himelstein, Drama was A Weapon 20.

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realistic plays on social themes:

The day of cliche and mechanical statement has gone by for the worker’s theatre . . . . An animated symbolic pantomime in a whirl of top hats and red-faced fists punctuated with appropriate slogans, may clearly illustrate to the intellectual the theory of surplus value, but the worker would prefer a vivid dialogue between a worker and a boss in terms of cash and cabbages. The class struggle has many channels and facets. A prevailing monotony apparently assumes that a worker has no life outside his place of work, forgets that he also thinks in terms of love, life and death outside the shop. . . . This theatre calls for characters that breathe, in situations that are real."

Clifford Odets responded to the advertisement, submitted Waiting for Lefty, a realistic agitprop, and won the first prize. In January 1935, the first night when the League staged the play on a ‘new theatre night’ proved to be an unprecedented event in the history of American drama. The play dramatized political events through easily recognizable human characters on stage with the purpose of inducing total absolute audience identification with the plight of the characters. Centered around the revolt of a taxi driver’s union against corrupt bosses, the play presented the economic suffering and consequent emotional crisis of working-class and middle-class characters. Among these are an actor, a poor worker named Joe, a lab

assistant, and a stenographer—all of whom are under pressure from peers and a beleaguered economy.

To give a convincing picture, Odets merged agitprop devices such as the direct incitement of the spectators, the choral response at the end of the play, the episodic structure, and the use of Marxian slogans, with a realistic atmosphere on stage that presented the troubles, hopes, emotions, and political beliefs of believable characters. Instead of the cartoon-like bosses in previous agitprops such as Dimitroff, Odets portrayed them as having real lives and occupations. Because the characters in the play created the illusion of being real, they appeared to be more terrifying. Odets further imparted a realistic touch by having his characters speak the typical working-class dialect. Furthermore, his use of the entire theatre—stage and auditorium—created a sense of realism by giving the audience in the hall an illusion of being present at an actual union meeting. The use of this technique proved to be successful. Exhilarated at the presentation of their own lives on stage, the audience, by the end of the play, became as involved as the protesters on stage and responded to the question addressed on the stage with an almost spontaneous cry of "Strike! Strike!" This was a significant achievement over previous agitprop dramas in which the use of caricatures,
instead of humanized workers, made the characters look fictitious. *Newsboy* illustrates this example, which despite being a powerful agitprop play, had far less impact than *Lefty*.

Vital to this kind of theatre was the need for constructive criticism, an alternative replacement for the existing system as strategy for relieving human suffering. Therefore, along with presenting the crisis in the lives of the working and middle classes, Odets in *Lefty* introduced the *Communist Manifesto* to the audience, thereby suggesting the establishment of a system based on Marxist lines, as a means of eradicating economic disparity and social inequality.

The play’s virtue was its content, which came through with an evident excitement and vitality. Conspicuously, the play deprecated the life and style of the middle class. By projecting contemporary socio-political events through a realistic mode, Odets imparted a new trend to the conventional realistic drama. He also achieved at a critical point in American drama what playwrights like John Osborne achieved two decades later in British drama. Indeed, the stormy response that *Waiting for Lefty* received is similar to that which followed Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*; in 1956 England this play likewise created a public furore when submitted to the Royal Court Theatre.
in London."

Socially committed playwrights' method of interweaving political ideas into a realistic plot for the purpose of conveying their commitment with greater intensity was indeed a technical innovation on the part of the social theatre. Its chief characteristic was that it imparted a social function to the conventional realistic device, and a professional character to the movement.

Though social realism was the chief device that these playwrights used for expressing their message effectively, Bertolt Brecht's Epic theory cast a considerable influence on social drama in the latter half of the 1930s. At this time, Brecht and Erwin Piscator incorporated Marxist philosophy into German drama. These playwrights believed that the task of a socially committed theatre was "to take reality as a point of departure and underline the discord of society so as to introduce the

"In 1956, protest was in the air in England, and the mood had changed from experimentation in the arts to one of grim political consciousness. This situation was similar to that which existed in America in 1935, where the theatrical dilettantism of the 1920s had given way to political awareness that the despair of the 1930s had motivated. For details, see John Russel Taylor, The Angry Theatre (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969).

"In social realism, reality is seen as the movement of social forces, and realism in this sense becomes a conscious engagement of the artist with social issues.
elements of accusation, revolution and the new order."46

Epic theatre differed from realistic revolutionary drama in that the former had a non-illusory style which was designed to impart an explicit social or political message by intentionally destroying the verisimilitude which completely absorbed the spectator’s attention. However, despite the difference in form, they shared a common didactic purpose and the desire to confront the audience with specific social and political alternatives. In 1935, the Theatre Union staged Brecht’s Mother, born out of his Marxist commitment. The Epic form also achieved substantial popularity through the Musical Revue and the Living Newspaper47 (productions of the Federal Theatre), both of which incorporated the Epic technique. The Musical Revue presented Blitzstein’s satire on capitalism and Fascism in The Cradle will Rock (1937) and Harold Rome’s Pins and Needles in the same year. These plays endorsed an anti-fascist political outlook in a light-hearted manner.

46Quoted from the chapter "From Expressionism to Epic Theatre," in Frederick Lumley, New Trends in Twentieth Century Drama (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 83.

47 The Living Newspapers were plays the Federal Theatre created for the purpose of social commentary and exposure of social problems to the masses.
By the middle of the decade, the movement toward a socially committed theatre had bloomed from an amateur into a full-fledged professional one. According to Malcolm Goldstein, it had developed from "what had begun in the murky days of the Wall Street Crash as an amateur enterprise . . . into an efficient institution confidently run by industrious professionals." 48 Its presentation of contemporary social themes began to overshadow the commercial drama of Broadway, which had paid little attention to the gravity of developing social problems. Impressed by its intensity, Bosley Crowther, a drama critic, commented in the New York Times that the socially oriented revolutionary theatre was displaying "undeniable evidence of artistic quality and dramatic force." 49

Awestruck by its impassioned zeal and dedicated involvement in the social struggle, Brooks Atkinson, remarked in the New York Times:

If there is any trend in today's theatre it is the vigorous advance of the drama of the left. The revolutionary theatre is forging ahead. It is becoming increasingly dynamic and is no longer a skirmish on the fringe of the theatre, for it has a coherent program and is inflamed with a Crusader's zeal. The Broadway theatre has


no program and no convictions; and in the midst of vast social upheaval, it has no comment to make.50

The frequency of socially committed theatre groups’ productions of plays with socially relevant themes during the decade imparted a uniqueness to this movement in American drama.51 The theatre’s puissant quality even compelled Broadway to stage some socially significant plays, like Sidney Kingsley’s Dead End, Maxwell Anderson’s Winterset, and Sherwood’s The Petrified Forest. Journals such as the Times Literary Supplement recognized the movement’s impact, stating:

An odd outlook, it may well appear, to capture so successfully, in Capitalist and individualist America of all places, so many adherents, even among those notoriously unstable beings, artists and intellectuals.52

Whereas Marxist and socialist influence on socially committed drama in the United States and even Great Britain in the first half of the decade was a result of


51 Socially committed theatre groups were the Theatre Union, The Mercury Theatre, Labor Stage, The New Marxist League, and The Federal Theatre. For information on these groups’ productions of social plays during the thirties, see Himelstein, Drama Was a Weapon.

52 Quoted in Rabkin, Drama and Commitment 35.
economic collapse, it made its impact in the latter half because of the rising threat of Fascism and fear of another war.

The Communist Party's Popular Front, formulated to save democratic institutions from totalitarianism influenced the theatre of protest to include a broader range of plays dedicated to the struggle against war, Fascism, and censorship. At this juncture liberal playwrights like Rice and Sherwood viewed any effort towards suppression of fascist forces as a valid reason to affiliate with the communists. By the middle of the decade, thus, Himelstein observed:

[T]he new theatre movement . . . encompassed plays written from many political points of view. There were the liberal dramas, as left-wing as the New Deal. There were the Marxist plays that explained the Depression problems by the philosophy of economic determinism. There were liberal plays with Marxian overtones. And finally, there were Communist dramas that not only followed the Marxian analysis of American society but also called for the violent "transition" to a Soviet America." 53

In view of this new policy, the League of Workers Theatre was rechristened New Theatre League in 1935. Even though, under the new policy, there was a retreat from the production of plays with overt Marxist content, committed

53Himelstein, Drama was a weapon 4.
playwrights wrote plays that were sufficiently political to arouse the consciousness of the working class and awaken the upper class elites to new horizons of life. Clifford Odets, in writing about the depredations of German Fascism in *Till the Day I Die*, brought forth angry voices against Hitler’s tyranny. George Sklar’s *Life and Death of an American* (1939), Michael Gold and Michael Blankfort’s *Battle Hymn* (1936), Rice’s *American Landscape* (1938), and Sherwood’s *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1938) are some of the plays of the Popular Front period that portrayed themes of Americanism and native heroes.

At the close of the decade the drama of the Popular Front consisted of works by Marxist playwrights like Odets, Communists such as Lawson, socialist liberals like Behrman and Rice who treated Marxist moralism with seriousness but did not listen to the Communist Party’s dictates. It also included some non-communist pacifist liberals like Sherwood.

Despite the differences that occurred between the thematic content of plays before 1935 and those of the Popular Front, the target of attack was clearly American economic and political policies. For example, revolutionary works such as George Sklar’s *Life and Death of an American* (1939) and liberal anti-fascist works of Sherwood and Rice were essentially concerned with changing
American policies to achieve political peace and social equality and a society free from the pressures of Fascism and war. An important fact, however, is that despite the difference in the plays’ political content and the diversity of their political beliefs, socially committed playwrights shared a sense of the writers’ social responsibility. This was a task they felt compelled to fulfill through their plays by constantly emphasizing the demerits of the existing socio-economic system in America and the need to create a better society.

After 1939, political commitment and sociological content in the plays of these writers became less evident and the theatre of protest staggered. This was because the World War II loomed and soon became the playwrights chief preoccupation. The war was no longer a feared future but a present reality that required more action than words. Furthermore, Hitler’s and Stalin’s entry into Poland through the infamous Non-Aggression Pact caused disillusionment with the Soviet Union who they viewed as a beacon of hope for suffering humanity. The U.S.S.R’s pact with Germany, the epitome of totalitarianism, seemed like a betrayal of faith that these playwrights had vested in Soviet Russia. Deeply disillusioned with this development, they found their revolutionary ventures to be discardable and turned to a large extent to a revival of personal
themes over socio-economic ones.

Nonetheless, the impact of this highly politicized and humanized literary genre during the 1930s should not be overlooked. Even though it did not have an absolute impact upon the American theatre, it did, as Gassner believes, have an influence for a time because of its revolutionary fervour. For this reason, drama of the thirties did not lose its complete foothold on the American literary scene. Socially committed drama endured as a result of the inexorable effort of committed playwrights to maintain their responsibility for dramatizing social issues. Examples of such works are Sherwood’s The Rugged Path (1945), Odets’ Night Music (1940), and Elmer Rice’s Flight to the West (1941).

The effort to bring about social change on the part of Odets, Rice and Sherwood is indicative of their belief that America, with its much-vaunted political economic system was passing through a deep psycho-sociological malaise. They felt that the country desperately needed a critique as well as a catharsis in the form of dramatic protest. Therefore, they were engaged in making the theatre a powerful tool of change in the hope that "social evils could be destroyed, injustices eliminated,

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54Gassner, "Foreword. Politics and Theatre," Drama was a Weapon ix.
inequities eradicated, humanity saved, and the 'good society' erected . . . ."55 This fact, however, raises an important question: How effective and influential was the socially committed theatre movement in changing the course of drama in America?

Insofar as its content is concerned, social drama gave a new direction to American theatre. Its conjunction with "the special problems of the nineteen-thirties gave American social drama a sense of novelty"56 and generated a strongly motivated form of socio-political drama that American theatre had never witnessed before. Its social commentary and dramatization of themes pertaining to class struggle transformed the theatre from a medium of entertainment to a vehicle for educating the public about contemporary socio-economic problems. Socially committed drama's effort to promote, in explicit and implicit terms, a reconstruction of the socio-economic order and project contemporary reality on stage, gave the American theatre tremendous vitality and courage. Its social analysis, strident criticism, unabated portrayal of the suffering of the dispossessed and hopeful visions of better conditions showed the courage of the dramatists themselves and their

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56Himelstein, Drama Was a Weapon 4.
hopefulness in a decade of political and economic flux. Gassner wrote two decades later that to the "theatre of the thirties, . . . social fervor and compassion gave an indisputable vitality found nowhere else in the world during the decade-- a vitality plainly not yet recovered in some twenty New York seasons."57

Drama of the thirties firmly consolidated the relationship between theatre, politics and commitment. Although literature was never completely apolitical, in that some American artists have, from time to time, dealt with vital political issues such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the theatre's intensity during this period further strengthened this relationship. Moreover, socially committed playwrights' involvement with issues that were vital to American society imparted a new indigenous impetus to American drama and decreased its dependence on European sources.

The theatre of the thirties new outlook of collective revolutionary action gave considerable impetus to the proliferation of a number of amateur and professional radical theatre groups such as the Group Theatre, Theatre Union, Theatre of Action, Theatre Collective, the Playwrights Company and numerous others. These groups "saw

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57 Gassner, "Foreword," *Drama Was a Weapon* xvi. **

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themselves unambiguously as adjuncts of the revolution, as instruments in the class war."⁵⁸ By virtue of bringing together politically conscious dramatists, the new theatre organizations helped writers to meet and exchange ideas on the working of the theatre and its functional value.

The drama of the thirties differed from the drama of the preceding era by catering to a new audience. Its emphases upon new ways of perceiving social discord on stage and new sets of social attitudes and values were designed to appeal to the working class, the illiterate and the unemployed. In this way, socially committed theatre also showed that drama was redeemable as an art form useful to society for direct political and economic change.

Socially committed drama arrived at a time when there was an intense need for players to entertain and educate workers. In this sense, theatre of the thirties brought about the convergence of a clearly defined theatrical and historical moment.

Despite its unique contribution to American drama, however, theatre of the thirties accomplished less than it intended. It failed to motivate and to mobilize the public to take collective action for a new economic and social

⁵⁸Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century Drama 199.
order in America. Drawn to Hollywood films and its escapism, the American public, largely speaking, remained indifferent to these plays. Lack of funds and public indifference resulted in its ultimate demise. The socially committed drama of the 1930s, particularly after World War II, lost its momentum and appeal in the American theatre. As the post-war economic recovery created more jobs and raised employment, people’s faith in the system revived, leaving little room for the survival of socialist ideas, and leading to a further decline in the appeal of revolutionary theatre. Moreover, Germany’s defeat in the war put an end to Fascism in Europe. Hence, playwrights like Rice and Sherwood who, earlier in the decade, had condemned war for its savagery and the misery that it inflicted upon human life, now viewed war with relief and as a necessary action for saving democratic values and human decency.

Yet, lest we forget, the arrival of socio-political drama set the stage for serious commentary on the glaring faults of the system. According to Anita Block, the highest function of art "is to serve life by revealing some aspects of truth which the artist feels the supreme need of expressing."59 By voicing their passionate

opposition to the oppressive forces of capitalism, imperialism, racism, sexism and Fascism and their harmful effects on fellow men, Odets, Rice, and Sherwood, through the medium of dramatic art, performed the important function of serving life.