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Staging *Waiting for Lefty*: Or, Agit-Prop in Ankara

Laurence Raw
Ayten Ağartan, Burcu Akcan, Berna Ayvalı, Serap Bizcanlı, İrem Bayamlıoğlu, Sibel Çekmez, Dilek Örnek, Sunal Özbek, Esra Selçuk, Ahmet Anıl Yeniay

The premiere of Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* took place on January 6th, 1935 in New York. It was listed on the throwaway without an author's name, simply as "presented by the cast of *The Eagle Guy*'" (another play that was playing at the same time). Ticket prices ranged from 25 to 90 cents. The director Harold Clurman recalled what happened soon after the play's beginning:

> The first scene […] had not played two minutes when a shock of detailed recognition struck the audience like a tidal wave. Deep laughter, not assent, a kind of joyous fervor seemed to sweep the audience toward the stage. The actors no longer performed […] Audience and actors had become one (qtd. Gibson 315).

With this propaganda piece, which cost only $8 to produce, Clifford Odets at the age of 28 had achieved his wildest dream; to present his experience to an audience in such a way that the performers and audience would merge. Most people agreed that the premiere was a unique moment in theater history. It was not just the twenty eight curtain calls; nor the fact that spectators were shouting and throwing their hats in the air in ecstasy. Rather, as Clurman recalled, it was the fact that once the final lines ("Strike! Strike!") had been delivered, the audience became aware that *Waiting for Lefty* constituted "the battle cry of the thirties […] It was a call to join the good fight for a better life in a world free of economic fear, falsehood and craven servitude to stupidity and greed" (qtd. Gibson 316).

Although the play continues to be anthologized today, there seems to be a general consensus that it constitutes little more than an historical curiosity. A trawl through the Internet reveals that it has been given the dubious accolade of inclusion on student-oriented sites such as gradesaver.com, where one critic describes it as a challenge to "blue-collar America to rise past individual fears, place faith in mass demonstration, and

possibly adopt a Communist revolution" (Wayne). Even those critics who have focused more specifically on Odets's work such as Gerald Weales observe that *Waiting for Lefty* was "tailored to do a specific job" in the 1930s (Weales 55), while Gabriel Miller suggests that "it [the play] retains its distinction not because it is a great play – it isn't – but because it represents a uniquely successful molding of the [agit-prop] form" (Miller 178). Harold Clurman himself admitted in 1979 that "*Waiting for Lefty* is undoubtedly 'dated'" (Clurman xi).

But perhaps we should not accept these opinions too readily. This article focuses in detail on a revival of the play, performed in Ankara in November 2004, which grew out of our work in an undergraduate course on American Drama. It will be divided into three sections. The first will explain our reasons for staging it in the first place, as an attempt to understand Odets's views on the collapse of the 'American Dream' at the time of the Great Depression, as characters from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds are forced into militant action by social circumstances that victimize them all. The second section will focus on how specific scenes were staged - looking at the problems presented by Odets's text, and how we sought to resolve them. Finally the article will examine the possible relevance of Odets's play to the contemporary Turkish context, which might serve to challenge the prevailing critical orthodoxy that the play is 'dated'.

Many students of American Studies harbor their own personal 'American Dreams' – for example, seeking to complete their education in American higher education institutions in the belief that they will obtain greater opportunities for professional and personal self-advancement. Alternatively they might develop a fondness for American consumer goods: the wearing of Levi's and Lee Cooper jeans becomes a status symbol in several institutions. This of course is nothing exceptional; the same could be said of students in any academic department. What differentiates American Studies students from their contemporaries is their apparent inability to connect the material studied on their undergraduate programs with their day-to-day experiences of American culture. They may study the origins and development of the 'American Dream' in history, culture or film courses, but many of them find it difficult to apply that knowledge to their own experiences. Partly this can be explained by the exam-oriented nature of the curriculum, that prioritizes essay-writing and knowledge acquisition over an ability to think across cultures. But there also exists, a belief (not exclusive to students in Ankara) that the past – particularly the past of another culture – is somehow not 'relevant' to the students' experience. Anyone teaching American Studies abroad is faced with the responsibility of developing

historical understanding and empathy, as well as promoting inter- or cross-cultural awareness. A formidable task indeed.

At least, this is what emerged during our final year undergraduate course in American Drama, which according to the course-description "aims to trace the development of the American theater in the twentieth century." With this in mind, we looked at *Waiting for Lefty* in such a way that would promote empathy both on the historical and cross-cultural levels, in the hope of developing personal responses and forging connections between the world of the text and the contemporary Turkish world. As the British teacher trainer D.Shemilt observed over two decades ago, performing a text can be "most readily justified as an aid to empathy" - even though he rather disdainfully regarded it as an example of "what Americans call 'gee whiz' history methods" (Shemilt 67). If we put the 'gee whiz' idea aside, it is nonetheless clear that staging a play may help students understand Odets's unique gift for language - a torrent of words heard on the street, in cafés, sports arenas and restaurants; in other words, the places they themselves frequent.

Why *Waiting for Lefty*? Partly our choice of text for performance was influenced by the idea of the American Dream. We wanted to stage a play that questioned certain ideas about the United States, that one regularly hears on the broadcast media. For example, we have regularly heard about the role played by the Americans in preserving the so-called 'free world' from despotism. *Waiting for Lefty*, on the other hand, has Sid rather cynically remarking that

> We [our family] worked like hell to send him to college - my kid brother Sam, I mean - and look what he done - joined the navy! The damn fool don't see the cards is stacked for all of us. The money man dealing himself a hot royal flush. Then giving you and me a phony hand like a pair of tens or something. Then keep on losing the pots 'cause the cards is stacked against you [….] Yes sir, he [the man in power] says, get up on that ship and fight those bastards who's making the world a lousy place to live in. The Japs, the Turks, the Greeks. Take this gun - kill the slobs like a real hero, he says, a real American. Be a hero! And the guy you're poking at? A real louse, just like you, 'cause they don't let him catch more than a pair of tens, too (Odets 18-19).

This type of speech not only shows how the American Dream went sour for many people in the 1930s, but suggests that their experiences were shared by many others, whether in the United States or Turkey. The knowledge of this

proved invaluable in helping the cast to identify with the experiences of the characters they portrayed.

We also chose to stage *Waiting for Lefty* in the hope of developing historical as well as cross-cultural understanding. The play is a good example of agit-prop theater, where the didactic purpose of each scene takes precedence over character development and dramatic action. Gerald Weales observes that the characters "are not realistic figures but thickened-out agitprop cartoons. This can be seen in his [Odets's] use of significant names" (Weales 48). *Waiting for Lefty* seems especially appropriate for student actors - especially the class that performed this revival that comprised nine females and one male. Roles could be exchanged at will, without concern for verisimilitude of characterization; moreover, this kind of play requires a simple method of staging, with minimal props and costumes. The aim was not to provide the audience with a 'good night out' but rather engage their emotions and stimulate their critical judgments in whatever way possible.

With this in mind, our revival began with the lights coming up on a bare stage to reveal the cast sitting on chairs arranged in two lines on either side of a desk placed at the center of the stage. All of them were dressed in blue boiler suits with a company's name emblazoned on the back (thoughtfully provided by Ayten). This enabled Harry Fatt - played by a woman (İrem) in a top hat - to talk directly to the spectators. As he spoke, the rest of the actors heckled him, using whatever epithets - whether in English or Turkish - they thought appropriate. This scene was intended to provoke the audience in two ways: first, they were directly addressed as if they were members of the striking taxi-drivers' union; and secondly, they were hearing the kind of earthy language which would not normally be expected from students (especially in the Turkish Republic). In staging this scene, we also wanted to show how the American Dream had collapsed for the workers. The playing area was bare except for the chairs, the desk and a mountain of trash - rolled-up newspapers, dog-eared flyers and discarded cigarette butts, which the actors kicked around from time to time in frustration. This underlined the importance of Joe's lines; like the cigarette-butts, the taxi drivers had been "kicked around so long we're black and blue from head to toes [….] And that's why we're talking strike - to get a living wage!" (Odets 6).

As rehearsals progressed, we began to understand the difficulty of promoting historical empathy while at the same time emphasizing the play's contemporaneity. The temptation was always to opt for the easy solution by transforming certain scenes into the kind of melodrama commonly associated with the Yeşilçam Turkish melodramas of the 70s and 80s, with stereotyped characters and formulaic plots centering mostly around a love-

affair. This was especially true of the 'Young Hack and His Girl' scene in *Waiting for Lefty*, in which Irv tries to prevent his sister Flor from seeing her boyfriend Sid, and Flor and Sid eventually decide to part for good. Gabriel Miller remarks that this scene shows how "the Depression has dug a chasm between romance and reality [….] Through music - Odets's frequent symbol of the ideal - the lovers embrace, but the moment cannot be sustained" (Miller 171-2). The situation was a familiar one; but we wanted to show how the lovers were the victims of circumstance, as economic hardship forced them to part for ever. Sid, Flor and Irv were played by three women (Serap, Sibel and Ayten): Serap and Sibel were best friends, while Ayten remained the outsider. This helped to stress the idea that despite his concern for Flor ("I remember you when you were a baby with curls down your back" (Odets 16), Irv never understands the depth of feeling between his sister and Sid. The dialog between Flor and Sid was kept largely intact, but the phonograph scene at the end was replaced by a sequence where the two of them slowly danced to the sound of a mournful bluegrass song ("No Depression in Heaven" sung by Peter Rowan) played through the sound-system. The music stopped: Sid delivered the line "Good-bye Babe" (Odets 20) and then moved off stage, while Flor looked at him. Sid suddenly turned back; Flor screamed "No!" and the two of them ran together and embraced once again. By replacing the phonograph music with the bluegrass song, we hoped to situate the action once again in its socio-historical context. The ending of the scene was rewritten to emphasize Flor's and Sid's predicament; they had to part but could not endure the thought of doing so. The fact that both roles were played by women did not seem at all incongruous: the Great Depression clearly affected everyone, irrespective of race, class or gender.

The two scenes either side of the "Young Hack and His Girl" scene – the "Lab Assistant Episode" and the "Labor Spy Episode" proved slightly more straightforward to stage. As in the opening scene, the Lab Assistant Episode began with Fayette (Berna) sitting behind a desk at the back of the playing area with Miller (Sunal) sitting in front of him. The remainder of the cast once again sat on chairs arranged either side of the desk, save for Fatt who observed the proceedings from a place immediately to Fayette's right. This emphasized the link between the two characters; their names sound the same, and their sole intention consists of exploiting the workers for personal gain. While Miller and Fayette were speaking, we introduced a new piece of stage-business in which Dr. Brenner (Ahmet) and Joe (Esra) talked silently to one another in the background; this was done to highlight Miller's observation in the text that "He's [Brenner's] an important chemist" (Odets 14). Brenner was also a fair man who, by being seen talking to Joe, demonstrated his support for the workers' cause. In Fayette's view, however,

Brenner represented a threat to national security; someone who might pass on his research to "those goddam Japs" (Odets 14). It was hardly surprising that Miller should react in the way he did, having rejected Fayette's offer to spy on Brenner, Miller stood up and felled him with one blow, repeating Fayette's line "no hard feelings" with heavy irony (Odets 15). The original text has Miller saying that there is "nothing suave or sophisticated about me! Plenty of hard feelings! Enough to want to bust you and your kind square in the mouth!" (15). Our revival omitted this speech in the belief that actions speak louder than words – as Miller delivered his knockout punch, the rest of the cast cheered, while Brenner shook Joe's hand. The workers might not have had much, but at least they preserved their self-respect.

In structural terms, this scene suggested that whereas the American Dream might no longer exist in material terms for many people, they could still draw strength from their sense of collective identity. This was reinforced further in our staging of the Labor Spy Episode (scene IV) where the dissenting voice – who reveals that the supposed strike-leader Clayton is actually a police informer (Odets 21) – was played by Burcu, the smallest member of the cast. When Fatt ordered the Gunman (Berna) to "take care of him" (21), it seemed like a clear case of bullying, with two powerful women and one man (Clayton, played by Ahmet) kicking the voice around as if she were a rag doll. The tone of the scene abruptly changed, however, once the voice revealed that she had "slept with him [Clayton] in the same bed sixteen years. HE'S MY OWN LOUSY BROTHER!" (Odets 22). Clearly the workers had nothing to fear from him any more; they got up from their chairs and chased Clayton and Fatt off, before gathering in a group center stage facing the audience, their arms around the voice. Odets's text describes Clayton as "a thin, modest individual" (Odets 20); here he was played by Ahmet, a thickset man of imposing presence. The fact that both he and Fatt had been forced to quit the stage was testament to the power of the workers both to challenge – and ultimately usurp – their superiors' authority.

The possibilities of collective – as opposed to individual – resistance, as a way of redefining one's American Drama was also stressed in this revival through a deliberate use of repeated action. Scene 1 in Odets's text ("Joe and Edna" is constructed around the motif of embrace – initially thwarted, as Joe seeks to atone for the loss of the family furniture by attempting to embrace his wife. She pushes him away with the contemptuous phrase "Do it in the movies, Joe – they pay Clark Gable big money for it" (Odets 7). However the scene ends with a symbolic – and potentially more powerful – embrace, as Joe kisses Edna "full on the mouth" (Odets 11) and rushes out to find Lefty Costello and espouse the activist cause. Our revival developed the theme of embracing still further, as Joe moved towards Edna (Dilek) but was pushed

away in disgust. The Clark Gable reference was deleted (on the grounds of obscurity) so Edna spat the line out "Maybe you'd like to talk about books?" with a derisive sneer. Once Joe had acquired sufficient self-belief to go out and find Lefty, he embraced Edna and his two children (Sibel, Burcu) who had been added as two extra characters. He subsequently turned towards the rest of the cast – sitting on chairs around the playing area – and shook their hands. He no longer had to fight alone; there were other people who shared the desire to fulfill his American Dream of social justice and an end to capitalist exploitation This seemed a more effective coda to the scene than Odets's text, which has Joe exclaiming "We gotta walk out!" before returning to his seat (Odets 11).

The importance of this belief was re-emphasized in Scene V – the Interne Episode. The action began quietly, with Barnes (Berna) telling Benjamin that he had been removed from his post at the hospital – not because of poor work, but simply because he was expendable. Benjamin initially felt sorry for himself and his family who "gave up an awful lot to get me this far. They ran a little dry goods ship in the Bronx until their pitiful savings went in the crash last year" (Odets 24). Like Joe, however, Benjamin realized that he had to take positive action if he wanted to change the world; he had to "Fight! Maybe get killed, but goddamn! We'll go ahead!" (254). At this point in our revival Benjamin got up from his seat and beckoned to his fellow workers to join him at the center of the stage. Everyone got up and joined in a clenched fist salute, yelling "Fight! Fight!" as they did so: even Doc Benjamin emphasized his commitment to the cause by stamping his foot on the line "And stamp down hard!" (25). The group then moved towards the audience and held their position for five seconds, as if inviting the spectators to join their cause.

In terms of the revival as a whole, this scene suggested that while one American Dream – of wealth, prosperity and individual freedom – might have collapsed, another manifestation of the Dream had risen like a phoenix from the ashes, based on collective action. In her definitive biography of Odets, Margaret Brennan Gibson believes that this is the play's central theme, as the author counsels himself "not to wait passively for his personal success of salvation, but to join with his Group brothers [both on and off stage] and deliver an uppercut to 'the enemy' responsible for *all* of their problems, ranging from betrayals by women to material deprivation" (Gibson 305).

With this belief uppermost in their minds, the workers became the dominant force in the play's final scene. Fatt tried to intimidate them by having the Gunman pistol-whip anyone who tried to heckle him; but it was clear that he was petrified of what might happen if the workers were

sufficiently roused. This scene was rewritten somewhat: it began with Joe - rather than Agate, as in Odets's text – emerging from the group of workers and observing (in some newly-written dialog) that he "used to think all our union officers were good. That is, until I met Fatt and his men. Now I understand what they are doing – working for themselves!!!". The long speech describing Agate's glass eye (which he wore "like a medal 'cause it tells the world where I belong – deep down in the working class!") was omitted altogether (Odets 25–6). Partly this was due to casting limitations (not enough actors for all the roles); but partly we wanted to shift the play's focus of attention away from class-conflict into a more generalized call for collective resistance. Fatt and the Gunman tried to silence Joe; but Joe broke free and rejoined the group of workers. They advanced threateningly on the union leader as Joe shouted (in another newly-written speech):

> This is your life and mine!! Christ, we men are dying every day? For what!! It's war!! Sid and Florrie, the other boys, old Doctor Barnes, Benjamin, fight with us for our rights! It's war!! We need to keep our families!! Tear down the walls of our old lives!! Let freedom really ring!!

Suddenly the scene was interrupted by the entrance of the man bringing the news that Lefty had been found "behind the car barns with a bullet in his head!" (Odets 27). Odets's text has the man coming in "up the center aisle from the back of the house" (27); this was not feasible in our revival (where no central aisle existed), so the man entered from the back of the stage. All the workers recoiled for a moment, then suddenly and without warning, they chased Fatt and the Gunman off the front of the stage and into the aisles either side of the auditorium – much to the audience's consternation. The sound of muffled cries could be heard at the back of the theater, as they finally enacted their own form of rough justice on those who had exploited them for so long. They subsequently returned to the stage in a triumphant procession, formed themselves into a group and listened to Joe's pronouncement (which had been rewritten slightly): "Hear it, boys, hear it? Hell, listen to me! Coast to coast! We're the workers of America who will die for what is right. Put fruit trees where our ashes are!!!" (Odets 27). Everyone participated in the call "STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE!!!", emphasizing their devotion to the cause with another clenched fist salute. The ending was rendered deliberately upbeat – inviting the audience not only to sympathize with the workers, but to realize the potential of collective enterprise as a way of resisting exploitation and unjustness.

In trying to assess what *Waiting for Lefty* might represent for students (and playgoers) involved in this revival, the play should not be looked at in terms in terms of its 'contemporary relevance' – whatever that may mean –

but rather examine whether it was possible to empathize with what Odets was trying to say. Despite the cast's obvious enthusiasm and commitment, perhaps the play should be best understood in its historical context as a commentary on the American Dream in the 1930s – where workers had no "safety net" to protect them from dire poverty, and no realization that Communism could also be corrupted, or that World War II wouldn't only be a bonanza for arms dealers but also an imperative struggle against fascism and genocide. In Odets's defense, however, it is certain that everyone involved in our revival would agree that *Waiting for Lefty* contains certain themes – for example, the consequences of poverty on family and/or personal relationships – which strike a chord in a context where the economy has continually veered between the opposite extremes of "boom" and "bust". There are many Harry Fatts in contemporary Turkey who exploit their fellow-workers in pursuit of personal gain. It was these themes we sought to underline by means of a simple, yet passionate staging that could metaphorically grasp the audience by the lapels and thrust them into the furnace of anger, idealism and (above all) resistance where *Waiting for Lefty* was forged by Odets and the Group Theater during the worst crisis in American economic history. This revival certainly contained rough edges; but it was precisely those rough edges that made it as powerful as a work of theater, expressing the rage Odets and his peers felt about the corruption and inequality of the capitalist economy, and how it destroyed people's dreams of wealth and prosperity (Berson). And this is something that anyone should be able to empathize with.

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