

THE GROUP THEATRE

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## The Group Theatre

Mordecai Gorelik once stated that if the Group Theatre had a theme it would be “What shall profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” Gorelik was the set designer for a majority of the twenty productions produced by The Group Theatre, a collective of young theatre artists in New York City during the 1930s. The Group Theatre formed out of unified desire to create theatre that would positively impact depression-affected America. From its origins in the 1920s, inception in 1931, to its dissolution in 1940, the Group Theatre’s founders, along with its evolving cast of players and young playwright Clifford Odets, created an experimental and innovative theatre company that became one the most influential forces in twentieth century American theatre.

In the summer of 1931, three young idealists, Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg were inspired by a passionate dream of transforming the American Theatre. These three determined artists recruited twenty-eight actors and formed a permanent ensemble dedicated to dramatizing society as they saw it. They conceived The Group Theatre as a response to what they viewed as the old-fashioned, light entertainment that dominated theatre of the 1920s. They created a vision of a new theater that would mount original American plays to mirror and possibly brighten the dark times of the early 1930s.

Clurman, in the years leading up to the official formation of the Group, talked incessantly about his vision for the theatre. These Friday night discussions began amongst friends in his room at the Hotel Maurice on West 58<sup>th</sup> Street. His fiery, sermon-like rants soon attracted more artists and Clurman, forced to find room for a large audience, moved the talks to his friend Cheryl Crawford’s larger apartment of West 47<sup>th</sup> Street. When the apartment became too small, Clurman managed to finagle a large room at Steinway Hall on West 57<sup>th</sup> Street that

was rent-free, an aspect that was essential to these starving artists. By May 1931, it was common for upwards of two hundred people to be in attendance at Steinway Hall on a Friday night.

Clurman was gaining followers like a charismatic faith healer. Stella Adler recalled his words were like a call to arms: “He said, ‘You are lost here. You won’t be able to find your way alone. Please follow me’” (Smith 4).

As he looked at the American theatre, Clurman saw an institution in such disarray that theatre artists as well as its critics could not figure out what was wrong with it. Clurman, twenty-nine years old in 1930 and a play reader for the Theatre Guild in New York City, was unimpressed by Broadway stars, unenthusiastic about their work in the classics, and doubted that any organization could give adequate theatrical expression to the American dramatists he admired. Though Clurman did most of the talking at these forums, his ideas were being shaped significantly by input from two of his friends, Cheryl Crawford, the Theatre Guild’s casting director, and Lee Strasberg, an aspiring actor and director. Soon, a clear vision which became known as the “Group Idea” emerged from Clurman:

A theatre is created when people with common interests and tastes unite to devise ways and means whereby they may give their group feeling an adequate theatrical expression. They seek out people who, for all the superficial differences of their temperament, fundamentally share the same feeling. They seek them amongst directors, actors, playwrights, scene-designers – confident all the time that the thing that binds them together must be a reflection of a sentiment that animates many people in the world about them . . . If the theatre is an art, if it has any value beyond decorating the emptiness of our existence, it too, collective art though it be, must have an analogous singleness of meaning and direction. It too must say something, it too must create from the chaos

which is the common experience of its members, an expression that will have, like that of the individual artist, an identity and significance with which people, sharing common experience, may sense their kinship and to which they can attach themselves. (Clurman Plans)

This “Group Idea” became the foundation for The Group Theatre. Clurman, Strasberg and Crawford set out to create an ensemble of actors built upon this Idea, which they had spent countless hours discussing and codifying. Though the three aspiring artists came from drastically different backgrounds, their individual talents congealed to create something new; a fortuitous primary example of the unification they set out to accomplish.

Harold Clurman was born to Russian-Jewish parents on the Lower East Side. His upbringing was not wrought with struggle or poverty, but was comprised of nearly the opposite. His father, a wealthy doctor, indulged young Harold in most of his endeavors, including dropping out of Columbia University at the age of twenty-one to move to Paris. With his good friend, Aaron Copland in tow, he explored theatre in the City of Lights, frequenting the Theatre du Vieux-Colombier and attending lectures by the theater’s principal director Jacque Copeau. Though Clurman had been enthralled by theatre from the early age of six when he saw Jacob Adler in *Uriel Acosta* at the Grand Street Theatre, it was not until his experience in Paris that the evolution of his views on theatre reached a state that could conceptualize a distinctly original American vision. In 1922, the Moscow Art Theatre trouped through Paris, and Clurman was awed by the production that so exceptionally utilized unified theatre and organized training for actors. Without Clurman’s time in Paris, his father’s willingness to indulge him, the existence of Copeau and the traveling Moscow Art Theatre, it can be surmised that The Group Theatre may never have existed. However serendipitous these events were, it was, perhaps, his introduction

to Lee Strasberg in 1925 that was the single most important event in the formation of The Group Theatre.

Lee Strasberg, born Israel Strasberg, immigrated to America in 1909 from what is now the Ukraine. His father immigrated to New York a few years earlier leaving his family behind. Finally, when enough money was saved, Baruch, Lee's father, sent for his wife and sons and the family was reunited. The Strasbergs, like the Clurmans, took up residence in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a popular neighborhood for Jewish immigrants. Lee's closest friend was his older brother Zalmon due to their mutual curiosity about all things and unquenchable appetites for books. Sadly, in 1918, Zalmon died from the influenza epidemic that swept through New York City, and despite being a straight-A student, Lee dropped out of high school; the trauma of his brother's death making it unbearable to attend school (Carnicke 45).

Strasberg was intelligent and entrepreneurial but confused about his future. He managed, with a partner, to scrape together enough money to open up a ladies wig manufacturing company. This became a mundane existence so Strasberg took refuge in theatre. Not necessarily for the art, but mostly for the social interaction as he was uninspired with his work at the wig shop. He joined the Students of Arts and Drama Club at the Chrystie Street Settlement House. There he caught the eye of Phillip Loeb, casting director for the Theatre Guild, who sensed that Strasberg could really act. Loeb approached Strasberg and asked him if he wanted to act professionally. In his typical succinct fashion, Strasberg declined with a simple "No." Like Clurman, it was witnessing the Moscow Art Theatre's work that deeply affected Strasberg and motivated him to fully delve into theatre as a career.

On 8 January 1923, Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) erupted like a volcano into the psyche of American theatre artists. They had never seen anything like the MAT's

productions of *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Three Sisters*, *The Lower Depths*, or *The Brothers Karamozov*. The “intense psychological realism of the acting, the sense of characters’ inner life resonating in every line and movement” (Smith 13) enraptured Strasberg and wowed New York audiences. There were two things that particularly impressed Strasberg: that every actor on stage, no matter the size of the role, was giving equally effective performances; and the realization that the quality of superb acting was no accident. “Obviously, this truth and reality was achieved by some singular process or procedure of which we in the American theatre had little knowledge” (Strasberg 38). Strasberg, determined to discover the methods behind this process, promptly sold his shares of the wig-making business to his partner and used the money to enroll in the Clare Tree Major School of the Theatre to make acting his career. Strasberg soon found that he possessed different goals than his cohort at the Clare Tree Major School. He wanted to be the type of actor he had witnessed in the MAT productions. While discussing these desires at school one day, a classmate mentioned to Strasberg that two former members of the Moscow Art Theatre were going to teach acting at a place called the American Laboratory Theatre. Young Strasberg dashed off to audition.

The two former members of the Moscow Art Theatre were Richard Boleslavsky, who studied with Stanislavski from 1906 to 1919 but fled Russia during the Russian Revolution and was already in the United States when the MAT came to perform in NYC and Maria Ouspenskaya, who was an actress for the MAT but decided to stay in America upon the MAT’s return to Russia. After the triumphant New York performances of his former company, Boleslavsky was invited to lecture at the Princess Theatre where he described for his American audience the secrets behind the MAT’s remarkable performances. In his lectures, Boleslavsky lamented the fact that Americans, he believed, solely created theatre as a product for financial

gain, no matter the quality and that “there are no laboratories of the theatre . . . to contemplate, to search, to create” (Willis 42). The philosophy and teachings of the MAT as explored by Strasberg at the Lab Theatre would permeate the acting techniques of The Group Theatre.

Strasberg soaked up everything he could at The Lab Theatre; his scholarly nature meshed well with the comprehensive artistic life preached by Boleslavsky. The Russian emphasized an actor’s need to learn all he/she could about history, music, painting, literature and culture. Strasberg invested fully in this philosophy and came to believe that this was the singular way to truly capture life onstage. His instinct also told him that these teachings had the potential to become an integral device in training American actors. “He knew that his own future as an actor—he was a slight unhandsome man – was limited. But soon he perceived that as a theoretician and teacher of this new ‘system’ it might become a major force in American Theatre” (Schickel 11). Instincts aside, Strasberg, still only twenty-three years old in 1924, was merely formulating his artistic style, soaking up all the information he could and churning it in his mind. It was not until 1925 that he was pushed to articulate his thoughts about theatre.

When the introverted Strasberg met the outspoken Clurman in spring 1925, the two men quickly realized that they possessed a shared a vision for theatre that stemmed from similar experiences and opinions. “Only the most compelling vision could have drawn two such different men together” (Smith 16). It was at a casting call for the Guild’s *Garrick Gaeties* that the two had their first conversation. Strasberg did not know Clurman, but Clurman knew of Strasberg, having been intrigued by the actor’s performance in Pirandello’s *Right You Are If You Think You Are* at the Belasco Theatre in 1923. For *Gaeties*, Strasberg was cast in the sketches and Clurman in the chorus, which left them ample time backstage to discuss their views on all aspects of theatre. “We were drawn together by our common dissatisfactions, our unshaped



ideals” (Clurman Fervent 11). Over the next five years, as they played small parts in Guild productions, their friendship blossomed, even though Strasberg was a difficult man to like. “In those days, I wasn’t too easy have a dialogue with” (Adams 92). Despite the differing temperaments of the two men, they spent long nights together discussing theatre.

Effectively, it remained mostly just talk. Then they met Cheryl Crawford. “Strasberg and I, as far as the theater world was concerned, were minor actors who talked a lot to whoever would lend an ear. We had no standing. So we went on with the business of job-hunting” (Clurman Fervent 24). In December 1928, after watching The Guild’s production of *Strange Interlude* for the second time, Clurman met Theresa Helburn, a producer for the Guild. She invited him to her office the next day. At the meeting, Helburn offered a job to Clurman as a play-reader for The Guild. He accepted and began his new job of January 1, 1929. During his first year of work, Helburn discussed with Clurman the possibility of producing “exceptional” (Clurman Fervent 26) plays for The Guild subscribers that would perform Sunday afternoons. The productions would be put under the supervision of Clurman, Herbert Biberman the resident stage manager for The Guild, and Cheryl Crawford, The Guild’s casting director. As play-reader, Clurman suggested a Soviet play named *Red Rust*. It was during this production, which included Strasberg in a role, that the two men figured out that Crawford was exactly the person they needed to bring their dreams to fruition.

Cheryl Crawford grew up far from the Lower East Side of Manhattan. She was born in Akron, Ohio, the daughter of a real-estate entrepreneur. Her childhood was uneventful and she daydreamed about being a missionary and leaving the dull life of the Midwest. On warm summer nights, she told fantastic stories to the children in her neighborhood on the front porch of their family’s modest home. Like Strasberg, Crawford was a voracious reader, spending endless

hours reading Dickens and Scott and memorizing poems by Keats, Shelley and Elizabeth Barrett. Her parents performed in the local Akron amateur theatrical society and she began acting in the third grade, though she did not firmly decide that the theatre was going to be her career at any point during her childhood. Overall, it was “a healthy, happy childhood. The sorrows and angers were childish ones. There were no grave problems or tragedies. Father, Mother and Grandma were a firm, solid core around which we children revolved safely” (Crawford 14). In 1921, she left Akron to attend Smith College and it was there that she became fully engrossed in the life of a theatre artist.

At Smith College, Crawford delved full on into the theatre while somewhat abandoning her Christian upbringing in favor of a more free-spirited lifestyle. She acted and directed as much as she could and in her junior year she was at the top of the list to be elected the student head of The Dramatic Association. The outgoing members decided who would be left in charge, but they were reluctant to choose Crawford because she had developed a reputation as an eccentric. She smoked, drank, and rumors of her promiscuous sex life circulated among the students. She developed an outspoken love for Nietzsche and spent “days on end hidden in remote corner of the library, reading hundreds of plays” (Crawford 17). Even so, her contribution to the college’s theatre department could not be denied and she was elected. The first play she chose to produce was *Shakuntala*. Though an odd choice of material, she worked hard on the production and it became a success, earning standing room only status for the run of its performances (two nights). Her notoriety for the production earned her a summer gig at the Provincetown Players and after graduating from college all her efforts culminated in a job replacing Philip Loeb as the casting director for The Guild. Four years into her work at The Guild, she was assigned to help produce a play suggested by a new Guild play-reader. The play

was *Red Rust* and the play-reader was Harold Clurman. Cast in the *Red Rust* was a frequent Guild actor who studied at the Lab Theatre named Lee Strasberg.

Crawford seemed much different than the volatile men who would become her partners, yet, like them, she yearned for something greater, personally and for the theatre. She disliked arguments and “would respond to people yelling around her by talking so softly that eventually they would quiet down just to find out what she was saying” (Smith 18). Crawford was organized and proactive and Clurman liked her immediately:

Cheryl Crawford was a practical person, I thought, a person shrewder, more tactful in many way, than either Strasberg or I. She had had executive experience at the Guild, and seemed to know how to deal with such people as the Guild board. With all this, she was capable of being roused to fine action when she was confronted with a sound idea or a noble motive. She had determination, moral perception, a desire to learn and grow. She was immediately caught by my analysis of the theatre situation, struck by my passion, intrigued by my praise of Strasberg’s ability as a stage director. (Clurman Fervent 28)

*Red Rust* was produced under the umbrella of an experimental off-shoot of the Guild called The Theatre Guild Studio. This facet of The Guild only lasted for one show because, in Crawford’s opinion, “The Guild’s fuse was too short” (Crawford 50). This frustrated Crawford, and Clurman and Strasberg’s ideas slowly began to impact her. While working on *Green Grow the Lilacs* (which would later become *Oklahoma!*), one of the last shows she cast for The Guild, and she worked with Strasberg again. She had cast him as the Peddler. This allowed for more long talks with Strasberg, and Clurman kept stopping by, peppering Crawford with conversion tactics.

Soon, Crawford could not help but fall under the spell of these two men. “[Lee] and Harold were as fervent in their ideas as ever. And Harold kept picking on my job and the Guild. ‘This isn’t what you really want is, it?’ he kept saying. He was very persuasive. Lee was often silent, completely nonverbal unless his passion for the theatre was aroused” (Crawford 51). Clurman and Strasberg were attempting to work with a few actors on plays in an uptown studio, but they admitted to Crawford that their efforts seemed fruitless. “They needed an executive, someone to spearhead their work. ‘Someone like you,’ Harold said. ‘Someone who believes in our approach and knows how to get things done’” (Crawford 51). Crawford halfway accepted the position and planned some informal discussions with their actor friends.

As mentioned previously, these talks began in Clurman’s hotel room but soon found much larger audiences. They struck a chord with people. They knew they were onto something and decided on a plan of action: “to go away to some country place with twenty-eight actors and rehearse two plays till they were ready for production in New York. We would pay no salaries, but we would provide meals, living quarters, laundry expense” (Clurman Fervent 36). Clurman, Strasberg and Crawford, now calling themselves “the directors” of the group were, as they say, in business. But to be in business, they would need money.

Finding initial investors proved to be easier than they initially thought. The Theatre Guild was oddly supportive. When Crawford, still under contract with The Guild, approached the board about working with Clurman and Strasberg and perhaps producing a play The Guild had optioned named *The House of Connelly* with them, the board directors agreed. They even went a step further, giving Crawford one-thousand dollars to help finance the summer retreat they were planning. The rest of the money came from various sources. Maxwell Anderson was a playwright that attended the meetings because he was in love with an actress who also attended.

At one meeting he submitted a play to Clurman for criticism. “My reaction was frankly negative” (Clurman Fervent 37), but even after handing Anderson his critique, Clurman still had the tenacity to ask the playwright for money. Anderson, perhaps trying to impress the girl, promptly agreed to donate fifteen hundred dollars. Dorothy Norman, a photographer, patron of the arts, and friend of Clurman’s donated five hundred and Edna Ferber, a Pulitzer Prize winning novelist, agreed to contribute five hundred if her niece, Janet Fox, could join in the summer work. With enough money together, Crawford began the arduous task of planning the MAT influenced summer retreat they desired to take. Prior to leaving, though, they had to determine which actors would join them on their artistic crusade.

At the heart of their mission was the idea of an ensemble. The directors were determined to leave egos at the door for the sake of art – a principle championed by the Moscow Art Theatre – but no easy task when choosing from people whose favorite thing was being on stage. Franchot Tone, an actor and friend of Clurman and Strasberg, once told an aspiring actress, “If you want to be a star don’t come to the Group. If you want to be a good actress do” (Smith 29). Strasberg, at this time, was on tour with *Green Grow the Lilacs*, and sent a list to Crawford with his suggestions for members, but left the final decisions up to his partners. The directors knew they wanted somewhat seasoned actors with a certain level of technical proficiency. They did not want to deal with amateurism. Aside from skill level though, they were more interested in the personal qualities of the actors. “We needed thinking actors, people who cared” (Crawford, Strasberg Interview). Clurman and Crawford interviewed the actors they did not know personally, and reexamined the ones they did. They examined their “character, temperament, education, background, feelings, and opinions as well as professional credentials” (Smith 29). In the end Clurman admitted the “the real basis of choice was the degree of the actor’s desire to be

a part of such a theatre “(Clurman Fervent 86). “We chose a group of twenty-eight actors, or perhaps I should say, they chose us” (Crawford 53).

Some of the actors chosen went on to become icons in the world of theatre while others slipped into obscurity. Nevertheless, in 1931, they were all considered an integral and vital part of something bigger than themselves. Bobby Lewis literally refused to be denied entrance into the Group. “The excitement of Harold’s fervent talks made the thought of going home after the Steinway Hall meetings impossible” (Lewis 37). Bobby was a short, plump character actor that fully understood that an ensemble was the only place he could truly thrive. Stella Adler was the daughter of legendary acting parents, Jacob P. and Sarah Adler, and had proven to most of her peers that she possessed as much talent as her famous parents. It did not hurt that Clurman was in love with her, despite her status as a married woman. “Here was the personification of something I wanted to integrate with my whole sense of life, someone who indeed was a living symbol of so much I desired (Clurman Fervent 28). “They began a relationship of flight and pursuit, deep affection and terrible cruelty that would amaze and appall their friends for decades” (Smith 23). In any case, Adler was on board. Sanford (Sandy) Meisner was a friend of both Clurman and Strasberg’s. He acted with them numerous times and spent long nights talking to Clurman at the Double R, a dive-bar opposite the Belasco Theatre. Meisner was a pianist turned actor that appreciated “acting which really dug at me” (Meisner 6). Meisner was a logical choice. Other selections included Margaret Baker, Phoebe Brand, Morris Cornovsky, Bill Challee, Ruth Nelson, Clifford Odets, Dorothy Patten, Eunice Stoddard, Franchot Tone, J. Edward Bromberg, Walter Coy, Virginia Farmer, Lewis Leverett, Sylvia Fenington, Friendly Ford, Gerrit Kraber, Gertrude Maynard, Paula Miller, Mary Morris, Herbert Ratner, Phillip

Robinson, Art Smith, Alixe Walker and Clement Wilenchick. In mid-May 1931, the directors sent invitation by telegram to the twenty-seven actors they chose.

All the actors accepted. Some with jubilation and some with a bit of reluctance. A good portion of the actors were on tour in *Elizabeth the Queen* and upon receiving their telegrams celebrated with group hugs and declarations that the day was the greatest day of their lives. Margaret Barker was not convinced until her mentor, Katherine Cornell, said to her “Beany, if I were twenty years younger it’s what I would want to do” (Smith 32). Others, like Bobby Lewis, were hit with unexpected requirement that all the actors contribute ninety dollars apiece for their room and board. “Democracy being what it is, the poor (like me) were expected to pay the same amount as the rich (like Franchot Tone). Ninety dollars was a walloping sum to anyone in my circle, in those days. But this was obviously going to be the most important step in my career, and I was desperate” (Lewis 38). Lewis searched for someone to lend him the money for a few days, finally asking the “one rich man I knew” and telling him “You invest in stocks and bonds. Here’s a chance to invest ninety dollars in someone’s life” (Lewis 38-39). The man loaned Lewis the money. Unfortunately, by the time Lewis had saved enough money to pay him back, the man had died. Still, he had the money and on the morning of June 8, 1931 he gathered along with his cohort in front of The Guild Theatre on West 52<sup>nd</sup> St. It was pouring rain, but the mood was electric. They were artists going on an adventure of self-discovery and artistic exploration. They were nervous and excited. Little did they know, they were about to change the course of American theatre and influence generations of theatre artists.

Their summer retreat spent in Brookfield, Connecticut proved to be a revelation for everyone involved, especially for their leaders. “The directors soon evolved their roles. Lee directed the play. Harold worked with individual actors and passionately kept our aims before us.

My responsibilities were more mundane: reading scripts, working on finance and calming tempers” (Crawford 54). Strasberg began to develop his “method” acting style with exercises using “affective memory” as well as shaping his dictatorial directing style. Strasberg lived for his work, “he hardly seems a person outside the theatre” (Clurman Strand). Crawford, at first, felt under-utilized as a fundraiser and occasional acting instructor. After careful self-reflection, though, she realized the importance of the work they were doing and that “the Group’s optimism about America, their sense that with struggles the future could be better than the past,” compelled her to stay loyal and support the Group in any and every way possible, even if she was not being fulfilled artistically (Smith 42). Clurman was in his element at Brookfield, writing in a letter to his friend Paul Strand that “Human relationships are the most important thing in the world to me and if they are not right, if art doesn’t affect them, if I do not feel that everything is round and clear in that respect then everything becomes unimportant or even futile to me. So the summer was spent in fighting within myself (or puzzling) the endless, confused, tragic enigmas of the personal, human relationships of people in the group” (Clurman Strand).

Clurman, Strasberg, and Crawford were not alone in their maturation as artists; Odets, a late selection by Clurman for the Group, was found to be an overly emotional yet quite intriguing fellow. Clifford Odets was an intense, unhappy twenty-four year old with deep psychic wounds inflicted by his parent’s miserable marriage. He began to write short stories and wrote a novel in 1929 while playing small parts in the Theatre Guild’s 1929-1930 tour. Clurman thought he was a strange man and a “terrible actor,” but one night, Odets, eager to please his peers, began a “high-flown monologue linking acting with polyphonic music of Beethoven, his hero, rattling on and on in an incoherent yet oddly moving fashion” (Smith 30). Odets began to write for the Group during the Brookfield summer retreat. He wrote an autobiographical play entitled *910*



*Eden Street* as well as a play about his hero, Beethoven. Clurman, though, dismissed both works as juvenile, but could see the underpinnings of a creative spirit yearning to be released. He encouraged Odets to keep writing. Odets' writing that summer may have been of no consequence, but his body of work would end up being a key to the company's success. A company, that when it came time to return to New York City, had yet to come up with an official moniker.

There are differing accounts about how The Group Theatre name became official. It was definitely debated on during the entirety of their summer in Brookfield. Names like The Atlantic Theatre and The New Theatre Commune were thrown around. Gerald Sykes, in the community diary which was kept during their time in Brookfield, wrote:

There is no need to look about for a name. You have as it is the best kind of name, one that means something to all of you: Group Theatre...You are new. There has never been anything like you before. You can't go to the past for the name. Let them turn their noses at the bareness of Group Theatre. Five years from now others will be imitating it. (Smith 55)

By this account, the name was settled prior to their exit from Brookfield, but Clurman claims it was much simpler. "At the last moment, when the company got back to New York, on August 17, the three directors decided amongst themselves that since they had always referred to 'our group' they might as well accept the inevitable, and call their company The Group Theatre" (Clurman Fervent 55). In any case, the name was official and The Group Theatre had a play they were ready to put in front of an audience.

The Group began their inaugural season with the production they had rehearsed all summer, Paul Green's *The House of Connelly*. In order to get enough money together to get the

play produced on a New York stage, they needed to make a deal with the Theatre Guild. Upon seeing a run-through, the board of directors of the Guild agreed to fully pay for the production with the stipulation that they recast two of the roles; if the Group chose not to recast they would only put up half the money. This was not a difficult decision for the Group because at their heart they were an ensemble, so they immediately took on the challenge of raising the other half of the funds. Clurman in those days said he had a sort of “God will provide” attitude toward the finances of the operation, much to the chagrin of Crawford who was left to see the practicality of financing and providing for a company of thirty artists. Fortunately, *The House of Connelly* opened at the Martin Beck Theatre on 28 September 1931 and met with relative success, earning the Group credibility with the Guild, audiences, and giving them a bit of financial breathing room. However, their next production, *1931*, was a dismal failure and closed after only nine performances. Thus began the ongoing financial struggle that would eventually begin to tear the Group apart.

Meanwhile, Odets was slowly finding his way as a playwright. His friend, Elia Kazan, an eventual member of the Group Theatre and later, a famed theatre and film director, read *Victory*, Odets’ play about Beethoven. He told Odets unequivocally that it was “terrible” (Kazan 101). Thinking himself more of an actor anyway, Odets threw himself into the teachings of Strasberg, later saying that “my chief influence as a playwright was the Group Theatre acting company, and being a member of that company . . . and you can see the Group Theatre acting technique crept right into my plays” (Mendolsohn 9). During the summer retreat in 1933 to Warrensburg, New York, Odets began writing a play about a middle-class Jewish family in the Bronx, initially called *I Got the Blues* then retitled *Awake and Sing!*. With encouragement from his fellow artists, he worked diligently on the play, and the Group performed Act II of the play

for the other camp residents. The audience was enthused, but Strasberg still felt the play unworthy of a full production. Still, Odets kept writing. Odets' first play to be fully produced was a one-act play entitled *Waiting for Lefty*. It premiered on Sunday night, 5 January 1935 at the Civic Repertory Theatre on Fourteenth Street. The play was a series of interconnected scenes depicting workers for a fictional taxi company but inspired by an actual taxi strike. The climax is a defiant call for the union to strike, which brought the entire opening night audience to its feet. *Waiting for Lefty* gained unexpectedly wild success and catapulted Odets and The Group to international fame. The Group then found success with a full touring production of Odets' *Awake and Sing!*

Financial hardships and a change in organizational structure were recognized as the two main contributing forces that led to the initial demise of the group in 1936. As the notoriety of The Group Theatre was steadily increasing, the burgeoning film business was growing exponentially in both popularity and financial opportunity. By 1936, Hollywood was already well into the habit of luring talented storytellers from the theatre and began to recruit members of The Group Theatre. Recognizing their talents as actors, directors and writers, Hollywood producers began to dangle substantial amounts of money in front of members like Odets, Clurman, Strasberg, Lewis, Adler, Kazan and several of the other Group actors. This money would finally give the artists some much desired financial security. Concurrently, during their 1936 summer retreat, Clurman had put forth a paper entitled "Group Organization" that altered the Group's make-up into less of a communal democracy. In this proposition, he named himself as the managing director and Strasberg and Crawford as associate managing directors. This simply meant that Clurman would have the final say in any and all of the Group theatre's decisions. In the paper he wrote "Nothing shall be considered official Group business of which

the managing director is not informed. No decision shall be considered official unless it is stated by or through the managing director who shall specify what means are to be taken to deal with every Group contingency, complaint, or problem” (Clurman Organization 2). Any decision made by the managing director could only be overturned by a vote of three-fourths majority.

Naturally, this did not sit well with many of the actors and they were hesitant to give so much power over to one man. Some were influenced by their communist beliefs and resisted the new organizational structure. In the end, though, the members believed in Clurman and they believed in the Group and wanted to do whatever was in the best interests of the community as a whole. They voted to enact the new hierarchy. Clurman immediately began looking at plays for the upcoming 1936 -1937 season.

The artistic beliefs of the Group and its leaders had remain unchanged but its dynamic was in flux. They were still determined to work as an ensemble and attempt to make a positive impact on American society. It was these ideals, though, that, perhaps, finally led to their official disbandment. “All they really wanted, all they ever wanted, was a good play to produce, a chance to say something important about American life and grow as artists at the same time” (Smith 273). Odets brought a play to Clurman that summer called *The Silent Partner*. Clurman found it his “most ambitious and most incomplete script” (Clurman Fervent 185). Odets was angry and crushed. Clurman had promised Odets in letters to him that if he had a play that was ready they would rehearse it that summer. Nevertheless, under the guise as final decision-maker, Clurman decided to move forward with a musical titled *Johnny Johnson* by Paul Green, the author of *The House of Connelly*. Clurman initially tapped himself to direct, but after a Strasberg tirade, acquiesced his desire to direct and allowed Strasberg to take on the challenge. The

production was going to be expensive and Clurman and Crawford set out to raise money. In the end, they raised over \$60,000 to get the production on its feet.

The rehearsals for *Jimmy Johnson* were tiresome and emotionally draining. The actors were untrained vocally, the set was huge and unworkable and the actors felt they were getting no personal attention from the director, a past highlight of working with Strasberg. The actors wanted the director to direct them, but Strasberg isolated himself, focusing more on the visual elements of the production than the acting – a total paradigm shift in Strasberg’s directing philosophy. Strasberg’s unavailability had a disastrous impact on the morale of the company. *Jimmy Johnson* was a failure – critically, financially and organizationally. Unable to salvage the wreckage of the disaster that was *Jimmy Johnson*, Hollywood began to sound even better to the members of the Group.

Clurman, Kazan, and Odets and several of the actors decided it was time to give Hollywood a try. They claimed that their motivation for doing so was to earn enough money to support the next season for the Group. On 17 January 1937, most of the Group went down to Grand Central Station and said goodbye to Clurman and Kazan as they boarded a train for California. Prior to leaving for California, all the members of the Group agreed to send ten percent of their earnings back to New York in an attempt to keep the Group alive in their absence. The checks were sporadic at best and the majority of the actors were essentially waiting for Clurman to make it as a Hollywood director. Strasberg, furious over the move to Hollywood, officially resigned from the group, and Crawford waited anxiously back in New York, stewing about the future of her beloved Group theatre. Kazan was the first to plead with Clurman to get back to New York and refocus on the work of the Group Theatre. Kazan made it clear that he was committed to the Group and was willing to rededicate himself to their efforts:

Harold, I've looked up to you for five years. You've epitomized for me – as I told you – the artist. The completely resolved person, with direction fixed everlastingly and therefore with terrific personal momentum. You were always surrounded with a miasma of incompetences, like a cow is with the sward of gnats, but they never mattered fundamentally to me. The cow was always there in the middle. You were the Group Idea; that was and is your significance. That, as a religious folks used to say, is your call. Well you've won me and converted me. I say all or nothing, and I say (after Lee) I'd rather have half an apple if I want an apple and I do. To me the Group is not so much a career. IT'S A WAY TO LIVE LIFE! THAT'S WHY I'VE GOT TO HAVE IT! (Smith 308).

Clurman was bored in Hollywood and Kazan knew how to manipulate his old pal. The letter worked like a charm, and Clurman refocused his energy on the Group. On 10 May 1937, the New York papers announced that Clurman would be returning to New York that August to begin rehearsals for their seventh season.

Odets was in Hollywood placidly working on the script for a film when the call came that the Group was going to give it another try. Odets, as he had done before, was fleeing his real family, a marriage that was troubled and disintegrating, to join the Group in New York. Odets was no longer the idealistic young man who wanted nothing more than the Group theatre to produce his plays. His season as “the toast of New York and his sojourn in Hollywood had made commercial success more important than ever to someone whose desire for mainstream recognition had always been strong” (Mendohlson 91). Odets did not want to be a curiosity. He wanted the people that had “lionized him after his early success to accept him as one of them, an important New York playwright” (Smith 311).

Odets gave Clurman the first two acts of his play *Golden Boy*, and Clurman found “contained Odets’ most clearly articulated writing” (Clurman Fervent 209). The Group raised \$19,000 for the production of the play of which it owned a substantial amount. It opened 4 November 1937 at the Belasco Theatre and was a smashing success. “The success of the play naturally released all sorts of creative forces. There was a great spurt of activity” (Clurman Fervent 211). The Group was refueled and made enough money from *Golden Boy* to support themselves for at least two more seasons. Still though, this was not enough to hold the Group together. Clurman’s reasoning for this exemplifies the natural maturing and aging of artists:

This desire for some center around which one might build a life was basic, and almost all the people in and around the Group clamored for it ever more insistently. Bitter disappointment, even hate, developed within the Group itself when the Group failed to furnish such a center. Though no Group manifesto had ever promised it, there’s something in the Group’s attitude that made its members and even many outside its ranks feel it could be, should be, the focus of a world of activity that would make great actors of some, writers of others, directors, designers, teachers, organizers, producers, administrators, or a combination of several of these things of the rest. The Group’s inclusive philosophy adumbrated a cosmos; therefore the Group’s function, even its duty, was to become a cosmos. It had to provide what society itself failed to provide. Because somehow the Group’s criticism of society implied that it was above society, it had become a society within a society, a protected unit, a utopia, an oasis with the city, in which one could work out one’s life career and salvation. (Clurman Fervent 211)

Therein was the problem. So many people wanted so much from the Group, the Group just did not have enough to give. The nurturing of a driven artistic spirit of each individual, combined

with essential economic needs of the human being, became more than the Group could generate. Though the Group managed to make it for two more seasons, it was unable to carry on past 1940.

The Group Theatre is a fascinating study in the ability of individuals to come together under a shared ideal and create something magical. Their collective and individual impacts on all facets of theatre can be felt throughout the theatre world today. A conversation in a living room led to a play, *Golden Boy* that ran for 250 performances – a culmination of the artistic growth through years of hard work and dedication to artistic craft. Economics will always weigh heavily on art, which is why every artist must always ask his question: What shall profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? This is a relevant theme for any aspiring artist.



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