

Labor issues center stage in 'Waiting for Lefty'

During the one year that actor Clifford Odets was a member of the Communist Party, he wrote his famous play "Waiting for Lefty." Only 50 minutes long, the play is framed around contentious meetings in which New York City cab drivers are trying to decide whether to go on strike or not.

Staged in 1935 by New York's legendary Group Theatre, "Waiting for Lefty" struck a nerve. Soon hundreds of productions of the play appeared in small theaters around the country.



John Angell Grant

On Thursday, Stanford Repertory Theater (SRT) opened a strong production of this 50-minute curiosity at the Nitery, on the Stanford campus.

SRT's theme this summer is, "Theater takes a stand." Both this play, and last month's "Slaughter City," are stage works about union organizing in a time of economic decline.

Heated meeting

"Waiting for Lefty" begins and ends during a raucous labor union meeting. Some union members support striking, others oppose it. There is Red-baiting. One heavy needs a baseball bat to keep order in the room.

Between these opening and closing union scenes are other vignettes, featuring new characters and new storylines, but all focusing on economic issues. In one, a boss at a chemical



RAUCOUS LABOR MEETING — Joe (Austin Caldwell), right foreground, and other members of the cast of "Waiting for Lefty." Photo by Frank Chen.

plant promotes an employee into a confidential research project for the manufacture of poison military gas. Warfare technology turns out to be a big money maker. (Sound familiar?)

Odets was the most famous playwright to come out of the Group Theatre, whose members included Elia Kazan, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, John Garfield, Lee J. Cobb, Sanford Meisner and many others who achieved fame.

Odets was a member of the communist party from 1934 to 1935. He later named names during the McCarthy hearings. He went on to have a working career as a Hollywood screen writer.

"Waiting for Lefty" resonates today. Its characters are working people who don't earn enough to live on. (Sound familiar?) Palo Alto's planning commission member Kate Downing made international headlines this week by resigning her position to move her family to Santa Cruz, because she cannot afford to live in Palo Alto.

Excellent production

Stylistically, "Waiting for Lefty" is written in bombastic tough-guy Hollywood dialogue of the time. While it feels stylized, the current Stanford production is so well done, that stylization becomes part of its amusing charm.

The show is very well directed

by Marty Pistone. There is lots of high-temperature anger. The acting is strong.

Austin Caldwell portrays a desperate cabbie struggling to support his family. Thomas Freeland is the fat cat union secretary, who discourages a strike in favor of letting party leaders negotiate with business owners.

Tess McCarthy plays an angry wife who calls her husband a sucker for not insisting on higher wages. "The world is supposed to be for all of us," she reminds him.

Thoughtful play

"Waiting for Lefty" is an ode to America's uncertain future. In this election year, it invites a review of the nature of work, and the nature of compensation.

In October, just before the upcoming presidential election, SRT will present another show, "Democratically Speaking." This staged reading features an interplay of voices on democracy, including Thomas Paine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Rosa Luxemburg, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Noam Chomsky, and many others.

For tickets and information about all SRT events, visit stanfordreptheater.com.

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