

BRIGHT YOUNG MAN OF THE THEATRE

A Study of Clifford Odets

THERE is an intriguing story behind the film version of "Golden Boy," soon to be seen in New Zealand. Most people thought that Clifford Odets, brightest young man of the American Theatre, who wrote "Golden Boy," would never "get across" in Hollywood. He has had one or two rebuffs from that quarter.

The first rebuff came from Rouben Mamoulian when Mamoulian was directing Capek's "R.U.R." for the Theatre Guild. Odets had been engaged to do a walk-on part, but a suggestion was made one day at rehearsal that he be given a couple of lines.

Mamoulian bridled, "He is no good," he declared flatly.

Odets promptly took a keen dislike to Mamoulian.

When Odets was in Hollywood a couple of years ago Mamoulian sent word that he would like to make a picture with him, purely in the relationship of director and author.

"You tell that fellow Mamoulian that he is the only director I loathe, and won't work with," said Odets. The message was delivered verbatim to Mamoulian. He wasn't offended, though he still insisted that he and Odets could do a wonderful picture together.

The point of the story is that Columbia's film version of Odets's play "Golden Boy" was directed by Mamoulian.

"Just Typical"

In spite of the publicity given in New Zealand of recent years to the Odets plays, "Waiting for Lefty" and "Till the Day I Die," both of which were first played here by the Auckland People's Theatre, less is known of Odets than of his rather more meteoric contemporary Orson Welles. This is only natural. It isn't everyone who can throw America into a panic and hit world headlines overnight, as Welles did with his broadcast of the "Martian invasion." But although less spectacular, Odets is likely to be more permanent than Orson Welles.

Odets has a way of referring to himself and his career in the third person. "This boy," he says, talking of his early years, "was a very ordinary middle class boy. He did typical things, for everything about him was typical, typical, so typical."

That is about the truth of it. The father of Odets progressed from small printer to direct mail advertising agent to vice-president and general sales manager of a Philadelphia boiler company. All of it very respectable and middle-class.

Rebelled Against Convention

But young Clifford rebelled against middle-class formality and middle-class education, and middle-class jobs. Instead of settling down and writing advertising copy as his father wanted him to do, he joined a Poets' Theatre, travelled round

the United States as a Roving Reciter, relying heavily on Robert W. Service and Rudyard Kipling for his material, worked for radio stations, and spent two years with a stage company.

In 1929 Odets appeared on Broadway in a play called "Conflict," in which he under-studied Spencer Tracy, who had the lead. Shortly after he got a job with New York's widely known Theatre Guild.



LAST MINUTE INSTRUCTIONS: Rouben Mamoulian (with script), William Holden, Adolphe Menjou, and Barbara Stanwyck, study the next scene in Columbia's film version of the Odets's play "Golden Boy." Cameraman Karl Freund (at left) looks on

At this stage of his life Odets confesses he brooded a lot about the meaning of life, reaching conclusions which were always vague and unsatisfactory. The conviction grew on him that he was living in a strange tragic-comic world.

Eccentric Behaviour

A couple of years of steady brooding and he decided to turn himself into as unattractive a character as possible. He shaved off his hair, grew a beard, and adopted turtle-necked sweaters. Nowadays, even though the Dostoevski mood has left him, he still affects turtle-necked sweaters.

Odets was one of the original members of the Group Theatre. While the Group was in the process of being organised, Odets, in the solitude of a furnished room in New York, wrestled with his soul, becoming so involved that he couldn't even write.

His literary activity at this stage consisted almost entirely of voluminous letters, carbon copies of which he has to this day. The carbons have been an invaluable aid to him in analysing his development, and he makes a point of reading them every now and then.

Odets wasn't by any means an outstanding Group actor, so he started writing plays. His first play was about Beethoven. But in his diary he observed, "Here I am writing the Beethoven play, which, when it is finished, may not even be about Beethoven. Why not write something about the Greenberg family, something I know better, something that is closer to me?"

Swing to the Left

The Greenbergs became the Bergens, and the play, which was first called "I Got the Blues," finally appeared as "Awake and Sing." "Awake and Sing" emerged on Broadway when the great migration to the Left that marked the later years of depression was at its peak. Since the play clearly suggested that things were going to be a lot better after the Revolution, Leftists acclaimed Odets as a revolutionary oracle.

Meanwhile, the critics, who were more or less agreed that the revolutionary note was dragged in, saluted Odets as an infinitely promising playwright.

In the midst of it all, the Group brought out "Waiting for Lefty," together with "Till the Day I Die," an anti-Nazi companion piece. "Till the Day I Die" provoked little comment, but "Waiting for Lefty," a sympathetic description of the causes behind a taxi-drivers' strike, added to Odets's reputation considerably.

Hollywood Takes Notice

On various dubious pretexts it was suppressed more often than any other play in the history of the American

Theatre. Then with three plays on Broadway and another, "Paradise Lost" already announced, Odets began to hear from Hollywood. Although offers for his services ran as high as 4,000 dollars a week, he refused to have anything to do with the movies until "Paradise Lost" proved unsuccessful. Then, to get money, and to save the show, he took a job in Hollywood, though, by that time the best offer was 2,500 dollars a week. In Hollywood where, thanks to people like Robert Montgomery and Melvyn Douglas, the class struggle is a burning if slightly academic issue, Odets was the hero of studio Leftists.

Cocktail parties in his honour were affairs of moment. He was even threatened by a Fascist—the ultimate tribute.

Marriage to Luise Rainer

When, in January, 1937, he married Luise Rainer, who was then being shown in "The Great Ziegfeld," the publicity was awesome. The Odets-Rainer romance was a stormy one, with well publicised quarrels and reconciliations.

Odets worked on three scripts while he was in Hollywood at that time. For Paramount he wrote "The General Died At Dawn," in which he also played a small part. For some reason the part was deleted completely in New Zealand.

In person Odets is thoroughly artistic and self-conscious. He talks like some of his characters, and will often come out with a profound utterance like "How sweet and nice to get up in the morning to see the glitter of the day—like when you were a kid."

He talks standing up because it gives him a chance to stride up and down, tossing his head, swelling his chest and throwing out his arms. He often indulges in a second-balcony stare, the head thrown back, the brows raised, the eyes opened wide behind heavy tortoiseshell glasses. The truth is really that he is a frustrated actor. Odets's relationship with the contemporary theatre is a peculiar one. He himself is thoroughly dissatisfied with the American Theatre. Poor scripts, awkward direction, and what he calls "lack of creativity," depress him, and he cannot stomach the rank commercialism of the majority of American actors. So he rarely goes to any plays but his own.

On the other hand, the American Theatre seems to be thoroughly satisfied with Odets. The prevailing critical opinion of him is fairly well summed up by Richard Watts, junr., who once said: "It is pretty clear by now that Mr. Odets's talent for dramatic writing is the most exciting to appear in the American Theatre since the flaming emergence of Eugene O'Neill as an author of one-act plays about the sea. Mr. Odets has fire and freshness and vast vitality."