

Awake and Sing!

Study Guide/Lobby Packett

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Section I

Clifford Odets: A Striving Life

Clifford Odets was born in Philadelphia, on July 18, 1906, the son of a working-class Jewish family made good. Louis Odets, his father, had been a peddler, but also worked as a printer for a publishing company. In 1908, Louis Odets moved his family to New York City, where, after a brief return to Philadelphia, he prospered as a printer and ended up owning his own plant and an advertising agency, as well as serving as a Vice President of a boiler company. Odets grew up in the middle-class Bronx, not the Berger's Bronx of tenements and squalor. Still Odets described himself as a "melancholy kid" who clashed often with his father. Odets quit high school after two years.

When he was 17, Odets plunged into the theatre. He joined The Drawing Room Players and Harry Kemp's Poets' Theater. He wrote some radio plays, did summer stock, and hit the vaudeville circuit as "The Roving Reciter." In 1929, he moved into the city because of a job understudying Spencer Tracy in *Conflict* on Broadway. A year later Odets joined the nascent Group Theatre, having met Harold Clurman and some of the other Group actors while playing bit parts at the Theatre Guild. The Group philosophy became the shaping force of Odets' life as a writer. Clurman became his best friend and most perceptive critic.

Odets wrote the first version of *Awake and Sing!*, then called *I Got the Blues*, in 1934. But not until after the unexpected success of Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*, staged as a benefit for *New Theatre* magazine in winter 1935, did the Group produce Odets' first full-length work. When they did, the company found its voice and Odets found his home. Odets wrote six more plays for the Group before it closed in 1941. But Odets was a hot commodity after having four plays produced on Broadway in the same year. Before the decade was out, he was profiled by *Time* and *The New Yorker* as the flaming voice of class revolution (though he belonged to the communist party for scarcely a year) and he went to Hollywood, worked on films, and married movie star Luise Rainer.

After the Group closed and Odets and Rainer divorced, Odets moved between Hollywood and Broadway, writing plays, and films, and occasionally directing his own work. His second marriage to Bette Grayson in 1943 produced two children, Nora, born in 1945, and Walt, born in 1947 before a divorce in 1951. After having been named by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee as "active in Communist work" in 1947, Odets was called before HUAC in 1952. Friends observed that his creative force was considerably drained after his testimony. He took up permanent residence in California in 1955, after *The Flowering Peach* failed on Broadway.

In the spring of 1963, Odets fell ill with what he thought might be colitis. He had accepted a contract for NBC to write twelve teleplays for T.V. star Richard Boone just the year before and had finished three of them. At the time, he said felt a new beginning coming on and he was planning new stage plays too. He died of cancer on August 14, 1963.

Suggested Reading: Margaret Brenman-Gibson's *Clifford Odets, American Playwright: The Years from 1906-1940* and *Critical Essays on Clifford Odets* edited by Gabriel Miller.

Suggested Viewing: Odets' films, including *The General Died at Dawn*, *The Sweet Smell of Success*, and *The Story on Page One*.

Section II:

Clifford Odets and the Group Theatre

Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg founded the Group Theatre in the summer of 1931. They invited a group of 28 actors, including Clifford Odets, to a summer camp of sorts in Brookfield Center, New York. There, in a series of intense workshops led by Strasberg, the group forged an ensemble-based approach to acting and theatrical production meant to repudiate the techniques of commercial theatre acting which depended on a star system and old-fashioned business.

The "method" of acting around which the Group built its ethos was an American interpretation of the teaching of Konstantin Stanislavsky, the turn-of-the-century Russian actor and director who co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre and produced Chekhov's greatest plays. Stanislavsky's students and MAT performers Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya settled in New York after the MAT toured the United States in 1924. They offered classes at the American Laboratory Theatre in the 1930s, which Strasberg attended.

Stanislavsky's system emphasized observation, emotional memory, and authenticity of performance. Strasberg and the Group pushed the system into a method that strove to break down the difference between living in life and acting on the stage: their grail was for the actor to actually feel the emotion his or her character felt in every moment of the play. In addition to Strasberg, the Group's original membership included Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, and Robert Lewis, artists who have trained successive generations of actors in American theatre and film, including Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Al Pacino, Meryl Streep and many others.

In the 1930s, the Group Theatre considered themselves to be both artistic revolutionaries and social reformers. Their method demanded that they portray real life, the troubled life of their times: its issues, its conflicts, its dreams. The Group insisted on showing the daily life of ordinary people in new plays that dared to rage against suffering and yearned to hope for a more just society. In Clifford Odets, their goals found the greatest written expression.

Suggested Reading: *The Fervent Years: The Story of the Group Theatre and the Thirties* by Harold Clurman and *Six Plays by Clifford Odets* with preface by the author and an introduction by Harold Clurman.

Suggested Viewing: The American Masters video on The Group Theatre by PBS.

Section III:

Original Production of Awake and Sing!

The first production of *Awake and Sing!*, directed by Harold Clurman, opened on February 19, 1935 at the Belasco Theatre where it ran for 120 performances. Its success rocketed Clifford Odets to stardom and marked the Group Theatre as a leader in new American drama.

The original cast of *Awake and Sing!* had Art Smith playing Myron Berger, Stella Adler as Bessie Berger, Morris Carnovsky as Jacob, and Jules Garfield playing Ralph. Sanford Meisner

played Sam Feinschreiber, Phoebe Brand played Hennie, Luther Adler played Moe Axelrod, J.E. Bromberg played Uncle Morty and Roman Bohnen played Schlosser.

Critics gave this first staging fairly positive reviews, if slightly reserved reviews. Brooks Atkinson in the New York Times was typical in his assessment that “When he succeeds in loosening the play from the bonds of his tense craftsmanship, Mr. Odets has the fervor and the skill in direct assertion that are the admirable qualities of *Waiting for Lefty*. He may not be a master yet, but he has the ability to be one.”

Despite Atkinson’s mixed reaction on first viewing of *Awake and Sing*, by the time it was revived by the Group in 1939 he was praising it as an unjustly ignored classic: “When Clifford Odets’ *Awake and Sing* burst in the face of an unsuspecting public four years ago, some of the misanthropes complained that it was praised too highly. Misanthropes are always wrong. For it is plain after a glimpse of the revival last evening that *Awake and Sing* cannot be praised too highly... When it was first produced, it seemed febrile as a whole and dogmatic in conclusion. It does not seem so now; it seems thoroughly normal, reasonable, true.”

Suggested Reading: *American Theatre as Seen By Hirschfeld* by Al Hirschfeld and *The Lively Years, 120-1973* by Brooks Atkinson and Albert Hirschfeld.

Section IV: ***Timeline***

This timeline emphasizes the major events of Odets’ life (all in bold), but also puts them in context of the artistic accomplishments and political events that filled his world. Odets’ life spanned most of the turbulent 20th century and his work occupied cultural moments shared with the artists like Lillian Hellman, Bertolt Brecht, Eugene O’Neill, Pablo Picasso, John Steinbeck, Orson Wells and many others.

1906 Clifford Odets born in Philadelphia

San Francisco Earthquake

Upton Sinclair publishes *The Jungle*

George M.Cohan’s *Fort-five Minutes from Broadway* open on Broadway

1912 Woodrow Wilson elected President of the United States

The Titanic sinks

F.W. Woolworth Company founded

1913 United States levies income tax for the first time

George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* has its premiere

D.H. Lawrence publishes *Sons and Lovers*

Willa Cather publishes *O, Pioneers!*

Igor Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring” has first performance

1914 First World War begins

Panama Canal opens

First Charlie Chaplin films shown

- 1917** United States enters First World War
Russian Revolution begins
- 1918** First World War Ends
Worldwide influenza epidemic kills 22 million
Theatre Guild founded in New York
Eugene O'Neill's *Moon of the Caribees*, *The Rope*, and *Where the Cross is Made* all premiere
- 1920** Warren Harding elected President of the United States
Prohibition legislation passed
21st amendment extends voting rights to women in the United States
Sinclair Lewis' publishes *Main Street*
George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House* premieres
- 1921** **Sacco and Vanzetti case tried**
John Dos Passos publishes *Three Soldiers*
Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* premieres
Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie* premieres
- 1923** **Odets leaves school to begin acting career**
Time Magazine founded
Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* premieres
Sean O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman* premieres
George Gershwin releases "Rhapsody in Blue"
- 1927** **Sacco and Vanzetti executed**
Charles Lindbergh makes the first solo transatlantic flight
Babe Ruth hits 60 home runs
First talking film, *The Jazz Singer*, premieres
Virginia Woolf publishes *To the Lighthouse*
Bertolt Brecht's *Man is Man* premieres
Kaufman and Ferber's *The Royal Family* premieres
- 1928** Herbert Hoover elected President of the United States
Penicillin discovered
First Mickey Mouse cartoon premieres
Margaret Mead publishes *Coming of Age in Samoa*
- 1929** **Odets moves to New York City, understudies Spencer Tracy in *Conflict***
Stock Market Crash triggers decade-long economic depression
William Faulkner publishes *The Sound and the Fury*
Mayakovsky's *The Bedbug* premieres
- 1930** Planet Pluto discovered
Sigmund Freud publishes *Civilization and its Discontents*
Dashiell Hammett publishes *The Maltese Falcon*

- Noel Coward's *Private Lives* premieres
- 1931 Group Theatre formed by Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, and Cheryl Crawford; Odets joins The Group**
 Empire State Building completed
 "Star Spangled Banner" made national anthem
 Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* premieres
 Salvador Dali shows "Persistence of Memory"
- 1932** Franklin Delano Roosevelt elected President of the United States
 Aldous Huxley publishes *Brave New World*
- 1933** Adolph Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany
 Prohibition repealed
 Federico Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding* premieres
 Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!* Premieres
- 1935** ***Waiting for Lefty*, Odets' first play, produced in a double bill with *Till the Day I Die***
***Awake and Sing* opens at the Belasco Theatre**
***Paradise Lost* opens**
 Odets monologue *I Can't Sleep* premieres
 United States Government passes the Social Security Act
 George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* premieres
 T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* premieres
- 1936** ***The General Died at Dawn*, Odets' first film, released**
 Spanish Civil War begins
 Eugene O'Neill wins Nobel Prize
Life Magazine founded
 Kaufman and Hart's *You Can't Take it With You* premieres
 Margaret Mitchell publishes *Gone With the Wind*
- 1937** ***The Golden Boy* premieres**
 Japan invades China
 Hindenburg dirigible buns
 Golden Gate Bridge opens
 John Steinbeck publishes *Of Mice and Men*
 Picasso shows "Guernica"
- 1938** ***Rocket to the Moon* premieres**
 German annexes Austria and occupies Sudetenland
 House UnAmerican Activities Committee formed
 e.e. cummings publishes *Collected Poems*
 Robert Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* premieres
- 1939** Second World War begins when Germany invades Poland

New York hosts World's Fair
Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* premieres
John Steinbeck publishes *The Grapes of Wrath*
James Joyce publishes *Finnegan's Wake*
Films of *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* released

1940 *Night Music* premieres

Germany conquers most of Western Europe
Ernest Hemingway publishes *For Whom the Bell Tolls*
Richard Wright publishes *Native Son*
Robert Sherwood's *There Shall Be No Night* premieres, starring Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne

1941 *Clash By Night* premieres

Japan attacks Pearl Harbor; United States enters World War II
Edna St. Vincent Millay publishes *Collected Sonnets*
Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* premieres
Orson Wells' film *Citizen Kane* released

1942 *The Russian People* premieres

Fermi splits the atom
Internment of Japanese-Americans
Albert Camus publishes *The Stranger*

1943 Odets marries Bette Grayson

Allies invade Italy
William Saroyan publishes *The Human Comedy*
Rogers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* premieres

1944 *None But the Lonely Heart* released

Allies invade Europe on D-Day
Aaron Copland composes "Appalachian Spring"
Mary Chase's *Harvey* premieres
Arthur Miller's *The Man Who Had All the Luck* premieres

1945 Harold Clurman publishes *The Fervent Years*

Odets' daughter Nora born

FDR dies, Harold Truman becomes United States President
United States drop atomic bombs on Japan
World War II ends
George Orwell publishes *Animal Farm*
Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* premieres

1947 Odets' son Walt born

India granted Independence from the British Empire
Transistor invented

Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire* premieres
Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* premieres

1949 *The Big Knife* premieres

Communist Revolution in China
NATO Treaty signed
Jean Genet's *Deathwatch* premieres
Orson Wells' film *The Third Man* released
Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* premieres

1951 *Odets and Grayson divorce*

Two-term limit on Presidential Office passed
J.D. Salinger publishes *The Catcher in the Rye*
Carl Sandburg's *Complete Poems* released

1952 *Odets called to testify before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee*

Elizabeth II becomes Queen of England
Dwight D. Eisenhower elected President of the United States
Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* premieres
Jean Anouilh's *The Waltz of The Toreadors* premieres
Bernard Malamud published *The Natural*
Ralph Ellison publishes *The Invisible Man*

1954 *The Flowering Peach* premieres

Supreme Court rules on *Brown vs. Board of Education* and bans school segregation
Anti-polio vaccine introduced by Dr. Jonas Salk
Kingsley Amis publishes *Lucky Jim*
William Golding publishes *Lord of the Flies*
Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* premieres
On the Waterfront released

1957 *The Sweet Smell of Success* released

USSR launches first satellite into space
Jack Kerouac publishes *On the Road*
Ayn Rand publishes *Atlas Shrugged*
Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* premieres
Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim's *West Side Story* premieres

1960 *The Story on Page One* released

John Fitzgerald Kennedy elected President of the United States
Laser technology invented
Harper Lee publishes *To Kill a Mockingbird*
Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* premieres
Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* released

1962 *Odets signs contract with NBC to write teleplays*

Cuban Missile Crisis grips nation
Rachel Carson publishes *Silent Spring*
Benjamin Britten releases “War Requiem”
Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* premieres

1963 Clifford Odets dies

JFK assassinated; Lyndon B. Johnson becomes President of the United States
Martin Luther King delivers “I Have a Dream” speech during Civil Rights March on Washington D.C.
Sylvia Plath publishes *The Bell Jar*
Neil Simon’s *Barefoot in the Park* premieres
Dr. Strangelove released

Suggested Reading: *Clifford Odets: The Thirties and After* by Edward Murray and *This Fabulous Century*, Volume 3, 1930-1940 by Time-Life Books.

Section V:

The Great Depression

After the United States Stock Market crashed in 1929, a confluence of worldwide economic crises caused the Great Depression, the deepest and most prolonged economic downturn in modern history. Widespread unemployment coupled with droughts that caused the dustbowl in Oklahoma meant that the 1930s were a decade of deprivation: food and jobs were scarce, many people found themselves homeless, living in shantytowns called Hoovervilles. Economists and business leaders argued about how best to address the effects of the Depression. For the first part of the 1930s, non-interference was the preferred mode. But, between 1929 and 1932 the income of the average American family was reduced by 40%, from \$2,300 to \$1,500.

Only after Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president in 1932 did the United States government sponsor direct programs to combat poverty and unemployment. The New Deal, “that vast, quite unplanned aggregation of relief and reform measures,” was FDR’s achievement. Its policies won FDR the support of common voters and restored many people’s hope for economic justice. The New Deal spawned an “alphabet soup” of agencies including the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the National Recovery Administration (NRA), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), where many writers and artist who were Odets’ contemporaries found employment as part of the Federal Art project or the Federal Theatre Project.

Meanwhile, popular culture in the 1930s tried to provide escape from the tough times. Radio was the dominant form of entertainment and some of the popular shows of the decade were *Amos and Andy*, *The Shadow*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, *Little Orphan Annie*, *Cavalcade of America*, and *Jack Armstrong, All American Boy*. Hollywood, meanwhile, was in its “Golden Age,” earning its title as the nation’s “dream factory.” Major releases of the decade included *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and Walt Disney’s first full-length animated movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Suggested Reading: *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1939: Decades of Promise and Pain* by David Kyvig, and *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Depression* by Studs Terkel.

Suggested Cultural History Websites:

<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/depression/photoessay.htm>

<http://www.nhmccd.edu/contracts/lrc/kc/decade30.html>

<http://history1900s.about.com/cs/greatdepression/>

Section VI:

The American Dream and American Realism

Like Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Lorraine Hansberry and Lillian Hellman, Odets is one of the signature realists of American drama. His attention to the daily lives of striving people and his transference of domestic situations into metaphors for the whole struggle of human dignity and destiny resonate with the achievements of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Little Foxes*, and *Raisin in the Sun*.

Realist theatre in America returns again and again to the thematics of the American Dream. Odets is no different. Each of the characters in *Awake and Sing!* strives for their full and rightful place in the world, hoping to make things better for themselves and their family. Jacob expresses the dream of a world where "life shouldn't be printed on dollar bills." Bessie dreams of a world of respectability and appreciation. Myron dreams of winning the lottery. Moe dreams of Hennie. Ralph wants to see all the teams working together. Their dreams are different in the details, but they are linked in intent. But because *Awake and Sing!* is set during the Depression, those dreams are compromised, regardless of the characters actions and intentions, good or bad. Gerald M. Berkowitz writes: "Everyone is doing what they're supposed to do, and it isn't working. The economic collapse has changed the world so that all the old values and models for behavior — responsibility, ambition, patriotism, the American Dream — are useless or actively dangerous."

The social history of the Depression confirms that anti-capitalist political movements would find fertile ground during the 1930s. Jacob's socialism and Ralph's interest in it reflects that reality. But have Jacob and Ralph given up the American Dream or simply reshaped it to address groups instead of individuals? Socialism in this case represents a return to the American Dream, rather than a refusal of it. Ultimately, though, Odets' exploration of the trapped and yearning Bergers has more to do with the yearning than the answer. Jacob's socialism is nostalgia, and, as the uncut pages of his books attest, he hasn't even managed to read much of the literature he refers to. At the end of the play, Ralph is vaguely utopian in his plans: he expects hard work, but how much can his plans be credited? Odets' treatment of the American Dream during the Depression is at once hopeful and ironic. It's no accident that throughout the play a gorgeous aria prompts us to think of Paradise, but that "O, Paradiso" ends up smashed to the floor.

Suggested Reading: *American Drama of the Twentieth Century* by Gerald M. Berkowitz.

Section VII:

Awake and Sing! and the American Jewish Repertoire

One of the projects of more recent scholarship about Clifford Odets is to reclaim him as not only one of the great voices of American theatre, but also as a great American-Jewish playwright. Essayist and researcher Elaine Schiff pinpoints several aspects of *Awake and Sing!*

as fundamentally Jewish: the Yiddish-infused rhythms of Odets' language, the power of the family matriarch, the mobilization of Jewish stage types ("the restless *belle juive*, the mild husband bewildered by 'life in America,' the sybaritic moneyman, the socialist grandfather, the bitter racketeer, and the discontented young hero"). Yet as Schiff herself notes, between the first draft of his breakthrough full-length play, then titled *I Got the Blues*, and the version of *Awake and Sing!* the Group Theatre performed, Odets "stripped" from the play "much of its original Jewish explicitness." Schiff argues he did this to persuade the Group to produce the play, though many of his Group Theatre colleagues were themselves Jewish.

Some of the major changes between *I Got the Blues* and *Awake and Sing!* include:

- The translation of Yiddish phrases into English: for instance, Morty originally said "*schmekt gitt*" about Bessie's cooking. In the final version he says "smells good."
- The removal of specific references to Jews and Judaism. In the first draft of the play, Jacob refers often to "the Jew Bible." In *Awake and Sing!* these references are largely replaced by the repetition of socialist ideas. Schiff notes that Moe's promises to Hennie originally referred to a fulfillment experienced by "the kid who stood in the synagogue while the Rabbi sang sad songs."
- Perhaps most important, Odets alters Bessie's objection to Ralph's girlfriend. In the later play, Bessie rejects Miss Hirsch as too poor, without a family. In *I Got the Blues*, however, the problem is that she's a gentile. In the original script, Bessie describes Blanche not as a "girl with no parents" but "a *shiksa!*"

Following Schiff's lead, it can be fun to think through the dialogue of *Awake and Sing!* and note the passages that still have Yiddish phrases or reflect the cadence of the New York Jewish accent (what Odets scholars sometimes refer to his as his use of "Yinglish"). How many examples can you come up with? Do these passages tend to be spoken by primarily the same characters or occur at specific points in the action of the play? One of the signatures of Odets' writing style is its crisp, bluntly poetic, and inventive dialogue. Can we think of that as related to his embrace of the sounds of immigrant and working class English mixed with Yiddish?

Another way of thinking about the "Jewishness" of *Awake and Sing!* is to consider the situations of the play's characters in light of trends in immigration history and the position of Jewish communities in the United States. Articles in Jonathan Sarna's collection *The American Jewish Experience* chart the wave of German Jewish immigration at the end of the 19th century and the subsequent wave of immigration from Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century as pogroms and anti-Semitism increased. Immigration created the Jewish community in which Odets imagined the Bergers living. But the 1930s represent what essayist Lloyd P. Gartner calls the "midpassage of American Jewry," the moment when the waves of immigration had given way at some imperceptible point more Jews were American-born than were newly arrived. Ralph and Hennie's experience in *Awake and Sing!* is the experience of the second generation, the one born in America. Notice the difference between them and Sam, who Hennie calls a "mockie," which means greenhorn. Additionally, Odets' depiction of the Bergers' struggles confirm how the hard times of the Depression could be even harder on immigrant and ethnic communities.

Suggested Reading: *The American Jewish Experience*, edited by Jonathan Sarna, "Introduction to *Awake and Sing!*" by Elaine Schiff in *Awake and Singing: Seven Classic Plays from the*

American Jewish Repertoire, and New York Jews and The Great Depression: Uncertain Promise
by Beth S. Wenger.

Section VIII:

Discussion Questions

- Compare Bessie Berger to the stereotype of the “Jewish mother.” In what ways has Odets crafted her to fit that type? What characteristics does he give her that are unexpected?
- “Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust, and the earth shall cast out the dead,” Jacob tells Ralph, quoting the Book of Isaiah. What does that quote come to mean to Ralph? What does it spur him to do? Why might Odets have chosen this phrase, instead of *I Got the Blues*, his original title?
- Much of the action of *Awake and Sing!* revolves around the discovery of hidden information and the Berger family’s subsequent response. What is the first hidden information to completely alter the family’s state of being? How is it revealed? What happens as a result? Likewise, what is “found out” in the middle of the play? By whom? What happens when the information is discovered? What other example of hiding and revealing can you think of in the play?
- Consider Morty, Myron, and Moe, the trio of men who fill up the Berger’s apartment and allow Bessie to take care of them. At what points do these seemingly passive men intervene in the action of the play, causing pivotal choices to be made by Bessie, Hennie, and Ralph?
- Odets’ play is rooted in the reality of daily life during the Depression. What are some of the circumstances of the Berger’s lives, both as revealed in their dialogue and seen in the design choices of the production, that reveal the economic hardship the country experienced during the 1930s?
- Contrast the paths Hennie and Ralph are poised to take at the end of the play. What are they both on the verge of doing? In what ways are Ralph and Hennie responding to the same limiting environment? How are their responses similar and different? How should an audience feel about the future these young people face?
- Debate the sequence of action leading up to Jacob’s death. What do his last moments on stage reveal about his state of mind when he went up to the roof? What things had he said earlier in the play that might suggest that his death wasn’t wholly an accident?

Section IX:

Glossary of References in *Awake and Sing!*

Act I

Stage Directions: “a picture of Sacco and Vanzetti”

Nicolo Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were young Italian immigrants and self-proclaimed anarchists. They had arrived in America in 1908. In 1920, they were arrested for the murder of a shoe factory paymaster and his guard in South Braintree, Massachusetts. The two young men’s radical politics, plus the fact that they had gone to

Mexico in 1917 to avoid the draft, prejudiced public opinion against them. In particular, the judge who requested their trial expressed bias against them on numerous occasions. Their case became a cause for liberal groups around the world. Though Sacco and Vanzetti's lawyers repeatedly reminded jurors that the politics of the men were not on trial, the verdict came back guilty. After over five years of appeals, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed. It is now generally believed that they were not guilty of the murder and had been railroaded because of their political views. The exposure of how mishandled their trial was, however, led to the passage of important laws in the state of Massachusetts regarding how mistrials and new evidence should be handled.

Myron: "Teddy Roosevelt used to say..."

Theodore Roosevelt was the 26th president of the United States, serving from 1901-1901. He became President when William McKinley was assassinated. He was 43 and the youngest man to serve the highest office. Roosevelt had a "rough and ready" public image and presented himself as an advocate of "the people" and a "trustbuster" who attack the power of business monopolies. In return, many average people admired him. Myron's idolization of Teddy Roosevelt is ironic because Roosevelt's constant pace of accomplishment is in direct contrast to Myron's ineffectuality.

Myron: "Life is like that — a cake walk"

A cake walk is a party game that works like musical chairs, where participants walk (or sometimes dance) in a circle have to stop on markers, one of which gets removed with each round. The last person standing wins a cake. So, Myron is saying that life is a game of chance.

Ralph: "...go to nightclubs with Greta Garbo?"

Greta Garbo was the great silent film star. Garbo came to America from Sweden in 1925 and made the transition to talking films in the 1930s. Her most famous films of the thirties are *Anna Christie*, *Romance*, *Mata Hari*, *Grand Hotel*, *Queen Christina*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Camille*.

Hennie: "What's that 'mockie' bothering about?"

"Mockie" is slang for Greenhorn.

Hennie: "It's a good bill — Belle Baker..."

Hennie is taking her parents to a vaudeville theatre, where they could see many short acts in the course of an evening. The headliner is Belle Baker, a signer who performed on Broadway and Tin Pan Alley. She is known for singing songs from the Yiddish theatre in addition to other hits. Some of Baker's singing can be heard on the CD compilations *Tin Pan Alley Blues* and *From Avenue A to the Great White Way: Yiddish & American Popular Songs From 1914-1950*.

Myron: "...Sophie Tucker took off twenty six pounds...Fearful business with Japan..."

Myron is reading the newspaper. Sophie Tucker, born Sophia Kalish in Russia, was a Jewish vaudeville singer known as the "last of the red hot mommas." Early in her career she performed in black face; she also made a career of being a big woman, singing songs

like “I Don’t Want to Be Thin” and “Nobody Loves a Fat Girl, But Oh How a Fat Girl Can Love.” The song most often associated with her is “Some of These Days.” Japan was an aggressive imperial force in Asia during the 1930s, so Myron also sees news about the war across the Pacific. Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931. After conquering Manchuria, Japan attacked China in 1936. When Nanking, then the capital of China, fell to the Japanese in 1937, the invasion of the city was so horrific that it is estimated that 300,000 Chinese soldiers died and 20,000 women were raped.

Myron: “Like the great Italian lover in the movies. What was his name? ? The Sheik...”
Myron can’t remember the name of Rudolph Valentino, who was known as The Sheik because of his role in the 1921 film of the same name. Before his death in 1926, he also starred in *Camille*, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, *Blood and Sand*, *The Young Rajah*, *The Eagle*, and *The Son of the Sheik*, among others.

Ralph: “She lives in Yorkville...”
Yorkville is an Upper East Side neighborhood of New York City, originally settled by German immigrants.

Moe: “I brought you some halavah.”
Also spelled “halvah,” this is a dessert bar with Middle Eastern origins. Some recipes for it are made out of semolina (wheat), but most call for ground sesame seeds and honey with chopped fruit or other needs added. Some modern recipes top it with chocolate.

Moe: “Didn’t I go fight in France for democracy?”
This is Moe’s way of saying he fought in World War I. He lost his leg because of his service in the trenches.

Jacob: “From *L’Africana*! ... “O, Paradiso”... Caruso”
L’Africana is a French Grand Opera by Meyerbeer from the “Belle Epoque,” or turn of the century. “O, Paradiso” is an aria from the opera. Enrico Caruso was a great Italian tenor from the turn of the century

Hennie: “that old Ignatz”
This reference is unclear. Ignatz is a Jewish name (one immigrants or their children often changed, for instance, Irving Berlin’s Hebrew name was Ignatz). So Hennie may be referring simply to an old-fashioned Jewish man. But also, Ignatz was the name of a character in one of the most popular comic strips of the period: George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*. Ignatz Mouse was Krazy Kat’s brick-wielding nemesis. So Hennie may be referring to the doctor as a trickster or a troublemaker.

Bessie: “I don’t eat chop suey and run around Coney Island...”
Coney Island is a public amusement park and beach on an island linked to Brooklyn and Manhattan by subway. The world’s first roller coaster opened on Coney Island in 1884. Though Coney Island was an upper class resort in the 19th Century, it was transformed into a site for the entertainment of the masses in the twentieth. In the 1920s and 1930s, Coney Island was known as the Nickel Empire, because most of the attractions on the

Boardwalk cost a nickel. You could also find all sorts of food concessions at the beach. Coney Island didn't close during the Depression, but it did get run down, since people had less money to spend on entertainment.

Jacob: "Marx said it — abolish such families."

Karl Marx is the author of *The Communist Manifesto* and the father of Socialist and Communist theory and philosophy. In his books he does observe that the family has become an arm of the capitalist state and puts some of its members in the service of others, trapping everybody.

Hennie: "For my beauty nap, Mussolini...apple blossom time in Normandy..."

Benito Mussolini was Italy's Fascist Dictator from 1922-1943, so by the 1930s, people in America were already aware of his threat. "When It's Apple Blossom Time in Normandy" is a popular song that appeared in the American Repertoire as early as 1902, but which was given a special poignancy by the experiences of American soldiers and nurses France during World War I (and later World War II).

Stage Directions: "Caruso singing a lament from *The Pearl Fishers*."

The Pearl Fishers is Georges Bizet's 1863 opera.

Myron: "Nora Bayes sang it.."

Nora Bayes is another early twentieth century vaudeville singer. Born in 1880 in Joliet, IL as Lenora Goldberg, she became most famous for the song "Shine On, Harvest Moon." Bayes also sang "How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm" and "Over There." She died in 1928 from complications during a surgery.

Act II

Moe: "How's Mickey Louse?"

The first Mickey Mouse cartoon came out in 1928 and Moe's having fun insulting Sam's mousy presence with this pun.

Morty: "Buy yourself a Packard..."

In the 1930s, Packards were the ultimate luxury cars. The finest model would run about \$5,350 in a time when a modest suburban house could be bought for under \$3,000.

Ralph: "Who am I? Al Jolson?"

Al Jolson was perhaps the leading entertainer of the 1930s. He starred in the first movie "talkie," *The Jazz Singer*, which premiered in 1927. Jolson was Jewish. He performed both in black face and without makeup. He is known for writing and recording songs like "Let Me Sing and I'm Happy," "To My Mammy," "Sonny Boy," "April Showers," "Swanee," "Toot, Toot, Tootsie," and "When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob Bob Bobbin' Along."

Bessie: "Poppa here could talk like Samuel Webster.... two-cent pickle in the Burland Market.."

Bessie refers to Jacob's excessive use of words in what seems to be a jumbled reference: Samuel Johnson (English) and Noah Webster (American) were the two great creators of English-language dictionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries. She seems to have combined their names into one.

We have not found any evidence that there was an actual market called "Burland" in the Bronx in the 1930s, but Odets is likely invoking the open air produce and grocery markets that were typical in large cities in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Hennie: "I wore my fingers off on an Underwood for six years..."
Underwood is a brand of typewriter.

Moe: "Ted Lewis playing the clarinet..."
Ted Lewis was a jazz bandleader in the 1920s who shepherded Benny Goodman, Jimmy Dorsey, and Jack Teagarden through his band and helped shaped the jazz and swing idioms. Lewis was known for his crazy antics onstage while playing clarinet and was billed as the "High-hatted Tragedian of Jazz" and the "Medicine Man for Your Blues."

Ralph: "You oughta see him — like Babe Ruth."
George Herman Ruth, Jr., known as Babe, was a formidably barrel chested and big stomached baseball player — the most famous baseball player of all time. His career took him from the Baltimore Orioles to the Boston Red Sox to the New York Yankees. Ruth is credited with the invention of the modern baseball bat and over his career he set record after record, some of which still haven't been broken today.

Morty: "Sing Sing!"
Morty invokes the name of the infamous prison in Ossining, New York, which, although it was not the first place a prisoner was executed by electrocution, carried out 613 electrocution and is forever associated with the electric chair.

Morty: "... a regular Charlie Chaplin."
Charlie Chaplin, also known as the "the little tramp," was a beloved movie comedian, skilled in physical comedy of the highest order. Chaplin worked in both silent films and talkies. The films he released during the 1930s include *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936).

Morty: "a real Boob McNutt..."
Morty is reading the comic pages of a newspaper (which are referred to as the "jokes") and Boob McNutt is a character in a comic strip.

Ralph: "So cold I did a buck 'n wing to keep warm."
A buck and wing was a typical vaudeville dance, a precursor to modern tap dance styles. The Buck and wing was also associated with Minstrel Shows.

Sam: "Odessa...Cossacks...a Jew without a beard!"
Orthodox Jewish men wear beards and having the beard cut off is considered a shame, and a betrayal of Jewish identity. Anti-Jewish sentiment was high in Russia and Eastern

Europe at the turn of the century and in the early parts of the 20th century. Pogroms (systematic violent attacks) against Jewish communities sent waves of immigrants to the United States. The incident Sam describes was not a joke, but purposeful harassment.

Bessie: “With Wallace Beery...Polly Moran too”

Wallace Berry and Polly Moran were both comic actors of the teens, twenties, and thirties. Berry won the Academy Award in 1932 for his performance in *The Champ*. Moran was known as an excellent comedienne.

Moe: “Lights are blinking...Funicalee, funicala...”

“The Land of Yama Yama” was a World War I English music hall song most famously performed by Florrie Forrester.

Act II

Ralph: “His books, I go them too — the pages ain’t cut in half of them.”

At this time, books were printed on continuous sheets of paper that were folded when bound so that the seams had to be sliced “open” so you could turn single pages. The fact that a book’s pages aren’t cut indicates that the book hasn’t be read, since a reader would miss pages if they didn’t slice the seams.

Section X:

Resources (Annotated)

Books:

Atkinson, Brooks and Albert Hirschfeld. *The Lively Years 1920-1973*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1973.

Atkinson, lead theatre critic for *The New York Times*, reflects on the major plays and playwrights he watched bloom on Broadway during his career, accompanied by drawings from Hirschfeld. His section on Odets admits that he didn’t recognize Odets’ greatness right away, but is a loving reading of his work in retrospect.

Berkowitz, Gerald M. *American Drama of the Twentieth Century*. Longman Literature in English Series. New York: Longman, 1992.

Contains a brief narrative section on Odets called “Drama of the Depression” and a biographical short in the index, plus an excellent timeline of American drama in the 20th century that runs in facing pages with a timeline of general historical and cultural events of the 20th century.

Brenman-Gibson, Margaret. *Clifford Odets, American Playwright: The Years from 1906-1940*. New York: Athaneum, 1981.

The most comprehensive biography of Odets' early life, with an exhaustively detailed timeline and list of Odets' works (published and unpublished, produced and unproduced) in the index.

Clurman, Harold. *The Fervent Years: The Story of the Group Theatre and the Thirties*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945.

Clurman's autobiography-cum-history of himself, the Group Theatre, Odets, their artistic quest and the cultural milieu of the late 1920s through the early 1940s. Contains useful backstage information and production history about all The Group's shows.

Hirschfeld, Al. *The American Theater as Seen by Hirschfeld*. New York: G. Braziller, 1961.

A book of Hirschfeld's line drawings of Broadway plays and players for *The New York Times* and other theatrical publications.

Kyvig, David. *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1939: Decades of Promise and Pain*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2002.

Part of the "Daily Life Through History" series, this book has dozens of illustrations and focuses both on political events and daily ephemera: what people ate, how they behaved at the movies, how they organized their home lives. Kyvig particularly explores the way the 1920s and 1930s marked the "dawning of the age of mass consumerism."

Miller, Gabriel, ed. *Critical Essays on Clifford Odets*. Critical Essays on American Literature. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1991.

An invaluable volume that collects newspaper reviews from the premieres of all Odets' major plays, plus the *Time* and *New Yorker* profiles of him, as well as a wide range of more academic articles on his body of work.

Murray, Edward. *Clifford Odets: The Thirties and After*. New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968.

One of the first volumes of Odets scholarship: the first chapter puts Odets in context of other writers, novelists and playwrights alike of the 1930s.

Sarna, Jonathan, ed. *The American Jewish Experience*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1997.

A collection of essays and stand-alone sociological studies about Jewish immigrants and the Jewish community in the United States from colonial times to the post-Holocaust period. Essays of particular relation to *Awake and Sing!* include "Immigrant Jews on the Lower East Side of New York: 1880-1914" by Deborah Dwork, "The Jewishness of the Jewish Labor Movement in the United States" by Lucy S. Dawidowicz, and "The Midpassage of American Jewry" by Lloyd P. Gartner.

Schiff, Ellen. "Introduction to *Awake and Sing!*." *Awake and Singing: Seven Classic Plays from the American Jewish Repertoire*. Ed. Ellen Schiff. Mentor Books. New York: Penguin, 1995.

An overview of Odets' play, exploring its presentation of a specifically Jewish milieu, detailing the changes Odets made between his first version of the play and the version of the play the Group performed, and analyzing his use of language.

Time-Life Books, ed. *This Fabulous Century Volume IV: 1930-1940*. New York: Time-Life Books, 1969.

Full of pictures from popular press magazines of decade, this volume also reprints and excerpts articles from *Time* and *Life*. Topics covered include trends in radio and movies of the decade, the growing labor movement, the economics and politics of the depression, the programs of the New Deal, the doings of high society, and details of the life of average workers.

Terkel, Studs. *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. New York: Avon, 1971.

Terkel's interviews run the gamut of Depression experiences; he talks with people who lost everything and people who stayed rich.

Wenger, Beth S. *New York Jews and The Great Depression: Uncertain Promise*. Yale Historical Publications. New Haven: Yale UP, 1996.

Drawn from oral histories, newspapers, memoirs, and communal records, Wenger's history focuses issues of adaptation and acculturation for Jews in America, especially as they affect class distinctions and financial insecurity in Jewish families during the 1930s. A social history that illuminates how the depression changed American Jews understanding of their own identity.

Videos/Films:

American Masters: The Group Theatre, video available through PBS.

Films by Odets:

The General Died at Dawn (1936, dir. Lewis Milestone)
None But the Lonely Heart (1944, dir. Clifford Odets) –Cary Grant and Ethel Barrymore won Academy Awards for their performances in this film
Deadline at Dawn (1945, dir. Harold Clurman)
The Sweet Smell of Success (1957, dir. Alexander Mackendrick)
The Story on Page One (1959, dir. Clifford Odets)
Wild in the Country (1960, dir. Philip Dunne) –starring Elvis Presley

Other films of the 1930s:

Heroes for Sale

Snow White, Disney's first full-length animated feature
Gone With the Wind
The Wizard of Oz
It Happened One Night
Duck Soup
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington
Bringing Up Baby
King Kong
The Thin Man
Top Hat
The Good Earth
Mutiny on the Bounty

Websites:

<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/depression/photoessay.htm>

An excellent photo essay on the depression.

<http://www.nhmccd.edu/contracts/lrc/kc/decade30.html>

Titled "American Cultural History: 1930-1939," this is truly a comprehensive cultural history site with hundreds of links and reference number guides for browsing in the Library of Congress:

<http://www.shambhala.org/business/goldocean/kausdep.html>

A simple and clearly worded explanation of "what caused the Great Depression."

<http://newdeal.feri.org/>

A site explaining/Documenting the New Deal (which seemed to represent Ralph's dream of a life not printed on dollar bills).

<http://history1900s.about.com/cs/greatdepression/>

A site full of excellent links about the Depression, some with pictures, some with real audio, some timelines, some overviews.

http://www.hyperhistory.com/online_n2/connections_n2/great_depression.html

Another timeline.

<http://www.tenant.net/Community/history/hist03a.html>

A serious site about tenant activism in New York City. This is the page that begins the section on activism for renter's rights during the Depression, and is followed by a section on details about how the Communist Party helped lead this fight.

<http://www.geopaix.com/caruso/>

A site about singer Enrico Caruso, who sings Jacob's "O, Paradiso."

<http://rs6.loc.gov/wpaintro/exhome.html>

Life histories recorded by the Federal Writer's Project with link to the WPA Life Histories Home page.

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/group_theatre.html

The PBS website for the “American Masters” episode on the Group Theatre.

<http://www.old-time.com/toc.html>

A website entirely about “old-time radio” with program lists and lots of information about 1930s popular culture.

http://bronxcountyclerksoffice.com/bronx_history.htm

Bronx History Website.