RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Significance and Artistry: A Critical Study of Clifford Odets

The Big Knife

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Received- 27 March 2017, Revised- 30 May 2017, Accepted- 2 June 2017, Published- 26 June 2017

ABSTRACT

This is an article that states about Clifford Odets and his plays. It also presents a brief introduction on Clifford Odets and his journey before becoming a successful playwright. Even though Odets is more popular, he has had different varieties in his part. Odets could have done more with his material in The Big Knife, but as the popular approval which it received, as indicated by its first run and the fact it has recently been made into a movie, seems to show, it is a play with more than critics that gave it credit for, at the time of its first appearance on the stage.

Keywords: Clifford Odets, Playwright, The Big Knife, Critics, Dialogues.

Clifford Odets was born in Philadelphia to Louis J. Odets and Pearl Geisinger Odets. Among their three children, Odets was the eldest and was closer to his Aunt Esther and her spouse, Israel Rossman than he was to his parents. Odets called his aunt, “Tante Esther,” who was elder to his mother and she was fluent in Yiddish. In his aunt’s family, the young Odets experienced language knowledge through daily newspapers that his uncle bought and by other means that were not present in his own house, and that he became well versed in dialogues throughout his career. Certainly, Odets was more successful than other playwrights of his era in capturing the speech cadences and intonations of Jewish Americans.

Odets’s middle range of plays—Rocket to the Moon, Night Music, and Clash by Night—deal largely with questions of love, personal isolation, and no fulfillment. None reaches the artistic level of the earlier plays. In the seven-year hiatus between Clash by Night and the 1949 production of The Big Knife, Odets produced three screenplays and an adaptation of Konstantin Simonov’s The Russians, a propaganda piece. Odets was unable to recapture in his later plays the freshness and the authentic social anger of his early plays.

When he was called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1952, Odets admitted to having been a member of the Communist Party “from toward the end of 1934 to the middle of 1935, covering anywhere from six to eight months.” Never a very convinced Party member, Odets favoured having a third major political party in the United States but was quickly disenchanted with the rigidity of the Communist Party and dismissed it as a reasonable vehicle for dealing with the social problems that perplexed him.

Odets’s last stage play, The Flowering Peach, reflects its author’s newly found interest in the biblical heritage of the Jewish people. A redaction of the Noah story, The Flowering Peach.
Peach is warm and sensitive, reminiscent in its family orientation of Awake and Sing! It is a play of resignation rather than of revolution. A writer whose life story has sometimes eclipsed his actual plays, Clifford Odets is known less for particular works than for representing a style, a mix of lofty aesthetic idealism with the gritty vernacular of American street culture.

Clifford Odets wrote his plays from the people and situations that he knew, his biographical background helps explain those plays. Clifford Odets was born in Philadelphia in 1906, the son of Louis J. Odets and Pearl Geisinger Odets. The family name had been Odet but the "s" had been added to it on a union card issued to Louis, who didn’t want to lose his place in the line of people applying for jobs in order to correct the mistake.

The story of The Big Knife like the stories of Golden Boy and Rocket to the Moon is that of a man who fails to live up to his ideals and possibilities. It is the story of Charlie Castle. A financially successful Hollywood star Charlie Castle could have been a good actor, but he has sold his soul to a movie producer whose chief interest is in dividends for the stock holders.

Odets has listened carefully to the way people talk and one of his greatest assets as a playwright is his ability to put real speech into the dialogue of his plays at the same time using that dialogue to demonstrate with brief, deft strokes the individual characteristics of the people in his plays.

While some of the characters in The Big Knife are too one-sided and a few approach stereotypes, all give proof of Odets’s ability to show characters as he has conceived them, and in Charlie; his wife, Marion; his agent, Nat Danzinger; his friend, Hank Teagle; and even in the Castles’ maid Odets has once again put real people on the stage. The audience sees Charlie’s embittered idealism even in such a brief speech as,

I’ll miss you, Hank. Write your book-- make it scandalous. Wire me for money any time you need it. Someone has to complete -nQ the work he was born to do. Naive, ain’t it? (112)

Marlon reveals both her own character and that of Charlie when she says, to Charlie,

 Aren't you the one who says he wants to live a certain way and do a certain kind of work?... And then pushes a pie in the face of everything he says? Men like Hoff and Coy have their own integrity— they're what they are I The beetle and the fervid Christian can't be equally corrupted! You can laugh--you can snort I But the critic who called you the Van Gogh of the American theatre saw, as I did, that you had a Christian fervor! (Beginning to cry) And now you're nothing, common trash—coarsened down to something I don't even recognize! (Pausing) Don't think I ever condoned what you did! (Weeping bitterly) But you're helpless, you're sick. You feel guilty and it makes you vicious. You've taken the cheap way out--your passion of the heart has become a passion of the appetites! Despite your best intentions, you're a horror … (62)

Throughout the play Nat maintains the same traits shown when he says,

Charlie, never underestimate a man because you don't like him I know Marcus more than thirty years. Before he wore three-hundred dollar suits and put his old, dead mother's picture on his desk— that mother he got from Central Casting, he's stepped in the tar himself enough, but he always keeps his shoes clean until that Christmas Eve you were a free agent. (34)

The author not only presents them as real people, he uses them to spotlight his theme, contrasting them against one another. Charlie Castle is the man who knows he has lost his integrity, but until the end of the play he can find nothing to do about it and then suicide is the only way for him to regain mastery of his fate. Marion knows he has lost his integrity and insists that he must do something about it. Hank
feels that the whole country, all but himself and Marion, has lost its ideals and there is nothing to be done about it. Nat Danzinger sees all the trouble and corruption and yet he just cannot help loving life and people.

Odets is bitter and he is not afraid to show it. He wants to present corruption and he does. Charlie Castle has not only sold his artistic ability for large checks for doing inferior but economically successful movies, but he has also let the producer convince him. It was necessary for him to let someone else take the blame for a hit-and-run accident of which he was guilty. Nor is Charlie faithful to Marion, whom he truly loves.

In the treatment of a minor character, Dixie, by the studio and its executives, even going so far, as the planning of lie's murder to prevent scandal, Odets goes even farther in his picture, of how much people can be degraded in the blind pursuit of money.

There is little action in The Big Knife. Much of what Odets is telling about has happened before the play opens, and the play itself is concerned with Charlie Castle’s struggle to regain his real self. Odets could have held the audience’s interest better with more physical action.

As the critics said, the play is overwritten. Odets could have stated his message more effectively with a quieter approach. Charlie Castle's problems would have seemed more real if they were described with less histrionics.

In this play as in Till the Day JE Die Odets approves of suicide as the one way left to his hero and the one final demonstration of righteous self-assertion. He shows his approval through Hank, who immediately after Charlie’s death tells the studio publicity agent,

There will be no photographers, there will be no lies, no display. This is my friend's hour, not the nation's, not Hoff's. Your work is finished here. It won't be smooth, but I'll...I'll tell the story. He...killed himself---because that was the only way he could live. You don't recognize a final... a final act of faith...when you see one. (147)

If The Big Knife seems overwrought, hollow, superficial, the fault lies partly in the fact that this is the kind of life Odets was trying to present.
Reference