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Review of ISU's "Waiting for Lefty"

Ted Morrissey

In 1935, Clifford Odets's experimental one-act play *Waiting for Lefty* premiered in New York City and launched his career as a playwright. Appearing in the darkest days of the Depression, the sympathetically socialist play was an instant hit, sparking a wave of performances at community theaters throughout the country. *Waiting for Lefty* is a frame narrative involving a heated meeting of taxi drivers at their union hall as they debate whether to strike against the cab company for better wages and working conditions. The desperate cabbies argue back and forth as they await their leader, Lefty Costello. Six vignettes form the interior of the narrative's frame, vignettes which explore various issues associated with the Depression and the deprivations they cause working-class people.

The Illinois State University School of Theatre and Dance

<https://finearts.illinoisstate.edu/theatre-dance/schedule/fall-2021/waiting-for-lefty/> is presenting five performances of Odets's signature piece September 23-26, 2021. I attended the opening-night performance at the Center for Performing Arts Theater on ISU's campus and was mightily impressed with the young cast and crew's accomplishment. Directed by Sanhawich Meateanuwat, the production drives home the fact that not only is Odets's play (sadly) timeless, but it is also (sadly) universal. That is, more than 85 years later, not only are U.S. citizens still grappling with income inequality and systemic injustices, but these toxic issues are prevalent in nearly every culture in the world.

In his Director's Note, Meateanuwat writes, "*Waiting for Lefty* provides us with the scary and depressing reality of a problem that still occurs in present society. In Thailand, my home country, the inequality rate is still high because of greedy men in power who run the country.... I can relate this play to my background very clearly, and I can see myself, my friends, or my family in the play." I wholeheartedly agree with the young director. As the various vignettes unfolded I felt a consistent

affinity for the characters and their woes, from marital strife and generational feuds to crises of conscience and fear of retribution.

In many ways the production follows the approach that Odets himself established when the Group Theatre staged *Waiting for Lefty*. Meateanuwat uses a bare-bones set with essentially every player on stage, either acting in a given vignette or responding to the action as a kind of Greek Chorus. As with Odets's original concept, there are also actors planted in the audience, which is transformed into the group of cabbies who are trying to decide their fate. By following Odets's original, Meateanuwat underscores the timelessness of the basic plot. However, he also departs from Odets's design in subtle but significant ways to shine a bright light on the theme of universality.

It is typical for actors in the play to be costumed in Depression-era clothing, and for the stage to have more of an American union hall appearance, though usually light in detail. Instead, the university's production dresses its players in simple costumes that suggest Asian cultures (perhaps the Thai director's own heritage), and the set is non-specific in terms of its geographical location. It could be anywhere in the world.

Another deft touch is the use of sound to transition between vignettes. In addition to the stage lights dimming, recordings of radio broadcasts (presumably) play as actors rearrange themselves on stage. The bits of news are economic in nature, talking about things like downturns in financial markets, unemployment figures, and hostile labor relations. At first, the radio clips are mainly from American broadcasts, but as the play progresses the clips come from increasingly diverse places as the voices speak a catalog of languages. It is a cleverly subtle way of expressing the universality of Odets's subject matter. I obviously could not understand the non-English snippets, but I assume they have to do with the same sorts of topics and express the same sorts of friction.

All fifteen players deliver strong performances, a feat which is even more impressive when one considers they are required to wear masks due to the pandemic. The masks deprive them of most of their faces for expressing emotion, plus they make it more difficult to project their voices. Nevertheless, they manage to communicate the stress, pain, fear, and desperation of their characters. The intimate setting of the theater helps as the audience is close to the players. I was able to hear Odets's dialogue without any difficulty, and the play's emotions are palpable thanks to the talents of the players.

Even though all of the actors' performances are valuable contributions to the production, I want to underline a few in particular. In the first internal vignette, taxi-driver Joe has an argument with his wife Edna, who wants him to lead the strike. But Joe is afraid of losing what little they have, plus he doesn't trust the union bosses as having the cabbies' best interests at heart. The scene is gripping and sets the emotional level of the play on maximum, essentially challenging the actors to follow their high-powered lead. Joe is played by Joshua Thomas; Hayley Brenner delivers an emotion-packed performance as Edna, who voices Odets's primary theme: "The world is supposed to be for all of us."

Perhaps the most poignant episode comes to life in the fourth vignette when a young taxi-driver, Sid, must end his relationship with Florence because they simply don't have enough money to marry

and establish the kind of family life they'd always talked about. The scene runs from lighthearted to gut-wrenching, which is a testament to the range of the actors, Jeremy Miller and Riley Doerner, respectively. The end of the scene is one of the most beautiful and most painful moments I've seen acted on a stage. (I urge you to see it for yourself.)

Finally, the hellfire conclusion of the play is a call-to-arms for the taxi drivers to "unite and fight!" delivered by Agete in the union hall. On Odets's opening night, audience members were so inspired by the speech they lingered in the streets outside the Civic Repertory Theatre to discuss putting the play's ideas into real-world action. It's a difficult legacy for any actor to live up to, but Riley Partin delivers the climactic speech with such force and passion, one can imagine that she, too, would have propelled that first audience into the streets of New York to right the wrongs of the Depression.

Waiting for Lefty made Clifford Odets one of the most influential playwrights of the '30s. If there's anything like fairness in the world, this production of the play, guided by the talented hand of Sanhawich Meateanuwat, will put many of its cast and crew on the path to their own well-deserved theatrical successes.



Ted Morrissey's novel ***The Artist Spoke*** < <https://tedmorrissey.com/the-artist-spoke/>> (Twelve Winters, 2020) won the Maincrest Media Award, and his collection *First Kings and Other Stories* (Wordrunner, 2020) was a finalist for the American Fiction Award. His novel excerpts, short stories, poems, essays, reviews and translations have appeared in more than ninety publications, recently or forthcoming *Academia Letters*, *EKL Review*, *Eclectica Magazine*, *Fare Foreword*, *Pangyrus*, and 9th Story Studios.

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