

Interview with Dean Gabourie, director of *Awake and Sing!*

Carl Bronski
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Carl Bronski: You've recently revived *Waiting for Lefty* here in Toronto. You've just finished a run with *Awake and Sing!* What is it about Odets' work that attracts you?

Dean Gabourie: I first did Odets in Ryerson Theatre School. We did *Lefty* along with a series of monologues from a group of miners' wives. After that, I read everything I could get that was written by Odets or about Odets. I watched everything I could. John Malkovich's film rendition of *Rocket to the Moon*, all the documentaries about the Group Theatre, Kazan's autobiography, the work of Elmer Rice, especially *Street Scene* that came before Odets. I loved everything about Odets. The dialogue, the voice. You know, eight months after he first put on *Lefty* it was being performed in 108 American cities. Absolutely unheard of.

CB: Not to mention that amazing opening night benefit in New York when the crowd almost tore the house down.

DG: Absolutely. Whatever happened in that space on that night was the absolute essence of what theatre is all about. There was an interview with Ruth Nelson, who was in the play. She was blacklisted in the fifties. When she got around to talking about that night—well, she broke down. She couldn't compose herself. It had that much effect on her even 50 years later.

CB: What happened that night, what moved Odets to write that incredible string of plays in the 1930s was all very much bound up with the times, the period of radicalisation in the Depression era. And then, maybe starting in 1939-40, you had this deterioration in Odets' creativity.

DG: Yes. Don't ask. Don't tell. Don't investigate social issues. Before the war, artists were speaking out on all sorts of questions. At the same time, the union

movement was growing. I think it was Shelley Winters who said that *Lefty* gave a whole boost to the organisation drives. Then the war came along. It's a lot like today. Everybody shuts up. Then, you had Odets himself who began to believe his own myth. Goes off to Hollywood with the big money and the starlets. Ten years later, he's in front of the Un-American Activities Committee. You know, Kazan writes in his book that the day Odets testified was the day he began to die. He was completely shattered.

CB: What do you think of Odets' and Kazan's testimonies?

DG: Well, they destroyed people's lives. They were cowards.

CB: You know, after *Lefty* and *Awake*, you had Clurman and Strasberg (Group Theatre directors) distancing themselves, putting ads in papers to say the Group Theatre didn't just do "political" plays. What's your view of so-called "agitprop" theatre?

DG: If you're going to do agitprop you have to be incredibly focused. You have to be able to walk the audience into something that grabs them before they know what hit them. Like they have no idea what they're watching until they are right in it. It's the difference between being a sledgehammer and building up to being a sledgehammer so the eye and ear of the audience becomes attuned.

CB: You give them real people, not cartoons. Do doors open or close for you when you propose these kinds of projects?

DG: One from Column A. One from Column B. I started Acme Theatre in 1989 because I wanted to do what interested me as an artist. Things like Edward Bond's *Saved* about a gang of punks who stone a baby to death in a pram. It's about the relationship between poverty and violence. A lot of the stuff we do isn't

popular or even known. It's hard enough doing a production in the first place without having to worry about its popularity. I know what I want to say in my life and I say it. Whether it's in my social work with the homeless or in my artistic life.

CB: How much did it cost to produce *Awake*?

DG: About \$13,000. We raised most of it through things like fundraisers. Didn't make it all back. April was a tough month. With SARS. A big ice storm. But it was an artistic success. You know, in the Co. [*Awake*'s production company], I work with the same group of people more or less. It's a collective. What we do is a result of a collective contribution.

CB: One of the reviews for *Awake* mentioned you had undercut Odets' ending.

DG: Well, I wanted to say something about what happened from then to now, and so we found a piece of radio from 1939 announcing the Nazi invasion of Poland. And then we added the sound of an airplane because during rehearsals we were thinking about the Boston Mail plane that so intrigued Ralph in *Awake*, and how that plane's flight pattern would have been pretty close to the 9/11 planes out of Boston airport. And I thought those things would undercut the hopeful ending with Ralph standing at the window, smiling and ready to face the world because we know what happened as history unfolded.

CB: That's quite a pessimistic view. Your rehearsals were in February and March. How much did the drive to war in Iraq affect your outlook?

DG: Well, I was pretty cynical way before that. But you know, I guess I wouldn't be able to keep showing up for work with the homeless if I didn't have some sort of hope.

CB: A lot of people in the radical theatre of the 1930s saw the working class as a force for social change.

DG: Harold Clurman used to say, "There will never be a utopia. But we must never stop fighting for one." The beast is really big and it's really, really bad. And you can't set aside what happened in Russia or in Cuba. Power corrupts. It's human nature. You can't step around that. You know, the *Toronto Sun*, one of the most right-wing newspapers around, has its biggest readership in the working class.

CB: Would stepping on Odets' ending contribute more or less to clarifying these problems?

DG: To play the ending the way Odets' conceived it,

after all that has happened, would have been naïve.

CB: What about other choices? You could have used radio news of the 1936 sit-down strikes in Flint or the 1934 Teamsters' Rebellion in Minneapolis...

DG: Yes. Right. And you ended up with Jimmy Hoffa and the Mob. I wanted to show the historical progression between there and here.

CB: Here in February and March, when you were rehearsing, there were two months of a massive, global mobilisation of people against the war. A totally unprecedented phenomenon. I'm just saying that pessimism isn't the only choice.

DG: Nothing is black and white. You're in trouble if you see things that way. Look at Odets. The same guy who made *Lefty* and *Awake* squealed on all his friends 25 years later. But my ending is not the important thing. Most people probably would have missed it, anyway. You even had to ask me about it. The important thing in *Awake* is how the grandfather, Jacob, the last bastion of culture in the family, throws himself off the roof so Ralph can collect an insurance payment. Jacob, the old revolutionist, sees the money as Ralph's salvation—so that "life shouldn't be printed on dollar bills." That's a big contradiction. And then Ralph doesn't take the money. He lets his family have it. He doesn't need the money. He's got Jacob's spirit. He's gone on a journey from boy to man, and he's ready to take on the world.

CB: Yes. A very powerful ending.

DG: Yeah.



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