Politics and the theatre: two plays in Toronto

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"I know what men can be!"—Clifford Odets, 1935

This past month, two expressly political plays opened and closed in Toronto after their scheduled three-week runs. The first, a revival of Clifford Odets' 1935 classic, *Awake and Sing!*, was staged at the Equity Showcase Theatre, a converted church hall and actors' studio located in the heart of an inner-city neighbourhood. The Co., a collective of theatre artists very much influenced by the tradition of the New York Group Theatre of the 1930s, mounted the production.

The second play, *Gagarin Way*, by the young Scottish playwright Gregory Burke, was staged on the fringe of Toronto's downtown entertainment district at Buddies In Bad Times Theatre, as part of the well-known Du Maurier World Stage Festival. It was presented by the Crow's Theatre group, a well-established company that also brought to the city *Shopping and F**king*, another apparently "very hot" installment from the despairing but comedic "Cool Britannia" literary-theatrical trend.

The interplay between political ideas and artistic expression in the theatre has always posed a difficult challenge to writers and directors. The struggle to produce "real-life drama"—that is to say, works that express what is universal in human experience through a portrayal of particular human relationships and dilemmas—is no small undertaking. After all, if it does not ground itself in an understanding or at least a serious investigation of the driving forces of society, how can any theatrical presentation successfully penetrate existing ideological constructs in the search for something that is true?

In the case of Odets, this concern, at least in his earlier works, was central not only to his play's ideational spine, but also to his development of dialogue, character and form. In the case of Burke, *Gagarin Way*, despite widespread critical acclaim, ultimately goes in the opposite direction.

It seems there is a street in Lumphinnans, Scotland, a former "Little Moscow" mining village in the now defunct West Fife coalfield, that was named (due to local Communist Party influence) after Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first man ever launched into space. Burke, who hails from the area, was intrigued by this bit of municipal geography. "I wanted to write about the rise and fall of the Soviet Union. I wanted to know how you got from this great Empire to a street sign in just a generation."

There is certainly something to be said for a working class, college dropout who chooses as his first artistic topic what is certainly the greatest political question of not only the twentieth century, but this current one as well. How one approaches this matter unavoidably says volumes about one's own prognosis for the future of, indeed, even the possibility for, progressive social development.

Burke makes no bones about his choice. Following in the footsteps of the original "angry young Scot," Irvine Welsh, Burke depicts a bleak and brutal social landscape populated by the disaffected and disillusioned victims of a globalised, vacuous consumer capitalism. A place where the "world is shite," where all that workers want "is a few shiny beads." Thematically, Burke is interested in investigating whether the great political and philosophical worldviews of the twentieth century have any relevance today. He answers with an emphatic "No."

It's West Fife near the turn of the new century. The coalfields have given way to unemployment queues, night watchmen's sheds and minimum wage component assembly jobs. Eddie, a crazed, nihilistic hooligan, and Gary, a demoralised former shop steward initially influenced by the Stalinist and syndicalist traditions of the area, hatch a plot to kidnap and kill a Japanese executive who they believe is slated to visit the computer chip factory where they now work.

Gary, who has come to embrace anarchism, believes the terrorist act will spark a de-politicised working class to rise up against their oppression. Eddie is simply curious to see what, if anything, the violence might produce.

Tom, a hapless university graduate *cum* security guard and potential young Blairite is inadvertently caught up in the scheme. He hopelessly tries to moderate their positions: "The economy. Capitalism. It's not an end in itself. It's a tool. We can use it." Eddie, Gary and their kidnap victim have seen a bit of life. This is one bill of goods none of them will buy.

Our two working class anti-heroes are a bumbling tandem. They disagree on almost everything. They can't organise their disguises nor can they ensure bullets for their gun. They are unaware that the Japanese no longer own the factory and that the "executive" that Gary abducts, Frank, is, in fact, a former local lad turned cynical, middle-aged efficiency consultant from Surrey. As it turns out, they are entirely incapable of refuting the world-weary Frank's own nihilistic retorts—except in the end, with a switchblade.

What are we to make of all this? Gregory Burke is the toast of London. *Gagarin Way* has been published and produced in dozens of countries and 20 languages. The critics are in awe of the play's fast, violent pacing, its tight structure and the humourous Scottish dialect. And there's more. It seems to be about ideas! Well, yes. But inasmuch as it equates socialism with the treacherous politics of the Stalinist and trade union bureaucracies, the ideas spring from a poisoned well.

The real core of the play centers on Gary's ultimately futile search for a political perspective in a world, as Burke himself writes in the preface to the piece, where "economics decides the fate of people, not their politicians. Governments are powerless when up against a multi-national, the vagaries of the stock market and history."

Yet, any investigation into the reasons behind the failure of either Stalinism or trade unionism entirely escapes the playwright, despite his stated intention for the play. The argument goes something like this: The power of globalised capitalism is unassailable. All attempts by socialists to change that fact have been abject failures, ending in Soviet police states, or fascist victory or a sterile capitalism where workers learn to hug their chains.

With such an outlook, it is no wonder that poor Gary is doomed to a final, abject moral capitulation.

When Gary brings up the heroic example of the workers who fought against fascism in Spain, Frank dismisses it with the remark that "once they knew they were beat, they turned on one another." Gary cannot refute this hoary, right-wing canard. Repeatedly, he meekly accepts Frank's set piece slurs—"Your workers. All they want is to own things." Gary basically agrees. For him, "workers don't want to be organised."

Frank pontificates that “Russia seems to go from one dark age to another.” Gary goes a step further. “What’s wrong with the dark ages?” he asks.

Perhaps to counter certain criticisms, Burke has produced a rosier spin for the published volume’s preface. If the independent political activity of the working class is no match for global capitalism, well, at least, he smugly opines, “the people remain. We remain and we find other things to keep ourselves amused.” One wonders what these other things are.

Certainly any inquiry into the fate of the working class movement in the twentieth century and its trajectory into the twenty-first requires a patient, historical explanation. It is, to be sure, something that would not have been provided to Gary by either the Communist Party, the Labour Party or the trade union bureaucracy. Indeed, in that fact lies Gary’s true tragedy. But neither has it been uncovered by Burke.

It is astonishing to read in his preface, for instance, that during the British miners’ strike of 1984-85, in the Fife coalfields—an area that fought as hard and long as any other district—defeat was not only inevitable, but that the Fife miners, as well as everybody else, knew it from the start! The fact that Burke believes that thousands of miners, along with their wives and children, endured hunger, cold and brutality for over a year with absolutely no hope of victory speaks volumes for his view of the working class as a noble, but perhaps rather brainless victim.

This is not, however, the most disconcerting thing about the play. What is worse, Burke actively agitates against genuine investigation! There is, from the opening comic 10-minute riff by the self-educated Eddie about the works of Sartre and Genet, an anti-intellectualism that permeates his message. Sartre was nothing more than a snappy title writer. Genet was simply a thief.

Tom, the most ineffectual of all the characters, holds a politics degree with an emphasis on left-wing political movements.

Gary weighs in with the position that “intellectual propaganda means nothing. Naybody listens tay a fucking debate.”

It is clear that Burke is aiming at much more here than an exposure of the pretensions of this or that ivory tower. For him, enlightenment can be attained with a simple cruise along the surface of appearance. After all, haven’t all the grand theories from the high foreheads of the past century led to nothing?

In *Gagarin Way*, Burke has managed to inject his own defeatist political positions directly into the debate on the future of the working class movement. The body of the play, not to mention its brutal, utterly hopeless ending, promotes the perspective that Gary’s predicament, and the current political confusion in the working class itself, cannot be remedied. Capitalism may be terrible, but there is no alternative.

In 1935, a 29- year-old Clifford Odets, the new “wunderkind” of the Broadway theatre, commented on the thematic drive behind his then-current work, *Awake and Sing!*, and the soon-to-be-produced *Paradise Lost*. “I believe in the vast potentialities of mankind. But I see everywhere a wide disparity between what they can be and what they are. That is what I want to say in writing. I want to say the genius of the human race is mongrelised. I want to find out how mankind can be helped out of the animal kingdom into the clear, sweet air.”

At the time, Odets had three plays running simultaneously on the Great White Way, *Awake* plus the more openly propagandistic *Till The Day I Die* and the sensational *Waiting For Lefty*. The period marked a conscious effort by the writer to grapple with the challenge of appropriately blending the directly prescriptive spine of traditional agitprop theatre with a more rich, mature and dialectical expression of the human condition.

There was no doubt, particularly after the staging of *Lefty*, that one of Odets’ major strengths was his ability to infuse his “theatre as a weapon” style with a natural, street-wise expressiveness that went far beyond the often cartoonish agitprop productions of the time. The rapturous response, still discussed today in theatre circles, to the opening night of *Lefty* gives ample testimony to that ability. (See accompanying interview).

But it was *Awake and Sing!* that represents perhaps his most successful interplay of political and theatrical expression. As critic Brooks Atkinson noted in the *New York Times* following the opening of the play: “The theatre of the Left is becoming increasingly dynamic and is no longer a skirmish on the fringe of the theatre, for it has a coherent program which the Broadway theatre has always lacked, and it is informed with a crusader’s zeal. It knows where it intends to go; and it does not doubt its ability to get there. The Broadway theatre has no program and no convictions; and in the midst of a vast, social upheaval it has no comment to make.”

Indeed, Atkinson’s criticism of the state of the traditional Broadway theatre in 1935 could easily be transposed to the current scenes in New York, London or Toronto where the *Lion King*s and *Mama Mia*s of the world still hold sway, and where “legitimate” political theatre is so often confused with self-absorbed explorations of gender, ethnic or sexual identity. It is to the credit of Toronto director Dean Gabourie and the Co. theatrical collective that Odets’ seminal work has been presented to local audiences.

Awake and Sing! is the story of the Bergers, a Jewish family in the Bronx, and their moral and material struggles in the depths of the Great Depression. The family is led by the mother, Bessie, an omnipresent force who will stop at nothing to keep her brood together—even if it means crushing its individual members in the process. Her power is only sometimes balanced by her father Jacob, a rather passive Marxist who, with perhaps more conviction than determination, tries to ameliorate Bessie’s fearsome effect.

It is a tall order. Bessie undercuts her son Ralph’s romance so that she can keep his meager warehouseman’s wage in the house. She forces Hennie, her pregnant and abandoned daughter, to marry a poor soul she does not love in order to maintain the family’s reputation. Her husband, Myron, has been emasculated years ago. She mistrusts Moe the lodger, a war veteran turned hustler, who thinks that what the country needs “is a good five-cent earthquake.” She makes a point of belittling Jacob’s socialist musings, sensing that it is this perspective that most threatens her own position.

In the scene that drives the play to its climax, she viciously smashes the old man’s beloved collection of Caruso recordings. Only her brother Morty, a smug, grasping little businessman, is treated adoringly, not only for his obvious monetary success in life, but in the vain hope that he might dispense to the family more than a few tokens of his largesse. With him, she makes common cause to cheat her son out of an inheritance.

It is clear from the opening chaotic kitchen scene to the climactic “awakenings” of Hennie and Ralph that Odets has created a deeply layered family of working people not stereotypically angry and noble as per the classical agitprop theatre of the time, but contradictory, quarrelsome, confused—somehow straining against their situation with only a flickering light to show the way. As soon-to-be critic Alfred Kazin wrote after first seeing *Awake* as a youth, “It seemed to me, sitting high up in the balcony of the Belasco Theater, that it would at last be possible for me to write about life...watching my mother and father and uncles and aunts occupying the stage by as much right as if they were Hamlet or Lear, I understood at last!”

The final act of *Awake* shows the rejection of Bessie’s and Uncle Morty’s perspectives by Hennie and Ralph—but not through any overt counterattack and in interesting and contradictory ways. Hennie, smothered by an unwanted baby and a new husband she unjustly blames for her unhappiness, takes a desperate grab at a better life by running off with Moe. “Make a break or spend the rest of your life in a coffin,” he exhorts. As they depart for “greener grass,” however, one is left unconvinced that their empty lives will necessarily be fulfilled by simple flight.

Ralph, on the other hand, decides to stay, but on his own terms, invested now with a nascent understanding that his task must be to put into action what his grandfather could only talk about—so that life shouldn't be printed on dollar bills.

The feeling of disquiet, the yearning for a better life lies at the heart of Odets' best work.

But it is not simply the dreams of a better material existence that drive his characters and inform his themes. It is a belief that people's yearnings are intimately bound up with society's own development. Odets makes us understand that only working people's self-sacrifice and collective action will move the world forward. And despite their imperfections, despite their personal tragedies, they are entirely capable of the task.