

Revival of Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy* (1937): The American dream turns sour

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16 January 2013

At the Belasco Theatre in New York City through January 20, directed by Bartlett Sher, produced by the Lincoln Center.

A revival of American playwright Clifford Odets' 1937 play *Golden Boy* is currently running at the Belasco Theater in New York City, presented by Lincoln Center Theater. The play was famously adapted for the screen in 1939, with William Holden (in his first movie role), Barbara Stanwyck and Adolphe Menjou, directed by Rouben Mamoulian.

Odets (1906-1963) was born in Philadelphia to Russian- and Romanian-Jewish immigrants, and raised in that city and in the Bronx. After dropping out of high school, he became a founding member, as an actor, of the left-wing Group Theater in New York in 1931.

Other leading members included Lee Strasberg, Cheryl Crawford and Harold Clurman. The company emphasized a psychologically naturalistic acting technique that Strasberg was developing, influenced by the work of such figures as the great Russian theater director Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938), which would later be referred to as "method" acting.

This approach had a powerful influence on the young Odets as he made the transition from performer to dramatist.

Undoubtedly impelled by the Russian Revolution, the social misery produced by the Great Depression and the resulting popular radicalization in America, Odets joined the Stalinized Communist Party in 1934 and began writing plays with strong left-wing and working class themes. His first play, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), concerned a group of New York taxicab drivers organizing a strike. This piece was well received on Broadway, which paved the way for later successes, most notably *Awake and Sing* (1935), about a Jewish family in the Bronx.

In 1936 Odets was persuaded to apply his talents to the Hollywood film *The General Died at Dawn* (directed by Lewis Milestone). Odets agreed to work on the script with the intention of using his salary to help fund the Group Theater. And it was this struggle between art and selfish, material concerns that became the central theme of *Golden Boy*, which premiered at the same theater that is home to the current production, the Belasco, on November 4, 1937.

Odets would follow up with plays such as *Rocket to the Moon*, *Clash by Night*, *The Big Knife* and *Country Girl* (the last three also being made into films), along with contributing directly to various Hollywood productions, most significantly perhaps, *Sweet Smell of Success* (directed by Alexander Mackendrick, 1957). However, Odets' shameful decision to inform against his former comrades when called to testify before the House Committee of Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1952 would drastically affect his relationship with many of his peers and his artistic output in the final years of his life.

At the center of *Golden Boy* is Joe Bonaparte (Seth Numrich), a gifted violinist. Bonaparte is equally adept as a boxer, however, and therein lies the play's drama. Our protagonist is torn between the attraction of fame and fortune as a professional prize fighter and the pursuit of his first love, music.

The play opens with Joe pleading with promoter Tom Moody (Danny Mastrogiorio) for a shot in the ring. Moody is reluctant at first, but it is left with no choice when one of his leading fighters suffers an injury. Joe seizes his opportunity and his name appears in the newspaper the following day, much to the surprise of his family and to the chagrin of his father.

Bonaparte's Italian-immigrant father (Tony Shalhoub) warns him of the strong possibility of

injuring his hands in the boxing game, thereby destroying any hopes Joe might have of succeeding as a violinist. Initially, it appears as if Joe is heeding these warnings: we learn that in his early fights he defends himself ably, but is somewhat reluctant to inflict pain on his opponents.

However, Moody quickly persuades Joe to develop a more aggressive boxing style. In this he is aided by a seasoned boxing trainer, Tokio (Danny Burstein), and Moody's fiancée Lorna Moon (Yvonne Strahovski). Moody, in fact, encourages the attractive young woman to use her charms to persuade Joe to commit fully to his boxing career.

In a matter of months, Joe develops a fearsome reputation in the ring and is quickly catapulted to star status. Along the way, he inevitably falls in love with Lorna and success inevitably goes to his head, which alienates him from his father, whose hopes of seeing his son become a classical musician are dashed.

A turning point in the story is the arrival of Eddie Fuseli (Anthony Crivello). Fuseli is a mobster also masquerading as a boxing promoter, but obviously one with a far more ruthless streak than Moody. Naturally, being attracted to Joe's talents, he consciously sets about winning over the naïve young fighter. This quickly takes place and from there onward Joe finds himself on a slippery slope.

In one of the play's more harrowing and deeply humane scenes, Joe breaks down in front of his trainer Tokio on discovering that his knockout punch has ended the life of an opponent. This scene is played beautifully by both Numrich and Burstein. Joe finds an emotional support in an apparently unlikely source, his rigorously masculine boxing coach.

The cast is uniformly strong throughout, dealing well with what at times is an overly melodramatic text. Odets' dialogue in many of the scenes feels stilted and somewhat contrived, but the nineteen actors succeed for the most part in making it as believable as they possibly can.

The talented Shalhoub is particularly moving as Joe's father, ably coping with a seemingly one-dimensional Italian American character. Mr. Bonaparte refuses to budge from his dignified stance of disapproval at Joe's career path. Even in a climatic scene where Joe—who has now reached the pinnacle of his boxing career—begs for his father's acceptance, Mr. Bonaparte stands firm.

This was arguably the most effective moment in the production and it clearly showed Odets' own disgust at that time of his career with the profit system.

Joe's love affair with Lorna Moon is played out sincerely. Yvonne Strahovski is convincing as Moon, a woman torn between her feelings for Tom Moody and Joe. Her decision to lean towards the latter proves fatal ...

Despite the foreboding that pervades Odets script, one is genuinely engaged for almost the entire three hours. The playwright unquestionably had limitations as a dramatist, particularly his tendency to hit the audience over the head with didactic dialogue. Yet, that being said, Odets proved with *Golden Boy* that he had the ability to raise issues that were in the forefront of people's minds during the Great Depression in a dramatic and largely entertaining manner.



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