

Clifford Odets'

AWAKE AND SING!

PROJECTS PACK



ALMEIDA
PROJECTS

‘Man is an heroic being if he can only break through to fulfilment ... Nothing moves me so much as human aspirations blocked, nothing enrages me like waste. I am for use as opposed to abuse.’

Clifford Odets

Welcome to our production of *Awake and Sing!* - a rarely seen 20th century classic by Clifford Odets. Odets ranks among America’s finest playwrights, part of the generation which includes Eugene O’Neill, Theodore Ward and Thornton Wilder.

AWAKE AND SING! is directed by Michael Attenborough, the Almeida’s Artistic Director, and marks the start of a new season of exciting and challenging theatre productions for 2007/8 at the Almeida Theatre. Rarely seen in the UK, *AWAKE AND SING!* captures the spirit of 1930s New York from the perspective of a second-generation Jewish immigrant family, fighting for survival against the backdrop of the Great Depression, the rising tide of Fascism in Europe and the rise of the workers’ movements in Russia and Eastern Europe.

Odets’ characters embody the passion, pain and boundless hope of an age when the promise of the American Dream is under question but where the future still beckons brightly to the young. Dealing with the domestic problems of an ordinary family awash in the sea of international events, the play offers a powerful and often comic counterpoint to the novels of Steinbeck and Hemingway.

Steeped in its period, the production does contain racial terminology which today we find unacceptable. The production preserves this language to remain faithful to the period because to change it would be revisionist.

At the time of writing, the production is in its first week of rehearsal and the actors are finding their feet with the script and the New York accents of 1933. This pack aims to provide an insight into our process in taking the production from research stage to performance. We hope you will use it help you in your own investigations into the play both before and after your visit to the Almeida.

ALMEIDA PROJECTS

Under the artistic directorship of Michael Attenborough, the Almeida presents an eclectic programme, ranging from redefined major classics to the cutting edge of brand new work. Our Projects reflect the main programme’s ambition by finding ways to challenge and excite our participants about the work you come to see at the Almeida. We hope to inspire you to approach your own theatre work in the same spirit of generosity and risk-taking that we encourage in our rehearsal room.

Workshops

Before you see the production, one of our Projects Team will be visiting you for a workshop, bringing some of the techniques explored in the rehearsal room, the challenges the play presents and some questions. The sessions are designed to be practical and participatory so please come energised, ready to work and wearing appropriate clothes and shoes.

Hosts

When you come to the theatre, you will be met by one of the Projects Team who will be on hand to answer your questions and listen to your feedback about the production. Please do take advantage of this opportunity to find out more about how the production has evolved. Thanks to all of the creative team and the cast who have been so generous in their enthusiasm and support of the Projects work.

We look forward to welcoming you to the Almeida soon.

Rebecca Manson Jones

Director, Almeida Projects



Nigel Lindsay
Hugo Glendinning

*If this life leads to a
revolution it's a good
Life. Otherwise it's for
nothing. JACOB*

CAST

Ralph Berger
Myron Berger
Hennie Berger
Jacob
Bessie Berger
Schlosser
Moe Axelrod
Uncle Morty
Sam Feinschreiber

Ben Turner
Paul Jesson
Jodie Whittaker
John Rogan
Stockard Channing
Keiron Jecchinis
Nigel Lindsay
Trevor Cooper
John Lloyd Fillingham

CREATIVE TEAM

Direction
Design
Lighting
Sound
Casting
Dialect coaches

Fight Director
Assistant Director
Production Manager
Company Manager
Stage Manager
Deputy Stage Manager
Assistant Stage Manager
Costume Supervisor
Wardrobe Supervisor
Wardrobe Deputy
Wig Supervisor
Chief Technician
Lighting Technician
Sound Technician
Theatre Technician
Production Carpenter
Set built by
Set painted by

Michael Attenborough
Tim Shortall
Paul Pyant
John Leonard
Julia Horan
Penny Dyer
Jan Haydn Rowles
Terry King
Meriel Baistow-Clare
Igor
Rupert Carlile
Suzanne Bourke
Nicole Keighley
Laura Draper
Lynette Mauro
Catrina Richardson
Charlotte Damigos
Zoe Goodchild
Jason Wescombe
Robin Fisher
Howard Wood
Mark Jenkins
Craig Emerson
Scott Fleary Ltd
Charlotte Gainey
Natasha Shepherd
Jodie Pritchard
Cosprop
Hugo Glendinning

Costumes by
Production Photography
Student on attachment
to stage management

Stephanie Burt-Andrews

ALMEIDA PROJECTS

Director, Almeida Projects
Projects Co-ordinator
Administrator
Pack Design

Rebecca Manson Jones
Beckie Mills
Clare Lomas
Ned Glasier

Workshop team:

Meriel Baistow-Clare
Curtis Jordan

Projects Pack

Rebecca Manson Jones
Ned Glasier
Lindsay Dukes (work placement)



Members of the cast rehearse *Awake and Sing!*
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

JACOB: *That's what you want, Ralphie? Your name in the paper?*

RALPH: *I wanna make up my own mind about things . . . be something!*

HENNIE: *I'm not marrying a poor foreigner like him. Can't even speak an English word. Not me! I'll go to my grave without a husband.*

The Bronx, New York. The action spans two years in the life of the Berger household and takes place in their apartment.

The action flows from one room to the next. Conversations overlap from room to room with characters coming and going, overhearing and interrupting.

ACT ONE: 1932

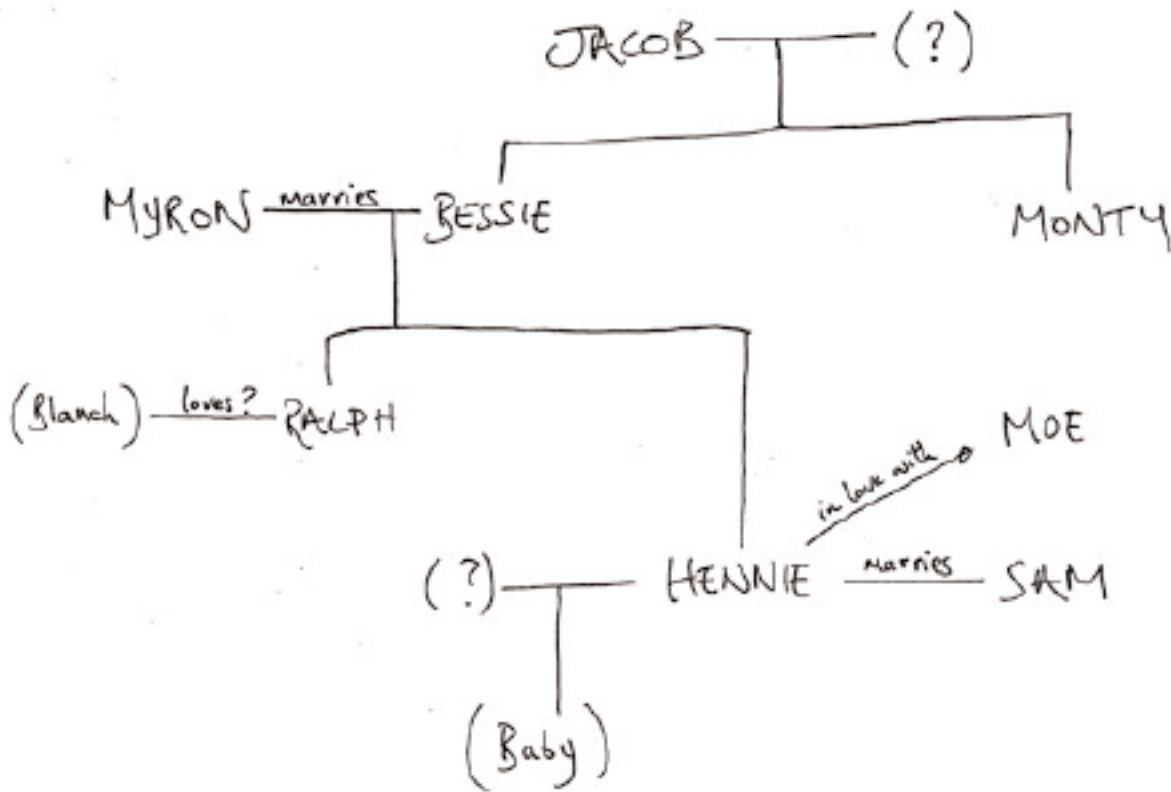
Bessie, Myron, Hennie, Ralph and Jacob – the Berger family - are finishing supper. Ralph frets about his inability to earn enough money to have fun. He wishes he could have learned to tap dance and become famous. Bessie is unimpressed.

Myron tells Ralph that life is unfair and unpredictable. He reprimands Ralph for stressing his mother. Ralph complains that he doesn't even have his own room. Bessie says he'll get his own room if Hennie ever gets married. Myron talks about a lottery where you can win a fortune and Bessie says it's more likely they'll be evicted.

Myron gives Hennie some chocolates sent by Sam Feinschreiber. Her parents encourage her to be nice to Sam but she is not interested in a recent immigrant. She wants to marry an American. Hennie changes the subject by offering to take her parents to the Music Hall. Bessie tells Ralph to stay away from the local kids whilst they are out.

Ralph and Jacob are left alone. Jacob tells Ralph to be strong, to be more aware of the world's problems not just his own. Ralph confides to Jacob that he's in love. His girlfriend, Blanche, is an orphan and he knows Bessie will not approve of her. Jacob advises Ralph to concentrate on his future and to worry about love later. Ralph goes out to meet his girlfriend.

Moe Axelrod arrives expecting to take Hennie out. Moe pretends he is there to see Myron for whom he has some winnings from a horse race. Moe and Jacob talk about the danger of another war.



RALPH: I been working for years, bringing in money here – putting it in your hand like a kid. ... Only just remember I pay some of the bills around here, just a few . . . and if my girl calls me on the phone I'll talk to her any time I please.

They start to play cards but are interrupted by the return of Bessie, Myron and Hennie. Hennie is unwell. Moe shares the news about Myron's win. Moe goes to a café to get change for Myron's winnings. Whilst he is out, Bessie and Hennie have an argument about seeing a doctor. Bessie realises that Hennie is pregnant.

Hennie at first refuses to reveal the father's identity but then tells them that Jacob helped her to contact him but she doesn't know where he is. Bessie decides that Hennie will marry Sam Feinschreiber. Jacob begs Bessie not to see the plan through but she tells him to go to his room. Myron asks Bessie to be calm so that the neighbours won't hear their business.

Moe returns. Bessie tells him that Hennie is getting married. Hennie goes to bed. Moe reveals that he is fond of Hennie. Bessie asks if he wants to marry her instead of Sam but Moe doesn't want to get married. From Jacob's phonograph in his room, the sound of Caruso singing echoes through the flat. Bessie is annoyed by the music.

Moe is agitated by the news of Hennie's marriage. To distract himself, he starts to play heads and tails with Myron.

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE – 1933 ONE YEAR LATER. SUNDAY AFTERNOON

Hennie and Sam Feinschreiber have married. Moe is renting Hennie's old room. Ralph still sleeps on the sofa in the sitting room. The family have gathered for a meal including Bessie's brother, Morty, a business man dealing in the rag trade.

Jacob cuts Morty's hair. Bessie sends Ralph out to get drinks. Ralph doesn't want to go in case he misses a telephone call. Bessie insists. Moe reports that there have been more suicides in the financial district. The phone rings. Bessie says that Ralph is out and hangs up. She asks Morty to get Ralph a better job but Morty says he can't help. Business is bad for him too.



Ben Turner in rehearsal as Ralph
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Bessie is worried: Myron's hours have been cut back to 3 days a week. Jacob says the slump is all the fault of the capitalists. Bessie tells him to go and live on the street to qualify for welfare. Morty reminds her that he gives her an allowance to keep Jacob. She says he could give her more.

The discussion turns to Moe's war pension. Morty says if they didn't give war pensions, America might not be in debt. Jacob says they should not have wars but Morty says that wars are necessary. Moe says that anyone who has been to war knows it's unnecessary and he'd be happy to give his pension back.

Jacob gives Morty a large envelope containing an insurance policy. He says the beneficiary is to be Ralph. He doesn't want Bessie to know about it. It's worth \$3000.

Ralph returns and asks if there was a phone call. Bessie says it was a wrong number and Jacob tells her not to lie. She attacks Ralph for making a scene in front of Morty. Ralph wants her to acknowledge that he contributes to the bills and therefore has a right to speak to his girlfriend whenever he wants.

Hennie complains about the state of her hands from washing nappies. Morty invites her to choose a new dress from his range. She misses her job as a secretary. Her days are spent washing nappies and nights awake because the baby is crying. Morty promises to leave her a nest egg. Moe jibes at Hennie that Sam is more like a nurse to the baby than a father. He asks her if they sleep together. They argue.

Ralph asks Moe if he heard the phone. He is worried about Blanche. He thinks she wants to leave New York. Moe teases Ralph about his inexperience with women. Morty warns Moe off encouraging Ralph to get into a racket. Moe says everything in life is corrupt from marriage to politics. Morty is offended. He knows that his workforce insult him behind his back but he is proud that he has got where he is by hard work and he has a good reputation. He says Ralph should be able to do the same.

Jacob thinks it's not possible for a young man to make it even though everyone around him is selling him the dream of success. Jacob foresees doom for the younger generation. Bessie tells him to shut up. Jacob points out that the American Dream hasn't delivered much to his family yet. His opinions are dismissed by Morty as those of a senile old man.

Most of the family sit down for dinner. Ralph stays with Jacob. The phone rings. It is Blanche. She explains to Ralph that her uncle is making her leave New York. He promises to meet her later that night. From the other room, Bessie calls them to sit down. Laughter is heard from the dinner table whilst Ralph sobs.

SCENE TWO - THAT NIGHT

Jacob reads aloud from a communist pamphlet which warns of an impending international conflict caused by capitalist self-interest. Ralph returns. Ralph has asked Blanche to marry him but she is too scared. Jacob tells Ralph not to worry about finding girls. He should sort out his own future first.

Sam arrives agitated. Hennie has told him that he is not the father of the baby. He tells how his father died of shame when humiliated by the Cossacks in Odessa. He feels the same way. He knows that Hennie looks down on him.

info box

Ralph is currently earning \$16 per week, \$832 per year, of which he keeps \$5 per week and the rest he gives to Bessie for household expenses. \$3000 in 1932 had the same purchasing power as \$44,275.26 today. (figures from measuringworth.com)



John Rogan as Jacob
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

JACOB:...*This is why I tell you – DO! Do what is in your heart and you carry in yourself a revolution. But you should act. Not like me. A man who had golden opportunities but drank instead a glass tea.*

MOE: ...*I never had a home either. I'm lookin' too!...*

MOE: So you're it – you're home for me, a place to live! ... Be with me, Paradise. What's to lose?

RALPH: ...*I'm twenty-two and kickin'! I'll get along. Did Jake die for us to fight about nickels? No! "Awake and sing," he said.*

Bessie and Myron return from the cinema, Bessie sends Myron to make tea and then persuades Sam that Hennie's temper has made her spiteful. Sam allows himself to be persuaded by Bessie that he is the baby's father and is sent home to bed.

Ralph asks Bessie if he can bring Blanche home to live in the apartment. Bessie refuses. She tells Ralph to go to bed. Myron expresses surprise that Hennie would have told Sam about the baby. Ralph overhears him and is disgusted by his parents' behaviour and that Jacob joined in the deception. Myron defends Bessie but Ralph calls him a lap dog. Bessie lets loose a tirade about how she has worked to keep the family together. She takes her anger out on Jacob and goes into his room where she smashes his collection of gramophone records.

Moe arrives singing drunkenly. Ralph offers to take the dog out on the roof but Jacob goes himself. Myron attempts a reconciliation with Ralph. He knows that he hasn't been the ideal American father. He talks about how life can take a turn at any time, a lottery ticket can change everything. Ralph tells Myron to grow up. Myron asks Ralph to understand his mother, she only wants the best for the family.

The door bell rings very loudly. The concierge has found Jacob's body on the street.

ACT THREE

A week later. The family are gathered after Jacob's funeral.

Bessie asks Morty to stay and help her with the insurance man and Ralph but Morty wants to get back to his sweatshop. His workers are threatening to strike. Morty tells Bessie that he will see Ralph signs over the insurance money to the family. Moe overhears them.

Ralph tells Moe that Blanche has left town. She thinks Ralph doesn't love her enough. He didn't meet up with her because of Jacob's death. Moe tells him about the insurance money and promises to back him up.

Sam tries to persuade Hennie to come home with him. Hennie tells Sam to go home without her. Moe tells Hennie that he is leaving New York for good. Bessie interrupts them.

Ralph confronts the family about the insurance policy. Moe backs him up by producing a letter he found in Jacob's room. Morty says it's a fake and Moe invites him to call his bluff: the insurance won't pay out if the death was a suicide. Bessie blames her brother for calling the insurance man so soon. Morty amazed says he is leaving before the argument escalates too far. He takes Sam with him, Hennie tells Sam she loves him.

Bessie tells everyone to go to bed. She asks Ralph not to have crazy ideas about the money. She reminds him of his upbringing, how she worked to keep them respectable and healthy. The family needs the money. Life in America isn't like the pictures on a calendar.

Moe reveals that the letter is blank. Ralph tells Moe that he feels that he's grown up in the week since Jacob died. He wants to get his co-workers to make a stand with him for better conditions. He goes to read some of Jacob's books. Moe reveals that he is planning to leave New York for good.

He asks Hennie to leave Sam and the baby and fly with him to Havana. He asks her to take the gamble on life and him.

Ralph comes in and tells them they should make the break. He is going to stay behind and make something of himself.

BESSIE: *“My whole life I wanted to go away too, but with children a woman stays home. A fire burned my heart too, but now it’s too late...The clock goes and Bessie goes. Only my machinery can’t be fixed.*”

MYRON: *“I’m not foreign born. I’m American, and yet I never got close to you. It’s an American father’s duty to be his son’s friend.*”

HENNIE: *“If I’m sore on life, why take it out on him?”*

RALPH ... *“We don’t want life printed on dollar bills, Mom!”*

JACOB: *“In my day the propaganda was for God. Now it’s for success. A boy don’t turn around without having shoved in him he should make success.*”

These are the character notes as given by the playwright, Clifford Odets. When you have seen the production, discuss what choices you think the cast and director made about using these notes as building blocks for character development. Did you notice any startling variations from Odets’ notes?

“ All of the characters in *Awake and Sing!* share a fundamental activity: a struggle for life amidst petty conditions.



BESSIE BERGER, as she herself states, is not only the mother in this home but also the father. She is constantly arranging the taking care of her family. She loves life, likes to laugh, has great resourcefulness and enjoys living from day to day. A high degree of energy accounts for her quick exasperation and ineptitude. She is a shrewd judge of realistic qualities in people in the sense of being able to gauge quickly their effectiveness. In her eyes all of the people in the house are equal. She is naïve and quick in emotional response. She is afraid of utter poverty. She is proper according to her own standards, which are fairly close to those of most middle-class families. She knows that when one lives in the jungle one must look out for the wild life.

MYRON, her husband, is a born follower. He would like to be a leader. He would like to make a million dollars. He is not sad or ever depressed. Life is an even sweet event to him, but the “old days” were sweeter yet. He has a dignified sense of himself. He likes people. He likes everything. But he is heartbroken without being aware of it.



HENNIE is a girl who has had few friends, male or female. She is proud of her body. She won’t ask favors. She travels alone. She is fatalistic about being trapped, but will escape if possible. She is self-reliant in the best sense. Till the day she dies she will be faithful to a loved man. She inherits her mother’s sense of humor and energy.

RALPH is a boy with a clean spirit. He wants to know, wants to learn. He is ardent, he is romantic, he is sensitive. He is naïve too. He is trying to find why so much dirt must be cleared away before it is possible to “get to first base”.



JACOB, too, is trying to find a right path for himself and the others. He is aware of justice, of dignity. He is an observer of the others, compares their activities with his real and ideal sense of life. This produces a reflective nature. In this home he is a constant boarder. He is a sentimental idealist with no power to turn ideal to action. With physical facts – such as housework – he putters. But as a barber he demonstrates the flair of an artist. He is an old Jew with living eyes in his tired face.

MORTY: ... I started from a poor boy who worked on an ice wagon for two dollars a week. ... I made it honest. In the whole industry nobody's got a better name.



UNCLE MORTY is a successful American business man with five good senses. Something sinister comes out of the fact that the lives of others seldom touch him deeply. He holds his own line of life. When he is generous, he wants others to be aware of it. He is pleased by attention – a rich relative to the

BERGER family. He is a shrewd judge of material values. He will die unmarried. Two and two make four, never five with him. He can blink in the sun for hours, a fat tomcat. Tickle him, he laughs. He lives in a penthouse with a real Japanese butler to serve him. He sleeps with dress models, but not from his own showrooms. He plays cards for hours on end. He smokes expensive cigars. He sees every Mickey Mouse cartoon that appears. He is a 32-degree Mason. He is really deeply intolerant finally.

MOE: The doctor said it – cut off your leg to save your life! And they done it – one thing to get another.

MOE AXELROD lost a leg in the war. He seldom forgets that fact. He has killed two men in extra-martial activity. He is mordant, bitter. Life has taught him a disbelief in everything, but he will fight his way through. He seldom shows his feelings: fights against his own sensitivity. He has been everywhere and seen everything.



All he wants is **HENNIE**. He is very proud. He scorns the inability of others to make their way in life, but he likes people for whatever good qualities they possess. His passionate outbursts come from a strong but contained emotional mechanism.

SAM: ...I make a nice living from the store. But it's no use – she looks for a star in the sky.



SAM FEINSCHREIBER wants to find a home. He is a lonely man, a foreigner in a strange land, hypersensitive about this fact, conditioned by the humiliation of not making his way alone. He has a sense of others laughing at him. At night he gets up and sits alone in the dark. He hears acutely all the small sounds of life. He might have been a poet in

another time and place. He approaches his wife as if he were always offering her a delicate flower. Life is a high chill wind weaving itself around his head.

SCHLOSSER, the janitor, is an overworked German whose wife ran away with another man and left him with a young daughter who in turn ran away and joined a burlesque show as chorus girl. The man suffers rheumatic pains.



He has lost his identity twenty years before.



Jodie Whittaker and Ben Turner as Hennie and Ralph
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

BESSIE: ...When I was your age it was already a big family with responsibilities.

JACOB: ...Never a young man had such opportunity like today. He could make history.

RALPH: ...Boy, I'm telling you I could sing! Jake, she's like stars. She's so beautiful you look at her and cry! She's like French words!

Below we've listed some of the themes that emerged during the rehearsal and production process of **AWAKE AND SING!**

After watching the play, try and note the specific moments within the production - lines, action or visual images - where the themes listed below emerge. Which themes feel most important to you - and how are they represented onstage? Are specific themes connected with a particular character, or a particular moment during the play? What other themes would you add to this list?

FAMILY LOYALTY vs INDEPENDENCE

GENERATIONAL STRUGGLE – GROWING UP

DREAMS vs REALITY

REVOLUTION – POLITICS – WAR

IDENTITY & ASSIMILATION

SURVIVAL – FINANCIAL & EMOTIONAL

BEAUTY – MUSIC, POETRY

HOME vs STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

LOVE



Michael Attenborough

RALPH: When I was a kid I laid awake at nights and heard the sounds of trains . . . far-away lonesome sounds . . . boats going up and down the river. I used to think of all kinds of things I wanted to do.

RALPH: ...'Cause life's different in my head. Gimme the earth in two hands. I'm stong. There . . . hear him? The air mail off to Boston. Day or night, he flies away, a job to do. That's us and it's no time to die.

On the first day of rehearsal, the director calls the cast, the creative team and the Almeida Theatre staff to an introductory meeting. The entire team responsible for making the play meets in one room, often for the first time. This session usually includes an introduction from the director about the ideas for the production. Here we have summarised some of Michael Attenborough's observations about the work of Clifford Odets and his own passion for this play.

Awake & Sing! marks the 3rd play produced at the Almeida set in the midst of the Great Depression. AS WITH DYING FOR IT (an adaptation by Moira Buffini of Nikolai Erdman's The Suicide) and BIG WHITE FOG by Theodore Ward, this play centres on people on the very edge of survival. Every day, the characters are pitted against world events which are beyond their control, making the dramatic stakes extremely high. Even the everyday business of living becomes a matter of survival. Characters manifest extreme reactions and great emotion in these circumstances. However, the plays are not on a monotone but contain dramatic colour and warmth, eg: the farcical nature of DYING FOR IT and the affectionate and finely observed portrayal of family life in both BIG WHITE FOG and AWAKE AND SING!

As a man, Clifford Odets was committed politically, a believer in Marxism, although privately he liked the finer things in life. As a playwright, he was interested in people rather than political systems. In this play he explores the nature of humanity amongst people who literally live on top of each other. The community and the family is very close knit: there is little privacy, individual needs are crushed for the good of the wider family and one person appears to bear the burden of holding everything together in order to ensure everyone's survival.

There is a tension between the generations as Hennie and Ralph crave independence whilst survival appears to necessitate the family unit sticking together.

Odets is writing from experience. He was a child of Eastern European immigrants his mother was Romanian, his father a Russian Jew. America was seen as the land of hope but Odets felt a personal need to break free from his background.

Indeed, the assimilation debate was as live an issue for the original production team as it was for the Odets family and the characters on stage. Whilst the original draft is firmly rooted in Odets' experience of a Jewish upbringing, the current script does not contain many ethnically specific references. During rehearsal for the original production in 1935, a decision was made to emphasise the universal resonances of this immigrant family living under duress rather than highlighting the particular predicament of a Jewish family.

ODETS' LANGUAGE

One of the elements of Odets' stage craft which appeals to Michael Attenborough is the way Odets uses language. From the naturalistic colloquial to the specific rhythms of the Jewish idiom, Odets understands that language can be used to keep people down, eg: Bessie, but it can also make the characters fly eg: Ralph, Moe, Jacob.

We have included quotations from the play throughout the pack to remind you of Odets' rich and precise use of language. You can use this to help you with the improvisations suggested later.



Images of the *Awake and Sing!* model box (designer: Tim Shortall)

Designing for the Almeida Theatre presents unusual challenges because the building was not purpose built as a theatre. It is what is known as a “found space” which means that it was discovered as a place where theatre productions might be made. As such, the Almeida does not have conventional wing space upstage or offstage and neither do we have many possibilities for flying scenery. However, we have a stage which is as wide and deep and high as the auditorium creating a completely unique relationship between the stage ie: the actors and the audience.

For the production of *AWAKE AND SING!*, Michael Attenborough explained to the cast that he and Tim Shortall, the designer, had opted for “smelly design” meaning that they wanted to represent the world of the Berger’s flat in as much realistic detail as possible using objects which were thoroughly researched and dressed so as to look, feel and if necessary smell like the 1930s.

They excluded the possibilities of changing the set between scenes apart from minor dressing to show the passage of time allowing the action to flow from one space to another, emphasising the cramped conditions and claustrophobia of a family home where it is almost impossible to have a private conversation.

One puzzling detail for Tim was how to show Jacob in his bedroom until he found pictures of 1930s tenements in the Bronx showing apartments that were built so close together that the rooms were given internal windows rather than external windows to allow some light into rooms where there was otherwise no natural light. Using this period detail allows us to see Jacob’s bedroom without the design being faked.

When you watch the production, notice how the action moves from one space to the other without the spaces pulling focus from one another.

Some important dates leading up to the start of the play:

19th century - mass migrations of Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia to the USA.

1848 – Marx publishes Communist Manifesto

27th October, 1858 - Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. born

February 25, 1873 - Enrico Caruso born

March 14, 1883 - Karl Marx dies

March 12th – 14th 1888 – The Great Blizzard

September 14, 1901 - Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. enters office.

March 4, 1909 - Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. resigns from office.

1914 - World War I begins

11th November, 1918 - Armistice Day: the end of World War I

January 6, 1919 - Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. dies

August 2, 1921 - Enrico Caruso dies

October 29, 1929 - Stock Market crash (Black Tuesday) the start of The Great Depression in America.

1930 - rise of Fascism and anti-semitism in Europe

1932 - millions of Americans were out of work.

1933 - Franklin Roosevelt becomes President.

1933 - Adolf Hitler elected Chancellor in Germany. Suppression of other political movements and minority groups including Communists and Jews.

To get a clear idea of the events mentioned in a play, the actors and director construct a timeline of the things that have happened **before** the play begins and the important events during the action.

Sometimes making decisions about when the events leading up to the play occurred can help answer questions about the characters and their relationships.

Unless the playwright is present and has a strong idea of when the events took place, the process of constructing a timeline can be open to debate and alteration during the rehearsal process. **Put these events into the order you think they must have occurred:**

Jacob becomes a barber

Bessie stops working

Hennie's baby is conceived

Ralph born

"I'm twenty-two and kickin"

Myron born?

"I was a little boy when it happened – the Great Blizzard."

Myron studies law

"...while Myron Berger went to law school"

Jacob born

"A man sixty-seven . . ."

Moe stops bootlegging

"I kissed bootlegging bye-bye two years back."

Moe loses his leg in France

"Didn't I go fight in France for democracy? Didn't I get my goddam leg shot off in that war the day before the armistice?"

Bessie born

"A girl twenty-six don't grow younger. When I was your age it was already a big family with responsibilities."

Morty born

Ralph becomes a clerk

Morty becomes a successful business man

Moe born

Bessie goes to work.

"The first two years I worked in a stocking factory..."

Sam comes to America

"For a boy only three years in the country he speaks very nice."



Ben Turner as Ralph
photo; Hugo Glendinning

When in rehearsal, actors create an idea of the offstage characters who affect their lives on stage.

They use the text to help them do this, mining it for information as a way to build up a character profile. Why is this important?

EXERCISE

Using Blanche, Ralph's girlfriend as an example, brainstorm everything you can remember about her from the production. Create your version of Blanche.

Improvisation:

Improvise the moment when Ralph and Blanche met. Where were they? Who else was there? What happened?

Between Acts 1 and 2, Ralph takes Blanche home for supper in a scene, we never see. Who was there? What happened? In groups of 4 or 5, improvise the scene.

For some characters, it's off stage events which help to define their onstage reality.

For each of the other characters, think of an important moment which takes place off-stage.

Eg: When Moe sees his first dead body in the war.
When Ralph brings Blanche home for dinner

Use the plot summary to brainstorm other off-stage moments for each of the characters.

Decide which other characters you want in the scene. Give your actors an introduction to the scene. Basing their behaviour on the information in these research materials, their own reading or references from films set in the period (eg Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*) and the production you have seen, ask them to run the scene.

Stop the scene after a few minutes and help the actors fine tune their reactions. Remember it's important to keep the emphasis on your focal character. What discoveries have you made about the focal character which could help the actor make his/her acting choices in the play?

For more information about improvisation as rehearsal technique see page 15 on the Group Theatre and the work of Lee Strasberg.

BESSIE: ...was Bessie Berger's children always the cleanest on the block?! Here I'm not only the mother, but also the father...On the calendar it's a different place, but here without a dollar you don't look the world in the eye. Talk from now to next year – this is life in America.



Information about the photo
Photo: Credit

“If you don’t turn out to be a genius, Clifford, no one will forgive you.”

Stella Adler

Clifford Odets was born in Philadelphia in 1918 and raised in the Bronx, New York - the setting for *Awake and Sing!*. He dropped out of school in order to pursue a career in acting and was a co-founder of the renowned **Group Theatre** in New York.

Odets was considered to be a limited actor and began to make his name as a playwright instead. His first professionally produced play was a one act play about trade union corruption called *Waiting for Lefty* and was performed by the Group Theatre in 1935. *Awake and Sing!*, which he had written before *Waiting for Lefty*, was performed a few months afterwards, but only after actors at the Group Theatre demanded that the theatre produce it.

Class consciousness, criticism of exploitative economic systems and socialism are recurring themes in Odets’ plays, particularly those written with the Group Theatre during the Great Depression of the 1930s. In 1953 Odets was called before Senator McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee. Unlike many fellow left-leaning writers, he was not blacklisted and continued to write for both stage and screen until his death from stomach cancer in 1963.

TIMELINE

1906	July 18, Clifford Odets born to Pearl Geisinger Odets and Louis Odets, Philadelphia.
1923	Leaves high school early
1929	Possible first marriage to Roberta [last name unknown] ends with suicide after she kills their infant daughter Joan.
1931	Charter member of Group Theatre.
1932	Begins <i>I Got The Blues</i> (to become <i>Awake and Sing!</i>).
1935	January: <i>Waiting for Lefty</i> presented at benefit for New Theatre magazine (Odets becomes an overnight sensation). February: <i>Awake and Sing!</i> opens (Belasco Theatre). March: <i>Waiting for Lefty</i> and <i>Till The Day I Die</i> open as double bill (Longacre Theatre). December: <i>Paradise Lost</i> opens (Longacre Theatre).
1936	First trip to Los Angeles (back and fourth to New York City until 1943);
1937	Marries Luise Rainer; <i>Golden Boy</i> opens (Belasco Theatre)
1938	<i>Golden Boy</i> (London opening); <i>Rocket To The Moon</i> opens (Belasco Theatre); Times magazine cover story.
1940	Divorces Rainer; <i>Night Music</i> opens (Broadhurst Theatre)
1941	Withdraws <i>Clash By Night</i> from group; Group Theatre dissolves. <i>Clash By Night</i> opens (Belasco Theatre; produced by Billy Rose)
1943	Marries Bette Grayson. In Los Angeles until 1948.
1944	<i>None But The Lonely Heart</i> *^
1945	<i>Rhapsody in Blue</i> *~; daughter Nora born.
1946	<i>Humoresque</i> *; <i>From This Day Forward</i> *~; <i>Deadline at Dawn</i> *, <i>It’s A Wonderful Life</i> *~; <i>Sister Kenny</i> *~; <i>Notorius</i> *~
1947	Son Walt born. Named by House Un-American Activities Committee as “active in communist work.”
1948	To New York City
1949	<i>The Big Knife</i> opens (National Theatre)
1950	<i>The Country Girl</i> opens (Lyceum Theatre).
1951	Bette Grayson divorces Odets.
1952	Questioned by House Un-American Activities Committee
1954	Bette Grayson dies; <i>The Flowering Peach</i> opens (Belasco Theatre)
1955	To Los Angeles with children, Nora and Walt.
1956	<i>Bigger Than Life</i> *~
1957	<i>Sweet Smell of Success</i> *
1959	<i>Story On Page One</i> *^
1960	<i>Wild In The Country</i> *; receives Gold Medal Award from American Academy of Arts and Letters.
1962-3	Walk On The Wild Side*~; revises <i>Golden Boy</i> for a musical; story editor for The Richard Boone Show (TV).
1963	August 14, dies of cancer, Hollywood.

*Screenplay

^Writer and director

~Uncredited

Clurman and Strasberg decided with Cheryl Crawford to start by organizing a permanent company of actors trained in a common technique, sharing a fresh esthetic vision, and unified their craft in a “new” kind of theatre. Their choices of members hinged essentially on whether the actor seemed interested in hearing about “a theatre we hope to make.”

There was considerable question about Odets, as he was considered a mediocre actor by both men. Yet, said Clurman, “let’s have him” because “something is cooking with that man. I don’t know if it’s potato pancakes or what, but what’s cooking has a rich odour. Something will develop from that man.” Clurman knew nothing at this time of Odet’s aspirations as a writer.

*Clifford Odets American Playwright The Years from 1906 - 1940
Margaret Brenman-Gibson*

Group Theatre was founded in 1931 by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg, created in opposition to the light entertainment that dominated American theatre during the 1920s. With its work rooted in the Great Depression which gripped America throughout the 1930s, the Group Theatre became renowned for its pioneering ensemble work, the political nature of its plays and its use of ‘method acting’ techniques inspired by the techniques of the Russian practitioner Konstantin Stanislavsky.

Like Stanislavsky’s Moscow Arts Theatre, the Group Theatre based its work on an ensemble approach in which Clurman, Crawford and Strasberg recruited a permanent company, or group, of actors, all of whom had equal importance within the company. One of those actors was Clifford Odets, whose decision to start writing provided the group with some of its most important and acclaimed plays.

A key part of the development of the Group Theatre collective was the use of a unified training style. Lee Strasberg’s development of ‘The Method’ – in which actors are encouraged to draw on their own memories, emotions and experiences to create life-like, realistic performances – became a cornerstone of the company’s work, although disputes about it eventually contributed to the Group’s fragmentation in the late 1930s.

The Group’s first production, *The House of Connelly* by Paul Green, was received enthusiastically by audiences and critics, many of whom recognised its innovative impact that it was to have on American theatre. More successes followed, before Odets burst onto the scene with *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing!* in 1935.

Odets’ work resonated with the desire of the Group to represent the life they saw around them – particularly within the working classes; a theatre company speaking to and for its audience.

The Group’s demise in the late 1930s and early 1940s came about for a number of reasons: financial problems, disagreements – which became increasingly personal - about the Method, the lure – for many company members – of Hollywood and impending war all contributed to its break up. In less than ten years the Group had revolutionised American Theatre and provided a springboard to fame and success for directors, actors and playwrights including Marlon Brando, James Dean, Paul Newman, Meryl Streep, Gregory Peck and David Mamet.

The work of the Group Theatre continued through the Actors Studio in New York, founded by Cheryl Crawford, Robert Lewis and Elia Kazan in 1947 and later led by Lee Strasberg. In the 1950s many of the Group Theatre’s former members appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee accused of being communists and subversives.



info box

Bootlegger

Someone who smuggles alcoholic beverages illegally, usually to circumvent taxation or prohibition.

Bootlegging normally refers to smuggling over land, while those who brought in alcohol by boat were known as 'rum-runners'.

Speakeasies

A speakeasy was an establishment that was used for selling and drinking alcoholic beverages during prohibition, the ban on drinking alcohol in the United States that lasted from 1920 - 1933.

The Bronx, New York City

The Bronx underwent rapid growth after World War I. Extensions of the New York City Subway contributed to the increase in population as thousands of immigrants flooded the Bronx, resulting in a major boom in residential construction. Many Jewish, Italian and Irish New Yorkers settled in the area, while the Jewish population increased as French, German and Polish immigrants arrived in the area.

By 1926, the Bronx was noted for its high crime rate and its many 'speakeasies': illegal bars. During prohibition, bootleggers and gangs ran rampant in the Bronx, smuggling illegal alcohol

The Great Depression

In October 1929 the US stock market crashed, wiping out 40 percent of the paper values of common stock. Even after the stock market collapse, however, politicians and industry leaders continued to issue optimistic predictions for the nation's economy. But the Depression deepened, confidence evaporated and many lost their life savings. By 1933 the value of stock on the New York Stock Exchange was less than a fifth of what it had been at its peak in 1929. Business houses closed their doors, factories shut down and banks failed. Farm income fell some 50 percent. By 1932 approximately one out of every four Americans was unemployed.

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself"

Franklin Roosevelt 1933

By 1933 millions of Americans were out of work. Bread lines were a common sight in most cities. Hundreds of thousands roamed the country in search of food, work and shelter.

Franklin D Roosevelt (1882 - 1945)

The 32nd President of the United States, widely regarded as one of the greatest Democratic Presidents and the only President ever to serve more than two terms: he was in power from 1933 - 1945. Best known during the 1930s for his interventionist approaches to the challenge of the Great Depression, he created the New Deal to provide relief for the unemployed.

As the Great Depression faded, Roosevelt advocated rearmament and formed strong links with Britain which led, eventually, to America's entry into World War II shortly after the Japanese attack on US Battleships in Pearl Harbour in 1941.

Almeida Projects



ALMEIDA PROJECTS

Awake and Sing! Projects Pack

Written by Rebecca Manson Jones
Design and layout by Ned Glasier

Awake and Sing! by Clifford Odets was produced at the Almeida Theatre from 31st August - 20th October 2007.

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Script extracts from *Awake and Sing!* by Clifford Odets

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Almeida Projects draws on the expertise of some of the best theatre artists in the UK and brings them together with our community partners, promoting innovative creative exchange between the Almeida and its local community.

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We also run introductory workshops for students from across the UK visiting our unique theatre building.

For more information about Almeida Projects, please visit the Almeida's website, www.almeida.co.uk or contact us directly by emailing projects@almeida.co.uk or by calling 020 7288 4916.

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