



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 11. Issue.4. 2024 (Oct-Dec)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

The Impact of the Great Depression on American Drama and the Playwrights in the USA: A Critical Study

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.11.4.57](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.11.4.57)



Article information

Article Received: 11/11/2024
Article Accepted: 09/12/2024
Published online: 20/12/2024

ABSTRACT

The 1930s in the USA witnessed the catastrophic collapse of the nation's economy and its consequences. The sudden stock market crash in 1929 because of inflation broke down the country's economic system, and its consequences could be felt in all realms of life. Money became a rare commodity; people were exposed to untold suffering when the crash of 1929 was followed by the Great Depression. The leading capitalist country in the world became a land of hunger, poverty, sickness and unemployment. This brought forth the search for social alternatives. The intellectuals throughout the preceding decade rushed to public commitment, and so the 1930s in the USA was described as the committed decade. Drama became a weapon in the class struggle. It being essentially a social art, the theatre, the audience, and the various aspects of production, including the acting talent, are of great significance, unlike, as in the case of movie or fiction, where the full impact of the work depends solely on the writer's ability.

Keywords - Great Depression, commitment, class struggle, committed decade.

The USA witnessed the catastrophic collapse of the nation's economy and its consequences during the 1930s contrary to the prosperous 1920s. The sudden stock market crash in 1929 because of inflation broke down the country's economic system and people were exposed to untold suffering when the Great Depression followed the crash of 1929. The Great Depression intensely impacted literature, and the literary movements of Realism and Modernism picked up speed during and after the Great Depression. Literature during the Great Depression was hyper-realistic. It focussed on the real-life problems of everyday people, including housing, securing food, and raising a family. The leading capitalist country in the world became a land of hunger, poverty, sickness and unemployment. This brought forth the search for social alternatives. Most of the people find Marxism as a philosophy and Communism as an organization as the most effective means of satisfying their needs. There was a literary turn to the left advocating other liberal reforms or revolutionary change in the economic,

political or social order. Among the various literary forms, drama particularly offered a very powerful means of propagating leftist ideas and attracted a number of talented writers.

This re-vitalization of art was explained by several critics of that period. Drama being essentially a social art, involving an audience, it began pulsating with the violent feelings of the people whom it represented. The nation's frustration became articulate through the drama of the period, and drama has been recognized as focusing attention on the most frustrating contemporary social problems. The depression created such an urge among writers, and it led to a prolific output of proletarian drama. The dramatists of the decade can, very broadly, be classified into two groups. The first group consisted of playwrights like Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, and John Howard Lawson. This group entered the thirties with a reputation already achieved in the previous decade. The second group consists of Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, Sidney Kingsley and William Saroyan. The reaction to the new drift of thought differed in intensity from group to group. Most of the major playwrights of the period – Clifford Odets, John Howard Lawson, Robert E. Sherwood, S. N. Behrman, Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, Irwin Shaw, and Lillian Hellman – became highly concerned with the socio-economic and political issues raised by the Depression. Gerald Weales notes that "Odets is so identified with the 1930s that a mention of his name elicits stock responses, the recollection of a time when literature was a weapon and leftist opinion almost mandatory" (Gerald Weales, 15). Harold Clurman in *The Fervent Years* called Odets "The voice of his day, reflecting, even more than he proclaimed or knew the urgent need of the people in his time and place." (Harold Clurman, 181). Odets rose out of the Depression to give voice to a world in crisis. He put the middle-class on the stage and gave them courage, dignity and stature. His immediate sources of inspiration, his point of view and even his weaknesses are typical of the thirties.

Drama became a weapon in the class struggle. It being essentially a social art, the theatre, the audience, and the various aspects of production, including the acting talent, are of great significance, unlike as in the case of movie or fiction, where the full impact of the work depends solely on the writer's ability. The realities of the Great Depression changed the tenor and direction of American drama. The age of experimentation suffered an immediate downfall. The change in the direction of American drama is first noticeable during 1932-33. Perhaps because drama is a complex and collective art, it takes a while for immediate social issues to find artistic reflection. Literature being the reflection of society, its depressed face was clearly caught in the works of the age. The thirties was the ideal period conducive to the intensification of theatrical activities and the production of a different type of drama to suit the temper of time. The restless spirit of the age was marked by the advent of a large number of new theatrical organizations. They are both major and minor, along with equally sincere activity in the fields of writing, directing, acting, in producing plays. The emotional climate of the day was favourable to the drama of real sincerity and self-criticism. The plays of the turbulent age had a positive approach. They launched an active quest for social and political alternatives.

This period of social ferment was searching for the right kind of drama, which would voice the spirit of the age in all its complexities. The emphatic search for alternatives was on with firm determination. The resolute quest for rebuilding had to be reflected. Discussing the stimulants and irritants behind the new type of drama during this period, John Gassner explains how "the irritants of a straitened economy in the thirties, which left the Broadway theatre floundering for a time, resulted in the rise of uncommercial, socially critical, militant or ameliorative organizations like the proletarian theatre union, the new theatre league ranches, the group theatre, and the relief project for the theatrical profession known as the federal theatre which became the first national institution of its kind in the United States." (John Gassner, 1954). American theatres have become an important aspect of the study of the history of American drama. The Theater Guild, an organization formed to present superior non-commercial plays to the American public. Its off-spring, the Group Theatre, a troupe that, in general, devoted its repertory to plays of social significance. There was the sporadic growth of many

'Little Theatres' all around enlivening the atmosphere. Their chief contribution was a sense of general awakening as far as the average American was concerned. American writers reacted to the grim reality of American life during the Great Depression by focusing on social issues such as migration, poverty, family troubles, working conditions, and unionization in their work. The dramatists of this period preferred to be "faulty and alive, instead of perfect and dead or meticulous and tepid" (Gassner, 387).

Aesthetic gratification sought by the younger generation was thus characterized by this 'aristocracy of spirit.' The evolution of a proper 'art theatre' had passed through certain distinct phases in the USA. As early as 1911, the Drama League of America had begun this experiment by placing emphasis on literary values of plays, both native and of foreign origin. Among the organizations that began to "dot the country with cases of culture," (John Gassner, 1954) were the Wisconsin Players, the Chicago Little Theatre, Workshop Theatre, the Carnegie Institute of Technology at Pittsburg, the Dakota Players and such other groups. Theatrical boost to these efforts was provided by the magazine *Theatre Art* founded in 1918, and books like *Footlight across America* by Kenneth McGowan. This movement reached the peak of its success by 1914 and 1915. Robert Edmund Jones, Phillip Moeller, and such other young enthusiasts built a stage at the back of a store in Washington Square, and established themselves as Washington Square players. Very soon, they moved into a small Band Box Theatre and continued functioning activity. After the First World War, in 1919, a number of them joined and founded the Theatre Guild, which has the record of becoming the longest-lived 'art theatre' in America. This became the parent organization for the 'Group Theatre,' which emerged in the thirties and sponsored the emergence of a number of young playwrights and actors.

Another major theatrical organization that came up almost simultaneously was the Provincetown Theatre, founded in 1915 by the Provincetown Players of Greenwich Village. Artists from several fields, including the Washington Square Players joined them, and began producing original American drama of real distinction. The next decade witnessed a few dramatic changes in the fortunes of the Broadway theatres, which had a jolt from the economic crash. A number of non-commercial theatrical organizations were formed; most of them highly critical of contemporary American society, attempting to seek correctives and alternatives. The most important among them are the Theatre Union, the New Theatre League, and the Group Theatre. The Federal Theatre had the unique distinction of being the first national institution in the USA meant to be the relief project for the theatrical profession, and had a very significant role to play during the decade of social upheaval.

The Theatre Union described itself as 'The first social theatre in America, incorporated as a non-profit-making, membership organization.' Gerald Rabkin explains the basic philosophy of the Theatre Union, "Theatre Union - the first and only professional American Marxist theatre - was an overtly committed theatre; its *raison d'être* was to demonstrate the efficacy of the slogan: Theatre is a weapon." (Gerald Rabkin, 1964). The Theatre Union was the direct outcome of the impact of Marxism on American thinkers. Its emergence in 1933 and its termination in 1937 coincided with the highest point of the influence of Marxism on America. The amateur Communist theatre which emerged after the 1929 debacle and the Depression that followed was a major contribution factor. The formation of the Popular Front gave added impetus. The Worker's Drama League (1926) and the New Playwrights (1927) to be considered precursors of the 'social theatre' in the USA, contributed very little to the founding of a radical theatrical group. Non-professional, Marxist-oriented theatres sprang up with amazing rapidity. Among them, the most important were the German-speaking Prolet - Bühne, and the Worker's Laboratory Theatre of New York. They specialized in a form of drama called 'agit-prop' aimed at agitation and propaganda.

The 'Agit-prop', the 'Living Newspaper' and such forms of drama that became popular in the 1930s came into prominence. The Marxist 'agit-prop' and the Living Newspaper, produced by large members in the 1930s were meant to confront the audience directly about specific social issues, suggesting probable alternatives. These represented attempts to channelize the general mood of protest

into specific directions. They were not aimed at producing wholesome works of literature with high aesthetic standards. The Living Newspaper unit was one of the several projects of the Federal Theatre. The Federal Theatre presented educational propaganda by using all the facilities in the theatre, such as the screen, charts, the living actors, the loudspeakers, lighting and soon. The purpose was to arouse the American conscience to matters of vital social interest.

The Group theatre, the socially based new theatrical organization, was a splinter group formed by a few members of the Theatre Guild. Herald Clurman, the main figure who spearheaded this movement, sums up the purpose behind such a new outlet: "The Group's inclusive philosophy adumbrated a cosmos, therefore the Group's function, even its duty, was to become a cosmos. It had to provide what society itself failed to provide." (Harold Clurman, 1974). This is a clear expression of the healthy, positive attitude the founders had towards the theatre as the right kind of forum for proper artistic expression of the 'American Spirit' of the times. Theatre as the most 'living' medium where both aesthetic and social values could mingle with integrity had to be taken with a spirit of dedication. For an age as complex as thirties, a voice which would convey all its discontent, frustration, yearning for alternatives, and above all, the positive assurance of a better future, had to be found in its most articulate form in the theatre, and it was imperative that such a theatre should not be circumscribed by rigid affiliation to one political ideology or organization alone. It has to be aware of the variety of approaches and analyses to all the issues concerning social problems and their solutions. The ideal theatre, according to Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, and Cheryl Crawford, the founders of the Group Theatre, was one based on the collective principle, where individuals holding different views could work together and reflect, not the spirit of an individual or a group, but of the entire age. In short, it had to be, as Clurman says, a miniature cosmos.

The central principle, driven home repeatedly by the directors of the Group Theatre, was the insistence on the realization of the social significance of a play before it was actually presented on the stage. No play represented the isolated experiences of an isolated individual. The individual is a unit of society, and therefore, every impulse belongs to the vast gamut of human experience. The social relevance of a good play, overtly Marxist in it or not, was clearly understood. Harold Clurman defines a good play as: "A good play for us is... one which...is the image or symbol of the living problems of our time. These problems are chiefly moral social and our feeling is that they must be faced with an essentially affirmative attitude, that is, in the belief that to all of them there must be some answer, an answer that should be considered operative for at least the humanity of all time and places." (Harold Clurman, 1974).

The spirit of the thirties, with its turbulence in every realm, was absorbed and reflected in its totality by the Group Theatre. The miniature cosmos, as Clurman referred to the new venture, played a very crucial role in giving adequate expression to the general tone of the day. The artist's awareness of his role as a citizen was of great importance in this contest, as he had to be conscious of his social obligations. The Group Theater did not try to cultivate a proletarian audience as the Theatre Union did, but attempted to produce plays which would appeal to a large section of the audience. In a way, it was still within the commercial framework of Broadway. Gerald Rabkin explains: "The Group's commitment was more moral than political; it felt compelled to raise and reflect on social questions, rather than to offer a uniform solution. If the Group possessed one generic political assumption, it was that social problems were soluble; but beyond a general affirmation of the feasibility of political action, the directors of the Group affirmed no overt political commitment." (Herald Clurman, 1932).

Talking about the social drama of that age, Douglas McDermott says, "The social drama of the thirties was not an accident but an intention." (R. C. Reynolds, 1986). The revolt of the social playwrights against corruption, oppression, injustice and family for 'social order' was not a blind one. It was like an inquiry into old and established institutions and ideas; a suggestion of positive alternatives. John Gassner writes, "The theatre of the thirties will be remembered for its playwrights, not because they

produced masterpieces for the ages, but because they responded to the challenge of their times vigorously and excitingly. They had the defects of their virtues.... But they were faulty and alive instead of perfect and dead or meticulous and tepid." (John Gassner,1968). These playwrights borrowed ideas from every possible source. The writers decided to change the status quo in their depression-torn country. Through their plays, Odets, Anderson, Lawson, and others continued to 'demonstrate their theme that society could face and conquer any of its problems if only it would learn to bring individuals together to work in a common cause for a common good.

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