

Theater Review

Waking the House

Pittsburgh Public Theatre brings Clifford Odets' Depression-era New York to life

Awake and Sing

By Clifford Odets
O'Reilly Theatre, Downtown
Through May 26
412.316.1600

Reviewed by Gabriel Davis

At the end of a very long day, as I saunter into the O'Reilly Theatre to see Clifford Odets' Depression-era play *Awake and Sing*, I am drowsy and yawning.

Still, Odets' reputation begs consciousness. After all, the Group Theatre, which introduced the rigors of "The Method" to American acting, owes a great deal of its success to Odets' playwriting. When it came to capturing the daily rhythms and spoken language of Jewish New Yorkers, Odets was a master.



Left to right: Larry John Meyers, Marilyn Fox and Lawrence Arancio

James Noone's scenic design for the Pittsburgh Public Theater's production epitomizes the decrepitude and cramped living conditions of a working-class apartment during the Great Depression. Everything is faded, from the lime green reading chair to the sickly yellow paint that covers one section of a worn, wood wall. A closet-sized bedroom, off the living room, can fit no more than a twin bed, a phonograph player and a diminutive poster reading "Labor Party."

This should be a rather serious evening of theatre. I am certainly reassured of the evening's integrity when I see, on the playbill, actors from hard-hitting television dramas like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Juliet Landau (a.k.a. Druisilla) will be playing Hennie.

To be fair, sans fangs, Landau seems at home in the verbally deficient world of a lower-class, second-generation Jewish American. What she lacks in vocabulary as Hennie, she makes up for

in spirit — a feisty, fiery "firecracker," rich in animal intelligence.

The problem is this: Hennie is pregnant, but her partner in conception is gone without a trace. Enter her overbearing mother, Bessie, played with nervous matriarchal zeal by Marilyn Fox. Bessie forces Hennie into accepting an unwanted offer of marriage before she starts showing.

The duped fellow is Sam (Lawrence Arancio), a Jewish immigrant straight off the boat, and strikingly similar in his servile nature to Hennie's father, Myron (Larry John Meyers). As Myron, Bessie's mousy and painfully deferential "kept" husband, Meyers is quietly complex.

Hennie may be doomed to repeat her mother's life. Still, a glimmer of hope for escape into a situation free of financial hardship and family obligation lies with Moe Axelrod (Karl Bury), a veteran of WWI and a runner of numbers.

Hennie's naive and fresh-faced brother, Ralph (Jarrod Fry), is also in danger of playing out his life in the mold of his elders — as an optimistic piece of milquetoast. Fry's quick, comic sensibility has little room to shine in so earnest a character.

Ralph's grandfather, Jacob (Gene Dynarski), is deeply disenchanted with capitalism and wishes he were young again so that he could effect change, even revolution. While Jacob hopes that Ralph will carry his torch into the future for him, the outcome looks bleak, as Ralph is too busy being in angst-ridden love over a "consumptive-looking" girl.

Will both these young adults sleepwalk through their lives, destined to repeat a family history of misery, or will they wake up and sing a heartwarming ditty? You get the idea.

Elna de Santos' direction keeps the telling realistic, creating stage pictures rich with the minutia of daily life. This attention to detail builds a verisimilitude essential for making the intense emotional piques of the play affecting rather than melodramatic.

During Bessie's breakdown, Santos is wise to keep her in Jacob's small bedroom. Bessie is barely visible, a figure trembling by the phonograph, Jacob's record collection in her hands. This collection is one of his few sources of pleasure, a welcome escape from the pervading atmosphere of deprivation.

The sound of records being smashed, one after another, pierces the outer room, where the others sit, perfectly still. The moment is haunting, troubling, sublime in its understated grace.

The play is not lacking in irreverence, either — much of which is generated by the lovable, sometimes hammy, stage presence of Robert Trebor.

In sum, *Awake and Sing* weaves political concerns, a dramatic storyline and humorous content into a well-balanced, satisfying whole.