AWAKE AND SING!

STIRRING AMERICAN CLASSIC

BY CLIFFORD ODETS

DIRECTED BY MELIA BENSUSSEN

HUNTINGTON THEATRE COMPANY

CURRICULUM GUIDE
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STANDARDS: Student Matinee performances and pre-show workshops provide unique opportunities for experiential learning and support various combinations of the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts. They may also support standards in other subject areas such as Social Studies and History, depending on the individual play’s subject matter.

Activities are also included in this Curriculum Guide and in our pre-show workshops that support several of the Massachusetts state standards in theatre. Other arts areas may also be addressed depending on the individual play’s subject matter.

Reading Literature: **Key Ideas and Details 3**

- **Grades 8:** Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

- **Grades 9-10:** Analyze how complex characters (e.g. those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the themes.

- **Grades 11-12:** Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop related elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

Reading Literature: **Craft and Structure 5**

- **Grades 8:** Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.

- **Grades 9-10:** Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks), create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

- **Grades 11-12:** Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

Reading Literature: **Craft and Structure 6**

- **Grades 8:** Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.

- **Grades 9-10:** Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

- **Grades 11-12:** Analyze a case in which grasping point of view required distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Reading Literature: **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7**

- **Grades 8:** Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors.

- **Grades 9-12:** Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g. recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist).
US HISTORY — GRADES 8-12

• **USII.11** — Describe the various causes and consequences of the global depression of the 1930s, and analyze how Americans responded to the Great Depression.
  A. Restrictive monetary policies
  B. Unemployment
  C. Support for political and economic reform

• **USII.13** — Explain how the Great Depression and the New Deal affected American society.
  A. The increased importance of the federal government in establishing economic and social policies.
  B. The emergence of a “New Deal coalition” consisting of African Americans, blue-collar workers, poor farmers, Jews, and Catholics.

ACTING

• **1.7** — Create and sustain a believable character throughout a scripted or improvised scene (By the end of Grade 8).

• **1.12** — Describe and analyze, in written and oral form, characters’ wants, needs, objectives, and personality characteristics (By the end of Grade 8).

• **1.13** — In rehearsal and performance situations, perform as a productive and responsible member of an acting ensemble (i.e., demonstrate personal responsibility and commitment to a collaborative process) (By the end of Grade 8).

• **1.14** — Create complex and believable characters through the integration of physical, vocal, and emotional choices (Grades 9-12).

• **1.15** — Demonstrate an understanding of a dramatic work by developing a character analysis (Grades 9-12).

• **1.17** — Demonstrate increased ability to work effectively alone and collaboratively with a partner or in an ensemble (Grades 9-12).

READING AND WRITING SCRIPTS

• **2.7** — Read plays and stories from a variety of cultures and historical periods and identify the characters, setting, plot, theme, and conflict (By the end of Grade 8).

• **2.8** — Improvise characters, dialogue, and actions that focus on the development and resolution of dramatic conflicts (By the end of Grade 8).

• **2.11** — Read plays from a variety of genres and styles; compare and contrast the structure of plays to the structures of other forms of literature (Grades 9-12).

TECHNICAL THEATRE

• **4.6** — Draw renderings, floor plans, and/or build models of sets for a dramatic work and explain choices in using visual elements (line, shape/form, texture, color, space) and visual principals (unity, variety, harmony, balance, rhythm) (By the end of Grade 8).

• **4.13** — Conduct research to inform the design of sets, costumes, sound, and lighting for a dramatic production (Grades 9-12).

CONNECTIONS

• **Strand 6: Purposes and Meanings in the Arts** — Students will describe the purposes for which works of dance, music, theatre, visual arts, and architecture were and are created, and, when appropriate, interpret their meanings (Grades PreK-12).

• **Strand 10: Interdisciplinary Connections** — Students will apply their knowledge of the arts to the study of English language arts, foreign languages, health, history and social science, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering (Grades PreK-12).

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

Attending live theatre is a unique experience with many valuable educational and social benefits. To ensure that all audience members are able to enjoy the performance, please take a few minutes to discuss the following audience etiquette topics with your students before you come to the Huntington Theatre Company.

• How is attending the theatre similar to and different from going to the movies? What behaviors are and are not appropriate when seeing a play? Why?

• Remind students that because the performance is live, the audience’s behavior and reactions will affect the actors’ performances. No two audiences are exactly the same, and therefore no two performances are exactly the same — this is part of what makes theatre so special! Students’ behavior should reflect the level of performance they wish to see.

• Theatre should be an enjoyable experience for the audience. It is absolutely all right to applaud when appropriate and laugh at the funny moments. Talking and calling out during the performance, however, are not allowed. Why might this be? Be sure to mention that not only would the people seated around them be able to hear their conversation, but the actors on stage could hear them, too. Theatres are constructed to carry sound efficiently!

• Any noise or light can be a distraction, so please remind students to make sure their cell phones are turned off (or better yet, left at home or at school!). Texting, photography, and video recording are prohibited. Food, gum, and drinks should not be brought into the theatre.

• Students should sit with their group as seated by the Front of House staff and should not leave their seats once the performance has begun.
CRAMPED QUARTERS: THE EARLY YEARS OF PLAYWRIGHT CLIFFORD ODETS

“[Odets had] an appetite for the broken and run-down, together with a bursting love for the beauty immanent in people, a burning belief in the day when this beauty would actually shape the external world. These two apparently contradictory impulses kept him in a perpetual boil that to the indifferent eye might look like either a stiff passivity or a hectic fever.”

– Harold Clurman, founder of the Group Theatre and director of the original production of Awake and Sing!

In Clifford Odets’ work, one can see etchings of the hardscrabble life that inspired it. Born in Philadelphia in 1906, he spent his earliest years in a cramped apartment in a Jewish ghetto that his parents — recent immigrants named Louis and Pearl — shared with his mother’s sister Esther. His family was strongly religious, but his father was so keen to assimilate that he denied that his mother’s name was actually Gorodetsky, even though it appeared on her tombstone. In 1912, eager to improve the family’s station, Louis moved the family to the Bronx.

Moving to New York started a string of transfers, each to slightly “grander” tenements. Odets would later write in notes for an unfinished play (783 Beck Street, named after one of these homes) that their constant apartment switching symbolized “the American and dehumanizing myth of the steadily expanding economy [...] Where does America stop? When does it begin to make homes and sink nourishing roots? [...] Perhaps follow the rise and fall of the house by the Odets family moving in and then, several years later (now hating the place!) moving away. Oh, the waste of it all.”

Clifford’s father Louis worked as a printer, rising to the rank of foreman and then starting his own press. Much to Louis’ disappointment and anger, Clifford was a poor student, often failing multiple subjects and skipping assignments to spend more time at the movies or rehearsing with his amateur theatrical group. At 17, Odets dropped out of school to become an actor, a discipline he met with mixed success. Though he found enough work, he played only small parts, stringing together a meager existence through the Black Tuesday crash and the start of the Great Depression. After jobs ranging from Broadway understudy to camp counselor, he was invited in 1931 to join in the founding of director Lee Strasberg’s Group Theatre.

Frustrated by his slight roles, Odets began to write. Casting about for inspiration, he penned a short story inspired by his surroundings: “I was holed up in a cheap hotel, in a kind of fit of depression, and I wrote about a young kid violinist who didn’t have his violin because the hotel owner had appropriated it for unpaid bills. He looked back and remembered his mother and his hard-working sister, and although I was not that kid and didn’t have that kind of mother or sister, I did fill the skin and the outline with my own personal feeling, and for the first time I realized what creative writing was.”

A natural product of his time spent as an actor, Odets transitioned into plays, and in 1935, premiered four different works back-to-back that would launch his career. First, his famous agit-prop piece Waiting for Lefty dramatizes the unionization of a group of taxi drivers and famously ends on the cry of “Strike! Strike! Strike!” Waiting for Lefty subsequently played on a double bill with Till the Day I Die. The third produced was the earliest begun, Awake and Sing!, which Odets had started roughly when he joined the Group Theatre. The fourth, Paradise Lost, met with tepid reviews.

Odets went on to a prolific career, authoring more than a dozen plays and six films, including The Sweet Smell of Success. But in those early years, his personal life was marked by loneliness and a longing for the kind of family he saw slipping away from American life. “When I was a boy, the whole promise of American life was contained for me in Christmas cards which showed a warm little house snuggled in a snow scene by night,” Odets wrote. “Often little boys and girls were walking up the path of the door and carrying bundles of good things. This represented protection, a home and hearth, goodness and comfort, all things which become increasingly more difficult to attain.”

Awake and Sing! has previously directed Kirstin Greenidge’s Luck of the Irish and Annie Baker’s Circle Mirror Transformation at the Huntington and directs Awake and Sing! this fall. She corresponded with Director of New Work Lisa Timmel about her personal connection to the play and its significance in 2014.

Lisa Timmel: Awake and Sing!, like much of Clifford Odets’s work, is steeped in a critique of capitalism. “Life shouldn’t be printed on dollar bills,” is a refrain throughout the play. You bring a personal connection to the ideas of Jake Berger — would you mind telling me a little more about it?

Melia Bensussen: Like Jake, my family was very committed to the visions of the left. They were socialists and communists, idolizers of Emma Goldman and others. My parents were “red diaper babies,” a phrase that has all but disappeared from our culture, but a term that spoke to a family’s commitment to Communist (“red”) ideals. Nowadays, does anyone even want to hear the word “communist” anymore?
Odets’s gift for me, personally, in this work is that he places a Jewish family at the center of that very familiar struggle. There is a strong connection for me in their tones, their arguments: a fierceness about their existence and their struggle. We forget how marginalized Jews were in the ’30s in this country, how radical it was to hear Yiddish on Broadway (most of which was excised from the Broadway production and some of which we hope to put back into our production).

LT: What draws you into the play emotionally?

MB: Like Chekhov and Arthur Miller — I think Miller would not exist without Odets, and Odets would not have written these plays without Chekhov — Odets captures the complexities of intimacy and tension in a close-knit family. To find a balance between love, support, and self-interest in any nuclear family has always been the stuff of great plays.

He is brutally honest about where generosity ends and self-interest begins: when is that a good thing, and when is that a wildly destructive impulse? I am struck by my empathy for these dragon moms — Bessie is a close relation to Amanda Wingfield from The Glass Menagerie — mothers who want, they say, what is best for their children but on some level are operating out of their own primal panics and fears. Their sons — Odets, Williams, and others — see clearly where these women have led their families to survive, but have also led them to destruction. That is a hell of a balance for anyone to try and strike.

LT: What do you think the play has to say to us in 2014?

MB: I think the play portrays the emotional battlefields that ensue when economic pressures overwhelm. How can we love purely and generously when we are in constant danger of losing our homes, our savings? How do families today decide about college for their kids, if they are lucky enough to even have that as an option? Kids find they cannot leave their parents’ home for financial reasons, and so the claustrophobia and intensity of the nuclear family continues to exert its pressures. This against a more and more conservative society — the generations of this family sound so familiar to me: the grandfather hoping/wishing for the next generation to fight for equality and less economic disparity, for unions and the rights of the people. I find my son, who at 18 is now trying to fight against our generation’s lack of movement on the environment leads to some similar arguments in my household.

Like all of us, these people have huge struggles — the magnification of their battles to stay connected and viable in the world reflects a piece of what we all must feel at different points in our life as we try to be ethical people while protecting each other. “Awake and Sing all ye who dwell in the dust!” It’s a call to action and to waking up in the deepest sense of the word — to be sure of one’s life choices and possible positive impact on the world.

QUESTIONS:

1. Playwright Clifford Odets started his theatrical career as an actor. What other playwrights and screenwriters have also worked as actors? How might experience acting inform a writer’s approach to their work?

2. Director Melia Bensussen sees a clear theatrical lineage from the works of Anton Chekhov, to those of Clifford Odets, to those of Arthur Miller (coincidentally, the Huntington Theatre Company recently produced Chekhov’s The Seagull in 2014 and Miller’s All My Sons in 2010). Research these other playwrights and their works. What themes did they focus on in their plays? What socio-economic issues inspired them? How were their works received by critics and audiences? Next, consider Chekhov and Miller in context with the works of Clifford Odets. What element(s) does one writer owe to the other?
From its earliest days, the United States has been branded the “land of opportunity” where anyone could fulfill their individual hopes and dreams through hard work and dedication. This vision, however, does not account for economic downturns. As the Great Depression rages on in Clifford Odets’s 1935 play, *Awake and Sing!*, some in the Berger household believe the personal dreams and aspirations of its members must be set aside in favor of what will benefit the entire family.

Matriarch Bessie Berger sees beyond the individual wants of her family members, particularly those of her children, and instead focuses on the needs of the family as a whole. Her son Ralph however wants the independence and self-fulfillment America promised him. “I wanna make up my own mind about things,” he says in the play’s opening moments. “Be something!” As a child, Ralph wanted to learn to tap dance, but Bessie saw better uses for the money that lessons would have cost. “You mean we shouldn’t have food in the house, but you’ll make a jig on the street corner?” she reminds him (I, 1). Ralph laments his life’s ongoing disappointments, from missing out on small luxuries as a child (“I never in my life even had a birthday party. Every time I went and cried in the toilet when my birthday came.”), to the lack of his own space in the Bergers’ apartment. “When I come home” from a hard day of being underpaid, Ralph grumbles, “[I] can’t even have my own room? Sleep on a day-bed in the front room!” (I, 1). Bessie expects that her children will follow her example and sacrifice their frivolous wants so that others can have stability. “When I was your age,” she points out to her unmarried 26-year-old daughter, Hennie, “it was already a big family with responsibilities” (I, 1). Bessie urges Hennie to consider marrying Sam Feinschreiber, a recent immigrant with a crush on Hennie. But Hennie is content just as she is, holding fast to her choice to reject the advances of both Sam and family friend and war veteran Moe Axelrod. “From now on I’m planning to stay in nights,” she declares (I, 1).

Things change, however, when Hennie reveals she is pregnant. Bessie insists that Hennie must marry the baby’s father, but when Hennie does not know where he is, Bessie believes she must act quickly to negate her daughter’s individual choices and preserve her family’s honor. “Tomorrow night bring Sam Feinschreiber for supper,” Bessie instructs her husband, Myron. “He’ll come tomorrow night for supper. By Saturday they’re engaged” (I, 1). To Bessie, this is the only option—Hennie’s happiness must be sacrificed in order to provide her with financial stability. Sam’s obvious feelings for Hennie provide a convenient route to respectability. But Sam and Hennie’s marriage is tumultuous, and their frequent arguments send Sam running to the Bergers for help. He looks for the group’s support as he tried to rein Hennie in. Bessie’s support is particularly valuable to Sam. “I make a nice living from the store. But it’s no use—[Hennie] looks for a star in the sky. I’m afraid like anything. What I shall do I’ll ask Mom,” he says, referring to his strong-willed mother-in-law (II, 2). When Bessie discovers that Hennie has revealed to Sam that he is not actually her baby’s father, Bessie immediately acts to repair the damage her daughter’s selfish actions have done to their family unit—even if it means telling Sam blatant lies about how his marriage to Hennie came out. “I’ll say the truth, Sam,” Bessie says.

We didn’t half the time understand her ourselves. A girl with her own mind. When she makes it up wild horses wouldn’t change her ... What do you think? She married you for your money? For your looks? You ain’t no John Barrymore, Sam. No, she liked you ... We stood right here the first time she said it. ‘Sam Feinschreiber’s a nice boy,’ she said it, ‘a boy he’s got good common sense, with a business head.’ Right here she said it, in this room. (II, 2)

Bessie’s words are enough to keep Sam pacified, but Ralph calls his mother out. “You trapped that guy,” he tells her (II, 2). Yet Bessie sees nothing wrong with what she has done. She sacrificed Sam for their family, and that is what matters most, a concept Ralph does not comprehend. “Let him, let him run and tell Sam,” she says of her son. “Publish in the papers, give a broadcast on the radio. To him it don’t matter nothing his family sits with tears pouring from the eyes” (II, 2).

Bessie’s brother, Morty, however, is not completely invested in his sister’s family-above-all ideals. His individual profit comes first, even when the family is in crisis. “I got a strike downtown,” he says.

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**THEMES FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION**

**GROUP VS. INDIVIDUAL**

Unemployed men in New York City, 1932.
In reality, Ralph is less concerned with individually reaping the financial benefits of his grandfather’s life than he is with the crude nature of his parents’ and uncle’s family-above-all stance. But Bessie still insists that her heart and head are both in the right place. “It belongs for the whole family,” she says. “A family needs for a rainy day. Times is getting worse. Prospect Avenue, Dawson, Beck Street—every day furniture’s on the sidewalk ... if I didn’t worry about the family, who would? On the calendar it’s a different place, but here without a dollar you don’t look the world in the eye” (III, 1). But money is not the most important thing to Ralph—he and others like him want a life of purpose and meaning. “We don’t want life printed on dollar bills, Mom,” he says (III, 1). Bessie understands her son’s desires better than he realizes, but from her perspective, it is the willingness to sacrifice for the greater good that is the difference between them:

I worked too hard all my years to be treated like dirt. It’s no law we should be stuck together like Siamese twins ... Here I’m not only the mother but also the father. The first two years I worked in a stocking factory for six dollars while Myron Berger went to law school ... “Mom, what does she know? She’s old-fashioned!” But I’ll tell you a big secret: My whole life I wanted to go away too, but with children a woman stays home. A fire burned in my heart too, but now it’s too late. (III, 1)

QUESTIONS:

1. In the interview in the Artists section of this guide, Melia Bensussen describes Bessie Berger and Amanda Wingfield from Tennessee Williams’s The Glass Menagerie as “dragon moms.” Read The Glass Menagerie and compare and contrast Bessie and Amanda. How are these women similar and how are they different? What dragon-like qualities do they possess? How do their choices reflect a concern for the whole family over its individual members?

2. Compare and contrast the financial state of Bessie, who is focused on sacrifice for the good of the family, with that of her brother, Morty, who focuses on what benefits him as an individual. What paths did each follow to arrive where they are at the beginning of the play? How do their values manifest in their relationships as siblings and with their father, Jacob?

3. Who does the insurance money belong to: the whole family or just Ralph? Why?

4. In Act III, Moe recalls that day he learned he needed to have his leg amputated in the war: “The doctor said it—cut off your leg to save your life! And they done it—one thing to get another.” How is the amputation of Moe’s leg a metaphor for Hennie’s decision at the end of the play?

5. Compare and contrast the size and emotional content of the roles in Awake and Sing!

6. Read the article, “Clifford Odets and the Group Theatre,” in the Further Exploration section of this curriculum guide. Then, describe how the ideals of the Group Theatre are reflected in Odets’s writing.

CLASS AND STATUS

In the 1930s, the Group Theatre strove to depict the struggles of the “working class”—generally defined as people employed in manual, industrial, or service jobs who receive hourly wages. Communist philosophy states that the working class is suppressed by those who own the means of production; workers are responsible for creating the wealth of society yet do not hold property of their own. Awake and Sing!, written by Group Theatre ensemble member and playwright Clifford Odets in 1935, centers on the fictional working class Berger family, which includes Jacob, the Marx-loving grandfather of the household. In the midst of the Great Depression, surrounded by evicted neighbors and reduced working hours, the Bergers cling to what little they have.

When he falls in love with an orphan girl named Blanche, Ralph knows his mother, Bessie, will not approve. Blanche knows it, too, and is afraid to visit Ralph at home. “You know Mom’s not letting my sixteen bucks out of the house if she can help it,” Ralph complains to his grandfather, Jacob, in Act I, Scene 1. “[Bessie]’d take one look at Blanche and insult her in a minute—a kid who’s got nothing ... What’s the diff?” Jacob agrees that Bessie would reject Blanche in an instant. “It’s no difference—a plain bourgeois prejudice,” he explains, lumping his daughter and son-in-law in with the property-holding elite. “But when they find out a poor girl—it ain’t so kosher.” Ralph’s concerns about how his mother will judge Blanche are proven true in Act II, Scene 1, when Bessie reports to her brother, Morty, just what kind of girl her son has taken up with—a freeloader who “takes charity.”

BESSIE: A girl with no parents.

MORTY: An orphan?

BESSIE: I could die from shame. A year already he runs around with her. He brought her once for supper. Believe me, she didn’t come again, no! ... A girl like that he wants to marry. A skinny consumptive-looking ... six months already she’s not working—taking charity from an aunt. (II, 1)

Bessie’s judgment of those she considers lower in class and status does not, however, extend to her choice of husband for her pregnant daughter Hennie. Although Sam Feinschreiber is a struggling immigrant, his affection for Hennie makes him the obvious choice to conceal Hennie’s out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Hennie immediately rejects the idea due to Sam’s lower class status. “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;” she declares (I, 1). Despite his Communist ideals, Jacob also objects to the match on the grounds that Sam is beneath Hennie. “Such a thing you can’t do,” he admonishes Bessie. “[Sam is] the lowest from the low” (I, 1). Although Hennie, under pressure from her mother, does eventually consent to marrying Sam, his lower class living is a wedge in their relationship. “Twenty-one a week he brings in,” Hennie says, describing her unhappiness to Uncle Morty. “A nigger don’t have it so hard. I wore my fingers off on an Underwood for six years. For what? Now I wash baby diapers ... You don’t know how it is, Uncle Morty” (II, 1). Hennie still dreams of living a higher class lifestyle and her misery with her current state is clear to Moe Axelrod. “I know you from the old days,” he says. “How you like to spend it! What I mean! Lizard-skin shoes, perfume behind the ears” (II, 1). Sam also knows that his wife wants for more than he can provide. “I wake up in the nighttime and she sits watching me like I don’t know what,” he confesses to Ralph and Jacob. “I make a nice living from the store. But it’s no use—she looks for a star in the sky” (II, 2).

As the family’s resident Marxist, Jacob believes that the real source of all class-based problems is America’s capitalist economic system. Jacob claims that they will only be able to rise above those problems in the new world that will be created by a workers’ uprising, but Moe reminds him that a war was fought not too long ago for that very purpose. “That’s why they had the big war,” Moe says. “To make a new world, they said—safe for democracy” (I, 1). But the way Jacob sees it, the war was not fought for the sake of democracy and opportunity for all, but for the sake of profit for the few. World War I was “an imperial war,” he says, fought for capitalistic gain. “You know what this means? ... By money men the interests must be protected” (I, 1). Jacob even sees capitalism’s negative influence in how his daughter, Bessie, runs her own family. As Bessie prepares to protect her family’s interests by forcing Hennie to marry Sam Feinschreiber, Jacob proclaims that he will never allow her philosophy to be pressed onto Ralph: “All you know, I heard, and more yet. But Ralph you don’t make like you. Before you do it, I’ll die first ... This is a house? Marx said it—abolish such families” (I, 1). By the end of the play, Ralph has both of his feet planted firmly in his grandfather’s camp. He envisions a future where human beings are not defined by class. Ironically, it is the money Jacob leaves to Ralph that has the potential to lift Ralph out of the working class and give him the leg up he needs, but Ralph is committed to his grandfather’s ideals—organizing with his fellow workers for the betterment of all who are kept down by those with means:

Sure, inventory tomorrow. Coletti to Driscoll to Berger—that’s how we work. It’s a team down the warehouse. Driscoll’s a show-off, a wise-guy, and Joe talks pigeons day and night. But they’re like me, looking for a chance to get to first base too. Joe razzed me about my girl. But he don’t know why. I’ll tell him. Hell, he might tell me something I don’t know. Get teams together all over. Spit on your hands and get to work. And with enough teams together maybe we’ll get steam in the warehouse so our fingers don’t freeze off. Maybe we’ll fix it so life won’t be printed on dollar bills. (III, 1)

QUESTIONS:

1. Why does Bessie judge Ralph’s girlfriend, Blanche, so harshly? Why does she not judge Sam Feinschreiber or the recently evicted family down the street the same way? How and why do Bessie and her father, Jacob, differ in their estimation of Sam Feinschreiber?

2. What does Bessie think of Schlosser? How do you know?

3. Jacob’s children, Bessie and Morty, do not share his Marxist views. Why might that be? Are there any other members of the Berger household who share Jacob’s belief that workers are kept down by those who own the means of production? If so, who? How do you know?
4. Harold Clurman, a founding member of the Group Theatre and the director of the original production of *Awake and Sing!* is quoted as saying that “there will never be a utopia. But we must never stop fighting for one.” When in history have people tried to create a utopian society? What prevented them from being successful? Do you agree or disagree with Clurman that a utopia in an unattainable goal?

**ASPIRATION AND OPPORTUNITY**

As the resident Communist in the family at the center of *Awake and Sing!*, Jacob presents his left-wing views on the nature and purpose of life as he tries to encourage his grandson, Ralph, in Act I, Scene 1: “If this life leads to a revolution,” he says, “it’s a good life. Otherwise it’s for nothing.” As the Berger family desperately tries to hang onto stable existence in tough economic times, Ralph feels his life stagnating. He spends his days in an underpaid job as a clerk that not only has no potential for growth, but is in danger of being cut back. He spends his nights in a home where his mother reigns supreme and where anything he thinks would enhance his own experience of life is secondary to the family mission. Ralph craves the opportunity to break out and reach his full potential. “Where’s advancement down the place? Work like crazy! Think they see it? You’d drop dead first ... All I want’s a chance to get to first base” (I, 1).

Ralph has plenty of support where his grandfather is concerned. Jacob hopes Ralph can succeed in turning his ideals into reality, something Jacob failed to do for himself. Ralph dreams of creating a new life with his girlfriend, Blanche. “Her and me together,” Ralph says, “that’s a new life” (I, 1). Jacob urges his grandson to focus on himself before pinning all his hopes on someone else. “Once, I had in my heart a dream, a vision, but came marriage and then you forget ... Boychick, wake up,” Jacob says, urging Ralph towards action. “Be something! Make your life something good. For the love of an old man who sees in your young days his new life, for such love take the world in your two hands and make it like new. Go out and fight so life shouldn’t be printed on dollar bills. A woman waits” (I, 1). Jacob believes in Ralph’s ability to make his own opportunity and worries that if he gets tied down too quickly, he will be forfeiting that freedom. Family friend Moe Axelrod seconds Jacob’s sentiments, adding his own cynical view of capitalist American society. “Get independent,” he tells Ralph. “Get what-it-takes and be yourself. Do what you like ... It’s all a racket—from horse racing down. Marriage, politics, big business—everybody plays cops and robbers” (II, 1). Moe’s view is that anyone who wants an opportunity must go and take it for himself—especially since the system is unfairly rigged.

Ralph’s uncle, Morty, takes issue with Moe’s remarks. As a successful businessman, Morty is both a consumer and a provider of product. He is also offended by Moe’s insinuation that all success is wrought through unethical means. “Don’t make such remarks to me without proof,” he fires back at Moe. I’m a great one for proof. That’s why I made a success in business. Proof—put up or shut up, like a game of cards. I heard this remark before—a rich man’s a crook who steals

The trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange, 1920s.
from the poor. Personally, I don’t like it. It’s a big lie! ... 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. (II, 1)

Morty sees himself not as a racketeer, as Moe calls him, but as someone who took advantage of opportunities as they presented themselves. Despite being Morty’s father, Jacob’s endorsement is restrained. “It’s an exception, such a success,” Jacob says (II, 1). Although Morty has managed to turn his opportunities into financial prosperity, Jacob worries that times have changed too much for Ralph to do the same. Not only that, he thinks Ralph’s family is holding him back. “In a house like this [Ralph] don’t realize even the possibilities of life,” Jacob says in Act II, Scene 1.

When Ralph’s girlfriend leaves New York for a work opportunity in Ohio, Ralph is devastated. Jacob fears that his grandson will become further disillusioned. “I used to think of all kinds of things I wanted to do,” Ralph muses. “What was it, Jake? Just a bunch of noise in my head?” (II, 2). Jacob encourages him not to give up in the face of adversity.

JACOB: You wanted to make for yourself a certain kind of world.
RALPH: I guess I didn’t. I’m feeling pretty, pretty low.
JACOB: You’re a young boy and for your life is all in front like a big mountain. You got feet to climb.
RALPH: I don’t know how.

JACOB: So you’ll find out. Never a young man had such opportunity like today. He could make history. (II, 2)

Ralph finds little solace in Jacob’s words. What does spur him to action, however, is the indifference of his girlfriend, Blanche, when he makes one final effort to get her to stay. The pressure from her guardians to find work is overwhelming and she is unwilling to push back against their demand that she relocate to Ohio. “I’d fight the whole goddam world, but not her. No guts. The hell with her,” Ralph laments. “If she wants to go—all right— I’ll get along ... She’ll see what I can do. No one stops me when I get going” (II, 2). When Ralph’s courage seems to waver, Jacob uses his own life’s short comings as examples of why Ralph cannot give up. Jacob was never able to bring his ideals into real world fruition; he does not want to see Ralph suffer the same disappointments.

JACOB: Look on me and learn what to do, boychick. Here sits an old man polishing tools. You think maybe I’ll use them again! Look on this failure and see for seventy years he talked, with good ideas, but only in the head. It’s enough for me now I should see your happiness. 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. (II, 2)

Ralph makes one last effort to secure a place for Blanche in the Berger household, but his mother, Bessie, quickly rejects his proposition, and when Jacob takes drastic action to ensure that
Ralph gets the leg up he never did, Bessie denies it to him. Soon, Ralph begins to see that if he wants the opportunity to make a life for himself, he can only rely on himself to make it happen.

RALPH: I’m not blaming you, Mom. Sink or swim—I see it. But it can’t stay like this ...

BESSIE: So go out and change the world if you don’t like it.
RALPH: I will! And why? ‘Cause life’s different in my head. Gimme the earth in two hands. I’m strong ... Let me die like a dog if I can’t get more from life. (III, 1)

QUESTIONS:
1. Do Ralph’s aspirations make him naïve? What is his biggest obstacle—His family, the economy, his own insecurity, or some combination of the three?
2. Why does Jacob believe that Ralph’s generation has more opportunity than Jacob’s own?
3. What does Jacob mean when he tells Ralph to “awake and sing”?
4. Research the economic conditions of the 1920s, when Morty would have started his business and first become financially successful. Do you think Morty “made something of himself” through dubious means?
5. Which character in the play has the most access to opportunities needed to make their aspirations reality? Who has the least?
6. Consider the play’s ending. Is it a hopeful one? Why or why not? How do you predict Ralph and Hennie’s futures will turn out?
MASTERY ASSESSMENT

ACT I, SCENE 1
1. What type of work does Myron do? How long has he been doing it?
2. What did Ralph want to learn to do as a child?
3. According to Bessie, when will Ralph get his own room?
4. Who sent Hennie a present?
5. Who is Schlosser?
6. Who is Blanche?
7. Why does Moe Axelrod have a fake leg?
8. Why is Hennie sick?
9. Who does Bessie insist Hennie must marry? Why does Jacob object?
10. How does Moe feel about Hennie?

ACT II, SCENE 1
11. Why are Blanche’s aunt and uncle forcing her to go to Cleveland?

ACT II, SCENE 2
12. Why does Jacob think some extra snow would not hurt?
13. Why did Ralph ask Blanche to marry him? Why did she refuse?
14. What regrets does Jacob have about his life? How does he suggest Ralph avoid making the same mistakes?
15. Why has Sam come to the Bergers’ home?
16. What truth did Hennie impulsively reveal to Sam? How does Bessie convince him that Hennie was lying?
17. What does Ralph ask Bessie to allow Blanche to do? Why does Bessie say no?
18. What regret does Myron have about his relationship with Ralph?
19. What does Schlosser say happened to Jacob when he went out on the roof?

ACT III, SCENE 1
20. Who is Bessie expecting to come to the Bergers’ home?
21. Where does Morty say he needs to go? Why can he not wait with Bessie?
22. Why are Bessie, Myron, and Morty trying to keep secret the fact that the insurance policy was made out to Ralph? Who tells Ralph the truth?
23. Who does Bessie say the insurance money is for?
24. How does Moe help Ralph when the insurance man arrives?
25. According to Jacob, what is responsible for enslaving workers?
26. Why does looking at his father make Ralph sad?
THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE GREAT RECESSION

“They threw out a family on Dawson Street today. All the furniture on the sidewalk. A fine old woman with gray hair.” (Awake and Sing! Act I, Scene 1)

Throughout the 1920s, the American economy was one of the biggest in the world while Europe struggled to rebound from the effects of World War I. When Herbert Hoover accepted the Republican nomination for president in August of 1928 before winning the election that fall he predicted that continued prosperity was on the horizon and claimed that an end to poverty was in sight. “Unemployment in the sense of distress is widely disappearing,” Hoover declared. “We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land. The poor-house is vanishing from among us. We have not yet reached the goal, but given a change to go forward with the policies of the last eight years, and we shall soon with the help of God be in sight of the day when poverty will be banished from this nation. There is no guarantee against poverty equal to a job for every man.” Hoover’s optimism was reflected in the stock market, which grew in value from $27 billion in 1925 to $87 billion in 1929, effectively tripling the portfolios of investors.

However, potential problems were brewing below the surface during the “Roaring Twenties.” Business owners had spent the decade reinvesting their record profits into expansion, resulting in a bubble that was primed for a burst by 1929. Meanwhile, the richest one percent of Americans held onto one-third of all American assets, while the middle and working classes took on more and more debt with their purchases of new technologies such as automobiles and household appliances. Banks were largely unregulated and loaned large sums to stock speculators (those who borrow money at a high interest rate to purchase larger amounts of stock, betting that their purchase will go up enough in value to still make a substantial profit after paying back the loan and interest). The banks also often had no formal contracts with their customers, the ordinary people who had entrusted the banks with their life savings.

When traders believe that the value of a stock is going to fall, they cannot sell it for a high price, and when everyone is selling and no one is buying, the overall value of the market shrinks. On October 24, 1929, only one year after Hoover made his acceptance speech upon accepting his party’s nomination, traders at the New York Stock Exchange began a massive sell-off of shares. On this day, which would come to be known as Black Thursday, shares were exchanged throughout the day for smaller and smaller values at alarming rates, and investors started to panic. The 13 million total shares traded that day set a US record. Independently wealthy investors like JP Morgan bought up large amounts of stock in an effort to stop the crash—their purchases buoyed the market to a slight gain the next day—but their attempts were ultimately unsuccessful. Monday, October 28 was another record trading day, resulting in a market decline of 22%. On Tuesday, October 29, remembered as Black Tuesday, more than 16 million stocks were traded and $14 million in value (another 12% of the market) was lost. Ten weeks later, the overall value of the stock market had shrunk by half.

The stock market crash is regarded as the first event in the roughly ten-year Great Depression. A depression is a sustained economic downturn in which a nation’s gross national product (the value of all of the nation’s products and services produced in a year) and sales are falling while businesses are failing and unemployment is rising. Over the course of the Great Depression, the US unemployment rate rose from 3% in 1929 to its peak of 25% in 1933. The stock exchange, worth $87 billion in 1929, was worth only $15 billion in 1932. Renters who fell behind on their monthly payments, like the Dawson Street family Bessie refers to in Act I, Scene 1 of Awake and Sing!, faced eviction. Homeless Americans began erecting shanty towns they called “Hoovervilles” after their president on the outskirts of urban centers. They constructed shelters out of cardboard, tar paper, tin, and salvaged lumber.

In Awake and Sing!, Ralph and his father, Myron, are among the millions of American workers who manage to stave off unemployment but see their hours cut back as a result of economic challenges. In Act II, Scene 1, Bessie discusses the situation with her businessman brother, Morty, in the hopes he can intervene on Ralph’s behalf:

BESSIE: Ralphie took another cut down the place yesterday.
MORTY: Business is bad. I saw his boss Harry Glicksman Thursday . . .
BESSIE: Do something for Ralphie down there.
MORTY: What can I do? I mentioned it to Glicksman. He told me they squeezed out half the people ...

BESSIE: What's gonna be the end? Myron's working only three days a week now.

Workers whose hours or wages were reduced saw their incomes shrink by one third, which, coupled with unemployment, caused reductions in purchasing. As unemployment and underemployment rose, middle class families tried to use their savings to cover their expenses. This became impossible for many of them, however, when banks across the country began to fail. Large numbers of anxious people withdrew their cash, borrowers defaulted on loans, and the lack of regulations and formal contract agreements between banks and their customers meant that account holders had no recourse if their bank closed—if a bank went under, its depositors' money went with it.

Throughout the Depression, however, the ideals of the prosperous 1920s remained, and films made at this time perpetuated images of a consumer-driven society. An American mythology around “making something of yourself” developed, while reliance on soup kitchens and the charity of family members was closer to reality. In Act II, Scene 1 of Awake and Sing!, an exchange between Moe, Jacob, and Morty details the shock of losing everything and the despair of not being able to earn a living wage:

MOE: Still jumping off the high buildings like flies—the big shots who lost all their cocoanuts. Pff!
JACOB: Suicides?
MOE: Plenty can't take it—good in the break, but can't take the whip in the stretch.

MORTY: I saw it happen Monday in my building. My hair stood up how they shoveled him together—like a pancake—a bankrupt manufacturer.

MOE: No brains.
MORTY: Enough ... all over the sidewalk.

JACOB: If someone said five-ten years ago I couldn't make for myself a living, I wouldn't believe.

Clifford Odets wrote Awake and Sing! in 1935, six years deep into the Depression. In the play, the character of Jacob takes a Marxist view of what has caused the recent economic turmoil. Karl Marx stated that the very nature of free-market capitalism promotes unbalanced acquisition of wealth. When the majority of wealth is accumulated in a limited number of hands, Marx believed, a crisis results, creating a chaotic pattern of economic boom followed by economic bust. The struggle of the poor then eventually leads to class conflict. Jacob sees his businessman son Morty's capitalist success during the prosperous 1920s as an anomaly and claims that the economic realities of the '30s would prevent his grandson, Ralph, from replicating Morty's path.

JACOB: It’s an exception such success.
MORTY: Ralph can’t do the same thing?
JACOB: No, Morty, I don’t think. In a house like this he don’t realize even the possibilities of life. Economics comes down like a ton of coal on the head.
were unable to survive. Without plains grasses to hold it in place, the dried-out topsoil was whipped into the air by strong winds, resulting in dust storms that could darken the skies for days at a time and left the interiors of even the most tightly sealed homes coated in a layer of dust. With the plains transformed into a “Dust Bowl,” families abandoned their farms and migrated west in search of work. There, they were in direct competition for jobs with longer established residents.

Comparisons abound between the Great Depression of the 1930s and the economic climate of the first decade of the 21st century. In the early 2000s, home values and prices increased dramatically due to speculation, creating the “housing bubble.” Buyers, already carrying more debt than ever before, took on mortgages with variable interest rates. But as speculation sent projected housing values higher, banks also increased the interest rates on variable rate loans. The number of subprime mortgages (high risk loans with high interest rates that a bank gives to people with weaker credit histories) grew higher than ever before. The housing bubble “burst” when large numbers of buyers were unable to repay their loans instead and tried to sell the properties they could no longer afford. With so many homes on the market, selling became difficult and prices fell sharply, thus leaving many homeowners owing more money than their homes were actually worth. High national unemployment rates further complicated matters for many would-be home-buyers. In October 2010, the United States national employment rate reached 10.1%, its highest rate in 26 years.

The National Bureau of Economic Research claims that the recession began in the United States in December 2007 and ended in June 2009, but similar to the Great Depression, the term “Great Recession” has come to refer to not just the economic downturn itself but the time following it in which its impacts were most harshly felt.

QUESTIONS:

1. In Act II, Scene 1, Jacob asks Morty, “You never heard how they shoot down men and women which ask a better wage? Kentucky 1932?” Jacob is referring to a series of incidents in 1931-32 in which Kentucky coal miners tried to organize for better wages and working conditions in a series of incidents known as the Harlan County War. Strikes led to confrontations between the miners and local law enforcement, which was commanded by a sheriff loyal to the business owners. When the confrontations turned violent, the Kentucky National Guard was called in to keep the peace. Research the Harlan County War. What specific demands did striking workers make? Why did a small number of miners decide not to join in the union strike? Why did the strikes become violent? How did the dispute finally resolve?

2. Following the stock market crash in October 1929, President Herbert Hoover was optimistic that its negative effects were temporary and that a rapid recovery was on the way. Why did he feel this way? What measures did the Hoover administration take to alleviate citizens’ suffering? Why did the Hoover administration not do more? How did the Great Depression impact the elections of 1930 and 1932?

3. President Hoover was criticized for signing the Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act, which placed high tariffs on foreign goods in an effort to reduce competition with American-made products. How did other countries react? What was the overall impact on international trade?

4. Research the New Deal, a series of domestic programs and initiatives spearheaded by President Franklin D. Roosevelt from 1933-1936. How did Roosevelt believe the New Deal would help lift the United States out of the depression? How successful were these programs? Which New Deal initiatives still exist in some form today?

5. What role did World War II play in lifting the United States out of the Great Depression?

6. Research how the Great Depression impacted the Boston area. Which communities were hardest hit? How did Bostonians make ends meet? Where did Hoovervilles spring up, and who lived in them?

KARL MARX

In Russia, an old man don’t take charity so his eyes turn black in his head. In Russia they got Marx. (Awake and Sing! Act II, Scene 1)

Karl Marx was a political philosopher and social scientist born in Trier, Germany, in 1818. Although his ideas received little attention during his lifetime, his social, political, and economic theories gained traction after his death in 1882. By the early 1980s, more than one-third of the world lived under regimes claiming a Marxist heritage.

As a student at the University of Bonn and the University of Berlin, Marx developed an interest in the works of the Young Hegelians, a group dedicated to promoting the ideas of the late German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). The Young Hegelians emphasized Hegel’s belief that societal progress was only possible through radical ideas—namely, the elimination of any aspect of society that stood as a barrier to freedom and reason. Religion and autocratic governments were chief targets of the group’s criticism. Marx became a member of the Young Hegelian movement, and after graduating from the University of Berlin, he became editor of Rheinische Zeitung, an influential liberal newspaper. Marx used the paper as a platform to critique the region’s feudal economic system and call for protections for those who toiled in manual labor. This attracted negative attention from the local government, however, and the paper was shut down in 1843.

Marx immigrated to Paris, France, with his wife, Jenny in 1843, where he studied the French Revolution, as well as the work of utopian socialists and French and English economists. During his early days in Paris, Marx also met with French socialists and exiled German workers. Based on these experiences, he wrote his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts in 1844, which would not be published until the 1930s. In the Manuscripts, Marx set down his philosophy of communism as a humanist one—Marx envisioned a society in which human beings freely developed in cooperation with each other, a contrast with capitalism, which Marx saw as an alienating force. Marx believed that free market systems
enslave workers. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx wrote that “the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion to the devaluation of the world of men. Labour produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity—and does so in the proportion in which it produces commodities generally.” This concept is deeply held by Jacob in *Awake and Sing!*. In Act II, Scene 1, he rattles off what he sees as examples of incidents in which American workers were suppressed and subjugated: “Pittsburgh, Passaic, Illinois—slavery—it begins where success begins in a competitive system.”

In 1844, Marx met Friedrich Engels, a German social scientist and political philosopher with whom Marx would develop a lifelong partnership. With Engels, Marx joined the Communist League, a group based in London composed primarily of German exiles, and the two became the League’s de facto theoretical leaders. At a League conference in 1847, Marx and Engels were commissioned to write a formal declaration of their economic and political positions. The resulting document, *The Communist Manifesto*, was published in 1848, and would become one of the most influential political documents in history. In the Manifesto, Marx and Engels stated their belief that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” The primary classes involved in this struggle, they explained, were the workers, or proletariat, and those who own the means of production, the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels stated that the bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat for their own profit, and that eventually, the proletariat will rise up to overthrow those who keep wealth in private hands; the proletariat’s rise to power, they said, would come largely through riots and the formation of unions.

Although capitalism was the dominant social and economic force in their time, Marx and Engels believed that socialism, and eventually communism, would eventually replace it. *The Communist Manifesto*’s closing line, “Workers of the world, unite!” represents the revolution Jacob repeatedly refers to in *Awake and Sing!*

QUESTIONS:

1. While Jacob is the Berger family’s chief communist, his son, Morty, is its chief capitalist. What arguments does Morty make against his father’s communist declarations?

2. What ten short-term demands did Marx and Engels make in *The Communist Manifesto*? Are any of them components of western democracy today?

3. Marx and Engels saw socialism as a precursor to communism. What is the difference between the two?

4. While Marx is considered the defining theorist of communism, Adam Smith is considered the father of capitalism. Research Smith’s life and work. What were the core tenets of Smith’s beliefs?

5. Research the rivalry between the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union, which came to a head during the Cold War of the 1980s. How and why did these tensions develop? How were they eventually diffused? What challenges still exist in the relationship between the United States and Russia today?

6. How did the Young Hegelians’ criticism of religion manifest in the application of Marxism by countries such as the Soviet Union and China?

7. In 1952, playwright Clifford Odets was called to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Research HUAC’s purposes and objectives. Why did it investigate Odets? Who else was a target? Why did Odets cooperate with HUAC and how did this decision impact his career and relationships?

**CLIFFORD ODETS AND THE GROUP THEATRE**

The Works Progress Administration (WPA), a component of President Roosevelt’s New Deal, was established in April 1935 with the goal of providing socially useful work for the unemployed. WPA work assignments included construction of public buildings (including schools and hospitals), recreational centers, and highways, as well as developing conservation facilities and nature sanctuaries. The WPA also included four arts-based initiatives: The Federal Writer’s Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Art Project, and the Federal Theatre Project. These initiatives employed thousands of artists and provided funding for new works by performance ensembles around the country, including projects by members of the Group Theatre in New York City.
**STARS OF THE 30S**

**Greta Garbo** (1905-1990) was a Swedish-born film star best-known for her work in *Romance* (1930), *Anna Christie* (1931), and *Camille* (1936). Garbo was one of the highest-paid women in America in the 1930s. In 1954, the Guinness Book of World Records named her “the most beautiful woman who ever lived.”

**Belle Baker** (1893-1957) was an American singer and actress who was born into a Russian Jewish family in New York City. Baker performed in both vaudeville and Broadway productions and was known for her interpretations of Yiddish-themed songs. She also hosted her own radio show during the 1930s.

**Sophie Tucker** (1887-1966) was a singer, comedian, actress, and radio personality. Born in Russia (in an area that is part of Ukraine today), Tucker performed with the Ziegfeld Follies early in her career and was known for vaudeville acts that evoked nostalgia for the early 20th century.

**Wallace Beery** (1885-1949) was born in Missouri and started his career in entertainment as an assistant elephant trainer with Ringling Brothers Circus. He is best known for his acting work in the films *Min and Bill* (1930), *The Champ* (1931), *Treasure Island* (1934), and *Viva Villa!* (1934).

**Polly Moran** (1883-1952) was a vaudeville actress and comedian particularly known for her brash style and talent for slapstick. She partnered with Broadway star Marie Dressler for several well-received films, including *The Callahans and the Murphys* (1927), *Chasing Rainbows* (1930), and *Caught Short* (1930).

The Group Theatre, founded in 1931, had already been in existence for four years before the Federal Theatre Project began. Founders Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg sought to create a theatre that would reflect, and perhaps even change, the values, struggles, and events of their time. They recruited 28 actors to join them to form a permanent ensemble. Over the course of ten years, the Group Theatre developed 40 original productions while emphasizing a highly collaborative, personal approach. They felt that if the actors had trusting, personal relationships off-stage, that their onstage relationships would be more believable as a whole. The Group Theatre also emphasized an approach to acting developed by Russian actor and director Constantin Stanislavski. Stanislavski stressed the importance of analyzing a character’s inner psychology to create believable emotions in their onstage performances. Group Theatre member Lee Strasberg applied Stanislavski’s theories to develop his own style, which would come to be referred to as “method acting.” Strasberg’s method emphasized emotional recall—an actor must draw on his or her own memory of experiencing emotions similar to those that his or her character experiences in the play, and then recreate them onstage.

As they worked, the Group Theatre upheld their commitment to their ensemble and eschewed fame and attention to its individual members, many of whom would go on to illustrious individual careers after the Group Theatre disbanded in 1941. Members Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner later became renowned acting teachers. Elia Kazan was a successful theatre and film director. Lee J. Cobb and Ruth Nelson both had subsequent careers onstage and in film.

Clifford Odets first joined the company an actor but created his lasting legacy as a playwright while with the Group. His politically-charged plotlines and working class characters matched well with the Group Theatre’s commitment to social change. The Group’s productions of *Awake and Sing!* (1935), *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), and *Paradise Lost* (1936) received especially positive reviews from critics and audiences alike. Other Group Theatre productions of Odets’s work included *Till the Day I Die* (1935), *Golden Boy* (1937), and *Rocket to the Moon* (1938). Odets wrote specifically with members of the Group Theatre’s ensemble in mind. In a 1961 interview with the University of Michigan’s Robert Hethmon, Odets cited this as an integral factor in the Group’s success. The plays “were written specifically for the Group company to perform,” Odets said, “and they could not have been done better by anyone else. The material was very congenial. Not only was it drawn from what in those times was bothering and disturbing millions of people. The material had the closest affiliation to the hopes, ideals, and future vistas of almost any member of the acting company.” He also credited Strasberg, and the high level of training he provided to the company, with making the Group such an influential force in the American theatre. “By the time my plays came along, Lee Strasberg had trained an acting company such as this country may never see again. He was uniquely the person who could and did do that. He did not direct any of my earlier plays, but it was his acting company which played them.”

By the time *Golden Boy* and *Rocket to the Moon* were produced, however, the Group had started to grow apart. Despite their efforts to remain a cohesive ensemble, members’ disagreements about
Acting theory and philosophy were major wedges between them. Actors who received smaller roles in productions also had less opportunity for in-depth training with Strasberg and Clurman, who focused much of their energy on those in leading roles. This, combined with tiered salaries resulted in jealousy and conflict. In the Hethmon interview in 1961, Odets recalled that “Sanford Meisner, who was a good actor, and, as we now know, a superb teacher and a fine director, threatened to leave the Group Theatre every other week, and the directors would have to meet with him and talk it over and convince him to stay. Many of the people were doing that.” Strasberg and Adler also traveled to Russia to study with Stanislavski, who had revised some of his earlier exercises, and when they returned home with these new techniques, the ensemble fell into turmoil over what method was correct and should be used by the Group.

The Group Theatre also suffered from significant financial difficulties due to some unsuccessful productions and a loss of institutional funding. As a result, ensemble members’ paychecks were cut. To make ends meet, many of them took on individual projects and moved to Hollywood to transition into more lucrative film careers. Odets was one of them. In 1947, former Group Theatre members Elia Kazan, Cheryl Crawford, Robert Lewis, and Anna Sokolov founded the Actors Studio as a place for actors to work on their craft in a private setting. Strasberg took on leadership of the studio in 1951, which focused on promoting and preserving the Stanislavski approach to acting. Today, the Actors Studio is not a school but a true studio where professional actors can come to develop new material, refine their skills, and receive feedback from others in a supportive environment.

QUESTIONS:

1. *Time* magazine put Clifford Odets on its cover in December, 1938. How did this attention to Odets as an individual artist impact the already shaky rapport of the Group Theatre ensemble members?

2. Despite its focus on the group, Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg were clear leaders within the company. Given the values the Group Theatre promoted, is there a contradiction in Clurman and Strasberg being essentially “in charge”?

3. In 1994, the Actors Studio established the Actors Studio Drama School, which today grants a Master of Fine Arts degree in Acting through Pace University. The Bravo television series *Inside the Actors Studio* documents a weekly seminar at the school. Research the relationship between the Actors Studio and the Actors Studio Drama School and compare and contrast their purposes, offerings, admission requirements, and training philosophy. Why do actors choose to attend one or the other? In addition to acting, in what other theatrical disciplines does the Actors Studio Drama School offer training?

4. The Federal Theatre Project utilized theatre as a way of providing employment, entertainment, and education to the American public. Research the Federal Theatre Project. What projects is it remembered for supporting? What is the enduring legacy of the Federal Theatre Project today? What other artists were able to nurture their talents under New Deal programs?
5. The Group Theatre emphasized the Stanislavski approach to acting, a focus that now extends to the Actors Studio and Actors Studio Drama School. Research the acting theories of Constantin Stanislavski. What other theatre artists cite Stanislavski as a major influence?

6. The Group Theatre’s emphasis on ensemble was largely inspired by work of the Moscow Art Theatre. Research the Moscow Art Theatre. Who founded it? What plays did it produce? What theatre companies today work in partnership with the Moscow Art Theatre?

JEWISH-AMERICAN VOICE

Theatre artists and scholars often place Clifford Odets in the same company as great American writers such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O’Neill, but recent scholarship on Odets has aimed to place even more emphasis on Odets’s status as one of the foremost Jewish-American voices in the American Theatre. In an article on Odets for jewishtheatre.com, researcher Ellen Schiff writes that *Awake and Sing!* is a fundamentally Jewish play, characterized by the Yiddish rhythms in its language and use of Jewish archetypal characters, including “the restless belle juive, the mild husband bewildered by ‘life in America,’ the sybaritic moneymen, the socialist grandfather, the bitter racketeer, and the discontented young hero.” The Berger family of *Awake and Sing!* also exemplify the Jewish immigrant story of the 1930s, in which the struggles of the Great Depression were particularly challenging for ethnic communities.

Though the text of *Awake and Sing!* is peppered with Yiddish words, Odets actually removed many Jewish phrases and references between his first draft of the play and the version that the Group Theatre eventually performed in 1935. Odets changed the play’s title, however, from *I Got the Blues* to the more overtly Biblical *Awake and Sing!* The Book of Isaiah, from which the title of the play is lifted, contains a mixture of prophesies and reports that center on the themes of judgment and salvation. Chapter 26, verse 19 (“Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust; for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead”) is a line in a song of praise for God’s forgiveness, and offers the prediction that true believers will be resurrected.

QUESTIONS:

1. Consider the moment in Act II, Scene 2 in which Jacob quotes Isaiah 26:19. Who is the “ye that dwell in dust” that Jacob uses the quote in reference to?

2. Examine the moments in *Awake and Sing!* in which characters use Yiddish words and phrases. Which characters employ Yiddish in their speech? Under what kinds of circumstances do characters use Yiddish?

3. Theatre researcher Ellen Schiff believes that Odets edited out much of *Awake and Sing!*’s “Jewishness” to convince the Group Theatre to perform it, despite the fact that many of the Group’s members were also Jewish. Why would the ensemble members have been resistant to performing an overtly Jewish play? Why do you think Odets was willing to revise his work to make it less Jewish?

4. Clifford Odets’s family name was shortened for the Russian Gorodetsky when the family immigrated to the United States. Research the story of how your own family came to be in the United States. What is the origin of your last name?
SCENE STUDY

PART I
Choose students to direct and act out or read scenes from *Awake and Sing!*. Prepare to perform the scene by completing the following questions:

- What are the given circumstances (5 W’s) of this scene?
- What is the scene’s primary conflict?
- Objectives: What does my character want in this scene? What does my character want in the play overall?
- Tactics: What is my character doing to get what he or she wants?
- Obstacles: What or who is standing in the way of my character’s efforts to achieve his or her objective?
- Stakes: What is at risk for my character? What is the best thing that could happen if my character achieves his or her objective? What is the worst thing that could happen if he or she fails?
- What adjectives describe my character’s personality? Are there any contradictions?
- What statements does my character make about him or herself? What do others say about my character?
- Describe the status of each character in the scene. Does anyone have power over someone else?

PART II
Create a biographical sketch of your character by answering the following in first person from the character’s perspective:

- Full name and date of birth.
- Where did you grow up? Where do you live now?
- Do you have any siblings?
- Describe your relationship with your parents.
- How did your childhood influence who you are today?
- When you were young, what were your dreams and aspirations? Have these dreams changed over time? If so, how and why?
- Do you have any secrets? If so, what are they?
- What is your best quality? What is your worst quality?
- Describe your sense of humor.
- Do you have any hobbies? If so, what are they? Why do you enjoy them?
- List your favorites: Food, color, music, season.

PART III
Put the scene on its feet. How can you use stage pictures to communicate the story of the scene? Consider:

- Composition of the onstage images.
- The rhythms of the actors’ movement around the stage.
- The pacing of the dialogue.
- How the actors’ body language and vocal expression reflects the information examined in Parts I and II.
METHOD ACTING: SENSE MEMORY

The Group Theatre used Method Acting, Lee Strasberg’s interpretation of the Stanislavski system, as their approach to performance. One of the tools the Group used in the Method was Sense Memory, a process in which actors access memories of real experiences they have had in order to recreate the connected emotions onstage.

- Sit in a chair and begin by putting yourself into a state of relaxation. Close your eyes, breathe deeply and focus on being present in this moment. If distracting thoughts enter, recognize them and then set them aside. Listen to your breath and recommit your focus.
- Imagine you are holding a peach in your hand. The peach is ripe and ready to eat. Notice the peach’s yellow and pink colors.
- Feel the texture of the peach’s fuzzy skin. Smell the fresh aroma of the fruit.
- Take a bite of the peach. Taste the sweet, tart juice on your tongue. Some drops my run down your chin or drip onto your hands. Protect your clothes from getting juice stains on them.
- Feel the texture of the peach’s flesh in your mouth as you chew and swallow. Hear the squishy crunching sounds as you chew.
- Repeat until you have eaten the entire peach and you are left with the pit. Be sure to nibble all remaining bits of fruit from the pit.

REFLECT:
- What happened to the position of your fingers as the peach got smaller?
- Did you really taste the peach? Feel the drops of juice? Hear your chewing? Smell the fruit’s sweet scent?
- How did you finish eating? What did you do with the pit? Did you lick your lips or fingers? Wipe your mouth with the back of your hand or with your sleeve?

Repeat this exercise several days in a row, increasing your focus each time. Be present through every detail of the memory. How honestly can you recreate the sensory experience of eating the peach?

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

The first pages of *Awake and Sing!* are dominated by Clifford Odets’s lengthy descriptions of the characters. Read these descriptions and make note of the information Odets provides, including:

- Physical characteristics
- Personality traits
- Personal history
- Inner thoughts and feelings

Given the Group Theatre’s approach to acting, why is the information in the character descriptions important? Why did Odets choose to provide so many details while other playwrights provide little to no information about their characters up front?

Imagine that you are adapting your favorite novel for the stage or that your family or friends are characters in a play. Write descriptions of the characters inspired by Clifford Odets’s descriptions of the characters in *Awake and Sing!*.
COSTUME DESIGN
Costumes play a major role in communicating information about characters, such as age and socio-economic status. Costume designers for productions of *Awake and Sing!* must pay special attention to details such as fabrics and accessories to draw distinctions between characters of different classes.

Choose two characters from *Awake and Sing!* who belong to different classes (for example, Morty/Schlosser or Hennie before marriage/Hennie after marriage) and design costumes for them. Research the fashion of the 1930s to find:

- What silhouettes were popular for men's and women's clothes?
- What types of clothes were functional for the characters' lifestyles?
- How might these clothes show wear and tear from frequent use?
- How do the clothes and accessories worn by people of different statuses differ?

Compile images of people of the 1930s from magazines and advertisements, as well as photos of regular people going about daily life. Use these images to draw sketches of costumes for your selected characters and include specific notes about fabric choices and how they might be distressed (showing wear and tear).

IMAGES OF THE DEPRESSION
In the 1930s, photographer Dorothea Lange was hired by the Farm Security Administration to document the lives of displaced farmers and sharecroppers as they migrated west in search of work. Lange's work brought public attention to their struggles and put a human face on the effects of the Great Depression. In a 1960 article in *Popular Photography* magazine, Lange said the following about *Migrant Mother*, which is often considered her most iconic work:

“I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.”

Examine the following page for examples of some of Lange's best-known photographs, including *Migrant Mother* (top left), and consider them in light of Lange's statements to *Popular Photography*.

**SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES**

- What makes these images so compelling? What stories are being told?
- Lange provides some contextual information about *Migrant Mother*. Are there questions you had about this image that were not answered in Lange’s comments?
- Why do you think Lange chose to reveal that the migrant woman is 32 years old? Did this information surprise you? How does it affect how you view the people in her other photos?
- Lange used words such as “hungry” and “desperate” to describe her subject. How do these words affect the way we view this photograph?

Choose a social issue in your community and take a series of photos that document it. Then, select one and answer the following questions:

- Why did you choose this image to represent your work?
- When you took this photograph, what first caught your eye?
- Where were you when you took this picture?
- What were you doing when you took this picture?
- What time of day was it?
- What were you thinking when you took this picture?
- What ideas or feelings were you trying to capture in this image?
- How were you able to capture these ideas or feelings?
- What do you think about now when you look at this image?
- How would you like the viewer to respond when they look at this image?
- How did you expect this image to look? What, if anything, looks different than what you expected? What surprised you about this image?

HISTORY AND POLITICAL SCIENCE — COMMUNISM VERSUS CAPITALISM
Research the economic systems of Communism and Capitalism, then compare and contrast the two using the chart on page 25.

**DEFINITIONS:**

- Communism: A theory advocating elimination of private property, a system in which goods are owned in common and are available to all as needed.
- Capitalism: An economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market.

*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*
SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOROTHEA LANGE
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2014-2015 STUDENT MATINEES

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER
SEPT. 17
ETHER DOME
OCT. 30 & NOV. 20
AWAKE AND SING!
NOV. 14
THE SECOND GIRL
JAN. 12
THE COLORED MUSEUM
MAR. 13 & APR. 2
COME BACK, LITTLE SHEBA
MAR. 16

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