Federal Theatre and Group Theatre: Crash Course Theater #42

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=vGLZDFHnnwk
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/vGLZDFHnnwk

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta.

This is Crash Course Theater, and today—[[[Yorick zooms in with a placard reading "Strike! Strike! Strike!"]]]—we're discussing theater in 1930s America. Don't cross any picket lines, ya boney scab. The 1930s was a fine decade if you're into worldwide economic collapse.

It was also pretty great for theater. Go figure! We'll be looking at the Group Theater, a hugely influential collective that tried to bring Stanislavski's theories to America.

And then we'll turn to the Federal Theater Project, a Works Progress Administration scheme that employed thousands of out-of-work theater professionals—even Orson Welles—and created full-length plays about...farming. And syphilis. Let's rock that cradle.

Lights up! INTRO The Group Theater was founded in New York in 1931 by Lee Strasberg, Cheryl Crawford, and Harold Clurman—three kids with guts, hearts, and a pretty all-encompassing interest in creating a socially conscious, politically motivated theater embodied in a naturalistic style of acting that felt right for modern life. Modern in 1931, at least.

Here's how Clurman put it: "Our interest in the life of our times must lead us to the discovery of those methods that would most truly convey this life through the theatre." They wanted to form an ensemble as unified and skilled as the one Konstantin Stanislavski had created at the Moscow Art Theater. Because they were superfans of the Moscow Art Theater. So in 1931, they convinced the Theater Guild to give them $1000 and permission to rehearse a new play in Connecticut.

They gathered up 28 actors and got to work, calling themselves the Group. They rehearsed Paul Green's "The House of Connelly," a tale of a romance on a plantation. Green was one of those white writers who won prizes for writing in black dialect, while black theater struggled to prove its legitimacy on the world stage.

The Theater Guild said they'd fund it if the Group fired a couple of their actors and restored the original downer murder ending. The Group said no—collectively!—and Eugene O'Neill stepped in with a little cash. The play was a critical success, but not a big financial success, because the Group was too idealistic to care about box office.

That would eventually become… a problem. Listen, I know that y'all wanna do it for the art–but take it from an actual theater professional (me): sometimes you gotta do it for the money,. IN ORDER to do it for the art.

I know it's tough. Rehearsing the play meant drilling actors in the Stanislavski system. Or at least the Stanislavski system as Strasberg understood it.

This is what we now call the method or method acting. So if you're an actor who has ever felt that you have to torture yourself in service of a role, or access some really, really dark memories, you can thank those guys! Affective memory or emotion memory is what Strasberg taught, and it goes a long way to explaining intense actors like Marlon Brando, or Daniel Day Lewis.

In 1934, Clurman and his wife Stella Adler actually met and worked with Stanislavski. And they came back to tell everyone that Strasberg had it all wrong. Stanislavski wasn't interested in feelings; he was interested in actions and circumstances.

This led to a pretty epic fight between Adler and Strasberg—a feud that lasted sixty years—and to Strasberg taking a reduced role within the company. The Group Theater dissolved in 1940. The company was smart about a lot of things, but money wasn't really one of them.

They produced their non-commercial plays in big, commercial Broadway theaters, and funding was a strain. Also, they had trouble figuring out a workable power structure. You might be shocked to learn that there's a lot of ego in theater.

Still it's hard to overstate the influence of the Group on American playwriting, acting, and directing. Keep in mind, as we talk about their plays, that most of the most famous acting teachers in America—including Strasberg, Adler, Sanford Meisner, and Bobby Lewis—all worked for the Group. Elia Kazan, Crawford, and Lewis would later go on to found the Actors Studio, who trained pretty much everyone.

Not all of the Group Theater's plays were strictly realistic, but the company helped to further a distinctly American naturalism that depended on big conflict and big emotion. Many of these plays were idealistic or at least interested in questions of idealism, encouraging a yea-saying rather than a nay-saying view of humanity. "Every good play is propaganda for a better life," Clurman said. An early hit was John Howard Lawson's "Success Story," about an ad man who risks losing his soul as he climbs the corporate ladder.

And the Group had a rare financial success with Sidney Kingsley's Pulitzer Prize winning "Men in White," a story of heroic doctors and their coats at a New York City hospital. But the playwright most indelibly associated with the Group is Clifford Odets. Odets had joined the Group as an actor, and he'd been begging them for years to stage one of his plays.

And the Group was like, ha ha—no. And Odets was like, no you guys, it's "Awake and Sing!" Come on! And the group was like, ha ha ha—still no.

Another company staged his play "Waiting for Lefty" in a benefit performance, and it was a huge hit. The Group was finally like, "Cliff, baby—let's do some shows!" Odets's plays are talky, scrappy, heartbreak-y dramas of the American immigrant experience. Conflicts typically arise from the tension between tradition and family, and what character's feel they owe to themselves.

As the grandfather in "Awake and Sing!" says to his grandson: "Wake up! 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." Odets's characters speak in contemporary, dialect-driven speech. But this ordinary language can soar into a kind of poetry when the characters are moved—sometimes by desire, sometimes by oppression. "Waiting for Lefty," had its historic premiere on January 6, 1935. Is it theater?

Or propaganda? Yes! Help us out, Thought

Bubble: The play is based on an actual forty-day strike among New York cab drivers in 1934. They were hoping for fairer contracts. As it begins, a corrupt union boss is trying to convince the drivers not to strike. The drivers are waiting for their chairman, Lefty.

This was before "Godot," when you could still wait for stuff and not have it seem derivative. The audience is positioned as other drivers at the meeting, and often they're addressed directly. Joe, one of the drivers, gets up to speak, and the scene shifts to Joe's apartment, the week before.

His furniture is being repossessed, and his family doesn't have enough money for groceries. But even though they're struggling, his wife tells him to stand up and strike. In other vignettes, other characters resist oppression.

A lab assistant refuses to spy on his boss and punches out the company's owner. A young driver tries to hold on to his girlfriend, though her family disapproves. A Jewish doctor is discriminated against and then radicalized.

Back at the meeting, one man, a veteran of another strike, tries to discourage the workers, but he's outed as a company spy. Then, another man runs in and tells everyone that Lefty has been shot dead, presumably by the taxi bigwigs. An organizer turns to the audience and asks, "Well, what's the answer?" On opening night, a few of the stagehands shouted, "Strike!" The audience started shouting it, too!

When the play finished, they were so moved that they stood up and clapped and stamped for forty five minutes, through twenty six curtain calls, until they were removed from the theater. And then they kept it up on the street outside. —Strike! Strike!

Thanks, ThoughtBubble. That was inspiring. Eventually, Odets left New York, lured to Hollywood, where he wrote a bunch of excellent screenplays.

But he eventually returned with plays that took a dark view of corrupting Hollywood power structures, and his new Broadway works said so. So, bite that hand, Cliff! If the Group Theater was a small, fervent, wildly influential response to the Great Depression, there was an even bigger one in the works—the Federal Theater Project.

The FTP, which kicked off in 1935, was a New Deal initiative meant to keep theater professionals working until the economy improved. Eventually, it employed more than fifteen thousand people across forty states. To head the FTP, the politicians didn't look to famous Broadway directors and producers.

Instead they chose Hallie Flanagan, a Vassar professor. And this was a baller move—because like a lot of academics—Flanagan liked plays that fell solidly in the weird and awesome range. Instead of programming feel-good comedies or Shakespeare, followed by Shakespeare, with a dollop of Shakespeare, she created a network of regional theaters and encouraged them to make weird, awesome work.

BUT ok there were some classic plays, too. In its four years, the FTP-sponsored hundreds of distinct productions, most of them open to the public with free admission. The FTP was not expected or required to turn a profit… and no one had any money anyway!

Susan Glaspell, whom you'll maybe remember from our episode on American moderns, headed the Midwest bureau. Not a trifle! The expressionist playwright Elmer Rice headed up the New York office.

The FTP also created units of the Negro Theater Project in 23 cities. The New York Unit was originally headed by two white directors, John Houseman and Orson Welles, though they were replaced a year later by three black directors: Edward Perry, Carlton Moss, and. H.

F. V. Edward.

The most famous project was probably the twenty-year-old Welles's wildly popular "voodoo" "Macbeth," which cast entirely black actors and reset the tragedy in the Caribbean. The FTP is probably best remembered for creating the Living Newspapers: plays by journalists and theater makers that were drawn from the news of the day; current events presented in a form inspired by vaudeville, pageant, and newer, more experimental forms. As Flanagan wrote, they were designed to "dramatize a new struggle—the search of the average American today for knowledge about his country and his world; to dramatize his struggle to turn the great natural and economic forces of our time toward a better life for more people." The first play, "Ethiopia," wasn't allowed to open.

The government issued a censorship order saying current heads of state couldn't be imitated onstage. Man, good thing we got over that anxiety, huh?! "Triple A Plowed Under" explored the rights of farmers. "One-Third of a Nation" was about a housing crisis. "Spirochete" was a fun play starring syphilis. Often these plays were narrated by a "little man." [[[Yorick flies in.]]] Bigger.

With a body. The little man was a Joe Average, here to learn about power, poverty, or VD. The FTP ran until 1939, when it was canceled because it had run through all the money it had been allotted, and because some politicians weren't too crazy about the Living Newspapers and the leftist content they provided.

Strike! Strike! Strike!

By 1940, the Group and the FTP had dissolved, but they'd left a lasting impression, both on the style of American writing and acting, and the network of regional theaters in which these American plays could now be performed. Next time, we're heading back to Europe for some not-so-political theater created by the actor, essayist, playwright, genius, and occasional madman Antonin Artaud. It's the Theater of Cruelty.

Until then… curtain, with compassion.