CHAPTER 1

Politics, Existentialism, and American Drama, 1935–1945

ALL: STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE!!

Clifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935)[1]

SIMON STIMSON: Yes, now you know. Now you know! That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those . . . of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you have a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another. Now you know – that's the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness.

Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (1938)[2]

America's Great Depression (1929–1941) brought uncertainty but also artistic possibility. The narrator, Tom, in Tennessee Williams's groundbreaking play *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) describes the bewilderment and miasma of the previous decade: "I turn back time. I reverse it to that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy."[3] The ruptured social fabric jolted Americans into a new self-awareness; as the world irrevocably changed, so the artistic representation changed. The Great Depression led to an unprecedented self-examination of what it meant to be an American. Theodore Dreiser, for example, observed in 1936 that the period forced Americans to reexamine their bedrock concepts of individualism and freedom, as well as rethink the highfalutin notions of the "self-made man, pioneers,

this is the best country in the world and you ought to be proud you were born here, the stars and stripes, etc."[4] Such skepticism yielded a new social awareness and a desire to uncover the roots of economic collapse.

In an effort by dramatists from 1935 to 1945 to create a theatrical language that would capture the desperation and prevailing hardships, two types of plays emerged. The first challenged adverse social conditions. The playwrights of this group were progressives who starkly highlighted the conditions of the poor. The second type examined a version of existentialism indigenous to America. These playwrights, influenced by the rising interest in European existentialism, concentrated on the nature of individualism or individuals who, through their actions, examined life's meaning and value. For the progressives, the economic woes prompted artists and writers to reconstruct events salient to the Depression. Documentary reportage, such as Arthur Arent's 1938 play *One Third of a Nation* (sponsored by the Federal Theatre Project's *Living Newspaper*) ushered in proletarian-style drama. "Social problem plays," such as Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* in 1935, examined the consequences of economic devastation. These dramatists additionally sought a vernacular that would replicate the machine age, urban living, and fast-paced "jazz age" of their time. For the existentialists, plays generally brought into focus American small-town family life, which illuminated the meaning of "being an American." The consequences of the Depression and world war reflected a sense that America had peered into the abyss, and that Americans had to reevaluate their actions in the face of futility. Moral certainty, which had characterized American melodrama prior to the 1930s, gave way to a sense of contingency. There arose a feeling that life was unpredictable. In *Existential America*, George Cotkin remarks that for French existentialists Sartre and Camus, Americans "lacked a sense of anguish about problems of existence, authenticity, and alienation," problems of general concern among Europeans. American materialism and optimism was believed to gainsay the gloom and doom representing European plays and literature. However, the American psyche during the mid-twentieth century, Cotkin contends, contained "certain darker and deeper elements" that were made evident by American art, literature, and drama.[5] Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), Robert Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest* (1935), and William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life* (1939) exemplified plays partaking in a

self-examination of community and a reevaluation of morality. The plays of the progressives and the existentialists laid the foundation of American drama for the second half of the twentieth century.

Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* is important for several reasons. One of the most significant political dramas of its time, it was produced by the Group Theatre, which would become the most innovative theatre company of the 1930s. Opening in January 1935 at the Civic Repertory Theatre in New York as a benefit for the left-leaning *New Theatre Magazine*, *Waiting for Lefty* concerns a number of taxi drivers awaiting the return of their representative, Lefty Costello. As the men debate whether to strike or not, they learn that Lefty has been murdered. Their reaction is to unite in demanding better wages and working conditions. This play captured the imagination of a generation seeking to galvanize the political aims of the "Popular Front." The "Popular Front," Michael Denning contends, was a "broad social movement" emerging from the economic crisis of 1929 that incorporated "workers' theatres, proletarian literary magazines, and film industry unions" yielding a social democratic agenda.[6] The standing room-only crowd at the Civic Repertory Theatre, along with the actors at the opening of *Waiting for Lefty*, shouted "Strike" at the conclusion. Energized by the performance, the actors and audience together spilled out into the streets of New York demanding economic justice for the working class. The spontaneous reaction was largely due to the drama's intensity as well as an actual taxi-cab strike ongoing in New York. The play became the standard-bearer of workers' theatre across the nation.

The play began as a workshop project for the Group Theatre. Founded in 1931 by producer Cheryl Crawford and directors Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman, the Group consisted of disillusioned actors, directors, and designers. Reacting against Broadway's triviality, they produced a theatre of social change. They advanced a new type of play and performance style that coincided with new aesthetic theories. Influenced by the Moscow Art Theatre's 1923 and 1924 tours through the United States, the Group Theatre instilled a naturalistic acting style centered on verisimilitude and social activism that marked a widespread shift in aesthetic values. The style developed by the Moscow Art Theatre's artistic director, Konstantin Stanislavsky, inspired Strasberg and Clurman to incorporate psychological depth, emotional connection, and three-dimensional characterizations within an American medium. Through Stanislavsky's influence, the American

acting style known as the "Method" took firm hold. Playwrights began writing dialogue to fit the "Method." The vernacular expressed the realistic demands of actors seeking Stanislavskian veracity. American actors and playwrights, however, added a distinction to Stanislavsky's system. The music of African American jazz and the indigenous vernacular of the blues had influenced American dramatists and performers for some time. Popular in the 1920s, by the mid-1930s jazz and blues records saturated American culture. Originating from turn-of-the-century Ragtime, the syncopated rhythms, improvisatory style, heightened energy, and jazz melodies characteristic of African American blues became integral to American acting style, and in turn influenced written dialogue. Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, in particular, illustrates these influences.

The brief one-act play consists of five scenes and an introduction intended to show what the Depression had done to the American worker. The first scene takes place in the apartment of Joe and Edna. Joe Mitchell is a cab driver down on his luck; Edna, his wife, has put their two children to bed when Joe arrives virtually empty-handed despite a day's work. The stage is bare; their furniture had been repossessed that afternoon because Joe was unable to keep up with the payments. Joe enters and immediately feigns ignorance. But Edna's no-nonsense attitude punctures his façade. Pleading for understanding, he makes the case that he is doing his best. Edna, the driving force in the scene, argues that the family is barely making ends meet and that he must take action. Joe is circumspect. He tries to keep Edna at bay, to no avail:

> Joe: You don't know a-b-c, Edna.
>
> Edna: I know this – your boss is making suckers outa you boys every minute. Yes, and suckers out of all the wives and the poor innocent kids who'll grow up with crooked spines and sick bones. Sure, I see in the papers, how good orange juice is for kids. But damnit our kids get colds one on top of the other. They look like little ghosts. Betty never saw a grapefruit. I took her to the store last week and she pointed to a stack of grapefruits. "What's that?" she said. My God, Joe – the world is supposed to be for all of us. (10)

The text reveals Odets's left-leaning ideology, the pragmatic emphasis on doing things, and jazz syncopation. Edna stresses action over passivity; for her, doing eclipses reflection and defeatism. The children

see orange juice but cannot drink it. Poverty and squalor are not abstractions, but rather the result of real adversity. Edna's point is grounded in the pragmatic belief that action can change reality, and words have little if any value unless supported by actions and results. In addition, the rhythm of Edna's speech is suggestive of jazz. It is energetic and direct ("your boss is making suckers outa you boys every minute"). She emphasizes time ("every minute") to suggest a drumming tempo. Her vernacular is tough and unsentimental as her discourse accelerates. The rhythm of the dialogue mimics the mechanisms of industrial society. Joel Dinerstein contends that "Jazz was the nation's popular music in the Machine Age (1919–45) because its driving, syncopated rhythms reflected the speeded-up tempo of life produced by the industrialization in the American workplace and the mechanism of urban life." Jazz, he adds, "also reflected the hopes of African Americans for finding a new life outside the South."[7] For similar reasons this expression of hope as well as the driving rhythm was picked up by white immigrants.

Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934) ran for 691 performances, becoming one of the most successful shows of 1935, and enjoyed revivals during the 1940s. Along with Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* it exudes social awareness. The drama explores small-town prejudices. Karen Wright and Martha Dobie are teachers who have built their own grade-school. They become victims of a rumor by a willfully destructive student, Mary. The rumor that Karen and Martha share an "unnatural" relationship spreads. Students withdraw from the school and the marriage of Karen and Dr. Joe Cardin is called off. The play's strength is its characterization of the two principals, Karen and Martha. Despite their being upstanding citizens with substantial contributions to the community to their credit, the mere suggestion of homosexuality stigmatizes them. In the final act, Joe Cardin departs Karen's home. Martha feels the sting of her friend's rebuff. Karen proposes that they run away and start anew. But Martha cautions Karen that "There'll never be any place for us to go. We're bad people. We'll sit. We'll be sitting the rest of our lives wondering what's happened to us. You think this scene is strange? Well, get used to it; we'll be here a long time."[8] Unable to contain her secret, Martha confesses her love. Her guilt eventuates in suicide. Homophobia surfaces as well in Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). While it remains uncertain in *Children's Hour* whether Martha's confession of love is actual or driven

by despair (or a consequence of both), it is, as in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the root cause of public disgrace. Hellman and Williams cast a critical perspective on American provincialism; the Midwest in *Children's Hour* and the South in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are exposed for their philistine intolerance. Hellman's future plays, such as *The Little Foxes* (1939), continued to address American avarice, bigotry, and small-mindedness.

The 1935 season presented another significant play, Langston Hughes's *Mulatto*, which ran for 373 performances. Despite a lack of critical support and a questionable rewriting of the last act by the producer Martin Jones, the popularity of its message made it an important development in African American drama (the play was adapted into an opera, *The Barrier*, by Jan Meyerowitz in 1951). Hughes was influential in creating the Karamu Playhouse in Cleveland (known first as the Gilpin Players, named after the actor Charles Gilpin), and he helped shape African American theatres in Los Angeles and New York (the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, just to take one example). Known primarily as a poet and essayist, Hughes was nonetheless a prolific playwright, writing protest plays such as *Scottsboro Limited* (1931), which examined the trial of nine black men falsely accused of rape in Alabama. He fought against job discrimination and unemployment by writing such plays as *Angelo Herndon Jones* (1936), *The Organizer* (1938), and *Don't You Want to Be Free* (1938). During this productive period he also wrote satires such as *Scarlet Sister Barry* (1938) and *Limitations of Life* (1938). Later he offered a gospel musical protesting racial injustice in *Tambourines to Glory* (1963).

Mulatto, based partly on Hughes's short story *Father and Son*, takes place on a Georgia plantation during the 1930s. Colonel Norwood is a brackish white patriarch of three children by his black mistress, Cora (performed by Rose McClendon, one of the leading actresses and producers of African American theatre). Norwood's stubbornness and racism conflict with his paternal feelings; he condescends toward his three children – William, the oldest, Sallie, the youngest, and Robert, an 18-year-old, precocious and rebellious – yet he supports them financially. Robert has the temerity to challenge his father's authority by entering their home through the front door. Robert's sense of entitlement – he believes in his privilege owing to his birthright – leads to a conflict over what it means to be black or white in a racist society. Robert and Norwood clash bitterly, and the ensuing animus results in Norwood's death. *Mulatto* also reflects indirectly the story

of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, Jefferson's slave mistress. Jefferson's long relationship with Hemings produced a family of mixed-race children. Though never explicitly mentioned, the Jefferson connection seems clear. Hughes's play, along with Hellman's *Children's Hour*, is an attack on prejudice and narrow-mindedness.

The year 1935 produced another landmark drama, Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing!* Produced again by the Group Theatre, the play (originally titled *I Got the Blues*, which reflects the influence of blues aesthetics) examines a lower-middle-class Jewish family living in the Bronx during the Depression. Odets writes that "All the characters in *Awake and Sing!* share a fundamental activity: a struggle for life amidst petty conditions."[9] Bessie Berger, the family matriarch, lives in fear of poverty and destitution; her uxorious husband Myron is an ineffectual nebbish. Their two children, Hennie and Ralph, desire to do better than merely grovel for minimum wage. Their grandfather, Jacob, is an ex-barber and armchair revolutionary; his passions are reading Marx and playing Caruso records. Moe Axelrod is a boarder in their home, a World War I veteran who lost a leg and acquired a cynical outlook on life. He loves Hennie, but his bitterness thwarts his capacity to express emotion. Hennie becomes pregnant by a stranger who abandons the neighborhood. In desperation, Bessie and Myron finagle Max Feinschreiber, a lonely greenhorn immigrant in love with Hennie, to marry her and avoid opprobrium. Once married, they convince Max that Hennie's child is actually his. Blinded by his love and desire to belong in America, Max marries Hennie and accepts the ruse that he fathered the child.

Like *Waiting for Lefty*, the play's power lies in its rhythmic language. Odets incorporates the fast pace of urban living, the sardonic and richly metaphoric Jewish humor, and the driving energy of a restless world. Characters (especially Bessie) frequently refer to the Depression – "furniture on the sidewalk" is a constant refrain – and the hand-to-mouth existence it has accrued in its wake. Jacob instills in his grandchildren the hope that beyond the craven desire for a buck there might be a socialist utopia. But he pushes his point too far, and his daughter Bessie, enraged, destroys his Caruso records. At the end of Act II Jacob climbs to the tenement roof and jumps. He hopes that his life insurance policy will provide a better existence for his grandson Ralph. Act III centers on the arrival of the insurance claims inspector; Bessie wants Ralph to share the policy's three thousand dollars, but Ralph balks. In her effort to persuade her son, Bessie's language is a

melting pot conveying the poetic and sarcastic inflection characteristic of Yiddish and guilt-inducing sacrifice mixed with jazz rhythm.

> Bessie: Ralphie, I worked too hard all my years to be treated like dirt. It's no law we should be stuck together like Siamese twins. Summer shoes you didn't have, skates you never had, but I bought a new dress every week. A lover I kept – Mr. Gigolo! (95)

Bessie relentlessly urges Ralph to share the money; her point is blunt. Ralph expresses a less cynical vision in the face of Bessie's nihilism.

> Bessie: 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. Talk from now to next year – this is life in America.
> Ralph: Then it's wrong. It don't make sense. If life made you this way, then it's wrong! (95)

For Odets, the grim business of living in a capitalist world forces people into a survivalist mode. He understands that life in the Great Depression was undermining the fabric of human relationships. People became hard; to survive, they had to grow estranged. Odets captures not merely the sorrowful results of economic collapse, but also the unsparing isolation that entraps people into selfishness and greed. When Bessie becomes impatient with her father, she destroys his one pleasure in life, his Caruso records. Smashing the records disheartens the old man, who commits suicide. However, he left a three thousand dollar insurance policy for his grandson because he believed that his vitality would inspire social change. Ralph understands his mother's fears, but he also knows that his grandfather left the money for altruistic reasons. It is noteworthy that the significance of "life insurance" as a narrative device is found in Robert Sherwood's 1935 play *The Petrified Forest* and is repeated in two of the most important plays to be dealt with in the next chapter: Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959).

Ralph's restless energy reveals a desire for happiness beyond mere scrounging. His talk of collectives is lukewarm Marxism rather than Communist dogma. One of Odets's great strengths in this play – a play presaging the work of two future American playwrights, Arthur Miller and David Mamet – is its representation of Jewish chutzpah. The characters display survival tactics as well as an arsenal of wit, guile,

and verve. The characteristics of Jews living in urban America resurface in Miller's and Mamet's work. When Jacob argues with his son-in-law, Myron, and his successful businessman son, Morty, about politics and religion, he anticipates Miller's dream of existence transcending money worship. But he also criticizes the forthcoming avidity that will become evident in Mamet's salesmen of *Glengarry Glen Ross* sixty years later.

> Jacob: So you believe in God . . . you got something for it? You! You worked for all the capitalists. You harvest the fruit from your labor? You got God! But the past comforts you? The present smiles on you, yes? It promises you the future something? Did you found a piece of earth where you could live like a human being and die with the sun on your face? Tell me, yes, tell me. I would like to know myself. But on these questions, on this theme – the struggle for existence – you can't make an answer. The answer I see in your face . . . the answer is your mouth can't talk. In this dark corner you sit and you die. But abolish private property! (73)

Odets regarded the nuclear family, based on the model of the male breadwinner and the organizing capacity of trade unions, as the principal instrument of social improvement. At the end of *Awake and Sing!*, Ralph evokes a socialist alliance of workers, saying, "It's a team down at the warehouse," 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" (97). The rat-race mentality that saturates Miller's *Death of a Salesman* in the next decade and Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* in the 1980s is indebted to Odets. The bitterness of life "printed on dollar bills," which is the trademark of Odets's work, is recreated in Mamet's huckster salesmen of *Glengarry* and greedy film producers in *Speed-the-Plow* (1988). The image of land conveyed in Jacob's speech above – "Did you found a piece of earth where you could live like a human being" – is deliberately praised in the past tense ("found") but couched as a question for the present and future. The speech marks the discrimination against Jews throughout Europe, where ownership of land was forbidden. The "fruit" symbolism in *Awake and Sing!* (Act I ends with Moe Axelrod saying, "What the hell kind of house this is it ain't got an orange!!") implies the earth's riches denied by anti-Semitism. Fruit belongs to the land; once an agrarian people enjoying the produce of the earth, Jews under

Christian rule in Europe were denied access to land ownership. They were forced to develop over two thousand years the merchandizing skills and talents for trade and commerce that made possible their survival. Success depended on "shylock" business savvy in order to live in a world of limited opportunities. Morty in *Awake and Sing!* epitomizes the successful Jewish businessman; as Bessie says, "Ralph should only be a success like you, Morty. I should only live to see the day when he rides up to the door in a big car with a chauffeur and a radio. I could die happy, believe me" (66). But for Odets Uncle Morty's success costs him his soul. He will never have a family nor discover happiness; instead, he will live to chisel like Mamet's characters more than a half century later. Morty's first line in the play begins Act II; while receiving a haircut from his father, Bessie enters and says: "Dinner's in half an hour, Morty." Morty replies: "I got time" (59). His success has purchased leisure time, but Morty finds little in the having of it. He is always scheming for his next sale, his next line of clothing. It is in the characters of Hennie, Ralph, and Moe Axelrod that Odets stakes his faith in the future. Moe's language captures that of the "tough guy with a heart" image popular in the 1930s. In the end he elopes with Hennie. Odets presents a hopeful, and a more sentimental, view than Miller and Mamet, but he is clearly their forebear. His immigrant characters are freighted with the burdens and scars of their shtetl life; for them the new world is a sign of hope, but only if they act.

Odets's *Golden Boy* (1937) followed in the tradition of plays that critiqued American avarice and class stature, such as Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922) and *The Great God Brown* (1926), Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928), and John Howard Lawson's *Success Story* (1932). In his study of post-World War I drama, Ronald Wainscott observes that during this period "the onslaught of the industrial complex, the destruction of manners, and the creation of a crass, consumer world" led many American theatre artists to regard "their transforming world as a way of life destroyed, a culture dispossessed." Consequently, many dramas reproduced "the confusion, anger, nihilism, celebration, and reactionism inevitable under such circumstances."[10] Odets's *Golden Boy* exploits these concepts raised by the dramas of the 1920s, adding new facets to issues that roiled during the 1930s.

Produced by the Group Theatre, *Golden Boy* concerns the conflict of Joe Bonaparte, who must decide whether to pursue the violin or

become a prizefighter. The backdrop is the same lower-middle Bronx milieu as Odets's *Awake and Sing!*, only now the immigrants are Italian rather than Jewish. For Bonaparte, music and pugilism symbolize the choices of beauty on the one hand, and wealth on the other. Tom Moody, a fight promoter, tries to persuade Joe to fight, while Joe's family encourages his artistic pursuits. Moody uses his girlfriend, Lorna Moon, as temptress; she draws Joe into the fight game over the protests of his family. The scene between Joe and Lorna typifies Odets's ability to weave together rhythmic language, inner conflict, and social aspirations. The two characters sit on a park bench one evening.

> Lorna: Success and fame! Or just a lousy living. You're lucky you won't have to worry about those things. . . .
> Joe: Won't I?
> Lorna: Unless Tom Moody's a liar.
> Joe: You like him, don't you?
> Lorna: (*After a pause.*) I like him.
> Joe: I like how you dress.[11]

Odets's language is taut. Lorna views the alternatives: boxing means "success and fame," while music is little more than a "lousy living." Joe's attraction to Lorna (who epitomizes the era's "whore with a heart of gold"), coupled with his insecurities (he is self-conscious about being "cross-eyed"), yields characterizations reflective of the times. Frustrated by social conditions, Americans looked for shortcuts. Joe's desire to fight rather than live artistically is indicative of a world where the need to survive trumps beauty. Joe's dilemma was shared by many who abandoned their dreams in order to gain the brass ring. Joe fights with a fury that leads to catastrophe. Despite Odets's naive conclusion (the play ends with Joe and Lorna crashing their car after Joe kills his opponent), what he successfully portrays is the image of the working-class immigrant overwhelmed by social conditions. Unable to resolve the conflict between old world values and new world ostentation, symbolized in *Golden Boy* by Joe's desire for fast and expensive cars, Odets's play projects a sense of helplessness.

Another social drama, Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset* (1935), marks a unique venture. A verse play like those of Gertrude Stein, *Winterset* takes place in the poor section of a Brooklyn dockyard. Loosely based on the 1927 execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, the story revolves around

the 17-year-old son, Mio, whose father, Romagna, was falsely executed. Mio returns to the neighborhood where the alleged crime took place seeking justice, but also falls in love with Miriamne, the sister of the only actual witness to the crime. The poetic dialogue in *Winterset* conveys the cacophonous world of gangsters, tenements, and surreal improbabilities. The play's ambience is suffused with injustice and violence. The lovers, Mio and Miriamne, consign themselves to death under a hail of bullets by gangsters trying to squelch their quest for justice. The play introduced to the theatre one of America's great set designers, Jo Mielziner. In an effort to accentuate the possibility of hope amidst tragedy, Mielziner's design for the play stressed the overarching Brooklyn Bridge. The initial stage directions obscured the bridge, or at least showed little interest in visualizing it. Mielziner, Mary Henderson writes, "wanted to turn the scene around so that the bridge would be visible as it soared toward an unseen landing and its majestic architecture could represent, perhaps, a metaphor for hope and faith."[12]

Several more plays of the period emphasize the social conditions of the Depression and leftist politics. Among them are: Marc Blitzstein's musical *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), John Steinbeck's adaptation of his novel of two drifters, *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and Sidney Kingsley's portrait of the working class in his *Dead End* (1935), based on the real-life location of the upper-class River House on East Fifty-Second Street juxtaposed beside a slum. Yet, despite the left-wing proclivity of several dramatists and others looking to experiment in form, the period's dramas primarily reinforced traditional values. Philip Barry's three-act comedy *The Philadelphia Story* (1939) takes place among upper-crust society and mildly pokes fun at the romantic antics of the wealthy. The story revolves around the divorce and new marriage of Tracy Lord (played by Katharine Hepburn), and underscores the lighthearted sexual misadventures of those without a care in the world. John van Druten's *I Remember Mama* (1943) takes a nostalgic look back at Norwegian immigrants living in 1910. The play extols the virtues of self-sacrifice, dedication, and the value of staying "true" to your family. A struggling writer, Katrin, learns that her Mama is the deserving heroine of her stories. Howard Lindsey and George S. Kaufman worked up a play from the *New Yorker* sketches of Clarence Day, producing one of the longest-running hits in American theatre. *Life with Father* opened in 1939 and ran for 3,224 consecutive performances. Its success can be attributed to its avuncular, blustering,

but inoffensive "Father," who refuses to see the value of being baptized. Eventually he reneges, though he retains his loveable recalcitrance and masculine pride. The play's setting takes place during the late 1880s, when it was thought traditional values should go unquestioned. "Father" lords over his family on Madison Avenue, dolling out axioms of fiscal responsibility. He says, for example, to the Mayor of New York, "If you can't run this city without raising taxes every five minutes you'd better get out and let somebody who can."[13] Although the play's male chauvinism and offensive comments about African Americans are inexcusable, the comedy provided a respite for a nation exhausted by the Depression and the anxieties of an impending war. Its nostalgic glance at the late nineteenth century, a seemingly more subdued and passive time, must have been a welcome relief from the complexities of the Depression. Moss Hart and Kaufman, in their play *You Can't Take It with You* (1936), succeed at much the same thing. The play involves an eccentric family, the Vanderhofs. One member of the family manufactures firecrackers in the cellar, another practices ballet in the living room, and Grandpa collects snakes and refuses to work or pay his back taxes that are 23 years in arrears. What holds together this essentially plotless play is the romance between Alice, the granddaughter, and her wealthy boyfriend, Tony. This comedy filled Broadway with humor and escapism in an effort to maintain sanity during an unstable time. At the play's conclusion Tony's father, Kirby, has come to take his son away from the Vanderhof mayhem. Grandpa defends his family's way of life against the rat-racing Wall Street mentality that Kirby represents. He asks Kirby why he keeps working when he hates his job and his life, and Kirby replies:

> Kirby: Why do I keep on – why, that's my business. A man can't give up his business.
> Grandpa: Why not? You've got all the money you need. You can't take it with you.

Grandpa suggests that Kirby follow his lead and "have a lot of fun. Time enough for everything – read, talk, visit the zoo now and then [. . .] even have time to notice when spring comes around."[14] Kirby finds Grandpa Vanderhof's thinking "dangerous philosophy" and downright "un-American" (309). The play affirms Grandpa's view that the unadorned life is desirable over the hurly-burly business world. The

lighthearted comedies of the period balanced against the stark reality of the times.

Another group of playwrights arose, encouraging a reevaluation of ethical and philosophical values. Thornton Wilder's 1938 three-act play *Our Town* takes place in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. Each act is presented in 1901, 1904, and 1913, respectively. On the surface Wilder provides a nation weary of the Depression with a welcome nostalgic look at bucolic America. Druten's drama, *I Remember Mama*, also creates its own nostalgic mood. Yet Druten's play remains sentimental, framed in flashbacks by the main character Katrin and centering on her Norwegian immigrant family. Wilder's play grows caustic; while the first two acts create a homespun atmosphere, with the Stage Manager serving as narrator as well as orchestrating the stage action, the last act admonishes the wasted lives of the town's inhabitants. The provincialism of the New Hampshire characters is shown in the third act by setting the scene in a graveyard in which the characters reminisce over their squandered hopes and unfulfilled dreams.

Characters in *Our Town* describe their lives; as Mr. Webb, publisher and editor of Grover's Corners newspaper, remarks, the town is "lower middle class: sprinkling of professional men . . . ten percent illiterate laborers. Politically, we're eighty-six per cent Republicans; six per cent Democrats; four per cent Socialists; rest, indifferent."[15] For a New Hampshire town at the turn of the century, this demographic, Webb goes on to say, creates a "Very ordinary town, if you ask me. Little better behaved than most. Probably a lot duller" (26). What makes the play theatrical is that Wilder has the Stage Manager address the audience directly, and strategically places actors in the audience sometimes challenging the characters. In the first act a character named "Belligerent Man at Back of Auditorium" says, "Is no one in town aware of social injustices and industrial inequality?" (27). "This is the way we were," the Stage Manager informs us; "in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying" (35). Act II centers around the courtship of George and Emily, while Act III occurs after Emily dies in childbirth.

Robert Sherwood's 1935 drama *The Petrified Forest* takes place at a roadside café, the "Black Mesa Bar-B-Q," which serves as a gas station and lunch room at a crossroad in the eastern Arizona desert. The inhabitants of this sleepy town meet two outsiders: the first is Alan Squier (played by Leslie Howard), an existentialist philosopher

described in the stage directions as a man with "an afterglow of elegance" but also "condemned." The second is the menacing Duke Mantee (played by Humphrey Bogart), a hardened gangster described as "vaguely thoughtful," and like Squier, "unmistakably condemned."[16] Mantee is on the run, stopping at the diner to regroup his gang after a heist during which several people were killed. The play's significance is in the relationship between Squier and Mantee; they are the flip side of the same personality. Squier admires Mantee's coolheaded ability to make decisions despite the threat of death. Squier inveighs against the world to Gabby, the idealistic female who falls in love with him. Moved both by her love and by her idealism, and in an effort to find purpose in his own meaningless world, Squier strikes a bargain with Mantee. He sets up an insurance policy for Gabby without her knowing, and when Mantee is ready to pull out from the diner and make a run for it he agrees to kill Squier, making it appear part of Mantee's murderous banditry rather than a planned suicide. His arrangement elicits Mantee's understanding. Though Squier is educated and speaks eloquently, Mantee grasps Squier's predicament intuitively.

> Squier: You'd better come with me, Duke. I'm planning to be buried in the Petrified Forest. I've been evolving a theory about that that would interest you. It's the graveyard of the civilization that's been shot from under us. It's the world of outmoded ideas. Platonism – patriotism – Christianity – romance – the economics of Adam Smith – they're all so many dead stumps in the desert. That's where I belong – and so do you, Duke. For you're the last great apostle of rugged individualism. Aren't you?
>
> (*Duke has been calmly defoiling a cigar, biting the end off, and lighting it.*)
>
> Duke: Maybe you're right, pal. (49)

The existential desire to find meaning in the world drives Squier to make his bargain with Mantee. Sherwood, observes Mark Fearnow, "transformed into action and character his sense of dissolution of American culture. The 'survival' motif of the 1930s permeated his work, as fossils from the earth's civilized past wander rather desperately through a newly barbaric world."[17] Symbolically, both Squier and Mantee converge at the point of life's purpose and value. Life and death, as the existentialists maintain, are never far apart, and both

characters share this awareness. It is significant that Squier takes out a life insurance policy as a hedge against life's meaninglessness. As the New Deal came into view, the world of literature and drama began to rely on life insurance in its narratives. This reflected the period's interest in Social Security. Historian David Kennedy contends that the New Deal "pattern can be summarized in a single word: security." Wallace Stevens added to this, noting that "We may well be entering into an age of insurance."[18] The period's drama and literature explored the idea of "human worth"; death now afforded living possibilities – security – for survivors. Clifford Odets and Robert Sherwood, and later Arthur Miller and Lorraine Hansberry, examine life's value resulting from a New Deal society that had taken up these concepts.

William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life* (1939) takes place in "Nick's," what Saroyan describes as "an American place: a San Francisco waterfront honky-tonk."[19] The central character is Joe, an independently wealthy ne'er-do-well who, like Squier in his aimlessness, spends his days at the bar watching the world pass. He is generous, dispensing money freely and treating everyone unlucky to a drink or cash. Throughout the play, characters come to the bar to listen to music or bemoan their fallen state of affairs. For Saroyan, the bar is the world in microcosm, as well as a place where time is examined. The author explores how people spend time; at the beginning of Act II Joe meets Mary, someone he has never spoken to or seen before. They are nevertheless soulmates, people who understand life's alienation but are helpless to change it. Mary asks Joe why he drinks, and Joe explains:

> Joe: Twenty-four hours. Out of the twenty-four hours at least twenty-three and a half are – my God, I don't know why – dull, dead, boring, empty, and murderous. Minutes on the clock, *not time of living*. It doesn't make any difference who you are or what you do, twenty-three and a half hours of the twenty-four are spent waiting. (75)

Saroyan's homage to the barfly is a reversal of the many temperance plays that existed before and during Prohibition (*Ten Nights in a Barroom*, for example). Prohibition had only been repealed for seven years when *The Time of Your Life* opened in 1939. The bar, Saroyan seems to suggest, is a place where down-and-outers find solace. The play is filled with the presence of a singer who cannot sing, a comedian

who is not funny, a prostitute who aspires to be a burlesque star, and other assorted outcasts filled with illusions. Like Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (written around the same time), the bar's ambiance can be a place of fantasy and self-deception. Unlike *Iceman Cometh*, Saroyan's world is gentle; however, Saroyan takes the passage of time seriously. When asked about work and life, Joe waxes philosophically:

> Joe: (*Slowly, thinking, remembering.*) What? What-not? That means this side, that side. Inhale, exhale. What: birth. What-not: death. The inevitable, the astonishing, the magnificent seed of growth and decay in all things. Beginning, and end. That man, in his own way, is a prophet. He is one who, with the help of beer, is able to reach that state of deep understanding in which what and what-not, the reasonable and the unreasonable, are one. (90)

Despite Saroyan's boozy sentimentalism, his play lays the groundwork for the bar as a locus of existential contemplation. Saroyan's "passage-of-time" shares much with Edward Hopper's paintings such as the *Automat* (1927) or *Room in New York* (1932). Hopper's works capture alienation American style; for both Saroyan and Hopper, lone individuals are enveloped in inertia. Despite the American pioneer spirit, both artists illustrate solitary disappointment. Rather than optimism, Hopper portrays a disconnected world, epitomized by the specter of a lone individual hunched over her coffee cup in *Automat*, or two figures existing in separate worlds in *Room in New York*: the man engrossed in his newspaper, the woman lazily fingering the piano. Saroyan is more sentimental than Hopper; his brand of existentialism possesses some hope. Neither Saroyan nor Hopper, however, shares Henry David Thoreau's enthusiasm for isolation and solitude in *Walden*, although they do share a sense of what Thoreau called "lives of quiet desperation." Saroyan and Hopper consider aloneness and silence as painfully fallow. Where Saroyan departs from Hopper is in his belief in the possibility that some human connection, however momentary, is genuine.

Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) symbolizes the American ability to persevere during hard times. Each act centers on the Antrobus family – father, mother, son, daughter, and their maid, Sabina – and each of the three acts depicts a historical catastrophe. In the first act, the family comes face to face with the ice age as it encroaches on

their home; the second act parallels Noah as the flood nears; and the third act takes place during the aftermath of a devastating war. The play's opening in 1942 gives the final act real-life significance. Wilder humorously theatricalizes the play by having actors talk directly to the audience. He adds to the humor by including deliberate theatrical "mistakes" in the text, such as missed cues and sick actors needing stage managers to replace them. These devices serve as relief from the seriousness of the play's intent. In 1942 the war was just beginning; audiences needed a breather. Wilder created the appropriate balance of comedy and drama. The play demonstrates the ingenuity, resourcefulness, and upbeat spirit of the Antrobuses amidst impending doom. As Sabina says at the opening:

> Sabina: We've managed to survive for some time now, catch as catch can, the fat and the lean, and if the dinosaurs don't trample us to death, and if the grasshoppers don't eat up our garden, we'll all live to see better days, knock on wood.[20]

Sabina's credo of survival is echoed throughout the play. She says: "Don't forget that a few years ago we came through the depression by the skin of our teeth! One more tight squeeze like that and where will we be?" (126). This line serves as the cue for the mother's entrance, but since the mother misses the cue, Sabina has to repeat her entire monologue. The catastrophe is an oblique reference to the ongoing war, but the tension is made palatable by the theatrical gag of actors missing cues. Sabina throws down her dust cloth and says to the audience:

> Sabina: I can't invent any words for this play, and I'm glad I can't. I hate this play and every word in it. As for me, I don't understand a single word of it, anyway [. . .] Besides, the author hasn't made up his silly mind as to whether we're all living back in caves or in New Jersey today, and that's the way it is all through. (127)

The conflict in the play is between father and son. Their struggle is accentuated by the son's peevishness and puerility, and the troubles brought about by his violence. Henry represents America's aggressive and immature side; his unbridled rage is countered by his father's ethical sensibility. However, in the second act the father loses his

moorings and flirts with Sabina. He threatens to leave and break up the family. During a political campaign in the second act, Antrobus says: "The watchword of the closing year was: Work. I give you the watchword for the future: Enjoy Yourselves" (172). Wilder combines American ideals of Puritan work ethic and the search for happiness, but he also shows the pitfalls of temptation. Sabina, who now plays the role of a "Fortune Teller" on the boardwalk (the act takes place by the sea just before the flood), warns Antrobus and the audience: "Your youth, – where did it go? It slipped away while you weren't looking. While you were asleep. While you were drunk" (179). During the romantic scene between Sabina/Fortune Teller and Antrobus, a headstrong Sabina declares that she will not "play the scene." Turning to the audience, she says: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. But I have to skip it. In this scene, I talk to Mr. Antrobus, and at the end he decides to leave his wife, get a divorce at Reno and marry me. That's all" (195). The act concludes with Antrobus ushering all the animals, two by two, onto boats.

The third act begins with an amusing problem: some of the actors have "taken ill" from food poisoning while noshing during intermission. The stage manager, dresser, and costumer must assume some of the roles so that the show can continue. The major point of the act, however, is the end of the unnamed "war." The play repeatedly declares that the war is over but that the peace will be as difficult to negotiate as the war was to win. The imbroglio between father and son comes to light in a heated exchange. Henry, a soldier who has risen in the ranks and has become the enemy, declares: "The first thing to do is burn up those old books; it's the ideas he [his father] gets out of those old books that . . . that makes the whole world so you can't live in it" (229). Antrobus counters Henry's belligerence with a speech reflecting American liberal values:

> George: How can you make a world for people to live in, unless you've first put order in yourself? Mark my words: I shall continue fighting you until my last breath as long as you mix up your idea of liberty with your idea of hogging everything for yourself. I shall have no pity on you. I shall pursue you to the far corners of the earth. You and I want the same thing; but until you think of it as something that everyone has a right to, you are my deadly enemy and I will destroy you. (236)

Henry's voracious appetite for materialism and autonomy must be balanced, as the playwright suggests, against the community's needs as a whole. The play defines the rationale for war based on American liberal ideals of individual freedom along with social equality. George Antrobus struggles to find a reason to carry on; he epitomizes everything "American" – hopeful and doubtful, strong-willed yet conscious of others, tempted by wealth and pleasure but also admiring of knowledge and fair play. His words at the play's conclusion are rooted in American work ethic and the struggle to make a new world:

> George: I know that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for – whether it's a field, or a home, or a country. All I ask is a chance to build new worlds and God has always given us that. [. . .] We've come a long ways. We've learned. We're learning. And the steps of our journey are marked for us here. (245)

George Cotkin comments on the play, saying that it "captures the eternal interplay between finite and infinite, with survival through the turmoil of existence." He contends that Wilder takes spectators "to the edge of an existential abyss but then retreats, showing the audience a nicely lit exit sign that offers an alternative to Kierkegaard's anguished leap of faith. In Wilder's work, the tragedy of existence is eased instead by a belly laugh, a polite shock of recognition, or a chuckle at the foibles of humankind."[21] Cotkin is correct, but only up to a point; American existentialists like Wilder, unlike their European counterparts, do not consider the world unremittingly bleak. Wilder, like other American dramatists of this era, borrows European ideas of questioning human aims and embracing the knowledge that, as Sartre would have it, existence precedes essence. However for Wilder, contra Sartre, existence is hardly a dire landscape causing us to succumb to nausea. Like Beckett, whose tramps in *Waiting for Godot* exist in a wasteland with little hope of Godot's arrival, the Antrobuses live in a precarious world awaiting catastrophe. Unlike Beckett, Wilder stakes his belief in American ingenuity and resourcefulness, the get-up-and-go spirit that can overcome obstacles. This view does indeed show audiences what Cotkin calls a "nicely lit exit sign" which relieves the burden of finality. But Americans in general avoid dwelling on Kierkegaardian anguish, preferring instead conscious resilience and

fortitude. The American poet and essayist Delmore Schwartz wrote in 1948 that "*Existentialism means that no one else can take a bath for you*."[22] Schwartz is referring to Heidegger's notion that no one can die for you, but he uses the bath metaphor rather than death as a way of interjecting tongue-in-cheek humor. A bath, Schwartz says, "is a daily affair, at least in America." He implies that for Americans the contemplation of life and death is not in itself morbid. Americans take life's inevitability and give it a good spin (or wash). In Wilder's world, the family unit is reengaged – son is reconciled and father returns to the fold – because for Wilder the American dream of the family unit is what can pull people through hardship. Wilder's view stakes its terrain on the traditional heterosexual family. This fact, albeit conventional, cannot conceal his existentialism, but suggests an American hopeful version of it. With Beckett, audiences are offered a recycling of nothingness; characters replay their fruitless search for Godot without closure. In the hands of Wilder and other American playwrights, something can be made from nothing, even if that something requires improvisation, and results, however vague, can be obtained. The Antrobuses believe that they can do more than merely endure, endurance being the hallmark of Beckettian "I can't go on, I will go on." Their optimism may be perceived by some as foolish; still, Wilder captures the "American-ness" of his existentialism.

A bleaker view of Americanism consistent with European existentialism can be found in the works of several African American dramatists. This is the result of deeply entrenched segregation, lynching, and the economic condition that gave rise to the expression of blacks as always "first fired, last hired."[23] The period from 1935 to the 1959 of Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* falls between two high watermarks of African American culture, the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. The period 1935 to 1959 has received far less attention than these two great epochs. However, two noteworthy plays, Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog* (1938) and the stage adaptation of Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* (1941, co-written with Paul Green), established the groundwork for future dramas. *Big White Fog* depicts the lower-working-class Mason family living in Chicago during the early 1920s and the early 1930s in the last act. Victor Mason, the father, is enlisted in the Garvey Movement and becomes one of its leaders. Led by the messianic charisma of Marcus Garvey, the Garvey Movement surfaced after World War I as a black separatist movement

seeking economic and social independence. Victor is a devout Garveyite, but when he depletes the family savings to support Garvey's Back-to-Africa mission, he costs his family opportunities. His son is denied entry into college owing to poverty and racism, and his daughter is forced into prostitution with a white man in order to survive. The third act takes place amidst the Depression, at a time when the family is facing eviction and the Garvey Movement has already disintegrated. The family turns to the socialists for help (it was a common refrain in the black community during the Depression that if faced with eviction, people would cry out "Get the Reds," meaning gather up the Communists who usually protested evictions and frequently forced landlords to back down). This is, in fact, what happens in the play; the family has twenty days to come up with the rent, and when it fails to do so, the Communists come to its aid. Victor, at the end, is shot and killed defending his furniture as it is being carried away by the police.

Chicago is also the setting for Richard Wright's social drama *Native Son*. Produced in 1941 with Canada Lee in the leading role of Bigger Thomas (Lee was also in *Big White Fog* and the 1944 play *Anna Lucasta* for the American Negro Theatre), the play portrays the bullying, uneducated, yet self-consciously aware Thomas whose unequivocal anger at whites and at his hopelessness ends in death. Taking a job as a chauffeur for a wealthy white family, he accidentally smothers the family's blind daughter. The daughter, desiring to go "slumming," has Thomas drive her and her boyfriend to a honky-tonk in a black neighborhood. She is drunk, forcing Thomas to carry her to her bedroom when they return home late. As she moans, Thomas fears for his life when he hears someone entering the house (a black man carrying a blind white woman to her bedroom might instantly produce a lynching rope). Terrified by the potential for accusations or worse, he covers her mouth in panic and accidentally smothers her. Knowing explanations to be useless, he is on the run for his life. Thomas is eventually caught, tried, convicted, and executed.

Although Wright broke from the Communist Party in 1943, his *Native Son* (1940 novel, 1941 play) is a model representation of socialism and existentialism in literature. Cotkin reminds us that "Wright's pathos depended upon the gritty realism with which he evoked the pain and inauthenticity forced upon African Americans." But Wright was also an "existentialist before he knew such a thing existed."[24] Influenced by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Wright's Bigger Thomas, like

Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, tests the limits of his actions and moral responsibility. For Wright, the added factor of race and the backdrop of social oppression inform the dramatic potential. Bigger Thomas possesses greater rage than Lorraine Hansberry's Walter Lee Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*, but both Bigger and Walter Lee keenly feel the injustice that comes from being a dreamer and an outsider. Both *Big White Fog* and *Native Son*, plays set in Chicago, laid the groundwork for Hansberry's Chicago-based play. We will observe how the social protest dramas and plays of existentialism helped develop the American concept of the outsider, as American dramatists emerged from World War II poised to challenge the received wisdom of values and traditions.