

'Waiting for Lefty' by Clifford Odets, in South Camden

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Before we classify Clifford Odets' 1935 one-act called *Waiting for Lefty* as a museum piece, a relic from another era almost never performed today, we should listen to what South Camden Theatre Company is telling us - with today's news in mind.

It's a play that considers a young man and woman who, in love during the Great Depression, will probably go their separate ways because they cannot afford to marry. (Check out the word on the streets of Cairo.) It deals with a husband and wife who can't find the money to pay their bills (check out the unemployment rate), a woman who cannot afford decent health care and her lame assigned doctor who cannot provide it (check out health-care reform), and so forth (just read the paper.)

I don't make the case that *Waiting for Lefty* speaks to us in the vernacular. Odets' series of vignettes, set against the backdrop of a union meeting of desperate New York taxi drivers whose bosses are probably corrupt, is full of antiquated language ("you gutless piece of baloney!"). The play is mid-'30s agitprop - so named because many saw it as rabble-rousing socialism that preached agitation with propaganda.

But let's not put down the form; *Waiting for Lefty* gave the 1935 theater added value because it was so relevant. And it gave Odets his first Broadway success.

The play - which at the South Camden company's new Waterfront South Theatre begins with a vintage newsreel that even mentions the plight of laid-off Camden shipping workers - is based, just a little, on a 1934 taxi strike in New York that followed one in Philadelphia, also mentioned in Odets' script. It has a shrill edge, which the cast, under the direction of Joseph M. Paprzycki, South Camden's artistic director, approaches unevenly at first.

An early scene with Joe (Kevin Costello) and Edna (Jen Beatty), the couple struggling with bills, should be taut but is loose and staged too statically, while a later one with Florence (Dani Lencioni) and Sid (James Kiesel) is fluid, flawed only by bizarre lighting that becomes suddenly low toward the end, as if we changed time zones.

This progression from clunky to well-oiled describes the production's spirit, which, by the time a character named Agate (Tom Juarez) declaims his call to action at the end, is in full throttle. The cast, including Randall McCann as a union boss, Edward Monterosso and Jason Cutts as physicians, Reuben Mitchell as a goon/spy, and Jamal Douglas as the man who outs him, ends up honoring the piece as if protecting a lost treasure they have discovered. Which they are.

Waiting for Lefty

Presented by South Camden Theatre Company at the Waterfront South Theatre, 400 Jasper St., Camden, through Feb. 20. Tickets: \$15. Information: 1-866-811-4111 or www.southcamdentheatre.org.

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"Waiting for Lefty" at South Camden Theatre Company features (from left) Randall McCann,...