

## 75-year-old play continues to resonate at Waterfront South Theatre

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You don't have to convince Joe Paprzycki that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Paprzycki, the founder and producing artistic director of the South Camden Theatre Company, need only point to "Waiting for Lefty," by fabled American playwright Clifford Odets, to confirm that old notion. He is currently directing a production of this iconic play at the Waterfront South Theatre through Feb. 20.

"It's something I've always wanted to do," says Paprzycki, who is shepherding the company through its sixth season. "The messages in 'Lefty' are truly timeless, but they are particularly relevant now, as we struggle through this long recession."

The 1935 play's unique history is, itself, the stuff of drama.

Odets created it as part of the Group Theatre, an artistic consortium created by theatrical giants Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crawford. The goal: to present audiences with plays of social and political relevance in an atmosphere that would be a training ground for actors.

It was with "Waiting for Lefty" that the group established itself as a theatrical force. Audiences loved the direct messages of Odets' work, one which surveyed social and political institutions like labor unions, the plight of the economically disenfranchised, and the impact of the Great Depression on ordinary folks.

Presented in a series of vignettes, one fading into the other, the play has most of the actors on the stage throughout the production. The lighting for fade-ins and fade-outs becomes a key technical element of the play.

But it's the universality of the work and its messages that Joe Paprzycki finds its most compelling feature.

"You can't help but relate today's conditions to those of that era," says the play's director, whose mission for the South Camden Theatre Company is to expose audiences to life's cosmic issues, while providing entertainment, insight and hope.

Producing "Waiting for Lefty" has its inherent challenges. It requires a cast of 15 – in itself, a challenge of casting, blocking and directing.

"We happen to have assembled a marvelous and devoted cast – you know that actors care when they arrive at rehearsals not just on time, but early!" says Paprzycki, who has a "day job" himself as an account manager for the American Red Cross.

His own passion for theater began when he discovered it as a student at Collingswood High School, and began educating himself. After that first flush of excitement, Paprzycki went about his life until seeing "Angels in America" fanned the flames again. "I literally couldn't move after I saw it, and within two weeks, wrote my first play." He was 37 years old at the time.

There have been numerous plays written since that life-changing experience, and the Gloucester City man, now 53, is devoted to the world of theater in all its aspects, from playwriting to producing and directing throughout the region.

But "Waiting for Lefty" has special resonance for Paprzycki. "The play is wrapped around the issue of a cab driver strike, but touches on so many other things, including love, spying within a company and family pressures. It breaks some of the 'rules' of theater – but so effectively that it's survived all these years."

If there is one message the play's director hopes audiences will take away with them from this short but powerful one hour, intermission-less production, it's this one:

"The play's title indicates that these people are waiting for someone named 'Lefty' to solve their problems," notes Joe Paprzycki. "I think what Odets was saying was that we can't always depend on our leaders, that we sometimes need to get up and do for ourselves. And that message is a pretty powerful one in any age."

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