

ABSTRACT

WAITING FOR LEFTY: ADVERSITY AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

By

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May 2012

In order to design the costumes for the depression-era play *Waiting for Lefty: Seeing Red* I searched for connections between contemporary life and that of the time period. People from both times have strived for the American Dream even as it gets further out of reach and have dealt with the realities of economic turmoil. I turned to the 1930s photography of Dorothea Lange and Everett W. Kuntz to research what everyday, working class people who were experiencing these difficulties would have worn. These subtly powerful photos helped me connect the characters to the time and the audience to the play.

WAITING FOR LEFTY: ADVERSITY AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

A PROJECT REPORT

Presented to the Department of Theatre Arts
California State University, Long Beach

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts in Technical Theatre

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May 2012

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LIST OF WORKS

IMAGE

1. "Migrant Mother," Dorothea Lange, 1936
2. "Unemployment Benefits Aid Begins. Line of men inside a division office of the State Employment Service office at San Francisco, California, waiting to register for benefits on one of the first days the office was open," Dorothea Lange, 1938
3. "Scene along 'Skid Row' Howard Street, San Francisco, California," Dorothea Lange, 1937
4. "San Francisco Waterfront Strike," Dorothea Lange, 1934
5. "Back," Dorothea Lange, 1935.
6. "A sign of the times – Depression – Mended Stockings, Stenographer, San Francisco," Dorothea Lange, 1934.
7. "After Church at Grandpa's," Everett W. Kuntz, 1939
8. "Men's Race, Everett W. Kuntz," 1940
9. "Mom and Dad, Augusta and Walter Kuntz," Everett W. Kuntz, 1942
10. "Capper's Weekly," Everett W. Kuntz, 1941
11. "Waiting for Lefty," computer sketch
12. "Awake and Sing," computer sketch
13. "Golden Boy," computer sketch
14. "Paradise Lost," computer sketch
15. "Rocket to the Moon," computer sketch
16. "Fatt," production photo

17. "The Men," production photo
18. "Union Members," production photo
19. "Musicians on the Corner," production photo
20. "Marathon Dance," production photo
21. "Sid and Florrie," production photo
22. "Clara's Family," production photo
23. "Moe and Hennie," production photo
24. "The Referee," production photo

CD of these works may be obtained from the University Library at California State University, Long Beach.

WAITING FOR LEFTY: ADVERSITY AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

In the fall of 2010, a team of collaborators and I set out to bring a unique version of Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* to the stage. Director Kim Rubenstein wove other scenes from Odets's plays into the script to create a new California Repertory production—*Waiting for Lefty: Seeing Red*. The choice of a Depression-era play for this season was deliberate; with the recent downturn of the American economy, a rash of housing foreclosures, and unemployment rates the highest they have been in decades, the subject matter is highly relevant. While the label “The Great Recession” may or may not stand the test of time, there are undeniable parallels between this time and that of the play. Our team set out to create a production that would connect to a 2010 audience through stories of the Great Depression.

Central to both the stories in the play and those playing out today is the disruption of the American Dream—the surprisingly modern idea that any citizen, no matter his or her station or birth, through diligence and hard work can achieve anything to which they set their mind. Further, their children's lives will be better than theirs, and their children's even better, and so forth. During the Depression this notion came to a screeching halt in spectacular fashion—breadlines and migrants, to name a few examples. Perhaps today we do not see many breadlines, but there are other indicators of stalling dreams—foreclosures, adult children moving back in with parents, and the worsening divide between the wealthy and the middle class. Additional issues such as corporate

control and attempts to destroy organized labor are prevalent, from the Supreme Court's "Citizens United" ruling which equated money to free speech and gave corporations the rights of citizens, to Wisconsin Governor Walker signing a bill taking away the collective bargaining rights of unions.

Waiting for Lefty: Seeing Red demonstrates the trials of various middle and working class people and shows them pitted against the quintessential fat cat of a union boss. Ultimately, we wanted the audience to rise up at the end, and shout with the cast: STRIKE! STRIKE! STRIKE! To achieve this reaction, the audience had to see themselves in the characters.

Regarding the costume design, I felt that the characters should not be in rags—these people are not the very poor, but the middle class. Neither should they be well dressed. They have fallen on hard times, when new clothes are far down the list of priorities.

In order to research this, I turned to photography from the period. Dorothea Lange was the first person that came to mind. Hired by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1935, she took some of the era's most iconic photographs ("Migrant Mother," for one). Her photographs span the continent, documenting signs of the times such as breadlines, skid row, and displaced workers, all while maintaining the dignity of those she photographed. Photographic historian Sandra S. Phillips said of Lange's work: "[those depicted are] the ordinary man and woman seen seriously and heroicized through eloquent gesture."¹ These ideas were all significant to the tone of the play.

1. Therese Thau Heyman, Sandra S. Phillips, and John Szarowski, *Dorothea Lange: American Photographs* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994), 10.

The other photographer from whom I drew inspiration is not nearly so well known. In fact, his photographs were not published until 2008 in a small book titled *Sunday Afternoon on the Porch*.² Although just a high schooler when he bought his first camera in 1939, Everett W. Kuntz took incredible pictures. For the next three years he would bring his camera everywhere in his small Iowa town, photographing the townspeople engaged in all manner of activities. The country was still reeling from the Depression, but life went on. There were picnics, sack races, dances, and lazy hours spent by the river. There was hard work, too, and escapism through a local paper that printed nothing but good news. Although life was hard during the depression, as evidenced by Kuntz's pictures, life was also good.

I took inspiration from a young man's everyday photographs of his hometown and a woman's evocative photographs from across the country. Inspired by this research, I designed costumes which emphasized that the characters are regular people who love, laugh, fight, and deal with extraordinary circumstances beyond their control. The care the characters show through their clothing translates to the care they have for their families and their place in the world, their willingness to keep fighting, and their refusal to surrender.

In contrast I put David Vegh, (who was cast in the role of the union boss, and somewhat mobster) in an exaggeratedly large padded suit. Reviewers enjoyed this literal "fat cat," and it turned out to be an effective image. Fatts stood out as the one character

2. Everett W. Kuntz and Jim Heynen, preface to *Sunday Afternoon on the Porch: Reflections of a Small Town in Iowa, 1939-1942* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), vii.

with body to spare—all the others were as lean as their pocketbooks. The rest of the costumes did not seem to be much of note to reviewers; one simply mentioned them as “drab,” an effective point to add to the “overwhelming sense that all progress has halted.”³ The colors I chose, blues, beiges and greys, certainly give that feeling. There is no excess of joy in the clothing just as there is none in the characters. My costumes’ muted tones starkly contrasted with Yuri Okahana’s shockingly red set and Heather Crocker’s sharp, dramatic lighting to push normal, working class people into a heightened reality evocative of the extraordinary circumstances of the period.

We may, as a team, have been trying too hard to connect to the modern day—this play actually does not need that. The song at the beginning, a pop piece by Savage Garden as sung by a group of actors in 30s style outfits, coats, and hats, threw the audience out of the period and confused them. The rest of the play featured jazz from the 20s and 30s, which was far more effective. This play works extremely well on its own, telling a story of its time from which the audience can clearly draw parallels to our own time. Still, while stories of economic hardship and political corruption are all too easy to relate to, the dignity and perseverance of the ordinary man and woman transcend time and circumstance to keep the American Dream alive.

3. David Cowan, “‘Waiting for Lefty’ inspires hope, resilience,” *Daily 49er*, October 4, 2011, accessed February 5, 2012, <http://www.daily49er.com/diversions/waiting-for-lefty-inspires-hope-resilience-1.2353985#.T353ItUp3W>.

