

Newsboy (1934)

(Adapted for American League against War and Fascism by Gregory Novikov from the poem by V. J. Jerome, as co-ordinated by the Workers' Laboratory Theatre)

The Scene.

The entire action takes place on the stage which has been draped in black so that we cannot distinguish its limitations. Before the black back-drop there are three 2-foot platforms, which serve as elevations for certain scenes and certain characters. However, these too must be covered with a black fabric, so that they are not seen by the audience. A street lamp is optional.

When the curtain rises, the stage is dark but the shuffling of many feet are heard. Slowly a light is thrown along the street surface which lights up only the feet of the passersby. We see all types of feet, well-shod, and poorly-shod, walking, strolling, and running back and forth. In the center stands the Newsboy, in the dark.

NEWSBOY: Extry, read all about it! Love nest raided on Park Avenue, Extry! Marlene Dietrich insures legs for fifty thousand dollars! Extry! Mrs Vanderbilt calls Mrs Whitney a liar! Read all about it! Babe Ruth joins Boston Braves . . . Extry . . . College student murders his professor's mistress. Get your papers. American, News and Mirror. Morning papers!

(Slowly a spotlight creeps over the Newsboy's face and spreads until it covers the entire stage with a sickly amber glow. Now we see the crowd in full, passing back and forth in front of the newsboy. Occasionally someone stops to buy a newspaper. We see the following episodes as the newsboy continues his shouts.)

- 1 An attractive girl, evidently a stenographer, walks across the stage, followed by a well-dressed man. She stops to buy a paper which the man pays for. They go off together.
- 2 A blind woman comes tap, tap, tapping across the stage, wailing: 'Alms for the poor blind . . . Ain't no one goin' to help the blind . . . Alms for the blind!' A pompous man with a mustache

drops a coin in her cup, and then stops to enter an item in his budget book.

- 3 Two shabbily dressed radicals cross the stage talking earnestly.
- 4 A nice young girl walks tearfully across the stage followed by a pleading young man.

(The murmuring of the crowd grows louder. The strollers now appear like some mad ballet, forming various patterns behind the newsboy as they buy their papers. The headlines of the newspapers scream out the words MURDER, SUICIDE, and DIVORCE. A piano has joined the medley of voices and the effect is of a discordant babble. Above it all we hear the newsboy.)

NEWSBOY: Read all about it! Murder . . . Rape . . . Scandal . . . All the latest sports events . . . morning papers . . .

(The crowd is chanting Murder, Rape, Scandal, Suicide. The symphony of sound reaches a climax when suddenly we hear the booming voice of the Black Man, as yet off-stage. At the first sound of his voice the murmur begins to die.)

BLACK MAN: Hey, there, Newsboy, how long you goin' ter stand there under the 'L,' yellin' yer guts out? How long yer goin' to keep yellin' that workers should be murdered and strikes outlawed?

(crowd continues soft chant.)

BLACK MAN: Because somewheres in a hotel room in 'Frisco a Follies' girl shot the brains out of the old rip that kept her? Don't you ever get tired, Newsie, shoutin' about hold-ups, and murders, and raids on Love Nests? Come into the-light, Newsboy, come into the light! . . .

(As he speaks he advances into the sphere of light. The crowd pays no attention to him but the newsboy watches him carefully out of the corner of his eye, as if he senses a menace.)

NEWSBOY: JAPAN WANTS WAR WITH THE UNITED STATES . . . SOVIET RUSSIA INSULTS UNITED STATES CONSUL . . . GERMAN OFFICIALS ATTACK AMERICAN GIRLS . . .

CROWD: (as the chant changes in nature, their attitudes change from apathy to hatred) Japan wants war . . . Soviet wants war . . .

Germany wants war . . . Down with the Soviet . . . Down with the Soviet . . .

NEWSBOY: Eight thousand boys join CCC camps* . . . Make professors swear loyalty to government . . . Bill passed in Congress to outlaw strikes . . . Japan prepares war . . . Germany arms 100,000 men . . . Italy masses troops on her border . . . attack on Abyssinia . . . Mrs Vanderbilt calls Mrs Whitney a liar . . . Mary Pickford granted her final decree . . . read all about it!

BLACK MAN: Why don't yer stop kiddin' yerself, Newboy? Don't yer see yer drunk with the poison gin of lies? All this talk of CCC camps and Boy Scout parades and International insults . . . you've got poison in yer bellies and it's eatin' yer guts and rottin' away yer minds. Yer linin' up fer war . . . that's what! Yer gettin' ready to fight again and kill again, and slaughter again . . .

CROWD: (growing louder) We need another war. War brings out the best in men. We need another war. War is natural. We need another war –

BLACK MAN: They're chloroforming yuh with lies, I tell yuh. Lies!

(The noise grows again to a crescendo as the crowd repeats the last speech and as the Black Man keeps shouting 'Lies'. The scene fades off. A corner of the stage is brightened with a white spotlight, slightly above the level of the crowd. In the spotlight we see a man at a telephone. Behind him on the wall are the title streamers of the New York American, Mirror, and Journal. It is William Randolph Hearst.)

HEARST: (into phone) Rush through the following scare heads. Very boldest type. 'Six Million Starve to Death in Soviet Russia.' 'Communism Must Go.' 'Down With American Reds.' 'USA Spends One Billion Dollars on Armaments to be Vested as Airplane Bombers, Cannon, Gas Bombs . . .'

(The voice fades with the spotlight. A light fades in on the other side of the stage. We see a man making a speech before a mob of people. Behind him is draped the bunting of Red, white, and blue. It is Huey Long.)

* Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) were organizations of unemployed youngsters formed into camp units under the jurisdiction of Roosevelt's New Deal legislation to do socially useful work such as planting trees, building, etc. [Ed.]

LONG: Every man is a king. That's my motto. Share the wealth. Every man is entitled to his rights, but no man should make over a million dollars. Every man a king, that's the motto of the Kingfish. A war wouldn't be such a bad thing. Boys, ha, ha, ha – every man a king . . .

(The lights and voice fade. A light on center of stage shows a man behind a microphone, in priest's clothes. It is Father Coughlin.)

COUGHLIN: . . . But our country, right or wrong. Of course, I am not a militarist . . . (sweetly) No man of Jesus can be a militarist . . . Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches humility and pacifism . . . BUT on the other hand, if our nation is in danger of an attack by a foreign nation who is after our gold – or, more particularly, our greatest asset, our silver supply . . . it is the God-ordained duty of every American citizen to fight and die for its protection. Our Government will be only as safe from without her borders as she is from within. Let us stamp out this ugly stain of communism with its militant peace policies. I can only repeat the words of that other great American, Chauncey Depew – 'Our Country, right or wrong . . .'

(The light and voice fade out, and again we see William Randolph Hearst speaking.)

HEARST: Our country right or wrong. Japan insults US envoy. Russia plans to attack the USA. US steel up 40 points. Anaconda copper up 23 points. Du Pont powder works rises 82 points . . . Soviet Union plans to attack . . .

(Voice dies away and spot fades. Murmuring of the crowd has begun again and grows louder. Sound of drums and martial music is heard in the distance, growing louder. As the lights reveal them, the people in the crowd line up in army formation, with rolled newspapers carried like rifles. They march back and forth and finally march straight front, and unroll their papers, revealing War Scare Headlines. The Black Man runs up and down the line trying to make them listen to him. They pay no attention; the Black Man is shouting over the music.)

BLACK MAN: Come into the light, comrades, come into the light. You're being chloroformed. Your heads are full of lies, and

you're gettin' ready to be killed. Cain't you see they're fixin' you for the slaughter. Cain't you see . . .

(They pay no attention. Black Man goes over and sits on the curb, his head in his arms. An Unemployed Man in ragged clothes comes in and stops a Well-dressed Man.)

UNEMPLOYED MAN: How about a nickel for a cup of coffee, buddy?

WELL-DRESSED MAN: Why don't you get a job?

UNEMPLOYED MAN: Why don't I get a job? Ha, ha. That's rich.

Why don't you get a job? Where do you suggest I look for one – in the *White House*?

WELL-DRESSED MAN: Why don't you go to a CCC Camp?

UNEMPLOYED MAN: Thanks, buddy, but I can starve here just as well as there.

(The Well-dressed Man goes on, and the unemployed man approaches a dignified Old Gentleman.)

Can you spare a nickel for a cup of coffee, sir. I've got to eat.

OLD GENTLEMAN: I don't believe in it.

UNEMPLOYED MAN: I don't get you.

OLD GENTLEMAN: I don't believe in charity. Why don't you join the army? It would make a new man of you. *(Feels his muscles)* A man with a body like yours should be in the service. It would build up your morale.

UNEMPLOYED MAN: I want to hang on to my arms and legs for a while, thanks. I'm not anxious to have them blown off in a war.

(Old Gentleman goes on. Unemployed Man accosts a Kindly Old Lady.)

UNEMPLOYED MAN: Lady, can you spare a nickel for a cup of coffee?

KINDLY OLD LADY: *(opening her purse)* Here you are, my good man.

Always glad to help the unfortunate. But why don't you join the army? That would keep you off the streets.

UNEMPLOYED MAN: *(throwing nickel back at her)* Thanks for the charity.

KINDLY OLD LADY: It was only a suggestion.

OLD GENTLEMAN: A good suggestion. Why don't you join the army?

UNEMPLOYED MAN: And get blown to bits!

WELL-DRESSED MAN: *(coming back to him)* Or why don't you join the CCC camps?

UNEMPLOYED MAN: And starve!

(The cry of 'Why Don't you join the army?' and the answer, 'And get blown to bits,' and the other cry of 'Why don't you join the CCC camps?' 'And starve,' are taken up by the crowd. They surge forward, and the chant becomes rhythmic. The Black Man jumps to his feet. The left entrance of the stage lights up. From off stage left is heard the voice of a Second Newsboy, quieting the other sounds.)

SECOND NEWSBOY: Fight against War and Fascism. Learn the truth about the munitions racket.

(He enters with a magazine bag at his side. He is holding aloft a handful of papers, spread fanwise, so we cannot see their title.)

Fight against War and Fascism. Fight NOW against that racket of the death manufacturers. The CCC camps are preparing men for war! Learn the truth!

(The First Newsboy belligerently steps forward to bar his way, but the Black Man and the Unemployed Man place themselves before the Second Newsboy as a shield. They hoist him to the top of a box stage center, and he gives them a stack of papers, which they distribute to the crowd. The First Newsboy slinks away. The crowd reads.)

MAN IN CROWD: *(as he reads)* Think of it. Eight and a half million men killed in the last war.

GIRL IN CROWD: *(as she reads)* Ten million will probably die in the next war.

ANOTHER MAN IN CROWD: *(as he reads)* Eight and a half million men killed for the profits of the munition-makers.

CROWD: *(taking up cry)* Eight and a half million men. Eight and a half million men. Killed – wounded – shell-shocked – millions more. Eight and a half million men murdered in war – murdered in war.

(The crowd is huddled in the center, near the Second Newsboy, with their backs to the audience, continuing this chant. The First Newsboy runs on the stage, shouting his slogans, and wheeling each person of the crowd around so they face the audience. He is faced by a solid wall of Fight (the paper of the American League against War and Fascism), displayed

to the audience. Above the wall, like a banner, the Second Newsboy waves his copy of Fight. The First Newsboy runs up and down the line, shouting his slogans, but gets no response.)

FIRST NEWSBOY: Japan insults the USA – Germany insults the USA – Soviet Russia insults the USA – William Randolph Hearst says – Marlene Dietrich insures her legs – Soviet Russia wants war with USA.

(He runs angrily off the stage, having gotten no response. The crowd is still chanting 'Eight and a half million men' and so on. The tableau is something like the following:)

Newsboy

Fight

Fight Fight Fight Fight Fight Fight Fight

Black Man

Unemployed Man

BLACK MAN: (exultantly) Get yourself a trumpet, buddy, a big red trumpet, and climb to the top of the Empire State building, and blare out the news . . . Now is the time to fight war and Fascism. (Comes center and speaks to audience.) Black men, white men, field men, shop men – it's time to fight war. It's time to fight Fascism . . . Get yourself a trumpet, buddy, a big red trumpet . . . and blare it out . . . time to fight war . . . time to fight Fascism . . .

CURTAIN

(Source: Karen Malpede Taylor, *People's Theatre in America*, Drama Book Specialists, New York, 1972.)

Waiting For Lefty (1935)

Introductory note

Waiting For Lefty was written some time during the latter months of 1934, whilst the playwright Clifford Odets was still a member of the Communist Party, and it was based on the New York taxi-drivers' strike of the previous February. Within the short space of one year the play had achieved considerable international recognition and had found its way into the repertoire of almost every Workers Theatre group in the USA and western Europe. Both *Waiting For Lefty*, and the strike on which it was based, were short, militant and politically effective.

At the time of writing, Clifford Odets was still an unknown actor with the Group Theatre, but he managed to convince several other Group members to assist with a performance of the play, in aid of the New Theatre League. Among the participants were Elia Kazan, Art Smith, Ruth Nelson, Phoebe Brand, Jules Garfield, Luther Adler and J. Edward Bromberg, all of whom were members of the cast of *Gold Eagle Guy* which was currently in performance on Broadway, and most of whom were members of the Group Theatre's highly influential Communist cell. The first performance of *Waiting For Lefty* took place on the evening of Sunday, 5 February, at the Civic Repertory Theatre, as part of a 'New Theatre Night' fund-raising event. Neither the organizers nor the cast were prepared for the phenomenal reception which greeted the play. As the final lines were being delivered from the stage the audience ran to the front and joined in with the ritual chants of 'Strike, Strike, Strike . . .' The publicity which surrounded the opening night served two purposes: it guaranteed the immediate playwriting future of Clifford Odets and pushed *Waiting For Lefty* to the forefront of the radical repertoire, where it remained for years to come.

By March 1935, the Group Theatre had included *Waiting For Lefty* in its own repertory as part of a double bill with Odets's anti-Nazi play *Till the Day I Die*. It ran on Broadway for 78 performances with Odets in his last acting role as the character of Dr Benjamin. Meanwhile, the reputation of *Waiting For Lefty* had spread throughout the United States. Almost every Workers