

MANUEL GOMEZ

A PROLETARIAN PLAY ON BROADWAY

A proletarian play is a play for workers, in the sense that workers constitute its natural audience. It is a play, moreover, which is written from the standpoint of the class interests of the workers. Plays like this are rare, particularly in America. When one of them appears which in addition to being splendidly conceived and earnestly written is given a production which makes it move powerfully in the rhythm of the class struggle, it is an event well worth noting.

Such an event has just occurred where one would be least inclined to look for it: in the course of the current theatrical season on Broadway. The play is *1931*—, by Paul and Claire Sifton. It was presented by the Group Theatre Company at the Mansfield Theatre as the second production of a series which began with Paul Green's *The House of Connelly*. The critics declared with some unanimity that it was a bad play, a depressing play, a play which presented "the public calamity of unemployment" in crude fashion, without showing a way out. It was easy to see that their reaction to it was primarily one of dismay, for several cried out that it was a libel against the unemployment relief agencies and one reviewer wrote in the *Brooklyn Times* that he doubted the advisability of showing any plays at all "about the depression" at a time like this. The prize goes to Percy Hammond of the *New York Herald-Tribune* who told his readers that he could not allow himself to be depressed by the unemployment situation as set forth in the play because on leaving the theatre he had seen crowds of warmly dressed men and women waiting to get into the movie palaces on Broadway. Unemployment? It simply doesn't exist! All things considered, it is perhaps not surprising that the play ran for only nine days, in spite of ovations at every performance. (The Group Theatre Company is understood to be considering resumption of the run at a later date if it can get some assurance of support. It is to be hoped that this will be the case.)

1931—is concerned with mass unemployment not as "a public calamity" but as a sharpening crisis in the struggle of the victimized working class. The story is told in fourteen scenes, with six interludes at the gates of a warehouse where a lengthening line of workers clamors for jobs and is confronted by the police. Adam, the central figure, is a husky young freight handler of the hundred per cent American type, blithe, independent, sure of himself and of his place in the industrial scheme. As the play opens he is shown with a group of fellow workers unloading packing cases at double quick. He gets into an altercation with a slave-herding foreman and is fired. What does he care? He knows he is a crackerjack at handling a truck and expects to get a new job for the asking. He meets his factory-girl sweetheart in the park at noon and they plan a wedding for the end of the week.

But Adam finds suddenly that jobs have become scarce. He tramps from agency to agency, tries the want ads, beats his way to other cities via the rods, all without result. "Baby," he says to the Girl, "I've been everywhere; there just aint no jobs!"

He still feels that he must get "the breaks" sooner or later—but the wedding is postponed indefinitely. Finally, when he is turned out of his rooming house because he can't pay the rent, he gives up seeing his girl entirely. He is "on the town" now—but "the town" does not take him to its arms, despite his lack of proletarian rebelliousness. Like other unemployed workers all around him, he is just a bum to be eyed nervously by the ever-watchful police, and to be shown off to tourists in bowery missions where he goes to get the munificent charity of a hunk of bread and a cup of coffee. His God also fails him when, ragged, hungry and sick, he prays desperately for "just one little job."

His lonely spirit is utterly broken now; he is ready to do anything for a job, even to licking the foreman's boots. At last, after months of fruitless wandering broken only by an occasional day's work like shovelling snow for one of the Unemployment Relief committees, he is offered a steady job in a cheap lunch room. Twelve dollars a week, and he jumps at it, although the man whose place he takes has been getting fourteen.

Through these long months of unemployment, the mass spirit of the workers has been crystallizing. A big demonstration,

organized by "the reds," is taking place out on the public square in front of the lunch room where Adam works. The crowd has grown so large that their shouts pierce through to those in the lunch room. A cop dashes in to telephone for the riot squad and machine guns. Adam's fat boss peers through the window and remarks that he never knew there were so many good-for-nothing bums before. They are hungry. He is frightened and locks the door. Adam has no time to look out of the window; he is hard at work sweeping the floor for twelve dollars a week. When he looks up from his work for a moment he notices that a girl who had come into the lunch room some time before for a cup of coffee is the sweetheart he has been separated from for so long. There are hasty words of greeting, while he continues his sweeping, with one eye on the boss. He certainly can't afford to be fired now! The Girl had lost her job long ago and, not knowing where to turn, had finally become a prostitute. That was getting "the breaks" all right! Well, his pay is twelve dollars a week, he whispers. They can get married and try living on that. She says "no, it's too late." And then she tells him that she has contracted a venereal disease.

This is the last straw for Adam. He has been beaten at every turn. There is no place for him in the world where he had thought he "belonged." "That makes it a hundred per cent perfect," he says slowly, flinging down his broom and taking off his apron while the boss looks on in frightened amazement. "Rock bottom, there aint any more down to go." He takes his hat and coat, kicks savagely at a chair. "I guess I'll see what those guys outside are after!" And he breaks open the door and joins the demonstrating crowd of workers in the street.

Confronted with a play such as this, it would be a mistake to let one's critical sense stand in the way of a fulsome recognition of the achievement that it represents. Yet there are obvious shortcomings, which spring for the most part from the inability of the authors to identify themselves with the working class of which they write. The play does not show any symptoms of constructive effort among the masses of the workers with which it deals, much less any element of conscious leadership. It gives them no real ideology, even in embryonic form. Except in the experiences of Adam, and the mass implications that may be drawn from them, there is no dynamic motivation than the generalized influence of events. While the method of the play is essentially sound in singling out a character like Adam and following his development, and while every stage of his development is convincingly portrayed, the failure of the authors to create an integrated background of developing working class tendencies prevents his personal story from blending properly into the whole complex of forces. The audience is incompletely prepared for the burst of working class solidarity at the end and the outlines of the movement which Adam has finally approached remain shadowy.

Among other faults that might be mentioned is a penchant for giving undue prominence among the workers to types that are not truly proletarian, as for instance a hobo pseudo-red philosopher, and the actor, musician, reporter and college boy in the snow scene. The play fumbles in its treatment of the bourgeoisie, inadvertently leaving some room for conceptions that the lot of the workers might be less harsh perhaps if the representatives of the bourgeoisie with whom they came into contact were not exceptional, hard-hearted individuals. There are also various technical inadequacies, some of which are by no means purely technical, such as the superfluous and confused final tableau.

All these things detract from the social import of the play and weaken it as drama. Yet, with all its faults, *1931*—succeeds in being a profoundly moving experience in the theatre. It touches universal chords of the class struggle which carry it far beyond the journalistic implications of its title. Nowhere in it is there the slightest concession to sentimentalism or to bourgeois prejudices. The isolation of the workers with regard to the framework of contemporary American society, the operation of that framework as a force against them, are vividly indicated. The exposure of this separate status of the workers in society is driven home with



by Tina Modotti

such persistence that when Adam, working wearily in the snow, gasps out to a fellow worker: "If you don't like this country why don't you get the hell out!," and then collapses from hunger and cold, the hollow mockery of those words for all workers rings eloquently through the theatre. This is a magnificent passage. It is one of the few separate incidents in *1931*—that rise to the level of the material,—but a few are not too little to ask of our playwrights.

The greatest merit of the play is that, however unsurely, it takes its audience outside of the theatre, setting up a chain of connection with the demonstrations of Communist-led workers in the streets. This aspect of it is heightened of course because it deals with an issue of special immediate vitality. Whether a worker has lost his job or is merely threatened with losing it, whether he can still pay his rent or is about to be evicted, whether he is familiar with Communist propaganda or has never attended a mass meeting, whether he is already beginning to be class-conscious or is still swayed by bourgeois ideology—he cannot follow the story of Adam through its successive stages without feeling somewhere at least a point of identity. And from that point on the play acts upon him as a mirror of his own future, and consequently as an influence making for the acceleration of his progress toward class consciousness.

As presented at the Mansfield Theatre, *1931*—gained much of its power from the acting and direction given it by the Group Theatre Company and from the superb settings by Mordecai Gorelik. These are valuable craftsmen when they turn their hands to a proletarian play, though their program statement of "What the Group Theatre Wants" is a pretty ambiguous muddle of phrases and their first presentation was of Paul Green's futile opus. It was a bold thing to do to produce *1931*—in a commercial playhouse of the Broadway district. The natural audience for this play is not to be found among "the theatregoing public" and the relationship that it calls for between audience and actors is not that of the commercial theatre. When we have a Workers' Theatre movement in America such a presentation as this will not be at the mercy of hostile bourgeois critics. It will be given again and again, as a valuable instrumentality of the class struggle. Meantime, we are looking forward to the next play by the Siftons with the hopes that they will have thrown off those limitations of outlook which prevent *1931*—from being a finer proletarian play than it is.

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