THE REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE OF THE
ROLE OF MOE AXLEROD IN CLIFFORD ODETS'
AWAKE AND SING

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

by

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In order to determine how the character of Moe Axlerod fits into the framework of *Awake and Sing* it was necessary for me to examine the central theme of the play: spiritual survival during the Great Depression. The script is concerned with the plight of the Bergers, a Jewish family living in the Bronx during the Depression. While the Bergers must struggle daily to survive in the city, Moe, a friend of the family, has achieved monetary success in the rackets. He is unfulfilled, however, for he has yet to succeed emotionally; he loves Hennie Berger, is unable to communicate this to her effectively, yet realizes that he must have her if his life is to be complete.

In the role of Moe, my pursuit of this objective became the spine of the character. It also served the playwright's intent of illustrating the behaviour and interaction of people caught in a prolonged stress situation attempting to make something better of their lives.

The next step in my analysis was to study the script listing any given circumstances affecting Moe. Given circumstances are those facts concerning a particular character's personality or situation which are offered either directly by the playwright or can be found within the text.
In his notes at the beginning of the play, O'Keeffe offers the following description of Moe:

"MOE AXLEROD lost a leg in the war. He seldom forgets that fact. He has killed two men in extra-marital activity. He is mordant, bitter. Life has taught him a disbelief in everything, but he will fight his way through. He seldom shows his feelings: fights against his own sensitivity. He has been everywhere and seen everything. All he wants is HENNIE. He is very proud. He scorns the inability in others to make their way in life, but he likes people for whatever good qualities they possess. His passionate outbursts come from a strong but contained emotional mechanism."

The following is a list of adjectives and characteristics about Moe and excerpts from the script to support them.

He must be old enough to have fought in World War I, yet young enough to be attractive to Hennie and remain within my age range as an actor. I decided he was thirty six.

Mordant, bitter........"MOE AXLEROD lost a leg in the war. He seldom forgets that fact. He is mordant, bitter." (O'Keeffe's note)

Had a hard life........"MOE. Was my life so happy? Chris', my old man was a bum. I supported the whole damn family--five kids and Mom. When they grew up they beat it the hell away like rabbits. Mom died. I went to war and got clapped
down like a bedbug; woke up in a room without a leg." (Act III)

 Wants Hennie............"All he wants is HENNIE." (Odets' note)

 "HENNIE. What do you want, Moe, what do you want?
 MOE. You!
 HENNIE. You'll be sorry you ever started-- MOE. You! (Act II)

 Cynical.................."Life has taught him a disbelief in every-
 thing,..." (Odets' note)

 "MOE. That's why they had the big war-- to
 make a new world-- safe for democracy. Sure
 every big general laying up in a Paris hotel
 with a half dozen broads pinned on his mous-
 tache. Democracy-- I learned a lesson."
 (Act I)

 "MOE. It's all a racket-- from horse racing
 on down. Marriage, politics, big business--
 everybody plays cops and robbers." (Act II,
 scene I)

 Tough......................"...but he will fight his way through (life)"
 (Odets' note)

 "MOE. You get what-it-takes. Then they don't
 catch you with your pants down." (Act II,
 scene II)

 "MOE. Make a break or spend the rest of your
 life in a coffin."
"MOE. Nobody knows, but you do it and you find out. When your scared the answer's zero."

(Act III)

Violent."He has killed two men in extra-marital activity." (Odets' note)

"HENNIE. I'll smack your face in a minute.

MOE. You do and I'll break your arm...."

(Act II, scene I)

"MORTY. Give me the note.

MOE. I'll give you the head off your shoulders."

(Act III)

Sensitive."...fights against his own sensitivity." (Odets' note)

"MOE. Give'em five. They got you pasted on the wall like a picture, Jake." (After Jake has been humiliated by Morty; Act II, scene I)

"MOE. (Deeply moved). Slipped? (On hearing the suggestion that Jake's fall from the roof might have been accidental; Act II, scene I)"

"MOE. (starts for the door; stops). You told Sam you love him....

HENNIE. If I'm sore on life, why take it out on him?" (Act III)

Quick-witted, kidder..."MOE. Hello, girls, how's your whiskers?

(to Ralph) All dolled up. What's it, the weekly visit to the cat house?" (Act I)
"...A guy in France had the right idea--dropped his wife into a bathtub fulla acid. (whistles) Ssss, down the pipe! Pffft--not even a corset button left!" (Act I)
"MORTY. Times'll change.
MOE. The only thing'll change is my underwear."

"MYRON. I'll tell you the way I see it. The country needs a great man now--a regular Teddy Roosevelt.
MOE. What this country needs is a good five-cent earthquake."

"MORTY. (scoffingly). Who's Marx?
MOE. An outfielder for the Yanks." (Act II, scene 1)

Proud.................."He is very proud." (Odets' note)

"MOE. Hennie went with, huh? She wants to see me squirm, only I don't squirm for dames."

"MOE. I need a wife like I need a hole in the head. What's to know about women, I know. Even if I ask her, she won't do it! A guy with one leg--it gives her the heebie-jeebies. I know what she's looking for. An arrow-collar guy, a hero, but with a wad of jack. Only the two don't go together. Me, I got what it takes......plenty, and more where it comes from...."

"MOE. She wantsa see me crawl--my head on a
plate, she wants! A snowball in hell's got a better chance." (Act I)
"HENNIE. Use a crutch, Axlerod. Give the stump a rest.
MOE. Mind your business, Feinschreiber.
BEHSSIE. It's a sensible idea.
MOE. Who asked you?
BEHSSIE. Look, he's ashamed.
MOE. So's your aunt Fannie." (Act II, scene I)

Superior.........."He scorns the inability in others to make their way in life,..." (Odets' note)
"JACOB. What's new in the paper, Moe?
MOE. Still jumping off the high buildings like flies-- the big shots lost all their coconuts. Pfft!
JACOB. Suicide?
MOE. Plenty can't take it-- good in the break, but they can't take the whip in the stretch."
"MOE. That your husband?
HENNIE. Don't you know?
MOE. Maybe he's a nurse you hired for the kid--it looks it-- how he tends it. A guy comes howlin' to your old lady every time you look cross-eyed. Does he sleep with you?"
"MOE. ....Christ, you coulda had a guy with some guts instead of a cluck stands around
boiling baby nipples.

HENNIE. Meaning you?

MOE. Meaning me, sweetheart."

"MOE. Don't be a bush-leaguer all your life." (to Ralph)

"MOE. There's two kinds in life—the men that's sure of themselves and the ones who ain't." (Act II, scene I)

"MYRON. Now here's a little thing the drugist gave me. (Reads) 'The Marvel cosmetic girl of Hollywood is going on the air. Give this charming little radio singer a name and win five thousand dollars. If you send—'

MOE. Your old man still believes in Santy Claus." (to Ralph; Act II, scene II)

Gambler and hustler..."MOE. (Shaking the cards) The first time I had my hands on a pack in two days. Lemme shake these cards up. I'll make'em talk."

"MOE. I got a present for our boyfriend, Myron. He'll drop dead when I tell him his gentle horse galloped in fifteen to one. He'll die." (to Jake--later he tells Myron,)

"MOE. Paid twelve and a half to one."

"BESSIE. If Moe said a sure thing, you couldn't bet a few dollars instead of fifty cents?"

(Act I)

"MOE. A quarter you're lousy. (Sam exits.)
"Gimme a buck, I'll run it up to ten." (to Sam
and then to Hennie; Act III)

Short-tempered ......... "His passionate outbursts......" (Odet's note)

"MOE. And I don’t want no one using my razor,
either. Get it straight. I'm not buying ten
blades a week for the Berger family. (Furious,
he limps out.) (Act II, scene II)

Strong-willed ......... "MYRON. Moe said you had a date with him for
tonight.

BESSIE. Axlerod?

HENNIE. I told him no, but he don’t believe it."

(Act I)

"MORTY. (Starting for Moe after a horrified
silence.) Let me see this note.....

BESSIE. Don’t touch it, Morty!

MOE. Not if you crawled." (Moe’s bluff to check
Morty’s scheme; Act III)

"HENNIE. Leave the baby?

MOE. Yeah!

HENNIE. I can’t....

MOE. You can!

HENNIE. No....

MOE. But your not sure!"

"MOE. Mom can mind the kid, she’ll go on for-
ever, Mom. We’ll send money back, and Easter
eggs.

RALPH. I’ll be here.
MOE. Get your coat... get it!
HENNIE. Moel
MOE. I know, but get your coat and hat and kiss the house goodbye." (Act III)

Closed..............."He seldom shows his feelings: ....
.... contained emotional mechanism." (Odets note)

MOE (Hiding his feelings). Here-- I bought you some halavah." (to Jake upon hearing that Hennie has stood him up; Act I)

"HENNIE. I get it-- your jealous. You can't get me.
MOE. Don't make me laugh.
HENNIE. Kid Jailbird's been trying to make me for years. You'd give your other leg. I'm hooked? Maybe-- but your in the same boat.
only it's worse for you, I don't give a damn no more, but you got a yen makes you--
MOE. Don't make me laugh."

"MOE (as if saying 'I love you'). Listen, lousy.
HENNIE. Go on, do something!
MOE. Listen--
HENNIE. You're so damn tough!
MOE. You like me." (Act II, scene I)

Worldly..............."He has been everywhere and seen everything."

(Odets' note)
"MOE. Like a battle ship she's got it. Not like other dames-- above' em and they lay. Not her...."

"MOE. ....What's to know about women, I know." (Act I)

"MORTY. Shame on you, Pop. Everybody knows war is necessary.

MOE. Don't make me laugh. Ask me-- the first time you pick up a dead one in the trench-- then maybe you'll know war ain't so damn necessary." (Act II, scene I)

"MOE. Ever see oranges grow? I know a certain place-- one summer I laid under a tree and let them fall right in my mouth." (Act I)

His leg fits poorly....."BESSIE. ....Your leg bothers you bad?

MOE. It's okay, sweetheart.

BESSIE (to Morty). It hurts him every time it's cold out...."

He dislikes Morty......."MORTY (to Moe). I hear the bootleggers still do business, Moe.

MOE. Wake up! I kissed bootleggin' bye-bye two years back.

MORTY. For a fact? What kind of racket is it now?

MOE. If I told you, you'd know something."

"MOE. If you don't like it, then go buy yourself a fife and drum-- and go fight your
own war." (to Morty, who has just protested the allegation that he, as a capitalist, provokes and supports war; Act II, scene I)

He likes Ralph........"RALPH. Why give me the needles all the time?
What'd I ever do to you?

MOE. Nothing. You're a nice kid. But grow up!" (Moe encouraging Ralph to take charge of his life; Act II, scene I)

"MOE. Wait a minute! (Crosses over.) They're trying to rock you-- a freeze-out.

RALPH. Who?

MOE. That bunch in there stuffin' their gut with hot pastrami. Morty in particular. Jake left the insurance-- three thousand dollars-- for you."

"MOE. I'll back you up. You're dead on your feet. Grap a sleep for yourself." (Moe exposing Morty's scheme to Ralph and offering his aid in a counter-plan; Act III)

Has had intercourse with Hennie once........"HENNIE. Think you're pretty good?

MOE. You'd know if I slept with you again."

(Act II, scene II)

"HENNIE. I'm a pushover.

MOE. I say lotsa things. You don't know me.

HENNIE. I know you-- when you knock'em down, you're done."
"MOE. You won't forget me to your dyin' day--
I was the first guy. Part of your insides,
you won't forget. I wrote my name on you--
indelible ink!
HENNIE. One thing I won't forget-- how you
left me crying on the bed like I was two for a
cent!"

"HENNIE. How you left the next week?" (I made
the choice that Moe left because he was humili-
ated by the necessity of removing his wooden
leg in order to make love to a girl he truly
cared for and was ashamed to admit it; Act III)

Hennie's baby is not
his.................If it were his, she would have told him so, if
not at the prospect of being trapped into
marrying Sam Feinschreiber, then most certainly
when Moe asks her to leave the child behind
and run off with him.

He moves into the
Berger household during
the one year interim
between Acts I and II...In Act II, scene I Bessie refers to Moe as

"....our star boarder." and mentions his two
spare legs in the closet. Moe also accuses
the family of using his razor blades. I decided
that Moe moved out of his old apartment not
because he had difficulty making the rent,
but rather to keep an eye on Hennie, who had
been obviously unhappy with Sam. It is also
logical to assume that since Myron is only
working "...three days a week now." and the
Bergers were having difficulty paying their
rent when he was working five, Moe felt he
could help them out by paying rent as a boarder.

In order to present the audience with a complete character-
ization that character must have a history which extends beyond the
chronological confines of the action of the script.

In formulating Moe's history, I dealt with only those specifics
of his background which I felt were relative to what the audience must
finally see. His history is as follows:

Born.................................1900
Begins working to support family.............1906
Until mother's death..........................1916
Lies about age, goes to war....................1916
Loses leg, war ends------------------------1918
Undergoes physical rehabilitation..........1918
Seeks legitimate employment, but refused
due to handicap. Meets Bessie Berger before
she is married to Myron.....................1919-20
Enters rackets.........................1921
Successful small-time racketeer..............1925
Travels abroad periodically...............1925-30
Has affair with Hennie.....................1934
Moves in with Bergers......................1936

After having chosen a super-objective for Moe (his desire
for emotional fulfillment with Hennie) it was necessary to select
minor objectives for each of his scenes which would support the super-objective. I then chose separate "moments" in the text which I could play, one after another, in pursuit of my minor objective for a particular scene.

When Moe first appears in Act I he intends to take out Hennie. I decided that the minor objective for this scene was simply for Moe to be with Hennie for the evening. This compliments the super-objective of trying to win her over.

The first playable moment in pursuit of "to be with Hennie" was to be charming and witty. This moment begins at Moe's entrance and continues until he discovers that Hennie has stood him up. Since Moe is proud, the next logical moment is for him to conceal his feelings at this discovery. Then he decides to wait for her return, but conceals his waiting with the excuse of a pinochle game with Jake. After Hennie, Bessie and Myron return early from the movie due to Hennie's nausea, Bessie begins to criticise her and Moe's next moment becomes defending Hennie. When accused of coming over to see Hennie, the moment changes to hiding behind an excuse of dropping in to give Myron his winnings from the racing bet, which Moe takes advantage of in the following moment of boasting, for Hennie's benefit, of his prowess as a gambler before he exits. This is the same working procedure I used in analyzing all of Moe's scenes--deciding on a minor objective subordinant to the super-objective and then dividing the scene into playable moments.

During the rehearsal period there occurred a few major problems. I had to decide whether to keep my leg rigid voluntarily to give the impression of it being false, or to use a brace. I used a brace
borrowed from the physical therapy clinic on campus. The brace enabled me to forget about the mechanics of my "wooden" leg and to place my concentration elsewhere. I did have to adjust to the lack of mobility due to the loss of my knee while wearing the brace. One night in rehearsal I discovered that if I was even slightly off balance in a certain direction, I would topple like a tree smashing furniture and anything else in my path before I was horizontal.

I was concerned with how far I should take the Bronx dialect and thought I had solved the problem when I asked an observer of one particular rehearsal if she thought it was too heavy. She said she wasn't aware that I had been using a dialect. Annoyed by this, I went onstage to play the scene where Moe returns after Bessie has smashed all of Jakes records, and I used a heavy dialect to work off some steam. I found it to be a tremendous help in giving me a handle on the character, a springboard out of myself. It also unlocked Moe's sense of humor for me, which had been a problem. Things began to gel from that point on.

I had difficulty in the first big scene with Hennie in Act II. It was too heavy and one-level. After latching on to Moe's sense of humor and a work-through of the scene with Angela D'Ambrosia (Studio Acting Instructor) that scene came together.

Working under Dr. Roy Bowen's directorship was a pleasure. His style of organic directing and grasp of the acting process allowed me the freedom to explore within the limitations imposed by the script. I did not feel the need to censor my work, for I felt that I could trust his eye. His use of improvisation to define the specifics of crucial events which occur during lapses of time not included in the
play were well conceived and beneficial. He is not afraid to let the actor work, while he quietly steers the production in a logical and relaxed manner towards his desired result. He is not intimidated by the actors' creative input and therefore encourages a co-creative working relationship.

When the show finally went into performance I had some reservations as to how our college audiences would receive a "30's" play. I was afraid that they would be alienated by the slang of that era and unable to relate to the Depression. They would not empathize with the characters and the production would fall on its nose.

The aspects of the play which I feared might alienate the audience served, rather, to lend a vivid, specific flavor to the show, distinctly thirty's. This flavor became one of the more popular aspects. It helped transport the audience into an era where there were characters in whose lives they could become involved.

I felt relaxed during the run, confident in the work done in rehearsal, knowing exactly how Moe fit into the story, what he wanted in each scene, and what I was trying to do, as actor, from moment to moment.

Generally, I felt my concentration was full; the proscenium staging was a definite plus--the physical separation of actors from audience was right for this show. One of the few times I felt my concentration drifting to the wrong side of the proscenium was when the audience found my use of the wooden leg funny, this, however, was not detrimental.

The following are two critical reviews which appeared in the two major Columbus newspapers, reproduced in their entirety.
"'Awake and Sing' Worthy of Praise
by Cynthia Robins
of the Dispatch Staff

Perhaps no other piece of drama to emerge from the
fertile years of the Group Theatre is so evocative of the
period as is Clifford Odets' 'Awake and Sing'.

Within the framework of a simple, Americanized ver-
sion of the Moskow Art theatre form, i.e. careful attention
to character development and ensemble acting, Odets skewered
an era in a few short acts.

OHIO STATE'S revival of the drama is worthy of praise
-- not only from the standpoint of Roy Bowen's economical
and precise direction but also from the quality of the
ensemble. He has schooled his players well. They work
as a unified whole with the precision of a Swiss movement.

No player in 'Awake and Sing' is unimportant. Thus,
no actor in Bowen's crew has a wasted moment on stage.
Action is carefully timed and motivated.

While the literature of the play seems rather dated
and odd, the actors are comfortable with it. Lines that
grew out in the mid-'40's work well in what can now be
considered a 'period' play. But, like most period works,
'Awake' has a deeper meaning than just a chronical of a
hard time in American history.

'Awake and Sing' is a saga of desperation and depre-
vation-- not monetary-- (Jewish families had enough to
eat even in the hardest times) but spiritual.
MOTHER BESSIE (played with compelling accuracy by Lynn Roth) dreams great things for her children. She wants them to fly, yet she snare them in gossamer traps of hidden guilt. Her husband, Myron (Anthony C. Dobrowolski) clings to his dreams of easy money and syphons his strength from Bessie.

It is grandfather Jake, however, with his impotent ravings about a new Marxist dawn that sparks the hope of the family and son Ralph, (James Macedo in a strong, masculine, yet vulnerable performance) to 'awake and sing.' Jake knows that to get what you want, you must give what you have—and he does.

Dr. Bowen's cast, to the very last person is superb. From Lynn Roth can be expected an intense and coiled performance. From Al Converse, however, comes an interpretation of Jake that is not 'Jewish', but right.

JAKE IS A railler against the wind, but he is an old Jewish man. And old Jewish men have built in shoulder shrugs in their voice. Converse chose to play it differently, more Gentile, perhaps, and it is an irritant rather than a plus for the character.

James Knobeloch is amazing as Joe Axlerod, a hustler and a goniff of the first order. The role fits him as if it were personally tailored.

Suzanne Shaner is exquisite to look at in the '30's clothes and projects a petulance and consistency of character that makes her performance a standout."

(Reproduced from the Columbus Dispatch, 11/13/75)
"Odets' 'Awake and Sing' brilliantly revived
By Gene Garell
Citizen-Journal Staff Critic

What we have in Roy Bowen's period-perfect revival of Clifford Odets' 'Awake and Sing' is a model of ensemble acting—-a stage 'family' portraying the real, very human characters of a Jewish family in one of the most significant plays of the Thirties.

Bravoes to director Bowen and a marvelously skilled cast for achieving a memorable, touching, meaningful stage triumph. There is just the right touch of everything to make this production pulsate with quiet tension and outbursts of rage, and to make us care deeply about the characters even today.

'AWAKE AND SING continues at Thurber Theatre on the Ohio State University campus through November 22. To miss it would be to miss the theatrical highlight of the season, and one of the most impressive performances in a number of years.

This is a production of which the Group Theatre (which first produced Odets' play in 1935) might have approved. It provides an extremely rewarding experience, a classic only too well revisited and revitalized by experts.

'AWAKE AND SING' is Odets' gently comic and occasionally moving portrait of a Jewish family in the midst of the Great Depression (what was so great about it?) of the 1930's -- living, loving, fighting, compromising, surviving.
The Bergers share an apartment in the Bronx. This is a family divided against itself, struggling to survive personal as well as financial crises.

THE YOUNG son, Ralph (sensitively played-- but with flashes of lightening-- by James Macedo), is pulled in three directions. He's in love with a girl whom he wants to marry.

His grandfather (another memorable performance by Al Converse), who plays Caruso records and reads revolutionary material, urges him to revolt, to do his part in cutting short the unhappiness in the world, rather than marry and ignore it.

HIS MOTHER (Lynne Roth should get more sympathy from the role) violently opposes the marriage because the girl is poor-- or at least that's the reason she gives. Bessie Berger encourages him to accept the world as it is and to be content in the struggle to make ends meet.

Finally, Ralph accepts the grandfather's philosophy-- after the old man's tragic death-- and decides to 'awake and sing.'

ODETS' FAMILY has been compassionately drawn. The play is about real people with whom we can identify. In addition to the mother, the grandfather, and Ralph, there are Ralph's sister (Suzanne Shaner has the Thirties acting style down pat. She is superb)-- a proud, beautiful girl forced into an unhappy marriage in order that her expected child may have a real father; Uncle Morty (Charles LaBorde
is fine in the role), a wealthy, shallow, selfish businessman; and Ralph's father, a touching failure, played with quiet dignity by Anthony C. Dobrowolski.

Then there is Moe Axelrod (James Knobeloch is brilliant in the part), a cynical 'cripple' with a short fuse. Knobeloch is truly an extraordinary talent.

FINALLY WE come to pitiful Sam Feinschreiber, who marries Hennie despite the fact that he is not loved in return. It's one of those small-but-mighty roles, and Daniel Gerstein gets all there is to be had out of it.

Quite flatteringly, the name Chekov has been mentioned in connection with 'Awake and Sing:' So has that of playwright Sean O'Casey. whose characters, like those in 'Awake and Sing,' move on somewhat the same level.

IT IS a level where people survive in an up-and-down world, somewhere between laughter and tears, dealing with tragedy and confusion and occasional happiness with the only weapon at their command— a kind of cock-eyed courage.

The people in 'Awake and Sing are as large as life, but seldom LARGER than life. They are merely there, and we accept them for what they are-- or are not.

As usual, production values are extremely high, and here I include the setting, lighting, sound, and costumes.

'Awake and Sing' will awaken you to the gorgeous possibilities of the theatre. I am happy to sing it's praises."

(Reproduced from the Columbus Citizen-Journal, 11/13/75)
Plate 1 (above)

"Sure, five dollars a week for expenses and the rest into the house. I can't even save for shoe laces."

(Ralph; Act I)

Plate 2 (right)

"...All dolled up. What's it? The weekly visit to the cat house?"

(Moe; Act I)
Plate 3 (above)

"...Ralphie, bring up two bottles seltzer from Weiss."
(Bessie; Act II)

Plate 4 (below)

"Use a crutch, Axlerod. Give the stump a rest."
(Hennie; Act II)
"...Hey-- here's a dame in the paper strangled her hubby with wire...."  
(Moe; Act II)

Plate 6 (below)

"...You coulda had a guy with some guts-- instead of a cluck stands around boilin' baby nipples."  
(Moe; Act II)
Plate 7 (right)

"...Get independant. Get what-it-takes and be your- self. Do what you like."
(Moe; Act II)

Plate 8 (below)

"...In this boy's life, a Red Sea will happen again, I see it."
(Jake; Act II)
Plate 9 (above)
The dinner table, end of Act II, scene I. Moe regards Hennie.

Plate 10 (below)
"Lissen. In two shakes of a lamb's tail, we'll start a real fight and then nobody won't like nobody...." (Morty; Act III)
Plate 11 (above)

"Please go home, Sam. I'll sleep here...."

(Hennie; Act III)

Plate 12 (below)

Moe halts Hennie's retreat in his attempt to lure her away from an unhappy life.

(Act III)
A tape of the performance is available in the Department of Theatre's archives.