

# **The American Century Theater Audience Guide (Excerpts)**

## **The Country Girl**

### **The Playwright: Clifford Odets (1906-1963) (Excerpt)**

By Jack Marshall

. . . Unquestionably, no writer ever approached such prominence having given so little warning based on the beginning of his career. Before 1935, Odets had been a socialist-revolutionary actor of no distinction whose best move was choosing his companions well. He had joined with the politically like-minded Cheryl Crawford, Lee Strasberg, and Harold Clurman in 1931 to split off from the junior acting company of the moderate Theatre Guild, and form the Group Theatre, which was to transform the American stage. Thus Odets became a co-founder of one of the bravest and most significant theater organizations in American theater history.

But his contribution to the Group didn't end there, for he would become literally its clearest voice. He had begun writing plays that would advance the company's objective of brewing an American brand of the Stanislavski acting principles, applied to ensemble, rather than individual, performing. . . .

1935, however, changed everything, because everything was changing. The Great Depression was deeper than ever, but structural changes in the American economy and perhaps the world were on the horizon. . . . The theater world in New York functioned like a big filter that captured the most flamboyant, ambitious, brilliant, and leftist American artists, and the New Theater League was born, a cooperative enterprise by many socialist-leaning organizations, including the Group Theatre.

The League offered a one-act play competition with revolutionary politics as its theme. Odets locked himself in his room for three days and walked out of it with *Waiting for Lefty*, a furious and theatrical account of a taxi cab strike.

This play wasn't depressing, it was exhilarating. It not only won the prize, it won the confidence of Odets's Group colleagues. . . . The Group brought *Waiting for Lefty* to Broadway, where it was popular even with audiences who didn't share its politics. Using flashbacks and the explosive dialogue that remained Odets's trademark for thirty years, it was just plain entertaining theater. . . . Odets was the new Eugene O'Neill. Well, O'Neill he wasn't, but he was the new Clifford Odets, and that was pretty good too. . . .

In 1935, he thought he had the formula down pat, and a guaranteed cheering section. This is why the failure of his next play, *Paradise Lost*, bewildered and upset him. . . . The failure of *Paradise Lost* sent Odets to Hollywood and the movies, though his first trip there didn't last long. He was back on Broadway with *Golden Boy* in 1937, and it was his biggest hit, the Group Theatre's biggest hit, and the play that guaranteed that even if his star fell completely (and it did) Clifford Odets would never be completely forgotten. . . .

During the run of *Golden Boy* the playwright fell in love with the beautiful and emotional actress who portrayed the play's doomed heroine, Laura. It was Frances Farmer, and when Odets ended their affair out of shame and regret (he was married at the time), she began her long, epic downward spiral into depression, alcoholism, self-destruction, and madness. What effect this had on Odets can only be speculated upon, but he was, unlike many artists, a kind and sensitive man. . . . *Golden Boy* was the peak from which Odets began his own fall from grace. . . . His flops also helped finish off the Group Theatre, although there were many other factors involved in its demise. . . . A kinder, gentler Clifford debuted in 1950 with *The Country Girl*, a sensitive examination of love, backstage show business, and the ravages of alcoholism, all topics he knew well. It was one of his biggest successes and the last that did him justice.

... Looking over Odets work now, his politics are less remarkable than his characters. As John Gassner and Bernard Dukore wrote in their assessment of the playwright:

*His characters assert themselves regardless of argument, and we wonder how it is they possess so much individuality while their author insists that they are the product of social pressures. Poor or rich, successes or failures, Odets characters are irrepressible because they were born alive in their author's memory and imagination.*

## **From Play to Film: The Transformation of *The Country Girl***

—*Jack Marshall*

Clifford Odets was a master of character, and character in drama is inevitably a hybrid between what the playwright creates and what the actor brings to the role. Casting changes everything, and this was especially true when *The Country Girl* travelled from Broadway to Hollywood.

The script was adapted to the screen by someone other than the playwright, despite Odets's extensive experience as a screenwriter—George Seaton, who also took over Odets's Broadway role as director. Seaton liked to direct his own screenplays, and he was well regarded in 1955, an Academy Award-winner some years earlier for *Miracle on 34th Street*.

He could not have cast the key roles of the alcoholic actor, his wife, and the director more distinctively, and, in more marked contrast to the play, which had been cast according to Odets's own vision of the characters. Broadway's creators of Frank Elgin, Georgie Elgin, and Bernie Dodd were pure stage actors in 1950, hardly known to the public outside of New York, though Paul Kelly, who played Frank, would have been a familiar face from his character work in films in the '30s. Their replacements—despite the critical success of the play, none of the Broadway cast was given consideration for the movie—were movie stars in every way. None of them had much stage experience, and one of them wasn't even considered a dramatic actor at all.

Yet unlike so many Hollywood adaptations that foundered on misbegotten casting—Barbra Streisand replacing Carol Channing in *Hello, Dolly!*; Jerry Lewis replacing Cyril Ritchard in *Visit to a Small Planet*—it worked. *The Country Girl*'s trio of superstars turned in performances worthy of their reputations, making the movie a success and, unfortunately, forever overshadowing the Broadway version.

Comparing the actors cast in the play and the film tells us much about the differences between the stage and the screen in the 1950s.

### ***Frank Elgin on Broadway: Paul Kelly (1899–1956)***

His father's saloon was located very close to the Vitagraph Studios in New York, and the studio used to borrowed furniture from the saloon for their

sets. As partial repayment (at the request of his mother), the studio would use Paul for some of their one-reel silents. He eventually became the resident kid actor at the studio from 1911 on.

Kelly moved into teen and young adult roles while alternating between theater and movie assignments. His Broadway shows included the highly popular *Penrod* starring Helen Hayes in 1918; in movies, he had a key role as Anne's boyfriend in the silent classic *Anne of Green Gables* (1919). He continued his dual track career on stage and screen through the 1920s.

But Kelly found himself involved in a love triangle with a married (and abused) woman, actress Dorothy Mackaye, and when her husband, Ziegfeld Follies song-and-dance man Ray Raymond, found out, the two men had a violent fight that ended with Raymond's death of a brain hemorrhage, allegedly from the beating applied by Paul Kelly's fists. Kelly was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to one to ten years in prison; he was paroled in August of 1929 for "good behavior" after serving 25 months.

Broadway didn't seem to care and began using him the minute the cell door shut behind him. He was in five shows in two years, and, although none were hits, he was firmly establishing himself once again. Hollywood sought him too, though mostly in "B" movie supporting roles. Kelly appeared in nearly thirty movies over the next fifteen years.

He made movies for the money, but he considered himself a stage actor first and so did the theater community. During the 1947–1948 season, Kelly won a Tony Award (tying with Henry Fonda and Basil Rathbone) for his performance in *Command Decision*. Odets knew his work well and cast him in the part of Frank Elgin.

Kelly wasn't surprised to lose the role to Bing Crosby when it was filmed in 1955; he had lost his leading role in *Command Decision* to Clark Gable a few years before. He was a star on Broadway, but in Hollywood he was just one of those guys you always see but whose name you can never recall. Kelly went on to play the same kind of anonymous supporting roles in various TV shows until November 6, 1956, when he died of a heart attack.

Can you picture his face? I can't.

***Frank Elgin in the movie: Bing Crosby (1903–1977)***

The greatest similarity between Paul Kelly and Bing Crosby is that both spent time in jail: in Bing's case, he was imprisoned a few months for an accident while he was driving drunk. Harry Lillis Crosby, otherwise, was one of the top ten superstars in American entertainment history, with epic success in films, television, radio, and recordings over a career that was still going strong when he dropped dead on a Spanish golf course, having completed a triumphant run at the London Palladium.

None of that success, including an Academy Award for *Going My Way* and more #1 records than either the Beatles or Elvis, came on the dramatic stage, however, and when he was cast in the very serious role of Frank Elgin, Crosby's range in screen drama had never ventured far beyond the mild traumas of facing off against Barry Fitzgerald over the best way to run an inner-city parish. So it was something of a surprise to everyone when film critic Bosley Crowther's review of *The Country Girl* for the *New York Times* began:

*Clifford Odets' poignant drama of a broken-down actor, his loyal wife and a misunderstanding stage director in The Country Girl has been put on the screen with solid impact—and with Bing Crosby in the actor role. This latter piece of offbeat casting is the most striking thing about the film. . . . For, with all the uncompromising candor of George Seaton's adaptation of the play and with all the intense, perceptive acting of Grace Kelly and William Holden in the other roles, it is truly Mr. Crosby's appearance and performance as the has-been thespian who fights and is helped back to stardom that hits the audience right between the eyes. . . . Although the heroic character is inevitably the wife, who fights for her weak and sodden husband with the last store of energy in her weary frame, it is he—the degraded husband—who is the focus of attention here. And the force and credibility of the drama depends upon how he is played. That is why it is Mr. Crosby who merits particular praise, for he not only has essayed the character but also performs it with unsuspected power. . . . he plays the broken actor frankly and honestly, goes down to the depths of degradation without a bat of his bleary eyes, and then brings the poor guy back to triumph in a chest-thumping musical show with a maximum of painful resolution and sheer credibility. There is no doubt that Mr. Crosby deserves all the kudos he will get.*

Crosby brought some personal issues to the part to be sure. His late wife, Dixie, was an alcoholic, and Crosby was wary of drink himself after his jailing for drunk driving. Nonetheless, the part was a huge gamble for the singer, who was a perfectionist and not accustomed to failing in anything he attempted. Director George Seaton had to coax Crosby into playing the role, and cope with periodic bouts of cold feet. He wrote:

*Come the first day of shooting and at nine-thirty, there was no Crosby; ten o'clock, no Crosby; ten thirty, and still no Crosby. At eleven, I had a call from Wally Westmore—who was head of the make-up department—and he said, 'You'd better come up here, I think you've got big trouble on your hands!'*

When Seaton arrived he found that Crosby was wearing an old toupee that he had worn nearly twenty years before.

*When I walked in, there sat Bing with his College Humor [1933] wig on! The wavy one he'd worn in all those early films, and he was very defiant. He said, 'I've just decided that this is what I'm going to wear in this picture.'*

*He said, 'Well, I've got my audience to think of. I don't want to look like an old man on the screen.' I said, 'You won't—you'll look your age—but there's nothing wrong with that, you're playing a character part' . . . . I said, 'Bing, let's be honest, you're frightened' and he almost started to cry and said, 'I can't do it.' I said, 'Please have faith in me, I'm frightened too, so let's be frightened together.' We threw our arms around each other and walked on to the set and from then on there was no problem at all.*

In his own December 1954 *New York Times* article, “Bing Scans His Elgin,” Crosby admitted that he was hesitant to play someone so different from his established screen persona:

*I suppose it's pretty apparent to anyone who goes to the movies much that through a career of sixty-odd pictures I have played one character—Bing Crosby. The background changed some, but not very much. The songs were other songs and the people I worked with generally were different people, but I played the same fellow. Really, there seemed to be no great reason to do otherwise. But when*

*[Producer] Bill Perlberg and George Seaton came to me with The Country Girl proposal, I knew the old routine wasn't going to do. Frank Elgin, my part, was a wholly different guy, and I must say I had some serious qualms about my ability to play the role accurately. It was surely something that I had never tried to do before. In fact, I told Seaton two or three times I didn't think I could cut it. I even suggested on several occasions some fellows I thought would be infinitely better choices, but George was firm. I think really he just wanted to see if I had guts enough to try. He told me if I carried it off I'd have done something of which I could really be proud.*

Bing had reason to be proud. The performance got him another Academy Award nomination (he lost to tough competition: Marlon Brando's epic Stanley ("Stella!!!") Kowalski) and opened up the possibility of other dramatic roles. If his amazing voice had ever waned, he had something else to fall back on.

But Bing Crosby could always croon "White Christmas" to the very end.

## **Clifford Odets Quotations**

"Life shouldn't be printed on dollar bills."

"We cancel our experience. This is an American habit."

"There are two kinds of marriages—where the husband quotes the wife and where the wife quotes the husband."

"One night some short weeks ago, for the first time in her not always happy life, Marilyn Monroe's soul sat down alone to a quiet supper from which it did not rise. . . . If they tell you that she died of sleeping pills you must know that she died of a wasting grief, of a slow bleeding at the soul."

“I will reveal America to itself by revealing myself to myself.”

“What this country needs is a good five-cent earthquake!”

“Sex . . . . the poor man's polo!”

“No one talks about the depression of the modern man’s spirit.”

—Lucas Pike, *Paradise Lost*

“This is why I tell you, DO! Do what is in your heart and you carry in yourself a revolution!”

—*Awake and Sing!*