

Odets Spans an Era

■ The L.A. Repertory Company's revival of 'Rocket to the Moon' makes the drama as relevant as it was in 1938.

By RAY LOYND
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Clifford Odets' Depression-era drama about loneliness and hope, "Rocket to the Moon," may be a curiosity 54 years after its premiere, but the L.A. Repertory Company in Studio City revives it with a vitality you would not expect.

Sure, that first act seems slow and, yes, those two intermissions are a drag, and, OK, the play does plod a bit. But wow, that 1930s Broadway boy wonder Odets could sure write dialogue. This production, directed by Peter Ellenstein, makes Odets' play about dreams and middle-aged romance seem as relevant today as in 1938.

The cast is uniformly solid, and the play's dentist parlor, with its sticky air and dark decor, seems right out of a time capsule. Scenic design by Jim Freiburger is excellent.

Said to have been Odets' favorite among his plays, though not the hit that his earlier "Waiting for Lefty" and "Awake and Sing" were, the play is markedly different from

Odets' more florid, socially conscious work. All the characters here—the married, the unmarried and the old man—are seeking love. That none of them finds it is not the least of the drama's many-layered surprises.

The dentist protagonist, Ben Stark, exceptionally well captured by John Herzog, is a weak, reactive, naive man who longs for something better than the caged world in which he festers. His conventional, insecure wife, who may as well be toting a leash—a wonderfully angular performance by Laura Gardner—literally manages his life.

And his imposing father-in-law (the theatrical Robert Ellenstein as the aptly named Mr. Prince) represents everything, including sexual freedom, that the husband lacks the guts to win for himself.

The doctors who share the office are either hapless and sweet/soft like a chocolate éclair (Alex Henteloff), cynical and loveless (Alan Safier) or, like the greasy entrepreneur downstairs, a phony, self-centered elitist (Paul Carr).

Into this muggy, tense environment steps the determined Cleo—the forthright Reo Danzelle—a moony dental assistant in love with the idea of love; but no fool. She's a character who breathes clear, bright air, not dust like everyone else.

Every man in the building lusts after her and, in a step that emboldens his life, our Hamlet-of-a-

Where and When

What: "Rocket to the Moon."

Location: L.A. Repertory Company at Company of Characters Theatre, 12655 Ventura Blvd., Studio City.

Hours: 8 p.m.

Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m.

Sunday matinees, through Aug. 30.

Running time: 2 hours, 45 minutes.

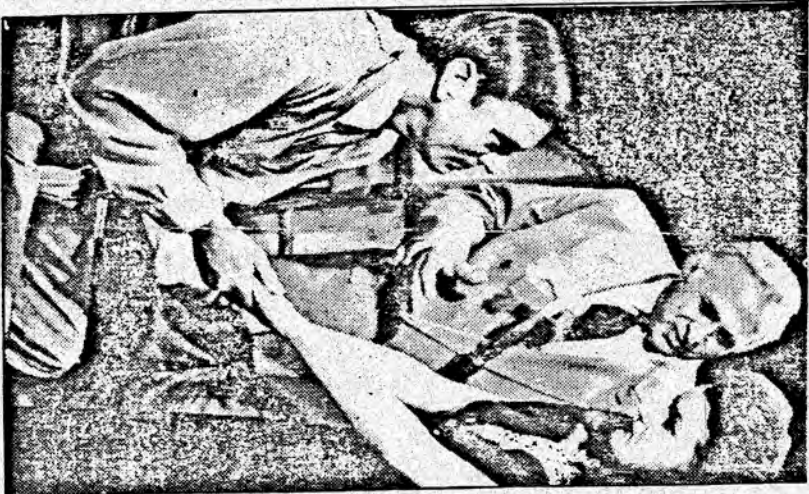
Price: \$15-\$17.50.

Call: (213) 466-1767.

dentist actually has her. When his haridan wife discovers this, the play literally crackles, like a rocket to the moon.

Odets' That old-fashioned, simplistic playwright? You gotta be kidding.

Ray Loynd writes regularly about theater for *The Times*.



John Herzog takes Reo Danzelle's hand as Robert Ellenstein talks in "Rocket to the Moon."

Los Angeles Times

FRIDAY, JULY 31, 1992

THEATRE REVIEWS

Rocket to the Moon*

Produced by the Los Angeles Repertory Company at the Company of Characters Theatre, 12655 Ventura Blvd., Studio City; (213) 466-1767. Opened July 16; plays Thurs.-Sat., 8; Sun., 2; closes Aug. 30

It is a rare treat indeed to see a Clifford Odets play being produced these days, even rarer when the production faithfully stages the period piece while at the same time revitalizing it with contemporary sensibilities. The Los Angeles Repertory Company's *Rocket to the Moon* astutely succeeds on all counts.



Soaring 'Rocket to the Moon' from Los Angeles Repertory, with John Herzog, Robert Ellenstein and Reo Danzelle

Directed by stage and screen veteran Peter Ellenstein—who cites *Rocket* as Odets' favorite play, as well as his own—this current offering is chock-full of affecting acting and arresting action.

With its examination of man's ongoing struggle between personal and professional pursuits, the play addresses today's world as well as the one Odets lived in 50 years ago. His themes of infidelity, incompatibility and moral dilemma are as relevant now as when they were written.

The central character of the play, Ben Stark (John Herzog), is a nice guy—perhaps too nice. Barely maintaining his modest dentistry practice through the Depression era, he puts up with an overbearing, demanding wife (Laura Gardner), endures the sarcastic presence of a neighboring doctor (Alan Safier), and helps cover the financial troubles of a down-on-his-luck colleague (Alex Henteloff).

Even nice guys have a limit, however, and when Ben's father-in-law (Robert Ellenstein)—who's not happy with his daughter either—suggests he shoot for the stars, Ben is prompted to have an affair with his headstrong young secretary, Cleo (Reo Danzelle). Of course, this action brings on its own set of complications, including competition for Cleo's hand from a smarmy talent agent (Paul Carr) and the father-in-law himself. And while the decision is ultimately left up to Ben, it is clear that all along Cleo has had her own agenda in the matter.

Peter Ellenstein's direction propels the three-act play along its seamless and smooth flight. By creating a vis-

ceral sense of the outside world despite its office setting, the oppressive city heat and societal hard times have their effect on the players in the emotional game, raising the stakes even higher.

The acting is exemplary, capturing both the essence of the piece's classical conventions and a wry intelligence that strikes a chord with modern audiences. Herzog is solid as Ben, torn between his former complacency and his new-found options. As his wife, Gardner gives Belle a regal dignity that all but masks her gnawing insecurities.

Robert Ellenstein makes the perfect plotting father-in-law, sly and spry and oh, so confident. His unabashed wooing of Cleo almost makes you root for *him* to win her hand. Henteloff provides many sweat-beaded comic moments as the financially strapped colleague. Safier and Carr each bring particular relish to their smug characters. As Cleo, Danzelle is still trying to become comfortable in the play's most challenging role, but her fresh sensuality and energetic spirit overcome her self-conscious awkwardness.

The fragmentary set design by Jim Freiburger and Giatheatics contributes its own symbolic statement of the world literally falling down around the play's characters. The warm, embracing light design is by Robert Pickering. Scott Ferguson provides the sturdy sound, and Alicia MacCarone the suitable costumes.

Fueled by Odets' timeless insights into morality and idealism, along with expert acting and direction, this *Rocket to the Moon* soars with stellar intensity.

*CRITIC'S CHOICE

—Elias Stimac

LAWEEKLY

JULY 31-AUGUST 6, 1992

THEATER PICK OF THE WEEK

ROCKET TO THE MOON

Director Peter Ellenstein has come up with a beautifully concise interpretation of Clifford Odets' intimate foray into a man's psyche as he chooses between the comfort of his longtime unhappy marriage and the risk of falling for someone new. Jim Freiberger's handsome waiting-room set and Allcia MacCarone's period costumes place us immediately in the 1930s. Soft-hearted dentist Ben Stark (John Herzog) kowtows to his pushy wife, Belle (Laura Gardner), but listens to her big bull of a father, Mr. Prince (Robert Ellenstein), who tries to nudge him out of his complacency. Urging Ben to "get out of the coffin by Labor Day," Mr. Prince even suggests that he have an affair with his attractive, incompetent secretary, Cleo (Reo Danzelle) — who, it turns out, is attracted not only to Ben but to lady's man Willy Wax (Paul Carr) and Mr. Prince himself. Though the pacing of the three-hour production tends to lag, especially in the first act, it is more than compensated for by an exciting ensemble that includes the comically neurotic Alex Hentelhoff and the inspired Alan Safier in supporting roles. Despite its age, *Rocket to the Moon* (originally produced in 1938) speaks freshly to such timeless themes as passion and the loss of it, and the need for love and dreams. Company of Characters Theater, 12655 Ventura Blvd., Studio City; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; thru Aug. 30. (213) 466-1767 or (818) 508-8838.

—Connie Monaghan



Reader

Los Angeles's Free Weekly

Friday, July 24, 1992

Volume 14, Number 41

READER'S GUIDE



THEATER

Rocket to the Moon

This romantic, beautifully written drama by one of America's most outstanding playwrights, Clifford Odets, is revived wonderfully by a fine cast. John Herzog is perfect as dentist Ben Stark, whose claustrophobic marriage to bitter, sad Belle (Laura Gardner) becomes unbearable after he hires the lovely young Cleo Singer (Reo Danzelle) as his assistant. Singer can't tell the truth, and she's certainly not efficient at her job, but her zest for life infects Stark, making him realize that no one should live life without passion. Robert Ellenstein as Belle's domineering father, Mr. Prince, Alan Safier as the cynical Frenchy, Alex Henteloff as down-on-his-luck Dr. Cooper, and Paul Carr as successful, slimy Willy Wax round out this excellent lineup. Director Peter Ellenstein does a terrific job staging and pacing this production, which features an atmospheric set by Jim Freiburger, just-right costumes by Alicia MacCarone, and mood-enhancing lighting by Robert Pickering. (Beth Hill)

■ Company of CharActors Theatre, 12655 Ventura Bl, Studio City. (213) 466-1767. Thurs-Sats at 8, Suns at 2. Closes Aug 30.