

John Howard Lawson

(25 September 1894 – 17 August 1977)

Michael M. O'Hara
Ball State University

PLAY PRODUCTIONS: *Standards*, Syracuse and Albany, 23–30 November 1915;
Servant-Master-Lover, Los Angeles, Morosco Theatre, 16 July 1916;
Roger Bloomer, New York, Forty-eighth Street Theatre, 1 March 1923;
Processional, New York, Garrick Theatre, 12 January 1925; revised, New York, Maxine Elliott's Theatre, 13 October 1937;
Nirvana, New York, Greenwich Village Theatre, 3 March 1926;
Loudspeaker, New York, Fifty-second Street Theatre, 7 March 1927;
The International, New York, Cherry Lane Theatre, 12 January 1928;
Success Story, New York, Maxine Elliott's Theatre, 26 September 1932;
The Pure in Heart, New York, Longacre Theatre, 20 March 1934;
Gentlewoman, New York, Cort Theatre, 22 March 1934;
Marching Song, New York, Nora Bayes Theatre, 17 February 1937.

BOOKS: *Roger Bloomer: A Play in Three Acts* (New York: Seltzer, 1923);
Processional: A Jazz Symphony of American Life, in Four Acts (New York: Seltzer, 1925);
The International (New York: Macaulay, 1927);
Loud Speaker: A Farce (New York: Macaulay, 1927);
Success Story: A Play (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1932);
With a Reckless Preface: Two Plays (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1934);
Theory and Technique of Playwriting (New York: Putnam, 1936); revised and enlarged as *Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting* (New York: Putnam, 1949);
Marching Song: A Play (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1937);



John Howard Lawson

The Hidden Heritage: A Rediscovery of the Ideas and Forces that Link the Thought of Our Time with the Culture of the Past (New York: Citadel, 1950; revised, 1968);
Film in the Battle of Ideas (New York: Masses & Mainstream, 1953);

Film: *The Creative Process; The Search for an Audio-Visual Language and Structure* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964).

PRODUCED SCRIPTS: *The Pagan*, motion picture, titles by Lawson, M-G-M, 1929;

Dynamite, motion picture, M-G-M, 1930;

Bachelor Apartment, motion picture, screen story by Lawson, RKO, 1931;

Good-bye Love, motion picture, additional dialogue by Lawson, RKO, 1933;

Success at Any Price, motion picture, RKO, 1934;

Party Wire, motion picture, adaptation by Lawson and Ethel Hill, Columbia, 1935;

Blockade, story and screenplay by Lawson, United Artists, 1938;

Algiers, motion picture, United Artists, 1938;

They Shall Have Music, motion picture, screenplay by Lawson and Irmgard Von Cube, United Artists, 1939;

Earthbound, motion picture, adaptation by Lawson and Samuel Engel, 20th Century-Fox, 1940;

Four Sons, motion picture, 20th Century-Fox, 1940;

Action in the North Atlantic, motion picture, Warner Bros., 1943;

Sahara, motion picture, Columbia, 1943;

Counter-attack, motion picture, Columbia, 1945;

Smash-up, The Story of a Woman, motion picture, Universal-International, 1947.

OTHER: John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, introduction by Lawson (New York: International Publishers, 1967);

Karen M. Taylor, *People's Theatre in Amerika*, introduction by Lawson (New York: Drama Books, 1972).

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS—

UNCOLLECTED: "Inner Conflict' and Proletarian Art," *New Masses*, 11 (17 April 1934): 29-30;

"Towards a Revolutionary Theatre," *New Theatre* (1 June 1934): 6-7;

Lawson and Lester Cole, "Two Views on O'Neill," *Masses and Mainstream*, 7 (June 1954): 56-63;

"The One Hundred Days," *ICarbS*, 3 (Summer-Fall 1976): 11-24.

John Howard Lawson is better known as one of the Hollywood Ten screenwriters blacklisted in the 1950s for alleged ties to the Communist Party than as a playwright or screenwriter. Critical discussions of his works have most often focused on his politics. Lawson's best plays, however, are not just vehicles for Marxist views. They blend political analysis with dramatic innovation. Plays such as *Processional* (1925), *Loud-*

speaker (1927), *Success Story* (1932), and *Marching Song* (1937) dramatize the ills of everyday life and suggest, rather than demand, leftist solutions for them. By combining dramatic techniques and ideas from German expressionism, Russian constructivism, American jazz, psychological realism, and Hollywood script writing, Lawson created new forms of dramatic expression.

Lawson was born to wealthy Jewish American parents in New York City on 25 September 1894. His father, Simeon Levy Lawson, had changed the family name from Levy to Lawson before John Howard Lawson was born. As Lawson wrote in an unpublished autobiography, his father explained he had done it primarily so that he could "obtain reservations at expensive resort hotels," many of which refused to accommodate Jews.

Lawson's mother, Belle Hart Lawson, died when he was five years old. His only memory of her was as an invalid "lying in a darkened room, aloof and resigned, waiting release from a burden that her frail body could not bear." She named her three children after people she admired. Lawson's elder brother, Wendell Holmes Lawson, was named after Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.; his sister, Adelaide Jaffery Lawson, was named for a friend who shared Belle Lawson's social activism; and the youngest child, John Howard Lawson, was named for an advocate of prison reform in eighteenth-century England. Interested in helping slum dwellers, immigrants, and other underprivileged people, Belle Lawson chose for her children's teacher a woman who supported economic reformer Henry George and women's suffrage.

After his wife's death in 1899, Simeon Lawson took charge of his children's education. John Howard Lawson had several governesses, who—he later wrote—were chosen for their "cultural attainments, which meant that they were not too young and had an academic manner." He attended the Halstead School in Yonkers, New York, and the Cutler School in New Rochelle, New York. In 1906 his father sent the three children on a grand tour of Europe. Visits to the theater were part of their itinerary, and from that time forward Lawson filled his notebooks and diaries with his reactions to set designs, actors, and plays. In 1909 their father sent the three children on a tour of the United States and Canada. Often critical of his father for giving his children expensive gifts more often than his attention, Lawson later tended to conceal his affluent background from his fellow leftists.

Lawson later described childhood situations in which his Jewish heritage caused him difficulties. He wrote that during a visit to the home of a Christian schoolmate he let slip that his father's real name was Simeon Levy and was never invited back. For the sake



Poster by John Dos Passos for Lawson's expressionistic play about striking coal miners in West Virginia (Collection of Lucy Dos Passos Coggin)

of appearances, said Lawson, his father decided that the whole family should join a Christian church, the First Church at 96th Street and Central Park West, but he continued strict observation of Jewish dietary laws.

Lawson also wrote about the prejudice he experienced after enrolling at Williams College in 1910. During his sophomore year, he was denied election to the editorial board of *The Williams College Monthly* when some students raised questions about his Jewish background. Later he said the experience was a good one because it forced him to begin his struggle to come to terms with his Jewish identity. Afterward Lawson stopped writing self-absorbed, lyrical poetry, and in November 1912 he began contributing articles on international affairs to the school magazine.

While at Williams, Lawson was introduced to the writings of Karl Marx by his older brother, who had been sent to live in Germany to study music and art. The works of German Marxist theoretician Karl Kautsky sharpened Lawson's political sensibilities and gave him a vocabulary to describe his sense of alienation. Despite his feelings of isolation, Lawson was involved in several campus activities at Williams. An editor of the senior-class book and a member of the varsity debating team, he was known to other students as a good-natured iconoclast and a frequent speaker at undergraduate meetings. He graduated from Williams with a B.A. in 1914 and worked as a cable editor for Reuters in New York (1914-1915) while attempting to launch his career as a playwright.

Lawson's first dramatic effort, *A Hindoo Love Drama*, was written at college and is untouched by Marxist ideas. Mary Kirkpatrick, head of the Williams College Drama Club, was impressed with this effort, giving Lawson the confidence to attempt three more plays in 1915 and 1916: *Standards*, *The Spice of Life*, and *Servant-Master-Lover*. *Standards*, which was sold to Sam Harris and George M. Cohan and given a tryout in Albany and Syracuse in 1915, is about the failure of two friends to achieve success in New York City. The play never made it to Broadway. Produced by Oliver Morosco in Los Angeles to uniformly bad reviews, *Servant-Master-Lover* (1916) dramatizes the story of a young Irish woman who is mysteriously whisked away from the slums to a rich man's home where her ideal "servant-master-lover" mate awaits her. The play had a brief run. *The Spice of Life* was never performed.

Lawson's start in theater was interrupted by the entrance of the United States into World War I, which he opposed. His father helped to secure him a position with the Norton-Harjes Volunteer Ambulance Corps, and in June 1917 he left for France. Aboard ship he met John Dos Passos, who became a close friend with whom Lawson often discussed writing and politics. Dos Passos was working on his first book, the autobiographical *One Man's Initiation: 1917* (1920), while Lawson started a new play, *Roger Bloomer* (1923). In November, when Norton-Harjes was folded into the American Red Cross Ambulance Service, Lawson and Dos Passos signed up to drive Red Cross ambulances in Italy. Before leaving, they and several other men spent about two months in Paris. Lawson attended a wide range of traditional and avant-garde theatrical events, including performances of the Comedie-Française and Sergey Diaghilev's ballet company. In January 1918, after they arrived in Italy, a letter in which Dos Passos criticized the ambulance service was turned over to Red Cross officials, and Dos Passos was forced to resign. Lawson also came under suspicion, but he managed to stay in Italy, doing public-relations work for the Red Cross.

In spring 1919 Lawson left Italy for Paris, where he married Katharine (Kate) Drain, who had been a volunteer nurse's aide during the war and later became an actress. They had one son, Alan, before they were divorced in 1923. On 25 September 1925 Lawson married Susan Edmond with whom he had two children, Jeffrey and Susan.

In Paris during 1920-1921 Lawson finished *Roger Bloomer*, the play he had begun during the war, and started *Processional*. He returned to the United States determined to be a full-time playwright. As he later wrote, his experiences in Europe forever changed his views. He had come into contact with a wide variety of

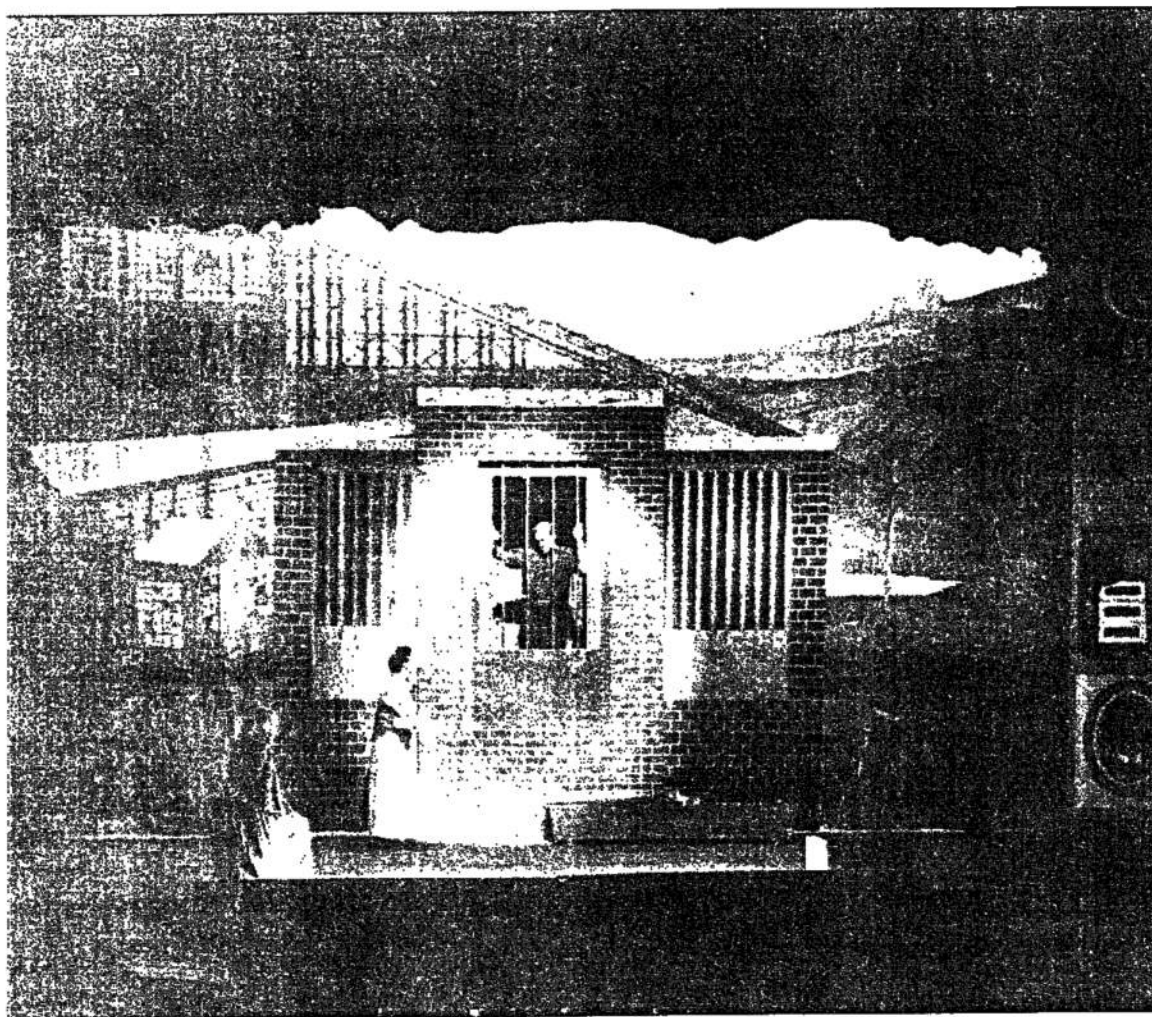
people, cultures, and circumstances that forced open the doors of his sheltered, bourgeois life. He had also discovered that serious commitment to any goal or cause required action rather than words, and he returned to playwriting with a fervid commitment.

Lawson's first play to reach Broadway, *Roger Bloomer* (1923) embodies all the feelings of frustration, social alienation, and lack of direction that Lawson had felt as a youth. Staged by the Equity Players, the play opened on 1 March 1923 and ran for fifty performances, despite poor reviews. A sprawling work of thirty scenes in three acts, *Roger Bloomer* is infused with an earnest, but overwrought, expressionism. Lawson's father was the inspiration for Everett Bloomer, a materialistic owner of a large department store in Excelsior, Iowa. His son, Roger Bloomer, is an unhappy dreamer and idealist.

Fleeing from his father and the way of life he represents, Roger follows Louise, a kindred soul, to New York City. They cannot think of one another romantically without feeling that sex is dirty. After her unscrupulous boss makes sexual advances, Louise commits suicide to preserve her virtue. Roger eats rat poison but survives and is arrested for her murder. The play ends with a scene that Lawson called a "Freudian dream-ballet" like the Diaghilev ballets he saw in Paris. Though the reviewers did not like the play, Dos Passos was impressed, and influenced, by the experimental techniques in *Roger Bloomer* and wrote the foreword for the published version.

Lawson was dismayed by the reviews for *Roger Bloomer* but not cowed. His next effort, *Processional*, evoked similar responses from critics but drew larger audiences than *Roger Bloomer*. Staged by the Theatre Guild, *Processional* opened on 12 January 1925 and closed after ninety-six performances. Like *Roger Bloomer*, *Processional* is expressionistic, but it is more political than its predecessor. Lawson combined the structure and pace of vaudeville, the vitality and rhythms of jazz, and the swirling energy of expressionist staging to create a violent, colorful parade of American character types in the early 1920s. Set in a West Virginia coal-mining town during a strike, *Processional* features thwarted lovers, heroic striking miners, singing minstrels, evil vigilantes, greedy capitalists, yellow journalists, foreign-born radicals, and ridiculous Klansmen—all clashing in what Lawson called "a jazz symphony" of American life. In 1937 he revised the play for a revival by the Federal Theatre Project, which was critically and popularly acclaimed. The 1925 production, however, failed financially, and the Theatre Guild told Lawson that they would not stage any more expressionistic plays.

Lawson's interest in theatrical and political experimentation was further strengthened in 1926 by the



George Abbott as Dynamite Jim in the 1925 Theatre Guild production of *Processional* (photograph by Vandamm; Theatre Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

New York International Theatrical Exposition, which included experimental European cubist, futurist, and constructivist plays. Immediately after the exposition closed, Lawson, Dos Passos, and Michael Gold, editor of *The New Masses*, formed the Workers Drama League, with the plan of producing revolutionary plays. Only a few weeks and a single production later, the three men disbanded the group and joined with Em Jo Basshe and Francis Faragoh to create the New Playwrights Theatre. This new venture survived until 1929, largely through the generosity of millionaire Otto Kahn.

Lawson's *Nirvana* opened on 3 March 1926 at the Greenwich Village Theatre and ran for only six performances. The play calls for a new religion that can help people survive the swirling cyclone of jazz, new machinery, great buildings, science fiction, tabloids, and radio. A mad scientist, bored housewives, mordant lovers,

eccentric millionaires, and characters with names such as "Giggling Girl" talk about life, the cosmos, and love. Cardboard characters, expressionistic format and design, and a dense and incoherent plot resulted in a dull drama. The play was allowed to run as long as it did because of the excellent stage design by Mordecai Gorelik and the reputation Lawson had established with *Processional*.

Despite the expressionism that links it to his previous plays, *Loudspeaker* marked a change in direction for Lawson, as he began to attack American capitalism directly. The first play produced by the New Playwrights Theatre, *Loudspeaker* opened on 7 March 1927 at the Fifty-second Street Theatre and ran for forty-two performances. Lawson got the idea for the play while attending the ceremonial laying of the cornerstone at the new Theatre Guild playhouse in 1924. Governor Alfred E. Smith and Otto Kahn were

in attendance, and Lawson wondered if Kahn would make a more interesting governor than Smith.

Employing a variety of techniques—including constructivism, jazz, expressionism, and realism—*Loudspeaker* follows Harry U. Collins's attempt to be elected governor. The play strips away the masks that politicians wear and reveals the manipulation and exploitation of American political campaigns. The humor is broad, the satire explicit, and the plot predictable. Though highly theatrical and topical, *Loudspeaker* lacks the sharp edge of other significant leftist plays.

Lawson had not yet joined the Communist Party, but in late 1926, along with Dos Passos, Gold, and others, he was on the "National Executive Committee" that attempted to found the Proletarian Artists and Writers League with backing from a similar Soviet organization. In August 1927 Lawson joined fellow committee members Dos Passos and Gold in Boston to demonstrate against the execution of Italian-born anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who had been convicted of murder and armed robbery. The case had become a cause célèbre for left-leaning American intellectuals, who believed that the two men had been convicted because of their politics and ethnic origin. During the protest the police charged the crowd of demonstrators and beat some of them. After this experience, Lawson wrote in his autobiography, he found that he could neither ignore the flaws in American politics and economics nor bring himself to become more deeply involved in the struggle. He wanted to be a playwright, but fulfilling that goal was hampered by the financial insecurity that burdened all New Playwrights Theatre efforts. He accepted an offer from M-G-M to write for the movies and left New York for Hollywood.

Soon after his departure, New Playwrights Theatre produced the last of Lawson's expressionistic plays, *The International*, with a set designed by Dos Passos. The play opened on 12 January 1928 and ran for twenty-seven performances. Widely panned by the critics, the play follows the launching of a world revolution that sputters to a halt on Wall Street. The play combines multiple locations—Tibet, China, Russia, France, England, and New York City—many scenes, and several plots for a huge, but empty, spectacle. Whereas *Processional* is novel and theatrical, *The International* is overwhelming and overbearing. The poor reception of *The International* strengthened Lawson's resolve to succeed in Hollywood.

Lawson's resignation from New Playwrights Theatre was also prompted by his financial troubles. He had dabbled in real estate and lost money. Money was not his only motivation, however; he was also lured by the challenge of a new medium—the motion picture. Lawson prospered in Hollywood, and with his earnings

he bought a large house on Long Island, living the sort of life he had satirized in his plays.

As the Depression deepened during the winter of 1930–1931, Lawson wrote *Success Story*. The script was rejected by the Theatre Guild, but Harold Clurman, a reader for the group, had just helped to found the Group Theatre and needed new scripts. Clurman and Lawson reworked the play during the summer of 1932, and *Success Story* opened on 26 September 1932 for a run of 121 performances.

Lawson's autobiographical response to his three years in Hollywood, *Success Story* follows the financial rise and moral decline of Sol Ginsberg, an employee of an advertising agency. Lawson mixed elements of expressionism and psychological realism, creating humanized characters rather than the stereotypes of his earlier works. Sol starts out as an awkward, hot-tempered clerk, filled with hatred born of his outsider status as a Jewish liberal. He resolves to make as much money as possible from the complacent establishment, while he waits for social revolution. In his single-minded focus on material success, Sol brings misery to everyone around him during his climb to the top. When he finally becomes president of his company, he looks back at the wake of broken hearts and broken promises and finds that money has not brought him happiness. The woman who once was his sweetheart and the reinforcer of his Marxist conscience, ends his misery by shooting him. The power and passion that Lawson infused in his characters nearly overcame the obvious plot. Some critics felt that it was "almost" a good play. Lawson wrote the screenplay for the movie version, *Success at Any Price* (1934), in which the original anticapitalist message nearly disappeared.

In 1933 Lawson helped to organize and became first president of the Screen Writers Guild. He was fired from his position at M-G-M and worked in Washington, D.C., to have the group recognized by the National Labor Board as a bargaining unit for screenwriters. While he was there, in 1934, two of his plays were produced in New York: *The Pure in Heart* and *Gentlewoman*.

Lawson wrote *The Pure in Heart* while he was working on *Success Story*. The Theatre Guild agreed to produce the play but closed it when the out-of-town try-out in Baltimore failed to impress audiences or critics. After the Group Theatre also rejected the play, it was produced by Richard Aldrich and Alfred De Liagre. *The Pure in Heart* opened on 20 March and ran for only seven performances.

The Pure in Heart is Lawson's attempt to explain the relationship of art and entertainment in American culture. He combined expressionism with motion-picture techniques he learned in Hollywood, and the result

was less than satisfactory. The play follows the rise and fall of small-town girl Annabel Sparks, who leaves her Depression-ravaged home with dreams of success on stage and screen. Propelled by the empty images of Hollywood in popular magazines, Annabel will stop at nothing to achieve success, getting her first job because she is willing to accommodate the sexual demands of the directors. She ends up having an affair with a mobster, and the two are gunned down in one another's arms. Annabel, the play suggests, has been driven to her meaningless end by the false but compelling images of capitalist culture. Lawson's use of Hollywood clichés, however, overshadows his social criticism, and the play was roundly criticized.

Gentlewoman, produced by the Group Theatre in association with D. A. Doran Jr., opened on 22 March 1934 and ran for only twelve performances. The title character is Gwyn Ballantine, a New York socialite whose husband kills himself in a fit of capitalist angst. After his death she falls in love with a younger man, radical writer Rudy Flannigan, a Communist who lacks personal integrity. He extols the concept of the common laborer but lacks compassion for individuals. Leaving Gwen, who is pregnant with his child, he goes to Iowa to join a farmers' strike, while she mutters about the coming Communist revolution that will destroy them all.

During the 1930s leftists criticized Lawson for his lack of ideological and political commitment. Mike Gold, with whom Lawson had worked in the New Playwrights Theatre, attacked him in *The New Masses*, calling Lawson "A Bourgeois Hamlet of Our Time" (10 April 1934) who wrote adolescent works that lacked moral fiber or clear ideas. Lawson was stung by these criticisms, and in his response, "'Inner Conflict' and Proletarian Art" (*The New Masses*, 17 April 1934), he candidly acknowledged his middle-class childhood was partly to blame for his incomplete understanding of the lower classes. Lawson also recognized that his Hollywood connections and his financial prosperity made him suspect in the fight for workers' rights. As a result of the criticisms leveled at him, Lawson joined the Communist Party and began a program of educating himself about the proletarian cause. He traveled throughout the poverty-stricken South to study bloody labor conflicts in Alabama and Georgia.

During his southern tours Lawson was arrested several times on a variety of charges that were apparently linked to the frequent and outspoken anticapitalist reports he wrote for the Communist newspaper *Daily Worker*. His experiences inspired *Marching Song*, his last produced play. Performed by the radical Theatre Union, it opened on 17 February 1937 and ran for sixty-one performances.



Lawson on the witness stand before the House Un-American Activities Committee, where he refused to testify about his ties to the Communist Party, 1947 (photograph © Bettmann/CORBIS)

Set in Brimmerton, a thinly disguised version of Birmingham, Alabama, *Marching Song* depicts a bloody class struggle. Lawson used techniques that were closer to classic Greek tragedy than to the expressionism of his previous plays. The play focuses on Pete Russell, a worker who has been blacklisted after an unsuccessful strike against a local automobile plant, as unemployed workers and their families, who have been evicted from their homes, join with union members to stage a sit-down strike to demand their jobs back. Race relations, exploitation of workers by the capitalist upper class, Depression economics, and police brutality are among the themes of the diffuse and far-ranging play. Despite clear political and economic insights and lively dialogue, *Marching Song* falls short of greatness. It is, however, one of Lawson's best efforts.

Marching Song was staged not long after Lawson had addressed the problem of writing ideological drama in *Theory and Technique of Playwriting* (1936). The first part of the book, an historical overview, is a treatise advocating radical dramaturgy, while the second part is an elementary approach to how to write a play, useful to any would-be playwright in its analysis of problems and pitfalls. The book has been used as a textbook in

college courses since its publication. Lawson revised the text to include screenwriting in 1949.

After *Marching Song*, Lawson was again invited to Hollywood, where he wrote the screenplay for one of the few movies that he considered truly his own work, *Blockade* (1938), starring Henry Fonda. He continued to work in Hollywood with increasing success until 1947, when he was one of the nineteen Hollywood writers called before the House Un-American Activities Committee for questioning about their ties to the Communist Party. He refused to testify and was among the Hollywood Ten cited for contempt of Congress. In 1948 he was sentenced to one year in prison, which he began serving in 1950. After his release, he was blacklisted and could no longer find work as a screenwriter. He contributed to a few motion pictures pseudonymously as Edward Lewis or without credit. During his later years, Lawson taught at several colleges and universities, including Stanford University, Loyola Marymount College, and Los Angeles University of Judaism.

Assessment of Lawson's works and career has been divided. Some critics have praised his dynamic agitprop technique and his incisive analysis of the contradictions and injustices of Western society after World War I. Others have called his plays formulaic presentations of stereotypical characters representing his vision of a dysfunctional capitalist society and a productive Soviet system. Lawson is remembered not for his plays or screenplays, or even for his radical political ideology, but as a writer who sacrificed his career to a cause.

References:

- Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Octagon, 1974);
- John Baxter, *Hollywood in the Thirties* (New York: Paperback Library, 1970);
- Eric Bentley, *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been: The Investigation of Show Business by the Un-American Activities Committee, 1947-1958* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972);
- Michael Blankfort, "Reckless but Feckless," *New Republic*, 80 (12 September 1934): 136;
- Beverle Bloch, "John Howard Lawson's 'Processional': Modernism in American Theatre in the Twenties," *Journal of American History*, 76 (December 1989): 1036-1071;
- Ben Brown, *Theatre at the Left* (Providence, R.I.: Bear Press, 1938);
- Richard Brown, "John Howard Lawson as an Activist Playwright," dissertation, Tulane University, 1964;
- Garry Carr, "John Howard Lawson: Hollywood Craftsmanship and Censorship in the 1930s," *ICarbS*, 3 (Fall-Winter 1976): 37-48;
- Carr, *The Left Side of Paradise: the Screenwriting of John Howard Lawson* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1984);
- John Dos Passos, *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos*, edited by Townsend Ludington (Boston: Gambit, 1973);
- Robert Gardner, "International Rag: The Theatrical Career of John Howard Lawson," dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1978;
- James Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism* (New York: Wiley, 1968);
- Malcolm Goldstein, *Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974);
- Morgan Himmelstein, *Drama Was a Weapon: Left-Wing Theatre in New York 1929-1941* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963);
- George Knox and Herbert Stahl, *Dos Passos and "The Revolt of Playwrights"* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1964);
- Lee Lowenfish, "John Howard Lawson's 'A Calendar of Commitment,'" *ICarbS*, 3 (Summer-Fall 1976): 23-36;
- Harrison McCreath, "A Rhetorical Analysis of the Plays of John Howard Lawson," dissertation, Stanford University, 1965;
- Michael Mendelsohn, "The Social Critic on Stage," *Modern Drama*, 6 (1963): 277-285;
- Kshamanidhi Mishra, *American Leftist Playwrights of the 1930's: a Study of Ideology and Technique in the Plays of Odets, Lawson, and Sherwood* (New Delhi: Classical Publishing, 1991);
- Gerald Rabkin, *Drama and Commitment* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964);
- Liliane Randrianarivony-Kozioł, "Techniques of Commitment in the Thirties: A Study of the Selected Plays of John Howard Lawson," dissertation, Indiana University, 1982;
- Nancy Schwartz, *The Hollywood Writers' Wars* (New York: Knopf, 1982);
- Sam Smiley, *The Drama of Attack* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1972);
- Darwin Turner, "Jazz Vaudeville Drama in the Twenties," *Educational Theatre Journal*, 11 (May 1959): 110-116;
- Mardi Valfemae, "Civil War Among the Expressionists: John Howard Lawson and the Pinwheel Controversy," *Educational Theatre Journal*, 20 (March 1968): 8-14;
- Jay Williams, *Stage Left* (New York: Scribners, 1974).

Papers:

There is an extensive collection of John Howard Lawson's papers, including his unpublished autobiography, at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.