

Odets, Here is Thy Sting

■ CHRISTINA WATERS

Anyone tired of tedious, traditional theater ought to come take a walk on the wild side at Bear Republic Theatre's new production of *I Can't Sleep*. The work of maverick playwright Gary Aylesworth, who's recently emerged in the Bay

Area, *I Can't Sleep* won the BRT's recent playwriting competition. It was probably the best spent \$500 in local theater history.

An irreverent, straight-shooting biography of American playwright Clifford Odets (who once had three

shows running on Broadway), the BRT play begins on Odets' deathbed and rips its way back to the themes and shams that marked Odets' controversial life.

From start to finish *I Can't Sleep* belongs to Marcus Cato, who, in the lusty tortured Odets, has found his finest stage role. A cyclone of subtle timing and body English, Cato brings inexhaustible style and wit to the brisk, two-hour performance. But he has help, especially from director Michael Griggs, who has whipped oft-chaotic material into sensuous shape. Aided by a spare, quick-change set, Griggs has obviously pumped his actors full of a sense of physical freedom, which helps prove that good theater needn't rely upon money if it has imagination.

The talented ensemble (kudos to Cato, Joan Bechtel, Richard Messina, Michael Neilond, Julia Garnett, Craig Huisenga and Serena Sorensen) ebbs and flows through myriad personalities and organic scene transitions that continuously rearrange the action like pieces in a moveable puzzle. Elia Kazan turns into Odets' mother, the violent, tyrannical father becomes Lee Strasberg, the homosexual producer becomes Odets' first wife Luise Rainer, the warm Jewish uncle becomes a Hollywood gladhander, and the crippled sister becomes a Busby Berkeley chorine.

Dennis Morgan's lightwork neatly hugs the inventive musical background created by Phil Collins. *I Can't Sleep* throbs with the true magic of theater — make-believe — while you watch.

Playwright Aylesworth has crammed every corner of this stage

PHOTO: MARILYN PAINTER



LAIID-BACK THEATER Rick Messina delivers deathbed one-liners to a recumbent Marcus Cato in BRT's dynamite new production *I Can't Sleep*.

On the Town

On the Town

exploration with intimate ideology, bawdy confessions and some very funny dialog. Throughout sophisticated scenarios and daring staging the major, often plaintive, themes of Odets' life emerge. The Golden Boy of Depression-era theater, Odets hopped on the Communist propaganda bandwagon, filling the plays he created for Lee Strasberg's Group Theater with melodramatic sloganeering and American working class drivel. Hollywood called, and Odets went, doctoring scripts, spouting phony politics and eventually betraying his friends at the HUAC witch hunts of the '50s.

As the play crisply shows, Odets never came to terms with his own cheap sentimentality, his chauvinism, his latent homosexuality and his delusions of genius. The many moments of charm and charisma in this startling production revolve around the ingenious staging of the

skyrocketing career and the suicidal realities of Odets' public vs. private personae. While the ending of the play lacks the satisfying razor edge of the first hour and a half, *I Can't Sleep* works on every level, from Cato's brief brilliant soliloquies (shades of Al Pacino) to the dizzying, rock'em, sock'em ensemble revelations.

BRT's latest offering is a dramatic, adult debunking of an American literary giant who often thought and spoke beyond his own grasp. Filled with surprise, playfulness and enough energy to light up the Great White Way, this superlative piece of theater deserves standing room only attendance. You'll have a chance to hear playwright Gary Aylesworth speak after the March 31 performance. But whatever you do, don't miss this electrifying World Premiere before it closes on April 15. Call 425-1725 for information. ■