



# *Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)*

contexte & enjeux / context & issues



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Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939) · PDF complet

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Le *Federal Theatre Project (FTP)* constitue une aventure singulière dans l'histoire du théâtre américain, inédite à l'époque et jamais réitérée sous cette forme. Dirigé pendant ses quatre années d'existence, de 1935 à 1939, par l'autrice, dramaturge et metteuse en scène Hallie Flanagan, il s'inscrit dans l'ensemble des mesures mises en place par l'administration Roosevelt dans le cadre du programme du *New Deal*, au sein de la *Work Progress Administration (WPA)* dirigée par Harry Hopkins. *Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939): contexte et enjeux* constitue la première étude française d'envergure sur cette période essentielle de l'histoire du théâtre américain. En mêlant approches transversales et études de cas, ce volume rassemblant les contributions de chercheuses, chercheurs et artistes se propose de mettre en lumière les angles morts et les figures oubliées de cette période de l'histoire théâtrale américaine, faisant le pari que ces oublis eux-mêmes racontent quelque chose de l'historiographie de cette période et, en retour, des regards contemporains que nous pouvons porter sur elle. L'ouvrage s'inscrit dans une perspective résolument transdisciplinaire, à l'image de ce que fut le *FTP*, en proposant des articles sur le théâtre à proprement parler mais aussi la musique et le cinéma.

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) is a singular adventure in the history of American theater, unprecedented at the time and never repeated at such. Headed during its four years of existence, from 1935 to 1939, by the author, playwright and director Hallie Flanagan, it is part of the program set by the Roosevelt administration as part of the New Deal, within the Work Progress Administration (WPA) directed by Harry Hopkins. *Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939): Context and Issues* is the first French volume on this essential period in the history of American theater. By combining cross-disciplinary approaches and case studies, this volume, which brings together contributions from researchers and artists, aims to shed light on the blind spots and forgotten figures of this period of American theatrical history, considering that these omissions themselves tell us something about the historiography of this period and, in turn, about the contemporary views we can take on it. The book is resolutely transdisciplinary, as was the FTP, with articles on theater itself, but also on music and film.

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*FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT (1935-1939) : CONTEXTE ET ENJEUX*

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Le *Federal Theatre Project (FTP)* constitue une aventure singulière dans l'histoire du théâtre américain, inédite à l'époque et jamais réitérée sous cette forme. Dirigé pendant ses quatre années d'existence, de 1935 à 1939, par l'autrice, dramaturge et metteuse en scène Hallie Flanagan, il s'inscrit dans l'ensemble des mesures mises en place par l'administration Roosevelt dans le cadre du programme du *New Deal*, au sein de la *Work Progress Administration (WPA)* dirigée par Harry Hopkins.

Sur le plan économique et social, la crise de 1929 a durement touché les secteurs de la création artistique et un très grand nombre d'acteurs se retrouve sans emploi. La crise que traverse la société américaine est telle qu'en 1932, plusieurs écrivains s'associent pour soutenir le ticket communiste aux élections nationales, incarné par les candidats William Z. Foster et James W. Ford, et ce malgré la méfiance du gouvernement américain à l'égard du communisme, dont pâtira également le projet de Théâtre fédéral. Dans ce contexte, ce groupe de plus de cinquante écrivains, la *League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford*, rédige un pamphlet intitulé *Culture and the Crisis*, sous la forme d'une lettre ouverte qui fait état des dysfonctionnements culturels et sociaux, appelant à des renouvellements profonds<sup>1</sup>. La toute première phrase de la préface de cette lettre pose le début des années 1930 comme charnière culturelle pour toute une génération :

<sup>1</sup> Voir *Culture and the Crisis: An Open Letter to the Writers, Artists, Teachers, Physicians, Engineers, Scientists and Other Professional Workers of America*, New York, Workers Library Publishers, 1932 (consulté le 4 avril 2017). Cette lettre est également reproduite dans Albert Fried (dir.), *Communism in America: A History in Documents*, New York, Columbia UP, 1997, p. 11.

Notre génération se tient à la croisée de deux ères. Lorsque nous regardons en arrière, nous voyons le passé de l'Amérique, le nôtre, comme un raz-de-marée qui maintenant se retire, mais qui fut réellement grandiose pour son balayage d'un pouvoir sans fondement social. Lorsque l'on regarde vers l'avenir, nous voyons quelque chose de nouveau et d'étrange, que la philosophie américaine n'a pas encore rêvé. Ce que nous voyons, c'est la menace d'une dissolution culturelle. La grande marée a laissé trop de débris – des débris naturels, des institutions et des schémas sociaux obsolètes, des restes de sang et de nerfs humains<sup>2</sup>.

6 À l'orée des années 1930, l'Amérique fait ainsi face à des « débris » et le projet de Théâtre fédéral mis en place par l'administration Roosevelt doit avant tout se penser dans la perspective d'une reconstruction d'un tissu social et culturel défait. C'est paradoxalement l'élection du candidat démocrate auquel les écrivains communistes s'opposent dans ce texte, qui permet l'expérimentation de formes culturelles soutenues et initiées par le pouvoir fédéral. Entre la crise de 1929 et le traumatisme de Pearl Harbour en 1941, l'État fédéral américain trouve ainsi les ressources pour penser et mettre en pratique une séquence théâtrale inédite, où il s'agit à plusieurs égards de faire aboutir les réflexions et expérimentations théâtrales des années 1920, et qui constitue un laboratoire où s'esquissent les renouvellements esthétiques de l'après seconde guerre mondiale. En cela, le *FTP* est bien à l'image de cette génération de l'entre-deux-temps décrite par les écrivains de 1932. C'est aussi ce que signale Malcolm Goldstein dans son ouvrage, *The Political Stage*, en faisant de la fin de la saison 1934-1935 et du début de la saison 1935-1936 un moment clé dans la structuration du champ théâtral américain<sup>3</sup>. C'est précisément à ce moment que germe le projet du Théâtre fédéral et c'est son rôle dans cette structuration, comme ses figures et ses influences, que ce volume se propose d'étudier<sup>4</sup>.

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2 « We of this generation stand midway between two eras. When we look backward, we see our American past like a great tidal wave that is now receding, but that was magnificent indeed in the sweep of its socially purposeless power. When we look ahead, we see something new and strange, undreamed of in the American philosophy. What we see ahead is the threat of cultural dissolution. The great wave piled up too much wreckage – of nature, of obsolete social patterns and institutions, of human blood and nerve. » (*Culture and the Crisis*, op. cit., p. 3.) (Nous traduisons.)

3 Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage, American Drama and Theater Of the Great Depression*, New York, Oxford UP, 1974, préface.

4 La première représentation recensée dans le catalogue établi par l'université George Mason, où sont conservées en partie les collections du *FTP*, date du 3 février 1935. Toutefois, Hallie Flanagan ne prend la tête du *FTP* qu'en août 1935.

*Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939): contexte et enjeux* constitue la première étude française d'envergure sur cette période essentielle de l'histoire du théâtre américain. En mêlant approches transversales et études de cas, sans ambitionner de dresser un panorama exhaustif, ce volume rassemblant les contributions de chercheuses, chercheurs et artistes se propose de mettre en lumière les angles morts et figures oubliées de cette période de l'histoire théâtrale américaine, faisant le pari que ces oublis eux-mêmes racontent quelque chose de l'historiographie de cette période et, en retour, des regards contemporains que nous pouvons porter sur elle. L'ouvrage s'inscrit dans une perspective résolument transdisciplinaire, à l'image de ce que fut le *FTP*, en proposant des articles sur le théâtre à proprement parler mais aussi la musique et le cinéma. Après une section d'introduction contextuelle, qui présente le *FTP* comme un moment de réflexion sur les enjeux de démocratisation, trois axes structurent ce volume : le premier se consacre à étudier le *FTP* comme un théâtre de la crise, à la fois du fait du contexte socio-économique dans lequel il émerge, mais aussi par les formes qu'il met en jeu, les croisements d'échelles et d'esthétiques qu'il initie. Le deuxième axe s'arrête sur les *Living Newspapers*, en tachant de mettre au jour l'histoire et les influences, comme les héritages contemporains, de cette forme emblématique du *FTP*. Enfin, le troisième axe réaffirme le rôle des figures féminines au sein du *FTP*, en étudiant par ce biais les processus de légimitation ou les passages sous silence à l'œuvre dans l'écriture de l'histoire du *FTP*.

## CONTEXTE : RÉINVENTER LA DÉMOCRATIE ?

La contribution de Jean Kempf dresse un tableau du contexte social du *New Deal*, dans lequel prend place le *FTP*. Elle permet surtout de comprendre comment l'irruption d'un acteur nouveau – l'État fédéral – dans la vie culturelle marque durablement la démocratie américaine. À travers cette prise de position de l'État fédéral dans l'économie culturelle, c'est l'interprétation des pouvoirs constitutionnels qui s'en trouve modifiée et élargie. Mais c'est aussi un retour, à certains égards, vers une synthèse féconde entre le populaire et le savant, une réinvention des termes mêmes de la démocratie à travers des formes et des pratiques culturelles qui sauraient renouer avec un temps d'avant la scission entre « culture d'en haut » et « culture d'en bas » (Lawrence Levine<sup>5</sup>). L'Amérique du *New Deal* réinvente ainsi paradoxalement la promesse

5 Dans son ouvrage de 1988, *Highbrow/Lowbrow. The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge [Mass.], Harvard UP), traduit en français en 2010 sous le titre *Culture d'en haut, culture d'en bas. Essai sur l'émergence des hiérarchies culturelles en*

d'une émancipation plus culturelle que spécifiquement économique préparant, sans nécessairement le savoir, la synthèse de la culture « moyenne » (*middlebrow*) et de l'abondance démocratique dans la société de consommation de l'après-guerre. Ce prisme de la démocratisation culturelle est celui adopté dans leur article par Sheila D. Collins et Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg: en revenant sur les origines, la structure et la gouvernance parfois complexe du *FTP*, les autrices proposent une traversée de la vie démocratique américaine dans les années 1930, avec ses ambitions, ses ruptures et ses controverses.

## LE THÉÂTRE DE LA CRISE : CROISER LES ÉCHELLES ET LES ESTHÉTIQUES

8 Cet enjeu de démocratisation transparaît aussi très fortement, dans le projet du *FTP* tel qu'il est pensé par Hallie Flanagan, par une tentative d'élargissement de la vie théâtrale hors des centres culturels dominants de l'époque, et en particulier New York. Irriguer l'ensemble du territoire américain était une des ambitions premières d'Hallie Flanagan et l'étude du cas de la ville de Cincinnati proposée par Nancy Jones permet d'aborder ce point crucial. Hallie Flanagan pensait que les petites villes avaient leur rôle à jouer dans le Théâtre fédéral qu'elle entendait créer. La créativité de l'unité de Cincinnati dans le *FTP* permet de questionner ce croisement fécond entre les échelles fédérale et locale, en se penchant notamment sur la représentation la plus iconique de cette unité, celle de *Macbeth*, mise en scène par Franklin Raymond, directeur régional du *FTP* en Ohio. La question des jeux d'échelles est également au cœur de l'article de Drew Eisenhauer: l'évocation de la figure d'Alfred Kreyborg, rédacteur et administrateur de l'unité Manhattan-Bronx du *FTP*, permet de saisir des enjeux majeurs du programme dirigé par Flanagan, comme la circulation entre le local et le fédéral ou les continuités et les ruptures chronologiques qu'incarne le *FTP* dans l'histoire théâtrale américaine.

Si les croisements s'opèrent entre les échelles fédérale et locale, ils sont aussi le fait d'une mise en crise des limites esthétiques et disciplinaires de l'époque, ainsi que des pratiques de création théâtrale alors en cours. Le *Federal Theatre Project*

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*Amérique* (Paris, La Découverte), Lawrence Levine étudie la manière dont Shakespeare, d'un auteur populaire au XIX<sup>e</sup> aux États-Unis, est peu à peu devenu un symbole de la culture dite « savante ». Ce faisant, Levine propose une histoire des formes et pratiques culturelles américaines, du rapport entre le champ culturel et l'ordre social, et de la manière dont le premier tend à devenir un instrument du second, au gré de certaines transformations socio-culturelles précisément en cours dans la période du *FTP*.



n'était pas un projet exclusivement théâtral ; il incarnait une ambition sociale portée par des expérimentations bien souvent à la croisée de plusieurs disciplines artistiques. Il a également constitué une forme de vivier pour toute une génération d'artistes qui y ont fait leurs armes avant de devenir des personnalités marquantes pour l'histoire des arts américaine, au premier rang desquels Orson Welles, dont la contribution de François Thomas présente la collaboration avec plusieurs des représentants de la musique américaine moderne, comme Virgil Thomson, Paul Bowles, Marc Blitzstein, Lehman Engel ou encore Aaron Copland. Le choix par Welles de ces musiciens appartenant à la génération antérieure à la sienne repose sur des raisons autant sociales et politiques que proprement musicales. L'article de François Thomas analysant précisément l'effet de groupe informel qui naît à ce moment-là et ses caractéristiques transdisciplinaires : les activités de la *WPA* dans le domaine du théâtre et de la musique se rejoignent, dans un mouvement de fusion des disciplines qui répond à un climat politique. Ainsi, on comprend ce que le travail engagé durant la *WPA* a suscité comme outrepassement des frontières artistiques. Les différentes unités se soutiennent, l'unité *Art* créant des affiches pour les spectacles de danse et les pièces de théâtre, l'unité *Radio* faisant la promotion de la danse moderne et du théâtre, les disciplines s'expérimentant les unes avec les autres. Cette notion d'expérimentation est essentielle à ce qui se joue artistiquement, et politiquement, durant cette période : le premier (et dernier) « *Federal Summer Theatre* » de 1937, étudié par Michael Farrell, en est un excellent exemple, tant ce rassemblement d'acteurs, de danseurs, de metteurs en scène, de scénographes au Vassar College a constitué un moment d'échanges transdisciplinaires entre des artistes venus de tout le territoire américain.

Le volontarisme politique revendiqué par Hallie Flanagan et son souhait d'articuler expérimentations théâtrales et solutions concrètes à une crise socio-économique d'envergure résonnent encore aujourd'hui. Ils ne vont pas sans ambiguïté, c'est ce que montre l'article d'Elizabeth Osborne, en revenant sur le cas de *It Can't Happen Here*, la pièce de Sinclair Lewis tirée de son propre roman. Elle y fait entrer en résonance les multiples représentations des années 1930 et la reprise de la pièce en 2016 : en cela, Elizabeth Osborne livre une réflexion sur la mise en scène de l'histoire américaine et sur ses soubresauts, prenant cette représentation comme une loupe pour regarder de plus près les ressemblances, les distorsions, les effets de rupture. Comment la reprise de cette mise en scène, en 2016, à Berkeley, s'appuie-t-elle à la fois sur l'histoire qui laprécède et en fait un fantôme, dans le but de faire sens dans le contexte d'aujourd'hui ? Que révèlent les différences de mise en scène de notre époque contemporaine ?

## LES *LIVING NEWSPAPERS*, D'HIER À AUJOURD'HUI

Encore aujourd'hui, la forme des *Living Newspapers* irrigue la création contemporaine, chez des metteurs en scène soucieux de questionner la capacité du théâtre à chroniquer le temps présent. Vicky Featherstone est directrice artistique du Royal Court Theatre de Londres qui a programmé, en 2021, une série de *Living Newspapers* directement inspirés de ceux du *FTP*. L'entretien mené avec elle par Jordana Cox témoigne ainsi de la contemporanéité des enjeux et des formes expérimentées pendant la période du *FTP*, invitant à réinvestir l'héritage bien vivant de la démarche initiée par Hallie Flanagan.

10 Si l'ancrage social du *FTP* est d'abord géographique, entendant se déployer sur l'ensemble du territoire américain et en embrasser les identités multiples, il passe aussi par la représentation, sur les scènes, des enjeux de société contemporains. Les *Living Newspapers* sont peut-être l'incarnation la plus forte de cette ambition du *FTP* d'être un théâtre qui embrasse, confronte, livre au débat public les sujets du temps. Puisant à diverses sources théâtrales, notamment européennes, ils ont laissé des héritages multiples dans le théâtre américain. C'est ce que montre la contribution d'Ilka Saal, qui présente cette forme théâtrale et en analyse le succès au sein du *FTP*, tant sur le plan politique qu'esthétique. En montrant qu'ils proposent un mélange idiosyncrasique d'esthétiques modernes et vernaculaires, de politique et de pédagogie, on comprend ainsi comment cette forme de théâtre politique a mobilisé les tropes et les stratégies rhétoriques du nationalisme culturel américain en dessinant des passerelles entre des sympathies politiques et des contextes sociaux finalement assez diversifiés. Le cas de la pièce, *Power* (1937), d'Arthur Arent présentée et analysée par Michael Selmon, constitue ainsi un des plus grands succès parmi les *Living Newspapers* mis en scène dans le cadre du *FTP*. Pour autant, le succès de ce *Living Newspaper* traitant de la tentative d'amener l'électricité dans les Appalaches, et son retournement contre le *FTP* par ses opposants politiques, invite à envisager les limites des ambitions affichées en les confrontant aux réalités politiques du temps.

## VOIX MINORITAIRES ET PROCESSUS DE LÉGITIMATION

Le *FTP* a été incarné par de nombreuses figures, qui ont marqué le paysage théâtral américain. S'il est vrai que le *FTP* a constitué une aventure originale et inédite, il est aussi important de noter que certaines de ces figures ont œuvré avant lui pour ouvrir la voie à des expérimentations théâtrales trouvant leur plein accomplissement dans le cadre du *FTP*. Orson Welles est sans doute la plus fameuse d'entre elles, et il apparaît ailleurs dans ce volume. Cette partie se propose toutefois de mettre en lumière la place des femmes,

nombreuses, qui ont aussi marqué le *FTP* et, par ce biais, les failles de l'historiographie en la matière, les processus de légitimation à l'œuvre comme les passages sous silence. Noelia Hernando-Real revient dans son article sur la place de Susan Glaspell dans le *FTP*, où la dramaturge a vu l'opportunité de poursuivre les efforts entrepris avec les Provincetown Players deux décennies plus tôt. Linda Ben-Zvi détaille quant à elle le rôle de Susan Glaspell en tant que directrice du bureau du Midwest pendant une vingtaine de mois, à travers notamment l'étude d'une production marquante du *FTP*, celle de la pièce *Spirochete* d'Arnold Sundgaard. L'histoire du *FTP* (et de la suite du théâtre américain) est aussi celle de ses archives, et le versant afro-américain de cette histoire est peut-être celui qui l'illustre le mieux. C'est ce que s'attache à démontrer Kate Dosssett en étudiant l'histoire des manuscrits du *Black Federal Theatre*. Le passage sous silence de certaines pièces témoigne, à ses yeux, d'opérations de catégorisations et de processus de légitimation qui ont eu des conséquences sur l'histoire du théâtre afro-américain et qui méritent, en tant que telles, d'être étudiées. À cet égard, l'article de Claudine Raynaud présente le cas éclairant de Zora Neale Hurston, et en particulier de son adaptation de *Lysistrata* d'Aristophane, qui n'a jamais été produite et dont le manuscrit a disparu. En 1935, Hurston rejoint la Negro Unit du *FTP* en tant que « conseillère en art dramatique ». Claudine Raynaud se propose d'étudier cette adaptation du *Lysistrata*, transposée au folklore noir américain, à la lumière de l'investissement de l'artiste au sein de cette unité du *FTP*, faisant l'hypothèse que ce moment a ensuite influencé l'ensemble de son œuvre. Mattie Brickman, enfin, est dramaturge et scénariste et l'entretien mené avec elle permet de revenir sur la figure décisive d'Hallie Flanagan. La pièce de Mattie Brickman, *Playground*, est une pièce sur Hallie Flanagan qu'elle a écrite et mise en scène en 2011 à l'occasion des festivités du 150<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de l'université de Vassar. Ce faisant, elle explore l'articulation entre la personnalité d'Hallie Flanagan et ses expérimentations théâtrales, entre son propre travail et les questionnements qu'a soulevé ce travail sur la période du *FTP*.

Ce volume découle du colloque international organisé conjointement par le laboratoire Cultures anglo-saxonnes (université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès) et le laboratoire Histoire des arts et des représentations (université Paris Nanterre) à Toulouse en octobre 2019, à l'occasion du centième anniversaire de la disparition d'Hallie Flanagan. Quelques mois après l'événement, le monde du spectacle a été frappé par une crise sans précédent : à partir de mars 2020, la pandémie de COVID a été la cause de la fermeture, entre autres, des théâtres de Broadway (jusqu'en septembre 2021). Des acteurs culturels ont alors interpellé le gouvernement afin que des aides soient attribuées aux artistes pour pouvoir traverser cette épreuve. En mars 2020, le Congrès a alors voté en faveur d'une

dotation supplémentaire de 75 millions de dollars versés au *National Endowment for the Arts* (NEA). Si elle a eu le mérite d'exister dans l'Amérique de Donald Trump qui, tout au long de son mandat, a cherché à supprimer le NEA et à abolir certains des avantages pour les investisseurs privés, cette mesure dans le cadre du plan de relance *CARES Act* (*Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act*) semble pauvre au regard de ce que le gouvernement Roosevelt avait mis en place après la crise de 1929. Alors que le candidat Joe Biden a déclaré, durant sa campagne, que sa présidence serait « *F.D.R.-size* », aucun programme proposé pour aider l'industrie théâtrale n'a ressemblé pour l'instant au *Federal Theatre Project*.

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## PREMIÈRE PARTIE

# Contexte





## RETROUVER « LA PROMESSE DE LA VIE AMÉRICAINE ». LE *NEW DEAL* ET LA CULTURE

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Il est bien difficile d'apporter aujourd'hui une contribution radicalement nouvelle sur une période de l'histoire des États-Unis aussi étudiée que le *New Deal*. Il n'est en revanche pas nécessairement inutile de se demander justement pourquoi le *New Deal* est devenu un marronnier de l'histoire américaine qui n'en manque pourtant pas. Qu'est-ce qui pousse des chercheurs, génération après génération, à remettre l'ouvrage du *New Deal* sur le métier de l'historien ?

Quelques réponses paraissent s'imposer : en trois quarts de siècle la Grande Dépression a conservé son caractère exceptionnel, encore renforcé par le sentiment pour le monde développé d'avoir triomphé d'une catastrophe alors même que plane sur son présent, depuis presque cinq décennies, le spectre de récessions massives. Par ailleurs, la personnalité exceptionnelle de Roosevelt a indubitablement pesé sur la postérité de la période. Ces raisons n'expliquent pourtant pas, à elles seules, pourquoi ces quelque cinq ou six années au mitan des années 1930, si lourdes de douleurs sociales et d'incertitudes, ont conservé, même à travers des périodes d'expansion et aujourd'hui encore, une force d'attraction qu'il est bien difficile d'ignorer.

La réponse la plus satisfaisante me semble à chercher à la fois dans la culture politique et la politique culturelle du *New Deal*. Je ferais l'hypothèse que le *New Deal* a incarné une tentative de conciliation de deux versions du nationalisme américain : l'une, illustrée par le « 100 % Americanism » de la décennie précédente, exclusionniste et fortement racialisée ; et l'autre inclusionniste, centripète et intégrative, faisant le pari de la dissolution des différences dans une culture commune des groupes ethniques (*white ethnics*) voire d'une déracialisation de la société<sup>1</sup>. La « recette » du *New Deal*,

1 Il s'agit d'un pluralisme, qui s'illustre d'abord dans une politique de redéfinition des rapports sociaux au sein du monde du travail, mais aussi, pour les éléments les plus progressistes du *New Deal*, par un ancrage dans les « droits civiques » de ce que l'on appellera plus tard les « minorités ». Voir Mark Bevir (dir.), *Modern Pluralism*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2012, en particulier les chapitres 5 (« Value pluralism in twentieth-century Anglo-American thought ») et 8 (« Liberalism, pluralism, multiculturalism: contemporary debates »).

car il y en avait une contrairement à ce qu'écrivait Richard Hofstadter qui n'y voyait que des mesures opportunistes et à courte vue, a précisément résidé dans l'invention et la promotion d'un concept *vague* de culture inclusive et d'intégration par la consommation<sup>2</sup>. Pour le dire en termes plus directs, paraissait alors possible une société d'où auraient, comme par magie, disparu les antagonismes de classes et les dominations raciales, une sorte de réalisation de la promesse américaine, sur des bases non pas marxistes ou nationales-socialistes comme en Europe, mais humanistes et libérales.

18 Si la réalité de cette possible synthèse fut toujours loin du compte, l'esprit en revanche resta toujours bien présent, alors même que le rêve d'un nationalisme simple et d'une société homogène commençait à s'effriter à la fois à l'intérieur du pays sous les coups des groupes opprimés, et à l'extérieur avec les peuples colonisés qui commencent à s'émanciper après le second conflit mondial, alors même qu'une partie de l'Europe connaît une nouvelle servitude. Il n'est donc en rien surprenant que le grand débat qui a agité l'historiographie du *New Deal* soit celui de la place, dans ses programmes mais aussi – et surtout – dans ses *intentions*, des minorités, tout particulièrement les Noirs et dans une moindre mesure les Amérindiens et les Hispaniques. La question qui s'est de plus en plus clairement posée, au fil des décennies 1960-2000, est celle de savoir si le *New Deal* était (structurellement) raciste. Or, poser la question en des termes contemporains revient à y répondre en s'arrogeant les droits que confère une vision surplombante. En revanche, si l'on veut comprendre le *New Deal* du point de vue de ceux qui l'ont vécu, c'est ailleurs qu'il faut regarder. Je fais donc l'hypothèse que si le *New Deal* continue à nous fasciner, c'est en raison du fantasme qu'il entretient de la possibilité, voire de l'existence d'une société homogène à qui il faudrait simplement redonner foi dans sa mission. Sa nature transitionnelle, ambiguë, et surtout protéiforme n'est pas pour rien dans l'attrait qu'il exerce. Il est pourtant moins l'annonce d'un monde nouveau (même si, par certains côtés, il marquera l'histoire sociale du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle) que les derniers instants d'un monde ancien, une manière de réaction à une frayeur généralisée face à ce qui apparut aux contemporains comme un effondrement<sup>3</sup>. C'est donc cette *nostalgie* d'un monde perdu que je me propose d'interroger, en reprenant d'abord les grands moments de l'historiographie, en regardant ensuite pourquoi le passé était si important pour ce mouvement progressiste et tourné vers l'avenir, pour

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2 Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, New York, Knopf, 1955; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making A New Deal*, Cambridge/New York, Cambridge UP, 1990.

3 Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself. The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, New York, Liveright, 2013.

interroger enfin l'intérêt complexe porté à la notion de culture dans une période où s'élaborait le *mainstream* et le *middle brow*.

## LE *NEW DEAL* AU PRISME DE SON HISTORIOGRAPHIE

Après la période des interprétations progressistes qui plaçait le *New Deal* dans le continuum d'une extension régulière de la démocratie aux États-Unis<sup>4</sup>, les historiens de la Nouvelle Gauche (au sens large du terme) en ont fait, au contraire, un moment de reprise en main par les grands intérêts capitalistiques et de dépossession du pouvoir de tous par un petit nombre d'hommes d'affaires, de hauts fonctionnaires et de politiques<sup>5</sup>. Ainsi, et jusqu'à la fin des années 1980, l'immense majorité de ceux qui s'intéressaient à la période voyaient plutôt la politique culturelle du *New Deal* comme une façon pour le capitalisme d'imposer son emprise sur un monde en train de lui échapper, une forme de répétition du moment Progressiste<sup>6</sup>.

Puis les choses basculèrent avec des études spécifiques de terrain – comme celles présentes dans ce volume –, des études sur les réalités individuelles de la Dépression, qui mirent en évidence que les choses n'étaient ni aussi simples ni aussi uniformes qu'on l'avait dit, et qu'il existait donc, sous des apparences d'unité, une diversité de situations réelles. Dès la fin des années 1960, les chercheurs qui s'intéressaient plus aux programmes culturels du *New Deal* qu'à son histoire politique, avaient commencé à déplacer le curseur. Jane de Hart Matthews, par exemple, appuyait ainsi la notion de « démocratie culturelle » qu'elle proposait sur une étude du *Federal Theater Project* comme instance d'implication des citoyens dans des pratiques culturelles effectives, même si, elle en convenait, il s'agissait souvent de consommation plus que de production. Pourtant, ces quelques voix pluralistes et dissonantes qui proposaient une lecture nuancée mais surtout complexe du *New Deal* « réel », restèrent fortement minoritaires, le devant de la scène historiographique étant plutôt occupé par des lectures incarnées par Warren Susman, et formulées au début des années 1980 dans son livre *Culture as History*, où, s'il reconnaît que la culture des années 1930 portait en elle une forte dimension inclusive, celle-ci s'accomplissait clairement, selon lui, au

4 Voir Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1949; Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1952 et *id.*, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous With Destiny*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1990.

5 Voir Paul Keith Conkin, *FDR and the Origins of the Welfare State*, New York, Crowell, 1967.

6 Sharon Ann Musher, « Art and the New Deal », dans Aaron D. Purcell (dir.), *The New Deal and the Great Depression*, Kent (Ohio), Kent State UP, 2014, p. 120.

profit de certains<sup>7</sup>. On trouve à peu près le même argument une décennie plus tard chez Jonathan Harris dans *Federal Art and National Culture* (1995) pour qui la politique culturelle du *New Deal* fut avant tout une machine à raboter les différences et à imposer une hégémonie culturelle du capitalisme à l'ensemble de la population – sous-entendu : alors que le moment aurait pu être propice à des changements radicaux<sup>8</sup>.

Ces analyses ne sont pas nécessairement totalement erronées. Mais elles accréditent une conception unificatrice et simplificatrice de la société des États-Unis dans les années 1930, et qui semble avoir été avant tout portée par une vision plus déductive (voire idéologique) qu'inductive. La contradiction est d'ailleurs arrivée par l'histoire sociale à partir des années 1990, d'abord avec la mise en lumière du développement de la culture syndicale<sup>9</sup>, puis avec l'histoire culturelle. Celle-ci, avec des livres comme *For The Millions* (2004) ou *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (2009)<sup>10</sup>, mais aussi les travaux d'Andrew Hemingway<sup>11</sup>, dressent un constat beaucoup moins négatif et surtout beaucoup moins monolithique (celui d'un monde qui n'aurait été dominé que par les seuls hommes blancs). Hemingway, par exemple, s'il note, comme d'autres, la prédominance des hommes blancs hétérosexuels (pour reprendre les catégories d'aujourd'hui) insiste sur la mise en valeur des marges dans les images et écrits de la période, ainsi que la promotion de l'idéal de coopération contre celui de concurrence. D'autres travaux, dans les années 2000, ont montré d'un côté que certaines artistes femmes ou appartenant à des minorités ont su tirer parti des programmes du *Works Progress Administration*<sup>12</sup> et que les animateurs nationaux de ces programmes se sont efforcés, malgré des oppositions locales, d'intégrer des minorités raciales et ethniques. Il faut en effet garder en tête que les programmes étant gérés localement, dans un pays sans culture administrative verticale, toute vision uniquement

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7 Warren Susman, *Culture as History*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1984, p. 164, 172.

8 Comme le suggère Ira Katznelson aussi, malgré une mise en évidence fine du croisement des facteurs raciaux, sociaux et géographiques, et surtout de la notion de « long *New Deal* » qui englobe la première partie de la guerre froide (*Fear Itself, op. cit.*).

9 Voir Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, New York, Verso, 1998.

10 A. Joan Saab, *For the Millions*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004; Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2009.

11 Voir Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2002.

12 Voir notamment Helen Langa, *Radical Art*, Berkeley, U of California P, 2004; Laura Hapke, *Labor's Canvas*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars, 2008 et Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff Rebecca, *Black Culture and the New Deal*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

nationale tendra à aplanir les différences et les tensions, soit dans un sens soit dans un autre<sup>13</sup>.

Ainsi ont été réalisés des entretiens auprès d'anciens esclaves, ou a été enregistré le folklore des minorités, ou enfin a-t-on collecté de nombreux artefacts de ce que l'on nomme les « arts et traditions populaires ». Certes, tout ceci fut souvent fait du point de vue de l'ethnologue, et non du point de vue des populations concernées, et ne changea pas grand-chose à une politique plutôt timide en direction des Noirs en particulier. Mais cette forte volonté patrimoniale n'est ni anecdotique ni paternaliste. Le passé fut en effet un enjeu capital de la politique culturelle du New Deal.

## LES ENJEUX DU PASSÉ AU CENTRE DE L'ACTION.

### LA QUESTION DU *USABLE PAST*

L'expression « *usable past* » entre dans le vocabulaire critique bien avant le *New Deal*, en 1918, avec le court essai de Van Wyck Brooks, « On Creating a Usable Past », et la question est aujourd'hui indissociable de la réflexion des intellectuels critiques de la première décennie du siècle, en particulier Randolph Bourne, trop tôt disparu, mais dont le « Trans-national America » (1916) pose les bases d'une réelle reconfiguration de l'américanité au début du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle<sup>14</sup>.

Si l'on exclut les références d'époque au débat intergénérationnel autour de la *Genteel tradition* auquel Brooks répond, l'argument de son texte est simple. Pas de grande civilisation sans de grands créateurs, et pas de grands créateurs sans une réinvention par eux du passé, sans que ce passé ne soit retravaillé aux feux du présent et non simplement hérité comme une antiquité. Et d'appeler donc les Américains à se « tailler les habits » dont ils ont besoin dans « l'étoffe du passé » qui leur sied le plus. Ses modèles ? Carlyle et Michelet qui ne se sont pas contentés, comme de bons professeurs, de reprendre le passé mais de le rendre utilisable, c'est-à-dire, « pertinent » (*relevant*) pour le présent. On est donc avec Brooks, et alors que l'histoire professionnelle s'est installée dans le paysage intellectuel et universitaire depuis plus d'un demi-siècle, dans

13 C'est ce que vont montrer les analyses conduites dans les années 1970 à 1990 sur des aspects bien spécifiques des programmes ainsi que sur leur organisation administrative (voir A.D. Purcell [dir.], *The New Deal and the Great Depression*, op.cit. et Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2009). Comme le remarque Purcell, jusqu'au *New Deal*, le seul contact qu'avaient les Américains avec l'État fédéral était la poste.

14 Van Wyck Brooks, « On Creating a Usable Past », *The Dial*, 11 avril 1918, p.337-341; Randolph S. Bourne, « Trans-national America », *Atlantic Monthly*, juillet 1916, p. 86-97.

un appel à remettre rien moins que l'imagination au pouvoir, mais une imagination nourrie de nos racines. La question pour lui est en effet de savoir ce qui appartient aux racines communes d'une part et d'autre part de ressusciter les oubliés du passé, comme il le dira avec sa fameuse phrase : « The creative past of this country is a limbo of the non elect <sup>15</sup>. »

Bien que son essai ne considère que l'immigration européenne, et que l'on n'y trouve aucune trace de l'Asie ou de la population noire, sa conception de la culture nationale produit, à la sortie de la Grande Guerre, un modèle qu'il nomme *cosmopolitisme*. Ce cosmopolitisme était la reprise d'une vieille idée lockienne, et plus généralement de l'Amérique des Lumières, faisant des États-Unis une sorte de méta-nation qui engloberait le monde entier ou constituerait la réincarnation d'une humanité réunifiée. En 1916, cette idée s'opposait courageusement à un chauvinisme nationaliste, fût-il américain.

22 Or, malgré sa richesse, cette pensée critique à la fois attentive au monde et à ce que l'Amérique pouvait encore contenir de promesse ne survécut guère aux années 1920 pas plus qu'à l'effondrement de la Dépression. On objectera qu'à l'aune de notre présent, ce cosmopolitisme restait bien ethnocentré, bien blanc et bien masculin. Certains critiques récents en ont même fait une manifestation d'isolationnisme <sup>16</sup>. Or, quelles qu'en soient les limites, cette idée me paraît être l'avatar jamais totalement disparu d'une promesse américaine, beaucoup plus généreuse qu'on le dit parfois.

L'une des hypothèses que je formulerais ici est que la disparition de cette exigence prometteuse est en partie le résultat de ce qu'une certaine vie intellectuelle américaine n'avait pas survécu à l'entrée dans la Dépression. Autrement formulé, le moment voit les humanités le céder aux sciences sociales, et des sciences sociales comprises souvent sous un angle très utilitariste. S'il existe en effet une vie intellectuelle *originale* aux États-Unis dans les années 1930, c'est plutôt dans la psychologie, l'économie et assez peu dans des domaines philosophiques ou politiques qu'il faut la chercher. On pense à la richesse de l'école anthropologique de Columbia avec Franz Boas d'abord, Ruth Benedict et Margaret Mead dont les travaux, rapidement médiatisés par le réseau unique aux États-Unis des « revues », dont la *Partisan Review*, fondée en 1932, modifient profondément les conceptions culturelles de la *Genteel tradition* ; et enfin à l'École de Chicago, dont l'empan est un peu plus large mais qui exprime bien l'esprit du temps. Même le marxisme américain, qui connaît alors une vogue, n'apporte pas

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15 V. W. Brooks, « On Creating a Usable Past », art. cit.

16 Christopher McKnight Nichols, « Rethinking Randolph Bourne's Trans-National America: How World War I Created an Isolationist Antiwar Pluralism », *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 8/2, 2009, p. 217-257.

de contribution radicalement originale et se contente de décliner un vocabulaire et des idées déjà largement sclérosées<sup>17</sup>. Il ne faut en effet pas voir les années 1930 comme principalement dominées par des oppositions entre marxistes et non marxistes. Si le communisme n'a jamais eu autant de soutiens aux États-Unis qu'à cette époque, on ne doit pas en conclure pour autant à une conversion de ces soutiens au marxisme<sup>18</sup>. En dépit de certaines manifestations de dogmatisme théorique – certes limitées à un petit nombre mais dont il sera fait grand cas dans l'avenir –, les années 1930 sont la meilleure illustration (ou même la source) de ce « centre vital », ce cœur battant que Arthur Schlesinger décrira dans son livre éponyme de 1949<sup>19</sup>. Son analyse en apparence très marquée par les affrontements idéologiques de la guerre froide est en réalité probablement tout autant inspiré par les années 1930. Schlesinger voyait la grandeur, ou à tout le moins la force et même la résilience de la société américaine, dans son absence d'idéologie voire d'idéalisme (il craignait par dessus tout les utopies). Il la percevait dans une forme de pragmatisme consensuel qui évitait les solutions globales d'une part et externes (ou théoriques) d'autre part, et sa description des années 1940-1950 pourrait constituer une description tout aussi juste de ce que fut le New Deal avant elles<sup>20</sup>. Pour revenir à Van Wyck Brooks, à travers le choix d'un point de vue très directement utilitariste (« *usable* »), il s'agit pour lui de construire à partir de ce que l'on a, et de ne pas rééditer l'utopie de l'ardoise vide, utopie des origines américaine mais aussi utopie partagée par les mouvements révolutionnaires comme le communisme dont l'hymne proclame que du passé, il faut faire table rase.

17 Il faudra attendre les mouvements noirs radicaux dans les années 1960 pour que soient reprises à nouveaux frais ces questions et qu'elles soient véritablement approfondies au-delà de mots d'ordre venus alors directement de l'URSS.

18 Le rayonnement du CPUSA dans les années 1930 s'est fait principalement par le biais syndical dans un contexte de crise économique. L'adhésion doctrinale a été sinon faible, du moins de courte durée, comme en témoigne l'indicateur des suffrages en faveur du candidat du CPUSA à l'élection présidentielle (fiable en la matière pour un parti fortement idéologique). Ceux-ci sont stables en 1924, 1928 et, fait particulièrement significatif, en 1940) et se situent autour de 0,1 % des suffrages (entre 40 et 50 000 voix). L'élection de 1932 constitue une exception – très modeste toutefois – puisque le CPUSA double son électorat à 0,2 % des suffrages (103 000 voix), l'élection de 1936 avec ses 0,17 % (80 000 voix) constituant un retour progressif à l'étiage.

19 A. M. Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, *op. cit.*

20 Dans le même ordre d'idée, on peut citer Reinhold Niebuhr, le théologien du réalisme chrétien (voir Isabelle Richet, « De l'utopie socialiste au réalisme chrétien. Reinhold Niebuhr et le New Deal », *Transatlantica*, 1, 2006 et Serge Champeau, « De la morale à la politique: le réalisme chrétien de Reinhold Niebuhr », *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, 94/1, 2014, p. 63-82).

# OCEAN PARK MUNICIPAL AUDITORIUM

FRIDAY **JUNE 16** 8:30 P.M.

*The*  
FEDERAL  
THEATRE  
PROJECT  
PRESENTS



*The*  
FAMOUS  
ANTI-NAZI  
PLAY BY  
GEORGE  
FESS

## "DAY is DARKNESS"

IN 3 ACTS  
DIRECTED BY ADOLPH FREEMAN

די וועלט בארימטע אונזי נאצי לעפנטנסבילד  
טאג איז פינסטערניש



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1. Federal Theatre Project, *The Federal Theatre Project presents "Day is darkness"*.  
California: Federal Art Project, 1939 (source: [Bibliothèque du Congrès](#)).



Si les années du *New Deal* n'ont pas vraiment produit de pensée originale, elles ont en revanche été celles d'une démocratisation de la vie publique. Démocratisation par une intégration de plus en plus forte des différents groupes ethniques issus de l'immigration européenne, en particulier les ashkénazes, les Italiens et les habitants des Balkans, à travers la consommation mais aussi la culture, comme l'a montré Lizabeth Cohen dans son livre *Making a New Deal* (1990)<sup>21</sup>. Cet ouvrage est l'une des plus intéressantes études sur la période (large puisqu'il s'agit de 1919 à 1939) ; Cohen y montre avec une extrême finesse dans son analyse du terrain (Chicago) que les années 1930 ont constitué une bascule culturelle majeure par rapport aux années 1920 en ce sens qu'a eu lieu une dissolution progressive des identités ethniques, en tout cas leur affaiblissement, au profit d'une « identité américaine » à travers d'une part la consommation et d'autre part l'action collective, et donc pas sous l'action de l'État.

Que cette intégration ait eu des limites, c'est une évidence. Dans les années 1930, la limite la plus profonde reste celle de la race. Le *New Deal* a bien sûr en ligne de mire une société massivement blanche, et elle l'est : en 1940 – comme en 1930 d'ailleurs – les Blancs représentent 90 % de la population des États-Unis. Le *New Deal* va donc naturellement s'intéresser beaucoup plus aux questions ethniques – intégrer les *white ethnics* dans un grand groupe blanc encore réservé, dans les années 1920, aux seuls « anglo-saxons » (fig. 1).

Pour autant, on ne saurait négliger le fait que, dans des villes comme New York et Chicago, les Noirs purent profiter de nombreux programmes du *Works Progress Administration/Federal Arts Project* qui ont participé au développement d'une autre Renaissance, tout aussi importante de celle de Harlem pourtant plus connue, la Renaissance de Chicago (fig. 2)<sup>22</sup>.

Démocratisation culturelle enfin, avec la métabolisation de la notion de « vernaculaire », aujourd'hui devenue commune en matière d'ethnographie, d'architecture, de photographie, etc. Mais au fond, le vernaculaire est une autre façon de parler d'un *statut utilisable du passé* en l'ancrant dans la démocratie<sup>23</sup>. C'est ce que firent tous les travaux d'inventaire rendus possibles par les programmes d'emploi du *New Deal*. À la fois destinés à réinclure les intellectuels et les artistes dans la vie économique de la nation en leur donnant des moyens de subsistance, reconnaissant ainsi leur contribution à la vie commune, ces campagnes furent aussi des opérations de

21 L. Cohen, *Making A New Deal*, *op. cit.*

22 Adam Green, *Selling the Race*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007.

23 Lewis Perry, *Intellectual Life in America*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 338 *sq.* et Merle E. Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, New Brunswick (NJ), Transaction Books, 1982, p. 718.

préservation patrimoniale et des outils politiques au même titre que l'archéologie pour la France et l'Allemagne dans l'entre-deux-guerres. En aval, elles ont nourri l'imaginaire d'artistes, visuels ou écrivains.



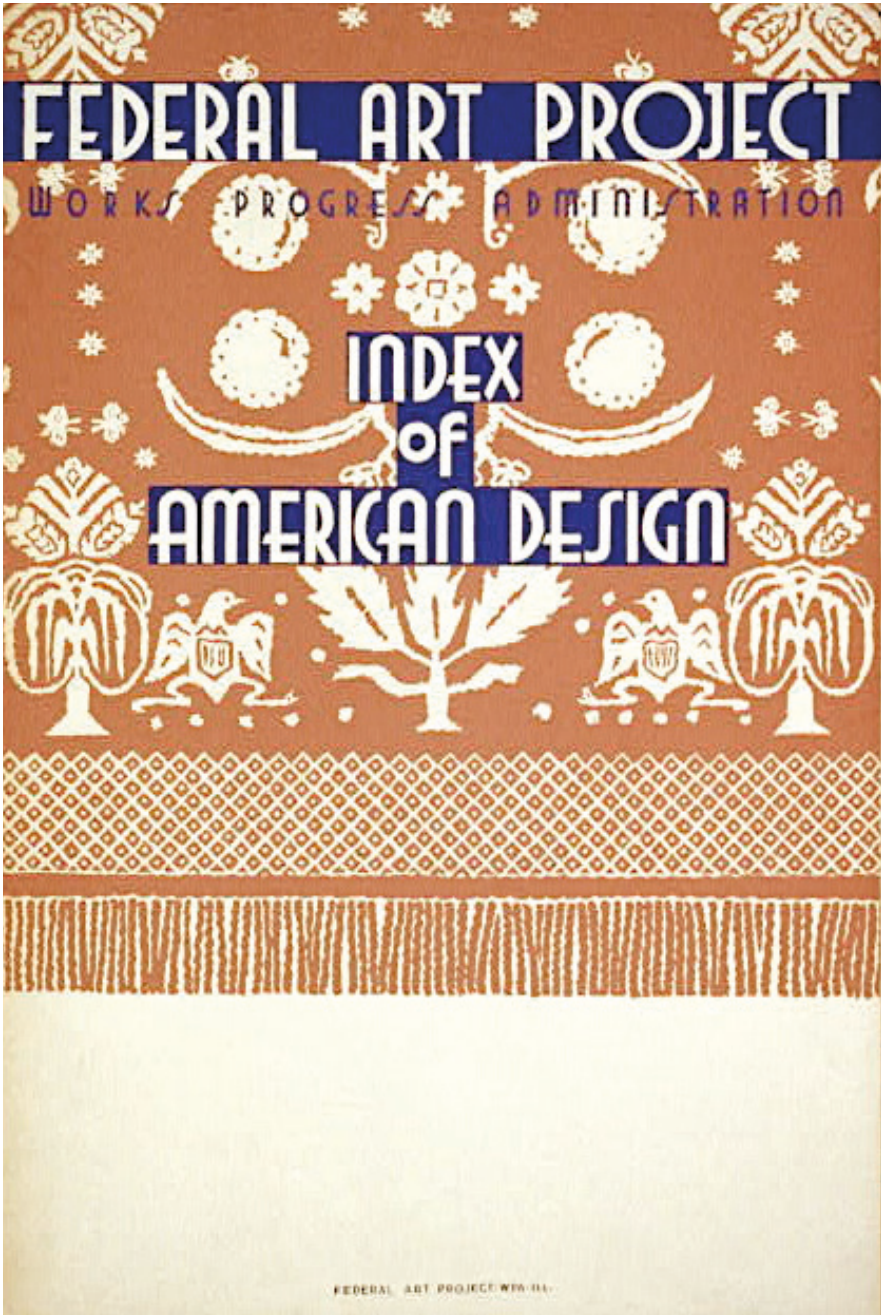
2. *Children's Theater*, New York, s.d. (source : [Bibliothèque du Congrès](#)).

On peut en citer quelques-uns pour mémoire : dictionnaire biographique des États-Unis, atlas linguistique d'Amérique du Nord, *Index of American Design*, publications d'archives et collecte de documents ethnographiques et folkloriques. Et puis bien sûr, probablement les plus connus même si l'oubli est passé par là, les « guides d'État », sorte de *compendia* de l'histoire, géographie, patrimoine, économie, bref de la culture des quarante-huit États, de certaines régions et de certaines métropoles (fig. 3)<sup>24</sup>.

Comme le note un spécialiste, on y voit clairement l'affirmation d'un lien nécessaire entre expérience (donc un passé) et expression (donc un développement de la culture). Cette rhétorique de la *redécouverte* fut peut-être la seule vraie politique culturelle du *New Deal* effectivement pensée, avec l'idée, comme le suggère Jerrold Hirsch, de marier des thèmes traditionnels américains à une volonté de réforme ancrée dans le pluralisme, afin de déboucher sur une nouvelle unité nationale<sup>25</sup>.

24 Voir [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_Guide\\_Series](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Guide_Series).

25 Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, University of North Carolina Press, 2003.



3. *Index of American Design*. Illinois, Federal Art Project, WPA, 1936-1939  
(source: [Bibliothèque du Congrès](#)).

## REDÉFINIR L'IDENTITÉ. LE PLURALISME À L'ŒUVRE

Si l'usage politique du passé n'est pas une disposition propre aux États-Unis, ce qui fit du *New Deal* un mouvement différent de ce qui avait lieu dans l'Europe d'alors, fut qu'il développa, ou en tout cas tenta de développer, une conception pluraliste du passé et, par extension, du présent et de l'avenir. On voit tout de suite combien cette idée pouvait être intolérable aux suprémacistes blancs dont les tenants, Démocrates sudistes, constituaient un soutien, difficile à aliéner, du président Roosevelt. Ces programmes eurent pourtant en commun d'être des entreprises collectives<sup>26</sup>. C'est d'ailleurs peut-être cette caractéristique qui à la fois leur permit de survivre et suscita de virulentes critiques quant à l'ingérence de l'État dans la « création ». Pour certains, la notion même de « création collective » était un oxymore et ne pouvait conduire qu'à la médiocrité ; pour d'autres, elle était le signe que le taylorisme qui définissait les nouvelles sciences de la société – qui, elles aussi, commençaient à se diriger vers la *big science* – avait définitivement eu raison des humanités.

28

Le lien entre culture (de masse) et politique n'est pas, dans les années 1930, une spécificité américaine. On sait que ce lien a été théorisé très tôt par les bolcheviks et, quelques années plus tard, par le fascisme italien, dont ce fut l'une des grandes caractéristiques, puis par le national-socialisme, pour qui les politiques culturelles étaient fondamentales puisqu'il s'agissait précisément de solidifier le peuple autour d'une culture homothétique à la race. La préoccupation culturelle du *New Deal* s'inscrit donc dans la révolution culturelle que connaît l'Occident dans les deux premières décennies du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, celle de la massification : culture et consommation, mais aussi guerre (la guerre totale) ; bref une nouvelle ère que l'on nommera celle des technologies de masse, ou de la « fabrication du consentement », tant politique qu'économique, l'un et l'autre étant soudés par la culture, dans son sens à la fois anthropologique et de productions culturelles. Cette apparente congruence des sociétés et des pratiques a pu conduire certains historiens, comme John Garraty<sup>27</sup>, à rapprocher le *New Deal* des régimes autoritaires d'Europe. Il semble pourtant que précisément rien ne fut plus différent de ces régimes que le *New Deal*, en dépit des similitudes de surface, et ce pour deux raisons fondamentales : une profonde faiblesse de l'État (à la fois dans sa notion et sa réalisation) aux États-Unis et une tradition libertarienne que les études tendent à sous-estimer au profit de lectures intégratives. Par ailleurs, comme des travaux récents l'ont montré, il y avait chez les responsables nationaux du *Federal Writers' Project*,

26 M. E. Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, op. cit., p. 718.

27 Voir John A. Garraty, *The Great Depression*, New York, Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1987.

comme chez certains New Dealers, une vraie adhésion à l'idée de « Front populaire » au sens où, pour eux, l'opposition aux fascismes en Europe et à celui qui se développait aux États-Unis dans des mouvements comme le Bund et chez certains Italo-Américains, ne pouvait passer que par la mise en valeur et la réhabilitation des « vies ordinaires », celles des Américains pauvres mais aussi des minorités raciales et ethniques<sup>28</sup>.

Quand on étudie les « programmes culturels » réalisés par le *New Deal*, comme l'ont fait depuis une vingtaine d'années les chercheurs, l'image traditionnelle d'une reprise en main conservatrice de la culture – comme celle qui suivit la Guerre de Sécession – s'estompe au profit d'une vision où les agences culturelles du *New Deal* ont été engagées dans la mise en œuvre d'une communauté américaine nouvelle, plus « égalitaire, démocratique et inclusive<sup>29</sup> ». Comme l'écrit Jerrold Hirsch, auteur d'une belle étude sur le *Federal Writers' Project*, « les responsables cherchaient à réconcilier la diversité culturelle [...] et le nationalisme culturel, et à traiter une culture pluraliste comme un élément positif de la modernité » dans tous les projets nationaux du *Federal Writers' Project*<sup>30</sup>. Ils suivaient en cela les politiques réformistes des années 1930 et plus généralement un désir populaire de redécouverte de l'Amérique dans un moment de doute extrême<sup>31</sup>. Victoria Grieve, dans *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (2009), fait même l'hypothèse que ces projets permirent le développement des musées et du marché de l'art et « annonçait » déjà le soutien aux arts par la puissance publique qui caractérisa l'après-guerre<sup>32</sup>.

28 J. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, *op. cit.*; Fraser M. Ottanelli, « Mussolini à East Harlem: police fasciste et identité italo-américaine », dans Antonio Bechelloni *et al.* (dir.), *Les Petites Italies dans le monde*, Rennes, PUR, 2015, p. 261-271.

29 J. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

30 *Ibid.*: « there were attempts by New Deal cultural agencies to redefine American nationality in a way FWP officials hoped would create a more egalitarian, democratic, and inclusive community. In doing this, they sought to reconcile cultural diversity, as a fact and (in their view) as a positive value, with cultural nationalism, and to treat a pluralistic culture as a positive aspect of modernity. Both goals were important in all the projects initiated by national FWP officials. »

31 *Ibid.* Voir aussi: « To the extent that anything that challenged exclusive definitions of America served the interests of those who had not been allowed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, FWP programs were ideological and reformist. But in addition, the FWP tried to unite Americans, individuals and groups with conflicting interests, while ignoring issues that divided them, and therefore the project also created a conservative myth that pointed to a harmonious future without indicating how a change from current circumstances to a better future could be achieved. » (Library of Congress, « Art, Culture, and Government: The New Deal at 75 », colloque des 13-14 mars 2008.)

32 V. Grieve, *The Federal Art Project...*, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

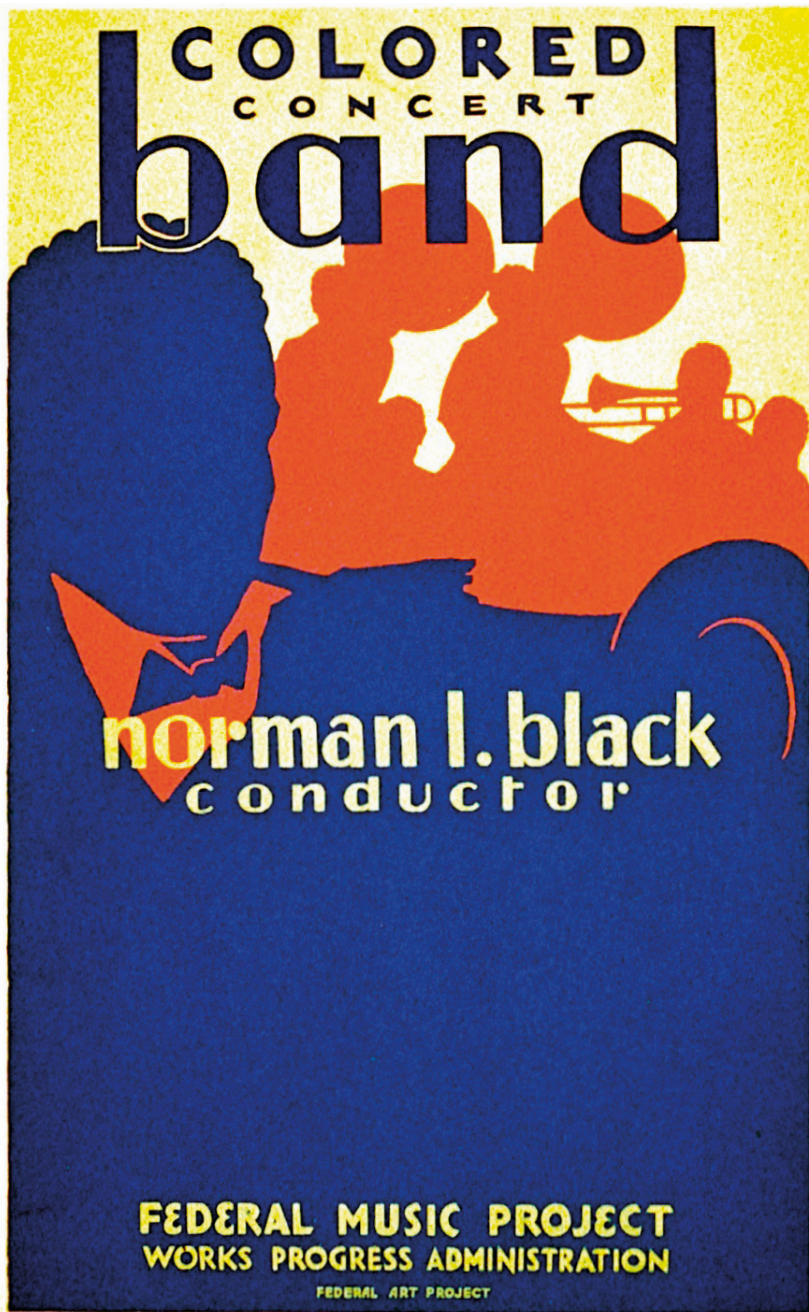
On peut évidemment penser, et à juste titre, que ce « désir populaire » était plus ambigu qu'il y paraît, à tout le moins difficile à définir et probablement plus clivant que consensuel. En réalité, le *New Deal* fut un grand moment de questionnement sur l'identité américaine mais un questionnement qui s'est beaucoup moins effectué sur le mode d'une fermeture anglo-américano-centrée, que sur celui de tentatives d'ouverture vers une société pluraliste et démocratique. Un renversement de perspective s'impose donc : à bien des égards, on retrouve dans nombre de programmes du *New Deal*, les injonctions de Bourne quelque vingt ans plus tôt. De même, comme l'écrit Hirsch, le *Federal Writers' Project* recherchait, sans d'ailleurs en être toujours pleinement conscient, et tout autant que les écrivains de la « Renaissance américaine », à proposer une forme d'Amérique transnationale qui intégrerait les multiples courants culturels des États-Unis dans une culture « médiane ». Il semble s'inventer ici un *mainstream* qui ne se contenterait pas d'être une simple culture commerciale asservie à celle du groupe dominant, pas plus qu'une donnée figée, mais plutôt une forme mobile, image, représentation et traduction d'une Amérique elle-même mouvante, mobile et plurielle<sup>33</sup>.

Parmi les différents programmes, il y a bien sûr le *Federal Theater Project*, mais aussi le *Federal Music Project* dont l'importance est un peu minorée mais qui a beaucoup compté dans la construction de ce *mainstream*, ne serait-ce que parce que la musique est un art populaire au sens plein du terme<sup>34</sup>. Le succès du *Federal Music Project* est aussi dû à la nature *a priori* moins politique de la musique comparée à d'autres arts, même si, elle aussi, est traversée par les clivages raciaux (fig. 4).

Opérant très tôt (1936) dans les grandes villes, le *Federal Music Project* s'étend rapidement – en un an et demi – à presque tous les États (42 sur les 48 que comptent alors les États-Unis). Les chiffres sont éloquentes : le *Federal Music Project* a employé plus d'agents que n'importe quel autre programme (jusqu'à 16 000), touché jusqu'à 160 millions de personnes (la population des États-Unis en 1940 est de

33 J. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, op. cit., p. 14.

34 L'autre art populaire est le cinéma – et l'on sait combien celui-ci comptait pour les hommes politiques, à commencer par Roosevelt lui-même. Mais le cinéma, déjà une immense industrie au début des années 1930, restera extérieur aux interventions officielles du gouvernement fédéral, du moins jusqu'à l'entrée en guerre des États-Unis. L'histoire des rapports entre Hollywood et la politique en 1930-1940 a été faite et il n'est pas besoin d'y revenir. Si la grande majorité des films relèvent de l'*entertainment*, et sont bridés par le code Hays, on en trouve aussi un grand nombre au message plus ou moins édifiant, les westerns d'abord mais aussi des comédies telles la célèbre *Ruggles of Red Gap* (1935) qui reste l'un des grands exemples de combinaison entre *entertainment* et didactisme.



4. Federal Music Project, *Colored concert band*, Norman L. Black, conductor. Illinois: Federal Art Project, s.d. (source: [Bibliothèque du Congrès](#)).

132 millions d'habitants) à travers 250 000 programmes locaux. Lorsque la guerre débute, en 1941, le *Federal Music Project* avait joué 7300 compositions originales de 2 558 compositeurs américains (fig. 5).

Mais peut-être encore plus remarquable le *Federal Music Project* a constitué l'un des plus formidables programmes de ce que l'on appelait en France l'*éducation populaire*, à travers la pratique et l'éducation musicales, en particulier en direction des populations moins favorisées, surtout dans les zones rurales<sup>35</sup>. Le *Federal Music Project* a même eu un grand écho chez les musiciens étrangers qui y ont vu précisément cette tentative à la fois de donner à entendre de la musique et de permettre au plus grand nombre d'avoir accès à la pratique musicale<sup>36</sup>.

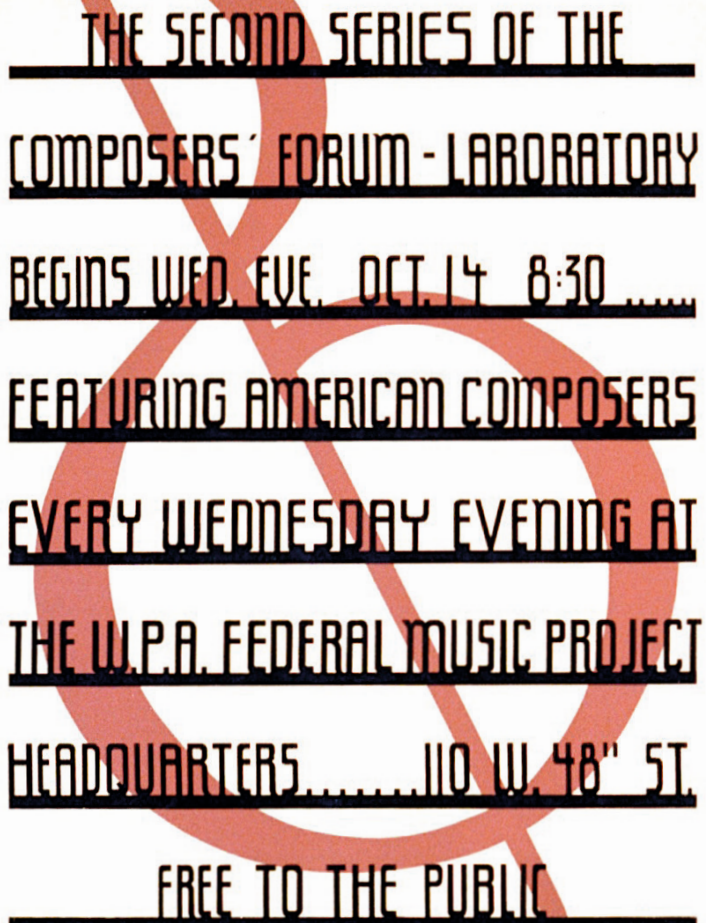
32 Il n'est bien entendu pas question de prétendre que le *New Deal* fut un grand moment d'harmonie où les différentes minorités de la société américaine connurent une merveilleuse forme de promotion, en tout cas pas dans les termes dans lesquels on le réclame aujourd'hui. Cette vision qui s'opposerait à la doxa longtemps acceptée serait elle-même un dangereux contresens. Il n'est pourtant pas plus question de défausser le *New Deal* de ses responsabilités en mettant en avant un *Zeitgeist* (« c'était comme ça à l'époque ») et une *realpolitik* (« il fallait bien faire des compromis »). Les deux positions seraient gravement antihistoriques : anachroniques et surtout moralisatrices. Et si le résultat est un paysage plus flou, plus confus, mais surtout qui se prête moins à des leçons pour le présent, c'est qu'il faut se méfier d'une conception de l'histoire qui servirait à notre édification car elle repose sur l'inévitable projection de nos désirs sur un passé qui n'en avait cure pour la simple raison qu'il ne nous connaissait pas.

Pour le dire très directement, nous ne sommes pas nous-mêmes condamnés à céder aux sirènes du « passé utilisable ». Et si le *New Deal* peut nous intéresser aujourd'hui, ce n'est pas pour en tirer des leçons pour un présent déboussolé. En tout cas pas de façon mécanique. Plutôt que de viser l'excellence, le *New Deal* visait l'engagement, la pratique, une forme de praxis sans laquelle le social disparaît, se délite, et avec lui le sens

35 Peter Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, Urbana/Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2015, p. 2.

36 « A London, England, magazine described the FMP as “the most important experiment in music ever undertaken by any people.” After attending a performance of a WPA opera in Los Angeles in 1938, the preeminent Austrian composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold concluded: “Nowhere in Europe is there anything that even compares with the Federal Music Project. Of course, we have state subsidized opera, but no country in Europe has anything to equal this.” » (*Ibid.*, p. 3.)





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même de notre humanité. Un travail sur l'histoire du *New Deal* nous permet de nous interroger sur une conception de la culture, au sens de « création » d'un part et au sens d'« éducation » d'autre part, qui ne soit pas directement un instrument de résolution des crises mais vue comme une activité qui, en soi, est constitutive d'une communauté.

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## NOTICE

Jean Kempf est professeur émérite de civilisation des États-Unis à l'université Lumière-Lyon 2. C'est un spécialiste de l'histoire de la photographie américaine au xx<sup>e</sup> siècle, d'abord avec sa thèse sur la section photographique de la *Farm Security Administration*, puis avec des articles sur la commande institutionnelle, les *street photographers* et les pratiques documentaires. Il s'intéresse aujourd'hui à la sociologie des milieux photographiques contemporains, et plus largement aux questions d'histoire culturelle des États-Unis, sujet sur lequel il a publié en 2015 une *Histoire culturelle des États-Unis* chez Belin, et en 2022, une étude sur les photographes de guerre contemporains (*Les Conquérants de l'Inutile. Photographes de conflits américains au tournant du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, aux Presses du Réel).

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## RÉSUMÉ

L'article s'interroge sur la permanence de l'intérêt pour le *New Deal* dans l'histoire américaine, une période qui n'a cessé d'être relue par les historiens. La réponse pour l'auteur tient dans l'existence d'une culture politique particulière, mélange d'originalité et de tradition. Réformiste dans un sens différent du Progressisme du début du siècle dont il semble pourtant être l'héritier, le *New Deal*, qui se déploie parallèlement à d'autres expériences sociales et politiques en Europe, a été en réalité porté par un fantasme, celui d'une société unifiée d'où auraient disparu les antagonismes de classe et de race, une actualisation de l'éternelle promesse américaine. Il apparaît donc que nombre de critiques portées à son encontre résultent de lectures anachroniques qui se sont plus intéressées à son bilan qu'à son projet.

## MOTS-CLÉS

États-Unis, *New Deal*, politique culturelle, *Federal Theater Project*, *Federal Music Project*, *Works Progress Administration*

## ABSTRACT

The New Deal has attracted a constant attention from American historians. Each generation has produced its own reading of this rather short but intense period. The author's argument to explain this rich and lively interest is that this is due to an original yet traditional political culture. The New Deal was reformist in a different sense from the Progressist era, and despite superficial similarities, was also different from other social and political experiments happening in Europe at the same time. Its originality is to be found in the fantasy of a society free from class or race struggles actualizing the American promise. Thus, much of the criticism it attracted over the years may be the result of anachronistic readings that have focused more on its results than on the project itself.

## KEYWORDS

United States, New Deal, Cultural policies, Federal Theater Project, Federal Music Project, Works Progress Administration



# THE FEDERAL THEATRE OF THE 1930S: AN EXPERIMENT IN THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF CULTURE

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## ORIGINS OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE

The Federal Theatre (FT), born in the United States during the height of the Great Depression, was a remarkable, albeit brief, experiment in government employment and the creation of a national theatre. There was nothing like it before or since. According to distinguished theatre critic, producer, and playwright, Robert Brustein, the FT “helped revolutionize our notions of the geography and purpose of the American stage.”<sup>1</sup> Richard Eyre, former director of Britain’s National Theatre called the FT “the most extraordinary phenomenon in American cultural history.”<sup>2</sup> The FT was one of four arts programs enacted as part of the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration (WPA). Although most WPA projects were in construction, the arts programs, known as Federal One, were part of the WPA’s effort to employ jobless cultural workers. WPA programs were intended to preserve workers’ talents and skills as well as restore the dignity that had been crushed by the Depression. New Dealers like President Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and WPA head Harry Hopkins believed the arts were part of the national wealth that America could not afford to lose, that they should belong to all the people, and that they could help rebuild the spirit of America if they were accessible to those who had never been to a play or dance program or seen a work of art.

The idea of a popular, non-commercial theatre was not new. During the progressive era (a period of political reform, c. 1890-1920) theatre reformers began talking about

- 1 Robert Brustein, “Hallie’s Comet: The Federal Theatre,” in Bonnie Nelson Schwartz and the Education Film Center (eds.), *Voices from the Federal Theatre*, Madison, U of Wisconsin P, 2003, p. xi.
- 2 Richard Eyre, “Former Director, National Theatre of Great Britain,” in B. Nelson Schwartz and the EFC (eds.), *Voices... op. cit.*, p.197.

it as a “communal instrument” dedicated to “public, not private ends.” Experimental or art theaters, usually associated with colleges and universities, presented innovative plays in isolated communities across the country.<sup>3</sup> However, increased railroad costs had made touring companies less profitable, and by the close of World War I, the Middle West, the Far West, and large parts of the South were deprived of first-rate theatre.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the commercial theatre, almost exclusively located in New York City, was charging prices few but the affluent could afford.<sup>5</sup>

40 Until the FT there had been no effort to create a national program. By 1932, **even commercial theatre was in trouble**. It had fallen victim to the practice of using theatres as real estate investments; syndicates that fostered a cross-country touring system; a monopoly booking system; the “star” system; long-running shows that destroyed repertory; type-casting that stifled actors’ development; and the practice of staging well-known rather than new plays.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, even before the 1930s the cinema had resulted in shuttering commercial theatres and reopening them as motion picture houses. By 1933, half the theatres in New York were dark; more than half the actors, unemployed; and a third of the plays were revivals. Road companies and vaudeville, popular from the 1880s until the early 1930s, no longer existed, resulting in thousands of actors fleeing to Hollywood to seek jobs as extras. Whether displaced technically or out of work because of the Depression, unemployed actors, playwrights, directors, stagehands, costumers, and circus performers numbered an estimated 20,000.<sup>7</sup>

While Hopkins initiated the New Deal’s FT, it was Hallie Flanagan, the program’s director, who gave it life and substance (fig. 1). Several seasoned theatre people had turned down Hopkins’ invitation to direct the FT, but as it turned out, Flanagan was probably the ideal director for the job.

A college classmate of Hopkins, she had directed Vassar College’s acclaimed Experimental Theatre that stressed original plays and designs and training in every phase of the theatre. Her approach to theatre had been influenced by two fellowships that had enabled her to study comparative theatre writing and production in Europe and Africa in

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3 Lorraine Brown, “Federal Theatre: Melodrama, Social Protest and Genius,” Washington, DC, Federal Theatre Project Collection.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Jane DeHart Matthews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1967, p.14.

6 Edith J.R. Isaacs, “Portrait of a Theatre: America-1935,” *Theatre Arts Monthly*, vol.17, no.1 January 1933, pp.32-42.

7 J. DeHart Matthews, *The Federal Theatre...*, *op. cit.*, p.27.



the 1920s. She returned with an extensive knowledge of theater and a passion for all its forms. It also convinced her:

[T]hat rigid adherence to any one school or cult hampered the theatre, and that every play dictated its own terms as to form of acting and as to design. It also proved to me that any person working in the field of the theatre should learn as much as he possibly could of history, literature, religion, languages, art, economics, science, in order that each play [...] might be informed from the past and integrated with the present.<sup>8</sup>

Flanagan's extensive knowledge of drama and theatre, her vision, integrity, originality and immense energy, her ability to bring out the best in artists and ignite the imagination and energy of others—as well as impatience with fools and incompetents—were qualities that made Flanagan the ideal director to turn the idea of a people's theatre into reality.<sup>9</sup>

Flanagan saw her task as that of producing a theatre with regional roots and socially relevant plays that would be offered free or at modest prices and that would be so vital to community life that it could form the foundation of a permanent, national theatre.<sup>10</sup> The United States never had a government-funded theatre, but from reading the inscriptions on stone theatres in Greece Flanagan concluded that: "Whatever had gone on had evidently been worth paying for out of government money [...]."<sup>11</sup> The design that began to take shape, however, would differ from European national theatres:



1. Hallie Flanagan, American Women Collection, Law Library of Congress.  
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.03004>.

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- 8 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Benjamin Blom, 1940, p.4.  
9 Robert Schnitzer, "Federal Theatre Project Administrator, Washington, DC," in B. Nelson Schwartz and the EFC (eds.), *Voices...*, *op. cit.*, p.116.  
10 H. Flanagan, "Manual for Federal Theatre Projects of the Works Progress Administration, October 1935," Federal Theatre Collection Administrative Records, Library of Congress; J. DeHart Matthews, *The Federal Theatre*, *op. cit.*, p. vii.  
11 *Id.*, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.5.

In Europe, although the pattern of a government-operated theatre differed from country to country, it was usually based on a somewhat arbitrary choice of the best possible company or companies, housed under the most advantageous conditions. *Here the main problem was to give work to theatre people on relief rolls, regardless of their excellence.*<sup>12</sup>

42 The dual purpose of the FT—to provide relief and achieve high-quality productions—would prove a severe artistic and political challenge but one well-suited to Flanagan who had produced noteworthy productions, largely with amateurs, at Vassar. Flanagan had decided that: “Knowledge of plays and techniques absorbed through years of theatre study here and abroad would be useful, but in the central conception what was immediately needed was a knowledge of the United States.”<sup>13</sup> Because Flanagan had lived in several parts of the country and traveled in every state, she felt confident in shaping a theatre that was as varied as the regional, ethnic and political diversity of her vast country. As the name implies, the FT would be modeled on the political structure of the United States: general policy and program hammered out in Washington, but implementation resting with the states and dictated by local conditions. It should also adapt to changing social conditions:

[T]he plays that we do and the ways that we do them should be informed by our consciousness of the art and economics of 1935 [...]. The stage [...] must experiment—with ideas, with psychological relationship of men and women, with speech and rhythm forms, with dance and movement, with color and light—or it must and should become a museum product.<sup>14</sup>

The Federal Theatre’s mission, as Flanagan interpreted it, was not only to entertain, but to produce works relevant to current social and political problems. This is how she expressed its mission:

In an age of terrific implications as to wealth and poverty, as to the function of government, as to peace and war, as to the relation of the artist to all these forces, the theatre must grow up. The theatre must become conscious of the implications of the changing social order, or the changing social order will ignore, and rightly, the implications of the theatre.<sup>15</sup>

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12 *Ibid.*, p.9 (emphasis added).

13 *Ibid.*, p.21.

14 *Ibid.*, pp.45-46.

15 *Ibid.*, p.46.

## STRUCTURE OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE

As the project evolved, five regional centers were established, each with a director who would represent the FT director in Washington: Northeast, Midwest, West, and South, with New York City constituting its own center. In cooperation with regional WPA officials, regional directors approved all appointments to superintendents' positions in their areas. Where possible, it was desirable to have local sponsors who could help make the project relevant to their communities. Regional directors were also responsible for designating a person or committee that could evaluate the qualifications of relief workers who were referred by the employment office and classify them by their level of skill and consequent wage scale. Persons found unqualified would be sent back to the employment service and reclassified for another kind of job.<sup>16</sup>

Theatre projects were housed in existing public theatres or non-profit private theatres of proven excellence, and their leaders were urged to cooperate in forming supplementary producing units. Universities with theatre departments could be used to test plays by native playwrights, to perform classic repertory, or to supplement their existing programs. Where no regional theatres were available, new, independent companies were encouraged. Each region would serve as a production and touring center for a professional company; a retraining center for actors of varying abilities and backgrounds; and a service, research, and playwriting center for the network of community theatres in that area. Each would work with nearby university and community theatres to develop playwrights who could produce a body of drama reflecting the history, tradition, and customs of that region.<sup>17</sup>

Since New York City was the theatrical center of the nation, five large units working on different theatrical forms were located there. These forms included: the Living Newspaper, a series of innovative productions focusing on salient issues in the news; the popular price theatre, designed to present original plays by new authors; the experimental theatre; and the tryout theatre. Additionally, there were actors from the Civil Works Administration (CWA), a previous New Deal program that employed a smaller number of actors on relief. These included a large Gilbert and Sullivan company, vaudeville units, marionette units, and a minstrel show. Further, new companies making use of a part of the personnel of the variety theatre were set up: one-act play units; classical repertory; poetic drama; children's theatre; Negro youth drama;

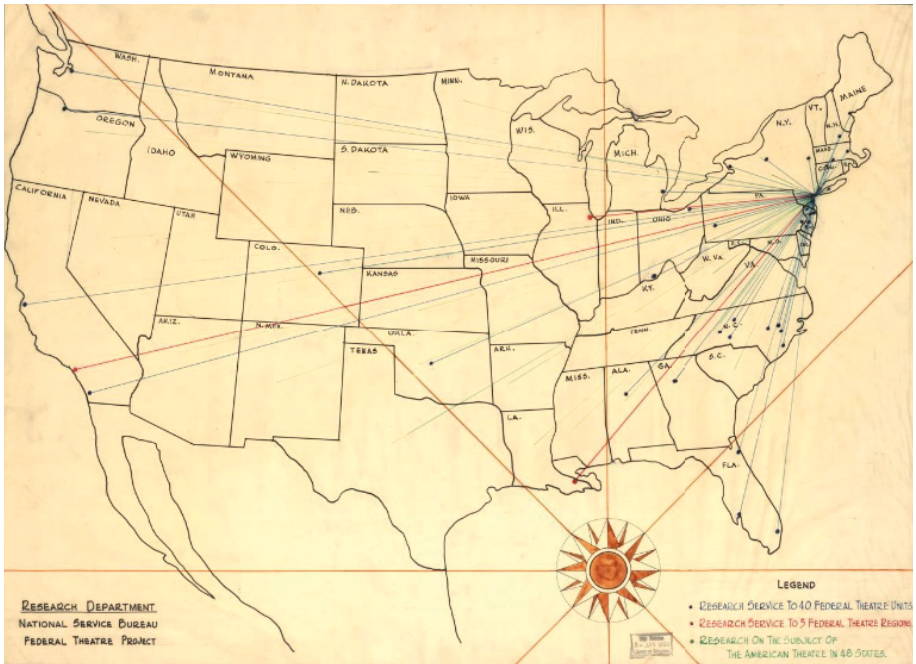
<sup>16</sup> H. Flanagan, *Manual...*, *op. cit.*, pp.7-8.

<sup>17</sup> J. DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre...*, *op. cit.*, p.31.

Yiddish vaudeville; German language classics; and Jewish classics in translation.<sup>18</sup> Each theatrical form could be implemented in various regions of the country.

New York City was also the hub of a national service bureau which synchronized national planning with regional production (fig.2). This bureau read plays from agents and authors and reported on their viability to FT directors. It also prepared bibliographies of available material; compiled original plays for production by special units; kept a record of plays produced by the FT; and conducted extensive research on US social conditions that could be used in plays—particularly for the Living Newspapers. The service bureau also produced a *Federal Theatre Magazine* that chronicled activities of this coast-to-coast enterprise, built *esprit de corps*, and was available without cost to projects throughout the country.<sup>19</sup>

44



2. Map showing research service to 40 FT units and 5 regional units, Federal Theatre Project's Research Service, Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress (006.00.00). Digital ID # q3701e.

18 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.59-60.

19 *Ibid.*, pp.63-64.

## THE FEDERAL THEATRE'S COMPLICATED MANAGEMENT

Getting the FT off the ground and maintaining it were no easy tasks. First was the fact that the US Treasury funds undergirding it were dependent on authorizations by both houses of Congress and were channeled to the finance division of WPA state offices, not directly to the FT. FT executives would then advise the WPA finance division in each state regarding the approximate amount of money needed in a particular community. Indicative of the primary relief function of the FT, non-labor costs were not to exceed ten percent of labor costs.<sup>20</sup> WPA legislation provided for no money to be collected by the project, but in January 1936, the Treasury Department approved modest admission charges. WPA Director Hopkins set these prices: free productions for under-privileged groups and, in rare cases, 10 cents, 25 cents, and 50 cents, but never to exceed \$1.00 for other groups.<sup>21</sup>

It is hardly surprising that a theatre dependent for funding on the political prejudices of a legislature primarily interested in relief rather than the arts would face myriad stumbling blocks. Bureaucratic delays in launching productions were understandable because government funding required the careful accounting of every penny as well as signoffs from a hierarchy of administrators not all sympathetic to the FT. Once the required number of applications were filled out, directors and applicants had to wait while the proposal made its way along the chain of command. Any error in filling out the forms meant repeating the entire procedure. It could sometimes take as long as seven weeks for approval.<sup>22</sup> The purchase of theatrical supplies was extremely difficult, since each play dictated its own needs, some of which were perishable commodities. For instance, a director needing a loaf of bread each night for a month's run might succeed—after hair-raising struggles—in delivery on opening night.<sup>23</sup>

A program meant for unemployment relief ran headlong into the goal of building a decentralized theatre that could attain the grassroots support necessary for permanence and, at the same time, reduce the overconcentration of theatrical workers in two or three large cities. Many areas of the country—especially the South and rural areas of the Midwest—had scant experience with theatre and few people qualified to put on dramatic productions. But regulations that prevented the transfer of personnel outside the area where they had registered for relief made it impossible to assemble theatrical

20 *Ibid.*, pp.32-33.

21 *Ibid.*, p.35.

22 J. DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre...*, *op. cit.*, p.48.

23 H. Flanagan, *Arena...*, *op. cit.*, p.34.

employees from over a large region, much less disperse them from the overcrowded centers of large cities. In some areas state WPA administrators made it impossible to set up sizeable projects. Eventually, this dilemma was overcome by traveling companies dispatched to areas lacking the requisite number of skilled people, accompanied by what Flanagan called a “flying squadron” consisting of a regional director, theatre director, stage designer and technician who would work with local groups.<sup>24</sup>

Another problem was that WPA administrators with backgrounds in industry often did not understand or appreciate the arts programs, requiring Harry Hopkins to issue a blistering demand for cooperation. “I want it distinctly understood that these projects are directed from Washington by the Federal Directors. These directors and their Regional Directors make all appointments, decide what people go to work and what sort of projects they work on.” One job of all WPA staff was “to expedite these projects by helping those in charge.”<sup>25</sup>

46

The FT also wrestled with the challenge of its dual goals: primarily providing relief to unemployed theatre people but also producing plays of high quality that would further the goal of creating a publicly funded national theatre. Hiring theatrical people was not as simple as employing unskilled construction workers. Auditions were needed to test the abilities of job applicants. Flanagan and New York director Elmer Rice explained to impatient WPA officials that the Theatre Project was not a construction project and that, if it were to be a theatre rather than a purely charitable venture, they must have time to obtain the most able, experienced people possible.<sup>26</sup> Although Flanagan sought to produce shows of the highest professional quality, it was not always possible. But if some of the shows were less than sterling, the program made up for it in the numbers of people reached and the variety of types of theatre offered.

Unions were another problem. Hopkins had insisted on complete cooperation with all unions, so long as there was no discrimination against non-union workers. But putting on a show required negotiating with as many as a dozen established unions, including the Workers Alliance, which was formed to represent non-unionized WPA workers. Established theatrical unions were often concerned that WPA wage scales would undercut their own and that their recruits could be tainted by amateurish productions with second-rate “relief” workers. Some regarded people on the project who did not belong to established unions as scabs, and older professional actors sometimes resented

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24 *Ibid.*, p.82.

25 Harry Hopkins, quoted in Flanagan to Regional Directors, January 8, 1936, RG 69, GSS-211.2 (J. DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, op. cit.*, pp.57-58).

26 *Ibid.*, p.49.

the presence of clerical workers. Many theatre owners in New York City feared that the FT, in providing shows free or for little, would undercut their own businesses. At the same time, they argued that the project would bring down the quality of theatre.<sup>27</sup> Thus, throughout its life, particularly initially, the program faced numerous obstacles.

Notwithstanding these challenges, FT administrators demonstrated they could mount shows that audiences loved, and the FT began to flourish. By March 13, 1936, it would claim 11,000 workers, twenty-two producing centers, and a weekly audience of 150,000 people. Yet the cost of such administrative difficulties was high. As a result of these obstacles, out of twenty-four directors originally hired, only eight of those would remain, with Hallie having to scout for replacements.<sup>28</sup>

## THE FEDERAL THEATRE'S CONTRIBUTION TO DEMOCRACY

Hallie Flanagan's signature gift to theatre was that it should contribute to building up democracy. She wrote:

Either the arts are not useful to the development of the great numbers of American citizens who cannot afford them; [...] or else the arts are useful in making people better citizens, better workmen, in short better-equipped individuals—which is, after all, the aim of a democracy. [...] Neither should the theatre in our country be regarded as a luxury. It is a necessity because in order to make democracy work the people must increasingly participate; they can't participate unless they understand; and the theatre is one of the great mediums of understanding.<sup>29</sup>

To that end, the FT offered its productions to diverse new audiences in cities, small towns and rural Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps. FT venues included not only theatres but schools, hospitals, asylums, prisons and reformatories, orphanages, parks, playgrounds, and houses of worship. One of the creative ways of bringing theatre to new audiences was New York City's Caravan Theatre which reached millions of the FT's targeted poor and working-class. For three summers, beginning in 1936, with productions ranging from classics to vaudeville, FT players brought live theatre to parks, baseball fields, and blocked-off streets in Manhattan's five boroughs by means of a portable stage, dressing rooms, costumes, lighting and sound equipment, all transported by a collapsible trailer towed to performances by tractors. These

27 Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, New York, Walker, 2008, p.52.

28 J. DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre...*, *op. cit.*, p.58.

29 H. Flanagan, *Arena...*, *op. cit.*, p.372.

performances played to over two-fifths of the total number attending FT shows in New York City, and 17 percent of the program's total audience nationwide during the program's four-year existence.<sup>30</sup>

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3. Children and adults at a FT performance in Central Park, New York City, photo by Dick Rose, Federal Theatre Project Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2011661685/>

The repertoire was as diverse as its audiences, including even the blind (fig.4 & 5). Among the numerous classical dramas catalogued in the [FT archives](#) were fourteen by Shakespeare; three by Moliere; two by Richard Brinsley Sheridan; and one each by Christopher Marlowe, Oliver Goldsmith, and Ben Johnson. Among the 349 plays categorized as “modern drama” were ten by Eugene O’Neill; eight by George Bernard Shaw; four by Maxwell Anderson; three by Henrik Ibsen; two by John Synge and

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth A. Osborne, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Recovering the Federal Theatre Project’s Caravan Theatre,” in *id.* and Christine Woodwork (eds.), *Working in the Wings*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois UP, 2015, pp.205-232. For size of audiences, see H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op.cit.*, p.435.



Thornton Wilder; and one each by Oscar Wilde, Anton Chekhov, Luigi Pirandello, and John Galsworthy.



4. Some of the varied repertoire of the Federal Theatre, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-theatre-project-1935-to-1939/>



5. More of the varied repertoire of the Federal Theatre, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-theatre-project-1935-to-1939/>

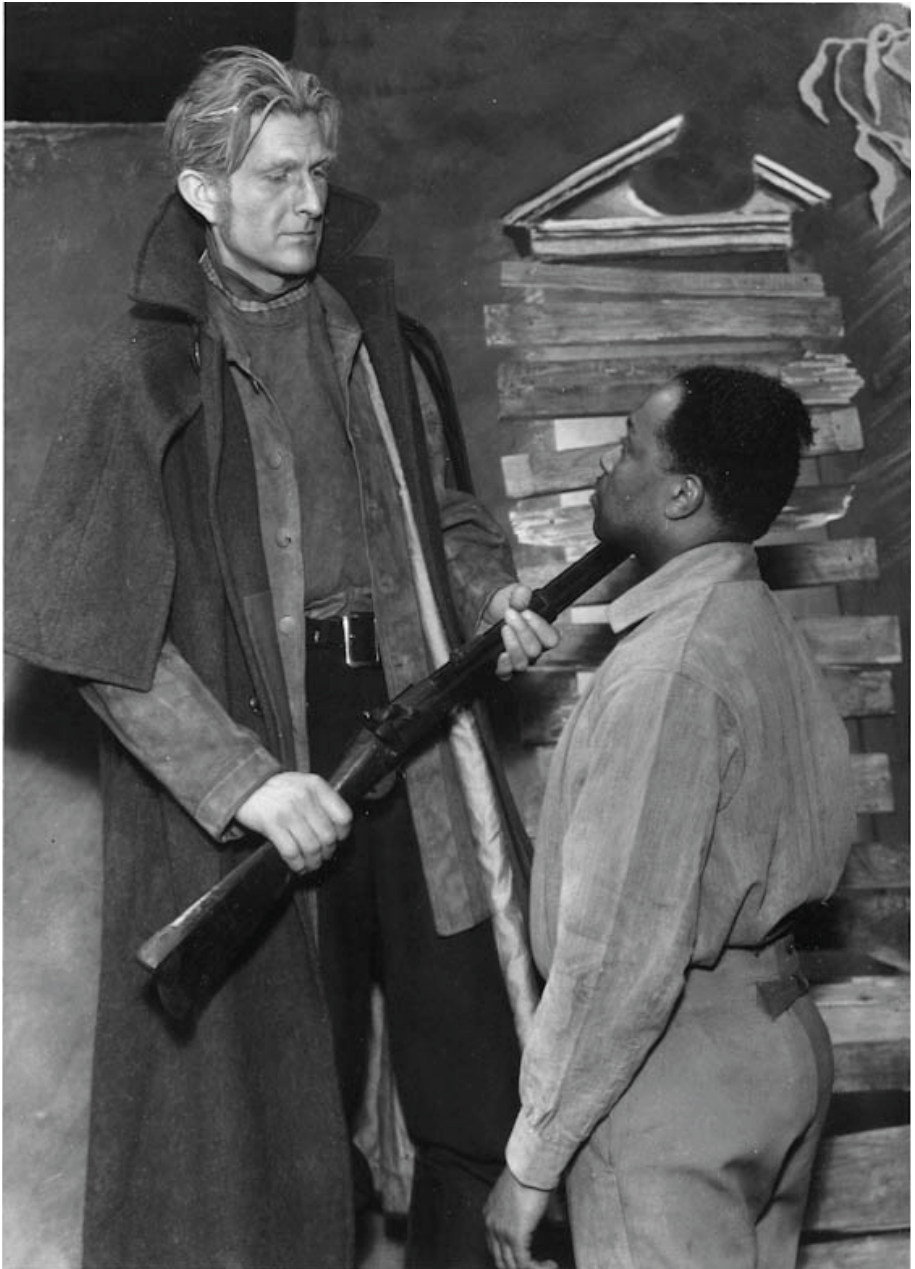
In addition, there were seventeen plays by native playwrights based on American history. Many of these, like *Created Equal*, based on the US Constitution, and *Battle Hymn*, about the anti-slavery champion John Brown, focused on the country's founding myths aiming to awaken the nation to its democratic ideal (fig.6 & 7).<sup>31</sup>



6. Scene from *Created Equal* Act 1, Scene 3, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ds.01244/>

Others were adaptations of classic American novels, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Little Women*. Musicals, comedies, light opera, dance drama, and radio drama were also offered. Among them were several by Gilbert and Sullivan, Victor Herbert, and Carl Maria von Weber. While some of these followed the standard repertoire, the FT turned others into original variations. Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, was transformed by an all-black cast into *Swing Mikado*, set on a Pacific South Sea island instead of Japan (fig.8).

31 Angela Sweigart-Gallagher, "John Hunter Booth's *Created Equal*: A Federal Theatre Model for Patriotism," *Journal of American Drama and Theater*, vol.24, no.2, Spring 2012, p.67.



7. Scene from *Battle Hymn* depicting John Brown and black slave, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum. <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/collections/franklin/index.php?p=digitalibrary/digitalcontent&id=3176>



8. Scene from *Swing Mikado*, *Coast to Coast: The Federal Theatre Project 1935-1939*, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/federal-theatre-project/gallery.html>

*The New York Times* theatre critic Brooks Atkinson, described it as:

[T]he Negro version of an impeccably Victorian theme, with the orchestra swinging some of the numbers and the performers swinging the choruses with the grinning exuberance of night club hot-cha. The orchestra goes on a bender, the performers grin and strut and begin stamping out the hot rhythms with an animal frenzy. All this is something to hear and see [...] one of the most enjoyable nights of the Gotham season.<sup>32</sup>

Children's drama consisted of adaptations of fairytales and books like Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* as well as newly written plays (fig.9).

Hundreds of thousands of children watched marionette and puppet shows (fig.10). At one time, twenty-two producing units, employing 358 persons, were presenting more than 100 performances a week to an average audience of 400.<sup>33</sup> An FT circus also operated in parks and armories to enthusiastic audiences (fig.11).

32 "Image Two of the *Swing Mikado*," Federal Theatre Collection, Library of Congress.

33 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.429.



9. Children's Unit, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, "WPA Fed Theatre Project in NY.Children's Theatre Unit, 'The Emperor's New Clothes,'" Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum. <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/collections/franklin/index.php?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=3817>



10. Marionette performance in Central Park, between 1935 and 1939. Coast to Coast: The Federal Theatre Project, 1935-1939, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress (084.00.00) Digital ID #ftp0084



11. Federal Theatre Circus, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ds.01244/>



12. Scene from *Murder in the Cathedral*, Library of Congress on permanent loan to George Mason University

For a country populated by immigrants, the FT provided foreign language dramas in French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Yiddish, usually using plays written by natives of those countries. Another innovation was religious drama which played in houses of worship. One of these, T.S. Eliot's verse play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, is one that probably no commercial theatre would undertake (fig.12).<sup>34</sup>



13. Some of the plays produced by the Negro Unit, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-theatre-project-1935-to-1939/>

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Among the most revolutionary innovations of the FT were the Negro Units. At a time of deep racial division in a country still using lynching to control its black population, Hallie Flanagan committed the FT to an enlightened racial policy that differed significantly, even from other New Deal programs. African Americans were to receive equal pay for equal work, not only as stagehands and technicians, but as dramatists, actors, directors, designers, and composers. As Rosetta LeNoire, who had acted in one of the Negro Units recalled: “It was the FT who gave us so many of our great actors, because they were permitted to play roles that they would never have been offered on Broadway.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, audiences were to be integrated. If a theatre refused to seat blacks and whites together, the FT would cancel the performance. Nor were racist employees tolerated.<sup>36</sup> During an era when the few theatrical parts for African Americans were in movies or minstrel shows that generally depicted them in demeaning, stereotypical roles, the FT’s seventeen Negro units not only gave them the opportunity to work as professionals, but to confront white power directly in their performances (fig.13). In *Go Down Moses*, for example, set during the Civil War, new Union army recruits prepare to attack a Confederate fort. They spur each other on, rehearsing the confrontation with white power on which their freedom depends and

S. COLLINS & G. SCHAFFNER GOLDBERG An Experiment in the democratization of culture

34 Robert Benchley, quoted in S. Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, op. cit., p.93.

35 Rosetta LeNoire, “Negro Theatre Unit, New York,” in B. Schwartz and the EFC (eds.), *Voices...*, op. cit., p.23.

36 S. Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, op. cit., p.99.

mocking the attempts of former slave-masters to control their identity as free men. For black men to compel white men to address them as equals was a radical act (fig. 14).<sup>37</sup>



14. Scene from Negro Unit's *The Conjur Man Dies*, image from 1936 production, New Federal Theatre. <https://newfederaltheatre.com/production/the-conjure-man-dies/>.

Negro units also gave African Americans the unprecedented opportunity to create black protagonists who did not conform to white stereotypes. For example, in *Natural Man*, long-standing theatrical traditions such as reinforcing white mastery through the enactment of abuses were reconfigured. This play, first staged by the Seattle Negro unit, featured iconic folk hero John Henry, the black steel-driving man who labored on the southern railroads and whose strength is exhibited in competition with the steam-drill. In most versions of the tale, John Henry dies from his extraordinary exertion, but not before he has beaten the machine and thus become a hero. The Seattle version subverts the traditional narrative. The black hero's suffering is not rewarded by whites' recognition of his virtue, nor is it redeemed through a triumphant death. No clear-cut moral is affirmed by John Henry's death. In portraying John Henry as a defeated hero in a society where black men who fight back are always punished, the drama questioned the price of being a victim-hero. Such a message was unsettling for audiences and radical for its time.<sup>38</sup>

37 Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2020, p.1.

38 *Ibid.*, pp.123-124. Witham, however, points out that some of the other characters in *Natural Man* did trade in stereotypes of black representation (Barry B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, New York, Cambridge UP, 2003, p.76).



In *Stevedore*, the theme of redemptive suffering is also subverted but not as its white, leftist playwrights had intended. The play traces the plight of black community stevedores in New Orleans in the wake of a white woman's false rape charge against a black man and its resistance to an impending lynch mob. The play climaxes as a black woman brandishing a gun, aims a lethal shot at a white man, and proclaims: "I got him! That red-headed son-of-bitch, I got him!" Such a depiction of black resistance was almost unheard of in the American theatre. But as performed by black actors, the play did something else. Its authors had envisaged it as a labor play about interracial unionism in which white unionists come to the rescue of black stevedores. In the FT version, the black community had already constructed a barricade and begun to fight, causing the interracial ending to appear as tacked on and unrealistic. The play's message: blacks were the agents of their own liberation.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the legacy of racist caricature that still hung over the FT, Negro Units were able to sever the children's story, *Little Black Sambo*, from its minstrel overtones.<sup>40</sup> All this enlightened racial policy occurred while other New Deal programs were underserving African Americans or, in the case of Social Security, omitting coverage of occupations in which large numbers of blacks were employed.

Not all Negro Unit plays were focused on race relations or traditional African American culture like *Walk Together, Chillun!* a drama laced with Negro spirituals. Under the direction of John Houseman, half the Negro unit produced plays by and for African Americans in their own locales, addressing contemporary issues. The other half focused on the classical repertoire.<sup>41</sup> This was the approach taken in *Macbeth*, one of the most important and sensational productions of the FT. Under the direction of the young Orson Welles, *Macbeth* was set in Haiti during the nineteenth century, a time of turmoil comparable to the violent events of the Scottish play, with the witches using voodoo to conjure up their "double, double toil and trouble." This precedent-setting production was "the first full-scale professional Negro Shakespearean production in theatrical history."<sup>42</sup> *Voodoo Macbeth* was an immediate sensation. Set in the Lafayette theatre in Harlem, the play was wildly popular. At 6.30pm on opening night,

39 *Ibid.*, pp.41-42.

40 Leslie Elaine Frost, *Dreaming America*, Columbus, Ohio State UP, pp.74-75.

41 John Houseman, though white, had been hired to head the Negro unit in Harlem because it was thought by blacks that he could go downtown without being thrown off the elevator or insulted before he got into the building. He was originally to have had a black female co-director, Rose McLendon, but she died of cancer before the project could get off the ground.

42 S. Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, *op. cit.*, pp.100-104.

10,000 people stood as close as they could get to the theatre, jamming the avenue for ten blocks and halting northbound traffic for more than an hour (fig.15).



15. Crowd outside Lafayette Theatre on opening night, Classical Theatre, « Voodoo » *Macbeth*, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/federal-theatre-project/gallery.html>.

All the Lafayette's 1,223 seats were taken, and scalpers were getting \$3 for a pair of 49-cent tickets. "The lobby was so packed that people couldn't get to their seats," causing a delay in the start of the program.<sup>43</sup> The next day Brooks Atkinson commented on the Theatre's lavish production values:

They [the witches from *Macbeth*] have always worried the life out of the polite tragic stage; the grimaces of the hags and the garish make-believe of the flaming caldron have bred more disenchantment than anything else Shakespeare wrote. But ship the witches down into the rank and fever-stricken jungles of Haiti, dress them in fantastic

43 "The Play That Electrified Harlem," Federal Theatre Project Collection, 1935-1939, Library of Congress; and "Crowds Jam Streets as 'Macbeth' Opens," *The New York Times*, April 15, 1936, p.25.

costumes, crowd the stage with mad and gabbling throngs of evil worshippers, beat the voodoo drums, raise the voices until the jungle echoes, stuff a gleaming naked witch doctor into the caldron, hold up Negro masks in the baleful light—and there you have a witches' scene that is logical and stunning and a triumph of theatre art.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the enthusiastic audiences and positive reviews like this one, Witham points out that the Negro Units continued to face racism and could never overcome the perception that they weren't quite legitimate.<sup>45</sup>

## THE LIVING NEWSPAPER

The Living Newspaper is a prime example of the Federal Theatre's contribution to democracy as well as of the innovations achieved by the FT in dramaturgy and stage design. Playwright Arthur Miller, who joined the FT as a jobless college graduate, considered the Living Newspaper "the one big invention of the theatre in our time."<sup>46</sup> "It was logical," Flanagan wrote, "that a theatre which had its root in economic need should be concerned in some of its plays with economic conditions"<sup>47</sup> (fig. 16).

According to Arthur Arent, author of *One-Third of a Nation*, one of the most successful of these plays: "The Living Newspaper is a dramatization of a problem composed in greater or lesser extent of many news events all bearing on the same subject and inter-larded with typical but not factual representation of the effect of these news events on the people to whom the problem is of great importance."<sup>48</sup>

It was not only the subject of these plays that departed from the mainstream of the American theatre. The technique was innovative, an experiment in making factual material dramatically effective by means of lighting, sound, acrobatics or cinematics.<sup>49</sup> Living Newspapers used newsreels, still photographs, live actors, music, and song. The technique was admirably suited to a project with little money and lots of people to employ. As Flanagan told Hopkins: "We could dramatize the news without expensive

44 Brooks Atkinson, "The Play; 'Macbeth', or Harlem Boy Goes Wrong Under Auspices of Federal Theatre Project," *The New York Times*, April 13, 1936, p.25.

45 B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, *op. cit.*, p.61.

46 Arthur Miller, "Federal Theatre Playwrighting Division," in B. Nelson Schwartz and the EFC (eds.), *Voices...*, *op. cit.*, p.140.

47 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.* p.183.

48 Arthur Arent, "The Technique of the Living Newspaper," *Federal Theatre Magazine*, vol.1, no.5, January-March 1973, p.76, cited in Stuart Cosgrove, *The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form*, PhD Dissertation, University of Hull, East Riding, p. v.

49 H. Flanagan, Speech delivered in Birmingham, Alabama (n.d.), Hallie Flanagan Papers, New York Public Library, cited *ibid.*, p.104.

scenery,” reminding him that the documentary dramas she had produced at Vassar had cost next to nothing.<sup>50</sup>



16. Scene from a Living Newspaper depicting striking workers. Art for Social Change Toolkit. <https://artforsocialchangetoolkit.wordpress.com/history/livingnewspapers/#jp-carousel-141>

Cosgrove writes that Flanagan and her associates built on its European antecedents.<sup>51</sup> He traces it to the attempt of the Bolshevik government to establish a vast apparatus of information, news, education, and agitprop propaganda in the face of wide-scale illiteracy. Such leading dramatists as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Berthold Brecht, and Erwin Piscator were associated with the development of the Living Newspaper and its use by the radical workers' movement in Eastern and Central Europe in the early twentieth century. In visiting Russia, Flanagan had encountered and admired the work of these dramatists.<sup>52</sup> Biographer Joanne Bentley, discussing Flanagan's European tour,

50 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, New York, Knopf, 1988, p.210.

51 S. Cosgrove, *The Living Newspaper*, *op. cit.*, esp. "Introduction: What Is Living Newspaper," pp. iii-xi; and Chap.1, "Origins and Development," pp.1-32.

52 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.65-77.

notes she was enthusiastic about the shows put on by the Blue Blouses, a dramatic troupe which “had evolved from a form of educational entertainment that dramatized the news and came to be known as Living Newspapers.”<sup>53</sup> Norman Lloyd, who acted in several Living Newspapers, writes that his first knowledge of the concept came from Piscator, and that it was brought to the US by Flanagan who put on a living newspaper at Vassar called *E=mc<sup>2</sup>*.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps because the FT, and especially the Living Newspaper, were attacked for Communist or leftist leanings, Flanagan tended to underplay foreign influences on the technique, turning it into a more moderate instrument of social reform.

Of course, certain of their elements had been used, for like all so-called new forms the living newspaper borrowed from many sources: from Aristophanes, from the Commedia dell’Arte, from Shakespearean soliloquy, from the pantomime of Mei Lan Fang. [...] Although it has occasional reference to the Volksbühne and the Blue Blouses, to Bragaglia and Meierhold [referred to as Meyerhold above] and Eisenstein, it is as American as Walt Disney, the March of Time, and the Congressional Record, to all of which American institutions it is indebted.<sup>55</sup>

## “FREE, ADULT, AND UNCENSORED:” THE CONTROVERSIAL LEGACY OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE

In calling for a federal theatre Harry Hopkins had stated that he wanted “a free, adult, and uncensored” theatre,<sup>56</sup> but in a time of deep political divisions and anti-communist hysteria that promise was hard to keep. Many who gravitated to the FT during this period were professed leftists and some were Communists. Despite Flanagan’s attempts to keep her plays free from what might be considered political bias, she could not fully control what might be produced. This became apparent when the first Living

53 *Ibid.*, pp.72-73.

54 Norman Lloyd, “Living Newspaper Unit, New York,” in B. Nelson Schwartz and the EFC (eds.), *Voices...*, *op. cit.*, p.20.

55 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.70. *The March of Time* was a short film series reporting the news and shown in movie theaters from 1935 to 1951.

56 Stated by Hopkins on August 27, 1935 in answer to a question of whether a theatre run by the government could be free by a participant at a National Theatre Conference at the University of Iowa, Iowa City at which the National Theatre was announced. The statement has been quoted numerous times by those who have written about the FT (see for example, H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.28; and J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.193).

Newspaper fell victim to government censors. Flanagan wrote that the first attempt “to create an authoritative dramatic treatment, at once historic and contemporary, of current problems,” was *Ethiopia*; “a subject chosen partly because it was the big news of the moment” and partly, because one of the first groups of actors sent from the relief office was from an African operatic company stranded in the US after a brief season.<sup>57</sup> The authors of *Ethiopia* saw it as an opportunity to speak out against the dangers of fascism, and so did Flanagan.<sup>58</sup> Mussolini had just invaded Ethiopia, and the documentary asked why the democracies had not put a stop to the invasion.

62 *Ethiopia* ran into trouble when the White House Press Secretary was shown the script in which Mussolini, the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, French Prime Minister Pierre Laval, and British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden were impersonated. The Secretary’s response was that a play dealing with foreign relations was “dangerous” and particularly so if foreign dignitaries were impersonated. The intervention of Eleanor Roosevelt who was very supportive of the FT was to no avail. The President ruled that the play could only open if no foreign dignitaries were represented in person. Under these conditions, *Ethiopia* was cancelled, Elmer Rice, the playwright and producer in charge of the FT in New York resigned, and Hallie herself veered toward the same but decided to stay. Brooks Atkinson, who had seen the play in rehearsal, praised it, admitting that the government’s unwillingness to sponsor it was understandable but regrettable. “[T]he theatre is reduced to innocuous commonplaces when it has to conform to diplomatic manners. This episode [...] shows how utterly futile it is to expect the theatre to be anything more than a sideshow under government supervision.”<sup>59</sup> Flanagan disagreed. She told her regional directors: “We are finding out something about the relationship of the government to the theatre. Let us proceed on the assumption that by exercising care we can do the sort of plays we want to do.”<sup>60</sup>

“Facts,” Flanagan wrote, “are highly explosive, and hence any plays based on fact must be carefully documented and handled with judicious restraint.”<sup>61</sup> That is why, compared to the number of scripts submitted, the number of Living Newspapers actually produced were few. *Injunction Granted*, a play about the history of labor in the courts, opened but with a run curtailed by Flanagan. There was much to recommend the production, but after Flanagan attended the rehearsal, she asked the writers to

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57 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.65.

58 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.211-212.

59 Brooks Atkinson, “‘Ethiopia,’ The First Issue of the Living Newspaper Which the Federal Theatre Cannot Publish,” *New York Times*, January 25, 1936, p.18.

60 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.215.

61 *Ibid.*

“clean up the script and make it more objective.”<sup>62</sup> Instead, they made changes that she felt hurt the production. Attending the opening night, she was shocked, particularly by the scene in which Supreme Court Justices were shown sleeping. She considered it “bad journalism and hysterical theatre.”<sup>63</sup> It did not matter to her that the play was drawing crowds. She wrote to the director of the Living Newspaper unit and the director of the play: “I will not have the Federal Theatre used politically. I will not have it used to further the ends of the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, or the Communist Party.”<sup>64</sup>

*Triple-A Plowed Under*—dealing through pantomimes, skits, and radio broadcasts with the severe hardships of American farmers, the reasons for their immiseration, and efforts to solve their problems—was the Living Newspaper’s first success.<sup>65</sup> The play’s title refers to the Agricultural Adjustment Agency (AAA) that was established by the New Deal to cope with the problems of over-production and depressed farm prices by paying farmers to plow under their crops. Two months before *Triple-A* premiered, in January 1936, the Act itself had been judged unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, hence “plowed under” (fig. 17).



17. Scene from *Triple A Plowed Under*, “WPA Fed Theatre Project in NY. Living Newspaper production of ‘AAA Plowed Under,’” Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum. <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/collections/franklin/index.php?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=3171>

62 *Ibid.*, p.235.

63 *Ibid.*, p.72.

64 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.72-73.

65 Robert Brustein, “Hallie’s Comet: The Federal Theatre,” in Nelson Schwartz and the EFC (eds.), *Voices...*, *op. cit.*, p.xiv.

Although Flanagan was not concerned about its “facts,” the play remained in the radical vein, ending with the suggestion that farmers and workers unite to cut out the middlemen who were the villains of the piece—then a current position of the Communist Party. The play was applauded by critics such as Atkinson, who called it “hard hitting” and “frequently brilliant,” but came under fire from the Hearst press and from conservatives in Congress. When Harry Hopkins was asked at a Congressional hearing whether government funds should be used to produce propagandistic plays like *Triple-A*, he replied that it was just a dramatic version of the news, “something like the March of Times in the movies.”<sup>66</sup>

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Two Living Newspapers published after *Injunction* and *Triple-A* were less radical than these earlier attempts and more akin to the reformist bent of the New Deal. *Power* dramatized government provision of electrical power to the nation’s farmers, 90 percent of whom had been without it at the outset of the New Deal. *Power* was basically about the New Deal’s Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the struggle of farmers to get the electrical power the private utilities would not give them. This play introduced the “consumer,” dubbed Angus K. Buttoncooper, who appeared throughout the play, asking questions and receiving explanations, and who reappeared in the Living Newspaper’s subsequent smash hit, *One-Third of a Nation*.<sup>67</sup> Sixty thousand people in New York City bought tickets for *Power* before it opened<sup>68</sup>.

*One-Third of a Nation* took its name and its subject from FDR’s second inaugural address: “I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.” The play is about the historical development of slums and their tragic consequences. The New York production had a spectacular set, a 45-foot high tenement house made of steel-pipe scaffolding with pieces from tenements dangling from it—tin cornices, balustrades, and other pieces rescued from tenements (fig. 18). In the opening scene, the tenement is burning. It was produced in New York and nine additional cities where it was adapted to specific community conditions.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, representing the most progressive wing of the New Deal, believed that *One-third of a Nation* achieved “something which we will be grateful for many years to come, something which will mean a tremendous amount [...] socially, and in the education and growing-up of America.”<sup>69</sup> After seeing the play,

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66 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.224.

67 Norman Lloyd, “Living Newspaper Unit, New York,” in B. Schwartz and the EFC, *Voices...*, *op. cit.*, p.28. Lloyd played Buttoncooper in *Power*.

68 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.184.

69 *Ibid.*, p.222.



Eleanor Roosevelt wrote this in her popular syndicated column: “[...] I think the WPA has made a remarkable contribution to civic education.”<sup>70</sup>



18. Scene from *One-Third of a Nation*, Coast to Coast: The Federal Theatre Project, 1935-1939, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/federal-theatre-project/gallery.html>

Despite the failure of more progressive Living Newspaper productions, Hallie Flanagan remained determined to bring controversial issues before the public. In the summer of 1936, she urged her supervisors and directors to suggest ideas that would make the theatre more responsive to “an age of expanding consciousness”—by which she meant that the dangers of fascism were beginning to be understood.<sup>71</sup> Americans’ fears were understandable. With severe economic depression threatening political collapse, Franklin Roosevelt had become president only three months after Hitler seized power in Germany and Mussolini’s fascism had ruled Italy for some time. Unemployment in 1936, after the New Deal infusions, still stood at 17 percent, and fascist movements were on the rise in the US. In response to Flanagan’s call for relevance, one of the FT supervisors suggested: “Why not get Sinclair Lewis to dramatize *It Can’t Happen Here*

<sup>70</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *My Day*, March 4, 1938.

<sup>71</sup> J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

and do it all over the country?”<sup>72</sup> The year before, Lewis, who had won the 1930 Nobel Prize for Literature, had published a harrowing tale of a Nazi takeover of the US. Lewis was happy to accept Flanagan’s invitation to dramatize his novel and he and playwright Jack Moffitt, along with a committee of people across the country, worked to turn the novel into a play. Flanagan wanted to open the play two weeks before the upcoming November election of 1936—a referendum on FDR’s New Deal.

As literary critic Michael Meyer wrote, Sinclair’s bestselling novel “gave shape to the free-floating anxieties that had consumed worried citizens for several years as the country stumbled through economic turmoil desperately seeking solutions.”<sup>73</sup> Meyer also cites the debates about whether fascism would come to America that were “swirling around him in newspapers, journals, and books.”<sup>74</sup>

66 The novel describes the rise to power of Berzelius “Buzz” Windrip, a demagogue who is elected President of the United States, promising drastic economic and social reforms and promoting a return to patriotism and “traditional” values. After his election, Windrip follows the script for fascist takeovers: seizing complete control of the government—eliminating the influence of the legislature, and outlawing dissent—all with the help of a ruthless paramilitary force or Gestapo, named Minute Men. The hero, Doremus Jessup, a liberal newspaper editor, slow to wake up to the fascist threat, ultimately takes part in a widespread liberal rebellion.

As Flanagan later wrote: “Few plays would justify nationwide openings.”<sup>75</sup> *It Can’t Happen Here*, she observed, fit the FT’s emphasis on contemporary American material by one of the country’s most distinguished writers. And it was a play “based on a burning belief in democracy.”<sup>76</sup> Lewis wanted the widest audience for his theme, and gave it to the FT. Flanagan would later refer to producing *It Can’t Happen Here* as the “funniest, craziest and most exciting” days of her life<sup>77</sup> (fig. 19).

It took considerable courage on the part of Flanagan and the FT to tackle *It Can’t Happen Here*. As the *Hollywood Citizen-News* wrote: “Where the motion pictures feared to tread, the FT tomorrow night will step boldly into the limelight of a controversial issue [...]”<sup>78</sup> According to *Theatre Arts Monthly*: “There is no other theatre in America

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72 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.116.

73 Michael Meyer, “Introduction,” in Sinclair Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here*, New York, New American Library, 2005, p. vi.

74 *Ibid.*

75 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.120.

76 *Ibid.*

77 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.142.

78 Quoted in H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.117.

that would have the courage to announce a dramatization of Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* to be offered simultaneously in fifteen cities [...]."<sup>79</sup> *It Can't Happen Here* opened on October 27th, just a week before the November-3rd election, playing in twenty-one theatres in seventeen states, not only in English but in Spanish and Yiddish as well—clearly a significant step toward Flanagan's goal of creating a national theatre.



19. Scene from *It Can't Happen Here*, Federal Theatre Project, NY. Jewish Theatre Unit Production, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum. <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/collections/franklin/?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=3137>

Despite some less than rave reviews from New York critics (but more positive ones from those outside New York) and Flanagan's own assessment that it had fallen short of her theatrical standards, *It Can't Happen Here* enjoyed long runs. By the time the last curtain descended, it had played for a total of 260 weeks or the equivalent of five years. Three companies in New York totaled 314 performances, and companies in Boston, Newark, Detroit, Los Angeles, Miami, and Tacoma went on tour.<sup>80</sup> Flanagan felt that the play had achieved something important: "Above all it was significant that hundreds of thousands of people all over America crowded in to see a play which says

79 Quoted *ibid.*, p.118.

80 *Ibid.*, p.244.

that when dictatorship threatens a country it does not necessarily come by way of military invasion, that it may arrive in the form of a sudden silencing of free voices.”<sup>81</sup>

More controversial than *It Can't Happen Here* was *The Cradle Will Rock*: “[A] labor opera inspired by Brecht’s *Three Penny Opera*, that was shut down before it opened.”<sup>82</sup> *Cradle* featured an eclectic assortment of theatrical and musical genres: recitatives, arias, revue patterns, tap dances, suites, chorales, continuous commentary music, and lullabies.<sup>83</sup>

68 *Cradle* was written by Marc Blitzstein, who is often referred to as the “social conscience of American music.” Blitzstein was part of a Marxist-inspired group committed to writing “relevant” music that would stir the masses.<sup>84</sup> He set *Cradle* in a fictional company town, Steeltown, USA, on a night when the workers gather in the streets and threaten to strike—actions close to what was happening in 1937, a year in which class warfare seemed a real possibility. The story is one of corporate greed and corruption featuring a rogue’s gallery of bourgeois hypocrites and abettors, all under the control of Mr. Mister, the man who owns Steeltown. The drama climaxes as workers come marching in to the sound of fife and drum their voices rising in a reprise of the marching song, “[The Cradle Will Rock](#).”

The true story of what happened to *The Cradle Will Rock* is one of the most dramatic in the history of American theatre, making it the subject of several revivals as well as a 1999 movie by Tim Robbins, which captures the frenetic chaos, excitement, and edgy political atmosphere of the times. *Cradle* proved to be too much for the FT’s political opponents. On the night of its final rehearsal, before its previews were to begin, an order was received from Washington (under the guise of budget cuts) to shut it down. Security guards were sent to confiscate all of the government “property,” including sets, musical scores, costumes, underwear, and wigs. Opposed even by theatre unions, the intrepid troupe, including its producer John Houseman and director Orson Welles, were determined to carry on. Deprived of a theatre, costumes and props, as well as the imprimatur of their unions, the entire cast and a large crowd that had gathered marched several blocks to an abandoned theatre. By 9:00pm that night the show went on—with Blitzstein belting out the songs on stage on a rickety piano and members of the company speaking and singing their parts from the audience.

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81 *Ibid.*, p.129.

82 While on a trip to the US, Brecht had encouraged Blitzstein to write a piece about “all kinds of prostitution—the press, the courts, the arts, the whole system.” (Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1989, p.113.)

83 S. Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, *op. cit.*, p.164.

84 E. Gordon, *Mark the Music*, *op. cit.*, p.xv.

The improvised *Cradle* was such a success that it ran for ten more days to packed houses. Houseman's and Welles' defiance of WPA orders resulted in their being fired, after which they opened their own theatre, the Mercury, and proceeded to produce the play there. The attack on *Cradle*, however, was the opening salvo in a campaign by right wing forces to shut down the bold experiment that had been initiated by Hopkins and Flanagan.

## REVOLT OF THE BEAVERS, THE DEATH OF PINOCCHIO AND THE END OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE

By 1938, the popularity of FDR and the New Deal were waning. The Depression was in its ninth year and had recently worsened following FDR's attempt to balance the budget—leading to what was termed “a depression within the Depression.” Moreover, major New Deal programs had been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. The growing power of organized labor, fostered by New Deal legislation, was anathema to conservative legislators of both parties. In the 1938 mid-term elections, FDR's party lost ground, and some Democrats were no longer committed to the New Deal.

Always beset by criticism—despite Flanagan's efforts to “stick to the facts”—the New Deal arts programs now had a more formidable enemy in the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). According to New Deal historian William E. Leuchtenburg: “Nothing divulged the sourish spirit of 1938 better than the creation of the House Committee on Un-American Activities.”<sup>85</sup> HUAC's attack on the Federal One Theatre and Arts programs is estimated to have exceeded more column inches of space than that given to any other organization in the country.<sup>86</sup>

To HUAC, Un-American Activities meant alleged Communist activities. It largely ignored fascism even though much pressure for the inquiry had come from anti-fascist congressmen.<sup>87</sup> HUAC did not offer witnesses with the safeguards of the US judicial system. It was “the first congressional committee to take full advantage of its power to punish with subpoenas and contempt citations and to harm witnesses through insinuations and publicity.”<sup>88</sup> In dealing with the Committee, Ellen S. Woodward, who headed the Women's Division of the WPA and was the administrator of Federal One,

85 William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, New York, Harper & Row, 1963, p.280.

86 J. DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre*, *op. cit.*, p.224.

87 *Ibid.*

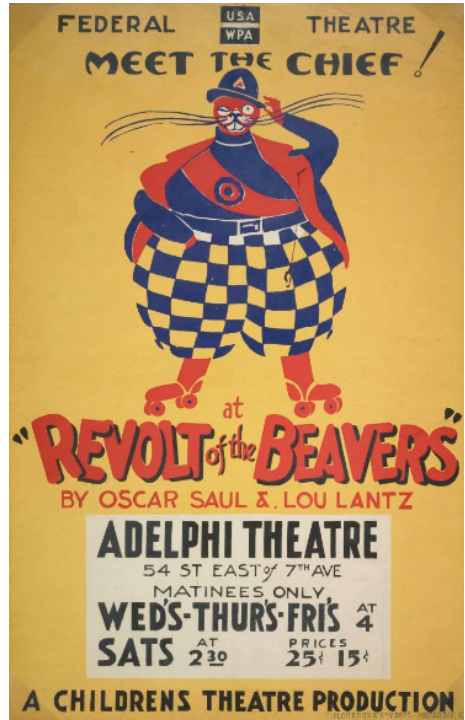
88 Ted Morgan, *Reds*, New York, Random House, 2003, p.188, cited in Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, New York, Norton, p.331.

was widely quoted as accusing HUAC of “the very un-American way in which the committee has handled charges made against this project under my jurisdiction.”<sup>89</sup> For reasons that are not entirely clear, neither Flanagan nor Henry Alsberg, who headed the Writers’ Project that was also under attack, was permitted by WPA officials to testify during months when Communist accusations were being hurled at both programs. New Dealers, including FDR, had tended to ignore the Committee as just another attack on the New Deal until it began flinging charges at several New Deal candidates for office, thus interfering in elections—at which time the President attacked HUAC for its methods.<sup>90</sup>

While the FT had continuously suffered criticism from right wing forces, FT actor Perry Bruskin contends that it was a children’s play, *The Revolt of the Beavers*, that provided the weapon that was used to end the FT<sup>91</sup> (fig. 20). The play

tells the story of two poor nine-year-olds who are swept away to a fantastic forest where nine-year-old beavers toil for a tyrannical Chief who controls the bark-producing “busy busy busy Wheel” hoarding its products for himself, until they finally stage a rebellion.

The play came to the attention of HUAC as a result of press comments such as that of Brooks Atkinson, otherwise friendly to the FT, who dubbed it “Mother Goose Marx.”<sup>92</sup> Flanagan, who held that the bad beaver chief—driven out by the oppressed



20. Poster for *Revolt of the Beavers*, Coast to Coast: The Federal Theatre Project, 1935-1939, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/federal-theatre-project/gallery.html>

89 Martha H. Swain, *Ellen S. Woodward*, Jackson, Mississippi UP, 1995, p.129. The reference is to 3rd Session US House of Representatives, 75th Congress, Un-American Activities, on H. Res. 282, IV, 2764-65, December 5, 1938.

90 J. DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre*, *op. cit.*, p.212.

91 Perry Bruskin, “Children’s Theatre Unit, New York,” in B. Schwartz and the EFC (eds.), *Voices...*, *op. cit.*, p.9.

92 B. Atkinson, “THE PLAY; ‘The Revolt of the Beavers,’ or Mother Goose Marx, Under

beavers “so that the beavers could eat ice cream, play, and be nine years old”—was in the tradition of such tales of the triumph of good over evil as Cinderella or Jack-in-the-Beanstalk.”<sup>93</sup> She also pointed to surveys of children attending the play by a New York University psychologist who found the play taught them “never to be selfish, that it is better to be good than bad.”<sup>94</sup> Although considering the play a fairy tale, Flanagan had admitted that it was class conscious.<sup>95</sup>

When Flanagan did appear before HUAC, she gave spirited testimony in response to its accusations: that she was a Communist; that the plays presented by the FT were largely Communist; that in order to be employed by the FT, applicants had to join the left-leaning Workers Alliance; and that a trip to Europe in the 1920s on a Guggenheim Fellowship that included a stay in Russia and a study of its theatre was evidence of her being a Communist.

Rep. Joseph Starnes of Alabama, one of the conservative Democrats on the Committee, asked Flanagan if the plays the FT had produced were propagandistic. Her reply: “To the best of my knowledge we have never done a play which was propaganda for communism, but we have done plays which were propaganda for democracy.” She cited *One-Third of a Nation* as “propaganda for better housing,” and *Power* as “propaganda for a better understanding of the derivation and the scientific meaning of power and for its wide use.”<sup>96</sup>

The ignorance of Flanagan’s interrogators is revealed in one of the most quoted exchanges in her testimony—when Starnes asked her about an article she had written for the magazine, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, regarding workers’ theatres that arose in the early 1930s. She stated that the work the article reported had nothing to do with the FT. Starnes, however, persisted, quoting from a line which referred to the intent of workers’ theatres to remake a social structure without the help of money as “a certain Marlowesque madness.” Starnes then said: “You are quoting from this Marlowe. Is he a Communist?” When Flanagan replied that she had been quoting from Christopher Marlowe, Starnes then said: “Tell us who Marlowe is, so we can get the proper reference.”

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WPA Auspices,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1937, p.19.

93 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.200-201.

94 J. DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre*, *op. cit.* p.221.

95 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.260, citing Letter to Philip Davis, November 8, 1936. For a discussion of how *The Revolt of the Beavers* was constructed differently by Flanagan and the FT staff, writers and policy makers, see Drew Chappell, “Constructions of Revolt of the Beavers and Notions of the Child Audience: Controversy in the Federal Theatre Project,” *Youth Theatre Journal*, vol.21, no.1, 2007, pp.41-53.

96 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.315-316.

Flanagan replied: “Put it in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period immediately preceding Shakespeare.”<sup>97</sup>

In addition to the charges of communism leveled against the FT, there was an alleged problem of competition with commercial theatres—a problem increased by the success of the FT, particularly in cities like New York and Chicago. The charge of competition with private enterprise became a “new line” against the FT when Congress was considering funding of the WPA in the Spring of 1939.<sup>98</sup>

Influenced by HUAC, the House Appropriations Committee budgeted funds for the WPA but cut the FT out entirely. In true dramatic fashion, the FT marked its demise. For the final showing of its highly acclaimed children’s play, *Pinocchio*, the author wrote a new ending (fig.21).

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21. Cast of *Pinocchio*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. The New York Public Library Digital Collections, 1938-1939. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/7f8a4e0-0a5e-0134-395a-00505686a51c>

*Pinocchio* had turned into a real boy at the conclusion of all preceding performances. This time, instead, *Pinocchio* died and was laid in a coffin, the cast chanting their

97 *Ibid.*, pp.317-318.

98 *Ibid.*, p.335.



grief, stagehands knocking down the sets, and an actor declaring: “Killed by an Act of Congress.”<sup>99</sup>

## THE FEDERAL THEATRE’S LEGACY

The FT’s demise meant that there would be no national, popular theatre in the US. Perhaps Brooks Atkinson best summed it up: “If you believe in democracy you have to acquiesce in the decisions of the people’s representatives in Washington. The truth is that Congressmen as a lot do not like, respect, or trust the theatre.”<sup>100</sup> But for a brief time Flanagan and her colleagues in the Federal Theatre had nurtured a flowering of democracy in all its messy turbulence. In just four years, the FT had produced 1,200 plays, given jobs to 13,000 people, and played to an audience of 30 million people, 65 percent of whom had never seen a live theatrical performance. One of its directors wrote that the year and a half he had spent with the project “was perhaps the most stimulating and enlightening period of my life. To be sure, I have not made a great deal of money from it. Nor have I learned much about the theatre that I didn’t know before. But I’ve learned more about this strange, exasperating, magnificent idea we call democracy than I would otherwise have learned in a lifetime.”<sup>101</sup>

The FT’s end did not mean that it had no lasting impact. It had nurtured some large talents like Orson Welles, Marc Blitzstein, John Houseman, Arthur Miller, Joseph Cotton, Studs Terkel, Burt Lancaster, Joseph Losey, Sidney Lumet, and choreographer Katherine Dunham, to name a few. Each went on to have a distinguished career in theatre, film, or radio. Others who lost their jobs found new ones in the USO, entertaining US troops during WWII. A little-noticed legacy of the FT Project was the new outlets for theater talents that it developed in an exploratory way in the fields of education, therapeutics, diagnosis, and social and community work.<sup>102</sup>

The FT may be gone, but it is certainly not forgotten. In addition to the several revivals of *Cradle*, as one former FT administrator has commented: “The national theatre that Hallie envisioned, we have it right now. We have all sorts of wonderful regional theatres.”<sup>103</sup> One such theatre, the Tony-award-winning Berkeley Theatre in

99 *Ibid.*, p.346.

100 B. Atkinson, “Mrs. Flanagan Tells it All,” *New York Times*, December 29, 1940, sec. x, p.1.

101 J. R. Ullman, “Report on Democracy Versus the Theatre,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 1939, p.A151.

102 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.372.

103 R. Schnitzer, “Federal Theatre Project Administrator, Washington, DC,” in B. Nelson Schwartz and the EFC (eds.), *Voices...*, *op. cit.*, p.120.

Berkeley California, is following in Flanagan's footsteps. Just as the FT's production of *It Can't Happen Here* played in the run-up to the 1936 election, the Berkeley company created an [audio version](#) of that novel that streamed on *YouTube*, with more than 100 theatres across the country named as "broadcast partners"—preceding the critical 2020 presidential election between demagoguery and democracy.<sup>104</sup> In a *New York Times* article reporting how twenty theater figures would recommend revolutionizing their world, acclaimed theater director Lear de Bessonet wrote: "We need a new Federal Theater Project, a national arts program in all 50 states as ambitious in scope as the original New Deal-era program."<sup>105</sup>

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104 Laura Collins-Hughes, "An Unsubtle Slide Into Autocracy: A 1930s Novel-turned Play about U.S. Fascism, Returns," *New York Times*, October 27, 2020, p. C3.

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## NOTICE

Sheila D. Collins is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at William Paterson University and former director of its graduate program in Public Policy and International Affairs. She is the author or co-author of seven books and numerous articles, book chapters, encyclopedia entries, and blogs on American politics and public policy, social movements, and religion. Among her most recent books are: *Ubuntu: George M. Houser and the Struggle for Peace and Freedom on Two Continents* (Ohio UP, 2020); and *When Government Helped: Learning from the Successes and Failures of the New Deal* (Oxford UP, co-authored and edited with Gertrude Goldberg). She has written and lectured widely on the New Deal and the arts. She was the recipient of the Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award in 2019.

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Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg, Professor Emeritus of Social Work at Adelphi University and former director of its Ph.D. Program in Social Work, led the team of scholars who published the first cross-national study of feminization of poverty. She subsequently initiated other comparative works on women's poverty and the welfare state, including *Poor Women in Rich Countries: Feminization of Poverty over the Life Course* (Oxford UP, 2009). With Sheila Collins, she edited and authored *When Government Helped: Learning from the Successes and Failures of the New Deal*. Goldberg has written and lectured in the U.S. and Europe on full employment, women's poverty, the New Deal and social reform movements. Chair of the National Jobs for All Network, she received the Columbia University Seminars 2018 Tannenbaum-Warner Award for Distinguished Scholarship.

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## ABSTRACT

One of the programs created by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s was the Federal Theatre Project. Established in 1935 as part of the larger Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Federal Theatre was the first and only attempt by the government to create a national theatre in the United States. Prior to this, the opportunity to enjoy live theatre had been relegated to the urban affluent classes and the arts had operated as commercial products. With the establishment of the Federal Theatre, theatre was de-commodified and democratized for the first time. The Federal Theatre produced plays, some highly innovative, and other forms of live entertainment

that were socially and politically relevant to the ethnically and economically diverse American public and in settings that went well beyond the Broadway stage. This essay examines the heroic and always fraught attempt to bring theatre to the masses and employ jobless workers at a time of political, economic and social upheaval.

#### KEYWORDS

New Deal; Federal Theatre, Works Progress Administration (WPA), Hallie Flanagan, Orson Welles, John Houseman, *Living Newspaper*, *Voodoo Macbeth*, *It Can't Happen Here*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Revolt of the Beavers*

#### RÉSUMÉ

L'un des programmes créés par le *New Deal* de Franklin Roosevelt dans les années 1930 fut le *Federal Theatre Project*. Fondé en 1935 au sein de la plus grande *Works Progress Administration (WPA)*, le Federal Theatre fut la seule et unique tentative du gouvernement pour créer un théâtre national aux États-Unis. Auparavant, seules les classes urbaines aisées avaient la possibilité de se rendre au théâtre et les arts étaient considérés comme des produits commerciaux. Avec la création du Federal Theatre, le théâtre s'est démocratisé et a vu sa marchandisation reculer pour la première fois. Le Federal Theatre a produit des pièces, certaines très innovantes, et d'autres formes de spectacle vivant socialement et politiquement contemporaine, d'une grande diversité d'un point de vue ethnique et économique, et dans des contextes bien éloignés de Broadway. Cet article examine la tentative héroïque, mais néanmoins périlleuse, d'apporter le théâtre aux masses et d'embaucher des chômeurs à une époque de bouleversements politiques, économiques et sociaux.

#### MOTS-CLÉS

*New Deal*, Federal Theatre, *Works Progress Administration (WPA)*, Hallie Flanagan, Orson Welles, John Houseman, *Living Newspaper*, *Voodoo Macbeth*, *It Can't Happen Here*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Revolt of the Beavers*



DEUXIÈME PARTIE

**Le théâtre de la crise :  
croiser les échelles et les esthétiques**





# FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT IN CINCINNATI, OHIO: A CASE STUDY IN LOCAL RELEVANCE

*Nancy Jones*  
*University of Kentucky*

Hallie Flanagan, the National Director of the Federal Theatre Project, had an ambitious goal at the heart of her mission: to create jobs for artists and present relevant theatre. Cincinnati, Ohio was home to one of the most impactful FTP units in the country due to their deliberate and consistent application of Flanagan's notion of relevancy. This case study will illuminate the key creative, cultural, and collaborative choices made by the leaders of the Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project that fueled its artistic success, and, more importantly, captured the broad support of the community.

## CINCINNATI, OHIO: HISTORY

A brief overview of Cincinnati's historical timeline and geography will serve to contextualize the city's cultural landscape, which influenced the Federal Theatre Project's relevance in the 1930s. Cincinnati, Ohio is situated at a crossroads of the Midwest region of the United States on the Ohio River, with Kentucky to the South and Lake Erie to its north. When Europeans arrived in the region after the Revolutionary War, there were predictable tensions resulting in violence between Native Americans and white colonizers. The US government stepped in to provide troops and built Fort Washington, aiding in the confiscation of this valuable land and locale. The place now known as Cincinnati was an ill-gotten and valuable gain for colonizers but a tragic blow to the Native American tribes of the area.<sup>1</sup>

At the turn of—and well into—the 19th century, Cincinnati's location on the Ohio River allowed for numerous economic opportunities. Its major industries were shipping (first by boat and later by rail) and pork processing, earning the city its nickname: "Porkopolis." Cincinnati was an American boomtown, listed as one of the ten largest cities in the country throughout the century. Journalist Horace Greeley called it "one of the most industrious places in the world," and predicted that it was destined to become

1 Jeff Suess, *Lost Cincinnati*, Charleston (SC), History Press, 2015, p.9.

“the focus and mart for the grandest circles of manufacturing thrift on this continent.”<sup>2</sup> Citizens of the region were passionate in their social and political views and had an economic interest in maintaining the *status quo*.

During the *antebellum* period, Cincinnati was a first stop on the Underground Railroad, as slaves made their way across the Ohio River, the great natural barrier that separated slave states from free states. Though it was the birthplace of Harriet Beecher Stowe, this was not an idyllic abolitionist mecca. The city was filled with volatile racial tensions that arose from xenophobic citizens. As a result of its location as a border between slave and free states, economic power was at play: Cincinnati conducted much of its trade with the South and was home to powerful groups more interested in “bills of lading and accounts-due than in humanitarian reform.”<sup>3</sup>

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In this fledgling city filled with industry and ambition, the early citizens of Cincinnati also valued entertainment and amusement and theatre played an important role in the city’s enthusiasm for pleasure.<sup>4</sup> The first play to be presented in the state, *Peeping Tom of Coventry*, was performed in Cincinnati at Fort Washington in 1801. *The Mock Doctor* and *She Stoops to Conquer* quickly followed; they were organized by a troupe of actors comprised of citizens and soldiers called the Thespian Corps.<sup>5</sup> As the century progressed, theatre and various performing events began to occur regularly, and by the second half of the 19th century, elaborate theatres were built to supply audience’s demand for entertainment. They were beautiful palatial structures, featuring a wide menu of theatrical events for every taste: highbrow entertainment with opera and plays, but also popular offerings like vaudeville, wild-west shows, and burlesque.<sup>6</sup> With its German and Irish immigrant population, influenced by a conservative Protestant work ethic and theology, Cincinnati society did not entirely welcome entertainers with open arms, though many actors held celebrity status and were featured prominently in advertisements that drew large crowds to the theatre. The great Sarah Bernhardt played *Camille* and *Hernani* at Cincinnati’s Pike Opera House in 1881 for four nights to wildly appreciative crowds.<sup>7</sup>

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2 *The WPA Guide to Cincinnati* (prepared by the Federal Writers’ Project in Cincinnati with a new introduction by Zane L. Miller), Cincinnati, Cincinnati Historical Society, 1987, p.50.

3 *Ibid.*, p.30.

4 *Ibid.*, p.105. During the 19th century, Cincinnati was reputed to be the “wettest” city between New York and Chicago, with bistros, beer gardens, and saloons on nearly every corner.

5 William Osborne, *Music in Ohio*, Ohio, Kent State UP, 2004, p.257.

6 Steven J. Rolfes, Douglas R. Weise, and Phil Lind, *Cincinnati Theatres*, Charleston (SC), Arcadia, 2016, pp.25-29.

7 Marion M. Miller and Phyllis J. Heckathorn, “Sarah Bernhardt in Ohio,” *The French Review*, vol.26, no.1, 1952, p.34.

The National Theatre was one of the city's leading playhouses, featuring melodramas and popular entertainments with titles like *The Stage-Struck Yankee*<sup>8</sup> (fig. 1).

This was the era of the *Stage-Door Johnny* and the *Floradora Girl*,<sup>9</sup> and the line between the merriment on and off stage was sometimes obscured.<sup>10</sup> John Wilkes Booth performed Shakespeare in the 1860s at the National Theatre, and his brother Junius Booth was finishing a two-week run of the play *The Three Guardsmen* at the Pike Opera House the night President Lincoln was assassinated.<sup>11</sup> In 1865, James O'Neill (the father of the great American playwright, Eugene O'Neill) launched his stage career at the National Theatre in Cincinnati at age twenty.<sup>12</sup> During the last three decades of the 19th century, Cincinnati promoted itself as the "Paris of America" to emphasize the

- 8 Ethan Schuh, *Historical Theatre in Cincinnati: Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: The People, The Places*, Cincinnati, Xavier University, 2018.
- 9 *Stage-Door Johnny* was a term for a man who lingered at the stage door to meet and court actresses. The *Floradora Girl* was a pretty, female, chorus dancer who drew the attention of many male admirers.
- 10 *The WPA Guide to Cincinnati, op. cit.*, p.109.
- 11 Jeff Suess, "150 years ago Lincoln was shot and *The Enquirer* missed it," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 11, 2015.
- 12 Robert M. Dowling, *Eugene O'Neill: A Life in Four Acts*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2014, p.29.

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J.A.S. W. BATES, MANAGER.  
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**BENEFIT OF MR. MURDOCH,**  
And most positively his last appearance, on which occasion he will appear in the characters of  
**BERALDO AND WISSMUTH!**

FIRST NIGHT OF THE STERLING PLAY OF  
**THE DEFORMED!**  
**OR, WOMAN'S TRIAL!**  
Written by Richard Penn Smith, Esq. of Philadelphia, and performed in Boston and Philadelphia with the most distinguished success.

SECOND NIGHT OF  
**HONOR,**  
A domestic Tragic Drama, in 4 parts, translated by Mrs. Ellet, the celebrated Authoress, from the German Play of "The Phantom Hour" by Franz Dingelstedt, and altered and adapted to the English Stage expressly for Mr. Murdoch.

On THIS, MONDAY EVENING, JULY 19th, 1847,  
Will be acted the sterling Play in 3 acts, called  
**THE DEFORMED!**  
**OR, WOMAN'S TRIAL!**

BERALDO, (a Profligate), . . . . .	MR. MURDOCH.
Duke of Florence, . . . . .	Mr. Adams.
Adorni, (the Deformed), . . . . .	Morris.
Trelatzo, (a Nobleman), . . . . .	Green.
Caldico, . . . . .	C. T. Smith.
Lodovico, . . . . .	Edwards.
Pedro, . . . . .	Duke.
Astrabel, (Daughter to Trelatzo), . . . . .	Miss E. Logan.
Oriana, (Duchess of Florence), . . . . .	Walters.
Eugenia, (Wife of Adorni), . . . . .	Mrs. Johnston.
Viola, . . . . .	Adams.

After which A PAS DE DEUX! by  
**SIGNORINA FANNY MANTIN AND MR. G. W. SMITH.**

The performance will conclude with this Drama in 4 parts, called  
**HONOR!**  
**OR**  
**THE MERCHANT & THE NOBLE!**

WISSMUTH, a Merchant, . . . . .	MR. MURDOCH.
Neus, (his Book-keeper), . . . . .	C. T. Smith.
David, (his Head Clerk), . . . . .	Green.
Count Von Piesten, . . . . .	Adams.
Amadeus Wolf, (his Son), . . . . .	Walters.
Reise, (the Count's Servant), . . . . .	Rodgers.
Franz, (a follower of the young Count Wolf), . . . . .	Drake.
Martide, (Wife to Wissmuth), . . . . .	Miss Logan.
Babet, (her Maid), . . . . .	Mrs. Adams.

**MRS. H. LEWIS,**  
The Celebrated Melo-Dramatic Actress;  
**MR. H. LEWIS & MISS BERTHA LEWIS,**  
Have been engaged for a few nights, and will shortly appear

67 Doors open at half past 7 o'clock, and the Curtain will rise at 8, precisely.  
65 Box Office open daily from 10 o'clock A. M. till 1 P. M. and from 3 P. M. till 5 P. M., where seats may be secured by application to Mr. T. A. LOGAN, Treasurer.

GARANTEE OFFER PAID.

city's sophistication and international appeal.<sup>13</sup> It drew an illustrious crowd. According to *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, during a lecture tour through the Midwest in 1882, Oscar Wilde stayed the night in Cincinnati, where he visited the world-renowned Rookwood Pottery, the first pottery company owned and established by a woman artist. Wilde also attended the opera to hear the great Adelina Patti sing in the new Cincinnati Music Hall.<sup>14</sup> The event must have made a strong impression on Wilde, as he mentioned the evening and meeting Ms. Patti in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.<sup>15</sup>

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Cincinnati was an ideal stop for the popular Showboat Theatres during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Betty Bryant, a young actress from *Bryant's Showboat*, enthusiastically describes her time spent in Cincinnati, where the company played to standing room only crowds for thirteen consecutive summers. Bryant, the youngest child, and company member in her family's successful entertainment business, remembers Cincinnati audiences as being "magnificent" and fielding requests for favorite standard melodramas like *Ten Nights in a Barroom* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>16</sup> The Showboat was a longstanding and popular tradition in this river town.

At the turn of the 20th century, Cincinnati added spectacular movie palaces like the Albee Theatre to satisfy the growing cultural appetite for silent film, but live theatre and vaudeville continued to hold audience interest.<sup>17</sup> The Marx Brothers made their Cincinnati debut at the popular B.F. Keith's Theatre in December 1914, performing their musical comedy *Home Again*. A review in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* praised the piano playing of Leonard (Chico) and harp solos by Arthur (Harpo), using their given names instead of their soon-to-be-famous stage names.<sup>18</sup> Theatre owners were willing to renovate and cater to the public desire for new forms of entertainment. B.F. Keith's Theatre succumbed to changing tastes when the vaudeville venue closed on February 4, 1928 but reopened three weeks later with an organ and a modern projection booth to show photoplays, premiering with Charlie Chaplin's *The Circus*.<sup>19</sup>

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13 Kevin LeMaster, "When Cincinnati was 'The Paris of America,'" *Building Cincinnati*, April 19, 2010.

14 John R. McClean, "Oscar Wilde: The Great Aesthete in the City," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 21, 1882.

15 John Cooper, "Patti in Cincinnati, February 20, 1882," *Oscar Wilde in America*, 2021.

16 Betty Bryant, *Here Comes the Showboat*, Lexington, Kentucky, U of Kentucky P, 1994, p.143.

17 J. Suess, *Lost Cincinnati*, *op. cit.*, p.67.

18 *Id.*, "Rise, fall of Keith's spotlights life, death of Downtown theaters," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 18, 2016.

19 *Ibid.*

During the first quarter of the 20th century, Cincinnati came to be known as a city with a vibrant cultural life and rich tapestry of live performance. Tom Wise, one of the great traveling stock and Broadway actors was quoted saying there were only three streets in America: “Broadway in New York, Market Street in San Francisco, and Vine Street in Cincinnati.”<sup>20</sup> For its average, working-class citizen, theatre represented an exciting form of entertainment that allowed the imagination to wander from the hardships of everyday life.

## THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

The Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed had a profound impact on Ohio. By 1933, more than 40% of factory workers and 67% of construction workers were unemployed and many families faced unprecedented economic hardship.<sup>21</sup> President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal responded to the need for relief, reform, and recovery from the Great Depression. Congress passed the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act in 1935, which allocated five billion dollars to create jobs for the unemployed, and President Roosevelt assigned Harry Hopkins to serve as the federal relief administrator. As supervisor of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Hopkins started the Federal One Programs that created jobs for artists and writers. He convinced Hallie Flanagan, a theatre professor at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, to run the Federal Theatre Project, a branch of Federal One.<sup>22</sup>

The New Deal programs signaled a Democratic power shift in Washington. Although many of these New Deal policies were controversial and triggered criticism among representatives of business, politics, and labor, most felt that immediate action to correct the economy was necessary when Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office in 1933. However, even in its first year of existence, there was fervent criticism of these social programs in conservative circles, heightening the ideological divide that led to tensions and political disputes. The Federal Theatre Project launched, in 1935, as this disapproval smoldered.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *The WPA Guide to Cincinnati*, *op. cit.*, p.104.

<sup>21</sup> “Great Depression,” *Ohio History Central*, n.d.

<sup>22</sup> Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, New York, Knopf, 1988, pp.185-187.

<sup>23</sup> Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Benjamin Blom, 1940, pp.333-335.

Hallie Flanagan was aware of the political tensions brewing, though she was seen by some in the WPA as naïve to the pressure. Flanagan understood that it was smart politics to expand the Federal Theatre Project beyond the artistic center of New York City, where Federal One was housed, to cities and towns across the country. Having a branch of the WPA in their hometowns gave politicians in Washington a point of local pride and a reason to vote across political lines in favor of funding this initiative. As the Federal Theatre Project expanded across the country, Ohio employed 187 workers and hosted projects in Cleveland, Dayton, Toledo, and Cincinnati.<sup>24</sup> Each city featured units that drew on their artistic strengths, including vaudeville, drama, children's theatre, marionettes, and African American units. By July 1936, Ohio couldn't maintain the number of artists or audience support needed to remain viable in all four cities. The rationale for consolidation was described in the *Federal One Progress Report*:

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The talent and facilities of the Toledo project will be absorbed by the larger and more flexible Cleveland units; and the Dayton unit will become a part of the Federal Theater in Cincinnati. This combination of personnel and facilities will centralize the Federal Theater efforts in Ohio's two largest cities and will undoubtedly result in stronger and more effective producing units.<sup>25</sup>

The Cincinnati FTP officially opened on December 19, 1935, and actively produced shows from April 1936 through May 1939.<sup>26</sup> During its three-year existence, it produced thirty-four plays and musicals, just over one production per month for three years, at various performance venues throughout the city. Four of these productions—*HMS Pinafore* (September 1936), *It Can't Happen Here* (January-March 1937), *Macbeth* (October 1938), and *Prologue to Glory* (May 1938)—help to illuminate how the unit established and fostered relevance in the larger community that led to its longevity and popular success.<sup>27</sup>

24 Ohio Federal Writers' Project, *Federal Project One in Ohio*, Columbus, OH, s.n., 1936, p.25.

25 *Ibid.*, p.31.

26 *Ibid.*, pp.33-35.

27 Compiled by the staff of the Fenwick Library (George Mason University), *The Federal Theatre Project: A Catalog-Calendar of Productions*, Westport (CT), Greenwood Press, 1986, p.224.

## HMS PINAFORE: COLLABORATION AND COST

In a collaboration between the Federal Theatre and Music Projects in Cincinnati, the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *HMS Pinafore* was directed by Theodore Hahn and staged in the bucolic natural environment of the Burnet Woods Park. Hahn was a widely known and respected Cincinnati musician, who was put in charge of the FTP in Cincinnati after the Ohio reorganization. Since he was also the Supervisor of the Federal Music Project in Cincinnati, his joint appointment was a rare opportunity for collaboration between the two units. Theodore Hahn had been a director of theatre orchestras, and it was thanks to his relationship with local professional musicians that the alliances between theatre and music projects had a significant level of professional artistry.<sup>28</sup> Hahn's background in music and theatre led to his interest in producing light operas like *HMS Pinafore*, a straightforward form of entertainment that was palatable and familiar to Cincinnatians. Hahn's concept for the production was ambitious. For this extraordinary show, the company built a realistic HMS Pinafore ship to serve as its stage on the Burnet Woods Lake (fig. 2). This setting might now be called "site-specific performance," a form of theatre designed to be staged in a unique, specifically adapted location other than a standard theatre.<sup>29</sup> Accomplishing this enormous task required community involvement: local lumber companies donated 49,000 feet of wood, the power company donated electrical current and equipment, and WPA units loaned carpenters. When it was finished, the "Pinafore" was 75 feet long and 40 feet wide with a mast 18 feet high and was equipped with a drum battery that provided the character Sir Joseph with a gun salute when he jumped aboard for his entrance. Actors arrived on stage conveyed by a small boat that rowed dramatically across the lake. The three-story structure included dressing rooms for actors and an orchestra pit that seated 30 musicians, borrowed from the Federal Music Project. Performances began at dusk and were dramatically illuminated by footlights as the evening and plot progressed.<sup>30</sup>

28 OFWP, *Federal Project One in Ohio*, *op. cit.*, pp.30-31.

29 Joanne Tompkins, "The 'Place' and Practice of Site-Specific Theatre and Performance", in Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (eds.), *Performing Site-Specific Theatre*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p.1-17.

30 Hallie Flanagan, "Gilbert and Sullivan al Fresco," *Federal Theatre Magazine*, 1937, vol.2, no.2, p.23.



2. HMS Pinafore (Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection)

Burnet Woods Park, the stage setting for *HMS Pinafore*, was located north of the city center and might have been accessed either by streetcar or a very long walk for most audience members. Despite the geographic challenge, 10,000 hopeful spectators arrived on opening night, and 5,000 had to be turned away. The performance started at 8.30pm with every seat taken. Spectators who didn't manage to procure a ticket blanketed the surrounding trees and hillsides, hoping to glimpse the action. Providing free or very inexpensive theatre tickets was one of Hallie Flanagan's top priorities for the Federal Theatre Project, and during the two-week run of *Pinafore* over 75,000 people saw the show free of charge.<sup>31</sup> In that troubled economic time, providing complimentary

31 Ead., *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.29.



tickets was a significant factor in building an appreciative audience and enhancing this unit's local relevance.

The production garnered community support, and, for the first time since the FTP had launched in Cincinnati, the company received attention from local newspapers. *The Cincinnati Post* heralded the news of the upcoming show and the visit by Hallie Flanagan in an editorial with the lengthy headline: “*Stage for HMS Pinafore to Be Built on Pontoons in Lake, While Audience Will Be Seated on Hillside; Rehearsal Is Held for National Director, Visiting in City.*”<sup>32</sup> Flanagan saw a final rehearsal for the show while on a tour of the Midwest, and applauded the production and collaborative efforts of the group in the *Federal Theatre Project Newsletter*. She praised the community spirit of the project, which garnered enthusiastic devotion from the local citizens, and the teamwork that brought together workers from various branches of the WPA and Federal One. In her article titled “Gilbert and Sullivan Al Fresco,” Flanagan wrote enthusiastically about the collaborative nature of the process and production:

With a fine exhibition of real troupers' spirit, actors from the vaudeville and dramatic units took off their coats and turned to the task of building the superstructure. They hammered and sawed, they built, they took turns acting as night watchmen, guarding the precious building materials. Meanwhile the cast was recruited from the vaudeville and dramatic units of the Theatre Project and from the choral unit of the Music Project. The symphonic unit of the Music Project furnished the orchestral accompaniment for the production. The Art Project made the posters, and the Writers Project took care of newspaper publicity.<sup>33</sup>

Flanagan recognized the relevance that this unit was beginning to engender, and applauded the collaboration and clever casting of performers in a letter to the editor of the newsletter:

The Cincinnati Federal Theatre Production of *HMS Pinafore* is unusually exciting due to three things: the remarkable way in which Theodore Hahn has utilized the dramatic talent of a number of professionals who formerly starred in opera; the unusual chorus, which is composed not of pretty ciphers, looking just alike, but of a rich variety of men and women from vaudeville, stock companies and other dramatic experience;

32 “WPA Thespians to Offer Operetta in Burnet Woods,” *The Cincinnati Post*, September 4, 1936, p.9.

33 “National Director Sees Ohio's Pinafore,” *Federal Theatre Project Newsletter*, vol.2, no.2, 1937, p.25.

and the remarkable cooperation, not only of the Four Arts, but of many civic bodies in Cincinnati.<sup>34</sup>

The *Cincinnati Times Star* sent a female journalist, George Elliston, to embed herself in the *HMS Pinafore*'s chorus for "behind the scenes" reporting. What Elliston assumed to be a lark and trivial assignment that none of her male colleagues would accept, took a serious turn as she prepared for her performance in the dressing room backstage. While applying her stage make-up, Elliston realized that she knew the woman sitting next to her:

I remember her when she and her bridegroom started out. Their acquiring a home of their own, an automobile. That he died very suddenly. "I tried everything to support the kiddies," she tells me, "I am a musician as you know—you remember I sang for eight years in the May Festival Chorus, belonged to the Mothersingers—now this. And believe me I am glad to get it." She hums a happy tune.<sup>35</sup>

In this brief interaction, Elliston acknowledged to herself and her readers that the Federal Theatre Project was impacting lives both on and off the stage. Hers is the first published review of an FTP production by a Cincinnati newspaper and Elliston described the experience as that of a fairy tale. Like those around her, she was transformed through her participation:

The thing that impresses this new chorine most is the lighthearted joy of this thing. Whatever the troubles of those who take part, they are forgotten here, there is no mistaking the happiness all around. This is one of the few things Mr. Roosevelt has okayed that has my hearty approval. I shall petition our incoming President, Mr. Landon, to continue the Federal Theatre.<sup>36</sup>

As implied in the final line of Elliston's newspaper review, Alf Landon, the Republican nominee challenging Roosevelt in 1936, was assumed by her, a conservative journalist, to be the unambiguous successor to the presidency. The tensions between policies of the right and left were evident in her benign closing. Elliston saw first-hand the benefits of this social program, despite her overall skepticism of its politics. Through her personal experience, she discovered the FTP's relevance and communicated it to the readership of the *Cincinnati Times Star*. The FTP's ability to bridge "party lines"

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34 *Ibid.*, p.23.

35 George Elliston, "Ship out of Fairy Tales Sails Star-Kissed Burnet Woods Lake," *Cincinnati Times Star*, September 16, 1936, p.23.

36 *Ibid.*

was a major factor in the success of this show, thanks to the artistic collaboration between various units of the WPA, community involvement in the creative process, and its free admission that welcomed a wide audience.

## IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE: CALAMITY AND COMMUNITY

Initial successes like *HMS Pinafore* allowed the Cincinnati FTP to make bolder artistic choices. Going beyond pure entertainment like musical comedy and operettas, they began to select plays that challenged audience members to question their social and political principles and normative ideals. To start the year, in January 1937 the unit planned to produce the controversial script, *It Can't Happen Here*, based on the novel of the same name, by Sinclair Lewis. The story is a warning against rising fascism in Europe that imagined the terrors of a dystopian America with a demagogue as a President. This divisive play was highly criticized before it was even adapted to its final script, and, for some, confirmed their beliefs about communist and subversive ideology in the Federal Theatre Project.<sup>37</sup> Lewis' script was considered to be propaganda by many, but unequivocally praised by others. In support of the FTP, *Theatre Arts Monthly* stated editorially: "There is no other theatre in America that would have the courage to announce a dramatization of Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*."<sup>38</sup> Hallie Flanagan, acknowledging the controversy, recalled that by opening night newspapers had written "78,000 lines of pro and con commentary."<sup>39</sup> One of Flanagan's most ambitious initiatives, the adaptation was produced at twenty-seven different Federal Theatre Project units across the country, including the Cleveland unit in Ohio. The Cincinnati production of *It Can't Happen Here* was scheduled to open on January 28, 1937, at the 2,200-seat Emery Theatre. Unfortunately, Mother Nature delayed the opening.

The 1937 Great Ohio Flood was a debilitating natural event affecting numerous cities and communities along the Ohio River, including Cincinnati (fig. 3). From January 5th, when waters began to rise, until February 5th, when they finally fell to below flood stage, it left at least 100,000 people homeless in Cincinnati alone. With their fragile hold on subsistence, many of those affected by the flood lost their meager belongings. Submerged in floodwaters, the city and its inhabitants were without potable water and left in darkness with no electricity for almost twenty days.<sup>40</sup>

37 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 Greg Noble, "From the Vault: Great Ohio River Flood of 1937 was biggest event in Tri-State History," Channel WCPO Cincinnati, January 21, 2016.

The scheduled play by the Federal Theatre Project was not a priority, rather, mere physical survival was the day-to-day objective of Cincinnatians.



3. 1937 Ohio Flood (Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection)

In *Arena*, Hallie Flanagan’s book that details the history of the Federal Theatre, she spoke with unwavering pride about the FTP artists’ response to this crisis: “In the midst of this devastation the actors and artists of the Federal Theatre Project went to work to aid the community, meeting the emergency by bolstering the spirits of those hit hardest by the flood.”<sup>41</sup> The vaudeville units in particular, with performers who were accustomed to a mobile system of touring, were first responders to the needs of citizens desperate for a diversion from their suffering. Performers rowed on boats to groups of stranded citizens, providing transitory amusement that alleviated their distress for a few hours. Flanagan describes the devastating situation and her pride in the artists’ selfless response:

41 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.166.

In fourteen days, Federal Theatre played forty engagements to 14,660 flood sufferers. Some of the actors lost in this flood what little they owned; some saw their own houses submerged; but they went on playing. Traveling by car, joining the team of trucks carrying food and medical aid to the victims, Federal Theatre actors played wherever they were needed. They were rowed across to a marooned colony, they were driven sixty-nine miles to beleaguered Mount Washington; they played in emergency shacks and in the open, on overturned tables, by the light of lanterns, candles, or flashlights. They were part of the community, working with and for the community.<sup>42</sup>

This episode was a defining moment for the Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project: in a moment of hopelessness, the FTP found a way to bring joy, laughter, and relief to the community. Hallie Flanagan reports in the *Federal Theatre Newsletter* that performers “clowned and sang; they danced; they performed marvelous feats of legerdemain.”<sup>43</sup> Adding to their relevance in the community, the artists of the FTP “quieted crying children, they soothed the nightmare memories of grief-crazed adults, they bolstered sanity undermined by desolating loss.”<sup>44</sup> First employed by circus performers in the late 19th century, the mantra “the show must go on” defined the idea that, despite any unfortunate event, the performance would continue on, and performers must keep the audience calm and reassured. By the time *It Can't Happen Here* finally opened on February 17, 1937 (fig. 4), the national government-funded organization had done just that. Edward Carberry, the official theatre reviewer from *The Cincinnati Post* (who had never before reviewed or attended an FTP play), described the production dramatically “as scene follows scene, terror, like fog slowly and imperceptibly fills the shabby elegance of the Emery [theatre]. Yes, you smile when the lights fail to work at the proper moment, when the gunshots come 10 seconds late...but it HAS gotten under your skin.”<sup>45</sup> Carberry, despite his criticism of the production’s professionalism, had been moved by its message and goes on to reflect:

Afterwards, you sit comfortably at a café table and enumerate the glaring flaws of the play over a warming drink. This and that so obviously wrong, amateurish...but you do not mention that you have carried away a small, stubborn fear that will not be banished. However crudely, the play has done this thing: brought Fascism home to you, put it in

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ead.*, “Entertaining Flood Sufferers,” *Federal Theatre Newsletter*, vol.2, no.4, 1937, p.13.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Edward Carberry, “What America Might be Like Under the Blight of Fascism,” *The Cincinnati Post*, February 18, 1937, p.20.

your house, your town, your country. And your imagination has corrected the mistakes of the play. For you know this has happened elsewhere.<sup>46</sup>

Carberry admired the dramatic power and imagination of the production and ended his review by giving the show his stamp of approval, stating: “I recommend seeing it.”<sup>47</sup> *It Can't Happen Here* played for ten days and, due to popular demand, was revived for one additional week on March 15, 1937. Hallie Flanagan described the great Ohio Flood of 1937 as the turning point for the Cincinnati unit of the Federal Theatre Project, in terms of its popular approval and artistic success. Flanagan believed that their work during the flood cemented the company as part of the artistic and social fabric of the region. The public attitude toward the FTP changed noticeably and Flanagan stated that “the two periods might be called B.F. and A.F.”<sup>48</sup> This was a turning point in relevance for the Federal Theatre Project in Cincinnati.

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#### MACBETH: CREATIVE CHANGE-MAKING

October 17, 1938, marked the opening of *Macbeth*, directed by Franklin Raymond, who had risen from assistant director to state director of the Ohio Project. It was the unit's first attempt at producing Shakespeare. Prior to being hired by the FTP, Raymond had been the artistic director of the Springfield Civic Theatre. His background as a New York actor with professional touring experience set the stage for his work on the FTP in Ohio.<sup>49</sup> With roots in the Little Theatre Movement,<sup>50</sup> prior to his involvement with the Federal Theatre Project, Raymond was no stranger to creating dynamic and community-grounded theatre for a midwestern audience. Raymond was one of the regional directors handpicked by Hallie Flanagan to participate in the FTP's

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46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*

48 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.166.

49 Brett Turner, “Theater Group Marks 85 years in Springfield,” *Springfield News-Sun*, October 8, 2016.

50 See Constance D'Arcy Mackay, *The Little Theatre in the United States*, New York, Henry Holt, 1917, pp.1-2; Clarence Arthur Perry, *The Work of the Little Theatres*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1933, pp.9-11; Dorothy Chansky, *Composing Ourselves*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois Press, 2004, pp.2-4. The Little Movement in the United States was influenced by its European predecessors and emerged as a reaction to commercial theatre. Its mission was to create theatre in an intimate setting, that would serve to improve society, and involve experimental artistic techniques. Mackay grounds its defining principles: “[E]xperimentation is the Little Theatre's *raison d'être*.” (C. Mackay, *The Little Theatre in the United States*, *op. cit.*, p.1.)

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From the Novel by **Sinclair Lewis**

**EMERY AUDITORIUM**

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**Sat. Matinee 2:15 p. m.**

Summer Workshop at Vassar College in 1937, where he was influenced by her artistic ideas and encouraged to experiment with a variety of new, innovative, artistic methods for creating theatre.<sup>51</sup> Taking the directorial helm for *Macbeth*, Franklin Raymond hoped to implement the techniques that were the foundation of Flanagan's aesthetic, particularly the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold and his experimentation with symbolism, expressionism and constructivism. Those revolutionary ways of approaching theatre would make their way into Cincinnati's *Macbeth*.

Prior to this production, the Cincinnati unit had presented their dramatic plays, including *It Can't Happen Here*, in the Emery Auditorium, a performing space funded by philanthropist Mary Emery for the Ohio Mechanics Institute in 1912. Located in the heart of the Cincinnati theatre district, the Emery was intended for use as a music and lecture hall for the trade school. The massive structure on Central Parkway seated 2,200, with acoustics that were compared to those of Carnegie Hall. In 1936, the Emery Auditorium housed no permanent artists or company, and was made available to the Federal Theatre Project.<sup>52</sup>

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As Raymond prepared to work on *Macbeth*, he determined that the Emery, where the FTP had been housed up to this point, served neither the audience nor the players well. It had never been intended for staging theatre and, although it was acceptable for musicals and light opera, the effect of realistic plays was lost on the enormous stage. Although beautiful and conveniently located, the immense stage and cavernous audience space didn't suit the experimental theatrical techniques that director Franklin Raymond hoped to employ in *Macbeth*. He found a more intimate and flexible environment several blocks away, in a space that he would transform into the Playbox Theatre. Located at 807 Race Street, the building had formerly housed a refrigerator store, whose owner agreed to remodel it to accommodate the theatre's specifications. Under Raymond's leadership, the company constructed a proscenium stage that was 26.5 feet wide and 28 feet deep, using recycled wood from *HMS Pinafore*. Raymond enthusiastically described to *The Cincinnati Enquirer* the scenic effects he could create with "lights and platforms draped in black."<sup>53</sup> The new space would also save the FTP money, as the rent was lower than the Emery's, so economically and artistically the move made good sense. Seating an audience of 250, the capacity was

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51 Pierre de Rohan, "The First Federal Summer Theatre...a Report," Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection, George Mason University Libraries, Fairfax, VA, 1937.

52 "Race Street Picked for New Federal Theater," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 29, 1938, p.6.

53 *Ibid.*



ideal for Raymond's artistic vision. It was christened as the Cincinnati FTP Theatre with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

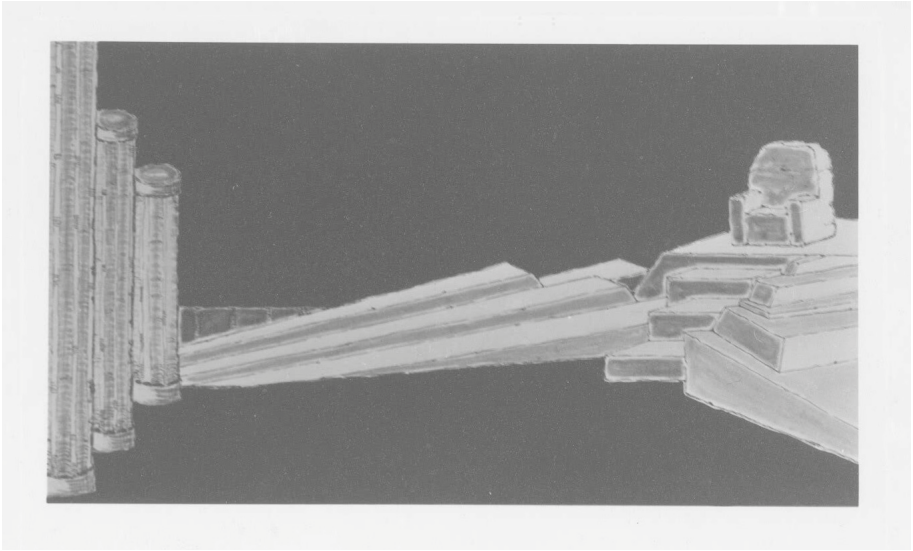
The Library of Congress has digitized Raymond's Production Book and FTP Report for *Macbeth*. It is a gold mine of information that documents the highs and lows of the rehearsal process and production. In the Director's Report, Raymond described his savvy approach to the script and his rationale for various artistic choices. This was the third year of the FTP's existence, and Raymond based his decisions on a clear understanding of his Cincinnati audience. He wanted to make Shakespeare relevant to his ticket buyers, and planned to introduce this popular tragedy in a way that they would find stimulating and wouldn't drastically tax their attention span explaining: "In rearranging the original script of *Macbeth* for our purpose, I kept one thing in mind, to make the script as exciting as possible and to keep it moving with speed."<sup>54</sup> Contrary to its original five acts, and with no apologies to the Bard, Raymond also made judicious cuts and divided the performance into three parts: "1) Macbeth's Rise to the Throne; 2) Macbeth's Reign as King; and 3) Macbeth's Downfall."<sup>55</sup> Raymond also recognized the theatrical limitations of his company members: "Realizing we did not have any exceptional Shakespearean actors, [I wanted] to invest the performance with a novelty in staging and business that would not point up the individual performances too much." His solution was a vaudevillian sleight-of-hand, a distraction he explained as: "I built up the witches and the super-natural elements," to focus the audience's attention on spectacle rather than dialogue.<sup>56</sup>

Raymond emphasized that the stage setting and impressionistic lighting had no connection to or attempt at realism (fig. 5). The production's lights used color to heighten the emotional impact of the scenes so the entire stage was painted grey, providing an empty palette for producing color changes with light. The single unit set consisted of three stone pillars that were moved to various configurations to create different locations, which encouraged the audience to use their imagination to conjure the environment. *The Cincinnati Enquirer* spoke favorably of Raymond's work, stating that "the handling of the players in this small area is little short of miraculous and speaks well for a resourceful director," and went on to applaud the scenic changes, remarking that "the manner in which this setting appears to change from a forest to

54 "Production Notebook from Cincinnati production of *Macbeth*," Library of Congress, Finding Aid Box 1035.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*



5. *Macbeth* Set Design (Rights: Library of Congress, Music Division, Federal Theatre Project Collection)

a castle banquet hall, to castle ramparts is another tribute to the technical skill of the Federal group.”<sup>57</sup>

Raymond’s report highlights his resourcefulness and continued dedication to local workers and artisans’ involvement in FTP productions. He noted his efforts with pride, “using the talents and resources at hand, props and costumes were all locally made.” Raymond boasted of his thrift in procuring materials for costumes, as “they were able to acquire skins from a local tannery at one dollar for a whole skin”<sup>58</sup> (fig. 6). In what had become an established tradition of collaboration for the Cincinnati FTP, Raymond worked with a musician from the Cleveland Federal Music Project who composed an original score for the production to heighten the emotional impact of the scenes and transitions. Unfortunately, the director’s best-laid plans for the music ran amuck during the final days of rehearsal. Raymond describes the pre-opening stumbling blocks in the report to the National Office: “The score was written for an electric organ, trumpet, and tympani. At the last moment, we were unable to get the organ promised us, so we had to use a piano. Much of the effect of the music was lost, due to this, especially the parts written to cover the witches’ scenes.”<sup>59</sup>

57 E.B. Radcliffe, “Here’s a Macbeth with Lots of Action,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 18, 1938, p.5.

58 “Production Book from Cincinnati production of *Macbeth*,” art. cit.

59 *Ibid.*



Act III.

Scene V.

Robert White as Macduff

Act II.

Scene IV.

The Witches



6. *Macbeth* Costumes (Rights: Library of Congress, Music Division, Federal Theatre Project Collection)

Raymond's vision was challenged by actors, resources, and unforeseen circumstances but his creativity triumphed. *The Cincinnati Post* gave *Macbeth* a rave review, stating in its headline that the "Production Displays Imagination and Craftsmanship," and heartily approved of the company's venue change to the Playbox Theatre:

It may be that the absence of most of the machinery of a professional theatre is precisely what the FTP needed, necessity being the mother, etc. etc. Whatever the cause, this admirably staged *Macbeth* is not only good entertainment, but it raises high hopes for the future. If the FTP continues to apply the ingenuity displayed in *Macbeth* it will make an invaluable contribution to the community.<sup>60</sup>

100 *The Cincinnati Enquirer* chimed in and described the production as having boldness and sincerity.<sup>61</sup> Both the *Enquirer* and *Post* praised the acting, especially that of Lady Macbeth played by Ruth Auerbach and Lyn Ranous in the titular role. Lyn Ranous was, in fact, a stage name used by director Franklin Raymond. Although he doesn't mention that detail in his report for the national office, perhaps the acting pool was weaker than he originally thought, for it seems that Raymond needed to pinch hit in the lead role himself. One can only imagine Raymond's anxiety: a brand-new, artistically risky theatre space; a complicated Shakespeare play with many technical requirements; both directing and acting in the lead role; and the critics and community watching the FTP's every move. Nonetheless, critics approved of Ranous/Raymond's performance stating that the roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth were particularly well done. *The Cincinnati Post* also applauded Raymond's direction as having a firmer hand than had been customary in FTP productions. Ultimately, the reviewers encouraged their Cincinnati audience to attend not just this play, but implied there were bound to be other successes in the future:

If the FTP continues in its present course, applying the craftsmanship and ingenuity displayed in *Macbeth* to plays which the commercial theater cannot or will not do, it should make an invaluable contribution to the community. In the meantime, *Macbeth* amply justifies your patronage. With a few screens and lights and handsome costuming, magic has been wrought and the verbal pageantry of Shakespeare given a setting wherein it can work its wizardry on your mind.<sup>62</sup>

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60 Edward Carberry, "Federal Theater Opens Playbox with *Macbeth*: Production Displays Imagination and Craftsmanship," *The Cincinnati Post*, October 1938, p.12.

61 E.B. Radcliffe, "Here's a *Macbeth* with Lots of Action," art. cit., p.5.

62 E. Carberry, "Federal Theatre opens Playbox with *Macbeth*," art. cit., p.12.

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7. *Ohio Doom* Poster (Rights: Library of Congress,  
Music Division, Federal Theatre Project Collection)

Raymond was in his artistic element and found his *oeuvre* was well showcased in the new Playbox Theatre. With positive reviews, solid audience support, and an established company of collaborators, the Cincinnati FTP was enjoying a period of artistic success and an increasing level of relevance in the community.

## PROLOGUE TO GLORY: CONFUSION AND CONCLUSION

The success of Raymond's experimental *Macbeth* allowed the FTP to take additional artistic chances in the remaining seven months of its existence in its new playing space. A few weeks after *Macbeth* closed, the unit produced *Ohio Doom*, a play by local writer Harold Igo (fig.7). The geographically relevant script illustrated the economic hardships of farmers in the region who found a solution to their struggles through community spirit and neighborly cooperation.

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A Living Newspapers play titled *Spirochete* followed soon after and was the penultimate production for the Cincinnati FTP in February 1939. Living Newspapers served Hallie Flanagan's desire to create theatre that could both entertain and instruct; they focused on issues of national, social, political, and economic importance. *Spirochete*, a play by Arnold Sungaard about the history and virulent spread of syphilis, brought to life the cultural shame and taboos that surrounded this, still prevalent, disease. *Spirochete* was an attempt by the FTP to improve public health and illuminated the silence that thwarted the spread of accurate information about treatment and prevention.<sup>63</sup> Adding to the list of accolades for the Cincinnati FTP, *Spirochete* was given a positive review by the *Enquirer's* E.B. Radcliffe, who explained that: "Frank and rational treatment of the subject material has resulted in a two-act panorama that includes many incidents that appeal to the hearts and minds of the audience."<sup>64</sup> Radcliffe gave a nod to the company's artistic progress and confirmed that: "The Federal Theater players surpass their past performances and staging, lighting, directing, and material are the best on record in the annals of Federal Theatre here."<sup>65</sup>

The Cincinnati FTP was riding the wave of this artistic success and in rehearsal for its next show, *Prologue to Glory*, when they received a fateful visitor from Washington, DC. In May of 1939, George J. Shillito, an investigator from the House Committee on Appropriations, which had been set up to investigate the Works Progress

63 Sara Guthu, "Living Newspapers: Spirochete," *The Great Depression in Washington State Project*, 2009.

64 E.B. Radcliffe, "Federal Theater Turns out Good Drama," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 22, 1939, p.10.

65 *Ibid.*

Administration, travelled to Ohio and attended a rehearsal of *Prologue to Glory*. Shillito arrived around 9.00pm and stayed to ask a few questions after watching only twenty minutes of the company's rehearsal. Based on his brief visit, Shillito returned to Washington and gave his disparaging report to the Committee, condemning the financial and artistic operations of the unit. He maintained that rent on the Playbox Theatre was much too high, its actors were inadequate, and box office receipts were being mishandled. Fighting for the company's artistic life and reputation, Franklin Raymond responded in an extensive letter rebutting every accusation made by Shillito. He explained in a written Statement to the Committee that, in June 1938, he had cut operating expenses for the FTP unit by moving to their new location in the Playbox Theatre on Race Street and managed to negotiate a monthly rental cost of \$225 per month, \$50 per month less than the former tenant had paid and a significant reduction from their former home in the Emery Auditorium. Shillito alleged that "he asked Raymond what the box office receipts were, and that Raymond had no information and seemed very vague about it."<sup>66</sup> Raymond countered by asserting that Shillito had asked no questions concerning the receipts from the box office during his brief visit. Raymond responded to Shillito's allegations, defending himself in *The Cincinnati Enquirer*:

It is my business to know, at all times, the financial condition of the operation. There is no possibility of being "vague" on this matter as there is only so much money to be expended and the project must operate within this set sum. The entire production costs of the Federal Theater productions must be met by the box office intake. As State Director of the Federal Theatre Projects in Ohio I have no voice in the using of Federal Funds nor box office funds. This is entirely in the hands of the Treasury Department.<sup>67</sup>

Shillito was also dismissive of the actors' talent and professionalism: "I found that 95 percent of the actors presently employed on that project are of amateurish standing and that only 5 percent are known as professional who had prior experience in the legitimate theater on the legitimate stage prior to being employed by the WPA."<sup>68</sup> Raymond contradicted that argument and published his rebuttal in a statement to the *Cincinnati Post* on May 17, 1939: "Signed applications are on file to show that all our actors have had professional experience of from one to forty years and they

66 Investigation and Study of the Works Progress Administration: [Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations House of Representatives](#), July 17, 1939, p.1320-1323.

67 "Denial Made of Washington Data on Federal Theater Project in Cincinnati," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 17, 1939, p.14.

68 *Investigation and Study of the Works Progress Administration*, art. cit., pp.1320-1323.

come from all categories of the theatre.”<sup>69</sup> The Federal Theatre Project in Cincinnati did not withstand this calculated attack on its viability or integrity and *Prologue to Glory: A Play in Eight Scenes Based on the New Salem Years of Abraham Lincoln* by Ellsworth Prouty Conkle was its final production. Produced in eight FTP units across the country, *Prologue to Glory* was an inspiring play about Lincoln’s early life and an overture to his later success as a politician. The *New York Daily News* described it as “an event inspiring national rejoicing.”<sup>70</sup> Yet it was regarded as radical by the Committee members who, without having seen or read the script, accused it of being filled with Communist Talk.

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Powerful political forces led to the demise of the Federal Theatre Project. Congress was influenced and misinformed by the House Committee on Appropriations, and although the more radical and public controversies involving the New York unit were at the heart of the issue, according to Hallie Flanagan in *Arena*: “Ohio was one of the few projects outside of New York in which there was any attempt at an investigation of the Federal Theatre Project by the sub-committee of the Committee on Appropriations investigating the WPA.”<sup>71</sup> Despite its record of prolific artistic accomplishment, and successful job creation that helped to fuel the economic engine of the community, the FTP was ended by an Act of Congress on June 30, 1939.<sup>72</sup> It marked the end of an era, and the Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project was finished.

## LOCAL AND CULTURAL RELEVANCE

Ultimately, the success of the Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project was linked to its local and cultural relevance in the community. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *relevant* as “bearing upon, connected with, pertinent to, the matter in hand;” it is derived from the Latin word *relevare*, which means “to raise up” or “relieve.”<sup>73</sup> To be relevant, an action, a person, or, for the FTP, an artistic endeavor, must be connected to the larger purpose, the “matter at hand” that is pertinent to the daily lives of both the participants and audience. Relevance was at the heart of Hallie Flanagan’s mission for the Federal Theatre Project. As accusations mounted against the organization in its final year, Flanagan’s daughter, Joanne Bentley, reflected that: “Hallie had been all too

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69 “State WPA Director Denies Theater Here Mismanaged,” *The Cincinnati Post*, May 17, 1939, p.5.

70 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.323.

71 *Ibid.*, p.335.

72 *Ibid.*, p.334.

73 *Oxford English Dictionary*, Compact Edition, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1971, p.2479.



successful in developing the kind of theatre she believed in, a *relevant* theatre.”<sup>74</sup> When Hallie appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) on December 6, 1939, she defended the ideologies of the Federal Theatre Project and her own hopes and dreams for it. Alabama Congressman Joe Starnes questioned Hallie and asked her if she believed that theatre was a weapon. Flanagan revealed her deep passion for what theatre can and should be in her response, avowing: “I believe that the theatre is a great educational force. I think it is an entertainment. I think it is excitement. I think it may be all things to all men.”<sup>75</sup> Near the end of her questioning by the HUAC, Hallie took “the same position she always had: a government-sponsored theatre should present ‘relevant theatre.’”<sup>76</sup>

Relevance for the Federal Theatre Project was determined by geographic region, economic necessity, and the quotidian realities of each unit. Decisions regarding which plays to produce were made on a case-by-case and locale-by-locale basis: scripts that were culturally relevant in New York or San Francisco may not have been interesting to an Ohio audience and vice versa. To wit, *Ohio Doom* never played outside of its one-week run at the Playbox Theatre. The Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project achieved relevance through a consistent and continuous application of collaboration, community engagement and creativity. With *HMS Pinafore*, the company involved the community in a massive construction event that had a magical quality, including its dream-like appearance on a lake. Through a collaborative spirit and generosity of resources, this colossal undertaking led to community support and pride. The production of the play *It Can't Happen Here* could have been the nail in the coffin for the Cincinnati FTP, the flood making a difficult artistic situation untenable. Yet, the result of this disaster was unflinching commiseration and gratitude from the community. In a moment of civic calamity, when the city was enduring an unimaginable tragedy, the FTP allowed citizens to escape from the harsh reality of the flood and provided solace. In this action of service, the FTP built a bridge of meaningfulness between artists and citizens that provided an opportunity to expand beyond pure entertainment. Moving forward, they were able to produce plays that educated the audience about social, political, and economic issues. The production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* combined established practices of creativity, collaboration, and community engagement in a new and innovative setting. The company never allowed themselves to rest on their artistic laurels: they were innovators and entrepreneurs of their artistic

74 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.285.

75 *Ibid.*, p.315.

76 *Ibid.*, p.320.

form, always concerned with increasing relevance and viability in the community. The company administrators adjusted overall costs, including monthly rents, so they could continue to provide dynamic theatre at an affordable cost to audience members. By the time *Prologue to Glory* was produced as its final show, the FTP was a beloved part of the community.

Though relatively short-lived, the Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project left a legacy of dynamic, vibrant, and relevant theatre in its wake. The traditions that the FTP established in the city continue to thrive to this day. Currently residing within a stone's throw of the Emery Auditorium (now sadly abandoned, and due to be gutted and converted into condominiums) and the Playbox Theatre (recently a photography studio, and now an international shipping company), are numerous theatre companies who carry on the mission of relevance that the FTP set in motion. The Know Theatre of Cincinnati defines itself as “an artistic playground where artists and audiences can come together to produce and experience work that could not be done anywhere else.”<sup>77</sup> Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati is dedicated to “producing world and regional premieres of works that often explore compelling social issues...hoping to enlighten, enliven, enrich and inspire” audiences.<sup>78</sup> The Tony Award winning Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, which opened in 1959, is known for “its excellence and commitment to new works and as an artistic home for America’s best actors, directors and designers.”<sup>79</sup> Cincinnati Shakespeare Company brings Shakespeare and Classics to life for audiences of all ages and “ignites the classics to create fresh, thought-provoking productions.”<sup>80</sup> The fully-restored Showboat Majestic, built in 1923, remains a Cincinnati institution, featuring light melodrama and musicals each summer on the Ohio River.<sup>81</sup> The Federal Theatre Project was a government funded program that supplied relief and employment for artists. Now, the [Ohio Arts Council](#) provides state funding to each of these theatres, in addition to numerous corporate and individual donations that keep them in operation. These theatre companies bring a wide range of dynamic performance to the regional audience that continues to demand and expect first-rate entertainment. There is a community insistence for a continuation of the art form that is creative, collaborative, and community engaged. Cincinnati is a city that demands culturally relevant theatre as sustenance: a need that was filled by the mission of the Federal Theatre Project, and a legacy that endures.

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77 The Know Theatre of Cincinnati, “[About Us](#),” *KnowTheatre*, 2020.

78 Ensemble Theatre, “[About Us](#),” *Ensemble Cincinnati*.

79 Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, “[About the Playhouse](#),” *Cincyplay*, 2017.

80 Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, “[About Us](#),” *CincyShakes*.

81 Showboat Majestic, “[Showboat Majestic official page](#),” *Facebook*.

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## NOTICE

Nancy Jones is a Professor at the University of Kentucky. Her work as a professional theatre director has been featured at the Lincoln Center Directors Lab, NY International Fringe Festival, La MaMa Experimental Theatre, American Living Room Festival at HERE, Immigrant’s Theatre Project, New Dramatists, Actors Theatre of Louisville and with her company, Théâtre Farouche. She has translated/directed works by Ionesco, Genet, and Marivaux and her play Moliere’s Women premiered at the Mae West Festival in Seattle and in Paris at Salle Adyar for the International Humanities Conference. Nancy served as Chair of the UK Department of Theatre for 12 years and teaches a Study Abroad Program in Paris each summer.

## ABSTRACT

Hallie Flanagan, the National Director of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), had an ambitious goal at the heart of her mission: to create jobs for artists and present relevant theatre. Cincinnati, Ohio, was home to one of the most impactful FTP units in the country due to their deliberate and consistent application of Flanagan’s notion of relevancy. Producing thirty-four shows during their three-year existence, the Cincinnati unit played a vital role in the Federal Theatre Project, fulfilling one of the principal mandates of its program: to create locally relevant theatre across the country and expand its reach beyond traditional theatre centers like New York City. This case study illuminates the key creative, cultural, and collaborative choices made by the leaders of the Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project that fueled its artistic success, and, more importantly, captured the broad support of the community.

## KEYWORDS

Cincinnati, Federal Theatre Project, Hallie Flanagan, Works Progress Administration Ohio, *HMS Pinafore*, *Macbeth*, *It Can't Happen Here*

## RÉSUMÉ

Hallie Flanagan, directrice du *Federal Theatre Project*, avait l'ambitieux objectif, propre à sa mission, de créer des emplois pour les artistes et présenter des pièces de théâtre pertinentes. Cincinnati, Ohio, abritait l'une des unités FTP les plus emblématiques en raison de la mise en application délibérée et cohérente de la vision de Flanagan. Produisant trente-quatre spectacles au cours de ses trois années d'existence, l'unité de Cincinnati a joué un rôle essentiel dans le *Federal Theatre Project*, remplissant l'un des principaux mandats de son programme: créer un théâtre localement pertinent à travers le pays et étendre sa portée au-delà des centres de théâtre traditionnels – comme New York. Cette étude de cas met en lumière les principaux choix créatifs, culturels et collaboratifs des dirigeants du *Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project*: ces choix furent à l'origine du succès artistique du projet, qui recueillit un large soutien de la communauté.

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## MOTS-CLÉS

Cincinnati, Federal Theatre Project, Hallie Flanagan, WPA Ohio, *HMS Pinafore*, *Macbeth*, *It Can't Happen Here*

# ALFRED KREYMBORG FEDERAL TROUBADOUR: SINGING THE UNSUNG MASSES

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Despite his enormous output of free verse, his ground-breaking avant-garde theatre produced in affiliation with the legendary Provincetown Players, an induction into the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1949), and consideration by the Pulitzer Prize committee, Alfred Kreymborg (1883-1966) is best remembered not for his writing but as editor of several modernist “little magazines.” Kreymborg’s editorial achievements are indeed remarkable: in the fourth issue of his first review, *Glebe* (1913), he and his co-editor, Man Ray, published the entirety of Ezra Pound’s first collection of Imagist poems—*Des Imagistes*. As editor of the legendary *Others* (1915-1921), Kreymborg helped launch the careers of fellow modernists William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Djuna Barnes, Lola Ridge, and Mina Loy among others. *Broom* (1921), which he co-founded with Harold Loeb, became one of the most important expatriate voices of the early twenties. Kreymborg then edited *The American Caravan* series of poetry annuals from 1927 to 1936 with Paul Rosenfeld, Lewis Mumford, and Van Wyck Brooks. Yet, criticism of Kreymborg’s extensive oeuvre of poetry and plays is scarce and biographical scholarship is limited to his early Greenwich Village years.<sup>1</sup> A complete study of Kreymborg’s life and work is long overdue.

Moreover, there has been virtually no examination of Kreymborg’s important work in mid-career with the Federal Theatre Project from 1934-1938.<sup>2</sup> The present paper

- 1 The only scholarly book treating Kreymborg as a central figure—and that in his role as editor—is Suzanne Churchill’s *The Little Magazine Others and The Renovation of Modern American Poetry* (Burlington (VT), Ashgate, 2006). While recent scholarship of the Provincetown Players has recognized the importance of Kreymborg’s poetic modernist plays such as *Lima Beans* (1916), a dearth of criticism pervades the rest of his oeuvre. For a perspective on Kreymborg’s artistic and political formation, see Louis Andrew Eisenhauer, “*Something Sweetly Personal And Sweetly Social: Modernism, Metadrama, And The Avant Garde In The Plays Of The Provincetown Players*” (PhD Dissertation under the direction of Jackson R. Bryer, University of Maryland, 2009).
- 2 Kreymborg’s work with the FTP has had brief mentions, for example, in the context of Yiddish theatre in Joel Schechter’s *Messiahs of 1933*, Philadelphia, Temple UP, 2008, and in Benjamin Dwight Norris’s remarkable undergraduate thesis (*An American Troubadour: The Career and Life of Alfred Kreymborg* *The Career and Life of Alfred*

recovers this period, relying on an exploration of the primary materials available in the National Archives and Records Administration and the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, conducted in 2019. The present study examines Kreymborg's work primarily as an artist but also as an administrator for the FTP from 1935-1937 at a critical juncture in his writing when he turned towards the far left. It includes the first critical analyses of his ardently anti-capitalist ensemble verse-play *America, America!: a Mass Recital* (1934), which laments the hardships of poverty and lambasts America's "sale" of "human flesh and misery,"<sup>3</sup> as well as two related trenchant anti-capitalist satires *Frank and Mr. Frankenstein* (1934), and *Privilege and Privation* (1937). The study also examines Kreymborg's application of both his theatrical and political theories in a major production of W.H. Auden's *The Dance of Death* (1936), a synthesis of drama, dance, verse, Marxism, and modernist experimentation. The production was Kreymborg's major, and as it happened only achievement as head of the Poetic Drama Unit which he had proposed to Hallie Flannigan and which she encouraged him to found in 1936.<sup>4</sup>

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Recovering Kreymborg's work for the FTP will not only fill an obvious gap in the work of one of American modernism's most overlooked figures but add a chapter to the history of the FTP, exploring the breadth of the project's work for theatre and the masses. Kreymborg's dramaturgy of the thirties was sufficiently far left enough to earn him friends in the communist party, and, subsequently, a blacklisting by the House Un-American Activities Committee. The study will ultimately expose those ideas of Kreymborg's that most probably resulted in his exclusion from the canon of American modernism in the second half of the twentieth century.

## TROUBADOUR OF THE COMMON MAN

Alfred Kreymborg is circumspect about his politics in his autobiography, *Troubadour* (1925), an odd work in which he speaks of himself throughout in the

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*Kreymborg as a Modernist and Beyond*, under the direction of Christopher MacGowan, College of William and Mary [VA, 2011], pp.67-68).

3 Alfred Kreymborg, *America, America!: a Mass Recital*, in *How do You do, Sir? and Other Short Plays*, New York, Samuel French, 1934, p.47. In 1935, the play also appeared in *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, edited by Joseph Freeman and Granville Hicks. Hicks was the first biographer of John Reed and America's pre-eminent Marxist literary critic until his resignation from the Communist party in 1939.

4 Hallie Flannigan to Alfred Kreymborg, 14 December, 1935 (Correspondence, Works Projects Administration, Federal Theatre Project Records, National Archives and Records Administration [NARA], College Park, Maryland).



third person, usually under the nickname “Krimmie.” He does not describe himself as having party affiliations in the early part of his career. However, beginning with his earliest verse and journalism, Kreymborg expressed concern with the common citizen and the downtrodden and an anarchist’s distrust of capitalism. While interviewing Horace Traubel, a socialist and the first biographer of Walt Whitman, for example, Kreymborg praised him as “a man of the streets more than any man of the streets, who writes exclusively about the man of the streets to the man of the streets,”<sup>5</sup> and contrasts Traubel’s writing with the right-wing Nietzsche:

Nietzsche sings the aristocrat, the individual; Traubel sings the crowd, the crowd as a unit, democracy, the crowd as individuals, liberty. Nietzsche sings in aristocratic meter; Traubel in the meter of the streets.<sup>6</sup>

Kreymborg was particularly concerned that although Traubel wrote “in the meter of the streets,” he was only read by “high-brows.” Avoiding this contradiction became for Kreymborg a central preoccupation of his career—he sought methods to produce challenging work, often derived from the formal experiments of European modernism that could nonetheless simultaneously reach the man in the street. In his dramaturgy, Kreymborg often employed absurd and ambiguous verse and stagings difficult even for the intelligentsia to comprehend, while yet expressing familiar themes and minimalist plots and situations reminiscent of children’s puppet theatre. In the stage directions for his first and best-remembered verse play, *Lima Beans* (1916), he famously referred to the piece as a “fantastic treatment of a *commonplace* theme set to a stylized rhythm” (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> This balance of the fantastic and the commonplace, and an attempt to make them accessible to the common spectator can be seen throughout his career as a rejection of the Nietzschean and aristocratic and an explicit embrace of the crowd.

Moreover, Kreymborg seems to have had a distinct political awakening in the spring of 1920 when he wrote his election satire *Vote the New Moon*, the last in the series of scripts produced in affiliation with the Provincetown Players. The playlet is set in a Toyland village where candidates favoring either a blue moon or a red one are “chosen” in a rigged election by the “burgher” and the “burgess,” who hit each other over the head with hammers to count votes, like in a Punch and Judy show.<sup>8</sup> In this surrealistic,

5 Alfred Kreymborg, “Traubel American: A Notable Figure,” *The Morning Telegraph*, New York, May 31, 1914, Section 2, p.7.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Alfred Kreymborg, *Troubadour* (1925), New York, Sagamore, 1957, p.242.

8 *Id.*, *Vote the New Moon*, in *Plays for Merry Andrews*, New York, Sunwise Turn, 1920, p.7-28.

mad Toyland former candidates are fed to a terrible monster—a giant purple catfish (catfish = cap-i-talism, perhaps?). The tension in the piece occurs when the citizens question the voting process—pointing out that there is no real difference between the blue and the red parties—and become tired of the pointless, mechanical spectacle. In the end, the catfish, merging the blue and the red into “royal purple,” stages a *coup d'état* and dominates the village.<sup>9</sup> As strange as the playlet is, a recent (and perhaps the only) revival on its centenary by the Metropolitan Playhouse of New York proves its relevance to the current American electoral circus and was [well-reviewed](#). The revival revealed Kreymborg as anarchistic in his politics as any of the era’s Greenwich Village “reds.” Moreover, *Vote the New Moon* was dedicated to Kreymborg’s colleagues at the Provincetown Players, John Reed and Louise Bryant, who were at the time illegally in Russia reporting on, or in Reed’s case actively supporting the revolution.

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In the early 1920s, Kreymborg and his wife Dorothy toured his verse dramas in the Midwest using a puppet play kit that had been given him by the legendary New York puppeteer Remo Bufano,<sup>10</sup> and which later collected in a book called *Plays for Merry Andrews*. The object was to bring modernist experimentation to Main Street. Kreymborg sought the meter of the streets, to sing of and to “the crowd...as democracy, the crowd as individuals”<sup>11</sup> as he had praised in Traubel, vowing to bring culture directly to them and not leaving it exclusively for high brows.

One essential aspect of Kreymborg’s aesthetics developed in these early years will also prove instrumental in his work with Federal Theatre Project—and this is his work with movement. The Provincetown Players allowed Kreymborg to perform his experimental works at their theatre under the provision that he would produce and cast his plays himself. Kreymborg, then editor of the avant-garde magazine *Others*, therefore founded the *Others* Players, a sub-group within the Provincetown Players, with post-impressionist artist William Zorach, fellow experimental modernist poets Mina Loy, William Carlos Williams, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and her sister Norma Millay.<sup>12</sup> While Edna Millay and other poets such as Floyd Dell produced along with Kreymborg some of the first modern verse drama in America at this time, Kreymborg pioneered experiments with movement and stage direction timed to poetic meter. In the *Others* Players, Kreymborg had notoriously directed the actors to move after the

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9 *Ibid.*, p.28.

10 Bufano had also acted a minor role in *Vote the New Moon*.

11 A. Kreymborg, “Traubel American: A Notable Figure,” art. cit.

12 For accounts of the *Others* Players, see Brenda Murphy, *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity*, New York, Cambridge UP, 2005 (Chapter 3); and Jeffrey Kennedy, *Staging America*, Tuscaloosa, U of Alabama P, 2023 (Chapter 18).

movement of the Greek chorus, in strophe and anti-strophe movements across the stage syncopated to the meter of the dialogue. In his autobiography, he relates the tale of the initial resistance his actors (including Williams and Loy) exhibited to his “beating out the rhythm with a baton.”<sup>13</sup> A photograph of the Others Players posing, several in a turning or kicking movement as they would cross the stage is preserved at the library of congress.<sup>14</sup> It is this feature of rhythmic movement which Kreymborg will employ in his later FTP work and may have been an influence on the choreographed movement of American workers’ theatre productions.

If Kreymborg had shown a concern for the common person, the meter of the streets, and incredulity at the American political system in his early career, by the 1930s, his thinking developed into a fully proletarian politics when he joined the Communist Party USA and developed a friendship with its chief cultural commissar, V.J. Jerome. A sharper orientation towards capitalism and the plight of the working classes then emerges in his poetry and plays of the 1930s, including, and especially in his work with the Federal Theatre Project. Throughout the decade, Kreymborg’s *America, America!: a Mass Recital*, a call to working-class action, was used as a curtain-raiser by both FTP and non-FTP productions. An advertisement in October 1934 for the magazine *The New Masses*—the communist successor to *The Masses* of pre-war Greenwich Village days—boasts the publication of Kreymborg’s playlet noting that it “has been produced all over the country.”<sup>15</sup> One production this writer has verified is that at the Repertory Playhouse Associates on May 20, 1934, at the Civic Repertory Theatre. This bill was intended as a showcase of plays from the best worker-theatres in New York.<sup>16</sup>

On August 29, 1935, the FTP was officially established. An examination of personnel records at the Library of Congress/George Mason Collection and NARA for the NY units of the FTP was inconclusive as to Kreymborg’s starting date with the organization. However, sometime before the fall of 1935, Kreymborg was made head of the Manhattan/Bronx Unit, where he remained throughout at least the first half of 1937. In addition to overseeing the weekly production conferences which provided updates for all performances currently being undertaken, Kreymborg sought to produce a bill of three of his plays for an evening of the FTP, repeating the pattern of three one-act plays which had been a staple of the Provincetown Players

13 A. Kreymborg, *Troubadour*, *op. cit.*, p.309.

14 Thank you to Jeffrey Kennedy for referring us to this photograph.

15 *New Theatre*, October 1934, p.2. *New Theatre* magazine also sponsored the Civic Repertory evening two Sunday nights a month “to show the best productions of the workers’ theatres” (*ibid.*).

16 “This Side of the Footlights,” *The Brooklyn Citizen*, May 12, 1934, p.8.

and other little theatre companies. The bill was to have included the Kreymborg sketches, *America, America!: a Mass Recital*, *Frank & Mrs. Frankenstein* and *Privilege and Privation*. The Weekly Production Conference reports from the fall of 1936 through early 1937 show *America, America!* was scheduled and then finally in rehearsal in the spring, while the second two pieces were “awaiting approval for contract” week after week.<sup>17</sup> Emile Beliveau, who would work with Kreymborg in a separate verse drama unit of the FTP, was selected to direct the last piece. However, the entry for March 23, 1937, reads “run thru 3/17—canceled without authority probably being withdrawn by Author.”<sup>18</sup> It is not clear from these notes if the show opened in early March but was then closed on the 17th or if only *America, America!* was performed. No newspaper notices have been found to confirm this run, so it may have been that Kreymborg canceled the bill when it was in rehearsal. Kreymborg possibly encountered problems with his publisher Samuel French in regards to payment from the FTP, since all three sketches had been previously published and this was not the norm for theatre productions at the time. On the other hand, given the significant pressure of the DIES committee in Washington that would eventually kill the FTP out of fear of communist infiltration, one must also ask why was it that the sole bill which hung in limbo during the spring of 1937 was one comprised of playlets of the most ardent anti-capitalist sentiment. Indeed, as we will detail below, *America, America!* closes with the crowd chanting in unison “in a threatening tone”<sup>19</sup> as if warning of revolution. Further research is warranted here to determine the cause of the project’s delay and subsequent abandonment.

In any case, *America, America!* would see at least one production on stage associated with the FTP. The play, received a reading in New York on March 20, 1936, apparently in English, with actors who were from the Yiddish Intimate Theatre,<sup>20</sup> and *America, America!* would see success translated into Yiddish and incorporated with 10 short Yiddish skits in the very successful FTP produced review: *We Live We Laugh* by the Yiddish Intimate Theatre (opened May 8, 1936, at the Public Theatre, with a new review presented the following year). The [program](#), a series of [photographs](#), and [posters, and costume designs](#) for the Yiddish skits survive from this marvelous production and have been digitized by the Library of Congress. However, no images of Kreymborg’s

17 Weekly Production Conference Reports, Federal Theatre Project, Manhattan Bronx Units, 1936-1937, Works Projects Administration, Federal Theatre Project Records, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland.

18 *Ibid.*

19 A. Kreymborg, *America, America!*, *op. cit.*, p.55.

20 “Stage News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Brooklyn, New York, March 20, 1936, p.25.

curtain-raiser appear online nor could any be found in the LOC archives. Typescripts of both the English and Yiddish versions of *America, America! a Mass Recital* can be found in the LOC collection.<sup>21</sup>

## AGITPROP FOR MERRY ANDREWS

In many ways, the three playlets Kreymborg intended for his FTP evening in 1936-37 continue his experiments from the nineteen-tens and twenties which aimed to concentrate meter and movement in performance. Kreymborg was influenced as well by worker's theatre agitprop, particularly the use of satiric cartoons of boss-worker relations, symbolically representative characters, and the episodic style, as Marc Blitzstein would famously employ in *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937). However, much of this was already Kreymborg territory: he regularly used symbolic types in the traditions of both the morality play and expressionist theatre in his early sketches—often choosing names from nursery rhymes or other common sources. We can see such characters sketched in *Frank and Mr. Frankenstein*,<sup>22</sup> the slightest of the FTP playlets, which for reasons of both theme and length, was probably intended as the first play.

Kreymborg sets the scene in the corporate office to expose the exploitation and mendacity of the boss, who ruthlessly cuts his staff, playing one off against the other, while mouthing the platitudes of business America. He often doesn't have to repeat these platitudes himself, though, because his employees, having heard them so often, anticipate and quote them verbatim. Kreymborg names his capitalist banker Mr. Frankenstein, a satirical jibe at the mad science of capitalism only a few years after the release of the mythic Hollywood film. His humble worker is Frank. Both are clear representatives of their socio-economic classes and not intended as realistic characters. They receive minimalist and symbolic descriptions: the boss is a "stout man [...] who looks like a generous dollar sign," his "thin" assistant looks like a "question mark."<sup>23</sup> These descriptions suggest modernist costuming and stage design and one easily imagines scenery something like Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* or Chaplain's contemporary *Modern Times*. Mr. Frankenstein views the universe and the nation as part of a giant machine, the workers as "cogs," the quintessential modernist trope about

21 The English typescript of Kreymborg's sketch is identical to the published text.

22 Alfred Kreymborg, *Frank & Mrs. Frankenstein*, in *How do You do, Sir?...*, *op. cit.*, pp.69-73.

23 *Ibid.*, p.69.

modernization, explaining away the current economic problems by saying that just “some of the cogs need tightening.”<sup>24</sup>

Kreymborg’s worker pleads for the families who find their only breadwinner with reduced wages or out of work, treated like parts easily replaced, as they are handed clichés about company loyalty. Frank is in Frankenstein’s office hoping to forestall another cut to his wages, which seem to come as often as Frankenstein receives a call from his broker about the value of the dollar declining. Frank doesn’t know how he can break the news about another pay cut done to “save the bank”<sup>25</sup> to his wife at home. It’s clear the conversation is one Frank and his boss have had before, and Kreymborg emphasizes the absurdity of this repetition in verse, using a simple ABAB rhyme scheme and regular (for Kreymborg) meter—iambic pentameter (with frequent inversions), and stanzas commencing regularly with an 11-syllable variation.<sup>26</sup> Mr. Frankenstein begins what the stage directions note ironically as the “pleasant conversation:”

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I’m sorry we can’t pay you what we paid you  
In days before the dollar fell apart.  
I know you’re loyal, Frank, but I’m afraid you  
Have let the great depression break your heart<sup>27</sup>

Frankenstein needs to say hardly anything else himself, however, as Frank can repeat back the excuses that he has heard so often before:

The firm’s a friend to every employee—  
I know that Mr. Frankenstein, I know  
And when a man’s been here eternally  
We’d rather cut our throats than let him go—<sup>28</sup>

As Frank worries about his wife at home, Mr. Frankenstein, blind to the pain of the workers and their families, relies on patriotic cant about saving the bank and prattles on about his responsibility to his “fraternities”<sup>29</sup> of other bankers and capitalists. He concludes the negotiations by telling Frank:

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69.

<sup>26</sup> Hendecasyllable. Kreymborg probably used this to enhance “feminine” rhymes of two syllables at the end of the lines, e.g. “paid you”/“afraid you.” The poem also features occasional couplets used as asides marking the characters’ thoughts as a form of chorus.

<sup>27</sup> A. Kreymborg, *Frank & Mrs. Frankenstein*, *op. cit.*, p.69.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

And now we understand each other so  
You mustn't mind a little cut, my boy.  
Millions of men are on the street and oh,  
Only a few are still in our employ.<sup>30</sup>

Frankenstein turns to answer a call and learns the dollar's "dropped another point." Poor Frank, presumably recognizing this means another cut in wages and another difficult announcement at home, faints. While he is unconscious, the boss promises Frank's desk and job to one of the employees who comes in to help. There is a chorus of "But Frank's a married man," but the boss shushes them with the question "You think a clerk who faints can start a riot?" Frankenstein is sure he can control the workers he terms "sheep."<sup>31</sup> In the end, a fellow employee happy to keep his own job escorts Frank home, who will likely have no job to return to the next day. Kreymborg's derisive satire condemns not only the capitalist but the other employees for not organizing to effectively "start the riot."

Kreymborg returns to the ideas of the worker's loyalty to the firm in the face of job losses, the insensitivity to workers supporting families, and particularly the bosses' self-absorption in the preoccupations of their class in the other two pieces designated for the FTP bill. Perhaps *America America!* would have been saved to conclude the evening and thus *Privilege and Privation* presented second.<sup>32</sup> In this piece, Kreymborg takes us outside the office to the streets—specifically to the park where jobless workers live as tramps. Again, we find the use of symbolic characters in the expressionist and morality play tradition in the central part of the play as a prose dialogue (although with repetitions and some rhetorical effects) between a Mr. Privation and a Mr. Privilege. Two versions of the script exist in the FTP papers. The longer version includes a revised ending and a new opening scene Kreymborg defines as an *aubade*—a song

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30 *Ibid.*, p.71.

31 *Ibid.*, p.72.

32 Alfred Kreymborg, *Privilege and Privation* (ca. 1936, ms.), Federal Theatre Project Collection, The Library of Congress Collection of U.S. Works Progress Administration Records; Special Collections Music Division, Washington, DC. All citations are from the longer of the two variant typescripts in the collection. Kreymborg apparently published a pamphlet version of the play in 1937, perhaps with a publisher called Pageant. It was then included in the *Annual Anthology of the One Act Play Magazine / 1937-1938*, New York, Contemporary Play Publications, 1938. In 1939, American composer John Joseph Becker published his musical score for "2 soloists, male chorus and small orchestra" of the play. It's not known if the score was composed by the time of the aborted FTP production.

celebrating the dawn from French art music. Kreymborg was a self-trained musician who often used musical terminology for his plays. For example, he called his best-known modernist work of the Others Players *Lima Beans* (1916) both a *scherzo* (a light song) and a *rondo* (a three-part-themed composition) in his stage directions. Here in *Privilege and Privation*, the “aubade” features the “bums” in the park as they rise for the morning; the “lead bum,” Mr. Privation, is found ironically sleeping curled around the feet of the park’s statue of Cornucopia—the goddess of plenty.<sup>33</sup> There is no indication in the script that the song should be sung rather than read, but the play was adapted as a musical by the American composer John Joseph Becker in 1939.

120 “It’s a lovely spring morning in one of the little city parks in this, our country” the stage directions read. Signs of American slogans such as “in god, we trust” and “gone with the wind,” are viewable as well as surrounding skyscrapers; “An aura of goodwill touches the sleeping forms of five or six bums.”<sup>34</sup> They awake, slowly throw off the newspapers they are using as blankets, and, along with a few passing cops and the birds in the trees raise their voices in joy, while the lyrics belie the sunny mood:

Glory, glory  
Hunky-dory  
See the pretty sun  
Follow fellow  
Fellow follow  
Everyman’s a bum.  
Naught to do the livelong day  
And naught when that is done.  
Hear the pretty birdies singing:  
All of us are one!<sup>35</sup>

Three of the tramps then take solos to tell us why their new lives in the park are better than their former world.

*Solo:*  
I was once  
A busted fellow  
When the rent came round.  
*Solo:*

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33 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*



Cops and cops that used to club me  
Never come around—

*Solo:*

‘Cept when they  
Come by to play  
Play without a sound.<sup>36</sup>

The cops return and join in to sing about how much they love the park and how it’s a haven to lovers after dark. Tramps and cops then sing the chorus: “Glory, glory, hunkydory / No more poverty!”<sup>37</sup> Eventually, the goddess of the statue joins in the surreal ensemble and ends the song with the cry “I AM LIBERTY,”<sup>38</sup> drawing the symbolic connection between the statues of Plenty and Liberty. The statue thus introduces the ironic theme that living in the park means “freedom” from all the economic pressures of the residents’ former lives, as well as freedom from having food, clothing, and housing.

After the song, Mr. Privation takes up a seat on a bench and a passerby, Mr. Privilege asks to join him. Mr. Privilege is a banker who is sad because his income has dropped from one million to only \$100,000 a year. His problems are on a rather different scale than that of the tramps. He laments: “The more a man owns, the worse off he is. And the more he loses, the more he worries about losing more.”<sup>39</sup> Mr. Privilege is chagrined that he has had to sell his two cars and borrow his wife’s, and recently even stoop to riding the subway. He worries he might have to sell one of his vacation houses.

Mr. Privation listens attentively, like a fellow gentleman, until he suddenly dives on a cigarette butt thrown by a passerby. He offers to share it with Mr. Privilege who at first hesitates, but then takes a puff and thanks Privation: “ah that’s democratic of you.”<sup>40</sup> The remark denotes the inversion of the social hierarchy in the park, a mid-summer forest where property and privilege are ostensibly unknown, an idyll free of capitalism. Privilege finds himself idolizing what he sees as the freedom in the park. “All you have to do is look after yourselves and loaf,”<sup>41</sup> he remarks, as he continues his tale of woe of shrinking economic power. He laments the contraction of his lifestyle, and relates how he is now forced to pay for the children “falling back on dad” and each with a

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36 *Ibid.*, pp.1-2.

37 *Ibid.*, p.2.

38 *Ibid.*, p.3.

39 *Ibid.*, p.4.

40 *Ibid.*, p.5.

41 *Ibid.*, p.7.

“townhouse, a country house and car,” all now “around his neck.” “Rockefeller can’t eat anymore,”<sup>42</sup> responds Privation sympathetically.

Kreymborg then returns here to the theme of the treachery of the corporations towards the workers exposed in *Frank and Mr. Frankenstein*. Privilege echoes Frankenstein’s comments about the bank/corporation’s parental status for its employees, quoting “Jim Stillman,” (presumably American banker James Jewett Stillman) that the “bank is our mother.” However, Privilege complains that, because of his recent reductions, “she’s been no mother to me.”<sup>43</sup> Privation gasps: “You’re killing me, sir,”<sup>44</sup> beginning an elaborate, extended satire in which he identifies with the bankers, as slaves once were expected to sympathize with their masters’ troubles and in which Privation excoriates himself and his fellow unemployed for all the trouble they have caused the poor managers. “We treated you worst of all...when we had jobs,” he cries to Privilege, “[e]very time you needed a rest, we asked for a raise...and when you had to dock us you docked only half our pay...we ruined you.”<sup>45</sup> Privilege protests all of these comments with humility, but Privation concludes his symphony of support: “And why did you sack us? [...] Because we deserved it!”<sup>46</sup> Privilege tumbles prostrate on the ground in abject guilt, as Privation forces him to say the common refrain of managers of the era, that he had “sacked them” only because “he had to.”<sup>47</sup>

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The two then sing a serenade to the Goddess of Plenty—to the tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*—including lines like: “Dollar, dollar in the bank...You have grown so very small/I can see you not at all,” with the various tramps taking solos. The last of the tramps serenades them:

You have joined the many millions and  
And the billions and quadrillions  
That belong to Henry Ford,  
Mister Morgan and good lord  
Left me lying in a ditch,  
Plinka planka plunka plank<sup>48</sup>

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42 *Ibid.*, p.7.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*, p.8.

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*, pp.8-9.

48 *Ibid.*, p.11.

Finally, he holds out his hat to the goddess of plenty who drops in a penny to end the number.

Privilege, glancing at his watch, is surprised by the time, and coming back to reality indicates he must go because, after all, it's time for lunch. Privation and crew are shocked. To a bewildered Privilege, Privation recounts an alternative history where for "eons" humanity spent its time "gorging" until some of the "finer minds," such as his own rebelled. In mock gentility, he claims he hadn't heard the word "lunch for years," and declares: "Eating has gone out of fashion. It's too vulgar." When Privilege demands: "How do you live?" Privation explains, in the park, they live "in the air—everywhere—debonair."<sup>49</sup> While somewhat mystified, Privilege's growing belief in the life of the tramp free from all the pressures of property is confirmed. After a discourse on the use of the different sections of the newspaper for their bedsheets and pillows, Privilege decides he will "sell out everything and come and sleep in the park."<sup>50</sup> At this moment, a German band strikes up a march tune and they sing:

Balance up the budget  
 And keep the rich alive  
 For if the rich should grow  
 Too poor  
 How could  
 the poor  
 survive?<sup>51</sup>

The cast waltz with one another, and, in the melee, Kreymborg employs the old vaudeville gag of having the men exchange hats. Privilege appears to be a full-fledged member of the gang now, wearing Privation's crushed bowler as Privation sports Privilege's silk top hat. The music ends and the other tramps disappear. Privilege asks where they've gone and is shocked to learn they've disappeared into the bushes. Privilege assumes they have gone to relieve themselves, but Privation explains that of course by living on a diet of air, they've no need to, and, implies, no longer have the capability to urinate or defecate. Privilege, suddenly shocked and terrified, snatches back his top hat and runs off.

Kreymborg had evidently sought a dramatic and comedic conclusion for the play (the other version of the script has Privilege remaining with the tramps in the park),

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*, p.13.

51 *Ibid.*, p.17.

though one imagines the scatological conclusion would seem to disqualify the play for Broadway success. The sudden turn in the ending may expose weakness in Kreymborg's plotting, but it is a sufficient vehicle for telegraphing the lampoon of upper class "suffering" and the abhorrence of the values of the business class at the core of the play. The ironically light dialogue and music throughout *Privilege and Privation* thus belie a derisive satire—part comedy, part tragedy, and part satyr-play. Kreymborg's logic must force the audience to reject both the forest and city to demand a reality in which they can live, neither on food nor ideologies composed of "air."

124 While Kreymborg set *Frank and Mr. Frankenstein* in the interior of the bank, in the heart of the corporate layoff machine and *Privilege and Privation* on the exterior where the victims of the machine have been banished, In *America, America!: a Mass Recital*, he takes us into the home of the workers where all three plays have implied the effects of unemployment are the most destructive. He then takes us back into the street, but now as a contested public space where the workers and the unemployed will fight. Kreymborg's mass recital is divided into three formal sections—in the first, we meet an orator speaking to a crowd on some "Union Square corner" where the orator indicts America for the plight of the working, and, now not-working poor.<sup>52</sup> In part II, a joyriding teenage couple of loose morals is used in agitprop style to contrast the decadence of the bourgeois class with the poor, struggling married couple that appears in part III. Kreymborg's contrasting pairs of lovers are again minimalist sketches of type and represent their respective classes, rather than being realistic depictions of individuals. As the orator recounts his tale of capitalist decadence and working-class oppression, the crowd joins in on the refrain "America, America!" which builds in intensity throughout the three parts to a crescendo in the final stanza.

Kreymborg dubs *America, America!* a "dramatic ode," presumably an ode to the workers. The verse begins with long 10-13-line stanzas in iambic tetrameter. The meter does not seem to follow either a classical or English odes, frequently giving way to free verse, anaphora, and repeating lists which recall Kreymborg's obsession with repetition in his earlier verse plays. However, there is some sense of the classical ode's 3-part structure and movements, strophe, anti-strophe, and epode in the three sections of the poem. Thus, in the strophe, the poet catalogs the woes of the poor who no longer thrive and can no longer partake of their liberty in America, the anti-strophe shows us the freedom enjoyed by the bourgeois teenagers whose families effectively own the country, and finally, in the epode, the first two movements are juxtaposed as the workers vow to take back their land.

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52 A. Kreymborg, *America, America!*, *op. cit.*, p.47.

Kreymborg subtitles his work a “mass recital” and follows some of the aspects of this genre of socialist ensemble performance that was emerging from worker theatres in New York. Influenced by the mass pageants that had been held on the American left, such as John Reed and Robert Edmond Jones’s *Patterson Silk Strike Workers Pageant* of 1913, the “mass recitation was a dramatic form in which actors chanted in verse, using rhymed or unrhymed couplets, to the accompaniment of choreographed movements and gestures.”<sup>53</sup> The form seems ideally suited to Kreymborg’s goal of celebrating the crowd. Moreover, choreographed movements of chanted verse were the staple of Kreymborg’s earlier experiments in the Little Theatre. One imagines in a fully staged production of *America, America!*, Kreymborg would have directed the actors to move stage left or stage right for the strophe and anti-strophe movements of the ode. Kreymborg had also experimented with non-movement—stasis on the stage—having actors play sculptures in another of his early playlets *Mannikin and Minnikin* (1916). There seems to be an echo of these experiments in the opening stage directions where the orator remains “stationary” but the “background of street scenes, moving crowds.”<sup>54</sup>

*America, America!* reveals a Kreymborg confident with modern techniques and at home in the theatre as it begins with a montage of off-stage sound effects to greet the audience before the curtain rises: “off-stage echoes of a patriotic past: ‘I pledge allegiance to my (sic) flag,’ spoken by school children; Sousa’s *Stars and Stripes Forever*; snatches of modern jazz...”<sup>55</sup> The sound montage adds a collage element—not unlike the elements used in the *Living Newspaper*. The chorus repeats the lines “America, America.” In the opening, the orator gives us the strophe as a sort of anti-ode of Depression-era America:

What have you done with all your gold,  
 America, America?  
 What have you bought and calmly sold  
 Of human flesh and misery;  
 What has it cost the growing poor  
 To earn their cornered liberty  
 The right to live awhile and wed;  
 The right to share a loaf of bread,  
 The right to one dark room and bed,

53 George W. Chilcoat, “Workers’ Theatre as an Inquiry Process for Exploring Social Issues of the 1930s,” *Social Education*, April/May 1998, vol.62, no.4, n.p.

54 A. Kreymborg, *America, America!*, *op. cit.*, p.47.

55 *Ibid.*

The right to love before they're dead,  
and all the children comforted—  
Why are the children thin and cold,  
America?<sup>56</sup>

The first portion of the poem thus concludes with the orator recounting the difficult conditions of the poor in their one-room, cold-water flats, the evaporation of the money in the economy, and their abandonment by society at large.

126 In part II, a sing-song dialogue is introduced for the two bourgeois lovers, Jack and Jill. Kreymborg had often used a meter like this before for childlike innocents, but here the decadence of the children of the upper class is shown as cruel and irresponsible. The reduction of the couple to nursery rhyme characters Jack and Jill underscores their infantilism. The teenagers, engage in casual sex in the back of Dad's car and will rely on dad the banker to pay for an abortion if necessary:

Nothing in the world to worry about,  
the old Harry's in and the old Harry's out,  
nothing in the world to be sorry about—  
"Who the hell cares what mother will say?—  
Daddy's got a bank and the bank will pay—" <sup>57</sup>

In part III, Kreymborg juxtaposes the joyriders with his proletarian heroes, Jim and Jane. Jim returns home having found no work, where Jane has done her best to find food for the family:

"What have you got for dinner, Honey?"  
"*Yesterday's soup—I'm out o' money—*"  
(America, America.)  
"What'll we do when the rent comes round?"  
"*Butter's gone up ten cents a pound.*"  
"I've been all over—no job in sight." <sup>58</sup>

The couple recites further details of their hardships and contemplates an impossible future. Kreymborg intends to show how traditional values are being undermined by the bosses.

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56 *Ibid.*, pp.47-48.

57 *Ibid.*, pp.50-51.

58 *Ibid.*, pp.47-48.

When Jane offers to go out and work on top of her domestic drudgery, Jim breaks free of his dogged acceptance of their family's plight, blaming the "great bastards" and "king after king" who "show him the door." He demands action and the play ends on the call to revolution:

"Up on your feet, Jane—up again now!"  
Now we'll start fighting—"How dear how?"  
"Tomorrow I'll tear down the whole damn sky!"  
"An' we'll run beside you—the children an' I!"  
"Tomorrow we'll start all over and ah—"  
"Die if we have to—" (America)!<sup>59</sup>

If Kreymborg followed his classical models, the ensemble would be brought together to the center of the stage for the final chanting of "America." The epode brings together not only the first two part of the ode but also strands from the two previous playlets as well: it is time for the workers to organize, not to faint as had the poor clerk Frank, but to "start the riot." Kreymborg's politics and his aesthetics found their perfect juxtaposition in the conclusion. While details about specific stagings and choreography are limited for *America, America!: a Mass Recital*, a substantial number of photographs do document Kreymborg's next project with the FTP, *The Dance of Death*.

## THE FTP POETIC DRAMA DIVISION – AUDEN'S *THE DANCE OF DEATH*

In the fall of 1935, even as he took the helm of the Manhattan Bronx Unit, Kreymborg wrote to Hallie Flannigan to suggest creating a Poetic Theatre Unit. She responded positively on December 14, and Kreymborg became head of this unit in February of 1936.<sup>60</sup> The new unit's only production would be W.H. Auden's verse play *The Dance of Death*, which had had its American debut directed by Flanigan herself at her home port, Vassar College. Composer and Vassar professor Claire Leonard had created a piano score for Flanigan, and Kreymborg hired him to create a full score for the New York production. Subsequent correspondence shows Kreymborg making various requests, including asking for stills of the Vassar production and making an appeal for younger actors who could handle the dancing and movement he envisioned

59 *Ibid.*

60 Correspondence between Kreymborg and Flanigan, Works Projects Administration, Federal Theatre Project Records, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland.

for the piece.<sup>61</sup> Auden's play afforded Kreymborg another opportunity to assail the capitalist establishment. The title signals the play as a modernist *dance macabre*, the dance led by the grim reaper to which all, regardless of station must ultimately join. The intervention of the off-stage voice of Karl Marx in the ending shows Auden exploiting the theme for class struggle in a move widely considered to be pro-communist at the time.<sup>62</sup> Kreymborg's approach to staging the play as a grand spectacle was his greatest, and would prove his last opportunity to create a fusion of poetic theatre and politics on stage.

W.H. Auden's *The Dance of Death: A problem in mass rhythmic pantomime and recitation*, "directed" by Emile Beliveau, with Alfred Kreymborg listed as "supervising director"<sup>63</sup> ran from May 19-June 6, 1936. The subtitle is clearly Kreymborg's as is the idea of having the cast move in time with poetic rhythm, following closely his concept for the *Others Players*, which included: "Pantomime in the form of a semi-dance of gesture, in accordance with the sense more than the rhythm of the lines."<sup>64</sup> No doubt it was the Kreymborgian terminology and objectives for the show that led some sources to refer to Kreymborg rather than Beliveau as director. Kreymborg undoubtedly wrote the program notes as well. After praising Auden and the poets of his generation for "a consciousness of British decadence and a determination to do something about it,"<sup>65</sup> the notes evolve into a manifesto for poetic theatre, showing Kreymborg balancing in mid-career the modernist impulse for ambiguity and indeterminacy against his ambition to reach and involve the masses:

*The Dance of Death* is susceptible to many meanings and interpretations. The pace of the lines and situations is so rapid as to defeat a specific interpretation made in haste. So much is left to the actors by the author and by the actors to the audience that the audience itself has a part in the play, or what might be called the mood of cooperation. The genial announcer states our common plight: "We present to you this evening a

61 Alfred Kreymborg to Hallie Flannigan, January 13, 1936, Correspondence, Works Projects Administration, Federal Theatre Project Records, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland.

62 In 1942, Auden apparently scribbled in a friend's copy of the printed play: "the communists never spotted this was a nihilistic leg-pull" (Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden; Late Auden*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1981, p.270).

63 *Dance of Death* program, Federal Theatre Project Collection, The Library of Congress Collection of U.S. Works Progress Administration Records, Special Collections in the Music Division, Washington, DC, p.1.

64 A. Kreymborg, *Troubadour*, *op. cit.*, p.131.

65 Alfred Kreymborg (?), "Program Notes" (ms.), Wystan Hugh Auden, *Dance of Death*. Federal Theatre Project Collection, The Library of Congress Collection, n.p.



picture of the decline of a class, of how its members dream of a new life, but secretly desire the old, for there is death inside them. We show you that death as a dancer.”

Those among us who have worked many years toward the revival of poetic drama in modern terms are greatly cheered by the sudden advance in public interest, abroad as well as at home.... Poetic drama, whether in verse or prose, is nothing more or less than the broadcast interpretation of a common experience.<sup>66</sup>



1. Chorus, Announcer, Dancer before ensemble. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

Pre-show publicity from the FTP’s office of information appeared in an article by Burns Mantle, announcing the goal of a synthesis of the arts: “It is an attempt to return to the fundamental union of the three dramatic arts and employs singers, dancers, and actors performing against a musical and plastic background.”<sup>67</sup> Mantle continues reporting “Death in the play is a dancer. The other characters in the play are men and

66 *Ibid.*

67 Burns Mantle, *Daily News*, New York, May 18, 1936, p.216.

women who are fleeing from life to the beach, to the sun, anywhere away from life and trouble.”<sup>68</sup> In *The Dance of Death*, Auden depicts the English middle class’s aversion to the unpleasantness of depression reality as they flock to the sun, although linear plot lines are immersed in a myriad of high modernist or expressionist fragmentation with many different characters, choruses, and obscure allusions.



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2. The episode, “In the sun.” Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress

There are five poetic choruses repeated at particular intervals during the show. The first invites people from all countries to enjoy a Cunard-style vacation in the sun on “the ship of England” and declares its quasi-revolutionary theme: “Revolutionary Worker, I get what you mean / But what you need is a revolution within / So let’s begin”.<sup>69</sup> The events are presided over by an Announcer—appearing in bourgeois evening dress and top hat in Kreymborg’s production—who declares that the play will picture the “decline of a class”<sup>70</sup>—the lines Kreymborg chose to include in his program notes. There is a Chorus proper that serves as a foil during dramatic moments but is primarily a send-up of the Greek tragic chorus of prominent citizens with conservative attitudes; there are also numerous cast members with obvious Anglo-Saxon surnames; and numerous

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68 *Ibid.*

69 W.H. Auden, “Choruses for *The Dance of Death*,” in *The Dance of Death* (ms.), Federal Theatre Project Collection, The Library of Congress Collection, pp.1-4.

70 *Ibid.*, p.1.

symbolic characters in the expressionist tradition such as the Three Professors and the Three Graces (see **fig. 1**). Auden gives us several episodes on a sunny cruise ship to lampoon the English middle class—such as the *Alma Mater* episode—parodying the English who hang onto the status of their *Alma Mater*s (the old school tie and such) far into advanced age and bear other classic marks of the leisure class.

Kreymborg’s script is reasonably faithful to the published text but with numerous cuts and minor changes. The rhythmic movement Kreymborg created to follow the verse, the music, and the Dancer’s choreography were all original to the FTP production. Several photographs preserve something of the dances and the staging, such as the “The Sun God Dance” which diverts the crowd of sunbathers.



3. The dance in the sun. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress

Here, the Dancer appears for the first time (**fig. 4**), an idealization of beauty, drawing the attention of the sunbathers, although the Announcer warns his beauty is “leading you on.”<sup>71</sup>

In Scene One, the sunbathers discover their clothes have been stolen and eventually they find a basket of old band uniforms and put on a musical review in the style of 1916, which turns into a pantomime of the First World War. The characters cry “a sword,” “a gun,” and the Chorus: “Look what they’ve gone and done,”<sup>72</sup> as a lead into a mass recital in which the audience is invited to join on war and revolution. It’s not clear how the lines were communicated to the audience in the FTP production, but the script asks the audience to chant along with the actors:

71 *Ibid.*, p.3.

72 *Ibid.*, p.8.



4. The Dancer. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress

One, two, three, four—the last war was a bosses’ war! Five, six, seven, eight—rise and make a worker’s state! Nine, ten, eleven, twelve—seize the factories and run them yourselves!

We will liquidate the capitalist state!<sup>73</sup>

The Chorus and Audience conclude with a chant of “Overthrow!” However, the popular revolution soon takes a satirical turn as the Announcer points out that Russia has not a middle class, and cannot offer a model for England, and anyhow Russians

just aren't English: "After all, are we not all of one blood, the blood of King Arthur... our first duty is to keep the race pure...and not let the dirty foreigners come in and take our jobs!"<sup>74</sup> It's then decided that because women are needed as caretakers for men, they too should be excluded from the English revolution. All join in a cry of "revolution," which has thus now been completely co-opted by traditional class and gender prejudices and is, of course, no revolution at all (fig. 5).



5. Dance of Death, Unidentified Scene. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress

The FTP production featured an intermission of 15 minutes and recommences with the Dancer appearing as if he were a daredevil pilot—at the time a role popular with young aristocrats. The Dancer is a shifting signifier throughout the play; earlier on the beach, we are told he symbolizes beauty; here as he prepares for a fatal dance, he represents the titular death. Here Auden throws out a philosophical allusion. If something happens to the Dancer: "Who will be our master, who will teach to fly from the alone to the alone?"<sup>75</sup> The allusion is to Plotinus who praised the individual, mystic

74 *Ibid.*, p.9.

75 *Ibid.*, p.18.

contemplation of works of art—suggesting the importance of the ego and individualistic consciousness or self—in fact, the aristocratic consciousness of Nietzsche as opposed to the collective consciousness of the masses. Thus in representing an excess of ego, of an unlimited aestheticism, Auden’s dancer may be interpreted as, and was recognized by at least one reviewer<sup>76</sup> of Kreymborg’s production as a symbol of fascism, the most alluring and seductive temptation for the hypocritical middle class.

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6. The Dancer Collapses. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress

The narration of the Dancer’s aeronautical stunt is covered by Box and Cox, two sports reporters, and the Audience is instructed to make the “oohs,” and “ahs,” and other noises appropriate for his various turns and leaps. The dancer falls and is injured—he is placed in a chair, paralyzed from the waist down (fig.6). In Auden’s text, the audience is invited on stage at this point, although there is no mention of this in Kreymborg’s script.

The Dancer makes out his will which sounds like that of an English country gentleman and industrialist, promising both the means of production and his wealth to the workers:

76 “The Dance of Death,” *The Brooklyn Citizen*, May 20, 1936, p.14.

He leaves you his engines and his machines  
The sum of all his productive means  
He leaves you his railways, his liners, his banks  
And he leaves you his money to spend with thanks<sup>77</sup>

The reading of the will seems to recount the history of the bourgeois rising against the landed nobility and the industrial revolution (fig.7), and ends by promising the workers both control of the means of production and the wealth of capitalism, possibly logically irreconcilable outcomes, and those so often promised by populist and fascist leaders. The set-piece also offers the opportunity for Claire Leonard's climactic number in the FTP show, the *Bourgeoise Blues*.



7. Rendition of *Bourgeoise Blues*. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress

The Dancer dies, and, in the FTP production, a lavish funeral is enacted. The chorus appeals to and sings of the *Alma Maters* and of the class that depends on them, although one of the English characters, McLaughlin, recognizes how they have sold out the working classes and unemployed who may seek revenge. “Quick, under the table, it’s the bread lines in the parks,”<sup>78</sup> he cries. They hide like Ostriches but are soon vanquished by the voice of Karl Marx: “The instruments of production have been too much for them. They are liquidated.”<sup>79</sup>

77 *Ibid.*, p.24.

78 *Ibid.*, p.27.

79 *Ibid.*

As had happened so often in Kreymborg's career, his work on *The Dance of Death* was misunderstood and derided for its oddity and somewhat impractical execution, while loyalists defended the temerity and intrepidity of his experimentation. George Kazacoff, the only scholar of the FTP to seriously consider the production, notes that "most reviewers did not feel that the life of the bourgeoisie would end imminently,"<sup>80</sup> dismissing the production's political insurgency. *The Wall Street Journal* "assured its readers that there was nothing to worry about" and suggested the production was more "a satire of itself than a serious philosophical statement."<sup>81</sup> However, the reviewers cited by Kazacoff grumbled less about politics and more about the modernist aesthetics of the disconnected dialogue, symbolic characters, and the absurdity of the plot, typical biases of American theatre critics' of the era towards non-realistic theatre. Kreymborg's defenders gave the show positive marks, such as the critic of *The Brooklyn Citizen* who, after dutifully noting a flaw in the "excess of sound caused by the actors' movement across the stage" argued:

A tradition of allaying contemporary poetic drama with some form of social protest was upheld [...] the outstanding characteristic of the drama is its abandonment of traditional forms of expression. Not only have music and choreography been employed in conjunction with rhyme and prose, but they are presented in bitter, vivid phrases. The effect is interesting, albeit if not always clear because of the appearance of the puzzling imagery.<sup>82</sup>

*The Dance of Death* offered Kreymborg the chance to fully exercise his theories of poetic movement and showcase formally protean modernism fused with proletarian politics with the size of cast and stage befitting participative drama for the masses. His efforts should be seen as a *tour de force* for the collaborative arts. Yet *The Dance of Death* was the first and last production for the Poetic Drama Unit, and it remains unclear if the unit's demise was for lack of a more receptive public or mounting political pressure on the FTP from Washington.

Kreymborg reappears in the FTP Radio Unit in 1937. Once again, he announced ambitious goals for the new unit: "Famous poets from all over the country will cooperate with the actors and directors of the project for a series of half-hour programs," while

<sup>80</sup> George Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre*, La Vergne, PageTurner Press and Media 2011, p.171.

<sup>81</sup> Cited *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> "The Dance of Death," art. cit., p.14.



plans were “afoot” for the dramatization of classic works, and “later programs” would be “devoted to the living American novelist, dramatist, and critic.”<sup>83</sup> More research needs to be undertaken to trace Kreymborg’s involvement with the Radio Unit and the conditions under which he left the FTP, but by 1938 he had emerged on radio not with the FTP but with NBC, where he would have his greatest popular success with a pacifist radio play based on Holst’s symphony *The Planets*. His success was short-lived, however, and after the war, Kreymborg’s career would be limited by his political views. Poetry scholar Alan Filreis quotes from a letter of Kreymborg’s from 1946 complaining about difficulties finding a publisher for his then-latest manuscript of poems. Kreymborg feared that with his poetry’s “embattled pacifism” and its expression of a wish for “peaceful coexistence” with the Soviet Union, “it won’t be easy to place in the current marketplace.” Kreymborg further lamented that he had “a temporarily exhausted and depleted heart” as the anti-communist obsession took hold in the United States. Poet Aron Kramer, then a young friend of Kreymborg’s was blunt in his assessment: Kreymborg was “bludgeoned into silence by the McCarthy period.”<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Kreymborg was eventually blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee, and his name became virtually unknown by the end of the 1950s. The author hopes that the present study will encourage further recovery of one of America’s most unusual voices, the troubadour who sang for the people instead of the king.

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## NOTICE

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DREW EISENHAUER  
Singing the Unsung Masses

## ABSTRACT

Despite his recognition as an important editor of modernist poetry and the acknowledgment of the significance of his early poetic plays performed with the Provincetown Players, scholarship about Alfred Kreymborg remains scarce, particularly his involvement with the FTP from 1934-1938. This paper is among the first efforts to recover this period of Kreymborg’s work, offering an initial exploration of the materials available in the National Archives and Records Administration and the Library of Congress. The present study discusses Kreymborg’s work both as writer and administrator for the Manhattan-Bronx unit of the FTP and offers the first critical analysis of his anti-capitalist ensemble verse-plays: *America, America!: a Mass Recital* (1934), *Frank and Mr. Frankenstein* (1934), and *Privilege and Privation* (1937). The paper also discusses Kreymborg’s application of his theatrical and political theories in a major production of W.H. Auden’s *The Dance of Death* (1936), undertaken as head of the Poetic Drama Unit in 1936.

## KEYWORDS

Kreymborg, Federal Theatre Project, poetic drama, Modernism, *Others*, Marxist literature, Auden, Yiddish theatre, Provincetown Players, agitprop

## RÉSUMÉ

En dépit de sa reconnaissance en tant qu'éditeur de poésie moderniste, et la publication de quelques critiques de ses premières pièces en vers produites par les Provincetown Players, les études sur Alfred Kreymborg restent rares, en particulier sur son investissement auprès du FTP de 1934 à 1938. Cet article s'appuie sur des documents conservés à la National Archives and Records Administration et à la Bibliothèque du Congrès. Il examine le travail de Kreymborg à la fois comme rédacteur et administrateur de l'unité Manhattan-Bronx du FTP et livre la première analyse critique de ses pièces chorales anticapitalistes : *America, America! a Mass Recital* (1934), *Frank and Mr. Frankenstein* (1934) et *Privilege and Privation* (1937). L'article traite également de l'application des théories théâtrales et politique de Kreymborg dans sa mise en scène de *The Dance of Death* de W.H. Auden (1936), entreprise en tant que chef du Poetic Drama Unit.

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## MOTS-CLÉS

Kreymborg, *Federal Theatre Project*, drame en vers, modernisme, *Others*, marxisme, W. H. Auden, théâtre yiddish, *Provincetown Players*, l'agit-prop

# ORSON WELLES ET SES COMPOSITEURS : UNE COHÉSION SOCIALE ET POLITIQUE AUTANT QU'ARTISTIQUE

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Orson Welles, à l'âge de 20 ans, a fait ses débuts de metteur en scène professionnel new-yorkais au Federal Theatre, où il a travaillé de janvier 1936 à juin 1937. À l'initiative du producteur John Houseman, il y a monté quatre spectacles : le premier au sein du *Negro Theatre Project* qui présentait des pièces anciennes ou contemporaines entièrement interprétées par des Noirs, les suivants au sein du *WPA Project 891*, voué au théâtre classique, que Houseman a obtenu de fonder. Cette année et demie passée au Federal Theatre n'est pas à proprement parler une période autonome de la carrière de Welles, car une continuité artistique relie cette aventure à celle de la compagnie de répertoire que Houseman et Welles ont créée dans la foulée, le Mercury Theatre, qui a monté six pièces jusqu'en mars 1939. Si l'on se permet d'annexer à l'ère du Federal Theatre un spectacle que Welles a supervisé parallèlement pour un conservatoire de musique, les compositeurs qu'il a engagés au Mercury étaient sans exception ceux qu'il a fréquentés grâce au Federal Theatre.

Welles collabore ainsi avec cinq compositeurs de musique savante, incarnant la modernité américaine en pleine expansion, qui œuvrent pour la scène aussi bien que pour le concert et forment un milieu artistique relativement homogène : par ordre d'entrée en lice, Virgil Thomson, Paul Bowles, Aaron Copland, Lehman Engel et Marc Blitzstein. Quand Welles est recruté par le Federal Theatre, Thomson et Copland font figure d'ainés, ayant respectivement 39 et 35 ans, tandis que Blitzstein a 30 ans, Bowles et Engel 25 ans. Houseman, lui, a 33 ans.

Comment un jeune homme de 20 ans parvient-il à réunir la fine fleur des compositeurs installés ou prometteurs de son temps ? Comment se définit la cohérence de ce cercle de musiciens ? Quel sera l'apport de leur fréquentation par Welles aux mises en scène théâtrales, aux dramatiques radiophoniques et aux films qu'il créera par la suite ? Faut-il considérer ces musiciens d'abord comme les collaborateurs de Welles ou comme ceux de Houseman ? Autant de questions permettant de mieux comprendre le milieu artistique, culturel et politique dans lequel baigne Welles à ses débuts et l'influence de ce milieu sur la suite de sa carrière, en même temps qu'elles fournissent

l'occasion de brosser le portrait d'une ère de la musique de spectacle new-yorkaise, alors que se joue l'invention d'un art national américain.

## LA CHRONOLOGIE DES COLLABORATIONS, DU FEDERAL THEATRE AU MERCURY THEATRE

La vie artistique et sociale de Welles à ses débuts dans le théâtre new-yorkais est fortement influencée par Houseman et par le mentor musical et ami proche de celui-ci, Virgil Thomson<sup>1</sup>.

142 À l'automne 1933, Thomson a fait faire à Houseman, qu'il ne connaissait pas, ses débuts au théâtre en lui proposant de monter, dans le Connecticut puis à New York, son opéra excentrique *4 Saints in 3 Acts* écrit des années plus tôt sur un livret de Gertrude Stein. La distribution de cet opéra situé au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle où Thérèse d'Avila et Ignace de Loyola croisent une vingtaine d'autres saints espagnols réels ou imaginaires était entièrement composée de Noirs, à l'initiative de Thomson. *4 Saints in 3 Acts*, acclamé à sa création en février 1934, a tenu six semaines à Broadway, ce qui faisait de lui l'opéra resté le plus longtemps à l'affiche. Thomson a choisi le novice Houseman parce qu'il pensait le contrôler, mais cela a donné naissance à la carrière artistique de Houseman en même temps qu'à une vive amitié et à des décennies de collaboration intermittente.

Quand Houseman, à l'automne 1935, est nommé codirecteur du *Negro Theatre Project* avec l'approbation de la communauté noire, il a déjà repéré Welles dans *Roméo et Juliette* de William Shakespeare où il faisait ses débuts à Broadway en interprétant deux personnages secondaires, et il lui a offert le rôle principal, celui d'un milliardaire omnipotent presque sexagénaire, dans la « tragédie en vers » d'Archibald MacLeish *Panic* qu'il a coproduite en mars 1935, avec une musique de Thomson. Houseman mise maintenant sur Welles pour mettre en scène *Macbeth* de Shakespeare, que le jeune prodige transpose dans le Haïti du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Leur « *Macbeth* vaudou » remporte un triomphe en avril 1936 au point de partir en tournée nationale avec une mise en scène simplifiée. Welles en demande la musique, qu'il veut exceptionnellement abondante, à Thomson. À côté de fanfares de trompettes ou de musiques de combat, le compositeur préfère signer surtout des arrangements, par exemple ceux de valse viennoises de Joseph Lanner pour le banquet au cours duquel le protagoniste voit apparaître le spectre de Banquo.

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1 Sur Thomson, voir notamment Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, New York/London, W. W. Norton, 1997.

L'amitié de Houseman et Thomson détermine la succession chronologique des choix de compositeurs. Thomson présente à Welles son protégé Paul Bowles et lui fait l'éloge de Marc Blitzstein, que Houseman et lui connaissent à peine.

En septembre 1936, Bowles est ainsi le compositeur du premier spectacle du *WPA Project 891, Un chapeau de paille d'Italie* d'Eugène Labiche et Marc-Michel, librement transposé par Welles et le poète et danseur Edwin Denby dans un Paris qui ressemble beaucoup à l'Amérique rurale, sous le titre *Horse Eats Hat*<sup>2</sup>. Le futur romancier d'*Un thé au Sahara* mène alors de front la composition (qu'il abandonnera peu ou prou vers 1947) et la littérature. Il signe là sa première musique de scène. Thomson le conseille et orchestre sa partition, car Bowles est quasi autodidacte en la matière. Pour honorer le minutage réclamé, là aussi considérable, la solution est d'amalgamer des compositions originales, des arrangements d'œuvres précédentes de Bowles et des morceaux tombés dans le domaine public. En janvier 1937, Bowles enchaîne avec *La Tragique Histoire du docteur Faust* de Christopher Marlowe, dont il orchestre cette fois la plus grande part, après que Thomson a décliné la proposition et lui a cédé le projet.

En avril 1937, Welles fait un détour en montant l'opéra pour chanteurs adolescents d'Aaron Copland *The Second Hurricane*, sur un livret de Denby, pour un conservatoire new-yorkais où le compositeur enseigne, la Henry Street Settlement Music School, qui a prévu trois représentations<sup>3</sup>. Débordé par ses autres activités et manquant d'enthousiasme pour l'œuvre, Welles délègue partiellement la mise en scène à l'un de ses assistants. À l'origine de la commande passée à Copland se trouve Lehman Engel, chef d'orchestre du conservatoire, qui a lui-même signé des musiques de scène pour le Federal Theatre, a dirigé les créations américaines d'un opéra et d'une comédie musicale de Kurt Weill et fera une longue carrière entièrement vouée au spectacle : compositeur pour la scène, chef d'orchestre de comédie musicale. On lui doit des enregistrements historiques de grands classiques de la comédie musicale, ainsi que des livres indispensables, souvent réédités, sur cet art<sup>4</sup>.

2 Sur Bowles, voir notamment Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno, *An Invisible Spectator*, London, Bloomsbury, 1989. La biographie plus récente de Virginia Spencer Carr (*Paul Bowles*, New York, Scribner, 2004) apporte de nombreuses informations complémentaires, mais ses passages sur la collaboration avec Welles sont émaillés d'erreurs.

3 Sur Copland, au sein d'une bibliographie giboyeuse, privilégions Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2000; Elizabeth B. Crist, *Music for the Common Man*, Oxford/New York, Oxford UP, 2005; et Gayle Murchison, *The American Stravinsky*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2012.

4 Citons en particulier *Words with Music*, New York, Macmillan, 1972 et 1977. Sur la carrière d'Engel, le seul livre est son autobiographie, *This Bright Day*, New York, Macmillan, 1974.

En juin 1937, incursion autrement décisive dans le théâtre musical, Welles crée *The Cradle Will Rock*, « a play in music » (« une pièce en musique ») de Marc Blitzstein, qui est son propre librettiste et parolier<sup>5</sup>. C'est l'une des tentatives les plus ambitieuses de fonder une tradition opératique américaine, dont le caractère précurseur sera amplement reconnu, notamment par Leonard Bernstein qui s'en fera le champion et multipliera les déclarations d'admiration envers son aîné. Blitzstein choisit Engel pour chef d'orchestre. Quatre jours avant la première, sur ordre du gouvernement américain, la *Works Progress Administration* interdit au Federal Theatre toute nouvelle création avant plusieurs semaines, ce qui est interprété comme une censure déguisée à l'encontre de cet opéra engagé. Le soir de la première, leur théâtre étant cadenassé et surveillé par des vigiles, Welles et Houseman défient le gouvernement en emmenant la troupe et le public pour une représentation organisée au pied levé dans une autre salle une vingtaine de rues plus loin. Le syndicat des musiciens ayant défendu à ses adhérents de se produire hors du cadre de leur contrat, la solution est de faire monter le compositeur seul sur scène, au piano, tandis que certains des chanteurs, eux aussi menacés, se lèvent depuis les rangs d'un public électrisé pour tenir leurs rôles. L'opéra sera ensuite joué non consécutivement dans trois théâtres avec Blitzstein au piano seul, ascétisme qui en renforce l'impact militant. Il en reste une trace éloquente : le premier enregistrement quasi intégral d'un spectacle musical américain en 78 tours, où l'auteur joue au piano et lie les chansons entre elles avec un commentaire<sup>6</sup>. Engel tiendra sa revanche amicale en dirigeant, à la demande de Blitzstein, les premières représentations avec orchestre de *The Cradle Will Rock* au New York City Center en 1960.

Après avoir échoué à convaincre la *Works Progress Administration* de laisser sa chance à *The Cradle Will Rock*, Welles démissionne du Federal Theatre tandis que Houseman est congédié. Dans le domaine musical, toutefois, la continuité l'emporte quand le tandem, en août 1937, fonde le Mercury Theatre pour lequel Houseman trouve des mécènes et loue une salle au cœur de Broadway. Le Mercury propose plusieurs spectacles de répertoire en rotation rapide, pour un prix modique. En dehors d'une pièce de George Bernard Shaw pour laquelle il se passe de musique, Welles sollicite de nouveau les compositeurs avec lesquels il vient de travailler. Blitzstein signe ainsi les partitions de *Jules César* de Shakespeare (novembre 1937) et de *La Mort de Danton* de Georg Büchner (novembre 1938), Engel celle de la comédie élisabéthaine *Le Jour de fête*

5 Sur Blitzstein, voir notamment Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1989; et Howard Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein*, Oxford/New York, Oxford UP, 2012.

6 La distribution n'est pas celle d'origine, mais celle, légèrement modifiée, du Windsor Theatre, à Broadway, qui reprend la pièce pour trois mois en janvier 1938.



*des cordonniers* de Thomas Dekker (janvier 1938), Copland celle de la première partie, seule représentée, de *Five Kings* (février 1939), condensé de plusieurs pièces historiques de Shakespeare coproduit par la Theater Guild, laquelle jette l'éponge pendant la tournée de rodage, privant le spectacle de sa création new-yorkaise. Certaines de ces partitions mêlent musique originale et arrangements d'airs d'époque. Bowles, lui, participe au vaudeville à la française de William Gillette *Too Much Johnson* que le Mercury s'apprête à représenter dans une petite ville du Connecticut en août 1938. Il fournit une partition destinée à accompagner des séquences muettes filmées en 16 mm qui doivent servir de prologue et d'épisodes de liaison entre les actes. Welles renonçant à finir le montage et à projeter le résultat, la musique est abandonnée. Bowles en tire une suite baptisée *Music for a Farce*, exécutée en concert à New York l'année suivante. Seul Thomson reste à l'écart du Mercury, mais c'est à lui que Welles propose en premier lieu *Five Kings* et plusieurs projets inaboutis.

Le panorama serait incomplet sans la mention de collaborations plus modestes avec Blitzstein grâce auxquelles la musique de *Jules César* est la seule dont nous puissions écouter aujourd'hui un équivalent d'époque. En 1938 et 1939, à la demande de Welles, le compositeur aménage en effet sa partition en trois occasions : un **coffret de disques 78 tours** ramenant la pièce à 40 minutes avec la distribution d'origine, une **dramatique radiophonique** d'une heure diffusée en direct dans la série produite par Welles *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, un **coffret de 78 tours** totalisant une heure et demie dans la collection pionnière d'enregistrements shakespeariens à vocation pédagogique « Mercury Text Records ». Blitzstein signe la partition de *La Nuit des rois* dans la même collection à laquelle sont aussi conviés, pour d'autres pièces, Elliot Carter et Bernard Herrmann.

Les compositeurs de Welles ne se contentent pas de se recommander les uns les autres. Thomson donne à Houseman et Welles l'idée d'adapter *Un chapeau de paille d'Italie* et souffle le nom du coadaptateur Denby. Pour les épisodes filmés de *Too Much Johnson*, Bowles suggère de recruter comme opérateur son proche ami touche-à-tout Harry Dunham.

Les commandes que leur passent Houseman et Welles sont décisives pour l'évolution de la carrière de Thomson et Bowles. *Macbeth* vaut à Thomson la proposition d'autres musiques de scène, y compris pour différentes branches du Federal Theatre. Dans la foulée d'*Un chapeau de paille d'Italie*, Bowles gagne sa vie pendant une douzaine d'années comme compositeur pour le théâtre.

Un jeu de rivalités s'installe graduellement, l'amitié de Blitzstein et Welles concurrençant celle de Thomson et Houseman, d'autant que Blitzstein et Thomson, dans un premier temps, ont des rapports malaisés. Bowles, en 1939, compte Houseman

au nombre de ses meilleurs amis new-yorkais. Engel et surtout Copland semblent avoir un rapport plus professionnel avec Houseman et Welles.

## LA COHÉSION D'UN GROUPE INFORMEL : CONFRATERNITÉ ET ANCRAGE À GAUCHE

Ces choix musicaux de Welles reposent sur des raisons autant sociales et politiques que proprement musicales. Les compositeurs qui travaillent avec Welles au temps du Federal Theatre forment avec d'autres qui n'œuvrent pas pour la scène (Roy Harris, Walter Piston, Roger Sessions...) un groupe informel, à une époque où la musique américaine se veut collective. Une unité indiscutable, voire une solidarité ou une osmose, se fait jour en leur sein.

146 Les chefs de file sont Copland et Thomson. Le premier surtout est un organisateur, un fédérateur, qui tient à cœur d'aider et promouvoir ses cadets et considère que les artistes doivent assumer eux-mêmes une part de l'organisation de la vie musicale afin d'élargir le public des œuvres contemporaines. Ces compositeurs s'échangent les travaux les uns les autres, travaillent en commun à des projets que l'un n'a pas le temps de mener seul à bien, écrivent les uns au sujet des autres dans des revues, se présentent des mécènes, s'invitent mutuellement à des colloques ou conférences, organisent des concerts publics ou privés de leurs œuvres, interprètent leurs productions respectives, jouent parfois en concert ensemble. Copland et Thomson favorisent la publication des partitions de leurs cadets, donnent leur opinion critique sur certains de leurs manuscrits. Copland, dès 1930, Thomson, l'année suivante, prennent sous leur aile Bowles auquel le premier enseigne un temps l'harmonie. En 1932-1933, Copland anime le Young Composers' Group, lieu de concerts entre soi et tribune de discussions souvent chauffées à blanc qui réunit des compositeurs impérativement âgés de moins de 25 ans, parmi lesquels figurent Bowles et Engel, occasionnellement rejoints par des visiteurs « extérieurs », dont Blitzstein et Thomson. En 1935, Thomson, qui a coutume de composer des portraits musicaux de ses amis en les faisant poser pour lui, écrit un *Portrait of Paul Bowles*, courte pièce pour piano, et Bowles lui rend la pareille avec *Portrait of Five*, où un hommage malicieux à Copland se glisse aussi. Copland est l'instigateur de la collaboration régulière de Blitzstein, Bowles et Thomson à *Modern Music*, la prestigieuse revue de la League of Composers dont il est l'éminence grise, premier périodique à favoriser la conscience d'une musique contemporaine américaine. Thomson s'impose dès lors comme un critique musical éminent, avant de régner en maître dans ce domaine pendant les décennies suivantes. À l'initiative d'Engel qui en assurera la présidence pendant vingt ans, Blitzstein, Copland, Thomson et lui fondent

en 1938 la maison d'édition à but non lucratif The Arrow Music Press afin de publier la musique américaine de leur temps. Tout cela n'empêche pas ces compositeurs de critiquer féroce­ment leurs œuvres respectives à l'occasion, en privé ou dans la presse.

Ce groupe informel s'explique aussi par le climat politique de la Grande Dépression et par l'attitude militante de compositeurs qui se veulent « dans le siècle ». Les musiciens partagent une aspiration à redéfinir la culture américaine, à faire émerger une culture nationale et populaire, progressiste, à créer une « démocratie culturelle » marquée par la justice sociale et l'égalité raciale. Ils acquièrent le sens de la responsabilité sociale, apprennent la politique et l'économie. Ils s'inquiètent de la montée des fascismes européens. Plusieurs de ces compositeurs sont proches de compagnies théâtrales de gauche comme le Group Theatre, le Living Newspaper ou d'autres sections du Federal Theatre. Bowles, Copland et Thomson participent au *Federal Music Project*, la branche musicale de la *Works Progress Administration*, dont Engel est l'un des piliers new-yorkais. Nos compositeurs sont parfois curieux du parti communiste américain, voire y adhèrent.

Le plus activiste est Marc Blitzstein, la conscience sociale de la musique américaine, partisan de l'« art pour la société » (« art for society's sake »), et l'un des musiciens américains les plus controversés du temps. En 1932, il écrit un opéra jamais représenté sur les militants anarchistes Sacco et Vanzetti exécutés cinq ans plus tôt. Il collabore à l'hebdomadaire marxiste *New Masses*, émanation du Parti. En 1935-1936, il est le secrétaire du Composers' Collective of New York, groupe affilié indirectement au Parti tout en revendiquant son indépendance, et dont la mission est de concevoir un style musical qui séduise les masses révolutionnaires tout en permettant l'expression personnelle. *The Cradle Will Rock*, opéra prolétarien, milite pour l'essor des syndicats ouvriers dans l'industrie sidérurgique et brosse un portrait des classes sociales au moyen des styles musicaux variés qu'il emploie. L'œuvre s'inscrit (malgré les réticences initiales de Blitzstein envers l'esthétique de Kurt Weill) dans la filiation de *L'Opéra de quat' sous* et de *Grandeur et Décadence de la ville de Mahagonny* de Bertolt Brecht et Weill. Elle est dédiée à Brecht, auquel Blitzstein s'est lié par l'entremise de V.J. Jerome, porte-parole culturel du Parti, qui a joué un rôle dans la genèse du projet. En 1937, Blitzstein célèbre le vingtième anniversaire de la révolution d'Octobre en écrivant une chanson en l'honneur du métro de Moscou. Il prend sa carte du Parti au printemps 1938.

Bowles commence à étudier le marxisme à la fin de l'année 1935, mais suit les cours sans dévotion, et il s'agit chez lui d'un communisme de rébellion plutôt que d'un espoir de voir le Parti gouverner. Il entre au Parti à l'automne 1938, à demi convaincu : les syndicats étant dominés par les communistes, et par une branche new-yorkaise

stalinienne, l'adhésion est utile pour tenir son rang au théâtre. Il restera au Parti deux ans, moins longtemps que Blitzstein qui le quittera en 1949.

Copland est alors un compagnon de route, prêtant son prestige à la gauche. Il est proche du Group Theatre dès sa formation à l'hiver 1930-1931, et donne des articles ou des concerts à des organisations marxistes. En 1934, *New Masses* le déclare vainqueur du premier concours de la **chanson du 1<sup>er</sup> Mai**, sa partition est entonnée à New York par huit cents choristes et publiée en Une du journal avant d'être reprise l'année suivante dans un recueil de la Workers' Music League. Les six courts mouvements de ses *Statements for Orchestra* (1932-1935) portent des titres empruntés à l'esthétique prolétarienne. Il déclarera avoir cessé de croire aux liens de la musique et de la politique vers 1935, mais reste dans cette mouvance jusqu'à la fin de la décennie. Selon Elizabeth Crist, qui a étudié l'irrigation du style de Copland par ses positions politico-sociales, son œuvre symphonique *El Salón México* (1932-1936), inspirée de danses populaires mexicaines, « reflète l'idéologie du Popular Front par son allégeance symbolique à un "américanisme pan-ethnique", par sa sympathie pour la culture ethnique de la classe laborieuse, et par son populisme teinté de radicalisme<sup>7</sup> ». Le livret didactique de *The Second Hurricane* exalte les vertus de l'action collective en montrant comment les retombées d'une catastrophe naturelle sont évitées grâce au revirement de six lycéens ordinaires du Middle West qui, après des réactions individualistes, finissent par adopter le respect mutuel et la solidarité. À l'arrière-plan de cette parabole se lit un discours antiraciste.

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Blitzstein, Bowles et Thomson sont également voisins par leur engagement antifranquiste pendant la guerre d'Espagne. En août 1936, dès le mois suivant l'insurrection militaire, Bowles, à la demande du metteur en scène Joseph Losey, écrit la musique d'un spectacle de propagande ayant pour but de collecter des fonds pour les républicains. En juin 1937, Joris Ivens ayant tourné près de Madrid le documentaire engagé *Terre d'Espagne* destiné à mobiliser l'aide internationale pour le compte d'une petite société de production proche du Parti, Blitzstein et Thomson sont chargés d'opérer une sélection de musiques espagnoles et d'en écrire les arrangements, à partir d'une poignée de disothèques privées dont celle de Bowles qui avait séjourné en Espagne deux ans plus tôt.

Houseman et Welles sont alors dans la même mouvance. *Panic* d'Archibald MacLeish que produit Houseman est une condamnation du capitalisme, où le magnat

7 Elizabeth B. Crist, « Aaron Copland and the Popular Front », *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 56/2, été 2003, p. 439 (ma traduction, comme pour les autres textes anglo-saxons cités plus bas).

de l'industrie et de la finance interprété par Welles voit son monde s'effondrer sous l'effet de la crise bancaire de 1933. La dernière représentation est parrainée par la New Theater League radicale et par *New Masses* dont les abonnés contribuent à remplir la salle, et suivie par un débat contradictoire auquel V.J. Jerome prête son aura.

Les prises de position publiques de Welles sont également nombreuses, et ses convictions le mettent de plain-pied avec les compositeurs évoqués. Lui aussi est un antifasciste convaincu. C'est lui qui enregistre le commentaire de *Terre d'Espagne*, écrit par Ernest Hemingway, avant qu'Ivens préfère le faire réenregistrer par l'écrivain lui-même. En 1938 et plus modestement l'année suivante qui voit son départ pour Hollywood, il participe à divers événements publics organisés par la gauche, telles des manifestations caritatives au profit des républicains espagnols et une série de conférences intitulées « La culture et le Front populaire » ou « Le théâtre et le Front populaire ». Cette dernière conférence est publiée dans *The Daily Worker*, le quotidien du Parti<sup>8</sup>. Welles retrouve parfois sur l'estrade certains de ses compositeurs, voire leur groupe entier quand il anime en février 1938 un concert au profit de *New Masses* où Blitzstein, Bowles, Copland, Engel et Thomson interprètent leurs œuvres et celles d'autres confrères engagés. Son antifascisme n'a d'égal que son antiracisme.

La formation même du Mercury Theatre affiche une dimension politique<sup>9</sup>. Le Mercury fait paraître son manifeste aussi bien dans le *New York Times* que, sous une forme différente, dans *The Daily Worker*, où il annonce l'avènement d'un « théâtre pour le peuple<sup>10</sup> ». Son *Jules César* aux implications antifascistes est sous-titré *Mort d'un dictateur*. Houseman affirmera que le Mercury compte sur le soutien des adhérents et des sympathisants de la gauche organisée. L'exégète du théâtre wellesien Richard France fait l'hypothèse d'accords passés entre le Mercury et le Parti qui lui fournit appui et spectateurs avant de s'opposer à sa vision de la Révolution française dans *La Mort de Danton* à l'automne 1938<sup>11</sup>. Pour éviter un boycott communiste, Houseman et Welles, sur l'insistance de Blitzstein qui s'est institué leur conseiller politique, acceptent de couper dans la pièce de Büchner ce qui pourrait susciter des parallèles avec la révolution russe. Les bénéfices de certaines représentations vont à des groupes antifascistes.

8 Orson Welles, « Theatre and the People's Front », *The Daily Worker*, 15 avril 1938.

9 Sur les rapports du Mercury à la politique, voir Michael Denning, « Towards a People's Theater: The Cultural Politics of the Mercury Theatre », *Persistence of Vision*, 7, 1989.

10 John Houseman, « Again – A People's Theatre; The Mercury Takes a Bow », *The Daily Worker*, 18 septembre 1937.

11 Richard France (dir.), *Orson Welles on Shakespeare*, New York/Westport (Conn.)/London, Greenwood Press, 1990, p. 18. France émet l'hypothèse que le Parti a contribué au financement de *Jules César*.

Selon ses propres dires, toutefois, Welles se serait un temps montré plus radical qu'il n'était pour ne pas perdre l'amitié de Blitzstein<sup>12</sup>, et il affichera bientôt des vues rooseveltiennes avant que, de l'automne 1943 à l'automne 1946, il soit tenté par une autre vocation : éditorialiste politique dans la presse et à la radio, orateur infatigable et soutien affirmé de la création de l'ONU, dont l'un de ses amis essaie de faire de lui le premier secrétaire général.

L'historienne de la culture Nadine Hubbs propose en outre de considérer que le cercle de musiciens constitué autour de Copland et Thomson (en plus de Blitzstein et Bowles, elle y fait entrer la génération suivante en les personnes de David Diamond, Leonard Bernstein ou Ned Rorem) est marqué par la solidarité homosexuelle ou bisexuelle. Dans une société homophobe, écrit-elle, des compositeurs gays sont paradoxalement les architectes de l'identité musicale nationale<sup>13</sup>.

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## LOIN DU ROMANTISME GERMANIQUE, PRÈS DE LA CLARTÉ FRANCOPHILE

Cette solidarité sociale et politique s'allie à une certaine cohésion stylistique. Copland et surtout Blitzstein ont commencé sous le signe de l'avant-gardisme voire de l'hermétisme, les œuvres du second étant fréquemment accueillies par l'indifférence et l'incompréhension. Thomson, lui, a presque d'emblée abjuré la complexité et la rhétorique pour viser une musique directe, marquée par l'économie de moyens et une écriture tonale précise et, pour les mélodies, par la clarté de la prosodie, aussi simple qu'une conversation amicale. Bowles, affectant une attitude dilettante, a livré une musique enjouée, spirituelle, ensoleillée, d'un naturel sans artifice.

Quand Welles croise leur route, ses compositeurs se tournent tous vers une musique plus accessible, qui ne soit pas réservée à un public d'habituez. Leur implication croissante dans la musique de spectacle les incite à la simplicité, l'immédiateté. Leur style est, pour l'essentiel, tonal, consonant, et parfois néo-classique dans le sillage d'Igor Stravinsky, employant des procédés d'écriture anciens avec une touche d'ironie. Ces compositeurs sont aussi perméables au jazz et, pour certains, à la comédie musicale. Thomson avec *4 Saints in 3 Acts*, Copland avec *The Second Hurricane* et Blitzstein

12 Barbara Leaming, *Orson Welles*, New York/London, Viking/Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985, p. 132.

13 Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2004; et « Homophobia in Twentieth-Century Music: The Crucible of America's Sound », *Daedalus*, 142/4, automne 2013. Hubbs ne prend pas en compte Engel, peut-être parce que sa carrière diverge vite de celle de ses confrères.

avec *The Cradle Will Rock* défient les barrières conventionnelles entre opéra et théâtre musical, apportant la preuve que l'on peut représenter des opéras modernes à New York ailleurs que dans les maisons d'opéra. *The Cradle Will Rock* est un « opéra pour acteurs », écrit pour des acteurs qui chantent et non pour des chanteurs d'opéra, et qui rejette explicitement l'art pour l'art. *The Second Hurricane* comporte des rôles chantés et d'autres parlés dans un style quotidien.

Copland, lui, est à l'aube d'une nouvelle étape de sa carrière. Déplorant que les compositeurs américains travaillent dans le vide et soient rejetés par les grands orchestres qui privilégient la tradition germanique, il met pendant un temps la plus grande partie de sa production au service du théâtre et du ballet. Avec *The Second Hurricane* et avec les deux œuvres qui déclenchent sa popularité, *El Salón México* et le ballet de 1938 *Billy the Kid*, il affirme son tournant vers une musique accessible sans perdre en singularité. Il reconnaîtra que ce changement d'orientation est consolidé par des conversations avec Thomson et par l'œuvre de celui-ci. Quant à Blitzstein, il se dirige progressivement vers un style plus abordable à partir de 1930 et, selon Copland, trouve réellement son identité artistique une fois qu'il se spécialise dans l'écriture pour la scène<sup>14</sup>.

La musique savante américaine ne bénéficiant alors pas d'une tradition propre, elle hésite entre deux voies, antagonistes mais qui se rejoignent dans le refus du postromantisme germanique. D'un côté, les tenants d'un américanisme pur et dur. Copland se donne ainsi pour mission d'écrire une musique qui ne pourrait être l'œuvre d'un Européen, et se met à utiliser des matériaux thématiques traditionnels américains ruraux. De l'autre côté, les tenants d'une influence de l'Europe non germanique, essentiellement française et anglaise, visant la clarté de la conception et l'élégance dans la proportion. La pédagogie française de composition s'est du reste introduite depuis quelque temps aux États-Unis tandis que la pédagogie allemande y perd du terrain. Thomson est le champion de la fécondation réciproque des musiques américaine et européenne, française en premier lieu. Ses textes sont remplis de mises en garde contre l'influence étouffante de la culture germanique, et il se félicitera que le romantisme soit une phase que les États-Unis n'auront jamais traversée<sup>15</sup>. Bowles est farouchement antiwagnérien sinon antigermanique, et le restera toute sa vie, déclarant que l'« esprit germanique » est pour lui une « cuisine indigeste »<sup>16</sup> et ne tolérant guère qu'Anton

14 Aaron Copland, *Our New Music*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1941, p. 140. Howard Pollack nuance cette affirmation dans *Marc Blitzstein, op. cit.*, p. 149.

15 Virgil Thomson, *American Music Since 1910*, New York/Chicago/San Francisco, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970, p. 20.

16 Myriam Annisimov, « Les tasses de thé de Paul Bowles », entretien, *Le Monde de la musique*, décembre 1990, p. 86.

Webern. Il se fait par ailleurs déjà le défenseur résolu de la musique non occidentale, notamment maghrébine.

Il va sans dire que ces compositeurs, hormis Bowles, ne détestent pas en bloc la musique germanique ; simplement, ils ne la prennent pas pour modèle. Blitzstein, malgré son antipathie pour le dodécaphonisme, est l'un des rares Américains à avoir étudié en Europe aussi bien avec Nadia Boulanger qu'avec Arnold Schönberg, brièvement dans les deux cas. Il voit en Hanns Eisler le parfait mélange de la musique et du marxisme, et accompagne ses chansons au piano en concert ou en studio d'enregistrement. Engel est un admirateur déclaré de Schönberg. Et le musicologue Matthew Mugmon a pu écrire un livre entier sur la relation de Copland à la musique de Gustav Mahler, cette musique dont il a favorisé la reconnaissance outre-Atlantique à un moment où elle était encore largement méprisée et qui a exercé une influence dissimulée sur son œuvre<sup>17</sup>.

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Plusieurs de ces compositeurs ont étudié en Europe lors de séjours parfois longs de plusieurs années, assistant aux premières exécutions d'œuvres phares et côtoyant les aînés dont ils revendiquent l'héritage. Copland a été l'un des premiers élèves de Nadia Boulanger à Paris, dès 1921, rejoint par Thomson et suivi par Blitzstein et, une décennie plus tard, passagèrement et sans conviction, par Bowles. Copland a voyagé en Europe tantôt avec Blitzstein, tantôt avec Bowles. Thomson, bien que Copland et Houseman l'exhortent à se rendre utile à New York, passe la moitié des années 1930 à Paris. Les saints de *4 Saints in 3 Acts*, dira-t-il, représentent le cercle parisien dans lequel il vit, où les artistes consacrés viennent en aide à leurs cadets. Bowles, qui a séjourné à Paris dès l'âge de 18 ans, parcourt le globe en 1931-1934 et, dans la seconde moitié des années 1930, ne fait guère que des escales à New York pour entretenir sa carrière théâtrale. Malgré la médiation de Copland, certaines frictions se créent entre les « expatriés » Thomson et Bowles et maints de leurs confrères.

Dans sa jeunesse, avant puis pendant son premier séjour parisien, Copland a écrit une poignée de mélodies sur des paroles de poètes français et des pièces en hommage à Claude Debussy et Gabriel Fauré. Les plus francophiles sont cependant Thomson et Bowles. Thomson a composé des mélodies françaises sur des textes d'Anne de Rohan, Bossuet, La Fontaine, Racine, le Marquis de Sade et le dadaïste Georges Hugnet, ou sur une nouvelle de Gertrude Stein. Il a écrit des portraits musicaux de Français, y compris d'un confrère comme Henri Sauguet, et arrangé du Emmanuel Chabrier. Bowles a mis en musique des textes de Jean Cocteau, *Scènes d'Anabase* de Saint-John Perse et, dans sa cantate *Par le détroit*, un texte français de son cru. La lettre de recommandation que

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17 Matthew Mugmon, *Aaron Copland and the American Legacy of Gustav Mahler*, Rochester (NY), University of Rochester Press, 2019.



Henry Cowell (l'« inventeur » du cluster) a donnée à Bowles pour Copland en 1930 est explicite : « Mon cher Aaron, juste un petit mot pour te présenter Paul Bowles. Sa musique est très française, mais cela pourrait t'intéresser<sup>18</sup>. »

À côté de Maurice Ravel et Darius Milhaud, l'un des modèles qui font le plus office de trait d'union entre ces musiciens américains est Erik Satie. Thomson, qui ne jure que par l'auteur des *Gymnopédies* auquel il initie Copland, est surnommé par la critique d'outre-Atlantique « le Satie américain ». Sa *Sonata da chiesa* facétieuse pour quintette hétéroclite (clarinette, trompette, cor, trombone et alto) ou son œuvre pour piano évoquent souvent le compositeur français, en en lançant même parfois comme négligemment des citations. Il orchestre des pièces de Satie et écrit les paroles d'une adaptation anglaise de *Socrate*, œuvre dont il favorise la carrière. Il consacrera à son idole un chapitre dans un de ses livres, où il juge que « l'esthétique musicale de Satie est la seule "esthétique du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle" dans la musique occidentale<sup>19</sup> ». Il programmera une pièce de Satie pour ses propres funérailles. Bowles, fondateur à New York des Éditions de la Vipère en 1933, publie deux pièces inédites de Satie dont il a acquis le manuscrit alors que le Français est boudé par les éditeurs américains depuis sa mort en 1925. Sa familiarité avec Satie se sent dans son œuvre, et le premier biographe de Bowles dépeint à juste titre la musique de *Too Much Johnson* comme « une composition délicieusement farfelue, tel un croisement d'Erik Satie et du music-hall anglo-saxon<sup>20</sup> ». Blitzstein admire chez Satie aussi bien les musiques de scène que les mélodies, dont il soulignera l'« usage non sentimental d'une forme sentimentale<sup>21</sup> », tandis que l'un de ses biographes estime que l'influence conjugquée de Satie et Stravinsky est plus profonde que celle de Brecht et ses collaborateurs sur son théâtre musical<sup>22</sup>.

On l'a compris, Welles a pour interlocuteurs au Federal Theatre des compositeurs proches à tout point de vue les uns des autres, parlant le même langage quelles que soient les divergences ponctuelles. Une fois patron du Mercury en duo avec Houseman, Welles n'a aucune raison de chercher d'autres collaborateurs que ceux qui lui ont été si facilement proposés. Ses musiciens font partie du même milieu social, politique et

18 Paul Bowles, *Mémoires d'un nomade*, trad. Marc Gibot, Paris, Le Seuil, 1999, p. 130.

19 Virgil Thompson, « La place de Satie dans la musique du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle », trad. Marcelle Jossua, *La Revue musicale*, hors-série « Erik Satie et ses amis », dir. Rollo Myers (dir.), 1952, p. 14 (extrait de *The Musical Scene*, New York, Knopf, 1945).

20 Ch. Sawyer-Lauçanno, *An Invisible Spectator*, op. cit., p. 203.

21 Entretien avec Marc Blitzstein, dans John Gruen, *Close-Up*, Viking Press, New York, 1967, p. 170.

22 H. Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein*, op. cit., p. 39.

artistique et certains d'entre eux influencent Welles au-delà de la musique tout autant qu'ils lui sont redevables.

## QUEL HÉRITAGE DU FEDERAL THEATRE DANS LES CHOIX MUSICAUX ULTÉRIEURS DE WELLES ?

154 Connaissant la mélomanie du jeune Welles, il est difficile de dire en quoi ses contacts avec ses premiers compositeurs ont orienté sa sensibilité musicale ou seulement conforté des goûts déjà ancrés. En tant que metteur en scène, Welles a des idées musicales arrêtées. Surmené, il lui arrive d'abandonner un compositeur à lui-même, comme avec Copland pour *Five Kings*, mais la règle est plutôt la mainmise. Thomson déclarera que, face aux exigences et aux connaissances musicales de son cadet pour *Macbeth*, il préféra arranger des morceaux préexistants plutôt que « s'humilier à écrire si précisément sur commande<sup>23</sup> ». Selon Engel, Welles lui a virtuellement dicté son travail pour *Le Jour de fête des cordonniers*, tapotant les rythmes et indiquant la nature de la mélodie et le nombre de mesures exigées<sup>24</sup>. Bowles choisira à l'inverse de témoigner que Welles manquait de compétences musicales<sup>25</sup>.

Toujours est-il que certains des partis pris musicaux de Welles au sein du Federal Theatre se prolongeront, après même la dispersion du Mercury et la rupture avec Houseman en 1941, dans son abondante œuvre théâtrale, radiophonique et cinématographique. Cela, y compris quand, de 1947 à 1955 puis de 1958 à 1970, Welles s'exilera en Europe.

Welles signera, de 1941 à 1960, dix mises en scène théâtrales aux États-Unis, à Paris, à Londres, en Irlande et en Allemagne, sans compter des spectacles de prestidigitation et un ballet pour Roland Petit sur une musique de Jean-Michel Damase. Il ne travaillera plus jamais deux fois pour la même société de production, mais se rendra au coup par coup là où l'occasion s'en offrira. La cohésion musicale cédera la place à l'éclectisme le plus complet, de Duke Ellington au symphoniste et compositeur de spectacle britannique Anthony Collins en passant par une comédie musicale de Cole Porter, *Around the World* en 1946, dont Welles écrira le livret d'après *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* de Jules Verne. Seul rappel des temps anciens : la partition de

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23 Cité dans John Houseman, *Run-Through*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1972, p. 192. D'autres témoignages ultérieurs où Thomson minimise le rôle de Welles sentent trop le parti pris rétrospectif.

24 Lehman Engel à Andrea Nouryeh, cité dans Patrick McGilligan, *Young Orson*, New York, Harper, 2015, p. 433.

25 V. Spencer Carr, *Paul Bowles, op. cit.*, p. 151.

Blitzstein pour *Le Roi Lear* de Shakespeare en 1956 à New York. Comme Welles désire en outre des « effets symboliques abstraits », Blitzstein lui recommande les pionniers de la musique électronique Otto Luening et Vladimir Ussachevsky, dont les interventions sur bande magnétique s'ajoutent à sa musique instrumentale.

L'étanchéité est quasi totale entre les premiers compositeurs théâtraux de Welles, d'une part, et les compositeurs de ses dramatiques radiophoniques et de ses films, d'autre part. Si l'on met de côté l'émission *Jules César* évoquée, aucun de ses musiciens théâtraux ne participe aux quelque deux cents dramatiques radiophoniques ni à la douzaine de films que Welles réalise, quoique Blitzstein, indisponible, soit son deuxième choix (après Bernard Herrmann et avant Jacques Ibert qui signera la partition) pour son adaptation cinématographique de *Macbeth* en 1948.

Les rapports ultérieurs de Blitzstein, Bowles, Copland, Engel et Thomson avec le cinéma, il est vrai, sont rares et fort éloignés du courant dominant hollywoodien, à une époque où l'influence germanique s'étend de façon prépondérante sur la musique de film hollywoodienne, marquée par ses longues lignes mélodiques et son orchestration luxuriante postromantique. Le seul à travailler épisodiquement, à partir de 1939, pour les studios californiens est Copland (Thomson l'imité pour un film unique à la fin des années 1950), qui refuse notamment la primauté du *leitmotiv*. Ses confrères participent exclusivement à des films amateurs, des expériences avant-gardistes, des courts métrages institutionnels ou gouvernementaux ; il s'agit, surtout, de documentaires progressistes, voire de propagande. Dans la seconde moitié des années 1930, quand les indépendants de la côte Est (Pare Lorentz, Ralph Steiner, Leo Hurwitz, Paul Strand, Joris Ivens, Willard Van Dyke) participent à des documentaires institutionnels ou militants inspirés par le *New Deal* ou plus radicaux, c'est à ces musiciens qu'ils font appel, pour des films sur l'érosion du sol surexploité des Grandes Plaines, sur les bienfaits de la Tennessee Valley Authority chargée de moderniser la vallée du Tennessee, ou sur la condition ouvrière. Le point de départ est la collaboration, en 1936, de Thomson avec Lorentz, auquel Houseman a recommandé son ami. Les autres s'engouffrent dans la brèche et continuent dans les années 1940.

Pourtant, les choix stylistiques des partitions radiophoniques de Welles ne sont pas si éloignés de ceux de son théâtre, et Welles poursuit dans la même veine quand il peut contrôler la partition de ses films.

Welles travaille presque sans discontinuer comme metteur en ondes radiophonique de 1938 à 1946. Son collaborateur musical le plus fréquent est alors Bernard Herrmann, de quatre ans son aîné, qui participe à environ cent vingt de ses dramatiques. Pressé par les délais hebdomadaires, Herrmann doit souvent se contenter d'arranger des œuvres du répertoire ou de puiser dans un catalogue de thèmes personnels qu'il remodèle à chaque

nouvel emploi, tout en écrivant des partitions originales pour les émissions aux enjeux les plus importants. Malgré sa participation au Young Composers' Group, ses relations avec nos musiciens ne sont guère étroites. Il se distingue notamment d'eux par son mépris pour Nadia Boulanger, et a des rapports tendus avec Blitzstein et Bowles. Il dirige néanmoins en octobre 1937 la création radiophonique de *I've Got the Tune*, une *song-play* (« pièce en chansons ») de Blitzstein dédiée à Welles qui aurait dû en interpréter le protagoniste, exaltant l'engagement des compositeurs au service de la lutte des masses travailleuses. Lié avec Copland à la fin des années 1930, Herrmann dirigera plus tard ses œuvres en concert et vantera ses partitions de cinéma. Il partage bien des goûts proches de ceux de ses rivaux, dont Charles Ives, la musique anglaise (Edward Elgar, Frederick Delius...) et la musique française, en particulier Satie qu'il interprétera comme chef d'orchestre, enregistrant certaines de ses œuvres à la fin de sa vie. La tradition symphonique et opératique germanique ne le retient qu'exceptionnellement.

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Au cinéma, l'éclectisme du choix des compositeurs par Welles est total, et souvent gouverné par des questions pragmatiques. Les difficultés de Welles à trouver des producteurs hollywoodiens puis ses années de pérégrinations internationales ne peuvent qu'aller dans le sens de la nécessité de tisser de nouveaux liens à chaque film. Après Herrmann pour *Citizen Kane* en 1941 et *La Splendeur des Amberson* l'année suivante, il se voit plusieurs fois imposer des compositeurs, comme ceux du *Criminel* (1946) et de *La Dame de Shanghai* (1947), respectivement Bronislaw Kaper et Heinz Roemheld, qui représentent tout ce qu'il fuit : inspiration germanique postromantique, redondance, prédominance de la mélodie, orchestration appuyée et luxuriante à la façon de la musique symphonique et opératique de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Puis le globe-trotter travaille avec des compositeurs européens, à commencer par Ibert, rencontré à Rome et qu'il réussit à faire engager par son producteur américain pour *Macbeth*. Certains des musiciens qu'il a choisis, principalement Herrmann et Angelo Francesco Lavagnino, le compositeur d'*Othello* (1952), de *Falstaff* (1966) et d'un *Marchand de Venise* inachevé pour la télévision (1970), suivent une ligne directrice à rebours qui réside moins dans une continuité d'inspiration que dans des refus, dans leur éloignement ou leur assouplissement du modèle hollywoodien. Leur musique se signale par la très faible influence germanique, quoi qu'ils aient pu écrire pour d'autres cinéastes.

## QUESTIONS D'INSTRUMENTATION

Les passerelles entre les premières partitions théâtrales de Welles et ses partitions cinématographiques ont surtout trait à des questions d'orchestration : le goût des

petites combinaisons instrumentales ; la méfiance à l'égard des cordes ; le rôle des percussions et leur interaction avec le dialogue.

Conformément à la raison d'être du Federal Theatre qui est de donner du travail aux artistes au chômage, il est souhaitable d'employer un grand nombre d'instrumentistes – bien davantage que dans le théâtre ordinaire de Broadway. *Macbeth* et *Un chapeau de paille d'Italie* jouent la carte du pandémonium dans deux registres différents : sorcellerie et sauvagerie pour le « *Macbeth* vaudou », bouffonnerie pour *Un chapeau de paille d'Italie*. L'orchestre de fosse réuni par Thomson pour *Macbeth*, outre les cordes, comprend flûte, clarinettes et trompettes par trois, trombones par deux, guitare et percussion. S'y ajoutent, en coulisses, un autre groupe de percussions (grosses caisses, timbales, *thunder drum*, feuille à tonnerre, machine à vent) également chargé de simuler des bruitages, et, sur la scène, idée apportée par Welles, quatre tambours africains à la violence primitive. Orchestrant la musique de Bowles pour *Un chapeau de paille d'Italie*, Thomson répartit une trentaine de musiciens dans la fosse, deux pianos de concert dans les baignoires, et, sur la scène, un petit groupe de jazz, un orchestre tzigane, une cornettiste, et un piano mécanique dévidant des rouleaux d'époque. Cela étant, Thomson utilise pour chaque morceau de petites combinaisons associant seulement quelques instruments, comme le duo incongru d'un tuba et d'un triangle joué par un détenu et son gardien. S'y ajoutent quelques chansons sur scène. Même l'entracte est rempli d'événements musicaux inattendus. L'orchestration de Bowles pour *La Tragique Histoire du docteur Faust* comprend cinq bois, quatre cuivres, les timbales et une harpe. *The Cradle Will Rock* est écrit pour une trentaine de pupitres avant que l'interdiction gouvernementale impose de miser sur le piano seul.

Compte tenu des moyens financiers modestes du Mercury, les compositeurs font de nécessité vertu avec quatre instrumentistes, soit le minimum requis par le syndicat des musiciens (le double pour *Five Kings* grâce à la coproduction avec la Theatre Guild). Comme *Le Jour de fête des cordonniers* est joué un temps en alternance avec *Jules César* qui l'a précédé, Engel emploie sans sourciller la formation imaginée par Blitzstein pour la pièce shakespearienne : trompette, cor anglais, percussion, orgue Hammond.

On remarque en particulier la méfiance des compositeurs et de Welles à l'égard des cordes, présentes seulement dans *Macbeth* et, avec des intentions probablement parodiques, dans *Un chapeau de paille d'Italie*. Bowles a même horreur des cordes (en particulier du sentimentalisme du violon solo), et compose presque uniquement pour le piano, les vents et les percussions, recherchant les instrumentations transparentes.

À la radio, où il dispose d'environ vingt-cinq musiciens, Herrmann varie lui aussi les petites combinaisons instrumentales inventives d'un morceau à l'autre. Au cinéma, Welles est partisan d'une orchestration allégée et se méfie des cordes. Certes, ses

partitions hollywoodiennes recourent à l'orchestre de studio, soit quelque quarante-cinq musiciens, peut-être moins pour *Macbeth*. Mais Herrmann et Lavagnino, surtout dans *Othello*, livrent un choix constamment renouvelé de petites combinaisons, en invitant volontiers des instruments exclus de l'orchestre symphonique (vibraphone, accordéon, orgue, clavecin...) et en gardant en réserve la masse orchestrale pour des apogées comme la découverte du sens de « *Rosebud* » dans *Citizen Kane*, où les cordes se déploient enfin de façon grandiose et solennelle, porteuses d'une ironie tragique.

Un autre héritage, capital pour les films shakespeariens de Welles, est celui de la percussion telle qu'elle est employée dans le « *Macbeth vaudou* », *Un chapeau de paille d'Italie* et *Jules César*.

Dans le « *Macbeth vaudou* », pour m'en tenir au spectacle le mieux documenté dans ce domaine, la souplesse des percussions, qui passent insensiblement d'une fonction musicale à une fonction de bruitage, permet d'adapter les variations d'intensité ou de rythme au dialogue<sup>26</sup>. D'un bout à l'autre de la pièce, la percussion souligne *crescendo* une réplique, elle détache une portion de texte en s'interrompant abruptement entre deux répliques, deux vers, deux hémistiches ou deux mots, en faisant ressortir le dernier mot décisif d'une tirade, ou encore elle ponctue une réplique, tout cela en fonction des contours du pentamètre iambique et de la portée dramatique du texte. Ces procédés aujourd'hui familiers sont sans doute novateurs en 1936, à en croire Thomson qui en attribue l'invention à Welles<sup>27</sup>. On peut y voir le prolongement de la pièce que Welles a écrite en 1932-1935 sans pouvoir la faire représenter, *Bright Lucifer*, où les tambours maléfiques ne cessent de s'élever depuis les coulisses, censément depuis une réserve d'Indiens où une veillée funèbre est donnée en l'honneur d'une squaw décédée, pour annoncer la prise de possession des forces obscures<sup>28</sup>.

Welles cinéaste reprend surtout cet arsenal, précisément, dans son *Macbeth* cinématographique, où les sorciers vaudous sont remplacés par des sorcières païennes.

26 Mes sources principales, outre *The Theatre of Orson Welles* de Richard France (Cranbury [NJ]/London, Associated UP, 1977), sont ici un manuscrit annoté du spectacle contenant des signaux de départ pour la musique (Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, coll. « Orson Welles », boîte 5, chemise 15) et des notes de travail comportant d'autres indications musicales (Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, coll. « Orson Welles Papers », U.S. Mss 15AN, boîte 1). Quatre minutes du « *Macbeth vaudou* » ont été filmées lors de la tournée à Indianapolis pour un court métrage promotionnel de la *Works Progress Administration*, mais elles ne rendent pas compte de l'apport de Thomson ni des percussionnistes.

27 R. France, *The Theatre of Orson Welles*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

28 Orson Welles, *Bright Lucifer*, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, coll. « Orson Welles Papers », U.S. Mss 15AN, boîte 1.

La percussion n'y est qu'un complément occasionnel à la partition orchestrale, mais plus de la moitié des interventions prolongées des timbales funèbres sont ajoutées par Welles après coup à la partition d'Ibert, et Welles les combine au dialogue d'une façon proche de celle du « *Macbeth* vaudou », parfois pour mettre en valeur les mêmes répliques. Nouvelle variante : à deux reprises, les battements réguliers ou les roulements de timbales s'arrêtent net pour faire ressortir le passage de Macbeth du dialogue au soliloque en voix intérieure, bouche fermée. Des effets analogues se retrouvent plus ponctuellement dans *Othello* et *Falstaff*. Les roulements de timbales qui soutiennent lugubrement le dialogue d'Othello et Iago décidant l'assassinat de Cassio et de Desdémone sont ainsi coupés au rasoir pour mettre en relief les derniers mots de Iago qui propose, sur le ton détaché de l'évidence, de se charger de Cassio : « *Laissez-moi être son croque-mort.* »

Welles, dans beaucoup de ses films, est très interventionniste en matière musicale, y compris une fois l'enregistrement livré. Pourquoi ne pas se passer alors d'un collaborateur dont il remaniera de toute façon l'apport ? La seule utilisation par Welles de musique préenregistrée est celle de pièces pour piano de Satie dans son dernier film de fiction achevé, *Une histoire immortelle* (1968) d'après le conte d'Isak Dinesen, coproduit par l'ORTF. Goût de la litote, brièveté des motifs, effets répétitifs, propension pour l'ostinato, refus du développement des idées musicales, légèreté harmonique... Fuyant l'emphase, la surcharge, Satie lui offre une nudité musicale qui correspond à la forme du film. Loin d'être l'apparent contre-pied des choix musicaux antérieurs du cinéaste, il en est en quelque sorte la quintessence revendiquée.

## LA RIVALITÉ DE WELLES ET HOUSEMAN ET LE PARTAGE DES AMIS

Après leur rupture en 1941, Welles et Houseman se disputent maintes fois leurs comédiens et collaborateurs communs, y compris leurs musiciens Thomson et Blitzstein<sup>29</sup>.

Thomson reste un des amis les plus proches de Houseman, avec lequel il travaille à maintes reprises au théâtre jusqu'en 1972 où Houseman crée son opéra *Lord Byron* au Juilliard Theatre. Thomson écrit également la musique de deux courts métrages institutionnels produits par Houseman, dont l'un [pour une agence gouvernementale de propagande pendant la guerre](#). En 1984, il compose le portrait de son ami pour piano. Welles, de son côté, recommande avec succès Thomson en 1953 pour la dramatique

29 Houseman collabore encore avec Bowles pour un spectacle théâtral en 1941 et avec Copland pour une dramatique télévisée en 1957, sans que cela soit significatif.

télévisée en direct de Peter Brook *Le Roi Lear*, sur CBS, entreprise pionnière et prestigieuse dont il est la vedette.

Blitzstein, surtout, jusqu'à sa mort en 1964, maintient des collaborations avec les deux membres séparés du tandem, lesquels continueront de s'attacher à son œuvre par la suite. En 1946, Welles crée le rôle du récitant dans sa cantate *Airborne Symphony*, son œuvre de concert la plus ambitieuse, avec Leonard Bernstein à la tête du New York City Symphony. En 1957, Blitzstein jette les bases d'un projet d'adaptation en anglais de *Mère Courage* de Brecht et Paul Dessau que Welles mettrait en scène. En 1958, Thomson étant indisponible pour collaborer une troisième année d'affilée au festival shakespearien dans le Connecticut dont Houseman est le directeur artistique, Blitzstein signe la musique du *Songe d'une nuit d'été* et du *Conte d'hiver*. En 1966, Welles participe à l'enregistrement discographique de *Airborne Symphony* par Bernstein avec le New York Philharmonic. En 1985, Houseman est l'animateur d'un concert Blitzstein au Lincoln Center de New York.

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Deux œuvres cristallisent plus encore cette rivalité autour du compositeur, *Le Roi Lear* et *The Cradle Will Rock*.

En 1950, Houseman s'adresse à Blitzstein pour *Le Roi Lear* à Broadway. En 1956, Welles, on l'a vu, le sollicite pour son propre *Roi Lear* new-yorkais, avec une partition nouvelle. Puis le chef principal du New York Philharmonic, Dimitri Mitropoulos, lui commande une œuvre orchestrale amalgamant ces deux musiques de scène, et *Lear: A Study* est exécutée à Carnegie Hall en 1958. Houseman revient à deux reprises au *Roi Lear* en se réservant de la partition de Blitzstein, en 1964 à UCLA, en 1978 en tournée nationale.

À un moment où *The Cradle Will Rock* est provisoirement tombé dans l'oubli, Houseman le porte à la scène off-Broadway en 1983, puis à l'Old Vic de Londres deux ans plus tard, en jouant lui-même le récitant. Sa mise en scène est pérennisée par un disque et par une **captation télévisée** diffusée sur PBS. En 1984, quand un producteur indépendant soumet à Welles, pour approbation, un scénario sur la genèse aventureuse de *The Cradle Will Rock*, Welles propose de le réaliser lui-même et le réécrit de fond en comble, mais le montage financier s'effondre quelques mois avant sa mort<sup>30</sup>. Welles y dépeint Houseman comme un poseur avide d'usurper sa part de célébrité, aimant parader avec l'*intelligentsia* new-yorkaise, tandis qu'il rend un hommage appuyé à Blitzstein, à la mémoire duquel son scénario est dédié. Pas une ombre n'entache le

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30 La dernière mouture du scénario est publiée: Orson Welles, *The Cradle Will Rock*, Santa Barbara, Santa Teresa Press, 1994.



personnage du compositeur, décrit comme un saint marxiste auquel son metteur en scène se contente de permettre d'accéder à la notoriété.

Welles et Houseman ont été le bon tandem au bon moment, trouvant sur leur chemin des collaborateurs hors pair pour le plus grand bénéfice des parties prenantes, mais l'harmonie des deux hommes de théâtre aura été de plus courte durée que celle de leurs musiciens. Après la seconde guerre mondiale, certes, les entreprises collectives étaient derrière ces compositeurs, le combat de la musique américaine était peu ou prou gagné. Chacun s'est établi professionnellement, avec une certaine insécurité pour Blitzstein, victime de la chasse aux sorcières anticommuniste tandis que Copland n'a été que marginalement inquiété. Bowles s'est installé à Tanger en 1947 et a privilégié sa carrière d'écrivain, Engel s'est éloigné du milieu de la musique savante, les liens personnels de Thomson, Copland et Blitzstein (avant la mort par homicide de ce dernier en 1964) se sont lentement distendus. Chacun pourtant, par-delà les décennies, n'a cessé de reconnaître l'apport de leur solidarité générationnelle à la musique américaine et à eux-mêmes.

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## NOTICE

Coauteur avec Jean-Pierre Berthomé de *Citizen Kane* (Flammarion, 1992) et d'*Orson Welles au travail* (Cahiers du cinéma, 2006), François Thomas a publié de nombreux articles sur l'œuvre radiophonique et cinématographique d'Orson Welles ainsi que des entretiens avec ses collaborateurs. Il a également signé trois livres sur Alain Resnais et codirigé des ouvrages collectifs sur le court métrage français de 1945 à 1968 et sur la notion de *director's cut*. Il est professeur en études cinématographiques à la Sorbonne Nouvelle et collaborateur de la revue *Positif*.

## RÉSUMÉ

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Pour ses quatre spectacles au sein du Federal Theatre en 1936-1937, le jeune Orson Welles collabore avec des représentants en pleine ascension de la musique moderne américaine : Virgil Thomson, Paul Bowles, Marc Blitzstein et Lehman Engel, tandis qu'il crée ailleurs un opéra pour chanteurs adolescents d'Aaron Copland. Dans les deux années suivant son départ du Federal Theatre, Welles s'adressera aux mêmes compositeurs pour une demi-douzaine d'autres spectacles. Son choix de ces musiciens, parfois inspiré par son producteur John Houseman, repose sur des raisons sociales et politiques autant que proprement musicales. Ces compositeurs font partie d'une constellation informelle à une époque où la musique américaine se veut collective : entraide, engagement à gauche, recherche d'un art américain dénué d'influence germanique. Aucun d'eux ne collaborera avec Welles au cinéma, mais certaines de leurs tendances stylistiques trouveront un prolongement dans les films du réalisateur mélomane.

## MOTS-CLÉS

Musique de scène, opéra américain, Marc Blitzstein, Paul Bowles, Aaron Copland, Lehman Engel, John Houseman, Virgil Thomson, Orson Welles

## ABSTRACT

When he staged four shows at the Federal Theatre in 1936-37 in his early twenties, Orson Welles worked with rising exponents of modern American music: Virgil Thomson, Paul Bowles, Marc Blitzstein, and Lehman Engel, while elsewhere he premiered a play-opera for high school performance by Aaron Copland. In the two years

following his departure from the Federal Theatre, Welles commissioned incidental music from the same composers for half a dozen productions. His choice of musicians, sometimes inspired by his producer John Houseman, was based on social and political as well as musical reasons. These composers were part of an informal constellation at a time when American music was meant to be collective: mutual aid, commitment to the left, and the search for an American art devoid of Germanic influence. Though none of them worked with Welles in the cinema, some of their stylistic tendencies found an echo in the films of the music-loving director.

#### KEYWORDS

Incidental music, American opera, Marc Blitzstein, Paul Bowles, Aaron Copland, Lehman Engel, John Houseman, Virgil Thomson, Orson Welles



THE FIRST FEDERAL SUMMER THEATRE:  
TRAINING GROUND FOR “A NEW, IMAGINATIVE THEATRE”

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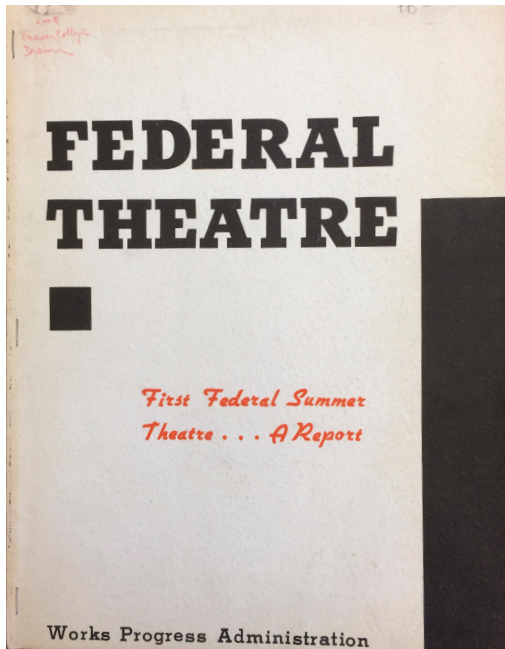
In the summer of 1937, the First Federal Summer Theatre was convened at Vassar College by Hallie Flanagan, Director of the Federal Theatre Project. The conference was titled “The First” in anticipation of its continuation in future summers. Unfortunately, it was also the last federal summer theatre training institute of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). Two years later, the entire relief program for theatre artists was suddenly shut down by the US Congress, due to conservative political backlash against the perceived leftist leanings of the Federal Theater Project.

At its inception in 1937, Flanagan’s initial stated purpose was to provide a retraining institute for theater artists and technicians from FTP units across America and to produce a Living Newspaper production at the end of the 6-week session. But as the summer conference unfolded, it became more apparent that she was also intent on using the conference as an opportunity to raise the quality of the shows that were being presented on the FTP stages, by introducing the 45 conference participants to emerging modern methodologies and theories, challenging them to step out of their comfort zones and embrace aesthetic innovation, and, encouraging them to consider treating a theatrical production as a laboratory for experimentation, with the ultimate and cumulative objective of fostering the development of “a new, imaginative theater” in America.<sup>1</sup>

This article retraces well-trod terrain. Multiple primary and secondary sources, historical accounts, biographies, and critical studies have treated the 1937 summer conference, providing similar brief descriptions of its purpose (retraining) and outcome (the Living Newspaper workshop production), without further elaboration.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Lorraine A. Brown, “Introduction: The Federal Theatre Project and Research Collection,” in *The Federal Theatre Project: A Catalog-Calendar*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1986, p. xix.
- 2 Jane DeHart Matthews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1967; Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage*, New York, Oxford UP, 1974; Tony Buttita and Barry Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents*, Philadelphia, U of Pennsylvania P, 1982; John O’Connor and Lorraine Brown (eds.), *The Federal Theatre Project “Free, Adult,*

A few accounts provide more detail. The first, and most extensive rendering of the event, “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre... A Report,”<sup>3</sup> is a formal, 40-page booklet that was produced by the official chroniclers of the FTP within a few months of the end of the summer session (fig. 1). In 1940, a year after the FTP was eliminated by Congress, the Director Hallie Flanagan wrote her own historical account of the national theater organization in her book *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre*,<sup>4</sup> that included a lengthy section on the summer conference. And in 1988, the biography *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre*, by Joanne Bentley,<sup>5</sup> provided further insight into the day-to-day activities and interpersonal drama of the events at Vassar in the summer of 1937.



1. First Federal Summer Theatre Report, Cover Page,  
Works Progress Administration, Federal Theatre National Publications, 1937.

*Uncensored*,” London, Eyre Methuen, 1980; C.W.E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century Drama, 1900-1940*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1982; Barry B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003; Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, New York, Walker, 2008.

3 “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre... A Report,” Works Progress Administration, Federal Theatre National Publications, 1937.

4 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Benjamin Blom, 1940.

5 Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, New York, Knopf, 1988.



This article, however, breaks new ground, by bringing forth archival research from the [Hallie Flanagan Papers](#) of the Special Collections Library of Vassar College,<sup>6</sup> but more importantly, the “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation on The Federal Summer Theatre,”<sup>7</sup> a 120-page comprehensive treatment of the activities of the summer conference that was completed in December of 1937 by a theater professor who was commissioned to evaluate the conference by the Rockefeller Foundation, a key sponsor of the summer institute. The report, housed at the [Rockefeller Archive Center](#), has not been mentioned by scholars, until now.

This article, drawing on all of these sources, sheds new light on the process, conflicts, and accomplishments of the Federal Summer Theater Conference of 1937, and most significantly, it provides a clearer understanding of Hallie Flanagan’s evolving objectives in convening the summer retreat. As we examine this particular moment in the history of the Federal Theatre Project, that lands dead center in the chronological middle of its short four-year life span, we will gain more insight as to the critical and pivotal role that the summer conference played in the ensuing two years of the FTP’s existence, and, perhaps, come to appreciate the long-lasting impact of the First Federal Summer Theatre at Vassar.

## NEW DEAL PROGRAMS: WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION AND FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was sworn in as President of the United States on March 4, 1933, and immediately went to work enacting his New Deal program of legislative initiatives in order to address the devastating consequences of the Great Depression that had begun in 1929, when the Stock Market crashed. In the first 100 days of his administration, the Democratic-controlled Congress passed, and the President signed into law, banking and securities regulations that helped stabilize the financial industry and the U.S. economy and they also created the Public Works Administration that infused the nation with monetary support for infrastructure improvements, and more importantly, provided millions of jobs for out of work construction industry workers.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Hallie Flanagan Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.

7 Virginia Heinlein, “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation on the Federal Summer Theatre,” Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Tarrytown, New York, Rockefeller Archive Center, 1937.

8 Jonathan Alter, *The Defining Moment*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2006.

Two years later, after a strong showing among Democrats in the 1934 mid-term elections, Roosevelt expanded his New Deal program to include the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in order to widen the scope and reach of back-to-work efforts across the nation.<sup>9</sup> In early 1935, Roosevelt's confidante, Harry Hopkins, was appointed Director of the WPA, and within a few months of taking office, Hopkins drafted plans to create work opportunities for unemployed artists and writers, via the four, newly-created Arts Projects in writing, music, art and theatre. Hopkins immediately tapped Henry Alsberg, a journalist, to run the Writers Project; Nikolai Sokoloff, a symphony orchestra conductor, to head the Music Project; and Holger Cahill, a folk art expert, to head the Art Project. He then turned to the Theater Project. In the spring of 1935, Hopkins invited Hallie Flanagan to Washington, D.C., to consider running the Theatre Project.<sup>10</sup>

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Hallie Flanagan was, at that point, a professor of theater at Vassar College and the founder and artistic director of the Vassar Experimental Theater. Hopkins had heard of her because of her nationally recognized record of theatrical achievements at the prestigious women's college, her education at Harvard, her participation in the National Theater Conference, her book *Shifting Scenes*, but also, notably, their shared alma mater, Grinnell College in Iowa.<sup>11</sup>

On her 45th birthday, Flanagan met with Hopkins in his office and was provided with key information about the objectives and parameters of the FTP. Notably, she was informed that work-relief was to be the main, if not the only, priority of the FTP.<sup>12</sup> She was told to spend most of her budget on artists not administrators, production costs or advertisements. The majority of the government funds dedicated to the FTP were to be dedicated to employing theater artists and technicians. Flanagan was informed that, "90% of the money allotted to FTP had to be spent on salaries." The remaining 10% would be dedicated to the other necessities of theatrical production, including administration, materials and marketing.<sup>13</sup>

She then went to the White House to meet with the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. Prior to his election as President, Franklin Roosevelt had served as Governor of the State of New York and the Roosevelts lived most of their lives in New Hyde Park, only a few miles away from Vassar in Poughkeepsie, and he had previously served on the

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9 S. Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, *op. cit.*, p.42.

10 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.188-89.

11 *Ibid.*, pp.185-86.

12 *Ibid.*, pp.188-89.

13 J. O'Connor and L. Brown, *The Federal Theatre Project*, *op. cit.*, p.7; B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, *op. cit.*, p.2.

Board of Trustees of the college. So, they were aware of Flanagan's work with the Vassar Experimental Theater, where she introduced her students and audiences to modern-era theatrical trends in expressionism, surrealism and constructivism that were emerging on the European continent.<sup>14</sup>

In *Arena*, Flanagan recounted the White House encounter where Mrs. Roosevelt spoke about the work at Vassar which led to a question from the First Lady: "Your ambitious productions [...] weren't they staged with little expense? Wouldn't it be possible to do similar productions which would look well without spending much money?" Flanagan responded that, indeed, her budgets were small, did not involve expensive sets, "relying scenically chiefly upon light," and the costs of labor were minimal because of student actors and crew.<sup>15</sup>

Flanagan also recalled that Roosevelt "asked a number of questions about my observations of government theatres abroad."<sup>16</sup> Back in 1926, not long after she began working at Vassar in the English Department, Flanagan was given a prestigious Guggenheim Foundation grant to explore the burgeoning field of modern dramatists in Europe. As a result, Vassar gave her a one-year leave to visit the theaters of London, Dublin, Rome, Dresden, and Moscow.<sup>17</sup> Upon her return, she wrote and eventually published, in 1928, her "dramatic diary of a year spent in European theatres," entitled *Shifting Scenes*<sup>18</sup> where she, among other things, described the national theaters of Europe and the governmental support for the arts. In the book, Flanagan noted an encounter with the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello, who suggested that a national theater for Italy would have to be regional and not centralized. Pirandello stated: "What I hope to do is to establish three national theatres, at Milan, Rome, and Turin, and possible a fourth at Naples," in order to "raise the entire dramatic tone of Italy."<sup>19</sup>

Two days after the White House visit, Flanagan accepted the job and immediately went to work hiring staff and creating various units of the Federal Theatre Project that included regional companies across the country. Flanagan later recalled, "in the central conception what was immediately needed was a knowledge of the United States. I was glad at this point that I knew my country," noting that she was born in South Dakota, educated in Iowa and Massachusetts, and had traveled throughout the country to big

14 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan, op. cit.*, p.188.

15 H. Flanagan, *Arena, op. cit.*, pp.11-12.

16 *Ibid.*, p.12; J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan, op. cit.*, p.188.

17 *Ibid.*, pp.48-50.

18 Hallie Flanagan, *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre*, New York, Coward-McCann, 1928.

19 *Ibid.*, pp.256-57.

cities and small ones. Flanagan continued: “I studied the map and the plan developed: five great regional theatres—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, possibly Boston, possibly New Orleans, each one a production center for a professional company.”<sup>20</sup>

Flanagan was mirroring Pirandello’s idea of a decentralized, region-based, theater that was federal in its organization but national in its mission. Jane DeHart Matthews, author of the first major history of the Federal Theater Project, described it as a “regionally centered national theatre.”<sup>21</sup> But Flanagan did not give Pirandello sole credit for the idea. In *Arena*, she noted that “[t]he idea of a regional theatre in some form had been in the minds of many people for many years,” identifying several fellow American academics, and the acclaimed theater director Kenneth Macgowan, who had written about the national regional idea in his 1929 book *Footlights Across America: Towards a National Theatre*.<sup>22</sup>

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Beyond the regional companies, Flanagan also established organizational divisions: the living newspaper; the popular-price theatre, presenting new plays by new authors; the experimental theatre; the commercial try-out theatre; and ethnic and race-based units, including, for example, the Yiddish, Cuban, and Black theatre units.<sup>23</sup> Those various FTP units went immediately to work in hiring theater and performance artists, back-stage crew and front of house staff, 11,000 in total, by the end of 1936, who went on to produce numerous plays, revues, vaudeville shows, marionette and children’s performances to 15 million viewers by the close of that first year of the Federal Theatre Project.<sup>24</sup>

Early 1937 in America was marked by Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s second inauguration that signified the peak of his political power. Roosevelt had successfully staved off conservative opposition in the 1936 election providing him and his administration with a vote of confidence in his New Deal programs, including the WPA, and, tacitly, the FTP.<sup>25</sup>

Public support for the administration, and its agenda, though, soon waned, when President Roosevelt introduced legislation in Congress to increase the number of justices on the United States Supreme Court. During the previous four-year term, the

20 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.21-22.

21 Jane DeHart Matthews, *The Federal Theatre 1935-1939*, *op. cit.*, p.40.

22 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.22; Kenneth Macgowan, *Footlights Across America*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1929.

23 C.W.E. Bigsby, *Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*, *op. cit.*, p.212.

24 1937 Memorandum, “Scope of the Project’s Activities in Nation-Wide Bases,” Rockefeller Foundation Records, Record Group 56.1, Series 200R, FA#386A, Box 289, Folder 3462, Tarrytown, New York, Rockefeller Archives Center.

25 S. Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, *op. cit.*, p.42.

Supreme Court had overturned several key New Deal legislative initiatives, holding that they were unconstitutional. In order to combat these decisions that stood in the way of his New Deal program, Roosevelt sought, early in his second term, to alter the composition of the court of last resort by increasing the number of justices within it. This so-called “court-packing scheme” faced fierce opposition in Congress and, more importantly, in the right-wing press of the period, that led to Roosevelt’s loss of support among the people and, more importantly, a decision by Congress to punish Roosevelt by calling for deep cuts in his proposed 1937 budget.<sup>26</sup>

The impact of all of this on the WPA and the FTP, unfortunately, was immediate. As Bentley notes, by mid-1937, “[a] greatly strengthened anti-New Deal coalition [in Congress] proposed to cut the WPA spending by 25 percent.”<sup>27</sup>

## PLANNING FOR THE CONFERENCE AT VASSAR

Despite the turmoil in Washington, Flanagan, from her headquarters in New York City, moved forward with her plans to convene key FTP personnel from across the country at a summer session in Poughkeepsie. The site was chosen, obviously, because of Flanagan’s connection to Vassar. She first reached out to the President of Vassar, Henry Noble McCracken, and by April was given permission by him and the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees to stage the conference at Vassar.<sup>28</sup> McCracken and Flanagan had a long history of collaboration and mutual admiration. The college president had hired Flanagan back in 1925, not long after the Grinnell College graduate had completed a post-graduate course in playwriting at Harvard, under the tutelage of George Pierce Baker.<sup>29</sup> She was brought to Vassar to teach playwriting and dramatic production in the English Department and it was McCracken who enthusiastically supported her one-year sabbatical in Europe, only after one year of employment. McCracken also endorsed her idea of founding the Vassar Experimental Theater, upon her return, so that she could put into practice many of the innovative theories that she was exposed to during her time in Europe.<sup>30</sup>

Flanagan also put together a formal proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation. The federal government would pay the salaries of the FTP personnel who attended the

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.156-57.

<sup>27</sup> J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan, op. cit.*, p.256.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Henry Noble McCracken to David H. Stevens, April 15, 1937, Rockefeller Foundation Records, *loc. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan, op. cit.*, pp.37-45.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.91-112.

conference, and Vassar would provide the facilities and the conference faculty and staff support, but money was needed to cover the production costs, travel to and from the conference, by all of the 45 participants, from as far away as Oregon and California, and support for additional hires and invited lecturers and speakers. Within six weeks of her application, the Rockefeller Foundation reported that they would provide \$10,500 for the Federal Summer Theatre at Vassar. Without this support, that was substantial in those days, the conference would not have been national in scope.<sup>31</sup>

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In her pitch to Vassar and the Rockefeller Foundation, Flanagan emphasized the educational aspect of the conference. It was clearly going to be a “re-training” institute for the conference participants. The retraining, Flanagan asserted, would be focused on technological innovations. Interestingly, there was no mention, in her funding application, of notions of art or artistry. This was cautious work on her part. Over the preceding two years she had received pushback from conservative and leftist forces when she publicly discussed the possibility of broadening the limited scope of the FTP, that Congress determined, in its budget allocation, was for the sole function of putting unemployed theater artists back to work. As Bentley recounts:

When Hallie made a public statement early in 1937 that the “Federal Theatre had been established to provide a high type of theatrical entertainment for the people of America,” WPA officials jumped on her. No, they said, Federal Theatre had been established to “provide employment for needy theatrical people.” Interestingly, the WPA and the militant leaders of the Workers’ Alliance, so far apart on most issues, were in agreement on this one point: Federal Theatre should concentrate on providing relief.<sup>32</sup>

All of that said, by early June of 1937, when the official press statement regarding the summer conference was sent out, Flanagan, with the approval of McCracken and Stevens, let her true ambitions for the conference be known, remarking that the participants “will be brought together *for six weeks of experimentation in the field of theatre*, such work to be focused on a public production.”<sup>33</sup>

Flanagan was a true believer in experimentation and an advocate for the incorporation of new forms and new theories into American theatre-making. In her book *Shifting Scenes* she decried the old school drawing-room dramas of the London stage, while praising the call for new indigenous theaters, by Lady Gregory of Ireland,

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31 Letter from Hallie Flanagan to David S. Stevens, March 27, 1937, Rockefeller Foundation Records, *loc. cit.*; see also S. Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, *op. cit.*, pp.226-227.

32 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.247.

33 Draft of Press Release, April 14, 1937, Rockefeller Foundation Records, *loc. cit.* (emphasis added).

and celebrating the challenging of notions of reality, by Pirandello in Italy.<sup>34</sup> She concurred with Edward Gordon Craig in his call for the rejection of well-lit painted scenery and box sets and embraced his innovative and stylized stage settings.<sup>35</sup> She championed the teachings of Stanislavsky's method training for actors, cheered the constructivism of Meyerhold and applauded the expressionistic techniques flourishing on German stages.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, in one of her most celebrated productions on the Vassar stage, soon after her return from Europe, she produced three versions of *The Marriage Proposal* by Anton Chekhov, in three distinct "manners"—realism, expressionism, constructivism.<sup>37</sup> In her presentation of these three distinct theatrical idioms, Flanagan was not necessarily advocating for any one particular stylistic choice, but challenging her audience, and other theater artists, to expand their aesthetic horizons. In her book *Dynamo*, the 1943 chronicle of her work in the Vassar Experimental Theatre, Flanagan, remarking on the Chekhov triptych, stated: "Any value of this experiment...is implicit less in the production itself than in the possibilities it suggests."<sup>38</sup>

In 1930s America, even with the innovations of O'Neill and Treadwell, Glaspell and Rice, of the previous decade, Flanagan's call for aesthetic change was a cry in the wilderness. So many theater practitioners were still steeped in their old-fashioned 19th-century ways. It was Hallie Flanagan's deep-seated desire to shift that paradigm. In a speech to her office staff, on the day she took office, she stated, emphatically:

We live in a changing world. Man is whispering through space, soaring to the stars, flinging miles of steel and glass into the air. Shall the theatre continue to huddle in the confines of a painted box set? The movies, in their kaleidoscopic speed and juxtaposition of external objects and internal emotions are seeking to find visible and audible expression for the tempo and the psychology of our time. *The stage too must experiment* with ideas, with the psychological relationship of men and women, with speech and rhythm forms, with dance and movement, with color and light—or it must and should become a museum product.<sup>39</sup>

34 H. Flanagan, *Shifting Scenes*, *op. cit.*, pp.19-43 and pp.250-259.

35 *Ibid.*, pp.64-80.

36 *Ibid.*, pp.137-202.

37 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.95-97.

38 Hallie Flanagan, *Dynamo*, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943, p.30.

39 Lorraine Brown, "Federal Theatre: Melodrama, Social Protest and Genius," *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, vol.36, no.1, Winter 1979, p.23 (emphasis added).

We can glean an intent from this statement. As she takes on her role as agency head of the Federal Theater Project, even though her formal title is “Director,” Flanagan intends to be the “Artistic Director” of this national arts agency of the federal government. Furthermore, she is telegraphing here, at least to her staff, that she intends to not only focus on the major work-relief obligation of the FTP, but also to use the opportunity to return theater to its place in the contemporary cultural conversation, by incorporating into theater-making, experimentation, and new ideas and forms from various arts and science disciplines.

## FTP AT THE MID POINT OF 1937: THE END OF THE HONEYMOON

176 As the summer approached, Flanagan and the FTP weathered some triumphs and trials. The Living Newspaper unit’s production of the play *Power*, based on the energy crisis in the country, turned out to be a critical and box-office success,<sup>40</sup> demonstrating the possibility of addressing a civic and social problem in a documentary drama form and doing so in a manner that was engaging and not overbearing or decidedly didactic. This had been an ongoing debate within the halls of the FTP offices, the tension between art and propaganda when charged plays, about volatile social and political issues, are developed and presented. During the summer of 1936, the Living Newspaper unit had created a highly controversial play, *Injunction Granted*, that focused on the Supreme Court’s rejection of many of the New Deal labor-related programs of the Roosevelt Administration. Flanagan was appalled by the rendering, for its heavy-handed treatment of the political material, and its derogatory characterization of the members of the Supreme Court. She let it be known to the authors that she considered such party-line agit-prop efforts to be potentially damaging to the long-term goals and life of the FTP. She wrote to the supervisors of the Living Newspaper unit: “I cannot, as custodian of federal funds, have such funds used as a party tool. That goes for the Communist Party as well as for the Democratic Party.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, she found the play to be “bad journalism and hysterical theatre.”<sup>42</sup>

A year later, however, a production that addressed the contentious political issues of capitalism and unionization in America was received by Flanagan with open arms. Marc Blitzstein’s opera, *The Cradle Will Rock*, directed by Orson Welles and produced by John Houseman, passed muster with the Director of the FTP, because, as Bentley

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40 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.184-185.

41 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.236.

42 L. Brown, *Federal Theatre*, *op. cit.*, p.28.



noted, “Hallie recognized the superb theatrical qualities of the work the first time she heard it.”<sup>43</sup>

But the production, slated to open on June 17, faced budgetary and political obstacles. On June 10, 1937, due to Congressional budget cuts of the WPA, fallout from Roosevelt’s doomed court-packing plan, the FTP was given the order to cut its budget by 25% for the following fiscal year.<sup>44</sup> Then on June 12, the WPA ordered the FTP to postpone all upcoming productions, including *The Cradle Will Rock*. Houseman and Welles suspected that this was political censorship veiled as fiscal prudence. Flanagan noted that the production was merely being delayed, not canceled. But everyone knew that a delay of several months of a play might very well turn out to be a cancellation because many of the artists in the production might not be available in a few months because of other opportunities. The company planned to go forward with a private presentation of the play, but once word of this plan made its way to WPA officials in Washington, they were met with armed WPA guards who prohibited them from entering the main FTP venue in Manhattan, the Maxine Elliott Theater. This show of force by WPA administrators in Washington (not Flanagan or her FTP staff in New York), broadcast to many that the show was not just being shut down for fiscal reasons. Welles and Housemen, on the scheduled night of the opening, June 16, 1937, acquired access to another theater, the Venice, about 20 blocks north of the Maxine Elliott and there staged an improvised performance of the politically-charged opera.<sup>45</sup>

For decades, this defiant act was considered by those on the Left to be a triumph against government censorship.<sup>46</sup> But other more moderate individuals sensed the danger that the ad-hoc production posed to the continuation of the Federal Theater Project as a taxpayer-supported endeavor. Bentley described the aftermath:

The play [Flanagan] had succeeded, but for the Federal Theatre itself the evening signaled a defeat. Although she did not know it at the time, the confrontation about *The Cradle Will Rock* marked a turning point for government-sponsored theatre. In Houseman’s words, the “honeymoon of the New Deal and the Theatre was over.”<sup>47</sup>

But Hallie Flanagan, in mid-June of 1937, did not stop to ponder the long-term consequences of that notorious production. She plowed forward with the final

43 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.260.

44 *Ibid.*, p.257.

45 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.260-264.

46 The moment and the events leading up to it were faithfully captured in the 1999 film, *The Cradle Will Rock*, directed by Tim Robbins.

47 Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.264.

pre-planning efforts for the summer conference at Vassar. Unfortunately, that work included sending messages to the participants in the upcoming training sessions, many of whom were state directors and company leaders of Federal Theatre Project units across the country, informing them that they would need to substantially cut their artistic and production staffs because of the impending budget cuts. That is, many of those folks who were readying themselves to travel to Poughkeepsie, had to, in their last act before leaving their offices, send out pink slips to employees in their FTP units.<sup>48</sup>

## THE FIRST FEDERAL SUMMER CONFERENCE BEGINS

**178** The Federal Theatre Project Summer Conference began, on Sunday, June 20, 1937, when the 45 participants, plus a staff and faculty of 20 individuals, Vassar President McCracken, and FTP Director Flanagan, opened the six-week conference in Josselyn Hall, a dormitory on the Vassar campus, with a supper and brief remarks.<sup>49</sup>

Of the 45 attendees, 20 were from New York City, while the rest were from across the country, representing both coasts and all of the regions and cities in between. According to the Rockefeller Foundation report of the summer conference, the individuals convening at Vassar were professionals in not only traditional theater, but also in different types of performance, ranging from children's theater to circus acts, and they were involved in various forms of companies, from vaudeville to stock, all of whom presented their work in a wide-ranging array of venues, from asylums to public parks to homes for the aged.<sup>50</sup>

Included in the group of conference participants, was Mary Virginia Heinlein, a 1925 graduate of Vassar and an instructor of theatre at Sarah Lawrence College, who was hired by the Rockefeller Foundation to provide a report of the conference. It was known by all, including Hallie Flanagan, that she was there for that purpose.

The following morning, in the greenroom of Avery Hall, Hallie Flanagan gave the first of many, inspiring lectures to the conferees. She began by reciting the brief history of the FTP and its parent agency, the WPA, and then turned to the real reason why they were there:

The theatre, which should be the most dynamically concerned with human life has remained, of all the arts, perhaps the least aware of the changing world. In an age of exciting group movements, in an age of mass miseries and mass celebrations, theater has

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48 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.205.

49 "Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre..." art. cit., p.7.

50 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., pp.10-12 and pp.19-21.

remained for the most part engrossed with individual problems. [...] Great social forces interpenetrate our theater, and our theater to be worth its salt, must interpenetrate the social and economic scene. The Federal Theatre can become an art force only as it fulfills its function as a life force.<sup>51</sup>

This speech aligns with the remarks she gave to her staff on her first day as Director of the FTP. To this larger group, representing the broad swath of American regions and cities, Flanagan was alerting them to the true goals of the conference. Many had been informed that the summer conference would involve retraining that focused mostly on technological innovations. But now they were being introduced to the lofty objectives of the summer conference: encouraging theatrical experimentation and producing relevant theater for the American public.

In the afternoon, the conference members reconvened in the Avery Theater to hear about plans for a socially-relevant production about the housing crisis in America. In addition to the re-training that would take place in classroom settings, taught by Vassar faculty members, with specializations in music, costume design, lighting design, set design, and dance/movement, the conference also included a practical application component, the development of a new play, where the lessons learned in the class sessions would be put into practice in rehearsal rooms, scene and costume shops, and on the stage. Arthur Arent, the head of the Living Newspaper unit and the author of the recent Broadway hit *Power*, described the, at that point, untitled play. He began by noting that the play was a work in progress and that they would only be presenting the first act of what would be a three-act play, to an audience on two nights, at the tail end of the conference.<sup>52</sup> He then described the sources for the production, that, when the play was published, amounted to an 8-page [bibliography](#) of source material.

Arent then proceeded to describe the production style that he, as playwright of the piece, felt was critical to the proper rendering of this documentary drama: realism. Apparently, he had neglected to inform his boss about this stylistic choice and was swiftly countermanded by Flanagan who announced that she would be looking to members of the conference to present design ideas for the production. Clearly, old-fashioned realism was not something she intended to present as the culminating artistic product of the Federal Theater Summer.<sup>53</sup>

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51 “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre...,” art. cit., p.12.

52 V. Heinlein, “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation...,” art. cit., p.99.

53 See “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre...,” art. cit., p.12; V. Heinlein, “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation...,” art. cit., p.99.

The next day, the entire conference boarded busses and drove 125 miles north to Bennington College to see a production of *Electra* by Sophocles, directed by Frances Ferguson. This stylized and movement-based piece was just the kind of avant-garde theatre that Flanagan was hoping to have presented at the end of the Vassar conference. The long bus ride home that night sparked furious conversations among the conferees about the performance they had just seen. Many expressed confusion about its meaning and questioned its artistic merit. Some were downright resistant to the modern rendering of the Greek classic. Meanwhile, in the midst of all that clamor, there was also talk about the Living Newspaper project. Someone on one of the busses, in the dead of night, came up with the title for the housing play: *One-Third of a Nation*. It was drawn from a quote by President Roosevelt during his second inaugural address: “We find one-third of the nation ill-housed, ill-clothed, ill-fed.”<sup>54</sup>

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The conferees were up bright and early the next day for their first training session with Helen Tamiris, the dance and movement instructor of the conference. Other retraining sessions in music, acting, design and technology would also begin that week.<sup>55</sup> Folded into those days, during that first week of the conference, there were conversations, formal and informal, about the Bennington performance. Flanagan made an effort, in lecture and discussion sessions, to convey the ideas of the piece and to encourage an appreciation of the production’s movement away from realism.<sup>56</sup>

The resistance to new ways of thinking and learning continued through the end of the week, culminating in a late-night drunken revelry by several male participants out in “Joss Beach,” in front of the dormitory for the conferees. Around about midnight on Friday, the inebriated men proceeded to play a game of “Balloon” improvisation, replicating an exercise they learned in Tamiris’s class, wherein they batted around an imaginary balloon, all of this done in a mocking tone, and all of it being witnessed by the other members of the conference from windows surrounding the U-shaped courtyard, who were trying to get some sleep. According to Bentley, who retells this story based on interviews, Flanagan called in the drunken revelers the next day for a dressing down regarding their sarcastic, and as she noted, as their boss, insubordinate antics.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond re-establishing a proper sense of decorum and respect, Flanagan was interested in breaking through to these men. Many of them were from the western contingent—California, Oregon, Colorado—and were older, more set in their ways,

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54 “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre...,” art. cit., p. 14.

55 *Ibid.*

56 V. Heinlein, “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation...,” art. cit., p. 46.

57 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, op. cit., pp. 265-266.

and considered to be of the “old school” variety of theater practitioners who approached theater-making from a purely practical perspective: where do you put the flats and furniture, how do you hang the wash of lights, and when do we break for lunch?<sup>58</sup> Flanagan was hoping to get them to think of themselves not only as technicians, but as artists, too. And while doing so, she hoped that they would also embrace the new ideas that were swirling around the world at that moment, which included, Tamiris’s class on imaginative play and movement. So, for all of those reasons, Flanagan needed to address this resistance to change that was exhibited by these men. And that is why, on the following Monday, Flanagan hauled them into her office.

## THE WORK OF THE CONFERENCE: RE-TRAINING

As the conference headed into its second week, details with regard to the production emerged. As Heinlein noted in her report, Flanagan never did solicit design ideas from the attendees and instead appointed Howard Bay, a Broadway designer, to design the production. Bay’s design concept was far removed from realism, and indeed, was tethered to the emerging idiom known as *surrealism*. Bay had a keen interest in exploring this modern form and, of course, was supported by Flanagan.<sup>59</sup>

Bay was also appointed director of the production. Many found this surprising and alarming since he had little to no experience as a director. John Houseman had been floated as a potential director but that did not come to pass, perhaps because of the *Cradle Will Rock* controversy. In any case, the production style was laid out to the conference, in a meeting on Monday of the second week, by Bay. It was acknowledged that when considering a visual notion of housing, the tenements of New York, the façade of those old buildings often come to mind. Bay noted that there had been shows in New York that presented that image on stage, notably the play *Street Scene* by Elmer Rice. But it was felt that such exteriors did not reveal to the audience “the most ghastly part of the tenement.”<sup>60</sup>

The authors of the official report on the summer conference wrote:

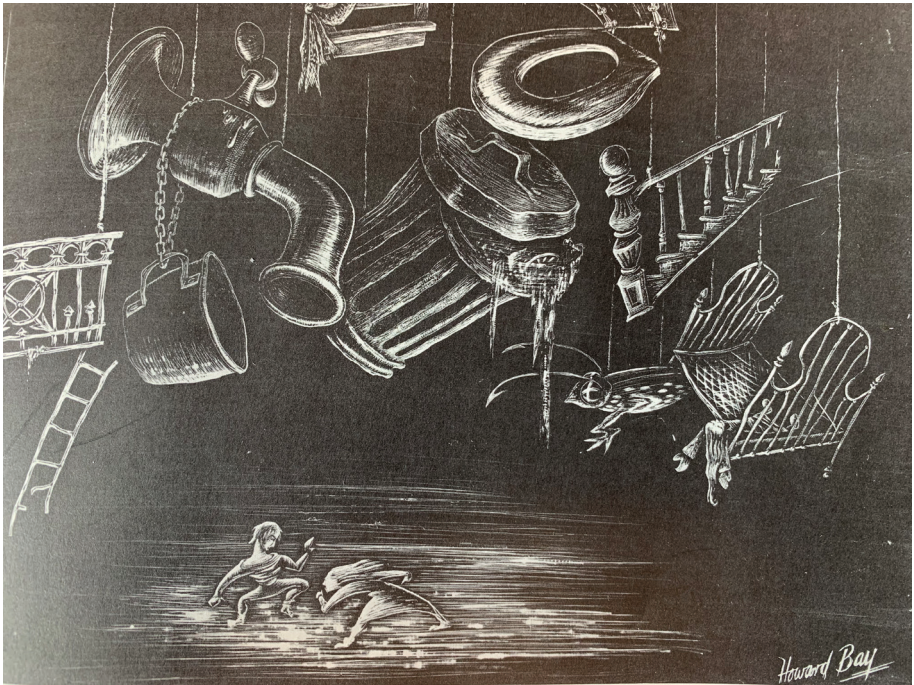
[I]t became apparent to directors and actors alike that the people of the tenements never talked about their house. They talked about the leaky faucets, the soggy beds, the crumbling walls, the broken stair-rail, the roach-infested sinks, the fire escape down which no one could escape. Howard Bay, therefore, conceived the idea of a setting

58 V. Heinlein, “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation...,” art. cit., pp.23-25.

59 *Ibid.*, pp.79-81.

60 “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre...,” art. cit., p.12.

in which the audience would see people actually living under the shadow of those horrible objects.<sup>61</sup> [fig. 2]



2. *One Third of a Nation* premiere at Vassar College, July 1937,  
Works Progress Administration, Federal Theatre National Publications, 1937.

While Bay's design for the production was clearly favored by Flanagan, his lack of qualifications to direct the show quickly became glaringly apparent. Within a day of taking the helm, he was removed as director and replaced by Harold Bolton.<sup>62</sup>

The various retraining sessions continued apace over the rest of the six-week conference. The Vassar faculty included Clair Leonard, Professor of Music and instructor Mary Merrill who taught Costume Design and supervised the costume construction. The professionals included: Howard Bay, who lectured on scenic design, Feder, the celebrated light designer who instructed on lighting and ran the lighting crew, and Madelyn O'Shea, a professional actor, who had been trained by Maria

61 *Ibid.*

62 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation....," art. cit., pp.99-100.

Ouspenskaya, a disciple of the famous Moscow Art Theatre, who did her best to engage the attendees in the modern methods and practices of Stanislavsky.<sup>63</sup>

In Heinlein's critique of the quality of the pedagogy, she noted that Leonard tried unsuccessfully to cram an entire semester's course, in music and music theory, into eight sessions. He also, according to Heinlein, just lectured and played music and put people to sleep. Similar issues were raised about Merrill's merits as a costume designer teacher.<sup>64</sup> Heinlein, in her report, reserved her harshest remarks for Howard Bay's, apparently, deficient skills as a teacher. She noted that he was dogmatic about surrealism and he pushed back against his students who questioned the efficacy of the form and he shunned those who, simply, had questions about how to render the ideas on the stage. Indeed, no questions were welcomed during his first session with the conferees. It had already been established that each conferee was given the option to decide which particular training session to attend. At Bay's second session, only a few showed up. Flanagan stepped forward to remedy this problem, by attending the third session, which apparently helped boost attendance for the design classes over the next few weeks.<sup>65</sup> Since these retraining classes were at the core of the stated purpose for the summer institute, it was critical that Flanagan encourage and foster engagement in all of the offered courses.

Feder and O'Shea were more successful with the students. Feder was popular because of his enthusiasm for the possibilities of lighting technique. He was teaching at a time when direction, control, color and movement of light were possible thanks to electricity, innovations in lenses and lighting instruments, dimmer controls, gels and mobile, or follow-spots, and shutters and lenses that could isolate and sharpen the focus of light. He believed that lighting was the wave of the future—and like Edward Gordon Craig and Adolph Appia in Europe, and Robert Edmond Jones in the United States, he was in favor of using light as the primary design element of stage productions, thus, reducing down or eliminating the need for elaborate sets.<sup>66</sup> Feder boisterously bellowed at the participants during his sessions: "Don't buy flats, paint, or costumes. Buy lights!"<sup>67</sup>

O'Shea's appeal was based on her experience as an effective pedagogue, and she too, like Feder, was teaching an innovative theatrical technique, Stanislavsky's method, that was all the rage at the time, and, therefore, her class sessions were well attended by the conference participants.<sup>68</sup>

63 *Ibid.*, pp.57-81; see also, T. Buttitta and B. Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents*, *op. cit.*, p.161.

64 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., pp.57-81.

65 *Ibid.*, pp.61-64 and pp.82-85.

66 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., pp.65-69.

67 T. Buttitta and B. Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents*, *op. cit.*, p.161.

68 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., pp.75-78.

## CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES: SESSIONS WITH FLANAGAN & DANCE PERFORMANCE

As classes continued, and the production work proceeded, Hallie Flanagan, made frequent trips to New York and Washington to keep the entire FTP afloat during turbulent times of potential budget cuts and increasing political scrutiny. When she was in attendance at the conference, she continued to give lectures in the greenroom, that were, by all accounts, enthusiastically received.<sup>69</sup>

184 Midway through the conference, *How Long Brethren*, a dance production choreographed by Tamiris, that had premiered in New York, was brought up to Poughkeepsie and performed on the Avery Stage at Vassar.<sup>70</sup> By that point in the summer, as the notions of movement-based art had become more accessible to the conferees, in part because of their attendance at the Bennington production of *Electra*, as well as their movement training sessions with Tamiris, according to Heinlein's observation, there was more openness, to dance and innovative art forms, by the conference participants.<sup>71</sup>

The production, though, raised issues of race and racism. The work was based on traditional "Negro spirituals" and sought to tell of the historical story of the African-American experience in America. In this dance piece about Black history and experience, white dancers were employed to interpret Black lives. Fortunately, the performance was not in black face. Black voices were represented in the work, in a chorus. But they were positioned off to the side, not center stage. Viewing these events, from a 21st-century perspective, the issues of cultural and racial appropriation and Black life/white performance, are glaringly apparent.<sup>72</sup> But no one at the time raised these issues. What was raised, though, was a charge of segregation that came forward to Flanagan. It was noted that the African-American members of the troupe were required to use separate housing and bathroom facilities during their stay on the Vassar campus. Flanagan investigated the incident and concluded that there was no attempt to segregate the African-American performers.<sup>73</sup> Whether this was a case of racial denialism or a fair assessment of what occurred cannot be determined from the scant evidence available. But all of that said, issues of race and racism, notably, the

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69 *Ibid.*, p.33 and pp.46-47; "Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre..." art. cit., pp.22-24.

70 *Ibid.*, p.21; H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.199 and p.213.

71 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., p.47.

72 See James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, Malden (MA), Blackwell, 2008.

73 Virginia Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., p.47.



performance of Black stereotypes, including minstrel shows, and instances of white authors and directors writing and creating Black stories, did arise throughout the four-year tenure of the Federal Theater Project and were brought to the attention of Flanagan and the FTP administration by Black playwrights and performers.<sup>74</sup>

In another session, one that was apparently requested by some of the conferees, Flanagan provided a more detailed presentation of the stylistic innovations that were on the rise in Europe and that were overtaking notions of realism. She began by discussing the relatively new nature of realism, it being a 19th-century phenomenon, while noting that the Greek tragedians, Noh Drama dramatists, and Elizabethan playwrights were far from realistic in their portrayal of life. All of this led to a robust and in-depth discussion of modern drama and its new forms.<sup>75</sup>

Flanagan must have been buoyed by this breakthrough with the conference participants. Their willingness to step out of their traditional comfort zones and to consider, appreciate, and, perhaps even, adopt modern trends was important to Flanagan's own notions of a successful retraining effort.

But that spiritual uplift was most probably tempered by other setbacks and conflicts that had been brewing among and within the group. Some of it had roots going back to that drunken mocking revelry on Joss Beach at the end of the first week. Many of those men had subsequently distanced themselves from other members of the conference by eating separately in the dining hall. Perhaps their desire for isolation was brought on by the bold and brash attitudes of the New York City contingent of theater artists. Many of those "upstart crows" were less experienced than the veteran stage workers, but that did not stop them from being overly opinionated about theater making. Heinlein described this East coast/West coast dichotomy, as breaking down along political lines: liberals from the east, and conservatives of the west. It did not help that many of these Easterners, who were seen as snobs, were also on the staff and faculty of the summer conference. The West coasters took particular aim at the lighting technique teacher and light designer of the production, Feder, for boasting of his use of numerous modern lighting instruments and other technological advances while neglecting to teach them how to work with the few archaic instruments that they had at their disposal in their theaters back home.<sup>76</sup>

74 See, E. Quita Craig, *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era*, Amherst, U of Massachusetts P, 1980, pp.8-30; Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1994, pp.168-95.

75 "Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre..." art. cit., pp.22-24.

76 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., pp.23-25.

By the final weeks of the conference, many participants began to not show up to classes, claiming that they were either bored by the teachers or not being taught anything that was relevant to the essential needs of their theaters and companies. And that critique was not limited to the westerners. Many of the participants chimed in with that complaint.<sup>77</sup> Although this suggests that the retraining was not successful; to the contrary, despite these setbacks in the formal training sessions, as we will see below, the lessons learned in those classrooms would be put into practice in the culminating production, leading to other important achievements.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF *ONE-THIRD OF A NATION*

186 In addition to all the concerns about the teaching sessions, the production, that all conference participants were required to work on, also came in for some heavy criticism from the conferees, and from Heinlein, who summarized, and agreed with, the critique.

First, Heinlein noted that *One-Third of a Nation* took up two-thirds of the conference work-time. And all this effort, for one act, or one-third, of a full-length play.<sup>78</sup> Each member of the summer conference was tasked with rehearsing and performing in the production, or working in the scene or costume shop, or hanging lights, or being on a running crew. There was expressed concern about the way they were treated in these roles and in the manner in which the work was organized and delegated over the course of the summer conference. Whereas the production was meant to be an experiment in collaboration among the 45 conference participants and the creative staff of the production, it turned out to be nothing of the kind. All artistic decisions were made from the very top by Flanagan, the producer; Arent, the playwright; Bay, the designer, Tamiris, the choreographer; and Bolton, the director. The participants, many of whom were skilled directors, designers, actors, writers and seasoned crew members in their own right, were, essentially, relegated to the task of worker bees with no input solicited from them as to the artistry of the endeavor, and, indeed, no welcoming of advice that might be derived from their production experience. Heinlein was extremely critical of this top-down system that ran the show, as it were, during the six-week production process.<sup>79</sup>

Without knowing the word for it, or even the system for making it happen, Heinlein was imagining a process that we now call *devising*—wherein theater artists

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77 *Ibid.*, pp.57-62.

78 *Ibid.*, p.109.

79 *Ibid.*, pp.99-110.

work together on a project in a de-centered and communal effort in collaboration and decision-making.<sup>80</sup>

She was also especially critical of the director—Harold Bolton. She minced no words in her report, noting, essentially, that he was inexperienced, inept, inadequate, incoherent and incompetent. She provided detailed accounts of his bad directing choices, including blaming the actors for his own incompetence.<sup>81</sup>

In sum, Heinlein, in her 120-page assessment of the conference, cites all of these problems: the lack of integration of training sessions and practice; the poor pedagogy of the teachers; the miscasting of Bolton as director; the overworking, maltreatment and misuse of the conference participants during the production—while laying little blame on Hallie Flanagan. Heinlein noted that Flanagan was required to leave the conference on numerous occasions in order to go to New York and Washington, DC, which left a vacuum of leadership while she was gone. As Heinlein noted, upon her return, Flanagan did her best to put out fires and settle disputes.<sup>82</sup> Flanagan met with participants, individually, to give them an opportunity to air grievances. And when that did not prove effective, according to Heinlein, near the end of the summer conference, Flanagan did have a session with the conference participants where she “let them have it,” demanding that they respect the faculty. And then she held a meeting with the faculty where she “let them have it”—demanding that they respect the conferees who help run and maintain the Federal Theatre Project across the country.<sup>83</sup>

While Flanagan was away from the campus, during the penultimate week of the conference, as a way of airing the problems associated with Bolton’s deficiencies as director, a collaboration workshop, between the actors of the show and the director, was convened. But it did not help, because Bolton ran it and lectured the group and did not allow for much discussion. Heinlein noted that it might have gone better if Flanagan had attended and mediated the discussion.<sup>84</sup>

One other impromptu session was convened, to go beyond the issues of the production and to discuss many of the problems of the conference. Flanagan’s deputy attended and chronicled the list of complaints from the participants. But growing tired of the mounting criticism, he finally blew up, stating, in Flanagan’s defense, that she was off fighting the fight to keep all of them employed. He then left the room.

80 Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson and Katie Normington, *Making a Performance*, New York, Routledge, 2007.

81 *Ibid.*, pp.106-109.

82 V. Heinlein, “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation...,” art. cit., pp.1-7 and pp.54-55.

83 *Ibid.*, p.52.

84 *Ibid.*, pp.54-55.

If the conferees had walked out, too, that could have been the end of the discussion. The participants, however, stayed. And they continued to hash out their grievances, creating a list of major issues of concern. They could have stopped there and handed the record of complaints up the line to the FTP powers that be. But instead, they remained together even longer, and began discussing possible solutions to the problems. They subsequently formed a planning committee to address the issues about the conference but more importantly, to take on issues of concern to their FTP units back in their regions. By the end of this impromptu session, the conference members in attendance had shifted their aim from criticizing the summer conference to developing a plan of action for saving and reinvigorating the FTP nationwide.<sup>85</sup>

## THE PERFORMANCE AND VALEDICTORY SESSION

With all this *sturm und drang* that went into the production and the entire summer conference, nevertheless, the show did go on. And it all worked out for the best in the end. The old adage, “bad dress, great opening night,” held true, and the two performances of *One-Third of a Nation* were roundly applauded by audience members. Critics were prohibited from attending this, essentially, workshop production, but nevertheless one reporter did provide a news report that came off as a review. The *Variety* reporter praised the production, noting, “it is all frankly non-realistic and tremendously effective,” and also reporting that the summer conference was focused on “study and experimentation.”<sup>86</sup> Flanagan was, no doubt, buoyed by the praise of the non-realism and the acknowledgement of the aim of the summer institute experimentation.

The celebrated playwright Paul Green attended the final dress and praised the production. The New York City Commissioner of Housing, one of the sources of the Living Newspaper play, attended and proclaimed: “You will convert more people with this play than I have converted in three years of shouting my lungs out.”<sup>87</sup> And on Saturday night, Eleanor Roosevelt attended the production and echoed the commissioner’s remarks, by telling Flanagan that the play, “achieved something which will mean a tremendous amount in the future, socially, and in the education and growing up of America...far more than...I, or even the President, might make”<sup>88</sup> (fig. 3)

85 V. Heinlein, “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation...,” art. cit., pp.54-55.

86 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, op. cit., p.214 (quoting review in *Variety*).

87 “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre...,” art. cit., p.32.

88 Quoted in J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, op. cit., p.268.



3. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Vassar College President Henry Noble MacCracken, July 1937, Works Progress Administration, Federal Theatre National Publications, 1937.

A closing session of the conference was held on Saturday morning, before the afternoon's pre-show preparations for the final performance that night. The newly-formed Planning Committee presented its set of recommendations to Flanagan and the entire conference, that included: the creation of national service bureaus in writing, costume design, set design, lighting design, and marketing, in order to coordinate efforts and share personnel across the nation; the development of more nationally produced plays; and, the convening of more conferences like the Vassar Summer Theater Conference that would meet in regional and national sessions. And last, but most definitely not least, these words were included in the recommendations by the

planning committee: “That workers who fail to keep abreast of the times have no place in the Federal Theatre.”<sup>89</sup>

This had to be an exceptionally proud moment for Hallie Flanagan. In that notion of keeping “abreast of the times” the conference participants were not only talking about remaining up-to-date with technological advances but they were acknowledging the duty of contemporary theater artists to remain relevant by addressing issues of concern to the audience and also to remain aware of current artistic trends, new theories and new forms. The committee’s recommendations were *unanimously* supported by the conference attendees, the faculty and staff. Flanagan could rest well, in knowing that she had achieved her over-all objective of breaking through to the vast majority of the conferees by challenging them, to step out of their comfort zones, to be willing to learn about new methods and practices, and to treat the theater as an experimental laboratory. Furthermore, it became clear at this closing session that the participants had learned vital lessons during the conference, and that they intended to take those lessons with them and apply them in their future work in their individual FTP units.

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## FEDERAL SUMMER THEATRE CONFERENCE: AFTERMATH AND LEGACY

What was the impact of the 1937 Federal Summer Theater Conference at Vassar College? The immediate effect was that the play *One-Third of a Nation*, after this workshop production of its first act, was produced several months later, in its entirety, on Broadway at the Adelphi Theater, and was a critical and box-office success (fig. 4). The play was subsequently produced in FTP productions across the country.<sup>90</sup> Because of pressures from commercial producers, the Broadway production involved a set design that was steeped in realism. But Flanagan was, in the end non-plussed by the shift away from the more abstract design of the Vassar production. In *Arena*, she stated: “Although the method of production differed from the earlier one, the emphasis on integration of music, movement and theme remained; and the six weeks of experimentation at the summer session made this play the most mature living newspaper we had done,” while also noting that the critics agreed with that assessment.<sup>91</sup>

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89 “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre...,” art. cit., pp.32-34.

90 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, op. cit., pp.268-272.

91 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, op. cit., pp.217-218.

FEDERAL THEATRE



*p r e s e n t s*



**A LIVING NEWSPAPER  
ABOUT HOUSING**

**ADELPHI THEATRE**

**54TH STREET EAST OF 7TH AVENUE**

MADE BY WPA FEDERAL ART PROJECT N.Y.C.

4. *One Third of a Nation* poster for Broadway production, October 1937, Wikimedia Commons

That play, however, “made enemies” in Congress, because of the portrayal of members of Congress in the narrative. And churches around the country, took umbrage because the play pointed out that most of the landlords or “slumlords” in most cities were religious institutions.<sup>92</sup> Flanagan would barnstorm around the country, in the fall of 1937, building support for the FTP and doing her best to respond to the political, censorship and budgetary storms that were brewing in the press, and most notably, in Congress, in the Dies Committee, later re-named the House Un-American Activities Committee, that had set its sights on the Federal Theatre Project ever since the notorious production of *The Cradle Will Rock*.<sup>93</sup>

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By the spring of 1939, Flanagan was called to testify before Congress in order to defend the Federal Theatre Project—and her own record. Her admiration of Russian theater and her trips to the Soviet Union in 1926, during her Guggenheim Fellowship, came under intense scrutiny during the hearings. She did her best to defend herself and the FTP against these scurrilous attacks.<sup>94</sup> After the hearing, in a published article entitled “Papa’s Got a Job,” Flanagan pleaded with the public to help save the FTP, noting its fiscal prudence, and for that matter, its financial genius: “The bare statistics of Federal Theatre are in themselves a drama: some nine thousand theater workers employed in forty theaters in twenty states, playing within three years before audiences totaling more than twenty-five million.”<sup>95</sup> But the defiant and heroic testimony before Congress was a mere pyrrhic victory and her plea to the public fell on deaf ears. Within a short time of her testimony before Congress, Flanagan would bear witness to the swift and decisive end of the Federal Theatre Project, with the mere stroke of a pen, in a late-night conference committee session that eliminated the entire FTP budget. Whereas the other Arts Projects of the WPA continued until 1943, the Federal Theatre Project was shut down on June 30, 1939.<sup>96</sup>

But when considering the resonance of the Federal Theater Summer Conference, its impact reverberated soon thereafter, and for years to come. As noted in 1939 by Pierre de Rohan in a report on the Federal Theatre Summer Conference, most of the participants in the conference returned to their cities, towns, states and regions,

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92 *Ibid.*, pp.220-22.

93 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.269-272.

94 See S. Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, *op. cit.*, pp.238-262; Jane DeHart Matthews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, *op. cit.*, pp.198-235.

95 Hallie Flanagan, “Papa’s Got a Job,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol.15, no.2, Spring 1939, p.250.

96 *Ead.*, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.220-222; J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.334-348.



and re-invigorated the theater scene with experimental, imaginative works. Flanagan summarized Rohan's study:

A report made two years later shows that the majority of people from the summer session returned to their various projects to do work of such caliber that they either were picked up for jobs in private industry...or else they won recognition [Guggenheim Fellowships], or else they became leaders in Federal Theatre activity.<sup>97</sup>

One participant wrote in a letter to de Rohan and Flanagan: "The Federal Summer Theatre gave me a much broader view of the theatre than I had had before: it impressed me with the need for music and dance in the theatre."<sup>98</sup>

The legacy of the entire Federal Theatre Project was profound and redounds to this day, in the National Endowment for the Arts, the Not-for-Profit sector of American theatre, the regional theaters, and the Off and Off-Off Broadway movements. And the spirit of the Vassar conference resonates in numerous summer conferences, notably, the [Eugene O'Neill Theater Center National Playwrights Conference](#), the [Sundance Institute Theatre Program](#), [Seven Devils New Play Foundry](#), the [Ojai Playwrights Conference](#) and [New York Stage and Film Powerhouse Season](#) that is held each summer in the Hallie Flanagan Davis Powerhouse Theater on the Vassar College campus.

We conclude with the words of Hallie Flanagan, that she delivered in her valedictory speech to the members of the conference, on that Saturday morning, in late July of 1937, just hours before the last performance, the last act, of the Federal Theater Summer at Vassar:

There will be other such meetings, other such summer theatres, but to you, the pioneers, will always go the credit of having been the first to take the risk, first to encounter the difficulties in this new reaching out to a stronger theater. From it we shall all learn. Through it we shall mutually create a theater which need not just be the frosting on the cake. It may be the yeast which makes the bread rise.<sup>99</sup>

97 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.215.

98 *Ibid.*, p.216, n4 *Report on the Results of the First Federal Summer Theatre*, by Pierre de Rohan, May 8, 1938 (W.P.A. Federal Theatre Records, Washington, DC).

99 "Federal Theatre; First Federal Summer Theatre... A Report," *art. cit.*, p.36.

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## NOTICE

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HERMAN FARRELL  
The First Federal Summer Theatre

## ABSTRACT

In the summer of 1937, the First Federal Summer Theatre was convened at Vassar College by Hallie Flanagan, Director of the Federal Theatre Project. This article, relying on well-known sources, as well as newly uncovered archival records, examines the immediate impact and long-lasting legacy of this particular moment in the history of the Federal Theatre Project. And it sheds new light on the far-reaching objectives of Director Flanagan, who hoped to use the summer retreat, attended by theater artists and practitioners from across the country, as an opportunity to raise the quality of the shows that were being presented on Federal Theater Project throughout the nation, and more importantly, to challenge the theater professionals of the conference to consider new forms and methodologies and to dare to treat their future artistic endeavors as laboratories of experimentation.

## KEYWORDS

Federal Theatre Project, Federal Summer Theatre Conference, Hallie Flanagan, Vassar College, Rockefeller Foundation

## RÉSUMÉ

À l'été 1937, le premier *Federal Summer Theatre* fut organisé au Collège Vassar par Hallie Flanagan, directrice du Federal Theatre Project. Cet article, s'appuyant sur des sources bien connues, ainsi que sur des documents d'archives récemment découverts, examine l'impact immédiat et l'héritage durable de ce moment particulier de l'histoire du *Federal Theatre Project*. Il apporte ainsi un nouvel éclairage sur les objectifs ambitieux de Flanagan, qui espérait faire de ce théâtre d'été, auquel ont participé des praticiens de tout le pays, une occasion d'améliorer la qualité des spectacles du *Federal Theatre Project*. Plus important encore, cette session met au défi les professionnels du théâtre qui y participent afin d'envisager de nouvelles formes et méthodologies et d'oser penser leurs futurs efforts artistiques comme des laboratoires d'expérimentation.

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## MOTS-CLÉS

*Federal Theatre Project, Federal Summer Theatre Conference, Hallie Flanagan, Vassar College, Rockefeller Foundation*

THE PROMISE OF *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE*:  
PERFORMANCES OF HISTORY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

*Elizabeth A. Osborne*  
*Florida State University*

[W]hen dictatorship threatens a country it does not necessarily come by way of military invasion, [...] it may arrive in the form of a sudden silencing of free voices.

Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, 1940

On October 27, 1936, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) staged one of its greatest triumphs: twenty-one productions of Sinclair Lewis and John C. Moffitt's *It Can't Happen Here* opened simultaneously in eighteen cities across the country.<sup>1</sup> It would be "the first nationwide production of any dramatic work in the history of theatre, and it became a widespread popular success."<sup>2</sup> More productions followed and companies from Boston (Massachusetts), Newark (New Jersey), Detroit (Michigan), Miami (Florida), Tacoma (Washington), and Los Angeles (California) toured nationwide. *It Can't Happen Here* ultimately played to hundreds of thousands of audience members over the equivalent of 260 weeks—five years—in what New York theatre critic Burns Mantle described as "justification of the organization as a

- 1 Participant companies were in question up to the day of opening due to late additions and last-minute cancelations, which explains why there are inconsistencies regarding the number of productions and the number of cities that participated in this opening night. As examples, Kansas City did not receive authorization to produce the show until October 20, and Brooklyn-Queens had an unanticipated issue that forced postponement; neither participated in the simultaneous opening in spite of plans to do so. However, even though Tampa still awaited translation of the script thirteen days before opening and Omaha delayed officially joining the opening until the day before, both Tampa and Omaha participated in the simultaneous opening night. This has unfortunately led to scattered records that indicate different things happening, and thus, confusion about events (Marjorie S. Korn, "*It Can't Happen Here*": *Federal Theatre's Bold Adventure*, PhD Dissertation, University of Missouri, Columbia, 1978, p.58).
- 2 "Program for *It Can't Happen Here* [Jefferson Theatre]," Birmingham, AL, October 27, 1936, p.5, Box 149, Federal Theatre Project, Vassar (College) Collection of Programs and Promotion Materials, 1935-39, Records of the Work Projects Administration, Record Group 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

people's theatre that is willing and able to discuss problems of social import boldly and freely."<sup>3</sup>

But *It Can't Happen Here* was more than the FTP's first nationwide opening. It was a political argument against fascism that opened one week before the 1936 presidential election—and it did so against a backdrop of economic turmoil from the Great Depression and the rise of fascist regimes in Italy, Germany, and other nations abroad that would ultimately lead to World War 2. First a popular novel (1935), and then a play, *It Can't Happen Here* imagined how the United States could transition from a democratic republic to a fascist state. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, one of National Director Hallie Flanagan's primary goals for the FTP was local relevance.<sup>4</sup> Thus, many of the FTP units adapted the production to fit their local communities, demonstrating how *their* communities would be torn apart. This worst-case scenario played out repeatedly, thus performing and re-performing this dystopian future—adapted to local communities nationwide—in the hopes of demonstrating why Americans must remain vigilant to the fascist threat.

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In October 2016, Berkeley Repertory Theatre resurrected *It Can't Happen Here* in a new adaptation by Tony Taccone and Bennett Cohen. Another presidential election was in its final weeks. The candidate that many thought could not possibly win railed against the mainstream media and intellectual elite, inspired violence against Others, and promised to “Make America Great Again” for a specific subset of Americans in one of the most divisive elections since the Civil War. More than fifty organizations in twenty-four states joined Berkeley Rep in a series of free staged readings that opened one week before the election.<sup>5</sup> Berkeley Rep produced a new audio version for the similarly damaging 2020 election. Broadcast on *YouTube* amidst the COVID-19 epidemic, it gathered over one hundred participating organizations across twenty-seven states and Washington, DC.

In this article, I delve into the historical phenomenon that was *It Can't Happen Here* and its subsequent reappearance in 2016. I argue that the piece initially operated as a potential future that played out for audiences in the imagined space of the theatre as a preventive lesson, with the intent of activating individual and community responses to fascism. With their invocation of *It Can't Happen Here* (2016), Berkeley Rep brought a performance from a specific moment in history—the Great Depression and the lead-up to World War 2—

3 Burns Mantle, “‘It Can't Happen Here’ by WPA,” *Daily News*, October 28, 1936, p.65.

4 Elisabeth A. Osborne, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

5 “It Can't Happen Here at Berkeley Rep,” *Berkeley Repertory Theatre*, October 23, 2016. Accessed September 16, 2019.

into the present. As the nation looked to an uncertain future, the Berkeley Rep production invoked the Federal Theatre Project's nationwide opening as a performance of *history* that had been a performance of *futurity* in 1936. And, though it is beyond the scope of this essay, in 2020, as the nation's political future rested upon a razor's edge, the revisiting of *It Can't Happen Here* recalled a moment of innocence, when Americans believed that it could indeed *not* happen here in spite of abundant evidence to the contrary. As an impressive group of scholars of authoritarianism argued in an open letter of concern:

Regardless of the outcome of the United States' election, democracy as we know it is already imperiled. However, it is not too late to turn the tide.

Whether Donald J. Trump is a fascist, a post-fascist populist, an autocrat, or just a bumbling opportunist, the danger to democracy did not arrive with his presidency and goes well beyond November 3rd, 2020.<sup>6</sup>

To this point, much of the scholarship on *It Can't Happen Here* has focused on its national importance. This was an American play by a Nobel Prize-winning American author, dealing with an issue of concern to all Americans. Hallie Flanagan devotes a chapter to it in her famous memoir of the FTP, *Arena*.<sup>7</sup> Nearly all of the major FTP histories at least touch on it, including books by Jane DeHart Mathews, George Kazacoff, Tony Buttitta and Barry Witham, and John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown.<sup>8</sup> However, relatively few focus explicitly on *It Can't Happen Here*. Lisa Jackson-Schebetta's article focuses on a single Spanish-language production in Florida, and two dissertations—one by Marjorie Korn and one by Macy Donyce Jones—deal more exhaustively with the production.<sup>9</sup> Korn carefully documents all of the nationwide iterations, while Jones uses *It Can't Happen Here* as a means to argue that the FTP was a propaganda-producing, Pro-American political machine. I enter the discussion by considering *It Can't Happen Here* as both a national phenomenon and a federation of local events, historically and in

6 Editorial Board, "How to Keep the Lights On in Democracies: An Open Letter of Concern by Scholars of Authoritarianism," *The New Fascism Syllabus*, October 31, 2020. Accessed November 1, 2020.

7 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940.

8 Jane DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre 1935-1939*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1968; George Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre*, Bloomington, Xlibris, 2011; Tony Buttitta and Barry Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents*, Philadelphia, U of Pennsylvania P, 1982; John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, *Free, Adult, Uncensored*, Washington, DC, New Republic Books, 1978.

9 Lisa Jackson-Schebetta, "Repertoires of the Asturian Diaspora: The Latin Unit's Production of *Eso no puede ocurrir aquí* in Ybor City," *New England Theatre Journal*, vol.22, August 2011, pp.53-78; M.S. Korn, *Federal Theatre's Bold Adventure*, *op. cit.*, note 1; Macy Donyce Jones, *Precarious Democracy: "It Can't Happen Here" as the Federal Theatre's Site of Mass Resistance*, PhD Dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2017.

the 2016 adaptation, and by comparing the two different adaptations to explore how they functioned in their respective times.

How did this performance of futurity, which shaped cultural memory through performance in its own time, appear again (and differently) in 2016, when it became *both* a performance of *history* and a performance of *futurity* for its audiences? How did the re-performance and adaptation in 2016 rely upon and ghost its own history in order to make meaning in the present? To address these questions, I look to the larger cultural history surrounding these performances by delving into scripts and production ephemera at the National Archives, Library of Congress, and George Mason University. I begin by setting the stage for the 1935 novel, a popular phenomenon that serves as a critical starting point for both adaptations of the script. I then connect the novel to the FTP's 1936 nationwide opening, giving particular attention to records that illuminate the mechanics and challenges of the work process. Finally, I blend this historical work with literary analysis in a case study that compares the FTP's version with Berkeley Repertory Theatre's 2016 adaptation, looking specifically at the different representations of women and the resulting shifts in meaning.

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*It Can't Happen Here*—at first a novel, then a play with a nation-wide audience, and then multiple iterations over the intervening eighty years—is particularly revealing in terms of these specific moments in time and their respective impacts on cultural memory. Berkeley Rep did not merely produce a historical show with some intriguing contemporaneous parallels in 2016. They also did not limit the production to their local audience in Berkeley (California). Instead, they created an opportunity for a national reading—with free rights, publicity blurbs, posters, and more—for any company interested in participating in the nationwide event and offering free admission. In so doing, they created a performance of history that ghosted the FTP's nationwide opening from 1936, itself a theatrical event that occupied a very specific historical moment and outcome. When more than fifty additional theatres, schools, and communities across the country opted into the program a week before the 2016 election, the repetition, with revision, was complete.

## SETTING THE STAGE: THE NECESSITY OF *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE*

Sinclair Lewis penned his lengthy hit novel, *It Can't Happen Here*, in the summer of 1935, or so the story goes.<sup>10</sup> Demonstrating just how much of a concern the rise of

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10 J. Donald Adams, "America Under the Iron Heel: A Novel by Sinclair Lewis Pictures a Fascist Dictatorship," *The New York Times*, October 20, 1935, p. BR1.



fascist dictatorships in Italy and then Germany had become to Americans, the novel sped to the top of the *New York Times* Best Sellers list, where it remained for months. More than 1,500 articles on fascism appeared in *The New York Times* in 1934 and 1935. A lengthy article comparing communism, socialism, democracy, and fascism created a scorecard of sorts, documenting the “wins” and “losses” of the political rivals. As Europe devolved into chaos, it suggests, millions of frustrated, despairing people sought “a hero to solve [their] problems,” and thus embraced Mussolini’s nationalist vision.<sup>11</sup>

Historian Leo P. Ribuffo argues that Americans of many political persuasions “were eager to denounce European fascism but were almost at a loss to explain it.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, as journalist George Seldes argued, fascism had already gained significant traction in the United States. It needed “only a Duce, a Fuehrer, an organizer and a loosening of purse strings of those who gain materially by its victory, to become the most powerful force threatening the Republic.”<sup>13</sup> Seldes and Sinclair Lewis were neighbors, and Lewis was married to journalist Dorothy Thompson, who had been expelled from Germany due to her incendiary investigative reporting on Adolf Hitler. Surrounded by their influence, Lewis dreamed of fascism rising in the United States, woke in a panic, and wrote *It Can't Happen Here*.<sup>14</sup>

Lewis’s novel imagines a nation in which a demagogue emerges, gains funds from wealthy business owners, and initiates a political transformation. It focuses on how a fascist coup would impact the people of one small American town in Vermont. A wide range of characters populate the town, including a vocal member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, a communist activist, a democratic socialist, a resolute liberal activist, business owners, and the reluctant hero, a small-town newspaper editor named Doremus Jessup. Few believe that fascism could arise in the United States, and it is clear that the idea is not initially of immediate concern because of an implicit faith in the power of American democracy.

Lewis’s fictional future bears an often-disturbing resemblance to the 1930s. Set in the Great Depression, the novel traces the rise of real-life Louisiana Senator Huey Long against a background of economic collapse, widespread unemployment, xenophobia, anti-intellectualism, class disparity, and polarizing political differences. Into this churning morass of hostility and frustration leaps Senator Berzelius (Buzz) Windrip,

11 Emil Lengyel, “Four World Ideas Vie for Domination,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 1934, p. SM4.

12 Leo P. Ribuffo, “*It Can't Happen Here*: Novel, Federal Theatre Production, and (Almost) Movie,” *Right Center Left*, New Brunswick (NJ), Rutgers UP, 1992, p.162.

13 George Seldes, *Sawdust Caesar*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1935, p.xiii.

14 John Chamberlain, “Books of the Times,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 1935, p.17.

the “ringmaster-revolutionist” that millions hailed to lead them through this “critical hour of the nation’s hysteria.”<sup>15</sup> Windrip takes the Democratic nomination from President Roosevelt and quickly gains widespread support as he promises to solve all of the nation’s many problems. Once elected, Windrip solidifies his base of power. He outlaws dissent, trains and arms his own paramilitary force, and manipulates Congress into passing a bill that gives him complete control of legislation. When Congress resists, he declares martial law and arrests those who dissent.<sup>16</sup> Democracy rapidly crumbles in the punishing suppression that follows.

While Windrip gains power through a combination of circumstances, Lewis suggests a chronic lack of education is one critical factor in the leadup to fascism. Lengthy critiques of the American failure to instill widespread education as a core value populate the novel. Indeed, the novel cites the words: *school*, 40 times; *education*, 25 times; *university*, 33 times; *think*, 167 times; and *thought*, 112 times.<sup>17</sup> In a particularly damning tirade, Doremus Jessup lists one example after another of easily manipulated Americans, prone to violence and hysteria:

Look how Huey Long became absolute monarch over Louisiana, and how the Right Honorable Mr. Senator Berzelius Windrip owns *his* State. Listen to Bishop Prang and Father Coughlin on the radio—divine oracles, to millions. Remember how casually most Americans have accepted Tammany grafting and Chicago gangs and the crookedness of so many of President Harding’s appointees? Could Hitler’s bunch, or Windrip’s, be worse? Remember the Ku Klux Klan? [...] Remember when the hick legislators in certain states, in obedience to William Jennings Bryan, who learned his biology from his pious old grandma, set up shop as scientific experts and made the whole world laugh itself sick by forbidding the teaching of evolution? [...] Why, where in all history has there ever been a people so ripe for a dictatorship as ours!<sup>18</sup>

In the novel, Lewis’s political sting is barbed, and the consequences dire. In 1935, it was but a short intellectual step to see how easily the United States could slip into dictatorship if a charismatic leader stepped forward. And as the 2016 election wore on and Donald Trump’s popularity reached new heights, the parallels to

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15 Sinclair Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here*, New York, P.F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1935, p.62.

16 *Ibid.*, pp.170-175.

17 For the purposes of clarity, I combined instances in which plurals and similar versions of the same word appear, such as “university” and “universities”. Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell, “*It Can’t Happen Here* Word Cloud,” *Voyant Tools*, n.d.

18 S. Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, n. 16, pp.21-22.

Lewis's imagined world seemed more and more prescient. With Trump's election, Lewis's novel leapt to the top of Amazon's Classic American Literature best-seller list as Americans struggled to cope with their new reality.<sup>19</sup> As Rick Searle noted: "Perhaps it's best to look upon *It Can't Happen Here* less as a novel and more as a sort of political compass, for my guess is, as long as our American Republic lasts, we will return to it whenever we feel ourselves lost and in danger of wandering in the darkness towards dictatorship."<sup>20</sup>

## PERFORMING THE FUTURE: THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT PRODUCTION

The Federal Theatre Project's (FTP) opened *It Can't Happen Here* nation-wide one week before the 1936 presidential election. Roosevelt would win in one of the most decisive victories the nation had ever seen, with more than sixty percent of the popular vote and 523 electoral votes, carrying every state except for Vermont and Maine.<sup>21</sup> The nation was certainly not united though, and to say that Roosevelt and his signature New Deal were universally popular within the Republican party would be akin to saying that contemporary Republicans heartily endorse President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act (a.k.a. ObamaCare).

As the FTP worked to open the production of *It Can't Happen Here*, fascism continued to take hold in Europe. The interim between the publication of Lewis's novel in October 1935 and the FTP opening the following October saw an exacerbation of conditions in Europe. In 1935, Italy invaded and annexed Ethiopia in an action that was condemned by the League of Nations. The following year, Hitler and Mussolini joined forces to support the Nationalist coup in Spain, catalyzing the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the decades-long rule of General Francisco Franco. The US government seemed to take these threats seriously; when Italy's invasion of Ethiopia inspired the FTP's first living newspaper, *Ethiopia*, the government closed the production before it

- 19 Tracy Mumford, "Sinclair Lewis' 'It Can't Happen Here' becomes a bestseller after Trump's win," *MPR News*, November 23, 2016.
- 20 Rick Searle, "How Sinclair Lewis Predicted Trump, and How He Didn't," *Utopia or Dystopia*, May 21, 2017.
- 21 In 1936, Maine had 5 electoral votes, Vermont had 3, and the total number of electoral votes available nationwide was 531 (S.L. Lohr and J.M. Brick, "Roosevelt Predicted to Win: Revisiting the 1936 *Literary Digest* Poll," *Statistics, Politics & Policy*, vol.8, no.1, June 2017, p.66; "U.S. Electoral College: Historical Election Results 1789-1996," *National Archives and Records Administration: U.S. Electoral College*, n.d.). <https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/1936>

opened, stipulating that: “No one impersonating a ruler or cabinet officer shall appear on stage.”<sup>22</sup> Director Elmer Rice resigned in protest but the regulation remained in force, perhaps because the federal government could not be seen criticizing leaders who were growing more and more powerful abroad.

Thus, it is not surprising that the FTP production of *It Can't Happen Here* was more politically moderate than the novel.<sup>23</sup> Rather than highlighting its attack on fascism, Lewis described the play as “pro-American and nothing more,”<sup>24</sup> and he announced that he selected the FTP as his producer because he could “depend on the Federal Theatre for a non-partisan point of view.”<sup>25</sup> FTP publicity documents supported this assertion by directing units to avoid all “controversial issues—political angles of any degree—special appeals—racial or group appeals—or inferences in any of these directions, since Federal Theatre is interested only in presenting good theatre.”

**204** The approach suggests intentional depolarization, and required all press and publicity documents be coordinated through and approved by a centralized office. Central to this strategy was the excision of phrases like: “What Will Happen When America has a Dictator?”—a well-known tagline in the novel’s publicity campaign—and, as expected, any references or comparisons to foreign powers.<sup>26</sup>

This “pro-American” approach becomes particularly clear in the production posters. They include no names, no overt references to communism or socialism, and no exciting taglines. The Adelphi Theatre in New York created a poster that features the Statue of Liberty, silhouetted in blue while red smoke pours from her torch; while the smoke suggests a major problem, the great symbol of the nation still stands as a beacon of hope amidst the patriotic red, white, and blue color scheme (**fig. 1**).

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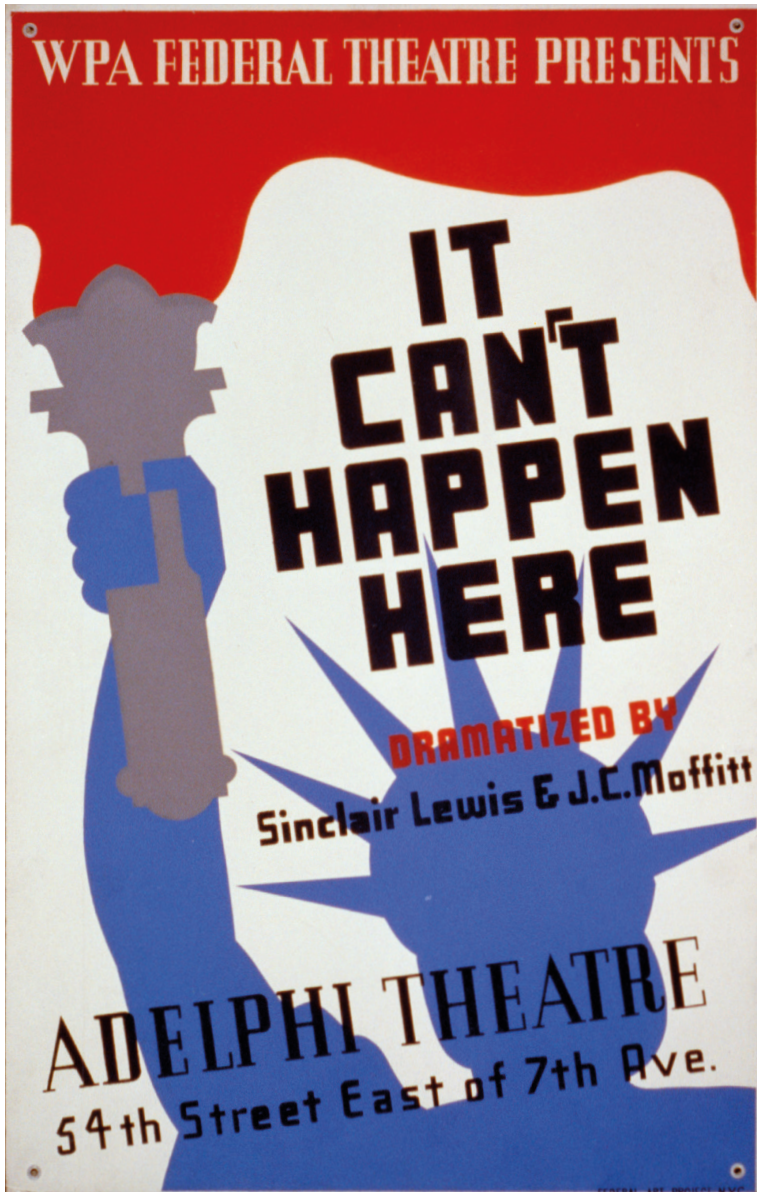
22 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, n. 8, p.66.

23 Lewis revised *It Can't Happen Here* independently in 1938, when it was published by Dramatist Play Service. Since there are no records of the FTP producing this version, I focus here on the Lewis/Moffitt version available in the FTP collection at the National Archives.

24 John Chapman, “Mainly About Manhattan: From a Playground Director,” *Daily News*, September 28, 1936, p.36.

25 “WPA Theatre to Produce ‘It Can't Happen Here,’” *Courier-Post* (Camden, NJ), August 22, 1936, p.4. This quote appears in numerous newspaper articles, as the story went out through the Associated Press, though I have only cited one here.

26 E.E. McCleish, “Instructions Governing Exploitation (*It Can't Happen Here*),” October 15, 1936, pp.1-2.

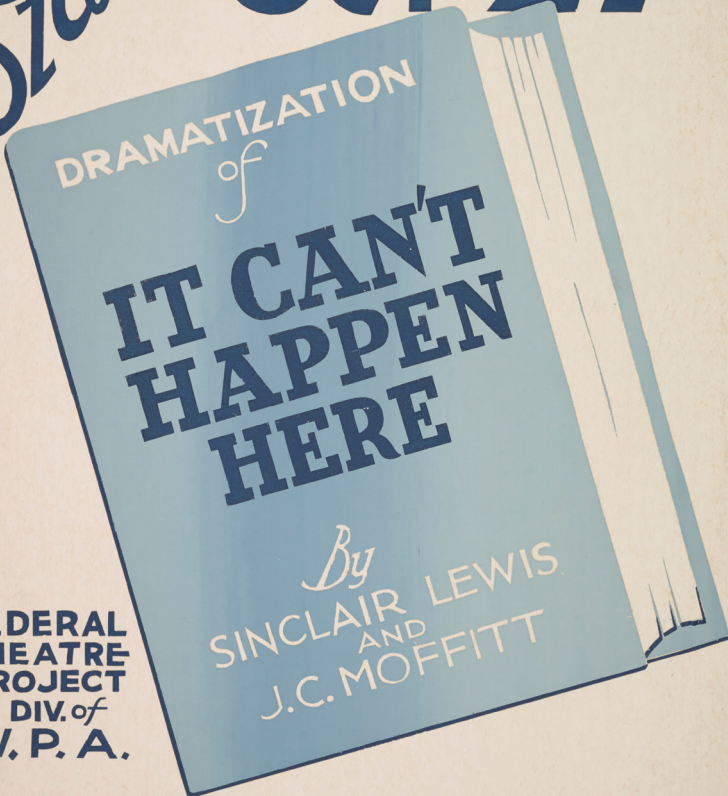


1. Poster for *It Can't Happen Here*, Adelphi Theatre, 54th Street, New York City  
(Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

The poster for the Los Angeles Mayan Theatre production centers on a rendering of Lewis's novel, a strategy that effectively circumvents this directive by evoking what potential audience members recall about the novel (fig.2).

**MAYAN** THEATRE  
HILL *at 11<sup>th</sup>*

*Starts* **TUES. OCT 27**

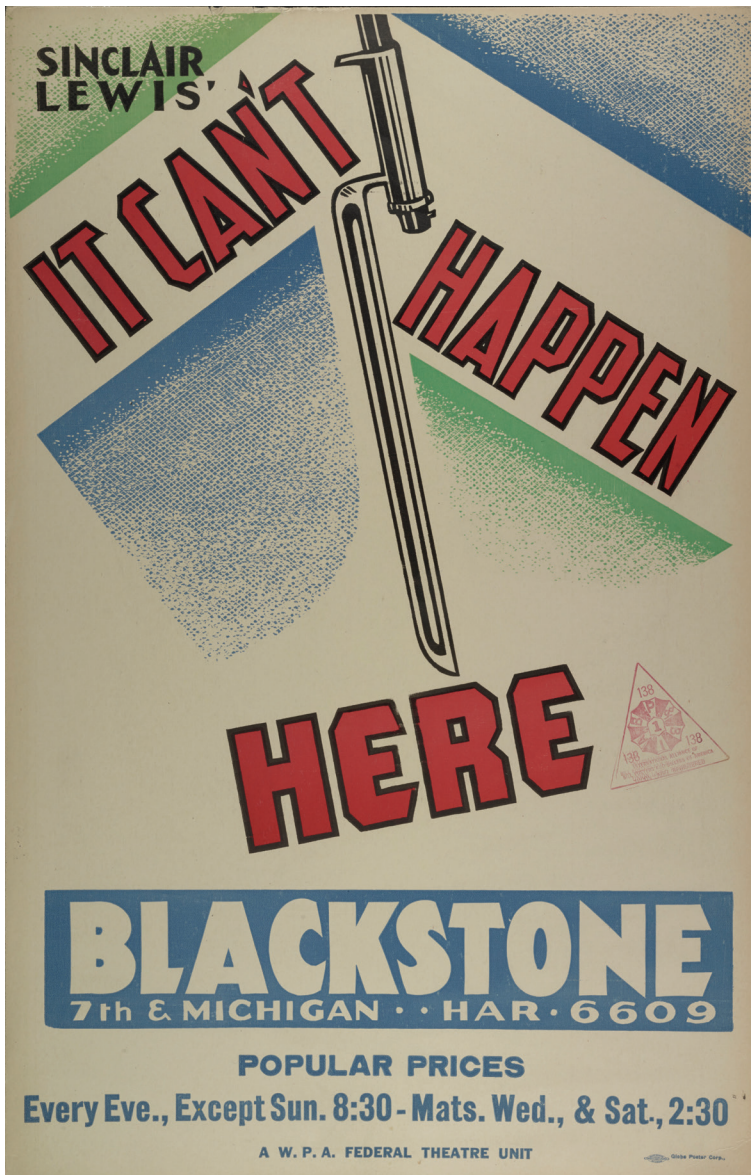


**FEDERAL  
THEATRE  
PROJECT  
DIV. of  
W. P. A.**

**NIGHTLY EXCEPT  
MON. ~ 8:30 P.M. 25¢ 55¢  
SAT. MAT. 2:30 P.M. TAX INC.**

2. Poster for *It Can't Happen Here*, Mayan Theatre, Los Angeles, CA  
(Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

Chicago's Blackstone Theatre pushes furthest, picturing a single bayonet surrounded by the title. The bayonet's sharp tip is a hair's breadth from piercing the final word of the title—"Here"—suggesting that violence could soon destroy the nation (fig.3).



3. Poster for *It Can't Happen Here*, Blackstone Theatre, Chicago, IL  
(Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

Each of these images either relied on the novel for political meaning or evoked an explicitly pro-American perspective, as opposed to one that championed anti-fascism or derided dictators. As Macy Jones argues in her dissertation on *It Can't Happen Here*, “the FTP was a political machine engaged in providing pro-American propaganda.”<sup>27</sup> For *It Can't Happen Here*, this pro-American policy emerged in the visual record, paving the way for audience members to engage with the show as essentially “pro-American propaganda.” It also appeared in the Department of Information’s press releases, which describes the play as Lewis expounding “his idea of what would happen to the United States and its people, when, if ever, a dictator captured control of this country.”<sup>28</sup>

208 Though this shift in focus might seem curious in light of the clear anti-fascist intent in the novel, the adaptation from novel to play—co-authored by Lewis himself—suggests the FTP was following Lewis’s intentions. The words *America* and *American* appear twenty times in the play and more than two hundred times in the novel. The word *dictator* appears eight times in the play and more than thirty times in the novel. However, Lewis uses “democracy” and variations on *fascism* forty times—each—in the novel. They all but vanish in the FTP play, with *democracy* arising only once early in the third scene. Doremus and his family gather to watch a parade featuring the Corpus—a nationwide proto-military organization established by Windrop to enforce his rule—when local businessman Frank Tasbrough joins them to get a better view of the parade. He compliments the “great sight” of the marching Corpus and reminisces about “the days our boys marched off to save the world for democracy.”<sup>29</sup> Tasbrough’s remark, following a scene in which the audience observes several Corpus beat an outspoken grocer to death, indicates both a remarkable ability to ignore unpleasant truths and a nostalgic wistfulness regarding the good old days when young American men saved democracy not only for the nation, but also the world. This juxtaposition—between a group that engages in unwarranted violence and established community leaders imagining the Corpus as noble inheritors of those who defended democracy—suggests that Lewis and Moffitt are focusing on a perspective that is embodying pro-American ideals rather than explicitly anti-fascist.

While Lewis softened his messaging, he was clearly interested in reaching a wide audience, and the FTP had the potential to generate a far more expansive audience than any other US theatre in existence—then or now. As Pierre de Rohan explained in

27 M.D. Jones, *Precarious Democracy*, *op. cit.*, n.10, p.24.

28 Department of Information, “*It Can't Happen Here*: Press Release,” New York, October 28, 1936, p.1.

29 S. Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, note 12; *id.*, and John C. Moffitt, “*It Can't Happen Here*,” New York, September 18, 1936, p.30.



*Federal Theatre*: “We could carry [Lewis’s] warning to sleepy America in villages and hamlets where the spoken drama was unknown until the Federal Theatre was born. This national audience was the deciding factor in the end [and...Mr. Lewis] was willing to risk considerably diminished royalties in order to reach more people.”<sup>30</sup> The gamble paid off for Lewis; in city after city, *It Can’t Happen Here* played to sold-out houses in theatres that saw some of their best sales ever, and more than half a million people ultimately witnessed the FTP productions.<sup>31</sup>

With *It Can’t Happen Here*, the FTP brought Lewis’s concerns for the nation’s future to the forefront of a piece that was adapted for a hyper-local focus. The dystopian future that Lewis imagined in response to the unrest in Europe was thus a lesson—a means to ward off the danger that fascism represented to US democracy. *It Can’t Happen Here* would be the FTP’s first real test as a decentralized “federation of theatres” with local relevance.<sup>32</sup> As the August 22nd announcement demonstrates, the FTP privileged local interpretations: “WPA officials said each production of ‘It Can’t Happen Here’ will be keyed to the section of the United States in which it is being shown.”<sup>33</sup> These interpretations shaped both the productions and the play’s content. The Denver production was set in Salida (Colorado), rather than Fort Beulah (Vermont), with revised local references throughout the script. In Tampa (Florida), a Spanish-language version of the play—*Eso no puede recurrir aquí*—offered clear support for the Spanish Republican government.<sup>34</sup> The Yiddish production in New York included a violent and degrading scene in which Doremus arrived in a concentration camp; this was cut from most of the other productions. The Seattle Negro Unit created a racially integrated production with white actors playing the dictator and his aides, and African American actors playing all of the other roles. Their goal was to demonstrate the impact of fascism on racial minorities, so they relocated the production to a Seattle African American community and adjusted the script accordingly.<sup>35</sup>

30 Pierre de Rohan, “It IS Happening Here – And Everywhere!,” *Federal Theatre*, vol.2, no.2, 1936, p.9.

31 Department of Information, “*It Can’t Happen Here*: Press Book,” New York, October 28, 1936, pp.1-9.

32 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, n. 8, p.23.

33 “WPA Theatre to Produce ‘It Can’t Happen Here,’” *art. cit.*, n. 26, p.4.

34 It is possible that the political power of the Ybor City production eluded censors due to the fact that it was produced in Spanish’ and few of the FTP’s local administrators were bilingual (L. Jackson-Schebetta, “Repertoires of the Asturian Diaspora,” *art. cit.*, n.10, p.58).

35 Pierre de Rohan, “It IS Happening Here...,” *art. cit.*, n.32, pp.10-13; M.S. Korn, *Federal Theatre’s Bold Adventure*, *op. cit.*, pp.56-57 and pp.137-138.

Such adjustments meant that the dystopian scenario Lewis imagined—and that worst-case scenario quickly escalated to violence, sexual assault, and firing squads—played out repeatedly in *local* communities rather than abstract, far-away cities. In this way, the local focus raised the stakes: it was not a generic New York City that was being taken over, it was each audience member’s hometown or the town next door, and the show was adapted to those circumstances by people who were embedded in the community.



4. Windrip addresses the crowd in a rally in the San Francisco Federal Theatre Project production (Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

New York City audiences also benefitted from this strategy. The city offered four different productions—plus a fifth in New Jersey—, all of which focused on specific communities in the city. These choices gave the show even more resonance for audiences that saw events unfold onstage. The Minute Men—Windrip’s unofficial vigilante soldiers—beat their grocer to death, executed their town doctor in front of a firing squad, and assaulted their neighbor’s daughter. And their young men *became* Minute Men as fascism infected the country.

The FTP script is a stark contrast to the novel’s clear and compelling indictment of social ills. New York newspaper critics highlighted numerous shortcomings. Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* argues that the play “hardly fulfills the opportunity Mr. Lewis has given to the stage, for the characters are meagerly defined, the dialogue

is undistinguished and many of the scenes dawdle on one foot.”<sup>36</sup> John Mason Brown of the *New York Post* bluntly states: “The excitement of the original is gone. So are its detention camps. So are its human values.”<sup>37</sup> Similar complaints emerge from those who actually worked on the productions. FTP production books from at least thirteen of the different ICCH productions are extant in the archives at the National Archives and Library of Congress, and many of these contain cast information, director commentary, production photographs, design renderings, programs, newspaper clippings, and other production ephemera.<sup>38</sup> For a production that is frequently hailed one of the FTP’s greatest triumphs, it is surprising to see the almost uniformly unenthusiastic comments from the people who participated in the actual creation of the work. As Michael Andrew Slane, director of the Denver production, explained in the director’s note in the production book for the Denver unit:

Enthusiasm was high as we read the novel of “IT CAN’T HAPPEN HERE” in which we saw excellent material for a play. It was a sore disappointment when we received the first script of the play. Much of the good material in the novel had been completely disregarded, characterizations had been changed beyond recognition, even the original idea had been altered...<sup>39</sup>

Other directors echoed Slane’s critique. They pointed to problems with everything from the play’s length to the focus on exposition rather than action. Several noted that they found it impossible to make headway on the production without referring back to the novel. Indianapolis director John Cameron wrote that “before the play be cast the novel itself should be read as it gives an excellent insight to the characters who are most prominent in the play.”<sup>40</sup> Others complained the script was melodramatic,

36 Brooks Atkinson, “Sinclair Lewis’s ‘It Can’t Happen Here’ Gets a Federal Theatre Hearing,” *The New York Times*, October 28, 1936, p.30.

37 Quoted in Department of Information, “Press Book,” art. cit., n. 33, p.3.

38 The Library of Congress contains production books from Los Angeles and San Francisco (CA), Denver (CO), Bridgeport (CT), Indianapolis (IN), Des Moines (IA), Omaha (NE), Cincinnati (OH), Tacoma and Seattle (WA), and multiple productions in New York City. The National Archives has duplicated many of these productions, as well as ephemera for additional productions, such as directors’ reports, designs, and production photographs.

39 “Synopsis and Production Notes for *It Can’t Happen Here* Production Report [Denver],” Denver, CO, October 28, 1936, p.2, Box 1024, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

40 “Production Report for *It Can’t Happen Here* [Keith’s Theatre, Indianapolis],” Indianapolis, IN, November 7, 1936, p.4, Box 1024, Federal Theatre Project Collection, *loc. cit.*

lacked comedy, or had too many scene changes.<sup>41</sup> Chicago director Harry Minturn was frustrated enough by the unending revisions that he decided to ignore most of them, selecting only a few based on what he thought worked rather than what the writers wrote.<sup>42</sup> Even the otherwise reasonably positive report from San Francisco, director Scott McLean concluded: “The performance was played hard and fast—and every effort was made to create an honest picture of the human characters of the story. The chief obstacle was the script itself—because of its hurried and superficial writing.”<sup>43</sup>

To be fair, the novel faced many of the same criticisms: it was too long, too reliant on caricatures, too melodramatic, and unrealistic in the rapid escalation of violence.<sup>44</sup> Lewis had written the novel in just a few months and, as reviewers repeatedly noted, that haste showed. The FTP playscript developed on a similarly expedited timeline. Written (and re-written) by Sinclair Lewis and John C. Moffitt in an acrimonious and very public process between August 21, when the FTP secured the rights,<sup>45</sup> and the nationwide opening on October 27, it was widely considered to be a subpar dramatic adaptation of an exciting and timely novel. As *L.A. Evening News* critic Frank Mittaur succinctly put it, “if there is a play in *It Can’t Happen Here* no one has gotten around to writing it yet.”<sup>46</sup>

And yet, the contemporary relevance and dramatic potential seen in *It Can’t Happen Here* have led to its repeated revival. *It Can’t Happen Here* seems to emerge from obscurity each time artists observe political movements that trend toward authoritarianism, with readings and productions in professional theatres, nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions.

A number of other adaptations have occurred since then, including one by Rick Hickman with the Z Collective in San Francisco, and productions have popped up

41 “Production Bulletin for *It Can’t Happen Here* [Omaha],” Omaha, NE, 1936, p.2, Box 1024, Federal Theatre Project Collection, *loc. cit.*

42 “Director’s Notes for *It Can’t Happen Here* [Blackstone Theatre, Chicago],” Chicago, IL, n.d., pp.1-2, Box 149, Federal Theatre Project, Vassar (College) Collection of Programs and Promotion Materials, 1935-39, Records of the Work Projects Administration, Record Group 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

43 “Production Bulletin for *It Can’t Happen Here* [Columbia Theatre, San Francisco],” San Francisco, CA, 1936, p.4, Box 1024, Federal Theatre Project Collection, *loc. cit.*

44 John Chamberlain, “Books of the Times,” *art. cit.*, n.15, p.17; J.D. Adams, “America Under the Iron Heel...,” *art. cit.*, n.11, p.BR1.

45 Pierre de Rohan, “It IS Happening Here...,” *art. cit.*, n.32, p.9.

46 Frank Mittaur, “Unconvincing Propaganda,” October 28, 1936, *L.A. Evening News*, J.Howard Miller personal papers, Collection #Co228, Special Collections Research Center, George Mason University Libraries.

periodically at professional theatres, nonprofits, and universities since the 1930s. Berkeley Repertory Theatre's 2016 adaptation, by Tony Taccone and Bennett Cohen, offers insights into how this piece functions as a performance of history.

## HISTORY AND FUTURITY: A CASE STUDY OF *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE*

In February 2016, Berkeley Repertory Theatre lost the rights to one of the first planned productions of the season. Artistic Director Tony Taccone and director Lisa Peterson saw this as an opportunity to respond to the presidential election. Donald Trump's unorthodox campaign was gaining traction and, when Peterson found information on the FTP's historic nationwide opening, *It Can't Happen Here* seemed like kismet.<sup>47</sup> Planned for a September opening, the production would close just two days before the November election, and Berkeley Rep would spearhead play readings nationwide in a strategy that evoked the historic FTP production. Taccone eagerly sought out the FTP script and shared it with his creative team, but he was unimpressed. He described it as "a really bad play," while Berkeley Rep managing director Susan Medak called it "ghastly."<sup>48</sup> Thus an adaptation process began.

Taccone approached screenwriter and long-time collaborator Bennett S. Cohen and the two decided to move forward with a new adaptation based on the novel rather than the FTP version. The "Adaptors' note" describes their intentions:

We have adapted this novel with enormous respect and admiration for its author, Sinclair Lewis. Even when taking liberties with both content and form, we have tried to retain the intent and ambition of the original text.

Mr. Lewis was a singular artist, and his ability to grasp the complexity and underpinnings of American society and to re-imagine the world continues to be a source of inspiration. With this play, we hope to sustain his artistic legacy and to translate his overreaching vision into a compelling piece of theatre.<sup>49</sup>

Note their clear attention to adapting the *novel*, rather than the play Lewis personally wrote for the FTP production. Their respect for Lewis is clear, in spite of

47 Claudia Bauer, "Berkeley Rep casts a vote with 'It Can't Happen Here,'" *SFGATE*, September 27, 2016.

48 Sean Elder, "It Can Happen Here: *It Can't Happen Here*, the fable of a fascist president, is coming just in time for the November election," *Newsweek*, October 7, 2016, p.61; Michael Paulson, "In an Election Year, a Play Asks What If," *The New York Times* (Late Edition [East Coast]), September 26, 2016, p. C1.

49 Tony Taccone, Bennett S. Cohen and Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, New York, Dramatists Play Service, 2016, pp.4-5.

the implication that Lewis's adaptation failed to successfully "translate his overarching vision into a compelling piece of theatre." But Taccone and Cohen saw something timeless in Lewis's work. As Taccone explains: "[T]his is *not* about a moment in time. This is about a pattern in American history. Some of the parallels are so eerie that you have to ask yourself, 'What is it about the system, the culture, the pathology that is endemic to this kind of political development?'"<sup>50</sup> Many parallels were already eerily prescient: Lewis describes Windrip as "vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and in his 'ideas' almost idiotic," yet he possessed an inexplicable power to bewitch audiences.<sup>51</sup> Taccone and Cohen further heightened these parallels, noting Trump's ability to garner advertising through the media: "The more offensive his remarks, the more papers get sold."<sup>52</sup> Hilary Rodham Clinton's reference to his supporters as a "basket of deplorables" appeared as well: "[I]t's not because they're all stupid and prejudiced and deplorable. [...] People want a voice. They want agency over their lives."<sup>53</sup>

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While Taccone and Cohen made many notable changes surrounding the complexity of the characters and updated some contemporary references in the transition from novel to play, I focus here on one area with wide-ranging repercussions: the representation of women. Lewis and Moffitt include only three women in the twenty-seven named characters in *It Can't Happen Here*: Mary, wife of the town doctor and mother to Doremus's only grandchild; Lorinda Pike, outspoken resistance operative and Doremus's love interest; and Mrs. Veeder, wife of the murdered grocer. Taccone and Cohen restore Doremus's wife, Emma, and his second daughter, Sissy, which allows all of the women in the play to resonate more deeply and individually. How does Sissy's reinstatement impact the other female characters in the play, particularly her older sister, Mary? How does her presence reshape the play dramaturgically? Here I focus on Sissy's return and consider the ramifications of her presence by comparing two specific moments from the different versions of the play: Mary's death and the play's final moments which,

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50 This interview, as well as numerous dramaturgical articles, are available here: <https://issuu.com/berkeleyrep/docs/program-ic> (Accessed June 7, 2022). Sarah Rose Leonard, "Outstripped by Reality: An Interview with Tony Taccone, Bennett Cohen, and Lisa Peterson," *The Berkeley Rep Magazine*, no. 1, 2016-2017, p.18.

51 S. Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, n. 16, p.71.

52 T. Taccone, *et al.*, *It Can't Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, n. 51, p.36.

53 Quoted from *The New York Times* (M. Paulson, "In an Election Year, a Play Asks What If," *art. cit.*, p. C1). The published version of the play changes this line to "it's not because they're all stupid and prejudiced and blind." (T. Taccone, *et al.*, *It Can't Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, p.44.)

in one version, also include Doremus's second daughter, Sissy. While I concentrate on Mary and Sissy, it is also worth noting that Emma's absence makes Doremus's desire for Lorinda more palatable to a Depression-era audience, even if it forces the character of Mary to function in multiple ways dramaturgically.

Mary, wife of the town doctor and mother to Doremus's only grandchild, is also Doremus's only female family member and one of two lead women in Lewis and Moffitt's script. The rise of an authoritarian leader has material and devastating consequences for Mary: in addition to her father's incarceration, Effingham Swan, commanding officer of the Corpos, executes her husband before a firing squad and Shad, a Corpo officer, lusts after the young widow. After Doremus's arrest, Shad attempts to step into Mary's life in a scene parodying domestic bliss. Mary, dressed in black and "huddled in the low sewing-rocker," sews a button on a shirt beside a stack of laundry while Shad destroys her work, threatens her son, and bodily grabs her. When Mary resists, Shad pursues her: "She can't hold out on me any longer! I love her—I love her, and I may die tomorrow! It ain't fair!" He chases her upstairs to assault her, which is where Mary kills him.<sup>54</sup> Shad's death is the catalyst for Mary and her son's desperate flight for the Canadian border, but Swan intercepts them. In the final moments on the play, Mary sends her son ahead while holding Swan at gunpoint:

SWAN. – I knew I should have killed Jessup!

MARY. – You couldn't! The Doremus Jessups can never die.

*(Door begins to open briskly. Swan leaps up and at Mary, shouting:)*

SWAN. – Grab her!

*(She shoots him. As he slumps back into chair, Peabody yanks out his automatic and shoots Mary. The two shots are almost simultaneous. Door filling with wondering Corpos... The curtain just beginning, very slowly, to fall, as Mary, rising from chair, staggering but not falling, one hand on her breast and one on the back of the chair in which she has been sitting, cries:)*

MARY. – Good by, Father....Good by, Fowler....Good by, Davey!<sup>55</sup> [fig. 5]

54 All spelling and punctuation preserved from original text (S. Lewis and J.C. Moffitt, "It Can't Happen Here," art. cit., pp.118-123).

55 *Ibid.*, p.150.



5. Mary's death scene in the Detroit Federal Theatre Project production (National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD).

Flanagan witnessed this scene at the Adelphi Theatre in New York City on opening night. She described her experience watching the audience as this scene unfolded: "I have never seen an audience more attentive than this one during the final scene at the immigration border. Whatever the script and our production may have lacked, there was in that moment an understanding wave of feeling that we are all Americans bound together."<sup>56</sup>

Flanagan's assessment notwithstanding, this melodramatic ending provides a powerful emotional climax that would likely lead to a very attentive audience. Mary's sacrifice becomes political only when she references the unkillable Doremus, a remark that suggests the symbol of resistance will endure. The remainder of the scene focuses on Mary attempting to escape murder charges and protect her son. While these are powerful objectives, Lewis and Moffitt added fuel to the conflagration by transforming Mary into a victim of sexual assault to justify her violent response. Murdering her husband, arresting her friends and family, threatening her son, and destroying the fabric

<sup>56</sup> H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, n.8, p.124.



of American democracy were insufficient. They also elected to end the play with Mary's death and centered her goodbyes to her father, husband, and son, reiterating her roles as daughter, wife, and mother rather than her work in the resistance. If audiences were drawn into this scene as Flanagan describes, one wonders what, precisely, drew them. Was it limited to an emotional climax created by watching a woman sacrifice her life to save her son and kill the man she held responsible for murdering her husband? Did it go beyond that to become a "wave of feeling that we are all Americans bound together"?

The FTP's audience survey reports prove illuminating here. While many of the comments on the production are generally positive, those that speak to the final scene are not. Next to the opening scene (which viewers rightly complain is far too long) and the script as a whole, the closing scene received the most comments, and the majority was negative. New York audiences wrote: "Ending too abrupt." "The end of the play should be clearer." "The end should have been more definite...no solving of problems...a certain something is missing."<sup>57</sup> Indianapolis audiences complained that "the finale should be more pointed in its solution," while Philadelphia audiences requested less "emotional stuff...please be calm."<sup>58</sup> These comments suggest an audience response that was less a "wave of feeling that we are all Americans bound together," and more frustration regarding an ending that felt unclear and dramatically incomplete. Yet many thought they knew what the message was *supposed* to be. As one put it: "Your heart is in the right place but [the] play [is] a caricature."<sup>59</sup> Mary's melodramatic death scene—moving as it may be—simply cannot resolve the political stakes of the play. Too many questions are left unresolved: did eleven-year-old David escape to Canada? What of the unkillable Doremus...did he escape? If so, where is he and what is he doing? What of the resistance? Is the United States doomed to fascism? What does this ending—focusing on the destruction of the American family—suggest about the power of fascism?

In Taccone and Cohen's 2016 Berkeley Rep adaptation, strong women return to the stage. Mary's demise is moved to the second scene of the final act, following

57 Dana Rush, "It Can't Happen Here Audience Survey Report (New York City, Adelphi Theatre)," New York, November 1936, p.6, Box 254, Federal Theatre Project: National Play Bureau Audience Survey Reports, 1936-38, Records of the Work Projects Administration, Record Group 69, National Archives, College Park, MD (added a space between "is" and "missing" in last quote).

58 *Id.*, "It Can't Happen Here Audience Survey Report (Indianapolis, IN, B.F. Keith's Theatre)," New York, December 16, 1936, p.4; *id.*, "It Can't Happen Here Audience Survey Report (Philadelphia, PA, Locust Street Theatre)," New York, February 15, 1937, p.5.

59 *Id.*, "It Can't Happen Here Audience Survey Report (New York City, Adelphi Theatre)," art. cit., n.59.

Doremus's incarceration in the concentration camp. Rather than encountering him as she flees, Mary chooses to approach Swan in his office and sets a careful trap for him by performing the role of the female victim. She then stabs him in the neck with a hairpin and, as he dies, reveals that *she* is the one who has been working against him: "Jessup. That's the name. Mary. Jessup. Greenhill."<sup>60</sup> Here, Mary references both her maiden name, Jessup, and her married name, Greenhill, reminding the audience of her family's tradition of principled resistance and her own personal reasons for fighting. Though Mary's death follows her last stand, this scene evokes Mary's death in the novel. There, empowered by her role as leader of her hometown's rebel cell and frustrated by the slow pace of change, she enlists in aviation and bombing lessons, and kills Swan by crashing her plane into his in midair. In both this adaptation and the novel, Mary becomes a formidable force. She makes arrangements for her son's care, and ultimately chooses a course that leads to her death rather than having it thrust upon her. It is the decision of a committed revolutionary—a warrior—rather than a woman who has been violated and assaulted and is running for her life.

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In an especially important choice, Taccone and Cohen restore Sissy, Doremus's second daughter, to the play. In doing so, they decouple the responsibilities that had been relegated to Mary in the FTP version, thus creating Mary and Sissy as unique characters who pursue separate agendas. Early on, Sissy becomes the driving force of the resistance and she pulls reluctant family members—including Doremus—along in her wake. Her daring manifests in a plan to undermine Shad:

SISSY. – He's sweet on me and I've been sort of letting him, you know

DOREMUS. – Sweet?... What?

SISSY. – Don't bust your gullet, Dad. I know how to protect myself.<sup>61</sup>

Sissy wields her sexual appeal as a weapon and recovers evidence reveals Shad's criminal activities and banishes him to a concentration camp. In this act, she recognizes the dangers and chooses to execute her plan anyway, confident in her abilities, committed to her cause, and willing to suffer the ensuing consequences. As Lorinda says: "That girl is fearless."<sup>62</sup> Sissy goes on to lead the rebel cell after Mary's death and her father's arrest. Even when Lorinda engineers Doremus's escape, Sissy helps him flee to Canada while she remains—now the only member of her family in the country. As he leaves, Doremus passes the responsibility to her: "I'm putting my faith in you, my

60 Tony Taccone, *et al.*, *It Can't Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, n.51, pp.88-89.

61 *Ibid.*, p.76.

62 *Ibid.*, p.77.

brilliant, brave daughter. I'm counting on you, Sissy. To fight.”<sup>63</sup> And fight she does. The play ends with a split focus between Doremus's ongoing clandestine work and Sissy and Julian, her boyfriend, printing resistance leaflets in Fort Beulah: “We have so much to do.”<sup>64</sup> A series of narrators tells us that “the struggle went on / past the span of [Doremus's] life / and the lives of his children, / and his children's children. / And history marched on, / and the struggle continued... / Straight on through to the present.” Sissy and Julian are that present and they choose to continue engineering resistance. The play ends with Julian and Sissy:

JULIAN. – Are you ready?

SISSY. – Yes, I'm ready.

(*Sissy and Julian start to run the press. The sound swells. The lights go out.*)<sup>65</sup>

Sissy's inclusion in Taccone and Cohen's script restores powerful women to the center of the play. No longer fulfilling multiple domestic roles, Mary becomes a complex character that seeks out Swan's destruction even at the cost of her life; she is an agent of change rather than a victim. Sissy similarly speaks her mind, and uses her intelligence and sexual appeal to advocate for her cause and recruit others. Both women are valuable allies tied inextricably to the core of the resistance. When Doremus leaves town to advocate change nationwide, he does so knowing that Mary has neutralized a formidable local opponent and Sissy's strength will feed the resistance. Finally, Sissy is still standing at the end of the play, along with a strong ally in Julian. Sissy and Julian look to the future, where they will work together to continue the movement after Doremus disappears into history. In this adaptation, the battle against fascism is ongoing. Doremus may have been the face of the resistance initially, but Sissy and Julian—empowered and politically engaged young people—take on that role at the end of the play. As they say, they are ready.

## DYSTOPIAN FUTURES

So how did *It Can't Happen Here* function differently in 1936 and 2016? The FTP script flattens characters and shows a tendency toward melodrama by conflating the emotional climax of a traumatized woman fleeing for her life and protecting her son with a muddled anti-fascist—or at least pro-American—political message. But in 1936,

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63 *Ibid.*, p.96.

64 *Ibid.*, p.100.

65 *Ibid.*, p.101.

the play was able to capitalize on the cultural memory of the novel as well as widespread awareness of the rise of fascism abroad. Americans were well aware that fascism was not something relegated to the land of impossibility even if public opinion was not necessarily convinced it was a danger in the United States. The novel made an intellectual case for the plausibility of its spread to the United States while the play functioned on a more emotional level. Even flawed, the social and economic reality of the Great Depression, the cultural saturation of the novel, and the FTP's reach into communities across the nation made *It Can't Happen Here* into a performance of futurity that captured the nation's attention. Roosevelt's resounding victory in the 1936 election offered a way to safely reject this performance of a potential future—for the moment.

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In 2016, Berkeley Rep employed a performance of history *and* a performance of futurity. Just as the FTP did, they employed a performance of a dystopian future to offer Americans a look at a future that they hoped would be rejected. And by mobilizing readings nationwide and ghosting the work of the FTP, Berkeley Rep also created a performance of history, looking back to the 1930s and producing a piece that marked a rejection of fascism. The undeniable historical parallels—widespread economic disparity, racism, radical political divisions, the rising popularity of a potential demagogue—marked 2016 as a historical repetition of sorts. The Berkeley Rep team worked hard to enhance these similarities, drawing on that historical rejection of fascism as a way to process the contemporaneous moment. Sissy and Julian—agents of change—looked to the future with optimism, but when Trump was elected president, it seemed the nation ushered in the leadership that would give rise to all that *It Can't Happen Here* warned against.

In 2020, the United States narrowly voted down a second Trump regime. In the midst of a global pandemic, Berkeley Rep reimaged *It Can't Happen Here* for a free national broadcast via *YouTube*. In this moment, ghosting one production that ended in a rejection of fascism and another that culminated in the election of a demagogue, *It Can't Happen Here* becomes even a performance of history with an uncertain future. For this audience—a nation torn apart by racial strife, white supremacy, economic collapse, widespread violence, and an unwillingness to trust science—it could indeed happen. The ongoing challenges to the democratic process and the Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021 show the fragility of the political system.

As we look back in time at this performance of a history that never was, perhaps we might take heart *knowing* that the nation was able to avoid slipping into fascism in the 1930s. Or perhaps we might take its contemporary reappearance as a warning that the dystopian future it predicts could be closer than ever.

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## NOTICE

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ELIZABETH A. OSBORNE  
The Promise of *It Can’t Happen Here*

## ABSTRACT

On October 27, 1936, the Federal Theatre Project staged one of its great triumphs: Sinclair Lewis and John C. Moffitt’s *It Can’t Happen Here*. The play rehearsed how the United States could become a totalitarian state bit by bit. I argue that the piece operates as a potential future that played out for audiences in the imagined space of the theatre as a preventative lesson, with the intent of activating individual and community responses to fascism.

In October 2016, Berkeley Repertory Theatre resurrected the play in a new adaptation by Tony Taccone and Bennett Cohen. Another presidential candidate railed against the mainstream media and intellectual elite. With this return to *It Can’t Happen Here*, Berkeley Rep brought a performance from a specific moment in history into the present. Employing cultural history and literary analysis, this article compares the novel, FTP production, and the Berkeley Rep production.

## KEYWORDS

Federal Theatre Project, Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Tony Taccone, Bennett Cohen, Fascism, Historical performance

## RÉSUMÉ

Le 27 octobre 1936, le Federal Theatre Project met en scène l'un de ses plus grands triomphes : *It Can't Happen Here* de Sinclair Lewis et John C. Moffitt. La pièce met en scène le basculement progressif des États-Unis vers le totalitarisme. Je démontre dans cet article en quoi l'œuvre dépeint un éventuel futur présenté au public dans l'espace imaginaire du théâtre sous la forme de ce que l'on pourrait appeler une « leçon préventive », dans l'intention de susciter chez les spectateurs des réactions tant individuelles que collectives face à la montée du fascisme.

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En octobre 2016, le Berkeley Repertory Theatre a ressuscité la pièce dans une nouvelle adaptation de Tony Taccone et Bennett Cohen. Un autre candidat à la présidentielle avait alors dénoncé les médias traditionnels et l'élite intellectuelle. Avec ce retour à *It Can't Happen Here*, le Berkeley Rep a proposé une performance qui transposait un moment spécifique de l'histoire dans le présent. S'appuyant sur l'histoire culturelle et l'analyse littéraire, cet article compare le roman, la production FTP et la production Berkeley Rep.

## MOTS-CLÉS

*Federal Theatre Project*, Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, *Berkeley Repertory Theater*, Tony Taccone, Bennett Cohen, fascisme, performance historique



TROISIÈME PARTIE

*Les living newspapers,*  
d'hier à aujourd'hui



“A GESTURE OF HOPE:” *LIVING NEWSPAPER: A COUNTER-NARRATIVE* AT THE ROYAL COURT THEATRE  
(AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTISTIC DIRECTOR VICKY FEATHERSTONE)<sup>1</sup>

Jordana Cox  
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*In the spring of 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic spread throughout the UK, London’s Royal Court Theatre shut its doors to the public. “We are in unprecedented times,” a March 16 statement explained, and “we have taken the difficult but ultimately inevitable decision to cease performances and rehearsals as of today.”<sup>2</sup> Other public venues were doing the same, following public health guidelines from Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Theatre-makers across the country faced indefinite unemployment.*

*In the coming months however, the Royal Court would develop a unique alternative to its pre-Covid programming: a seven-part Living Newspaper, inspired by the Federal Theatre Project. Artistic Director Vicky Featherstone would employ over 300 freelancers and the full complement of Royal Court staff. The large team, like their predecessors at the FTP’s Living Newspaper, would dedicate themselves to dramatizing pressing social issues—not only Covid, but also racism, colonialism and forced migration, and Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union.*

*The seven editions of Living Newspaper: A Counter Narrative featured recurring “sections,” inspired by locations in the theatre itself. The “Front Page,” an original song performed by the ensemble, would appear in the Jerwood Theatre Downstairs. Solo-authored pieces would follow throughout the theatre—a long-form expose in the rehearsal hall, a weather report in the green room, horoscopes in the former ladies’ washroom. The roster of company members changed, and so too did the format and medium. When Living Newspaper premiered on 10 December, government Covid regulations were still permitting small gatherings; therefore, the Royal Court designed a hybrid platform, bringing a small live audience into the theatre for limited in-person performances, then making a video available online the following week. As Covid restrictions tightened however, the Royal*

1 The author thanks Anoushka Warden for coordinating this interview, and Kevin Christopher Carey for his assistance with transcription and editing.  
2 [A Statement from the Royal Court Theatre](#) published on 16 March 2020.

*Court announced that its remaining editions would occur exclusively online. Edition Two followed a format similar to the online version of Edition One, with a video available to audiences on-demand for a week. By Edition Three however, Featherstone and her team had developed a format they would retain for the remaining editions: a “front page” that a limited audience could stream live and remaining sections released daily, via email, for spectators to watch at their leisure.*

*The following is a condensed transcript of a conversation that occurred on March 18, 2021, while preparations were underway for Edition Three.*

**JORDANA COX.** – I thought we would start with the story of how this idea came about, what inspired the project, and how you decided to pursue it.

**228 VICKY FEATHERSTONE.** – I went to Manchester University in the north of England, for drama and English, and I studied this as part my course, and was blown away by it, really, by its politics and the kind of genesis and also the breadth of the project overall. I’ve always been fascinated in the context that theatre is made in—and I love the fact that there was this extraordinary, life-changing project that was really about the context that theatre needed to survive in. And I sort of banked it as something that I’d be really interested in looking at, at some point. And then in 2004, I got the job to set up the National Theatre of Scotland. I was the inaugural Artistic Director. What was very interesting about Scotland as a country is that it’s a socialist country, essentially, a kind of working-class country, and the model that they had come up with for a National Theatre was not building-based. It was about an idea of a national theatre and about work, so it wasn’t about building a big monolith or a big architectural example in the sort of colonial way of “our brilliance.” It was about creating relationships, working with existing communities all around Scotland. And Scotland is a complex geographical country with very different demographics according to where you are, whether you’re in the central belt of Glasgow and Edinburgh or the Highlands. And that has a real similarity to America in terms of that variety. And I thought about what the FTP was, and what the living newspaper had been there, and we created lots of different models of work.<sup>3</sup> I was there for nine years and talked about doing a living newspaper, but the political moment didn’t exist. It was interesting: the cultural moment existed, and we responded and did lots of different things, but the political urgency wasn’t there. I mean the cultural model—about employment, and about access, and about new voices

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3 Throughout this transcription, “living newspaper” appears in lower-case letters when it refers to the theatrical form writ-large, whereas when capitalized, “Living Newspaper” refers to the Royal Court production.

being heard, all of those things—culturally, that was felt, right? The *political* moment of the living newspaper, that kind of work, which is kind of...not the best drama, not the best experiences you would ever have in the theatre...they exist for a different reason. It felt that we had space and we had time and we could slow cook and we could think about things that we wanted to make theatre about. There wasn't the same urgency. Scotland does have a history since the 1970s of quite agitprop political theatre as a form, and I've always been very influenced by the company 7:84, and John McGrath's work. But it felt that Scotland was in a different place.

And then last April or May, we were locked down, the theatre was shut. We were thinking about what could we do, what is our role? Massive questions about the role of freelancers, about institution versus the artist... And we were holding forums to discuss all of those things. This was pre-George Floyd's murder, so it was very specifically about the moment of theatre and the inequity in theatre, and the pandemic and inequality in the world around pandemics and who was suffering most. And I woke up in the middle of the night, and I went: "Oh my God! Living newspaper! Federal Theatre Project!" And it literally went like that.

I had done a big project, called *Enquirer* (with John Tiffany) around the Leveson inquiry in this country. We'd gotten four major journalists to interview ten journalists each about the death of the newspaper and what that meant, and we created that as a site-specific piece. It was incredible—a whole conversation, there, about theatre and journalism and how that feeds in. It was such a learning curve. It was a quick response piece, but it had gone really deeply because of the way that journalists ask questions of other journalists, which is much less polite than the way that theatre people ask questions. We got amazing material. But because we'd done that, and I was very proud of that, when I started thinking about *this* living newspaper...I don't think this version should get caught up in trying to be like a newspaper or trying to be journalistically successful because I'd *felt* what theatre and journalism had been like when it really was successful. And what this needed to be about was giving employment to theatre makers, to writers. And the intersection can be quite interesting when you get a writer and a journalist next to each other because there's, well, it's complex in terms of stories, facts, information, empathy—all of those kinds of things.

J. C. – When you say that you weren't striving for the same kind of "journalistic" theatre in the Court's living newspapers, what kinds of expectations did that allow you to relax or set aside?

V. F. – Well, at the Royal Court we work with, at any one time, over 200 writers. We do like fifteen plays a year. We have writers' groups. We have writers under commission. We have the writers who we're close to; we've done their plays, all of that. So, I sort of knew

that if we could come up with a model that would be about asking all of these writers to write about what they *wanted* to write about... That's why it wouldn't be journalistic. Because actually we never, *never* tell the writers what they should write about at the Royal Court. What we say is: "What do *you* need to say? How do *you* want to say it?" They're always the primary artists. We never commission to a brief. And therefore, the work is always surprising, and it's way ahead of a journalist's [brief]—unless it's some long-form sort of analytical journalism—it's way ahead of where people are because that's what writers are. They're shamans, aren't they?

J. C. – Can you talk then about how you invited artists to participate in this project? What kinds of instructions and context, if any, did you give to writers?

V. F. – I was really aware that people were really struggling with writing and the completion of an idea. So, I sort of knew that it wasn't right to ask somebody to have a thesis or an idea and to finish something off. And there were so many little commissions going around about "write your lockdown monologue and we'll film it, and it will go on the BBC," kind of great and awful all at the same time. And I knew that our writers at the Royal Court had been asked to do some of that stuff and rejected it and we hadn't decided to do any of that. I knew I had to be really sort of careful with what I was asking. The other thing that happened was the big problem about social distance and audiences. The question was pragmatic: "How do you get 500 people into the theatre at 7:30 to sit down and watch a play?" And I knew that if I was asking that question, it was the wrong question. Theatre was never going to come back within a year if we were asking that question. So, what I did—because at National Theatre of Scotland we've *no* building—we thought about the whole of our building as a newspaper. And then what were the different rooms that we could use, that people could go on a site-specific journey in a group of five, socially distanced, around the building to witness these small pieces that were made site-specifically in each room? So, the form of our building gave us the form of how a living newspaper would work. That's a really important part of it. So, I presented this to my amazing artistic team, and I explained to them about FTP, and none of them knew about it! So, I explained it, and they became completely addicted to how amazing it was. So, we did a bit more work on how it would work, and then we invited our 200 writers to three or four *Zooms* in different groups where I presented the idea to them, and I said that what we want to do is a series of editions, a weekly edition, and we're going to invite some of you to become part of a collective and take responsibility for a front page and headline together, and others of you don't need to meet, you can just write contributing articles.

And they asked so many interesting questions, like: "We're bored of the news, the rolling news; we're not interested. We don't want it to be about facts and figures, you

know—we're rejecting all of that." They said things like, "Surely, whatever we write is the news. We're writers. Who dictates what the news is? Who owns it?" They talked a lot about—because of the diversity of our writers—who chooses what we see? Who edits? Who's in control of that? How do you enable people to look into the gaps, where things aren't written, to think for themselves? And one of their big fears was that they thought they were going to have to be cohesive and agree. And I was saying: "This is really going to be like the structure of a newspaper where you can have two pieces next to each other, two completely different [pieces] in opposition to each other. You do not have to reach a consensus. What's exciting about this form, which is, you know, fifteen, five-minute pieces in our building is that it can really be dissonant." And they were so relieved at that. That was a big thing in persuading them about whether to do it.

J. C. – That struck me as one of the important departures from the FTP's living newspapers. By using the different sections of a newspaper you could allow not only disagreement but also more texture in terms of tone—by juxtaposing a horoscope section, for example, with obituaries.

Do you recall any other questions from writers that influenced the shape and structure of the overall piece?

V. F. – There was a lot of conversation about whether there should be some narrative structure or something which held them together. Some writers could really handle thinking about each piece in isolation. Others felt that they wanted to take more responsibility for the audience and how they felt and why they were a lot...there was so much about holding people, about making people feel safe—while challenging people with the ideas—but the experience feeling safe and feeling comfortable. There were questions about access: "If we're making a new form of theatre, how do we make theatre that feels equitable and accessible? What's the hierarchy of decision-making within that?" The big thing about us for this whole project was that nobody has done it before. So, I was able to say to everybody, from our stage door person to me, as Artistic Director, to everybody: "We are all creating this together." It's totally flat in terms of its democracy because none of us know how to do this, and that felt really, really exciting. Some of the principles of the FTP which we took forward were: everybody gets paid the same, everybody gets a weekly wage—principles that we normally wouldn't have in the way we make theatre that we introduced at this point to agents and to the other artists. And they talked a lot about joy. They felt very strongly that if we were creating space at this time, yes, it could be provocative, but they really needed it to feel joyful. And that's where the playful things like the horoscopes came from. You know, we need to be able to imagine better things. It's not just about how shit it is.

J. C. – To me that also came through the recurring “aunties” that you have in the second edition—an alternative to the “little man” figure representing “average Americans” in the 1930s living newspapers? How did that “auntie” through-line come about?

V. F. – That was one of the writers. The structure [for creation] would be that we would gather the people who we wanted to be in the collective and then ask them if they would be together. We spent ages working out the composition of the collective writers. And then we’d gather them, and I’d introduce the project in more detail, and we’d talk about whose voice was, sort of, *leading*, which we really wanted to challenge. So, there’s a writer called Tife [Kusoro]—she’s one of our youngest writers and has come through our Participation department—she talked about “*WhatsApp* aunties,” her aunties on *WhatsApp*, who are a massive part of how all of her family get their information. But it can often be completely made up. You know, who knows what is real? It’s that whole thing about, “if you eat this you won’t get Covid,” or whatever, right?

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But it has real validity in their world that they all communicate in. So she talked about that. And then Felicia’s [Anchuli Felicia King] aunt, who’s Australian-Thai, so there are Thai aunties. And then Mark Ravenhill, who’s, you know, middle-aged, white, Southern, gay man said: “Oh my God, I grew up with a whole set of aunties that weren’t my auntie.” And you suddenly go: “Wow! Every culture has the aunties.” And what happens if they have the power, and that’s what to think? So that’s where that came from, from Tife saying that, the whole of the collective went: “Oh my God, let’s make it an edition about aunties.” So, she really unlocked something incredible.

J. C. – It’s interesting: the *modus operandi* of the aunties is gossip, in a way, and that’s such an interesting counterpoint to news writing. I mean gossip is the opposite of “legitimate” news. It’s intimate. It’s kind of unchecked. It’s free.

V. F. – Completely necessary.

J. C. – Absolutely. Can you walk me through what the process is for putting together an edition?

V. F. – It’s changed, and it’s changed this time because we had to stop it [the process for Edition 3], and we’re doing it in a different way, but the process is very similar. Our artistic team decide who are the collective going to be. They have one first meeting with me and whoever the Associates are from our artistic team looking after that edition. In that meeting we talk about the genesis of the FTP, living newspaper; about what they think of their responsibilities; what things they’ve been thinking about. The Design Collective come and make their presentation of design ideas, which is what the rooms are, the offers of what the rooms are.

J. C. – And what is the Design Collective?



V. F. – Over the summer we had an Associate Designer called Chloe Lamford, and she said: “I’ve never had so much time before. I suddenly feel I should take some responsibility over this time for some emerging designs. I’ve never felt that before—*I’ve* been one of the youngest for ages. I’m not anymore.” And we had this amazing list of designers who had written to us, who wanted to work with us. So, she met up with these people individually and they started meeting once every two weeks. There were, like, seven of them, and they just started, together with Chloe, talking about various techniques...they decided that, why couldn’t design be made as a collective? Why did we get stuck in this way of “Super Designer,” and this sort of thing? They came up with a manifesto together of design for sustainability, for new ways of working. And then we’d get people to go in and do different sessions and everything. It wasn’t going to go anywhere. We were just getting to know them and using the time. Then, Chloe said to me, “I would love you to come in and meet them; they’re incredible.” They’re literally the most diverse, extraordinary group of young designers I’ve ever met. And they started talking to me, and then I sent her a message, because Chloe was going to be the designer of the Living Newspaper—and I said: “Should we ask you and them as part of the Design Collective to design it?”

So, this group—Shankho Chaudhuri, Debbie Duru, Cara Evans, Sandra Falase, Zoë Hurwitz and Chloe Lamford—spent hours, and they looked at the building, and worked out all the different spaces. They offered up this design book to the writers and said: “This is our offer to you.” And the writers loved it because normally *they* start with an idea. So, that was incredible, and the designers were saying: “We never get to start an idea and we’re always brought in and we have to interpret!” So, it’s really interesting about how this project, you can’t really tell where it began and who did what. It’s one of those. It’s really amazing. It’s a real collaboration.

When the Design Collective turned up at that first meeting, they blew the minds of all the writers by going: “This is a picture of the Royal Court. We think the front page should be a musical number and it should be in the theatre downstairs. Then, under the stage: this amazing bit where we think it’s a *subculture*, *substage*, all the subcultures that have been repressed. The plenum, which is a bit under the seating, they felt looked like a control room, like a sort of idea of mistruths, Trump, all of that stuff; and the Agony Aunt in our cloakroom. And then we created, in our theatre upstairs, a big white space with just paper hanging down the walls. That would be like “The Long Listen,” which is like the long-form piece, and it’s a blank canvas, and then you just draw on the walls what you need. All of these things, so, the writers would be inspired by the space. Or sometimes they’d go: “I’m going to write this thing,” and we’d find the space.

So that was the beginning. And then there would be weekly meetings where they would come together just to further their thinking overall: what were the themes, what the ideas they were interested in looking at, like how do the aunties come out, that sort of thing.

And there would be a designer from the Design Collective allocated to each week [who] would join all the meetings and our Associates. And then we brought in lighting designers, sound designers, choreographers, other directors. So, they would all be talking about all of these things together. And the main job that the collective had to do was to come up with the idea, a composer for the front page for the music and what the theme of that would be, and then how they would extrapolate from the front page to write their own individual articles. And then we would, alongside that, be having meetings with other writers, who were the contributing writers, to find out what they wanted to write, whether they could fit into that edition or whatever, we'd move them around. So, that was the sort of process of getting the material going.

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There was always a stutter when they would go: "We can't. We don't know what the front page is. We can't come up with that." And they would always get through it. They would start writing, and then we would allocate a director or a facilitator to each one. And the big job was working out the order and the actors and the journey, and all of that. Of course, that was taken away from us [after the second edition, when a Tier Three lockdown prohibited even small audiences from entering the theatre].

J. C. – And that was something that the collective would determine together, the order [of pieces]?

V. F. – No, the Associate facilitators would determine that. We had a series of meetings with the collective [where] we would work out all the bits.

J. C. – What an architectural process. At a moment when people had stopped coming to the theatre [due to lockdown], the space of the theatre was becoming important for you in a new way.

V. F. – Yes. And you know, it was about looking at the whole thing differently. How we made theatre, how we spoke to each other, how we would introduce people to the building, about who felt alright in it, all of those things. It's been a complete transformation in terms of the way we work.

And also the casual staff—the people who would rig the lights with the lighting team and all of these kinds of things—they hadn't been working at all over this time and they felt so empowered, coming into the building to do something which, again, nobody had done before. But they were an absolute equal part of the team, making it work, to the writers or to actors or anybody.

It was a massive thing, as well, about the *living*—the actors would never learn the script. It had to show its rawness. And we must never try to make it be a polished thing. All of that had to be absolutely a part of its story. There wouldn't be costumes apart from the horoscope and the Agony Aunt—all of those things. So, it was you know, it was like, we're here now, we're doing this because we have to do it now.

J. C. – It's a truism for so many theatre makers that there's never enough time to rehearse, to put together a production, and these editions come together so fast, and the speed is part of the form. What has been the outcome for you of working so quickly?

V. F. – I think really only good things in this context, which meant that when it had to get moved or stopped or whatever, we had created something that could deal with whatever was thrown at it, deliberately. Nobody had over-invested. There's nobody holding onto "But it's my vision" or "It's this" or "It's that."

J. C. – So, the speed really complements the impulse to work as a collective.

V. F. – Totally... But then one of the big risks has been that, once we'd get the writers going about the collective, then we'd have to postpone it. Actually, we had to stop having meetings sometimes because they would start to unravel with over-discussion of their ideas. We had to sort of go: "Let's not talk about it again. We can't make it for another six weeks, so let's meet again in five weeks' time. See where we are and then go for it again."

J. C. – What was it like to have to make the transition from first edition to second edition, from having a small group of people who could move through the theatre to going completely virtual?

V. F. – Really sad. Sort of inevitable. And we sort of knew that would happen. I think the thing that was interesting about it though, was that we started rehearsals on the Monday thinking we could have an audience on the Thursday, and it was sold out for the rest of the week. And then of course on the Monday, they [the Prime Minister's office] said, "no audience, back in[side]," it went into a kind of lockdown. We could still work but we weren't allowed the audience. But we'd already started it. So, we made a virtue of the fact that the ushers were there and there was no audience—the absence of the audience in that week became part of the story. That you were nearly here, but you're not, and here are the empty seats. Or, here are the ushers not knowing what to do, because we'd booked them all, so we weren't going to send them home. They were here, waiting, but there was nothing happening, you know.

The other thing that was a bit hard, was that we had to work out how the actors were acting. Because obviously the Week One [edition] is a capture of a live performance that you're watching. Whereas Week Two was a film. So that's why we had the ushers there. We said: "Look, we still have to perform this one as if it's a capture because it

would have been if I hadn't been [lockdown]... Two days ago it wasn't going to be empty.”

It's really interesting how they morph. By the next version, of course, we were never going to have an audience. We're just doing it for film. So that will be a different thing again.

J. C. – How has your thinking about audience changed as you've gone through different forms? [The shift in medium] seems to really lend itself to these questions that you're asking about access, and about who feels welcome in a theatre and who doesn't.

V. F. – It's made you realize that you don't have to just have a monologue on an empty stage as part of your digital offering, you know. That actually it's a really complex thing that we've made, that we then film, and we then put together, that goes out. And it's kind of messy, and that's quite good that it's that. So, I think it's been really positive overall for us that we've been able to sort of find that as a kind of medium. And I think that the audience had such good fun in the first week. So, I just feel sad that that isn't happening. It's much better that we have this material, people can keep seeing it...and the way that we're looking at it [for Edition Three] is really different because a lot of our research, a lot of our experience said that people have definitely got digital fatigue sitting down and watching theatre [online]. And I thought to myself, as well, obviously we make theatre for the audience. You also make it as artists to be alive and all of those sorts of things. And, actually, part of the FTP was about the theatre workers. So, when we really wrestled with the question of should we continue it or not, I was like: “Do you know what? It is about all of these people having this work and making something together and being engaged in the act of creation and the act of imagination, and that is the thing that *makes*, that keeps us alive, and it's really important that we still know how we do that.” So for me, it was a real imperative about going into this new form, even if nobody watches—because we'd raised all the money for it—even if nobody watches it—and I can't believe I'm saying this as a subsidized theatre and I haven't said this out loud either...but you know, even if nobody watches it, the act of creating it is as important, and I really, I really feel strongly about that.

J. C. – There are so many outcomes of the FTP that we lose if we only consider what audiences saw. Kate Dossett, for example, has written about the dramaturgical conversations that shaped “Black performance communities” even for plays that the FTP never produced, like the Living Newspaper *Liberty Deferred*.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2020.

V. F. – There are so many things which have come out of this like that. For example, we have an international program, which has been at the Royal Court for thirty years. And it's really successful. I've always questioned it because it is definitely colonial, it's definitely: "the Royal Court goes and teaches people in Palestine how to write a play." I mean, it's not deliberately that, I just think it is that, of course. But what happens is, the countries that traditionally the Royal Court has gone to, they are countries that have benefited a lot in terms of the theatre scene from that association, or the writers have, and those kinds of things. And so, you'd need to dig a bit deep to say it's colonial, but in the context of this year, you don't need to dig deep at all. That was the whole thing about supremacy, about turning up and saying: "We know how to do it. Do it like this." If you used to say this a few years ago, people would think: "You're really lefty, Vicky. Just get over it. It's a really good international department." So, what's happened over this year is that our amazing international writers that we've built up these relationships with—in Palestine, Ukraine, Peru, South Africa, India—are part of this collective. If we hadn't been on *Zoom*, we would never have invited them in to be part of the collective in the same way. We would have said to them: "Would you like to write an article about something in your country?" This is what we would have done! So, we would have pigeonholed them in terms of identity and cultural politics. As it is, we've invited them into the collective who have the luxury to just go, "What do we want to think about as artists?" And those international writers have contributed to that thinking and are writing things that they would never normally write for us at the Royal Court. That's really massive that our writers are having different conversations with each other internationally now than they've ever been able to have before.

J. C. – There were risks built into working for the FTP: being tied to the Roosevelt government and its agendas; criticism from conservatives in political office... Ultimately, as you know, the whole FTP got shut down because it was seen as too partisan, too propagandistic. What have you experienced as the riskiest parts of *this* project?

V. F. – I think ultimately, there is no major risk because the mission of this project is right. So, therefore, there is no risk, because it's only when that is wrong that there is real risk, but within it there are small things. I mean, the obvious one, the simplest one is like having so many people in the building doing so many weird things that none of us have done before is difficult in Covid-time. So, there's actually the physical risk. It would be so awful to create a project like this and for everybody to fall ill and for somebody to die of Covid. I mean, I'm not being flippant. There's that.

The other risk... What's been interesting in terms of where you brought up the subject of risk from...what's been interesting is that some of the things that the writers wanted

to write about, we've had to support them in their writing. So, for example, the Indian writer wants to write about the farmers' riots, but people in India are getting death threats from being part of the theatre. They've closed theatre, you know the right-wing groups are closing theatre down, all those kinds of things. And when we were announcing that we were doing this edition, her and one of our Associates, who's British Indian, said we can't say what that playwright is writing about, even though it's really interesting, because she will receive death threats. So, I mean, that's sort of massive, isn't it? And we have a writer in Lebanon who is also writing about something and she said: "I don't want my name on it." Who's writing about the politics, the government in Beirut. This goes back to one of the early conversations we had in the big *Zoom* meeting with the writers where one of them, Anna Jordan—she's a very brilliant writer who wrote a play called *YEN*, brilliant woman—she went: "I'm sick of the news." And then somebody really quietly sort of piped up, a writer from Singapore was going: "Wait. I don't know what our news is. It's all censored. It's an absolute privilege to say you're sick of the rolling news when we don't even get any. And we just sort of went: "Oh my God!" It's extraordinary. And the Thai aunties as well, you know in Thailand news has been censored. And the two writers from Palestine were saying: "You know, the language that is used in the British press about Palestinian situations is so racist, even though the press don't realize they're doing it." It's everybody kind of celebrating Israel and the vaccine rollout [but] no Palestinian's seen one vaccine yet. And in Lebanon, there's a massive crisis that's occurred, which is that because the government is so corrupt, there are no vaccines, yet the UN have rolled out vaccines in the refugee camps. So, there's now massive civil battle going on with the refugees. So they're bringing this in and we're like: "Wow." It's extraordinary how you realize that what is a risk to us [artists working in London] is a very different risk, or what doesn't seem like a risk to us because we're so proud of our free speech, we're so proud of these things, is a massive risk to other people...

J. C. – —and another outcome, perhaps, of what you were talking about earlier, in terms of bringing writers of different nationalities together on *Zoom*. A cross-section of differing access to news and information around world...

V. F. – Completely. But we're still balancing some of those risks because those pieces haven't been written yet. So, it's just interesting how we can support those writers and what they do. We have a Chinese writer as well; that's a really complex situation for her about whether she puts her name on something or not.

But other risks are really interesting... I got an email yesterday from [the collective working on] Edition Five. You know, we're called the Royal Court Theatre, but that's the *building* that's called the Royal Court. Our *organization* is actually called the

English Stage Company. That's how we're configured. I mean, nobody knows that. And the [Edition Five] collective want to put a thing on *Twitter* saying: "We want to rename the Royal Court. It shouldn't be called 'royal.'" But it hasn't got a royal decree; it's just, the building is called the Royal Court. So, then they [writers] said: "And what we want to put out on *Twitter* is: 'What should we rename the Royal Court?' and the one that wins, for our edition, we want to create a new set of neon lights or a banner and rename it. Would that be an option? Can we do that?" And I was like: "Yeah, you have to be allowed to do that. I can't say no to that." So, what are people on *Twitter* going to want to name the Royal Court? And it's going to have to be up there! So that is a risk!

J. C. – Yes, because you've made the institution itself available for critique. This form, as it did in the '30s, has come out of a moment of real precarity and urgency, and it may be tempting, for some, to say that someday things will go back to "normal" whatever that is. But I have a sense you're using this as an opportunity to make improvements or changes that you will hold onto. So, what are some of the takeaways that you think theatre workers should be taking seriously, not just as a temporary response to Covid for instance, but really as long-term ways that we can be thinking about institutions and access, and these other ideas...

V. F. – I think that there's a democracy in this, and a sort of equity which I think is really important, and there's a really important way to continue conversations going forward. I think there's a real lesson about how things don't need to be singular, that they can be multiple. And you know, it's that awful thing that people say about inclusivity or diversity: "I want a seat at the table." And then people brilliantly saying: "No, I don't want a seat at the table. The table just needs to get bigger." Because it needs to be: "I don't want to fit into *that* thing. It's like *this* now." So, there's something for me about the collective power of this idea and the power of the imagination within it, [which] means that it's about how it can encompass a lot of different things. There isn't a singular way of going to do something.

The writers also need to have their own space to be completely themselves. It's really important that they know that we don't want them always to be working together, and we don't need a small thing and a shared thing, that we really want some deep thinking, and that we will return to those spaces which are years' worth of their idea created very carefully. That's also important, to know that they need that as well, but this wasn't the right time for it. And the other thing for me—which I always try to do anyway anywhere I work—is about harnessing the skills of everyone who works there. It's about going: "This project cannot exist without every single person in the building at their best making it happen." So, when other theatres over this time were talking about redundancies, it was my absolute need to come up with a project that we

needed all of our ushers to be able to deliver. We needed everybody. It was a project that couldn't exist without the whole staff. That's how I was able to raise the money for it, by saying this is a project that needs all of us, but it's going to cost this much, so therefore we need you to give money. So, we raised all the money for it. The luxury is that we've been able to keep reimagining—there's never been a pressure on income because we raised all the money. That's amazing luxury.

Other big changes have come out of [the process], like my production team have talked to other members of the creative team like the lighting designers and the sound designers and all of those kinds of things. Often that can be quite service-led: "What do you need? Oh, I'll give this to you and you can set all that up." And [in this case] nobody knew what they needed or what they wanted. So, there's been a much more exciting meeting of: idea, and then let's work out how we do the idea. So, everyone's had much more agency than they would normally feel they had. And that's a big thing we have to take forward. I can't take that away from people.

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J. C. – Is there anything else that you would like to mention, to be included in this account?

V. F. – I always think that the most important moments, artistically or creatively, in terms of an institution, in the context that you make theatre, are when the work that you created is something that you don't know how to do and that the creation of the work itself becomes a manifesto for how you want to go forward. And this has absolutely done that. And I think what's important about that in terms of leadership is that you need to be very clear that you're saying to people: "We do not know how to do this, but that doesn't matter, and I will take responsibility for the bad bits. So, this is not about failure—it doesn't matter. It's about genuinely continuous learning. So, let's keep going with that, and it will be on my head if it doesn't work." It's [the responsibility] not collective—that's not a collective thing. And I think that really gives people freedom to do extraordinary things. I'm not saying that it's about me going: "Oh my God, it's great! I'm taking all that!" But it's just about...I do not need it to be brilliant. I do not need it to work. I just need us to be doing it. And out of that grows a manifesto, or a new way of thinking in a collective way, and because you've all experienced it, you don't even need to name it. We will name it, but it's just...it becomes in our DNA. And I always have believed in everything about that. You know, people come up with statements, quotes, and all this kind of thing, and actually what we understand is action and the gesture. So, this really is that—it's a piece of action. It's a piece of activist art. And it's a gesture of hope. That's what I really think.



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## NOTICE

Jordana Cox is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Waterloo. The Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers in New York, co-launched the University of Massachusetts Press' Journalism and Democracy series. Some of her other work appears in Theatre Survey, Review of Communication, and Journal for the History of Rhetoric. She holds an Interdisciplinary PhD in Theatre and Drama from Northwestern University.

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Vicky Featherstone is Artistic Director of the Royal Court Theatre, London. She was Artistic Director of Paines Plough from 1997-2005, and inaugural Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Scotland from 2005-2012. She holds an MA in Directing from the University of Manchester.

## ABSTRACT

In December 2020, London's Royal Court Theatre launched a Living Newspaper series inspired by the Federal Theatre Project. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, which prompted a nationwide lockdown of theatres and public venues, *Living Newspaper: A Counter Narrative* employed over 300 freelancers and the full complement of Royal Court staff. The first edition premiered for a small in-person audience, followed by a virtual audience from around the world; as public health regulations tightened, the remaining six editions were presented entirely online. In this interview, given between the second and third editions, Artistic Director Vicky Featherstone discusses the project's origins and development.

## KEYWORDS

Living Newspaper, Royal Court, Federal Theatre Project, new play development, collective creation

## RÉSUMÉ

En décembre 2020, le Royal Court Theatre de Londres a programmé une série de *Living Newspapers* inspirée des expériences du Federal Theatre Project. En pleine pandémie de Covid-19, suite à la fermeture à l'échelle nationale des théâtres et lieux publics, *Living Newspaper: A Counter Narrative* a employé plus de 300 travailleurs indépendants ainsi que tout le personnel du Royal Court. La première a eu lieu devant un public réduit en salle et fut suivie par des spectateurs en ligne partout dans le monde ; du fait du resserrement des contraintes sanitaires, les six dernières éditions ont eu lieu entièrement en ligne. Dans cet entretien, réalisé entre la deuxième et la troisième représentation, la directrice artistique Vicky Featherstone revient sur les origines et les enjeux de ce projet.

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## MOTS-CLÉS

Living Newspaper, Royal Court, Federal Theatre Project, nouvelle création, création collective.

“AS AMERICAN AS WALT DISNEY:”  
THE POLITICAL THEATER OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

*Ilka Saal*  
*University of Erfurt*

When Harry Hopkins, head of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), appointed Hallie Flanagan as director of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) in September 1935, he charged her with “an American job.”<sup>1</sup> As part of Federal Project One, the Federal Theatre Project was designed to put thousands of unemployed theater workers back to work in the theater. In addition, it was to stimulate theater-going among the lower-income public, to attract those who had never been to the theater or had not been able to afford it for the past few years, and thus to provide theater in general with a new lease on life. In both these regards, the FTP was to operate nationwide. Flanagan and her colleagues accomplished an “American job”. With the help of five centers across the country and numerous touring companies playing the regions in-between, FTP soon operated as a theater “national in scope and regional in emphasis,” providing theatrical entertainment for as little as ten to twenty-five cents and often entirely free of charge.<sup>2</sup> Already in the spring of 1936, Flanagan could report that the project had put 12,500 theater workers back to work and was playing in thirty-one states, attracting an average audience of 500,000 spectators per week.<sup>3</sup>

As a government-sponsored theater with a nation-wide impact, director Flanagan repeatedly had to defend the FTP against accusations of endorsing in some of its plays a political agenda, especially against charges of supporting class struggle. In several mementos, reports, speeches, and introductions, Flanagan untiringly and adamantly stressed the *non-political* nature of the FTP, underscoring its primary objectives of returning theater workers to jobs and of stimulating theater-going among a broad public. In a letter to Morris Watson, head of the Living Newspaper unit, Flanagan for instance writes: “Morris, I want you [...] to be clear about this. As I have repeatedly said I will

1 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940, p.20. FTP centers were established in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, and New Orleans. Hopkins stipulated that theater prices were not to exceed \$1. Compare to Broadway tickets at a minimum of \$3.50 at the time.

2 *Ibid.*, p.45.

3 *Ead.*, “Report of the Director,” *The New York Times* May 17, 1936.

not have the Federal Theatre used politically. I will not have it used to further the ends of the Democratic party, the Republican party, or the Communist party.”<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere she states that the FTP partakes in the general government effort to “rethink [...], redream [...], and rebuild [...] America” by joining the struggle along “a new frontier in America, a frontier against disease, dirt, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, despair, and at the same time against selfishness, special privilege, and social apathy,” insisting that these struggles are “*not political* in any narrow sense. They would exist under any administration.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, despite Flanagan’s repeated efforts to present the Federal Theatre as a moral (rather than political) and profoundly patriotic intervention in the recession crisis of the 1930s, the project eventually came under attack precisely for its political potential. Having been declared by an investigative committee of the House of Representatives (House Un-American Activities Committee) as “subversive, communistic, and indecent,”<sup>6</sup> it was discontinued by act of Congress in June 1939.

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Communist paranoia aside, it would be difficult to deny or ignore the explicit political nature of a small but relevant part of Federal Theatre productions. Flanagan herself emphasized that it seemed only logical to her “that a theatre which had its roots in economic need should be concerned in some of its plays with economic conditions.”<sup>7</sup> Among the eight dramatic lines that comprised the FTP’s overall repertoire, one in particular—the Living Newspaper—was designed to illuminate the larger political context of the current economic crisis and to address, in Flanagan’s words, “the conditions back of conditions.”<sup>8</sup> The Living Newspaper—a fairly young theatrical form specializing in the creative dramatization of news “with living actors, light, music, and movement”<sup>9</sup>—derived, just like all other Federal Theatre productions, its primary impulse from the task of putting a great number of people back to work. Indeed, with its extensive research and editorial staff, an enormous cast, and dozens of

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4 *Ead., Arena, op. cit.*, p.73.

5 *Ead.*, “Introduction,” in Pierre de Rohan (ed.), *Federal Theatre Plays*, New York, Random House, 1938, vol.1, p. xiii (emphasis added).

6 *Ibid.*, p.343, and p.338. For documentation on how FTP fell victim to a well-orchestrated conservative backlash against Roosevelt’s New Deal policies, see, in addition to Flanagan’s *Arena*, Jane DeHart Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-39*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1967 and Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisations*, New York, Walker, 2008.

7 H. Flanagan, *Arena, op. cit.*, p.183.

8 *Id.*, “Introduction,” in Pierre de Rohan (ed.), *Federal Theatre Plays*, New York, Random House, 1938, vol.2, p.viii. Flanagan lists the following primary categories in FTP’s programming: classics, theatre of entertainment, children’s theater, dance drama, American drama series, Living Newspapers, radio drama, and “Negro theater” (*ead.*, “Introduction,” vol.1, p. ix).

9 *Id.*, “Introduction,” vol.2, p. xii.

people backstage, the Living Newspaper became one of the FTP's most labor-intensive projects.<sup>10</sup> To Flanagan it was, however, also important that the Living Newspapers be concerned "not with surface news, scandal, [and] human interest stories, but rather with the conditions back of conditions."<sup>11</sup> She elaborates more explicitly, "the struggle inherent in all Living Newspapers [...] is the struggle of the average citizen to understand the natural, social, and economic forces around him and to achieve through these forces, a better life for more people."<sup>12</sup>

Flanagan's understanding of theater is here remarkably close to definitions of political theater practice put forth at the time by Weimar modernists Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht as well as by several leftist workers' theaters in the US, such as the Workers' Laboratory Theatre and the Theatre Union.<sup>13</sup> They, too, considered theater an effective means of providing workers, farmers, and employees with what Brecht calls "*ein praktikables Weltbild*" ("a workable picture of the world")—a representation of contemporary life that "hand[s] the world over to their minds and hearts, for them to change as they think fit."<sup>14</sup> This kind of stage praxis is political not simply by virtue of taking on political repercussions in the process of reception (on that score, of course, all works of art are political, including those that pose as non-political). Rather, as theater scholar Klaus Gieber asserts, "it understands itself anchored in politics already in its very intention, its thematic objective, and the functional use of aesthetic techniques; it is *an aesthetics aiming at political effect*."<sup>15</sup> I see the Living Newspaper's aesthetics and pedagogy

10 Flanagan motivates the choice of the format with its "emphasis on many people doing small bits rather than roles demanding a few stars" (*Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.20). *Triple-A Plowed Under* apparently employed a total of 243 people (see Richard Lockridge, "The New Play," *The New York Sun*, March 16, 1936), while in *One-Third of a Nation* the cast alone consisted of some eighty actors (see Brooks Atkinson, "The Play," *The New York Times*, January 18, 1938). At its height, FTP employed a total of 13,163 workers (see Willson Whitman, *Bread and Circuses: A Study of Federal Theatre*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1937, p.31).

11 H. Flanagan, "Introduction," vol.2, p.viii (emphasis added).

12 *Ibid.*, p.viii and p.x.

13 Theatre Union, for instance, proclaims to produce plays that "deal boldly with the deep-going social conflicts, the economic, emotional and cultural problems that confront the majority of people." (Quoted in Ben Blake, *The Awakening of the American Theatre*, New York, Tomorrow Publishers, 1935, p.35.)

14 Bertolt Brecht, "Über das experimentelle Theater," in *Ausgewählte Werke in sechs Bänden*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1997, vol.6, p.414; *Id.*, "Short Organon," in John Willet (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* [1957], New York, Hill and Wang, 1992, p.185.

15 "*Politisches Theater ist eine Bühnenpraxis, die nicht allein im rezeptiven Vorgang zum Politikum gerät, sondern bereits von der Intention, der inhaltlichen Ausrichtung und der funktionalen Verwendung ästhetischer Technik sich als eine auf Politik fundierte,*

as very much in line with this specific understanding of political theater. Similar to the more avowedly political theater forms of the time, the Living Newspaper used the stage as a means to educate its audience of average citizens about pertinent economic and political issues of the day in order to mobilize them to action: be it with regard to the shortage of affordable housing in *One-Third of a Nation* (1938), the high cost of food and utilities in *Triple-A Plowed Under* (1936) and *Power* (1937), or the relevance of labor struggles for fair wages in *Injunction Granted* (1936). On this score, the Living Newspaper certainly qualifies as a political stage praxis in the interventionist sense of Gleber's definition.

Moreover, Flanagan's persistent efforts to downplay the political nature of a significant part of Federal Theatre productions notwithstanding, the general theater public was keenly attuned to it, particularly in the case of the Living Newspapers. But unlike anti-progressive forces in the government, for the most part it tended not to perceive them as subversive threats to the current economic and political system, nor as "un-American." On the contrary, after some initial hesitation, a broad spectrum of critics (ranging from progressive to moderate to ultra-conservative) clamored to claim the Living Newspaper issues as "good" propaganda on behalf of American capitalism and democracy. Such broad, public consensus across the political spectrum indicates that more than one's political conviction was at stake in appraising the Living Newspaper productions.

This article aims to take a closer look at the complex stage praxis of the New Deal Living Newspaper to assess its particular "aesthetic aiming at political effect." It suggests that it succeeded in developing an idiosyncratic form that allowed it at one and the same time to articulate a critique of the existing socio-economic system as well as to uphold faith in it, to appeal to both radical and conservative spectators, to those invested in social change as well as to those intent on securing the political status quo. Drawing on the issue *One-Third of a Nation* as my primary example (fig. 1), I argue that the Living Newspaper succeeded in appealing to a broad and heterogeneous audience thanks to its effective amalgamation of elements of modernist theater praxis with the tried aesthetic forms of the established culture industry. Mobilizing affirmative tropes and rhetorical strategies of American nationhood, it, moreover, rechanneled a potentially divisive class argument into a shared consumer consciousness. In this manner, the Living Newspaper created an idiosyncratic form of progressive political theater that was forceful in its critique of the capitalist system and, nonetheless, managed to come across, in Flanagan's words, "as American as Walt Disney."<sup>16</sup>

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*auf politische Wirkung reflektierte Ästhetik versteht.*" (Klaus Gleber, *Theater und Öffentlichkeit*, Frankfurt/Main, Peter Lang, 1979, p. iv [trans. mine, emphasis added]).

FEDERAL THEATRE  
presents



A LIVING NEWSPAPER  
ABOUT HOUSING

**ADELPHI THEATRE**

54TH STREET EAST OF 7TH AVENUE

MADE BY W.P.A. FEDERAL ART PROJECT N.Y.C.

1. Poster of *One-Third of a Nation*, by Federal Theatre Project (Library of Congress, Public Domain).

Out of a total of twenty-two issues produced by the FTP, *One Third of a Nation* was by far the most successful Living Newspaper.<sup>17</sup> Produced at the Adelphi Theatre in New York City, it ran for 237 performances between January and October 1938 and also received productions in several other cities across the country, such as in Philadelphia, Seattle, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Detroit, Portland, and New Orleans. Similar to its peer issues *Triple-A-Plowed Under* (1936) and *Power* (1937), it targets economic issues of prominent public concern. Taking its name and inspiration from Franklin D. Roosevelt's second inaugural address of 1937, the issue sets out to investigate the "conditions back of conditions" that relegate a substantial part of the population to live in substandard conditions. "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished," Roosevelt asserts and announces his government's promise "to make every citizen the subject of his country's interest and concern. [...] The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."<sup>18</sup> *One Third of a Nation*, written by Arthur Arent with the help of research compiled by the FTP editorial staff, takes the president by his word. Exposing the various roots of the contemporary housing crisis, it examines possibilities of providing low-income families with affordable decent housing.

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- 17 Douglas McDermott counts a total of thirty-eight Living Newspaper manuscripts in the USA, out of which twenty-two saw production ("The Living Newspaper as a Dramatic Form," *Modern Drama*, vol.8, no.1, May 1965, pp.82-94). *One-Third* was one of the four New York editions, which received wide press coverage and were quickly made available in print and taken up in other cities: *Injunction Granted* (1936), *Triple-A-Plowed Under* (1936), *Power* (1937), and *One-Third of a Nation* (1938). A fifth paper, *Ethiopia*, the very first issue of 1936, which addressed Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, was cancelled by the government shortly before its opening over concerns of "international complications." (Bosley Crowther, "Once Over the WPA," *The New York Times*, March 15, 1936.) A sixth issue, 1935, presents a retrospective of landmark events of the preceding year. Several cities also produced their own Living Newspapers, such as Chicago on the fight against syphilis (*Spirochete*). Cincinnati produced *Flood Control*, *Oregon Flax*, and Iowa *Dirt* (see H. Flanagan, "Introduction," vol.2, p. xii).
- 18 Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "'One-Third of Nation': FDR's Second Inaugural Address," [History Matters](#).





2. Photograph of the New York production of *One-Third of a Nation*, a *Living Newspaper* play by the *Federal Theatre Project* (Library of Congress, Public Domain).

As the curtain opens, we behold an impressive set by Howard Bay, presenting a cross-section of a typical New York four-story, “old-law” tenement building of the late-nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> The front wall is partly stripped so that both the outside of the building as well as the inside of some of its apartments are visible. For a couple of minutes, we watch tenants go about their everyday business. Suddenly, a fire erupts and quickly engulfs the building. We see flames and smoke; hear people screaming; watch them rush for water, cower in hallways, and fall from broken fire escapes. A loudspeaker announces: “February 1924—This might be 397 Madison Street, New York. It might be 245 Halsey Street, Brooklyn, or Jackson Avenue and 10th Street, Long Island City.”<sup>20</sup> With such references to local tenement fires of recent years, the play thrusts us immediately into the heart of the action. The scene then switches abruptly to the

<sup>19</sup> “Old law” refers to buildings erected before new housing laws were implemented in 1901.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Arent, “One-Third of a Nation,” in P. de Rohan (ed.), *Federal Theatre Plays*, *op. cit.*, vol.1, p.13.

next episode: a committee sets out to investigate the cause of the fire, which killed fourteen people, realizes that the building was essentially a firetrap, and, yet, finds no violation of safety regulations. Instead it concludes that this particular fire (and the fires that might potentially break out in 67,000 similar old-law tenement buildings) is simply the tragic result of conditions long entrenched in the city's real estate market. When a baffled father, who lost his entire family in the fire, protests in anguish against such bureaucratic dismissal of the catastrophe, he is told by another character: "You'll have to go back into history and blame whatever it was that made New York City real estate the soundest and most profitable speculation on the face of the earth."<sup>21</sup> With this invitation the plot proper sets in: a guided tour through the history of New York's real estate, from the first land grants in colonial times, the ensuing land speculations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the arrival of several waves of immigrants in the course of the nineteenth century. We then learn of the introduction of the tenement house laws at the turn of the century, their persistent violations, and the resulting spread of contagious diseases and increase in juvenile delinquency, until we are finally introduced to a handful of inadequate attempts of improving the situation—taking us right up to 1938.

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From the point of view of political theater, what stands out in this *tour de force* dramatic investigation of "conditions back of conditions" is the idiosyncratic amalgamation of modernist techniques borrowed from radical theater practice with tried techniques of the established bourgeois theater. To begin with, the very concept of a *living newspaper* is drawn from agitprop performances of 1920s workers' theaters in Soviet Russia, Weimar Germany, and the United States. With short, rapid sequences of brief, minimalist skits in direct address of the audience, the *Blue Blouses* in Soviet Russia, Piscator's political revues at the Berlin Volksbühne, as well as workers' theatres in the US (e.g. the German-speaking *Proletbühne*, the Hungarian-speaking *Uj Elore*, and the English-speaking Workers' Laboratory Theatre) sought to educate spectators about pressing contemporary issues and to mobilize them to a specific action. As a theater scholar, Flanagan was of course aware of these influential forms of agitprop and modernist theater; she had studied the theater of Meyerhold while on a Guggenheim fellowship in the Soviet Union (1926-27) and had probably also seen a performance of *Proletbühne* during her time at Vassar College. In an article of 1931 in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, she had moreover applauded American leftist workers' theaters for effectively using theater as a weapon of class struggle.<sup>22</sup> So, while playwright Arthur

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21 *Ibid.*, p.23.

22 Hallie Flanagan, "A Theatre is Born," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, vol.15, no.11, 1931, pp.908-915.

Arent adamantly denies the influence of leftist agitprop techniques on the genesis of the FTP's Living Newspaper, Flanagan somewhat guardedly acknowledges "occasional references to the *Volksbühne* and the Blue Blouses, to [...] Meierhold and Eisenstein," but hastens to assure her readers that ultimately it is as "American as Walt Disney, the *March of Time*, and the Congressional Record."<sup>23</sup>

In addition to taking up the episodic structure, direct address of the audience, and non-illusory staging techniques of agitprop theaters, the Living Newspaper also borrows the technique of translating abstract concepts into visual imagery or burlesque physical action. In *Power*, an issue about the need for public ownership of utilities, the concept of a holding company is vividly illustrated with the help of variously colored boxes, which are continuously subsumed by other and ever-larger boxes. In *One-Third of a Nation*, the profitableness but also callousness of real-estate speculation is acted out in burlesque fashion with the help of a small grass carpet onto which more and more people crowd for ever higher fees. As the tenants of the by now extremely crowded carpet continue to go about the daily business of shaving, dressing, and eating in ever more restricted poses, the landlord meticulously clears a few more unoccupied blades of grass. "A Very Fat Man hands over the money, kneels down, looks at it. He backs away to get a running start, then runs and jumps onto his spot. He bumps the Tenants who are annoyed. Then, music "Home! Sweet Home!"<sup>24</sup> The essence of the housing market is here translated into a physical burlesque. Similar to the workers' theaters of the 1920s, the Living Newspaper repeatedly draws on such "direct actions"<sup>25</sup> to visualize abstract concepts for its audiences.

It, furthermore, also borrows key elements from the epic form of political theater developed by Piscator and Brecht in Weimar Germany. The Loudspeaker, which features so prominently as the "Voice of the Living Newspaper" in a number of issues is heir to the device of the narrator in epic theater.<sup>26</sup> It serves as a sort of narrative guide, providing facts (which are then acted out by actors in short sketches) as well as critical commentary; at times it also interacts with the characters on stage. Also very similar

23 *Ead.*, "Introduction," vol.2, p.xi. See also Arthur Arent, "The Technique of the Living Newspaper," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, vol. 22, no. 11, November 1938, pp.820-825.

24 *Ead.*, "One-Third...", art.cit., p.35.

25 On this score, see e.g. Erwin Piscator, *Das Politische Theater*, Berlin, Adalbert Schutz Verlag, 1929, p.66. In his 1924 *Red Revue (Revue Roter Rummel)*, Piscator famously staged a boxing match to illustrate the dynamics of an election campaign.

26 See e.g. *One Third of a Nation* and *Power*. Piscator began to experiment with narration as early as 1924 in his *Red Revue*. Building on the work of Piscator, Brecht made narration in form of titles, projections, songs an integral element of his epic dramaturgy from 1935 onward.

to Piscator's epic documentary theater, the various issues of the Living Newspaper tend to incorporate different media into their productions by way of underscoring their fact-based approach to a problem.<sup>27</sup> *One-Third of a Nation* prominently features a projection screen, where empirical evidence in the form of historical documents, statistics, photographs, and film clips is projected in support of its analysis of the housing situation.

All these techniques borrowed from leftist theater practice—rapid sequence of short sketches, lack of fourth wall, translation of abstract issues into concrete physical action and visual imagery, narration, and projections—essentially function in the spirit of modernist political theater: they are designed to sustain spectators' awareness of the very mediality of the production and, hence, interpellate them primarily as critical observers and learners (rather than consumers) into the dramatic action, while also, via montage of these various elements, building up energy and momentum toward a final moment of pathos, when as Sergey Eisenstein puts it, "the spectator is compelled to jump from his seat, [...] forced 'to go out of himself,'" ready to join in some collective action.<sup>28</sup>

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Yet, at the same time that the authors and directors of the Living Newspaper generously borrowed such techniques of modernist leftist theater practice, they were also quite aware that in the context of late 1930s American politics and culture, these techniques did not suffice to reach a broad and heterogeneous audience with diverse political sympathies and varying theater experience, that an approach anchored in them alone might alienate (I here use the term precisely in the Brechtian sense) parts of the audience to a degree that would induce frustration rather than political awareness. By 1936, it had become quite clear that the epic approach of Brecht and Piscator did not work with American audiences. Both Theatre Union's production of Brecht's *Mother* in 1935 and the Group Theatre's production of Piscator's *Case of Clyde Griffith* in 1936 had been noteworthy failures.<sup>29</sup> Faced with the rise of fascism abroad and anti-democratic tendencies at home as well as with a growing disillusionment with Soviet-style communism, even the more radical leftist theaters in the US began to abandon their earlier sectarian stance by mid-decade. In order to mobilize a broad cultural

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27 In addition to physical skits and narration, Piscator also used projection screens to show documentary footage, such as in his 1925 revue *Trotz alledem! (In Spite of Everything!)*.

28 Sergey Eisenstein, *Film Form* [1949], New York, Harcourt and Brace, 1977, p.166.

29 For a discussion of the failure of these two productions, see Ilka Saal, "Broadway and the Depoliticization of Epic Theater: The Case of Erwin Piscator," in Chris J. Westgate (ed.), *Brecht, Broadway, and the US Theater*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars, 2007, pp.45-71 and *ead.*, "Vernacularizing Brecht: The Political Theater of the New Deal," in William Demastes and Iris Smith Fischer (eds.), *Interrogating America through Theatre and Performance*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp.100-119.

front across class and party lines against fascism, war, racism, and labor repression and in the defense of civil liberties, they now aimed for a general *rapprochement* of the radical aesthetics of workers' theater with the tried and proven techniques of the bourgeois stage.<sup>30</sup> The Federal Theatre was, in addition to its origin in government sponsorship, in many regards also the product of this emerging collaboration between labor movement and established culture industries. Quite a number of artists recruited on its behalf had formerly been actively involved with leftist theaters, such as Alfred Saxe (former director of the Workers' Laboratory Theater) and John Bonn (former director of Proletbühne). For the sake of consolidating a broad cultural alliance against anti-democratic tendencies at home and abroad, they now joined forces with traditional theaters as well as with Roosevelt's New Deal. The Federal Theatre partook, in this regard, in what Michael Denning calls "the extraordinary flowering of arts, entertainment and thought based on the broad social movement that came to be known as the Popular Front."<sup>31</sup>

In its effort to reach a heterogeneous Popular Front audience, comprised of workers and middle-class people, young radicals, and traditional Broadway audiences, the Living Newspaper skillfully wedded modernist techniques of education and agitation to conventional techniques of cultivating empathy and identification. The elaborate set design for *One-Third of a Nation* by Howard Bay is a good example of this. While in general Living Newspaper productions tended to be sparse in stage setting (only ten percent of the allotted federal budget could be spent on production cost), Bay's set presents, as critic Mary McCarthy puts it, "a masterpiece of grisly realism."<sup>32</sup> We behold a detailed cross-section of a tenement structure, with domestic life revealed in progress in each of its sections—suggesting *une tranche de vie* of the slums. While McCarthy considers such naturalism an aesthetic setback compared to the more stylized and abstract staging in issues such as *Triple-A Plowed Under* or *Power*, she also concedes that in the case of *One-Third of a Nation* this artistic choice is a logical one: "for what stylization of a tenement could demonstrate the horrors of modern housing as well as a tenement itself?"<sup>33</sup> In naturalist fashion, the photographic realism of the set is

30 For a detailed discussion of this pronounced shift in leftist commitment on US theatre stages, see Ira A. Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre*, Ann Arbor, U of Michigan P, 1980, pp.86-99 and Ilka Saal, *New Deal Theater*, New York, Palgrave, 2007, pp.101-109.

31 Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* [1997], London, Verso, 1998, p.xvi.

32 Mary McCarthy, *Theatre Chronicles, 1937-1962*, New York, Farrar, Strauss & Co, 1963, p.35.

33 *Ibid.*

to underscore the impact of the milieu on characters' choices. Accordingly, the issue repeatedly punctures the abstract, historical tour of the housing situation with brief "human interest" scenes played out in the various cubicles of the tenement set. We witness how a young woman takes up prostitution and crime in hopes of escaping the slums; how a young boy is bullied into violence by his peers; and how a wife refuses to have another baby, having already lost two infants to disease. As author Arthur Arent explains, while the statements and statistics are essential to the overall argument of the Living Newspaper, they would appear flat on stage. He therefore falls back on techniques of conventional drama to enable audience identification. Arent's "creative scenes" are to provide the much needed "bridge that leads to an understanding in human terms of the subject of debate."<sup>34</sup>

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The identificatory angle is further enhanced by the characterization of the protagonist, Little Man. A type rather than a fully developed character, this figure is a staple of many Living Newspapers. Variouslly called Timothy Taxpayer, Homer Bystander, John Q. Public, or simply, Consumer, he often enters the stage from the audience to signal his function as a surrogate for the spectator/citizen. In *One-Third of a Nation*, Little Man joins the stage action in the fourth scene, having previously watched the play from a seat in the auditorium. His curiosity incited, he rushes on stage to demand specific answers concerning his own housing situation. As he explains to the Loudspeaker, he himself lives in an old-law tenement building and, for several years now, has been applying in vain to the new government-sponsored housing developments. "So I went down to see the Tenement House Commissioner. He told me the Living Newspaper was doing a show on housing and I ought to see it... So here I am."<sup>35</sup> Frustrated with how things are, he demands explanations: "Every time something happens that I don't understand I'm going to stop the show and ask questions."<sup>36</sup> From this point on, the Loudspeaker becomes his mentor in a learning process. In setting up a student-teacher relationship as the dramaturgical focus, the Living Theater takes up another technique of epic theater: the ruse of teaching the audience by teaching a character on stage.<sup>37</sup> Significantly, Little Man is not just a stock character (the consumer, the citizen—although he is that, too) but becomes personalized in sympathetic ways thanks to his colloquial speech, genial temperament, and quirky behavior. For example, he misses parts of the show, when during intermission

34 A. Arent, "Technique..." art. cit., p.821 and p.822.

35 A. Arent, "One-Third..." art. cit., p.40.

36 *Ibid.*, p.39.

37 On this score, see e.g. Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, London, Verso, 1998.

he goes out "for a beer." We also learn that his name is Angus K. Buttonkooper, that he has a wife and baby and dreams of "a little light and air, fair-sized rooms, and a few modern plumbing gadgets."<sup>38</sup> These few personal touches make him recognizable and relatable to audiences, so that he can serve as a figure of identification precisely in his role of the American Everyman.

Last but not least, as the show is concerned with the concrete problems of the average citizen, it also emulates, in its plot structure, the pattern of reflective thinking with which, as Douglass McDermott points out, an average person habitually tends to solve problems.<sup>39</sup> It delineates a problem (real estate), acknowledges its importance (conflagrations, diseases, crime), determines its causes (land speculation), examines alternatives (rent strikes, government projects), and arrives at a decision. According to McDermott, the majority of issues of the Living Newspaper follows this pattern in their plot structure:

Beginning with some recent, sensational event which presented the problem, the writers forced the protagonist to recognize the need for a solution. His curiosity about the problem's cause was thus aroused and subsequently satisfied by an excursion into recent history. Once the cause was established, various alternative solutions were suggested, analyzed, and discarded until only one remained. The characters consequently advocated this solution with tremendous force.<sup>40</sup>

It is precisely such skillful translation of abstract issues into the language of common sense as well as sentiment that for many spectators of the time reinforced the impression that, despite the show's overt didacticism and heavy use of non-illusory staging techniques, they were presented with a viscerally compelling, absorbing, and utterly realistic account of the contemporary situation.

Worker John Mullen writes about his experience of watching both a Living Newspaper and a Piscator play: "What's got me stumped [...] is this: there's a 'speaker' in the *Triple-A Plowed Under* and the acting is episodic as in *The Case of Clyde Griffiths*. But there the similarity stops. The WPA show is so good that it makes your hair tingle and sits you on the edge of your seat."<sup>41</sup> Whereas Mullen was clearly annoyed by the

38 A. Arent, "One-Third...", art. cit., p.97.

39 Douglas McDermott, "The Living Newspaper as Dramatic Form," *Modern Drama*, vol.8, no.1, May 1965, pp.86-87. McDermott here draws on the insights of philosopher John Dewey (i.e. John Dewey, *How We Think*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1933).

40 D. McDermott, "The Living Newspaper as Dramatic Form," art. cit., pp.86-87. According to McDermott, this "orthodox" pattern was typical for all New York issues.

41 John Mullen, "A Worker Looks at Broadway," *New Theatre*, March 1936, pp.26-27.

constant lecturing of Piscator's Speaker, he was strongly moved by the stark reality of the facts presented by the Loudspeaker in *Triple-A Plowed Under*. Thanks to its combination of hard facts with sentimental scenes and its emulation of the reflective thinking of the common person, the Living Newspaper did not carry for him the connotations of heavy-handed didacticism and abstract theorizing that epic theater was commonly associated with in the United States. Rather, its use of modernist alienation techniques notwithstanding, it seemed to appeal precisely on account of its vigorous truthfulness.<sup>42</sup> A reviewer of the New Orleans production of *One-Third of a Nation* similarly comments, "Lantern slides and movies, and a symphonic accompaniment to fix the mood and theme—with them come realism that makes you sometimes hold your breath."<sup>43</sup> These impressions of a high degree of verisimilitude, audience identification and absorption are borne out by audience and press reactions more generally.

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In particular, *One-Third of a Nation* proved to be very popular with audiences and critics. In New York alone over two hundred thousand people saw the production between January and October 1938.<sup>44</sup> The press, pretty much across the spectrum from left to right, applauded it as "vivid theater."<sup>45</sup> The Republican *New York Herald Tribune*, for instance, conceded that while "the Living Newspaper method is, of course, earnest, partisan, bitter and given to a Left Wing point of view," it is nonetheless "almost invariably forceful, striking and remarkably skillful in dramatizing what might seem to be undramatic ideas."<sup>46</sup> *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* likewise commended the show for being not only "beautiful and moving and entertaining and educative but [...] actually slick."<sup>47</sup> Strikingly, whereas some of the same critics had only a few years prior rejected similar theatrical techniques in the New York productions of Brecht's and Piscator's epic plays as dull and schematic, they now praised them as "exhilarating showmanship,"<sup>48</sup> "brilliant and vivid,"<sup>49</sup> "deeply moving and almost always forceful."<sup>50</sup> What's more, what was once dismissed as preaching to the converted and communist

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42 On the score of concepts of realism and truthfulness in 1930s proletarian fiction, see Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations*, Durham, Duke UP, 1993.

43 Harnett T. Kane, "One-Third of a Nation Packs Dramatic Punch; Well Done," *The New Orleans Item*, June 28, 1938.

44 Flanagan cites 217,458 visitors to the show (*Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.217).

45 Brooks Atkinson, "The Play," *The New York Times*, January 18, 1938.

46 Richard Watts, "The Theaters," *New York Herald Tribune*, January 18, 1938.

47 Arthur Pollock, "The Theater," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 18, 1938.

48 B. Atkinson, "The Play," *art. cit.*

49 John Anderson, "One-Third of a Nation Vividly Presented," *New York Journal American*, January 18, 1938.

50 Richard Lockridge, "The New Play," *The New York Sun*, January 18, 1938.



propaganda could now be lauded as “a stimulating lesson in a social problem”<sup>51</sup> and “clever propaganda.”<sup>52</sup> Even the Hearst-owned, right-wing *New York American* raved about *Power*: “Propaganda? Precisely... and excellent propaganda. Propaganda with a strong pulse to it, doubled fists, a tough jaw and a fighting jag.”<sup>53</sup> *New York Telegram* explained to its readers the difference between the “breast-beating indignation and tearing down of a system of government as we always get it from the leftist playwrights” and “the straightforward and sensible narrative of abuses existing under a government that is seeking to prevent them.”<sup>54</sup> And the liberal *New York Post* commended attendance of *One-Third of a Nation* as “every good citizen’s duty.”<sup>55</sup>

How to explain the sudden enthusiasm of a broad spectrum of mainstream papers for interventionist political theater? While the skillful amalgamation of techniques of modernist political theater with the tried conventions of the established theater industry was certainly key to triggering the aesthetic enthusiasm of a broad spectrum of mainstream critics, I contend that it also took a particular rhetorical strategy to implement the Living Newspapers’ political vision of good citizenship that could be embraced across party-lines and class-divides. This is most apparent in the final section of *One-Third of a Nation*.

Thanks to an extended lesson in the economic and legislative history of the New York housing situation, Little Man realizes that the dismal situation has essentially remained the same for the past 150 years. Interventions such as tenement laws, rent strikes, and emergency rent laws have at best addressed only the worst symptoms. At the source of the ubiquitous lack of affordable and decent housing, so a disillusioned Little Man discovers, is the profit system intrinsic to a capitalist economy, which effectively makes the building of affordable housing impossible. But before the plot can peter out in economic determinism, the Loudspeaker resolutely intervenes:

Wait a minute! Hold it! Don’t black out on that yet! Bring those lights up—full! (*They come up.*) That’s better. This scene isn’t over yet. (*Pause*) Now, Mister Landlord, we know that the conditions you showed us exist. [...] But we can’t just let it go at that.

51 B. Atkinson, “The Play,” art. cit.

52 Robert Coleman, “WPA Federal Theatre,” *New York Daily Mirror*, January 18, 1938. See also Sidney Whipple, “Problem of Slums Presented in Play,” *New York World Telegram*, January 18, 1938.

53 Gilbert Gabriel, “Power,” *New York American*, February 24, 1937.

54 Douglas Gilbert, “Power at the Ritz as Living Newspaper,” *New York World Telegram*, February 24, 1937.

55 John Mason Brown, “Two on the Aisle: *One-Third of a Nation* at the Federal Theatre,” *New York Post*, January 18, 1938.

We can't let people walk out of this theatre knowing the disease is there, but believing there's no cure. There is a cure! [...] If you can't build cheap houses—and you've just shown that you can't—then let somebody do it who can—and I mean the United States Government for instance.<sup>56</sup>

At this point, the Living Newspaper introduces in quick succession recent government housing initiatives across the country and follows up with a discussion of the Wagner Steagall Housing Bill of 1937 seeking to appropriate one billion dollars of the national budget for the elimination of slums and the development of safe and healthy housing. While the Loudspeaker and Buttonkooper clearly support these kind of government interventions, they also quickly realize that, as currently practiced, they address at best two percent of the problem.

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If we follow the logic of the quasi-Marxist lesson provided to Little Man during his excursus into the long history of the New York housing situation, we find that, in the words of Ira Levine, the play “exposed conditions that neither the legislative nor the judicial system had been able to change and that therefore appeared to cry out for more radical solutions.”<sup>57</sup> The logical next step would be to consider, analogous to the issue *Power*, the public ownership of housing. Indeed the conversation briefly touches upon this possibility but only to have it quickly dismissed by Little Man himself. As Mary McCarthy correctly points out, while power plants can be appropriated “without upsetting the system,” the government cannot take over housing, “for to do that would be to expropriate land. *One-Third of a Nation*, as a WPA play, is therefore in no position to offer the one effectual remedy for the evil it pictures.”<sup>58</sup>

Hence, even as *One-Third of a Nation* is dead on in its diagnosis of the intrinsic problems of capitalism (the profit system), in the end it shies away from advocating radical, systemic change. Instead it proposes a thin, system-immanent solution: to shift the budget from military spending to senator Wagner's housing bill. More importantly, it concludes its historical analysis by diverting critique from the system to the individual. According to the Loudspeaker, “the thing that's made these slum conditions possible for the last hundred and fifty years” is not capitalism itself but something it vaguely diagnoses as “inertia.” “The thing that makes people like you and everybody else sit back and say, ‘Well, this is the way it has always been, this is the way it's always going

56 A. Arent, “One-Third...,” art. cit., pp.103-104.

57 I. Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory...*, op. cit., p.166.

58 M. McCarthy, *Theatre Chronicles...*, op. cit., p.37.

to be.”<sup>59</sup> Mobilizing in the very last scene a determined Mrs. Buttonkooper, who has been watching the show from the auditorium, *One-Third of a Nation* ends with the suggestion that what it really takes to amend the situation is for each citizen to exercise their democratic voice to pressure the government for further reform. Or as Mrs. Buttonkooper puts it: “You know what we’re going to do—you and me? We’re going to holler. [...] Can you hear me—you in Washington or Albany or wherever you are! Give me a decent place to live in! Give me a home! A home!”<sup>60</sup>

Abruptly shifting the line of attack in the finale from the critique of a system to the critique of individual civic commitment, *One-Third of a Nation* essentially re-channels its dramatic energy from a radical, systemic critique into the time-honored rhetoric of the American Jeremiad. Originally coined in reference to political sermons in late seventeenth-century American Puritan culture that sought to exhort the congregation to a stricter pursuit of its religious founding covenant, the term has been expanded in American Studies scholarship to designate a general structuring principle of American culture and ideology. Sacvan Bercovitch understands the American Jeremiad as a rhetorical strategy or mode of cultural production that simultaneously laments the decline of the national dream, while also celebrating and affirming its very essence.<sup>61</sup> Under the mantle of critique and exhortation, it asserts an unshakeable optimism and belief in American progress. Rather than as a vision of doom and destruction, as which it at first appears, it essentially functions as a moral corrective to the current course of events.

The Living Newspaper is very much heir to this tradition. While it might remind its audience, as in *Triple-A Plowed Under*, that the American people have revolted “for slighter causes” than the lack of home, work, and food,<sup>62</sup> it also reassures them that what is needed now is not another revolution but sufficient clamor on part of the average citizen to move the elected government to reforms that can make the system work on their behalf: the Soil Conservation Act in *Triple-A Plowed Under*, the Tennessee Valley Authority in *Power*, and the Wagner Steagall Housing Bill in *One-Third of a Nation*. Hence, despite its forceful critique of American capitalism, in the end the Living Newspapers assert a fundamental faith in the intrinsic regenerative powers of US American democracy. They insist that while the system might not have unfolded its

59 A. Arent, “One-Third...,” art. cit., p.117.

60 *Ibid.*, p.120.

61 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, Madison, U of Wisconsin P, 1978, p.180.

62 Staff of the Living Newspaper, “Triple-A Plowed Under,” in Pierre de Rohan (ed.). *Federal Theatre Plays*, vol.2, *op. cit.*, p.15.

full democratic potential yet, this shortcoming can be corrected: American capitalism can be made to work for all.

This rhetorical move is complemented by a second strategy. Although the Living Newspaper's main goal was to improve living conditions for workers, farmers, and middle-class people—and, in general, the “one third of a nation” suffering most severely from the economic recession—, it rarely argued along class lines. Rather, it tended to hail these various groups under the umbrella term of *consumer*. Little Man is the average consumer struggling with utility bills and the housing situation and complaining about the price of milk and meat. In *Power*, he is straightforwardly referred to as “Consumer,” while in *One-Third of a Nation* he is tellingly called “Buttonkooper,” the buyer of buttons. As suggested most clearly in *Triple-A Plowed Under*, the consumer is considered the crucial link in the economy. By strengthening her purchasing power, the agricultural crisis can be amended, business revitalized, and the unemployed be put back to work. On this score, the political argumentation of the Living Newspaper is very much in line with Roosevelt's Keynesian reform program. It, moreover, presents consumer consciousness as part and parcel of a democratic national identity. When at the end of *Triple-A*, the struggling farmers, along with impoverished city people, and the starving unemployed call out to the government: “We need you!;” when at the end of *Power*, the people of the Tennessee Valley anxiously await the Supreme Court's decision on the constitutionality of the TVA; and when at the end of *One-Third of a Nation*, the Buttonkoopers along with “everybody that lives in a place like this” holler out “Can you hear us Washington?,” they do so primarily as citizen-consumers, indicating that the economic welfare of the average citizen is in the national interest, is instrumental to the welfare of the nation. The time-honored revolutionary battle cry of “We, the people” is here effectively rearticulated as: “We, the consumers.”

In conclusion then, while the Living Newspaper is clearly heir to the radical leftist theater practices of the early twentieth-century both with regard to its aesthetics as well as its basic thrust of political inquiry, it also modifies this legacy according to the contingencies of its time and place. Between 1935 and 1938, the Living Newspaper succeeded as political theater precisely because, on the one hand, it integrated modernist techniques with an established theater praxis in order to reach a broad, heterogeneous audience. On the other hand, it also managed to adapt, as Levine astutely puts it, “a revolutionary theory (the capitalist profit system was responsible and must be changed) to a nonrevolutionary end (the federal government could cure the unfortunate consequences of that economic system).”<sup>63</sup> While it effectively

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monitored the shortcomings of American capitalism, it did not attack capitalism itself. On the contrary, it maintained that under the supervision of a democratically elected government a moral capitalist system could prosper to the benefit of all if only each and every citizen committed to it. In this regard then, it is not surprising that the Living Newspaper was widely accepted as a critical but essentially innocuous mouthpiece for the average American citizen and consumer. Even as it rooted for the underdog, its primary purpose was not incitement to revolution but the reassurance of its audience of the intrinsic merits and powers of American democracy. In this regard, it was indeed, in Flanagan's words, "as American as Walt Disney."

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## NOTICE

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## ABSTRACT

This essay considers the Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project as a form of political theater. Drawing on the example of the popular 1938 issue *One-Third of a Nation*, it examines the paper’s complex amalgamation of modernist strategies of leftist theater practice with tried techniques of the established bourgeois culture industry. It also shows how the Living Newspapers effectively mobilized the tropes and rhetorical strategies of American cultural nationalism. These strategies enabled the Living Newspapers to bridge diverse political sympathies and social backgrounds and to appeal to a broad and heterogeneous public. I argue that despite its radical, interventionist potential, the Living Newspaper was, ultimately, in Hallie Flanagan’s words, “as American as Walt Disney,” precisely because it focused on the plight of the common man and rearticulated problems of social inequality as questions of

consumer agency. In this manner, it succeeded in both critiquing capitalist excess as well advocating system-immanent solutions to the current crisis of capitalism.

#### KEYWORDS

Federal Theatre Project, Living Newspaper, *One-Third of a Nation*, political theater, cultural nationalism, New Deal

#### RÉSUMÉ

264 Cet article analyse les *Living Newspapers* du *Federal Theatre Project* comme des formes de théâtre politique. En s'appuyant sur l'exemple du succès de 1938, *One-Third of a Nation*, l'article considère l'amalgame complexe entre stratégies modernistes du théâtre « gauchiste » et techniques de l'industrie culturelle bourgeoise bien établie. Il montre également comment les *Living Newspapers* ont effectivement mobilisé les tropes et les stratégies rhétoriques du nationalisme culturel américain. Ces stratégies ont permis aux *Living Newspapers* de surmonter des sympathies politiques et des milieux sociaux divergents, et de parler à un public large et hétérogène. L'article défend l'hypothèse selon laquelle, malgré leur potentiel radical et interventionniste, les *Living Newspapers* étaient, finalement, selon les mots d'Hallie Flanagan, « aussi américains que Walt Disney », précisément car ils se concentraient sur le sort de l'homme ordinaire et faisaient des problèmes d'inégalité sociale des enjeux de protection des consommateurs. De cette manière, ils sont parvenus à critiquer les excès du capitalisme comme à prôner des solutions intrinsèques à ce même système et à sa crise.

#### MOTS-CLÉS

*Federal Theatre Project, Living Newspaper, One-Third of a Nation*, théâtre politique, nationalisme culturel, *New Deal*



THE LIMITS OF TECHNOLOGY:  
ACTORS, NETWORKS, THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT,  
AND *POWER*

*Michael Selmon*  
*Alma College – Michigan*

Arthur Arent's 1937 drama *Power* was among the most successful productions of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). Admittedly, the play was an unlikely hit. Certainly its subject matter—a dramatization of the economic, social, and political conflicts underlying the efforts to bring electricity to Appalachia—was untraditional. And its scope was unusual as well, for it used 21 scenes with over 175 characters to tell the story of the newly created Tennessee Valley Authority. But it was the play's genre which most departed from the norm for, as a "Living Newspaper," this 90-minute drama used a documentary format, complete with extensive footnotes added to the written script. "All material from which this play was drawn," a "Special Note" to the New York production assured the public, "may be examined at the offices of the Living Newspaper upon application."<sup>1</sup>

Despite its deviations from tradition—or perhaps because of them—*Power* garnered rave reviews. New York critics called it a "lively, vigorous and dramatic history" presented "with great theatrical effectiveness."<sup>2</sup> They commended the way *Power* used "the theatre brilliantly as a medium of expression;" celebrated its "swiftness" and "sureness;" and praised its actors for "the ingenious way they have of making the stark facts flare." *Power*, in short, was "one of the most exuberant shows in town;" its audience would be treated to "one of the most exhilarating and instructive evenings the theatre offers."<sup>3</sup>

*Power* was a box-office success as well, playing to audiences of nearly 100,000 in New York. Ironically, the fact that the Federal Theatre was an employment project limited the number of regional productions, for staging *Power* required enormous casts

- 1 [New York Production Notebook 1, image 5](#) from the New York production of *Power* (Finding Aid Box 1054, Music Division, Library of Congress). *Power* was the fourth Living Newspaper production (see [image 7](#)).
- 2 The excerpts from the New York reviews are taken from [page 4](#) of the Library of Congress [Playbill](#) for the Ritz Theatre's production of *Power*.
- 3 *Ibid.*

W.P.A. FEDERAL  
THEATRE PROJECT  
LIVING NEWSPAPER  
PRESENTS

# POWER

BY ARTHUR ARENT

**RITZ**  
**THEATRE**  
48<sup>th</sup> STREET  
West of Broadway

FEDERAL ART PROJECT, N.Y.C.

1. Poster for the 1937 New York production of *Power*  
(WPA Poster Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress).

and crews. The 1937 New York production, for instance, had 67 actors (figs. 1-2), and its 1938 revival featured 109 performers, with nearly as many working offstage;<sup>4</sup> even a regional staging like Seattle's had 81 performers and 119 in its total cast and crew.<sup>5</sup> Still, the four regional productions of *Power* also garnered strong reviews, with their audiences running well into the tens of thousands.<sup>6</sup> In short, the play was a hit, and in fact has aged well: to read *Power* even now is to be struck by its energy and wit, its engaging spectacle, and its inventive though bald propaganda.



2. The New York cast of *Power* (“‘Power’ #27,” *Power* (110 Photographs), image 80, Box 1228, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress).

Unfortunately for the FTP, the dramatic success of plays like *Power* would prove to be the project's undoing. Within two years, opponents would turn the analyses of class conflicts that fueled Living Newspapers against the FTP itself, using carefully scripted Congressional hearings to defund the project as a whole. This paper uses the

- 4 *Ibid.*, pp.2-3; and Library of Congress, “FPC Productions of *Power*.”
- 5 Barry B. Witham, “The Economic Structure of the Federal Theatre Project,” in Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (eds.), *The American Stage*, New York, Cambridge UP, 1993, p.203.
- 6 Hallie Flanagan's *Arena* notes that Seattle ticket sales totaled \$4,000, which given ticket prices of ¢25 and ¢40 implies an audience between 10,000 and 16,000 in that city alone (New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940, p.306).

actor-network theory of Bruno Latour<sup>7</sup> to examine this bifurcated reception. It first

7 Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in general, and Latour's formulation of it in particular, have evolved extensively since the ideal was first developed in late 1970s works like Latour and Steve Woolgar's *Laboratory Life*. Latour's original formulations were grounded in close observations of the daily work of scientists. By the early 21st century, though, Latour would generalize ANT, presenting it as a program that redefines "sociology not as the 'science of the social', but as the *tracing of associations*" (Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford, Oxford UP, p.5).

Three key ideas have been central to the theory throughout its development; each has a role in this paper's analysis. The first is the notion of a network. A network in its simplest form is not the highly complex set of connections found in technologies like a transit system or a computer network, but instead is something better visualized as a fisherman's net, a set of point-to-point links (p.132). In a network "resources are concentrated in a few places—the knots and the nodes—which are connected with one another—the links and the mesh: these connections transform the scattered resources into a net that may seem to extend everywhere" (*id.*, *Science in Action*, Cambridge [MA], Harvard UP, 1987, p.180). While networks "necessitate the weaving together of a multitude of different elements," as long as the intertwining remains intact the enterprise can succeed, since like trains and electricity, "facts and machines ... can go everywhere as long as the track along which they travel is not interrupted in the slightest" (pp.232, 250). When an interruption causes a move outside these networks, however, "complete chaos ensues."

The second key notion is the idea of an actor. In Latour's earliest studies, this role was played by scientists and engineers who "speak in the name of new allies that they have shaped and enrolled; representatives among other representatives, they add these unexpected resources to tip the balance of force in their favour" (p.259). Over time Latour generalized the notion to include any element, human or non-human, granted the ability to influence other elements in the network. This influence is not innate, but rather occurs when elements are "associated in such a way that they *make others do things*" (*Reassembling the Social*, *op.cit.*, p.107). Latour turns explicitly to theatre metaphors to explain the intertwining of actors and networks, noting that "it's never clear who and what is acting when we act since an actor on stage is never alone in acting" (p.46). Indeed, actors are so determined by their position within actor-networks that the two terms eventually coalesce, with Latour noting that an actor is "made to exist by its many ties: attachments are first, actors are second" (p.217).

Finally, Latour notes that a successful actor-network maintains a constant circulation of resources and reference. Key to this movement are the linked ideas of transformation and translation. For Latour transformation works on the semiotic level. Reference, rather than being a way of bridging the gap between words and world, is instead linked to a series of reversible transformations, with the term designating "*the quality of the chain in its entirety*" (*id.*, *Pandora's Hope*, Cambridge [MA], Harvard UP, 1999, p.69). Chains of translation, "the work through which actors modify, displace, and translate their various and contradictory interests," function similarly (p.311). At the broadest level "Translating interests means at once offering new interpretations of these interests and channeling people in different directions"; the result of these processes

explores how a unique combination of off-stage infrastructures and on-stage aesthetics underwrote the success of *Power*, and by extension the success of the FTP. It closes by looking at how the enterprise failed, noting how the combination of resources that fueled the FTP's success created vulnerabilities that led to its demise.

In some ways, of course, such an analysis suggests a very old critique, a contemporary example of a tragic flaw. But this paper explores a modern twist on that tale, the way that the theatrical enterprise we see in *Power* ends up being analogous to the scientific enterprise that Bruno Latour describes in works like *Science in Action* or *Pandora's Hope*. In these works, Latour celebrates the efficacy of science even as he strips away its magic. The key, he argues, is to focus on the mechanisms that underlie the enterprise's growth: "every time you hear about a successful application of a science, look for the progressive extension of a network. Every time you hear about a failure of science, look for what part of which network has been punctured."<sup>8</sup>

## MAKING CONNECTIONS: THE ROOTS OF THE LIVING NEWSPAPER

Combine the newspaper and the theatre and to hell with  
the traditions of both.

Morris Watson, "The Living Newspaper," 1936<sup>9</sup>

The analytic approach Latour proposes for the study of science—his search for inflection points, the places where the network that provides resources to an enterprise either expands or is punctured—illuminates the theatre of *Power* as well. In part, this is because *Power*, despite predating Latour by decades, in fact enacts its own actor-network critique.<sup>10</sup> *Power*, on a basic level, is a simple play: telling the tale of how

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is that particular issues become "solidly tied to much larger ones ... so well tied indeed that threatening the former is tantamount to threatening the latter. Subtly woven and carefully thrown, this very fine net can be very useful at keeping groups in its meshes" (*Science in Action*, *op. cit.*, p.117).

8 *Ibid.*, p.249.

9 Morris Watson, "The Living Newspaper," *New Theater*, vol.3, no.6, 1936, p.8.

10 While Latour on occasion uses theatre imagery in his analyses of science, there is no evidence that he is familiar with Arent's play. Nonetheless, the convergence between *Power* and Latour's theories of science in action is not entirely coincidental. In particular, Latour argues in *Pandora's Hope* that physical properties normally considered the purview of science at times shape social enterprises as well: "The extension of networks of power in the electrical industry, in telecommunications, in transportation, is impossible to imagine without a massive mobilization of material

the Tennessee Valley Authority triumphed over private electrical companies, in many ways the play dramatizes a straightforward conflict between competing electrical grids. But Latour's actor-network approach works well with *Power* because Arent's play always had a larger aim, using the technology of the theatre to highlight the way America's electrical distribution system controlled social and economic access. *Power*, like the FTP in general, succeeded when it combined internal and external networks of support to fuel this critique; it failed when opponents were able to puncture these links.

Certainly the FTP, despite its later innovations, was built by expanding existing professional networks. Director Hallie Flanagan, for instance, was recruited because of her well-established reputation in the theatre community, including her work with documentary drama.<sup>11</sup> Flanagan's outreach to Elmer Rice solidified these links, for the commercial success of his 1914 drama *On Trial*, and the accolades accorded **270** *The Adding Machine* (1923) and the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Street Scene* (1929), made Rice a fixture of New York theatre.

These connections would prove crucial to the Living Newspaper, which like many innovations emerged as the solution to a problem. Admittedly, when Flanagan described the genre's origin, she chose to emphasize the spontaneity of the solution, telling how, in September 1935, she and Rice attended the New York production of *The Night of January 16th*. Afterwards:

Elmer said that the play had convinced him that he should not take the directorship of the New York project. "Even with a cast that big, or twice that big, we couldn't make a dent in the hordes of people on the project. What would we do with 'em? We'd have to have twenty plays with 30 in each cast and then how could we get the sets built?" I said, "We wouldn't use them all in plays—we could do living newspapers. We could dramatize the news without expensive scenery—just living actors, light, music, movement. Elmer seized upon the idea, accepted the directorship for New York, secured the sponsorship of the Newspaper Guild and appointed Morris Watson to head the living newspaper."<sup>12</sup>

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entities. [...] [A] technical invention (electric lighting) led to the establishment (by Edison) of a corporation of unprecedented scale, its scope directly related to the physical properties of electrical networks." (*op. cit.*, p.204.)

**11** Barry B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003, p.78.

**12** H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.64-65. She first told an abbreviated version of the tale in her "Introduction" to Pierre de Rohan (ed), *Federal Theatre Plays*, New York, Random House, 1938, p.vii. When asked in 1967, Rice remembered the Living Newspaper's origins differently: "I hesitate to match my recollection against Hallie's, especially after thirty years. But as I remember it, The Living Newspaper project arose out of discussions between Morris Watson, head of the Newspaper Guild, and myself. He asked me if I couldn't do something for unemployed newspaper men. At first I couldn't

But while Flanagan downplayed the Living Newspaper's links to earlier theatre traditions, her inspiration had deep roots. Multiple critics have connected the genre with Soviet theatre, for instance;<sup>13</sup> Meyerhold made a particularly strong impression on Flanagan, though Rice found his theatre "a distinct disappointment."<sup>14</sup> Living Newspaper directors like Brett Warren, the New York director of *Power*, and Joseph Losey likewise were influenced by epic theatre traditions.<sup>15</sup> And Flanagan's suggestion to Rice that the new theatre operate "without expensive scenery—just living actors, light, music, movement" echoed her thinking about the early 1930s Workers' Theatre movement.<sup>16</sup>

Yet if European traditions lay the groundwork for the Living Newspaper, American professional networks provided the driving force. Arguably, Flanagan and Rice supplied the most crucial connection, for both provided input during the FTP's initial planning.<sup>17</sup> And both emphasized American links. Although some critics speculate that the FTP later downplayed Russian influences to forestall Congressional critics, as early as 1931 Flanagan emphasized that US theatres "must work out their own ideas and their own style."<sup>18</sup> Likewise Rice, despite his longstanding criticisms of US commercial

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see how they would fit into a theatre project. But as we talked it over, the idea of doing a sort of animated newsreel evolved." (Dan Isaac, "Introduction", in "'Ethiopia:' The First 'Living Newspaper,'" *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol.20, no.1, 1968, p.16.) Watson, who published the earliest account, supports Flanagan's timeline, reporting that he talked with Rice in October 1935, a month after Flanagan and Rice's first conversation (M. Watson, "The Living Newspaper," art. cit., p.8).

- 13 See, for instance, Douglas McDermott, "The Living Newspaper as a Dramatic Form," *Modern Drama*, vol.8, no.1, 1965, pp.83-94; John Fuegi, "Russian 'Epic Theatre' Experiments and the American Stage," *Minnesota Review*, vol.1, 1973, pp.102-112; Arnold Goldman, "Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit," *Theatre Quarterly*, vol.3, no.9, 1973, pp.69-83; and Colin Gardner, "The Losey-Moscow Connection: Experimental Soviet Theatre and the Living Newspaper," *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol.30, no.3, p.254.
- 14 J. Fuegi, "Russian 'Epic Theatre' Experiments," art. cit., pp.105-106; Elmer Rice, "As a Playwright Sees Russia," *The New York Times*, September 4, 1932, p.X2.
- 15 D. McDermott, "The Living Newspaper..." art. cit., pp.84-85; C. Gardner, "The Losey-Moscow Connection..." art. cit., p.254.
- 16 Hallie Flanagan, "A Theatre is Born," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, vol.15, no.11, 1931, pp.908, 911.
- 17 Elmer Rice summarizes these discussions in both "The Federal Theatre Hereabouts," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1936, p.X1; and *The Living Theatre*, New York, Harper, 1959, pp.148-153. The latter includes a spring 1935 letter to Harry Hopkins outlining Rice's ideas for the FTP.
- 18 A. Goldman, "Life and Death..." art. cit., p.69; C. Gardner, "The Losey-Moscow Connection..." art. cit., p.256; H. Flanagan, "A Theatre is Born," art. cit., p.909.

theatre, proposed that the FTP restore the infrastructure that fueled 19th-century American theatre, including regional companies and the travelling star system.<sup>19</sup>

And the Living Newspaper's writers were even more grounded in American traditions. Arthur Arent's prior theatre background consisted of writing sketches for the musical reviews of a Borscht Belt theatre;<sup>20</sup> when, in 1938, the Living Newspaper's popularity led to claims of international parentage, Arent dismissed the assertions with characteristic flair:

As a matter of fact, it was only about a year ago that I learned that there had been anything like a Living Newspaper before ours. Then, as if to make up for two years of silence, it turned out that there had been not one, but several, predecessors. [...] But, and here's the point, I never seem to be able to locate anybody who saw one. Nor have I ever seen the script of any such production. And so, while admitting the possibility of a whole avalanche of predecessors, I deny their influence.<sup>21</sup>

Writing two years earlier, Morris Watson was even more blunt (fig. 3): "Whatever the idea behind the Living Newspaper in the beginning, circumstances and influences of one kind or another have modified it. A literally rough estimate of it at the moment would be 'Combine the newspaper and the theatre and to hell with the traditions of both.'"<sup>22</sup>

Certainly the link to the Newspaper Guild proved crucial to the FTP network. Watson, who just weeks before had been fired by the Associated Press for his role in founding the Guild,<sup>23</sup> was of course well-connected with journalists and journalistic practices. These connections would bring some modest economic benefits, for the Newspaper Guild sponsored all early Living Newspaper productions.

19 Elmer Rice, "Elmer Rice Says Farewell To Broadway," *The New York Times*, November 11, 1934, p. XI and p. X3; *id.*, "The Federal Theatre Hereabouts," art. cit., p. X1; *id.*, *The Living Theatre...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-153. Tellingly, Rice did not mention a Living Newspaper in his letter to Hopkins; that idea took life only after discussions with Flanagan and Watson.

20 A. Goldman, "Life and Death..." art. cit., p. 72.

21 Arthur Arent, "The Technique of the Living Newspaper," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, vol. 22, no. 11, 1938, p. 820.

22 M. Watson, "The Living Newspaper," art. cit., p. 8.

23 "Morris Watson, Newsman, Dies; Won Key Labor Law Test Case," *The New York Times*, February 13, 1972, p. 62. Watson's appeal of his dismissal, which was decided in his favor by the Supreme Court in 1937, established the constitutionality of the National Labor Relations Act.





3. [Morris Watson](#) (“Photographic Print from New York Production of *Power*,” image 2, Finding Aid Box 1182, Music Division, Library of Congress).<sup>24</sup>

Much more importantly, though, the Guild also provided an infrastructure. This in part was administrative: as Flanagan noted, the “staff of the Living Newspaper was set up like a large city daily, with editor-in-chief, managing editor, city editor, reporters and copyreaders.”<sup>25</sup> But importing journalism’s disciplinary infrastructure had aesthetic consequences as well, for the FTP’s new cadre of reporters would bring to the theatre two key stylistic preferences. The first, as Brooks Atkinson noted in *The New York Times* review of *Power*, was a disciplinary inclination “[t]o shake the living daylights out of a thousand books, reports, newspaper and magazine articles.”<sup>26</sup> Watson himself pointed to the second with his observation that the journalists “who edit the Living Newspaper are just telling the story for what it is worth.”<sup>27</sup> He acknowledged that the resulting “combination of newspaper and topical review” at times “violates all the rules

24 The *Power* poster in the background of the photo is fig. 1; the “Buck Watson” on his hat links to *The New York Times* review (see n.27).

25 H. Flanagan, “Introduction,” art. cit., p.vii.

26 Brooks Atkinson, “*Power* Produced by the Living Newspaper Under Federal Auspices,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 1937, p.18.

27 M. Watson, “The Living Newspaper,” art. cit., p.6.

of dramatic writing:” “That the scene should have a ‘wallop’ at the end may be a valid criticism. I’m not saying that it isn’t. The usual news story is written with the punch at the top.” But he quickly added that: “We newspapermen are newly wedded to the theatre. We have a lot to learn about each other. A dozen more editions should put us in step.”<sup>28</sup> The *Times* review of *Power* confirmed this prediction, noting that “after an apprenticeship of one year” the Living Newspaper:

[H]as learned how to use the theatre brilliantly as a medium of expression. If a lecture on the history, business methods and politics of electric light seems to you like a dull subject, you have only to see what the aggressive and versatile lads of the Living Newspaper can do when they have a regiment of actors on their hands and a battalion of theatre technicians. [...] The material for “Power” has been industriously assembled by the staff members of Morris Watson’s disinterestedly insurgent Living Newspaper. They present “Power” with a list of accredited sources long enough to break your arm off.<sup>29</sup>

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Adding journalism to the Federal Theatre Project’s network of support, that is, did more than bring administrative and financial resources: it opened a stylistic exchange as well. This pattern—the FTP first linking to an external network to obtain resources, and then incorporating a technique derived from the link into works like the Living Newspapers—occurred on scales large and small. The footnotes of *Power*, for instance, were grounded in the discipline of journalism. But they had an aesthetic dimension too, a rhetorical power that over time would be manifest onstage through devices like *Power*’s “LOUDSPEAKER” or the “MAN WHO KNOWS.”<sup>30</sup> And reviewers praised this sensibility, lauding the way that in *Power*: “The unit of the piece is the fact; each fact is accurate (see the bibliography); and the author of the play, Arthur Arent, proves what journalists have always maintained—that an accurate fact carefully aimed may be as deadly as a bullet.”<sup>31</sup>

The Living Newspaper’s publicity campaigns likewise suggest the way that, as Latour would predict, linking theatre to other professional networks fueled the emerging genre’s success. Carefully documented in FTP notebooks, the campaigns combine a sophisticated approach to media networks with impressive dramatic

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28 *Ibid.*

29 B. Atkinson, “*Power...*,” art. cit., p.18.

30 Tellingly, Arthur Arent noted that the original plan for *Ethiopia* “was to use a teletype across the top of the proscenium;” when this “proved impracticable,” a “loudspeaker was hurriedly requisitioned and it remains in use until this day.” (“Technique...,” art. cit., p.822.)

31 “Newspaper into Theater,” *The Nation*, vol.144, no.10, 1937, p.256.

expertise. The “Method of attack” for the Seattle Production, for instance, included: “Speeches, advance ticket sales, special displays. Every type of organization: racial, social, political, labor; was covered.”<sup>32</sup> Radio announcements supplemented these efforts, and “23 dramatic programs centered around ‘Power’ were put on the air;” in addition: “Stories, articles, pictures and every form of printable exploitation was used in Seattle’s three dailies and 35 weeklies.”<sup>33</sup>

Links to other networks shaped the FTP as well, for Flanagan worked tirelessly to maintain popular and political support. Of particular importance was her belief that the FTP should work “to extend the boundaries of theatre-going, to create a vigorous new audience, to make the theatre of value to more people.”<sup>34</sup> This understanding quickly “pushed the Federal Theatre beyond its initial mandate of supplying jobs to out-of-work theatre professionals under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration.”<sup>35</sup>

The need for political support had a similar aesthetic impact. This imperative was underscored by the closure of the initial Living Newspaper, *Ethiopia*, and Rice’s subsequent resignation. Flanagan attempted to put a positive spin on the episode, describing Rice’s decision as “a potent factor in keeping” the Federal Theatre “close to the line laid down by Harry Hopkins when at its inception he said that it was to be ‘a free, adult, uncensored theatre.’”<sup>36</sup> But Flanagan’s subsequent efforts to reign in the more politically active Living Newspapers inevitably impacted the genre’s aesthetic, moving it toward plays that instead highlighted a “prevailing national faith in progress through technology, a belief shared by conservative defenders of capitalism and Populist Front leftists.”<sup>37</sup> *Power* clearly manifest this belief.

Thus *Power* emerged from an amalgamation of practices imported from multiple networks of support. Predictably, at times these traditions clashed. Such conflicts were particularly visible in regional productions, since *Power*’s enormous cast and crew forced producers to bring all hands on deck. In Seattle, for instance, the local project could only mount the play by combining its previously segregated white and black performance troupes. The company’s production notebook would later boast of this experiment’s success, noting that the: “Class, racial, and professional lines of distinction

32 “Production Notebook from Seattle production of *Power* [2],” image 4 (Finding Aid Box 1058, *loc. cit.*).

33 *Ibid.*, images 8 and 7.

34 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.43.

35 Kurt Eisen, “Circulating Power: National Theatre as Public Utility in the Federal Theatre Project,” *Theatre Symposium*, vol.9, 2001, p.29.

36 H. Flanagan, “Introduction,” *art. cit.*, pp.viii-ix.

37 K. Eisen, “Circulating Power...,” *art. cit.*, p.29. The passage discusses the controversies surrounding *Ethiopia* and *Injunction Granted*.

disappeared. White union stage hands ran one side of the stage in perfect co-ordination with colored non-union men working from the other.”<sup>38</sup> But the vulnerabilities in this amalgamation were visible from the start, for integration initially faced internal resistance.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the fractures would linger, and the charge of “mixing the races” would return in the hearings that ended the FTP’s funding.<sup>40</sup>

Even less controversial decisions led to aesthetic clashes. Speaking for the writers, for instance, Morris Watson acknowledged “plenty of friendly conflict between those of us in the Living Newspaper who are of the fourth estate and those who are of the theatre.”<sup>41</sup> And onstage the large cast sizes likewise ensured that performers came from a wide range of traditions; the resulting clashes could be serious. While Flanagan would boast how the Living Newspaper blended traditions ranging from Aristophanes and Shakespeare to Walt Disney,<sup>42</sup> on multiple occasions performers rejected the blend. Preparation for *Triple A Plowed Under*, for instance, ground to a halt when “we had one night at rehearsal a rebellion;” actors gave “impassioned speeches explaining why this swift, pantomimic, monosyllabic, factual document was not drama.”<sup>43</sup> Flanagan first tried to mollify them by explaining that “people today are interested in facts, as evidenced by the enormous increase in circulation of daily newspapers and news sheets.” But the cast was only satisfied when she reminded them of the play’s links to traditional theatre, asking them to “withhold judgement [...] until we added two powerful elements which were an intrinsic part of the plan, the musical score and the light score.”<sup>44</sup>

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*Power* too faced such rebellions. The San Francisco director, for instance, described the play as “very poor” and complained that the “dry material” contained “no parts to interest the actors, nor to stir up the emotion of the audience;” reviews describing the San Francisco *Power* as “a propaganda play minus the excitement” suggest that that company’s performances never overcame his doubts.<sup>45</sup> And Seattle reported a similar clash:

Rehearsals of “Power” developed interesting clashes of opinion. To manage a cast from so small a project, Vaudevillians, Repertory, actors, costumers, janitors—in fact

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38 “Production Notebook from Seattle production... [2],” art. cit., p.31.

39 B.B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, op. cit., pp.80-81, and p.85.

40 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, op. cit., p.361.

41 M. Watson, “The Living Newspaper,” art. cit., p.8.

42 H. Flanagan, “Introduction,” art. cit., p. xi.

43 *Ibid.*, p.ix.

44 *Ibid.*, pp.ix-x. Morris Watson, in “The Living Newspaper,” recalls similar episodes occurring with the early review 1936 (art. cit., pp.7-8).

45 “Production Notebook from San Francisco production of *Power*,” images 11 and 58 (Finding Aid Box 1056, Music Division, loc. cit.).

neatly the entire white personnel were drafted. This curious conglomeration of talent, tradition and prejudice responded with a certain skepticism to the first playreading. General response: “This isn’t a play at all—Lord knows what it is.” But by fifth rehearsal, this conservative bloc was saying: “This is great stuff, and anyone who doesn’t think so is so old fashioned.”<sup>46</sup>

The production notebook goes on to report that: “Local audience reaction was very similar. For the first few scenes, each house appeared puzzled... After three scenes in, the audience would catch the rhythm and we never failed to close with at least four curtain calls.”<sup>47</sup>

In short, the source of power in *Power* was an amalgamation of networks. The conjunction nurtured a work of genuine impact, with one Seattle reviewer arguing that: “The living newspaper, if ‘Power’ is at all representative of its genre, is capable of an epic sweep and a permanency beyond the timely situation it portrays.”<sup>48</sup> In retrospect, of course, we can see places where the disparate traditions only partially combined, and future fault lines would emerge. But in 1937, these links underwrote impactful critique.

## DEPLOYING POWER

One aspect of the problem should be explained fully and completely in one scene and then forgotten, with the next scene going on to another point.

Arthur Arent, “The Technique of the Living Newspaper,” 1938<sup>49</sup>

46 “Production Notebook from Seattle production of *Power* [1],” image 19 (Finding Aid Box 1057, Music Division, *loc. cit.*).

47 *Ibid.*, image 20.

48 *The Seattle Town Crier* (“Production Notebook from Seattle production... [1],” art. cit., image 22). Other Seattle reviews were mixed. While a radio review noted that *Power* “raises the theatre completely out of the realm of mere amusement and gives it cultural and educational significance,” the *Seattle Times* more ambiguously called *Power* “as fine a piece of overdone propaganda as ever trod the boards,” noting that it “has the subtlety of a sledgehammer.” The *Post Intelligencer* went further, denouncing *Power* as “a play only to the extent that it has numerous characters who speak lines” (“Production Notebook from Seattle production... [2],” art. cit., images 35, 32, and 34).

49 A. Arent, “Technique...,” art. cit., p.824.

Predictably, *Power's* stagecraft also reflects the amalgamation that led to the FTP. It was no coincidence that Flanagan begged the cast of *Triple A* to wait for music and lights before rendering judgements. Since funding guidelines limited non-personnel expenditures to 10% of the total cost, Living Newspaper sets and props were typically simple; Rice noted that “the machinery for spending [FTP] money imposes cruel limitations upon the operation of the project.”<sup>50</sup> Conversely, the plays exploited those elements of stagecraft that were most dependent on personnel. Offstage, they used large crews and numerous musicians. And onstage, of course, the dramas relied on the fundamental icon of theatrical representation, the actor’s body, which Flanagan argued should be “emphasized by light, seen from as many angles, massed with other bodies in as many formations as possible.”<sup>51</sup>

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The opening scene of *Power* demonstrates how firmly the play is grounded in this art. Fittingly, given that Arent would later cite “the use of projection as background” as one of *Power's* key advances, the drama starts with an image projected on the front curtain—“*The Living Newspaper presents Power. The word ‘Power’ grows larger, the other words fade out.*”<sup>52</sup> The curtain rises, revealing “two ELECTRICIANS and a STAGE MANAGER at a portable switchboard;” a voice over the LOUDSPEAKER explains: “This is the switchboard of the Ritz Theatre. Through this board flows the electric power that amplifies my voice, that ventilates the theatre, and the power that lights this show.” The STAGE MANAGER reinforces the point, “*picking up a fat cable*,” as he adds: “It all comes through here.” *Power*, in short, entangles its audience in electrical networks from the start.

Indeed, the purpose of the opening scene is to remind us that we already were entangled in these networks. Arent felt that Living Newspapers worked best when given an “episodic” construction “patterned closely on the revue;” in this approach, the “self-contained” scenes have:

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50 B.B. Witham, “Economic Structure,” art.cit., p.201; E. Rice, “The Federal Theatre Hereabouts,” art.cit., p.X1. Productions could partially overcome the funding limitations if community partners lent expensive items for temporary use of the set. Correspondence from the Seattle production of *Power*, for instance, notes that one sponsor lent “washing machines and some other electrical appliances to use for props” (B.B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project, op. cit.*, p.83).

51 H. Flanagan, *Arena, op. cit.*, p.321.

52 A. Arent, “Technique...,” art.cit., p.835; *Power*, in Pierre de Rohan (ed), *Federal Theatre Plays, op. cit.*, pp.9-10. The plays in this volume are separately numbered; all page numbers refer to the *Power* section.

[T]hree primary functions: 1, to say what has to be said; 2, to build to the scene's own natural climax; and 3, to build to the climax of the act curtain and the resolution of the play. [...] One aspect of the problem should be explained or dramatized fully and completely in one scene and then forgotten, with the next scene going on to another point.<sup>53</sup>

He would cite “the opening sequence of *Power*, which explains what would happen if our electricity were cut off,” as a clear example “of making a point once and for all, clearly and dramatically.”<sup>54</sup>

Fittingly, electricity plays a central role in the scene's critique. Onstage, spotlights come on sequentially, each focusing our sight, each accompanied by the LOUDSPEAKER's electronically amplified voice;<sup>55</sup> the portable switchboard remains visible, continuing to highlight the stage's dependence on power. Soon, simple props are added, each iconically pointing to the offstage world, each emphasizing that the theatre is not the only place where electricity governs experience. As the lighting becomes progressively brighter we see:

- a clothing factory where workers huddle over electronic sewing machines;
- a home where an elderly couple listen to music on the radio;
- a police radio operator directing cars from the station's switchboard;
- a hospital operating room illuminated in stark white light (fig. 4); and
- a street scene where traffic lights flash red and green.

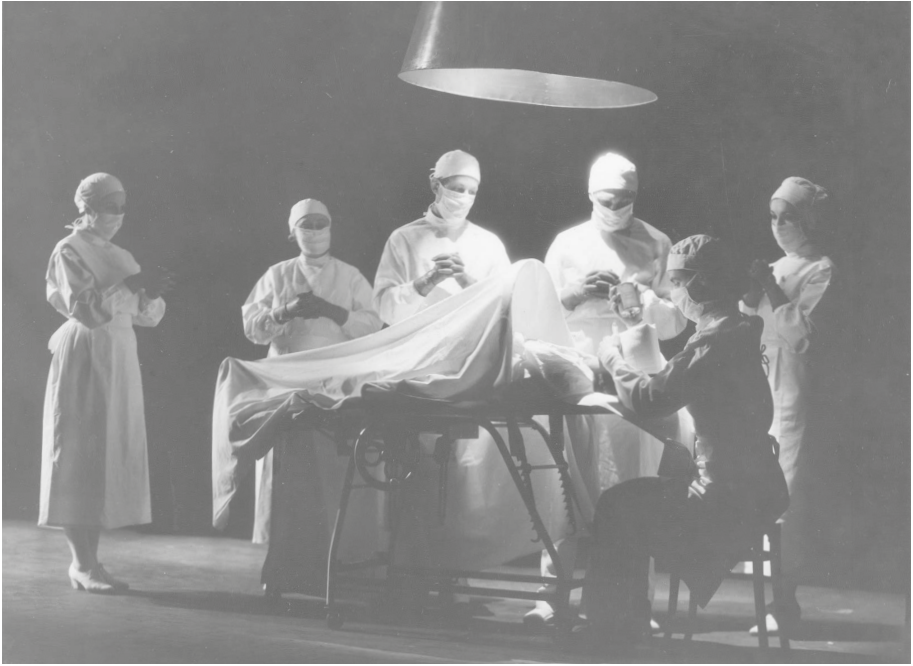
“Eighty-six hundred of these sentinels in New York City keep us from crashing our autos together, night and day,” the LOUDSPEAKER informs us, and as: “*The traffic light flashes red and green rapidly*,” the voice goes on to note “you flick on your lights in your home with power.... You heat your iron with Power. You clean with Power.” “[The] *Lights come up on the various groups previously lit*,” as the litany continues: “You curl your hair, you cook, you even shave, all with Power!”<sup>56</sup>

53 A. Arent, “Technique...,” art. cit., p.824.

54 *Ibid.*, p.825.

55 Arent identified the way that the LOUDSPEAKER “began to take on individuality and coloration” as *Power*'s second major innovation (*ibid.*, pp.824-825).

56 *Id.*, *Power*, *op. cit.*, pp.11-12



4. *Power*, scene 1.i: *The Hospital Operating Room* (“Photographic Print from New York Production of *Power*,” image 2, Finding Aid Box 1182, Music Division, Library of Congress).

And then, the auditorium plunges into blackout. A stunned silence ensues, as actors and spectators alike are suddenly cast outside the networks of power. “Flashlights, quick,” a DOCTOR calls, and “[a] NURSE comes running with two flashes. One is passed to another NURSE, and they both flash lights over the DOCTOR’s shoulder as he goes on with the operation. His assistant lights up with a third flash. They hold for a second, and all three flashlights go out.”<sup>57</sup> The isolation is uncomfortable and lasting. “All characters in the remainder of this scene,” the stage directions tell us, “light their own faces for the duration of their speeches, either with telephones having small flashlights in the mouthpieces, or with pocket flashes.” In short, in the opening aesthetic of *Power* form and content coincide, as the darkened audience watches the darkened performers struggle with a loss of power. In the modern world, the play reminds us, both onstage representation and offstage life depend on electrical networks, systems where, as both Latour and *Power* point out, corporate infrastructure and the physical properties of electricity have intertwined since Edison’s day.<sup>58</sup>

57 A. Arent, *Power*, *op. cit.*, p.12.

58 Br. Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, *op. cit.*, p.203.





5. *Power*, scene I.ii: *Inventors* (“Photographic Print from New York Production of *Power*,” image 2, Finding Aid Box 1182, Music Division, Library of Congress).

This strategy of highlighting networks by shifting the audience’s perspective continues in the scenes that follow. Repeatedly lights, sound, actors, and props first make power visible onstage, then force the audience to experience what it is like to be outside these networks of power. Consider scene I.ii, “*Inventors*” (fig. 5). The scene enacts the progress of science, as researchers from Faraday to Ohm to Edison share their legacy by passing inventions hand to hand. The chain is broken, however, at the end of the scene as businessmen surround Edison while clamoring for exclusive distribution rights. Next, scene I.iii, “*Kilowatt Hour*,” shows the resulting isolation of the consumer and audience alike as an electrical company, its market guaranteed by monopoly status, bills for its services in kilowatt hours; the concept is so abstract that a befuddled CONSUMER onstage has no idea what it is until an ELECTRICIAN lowers a light with a blinding thousand watt bulb (fig. 6).<sup>59</sup> Scene I.iv, “*Expansion*,” highlights the growth of electrical distribution networks; Scene I.v, “*Park Bench—1907*,” foregrounds a MAN who remains outside these new systems, unable to partake in the “wonderful age we

59 A. Arent, *Power*, *op. cit.*, p.21. In the New York production, the ELECTRICIAN’s explanation was shifted to the MAN WHO KNOWS.

live in” because he has no access to electricity.<sup>60</sup> Each scene is, as Arent’s aesthetic dictates, a separate episode with its own distinct point. Simultaneously, though, the scenes reinforce each other, building toward a larger end.



6. *Power*, scene I.vi: THE MAN WHO KNOWS explains a kilowatt hour to the CONSUMER  
("Photographic Print from New York Production of *Power*," image 1, Finding Aid Box 1182,  
Music Division, Library of Congress).

The pattern of alternating portraits of consumers outside and inside the network continues throughout the play. Scene I.vii, "*Fair Profits*," starts by dramatizing an electrical executive’s assertion that holding companies deserve “the credit for the great development of the electric light and power business;” when the concept of a holding company proves as abstruse as the earlier kilowatt hour, the “MAN WHO KNOWS” enters to illustrate the idea, ordering the stage crew to bring out a set of large blocks to represent the multiple corporations (fig.7). In a coup de théâtre, the pyramid of blocks he constructs to illustrate the complexity of their intertwined structures eventually towers over the actors onstage.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>61</sup> A. Arent, *Power*, *op.cit.*, p.29 and p.31. Arthur Goldman notes that, since Arent was hospitalized with pneumonia, Watson conceived the sequence with the stacked blocks; he later delighted in reminding Arent of this staging success (“Life and Death...,” *art.cit.*, n. 31, p.82).

An equally ingenious bit of staging concludes the scene. As Senators testify about corporations doing business with each other, an “*animated chart showing an octopus*” is projected on the scrim.<sup>62</sup> But when one Senator notes that “this puts a director in the *almost impossible position* of sitting across the table from himself,” Arent makes the image come to life:

*Lights come up on CARMICHAEL seated at cut-out desk, right. Left of desk is an empty chair. During the following, flesh-pink light is on CARMICHAEL when he sits at desk, which changes to steel-blue when he moves to chair, desk left. There is projected behind him a cartoon of a triple mirror.*<sup>63</sup>

And finally the next episode, “*Childish Questions*,” returns to using blocks to make its point: “*Lights up on FATHER and DAUGHTER, center. He is seated in chair; she is sitting on the floor playing with large alphabet blocks.*” “Do all the people need electricity?” the DAUGHTER asks. “And does the company own what all the people need?” She drops her blocks as she exclaims: “Gee, Daddy; the people are awfully dumb” (fig.8).<sup>64</sup>



7. *Power*, scene i.vii: THE MAN WHO KNOWS explains the meaning of “holding companies” (“Production Notebook from New York Production of *Power* [1],” image 41, Finding Aid Box 1057, Music Division, Library of Congress).

62 A. Arent, *Power*, *op. cit.*, p.33.

63 *Ibid.*, p.34.

64 *Ibid.*, pp.38-39.



8. *Power*, scene i.viii: **DAUGHTER with blocks** (*Power [110 Photographs]*, image 20, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Box 1228, Music Division, Library of Congress).

This insight about the need for collective action drives the remainder of the play. By the end of Act One, the people unite to form their own network of power, one explicitly associated with the newly created TVA: “*A parade of men and women comes on stage behind scrim, singing the TVA song. Many of them carry lanterns. Red, yellow and amber side lights pick up the parade. They circle the stage and continue the song until act curtain falls, which comes down on movie of second large waterfall.*”<sup>65</sup> The scene, Hallie Flanagan thought, used projected scenery “more successfully” than any prior Living Newspaper, spectacularly dramatizing the strength of individuals working together as they “struggle [...] to understand the natural, social, and economic forces” that surround them, “and to achieve through those forces, a better life for more people.”<sup>66</sup> Tellingly, Flanagan located the scene’s power in the conjunction of live theatre traditions with projected documentary images: “If you think such a struggle is undramatic,” she would write, “reserve judgement until, through the roaring waterfalls and vast machines of *Power*, you see the torchlight procession of workers and hear them sing.”<sup>67</sup> The dropped curtain then returns the focus to the audience’s world, for: “[The] *Movie continues on front curtain until the end of film.*”<sup>68</sup>

Act Two returns to this device, as: “*During overture of Act Two, a map of TVA territory is projected on house curtain;*”<sup>69</sup> we soon see the private electric companies combat the people’s power. This time they seek to expand their networks to ensure that the Tennessee Valley market remains under their control. “We’ve got to open up the whole valley!” a company CHAIRMAN exclaims. “The government won’t run lines parallel to anybody else’s. *If we get in there first, that farm is ours.*”<sup>70</sup> Thus, by scene II.iv, “*Competition,*” collective resistance gives way to individual struggles: while a FARMER orders linemen off his property by threatening to “sick the dog on you” (fig. 9) and an OLD WOMAN with a gun drives off a second worker (fig. 10), an illiterate COLORED MAN fairs less well, coerced by deceitful agents (fig. 11).<sup>71</sup>

65 *Ibid.*, p.68.

66 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.184; *ead.*, “Introduction,” *art. cit.*, p. x.

67 *Ibid.*, pp.x-xi.

68 A. Arent, *Power*, *op. cit.*, p.6.

69 *Ibid.*, p.70.

70 *Ibid.*, pp.74-75.

71 *Ibid.*, pp.76-78.



9. *Power*, scene II.iv: **A FARMER orders linemen off his property** (“Photographic Print from New York Production of *Power*,” image 2, Finding Aid Box 1182, Music Division, Library of Congress).



10. *Power*, scene II.iv: **An OLD WOMAN with a gun drives a lineman of her property** (“Photographic Print from New York Production of *Power*”, Finding Aid Box 1182, Music Division, Library of Congress).



11. *Power*, scene i.viii: An illiterate COLORED MAN is coerced into signing an electric contract (“Photographic Print from New York Production of *Power*,” image 2, Finding Aid Box 1182, Music Division, Library of Congress).

The people’s network temporarily regains power as the play nears its end, with the Supreme Court offering an initial victory for the TVA; in an echo of Act One, an “*impromptu parade*” breaks out, replete once more with “*red, blue, yellow and amber side-lights*.”<sup>72</sup> Soon, though, a second court decision again threatens the project, and the reflection of Act One literally dims as the lights drop “*down to one-fourth*.”<sup>73</sup> Eventually the side-lights “*come on to half*” as the ENSEMBLE lines up and steps toward the audience, collectively asking: “*What will the Supreme Court do?*” A “*huge question mark*” is projected on the scrim as the curtain falls, inviting the audience to face the question on their side of the stage.

But even as *Power* stages its network analysis, a subtle shift occurs. The drama repeatedly uses the power of electricity to critique those who monopolize such power, highlighting the way that even individuals linked to electric networks—the CONSUMER and the audience alike—finally are more controlled than empowered. In Act Two, though, the drama’s critiques of offstage actions are increasingly grounded in onstage truths. Thus when a government lawyer, arguing before the Supreme Court

72 *Ibid.*, p.88.

73 *Ibid.*, p.91.

on behalf of the TVA, asks “Shall the power which belongs to the people be wasted?,” almost immediately brief “*staccato scenes take place down stage*.”<sup>74</sup> These “*flash backs*,” a break with Arent’s adage that an episode should be forgotten, directly echo lines from the close of Act One. Where once the play opposed electrical and corporate networks by documenting external sources, now it points to onstage reality to power its critique.

This is how technology works in *Power*, creating meaning by giving offstage references onstage presence, using external networks to support theatre production in a process analogous to Latour’s *Science in Action*. Indeed, this exposure of underlying networks is central to the drama’s goals. “The Living Newspaper,” Flanagan noted in 1939, “from the first was concerned not with surface news, scandal, human interest stories, but rather with the conditions back of conditions.”<sup>75</sup>

## 288 BREAKING THE LINKS: THE DEMISE OF THE FTP

As the hearing broke up I thought suddenly how it all  
looked like a badly staged courtroom scene.

Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, 1940<sup>76</sup>

But if *Power* succeeded because it exemplified the science of the FTP stage, it arguably would fall victim to flaws inherent to this mode of understanding. “The scientific text is different from all other forms of narrative,” Latour claims.<sup>77</sup> “It speaks of a referent, present in the text, in a form other than prose: a chart, diagram, equation, map, or sketch. Mobilizing its own internal referent, the scientific text carries within itself its own verification.” Despite Latour’s claim about the exclusivity of science, theatre in fact works similarly: it is the embodiment of iconic representation, always creating meaning by filling its stages with people and props.<sup>78</sup> As such, theatre too experiences the instability of reference that Latour describes:

It seems that reference is not simply the act of pointing or a way of keeping, on the outside, some material guarantee for the truth of a statement; rather it is our way of

74 *Ibid.*, pp.85-86; the “staccato scenes” echo pp.66-76.

75 H. Flanagan, “Introduction,” art. cit., p.viii.

76 *Ead.*, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.344.

77 Br. Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, *op. cit.*, p.56.

78 Compare this to the theatrical imagery Latour employs in *Pandora’s Hope* as he attempts to describe the way that Louis Pasteur staged the discovery of fermentation (*ibid.*, pp.127-133).



keeping something *constant* through a series of transformations. Knowledge does not reflect a real external world that it resembles via mimesis, but rather a real interior world, the coherence and continuity of which it helps to ensure.<sup>79</sup>

The implication applies to the theatre as well. The power of performance ultimately is not derived by pointing to the outside world. The theatre's power comes instead from pointing to itself, from progressively reshaping material until it transforms external complexities into internally coherent understandings. *Power*, like other Living Newspapers, might begin with footnotes, but its climax depends on the sort of self-reference that we see in the "staccato scenes" of II.vi.

And *Power* exploits such self-reference repeatedly. Of course, elements of Act Two—the corporate boardrooms, the Supreme Court, and the race to string competing electric lines across Tennessee—still allude to the external world. But the devastating judgements that *Power* makes in its second act, the certainty it conveys about which actions are right and which are wrong, come about because Act One had already enacted similar situations on the stage. The decisive reference, that is, comes from the way the drama points to theatrical truths.

And here lies the Living Newspaper's fatal flaw: while it claims to be documentary, its aims exceed the protection that facts can provide. As Kurt Eisen has pointed out, social documentaries implicitly believe that the situations they depict can be altered: "The very act of documenting a social problem—whether in a photograph, an essay, or a script for the stage—presents that problem as a human construct and, therefore, as capable of a human solution."<sup>80</sup> While *Power*, like other Living Newspapers, attempted to create what Flanagan called "an authoritative dramatic treatment, at once historic and contemporary, of current problems,"<sup>81</sup> dramatic treatment cannot be authoritative if facts can be changed. Indeed, Arent noted out that even journalists had come to accept that the theatre required an "adroit manipulation" of quotes, a "pardonable skulduggery [*sic*] on the dramatist's part in which a direct quote was broken into many speeches."<sup>82</sup> Thus, in practice the factual grounding of *Power*—its extensive footnotes and lengthy bibliography, its files open to public inspection—was as much a sign of vulnerability as of strength, a defense against the hostile scrutiny the play expected to

79 *Ibid.*, p.58. In practice, the resemblance of science to theatre is so close that it causes Latour some discomfort, and he at times tries to explain away the link (see *ibid.*, pp.115, 135).

80 K. Eisen, "Circulating Power..." art. cit., p.30.

81 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.65.

82 A. Arent, "Technique..." art. cit., p.822.

receive. At best, the play's specificity of reference temporarily masked the fact that the truths created in the laboratory of the theatre disappear when the power is unplugged.

Likewise, the truths created by drama can be overwritten by other scripts, a limit that Flanagan knew well. She recognized, for instance, that *Power's* strong attendance would offer no protection against the FTP's opponents, for it was too easy to dismiss the crowds as the product of agitation or the FTP's well-orchestrated publicity campaigns. Indeed, a year earlier she had warned Morris Watson that: "The fact that *Injunction Granted* is drawing crowds does not help. Everyone knows that those crowds are being sent by their Unions."<sup>83</sup> Flanagan knew, that is, that FTP opponents chose to follow a different script, and that for them the power of the Federal Theatre was not a strength but a problem. Their solution would be to sever the FPC's networks of support, undo the links the FTP had forged.

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Opportunities for such unravellings abounded. While the FTP incorporated journalists into their networks, the newspapers themselves remained outside, and Elmer Rice noted that "the powerful anti-Roosevelt press [...] lost no opportunity to denounce wastefulness, vote buying and what was quaintly called 'boondoggling';" likewise the incorporation of unemployed actors threatened "leaders of the professional theatre, who argued that the Project's performances at nominal prices were taking business away from them."<sup>84</sup> Flanagan herself similarly faced vociferous protests from FTP designers and scene workers who felt that her advocacy for projections and light threatened centuries of advances in scenery design.<sup>85</sup> And political divisions within the FTP creative team proved even more difficult to manage. Flanagan's protracted fight with Watson and Losey about the pro-labor politics of *Injunction Granted* was so fierce that Flanagan threatened to dismiss them both; while Losey eventually resigned, thirty-five years later he still spoke bitterly about the experience.<sup>86</sup>

Ironically, though, it was a different political theatre that proved the FTP's undoing. The carefully scripted performances that occurred in venues like Martin Dies' House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities, replete with charges of communism and un-American behavior, would invert the story the FTP sought to tell. Indeed, in a sequence that proved eerily similar to *Power's* depiction of competing electrical networks, Congressional opponents in effect defeated the FPC by staging a theatre of

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83 Jane De Hart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1967, p.112.

84 E. Rice, *The Living Theatre*, *op. cit.*, pp.155-156.

85 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.321-322.

86 J. Mathews, *The Federal Theatre...*, *op. cit.*, pp.109-113; A. Goldman, "Life and Death..." *art. cit.*, p.76.

their own. Even Flanagan, despite still smarting from the defunding of the FTP, was able to recognize the parallel as she concluded *Arena*:

It is probable that during the last four years more discussion of the theatre took place in the House and Senate and in congressional committees than in all the other years of our congressional history put together. Scenes from Federal Theatre plays were enacted on the floor of Congress; eloquent speeches were made for and against the theatre as an art and as an institution; Shakespeare came into discussion, and Marlowe, and Aristotle. A Senator who fought for Federal Theatre told me that months after that institution was ended, fights about its merits were still going on in congressional cloakrooms.<sup>87</sup>

Flanagan did not, however, fully recognize the logic of her opponents' attack. Despite her caution and political savvy, she failed to foresee what Latour makes clear: that when an enterprise—be it science, Living Newspapers, or Congressional hearings—is powered by the progressive expansion of networks, it never encourages dispassionate assessment. Instead, such an enterprise systematically works to ensure that all deliberations occur on unequal grounds.<sup>88</sup>

This truth caught Flanagan unprepared. In contrast, Watson sensed the political danger from the start, arguing, as early as 1936, that it would necessary to “divorce” the FTP from the WPA for Living Newspapers to grow, since: “So long as [the FTP] is a part of the WPA it will be subject to petty and unfair attacks from those reactionary forces which see red in every letter of relief.”<sup>89</sup> But Flanagan thought that she could protect the FTP by steering a middle course that avoided giving “ammunition against the project.”<sup>90</sup> To be fair, she worked at a significant disadvantage as she confronted the FTP's Congressional opponents, for the same networks of federal bureaucracy that brought the FTP its funding would ultimately censor her response to the Congressional threat. In particular, after she attempted to publicly counter early committee testimony, WPA officials informed Flanagan that “on no account was I to reply to these charges.”<sup>91</sup> She eventually understood that: “Any agency like the W.P.A. which depends for its continued existence upon periodic appropriations wants to keep out of the papers.”

Still, Flanagan's ultimate failing was that she expected a fair fight; her opponents would have none of it. She ends *Arena* with an account of the indignities she suffered as

87 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.333.

88 Compare Bruno Latour's discussion of scientific literature and laboratories in *Science in Action*, *op. cit.*, pp.45-79.

89 M. Watson, “The Living Newspaper,” *art. cit.*, p.33.

90 J. Mathews, *The Federal Theatre...*, *op. cit.*, p.112.

91 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.335-336.

she attempted to get a fair hearing before the Dies committee: the lack of due process, the hostile questioning, the way her testimony was brushed aside, the way she was not allowed to give her closing statement or even enter it into the record.<sup>92</sup> For her:

[The Dies committee] looked like a badly staged courtroom scene; it wasn't imposing enough for a congressional hearing on which the future of several thousand human beings depended. [...] Yet here was a Committee which for months had been actually trying a case against Federal Theatre, trying it behind closed doors, and giving one side only to the press. Out of a project employing thousands of people from coast to coast, the Committee had chosen arbitrarily to hear ten witnesses, all from New York City, and had refused arbitrarily to hear literally hundreds of others.<sup>93</sup>

292 In retrospect, of course, the incongruity makes sense. Far from being “badly staged,” the Congressional hearings quite effectively gave the FTP’s opponents an opportunity to reorient the networks the project had so carefully conjoined, appropriating them to the opponents’ own ends.

Latour’s adage that: “Every time you hear about a failure of science, look for what part of which network has been punctured” captures the strategy perfectly, for, one by one, the FTP’s once-secure bullworks of support were undone.<sup>94</sup> Journalism, which the Living Newspaper had so successfully incorporated into the theatre’s machinery, now worked against it as “the papers gave more and more space to the testimony of a few unqualified witnesses;” the FTP’s networks of theatre professions were accused, to Flanagan’s horror, “of being made up largely of non-relief amateurs;” even the internal references that fueled *Power*’s onstage success became a weapon: “[A] project which from first to last had stood on American principles of freedom, justice, and truth, was accused of being through its plays, its audiences, and its personnel, subversive, communistic, and indecent.”<sup>95</sup> Limits on the number of witnesses before the Dies committee ensured that the enormous casts that *Power* used so effectively could not be deployed. Nor could large audiences and positive box-office revenue provide support. In the end, Flanagan was right when she wondered if the FTP’s audience actually had counted against it, if Congressional critics feared what could happen when large numbers of people attended plays that highlighted issues of capital, class and race.<sup>96</sup>

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92 *Ibid.*, pp.337-344.

93 *Ibid.*, p.345.

94 Br. Latour, *Science in Action*, *op. cit.*, p.249.

95 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.335-336.

96 *Ibid.*, p.361.

And finally, even the theatre's most powerful signifier, the body of the performer, was simply banished from the stage: "We don't want you back," a Congressman laughingly told Flanagan, "[y]ou're a tough witness."<sup>97</sup> Once all these supporting networks were dismissed, the FTP's fundamental lifeline, federal funding, lay bare. It too was easily severed during the compromises required in negotiating the final budget bill.<sup>98</sup>

But while the FTP's closure was permanent, decades later a delightful coda has begun to fill the space. Hallie Flanagan was devastated by her failure to deliver her closing brief to the Dies committee or to share it with the public afterwards.<sup>99</sup> But ironically, over time the same WPA bureaucracy that silenced Flanagan's response to her critics would ensure that her efforts were preserved, eventually transferring the FTP archives to Library of Congress control. Access to these physical documents was once limited, of course, by the restrictions of time and place. But with the advent of the Internet in the 1990s, the library began digitizing key records from *Power*. Now, through the Library of Congress' "Federal Theatre Project Collection," production documents can be readily accessed worldwide. It's a reminder that Latour's adage has a positive side, that the punctures which halt science can be repaired, and new distribution networks created. Our digital age, then, has at least partially restored the FTP's *Power*, and in fact has distributed archival productions far more widely than they were at the Federal Theatre Project's peak. It's an outcome that Flanagan doubtlessly would enjoy.

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## NOTICE

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MICHAEL SELMON The Limits of Technology

## ABSTRACT

Arthur Arent's 1937 Living Newspaper *Power* was among the Federal Theatre Project's most successful productions. This paper uses the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour to examine how the off-stage infrastructures and on-stage aesthetics that underwrote *Power*'s success eventually triggered its demise. Despite predating Latour by decades, *Power* enacts its own actor-network critique, using the theatre's technology to highlight the way social networks controlled access to America's electrical distribution system. The drama succeeded, the paper argues, by linking off-stage and on-stage networks of support; its failure came when opponents punctured these connections. The paper first examines the off-stage infrastructure that supported *Power*, particularly its links to earlier theatre networks. It next explores the on-stage aesthetic that developed as Arent used theatre technologies, especially technologies fueled by electricity, to critique the off-stage influence of corporate power. The paper closes by noting how the conjunction of networks that fueled *Power*'s success left it politically vulnerable.

## KEYWORDS

Arthur Arent, *Power*, Living Newspapers, Bruno Latour, actor-network theory

## RÉSUMÉ

Le « Living Newspaper » *Power*, écrit par Arthur Arent et joué pour la première fois en 1937, figure parmi les productions les plus réussies du Federal Theatre Project. Dans cet article, la théorie de l'acteur-réseau de Bruno Latour est mobilisée pour examiner comment les infrastructures hors scène et l'esthétique sur scène, qui ont garanti le succès de *Power*, ont fini par causer sa disparition. Bien qu'il ait précédé Latour de plusieurs décennies, *Power* fait sa propre critique d'acteurs-réseaux, utilisant la technologie du théâtre pour mettre en évidence la façon dont les réseaux sociaux contrôlaient l'accès au système de distribution électrique américain. Le lien entre les réseaux de soutien sur et hors scène a garanti la réussite du drame ; son échec s'est produit lorsque les adversaires ont rompu ces connexions. L'article examine d'abord l'infrastructure hors scène qui a soutenu *Power*, en particulier ses liens avec les réseaux de théâtre antérieurs. Il explore ensuite l'esthétique sur scène qui se développait au fur et à mesure qu'Arent utilisait les technologies du théâtre, en particulier les technologies alimentées par l'électricité, pour critiquer l'influence hors scène du pouvoir d'entreprise. L'article conclut en expliquant pourquoi la conjonction des réseaux qui avaient alimenté le succès de *Power* l'a également rendu politiquement vulnérable.

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## MOTS-CLÉS

Arthur Arent, *Power*, *Living Newspapers*, Bruno Latour, théorie de l'acteur-réseau



QUATRIÈME PARTIE

**Figures féminines  
et processus de légitimation**



“THE PROVINCETOWN PLAYERS AND THE FEDERAL THEATRE:  
THE ESSAY SUSAN GLASPELL NEVER WROTE”

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Susan Glaspell directed the Federal Theatre Midwestern Play Bureau from September 1936 to April 1938. Joining and leaving the Federal Theatre Project were not easy decisions for this experienced playwright and fiction writer, then in her sixties. In a 1937 interview with A.R. Crews for *The Drama*, Susan Glaspell confided that she hesitated when Hallie Flanagan invited her to take over this work. Her adventure in the theatre, mostly carried out during her time with the Provincetown Players, which she co-founded in 1916, had been dormant ever since she had won the Pulitzer Prize for drama with *Alison's House* in 1931. She had then gone back to fiction, “a private endeavor that certainly pays more than the Federal Theatre does,” as she added in the Crews interview.<sup>1</sup> But finance, a ridiculous income of \$200 a month,<sup>2</sup> did not deter Glaspell, as it did not deter her back in 1916, when, leaving aside a successful career as a fiction writer, she devoted herself to the Provincetown Players. As Glaspell admitted, “I wanted to be connected with [the Federal Theatre] and work with it. I felt that here was something significant and worthwhile. It offered unlimited opportunities and I wanted to be identified with it.”<sup>3</sup> Having been a foundational part of the little theatre that had redirected the route of a new and modern American drama in the 1910s and 1920s, Glaspell somehow knew that if she accepted Flanagan’s proposal, she would be part of another milestone in American theatre history. Glaspell biographers—Marcia Noe, Barbara Ozieblo and Linda Ben-Zvi—have suggested that Glaspell possibly saw in the Federal Theatre Project an opportunity to continue the legacy of the Provincetown Players, a suggestion requiring further elaboration. In fact, their aims, ideological background, and organizational patterns, as the present work argues, are strikingly similar. Furthermore, it is my stance that Glaspell’s acceptance to chair the Midwestern Play Bureau was also a particular celebration of Jig Cook’s

1 A.R. Crews, “Susan Glaspell and the Federal Theatre,” *The Drama*, April 15, 1937, vol.5, no.31, p.4.

2 Marcia Noe, *Susan Glaspell*, Macomb, Illinois, Western Illinois UP, 1983, p.67.

3 A.R. Crews, “Susan Glaspell and the Federal Theatre,” art. cit., p.4.

legacy, the chance to convince the world that Cook's theatrical vision, initiated with the Provincetown Players, was not only valid, but also that it could live through the Federal Theatre.

The Susan Glaspell Papers at the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library hold unpublished notes Glaspell wrote for articles and speeches on the Federal Theatre Project. One set of notes develops the headline "The P.P. and the Federal Theatre," tracing a story from the Provincetown Players to the Federal Theatre Project. Glaspell never wrote this essay, but the notes suggest she used these ideas for speeches. Glaspell possibly did not write this essay because the disappointment she felt when she resigned from her office in 1938 tasted familiar: that same disillusionment she felt when leaving the Provincetown Players in 1922. When Glaspell and her husband, Jig Cook, "President" of the Provincetown Players, decided to take an interim of one year from the Provincetown Players and left for Greece, their sense of disappointment was widely known. They believed that the Provincetown Players had betrayed their missions, that they had failed miserably and just become another voice of mediocrity, as can be observed in this letter Cook sent from Greece months later in which he sentences the death of the company:

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I am now forced to confess that our attempt to build up, by our own life and death, in this alien sea, a coral island of our own, has failed. The failure seems to be more our own than America's ... As a group we are no more but less than the great chaotic, unhappy community in whose dry heart I have vainly tried to create an oasis of living beauty. Since we have failed spiritually in the elemental things ... and since the result is mediocrity, we keep our promise: We give this theater we love good death; the Provincetown Players ends their story here.<sup>4</sup>

Glaspell seemed to share her husband's feelings, since at that time she went back to fiction and would not write another play for years. In her hagiography, *The Road to the Temple* (1926), Glaspell attempted to relocate her husband as the rightful leader—and visionary—of the Provincetown Players, a role they then felt had been usurped by the triumvirate formed by Eugene O'Neill, Robert Edmond Jones, and Kenneth Macgowan, that took over the Players. Glaspell always felt that not enough had been done to celebrate Jig's legacy. When upon her return from Greece, after Cook's sudden death in February 1924, she realized no one would pay him the lasting homage she had in mind, she severed her relationship with the Players. Therefore, it does not seem a mere coincidence that Cook's words appear again and again in Glaspell's notes on

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4 Susan Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2005, p.241.

the Federal Theatre Project. The examination of how Glaspell uses Cook's words, interspersed among data about Hallie Flanagan and the Federal Theatre, suggests that Glaspell was building an imaginary bridge from Cook to Flanagan, to the point that it seems that Glaspell saw in Hallie Flanagan a new version of her beloved Jig. Glaspell wonders in her notes, "The magical thing of how the same feeling is in widely separated people."<sup>5</sup> Cook and Flanagan, and the members of the Provincetown Players and those who worked for the Federal Theatre, shared feelings for the theatre across time and space. Years before the Federal Theatre Project helped to "reimagine the nation's art"<sup>6</sup> the Provincetown Players had envisioned and experimented with such reimagining.

While many of the achievements of the Provincetown Players and the Federal Theatre can be said to be magical, the truth is that parallels in their successes—or also in their failures—respond to similarities in the projects. To start with, they share an unpromising genesis of denial. The Provincetown Players and the Federal Theatre were created to provide a stage for people who had been rejected by other theatre companies and/or were unemployed. Glaspell muses over this in her notes, "Uncle Sam went into the show business because people were hungry. Man does not live by bread alone, but he doesn't live without it. The administration had the unique idea that people were not to starve," to which she adds in some other notes that the "Federal Theatre [was] founded for economic reasons ... In 1935, 15,000 actors and other theater people [were] out of work."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is well known that the creation of the Federal Theatre Project was meant to put "Americans back to work in their fields."<sup>8</sup> That is, to diminish the harsh effects that the Great Depression had on the theatre industry: the darkening of 6,000 theatres and the reduction of stock companies to one fourth in five years. It aimed to help those 6,000 actors members of the Actors' Equity Association who were unemployed, together with the unemployed stagehands, carpenters and electricians.<sup>9</sup> Scholars and critics have noted that there was a feeling that the Federal Theatre was created by and for "down-and-out-ers," people who were not "good enough for Broadway."<sup>10</sup> Something conspicuously missing from Glaspell's notes is that 20 years earlier the Provincetown Players also originated because

5 Ead., "Typewritten Notes for Speeches and Articles," Federal Theatre Project Folder, Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library, n.d., n.p.

6 Elizabeth Osborne, *Staging the People*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p.2.

7 S. Glaspell, "Typewritten Notes for Speeches and Articles," art. cit., n.p.

8 E. Osborne, *Staging the People*, op. cit., p.2.

9 John Charles Koch, *The Federal Theatre Project: Region IV. A Structural and Historical Analysis of How it Functioned and What it Accomplished*, PhD Dissertation, UMI Diss. Int. Service, 1981, pp.1-2.

10 Willson Whitman, *Bread and Circuses*, New York, Oxford UP, 1937, p.30.

plays written by its future members were rejected, even by other little theatres. For example, one of the plays that unofficially inaugurated the Players, *Suppressed Desires*, by Glaspell and Cook, had been rejected by another Greenwich Village little theatre, the Washington Square Players, because they had found the play “too special.”<sup>11</sup> In a similar way, Eugene O’Neill’s plays—later to be widely acclaimed—did not find a stage until the Players decided to give the young O’Neill—with a trunk full of plays—a chance in the summer of 1916. Significantly, in both cases, this preliminary idea of rejection was turned upside down and became a centripetal motion giving way to the fruitful and successful synergies both organizations provided. Regarding the Federal Theatre Project, as Willson Whitman has said, “there gravitated towards the project people who had loved the theatre but hadn’t, perhaps, felt at home in the Broadway racket, people with socialized intelligence they hadn’t had a chance to use before, and with definite ideas for improving theatrical practice.”<sup>12</sup> And in the case of the Provincetown Players, they became, in Brenda Murphy’s words, “a cultural crucible in which the disparate and seemingly random ideas, aesthetics, and cultural values swirling around Greenwich Village in the teens and twenties were annealed into a practical aesthetics for the theatre.”<sup>13</sup> Writers, intellectuals, journalists, visual artists, and even university graduates as disparate as Sophie Treadwell, Mike Gold, Alfred Kreymborg, Edna St. Vincent Millay or Brör Nordfeldt participated in this productive community. Indeed, it is sensible to wonder if avant-garde artists such as Nordfeldt, or Marguerite and William Zorach, who contributed their crafts to different designs of the Players,<sup>14</sup> would have turned to theatre if it had not been as part of this group. In his autobiography, William Zorach recalls this mutual magnetism:

That summer we became fascinated by the Provincetown Players. A group of unknown Playwrights were producing their plays on an old wharf. They asked Marguerite and me if we would design and paint scenery for them. It was their first experience with the theatre and ours too, but we had no hesitation. We were full of ideas and were eager to use them.<sup>15</sup>

11 Quoted in Barbara Ozieblo, *Susan Glaspell*, Chapel Hill/London, U of North Carolina P, 2000, p.67.

12 W. Whitman, *Bread and Circuses*, *op. cit.*, pp.35-36.

13 Brenda Murphy, *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2005, p. xv.

14 A print by Marguerite Zorach would in fact be used on the Provincetown Players’ posters and playbills.

15 William Zorach, *Art is my Life* New York, World Publishing, 1967, p.42.

Zorach admits that their participation gave way to the “first modern and abstract plays ever put on in New York.”<sup>16</sup> It is thus unquestionable that the success of both projects relied on enlisting incredibly diverse people, who for different reasons were eager to experiment with theatre but had lacked the opportunity. But these successes were also possible because, as Glaspell adds in her typescript: “Almost at once something else [was] evident—people of this country [were] also hungry for theatre.”<sup>17</sup> Glaspell’s remark, that there was a potential audience in the 1930s, echoes the same awaiting audience that welcomed the Provincetown Players, as made clear in *The Road to the Temple*: “The spectators were part of the Players, for how could it have been done without the feeling that came from them, without that sense of them there, waiting, ready to share, giving.”<sup>18</sup>



1. Wharf Theatre, Provincetown, Massachusetts. Carl Van Vechten, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten Collection.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.46.

<sup>17</sup> S. Glaspell, “Typewritten Notes for Speeches and Articles,” art. cit., n.p.

<sup>18</sup> *Ead.*, *The Road to the Temple*, *op. cit.*, p.205.

Hungry theatre workers and hungry audiences needed orchestrations by the right kind of provider, and in Glaspell's eyes Jig Cook and Hallie Flanagan were not just the right providers, but also rightful leaders. Cook and Flanagan shared two key traits of leadership that explained why they were able to organize such complex projects. First of all, Cook and Flanagan, as Glaspell's notes suggest, were dreamers in capital letters. In Glaspell's words, the Provincetown Players were Cook's "dream city:"

[T]he place into which creative life could come. And that is why the P.P. came to have importance beyond the people directly involved, and came to endure beyond its own existence the deep insistence of the dream of one man. It is one of the mysterious and beautiful things of the world—if you are true to the things you feel, across gulfs of experience you find in another the things he feels.<sup>19</sup>

**304** This fragment exemplifies how Glaspell mythologizes Cook and is significant in several ways. To start with, Glaspell highlights that the Provincetown Players came into existence because of Cook's dream, and that his dream was meant to encourage creativity. Second, that although the Provincetown Players terminated their existence, that dream has endured, suggesting that Cook's legacy is still palpable in those who joined the Players. And last but not least, that this dream is one Glaspell feels in another person, "across gulfs of experience," that is, in Hallie Flanagan. The dream Cook and Flanagan shared in Glaspell's view is that they both dreamt of a world where imagination—put onstage—would help reshape a better world. In his circular of the 1918-1919 season, a season which marked the closing down of other little theatres in New York City because of the war, Cook wrote:

One faculty, we know, is going to be of vast importance to the half-destroyed world—indispensable for its rebuilding—the faculty of creative imagination. That spark of it which has given this group of ours such life and meaning as we have is not so insignificant that we should now let it die. The social justification which we feel to be valid now for the makers and players of plays is that they shall help keep alive in the world the light of imagination. Without it the wreck of the world that was cannot be cleared away and the new world shaped.<sup>20</sup>

In *Arena*, Hallie Flanagan uses imagery similar to Cook's to express her belief that "theatre can oppose against destructive forces [...] against the death forces of ignorance,

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>20</sup> George Cram Cook, "The Playwrights' Theatre. Seasons 1916-1922," Beinecke Library, Yale Collection of American Literature, n.d, n.p.



greed, fear, and prejudice [...] theatre is a life force.”<sup>21</sup> As did Cook, Flanagan also saw theatre as a way to move people to action: “Drama, through rhythmic speech, dynamic movement and contagious listening, can influence human thought and lead to human action.”<sup>22</sup> Cook and Flanagan tirelessly believed in the power of theatre as an educational tool that could improve society.

Within this dream of reshaping the world and stirring up life through theatre, Cook and Flanagan performed a fundamental role, the second trait Glaspell sees as pivotal in theatre leaders: they had the gift to inspire others to do great things. In Glaspell’s words, Cook had the ability to “inspire—urge—bully even—until people around him would find in themselves what they had not known was there.”<sup>23</sup> Former colleagues from the Players also acknowledged his role as “the guiding spirit.”<sup>24</sup> And for Eleanor Fitzgerald, secretary of the Provincetown Players from 1918 till their end, “it was his inspiration that built up the Provincetown Theatre, his shoulders that carried the burden.”<sup>25</sup> Karen Malpede, in her portrayal of Flanagan in her groundbreaking *Women in Theatre: Compassion and Hope* (1983), depicts her as “an inspiring theorist, capable of infusing dedication, purpose, and unity of vision in people who had long been on relief as well as in young theater artists at the peak of their creative energy who were drawn to the Federal Theatre because it offered subsidy for a dream they also shared.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, others have defined Flanagan as “a visionary,” “eloquent and expansive,”<sup>27</sup> or as “the biggest boss of show business the world has ever known,” as the *New York Daily News* put it.<sup>28</sup> Eloquent and persuasive she was, for she convinced Glaspell to leave her Massachusetts farm home, to drop her half-finished novel and to board a train to Chicago to join the Federal Theatre.<sup>29</sup>

21 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Limelight, 1985, p.373.

22 John O’Connor and Lorraine Brown (eds.), *The Federal Theatre Project. “Free, Adult, Uncensored,”* London, Methuen, 1980, p.25.

23 S. Glaspell, “Typewritten Notes for Speeches and Articles”, art. cit., n.p.

24 G.T. Tanselle, “George Cram Cook and the Poetry of Living, with a Checklist,” *Books at Iowa*, no.24, 1976, pp.3-37.

25 Louis Weizenkorn, “George Cram Cook”, *New York World*, January 20, 1924, n.p.

26 Karen Malpede, *Women in Theatre*, New York, Drama Books, 1983, p.179.

27 Pauline Hahn, “Hallie Flanagan: Practical Visionary,” in Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (eds.), *Women in American Theatre*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 1987, p.206.

28 W. Whitman, *Bread and Circuses*, op. cit., p.25.

29 A.R. Crews, “Susan Glaspell and the Federal Theatre”, art. cit., p.3.



2. George Cram Cook in Greenwich Village, *ca.* 1916.

Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library



3. Hallie Flanagan, director of the WPA Federal Theatre Project. Created *ca.* 1939.  
Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress

A third significant memory of Cook that Glaspell could have found in Flanagan is that the passion they put into their projects was only equal to their disregard of pecuniary benefits, as different as their contexts were. The Provincetown Players started with a budget of \$320. They had saved \$80 through the 1916 summer season at their fragile Wharf Theatre in Provincetown; they asked their newly-constituted members to contribute what they could—8 members provided \$30 each—and Cook spent practically this amount in renting, equipping, and embellishing the parlor floor space at 139 MacDougal Street, the first, and pretty Spartan, New York theatre of the Provincetown Players. The Constitution of the group stated that only the president and secretary would receive a salary,<sup>30</sup> but exceptions were made to pay design and technical staff, some directors and, starting in the 1919-1920 season, actors.<sup>31</sup> Flanagan's monetary context was necessarily different. One of the first questions Mr. Hopkins asked Flanagan was "Can you spend money?" warning her that "It's not easy. It takes a lot of nerve to put your signature down on a piece of paper when it means that the government of the United States is going to pay out a million dollars to the unemployed in Chicago," and that there was the risk of being accused of "wasting the taxpayers' money."<sup>32</sup> Although Flanagan had a much more generous budget, over 46 million dollars,<sup>33</sup> one of the premises was that "A small percentage (not to exceed 10%) of labor costs [could be allocated] for production costs, depending on the nature of the project."<sup>34</sup> But as Cook had said, and as Glaspell quotes in her notes, "Money cannot create a thing like this—it is born of the spirit."<sup>35</sup> Financial shortage redirected the experimental nature of the Players and indeed helped determine their success. As indicated in their first circular, they had been created "to afford an opportunity for actors, producers, scenic and costume-designers to experiment with a stage of extremely simple resources—it being the idea of the PLAYERS that elaborate settings are unnecessary to bring out the essential qualities of a good play."<sup>36</sup> Hence, they turned what could seem a handicap into a benefit and exploited the use of single settings, resorted to evocative language and recycled their sceneries. In sum, they favored imagination. In a similar way and given that the Federal Theatre budget was

30 Provincetown Players, "Constitution" (1916), Provincetown Players Scrapbook and Clippings Scrapbook, Billy Rose Theatre Collection for the Performing Arts, New York Public Library, n.p.

31 Edna Kenton, "The Provincetown Players and the Playwrights' Theatre 1915-1922," *Eugene O'Neill Review*, vol.21, no.1-2, 1997, p.65, 106.

32 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.26.

33 E. Osborne, *Staging the People*, *op. cit.*, p.4.

34 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.30.

35 S. Glaspell, "Typewritten Notes for Speeches and Articles," *op. cit.*, n.p.

36 G. C. Cook, "The Playwrights' Theatre. Seasons 1916-1922," *art. cit.*, n.p.



4. Members of the Provincetown Players setting up the stage for O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff* at the Playwrights' Theatre (1916). The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

mainly meant to cover salaries, Flanagan found it essential to “try for telegraphic methods of communicating and evoking ideas and emotions.”<sup>37</sup> Besides trying to establish a practical exchange system among theatres that would enable the circulation of sceneries and costumes, which did not work out, Flanagan made a call that vividly echoes the Provincetown Players’ first circular:

In January 1938, I wrote a letter to actors designers, and producers of the FTP in which I again urged them to re-think the whole matter of staging, of substituting light and dynamic movements for cumbersome scenery [...] we must have inexpensive and expressive scenery [...] the stage should [...] try to develop] the living body of the actor [...] Like architecture, the stage should emphasize its own special materials—three-dimensional movement of three-dimensional bodies; voice, individual and choric: light and its effect on both movement and sound; and an audience with which a connection can and must be made.<sup>38</sup>

37 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.321.

38 *Ibid.*

The call was heard, and “designers and lighting experts moved away from lavish sets and developed settings that relied on abstract space and symbolic realism,”<sup>39</sup> exactly what the Players had done 20 years earlier.



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5. Scene from the Federal Theatre Project production of O’Neill’s *One-Act Plays of the Sea* at the Lafayette Theatre (Oct. 1937-Jan. 1938), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library: “Mr. Neil’s Barn,” The New York Public Library Digital Collections, 1937 (note the simplicity of the scenography and the similarities with the Provincetown Players’ production above)

The belief that the job was “immeasurably more important than money,”<sup>40</sup> as Flanagan put it, liberated both Cook and Flanagan from the box office—and neither of them had undertaken the challenge for personal gain. Flanagan confided that her Federal Theatre salary was less than she was earning at Vassar College,<sup>41</sup> and Cook had a salary of \$15 a week.<sup>42</sup> Such personal and professional disregard of financial success is hard to find in the theatre world. As O’Connor and Brown have stated, the Federal Theatre Project was not “tied to the box office,”<sup>43</sup> and, regardless of external pressures, as Karen Malpede has noted, Flanagan “never opted for quick or easy commercial

39 J. O’Connor and L. Brown (eds.), *The Federal Theatre Project*, *op. cit.*, p.7.

40 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.24.

41 *Ibid.*, p.24.

42 Provincetown Players, “Constitution,” *art. cit.*, n.p.

43 J. O’Connor and L. Brown (eds.), *The Federal Theatre Project*, *op. cit.*, p.7.

success, never diluted her vision to serve the greed of Mammon.”<sup>44</sup> In like manner, Cook never surrendered to the box office. This is clear from the fact that no invitations were given to critics in exchange for reviews that would advertise their plays and that Cook organized the theatre as a club. As he proudly stated in one of his circulars: “Thanks to our subscription audiences, which have so steadily financed our seasons in advance, we have never faced the necessity of choosing plays with an ear to so-called ‘popular appeal’ or with an eye to box office receipts.”<sup>45</sup> Circular after circular, Cook meticulously remembered to add his membership invitation and a reminder to acquire tickets and to bring friends along. Being to some extent freed from the box office, Cook’s and Flanagan’s task could be much more idealistic, but this meant they needed to work with people who would share and nourish such idealism.

Glaspell found in Flanagan a leader who understood that the only way to sustain her project was by basing it on a sense of community, a principle that brought her back to the early days of the Provincetown Players. In her notes, Glaspell quotes how Cook, helped by Neith Boyce, formulated their *modus operandi*: “One man cannot produce drama. True drama is born only of one feeling animating all the members of the clan—a feeling shared by all and expressed by the few for all.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Cook envisioned the Players as a “beloved community of life givers” where individual gifts and talents would seek the perfection of the group.<sup>47</sup> Flanagan also turned to poetry to make her call for individual talents to emerge and unite for the success of her theatre. In her case, she quoted W.H. Auden’s lines, uttered by the Chorus in the play he co-wrote with Christopher Isherwood, *The Dog Beneath His Skin, or Where Is Francis* (1935):

The precision of your instruments and the skill of your designers is unparalleled:  
Unite.  
Your knowledge and your power are capable of infinite extension:  
Act. [...]  
To each his need; from each his power.<sup>48</sup>

44 K. Malpede, *Women in Theatre*, *op. cit.*, p.179.

45 E. Kenton, “The Provincetown Players and the Playwrights’ Theatre 1915-1922,” *art. cit.*, p.143.

46 S. Glaspell, “Typewritten Notes for Speeches and Articles,” *art. cit.*, n.p.

47 Quoted in Robert Károly Sarlós, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players. Theatre in Ferment*, Amherst., U of Massachusetts P, 1982, p.131.

48 Quoted in H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.204.

Auden's lines, later attributed to Marx by detractors of the Federal Theatre Project,<sup>49</sup> were indeed meant to encourage playwrights, designers, directors and actors to do their best: a direct appeal to their creative drives to work for a communal project. These romantic notions of communities that would put individual talents for the benefit of the group also translated into non-romantic, but realistic notions, such as the fact that, in both cases, members had to donate their own money to produce their plays. The Provincetown Players' scenery and costumes many times consisted of pieces of furniture the Players had at home and of their own garments. And as Flanagan remembers in *Arena*, many Federal Theatre Project members spent their own money out of the "devotion to the job."<sup>50</sup> This fact denotes that those deeply involved in these projects firmly believed in them and in their leaders, and that being part of a community of life givers that would also feed the hungry was sufficient retribution for devoting their time and money to such projects.

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It must be noted that if Glaspell could find these parallels between Cook and Flanagan it is because they shared a common theatrical background that informed the way they envisioned their projects. Both were deeply inspired by ancient Greek drama. Once his adventure with the Players was over, Cook, who called himself a "Greek Thoreau," tried to pursue his ideal theatre in Delphi.<sup>51</sup> Only his death put an end to his Delphi Players and a grand pageant that would involve shepherds and villagers in staging Greek history, a performance that would inspire the Delphic Festivals years later. Furthermore, Cook wrote *The Athenian Women*, an anti-war play similar to Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* produced by the Players in April 1918. Cook's belief in the transcendental power of *Lysistrata* became more vivid in the Greco-Turkish post-war context, leading him to muse over the idea that if people had been moved to the quick by *Lysistrata*, the world order today would be different: "If two thousand three hundred and forty years ago that play of Aristophanes which was a prayer, had been answered, if women had been equal to that poet's vision—then Europe-America-today would be built, not on Roman law and order and immoral imperialism, but on Greek philosophy and poetry and art and freedom."<sup>52</sup> During his time in Greece, Cook started translating his play into modern Greek. Upon his sudden death in 1924, Glaspell arranged with Leandrus Palamas for the publication of Cook's play in a bilingual (English-Greek) edition. A young poet called C. Carthaios completed Jig's unfinished translation.<sup>53</sup>

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49 *Ibid.*, p.204.

50 *Ibid.*, p.34.

51 Linda Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell*, Oxford/New York, Oxford UP, 2005, p.279-280.

52 S. Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*, *op. cit.*, p.317.

53 B. Ozieblo, *Susan Glaspell*, *op. cit.*, p.225.



Ten years after Cook's death Hallie Flanagan visited Delphi. She also felt astounded by the magnitude of its theatre, its capacity to move people from all the country to come and see plays marked by their timely essence. In her own words, these plays "were of their own time and country."<sup>54</sup> Flanagan's recollection of how she would go to the theatre of Delphi with her husband, Greek Professor Philip Haldane Davis, just sit there, reading inscriptions in the theatre, and then going to town to drink *ouzo* and talk to villagers, captivated by the immensity of Greek drama and Greek culture,<sup>55</sup> echo the later chapters of Glaspell's *The Road to the Temple*. Glaspell's words also talk of the luring mystery provoked by the ruins and their inscriptions, and of the noisy, cheerful and at the same time inspiring drinking sprees Cook shared with the villagers.



6. Ruins of the theatre, Delphi (Greece). Noelia Hernando-Real, 2008

Besides this Greek connection that surely Glaspell found romantically appealing, Cook and Flanagan were transformed by the influence of another theatre well-known for encouraging plays of their time and country: the Irish Abbey Players. The Abbey Players "were deeply rooted in the realism of Irish life," and their plays showed their "effort to create a national theatre that had both artistic and social aims."<sup>56</sup> Sponsored

54 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.4.

55 *Ibid.*, p.4.

56 Adele Heller, "The New Theatre," in Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick (eds.), 1915. *The Cultural Moment*, New Brunswick (NJ), Rutgers UP, 1991, p.221.

by financial lawyer and art-lover John Quinn, Lady Gregory's Abbey Players toured the United States in 1911-1912, producing plays and also giving lectures.<sup>57</sup> Cook attended one of the Abbey Players' performances in Chicago, and their impact was direct: "Quite possibly there would have been no Provincetown Players had there not been Irish Players. What [Cook] saw done for Irish life he wanted for American life."<sup>58</sup> Provincetown Players scholar Brenda Murphy has elaborated on this influence:

The Irish Players, with their amateur origins, their dedication to drama as a literary art form, their cultural nationalism, their refusal to embrace theatrical convention, and their determination to break new ground in a broad spectrum of drama [...] provided a strong precursor and direct model for the Provincetown Players. [...] The Provincetown Players were carrying out an American version of the Abbey Players' mission.<sup>59</sup>

**314** In turn, Flanagan was drawn to the Abbey Players under the auspices of a Guggenheim Fellowship. In 1926-1927, she started a comparative analysis of the tendencies in European drama and theatre as regards traditional staging and new developments in writing, acting, designing, lighting and directing. The study of the Abbey Players, together with other theatres, schools and methods, convinced Flanagan that "rigid adherence to any one school of cult hampered theatre, and that every play dictated its own terms as to form of acting and as to design."<sup>60</sup> What she does not add, but seems pretty obvious, is that the Abbey Players, as had happened to the Provincetown Players, also animated Flanagan's drive to inspire the writing of American plays and the creation of a national theatre.

This transposition of the Abbey Players' ideal to American soil makes the Provincetown Players pioneers in US theatre history in their zeal to create what they called "native" drama. As Edna Kenton muses in her history of the Provincetown Players, "we lamentably lacked a native drama—'native' meaning always that which is spontaneous, free, liberated and liberating, flowing through and from and again into the people and nation concerned."<sup>61</sup> This is how, also among other little theatres, "the Provincetown aim was different; it was unique. To found a native stage for native playwrights, to maintain in the heart of New York a little laboratory for dramatic

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57 Steven Watson, *Strange Bedfellows*, New York, Abbeville Press, 1991, p.174.

58 S. Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*, *op. cit.*, p.180.

59 B. Murphy, *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity*, *op. cit.*, p.4.

60 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.4.

61 E. Kenton, "The Provincetown Players and the Playwrights' Theatre 1915-1922", *art. cit.*, p.18.

experiments—could it be done or couldn't it?"<sup>62</sup> Their "Resolutions" open with: "[I]t is the primary object of the Provincetown Players to encourage the writing of American plays of real artistic, literary and dramatic—as opposed to Broadway—merit."<sup>63</sup> And this search, to "cause better American plays to be written,"<sup>64</sup> as Glaspell puts it in her notes, never ended. Their first circular insisted that "During the summer of 1916, eleven original one-act plays by American authors had their first production," the second that there ought to "be one little theatre for American writers to play with" and even in their farewell circular, Cook underlined that: "During our eight seasons we have produced ninety-three plays by forty-seven American playwrights."<sup>65</sup> The Federal Theatre Project numbers were also remarkable: over 1,400 plays by 100 hitherto unknown American playwrights. On their own scales, both projects fostered new American plays; or in Flanagan's words, "a theatre which should reflect our country, its history, its present problems, its diverse regions and populations."<sup>66</sup>

Although the Abbey Players animated the Players' and the Federal Theatre's creation of American theatre, the nationalism behind projects derives from George Pierce Baker, who first promoted the radical transformation of American drama. After studying German theatre and drama—especially Reinhardt's innovative use of scenery and lighting—and meeting Oscar Wilde, Edward Gordon Craig, W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, Baker had the firm determination to help transform theatre in his country. He succeeded in disseminating his ideas through his lectures across the United States and his course English 47 at Harvard. For example, in his well-known lectures "The Development of Drama in the Nineteenth Century," "The American Drama of To-Day," and "The Modern Drama," Baker emphasized the necessary link between theatre and life, the role of drama as "a reflex of the thought and conduct of the time," and the specific need to "remodel" and "readjust" American drama "to the conditions of this and the next century." Such remodeling, Baker wrote, implied a careful study of America to write about it.<sup>67</sup> Far from the escapist fashion of Broadway plays, Baker advised his students: "Write what you know to be true about your characters, and write nothing that you do not know to be true," "Get your material from what you see

62 *Ibid.*, p.27.

63 Provincetown Players, "Resolutions" (1916), Provincetown Players Scrapbook and Clippings Scrapbook, Billy Rose Theatre Collection for the Performing Arts, New York Public Library, n.p.

64 S. Glaspell, "Typewritten Notes for Speeches and Articles", *op. cit.*, n.p.

65 G. C. Cook, "'The Playwrights' Theatre.' Seasons 1916-1922", *op. cit.*, n.p.

66 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.45.

67 Quoted in Wisner Payne Kinne, *George Pierce Baker and the American Theatre*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard UP, 1954, pp.67-69.

about you.”<sup>68</sup> Among his students, future leading playwrights in US history are found, students who would also be members of the Provincetown Players and the Federal Theatre Project. Eugene O’Neill, Hutchins Hapgood, Robert Edmond Jones, Kenneth Macgowan and John Reed were among Baker’s students. Hallie Flanagan herself acknowledged the effect that working as “student and production assistant of Professor George Pierce Baker at Harvard in 1923-24” had on her and on her later experimental theatres at Grinnell College and at Vassar College,<sup>69</sup> an effect also noticeable in her work for the Federal Theatre Project.

Another intersection between the Provincetown Players and the Federal Theatre Project is Broadway, which acted as the antagonist determining their creations and developments. In claiming that they wanted a theatre “opposed to Broadway,” the Provincetown Players opted for non-commercialism and experimentation, a conceptualization that resonates as the motor behind the Federal Theatre plays. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that both projects eventually integrated Broadway into their own schemes. For the Provincetown Players, Broadway meant their end. The decision whether to move successful plays—starting with O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*—to Broadway constituted an insurmountable breach in the Provincetown Players. The Federal Theatre Project, however, managed to cope with Broadway by both allying with and staying apart from it. Hallie Flanagan understood that the aim of the Federal Theatre Project was two-fold: to put people to work—and the more people, the better—and to foster US drama, and both were equally important. Thus, in *Arena* she confides: “I felt that however reluctant we might be to sacrifice a hit show, since we were set up to return people to private enterprise, this was not only permissible but to be encouraged.”<sup>70</sup> In their 1920-1921 season circular, Cook affirmed that: “The Provincetown Players are beginning to take their long plays to Broadway—some to succeed there, some to fail – but some of these writers have it in them to write plays that cannot be given there—plays too good for that movie-invaded stage.”<sup>71</sup> These words suggest a suspicion that Broadway could be detrimental to their mission. And indeed for Cook, Glaspell, and other members of the Provincetown Players, sacrificing hit shows to Broadway should not have been permitted as this prompted, they thought, a commercialization of their theatre and an end to their experimental nature. In Edna Kenton’s words:

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68 Quoted in Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, *O’Neill*, New York/London, Applause, 2000, p.431.

69 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.7.

70 *Ibid.*, p.146.

71 G. C. Cook, “‘The Playwrights’ Theatre.’ Seasons 1916-1922,” *art. cit.*, n.p.

[P]roblems began [...] when offers came in from half a dozen Broadway managers to take *The Emperor Jones* uptown. No wonder we fell, with *The Emperor Jones*, into the trap that seemed a garden of flowers but whose steel teeth never unclosed on us once we had fallen. Again it was a many-edged problem, whether or not to put the play on Broadway. For the first time we had a chance to make some money—perhaps a great deal. [...] As the matter turned out, what we gave away, with our decision to go in for uptown producing, was nothing less than the Provincetown Players, the Playwrights' Theatre and the experimental, native stage unique in America.<sup>72</sup>

Years later, the Federal Theatre Project proved Cook, Glaspell and Kenton were mistaken, that transferring plays to Broadway was compatible with being independent from it. As Osborne has noted: "Though the Federal Theatre Project repeatedly demonstrated that it could succeed on Broadway's terms, it instead sought to provide an alternative to Broadway."<sup>73</sup> That is, it was possible to use commercial theatres as a stage for economic reasons while maintaining experimental units.

Their self-conceptualization as laboratories is indeed another foundational principle shared by the Provincetown Players and the Federal Theatre Project. In her opening address at the Federal Theatre Production Conference in Poughkeepsie in July 1936, Flanagan insisted on the idea of "experiment." She straightforwardly claimed that: "The greatest danger from which the American theater had always suffered" was "imitativeness."<sup>74</sup> Consequently, another goal of the Federal Theatre Project was, as Glaspell affirms in her notes, "to expand, as greatly as our imagination and talents will permit, the boundaries of theatre,"<sup>75</sup> adding that if the American plays they are looking for do not exist yet, "We shall have to work more closely with our dramatists."<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Francis Bosworth, director of the New York Play Bureau, explicitly defined the Federal Theatre Project as a "laboratory theatre." He summarized the Federal Theatre Project objectives in bullet points: plays by young and new playwrights, no taboos on subject matter, form, or theme, plays had to be written for the audience, and they had to be timely.<sup>77</sup> This declaration of intentions, written in 1936, echoes

72 E. Kenton, "The Provincetown Players and the Playwrights' Theatre 1915-1922", *op. cit.*, p.129.

73 E. Osborne, *Staging the People*, *op. cit.*, p.183.

74 Quoted in K. Malpede, *Women in Theatre*, *op. cit.*, p.183.

75 Susan Glaspell, "Typewritten Notes for Speeches and Articles," *art. cit.*, n.p.

76 Quoted in K. Malpede, *Women in Theatre*, *op. cit.*, p.184.

77 Francis Bosworth, "The Playreading Department," and "What Type of New Plays Does the Play Bureau Want?," Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress, respectively p.6 and pp.4-5.

the Resolutions the Provincetown Players had signed in Provincetown at the end of the summer of 1916. That summer, the Provincetown Players resolved that “it shall be the duty of active members to discover and encourage new plays and playwrights.”<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, the very name of their New York Theatre, the Playwrights’ Theatre—suggested by O’Neill—embodied their experimental nature: theirs was to be a theatre where playwrights could experiment with form and subject matter as they aimed at creating new American plays.

In their search for plays by American playwrights, the Provincetown Players and the Federal Theatre Project shared their call but differed in their methods. On the one hand, the *modus operandi* of the Players predates that of the Federal Theatre: authors had absolute freedom as far as subject matter and form were concerned, and cooperation was sought. Their Resolutions highlighted that the author was to conceive not only the play, but also the production as they wanted, being assisted, as long as they desired so, by the President. All the resources would be at the authors’ disposal, and there would be no interference whatsoever. In this way, for example, the Provincetown Players’ 1917-1918 circular states: “We mean to go on giving artists of the theatre—playwrights, actors, coaches, designers of set and costume—a chance to work out their ideas in freedom.”<sup>79</sup> Also predating the Federal Theatre’s reading committees, the Provincetown Players understood their usefulness in working with potential authors. Plays were selected for production by vote. Quite amateurishly, at the beginning all plays were read aloud and all active members voted upon their reading.<sup>80</sup> Just a month later, they decided that not all members had to read all the plays and that voting would be left for a later meeting. Susan Glaspell was one of those members of the reading committee who tirelessly met the group’s Resolutions, carefully reading submitted plays till the dissolution of the group, a job that trained her well for the work of the Federal Theatre Project.<sup>81</sup> The Federal Theatre Project, counting on a larger staff, worked this system out much more efficiently. For example, as Francis Bosworth put forward the functioning of the New York Playreading Department, a submitted play was given to one first reader who would write a report and assign it to a more suitable reader. The positive report of these two readers would enable the passage of the script to

78 Provincetown Players, “Resolutions” (1916), art. cit., n.p.

79 G. C. Cook, “‘The Playwrights’ Theatre.’ Seasons 1916-1922,” art. cit., n.p.

80 Provincetown Players, “Minutes,” Provincetown Players Scrapbook and Clippings Scrapbook, Billy Rose Theatre Collection for the Performing Arts, New York Public Library, n.p.

81 E. Kenton, “The Provincetown Players and the Playwrights’ Theatre 1915-1922,” art. cit., p.46.

a playreading committee of six. If approved, the play would enter a list of recommended scripts to be sent to directors, and if rejected, it would be given a fourth reading to provide suggestions for the author.<sup>82</sup> As seen, and though on a different scale, both the Provincetown Players and the Federal Theatre Project understood that the kind of new American drama they were looking for would not emanate naturally, but that it had to be facilitated by their organizations. At the time of announcing the one-year interim that would be their factual end, Cook complained:

TO OUR PLAYWRIGHTS. We have a frank word to say. Founded for you, committed to the production of your plays only and with a steady flood of manuscripts almost submerging us, we have faced notwithstanding, season after season, a discouraging lack of plays worth doing. [...] We have given two playwrights to America, Eugene O'Neill and Susan Glaspell: we could have given a dozen by now if the other ten had appeared. We have looked for them eagerly and we have not found those among you offering us a sustained stream of freely experimental work in new dramatic forms.<sup>83</sup>

Distance allows us to realize that perhaps one shortcoming of the Provincetown Players was precisely that they should have worked with playwrights more closely. Though some networks existed, as for example, Glaspell and O'Neill read each other's works, which might partially explain their status as the leading voices in modern American drama, a more systematized form of collaboration could have given the Provincetown Players a longer and better life. For "to cause better American plays to be written," as Glaspell summarizes the Provincetown Players' main aim in her notes, is a goal too great to leave in the hands of fate. Providing the space for these plays to be produced was an important step the Players genuinely took, but earnestly working with playwrights to make these plays happen is the unique success of the Federal Theatre Project. With the Federal Theatre Project, Glaspell had the chance to develop her mentoring abilities.

Glaspell is always extremely succinct when referring to her own merits and achievements. In her notes for speeches on the Provincetown Players and the Federal Theatre, the very last page starts with a brief: "What brought me here,"<sup>84</sup> followed by "the belief that now is a time for plays to be written from the middle west."<sup>85</sup> Humble as she always was, her other notes on this topic avoid referring to herself as "I," using always

82 F. Bosworth, "The Playreading Department," art. cit., p.6.

83 G. C. Cook, "The Playwrights' Theatre. Seasons 1916-1922", art. cit., n.p.

84 The analysis of the Midwest is indeed a key theme in Glaspell's oeuvre (see Marcia Noe, "Susan Glaspell's Analysis of the Midwestern Character," *Books at Iowa*, vol.27, no.1, 1977, pp.3-20).

85 S. Glaspell, "Typewritten Notes for Speeches and Articles," art. cit., n.p.

“we,” perhaps also a reminiscence of the beloved community of life-givers she was reviving in Chicago. What she did for the Federal Theatre Project and how she did it was an extension of her work for the Provincetown Players. To start with, she tirelessly kept looking for good plays, sending numerous letters to writer and editor Barrett H. Clark, to R.W. Cowden—director of the Hopwood Awards for drama at the University of Michigan—, and to E.C. Mabie, professor and director of the theatre at the University of Iowa. Next, faithful to her work for the Provincetown Players, Glaspell went on fostering innovative, experimental work, and, very specifically, according to Arnold Sundgaard, she tried “to encourage writers whose plays were rejected.”<sup>86</sup> Likewise, she revitalized and improved the play reading system used with the Players. She gathered a group of readers, including Sundgaard, playwright and actress Alice Gerstenberg, University of Iowa graduate Fanny McConnell, who later became executive director of the Negro People’s Theater, and writer Sidney Blackstone, assigning to each two plays to read a day. Her instructions were that they had to read the plays carefully and write a commentary that would be returned to the author.<sup>87</sup> Reviving the times of the First Red Scare she had lived through with the Players, as the chair of the Midwestern Play Bureau, one of her greatest challenges was to deal with censorship. Her defense of Theodore Ward’s *Big White Fog* (1938), a play on the polemical figure of Marcus Garvey, was notable. Equally fierce was her unsuccessful defense of Edwin S. Self’s *The Great Spirit*, a play about the betrayal of Native American leader James Logan by land-hungry whites—indeed a theme she had used in her three-act *Inheritors* back in 1921. And finally, her time with the Provincetown Players surely had taught her how to sail across dangerous financial streams. One first significant lesson, and because her work for the Provincetown Players as a playwright, actress, playreader and counselor was always for free, was that anyone working for the theatre deserved fair wages; only then could those plays for the people and about the people be justly written by the people. A second vital lesson she had also learnt was how to survive when money is short. In spite of the generous budget assigned to the Chicago division, Glaspell noted that a significant difficulty she encountered was “the small sum that can go for advertising,” putting it in a humorous way: “Running a theatre without advertising is like winking at your girl in the dark. You know what you’re doing but she doesn’t.”<sup>88</sup> Glaspell’s solution echoes Cook’s circulars. Her notes include a paragraph she would

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86 George Kazakoff, *Dangerous Theatre*, New York, Peter Lang, 1989, p.233.

87 B. Ozieblo, *Susan Glaspell*, *op. cit.*, p.255.

88 “Typewritten Notes for Speeches and Articles,” Federal Theatre Project Folder, Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library, n.d., n.p.



include in her speeches and press releases which reads: “We offer you a season of rich entertainment in the theatre. It is your theatre and we want your support. Come and see our plays and tell your friends about them. Let us make this a season we can all be proud of and then, with the audience we’re building up, go on to bigger things.”<sup>89</sup>

The time Glaspell worked for the Federal Theatre is indeed a time to be proud of. According to Marcia Noe, by June 1937, 600 plays had been submitted in answer to Glaspell’s insistent call for manuscripts,<sup>90</sup> and the Chicago division produced some of the most exciting plays seen during the existence of the Federal Theatre Project: all black *Swing Mikado*, the afore-mentioned *Big White Fog*, or Arnold Sundgaard’s *Spirochete*. Inspired by the revival of O’Neill’s *The Straw*, which indeed had premiered at the Provincetown Players’ Playwrights’ Theatre in 1918, Glaspell prompted Sundgaard to write *Spirochete*, a milestone in the history of the Federal Theatre Project, that for many justified its very existence: “*Spirochete* demonstrated that a federally funded, national theatre could create socially vital, locally relevant theatre.”<sup>91</sup> Hopefully, further research on the direct impact that Glaspell’s direction had in the achievements of the Chicago division in those years will show that her influence is greater than has been suggested by scholars so far.

In conclusion, Glaspell’s unpublished notes on the Federal Theatre Project evidence the lasting legacy of the Provincetown Players. Despite being a local experiment, first in Provincetown and later in New York City, the scope, geography, and accomplishments of the Provincetown Players were far more wide-ranging than has been previously acknowledged. Glaspell’s notes, and the present discussion add up to the previous personal stories of Provincetown Players that worked for the Federal Theatre Project, such as those by Jasper Deeter, James Light, Eleanor Fitzgerald, Mike Gold, Alfred Kreyborg or Cleon Throckmorton,<sup>92</sup> helping to provide a more complete history. As evidenced here, a new understanding of the depth and richness of the Federal Theatre Project is, at the same time, a celebration of the legacy of the Provincetown Players. The proved parallels regarding the aims of the Players and the Federal Theatre Project and the means to do so, involving organizational decisions and the use of financial resources, allows one to regard the Provincetown Players as an early experiment later continued by the Federal Theatre Project. The dissection of Glaspell’s notes, together with Flanagan’s and Cook’s own writings, suggests that the many similarities

89 S. Glaspell, “Typewritten Notes for Speeches and Articles,” art. cit., n.p.

90 M. Noe, *Susan Glaspell*, op. cit., p.68.

91 E. Osborne, *Staging the People*, op. cit., p.48.

92 Robert Károlyi Sarlós, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players*, op. cit., pp.165-166, p.131.

found in both organizations dwell in the intrinsic similarities found in their leaders. Furthermore, the notes also encapsulate Glaspell, Cook and Flanagan's dream-like vision of theatrical communities where individuals offer the best they have to reshape not only better artistic forms, but also better worlds; an encouraging vision that still sounds today as firm foundations for lasting theatrical adventures.

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## NOTICE

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## ABSTRACT

Susan Glaspell directed the Midwestern Play Bureau from September 1936 to April 1938. Glaspell, an experienced playwright and fiction writer, confided that she hesitated when Hallie Flanagan invited her to take over this work, but eventually accepted. Having been a foundational part of the Provincetown Players, the little theatre that had redirected the route of modern American drama in the 1910s and 1920s, Glaspell recognized in the FTP another milestone in American theatre history. This essay takes up Glaspell biographers' suggestion that Glaspell possibly saw in the FTP an opportunity to continue the legacy of the Provincetown Players. Now based on unpublished notes Glaspell wrote, this paper examines the many parallels between the Provincetown Players and the FTP, with a special emphasis on the similarities Glaspell found between Jig Cook and Hallie Flanagan, which prompted her to accept Flanagan's proposal, as well as on Glaspell's role within both organizations.

## KEYWORDS

Susan Glaspell, George Cram (Jig) Cook, Provincetown Players, Hallie Flanagan, Midwestern Play Bureau.

## RÉSUMÉ

Susan Glaspell a dirigé l'antenne du Midwest du FTP de septembre 1936 à avril 1938. Atrice de théâtre et écrivaine reconnue, Glaspell a confié avoir hésité lorsque Hallie Flanagan lui a proposé ce travail, mais elle a fini par accepter. Ayant contribué à la création des Provincetown Players, petit groupe qui a influencé la destinée du théâtre américain moderne dans les années 1910 et 1920, Glaspell a vu dans le FTP un nouveau jalon de l'histoire théâtrale américaine. Cet article se base sur les hypothèses des biographes de Glaspell, selon lesquelles l'atrice aurait vu dans le FTP une opportunité de poursuivre l'héritage des Provincetown Players. En se fondant sur des notes inédites de Glaspell, cet article analyse les nombreux parallèles entre les Provincetown Players et le FTP, en se focalisant plus particulièrement sur les ressemblances identifiées par Glaspell entre Jig Cook et Hallie Flanagan, ressemblances qui l'ont poussée à accepter la proposition de Flanagan. L'article revient également sur le rôle central de Glaspell dans ces deux expériences.

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## MOTS-CLÉS

Susan Glaspell, George Cram (Jig) Cook, *Provincetown Players*, Hallie Flanagan, Midwestern Play Bureau

# SUSAN GLASPELL AND THE MIDWEST PLAYWRIGHTS' BUREAU OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

*Linda Ben-Zvi*

*Colorado State and Tel Aviv Universities*

After several decades during which Susan Glaspell's name and plays faded from the annals of theatre history, contemporary theatre scholars have re-established her position as a pioneer in the development of modern American drama.<sup>1</sup> Her fifteen one-act and full-length plays are once again published,<sup>2</sup> studied, translated, and performed around the world; her role as co-founder of the Provincetown Players, the first theatre dedicated to producing indigenous American drama, acknowledged; and many of her fifty short stories and nine novels again back in print. However, one area of her extensive and varied career that has received little critical attention is her association with, and significant contributions to, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). Few have explored the period between September 1936 and May 1938, during which Glaspell served as head of the Midwest Playwrights' Bureau of the FTP. In the late 1980s, when I began the research for my Glaspell biography, the only study to mention the Glaspell/FTP connection was Marcia Noe's 1976 dissertation, the first doctorate written on Glaspell.<sup>3</sup> Even now, with the exception of Barbara Ozieblo's Glaspell biography and my own,<sup>4</sup> Glaspell scholars continue to concentrate for the most part on Glaspell's work with the Provincetown Players: writing eleven plays for the company, acting in several of these works, and overseeing administrative details during its seven-year history.<sup>5</sup> However, as this essay illustrates, the same impetus that drove Glaspell during

- 1 For information on Glaspell, see [Susan Glaspell International Society](#).
- 2 See Linda Ben-Zvi and J. Ellen Gainor (eds.), *Susan Glaspell: The Complete Plays*, Jefferson, NC, McFarland, 2010.
- 3 Marcia Noe, *A Critical Biography of Susan Glaspell*, PhD. Dissertation, U of Iowa, 1976; and *Susan Glaspell*, Macomb (ILL), Western Illinois Monograph Series, 1983, pp.67-70.
- 4 Barbara Ozieblo, *Susan Glaspell*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2000, pp.252-266; and Linda Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell*, New York, Oxford UP, 2005, pp.265-269, the basis of the expanded and edited version appearing in this essay.
- 5 The original Provincetown Players ended in March 1922, when Glaspell and Cook left for a one-year sabbatical in Greece, which stretched to two years. After Cook's death in Delphi in 1924, the theatre reopened as the Provincetown Theatre under the leadership of Eugene O'Neill, Robert Edmond Jones, and Kenneth Macgowan, and produced international as well as American contemporary plays. In *Arena*, whenever Flanagan

her Players' period can be seen in her commitment to, and success with, the FTP: the desire to develop innovative forms of American drama; to expand theatrical and performative possibilities; to address contemporary social, cultural, and political issues; and to create characters with whom audiences can identify. Built on similar premises, it is not surprising that Glaspell and other associated with the Provincetown Players were drawn to the FTP, another pioneer attempt to enrich America through theatre.<sup>6</sup>

## A PIONEER PLAYWRIGHT FOR A PIONEER JOB

328 On April 8, 1935, the US Congress approved the establishment of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), designed for workers with specific skills and trades, who were presently unemployed and on relief, to return to work in their professions, paid by the government. Harry Hopkins was appointed to head this vast, innovative, and unprecedented national program. He in turn enlisted theatre professor Hallie Flanagan to devise a project whereby theatre practitioners presently receiving welfare might also return to work by producing plays in venues around the country for audiences to attend without pay or for a nominal charge. Hopkins described such a theatre project as “free, adult, [and] uncensored.” Four months later, Flanagan had come up with a plan designed to be “part of a tremendous re-thinking, re-building and re-dreaming of America,” and to function as “the new frontier in America.”<sup>7</sup>

Such idealistic words and aspirations must have resonated with Glaspell. An Iowan, like Hopkins and Flanagan, she grew up with stories of pioneer settlement and the spirit needed to challenge new frontiers. The Provincetown Players was a pioneer venture; so too were Glaspell's plays, short stories, and fiction, in which her protagonists—invariably women—struggle to escape limitations that hold them in place and seek new, freer lives. As Claire Archer proclaims in *The Verge* (1921), her most experimental play: “We need not be held in forms molded for us.”<sup>8</sup> The words echo a quotation by philosopher Alfred North Whitehead that Glaspell jotted down in a notebook during her FTP years: “the leap of the imagination reaching beyond what is then actual,”

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cites the Players, she is referring to the later Provincetown Theatre.

6 Players who worked for or whose plays were produced by the FTP include Jasper Deeter, Edna Ferber, Mike Gold, Alfred Kreymborg, Lawrence Langner, James Light, Pierre Loving, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Eugene O'Neill.

7 Quoted in John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown (eds.), *Free, Adult, Uncensored*, Washington, DC, New Republic Books, 1978, p.26.

8 Susan Glaspell, *The Verge*, in L. Ben-Zvi and J.E. Gainor (eds.), *Susan Glaspell: The Complete Plays*, op. cit., p.235.



to which she added “Adventure beyond the safety of the present.”<sup>9</sup> This pioneering spirit emboldened Glaspell to break with traditional forms of theatre, just as it drove Flanagan and the FTP to create a national American theatre movement, never before attempted in the country—and after.<sup>10</sup>

Toward this end, in the winter of 1936 Flanagan wrote to Glaspell inviting her to head the Chicago-based Midwest Playwrights' Bureau of the FTP. It was an excellent choice. Glaspell brought with her, as Flanagan surely knew, seven years of experience writing for and overseeing the Provincetown Players as well as her reputation as a playwright lauded in America and abroad, whose play *Alison's House* had received the 1931 Pulitzer Prize for drama. For Glaspell, it was an ideal job, and it came at an ideal time. Although she had left the Midwest twenty-three years earlier, it had never left her. As she told her friend Edmund Wilson: “It must have taken a strong hold of me in my early years. I've never ceased trying to figure out why it is as it is.”<sup>11</sup> She knew the Midwest area personally and had used the region's people, topography, habits, idioms and beliefs in many of her works, going so far as to set the house of the eponymous Alison/Emily Dickinson on the banks of the Mississippi. Flanagan's invitation also came at a difficult time in Glaspell's life. After the sudden death of her husband, George Cram “Jig” Cook, in Delphi, Greece in 1924, where they had been living, Glaspell returned to her home in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and soon after began an eight-year affair with journalist Norman Matson, seventeen years her junior. When that relationship ended in 1932, she was devastated. Always a disciplined writer, she was, for the first time in her career, unable to write. By taking up the position Flanagan offered, she could temporarily leave her own work and focus instead on a new challenge for which she was uniquely suited. It also allowed her to return once more to Chicago, which she knew well, had family, and had often used as the locale for several of her novels.

In September 1936, Glaspell began her new position, and her first concern was clarifying the scope of her work. The Provincetown Players had been a small, disorganized group with a constitution that none of the members actually followed. The FTP was a countrywide, hierarchical-heavy organization overseen by a subcommittee of the United States Congress, and —despite Hopkins wishful description—had the power to not only withhold funds but to censure plays they deemed controversial. Almost

9 Susan Glaspell, “*Norma Ashe* Holograph Notebook,” Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

10 In reaction to theatre closings because of Covid-19, [some call for a new FTP](#).

11 Susan Glaspell to Edmund Wilson, Edmund Wilson Papers, Beinecke Library, Collection of American Literature, Yale University.

immediately, Glaspell experienced the differences between the two organizations. It took eleven letters, written between September 24 and December 10, 1936 for her to make clear to FTP administrators that she did not have the staff to handle the bureaucratic workload the position demanded, which included registering plays received, securing venues for productions, overseeing all FTP programs in Illinois, and interacting with the national Play Reading bureaus. Instead, Glaspell indicated that her primary responsibilities should be to find manuscripts and published plays dealing with Midwestern themes, of interest to Midwestern audiences, or written by Midwestern authors; to work for the development of such plays in cooperation with the authors; and recommend the best scripts to be produced both regionally and nationally. Hiram Motherwell, her contact in the National office, agreed.

330 Realizing that an “ideal Midwest play” would not miraculously turn up among the 600 unsolicited manuscripts that arrived in her office the first year, Glaspell sent out numerous letters in order to find them. To publisher Barrett Clark she wrote: “If I can find some good plays from the soil or from the experiences of recent years, I will feel that we are doing something for the theatre in helping build it up through this part of the country.”<sup>12</sup> In response, he sent a rough manuscript by poet Edgar Lee Masters, which Glaspell found unworkable for the stage. When Professor E.C. Mabie<sup>13</sup> invited her to the opening of a new theatre laboratory built on his University of Iowa campus, she enthusiastically accepted the invitation, hoping to find original plays there. From those students she met, she selected Iowan Marcus Bach’s drama *Before These Walls* concerning a young postulate in a Trappist monastery in Kentucky, and Ellsworth Conkle’s *A Prologue to Glory*, describing the early life of Abraham Lincoln, a play that would be threatened with Congressional censorship, but eventually became one of the most successful FTP productions.<sup>14</sup> One of Mabie’s students whom Glaspell probably did not meet on her visit was Tennessee Williams, whose plays and sexual orientation

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12 Susan Glaspell to Barrett Clark, October 7, 1936, Barrett H. Clark Papers, Beinecke Library Rare Book and Manuscript Library Repository, Yale University.

13 Mabie had been one of the first people Flanagan enlisted to help organize a national theatre under the WPA. Toward that end, he wrote *A Plan for the Organization of the Regional Theatres in the United States*. Flanagan appointed him Regional Director for the Midwest; but in January 1936, he resigned after receiving no cooperation from local theatres (Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Benjamin Blom, 1940, p.22-24).

14 J. Parnell Thomas, Republican Member of Congress, found *Prologue to Glory* objectionable, arguing that Lincoln’s “battling with the politicians... is simply a propaganda play to prove that all politicians are crooked.” However, critic Burns Mantle countered: “If the Federal theatre had produced no other single drama this production of *Prologue to Glory* would doubly justify its history and all its struggles” (*ibid.*, p.173 and p.320).

Mabie was known to dislike. After Glaspell had left the program, Williams submitted *Candles in the Sun* and *The Fugitive Kind* to the FTP, two plays Mabie had ridiculed in class. Both were rejected.

Glaspell did make contact with another playwright later to be a luminary in American theatre: Arthur Miller. In 1937, University of Michigan Professor Kenneth Rowe asked her to serve as a reader for the Hopwood Prize, given each year for the best student play. She had dismissed the invitation but now accepted, hoping to find interesting plays to consider for the FTP. From the ten works submitted, she awarded first place to *Honors at Dawn* by the author “Corona,” the name Miller may have chosen to honor the typewriter on which he composed it. “A faulty play as it stands, but says something in feeling, and here too I found real possibilities in this author,”<sup>15</sup> she wrote to the committee. In a personal note, she indicated her desire to contact some of the young playwrights to see if they might be able to develop their works for production. For some reason she did not put Miller on her list. However, his second Hopwood-prize play awarded the next year, *They Too Arise*, had one performance in the Detroit Federal Theatre in October 1937.

Continuing her search for playwrights, Glaspell also wrote to Yale Professor William Eaton Pritchard, who had chaired the committee that awarded her the Pulitzer Prize for *Alison’s House*. Pritchard recommended Arnold Sundgaard, a Wisconsin Rockefeller Fellowship student, who had just graduated and returned to the Midwest. Glaspell immediately wrote to Sundgaard, asking if he had material to send. Instead of answering, Sundgaard, then unemployed with a wife and children to support, hitchhiked to Chicago and met Glaspell. “My immediate impression,” he wrote, “was of a rather frail and somewhat shy woman with the look of an English professor I had known at Wisconsin.”<sup>16</sup> Ten days later, after filing for welfare, a requisite for being accepted, he joined Glaspell’s play readers’ staff. It included Chicago playwright and novelist Alice Gerstenberg whose play *Overtones* (1913) was one of the first one-act expressionistic drama written by an American; University of Iowa graduate Fanny McConnell, who founded the Negro People’s Theater in Chicago in 1938, and later married Ralph Ellison, then part of the New York Federal Writers’ Project; and doctoral student in theatre Sidney Blackwell.

15 Susan Glaspell to R.W. Cowden, Hopwood Committee, May 14, 1937, Hopwood Papers, University of Michigan Archives.

16 Arnold Sundgaard, “Susan Glaspell and the Federal Theatre Revisited,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, vol.9, no.1, Winter 1997, pp.1-10. The following descriptions come from this article.

In his essay about working for the FTP, Sundgaard provides the most detailed description of the work of these readers under Glaspell's supervision. Each was expected to read two plays a day; and at their weekly meeting, which Sundgaard calls "a kind of post-graduate seminar," Glaspell requested that they say something positive and constructive about each work. As he quotes her: "Many [...] are new writers. If they are promising, we try to [...] help them get their plays ready for a production. If they won't do, we still try to offer criticism and suggestions." Sundgaard adds: "It would have been easy enough to dismiss [them] with a brief summary except for Susan's implicit admonishment that we not be cruel," a habit she had developed when she read submissions to the Provincetown Players.

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Since several in her group were playwrights themselves, Glaspell tried to interest them in writing an original work that would have a Midwest flavor. To stir their interest, at one meeting she brought in a photograph of a vast prairie field that she had clipped from the journal *Midwest*, hoping to inspire them to create the play she dreamed to discover. Sundgaard alone seemed moved by the image and embarked on writing a loose epic tracing the history of Western settlement from its mythic beginnings to the labor unrest the region was experiencing in the 1930s. She called his project *Midwest*, but Sundgaard eventually gave it the title *Everywhere I Roam*, borrowed from an earlier, abandoned play. Despite her enthusiasm for the work, Glaspell could not convince the regional production head George Kondolf to consider the idea, although Flanagan reports in *Arena*, that it was given an in-house production for FTP directors. A few years later, however, the play had a short run on Broadway, with the set based on the photo that had so moved Glaspell and executed by her old Provincetown Players friend, the famed scenic designer Robert Edmund Jones.

When Glaspell arrived in Chicago to take up her position, she found one project already begun: an adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, undertaken by Shirley Graham for the Chicago Negro Unit. In a letter to Flanagan on September 27, 1937, Glaspell indicated that the work would be "worthy of production," adding "how Eugene O'Neill may feel about it of course one cannot say." As the unit had already started to do "a little work" on the project, she requested that Flanagan indicate her decision about continuance as soon as possible.<sup>17</sup> Flanagan might have accepted the proposal, but O'Neill—as Glaspell may have anticipated—refused permission, most likely because of the failure of the New York Negro Unit's production of his *Sea Plays*,

17 Susan Glaspell to Hallie Flanagan, September 27, 1937, quoted in Leslie White, *Eugene O'Neill and the Federal Theatre Project*, PhD Dissertation, New York University, 1986, p.232.

in which both words and locales were altered, something that was anathema to O'Neill. In response to the request, he made clear that all his plays were to be staged exactly as written and notified the FTP that, in the future, only the two plays written specifically for black actors, *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun got Wings*, would be allowed to be produced by Negro Units. Only the former was performed by the FTP.<sup>18</sup>

## BIG WHITE FOG

In an essay he had written twelve years earlier, O'Neill admonished black actors to choose works that reflected their own lives and experiences:

Be yourselves! Don't reach out for *our* stuff which *we* call good! Make *your stuff* and *your good*! You have within your race an opportunity—and a shining goal! for new forms, new significance .... There ought to be a Negro play written by a Negro that no white could ever have conceived or executed...*yours, your own*, an expression of what is deep in you, *is you, by you!*<sup>19</sup>

Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog*, one of the most important and controversial plays produced by the FTP, may well have been the type of play O'Neill imagined (fig. 1): written by a black playwright, based on black history, and presenting the personal experiences of a black family, a play, as O'Neill knew, "no white could ever have conceived or executed."

*Big White Fog* originated in the Chicago Negro Play Unit, and Glaspell, while not initiating the play, was an active and enthusiastic supporter. Ward had arrived in Chicago and the FTP through a circuitous route. He was born in Louisiana in 1902, the sixth of eleven children, his father a former slave. He left home at 15, soon after his mother, who had supported his early writing, died in childbirth. For the next several years, he rode freight trains crisscrossing the country and supported himself by doing odd jobs. It was from the open door of a boxcar that he saw the image that became the impetus for *Big White Fog*: the east rim of the Grand Canyon, beautiful and majestic, with fog slowly rising up from below, covering the sides of the surrounding cliffs. As he explained, after seeing this image:

<sup>18</sup> As long as his plays were unchanged, O'Neill welcomed his association with the FTP, which produced 28 of his works, and which, White argues, expanded his reputation across the country.

<sup>19</sup> Eugene O'Neill, "Eugene O'Neill on the Negro Actor," *Messenger*, vol.7, no.1, January 1925, quoted in Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, New York, Cambridge UP, 1996, pp.11-12.

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Suddenly I found my spirit sickened as I realized the truth: I'm a Negro and all this beauty and majesty does not belong to me. With a fallen heart, I acknowledged that I had nothing to boast of. I was a descendant of the slaves who had built this country, yet I was still deprived of the patriotic joy felt by those who claimed the land as their own. In my bewilderment that late afternoon, it suddenly occurred to me that we as a people were engulfed by a pack of lies, surrounded, in fact, by one big white fog through which we could see no light anywhere.<sup>20</sup>

*Big White Fog* concerns a black family, the Masons, who became part of the "Great Migration" from the South to Chicago in the 1930s, in pursuit of a better life, but who found instead that the destructive forces of racism and capitalism followed them. In the last scene of the three-act play, with the family about to be dispossessed from their home, having lost all their money and hope, and Vic, the father, shot in the back by the police for resisting the eviction, Ward introduces an offstage group of black and white supporters who have gathered in solidarity with the family and against the police. Their united voices of protest close the play.<sup>21</sup>

Encouraged by Richard Wright, a friend and associate of the Negro Unit, Ward worked on his play; and on November 5, 1937, Glaspell wrote to Howard Miller, Deputy National Director of the FTP, asking permission to produce it. It was the type of play she admired: drawing its inspiration from inequities in the society, while presenting the possibility of change, if people across racial and political lines unite; a theme many of her own works and those of other Provincetown Players embraced. Eventually, Glaspell's request came to Flanagan, who also admired the work, but feared that its perceived Communist ending would be a clear red flag to a Congress already wary of the theatre project on precisely these grounds. Glaspell—who had experienced similar threats of censure leveled at the Players during the Red Scare, following World War I, when the fear of Communism was rampant in America—was unfazed by the criticism and unflagging in her support of Ward's play, and applauded its ending.

Shirley Graham, of the Negro Play Unit, also applauded the play and was anxious to see it presented, particularly to the large black community in Chicago, whom she believed would embrace it. However, as Rena Fraden suggests, when Graham learned that Kay Ewing, a white director and Flanagan's protégé, was slated to direct the work

20 Theodore Ward, quoted in Michael Attenborough, "My search for the lost voice of black America," *The Guardian*, May 10, 2007.

21 *Id.*, *Big White Fog*, in James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (eds.), *Black Theater, U.S.A.*, New York, Free Press, 1974, pp.284-324. See also Nick Hern Books, 2007.

instead of her, Graham withdrew her support. She now argued that Ward's portrayal of a black family was inauthentic and his depiction of characters stereotypic and unflattering to the black community in Chicago, as audience responses to a preview performance indicated.<sup>22</sup> In addition, FTP officials feared that the play might exacerbate racial divisions in the city and even cause riots.

The administrative locus for the ensuing production battle was Glaspell's Playwrights' Bureau to which various FTP officials dispatched memos trying to decide what stand to take in response to this powerful but controversial play. Finally, it was Harry Minturn, acting head of Chicago productions, who approved the production; and *Big White Fog* opened April 7, 1938, in the Great Northern theatre situated in the Loop and designated for FTP experimental productions.<sup>23</sup>

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To the surprise of many, during its run it played to an enthusiastic mixed racial audience, even receiving positive reviews from Chicago reviewers who generally disparaged FTP productions. However, after a successful run of thirty-seven nearly sold-out performances, on May 30, Minturn moved the production from the prestigious Great Northern theatre to a black high school located in the Chicago South Side, explaining that the venue would be more convenient for black audience to reach. Four days later, the play closed for lack of an audience. Flanagan, for her part, heralded the response to the play, shifting the attention away from charges of Communism ("This script carried no political definition," she claimed)<sup>24</sup> to questions of race and historical reactions to Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa Movement." However, Ward believed that the FTP decision to move the play was motivated by fear concerning charges of Communism, and argued, that his ending was advocating "unity, interracial unity. Why do you have to be Communist for that?"<sup>25</sup> Despite the sudden closure of the play, Langston Hughes would call *Big White Fog* "the greatest encompassing play on Negro life that has ever been written. If it isn't liked by people, it is because they are not ready for it, not because it isn't a great play;" and Ralph Ellison would say that it was "like no other Negro play [...] in its three-act attempt to probe the most vital problems of Negro experience."<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, *Big White Fog* is

22 For details about the controversy, see R. Fraden, *Blueprints...*, *op. cit.*, pp.115-132.

23 See [Big White Frog poster](#).

24 R. Fraden, *Blueprints...*, *op. cit.*, p.143.

25 Quoted in *ibid.*, p.133. Fraden speculates that "the move from an established theatre in the middle of the theatre district to a high school auditorium certainly sends a strong signal that the FTP did not think the play was worthy of a professional production" (*ibid.*, p.143).

26 Both quoted in Kate Dossett, "Staging the Garveyite Home: Black Masculinity, Failure, and Redemption in Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog*," *African American Review*, vol.43, no.4, Winter 2009, p.557.



virtually unknown today, despite its contemporary relevance. There have been only three professional productions since its opening. In 1940, it was produced in Harlem's Lincoln theatre by the Negro Playwrights Company founded by Ward, Paul Robeson and Richard Wright; in 1995 by the Minneapolis Guthrie theatre; and in 2007 at the Almeida theatre in London.<sup>27</sup>

## SPIROCHETE

While Glaspell was an early and enthusiastic supporter of Ward's play, she was the instigator of, and collaborator on, a FTP play equally celebrated and controversial: Arnold Sundgaard's Living Newspaper *Spirochete* (fig. 2). In October 1937, she and Sundgaard went together to see the FTP production of *The Straw*, an early O'Neill play based on his 1912 hospitalization for tuberculosis at Gaylord's Farm Sanitarium. Walking home afterwards, Glaspell admitted that she found the subject matter a bit dated, since tuberculosis had abated.<sup>28</sup> However, another scourge-like illness was now threatening great numbers of people: syphilis.<sup>29</sup> Why not write a living newspaper play on that subject, she threw out to Sundgaard, who immediately caught the idea.

From the inception of the FTP, Flanagan had envisioned creating living newspapers, similar to those of the Blue Blouse troupes, which she had seen during her two trips to Russia in 1926 and 1930, that employed music, sound effects, comedic routines, physical action, dance, and satire to theatricalize local and national issues for audiences who either could not or did not read newspapers. Although she recognized that the form had many international antecedents, including Aristophanic comedies, commedia dell'arte, Peking Opera, the Berlin Volksbühne theatre, Meyerhold-directed Russian plays, and Eisenstein films, Flanagan argued that the living newspaper "is as American as Walt Disney, The March of Time, and the *Congressional Record*," lest

27 For the 1997 production, see Tad Simons, "Big White Fog Review," *Variety*, October 2, 1995, Guthrie; for the 2007 production, see M. Attenborough, "My Search for the lost voice of black America," art. cit., Almeida.

28 See A. Sundergaard, "Susan Glaspell and the Federal Theatre Revisited," art. cit., p.8.

29 For information on *Spirochete*, and accompanying photographs of productions, see Sarah Guthu, "Living Newspaper: *Spirochete*," *The Great Depression in Washington State*, Website, 2009. See also John S. O'Connor, "*Spirochete* and the War on Syphilis," *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol.21, no.1, 1977, p.91-98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1145110>; M.C. Winter, "Theatre, Infectious Disease, and the 20th Century," MA thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2020; and Libra Jan Cleveland Gysel, "Whisper Out Loud! *Spirochete*, a Living Newspaper, 1937-1939," PhD Dissertation, Virginia Technic Institute and State University, 1989.

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Congressional committees resist importation of foreign art forms. She also emphasized its possibilities: “The living newspaper, factual and formal, musical and acrobatic, abstract and concrete, visual and aural, psychological, economic and social, is a dramatic form in the beginning stage, a form capable of infinite extension.”<sup>30</sup>

Glaspell may have seen examples of living newspapers even before her connection with the FTP, since Mike Gold, her friend from her Provincetown Players’ days, also part of the FTP, had tried in 1927 to start a workers’ theatre in America, using elements of living newspaper theatre, to which he had been exposed in Germany, through the works of Bertolt Brecht and Ernst Toller.<sup>31</sup> She had also heard about, if not seen, the first produced FTP living newspaper, *Triple-A Plowed Under* in March 1936. It was, therefore, not surprising that she suggested the form to Sundgaard (fig.3).



3. LOC, Living Newspaper Posters, FTP, Library of Congress

The timing of the play was propitious. In 1936, the Surgeon General of the United States had pressured states to pass legislation requiring mandatory blood tests as a requirement for marriage licenses. Illinois had approved such a law, and the mayor of Chicago, who had veto power over plays presented in his city, supported the project. Spending as much time as he could spare away from his Playwrights’ Bureau duties, Sundgaard gathered all available material on the subject of syphilis, much of it published by the United States Health Service, which was in the midst of a nation-

30 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.70. For antecedents of the Living Newspaper in America, see Lynn Mally, “The Americanization of the Soviet Living Newspaper,” *Carl Beck Papers in Russia and Eastern European Studies*, no.1903, February 2008, p.1-44.

31 See S. Cosgrove, *The Living Newspaper: History, Production, and Form*, PhD Dissertation, University of Hull, 1982, p.38-39.

wide campaign to raise awareness about the disease that in the 1930s had the stigma that AIDS would acquire fifty years later and would produce strikingly similar plays.<sup>32</sup>

Sundgaard and Glaspell worked closely refining the play, which Sundgaard initially called *Dark Harvest*, out of deference to public sensitivity about even mentioning the disease. However, Harry Minturn, now production head in Chicago, and a strong supporter of the work, challenged the playwright to call it what it was: *Spirochete*. It opened at the Blackstone theatre on April 29, 1938, with the blessing and assistance of the Chicago medical community and the Board of Health, which provided free syphilis testing in the lobby. Flanagan, in her summary of the accomplishments of the entire Federal Theatre program, cites *Spirochete* as an important milestone.<sup>33</sup> What she does not mention is the battle Glaspell waged, not only for the production of the play but also for the right of Sundgaard to retain the copyright. Flanagan argued that since Sundgaard had written the play while in the employ of the FTP, the work belonged to them, and they did not have to pay him royalties. Glaspell, ever sensitive to writers' rights, sent out numerous letters to various officials, in which she argued that the research might have been done on government time, but the actual writing took place after hours, while Sundgaard continued to serve as a play reader, the position he was paid to execute. With the issue still unsettled, Glaspell wrote directly to Flanagan on April 18, 1938, eleven days before the play was scheduled to open, explaining her position:

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I hope you know how strong is my feeling for the Federal Theatre. I think I have shown it in remaining here for more than a year and a half, giving up my own work from which I make a great deal more, and also weakening my own position, because if you pause too long in the writing world it is a disadvantage to your name. But strong as is my feeling for the Federal Theatre, I think it only right to tell you now that if this matter cannot be arranged with justice to Mr. Sundgaard [...] I shall feel compelled to take it to the immediate attention of the Dramatists' Guild.<sup>34</sup>

Flanagan refused to accept her rationale, and Glaspell—someone who never backed down if a principle was at stake—made good her threat. She brought the matter to the Dramatist Guild, which issued an immediate injunction stating that unless Sundgaard was allowed to keep his copyright for *Spirochete*, the FTP would no longer be allowed

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32 For an example of the connections between *Spirochete* and plays dealing with AIDS, see Terry Ann Swanson, *Theatre Diagnosis Plague: A Study of "Spirochete" and "The Normal Heart"*, PhD Dissertation, San Francisco State University, 2010.

33 See *Spirochete poster*.

34 Susan Glaspell to Hallie Flanagan, April 8, 1938, National Archive, Washington, DC.

to produce any plays by Guild writers, and that meant a majority of the established playwrights whose plays they produced including Glaspell and O'Neill. Flanagan relented.<sup>35</sup>

The amazing coda to this story is that through the entire furor that went on for some time, Sundgaard, busy with his first produced play, knew nothing of Glaspell's efforts on his behalf. It was not until the late 1990s, when he visited the FTP archives at George Mason University that he came across her correspondence, too late to thank her, since she had died in 1948.

Glaspell won this battle, but her relations with Flanagan may have suffered as a result. On May 1, right after the opening of *Spirochete*, Glaspell officially resigned her position in the FTP<sup>36</sup>. Whether her decision was prompted by added responsibilities funding cutbacks required or her dispute with Flanagan is not certain. On July 15, 1938, when Flanagan attended the yearly meeting of the Midwest group, she enumerated its accomplishments but made no mention of Glaspell. By October, Don Farran, another Iowan, became Head of the Midwest Bureau, replacing Glaspell whom he said resigned because of illness and overwork. In *Arena*, listing the Bureau's accomplishments, Flanagan writes: "Susan Glaspell and later Don Farran stimulated the writing of a number of play of the Midwest." Of the five playwrights she cites—Sundgaard, Marcus Bach, Theodore Ward, George Murray, and David Peltz—Murray and Peltz were never produced and the other three were chosen by Glaspell alone, before Farran took over<sup>37</sup>.

By June 1939, the entire FTP went out of business, due to Congress's refusal to renew its appropriation, based partly on their assumption of its Communist leanings denounced by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Martin Dies, who chaired the Committee, also chastised the FTP for presenting immoral plays. One Congressman citing the "suggestive and salacious titles" foisted on the public, asked: "Are the people of this country to be taxed to support such vulgar and villainous activities?" He gave an example of a play whose title he argued was clearly obscene: *Suppressed Desires*,<sup>38</sup> Susan Glaspell's first play written in 1915 with Jig Cook, which parodied the Greenwich Villagers' embrace of Freud. For her eighteen months of work

35 In the production record of Living Newspapers listed in *Arena*, Flanagan has a footnote indicating that all such scripts, with the exception of *Spirochete*, can be produced without payment of royalties to either the authors or the government (H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.391).

36 This may explain why there is no correspondence from Glaspell concerning the move of *Big White Fog* at the end of May.

37 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.266.

38 *Ibid.*, p.355.

for the Federal Theatre, this is the one official government acknowledgement of her participation and Flanagan's third reference to Glaspell in *Arena*. There is a footnote. When Sundgaard, after a long and successful career, died at the age of 96 in 2006, the *New York Times* printed a long obituary. In it the writer, citing *Spirochete*, notes that "mentored by the distinguished writer Susan Glaspell, Mr. Sundgaard wrote a two-act play chronicling the spread of the disease and the search for a cure," a belated acknowledgement of Glaspell's work for the FTP.<sup>39</sup> What still needs to be studied and acknowledged are the many links between the Provincetown Players and the FTP, both, as Glaspell understood, derived from a similar awareness of that pioneer spirit that believed in theatre as a means to explore the rich potential of American theatre and its people.

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39 Margalit Fox, "Arnold Sundgaard, Lyricist and Playwright, is Dead at 96," *New York Times*, October 31, 2006.

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## NOTICE

Linda Ben-Zvi, Professor emerita Colorado State and Tel Aviv University, was John Stern Distinguished Professor, Colorado; Lady Davis Professor, Hebrew University; Library of Congress and National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow; and twice elected president of the International Samuel Beckett Society. She was Visiting Professor at Waseda and Aoyama Gakuin University, Japan; the University of Trento and Venice International University, Italy; and Doctoral Seminar Professor, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain. Of her thirteen authored and edited books, four are on Beckett and four on Susan Glaspell, including *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times*, winner of the Jury Prize of the American Theatre Library Association.

## ABSTRACT

In the winter of 1936, Hallie Flanagan invited Susan Glaspell to head the Midwest Playwrights Bureau of the Federal Theatre Project. Glaspell was an excellent choice: as co-founder of the Provincetown Players, she had first-hand experience administering a theatre company, soliciting and selecting original plays, and encouraging new playwrights. She also brought her reputation as the most prominent woman playwright in America at the time. Her eleven plays written during her Provincetown years (1916-1922) had created new dramatic forms, and her later work *Alison's House* received the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1930. This essay explores Glaspell's work for the FTP, which has received little critical attention, and focuses particularly on her significant support of Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog* and her initiation of and involvement in the production of Arnold Sundgaard's Living Newspaper *Spirochete*, two of the most important and original works staged by the FTP.

## KEY WORDS

Susan Glaspell, Federal Theatre Project, Hallie Flanagan, Theodore Ward, *Big White Fog*, Arnold Sundgaard, *Spirochete*

## RÉSUMÉ

346 Durant l'hiver 1936, Harry Flanagan a invité Susan Glaspell à diriger l'antenne du Midwest, dans le cadre du *Federal Theatre Project*. Glaspell était un excellent choix : co-fondatrice du groupe des Provincetown Players, elle possédait l'expérience nécessaire pour gérer et faire vivre une compagnie de théâtre. Le projet allait aussi bénéficier de sa réputation : Glaspell était alors considérée comme la plus importante écrivaine de théâtre de sa génération, aux États-Unis. Avec les onze œuvres écrites durant ses années avec les *Provincetown Players*, entre 1916 et 1922, elle avait initié de nouvelles formes dramatiques. Sa dernière œuvre, *Alison's House*, avait reçu le prix Pulitzer des écrits dramatiques en 1930. Cet article explore le travail de Glaspell au sein du FTP, qui a été peu traité par la critique, et analyse en particulier le soutien apporté par Glaspell à la pièce *Big White Fog*, de Theodore Ward et son implication dans la production majeure d'Arnold Sundgaard, *Spirochete* ; ces pièces incarnant deux des plus importants travaux mis en scène par le FTP.

## MOTS-CLÉS

Susan Glaspell, *Federal Theatre Project*, Hallie Flanagan, Theodore Ward, *Big White Fog*, Arnold Sundgaard, *Spirochete*

# BLACK THEATRE, ARCHIVES AND THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

*Kate Dossett*  
*University of Leeds*

The history of the FTP records, like the Project itself, is one of troubles.

Lorraine Brown, "A Story Yet to be Told: The Federal Theatre Project," 1979<sup>1</sup>

there may be thirty plays by Black writers alone that have never been produced. [...] All of that material from the Federal Theatre is just waiting to be surfaced.

Amiri Baraka and Vévé Clark, "Restaging, 1979"<sup>2</sup>

The Federal Theatre Project figures prominently in debates about the promise and danger of political art in the United States. Ambitious in reach and in popular appeal, its contentious closure following Congressional investigations into Un-American activities in 1939 helped cement the project's importance in the Cold War American imagination. The Federal Theatre's continued significance in [conversations about state-sponsored art](#) is due, in no small part, to the many and extraordinary rebirths of its archive.<sup>3</sup> Out of place and out of sight through the first decades of the Cold War, this rich cultural archive reemerged at an auspicious moment. Recovered in 1974, just as theatre makers of the Black Arts Movement were searching for a radical heritage on which to build, the timing of its rediscovery had a significant impact on both US theatre history and the history of Black radical culture. The epistemological frameworks established by the New Deal and its many agencies have long framed how and what we research. However, the research agenda for US theatre and drama studies has also

1 Lorraine Brown, "A Story Yet to be Told: The Federal Theatre Project," *Black Scholar*, vol.10, no.10, July-August 1979, p.70.

2 Amiri Baraka and Vévé Clark, "Restaging Langston Hughes' *Scottsboro Limited*: An interview with Amiri Baraka," *Black Scholar*, vol.10, no.10, July-August 1979, p.64.

3 Vinson Cunningham, "How are Audience Adapting to the Age of Virtual Theatre," *The New Yorker*, October 5, 2020.

been influenced by new modes of knowledge production since the 1930s. Domestic anti-communism, the Black Freedom Struggle, the Women's movement and more recently, the Movement for Black Lives, have reframed the racial and gender politics of knowledge production, influencing both what is collected (by archives, publishing houses, the repertoire) and how it is used (by scholars and theatre makers).

In this essay I examine the evolving history of the Federal Theatre archive and how it has shaped scholarly research on Black Federal Theatre. I argue that racial and gender hierarchies of the twentieth century continue to influence the knowledge that scholars produce about the Federal Theatre in the twenty-first. In order to better understand the history and significance of the Federal Theatre Project for African Americans and for women, we need to find new ways to read the archive. Too often we turn to the most accessible archives, attempting to read "against the grain" in archives that privilege the experiences and narratives of white subjects. This chapter argues that we need first to move along the grain, to understand how and in what contexts the archive becomes a knowledge producer, and how this has shaped the questions we ask.<sup>4</sup>

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## THE END OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT AND THE BEGINNING OF AN AFTERLIFE

The Federal Theatre Project was an easy target for Congressional opponents of President Roosevelt's New Deal. Of the Four Art Projects that made up Federal One, the Federal Theatre Project was the most contentious: a publicly funded theatre project which reached around 25 million Americans, (approximately 20% of the population), refused to allow segregated audiences, and put on new plays which addressed labor, race and other social problems in America, it helped to define the very terms of American culture in the 1930s. Where its defenders saw a brilliant, unprecedented experiment brought down by Southern Democrats and Republicans wanting to slow the engine of New Deal reform, its critics decried an un-American programme that squandered taxpayers' dollars to produce mediocre art and Communist propaganda. In both historical scholarship and popular culture, the premature closure of the FTP in June 1939 following investigations by the Dies Committee, is often regarded as a staging post on the road to McCarthyism.<sup>5</sup> Named after [Martin Dies](#), (the Texas Democrat

4 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2008.

5 See for example, Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Theatre, 1935-1939*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1994, p.107-108; Laura Browder, *Rousing the Nation*, Amherst, Massachusetts, U of Massachusetts P, 1998, p.153; Stuart Cosgrove, *The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form*, PhD Dissertation, University of Hull, 1982, p.139.

who chaired the new House un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) set up to investigate extremism at both ends of the political spectrum in 1938) the Committee has long played a starring role in the history of the FTP.<sup>6</sup> Immortalized in Tim Robbins 1999 film, *Cradle Will Rock*, the Dies Committee's incompetent interrogation of Federal Theatre director Hallie Flanagan has often been deployed to illustrate the illogic and absurdity of American anticommunism. When Flanagan was called to testify, committee members focused on her Guggenheim-sponsored research trip to Europe and Russia. Flanagan had reported her impressions on European Worker's Theatre in an essay published in a 1931 issue of *Theatre Arts Monthly*. Eight years later, Committee member Congressman Starnes read out an excerpt from Flanagan's essay, which included a reference to the English playwright Christopher Marlowe:

Unlike any art form existing in America today, the workers' theaters intend to shape the life of this country, socially, politically, and industrially. They intend to remake a social structure without the help of money—and this ambition alone invests their undertaking with a certain Marlowesque madness.<sup>7</sup>

In his effort to prove that Flanagan was sympathetic to, if not an associate of Communists, Starnes demanded to know: "You are quoting from this Marlowe. Is he a Communist?" Flanagan apologized with exaggerated politeness: "I am very sorry: I was quoting from Christopher Marlowe." None the wiser, Starnes demanded that Flanagan "Tell us who Marlowe is, so we can get the proper reference." Flanagan responded: "Put in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period of Shakespeare, immediately preceding Shakespeare."<sup>8</sup> To reporters covering the hearings, this incident was a source of mirth.<sup>9</sup> However, in both scholarly and popular accounts of the hearings, the exchange has assumed a greater significance. The Dies Committee's dubious methods—in particular their assumption of guilt by association—is seen as marking

6 Reflecting Democratic dominance of Congress, the House Committee was composed of five Democrats and two Republicans. Of the Democrats, only John J. Dempsey of New Mexico was a clear supporter of the New Deal. Arthur D. Healey of Massachusetts was a wavering New Dealer; Joe Starnes of Alabama, and Harold G. Mosier of Ohio were not New Deal enthusiasts. The two Republicans were J. Parnell Thomas of New Jersey, an outspoken critic of work relief programmes, and Noah M. Mason of Illinois.

7 House of Representatives, 75 Congress, 3 Session, *Hearings*, Special Committee on Un-American Activities and Propaganda on House Res, 282, *Hearings*, IV, 2857.

8 *Ibid.* *Hearings*, IV, 2857.

9 See for example "On the Newsfronts of the World," *Life Magazine*, December 19, 1938, p.8; "Mrs. Flanagan Defends Plays as Propaganda," *Herald Tribune*, December 7, 1938, in Vassar Collection of Press Clippings, RG69 WPA, Records of the Federal Theatre Project, Box 137, National Archives.

the beginning of a sustained and sometimes successful campaign to use Congressional committees to deny both African-American and women's rights, and to push back against what committee members perceived to be a progressive bias in American arts, education, media and culture.<sup>10</sup> More immediately, the Dies Committee hearings are often regarded as precipitating the premature demise of the Federal Theatre Project. What is less often acknowledged, is the extent to which they influenced the fate of the archive and early attempts to write the history of the Federal Theatre.

The Dies Committee's investigations into the Federal Theatre Project had an immediate impact on the first drafts of history as well as the fate of its archive. In her testimony before Committee members in December 1938, Flanagan delivered an oral defence of the Federal Theatre. She also compiled, with the help of the legal division of the WPA, a written brief which made extensive use of the FTP archive and included a list of plays "with specific analysis of every play criticized," lists of organizations whose members made up theatre audiences, and a signed affidavit from Flanagan stating that she was not, and had never been, a Communist. The brief was not entered into the [Dies Committee's transcript](#) despite assurances from the committee secretary.<sup>11</sup> It seems unlikely that it would have made much difference to the Committee's report. Filed with the House of Representatives on January 3, 1939, the Dies Committee report focused much of its attention on the Federal Writers Project and included only a short paragraph that addressed the Theatre Project. Citing no evidence, the Committee concluded that "a rather large number of the employees on the Federal Theatre Project are either members of the Communist Party or are sympathetic with the Communist Party."<sup>12</sup>

Having failed to get evidence from the Federal Theatre archive inserted into the official record, Flanagan determined to find another venue through which to present a full and public defence of the project. The former director took matters into her own hands. Immediately following the project's closure, Flanagan made plans to transfer a significant portion of the Federal Theatre archive to Vassar College, the liberal arts college in upstate New York where she directed the Experimental Theatre prior to her

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10 Tim Robbins (dir.), *Cradle Will Rock* [1999], Buena Vista, 2006; John H. Houchin, *Censorship of American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003, pp.149-150; J. Michael Sproule, *Propaganda and Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1997, pp.126-27.

11 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940, pp.338-339.

12 Investigation of Un-American Activities and Propaganda Report Pursuant to H. Resolution 282, 75th Congress, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1939, p.123.

appointment to the FTP. Securing a loan of the collection, and a Rockefeller Grant to catalogue materials at Vassar College Library, Flanagan did not wait for the Federal Theatre archive's transfer to be made official. According to Esther Porter Lane, a theatre director on the FTP and Flanagan protégée, portions of the FTP archive were liberated from the New York office before approval was granted. Lane recalled: "When I was in New York, we'd fill the trunk of my car with papers. It was a snitch kind of job, but Hallie needed them."<sup>13</sup>

There is no doubt that Flanagan and her close associates (she took with her to Vassar key members of her FTP team including National Service Bureau director Emmet Lavery) understood the administrative records, manuscripts and production records of the project as a political archive.<sup>14</sup> As early as January 1940, before the records had been organized, Flanagan opened them for "public inspection and study." Flanagan understood the legacy of the Federal Theatre would be central to current and future debates about government subsidy of the arts and was determined to shape that legacy: "This is a form of research," she explained to the *Vassar Miscellany News*, "which is more concerned with the present and the future than with the past. Consequently, we want to place our library immediately at the disposal of the college, for use by students and faculty alike."<sup>15</sup>

Flanagan spent the year after the demise of the project working on the first and still most widely cited account of the FTP. Published in December 1940, *Arena* is both a record of the achievements of the Federal Theatre Project and an attempt to protect its archive and legacy from its damaging encounters with the Dies Committee. Theatrical metaphors and devices are woven through the narrative. Flanagan casts the Congressional Committee hearings as an ill-conceived, badly rehearsed courtroom drama, replete with stock types: the hectoring, cigar-dripping Congressmen who set themselves up as judge and jury, the cameramen and reporters who formed the audience, and the heroic defender of the people: Hallie Flanagan. Organized into three acts—"Danger: Men Not Working," "Men at Work," and "Blasting: Work Suspended"—, the final part of the book is dedicated to the Congressional investigations and the campaign to save the project between the summer of 1938 and the final closure of the project on June 30, 1939. Unlike the Dies Committee report, *Arena* presents a wealth of evidence to support its thesis. In particular, it spotlights the treasure trove that is the Federal Theatre archive. In her closing argument, Flanagan addresses the FTP's

<sup>13</sup> Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, New York, Knopf, 1988, p.351.

<sup>14</sup> *Vassar Miscellany News*, December 2, 1939, p.3.

<sup>15</sup> *Vassar Miscellany News*, January 24, 1940, pp.1 and 4.

enduring legacy, taking pains to document the value of the archive not only to the US President but also to the directors of the Library of Congress and New York Public Library, each of whom had offered to house the collection:

The President of Vassar College secured from the President of the United States the loan of the records for one year; the Rockefeller Foundation, believing that the records were of public and educational interest, financed a staff to put them in order and to make them available for this book and other books on various aspects of Federal Theatre.<sup>16</sup>

In September 1940 the WPA requested the FTP records be returned so that it might begin a new project surveying the plays written and produced on the project. While the FTP was terminated in 1939, the WPA would continue until 1943.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, Vassar College Library, which had held the FTP collection on loan since November 1, 1939, returned the collection to the WPA on December 1, 1940, two weeks after Flanagan's own account was published to wide acclaim.<sup>18</sup>

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*Arena* attracted a good deal of attention even before publication. Advance notices in *The New York Times* highlighted the in-depth discussion of the Federal Theatre's entanglement with the Dies Committee while the publisher's advertisement proclaimed: "HALLIE FLANAGAN at last tells the honest and complete story of the great American social experiment which she directed—The Federal Theatre."<sup>19</sup> The publisher's claims for the book are mirrored in much of the scholarship on the Federal Theatre. Scholars routinely quote from and treat *Arena* as an authoritative source. In 1978, four years after the Centre for Federal Theatre Project Research at George Mason University (GMU) had recovered and vastly expanded the archive of the FTP, its own newsletter described *Arena* as "the definitive history of the FTP."<sup>20</sup>

Flanagan is a skilled and persuasive narrator and her story includes recognizable villains and virtuous heroes. Moreover, she cleverly contrasts her detailed evidence with the baseless allegations that littered the meandering reports of the Dies Committee and on-going Congressional Committees investigations into Un-American activities. *Arena* includes 56 pages of tables organized in an Appendix. These consist of a Production Record classifying productions "according to type," as well as a financial statement,

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16 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.369.

17 *Ibid.*, p.369.

18 *Ibid.*, p.378.

19 "Notes on Books and Authors," *The New York Times*, November 14, 1940, p.121; "Books-Authors," *The New York Times*, December 3, 1940, p.35; "Display Ad," *The New York Times*, December 15, 1940, p.111.

20 "Why Hallie Flanagan," *Federal One*, vol.3, no.2, September 1978, p.4.



a detailed account of how data was collected, and a description of its cataloguing system. The Appendix follows a classification system that reflects the priorities and organization of the Federal Theatre Project. As Flanagan explains, “the general policy has been to list a play according to the special field which gave the plays its emphasis in Federal Theatre.” Accordingly, the catalogue in her appendix is divided between dramas first staged by the FTP and those produced previously. For original dramas there is a further subdivision between New Productions “General” and New Productions “Special”. This “special” category included Dance dramas, drama for Children, Living Newspapers as well as “Negro Drama, including material especially adapted for Negro companies.”<sup>21</sup> Thirteen of the thirty New Productions categorized as “Negro Drama” are by Black authors. Of the remaining seventeen, some are adaptations of white dramas by Black troupes. However, like the many catalogues drawn up by FTP administrators, *Arena’s* catalogue does not always acknowledge the Black creative labor that went into adaption. For example, the entry for *The Swing Mikado* merely states “adp. From Gilbert and Sullivan.” Developed by the Black troupe of the Chicago Negro Unit under the supervision of Shirley Graham Du Bois, *The Swing Mikado* went on to become one of the biggest hits of the FTP, transferring to New York City and inspiring the rival commercial show *The Hot Mikado*. Graham’s contribution to developing the show was written out both at the time and in later accounts.<sup>22</sup> “Negro Productions” also feature in the “previously produced on the professional stage” lists of plays. Categorized as “Standard Productions,” the list of “Negro dramas” the FTP revived or “specially adapted for Negro Companies” is noteworthy: unlike the New Productions it consists almost entirely of white-authored plays. Of the twenty-five “standard Negro” dramas listed just three are by African American authors.<sup>23</sup>

Flanagan’s focus in *Arena* on plays that were staged is understandable in light of the critical investigations by the Dies Committee. The committee had quizzed Flanagan and other witnesses on the length of time taken to make a play stage-ready, and why it was that certain dramas never made it into production. It was a line of attack with which Flanagan was all too familiar. Throughout the four years of the project Flanagan had to navigate the expectations of New Deal administrators and hostile legislators for whom success could only be measured in numbers: plays staged and audience

21 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.377-378.

22 *Ibid.*, pp.392-393; Mary White Ovington to Shirley Graham, February 27, 1939, Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, MC 476; Gerald Horne, *Race Woman*, New York, New York UP, 2000, pp.79-80.

23 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.428-429.

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"Swing" orchestration by — Charles Levy

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The Federal Theatre Project is a part of the W. P. A. However, the viewpoint  
expressed in the play is not necessarily that of the W. P. A.  
or any other agency of the Government.

1. *The Swing Mikado* Playbill, Sir W.S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan, *The Mikado*, [Chicago, IL, 193] Image (retrieved from the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, USA)

members.<sup>24</sup> Yet Flanagan's decision to foreground dramas staged by the FTP helped foster a scholarship that focused on what was given approval by white structures and administrators to the detriment of work created by Black Americans. Early historical accounts paid little attention to Black dramas developed but not staged on the Federal Theatre Project. Rather they focused on Black actors or the administration of Negro Units, both of which were often viewed through the lens of what they revealed about the apparently "progressive" views of its white administrators. For example, in 1974, Ronald Ross concluded that the Federal Theatre's "actual operation was as democratic as its rhetoric" and that African Americans were "involved in all levels of the planning of this new theatre venture."<sup>25</sup> Able to draw on an ever growing archive, and in the context of the development of Black Studies programmes, scholarly accounts in the 1980s and 1990s began to question narratives of good intentions and well-meaning white officials and sought instead to show the structural racism that underpinned all the Federal Arts programmes. Frequently focused on the administrative structures of the Negro Units, this scholarship has often, sometimes inadvertently, reinforced a white-centric narrative in which Black priorities were easily pushed aside by individuals or groups of white liberals.<sup>26</sup>

Recent scholarship has begun to correct this. Drawing on a broader production archive and by examining variant theatre manuscripts held in different archives, scholars have looked beyond the administrative and cataloguing processes that direct our gaze to white imperatives and desires, to find new ways to centre the political ambitions and creativity of the diverse communities who engaged with the FTP.<sup>27</sup>

- 24 Emily Klein, "Danger: men not working,' Constructing citizenship with contingent labor in the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers," *Women & Performance*, vol.23, no.2, 2013, pp.193-211 (especially pp.200-202).
- 25 Ronald Ross, "The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939," *Journal of Negro History*, vol.59, no.1, January 1974, p.41.
- 26 Rena Fraden, *Blueprint for a Black Federal Theatre*, *op.cit.*, p.xvi, p.10; see also Tina Redd, "Staging Race The Seattle Negro Unit Production of Stevedore," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, vol.7, no.2, Spring 1995, pp.66-85; Ron West, "Others, Adults, Censored: The FTP's Black Lysistrata Cancellation," *Theatre Survey*, vol.37, no.2, November 1996, pp.93-111.
- 27 Adrienne Macki Braconi, *Harlem's Theaters: A Staging Ground for Community, Class, and Contradiction, 1923-1939*, Evanston, Northwestern UP, 2015, p.19; Elisabeth Osborne, *Staging the People: Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp.23-24, n.25, p.193; Lauren Sklaroff, *Black Culture in the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009, p.12; n. 131, p.263, p.137; Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2020 (esp. pp.20-25).

Even so, much work still remains to be done to open up and reveal the heterogeneous work of the many communities, groups and individuals who developed innovative and ambitious work in and around the Federal Theatre Project. The question of how best to access these histories, held in official archives constructed by and usually for white officials remains an important one. As scholars of colonial archives have suggested, one method might be to read “against the grain” to find the voices of those whose refusal is managed and contained in the archive. In Federal Theatre Studies, [playreaders’ reports](#) are often read “against the grain.” The FTP’s National Service Bureau, included a playwriting division, which served as a clearing house through which all prospective FTP plays had to pass in order to be considered for production. Although there was a special committee of playreaders dedicated to reading ‘Negro’ dramas which included at least three African Americans (the playwright Abram Hill, John Silvera and C.C. Lawrence), the playwriting division was predominantly staffed by white employees, few of whom had a background in Black drama. Accordingly, playreaders reports are often replete with racist stereotypes, misconceptions about Black art and a broad ignorance of Black history. Even so, studies of Black FTP dramas pay disproportionate attention to the racial paternalism of white play readers reports.<sup>28</sup> Such an approach invariably keeps the spotlight focused on the desires—and sometimes fears—of white officials. It pays insufficient attention to how archives are produced and how the ways we use them can maintain the focus on white subjects and their priorities. To better understand the ambitions and creativity of African Americans, and especially Black women who made theatre on the project, we might first read “along the grain.” Writing about colonial histories, Ann Stoler suggests we learn to be less assured when we approach the archive. She warns of the dangers of “assuming we know these scripts” with their “predictable stories” and “familiar plots.” Rather she encourages us instead to question our starting points, “to explore the grain with care and read along it first.”<sup>29</sup> As scholars of the Federal Theatre, we must first attend to the cumulative processes which have shaped Federal Theatre archives. Recognizing archives as producers, rather than depositories of knowledge, as subjects as well as sources, might enable us to write histories of Federal Theatre that disrupt, rather than reinscribe the hierarchies of the archive.

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28 For example, Sklaroff dedicates ten of the forty-eight pages on Black Federal Theatre drama to the workings and reports of the Play Bureau (*Black Culture in the New Deal*, *op. cit.*, pp.50-60).

29 A.L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, *op. cit.*, p.58.

## THE RECOVERY OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT ARCHIVE

The story of the Federal Theatre Project archive—like narratives of Black culture and the radical left—usually has it dormant through the middle decades of the twentieth century. It was woken from its long sleep in the 1970s when it was *discovered* by researchers from George Mason University. In fact, the FTP archive underwent several moves and significant cataloguing projects between its spell at Vassar and its recovery in 1974. As early as 1939, the WPA began working with the Library of Congress to collect and preserve its history. Between 1939 and 1941, state WPAs were invited to send their records to the central WPA office in Washington, DC which transferred the majority of documents to the Library of Congress.<sup>30</sup> This collection included administration and production records from the Federal theatre's New York office as well as the play scripts and music libraries of the FTPs National Service Bureau. In 1940, the WPA recalled the FTP collection on loan to Vassar College. The National Archives also held a significant collection of FTP materials, having overseen the processing of state and local Federal Theatre records held in the New York City office. In 1941, the Library of Congress WPA project, which at one point had eighty members of staff working on it, was closed. However, the Library of Congress and National Archives continued to work on the collections through the 1940s, dividing the materials so that the National Archives collection included predominantly administrative records and the official file of FTP production records, while the Library held another set of production records as well as the many FTP publications. In 1949, Frances T. Bourne, an archivist on the National Archives staff, conducted a major inventory of FTP records and recommended destroying over half the archive. Fortunately, the Library disagreed and held onto the collection, dispersing some of it to special collections and offloading duplicates through various exchange and gift programs. The collection remained in the Library's Capitol Hill buildings until the 1960s, when following a review in 1964, the Library decided to move the collection to a remote collection east of Baltimore where it remained for the next decade.<sup>31</sup> During the formative years of the Black Arts Movement, the archive of Black Federal Theatre dramas was inaccessible.

The dislocation of the Federal Theatre archive is part of a broader history of knowledge production that has made it difficult for Black artists to know of and build upon a rich heritage. Black theatre makers have long wrestled with how to uncover

30 Mary C. Anderson, "Federal Theatre Project Records at George Mason University," *Performing Arts Resources*, vol.6, 1980, p.13.

31 Mary C. Anderson, "Federal Theatre Project Records," art. cit., pp.14-15.

a Black tradition in a context where not only Black theatre, but knowledge about it was controlled by white run theatre, research, and publishing industries. Such debates were especially important during the early years of the Black Arts Movement. Black theatre artists rejected the inheritance of those who came before them who they regarded as relying on and working within the parameters set by white institutions. Insisting art controlled by white people could not articulate the experience and needs of Black communities, leading figures of the Black Arts Movement argued there was no radical Black tradition on which to build before the 1960s. Manifestoes of the Black Arts movement frequently distance themselves from, even as they spotlight, the many connections to their literary antecedents.<sup>32</sup> From Baraka's "The Myth of a Negro Literature" (1963) to Larry Neal's essay in the Black Arts edition of *The Drama Review* (1968), and Addison Gayle's *The Way of the New World* (1975), Black arts of the first half of the twentieth century are presented as inauthentic, mediocre and middle class.<sup>33</sup>

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If the articulation of a Black Aesthetic relied, at least initially, on generational disaffiliation, the Black Arts Movement would ultimately come to play a defining role in recovering the long history of Black radicalism. Black Federal Theatre would be central to this restitution. In his 1979 essay "The Revolutionary Tradition in Afro American Literature," Baraka traced a Black tradition through the slave narrative, the Civil War and the Harlem Renaissance. Notably, he singled out Theodore Ward's Federal Theatre play, *Big White Fog*, as one of the "finest plays." Lamenting the obscurity of Ward and his work, Baraka argued: "It is impossible to teach Afro-American literature correctly if you don't know about Theodore Ward's Big White Fog." Baraka became a champion of Black Federal Theatre plays following a visit to the Federal Theatre archive at GMU in 1979: "There's a play by Langston, one by Hughes Allison who was a local playwright called *The Trial of Dr. Beck*. They have another play of his at George Mason University; it's a long historical pageant that he wanted to put on. [...] All that material from the Federal theatre is just waiting to be surfaced."<sup>34</sup>

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32 James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2005, p.8; David Lionel Smith, "The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics," *American Literary History*, vol.3, no.1, March 1991, pp.93-110.

33 Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, "The Myth of a Negro Literature," first published in *Saturday Review*, April 20, 1963; Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review*, vol.12, no.4, Summer 1968, pp.28-39; Addison Gayle, *The Way of the New World: the Black Novel in America*, Garden City (NY), Anchor Press, 1975.

34 A. Baraka and V. Clark, "Restaging Langston Hughes' *Scottsboro Limited*," art.cit., p.160.

The process of re-surfacing begun in 1974 when Lorraine Brown, an English and Women's Studies professor at GMU in Fairfax, Virginia, began looking for the collection at the Library of Congress (fig.2). Enquiring into the whereabouts of this important national collection, Brown and her colleagues at GMU *discovered* the archive was being held at an unsuitable and inaccessible Baltimore warehouse. They secured a loan of the collection from the Library of Congress and a series of funding awards from major grant awarding institutions, which allowed Brown and her colleagues to restore and catalogue the collection and to set up a new Research Centre for the Federal Theatre Project at GMU.<sup>35</sup>



2. George Mason University faculty members (left to right): John O'Connor, Lorraine Brown, and Michael Sundell examine FTP materials in Fenwick Library, 1974 (Broadside photograph collection, R0135, Box 9, Page 12, Special Collections Research Center, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA)

They expanded the archive too. A decade long [oral history program](#) and the collection of the [personal papers](#) of Federal Theatre participants breathed new life

35 For a brief account of the recovery of the Federal Theatre Archive, see John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown (eds.), *The Federal Theatre Project: Free, Adult, Uncensored*, London, Eyre Methuen, 1980, pp.vii-viii. The history of the recovery of the FTP archive is also told in *Federal One*, the newsletter is available in SCA, GMU. The account published in *Performing Arts Resources* offers detail on the many different parts of the Federal Theatre archive but tends to trumpet the role of the Library of Congress (M.C. Anderson, "Federal Theatre Project Records," art. cit.).

into the archive. Veterans of the FTP, long wary of sending materials to the official archive following the FTP's contentious shut down in 1939, began to donate theatre manuscripts and private collections to GMU, as well as to regional public and University Libraries.<sup>36</sup>

A special Black Theatre issue of *Black Scholar* published in 1979 reveals how the recovery of the FTP archive was shaped by, and part of, the Black Arts Movement. The issue includes essays from theatre historians James Hatch and Krystyna Bakowski and an interview with Black Arts playwright and theorist Amiri Baraka, alongside an essay from Lorraine Brown on the discovery of Black theatre makers in the FTP archive. What is Black theatre, and how to recover and preserve its histories and traditions would become central questions for the Black Arts Movement. They are questions that feature prominently in Brown's contribution to the *Black Scholar* volume. Brown was acutely aware that the written record had been particularly untrustworthy in its failure to document the contribution of African Americans to American theatre: "paper records," she admits, "often omit information altogether, tell an incomplete story, mislead or even occasionally falsify what actually occurred." This belief was an important factor in the impetus to begin an oral history programme that "although providing its own conflicting versions of the "truth," would supplement and illuminate immeasurably the material already at hand."<sup>37</sup>

Over the next forty years, GMU's oral history recordings and transcripts would feature heavily in scholarly accounts. But the oral histories also informed the recovery and cataloguing of the FTP and had a significant impact on the new research it generated even as it was being collected. In 1976, the Research Centre for the Federal Theatre Project at GMU launched *Federal One, A Newsletter of 1930s Culture*. Published at regular intervals between 1976 and 1994, in October of 1994, it was retitled *New Federal One*. A record of the archive, *Federal One* catalogued, summarized and publicized key research discoveries. The newsletter gave particular prominence to the oral history programme through regular updates on upcoming interviews, requests for information concerning potential interviewees and through publishing snippets from and profiles of recent interviewees. Black theatre and theatre makers feature prominently early on. For example, the second issue of *Federal One* published in May 1976 is dedicated to Black drama. It describes the range of "outstanding plays

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36 Oral histories of FTP participants are catalogued under the WPA Oral Histories Collection, 1961-1984, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA (hereafter OHC-GMU).

37 L. Brown, "A Story Yet to be Told," art. cit., p.71.



players and companies” and of the “[l]arge and enthusiastic audiences” which “reaped the delights and benefits” of the “fruitful collaboration” between young aspiring theatre makers and established practitioners, before concluding “few other divisions of the Federal Theatre brought more accolades than did the nine Negro Units.”<sup>38</sup> The on-going process of recovering and interpreting the FTP archive through the lens of oral histories would reveal there were up to seventeen, rather than nine Negro Units as first thought. Significantly, *Federal One* attends not only to Negro Units but also to Black creatives. For example, the May 1976 issue included a profile of two prominent Black theatre makers on the project, [Ralf Coleman](#), the only African American to serve as Director of a Negro Unit from the outset, and [Clarence Muse](#), who served as an advisor to the Los Angeles Negro Unit and guest director of *Run Little Chillun*, the enormously successful production of Hall Johnson’s Black folk drama with music which ran at the [Mayan Theatre](#) for two years.

The *Federal One* newsletter spotlighted recent oral history interviews with Black playmakers whose significance could not be fully understood through the administrative and production records of Negro Units. For example, it featured profiles of Theodore Browne and Joseph Staton, actors and playwrights who were at the centre of the Seattle Negro Unit as actors and playwrights. The Seattle Negro Unit has been well documented in both the archive and scholarly literature on the FTP. In addition to the records of the FTP, there are collections at the University of Washington documenting its history. These include the papers of Florence and Burton James, two white liberal drama professors, whose Seattle Repertory Theatre sponsored and directed the Unit from its inception in 1936 until 1937. When they left the project, Hallie Flanagan sent her protégée, Esther Porter to help run the city’s Negro and Children’s Theatre Units. The high profile of Florence James and Porter within the theatre world and in the records of the FTP have served to foreground the role of white women in promoting Black theatre on the project. However, oral histories conducted by GMU researchers have helped uncover the leadership roles of Black troupe members who guided the Unit both before and after the Jameses left the project.

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38 “Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Project,” *Federal One*, vol.1, no.2, May 1976, p.1.



3. Cast of *Noah* with Florence and Burton James outside the Seattle Repertory Playhouse (Theodore Browne Collection, CO225, Box 1, Special Collections Research Centre, George Mason University Libraries)

Theodore Browne and Joe Staton were never appointed to formal supervisory roles during their time at the Seattle Negro Unit. As such they feature more often as subjects rather than creators of records in the official FTP archive. Yet it was they who shaped the direction of the Unit, writing new dramas and adapting white-authored material for the Seattle troupe. Both began their Federal Theatre careers playing lead roles in white-authored, white-directed dramas including *Noah*, *Stevedore*, and *It Can't Happen Here*. Both ended up as directors and playwrights creating new material and bigger ambitions for the Seattle Negro Unit. Theodore Browne is best known for his John Henry drama *Natural Man*, which was first staged at the Seattle Metropolitan Theatre, in 1937, and adapted by the [American Negro Theatre](#) in Harlem, in 1941 (fig.4). It is one of the few dramas developed on the Negro Units to be published in a Black theatre anthology. Browne also adapted Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* for the Seattle troupe, though it was closed down after just one performance by the WPA state director, who found its risqué theme (the women refuse to have sex with their men until they agree to stop fighting) provocative. He also wrote a Harriet Tubman drama, *Go Down Moses*, which was being

rehearsed by the Harlem Negro Unit when the project was shut down in 1939. When Browne left for the East Coast in May 1938, it was Staton who became the driving force behind the Seattle Negro Unit. He devised and directed *An Evening With Dunbar* in October 1938 and, alongside troupe member Herman Moore and played a key role in adapting *The Taming of the Shrew* for the company in June 1939.<sup>39</sup>



4. Episode 8, Theodore Browne, *Natural Man*, Seattle Repertory Playhouse, Seattle Negro Unit (Federal Theatre Project Photograph Collection, C0205, Box 69, Folder 25, Special Collections Research Centre, George Mason University)

In their oral history interviews both men reflect on their relationships with white supervisors. Commenting on the power dynamic between white supervisors and the Black troupe, Staton observed: “These people left a lot of the things to us because it made them look better.”<sup>40</sup> While Browne later paid credit to the Jameses: “I thought the Seattle Unit owed them a great deal,” he also recorded his own role in recruiting

<sup>39</sup> Staton and Oliver interviews. Staton is variously listed as director or sometimes assistant director on the productions he staged (Production Notebooks for *An Evening with Dunbar* and *Taming of the Shrew*, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Boxes 1006 and 1079).

<sup>40</sup> Joseph Staton interviewed by John O’Connor, 7 January 1976, p.23, OHC-GMU, Box 10, Folder 6.

actors to the unit at the outset, “of course, knowing me, they got me to interview the Negroes, you know, who were on relief at that time and had possibilities.”<sup>41</sup> Charles Monroe, actor and stage manager for Seattle Negro Unit productions, recalled Browne’s influence: “We were just the Indians. He was the chief and we were the Indians.”<sup>42</sup> Oral history interviews with white supervisors on the Seattle Unit also add complexity to our understanding of the relationships between official white leaders and informal Black leaders within Negro Units. Appointed to direct the unit in a production of *Is Zat So?* in the winter of 1937-1938, Esther Porter remembered the troupe trying to educate her. The play concerns a prize-fight boxer who helps a white socialite out of a fix. Porter recalled the troupe “insist[ing]” she come along with them to watch a boxing match: “[T]hey thought I shouldn’t direct the show unless I came and saw what a fight was really like.”<sup>43</sup> White directors assigned to the Seattle Negro Unit soon discovered that their vision of Black drama would be resisted and reimagined by this tightknit and talented group of emerging theatre professionals.<sup>44</sup> Oral histories help us understand the complex dynamic at play between white supervisors and directors and Black creatives who drew on the resources of and found ways to navigate both the opportunities and limitations of Negro Units. They also spotlight the creative work of Black theatre makers on the project, rather than the choices and decision making of white directors.

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The oral history programme at GMU and its dissemination through *Federal One* are important markers in the history of Black Federal Theatre because they initiated the slow process of reframing the categorization of Black drama first developed under the auspices of the project. The Black drama issue of *Federal One* includes a mini catalogue of “Black plays *and* plays produced by the Negro Units of the Federal Theatre Project” (emphasis mine). Such a distinction matters, for it recognizes that Black plays and plays produced by Negro Units are not one and the same. Moreover, it suggests a capacious understanding of the idea of “production.” Plays “produced” appears to refer here both to plays developed, but never staged by the FTP, as well as to plays that were staged. Such a categorization is important for it allows inclusion of African American women whose work was dismissed by FTP programmers and whose invisibility is reinforced

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41 Theodore Browne interviewed by Lorraine Brown, 22 October 1975, OHC-GMU, Box 2, Folder 11, First tape, Side 1, 4, 19, and 6.

42 Charles Monroe interviewed by Lorraine Brown, 9 November 1978, OHC-GMU, Box 7, Folder 25, First tape, Side 1, 33.

43 Esther Porter Lane, interviewed by Mae Mallory Krulak, 7 September 1976 (revised by interviewee, February 1979), OHC-GMU.

44 Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003, p.62.

by categorizations of Black work in the FTP archive and Flanagan's *Arena*. For example, *Federal One's* list of Black plays includes five plays by the Harlem Renaissance playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson, the only Black women to appear on the list. Not one of her five plays were produced by the FTP.<sup>45</sup>

## THE VISIBILITY OF BLACK WOMEN IN ARCHIVES

The invisibility of Black women as creatives and directors on the FTP reflects the disproportionate opportunities made available to white men and women, and to a lesser extent Black men, in comparison to their female counterparts. But it also reflects the gendered processes of knowledge production which have served to amplify the creative and intellectual legacy of men, not least by imagining the play as the product of individual genius rather than dynamic collaboration. The histories written onto the Federal Theatre are no exception. For while the Federal Theatre archive documents the considerable contributions women made to the Federal Theatre Project, there has been no systematic study of how gender shaped the experiences and opportunities available to playwrights, actors, and directors, as well as access to the technical and administrative roles required to make theatre. Studies of women on the FTP are few and far between, and tend to focus on a handful of white women who occupied leadership roles on the FTP but whose reputation was made before the project: [Hallie Flanagan](#), the first woman to win a Guggenheim scholarship, whose directorship of the FTP made her the only woman to lead one of the four arts projects; Susan Glaspell, the prize-winning playwright and co-founder of the experimental Provincetown Players, who served as the Director of the Midwest play bureau of the Federal Theatre Project from 1936 to 1939, and [Florence James](#), director of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse and Seattle Negro Unit.<sup>46</sup> While each of these women played important and even defining roles in

45 "Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Project," *Federal One*, vol.1, no.2, 1980, pp.3-4.

46 Flanagan is a frequent presence in many studies of the Federal Theatre and in histories of anticommunism which explore her testimony before the Dies Committee. See, for example, Kate Dossett, "Gender and the Dies Committee Hearings on the Federal Theatre Project" *Journal of American Studies*, vol.47, no.4, November 2013. However, there has, surprisingly, been no recent biography of her. Joanne Bentley, her stepdaughter, authored a biography in 1988 (*Hallie Flanagan, op.cit.*). She is an important figure in Tim Robbins' 1999 film, *Cradle Will Rock*. In 2010, Vassar commissioned a new play by the playwright Mattie Brickman as part of its sesquicentennial celebration. [Playground](#) explores Flanagan's life at the start of her career as a professor at Vassar and her trip to Russia. Until recently Glaspell was a widely admired but seldom studied pioneer. Recent studies include: Émeline Jouve, *Susan Glaspell's Poetics and Politics of Rebellion*, Iowa City, U of Iowa P, 2017; Martha C. Carpentier and Émeline Jouve (eds.), *Trifles:*

shaping the FTP in the 1930s, the paucity of opportunities for women creatives across the project is deserving of a fuller study.

In an early edition of *Federal One*, researchers at GMU offered an initial assessment of women's participation on the Federal Theatre Project suggesting: "Their jobs were many, varied, and occasionally surprising." Women were, perhaps unsurprisingly, most visible as actors, but even here they were "surprisingly under-represented."<sup>47</sup> As a work relief project, the FTP, unlike commercial theatre, sought out productions with large casts to meet the primary function of relieving unemployment in the theatre industry. Yet even on the rolls of actors, men outnumbered women actors "by large ratios." Women often took roles as costume designers and as *seamstresses*, but far less often as technicians. When it came to the FTP's record on supporting and staging women playwrights *Federal One* offers a generous appraisal, suggesting the project's "playwriting needs were sufficiently wide and its Play Bureau progressive enough to prevent discrimination by sex."<sup>48</sup> Such a view is at odds with the data: of the 2,845 FTP productions, only 532 (just under 20%) were written by women and few women of color were given opportunities to develop new work. Overall, women constituted 27 percent of participants in the Federal Theatre Project, approximately the same as the number of women participating in the Federal Art Project, but less than the 40 percent of women who worked on the Federal Writers Project.<sup>49</sup> Of those dramas penned by women, plays for children, as well as vaudeville and religious productions were well represented. Significantly, white women were also relatively well represented in plays of Black life. Of the plays that were staged, they were often by already established female playwrights, including Glaspell (*Suppressed Desires* and *Inheritors*) and Lillian

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*On Susan Glaspell's Trifles and "A Jury of Her Peers"*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2015, a collection of new essays to mark the centennial of Glaspell's best known play; Noelia Hernando-Real, *Self and Space in the Theater of Susan Glaspell*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2011; Linda Ben-Zvi and J. Ellen Gainor (eds.), *Susan Glaspell: The Complete Plays*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2010; Florence Bean James's posthumously published memoir: *Fists upon a star* (with Jean Freeman), Regina, Saskatchewan, U of Regina P, 2013. Also see Kurt E. Armbruster's *Playing for Change*, Seattle, U Book Store P, 2012; Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, *op. cit.*

47 *Federal One*, vol.3, no.2, September 1976, p.6.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene suggest that in 1938, the peak year of WPA employment, women made up 13.5% of the WPA workforce, a figure disproportionate to their representation in the overall workforce where women made up 24% of workers, and had unemployment rates commensurate, if not higher than men (*Women, Art and the New Deal*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2016, pp.41-42). Also see [the list of FTP plays with authors' names](#) in the Finding Aid for the FTP collection at GMU.

Hellman (*Les Innocentes*), although a number of suffrage plays and anti-war plays were given their first productions by the FTP, including *Lucy Stone* by Maud Wood Park.<sup>50</sup>

The fewer opportunities accorded to women as creatives on the Federal Theatre Project is part of the story of why women's contributions have not been recorded in the same way as their male counterparts. But it also reflects systems of recognition and reward within the theatre industry, as well as archival and academic practices, which have obscured the collaborative process of playmaking, the roles of women and especially women of colour. As we have seen, the recovery of Black theatre making on the Federal Theatre was championed in the 1970s by the emergence of Black studies programmes and journals such as *Black Scholar*. There was, however, no equivalent effort to recover, promote and celebrate the work of women who made theatre in and around the Federal Theatre. Amiri Baraka's championing of Theodore Ward, the restoration of the FTP archive, and anthologizing of a small number of Black-authored FTP dramas in *Black Theater U.S.A.* has helped recover the work of Ward, Theodore Browne and Abram Hill. Yet it has also contributed toward a Black aesthetic which reifies a particular *radical* Black tradition, one created and narrated by men. Such tradition making has been important in redressing the silencing of Black male creativity and tradition making in theatre. But it also reminds us that Black knowledge production about the practice and history of theatre in the United States has sometimes served to amplify the creativity of Black men at the expense of Black women.

This is a phenomenon by no means unique to Black theatre or Black radicalism. Historians and archivists have long recognized that archives are not mere containers of records, but rather help bring into being that which they document. Archives reproduce power in various ways, through exclusion and neglect, as well as through inclusion and containment.<sup>51</sup> Women, and their creative work, are often presumed missing from the archive; they are also harder to find. The considerable resources required to recover work scattered across numerous collections named for male geniuses is compounded by the emotional labour required to confront over and again the archive's refusal of Black female agency. Black feminists have created new analytical frameworks to map and historicize the ways in which Black women develop radical visions of freedom while protecting themselves from the "controlling images" which occupy archives of the enslaved. From [Darlene Clark Hine's](#) "culture of dissemblance," to [Saidiya Hartman's](#)

50 "Women Playwrights," *Federal One*, vol.3, no.2, September 1976, p.7; see also E. Osborne, *Staging the People*, *op. cit.*, pp.70-84.

51 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago/London, U of Chicago Press, 1995, p.23.

“critical fabulation,” the imaginative labour of Black feminist knowledge production has been concerned to find ways to map the unknowable, to reclaim and make visible that which has been strategically withheld, without re-enacting the violence of the archive.<sup>52</sup> Other scholars have demonstrated that inclusion in the archive is no guarantee of inclusion in historical narratives. Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodward have argued that too often Black women’s contributions are not invisible, but harder to see, because they do not fit into the race-gender categories through which we view the past.<sup>53</sup> Black women creatives working in and around the Federal Theatre Project have been excluded and written out of archives and catalogues. But they have also been hidden in plain sight.

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Black women were central to the making of Black theatre on the Federal Theatre Project and oftentimes they documented that contribution. Understanding women’s roles as makers of theatre and agents of change requires that we examine both the archives of the Federal Theatre Project as well as personal papers of African Americans. It also demands a troubling of the categories which centre male theatre makers. In order to access the contributions of women, we need attend both to the collaborative process of play making and the history of Black theatre manuscripts. In the 1930s, much of this collaborative work took place in what I call Black performance communities. These communities developed in and around, but importantly operated beyond the white-controlled Negro Units of the Federal Theatre. The idea of a Black performance community draws on Richard Barr’s notion of the “temporary social organization” which performance creates among spectators, actors, and actants—that is the director, author, composers, set designers and others whose “backstage” roles shape both text and performance.<sup>54</sup> Although temporary, these social communities are capable of producing longer lasting relationships and alignments between actors, actants and spectators. Women were at the heart of Black performance communities. Some had official roles within Negro Units or established Black theatre communities, such as [Rose McClendon](#), Edna Thomas, and Fredi Washington in New York City, while [Shirley Graham Du Bois](#) was the supervisor of the Chicago Negro Unit. Others, such as Gwen Reed in Hartford and Gladys Boucree in Chicago were, and remain, less well-known. But they were part of a broad network of women who made theatre: on play-reading

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52 Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs*, vol.14, no.4, Summer 1989, pp.912-920; Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, vol.12, no.2, June 1, 2008, pp.1-14.

53 Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodward, *Want to Start a Revolution?*, New York, New York UP, 2009, p.3.

54 Richard Barr, *Rooms with a View*, Ann Arbor, U of Michigan P, 1998, p.11.



committees and as cast members, women critiqued, amended, and wrote collaborative Black manuscripts. They also devised and developed new Black theatre manuscripts.



5. Gwen Reed, circa 1950s (Hartford History Center, Hartford Public Library).

Gwen Reed is a case in point (fig. 5). An important creative presence on the Hartford Negro Unit, Reed was secretary of the Charles Gilpin Players, an independent

community theatre established in Hartford, Connecticut in 1921. Like many of the FTP Negro Units, the Hartford Negro Unit developed out of a well-established Black theatre producing company. The Gilpin Players met in churches, halls and sometimes in each other's homes throughout the 1920s. They staged their own work as well as performing white classics and new work by white theatre practitioners. In the 1930s, Reed, who worked in the tobacco fields of Connecticut, appeared in her first acting role for the company in a production of *Trilogy in Black*, a collaboration between the Black theatre troupe and a local young white playwright Ward Courtney. Reed also began writing her own dramas, some of which were staged by the Gilpin Players. In 1937, the company applied to become a recognized and funded Unit of the Federal Theatre Project with paid administrative staff and a Black troupe. Reed played a number of leading roles including Marie in Dorothy and Dubose Heyward's *Porgy* and May in Paul Green's *The Field God*.<sup>55</sup>

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Reed's work as an actor for the Hartford Negro Unit is documented in the official FTP archive. So too is her authorship of new work. Reed was one of several members of the Black troupe who wrote the collaborative, radical new drama *Stars and Bars*. Devised by the Hartford Negro Unit in collaboration with Ward Courtney, *Stars and Bars* was a Living Newspaper, a new form inspired by Russian and European workers theatre and remade for the Federal Theatre Project. Living Newspapers incensed Congressional opponents of the New Deal from the outset. Shining the spotlight on the inequalities which blighted the lives of Americans, Living Newspapers became an early target of the Dies Committee's investigations into Un-American activity on the Arts projects.<sup>56</sup> Responding to these charges in *Arena*, Flanagan downplayed the radical nature of Living Newspapers, insisting they were as American as "Walt Disney, the March of Time and the *Congressional Record*" and that they "did not resemble anything hitherto seen on the stage."<sup>57</sup> The scholarship on the Living Newspaper has pursued the question of how far they represented a radical innovation in US theatre. While some scholars view the Living Newspaper as a decisive break with the bourgeois realism that had shaped leftist American theatre in the early decades of the twentieth

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55 W. Earle Smith, "The Charles Gilpin Players," December 7, 1936, Production Records, New Haven, FTP-LOC, Box 1068; "Negroes on W.P.A Projects," Connecticut Federal Theatre, National Archives, E839, Box 32, Folder Negro, No. 3 and 4. Gertrude Don Dero Memo to William M. Stahl, 7 December 1936, Production Records, New Haven, FTP-LOC, Box 1068; "Negro Drama Players Now Part of WPA," *The Hartford Courant*, September 11, 1936, p.20.

56 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.433; Stuart Cosgrove, *Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form*, PhD Dissertation, University of Hull, 1982, p.133.

57 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.70.

century, others argue that the move away from realism—sparse sets, documentary styles and mass casts—can be attributed to the requirements of Federal Theatre budgets rather than any commitment to Brechtian political theatre.<sup>58</sup> The problem with such debates about the radicality of the FTP's Living Newspaper is that they are framed within the parameters of an archive that only includes white Living Newspapers. There were likely five Black-authored Living Newspapers in varying stages of development when the FTP closed in 1939.<sup>59</sup> While we know little about three of these beyond their titles, we do have manuscripts for two Black Living Newspapers. *Liberty Deferred* was written by Abram Hill and John Silvera, under the supervision of National Service Bureau director Emmet Lavery, and a version of it has been published. However, a fifth Black Living Newspaper developed by the Hartford Negro Unit has not been catalogued or included in studies of Living Newspapers. Black Living Newspapers require us to reframe our understanding of the genre and the possibilities for experimental theatre making by Black creatives on the FTP, for they offered a radical critique of the Living Newspaper form, of the FTP and of US theatre.<sup>60</sup>

*Stars and Bars* was written by the Hartford Negro Unit between 1937 and 1938. Set in Hartford, it puts the spotlight on the city's poor housing and health provision and its disproportionate effect on Black lives. That racial discrimination in the urban North was less honest, rather than less acute than in the Deep South, is its constant refrain. Originally entitled "The Hartford Negro," it was renamed "Bars and Stripes," before eventually settling into its new name in the summer of 1938. *Stars and Bars* is usually credited solely to the young white dramatist Ward Courtney, both in Federal Theatre Project programming and catalogues, and on the rare occasions it is mentioned in FTP scholarship.<sup>61</sup> Such attribution is at odds with the [manuscript](#) which records the contributions of the Black troupe to the Living Newspaper on the opening page: "Based on research compiled by the author, with the cooperation of the Negro Unit of the Connecticut Federal Theatre."<sup>62</sup> Black authorship is clearly documented throughout the manuscript. Alvin Napper, a Tenants Rights activist in Hartford, and member of the Hartford Negro Unit wrote an extraordinary poem for the scene that opens Act 2.

58 Ira Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre*, Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1985, p.150; Ilka Saal, *New Deal Theater*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p.130.

59 Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, pp.80-81.

60 *Ibid.*, especially pp.78-121.

61 See for example Paul Nadler, "Liberty Censored: Black Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project," *African American Review*, vol.29, no.4, 1995, p.616.

62 The Hartford Negro Unit with Ward Courtney, "Stars and Bars," Federal Theatre Project Collection, George Mason University, Box 6, Folder 1.

“Drama of the Slums,” is clearly a parody of the Federal Theatre’s most successful Living Newspaper, *One-Third of a Nation*, which was often advertised as a “Saga of the Slums.”<sup>63</sup> Napper’s scene personifies the diseases of poverty: Tuberculosis, Infant Mortality, and Syphilis seize women, men, and children and dance them off stage to an early death. Napper’s authorship is highlighted on the title page of Act 2: “The poem, ‘Drama of the Slums,’ written by Alvin Napper of the Negro Unit for the play.”<sup>64</sup> Other troupe members also contribute sketches drawn from their own lives and experiences of the Black community. Donald Wheedlin, a Communist activist and lead actor for the Unit appears in a scene as himself, NEGRO, alongside Courtney, who appears as AUTHOR. Together the two men travel to a crowded slum in Hartford’s North End to interview a female tenant about her exploitative landlord. Black women are not only subjects but also authors in *Stars and Bars*. Gwen Reed wrote the medical sketch (Act 1, scene 5) which showcases the inferior medical treatment received by Black Americans. Based on her own experience, it suggests the anguish and pain suffered by Black communities while they waited for the doctor to arrive, only to be treated with disdain and prescribed expensive and useless medication. Reed’s authorship is documented on the manuscript. As with other accreditations to Black authors, Reed’s contribution is given a full page ahead of the scene in question with the following citation: “Sequence on medical attention in the following scene written by Gwendolyn Reed of the Negro Unit for the play.”<sup>65</sup>

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Despite Reed’s prominent place in the history of the Gilpin Players and the Hartford Negro Unit, her work has been obscured. While her roles as actor and writer for the Hartford Negro Unit are documented in the official FTP archive, Reed’s contributions to Black theatre manuscripts have not been credited in catalogues produced by the FTP or in scholarship on the Federal Theatre. This writing out of Black contributors obscures Black creativity as well as the collaborative process of both the Living Newspaper format and the working methods of the Hartford Negro Unit.<sup>66</sup> Yet Reed was not an obscure figure who disappeared from view after the closing of the Federal Theatre Project in 1939. She went on to direct plays for the Hartford Community Players, an independent Black community theatre in the 1940s and 1950s and to play

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63 Brooks Atkinson, “Saga of the Slums: The Openings,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 1938, p.151.

64 *Stars and Bars*, title page Act II.

65 *Stars and Bars*, start of Act 1, scene 5.

66 *Stars and Bars* is not mentioned in *Arena*. For discussion on the misattribution of *Stars and Bars*, see K. Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, *op. cit.*, pp.92-93.

lead roles in for the Hartford Stage Company, a major new institution which opened with a production of *Othello* in 1962. But for sixteen years, between 1946 and 1964, Gwen Reed also played the role of Aunt Jemima for the Quaker Oats Company. One of many African American women who performed as the pancake-box cook to promote Quaker Oats, Reed and other Aunt Jemimas were anonymous. Newspaper reports and publicity announcements would record only that: “Aunt Jemima arrived in town today, brilliant in her red and white check outfit.”<sup>67</sup> While Reed was, apparently, happy to remain anonymous in her Aunt Jemima role, as a writer on the Harlem Negro Unit, Reed made sure to record her identity, both on the manuscripts she contributed to as well as in her own account of the project which she preserved for years after the FTP closed. Such precaution was a necessity. For when it came to documenting Black authorship, the Federal Theatre Project, no less than the Quaker Oats Company, often concealed the identity of its Black creatives.

Reed’s Quaker Oats career make her an awkward fit for recovery projects of the Black Arts Movement that sought to uncover a revolutionary Black tradition, and perhaps offer one explanation for why she is not better known. Yet, Reed’s account of the Hartford troupe suggests that the Hartford Negro Unit was invested in and found ways to create a Black aesthetic of their own. Acquired by friends for the Hartford Public Library following her death in 1974, [Reed’s personal papers](#) include a history of the Black troupe that formed the Hartford Negro Unit. [Reed’s account](#) of the Federal Theatre Project has a lengthy and revealing title: “The Sincere Testimony to Anxiety, Labor, Patience, Time and Cordial, Constructive Criticism and to Memories Turbulent or Tender of Conn. Federal Theater October 1936 to May 6, 1939.” Here Reed documents the company’s history prior to becoming a Negro Unit and creates a picture of an experienced troupe accustomed to designing their own repertoire. For example, she emphasizes how the company developed “plans and suggestions of their own” which led to a weekly spot on the local radio station. Reed also attends to the relationship between Black and white creatives. In Reed’s account, Black theatre practitioners are not under the direction of whites. Rather the established, critically acclaimed theatre company commission Courtney to write for them.<sup>68</sup>

67 Christopher Baker, “From Fields to Footlights: Gwen Reed,” in Elizabeth J. Normen (ed.), *African American Connecticut Explored*, Middletown, Wesleyan UP, 2013, p.320.

68 This account is available digitally following the author’s request for scans in 2017 (“The Sincere Testimony to Anxiety, Labor, Patience, Time and Cordial, Constructive Criticism and to Memories Turbulent or Tender of Conn. Federal Theater October 1936 to May 6, 1939,” Gwen Reed Collection, Hartford History Center, Hartford Public Library).

The documentation of Reed's creative labour reminds us that Black women's work is often hidden in plain sight.<sup>69</sup> In order to make it visible, we must start with the proposition that African Americans were creative agents, rather than disempowered subjects of Federal theatre administrators and historical archival practices. We must learn to read along the grain. Such an approach will also assist efforts to read against the grain. Federal Theatre records suggest there were no Black playwrights on the payroll of the Hartford Negro Unit. Expanding the scope of our search for the documentation of Black authorship beyond the categories and catalogues constructed by white administrators will help us to interpret clues contained within them. For example, WPA publicity notices suggest the contributions of Negro Unit members to theatre manuscripts were improvised in performance. A press release issued in May 1937 about the Hartford Negro Unit's upcoming production of French author, Andre Obey's

**374** *Noah* is a good example of how the WPA publicly acknowledged the creativity of Black troupe members in shaping theatre manuscripts even as it sought to contain and even dismiss it:

Negroes are not content with being the best natural actors in the world—they persist in some of its best playwriting as well. They don't sit down at a typewriter to do this—it's a gift peculiar to the Negro actor which gets underway when he rehearses a play, which prompts him, in the emotional excitement of acting, to substitute his own lines and business when he forgets portion of his role. Nearly always the substitutions are so much better than the original parts that a wise director writes them into the script and they are acted that way from then on.<sup>70</sup>

White administrators on the project often perpetuated the idea that Black Americans were *natural* performers rather than trained artists. Such paternalism was routine, shaping African Americans experiences in the 1930s and beyond. The idea that African Americans produced little original work on the Federal Theatre Project has informed the cataloguing, archiving and historical narration of Black federal theatre in the twentieth century. It has become part of a cycle: researchers do not expect to find evidence of Black authored work and therefore do not look for it in the archive. Reinforcing the idea that archives only ever reveal their secrets indirectly, "against the grain" can contribute to the silencing of those Black voices it contains. Ending this

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69 D.F. Gore, J. Theoharis, and K. Woodward, *Want to Start a Revolution?*, *op. cit.*, p.3.

70 "Release to Hartford Times, Noah," pp.1-2; "Release to Hartford Courant," WPA, FTP activities in Hartford, Connecticut, WPA, RG69 in *Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century: Federal Government Records*, ProQuest History Vault. <https://proquest.libguides.com/historyvault/bfsfed>

cycle requires that we attend to the histories of archives and knowledge producing practices that have shaped histories of the Federal Theatre Project; that we learn first to read along the grain.

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## NOTICE

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## ABSTRACT

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This essay examines the history of the Federal Theatre archive and how it has shaped scholarly research on Federal Theatre dramas. In particular it explores how race and gender hierarchies inform the knowledge produced about the Federal Theatre, influencing both what is collected and how scholars and theatre practitioners' approach archives of dramatic literature and theatre. It argues that we need to find new ways to read the archive if we are to understand the history and significance of the FTP for African Americans and for women. Too often we turn to the most accessible archives, attempting to read "against the grain" in archives that privilege the experiences and narratives of white subjects. This chapter argues that we need first to move "along the grain," to understand how and in what contexts the archive becomes a knowledge producer, and how this has shaped the cumulative processes of cultural production from the 1930s to the present.

## KEYWORDS

Black theatre, Black drama, Federal Theatre Project, archives, archive theory, race, gender, knowledge production.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article revient sur l'histoire des archives du FTP et la manière dont cette histoire a influencé le travail des chercheurs sur les pièces de cette période. Il explore en particulier comment les hiérarchies de race et de genre ont conditionné la production des connaissances sur le FTP, en agissant tant sur les archives étudiées que sur la manière

dont les chercheurs et les praticiens de théâtre interprètent ces archives littéraires et théâtrales. Cet article avance l'hypothèse selon laquelle nous devons trouver de nouvelles manières de lire ces archives si nous voulons comprendre l'histoire et le sens du FTP pour les Afro-américains et les femmes. Trop souvent, les chercheurs se tournent vers les archives les plus accessibles, en tentant d'interpréter « à contre-courant » des archives qui privilégient les expériences et les récits des populations blanches. Cet article propose plutôt de « suivre le courant », pour comprendre comment et dans quels contextes les archives deviennent des outils de production de connaissance, et comment ce processus a façonné les procédés cumulatifs de production culturelle, des années 1930 à nos jours.

#### MOTS-CLÉS

*Black Theatre, Black drama, Federal Theatre Project*, archives, théorie des sources, race, genre, production des connaissances



# ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S "REAL NEGRO THEATER" AND THE NEGRO UNIT OF THE FEDERAL THEATER PROJECT IN NEW YORK

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## HURSTON AT THE NEW YORK NEGRO UNIT: CROSS-INFLUENCES OR CLOSE FIT?

This article first assesses Zora Neale Hurston's brief participation in the New York Negro Unit of the Federal Theater Project in 1935. As critics primarily focused on her fiction, her collections of folklore, and her essays, her theatrical endeavors have been somewhat downplayed.<sup>1</sup> Yet Hurston repeatedly expressed her wish to play a major role in establishing a Negro theater. The first prizes she won in 1925 were for two plays: *Color Struck* and *Spears*. Although the manuscript of the play she wrote for the Negro Unit did not survive, the context of the productions of the FTP, and more specifically its Negro Units—Haitian hoodoo (Orson Welles's *Macbeth*), adaptations of Greek plays to an African American setting, or the production of plays that dramatized the condition of Black workers—echoes Hurston's own repeated attempts at bringing black life and expressive culture to the stage. It is my contention that contemporary productions of Negro Units help establish correspondences with her aborted 1935 endeavor, and that parallelisms can be drawn between Hurston's output and some of the plays produced under the aegis of the FTP.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 This emphasis is shifting. Hurston's plays have been anthologized in Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell (eds.), *Collected Plays*, New Brunswick, Rutgers UP, 2008. [Ten of her plays](#) have been digitalized and are held at the Library of Congress. With the exception of *Mule Bone* (1930) that has received consistent critical attention, thanks to George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and *Color Struck* (1925), the other plays have not been thoroughly studied. See *inter alia*, Jennifer A. Cayer, "'Roll Yo' Hips and Don't Roll Yo' Eyes': Angularity and Embodied Spectatorship in Hurston's play, *Cold Keener*," *Theater Journal*, vol.60, no.1, March 2008, pp.37-69. Contemporary productions of Hurston's plays have nonetheless drawn sustained critical commentaries.
- 2 Within the scope of this essay, I limit myself to establishing the basis for a broader contextual study of Hurston's relationship to, or even congruence with, the work of the Negro Units of the FTP in terms of cross-influences and echoes, based notably on an analysis of the texts.

Albeit short-lived and *de facto* poorly documented, Hurston's work within the New York Negro Unit in 1935 took place in the context of the nationwide creation of Negro Units. Twenty-three were created across the country.<sup>3</sup> Placing her theatrical production within that larger perspective thus allows to assess, on the one hand, how prevalent the themes that concerned her were at the time and, on the other hand, how affected she was by the conflicting issues related to the representation of black life and culture on stage, issues that other playwrights and stage producers also had to contend with. One must recall that the dramatic or comic treatment of "Negro experience" was not the sole province of the Negro Units. Eugene O'Neill (*The Emperor Jones*, 1920) and Paul Green (*In Abraham's Bosom*, 1926) wrote and produced plays about black life and history. The lingering minstrel tradition, the vaudeville, and the stereotypes attached to them made it difficult to produce authentic black drama. They framed theatrical productions as comedy, thus precluding any serious treatment of the condition of Black Americans.

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On the opposite side of the spectrum was the radicalism of the Federal Theater at the hands of social and political activists. Hurston was anti-communist. Her distinct choice not to bring forth the oppression of the American Blacks in her productions meant that she was doomed to be the butt of virulent criticism, even on the part of her peers. Indeed, while she claimed that she did not belong to the "sobbing school of Negrohood,"<sup>4</sup> Richard Wright attacked her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), on the grounds that her characters fell within the minstrel tradition.<sup>5</sup> The poet Sterling Brown also criticized her book of folklore *Mules and Men* (1938) for its failure to address black people's bitterness and Harold Preece decried its lack of political commitment.<sup>6</sup> Engaged in a similar debate over theatrical productions, radical leftists and the black bourgeoisie had contradicting expectations as to what would or

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3 For a thorough study of radical Black theater in that era, see Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theater in the New Deal*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2020. For a more general overview, see Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2009; Jane Matthews, *The Federal Theatre 1935-1939*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1967.

4 Zora Neale Hurston, "How it Feels to be Colored Me" (1928), in Cheryl Wall (ed.), *Zora Neale Hurston*, New York, Library of America, 1995, p.827.

5 "Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theatre the minstrel technique that makes 'white folks' laugh." (Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," *New Masses*, October 1937, p.23.)

6 Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, Urbana-Champaign, U of Illinois P, 1977, pp.219-220.

should be staged in the Negro Units.<sup>7</sup> That political and artistic environment, rife with tensions over the content and form of black art, throws a light on Hurston's own dramatic output, as well as on her other endeavors in the performative arts, such as the concerts she produced. Her desire was to have her folklore material brought to the stage in plays that drew heavily on that content.<sup>8</sup> Anthropological fieldwork met and led to Black theater.

## THE NEW YORK NEGRO UNIT OF THE FTP AS CONTEXT FOR HURSTON'S THEATRICAL WORK

In the fall of 1935, Hurston joined the "Negro Unit" of the WPA's Federal Theater Project in New York, based in the Lafayette Theatre, with John Houseman and Orson Welles as directors, who were replaced by three black directors, Edward Perry, Carlton Moss, and H.F.V. Edward, a year later (fig. 1). Hurston was hired as a "drama coach" and worked on the production of Frank Wilson's *Walk Together Chillun*, a social drama with negro spirituals.<sup>9</sup> The play revolved around the labor dispute between New York State workers and migrants from the South brought to the city as cheap labor. Hurston, who was busy trying to have her book of southern folklore *Mules and Men* published, had little money at the time. In August 1935, she left Eatonville for New York and signed on with the FTP for \$23.86 per week.<sup>10</sup> A letter to Carl Van Vechten dated September 6 explains: "Every day I have been running from place to place thinking that I'd be placed for a job before night. [...] But I kept getting put off and my feet got more tired and my spirits lower. But it looks like I am really going to have a job now."<sup>11</sup> She was subsequently asked to write a play that was never produced, a black folk adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* that she delivered in a week. She also mentions in a letter to Edwin Osgood Grover, dated December 29, another play that may be an adaptation of her short story "Spunk:"

7 See Melissa Barton, "Speaking a Mutual Language: Negro People's Theater in Chicago," *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol.54, no.3, Fall 2010, pp.54-70.

8 In 1929, she transcribed Lovelace's sermon that was dramatized as *The Sermon in the Valley*. It was presented by the Gilpin Players in Cleveland in 1931 and revived by the same company in 1934. Black theater in the 1930s went beyond the creation of the Negro Units (Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1990, p.18). For the purpose of this essay, the emphasis falls on the FTP.

9 The two-act play run from February 2 to February 26, 1936 for a total of 29 performances. The choral arrangement was made by Leonard De Paur and the scenic design by Manuel Easman. The lead roles were held by Alonzo Bosen, Julian Costello, and Cornelius Donnelly.

10 R. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, op. cit., p.218.

11 Carla Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston*, New York, Doubleday, 2002, p.358.

I am on this Federal Negro Theater project and I have been called to do a play within a week and believe it or not, I did it and got it accepted. I am requested at public places and make some of them besides getting some reading done and some work on another play which I think is all set so far as acceptance is concerned.<sup>12</sup>

In her *Lysistrata*, Hurston adapted the Greek play, which stages the women of Athens, Sparta, and Thebes, to a Florida fishing community. The plot of Aristophanes' comedy has the women go on a sex strike to stop their husbands from going to war and thus end the Peloponnesian war. Hurston's adaptation was considered unsuitable as it "scandalized both Right and Left by its saltiness,"<sup>13</sup> and was not produced. Unfortunately, the manuscript did not survive.<sup>14</sup> In his autobiography, Houseman wrote that she was "their most talented writer on the project."<sup>15</sup>

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Trained as an anthropologist under Franz Boas and working also with Melville Herskovits, the author of plays and short stories, Hurston was a celebrated writer by the time of her hiring on the Federal Theater Project. She had published *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and six of her essays had appeared in Nancy Cunard's *Negro: An Anthology* (1934). She was also busy at the time with the writing of *Moses, Man of the Mountain* for her publishers. However, as her theatrical works, as well as the various positions in the thirties as drama teacher at Rollins College, and later at Bethune, attest, she was also pursuing the dream of creating a "real Negro art theatre." Her letter to Langston Hughes of April 12th, 1928 explains her project which was to be nourished by the folklore collected in Florida and the Bahamas: "Did I tell you [...] about the new, the *real* Negro art theater, I plan? Well, I shall, or rather *we* shall act out the folk tales, however short, with the abrupt angularity and naiveté of the primitive 'bama nigger. Just that with naive settings."<sup>16</sup>

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12 *Ibid.*, p.363.

13 John Houseman, *Run-Through*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1972, p.205.

14 Historian Tiffany Ruby Patterson, who mentions the play as *A Negro Lysistrata*, explains that she looked for it in the following archives and could not find it: John Houseman papers at UCLA Library Special Collection, at the Federal Writer's Theater Project at George Mason University Libraries, and at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York (*Zora Neale Hurston and the History of Southern Life*, Philadelphia, Temple UP, 2005, n.18, p.211).

15 J. Houseman, *Run-Through*, *op. cit.*, p.205.

16 C. Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston*, *op. cit.*, p.116 (emphases Hurston's). She also mentions "the real Negro theater" she intends to set up in Eatonville in a 1932 letter to Edwin Osgood Grover (*Ibid.*, p.259).





1. Zora Neale Hurston and three boys in Eatonville, FL  
 (photos taken during Lomax-Hurston-Barnicle recording expedition in Florida),  
 Alan Lomax collection, June 1935, retrieved from the Library of Congress

Her fieldwork as a folklorist and her urge to become a successful creative writer found an outlet in staging concerts and musical revues. *Meet the Mama*, her musical play, was written as early as 1925. She strove towards her goal in the context of the white patron-black writer relationship that she had established during the Harlem Renaissance with her “Godmother,” Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, as early as 1927. As Hurston’s patron, Mason forbade her to use the material she collected for commercial purpose.<sup>17</sup> Undeterred, Hurston relentlessly sought to produce performances that would translate to the audience the authenticity of black expressive culture, unadulterated by a white

<sup>17</sup> The musical *The Great Day* and its various versions bear traces of that demand. The acknowledgements of [the program of the 1932 production](#) nonetheless read: “This work of salvaging surprising portions of original primitive Negro life has had spiritual and material support from Mrs. Osgood Mason of New York” (“*The Great Day*: a program of original negro folklore” [1932], Prentiss Taylor papers, 1885-1991, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution). The play *The Fiery Chariot* may have been added to the show to make up for the suppressions.

vision of black art or rearranged to cater to white taste. However, the majority of her theatrical endeavors appears to have been beset by financial troubles and uneasy work relationships with the administration of the various universities where she attempted to be hired, but also with her colleagues and artist friends. Her falling out with Langston Hughes over the authorship of the play *Mule Bone* (1930) is the most notorious and best documented of such episodes.<sup>18</sup> That she should not remain long within the New York section of the FTP strikes a similar pattern of concurring and antagonistic goals and of difficulties over asserting her own vision for black theater. First and foremost, it points to how reliant she was on financial support. Her involvement was interrupted this time by her pursuit of a university degree and, understandably, the funding that supported that venture, a prestigious and generous Guggenheim fellowship.

**386** Hurston indeed left the Federal Theater Project after she received that fellowship, which led her first to Jamaica, then to Haiti where she conducted fieldwork. Orson Welles's celebrated *Voodoo Macbeth* was staged on April 14, 1936 while Hurston was in Haiti. This immersion in Caribbean voodoo practices and rituals resulted in her ethnographic travelogue, *Tell My Horse* (1938), which records her initiation into secret societies (fig.2).



2. Zora Hurston, half-length portrait, standing, facing slightly left, beating the hountar, or mama drum, 1937, retrieved from the Library of Congress

**18** See the edition of the play followed by the documents of the controversy by George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Mule Bone*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1993.

She had left the theatre for what Michel Leiris would later theorize as the “lived theater” of black expressive culture and religion.<sup>19</sup> Such an undertaking stands in direct line with her interest in Florida folklore and hoodoo practices that constitute the last part of *Mules and Men*.<sup>20</sup> It also stresses her necessity to collect first-hand material which would later be channeled, with as little tampering as possible, into her productions and performances and bear the stamp of authenticity.

All over the country, the Negro Units produced a number of plays that resonate with Hurston’s own concerns: black folklore and its heroes, black historical legends, black workers’ everyday life. Conjointly with Welles’s heavily documented black *Macbeth*,<sup>21</sup> the New York Negro Unit also produced *Conjur’ Man Dies*, after Rudolph Fisher’s novel, adapted by Countee Cullen and Arna Bontemps, in March-April 1936. The play deals with superstition and the occult among Harlem Blacks. Besides being part two of *Mules and Men*, conjure is an important element of Hurston’s “Spunk” and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Following *Conjur’ Man Dies*, the actor-writer J. Augustus Smith had two plays produced. *Turpentine*, co-authored with Peter Morrell (June 1936),<sup>22</sup> dealt with labor camps in the South (to which I shall return at the end of this article).

19 Michel Leiris established a distinction between performed or play-acted theater (“*théâtre joué*”) and lived theater (“*théâtre vécu*”) that troubles an outside observer’s perception of these rites. In 1958, while conducting research on spirit possession in Ethiopia, the French ethnographer realized that there was a certain amount of self-reflexivity, a doubleness, on the part of those involved in rites of possession (*La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar*, in *Miroir de l’Afrique*, ed. Jean Jamin and Jacques Mercier, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, pp.1047-1061). For an analysis of Leiris’s “lived theater,” see Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, *Spirit Possession in French, Haitian, and Vodou Thought*, New York, Lexington Books, 2015, pp.127-142.

20 That section is a reworking of her scholarly work that had previously appeared in *The Journal of American Folklore* (Fall 1931), and which the publishers asked her to include in the book, along with an autobiographical storyline.

21 Interestingly, song writer Lawrence Gellert describes the interactions between the white producers and the black cast of 800 as a “plantation system” (Bruce M. Conforth, *African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics*, Plymouth, Scarecrow Press, 2013, p.150). Excerpts from the play can be viewed in a propaganda film from the WPA: Orson Welles (dir.), “*Voodoo Macbeth*” (4 min.), in Edgar Smith (dir.), *We Work Again*, black and white moving picture, Works Progress Administration, 1937, 15 min. 12.

22 J. Augustus Smith and Peter Morrell, *Turpentine*, New York, 1936 (poster retrieved from the Library of Congress). “Gus” Smith, who, like Hurston, was a Florida native, wrote the screenplay for the film *Drum o’Voodoo* (1934) directed by Arthur Hoerl, based on his three-act play *Louisiana* (1933). The play premiered at the Majestic Theater on February 20th, 1933; it included spirituals, voodoo drums, and a sermon in a Baptist church. Morrell was a white playwright who also worked on the musical *Africana* (1933) and radio plays.

Hurston celebrates these rural settings in *Mules and Men*, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, and in a 1939 essay.<sup>23</sup> *Just Ten Days* (1937), a social melodrama centering on a family crisis during the Depression, toured the streets of New York from August to September.<sup>24</sup> Outside of New York, the Chicago Unit produced *Big White Fog* by Theodore Ward in 1938,<sup>25</sup> while the Seattle Unit staged an adaptation from Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* by Theodore Browne in 1937 that one might compare to Hurston's own failed attempt. In addition to that play, Browne also wrote *Natural Man* about the Black folk hero John Henry, *Go Down Moses* that dealt with the abolitionist legend Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, and the musical revue *Swing, Gates, Swing* (1937). In her books on folklore, Hurston related the legend of the heroic railroad worker, the subject of sundry folk ballads.<sup>26</sup>

### HURSTON'S BLACK MUSICAL THEATER AS CONGENIAL TO THE SPIRIT OF THE FTP?

Hurston's numerous contributions to the theater in the 1920s and 1930s accounted for her being hired on the FTP. She could indeed be considered as one of the jobless playwrights that the WPA sought to help. She had joined the Howard Players in 1920. Her plays *Color Struck* (later published in *Fire!!*) and *Spears* (later published in *The X-Ray. The Official Publication of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority*), had been distinguished in the literary contest of *Opportunity* magazine in May 1925. In July 1925, when she completed *Meet the Mama*, one can trace an involvement with the Harlem based Krigwa Players. Founded by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1926 as an appendage to *The Crisis* magazine, the Krigwa Players (Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists) was

23 See Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, ed. Robert Hemenway, Urbana-Champaign, U of Illinois P, 1984, pp.177-184; *ead.*, *Cross City*, Cross City, Florida State Archives, 1939, pp.1-5. See also note 65 below.

24 It featured Frank Alvin Silvera of the Boston Federal Theater.

25 *Big White Fog* (April-May 1938, Chicago Negro Unit) is set in Chicago during the height of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Depression of the 1930s. It depicts an African American family coming to grips with oppression (Garveyism, capitalism, communism, color stratification). For an analysis of black masculinity in the play, see Kate Dossett, "Staging the Garveyite Home: Black Masculinity, Failure, and Redemption in Theodore Ward's 'Big White Fog,'" *African American Review*, vol.43, no.4, Winter 2009, pp.557-576.

26 Z.N. Hurston, *Mules and Men*, *op.cit.*, p.230, and pp.233-236; *ead.*, *Works-in-Progress for The Florida Negro*, in C. Wall (ed.), *Zora Neale Hurston, op.cit.*, Library of America, 1992, p.879. John Henry was also the hero of another play by that title written by Frank B. Wells (1936).

a Harlem-based theater company created to reflect his goals for the “Negro Little Theatre.”<sup>27</sup> Hurston sent Du Bois two plays that he did not publish.<sup>28</sup> In 1927, her play *The First One* appeared in Charles S. Johnson’s *Ebony and Topaz*. In 1930, when she collaborated with Hughes on *Mule Bone*, she also worked with Porter Grainger on *Jungle Scandals*. She copyrighted *Mule Bone* as *De Turkey and the Law* and canceled the production of the play in 1931, when she broke with Hughes. She titled her sketches for *Jungle Scandals* as *Cold Keener*. The same year, she also contributed sketches to the Broadway musical revue, *Fast and Furious*.

Another endeavor in the performing arts enlightens Hurston’s stint at the Negro Unit. Three years before joining it, Hurston engaged in the production of a Negro folk concert entitled *The Great Day* (fig. 3).



3. “The Great Day: A Program of Original Negro Folklore” (1932),  
Prentiss Taylor papers, 1885-1991, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

- 27 W.E.B. Du Bois, “Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre,” *The Crisis*, vol.32, July 1926, pp.134-136.
- 28 Du Bois’s vision of the talented tenth and his conservatism concerning gender roles and proper behavior clashed with Hurston’s depiction of Southern life. The young Turks opposed him in *Fire!!* Alain Locke published *Color Struck in Fire!!*, and then in *The New Negro* (Alain Locke, “Fire: A Negro Magazine,” *The Survey Graphic*, vol.58, 1925, pp.10-12).

This experience is related in a chapter of the new edition of *Dust Tracks on the Road* established by Cheryl Wall for the Library of America in 1995. As it had been left out of the 1942 edition, its erasure contributed to minimizing Hurston's dedication to public performance.<sup>29</sup> The concert program for the John Golden theater of *Great Day* bore a text by Alain Locke explaining that the show was a "cycle of Negro folk-song, dance and pantomime" collected during a four-year travel period (1927-1931).<sup>30</sup> In his presentation, Locke insisted on the primitivism in the rendering of black life. The first "concert," or example of the musical theater that was popular at the time, included a performance of *The Fire Dance*.<sup>31</sup> Qualifying Locke's appreciation, dance history scholar Anthea Kraut analyzes the show as a break away from the minstrel tradition and the evidence of a deep understanding of diasporic black culture:

Hurston's staging of a West Indian folk-dance cycle within a program of southern-US black folkways constituted an important turning point in the history of stage representations of black vernacular dance idioms, helping to re-orient those idioms away from the racist legacy of blackface minstrelsy and toward an understanding of how African-derived expressive forms arrive on American shores.<sup>32</sup>

Hurston's position vis-à-vis black folklore, her desire to have the material she collected staged with minimal changes, ran counter to the divisions between the different expressive arts of the WPA (music, theater, dance) and to their choices in matters of aesthetics (fig. 4).

29 For an analysis of the changes between the manuscript of *Dust Tracks* and the published version, see Claudine Raynaud, "Rubbing a Paragraph with a Soft Cloth: Muted Voices and Editorial Constraints in *Dust Tracks on a Road*," in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds.), *De/Colonizing the Subject*, Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 1992, pp.34-65.

30 "*The Great Day*: a program of original negro folklore" (1932), art.cit. In 1929, she had collected Bahaman dances and over the three subsequent years she garnered tales, songs, and sermons in Florida, Alabama, and New Orleans.

31 *From Sun to Sun*, a version of *The Great Day* was presented at other New York venues. It now included *The Fiery Chariot*. It was staged at Rollins College and toured as *All De Live Long Day* throughout Florida, while another version of *The Great Day* was performed in Chicago as *Singing Steel* in 1934.

32 Anthea Kraut, "Everybody's Fire Dance: Zora Neale Hurston and American Dance History," *S&F Online*, vol.3, no.2, Winter 2006, n.p.



Fig. 4. Hurston rehearsing a group of performers for *Sun to Sun* (originally published in *Theater Arts*, April 1932), Zora Neale Hurston collection, University of Florida.

It was dance (*The Fire Dance*, with the subtitle *An African Grotesque*, included: “The Jumpin’ Dance,” “The Ring Play,” and “The Crow Dance”);<sup>33</sup> it was singing (such as the song “Halimuhfack”<sup>34</sup> or the Spirituals); it was music; it was drama. Hurston wrote one-act plays and championed a view of staging black culture that clashed with dominant opinions. For instance, her desire to have Negro spirituals sung as they were in the South, and not adapted and altered, stands in direct opposition to Helen Tamiris and her dance ensemble’s interpretation of the spirituals and protest songs. In her essay, “Spirituals and Neo Spirituals” (1934), Hurston states:

There never has been a presentation of genuine Negro spirituals to any audience anywhere. What is being sung by the concert artists and glee clubs are the works of Negro composers or adapters based on the spirituals. Under this head come the works of

33 Zora Neale Hurston, “The Crow Dance,” vocals with clapping by Z.N. Hurston, F.W.P. Halpert, Stetson Kennedy, 1939 (audio recording). [A Dance Unit of the WPA was also established, but it was disbanded in 1938.](#)

34 *Ead.*, “Halimuhfack,” vocals by Z.N. Hurston at Federal Music Project Office, Jacksonville (FL), on June 18, 1939 (audio recording).

Harry T. Burleigh, Rosamond Johnson, Lawrence Brown, Nathaniel Dett, Hall Johnson and [John Wesley]. All good work and beautiful, but *not* the spiritual.<sup>35</sup>

Modern dancer Helen Tamaris starred in a successful dance drama that used spirituals and protest songs sung by a black chorus as a backdrop to her performance. Opening on May 1937 at the Nora Bayes Theater, the concert *How Long Brethren?* was divided into three parts. The first part was a series of five spirituals performed by the Federal Theater Negro chorus, and the second part consisted in four solos pieces that Tamaris danced to the spirituals. The third and final part, entitled *How Long Brethren?*, saw her and her dancers perform to the Negro protest songs that Lawrence Gellert had collected in the South during his assignment to the Atlanta unit of the FTP (fig. 5).

392 The music score was by Elie Seigmeister.<sup>36</sup> Tamaris also choreographed eight Negro spirituals which were performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in April 1939 with six other short dances in a program shared with Hanya Holm.<sup>37</sup> The dancer's understanding of black culture as a foil to white dancers clashes with Hurston's goal to remain true to unadulterated African American artistic creations placed center stage. The show was a piece of Popular Front propaganda. This opposition on aesthetic—but also in effect racial—grounds partly explains the reception of Hurston's own productions. Were they not too close to “nature” for white culture's tastes? The primitivism that was lauded was also understood, framed, and shaped from white culture's point of view.<sup>38</sup> Hurston fought for a theater of unmediated expression, untampered slices from “Negro life.” She thus contributed to supporting black performers and was not alone of that opinion, as this comment by *The New York Age*


35 Ead., “Spirituals and Neo Spirituals,” in *The Sanctified Church*, Berkeley, Turtle Island, 1981, p.80. (emphasis Hurston's).

36 Lawrence Gellert was the brother of the illustrator and communist activist Hugo Gellert who worked for *New Masses*. The book of protest songs was compiled by Lawrence after he visited lumber camps and met with African Americans on the Southern chain gangs. He was part of the Atlanta unit of the WPA. Lawrence Gellert's biographer, Bruce M. Conforth, has assembled evidence that Gellert may have made up the songs.

37 Gellert gathered these songs in his *Negro Songs of Protest*. In her book, Hallie Flanagan stated: “To the singing of a Negro Chorus and music by Genevieve Pitot, Tamaris and her group danced seven episodes of Negro life all simple in pattern but dramatic in intensity.” Hallie Flanagan, *Arena. The Story of the Federal Theater*, New York, Benjamin Blom, 1940, p.199.

38 Dance historian Susan Manning reads the production along racial lines: “Can the feminism of *How Long Brethren* be separated from its metaphorical minstrelsy? The answer, I would suggest, is no.” (“Black Voices, White Bodies: The Performance of Race and Gender in ‘How Long Brethren,’” *American Quarterly*, vol.50, no.1, March 1998, p.27.)



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5. *How Long Brethren? 2* (poster retrieved from the Library of Congress,  
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columnist Ebenezer Ray makes clear: “We are among those who feel that the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre should remain, because of its financial benefit and furtherance of their art to Negro performers, but we also feel that this Unit should justify its existence as a source of community entertainment. It should awaken from its lethargy.”<sup>39</sup>

## TWO BLACK *LYSISTRATAS*: COMEDIES WITH SOCIAL COMMENTARY?

The Negro Units of the 1930s tapped into the flourishing of Black art and cultural effervescence now known as the Harlem Renaissance, of which Hurston was a prominent member. If she qualified as a deserving impoverished black artist, yet again, her own view of stage direction might have run counter to prevailing opinions. The director of the Federal Theater Project, Hallie Flanagan, explains in her 1936 essay, “A Theater for the People,” that the project was created during the Great Depression to give work to the unemployed actors and technicians (stagehands, electricians, costume designers, builders, prop-handlers) who worked in the theater.<sup>40</sup> Among the nation’s unemployed, the African Americans were indeed the most numerous. Her text explains that laid-off artists, craftsmen, etc. in the theater trade found work through the structure of the WPA; these workers also achieved awareness of their role in society. She thus acknowledges the political and educational purpose of the program. With this goal in mind, Flanagan decided to establish FTP units across the country to bring theater to the people. She did this under the advice of the celebrated black actress, Rose McClendon.<sup>41</sup> McClendon had gained prominence in the 1920s for her roles in Paul Green’s *In Abraham’s Bosom* (1927) and George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* (1927). She also starred in Langston Hughes’ *Mulatto* (1935), before her untimely death in 1936. She had advised the Harlem Experimental Theater since 1927. However, McClendon is reported to have insisted on a white director for the New York Negro Unit with experience rather than a black director. Beyond professionalism and talent, what was at stake was indeed racial dynamics. Hurston was fighting to have her position as a black

39 Ebenezer Ray, “Dottings of a Paragrapher,” *The New York Age*, February 12, 1938, p.6.

40 Hallie Flanagan, “A Theater for the People,” *The American Magazine of Art*, vol.29, no.8, August 1936, pp.494-503.

41 On Rose McClendon, see Jay Plum, “Rose McClendon and the Black Units of the Federal Theatre Project: A Lost Contribution,” *Theatre Survey*, vol.33, no.2, November 1992, pp.144-153. On Flanagan’s effort to find jobs for unemployed black playwrights, see Ronald Ross, “The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939,” *The Journal of Negro History*, vol.59, no.1, January 1974, pp.38-50.

director recognized. Here is what she says about Frank Merlin, the white director of *Run, Little Chillun*, Hall Johnson's play for which he also acted as music director:<sup>42</sup>

My play 'Mule Bone' has been asked for by the Little Theater in New York. Same director as *Run Little Chillun*. I am wondering whether to send it there or to produce it myself here. I have a very good opening. Since all funds for the play and everything else can be had right here. I am wondering if I could not do a better job of interpreting Negro material than any white director ever could.<sup>43</sup>

Hurston could not be more explicit about her wish to produce her own plays and not leave that position up to white directors.

A comparison between Hurston's unpublished play, *Lysistrata*, and the play produced by the actor turned playwright, Theodore Browne of the Seattle Negro Unit, that bears the same title, may also clarify what was at stake in black theater directed by black playwrights for a black audience. Browne's *Lysistrata* was an adaptation of Aristophanes' comedy. The Greek play had actually been produced in the 1930 at the Philadelphia Theater Association and then at the New York Theater on 44th Street with Miriam Hopkins in the title role.<sup>44</sup> In Seattle, Browne's play was produced at the Orpheum Theatre in 1936. Browne started this project after the success of the play he had directed, George Sklar and Paul Peter's *Stevedore*,<sup>45</sup> and his acting in André Obey's

42 *Run, Little Chillun* (March 1-June 17, 1933) is a play in four scenes: "The Parsonage in a small Southern town;" "The Meeting Place of the New Day Pilgrims;" "Toomer's Bottom;" "Hope Baptist Church." It was performed at the Lyric Theater in New York (213 W. 42nd St.); the theater became a movie house in 1934 after a string of flops.

43 Letter to Alain Locke, October 29, 1934, quoted in C. Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston, op. cit.*, p.321.

44 Norman Bel Geddes was the stage designer. The New York version, with horse play and slapstick, is said to be a toned-down version of the Philadelphia production.

45 Here is Sarah Guthu's summary of the play's action: "George Sklar and Paul Peter's piece of labor agitation-propaganda (agit-prop) explored the confluence of class and racial prejudice. In the play, a white woman who threatens to expose her extramarital affair is beaten by her lover. Rather than reveal the truth—and her infidelity—the woman claims that a black man attempted to rape her. Police scour the city, picking up as many black men as they can, harassing them and putting them into lineups" ("*Negro Repertory Company: Lysistrata*," in *The Great Depression in Washington State Project*, Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, U of Washington, 2009, n.p.). Florence James and her husband signed for two shows with the FTP. They had worked on *In Abraham's Bosom*. See also T. Redd, "Stevedore in Seattle: A Case Study in The Politics of Presenting Race on Stage," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, vol.7, 1995, pp.66-87.

*Noah*,<sup>46</sup> a gospel chorus musical that had opened on April 28, 1936.<sup>47</sup> As Welles had relocated his *Macbeth* from Scotland to an unknown West Indian island reminiscent of the Haiti of King Christophe, Browne moved the setting of his play from Ancient Greece to the fictional African country of Ebonia (fig.6).

Like its Greek source, the play described how the women waged their own struggle for peace by refusing to have sex with their husbands. They went on a sex strike until the men stopped fighting wars. Sarah Guthu gives a brief description of the play whose typescript is located in the George Mason University Libraries: “Browne’s adaptation stayed close to the original script, with a few alterations. He added three choral numbers, which seem to have rapidly become one of the most popular features of Negro Repertory Company productions, to the play. He eliminated the lesbian woman.”<sup>48</sup> The production was halted after only one performance, since it was considered too risqué; an opinion that echoes the rejection Hurston’s *Lysistrata* had suffered. Dan Abel of the WPA, who had not seen the play, closed it down on the grounds that it was bawdy and indecent. Hallie Flanagan, as head of the FTP, sent her assistant, Howard Miller, to help find a solution. Browne himself assessed the situation as follows: “Instead of transgressing a generalized moral standard *Lysistrata* violated Seattle socially and ethnically coded definition of ‘decency’ that was tantamount to a structure of cultural and racial control.”<sup>49</sup> The play also shut down because Franklin Roosevelt’s administration did not like the change of setting that might cost him the support of Southern democrats. Mussolini had invaded Ethiopia in 1935 as part of the colonial expansion of his fascist regime that already occupied Libya, Eritrea, and Somaliland—countries that thus constituted Italy’s African colonies.

New York *Living Newspaper* project’s recent production of *Ethiopia* had been censored and rapidly shut down for the same reason.<sup>50</sup> The Seattle Negro Repertory Theater may have also been the victim of dissensions between the Federal Theater Project and the WPA, as the following comment makes clear:<sup>51</sup>

46 The play ran from April 28 to July 8, 1936.

47 The play was performed at the Lafayette Theater from October 7 to November 28, 1936.

48 S. Guthu, “Negro Repertory,” art. cit.

49 Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theater*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003, p.328.

50 Arthur Arent, “‘Ethiopia:’ The First ‘Living Newspaper,’” *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol.20, no.1, March 1968 (20th Century American Theater Issue), pp.15-31.

51 The printed program of *How Long Brethren?* clearly states that the opinions of the play are not those of the WPA.



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6. Poster of Theodore Browne's *Lysistrata*, Moore Theater  
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Florence Bean James Papers [accession #2117-001, Box 6, Folder 11]).

The hierarchies of power between the Works Progress Administration and the Federal Theatre Project had never been clearly delineated. The two government institutions were supposed to function independently of each other, but in practice, the FTP frequently found itself subject to the WPA, which created both national and local frictions between both programs. *Lysistrata* served to solidify the independence of the Federal Theatre Project from the WPA, but unfortunately, the Negro Repertory Company's production was sacrificed in the process.<sup>52</sup>



Fig. 7. Scene from Theodore Browne's *Lysistrata*  
(courtesy of the University of Washington Library Special Collections division,  
UW Theaters Photograph Collection [PH Collection #236, Box 4, Folder 13])

As Lena Hill's comparative analysis of Browne's and Hurston's plays shows, what stands at the core of both works is the "complicated nature of black playwrights' turning to Greek humor on the 1930s stage."<sup>53</sup> The critic explains that Aristophanes' comedy is not devoid of political commentary. It is precisely that aspect that both black

52 S. Guthu, "Negro Repertory," art. cit.

53 Lena Hill, "A New Stage of Laughter for Zora Neale Hurston and Theodore Browne: *Lysistrata* and the Negro Units of the Federal Theatre Project," in Kathryn Boshier, Fiona Macintosh, et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas*, New York, Oxford UP, 2015, chapter 18.

playwrights transferred to their adaptations. Houseman recalls in his autobiography that Hurston's play had as its setting "a Florida fishing community where the men's wives refused them intercourse until they won their fight with the canning company for a living wage."<sup>54</sup> This southern locale was a "natural choice" for Hurston who had been brought up and had conducted fieldwork in Florida.<sup>55</sup> In Loughman, an important industrial center where, at one time, four lumber cypress companies were located, a section of the Everglades Cypress Company was converted into a canning factory in 1918. A decade later, the factory was on the verge of closing down when Hurston arrived.<sup>56</sup> Ron West has attributed the choice of the Greek comedy to white administrators projecting their Marxist political agendas on the black companies.<sup>57</sup> Yet Hurston's adaptation of Aristophanes might also follow from her own education and love of the classics. She mentions a book of Greek and Roman myths sent her by white ladies when she was a child, and cites Pluto and Persephone, in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, she took courses in the Greek and Latin classics at Howard. Although Hurston was a staunch anti-communist, her rendering of rural life is not exempt from political consciousness. Her transcription of folk life as it is, and specifically of black speech, with hardly any commentary by a narrator, leaves room for the reader and the spectator's assessment of power relations at these rural labor locations.

Hill sees Browne as using his play to address the 1930s African American socio-political reality. His *Lysistrata* is politically conscious as opposed to her friend and neighbor Calonice who accepts negative feminine traits while she is not entirely depicted in a comic way. *Lysistrata* appeals to female solidarity and stresses patriotism but, since the references to Ebonia are not specific, they allow the audience to substitute America for Ebonia. The play consequently turns into satire. Browne's *Lysistrata* places the urban-rural tension at the center of the debate and establishes a number of links with Welles's Voodoo *Macbeth* through allusions. Blacks living in urban areas looked down on recently arrived blacks as a result of the Great Migration. Hill cites three other arguments to prove her point as to the topicality of the adaptation. First, the context of sociologist Robert E. Park's work on African Americans who had migrated to the city.<sup>59</sup> The play can be

54 J. Houseman, *Run-Through*, *op. cit.*, p.205.

55 L. Hill, "A New Stage," art cit.

56 T.R. Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston*, *op. cit.*, p.132.

57 See Ron West, "Others, Adults, Censors: The Federal Theater Project Black *Lysistrata* Cancellation," *Theater Survey*, vol.37, 1996, pp.93-113.

58 Z.N. Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, *op. cit.*, p.47 and 53.

59 See Robert Park, *The City* (1925), Chicago, Chicago UP, 1984.

seen as stating that women are fit to hold political roles; they can also be concerned by war since they provide the cannon fodder. Second, the play makes references to the racist stereotypes of the Reconstruction. Third, some of the dialogue brought home to theatergoers the fact that whites discouraged black education. This element features in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, a work that would have been known to the audience. Hill quotes a folktale from *Mules and Men* as further proof of the match between the Greek comedy and African American folklore. Indeed, in her collection of folklore, Hurston reports Mathilda's story that illustrates why women always take advantage of men.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, as the power dynamics of gender relations on the lumber camps attests, an aspect Hurston chronicled in *Mules and Men*, women held their own; as well as men, they were embroiled in fights and murders. Therefore representing them in a powerful role was also faithful to the reality of their lives and character. These women fought to bring to an end the oppression of their men in exploitative labor relations. Added to the theme of social justice, one may indeed conjecture that Hurston's depiction of powerful black women in her *Lysistrata* was reason enough for the rejection of her play. It is also in-fitting with the consistent feminist thread of her output, Janie of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* being the model of the free black woman.

400

## SPUNK AND THE FLORIDAN WORKING CAMPS: RURAL MELODRAMAS

Hurston's choice of a fishermen's village for the setting of her *Lysistrata* fits the location of her play *Spunk*. It also calls forth the working camps that are the settings of Smith and Morrel's 1936 *Turpentine* and of her own later *Polk County*. Such locales were thus familiar to and a source of inspiration for black playwrights. A rewriting of her 1925 short story that was set in an all-black Florida rural town, Hurston's *Spunk* is a mixture of song, chants and ballads, dance, music, and dramatic elements. It was never produced. It is replete with folk elements taken from her fieldwork: she incorporates in the original story line of romance, jealousy, harrowing manual labor and tragedy, a toe party,<sup>61</sup> croquet matches, lining songs, and hoodoo rites. Sections of *Spunk*—notably the musical and dance interludes—may also have been staged as part of *The Great Day*

60 Z.N. Hurston, *Mules and Men*, *op. cit.*, pp.35-39.

61 In *Mules and Men*, Hurston has one of the men she meets explain to her what is a toe party: "[...] they hides all de girls behind a curtain and you stick out yo' toe. [...] when all de toes is in a line, sticking out from behind de sheet they let the men folks in and they looks over all de toes and buys de ones they want for a dime. Then they got to treat de lady dat own dat toe to everything she want." (*Ibid.*, p.20.)



and *From Sun to Sun*. If *Spunk* had been produced, it would have been a fine example of how genuine elements from black folklore could be incorporated in a dramatic production of the "real Negro theater." However, the play's ending differs significantly from the original story that closes on the tragic death of the main protagonist, killed by one of the saws. The play's couple, Spunk and Evelina, can live together; it is the rival, not the lover, who dies. The change in plot might have been triggered by censorship or/and self-censorship, a happy ending, less politically charged, being deemed more suitable for the stage.

Fishermen and their wives inspired Hurston, as did her native Eatonville, but she was also drawn, as an anthropologist, to the lives of manual workers in rural sawmills, lumber or turpentine camps. J. Augustus Smith and Peter Morrell's *Turpentine*, produced in June 1936, bears comparison with Hurston's own production. Its subtitle, as it appears on the playbill, was "A Tale of Florida Pine Forests" (fig. 8 and 9).

It was supposed to have been the first play put together by the Negro Unit. A play in three acts and ten scenes, it depicts the mistreatment of workers in the turpentine labor camps of Florida. *The New York Times* review of the play reads as follows:

The authors—J.A. Smith and Peter Morell—have taken as their people the workers of a turpentine camp in Central Florida. It is a story of the subjection of the black to the white, and a plea for equality. The workers are starving, underpaid, harshly treated: unionization is the only solution and so they seize it. As played at the Lafayette much of "Turpentine" is exciting as melodrama and just as much is moving as social document.<sup>62</sup>

The play was a huge production with more than eighty cast members; it stopped, however, after sixty-two performances.<sup>63</sup> Hurston had spent much time collecting the work songs of the men in the various labor camps she visited in the twenties. She eventually recorded them.<sup>64</sup> Much later, in 1944, her play *Polk County: A Comedy of Negro Life on a Sawmill Camp with Authentic Negro Music in Three Acts with Dorothy Waring*, resembles, at least in terms of its setting and its theme, Smith and Morrell's production. The issue as to whether Hurston was influenced by that play remains unresolved.<sup>65</sup> Hurston had travelled to Polk County and visited sawmills, lumber

62 Quoted in Kathleen M. Newman, *Radio Active*, Berkeley, U of California P, 2004, p.70.

63 Br.M. Conforth, *African American Folksong*, *op. cit.*, p.150.

64 "Wake Up, Jacob," vocals with hammering by Z.N. Hurston at Federal Music Project Office, Jacksonville, FL, on June 18, 1939 (audio recording).

65 The authors of the anthology of Hurston's collected plays also make this rapprochement (see Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell, "Introduction," in Z.N. Hurston, *Collected Plays*, *op. cit.*, n.24, p.xxxi).

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9. J. Augustus Smith and Peter Morrell, *Turpentine*, New York, 1936  
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and turpentine camps in 1928. She returned to Florida ten years later in May 1938 as a junior interviewer for the Federal Writer's Project.<sup>66</sup> During that later stay, she went to Cross City in Dixie County, Florida, to interview workers of the Aycock and Lindsay turpentine camp. Turpentine camps were isolated and known for their terrible working conditions and abuses. Her essay traces her travel on horseback through the pine forests with foreman John McFarlin, who explains to her that turpentine workers, unlike sawyers, no longer create songs:

"No, Ma'am. they don't make up many songs. The boys used to be pretty ad [sic] about making up songs but they don't do that now."

"If you don't make up songs while you are working, don't you all make some up round the jook?"

"[No Ma'am], its like I told you. Taint like saw-mills and such like that. Turpentine woods is kind of lonesome."<sup>67</sup>

Hurston goes on to describe the trade and the different tasks performed by the workers as accurately as possible.

The setting of *Polk County* is not a turpentine camp, but a sawmill. Hurston drew her characters for her play from the man and the woman, Lucy and Big Sweet, she had met at the lumber camp in Loughman in 1928. The character of Leafy Lee is a fictionalized version of Hurston herself and the play stages an episode that she had already related in *Mules and Men*, her attack and near escape.<sup>68</sup> The material of the play had also appeared in *De Turkey and de Law*, *Mule Bone*, *Spunk*, and *Their Eye Were Watching God*. Large sections of *Mules and Men* and of *Dust Tracks* indeed contain the same elements slightly transformed to fit their different format. She also used almost verbatim a dialogue from Act 3 of *Mule Bone* in *Their Eyes were Watching God*.<sup>69</sup> Such recycling is the hallmark of Hurston's creativity in its relation to black

66 After that stint in New York, she continued working for the WPA: as part of the WPA Florida Unit, two productions of her folklore were staged in 1939 under the title of *The Fire Dance*. Her writings have been collected in the following volume: *ead.*, *Go Gator and Muddy the Water*, ed. Pamela Bordelon, New York, Norton, 1999.

67 *Id.*, "Turpentine – Camp-Cross City," State Library of Florida, Stetson Kennedy Florida Folklife Collection, 1935-1991, Series 1585.

68 Z.N. Hurston, *Mules and Men*, *op.cit.*, p.147; and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, *op. cit.*, pp.189-191.

69 In this scene, Jim and Dave engage in a courtship ritual, trying to outdo each other to win Daisy's favors, see Claudine Raynaud, "Signifyin' (on) Modernism: The Jagged Harmony of Their Eyes Were Watching God," *Revue française d'études américaines*, vol.154, no.1, 2018, pp.33-49.

expressive culture; it also illustrates her technique that consists, in the same gesture, in tampering as little as she can with the material. In so doing, she crosses generic and disciplinary borders. On the stage, one can argue, even more than on the page, the issue of authenticity, mediated by the black actors' performance and live presence, was at the forefront: black actors performed black lives.

Hurston's brief work with the FTP and the correspondence it entertains with other contemporary FTP plays allow us to draw certain conclusions. She carried on working along the lines that were hers: *i.e.* an inclusion of genuine elements of sundry black cultural practices (folklore, songs, music). That she failed to have her play *Lysistrata* produced can fall within the same pattern as other productions that were also caught in the crossfire of the conflicts between the WPA and the FTP. In addition, the radicalism of some of the plays of the Negro Units would have been at odds with her political beliefs. Her plays can nonetheless be seen as social documents of sorts. As most critics have argued since the 1980s<sup>70</sup> in a reappraisal of her work and statements, portraying the Negro "farthest down"<sup>71</sup> in his own words and highlighting the artistic expression (dance, song, music) and verbal talent of her people, in short being true to black culture, was also a political statement. The productions of the Negro Units in the 1930s show that she was not alone in thinking of putting the life of ordinary black workers, their folklore and their artistic productions on stage. Had she not been drawn in the direction of fieldwork at the moment when she integrated the New York Negro Unit, that environment might have been supportive, if extremely competitive and run through racial and ideological tensions. Playwright *and* anthropologist, Hurston wanted to combine both callings in her own version of a living *and* lived theater.

70 See *inter alia*, Lynda Marion Hill, *Social Ritual and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston*, Washington, Howard, 1996; T.R. Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston*, *op. cit.*

71 Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in C. Wall (ed.), *Zora Neale Hurston*, *op. cit.*, p.839.

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## NOTICE

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CLAUDINE RAYNAUD  
Zora Neale Hurston's "Real Negro Theater"

## ABSTRACT

Short-lived and poorly documented, Zora Neale Hurston's work within the New York Negro Unit deserves to be examined in the context of the Negro Units. That environment throws light on her own dramatic and novelistic output, as well as the concerts or musical theater she produced. In 1935, Hurston joined the "Negro Unit" of the WPA's Federal Theater Project in New York, based at the Lafayette Theatre, as a "drama coach," to work on the production of *Walk Together Chillun* and asked to write a black folk adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* that was never produced. The manuscript did not survive. Theodore Browne (Seattle Negro Unit) staged a production also titled *Lysistrata* (1937) while J.A. Smith and Peter Morrell's *Turpentine* (1936) bears comparison with Hurston's 1944 *Polk County*. Even if her stay at the Negro Unit was cut short, her desire to have her folklore material and her plays brought to the stage is reverberated by that environment.

## KEYWORDS

Zora Neale Hurston, Federal Theater Project, Negro Unit, African American art, Staged folklore, Musical theater, *Lysistrata*

## RÉSUMÉ

Le travail de Zora Neale Hurston au sein de la *Negro Unit* new-yorkaise, bref et peu documenté, doit être étudié dans le contexte des *Negro Units*. Cet environnement éclaire sa propre production théâtrale et romanesque, tout comme les concerts et le théâtre musical qu'elle a réalisés. En 1935, Hurston rejoignit la *Negro Unit* new-yorkaise, basée au théâtre La Fayette, du *Federal Theatre Project* de la *Works Progress Administration* en tant que « conseillère en art dramatique » pour travailler à la production de *Walk Together Chillun* et écrire une adaptation du *Lysistrata* d'Aristophane, transposée au folklore noir américain : la pièce ne fut cependant jamais montée et le manuscrit n'a pas survécu. Theodore Browne (*Seattle Negro Unit*) mit en scène une pièce qui a également pour titre *Lysistrata* (1937) tandis que *Turpentine* (1936) de J.A. Smith et Peter Morrell peut être comparé à la pièce de Hurston, *Polk County* (1944). Malgré son passage éclair dans le *Negro Unit* de New York, son désir de mettre en scène le matériau du folklore noir et ses pièces de théâtre trouve un écho dans cet environnement.

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## MOTS-CLÉS

Zora Neale Hurston, *Federal Theatre Project*, *Negro Unit*, art afro-américain, Folklore au théâtre, Théâtre musical, *Lysistrata*

*Emeline Jouve and Géraldine Prévot*  
*Toulouse-Jean Jaurès University/Paris Nanterre University*

Mattie Brickman is a playwright, screenwriter, and creative director based in Los Angeles. Her plays have been produced across the United States. They include *The Imaginary Audience*, *If Found Please Return to Charles Darwin*, *Bill Clinton Goes to the Bathroom*, *American Catnip*, *Max Out Loud*, *The Redundant Colon*, *Starbox*, *Meeting Important*, *Modern Love*, *Reunions Reunions Reunions*, *Rabbi Bob and the Year Hanukkah Came Early*, *Husky and Scratch*, and *Five Second Chances*. *Playground: The Hallie Flanagan Project* was commissioned and produced by Vassar College. It explores the beginning of Hallie Flanagan's directing career in the USSR and at Vassar, as she navigates life, love, and politics, all while trying to stage a groundbreaking play.

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*This interview was conducted virtually in April 2021, in response to Mattie's talk on Playground at the International Conference on the Federal Theatre Project in Toulouse, France, on October 17, 2019.*

**ÉMELINE JOUVE & GÉRALDINE PRÉVOT.** – How did you first learn about Hallie Flanagan and what struck you most about her?

**MATTIE BRICKMAN.** – Hallie entered my life in the fall of 2010. I received a call from Jen Wineman, a director I'd worked with at the Yale School of Drama. Jen was an alumna of Vassar College and, that year, Vassar was celebrating its 150th anniversary. The school had asked Jen to direct a play and suggested possibly re-staging a Hallie Flanagan/Vassar production from the 1920s-30s.

Instead, Jen proposed creating a new play *about* Hallie. She asked if I would write it—and *quickly*. It was October and the play would be going into rehearsal in January for a March 1st opening. Fortunately, I love a good deadline.

As an undergraduate at Princeton, I'd read about the Federal Theatre Project while researching my public policy thesis on the relationship between Congress and the National Endowment for the Arts, so I knew a little about Hallie. Now I had to figure out how to step into her shoes.

**É. J. & G. P.** – You spent a lot of time digging into the collection of papers about Hallie at Vassar. Can you describe how these documents were a source of inspiration for your writing?

**M. B.** – As I began my research, it soon became clear that I could spend the rest of my career writing plays about Hallie Flanagan. She was an infinitely brilliant, complicated, surprising, tenacious artist and human being. My challenge was how to narrow the scope, to find the story, to find *Hallie*.

I had the opportunity to review Hallie’s papers at Vassar, where I got to know her through her journals and letters. I spent time absorbing how she spoke, how she wrote, how she thought—and wherever I could, I incorporated Hallie’s own words into the play.

**412** I went into the process fully intending to write about Hallie’s tenure as head of the Federal Theatre Project. But as I progressed, I found myself gravitating toward a confluence of events in her life that unfolded about a decade earlier—during her trip to Leningrad and her early years at Vassar—events that shaped her vision as a director and pushed the American theatre in a new, exciting direction.

**É. J. & G. P.** – Shortly after starting at Vassar, Hallie was the first woman awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which took her on a 14-month trip in 1926 and 1927 to study theatre across Europe and Russia. How would you describe the influence of this trip on her theatrical vision?

**M. B.** – This trip opened Hallie’s eyes to theatre on a global stage. She was there to take it all in and, eventually, write a book (which she did, *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre*). It was a pivotal trip that influenced her perspective and work moving forward.

To understand how this trip affected her professionally, it’s also helpful to understand where she was coming from, personally. Hallie had embarked on this journey alone, having lost her husband and partner-in-crime, Murray Flanagan, to tuberculosis several years earlier. When she felt alone, Hallie noted in her journals that she was grateful she was there for work. “The loneliest thing in the world would be to travel this way if one were not doing a definite job,” she wrote, “[o]nly work helps.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout her travels, Hallie threw herself into her work. She clung to it.

In Russia, Hallie fell in love: with Stanislavski’s directing precision, with Meyerhold’s constructivist technique that united actor and audience, and, it seems perhaps, with an American scientist who was working in Pavlov’s lab, translating his work.

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<sup>1</sup> Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, Toronto, Random House of Canada, 1988, p. 86-87.

The scientist's name was Horsley Gantt. Hallie was immediately taken with him. They met the night before she was to leave Russia. He convinced her to stay longer. "Of course I pretend I am staying on because of drama," Hallie wrote in one of her journals. "But, in reality, I know it is to explore a new personality."<sup>2</sup>

Hallie and "Lee," as she began to call him, connected over art and science. He even gave her a tour of Pavlov's lab, and she was struck by the meticulous experiments.<sup>3</sup> She described Lee as having "clear, cold objectivity," then went on to write, "of course this is also the quality which makes him one of the most fascinating people I have ever met." "The more I see Dr. Gantt," she wrote, "the more he becomes a complete puzzle."<sup>4</sup>

It seemed that Hallie had met someone not unlike herself. Like Hallie, Lee put everything into his work. So, despite her fascination with him, Hallie also wrote: "Why should I become lost over a scientist who must not fall in love?" and "[a]ny woman would think twice before marrying him."<sup>5</sup>

When Hallie returned from Russia in 1927 and resumed her role in the theatre department at Vassar, she decided to stage a Chekhov one-act, *A Marriage Proposal*. The play followed two lovers who keep getting derailed. Hallie planned to stage the play three different ways, all in one evening.

In Act 1, she'd stage the play realistically, with authentic details like carved furniture, glimpses of Russia through the windows, and, of course, beards for the Vassar girls playing male roles. In Act 2, she'd stage it expressionistically. The stage would be abstracted into bold, clashing colors to illustrate the dramatic tension between the lovers. The actors would wear masks and use rhythmic speech to capture character and intent.<sup>6</sup>

Act 3 was Hallie's true passion project, inspired by the theatre she'd experienced in Russia: her nod to Meyerhold's constructivism. Here she sought to unite actor and audience. The reluctant lover would enter not from the stage, but from the aisles of the theatre.<sup>7</sup> "He might be any one of us," she wrote, "and thus takes us with him."<sup>8</sup> The stage itself would be "undecorated," she described, "unset, save for those elements of reality—seesaws, swings, ladders—on which the rhythms of the play (could be) best

2 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 95-96.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 96-97.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

expressed.”<sup>9</sup> The characters would be dressed in coveralls, “undifferentiated;” their interaction with the physical elements onstage would communicate the nuances of their emotional dynamic with one another.<sup>10</sup> Essentially, Hallie was building a literal and theatrical *playground*.

Hallie’s vision to stage one play in three distinct ways seemed to be a direct response to her time in Russia. It was experimental, almost scientific—a tribute not only to Meyerhold, but perhaps also to the scientist she called “Lee.”

É. J. & G. P. – Can you tell us more about the play you created for Vassar in 2010?

M. B. – The play I wrote is called *Playground*. It unfolds over the course of tech and dress rehearsals of Hallie’s masterful Act 3 of *A Marriage Proposal*. In the spirit of Hallie’s intentions, I crafted the play so that it harnessed the space in non-traditional ways and united actor and audience in moments of surprise. It’s also a memory play.

414 The playground equipment morphs over the course of the story, transporting Hallie to memories with both Lee and her late husband Murray.

*Playground* is a love letter to theatre—and to Hallie. As she grieves the husband she lost, yearns for the scientist who sparked her, connects with a fellow Vassar professor (Philip Davis) whom (spoiler alert) she eventually marries, and navigates political obstacles flung by the Vassar faculty, she somehow manages to stage a truly groundbreaking play, one that made waves far beyond Poughkeepsie.

É. J. & G. P. – To what extent would you say Hallie had to fight for academic acknowledgment of her teaching and vision of theatre?

M. B. – We have to remember that Hallie was attempting to theatrically trailblaze at an academic institution that did not yet value theatre the way it valued scholarship. Many faculty members viewed Hallie’s course in dramatic production as unacademic and, thus, less significant.

Hallie had to fight every step of the way. She had to fight for her students’ time. She had to fight to equip the “abysmal” lecture hall they were performing in with proper lights, dimmers, wings, a catwalk, and a green room.<sup>11</sup> She had to fight to make the case that theatre was not only worthy, but vital.

É. J. & G. P. – Vassar’s experimental theatre was, in a sense, a toolbox for the work Hallie tried to implement during the Federal Theatre Project. Can you present this academic experimentation and how it pushed American theatre in a new direction?

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9 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 96-97.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

**M. B.** – One of the things *Playground* explores is how Hallie’s time at Vassar was like a warm-up—a dress rehearsal for her time as Director of the Federal Theatre Project. At Vassar, Hallie got to flex as a director, producer, and leader, fielding an array of challenges from the faculty, as she shepherded her vision for the Experimental Theatre. All of the challenges she confronted during this period prepared her to run and, eventually, defend the Federal Theatre Project so fiercely a decade later. Hallie came to understand that politics was its own type of theatre. And, so, she learned to leverage her finely-tuned skills as a director to meet those challenges as they came.

**É. J. & G. P.** – Where does the balance lie, in the writing and staging of *Playground*, between memory and history, theatrical experimentation and biographical inspiration?

**M. B.** – *Playground* is certainly inspired by the history, by Hallie’s biographical details, but the play is not a historical or biographical account. Nor am I a historian or biographer. I am a dramatist. With this play, I embraced the spirit of Hallie’s own vision in order to enter her life during this pivotal moment in her personal and professional career.

In doing so, I sought to unlock a truthful understanding of Hallie the person, the woman, the human being behind the larger-than-life director and leader we know her as. By focusing on the more subtle facets of her life, I wanted to bring Hallie to life in a way that felt real and relatable—in a way that transcended time. Because Hallie *was* so ahead of her time.

**É. J. & G. P.** – In the end, what sort of legacy would you say Hallie has left in the contemporary American theatre?

**M. B.** – Hallie’s fervent passion for experimentation pushed the bounds of storytelling. Whether or not she was staging a play on an actual playground, the theatre was, for Hallie, *always* a playground. She continually engaged with and transformed the physical space of the theatre in fresh, new ways. Her body of work challenges us to keep pushing, to keep forging new paths for stories to manifest in ways we never considered or imagined. As Hallie proclaimed when she was Director of the Federal Theatre Project, “The theatre must grow up.”<sup>12</sup>

This continual theatrical evolution served Hallie’s greater purpose, which was to engage audiences in experiences that were relevant, immediate, and impactful. The theatre was not simply a place to be entertained. The theatre held *power and responsibility*. It was a place to mine experience—whether personal, collective, social, or political—in order to provoke dialogue and spur progress. For Hallie, theatre was a means to move

<sup>12</sup> Hallie Flanagan, “Theatre as Social Action,” in Piere de Roban (ed.), “First Federal Summer Theatre: A Report,” *Federal Theatre*, June-July 1937.

people... to *action*. “Theatre, when it is any good, can change things,” Hallie said, “... it may be the yeast which makes the bread rise.”<sup>13</sup>

Hallie knew that theatre could spark a student body. That it could galvanize a community. That it could revitalize a nation.

May we continue to carry her legacy forward.

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## NOTICE

Emeline Jouve is Professor of English and American studies at Toulouse-Jean Jaurès University. Her research focuses on American avant-garde theatre. She is the author of *Susan Glaspell's Poetics and Politics of Rebellion* (U of Iowa P, 2017), *Paradise Now en Paradis : histoire du Living Theatre à Avignon et après (1968/2018)* (Classiques Garnier, 2022) and *Un siècle d'avant-garde étasunienne* (Deuxième Époque, forthcoming). She also published *Avignon 68 & le Living Theatre. Mémoires d'une révolution* (Deuxième Époque, 2018) and papers on Gertrude Stein, Eugene O'Neill, The Living Theatre, Wooster Group, Big Art Group and Andrew Schneider. She is the editor of the ejournal *Miranda* and the co-editor of “Nouvelles Scènes/Anglais” (PUM). Since 2021, she has been the president of the International Susan Glaspell Society and of RADAC (Recherches sur les arts dramatiques anglophones contemporains).

Géraldine Prévot studied at the École normale supérieure (Lyon). She holds an agrégation in modern literature and a PhD degree in theatre studies, from Paris Nanterre University. Her PhD focused on American and French theatre between the two world wars, especially on outdoor theatre, through a comparison between Paris and New York. She co-edited the issue of the online magazine *Thaêtre* dedicated to the links between theatre history and practical experiments, and published papers in different books and journals. Her research now focuses on French and American histories of theatre, on the links between theatre and the city and on the epistemology



of theatre studies. She currently works at the Institut français in Paris, where she is in charge of translation issues to support the international export of French books.

Mattie Brickman is a playwright, screenwriter, and creative director based in Los Angeles. Her plays have been produced across the United States. They include *The Imaginary Audience*, *If Found Please Return to Charles Darwin*, *Bill Clinton Goes to the Bathroom*, *American Catnip*, *Max Out Loud*, *The Redundant Colon*, *Starbox*, *Meeting Important*, *Modern Love*, *Reunions Reunions Reunions*, *Rabbi Bob and the Year Hanukkah Came Early*, *Husky and Scratch*, and *Five Second Chances*. *Playground: The Hallie Flanagan Project*, was commissioned and produced by Vassar College. It explores the beginning of Hallie Flanagan's directing career in the USSR and at Vassar, as she navigates life, love, and politics, all while trying to stage a groundbreaking play.

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## ABSTRACT

In this interview, playwright Mattie Brickman reflects on her play *Playground: The Hallie Flanagan Project*, written at the invitation of Vassar College. The work was presented as part of the 150th anniversary of the college where Hallie Flanagan was active in promoting theater.

## KEYWORDS

Hallie Flanagan, playground, Russia, Meyerhold, Horsley Gantt, Vassar College, Chekhov, *A Marriage Proposal*, The Federal Theatre Project, experimental theater

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet entretien, l'autrice Mattie Brickman revient sur sa pièce *Playground: The Hallie Flanagan Project* écrite à l'invitation de Vassar College. L'œuvre fut présentée dans le cadre du 150ème anniversaire de l'établissement où Hallie Flanagan exerça pour promouvoir le théâtre.

## MOTS-CLÉS

Hallie Flanagan, espace scénique, Russie, Meyerhold, Horsley Gantt, Vassar College, Tchekhov, *A Marriage Proposal*, *Federal Theatre Project*, théâtre expérimental

*PLAYGROUND: THE HALLIE FLANAGAN PROJECT.*  
*EXCERPT*<sup>14</sup>

*Mattie Brickman*

SETTING

THE TIME AND PLACE

- 418** Memories whirling around the founding of the Experimental Theater at Vassar in 1927, with trips into the past and trips into the future.

All action past and present unfolds on a playground – see-saw, swingset, and jungle gym – which is the set of Hallie Flanagan’s production of Anton Chekhov’s *A Marriage Proposal*.

CHARACTERS

**Hallie Flanagan** (female, 37)

**Mrs. Flanagan**, the part of Hallie that hasn’t let go of her deceased husband Murray Flanagan (female, 37, appearance is identical to Hallie’s)

**Dr. Horsley Gantt**, American scientist who works in Pavlov’s lab (male, mid 30s)

**Philip Davis**, professor of Greek history at Vassar (male, late 20s)

**Howard Wicks**, Hallie’s technical director (male, early 20s)

**Henry Noble MacCracken**, Vassar President (male, late 40s)

**Paula**, Horsley Gantt’s fiancée (female, early 20s)

**Edna St. Vincent Millay**, poet and Vassar alum (female, 35)

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CHORUS OF VASSAR STUDENTS (ALL FEMALE, COLLEGE-AGE)

**Sue**, the stage manager

**Mary**, a freshman and Hallie's assistant

**Dory**, the costume designer

**Ruth**, who plays "Chubukov" in *A Marriage Proposal*

**Frieda**, who plays "Lomov" in *A Marriage Proposal*

**Ginny**, who plays "Natalia" in *A Marriage Proposal*

When the Chorus speaks together, it is full and overlapping—a cascade of youthful energy. **419**

There is room for play here: some lines should be shared; some, distributed amongst the girls.

In Leningrad, the Chorus plays fellow patrons in the nightclub.

In Pavlov's Lab, the Chorus plays the dogs. Ginny plays Winston.

Please note:

Slashes (/) indicate overlapping speech.

Dashes (—) indicate interruptions.

Brackets ([ ]) indicate words that have been interrupted or not fully completed.

Single quotation marks (‘ ’) indicate text from Chekhov's *A Marriage Proposal*.

Columns denote simultaneous speech.

All caps denote singing.

Beats don't necessarily imply anything long.

The pace, in general, is quick.

Transitions are fluid, graceful.

Act One: Tech Rehearsal

Scene One

*In darkness, we hear the voice of Mrs. Flanagan, singing:*

**MRS. FLANAGAN:**

I SEE THE MOON

AND THE MOON SEES ME

THE MOON SEES THE SOMEBODY I WANT TO SEE...

Do you remember when I'd sing that to you and the boys? It doesn't seem so long ago...

Do you remember?

*A single spotlight appears.*

I SEE THE MOON

AND THE MOON SEES ME

*The spotlight begins to move, shakily, into the audience.*

THE MOON SEES THE SOMEBODY / I WANT TO SEE—

*Coming from the dark stage:*

**CHUBUKOV:**

'Who is this I see?'

*The shaky spotlight continues to search within the audience. It locates a face: Lomov.*

'What a surprise!'

*Chubukov jumps off the stage and into the audience.*

*Lomov comes down the aisle to meet him. The spotlight follows.*

'I'm so glad to see you!'

**LOMOV:**

'And how are you doing?'

**CHUBUKOV:**

'We get by, my boy...'

**MRS. FLANAGAN:**

Dear Murray...

**CHUBUKOV:**

'We get by.'

**MRS. FLANAGAN:**

There's something...

**CHUBUKOV:**

'Glad to know you're thinking of us now and then.'

**MRS. FLANAGAN:**

There's something I want to tell you.

*From the back of the theater, we hear:*

**HALLIE:**

Howard? Howard?

**MRS. FLANAGAN:**

*(quickly, whispering)* Poughkeepsie. 1927.

**HALLIE:**

Howard??

*From above us, where the spotlight is:*

**HOWARD:**

Yeah?

**HALLIE:**

One should become two.

**HOWARD:**

Huh?

*From the wings:*

**SUE:**

I believe she said, "One should become two!"

**HOWARD:**

I heard her, I just—

**HALLIE:**

Could we hold? Actors hold.

**SUE:**

Actors hold!

*The spotlight moves to illuminate Hallie, who is now at the foot of the stage.*

*Hallie wears a hat, always.*

**HOWARD:**

Sorry the spot is so erratic, Hallie. I'm still getting used to it. When we break, I'll try and reconfigure the mount to smooth out the tracking and—

**HALLIE:**

No, no. I like it, erratic. The way it dances about, trying to find its way. As *we* are, in these first moments. The spot lands on Lomov, our reluctant lover... but we have to believe that it *could have* landed on anybody. The reluctant lover *could be... any of us*.

*Hallie reaches into the dark audience before her.*

We must believe that he comes from the audience. *From us*. So that he may, then, *take us with him*.

*The lights have risen, just slightly, over Hallie's speech—just enough to see the Chorus moving in from the audience and wings to listen to her.*

*We now also see the silhouette of a playground onstage: swings, see-saw, and jungle gym.*

Chubukov.

**RUTH:**

Yes, Miss Flanagan.

**HALLIE:**

You are the first voice in this experiment. And it is most important, the way we begin.

'Who is this I see?'

**RUTH:**

'Who is this I see?'

**422 HALLIE:**

'Who is this I see?' *Who is this I see...*

*The lights begin to dim again...*

[...]

## Scene Two

*The shaky spotlight finds a new face in the audience:*

*Horsley Gantt.*

**MRS. FLANAGAN:**

Dear Murray, I just had the most marvelous day.

*The playground transforms into a nightclub.*

*The Chorus turns from students into patrons of the club.*

*It's slow-mo, dreamlike.*

(quickly, whispering) Leningrad. A year ago. Almost.

*As Horsley approaches the stage, we now see Mrs. Flanagan, too.*

*Mrs. Flanagan looks exactly like Hallie: same age, same dress – and, of course, same hat. But Mrs. Flanagan sits to the side of the stage, separate from the action, at a writing*

*table. As Mrs. Flanagan talks, she writes, seals envelopes, and stacks letters.*

*This stack of letters grows and grows.*

*Horsley reaches the stage.*

I think I've met someone.

**HORSLEY:**

Horsley Gantt.

*Horsley extends his hand. Hallie takes it.*

**HALLIE:**

Mr. Gantt.

**HORSLEY:**

Dr. Actually.

*But he seems a bit sheepish for correcting her.*

You can call me Lee.

**HALLIE:**

Lee. Hallie Flanagan.

*Hallie and Horsley are still holding each other's hands.*

**HORSLEY:**

Miss Flanagan?

*As they shake...*

Or Mrs... Is it Mrs. Flanagan...?

*A moment.*

*Hallie looks to Mrs. Flanagan.*

*Mrs. Flanagan raises her eyebrows.*

**HALLIE:**

Mmmiss.

*Horsley grins.*

**HORSLEY:**

Miss Flanagan...

## CRÉDITS PHOTO

### VISUELS DE COUVERTURE (TOUS DANS LE DOMAINE PUBLIC)

1. Hallie Flanagan, director of the WPA Federal Theatre Project. Created *ca* 1939. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress.
2. Windrip addresses the crowd in a rally in the San Francisco Federal Theatre Project production of *It Can't Happen Here*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
3. Photograph of the New York production of *One-Third of a Nation*, a Living Newspaper play by the Federal Theatre Project, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
4. « Continue WPA ! », Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. « Federal Theatre Project » The New York Public Library Digital Collections.
5. Crowd outside Lafayette Theatre on opening night, Classical Theatre, « *Voodoo* » *Macbeth*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
6. Scene from the Federal Theatre Project production of O'Neill's *One-Act Plays of the Sea* at the Lafayette Theatre (Oct. 1937-Jan. 1938), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, New York Public Library, « Mr. Neil's Barn » The New York Public Library Digital Collections.



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## E-THEATRUM MUNDI

Collection dirigée par Julie Vatain-Corfdir & Sophie Marchand

La collection « e-Theatrum Mundi » considère le théâtre sous tous ses angles et dans tous ses états. Dans la continuité de la collection papier à laquelle elle est adossée, elle se veut un lieu de réflexion sur les diverses manifestations d'expression théâtrale à travers le monde, et rassemble des travaux de recherche sur l'écriture, le jeu, les pratiques et les formes scéniques, la mise en scène et le spectateur. Sa particularité est de proposer uniquement des volumes interdisciplinaires, en lien avec le Programme de recherches interdisciplinaires sur le théâtre et les pratiques scéniques de Sorbonne Université (PRITEPS), dont elle reflète les activités. En croisant les angles d'approche, la collection vise à provoquer des confrontations fructueuses entre les scènes, les langues et les méthodologies, dans le domaine des études théâtrales.

### DÉJÀ PARUS

*L'apothéose d'Arlequin. La Comédie-Italienne de Paris :  
un théâtre de l'expérimentation dramatique au xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle*  
Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

*American Dramaturgies for the 21st Century*  
Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

*Une œuvre en dialogue. Le théâtre de Michel-Jean Sedaine*  
Judith le Blanc, Raphaëlle Legrand & Marie-Cécile Schang-Norbely (dir.)

*American Musicals*  
*Stage and screen/L'écran et la scène*  
Anne Martina & Julie Vatain-Corfdir (dir.)

*La Haine de Shakespeare*  
Élisabeth Angel-Perez & François Lecercle (dir.)

*La Scène en version originale*  
Julie Vatain-Corfdir (dir.)

