Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)

contexte & enjeux / context & issues

Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

I. The Federal Theatre of the 1930s: An Experiment in the Democratization of Culture · S. D. Collins & G. Schaffner Goldberg
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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 metteure 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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PREMIÈRE PARTIE

Contexte

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."[1] Richard Eyre, former director of Britain's National Theatre called the FT "the most extraordinary phenomenon in American cultural history."[2] 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.[3] 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.[4] Moreover, the commercial theatre, almost exclusively located in New York City, was charging prices few but the affluent could afford.[5]

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.[6] 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.[7]

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

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 Mathews, *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.[8]

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

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.[9]

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.[10] 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 [...]."[11] The design that began to take shape, however, would differ from European national theatres:

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*.[12]

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."[13] 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.[14]

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.[15]

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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. [16]

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. [17]

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;

16 H. Flanagan, *Manual...*, *op. cit.*, pp.7-8.

17 J. DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre...*, *op. cit.*, p.31.

Yiddish vaudeville; German language classics; and Jewish classics in translation.[18] 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.[19]

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.[20] 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.[21]

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.[22] 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.[23]

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.[24]

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."[25]

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.[26] 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

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.[27] 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.[28]

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.[29]

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.[30]

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

30 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/

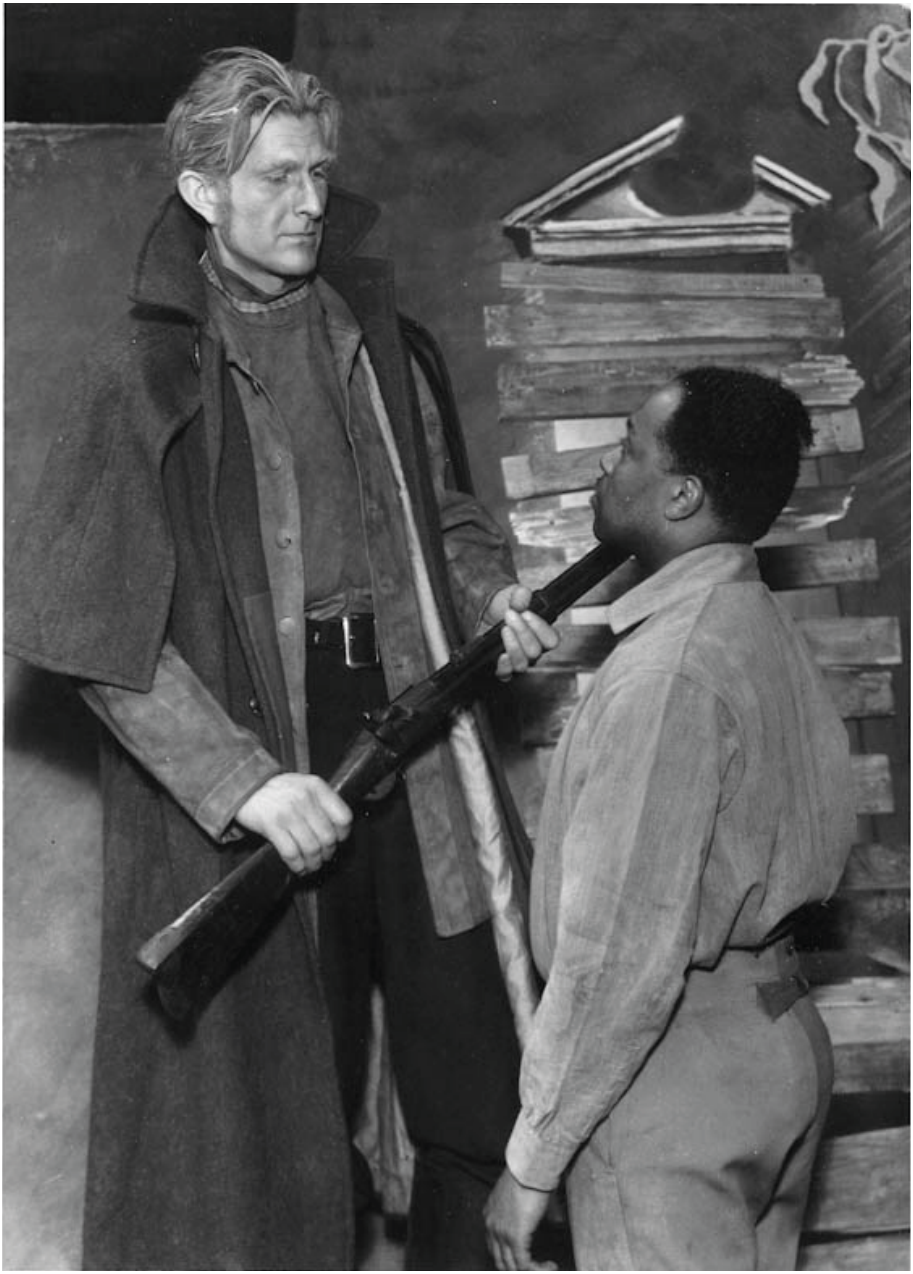
5. More of the varied repertoire of the Federal Theatre, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-theatre-project-1935-to-1939/

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**).[31]

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=digitallibrary/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.[32]

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.[33] 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**).[34]

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/

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."[35] 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.[36] 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

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**).[37]

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.[38]

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.[39]

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.[40] 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.[41] 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."[42] 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, *« Voodo » 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.[43] 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 worshipers, 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.[44]

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.[45]

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."[46] "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"[47] (**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."[48]

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.[49] 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.[50]

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.[51] 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.[52] 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."[53] 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 $E=mc^2$.[54]

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.[55]

"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,[56] 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 requoted 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.[57] The authors of *Ethiopia* saw it as an opportunity to speak out against the dangers of fascism, and so did Flanagan.[58] Mussolini had just invaded Ethiopia, and the documentary asked why the democracies had not put a stop to the invasion.

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."[59] 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."[60]

"Facts," Flanagan wrote, "are highly explosive, and hence any plays based on fact must be carefully documented and handled with judicious restraint."[61] 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

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."[62] 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."[63] 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."[64]

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.[65] 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."[66]

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*.[67] Sixty thousand people in New York City bought tickets for *Power* before it opened[68].

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."[69] After seeing the play,

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."[70]

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.[71] 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*

70 Eleanor Roosevelt, *My Day*, March 4, 1938.
71 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.241.

and do it all over the country?"[72] 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."[73] Meyer also cites the debates about whether fascism would come to America that were "swirling around him in newspapers, journals, and books."[74]

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."[75] *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."[76] 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[77] (**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 [...]."[78] According to *Theatre Arts Monthly*: "There is no other theatre in America

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 [...]."[79] *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 Flannagan'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.[80] 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."[81]

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."[82] *Cradle* featured an eclectic assortment of theatrical and musical genres: recitatives, arias, revue patterns, tap dances, suites, chorales, continuous commentary music, and lullabies.[83]

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.[84] 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."[85] 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.[86]

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.[87] 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."[88] In dealing with the Committee, Ellen S. Woodward, who headed the Women's Division of the WPA and was the administrator of Federal One,

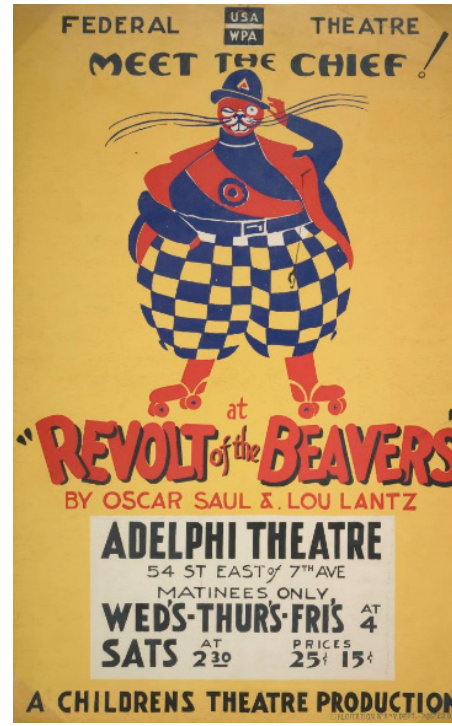
85 William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, New York, Harper & Row, 1963, p.280.

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."[89] 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.[90]



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

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[91] (**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."[92] Flanagan, who held that the bad beaver chief—driven out by the oppressed

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."[93] 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."[94] Although considering the play a fairy tale, Flanagan had admitted that it was class conscious.[95]

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."[96]

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."

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

93 H. Flannagan, *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."[97]

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.[98]

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**).

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."[99]

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."[100] 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."[101]

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.[102]

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."[103] 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.[104] 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."[105]

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105 Jennifer Schuessler and Scott Heller, "20 Theatre Figures on How to 'Revolutionize' Their World," *New York Times*, September 11, 2020, p. AR6.

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NOTICE

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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*

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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 adresses 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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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.

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