Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)

contexte & enjeux / context & issues

Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

III. "A Gesture of Hope:" Living Newspaper: A Counter-Narrative at the Royal Court Theatre · Interview V. Featherstone by J. Cox
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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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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)[1]

Jordana Cox
University of Waterloo

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."[2] *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.

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.[3] 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

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?

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 sub*culture*, sub*stage*, 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.

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*.[4]

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.

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.

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.

Mots-clés

Living Newspaper, Royal Court, Federal Theatre Project, nouvelle création, création collective.

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 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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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 xviiie siècle
Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

American Dramaturgies for the 21st Century
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