



# *Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)*

contexte & enjeux / context & issues



Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

III. "As American as Walt Disney:" The Political Theater of the Federal Theatre Project · Ilka Saal

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

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

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(1935-1939)

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TROISIÈME PARTIE

*Les living newspapers,*  
d'hier à aujourd'hui



“AS AMERICAN AS WALT DISNEY:”  
THE POLITICAL THEATER OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

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*University of Erfurt*

When Harry Hopkins, head of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), appointed Hallie Flanagan as director of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) in September 1935, he charged her with “an American job.”<sup>1</sup> As part of Federal Project One, the Federal Theatre Project was designed to put thousands of unemployed theater workers back to work in the theater. In addition, it was to stimulate theater-going among the lower-income public, to attract those who had never been to the theater or had not been able to afford it for the past few years, and thus to provide theater in general with a new lease on life. In both these regards, the FTP was to operate nationwide. Flanagan and her colleagues accomplished an “American job”. With the help of five centers across the country and numerous touring companies playing the regions in-between, FTP soon operated as a theater “national in scope and regional in emphasis,” providing theatrical entertainment for as little as ten to twenty-five cents and often entirely free of charge.<sup>2</sup> Already in the spring of 1936, Flanagan could report that the project had put 12,500 theater workers back to work and was playing in thirty-one states, attracting an average audience of 500,000 spectators per week.<sup>3</sup>

As a government-sponsored theater with a nation-wide impact, director Flanagan repeatedly had to defend the FTP against accusations of endorsing in some of its plays a political agenda, especially against charges of supporting class struggle. In several mementos, reports, speeches, and introductions, Flanagan untiringly and adamantly stressed the *non-political* nature of the FTP, underscoring its primary objectives of returning theater workers to jobs and of stimulating theater-going among a broad public. In a letter to Morris Watson, head of the Living Newspaper unit, Flanagan for instance writes: “Morris, I want you [...] to be clear about this. As I have repeatedly said I will

1 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940, p.20. FTP centers were established in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, and New Orleans. Hopkins stipulated that theater prices were not to exceed \$1. Compare to Broadway tickets at a minimum of \$3.50 at the time.

2 *Ibid.*, p.45.

3 *Ead.*, “Report of the Director,” *The New York Times* May 17, 1936.

not have the Federal Theatre used politically. I will not have it used to further the ends of the Democratic party, the Republican party, or the Communist party.”<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere she states that the FTP partakes in the general government effort to “rethink [...], redream [...], and rebuild [...] America” by joining the struggle along “a new frontier in America, a frontier against disease, dirt, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, despair, and at the same time against selfishness, special privilege, and social apathy,” insisting that these struggles are “*not political* in any narrow sense. They would exist under any administration.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, despite Flanagan’s repeated efforts to present the Federal Theatre as a moral (rather than political) and profoundly patriotic intervention in the recession crisis of the 1930s, the project eventually came under attack precisely for its political potential. Having been declared by an investigative committee of the House of Representatives (House Un-American Activities Committee) as “subversive, communistic, and indecent,”<sup>6</sup> it was discontinued by act of Congress in June 1939.

244

Communist paranoia aside, it would be difficult to deny or ignore the explicit political nature of a small but relevant part of Federal Theatre productions. Flanagan herself emphasized that it seemed only logical to her “that a theatre which had its roots in economic need should be concerned in some of its plays with economic conditions.”<sup>7</sup> Among the eight dramatic lines that comprised the FTP’s overall repertoire, one in particular—the Living Newspaper—was designed to illuminate the larger political context of the current economic crisis and to address, in Flanagan’s words, “the conditions back of conditions.”<sup>8</sup> The Living Newspaper—a fairly young theatrical form specializing in the creative dramatization of news “with living actors, light, music, and movement”<sup>9</sup>—derived, just like all other Federal Theatre productions, its primary impulse from the task of putting a great number of people back to work. Indeed, with its extensive research and editorial staff, an enormous cast, and dozens of

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4 *Ead., Arena, op. cit.*, p.73.

5 *Ead.*, “Introduction,” in Pierre de Rohan (ed.), *Federal Theatre Plays*, New York, Random House, 1938, vol.1, p. xiii (emphasis added).

6 *Ibid.*, p.343, and p.338. For documentation on how FTP fell victim to a well-orchestrated conservative backlash against Roosevelt’s New Deal policies, see, in addition to Flanagan’s *Arena*, Jane DeHart Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-39*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1967 and Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisations*, New York, Walker, 2008.

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

8 *Id.*, “Introduction,” in Pierre de Rohan (ed.), *Federal Theatre Plays*, New York, Random House, 1938, vol.2, p.viii. Flanagan lists the following primary categories in FTP’s programming: classics, theatre of entertainment, children’s theater, dance drama, American drama series, Living Newspapers, radio drama, and “Negro theater” (*ead.*, “Introduction,” vol.1, p. ix).

9 *Id.*, “Introduction,” vol.2, p. xii.

people backstage, the Living Newspaper became one of the FTP's most labor-intensive projects.<sup>10</sup> To Flanagan it was, however, also important that the Living Newspapers be concerned "not with surface news, scandal, [and] human interest stories, but rather with the conditions back of conditions."<sup>11</sup> She elaborates more explicitly, "the struggle inherent in all Living Newspapers [...] is the struggle of the average citizen to understand the natural, social, and economic forces around him and to achieve through these forces, a better life for more people."<sup>12</sup>

Flanagan's understanding of theater is here remarkably close to definitions of political theater practice put forth at the time by Weimar modernists Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht as well as by several leftist workers' theaters in the US, such as the Workers' Laboratory Theatre and the Theatre Union.<sup>13</sup> They, too, considered theater an effective means of providing workers, farmers, and employees with what Brecht calls "*ein praktikables Weltbild*" ("a workable picture of the world")—a representation of contemporary life that "hand[s] the world over to their minds and hearts, for them to change as they think fit."<sup>14</sup> This kind of stage praxis is political not simply by virtue of taking on political repercussions in the process of reception (on that score, of course, all works of art are political, including those that pose as non-political). Rather, as theater scholar Klaus Gieber asserts, "it understands itself anchored in politics already in its very intention, its thematic objective, and the functional use of aesthetic techniques; it is *an aesthetics aiming at political effect*."<sup>15</sup> I see the Living Newspaper's aesthetics and pedagogy

10 Flanagan motivates the choice of the format with its "emphasis on many people doing small bits rather than roles demanding a few stars" (*Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.20). *Triple-A Plowed Under* apparently employed a total of 243 people (see Richard Lockridge, "The New Play," *The New York Sun*, March 16, 1936), while in *One-Third of a Nation* the cast alone consisted of some eighty actors (see Brooks Atkinson, "The Play," *The New York Times*, January 18, 1938). At its height, FTP employed a total of 13,163 workers (see Willson Whitman, *Bread and Circuses: A Study of Federal Theatre*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1937, p.31).

11 H. Flanagan, "Introduction," vol.2, p.viii (emphasis added).

12 *Ibid.*, p.viii and p.x.

13 Theatre Union, for instance, proclaims to produce plays that "deal boldly with the deep-going social conflicts, the economic, emotional and cultural problems that confront the majority of people." (Quoted in Ben Blake, *The Awakening of the American Theatre*, New York, Tomorrow Publishers, 1935, p.35.)

14 Bertolt Brecht, "Über das experimentelle Theater," in *Ausgewählte Werke in sechs Bänden*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1997, vol.6, p.414; *Id.*, "Short Organon," in John Willet (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* [1957], New York, Hill and Wang, 1992, p.185.

15 "*Politisches Theater ist eine Bühnenpraxis, die nicht allein im rezeptiven Vorgang zum Politikum gerät, sondern bereits von der Intention, der inhaltlichen Ausrichtung und der funktionalen Verwendung ästhetischer Technik sich als eine auf Politik fundierte,*

as very much in line with this specific understanding of political theater. Similar to the more avowedly political theater forms of the time, the Living Newspaper used the stage as a means to educate its audience of average citizens about pertinent economic and political issues of the day in order to mobilize them to action: be it with regard to the shortage of affordable housing in *One-Third of a Nation* (1938), the high cost of food and utilities in *Triple-A Plowed Under* (1936) and *Power* (1937), or the relevance of labor struggles for fair wages in *Injunction Granted* (1936). On this score, the Living Newspaper certainly qualifies as a political stage praxis in the interventionist sense of Gleber's definition.

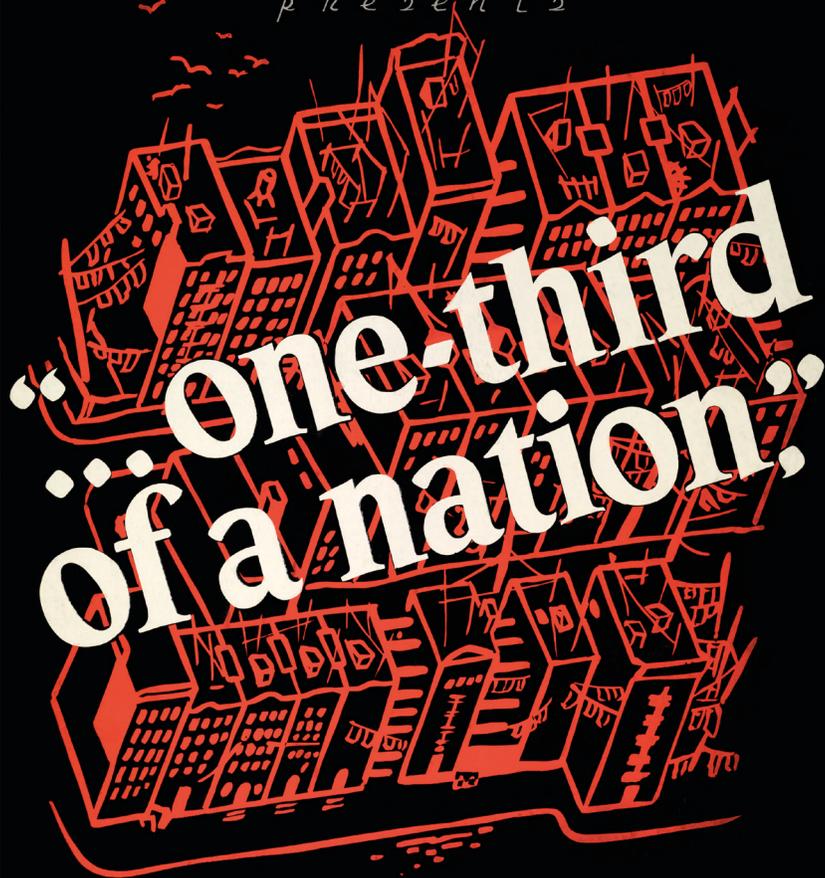
246 Moreover, Flanagan's persistent efforts to downplay the political nature of a significant part of Federal Theatre productions notwithstanding, the general theater public was keenly attuned to it, particularly in the case of the Living Newspapers. But unlike anti-progressive forces in the government, for the most part it tended not to perceive them as subversive threats to the current economic and political system, nor as "un-American." On the contrary, after some initial hesitation, a broad spectrum of critics (ranging from progressive to moderate to ultra-conservative) clamored to claim the Living Newspaper issues as "good" propaganda on behalf of American capitalism and democracy. Such broad, public consensus across the political spectrum indicates that more than one's political conviction was at stake in appraising the Living Newspaper productions.

This article aims to take a closer look at the complex stage praxis of the New Deal Living Newspaper to assess its particular "aesthetic aiming at political effect." It suggests that it succeeded in developing an idiosyncratic form that allowed it at one and the same time to articulate a critique of the existing socio-economic system as well as to uphold faith in it, to appeal to both radical and conservative spectators, to those invested in social change as well as to those intent on securing the political status quo. Drawing on the issue *One-Third of a Nation* as my primary example (fig. 1), I argue that the Living Newspaper succeeded in appealing to a broad and heterogeneous audience thanks to its effective amalgamation of elements of modernist theater praxis with the tried aesthetic forms of the established culture industry. Mobilizing affirmative tropes and rhetorical strategies of American nationhood, it, moreover, rechanneled a potentially divisive class argument into a shared consumer consciousness. In this manner, the Living Newspaper created an idiosyncratic form of progressive political theater that was forceful in its critique of the capitalist system and, nonetheless, managed to come across, in Flanagan's words, "as American as Walt Disney."<sup>16</sup>

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*auf politische Wirkung reflektierte Ästhetik versteht.*" (Klaus Gleber, *Theater und Öffentlichkeit*, Frankfurt/Main, Peter Lang, 1979, p. iv [trans. mine, emphasis added]).

FEDERAL THEATRE  
presents



A LIVING NEWSPAPER  
ABOUT HOUSING

**ADELPHI THEATRE**

54TH STREET EAST OF 7TH AVENUE

MADE BY W.P.A. FEDERAL ART PROJECT N.Y.C.

1. Poster of *One-Third of a Nation*, by Federal Theatre Project (Library of Congress, Public Domain).

Out of a total of twenty-two issues produced by the FTP, *One Third of a Nation* was by far the most successful Living Newspaper.<sup>17</sup> Produced at the Adelphi Theatre in New York City, it ran for 237 performances between January and October 1938 and also received productions in several other cities across the country, such as in Philadelphia, Seattle, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Detroit, Portland, and New Orleans. Similar to its peer issues *Triple-A-Plowed Under* (1936) and *Power* (1937), it targets economic issues of prominent public concern. Taking its name and inspiration from Franklin D. Roosevelt's second inaugural address of 1937, the issue sets out to investigate the "conditions back of conditions" that relegate a substantial part of the population to live in substandard conditions. "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished," Roosevelt asserts and announces his government's promise "to make every citizen the subject of his country's interest and concern. [...] The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."<sup>18</sup> *One Third of a Nation*, written by Arthur Arent with the help of research compiled by the FTP editorial staff, takes the president by his word. Exposing the various roots of the contemporary housing crisis, it examines possibilities of providing low-income families with affordable decent housing.

248

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- 17 Douglas McDermott counts a total of thirty-eight Living Newspaper manuscripts in the USA, out of which twenty-two saw production ("The Living Newspaper as a Dramatic Form," *Modern Drama*, vol.8, no.1, May 1965, pp.82-94). *One-Third* was one of the four New York editions, which received wide press coverage and were quickly made available in print and taken up in other cities: *Injunction Granted* (1936), *Triple-A-Plowed Under* (1936), *Power* (1937), and *One-Third of a Nation* (1938). A fifth paper, *Ethiopia*, the very first issue of 1936, which addressed Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, was cancelled by the government shortly before its opening over concerns of "international complications." (Bosley Crowther, "Once Over the WPA," *The New York Times*, March 15, 1936.) A sixth issue, 1935, presents a retrospective of landmark events of the preceding year. Several cities also produced their own Living Newspapers, such as Chicago on the fight against syphilis (*Spirochete*). Cincinnati produced *Flood Control*, *Oregon Flax*, and *Iowa Dirt* (see H. Flanagan, "Introduction," vol.2, p. xii).
- 18 Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "'One-Third of Nation': FDR's Second Inaugural Address," [History Matters](#).



2. Photograph of the New York production of *One-Third of a Nation*, a *Living Newspaper* play by the *Federal Theatre Project* (Library of Congress, Public Domain).

As the curtain opens, we behold an impressive set by Howard Bay, presenting a cross-section of a typical New York four-story, “old-law” tenement building of the late-nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> The front wall is partly stripped so that both the outside of the building as well as the inside of some of its apartments are visible. For a couple of minutes, we watch tenants go about their everyday business. Suddenly, a fire erupts and quickly engulfs the building. We see flames and smoke; hear people screaming; watch them rush for water, cower in hallways, and fall from broken fire escapes. A loudspeaker announces: “February 1924—This might be 397 Madison Street, New York. It might be 245 Halsey Street, Brooklyn, or Jackson Avenue and 10th Street, Long Island City.”<sup>20</sup> With such references to local tenement fires of recent years, the play thrusts us immediately into the heart of the action. The scene then switches abruptly to the

<sup>19</sup> “Old law” refers to buildings erected before new housing laws were implemented in 1901.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Arent, “One-Third of a Nation,” in P. de Rohan (ed.), *Federal Theatre Plays*, *op. cit.*, vol.1, p.13.

next episode: a committee sets out to investigate the cause of the fire, which killed fourteen people, realizes that the building was essentially a firetrap, and, yet, finds no violation of safety regulations. Instead it concludes that this particular fire (and the fires that might potentially break out in 67,000 similar old-law tenement buildings) is simply the tragic result of conditions long entrenched in the city's real estate market. When a baffled father, who lost his entire family in the fire, protests in anguish against such bureaucratic dismissal of the catastrophe, he is told by another character: "You'll have to go back into history and blame whatever it was that made New York City real estate the soundest and most profitable speculation on the face of the earth."<sup>21</sup> With this invitation the plot proper sets in: a guided tour through the history of New York's real estate, from the first land grants in colonial times, the ensuing land speculations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the arrival of several waves of immigrants in the course of the nineteenth century. We then learn of the introduction of the tenement house laws at the turn of the century, their persistent violations, and the resulting spread of contagious diseases and increase in juvenile delinquency, until we are finally introduced to a handful of inadequate attempts of improving the situation—taking us right up to 1938.

250

From the point of view of political theater, what stands out in this *tour de force* dramatic investigation of "conditions back of conditions" is the idiosyncratic amalgamation of modernist techniques borrowed from radical theater practice with tried techniques of the established bourgeois theater. To begin with, the very concept of a *living newspaper* is drawn from agitprop performances of 1920s workers' theaters in Soviet Russia, Weimar Germany, and the United States. With short, rapid sequences of brief, minimalist skits in direct address of the audience, the *Blue Blouses* in Soviet Russia, Piscator's political revues at the Berlin Volksbühne, as well as workers' theatres in the US (e.g. the German-speaking *Proletbühne*, the Hungarian-speaking *Uj Elore*, and the English-speaking Workers' Laboratory Theatre) sought to educate spectators about pressing contemporary issues and to mobilize them to a specific action. As a theater scholar, Flanagan was of course aware of these influential forms of agitprop and modernist theater; she had studied the theater of Meyerhold while on a Guggenheim fellowship in the Soviet Union (1926-27) and had probably also seen a performance of *Proletbühne* during her time at Vassar College. In an article of 1931 in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, she had moreover applauded American leftist workers' theaters for effectively using theater as a weapon of class struggle.<sup>22</sup> So, while playwright Arthur

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21 *Ibid.*, p.23.

22 Hallie Flanagan, "A Theatre is Born," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, vol.15, no.11, 1931, pp.908-915.

Arent adamantly denies the influence of leftist agitprop techniques on the genesis of the FTP's Living Newspaper, Flanagan somewhat guardedly acknowledges "occasional references to the *Volksbühne* and the Blue Blouses, to [...] Meierhold and Eisenstein," but hastens to assure her readers that ultimately it is as "American as Walt Disney, the *March of Time*, and the Congressional Record."<sup>23</sup>

In addition to taking up the episodic structure, direct address of the audience, and non-illusory staging techniques of agitprop theaters, the Living Newspaper also borrows the technique of translating abstract concepts into visual imagery or burlesque physical action. In *Power*, an issue about the need for public ownership of utilities, the concept of a holding company is vividly illustrated with the help of variously colored boxes, which are continuously subsumed by other and ever-larger boxes. In *One-Third of a Nation*, the profitableness but also callousness of real-estate speculation is acted out in burlesque fashion with the help of a small grass carpet onto which more and more people crowd for ever higher fees. As the tenants of the by now extremely crowded carpet continue to go about the daily business of shaving, dressing, and eating in ever more restricted poses, the landlord meticulously clears a few more unoccupied blades of grass. "A Very Fat Man hands over the money, kneels down, looks at it. He backs away to get a running start, then runs and jumps onto his spot. He bumps the Tenants who are annoyed. Then, music "Home! Sweet Home!"<sup>24</sup> The essence of the housing market is here translated into a physical burlesque. Similar to the workers' theaters of the 1920s, the Living Newspaper repeatedly draws on such "direct actions"<sup>25</sup> to visualize abstract concepts for its audiences.

It, furthermore, also borrows key elements from the epic form of political theater developed by Piscator and Brecht in Weimar Germany. The Loudspeaker, which features so prominently as the "Voice of the Living Newspaper" in a number of issues is heir to the device of the narrator in epic theater.<sup>26</sup> It serves as a sort of narrative guide, providing facts (which are then acted out by actors in short sketches) as well as critical commentary; at times it also interacts with the characters on stage. Also very similar

23 *Ead.*, "Introduction," vol.2, p.xi. See also Arthur Arent, "The Technique of the Living Newspaper," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, vol. 22, no. 11, November 1938, pp.820-825.

24 *Ead.*, "One-Third...", art.cit., p.35.

25 On this score, see e.g. Erwin Piscator, *Das Politische Theater*, Berlin, Adalbert Schutz Verlag, 1929, p.66. In his 1924 *Red Revue (Revue Roter Rummel)*, Piscator famously staged a boxing match to illustrate the dynamics of an election campaign.

26 See e.g. *One Third of a Nation* and *Power*. Piscator began to experiment with narration as early as 1924 in his *Red Revue*. Building on the work of Piscator, Brecht made narration in form of titles, projections, songs an integral element of his epic dramaturgy from 1935 onward.

to Piscator's epic documentary theater, the various issues of the Living Newspaper tend to incorporate different media into their productions by way of underscoring their fact-based approach to a problem.<sup>27</sup> *One-Third of a Nation* prominently features a projection screen, where empirical evidence in the form of historical documents, statistics, photographs, and film clips is projected in support of its analysis of the housing situation.

All these techniques borrowed from leftist theater practice—rapid sequence of short sketches, lack of fourth wall, translation of abstract issues into concrete physical action and visual imagery, narration, and projections—essentially function in the spirit of modernist political theater: they are designed to sustain spectators' awareness of the very mediality of the production and, hence, interpellate them primarily as critical observers and learners (rather than consumers) into the dramatic action, while also, via montage of these various elements, building up energy and momentum toward a final moment of pathos, when as Sergey Eisenstein puts it, "the spectator is compelled to jump from his seat, [...] forced 'to go out of himself,'" ready to join in some collective action.<sup>28</sup>

252

Yet, at the same time that the authors and directors of the Living Newspaper generously borrowed such techniques of modernist leftist theater practice, they were also quite aware that in the context of late 1930s American politics and culture, these techniques did not suffice to reach a broad and heterogeneous audience with diverse political sympathies and varying theater experience, that an approach anchored in them alone might alienate (I here use the term precisely in the Brechtian sense) parts of the audience to a degree that would induce frustration rather than political awareness. By 1936, it had become quite clear that the epic approach of Brecht and Piscator did not work with American audiences. Both Theatre Union's production of Brecht's *Mother* in 1935 and the Group Theatre's production of Piscator's *Case of Clyde Griffith* in 1936 had been noteworthy failures.<sup>29</sup> Faced with the rise of fascism abroad and anti-democratic tendencies at home as well as with a growing disillusionment with Soviet-style communism, even the more radical leftist theaters in the US began to abandon their earlier sectarian stance by mid-decade. In order to mobilize a broad cultural

27 In addition to physical skits and narration, Piscator also used projection screens to show documentary footage, such as in his 1925 revue *Trotz alledem! (In Spite of Everything!)*.

28 Sergey Eisenstein, *Film Form* [1949], New York, Harcourt and Brace, 1977, p.166.

29 For a discussion of the failure of these two productions, see Ilka Saal, "Broadway and the Depoliticization of Epic Theater: The Case of Erwin Piscator," in Chris J. Westgate (ed.), *Brecht, Broadway, and the US Theater*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars, 2007, pp.45-71 and *ead.*, "Vernacularizing Brecht: The Political Theater of the New Deal," in William Demastes and Iris Smith Fischer (eds.), *Interrogating America through Theatre and Performance*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp.100-119.

front across class and party lines against fascism, war, racism, and labor repression and in the defense of civil liberties, they now aimed for a general *rapprochement* of the radical aesthetics of workers' theater with the tried and proven techniques of the bourgeois stage.<sup>30</sup> The Federal Theatre was, in addition to its origin in government sponsorship, in many regards also the product of this emerging collaboration between labor movement and established culture industries. Quite a number of artists recruited on its behalf had formerly been actively involved with leftist theaters, such as Alfred Saxe (former director of the Workers' Laboratory Theater) and John Bonn (former director of Proletbühne). For the sake of consolidating a broad cultural alliance against anti-democratic tendencies at home and abroad, they now joined forces with traditional theaters as well as with Roosevelt's New Deal. The Federal Theatre partook, in this regard, in what Michael Denning calls "the extraordinary flowering of arts, entertainment and thought based on the broad social movement that came to be known as the Popular Front."<sup>31</sup>

In its effort to reach a heterogeneous Popular Front audience, comprised of workers and middle-class people, young radicals, and traditional Broadway audiences, the Living Newspaper skillfully wedded modernist techniques of education and agitation to conventional techniques of cultivating empathy and identification. The elaborate set design for *One-Third of a Nation* by Howard Bay is a good example of this. While in general Living Newspaper productions tended to be sparse in stage setting (only ten percent of the allotted federal budget could be spent on production cost), Bay's set presents, as critic Mary McCarthy puts it, "a masterpiece of grisly realism."<sup>32</sup> We behold a detailed cross-section of a tenement structure, with domestic life revealed in progress in each of its sections—suggesting *une tranche de vie* of the slums. While McCarthy considers such naturalism an aesthetic setback compared to the more stylized and abstract staging in issues such as *Triple-A Plowed Under* or *Power*, she also concedes that in the case of *One-Third of a Nation* this artistic choice is a logical one: "for what stylization of a tenement could demonstrate the horrors of modern housing as well as a tenement itself?"<sup>33</sup> In naturalist fashion, the photographic realism of the set is

30 For a detailed discussion of this pronounced shift in leftist commitment on US theatre stages, see Ira A. Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre*, Ann Arbor, U of Michigan P, 1980, pp.86-99 and Ilka Saal, *New Deal Theater*, New York, Palgrave, 2007, pp.101-109.

31 Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* [1997], London, Verso, 1998, p.xvi.

32 Mary McCarthy, *Theatre Chronicles, 1937-1962*, New York, Farrar, Strauss & Co, 1963, p.35.

33 *Ibid.*

to underscore the impact of the milieu on characters' choices. Accordingly, the issue repeatedly punctures the abstract, historical tour of the housing situation with brief "human interest" scenes played out in the various cubicles of the tenement set. We witness how a young woman takes up prostitution and crime in hopes of escaping the slums; how a young boy is bullied into violence by his peers; and how a wife refuses to have another baby, having already lost two infants to disease. As author Arthur Arent explains, while the statements and statistics are essential to the overall argument of the Living Newspaper, they would appear flat on stage. He therefore falls back on techniques of conventional drama to enable audience identification. Arent's "creative scenes" are to provide the much needed "bridge that leads to an understanding in human terms of the subject of debate."<sup>34</sup>

254

The identificatory angle is further enhanced by the characterization of the protagonist, Little Man. A type rather than a fully developed character, this figure is a staple of many Living Newspapers. Variouslly called Timothy Taxpayer, Homer Bystander, John Q. Public, or simply, Consumer, he often enters the stage from the audience to signal his function as a surrogate for the spectator/citizen. In *One-Third of a Nation*, Little Man joins the stage action in the fourth scene, having previously watched the play from a seat in the auditorium. His curiosity incited, he rushes on stage to demand specific answers concerning his own housing situation. As he explains to the Loudspeaker, he himself lives in an old-law tenement building and, for several years now, has been applying in vain to the new government-sponsored housing developments. "So I went down to see the Tenement House Commissioner. He told me the Living Newspaper was doing a show on housing and I ought to see it... So here I am."<sup>35</sup> Frustrated with how things are, he demands explanations: "Every time something happens that I don't understand I'm going to stop the show and ask questions."<sup>36</sup> From this point on, the Loudspeaker becomes his mentor in a learning process. In setting up a student-teacher relationship as the dramaturgical focus, the Living Theater takes up another technique of epic theater: the ruse of teaching the audience by teaching a character on stage.<sup>37</sup> Significantly, Little Man is not just a stock character (the consumer, the citizen—although he is that, too) but becomes personalized in sympathetic ways thanks to his colloquial speech, genial temperament, and quirky behavior. For example, he misses parts of the show, when during intermission

34 A. Arent, "Technique..." art. cit., p.821 and p.822.

35 A. Arent, "One-Third..." art. cit., p.40.

36 *Ibid.*, p.39.

37 On this score, see e.g. Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, London, Verso, 1998.

he goes out "for a beer." We also learn that his name is Angus K. Buttonkooper, that he has a wife and baby and dreams of "a little light and air, fair-sized rooms, and a few modern plumbing gadgets."<sup>38</sup> These few personal touches make him recognizable and relatable to audiences, so that he can serve as a figure of identification precisely in his role of the American Everyman.

Last but not least, as the show is concerned with the concrete problems of the average citizen, it also emulates, in its plot structure, the pattern of reflective thinking with which, as Douglass McDermott points out, an average person habitually tends to solve problems.<sup>39</sup> It delineates a problem (real estate), acknowledges its importance (conflagrations, diseases, crime), determines its causes (land speculation), examines alternatives (rent strikes, government projects), and arrives at a decision. According to McDermott, the majority of issues of the Living Newspaper follows this pattern in their plot structure:

Beginning with some recent, sensational event which presented the problem, the writers forced the protagonist to recognize the need for a solution. His curiosity about the problem's cause was thus aroused and subsequently satisfied by an excursion into recent history. Once the cause was established, various alternative solutions were suggested, analyzed, and discarded until only one remained. The characters consequently advocated this solution with tremendous force.<sup>40</sup>

It is precisely such skillful translation of abstract issues into the language of common sense as well as sentiment that for many spectators of the time reinforced the impression that, despite the show's overt didacticism and heavy use of non-illusory staging techniques, they were presented with a viscerally compelling, absorbing, and utterly realistic account of the contemporary situation.

Worker John Mullen writes about his experience of watching both a Living Newspaper and a Piscator play: "What's got me stumped [...] is this: there's a 'speaker' in the *Triple-A Plowed Under* and the acting is episodic as in *The Case of Clyde Griffiths*. But there the similarity stops. The WPA show is so good that it makes your hair tingle and sits you on the edge of your seat."<sup>41</sup> Whereas Mullen was clearly annoyed by the

38 A. Arent, "One-Third...", art. cit., p.97.

39 Douglas McDermott, "The Living Newspaper as Dramatic Form," *Modern Drama*, vol.8, no.1, May 1965, pp.86-87. McDermott here draws on the insights of philosopher John Dewey (i.e. John Dewey, *How We Think*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1933).

40 D. McDermott, "The Living Newspaper as Dramatic Form," art. cit., pp.86-87. According to McDermott, this "orthodox" pattern was typical for all New York issues.

41 John Mullen, "A Worker Looks at Broadway," *New Theatre*, March 1936, pp.26-27.

constant lecturing of Piscator's Speaker, he was strongly moved by the stark reality of the facts presented by the Loudspeaker in *Triple-A Plowed Under*. Thanks to its combination of hard facts with sentimental scenes and its emulation of the reflective thinking of the common person, the Living Newspaper did not carry for him the connotations of heavy-handed didacticism and abstract theorizing that epic theater was commonly associated with in the United States. Rather, its use of modernist alienation techniques notwithstanding, it seemed to appeal precisely on account of its vigorous truthfulness.<sup>42</sup> A reviewer of the New Orleans production of *One-Third of a Nation* similarly comments, "Lantern slides and movies, and a symphonic accompaniment to fix the mood and theme—with them come realism that makes you sometimes hold your breath."<sup>43</sup> These impressions of a high degree of verisimilitude, audience identification and absorption are borne out by audience and press reactions more generally.

256

In particular, *One-Third of a Nation* proved to be very popular with audiences and critics. In New York alone over two hundred thousand people saw the production between January and October 1938.<sup>44</sup> The press, pretty much across the spectrum from left to right, applauded it as "vivid theater."<sup>45</sup> The Republican *New York Herald Tribune*, for instance, conceded that while "the Living Newspaper method is, of course, earnest, partisan, bitter and given to a Left Wing point of view," it is nonetheless "almost invariably forceful, striking and remarkably skillful in dramatizing what might seem to be undramatic ideas."<sup>46</sup> *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* likewise commended the show for being not only "beautiful and moving and entertaining and educative but [...] actually slick."<sup>47</sup> Strikingly, whereas some of the same critics had only a few years prior rejected similar theatrical techniques in the New York productions of Brecht's and Piscator's epic plays as dull and schematic, they now praised them as "exhilarating showmanship,"<sup>48</sup> "brilliant and vivid,"<sup>49</sup> "deeply moving and almost always forceful."<sup>50</sup> What's more, what was once dismissed as preaching to the converted and communist

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42 On the score of concepts of realism and truthfulness in 1930s proletarian fiction, see Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations*, Durham, Duke UP, 1993.

43 Harnett T. Kane, "One-Third of a Nation Packs Dramatic Punch; Well Done," *The New Orleans Item*, June 28, 1938.

44 Flanagan cites 217,458 visitors to the show (*Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.217).

45 Brooks Atkinson, "The Play," *The New York Times*, January 18, 1938.

46 Richard Watts, "The Theaters," *New York Herald Tribune*, January 18, 1938.

47 Arthur Pollock, "The Theater," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 18, 1938.

48 B. Atkinson, "The Play," *art. cit.*

49 John Anderson, "One-Third of a Nation Vividly Presented," *New York Journal American*, January 18, 1938.

50 Richard Lockridge, "The New Play," *The New York Sun*, January 18, 1938.

propaganda could now be lauded as “a stimulating lesson in a social problem”<sup>51</sup> and “clever propaganda.”<sup>52</sup> Even the Hearst-owned, right-wing *New York American* raved about *Power*: “Propaganda? Precisely... and excellent propaganda. Propaganda with a strong pulse to it, doubled fists, a tough jaw and a fighting jag.”<sup>53</sup> *New York Telegram* explained to its readers the difference between the “breast-beating indignation and tearing down of a system of government as we always get it from the leftist playwrights” and “the straightforward and sensible narrative of abuses existing under a government that is seeking to prevent them.”<sup>54</sup> And the liberal *New York Post* commended attendance of *One-Third of a Nation* as “every good citizen’s duty.”<sup>55</sup>

How to explain the sudden enthusiasm of a broad spectrum of mainstream papers for interventionist political theater? While the skillful amalgamation of techniques of modernist political theater with the tried conventions of the established theater industry was certainly key to triggering the aesthetic enthusiasm of a broad spectrum of mainstream critics, I contend that it also took a particular rhetorical strategy to implement the Living Newspapers’ political vision of good citizenship that could be embraced across party-lines and class-divides. This is most apparent in the final section of *One-Third of a Nation*.

Thanks to an extended lesson in the economic and legislative history of the New York housing situation, Little Man realizes that the dismal situation has essentially remained the same for the past 150 years. Interventions such as tenement laws, rent strikes, and emergency rent laws have at best addressed only the worst symptoms. At the source of the ubiquitous lack of affordable and decent housing, so a disillusioned Little Man discovers, is the profit system intrinsic to a capitalist economy, which effectively makes the building of affordable housing impossible. But before the plot can peter out in economic determinism, the Loudspeaker resolutely intervenes:

Wait a minute! Hold it! Don’t black out on that yet! Bring those lights up—full! (*They come up.*) That’s better. This scene isn’t over yet. (*Pause*) Now, Mister Landlord, we know that the conditions you showed us exist. [...] But we can’t just let it go at that.

51 B. Atkinson, “The Play,” art. cit.

52 Robert Coleman, “WPA Federal Theatre,” *New York Daily Mirror*, January 18, 1938. See also Sidney Whipple, “Problem of Slums Presented in Play,” *New York World Telegram*, January 18, 1938.

53 Gilbert Gabriel, “Power,” *New York American*, February 24, 1937.

54 Douglas Gilbert, “Power at the Ritz as Living Newspaper,” *New York World Telegram*, February 24, 1937.

55 John Mason Brown, “Two on the Aisle: *One-Third of a Nation* at the Federal Theatre,” *New York Post*, January 18, 1938.

We can't let people walk out of this theatre knowing the disease is there, but believing there's no cure. There is a cure! [...] If you can't build cheap houses—and you've just shown that you can't—then let somebody do it who can—and I mean the United States Government for instance.<sup>56</sup>

At this point, the Living Newspaper introduces in quick succession recent government housing initiatives across the country and follows up with a discussion of the Wagner Steagall Housing Bill of 1937 seeking to appropriate one billion dollars of the national budget for the elimination of slums and the development of safe and healthy housing. While the Loudspeaker and Buttonkooper clearly support these kind of government interventions, they also quickly realize that, as currently practiced, they address at best two percent of the problem.

**258** If we follow the logic of the quasi-Marxist lesson provided to Little Man during his excursus into the long history of the New York housing situation, we find that, in the words of Ira Levine, the play “exposed conditions that neither the legislative nor the judicial system had been able to change and that therefore appeared to cry out for more radical solutions.”<sup>57</sup> The logical next step would be to consider, analogous to the issue *Power*, the public ownership of housing. Indeed the conversation briefly touches upon this possibility but only to have it quickly dismissed by Little Man himself. As Mary McCarthy correctly points out, while power plants can be appropriated “without upsetting the system,” the government cannot take over housing, “for to do that would be to expropriate land. *One-Third of a Nation*, as a WPA play, is therefore in no position to offer the one effectual remedy for the evil it pictures.”<sup>58</sup>

Hence, even as *One-Third of a Nation* is dead on in its diagnosis of the intrinsic problems of capitalism (the profit system), in the end it shies away from advocating radical, systemic change. Instead it proposes a thin, system-immanent solution: to shift the budget from military spending to senator Wagner's housing bill. More importantly, it concludes its historical analysis by diverting critique from the system to the individual. According to the Loudspeaker, “the thing that's made these slum conditions possible for the last hundred and fifty years” is not capitalism itself but something it vaguely diagnoses as “inertia.” “The thing that makes people like you and everybody else sit back and say, ‘Well, this is the way it has always been, this is the way it's always going

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56 A. Arent, “One-Third...,” art. cit., pp.103-104.

57 I. Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory...*, op. cit., p.166.

58 M. McCarthy, *Theatre Chronicles...*, op. cit., p.37.

to be.”<sup>59</sup> Mobilizing in the very last scene a determined Mrs. Buttonkooper, who has been watching the show from the auditorium, *One-Third of a Nation* ends with the suggestion that what it really takes to amend the situation is for each citizen to exercise their democratic voice to pressure the government for further reform. Or as Mrs. Buttonkooper puts it: “You know what we’re going to do—you and me? We’re going to holler. [...] Can you hear me—you in Washington or Albany or wherever you are! Give me a decent place to live in! Give me a home! A home!”<sup>60</sup>

Abruptly shifting the line of attack in the finale from the critique of a system to the critique of individual civic commitment, *One-Third of a Nation* essentially re-channels its dramatic energy from a radical, systemic critique into the time-honored rhetoric of the American Jeremiad. Originally coined in reference to political sermons in late seventeenth-century American Puritan culture that sought to exhort the congregation to a stricter pursuit of its religious founding covenant, the term has been expanded in American Studies scholarship to designate a general structuring principle of American culture and ideology. Sacvan Bercovitch understands the American Jeremiad as a rhetorical strategy or mode of cultural production that simultaneously laments the decline of the national dream, while also celebrating and affirming its very essence.<sup>61</sup> Under the mantle of critique and exhortation, it asserts an unshakeable optimism and belief in American progress. Rather than as a vision of doom and destruction, as which it at first appears, it essentially functions as a moral corrective to the current course of events.

The Living Newspaper is very much heir to this tradition. While it might remind its audience, as in *Triple-A Plowed Under*, that the American people have revolted “for slighter causes” than the lack of home, work, and food,<sup>62</sup> it also reassures them that what is needed now is not another revolution but sufficient clamor on part of the average citizen to move the elected government to reforms that can make the system work on their behalf: the Soil Conservation Act in *Triple-A Plowed Under*, the Tennessee Valley Authority in *Power*, and the Wagner Steagall Housing Bill in *One-Third of a Nation*. Hence, despite its forceful critique of American capitalism, in the end the Living Newspapers assert a fundamental faith in the intrinsic regenerative powers of US American democracy. They insist that while the system might not have unfolded its

59 A. Arent, “One-Third...,” art. cit., p.117.

60 *Ibid.*, p.120.

61 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, Madison, U of Wisconsin P, 1978, p.180.

62 Staff of the Living Newspaper, “Triple-A Plowed Under,” in Pierre de Rohan (ed.). *Federal Theatre Plays*, vol.2, *op. cit.*, p.15.

full democratic potential yet, this shortcoming can be corrected: American capitalism can be made to work for all.

This rhetorical move is complemented by a second strategy. Although the Living Newspaper's main goal was to improve living conditions for workers, farmers, and middle-class people—and, in general, the “one third of a nation” suffering most severely from the economic recession—, it rarely argued along class lines. Rather, it tended to hail these various groups under the umbrella term of *consumer*. Little Man is the average consumer struggling with utility bills and the housing situation and complaining about the price of milk and meat. In *Power*, he is straightforwardly referred to as “Consumer,” while in *One-Third of a Nation* he is tellingly called “Buttonkooper,” the buyer of buttons. As suggested most clearly in *Triple-A Plowed Under*, the consumer is considered the crucial link in the economy. By strengthening her purchasing power, the agricultural crisis can be amended, business revitalized, and the unemployed be put back to work. On this score, the political argumentation of the Living Newspaper is very much in line with Roosevelt's Keynesian reform program. It, moreover, presents consumer consciousness as part and parcel of a democratic national identity. When at the end of *Triple-A*, the struggling farmers, along with impoverished city people, and the starving unemployed call out to the government: “We need you!;” when at the end of *Power*, the people of the Tennessee Valley anxiously await the Supreme Court's decision on the constitutionality of the TVA; and when at the end of *One-Third of a Nation*, the Buttonkoopers along with “everybody that lives in a place like this” holler out “Can you hear us Washington?,” they do so primarily as citizen-consumers, indicating that the economic welfare of the average citizen is in the national interest, is instrumental to the welfare of the nation. The time-honored revolutionary battle cry of “We, the people” is here effectively rearticulated as: “We, the consumers.”

In conclusion then, while the Living Newspaper is clearly heir to the radical leftist theater practices of the early twentieth-century both with regard to its aesthetics as well as its basic thrust of political inquiry, it also modifies this legacy according to the contingencies of its time and place. Between 1935 and 1938, the Living Newspaper succeeded as political theater precisely because, on the one hand, it integrated modernist techniques with an established theater praxis in order to reach a broad, heterogeneous audience. On the other hand, it also managed to adapt, as Levine astutely puts it, “a revolutionary theory (the capitalist profit system was responsible and must be changed) to a nonrevolutionary end (the federal government could cure the unfortunate consequences of that economic system).”<sup>63</sup> While it effectively

260

monitored the shortcomings of American capitalism, it did not attack capitalism itself. On the contrary, it maintained that under the supervision of a democratically elected government a moral capitalist system could prosper to the benefit of all if only each and every citizen committed to it. In this regard then, it is not surprising that the Living Newspaper was widely accepted as a critical but essentially innocuous mouthpiece for the average American citizen and consumer. Even as it rooted for the underdog, its primary purpose was not incitement to revolution but the reassurance of its audience of the intrinsic merits and powers of American democracy. In this regard, it was indeed, in Flanagan's words, "as American as Walt Disney."

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## NOTICE

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## ABSTRACT

This essay considers the Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project as a form of political theater. Drawing on the example of the popular 1938 issue *One-Third of a Nation*, it examines the paper’s complex amalgamation of modernist strategies of leftist theater practice with tried techniques of the established bourgeois culture industry. It also shows how the Living Newspapers effectively mobilized the tropes and rhetorical strategies of American cultural nationalism. These strategies enabled the Living Newspapers to bridge diverse political sympathies and social backgrounds and to appeal to a broad and heterogeneous public. I argue that despite its radical, interventionist potential, the Living Newspaper was, ultimately, in Hallie Flanagan’s words, “as American as Walt Disney,” precisely because it focused on the plight of the common man and rearticulated problems of social inequality as questions of

consumer agency. In this manner, it succeeded in both critiquing capitalist excess as well advocating system-immanent solutions to the current crisis of capitalism.

#### KEYWORDS

Federal Theatre Project, Living Newspaper, *One-Third of a Nation*, political theater, cultural nationalism, New Deal

#### RÉSUMÉ

264 Cet article analyse les *Living Newspapers* du *Federal Theatre Project* comme des formes de théâtre politique. En s'appuyant sur l'exemple du succès de 1938, *One-Third of a Nation*, l'article considère l'amalgame complexe entre stratégies modernistes du théâtre « gauchiste » et techniques de l'industrie culturelle bourgeoise bien établie. Il montre également comment les *Living Newspapers* ont effectivement mobilisé les tropes et les stratégies rhétoriques du nationalisme culturel américain. Ces stratégies ont permis aux *Living Newspapers* de surmonter des sympathies politiques et des milieux sociaux divergents, et de parler à un public large et hétérogène. L'article défend l'hypothèse selon laquelle, malgré leur potentiel radical et interventionniste, les *Living Newspapers* étaient, finalement, selon les mots d'Hallie Flanagan, « aussi américains que Walt Disney », précisément car ils se concentraient sur le sort de l'homme ordinaire et faisaient des problèmes d'inégalité sociale des enjeux de protection des consommateurs. De cette manière, ils sont parvenus à critiquer les excès du capitalisme comme à prôner des solutions intrinsèques à ce même système et à sa crise.

#### MOTS-CLÉS

*Federal Theatre Project, Living Newspaper, One-Third of a Nation*, théâtre politique, nationalisme culturel, *New Deal*

## CRÉDITS PHOTO

### VISUELS DE COUVERTURE (TOUS DANS LE DOMAINE PUBLIC)

1. Hallie Flanagan, director of the WPA Federal Theatre Project. Created *ca* 1939. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress.
2. Windrip addresses the crowd in a rally in the San Francisco Federal Theatre Project production of *It Can't Happen Here*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
3. Photograph of the New York production of *One-Third of a Nation*, a Living Newspaper play by the Federal Theatre Project, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
4. « Continue WPA ! », Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. « Federal Theatre Project » The New York Public Library Digital Collections.
5. Crowd outside Lafayette Theatre on opening night, Classical Theatre, « *Voodoo* » *Macbeth*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
6. Scene from the Federal Theatre Project production of O'Neill's *One-Act Plays of the Sea* at the Lafayette Theatre (Oct. 1937-Jan. 1938), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, New York Public Library, « Mr. Neil's Barn » The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

## TABLE DES MATIÈRES

Avant-propos. <i>Federal Theatre Project</i> (1935-1939) : contexte et enjeux .....	5
Émeline Jouve et Géraldine Prévot	

### PREMIÈRE PARTIE

#### CONTEXTE

Retrouver « la promesse de la vie américaine ». Le <i>New Deal</i> et la culture .....	17
Jean Kempf	
The Federal Theatre of the 1930s: An Experiment in the democratization of culture .....	39
Sheila D. Collins & Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg	

425

### DEUXIÈME PARTIE

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

Federal Theatre Project in Cincinnati, Ohio: A Case Study in Local Relevance .....	81
Nancy Jones	
Alfred Kreymborg Federal Troubadour: Singing the Unsung Masses.....	111
Drew Eisenhauer	
Orson Welles et ses compositeurs : une cohésion sociale et politique autant qu'artistique.....	141
François Thomas	
The First Federal Summer Theatre: Training Ground for "a New, Imaginative Theatre" .....	167
Herman Farrell	
The Promise of <i>It Can't Happen Here</i> : Performances of History in Times of Crisis.....	197
Elizabeth A. Osborne	

### TROISIÈME PARTIE

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

"A Gesture of Hope:" <i>Living Newspaper: A Counter-Narrative</i> at the Royal Court Theatre. An Interview with Artistic Director Vicky Featherstone .....	227
Jordana Cox	
"As American as Walt Disney:" The Political Theater of the Federal Theatre Project.....	243
Ilka Saal	
The Limits of Technology: Actors, Networks, the Federal Theatre Project, and <i>Power</i> .....	265
Michael Selmon	

QUATRIÈME PARTIE  
FIGURES FÉMININES ET PROCESSUS DE LÉGITIMATION

“The Provincetown Players and the Federal Theatre: The Essay Susan Glaspell Never Wrote” .....	299
Noelia Hernando-Real	
Susan Glaspell and the Midwest Playwrights’ Bureau of the Federal Theatre Project .....	327
Linda Ben-Zvi	
Black Theatre, Archives and the Federal Theatre Project.....	347
Kate Dossett	
Zora Neale Hurston’s “Real Negro Theater” and the Negro Unit of the Federal Theater Project in New York.....	381
Claudine Raynaud	
426 Finding Hallie: An Interview with Mattie Brickman .....	411
Emeline Jouve and Géraldine Prévot	
<i>Playground: The Hallie Flanagan Project. Excerpt</i> .....	418
Mattie Brickman	
Crédits photo.....	424
Table des matières .....	425

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Collection dirigée par Julie Vatain-Corfdir & Sophie Marchand

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