Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)

contexte & enjeux / context & issues

Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

IV. Susan Glaspell and the Midwest Playwrights' Bureau of the Federal Theatre Project · Linda Ben-Zvi
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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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QUATRIÈME PARTIE

Figures féminines et processus de légitimation

SUSAN GLASPELL AND THE MIDWEST PLAYWRIGHTS' BUREAU OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

Linda Ben-Zvi
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After several decades during which Susan Glaspell's name and plays faded from the annals of theatre history, contemporary theatre scholars have re-established her position as a pioneer in the development of modern American drama.[1] Her fifteen one-act and full-length plays are once again published,[2] studied, translated, and performed around the world; her role as co-founder of the Provincetown Players, the first theatre dedicated to producing indigenous American drama, acknowledged; and many of her fifty short stories and nine novels again back in print. However, one area of her extensive and varied career that has received little critical attention is her association with, and significant contributions to, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). Few have explored the period between September 1936 and May 1938, during which Glaspell served as head of the Midwest Playwrights' Bureau of the FTP. In the late 1980s, when I began the research for my Glaspell biography, the only study to mention the Glaspell/FTP connection was Marcia Noe's 1976 dissertation, the first doctorate written on Glaspell.[3] Even now, with the exception of Barbara Ozieblo's Glaspell biography and my own,[4] Glaspell scholars continue to concentrate for the most part on Glaspell's work with the Provincetown Players: writing eleven plays for the company, acting in several of these works, and overseeing administrative details during its seven-year history.[5] However, as this essay illustrates, the same impetus that drove Glaspell during

1 For information on Glaspell, see Susan Glaspell International Society.

2 See Linda Ben-Zvi and J. Ellen Gainor (eds.), *Susan Glaspell: The Complete Plays*, Jefferson, NC, McFarland, 2010.

3 Marcia Noe, *A Critical Biography of Susan Glaspell*, PhD. Dissertation, U of Iowa, 1976; and *Susan Glaspell*, Macomb (ILL), Western Illinois Monograph Series, 1983, pp.67-70.

4 Barbara Ozieblo, *Susan Glaspell*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2000, pp.252-266; and Linda Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell*, New York, Oxford UP, 2005, pp.265-269, the basis of the expanded and edited version appearing in this essay.

5 The original Provincetown Players ended in March 1922, when Glaspell and Cook left for a one-year sabbatical in Greece, which stretched to two years. After Cook's death in Delphi in 1924, the theatre reopened as the Provincetown Theatre under the leadership of Eugene O'Neill, Robert Edmond Jones, and Kenneth Macgowan, and produced international as well as American contemporary plays. In *Arena*, whenever Flanagan

her Players' period can be seen in her commitment to, and success with, the FTP: the desire to develop innovative forms of American drama; to expand theatrical and performative possibilities; to address contemporary social, cultural, and political issues; and to create characters with whom audiences can identify. Built on similar premises, it is not surprising that Glaspell and other associated with the Provincetown Players were drawn to the FTP, another pioneer attempt to enrich America through theatre.[6]

A PIONEER PLAYWRIGHT FOR A PIONEER JOB

On April 8, 1935, the US Congress approved the establishment of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), designed for workers with specific skills and trades, who were presently unemployed and on relief, to return to work in their professions, paid by the government. Harry Hopkins was appointed to head this vast, innovative, and unprecedented national program. He in turn enlisted theatre professor Hallie Flanagan to devise a project whereby theatre practitioners presently receiving welfare might also return to work by producing plays in venues around the country for audiences to attend without pay or for a nominal charge. Hopkins described such a theatre project as "free, adult, [and] uncensored." Four months later, Flanagan had come up with a plan designed to be "part of a tremendous re-thinking, re-building and re-dreaming of America," and to function as "the new frontier in America."[7]

Such idealistic words and aspirations must have resonated with Glaspell. An Iowan, like Hopkins and Flanagan, she grew up with stories of pioneer settlement and the spirit needed to challenge new frontiers. The Provincetown Players was a pioneer venture; so too were Glaspell's plays, short stories, and fiction, in which her protagonists—invariably women—struggle to escape limitations that hold them in place and seek new, freer lives. As Claire Archer proclaims in *The Verge* (1921), her most experimental play: "We need not be held in forms molded for us."[8] The words echo a quotation by philosopher Alfred North Whitehead that Glaspell jotted down in a notebook during her FTP years: "the leap of the imagination reaching beyond what is then actual,"

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cites the Players, she is referring to the later Provincetown Theatre.

6 Players who worked for or whose plays were produced by the FTP include Jasper Deeter, Edna Ferber, Mike Gold, Alfred Kreymborg, Lawrence Langner, James Light, Pierre Loving, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Eugene O'Neill.

7 Quoted in John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown (eds.), *Free, Adult, Uncensored*, Washington, DC, New Republic Books, 1978, p.26.

8 Susan Glaspell, *The Verge*, in L. Ben-Zvi and J.E. Gainor (eds.), *Susan Glaspell: The Complete Plays*, *op. cit.*, p.235.

to which she added "Adventure beyond the safety of the present."[9] This pioneering spirit emboldened Glaspell to break with traditional forms of theatre, just as it drove Flanagan and the FTP to create a national American theatre movement, never before attempted in the country—and after.[10]

Toward this end, in the winter of 1936 Flanagan wrote to Glaspell inviting her to head the Chicago-based Midwest Playwrights' Bureau of the FTP. It was an excellent choice. Glaspell brought with her, as Flanagan surely knew, seven years of experience writing for and overseeing the Provincetown Players as well as her reputation as a playwright lauded in America and abroad, whose play *Alison's House* had received the 1931 Pulitzer Prize for drama. For Glaspell, it was an ideal job, and it came at an ideal time. Although she had left the Midwest twenty-three years earlier, it had never left her. As she told her friend Edmund Wilson: "It must have taken a strong hold of me in my early years. I've never ceased trying to figure out why it is as it is."[11] She knew the Midwest area personally and had used the region's people, topography, habits, idioms and beliefs in many of her works, going so far as to set the house of the eponymous Alison/Emily Dickinson on the banks of the Mississippi. Flanagan's invitation also came at a difficult time in Glaspell's life. After the sudden death of her husband, George Cram "Jig" Cook, in Delphi, Greece in 1924, where they had been living, Glaspell returned to her home in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and soon after began an eight-year affair with journalist Norman Matson, seventeen years her junior. When that relationship ended in 1932, she was devastated. Always a disciplined writer, she was, for the first time in her career, unable to write. By taking up the position Flanagan offered, she could temporarily leave her own work and focus instead on a new challenge for which she was uniquely suited. It also allowed her to return once more to Chicago, which she knew well, had family, and had often used as the locale for several of her novels.

In September 1936, Glaspell began her new position, and her first concern was clarifying the scope of her work. The Provincetown Players had been a small, disorganized group with a constitution that none of the members actually followed. The FTP was a countrywide, hierarchical-heavy organization overseen by a subcommittee of the United States Congress, and —despite Hopkins wishful description—had the power to not only withhold funds but to censure plays they deemed controversial. Almost

9 Susan Glaspell, "*Norma Ashe* Holograph Notebook," Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

10 In reaction to theatre closings because of Covid-19, some call for a new FTP.

11 Susan Glaspell to Edmund Wilson, Edmund Wilson Papers, Beinecke Library, Collection of American Literature, Yale University.

immediately, Glaspell experienced the differences between the two organizations. It took eleven letters, written between September 24 and December 10, 1936 for her to make clear to FTP administrators that she did not have the staff to handle the bureaucratic workload the position demanded, which included registering plays received, securing venues for productions, overseeing all FTP programs in Illinois, and interacting with the national Play Reading bureaus. Instead, Glaspell indicated that her primary responsibilities should be to find manuscripts and published plays dealing with Midwestern themes, of interest to Midwestern audiences, or written by Midwestern authors; to work for the development of such plays in cooperation with the authors; and recommend the best scripts to be produced both regionally and nationally. Hiram Motherwell, her contact in the National office, agreed.

Realizing that an "ideal Midwest play" would not miraculously turn up among the

600 unsolicited manuscripts that arrived in her office the first year, Glaspell sent out numerous letters in order to find them. To publisher Barrett Clark she wrote: "If I can find some good plays from the soil or from the experiences of recent years, I will feel that we are doing something for the theatre in helping build it up through this part of the country." [12] In response, he sent a rough manuscript by poet Edgar Lee Masters, which Glaspell found unworkable for the stage. When Professor E.C. Mabie [13] invited her to the opening of a new theatre laboratory built on his University of Iowa campus, she enthusiastically accepted the invitation, hoping to find original plays there. From those students she met, she selected Iowan Marcus Bach's drama *Before These Walls* concerning a young postulate in a Trappist monastery in Kentucky, and Ellsworth Conkle's *A Prologue to Glory*, describing the early life of Abraham Lincoln, a play that would be threatened with Congressional censorship, but eventually became one of the most successful FTP productions. [14] One of Mabie's students whom Glaspell probably did not meet on her visit was Tennessee Williams, whose plays and sexual orientation

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12 Susan Glaspell to Barrett Clark, October 7, 1936, Barrett H. Clark Papers, Beinecke Library Rare Book and Manuscript Library Repository, Yale University.

13 Mabie had been one of the first people Flanagan enlisted to help organize a national theatre under the WPA. Toward that end, he wrote *A Plan for the Organization of the Regional Theatres in the United States.* Flanagan appointed him Regional Director for the Midwest; but in January 1936, he resigned after receiving no cooperation from local theatres (Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Benjamin Blom, 1940, p.22-24).

14 J. Parnell Thomas, Republican Member of Congress, found *Prologue to Glory* objectionable, arguing that Lincoln's "battling with the politicians... is simply a propaganda play to prove that all politicians are crooked." However, critic Burns Mantle countered: "If the Federal theatre had produced no other single drama this production of *Prologue to Glory* would doubly justify its history and all its struggles" (*ibid.*, p.173 and p.320).

Mabie was known to dislike. After Glaspell had left the program, Williams submitted *Candles in the Sun* and *The Fugitive Kind* to the FTP, two plays Mabie had ridiculed in class. Both were rejected.

Glaspell did make contact with another playwright later to be a luminary in American theatre: Arthur Miller. In 1937, University of Michigan Professor Kenneth Rowe asked her to serve as a reader for the Hopwood Prize, given each year for the best student play. She had dismissed the invitation but now accepted, hoping to find interesting plays to consider for the FTP. From the ten works submitted, she awarded first place to *Honors at Dawn* by the author "Corona," the name Miller may have chosen to honor the typewriter on which he composed it. "A faulty play as it stands, but says something in feeling, and here too I found real possibilities in this author,"[15] she wrote to the committee. In a personal note, she indicated her desire to contact some of the young playwrights to see if they might be able to develop their works for production. For some reason she did not put Miller on her list. However, his second Hopwood-prize play awarded the next year, *They Too Arise*, had one performance in the Detroit Federal Theatre in October 1937.

Continuing her search for playwrights, Glaspell also wrote to Yale Professor William Eaton Pritchard, who had chaired the committee that awarded her the Pulitzer Prize for *Alison's House*. Pritchard recommended Arnold Sundgaard, a Wisconsin Rockefeller Fellowship student, who had just graduated and returned to the Midwest. Glaspell immediately wrote to Sundgaard, asking if he had material to send. Instead of answering, Sundgaard, then unemployed with a wife and children to support, hitchhiked to Chicago and met Glaspell. "My immediate impression," he wrote, "was of a rather frail and somewhat shy woman with the look of an English professor I had known at Wisconsin."[16] Ten days later, after filing for welfare, a requisite for being accepted, he joined Glaspell's play readers' staff. It included Chicago playwright and novelist Alice Gerstenberg whose play *Overtones* (1913) was one of the first one-act expressionistic drama written by an American; University of Iowa graduate Fanny McConnell, who founded the Negro People's Theater in Chicago in 1938, and later married Ralph Ellison, then part of the New York Federal Writers' Project; and doctoral student in theatre Sidney Blackwell.

15 Susan Glaspell to R.W. Cowden, Hopwood Committee, May 14, 1937, Hopwood Papers, University of Michigan Archives.

16 Arnold Sundgaard, "Susan Glaspell and the Federal Theatre Revisited," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, vol.9, no.1, Winter 1997, pp.1-10. The following descriptions come from this article.

In his essay about working for the FTP, Sundgaard provides the most detailed description of the work of these readers under Glaspell's supervision. Each was expected to read two plays a day; and at their weekly meeting, which Sundgaard calls "a kind of post-graduate seminar," Glaspell requested that they say something positive and constructive about each work. As he quotes her: "Many [...] are new writers. If they are promising, we try to [...] help them get their plays ready for a production. If they won't do, we still try to offer criticism and suggestions." Sundgaard adds: "It would have been easy enough to dismiss [them] with a brief summary except for Susan's implicit admonishment that we not be cruel," a habit she had developed when she read submissions to the Provincetown Players.

Since several in her group were playwrights themselves, Glaspell tried to interest them in writing an original work that would have a Midwest flavor. To stir their interest, at one meeting she brought in a photograph of a vast prairie field that she had clipped from the journal *Midwest*, hoping to inspire them to create the play she dreamed to discover. Sundgaard alone seemed moved by the image and embarked on writing a loose epic tracing the history of Western settlement from its mythic beginnings to the labor unrest the region was experiencing in the 1930s. She called his project *Midwest*, but Sundgaard eventually gave it the title *Everywhere I Roam*, borrowed from an earlier, abandoned play. Despite her enthusiasm for the work, Glaspell could not convince the regional production head George Kondolf to consider the idea, although Flanagan reports in *Arena*, that it was given an in-house production for FTP directors. A few years later, however, the play had a short run on Broadway, with the set based on the photo that had so moved Glaspell and executed by her old Provincetown Players friend, the famed scenic designer Robert Edmund Jones.

When Glaspell arrived in Chicago to take up her position, she found one project already begun: an adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, undertaken by Shirley Graham for the Chicago Negro Unit. In a letter to Flanagan on September 27, 1937, Glaspell indicated that the work would be "worthy of production," adding "how Eugene O'Neill may feel about it of course one cannot say." As the unit had already started to do "a little work" on the project, she requested that Flanagan indicate her decision about continuance as soon as possible.[17] Flanagan might have accepted the proposal, but O'Neill—as Glaspell may have anticipated—refused permission, most likely because of the failure of the New York Negro Unit's production of his *Sea Plays*,

17 Susan Glaspell to Hallie Flanagan, September 27, 1937, quoted in Leslie White, *Eugene O'Neill and the Federal Theatre Project*, PhD Dissertation, New York University, 1986, p.232.

in which both words and locales were altered, something that was anathema to O'Neill. In response to the request, he made clear that all his plays were to be staged exactly as written and notified the FTP that, in the future, only the two plays written specifically for black actors, *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun got Wings,* would be allowed to be produced by Negro Units. Only the former was performed by the FTP. [18]

BIG WHITE FOG

In an essay he had written twelve years earlier, O'Neill admonished black actors to choose works that reflected their own lives and experiences:

> Be yourselves! Don't reach out for *our* stuff which *we* call good! Make *your stuff* and *your good*! You have within your race an opportunity—and a shining goal! for new forms, new significance ....There ought to be a Negro play written by a Negro that no white could ever have conceived or executed...*yours*, *your own*, an expression of what is deep in you, *is* you, *by* you! [19]

Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog*, one of the most important and controversial plays produced by the FTP, may well have been the type of play O'Neill imagined (**fig.1**): written by a black playwright, based on black history, and presenting the personal experiences of a black family, a play, as O'Neill knew, "no white could ever have conceived or executed."

Big White Fog originated in the Chicago Negro Play Unit, and Glaspell, while not initiating the play, was an active and enthusiastic supporter. Ward had arrived in Chicago and the FTP through a circuitous route. He was born in Louisiana in 1902, the sixth of eleven children, his father a former slave. He left home at 15, soon after his mother, who had supported his early writing, died in childbirth. For the next several years, he rode freight trains crisscrossing the country and supported himself by doing odd jobs. It was from the open door of a boxcar that he saw the image that became the impetus for *Big White Fog*: the east rim of the Grand Canyon, beautiful and majestic, with fog slowly rising up from below, covering the sides of the surrounding cliffs. As he explained, after seeing this image:

18 As long as his plays were unchanged, O'Neill welcomed his association with the FTP, which produced 28 of his works, and which, White argues, expanded his reputation across the country.

19 Eugene O'Neill, "Eugene O'Neill on the Negro Actor," *Messenger*, vol.7, no.1, January 1925, quoted in Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, New York, Cambridge UP, 1996, pp.11-12.

1. LOC, Posters, FTP, poster for *Big White Fog*, Library of Congress

> Suddenly I found my spirit sickened as I realized the truth: I'm a Negro and all this beauty and majesty does not belong to me. With a fallen heart, I acknowledged that I had nothing to boast of. I was a descendant of the slaves who had built this country, yet I was still deprived of the patriotic joy felt by those who claimed the land as their own. In my bewilderment that late afternoon, it suddenly occurred to me that we as a people were engulfed by a pack of lies, surrounded, in fact, by one big white fog through which we could see no light anywhere.[20]

Big White Fog concerns a black family, the Masons, who became part of the "Great Migration" from the South to Chicago in the 1930s, in pursuit of a better life, but who found instead that the destructive forces of racism and capitalism followed them. In the last scene of the three-act play, with the family about to be dispossessed from their home, having lost all their money and hope, and Vic, the father, shot in the back by the police for resisting the eviction, Ward introduces an offstage group of black and white supporters who have gathered in solidarity with the family and against the police. Their united voices of protest close the play.[21]

Encouraged by Richard Wright, a friend and associate of the Negro Unit, Ward worked on his play; and on November 5, 1937, Glaspell wrote to Howard Miller, Deputy National Director of the FTP, asking permission to produce it. It was the type of play she admired: drawing its inspiration from inequities in the society, while presenting the possibility of change, if people across racial and political lines unite; a theme many of her own works and those of other Provincetown Players embraced. Eventually, Glaspell's request came to Flanagan, who also admired the work, but feared that its perceived Communist ending would be a clear red flag to a Congress already wary of the theatre project on precisely these grounds. Glaspell—who had experienced similar threats of censure leveled at the Players during the Red Scare, following World War 1, when the fear of Communism was rampant in America—was unfazed by the criticism and unflagging in her support of Ward's play, and applauded its ending.

Shirley Graham, of the Negro Play Unit, also applauded the play and was anxious to see it presented, particularly to the large black community in Chicago, whom she believed would embrace it. However, as Rena Fraden suggests, when Graham learned that Kay Ewing, a white director and Flanagan's protégé, was slated to direct the work

20 Theodore Ward, quoted in Michael Attenborough, "My search for the lost voice of black America," *The Guardian*, May 10, 2007.

21 *Id.*, *Big White Fog*, in James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (eds.), *Black Theater, U.S.A,* New York, Free Press, 1974, pp.284-324. See also Nick Hern Books, 2007.

instead of her, Graham withdrew her support. She now argued that Ward's portrayal of a black family was inauthentic and his depiction of characters stereotypic and unflattering to the black community in Chicago, as audience responses to a preview performance indicated.[22] In addition, FTP officials feared that the play might exacerbate racial divisions in the city and even cause riots.

The administrative locus for the ensuing production battle was Glaspell's Playwrights' Bureau to which various FTP officials dispatched memos trying to decide what stand to take in response to this powerful but controversial play. Finally, it was Harry Minturn, acting head of Chicago productions, who approved the production; and *Big White Fog* opened April 7, 1938, in the Great Northern theatre situated in the Loop and designated for FTP experimental productions.[23]

To the surprise of many, during its run it played to an enthusiastic mixed racial audience,

even receiving positive reviews from Chicago reviewers who generally disparaged FTP productions. However, after a successful run of thirty-seven nearly sold-out performances, on May 30, Minturn moved the production from the prestigious Great Northern theatre to a black high school located in the Chicago South Side, explaining that the venue would be more convenient for black audience to reach. Four days later, the play closed for lack of an audience. Flanagan, for her part, heralded the response to the play, shifting the attention away from charges of Communism ("This script carried no political definition," she claimed)[24] to questions of race and historical reactions to Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa Movement." However, Ward believed that the FTP decision to move the play was motivated by fear concerning charges of Communism, and argued, that his ending was advocating "unity, interracial unity. Why do you have to be Communist for that?"[25] Despite the sudden closure of the play, Langston Hughes would call *Big White Fog* "the greatest encompassing play on Negro life that has ever been written. If it isn't liked by people, it is because they are not ready for it, not because it isn't a great play;" and Ralph Ellison would say that it was "like no other Negro play [...] in its three-act attempt to probe the most vital problems of Negro experience."[26] Unfortunately, *Big White Fog* is

22 For details about the controversy, see R. Fraden, *Blueprints...*, *op. cit.*, pp.115-132.

23 See Big White Frog poster.

24 R. Fraden, *Blueprints...*, *op. cit.*, p.143.

25 Quoted in *ibid.*, p.133. Fraden speculates that "the move from an established theatre in the middle of the theatre district to a high school auditorium certainly sends a strong signal that the FTP did not think the play was worthy of a professional production" (*ibid.*, p.143).

26 Both quoted in Kate Dossett, "Staging the Garveyite Home: Black Masculinity, Failure, and Redemption in Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog*," *African American Review*, vol.43, no.4, Winter 2009, p.557.

virtually unknown today, despite its contemporary relevance. There have been only three professional productions since its opening. In 1940, it was produced in Harlem's Lincoln theatre by the Negro Playwrights Company founded by Ward, Paul Robeson and Richard Wright; in 1995 by the Minneapolis Guthrie theatre; and in 2007 at the Almeida theatre in London.[27]

SPIROCHETE

While Glaspell was an early and enthusiastic supporter of Ward's play, she was the instigator of, and collaborator on, a FTP play equally celebrated and controversial: Arnold Sundgaard's Living Newspaper *Spirochete* (**fig. 2**). In October 1937, she and Sundgaard went together to see the FTP production of *The Straw*, an early O'Neill play based on his 1912 hospitalization for tuberculosis at Gaylord's Farm Sanitarium. Walking home afterwards, Glaspell admitted that she found the subject matter a bit dated, since tuberculosis had abated.[28] However, another scourge-like illness was now threatening great numbers of people: syphilis.[29] Why not write a living newspaper play on that subject, she threw out to Sundgaard, who immediately caught the idea.

From the inception of the FTP, Flanagan had envisioned creating living newspapers, similar to those of the Blue Blouse troupes, which she had seen during her two trips to Russia in 1926 and 1930, that employed music, sound effects, comedic routines, physical action, dance, and satire to theatricalize local and national issues for audiences who either could not or did not read newspapers. Although she recognized that the form had many international antecedents, including Aristophanic comedies, commedia dell'arte, Peking Opera, the Berlin Volksbühne theatre, Meyerhold-directed Russian plays, and Eisenstein films, Flanagan argued that the living newspaper "is as American as Walt Disney, The March of Time, and the *Congressional Record*," lest

27 For the 1997 production, see Tad Simons, "Big White Fog Review," *Variety*, October 2, 1995, Guthrie; for the 2007 production, see M. Attenborough, "My Search for the lost voice of black America," art. cit., Almeida.

28 See A. Sundergaard, "Susan Glaspell and the Federal Theatre Revisited," art. cit., p.8.

29 For information on *Spirochete*, and accompanying photographs of productions, see Sarah Guthu, "Living Newpaper: Spriochete," *The Great Depression in Washington State*, Website, 2009. See also John S. O'Connor, "*Spirochete* and the War on Syphilis," *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol.21, no.1, 1977, p.91-98, https://doi.org/10.2307/1145110; M.C. Winter, "Theatre, Infectious Disease, and the 20th Century," MA thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2020; and Libra Jan Cleveland Gysel, "Whisper Out Loud! *Spirochete*, a Living Newspaper, 1937-1939," PhD Dissertation, Virginia Technic Institute and State University, 1989.

2. LOC Poster, *Spirochete*, FTP, Library of Congress

Congressional committees resist importation of foreign art forms. She also emphasized its possibilities: "The living newspaper, factual and formal, musical and acrobatic, abstract and concrete, visual and aural, psychological, economic and social, is a dramatic form in the beginning stage, a form capable of infinite extension."[30]

Glaspell may have seen examples of living newspapers even before her connection with the FTP, since Mike Gold, her friend from her Provincetown Players' days, also part of the FTP, had tried in 1927 to start a workers' theatre in America, using elements of living newspaper theatre, to which he had been exposed in Germany, through the works of Bertolt Brecht and Ernst Toller.[31] She had also heard about, if not seen, the first produced FTP living newspaper, *Triple-A Plowed Under* in March 1936. It was, therefore, not surprising that she suggested the form to Sundgaard (**fig.3**).

3. LOC, Living Newspaper Posters, FTP, Library of Congress

The timing of the play was propitious. In 1936, the Surgeon General of the United States had pressured states to pass legislation requiring mandatory blood tests as a requirement for marriage licenses. Illinois had approved such a law, and the mayor of Chicago, who had veto power over plays presented in his city, supported the project. Spending as much time as he could spare away from his Playwrights' Bureau duties, Sundgaard gathered all available material on the subject of syphilis, much of it published by the United States Health Service, which was in the midst of a nation-

30 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.70. For antecedents of the Living Newspaper in America, see Lynn Mally, "The Americanization of the Soviet Living Newspaper," *Carl Beck Papers in Russia and Eastern European Studies*, no.1903, February 2008, p.1-44.

31 See S. Cosgrove, *The Living Newspaper: History, Production, and Form,* PhD Dissertation, University of Hull, 1982, p.38-39.

wide campaign to raise awareness about the disease that in the 1930s had the stigma that AIDS would acquire fifty years later and would produce strikingly similar plays.[32]

Sundgaard and Glaspell worked closely refining the play, which Sundgaard initially called *Dark Harvest*, out of deference to public sensitivity about even mentioning the disease. However, Harry Minturn, now production head in Chicago, and a strong supporter of the work, challenged the playwright to call it what it was: *Spirochete*. It opened at the Blackstone theatre on April 29, 1938, with the blessing and assistance of the Chicago medical community and the Board of Health, which provided free syphilis testing in the lobby. Flanagan, in her summary of the accomplishments of the entire Federal Theatre program, cites *Spirochete* as an important milestone.[33] What she does not mention is the battle Glaspell waged, not only for the production of the play but also for the right of Sundgaard to retain the copyright. Flanagan argued

that since Sundgaard had written the play while in the employ of the FTP, the work belonged to them, and they did not have to pay him royalties. Glaspell, ever sensitive to writers' rights, sent out numerous letters to various officials, in which she argued that the research might have been done on government time, but the actual writing took place after hours, while Sundgaard continued to serve as a play reader, the position he was paid to execute. With the issue still unsettled, Glaspell wrote directly to Flanagan on April 18, 1938, eleven days before the play was scheduled to open, explaining her position:

> I hope you know how strong is my feeling for the Federal Theatre. I think I have shown it in remaining here for more than a year and a half, giving up my own work from which I make a great deal more, and also weakening my own position, because if you pause too long in the writing world it is a disadvantage to your name. But strong as is my feeling for the Federal Theatre, I think it only right to tell you now that if this matter cannot be arranged with justice to Mr. Sundgaard [...] I shall feel compelled to take it to the immediate attention of the Dramatists' Guild.[34]

Flanagan refused to accept her rationale, and Glaspell—someone who never backed down if a principle was at stake—made good her threat. She brought the matter to the Dramatist Guild, which issued an immediate injunction stating that unless Sundgaard was allowed to keep his copyright for *Spirochete*, the FTP would no longer be allowed

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32 For an example of the connections between *Spirochete* and plays dealing with AIDS, see Terry Ann Swanson, *Theatre Diagnosis Plague: A Study of "Spirochete" and "The Normal Heart"*, PhD Dissertation, San Francisco State University, 2010.

33 See Spirochete poster.

34 Susan Glaspell to Hallie Flanagan, April 8, 1938, National Archive, Washington, DC.

to produce any plays by Guild writers, and that meant a majority of the established playwrights whose plays they produced including Glaspell and O'Neill. Flanagan relented.[35]

The amazing coda to this story is that through the entire furor that went on for some time, Sundgaard, busy with his first produced play, knew nothing of Glaspell's efforts on his behalf. It was not until the late 1990s, when he visited the FTP archives at George Mason University that he came across her correspondence, too late to thank her, since she had died in 1948.

Glaspell won this battle, but her relations with Flanagan may have suffered as a result. On May 1, right after the opening of *Spirochete*, Glaspell officially resigned her position in the FTP[36]. Whether her decision was prompted by added responsibilities funding cutbacks required or her dispute with Flanagan is not certain. On July 15, 1938, when Flanagan attended the yearly meeting of the Midwest group, she enumerated its accomplishments but made no mention of Glaspell. By October, Don Farran, another Iowan, became Head of the Midwest Bureau, replacing Glaspell whom he said resigned because of illness and overwork. In *Arena*, listing the Bureau's accomplishments, Flanagan writes: "Susan Glaspell and later Don Farran stimulated the writing of a number of play of the Midwest." Of the five playwrights she cites—Sundgaard, Marcus Bach, Theodore Ward, George Murray, and David Peltz—Murray and Peltz were never produced and the other three were chosen by Glaspell alone, before Farran took over[37].

By June 1939, the entire FTP went out of business, due to Congress's refusal to renew its appropriation, based partly on their assumption of its Communist leanings denounced by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Martin Dies, who chaired the Committee, also chastised the FTP for presenting immoral plays. One Congressman citing the "suggestive and salacious titles" foisted on the public, asked: "Are the people of this country to be taxed to support such vulgar and villainous activities?" He gave an example of a play whose title he argued was clearly obscene: *Suppressed Desires*,[38] Susan Glaspell's first play written in 1915 with Jig Cook, which parodied the Greenwich Villagers' embrace of Freud. For her eighteen months of work

35 In the production record of Living Newspapers listed in *Arena*, Flanagan has a footnote indicating that all such scripts, with the exception of *Spirochete,* can be produced without payment of royalties to either the authors or the government (H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.391).

36 This may explain why there is no correspondence from Glaspell concerning the move of *Big White Fog* at the end of May.

37 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.266.

38 *Ibid.*, p.355.

for the Federal Theatre, this is the one official government acknowledgement of her participation and Flanagan's third reference to Glaspell in *Arena*. There is a footnote. When Sundgaard, after a long and successful career, died at the age of 96 in 2006, the *New York Times* printed a long obituary. In it the writer, citing *Spirochete*, notes that "mentored by the distinguished writer Susan Glaspell, Mr. Sundgaard wrote a two-act play chronicling the spread of the disease and the search for a cure," a belated acknowledgement of Glaspell's work for the FTP.[39] What still needs to be studied and acknowledged are the many links between the Provincetown Players and the FTP, both, as Glaspell understood, derived from a similar awareness of that pioneer spirit that believed in theatre as a means to explore the rich potential of American theatre and its people.

39 Margalit Fox, "Arnold Sundgaard, Lyricist and Playwright, is Dead at 96," *New York Times*, October 31, 2006.

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NOTICE

Linda Ben-Zvi, Professor emerita Colorado State and Tel Aviv University, was John Stern Distinguished Professor, Colorado; Lady Davis Professor, Hebrew University; Library of Congress and National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow; and twice elected president of the International Samuel Beckett Society. She was Visiting Professor at Waseda and Aoyama Gakuin University, Japan; the University of Trento and Venice International University, Italy; and Doctoral Seminar Professor, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain. Of her thirteen authored and edited books, four are on Beckett and four on Susan Glaspell, including *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times*, winner of the Jury Prize of the American Theatre Library Association.

ABSTRACT

In the winter of 1936, Hallie Flanagan invited Susan Glaspell to head the Midwest Playwrights Bureau of the Federal Theatre Project. Glaspell was an excellent choice: as co-founder of the Provincetown Players, she had first-hand experience administering a theatre company, soliciting and selecting original plays, and encouraging new playwrights. She also brought her reputation as the most prominent woman playwright in America at the time. Her eleven plays written during her Provincetown years (1916-1922) had created new dramatic forms, and her later work *Alison's House* received the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1930. This essay explores Glaspell's work for the FTP, which has received little critical attention, and focuses particularly on her significant support of Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog* and her initiation of and involvement in the production of Arnold Sundgaard's Living Newspaper *Spirochete*, two of the most important and original works staged by the FTP.

Key Words

Susan Glaspell, Federal Theatre Project, Hallie Flanagan, Theodore Ward, *Big White Fog*, Arnold Sundgaard, *Spirochete*

RÉSUMÉ

Durant l'hiver 1936, Harry Flanagan a invité Susan Glaspell à diriger l'antenne du Midwest, dans le cadre du *Federal Theatre Project*. Glaspell était un excellent choix : co-fondatrice du groupe des Provincetown Players, elle possédait l'expérience nécessaire pour gérer et faire vivre une compagnie de théâtre. Le projet allait aussi bénéficier de sa réputation : Glaspell était alors considérée comme la plus importante écrivaine de théâtre de sa génération, aux États-Unis. Avec les onze œuvres écrites durant ses années avec les *Provincetown Players*, entre 1916 et 1922, elle avait initié de nouvelles formes dramatiques. Sa dernière œuvre, *Alison's House*, avait reçu le prix Pulitzer des écrits dramatiques en 1930. Cet article explore le travail de Glaspell au sein du FTP, qui a été peu traité par la critique, et analyse en particulier le soutien apporté par Glaspell à la pièce *Big White Fog*, de Theodore Ward et son implication dans la production majeure d'Arnold Sundgaard, *Spirochete* ; ces pièces incarnant deux des plus importants travaux mis en scène par le FTP.

Mots-clés

Susan Glaspell, *Federal Theatre Project*, Hallie Flanagan, Theodore Ward, *Big White Fog*, Arnold Sundgaard, *Spirochete*

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.

TABLE DES MATIÈRES

QUATRIÈME PARTIE

FIGURES FÉMININES ET PROCESSUS DE LÉGITIMATION

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Collection dirigée par Julie Vatain-Corfdir & Sophie Marchand

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