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Federal Theatre Project : an American people's theatre

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FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT: AN AMERICAN PEOPLE'S THEATRE

A Thesis Presented to
The History Department
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of the Arts

by
Kay Thornton

May 2005

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ABSTRACT

FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT: AN AMERICAN PEOPLE'S THEATRE

by Kay Thornton

This thesis addresses the topic of the Federal Theatre Project and its relation to the American People's Theatres that preceded it. In particular, it examines the role of the American people, as theatre workers, audience, and subject matter in conjunction with these groups of the 1920's and 1930's. This thesis shows first that the FTP would not have existed in the form it did had it not been for the groundwork laid by the earlier workers' theatres. Secondly, this thesis illustrates that the FTP refined these ideas to make its productions available and accessible to all people.

Due to the efforts of the staff at George Mason University, Special Collections, documents from the Federal Theatre collection have been cataloged and made available to the public. In addition, federal and state government agencies, universities, and theatre libraries have collected large amounts of material pertaining to the FTP and its predecessors.

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Introduction

The Federal Theatre Project was the only government-produced theatre in the United States. Even more remarkable, this theatre “company” was the largest the country has ever seen, with up to 185 units in twenty eight states. The final totals included almost one thousand different productions and 63,728 performances to audiences amounting to more than 30,398,726 people.¹ But the most noteworthy aspect of the FTP was its stated focus on people. This characteristic was indicative of that period; the early 1900s were filled with men and women uniting against a system they felt was unjust to those at the lower end of the class structure. Some reacted by joining Marxist or Communist groups. Many joined unions and strikes. Still others formed theatre groups to express their feelings and to rally the masses to their cause. These groups formed such companies as the Workers’ Laboratory Theatre, the Theatre Union, and the Group Theatre, all claiming to be of the People.

For the purposes of this writing, “people” and “theatre” should be defined. “Theatre” is the easier of the two; in this paper, the word refers to a company that performs written plays for a live audience. “People,” on the other hand, is not quite as easy to pin down. In the above paragraph, “people” denotes members of the working class, those of lesser means and lower socio-economic position. That is certainly implied in the word’s usage in earlier People’s, or Workers’, Theatre. However, in reference to the FTP, “people” will include any person who was a part of a larger group of humanity.

¹ A production refers to a play in its entirety, including its full run, while a performance simply indicates a single presentation. Statistics from Tony Buttitta and Barry Witham. Uncle Sam Presents (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1982) 231 and Hallie Flanagan, Arena (New York: Duell, 1940) 435.

This group, the people of “People’s Theatre,” was certainly made in large part by those of the working class, but also by those who were willing to leave class behind to participate in the world of theatre, as company member or audience, for entertainment or education, relief or escape. In short, “people” is defined in the style of Noah Webster- “The mass of ordinary persons: POPULACE.”²

Although these earlier groups were certainly more representative of the “common man” than Broadway companies, only the FTP was a People’s Theatre in all its aspects. These aspects included theatre by people (those who ran it), about people (found in its subject matter), and for people (those who benefited from it). It is the purpose of this paper to look at how the FTP built upon the concepts of the preceding People’s Theatres, but went further to encompass all people, not just those of the working class. Study of non-commercial theatre of the American 1920s and 1930s proves insight into a segment of the population with progressive ideas and the drive to express them. By studying the Federal Theatre Project and those it involved, we can learn about the American people of the Depression, those who were trying to cope with loss, and those who were doing their best to help.

This thesis shows first that the FTP would not have existed in the form it did had it not been for the groundwork laid by the earlier workers’ theatres. Producing such plays as Stevedore and Waiting for Lefty³, these groups introduced Americans to concepts such as “agit-prop” (short for agitation-propaganda) and “Theatre is a weapon” (the slogan of

² “People,” Webster’s II: New Riverside University Dictionary, 1984 ed.

³ Stevedore by Paul Peters has racial prejudice and the unionization of longshoremen as its theme. Waiting for Lefty by Clifford Odets, dealing with the 1934 New York taxi-driver strike, is one of the most renowned pro-Union plays in American theatre history.

the Theatre Union). Marxism, once taught through pamphlets and speeches, soon disseminated its principles from the stage. Although not reaching all people (for obvious reasons, members of wealthier society did not generally patronize Marxist theatre), workers' theatre offered fare created for reasons other than making a profit. Secondly, this thesis illustrates that the FTP took these ideas and refined them to make its productions available and accessible to all people.

Background—Early Twentieth Century

The beginning of the twentieth century in America was marked by major movements and events. Progressivism and the first World War were, perhaps, the most influential in the coming decades. Progressivism, according to historians Arthur Link and Richard McCormick, encompassed “the first comprehensive efforts to grapple with the ills of a modern urban-industrial society.”⁴ From welfare benefits to women's suffrage, the progressives sought to affect reforms in all levels of government and society. US entrance to World War I, unfortunately, curtailed much of the progressive movement. Although Woodrow Wilson's dire prophecy, “Every reform we have won will be lost if we go into this war,” did not come to pass, the movement never regained the momentum it had before the war.⁵

WWI had further indirect influences on American society. One of the members of the Alliance, Russia, was experiencing its own internal difficulties that culminated in

⁴ Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, Progressivism (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davison, 1983) 3.

⁵ qtd. in Link and McCormick 106.

the Bolshevik Revolution, overthrow of its Czarist government, and withdrawal from the war. In simplistic terms, this was an ousting of an established government and its replacement by common people who advocated power to workers and opposed capitalism. The Russian Revolution and consequent dissemination of this social and economic philosophy, whether named Marxism, Bolshevism, or Communism, terrified the champions of capitalism worldwide.

What the Progressives had tried to do for the working class from the top down, the unions tried to do from within. Groups such as the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies) attempted to win rights for workers, such as better pay, better working conditions, and benefits. Although laborers on farms, railroads, and coal mines certainly organized to better their conditions, the early 1900's saw a majority of union activity in industry. As big business and factories took over what had once been the labor of skilled artisans, workers found themselves alienated from their work, mere cogs in the industrial machine. As cogs, they were left without rights and protections. With the support of each other through the unions, as well as prominent citizenry of the Progressives, workers did gain concessions. By 1915, one eighth of the labor force had won a forty-eight hour workweek; half had gained the shorter hours by 1920.⁶ Other improvements for working class life were higher wages and the beginnings of workers' compensation.

These victories were gained, by and large, through strikes, the workers' best way of making their voices heard. Strikes were numerous and varied in their participation and

⁶ Harvey Green, The Uncertainty of Everyday Life: 1915-1945 (New York: Harper Collins 1992) 33.

results. Some ended in bloodshed and defeat, while others gained concessions for their participants. Some even resulted in legislation, although the legislation could be either for or against the workers.

One of the most infamous strikes occurred in 1912, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, when state legislature enacted a law to cut workers' hours. Employers retaliated by speeding up the looms and cutting pay. Two days later, the IWW led a strike of the mills' thirty thousand workers, half of them girls between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. The IWW organized relief and translated literature and speeches into the languages of the various immigrants involved. Strikers set up massive picket lines and parades. Mill owners and government officials responded with force, including a declaration of martial law and a ban on public meetings. When New York socialists became concerned for the strikers' children, they arranged to transport the children out of town. The exodus of the children created such a large amount of sympathy for the strikers that the Lawrence authorities announced that the children would no longer be allowed to leave. Two days later, a group from Philadelphia arrived to remove more of the children. Police surrounded the group, indiscriminately beating the women and children, before throwing them in a military truck. Soon, public opinion across the country turned against the employers who were forced to capitulate to the strikers.⁷

⁷ Nelson Lichtenstein, Susan Strasser, and Roy Rosenzweig, Who Built America: Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society, vol. 2 (New York: Worth, 2000) 230-31.

Chapter 1: Early Workers' Theatres

The need for entertainment oriented toward working-class Americans was a central concern of workers' theatre, regardless of the other political agendas it promoted.⁸

Colette A. Hyman

Paterson Silk Strike Pageant

Not all strikes were resolved in favor of the workers. On January 27, 1913, in Paterson, New Jersey, 800 workers at a silk mill staged a massive walkout.⁹ They were soon joined by other workers in different mills throughout the city, so that by February, nearly 300 mills and dye factories were stopped and approximately 24,000 men, women, and children had joined the industry-wide strike. The IWW came in to help organize and mobilize the strikers.¹⁰ Many of the Paterson employees were immigrants, but many were not. The mill bosses exploited the ethnic differences by making deals with the English-speaking workers on a shop-by-shop basis, thus collapsing the seven-month strike.¹¹

This would have been simply another failed strike in the annals of U.S. labor history but for the event that took place in New York in early June of that year. Due to the efforts of both the IWW and some Greenwich Village dramatists, the Provincetown

⁸ Colette A. Hyman, Staging Strikes: Workers' Theatre and the American Labor Movement (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1997) 116.

⁹ This was not the first strike in Paterson. In July of 1835, children went on strike for an eleven-hour day, six-day workweek. Allen Lutins, "An Eclectic List of Events in U.S. Labor History," 19 Aug. 2002, 23 Jan. 2004 <<http://www.lutins.org/labor.html>>.

¹⁰ "Reading 2: Strike!" Adapted from James Sheire, Pietro Botto House (Passaic County, NJ) National Historic Landmark Documentation (Washington: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1982), Teaching With Historic Places Lesson Plans: Paterson, New Jersey: America's Silk City, 28 May 2003, National Park Service, 23 Jan. 2004 <<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/102paterson/102facts2.htm>>.

¹¹ Lichtenstein, Strasser, and Rosenzweig 232.

Players, the events of the strike were turned into a grand pageant, performed by over one thousand of the original strikers.¹² What is significant about this pageant was that for the first time, New York's intellectuals were linked to the organized working class. The result was not constructive in this instance (no money from the performance ever reached the strike fund, and during rehearsals scabs were able to break the picket line), but it did provide the groundwork for future collaboration and support between the two groups.¹³ By bringing these two otherwise disparate groups together, cause and art were united into a formidable front.

Directed by John Reed (who would later write a firsthand account of the Russian Revolution in Ten Days that Shook the World), the pageant combined a re-staging of strike events with speeches by IWW leaders and songs such as "The Internationale" and "The Marseilles."¹⁴ The pageant was divided into six episodes. The first, "The Mill Alive-The Workers Dead," began with 1,200 people, from the elderly to small children, tramping disparately into the old Madison Square Garden, with nothing but a simple but huge backdrop hung to represent the silk mill. According to the New York Herald Tribune, "Their mutterings of discontent were soon merged in the whirl of the looms as the whistle blew and the day's work was on."¹⁵ Episode Two, entitled "The Mills Dead - The Workers Alive," was a staging of the walkout. Workers defiantly rushed from the mill to picket in front of the now silent looms. The "actors" invited the audience to join

¹² Hyman 11.

¹³ Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl, and Stuart Cosgrove, Theatres of the Left, 1880-1935 (London: Routledge, 1985) 265.

¹⁴ Linda Nochlin, "The Paterson Strike Pageant of 1913," Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980, ed. Bruce A. McConachie and Daniel Friedman (Westport: Greenwood, 1985) 87-88.

¹⁵ "Strike Realism Staged in Pageant," New York Herald Tribune 8 June 1913: 3.

them in singing “The Marseilles.” Police (still actors) then arrived and brutalized the workers. As anger was escalated, many strikers were clubbed and arrested, and hired detectives began to shoot into the crowd. At the close of the scene, Victor Modestino, neither a striker nor a mill worker, was shot and killed from his porch, where he stood with one of his children in his arms.

Episode Three reenacted Modestino’s funeral, complete with a processional of his coffin. The emotions of the actors were felt by the thousands of audience and sympathizers, who reportedly reacted with moans and groans and sobs. Carlo Tresca, one of the IWW organizers, then appeared to deliver the same “Blood for Blood” speech that originally got him jailed in Paterson. A mass meeting was the subject of Episode Four that included speeches by more IWW leaders and songs composed by strikers, in which the audience was again invited to join.

Episode Five was a staging of the May Day Parade. This episode portrayed the handing over of the strike children, dressed in red, to “strike mothers” from other cities, and featured a speech by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. The final episode was the strike meeting in which the strikers organized and passed legislation for themselves, including a law for an eight-hour day. Speeches again were made by IWW organizers.¹⁶

In this form of People’s Theatre, the element of theatricality was at its simplest and least subtle. By using strike participants as well as actors, the emotions portrayed were as honest and true as possible. With the exception of the one backdrop and Modestino’s coffin, there were no sets or props, and the costuming came from the

¹⁶ “Strike Realism” 1-4.

players' own closets. In the space of three weeks, John Reed put together a performance that reached an estimated audience of 15,000 people for the sole purpose of propaganda representing class conflict from the workers' point of view. Although the pageant did not seem to affect the strike directly, it did bring national attention to the plight of the workers and paved the way for future collaboration between labor and art.

Workers' Drama League and New Playwrights' Theatre

It was not until several years later that this collaboration came into fruition. In the intervening years, there had been many amateur theatre groups formed in reaction to the economic problems of the period. Since the 1920's were a prosperous time for most Americans, economic problems tended to belong to the working class. Influenced by the Russian Revolution of 1918 and consequent rise of the Communists, economic hardship led to a theatre movement made mostly of workers. Some of these small groups were organized by Communists or Socialists, although most were not affiliated with any party but simply had sympathies to the Left.¹⁷

In May of 1926, the short-lived Workers' Drama League proclaimed itself to be the "first workers' theatre in America."¹⁸ It was formed by a group of intellectuals, including John Howard Lawson and Jasper Deeter, and organized by Michael Gold. For the most part, this group did short sketches involving group chants and calls for better conditions for workers. Their first sketch, Strike, was written by Gold after he had been

¹⁷ Jay Williams, Stage Left (New York: Scribner's, 1974) 33.

¹⁸ Hyman 12.

to Europe and seen the propaganda plays performed in Russia and Germany.¹⁹ Their only full-length play to receive any critical attention was a translation of the German satire, by Karl Wittfogel, The Biggest Boob in the World.²⁰

In 1927, Gold and Lawson tried again with the New Playwrights' Theatre, financed initially by Otto Kahn. Their opening salvo was The Loudspeaker by Lawson, a farce on politics.²¹ The NPT saw itself as "mirroring the color and tone of life around us [and] crystallizing rebellion."²² They consequently lowered their ticket prices to appeal to working class audiences. Unfortunately, most of the audience it did draw was made up of middle-class sympathizers, and as such, was preaching to the choir. After producing three seasons, which saw plays such as Processional, Earth, The Belt, and Singing Jailbirds (running for seventy nine performances, it was the NPT's only real hit), the New Playwrights' Theatre closed. Its failure was due to many causes, including difficulties with theatre size and artistic temperament.²³ However, as noted by member John Dos Passos, "the fact that [the New Playwrights] existed makes the next attempt in the same direction that much easier."²⁴

¹⁹ Williams 34.

²⁰ Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres for Old (New York: Dutton, 1940) 400.

²¹ Gorelick 400.

²² Hyman 18.

²³ Even a good play can fail if the theatre is wrong. A play intended to be intimate is lost on a large stage, just as a large show is cramped on a small one.

²⁴ John Dos Passos, "Did the New Playwrights' Theatre Fail?" New Masses Aug. 1929: 13, qtd. in Hyman 27.

Prolet-Bühne

In 1925, the German group Arbeiterbund, or Workers Club, was formed, with the Prolet-Bühne, or Proletarian Stage, as its dramatic section. Three years later, the Prolet-Bühne became an independent group under the direction of German émigré John Bonn and his wife Anne Howe.²⁵ At that time, the arrival of new immigrants from Germany introduced the style of agit-prop to the group.²⁶ Agit-prop, short for agitation-propaganda, is a style of theatre that is simple, repetitive, and intended to include the audience in an emotional appeal. The message of the play was invariably political or social change. The Prolet-Bühne has been accused, by historians such as Morgan Himelstein, of being a tool of the Communist Party, a “theatrical dragon to devour capitalism,” which nonetheless failed to change “the theatre or the world.”²⁷ However, as pointed out by Jay Williams, “The idea of Broadway being invaded and conquered by bands of thespian Reds is as deliciously improbable as imagining Mae West ravished by a Cub Scout.”²⁸ Although the Prolet-Bühne did produce plays that denounced capitalism and praised the Soviet system, at that time it seemed that Communism could right many of the wrongs that were taking place in the U.S. It should also be noted that the Prolet-Bühne was a German group, not a Russian one.

This group traveled to strike sites and picket lines, and performed at workers’ meetings. In April of 1930, it began to perform outside of the German immigrant

²⁵ Williams 36.

²⁶ Bruce A. McConachie and Daniel Friedman, eds., Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980 (Westport: Greenwood, 1985) 113.

²⁷ Morgan Y. Himelstein, Drama Was a Weapon: The Left-Wing Theatre in New York, 1929-1941 (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1963) 9.

²⁸ Williams 33.

community.²⁹ The plays were performed with very little scenery, simple, symbolic costumes, and in whatever space they found themselves in - stage, platform, floor, or street. The scripts were crude and full of labor clichés.³⁰ The purpose of the Prolet-Bühne, according to Bonn, was “the theatre of the class struggle. Its only purpose is reflecting (dramatizing) the class struggle, and promoting (propagandizing) the class struggle. Its only audiences are the masses of the workers. Workers’ theatre is for the exploited, bourgeois theatre is for the exploiters.”³¹ As such, Bonn felt that agit-prop was the only theatrical form that should be used.

They did, however, cover a wide range of subjects. The 15 Minute Red Revue of 1932 was a six-part revue that called the proletariat to revolt against the injustice of the capitalists. It called to its audience,

Comrades, workers, listen, stop-
Prolet-Bühne agit-prop.

Agitprop- against hunger and destitution-
Agitprop- theatre of revolution-

Agitprop- and the bosses quake with fear-
Agitprop- for the workers’ day is near.³²

Art Is a Weapon, written in 1931, also pitted the worker against the capitalist, the chanted dialogue an argument over the use of theatre and art. The Capitalist claims that-

ART is a weapon in the fight for my interests.

The workers, however, contend that-

²⁹ McConachie and Friedman 113.

³⁰ Ben Blake, qtd. in Gorelik 401.

³¹ Workers Theatre, 1931, qtd. in Williams 37.

³² qtd. in Himmelstein 12.

\ Art is a weapon
 theatre is a weapon
 Workers' Theatre is a weapon
 Workers' Theatre is a weapon in the class struggle.
 A weapon in the class struggle.

The Capitalist then says that Art is above the “daily routine, above politics, above party strife. Art is the expression of our yearning for beauty and harmony,” to which the workers counter that it is a yearning, not for beauty, but-

 yearning of slaves (for) freedom
 yearning of the hungry for bread
 yearning of the homeless for shelter
 yearning of the persecuted for rest
 yearning of the unemployed for work
 yearning of the victims of capitalist brutality for
 justice
 yearning of the mistreated negroes for equality
 yearning of the suppressed class for the abolition of all
 classes
 yearning of the rebellious for the final conflict
 art is a weapon
 theatre is a weapon
 theatre is a weapon in the class struggle.³³

A third play was Scottsboro, about the discrimination against nine black youths who were tried, convicted, and executed for the rape of two white girls, despite inadequate evidence. Members of the Prolet-Bühne lined up to speak-

2: And the sun gleams
3: on the gay Sunday clothes
4: of the wives and children...
5: The children with flags-
6: and the men with guns...
3: and everyone is shouting-
All: (*shouting*) Lynch! Lynch! Lynch! ...

³³ Description of and lyrics to Art Is a Weapon (1931), qtd. in Eric Trumbull, “The Workers’ Theatre Movement,” Dogwood Project, 1998-2001, Northern Virginia Community College, 20 Feb. 2004 <<http://novaonline.nv.cc.va.us/eli/spd130et/federaltheatre-dogwood1.htm#artis>>.

3: Eugene Williams, 13 years old. Sentence-
All: Death!
3: Ozie Powell, 14 years old. Sentence-
All: Death! ...³⁴

Workers' Laboratory Theatre

At the same time that the Prolet-Bühne was moving out of the German community, The Workers' Laboratory Theatre emerged as an English language agit-prop theatre. The troupe was first adopted by the Communist Party affiliated Workers' International Relief, for whom it did sketches in exchange for rehearsal space.³⁵ It performed these sketches at WIR meetings between 1928 and 1930. By 1931, the WLT was performing English translations of Prolet-Bühne plays, such as Tempo, Tempo and Art is a Weapon. Beginning in 1932, however, it began to develop its own style and write its own plays. Part of its individual identity was the development of two different sections in 1933, the Shock Troupe and the Evening Section. The latter was a group of approximately fifty people who went to jobs or school during the day and did theatre at night, who supported the Shock Troupe. The Shock Troupe was between twelve and eighteen people who devoted themselves to theatre full time and performed as often as possible and whenever called.³⁶

The WLT was the largest and most influential of the early People's Theatre groups. In the beginning, it had a repertoire of nearly a dozen pieces, including the Prolet-Bühne's Scottsboro, comedies like Charity and The Sell-Out, serious playlets such

³⁴ Williams 48.

³⁵ Williams 41.

³⁶ Douglas McDermott, "The Workers' Laboratory Theatre: Archetype and Example," qtd. in McConachie and Friedman 124.

as The Big Fight, and even vaudeville collections like The Side Show. Both groups were booked often by local unions, fraternal organizations, and progressive groups, for which there would be a small booking fee, the main source of income for the WLT. The Shock Troupe also did free performances for the Unemployed Councils and strikes, for which it was always on call.³⁷

By 1934, the WLT had garnered enough stature, through winning competitions and forming a loyal audience, that the unevenness of its beginning years had smoothed out. The groups to hire the WLT were no longer allowed to keep the troupe longer than promised. Fees, too, were more consistent; groups had to pay a deposit and paid according to the length and composition of the performance. The actors of the WLT also worked to improve their skills by taking more classes, from dance and fencing to elocution and acting, often taught by members of the Group Theatre.³⁸

Although the WLT was associated with the Communist Party, as many of the actors were members, no one really saw the group as Communist Theatre.³⁹ Despite this, the company performed plays that portrayed women in typical CP fashion - the division of work and family was divided sharply along gender lines. For example, in The Miners Are Striking, the character “Worker” is a man who attacks the Capitalist for poor working conditions, while “woman” discusses the poor living conditions in the home. In Tempo, Tempo (adapted from the Prolet-Bühne) characters are defined as “worker,” who

³⁷ Williams 79.

³⁸ Williams 153.

³⁹ Trumbull chap. 2.

are all male and remain workers throughout the play, and “woman worker,” who reverts to simply a woman when not at work.⁴⁰

Despite this inattention to a large part of the working class, the WLT, like the Prolet-Bühne, had a large variety of subjects in a large variety of styles. For instance, songs were added to Charity and the title turned to Sweet Charity (no relation to the 1966 Broadway musical of the same name). It was so popular that the WLT printed and sold copies of the lyrics each night to audiences walking out singing the finale:

Do you want milk for your hungry babies
Without any ifs or buts or maybes?
Join the militant workers!
Do you share with us our firm belief
That the unemployed should get relief?
Join the militant workers!⁴¹

In 1933, they produced Who’s Got the Baloney? for New York’s municipal elections:

In our little voting machine
We go up, up like a feather.
In our little voting machine
We will all be elected together.⁴²

In the summer of the same year, the WLT undertook its most elaborate mobile production, World Fair, coinciding with that year’s World’s Fair in Chicago. The show featured exhibits such as the “Rogues Gallery” of New Dealers; the “House of Culture,” a backdrop of the Rockefeller Center; the “House of Morgan,” featuring a confusion of stock market buyers and sellers; and the “House of Agriculture,” with “The Song of the

⁴⁰ Hyman 64.

⁴¹ Williams 88.

⁴² Williams 88.

Landowners and the Bankers” to the tune of “Old MacDonald Had a Farm.” The show unkindly compared business and political leaders to the cheap entertainment found at fairs and amusement parks. It further provided a criticism of the Chicago’s World Fair as obscuring the important issues of the day.⁴³

The WLT’s most well known piece was a production entitled Newsboy. It was originally a short poem by V. J. Jerome, the CP’s cultural guru. The simple plot was that the press concealed society’s corruption with gossip, lies, and trivia. The poem was then transformed, first into an agit-prop piece, and then into a more complex work inspired by the montage techniques of Serge Eisenstein.⁴⁴ The result was a fifteen minute sketch that portrayed the desperation of the poor, the insensitivity of the bourgeoisie, and racism, all covered with the veneer of news items such as “Love nest raided on Park Avenue,” “Marlene Dietrich insures legs for \$50,000!,” and “Yanks take Dodgers 3-0.”

Inspired by the Group Theatre’s production of Waiting for Lefty (to be discussed in Chapter Four), in 1935 the WLT tried its hand at a full-length play. The Young Go First, was a dramatization of life in the Civilian Conservation Corps, written by Arthur Vogel and members of the Company. For the occasion, the Shock Troupe renamed itself the Theatre of Action. Although it played for forty-eight performances, The Young Go First failed due to criticism of its script.⁴⁵ As a result, the WLT slowly collapsed. First, the Evening Troupe disbanded in order not to place an economic burden on the performers. The Shock Troupe continued to play its shorter productions for some time,

⁴³ Hyman 88.

⁴⁴ Eisenstein was a Russian filmmaker whose technique of putting together many images to form a central idea influenced generations of cinematographers. His best-known films are Battleship Potemkin and October.

⁴⁵ Williams 168.

working itself out of debt by 1936. Soon, though, the Troupe was absorbed into the Federal Theatre Project as the One-Act Experimental Theatre, gave a single bill of short plays, and ceased to exist.⁴⁶ The members were then moved to other FTP units within New York City.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ A bill is one evening's performance of a number of shorter works.

⁴⁷ McDermott, qtd. in McConachie and Friedman 125.

Chapter 2: The Theatre Union

We produce plays that deal boldly with the deep-going social conflicts, the economic, emotional, and cultural problems that confront the majority of the people. Our plays speak directly to this majority, whose lives usually are caricatured or ignored on the stage. We do not expect that these plays fall into accepted social pattern. This is a new kind of professional theatre, based on the interests and hopes of the great mass of working people.⁴⁸

Theatre Union Manifesto

Thus was the manifesto of America's first professional, socialist theatre company, the Theatre Union. Although it only produced seven plays in four short seasons, Theatre Union was what theatre designer Mordecai Gorelik calls the next "step forward in the almost biological process of growth from 'social significance' to art."⁴⁹ Unlike its predecessors, this company sought well-written plays and used the talents of professional theatre people. According to Gerald Rabkin, these predecessors, the amateur communist theatres, were necessary for Theatre Union's inception. Stimulated by the growing despair of the Depression, many people found themselves united to give voice to the needs of the working class. This unity was also found in the Popular Front, a social and political coalition of Communists, Socialists, Marxists, and fellow travelers who formed an alliance against the common foes of fascism, war, and censorship. This relaxing of strict party lines benefited Theatre Union in that it was able to use the professional talents of those not members of one of the Parties.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ qtd. in Gerald Rabkin, Drama and Commitment: Politics in the American Theatre of the Thirties (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1964) 45.

⁴⁹ Gorelik 403.

⁵⁰ Rabkin 46.

Further, because the productions were not written under the auspices of one Party or another, they appealed to a wider audience than the previous workers' theatres. Indeed, it was a main purpose of Theatre Union to create a new and diverse audience that at once sympathized with the working class and deserved professional theatre. Paul Peters, one of Theatre Union's playwrights, wrote that their goal was

To produce plays that reflect the lives and discuss the problems of the majority of Americans - the working class people; to produce on a professional scale but at low prices...and to organize its potential audience, which includes regular playgoers as well as thousands of people who cannot afford and do not patronize the Broadway theatre.⁵¹

It was mostly this latter group that Theatre Union appealed to, as the Broadway audience disposed to attend social plays was comparatively small.

However, Theatre Union did use two methods that successfully brought audiences to the theatre. The first was to sell discounted blocks of tickets to groups that could then sell the tickets at a regular price for the profit of their group. And, although some of the groups included the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, other organizations were as diverse as the Dentists' Wives Society, the Flatbush Culture Club, the Bryn Mawr Alumni Association, a synagogue, the Followers of Nature, and at least one fraternity.⁵²

Theatre Union was also the first professional theatre company in the United States to sell tickets to blacks for any seat in the house. Although there were no actual segregation laws for theatres in New York, no commercial theatre would sell an orchestra seat to a black person, thus relegating them to the far balcony. Theatre Union not only sat blacks prominently in the orchestra, but also refused to sell a ticket to a white person

⁵¹ Williams 110.

⁵² Hyman 51; Rabkin 51.

who complained.⁵³ And, just as black audience members were treated with equality, black actors were given the same respect backstage. They were given the same pay, shared dressing rooms with white actors, and were given the same respect by the directors and executive board.⁵⁴

Ticket prices were also kept extremely low to make welcome working class audiences. And these audiences did come to see the plays; some came who did not even know the meaning of the term “play” (foreshadowing the Federal Theatre Project). At intermission of each performance there was a curtain speech asking for contributions from the audience to pay for the unemployed and tickets were always given to the Unemployed Councils, whether any money had come in or not.⁵⁵

Thus, one of the goals of Theatre Union was accomplished, that of bringing professional theatre to those who could not afford Broadway prices. However, there was still the question of producing actual Broadway-quality plays. Because Theatre Union was run by an executive board, all scripts had to be stringently checked and re-checked for not just box office potential, but also ideological suitability. A play to be considered was first read by the play-reading department. If found to have potential, it was passed to the executive board, where it had to be unanimously approved. The play was then given several readings and only then was the author sent to the playwriting committee to work with it to revise the script into one that fitted with company ideologies. The play also had to receive the approval of a worker in the field with which the play dealt, if needed.⁵⁶ If

⁵³ Wendy Smith, Real Life Drama (New York: Knopf, 1990) 156.

⁵⁴ Williams 115.

⁵⁵ Williams 117-18.

⁵⁶ Rabkin 53-54.

the author refused this “help” from the committee, asserting “too much individualism,” the script was rejected, regardless of its merits. It is, therefore, not surprising that, with the exception of John Howard Lawson’s Marching Song, the only original plays produced were written by the playwriting committee members.⁵⁷

George Sklar and Albert Maltz were such committee members who wrote that they wanted “to produce plays about the working class, written from the point of view of the working class.”⁵⁸ They wrote the first TU production, Peace on Earth. Its subject was a professor who crosses class lines to criticize the handling of a longshoreman strike, and is ultimately executed for a crime he did not commit. Although the press was not complimentary, audiences seemed to love it, giving it a run of sixteen weeks. One woman bought a block of seats every Friday and brought a different group of friends each week.⁵⁹

However, this first production was indicative the entire life of Theatre Union. Although it met with popular success, it did not meet with financial success. As Himelstein jeers, “the financial failure was caused by the fact that a large part of the cheering audience had been given free seats.”⁶⁰ The “financial failure” was not that simple. While there is truth in the fact that free seats do not contribute to success in the box office, there were other factors. Peace on Earth had a cast of forty, which the Theatre Union had hoped to cast with one half Equity (the actors’ union) actors, and one half amateurs from the workers’ theatre movement. However, Equity proclaimed that since

⁵⁷ Sam Smiley, The Drama of Attack: Didactic Plays of the American Depression (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1972) 46.

⁵⁸ Sklar and Maltz, qtd. in Rabkin 45.

⁵⁹ Williams 113-14.

⁶⁰ Himelstein 59.

the TU wanted to be a professional company, it must use a full professional cast. Even paying the flat Equity minimum to all actors was costly. The company tried to supplement the actors' wages with a profit-sharing program, but there were never any profits to share.⁶¹

The next play, and the most successful one, was *Stevedore*, written by Paul Peters and George Sklar. It is the story of a black longshoreman who is framed for raping a white woman because he is a militant union agitator. He escapes at first, but his run from the police eventually incites a race riot in which the hero gets shot, but the black workers are joined by their white co-workers in the final scene. In this case, the press was as fond of the play as the audience, if not as enthusiastic. Brooks Atkinson, chief drama critic for the New York Times, called it a "sound, mettlesome piece of writing" that came into the theatre, "bursting with vitality." He further wrote, "Although it has propaganda implications, it does not hamstring its characters with classroom ideas."⁶²

Audience members, however, were wholehearted fans. Blacks and whites, mixed together in the audience, raucously cheered for the heroes and booed the villains. In fact, in the final scene of one performance, an audience member jumped up from the second row of the orchestra with a shout of "Let's get 'em!" and joined in the brawl on stage. This man turned out to be Bill "Bojangles" Robinson.⁶³ This connection between performers and audience caused reviewers, despite their opinions of the play's politics, to

⁶¹ Williams 112-18. In addition to the issue with the actors' union, the stagehands union refused to allow a flat minimum to all workers, but insisted that proper scale be paid. It is ironic that Theatre Union was on the side of workers and unions, but was put in a bind by these two.

⁶² "Stevedore," Brooks Atkinson, New York Times 19 Apr. 1934.

⁶³ Williams 116-17. Other celebrities had opinions about this play. Groucho Marx, withholding his usual wisecracks, acknowledged the plight of Blacks in the South and said of *Stevedore*, "It's without question the best propaganda play I've seen in my whole life" (qtd. in Williams 117).

note that it was not a play, but an “emotional experience” (New York Sun) and represented “a righteous cause pushing its big black fist at last up out of the ooze of defeatism and servility” (New York American).⁶⁴ According to Gerald Rabkin, Stevedore’s success was because “it appealed on the most primitive dramatic level.”⁶⁵ For an audience with no previous live theatre experience, abstract concepts would be difficult to comprehend and therefore of little attraction. Stevedore ran for 23 weeks.

The remaining five plays did not fare as well as the first two, although there were some high points. Black Pit, by Maltz, told the story of a former union member who, after being released from jail, is forced to inform on union activities to support his pregnant wife and disabled brother-in-law. Many labor activists were dismayed at Theatre Union’s choice to present what should have been simply a stool pigeon as a tragic character.⁶⁶ Sailors of Cattaro fared much better. It was written by Friedrich Wolf, translated and revised by Peters and Keene Wallis, and dealt with the mutiny of an Austrian battleship crew at the end of World War I. Himmelstein missed the point when he sneered that the author “was unable to hide the historical fact of defeat. Nor could the director hide this fact.”⁶⁷ The defeat, in fact, was the point, as it was the conclusion of the conflict between the need for autocratic leadership and the desire for democratic decision. The author used the play to demonstrate Lenin’s statement, “you can’t play

⁶⁴ Hyman 56-57.

⁶⁵ Rabkin 59.

⁶⁶ Smith 216.

⁶⁷ Himmelstein 61.

with revolution. Once it starts you've got to follow it through to the end."⁶⁸ It ran for 96 performances to critical applause, if not the same passion as Stevedore.

Bertolt Brecht's Mother was another seeming compromise, but of dramatic technique. Instead of presenting the play in Brechtian terms, including divorcing the characters from the actors, the directors attempted to make it more realistic to connect to the audience. *Mother* wavered between the two styles and succeeded in neither.⁶⁹ Bitter Stream, adapted from an Italian novel by Ignazio Silone, was about Italian fascism. Although the play itself was received well, internal difficulties, including a change of directors, two brand-new costumers, and debt left from Mother, made it financially untenable beyond sixty-one performances.⁷⁰ John Howard Lawson's Marching Song was an intellectual's version of what a proletarian drama ought to be. Although all the proper devices were present, it was devoid of the emotion needed to appeal to the masses it intended to represent.⁷¹ Both critics and supporters of Theatre Union agree that it was an overloaded drama with heavy-handed dialogue.⁷²

Seven plays, some of them quite good, some of them even popular, should not equal a failed company. What, then, went wrong for Theatre Union? The most obvious culprit was money, or, rather, a lack of it. Theatre is an expensive venture.⁷³ Theatre Union had a limited number of backers, including Hammond Organ heir John Henry

⁶⁸ Friedrich Wolf, Sailors of Cattaro (New York, 1935) iii, qtd. in Rabkin 61.

⁶⁹ For a more complete definition of Brechtian theatre, read chapter 20 of Marvin Carlson, Theories of the Theatre (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984).

⁷⁰ Williams 194. Because the play was never published, there is no modern criticism of the play itself.

⁷¹ Rabkin 160.

⁷² Himmelstein 70-71.

⁷³ Just ask anyone who has ever been involved with it.

Hammond, Jr., but backers generally only provide capital enough to begin.⁷⁴ Most finances had to come from ticket revenue, but Theatre Union insisted upon low ticket prices, thus occasioning one of several contradictions that felled the company.

The executive board was another blessing and curse. Because this was a Popular Front organization, the board was made up of many different affiliations, including Communists, Socialists, and the American Workers' Party.⁷⁵ Although this was "a nice balance of left-wing opinion," it left little room for theatrical genius.⁷⁶ The committee was also appropriate in the spirit of the Collective, but theatre, at times, needs individual leadership to make quick and firm decisions.

Outside politics, too, had an effect on the company. Many supporters of socialism were otherwise more conventional in their ideologies, but had participated in Party functions, including theatre, due to disgust with current American politics. But, with the change in national leadership in 1932, drama historian Harold Rabkin writes, "liberals who had taken a plague-on-both-your-houses attitude toward the major political parties found that they could, after all, find virtue in the Roosevelt administration."⁷⁷ A side effect of the Roosevelt administration was the Federal Theatre Project, which, as we shall see, operated with some similar ideology, but with the addition of a financial backer.

Even the ideology of Theatre Union was problematic. The plays it produced were an attempt to present the workers' point of view, but, according to Rabkin, were never

⁷⁴ Williams 110.

⁷⁵ Hyman 45.

⁷⁶ Williams 118.

⁷⁷ Rabkin 66.

actually that of any significant portion of the American working class.⁷⁸ Although Theatre Union went to great lengths to provide accuracy in its portrayal of workers, i.e. the interminable play selection process, these plays were not necessarily what the workers wanted to see. As Himelstein points out, “professionalism was not the sole lure of commercial theatre and. . . low admission scale was not the only attraction of motion pictures.”⁷⁹

However, even though Theatre Union did not last, it was an important link in the chain of People’s Theatres. For the first time production values had been added to working-class plays, making them more than simple agit-prop sketches.⁸⁰ The earlier theatre companies, the WLT and the Prolet Bühne, played to audiences of like ideologies. These companies also went to their audiences, at strikes and rallies, as a means of bolstering morale. Theatre Union, with its diverse politics, sought a diverse audience and attempted to bring this audience to the theatre. And, although it was but a drop in the theatre-going bucket, historian Colette Hyman writes, it proved that, “given affordable prices and content that bore some relevance to their lives, working people would take a prominent place among theatregoers.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ Rabkin 50.

⁷⁹ Himelstein 72. The competition with motion pictures will be discussed in a later chapter.

⁸⁰ Production values refer to lighting, sets, costumes, acting technique, etc.

⁸¹ Hyman 52.

Chapter 3: The Group Theatre

As a social theatre of the thirties, the Group took its place between those organizations like the Theatre Union, which offered nothing but socially meaningful plays, and those like the Federal Theatre and the Theatre Guild, which presented social drama as a small part of their broader repertoires.⁸²

Morgan Himmelstein

The Group Theatre was different from the other non-Broadway companies. While it did produce plays of social relevance, revolution was neither the goal of its directors, nor the theme of most of the plays it produced. Instead, as founder Harold Clurman (with co-founders Lee Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford) wrote, “the development of playwrights, actors, repertory, and the rest are important only as they lead to. . . an active consciousness of a common way of looking at and dealing with life.”⁸³ The Group Theatre was first an acting company, dedicated to find a new way of performing and producing plays. It was more of a theatre movement than a social movement, adopting a tenet of three basic ideas of what theatre should be- 1) theatre as art, 2) theatre as a collective, and 3) theatre as communion.⁸⁴ The company was set up as a membership corporation; power was in the hands of the director who was, however, subject to recall by the members.⁸⁵ The Group, then, was a People’s Theatre, with an emphasis on *by* the people.

⁸² Himmelstein 179.

⁸³ Harold Clurman, The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre and the Thirties (New York: Harcourt, 1975) 72.

⁸⁴ Rabkin 72.

⁸⁵ Gorelik 43, note 9.

The Group Theatre began in November of 1930 when Clurman, Crawford, and Strasburg invited members of the acting community to meetings to discuss life and theatre. In the words of Clurman-

If man was to be the measure of all things in our theatre, if life was the starting point, and an effect on life the aim of our effort, then one had to have a point of view in relation to it, one had to define an approach that might be common to all the members of the group.⁸⁶

The meetings, held at first in Clurman's apartment, continued on a weekly basis through May of the following year. By that time, they had outgrown Clurman's and then Crawford's apartments, and were held in a community room provided by a friend of a friend at no charge. Many of the attendees, including Clurman and Crawford, were members of the Theatre Guild. These two, in order to stave off rumors of revolt, petitioned the Guild to be subsidized as a "studio" project. The Guild not only did so, but also agreed to release a play to the Group on which it held an option, allowed the use of two of its lead actors, and gifted \$1,000 towards rehearsal expenses for that summer.⁸⁷

In June, the Group headed out to the hills of Connecticut, to Brookfield Center, for the first of many intensive workshop/rehearsal summers. In those ten weeks, the actors not only rehearsed their first play, House of Connelly by Paul Green, but also learned how to act, move, improvise, and, in general, live together. Classes and rehearsals were held every day, and at night they played together and improvised skits

⁸⁶ Clurman 34.

⁸⁷ Clurman 36.

with each other as audience. They even learned to eat the awful food prepared by the Center's director together.⁸⁸

The House of Connelly opened September 28, 1931 in New York to critical recognition and played for ninety-one performances. The two additional plays of the '31-32 season, 1931 and Night Over Taos, ran for twelve and thirteen performances, respectively.⁸⁹ Despite the initial triumph of Connelly, the season was not a financial success. In addition, at the end of this inaugural season, the Theatre Guild ended its connection to the Group.⁹⁰ At the end of the season, the company had no contracts and many of the actors had no jobs. Despite a rough start, the members of the Group stuck together because of their commitment to each other and their new, cooperative form of theatre.⁹¹

During their second workshop summer (held, this time, at Dover Furnace, New York), the Group's interest turned towards issues of political, social, and economic import, which were, as Clurman remembered, "like a fever running through our camp."⁹² However, it was not until the '34-35 season that the Group made its biggest hit in the realm of social plays with Clifford Odets' Waiting for Lefty. This play quickly became the dramatic anthem of the labor movement of the Thirties. Staged in seven short vignettes, Lefty gives examples of the wealthy class' attempts to keep the working class from organizing. At the end of the play, a group of taxi drivers learn that their leader,

⁸⁸ Smith 35.

⁸⁹ Weldon B. Durham, ed. American Theatre Companies, 1931-1986. (New York: Greenwood, 1989) 271.

⁹⁰ Durham 271. Cheryl Crawford resigned her position with the Guild at the same time.

⁹¹ Williams 62-63.

⁹² Clurman 91.

Lefty Costello, has been murdered, and call upon the working class of America to strike.⁹³ Although the plot and characters are simple, Odets was a gifted playwright whose use of language and vernacular crafted a stunning play capable of stirring audiences and readers to this day.

Waiting for Lefty was important for the Group Theatre specifically and Peoples' Theatres in general. The Group gained prestige with both the working class movement and non-working class critics. The play won awards and was performed by other companies throughout the country. It was widely banned. For other companies, it raised the standard of playwrighting and performing.⁹⁴ (Lefty was also important for Odets, who authored seven more plays for the Group, and became an influential American playwright of the Twentieth century.)

Nonetheless, the Group remained a theatre company whose emphasis was on its members, not its audience. Although its choice of plays drew the same audiences as the Theatre Union and the Workers' Laboratory Theatre, the Group saw these people as conventional theatregoers.⁹⁵ The members of the Group, despite their involvement with more radical theatre companies, chose plays which reflected contemporary social values and raised questions related to some of the problems.⁹⁶ According to one of the Group's scenic designers, Mordecai Gorelik, a large number of the plays were built around the theme "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own

⁹³ Clifford Odets, Waiting for Lefty and Other Plays (New York: Grove, 1966) 1-31.

⁹⁴ Williams 149-51. Odets allowed the play to be performed free of royalties by amateur groups and at reduced rates by semi-professional ones. Considering that royalties are often the only means of income for an author, particularly in the Depression this was a generous allowance and spoke of Odets' belief in the importance of his play.

⁹⁵ Hyman 54.

⁹⁶ Rabkin 73.

soul?”⁹⁷ Gorelik continues that the lower middle class audiences did not need this advice not to gain the world, since they were simply interested in holding on to their jobs.

The Group did manage to succeed with its audiences for ten seasons. It had two major successes with Men in White, by Sidney Kingsley, which won the Pulitzer Prize and ran for 351 performances, and Golden Boy, by Clifford Odets, which ran for 250 performances.⁹⁸ It also produced plays that had considerably shorter runs. Others, such as John Howard Lawson’s Success Story, ran for a lengthy period, but had disappointing houses. In such cases, the actors and directors took salary cuts in order to pay the producers and bills. The actors lived communally and helped each other monetarily to keep the company going.⁹⁹

This collective spirit moved the actors to work outside of the Group. Nearly all the actors were interested in workers’ theatre and gave their time to these groups conducting workshops, teaching classes, and supporting their productions. Furthermore, as professional actors, they belonged to Actors’ Equity and agitated within the union for reforms, such as unemployment insurance and old-age pensions.¹⁰⁰ In their excitement, particularly in the early days, the actors continually reaffirmed the belief that what they performed confirmed their faith in man’s ability to ameliorate social evil.¹⁰¹

As with the other theatre companies, money and patronage were not in sufficient supply to keep the Group in business.¹⁰² The company closed after a single production in

⁹⁷ Gorelik 243.

⁹⁸ Durham 272-74.

⁹⁹ Williams 65-66.

¹⁰⁰ Williams 142, 213.

¹⁰¹ Rabkin 91.

¹⁰² Rabkin 91.

its 1940-41 season. By this point, both Crawford and Strasburg had left the company, leaving Clurman as its sole head and main director. The company had also begun to hire actors from outside the Group, bringing in stars for some of the lead roles. At the same time, the Group actors were leaving the company to pursue their own careers. In fact, a problem that vexed the company from early on was, as Williams writes, the pull between company members' "love for everything the Group stood for and their desire to further their own ambitions."¹⁰³ This internal struggle was reflected of many of its plays.

Although the Group has been classified as a "Left" theatre due to its nature as a non-Broadway theatre and its production of Waiting for Lefty, it was not a part of the Left, nor were very many of its members part of the communist party. In fact, while the regular press criticized the Group for its Leftist leanings, the Leftist press criticized that it wasn't Left enough. The Group produced only five plays with an overtly Marxist message, four of which were authored by Clifford Odets. However, of its twenty-four productions, only three or four did not deal with a specific social or political issue and suggest an alternative solution.¹⁰⁴

What was particularly significant about the Group Theatre was not its contributions to the working class cause. Instead, it was a company that promoted the growth of those who were dissatisfied with the existing Broadway view of drama. It set in motion the writing careers of William Saroyan, Sidney Kingsley, Clifford Odets, and Tennessee Williams. Lee Strasburg began his role of leadership with the Group, and later

¹⁰³ Williams 65.

¹⁰⁴ Rabkin 78.

went on to teach his version of the Method and to found the Actor's Studio.¹⁰⁵ In its ten seasons, 1931-1941, the Group Theatre presented plays that dealt with a wide range of topics, in a wide range of styles, which appealed to both the Broadway audience, as well as the working class audience. This provided a direct segue to the ideas of the Federal Theatre Project.

¹⁰⁵ The Method is an acting technique based loosely on the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavsky.

Chapter 4: The Depression

We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land. We have not reached the goal, but...we shall soon, with the help of God, be in sight of the day when poverty will be banished from this nation.¹⁰⁶

President Herbert Hoover

This attitude was a prevalent one in the 1920's. It was a decade of delirious prosperity for the victors of the Great War, and nowhere was it more apparent than in the United States. It was a time of reckless abandon for everything from music to fashion to sex. Americans were also reckless in their spending. People were spending not only all of their wages, but buying on installment, depending on a never-ending future of affluence.¹⁰⁷ But perhaps the most glaring root of the Crash was speculation in the stock market.

The same people that were buying automobiles and refrigerators on credit were doing the same with stocks. The purchaser bought stock with money to cover only a small percentage of the actual price, using the stock itself as collateral for the loan of the remaining portion. For example, in 1928 an investor could put up \$10 for a share of RCA, the additional \$75 needed on loan from the broker. At the end of the year, the stock could have been sold for \$420. Minus the original loan and a five percent fee, the investor could have made \$341.25, a whopping profit of thirty-four times the original investment.¹⁰⁸ However, this sort of profit only works if very few people pull their gains

¹⁰⁶ Herbert Hoover, Republican presidential nomination acceptance speech, 1928, qtd. in David Kennedy, ed., The American People in the Depression (West Haven: Pendulum, 1973) 13.

¹⁰⁷ Robert S. McElvaine, The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941 (New York: Three Rivers, 1993) 73.

¹⁰⁸ McElvaine 44.

out of the market. In the decline that started in early September of 1929, investors began to lose their confidence and sell, causing a downward slide that culminated with the events of October 24 and 29.

This loss of confidence proceeded to wreak further havoc with the economy. Both businesses and individuals suffered from fear of losing more. Hoover asked businesses to maintain wages and continue investments, but these measures were not very effective. For example, while wages remained stable for a time, payrolls were cut. Those individuals who did have jobs were reluctant to consume or invest for fear of losing the remaining jobs. As buying declined, the Depression worsened.¹⁰⁹ From the height of prosperity in 1929 to its depth in 1933, consumption expenditures dropped by eighteen percent, the Gross National Product by twenty-nine percent, and investment by ninety-eight percent.¹¹⁰

The Depression put millions of people out of work. Keeping in mind that the Crash took place at the end of tenth month of the year, the annual average unemployment in 1929 was 1,550,000, or slightly over three percent of the civilian workforce aged fourteen and older. In 1930, unemployment was at 4,340,000, or nearly nine percent. At the height of unemployment in 1933, almost twenty-five percent of the workforce was without a job. In 1936, the year that the FTP was born, the annual percentage was down to just under seventeen percent, which still left 9,030,000 men and women out of work.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ McElvaine 73.

¹¹⁰ McElvaine 75.

¹¹¹ Kennedy 83.

The Depression did not affect all people equally. Many at the top of the economic hierarchy tended to be unaffected, or even took advantage of others' losses. William Benton, a general manager in a successful advertising firm, noted, "We didn't know the Depression was going on."¹¹² Arthur A. Robertson, a wealthy industrialist, recalled that in the Thirties he was known as a scavenger, buying broken down businesses that banks had taken over; "That was one of my best eras of prosperity."¹¹³ However, both Benton and Robertson recall knowing men who lost great fortunes. While men with more modest incomes lost thousands of dollars, those who headed large corporations lost millions. Robertson was approached by a number of men desperately begging for loans to finance floundering businesses. He generally declined, refusing to throw "good money after bad."¹¹⁴

Those of the middle class were more uniformly affected, in a negative manner. For those who were able to keep their jobs, their salaries went down, while prices for most essentials stayed at 1929 levels. In an article on the National Recovery Administration's "Buy Now" campaign, James R. Martin noted bitterly that he and most consumers could not buy more because they were struggling to buy what they needed.¹¹⁵ Ben Isaacs, a self-employed, door-to-door clothing salesman, lost nearly all his business. He recalls collecting \$400-\$500 a week before the Crash, but not even \$10-\$15 after. He eventually had to go on relief and sorrowfully recollected, "the tears were running out of

¹¹² qtd. in Studs Terkel, Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression (New York: Pantheon, 1986) 61.

¹¹³ qtd. in Terkel 66.

¹¹⁴ qtd. in Terkel 68.

¹¹⁵ James R. Martin, "'Buy Now'—On \$30 a Week," The Nation 1 Nov. 1933: 502-3, reprinted in Kennedy 95-99.

my eyes.”¹¹⁶ Although he and his family made it through the Depression, he remembers the shame that many faced, “Lotta people committed suicide, pushed themselves out of buildings and killed themselves, ‘cause they couldn’t face the disgrace.”¹¹⁷

Those at the bottom were hardest hit, as their jobs were first to go; their wages, low already, fell below subsistence level. For example, a large immigrant family, dependent on the father’s \$7/day job, became destitute when he lost the job in 1930. Associated Charities, of Cleveland, Ohio, paid for the family’s necessities and mortgage twice, but the family was continually threatened with foreclosure.¹¹⁸ In the rural South, landlords of tenant farm systems became unable to finance their tenants. These farmers were left without food and clothing, many in counties with no charitable organizations to help. Conditions such as these affected blacks and whites alike.¹¹⁹ The Depression was not a singular event in the lives of the poor; these people were already suffering from hardships such as competition from immigrants, the first world war, and low paying jobs, both in agriculture and industry.¹²⁰

The poor and working classes were also hit in another manner. The live entertainments that they had been most likely to attend— melodrama, vaudeville, and amateur performances— were among the first to be closed. Therefore, actors and other theatrical workers who had been a part of these genres were among the first to lose their

¹¹⁶ Terkel 425.

¹¹⁷ Terkel 425.

¹¹⁸ Federal Aid for Unemployment Relief: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Manufacturers on S. 5125, United States Senate, Seventy-Second Congress, Second Session (Washington, DC: GPO, 1933) 507-509, qtd. in Kennedy 104.

¹¹⁹ Unemployment Relief: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Manufacturers, United States Senate, Seventy-Second Congress, First Session (Washington: GPO, 1932) 244-255, qtd. in Kennedy 94.

¹²⁰ Ann Banks, ed., First-Person America (New York: Knopf, 1980) xii.

jobs. But performers of all genres, indeed in all media, were impacted by the decimation of the nation's economy. In Martin's "Buy Now" article, he lamented, "We do not patronize plays, concerts, or big games."¹²¹ Theatre companies were forced to cut back. The Theatre Guild, one of the largest New York companies in the 1920's, dropped its ticket prices and shortened its runs. The American Theatre Society, which had branches in different parts of the country, was forced to close several of its cities.¹²² By 1930, at least 20 theatres on Broadway were closed, representing a large number of companies, productions, and tours that were no longer in existence.¹²³

Actors and the theatre industry had been affected before the Crash with the development of entertainment technology. Moving pictures were moving into vaudeville performances as a novelty act. But the novelty did not wear out. According to historian Benjamin B. Hampton, due to cost of tickets, infrequency of touring companies to smaller cities, and a lingering puritanical condemnation of theatre, the need for movies was created not as "an instrument to create more comfort and luxury for the well-to-do. It was a romantic device to bring entertainment to the common people."¹²⁴ In the early twentieth century, the film industry rapidly grew; motion picture houses, feature films, nationwide releases, the star system, and semi-vaudiville programs all contributed to a

¹²¹ James R. Martin, "'Buy Now'—On \$30 a Week," reprinted in Kennedy 99.

¹²² Roy S. Waldeau, The Vintage Years of the Theatre Guild, 1928-1939 (Cleveland: P of Case Western Reserve U, 1972) 156.

¹²³ Waldeau 92. A theatre building rarely houses only one company. Although a company may be in residence and perform most of their season there, the building is generally rented out to others while the resident company is not performing.

¹²⁴ Benjamin B. Hampton, History of the American Industry: From Its Beginnings to 1931 (New York: Dover, 1970) 13-14.

decline in live theatre.¹²⁵ Sound in 1927 and color in 1932 added to the excitement of film.¹²⁶ According to the Motion Picture Almanac, by 1932, there were 14,000 movie houses with sound, attracting 70,000,000 admissions per week.¹²⁷

However, even the motion picture industry was affected by the Depression. In 1932, a ten percent federal tax was levied on all movie tickets over forty cents. By the end of 1932, admissions were down thirty percent.¹²⁸ Americans who could not afford even movie prices turned to a still cheaper alternative- radio. Radio, like motion pictures, started small. It was not until 1926 that NBC changed radio with the first national programming; CBS followed suit the next year. Shows were fairly bland - cooking tips for women, educational shows for children, music, talk, and the occasional celebrity did not yet capture the attention of the American public.¹²⁹ It was the first serial, Amos 'n' Andy, that changed the future of radio programming by giving the public characters and plots to follow.¹³⁰ Even more than with movies, common people were able to afford this entertainment that was broadcast into their own homes, regularly enough to make it almost part of the family. Theatre was dealt a further blow when, with the success of The Rudy Vallee Show, popular music and a variety show on the radio replaced the prestige

¹²⁵ Flanagan, Arena 12-13.

¹²⁶ Richard Platt, Eyewitness Books: Film (New York: Knopf, 1992) 22, 26. Sound immediately took; the last all silent film was made only two years after sound's premier. This innovation displaced thousands of musicians. Technicolor was much more expensive. Even in the 1950's, only half of the industry's product was shot in color.

¹²⁷ Flanagan, Arena 13.

¹²⁸ Robert Stanley, The Celluloid Empire: A History of the American Motion Picture Industry (New York: Hastings, 1978) 84-85.

¹²⁹ J. Fred MacDonald, Don't Touch that Dial: Radio Programming in American Life from 1920 to 1960 (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1978) 24-26.

¹³⁰ MacDonald 27.

of vaudeville.¹³¹ No other form of entertainment offered such an assortment of programs, available to all people, for such a cheap, one-time purchase.

Many actors went to Hollywood to continue their careers, but most did little more than work as extras. Those who attempted to remain on the stage were often out of work for great stretches of time. Nor was it only bad actors who were out of work. Gifted actors, too, were unemployed (even though this was a stigma that haunted the first years of the FTP and the earlier attempts by the Civil Works Administration and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration).¹³² Neil Schaffner, part of a touring group from the Midwest, recalled a sudden drop in patrons. On July 4, 1930, they had a normal number of patrons, but only two days later they played to a total of \$30 of admissions, closing the week with \$200 on a \$1500 show.¹³³

Also out of work were stagehands, directors, designers, and anyone else associated with theatre. New York producer Herman Shumlin recollected running into an acquaintance who had been a theatre treasurer. The man had been unable to pay rent on his upscale neighborhood home and his wife had kicked him out, leaving him to walk the streets in “perpetual shame.” In Shumlin’s opinion, this was the greatest tragedy of the Depression— people who believed that they were useless.¹³⁴

¹³¹ MacDonald 28.

¹³² Flanagan, Arena 9.

¹³³ Terkel 369.

¹³⁴ Terkel 381.

Chapter 5: New Deal Relief Programs and Federal One

There is something about the anniversary of your layoff which makes you feel more hopeless.¹³⁵

E. Wight Bakke

A general miasma of despair permeated the United States of the early 1930's. Those who had lost everything could not seem to regain anything, and those who had retained their fortunes seemed unsympathetic. President Hoover was of the opinion that things would get better by waiting. But things did not get better, and so Hoover was voted out, and the charismatic Franklin D. Roosevelt was voted in on the promise of making a change. Surrounding himself with like-minded liberal thinkers, like Harry Hopkins, Harold Ickes, and Francis Perkins (soon to be head of the WPA, Secretary of the Interior, and Secretary of Labor, respectively), FDR ushered in an era of social change. However, unlike their Progressive predecessors of the pre-war period, these New Dealers claimed their programs were not for humanitarian reasons, but for pragmatic, economic ones.¹³⁶

But the new president and his administration had their work cut out for them. Roosevelt took office in March of 1933, the year that was to be the worst of the Depression. Relief up to that point had been largely the purview of local government agencies and charitable organizations. But these agencies were quickly running out of the means to help. Further, the demographic of those on relief had changed. At first,

¹³⁵ E. Wight Bakke, The Unemployed Worker (New Haven, 1940) 187, qtd. in William Leuchtenberg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper, 1963) 118.

¹³⁶ Leuchtenberg 339. Ickes was even nominally a Republican. Perkins was the first woman to hold a Presidential cabinet position.

those who were unemployable were on the relief rolls, but as the Depression entered its fourth year, white collar workers began to swell the ranks of the unemployed. Although many used their savings in a desperate attempt to stave off receiving a hand-out, it was not long before their “scruples were conquered by want.”¹³⁷

In 1933, Congress passed a number of bills attempting to rally both the economy and morale, thus establishing the Public Works Administration (PWA) the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), and the Civil Works Administration (CWA). PWA received an appropriation of \$3,300,000,000, FERA \$500,000,000, and CWA operated at just under \$1,000,000,000.¹³⁸ These three programs often overlapped and borrowed from each other, one taking over when another was ended. The jobs handled by CWA tended to be done fast and sloppy, yet it completed approximately 400,000 projects including the building or improving of roads, schools, airports, and parks.¹³⁹

The CWA also employed 50,000 teachers and some 3000 writers and artists.¹⁴⁰ In conjunction with Actors’ Equity, the CWA put approximately 450 people to work giving free shows or directing amateur groups in large cities like New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. However, since these projects were based wholly on relief, this goal was reflected in the quality of the presentations. Many of the actors involved, while appreciating the chance to work, would not allow their names to be associated with the performances.¹⁴¹ The PWA, too, had a small entertainment program, in New York, which sent companies to public schools. These companies were often ill equipped for the

¹³⁷ Arthur M Schlesinger, Jr., The Coming of the New Deal (Boston: Houghton, 1958) 272.

¹³⁸ Schlesinger 99, 265, 270.

¹³⁹ Schlesinger 270.

¹⁴⁰ Schlesinger 270.

¹⁴¹ Flanagan, Arena 15-16.

task at hand. The program was headed by former Colonel Earle Boothe, whose favorite play for the performances was Meet the Enemy, written by none other than Colonel Earle Boothe.¹⁴²

When CWA was ended, most of its clients were put back onto FERA, which had been established six months previously. Headed by Hopkins, its purpose was to channel relief funds through state and local agencies.¹⁴³ Although FERA workers received substantially less than they had received as CWA workers (\$6.50/week with FERA, as opposed to \$15.04/week with CWA), it managed to carry out many projects. Five thousand public buildings and 7,000 bridges were built, and many land projects, such as river dredging and stream clearing, were completed. Too, more than 1.5 million adults were taught to read and write, approximately 100,000 students were sent to college, and programs such as nursery schools for children from low-income families were maintained.¹⁴⁴

Finally, in April of 1935, Congress allotted \$4,880,000,000 to the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act. Of this money, \$1,390,000,000 was set aside to create the Works Progress Administration (WPA).¹⁴⁵ It was headed once again by Hopkins, who took his experiences with FERA and refined them to make the WPA better. For example,

¹⁴² Williams 222.

¹⁴³ Leuchtenberg 120. Thirty minutes after leaving the White House from his FERA appointment, Hopkins had set up his desk in the hallway of an unpacked building. Within the next two hours, he had spent over \$5,000,000 (Leuchtenberg 121). Hopkins' unabashed way of spending huge amounts of money caused him to suffer more attacks than all other New Dealers combined. His reasoning was, "Work relief costs more than direct relief, but the cost is justified. First, in the saving of morale. Second in the preservation of human skills and talents. Third, in the material enrichment which the unemployed add to our national wealth through their labors." Milton Meltzer, Violins and Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects (New York: Delacorte, 1976) 18.

¹⁴⁴ Leuchtenberg 123.

¹⁴⁵ McElvaine 254-55, 265.

three new rules were set up with the WPA-

1. Only employables were to be taken from the state relief rolls.
2. Work was to be offered to these people within their own skills and trades.
3. Unemployables were to be put back on state relief.

Unemployables were defined as those who were unable to work, such as mothers, children, and men and women who were old enough to earn retirement.¹⁴⁶

One rule that did not exist under the WPA was segregation. The Civilian Conservation Corps, established in 1933 to take young, unmarried men off the relief rolls, employed 2.5 million, only eight percent of whom were black (blacks made up approximately ten percent of the national population). The WPA, on the other hand, used no such quota and so blacks were about thirty percent of the WPA workforce.¹⁴⁷ And yet, discriminatory practices were still in place. Blacks were often paid lower wages than their white counterparts because they were accustomed to less pay. They were often forced back into the private sector (often in domestic service) even at lower wages than they were earning with the WPA. They were also denied certain jobs within the WPA, such as work as part of survey teams because “whites [did] not like to be interviewed by Negroes.”¹⁴⁸ Women, who comprised almost one quarter of the workforce, were kept to only one sixth of the WPA rolls. As the Louisiana WPA manual stated: “As a general rule, a woman with an employable husband is not eligible for referral, as her husband is

¹⁴⁶ Flanagan, Arena 17.

¹⁴⁷ Carl N. Degler, ed., The New Deal (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970) 14. The black community realized this recognition and showed their appreciation on election days.

¹⁴⁸ Alfred E. Smith, “Highlights of Activities,” Sept. 1938: 3, qtd. in Nancy E. Rose, Put to Work: Relief Programs in the Great Depression (New York: Monthly Review, 1994) 102-03.

the logical head of the family.”¹⁴⁹

The weekly “security” wage for a WPA employee who could qualify as “senior research worker” was \$23.86.¹⁵⁰ The nationwide average was \$55/month, or \$600/year, which was only half of the minimum subsistence level of \$1200/year.¹⁵¹ This pay was more than could be had on direct relief, but less than was paid by private industry. There were two reasons for this wage. First, there was simply not enough funding to go around. Second, the government did not want to compete with private enterprise.¹⁵² Workers, in fact, were required to accept private employment as it became available.¹⁵³ Unfortunately, this caused a contradiction that was to cause problems throughout the history of the program- on the one hand, it was a “real” job because work was required for money, but on the other, it was not “real” because the wages were below subsistence level.

By the time it expired in June of 1943, the WPA had provided numerous benefits for the public, such as the building or improvement of over 2,500 hospitals, 5,900 school buildings, 1,000 airport landing fields, and nearly 13,000 playgrounds.¹⁵⁴ These construction projects comprised seventy-seven percent of the money spent.¹⁵⁵ Research and records projects, such as health surveys, mapping, and preservation of historic documents, education programs, and the arts projects were another eleven percent. The

¹⁴⁹ Donald S. Howard, The WPA, 278, qtd. in Rose 100-01.

¹⁵⁰ Meltzer 17.

¹⁵¹ McElvaine 266.

¹⁵² McElvaine 266.

¹⁵³ Rose 99.

¹⁵⁴ Flanagan, Arena 126.

¹⁵⁵ Rose 104.

remaining money was spent on housekeeping aide and public health projects.¹⁵⁶ These projects included the serving of 600,000,000 school lunches by 1941, the maintenance of 1,460 nursery schools, and the manufacturing of more than 300,000,000 garments for needy families.¹⁵⁷ And yet, the greatest allotment of funds went towards wages. For every \$100 spent by the WPA, \$86 went to wages, \$10.50 to materials, and \$3.50 to administration.¹⁵⁸

Federal One

Of all those left without jobs in the wake of the Depression, those whose skills were highly specialized were particularly hard hit. Actors' Equity estimated nearly 8,000 unemployed actors and more than 4,000 unemployed members of Chorus Equity in New York alone.¹⁵⁹ The American Federation of Music approximated that by 1933 two-thirds of its national membership was unemployed.¹⁶⁰ These people were willing to do anything to earn money, but often found that they had to compete, at a disadvantage, with those unskilled laborers who were better suited to jobs such as digging ditches or paving roads. Many of the specialists were artists of one sort or another- actors, writers, musicians, painters.

They soon had to rely on charity to eat. In large cities like New York, organizations such as the Dinner Club were formed in which someone who could afford a

¹⁵⁶ Rose 107.

¹⁵⁷ Dixon Wecter, The Age of the Great Depression, 1929-1941, Hist. of American Life 13 (New York: Macmillan, 1948) 98.

¹⁵⁸ F. D. Roosevelt. Public Papers and Addresses, ed. S. I. Rosenman (New York, 1938-1941), qtd. in Wecter 97.

¹⁵⁹ Williams 221.

¹⁶⁰ Meltzer 92.

meal would buy a second meal for an actor who would in turn offer entertainment.¹⁶¹

Also in New York, the Gibson Committee took a number of jobless painters and architects and sent them to a farm in New Jersey where they did farm labor in the mornings, but were free to draw or paint the rest of the day.¹⁶² However, even charity among citizens was limited by more than economics. The Dinner Club refused to allow blacks an opportunity. The Club secretary claimed, “We don’t discriminate against them, but we don’t want them here.”¹⁶³

Hopkins realized that these artists needed work, and that Americans badly needed entertainment. His first efforts at Arts Projects under the CWA were criticized; he, however, replied, “Hell, don’t artists have to eat like other people?” These musicians, painters, writers, and actors shouldn’t have to learn how to build bridges and roads to keep their families from starving. They, like the actual bridge and road builders, should have a chance to preserve their skills, which were just as much of an American heritage.¹⁶⁴

Hopkins asserted that there was precedence in American history for the government to sponsor public works. Free land had been given to veterans and other settlers, as well as railroads. Vast amounts of money had been spent on roads, harbors, and canals. Franchises were given to fledgling companies, credit to banks, patents to inventors.¹⁶⁵ Why not, then, spend money to support the effort to develop and preserve

¹⁶¹ Flanagan, *Arena* 14.

¹⁶² Meltzer 55.

¹⁶³ Williams 221.

¹⁶⁴ Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre* (New York: Knopf, 1988) 186-87.

¹⁶⁵ Meltzer 18.

the American arts? Furthermore, as Flanagan wrote, there were artists who wanted to work and people who wanted to enjoy the arts; couldn't these two groups "be brought together for their mutual benefit?"¹⁶⁶

Thus, Federal One was created. Out of \$4,000,000,000 given to the WPA by the 1935 Relief Act, \$27,000,000, not even seven tenths of a percent, had been set aside for the combined four categories of art, music, theatre, and writing.¹⁶⁷ The national directors were Holger Cahill for Art, Nikolai Sokoloff for Music, Hallie Flanagan for Theatre, and Henry Alsberg for Writing. The general structure was the same for all four projects - under the Big Four were regional directors who supervised the local administration in each state where the project existed. Thus art was not centralized in large metropolitan areas, but spread throughout the country.¹⁶⁸ This followed the basic Federal One goal that art was the possession of all people, everywhere.

Art

Art, as represented by painting, sculpture, architecture, and their like, was the first of the Fine Arts to receive its own project. The Public Works of Art Project, funded by the Treasury Department and the CWA, was begun in December of 1933 at the suggestion of Philadelphia artist George Biddle. A friend of the Roosevelt's, he reported the example of Mexican President Obregon who set artists to work on public buildings at

¹⁶⁶ Hallie Flanagan, "A Theatre for People," American Magazine of Art Aug. 1936: 4.

¹⁶⁷ Flanagan, Arena 44.

¹⁶⁸ Meltzer 21.

workers' wages.¹⁶⁹ When it closed in the summer of 1934, it had employed nearly 4,000 artists and provided approximately 700 murals and 15,000 other works of arts to public buildings such as schools, libraries, and courthouses.¹⁷⁰ The Treasury Department sponsored two more projects that continued to employ both relief and non-relief artists to "decorate" federal buildings.¹⁷¹ Contributors to these programs included Biddle himself and Diego Rivera.¹⁷²

Finally, the Federal Art Project began in August of 1935. National Director Holger Cahill established his section of Federal One with the idea that art was not just for the wealthy and well educated, but should be available for all the masses to enjoy.¹⁷³ Like the earlier projects, FAP provided art for public buildings, but also provided community works. Free art classes were given to the public that averaged 6,000 students each month. The FAP employees also maintained sixty-six community art centers that attracted more than 6,000,000 visitors.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, the Project artists collaborated with their fellows on other Projects. They designed sets and posters for the FTP and posters for the FMP. The FAP had many divisions, including photography, graphic design, printmaking, and murals. It also incorporated the Index of American Design. Conceived of by Ruth Reeves and Ramona Javitz, it was to be a record of three-dimensional American design from around the country. Cahill was forced to scale the project down to

¹⁶⁹ E. M. Hugh-Jones, "Art and the Community: What America is Doing," London Mercury Oct. 1937: 543.

¹⁷⁰ Wecter 267.

¹⁷¹ Francis V. O'Connor, ed., The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs (Washington: Smithsonian Institution P, 1972) 12.

¹⁷² Wecter 267.

¹⁷³ Meltzer 56-57.

¹⁷⁴ Wecter 267-68.

include only folk and vernacular work from Americans of European descent. The 400 artists thus employed located the works, rendered them to paper, and recorded them for future study and inspiration.¹⁷⁵ This tome still exists as an invaluable aid in many libraries.

Music

Musicians had been affected before the 1929 Crash. Recording and radio had both made a damaging mark on the profession. The Depression merely exacerbated a bad situation. When the Roxy Theatre opened in New York in 1932, 3,000 musicians auditioned for eighty positions.¹⁷⁶ Although musicians, too, were aided first by philanthropy, then by small allowances from FERA and CWA, there were no projects to bring musicians and audiences together on a national scale until Federal One. National Director Nikolai Sokoloff wrote, "Inherent in the national music plan was the principle that the projects must serve the community culturally."¹⁷⁷ In order to accomplish this goal, he approved projects for numerous performing groups, both instrumental and choral, composers, soloists, teachers, copyists, and recorders.¹⁷⁸ Performances occurred in all parts of the country, from metropolitan centers to rural towns, from parks to concert halls to the radio.

¹⁷⁵ Bruce I. Bustard, A New Deal for the Arts (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1997) 107.

¹⁷⁶ Meltzer 92.

¹⁷⁷ Nikolai Sokoloff, "A Preliminary Report of the Work of the Federal Music Project," report to WPA, Harry Hopkins, administrator, 9 Apr. 1936, 6.

¹⁷⁸ Sokoloff 5. The recording project recorded some 2000 "primitive and vernacular" songs including folk music from the Kentucky hills, Creole bayou chants, Negro spirituals, and cowboy ballads (Wecter 266-67).

Over the course of the project, more than 15,000 men and women were employed, approximately 150,000 programs were performed to over 100,000,000 patrons, many of them hearing live music for the first time.¹⁷⁹ The FMP also collaborated with the FTP for all the Theatre Project's musicals, dance concerts, and vaudeville shows as music writers and performers. Further, like the other projects, the FMP held free classes for members of the community and worked with established musicians and composers, such as Aaron Copland and Roy Harris. And, like the FAP, the music project created an Index of American Composers. It was composed of two lists, one of composers, the other of compositions, and notes on American folk tunes and legends. Although the Index was never finished nor published, the card files are available in the music division of the Library of Congress. It contains more than 7,000 compositions and over 2,200 American composers.¹⁸⁰

Writing

Like the other projects, the Federal Writers' Project began in 1935 to bring employment to out-of-work writers and writing about America to Americans. A writer was defined by the project administrators as any kind of writer, and so it was home to poets, journalists, biographers, technical writers, and historians, to name just a few. However, unlike the other projects, applicants need not display experience; they merely needed to be on relief and love writing.¹⁸¹ The FWP employed between 3,500 and 6,700

¹⁷⁹ Wecter 266.

¹⁸⁰ Meltzer 96.

¹⁸¹ Meltzer 104.

of these writers and published more than 276 books, 701 pamphlets, and 340 “issuances” (articles, leaflets, and radio scripts).¹⁸² Many of these books were published through commercial houses, with royalties going either back to the project (for non-labor expenses) or to the Treasury.¹⁸³

However, the two most lasting works were the interviews with former slaves and the state guide series. The first attempt at interviews was made in 1929 at southern universities, as it was realized that the number of former slaves was diminishing. John A. Lomax, a white Southern folklore researcher, was asked to head the work. Although national headquarters could not dictate whom the state projects should hire to do the interviews, states such as Florida and Louisiana found that the former slaves responded more openly to black writers.¹⁸⁴ State guides were published for the forty-eight continental states and Alaska, most large cities, many towns, and places of local interest. Rather than following the model of previous travel guides, these offered more than just a manual of amusing stops. For example, each state guide had three parts - 1) short essays on the state history, arts, and economy, ethnic make-up, etc., 2) descriptions of the most important cities, and 3) detailed and accurate road tours.¹⁸⁵ Both of these collections are still available. The slave narratives, not published until 1972, are available in the Library

¹⁸² Archie Hobson, ed., Remembering America: A Sampler of the WPA American Guide Series (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 1-2.

¹⁸³ Wecter 260.

¹⁸⁴ Meltzer 125.

¹⁸⁵ Hobson 2.

of Congress.¹⁸⁶ The history guides are still in print; many states have revised and reprinted their guides since their original printings in the late thirties and forties.¹⁸⁷

Whatever benefits were gained, problems beset all the projects, both from within and from without. The ultimate drawback was that of funding. Money came from the federal government, as approved by Congress. Many of the key posts in the special committees were held by conservative Senators, who did not approve of money spent on what they felt was “boondoggling.” The phrase “boondoggling” was first seen in a New York Times article in April of 1935 and used to describe the government cheating the taxpayers by paying people on relief to produce worthless items.¹⁸⁸ In addition, the press of the 1930’s was predominantly Republican, and did not hesitate to write about the projects with ridicule and scorn.¹⁸⁹ According to historian Dixon Wecter, even writers who generally favored the WPA had notions that the workers “were apt to be less than efficient than the cream of man power skimmed repeatedly by private industry.”¹⁹⁰

Federal One continually faced budget cuts and mandates for layoffs. But the employees did not take the news quietly. For example, on March 22, 1938, groups of twenty to several hundred people took four-hour shifts for a forty-eight hour death watch outside of WPA offices to call for more relief help in the arts. One such office belonged to Paul Edwards, a project administrator, who allowed a delegation of picketers an interview. He notified them that he could only send their appeals forward to

¹⁸⁶ Meltzer 127. A search of the Mississippi state archives turned up an additional 2000 pages of interviews, so it is conceivable that there are still more undiscovered interviews.

¹⁸⁷ Hobson 3.

¹⁸⁸ Michael Quinion, World Wide Words, 1996–2004, 16 Oct. 2004 <<http://www.quinion.com/words/weirdwords/ww-bool.htm>>.

¹⁸⁹ Meltzer 22.

¹⁹⁰ Wecter 99-100.

Washington.¹⁹¹ A mere three days later, the WPA authorized the addition of 800 new artists to the Federal One Project in New York.¹⁹²

But such techniques were not often successful. After the closure of the FTP in June of 1939, Congress lay down rules for the remaining arts projects. States were required to assume supervision of the projects, and twenty-five percent of the costs. Employees were allowed only eighteen months on the project; hundreds were immediately thrown out of work.¹⁹³ One member of Congress suggested - "What the hell- Let's have 'em have a pick and shovel."¹⁹⁴ The Federal One workers were gradually given assignments dealing more and more with the defense program and by 1943 were completely phased out.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ "Marathon Picketing of WPA Office Begun," New York Times 23 Mar. 1938.

¹⁹² "WPA Will Add 800 to Arts Project," New York Times 26 Mar. 1938.

¹⁹³ Bustard 126.

¹⁹⁴ Bustard 123.

¹⁹⁵ Meltzer 141.

Chapter 6: The Federal Theatre Project

It would be supreme sentimentality to become so involved in the human values of our project that we failed to see that these human values can be continued only if we achieve theatre results.¹⁹⁶

Hallie Flanagan

In a country that considers the arts a luxury rather than a necessity, theatre rapidly vanished during the Depression. Of the 250 stock companies in existence before the Crash, only thirty were left by 1934. Broadway saw half of its theatres dark (closed). Only twenty-five percent of the actors employed in 1927 were still working in 1934, and the average salary was cut in half.¹⁹⁷ What Broadway that was left tended to be unappetizing. According to New York drama critic Brooks Atkinson, Broadway was ignoring the times, missing out on an opportunity to be “the chief force in public life,” but instead, “The Broadway theatre has no program and no convictions; and in the midst of a vast social upheaval it has very little comment to make.”¹⁹⁸ In addition, the theatre styles hardest hit—melodrama, vaudeville, and amateur—were those largely attended by the working class.¹⁹⁹

The Federal Theatre Project commenced in August 1935, with its first opening in December of the same year. By the time it was closed in July of 1939, it had employed an average of 10,000 people per year, 2,660 of whom were returned to private industry. By the end of March of 1939, 30,398,726 people had attended 63,728 performances of nearly one thousand different productions. The total cost of the FTP, including both

¹⁹⁶ Hallie Flanagan, “What Are We Doing With Our Chance?,” *Federal Theatre* 1937: 2.3: 5.

¹⁹⁷ Frank Gillmore, “The Dramatis Personae of ’34,” *New York Times* 11 Feb. 1934: sec. 9, 1.

¹⁹⁸ Brooks Atkinson, “Fiddling at the Old Tunes,” *New York Times* 17 Mar. 1934: sec. 8, 1.

¹⁹⁹ McConachie and Friedman 171.

labor and non-labor, amounted to \$46,207,779. Director Hallie Flanagan pointed out that this was the approximate cost of one battleship.²⁰⁰

There were 185 units in thirty states, although some were discontinued before the project as a whole was ended.²⁰¹ The units included those that performed conventional plays done in English, as well as those in Yiddish, German, Italian, Spanish, and French. These units did classics, modern plays, musicals, and new plays written for the FTP, as did the Negro and Children's units. Some of these units did experimental plays, religious dramas, or drama based on the region in which they played. In addition, there were units for marionettes, vaudeville, dance, circus, and the Living Newspaper.

The primary purpose for which this grand theatre experiment was formed was relief. FTP rules closely followed the rules for employment set up by the WPA.

1. That the re-employment of theatre people now on relief rolls is the primary aim.
2. That this re-employment shall be in theatre enterprises offering dramatic entertainment either free or at low cost.
3. That whenever possible regional theatres developing native plays and original methods of production shall be encouraged.
4. That the W.P.A. will pay:
 - a. *Labor costs* of unemployed people enrolled on the project at the wage stated by the local W.P.A. administration.
 - b. *Superintendence cost*, on an average of one person not on relief rolls to twenty who are, at a small wage.
 - c. *A small percentage* (not to exceed ten percent) of labor costs *for production costs*, depending on the nature of the project.
5. That if the sponsoring organization is a public enterprise, or a non-profit-making co-operative, or can be incorporated as such, any funds made by admissions may accrue to the project.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Flanagan, Arena 435-36.

²⁰¹ Flanagan, Arena 435-36.

²⁰² Hallie Flanagan, "Theatre Project for Works Progress Administration," enclosed in letter to Bruce McClure, 17 Aug. 1935 (Washington: WPA Federal Theatre Records), qtd. in Flanagan, Arena 29-30.

But there were more reasons than relief. The FTP gave the country a chance to construct a national theatre. In the words of Eleanor Roosevelt,

Somehow we must build throughout this country a background of culture. No nation grows up until that has been accomplished, and I know of no way which will reach more of our people than the great plays of the past and of the present-day authors. I think that we can feel that this work, undertaken under the WPA Federal Theatre Project, is going to bring us back in the future a great deal that will be of value to the people as a whole.²⁰³

Theatre had been deeply affected by the Depression and by the twin inventions of moving pictures and radio. It was hoped that in addition to relief, the FTP might revitalize live theatre itself. However, these top two missions of the FTP turned out to be conflicting; as Flanagan later stated, “the problem of deciding how much weight should be given to the human need of the people we were employing and the audiences they were serving, as opposed to the matter of the high standard which should be required of a government enterprise, was a tormenting one.”²⁰⁴ This tormenting problem was to plague the project for the entire length of its run.

In order to carry out these plans, the FTP needed to be headed by a strong willed person with no small amount of theatre experience. For this daunting task, WPA head Harry Hopkins chose the diminutive Hallie Flanagan, who was at the time head of theatre at Vassar College. Flanagan had gone to school with Hopkins at Grinnell College in Iowa. She had studied with Stanislavsky in Russia and was one of the first five women to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship.²⁰⁵ With her Fellowship, she had studied government-

²⁰³ Flanagan, “Theatre Project” 206.

²⁰⁴ Flanagan, *Arena* 175.

²⁰⁵ Mary-Lynn Son Hilton, “An Investigation of Modern Dance Works Sponsored between 1936 and 1939 by the Works Project Administration Federal Theatre Dance Project,” thesis, U of Oregon, 1976,

sponsored theatre in many European countries, which made her uniquely qualified to assemble the Project in the United States (although this would later rouse the suspicions of Congress). She had also studied playwriting with George Pierce Baker in his innovative 47 Workshop at Harvard.²⁰⁶ While teaching at Vassar, Flanagan had written and produced Can You Hear Their Voices?, an adaptation of a description of the Arkansas drought. It described the divergent living conditions of the rich and the poor and the disinterest of Congress. This college production was reviewed by major newspapers and journals throughout the country.²⁰⁷

Many from Broadway balked at the thought of a national theatre director with no experience on Broadway. Worse, Flanagan's ideas of theatre veered towards the experimental, rather than popular. They felt that she was an amateur from a fancy girls' school who would buckle under the pressure of commercial theatre.²⁰⁸ However, it was precisely these qualities that made Flanagan ideal in the eyes of both Hopkins and President Roosevelt. They deemed it important that the head of the FTP be concerned with the social aspects of the project, rather than just the profit potential.²⁰⁹

Flanagan built the Project on the premises that the people employed must have been on relief as well as actual theatre workers, that theatrical entertainment be provided

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²⁰⁶ Baker's innovative course pushed American theatre from its Puritan notions of moral, inoffensive entertainment to theatre that could challenge its audiences to think. Other authors who went through his course were Eugene O'Neill, George Abbott, George Sklar, and Albert Maltz (Bentley 31).

²⁰⁷ John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, eds., Free, Adult, Uncensored (Washington: New Republic, 1978) 2-3. It is extremely rare that anything but a local newspaper review a college drama production, and not very common that even a local newspaper will write more than a few lines.

²⁰⁸ O'Connor and Brown 3.

²⁰⁹ Buttitta and Witham 4.

to the public at little or no cost, and that original material and methods be encouraged.²¹⁰ According to Flanagan, “While the immediate aim of the program is to put back to work those theatre workers in all branches of the profession who have been on the relief rolls, one of the more far-reaching purposes is to create theatrical enterprises of lasting value.”²¹¹ In addition, like all WPA projects, the productions could not compete with existing private enterprises.²¹² Competition was easier to avoid in the theatre than in non-artistic WPA projects because theatre thrives on the new, whether a completely new composition, or a new way of producing an old standard.

Flanagan was sworn into U.S. government office on August 27, 1935 (her forty-sixth birthday).²¹³ She immediately began the Herculean task of producing government-sponsored theatre, which involved facing down political opposition, Broadway antagonism, and union resistance. Hopkins warned her, “Don’t forget that whatever happens you’ll be wrong.”²¹⁴ Even audiences proved problematic at first. Particularly in New York City, where Broadway theatregoers were practically professionals themselves, the idea of a government-funded theatre was scorned. These theatre snobs refused to believe that any actor who was worthy to appear on stage would be without work and on relief. Letters were written expressing the fear that the Project productions would be of poor enough quality that they would actually harm theatre as an institution.²¹⁵

Much of the political opposition came from politicians who were against

²¹⁰ Flanagan, *Arena* 29.

²¹¹ “\$27,000,000 in Jobs for National Arts,” *New York Times* 11 Oct. 1935: 1.

²¹² Willson Whitman, *Bread and Circuses* (New York: Oxford UP, 1937) 16.

²¹³ Bentley 193.

²¹⁴ Flanagan, *Arena* 26.

²¹⁵ Flanagan, *Arena* 40.

Roosevelt and the New Deal itself, rather than the FTP specifically. Many members of Congress were anti- New Deal and would do anything to undermine it. The label of boondoggling was quickly applied to the FTP with the accusation that actors were not really working, but only playing at the government's expense. This charge was repeatedly refuted by Flanagan who, time and again, instructed her accusers to look at the results.²¹⁶

Congress was not the only group of people opposed to the FTP. Broadway producers felt threatened by government subsidized theatre. They complained, first, that no actor who was on relief would be good enough to appear on stage. Any show produced by the FTP would therefore be bad. They then contradicted themselves by asserting that these plays would compete with private industry and take audiences away from commercial theatre. Amongst these Broadway producers were Brock Pemberton, who claimed that the whole idea of plays produced with relief talent was completely absurd, and John Golden, who wrote a letter to the New York Times complaining that these unprofessional shows would harm the theatre as an institution. Even Eva Le Gallienne (who had wanted the FTP money to help pay for her Civic Repertory Theatre) called it a "vast mistake" to feed people "very malnourished and downright bad food."²¹⁷

Flanagan and her directors further had their work cut out for them in dealing with the innumerable unions that were involved in theatre. These unions included Actors' Equity, the Dramatists' Guild, the United Scenic Artists of America, the American

²¹⁶ John Hobart, "No Boondoggling in the Federal Theatre," San Francisco Chronicle 19 Feb. 1939: 26.

²¹⁷ Flanagan, Arena 40. Information about Eva Le Gallienne's desires for FTP money from Bentley 187.

Federation of Musicians, Chorus Equity Association, the Teamsters, Theatrical Wardrobe Attendants, the Theatrical Press Representatives of America, plus many more.²¹⁸ Each of these unions needed to be negotiated with separately, with separate demands for their members working on the FTP productions. There were also performers who had no union affiliations, such as Jews, blacks, and dancers, as well as many of the administrative and maintenance workers. FTP wages were generally lower than union wages, which was cause for complaint, but the unions did not take into account that this was a steady wage, paid even when an actor was not rehearsing or performing.

Flanagan did have the assistance, however, of many of the theatre people who shared her hopes for theatre. She asked several of these people to join the FTP National Advisory Committee, including Harold Clurman, Margaret Larkin (the executive secretary for Theatre Union), Clifford Odets, George Sklar, Albert Maltz, Marc Connelly, and Cheryl Crawford.²¹⁹ These people, unlike the Broadway producers, readily accepted and offered support and advice. Although FTP contributed to the demise of some of the earlier groups (but also absorbed their members), it was able to continue these groups' work of social theatre within its own.

The first show to charge admission was in Los Angeles in late December of 1935.²²⁰ Immediately afterwards, however, the FTP hit its first major snag when it was forced to close its first Living Newspaper production before it was opened. Ethiopia, regarding the conflict between that nation and Italy, featured actors who portrayed and

²¹⁸ Flanagan, Arena 36-37.

²¹⁹ Hallie Flanagan, form letter to listed people, 9 Oct. 1935.

²²⁰ Flanagan, Arena 276.

quoted both Haile Selassie and Benito Mussolini. In January of 1936, Morris Watson, chief editor for the Living Newspaper staff, wrote the White House asking for permission to use one such quote. WPA official Jacob Baker responded that no living head of state was to be represented in any way without prior approval of the Department of State. It was already too late for Ethiopia.²²¹

This first act of censorship against the WPA caused the resignation of New York director Elmer Rice and a blow to the fledgling Project. It badly needed a hit. The New York units were able to meet the challenge in March with not just one, but four hits - Triple-A Plowed Under, a Living Newspaper production; the world premier of T.S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral; Chalk Dust, which attacked the American educational system; and the voodoo Macbeth, featuring a company of African performers who had been stranded in New York.²²² Each of these productions brought acclaim and audiences to the FTP and boosted its estimation in the eyes of the public.

FTP thus entered the world of a professional theatre company, complete with disasters and successes alike. The difference was that these disasters and successes were on a national scale and affected by the country's ups and downs. When the national budget suffered, layoffs took place in all units across the country. The first of these personnel cuts occurred shortly after the presidential election of 1936. The election itself was a landslide victory for Roosevelt (he carried every state but Maine and Vermont), but a severe drought in the Midwest caused Hopkins to redistribute WPA funds. Although Congress had approved funds through June of the following year, Hopkins made cuts that

²²¹ Flanagan, Arena 65-66.

²²² O'Connor and Brown 6.

caused 500,000 WPA clients to be let go. Of this number, 8,000 came from Federal One.²²³

The following spring, rumors of more cuts seeped into New York City. In mid-May of 1937, choreographer Charles Weidman appeared on stage after the final curtain of a Candide/Brethren performance and told the audience that the entire cast and crew were sitting-in to support a pending relief bill that, if not passed, would see 100,000 in New York City alone cut from WPA relief rolls. He invited the audience to stay with them and over 250 patrons remained in the theatre. In the mean time, approximately 500 people outside the theatre joined the protest, singing and passing out pamphlets.²²⁴

On May 27, many unions, including the WPA Teachers' Union, the Artists' Union, and the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists and Technicians, joined in a city-wide work stoppage. Of the city's 9,000 relief workers, 7,000 participated. All of the FTP theatres were dark and refunds were given (at least to those who had paid for their tickets). Police were present, but there was no violence. The resulting cut was thirty percent of the New York project; 1,701 people lost their jobs. Although there were further demonstrations and protests, there was still no violence.²²⁵

It was at this time that The Cradle Will Rock made its mark on theatre and history. A musical written by Marc Blitzstein, it pulled no punches in its pro-labor/anti-corporate message. Borrowing heavily from agit-prop technique, it told the story of the accidental arrest of the anti-Union League at a mine-union meeting. The members of this

²²³ Buttitta and Witham 95.

²²⁴ "250 in Audience Join WPA Actors' Sit-Down," New York Times 20 May 1937.

²²⁵ Flanagan, Arena 202.

League are revealed to be under the control of the mine's owner, Mr. Mister. The show ends with the meeting's speaker, Larry Foreman, calling the workers to revolution- "There's a storm that's going to last until the final wind blows. . . and when the wind blows. . . the cradle will rock!"²²⁶

However, the FTP was never able to present this play. Although 14,000 seats had been sold before its opening, in mid-June the government issued an edict stating that, because of the cuts, no new plays, musical performances, or art galleries were to open before July 1. Flanagan states that this "was obviously censorship under a different guise."²²⁷ On opening night, a sign was posted outside the theatre announcing "NO SHOW TONIGHT." However, the team of John Houseman (producer) and Orson Welles (director) were not about to let this stop the show. When the two threatened to produce the play on their own, WPA officials released interest in the play and granted the actors a leave of absence.

After loading a beat-up piano onto a fire truck, they escorted the growing opening-night crowd down the street to a vacant theatre. As Actors' Equity, the American Federation of Musicians, and IATSE (the stagehands' union) had all forbidden their members to take part in the renegade production, Blitzstein, Houseman, and Welles set up on stage to perform it themselves. However, as Blitzstein began to sing the opening song, he was surprised to be joined by a nervous soprano. Olive Stanton, who played the part of the prostitute, stood up in the audience to play her part. She was

²²⁶ Douglas McDermott, "The Workers' Laboratory Theatre: Archetype and Example," Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980, ed. Bruce A. McConachie and Daniel Friedman (Westport: Greenwood, 1985) 129-30.

²²⁷ Flanagan, Arena 202-03.

joined, one by one, by the rest of the cast members while Blitzstein continued to play his score from the stage.²²⁸

This incident caused Houseman and Welles to leave the FTP for good and to set up their own Mercury Theatre. It also underlined the difference between public and government perception of the FTP. This governmental animosity was particularly apparent with some of the non-arts WPA officials. For example, Federal One was originally headed by General Hugh Johnson, who was replaced by Victor Ridder, who was then replaced by Colonel Brehan Somervell, all by August of 1936. Col. Somervell admitted that he did not believe in work relief and did not like the arts.²²⁹

Similar reports came from regional projects. The West was a prime example, as Flanagan found out when she first visited California in the fall of 1935. She was greeted in southern California by Colonel Donald H. Connolly, a former army man and the state's WPA administrator. Connolly informed Flanagan that he did not want to have anything to do with any of the arts projects that he could not control completely. This meant that the projects would be run with military discipline and methods. When asked by Flanagan what a good theatre project was, he responded that it would be "Anything that keeps out of the papers" (obviously anathema for theatre)²³⁰. Fortunately, Connolly did turn over the Project to Gilmor Brown and his assistant, Howard Miller. Brown was the founder of

²²⁸ Buttitta and Witham 148-50. The movie The Cradle Will Rock, directed by Tim Robbins, is a reasonably accurate portrayal of these events and of the FTP.

²²⁹ Buttitta and Witham 96.

²³⁰ qtd. in Flanagan, Arena 274.

the Pasadena Playhouse and was able to bring several of his young actors into the project with him.²³¹

However, in 1938, for no apparent reason, all arts projects in California reverted to the control of Col. Connolly. Querying Ellen Woodward, Federal One's Washington administrator, about the announcement, Flanagan merely received vague allusions to charges of communism and immorality. Flanagan then wrote to Connolly, pledging her full support to him in administrative matters, while reminding him of Hopkins' orders entrusting to her all artistic matters.²³² Connolly never replied. Instead, all FTP directors were forbidden to communicate with Washington except through Connolly and all letters from Washington were opened. Gilmor Brown was suddenly dismissed. All scripts were called in and Elmer Rice's anti-Nazi Judgment Day was canceled.²³³

In the East, there were also problems. Jasper Deeter, formerly of the cooperative Hedgerow Theatre and the Workers' Drama League, headed the Pennsylvania project, but only for a short while. He tried to run the WPA project in much the same manner, but this did not sit well with the local officials. After delegating the project to Helen Schoeni, he resigned in early 1936. In a final report to Washington, he alleged that the local government did its best to wreck the project after finding that it could not give jobs

²³¹ Stacy Claire Brightman, "The Federal Theatre Project in Los Angeles," diss., U of California, Davis, 1999, 32.

²³² Jane DeHart Mathews, The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967) 163-64.

²³³ Flanagan, Arena 286. This play, "a thinly disguised dramatization of the notorious Reichstag fire trial," was "pooh-poohed as exaggerates and alarmist" after its opening in 1934 in New York. It was nearly censored in London, played for only one night in Oslo, and denied permission in Paris and Amsterdam. See Elmer Rice, The Living Theatre (New York: Harper, 1959) 279-80.

to its favored political appointees.²³⁴

However, there were success stories. The Indianapolis unit was headed by Dr. Lee Norvelle, who had been granted a year's leave from the University of Indiana. He was friends with the local WPA official and so had the backing of both local and city government. They managed to employ 115 theatre professionals on relief. Their first play, Booth Tarkington's Clarence, was attended by numerous dignitaries, including the Indianapolis mayor and the governor of Indiana.²³⁵

Even better, in New Orleans, the Theatre Project had the simultaneous endorsement of the church, both Catholic and Protestant, and state, no matter the political affiliation. When threats were first made to the Project in 1939, the state administrator, Mr. Crutcher, offered to make cuts in other projects in order to keep the Theatre Project. In fact, at the time of the FTP closure in June of that year, the New Orleans Civic Council was on the verge of laying aside \$6000/year to make a state theatre.²³⁶ This was exactly the kind of support that Flanagan had hoped for (even if it did not come to fruition), that local governments and neighborhoods would be inspired by the FTP and include theatre as part of their communities.

²³⁴ Flanagan, Arena 247.

²³⁵ Flanagan, Arena 154-55.

²³⁶ Flanagan, Arena 87.

Chapter 7: By People

It shall be unlawful for any person to deprive, attempt to deprive, or threaten to deprive, by any means, any person of any employment, position, work, compensation, or other benefit, provided for or made possible by the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1938 or this joint resolution, on account of race, creed, color, or any political activity, support of, or opposition to any candidate or any political party in any election.²³⁷

Public Resolution number 10, 76th Congress

The FTP's primary goal was to employ out of work theatre professionals without any other qualifiers. Like the earlier non-commercial theatres, the project sought people who were interested in the craft of theatre. Unlike the earliest companies, however, FTP had the luxury to hire professionals. Because the FTP, like Theatre Union and the Shock Troupe, had more than talented amateurs, the company had more credibility (although, as we have seen, it took some time before the FTP's professionalism was recognized). However, because of the economic basis of the FTP, the hiring of professionals was not just a luxury, but also an imperative. Due to WPA rules and pressure from unions, those equipped merely with talent, such as recent college graduates, were barred from WPA employment. In October of 1935, Flanagan announced that only those who had previously made a living in theatre and who would be able to make a living in theatre in the future would be hired.²³⁸

Hallie Flanagan, as the head of the FTP, was one of the reasons that the FTP was focused on people. Flanagan was chosen specifically by WPA head, Harry Hopkins, because she did not have any Broadway experience. "It's got to be run," he told her, "by

²³⁷ Public Resolution number 10, 76th Congress (Washington: GPO), qtd. in Flanagan, *Arena* 36.

²³⁸ O'Connor and Brown 3.

a person who isn't interested just in the commercial type of show."²³⁹ On the contrary, as a Guggenheim Fellow, Flanagan had spent fourteen months studying the theatres of Europe, particularly in Russia, and was at the time producing and directing experimental plays at Vassar College. Flanagan had studied with George Pierce Baker at Harvard in one of the country's first playwriting workshops (which also trained such playwrights as Eugene O'Neill, George Sklar, and Albert Maltz).²⁴⁰ Flanagan then chose regional and state directors for much the same reason- that they were not driven to produce plays simply to make money. These men and women chose to use their theatrical careers to present new ideas to new audiences.

Of the original eleven regional directors, only one, Elmer Rice, was a Broadway playwright. Even Rice, however, had resigned from Broadway because, he said, the profit system "stifles the creative impulse and dams the free flow of human vitality."²⁴¹ The rest were directors of regional theatres, chosen for their familiarity with operating theatres with local people. Flanagan chose such distinguished men as Jasper Deeter, founder of Pennsylvania's Hedgerow Theatre and former Workers' Drama League member; Glenn Arthur Hughes, director of Theatre at the University of Washington; Frederick McConnell, director of the Cleveland Community Playhouse; E.C. Mabie, director of Theatre at Iowa University; and Gilmore Brown, director of the experimental Pasadena Playhouse.²⁴² Although all were distinguished in their field, none, with the

²³⁹ O'Connor and Brown 2.

²⁴⁰ Bentley 31.

²⁴¹ Williams 222.

²⁴² Lorraine Brown, "Federal Theatre: Melodrama, Social Protest, and Genius," The American Memory Project, 1999, Library of Congress, 15 Jul. 2004 <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/ftbrwn01.html>>.

exception of Rice, was involved in commercial theatre. Flanagan felt that this would give them an insight into theatre for people rather than profit.

In addition to the directors were the performers, technicians, and other support. For the most part, they were not famous or elite, but members of a profession that had been hit hard by both the Depression and the growing popularity of movies. During the Depression, there were an estimated 40,000 destitute theatre workers. Not only did they lose their primary means of income, theatre, but they were further unable to find part-time work in between theatre jobs.²⁴³ Flanagan took these people and put them in the many and varied units.

The vaudevillians were one of the most affected theatre groups to be aided by the FTP. Not only had the Depression put many of these people out of work, but the growing popularity of movies and radio, much cheaper than live theatre, drew away its former working class audiences. Except for the stars in the few shows that remained, the small-time acts and former stars found work with the FTP vaudeville unit (part of the Variety Theatre), headed by Broadway actor and producer Eddie Dowling. These shows proved immensely popular, particularly for the free park, hospital, prison, and settlement house shows. The vaudevillians also were an important component in the Living Newspaper productions, as well as many of the children's shows.²⁴⁴

Circus performers were in similar straits to the vaudevillians. Dependent on travel and the spare change of those in small and large towns alike, the Depression caused

²⁴³ Rabkin 98. Most actors have to supplement their income by part-time work as there are always more actors than jobs. During the Depression, part-time work was just as sought after as full-time work and actors simply could not find the extra income. This was also true of other art groups.

²⁴⁴ Jeanne S. Burch, "FTP Vaudeville," from Brenda Zanger Greene et al., "People's Theatre: 1935- 1939," Federal One 5.1 (1980): 10.

the closure of many small circuses. The FTP was able to absorb many of these circuses and, because their acts were already established, was able to open immediately. The first WPA performance was the FTP Circus, given in October of 1935 in Brooklyn. Traveling between New York and New Jersey, it employed such entertainers as Kate Sandwina, renowned strong woman, inveterate (and one-armed) animal trainer Ernest Engerer, world famous clown Oscar Lowande, and a young aerial duo - Nick Cravat and Burt Lancaster.

The circus did pose a special problem for the FTP. Most of these acts were composed of whole families, and WPA rules stated that only one member of a family could draw a project paycheck. Some families, therefore had to be creative with their listed jobs; in one family, the father worked as the head of the cook tent, while the daughter performed in the ring, assisted by her mother. The only other documented WPA circuses were in Boston and Iowa; a few others toured the country, but the unit, also part of the Variety Theatre, remained small.²⁴⁵

Another group of people that made up an integral part of the FTP was blacks. Although used or imitated in blackface in minstrel shows, blacks were not sought as performers or audience of white theatre until the advent of the Theatre Union.²⁴⁶ The FTP had sixteen Negro units in cities such as New York, Boston, Seattle, and Los Angeles. In a country dominated by Jim Crow laws, with the civil rights movement still more than two decades in the future, these units wished to show that black Americans,

²⁴⁵ All information on the circus from Greene et al. 11-14.

²⁴⁶ Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression (New York: Oxford UP, 1974) 66.

too, were talented and just as deserving of help as white Americans. They performed a wide range of productions from Aristophanes to Shakespeare, from Gilbert and Sullivan to Eugene O'Neill.²⁴⁷ These units performed 55 separate works, most of them new, original works. Rosetta LeNoire, actress with the New York Negro Unit, recalled many fights in the lobby of theatres where the Negro Unit played over the suitability of blacks playing Shakespeare. She remembered, "if it was a maid's role, go ahead, but if it was something from the classics, no."²⁴⁸

Not only were black actors encouraged and supported by the FTP, but black playwrights, such as Ted Ward, Theodore Brown, and Frank Wilson, were encouraged to pen plays that reflected true black-American experience, rather than stereotypes.²⁴⁹ For example, Conjur' Man Dies, the first black-American mystery novel, written in 1932 by Rudolph Fisher, was adapted to the stage and played to 83,000 people in Harlem.²⁵⁰ In addition, the FTP was the first to hire black technicians in professional theatre, thus breaking the union stranglehold backstage.²⁵¹ (Although unions were created for workers, IATSE did not formally and fully integrate its locals until 1964.²⁵²)

FTP success was measured by feats such as the seven-month New York run, and a nationwide tour, of Macbeth (in which Orson Welles made use of an African dance

²⁴⁷ O'Connor and Brown 18.

²⁴⁷ Interview with Rosetta LeNoire, Bonnie Nelson Schwartz and the Educational Film Center, Voices from the Federal Theatre (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2003) 23.

²⁴⁹ Williams 230.

²⁵⁰ Who Killed the Federal Theatre?, dir. Bonnie Nelson Schwartz and the Educational Film Center, 2003; Flanagan, Arena 69.

²⁵¹ Schwartz 23.

²⁵² Ben Stahl, Labor Leadership in Civil Rights at the Local Level: The Story of the Philadelphia AFL-CIO Human Rights Committee, 1957-1965, 5 Jan. 2004, Drexel U, 22 Jul. 2004 <<http://www.cis.drexel.edu/faculty/gerry/personal/family/ben/humrgts.html>>.

company stranded in New York and a practicing witch doctor).²⁵³ The San Francisco production of Run, Little Chillun drew some audience members to see the show every night,²⁵⁴ and its Los Angeles production earned enough revenue to buy new equipment, sets, and costumes for all the other Los Angeles units.²⁵⁵

FTP wasn't limited to actors. It also employed technicians, designers, play readers, ushers, cleaners, and other support who worked hard behind the scenes to make those on the stage be seen. Employing these people was a new experience, as a standard theatre company generally did not have to concern itself with keeping most of these positions on payroll. Designers were brought in on a contract basis and the rest usually came with the theatre building rather than the company. Nonetheless, these people were part of the workforce that made up ninety percent of FTP costs.

Many found themselves in demand after their work with the Project. For example, George Izenour was hired by Flanagan on a whim and became director of lighting for all seven Los Angeles theatres. Izenour later went on to become a professor at Yale and to design the forerunner of modern dimming consoles.²⁵⁶ Also a lighting designer, Jean Rosenthal began as an assistant in the FTP and ended up a Broadway designer and technical director for the Martha Graham Dance Company, not an easy task for a woman at that time.²⁵⁷

Another important group included in the FTP was the Dance Unit. Dancers had been part of the Workers' Theatre movement, but rarely as part of any theatre company.

²⁵³ O'Connor and Brown 8.

²⁵⁴ Flanagan, Arena 290.

²⁵⁵ O'Connor 98.

²⁵⁶ O'Connor and Brown 5.

²⁵⁷ Schwartz and the Educational Film Center 56.

The FTP realized that dance was important part of theatre and had three different units - a repertory recital group, an experimental group, and a service group to supply choreographers and dancers to other theatre units, such as opera and vaudeville. Dancers, however, did not feel that being a portion of the theatre gave them enough resources and soon began lobbying for a Project of their own. Flanagan petitioned and received support for the Federal Dance Project in the form of \$150,000 to last from January to June of 1936, including appropriations for costumes and scenery, a theatre, support staff, and 185 dancers.²⁵⁸

Although the FDT was absorbed back into the FTP in October of 1937, it presented a number of seminal works for dance in America, such as Trojan Incident, Mother Goose on Parade, Americana, and Eternal Prodigal. However, the longest running, and most influential, dance program was Charles Weidman's revival of his Candide and Tamiris' original work How Long Brethren?. These pieces, presented on one program, played all summer and fall for a total of 41 performances to 24,235 admissions.²⁵⁹ Tamiris' work was a suite of dances based on Negro spirituals. The dancers were accompanied by a full orchestra and a twenty voiced gospel choir (members of the Federal Theatre Negro Choir). According to dance critic Henry Gilfond, Tamiris "presented one of the most exciting compositions of this or any season."²⁶⁰ Tamiris had taken an American topic, accompanied it with American folk music, and given the audience a social issue to think about. And the audience loved it.

²⁵⁸ Ellen Graff, Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942 (Durham: Duke UP, 1997) 80.

²⁵⁹ Grant Code, "Dance Theatre of the WPA: A Record of National Accomplishment, Part II," Dance Observer Nov. 1939: 280.

²⁶⁰ Henry Gilfond, "Review: Tamiris—Charles Weidman," Dance Observer June-July 1937: 68.

A much smaller unit was found in Muskogee, Oklahoma, at the Oklahoma School for the Blind. The unit consisted of only the director, who was completely blind, and his assistant. The actors were all students of the school, who memorized the scripts transcribed into Braille and performed for their fellow students, their teachers, family, and friends. With the exception of a thin strip of carpet at the front of the stage (to warn the actors of the edge), it would have been difficult for a sighted member of the audience to tell that the performers were blind.²⁶¹

The people of the FTP should not simply be remembered for the inclusive hiring practices of Flanagan and her directors. These were people who felt a connection with their communities and knew that a play was only as good as its audience's reaction. To that extent, there have been countless stories of this special connection. For example, in January of 1937, an devastating flood hit Cincinnati, submerging the electric plant and water works. Homes and stores were destroyed and all businesses were closed. The local unit accompanied food and medical aid trucks to victims of the flood. They played forty engagements for fourteen days, to 14,000 people, and yet some of the actors were victims of the flood themselves.²⁶²

In Gary, Indiana, the FTP took over the nearly failed marionette theatre of Betty Kessler Lyman. She and her husband had turned their home into a workshop and theatre to teach children to make the puppets and to perform with them. The FTP provided ten people for technical support and assistance while the actual performers were the children. This small unit gave 179 free performances to 66,980 children; neither the children who

²⁶¹ Flanagan, *Arena* 99.

²⁶² Rabkin 95.

performed nor the ones who watched had any other form of entertainment. Flanagan continually had to explain to state WPA officials that the children were not on payroll, but the unit closed in 1938 due to Lyman's health.²⁶³

Even though the FTP has been accused of causing the end of Workers' Theatre companies, particularly Theatre Union and Workers' Laboratory Theatre, it absorbed actors from these groups into various units, including the Children's Units and the One-Act Experimental Theatre Unit. When the WLT closed for financial reasons, the members of the Shock Troupe (the more professional performers) gravitated towards the stability of the FTP. After performing one bill of short plays as the Experimental Theatre, the unit was closed and the actors moved to other units.²⁶⁴ The Theatre Union, too, lost actors to the FTP, and eventually closed. However, as Williams writes, "they brought with them their determination to do social-conscious works if they could and to reach the mass of the non-theatre-going public."²⁶⁵

Flanagan wrote of the FTP actors and other workers in Arena, "It was because of them, because of their courage, their willingness to try new things, their will to believe, that. . . the Federal Theatre had a voluminous press filling many volumes, in the main favorable. . . Literary Digest wrote in 1936, "'the greatest producer of hits is the Federal

²⁶³ Flanagan, Arena 152-53.

²⁶⁴ Douglas McDermott, "The Workers' Laboratory Theatre: Archetype and Example," qtd. in McConachie and Friedman 125.

Perry Bruskin, actor from the WLT's Theatre of Action, had been assigned to the Children's Theatre Unit in New York. He recalls his part in a show called Horse Play: "Here I was a rear end of a horse being cheered by kids. What else can you take with you for life? It was beautiful" (qtd. in Schwartz and the Educational Film Center 8).

²⁶⁵ Williams 232.

Government.””²⁶⁶ Between its inception in 1935 and closure in 1939, the FTP employed an average of 10,000 people per year. Of these, 2,660 were able to return to private industry as a direct result of their work at the FTP.²⁶⁷ By 1939, the FTP units were bringing in enough revenue to cover all costs but labor.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Flanagan, Arena 80.

²⁶⁷ Buttitta and Witham 231.

²⁶⁸ Himmelstein 110.

Chapter 8: About People

Giving apoplexy to people who consider it radical for a government-sponsored theatre to produce plays on subjects vitally concerning the governed is one function of the theatre...The Federal Theatre must continue to be, among other things, a thorn in the flesh of the body politic. I say "among other things" because while social plays such as the Living Newspapers...are undoubtedly the most important achievements of the Federal Theatre so far, they are by no means the only avenues of its expression.²⁶⁹

Hallie Flanagan

The earlier theatre companies focused on political, economic, and social injustice, sometimes offering solutions, sometimes simply agitating. With the exception of the Group Theatre, the protagonist was always a member of the working class, as was the intended audience. The FTP, on the other hand, while offering some of this same fare, realized that people went to the theatre for other reasons as well. It recognized that people were not always workers, and did not have to be constantly rallied against their oppressors. Flanagan wanted the plays to say something timely to the audience, yet "not always by Lenin's blood streaming from the firmament."²⁷⁰

The nearly one thousand different productions are too numerous to study each for their content, but the selection was great and varied. Some of the plays presented were by Shakespeare and Ibsen, introducing classics to those who never had had the opportunity to see them. Some educated their audiences in the history of the community or country. There was vaudeville, marionette, dance, even circus. In addition, plays were put on for children, non-English speakers, and those in hospitals and asylums. Due to

²⁶⁹ Hallie Flanagan, "Theatre and Geography," *Magazine of Art* Aug. 1938: 1.

²⁷⁰ Hallie Flanagan in *Federal Theatre* 4: 5, qtd. in Goldstein 251.

their limited subjects, the earlier companies had limited audiences, and could not, therefore, serve all people. The FTP was diverse enough that it could reach nearly anyone.

In recognition of the importance of the work of the earlier companies, FTP produced some of the most successful plays put on by Theatre Union and the Group Theatre. These plays included Stevedore, Let Freedom Ring, Waiting for Lefty, House of Connelly, Awake and Sing (done in Yiddish), and Johnny Johnson. While these plays were all born of the social unrest of the 1930's, they were not all labor plays. Particularly in the case of the Theatre Union plays, Federal Theatre was able to present a better production (real costumes, better lighting and scenery) and reach a wider audience.

FTP did a great many classics from authors such as Shakespeare, Aristophanes, and Molière. Of the thirty-one pre-Ibsen classics, seventeen were plays by Shakespeare. Most were comedies, such as The Comedy of Errors and A Midsummer Night's Dream, and tragedies like Hamlet and Macbeth, but they also performed more difficult works like Richard III and Coriolanus.²⁷¹ They also performed modern classics from the likes of Ibsen, Chekhov, and Oscar Wilde. These works were performed not only in cultural centers such as New York City and Los Angeles, but also in more ordinary towns like Lynn, Massachusetts; Des Moines, Iowa; and Tampa, Florida.

Both George Bernard Shaw and Eugene O'Neill allowed FTP to perform their plays for small royalties. Shaw gave his plays for nationwide performance for a rate of \$50 per week and declared, "As long as you stick to your fifty-cent maximum for

²⁷¹ Flanagan, Arena 399-400.

admission. . . you can play anything of mine you like. . . Any author of serious plays who does not follow my example does not know what is good for him.”²⁷² Eugene O’Neill offered his plays on the same terms. Both of these men were leading English language playwrights of the time. FTP was able to offer plays such as Arms and the Man and Pygmalion, by Shaw, and Ah, Wilderness! and Anna Christie, by O’Neill. It was in part due to plays such as these that FTP earned credibility with experienced playgoers and theatre critics.

At the other end of the spectrum were plays created specifically for the Project. Most apparent were the Living Newspapers. The title, “Living Newspaper,” came from the Soviet Blue Blouses’ dramatizations of news stories for their comrades who could not read. This model had also been used in cabarets in Europe and even in the earlier Workers’ Theatres in the U.S.²⁷³ It was Flanagan who took the concept even further and made it into a full, theatrical production.²⁷⁴ Elmer Rice (persuaded to join the FTP, in part, by the vision of the Living Newspaper) contacted Heywood Broun, national president of the American Newspaper Guild, who gave sponsorship of the New York City chapter.²⁷⁵ Created like a written newspaper, complete with editors, reporters, and copyreaders, these shows took pertinent, newsworthy subjects and, with the help of techniques borrowed from film and radio, presented a visual journal. The subjects were

²⁷² qtd. in Flanagan, Arena 192. To put the royalty fee in perspective- there were nine Shaw plays that were performed several times in numerous cities between April of 1937 and June of 1939, a total of 116 weeks or \$5,800. In 2003, one musical was performed in one local theatre for four weeks for a royalty of \$1,500.

²⁷³ Williams 224.

²⁷⁴ The first Flanagan Living Newspaper was E=mc², performed at Vassar. Norman Lloyd interview in Schwartz and the Educational Film Center 28.

²⁷⁵ Buttitta and Witham 35.

housing, power and electricity, farming, even syphilis.²⁷⁶ There were no stars, no real plots, heroes or romances, just facts about common people struggling to live their lives.

Although these dramatizations were supposed to be presented as objectively as a newspaper (however objective that might be), the writers tended to present their own opinions within the plots. Flanagan became upset with Chief Editor Morris Watson and director Joe Losey over insinuations found in Triple-A Plowed Under and Injunction Granted. When they replied that the plays were drawing crowds, Flanagan chided, “As I have repeatedly said I will not have the Federal Theatre used politically. I will not have it used to further the ends of the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, or the Communist Party.”²⁷⁷

One of the most popular FTP Living Newspapers was One-Third of a Nation. This production dealt with housing, or, rather, its lack. Taken from FDR’s Second Inaugural speech, “I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished,” it was a final project of the Federal Summer Theatre, held at Vassar in 1937.²⁷⁸ When the play opened on Broadway in 1938, Brooks Atkinson wrote, “Even a cash customer would describe it as vivid theatre.”²⁷⁹ He went on to praise the production, “‘One-Third of a

²⁷⁶ The first Living Newspaper subject was the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (again making use of the stranded African dancers). Before opening, the federal government issued the order that no living head of state was to be represented on stage, which ultimately caused the show to fold before opening and Elmer Rice to leave the FTP. See Flanagan, Arena 5.

²⁷⁷ Who Killed the Federal Theatre?; Flanagan, Arena 73.

²⁷⁸ Flanagan, Arena 211.

²⁷⁹ Brooks Atkinson, rev. of One-Third of a Nation, New York Times 18 Jan. 1938, from Bernard Beckerman and Howard Siegman, eds., On Stage: Selected Theatre Reviews from the New York Times, 1920-1970 (New York: Arno, 1973) 196.

Nation' is a notable job in the simplification of New York real estate history and the ever-recurring housing scandals that are bound up with supply and demand."²⁸⁰

This production begins with a tenement building catching fire, many of its inhabitants dying due to the poor conditions of the structure. Like all of the Living Newspapers, this was based on a true incident, but in this case, it could have been one of many; the script indicates three within six days in New York of 1924. It then traces the history of land ownership and housing development, the voice of the Loudspeaker guiding the Little Man from 1705 to the play's present, 1938. The entire eighteen scenes were researched and documented with the care of a thesis. It ends with the Little Man and his wife demanding of Washington "a decent place to live in... a place that's clean and fit for a man and woman and kids!" while a new tenement fire has begun in the background.²⁸¹ The play was adapted in many cities, such as Detroit and Philadelphia, for their own housing problems.²⁸² Although Flanagan had demanded that the FTP produce plays free of political affiliation, she certainly was not opposed to voicing the concerns of those who had difficulty voicing them on her own.

And yet, even the Living Newspapers touched upon subjects other than labor. Spirochete was about the history and prevention of syphilis. Beginning with a young couple faced with the necessity of a medical exam before obtaining a marriage license, the play traces the history of the disease from one of its first introductions to Europe to contemporary legislation in America. Written in Chicago, this Living Newspaper

²⁸⁰ Brooks Atkinson, rev. of One-Third of a Nation, from Beckerman and Siegman 196.

²⁸¹ Pierre de Rohan, ed., Federal Theatre Plays: Prologue to Glory, One-Third of a Nation, and Haiti (New York: Random, 1938) 120.

²⁸² Flanagan, Arena 163, 249.

production differed from the others in that it did not have myriad references to newspaper and government reports. What it did have was extensive scientific research, supervised by many leading medical men, including Surgeon General Thomas Parran.²⁸³ The play was then produced in many cities throughout the country, often supported by local medical boards in a campaign against the deadly disease.

Dance productions were on a myriad of subjects, from Americana to classic drama to children's theatre. Young Tramps, created for FTP by Don Oscar Becque, depicted American youth on the move due to the Depression. Myra Kinch's American Exodus was not only about the experience of American pioneers, but helped to pioneer an American voice in modern dance. Charles Weidman's Candide and Helen Tamiris' Trojan Incident were dance versions of the classic plays by Voltaire and Euripides. Dancers also contributed heavily to productions such as Mother Goose on Parade, Sing for Your Supper, and even somewhat in One-Third of a Nation.

Labor plays were also written for the FTP. Perhaps the most infamous was The Cradle Will Rock, a musical by Marc Blitzstein. The theme of this play (closed, like Ethiopia, before it opened), was anti-capitalism and employed devices, such as agit-prop, borrowed from workers' theatre. According to Blitzstein, "As people discover what, and who, is responsible for society's ills, they must and will rise to overthrow the chief capitalists and their middle-class servants."²⁸⁴

²⁸³ Flanagan, Arena 144.

²⁸⁴ Marc Blitzstein, The Cradle Will Rock, in The Best Short Plays of the Social Theatre, qtd. in Sam Smiley, The Drama of Attack: Didactic Plays of the American Depression (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1972) 134.

George Sklar's Life and Death of an American (the last play produced by the FTP) was the epitome of the working class American. It is the story of Jerry Dorgan, the first American born in the twentieth century. Through no fault of his own, Jerry is forced to leave high school when his father dies, gets a good job in the boom of the twenties, only to lose it in the Crash. While playing football in a park with his son, he is accidentally killed during a labor demonstration.²⁸⁵ The working-class audiences who saw this play could feel a kinship to Jerry since they, too, suffered from circumstances not of their making.

But not all plays had to deal with suffering. Horse Eats Hat, based on a French farce, was the first offering of the Welles/Houseman Project 891. It was a wild and colorful production that tended to confuse audiences, but left those who understood it screaming with laughter.²⁸⁶ The Royal Family, by comedic writers George Kaufman and Edna Ferber, tells of a family of thespians (based very loosely on the Barrymores), some of whom dare to defect to moving pictures or even to abandon the stage altogether.

Musicals and vaudeville were extremely popular forms that brought in audiences eager to laugh. Besides several Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, FTP produced classic musicals such as Babes in Toyland and Abu Hassan. In addition, there were several musicals and revues written by FTP staff. Ready! Aim! Fire! was a musical satire on dictatorships and was a big hit in Los Angeles.²⁸⁷ O Say Can You Sing and Sing for

²⁸⁵ John O'Connor, "Theatre for Working Class Audiences," from Greene 4.

²⁸⁶ O'Connor and Brown 37, 43.

²⁸⁷ Buttitta and Witham 175.

Your Supper were both revues based on the simple plot of Uncle Sam, faced with a crowd of unemployed performers, deciding to put them in a musical.²⁸⁸

The FTP also produced American plays. A stage version of Uncle Tom's Cabin played in tent shows in small towns like Peoria, Illinois. It also played in New York with an all black cast and orchestra.²⁸⁹ Prologue to Glory was a romantic account of the early life of Abraham Lincoln. Drama critic Burns Mantle wrote, "No citizen of these United States, native or in the making, should be permitted to miss it."²⁹⁰ There were also a number of plays written in America between the years of 1767 and 1900 that were used as familiar standards.

A completely new innovation for any theatre company was the inclusion of the several foreign language units. In the past, immigrant communities had their own theatre groups, some producing contemporary labor plays, some producing plays from their native countries. The FTP had units that played exclusively in French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Yiddish. These units were in cities where immigrant groups were strongly represented. Most of the plays they produced were either classics from their respective countries or plays written in their respective languages. However, there were translations of plays, such as Awake and Sing and Professor Mamlock (into Yiddish). All groups participated in the mass-produced It Can't Happen Here, each translating and adapting the play. Members of the various units further were loaned to other projects, such as the

²⁸⁸ Buttitta and Witham 195. Musicals also have the advantage of not only employing a large number of performers, but also the ability to put the lesser talented ones at the back of the stage.

²⁸⁹ Flanagan, Arena 240.

²⁹⁰ This review appeared in the Daily News, a paper known for being anti-New Deal. qtd. in Buttitta and Witham 181.

production of Created Equal; this play traced the history of the country and used actors from the Italian and Negro units.²⁹¹

Regional theatres produced plays written by and/or about the history and people of their areas. This was remarkable in that it gave the local audiences a chance to speak and learn about themselves. The Theatre of the Southwest, directed by Virginia Farmer, wrote and produced a cycle of plays on the history of California. The subjects of this cycle were Spanish conquistadors, prospectors, railroad workers, and contemporary agriculturists.²⁹² The Oklahoma Federal Theatre sought stories and folklore from its residents to produce its plays and radio programs.²⁹³ The project in Oregon produced a series of dances on the subject of flax, an important industry of the state's Willamette Valley.²⁹⁴ The Lost Colony, a play about the deserted colony of Roanoke, drew an average of one thousand people a week for three years because its subject was, according to its author Paul Green, "not just good men and great- all sorts of men."²⁹⁵

In Alabama, Altars of Steel was written by Thomas Hall-Rogers, an author from Birmingham. The local play bureau accepted it after John Temple Graves, a local lawyer and newspaperman, challenged the FTP to find a Southern subject somewhere between "moonlight and magnolia" and "Tobacco Road."²⁹⁶ This play, written in the South, on a subject that affected Southern life, brought crowds to the theater and created talk and controversy.

²⁹¹ Flanagan, Arena 228.

²⁹² Flanagan, Arena 283.

²⁹³ Flanagan, Arena 99.

²⁹⁴ Flanagan, Arena 298.

²⁹⁵ qtd. in Flanagan, Arena 111. This play is still running on Roanoke Island.

²⁹⁶ John Temple Graves, from the Birmingham Age-Herald, 7 Oct. 1936. qtd. in Flanagan, Arena

Another unique unit to the FTP was the Theatre of the Air, the national radio unit. Although meeting with initial resistance, this division played for three years, presenting approximately 2,000 programs each year, which were released through commercial stations and networks such as NBC and CBS. These programs, like the FTP offerings as a whole, were extremely varied in subject. Some were dramatizations of playwrights and authors such as Ibsen, Molière, Irving, and Dickens, as well as modern authors. There were children's programs, history programs, science programs, and health programs. Theatre of the Air also worked with the Federal Music Project to present scripts written for many classical composers. There were units in twelve states that both wrote their own programs, as well as producing those of the New York unit.²⁹⁷

One of the FTP's most notorious plays was a children's play, The Revolt of the Beavers. Rabkin writes that although this was a children's play, it "contains, in miniature, the prototypes of proletarian drama."²⁹⁸ The plot tells the simple tale of two children helping a town of beavers regain the products of their work from their wicked chief. The story can be seen as an incitement to Marxism and strikes, or as a celebration of democracy (or even, perhaps, a fable for children to stand up to bullies), but the characters of the story were not superheroes, merely ordinary people (or beavers) who wanted to better their lives.

Children's plays were written or adapted for a young audience, but were often also about children. Stories such as Hansel and Gretel, Jack and the Beanstalk, and The Emperor's New Clothes all had children as heroes, often outsmarting adults. Although

²⁹⁷ Flanagan, Arena 268-69.

²⁹⁸ Rabkin 112.

children are not traditionally counted as active members of society, particularly not by Workers' Theatres, Flanagan recognized that they, too, were capable of teaching and learning through theatre. And yet, just as with the plays for adults, children were also treated to plays that made them laugh and cheer and escape from the harshness of life during the Depression.

Chapter 9: For People

...it is up to us to study this vast new audience; to give this audience something which they cannot get in any other form of entertainment; and to give it at a price which they can afford to pay.²⁹⁹

Hallie Flanagan

“The arts projects were being set up to deal with physical hunger, but was there not another form of hunger with which we could rightly be concerned, the hunger of millions of Americans for music, plays, pictures, and books?”³⁰⁰ Such were the thoughts of Hallie Flanagan, who wanted to create plays for all people. And in this venture, she was successful. As seen from the statistics at the beginning of this paper, the three and one half years of FTP productions played to audiences amounting to more than 30,398,726, from the Broadway carriage crowd to people who had never before seen live theatre.³⁰¹

The earlier theatre groups were particularly concerned with their audiences. All theatre companies are quite naturally interested in bringing as many people to their performances as possible. Those with a message for the working class, such as Theatre Union and the Workers’ Laboratory Theater, did all that they could to put working class people in their theatres. Unfortunately, they mostly reached others who wanted to help the working class, rather than the working class itself. The Group Theatre, on the other hand, was simply interested in surviving as a theatre company. It therefore largely ignored the non-Broadway crowd in order to sell tickets.

²⁹⁹ Hallie Flanagan, “What Are We Doing” 6.

³⁰⁰ Flanagan, Arena 19.

³⁰¹ Flanagan, Arena 435.

Federal Theatre, on the other hand, was able to provide for audiences both experienced and those not. In New York, the theatre capital of America, both Johnny Johnson and Prologue to Glory were listed by drama critic Burns Mantle as a Best Play of the Year (for 1936-1937 and 1937-1938, respectively). FTP publicist Tony Buttitta remembers “first-nighters flashing jewels, silk hats, ermine, and silver minks” for the opening of Voodoo MacBeth.³⁰² Walt Disney attended Pinocchio eight times and then made it his next cartoon feature.³⁰³ In contrast, according to surveys taken in the first years of the project, up to sixty-five percent of the audiences were seeing a play for the first time.³⁰⁴

Flanagan wanted to combine groups who already came to see plays with those who did not, to bring all Americans to see plays. Because the bills were paid by the government, she did not have to worry about ticket prices and reaching out to only those who could afford theatre, and could, instead, concentrate on fitting the play to the playgoer. As pointed out by Willson Whitman, “Commercially produced, a play of immense popular appeal may not be seen at all by the audience which would love it but cannot afford it. It may be a commercial failure, but it cannot be said that it is not a popular play unless it is tried at popular prices.”³⁰⁵

³⁰² Buttitta and Witham 64.

³⁰³ Bentley 328.

³⁰⁴ O'Connor, “Theatre For Working Class Audiences,” in McConachie and Friedman 172. These surveys were taken at regular showings of plays, and did not include special performances. Special performances were given, free, to hospitals, orphanages, Civilian Conservation Corps camps, prisons, and other out of the ordinary venues.

³⁰⁵ Whitman 143.

To this end, the FTP also employed publicists and press agents on relief to bring in specific audiences, including labor unions.³⁰⁶ One of the onerous rules governing the project was that it was restricted in its use of newspaper advertising. As a result, these publicists had to work with more creative ways of getting the word out. In addition to using signs and posters, publicity stunts and promotional tie-ins, and the FTP's own radio unit, they relied on group sales and scholastic press to bring in large groups.³⁰⁷ Like Theatre Union (in fact, it hired Theatre Unions former sales agent, Margaret Larkin), FTP offered blocks of tickets to charitable organizations, unions, hospitals, and social groups at a discount to be sold at full price. So popular was this form of sales that by 1939, 12,000 organizations, representing approximately four million people, were involved with block sales, or nearly half of all FTP sales.³⁰⁸

In addition, FTP realized that many people were unable to travel to cities where theatre occurred, or were intimidated by live theatres. To counter this, bus trips were organized, notably in Manhattan, to bring people with their friends and neighbors to the more elaborate productions. In other cases, theatre was brought to the smaller communities. The Suitcase Theatre, supervised by Stephen Karnot, formerly of the WLT, had over 600 bookings and an audience of over 900,000 in its first two years.³⁰⁹

Flanagan also felt that it was important to utilize and strengthen the communities in which the units played. The Community Drama Unit was created to guide social centers in developing dramatic interests among their citizens. Its directors were

³⁰⁶ Hyman 130.

³⁰⁷ Buttitta and Witham 129.

³⁰⁸ O'Connor, in McConachie and Friedman 172. Block or group sales remains a viable method of ticket sales for theatre.

³⁰⁹ O'Connor, in McConachie and Friedman 174.

instructed to work with the leaders of these organizations to produce plays created by the community members. For example, Herbert Price and Mary Dirnberger were sent to the rural, poor South. They began by creating a place for people to recite ballads, folk songs, or do dances. The older people chanted sagas of their life experiences. Coal miners in West Virginia were encouraged to write a play about themselves. In one of the more touching stories to come out of the FTP, a small girl in Georgia attempted to smuggle home a puppet she had made for a local puppet theatre. She refused to give it up, saying, "Hit's mine. Hit's the onliest thing I ever had what was mine." The theatre temporarily changed its task so that every child in the area had his or her own corncob doll. Although the project itself closed in 1939, when Flanagan wrote Arena the following year, she noted that "plays are still going on in unexpected places in the Black Ankle Belt."³¹⁰

Children were, indeed, one of the foci of the project. Elbert B. Sargent, head of Cleveland's Theatre for Youth, wrote, "They are actual playgoers and if we treat them as adults and do not try to fool them, they instinctively take to good theatre."³¹¹ Theatre was also used for young people as an attempt to prevent juvenile delinquency. The first such experiment was in Brooklyn where a project was set up for educational drama, working closely with the superintendent of schools, the Juvenile Aid Bureau, and other civic agencies.³¹² In Los Angeles, the Chief of Police wrote that the Friday night FTP shows at local high schools played a big part in the prevention of juvenile delinquency; "we want to go on record at this time asking for its continuation, as any decrease... would directly

³¹⁰ Flanagan, Arena 91-92.

³¹¹ Flanagan, Arena 169.

³¹² Whitman 67.

hinder us in our efforts to reduce delinquency.”³¹³

Children weren’t the only members of the community to benefit from Flanagan’s plans. In Milwaukee, the project closed in October, 1936, because the director, Laura Sherry chose plays that did not serve the diverse population. From this failure Flanagan learned, “Federal Theatre could never succeed unless it became part of community life.”³¹⁴ The project took this notion and put units in unlikely places such as reformatories, prisons, asylums, orphanages, and hospitals.

For example, children with crippled hands learned how to use marionettes, which gave them pleasure as well as painful but necessary exercise. In reformatories, psychiatrists claimed that the reactions of patients to certain performed scenes helped with diagnosis. Prison wardens reported that morale among the prisoners rose after FTP performances.³¹⁵ In a letter from the St. Francis Orphanage, Mother Hedwig wrote, “The play, ‘Feet on the Ground’ pleased us all very much for it was not only highly entertaining and excellently performed but educational as well.”³¹⁶ Even the police benefited from community outreach. Death Takes the Wheel was a marionette play on the dangers of reckless driving. Buffalo Commissioner of Police, James W. Higgins, wrote that he was “quite definitely impressed with the possibilities of this type of visual

³¹³ Flanagan, Arena 277.

³¹⁴ Flanagan, Arena 159.

³¹⁵ Flanagan, Arena 238.

³¹⁶ Mother Hedwig [of the St. Francis Orphanage in Reading, PA], letter to Hallie Flanagan, 30 Sept. 1936, reprinted in Federal Theatre Magazine 1.10 (1936): 18.

education” and required not only his entire Traffic Division to see it, but used it at the new Police Traffic School.³¹⁷

Another community that benefited from the FTP was blacks. As has been seen in previous chapters, the project believed in hiring black theatre performers and producing plays about the black community. Although the units were structured on a separate but equal basis, the audiences were treated with complete equality. Actor and director Alan Peters recalled an incident in Peoria in which he stopped the box office from selling gallery tickets to two African-Americans, rather than on the main floor. The box office man complained and reported him. Peters soon after received a phone call from a local Congressman, telling him that he could not do what he did. Peters replied, “The hell I can’t; I just did it, and I’ll do it again.”³¹⁸

Regional director H.C. Howard reported of his rural audiences, “They come from miles around on show nights, sit as near to the front as they can get and never want to go home when the play’s over!”³¹⁹ Similar reports came in from all parts of the country. In Valley, Nebraska, 800 of the town’s population of 1,000 tried to fit into the local schoolhouse to see the town’s first ever play.³²⁰ In a small southern town, the local unit gave a production of Twelfth Night. At the curtain call, there was no applause, causing the actors to think that they had utterly failed. Afterwards, however, as the actors were despondently removing their costumes and make-up, the townspeople slowly trickled in

³¹⁷ James W. Higgins, letter to Hallie Flanagan, Buffalo, NY, reprinted in Federal Theatre Magazine 1.10 (1936): 19.

³¹⁸ Interview with Alan Peters, in Schwartz and the Educational Film Center 39.

³¹⁹ Flanagan, Arena 150.

³²⁰ Flanagan, Arena 177.

to the dressing rooms to say that they had loved the play. When asked why they did not clap, they responded that they did not want to interrupt.³²¹

Why was it that the Federal Theatre was able to tap into Flanagan's "vast new audience"? There were many reasons that audiences, particularly working class audiences, did not go to live theatre - it was too expensive, it did not exist in their locale, radio and movies were more exciting (and more affordable). In addition, the styles of theatre that were most appealing to these people, melodrama and vaudeville, were the genres that were first and hardest hit by the effects of the Depression. Flanagan set out to meet these complaints by offering cheap or free tickets, performances that were easy to get to, and enticing plays, such as revivals of vaudeville shows, or plays that took advantage of the current technology to create exciting lights or sets.³²² In addition, the FTP presented plays that utilized slang, obscenity, and colloquialisms that made them realistic to working class audiences. And, in order to compete with movies, the plays were lively and fluid to keep the audience's attention.³²³

The FTP also participated with other WPA groups, notably the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Grace Heyward was the author of one of the FTP's most popular plays, CCC Murder Mystery, in which eight actors traveled to these camps to involve the youths in the play. Heyward traveled to many of the 258 camps to revise the play for that particular location. It involved one of the boys as a volunteer murder suspect and utilized other boys and officers as jurors. The play had no sets and only a

³²¹ Interview with Studs Terkel, in Schwartz and the Educational Film Center 50.

³²² O'Connor, in McConachie and Friedman 171-73.

³²³ O'Connor, in McConachie and Friedman 178.

few hand props, thus making it easy to travel to each camp. It had a captive and happy audience of nearly 300,000 boys.³²⁴

But the FTP did perform for the Broadway carriage crowd as well, and to critical acclaim. In addition to the above-mentioned Johnny Johnson and Prologue to Glory, plays such as Murder in the Cathedral, Voodoo Macbeth, Dr. Faustus, and Swing Mikado had long runs and popular appeal. Swing Mikado, in fact, was so popular that, after running for twenty two weeks, producer Michael Todd offered to buy it. When he was refused, Todd opened his own version, entitled Hot Mikado.³²⁵

Meanwhile, in San Francisco, the production Run, Little Chillun (another play by a Negro unit) was doing extremely well at the Alcazar (a West Coast version of a Broadway theatre). Its sell-out crowds were so excited about the show that some claimed to see it every night.³²⁶ In Los Angeles, the same production was so successful that its revenues, in spite of low ticket prices, were sufficient to purchase new equipment, sets, and costumes for all the other Los Angeles units.³²⁷

The epitome of the FTP's attempt to reach all people was the multi-city It Can't Happen Here. It opened on October 27, 1936, twenty two productions occurring simultaneously in eighteen cities (or as close to simultaneously as different time zones allowed), in three different languages. It ran for an equivalent of 260 weeks, or five

³²⁴ Buttitta and Witham 76.

³²⁵ Todd was able to perform this bit of chicanery because the original Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, The Mikado, was public domain. His version starred Bill Robinson and an erupting volcano, and sold tickets worth up to \$3.30, as opposed to the FTP's top price of \$1.10. Critics were divided as to the better show. Stanley Green, Broadway Musicals of the 30's (New York: Da Capo, 1971) 179.

³²⁶ Flanagan, Arena 290.

³²⁷ O'Connor 98.

years, to audiences numbering nearly 500,000.³²⁸ Not only was this a unique occurrence in theatre history for its large opening, but it was also adapted for each of the cities it played in. For example, in Birmingham, it was staged in the style of a southern political rally. The Spanish and Negro units emphasized the effects of white dictatorship on minorities.³²⁹

The critical acclaim of this play proved its absolute success. Up to opening night, newspapers and journals across the country had written 78,000 lines about the play, both pro and con.³³⁰ On opening night, telegrams from all over the country poured in to Flanagan, praising the production and reporting its triumph with audiences: *Bridgeport*: RECEPTION SPLENDID. *Miami*: AUDIENCE DEEPLY INTERESTED, ENTHUSIASTIC AT CURTAIN. *Omaha*: RECEIVED WITH ACCLAIM ACTORS GIVING FINE PERFORMANCE. Even commercial producer Lee Shubert enthused, "Critics won't like it, but it's got something for the audience- it's in for a long run."³³¹ The Broadway critics mostly agreed with *Herald Tribune* writer Richard Watts whose only real criticism was that it "does not make the attack on fascism as bitter and angry as it should."³³² Flanagan concluded that, "Above all it was significant that hundreds of thousands of people all over America crowded in to see a play that when dictatorship threatens a country...it may arrive in the form of a sudden silencing of free voices."³³³

³²⁸ O'Connor 59.

³²⁹ O'Connor 64.

³³⁰ Report from Ellen Woodward to Harry Hopkins on the Federal Arts, 5 Dec. 1936, qtd. in Flanagan, *Arena* 118.

³³¹ Flanagan, *Arena* 124-25.

³³² Buttitta and Witham 90.

³³³ Flanagan, *Arena* 129.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

It is probable that in the last four years more discussion of the theatre took place in the House and Senate and in congressional committees than in all the other years of our congressional history put together...No one fights over a dead art or a dead issue.³³⁴

Hallie Flanagan

For the final performance of Pinocchio, at the Ritz Theatre in New York, Yasha Frank improvised a new ending. Rather than the written ending, in which Pinocchio is granted life as a real boy, the cast placed the puppet in a pine coffin, bearing the epitaph- “Born December 23, 1938. Killed by Act of Congress June 30, 1939.” The audience joined the cast in a funeral march through the theatre and out onto the streets of New York.

Despite the enormous good that it did, the Project was federally funded and ultimately at the mercy of politicians. Three and one half years after it was begun, the Congressional Dies Committee convened for a series of hearings that ultimately closed the FTP. During these hearings, rather than pay attention to the good that theatre had done for the unemployed, including jobs for theatre workers and entertainment for the American people, congressmen queried Federal Theatre members on their political affiliations. Because of the relatively recent Russian Revolution, the infiltration of communists was seen and feared to be everywhere. Because it spoke directly to people, theatre was particularly scrutinized.

In August of 1938, Congressman J. Parnell Thomas was quoted as saying “practically every single play presented under the auspices of the Theatre Project is sheer

³³⁴ Flanagan, Arena 333.

propaganda for Communism or the New Deal.”³³⁵ Yet, members of the Theatre Project were rarely called upon to testify, and rarely listened to when they were. Emmet Lavery, a director of the federal theatre whose job it was to clear plays for production, wrote a letter to the Committee volunteering to testify; he was never called upon, nor even received an acknowledgment of his letter.³³⁶ Flanagan described one of the most famous moments in her particularly frustrating match with the Dies Committee:

...the phrase where I had described the enthusiasm of these theatres as having “a certain Marlowesque madness.”

“You are quoting from this Marlowe,” observed [Congressman] Mr. Starnes. “Is he a Communist?”

The room rocked with laughter, but I did not laugh. Eight thousand people might lose their jobs because a Congressional Committee had so pre-judged us that even the classics were “communistic.” I said, “I was quoting from Christopher Marlowe.”

“Tell us who this Christopher Marlowe is, so we can get the proper references, because that is all we want to do.”

“Put in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period of Shakespeare, immediately preceding Shakespeare.”

Mr. Starnes subsided.³³⁷

However, these congressmen must have been very clever indeed, for many of them never saw any of the productions.³³⁸

Of the 830 major titles produced by the FTP, 81 were criticized for content, which represented less than four percent of the total FTP productions. Of these 81, only 29 were FTP originals; five were never produced by the project at all and seven originated

³³⁵ Emmett Lavery, “Who Killed Federal Theatre?,” Commonwealth 4 Aug. 1938: 610.

³³⁶ Lavery 611.

³³⁷ Flanagan, Arena 342. This exchange took place on December 6 of 1938. And yet, in a letter to Flanagan dated December 22, 1938, as a reply to an invitation to actually see a FTP work, Pinocchio, Starnes wrote, “Undoubtedly the FTP has put on some very credible performances. You have had a difficult task, one which challenged your interest and your genius. I congratulate you upon the fine work you have been doing in rehabilitating theatre people.” Joe Starnes. Letter to Hallie Flanagan. 22 Dec. 1938. National Archives, Maryland.

³³⁸ Marian Roet, “The Dance Project of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre: A Description of its Organization, Activities and Accomplishments,” thesis, New York U, 1949, 37.

with local community groups. The remaining were mostly stock revivals, with a handful of classics, translations, and a children's play thrown in. Among the plays criticized were Prologue to Glory, the story of Lincoln's early life, and Candide, the dance interpretation of the classic comedy by Voltaire. Another was the musical Sing for Your Supper; its finale, "Ballad for Americans," became the theme song of the 1940 Republican National Convention.³³⁹

Another play accused of disseminating Communism was Revolt of the Beavers, a fable for children. On one hand, Burns Mantle called this play Marxism for Mother Goose and the Saturday Evening Post editorialized that poor children might be taught to murder rich children.³⁴⁰ On the other, Flanagan maintained that all fairy tales contain a child abused by a selfish adult, the child triumphant in the end, and that this story was no different.³⁴¹ Trained psychologists surveyed the young audiences and found only favorable reactions, such as "teaches us never to be selfish" and "it is better to be good than to be bad."³⁴²

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of Flanagan, Lavery, and thousands of others, on June 30 of 1939, Congress voted to end the Theatre Project. Rumors of cuts had begun as early as December of 1938. In January of 1939, Dance Observer ran an editorial, "WPA Must Go On," on its front cover; "The nation must not be robbed of its new birth of the arts. And workers in the arts must not be robbed of their daily bread." Yet robbed they were. On January 15, sixty-five percent were dismissed from WPA

³³⁹ Flanagan, Arena 432-34.

³⁴⁰ Himmelstein 103.

³⁴¹ Flanagan, Arena 200-01.

³⁴² Flanagan, Arena 342-43.

rolls. Several pieces had to be cut from the FTP performance calendar, including one entitled, ironically, Americana.

There has been much speculation as to the reasons for the FTP's closure.

According to the Dies Committee Report, filed January 3, 1939:

We are convinced that a rather large number of the employees on the Federal Theatre Project are either members of the Communist Party or are sympathetic with the Communist Party. It is also clear that certain employees felt under compulsion to join the Workers' Alliance in order to retain their jobs.³⁴³

It is ironic that the Dies Committee closed the FTP for its alleged communist affiliation when the project actually did a great deal towards putting real Marxist theatres out of business.³⁴⁴

However, there were obviously many other considerations. According to Himelstein, the Project was too controversial for a government project. It did not help the cause of the FTP that communists frequently protested on the FTP's behalf. In addition, there were many in Congress with puritanical leanings who hated theatre and the immorality they thought it brought. Finally, Himelstein concludes that the FTP closure was a political sacrifice, made by Roosevelt to protect other projects.³⁴⁵ Rabkin, in a rare moment of accord, comes to the same conclusions as Himelstein, and adds the FTP's nondiscrimination policy as a problem with Southern politicians. He further writes, "as the economy improved, the social forces which converged to create the Federal Theatre were dissipated."³⁴⁶ Williams provides the further insight that politicians

³⁴³ Flanagan, Arena 347.

³⁴⁴ Himelstein 112.

³⁴⁵ Himelstein 110.

³⁴⁶ Rabkin 121-23.

had accused the entire WPA project of boondoggling, but that the charge was difficult to make stick when bridges and roads were getting built. The arts projects, then, were a much easier target.³⁴⁷

Furthermore, the program was a branch of a relief project. The set-up was therefore based on expediency. People were out of work and starving in the *now* and couldn't wait while Flanagan and her troupe planned for the distant future. However, to survive, the Project needed a strong foundation to give theatre a basis to grow as an arts program. Had the various theatre, dance, opera, and other companies been given a chance to develop artistic goals, gather materials and designers, and slowly find the right personnel to perform, the government's theatre might have been a stronger structure that would have withstood the pressures of Congress.

The process for hiring also had to follow guidelines for feeding people rather than auditioning for a company. Employment was based more on economic need, and not necessarily talent. Many were talented, but, as John Martin writes of the dancers on the Project, "perhaps some are there who have been misguided in taking up the dance as a profession."³⁴⁸ As a result, it was sometimes difficult for critics to know whether to review a performance as a relief work or a professional work. This in turn made it difficult to assess properly the quality of the work being presented by the FTP. This appraisal was necessary in order to present to the public the success (or failure) of the project, which generally means more (or less) funding. Fortunately, in the case of the FTP, most of the major pieces presented were of good enough caliber that critics claimed

³⁴⁷ Williams 227.

³⁴⁸ John Martin, "The Dance: WPA Theatre," New York Times 16 May 1937.

that eventually allowances need not be made.³⁴⁹

Unfortunately, though, funding did not hinge upon the quality of the entertainment, nor on the vast numbers of people who were exposed to an art form that they had never before encountered. As this was a government-supported project, its life was dependent on politics and politicians. And politicians quite often had agendas that had nothing to do with the projects with which they were involved. The published reason given for the cut of the Project was economics, but in reality, the FTP used less than three-fourths of one percent of all WPA moneys. When it was cut, the Theatre money did not go back to other Congressional projects, but was redistributed among the other WPA projects.³⁵⁰ Even the president could not, or would not, extend the life of the FTP. As with any president, Roosevelt had his share of detractors, eager to undermine anything they could. Roosevelt, in turn, had to make concessions where he could, and, according to historian William Leuchtenberg, “threw his opponents some of his least popular experiments”³⁵¹ In this case, without a strong enough lobbying group behind it, the concession was the Theatre Project.

A further problem with government funding and theatre was censorship. Dance pieces like Young Tramps and How Long Brethren?, or plays such as It Can't Happen Here and The Cradle Will Rock voiced opinions on current social and political issues with which not everyone agreed. Before it opened, It Can't Happen Here was accused of

³⁴⁹ Martin, “The Dance.”

³⁵⁰ Flanagan, Arena 344.

³⁵¹ Leuchtenberg 273.

being everything from pro-Roosevelt to fascist to communist.³⁵² The Cradle Will Rock was closed by “budget cuts” before ever getting a chance to open.

There were also problems intrinsic to the FTP that contributed to its closure. The biggest was the conflict between the necessary purposes of relief and that of theatre. Relief is a temporary state, while drama, hopefully, is a permanent one, and so planning for a project of both permanence and impermanence is not easily workable.³⁵³ One of the biggest problems came with the budget cuts. If the FTP was solely a relief project, then the logical choice for cuts were the best workers who would be more easily assimilated into commercial work. On the other hand, in order to create a viable theatre, the least talented should have been let go in order to offer the best possible theatre to the American public. Nor did the American public understand that, when people came onto its projects they were no longer relief clients, but people doing work useful enough to be paid out of government funds. A further variance was between the theatre people of the FTP and the bureaucrats of the WPA. As we have seen in previous chapters, there were many clashes between directors at each level and the local WPA officials who did not know how theatre was to be run. As Flanagan pointed out, theatre must always move forward, while bureaucracy cannot take chances.³⁵⁴

And yet, despite all of these problems, both internal and external, the people were eager for its continuance. Commercial theatre threw itself into the fight to save the FTP by sending telegrams to Congress and the White House from Equity, IATSE, the Tri-

³⁵² Flanagan, Arena 117

³⁵³ Rabkin 100.

³⁵⁴ Flanagan, Arena 256.

Guilds of Hollywood, and all the other theatrical unions. Well-known individuals also lent their support, such as Eddie Cantor, Helen Hayes, Burgess Meredith, and Tallulah Bankhead.³⁵⁵ Performers such as Bankhead and Raymond Massey encouraged their audiences to protest the closing.³⁵⁶ Most telling, however, were protests from the audiences for whom the FTP had been created. Hospitals, orphanages, prisons, asylums, and many other institutions, as well as countless individuals sent their letters to Washington. 2,300 inmates of VA hospitals sent their letters asking for the FTP's continuation.³⁵⁷

It was this great amalgamation of people that proved the range of the Project and its ability to exceed its predecessors. Flanagan's point of view was that all theatre is influenced by those who pay the bills. This is true for commercial theatre, as well as college, workers', and community theatre. The type of plays produced must cater to the tastes of each theatre's financial contributors. Flanagan firmly believed that Federal Theatre was compelled to produce all genres of plays as "theatre supported by taxes from all the people must be a people's theatre."³⁵⁸ She therefore drew experienced audiences to see new stagings of classics and productions by renowned contemporary playwrights. These audiences, in turn, patronized lesser-known works because of the quality of the productions they had already seen.

FTP also appealed to working class audiences because, unlike the theatres created specifically for them, it offered a variety of drama. FTP did produce plays like Waiting

³⁵⁵ Buttitta and Witham 219. Tallulah Bankhead's father and uncle were both senators.

³⁵⁶ Interview with actor Jeff Corey, in Schwartz and the Educational Film Center 15.

³⁵⁷ Flanagan, Arena 238-39.

³⁵⁸ Flanagan, Arena 236.

for Lefty and Stevedore, but also comedies and dramas that were simply a means of escape from Depression life for an hour or two. Federal Theatre also had units to present vaudeville, marionettes, and dance-dramas, alternate genres to attract those who did not attend theatre much.³⁵⁹ This variety in theatre additionally drew audiences who had been filling movie houses to see that novel form of entertainment.

Audiences were also made. One of the provisos of the FTP was that performances were to be made available to audiences for low cost, often even for free. This applied to the whole country, rather than just big cities. The FTP sent companies to smaller towns, such as Peoria, Illinois; Gary, Indiana; Manchester, New Hampshire. These cities that were not centers of art were beneficiaries of affordable theatre. Even in New York City, audiences who were previously unable to see theatre because of prohibitive prices were finally exposed to live theatre and were able to develop a taste for it. But it was not just ticket prices that drew the new audiences. Affordability was, perhaps, the initial draw, but the great variety of subjects and quality of performances kept them returning.

However, the FTP could not have been created out of nothing. Its forerunners provided the foundation and vision. The first theatre groups to explore the working class as both audience and subject matter did little more than just that - explore. Because theatre had long been the domain of entertainment for the well to do, the worker did not often stand in the forefront. As a result, neither the companies nor the audiences were very polished. However, they did possess a great deal of energy and dedication. Art and

³⁵⁹ Himelstein 86.

cause were married in a way not before seen in the U.S. Companies such as the Prolet-Bühne and the Workers' Laboratory Theatre provided the foundation upon which the next groups could build. According to Colette Hyman, groups such as these "provided Hallie Flanagan with much of the vision that guided her work in the Federal Theatre."³⁶⁰

The Theatre Union, too, was part of the foundations of Federal Theatre. By using professional actors, it was able to show that quality theatre could be produced both about and for the working class. Theatre Union's biggest hit, Stevedore, in fact, was later produced by the Seattle Negro unit and ran for more than one year. In addition to contributing to the performance aspect, Theatre Union set the precedence for welcoming non-Broadway audiences. It was were the first to set ticket prices low enough for the working class to afford and refused to discriminate against black patrons. Flanagan continued these practices in her quest to bring theatre to all Americans.

The Group Theatre contributed to the FTP in a different manner. The previous companies were stymied by their search for plays that supported the cause of the working class. The Group, on the other hand, looked first for quality scripts. Its only dedication to a Collective was within its own company. While it did produce plays with working class subjects, Waiting for Lefty being the most notable, the audiences it sought were those who would attend Broadway performances. This was an important lesson for the FTP to learn, that no matter the nobility of a cause, the presentation must be of value.

It was alleged by members of the earlier theatre, such as Theatre Union and the

³⁶⁰ Hyman 128.

Workers' Laboratory Theatre, that Federal Theatre killed their efforts. It is certainly true that the FTP had several advantages over its predecessors. The most obvious was the FTP's freedom from reliance on the box office. With funding from the federal government, it did not have to seek sponsors or producers, and did not have to close if a show did poorly. Furthermore, due to the nature of the FTP as a relief project, the casts were necessarily large, enabling directors to not only pick shows that smaller companies could not produce, but also to draw from a larger pool of talent. These large casts also had the advantage of longer rehearsal periods.³⁶¹

However, in some areas, the FTP had to be just as inventive as the earlier groups. For example, since the federal money was to be used primarily for salaries, lavish amounts of money could not be spent on sets. Because of this restriction, most technical costs went towards lighting, which is more flexible and reusable than sets, costumes, or props. As a result, the nature of stage design was changed to a more stark, yet dynamic, ideal.³⁶² And, while Federal Theatre certainly benefited from the foundations laid by its antecedents, it also contributed to the workers' theatres cause by maintaining labor unions' interests in theatre. In addition, many former members of the earlier groups were later employed by the FTP.³⁶³

³⁶¹ O'Connor and Brown 7.

³⁶² O'Connor and Brown 7.

³⁶³ Hyman 127-29.

Implications for the Future

If it had been allowed to continue, Flanagan believed that Federal Theatre would have built an art in which

each region and eventually each state would have its unique, indigenous dramatic expression, its company housed in a building reflecting its own landscape and regional materials, producing plays of its past and present, in its own rhythm of speech and its native design, in an essentially American pattern.³⁶⁴

Important, though, from the point of view of arts in general was the U.S. government's actual willingness for the first time to fund cultural projects. In 1935, Congress passed the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act that essentially gave Roosevelt a nearly five billion-dollar check to spend on relief, in whatever manner he chose. Although it has been an uphill battle since then, with many defeats due to politics and censorship, the government has been subsidizing arts groups with federal funds. The most notable of these groups is the National Endowment for the Arts that supports more traditional arts, such as opera and Shakespearean companies, but also more experimental groups in all manner of media. American audiences are still being exposed to art at a reasonable price and artists are being exposed to audiences instead of waiting tables, all due to the first risk taken in 1935.

Because of the ideals of Roosevelt, the appointment of Hopkins, the hard work of Flanagan and countless others, theatre in the United States was preserved and continued. Moreover, theatre was able to create a new form that was uniquely American in origin and nature. Audiences who had never before experienced live theatre were given the gift

³⁶⁴ Flanagan, Arena 371.

of accessible performances, and left wanting more. In the words of John Martin, “the WPA experiment has proved its immediate desirability too eloquently to be denied.”³⁶⁵

To revisit the assertions of this thesis, first, the FTP would not have existed in the form it did had it not been for the groundwork laid by the earlier workers’ theatres, and second, the FTP took these ideas and refined them to make its productions available and accessible to all people.

³⁶⁵John Martin, Introduction to the Dance (New York: Dance Horizons, 1965) 310.

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