

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: THEATRICAL MILITANTS: STAGE FOR  
ACTION AND SOCIAL ACTIVIST  
PERFORMANCE, 1943 - 1953

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Directed By: Dr. Heather S. Nathans, Department of Theatre

Stage For Action began as “Stage Door to Action” in December 1943 under the leadership of a twenty-three year old radio performer, Perry Miller, along with fellow radio actress Donna Keath, the stage actress Berilla Kerr, and Peggy Clark, a soon-to-be prominent Broadway designer.<sup>1</sup> Officially changing their name in March of 1944, Stage For Action was described in newspapers as a group which “dramatiz[es] current problems and [is] patterned after the Living Newspaper technique.”<sup>2</sup> From their original theme of supporting the war effort to tackling post-war issues of atomic warfare, racism, anti-Semitism, and the witch-hunts of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (commonly referred to as HUAC), Stage For Action became the prevailing social activist theatre group of the 1940s. They operated as one of the “opposing currents of dynamic progress and static conservatism...with its militant program...tak[ing] the theatre to the people when the

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<sup>1</sup>Burton Lindheim, “A Stage For Action,” *New York Times*, 14 May 1944, X1.

<sup>2</sup>Sam Zolotow, “Patricia Kirkland Gets a Lead Role,” *New York Times*, 27 March 1944, 16.

people can't come to the theatre."<sup>3</sup> By the time of Walter S. Steele's July 21, 1947 testimony before the HUAC, Stage For Action had created their own performance aesthetic, operated in at least nine cities, initiated a training school in New York City, and was funded by or had a direct connection to the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, the CIO Teachers' Union, the United Electrical Workers, the Furriers Union, Transport Union, National Maritime Union, and Department Store Workers' Union.<sup>4</sup>

This dissertation constructs Stage For Action as a social activist theatre that drew on the practices of the social activist and Workers' Theatres of the 1930s but utilized events specific to their historical moment in order to educate and activate their audiences. The dissertation moves freely between analyses of political, social, and theatrical events in order to address how Stage For Action directly commented on its entire cultural moment, its "norms, values, beliefs, and ways of life"; combating not only fascism and racism, but also the mainstream or commercial theatrical market through its productions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>*New York Times*, 22 September 1946, X1.

<sup>4</sup>Walter S. Steele, at the time of his testimony, was chairman of the national security committee of the American Coalition of Patriotic, Civic, and Fraternal Societies as well as managing editor of *National Republic*; Congress, Senate, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Testimony of Walter S. Steele Regarding Communist Activities in the United States*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 21 July 1947, 113 – 117.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, The Haymarket Series (New York: Verso, 1997; Verso, 1998), 3.

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PERFORMANCE, 1943 - 1953

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
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I consider archivists and librarians the ‘salt of the earth’ and although every archive is a joy to explore, Walter Zvonchenko at the Library of Congress and K. Kevyne Baar at the Tamiment Library went above and beyond the call of duty in their assistance.

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To family I offer my greatest appreciation. Julianna Dail, my sister and the best listener I know, acted as sounding board and research assistant during this process. I can’t say “thank you” enough to my parents, Orysia and Michael Dail, for their emotional sustenance, reading of early drafts, and providing much needed childcare during research trips, conferences, and long hours of writing. And to Lelia, a ‘nosey nuzzle’ for making me realize there is so much more to life than work.

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## Introduction

Often a person has a moment or period in their life which they refer back to as pivotal. I've been fortunate to have many such moments, but one has proven most noteworthy to my academic career. This pivotal academic moment occurred while pursuing my master's degree at the University of Maryland where I had the opportunity of interning at the Library of Congress Performing Arts Reading Room under the guidance of Walter Zvonchenko.<sup>6</sup> The internship was only intended to last one semester but I continued volunteering for the Library of Congress during the next three years into my doctoral studies. My function at the Library was processing the immense and exciting collection of Broadway lighting designer Peggy Clark. It was a thrilling experience each Friday arriving at the LOC early in the morning, scanning my ID into the basement (what I affectionately term the Dungeon), donning lab coat and cotton gloves, and working for hours in the dry, frigid, small, secluded corner of that immense edifice and combing through, labeling, organizing, and recording boxes of materials including some of the most prized designs of the "Golden Age" of Broadway. Thankfully for me, Peggy Clark was a pack rat keeping copious records of everything she worked on in her professional career spanning fifty years and I worked diligently at putting her memorabilia into order for another scholar to research. Processing Clark's collection I discovered that this largely forgotten designer was a fascinating and multi-faceted person. Subsequently, as I engaged in phone conversations with her brother and sister-in-law I knew someday I would write

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<sup>6</sup>A debt of gratitude is owed to Dr. Franklin Hildy at the University Of Maryland Department Of Theatre for initiating contact with Dr. Walter Zvonchenko and for facilitating the semester-long internship.

about her life. Before I undertook that project I felt another moment in theatre history must be recorded. This was also initially inspired by the Peggy Clark collection at the Library of Congress.

### Stage For Action

This history begins serendipitously with a thin folder misfiled in Peggy Clark's graduate work at Yale and bearing the heading "Stage For Action." The folder included only a few documents: meeting announcements dated December 1943, February and March 1944; a program for a benefit performance occurring on Wednesday, April 19, 1944 at the Henry Hudson Hotel in New York City where Eleanor Roosevelt was the guest of honor; a letter from the United Scenic Artists concerning the fees for the benefit performance; the invitation to the benefit performance; a design by Clark for the Stage For Action membership card; pencil and color set designs by Clark for one of the group's performances; and Peggy Clark's letter of resignation from the group in 1946. This small collection of materials sent me on a research journey lasting six years and spanning archives in nine states, as well as personal interviews with the few members of the group still living and amenable to interview, most of who are in their upper nineties.

The research process has been joyful and yet frustrating as quite often the documents about the group were in closed government files or not attributed to the correct author in libraries or collections. One of the juicier moments of halted research came when accessing the *Best Stage For Action Plays* in the New York Performing Arts Library. Included in the index was an unknown (to me) listing of Arthur Miller's *The Hiccups of Mr. Higgins*. When I turned to the appropriate page



number in the book I found this play completely excised from the collection. The interior edges of the pages existed, however the remainder of each page had literally been sliced out of the book. Therefore, larger questions of historical or political silencing pervade this work and provide an intriguing backdrop for telling Stage For Action's story.

This historical silencing proved exceptionally problematic as I faced the unwillingness of many participants of the group to speak about their involvement. These same people are more than willing to spend hours weaving wonderful tales about their work on Broadway or in radio, television, and film; but about Stage For Action, their memories are conveniently clouded. Charles Polacheck, one of the many actors and playwrights involved with Stage For Action, told me stories of his work at NBC and a humorous anecdote on the difficulty of finding the original German translation of a Straus opera with incredible clarity. When asked about Stage For Action, he stated "I have lots of memories, but not about everything."<sup>7</sup>

This selective amnesia is not new to me. As the granddaughter of a Ukrainian immigrant captured by the Germans during WWII who underwent incredible psychological torture under Stalin and then Hitler, I understand a person's need for privacy and silence regarding events occurring prior to, during, and after the war. At the end of my conversation with Charles Polacheck he attempted to apologize for his silence about Stage For Action stating, "I've had a checkered career in the Arts. I'm ninety-five years old. I retired to Austin to spend time with my three sons and their families." Polacheck, who is an intelligent, jovial, and charming man, seemed to be telling me, "Please don't write anything that will jeopardize my last years or my

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<sup>7</sup>Charles Polacheck, interview by author, 22 June 2009, phone call.

family's life.” This kind of fear, perhaps paranoia, might seem unnecessary for participation in a group that lasted barely a decade over fifty years ago, but many of the members of Stage For Action never recovered their careers after federal prosecution because of the group's direct connection to the Communist Party. The sad fact about Stage For Action is that their important work in the field of social activist performance was eclipsed and eventually erased by their political connections. Participants in the group are understandably unwilling to sacrifice themselves or their families to possible public scrutiny due to the brutal prosecution their colleagues faced during the period known as McCarthyism or because of their guilt at being members or “fellow travelers” in the CPUSA, which had political connections to Moscow and therefore Stalin's appalling criminal acts.<sup>8</sup> This work is therefore equal parts resurrection and redemption in writing the history of Stage For Action. It offers an analysis of the creation of Stage For Action, their performance methodologies, the social changes advocated in their performances and how these were influenced by the cultural climate of the '40s and '50s. I conclude with an analysis of the government prosecution of the group and situate SFA as vital to the broader study of social activist performance; connecting them to, and more importantly separating them from, their tainted political past.

Stage For Action began as “Stage Door to Action” in December 1943 under the leadership of a twenty-three year old radio performer, Perry Miller, along with fellow radio actress Donna Keath, the stage actress Berilla Kerr, and Peggy Clark, a

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<sup>8</sup>Of the living SFA members contacted (Bunny Kacher, Perry Miller, Charles Polacheck, and Terese Hayden) only Terese Hayden refused to speak with me. The other three were extremely cordial but not willing to share a great deal of specific information regarding the group's work. Peggy Clark's brother, Doug Clark, had no recollection of SFA however he would have been under the age of ten during Clark's participation with the group.

soon-to-be prominent Broadway designer.<sup>9</sup> Officially changing their name in March of 1944, Stage For Action was soon described in newspapers as a group which “dramatiz[es] current problems and [is] patterned after the Living Newspaper technique.”<sup>10</sup> It was not long before established and rising playwrights and performers including Edward Chodorov, Norman Corwin, Will Geer, Ben Hecht, Sandra Michaels, Arthur Miller, Thelma Schnee, and Sam Wanamaker signed on to the group in the hope of “bring[ing] the message of the dangers of native fascism in America to audiences outside the Broadway area.”<sup>11</sup>

The group continued growing throughout the 1940s, both in membership and in the social problems it addressed but its basic mission during and after the war remained the same. Most of Stage For Action’s performances were free to the public, focused on a specific issue generally inspired by a recent news event, and encouraged audience participation in order to inspire personal responsibility. From their original theme of supporting the war effort to tackling post-war issues of atomic warfare, racism, anti-Semitism, and the witch-hunts of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (commonly referred to as HUAC), Stage For Action (SFA) became the prevailing social activist theatre group of the late 1940s. They operated as one of the “opposing currents of dynamic progress and static conservatism...with its militant program...tak[ing] the theatre to the people when the people can’t come to the theatre.”<sup>12</sup> By the time of Walter S. Steele’s July 21, 1947 testimony before the HUAC, Stage For Action operated in multiple metropolitan regions, had initiated a

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<sup>9</sup>Burton Lindheim, “A Stage For Action,” *New York Times*, 14 May 1944, X1.

<sup>10</sup>Sam Zolotow, “Patricia Kirkland Gets a Lead Role,” *New York Times*, 27 March 1944, 16.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>*New York Times*, 22 September 1946, X1.

training school in New York City, and was funded by or had direct connection to the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, the CIO Teachers' Union, the United Electrical Workers, the Furriers Union, Transport Union, National Maritime Union, and Department Store Workers' Union.<sup>13</sup> The group was implicitly tied to national politics with several members of the Executive Committee serving as instructors during a three day seminar titled "School for Political Action Techniques," sponsored by the Political Action Committee (PAC) in Washington, D.C. in June of 1946.<sup>14</sup> SFA provided the entertainment for the national CIO convention in Atlantic City in November 1946 and was effective enough to spark the formation of other activist theatre groups including the New Theater and the Trade-Union Theater.<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately this dissertation constructs Stage For Action as a social activist theatre that drew on the practices of the social activist and Workers' Theatres of the 1930s but utilized events specific to their historical moment in order to educate and activate their audiences. Due to the political prosecution and historical erasure of Stage For Action my study relies heavily on archival sources, including those focusing on SFA as a group as well as its individual members.<sup>16</sup> However

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<sup>13</sup>Walter S. Steele, at the time of his testimony, was chairman of the national security committee of the American Coalition of Patriotic, Civic, and Fraternal societies as well as managing editor of *National Republic*; Congress, Senate, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Testimony of Walter S. Steele Regarding Communist Activities in the United States*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 21 July 1947, 113 – 117; SFA operated in major metropolitan areas including New York, Chicago, Washington D.C., Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

<sup>14</sup>Joseph A. Loftus, "PAC Opens College of Political ABC's," *New York Times*, 27 June 1946, 23; John Leslie, "Stalin's Hand in Our Ballot Box," *Plain Talk* (October 1946): 7 – 8.

<sup>15</sup>*Testimony of Walter S. Steele Regarding Communist Activities in the United States*, 117.

<sup>16</sup>The archives accessed for this study include the Counterattack files and John Randolph papers at the Tamiment Library, the Paul and Eslande Robeson collection at Howard University, the Stage For Action collection at the Charles Deering McCormick Library at Northwestern University, the Library of American Broadcasting at the University of Maryland, the Programs collection at the Carnegie Hall Archives, the Josephine Nichols Papers at the New York Performing Arts Library, the J.B. Matthews Collection at Duke University, the National Republic Records at the Hoover Institution Archives at Stanford University, the John Gassner collection at the University of Texas, the Hilda

methodologically, my work combines social, cultural, and political history practices in order to offer an analysis of the political, social, race, and gender issues surrounding Stage For Action. Specifically my dissertation is deeply rooted in the ways a particular group of people, in this case the members of Stage For Action, understood and influenced United States culture. Therefore my dissertation moves freely between analyses of political, social, and theatrical events in order to address how SFA directly commented on its entire cultural moment, its “norms, values, beliefs, and ways of life”; combating not only fascism, racism, and sexism but also the mainstream or commercial theatrical market through its productions.<sup>17</sup>

### Methodology

Drawing heavily on the work of cultural historians such as Michael Denning, Warren Susman, and Alan M. Wald; I connect Stage For Action with the complex and rapidly changing social world it operated in and against. Denning is especially resourceful at challenging common assumptions about political rhetoric and labels bandied about during a specific time period such as his dissection of the terms “labor” and “proletarian” during the 1930s. I utilize his methods of analysis to challenge the blanket use of the label “communist,” which covered and eventually suffocated the political left during the late ‘40s and early ‘50s. Alan M. Wald, whose work on the literary left during the ‘30s and ‘40s, is both diligently researched and beautifully written, offers a wonderful method in utilizing biography for mapping a larger swath

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Worthington Smith Papers at the Schlesinger Library, the recently opened Billy James Hargis Papers at the University of Arkansas, and the Peggy Clark, Louis N. Ridenour, and National Council of Jewish Women collections at the Library of Congress.

<sup>17</sup>Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, The Haymarket Series (New York: Verso, 1997; Verso, 1998), 3.

of an historical period. Each of Wald's biographical sketches acts as a single square in the complicated patchwork of '30s and '40s leftist literati.

My methods of historical investigation are equally influenced by the work of a small enclave of historians including Patricia Cline Cohen, Carol F. Karlsen, Mary Beth Norton, Nell Irvin Painter, Carla L. Peterson, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, and Jean Fagan Yellin. These historians are adept at upsetting the hegemonic and resoundingly patriarchal meta-narrative surrounding their particular time periods, whether that is the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth century in U.S. history. Relying predominantly on archival and primary research, each of these historians considers newly discovered patterns in their historical moment—financial, legal, medical, or media-based—challenging common assumptions of power structures and questioning historical biases regarding how people during a specific cultural moment are recorded.

This study includes analysis of previously unseen archival materials collected through my work on the Peggy Clark archive at the Library of Congress. It incorporates several of her diaries, scripts SFA performed, technical designs for their productions, contracts with the various spaces they performed in, and the letters the members wrote to each other. Through these newly uncovered documents I aim at upsetting the traditional narrative which depicts the immediate post-war period in the theatre as one of social activist apathy. This method of analysis, what may be referred to as a simultaneous recuperating of artifacts and reconditioning of historical meta-narratives, proves especially fruitful when considering the histories of black and female members of SFA. Careful reconsideration of open archives, analysis of

newfound records accessed through the still-closed Peggy Clark collection, critical dramatic reviews, political documents, and popular writing of the period coupled with analyses by prominent feminist, race, and political historians provides a more complete picture of Stage For Action and a new interpretation of social activism at mid-century.

### Chapter Overview

Understanding why SFA generated such a hostile response requires situating its development in its cultural and political context. Chapter One (*Before the Battle Began*) analyzes the shift in the cultural climate surrounding the social activist theatres operating in post-World War I United States to the U.S. entry into World War II. In this first chapter I survey the theatrical practices utilized by these earlier social activist groups as well as the major artists continuing their work with Stage For Action. Additionally, through analysis of the terms political and social activist performance, I suggest that Stage For Action is a critical missing piece of the history of social activist performance in the United States.

The second chapter (*Stage For Action Goes to the People*) explores the origins of Stage For Action. I begin this chapter with an overview of some of the earlier assertions that have been made concerning the trajectory of social activist theatre in the post-WWII period as a prelude to my own contention that the 1940s work of SFA needs to be reintegrated into that narrative. I then move to a broader analysis of how Stage For Action formed, since I argue that by tracing its shift in leadership (particularly in the New York City unit), historians of social activist and community-based performance can re-imagine the significance of the 1940s to its broader

scholarly field. Additionally, the chapter examines the impact that the group's political connections had on their success, especially during relatively conservative historical moments.

The third chapter (*I Also Fought*) provides a cultural history analysis of several significant SFA productions by Arthur Miller, Robert Adler, George Bellak, Louis Ridenour, Lewis Allan, and Sidney Alexander. By examining the ways in which SFA approached issues such as daycare for the children of women employed during wartime, post-war inflation, and atomic warfare, I suggest that theatre historians may expand their understanding of the areas of interest significant to activist theatre practitioners during the wartime and immediate post-war periods. Available scripts provide valuable insights into how SFA highlighted its concerns – since they suggest not only the intellectual position of the authors and artists involved in the company – but reveal information about the *audience's* interests and expectations as well. The significant percentage of analysis in this chapter investigates how the various SFA scripts speak to or directly incorporate current events.

Building on Alan Wald's assertion that 1945 - 1946 marks Arthur Miller's "missing chapter," Chapter Three explores how Miller may have used SFA as a literary testing ground for ideas that would be more fully developed during the 1950s. I suggest in this chapter that *The Crucible* may have also been inspired by another SFA production not penned by Miller. In 1948, five years prior to *The Crucible's* Broadway debut, SFA performed *Salem Story* by Sidney Alexander, focusing on the



Salem witchcraft trials of 1692 and considering the same ideas of perjury versus self-sacrifice.

The question of how Stage For Action's performances differed from other mainstream productions during the same time period (1943 – 1953) is central to my investigation of how SFA functions as a social activist theatre and how it fits into the larger scope of social activist theatre history. Thus the fourth chapter (*'I See My Work as a Social Weapon'*) addresses the social problem SFA most focused on during its existence, racism in the United States. Over a decade before Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 *A Raisin in the Sun* addressed race on the Broadway stage and four years before Lt. Joseph Cable had to be "carefully taught" in *South Pacific* (1949), Stage For Action was producing plays on race in the United States with integrated casts. Additionally the group included a large percentage of African American sponsors and Board members. This chapter addresses how race functioned in Stage For Action both on and offstage and how the group dealt with one of the nation's most volatile topics.

My concluding chapter (*Healing Wounds*) addresses the influence of the HUAC and other political and social pressures on Stage For Action and also situates the group in its larger scholarly field as the missing link or bridge between the Workers' Theatres of the 1930s and the social activist performance collectives of the 1960s such as the Living Theatre, Free Southern Theatre, El Teatro Campesino, San Francisco Mime Troupe and Bread and Puppet. I suggest that these later groups share the characteristics of militancy and professionalism found in the scripts of Stage For Action.

Walter S. Steele testified to HUAC about Stage For Action's communist affiliations and their methods of "cultural" persuasion in 1947. SFA was named in the Red Channels list in 1950. In 1952, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce published a highly influential pamphlet calling for "an untrammelled investigation and prosecution of Communists, the complete exclusion of Reds and fellow travelers from all agencies and professions affecting public opinion...particularly those in the entertainment field..."<sup>18</sup> The Red Scare and McCarthyism reached their apex in the early fifties and, given the atmosphere of tension and suspicion, it seemed impossible that Stage For Action could continue. Elia Kazan, who was a guest speaker at a pro-Stage For Action forum on January 27, 1946, named prominent SFA members in his HUAC hearing on April 10, 1952 and when Jerome Robbins designated Edward Chodorov, the long standing Chairman of SFA's Board and certainly one of their most ardent supporters, a communist on May 5, 1953 in close temporal proximity to the Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB) ruling that the Communist party (and its members) had to register as a subversive organization, I believe he hammered the proverbial final nail in SFA's coffin.<sup>19</sup>

Less than two years after Kazan's testimony and the final SFA performance, Philip Loeb, a SFA performer and Board Member as well as an original member of the Group Theatre, committed suicide on September 1, 1955, because of his inability to find work after being named in the Red Channels list and HUAC hearings.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930 -1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 216.

<sup>19</sup>Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); "Rascoe to Head Stage Forum," *New York Times*, 22 January 1946, 36.

<sup>20</sup>Counterattack, *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* (New York: American Business Consultants, 1950), 101 – 102.

Canada Lee, a sponsor and Board Member named in the HUAC hearings would die penniless and alone after being banned from forty television shows.<sup>21</sup> Pert Kelton, a prominent radio and stage actress who was married to another SFA member, Ralph Bell, suffered her first heart attack after being named in the Red Channels. Will Geer, also named in the Red Channels list, and an original member of SFA was called before the HUAC in 1951 and was unable to find work for over a decade afterwards.<sup>22</sup> The actor Sterling Hayden named SFA sponsor Karen Morley at his hearing in 1951, but her acting career had already been demolished in 1947 when she refused to testify at her HUAC hearing.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to many other SFA members, Arthur Miller rose in prominence after his HUAC hearing and his refusal to “name names” on June 22, 1956. Miller later denounced Elia Kazan’s actions with the congressional hearings and the HUAC played a central role in several of his future dramas.

There is no doubt in my mind that many members of Stage For Action were also members of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). However the process of uncovering their history has introduced me to something much greater than one of the artistic pawns of a much maligned political group. Stage For Action’s vast collection of social activist performances, many of which are decades ahead the general comprehension of civil rights and anti-atomic activism chronology, as well as the dedication and talent of participants in the group, offer a significant revision to theatre history at mid-twentieth century. Their work deserves a fresh appraisal. Although the group is firmly situated in their cultural moment, this

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<sup>21</sup>Navasky, 340.

<sup>22</sup>Counterattack, 60 – 61.

<sup>23</sup>Navasky, 100.

deeper analysis of their work offers scholars of social activist performance and U.S. theatre history in general a new perception of theatre during the 1940s.

## Chapter 1: Before the Battle Began

As I suggested in the Introduction, Stage For Action (SFA) has remained a largely unexamined phenomenon in the history of American political and social activist performance for more than five decades. What accounts for its comparative invisibility? Did it not meet contemporary (or current) definitions of political performance? Did its founders deliberately downplay its activist mission for reasons of their own? Did subsequent events such as the Red Scare obscure its origins and function? In this chapter I re-situate SFA in its historical context, placing it alongside the various European and United States theatrical movements which inspired it. Moreover, understanding why SFA generated such a hostile response requires situating its development in its cultural and political context. Therefore this chapter analyzes the shift in the cultural climate surrounding the social activist theatres operating in post-World War I United States to the U.S. entry into World War II. I survey the theatrical practices utilized by these earlier social activist groups as well as the major artists continuing their work with Stage For Action. Additionally, through analysis of the terms political and social activist performance I suggest that Stage For Action is a critical missing piece of the history of social activist performance in the United States.

Theatre, as one of the creative harbingers of humanity, often responds to and may occasionally shape the environment in which it is created. Quite often what theatre artists are engaging with is a *political* moment, which they feel can only be challenged or addressed through their particular mode of artistic expression.

Historically, theatre artists have countered specific political moments in various

ways; records of rehearsed, improvised, scripted, oral, repeated, and solitary performance interpretations or reactionary performances exist from the origins of eastern and western theatre. The term “Political Performance” therefore has a multitude of definitions, becoming a potential umbrella term for any work that challenges the current governing power or hegemonic structure. Some scholars study the performative aspects of street demonstrations across the globe, while others explore the politically subversive content of a Broadway musical theatre production like *Urinetown*.<sup>24</sup>

One of the many strands of political performance, and the strand with which this study concerns itself, is social activist performance.<sup>25</sup> I define social activist performance as performances dedicated to remedying a local, national, or global problem through immediate social action. The performances are developed by one playwright or a collective group and performed for little or no costs to the audience. The origins of social activist performance in Western Europe can be traced to medieval morality plays, if not earlier, but most scholars connect social activist performance with the rapid rise in size and power of the Socialist movement during the period of the Second International in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (1880 – 1917) and specifically to either Romain Rolland’s work *The*

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<sup>24</sup>For many excellent analyses and definitions of political theatre see: Allan Bloom, trans. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1960); Walter A. Davis, *Art and Politics: Psychoanalysis, Ideology, Theatre* (London: Pluto Press, 2007); Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992); Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre: A History 1914 – 1929* (New York: Avon Books, 1978); the Introductory Chapter of Richard G. Scharine, *From Class to Caste in American Drama: Political and Social Themes Since the 1930s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

<sup>25</sup>Many scholars utilize the term “social drama” as synonymous with social activist performance, however I believe social activist performance and social dramas are both sub-genres of Political Theatre. Where as social activist performance demands of its participants and observers (or participant-observers) immediate social change or action, social dramas, are performances advocating a societal change based on thought or ideology and rarely inspire immediate action.

*Theatre of the People* in 1903 or the agit-prop performances of the Blue Blouses and other Soviet “small forms” methods.<sup>26</sup>

In his *Challenging the Hierarchy: Collective Theatre in the United States* Mark S. Weinberg uses the term “Collective Theatre” in much the same way I utilize social activist performance. He suggests that the modern European influence on U.S. social activist performance should be traced to the Paris Commune in 1871 when they debated the formation of “small, socialist theatre associations that would remain in their local areas to perform plays...to a mass popular audience.”<sup>27</sup> He offers an overview of Collective Theatre in France, arguing that the French of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century never fully grasped the true purpose of social activist performance. He then focuses on Germany with Gropius’s *Bauhaus* and the work of Reinhardt and Piscator, drawing a direct link between Piscator and the Living Theatre. However Weinberg finally concedes it was the Russian Revolution and labor problems that most directly influenced social activist performance in the U.S.<sup>28</sup> In this way, Weinberg falls in line with many of the other historians tracing what has variously been called Worker’s Theatre, People’s Theatre, Collective Theatre, Social Drama, Political Theatre, and Social Activist Performance in the United States.

In another of the many well-constructed histories of the development of social activist performance in the United States, Raphael Samuel argues that prior to the Russian Revolution, performances hailing from the earliest U.S. Socialist groups were not successful social activist performances because the political leadership of

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<sup>26</sup>See Mark S. Weinberg, *Challenging the Hierarchy: Collective Theatre in the United States* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992); Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theatre and the Soviet State, 1917 – 1938* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup>Weinberg, 34.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 34- 35.

the time was more interested in promoting “equal rights in the cultural sphere” than theatre for social change. The focus in early productions was on equal accessibility to the arts for all, not on the political parameters of a piece.<sup>29</sup> These original performances were far from propaganda or agit-prop performances and instead seem “to have been socially conscious rather than politically engaged...conceived of as a form of spiritual uplift, taking on the powers of darkness, and exhibiting the light of knowledge.”<sup>30</sup> These early “socialist” theatre groups produced work more akin to realism, melodrama, and even morality plays; not works engaging with and promoting active change.<sup>31</sup> Weinberg would most likely argue that these performances shared more in common with the theoretical Paris Commune

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<sup>29</sup>Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl, and Stuart Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left 1880 – 1935: Workers’ Theatre Movements in Britain and America*. (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), xvii. Other histories of late nineteenth and early twentieth century social activist performance consulted but not directly quoted in this introductory chapter include: Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Octagon Books, 1974); Jonathan L. Chambers, *Messiah of the New Technique: John Howard Lawson, Communism, and American Theatre, 1923 – 1937* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006); Edmond M. Gagey, *Revolution in American Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947); Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Colette A. Hyman, *Staging Strikes: Workers’ Theatre and the American Labor Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); Ira A. Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985); Gerald Rabkin, *Drama and Commitment: Politics in the American Theatre of the Thirties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964); R.C. Reynolds, *Stage Left: The Development of the American Social Drama in the Thirties* (Troy: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1986); Ilka Saal, *New Deal Theater: The Vernacular Tradition in American Political Theater* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Richard Stourac and Kathleen McCreery, *Theatre as a Weapon: Workers’ Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany and Britain, 1917 – 1934* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); Jay Williams, *Stage Left* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974).

<sup>30</sup>Samuel, xviii – xix.

<sup>31</sup>A wonderful collection of pre-twentieth century plays exemplifying this type of social consciousness can be found in the collection *When Conscience Trod the Stage: American Plays of Social Awareness*, edited by Walter J. Meserve and Mollie Ann Meserve (New York: Feedback Theatrebooks & Prospero Press, 1998). Although an argument can be made that the temperance pledges signed at the end of pro-temperance plays such as *The Drunkard* and *Ruined by Drink* were inspiring a form of action in the audience, there is little evidence temperance continued once the signatures were dry and the patrons left the theatre building.



performances or the work of Fermin Gemier and the Théâtre Ambulant touring rural France in 1911 through 1913.<sup>32</sup>

The end of World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the global rise of the Communist Party fundamentally changed the focus of social activist performance in the United States and Europe from being more socially conscious focused (ideology/thought) to activist focused (action). The focus on workers' power and the embracing of industrial methods of production quickly supplanted the pre-1917 belief that socialist performance needed to be beautiful or technically advanced. Social activist performance owed its next transformation (1917 – 1935) to the influence of Russian artists such as Meyerhold and Vakhtangov, the pro-Soviet Blue Blouses, Piscator in Germany, and the Théâtre Libre in France. This period, which can essentially be defined as the Workers' Theatre bloc, encompasses what most acknowledge as the heyday of socialist activist performance in the United States when scads of working class groups "all mobilized to activate and entertain their own specific communities."<sup>33</sup> Members of many of these workers' theatre groups were also part of the professional theatre community and attempted to bring social activist theatre methods to mainstream audiences through artistic outlets such as the Theatre Union, the New Playwrights Theatre, the Group Theatre, and the Federal Theatre Project.

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<sup>32</sup>Weinberg, 34.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 260; I am utilizing Gramsci's interpretation of the term "bloc" because it provides a useful means of framework for interrogating the power structures inherent in workers' theatre groups and their influence on the means of production in United States theatre, especially in areas of design, for years to come. The Workers' Theatre Movement also operates as a Gramscian bloc because it set a precedent or solidified the operational hierarchy for social activist theatre and community theatre groups through out the twentieth century.

The history of workers' theatre groups as directly connected to various cultural groups, the communist and socialist parties, and unions have been well documented by various historians (although further research on this period remains necessary). Additionally, much research has been devoted to popular performance during the Popular Front bloc (1929 – 1959); a period encompassing New Deal policies, the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the advent of the Cold War, the Korean War, and the burgeoning Civil Rights movement.<sup>34</sup> Although scholars have carefully recorded social activist performance histories for the first decade of the Popular Front, there is still a paucity of scholarship on the period between the disbanding of the Federal Theatre Project in 1939 and the impact of well-known social activist groups of the 1960s such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Open Theatre, the Free Southern Theatre and El Teatro Campesino.<sup>35</sup> I do not suggest that there exists a contiguous history of social activist theatre; as Samuel attests; alternative or non-mainstream theatre does not operate on a continuum but as a “succession of moments separated by rupture.” Therefore it is essential when seeking significant periods of social activist performance, (a performance style intrinsically linked to its specific political moment because the

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<sup>34</sup>Historians debate the exact beginning date of the Popular Front. Raphael Samuel states in the introduction to *Theatres of the Left* that the advent was 1935, while Michael Denning in his introduction of *The Cultural Front* dates its origins to the emergence of the “crisis of 1929”; Samuel, xx; Denning, xviii. Bernard K. Johnpoll, in his eight volume collection *A Documentary History of the Communist Party of the United States* suggests that the term Popular Front is a “mislabel” and that the period known as the People’s Front started in 1935 and ended two years later. (Volume VII, xviii).

<sup>35</sup>Jan Cohen-Cruz, for example, in her excellent work *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States* does not mention a single community based theatre operating during the 1940s. She does write briefly about Robert Gard and grassroots theatre during the early ‘50s, but as a whole makes a leap from the end of the Federal Theatre Project in 1939 to the Open Theatre, the Living Theater, and the Free Southern Theater in the early ‘60s; 17 – 37.

people involved want nothing less than immediate change in that moment), to search for societal unrest or ruptures.

One need look no further than the U.S. entry into World War II for a moment of rupture; indeed a great chasm was forming in American society based on contrasting ideas of war, religion, race, class, and gender, and in response to this rift a social activist theatre group called Stage For Action formed. Comprised of a group of radio, stage, and literary personnel at various points in their careers, Stage For Action officially organized in 1943 in order to support war causes and “bring to public attention the menace of native fascism.”<sup>36</sup> In July of 1942, actor Philip Huston wrote in *Equity*, the Actors Equity Association Magazine, “The theatre can be important only where the need for it is important. And some three million khaki-clad arms point to where that need is.”<sup>37</sup> The following summer President Franklin D. Roosevelt reinforced this statement in a telegram that was eventually printed in *Billboard Magazine* saying “Entertainment is always a national asset; invaluable in time of peace, it is indispensable in wartime.”<sup>38</sup> Stage For Action was in good company as theatre professionals and government organizations across the country answered the presidential call, and the U.S.O., the U.S. Treasury Department play program, and the American Stage Wing with its Stage Door Canteens rallied to cheer the troops.

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<sup>36</sup>Burton Lindheim, “A Stage For Action: From the Bronx to Canarsie With the Players of Topical Problems,” *New York Times*, 14 May 1944; By “native fascism” SFA members were referencing what they saw as the oppression of certain classes, religions, and races in the United States. Additionally they were deeply concerned with the number of people engaged by the social and political messages of both Hitler and Mussolini.

<sup>37</sup>Peter Royston, *Equity at 90: Our Lesson and Our Legacy*, “1940’s: Hurry Up and Close That Big Show” (New York: Actor’s Equity Association, 2006), <[http://www.actorsequity.org/AboutEquity/timeline/timeline\\_1940.html](http://www.actorsequity.org/AboutEquity/timeline/timeline_1940.html)> First accessed May 2007.

<sup>38</sup>John Bush Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War: Popular Music and the Home Front, 1939-1945* (Lebanon: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 31.

But the formation of Stage For Action (SFA) is exceptional during this bloc for a number of reasons: it involved some of the leading literary and artistic minds of the day on its Executive Board; including Howard Fast, Elizabeth Hawes, Paul Robeson, Norman Corwin, Abram Hill, and Dorothy Parker; the group was racially integrated, and was at times during its ten year existence sponsored by the American Communist Party. In only a few short years, Stage For Action (SFA) rose from a small New York-based volunteer theatre company working on a shoestring budget, to an instrumental force in the creation of a Political Action College in Washington, D.C. with a theatrical training school in New York and branch companies in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, San Francisco, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Chicago.<sup>39</sup> The company produced numerous shows, including one production reviewers described as “the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of its time,” because it so forcefully confronted established ideas of race relations and unlike its U.S.O and Stage Door Canteen counterparts, Stage For Action had a larger mission to transform the shape of American theatre, and more importantly, the shape of American social activism. As a review of the group in the *People’s Voice* touted, Stage For Action was “determined that they should apply their art and devote themselves to the cause of a better America.”<sup>40</sup> The New York City and Chicago cells of the group were even influential enough to warrant televised productions of at least two of their plays: Arthur Miller’s *That They May Win* was televised by WBKB of Chicago on Friday evening,

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<sup>39</sup>Records of the Chicago and Washington, D.C. Stage For Action units have been found in a small collection about Stage For Action at the Charles Deering Library at Northwestern University and *The Washington Post*. Records of Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, Los Angeles, and San Francisco branches of SFA were found in *The Worker* beginning in April of 1945 and *The Daily Worker* beginning in May 1946.

<sup>40</sup>[Stage For Action, Informational Pamphlet], The J. B. Matthews Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

December 15, 1944 from 7:30 to 8:30 and reviewed by *Billboard's* Cy Wagner as “the best television show of the year.”<sup>41</sup> Additionally Arthur Laurents’ *Walk With Me* played on the same television network on Thursday, January 24, 1946 and the reviewer of the show stated, “the play is probably one of the best to emerge from the local tele station...of such stuff is good propaganda fashioned.”<sup>42</sup>

But included in their performances aimed at creating a “better America” was a rhetoric that many government officials found steeped in communist rather than nationalist propaganda, and like the Federal Theatre Project fourteen years earlier, Stage For Action was shut down by federal authorities for its communist ties. However the nation had changed immensely in the fourteen years since the Federal Theatre Project dissolved and with the Cold War, Korean War, and McCarthyism at their zenith Stage For Action members faced federal prosecution and professional blacklisting that their FTP brethren had not encountered.

### Social Activist Performance, 1917 – 1942

Workers’ Theatre, which forms the historical roots of social activist performance in the United States, can be divided into two subgroups: 1) Performances by workers in similar cultural or labor groups (and later unions) performing for workers of the same group, and 2) performances by theatre professionals for workers of various cultural and labor groups. These theatre professionals may or may not simultaneously be members of the cultural or labor group for whom they are performing. But what is meant by the term “Worker”?

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<sup>41</sup>Cy Wagner, “Television Reviews: Balaban and Katz,” *The Billboard*, 23 December 1944, 10 and 12.

<sup>42</sup>*The Billboard*, “Television Reviews: ‘Walk With Me,’” 2 February 1946, 10.

What is the cultural and political significance of this word in the context of American political theatre?

Historically, the word “Worker” is connected to members of what is often called the “working-class”. In *The Working-Class Majority* Michael Zweig defines the working-class as “people who share a common place in production, where they have relatively little control over the pace and content of their work, and aren’t anybody’s boss. They produce the wealth of nations, but receive from that wealth only what they can buy with the wages their employers pay them.”<sup>43</sup> The concept of a working-class “identity” is both a historical and cultural formation, and what E.P. Thompson refers to as “an historical phenomenon,” because class occurs

“when some, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other[s] whose interest are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which [people] are born—or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms; embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.”<sup>44</sup>

While the working-class is a historical phenomenon, dating back to the origins of caste-based societies, the term ‘Worker’ with a capital ‘W’ is a consciously embraced political moniker inspired by Marxist theories and adopted by Progressive-Era activist members of the working-class and their supporters from the intelligentsia in order to raise awareness about the institutional problems of an entire segment of the population. However, Progressive Era efforts to develop one cohesive “working class identity” were impaired by the differing views on race, ethnicity, immigration

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<sup>43</sup>Michael Zweig, *The Working-Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>44</sup>E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 9 – 10. Here Thompson’s word “men” has been changed to the more inclusive “people.”

status, gender, and religion that often influenced various cultural, labor, and union group's foci. Thus very rarely did the multitudinous working-class groups ever coalesce to a united understanding of what it meant to be a 'Worker' in the first half of the twentieth century in the United States.<sup>45</sup> Attempting to address Workers' Theatre as a whole from 1917 to 1942 as well as nail down the political stances of participants who may or may not have aligned themselves to any number of left-leaning political parties must be an exercise in generalities. However, when surveying the activities of these various groups during the period between the wars, some distinct themes emerge, and it may be productive to examine the boundaries that various social activist theatres *tried* to draw around their activities, as well as the common causes that they acknowledged. In order to lay the foundation for SFA's mission and controversial status in American culture, I will examine both the distinctions and the unifying goals among some of the many performance groups—Democratic, Socialist, Communist, and a-political—operating during this period.

Scholars Stuart Cosgrove and Morgan Himmelstein both offer excellent analysis of how 'Workers' Theatre' and 'Theatre of the Left' formed in the United States and how these movements were influenced by policy changes in the Communist Party. The phrase 'Theatre of the Left' was often used during the '30s to describe any performance with a social activist agenda. Himmelstein suggests that this phrase became the umbrella term for performances written from a myriad of leftist political perspectives including "liberal dramas..., Marxist plays that explained the Depression

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<sup>45</sup>IWW scholars might suggest otherwise, but the Wobblies were effectively dissolved in 1917 when J. Edgar Hoover arrested and indicted one hundred IWW top ranking officials, "in a single swoop...the IWW was crushed and never revived." Ted Morgan, *Reds: McCarthyism in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004), 314.

problems by the philosophy of economic determinism. There were liberal plays with Marxist overtones. And, finally, there were Communist dramas that not only followed the Marxist analysis of American society but also called for the violent ‘transition’ to a Soviet America.”<sup>46</sup> Cosgrove and Himmelstein’s works provide the foundation for an explanation of how the social activist dramas of the ‘20s and ‘30s influenced Stage For Action during the immediate post-WWII period. The two authors outline the following performance characteristics shared by Workers’ Theatres in the ‘20s, Theatre of the Left during the ‘30s, as well as Stage For Action in the ‘40s:

- 1) Agit-prop as the primary, but not sole, preferred theatrical form; living newspapers, social dramas, and agit-trials were also utilized.<sup>47</sup>
- 2) The content of the plays focus on: racism and immigration, personal commitment to social change, local and national political problems versus historical trends, and “the struggle against war, Fascism, and censorship.”<sup>48</sup>
- 3) Performed for members of the working-class and their liberal-leaning brethren.<sup>49</sup>

Cosgrove asserts the heyday of Workers’ Theatre began with the formation of the Workers’ Drama League by Mike Gold and John Howard Lawson in 1926 and lasted until approximately 1936 after the implementation of the Federal Theatre

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<sup>46</sup>Himmelstein, 4.

<sup>47</sup>As subsequent chapters assert, Stage For Action expanded upon these earlier social activist theatrical forms incorporating dance, comedy, and fantasy into their performances.

<sup>48</sup>Cosgrove, 268.

<sup>49</sup>Cosgrove states the audiences for Workers’ Theatre were “individuals who shared working-class identity either by birth or by membership of workers’ organizations and parties,” 262.



Project and folding of the socialist magazine published by the New Theatre League *Theatre Workshop*.<sup>50</sup> He argues that “as the war became imminent, the problems of Workers’ Theatre seemed redundant and were never really reassessed until ‘New Left’ theatre emerged in the 1960s.”<sup>51</sup> However, new archival evidence and recent reevaluation of leftist not-for-profit performance groups in operation during and immediately following WWII (especially those such as Stage For Action whose primary focus was serving the needs of the working-class and union members) challenges this assertion and brings to light new evidence that the 1940s and early ‘50s were not a period apathetic to the concerns of workers.

Cosgrove’s argument, although valid based on the archival evidence available at the time, makes the tacit assumption that the political agenda of the early Workers’ Theatres were subsumed by the nationalist fervor of World War II. Yet Workers’ Theatre groups remained both active and relevant during the war and immediately afterwards. Additionally, Cosgrove’s argument overlooks the fact that many members of the wartime Workers’ Theatres did not consider Communism or workers’ rights as incompatible with nationalism. Indeed, part of the impetus for the continuation of Workers’ Theatres during and post- WWII was political and directly connected to Communist propaganda. Immediately following Hitler’s violation of the non-aggression pact with the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the American Communist Party reached out to all labor unions to crusade against fascism in any way they could. A week after the invasion the National Committee of the Communist Party U.S.A released a manifesto calling for, “...the

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid, 268 - 69.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid, 269.

successful struggle to defeat Hitlerism. Organized labor and the whole working class are the sworn enemies of reaction, fascism and Hitlerism. In this new and critical world situation the working class therefore faces the duty to assume leadership in the people's fight against the fascist menace..."<sup>52</sup> By forming a group intent on combating "native fascism" the members of Stage For Action responded to many calls of duty: the President's, Actors' Equity, as well as the American Communist Party. The supporters and members of SFA were not the only U.S. citizens intent on ending Hitler's reign or quieting the ultra-conservative voices in the United States, however it was their direct connection to the American Communist Party and their far from subtle political rhetoric that brought federal interest and eventual prosecution on the group.

### Theatrical Influences

SFA drew its inspiration from a number of social activist theatre groups operating during the late '20s into the early '40s in the United States, but the most influential groups were the Workers' Laboratory Theatre (WLT), which was later re-named the Theatre of Action, the traveling units and 'New Technique' of the New Theater League (NTL), and the Living Newspaper Unit of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP).<sup>53</sup> The WLT formed in 1930 under the artistic direction of Alfred Saxe, Harry Elion, Will Lee, Jack and Hiam Shapiro, and Ben Blake, and for the their first four

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<sup>52</sup>National Committee, Communist Party U.S.A, "Manifesto (June 29, 1941)" in Bernard K. Johnpoll, ed. *A Documentary History of the Communist Party of the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), Vol. VII, 34.

<sup>53</sup>Based on membership and literary analysis I believe that the WLT/Theatre of Action and FTP were more influential on the staging practices and organization of SFA, however an article by Harry Taylor in the January 2, 1945 edition of *New Masses* suggests it was the Current Theater and New Theater in the United States that most influenced their formation. The Current Theater does not appear in any major academic work involving political performance during the pre-WWII period and therefore necessitates further research. Harry Taylor, "Stage For Action," *New Masses*, 2 January 1945, 29.

years of operation they were “primarily an amateur group producing agit-props dealing with the Depression, the New Deal, the New York City political scene, and foreign affairs.”<sup>54</sup> The most influential aspect of the WLT on Stage For Action was their Shock Troupe’s ability to respond to current events and the performance styles of Theatre of Action, which the Shock Troupe reemerged as in 1934. The Shock Troupe staged agit-props on the docks and at factories and taught evening courses in performance to workers in order to broaden the size of their group and as a means of cultural education. Much of the rhetoric utilized in SFA’s pamphlets and in articles reviewing SFA’s work replicates the mission of the WLT Shock Troupers who were “ready to bring their revolutionary agit-props to the public at a moment’s notice.”<sup>55</sup> SFA participants did not live in collectives like the openly communist Shock Troupers, but like the Shock Troupers they emphasized their mobility, stressing in all of their publicity that they would travel to perform anywhere that was accessible by public transportation. In a 1944 *New York Times* article on the SFA, Burton Lindheim writes cheekily, “To reach the people Stage For Action troupers journey to the hinterlands of the Bronx, trek through the wilds of Canarsie or even cross the waves to Hoboken.”<sup>56</sup> In a Chicago SFA pamphlet, the group publicizes that Stage For Action performs at “Unions, Women’s Clubs, PTA and other Educational Groups, Non-Partisan Political Action Meetings, Churches, Philanthropic organizations, Community Conferences, Conventions, Civic Rallies, Club, Lodge and

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<sup>54</sup>Himmelstein, 14.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Burton Lindheim, *New York Times*, 14 May 1944.

Social Organizations...In fact, wherever people gather together for meetings, Stage For Action is ready to present a timely, to-the-point production.”<sup>57</sup>

The WLT ended in 1934 and with this concluded their presentation of agit-props. The newly formed Theatre of Action “reorganized on a full professional basis for the indoor presentation of realistic plays” utilizing a writing technique that demanded “Marxist ideas [woven] into a realistic plot.”<sup>58</sup> Although many of Stage For Action’s plays during their ten year existence included Marxist messages and strove for more fully developed characters and plot lines than those in agit-props, only a few of their performances were realistic or necessitated an indoor performance space and none of the extant plays are full-length pieces. The WLT shift in forms correlates directly to the shift in Soviet drama from agit-prop to Soviet Realism (often referred to as social or socialist realism) in supporting the Soviet state and the communist agenda.

It is interesting that SFA did not fully embrace the idea of either agit-prop or Marxist realism, nor did they achieve anything close to the New Theatre technique suggested in *Theatre Workshop* and many of the New Theatre League performances. SFA instead created pieces that were hybrids of many forms—specifically expressionism, realism, and agit-prop laced with a Marxist agenda—due to the many playwrights involved in SFA, the different styles each playwright embraced, the ever-shifting beliefs on what socialist art meant and how it was best achieved during the 1940s, and their level of commitment to communist doctrine. This hybridity of forms practiced and promoted by SFA resulted in a new aesthetic unique to the company.

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<sup>57</sup>Stage For Action, “Chicago Stage For Action Pamphlet, 1945-46” From the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library, Series XCIX, Folder 1.

<sup>58</sup>Himmelstein, 17.

Most of their scripts call for a breaking of the fourth wall and use dream or fantasy sequences while simultaneously relying on both characters and scenes based on current events or drawn from history. Additionally, the majority of SFA performances included music and dance in order to sustain audience interest. SFA scripts do not encourage chanting “Strike” or any other *specific* audience response during the performance. However through the breaking of the fourth wall and technique of using performers planted in the audience, the performances inspired immediate debate and (hopefully) future action. Inspiring debate and action were fundamental to SFA scripts as many of their performances were held at union or community meetings where the performance was used as an ice-breaker to encourage fruitful discussion on the dedicated topic of the evening.

When defining theatrical forms and social activist performance it is important to recognize that scholars and critics of the 1930s did not agree on how to define the performances. Many questioned if the performances were strictly propaganda or a new form of performance. John Gassner, arguably the preeminent critic of 1930s social activist performance, stated in 1938 that calling the performances of the various Workers’ Theatres on one hand “brutally realistic” and “unmitigated propaganda” or alternatively “an absolutely new phenomenon in the theatre” concluded in both cases in a critique of half-truths.<sup>59</sup> Instead he ascribes to the plays (as I do the performances of SFA) a combination of forms based on individual playwrights’ intentions and preferences. Some of the performances of the ‘30s were revolutionary, some were reformist, some were in the realist style or socialist realism, many were expressionistic, and still more were blatantly romantic. All, according to

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<sup>59</sup>Gassner, 272.

Gassner, were “intended to inculcate a lesson, agitate for the elimination of abuses, and indict a social order that tolerated them... Theirs was the drama of dynamic processes affecting society and its individuals.”<sup>60</sup> Although Gassner wrote in 1938 that the previous season signaled the end of what he then termed “sociological drama” in the United States, in 1946 he saw in SFA a promising resurgence of these earlier forms, writing about the group in the preface to his *Best Plays* series and serving on their Advisory Council.<sup>61</sup>

Without question the forms embraced by many of the SFA playwrights also drew inspiration from performances staged under the auspices of the New Theatre League. Emerging from the League of Workers Theatres in 1935, John Gassner describes the New Theatre League’s exact purpose as “a mass development of the American theatre to its highest artistic and social level; for a theatre dedicated to the struggle against war, fascism, and censorship.”<sup>62</sup> There were many “Socialist, Farmer-Labor, liberal, [and] Communist” theatre groups included in the New Theatre League and their incorporated name as of 1936 was People’s Theatre, Inc.<sup>63</sup> Arguably the impact of the League was not on the individual theatre companies it included but in its publications and development of new works. The *Theatre Workshop*, their quarterly journal of theatre and film arts developed in October 1936, contained writing by most of the theatrical heavyweights of the day including Lee Strasberg, John Howard Lawson, Marc Blitzstein, Alice Evans, Mordecai Gorelik,

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<sup>60</sup>John Gassner, “The One-Act Play in The Revolutionary Theatre,” in *The One-Act Play Today*, Ed. William Kozlenko (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 275.

<sup>61</sup>John Gassner, *Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), xiv.

<sup>62</sup>Gassner, “The One-Act Play in The Revolutionary Theatre,” 257.

<sup>63</sup>Himmelstein, 33.

Irwin Shaw, Hallie Flanagan and many others. The publication announced important social activist productions, sponsored playwriting competitions, advertised classes in the performing arts, included translated texts of vital theatre theorists, and published plays.<sup>64</sup> It was also the source for increasing membership in the New Theatre League. The April-July 1937 edition of *Theatre Workshop* included an announcement on the last page for the 1937 national membership drive stating,

“The theatre isn’t dead yet! Some people think it is, but take our word! The commercial theatre may have entangled itself in a mesh of profit and loss statements—but the new theatres have a way of surviving and growing in spite of all their troubles...the NEW THEATRE LEAGUE, the only national cultural organization of the theatre striving to build a genuine, progressive people’s theatre movement.”<sup>65</sup>

Annual membership in the New Theatre League for 1937 cost \$1.00 and included discounts on all National Theatre League publications and delegate representation at regional and national conferences. The memberships were advertised to both professional and non-professional theatre groups as well as anyone involved in the Federal Theatre Project.<sup>66</sup> SFA utilized much of the same rhetoric and practices that the New Theatre League embraced as it moved from a New York based group to a national organization in order to gain audiences and members.

Finally, the third connection between SFA and theatre groups of the ‘30s is through the Federal Theatre Project. This connection appears at first glance slightly more tenuous than the connection to the WLT, Theatre of Action, and New Theatre League. Many articles about SFA cite that they embraced the Living Newspaper

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<sup>64</sup>John Gassner bemoaned the loss of the New Theatre League’s other publication, *New Theatre*, in the spring of 1937 due to the bankruptcy of its publishing house. It is clear that Gassner considered *New Theatre* the more vital of the League’s two publications. Writing a year later Gassner stated that *Theatre Workshop* was “a technical, nonpolitical quarterly.” John Gassner, “The One-Act Play in The Revolutionary Theatre,” 268.

<sup>65</sup>*Theatre Workshop*, 1 (April-July 1937): 96.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*

technique based on the Soviet model of this form made popular in the United States by the Federal Theatre Project however it appears the greater connection is in participants who first made a name for themselves in the FTP productions and then continued their social activist performance work with SFA.<sup>67</sup> For example, Morris Watson, who co-wrote the stage adaptation of the Sayers and Kahn book *The Great Conspiracy Against Russia*, which was performed at Carnegie Hall on September 22, 1947 with a cast of 100 Stage For Action volunteers led by Paul Robeson and Paul Draper and financially supported by the *New Masses* magazine, was supervisor and contributing writer of three 1930s performances produced by the Living Newspaper Unit of the Federal Theatre Project: *Triple A-Plowed Under* (1936), *1935* (1936), and *Power* (1937). Brett Warren, Watson's co-writer and director for *The Great Conspiracy Against Russia* directed *Power* for the FTP. Warren had been involved with Workers' Theatre prior to his FTP experience as a director with The Collective Theatre of New York.<sup>68</sup> Will Geer, Arthur Miller, Ben Hecht, and a host of others vital to SFA made theatrical waves with the FTP.<sup>69</sup>

Additionally, SFA seems to have drawn much of its organizational inspiration from the foundational mantras the FTP embraced (mantras that were certainly aligned with communist rhetoric) such as the initial purpose of the FTP that "man is changed

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<sup>67</sup>For an excellent analysis of the similarities and differences between Russian and U.S. forms of the Living Newspaper prior to WWII see Lynn Mally, "The Americanization of the Soviet Living Newspaper," *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian & East European Studies* (No. 1903), February 2008; Several articles mention SFA's embracing of the Living Newspaper technique including *The New York Times* on 27 March 1944, 16 November 1944, 6 December 1944, 11 January 1945; in Eleanor Roosevelt's "My Day" series on April 21, 1944; *New Masses* on 2 January 1945, and the *Daily Worker* on 5 March 1946.

<sup>68</sup>John Gassner, "The One-Act Play in The Revolutionary Theatre," in *The One-Act Play Today* by William Kozlenko, ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 265.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid, 263; One of Will Geer's first roles in social activist performance was with the "Let Freedom Ring" Company in Paul Green's *Unto Such Glory* in January 1936.



by his living; but not fast enough” and the message to playwrights regarding the audience, “that they desire[d] a different rhythm of life,” and finally an important reminder to actors and directors, especially poignant for social activist performance, which holds at its center the cooperative experience: “all are members upon one condition, that they forget their own importance.”<sup>70</sup>

Certainly the Federal Theatre Project was not the only 1930s theatre group with personnel connections to SFA. I suggest a significant reason for SFA’s success in building upon the work of these earlier Workers’ Theatres is that they included many of the same members of these previous groups in combination with some of the finest literary and performance talent of the ‘40s and ‘50s. Various members of the previously discussed theatre companies as well as others friendly to or members of the Workers’ Theatre history and the New Theatre League including the New York Harlem Suitcase Theatre, Union Theatre, and Group Theatre were active in SFA including: Paul Peters, Mike Gold, Langston Hughes, John Gassner, Peter Frye, Freda Altman, Ben Bengal, Howard DaSilva, Michael Gordon, Howard Bay, Earl Robinson, Mitchell Grayson, and Philip Loeb--all serving in various capacities with Stage For Action including playwriting, performing, designing, or directing for the group as well as financially sponsoring events.<sup>71</sup>

Arguably more important than the performance styles employed by the FTP and Worker’s Theatres of the ‘30s or even the creative forces behind these groups,

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<sup>70</sup>Federal Theater Project, “First Production Conference,” July 1936. Accessed through the Library of Congress American Memory website. < <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=ftscript&fileName=farbf/00010007/ftscript.db&recNum=0>>

<sup>71</sup>There are well over three hundred individuals connected to SFA and people such as Cheryl Crawford, Harold Clurman, and Louis Kronenberger have been named on SFA letterhead as sponsors of the group, however the focus of this study are core members of the group and the remaining people of interest will be listed in the appendix with their known connections.

was the overarching goal of social activist theatre adopted by SFA in the mid-forties. John Gassner states that the social activist theatre of the thirties, exemplified by the work of Clifford Odets, Mark Blitzstein, Lillian Hellman, Elia Kazan, Cheryl Crawford and many other less famous theatrical names, was considered political or “leftist” because the plays were both socially influential and distinguishable from the other dramas of the period.<sup>72</sup> Specifically Gassner argues that (traditionally) in order for a work to be considered a social activist performance relevant to a working class mentality, the “authors implement[ed] their social sympathies with revolutionary Marxist visions of the overthrow of the capitalistic system in the course of an apocalyptic ‘final’ conflict between capital and labor.”<sup>73</sup> Although this revolutionary pro-Communist rhetoric was more acceptable during the Depression, both theatre companies and the American Communist Party itself understood the need to tone down their message during the 1940s if they wished to produce any significant social change. This need for a transformation in rhetoric came from the top leaders of the American Communist Party as evidenced in a publication issued by the national chairman of America’s Communist Party, William Z. Foster in July of 1941:

“We must break sharply with the methods of work which were adapted to the past period. Now we must proceed boldly to develop the broadest united front and People’s Front activities. We must be prepared to work with all elements, even those openly critical of our Party, who are willing to fight against Hitler. This will require real flexibility on our part. Our greatest enemy is sectarianism, and against this we must be vigilantly on guard on all fronts. We must especially avoid short-cut slogans, radical sounding appeals, in our eagerness to defend the Soviet Union and to fight Hitler. We must know how to work out practical slogans calculated to really mobilize the masses, rather than merely to give forth revolutionary sounds. Our manifesto lays the basis for such policies and our Party membership should not only circulate it among the masses, but also study it

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<sup>72</sup> John Gassner in Himmelstein, viii – ix.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, ix.

carefully themselves.”<sup>74</sup>

A number of significant phrases appear in this text, originally delivered at the meeting of the Communist Party National Committee on June 28, 1941. Foster admits that the methods of the previous period were not applicable to a country facing imminent war and suggests that in order to reach the broadest audiences new approaches must be applied, including foregoing a focus on theory for a focus on practice or action.

Foster argues that mobilization of the masses will occur only through the development of “the broadest united front and People’s Front activities.” Some of these activities included traditional meetings and lectures on Marxist ideology, but also developed during this time were music groups, dance clubs and classes, and theatre training and performances intended to bring about significant social change.

There are voluminous records of Communist Party supporters who found their most significant political and social motivation through the arts. For example, performer Jackie Gibson Alper stated that she, “always enjoyed participating in musical, theatrical, and dance activities and had the feeling that people who could not be reached in other ways would attend a cultural function and be moved to thought and possibly even action enough to become involved in [the Communist Party’s]

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<sup>74</sup>According to Bernard K. Johnpoll, the CPUSA issued a public statement about the Nazi invasion only hours after the attack. Six days later a meeting was held by the National Committee of the CPUSA, attended by 145 party delegates, and led by William Z. Foster and Robert Minor, who both made speeches at the meeting. Minor was standing in for general secretary Earl Browder, who was serving a prison sentence in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. The purpose of the National Committee meeting on June 28, 1941 according to Johnpoll was “to enunciate the new line and to calm the near hysteria that permeated the party ranks.” See Bernard K. Johnpoll, *A Documentary History of the Communist Party of the United States*, Vol. VII (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 37; William Z. Foster, “The New World Situation and Our Tasks,” *The Fight Against Hitlerism* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, Inc., 1941), 11.

struggles.”<sup>75</sup> As scholar Robbie Lieberman suggests, utilizing the arts for political purposes implies that “cultural products [are] important in shaping peoples’ world views; that people had to be affected emotionally as well as intellectually in order to change their political outlook; and that participation rather than passive consumption was critical to the process of changing consciousness and acting on that changed point of view.”<sup>76</sup>

Increasingly active participation in cultural events intent on promoting political or social change was a focus of many members of the Left during the ‘40s. The most productive year in SFA’s existence, 1946, was also the year in this decade in which the national debate on the political influence of the arts to society (or as journalist Charles Norman originally presented it “the whole pressing, fascinating question of the artist’s place in society”) reached its apex.<sup>77</sup> The conversation began in late 1945 in the pages of *PM* with a discussion of the poet Ezra Pound and whether his political views and actions as a fascist (he supported Mussolini during the war and was an anti-Semitist) should outweigh public appreciation of his poetry. The discussion originated between literary giants such as e.e. cummings, William Carlos Williams, Karl Shapiro, and Louis Untermeyer but quickly spread to communist papers and inspired a debate in all art forms of whether one can separate a person’s politics from her/his art. This question haunted many theatre artists (card-carrying members and fellow travelers alike) of the Communist Party throughout their lives as

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<sup>75</sup>Robbie Lieberman, “*My Song Is My Weapon*”: *People’s Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50*, Music in American Life (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 81.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid, 83.

<sup>77</sup>Robert A. Corrigan, “What’s My Line: Bennet Cerf, Ezra Pound and the American Poet,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 24.1 (March 1972), 101.

Senator McCarthy and the HUAC made it clear that a person and his or her political affiliations were considered one and the same. Max Lerner concludes his article in *PM*,

“The relationship between art and life is a two-way street. We have always recognized that life nourishes art. But it is also true that art nourishes life. I don’t want to cut my culture off from anything valid or beautiful in art, even though I might consider the man who did it a fool or a barbarian. Nor do I want to cut myself or my culture off from the great tradition of reason, on which depends the long-run war against the forces of unreason.”<sup>78</sup>

The debate on the interconnectedness between politics and art and the purpose of art in society continued in early April 1946 with a series of articles in *The Worker* discussing social art. Marion Summers writes,

“Anything which deals with humanity and therefore, of necessity with society may be said to be social art...It has been applied to art which recognizes the existence of poverty, inequality, strikes, lynchings, war, exploitation or the myriad other problems of contemporary life. It is an art which is aware that the world is not one big musical comedy in Technicolor. Social art, as we understand it, is unequivocal and outspoken propaganda for social progress.”<sup>79</sup>

Two weeks later on April 18, 1946 the debate took on greater urgency when the ‘Art Is A Weapon’ Symposium was conducted with 3,500 in attendance at the Manhattan Center in N.Y.C. The event included speeches by Arnaud d’Usseau, Howard Fast, William Z. Foster, Joseph North, Elizabeth Catlett, and Samuel Sillen. Additional greetings from the absent Albert Maltz, John Howard Lawson, and Alvah Bessie were read aloud at the symposium.<sup>80</sup> John Howard Lawson hailed the symposium as a call to arms for artists: “Let us appeal to all writers and artists and scholars to fulfill the responsibilities that life imposes upon us, to dedicate our skill

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<sup>78</sup>Max Lerner, “Artists and Fascists,” *PM*, 17 January 1946, 2.

<sup>79</sup>Marion Summers, “Social Art Must Breathe the Air of the Common Man,” *The Worker*, 7 April 1946, 14.

<sup>80</sup>“Art as Weapon Symposium to Be Held April 18,” *Daily Worker*, 8 April 1946, 11; “3,500 at Symposium on Art Is Weapon,” *Daily Worker*, 19 April 1946, 7.

and talent to the cause of labor, to use our art and knowledge as weapons in the struggle for peace, freedom and security.” Albert Maltz was more concerned with the economic or perhaps pure Marxian future of the arts in the United States declaring, “It is the ironic truth that where culture is limited—where it is the privilege of the purse rather than the automatic possession of citizenship—there, even for the purse, it is a twisted thing, a stunted culture.”<sup>81</sup>

While Lawson and Maltz focused on the arts in general, d’Usseau, co-author of *Deep Are the Roots* and a member of SFA’s Board of Directors, spoke specifically about “The Theatre as a Weapon,” articulating, “Playwrights have to understand more fully their sources of inspiration, and draw from them every possible idea and insight that will serve the people. Playwrights must be utilitarian in a dialectical fashion, not in a narrow sense, but broadly.”<sup>82</sup> Arnaud d’Usseau and his writing partner James Gow (also on the SFA Board) co-wrote an article for the *New York Times* five months after the ‘Art Is a Weapon’ Symposium, toning down their rhetoric for a more centrist-leaning audience. They were responding directly to Lawrence Langner’s alarm at the wide-spread prevalence of “social themes” plays being written and produced on Broadway. d’Usseau and Gow defend these “social themes” plays suggesting, “they have helped open the way to wider, more exciting and more varied content in the commercial theatre...the theatre is a good place indeed for the sharpest kind of comment on the manners and morals of America, 1946.”<sup>83</sup> Not wanting to offend their anti-capitalist (and therefore anti-Broadway) comrades at the *Daily*

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<sup>81</sup>“Hollywood Writers Send Messages to Art Forum,” *Daily Worker*, 19 April 1946, 12.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Arnaud D’usseau and James Gow, “Another Definition for Commercialism,” *New York Times*, 22 September 1946, X1.

*Worker*, the two playwrights suggested that audiences who found Broadway tickets too costly should support neighborhood and grassroots groups. They proclaimed that “theatre is breaking out all over,” and they promoted companies such as the American Repertory Company, the American Negro Theatre (which shared many SFA members including Gordon Heath, Peggy Clark, and Abram Hill), Stage For Action, and the “proposed experimental theatre of the American Theatre Wing school.”<sup>84</sup>

It is important to note that d’Usseau’s statements in his Symposium speech and his perspectives in the *New York Times* article, as well as the opinions of several other writers quoted above, support not only popular Leftist thinking of the period but also recognizably Communist-tinged rhetoric about the arts. Russian leader Vladimir Lenin’s writings on the need for developing intelligent and accessible arts for the people (workers specifically) were quoted quite often during this debate on the purpose of arts in people’s lives; especially in communist-published newspapers. Lenin wrote, “Art belongs to the people. It must have its deepest roots in the broad mass of the workers. It must be understood and loved by them. It must be rooted in and grow with their feelings, thoughts and desires. It must arouse and develop the artist in them.”<sup>85</sup>

The idea of arousal, of stimulating action and intellect in one’s audiences (i.e. effect) and the best method in which to achieve this end (i.e. form) as well as the best method for making this art affordable is what most of the social art rhetoric pre- and post-the ‘Art Is A Weapon’ Symposium focuses on. This message varies little from

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

<sup>85</sup>Christopher Hill, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution* (London: Hodder Stoughton Limited, 1947), 229; Samuel Sillen, “Lenin’s Dream of A Culture Truly Belonging to the People,” *Daily Worker*, 13 January 1946, 9.

those of most theoretical treatises on theatre over its long history. Indeed, what is *The Poetics* beyond a questioning of how to create the best tragedy and for what purpose? Intriguingly the specific doctrine outlined at the ‘Art Is a Weapon’ Symposium – form, effect, economics – would be re-hashed a decade later in Arthur Miller’s (one of the earliest SFA members and playwrights) review of the then-current Broadway season for the *International Theatre Annual* in 1956. The commentary, though much more guarded than the polemical tone found in Communist-sponsored 1940s papers such as the *New Masses* or *Daily Worker*, questions the purpose and future of Broadway theatre. Though by the end Miller is cautiously optimistic, it is clear he embraces hope for a change, and perhaps for a resurgence of social activist art. The article appeared in response to a newspaper editorial calling 1956 “the most exciting Broadway season in many years as well as the most successful financially.” By contrast Miller found the season to be “the usual trendless jumble.”<sup>86</sup> He argues that Broadway audiences and theatre critics have no capacity for judging what they see, and the same audiences who rave about *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* would be shocked to discover it is truly a commentary about the bourgeois, or “on nearly everyone who watches it.”<sup>87</sup> In his article Miller consciously dissects Broadway theatre and its monotony without offering any solutions, but he suggests a revolution in theatre inspired by “yet unknown playwrights” is waiting just around the corner. I quote Miller here at length:

I do not believe that anything has been really changed [in recent years]. No acting company has been put together, no genuine new approach to anything has been developed, and it goes without saying that the theatres still take about forty percent of the gross and one chain is demanding fifty. The price of seats is still astronomical by my standards,

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<sup>86</sup>Arthur Miller, “Concerning the Boom,” *International Theatre Annual* 1(1956): 85.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid, 86.



and unless people have adopted an entirely new idea of the value of money, which is not impossible, the audience must still be composed of a very small segment of the population. I talk occasionally before groups of yet unknown playwrights, and I get a certain amount of mail from some I have never seen, and it does seem to me that lately there is a kind of dramatic questioning which is deeper and less easily satisfied with opportune answers than once was the case. There seems to be a genuine dissatisfaction with the uncourageous play or the ill-made, meandering work whose only justification is its spontaneity and its departure from living room realism. *There is an as yet half-conscious but nevertheless growing awareness of the larger social mission of theatre among these people which was not there even two years ago, in my estimation.* Form is no longer spoken of as though it were a free choice of the writer, but its roots in the play's forces are being investigated. *And despite the preoccupation of the daily critics with questions of effect, and effect at almost any cost, I sense in these writers a need to come to an agreement with themselves as to the value and the meaning for man of these effects.*<sup>88</sup>

In many ways I consider Miller's article a transitional piece between the social activist performances of Stage For Action, which offered its last public performance in 1953, and the social activist groups just on the horizon such as The Living Theatre, which originated in 1947 but did not become a theatre of social activism until its anti-atomic bomb street performances during the 1950s.<sup>89</sup> Although SFA was a watered down version of its previous self by 1953 due to a number of political influences including the formation of the Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB) in 1950, Actors' Equity Association's (AEA) 1953 accession to government pressures, and the HUAC's consideration that any message suggesting an alternative to the government status quo –Civil Rights, Equal Rights, anti-nuclear warfare– could be considered a Communist agenda, the fact that SFA lasted—even if it only limped along—until 1953, is evidence of the troupe's commitment to a theatre of social change combating massive social problems against insurmountable odds.

But non-mainstream and social activist theatres were not the only victims of the Red Scare. Broadway comedies had largely lost their political edge long before

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<sup>88</sup>Ibid, 87-88. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>89</sup>Gary Brackett, "The Legacy of Julian Beck and The Living Theatre Today," *The Living Theatre* <<http://www.livingtheatre.org/julian.html>> Accessed 3 June 2009.

SFA dissolved. For example Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse went from their politically savvy Pulitzer Prize-winning *State of the Union* in 1945 to their deflated *Remains to be Seen* six years later in 1951. Of the latter, John Gassner comments that the authors have created a “show,” but “have been clever enough to refrain from” creating any plot; stating that through their “farce-melodrama” they have “seemed to be concerned about nearly everything but their story.”<sup>90</sup> In many ways it seems that Broadway creators during the McCarthy lead HUAC years offer a carnivalesque mirror image of the Russian and Ukrainian creators such as Meyerhold, Mayakovsky, and Kurbas who operating under the Stalin regime produced some of the finest avant-garde works of the twentieth-century but were ultimately put to death because their works, even if in support of the Soviet state, did not adhere to a strict Soviet-Realist perspective. By contrast, in a Bakhtinian ironic turn, U.S. mainstream theatrical creators who had openly criticized the government during the 1940s, were now selling-out their artistic souls in the 1950s by creating mediocre works such as *Remains to be Seen* out of fear of being blacklisted for creating anything vaguely political.<sup>91</sup>

Facing this crisis, Miller’s “Concerning the Boom” article hails the theatrical work he and fellow playwrights, directors, designers, and performers did with SFA as significant to “the larger social mission of theatre” and signals a coming change. Perhaps this article was written in self-defense, since 1956 was the year he was called before the HUAC. It may also have been written out of anger or frustration at losing

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<sup>90</sup>John Gassner, “Broadway in Review,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 3.4 (December 1951): 322-323.

<sup>91</sup>I am not suggesting the blacklisted authors, directors, and performers in the U.S. garnered anywhere near the horrifying treatment of the thousands of artists purged by Stalin. I am only noting that both countries took steps at silencing artists speaking out against social injustices.

the funding on a film regarding juvenile delinquency and gangs in New York City because of being (in his words), “a disloyal lefty.” Yet Miller saw a true absence on the Broadway stage of any piece approaching social activism.<sup>92</sup> I believe Miller understood he was already too involved in Broadway’s maelstrom to return to the kind of grass-roots theatre he explored in the mid-forties, but he also felt the need to welcome in a new cadre of social activist playwrights willing to question the economics, politics, forms, and purpose of theatre in society. As the rapidly approaching 1960s exploded with social activist theatre groups intent on taking the theatre to the people (and to the streets, factories, neighborhoods, schools, and fields) as Stage For Action had so bravely done, it appears Miller’s and many others’ hesitant hopes for the future were rewarded.

An analysis of Stage For Action’s performances and participants offers theatre historians an intriguing glimpse at the social activist offerings of a silenced decade ripe with political tensions and a significant collection of dramatic literature virtually unstudied. Subsequent chapters highlight Stage For Action’s performances, the artists involved, and the objectives of their social activism; many of which are reminiscent of earlier social activist or Workers’ Theatres -- combating racism, union regulation, housing shortages, and the treatment of immigrants. But SFA also embraced topics not previously explored including debunking myths about the biological differences between the races, increased rights for Puerto Ricans, child care for working mothers, promoting progressive politics through the active support of the Henry Wallace presidential campaign, and the cessation of all nuclear warfare.

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<sup>92</sup>Arthur Miller, “Are You Now Or Were You Ever”? *The Guardian* (online edition) 17 June 2000 < <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/jun/17/books.guardianreview>>.

Stage For Action's confrontation with the HUAC and federal government is directly connected to its involvement in promoting these agendas, which were considered friendly to a Communist agenda and therefore un-American in the Cold War climate. Additionally the troupe's choices of performance venues including street theatre at labor strikes, union halls, churches, hospitals, town halls, YMCAs, combined with their "militant" messages and an openly pro-Soviet performance at Carnegie Hall in 1946 ruffled the feathers of many local, state, and federal government officials intent on clamping down on anything or anyone challenging peacetime prosperity or a pro-U.S. government rhetoric.

What the following chapters illustrate is the people involved with SFA were more interested in improving the lives of workers in the United States, not in changing the United States into a Communist state, and certainly not the violent overthrow of the government. Most Stage For Action members were at best dedicated social activists and at worst politically naïve. Ellen Schrecker argues in *Many Are the Crimes*, the "American Communist party was, above all, an organization of activists." The CP expected members to dedicate "Every Evening to Party Work" therefore they were to "attend meetings, read party literature, and become active in labor unions and other so-called 'mass organizations' (CP term) or 'front groups' (CP opponent term)."<sup>93</sup> Although many members and supporters of the American Communist Party ultimately left the group because of boredom or burn-out, others stayed in for long periods of time because of the camaraderie offered by

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<sup>93</sup>Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 8.

belonging to a passionate activist group, and the deep-seeded belief that their actions meant something.

## Chapter 2: “Stage For Action *Goes to the People*”<sup>94</sup>

Many scholars seem to share the assumption that social activism in American theatre largely died out during the years immediately following World War II. Those scholars date the rekindling of social activist performance to Judith Malina and Julian Beck’s Living Theatre in the late 1950s, and credits the Living Theatre with inspiring the fiery social activist performances of the 1960s among groups such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino, and the Free Southern Theatre.<sup>95</sup> However, I contend that without the foundation laid by the artists of Stage For Action in the 1940s, the course of social activist theatre in America would not have followed the path it did in later decades. Thus I begin this chapter with an overview of some of the earlier assertions that have been made concerning the trajectory of social activist theatre in the post-war period as a prelude to my own contention that the 1940s work of SFA needs to be reintegrated into that narrative. I then move to a broader analysis of how Stage For Action formed, since I argue that by tracing its shift in leadership (particularly in the New York City unit), historians can ascertain some of the successes and failings of the group’s infrastructure. Additionally, the chapter examines the impact that the group’s political connections had on their success, especially during relatively conservative historical moments. My ability to make this argument about Stage For Action has been aided by the passage of time. During the 1940s, while World War II was still in progress and McCarthyism and the

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<sup>94</sup>[Stage For Action, Informational Pamphlet], The J. B. Matthews Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

<sup>95</sup>Although The Living Theatre began in 1951, it was not until the late ‘50s that they began producing social activist performances.

Cold War were just on the horizon, groups like Stage For Action revived the tradition of grassroots theatrical organizations focused on social change. Yet these very forces ultimately led not only to the dissolution of many of these grassroots groups, but to reluctance on the part of their members to discuss their work for fear of personal and professional reprisals. As archives, both government and civilian, holding information on these groups become more centralized and accessible, and as the private papers of artists who no longer need to fear blacklisting are released, theatre historians will recognize the immediate post-war period as a rich and exciting moment in social activist theatre.

### Overview of Scholarship

In her compelling study, *Local Acts*, Jan Cohen-Cruz, an expert in social activist performance, claims the end of the '50s "laid the groundwork for engagement in cultural forms that shared a progressive political activism."<sup>96</sup> Yet Cohen-Cruz's assertion overlooks the multitude of newspaper reviews during the 1940s suggesting that Stage For Action was the future of progressive political theatre in the United States. Indeed, the effects of Stage For Action were not confined simply to the stage during the post-war period. Although Robbie Lieberman contends that "left-wing experiments in literature, theater, and film ended abruptly at the close of the decade, with the onset of the war" while "in contrast, the folk song movement was only beginning to explore its cultural and political potential," her statement overlooks the

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<sup>96</sup>Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 35.

role that SFA played in that transitional period.<sup>97</sup> Lieberman points to the significance of 1940s groups like People's Songs. I contend that the development of People's Songs would not have been possible without the support of SFA, since SFA housed People's Songs in its office space during their first year in operation. Moreover, the two groups had a large overlap in committee members and performers, and SFA lasted almost as long as the leftist music group before they both finally succumbed to government pressures.<sup>98</sup>

In *New Deal Theater: The Vernacular Tradition in American Political Theater* Ilka Saal offers an excellent analysis of the “aesthetics and function of political theater,” by distinguishing between the two forms of political theatre (modernist and vernacular) being debated during the late '30s.<sup>99</sup> However Saal leaps in her study from the Broadway revival of *Pins and Needles* in 1939 to political theatre during the 1960s, citing their “common goal was the decisive break with the hegemony of Broadway's unproblematic realism, the radical disruption of established traditions, and the stimulation of the audience's senses and perception—an endeavor reminiscent of the historical avant-garde half a century earlier.”<sup>100</sup> Although I hesitate to call any Stage For Action script avant-garde, as many of them were ameliorations of the modernist and vernacular techniques adopted and even developed by political theatres of the '30s, certainly Stage For Action during the '40s

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<sup>97</sup>Robbie Lieberman, “My Song is My Weapon” *People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture 1930-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 49.

<sup>98</sup>Pete Seeger, founder of the People's Songs movement, stated on August 8, 2009 that it was actor and Stage For Action member Will Geer who introduced Seeger and Woody Guthrie and was instrumental in getting Seeger involved in the New York folk music scene. Therefore it is arguable that the powerful folk song movement in the United States occurring during the late 40s through the 60s owes its origins to people involved in Stage For Action.

<sup>99</sup>Ilka Saal, *New Deal Theater: The Vernacular Tradition in American Political Theater*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 19 – 20.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid*, 151 – 152.



broke with Broadway's hegemony and as reviews of the group attest, "stimulated" audiences by "encouraging objective and unemotional thinking about topics of public interest."<sup>101</sup>

Bruce McConachie's *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War* indirectly furthers the assumption that social activism in theatre died during the immediate post-war period by implicitly allowing Broadway to speak for *all theatre* during the '40s and '50s and by arguing that "whole areas of working-class life vanished from the theater during the early Cold War."<sup>102</sup> McConachie, who is no stranger to Worker's Theatre (having co-edited the expansive *Theatre for Working Class Audiences in the United States, 1830 – 1980*), writes in this later work that many capitalists and union leaders assuaged post-war working class anger through higher wages and other concessions while simultaneously pushing for passage of the Taft-Hartley Act. He also discusses the difficulty of finding jobs, the demotion of black workers, economic unrest, and how anti-communist groups attempted to rid the country of radical labor unions during the late 1940s.<sup>103</sup> But not once does he note that there were theatre groups in existence during these same years attempting to combat these *exact issues*. By suggesting that "Broadway operated at the center of a centrifugal force field that shaped the entire American theater from 1947 to 1962" and reiterating what seems to be a fairly widespread assumption that the Living Theatre, Shakespeare in the Park, and a handful of off-Broadway performances barely challenged the centrality of Broadway during the '50s and '60s, theatre historians do

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<sup>101</sup>Washington Stage For Action, "Press Release, September 24, 1946," *Hilda Worthington Smith Papers*, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

<sup>102</sup>Bruce McConachie, *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947 – 1962* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid*, 6 -7.

a disservice to the many smaller theatre groups operating during the 1940s that considered their work vital to society.<sup>104</sup> I am in no way suggesting that Broadway or mainstream theatre does not operate as a “centrifugal force,” but rather that it was not the only compelling form of theatre in existence during WWII and the early Cold War years. An acknowledgement must be made of those groups with strong alternative voices to the mainstream. While the overall number of people attending Broadway performances in any given year may be miniscule compared to the number who see films, watch TV, listen to radio, or participate in local, community-based performances, the phenomenon of the Broadway show has acquired a cultural cachet that transcends its restricted locale and its relatively narrow audience. The result is an artificial standard for evaluating the success or impact of any non-Broadway show or company on American culture. Additionally, because Broadway’s most successful products have often showcased the dominant groups in American society, focusing specifically on Broadway as a barometer for American culture risks overlooking how important considerations of race, class, gender, and ethnicity were being played out elsewhere in American theatre during the crucial period immediately after World War II.

Interestingly, while theatre historians may have assumed that audiences for projects such as SFA were always smaller than those for mainstream Broadway shows, newspaper accounts of the period suggest otherwise. For example in 1945, only a year and a half after SFA’s formation, *The Worker* proclaimed, “They’ve performed before some 300,000 people-and it’s safe to say their biggest audiences are

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<sup>104</sup>Ibid, 7; Joseph Papp was one vote away from losing the approval of producing New York City “Shakespeare in the Schools” program during the late 1950s due to his supposed communist ties.

supplied by the trade unions.”<sup>105</sup> An informational pamphlet about SFA published post-World War II announced, “In the war years, Stage For Action played before thousands of organizations, before audiences totaling nearly a million people who saw anti-Semitism, Negro discrimination, defeatism dealt with as *you* would like to deal with them.”<sup>106</sup>

Not only did Stage For Action produce plays central to the working-class agenda, it received sponsorship from both blue collar and white collar unions during its ten year existence. In his testimony before the HUAC on July 21, 1947 Walter S. Steele stated “[SFA] has a mobile unit composed of 50 performers, which is now launching a tour under the auspices of locals of the United Electrical Workers, managed by the national office of the union.”<sup>107</sup> Stage For Action also had a stronghold in other labor unions including the Furriers, Transport, and National Maritime Unions.<sup>108</sup> It was SFA’s vigorous support of working class, union labor, and civil rights agendas, along with their considerable connection to other mass organization groups and the Communist Party itself that aroused government suspicion.

Theatre scholars should not underestimate the impact of Stage For Action’s politics, networks, and training on artists such as Arthur Miller, Will Geer, Thelma Schnee, and Burl Ives (among hundreds of others) when analyzing major Broadway theatrical productions of the ‘40s and ‘50s. For each of these artists, their work and

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<sup>105</sup>Bill Mardo, “Stage For Action Trods the Boards to Dramatize Labor’s Viewpoint,” *The Worker* 3 June 1945, 15.

<sup>106</sup>[Stage For Action Informational Pamphlet].

<sup>107</sup>Congress, Senate, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Testimony of Walter S. Steele Regarding Communist Activities in the United States*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 21 July 1947, 115.

<sup>108</sup>*Ibid.*

connection with the group during and post-World War II inevitably affected their artistic and political output during this period. Especially for an artist such as Arthur Miller, the early '40s and Miller's interactions with various Communist newspapers and front groups had a particularly significant impact on the rest of his career.<sup>109</sup> But the artistry, political savvy, and penchant for social change among the intellectual left was not limited to members of Stage For Action during the immediate post-war period. As Richard H. Pells argues, the liberals or intellectual left of the '40s and '50s "created the vocabulary and the mental framework with which the next generation of Americans assaulted the nation's political institutions and social values in the 1960s. Inadvertently and often unhappily, the postwar intellectuals became the parents and teachers—literally and spiritually—of the New Left, the partisans of the counterculture, the civil rights activists, and the movement to end the conflagration in Vietnam."<sup>110</sup> Thus one might argue that SFA provided the content, ideas, and positions for much of the social activist theatre of the late '50s through the '70s.

### Theatrical Activism during the War

When Perry Miller and her associates Berilla Kerr, Donna Keath, and Peggy Clark initiated Stage For Action (originally named Stage Door to Action) in December of 1943, other federally and privately sponsored theatrical groups interested in supporting the war effort already existed.<sup>111</sup> Much has been written

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<sup>109</sup>Alan M. Wald, *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left & the Antifascist Crusade* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 210 – 235.

<sup>110</sup>Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), ix.

<sup>111</sup>Marguerite Higgins cites a performance before the New York State Conference of Women Workers at Pythian Plaza on December 11, 1943 as Stage For Action's first public performance; "Dramas Bring Issues of Day Home to Women," *New York Herald Tribune* (May 1944), accessed in

about those groups whose purpose was entertaining the troops through conservative means of production such as the U.S.O and the Stage Door Canteen performances of the American Theatre Wing. Additionally, different theatre, government, and military institutions took steps to include military personnel in theatre productions. For example, in June of 1943 the National Theatre Conference sponsored a playwriting competition specifically for armed services members that produced 559 manuscripts. In addition to receiving scholarships or fellowships to “18 leading American community and university theatres” the more significant purpose of the scholarships offered to the winners was “outlin[ing] an educational blueprint for readapting returning war veterans to a peacetime society.”<sup>112</sup> The winners of the contest--ranging from Privates to Corporals-- were not professional playwrights and many were not involved in the theatre in any way prior to this contest. No restrictions were placed on their writing, however most chose to write about aspects of military life or the war, and although theatre scholar George McCalmon intimates that none of the plays were exceptional theatre if “judged by the canons of theatrical art,” he also observes that one could not expect more from a group of writers facing a “constant call of duty, unrelenting fatigue, enervating climates and lack of facilities.”<sup>113</sup>

While McCalmon notes that few of the contest plays were professional caliber, Albert Wertheim’s *Staging the War*, describes a range of military sponsored productions during WWII (including the one-act playwriting contest for American soldiers produced by John Golden and the Army Special Service Staff), which

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the *Hilda Worthington Smith Papers*, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

<sup>112</sup>George McCalmon, “Playwrights in Uniform,” *Theatre Arts* (July 1944): 410.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid, 412.

resulted in the Broadway production *The Army--Play by Play* in 1943. *The Army--Play by Play* inspired another 1943 government sponsored Broadway production, *Winged Victory: The Army Air Forces Play* by Moss Hart. In February 1944 *Theatre Arts* named *Winged Victory*, “one of the theatre’s finest wartime productions.”<sup>114</sup> Additionally, the military looked at performance as a possible morale booster; producing scripts for various musical revues intended for use by military personnel on army and navy bases and sponsoring three original musicals, *About Face!*, *Hi, Yank*, and *P.F.C Mary Brown*, all intended as entertainment by the troops for the troops and written by Frank Loesser, who was then a private in the army.<sup>115</sup>

Didactic performances were written and sponsored by the government for both military and civilian use. There were plays informing G.I.’s about preparing for “hygiene problems” during combat and appropriate wartime nutrition as well as Treasury Department plays performed for elementary school children about encouraging the sale of War Stamps and Bonds and reminding them about the importance of food and metal rationing. Older students saw performances like *Star for a Day* aimed at post-graduation responsibility, suggesting military service for young men and underscoring the importance of “stay-at-home, work-at-home, knit-at-home” labor for young women.<sup>116</sup>

As Wertheim states, the Treasury Department’s and other government sponsored plays intended for civilian production, “represent significant artifacts of American wartime culture” illustrating how the government “sought to employ drama

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<sup>114</sup>“The World and the Theatre,” *Theatre Arts* (February 1944): 67.

<sup>115</sup>Albert Wertheim, *Staging the War: American Drama and World War II* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 126 – 152.

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid*, 161.

as a means of suasion and propaganda.”<sup>117</sup> Not all of the government sponsored civilian plays supporting the war efforts were as blatantly gendered as those of the Treasury Department, however, they generally ignored issues of class, race, and gender, and they utterly discounted pacifism as (essentially) unpatriotic. Perhaps these government-sponsored performances of ‘battle for men and knitting for women,’ helped inspire four women—Miller, Kerr, Keath, and Clark—to create a theatre company with a different message.<sup>118</sup>

### The Development of Stage For Action:

#### Perry Miller

Perry Miller, the founder of Stage For Action, was a twenty-three year old radio actress when she developed the idea for SFA and invited fellow radio actress Donna Keath, stage performer Berilla Kerr, and lighting designer Peggy Clark to join her in creating a theatre group “determined to bring to public attention the menace of native fascism.”<sup>119</sup> Of these four founding members, only Donna Keath would eventually face naming on the infamous *Red Channels* list. However, of the seven supporting names listed in the first major *New York Times* article detailing Stage For

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid, 172.

<sup>118</sup>SFA was certainly not the only female led civilian group intent on supporting the war effort through theatrical means. In the spring of 1944, just as SFA was gaining full speed, the American Theatre Wing developed a program of theatre outreach in support of the war effort with the addition of its Script Department under the guidance of Esther Hawley. The purpose of this department was distributing “war sketches and one-act plays to non-professional, school and community groups for production.” Most of the distributed scripts came from the American Theatre Wing playwriting contest about the war effort held in the winter of 1943. The biggest differences between these American Theatre Wing scripts and the early SFA plays is SFA charged its subsidiary groups a nominal fee for usage of their scripts while the American Theatre Wing scripts were available for gratis and SFA scripts were weightier politically. “The World and the Theatre,” *Theatre Arts* (May 1944): 260.

<sup>119</sup>Burton Lindheim, “A Stage For Action: From the Bronx to Canarsie With the Players of Topical Problems,” *New York Times*, 14 May 1944, X1.

Action's work, four of the seven, Edward Chodorov, Norman Corwin, Arthur Miller, and Sam Wanamaker faced HUAC prosecution. These supporting members are noticeably all male and better known to the average theatre historian than the founding women, which is interesting in itself. But it also speaks to the intense level of interest the HUAC showed in Stage For Action once the group included and was run by men renowned in their artistic fields and with a considerable history of involvement in leftist and Communist propaganda.

Perry Miller (Adato), the group's founder, had a relatively brief career in theatre and radio before becoming known as a documentary film maker. Her career in film spanned over forty years and she garnered numerous Emmy nominations as well as an Emmy Award for her film, *Dylan Thomas – The World I Breathe*. She was the first woman to win a Directors Guild of America Award for her film *Georgia O'Keeffe-A Life in Art* in 1977 (an award she won three more times). Her 1970 documentary, *Gertrude Stein: When You See This, Remember Me* is considered "one of the key works of the historical documentary genre."<sup>120</sup> Along with her work on Thomas and O'Keeffe, Miller Adato directed works on Radio Comedians of the '30s and '40s, Mary Cassatt, Charles and Ray Eames, Frankenthaler, Picasso, Sandburg, and Eugene O'Neill. Her most recent works were released in 2001 and 2006. In late 2008 Miller Adato began filming a new two-hour documentary produced by PBS about Parisian cultural life between 1905 and the 1930s titled *Paris: The Luminous*

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<sup>120</sup>New York State Writer's Institute, "Perry Miller Adato," <<http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/webpages4/archives/pmadato.html>> Accessed 21 July 2008.



Years, for which she received an \$800,000 grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities.<sup>121</sup>

Miller was named as the founder of SFA in a *New York Times* article in May 1944. At the benefit performance for the group on April 14, 1944 at the Henry Hudson Hotel, the playbill listed her as the Executive Secretary with Donna Keath acting as Chairman of the Board. A year after the group's formation the *New York Times* described Miller as the retiring executive director of the group, but still a member of its Board of Directors along with Donna Keath, Berilla Kerr and twenty-two other members. Edward Chodorov took over as Chairman of the Board in 1945.<sup>122</sup> Miller is named as a member of the Board of Directors on letterhead dated May 1946 and she taught the courses in 'Living Newspaper' and political theatre techniques along with Alex Leith and Art Smith at a three-day seminar in Washington, D.C. sponsored by the Political Action Committee (PAC) in June of the same year.<sup>123</sup> Additionally, Walter Steele "named" Perry Miller as one of the instructors at Camp Annisquam in Gloucester, MA—a summer camp run by the communist affiliated Samuel Adams School in Boston, MA—in his congressional testimony in 1947. The Samuel Adams School "sponsor[ed] an amateur theater group which is affiliated with Stage For Action," and Miller was involved with this aspect of the School and summer camp.<sup>124</sup> Whether or not Steele's testimony precipitated Miller's flight from SFA remains unclear, but puzzlingly despite her deep

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<sup>121</sup>Emily J. McMurray, ed., "Adato, Perry Miller." *Contemporary Theatre, Film and Television*, 11. (Detroit: Gale Research, 1994.): 3-4, *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, accessed 12 February 2010.

<sup>122</sup>"Chodorov Wins Honor," *New York Times*, 11 January 1945, 19.

<sup>123</sup>John Leslie, "Stalin's Hand In Our Ballot Box," *Plain Talk* (October 1946): 8.

<sup>124</sup>*Testimony of Walter S. Steele Regarding Communist Activities in the United States*, 52

involvement with many aspects of SFA during its first three years, her name disappears entirely from the company's letterhead after December of 1946.

Miller never completed her college education, although she did attend the Marshalov School of Drama as well as the New School for Social Research during the 1940s and was awarded an honorary L.H.D from Illinois Wesleyan University in 1984.<sup>125</sup> As a young child she suffered a devastating loss; the death of her father, a dentist, from a heart attack when she was two years old. She had one five year old and one nine month old sibling at the time. She started performing at an early age in summer camps and then began performing in community theatre in Yonkers at age twelve. Her first professional work was in summer stock at Lake Champlain in Essex where she was an acting apprentice but went on for the lead in *Goodbye Again* when the lead did not arrive in time for curtain. She describes herself as being "very beautiful" and did both modeling and commercials before being cast in a minor role in the Theatre Guild's production of *Madame Bovary*, which opened on November 16, 1937 at the Broadhurst Theatre in New York City. Miller was still in high school when she performed as one of the "girls in the balcony." A review for the Washington, D.C. try-out of *Madame Bovary* called the girls in the balcony the Greek Chorus for the piece in which "Emma's schoolgirl companions who, placed in the two upper stage boxes, take up a portion of the story while Emma stands alone on the darkened stage."<sup>126</sup> She left school for six months in order to participate in the production but still graduated on time as salutatorian of her class. Through this production she became a member of Actor's Equity and in December of 1942 rented

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<sup>125</sup>McMurray.

<sup>126</sup>"Madame Bovary Staged in Capital," *New York Times*, 6 October 1937, 28.

an apartment at 658 Lexington Avenue in New York City, one year prior to forming Stage For Action with Clark, Kerr, and Keath.<sup>127</sup>

During my interview of her on June 30, 2008, Miller Adato pointed to the work of Hallie Flannigan and the Living Newspaper technique of the Federal Theatre Project as her inspiration for forming SFA. She stated, “I wanted a way to communicate ideas; I wanted to save the world; tremendously idealistic in abolishing poverty and misery.”<sup>128</sup> Miller Adato said she was very political in the sense that she understood change had to come through politics and “not through lectures [on politics] but through entertainment. The way to get to the people was to go to them where they were. Create something that offers them entertainment and shows the world; life that’s important to them.”<sup>129</sup> Miller Adato asserts that the most important political event for inspiring the formation of the group besides WWII was the Spanish-American War. Yet she claims that her most *personal* inspiration for beginning the group came from a distinctly Jewish perspective that “you can’t do business with Hitler” and a need for immediate change in Europe and in the American perspective on fascism.

I questioned Miller about her movement away from SFA only a few years after its founding, and her transition from theatre to film and she noted that her disillusionment with SFA stemmed from the fact that theatre as an art form relies on people and live performance. There was a lot of frustration due to the “dependence on live actors and there was always a problem — child getting sick, people getting a job—even with three or four casts,” so she began searching for a different medium in

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<sup>127</sup>*New York Times*, 19 December 1942, 32.

<sup>128</sup>Perry Miller Adato, interviewed by author, 30 July 2008, phone call.

<sup>129</sup>*Ibid.*

which she could more effectively “communicate ideas.” One afternoon she attended a screening of a film in the *Why We Fight* series at the MoMA and said to herself, “Film, that’s it, film!”<sup>130</sup> The *Why We Fight* series was directed by Frank Capra for the War Department while he was serving in the Signal Corps. It included seven films: *Prelude to War*, *The Nazis Strike*, *Divide and Conquer*, *The Battle of Britain*, *The Battle of Russia*, *The Battle of China*, and *War Comes to America*. The purpose of the films (originally released exclusively to war plants in April 1943), was to motivate the military draftees, many of whom had little knowledge of national or international events.<sup>131</sup> What drew Miller to the films was Capra’s underlying message in each of the documentaries, which was “insuring against the recurrence of world war” by “showing the necessity for better understanding between nations and peoples, showing the necessity for outlawing conquest and exploitation by the few, and showing the necessity for eliminating economic evils.”<sup>132</sup>

Miller Adato alludes to an epiphany while watching one of the fifty minute *Why We Fight* films, suggesting she instantaneously understood that documentary film making was the best way to reach broad audiences regarding significant topics. Miller Adato’s change of career led her to a series of jobs in the independent and documentary film community prior to directing her own films. She archived a collection of social welfare films for the United Nations, co-founded the Film Advisory Center in Manhattan, and worked for CBS in Europe as a film consultant

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<sup>130</sup>Ibid; I do not have an exact date for when Miller Adato viewed the *Why We Fight* film at MoMA, however it was no earlier than 1945; For a concise history of the MoMA during the 1930s – 40s see Iris Barry, “Why Wait for Posterity,” *Hollywood Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (January 1946): 131-137.

<sup>131</sup>Thomas William Bohn, *An Historical and Descriptive Analysis of the “Why We Fight” Series*, (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 98 and 109.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid, 100.

before landing a position with National Educational Television—the predecessor to PBS—in 1964. Although her initial job at NET was that of a film researcher, she quickly worked her way up to directing and producing her own documentary television programs and films. What makes Miller Adato’s work stand out has much to do with her training as an actress; she was the first United States documentary film director to master the art of merging documentary film and drama, as is evidenced by her films on Carl Sandburg and Eugene O’Neill. In Miller Adato’s quest to “change the world” through film, she also changed the potential of documentary film making, and film makers as renowned as Ken Burns name her “a major influence” on their work.<sup>133</sup>

Miller Adato was named only once during the HUAC hearings on communist activity in the United States. Walter S. Steele, in his testimony on July 21, 1947, included her in a long list of the faculty members at the communist-friendly Camp Annisquam in Gloucester, MA.<sup>134</sup> During the 1940s, Camp Annisquam was one of hundreds of communist-sponsored vacation retreats in the United States and Miller-Adato’s connection to the camp was brief. She was spared any further investigations by the HUAC because her participation in any communist related activities ended in the late summer of 1946 (approximately a year before the hearings regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry began.)

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<sup>133</sup>The Paley Center for Media, “Perry Miller Adato: Television Producer, Director, Writer,” <<http://www.shemadeit.org/meet/biography.aspx?m=160>> First accessed 15 July 2009; Deirdre Branley, “Perry Miller Adato to Be Honored By the Paley Center for Achievements in Film and Television,” *Thirteen WNET New York* <<http://www.thirteen.org/pressroom/pdf/company/AdatoSheMadeItRelease.pdf>>, First accessed 8 July 2009.

<sup>134</sup>Camp Annisquam has subsequently become a campsite in the up-scale tourist area of Gloucester known as Cape Ann, which is famous for its yachting, whale-watching, and antique stores.

## Peggy Clark

Peggy Clark's participation in Stage For Action mirrors that of Perry Miller. She too escaped the HUAC frenzy and enjoyed a long and illustrious career on Broadway as a designer despite her intimate connection to several other leftist political and theatre groups, including the IWO, Green Mansions Theatre, A.F.L.-C.I.O, American Negro Theatre, and the Committee for Russian War Relief. Best known for her lighting designs, Clark's resumé includes the Judith Anderson *Medea*, *No Time for Sergeants*, and *Auntie Mame* as well as numerous original musical productions such as *Brigadoon*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *Wonderful Town*, *Kismet*, *Peter Pan*, *Flower Drum Song* and a host of others from 1946 to 1980. Clark's protection against HUAC prosecution seems to have been her ability to work on both sides of the political fence. While most likely a "fellow traveler" between 1939 and 1946, she also co-designed the interior for the original New York Stage Door Canteen and was an active volunteer for the Canteen's sponsor, the American Theatre Wing.<sup>135</sup>

Though Clark's involvement in SFA was relatively brief, it is thanks to her collection at the Library of Congress that original programs from the benefit performance at the Henry Hudson Hotel, that SFA member cards (which she designed), set designs, and initial press releases from Stage For Action still exist. In March of 1946, Clark designed the sets for the performance of Arnold Perl's *Dream Job*, which was a part of SFA's variety performance at Carnegie Hall titled *Theatre Parade*. However she left the company on August 15, 1946. In a letter to the Board

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<sup>135</sup>American Theatre Wing War Service, Inc., "Certificate to Peggy Clark," 1944(?) in Peggy Clark Collection, Special Collections, Performing Arts Reading Room, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

she stated, "Since I do not feel that your new perspective for Stage For Action is a realistic one and as a result can make no contribution to the new expanded dreams; - I hereby tender my resignation from the Play Board, the Production Department, the Executive Committee, and the Board of Directors of Stage For Action."<sup>136</sup>

Following Miller and Clark's exits in 1946, only two of the original founders, Berilla Kerr and Donna Keath, remained as either members of the board or sponsors of the group after the point Stage For Action was named as a communist front. For both Kerr and Keath their association with SFA after it became a political target seems to have had a strong impact on their theatrical careers.

#### Berilla Kerr<sup>137</sup>

One of Berilla Kerr's first professional performance roles was with the Farragut Players in Rye Beach, New Hampshire during their summer season of 1940.<sup>138</sup> She was affiliated with SFA as a performer, board member, and sponsor from 1943-1948, and I suggest that her connection with SFA after it came under political fire may have prevented her from working as a performer for some time afterwards. After an absence of five years, she is listed as the production assistant for *The Fifth Season* on Broadway in 1953 and she co-authored *The Vacant Lot* with Paul Streger in 1954, which had its premiere at the La Jolla Playhouse.<sup>139</sup> She then seems to disappear again for a period of roughly fifteen years before re-appearing in 1969

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<sup>136</sup>Peggy Clark, "Letter of Resignation to Stage For Action," 15 August 1946 in Peggy Clark Collection, Special Collections, Performing Arts Reading Room, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>137</sup>Alternative spelling: Berrilla Kerr

<sup>138</sup>Internet Broadway Database, "The Fifth Season," <<http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=2212>> Accessed 9 June 2009; Lucas and Monroa, "Summer Season: The Playhouses Prepare," *New York Times*, 9 June 1940, X1.

<sup>139</sup>Sam Zolotow, "Wayne Will Take 'Teahouse' Leave," *New York Times*, 9 August 1954, 13.

and moving back and forth between playwriting and performing. Kerr returned to the New York City stage in March 1969 at St. Mark's Theatre in Doric Wilson's *Now She Dances*.<sup>140</sup> On May 17, 1972 Kerr's play *Inside Out Sweetness* (co-authored with Jeffery Moss) was staged by Roddy O'Conner and Rhoda Grauer at LaMama E.T.C.<sup>141</sup> Two years later Kerr was on-stage again performing the role of Eva Temple in the first New York City production of the Tennessee Williams play *Battle of Angels* (later revised and re-named *Orpheus Descending*). The 1974 New York City production stayed true to the original *Battle of Angels* script and was staged by Marshall Mason of the Circle Repertory Company.

In 1975 Kerr joined the resident playwriting staff of the Circle Repertory Company and her play *The Elephant in the House* was produced later that year. In 1995 Abingdon Theater Company produced two of Kerr's short plays, *German Games* and *Evangeline and God*.<sup>142</sup> Other plays written by Kerr and housed in the Circle Repertory Theatre Collection at the Billy Rose Library include *A Biography*, which was named one of the Best Plays of 1985 – 1986, *Away from Goodness* co-written with Arlene Nadel, *Beach Play*, *Evelyn*, *Frisbee*, *Gypsy Plumber*, *How Are You?*, *Judith*, *The Life and Death of a Radical*, and a host of other titles.

There has been for many years a New York City Foundation in Kerr's name, which continued after her death in 1993 and gives yearly awards to theatres as well as playwrights for the development of new works. According to *Backstage Online*, the

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<sup>140</sup>Ruth Gilbert, ed., *The New York Magazine*, 10 March 1969, 11.

<sup>141</sup>La Mama E.T.C., "Archives: Play List 1972," <<http://www.lamama.org/>> Accessed 9 June 2009.

<sup>142</sup>Mel Gussow, "Stage: 'Battle of Angels'; The Cast," *New York Times*, 4 November 1974, 51; Mel Gussow, "Stage: Clumsy 'Elephant'," *New York Times* 4 November 1975, 29; Paul Gardner, "The Man Who Keeps Circle Rep Rolling; Marshall Mason," *New York Times*, 3 October 1976, 67; *New York Times*, 28 May 1995, H34.



foundation accepted neither nominations nor applications and “award-winners are selected by board members, all of whom are theatre insiders well-versed in what’s being produced and published.”<sup>143</sup> The seemingly typical experience of a Berilla Kerr Playwriting Award recipient was recorded in the *Worcester Telegram and Gazette* in 2003. Gino Dilorio is a theatre professor and Playwright in Residence at New Jersey Repertory Theatre. When Dilorio received the phone call informing him that he had been chosen as the recipient of the 2003 Berilla Kerr Award for Playwriting he had the following response, “I knew about the award. I had never heard of her... The Foundation itself is kind of a mystery. You call and leave a voice mail....” About Kerr, the woman whose foundation gave him an undisclosed amount of money with which he could do “whatever [he] liked,” he states, “Kerr was a playwright who never really hit a home run. She never really made that much of a name for herself, but she was very talented. Somehow she had a good deal of money, and set up a foundation to help other playwrights and give them a shot she never got.”<sup>144</sup> Recipients of the Berilla Kerr Foundation grants number in the thousands and read as a “Who’s Who” of contemporary playwrights and regional theatres.<sup>145</sup> A quick run-down of the list of playwrights Kerr’s Foundation supports exemplifies her passion for social-activism and the advancement of diversity in the American Theatre. The recipients include at least two Pulitzer Prize winners, cutting-edge Latino and

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<sup>143</sup>*Back Stage*, 29 October 1999, <<http://www.allbusiness.com/services/amusement-recreation-services/4591290-1.html>> First accessed 1 July 2009.

<sup>144</sup>Richard Duckett, “Theater Teacher Scores With Stage Dialogue,” *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*, 7 August 2003, C1; According to other sources about the Foundation awards, most recipients received somewhere in the vicinity of \$15,000.

<sup>145</sup>A partial list of Berilla Kerr grant recipients includes the playwrights John Belluso (who died in 2006 and was a champion for artists with disabilities), Suzanne Bradbeer, Jan Buttram, Marcus Davidson, Pulitzer Prize Winners Margaret Edson and David Lindsay-Abaire, Anthony Giardina, Peter Gil-Sheridan, Joanna Glass, Jessica Goldberg, Sigrid Heath, David Johnston, Eduardo Machado, and Lucy Wang.

Asian-American playwrights, as well as a playwright who made significant advances in the theatre for people with disabilities. Despite Dilorio's assertion that Kerr was an "unknown," because she never "hit a home run," and because her works were not part of the U.S. mainstream theatre canon, her career spanned more than half a century, and her role as a founder of SFA, a resident artist at Circle Rep, and a supporter of new American playwrights suggests that she sustained a lifelong commitment to developing new and socially conscious theatre.

### Donna Keath

The final founding member of Stage For Action, Donna Keath, was the lone member of the foursome named on the *Red Channels* list and therefore effectively blacklisted. Donna Keath was better known as a radio performer but had a brief career on the stage performing in *The Playboy of Newark* at the Provincetown Playhouse in March 1943 and playing the role of Irene Halenczik in the ill-fated Broadway production *Sophie* in December 1944. Interestingly, *The Playboy of Newark* cast included Stage For Action member Peggy Meredith and *Sophie* included four other Stage For Action members: director Michael Gordon and actors Will Geer, Doris Rich, and Ann Shepard.<sup>146</sup>

Critic George Jean Nathan disliked *The Playboy of Newark* and his review of *Sophie* in *The Theatre Book of the Year 1944 – 1945* was equally scathing. He described it as a poor production with horrendous acting, a tired plot line, and weak

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<sup>146</sup>“Events,” *New York Times*, 14 March 1943, X1; Sam Zolotow, “Paxinou to Arrive in Comedy Tonight,” *New York Times* 25 December 1944, 16; “Sophie Halenczik, American,” *The Billboard*, 23 December 1944, 32; By the date of the first Stage For Action Benefit at the Henry Hudson Hotel on Wednesday, April 19, 1944, Meredith, Geer, Rich, and Shepard were established members of SFA. Only Michael Gordon joined after this date.

directing. Of the acting Nathan remarked it was “of the species more usually encountered in the one-floor-up little theatres,” except for the leading lady, the Greek actress Madame Katina Paxinou, whose performance was dubbed as reminiscent of a “splashing goldfish.”<sup>147</sup> Perhaps more significantly, Nathan disliked the political undertone in the performance which was well intentioned as, “a plea for the understanding kind of Americanism that will be tolerant of foreigners in our midst,” but was simultaneously undercut by the heavy handedness of the political message inserted into an otherwise “folk flavor” comedy (apparently the play included multiple jokes about human posteriors referred to as “heinies”). As for Michael Gordon’s direction of the piece, according to Nathan there was so much “mad galloping about the stage and so much noise that the audience momentarily expected the actors to come down into the aisles.”<sup>148</sup> Not surprisingly, the production lasted only nine performances.

Keath also tried her hand at playwriting and in 1943 co-authored *Leave It As You Find It* with Andrew Rosenthal.<sup>149</sup> A few years later, *The New York Times* mentioned Keath’s name in connection with playwright Alden Nash as co-author of a yet unnamed piece, which was eventually registered for copyright in July, 1946 as a three-act play entitled *Soon the Morning*.<sup>150</sup> Keath was much more successful in her radio career, eventually landing the role of Lynne Dineen in the long running soap

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<sup>147</sup>George Jean Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1944-45* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 204 - 205.

<sup>148</sup>Ibid.

<sup>149</sup>Library of Congress Copyright Office, *Catalog of Copyright Entries*, vol. 16, no. 1(1943): 105.

<sup>150</sup>Lewis Funke, “News and Gossip of the Rialto,” *New York Times*, 30 June 1946, X1; Library of Congress Copyright Office, *Catalog of Copyright Entries*, vol. 18-19, no. 1(1945): 102 and 118.

opera radio program *Young Dr. Malone* (1939 -1960).<sup>151</sup> By 1943 she was a national board member of the American Federation of Radio Artists (AFRA) and one of the New York delegates at the 1943 AFRA National Convention in Chicago.<sup>152</sup> Four other New York AFRA delegates at the national convention were also SFA members. Felix Knight and Paul Mann were on the Board of Directors, Minerva Pious was on the Advisory Council, and Mann, Pious, and Ann Shepard performed in SFA productions.<sup>153</sup>

The connection between SFA and AFRA was not a coincidence and Keath's work with the group from the beginning is illustrative of SFA's simultaneous on-stage as well as on-air presence. As early as 1944 Stage For Action's *That They May Win* by Arthur Miller was performed over the air and in the 1947 Congressional hearings one of the larger accusations against SFA was their endorsing the People's Radio Foundation (considered a communist front) for a FM broadcasting license so that they could continue producing their plays over the airwaves. In late December of 1946 Stage For Action and the American Negro Theatre teamed up to perform several plays on air in support of the People's Radio Foundation in a program titled "Adventure Radio" that was directed by Milton Robertson and included "a huge inter-racial cast."<sup>154</sup> The People's Radio Foundation (PRF), spearheaded by attorney Joseph Brodsky and political activist Rockwell Kent, was created to produce "for the first time a radio station...owned and operated in the interest of the community, free

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<sup>151</sup>“Through the Years With Young Dr. Malone—In Pictures,” *Radio and Television Mirror*, vol. 32, no. 3 (August 1949): 36 – 39.

<sup>152</sup>“Delegates to AFRA National Convention Chicago, August 28 and 29,” *The Billboard*, 4 September 1943, 9.

<sup>153</sup>“The Billboard AFRA Convention Pix,” *The Billboard*, 9 September 1944, 13.

<sup>154</sup>“Radio Foundation for Minorities,” *New York Amsterdam News* 28 December 1946, 7.

from business pressures.”<sup>155</sup> Their mission was to “offer honest labor news, promote international friendship, fight race hatred, educate the community, and offer opportunity to developing artists.”<sup>156</sup> As these were all social issues SFA supported, it was strategically advantageous for the group, especially with a number of radio personnel already involved, to stand behind a venture with the potential to substantially broaden their audience.

PRF collected a number of foes equal to, if not greater than, its supporters. In late 1946, the ultra-conservative and vociferously anti-communist radio and television evangelist, Reverend James Hargis (1925 – 2004), spoke out against the People’s Radio Foundation receiving a FM license specifically because they were receiving the support of SFA, which he stated was “steeped in red propaganda, taught to ridicule our religious concepts, morals, our institutions and Constitution” continuing, “it is easy to deduce the type of material which will be sent over the air waves to etherize the people into acceptance of these philosophies so that their task of destruction may be easier and more rapid.”<sup>157</sup> Because mass organization groups such as Stage For Action supported the PRF the FCC rejected the PRF’s bid for one of the five remaining FM licenses available for labor union groups in the spring of 1947, and the PRF disbanded a year later due to attacks from the left and the right.<sup>158</sup>

It is plausible that Donna Keath was responsible not only for the early broadcasting of SFA plays on national airwaves, but also for bringing playwright and

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<sup>155</sup>Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Waves of Opposition: Labor and the Struggle for Democratic Radio* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 140

<sup>156</sup>Ibid.

<sup>157</sup>Billy James Hargis, “Report on Stage For Action, Inc.,” 1946, in Billy James Hargis Papers, Special Collections, University of Arkansas.

<sup>158</sup>Fones-Wolf, 160.

radio writer Norman Corwin into the Stage For Action fold as she performed in a March 7, 1944 Columbia Broadcast of Corwin's *Studio Primer* with fellow SFA performers Ralph Bell and Minerva Pious.<sup>159</sup> One month later Keath was the named Chairman of SFA and later that month on April 19, 1944 Corwin was listed as a sponsor in the program for the SFA benefit performance. Corwin also spoke at the benefit and allowed a performance of scenes from his *Untitled* that evening.<sup>160</sup> Hargis, in his 1946 report on Stage For Action, called Corwin "a person who deserves further attention. During the recent hearings by the FCC...evidence was submitted to show that this same Norman Corwin (biggest individual money raiser for left front movements) would contribute to programs broadcast by the station if and when the PRF was granted a license."<sup>161</sup> Stage For Action was intimately connected with the PRF and there is no telling what the impact of SFA would have been on both the radio and theatre worlds had the FCC granted them a license. However one can speculate that names such as Jean Karsavina, Charles Polacheck, Peggy Phillips, and Arthur Vogel, which inspire only the faintest of recollections now, might have had a much wider influence had their SFA plays been performed over the airwaves.

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<sup>159</sup>R. LeRoy Bannerman, *Norman Corwin and Radio: The Golden Years* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1986), 240; Regardless of the possible Keath and Corwin connection, it is Corwin's wife Betty and Perry Miller who sustained what appears to be the longest lasting relationship from SFA. Miller (Adato) spoke in 2008 of seeing her on a regular basis as the two of them lived down the street from each other in Westport, CT.

<sup>160</sup>Stage For Action, "Stage For Action Presents a Special Showing of 3 Plays in its Repertory," 19 April 1944, Peggy Clark Collection, Special Collections, Performing Arts Reading Room, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>161</sup>Hargis, 22.

### Stage For Action and the Russian Question

Donna Keath's contributions to SFA were not merely her organizational skills or her connections with well-known radio writers and performers. Her work with Soviet films also links her to one writer in particular who would prove fateful to the group. In 1945 Keath provided voice-over work for two Soviet films dubbed into English, *Wait for Me*, based on a poem by Konstantin Simonov and *Zoya* by Lev Arnshtam and Boris Chirskov for which SFA sponsor and HUAC blacklist member Howard Fast provided the "faintly fustian" English dialogue.<sup>162</sup> Of these three Soviet writers, Arnshtam, Chirskov, and Simonov, it was SFA's relationship with Simonov (the Secretary of the Russian Writers Union from 1946 to 1950 and again from 1967 until his death in 1979 as well as a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party from 1952 until 1956) that proved most problematic. Konstantin Simonov intersected with Stage For Action at several points during its existence (and he became a player in United States theatre in general during the 1940s). One year after Keath worked on *Wait for Me*, and while she was serving on SFA's Board of Directors, Simonov spoke at an event hosted by Stage For Action. The event, on June 5, 1946, took place during Simonov's visit to the United States by invitation of the State Department. The event was sponsored by some of the most renowned names in theatre at the time including Sam Jaffee, Oscar Serlin, Harold Clurman, James Gow,

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<sup>162</sup>"News of the Screen," *New York Times* 12 March 1945, 22; B.C. "The Screen," *New York Times* 16 April 1945, 26; Two other SFA members provided voiceover work for *Wait for Me*: Paul Mann and Byron McGrath.

Louis Kronenberger, and Cheryl Crawford and the invitations for the event were distributed on Stage For Action letterhead.<sup>163</sup>

Simonov first came to the attention of American audiences in December 1942 when his work *The Russian People* was adapted for the American stage by Clifford Odets and produced by the Theatre Guild. George Jean Nathan called the piece, “complete trashiness” and bemoaned the future of the stage if critics as well respected as Nemirovich-Danchenko lauded works such as *The Russian People*. Nathan writes,

It was critically dismaying to hear the late and once highly regarded Nemirovich-Danchenko, director of the equally highly regarded Moscow Art Theatre, observe: "In these stern days of war, it is difficult to over-rate the significance of *The Russian People* as art. . . . Tell the actors that the role of art has now matured as never before. Art cannot tolerate any compromise at this time. Art must teach the people to hate the dark and terrible forces of Fascism which threaten humanity and its culture." So art is not art save it wear an Allied uniform and carry, with a curse on its lips, a gun in its hand. Love, once the bread and butter of the drama, for the time being seems to be surrendering its thematic place to this hate. Where the delicate emotion once occupied the larger portion of drama, we now find its emotional opposite. Whereas the former drama was usually for something, the present is against something. The aforesaid Fascism and Nazism have been the forces motivating the change. The day may not be far off when the dramatic spectacle of a man tenderly kissing a woman will be as sensational as was the stage's first articulation of the term "son-of-a-bitch."<sup>164</sup>

It comes as no surprise that Nathan would disapprove of any work professing a social agenda as he rarely embraced so-called ‘social dramas’. But Nathan’s critique of *The Russian People* and his opinion that the future of U.S. theatre was one in which promoting hate would persevere over promoting love is flawed. It is true a large number of anti-Fascism plays were produced during and post-WWII, however

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<sup>163</sup>James Gow, et al, “Stage For Action Letter,” 28 May 1946 in People’s Songs/Stage For Action, American Business Consultants, Inc. Counterattack: Research Files, TAM 148, Box 13, Folders 12 – 17, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University Libraries; It is interesting that Simonov was invited to speak by these theatrical heavyweights because Simonov had displayed a somewhat condescending position toward the U.S. stating they “had little to teach a Russian about art or the theatre.” Robert van Gelder, “News and Views of Three Visiting Russian Writers,” *New York Times* 19 May 1946, BR2

<sup>164</sup>George Jean Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year 1942 – 1943* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 204.



contrary to Nathan's beliefs these plays did promote love. The major difference being a progressive and patriotic love for one's country became the theme instead of romantic love for another human. Although most of these patriotic love plays, especially those produced by SFA, lacked the subtlety much appreciated by Nathan, an argument could be made for the playwrights writing during this period that in the face of death and terror, delicacy and subtlety were un-affordable luxuries. I liken the changing artistic sense of the anti-Fascism plays during and post-WWII to the iconic image of Rosie the Riveter: both beautiful in their bold, rugged simplicity and proud of showing their dressed-down aesthetic and musculature. SFA plays, like their predecessor *The Russian People*, were part of a new theatre aesthetic.

Conservative critics like Nathan seemed to have difficulty reconciling familiar standards and styles with a newly politicized dramatic form that sacrificed dramatic subtlety to a heightened sense of political and social awareness.

While Simonov had a strong impact on many of the members of SFA, his influence was part of a larger interest many of the SFA members took in Soviet theatre, culture, and language. Thelma Schnee offers a good example of how involved many SFA members were in the intersections between Soviet and American culture during the immediate post-war period. Schnee (1918 – 1997) was a performer with and early member of SFA. She studied acting directly under Lee Strasberg and translated Simonov's play *The Whole World Over* into English in 1946. The play received a Broadway production in 1947 and was co-produced by her husband Paul F.

Moss and Walter Fried and directed by Harold Clurman.<sup>165</sup> Schnee's trajectory is, in many ways, typical of the membership of Stage For Action. She had a thriving stage career and in 1944 was considered one of the most talented young actresses on Broadway. A graduate of Carnegie Tech, by age 26 she had already toured with the Lunts as Nina in their production of *The Seagull* and landed the role of Bessie Watty in the Broadway production of *The Corn is Green*. While sustaining a Broadway career she began studying Russian so that "she may see her dream of acting in the native tongue of the Soviet Union come true."<sup>166</sup> Schnee's Broadway performing career ended abruptly however in 1950 in the production *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* and she moved on to writing for television. Personal tragedy during the late 1950s led to severe depression and psychotherapy, which ultimately inspired her pursuit of a degree in parapsychology.<sup>167</sup> Writing under the names Constance A. Newland and Thelma Moss, she had a thriving career as an academic with a large part of her field research taking place in the Soviet Union.<sup>168</sup>

Arthur Miller, writing about the Soviet theatre in 1969, defended Simonov's works during the '40s calling them "good, workable plays, poems, and novels." In his essay accounting for Soviet writers who thrived during Stalin's regime (and perhaps Communist and Communist sympathizing writers during this period in the U.S. as

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<sup>165</sup>Sam Zolotow, "Don Appell's Play to Open April 30," *New York Times*, 22 April 1946, 32; Konstantin Simonov, *The Whole World Over: Adapted from And So It Will Be*, trans. Thelma Schnee (New York: Samuel French, 1947).

<sup>166</sup>Douglas Hubbard, "Some Younger Actors and the Road They Traveled," *Theatre Arts* (February 1944): 175.

<sup>167</sup>Constance A. Newland, *My Self and I* (New York: Coward McCann, 1962); Thelma Moss, *Body Electric: A Personal Journey into the Mysteries of Parapsychological Research, Bioenergy and Kirlian Photography* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1979).

<sup>168</sup>Schnee was "named" in the HUAC testimony of Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam as one of the hundreds of people who signed the "Message to the House Of Representatives" opposing renewal of the Dies Committee (the predecessor of the HUAC) in 1943; Congress, Senate, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Testimony of Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam*, 83<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 1st sess., 21 July 1953, 3667.

well), Miller argues that a person trying to defend his or her past actions is “like a man trying to explain how he fell in love with a perfect woman who turned out to be murderous, vain, even insane, and cared nothing for him, a woman to whom he had dedicated his works, his life, and his highest idealistic feelings. How can you explain that, when the truth is now so obvious to your listener?”<sup>169</sup> Miller, like so many writers attempting to explain their connections to communism (and therefore Stalin), understands that with hindsight, it is clear that these followers made poor choices, but that at the time supporting a communist agenda seemed like the reasonable thing to do.

Perhaps Simonov’s most significant impact on SFA and his most direct contribution to their eventual downfall stemmed from HUAC’s continual pattern of targeting groups and individuals based on their patterns of association. After the publication of his anti-American newspaper play *The Russian Question* in December 1946, Simonov became the preferred Soviet whipping boy of conservative groups and media outlets (especially those controlled by William Randolph Hearst). This was only six months after speaking at his SFA sponsored event.<sup>170</sup> *The Russian Question* tells the story of a low-level honest newspaper reporter whose draconian boss demands that he write a slanderous work about Communism following his return from a fact-finding trip to the Soviet Union. The reporter refuses and loses his job, home, friends, and eventually his wife. Soviet reviewers found the play a dramatization of “the real conflict of American life...introducing us to a world in which the most odious crimes take place and has shown the people responsible for

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<sup>169</sup>Robert A. Martin and Steven R. Centola, eds., *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 323-324.

<sup>170</sup>“Horrible Crimes’ of U.S. Press Seen,” *New York Times*, 14 December 1946, 18.

those crimes.”<sup>171</sup> Delbert Clark, reviewing a German production of the play at the Max Reinhardt Deutsches Theatre in Berlin in May of 1947 argued that the play was not only anti-American, it was simply bad theatre. He states, simultaneously critiquing the play and illustrating the late 1940s perception that American Communists followed a Procrustean political order, “I am sure [*The Russian Question*] could be shown to any random Communist audience in New York and be laughed off the stage, unless the audience was under orders not to laugh.”<sup>172</sup> Not surprisingly despite negative reviews of the play in the U.S. and Germany, *The Russian Question* was so highly regarded in the Soviet Union that it was eventually turned into a film in 1947 by film maker Mikhail Romm.<sup>173</sup> SFA’s direct connection with Simonov, coupled with the group’s production of *Adventure Dramatic: The Great Conspiracy Against Russia* in September 1946, as well as their open support of other groups named as Communist fronts such as the Congress of American Women (CAW) and the National Council of American Soviet Friendship (NCASF) warrants a closer look when tracing the prosecution of Stage For Action during the latter half of the 40s.<sup>174</sup>

### Putting Up a Front:

#### Stage For Action’s Support of the CAW and the NCASF

In her work on the Women’s Movement and Communism, *Red Feminism*,

Kate Weigand states that radical leftist women contributed some of their “most

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<sup>171</sup>Drew Middleton, “Of A Muscovite With a Mission,” *New York Times*, 16 February 1947, X3.

<sup>172</sup>Delbert Clark, “Berlin Lukewarm to Anti-US Play,” *New York Times*, 4 May 1947, 54.

<sup>173</sup>J. Hoberman, *The Red Atlantis* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 163.

<sup>174</sup>Encyclopedia of Soviet Writers, “Simonov, Konstantin Mikhailovich,” <<http://www.sovlit.com/bios/simonov.html>> Accessed 21 July 2008; [Stage For Action], “Press Release – 18 February 1947,” The J. B. Matthews Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

valuable feminist work” during the years of 1945 to 1956. In many ways, during its first few years, SFA supported a number of the agendas forwarded by the Communist-run Congress of American Women (CAW), especially the Child-Care commission (initiated while the war was still being fought) and the Peace commission (inaugurated immediately post V-Day).<sup>175</sup> It is not simply because the group was started by women that I assert SFA aligned with feminist perspectives of the day. By the time Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s pamphlet 1947 *Woman’s Place in the Fight for a Better World* appeared advocating eleven demands for U.S. women including “Adequate childcare facilities with federal and state support for nurseries, recreation centers and schools with hot lunches,” Arthur Miller’s *That They May Win*, calling for the exact same support for working mothers had been performed for over three years by almost every national SFA unit and had proved one of their most popular pieces.<sup>176</sup>

From its inception in December 1943 until the spring of 1945, SFA was exceptionally supportive of women’s rights. I have noted earlier that the group was

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<sup>175</sup>Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 5; Also see Weigand’s chapter on the formation of the CAW: Chapter 3-The Congress of American Women: Catalyst for Progressive Feminism, pgs 46 – 64. Amy Swerdlow in *Women Strike for Peace* produces a strong argument that women’s connection with pacifism has been an assumed identity since the 1930s suggesting, “women were seen not only as auxiliary peace activists but as the very body of pacifism.” Although I understand the real purpose of Swerdlow’s excellent research is putting the Women Strike for Peace movement in historical perspective as well as drawing comparisons between female anti-war activists of the 30s through 40s and the 60s and the way in which the female body portrays/reads pacifism, I think, in light of Weigand’s newer work, it is too convenient to write the CAW off as simply a pawn of the communist party, more “concerned for the survival of the Soviet Union,” then for actual peace for the United States. By conceding this, Swerdlow is towing the 1949 HUAC party line that issues such as child care for working mothers and equal rights for women were simply “smokescreens of attractive idealism” to entice women into the group. Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 36 – 37; Congress, Senate, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Report on the Congress of American Women*, 81<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 23 October 1949.

<sup>176</sup>*Ibid*, 73 – 74. Consequently Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, who was a prominent leader of the CPUSA, was the invited speaker at a Western Union strike mass rally on January 22, 1946 where Stage For Action performed; *The Worker*, 20 January 1946, 12.

founded entirely by women, and that its initial leadership structure was dominated by women. Even when Edward Chodorov became Chairman of the Board of Directors in January 1945 (after Donna Keath and Perry Miller stepped down from their positions as Chairman and Executive Director respectively), the group continued its support of issues significant to the CAW and other leftist women's groups of this period. Perhaps this is because many of the members of the CAW were also sponsors, family members of sponsors, and members of SFA.

In fact, SFA's political connections outside the realm of theatre are often surprising. For example, when the CAW and its board came under attack from the Justice Department in 1950, their lawyer was long-time SFA sponsor (and well known leftist) John Abt. Muriel Draper, the executive vice-president of the CAW and the founding member of the Women's Committee of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship perhaps entreated her nephew, Paul Draper, to perform in *The Great Conspiracy* for SFA. Draper was well connected with Arthur Miller and Paul Robeson, as well as Robeson's wife Eslande who also served on the CAW Board, and Miller and Paul Robeson were involved in the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship as well as SFA.<sup>177</sup> Other women of influence who involved themselves with both SFA and the CAW were department store heiress and leftist activist extraordinaire Elinor Gimbel (also the vice-chairman of the Women's Committee of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship or NCSAF), Joyce Borden Balokovic (the some-time actress and heiress wife of SFA Board of Directors member and Croatian-born violinist Zlatko Balokovic), Katherine Earnshaw (also

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<sup>177</sup>*Report on the Congress of American Women*, 63-64; American Women in the Arts, "Intimate Circles," <<http://highway49.library.yale.edu/awia/gallery/draper.html>> First accessed 22 July 2009.

involved with the NCSAF), and actress Jean Muir (who was named as vice-president of one of the CAW chapters in the 1949 congressional hearings).

The connection between the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship and SFA proved one of the most damning allegations made against SFA. Walter S. Steele sites the NCSAF as “one of the most important centers of Soviet and Communist activities in our country,” and a leader in the “advancement of present-day Communist “cultural” activities.”<sup>178</sup> In an October 1949 report by the HUAC on the CAW the committee emphasized the “close kinship” between the CAW and NCSAF, stressing the “ardently pro-Soviet” and “frantically anti-American” nature of the NCSAF and noting that Attorney General Tom C. Clark cited the NCSAF as a subversive group on both June 1 and September 28, 1948.<sup>179</sup>

Much has been written about the direct influence, both perceived and actual, of the Communist Party in the day-to-day procedures of mass organizations. Ellen Schrecker, one of the foremost scholars on McCarthyism and Communism in the United States, writes in several of her works that although the Comintern and leaders in the CPUSA had some influence over the daily mechanics of front group operations, the people involved with these groups were rarely dupes of a brain-washing umbrella group intent on secretly coercing people into the Communist Party. Instead, most front group members knew that the group was somehow connected to the CPUSA, and “knowingly collaborated with the party, believing it to be the most effective ally they could find” in the political climate of the late 30s and early 40s.<sup>180</sup> Most members of front groups as well as rank-and-file communist party members did not

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<sup>178</sup>*Testimony of Walter S. Steele Regarding Communist Activities in the United States*, 99.

<sup>179</sup>*Report on the Congress of American Women*, 105.

<sup>180</sup>*Ibid*, 8.

adhere to the unquestionably dictatorial tenets passed down from Moscow to the CPUSA. Instead the vast majority of these people saw the progressive work many of these groups were doing and felt a compulsion to collaborate out of humanitarian kindness. The intentions of many of the front groups were socially positive despite the official policies of the political party being at their best misguided and at their worst heinous. Of course this opinion was not shared by most people involved in prosecuting alleged communists during the late 1940s and early '50s. In *The Techniques of Communism* Louis Budenz, a former communist turned FBI informant, writes that it is not significant that the government can *prove* communist party membership, but instead a person's affiliation is justifiable evidence for prosecution. Budenz states, "It is the *records* of pro-Communists in education, government, or other agencies which should be primarily considered, therefore, and not whether technically they can be proved to be Communists. If those records reveal a consistent aid to Soviet Russia, its fifth column here, and its fronts, then these individuals are enemies of the United States and should be recognized as such."<sup>181</sup> Budenz is suggesting that it does not matter if a person actually admits to being a Communist, regardless of the fact that the person "pleads the fifth," their affiliations will prove them to be one. Howard Fast reacted strongly to Budenz and others questioning the validity of pleading the Fifth Amendment in the publication *Masses and Mainstream* in 1954. Fast retorts,

"Let us suppose, however, that a Communist stands before the particular inquisition and answers, in reply to the question, that he is a member of the Communist Party and is proud of it, thereby exercising that capacity for pride which the Senator so aptly suggested. The difference between a senator and a witness is that the senator can indulge

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<sup>181</sup>Francis X. Gannon, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Left*, vol. 4 (Belmont: Western Islands, 1973), 214.



his pride without any harmful consequences. The Communist who declares he is a Communist finds that his life has become both complex and dangerous.

If the Communist Party member who is asked this question should invoke the Senator's suggested attitude of pride and disdain, as every Communist witness in this position unfailingly has, he would not be allowed to do so under the guarantee of the Fifth Amendment; for his previous waiver of the privilege of the Fifth Amendment would destroy his subsequent use of the privilege. Therefore, his unwillingness to become a stoolpigeon, a police informer, would be rewarded with a year in prison for contempt of Congress, and fines which could be as high as \$10,000. Any one of our federal kangaroo courts could also very easily—as they have in the past—construe his unwillingness to answer the question as a result of conspiracy, and add many more years of prison to the congressional sentence of one year.<sup>182</sup>

In many ways, Louis Budenz' political stance that silence or the Fifth Amendment does not assuage a communist of their guilt matches the stance of many SFA members, that actions—or what a person does and the company they keep—speaks much louder than words. In a time period when guilt by association ruled, Budenz is merely reinforcing the de facto policies of McCarthyism and opening the door for some of the most prestigious artists in the United States during the '30s through '50s, many of whom directly involved with Stage For Action, to be considered enemies of the United States. In any case, close government scrutiny of NCSAF, CAW, and other similar Communist-affiliated organizations likely prompted SFA to downplay or stop their activities for fear of official reprisals. Performances of the New York City branch of SFA ended in February 1949 with the rest of the branches breaking down by 1953.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup>Howard Fast, "Why the Fifth Amendment," *Masses and Mainstream* 7, no. 2 (February 1954): 44 - 50.

<sup>183</sup>A column in the *Chicago Defender* lists an upcoming performance of *Dixiecrat* "presented by special arrangements with the Stage For Action company"; Marion B. Campfield, "Mostly About Women," *Chicago Defender*, 12 February 1949, 10.

### The Mystery of Mildred Linsley

While much attention has been paid to the role Communism played in the formation (and downfall) of SFA, I would argue that theatre scholars should also examine the role of post-war feminist politics in the organization as well. Many of the influential women who shaped SFA had connections to Communist *and* proto-feminist networks across the nation. Though the female leadership structure of SFA seems to have been largely displaced by 1946-47, I suggest that the early affiliations between the female leaders of the organization, as well as the communist networks and the proto-feminist politics of the immediate post-war period, inevitably shaped the development of the SFA. This section briefly explores the links between one of SFAs least-known female leaders, Mildred Linsley, and her connection to feminist and communist networks beyond the realms of theatre.

As noted earlier, a female-instigated or female-operated theatrical operation during the war was not a rarity. However by the end of 1945 all of the Stage Door Canteen units (managed primarily by women), had closed their doors and women in every profession in the United States were finding themselves less welcome than they had been during the war years. The government issued an unprecedented number of advertisements suggesting a woman's proper place was in the home and many women who enjoyed the work they had done during the war and wanted to continue in their professions were informed they were losing their positions to returning GI's. SFA shares the same history of many other female-run operations during the war. Started by women in December 1943, the New York City unit remained a female-run operation for three full years, through December 1946, when letterhead dated

December 12, 1946 indicates that Mildred Linsley, originally elected Executive Director in January 1945, had been replaced by Alex Leith. Leith would only remain Executive Director for a few months as letterhead dated February 18, 1947 lists Gene Frankel as Acting Executive Director. He would remain the Acting Executive Director until the New York group's disbanding in 1949.

The female grasp on SFA began slipping as early as 1945 when playwright, screenwriter, and producer Edward Chodorov was elected Chairman of the Board, replacing Perry Miller in that position. The vice-chairman position remained filled by a woman for a few months with Mrs. Arthur Mayer performing the duties, but by April of 1945 Mayer was no longer Vice Chairman and Abram Hill, Director of the American Negro Theater, had assumed the role.<sup>184</sup> Beginning the following year and for the remainder of its existence, the Executive Branch of the Board of Directors for SFA -- Chairman, Vice Chairman, and Treasurer -- were filled by men.<sup>185</sup>

What is important to note here, aside from the fact that SFA had an African American male on its Executive Board in 1945 in the person of Abram Hill, is that while the Board of Directors was all male after 1946, the person in charge of daily operations for SFA (what Alex Leith in his HUAC hearing described as "in charge of the over-all functioning of the organization,"), was always a woman.<sup>186</sup> Women provided all of the foundational work for SFA, from its inception through its disbanding. In particular, Mildred Linsley deserves much of the credit for

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<sup>184</sup>“Chodorov Wins Honor,” *New York Times*, 11 January 1945, 19; Eugene Gordon, “Stage For Action Takes Plays Directly to Its Audiences,” *The Worker*, 8 April 1945, 14.

<sup>185</sup>In 1946 this was Edward Chodorov, Abram Hill, and Elias Goldin, respectively

<sup>186</sup>Congress, Senate, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding Communist Infiltration of Labor Unions-Part 3*, 81st Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 29 August 1950; In an article by Samuel Sillen in *The Daily Worker* on August 27, 1946, Alex Leith is named as the executive director of SFA.

transitioning SFA from a grassroots theatrical operation in New York City into a national group with units in at least eight other metropolitan cities. The first Chairpeople or Executive Directors of many of these subsidiary units were also women. In Washington, D.C. for example, the Chairman was Hilda Worthington Smith and she remained in this position from the launch of the unit in 1945 through the last recorded date for the group's activities on January 30, 1947, when the Executive Committee voted on whether or not they should affiliate for a fee of fifty dollars a year with the New York City SFA office.<sup>187</sup> The Chicago SFA unit was originally run by a woman. Virginia Payne was the Chairman of the Chicago Executive Committee during its first three years (1944 through 1946).<sup>188</sup> In 1947, Benjamin J. Green is listed as Chairman of the group but the Executive Director is Lucille Colbert.<sup>189</sup> Although very few records of the Philadelphia Stage For Action unit list their Executive Committee, in a file included in a collection on Communist Cultural Movements at the Hoover Institution as late as June 28, 1947 Ruth Deacon is named as the head of their SFA unit.<sup>190</sup> Deacon was an employee of a communist bookstore, the Locust Bookshop in Philadelphia.

It is interesting that Ruth Deacon was employed by a communist bookshop while working for Stage For Action, as it appears one of Mildred Linsley's occupations was an employee for a supposedly communist operation, the Bookshop

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<sup>187</sup>Hilda Worthington Smith, "Stage For Action: Report for First Year 1946-1947," 30 January 1947, Hilda Worthington Smith Papers, Box K, Folder 393, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

<sup>188</sup>Stage For Action, "Stage For Action, Inc.: A New Kind of Theatre to Dramatize Issues of the Day," 1945 or 46, Series XC1X, Folder 1, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library.

<sup>189</sup>\_\_\_\_\_. "Stage For Action Presents Its Showcase (Fourth Season)".

<sup>190</sup>"Report on Stage For Action," National Republic Records, 1920-1960, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

Association located in Baltimore, MD. The Bookshop Association closed its store front in 1943 but remained active as an association until 1946.<sup>191</sup> In J. Louis Ginsberg's testimony to the HUAC he named Mildred Linsley as an employee of the store for twenty-five dollars a week but did not specify the dates she worked at the store nor did he admit that the Association or store were connected to the Communist Party.<sup>192</sup> Linsley had an additional connection to the Washington, D.C. metro area, as she was the Education Director in 1950 for the National Council of Jewish Women's D.C. Office.<sup>193</sup> Perhaps she was only Director of Education for one year because she was soon named by Ginsberg in the HUAC hearings.<sup>194</sup> Regardless of Linsley's D.C. metro area connections, it is clear that by January of 1945 Mildred Linsley was living in New York City and working, most likely full-time, for Stage For Action.

Of all the executive committee members of Stage For Action during its five year existence, Mildred Linsley is the most elusive. Apparently not involved in theatre in any way prior to her work with Stage For Action, it seems strange that Linsley would be appointed Executive Director of a theatrical company with so many other prominent stage, radio, and film artists working in their ranks. Linsley does not appear in any promotional materials (programs, pamphlets, etc.) for the group until

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<sup>191</sup>Congress, Senate, Committee on Un-American Activities, "Testimony of Louis Ginsberg," *Hearing Related to Communist Activities in the Defense Area of Baltimore-Part 3*, 82<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 10 July 1951, 1072.

<sup>192</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup>National Council of Jewish Women Collection, Group II, Box 42 Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>194</sup>Perhaps it is due to Linsley's influence that the National Council of Jewish Women utilized theatrical techniques for raising awareness of the group's overseas social projects in education during the 1950s. At least four scripts, *Design for Serving*, *Cum Laude for Council*, *Eternal Light*, and *Three Taps of the Gavel* were distributed (just as SFA did) to regional council units in order to "inspire and recruit." National Council of Jewish Women, Group II, Box 42, Folders 7 and 8, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

the *New York Times* announcement of recent elections for the group in January 1945. Additionally, in February 1946 Linsley is listed as a member of the Advisory Council of People's Songs. People's Songs, which was led by Pete Seeger and shared many of the same members and sponsors as well as offices with the New York unit of Stage For Action, was formed "to make and send songs of labor and the American people through the land" and quite often the two groups performed together at strikes and pickets.<sup>195</sup> The very fact that Linsley had Communist connections prior to her work with SFA and the understanding that most Communist mass organizations utilized a CPUSA member, or cadre of members, to run their daily operations leads me to believe that when Linsley was elected to the Executive Committee in January 1945 is when the Communist Party started having a more official say in the structure and progress of the group.<sup>196</sup>

Although Linsley's appointment with SFA seems to have signaled a clear change in the organization's mission, this change was short-lived. As I have noted, two of the group's most important founding members retired from the project around that time, noting SFA's change in agenda. More importantly perhaps, in terms of external perceptions of the group, the involvement of members such as Linsley (who had no obvious connection to the theatre, but who did have overt connections to various political organizations), suggested that SFA was gearing up to play a political

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<sup>195</sup>People's Songs, "People's Songs Bulletin February 1946, Volume 1.1," People's Songs/Stage For Action, American Business Consultants, Inc. Counterattack: Research Files, TAM 148, Box 13, Folders 12 – 17, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University Libraries; Woody Guthrie, another member of People's Songs, mentions Linsley in his autobiography *Pastures of Plenty* but does not specifically state what her connection the group was; Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal, eds., *Woody Guthrie: Pastures of Plenty, A Self-Portrait* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 157.

<sup>196</sup>Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History With Documents*, 2d ed. The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002), 7.

role that extended beyond the development of a new artistic aesthetic or appreciation for Soviet theatre. The group's appointment of Linsley would seem to signal a *conscious* choice to change direction and tactics. However a year later well-known theatre personnel would again be at the helm of SFA and the group started shifting rapidly from a mobile theatre company operating on a shoe-string budget to goals of establishing a permanent people's theatre in New York City. This goal could not come to fruition in the challenging political climate of the early 1950s.

Chapter Three of this study addresses many of the scripts and some of the performances by SFA. However as I argue here, the involvement by SFA members with the CPUSA and other mass organizations had much more to do with the group's demise than the quality of their productions. The list of executive committee members for the New York City unit of SFA during their five year existence is relatively short. There were only thirteen people in the important roles of Executive Director, Chairman, Vice-Chairman, and Treasurer during this period. The list includes the original four: Perry Miller, Donna Keath, Berilla Kerr, and Peggy Clark with Elias Goldin, an accountant by profession who became financial general manager and also producer of hundreds of Broadway shows, stepping in as Treasurer in early 1944 and remaining in that position until 1946 when he was replaced by Milton Baron—another Broadway general manager and producer.<sup>197</sup> The remaining eight executive committee members: Edward Chodorov, Mrs. Arthur Mayer, Mildred Linsley, Abram Hill, Art Smith, Alex Leith, and Gene Frankel were all connected to the performing arts in some way, except for Linsley. I have no proverbial smoking-gun connecting Mildred Linsley as the cadre member or official representative of the

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<sup>197</sup>“Elias Goldin Dead; Stage Producer, 59,” *New York Times*, 9 April 1972, 71.

CPUSA to Stage For Action, however records indicate that after her rise to Executive Director the group started being promoted and advertised not only in the *New York Times* but also in communist sponsored periodicals such as *New Masses*, *The Worker*, and *The Daily Worker*.

*The New York Times* ran eight promotions including two major stories on SFA from March to December 1944. The first article detailing the work of SFA in a communist supported paper occurred on January 2, 1945 in *New Masses*. This two and a half page article, written by Harry Taylor, occurred within days of the annual meeting when Mildred Linsley became Executive Director of the group.<sup>198</sup> *The Worker* published a feature article on SFA three months later however *The Daily Worker* did not begin regularly covering SFA's achievements until January 1946. What is interesting about the differences between the coverage in *The New York Times* and the communist newspapers during 1945 and 1946 is that most of *The New York Times* articles talk about the playwrights involved or summarize a specific performance while the communist articles focus on Linsley, major SFA sponsors, their operational procedures, and the audiences being targeted.<sup>199</sup> By January 22, 1946 Stage For Action had become so connected to and such a popular vehicle with labor unions and other workers' rights groups that they received their own Theater Calendar in the *Daily Worker*.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup>Harry Taylor, "Stage For Action," *New Masses*, 2 January 1945, 29 -31.

<sup>199</sup>Other regional newspapers covering Stage For Action during their existence include the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, *The Chicago Defender*, *New York Amsterdam News*, and *The Pittsburgh Courier*.

<sup>200</sup>On January 24, 1946 the *Daily Worker* announced SFA was "intensively engaged in servicing the striking unions," and had started publishing a Theater Calendar for them two days earlier: "Stage For Action Theater Calendar," *Daily Worker*, 22 January 1946, 11.



Under Linsley's tenure as Executive Director of SFA the group became intimately connected to many different unions as well as expanded into a national organization. When she was replaced (or resigned) as Executive Director in the summer of 1946, over 1,100 people were registered members with the New York branch of SFA alone and this group boasted nine touring companies with each company consisting of approximately eight members.<sup>201</sup> SFA reached its apex under Mildred Linsley, and yet little to no information is available on her, either prior to her joining SFA or after her commitment to the group ended. It is feasible Linsley changed her name after she was "outed" by Louis Ginsberg in 1951, but certainly the group would not have the gravitas it can now claim had she not been involved as well as bringing with her the support (financial and otherwise) of the CPUSA.

SFA had influential members and supporters on every rung of the social and political ladder and they brought together people of all different racial, generational, gender, religious, and political affiliations. With audiences numbering in the millions and units in nine metropolitan markets by the time they dissolved due to government pressures in 1953, the group had become their own left-wing theatrical institution in the United States. As the two subsequent chapters address, their plays and the subjects covered during their six year existence were as diverse as their membership.

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<sup>201</sup>Samuel Sillen, "Stage For Action Moves Forward," *Daily Worker*, 27 August 1946, 11.

### Chapter 3: I Also Fought

When Stage For Action started touring the New York City metropolitan region in December of 1943 there were very few plays included in their repertory. Of greater importance to the four founding members of the group (Perry Miller, Berilla Kerr, Donna Keath and Peggy Clark) were the intentions behind the performances as well as the quality of the plays and the performers. What differentiated SFA from the Workers' Theatre groups of the '30s or other activist theatre groups operating during the same period was its professionalism, "in every department...it tries to avoid doing what a pamphlet or a speaker could do better, striving to get its message across strictly in terms of theater entertainment values...and it is a child of this particular period."<sup>202</sup> These three attributes—professionalism, theatricality, and timeliness—are some of the elements analyzed in this chapter regarding SFA. Additionally this chapter connects these elements to both the scripts SFA produced during 1943 to 1948 and how the scripts addressed topics SFA considered socially vital. The scripts included for analysis are *That They May Win*, *Open Secret*, *The Investigators*, and *The Salem Story*.<sup>203</sup>

There are many challenges in analyzing the individual performances of Stage For Action plays: 1) very few reviews of individual performances were published in either communist or non-communist sponsored papers, 2) there are only a few playbills for SFA performances in existence (mostly from benefit performances or

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<sup>202</sup>Harry Taylor, "Stage For Action," *New Masses*, 2 January 1945, 29.

<sup>203</sup>These plays do not address the subject that SFA seemed the most concerned with after the war. SFA's dedication to civil rights separates them from other activist groups of this period, and places them as the bridge between activist groups of the 30s and the late 50s. This pivotal topic and how Stage For Action incorporated it in theatrical terms, is addressed in its own subsequent chapter (*Chapter 4*).

annual events when snippets of all the plays in repertory for that year were performed); and 3) because each unit of SFA had a number of ensembles touring with a particular script, it is almost impossible to know which performers were involved in a production at any one time. Thus this chapter incorporates a cultural rather than a performance or literary analysis of the plays. I interrogate how the plays addressed social problems from 1943 to 1948. I have chosen to focus on the most controversial pieces performed during and after the war. I include three different versions of Arthur Miller's *That They May Win*, a piece on the need for child care facilities and affordable food, because its production history encompasses the story of the relationship between the CIO and the Communist Party and it also provides a useful bookend for the beginning and end of the New York branch of Stage For Action. *Open Secret* by Robert Adler and George Bellak (based on an earlier piece by Dr. Louis Ridenour) addresses the fears of a nuclear apocalypse in a post-atomic bomb era. I also examine two plays in a series of dramas commenting on the Un-American Activities Committee. *The Investigators* by Lewis Allan, is a highly stylized piece performed by SFA in 1948 that was dubbed "Communist Political Subversive Material" by the HUAC. *The Salem Story*, a musical play written by Sidney Alexander and performed a number of times by Stage For Action in 1948, is included because it won a prestigious playwriting award and offers an intriguing precursor to Miller's *The Crucible*.<sup>204</sup> Through a sharp focus on these four plays, I hope to illustrate the different forms of theatrical genres SFA encompassed and the important 1940s social problems addressed in their work

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<sup>204</sup>The other two openly anti-HUAC plays produced by SFA include *Freedom 1948* by Jack Jacobs, which according to the introduction of Joseph Lieberman's collection was never performed and *You're Next* by Arthur Miller, which was popular during the 1947 season.

*That They May Win*  
(1943, 1944, and 1948)

Although he was without question the most well-known member and playwright involved with Stage For Action, few scholars remember that one of Arthur Miller's early successes was a play on child care produced for SFA. He contributed three pieces to the group -- two of which are extant.<sup>205</sup> *That They May Win* (a drama about the employment and child care crisis facing American families) interestingly was both the first and one of the final performances in SFA's repertory, and proved to be one of the most popular as well. According to Margaret Mayorga, the play was "originally produced for the Victory Committee of Welfare Center 67 at Albemarle Road, Brooklyn, New York, on December 21, 1943" stating the original cast included Michael Strong, Hildreth Price, Camille Staneska, Jay Williams, and Lew Gilbert.<sup>206</sup> Marguerite Higgins however in a May 1944 story on the group in the *New York Herald Tribune* cites a performance before the New York State Conference of Women Workers at Pythian Plaza on December 11, 1943 as Stage For Action's first public performance.<sup>207</sup> Evidence indicates that there were three SFA casts originally performing the play. In a letter to SFA Committee members in early December 1943

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<sup>205</sup>Included in the index of *The Best Stage For Action Plays* edited by Joseph Lieberman and housed in the New York Performing Arts Library Rare Reading Room is a listing of a work by Arthur Miller titled *Hiccups Mr. Higgins*. When one turns to the page indicated in the collection where the play should appear, all one finds is a carefully cut out portion of the book with only the briefest left-hand marginalia intact. The Foreword of the collection makes no reference to this play but does note both *That They May Win* and *You're Next*. In May of 1947 *Billboard Magazine* published a brief review of the American Federation of Labor four-part radio series titled *Story from the Stars* on which Miller was one of the writers. His contribution to the show the first week was an eight-minute sketch titled *The Hiccups of Alfred Higgins* in which the protagonist begs the audience for support in fighting the Taft-Hartley bill; Sam Chase, "Story From the Stars," *Billboard Magazine* 17 May 1947, 11 and 18. My thanks to Stephen Shaffer for bringing the *Billboard* review to my attention.

<sup>206</sup>Margaret Mayorga, ed. *The Best One- Act Plays of 1944*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1945), 46.

<sup>207</sup>Marguerite Higgins, "Dramas Bring Issues of Day Home to Women," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 1944, accessed in the *Hilda Worthington Smith Papers*, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

Perry Miller states that “our first script on the need for child care centers for the children of working mothers, written by Arthur Miller, is being directed by Sam Wanamaker, and has been cast in triplicate with prominent actors of radio and stage.”<sup>208</sup> Regardless of the initial performance date, the production of *That They May Win* at the Victory Committee of Welfare Center was one of the first performances of Stage For Action (still called Stage Door to Action at this point) and Lew Gilbert (alternatively billed as Lou Gilbert) performed regularly with SFA through 1946.<sup>209</sup>

By 1945 Arthur Miller was best known as a radio writer and as the screenwriter for the film *The Story of GI Joe*.<sup>210</sup> In 1944 Miller’s novel *Situation Normal*, which Christopher Bigsby describes as “a remarkable book...a critique of American values...published at a time when those values were taken as self-evident,” appeared in January only a month after his involvement with Stage For Action began. But Miller’s mainstream playwriting career would not begin as successfully. *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, Miller’s first Broadway production, would come and go in four performances in late November of 1944.<sup>211</sup> In his *Trinity of Passion*, Alan

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<sup>208</sup>Perry Miller, “Stage Door to Action Letter: December 1943,” Located in Peggy Clark Archive, Library of Congress; It is intriguing that Jay Williams does not mention Stage For Action in his excellent work on 1930s socially conscious theatre groups *Stage Left* despite the fact that he performed in one of their plays. Additionally Williams like so many other theatre historians in their prime during the McCarthy years mention Miller’s first play as *The Man Who Had All the Luck* and then *All My Sons*, regrettably editing out one of the most political moments in Miller’s writing career. See Jay Williams, *Stage Left* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), 256.

<sup>209</sup>Mayorga, 47.

<sup>210</sup>Ibid; Christopher Bigsby, *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 49.

<sup>211</sup>*The Man Who Had All the Luck*, which critics labeled confusing because of its “somewhat jumbled philosophies,” ultimately asks whether wealth stems from hard work or good fortune. In his *New York Times* review Lewis Nichols compared Miller and Saroyan (arguing Saroyan was the better playwright). *The Man Who Had All The Luck* offers a Marxist critique on capitalism, as critics at the time noted, the work lacks any real depth of political positioning (which separates it sharply from the other writing produced by Miller during this same period); Lewis Nichols, “The Play: The Philosophy

Wald calls the two years (1945 and 1946) following that turkey “Arthur Miller’s Missing Chapter.” Wald asserts Miller disappeared from Broadway between *The Man Who Had All The Luck* and *All My Sons* and poured himself into revolutionary work and leftist theatrical criticism with the *New Masses*. Yet Miller had already started down this route and was far from invisible. Between 1943 and 1948, he established himself as the first and longest-lasting playwright of Stage For Action. After *All My Sons* opened on Broadway and Miller catapulted into the national spotlight, he called “a meeting of writers, playwrights, composers and lyricists...in connection with the National Council of American Soviet Friendship’s membership drive” at Zero Mostel’s home “to discuss a projected series of performances which Stage For Action will produce for the National Council...special material, such as plays, sketches and songs, will be written on American-Soviet friendship.”<sup>212</sup> Some of the attendees included “Irving Wexler, George Scudder, Leslie Stevens, Paul Kent, Lou Kleinman, Joe Darion, Paul Sekon, Dave Schreiber and George Kleinsinger,” many of whom already had prolific Broadway and Hollywood writing careers.<sup>213</sup> The fact that Miller was in charge of a meeting of such stature and that his invitation aroused the interest of such prominent members of the entertainment writing community illustrates that by 1947 Miller was a leader in Stage For Action and comfortably situated in leftist culture as well as on Broadway.

The three available versions of Miller’s *That They May Win* also point to his influence on and lasting commitment to SFA. Mayorga published the original script,

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of Work Against Chance Makes Up, ‘The Man Who Had All the Luck,’ *The New York Times*, 24 November 1944, 18.

<sup>212</sup>Ibid.

<sup>213</sup>Ibid.

but two other versions of the script exist. The second version of the script is undated although it was definitely written while the war was still going on, probably in 1944, and a much revised third version of the play is dated June 1948. The three scripts utilize the same characters, some of the same dialogue, and ultimately share the same goals of rousing the audience to demand change from their local and national politicians. The first two versions are more focused on obtaining suitable childcare so that both parents can work, while the third piece—written for the Chicago Arts Committee for Wallace—suggests that voting the Progressive Party into the White House will fix the lack of jobs as well as sky-high rent and food costs.

All three versions of the script focus on a married couple, Delia and Danny, who have a small child and live in tenement housing. The third main character in the play is their best friend Ina who is unmarried and the only person in the play with a job. The 1943 and 1944 versions of the script begin a week after Danny has returned home from war, a hero but with a serious war wound. While he was overseas (Italy in the 1943 script, Africa in the 1944 version, and Germany in the 1948 version) Delia lied to him in her letters about how she and the baby were surviving on his military allotment. In truth, she had to move to the slums because she could not afford rent and food with the high inflation during the war years. At one point in the play she admits to Danny,

“I didn’t move to this place temporarily, like I told you. I moved here because I can’t pay a decent rent and eat right, too. Danny, you got no idea what it is to buy anything today. They cut your throat for a bunch of carrots. I go out and I spend five dollars and I come back with a bag full of nothing. I walked a mile and a half last week to save twenty cents on vegetables. I’m dealing in nickels and dimes and pennies. We can’t live on that money.”<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>214</sup>Arthur Miller, *That They May Win* in *The Best One-Act Plays of 1944*, ed. Margaret Mayorga (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1945), 53 – 54.

This speech is replicated in all three versions of *That They May Win* and each version of the script includes two figures planted in the audience (labeled “Distressed Man” and “Man Who Knows”) who yell back at the characters onstage, at each other, and the other audience members about solutions to the current economic problems. In the 1943 version of the script the two men recommend pushing for government funded child care centers and that the women in the audience get training through and volunteer with the Office of the Price Administrator (OPA). In the 1948 version of the script, where Danny is first seen not recovering from a battle wound but washing and drying dishes at the kitchen sink while wearing his wife’s apron, the call for child care centers gives way to a call to vote the Progressive Party ticket. Between the 1943 and 1948 versions Delia’s adamant “I *want* to work” changes into Danny’s, “No, goddamit! Just because I’m wearing this lousy apron, don’t mean I ain’t wearing pants, too. I don’t want you to have a job. I want a house—where you’ll live—with the baby.”<sup>215</sup> Although it appears at first that the 1948 version of the script is erasing any advancements for women suggested in earlier versions, in later scenes the 1948 script reveals itself to be a prescient analysis of gender and political structures at mid-century.

The focus on women working outside the home and childcare in all three versions of *That They May Win* offers intriguing insights into how SFA situated their work in the larger political and social debates raging in 1940s’ America about “proper” family structures. In his 1944 work *The First Round: The Story of the CIO Political Action Committee* Joseph Gaer wrote the “War Manpower Commission has

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<sup>215</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *That They May Win* (1948) Housed in the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library, Series XCIX, Folder 7, 5.



listed 370 community problems affecting the utilization of manpower—most of them affecting womanpower more. The most prominent of all these vexing problems is Child Care.”<sup>216</sup> By July 1944 one-third of the civilian workforce was women, which means that between July 1937 and July 1944, seven and a half million women entered the workforce. This brought the total to 17.7 million with an estimated thirty-three percent of these women being mothers of children under the age of 16.<sup>217</sup> Demand for improved child care for mothers working in war time industries did not become a national issue until late January 1942 when the Department of Labor issued emergency dispensations for longer work hours by women. All over the nation, need for child care rose “many hundred percent with the war program’s gain in momentum.”<sup>218</sup> The government responded by issuing the Lanham Act, which provided “about 2,500 nursery schools and child-care centers” and approximately twenty million dollars in funding “for the fiscal year July 1944, to July 1945, for child care.”<sup>219</sup> The planning needed to design and implement the day cares, including finding appropriate locations for child care and then staffing the nurseries and day cares, many of which needed to be in seven days a week operation, was not given proper time due to the immediate and ever-increasing workforce demands on women during the war. Additionally, the Lanham Act only provided funding in areas delegated “centers of wartime industry,” so cities such as New York, which a great demand for child care did not receive government support because they were not

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<sup>216</sup>Joseph Gaer, *The First Round: The Story of the CIO Political Action Committee* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944), 414.

<sup>217</sup>*Ibid*, 411 and 415.

<sup>218</sup>“War Work ‘Orphan’ to Get Day Care,” *New York Times*, 27 January 1942, 18.

<sup>219</sup>Gaer, 416.

considered part of the war machine.<sup>220</sup> *That They May Win* explores in part the problems of those families *not* covered by this act – particularly those families in which the wives of soldiers entered the work force due to their husbands' absence, high living costs, and inadequate military wages.

In the 1943 and 1944 versions of *That They May Win*, Delia suggests that Danny stay home with his daughter while he is recovering from his war wounds. But Danny, who has secretly already secured a part-time job, offers an alternative that he has read about both in the English soldier papers and at home. The following exchange between Delia and Danny illustrates the dire situation working mothers faced:

**DANNY:** Ain't there some nursery or something? I was reading about in London how they got nurseries...The kids get the best of everything. And come to think of it, didn't I read that our government was granting money for these things?

**DELIA:** It's in the newspapers, darling. They're not here, though. And the ones that are, are either too full or they cost too much.

**DANNY:** Well, what are all the women in the factories doing with their kids, throwing them in the sewer?

**DELIA:** They put a key around the kid's neck and let him run loose, or they got relatives or something...I don't know. I looked all over; there's no place to leave her. So if you'd stay home...

The exchange leads to the climax of the play when Danny yells at Delia:

**DANNY:** What's the matter with you? They knock you down; they walk all over you; you get up, brush yourself off and say it's workin' out great. What do you pay taxes for; what do you vote for?<sup>221</sup>

In his tirade and through the dénouement of the short piece, Danny suggests changes for women that seem progressive for the period, namely: Women should have the

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<sup>220</sup>“War Work ‘Orphan’ to Get Day Care”.

<sup>221</sup>Miller in *The Best One-Act Plays of 1944*, 55 – 56.

right to work if they want to and should have access to adequate child care, women should educate themselves on their legal rights, and women can prove a powerful lobbying group if they work together for change.

The 1943 version ends with a speech by the Man Who Knows defending the intellect and power of women against Distressed Man, stating:

[Women] aren't dumb, my friend; look what they learned to do in this war. They learned how to weld, how to run a drill press, how to build a P-47, how to hold a home together while their husbands are away fighting to win the war, how to vote. And they're learning that women can fight in this war too, right here on the home front. Their army is the Consumers' Council and their machine guns are market baskets, and some day, when Johnny comes marching home, they'll be able to say to him, "Okay, soldier, I was a soldier, too!"<sup>222</sup>

The rhetoric is filled with empowering justification for women engaging in politics during the war, suggesting the women's first military front should be an economic one. The text reads as a Marxist critique of U.S. society. Intriguingly, the message changes substantively in the 1944 version when the Man Who Knows is transformed into a woman, who ends the short play stating:

It's up to women like us who are the wives of our fighting soldiers, the mothers of their children, to get together to fight conditions like that. They're holding the prices down in Canada and England because the people there won't stand for them going up. Even in China they've got nurseries; they've got no shoes but they've made a place for their children. What can we do about it here? Why aren't the unions, the housewives, the church clubs all working together more closely? Why aren't all the groups who want the same things getting together about it? The President can't do it alone. He needs your help. Let our congressmen know that we're dead serious about keeping our people on the home front happy and well. Organizations are like microphones. Turn on the juice and speak up, and when our boys come home you'll be able to face them and say, "I also fought. Yes, and I also won."<sup>223</sup>

By changing the protesting audience member from a man to a woman, Miller suggests that women have the right and obligation to take political action and rectify injustices in American society. He also offers an interesting parallel among union

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<sup>222</sup>Ibid, 58 – 59.

<sup>223</sup>Arthur Miller, *That They May Win* (1944?) Housed in the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library, Series XCIX, Folder 7, 9.

labor and “housewife” labor and grass roots community organizations, suggesting that each can mobilize to effect change.

Historically women do the majority of purchasing for the home and therefore advertisers gear domestic products specifically toward women.<sup>224</sup> During WWII, women were responsible for most aspects pertaining to fiscal responsibility, not only purchasing food and sundries but also paying rent or mortgages, making home and automobile repairs, and deciding how much to spend or save each month. Women’s rising fiscal responsibility directly affected government policies. In May 1944, thirteen women were named OPA Advisors with additional calls for more female members on regional rationing boards in New York State. Mrs. Edward Gibson, the new Chairwoman of the Goshen, NY rationing board suggested that it was not enough simply to have women on the local boards but instead, “that local panels be made up entirely of women [were needed] because they are more alive to the seriousness of what would happen if prices got out of hand...men may think about the situation but women come in daily contact with it.”<sup>225</sup> The initial changes in OPA policy occurred one month after a SFA benefit performance of *That They May Win* attended by Eleanor Roosevelt. *That They May Win*’s message that women should involve themselves with the OPA and the Consumers’ Council in order to combat

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<sup>224</sup>See Daniel Deis Hill, *Advertising to the American Woman*, (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2002); Jean M. Grow, “The Gender of Branding: Early Nike Women’s Advertising a Feminist Antenarrative,” *Women’s Studies in Communication*, Vol. 31.3 (Fall 2008), 312 – 343; Annegret S. Ogden, *The Great American Housewife: From Helpmate to Wage Earner, 1776 - 1986* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986); Daryl Travis, *Emotional Branding: How Successful Brands Gain the Irrational Edge* (Roseville: Prima Publishing, 2000).

<sup>225</sup>“13 Women Named As OPA Advisors,” *The New York Times*, 12 May 1944, 16; For the connection between the OPA, Left-feminists, and McCarthyism see Landon Storrs, “Left-Feminism, the Consumer Movement, and Red Scare Politics in the United States, 1935 – 1960,” *Journal of Women’s History* 18.3 (2006): 40 – 67.

political oppression was an important strategy for promoting war time political change.

Stage For Action had ties to the OPA and New York Consumers' Council beyond producing plays which supported their causes. In May of 1944, two of the thirteen women named to the OPA Advisory Committee were SFA supporters either through sponsorship or board membership: Mildred Gutwillig, who was president of the New York City Consumer Council, and Mrs. Arthur Mayer, who was OPA representative of the war committee of the Women's City Club. The following year, in January 1945, Mrs. Arthur Mayer was elected vice-chairman of the Board of SFA. Although she only remained in this administrative position for a few months both Gutwillig and Mayer remained sponsors of SFA throughout its existence. It is clear that SFA had strong connections to and concerns with economic policies on the home front during and immediately after the war.

In contrast to the activist message of the earlier productions of the text, the 1948 version of *That They May Win* demonstrates a fatalistic sense that the post-war economy has proven destructive for everyone in the typical working class family. Although it would be easy to read the 1948 script as affirming a return to pre-war patriarchal structures, Miller is not necessarily emasculating Danny by placing him in an apron. Instead, he is showing the change in the American family structure due to the breakdown in government perceived by many leftists and progressives. By 1946 many of the war-time advances for women including equal pay, maternity leave, and

the Lanham Act (in its entirety) had been terminated.<sup>226</sup> Miller shows progressive males in the Stage For Action audience that keeping the family running smoothly may necessitate a shift in popular notions of gender construction. A perfect example of this shift in post-war domestic structure occurs in the following exchange at the beginning of the 1948 version of the play:

**INA:** What's wrong?

**DANNY:** No more than usual. Kid didn't sleep all night's all. He don't sleep, we don't sleep—who sleeps? They're taking a nap now. (*Kicks a chair toward Ina*) Relax a minute. She'll be up soon. (*A little guiltily*) Helping with the dishes. (*Indicates apron, laughs a little*)

**INA:** On you it's got class. If more men put on more aprons more times, things might be a little better.<sup>227</sup>

Ina, who I extrapolate as a stereotypical Rosie the Riveter in the 1944 version of the play, takes an even more significant role in the final revision of *That They May Win*.<sup>228</sup> She has a job and can earn money to buy food (specifically meat). More importantly, she is the seer, the one who “knows history” and takes Danny to task for not trying to find a job and for not paying attention to what is happening to his family and society around them. The message of the 1948 version of the script is not that Danny is “less of a man” for helping with domestic responsibilities or that Delia is wrong for wanting to work outside the home, but rather that they are both failing as productive members of society for not trying to change any of the social problems that placed them in their economic predicament.

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<sup>226</sup>Almanac of Policy Issues, “Child Care,”  
<[http://www.policyalmanac.org/social\\_welfare/archive/child\\_care.shtml](http://www.policyalmanac.org/social_welfare/archive/child_care.shtml) > First accessed 5 August 2009.

<sup>227</sup>Miller, *That They May Win* (1948), 1.

<sup>228</sup>\_\_\_\_\_. *That They May Win* (1944?), 1; In the 1944 version of *That They May Win* Ina is described as “a young woman, now working in a factory. She is dressed in her ordinary go-to-work clothes.”

In the 1948 production of *That They May Win*, several new issues arise including the lack of available jobs for the working class, the suggestion that another war is on the horizon (and indeed it was), the lack of faith in union power, and the idea that it is a unified people (both men and women) who will produce change in the country. Whereas in the 1943 and 1944 versions of *That They May Win* the Man (Woman) Who Knows calls on women to make economic and therefore political changes in the United States, in the 1948 version this character asks:

Where are the people?...To be people, you gotta start *acting* like people. You gotta be people. This is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Get the dame [Ina] who knows history...she'll tell you. The government is you, and you gotta do something about it. We, the people, gotta go into politics. And don't get me wrong. Politics isn't something way off in the clouds. Politics is just another way of saying how much bread and chopped meat and milk your dollar's going to buy, and what you'll have to pay for Junior's new shoes. You have to go to those Senators and Congressmen you elected ...and that President you got in on a default...and you gotta say to them: "Listen here for a minute, mister. We're your boss, and you have to work for us. You get right in there and give us a little price control, a little housing, a little efficiency, or by God, you're on your way out!"<sup>229</sup>

The Man (Woman) Who Knows, and therefore SFA, suggest citizens ultimately change societal problems by voting. Since this production was sponsored by the Chicago Arts Committee for Wallace, voting for Henry Wallace in the 1948 presidential election was (implicitly) the best way to produce social change.

One additional element that all three versions of *That They May Win* share is the adherence to the twelve propositions set forth by the Political Action Committee (PAC). As I noted in earlier chapters, Stage For Action had a strong connection to the CIO-PAC. Several of PAC's leaders were sponsors or on the Board of SFA, and SFA members taught living newspaper and other theatrical techniques to PAC

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<sup>229</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. *That They May Win* (1948), 8; The "President you got on default" jab is referencing Vice President Harry S. Truman's rise to Presidency on April 12, 1945 upon the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

members. The PAC was formed out of a delegation of CIO (Congress of Industrial Organization) members on July 7, 1943 in order to educate labor union members and provide “effective labor action on the political front.”<sup>230</sup> In 1944, SFA was so interconnected with the CIO (and the PAC) that Presidents and Secretaries of local CIO and AFL unions, William P. Feinberg, John T. McManus, and Saul Mills spoke at the initial benefit event for the group in between performances written by Bob Russell, Ben Hecht, Arthur Miller, and Norman Corwin and speeches by theatrical luminaries John Gassner and Norman Corwin.

The Ben Hecht play performed at this April 19, 1944 benefit with CIO and AFL leaders in attendance was *The Common Man*. Hecht’s play would have been especially resonant to the labor union leaders as the PAC director Philip Murray in February of 1944 in *American* magazine set forth the purpose of the Political Action Committee stating, “For the first time in American history, the forces of labor are now setting up a nationwide organization to protect the political rights of the working man, as well as the rights of the returning soldier, the farmer, the small business man, and the so-called “common man.”<sup>231</sup> Hecht’s play was primarily a pro-Roosevelt re-election playlet and in alignment with the PAC’s “common man” rhetoric, which would be carried on by Henry Wallace’s book, *The Century of the Common Man* and by his own election campaign. Miller’s *That They May Win* also espouses sentiments strengthening the relationship between the CIO-PAC and Stage For Action. Miller’s play in 1944 seems to adhere to the “One Dozen Simple Propositions” of the PAC, especially numbers 1, 6, 7, 8, and 12 stating respectively: “America belongs to

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<sup>230</sup>Gaer, 60.

<sup>231</sup>Ibid, 67.



Americans, Earning and spending are political matters, The government should serve the people, All the people should elect their governments, and Education for Political Action requires organization.”<sup>232</sup> By 1948 however, with the final version of *That They May Win* being performed in support of Henry Wallace’s presidential bid, SFA and the CIO were on icy terms due to the communist and non-communist factions within the CIO in complete disagreement over the Marshall Plan.<sup>233</sup> The frigid relationship is reflected in the script changes between 1944 and 1948. In 1944 “The unions got to get delegations together and go to the Mayor” but by 1948 “[The union] ain’t interested. My brother-in-law also has this problem. He went down to the union. He tells them his problem. He talks to them. They listen very carefully. They got a solution...what is it? His family are still eating meat once a week.”<sup>234</sup>

Heavy tensions also arose between communist and Non-communist union members over election support of Henry Wallace in 1948. Henry Agard Wallace, former Secretary of Agriculture and later Vice-President, ran on the Progressive Party ticket in 1948 against Truman on the Democratic ticket, Thomas E. Dewey on the Republican ticket, and Strom Thurmond on the States’ Rights Democratic Party ticket. Despite the CIO backing Wallace for re-election to the vice-presidency in 1944, the CIO-PAC had never supported a three-party system. Additionally Wallace’s friendly relationship with the Communist Party, particularly in the anti-communist political climate and during a time of heightened labor unrest, forced the CIO to adopt a staunchly anti-communist and anti-Wallace stance. SFA members

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<sup>232</sup>For the complete list of the Simple Propositions set forth by the PAC and their full explanations see Gaer pages 57 – 60.

<sup>233</sup>Martin Halpern, *UAW Politics in the Cold War Era*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 242.

<sup>234</sup>Miller, *That They May Win* (1948), 6.

took sides with the Communist Party in backing Wallace, therefore losing most of their labor support. Wallace won only 2.4% of the popular vote and none of the Electoral College votes in 1948. Stage For Action's support of the Henry Wallace presidential campaign tightened the government's noose around the group's neck. The third version of *That They May Win*, performed in June of 1948, was Miller's final collaboration with the group and ushered in the end of the New York City branch of Stage For Action.

*Open Secret*  
(1946 - 1947)

*Open Secret* by Robert Adler and George Bellak was based on a playlet written by Dr. Louis Nicot Ridenour called *Pilot Lights of the Apocalypse*, originally published in *Fortune Magazine* in January 1946. There was a lot of interest in Ridenour's short play about the dangers of atomic warfare. According to correspondence found in his collection at the Library of Congress, many college and high school groups—both nationally and internationally—produced the play. Screenwriter Daniel Boyde Cathcart planned to make a film of the short Ridenour script. Adler, in letters written to Ridenour, said that he and Bellak unconsciously modeled their work after Ridenour's play but because of the similarities wished to include him as an author on the piece when the performance was produced or published. Ridenour agreed to the inclusion of his name on any publications or

performances of *Open Secret* but also requested one-third of any profits earned from the production<sup>235</sup>.

Analysis of *Open Secret*, which is a thinly veiled attack on the global problems associated with nuclear warfare, must include an understanding of Ridenour's expertise in science, literature, and military operations. Ridenour had numerous questions about Adler and Bellak's interpretation of his work. In a 1946 response to Adler's first draft (at this point still titled *Top Secret*), he critiqued at length what he considered the significant flaws of the Stage For Action script, especially the protagonist Brigadier General Shulman, a celebrated atomic physicist. Ridenour wrote:

If he [Shulman] was in fact unable to tell the difference between puzzling out a gimmick to establish projectiles in a satellite orbit and "an experiment in pure science," I would never put my dough on him to win a Nobel prize. Just at this moment, when everybody is confused about science and technology—when legislators are disposed to restrict the former because of the wartime accomplishments of the latter—it seems to me of the utmost importance to make perfectly clear the distinction between the two. Your B.G. Shulman, though he may have a degree in physics, is an engineer in the hire of the Army and nothing else. I have been that myself, and a scientist at another time, and I can assure you there is a difference. A very profound difference. For God's sake, don't mislead the public any more. They are confused enough already.<sup>236</sup>

Additionally Ridenour was concerned with Adler and Bellak's description of the atomic defense underground chamber setting and the people it employed. He argued their laboratory seemed "the slap-happy pinochle-playing repository of the entire atomic defense of the United States. Now it is well known that I don't have much respect for the military or for the political mind, but I can scarcely bring myself to

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<sup>235</sup>It is unusual that Ridenour demanded profits for *Open Secret* because based on correspondence in his papers at the Library of Congress he allowed school groups and other interested parties to perform *Pilot Lights of the Apocalypse* for free.

<sup>236</sup>Louis N. Ridenour, "Letter to Robert Adler, 24 November 1946," *Louis N. Ridenour Papers*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Box 8, Folder 9 – Fiction (1945 – 57, N.D).

believe that either soldiers or politicians would behave with the great ineptitude that you imply.”<sup>237</sup>

Dr. Ridenour’s concerns about the scientific inaccuracies of the original version of *Open Secret* were based on his technical and academic knowledge. Ridenour was an expert on atomic weaponry, war weapons in general, and the academic fields of physics and chemistry.<sup>238</sup> A letter from Robert Oppenheimer in May 1943 argues although Ridenour would be invaluable to the Los Alamos Project, as the Assistant Director of the Radiation Laboratory at MIT, Ridenour was irreplaceable.<sup>239</sup> His group at MIT developed the XT-1, the automatic tracking radar that served as the developmental prototype for the SCR-584, which was radar guided anti-aircraft system.<sup>240</sup> During 1944 he served in Europe as chief radar advisor to General Spaatz, who then commanded the United States Strategic Air Forces in Europe (USSTAF). Ridenour’s fervent support for advancement in technology was tempered only by his support for human ingenuity, stating, “Except for acts of imagination or genius, there is scarcely any human mental occupation which, in principle, an information machine could not do better or faster.”<sup>241</sup> In November 1951 Ridenour started his own company in California, Ridenour Associates, Inc. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage nine years later on May 21, 1959, considered a leader

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<sup>237</sup>Ibid.

<sup>238</sup>Ridenour started his academic teaching career as an instructor of physics at Princeton University. From 1938 until 1942 he served as assistant professor of physics at the University of Pennsylvania, when during the war he was instated as the Assistant Director of the Radiation Laboratory at MIT—a post he tried to resign from in favor of the Los Alamos project.

<sup>239</sup>Robert Oppenheimer, “Letter to Dr. Louis N. Ridenour, 14 May 1943,” *Louis N. Ridenour Papers*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Box 2, Folder 5 – General Correspondence (1931 – 1947).

<sup>240</sup>Ridenour’s understanding of advanced radar systems connects directly to the dénouement of *Open Secret*.

<sup>241</sup>Editor’s Page, *Popular Science* 161.1 (1952): 130.

in physics, science administration, and still vehemently against atomic warfare. An obituary in *Air Force Magazine* claimed that although his “name was barely known to the general public” Ridenour was “one of the prime architects of the space age.”<sup>242</sup>

Although his background may make his venture into literature somewhat puzzling, it was, in many ways, a natural outgrowth of his understanding of the intersections between science, politics, and literature. For example, he reviewed George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* for *The Saturday Review of Literature* in 1946, a regular column on science and non-science related items in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1947, and he had a life-long friendship with Thornton Wilder (who was his professor at the University of Chicago) as well as a long span of correspondence with the renown essayist and novelist Philip Wylie. The letters between Wylie and Ridenour are worthy of further study as an example of the meeting of two of the more outspoken academic minds in science and philosophy during the 1940s and Ridenour certainly appreciated Wylie’s fiction, but it is unclear if he was supportive of Wylie’s conservative political or social views.<sup>243</sup> Ridenour balanced the political scales through his friendship with fellow University of Chicago alum, prominent radio writer, and Radio Writer’s Guild union leader, Orvin Tovrov.<sup>244</sup> Writing to Ridenour on August 16, 1950, Tovrov commented on the current U.S. anti-communist hearings and the possibility of another World War stemming from the current Korean War:

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<sup>242</sup> American Association for the Advancement of Science, *Science* (1959): 20; Air Force Association, *Air Force Magazine*, 42 (1959): 90.

<sup>243</sup> Jessica Wang scratches at the surface of the relationship between Ridenour and Wylie in her *American Science in an Age of Anxiety: Scientists, Anticommunism, and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), however a much larger exploration of Ridenour’s relationship with Wylie and other literary and philosophical writers of the day would be fruitful and warranted.

<sup>244</sup> Orvin Tovrov is alternatively spelled in historical documents as Orin Torov. Most documents indicate he was a writer for 1940s radio soap operas (and later television series and soaps), a radio script analysis instructor, and involved with the organizing of radio broadcasting unions.

I don't think there will be a war. Nor do I think there is any analogy between the politics of today and 1941. Although I am a registered Democrat I certainly don't agree with this administration's policy in either Europe or Asia. You do not sell democracy to the Chinese by dropping bombs on the North Koreans. The way to stop communism is to prove that our way of life is superior, and by "way of life" more is included than ways of death. In our frantic fear of communism we have abandoned our most powerful weapons, the moral and the nutritional. We have stupidly permitted ourselves to be stampeded into alliance with an oppressive reaction all over the world, and our present policy is to stop communism in Asia by killing all Asiatics before they get sick...But this is no new folly; the memory of man runneth not to the contrary. I think that the chief value of the hysteria of the last five years has been to create a most desperate anxiety for peace, among all peoples. And this is salutary. We can break ourselves rearming; we can return to the 38th Parallel; we can tax ourselves silly; but nobody wants a war and I say there won't be a war. A war is unthinkable, because there is no winning any more. England and France are as lost today as Italy and Poland, and anyhow business is too good here.<sup>245</sup>

Regardless of whether Ridenour's politics leaned more towards Wylie or Tovrov, he surrounded himself with the leading scientific and literary minds of the day. His own writing of fiction—both short stories and plays—as well as the fact that he wanted involvement with the publication of *Open Secret* create the characterization of a multi-faceted man; passionate about learning and dedicated to preserving humanity. Ridenour publicly stated his moral stance on the relationship between science, war, and the responsibility of the scientist, "God told Moses, 'Thou shalt not kill,'—not 'Thou shalt not kill with atomic energy, for that is so effective to be sinful.'"<sup>246</sup>

The other playwrights involved with *Open Secret*, Robert Adler and George Bellak, both had careers in theatre and film after their brief run with Stage For Action. Adler and Bellak, both born in 1919 and both from New York City, collaborated on material for musical revues prior to serving in the Army during WWII. Once the war began, Bellak was assigned to the Signal Corps where, along

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<sup>245</sup>Orin Tovrov, "Letter to Louis N. Ridenour, 16 August 1950," *Louis N. Ridenour Papers*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Box 2, Folder 5 – General Correspondence (1931 – 1947).

<sup>246</sup>Louis Ridenour, "The Scientist Fights for Peace," *Atlantic Monthly*, (May 1947): 82.

with other duties, he wrote orientation manuals in the form of radio plays broadcast for military personnel. Adler left the military at the rank of Captain, serving as writer and director for overseas soldier shows including *Stars & Gripes*, *Yanks a Poppin*, and *Objective U.S.A.*<sup>247</sup> According to the introduction to *Open Secret* in Mayorga's collection, by the mid-1940s Bellak was writing screenplays and short stories for the British literary magazine *Horizons* and a new U.S. publication called *Vision*, while Adler was free-lance writing for television shows and teaching drama at the George Washington Carver School.<sup>248</sup> Adler and Bellak were writers of another 1946 Stage For Action performance, *Keynotes of Unity*, which was written with composer Elmer Bernstein at Camp Unity and performed at the Fraternal Club House Theatre in October of 1946. George Barry of *The Daily Worker* wrote that in *Keynotes of Unity* Adler, Bellak, and Bernstein "are literally swinging Karl Marx, putting historical materialism to music, and –horrify the Hollywood slush-mongers as it might—they are doing a better job of it than the radio ever hears."<sup>249</sup> Adler's career after 1947 is difficult to ascertain, but Bellak continued writing for various publications as well as television, film, and even novels for the next thirty years. The same year Mayorga's collection included *Open Secret*; Bellak won the DuBose Heyward Playwriting Award for his play *The Edge of the Sword* (about occupied Germany).<sup>250</sup>

In a letter to Ridenour dated April 5, 1946, Robert Adler described the similarities and the differences between *Open Secret* and *Pilot Lights of the*

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<sup>247</sup>Margaret Mayorga, Ed. *The Best One-Act Plays 1946 -1947* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1947), 179 – 180.

<sup>248</sup>Ibid.

<sup>249</sup>George Barry, " 'Keynote of Unity' A Militant Musical," *Daily Worker*, 16 September 1946, 7; " 'Keynotes of Unity'—Posies and Wafted Kisses," *Daily Worker*, 3 October 1946, 11. The Barry article is one of many times when Stage For Action is called "militant." Robert Adler is quoted in the article, "It's going to be a hell of a lot more militant than any review seen for a long time."

<sup>250</sup>"Bellak Wins Play Award," *New York Times*, 2 November 1947, 27.

*Apocalypse*. Claiming that the differences were primarily mostly in the play's literary structure he noted:

In a dramatic sense, however, our plays are completely different. Your script presented the factual matter in an expository manner and moved immediately to the curtain climax; whereas, it was our intention to avoid untheatrical exposition, and we endeavored to create suspense and build several climaxes, prior to the final dénouement. Being impressed, as we were, by the character and dramatic values, as well as by the theme, we placed our stress on the plot. In this respect, I believe, we were successful. Our script approaches the highly theatrical at the same time that it remains within the realm of the probable. We were not equipped, however, to bring to our script the authority and the technical "know how" which so definitely glows through yours.<sup>251</sup>

Upon receiving Ridenour's criticism of the original draft of *Open Secret*, Adler and Bellak revised the piece -- especially the character General Shulman. They wrote to Ridenour that the new Shulman, "although [sic] he is symbolic of the dialectic growth of science, is as a character, merely an engineer in the hire of the Army."<sup>252</sup> The change must have been significant enough that Ridenour agreed to publish *Open Secret* in Mayorga's collection in 1947, and to sign a contract with Samuel French in 1948.<sup>253</sup> Additionally, it was Ridenour's widow Gretchen who renewed the copyright license on the play in 1974.<sup>254</sup>

The setting of *Open Secret* is an underground chamber in one of the Atomic Control centers in the United States. As is true of many SFA plays, the piece opens with a prologue in which a character addresses the audience directly and sets up the scenario. The theatrical device used is that General Shulman is addressing a class in nuclear physics and explaining why this will be their final class together:

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<sup>251</sup>Robert Adler "Letter to Dr. Ridenour, 5 April 1946," *Louis N. Ridenour Papers*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Box 2, Folder 5 – General Correspondence (1931 – 1947).

<sup>252</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, "Letter to Dr. Ridenour, 8 January 1947," *Louis N. Ridenour Papers*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Box 2, Folder 5 – General Correspondence (1931 – 1947).

<sup>253</sup>Samuel French, "Contract for *Open Secret*," *Louis N. Ridenour Papers*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>254</sup>United States Copyright Office, *The Catalog of Copyright Renewal Records* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 5582.



I imagine that most of you know that I have been engaged on experiments dealing with the latest devices employing fast chain reactions [*He smiles a bit*] what our less scientific friends call atomic bombs. I presume also that since most of you are fairly intelligent, you have been following the controversy concerning international control of atomic energy. There is no need to tell you what my position has been on this matter...Because I have maintained that our sole possession of a huge stock pile of atomic bombs constituted a threat to world peace, because I believed that powerful elements in this country were waving an atomic club over the rest of the world, because I wrote and published numerous articles arguing that a policy of atomic secrecy was impossible, and if pursued would lead inevitably toward this country's becoming the focal point of world hatred and suspicion, I have been called less polite names than traitor in the columns of the national press...Still, I am a scientist, and an American citizen. This is the last class I will teach because I have just been appointed a Brigadier-General in the United States Army. As technical supervisor I will work with the atomic control team...So, I can think of nothing else to say except to wish you luck in your future work and to caution you to remember that science is not only an exciting study, a fascinating chase; it is also a sacred trust that each true scientist holds for all humanity...Good-by.<sup>255</sup>

The controversy to which General Shulman refers-- who has the right to use or control nuclear energy for military purposes-- was at the forefront of many minds during the late 1940s.<sup>256</sup>

When the United States became the first country to successfully develop a nuclear weapon it sparked an international race to harness the power of nuclear energy and create nuclear weapons.<sup>257</sup> *Open Secret* dramatizes the possibilities of

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<sup>255</sup>Robert Adler, George Bellak, and Louis N. Ridenour, *Open Secret*, included in Margaret Mayorga, Ed., *The Best One Act Plays 1946 – 1947* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1947), 181 – 82.

<sup>256</sup>For clarification, atomic bombs and hydrogen bombs both utilize nuclear energy and are therefore thermonuclear weapons. Atomic bombs are formed through nuclear fission while the much more powerful hydrogen bomb uses nuclear fusion. In 1946, when *Open Secret* was originally written, atomic energy was defined by the U.S. government as “all forms of energy released in the course of or as a result of nuclear fission or nuclear transformation.” James D. Nuse, “Atomic Energy Act of 1946,” *Public Law 585, 79<sup>th</sup> Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Atomic Energy Commission, 1965), 21. Accessed online <<http://www.osti.gov/atomicenergyact.pdf>> November 23, 2009; Steve Coll and David Ottaway wrote in 1995, one week before the re-negotiations of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, that the same questions existed in 1946 for politicians, scientists, arms control officials, and citizens, “What is the best way to deter a nuclear war? What role do nuclear weapons play in U.S. national security? Is it possible to do away with nuclear weapons? Can the emergence of new nuclear weapon states and threats be prevented?”; Steve Coll and David B. Ottaway, “A Changing Nuclear Order; Reopening the Debate Over Atomic Weapons 50 Years After the First Bomb,” *The Washington Post* 9 April 1995, A1.

<sup>257</sup>By the time President Kennedy took office in 1961, at least a dozen nations worldwide had the technology necessary to engage in nuclear warfare. The United States continued testing of nuclear weapons from the early days of Los Alamos through the 1990s, except for a brief moratorium from 1958 to 1962. The Nuclear Proliferation Treaty of 1970 acted as a safeguard against the development

global nuclear war and plays on the fears of living in a post-atomic world. *Open Secret* allows contemporary audiences a glimpse into the mind of nuclear weapon scientists and political policy makers in the year immediately following the attacks on Japan. Ridenour's connection to the play as a high ranking military decision-maker and gifted physicist grants *Open Secret* a kind of authoritative voice that other fictionalized literary works fearful of the dangers of nuclear weapons at the time could not boast. Perhaps Ridenour's inspiration for writing his original playlet came in part from the disappointing limitations set by the Atomic Energy Act of 1946. The act established the Atomic Energy Commission as well as the eighteen-member Senate and House Joint Committee on Atomic Energy and gave the government the direct control of all "fissionable material." It also condoned the confiscation of the ores as well as the actual land of private citizens if the AEC found that the property in question might result in the production of fissionable material.<sup>258</sup> Likewise, the act clearly states that any public lands found to contain materials, "peculiarly essential to the production of fissionable material...are hereby reserved for the use of the United States."<sup>259</sup> Land use rights violations aside, the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 directly challenged Ridenour's moral objections to nuclear weapons, authorizing the commission to "conduct experiments and do research and development work in the military application of atomic energy; and engage in the production of atomic bombs ,

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of more nations accessing nuclear weapons and contained a clause that allowed countries that had successfully tested nuclear weapons prior to 1968 to retain their weapons, but nuclear development in all other countries would desist immediately.

<sup>258</sup>James D. Nuse, "Atomic Energy Act of 1946," *Public Law 585, 79<sup>th</sup> Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Atomic Energy Commission, 1965), 6 - 8. Accessed online through the Office of Scientific and Technical Information, a subsidiary of the Department of Energy. <<http://www.osti.gov/atomicenergyact.pdf>> November 23, 2009.

<sup>259</sup>Ibid, 8

atomic bomb parts, or other military weapons utilizing fissionable materials.”<sup>260</sup> The act established the punishments of “death or imprisonment for life” for those found guilty of conspiring with another nation regarding atomic energy with the “intent to injure the United States” and lesser punishments of fines and jail time for sabotage or espionage without the intent to injure the United States.<sup>261</sup> A person could not be hired to work with the AEC or fissionable materials until the F.B.I investigated their “character, associations, and loyalty.”<sup>262</sup> Although the stated intention of the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 was the “development and control of atomic energy,” development of atomic *weapons* was plainly the focus of the Act. Passage of the Act granted the U.S. government and military complete authority over any mandates or decisions regarding this power.<sup>263</sup>

These decisions were in total opposition of the declaration made only a year earlier by the Federation of Atomic Scientists in November 1945. The Federation called for education of every citizen “to the realization that 1) there can be no secret; 2) there can be no defense; and 3) there must be world control.”<sup>264</sup> The scientists’ objectives were “lightening civilian ignorance, and to modify the attitude of military authorities—in particular, to loosen the closeness with which the Army has held the power of decision over the atomic potential of the United States, not only during, but since the end of hostilities.”<sup>265</sup> Louis Ridenour fully supported the declarations made by the Federation of Atomic Scientists and contributed a chapter titled “There is No

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<sup>260</sup>Ibid, 10

<sup>261</sup>Ibid, 13

<sup>262</sup>Ibid, 14

<sup>263</sup>Ibid, 1

<sup>264</sup>“American Survey: Political Scientists,” *The Economist*, 2 February 1946, 178.

<sup>265</sup>Ibid.

Defense” for a work entitled *One World or None* commissioned by the federation and published in March of 1946. In a *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists of Chicago*, to which Ridenour was also a contributing writer, the scientists called for “an enlightened bill; looking forward to international cooperation and peaceful development of atomic energy.”<sup>266</sup> Instead the Atomic Energy Act reconstituted the power of the government in controlling atomic energy, keeping its dangers secret from the American public, researching atomic weaponry, and obliterating any possibility of international cooperation on its development (thereby heightening the tense relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and speeding up the impending Cold War). The scientists were not quelled by the Congressional argument that there would be a respected scientist on the planned Atomic Energy Committee. Regarding this decision scientists remarked “to the military mind, one scientist may be as good as another; if one leaves he can be replaced by another one. This is the spirit in which Hitler let the best German scientists leave the country. He thought that he could find adequate replacement among servile nonentities with party membership cards.”<sup>267</sup>

The Federation of Atomic Scientists feared that rising tension with the Soviet Union would taint congressional views on atomic energy. In what became a prophetic questioning of U.S. governance, they demanded, “Will the Congress, in despair over the momentary—and perhaps passing—international troubles, enact

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<sup>266</sup>“Momentous Decision: Senate Committee Prepares Domestic Bill,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists of Chicago*, March 1, 1946 (1.6), 12. Accessed online <  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=MQwAAAAAMBAJ&pg=PT1&lpg=PT1&dq=%22Louis+N.+Ridenour%22+%2B+Federation+of+Atomic+Scientists&source=bl&ots=Bjz1IRvd7t&sig=TV0cMy0POKkH5FT\\_EwxtNyvn4ms&hl=en&ei=Kf0KS7TMITDklQeLhOnABw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=resu<resnum=5&ved=0CBkQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=%22Louis%20N.%20Ridenour%22%20%2B%20Federation%20of%20Atomic%20Scientists&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=MQwAAAAAMBAJ&pg=PT1&lpg=PT1&dq=%22Louis+N.+Ridenour%22+%2B+Federation+of+Atomic+Scientists&source=bl&ots=Bjz1IRvd7t&sig=TV0cMy0POKkH5FT_EwxtNyvn4ms&hl=en&ei=Kf0KS7TMITDklQeLhOnABw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=resu<resnum=5&ved=0CBkQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=%22Louis%20N.%20Ridenour%22%20%2B%20Federation%20of%20Atomic%20Scientists&f=false)> First accessed 23 November 2009.

<sup>267</sup>Ibid

legislation which will create, in the tissue of our public life, a malignant tumor of irresponsible military rule; which will stifle science in the name of a futile ‘security’, create a ‘Maginot line’ of a stock of atomic bombs, and start the whole world on the road to disaster?”<sup>268</sup> Although the federation achieved one of their goals, which was removing the power of atomic energy development directly from the hands of the military, the remainders of their fears were not calmed by the Atomic Energy Act. In light of these controversies and the ongoing concerns over the dangers of atomic power, Ridenour’s support of the SFA play *Open Secret* seems much more understandable. Ridenour embraced a mission to educate the public in as many ways as he could.

Scientists of course were not the only people interested in educating U.S. citizens about the horrors of atomic warfare. One month before Adler wrote his initial letter to Ridenour and a few weeks before the Atomic Energy Act passed congress, the popular magazine *Look* published a pictorial article depicting what a typical U.S. city would look like after an atomic bomb. The article made a direct appeal to “teachers, clergymen, salesmen, real estate men, newspapermen, others to organize action among their professional groups for enlightenment on the dangers threatening them specifically, and organized action for the prevention of an atomic war.”<sup>269</sup> *Look* was primarily a popular culture pictorial magazine covering the lives of movie stars and the occasional national event. Its heyday of publication was

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<sup>268</sup>Ibid

<sup>269</sup>“‘Look’ Publishes Pictorial Summary of Atomic Bomb,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists of Chicago*, March 1, 1946 (1.6), 12. Accessed online <  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=MQwAAAAAMBAJ&pg=PT1&lpg=PT1&dq=%22Louis+N.+Ridenour%22+%2B+Federation+of+Atomic+Scientists&source=bl&ots=Bjz1IRvd7t&sig=TV0cMy0POKkH5FT\\_EwxtNyvn4ms&hl=en&ei=Kf0KS7TMItdklQeLhOnABw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=5&ved=0CBkQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=%22Louis%20N.%20Ridenour%22%20%2B%20Federation%20of%20Atomic%20Scientists&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=MQwAAAAAMBAJ&pg=PT1&lpg=PT1&dq=%22Louis+N.+Ridenour%22+%2B+Federation+of+Atomic+Scientists&source=bl&ots=Bjz1IRvd7t&sig=TV0cMy0POKkH5FT_EwxtNyvn4ms&hl=en&ei=Kf0KS7TMItdklQeLhOnABw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5&ved=0CBkQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=%22Louis%20N.%20Ridenour%22%20%2B%20Federation%20of%20Atomic%20Scientists&f=false)> First accessed 23 November 2009.

during the '40s when its readership was in the millions. Adler and Bellak were immersed in a culture panicking about the issue of atomic weapons and the *Look* article is another example of how this issue circulated in popular culture and weighed on the American mind.<sup>270</sup>

*Open Secret* debuted under the auspices of Stage For Action on December 8, 1946 at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York City. The cast included Nick Persoff, Richard Robbins, Salem Ludwig, Antoinette Kray, Lee Payant, Sy Travers, and Lee H. Nemetz with direction by John O'Shaughnessy.<sup>271</sup> The play reads as one of the more technically demanding performances by Stage For Action; requiring significant light cues and a large rotating wall complete with “switches for launching and controlling atomic projectiles...three built-in radar screens and photographic devices. The remainder of the rear wall...is one huge light panel. The indicators on the panel are grouped in series of threes, labeled with the names of the major cities of the world, and subdivided into columns by nationality.”<sup>272</sup> The set designer for the original production was Aaron Ehrlich. Ehrlich did not have a long career in theatre, leaving the stage to become a respected graphic artist and photographer before entering into nightly news production and then advertising. He eventually began working with the highly esteemed advertising agency DDB in New York City in 1963 and produced the infamous “Daisy” commercial for the 1964 Lyndon Johnson

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<sup>270</sup>*Look Magazine*, 5 March 1946: 19 – 33.

<sup>271</sup>Mayorga, 178; Of all the performers in the original production of *Open Secret*, Salem Ludwig (1915 – 2007) had the most successful stage career performing in plays by Miller, Williams, Foote, and Ionesco on Broadway. He was blacklisted during the late 50s for his politics and recounts the stories of how friends and family were threatened prior to and during his blacklisting; See Robert Simonson, “Salem Ludwig, Veteran Stage Actor, Dies at 91,” *Playbill.com*. Accessed online <<http://www.playbill.com/news/article/107054-Salem-Ludwig-Veteran-Stage-Actor-Dies-at-91>> November 24, 2009.

<sup>272</sup>Mayorga, 181.

presidential campaign.<sup>273</sup> It is perhaps ironic that Ehrlich, once employed as the designer of a play discussing the horrors of atomic weapons, would eventually oversee production of an iconic commercial ending in an atomic mushroom cloud.

In a running time of no longer than a half an hour, *Open Secret* educates its audiences about the number of atomic warheads the United States has in its arsenal. In the play these weapons are all in orbit and controlled by one military commander in a centralized top secret U.S. location. The commander, Major General Harris, has power over two thousand seven hundred orbiting missiles with one lone political scientist, Professor Cornel Lowery, as his advisor. Brigadier General Schulman informs the Secretary of War that “The bombs will act as planets as long as our equipment controls them. There is no time limit. When desired, we can create an increase in gravitational pull on any individual bomb. That is, we can draw it from its orbit and direct its plunge to a specific point on the surface of the earth or any of the bodies of water.”<sup>274</sup>

Schulman argues throughout the play that what he has created for the military is “a terrible weapon” and a “perfect engine of destruction” with “no room for mistakes.”<sup>275</sup> He offers the lone voice of reason in the command station, but is outranked by both Major General Harris and the Secretary of War. The play quickly reaches its climax when satellite images show that instead of twenty-seven hundred missiles orbiting the earth, there are four thousand eight hundred and forty-one – meaning that the United States is no longer alone in its top secret mission. *Open*

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<sup>273</sup>Conelrad, “The Men Who Made Daisy,” Accessed online  
<<http://www.conelrad.com/daisy/daisy2.php>> First accessed 24 November 2009.

<sup>274</sup>Mayorga, 188.

<sup>275</sup>Ibid, 184 and 189.

*Secret* comes to its nihilistic close when one of the lights on the control board shows that San Francisco has been attacked. In a knee-jerk decision Major General Harris launches a missile at and destroys Moscow. Moscow quickly retaliates and destroys Madrid which in turn hits Paris, which in a matter of seconds wipes out Buenos Aires. A few moments later the characters learn that it was a massive earthquake and not an atomic warhead which destroyed San Francisco. As the members of the underground control chamber attempt to rectify the situation by having the President announce in an international wire “There is no War,” U.S. cities come under attack one by one. Philadelphia, New York, Boston, New Orleans, Newark, Washington, D.C., St. Paul, Minneapolis, Shreveport, Seattle, and Pittsburgh are all flattened before Major General Harris wires the order that “The United States will destroy all atom bombs and stock piles immediately.” But it is too late. In the control bunker the lights go out, sirens scream, and the control equipment crashes down. Major General Harris screams in futility, “But it was a mistake. Tell them it was a mistake. THERE IS NO WAR!” The final stage directions read, “In the darkness, only the red light can be seen going on and off. As the terrible sound of destruction rises, that, too, is extinguished. And now, as the sound fades to an eternity of silence...”<sup>276</sup>

Charles A. Carpenter, Professor Emeritus of English at Binghamton University, calls *Open Secret* “overtly moralistic” and “watered down” and refers to Adler and Bellak as “theatre hacks,” although he is complimentary of Ridenour’s playlet.<sup>277</sup> *Open Secret* does give the twenty-first century reader the feeling that he or she has stumbled upon an early draft of the satire *Dr. Strangelove*. *Open Secret* is

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<sup>276</sup>Mayorga, 202.

<sup>277</sup>Charles A. Carpenter, *Dramatists and the Bomb: American and British Playwrights Confront the Nuclear Age, 1945 – 1964* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999) 30 – 33.



intentionally exaggerated, yet the modern reader can easily understand why Stage For Action felt this was a vital topic for dramatic exploration and why it might choose such an apocalyptic piece. By analyzing *Open Secret* from a purely literary perspective and separating it from its cultural and performative context, Carpenter misreads the intention of the piece as solely an immediate form of dramatic propaganda. *Open Secret* was only performed a handful of times during the 1946 - 1947 Stage For Action season, however I suggest this was due to its technical requirements, which were not in line with the rest of Stage For Action productions, rather than any lack of merit.<sup>278</sup> Despite its brief production history, the play was considered significant enough to be included in Margaret Mayorga's *Best One-Act Plays of 1946 – 1947*. It is also still available through Samuel French.

*The Investigators and The Salem Story*  
(1948)

Following the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 the U.S. government responded with both the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the passage of the “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001” better known as the USA Patriot Act. The purpose of the act is “to deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes” and includes titles and provisions on enhancing domestic security and surveillance, money laundering, border protection, immigration reform, and “removing obstacles to

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<sup>278</sup>The play was generally on the same bill as Arthur Miller's *You're Next* (about red-baiting and the HUAC) and Ben Bengal's *All Aboard* (about racism).

investigating terrorism” among many others.<sup>279</sup> Interestingly, many of the provisions of the Patriot Act built upon previously passed laws that directly concerned members of Stage For Action, including the Alien Registration or Smith Act (1940), the National Security Act (1947), and the Internal Security Act, often referred to as the McCarran Act (which was the short title for the “Subversive Activities Control and Communist Registration Act” of 1950 that President Truman vetoed because it would “greatly weaken our liberties and give aid and comfort to those who would destroy us”).<sup>280</sup> Despite the presidential veto the Act passed with a startling majority and became one of the more hotly debated laws in U.S. history. The final two plays under analysis in this chapter, *The Investigators* and *The Salem Story*, indirectly question the constitutionality of the initial two acts passed during the 1940s, and directly challenge the formation and interrogation processes of the House Un-American Activities Committee; especially the Hollywood Ten hearings in 1947. The Internal Security Act especially, which was directly inspired by the findings of the HUAC, proved devastating to most units of SFA. The New York group closed down immediately and the second largest unit based in Chicago limped along for a few more years before it too buckled to government pressure.

Both *The Investigators* and *The Salem Story* are musical plays of sort. *The Investigators* was intended to be performed with piano accompaniment “to stylize the delivery.” Its writer, Lewis Allan -- the pseudonym of Abel Meeropol (1903-1986) --

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<sup>279</sup>107<sup>th</sup> Congress of the United States of America, “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001,” <[http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=107\\_cong\\_bills&docid=f:h3162enr.txt.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=107_cong_bills&docid=f:h3162enr.txt.pdf)>(pages 1 – 5). First accessed 5 January 2010.

<sup>280</sup>Harry S. Truman, “The Internal Security Act Veto Message,” in *The Communist Problem in America*, ed. Edward E. Palmer (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1951), 447.

was a prolific songwriter and poet with a penchant for theatre.<sup>281</sup> His most well known song is *Strange Fruit* (1938), based on his poem *Bitter Fruit* and written in 1936 after he saw a particularly gruesome photograph of a lynching in the newspaper. The song was made famous by occasional SFA performer Billie Holiday on her album *The Lady Sings the Blues*. *Strange Fruit* was not Allan's first political piece. He had a long history of writing political music and collaborated during the 1930s with members of the Communist Composers Collective. He also enjoyed a thirty year friendship and writing partnership with communist composer and SFA supporter, Earl Robinson.<sup>282</sup> During the late '30s Allan and his wife Anne (*née* Shaffer) were members of the Theatre Arts Committee (TAC) and employed as teachers in the New York City public school system. Allan, who had written for his college's humor magazine as an undergraduate, was a frequent contributor to the Cabaret performances of the TAC. According to Nancy Kovaleff Baker, Allan greatly appreciated the work of Brecht, Weill, Odets and Blitzstein. During the '40s and '50s Allan collaborated on songs with Kurt Weill and Lehman Engel, the conductor of Blitzstein's musical *The Cradle Will Rock*.<sup>283</sup>

It is unclear exactly when Allan wrote *The Investigators* and whether it was originally intended for Stage For Action, but the most likely date of creation is between 1945 and 1948 (based on the standing status of the HUAC and Allan's friendship with many members of the Hollywood Ten). The copy I used was intended for the Chicago Arts Committee for Wallace in June of 1948. According to

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<sup>281</sup>Lewis Allan, *The Investigators*, 1. Accessed in the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library, Series XLIX, Folder 4.

<sup>282</sup>Nancy Kovaleff Baker, "Abel Meeropol (a.k.a. Lewis Allan): Political Commentator and Social Conscience," *American Music* 20.1 (2002): 29.

<sup>283</sup>*Ibid*, 39.

Baker, as well as the hearings on Communist Political Subversion by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956, the “sketch” or “skit” as it is alternatively called, was published in 1948 by the National Education Committee of the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order.<sup>284</sup> This short play was not the first piece that had raised government suspicions about Allan’s political affiliations. He had previously written songs brazenly titled “I Kissed a Communist (Was My Face Red)” and “Is There A Red Under Your Bed?” during the late 1930s (a period much more congenial to those with communist sympathies).<sup>285</sup> In 1941 he was investigated by the Rapp-Codert Commission regarding communist infiltration of the educational system, and by 1948 Allan and his wife left their stable Hollywood life where Allan had been writing songs for the movies. They began a decade of frequent moves in order to dodge HUAC subpoenas.<sup>286</sup>

Allan was openly critical of the HUAC hearings and later of Senator Joseph McCarthy, writing not only *The Investigators* but also songs such as “Riding the Broom” and “Ballad of the Hollywood Ten.”<sup>287</sup> However, he and his wife’s most political and sympathetic act was adopting Julius and Ethel Rosenberg’s two young sons following their parents’ execution in 1953. During the ‘50s and ‘60s Allan composed several musicals and continued his political activism, which he passed on to his adopted sons Michael and Robert. He was outspoken about his distrust of Nixon and the Vietnam War and in 1973 the National Endowment for the Arts commissioned Allan to write the text and lyrics for a cantata titled *The Song of the*

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<sup>284</sup>Ibid, 62.

<sup>285</sup>Ibid, 57.

<sup>286</sup>Ibid, 63.

<sup>287</sup>Along with *The Investigators* SFA often performed Allan’s compositions at cabaret and variety events.

*Liberty Bell* emphasizing the “role of minorities in American democracy.”<sup>288</sup> Allan died on October 29, 1986 from complications of Alzheimer’s.

*The Investigators* is not an exceptional piece of dramatic literature and at only six pages in length and lacking in any serious character or plot development it better represents the agit-prop style of theatre performed by SFA’s 1930s contemporary, the Workers’ Laboratory Theatre. However it brings attention to several concerns facing SFA and those supporting the Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace: the tightening of government control over labor unions; the labeling of all communists as “subversive”; the corrupt investigative processes of the HUAC; race relations in the South; and the stifling of intellectual freedom and freedom of thought in the United States. The character types in the brief play include the Investigators, the Victim, the Rat, the Lawyer, and finally the Robot, who is meant to symbolize the U.S. government’s “synthetic creation; the perfect citizen of a perfect well-regulated nation,” whose spirit has been “cut in proportion – a sort of intellectual abortion.”<sup>289</sup>

All of the characters are broad stereotypes and Allan suggests in his stage directions that “the sketch should be done in a highly stylized manner both in the reading of the lines and in movement, and it should have a nervous, staccato effect, especially from the Investigators. The Rat should be a broad burlesque of all stool pigeons. The other characters should be handled simply, underplayed for effect.”<sup>290</sup> The absence of a required set or props and the ease of manipulating the cast size make *The Investigators* an ideal piece for town hall meetings or political rallies. It is easy to understand why the play would be chosen for a Wallace campaign meeting and

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<sup>288</sup>Ibid, 70.

<sup>289</sup>Lewis Allan, *The Investigators*, 6.

<sup>290</sup>Ibid, 1.

performed by SFA. The end of the piece was revised slightly by the Chicago Arts Committee for Wallace so that the Robot breaks out of its brain-washed routine at the end of the play and triumphantly shouts “Wallace in ’48!” as the Investigators run off stage screaming.<sup>291</sup>

*The Investigators* is only one of many SFA productions challenging the procedures of the HUAC. The House Un-American Activities Committee had existed on a temporary basis since 1938, becoming a permanent committee in 1945, and was a standing committee for the next thirty years with its heyday of prosecutions occurring during the late 40s through the 50s when its primary concern was investigating Communist infiltration at all levels of U.S. society. When *The Investigators* was published by the Chicago Arts Committee for Wallace in June of 1948 the first wave of investigations into performing artists and writers had already occurred and within less than two months Whittaker Chambers would be testifying before the HUAC that Alger Hiss was a communist and a spy. But *The Investigators* deals with more than targeting communists. It brings to the fore a growing problem in the conservative climate of the late ‘40s of a devaluing of intellectual freedom and a whitewashing of American society regarding politics, ethnicity, religion, and culture. In using a robot to symbolize the perfect American citizen, *The Investigators* draws on popular novels and films of the 1940s that use robots, zombies, and outer-space body snatchers to illustrate (depending on the creator’s political beliefs) the brain washing of American citizens by the government or by communists. Even government officials with justifiable fears of espionage, war, or revolution questioned

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<sup>291</sup>Ibid, 6.

what the homogenizing of U.S. society through forced suppression of difference would mean to our creative and intellectual output.

Lewis Allan spent his life combating what he saw as racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-democratic activity by the government in his songs, poems, and plays. He argued that freedom of thought was foundational to the American way of life. *The Investigators* claims that the corrupt HUAC members value only the citizen who abdicates his right of free speech:

Why if everybody had concealed thoughts it would be a terrible blow!  
And if they thought out loud they might even gather a crowd  
And then where would our profits go?  
We have our own idea of the kind of citizen  
Who fits into our conception of society.  
Somebody very safe and sane.  
With an arrested brain.<sup>292</sup>

Two years later in Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson's written opinion of the *American Communications Association, et al. v. Charles T. Douds* case of 1950 Jackson offers both an exceptional critical understanding of the possible dangers of communism to American society as well as the even greater dangers facing a nation in which political and business leaders felt it was their right to prosecute people based solely on their "beliefs or opinions, even though they may never have matured into any act whatever or even been given utterance."<sup>293</sup> Jackson expressed similar fears to Allan on where the United States was headed in his decision:

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<sup>292</sup>Allan, 6

<sup>293</sup>Law Library- American Law and Legal Information, "American Communication Association v. Douds," <<http://law.jrank.org/pages/12530/American-Communications-Association-v-Douds.html>> First accessed 6 January 2010; Robert H. Jackson, "The Communist Party in America," in *The Communist Problem in America*, ed. Edward E. Palmer (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1951), 379; The defense in this Supreme Court case claimed that the "requirement of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Labor Management Relations Act that union officials affirm in writing that they are not members of the Communist Party violates their First Amendment Rights."

“Our forefathers found the evils of free thinking more to be endured than the evils of inquest or suppression. They gave the status of almost absolute individual rights to the outward means of expressing belief... This is not only because individual thinking presents no danger to society, but because thoughtful, bold and independent minds are essential to wise and considered self-government. Progress generally begins in skepticism about accepted truths. Intellectual freedom means the right to re-examine much that has been long taken for granted. A free man must be a reasoning man, and he must dare to doubt what a legislative or electoral majority may most passionately assert. The danger that citizens will think wrongly is serious, but less dangerous than atrophy from not thinking at all... The priceless heritage of our society is the unrestricted constitutional right of each member to think as he will. Thought control is a copyright of totalitarianism, and we have no claim to it.”<sup>294</sup>

In the same year that Allan’s *The Investigators* appeared, SFA produced Sidney Alexander’s play in six scenes, *The Salem Story*. Alexander seems to have had very little connection to SFA either before or after the production and his live theatrical experience appears limited to writing two plays (*The Salem Story* and *The Third Great Fool*). Born in New York in 1912, Alexander graduated from Columbia University in 1934 and served in the Army during WWII. He is best known as a novelist but he also composed a number of poems, novels, short stories, and radio plays in his early career.<sup>295</sup> He won the prestigious P.E.N award for his translation of a work on Italian History in 1970. This was the first award for translation offered by the P.E.N International.<sup>296</sup> During the 1950s through the 1980s he spent long periods of time in Italy, returning to the United States between 1963 and 1967 when he taught in the Fine Arts Department of Syracuse University. While in Italy, Alexander worked as both a cultural reporter for *The Reporter Magazine* and as an independent scholar. He returned to the United States again in 1983 and lived in Richmond, VA

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<sup>294</sup>Jackson, 382.

<sup>295</sup>Some of Alexander’s major publications include a biography of Marc Chagall, historical novels on the life of Michelangelo, and translations of many important Italian works.

<sup>296</sup>Henry Raymond, “Translator Gets P.E.N Club Prize: Sidney Alexander is Named for Work on Italian Text,” *The New York Times* 16 May 1970; P.E.N American Center Archives, <<http://infoshare1.princeton.edu/libraries/firestone/rbsc/aids/pen.html>> First accessed 11 January 2010.



where he taught at Virginia Commonwealth University. His final work was a translation of Horace's *Odes and Satires* in 1999 and he died soon after publication of the work on December 11, 1999.<sup>297</sup>

Although Alexander had little connection to the theatre, his poetry and novels suggest an alignment with the liberal perspectives espoused in many of SFA's plays and by members of the group. His second collection of poetry, *Tightrope in the Dark*, published in 1950, was inspired by his work as a Welfare investigator in Harlem, as well as his personal reactions to war and the Holocaust. Maurice Irvine, reviewing the collection for *The New York Times*, states that the poems fall into two groups, "those which are rather intimate and sensitive...and those of social protest." Irvine continues, "Liberal views in these present poems are presented with skill and emotion. One has the feeling of having been in good company. To walk "tightropes in the dark" is to be concerned about and to believe in hope of a better world."<sup>298</sup> Not everyone approved of Alexander's insertion of his own political views into his work. Orville Prescott, reviewing Alexander's second historical novel on Michelangelo, *The Hand of Michelangelo*, asserted that the only fictional character in the work, Andrea del Medigo, a Jewish physician who is one of Michelangelo's closest friends, "serves as an excuse for writing about the Jews of Renaissance Italy and also as a mouthpiece for some of the author's own ideas...the doctor is a distracting intrusion and does not seem to belong." Another *New York Times* reviewer, Thomas Lask disagrees with Prescott's opinion of the Jewish doctor stating, "It is worth noting that this one

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<sup>297</sup>"Sidney Alexander, Historian, Novelist and Translator, 87," *New York Times*, 22 December 1999, C26; Syracuse University, "Collections and Personal Papers: Faculty Papers: Sidney Alexander," < <http://archives.syr.edu/collections/faculty/alexander.html> > First accessed 6 January 2010.

<sup>298</sup>Maurice N. Irvine, "In Good Company," *New York Times*, 11 June 1950, 197.

character, freed from the allegiance to a restrictive group of facts, takes on an individuality and life not matched by any other figure in the book... [the doctor's] spiritual struggles and the position he arrives at on matters of faith and his place in the world can easily be taken for the contemplative conclusions of the author."<sup>299</sup> Sidney Alexander, as a creative writer with an understanding of art, history, religion, and politics always found ways of including his opinions in even his most historically-based works, and *The Salem Story* does not sway far from this approach.

*The Salem Story*, when considered with the rest of Stage For Action's performances, does not fit into their standard repertoire. The language of the play is melodic and well-crafted prose with multi-dimensional characters and a loftier style similar to other mainstream plays of the time rather than the monosyllabic agit-prop of earlier SFA productions. *The Salem Story* won the annual Maxwell Anderson Award for poetic drama in September 1948 sponsored by Stanford University.<sup>300</sup> As *The Salem Story* was produced for a limited weekend performance run on March 12 - 14 in 1948 in benefit of the Sydenham Hospital, Stage For Action performed the piece on a proscenium stage with sets and costumes in the Central Needle Trades High School auditorium. The Sydenham was New York City's only interracial hospital at the time, providing medical services to much of Harlem.<sup>301</sup> One of Stage

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<sup>299</sup>Orville Prescott, "Anatomy of Genius," *New York Times*, 17 September 1967, BR23; Thomas Lask, "Books of the Times: Man With a Chisel," *New York Times*, 10 May 1967, 79.

<sup>300</sup>Louis Calta, "Two More Shows May Quit Tonight," *New York Times*, 18 September 1948, 11.

<sup>301</sup>Sydenham Hospital plays an important part in the racial struggles of New York City. Besides being interracial, it was the first hospital in New York City to hire black doctors and was one of the initial race riot sites following the shooting of a black soldier by a white policeman in August 1943. Lack of funding threatened the hospital shut down in 1948, but a series of benefits (including SFA's) saved the hospital and in March of 1949 the city took the hospital over in order to preserve its interracial status. Other performance benefits included a jazz concert featuring Duke Ellington, Count

For Action's direct connections to Sydenham Hospital was their sharing of a significant Board Member. Ferdinand C. Smith, Jamaican-born vice-president (other records claim Secretary) of the powerful National Maritime Union in 1948, was on the Board of both groups but was in March of 1948 facing deportation proceedings under process of the Smith Act due to his participation in the CPUSA and labeling as an "undesirable alien."<sup>302</sup> Perhaps their more significant connection however was their shared belief in equality. Stage For Action was dedicated to civil rights in their post-war rhetoric and performances. It seems appropriate that they would fight to keep Sydenham open as it was the only hospital in the United States, "where all racial barriers have been lowered, so that Negroes sit on the board of trustees, practice medicine and surgery, conduct research and nurse the ailing."<sup>303</sup> Stage For Action, which was one of the only interracial theatre groups in the United States during the 1940s perhaps felt a kinship with Sydenham and therefore rushed to its aid.

According to a *New York Times* press release for the performance, the score of *The Salem Story* was composed by Herbert Haufrecht with choreography by Valentina Litvinoff and direction by Gene Frankel.<sup>304</sup> An undated Stage For Action press release for the event describes *The Salem Story* as "a dynamic new play by Sidney Alexander, prize winning author, dealing with the witch hunt of an earlier day" and touting "a cast of thirty, featuring several prominent Broadway actors and a

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Basie, and Billie Holliday; "Sydenham Seeks Aid to Bar Closing," *New York Times*, 1 March 1948, 20; "Sydenham to Benefit Tonight," *New York Times*, 3 April 1948, 10.

<sup>302</sup>"Bernecker Plans Aid to Sydenham," *New York Times*, 2 March 1948, 26; Congress, House, *House Reports*, "Miscellaneous," 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., January 10 – December 19, 1944, 179 – 180; Clarence Mitchell, Jr., *The Papers of Clarence Mitchell Volume 1: 1942 - 1943* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 556; Philip Sheldon Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker: 1619 – 1981*, (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 285.

<sup>303</sup>"Sydenham's Needs," *New York Times*, 5 March 1948, 20.

<sup>304</sup>"To Present Witchcraft Play," *New York Times*, 11 March 1948, 35.

special score and dances composed for the play, it will tell the story of our ancestors' early fight against thought control."<sup>305</sup> The SFA press release was apparently intended for large organizations as it suggested the groups secure block tickets in advance for a discounted rate.<sup>306</sup>

Perhaps interest in *The Salem Story* would end here if not for its apparent similarity to Arthur Miller's 1953 production, *The Crucible*. Having already established Arthur Miller's connection to SFA, it should be clear that he was heavily involved with the group; not only as their most prolific playwright but also as a meeting host and leader. I have no direct correspondence linking Miller and Alexander, but it is highly probable that the two knew each other through Stage For Action events, the prominence of both of their writings, and the fact that they were both occasional writers for *The Cavalcade of America* radio program.<sup>307</sup> It is also intriguing that Alexander won the P.E.N award the year after Arthur Miller completed his four year engagement with the international group as their president. However they may have encountered each other, the similarities of *The Salem Story* written by Sidney Alexander and first performed in 1948, and *The Crucible* written by Arthur Miller in 1952 and first performed in 1953 cannot be ignored.

I have thus far discovered two copies of the unpublished *The Salem Story* and both are housed at the New York Performing Arts Library. One of the copies is included in a bound edition of the Burnside-Frohman collection and the second is

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<sup>305</sup>Stage For Action, "*The Salem Story* Press Release" (1948?) Found in the J.B. Matthews Collection, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library of Duke University.

<sup>306</sup>Ibid.

<sup>307</sup>Sidney Alexander was the writer for the June 14, 1943 *The Cavalcade of America* program "Make Way for the Lady" and Arthur Miller adapted the December 28, 1942 program on Garibaldi and wrote the April 19, 1943 program on Pastor Martin Niemoeller, "Listen for the Sound of Wings." Actor Will Geer, another member of Stage For Action, was a radio performer in each of these programs.

included in *The Best Stage For Action Plays* edited by Joseph Lieberman. The play's plot revolves around the witchcraft hysteria in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, but unlike Miller's work where the triangular relationship between John and Elizabeth Proctor and Abigail Williams dominates, Alexander's short play focuses squarely on Giles Corey, his relationship with Reverend Samuel Parris, and his reluctance to speak before the court (a plot device also found in Miller's work). Both plays open in the house of Reverend Parris and both indicate his anger with certain citizens of Salem for their backward or "yeoman" behavior, their absence from the meeting house, and for not providing the Parris household with the appropriate amount of firewood. In Alexander's play Parris lashes out at the townspeople in a conversation with his wife stating, "I tell you this village is filled with evil people: beggars without property, tavern-keepers, bawds, thieves, preachers of rebellion, Horned prophets erecting idols of pride and Gods of non-conformity...Those whose only law is the lumpy average will of all of them...That kind is dangerous here in Salem: A cancer that would eat away our property and home and righteousness..."<sup>308</sup> Parris, along with the Reverend Cotton Mather, are the clear antagonists in Sidney Alexander's play. By contrast in Miller's work Parris appears as a bumbling fool and a cog in the machinery of Salem's political and religious insanity. Other major differences between the two pieces include their lengths; *The Salem Story* lasts only six scenes, while *The Crucible* runs for four full acts. Additionally, it is a Welsh servant named Hagar and Parris's sixteen-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, and not the slave from Barbados, Tituba, and Abigail Williams who instigate the witchcraft accusations. In

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<sup>308</sup>Sidney Alexander, *Salem Story*, (No publisher, No publication date) Housed in the Manuscript Division of the New York Performing Arts Library, 6.

fact, the named character list in *The Salem Story* only includes ten characters: Giles, Martha, and Abigail Corey; John Burroughs (betrothed to Abigail Corey), Samuel Parris and his wife and daughter; Hagar, Cotton Mather, and a Prophet. The rest of the “cast of thirty” are comprised of mostly un-named townspeople who are on stage for the group scenes and make whispered accusations against the Coreys during underscored and choreographed moments in the play. Completely absent from *The Salem Story* is the adultery plot device. Instead the piece focuses upon a corrupt religious system allowing the hysterical accusations of a few disgruntled citizens, a superstitious European servant, and a few young girls to destroy the lives of otherwise innocent people.

Miller’s *The Crucible* is a historical fiction drama exploring the Salem witchcraft hysteria from the perspective of John Proctor, Elizabeth Proctor, Reverend Parris and Abigail Williams. Miller stated in 1958 that he wrote *The Crucible* “not merely as a response to McCarthyism...It is examining the questions I was absorbed with before—the conflict between a man’s raw deeds and his conception of himself; the question of whether conscience is in fact an organic part of the human being, and what happens when it is handed over not merely to the state or the mores of the time but to one’s friend or wife.”<sup>309</sup> One of the subplots in the play involves John Proctor’s brief sexual affair with the teen-aged Abigail Williams and her subsequently accusing Elizabeth Proctor of witchcraft. Near the end of the play Elizabeth Proctor lies about the affair to protect her husband’s honor and inadvertently sentences him to death. In

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<sup>309</sup>Robert A. Martin and Steven R. Centola, eds., *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 172 – 173.

the final scene of the play John Proctor refuses to sign his name to his testimony admitting to witchcraft and therefore hangs.

Similarities between *The Salem Story* and *The Crucible* are plentiful and both playwrights take great liberties with the historical moment; especially regarding the ages of Elizabeth Parris and Abigail Williams. Additionally, both authors present a man unwilling to perjure oneself before a corrupt legal process in order to save his life. Significant lines based on historical testimony are repeated in both plays; during the trial of Martha Corey she is questioned during her hearing, “How can you know that you are not a witch and yet not know what a witch is?”<sup>310</sup> Also in both plays the judges or investigators question their own motives near the climax of the play and during the trials. In Alexander’s play this occurs in scene five between Mather and Parris:

**PARRIS:** Well?

**MATHER:** (*Shaking his head*) No change.

**PARRIS:** They have not confessed?

**MATHER:** No, the woman remains obdurate. She denies all charges. She even denies the existence of witchcraft.

**PARRIS:** And Giles?

**MATHER:** There is the hardest nut of all. The rumor spreads even more wildly that he will stand mute at tomorrow’s examination.

**PARRIS:** (*Scoffingly*) ‘Tis but a ruse. He thinks to secure his property to his heirs. He reasons the court can apply no attainder if he does not plead.

**MATHER:** No, there is more to it than that. I see it in the man’s eyes. He never speaks to me. Whenever I enter the cell, he rises and takes his wife’s hand and remains so all the while, tall and still...

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<sup>310</sup>Alexander, 33; In *The Salem Story* this question is put to Martha Corey by Cotton Mather and in Miller’s work the phrasing by Judge Hathorne is “How do you know, then, that you are not a witch?”

**PARRIS:** You waste your time on those two, Brother Mather. The docket overflows with new accusations. Certainly you should be convinced by now...

**MATHER:** (*Surprised*) Convinced of what?

**PARRIS:** (*Rising from his chair, a little more boldness in his tone*) Brother Mather, I've been meaning to talk to you for quite a while about your curious behavior. It's been three weeks now since the Coreys were seized and scarcely a day has gone by when, you've not visited them in their cell, down on your knees before those two. The woman is nothing but a rampant hag, and the man is worse. Why do you demean yourself to pray for them?

**MATHER:** (*Quietly*) I wish them to confess.

**PARRIS:** (*Impatiently*) Of course. We wish them all to confess. But if they will not, then let us hang them, I say, and get on with it!

**MATHER:** (*With quiet persistence*) It is more important that Giles Corey confess than any of the others.

**PARRIS:** Why? Is he a special case?

**MATHER:** (*In the tone of a school-master*) Your understanding is faulty, Brother Parris. Did you not hear me say that the mans threatens to stand mute at his trial?

**PARRIS:** Oh, that is merely a bluff. He was always a stubborn old fool. But that stubbornness will be broken once he feels the heavy weights upon him. He will plead.

**MATHER:** And if he does not?

**PARRIS:** If he does not, then he will die on the boards rather than dangling from a rope. What difference does that make? The Court will attach his property nonetheless...

**MATHER:** Property! ...Oh how blind you are, my friend! Already all Salem murmurs with Corey's resolution to stand mute. Don't you realize that if the old man carries this through, it shall not be merely his backbone that breaks under the stones, but the backbone of all our endeavor? He will remain in men's memories not as a witch but as a godly martyr. And you and I, Brother Parris—you and I—shall be hanged a thousand times in retrospect. No, he must be turned from this resolve. Let him either confess or deny—but he must plead.

**PARRIS:** (*Shaken by the argument but still unconvinced*) You set his importance too high.

**MATHER:** No...I do not. Affairs are reaching a head. Since spring, when these diabolical vexations first visited this village, seventy persons have been held and



eighteen hanged. Even the good people of Salem, who support our work, express doubts at the unparalleled extent of this devils' conspiracy. And now every day there are more and more people stirring up hatred toward magistrates and ministers, mocking us in the streets...They have petitioned the Governor for a suspension of the trials, and it may be that Phipps will listen to them.

**PARRIS:** He will not listen. Why, this special court is of his own creation.

**MATHER:** I tell you he may. Yesterday I received a letter from Boston...*(softly, meaningfully, after a pause)* The governor's wife has been accused of witchcraft.

**PARRIS:** *(Thunderstruck, dropping in his seat)* What?

**MATHER:** Yes. Do you understand now, my friend? Phipps is already half-disposed to end our work, and he will certainly do so if a great hue and cry is raised over a false martyr. Then, all our toiling will have gone for naught. Giles Corey dead will knock the sword of Gideon from our hands. I tell you if this man stands mute all the clamor of our zeal will be deafened by his silence. Let him deny his guilt, or confess it—but he must plead.

**PARRIS:** *(Convinced now, speaking to Mather as disciple to master)* If his wife confesses tomorrow, he will confess too. He will want to die, dancing in the air with her.

**MATHER:** *(Moodily)* That is our only hope. *(He rests his head in his hands)* Oh, it is not easy to be a soldier of the Lord...

Judge Danforth in *The Crucible* has a brief moment in which he questions Abigail Williams's veracity in Act III and then in Act IV there is an extended conversation between Danforth, Hale, and Parris that substitutes the significance of John Proctor's confession for the desperately needed confession of Giles Corey in *The Salem Story*. In both plays the men refuse to publicly confess to witchcraft and therefore the trials begin to break down. However whereas John Proctor in *The Crucible* has a moment of temporary weakness and he allows his confession to be written, Giles Corey stands mute at his trial and is pressed to death by weights. This is Corey's fate in both of the plays. However in Miller's work Elizabeth Proctor tells John Proctor in the jail cell that "Great stones they lay upon his chest until he [Giles

Corey] plead aye or nay. (*With a tender smile for the old man:*) They say he give them but two words. “More weight,” he says. And died.” This attention to historical detail suggests Miller read either the original court documents or the mammoth W.P.A collection on the trials (which Miller scholar Brenda Murphy supports).<sup>311</sup> In Alexander’s work Corey is the protagonist and is allowed a final courtroom speech of his own (rather than having his death described by another character):

“I will not plead. If I deny, I am convicted already in this court where ghosts appear and swear men’s lives away. If I confess, then I confess a lie to buy a life that will be death in life: a shivering skin, a crouching in the dark...No, I will not plead. I will not bear false witness against anyone, not even against myself...whom I count least...If there is any grain of guilt in me, fear was that guilt: the long silence; the shameful turning of the back: the downcast eye at the murderous procession...but now I taste death bitter-sweet upon my lips...and soon the heavy weights shall crush my life...and yet if one word were to save me, and that word were not the truth...if it did swerve a hair’s breadth from the truth...I would not say it.”<sup>312</sup>

Arthur Miller has spoken and written at length on his inspiration for writing *The Crucible*. He states that the work was partially inspired by the HUAC trials and McCarthyism; by the fear for self-preservation espoused by “people who had had only the remotest connections with the Left who were quite as terrified as those who had been closer,” and also by his fascination with guilt and social compliance.<sup>313</sup> He claimed that he started actively researching the Salem witch trials in the spring of 1952 after someone gave him a copy of Marion Starkey’s *The Devil in Massachusetts*.<sup>314</sup> Starkey’s book first published in 1949 (a year after the SFA performances of *The Salem Story* and Alexander’s receiving the Maxwell Anderson award), is drawn from primary sources on the witch trials, nineteenth-century

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<sup>311</sup>Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Cambridge University Press, 2003), 139.

<sup>312</sup>Alexander in Lieberman, 32.

<sup>313</sup>Arthur Miller, *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*, Robert A. Martin and Steven R. Centola, eds. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 154.

<sup>314</sup>*Ibid*, 27; Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 330.

historical treatments of the trials, as well as her background in psychology, “particularly of the Freudian school.”<sup>315</sup> It is clear from reading Starkey’s work that Miller was heavily influenced by it, and Brenda Murphy, in her excellent chapter on *The Crucible in Congressional Theatre*, offers an analysis of how Starkey as well as novelist Merle Miller and writers for the *Nation* and *New Republic* (among many others) strengthened the public association of the Salem trials to the HUAC. I have no doubt that Miller was influenced by all of these works, and without question *The Crucible* is a finer play than *The Salem Story*, but I contend here that another significant inspiration for Miller was the Stage For Action performance of Sidney Alexander’s *The Salem Story* in 1948. The final piece of evidence I offer concerning the impact Alexander’s work had on Miller is from Alexander’s play in which the character of the Prophet speaks to the townspeople and says, “The after is shaped now: the fruit falls near the tree: Hate and you shall be hated: kill and be killed!...the *crucible* is here; the mold foretells the form!”<sup>316</sup>

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The four Stage For Action plays analyzed in this chapter offer modern theatre historians more than a glimpse of the social activist performance being produced during the 1940s. They suggest that there was a thriving political fervor in playwrights and performers across the United States during a period formerly believed largely void of activist performance. They also suggest a growing aesthetic tension between the stalwart communist supporters and those whose politics fell far

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<sup>315</sup>Marion L. Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Inquiry into the Salem Witch Trials* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), vi.

<sup>316</sup>Alexander, 29; the emphasis is mine; Miller wrote that one of the reasons for *The Crucible* initially failing on Broadway in 1953 is that “nobody knew what a crucible was”; Arthur Miller, “Are You Now or Were You Ever,” *The Guardian* 17 June 2000.

left of center but not far enough to sacrifice art for pure propaganda. What separates Stage For Action from the political theatre groups of the 1930s and even the Group Theatre is that SFA did not self-destruct or lose most of its supporters to the lure of Hollywood; it was destroyed by what Alan M. Wald so aptly calls the “Cold Warriors” and by a conservative front so bent on silencing anything faintly left of center that they used trumped-up congressional hearings, illegal investigation and interrogation tactics, corrupt witnesses, and even death to scare an already frightened society into submission.

Stage For Action, despite its communist ties, never once espoused in their plays or marketing materials what many interpreted as the negative “distinguishing characteristics” of the Communist Party including seizing power rather than acquiring power through the vote, handing over control of the United States government (once seized by force) to a foreign power (presumably the Soviet Union), utilizing violent and undemocratic means to achieve their goals, or gaining control of the labor movement. However, it is easy to understand why a group that supported the Progressive Party as well as Soviet theatre works, methods, and scholars; that favored labor unions and the right to strike; and that had members who wrote for Communist newspapers would be an easy target for government persecution. Stage For Action’s plays and performances were tinged with red but they were also consistent with much of the liberal democratic thinking of the period: equality for all people, personal and intellectual freedom, the dream of living in a world free from atomic warfare, and an understanding of humanity on a global versus national level. These goals are very

much in line with liberal thinking today and yet during the 1950s many members of Stage For Action lost their livelihoods and even their lives due to their beliefs.

## Chapter 4: “I see my work as a social weapon”<sup>317</sup>

Stage For Action performances covered a wide range of topics, from advocating proper childcare for working mothers to anti-nuclear war pieces. Each performance directly challenged a societal injustice and although many of the plays were inspired by specific regional grievances, pieces often made their way to other Stage For Action branches and thus became more “national” in tone and scope. The most important societal issue with which SFA concerned itself was the struggle for civil rights in post-WWII United States. This chapter addresses the civil rights plays performed by various Stage For Action branches. I explain how the playwrights and performers of SFA responded to and sought to shape their cultural moment. I also suggest it was their choice of addressing civil rights-oriented works that continued the HUAC watchdogs’ interest in the group and brought negative attention to the company’s productions.

The insufferable treatment of Africans Americans was by no means a new topic when the members of the SFA adopted it as a cause in the 1940s and ‘50s. During the 1930s groups like the Workers Laboratory Theatre (with their productions of *Scottsboro* and *Newsboy*) and the Theatre Union (with *Stevedore*) addressed the treatment of blacks in the U.S. judicial system.<sup>318</sup> Even earlier, immediately

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<sup>317</sup>Paul Robeson, “Birthday Party Press Release,” 16 April 1944, Paul and Eslande Robeson Collection, Spingarn Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C.; Robeson’s full statement reads, “In the present world struggle, I see my work as a social weapon, not as art for art’s sake.” The idea of utilizing “Art as a weapon” is not new to Robeson, but would be carried forth through the forties by prominent figures in the arts world and culminate at an Art as a Weapon’ Symposium at the Manhattan Center April 18, 1946 with 3,500 people in attendance and speeches by SFA members Arnold d’Usseau and Howard Fast as well as American Communist Party leader William Z. Foster, Editor of *New Masses* Joe North, and Editor of the *Daily Worker* Samuel Sillen; See *Daily Worker* 8 April 1946, 11; 19 April 1946, 7.

<sup>318</sup>Jay Williams, *Stage Left* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974).

following WWI, there had been an outpouring of social activist plays regarding the treatment of black men returning to a segregated society after fighting courageously for the U.S. overseas, although these plays were rarely given public performances.<sup>319</sup>

What separates Stage For Action's plays about the mistreatment of African Americans from these earlier works of the 1920s and '30s is that they do not merely highlight the problem of racial prejudice; instead they demand new laws addressing issues of inequity, therefore living up to their name of Stage For Action.

Additionally, through plays such as *Skin Deep* and *Talk in Darkness* Stage For Action contradicted much of the social and scientific thought of the period, suggesting instead that other than differences in the levels of melanin and carotene found in pigmentation, fundamental biological differences between people do not exist.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, what separated Stage For Action from most of the earlier social activist theatre groups in the arena of civil rights was not the content of their plays or their casting of a large percentage of black actors but the inclusion of an unprecedented number of African Americans sponsors and board members for a 1940s theatre company. Stage For Action supported integration at every level of their institution in a period of American politics when this support automatically labeled someone a liberal and often a Communist as well. As one military intelligence officer involved in the Truman administration's loyalty program argued in 1947, "A liberal is only a hop, skip, and a jump from a Communist. A

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<sup>319</sup>Katie Egging, "Blurring the Boundary Between Homefront and Warfront: Mary P. Burrill's *Aftermath* and African-American Performance of Nationality." MATC Conference, Kansas City, 28 February 2008.

Communist starts as a liberal.”<sup>320</sup> The paranoid post-WWII powers leapt at the opportunity to attack any group which seemed to undermine “Americanism” and as various primary documents written by prominent civil rights leaders and groups of the Cold War era illustrate, integration supporters were constantly attacked as being un-American. Paul Robeson, a great supporter of equality and a Board and Advisory Member of Stage For Action as well as a sponsor of the group, was constantly harangued for his integration advocacy. In a July 13, 1949 letter to members of the Council on African Affairs, Dr. W.A. Hunton, secretary of the Council, wrote in opposition to government policy on the treatment of African Americans in the U.S. and mentioned Robeson’s most recent speech explicitly. It is worth quoting Hunton here at length:

When the House Committee on Un-American Activities notorious for its Dies-Rankin-Wood Dixiecrat leadership and its constant smearing of those who do not subscribe to its own brand of Americanism, turns its attention to the opinions of Paul Robeson regarding the Negro peoples’ attitude toward war against the Soviet Union, it’s obvious that the Committee is not concerned with and does not dare place in the record the full context of what Robeson actually said on this subject... This same committee which has pursued a persistent and deliberate do-nothing policy with respect to the protection of Negroes against outrageous mob violence and other un-American practices, and has even called the fight against these evils “Communist inspired,” now sets itself up as the judge of the “loyalty” of Negro Americans.<sup>321</sup>

Stage For Action’s commitment to civil rights both within their group and in American society during a period when being supportive of “equal rights for all” proved questionable because this equality might feasibly include people considered to

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<sup>320</sup>Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes* (New Brunswick: Princeton University Press, 1999), 276.

<sup>321</sup>W.A. Hunton, “Letter to the Council on African Affairs, 13 July 1949,” Paul and Eslande Robeson Collection, Springarn Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C.



be American enemies. Ironically (and unfortunately), the group's commitment to the cause of civil rights was one of the elements that led to their demise.<sup>322</sup>

Communism and civil rights may at first seem like strange bedfellows, but the partnership between prominent communist and black civil rights leaders had begun in the United States during the 1920s when the Communist Party started championing the formation of labor unions. Although communist control of many labor unions in the United States would not occur until the Great Depression during the 1930s, as early as 1928 the Comintern of Moscow was pressuring the U.S. (through their "black belt" initiative), to push for equality of the races and integration of labor unions. During the height of McCarthyism from 1946 to 1956, while many Communist-run unions were losing record numbers of members, they often retained African American and Latino members because as one black miner explained, "I've never known a Communist in the labor movement to mob a man outside city hall, lynch him, castrate him, and everything else, even shoot him on sight... It's the good white man who does that, you see. So, why am I going to go out and fight somebody who doesn't do the things that the good white folks have done."<sup>323</sup>

The message of racial equality was focused upon at every level of American Communist Party life and they demanded racial integration of each union, school, and social event they controlled. They sponsored multicultural events, promoted Black

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<sup>322</sup>Despite the top-down integration policies of Stage For Action and the significant number of Black and Latino actors in their ranks, it must be noted that the group did not perform any plays written by Black or Latino playwrights. In this way, SFA perpetuated the racially biased paternalism prevalent in the United States during the 1940s.

<sup>323</sup>The "black belt" initiative was an essentially non-realistic Moscow developed program adopted at the Sixth World Congress in 1928 calling for the heavily black populated areas of the Southern United States to create their own separate nation. Although this initiative was in now way feasible for Black, southern, U.S. citizens, it did, as Ellen Schrecker states, "force American Communists to confront what was after all the worst social problem in the United States."; Schrecker, 32.

and Latino culture in their curriculum, and advanced African Americans to leadership positions within many Communist Party branches. The CP was the first political party in the U.S. to promote an African American for national office. In 1932, James Ford ran for vice-president on the CP ticket and in 1943 Benjamin Davis, Jr. was elected to the New York City Council under the Communist Party; two years later the Democratic Party endorsed Davis for council as well.<sup>324</sup> In a time period when Jim Crow-ism was affecting the livelihood of so many African Americans and destroying the lives of others, the Communist Party offered what appeared to be a genuine chance for social, political, economic, and cultural advancement.

Significantly, the relatively wide-spread belief that the American Communist Party instigated any advancement in equality gained by African Americans during the 1940s is illustrated by responses to the passage of the Ives-Quinn Bill in 1945. The Ives-Quinn Anti -Bias Bill, which was passed by the New York State Assembly on February 28, by the State Senate on March 5, and signed into law by Governor Dewey on March 12, 1945 established a permanent anti-discrimination commission in the state for the purpose of, “the elimination of discrimination on racial or religious grounds in the hiring, promotion or the discharge of employees; with enforcing provisions barring labor unions from discriminating in the admission or expulsion of members on racial or religious grounds; and with preventing similar discrimination by employment agencies.”<sup>325</sup> In a reaction to the passage of the Bill by a 109 to 32 decision and failure of three proposed amendments to the Bill, Assemblyman William

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<sup>324</sup>Ibid, 33-34.

<sup>325</sup>“How State Senate Voted on the Anti-Racial Bill,” *New York Times*, 6 March 1945, 17; “Anti-Racial Bill Signed by Dewey,” *New York Times*, 13 March 1945, 38; “CIO Urges Albany Pass Job-Bias Bill,” *New York Times*, 8 February 1945, 14.

M. Stuart stated, “This bill cannot work...it is a definite part of the communist program and part of a communist pattern to disrupt social and economic relations in the United States.”<sup>326</sup>

Two years later, in March 1947, New York City Roman Catholic Archbishop J. Francis A. McIntyre contested the Austin-Mahoney Bill which was aimed at equality in education, especially higher education. He claimed that it was “formed after a Communistic pattern which would be detrimental to further generations,” because in his opinion education should be in the hands of parents and not the State.<sup>327</sup> McIntyre asserted, “If the statement that education is a State function is written into the law, it will permit further encroachments on the parental function of education. That is what we mean by the infiltration of Communist ideas.”<sup>328</sup>

Although McIntyre’s argument indicates a greater public fear of Communist educators and propaganda infiltrating non-sectarian U.S. high schools and colleges (the ever-popular coalition of education with liberalism and liberalism with Communism), it also illustrates the struggle between different religious sects for control of educational curriculum and hiring practices during the 1940s and therefore the power organized religion held over politics. The lack of separation between church and state combined with a popular belief that Communists promoted an atheist

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<sup>326</sup>“Anti-Bias Bill is Passed, 109 – 32, By Assembly Without Amendment,” *New York Times*, 1 March 1945, 1 and 16; Republican Irving M. Ives became a U.S. Senator and along with Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota championed the Fair Employment Practices Bill in 1952, which initiated development of a Democratic Party platform pushing for civil rights legislation. In 1954, Ives’ cordial relationship with the Democratic Party ended during his bid for New York governor against Averell Harriman whom he accused of attempting to change voter registration dates in order to block Jewish voters.

<sup>327</sup>“Archbishop Scores Anti-Bias Measure,” *New York Times*, 3 March 1947, 3.

<sup>328</sup>*Ibid.*

and consequently anarchist society often tipped the political scales to those leaders favoring a Christian and specifically Catholic agenda.<sup>329</sup>

McIntyre and the Roman Catholic Church of New York succeeded in enforcing an amendment to the bill, excluding private and religious schools from compliance, and re-wording the section citing education as a state responsibility to the responsibility of the community. The amended bill read “The function of education is to develop the fullest potentialities of the individual and prepare him for responsible citizenship. The community is therefore concerned that talent should be fostered and not stifled and that no potentially useful servant of society shall be denied access to educational opportunity.”<sup>330</sup> These revisions to the original bill in turn incited Republican Walter J. Mahoney, co-sponsor of the bill, to request a delay of passage, siding with the Association of Colleges and Universities of the State of New York who had previously opposed the bill.<sup>331</sup> Democrat and co-sponsor Bernard Austin responded with some anger, “Discrimination is not a religious issue. It is not a political issue. It affects young men and women of every faith, of every national origin. In the field of education its results have been alarming. It has deprived this state of the brains and ability of many persons who could have made a most useful contribution to our life.”<sup>332</sup> Despite Austin’s attempts to keep the bill alive, it failed to clear the legislature for the second time in 1947, and was still being

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<sup>329</sup>As Ellen Schrecker effectively argues in *Many Are the Crimes*, the struggle between the Catholic Church and the American Communist Party was both an economic and a religious battle. Both groups needed the support (financial and otherwise) of their primarily working class constituents and the Catholic Church as a whole was appalled by the brutalizing of the Spanish Church by the Spanish Loyalist regime, whom they believed essentially Communist, during the Spanish Civil War; Schrecker, 72 – 75.

<sup>330</sup>“Alteration Asked In Education Bill,” *New York Times*, 4 March 1947, 27.

<sup>331</sup>“State Ban is Seen on Scholastic Basis,” *New York Times*, 22 December 1947, 27.

<sup>332</sup>“Austin Firm For His Bill,” *New York Times*, 12 March 1947, 16.

bandied about two years later.<sup>333</sup> Consequently the United States government attempted again in 1949 to challenge any notion that communism would assist in ending educational, racial, or religious disparity in the United States through their publication *100 Things You Should Know About Communism*. The work is a Platonic discussion on the truths and fallacies of Communism and the role it plays in society. Question twenty-six in the work asks, “But don’t the Communists promise an end to racial and religious intolerance?” To which the government responds, “Yes, but in practice they have murdered millions for being religious and for belonging to a particular class. Your race would be no help to you under Communism. Your beliefs could get you killed.”<sup>334</sup>

As I have already stated, Stage For Action was artistically and financially supported by many members of the American Communist Party during the 1940s and ‘50s. Many of these same supporters were equally involved in the civil rights movement and supporters of the Ives-Quinn and Austin-Mahoney Bills in New York as well as the Federal Fair Employment Practices Act and a Civil Rights Amendment. It is not clear what influenced SFA’s interest more in tackling civil rights in their plays, the official American Communist Party line or the personal beliefs of so many of its members, the actual “workers” in the group. Workers such as Bunny Kacher of the Chicago SFA branch who stated their group, under the leadership of Paul Robeson, focused on “Civil Rights, housing, and labor organizing” and “getting the

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<sup>333</sup>“Measure Filed to Revise Anti-Racial Curbs; Dewey and New York City Group Confer,” *New York Times*, 2 February 1949, 21.

<sup>334</sup>Committee on Un-American Activities, U.S. House of Representatives, *100 Things You Should Know About Communism* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. House of Representatives, 1949), 9.

message around that was important; [performing about] a lot of good causes.”<sup>335</sup>

Kacher admits that most of the performances were presented to like-minded audience members, and that the performances were always well received, claiming the sole reason the Chicago branch of Stage For Action disbanded “was because of the Red labeling.”<sup>336</sup>

Regardless of whether the content of the plays was decided by official Communist decree or the interests of individual members, several Stage For Action plays address issues significant to civil rights during the ‘40s, and directly address hotly contested political legislature such as the Ives-Quinn and Austin-Mahoney Bills as well as the Federal Fair Employment Practices Act. The plays addressing civil rights issues were Edward Chodorov’s *Decision* in 1944; Charles Polacheck’s *Skin Deep* and Paul Peters’ *And No Wheels Roll* in 1945; *All Aboard* by Ben Bengal and *Dream Job* by Arnold Perl in 1946; and *Dress Rehearsal* by Jerome Bayer as well as *Talk in Darkness* by Malvin Wald in 1948. Although all of these plays are significant to SFA’s discussion of civil rights, it is the plays specifically including integrated casts—*Skin Deep*, *All Aboard*, *Dream Job* and *Talk in Darkness*—which I conjecture promoted significant public discussion on civil rights and spurred anti-Communist interest in the group.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>335</sup>Stage For Action. “Stage For Action.” Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library, Evanston, IL.

<sup>336</sup>Ibid.

<sup>337</sup>According to the *New York Amsterdam News* Paul Peters’ *And No Wheels Roll* is “a twenty minute playlet narrating how native American fascists use race hatred as a means of promoting strikes to slow up the war effort.” An additional record of the play’s performance was at a mass meeting at Holy Trinity Baptist Church in 1945. The purpose of the meeting was establishing a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). Speakers at the event included Harry McAlphin (the only African American White House correspondent at the time), Councilman Ben Davis, Assemblyman William Andrews, Judge Benjamin Brenner, and Benjamin F. McLaurin (a labor leader who in the late 1950s became one of the organizers of major Civil Rights rallies in New York and New Jersey).

### Skin Deep

The career of Charles Polacheck (9/30/1914 - ), playwright of *Skin Deep*, illustrates both the versatile accomplishments common to most members of Stage For Action, and, as a little studied member of mid-twentieth century American theatre and television history, evidence of how many artists from this time period have not been attended to in academic scholarship.<sup>338</sup> Prior to writing for Stage For Action, he had two songs - *Italian Infantry* and *Help Yourself* - produced by the social activist predecessor to SFA in Illinois, the Chicago Repertory Group.<sup>339</sup> He was also an actor and performed in the Playwright's Company production of Elmer Rice's *Two on an Island* at the Broadhurst Theatre in 1940 and the original production of Marc Blitzstein's *No for an Answer* with Carol Channing and fellow SFA performer Lloyd Gough in 1941.<sup>340</sup> A singer as well as a music arranger, Polacheck was (prior to 1942) a member of the Almanac Singers with Pete Seeger and Woodie Guthrie. He was also a member of People's Songs, Inc. and on May 9, 1946 worked as the stage manager for one of their famous Hootenannies.<sup>341</sup> He arranged the songs for fellow SFA member Arnold Perl's play *Dream Job* in 1946 and performed these songs with

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According to a review of the performance in *The Worker* on June 3, 1945 *And No Wheels Roll* used an integrated cast but a copy of this script has not yet been discovered. See "New Stage For Action Forums Makes Its Debut," *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 February 1945, B7; "Dewey Sends Best Wishes to FEPC Meet," *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 April 1945, 7; Bill Mardo, "'Stage For Action' Trods the Boards to Dramatize Labor's Viewpoint," *The Worker*, 3 June 1945, 14.

<sup>338</sup> In an article in the *New York Amsterdam News* on March 31, 1945, Arthur Arent is listed as the co-author of *Skin Deep*. Thus far this is the only mention I have found of Arent's involvement with the play. When the same newspaper published an article on November 17, 1945 regarding *Skin Deep* Arent was no longer listed as co-author.

<sup>339</sup>Chicago Repertory Group Collection of Scripts and Scrapbooks, [Box 6, Folder 1 and 10], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

<sup>340</sup>Elmer Rice, *Seven Plays* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), 375; Marc Blitzstein, *No For an Answer* [sound recording] (Hollywood: American Entertainment Industries, 1982).

<sup>341</sup>Library of Congress Copyright Office, *Catalog of Copyright Entries*, "Dramatic Compositions and Motion Pictures," Listed under the name Bess Hawes, v. 19 (1946), 83.

future blues star Brownie McGhee in the Carnegie Hall performance of the play on March 31, 1946.<sup>342</sup>

After his brief career with Stage For Action, Polacheck became a television producer and director from the late 1940s through 1960 working on programs such as *Charade Quiz*, *Captain Video and his Video Rangers*, *Colonel Stoopnagle's Stoop*, *Voice of Firestone*, *The Edge of Night*, *The Far Horizon*, *Recital Hall* and *Wide World TV*. He translated and directed the final act of a televised production of Puccini's *La Boheme* in 1949, which ultimately led to his position as director for the first season of the *NBC Television Opera Series* for which he directed Kurt Weill's *Down in the Valley*, Johann Strauss' *The Bat*, Bizet's *Carmen*, and produced and directed Tchaikovsky's *Pique Dame* with an English translation by fellow SFA writer Jean Karsavina in 1952. During the second season of the program Polacheck served as Associate Producer. He continued his work with the television program by translating Strauss' *Salome* in 1954.<sup>343</sup>

In 1953, the year SFA disbanded, Polacheck was honored with a Christopher Award for his work on the Easter edition of the *Voice of Firestone* program. The Christopher Awards were established in 1945 by a Roman Catholic group and were dedicated to honoring creative works that "restore the truths of Christ to the market place, thereby changing the world for the better."<sup>344</sup> It is not without irony that in the

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<sup>342</sup>Ed Cray, *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 252; Stage For Action, *Theatre Parade Program*, Carnegie Hall Archives, Carnegie Hall, New York.

<sup>343</sup>c"NBC Televises a Superb 'Salome'," *New York Times*, 9 May 1954, 86; "Game on TV is Set for Day and Night," *New York Times*, 11 June 1960, 45; "'The Saint' Opens Here Thursday," *The Washington Post*, 27 June 1955, 29.

<sup>344</sup>Brian Ignance Rose, *Televising the Performing Arts: Interviews with Merrill Brockway, Kirk Browning, and Roger Englander* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), 74 – 75; "Let's Talk Hollywood, Screen Quiz Show, to Hold Down Jack Benny Time," *New York Times*, 24 June 1948, 40;



same year many Stage For Action members were being blacklisted for their communist ties - ties which many in powerful religious and government positions saw as anti-Christian values - Polacheck escaped government scrutiny; receiving public honors from a religious institution.

This irony is especially acute because Polacheck did not turn his back on confrontational performances during the height of the Red Scare. While his television career blossomed Polacheck continued his relationship with the theatre, directing the confrontational Brecht piece *The Private Life of the Master Race* translated by Eric Bentley for the People's Drama, a leftist Little Theatre in August 1949. But he tempered this production with safer (or at least more centrist) work such as translating Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* with Herbert Grossman for television in 1951, and later the same year, he loaned the translation to the Metropolitan Opera for a benefit performance supporting the Free Milk Fund for Babies. In 1959 Polacheck, known at that point primarily as a television producer, produced an evening of Noh plays for an Off Broadway theatre. The dramas, *Dojoji* by Seami Motokiyo written in 1430 and Yukio Mishima's 1957 adaptation of the same play, were translated by Asian scholar Donald Keene and presented in April 1959 utilizing a Japanese director, costumes and masks, and orchestra for the staging.<sup>345</sup> Polacheck completed

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"NBC to Offer Video Presentation of Last Act of 'La Boheme' Next Thursday Night," *New York Times*, 20 January 1949, 54; "Display Ad- 45," *New York Times*, 14 January 1950, 18; "Display Ad - 101," *New York Times*, 6 March 1950, 25; "News and Notes from the Studios," *New York Times*, 12 November 1950, 109; "Pique Dame on TV in Short Version," *New York Times*, 4 January 1952, 26; "TV Program Upsets a Theory on Music," *New York Times*, 25 January 1952, 18; "News and Notes of Television and Radio," *New York Times*, 7 September 1952, X13; "Christophers Cite Four Songwriters," *New York Times*, 1 May 1953, 19.

<sup>345</sup>"News and Gossip Gathered Along the Rialto," *New York Times*, 1 March 1959, X1.

his professional theatre career in 1964 by writing a musical version of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*.<sup>346</sup>

The scant biographical information available on Charles Polacheck is illustrated by the fact that he is not even listed as the playwright on the extant typescript of *Skin Deep*. However, since *Skin Deep* was so significant to its immediate time period; each newspaper article reporting on the original performances of the piece and the racial tensions it addresses name Polacheck as the playwright.<sup>347</sup> Additionally, although the piece was never officially published, it was recorded under Polacheck's name on April 2, 1946 in the Catalog of Copyrights with the Library of Congress as *Skin Deep: A Living Newspaper; A Stage For Action Dramatic Composition*.<sup>348</sup>

The extant copy of *Skin Deep* housed at the Schomburg Library Rare Books Reading Room was donated by Oakley C. Johnson. Johnson was a guest professor of English and in charge of the Little Theatre at Talladega College in Alabama during the 1946 to 1947 school year. When he found out he was to direct the theatre program that year he contacted both Abram Hill of the American Negro Theatre and Stage for Action for script recommendations. Johnson states that *Skin Deep* was Talladega's "most popular production, staged seven times in a single year."<sup>349</sup> The

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<sup>346</sup>"Todd Seeks Talent for Variety Bills," *New York Times*, 23 July 1949, 6; "Alcestis in English," *New York Times*, 30 November 1951, 36; "Met to Present Twin Bill Jan. 10<sup>th</sup>," *New York Times*, 31 December 1951, 7.

<sup>347</sup>"To Present Musical Comedy," *New York Times*, 2 October 1945, 20; "Laymen to Preach in City Churches," *New York Times*, 20 October 1945, 18; "Race Hatred Cited as Principal Peril," *New York Times*, 10 November 1945, 13.

<sup>348</sup>Library of Congress Copyright Office, *Catalog of Copyright Entries*, "Dramatic Compositions, Lectures, Motion Pictures," Listed under the name Charles Polacheck, v. 19 (1946), 154.

<sup>349</sup>Oakley C. Johnson, "One Year in the Deep South: A Documentary of Seventeen Years Earlier," *Journal of Human Relations* 12.1 (1964):46.

piece was so popular the students took the play on tour performing before both white and black audiences in Talladega, Montgomery, and Birmingham. In his reflection on the performances, Johnson writes, “Excitement, thrills, laughter—that’s the recipe for entertainment. And *Skin-Deep* gives them all, plus *social content*...I have often in my heart thanked the unknown authors of *Skin-Deep* for a very skillful, effective, and socially valuable dramatic vehicle.”<sup>350</sup> The Talladega students performed for audiences ranging from fifty to one thousand people and in feedback questionnaires taken after the performances audiences commented *Skin Deep* “would help break down barriers between white and black.”<sup>351</sup> Although Talladega College’s performances of *Skin Deep* are not the first ones on record, they are significant because they suggest social activist performance occurring in the segregated south twenty years prior to the arrival of the Free Southern Theater. Additionally, the plays were performed with all black actors (primarily female) portraying black and white, female and male characters.

The *New York Times* notes two public performances of *Skin Deep* in the New York City area during the fall of 1945, however the play was first added to Stage For Action’s repertoire on April 15, 1945 with at least one performance starring Enid Raphael (a Broadway performer during the 1930s) being performed in Harlem in June of 1945.<sup>352</sup> *Skin Deep* was first performed at a youth conference under the auspices of the Greater New York Federation of Churches on October 20, 1945 at the Marble

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<sup>350</sup>Ibid, 46 – 47.

<sup>351</sup>Ibid, 48.

<sup>352</sup>“‘Skin Deep’ to Hit Race Discrimination,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 31 March 1945, 5B; “Through Harlem,” *The Chicago Defender*, 23 June 1945, 17; *The Chicago Defender*, 30 June 1945, 17.

Collegiate Reformed Church.<sup>353</sup> Less than a month later, on November 9, 1945 the integrated cast performed at Benjamin Franklin High School after a break-out of racial violence in and around the school. Benjamin Franklin High School, an all boys school located in East Harlem, in 1945 had a racial make-up of fifty percent Italian-American students, thirty percent African-American students, and the rest undisclosed.<sup>354</sup> The school was founded by Dr. Leonard Covello in May 1941 to “play a central role in the social reconstruction of East Harlem...serv[ing] as a catalytic hub for creating and strengthening social networks and fostering community norms of civility, trust, and reciprocity.”<sup>355</sup> This “civility” faced a serious setback on Thursday and Friday, September 27 and 28, 1945 when a student strike demonstration over increased pay for athletic coaches escalated to violence and “street fighting broke out in which knives flashed, stones and bottles were flung from roof-tops.” Five hundred students and their guardians engaged in an all day riot that swarmed to a group of two thousand white and black students battling against plain-clothed and uniformed police officers. The riot extended into a weekend of stand-offs between Benjamin Franklin students and the police. Five black students were detained at the scene and arraigned for carrying “dangerous weapons” including “knives, an ice-pick, a baling-hook, and a razor.” None of the white students, “throw[ing] stones and bottles and assailing [black students] with sticks, bats, and clubs” were arrested.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>353</sup>“Laymen to Preach in City Churches,” *New York Times*, 20 October 1945, 18.

<sup>354</sup>Michael C. Johande and John L. Puckett, *Leonard Covello and the Making of Benjamin Franklin High School* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 203.

<sup>355</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>356</sup>“Student ‘Strikes’ Flare into Riots in Harlem Schools,” *New York Times*, 29 September 1945, 1 - 2.

In their historical analysis of the riot Michael C. Johande and John L. Puckett argue that local newspapers blew the events in late September out of proportion quoting the Mayor's Committee on Racial Unity "that the incident was not a race controversy but a dispute growing out of a fight... There was nothing of any startling nature that happened Sept. 27 or 28, but the possibilities of serious happenings in the community are not only present but growing greater month by month... the need for city-wide attention cannot be ignored."<sup>357</sup> Although newspaper reports suggest the riot escalating from the coach's strike was the culmination of a series of events including "a dispute over a basketball game between a Negro and a white team on Thursday, in friction over dominance of the school's activities between the student bodies of each race, and in reports which had a Negro teacher striking a white student," leaders of the East Harlem community and Benjamin Franklin High School made it clear that although the initial incident on September 27 was nothing more than a disagreement between riled-up adolescent boys, the effects had deeper consequences.<sup>358</sup>

The greater implications of the fight, the way in which it quickly escalated, and the media coverage spinning the event into a racially charged riot, indicated a need for awareness of racial tensions in East Harlem and the rest of New York City. In other words, just as media coverage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 fabricated many incidents occurring within the stranded and poverty-stricken New Orleans residents in the Superdome, the coverage also spotlighted the immense disparity between the haves and have-nots in the city, which may have otherwise continued unchecked.

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<sup>357</sup>Johande and Puckett, 205.

<sup>358</sup>"Student 'Strikes' Flare into Riots in Harlem Schools," 2.

Yet the events at Benjamin Franklin High School in September of 1945 were not isolated incidents. Racial tensions were steadily escalating in the early 1940s all over the United States and especially in major urban areas such as Detroit, Chicago, and New York City and these tensions exploded, despite warnings from prominent religious and political leaders, after the war.<sup>359</sup> In late June 1943, city councilman and eventual sponsor and advisory council member of Stage For Action, Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., warned that the 1942 Detroit race riots would soon be replicated in New York City if immediate and proactive attention was not paid to the “whitewashing” of the mistreatment of the black community in NYC.<sup>360</sup> Challenging the Mayor and Police Commissioner to take responsibility for the rising racial tensions in the city Powell stated, “If any riots break out here in New York, the blood of innocent people, white and Negro, will rest upon the hands of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and Police Commissioner Lewis Valentine, who have refused to see representative citizens to discuss means of combating outbreaks in New York. The Mayor says that he is ready. Ready for what? Ready after it is too late? We want to be ready now, beforehand.” Despite Powell’s warnings and formation of a subcommittee designed “to handle aspects of a campaign to counter-act propaganda designed to foment racial conflicts,” the Harlem riots, which resulted in five deaths, four hundred injuries, and property damage estimated at five million dollars, began less than two months after Powell’s speech on August 1, 1943.<sup>361</sup> Although Mayor La Guardia and many others denied these were actually “race riots,” the events were

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<sup>359</sup>“Churchmen Urge End of Racial Prejudice,” *New York Times*, 25 February 1943, 25.

<sup>360</sup>“Negro Councilman Warns Mayor of the Danger of Race Riots Here,” *New York Times*, 25 June 1943, 8.

<sup>361</sup>*Ibid*; “Harlem is Orderly with Heavy Guard Ready for Trouble,” *New York Times*, 3 August 1943, 1.

bred out of general dissatisfaction with the discrepancies in job opportunities, criminal punishment, housing, and recreational facilities between black and white communities.<sup>362</sup>

One year later in June 1944 another prominent leader, Malcolm Ross, chairman of the Committee of Fair Employment Practice, again attempted to draw attention to the racially discriminatory hiring practices of employers and the problems this would cause when an estimated one and a half million Black and Latino veterans returned from war looking for work and expecting equality in return for serving their country.<sup>363</sup> Ross was attempting in 1944 to push through the original Ives-Quinn Bill, which had been in process for over a year. However Governor Dewey, assumedly fearing a presidential election loss if the bill was passed in 1944, stalled the bill's movement and no decision was enacted providing for fair employment practices and therefore the possible easing of racial tensions until the spring of 1945.<sup>364</sup> So when veterans of all races returned and could not find work in New York City and other large urban centers of the U.S., racial tensions escalated yet again.<sup>365</sup> Incidents between white and black students occurring in other parts of New York City following the Benjamin Franklin riot, and the riot at the high school itself, help illustrate that racial tension was threatening the very seams of New York City's fragile post-war fabric.

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<sup>362</sup>“Harlem’s Tragedy,” *New York Times*, 3 August 1943, 18.

<sup>363</sup>“Warns of Race Tensions,” *New York Times*, 10 June 1944, 15.

<sup>364</sup>“Dewey Criticized on Anti-Bias Bill,” *New York Times*, 12 May 1945, 14.

<sup>365</sup>“Jobs for Veterans in ‘Alarming’ State,” *New York Times*, 10 January 1946, 25.

*Skin Deep* was “adapted from the pamphlet *Races of Mankind*” and commented on the growing racial tensions in New York and around the nation.<sup>366</sup> As I noted, the extant copy of the play is located at the Schomburg Library in the rare books room. It contains no performance dates, but the epilogue of the play suggests much about the *mise en scène* of SFA performances as well as their purpose:

“Stage For Action, which composed and published the play, SKIN-DEEP, is an organization of professional people of stage and radio with headquarters in New York City. Stage For Action composes plays on important subjects for the purpose of combining entertainment with information that will help build a better America... Since we bring these plays to you and don’t ask you to come to a regular theatre to see us, we must ask you to imagine all the glamour and expensive scenery of a Broadway play. For instance, the opening scene of the play is on the bus. We can’t put a real bus on the stage, so we have put these chairs here to represent the bus.”<sup>367</sup>

The play begins with a confrontation on a South-bound bus between a black veteran and the white driver with other bus riders becoming involved. There is a college professor on board who acts as both the mediator and narrator for the performance. He leads the riders of the bus (and the audience) to various significant landmarks including a medical tent in the South Pacific during WWII, a blood specialist center and a psychiatrist’s office in New York City, and the Tuskegee Institute through these sojourns. The riders are introduced to an injured white soldier receiving the blood of a black medic as well as the spirits of George Washington Carver and Adolf Hitler. Each trip addresses stereotypes about blacks as well as cultural history in general. At each stop common cultural prejudices of the 1940s regarding differences in blood type, brain size, intelligence, and contributions to civilization are debunked and the racist riders on the bus ultimately realize that their

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<sup>366</sup>Joseph Lieberman, *Best Stage For Action Plays*, (New York: Privately Published, 195(?)), 1.

<sup>367</sup>Stage For Action, *Skin Deep*, Schomburg Library Rare Books Reading Room, New York Public Library, 1.



prejudices are supporting Hitler's overarching message of "hate." At the climax of the play the spirit of Hitler shouts gleefully,

"My idea is: HATE! Hate the Jews, hate the Russians; hate the foreigners; hate the Catholics and hate the dirty, stinking, black niggers! And you do it. You fall for it. Look what happens in your Tennessee in the town of Columbia. Look what happens in your great state of New York in Freeport, Long Island! That's right. Hate them, jim-crow them, starve them, terrorize them, shoot them, kill them. Be like me. Be supermen. Be NAZIS!"<sup>368</sup>

The play closes with the riders realizing their prejudices have been fostered by socially constructed fears and that the last thing they want to do is fall prey to a message endorsed by Hitler. One of the most alluring moments of the piece, and one which the HUAC would have found interesting was when the white veteran on the bus is questioning State's Rights and the Jim Crow laws stating, "Some states make their own laws on how and where Negroes can love, marry, go to school. Vote, ride on trains, and stuff like that. And if the people don't change the laws, they stay that way, no matter how they may conflict with the other laws in the Constitution."<sup>369</sup>

The piece ultimately suggests, in barely masked communist propaganda style, that Americans need to question at a very personal level how beliefs are started, why certain laws are enacted, and challenge the laws that they find supportive of Hitler's rhetoric of hate; i.e. fascism.

### All Aboard

In 1946 Ben Bengal (1907 – 1993) was well established in leftist theatrical circles as the playwright of *Plant in the Sun*, a piece written in 1936 about young sit-in strikers in New York, which had originally been produced by the short-lived Theatre of Action and then by the New Theatre League. It became the go-to strike

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<sup>368</sup>Ibid, 16 – 17.

<sup>369</sup>Ibid, 5.

play during the late '30s and according to novelist and historian Jay Williams a “welcome alternative to *Waiting for Lefty*, which had been performed beyond endurance.”<sup>370</sup> Bengal had also co-written the play *With Honor* with Ben Martin under the auspices of the New Theatre League in 1941, and by the time Stage For Action produced Bengal’s *All Aboard*, he had already moved into film writing, which may explain why this short piece was his lone collaboration with the group. He spent the next three years fully immersed in the film world. Perhaps as a way of avoiding blacklisting, he wrote the screenplay for *Illegal Entry* in 1949, a Universal-International film, which supported cracking down on illegal immigration and had financial backing from the government. Bengal may have been wise to quickly disassociate himself from Stage For Action and his earlier leftist theatrical ties, however he did not avoid the Hollywood blacklist. He was named by Leo Townsend as a Communist, along with fellow SFA playwright Ben Barzman, and thirty-five others in a 1951 HUAC hearing. Bengal eventually appeared before the HUAC at a March 12, 1953 hearing.<sup>371</sup>

*All Aboard* takes place in a passenger coach on a train headed south after WWII. Three white GI’s are enjoying their travels until Lenny, a black GI arrives and one of the white GIs, Shreveport, refuses to stay in the same car. The action escalates when the “Old Man” also sitting in the car demands that the blacks be moved to the front car. Bakokus, the Jewish GI from N.Y.C defends Lenny. The Old Man then demands all foreigners be removed from the train as well. Shreveport ends up defending both Lenny and Bakokus when the Old Man calls Bakokus a “goddam

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<sup>370</sup>Jay Williams, *Stage Left* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 239.

<sup>371</sup>Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 246 – 47 and 283; Robert Vaughn, *Only Victims*, (New York: Proscenium Publishers, 1972), 278 and 290.

Jew bastard” and eventually it is the Old Man who is removed from the train, all the while threatening to report the blatant violation of Jim Crow laws to the local government.<sup>372</sup> Another character on the train, named “Middle Aged Man,” responds to the incident saying, “To hell with the Mason-Dixon line! If he was good enough to die for us, he’s good enough to ride with us, Goddamit!” with his wife, named “Middle Aged Man’s Wife” stating, “My God, if this isn’t the most disgusting thing that I ever witnessed in my whole life.”<sup>373</sup> The play concludes with Bakokus, possibly looking straight out to the audience, asking, “Anybody else want to get off the train?”<sup>374</sup>

The writing in *All Aboard* is blunt and predictable, in accordance with many of the agit-prop plays of the ‘30s. It features hyperbolic characters addressing commonalities between race, gender, age, ethnicity, and regional bias. Nine years before the Alabama bus boycotts, Bengal and Stage For Action argued that it is the people who do not believe in civil rights for all who are [excusing the pun] on the wrong track. Therefore, it is not surprising that although written in 1946, *All Aboard* became one of the most popular pieces in Stage For Action’s repertoire during the 1947 season, when a national incident involving a train took political center stage and Bengal’s play became a touchstone performance for the NAACP in New York City and elsewhere.<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>372</sup>Joseph Lieberman, ed. *Best Stage For Action Plays*, New York: Privately Published, 195?, 9.

<sup>373</sup>Ibid, 10.

<sup>374</sup>Ibid, 11.

<sup>375</sup>“N.A.A.C.P. Mass Membership Rally,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 April 1947, 17; “B’klyn NAACP Opens Drive For Members,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 3 May 1947, 15.

In May of 1947, “over sixty organizations including the American Federation of Labor, the American Veterans of World War II, the National Urban League, and the NAACP sent representatives to a White House conference for the purpose of organizing the American Heritage Program and Inaugurating the Freedom Train.”<sup>376</sup> The Freedom Train, a traveling shrine dedicated to displaying historic artifacts symbolizing the “dignity and freedom of the individual” to all U.S. citizens was scheduled to visit 315 cities in all forty-eight states.<sup>377</sup> The artifacts on board included “George Washington's copy of the Constitution, Thomas Jefferson's Bill of Religious Freedom, Francis Scott Key's manuscript of *The Star Spangled Banner*, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the German treaty of unconditional surrender that ended World War II in Europe.”<sup>378</sup> Every city planned special events around the arrival of the Freedom Train including Community Rededication Weeks with pageants where the whole community recited the "Freedom Pledge" and "The Nine Promises of a Good Citizen.”<sup>379</sup>

Due to the emphasis on equality, religious freedom, and inclusion of the Emancipation Proclamation, members of the Birmingham, Alabama NAACP blocked the Freedom Train from stopping in their city. The announcement was made on Christmas Eve, 1947 and the reason NAACP members gave for blocking the event was that they did not believe the city, renowned for its atrocities against blacks, should have the privilege of hosting an event of such national significance when it so

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<sup>376</sup>John White, “Civil Rights in Conflict: The “Birmingham Plan” and the Freedom Train, 1947,” *Alabama Review* (April 1999), [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3880/is\\_199904/ai\\_n8844039](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3880/is_199904/ai_n8844039).

<sup>377</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>378</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>379</sup>*Ibid.*

blatantly disregarded the beliefs that the artifacts on the Freedom Train espoused. Although the blocking of the Freedom Train from making its patriotic stop in Birmingham did not change Jim Crow laws in Alabama, it did count as a moral victory for blacks in Birmingham and in many other Southern cities, making the final line of *All Aboard*, “Anybody else want to get off the train?” all the more prescient.

### *Dream Job*

*Dream Job* by Arnold Perl (1914 – 1971) addresses several social problems directly influenced by state and federal legislature in debate during the immediate post-war era. Like most SFA pieces, it is a short script, and lays out in simple language the story of a young African American Army mechanic and pilot, Ted, returning from the war with a purple heart to a segregated homeland where he is unable to be served in a bar or find a job because of his race. Ted mourns his experiences and training in the military because they have allowed him to experience freedoms he will never know in the United States. Speaking to his sister Cora after another job rejection Ted says, “They teach us how to fix things, how to be experts. They even teach us how to fly a plane... So you can go back and think about how to fly a plane while you’re running an elevator. So you can think about Diesel engines while you’re scrubbing floors. Took me up to the heights...showed me what a man can do. What they want to raise me up for? So they can smash me down twice as hard. (*Long Pause*) I wish they never did it.”<sup>380</sup>

Eventually Ted is reunited with his Army buddy Sam, who finds him a position as a mechanic at the same plant for which he works. Initially Ted is reluctant to accept the position because he fears the boss will fire him at a moment’s notice

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<sup>380</sup>Lieberman, 9 -10.

because of his race, but Sam convinces him otherwise and it is through this dialogue that the main argument of the play is forwarded:

**SAM:** Then listen to this. (*Pause*) Our plant is a union plant, Ted. And we signed a contract that forbids discrimination against any man because of his color, nationality or creed.

**TED:** You...you got that in the contract?

**SAM:** We have. And more and more unions are making the same contracts every day.

**TED:** I...I didn't think there was such a thing?

**SAM:** There is, Ted. Now, are you going to take that job?

**TED:** Boy...am I!!!

**SAM:** And we'll all keep on building the union as strong as we can. That's the surest guarantee that you, as well as ourselves, will never lose that feeling of being men. (*They shake on it*). *CURTAIN*<sup>381</sup>

Gender politics of the final line of the play aside, *Dream Job*, which to modern readers may seem somewhat romanticized if not completely naive, addresses a number of issues significant to civil rights and presents a politically volatile rhetoric for the 1940s. The playwright Arnold Perl was named in the *Red Channels* list because of this and other works challenging the suspect treatment of marginalized individuals in society by the U.S. and international governments. Some of the other topics Perl broached in his writing included the elderly, raising children during the war and the complications of providing adequate daycare and education for the millions of “war babies”, and the plight of Palestinian immigrants.<sup>382</sup> Despite all these seemingly “subversive” beliefs I argue that Perl was not labeled a Red for any one of these topics, but for his challenging

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<sup>381</sup>Ibid, 16.

<sup>382</sup>“Programs In Review,” *New York Times*, 5 October 1947, X11; “Old Age,” *New York Times*, 12 October 1947, X11; “The News of Radio,” *New York Times*, 13 April 1948, 54.

of media censorship. In 1946 Perl blew the whistle on the Army for banning his radio drama “Assignment Home,” which offered many of the same arguments as *Dream Job*. Although the piece remained unpublished, Perl renamed it *The Glass* and staged the piece under the auspices of SFA listing it with the Library of Congress Catalog of Copyrights as a Stage For Action dramatic composition on March 8, 1946.<sup>383</sup> Two years later he claimed that the Mutual Broadcasting System (MBS) changed their original intentions of dramatizing the report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights due to “protests from persons and interests in the South.”<sup>384</sup> This shifting of the “original intention of employing the dramatic form...in favor of straight readings” for the radio report on civil rights is critical to understanding Stage For Action’s specifically, and social activist performance in general, effect on audiences.<sup>385</sup> The head of MBS’s educational department stated a dramatized version would “distort the actual” and would not “permit coverage of the entire report.”<sup>386</sup> But if considering this statement in connection with Southern protests of the dramatization and the many revisions Perl was called on to make in his script, it seems more likely that possible obfuscation of the report was not the issue but instead the potential of a “dramatic” form of presentation being more socially swaying, more of a call to action for the audience, than a straight forward non-dramatic version.

Perl suffered approximately nine years of television and film blacklisting because of being named to the *Red Channels* list. Several of the actors and directors he

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<sup>383</sup>“Arnold Perl Play Listed,” *New York Times*, 25 March 1946, 28; Library of Congress Copyright Office, “Dramatic Compositions and Motion Pictures,” *Catalog of Copyright Entries* 19 (1946): 150.

<sup>384</sup>“The News of Radio; MBS Abandons Its Plan for Dramatization of Civil Rights Report Series,” *New York Times*, 23 February 1948, 36.

<sup>385</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>386</sup>*Ibid.*

worked with in radio and in Stage For Action including Ralph Bell, Howard Da Silva, Lloyd Gough, Mitchell Grayson, and Martha Scott fell prey to similar or worse fates. However as the Red Scare began calming Perl slowly regained his foothold in the arts, becoming a prolific television writer during the '60s. Today he is probably best known for writing and directing the original 1972 film *Malcolm X* and is credited as screenwriter with Spike Lee for the 1992 re-make. Additionally, as owner of the rights to Sholom Aleichem's stories, Perl had input into and gained residuals from the original and subsequent productions of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

In comparison to *Fiddler on the Roof*, the SFA performance of *Dream Job* at Carnegie Hall as part of their *Theatre Parade* program on March 31, 1946 probably earned Perl little money and certainly no residuals, but it does mark a shift in overall purpose of the group. In press releases and advertisements for the variety show performance, which included performers such as Mildred Bailey, Imogene Coca, Eddie Condon, and Billie Holiday with Fred Keating as Master of Ceremonies, the group announced a shifting in their mission from "using the medium of drama to sustain public support of the war effort" to "a vast expansion in its activities of dramatic public instruction on vital issues of the day." SFA shifted from a company of volunteer theatre professionals operating within acceptable theatrical and political boundaries because of their nationalistic and pro-war support rhetoric to a group of "militant" outlaws operating, as the government would describe it, a propaganda-spewing communist front.



*Talk in Darkness*

Joseph Lieberman states that Malvin Wald's play *Talk in Darkness* was one of the "most popular plays in Stage For Action's repertory" in 1948.<sup>387</sup> The play is set in a recreation room of the U.S. Army Hospital in September 1946. The piece revolves around two soldiers, one black and one white, both blinded during the war discovering they are from the same block in New York City. The two soldiers are getting along, sharing memories of their youth in New York when they discover they are not of the same skin color. It is soon revealed that Mike Vecchio (the white soldier) and his gang used to beat up black citizens, including the black soldier Russ Peters, in the neighborhood simply for stepping onto their corner. At the climax of the play, Russ questions why Mike is not trying to change others' perspective on race relations:

**MIKE:** I said I was sorry. I didn't know the score.

**RUSS:** Why didn't you? Did you have to believe every lie you ever heard? Didn't you ever question your friends or your neighbors—or your father and mother? They taught you to hate us—in school, on street corners, on the baseball field. (Bitingly) "Eeny, Meeny, Miney, moe, catch a nigger by the toe." They gave it to you along with your teething ring. One world for the whites—another for the black. That's how it was in school. And that's how it was in the Army! The only thing they didn't provide was Jim Crow bullets... What did we fight for? What did the guys in my outfit die for? What did I lose my eyes for? Ask yourself why? You've still got a voice.<sup>388</sup>

In typical Stage For Action form, Mike promises he will return to the old neighborhood and fight for equality between blacks and whites. But the romantic yet simple language of the play is not easily dismissed when coupled with the political moment in which the play is operating; a tenuous election year with immense consequences for African Americans.

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<sup>387</sup>Lieberman, 1.

<sup>388</sup>Ibid, *Talk In Darkness*, 13.

The presidential race of 1948 between Democratic incumbent Harry S. Truman and Republican candidate Thomas Dewey proved especially intense because it was the year that the Democratic party split three ways. Henry Wallace, the former Secretary of Agriculture and Vice-President under F.D.R, ran on the Progressive Party ticket, promoting anti-war sentiments, calling for the elimination of the HUAC, and fighting discrimination against blacks and women. The Communist Party rallied behind Wallace, despite his attempts to distance himself from their support, and SFA, along with most of its membership, backed the Wallace campaign as well. The second group that split off from the Democratic Party was the State's Rights Party, better known as the Dixiecrats, led by Strom Thurmond. Their main platform was continuing racial segregation and the Jim Crow Laws in the South, which Truman vehemently opposed. There was a final candidate, often considered a splinter of the Democratic Party as well; Norman Thomas was an ordained Presbyterian minister and pacifist who ran under the Socialist Party ticket. Although the election eventually came down to Truman versus Dewey, both Wallace and Thurmond each won approximately 2.4% of the popular vote or over a million votes each with Thurmond winning 39 electoral votes.

Historian Irwin Ross reflected in 1968, "Long before the campaign began, the certainty of Dewey's victory was almost universally accepted. On the eve of the Republican convention in June, the *New York Times*' James A. Hagerty, dean of American political writers, reported, 'the general conviction that the nominee of the convention will become the next President of the U.S.'"<sup>389</sup> Ross continues, "After the campaign opened in September, many correspondents noted the warmth and

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<sup>389</sup>Irwin Ross, *The Loneliest Campaign* (New York: The New American Library, 1968), 2.

friendliness of the crowds which Truman attracted, but saw no reason to revise their view that he was engaged in a hopeless and quixotic effort... In one of the memorable lines of 1948, Richard H. Rovere wrote in *The New Yorker* that the American people seemed willing to give Truman 'just about anything he wants except the Presidency'.<sup>390</sup>

Of course the 1948 election was one of the most historic upsets in American political history with Truman's victory embarrassing most pollsters and reinforcing the solid hold Democrats had on American popular politics (though not on Congress) and the significance of civil rights for the voting populace. Although Truman's success was not based solely on his civil rights stance, it was certainly one of the major reasons for his re-election.<sup>391</sup> In the end, Truman carried 28 states with 303 electoral votes to Dewey's 16 states and 189 electoral votes. He also had a margin of more than two million popular votes over Dewey.<sup>392</sup>

In 1948 President Truman gained elected control over a country that was in a constant state of anxiety. He had dropped the atomic bomb on Japan, the atrocities of the Holocaust were clearer to U.S. citizens than they had been during the war, the Cold War was a constant perceived threat, and Americans were anxious and scared. Truman may have supported civil rights but he also authorized an unprecedented attack on civil liberties through the unbridled antics of Hoover and the F.B.I and McCarthy and the HUAC. Although African Americans experienced small advances under the Truman administration, as a whole this time period was marked by overwhelming fear. This

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<sup>390</sup>Ibid.

<sup>391</sup>Gary A. Donaldson, *Truman Defeats Dewey* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 91 – 122.

<sup>392</sup>Ross, 246.

fear was debilitating to many social agendas because the threat was undefined and the enemy boundary-less. If a neighbor, co-worker, or relative could operate as informant, and if a person's actions no matter how innocently undertaken could warrant investigation, then many social activists were frightened into non-action and many social activist groups dissolved over internal conflicts perpetuated by fear.

It appears the first wave of internal conflict occurred with Stage For Action soon after the *Theatre Parade* performance at Carnegie Hall in 1946. Dissension occurred both within and outside the company because of the rapid changes in the group's management. Several founding members of Stage For Action resigned. As I noted earlier founding member and resident designer for the group Peggy Clark, left the company on August 15, 1946 stating, "Since I do not feel that your new perspective for Stage For Action is a realistic one and as a result can make no contribution to the new expanded dreams; - I hereby tender my resignation from the Play Board, the Production Department, the Executive Committee, and the Board of Directors of Stage For Action."<sup>393</sup> In 1948, with the HUAC trials well under way, Ferdinand C. Smith became one of the first SFA members facing prosecution due to Communist affiliations. In March of 1948 SFA sponsored a benefit performance for the interracial Sydenham Hospital in Harlem. Smith, a black Jamaican-born board member of both SFA and Sydenham, a staunch supporter of civil rights, and one of the highest ranking African American union leaders in the United States missed the benefit performance of *The Salem Story* because he was awaiting deportation on Ellis Island for his Communist-

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<sup>393</sup>Peggy Clark, "Peggy Clark Collection," Library of Congress Performing Arts Reading Room, Washington, D.C., unprocessed.

related activities.<sup>394</sup> At the height of the HUAC investigations into un-Americanism among screen and stage performers, Paul Robeson and many other fighters for civil rights found themselves among vocal fellow travelers. A 1949 telegram to Robeson following his return from Europe and the soon-to-be revocation of his passport by the United States federal government acknowledges the support of his fellow theatre artists, “The rights and liberties of many Americans have already been taken from them while the rights of the rest of us are increasingly being threatened. The lifelong fight you have waged against reaction is a tribute to the spirit of man and an inspiration to all lovers of freedom. The members of the theatre join you and back you in your fight. Noble ideas can not finally be suppressed.”<sup>395</sup>

There is little archival evidence suggesting that the exodus of several founding members from SFA was motivated by the thematic shift to civil rights in their performances. For example Peggy Clark was a long time supporter of civil rights and she continued teaching stagecraft at the American Negro Theatre for two more years after resigning from SFA.<sup>396</sup> Instead it appears the very public announcements of shifting the company’s focus from supporting the war to combating “native fascism” or what Fredi Washington in *The People’s Voice* labeled “domestic fascism,” [translated] by historian Cheryl Black as “Jim Crowism,” combined with increased publicity of the group in communist-sponsored publications instigated an almost immediate HUAC

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<sup>394</sup>“Bernecker Plans Aid to Sydenham,” *New York Times*, 2 March 1948, 26; Congress, House, *House Reports*, “Miscellaneous,” 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., January 10 – December 19, 1944, 179 – 180; Clarence Mitchell, Jr., *The Papers of Clarence Mitchell Volume 1: 1942 - 1943* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 556.

<sup>395</sup>“Telegram to Paul Robeson from the Producer and Cast Members At War with the Army” 18 June 1949, Paul and Eslande Robeson Collection, Spingarn Library, Howard University, Washington D.C. The show, which seems to have no connection to either the HUAC trials or Stage For Action, closed less than a month after the telegram was sent.

<sup>396</sup>Bernard L. Peterson, Jr. *The African American Theatre Directory, 1816 – 1960* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1997), 15.

interest and frightened those members with promising or already successful careers from continuing with the company.<sup>397</sup> The fear of government backlash and therefore loss of personal and professional stability came at a great cost to the civil rights movement; slowing progress down to a crawl. Cheryl Black explains, “U.S. participation in World War II provided an optimum moment to combat domestic fascism, the moment was lost to postwar anxiety over the perceived threat of Communism.”<sup>398</sup> As the concluding chapter of this work explains, for many members of SFA, the threat of the HUAC was not just “perceived,” it was a frightening reality with many members losing their careers for involvement with an assumed communist front group.

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<sup>397</sup>Cheryl Black, “New Negro” Performance in Art and Life: Fredi Washington and the Theatrical Columns of *The People’s Voice*, 1943- 47,” *Theatre History Studies* 24 (June 2004): 61.

<sup>398</sup>Ibid, 67.

## Conclusion: Healing Wounds

When the HUAC instituted the McCarran Act of 1950 and Joseph McCarthy increased his role in the investigations, the New York City branch of Stage For Action quickly shut down. Performances in all of the branches ended in 1953, the same year in which Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed for espionage. It is surprising that SFA lasted as long as it did given Walter S. Steele's damning testimony regarding Communist activities in the United States on July 21, 1947 – testimony that was especially critical of SFA and its activities.<sup>399</sup> The HUAC trials lasted until 1957 and during the period from 1941 to 1956, forty percent of the currently known Stage For Action membership was named by informants. Many were called to testify before the congressional hearings including Arthur Miller, Philip Loeb, Jerome Robbins, Jean Muir, Gertrude Berg, and Canada Lee.<sup>400</sup> Some of the Stage For Action members implicated in the hearings reestablished their careers but many more did not. Although it would be easy to say that the HUAC trials were the main impetus for the disbanding of SFA, there were many contributing factors (including transformations within the organization) that also contributed to the group's dissolution. While the original SFA form did not outlast HUAC, many of its

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<sup>399</sup> Committee on Un-American Activities, "Testimony of Walter S. Steele Regarding Communist Activities in the United States," *Hearings Before the Committee on Un-American Activities* (July 21, 1947), 39; 51 – 52; 100 – 117; 175. Accessed online <<http://www.archive.org/stream/testimonyofwalte1947unit#page/n3/mode/2up>>

<sup>400</sup>Of the SFA participants currently identified, 132 of them or approximately 40% were named in one or more HUAC hearings. 20 of these 132, or approximately 15%, offered an admission of Communist Party membership or "named names" in their hearings. Some members of SFA, such as Burl Ives, were not called before the HUAC but testified in other congressional hearings. Additionally a great number of SFA members called before the HUAC pleaded the Fifth Amendment in order to avoid self-incrimination. Those who "plead the Fifth" often faced more hostile public and occupational opinion than those who admitted to Party membership or implicated others.

former members found a way to translate the ideas and ideology of the group into their work.

It is not within the scope of this project to trace the career trajectories of the more than three hundred members of Stage For Action after the federal government began their investigations of the group. Instead what follows is a brief summary of the experiences of some of the better known members of the New York City Stage For Action branch during the period of 1947 to 1953, a six year duration book-ended by the “Hollywood Ten” investigations and the Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB) ruling that the Communist party, Communist front groups, (and their members) had to register as subversive organizations.<sup>401</sup> My conclusion focuses on the lasting impact of Stage For Action. I argue that the group functions as a bridge between the social activist theatre groups of the 1930s to the 1960s both in their “militancy” and their objectives. I also offer some possible explanations for the sixty-year silence surrounding SFA.

### Strategic Failings

Stage For Action’s strongest period (in terms of management stability and acceptance in mainstream and communist publications) mirrors the brief period in 1940s political history when the Communist Party in the United States was at its most publicly accepted. After Nazi Germany violated the German-Soviet pact in 1941 and invaded Russia, the leader of the Communist Party USA (as it was then named), Earl Browder, made substantial changes to the inner workings of the Communist Party in

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<sup>401</sup>Despite the fact that the Communist Party (nor any other organization designated subversive) registered with the SACB as subversive does not diminish the fear of what this labeling would mean to card carrying members or fellow travelers of the Communist party; See Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 135.



the United States; thereby shifting its public image. American Communists supported the war effort, engaged in the no-strike pledge, and backed F.D.R. The disassembly of the Soviet Comintern and Browder's renaming the CPUSA as the Communist Political Association (CPA) appeared exceptionally patriotic. Additionally Browder called for an end to any rhetoric espousing revolution or the violent overthrow of the United States government. He promoted the theory that communists must work *within* the capitalist system to promote change and equality for all. Some of these shifts were quite radical and shook the very core of the American Communists' ideology. However, they also inspired many to join the Communist Party-- if not as card carrying members-- than at least as supporters of their work. This period of 'softening' in communist rhetoric generated a huge number of mass organizations (front groups).

This movement, often referred to as the New Popular Front, was led by patriotic and liberal-minded U.S. citizenry intent on improving the lives of not only Americans but citizens of the world. In his testimony before the HUAC, Jerome Robbins explained how he became involved with front groups such as Stage For Action during the period of 1941 to 1945. His testimony makes it easier to understand how many men and women who became part of the New Popular Front became fellow travelers: "I did join a large number of front organizations. I did not realize that they were front organizations to the effect that these were instigated by Communists and attempted to be controlled by them. I did realize Communists participated in them, but I was very much in favor of the things they apparently stood

for.”<sup>402</sup> While Robbins’s statement has to be filtered through an understanding that he was fighting to save his career and his reputation, and while his disavowal of the communist agenda seems *pro forma*, I suggest that it is the second half of his statement that is most significant in terms of understanding the complicated connections between SFA, the American Communist Party, and the New Popular Front (NPF). As a member of Stage For Action, Robbins “stood for” equal rights for all citizens, an end to nuclear warfare, childcare for working mothers, and the freedom to speak openly against the United States government. As a *Chicago Tribune* reviewer of the group wrote in 1946, Stage For Action is “a group of stage, radio, and motion picture actors banded together with the purpose of assuming personal responsibility for maintaining democracy.”<sup>403</sup> The fact that the *Tribune* reporter aligns SFA with a *democratic* agenda suggests that for many observers their affiliation with the NPF or American Communist party was of secondary importance.

Of course, the testimony of SFA members like Robbins and the reports from the *Tribune* and other mainstream newspapers tell only part of the story. Larger debates taking place on an international scale suggest the turmoil in the American Communist party during this period. Many scholars of American Communist history argue that although on the surface the years between 1941 and 1945 seem like a breaking away from Soviet control by the Communist Party of the United States, this period was, in some ways, a knee-jerk response to the Voorhis Act.<sup>404</sup> Documents

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<sup>402</sup> Eric Bentley, ed., *Thirty Years of Treason* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002), 629.

<sup>403</sup>“Jewish Women Will See Two One Act Plays,” *Chicago Tribune*, 8 December 1946, F5.

<sup>404</sup>Criminal Resource Manual, “The Voorhis Act (18 U.S.C. § 2386) requires registration with the Attorney General of certain organizations, the purpose of which is to overthrow the government or a political subdivision thereof by the use of force and violence.” Accessed online < [http://www.justice.gov/usao/eousa/foia\\_reading\\_room/usam/title9/crm02067.htm](http://www.justice.gov/usao/eousa/foia_reading_room/usam/title9/crm02067.htm)> First accessed 15 January 2010.

from Soviet files released post-1991 suggest this modified rhetoric was part of a strategy ordered by Moscow to improve Soviet-American ties after the rupture caused by the Nazi-Soviet Pact.<sup>405</sup> Whether the American Communists had a true change in policy under Browder or were simply taking orders from Moscow as conservative historians suggest, this period ended abruptly in the spring of 1945 with the publication of Jacques Duclos's article "On the Dissolution of the American Communist Party". Duclos alleged that Browder's policies in the U.S. were a "notorious revision of Marxism" leading to the "liquidation of the independent political party of the working class."<sup>406</sup> When the Duclos article reached America in May of 1945 most U.S. party officials read it as a direct message from Moscow (suggesting that during the period most American Communists believed Browder's policies were independent of Soviet intervention). The ousting of Earl Browder and the installation of William Z. Foster and Eugene Dennis as CPUSA leaders quickly followed, as did a reification of pro-Soviet sentiment and a more revolutionary rhetoric. This reaffirmation of Soviet-control did not bode well for the CPUSA's future legal proceedings. When eleven of the members of the CPUSA's national board stood trial in 1949, the accusations against them were that in 1945 the defendants reorganized the CPUSA on orders from Moscow to "teach and advocate force and violence to overthrow the United States Government and destroy American democracy."<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>405</sup>Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 87 – 100.

<sup>406</sup>*Ibid*, 95.

<sup>407</sup>Russell Porter, "Robeson Testifies for 11 Communists," *New York Times* 21 September 1949, 18.

The fact that revolutionary or violent rhetoric was not reinforced in any Stage For Action scripts did not spare the group from government prosecution. SFA's interest in civil rights, support of the Wallace campaign, anti-nuclear policy, anti-HUAC performances, and their close ties to many Soviet-supportive groups was proof enough of a communist, and therefore dangerous, agenda. Additionally it was during the 1945 to 1946 season that Mildred Linsley—who apparently had no previous professional theatrical experience but was a member of People's Songs and had been connected with several pro-communist groups—became executive director of the group.<sup>408</sup> Other issues adding to Stage For Action's prosecution were: the SFA meeting called by Arthur Miller and held at the home of Zero Mostel on February 17, 1947 with the explicit purpose of discussing “a projected series of performances which Stage For Action will produce” for the National Council of American Soviet Friendship. At the meeting writers were encouraged to create works of “special material, such as plays, sketches and songs” on “American Soviet friendship.” Additionally, Paul Robeson's steadfast support and defense testimony at the trial of the Communist Party national board leaders in September of 1949 did not help separate SFA from government perceived communist affiliations.<sup>409</sup>

It is unclear if Peggy Clark and Perry Miller, two of the founding members of the group, left SFA in 1946 because of organizational, philosophical, or economic shifts in the group. SFA recovered from their organizational stumbling block quickly

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<sup>408</sup>Mildred Linsley is listed as involved with People's Songs in *Woody Guthrie: Pastures of Plenty, A Self-Portrait* edited by Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal; Harry Goldman and Mel Gordon in their article “Workers' Theatre in America: A Survey 1913 – 1978” claim that Linsley founded Stage For Action in 1944.

<sup>409</sup>Stage For Action, “Press Release 18 February 1947,” J.B. Matthews Collection, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University; *New York Times*, 21 September 1949.

and by 1947 recognizable theatre personnel were again at the helm. However in 1948 one of their Board Members, Ferdinand C. Smith, was deported for Communist ties and the group could not survive for long in the wake of rising suspicion of American communists, the HUAC trials, and the focus and prosecution by the government of communist sympathizers in the creative arts.<sup>410</sup>

### Friendly Fire

A significant group of people involved with Stage For Action testified and even “named-names” at their HUAC and other Congressional trials, but Elia Kazan, who had strong connections to Stage For Action, is probably the most infamous of the entertainment industry testifiers.<sup>411</sup> Kazan first testified before the Committee in an executive session on January 14, 1952. On April 10, 1952 he presented a prepared statement before the HUAC in which he once again swore he was only a member of the Communist Party from “the summer of 1934...and the late winter or early spring of 1936, when [he] severed all connection with it.”<sup>412</sup> In his statement he “named names” of well-known theatre and film professionals and claimed that although the Communist Party was interested in controlling the Group Theater, it never accomplished this feat because the group stayed in control of “the hands of the three non-Communist directors, Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, and Cheryl Crawford.”<sup>413</sup> Two of the people that Kazan did claim were communists with him were Clifford Odets and Art Smith. Kazan stated that Odets “got out about the same time I did,”

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<sup>410</sup> Although scant financial records for SFA are available, it appears the group began discussions of operating on a for-profit level in late 1945.

<sup>411</sup> Peter Kihss, “Robbins, Showman, Admits He Was Red,” *The New York Times* 6 May 1953, 1.

<sup>412</sup> Bentley, 485.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid*, 489.

but provided no such information about Smith (thus implying that he was still a member of the Communist Party). Kazan had previously mentioned Group Theater company member Michael Gordon in his HUAC testimony, but his April 10<sup>th</sup> affidavit states, “I believe in my previous testimony I mentioned that there were nine members in the unit. I was including Michael Gordon, but in searching my recollection I find that I do not recall his having attended any meeting with me.”<sup>414</sup> Kazan’s testimony is critical to Stage For Action’s history because all but one of the Group Theater members he names, regardless of their connection to the Communist Party during the ‘30s, were connected to Stage For Action during the 1940s— including Elia Kazan.<sup>415</sup>

Six years before his HUAC testimony, on January 27, 1946, Kazan spoke at a symposium at City College Auditorium sponsored by Stage For Action on the play *Home of the Brave*. Other participants on the panel included Harold Clurman, James Gow, Arthur Laurents, Michael Gordon, and Jose Ferrer, with Burton Rascoe acting as moderator. The symposium was announced in *The New York Times* and in the Communist paper *The Daily Worker*. The proceeds of the symposium supported the strikes at which Stage For Action performed, including one that was currently in progress (the Western Union strike).<sup>416</sup> 1946 is also the year that Art Smith became vice-chairman of Stage For Action, and on June 5, 1946 Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crawford were two of the sponsors of the Stage For Action event at the Hotel Astor at

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<sup>414</sup>Ibid, 487.

<sup>415</sup>Lee Strasburg is not mentioned in any Stage For Action literature or reviews of the group.

<sup>416</sup>“Rascoe to Head Stage Forum,” *New York Times*, 22 January 1946, 36; “Symposium on ‘Home of the Brave,’” *The Daily Worker*, 24 January 1946, 8 and 11; Samuel Sillen, “Labor’s Fight Is Our Fight, Say Artists and Scientists,” *The Daily Worker*, 25 January 1946, 11; “What’s On,” *The Daily Worker*, 25 January 1946, 8; *The Daily Worker*, 26 January 1946, 8.

which Konstantine Simonov was invited to speak. The following spring Stage For Action incorporated yet another Group Theater member into its fold by reviving Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* on April 6, 1947 at the Knickerbocker Music Hall in New York City. The announcement of the performance came the same day and on the same page in the *Daily Worker* that Stage For Action announced it was starting a training school (the School of the Stage For Action) that would foretell "a rebirth of the kind of social theatre we had back in the thirties."<sup>417</sup> By linking the School of the Stage For Action with the social theatres of the thirties, it is being suggested in communist circles that SFA will imbue the American theatre scene with a renaissance in ensemble-focused actor training not seen since the closing of the Group Theater. Kazan claimed that his connection to the Communist Party ended in 1936, and this may have been the year in which he gave up his official membership in the party, but as the above example makes clear, he sustained connections to many members of the party and its affiliated organizations well into the 1940s. Kazan had knowledge of several other people's affiliation with SFA as well, such as Arthur Miller's, about which he chose to remain silent.<sup>418</sup>

There were other "friendly witnesses" (people who agreed to name-names in their hearings with ties to Stage For Action) besides Kazan, Ferrer, Odets, and Robbins and numerous others who undoubtedly perjured themselves in congressional hearings. Burl Ives, best known for his turn as Big Daddy in Tennessee Williams'

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<sup>417</sup> "'Waiting for Lefty' Revived Sunday" and "Stage For Action Starts a New Training School," *The Daily Worker*, 5 April 1947, 11.

<sup>418</sup> Jose Ferrer in his second appearance before the HUAC on May 25, 1951 stated, "I believe in what you [the HUAC] want to do. I am against the Communist Party. I don't want it. And however negligent I may have been, my actions have never been other than anti-Communist and pro-American." in Bentley, 433; Clifford Odets "named names" at his HUAC hearing in May 1952.

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (both on Broadway and film) voluntarily testified before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS) on May 20, 1952.<sup>419</sup> He denied any connection to Stage For Action and named names in the hearing. Prior to his hearing, Ives stated publicly that his participation in organizations later deemed subversive usually were for the benefit of “feed[ing], cloth[ing], or help[ing] someone.”<sup>420</sup> Ives statement aligns with the vast majority of fellow travelers who dedicated themselves to causes they felt were socially relevant regardless of their political affiliations. Historian Richard H. Pells suggests that members of the entertainment, state department, and scientific communities accused of communist ties from 1947 to 1955 were often devastatingly lonely because they lacked any support or encouragement from the various institutions or guilds to which they belonged. Faced with economic, professional, and familial destruction, each defendant “had to make that choice alone...Given these lonely circumstances, the ‘friendly’ witness should not be too facilely judged or condemned...no one knows in advance how he will act when his work, his family, his future are at stake. Until we ourselves have passed the test more nobly than our predecessors, we ought to have compassion for both the informers and the victims.”<sup>421</sup>

Historian Richard Hofstadter suggested in 1964 and many others have since replicated his argument that it is the government and not the informers or victims that should be admonished for the mistreatment of communists and alleged communists

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<sup>419</sup>Burl Ives was also the voice of Sam the Snowman in the 1964 holiday classic *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

<sup>420</sup>Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940 - 1970*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 80.

<sup>421</sup>Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*, (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 264.



during the '40s and '50s. Hofstadter refers to the McCarthy period (and many other moments in U.S. history) as representative of the “Paranoid Style” in American politics. Hofstadter elucidates two of the more scurrilous examples of political paranoia during the McCarthy era:

“Perhaps the most representative document of the McCarthyist phase was a long indictment of Secretary of State George C. Marshall, delivered in 1951 in the Senate by senator McCarthy, and later published in a somewhat different form...Marshall was associated with practically every American failure or defeat, McCarthy insisted, and none of this was either accident or incompetence. There was a “baffling pattern” of Marshall’s interventions in the war, which always conduced to the well-being of the Kremlin. The sharp decline in America’s relative strength from 1945 to 1951 did not “just happen”; it was “brought about, step by step, by will and intention”...“a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man.”<sup>422</sup>

Conspiracy theories were not only offered by politicians. Ultra-conservative founder of the John Birch Society, Robert H.W. Welch, Jr., offered his interpretation on the communist infiltration of the United States, “They started a run on American banks in 1933 that forced their closure; they contrived the recognition of the Soviet Union by the United States in the same year, just in time to save the Soviets from economic collapse; they have stirred up the fuss over segregation in the South; they have taken over the Supreme Court and made it one of the most important agencies of Communism.”<sup>423</sup> The psychological fear (what Hofstadter refers to as paranoia)—bordering on hysteria—permeating the nation during the late 1940s into the 1950s was played upon by politicians and did encourage a national policy of containment. But this could not have happened if citizens had not already been so paralyzed by their own personal concerns for survival that they simply refused to combat the blanket of oppression under which they were living.

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<sup>422</sup>Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s Magazine* 229.1374 (November 1964), 82.

<sup>423</sup>Ibid; “Robert Welch, Jr., Founder of Birch Society, Dies at 85,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 January 1985.

### After the Battle

Those SFA members most affected by the HUAC and blacklisting were the ones who had successfully transitioned in their performance, producing, or writing careers to national prominence: actors such as Gerturde Berg, Howard Da Silva, Will Geer, Felix Knight, Burl Ives, Canada Lee, Philip Loeb, Fredric March, Zero Mostel, Jean Muir, Paul Robeson and Sam Wanamaker as well as prestigious writers and producers Lewis Allan, Edward Chodorov, Norman Corwin, Arnold D'Usseau, Howard Fast, Elizabeth Hawes, Millard Lampell, Arthur Miller, Dorothy Parker, Oscar Serlin, Herman Shumlin, and James Thurber. Fredric March and Dorothy Parker, both national sponsors of Stage For Action, were accused of being members of the Communist Party in a high profile FBI report on June 8, 1949. March responded to the allegations that it was "the most absurd thing" he had ever heard. When Dorothy Parker was asked by a news reporter if she wished to overthrow the government, she responded with a laugh, "Overthrow our government?...I want to overthrow prejudice and injustice."<sup>424</sup> But these accusations were no laughing matter and Dorothy Parker was officially blacklisted as a Hollywood writer.

A significant number of Stage For Action members chose to leave the country either out of fear of prosecution for their alleged communist connections or out of dismay with their birth country's political procedures. Playwright Sidney Alexander moved to Florence in the early fifties and called Italy his home for the next thirty years. Partners Gordon Heath (who had a leading role in Arnold Perl's 1946 SFA performance *Dream Job* at Carnegie Hall), and Lee Payant (who performed in SFA's

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<sup>424</sup>“Film ‘Communists’ Listed in FBI File in Coplon Spy Case,” *New York Times*, 9 June 1949, 1.

*Open Secret* the same year) moved to Paris in 1948 starting a cabaret called L'Abbaye. It became one of the most popular spots for expatriates in France until Payant's death in 1976.<sup>425</sup> These three members of SFA were not implicated by the HUAC. Perl cites no reason for his move to Italy, but Heath considered 1940s France more hospitable to both blacks and homosexuals.<sup>426</sup>

Playwright Ben Barzman was implicated as a communist and fled to England when subpoenaed. Many other SFA members who stayed in the States faced five to ten years of blacklisting including Ben Bengal, Howard Da Silva, Paul Draper, Will Geer, Michael Gordon, Karen Morley, Zero Mostel, Jean Muir, Paul Robeson, and Art Smith. Some of these members remained outspoken activists while facing government prosecution. In a well-publicized conference of the Committee for the Negro in the Arts in July of 1949, performers Canada Lee and Paul Robeson as well as writer Howard Fast, spoke out about the "indecent treatment" of blacks in the United States. Robeson "predicted the death of American democracy if Negroes and 'progressive' artists in this country did not unite with the twelve indicted leaders of the Communist party to overthrow the 'guys who run this country for bucks and foster cold war hysteria.'"<sup>427</sup> As early as 1944 Paul Robeson had been publicly declared a communist and in May of 1952 he was barred from leaving the United States and had his passport revoked because of congressional investigations.<sup>428</sup>

Other members of SFA fought back legally against communist labeling. Dancer Paul

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<sup>425</sup>Bourne, Stephen. "Heath, Gordon." *Who's Who in Contemporary Gay & Lesbian History from World War II to the Present Day*. Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 183.

<sup>426</sup>Ibid.

<sup>427</sup>"Radio Held Biased on Negro Problem," *New York Times*, 10 July 1949, 31.

<sup>428</sup>Louis Stark, "PAC Unit is Called Communist Agency," *New York Times*, 4 October 1944, 17; "Canadians Hear Robeson," *New York Times*, 19 May 1952, 19.

Draper sued a number of newspaper companies for libel in 1950 because they presented him as pro-communist.<sup>429</sup> Despite consistent denials of Communist Party affiliations devastating ends befell two Stage For Action members as a result of blacklisting. Canada Lee died penniless from uremia on May 9, 1952, having been unable to find work in the United States since 1949. Actor Philip Loeb, a popular stage and television actor, was blacklisted despite his testimony to a senate investigating subcommittee in September of 1952 that at no time did he “connect himself with a group that he knew to be communistic.”<sup>430</sup> Unable to find work and forced to place his mentally challenged child in a state institution, Loeb committed suicide on September 1, 1955.<sup>431</sup>

### Re-building Bridges and Militants in Hiding

While theatre scholars have explored the individual fates of many artists affected by the HUAC hearings, at times the impact of the groups and causes those artists supported has received less scrutiny. The collapse of any organization naturally calls its mission into question. The dramatic events of the HUAC hearings and the aftermath of the blacklisting have re-framed the theatrical history of this period around the stories of individual artists penalized for their beliefs. While it is easy to draw a correlation between the destruction of a single career and events such

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<sup>429</sup>Warren Weaver, Jr., “Adler-Draper Suit Cites News Items,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1950, 3.

<sup>430</sup>C.P. Trussell, “Reds Dupe Artists, Senate Group Says,” *New York Times*, 25 September 1952, 12.

<sup>431</sup>Paul Buhle and David Wagner, *Blacklisted: The Film Lover's Guide to the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2003); Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1998); David Everitt, *A Shadow of Red: Communism and the Blacklist in Radio and Television* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007); Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1980).

as the HUAC hearings, it is less simple to understand why an entire organization failed. Some of the reasons are obvious. The climate of political danger of the 1950s discouraged individuals from claiming membership in SFA. The 1956 revelations concerning Stalin's genocides and crimes against humanity tainted the philosophies so many of the SFA members had embraced one decade before. A lack of infrastructure and financial resources within the company meant that, despite its successes and rapid expansion in the 1940s, it could not meet these rising external threats with a unified response.<sup>432</sup>

The guilt and disillusionment faced by many members of the CPUSA and therefore Stage For Action in the wake of the HUAC trials and the 1956 revelations about Stalin's atrocities must have been overwhelming. These troubled associations, combined with the brutal lesson of the blacklist, may help to explain why Stage For Action has been wrapped in a shroud of silence for nearly sixty years. Many members of the group who are still living either refuse to speak about their involvement or claim that their memories of the period are no longer reliable. All but a select few seem intent on letting the legacy of Stage For Action fade into oblivion. But to lose the legacy of Stage For Action means denying a significant part of theatre history and suggests that there were no positive attributes of the group or even this time period.

As stated earlier, Stage For Action offers historians a missing bridge between social activist performance of the 1930s and 1960s. Several newspaper articles of the 1940s suggest that SFA started where the Federal Theatre Project and Workers'

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<sup>432</sup>“LaGuardia Sponsors Stage For Action Concert March 31,” *The Daily Worker*, 5 March 1946, 11.

Theatres left off; especially in their use of Living Newspaper techniques and in the their audience demographics. Clearly, Stage For Action was inspired by many theatre groups of the 1930s through their overlap in methodologies, social activism, and personnel. What may be less readily apparent is how SFA connects to social activist theatre groups of the 1960s. But the connection is there; in the grassroots nature of the groups, their focus on equal rights and political activism, the embracing of a more “militant” style of performance, and in many cases the dedication to professionalism that became the core of groups such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Free Southern Theatre.

The first intriguing link between Stage For Action and social activist theatre groups of both the 1930s and the 1960s is their sharing of the loaded term “militant.” Stage For Action is referred to as “militant” many times in communist and non-communist reviews of the group during the 1940s.<sup>433</sup> The term itself, which in its political context is defined as “vigorously active, aggressive, or combative; especially in support of a cause” became commonly used in the United States around 1907.<sup>434</sup> This is evidenced by newspaper articles of the early twentieth century and through its connection to a variety of social and political causes including suffrage, labor unrest, various religious factions, repealing of Prohibition, and eventually with pro-

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<sup>433</sup>See especially the *The Daily Worker* on 16 September 1946; *Forum*, Vol. 105-106 (1946), 847; *New York Times* on 22 September 1946 and 11 April 1947; Very few other theatre performances were referred to as “militant” in the mainstream newspapers during the 1940s. The lone example in the *New York Times* is a review of the revival of *The Cradle Will Rock* on December 27, 1947 which was called “no less militant and exciting than it was a decade ago.”

<sup>434</sup>“militant.” *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. 08 Feb. 2010. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/militant>>; “militant.” *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Douglas Harper, Historian. 08 Feb. 2010. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/militant>>.

communist groups.<sup>435</sup> The first United States theatre group earning the title “militant” in mainstream presses was the Theatre Union; one of the only professional Workers’ Theatres of the 1930s, which formed in 1933 and eventually shared several members with Stage For Action.<sup>436</sup>

The term militant is also used frequently in describing political theatre collectives of the 1960s and an entire genre of Black Theatre spanning into the early 1970s.<sup>437</sup> In the introduction to James M. Harding and Cindy Rosenthal’s *Restaging the Sixties* the editors suggest all of the groups covered in their collection “espous[e] a militant antiauthoritarian ideology.” In her essay on the Living Theatre Erika Munk states that the Radical Left took issue with early productions of the Living for not being “militant enough.” In the ‘Historical Overview’ of the San Francisco Mime Troupe Harding writes that toward the end of the 1960s many of the more “militant Marxists” left the group over ideological differences and in the summer of 1964, following the murders of three civil rights activists, the Free Southern Theatre revised their play *In White America* to be “more militant.”<sup>438</sup> Throughout historical analyses of 1960s social activist theatre collectives as well as in 1940s reviews of Stage For

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<sup>435</sup>Some of the more interesting pre-1940s articles in which a group is referred to as “militant” in the *New York Times* include: “Citizens’ Union Asks Place On The Ticket: Wants a Column in Which to Put the Names of Candidates It Indorses,” 7 July 1909; “Militants Counting on Democrats Now :Believe Suffrage in Tennessee Depends on Willingness to Follow Party Leaders,” 25 July 1920; “Reds Ousted at Cleveland: They Then Attack La Follette Convention as Most Reactionary,” 6 July 1924; “Says Bryan Victory Means Church Split :Erdman Group Opposes Severe Action Against Liberal Presbyterians,” 16 May 1925; “Moderation Urged in School Pay Fight :Mrs. Lindloff, at Meeting of Militant Group,” 8 September 1932; “Hulbert’s Ruling Meets With Favor :Militant Group in Seamen’s Union Says New Election Is All it Wanted,” 5 October 1936.

<sup>436</sup>Brooks Atkinson, “They Shall Not Die: Defending the Propaganda Play, With Special Concern Over the Scottsboro Drama,” *New York Times*, 11 March 1934; Brooks Atkinson, “The Play: Drama of the Race Riot in ‘Stevedore,’ Put On by the Theatre Union,” *New York Times*, 19 April 1934.

<sup>437</sup>See Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>438</sup>James M. Harding and Cindy Rosenthal, eds. *Restaging the Sixties: Radical Theaters and Their Legacies* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 5, 49, 171, and 264.

Action the word militant is used alternatively in the positive or pejorative depending on the audience and the political purpose of the performance in question.

SFA's connection to the historically loaded term militant is not the only characteristic it shares with its 1960s counterparts. As much as the Free Southern Theater can claim to be the first *southern* integrated performance group offering an example of "what an 'integrated performance aesthetic' might look like," it was certainly not the first racially integrated social activist performance group.<sup>439</sup> Twenty years prior to the Free Southern Theater's emergence Stage For Action was built on a foundation of integration; in its casts, audiences, and management. Stage For Action, [just as many of the theatre collectives highlighted in *Restaging the Sixties*,] was formed by "trained theater people bringing their expertise to serve shared political goals."<sup>440</sup> What distinguished SFA was a broad agenda of social reform and a national mission (rather than some of the more locally-based, single-issue driven theatre collectives of the 1960s). Perhaps in this way SFA championed too many social causes and spread itself too thin in its political objectives and by the sheer size of the group.

Stage For Action also acts as a bridge between the 1930s and 1960s because it built upon the methods of the Workers' Theatre groups of the 1930s, incorporating Americanized Living Newspaper techniques and other agit-prop performance styles. It also adopted similar audiences by performing for labor unions, town halls, church and school groups. But unlike most Workers' Theatres of the 1930s, SFA developed

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<sup>439</sup> Annemarie Bean, "The Free Southern Theater: Mythology and the Moving Between Movements," in *Restaging the Sixties*, 279.

<sup>440</sup> Jan Cohen-Cruz, "Comforting the Afflicted and Afflicting the Comfortable: The Legacy of the Free Southern Theater," in *Restaging the Sixties*, 290.



its own hybrid performance styles based on changes in theatre traditions and mainstream audience tastes, and used trained actors and professional playwrights to create their social activist performances. The groups of the 1960s differ from their predecessors such as the Workers' Theatres in the 1930s and Stage For Action in the 1940s by shrinking or limiting their ensemble sizes, focusing their agendas to one or two social causes, and increasing (in many but not all cases) the professionalism of their groups. I am not suggesting these changes were conscious decisions on the part of 1960s social activist theatre collectives, but these trends possibly contribute to their longer lasting existence as functioning performance groups. Perhaps the most significant change between Stage For Action and the social activist groups of the 1960s however is the change in the political climate. Although the Living Theatre began in the late 1940s, it did not come into its own artistically or politically until the 1960s.<sup>441</sup> The burgeoning of the New Left movement on college campuses, John F. Kennedy's presidential win, a massive economic expansion beginning in 1961, and youthful or "counterculture" responses to a long period of conservatism (which many defined alternatively as Capitalist Puritanism) ushered in an unquestionably tumultuous political climate but ultimately one much more sympathetic to radical views on equality, women's rights, and other social reforms.<sup>442</sup> The social activist theatre groups of the 1960s such as the Free Southern Theater, El Teatro Campesino, Bread and Puppet, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe succeeded and flourished

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<sup>441</sup> There is a possibility that Judith Malina, one of the co-founders of the Living Theatre, knew about Stage For Action's work as she was employed briefly by Gertrude Berg in 1951 on *The Goldbergs* where she worked with SFA members Berg and Philip Loeb. See Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina 1947 – 1957* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1984): 155 – 158.

<sup>442</sup> For an interesting philosophical exploration of the 1960s counterculture see Herbert Marcuse, "An Essay on Liberation," in *The Times Were a Changin': The Sixties Reader*, eds. Irwin Unger and Debi Unger (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 69 – 73.

where Stage For Action floundered. Certainly members of most of these groups also faced legal proceedings and even death threats, but somehow the slightly more lenient political atmosphere of the 1960s allowed these groups and their leaders to persevere; an option unavailable to Stage For Action.

There is still much to be learned by studying the methods, performances, and people of Stage For Action. Like its Federal Theatre Project predecessor, SFA understood that a national theatre dedicated to free or inexpensive performances was an ideal tool for educating and even entertaining the masses. Referred to as “Pioneers” in 1944, Stage For Action was heralded for “selling democracy” to audiences in their efforts of making “lasting peace a reality.”<sup>443</sup> The plays produced by SFA and the people involved highlight the social needs and political climate specific to the 1940s and 1950s because they are so intimately connected to the intricate issues of this moment. Harry Taylor in 1945 called them “a child of this particular period: of a time of growing community consciousness, of powerful trade union organization, of widespread and increasing desire among people for more light and guidance on the social, economic and political facets of the day...SFA is today’s theater of the people.”<sup>444</sup> They are instrumental to our understanding of the intersection and history of twentieth century United States civil rights and theatre. They offer an intriguing connection between their civil rights plays like *Skin Deep* and *Who are the Weavers* and the work of the Free Southern Theater and El Teatro Campesino.

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<sup>443</sup>“Gladys Williams, Star of ‘Stage For Action’,” *The Chicago Defender* 18 November 1944, 14.

<sup>444</sup>Harry Taylor, “Stage For Action,” *New Masses* 2 January 1945, 29 – 30.

Finally, every political moment has a responsibility to its citizens in offering alternative viewpoints or methods of thinking. The existence of Stage For Action and a continued focus on its theatrical output and political messages suggests an alternative to the often-repeated beliefs that United States theatre during the post-WWII period and early Cold War was apathetic to social activism. Stage For Action, operating as a vital part of non-mainstream social activist performance during the 1940s, offered a multitude of Americans the opportunity to see, hear, and participate in a radically different theatrical event.

Stage For Action brought urgent social messages to its audiences through emotional as well as intellectual methods of performance in a moment when the gaps between different classes, races, genders, and ages were rapidly widening into chasms. Their means were simple. They brought theatre to the people in every imaginable venue for little to no cost to audiences and with very little sets or costumes. Their mission however was great: “Stage for Action is an idea--an idea that talent should be at the service of the community...that entertainment should have purpose...and that purpose must be exerted to prevent war, stamp out race hatreds, combat poverty.”<sup>445</sup> For those interested in the intersections between activism and theatre, Stage For Action’s history serves as a powerful model and demonstrates the potential that social activist performance possesses for fostering change.

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<sup>445</sup>[Stage For Action, Informational Pamphlet], The J. B. Matthews Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

**Appendix A:**  
**Stage For Action Executive Committee**

<b>NAME</b>	<b>POSITION</b>
Milton Baron	Treasurer
Edward Chodorov	Chairman
Lucille Colbert	Executive Secretary, Executive Director (Chicago)
Leah Rita Fox	Acting Executive Secretary (Washington, D.C.)
Gene Frankel	Executive Director
Elias Goldin	Treasurer
Stanley Gordon	Treasurer (Chicago)
Benjamin J. Green	Chairman (Chicago)
Ernest F. Harper	Vice-Chairman (Washington, D.C.)
Abram Hill	Vice-Chairman
Raymond Jones	Vice-Chairman (Chicago)
Donna Keath	Chairman
Berilla Kerr	Production Director
Alex Leith	Executive Director
Mildred Linsley	Director
Perry Miller	Founder, Chairman, and Executive Secretary
Virginia Payne	Chairman (Chicago)
Art Smith	Vice-Chairman
Hilda Worthington Smith	Chairman (Washington, D.C.)
Harry Stark	Treasurer (Washington, D.C.)
Eileen Tekley	Executive Secretary (Washington, D.C.)

## Appendix B:

### Stage For Action Board of Directors & Advisory Committee

Freda Altman	Fred Arkus	Milton Baron
Zlatko Balokovic	Ralph Bell	Bess Blumberg
Frances Carlon	Edward Choate	Peggy Clark
Howard Cordery	Howard Da Silva	Clarence Derwent
Isobel Donald	Betty Hawley Donnelly	Arnold d'Usseau
Katherine Earnshaw	Leif Ericson	Winifred Fisher
Tom Fizdale	Peter Frye	Dorothy Funn
William S. Gailmor	Michael Gordon	Lloyd Gough
James Gow	Anita Grannis	Mildred Gutwillig
Ruth Haber	Ann Hedgman	Robert (Bob) Heller
Jane Hoffman	Judge Anna M. Kross	Byron McGrath
John T. McManus	Michael M. Nisselson	Russ Nixon
Marion Nobel	Esther Peterson	George Ross
Victor Samrock	Bernard Simon	Ferdinand Smith
Helen Tamiris	Betty Taylor	Jocelyn Wagner
Sam Wanamaker	Fredi Washington	Martin Wolfson

## Appendix C:

### Stage For Action Sponsors

#### National Sponsors

Howard Bay	Gertrude Berg	Edward Chodorov	Norman Corwin
Howard Fast	Hon. James H. Fay	Michael Gordon	Elizabeth Hawes
Felix Knight	Canada Lee	Fredric March	John T. McManus
Sandra Michael	Dorothy Parker	Paul Robeson	Oscar Serlin
Herman Shumlin	James Thurber	Sam Wanamaker	

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John Abt	Bertram Bloch	Bess Blumberg	Harry Brandt
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William Gailmor	John Gassner	Wolcott Gibbs	Anne Gerlette
George L. George	Elinor Gimbel	Michael Gordon	Harry Granick
Anita Grannis	Mitchell Grayson	Mildred Gutwillig	Anna Arnold Hedgeman
Bob Heller	Langston Hughes	Stanley M. Isaacs	Viola Ilma
Donna Keath	Berilla Kerr	Millard Lampell	Philip Loeb
Paul Mann	Mrs. Arthur Mayer	John T. McManus	Saul Mills
William Morris	Jean Muir	Clyde Murray	Karen Morley
Ace Ochs	Esther Peterson	Minerva Pious	Jacob Potofsky
Rev. Adam Clayton Powell	Michael Quill	Dr. Lawrence Reddick	Mabel Roan
Jerome Robbins	Earl Robinson	Rita Romilly	Norman Rosten
Bob Russell	Victor Samrock	Jack Shaindlin	Bernard Simon
Peter Strand	Al Tamarin	Channing Tobias	Toni Ward
Frank Wilson			

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Prof. Ernest Burgess	Cong. William Dawson	Desiree Defauw	Edwin Embree
Marshall Field	Rudolph Gans (Ganz)	Arnold Gingrich	Ira Latimer
Leo A. Lerner	Mrs. Andrew MacLeish	Judge George Quilici	Edward J. Sparling
Rabbi Jacob Weinstein	Louis Zara	Exec. Board, Chicago A.F.L.	Exec. Board, Chicago C.I.O.

## Appendix D:

### *Theatre Parade Sponsors & Performers*<sup>†</sup>

#### Sponsors

Howard Bay	Bessie Beatty	Barbara Bel Geddes
Kermit Bloomgarden	Mady Christians	Harold Clurman
Rep. Hugh De Lacy	Arnaud d'Usseau	Howard Fast
Jose Ferrer	Melchor Ferrer	Michael Gordon
James Gow	Mitchell Grayson	Oscar Hammerstein II
Moss Hart	Abram Hill	Judy Holliday
Libby Holman	Oscar Homolka	Rex Ingram
Garson Kanin	William R. Katzell	Frank Kingdon
Louis Kronenberger	Arthur Laurents	Canada Lee
Philip Loeb	John T. McManus	William Morris
Jean Muir	Minerva Pious	Jerome Robbins
Lee Sabinson	Martha Scott	Lisa Sergio
Oscar Serlin	Kenneth Spencer	Johannes Steel
Fredi Washington	Margaret Webster	Frank Wilson

#### Performers

Mildred Bailey	Imogene Coca	Eddie Condon
Coker and Cimber	Howard Da Silva	Jane Dulo
Paul Ford	Peter Frye	Louis Gilbert
Max Goberman	Lloyd Gough	Mitzi Green
Gordon Heath	Billie Holiday	Fred Keating
Phil Leeds	Ray Lev	Brownie McGhee
Moune	Sono Osato	Bob Penn
Arnold Perl	Charles Polacheck	Lou Polan
Josephine Premice	Ken Renard	Martha Scott
Val Valintinoff	Bernie West	Jane White
Mary Lou Williams	Dooley Wilson	

<sup>†</sup> *Theatre Parade* was a benefit performance for Stage For Action at Carnegie Hall on March 31, 1946.

## Appendix E:

### Stage For Action Scripts & Playwrights

<i>60,000,000 Jobs<sup>+</sup></i>	Charles Polacheck and Raphael Hayes
<i>A Wee Bit of Corruption</i>	Lester Pine
<i>According to Law</i>	Anonymous
<i>All Aboard</i>	Ben Bengal
<i>All Our Tomorrows</i>	Gerald Savory and Harry Grannick
<i>And No Wheels Roll</i>	Paul Peters
<i>And So Upon a Sailing Ship</i>	Lester Pine
<i>Assignment Home</i>	Arnold Perl
<i>Coast to Coast</i>	Anonymous
<i>Common Man</i>	Ben Hecht
<i>Danny Miller</i>	Anonymous
<i>Decision (One-Act Version)</i>	Edward Chodorov
<i>Dream Job</i>	Arnold Perl
<i>Dress Rehearsal</i>	Jerome Bayer
<i>Family Crossroads</i>	Aaron Weingarten
<i>Foreign Policy Shnitzelbank</i>	Various Artists
<i>Freedom 1948<sup>+</sup></i>	Jack Jacobs
<i>Freedom of the Press</i>	Ben Barzman & Gans
<i>Hiccupping Mr. Higgins</i>	Arthur Miller
<i>How to Canvass-How Not</i>	Irving Gold
<i>How to Win Fifty Dollars</i>	Don Murray
<i>J.P. Dropabomb</i>	Anonymous
<i>J'Accuse</i>	Peggy Phillips
<i>Joe McGinnical</i>	Lester Pine
<i>Just Plain Bowles</i>	Aaron Ruben
<i>Open Secret</i>	Adler, Bellak, & Ridenour
<i>Revolt in the Warsaw Ghetto</i>	Betty Jaffey
<i>Room for a Crib</i>	Lee Gilbert
<i>Short Wait Between Trains</i>	Ruth Moore
<i>Shortage</i>	Anonymous
<i>Skin Deep</i>	Charles Polacheck
<i>Summer Crop</i>	Lou Scofield
<i>Talk in Darkness</i>	Malvin Wald
<i>Taste of Peacetime</i>	Anonymous
<i>That They May Win</i>	Arthur Miller
<i>The 'American' Lesson</i>	Arthur Vogel
<i>The Battle for 3-B</i>	Arthur Vogel
<i>The Case of the Empty Purse</i>	Ben Barzman & Waters



<i>The Colonel and the Goats</i>	Saul Aarons
<i>The Economist</i>	Ben Barzman
<i>The General &amp; The Goats</i>	Stratton & Aarons
<i>The Investigators</i>	Lewis Allan
<i>The Man With the Three Cornered Attitude</i>	Peter Martin
<i>The Salem Story</i>	Sidney Alexander
<i>The Scarf</i> <sup>+</sup>	Raphael Hayes
<i>The Soldier Who Became a Great Dane</i>	Shore & Lincoln
<i>The Way Things Are</i>	Irving Wexler
<i>To the Returned</i> <sup>+</sup>	Jean Karsavina
<i>Untitled</i>	Norman Corwin
<i>Walk With Me</i>	Arthur Laurents
<i>White and Blue Network</i>	Norman Corwin
<i>Who Are the Weavers</i> <sup>+</sup>	Joseph Shore & Scott Graham Williamson
<i>You're Next</i>	Arthur Miller

<sup>+</sup> Denotes a completed script with no record of performance

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