

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: HOW WIDE IS BROADWAY? : THE THEATRE  
GUILD'S RADIO AND TELEVISION  
PRODUCTIONS IN POST-WORLD-WAR-II  
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Richard Kenneth Tharp, Doctor of Philosophy, 2010

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In the fall of 1947, the Theatre Guild, arguably the theatrical producing organization that had defined the American theatre aesthetic since its inception in 1918, splashed confidently and unhesitatingly into the barely-charted waters of the nascent medium of live television. The attempt seemed destined for success since the Guild had been producing a successful radio program for two years and was paired with NBC, the most successful of the early television networks. However, fourteen months later the Guild retired from television. It had failed in its ambitious plan to bring the sights, sounds of Broadway to every living room from coast to coast. I argue that the principal reason for its failure was artistic rather than commercial and that by 1948 the Guild's various broadcasting ventures illustrate that the Theatre Guild, which had once defined itself as farsighted and experimental had in reality become nearsighted and stodgy.

This dissertation explores the background of the Theatre Guild before it entered broadcasting, during the time it was developing its position as Broadway's leading exponent of artistic plays and experimental theatre. It continues the story through the

Guild's production of *The Theatre Guild on the Air*, a weekly series of hour-long adaptations of stage plays that it began producing in 1945, and on to the Guild's abortive first attempt at live television from 1947-1948. Finally, it documents the Guild's efforts to return to television, which it ultimately did in 1953, although with a different purpose in mind and with a much more successful approach.

HOW WIDE IS BROADWAY? : THE THEATRE GUILD'S RADIO AND  
TELEVISION PRODUCTIONS IN POST-WORLD-WAR-II AMERICA

by

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## Introduction

In October 1947, *Variety* announced that the upcoming television premiere of a partnership between Broadway's Theatre Guild and television's National Broadcasting Company would be "the biggest thing that's happened on video since the World Series."<sup>1</sup> *Radio Daily* hailed the collaboration as the first major "tie-in between TV and the legitimate theatre."<sup>2</sup> Observers of the fledgling medium of television anticipated the possibility of being able to watch a Broadway production from the comfort of one's living room.<sup>3</sup> However, after a rocky first production, the television series lasted only eight months and broadcast seven plays. By December 1948, the collaboration had dissolved.<sup>4</sup>

The combination of a Broadway producer and a broadcasting network would seem to be a natural merging of organizations. By the fall of 1947, the Theatre Guild had earned a reputation as arguably Broadway's most distinguished producer with a history spanning nearly thirty years. Similarly, NBC's television division contained one of the industry's most skilled production staffs with over fifteen years of experience, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> "NBC Splurges on 1st Theatre Guild Show; Seeks Sponsor for Others," *Variety*, 29 October 1947, 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Radio Daily*, 7 October 1947, 7.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Jack Gould, "News of the Radio," *New York Times*, 7 October 1947, 54.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Gould, *New York Times*, 16 November 1947, sec. II, 1. For dates of the individual programs which ran until 6 June 1948, see WNBT Master Program Logs, November 1947 to June 1948. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC. For notice of the dissolution, see *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 11 December 1948, 4.

the largest linked network of affiliate stations in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the Theatre Guild came into the venture with broadcasting experience of its own. Since September 1945, the Guild had been producing a weekly hour-long radio drama with moderate commercial and critical success.<sup>6</sup> Yet the combined talents of these two entertainment heavyweights could not produce a successful blending of theatre and television. The promise of what might have been has since faded and exists as an obscure footnote in the histories of both television and theatre.

I first encountered the Theatre Guild's initial television venture nearly thirty years ago while researching early live television drama.<sup>7</sup> What struck me as curious was that although the print media in 1947 hailed the program as a revolutionary development in television, in the early 1980s none of the standard works on television history mentioned it.<sup>8</sup> Later while investigating the program in its relation to theatre history, I discovered

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<sup>5</sup> See Walter Pritchard Eaton, *The Theatre Guild: The First Ten Years with Articles by The Directors* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1929) for information on the Guild. For information on NBC's stations, see *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 27 September 1947, 3-4. For information on NBC's television history see William Hawes, *American Television Drama: The Experimental Years* (University, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Martin Grams, Jr., *Radio Drama: American Programs, 1932-1962* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2000), 505-513. For information on representative program content, see William Fitelson, ed., *Theatre Guild on the Air* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1947).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Tharp, "The Theatre Guild Television Playhouse," *RERUNS, The Magazine of Television History*, June 1980, 5-7.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Arthur Shulman and Roger Youman, *How Sweet It Was – Television: A Pictorial Commentary* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1966) and Arthur Shulman and Roger Youman, *The Television Years* (New York: Popular Library, 1973). Although both works list notable television pioneers, neither mentions the Theatre Guild's program. The groundbreaking work, Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory of Prime Time Network TV Shows 1946-Present*, 1st ed. (New York:



the same lack of attention to not only the Guild's work in television and radio, but an overall disinterest in the interaction between the New York theatrical community and radio and television in the 1930s and 1940s. However, my research brought to light a multitude of artistic and creative links the legitimate theatre in New York had with both radio and television. Even so, most comprehensive theatre histories either overlook these connections entirely, or refer to them only in the context of a competition for prospective audience members.<sup>9</sup>

It occurred to me that the Theatre Guild's experience could become a lens through which one could explore the contribution of theatre to what became the dominant form of entertainment in the latter half of the twentieth century. Thus, while focusing on the Theatre Guild, I hoped to explore the types of interactions that took place between theatre

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Ballantine Books, 1979) does not mention the program either in the alphabetical series listing on in the "Prime Time Schedule: 1947" which shows NBC airing "various special presentations" during the Guild's Sunday time slot. See 708. In the preface to the revised version of his television encyclopedia, Vincent Terrace assures the reader that he included "every known entertainment program, no matter how obscure, from 1947 to 1979," but the Guild's program is missing. Vincent Terrace, *The Complete Encyclopedia of Television Programs 1947-1979* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1979). Other contemporary television histories having no mention of the Guild's first television program include Craig T. Norback and Peter G. Norback, ed., *TV Guide Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980); Max Wilk, *The Golden Age of Television: Notes from the Survivors* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976); Les Brown, *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Television* (New York: Times Books, 1977); Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume II— 1933 to 1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Arnold Aronson, "American Theatre in Context: 1945-Present," in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume 3, Post-World War II to the 1990s*, ed., Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 102-103; Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, *Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama since 1870* (Englewood Hills, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973); Felica Hardison Londré and Daniel J. Watermeier, *The History of North American Theatre* (New York: Continuum, 1998); Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

and broadcasting in the period during and just subsequent to the Second World War. My preliminary research into the Theatre Guild's broadcasting career left me with the following questions: Why did the Theatre Guild supplement its Broadway and touring productions with radio and television programs? Was it merely for financial reward and increased visibility? Once involved in broadcasting, what methods did it utilize to transform live stage productions into radio and television plays? What effect did these experiences have on both the Guild and the media it attempted to co-opt? Finally, why did the Guild's collaboration with NBC not continue after the first trial?

The first three questions seemed fairly straightforward. Surely the Theatre Guild had communicated its rationale at the time and my research should uncover both the why and the how. The third question seemed a bit more delicate since cause and effect in human behavior is not always apparent. My investigations surrounding the final question caused me to look at the Theatre Guild in an entirely different light. Before beginning my research, I assumed the answer to the final question would reside in the world of commerce. After all, broadcasting and the Broadway theatre are commercial in nature, one driven by ratings and the other by the box office. To my surprise, I learned that profit, although playing a part in the decision to cease producing the television program, was secondary to philosophical issues embedded in the mindset of the Guild's leadership. In the late fall of 1948 the Theatre Guild had the opportunity to continue in television but let it slip away. The Guild's television venture revealed to me not only a fundamental change in its perception of theatre, but a critical artistic weakness.

Until the early 1940s, the Guild consistently differentiated itself from commercial Broadway theatre, characterizing its type of theatre as an alternative for theatregoers. I

suggest that by the mid-1940s the Guild had reversed its opinion and not only identified itself with commercial theatre, but promoted its aesthetic as the standard by which audiences and critics alike should judge all theatre. Similarly, I argue that the Guild's various broadcasting ventures illustrate that by the late 1940s the Theatre Guild, which had once defined itself as farsighted and experimental had in reality become nearsighted and stodgy. Thus, the answer to my third question lay in a combination of what I perceive as the Guild's distorted self-image and its inflexibility and unwillingness, or inability, to experiment. It was a deadly combination that doomed the Theatre Guild in television. For me, the Guild's abortive attempt in television illustrates the story of an artistic organization that lost its way.

Although telling this story requires an examination of the beginnings of the Theatre Guild and the stated and perceived rationales for its existence, my intent is not to write a history of the Theatre Guild or delve deeply into its theatrical productions. Although no definitive work exists on the entire history of the Guild, a few authors have illuminated the Guild's extensive production history. Walter Pritchard Eaton's and Roy S. Waldau's histories of the Guild detail the theatrical productions of the Guild before 1940. Christopher Bigsby includes an excellent chapter on the first two decades of the Guild in *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Volume One 1900-1940* and Norman Nadel's pictorial history of the Guild continues the Guild's career to the late 1960s. To this collection, one may add the autobiographies of Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn, prime players in my narrative.<sup>10</sup> However, none of these

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<sup>10</sup> Eaton, *The Theatre Guild*; C.W.E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Volume One 1900-1940* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Norman Nadel, *A Pictorial History of the Theatre Guild*, special

works deals in any great detail with the Guild's foray into radio and television in the 1940s or asks the questions which interest me.

The story of what the Theatre Guild wanted to accomplish and the methods it used to satisfy its desires is a narrative of people and ideas. It is a story of people such as Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn who controlled the Guild after 1939. However, the Theatre Guild, as any organization, did not operate in a vacuum. Therefore the story includes the people with whom the Guild constantly found itself interacting: its audience, the public at large, critics, other theatrical entities, broadcasters, and corporate sponsors. Each of these groups represented for the Guild both opportunities and hazards. It is a story of ideas such as the one NBC used to promote the Guild television program. In a full-page ad in *Variety*, NBC asked,

How wide is 'Broadway?' To people all over the world, 'Broadway' means the theatre. So when NBC, in October 1947, introduced regular telecast performances of Theatre Guild productions, an expansion of 'Broadway' began—and someday it will be nation-wide.<sup>11</sup>

It is also the story of the "right sort" of Broadway; in this case, the sort of Broadway that only the Theatre Guild could deliver.

In order to begin to answer the questions I have posed, I found it necessary to return to the Theatre Guild's beginnings and the underlying principles for its existence. Thus, in Chapter 1, I discuss the development of the Theatre Guild from its beginnings

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material by Lawrence Langner and Armina Marshall with an introduction by Brooks Atkinson (New York: Crown Publishers, 1969); Lawrence Langner, *The Magic Curtain, the Story of a Life in Two Fields, Theatre and Invention, by the Founder of the Theatre Guild* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1951); Theresa Helburn, *A Wayward Quest; the Autobiography of Theresa Helburn* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960).

<sup>11</sup> *Variety*, 28 July 1948, 45. Ironically, the advertisement came seven weeks after the final Guild telecast.

through 1939, a year that became a turning point in the Guild's history. I propose that three incidents affected the individuals who made up the Theatre Guild during its first two decades in profound ways that would lead them individually and collectively in search of the mass audience that broadcasting could deliver. The first was the collapse of the Washington Square Players in 1918. The second was the success of the Guild's production of *John Ferguson* the following year. The third, and most important for this discussion, was the success of *The Philadelphia Story* in 1939 which resulted in the breakup of the Guild's Board of Managers and its reformation with Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn in control of the Guild's artistic direction. Each of these turning points helped to shape the direction and vision of the Theatre Guild in ways that I believe none of the participants fully realized. However, the subsequent actions by the participants reveal a basic transformation of the Theatre Guild that culminated in the television program. It is this transformation that becomes the core of the story.

In Chapter 1 I suggest that in its first two decades, the Theatre Guild constructed its identity as an alternative to commercial Broadway with an aesthetic that it deliberately promoted as elitist. Although undergoing subtle changes, for roughly twenty years this identity and underlying aesthetic remained largely intact. However, in 1939 internal disputes resulted in the Guild informally decreasing its Board of Directors from seven to three, of whom Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn were the remaining members in charge of production. By 1941 the parties in question contractually fixed the arrangement with the addition of a clause giving Langner and Helburn authority to engage in outside activities as long as they conformed to a "Guild standard" as

determined by an outside “umpire.”<sup>12</sup> The new Guild leadership lost little time in exploring radio, television, and film as possible outside activities, always cognizant of the limitations imposed by a “Guild standard.” In Chapter 2, I propose that Langner and Helburn manipulated the aesthetic underpinnings of this standard as it applied to different media and technologies thus beginning the transformation of the Guild. In essence, the Theatre Guild aspired to expand its audience from the confines of individual theaters to a nation of living rooms therefore necessitating a retreat from its earlier elitism and a subsequent embrace of populism. The first step in this campaign would be an expansion into commercial radio, which it accomplished in 1945. In order to contextualize the Guild’s radio experience, Chapter 2 investigates the techniques of radio drama in the late 1930s and 1940s especially as they applied to the Guild’s efforts. The single constant in the Guild’s broadcasting forays was its insistence on delivering stage plays to a mass audience. As such, the Guild dealt exclusively in adaptations rather than original scripts. This presented a challenge since, rather than creating stories to fit radio’s strengths, it had to modify stories intended for another medium. I include a discussion of what made good, and poor, radio adaptations. Not all stage plays make good radio plays, a fact known to those whom the Guild hired to produce the radio broadcasts. How the Guild

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<sup>12</sup> The details of the contract became public in 1950 when the Supreme Court of New York ruled in favor of Langner and Helburn in a suit brought against them by the former directors to regain control of the Theatre Guild. See “Lee Simonson et al., Plaintiffs, v. Theresa Helburn et al., Defendants,” Supreme Court of New York, Special Term, New York County, 17 May 1950. Accessed 2 February 2005 through Lexis-Nexis online at [http://web.lexis-nexis.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/universe/document?\\_m=eb36c7a77e2153e4fb031ab78ef83514&\\_docnum=1&wchp=dGLzVlz-zSkVA&\\_md5=8544e26e2ef15d503359ea35304f9499](http://web.lexis-nexis.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/universe/document?_m=eb36c7a77e2153e4fb031ab78ef83514&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLzVlz-zSkVA&_md5=8544e26e2ef15d503359ea35304f9499).

negotiated the sometimes-treacherous waters of adaptations bears upon how they later approached television.

Chapter 3 follows the Theatre Guild into the brave new world of television which, in the years during and after World War II, was uncharted territory for nearly everyone in broadcasting. In this chapter, I retrace the Guild's movement toward the eventual broadcasting of its first program, an adaptation of *John Ferguson* on 9 November 1947 over the NBC television network. It was a journey that took the Guild steadily, if not always by the shortest path, at least toward the ultimate goal of a television production. However, at each junction the Guild considered its options and always chose theatrical rather than broadcast models. Moreover, it often touted its theatrical experience as a surrogate for television experience, in effect characterizing the new medium as inferior to the stage. I argue that the Guild began to reveal its lack of creativity and narrow field of artistic vision during this phase of its broadcast history. In order to appreciate the Guild's inadequacies and the resulting difficulties it encountered, I examine the history and techniques of live television drama up to that point, circa 1947.

Chapter 4 documents the seven NBC broadcasts and casts light on a largely forgotten section of both theatre and television history. I suggest that the broadcast productions provide compelling evidence of the Theatre Guild's inability to both recognize and benefit from the strengths of television. Although numerous contemporary observers commented on the shortcomings of the Theatre Guild's single-minded determination to transform television into theatre, the Guild refused to change course or tactics. It was unwavering in its view that theatre was the superior art form and that the best use of television was as a delivery tool to bring theatre to the masses. The fall of

1947 to the spring of 1948 was a crucial time in the development of network television (what one generally thinks of network programming would not begin until the fall of 1948) and had repercussions for both industries. It was a time of experimentation for the television industry with the Guild program serving as a testing ground for both the network and the Guild. However, each had its own agenda. NBC wanted to experiment and entertain. The Guild wanted to experiment and promote itself. After the broadcast of an adaptation of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* in June 1948, both Langner and Helburn were confident that the series would return in the fall.

Chapter 5 explores why that did not happen. In retrospect, it might have occurred with very little effort on the part of either NBC or the Theatre Guild. With no sponsor on board, NBC agreed to air the first seven broadcasts on a sustaining basis. As such, the network shared expenses with the Guild, although NBC bore most of the financial burden.<sup>13</sup> Even though NBC operated at a loss (as did the television industry in general) in order to draw audiences for future programs, the network could not continue funding programs such as the Theatre Guild indefinitely. Clearly, in order to continue, the Guild would have to find a sponsor. In this chapter I investigate what sponsors meant to television and radio programs in the late 1940s. For example, unlike the current practice through which several advertisers buy short blocks of commercial time during a particular program, at that time sponsors purchased entire programs. As such, the sponsor's name was directly associated with the program. Thus in 1948 one could watch *The Kraft Television Theatre* or *The Texaco Star Theatre*. Moreover, advertising agencies working for the commercial sponsor typically produced the programs and often provided

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<sup>13</sup> "Sustaining" was a term from radio and meant that the network would pick up the costs in hopes of building an audience and attracting sponsorship.



directors and writers. Ultimately, no sponsorship emerged and the Guild did not return to television for another five years.

In Chapter 5, I suggest that the Guild and NBC could have solved the sponsorship problem if not for the Theatre Guild's flawed self-image and unwillingness to compromise. The Guild's experience in radio had taught it that sponsorship was a two-edged sword. In radio, the Theatre Guild had learned to compromise artistically, typically in its selection of scripts. However, radio never challenged the Guild's self-image as a purveyor of fine art, chiefly because radio was a medium of words and imagination. Television, on the other hand, required more than literature or great scripts; it insisted on visual stimulation and the ability of the artist to create this on a screen the dimensions of a moderately-sized dinner plate. As a new medium, television demanded experimentation and imagination, two qualities that, by 1948, I argue Theatre Guild lacked. However, even that shortcoming did not ultimately prevent the Guild from continuing its television program. If not for its refusal to give up a time slot on Sunday night, the history of the Theatre Guild on television might have taken a vastly different and influential course.

The Epilogue briefly examines the Theatre Guild's reentry into television in October 1953, with a new program under the sponsorship of U.S. Steel, effectively transferring its radio program to television. In all aspects, this second series was a success both artistically and commercially. It was not, however, groundbreaking or true to the Guild's earlier broadcasting aspirations. Many of its programs featured original scripts and not stage adaptations, as was the standard in television drama. It also did not advertise itself as a Theatre Guild production. On radio it had been *The Theatre Guild*

*on the Air*; on television it was *The U.S. Steel Hour*. This final incarnation lasted until 1963 and remained a live production until the end existing as a holdout in a medium dominated by film and videotape.

The Guild's first venture on television did not succeed. By all rights it should have, as the second series did. I believe that the principal reason for its failure was artistic rather than commercial since in 1948 it would have been easier for the Guild to solve the problem of finances than to suddenly develop vision. As an example, consider the thoughts of Jo Mielziner, hired by CBS in 1948 to advise its designers.<sup>14</sup> Mielziner recognized that "none of the mediums of the 20<sup>th</sup> century captures" the immediacy of theatre, "with the possible exception of television." He saw television as a "medium of intimate contact," regardless of screen size. Most importantly, Mielziner believed that television was "a new and visual medium. It calls for a fresh and courageous eye."<sup>15</sup> Therein lay the problem with Theatre Guild's television adventure. It did not bring to this visual medium a "fresh and courageous eye" and NBC did not ask it to. Rather than embrace television as a new art form, which Mielziner thought essential for success, the Theatre Guild tried to fit a rectangular proscenium arch into a small, round television screen.

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<sup>14</sup> *Radio Daily*, 19 May 1948, 6. CBS had earlier approached Norman Bel Geddes for the same job, but Bel Geddes, then working as an industrial designer, opted out. See *Variety*, 7 April 1948, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Jo Mielziner, "Intimacy Is the Clue to Television's Charm," *Variety* 28 July 1948, 39.

## Chapter 1: “To Produce Plays of Artistic Merit” – The Theatre Guild Develops an Aesthetic.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding how the Theatre Guild came to define itself requires looking at its lineage and precursors. “Not the Washington Square Players, but several members of that erstwhile sect, have bound themselves together under the name of the Theatre Guild, and will begin to produce plays about April 1,” reported the *New York Times* on 19 January 1919.<sup>2</sup> Newspaper reports of the new organization listed Rollo Peters, Philip Moeller, Lee Simonson, Helen Westley, Lawrence Langner, Josephine A. Meyer, Ralph Roeder, and Justus Sheffield as founding members.<sup>3</sup> With the exception of Sheffield, who had been a member of the Provincetown Players,<sup>4</sup> the Theatre Guild sprang wholly from the Washington Square Players, a semi-professional theatre group that began operation in 1915 in an attempt to give theatre practitioners and playgoers an alternative to commercial theatre in New York.

In their manifesto the Washington Square Players evoked the spirit of the modernist theatre movement in Europe, specifically England, with a call for a rebirth of

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<sup>1</sup> Langner, 116-118. According to Langner, this was the Guild’s answer to the question, “Why did you start the Theatre Guild?”

<sup>2</sup> “What News on the Rialto,” *New York Times*, 19 January 1919, 42.

<sup>3</sup> See “Selwyns Acquire Another,” *Washington Post*, 9 February 1919, 50; *New York Times*, 19 January 1919, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Sheffield was a lawyer and had acted with the Provincetown Group. He had also had a romantic relationship with feminist Edna Kenton who was associated with the Guild. See Cheryl Black, *The Women of Provincetown: 1915-1922* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 21.

American theatre.<sup>5</sup> They had “only one policy in regard to the plays which we will produce — they must have artistic merit.” Although the Players intended to feature plays by American writers, “we shall also include in our repertory the works of well-known European authors which have been ignored by the commercial managers.”<sup>6</sup> These two ideas: plays of artistic merit and a desire to keep the pressures of commercialism to a minimum drove the Players in their efforts at experimentation. Their first bill on 19 February 1915 at the Bandbox Theatre, a small space on East 57<sup>th</sup> Street, included Maurice Maeterlinck’s symbolist play *Interior*, and *Eugenically Speaking*, a satire on eugenics by the American Edward Goodman. The *New York Times* critic noted that, “the flavor of amateurishness was not lacking, but this added the zest that always attaches to an experiment to the whole,” and that, “If the Players can keep up their present pace, they will make the Bandbox an institution.”<sup>7</sup>

For the next three years the Players served up a variety of one-act plays by playwrights as diverse as Anton Chekhov, Bernard Shaw, Arthur Schnitzler, Susan

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<sup>5</sup> The text of the manifesto is in Eaton, 20-21. It refers to the work of Granville Barker which it says is “the culmination of a growth of some years of the development of new methods of acting and production in English drama ...” For information on the modernist movement in England, see Thomas Postlewait, “The London Stage, 1895-1918,” in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume 3, Since 1895*, ed., Baz Kershaw (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 44-50.

<sup>6</sup> Eaton, 21.

<sup>7</sup> “Art Colonists Act Plays at Bandbox,” *New York Times*, 20 February 1915, 11. The Bandbox had two hundred ninety-nine seats, far fewer than commercial theatres. See Weldon B. Durham, “Washington Square Players,” in *American Theatre Companies, 1888-1930*, Weldon B. Durham, ed. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 460-463.

Glaspell, and Eugene O'Neill.<sup>8</sup> Engaged in the endless battle between art and commercial viability, the Players attempted to enlist a faithful audience with reasonable ticket prices. Their prices of individual tickets at fifty cents or "subscriptions for ten tickets (two for each of our monthly performances) at the cost of \$5.00," compared favorably to other New York theatres.<sup>9</sup> Good notices and a loyal following supported them until the United States entered the World War in 1917. However, the pressure of operating an experimental theatre in wartime took its toll both financially and in personnel. In May 1918, the Players ceased operations after losing most of their actors as well as their director and manager Edward Goodman (the same man who had supplied one of their first original plays) to the Army.<sup>10</sup> However, the artistic drive that propelled the Players surfaced again less than a year later in the New York theatre community embodied in the person of a patent attorney and amateur playwright named Lawrence Langner.

Born in Wales in 1890, Langner immigrated to the United States in January 1911 where he opened an office as a patent attorney. As a boy of thirteen, Langner had

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<sup>8</sup> For a list of productions, see Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Volume One*, 300-301. Shaw preferred "Bernard Shaw" rather than "George Bernard Shaw," even though many contemporaneous sources use the latter. The members of the Guild, particularly Lawrence Langer and Theresa Helburn, addressed him as "Bernard" and that is the convention I will use in this work.

<sup>9</sup> Eaton, 21. Comparable ticket prices in New York ranged from twenty-five cents for some seats at "William Brady's Gargantuan Production of LIFE" at the Manhattan Opera House to \$1.50 at most theatres. For representative pricing, see the display ads in the *New York Times*, 23 February 1915, X6.

<sup>10</sup> "Washington Players Hit Hard by War," *New York Times*, 17 May 1918; "Washington Players Fail, Their assignment an Amicable Arrangement with Creditors," *New York Times*, 22 May 1918, 7.

worked as a clerk in the offices of J. Howard Bannister, a noted London theatre manager of provincial theatres and touring companies. Before his mother put an end to his romantic notions of a life in theatre and apprenticed him to a Chartered Patent Agent, Langner basked in the glow of theatre in general and Ellen Terry in particular.<sup>11</sup> After moving to the United States, Langner rekindled his interest in theatre in part by becoming a member of a social group that later formed the Washington Square Players, of which Langner was a charter member.<sup>12</sup> Langner's passion for theatre (he had written plays for the Players and others) needed an outlet.<sup>13</sup> According to his autobiography the genesis of the Theatre Guild was a chance meeting he had with Helen Westley and Philip Moeller on 18 December 1918 at the Brevoort Hotel in New York.<sup>14</sup> Langner had been pondering the prospect of creating another theatre company after the wartime demise of the Players and he mentioned it to Westley and Moeller, former members of the Washington Square Players, she as an actress and he as a director and playwright. After both expressed enthusiasm for Langner's idea, he began to contact other former Players. The new venture would differ from the old in two important respects which Langer

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<sup>11</sup> Langner, 16-23. Terry's manager, William Courtney, shared offices with Banister and Langner often admired the actress in Shakespearean roles.

<sup>12</sup> Some of Langner's acquaintances during this time period, 1911-1914, included Edward Goodman, Philip Moeller, Theresa Helburn, and Josephine A. Meyer. He also had contact with Walter Lippmann and Waldo Frank, two future political commentators. Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>13</sup> Langner wrote two one-act plays for the Washington Square Players: *License*, which was the first play performed on the Players first bill, and *Another Way Out*, produced in 1916. The Players produced his full-length play *The Family Exit* in 1917. Langner would later write plays for the Provincetown Players and other small theatre groups. In his career, Langner would eventually write or collaborate on eighteen plays of various lengths and adapt eight others. For a complete listing, see Langner 463-465.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 114.

included in the letter he wrote explaining his idea to his friends. Unlike the Players, which operated as a loose confederation of amateurs, Langer envisioned that the new company “should be governed entirely by its Board of Managers, to which its director should be responsible,” and that, “It should be a professional theatre, employ professional actors and produce only long plays ‘which should be great plays’.”<sup>15</sup> A few days later, Edna Kenton and Rollo Peters joined Langer, Westley, and Moeller at the home of Josephine A. Meyer to hammer out the ground rules for the new organization.<sup>16</sup> Meyer’s living room was a logical choice since not only had she been one of the founding members of the Players, but budding playwrights had often gathered at her house to read the works of writers such as Bernard Shaw and Maurice Maeterlinck which had not yet found a production in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

The meeting at Meyer’s house produced some consensus on major points. First, Langner remembers that the new theatre company would differ from both the Washington Square and the Provincetown groups by being “an expert theatre; that ... would be made up only of artists of the theatre who are experts in their work.” Second, in order to expand its audience capacity the theatre would “either lease or secure the building of a theatre seating a considerable number of people ... in some place where the

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<sup>15</sup> Langner, 115. The quotation is by Langner from his autobiography.

<sup>16</sup> Eaton puts the date of the meeting as 19 December 1918, a day after Langer met Westley and Moeller. See Eaton, 30. Langner says only that it took place “a few days before Christmas.” See Langner, 116. In his history of the Guild, Norman Nadel says that the meeting took place “a few nights later [than the first meeting] at the home of the ailing Josephine A. Meyer.” See Nadel, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Meyer made her acting debut by speaking the first line in the first production by the Players. See “Art Colonists Act Plays at Bandbox,” *New York Times*, 20. For information on the readings, see Helburn, 49; and Langner 44-45

rents were sufficiently low not to make rentals a burden.” Third, it would improve upon the operation of previous collectives through a committee that would “govern absolutely” and delegate administrative duties to the members.<sup>18</sup> Although the assembled enthusiasts agreed on these three points they differed on the notion of what constituted a “professional” or on the meaning of the term “expert” as it applied to actors. The Washington Square actors had been amateurs but a contingent of the new group led by Rollo Peters wanted the new organization to be professional in regards to its acting company. Langner remembers that the debate between amateur and professional was “fought to a standstill at our original meetings,” but Peters’ substantial influence carried the day for professionalism.<sup>19</sup> This early battle foreshadowed others to come regarding the group’s self-identification.

Whether one identifies oneself as a professional or an amateur, the artist cannot create without proper support. For the ex-Players, proper support meant sufficient operating funds. After enumerating principles, the next step was capitalization. Helen Freeman, Lee Simonson and Justus Sheffield joined those from the meeting at Meyers’s house and discussed raising \$40,000 from some wealthy benefactor. It became apparent that it was easier to theorize benefactors than to identify them. Consequently, the group decided to raise funds from its members. In the spring of 1919 the Theatre Guild, the name taken from the medieval craft guilds, began preparation to present its first

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<sup>18</sup> Langner, 116.

<sup>19</sup> See Langner, 118 and Eaton, 30. Charles Rollo Peters (1892-1967) was born in Paris and raised in California. He studied art in Europe and served as actor and designer with both the Washington Square Players and the Theatre Guild. See entry in Gerald Bordman and Thomas S. Hischank, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre, 3rd edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 496.



production on a budget of \$2,160.<sup>20</sup> The first Board of Managers for the Theatre Guild included Rollo Peters, also named Director, Lee Simonson, Helen Freeman, Helen Westley, Philip Moeller, Justus Sheffield and Lawrence Langner. Josephine Meyer had the position of play reader.<sup>21</sup> To this collection came a budding playwright, Theresa Helburn, who joined in mid-1919 with the title of play representative and, as she described it in her autobiography, “a year later I was made executive secretary *pro tem*, a job that not only I didn’t want but that no one wanted.”<sup>22</sup> It was a “temporary” position that she would hold for nearly twenty years during which she served as a member of the Guild’s Board of Managers, a group that eventually coalesced into herself, Langner, Moeller, Westley, Simonson, and Maurice Wertheim.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Eaton contends that the participants voted down the \$40,000 proposal at the first meeting with Simonson, Freeman and Sheffield. See Eaton, 31. Langner remembers it differently. In his version he later approached an “obliging millionaire” who lost interest after learning that Langer and friends had only raised between \$500 and \$1,500. Both accounts agree that Langer and Sheffield originally contributed \$500 apiece with an additional \$500 coming later from Maurice Wertheim. Langner later added \$1,160. See Langner 118-119 and note on 119.

<sup>21</sup> Eaton lists these seven members. Langner omits Freeman. See Eaton, 33; Langner 120.

<sup>22</sup> Helburn remembers joining the Guild a few months after meeting her future husband John Baker Opdycke on 19 April 1919. Helburn, 62, 66.

<sup>23</sup> Wertheim was an investment banker of the firm Wertheim and Company and had a personal history with many of the creative principals. He had been a member of George Pierce Baker’s ’47 workshop at Harvard along with Helburn, Simonson and others. In 1915, Langner married his first wife on Wertheim’s Greenwich, Connecticut estate. Wertheim would have most probably been involved in the genesis of the Guild but had been out of the country during the first months of 1919. It was upon returning from Persia and attending the Guild’s initial production *The Bonds of Interest* that he offered to aid Langner with funding for the Guild and thus came aboard. *The Story of the Theatre Guild 1919-1947* (New York: The Theatre Guild, 1948), 4-5; Langner, 106, 122-123; Helburn, 15, Eaton 36.

The driving force behind the Theatre Guild's offerings in the first ten years of its existence was the phrase that Langner remembered the founders agreeing on as a definition of the Guild's "aims and ideals," namely "To produce plays of artistic merit not ordinarily produced by the commercial managers."<sup>24</sup> Thus the Guild from its beginning affirmed the familiar dichotomy between "artistic merit" and commercial appeal. It was a belief shared by those who had been in the Washington Square Players and one which would guide the Guild's artistic decisions for the next decade. Following this creed, the Board selected as its first production a translation of *The Bonds of Interest* by the Spanish playwright Jacinto Benavente, first produced in Spain in 1917, and which the *New York Times* noted "exclusive of one or two short pieces ... is the first of Benavente's plays to be performed here."<sup>25</sup> Attending the first performance at the Garrick Theatre on West 35<sup>th</sup> Street were about one hundred fifty subscribers who had purchased tickets for two productions, sight unseen.<sup>26</sup> The Guild's founders believed that

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<sup>24</sup> Langner, 117-118.

<sup>25</sup> "An Unusual Stock Record," *New York Times*, 16 March 1919, 44; "The Week's New Offerings," *New York Times*, 13 April 1919, 50.

<sup>26</sup> The Guild had originally looked at Daly's Theatre at Broadway and 30<sup>th</sup>, opened in 1879 by Augustin Daly and vacant since most producers had moved north up Broadway. For information on the theatre's opening see George C. D. Odell, in *Annals of the New York Stage, vol. 11: 1879-1882* (Columbia University Press, New York, NY, 1939), 12. The Guild later settled on the Garrick Theatre at 67 W. 35<sup>th</sup>. Built in 1890 as Harrigan's Theatre, it became the Garrick in 1895 and fell into disuse by 1915. The wealthy businessman Otto Kuhn bought it in 1917 and refurbished it for Jacques Copeau. Kuhn, in a magnanimous gesture agreed to let the Guild have the theatre on the condition that they would only need to pay rent when they could afford to. See entry for the Garrick Theatre in Bordman and Hischank, 253. For location of the Garrick see entry at The Internet Broadway Database, <http://www.ibdb.com/venue.asp?ID=1491>, accessed 10 October 2006. For a description of the negotiations with Otto Kuhn see Langner, 119-120; Eaton 31-32.

by selling season subscriptions, a strategy utilized by the Washington Square Players and European independent theatres, and deliberately limiting play runs, they could not only build a loyal audience, but assure sufficient financial backing to avoid the pitfalls of commercialism.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, the show was a financial failure and by the time the Guild was ready to open its second promised production, St. John Ervine's Irish melodrama *John Ferguson*, its treasury contained \$19.50.<sup>28</sup>

It is at this point that events, both within and beyond the Guild's control, conspired to rescue the new organization from possible oblivion. The first of these concerned the production at hand. *John Ferguson* opened on 12 May 1919 with the Guild intending to limit the run, as a hedge against financial disaster, to a single week. However, unlike *The Bonds of Interest* which had received good reviews and few paying customers, *John Ferguson* quickly began to play to full houses.<sup>29</sup> Writing in the *New York Times* John Corbin noted that rather than presenting "a whimsical comedy" or an

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<sup>27</sup> Several subscription club theatres operated in England during roughly the same period producing plays with limited commercial value. See Maggie Gale, "The London Stage, 1918-1945," in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume 3, Since 1895*, ed., Baz Kershaw (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 150-151. Additionally, Langner mentions visiting the Volksbühne Theatre in Germany in 1913 where its "fifty thousand subscribers made a strong impression on me which I utilized later on." Langner 57-58. Helburn specifically lists this as the reason for the Players' policy of subscription sales. See Helburn, 51. For the opening, see Gerald Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1914-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 100; and Langner, 122.

<sup>28</sup> *The Story of the Theatre Guild*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> In his review of the Guild's initial production, John Corbin of the *New York Times* praised the acting which in spite of its amateurism was "touched always with imagination and the instinct of true quality." Corbin predicted that "Unless all signs fail, an artistic coterie production has at last achieved popular success." All signs did fail and the production closed after four weeks. John Corbin, "Review of *The Bonds of Interest*," *New York Times*, 15 April 1919, 9; Eaton, 35-36.

“eerie, imaginative tragedy of the Irish players from Dublin,” the Theatre Guild had given audiences a “bit of dour, upstanding realism from the north.” With its melodramatic plot involving the travails of an Irish farmer who finds himself beset by economic adversity, a prodigal son, an evil landlord, the despoliation of his daughter and the subsequent murder of her attacker, the play combined elements of modern realism with the story of Job. Corbin found it so to his liking that he lamented the Guild’s announced truncated run. “With regard, probably, to the bitter passions and the dour gloom of the play,” he wrote, “the performance is to be limited to the present week. For those who care for what is rarest and best in the art of the drama and of the theatre, it is an occasion not to be missed.”<sup>30</sup>

The Guild was justifiably relieved at the show’s popularity. Langner later noted that “*John Ferguson* wrung the emotions of the drama critics so hard that the next day their pens dripped ecstasy.” However, even more rewarding for the Guild, “The public rushed to the Garrick Theatre and stood in a line reaching out into the street.”<sup>31</sup> Before the week was out the Guild announced that the show would continue “for a week, and possibly longer.” Clearly the Guild had a hit on its hands. Corbin expressed his disappointment that the play had opened so late in the Broadway season. “It is a doubly noteworthy circumstance that so excellent production should have had to wait until the fag end of the season, and that when it is produced should score so notable a popular

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<sup>30</sup> John Corbin, “Review of *John Ferguson*,” *New York Times*, 13 May 1919, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Langner, 124.

success.”<sup>32</sup> One week became two and by the early summer *John Ferguson* was still receiving good reviews and packed houses. Notices of the production used phrases such as “highly successful presentation of ... a grimly realistic Irish tragedy,” as in the weekly publication *The Independent*.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, critics invariably recognized the Theatre Guild’s commitment to a higher form of drama than currently prevailed on the New York stage. “With its second offering, the newly organized Theater [sic] Guild of New York achieved one of the finest and most impressive productions of the New York dramatic season which has just come to a close,” wrote one critic. What appeared to separate the Guild from other producers was its devotion to “sincerity, intensity and simplicity, the informing characteristics” of both *John Ferguson* and “the performance at the Garrick Theater by the young idealists of the theater.”<sup>34</sup>

“Young idealists” are not always capable of navigating the shoals inherent in the world of commerce. From the outset, the Guild had been mindful of the dangers of idealism in the commercial theatre and had been resolute that when it came into conflict with commercialism, idealism would triumph. However, with its second production the Guild faced a choice. *John Ferguson* looked as though it could run for months but the Guild had always intended to limit runs into order to keep its company fresh. Moreover, the Garrick Theatre only held about six hundred with the top balcony closed, as it had

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<sup>32</sup> John Corbin, “Blank Verse by Ear and by Voice,” *New York Times*, 18 May 1919, 50.

<sup>33</sup> “The New Plays,” *The Independent*, 31 May 1919, 305. Accessed 10 October 2006 through American Periodical Series Online hereafter referred to as APS.

<sup>34</sup> “Music and Drama: ‘John Ferguson’ — an impressive tragedy of ironical chance,” *Current Opinion*, July 1919, 24. Accessed 10 October 2006, through APS Online.

been for this production, thus limiting its commercial possibilities. By moving the show to a larger uptown theatre and extending the run, the Guild could maximize its profit. However, that would commit its acting company to possibly a lengthy run and make them unavailable for another show. The debate within the company was between the idealists and the realists; between those who wished to remain apart from commercial theatre and those who recognized that without sufficient funds their experiment would be stillborn.<sup>35</sup> Those in favor of financial independence prevailed and on 7 July 1919 *John Ferguson* transferred to the Fulton Theatre on West 46<sup>th</sup> Street where it would brave the hazards of a New York summer without air conditioning.<sup>36</sup>

With the selection of *John Ferguson*, the Guild set in motion one of the two events of the summer of 1919 that would assure its continued existence. By all contemporary accounts, it was a good play. The *New York Times* reported that Percy Burton of the London *Pall Mall Gazette*, who had been visiting New York, called it “one of the three best plays he saw here— ‘rather sombre [sic], but very powerful’.”<sup>37</sup> A critic for *Life* called it a “powerful drama well played” and “one of the few really worth-while

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<sup>35</sup> Eaton, 38-39.

<sup>36</sup> The *New York Times* noted that the production would be “defying July and all that it means to a drama.” “This Week’s Events,” *New York Times* 6 July 1919, 38. Helburn remembered that typically “only the frothiest of musicals could survive a torrid New York summer.” Helburn, 76. The Fulton at 210 West 46<sup>th</sup> Street had opened in 1911 as the Follies-Bergere and began life as a dinner theatre. It could seat approximately fifty percent more than the Garrick. See entry at The Internet Broadway Database, <http://www.ibdb.com/venue.asp?ID=1154> accessed 10 October 2006; Nicholas van Hoogstratten, *Lost Broadway Theatres*, revised edition (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 137-141.

<sup>37</sup> “Playgoing and the Play,” *New York Times*, 5 July 1919, 11.

accomplishments of the closing season.”<sup>38</sup> Alexander Woollcott thought that “Any playgoer who enjoys an engrossing human story artfully and dramatically unfolded is missing the time of his life he does not go to see ‘John Ferguson.’ It is so packed with all the stuff that has ever thrilled an audience that the mild surprise its success has caused is a little puzzling.”<sup>39</sup> But even with a good play, one cannot depend on success; sometimes one needs to be lucky as well. The Theatre Guild found itself blessed with good fortune when on 6 August 1919 members of the Actor’s Equity Association, an organization that had been in existence for just over three years, voted to strike most commercial theatres. The next night, actors scheduled to appear at thirteen New York theatres walked out just before the opening curtains. Fifteen thousand audience members, many who had battled their way into Manhattan in spite of a Brooklyn street car strike, left the theatres disappointed. However, the list of affected theatres did not include the Fulton. Since the Theatre Guild was a co-operative, recognized Equity contracts, and was not a member of the Producing Managers’ Association, *John Ferguson* went on as scheduled.<sup>40</sup> Two

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<sup>38</sup> “Winding Up a Remarkable Season,” *Life*, 29 May 1919, 948, Accessed through APS Online, 10 October 2006 . The unidentified critic also opined that the production was “too serious for summer entertainment” and would have “doubtless enjoyed a much longer run than is possible with warm weather at hand.”

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Woollcott, “Second Thoughts on First Nights,” *New York Times*, 10 August 1919, XX2.

<sup>40</sup> John Frick, “A Changing Theatre: New York and Beyond,” in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume 2, 1870-1945*, ed., Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 221; *The Post* noted that those theatres offering musicals attempted to go on with “chorus girls and performers of lesser parts.” When audiences flocked to the box office for refunds, “this plan was called off.” “New York Theatres Dark,” *Washington Post*, 8 August 1919, 1. For a list of affected theatres see “Our Empty Theatres”, *New York Times*, 31 August 1919, 44.

weeks later the number of closed theatres had risen to twenty-one with only *John Ferguson* at the Fulton, *9:45* at the Playhouse, and vaudeville at the Winter Garden still open. For the next month, the Theatre Guild had a virtual monopoly on dramatic entertainment on Broadway. If one wanted to see a Broadway play, *John Ferguson* was literally the only show in town.<sup>41</sup> This unlikely happenstance assured *John Ferguson*, and the Theatre Guild, financial success. More importantly, it ensured the Guild's continued existence and began to build for it both an audience and critical recognition.

The Equity strike ended in early September and the Theatre Guild readied itself for the coming season which would include its first full schedule of productions.<sup>42</sup> It was a challenge that its Board members welcomed. The Guild had begun with an eye to presenting dramatic fare that, if sometimes unfamiliar to theatregoers, would hopefully impress them with its inherent artistic and intellectual worth. The various members of the Guild had a collective dream to heighten the dramatic sensibility of audiences through productions of great works of art. Moreover, the Guild's founders believed that theatre was larger than the individuals who produced it and that, if given choices, the public

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<sup>41</sup> "Two More Theatres Dark," *New York Times*, 24 August 1919, 5. *9:45* had originally closed and then reopened with a different cast. By the end of the month forty-one of the forty-five New York theatres were closed and John Ferguson was the only "legitimate production" unaffected. See "Our Empty Theatres," *New York Times*, 31 August 1919, 44. Only once was the production in doubt. Its manager at the Fulton, the future film producer Walter Wanger (*Stagecoach*, 1939, *Cleopatra*, 1962), joined the Producing Managers' Association in mid-August but the co-operative nature of the company saved it. See "Striking Actors Sued for \$500,000 by the Shuberts," *New York Times*, 12 August 1919, 1-2. For information on Wanger, see entry in Tim Cawkwell and John M. Smith, editors, *The World Encyclopedia of Film* (New York: Galahad Books, 1972), 287.

<sup>42</sup> For details on the strike's conclusion see "Theatres Reopen With All Pleased Over Strike's End," *New York Times*, 7 September 1919, 1, 23.



actually preferred high standards of art, at least, standards espoused by the Guild.<sup>43</sup> The Guild's goals then became elitist primarily because its members collectively installed themselves as the sole arbiters of artistic quality. What aided the Guild immeasurably was the success of *John Ferguson*. One strategy to overcome the disconnection of art and commerce is to present art disguised as entertainment. Whether intentionally or not, this is what the Guild managed to do with its second production. A realistic tragedy (for early twentieth-century drama) with elements of classic melodrama, *John Ferguson* struck a happy balance between modernism and popular entertainment. The Guild had happened upon a recipe for success that both audiences and critics embraced. In an article for *Forum* C. Courtney Savage extolled the literary and dramatic virtues of *John Ferguson*, virtues that many had overlooked before its production by the Theatre Guild. After the success of the play on Broadway, Savage came to the conclusion that "American *theatregoers* are not play readers, and the American theatrical management sometimes overlooks a play which has real literary quality as well as dramatic value." Into this void stepped the Theatre Guild with a chance to change the face of the American theatre. "If the Theatre Guild," wrote Savage, "can offer plays of this type, stage and act them with the same degree of perception, there is no reason why they cannot become one of the leading factors of the theatrical world."<sup>44</sup> This was heady praise for a group of young idealists. After the success of their second show, the members of the Guild felt ready for anything.

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<sup>43</sup> Eaton, 5-6.

<sup>44</sup> C. Courtney Savage, "The Theatre in Review," *Forum and Century*, September 1919, 372. Accessed through APS Online, 10 October 2006 .

The Guild began its second season with a new Board, new playwrights, and a strong sense of purpose. Even with the commercial and critical success of its first abbreviated season, there had been a reshuffling of the leadership. Justus Sheffield dropped out to devote time to his law practice and Augustin Duncan, brother of dancer Isadora Duncan and the director and star of *John Ferguson*, took his place. Illustrating the need for the commercial as well as the artistic, investment banker Maurice Wertheim joined, adding knowledge of the business world.<sup>45</sup> During the run of the first production, John Masefield's verse retelling of a Japanese legend *The Faithful*,<sup>46</sup> a debate ensued between those who favored collective management by the Board and those who favored a single organizational manager. Duncan, Peters and Freeman were of the latter opinion. Their position became increasingly hardened since Peters and Duncan were the company's most accomplished male actors, thus complicating play selection, and Peters had been serving as nominal Director of the company. Matters came to a head and before the end of *The Faithful*'s four-week run, Duncan and Peters left.<sup>47</sup> The Board, after an abortive attempt by Lee Simonson to manage the Guild's affairs, appointed Theresa

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<sup>45</sup> Langner 124. For information on Duncan see "Who's Who on the Stage," *New York Times*, 19 May 1919, 50; also see entry for Augustin Duncan in Bordman and Hischank, 193.

<sup>46</sup> "Plays of a Busy Week," *New York Times* 12 October 1919, 42. *The Faithful* opened on 13 October 1919 and *John Ferguson* went on tour with a different cast, probably to the Cort Theatre in Chicago. Contrary to both Eaton and the Guild's official history, *John Ferguson* ran until 11 October 1919 at the Fulton. Both have the production closing on 30 August 1919. See Eaton, 40; *The Story of the Theatre Guild*, 37. For information on the closing of *John Ferguson* see "Theatre Guild to Give 'The Faithful,'" *New York Times*, 30 September 1919, 17; "Barrymore Will Play Dual Role in Stevenson's 'Jekyll and Hyde,'" *Washington Post*, 12 October 1919, 50.

<sup>47</sup> Langner, 124-125, Helburn, 79-80, Eaton, 45.

Helburn as Executive Director, thus bringing onboard the second of the two people who would later control the Theatre Guild's future.

Born in New York in 1887 and raised in Boston, Theresa Helburn became interested in all aspects of theatrical production while attending Bryn Mawr. During post-graduate work at Radcliffe in 1909 she was able to attend George Pierce Baker's '47 Workshop at Harvard where she met other future Guild members Wertheim and Simonson. She later lectured on drama at a New York finishing school, (among her pupils was Katherine Cornell), published poetry and short stories, and studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris. She returned to the United States in 1914 and quickly fell in with those who gathered at Josephine Meyer's house to read plays. Helburn also wrote dramatic criticism for *The Nation* and contributed a play, although ultimately unproduced, to the Washington Square Players.<sup>48</sup> As previously mentioned, prior to her selection as Executive Director she had been acting as the Guild's play representative for less than a year.

Before the end of its first year, supporters of the Theatre Guild's had weathered failure, reveled in success, witnessed the leadership fracture and then reform, but still clung to the goal of elevating the art of the theater. Of the Board members that remained, Langner, Moeller, Simonson, Westley, and Wertheim, with Helburn as Executive Director, would chart the course for the Theatre Guild for the next decade, during which

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<sup>48</sup> For details on Helburn's early career, see Helburn 3-55. The Players withdrew *Enter the Hero*, the play she contributed, during rehearsals. It was to have starred Edna St. Vincent Millay. See also Jennifer Stock, "Theresa Helburn," in, *Notable Women in the American Theatre: A Biographical Dictionary*, Milly S. Barranger, Vera Mowry Roberts, and Alice M. Robinson, ed. (Greenwood Press, New York, NY, 1989), 403-407. Stock confuses some dates, but the summary of Helburn's career is generally useful.

time it solidified its standing as Broadway's most successful art theatre.<sup>49</sup> It would be a course that included financial and artistic failures and successes, but that always remained firmly pointed toward the goal of what the Guild and its members believed to be "great theatre."

For the next few seasons, the Theatre Guild continued to expand its subscriber base which reached six thousand by the fall of 1922.<sup>50</sup> It accomplished this in part by satisfying a desire by audiences to experience theatre substantially different from conventional Broadway entertainment. As an example, the Guild's third season (1920-1921) began with Ludwig Lewisohn's translation of David Pinski's Yiddish comedy *The Treasure*, which Pinski wrote in 1906 and Max Reinhardt produced in Berlin four years later.<sup>51</sup> It followed this with the premiere of Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House*, launching a long and prosperous association between the Irish playwright and the Guild.<sup>52</sup> During the run of Shaw's play the Guild presented a six-matinee run of David Leibovitz's *John Hawthorne*, an American play and something of a novelty for the Guild which to that point had primarily presented works by European playwrights. The Guild filled out the season with A.A. Milne's *Mr. Pim Passes By*, Benjamin F. Glazer's

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<sup>49</sup> Helen Freeman resigned in late January 1920 after the first three plays of the 1919-1920 season once again brought the Guild to the brink of bankruptcy. See Waldau, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Eaton chronicles the rise in subscribers by seasons as follows: five hundred by 1919-1920, thirteen hundred by 1920-1921, and six thousand by the beginning of the 1922-1923 season. See Eaton, 45, 48, 65.

<sup>51</sup> Eaton, 48-49.

<sup>52</sup> Between 1920 and 1935 the Guild produced thirteen Shaw plays. Interestingly, *Heartbreak House* was to open the season, but Shaw insisted on waiting until after the November presidential election, convinced that theatre always did poorly at the box office before a major election. For a list of Guild-produced Shaw plays see Langner 473-477. For the delaying of the opening see Eaton 49-50; Langner 128; Helburn 144-145.

adaptation of Ferenc Molnar's *Liliom*, and a special performance for its subscribers of Osman Edwards' translation of symbolist poet Emile Verharen's blank verse and prose play *The Cloister*. The Guild's season differed wildly from its competitors' offerings. It included an eclectic mix of mostly foreign plays that could not find a European production, as was the case with *Heartbreak House*, plays that had little commercial appeal, such as *The Cloister*, and plays that had had little European success, as with *Liliom*.

In contrast, that same season on Broadway saw over one hundred fifty new productions and counted as commercial successes such diverse shows as Florenz Ziegfeld's latest *Follies*, Mary Roberts Rinehart's mystery *The Bat*, Octavus Roy Cohen's black-face comedy *Come Seven*, and Winchell Smith's and Frank Bacon's rural comedy *Lightnin'* which had been running in New York since August of 1918 and by the end of the season had amassed 1,206 performances.<sup>53</sup> Of the nineteen plays that opened during the 1920-1921 season in New York and ran for at least two hundred performances,

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<sup>53</sup> Burns Mantle, "The Season in New York," in *The Best Plays of 1920-1921 and the Year Book of the Drama in America*, Burns Mantle, ed. (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1921; reprint 1947), 1-11. Page numbers refer to the reprint. For the length of the *Lightnin'* run see Mantle, 455. The show had opened in Washington at the National Theatre on 28 January 1918. For notice of opening, see "Near-Poet Writes Comedy," *Washington Post*, 6 January 1918, SM2. *Come Seven*, despite being reviled by Eaton and other critics for its portrayal of African Americans, all played by white actors in blackface, ran for nine weeks after its July 1920 opening. See entry in Samuel L. Leiter, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the New York Stage 1920-1930, vol. 1: A-M* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1985), 157; Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1914-1930*, 128.

only two were dramas and only one of those, Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, would not have seemed out of place if included in the Theatre Guild season.<sup>54</sup>

Critics not only noted the distinct nature of the Theatre Guild's repertoire, but also its subscription audience. Burns Mantle chose *Liliom* for inclusion in *The Best Plays of 1920-1921* not because it was financially successful (which it was),<sup>55</sup> but because of "its novelty and quality." Mantle acknowledged that Molnar had had difficulty securing an American production, but "the league's [Theatre Guild's] special public took to it enthusiastically."<sup>56</sup> The concept of a "special public" was one the Guild embraced enthusiastically, most probably since its elitist goals necessarily needed a commensurately elite audience to appreciate them. It was a concept which members of the Guild addressed in subsequent discussions of the Guild and its place in theatre.

In a 1921 article for *Theatre Arts* Theresa Helburn enumerated the problems the Guild had faced in attempting to found an art theatre in the midst of commercial Broadway. She acknowledged that any merging of art and commerce "results in

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<sup>54</sup> The other seventeen productions included light comedies, musicals, revues and a burlesque melodrama from George M. Cohan entitled *The Tavern*. For a list of productions with the number of performances listed see Mantle, 351-354. Although the Washington Square Players and the Provincetown group had been artistic rivals, Langner maintained a friendship with George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell. When the Provincetown group produced *The Emperor Jones* it used Langner's one-act play *Matinata* as a "curtain raiser." See Langner, 109. In the manner of the Theatre Guild, The Provincetown Players opened *The Emperor Jones* at a smaller venue on MacDougal Street in November 1920 and moved it to the larger Princess Theatre on 29 January 1921. See Mantle, 299.

<sup>55</sup> As had *John Ferguson* two years previously, *Liliom* became profitable enough to move from the Garrick to the Fulton after four weeks. See announcement of the May 23 move in "Liliom' to Move to the Fulton," *New York Times*, 8 May 1921, 8.

<sup>56</sup> Mantle, 10.

innumerable compromises,” primarily to the detriment of pure art. Therefore, Helburn reasoned, one could reasonably doubt “whether there would be a place for [pure art] in an organization as synthetic as the theatre.”<sup>57</sup> Recognizing the great difficulty, if not impossibility, of producing a theatre dedicated to art for its own sake the supporters of the Theatre Guild consciously strove to bridge the chasm which they believed existed between the purely commercial and the purely artistic. The Broadway theatre of the post-Great War era was, in their view, “frankly commercial” containing very few “beautiful and worthwhile” productions. Experimental theatre, in the manner of the Washington Square Players and similar groups, was “small, uncertain, of primitive execution, of limited appeal, as all such enterprises must be—and of supreme importance.” The Theatre Guild’s quest was to find a “niche” between commerce and experimentation, “a place for things that are sincere and beautiful in the theatre.” It sought a middle ground where art and commerce could co-exist. This called for compromise by those Guild members who placed their faith in pure art, thus the inner tension caused by the “stigma of success” of *John Ferguson*. Financial concerns such as labor, rents and salaries Helburn considered trivial. These were open to discussion and compromise.<sup>58</sup> However, what the Guild could not compromise on was its all-important audience.

Of the three major problems the Theatre Guild faced, “reaching and holding the *right* audience for the sort of plays we wish to produce,” came just after play selection

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<sup>57</sup> Theresa Helburn, “Art and Business: a Record of the Theatre Guild, Inc.,” *Theatre Arts Magazine* 5, No. 4 (October 1921): 268.

<sup>58</sup> Helburn, “Art and Business,” 268.

and the securing of “first-rate actors, producers and artists.”<sup>59</sup> In answer to the question of what type of people would make up the “right” kind of audience, the Guild founders had only to look in the mirror. Helburn delineated this quite clearly and demarcated the difference between the Guild’s perceived audience and other theatregoers.

[A]s a group we generally approximate in miniature the taste of the public we exist for, not the public of the commercial theatre, of claptrap farce, of melodrama, of comic opera, but the public that wants reality, sincerity and beauty—the only public we are trying to reach.<sup>60</sup>

It was all a matter of taste and preference. If the Guild could reach those who shared its members’ aesthetic sensibilities then all would be well. Helburn, and the other leaders of the Guild, believed that the problem of audience development would be difficult but not insurmountable. “Ours is not necessarily a small audience,” she wrote, “but it is a special one. It includes . . . everyone who likes the genuine article in the theatre and not the specious.” Those who preferred Edith Wharton and Bernard Shaw to Ethel M. Dell or Robert Hichens, for example, would necessarily prefer offerings by the Theatre Guild to the collective dross of contemporary Broadway.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 270. Emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>61</sup> Helburn, “Art and Business,” 272. Ethel M. Dell (1881-1939) was a highly successful author of romance novels. In her 1912 novel *The Way of an Eagle* she introduced Nick Ratcliffe, a character whose exploits spanned the Indian sub-continent and eventually led him to his native Great Britain where he later became a member of Parliament in *The Keeper of the Door* (1915). For a sampling of Dell’s works, see her entry in Project Gutenberg at <http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/d#a3564>, Accessed, 10 October 2006. For reviews of her works see William Morton Payne, “Recent Fiction, *The Dial*, 27 May 1915, 424; and Arthur Guiterman, “Rhymed Reviews: *The Way of an Eagle*,” *Life*, 18 April 1912, 796; both Accessed through APS Online, 10 October 2006. Robert S. Hichens (1864-1950) was a popular Edwardian novelist and playwright who specialized in romantic treatments of exotic locales. He helped adapt his



By presenting “good plays for their own sake,” with the Guild defining “good”, it could educate and recruit new patrons. In this regard the members of the Guild viewed themselves as leaders in a movement to elevate theatre. As leaders, they welcomed recruits to the cause. “We are glad,” Helburn wrote, “to welcome other organizations with aims similar to ours, either in our own or other cities, for it is only by having plenty of good dramatic fare that the public at large will come to appreciate it, and to discriminate between the good and the bad.”<sup>62</sup> Not only organizations could join the cause. Guild patrons could become soldiers in the war against mediocrity, a war the Guild was fully prepared to wage.

The first step in creating an *esprit de corps* was a theatre building of their own and on 4 March 1923 the Guild announced that it would begin raising money to construct its own theatre building by selling \$500,000 in bonds.<sup>63</sup> By early April the Guild had sold \$273,000 worth of bonds and had exceeded its announced goal by the end of the month.<sup>64</sup> Although the price eventually rose to \$1,000,000 (necessitating a mortgage),

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1904 novel *The Garden of Allah* into a successful play that featured lush Middle-Eastern locales in a tale of Christian love set in the world of Islam. For a biography of Hichens, see Richard Bleier, “Robert S. Hichens,” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 153: Late-Victorian and Edwardian British Novelists, First Series*, ed. George M. Johnson, (n.p.: Gale Group, 1995), 106-119. Accessed online through Literature Resource Group, 15 October 2006. For a description of the stage production of *The Garden of Allah* see entry in Bordman and Hirschank, 252.

<sup>62</sup> Helburn, “Art and Business,” 274.

<sup>63</sup> “Theatre Guild Now to Own a Theatre,” *New York Times*, 5 March 1923, 17. Walter Pritchard Eaton, head of the building committee made the announcement during his talk on “The American Theatre” at a dinner for 1,500 at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

<sup>64</sup> For notices on the Guild’s fund-raising progress, see “Theatre Checks Evil Says Otto H. Kahn,” *New York Times*, 9 April 1923, 14. Kahn expressed the idea that a strong theatre could influence society in positive ways. According to the article, “The crime

the Guild opened the doors on its new theatre building on 5 April 1925 and raised the curtain on its first production, Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*, on 13 April. Located at 245 West 52nd Street, the Guild Theatre had a capacity of roughly twice that of the Garrick, thus removing the necessity of transferring a successful production.<sup>65</sup>

Not long after initiating the creation of their permanent home, the Guild began the second phase in the plan to fortify the connection it had with its supporters. On 15 December 1923, the *Theatre Guild Bulletin* began publication and contained the notice that it would be "Published occasionally and sent free to Guild members and their friends."<sup>66</sup> After the first issue, Lawrence Langner explained to Warren Munsell, the Guild's business manager, the need for an in-house publication that the Guild could send to "bond-holders as well as subscribers." Each issue would contain six parts which Langner detailed as "Editorial, Announcements, Membership, The Guild Theatre, Friends of the Theatre Guild, [and] Special News Articles."<sup>67</sup> As a template for the *Bulletin*, Langner looked to the *Provincetown Playbill*, a publication of the Provincetown Players,

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wave and some of the evils of society, he said, were due largely to the lack of a medium affording an opportunity for society to let out its underlying emotions." For a list of major contributors in the campaign, which included violinist Jascha Heifetz, see "Guild Gets \$542,800 for new Theatre," *New York Times* 30 April 1923, 11.

<sup>65</sup> For a description and chronology of the Guild Theatre, which is still in use as the August Wilson Theatre, see entry in the Internet Broadway Database, <http://www.ibdb.com/venue.asp?ID=1179>, accessed 15 October 2006. For a description of the bond-selling process and the first production see Eaton, 74-77, 270-271.

<sup>66</sup> Notice in *Theatre Guild Bulletin*, December 1923, Lawrence Langner Papers, Box 138 – Correspondence 1923-1927, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>67</sup> Lawrence Langner, Letter to Warren Munsell, 21 December 1923, Lawrence Langner Papers, Box 138 – Correspondence 1923-1927, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

with more than a little envy. In a letter to Cornelia Lathrop, the *Bulletin*'s publisher, Langner opined that the Guild's "highbrows" were every bit as literary as those of Provincetown and could not Lathrop recruit them for articles?<sup>68</sup> Lathrop agreed with Langner but asked him to do the recruiting honors. No one she contacted had "time in which to write a paragraph or two for publication."<sup>69</sup> If Langner wanted highbrows it would be more efficient if he contacted them himself. In the end Langner contributed much of the magazine's content and by the third issue, dated May 1924, he identified himself as the heretofore-unnamed editor.<sup>70</sup>

Langner used the fifth issue in February 1925 to deliver a manifesto of sorts, an attempt to not only explain to the Guild subscribers why the Guild operated as it did but to inculcate within them a sense of purpose. Entitled "A Talk with Our New Members," the article was a simultaneously a statement of purpose and an address to the faithful.

The full text follows below:

Membership in the Theatre Guild not only means you have seats in our theatres in preferential locations and the privilege of attending certain lectures and entertainments. It also means that you are associated with a progressive Theatre,

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<sup>68</sup> Lawrence Langner, Letter to Cornelia Lathrop, 22 January 1924, Lawrence Langner Papers, Box 138 – Correspondence 1923-1927, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Cornelia Penfield Lathrop was also the publisher of the Theatre Guild's play programs and operated out of an office in the Garrick Theatre.

<sup>69</sup> Cornelia Lathrop, Letter to Lawrence Langner, 24 January 1924, Lawrence Langner Papers, Box 138 – Correspondence 1923-1927, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>70</sup> The *Bulletin* became the *Theatre Guild Quarterly* with the April 1927, vol. 4 no. 2 issue. It continued in various forms until the early 1930s. The early issues are contained in the Lawrence Langner Papers, Box 138 – Correspondence 1923-1927, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

a Theatre which is pledged not only to production of all that is best in the Theatre, but is also pledged to experiment in the Theatre. It is not a difficult matter for the Theatre Guild to select artistic plays; that is a matter of taste. But it is an entirely different matter to select popular plays. That is purely guesswork. The Guild selects artistic plays, and if these happen to be popular, then so much the better. And it is an actual fact, to which we can testify with the most bloodcurdling of oaths, that most of our greatest popular successes have been plays in which we, in selecting, saw only the artistic possibilities and not the box-office possibilities; among them we number *John Ferguson*, *Liliom*, *He-Who-Gets-Slapped*, and last but not least, *The Guardsman* and *They Knew What They Wanted*.

And when our members have been with us for a while, they will realize the important function they serve along with our entire membership in stimulating American theatre in every direction. We had the privilege of meeting one of our leading novelists recently, and he told us that after seeing *Processional* he was so stirred with the desire to write for the theatre, that he determined to start work immediately upon a play. We doubt whether this gentleman would have been stirred one millimeter by *Abie's Irish Rose*, so if he now produces a masterpiece for the American theatre, it will be the Theatre Guild which will have sown the seed.<sup>71</sup>

In this remarkable article, Langner iterated the chief responsibilities of the both the Theatre Guild and its supporters. For the former, the Guild was to be progressive. This, in Langner's view, meant an adherence to "the best in theatre," which necessarily meant "artistic plays," and the courage to experiment and diverge from theatrical norms. From the beginning the Guild's theatrical emphasis had been on the literary quality of scripts and six years later Langner underscored this. It was also an emphasis that helped attract kindred theatre enthusiasts to the Guild. One of these was Harold Clurman. By his own admission, Clurman "had tried hard to get a job" with the Theatre Guild in 1924 and

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<sup>71</sup> Lawrence Langner, "A Talk With Our New Members," *Theatre Guild Bulletin*, February 1925, 4. Lawrence Langner Papers, Box 138 – Correspondence 1923-1927, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

finally latched on as an extra in *Caesar and Cleopatra* in early 1925.<sup>72</sup> While in rehearsal for the production which would christen the new Guild Theatre, Clurman wrote to the *New York Times* chastising dramatic critics for not paying sufficient attention to the literary merit of plays on Broadway. Although acknowledging that “Night after night [the critic] is called upon to judge plays so rudimentary that one cannot imagine an editor submitting for review a book of similar stripe to any but the most deplorable hack,” Clurman nonetheless took the critical establishment to task for not commenting intelligently on what he felt was “doggedly second-rate” drama. In Clurman’s view, (which parallels part of Langner’s statement on the Theatre Guild’s viewpoint), “the theatre can have only two values: It should either permit us to hear great literature—and all plays must stand comparison with the best literature—or to see beautiful spectacle, to be judged impressionistically as such.”<sup>73</sup>

Harold Clurman’s championship of the Theatre Guild epitomizes Langner’s second point in his article, the responsibility Guild subscribers and supporters had in elevating the theatre. Langner mentioned an unnamed novelist whom the Guild inspired to enrich theatre with his talents. Arguably, the Guild had the same influence on Harold Clurman whose interest in the Guild did not begin in 1924; it had impressed him in 1919 when he was beginning college. As Clurman’s theatrical aesthetic developed, he began

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<sup>72</sup> Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre and the Thirties* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957; reprint New York: Da Capo Press, 1983), 9-10. Page numbers refer to the reprint.

<sup>73</sup> Harold Clurman, “Letter to the Dramatic Editor,” *New York Times*, 22 March 1925, 128. The date of the letter was 14 March 1925. Clurman had his own aesthetic and it is unlikely that the Guild managers would have agreed with his disparaging of such authors as Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, Arthur Schnitzler and Edmond Rostand.

to appreciate the type of theatre the Guild produced. After working in various capacities as actor and assistant stage manager, Clurman became one of the Guild's play readers in January 1929, a position he held even after he helped found the Group Theatre in 1931.<sup>74</sup> The Theatre Guild's purpose, as Langner so succinctly expressed it was in "stimulating American theatre in every direction," and to accomplish this it needed a legion of collaborators. Clurman became one in an overt capacity. He influenced, or tried to influence Guild productions and thus theatre in general. However, a simple audience member could do the same by merely patronizing the Guild's plays. (With apologies to John Milton), the Theatre Guild believed that they also serve who only sit and watch.<sup>75</sup> It was precisely those potential audience members — discriminating, educated, passionate about beauty in the theatre — that the Guild coveted with an almost religious fervor.

For the remainder of the 1920s, The Theatre Guild prospered. It seldom wavered from the principles it had inherited from the Washington Square Players and with a combination of luck, skillful play selection, and inspired productions, it increased its nationwide subscription list to approximately 60,000 by the end of the decade.<sup>76</sup> Maurice Wertheim recalled that during this period there was never a play "produced or left

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<sup>74</sup> Clurman, *The Fervent Years*, 5, 12-37. For Clurman's resignation as a regular play reader, see Harold Clurman, Letter to Theatre Guild Board of Directors, 27 December 1931, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 33 – Harold Clurman Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>75</sup> The quotation from Milton, "They also serve who only stand and wait," is from Sonnet XIX. For a text see the online entry at Luminarium, <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/milton/sonnet19.htm>, accessed 19 October 2006.

<sup>76</sup> Maurice Wertheim, "An Art Theatre without Endowment," in Walter Pritchard Eaton, *The Theatre Guild: The First Ten Years with Articles by The Directors* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1929), 177-178. Wertheim estimated that the number reflected an even split between New York and road subscribers.

unproduced because of its box office draw.”<sup>77</sup> Yet, the Guild still managed to choose box office successes. Roy Waldau estimates “The Guild, at the beginning of the 1928-1929 theatrical season, had some sixty productions behind it—roughly half of them commercial, as well as artistic, successes.” This left it with assets of over a million dollars and the reputation as one of the finest organizations of its type in the world.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, the first ten years of the Guild left Wertheim and his fellow Board members “convinced that the more fully you adhere to your ideal, the more thoroughly the public will support you.”<sup>79</sup>

All of this success should not imply universal acceptance of the Guild and its methods. Criticism of the Guild typically came on two fronts, one from without and one from within. The first form of criticism grew out of the Guild’s elitism embodied in attempts to spread its own version of artistic excellence. This placed it in the middle of a larger cultural battle taking place in pre-World-War-II America. Lawrence Levine has characterized American cultural divisions as “permeable and shifting rather than fixed and immutable.”<sup>80</sup> In 1924, Gilbert Seldes recognized this permeability in his attack on high culture’s “The Great God Bogus.” Seldes believed that popular culture, what he termed “the 7 Lively Arts” and including such forms as vaudeville and film, was in many instances more aesthetically rewarding than so-called high art. In this latter category,

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>78</sup> Waldau, 36.

<sup>79</sup> Wertheim. 175.

<sup>80</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 8.

Seldes placed “the serious intellectual drama” with its “spurious appeal to our sentimentality or our snobbery.” As an example of bad drama, Seldes’ offered *Jane Clegg* by St. John Ervine, produced by the Guild in 1920.<sup>81</sup>

This type of criticism affected the Guild only minimally for the simple reason that Langner had given in his *Bulletin* article. “It is not a difficult matter for the Theatre Guild to select artistic plays; that is a matter of taste,” he had explained. Since the relative term “taste” created the dividing line, Seldes and others like him could choose to patronize other producers that conformed to their own sensibilities. The Theatre Guild would continue its solicitation of “an intelligent theatre-going public,” as Maurice Wertheim characterized them.<sup>82</sup> This us-against-them mentality, the polarization of audiences into those who preferred the Guild’s aesthetic and those who did not permeated the writings of the Guild Board members.

If intelligent audiences attended Guild plays, then how would one describe those who did not? If Helburn’s commercial audiences laughed at claptrap farce, what higher form amused Guild audiences? Lee Simonson, the primary Guild stage designer during this time, asserted that “the Guild’s avowed purpose has always been to produce plays which, according to Broadway or the Backwoods, the public didn’t want ...”<sup>83</sup> In this

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<sup>81</sup> Gilbert Seldes, *The 7 Lively Arts*, revised edition (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1924; revised, New York: Sagamore Press, 1957), 263-269. Page numbers are from the revised edition. In drama, Seldes separated high art from “great art,” which included Shakespeare and Greek playwrights such as Euripides.

<sup>82</sup> Wertheim, 177.

<sup>83</sup> Lee Simonson, “Setting the Stage,” in Walter Pritchard Eaton, *The Theatre Guild: The First Ten Years with Articles by The Directors* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1929), 193.



case, non-believers would include both urban commercial interests and those from the hinterland. The implication in each of these examples is clear: support of the Guild earned one elite status, at least aesthetically.

Cultivation of this support became paramount but was also fraught with responsibility. Philip Moeller believed “There is very definitely a Theatre Guild Audience,” composed of “intelligent friends alive to our success, critical of our failures, but always keenly interested in our development.”<sup>84</sup> The second form of criticism came from some of the “intelligent friends” who reacted strongly when they thought the Guild had strayed from the true path. “It hurts to be let down this way by the Theatre Guild,” wrote critic Ralph Barton. “It is like watching your mother drink herself to death. You can hardly believe your eyes.” The object of his concern was the Guild’s production of Romain Rolland’s *The Game of Love and Death* in 1929. For Barton, not only was the production “so dull that it produces, as the evening wears on, a slight roaring sensation in the ears,” but he saw it as part of a continuing trend in bad Guild productions.<sup>85</sup> Barton’s acerbic comments strike at the heart of what the Theatre Guild had attempted to do, convert audiences and show them the path to true theatrical art. However, in order to accomplish this, the Guild had to remain faithful to its word and it was with this that Barton took issue. Although facetious in tone, Barton censured the Guild for promising but not delivering.

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<sup>84</sup> Philip Moeller, “The Guild and Production,” in Walter Pritchard Eaton, *The Theatre Guild: The First Ten Years with Articles by The Directors* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1929), 168.

<sup>85</sup> Philip Barton, “Theatre,” *Life*, 13 December 1929, 20. Accessed through APS Online, 10 October 2006. Eleanor Stimson Brooks translated the play from the French and Rouben Mamoulian staged the production. For details see Waldau, 401.

Those who have brought us up so carefully to see and like what is good for us to see and like in the theatre, they to whom we have learned to say “whither thou goest, I will go, and thy gods shall be my gods,” have been putting on profounder and profounder trash and apologizing for it with longer and longer program notes until they have practically hit bottom.<sup>86</sup>

If Barton represented the estrangement of an outsider who had been “brought up so carefully to see and like what is good for” him and had become disillusioned, then Harold Clurman’s experience with the Theatre Guild offers an example of how one of the inner circle could also become estranged. As previously mentioned, Clurman began reading plays in January 1929 and by the summer of 1930 his disenchantment with the Guild had grown. Clurman, as is apparent from his autobiographical appraisal in *The Fervent Years*,<sup>87</sup> was at that time in the midst of what Helen Westley described as her “youthful emotional life; and that in turn was firmly bedded in idealism.”<sup>88</sup> The Guild’s quest for excellence drew Clurman to it; its lack of focus caused him to begin to look elsewhere. According to Clurman, the weakness in the Guild’s Board, and hence in the Guild, was its “lack of basic artistic personality.” In Clurman’s estimation, the Board members “represented a general high level of taste in the coming-of-age period of American theatre, but with no single guiding tendency of their own.”<sup>89</sup> In a letter to Helburn written while Clurman spent the summer in Saratoga Springs, he said “Nothing

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<sup>86</sup> Barton, 20.

<sup>87</sup> Clurman, *The Fervent Years*, 25-30.

<sup>88</sup> Helen Westley, “An Actor’s Relation to the Art Theatre and Vice Versa,” in Walter Pritchard Eaton, *The Theatre Guild: The First Ten Years with Articles by The Directors* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1929), 179.

<sup>89</sup> Clurman, *The Fervent Years*, 25.

is alive which does not create; nothing will create that does not affirm, nothing can be affirmed where there is no belief.” Clurman was commenting on the lack of direction for the latest incarnation of the Guild magazine but he might have had the Guild Board in mind. In his estimation, it had subtly changed from a group “that produced ‘Liliom’ and ‘Processional’, ‘Goat Song’ and ‘Strange Interlude’, ‘Masse Mensch’ and ‘Right You Are’” into one intent on “issuing a perfectly ‘safe’ magazine.”<sup>90</sup> The similarity to Barton’s comments of a year earlier is strong.

Clurman also drifted away because the Theatre Guild began to choose plays that did not interest him and that he thought unworthy of a Guild production. For example, in 1930 Clurman read Jean Giraudoux’s *Amphitryon* 38 and noted that although “It is enchantingly written and very clever as well as imaginative in the manner of minor French comedy it was “purely literary ... and would send our audience to sleep.”<sup>91</sup> Nonetheless, five years later the Guild was considering the play as a vehicle for Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, who since their joint appearance in *The Guardsman* (1924) had become the most popular husband and wife team in theatre and the Guild’s greatest drawing card.<sup>92</sup> In 1937 the Lunts, in conjunction with the Theatre Guild, staged an

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<sup>90</sup> Harold Clurman, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 30 August 1930, 1, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 33 – Harold Clurman Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>91</sup> Harold Clurman, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 24 July 1930, 1, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 33 – Harold Clurman Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Clurman spent the summer in Saratoga Springs where he was “working here quietly: writing articles on the theatre, reading plays for the Guild and surveying once more the realm of Greek and Elizabethan drama.”

<sup>92</sup> For a capsule of the Lunt’s career with the Theatre Guild before 1948, see *The Story of the Theatre Guild*, 10-11.

adaptation of the play which toured before opening in New York to less than enthusiastic critical response, some of which echoed Clurman's original misgivings.<sup>93</sup> The more plays Clurman read, the more that he realized that he and the Guild had different ideas on what made good theatre.

In November of 1930 Clurman began meetings that would lead to the formation of the Group Theatre in May 1931,<sup>94</sup> and in letter to Helburn on Christmas Day 1930 felt compelled to account for his aesthetic estrangement from the Guild. She had asked him to explain what "plays had moved me during the past two years – and speak of tears or some such physical manifestation – as an indication of emotion." After a lengthy discussion of what the word "moved" meant in the connotation of being an audience member, Clurman answered her by writing "Whenever I find virtue in a play, I may be said to moved by it ...," although his emotional response may not have been what Helburn and others expected.<sup>95</sup> Clurman ended the letter with a series of questions that illustrate both his defensiveness and growing isolation from the Theatre Guild type of play at the beginning of its second decade of existence.

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<sup>93</sup> For a discussion of the production's genesis and journey to New York see Waldau, 256-262. In his review for the *New York Times* Brooks Atkinson noted that "Although the bedroom joke is more durable than most, it is still only one joke for the space of three acts, and it stumbles through a monotonous stretch in the middle of the evening." Brooks Atkinson, "Review of *Amphitryon 38*," *New York Times* 2 November 1937, 32. This is similar to Clurman's prior opinion that the play's "quality is essentially the good old French bouquet sentimentality about the bed." Clurman, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 24 July 1930, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Clurman, *The Fervent Years*, 32-37.

<sup>95</sup> Harold Clurman, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 25 December 1930, 1-2, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 33 – Harold Clurman Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

What play produced by the Guild during the last two years has moved you deeply in the sense that you were moved by *He Who Gets Slapped*? What play of recent memory do you commend to me because of a universal and inescapable emotional appeal which you feel my too-hard-head alone will not permit me to appreciate? If you can name one, I give you leave to broadcast a denunciation of my aesthetic! If you can't, should you not offer to publish a volume of my selected reports and promise to read them in the rainy seasons?<sup>96</sup>

By the end of 1931, Clurman made his break with the Guild in a letter to the Board that touched upon the same frustrations he had earlier expressed to Helburn. Clurman no longer wished to serve as a play reader because “For the past few months my job in the play department has consisted with little exception of reading plays of absolutely no merit, plays which required no particular knowledge or experience to put down as bad.”<sup>97</sup> Two weeks before his resignation, Clurman had published an article in the *New York Times* in which he had outlined the purpose of the Group Theatre. In it, he (unconsciously or not) referenced the Theatre Guild and its penchant for producing great plays. “To say, as many have said, that the new theatre hopes to do ‘good plays’ would in the last count be evasive, for the term is so variable and general as to be meaningless.” Clurman wanted a theatre that would “give voice to the essential moral and social preoccupations of our time.”<sup>98</sup> In other words, he needed more from the theatre than the Guild was either willing or able to provide.

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<sup>96</sup> Clurman, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 25 December 1930, 3.

<sup>97</sup> Harold Clurman, Letter to Theatre Guild Board of Directors, 27 December 1931, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 33 – Harold Clurman Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>98</sup> Harold Clurman, “The Group Theatre Speaks for Itself,” *New York Times*, 13 December 1931, X2.

Although the differences of opinion might seem to be minor, one can view Clurman's disaffection as a symptom of the larger problem Barton noted: the Guild's tendency to deviate from producing meaningful plays for the faithful. As a result, it was losing the experimentation and fervor that those like Clurman could appreciate and provide. During the turbulent 1930s, the Theatre Guild continued to produce plays that collectively the Board members felt were acceptable. Clurman and others bent on social issues could do what they might but the Theatre Guild would concentrate on its aesthetic goal. Wertheim had referred to this when he earlier wrote "The public wants the best — not the worst — and if you have it in you to provide them with the best and are willing to work hard, you can become self-supporting as well as successful."<sup>99</sup> Christopher Bigsby has noted that the Theatre Guild "developed no social or aesthetic programme."<sup>100</sup> It was as likely to produce a left-wing propaganda play as a Bernard Shaw comedy or a Maxwell Anderson historical drama. For the Theatre Guild's first decade, this philosophy was enough. However, in the 1930s the artistic and commercial health of the Guild began deteriorating.

In her autobiography, Theresa Helburn explained the downward commercial spiral of the Guild during the 1930s as a deadly combination of circumstance and competition. By 1938 the once powerful Theatre Guild "came as close as it ever will come to being abandoned in despair." In her estimation, the criticism that contended that

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<sup>99</sup> Wertheim, 172.

<sup>100</sup> Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Volume One*, 121.

the Guild had lowered its standards by producing unworthy plays was unfounded.<sup>101</sup>

After all, in the first eight years of the decade the Guild had fifteen plays selected for inclusion in Burns Mantle's *Best Play* series of which two won Pulitzer Prizes.<sup>102</sup> What had crippled the Guild in was in her view:

the long and devastating effect on the economy of the nation caused by the Depression; the enormous and rapidly increasing costs; the fact that Hollywood had claimed not only many of the finest actors but a number of the most promising playwrights. Other theaters were now offering real competition by presenting fine plays. And last, but not least, a whole series of financially disastrous plays.<sup>103</sup>

In many ways, the 1930s ensnared the Guild in a classic double bind. It had attempted to hold fast to its stated goal of producing "artistic plays" for their own sake, but often those plays were not commercially feasible. However, if it tried to select plays that might have had a chance a reaching a broader audience base, it risked alienating its core supporters. Added to this problem was the subscription system which worked so beautifully on successful or moderately successful plays. Unfortunately for the Guild, if a play was a flop then the subscription system only compounded the situation. As Helburn described it,

When all went well we were in clover. We could start a season with more money in the bank than most producers ever saw. If our plays succeeded, the money could remain as a nice and comforting nest egg. But when the plays flopped we

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<sup>101</sup> Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*, 296-297.

<sup>102</sup> For a list of the plays see *The Story of the Theatre Guild*, 34-35. The Pulitzer winners were *Both Your Houses* (1933) by Maxwell Anderson and *Idiot's Delight* (1936) by Robert Sherwood.

<sup>103</sup> Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*, 296.

were in trouble because we had to continue to run them until all the subscription audience had seen them. In that case, we were taking a real beating.<sup>104</sup>

The combination of sniping from within and economic misfortune increased the pressure on the Board to make changes. For example, Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times*, long a Guild supporter, expressed the impatience of many audience members after the close of the 1933-1934 season in article sub-headed “After One of Its Most Successful Seasons the Theatre Guild Begins to Look Middle-Aged.” Even though the season had had a fair share of hits, Atkinson was uneasy about the Guild’s prospects for the future. Although lauding such productions as the return of George M. Cohan in *Ah Wilderness!*, Atkinson nonetheless felt something lacking. The Guild, once the epitome of experimentation, “has concluded its season with a bright, clever, wicked little comedy that is indistinguishable from the primrose dalliance of Broadway.”<sup>105</sup> Part of the problem lay in the absence of the Lunts who were “currently electrifying London audiences in ‘Reunion in Vienna,’” but the real problem lay with the Guild Board. “Enthusiasm, exuberance, enterprise,” were the qualities Atkinson believed essential to theatre and currently lacking in the Guild. “Although the Guild has seldom been gay,” wrote Atkinson, “it was once more aggressive and alert and it was once bursting with original ideas.” Although a loyal supporter of the Guild (“No intelligent playgoer can get on without it.”), Atkinson called for a change in direction: “The Guild needs the tonic of

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<sup>104</sup> Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*, 298.

<sup>105</sup> The comedy was *Jig Saw* by Dawn Powell. Although Atkinson found it “dull on the surface but ... bright on top,” and amusing, Gerald Bordman later called it “yet another bad play.” See Brooks Atkinson, “Review of *Jig Saw*,” *New York Times*, 1 May 1934, 26; Gerald Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930-1969* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 96.



a bold experiment. When it comes we shall probably damn it, but it will be encouraging to feel that the Guild is still interested in the advance of the drama.”<sup>106</sup>

Interestingly, Atkinson’s criticism came after a financially successful season for the Guild. Financial failures brought problems of their own and generally served to exacerbate tensions in the Board which had been present since Duncan, Peters, and Freeman left at the beginning of the 1919-1920 season. For some time, there had been conflict within the Board over such matters as play selection, casting decisions, and the director’s authority over the production. During April of 1931, at about the same time Clurman and others were meeting to form the Group Theatre, Langner called an emergency meeting of the Board to settle the problem of what he called “director-dictator.” For a brief period in 1930 and 1931 stage directors Rouben Mamoulian and Herbert Biberman served on the Board shifting the balance of power toward the director and away from the designers and producers. The resolution of the crisis resulted in Biberman being forced to leave and agreements on what specific duties each Board member would have in future productions. One of these stipulated that “a production committee of two members of the Board would be selected for each play by a majority vote of the entire membership.”<sup>107</sup> In effect, only two Board members (rather than the entire Board) would have production responsibilities for all aspects of an individual play. It was a stipulation that would prove more important in the future. Langner believed the Guild came through it all “in a far healthier condition, and its good results were shown in

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<sup>106</sup> Brooks Atkinson, “Sixteen Years Old,” *New York Times*, 6 May 1934, X1.

<sup>107</sup> Waldau, 117; Langner 250. Langner’s account adds the stipulation that “said committee to be in charge of each play and have the right to call the full Board to rehearsals for advice.”

the improvement in our productions and personal relations in the seasons which directly followed.<sup>108</sup> Others on the Board felt differently, but the faction of Langner, Helburn, and Wertheim carried the day.<sup>109</sup> After every major conflict from 1919 until 1931, the producing and business faction within the Board became stronger than the artistic faction. This was a pattern that would continue throughout the Theatre Guild's second decade as Langner, Helburn and Wertheim became more prominent than Simonson, Moeller and Westley.

As the 1930s wore on and the Depression deepened, the Guild suffered more and more box-office setbacks resulting in a number of defections as various actors and board members left New York for greener pastures in Hollywood. During the 1933-1934 season, Helen Westley took a leave of absence to act in a motion picture and the following season, Philip Moeller and Lee Simonson both asked their fellow Board members permission to follow Westley's lead. Consequently, Moeller signed a directing contract with RKO and spent his time shuttling from coast-to-coast while Simonson made preparations to leave in December 1933 for a period of eight months. Theresa Helburn

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<sup>108</sup> For the events surrounding what Langner called "the Regime of the Directors," see Langner, 247-251. Biberman had studied with Meyerhold in the Soviet Union and the *New York Times* described him as "the Guild's counselor on revolutionary theatricals" after his direction of *Red Rust* in 1929. He left the Guild for Hollywood and eventually gained notoriety of a sort by becoming one of the "Hollywood 10" in 1947. In 1950, he served six months for contempt of Congress. See "A Director's Way with 'Roar China,'" *New York Times*, 2 November 1930, X2; and obituary at *New York Times*, 1 July 1971, 50. Mamoulian had a distinguished career both on stage and in films and is known for directing the Theatre Guild productions *Porgy* (1927) and *Marco's Millions* (1928) as well as their landmark musicals *Oklahoma!* (1943) and *Carousel* (1945). See his entries in Cawkwell and Smith, 176; and Bordman and Hirsch, 410.

<sup>109</sup> See Waldau 110-120 for a detailed account. It during these discussions in April 1931 that Helburn resigned as Executive Director and exclusively became a Board member.

followed suit by working for Columbia Pictures for most of 1935.<sup>110</sup> In the past the Guild had supplemented the composition of the Board by periodically adding members. Partially to compensate for the effect the turnover in Board membership had on the organization and to partially solidify the connection between the Guild and the Lunts, Alfred Lunt became a permanent Board member in the spring of 1935.<sup>111</sup> The addition of Lunt temporarily stabilized the Board but another crisis in management arose in early 1938 with the defection of five of the Guild's most prominent playwrights.

As Brooks Atkinson recounts, the beginning of the Playwrights Company came when Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, and Robert E. Sherwood met for drinks after a Dramatist Guild meeting in November 1937. Sidney Howard and S.N. Behrman quickly came on board and in early 1938 they announced that henceforth they would be operating as their own production company.<sup>112</sup> Although this alliance affected other producers, it struck the Theatre Guild particularly hard. Since 1923, the five playwrights had contributed nineteen plays or adaptations to the Guild, including six of its twelve most

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<sup>110</sup> Waldau, 191-192; Langner, 258; Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*, 300-301. Westley eventually made thirty-eight movies before her death in 1942. See *New York Times*, 13 December 1942, 74 for her obituary. For a list of her films see her entry in the Internet Movie Database online at <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0922818/>, accessed 10 November 2006. Philip Moeller signed a three-year contract with RKO and directed two films, *The Age of Innocence* (1934) and *Break of Hearts* (1935). See *New York Times*, 27 April 1958, 86 for his death notice and his entry in the Internet Movie Database online at <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0595451/>, accessed 10 November 2006.

<sup>111</sup> For the circumstances surrounding Lunt's appointment, see Waldau 207. Lunt asked that the Board keep the appointment from the press until the fall when he and his wife would open the New York production of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

<sup>112</sup> For a thorough discussion of the founding company and the ramifications on the New York theatrical community, see Brooks Atkinson, *Broadway* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), 267-283.

recent productions.<sup>113</sup> Devastated, Langner recalled that he called an agent who represented some of the offending writers and facetiously “suggested somewhat bitterly that they take over the Guild subscription as well, since I saw little prospect of the Guild being able to continue without the support of these representative playwrights.”<sup>114</sup> In past years, the Guild had experienced problems working with writers who objected to dealing with a committee rather than one or two producers. The loss of five of the most prominent playwrights in the country (fortunately not including Eugene O’Neill) left the Guild without the steady pipeline of scripts upon which it depended.<sup>115</sup> By the end of 1938, the Guild Board found itself on the brink of financial ruin. The members of the Board had to contribute \$60,000 of their own money to keep the Guild solvent.<sup>116</sup> In 1919, the successful production of *John Ferguson* rescued the Theatre Guild from an aborted beginning. In 1939, the Guild again found itself at the precipice. However another *deus ex machina* twist of fate ensued and it found a play that would deliver salvation of a kind. The play was Philip Barry’s *The Philadelphia Story*.

Barry had one demand when he approached the Guild with the play he was writing as a vehicle for Katharine Hepburn; he wanted Langner and Helburn to be the

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<sup>113</sup> The totals, beginning with Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* (1923) through S.N. Behrman’s *Wine of Choice* (1938) are: Elmer Rice, 1; Sidney Howard, 4; S.N. Behrman, 7; Maxwell Anderson, 5; Robert E. Sherwood, 2. See Langner, 474-477.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>115</sup> Unfounded rumors reached Helburn that Eugene O’Neill would join them. O’Neill, in the midst of working on a six-play cycle, reassured her that he was not in the position to “talk production of plays with anyone!” Even if he had been, he was not “the kind of heel who would naturally try to get away from you the moment you had tough luck!” Quoted in Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*, 272.

<sup>116</sup> Waldau, 323; Langner, 273.

Board members with complete control of the production. Given the dire financial straits in which it found itself, the Board had no choice but to agree and preparations began for a February 1939 opening in New Haven. Helburn had previously cast Hepburn in an adaptation of *Jane Eyre* that toured in the winter of 1936-1937 and liked her enormously.<sup>117</sup> Barry's work was a fortunate occurrence of the play and the actor merging perfectly. *The Philadelphia Story* opened in New York on 28 March 1939 and ran for 417 performances before continuing nearly another two years on the road. In another stroke of luck, Hollywood purchased the lucrative movie rights.<sup>118</sup> With its newfound financial success, the Guild found itself devoid of red ink almost overnight. It had, however, undergone fundamental changes. Before the windfall, in the spring and summer of 1939 there had been talk of disbanding the Guild with the Board in disarray and seemingly incapable of agreement.<sup>119</sup> After *The Philadelphia Story*, the situation was markedly different. Barry's ultimatum brought about a complete reorganization that took effect before the beginning of the 1939-1940 season. The Guild would continue, but as a vastly different organization; an organization no longer run by a committee of seven, but by two individuals—Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn. Although no one in later years could agree on just how the Board came to the arrangement, the composition of the new leadership seemed to be a natural product of the debates within the Guild's

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<sup>117</sup> The play did not have a New York production. Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*, 302-307.

<sup>118</sup> Waldau, 329-332; Langner, 316-320; Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*, 302-309.

<sup>119</sup> Langner, 274.

Board that had taken place for more than decade. In nearly every philosophical dispute, Langner and Helburn had been on the winning side.<sup>120</sup>

When the Guild raised the curtain on its first season under the new regime (William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life* in October 1939), Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner had complete artistic control of the Guild. The two of them and Maurice Wertheim comprised the entire board. Philip Moeller, Lee Simonson, and Helen Westley had become merely advisors, there if needed, but seldom consulted. Alfred Lunt had resigned. How this occurred became public knowledge after the settlement of an unsuccessful 1950 lawsuit brought by Simonson and others against Helburn, Langner, Wertheim, and Warren Munsell challenging a contract that they had all signed in 1941. The contract had ratified the unofficial arrangement under which the Guild had operated after *The Philadelphia Story*. According to court documents, the "purpose of the agreement was to solidify and perpetuate this arrangement so that the talents of Mr. Langner and Miss Helburn could be made effective for the benefit of the corporation." At that time, the Guild still owed \$45,000 in back salaries and bondholders were claiming debts of \$375,000. However, because of the "spectacular success of [*The Philadelphia*

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<sup>120</sup> Langner, Helburn, and the Guild's official history tended to characterize it as a natural development in the history of the Guild. Simonson was convinced it was the culmination of a power play that the victors had been planning for years. See Waldau, 334-335 for a synopsis of the debate. Also see Langner, 320; Helburn, *A Wayward Quest* 302; *The Story of the Theatre Guild*, 4. Even with the Barry play the Guild needed a consistent source of scripts. The job of recruiting new writers fell to John Gassner, the primary play reader. In September 1939 Gassner commented that several playwrights were possibilities for the Guild including Irwin Shaw, Thornton Wilder and the young Arthur Miller. "Now that Miller has left the rank of dissenters, how about acquiring him for our playwrights [sic] course." Miller was late of the Federal Theatre project and Gassner thought he had "unusual promise." John Gassner, Memo to Theresa Helburn, 8 September 1939. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 52 –Folder John Gassner Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

*Story*], as well as other successful plays produced under the same guidance and control” the agreement became official at the Board meeting of 9 December 1941, although it had been in effect for the past two years.<sup>121</sup>

The 1941 agreement included several points which became the basis for the Theatre Guild’s future career in broadcasting. One clause allowed Helburn and Langner “to engage in personal ventures, provided the question of competition with the Guild is first passed upon by an umpire. The umpire may take into consideration the question of whether the proposed venture involves plays of ‘Guild standard’.”<sup>122</sup> All parties at the time understood that these new ventures would include radio, television and film since they had previously considered them. A 1941 draft contract for Langner includes a clause compensating him if he “either alone or with Theresa Helburn, the other Administrative Director, should extend the activities of the Guild to any of the following fields: (1) radio; (2) motion pictures ...” The same clause specifies that “the provisions of this paragraph are not intended to and shall not apply to sales of subsidiary rights (including motion picture, radio and television rights) of Guild plays, the entire proceeds of which shall at all times inure directly to the Guild.”<sup>123</sup> Clearly, broadcasting was part of the equation. Most likely, what the outgoing directors did not foresee was the extent to which Langner and Helburn would exercise their rights to expand the Guild’s interests.

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<sup>121</sup> Lee Simonson et al., Plaintiffs, v. Theresa Helburn et al., Defendants, 11.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>123</sup> Draft Employment Agreement for Lawrence Langner, n. d., Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 78 – Lawrence Langer Folders, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 3-4. Internal evidence dates the contract to 1941. It mentions a 7 January 1941 agreement “which will remain in effect” until the parties ratify a new one. However, it differs in some respects from the one that the parties signed on 9 December 1941.

With the change in management, Langner and Helburn found few constraints upon them. As long as they held to the “Guild standard,” however an outside arbiter defined the term, they were free to move into areas peripheral to the legitimate stage. In the time period directly after *The Philadelphia Story* and the replenishing of the Guild’s coffers, there is no evidence that they initially strayed from the standard Theatre Guild line of experimentation and art. Rather, the next play they presented was William Saroyan’s’ unconventional *My Heart’s in the Highlands*, originally done by the Group Theatre and which the Guild moved to their larger venue at the Guild Theatre on 13 April 1939. Ironically, Lee Simonson had to defend the choice to an irate subscriber.

So many of our subscribers, including yourself, seem to demand of us only the equivalent of Broadway successes. If we put on a hit like “Philadelphia Story”, everyone seems satisfied. When we live up to our traditions as an experimental theatre, it is our subscribers who begin to grouch, including yourself. You complain that the present Saroyan play is a shapeless as an oyster without a shell. Thus, when you get an experimental play you, like most of our subscribers, won’t accept the aspects of it which are experimental. Formlessness is one cliché criticism that has been hurled at experimental plays from Shaw’s middle period conversation pieces backwards and forward. An experimental play does not have ‘everything’, in Hollywood parlance. It has certain qualities which make it worthwhile to put on despite incompleteness in other aspects. Saroyan’s play has unique qualities of mood, of presentation, of characterization and philosophy. It is not a play in the good old Aristotelian convention with an obvious beginning, a middle and an end. But unless you will accept the experimental nature of experimental plays when the Guild does them, what can we do with subscribers such as yourself?”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Lee Simonson, Letter to DeWitt Gutman, n. d., Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 57 –Folder GU, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Although the letter is not dated, the play was most probably *My Heart’s in the Highlands* and not *The Time of Your Life*. Gutman wrote to the *New York Times* complaining about that later production and his argument differed from the one to which Simonson appears to be responding. See DeWitt Gutman, “Letter to the Drama Editor, *New York Times*, 26 November 1939, 132. The date of the letter was 15 November 1939. For details on the Guild production of *My Heart’s in the Highlands*, see Waldau, 477.



It was to be a parting shot by Simonson in defense of the Guild. After twenty years, the organization was beginning a new journey and he would not be along for the ride. The Guild would continue to experiment, although not on the stage. Within four years of the December 1941 agreement, Helburn and Langner would have the Theatre Guild on the air with a weekly radio program. Although the venue had changed, the message remained the same. They would persevere in “stimulating American theatre in every direction.” In this case the direction would be radio.

## Chapter 2: “Plays of Distinction and Performances of Quality” – *The Theatre Guild on the Air.*<sup>1</sup>

The Theatre Guild began life as an organization dedicated to elevating what its founders had seen as an artistic medium lacking any consistent aesthetic merit – the Broadway stage. Twenty years later, having survived numerous ups and downs, the Theatre Guild remained, at least on the surface, dedicated to the production of “plays of artistic merit not ordinarily produced by the commercial managers.” Similarly, the Guild still cultivated a “special” audience which it felt it could attract by choosing plays with artistic merit as the sole criterion. As the 1930s ended and the 1940s began, adherence to these principles came into conflict with two Guild aspirations which resulted in a gradual metamorphosis of the Theatre Guild from experimental to conventional. The aspirations, neither unreasonable, were financial stability and a vast increase in the audience for Guild plays.

By 1938, financial realities overwhelmed the Guild. The delicate balance between art and commerce necessitated a shift toward the latter. Like it or not, solvency required financial success, a lesson the Guild learned in 1919 with *John Ferguson* and had reinforced in 1939 with *The Philadelphia Story*. One way to help ensure financial success was brand recognition, something the Guild cultivated not only with its own name, but through its association with well-known playwrights and actors, hence its disappointment with the defection of the Playwrights Company and cultivation of Lunt and Fontanne. There had been a tremendous alteration in the landscape of popular entertainment in America between 1919 and 1939, making brand recognition more

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<sup>1</sup>H. William Fitelson describing the content of *Theatre Guild on the Air* in Fitelson, ed., *Theatre Guild on the Air*, xii.

important than ever. The change was commercial radio, a medium roughly as old as the Theatre Guild and one which by 1940 reached in excess of eighty percent of all Americans. It was a tempting audience and one hard to ignore, especially for those who wished to spread an aesthetic as did Langner and Helburn. However, it was an audience that was immeasurably more difficult to categorize than the theatregoers who patronized Guild plays. From the beginning of the organization, the Guild had cultivated a singular type of audience, one in tune with the Guild's artistic sensibilities. In order to appeal to a nationwide audience, the Guild would need to change tactics. Shortly after taking *de facto* if not *de jure* control of the Theatre Guild in the early 1940s, Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner began actively investigating the possibility of producing a commercial radio program. However, remaining true to the Theatre Guild's credo, the broadcasts would consist of adaptations of stage plays. Their plan was threefold: to find a way to tap into the vast audience that radio could deliver (approximately 28.5 million families in 1940), deliver their own product, and make it stand out within a genre with which radio audiences were already familiar.<sup>2</sup>

The partnership between theatre and radio was one which had existed almost from the beginning of commercial broadcasting. From the early 1920s radio programs appropriated theatrical plays as source material. When local station WGY in Schenectady, New York began airing dramatic programs in August 1922 it included Ibsen's *Wild Duck* as well as several one-acts. Three months later, Cincinnati's WLW began airing dramatic scenes and plays, one of which, coincidentally, was Langner's

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<sup>2</sup> The estimated size of radio audiences circa 1940 are from Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 176.

*Matinata* which aired on 23 November 1922.<sup>3</sup> After the beginning of network radio at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s the trend continued. For example, an hour-long program, *Radio Guild*, debuted in November 1929 over the NBC Blue Network with a presentation of *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>4</sup> For the next two decades, radio adaptations of stage plays dominated non-music commercial dramas and comedies. The *Lux Radio Theatre* began broadcasting in 1934 and continued for twenty years airing a steady diet of both stage and film adaptations.<sup>5</sup> *The Campbell Playhouse*, featuring Orson Welles and his Mercury Theatre players, broadcast the first radio adaptation of *Our Town* in 1939.<sup>6</sup> It seemed only fitting that the Theatre Guild should become part of an industry that had leaned so heavily on stage plays.

Langner and Helburn had connections and experiences with radio that predated the organizational breakup that left them in control of the Guild. In February 1930 Theresa Helburn appeared on WJZ in New York to introduce an excerpt from *Pygmalion* broadcast over that station as part of a celebration of National Drama Week by NBC and

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<sup>3</sup> Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume 1—to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 136-137.

<sup>4</sup> The program lasted until 1940 airing adaptations of plays, books and short stories mixed in with original scripts. From 7 November 35 until 13 February 1936 it aired fourteen programs based upon Shakespeare's plays devoted to English kings from John to Henry VIII. See Grams, Jr., 394-400.

<sup>5</sup> The program began in New York with adaptations of Broadway plays but in 1936 moved to Hollywood and featured Cecil B. DeMille as host. Subsequently it primarily aired adaptations of popular films. See John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 416-419 and Grams, Jr., 292-315.

<sup>6</sup> Grams, Jr., 53.

the Church and Drama League.<sup>7</sup> She also made several appearances as a guest on interview and discussion programs such as “Critics and Counter-Critics,” which aired in 1933 (also on WJZ).<sup>8</sup> Later that year, Lawrence Langer and his wife Armina Marshall Langner were among the honored guests of NBC at the grand opening of its Radio City Studio, with seating for twelve-hundred, on 11 November. One can imagine that NBC’s distribution of the one-hour program over “every NBC station in the United States, Canada and Hawaii and ... by short waves to all parts of the world” would have impressed the Guild directors in their positions as business leaders in the entertainment industry.<sup>9</sup> Commercial radio was not the only broadcasting concern expressing interest in the Theatre Guild. In October of 1936, Levering Tyson, the Secretary and Director of the National Advisory Council on Radio in Education, contacted Helburn with an interesting, and somewhat flattering, proposal considering the fact that Helburn had little practical experience in radio. Would she consider chairing the Radio Drama panel at the

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<sup>7</sup> The broadcast aired on 15 February at 11:00 P.M. and also featured excerpts from *Street Scene* and *Death Takes a Holiday* as well as an address by Frank Gilmore, president of Actors’ Equity. “Plays on Air Tomorrow,” *New York Times*, 14 February 1930, 27.

<sup>8</sup> The program on which Helburn appeared included Dr. Henry Moskowitz, President of the New York Drama League, playwright Dawn Powell, and theatre critic John Anderson among others. It aired on Friday afternoons from 5:00 to 5:30. *New York Times*, 24 February 1933, 20.

<sup>9</sup> “Radio City Studio Dedicated by NBC,” *New York Times*, 12 November 1933, N6. The Langners also received thank you notes from NBC for “your splendid spirit of cooperation as well as your efforts in making the inaugural programs of the National Broadcasting Company so outstandingly successful.” See George Engles (NBC Artists Service, Office of the Vice President), Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Langner, 15 November 1933, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 98 –Folder NA, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Also see John F. Royal, Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Langner, 6 December 1933, Box 98 –Folder NA, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

upcoming “First National Conference on Educational Broadcasting” to be held in Washington D.C. in December?<sup>10</sup> Helburn declined, not necessarily because it did not interest her, but because as she told a friend, “it is out of town in Washington and the week before one of our openings – and I cannot see that is worth the effort.”<sup>11</sup>

Even if Helburn and Langner had seriously considered moving the Guild into radio in the mid-1930s, limitations on their roles as Guild directors would have precluded it. However, the reorganization of the Guild in the 1940s, which allowed the directors to extend the Guild’s activities into other fields, gave them the liberty to investigate other performance venues including radio. One of the first discussions on the subject arose out of a suggestion to Helburn by Joel Hammil, a student at a dramatic workshop held at the New School for Social Research under the direction of Erwin Piscator.<sup>12</sup> While in a playwrighting class taught by John Gassner, the Guild’s play reader, Hammil broached the idea of “creating a radio writing group from among the young play-wrights” so that they might earn money while honing their craft. Gassner suggested that Hammil contact

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<sup>10</sup> Levering Tyson, Letters to Theresa Helburn, 12 October 1936 and 13 October 1936, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 98 –Folder N, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>11</sup> Theresa Helburn, Letter to Ruth Benedict, 19 October 1936, Box 98 –Folder N, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Benedict worked with Helburn on the Bureau of New Plays, a playwrighting contest Helburn organized on 4 May 1936. See *Washington Post*, 1 October 1937, 16; Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*, 253-255. For Helburn’s response to Tyson see Theresa Helburn, Letter to Levering Tyson, 21 October 1936, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 98 – Folder N, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>12</sup> The workshop opened on 15 January 1940. For information on the faculty and areas of instruction, see “Drama Workshop to Open,” *New York Times*, 29 November 1939, 19; “School to Teach Work of the Stage,” *New York Times*, 10 December 1939, 77.

Helburn, which he did in July 1940. Hammil's idea, which he shared with fellow budding playwright Seymour Goss, was to launch a commercial radio program under the banner of the Theatre Guild.<sup>13</sup> Although Helburn took no action on Hammil's idea for the Guild (she did suggest he discuss it further with Gassner), she had recently participated in a radio-theatre partnership that demonstrated the ability of the former to reach patrons of the latter.<sup>14</sup> On 26 May 1940 Helburn served as "mistress of ceremonies" for one segment of a marathon radio fundraiser to benefit two charities, the Red Cross and the Greater New York Fund. Her broadcast featured, among other performers, Laurence Olivier and Vivian Leigh in the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* and Jessie Royce Landis singing "one of her numbers in William Saroyan's play, 'Love's Old Sweet Song'."<sup>15</sup> In many ways, a radio broadcast before an enthusiastic studio audience can be as seductive as a theatrical performance.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Joel Hammil, Letters to Theresa Helburn, 15 July 1940 and 18 July 1940, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 58–Joel Hammil Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Seymour Goss had some success as a playwright. His play *The Moorings* opened at the Long Beach Theatre on Long Island on 14 August 1939. "Summer Trials," *New York Times*, 13 August 1939, X1.

<sup>14</sup> Theresa Helburn, Letter to Joel Hammil, 18 July 1940, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 58–Joel Hammil Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>15</sup> Cosmo Sileo, "Microphone Presents," *New York Times*, 26 May 1940, X8. The benefit included twenty-five separate broadcasts from 26 May until 1 June 1940. Helburn's show originated from Radio City and station WEAJ at 4 PM on Sunday 26 May.

<sup>16</sup> Erik Barnouw noted that most variety and comedy broadcasts of the time had "studio audiences whose reactions were considered part of the show." John Royal of NBC attributed this to the insistence of Ed Wynn and Eddie Cantor, both of whom "had suffered early agonies in performing in empty studios." Thus in both venues, the connection between performer and audience member was important. See Erik Barnouw,

It is conceivable that Helburn's appearance on the radio stage, surrounded by theatrical luminaries, made her receptive to the notion of using radio to further the Guild's aims. Less than year later, Helburn and the Guild were further tempted, this time by Yasha Frank of CBS who approached Theresa Helburn in March 1941 with an offer about a summer replacement for the CBS program *The Silver Theater*. Frank envisioned using "second generation young people of theatrical families to form a summer stock company of the air."<sup>17</sup> Although Helburn was interested in the idea, nothing came of the plan when CBS found another venture to fill the Sunday evening time slot.<sup>18</sup> However, even if Helburn and Langner had wanted to move into radio at that time, there is doubt that they would have been able to. Certainly the December 1941 management agreement gave her and Langner the authority to do so, but that was still in the future. It seems clear that these first few investigations into and experiences with radio helped to dictate the terms of the later agreement. Interestingly, however, when the Guild did begin to

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*The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume II— 1933 to 1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 136 and note at bottom of page.

<sup>17</sup> The CBS inquiry included the appointment of "a director in whom you would have confidence to carry out the work. They would like you to appear on each program to introduce the idea to the public. They would go over the choice of plays with you – typical light summer stock plays – 30 min. program for 6 or 8 weeks. Would you be interested and what would you charge?" See unsigned Memo to Theresa Helburn, 11 March 1941. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 34–CBS Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. *The Silver Theater* was a Hollywood production using film talent. It debuted on 3 October 1937 and aired until 17 August 1947. See Grams, 432-437.

<sup>18</sup> Helburn was evidently so taken with the idea of a radio show that Frank wrote her "Your interest in the idea has aroused a great deal of enthusiasm here at CBS and we can think of several other clients for whom this summer stock policy would be appropriate." Yasha Frank, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 13 March 1941. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 34–CBS Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.



seriously consider exploring radio, the impetus came not from Helburn or Langner, but from Langner's wife Armina Marshall Langner.<sup>19</sup>

The agreement which left Langner and Helburn in control of the Guild gave them sufficient authority to expand the Guild's operations but left them understaffed. They no longer had several associates to share the duties of running both the business and artistic sides of the organization. If they were to implement any plans for expansion, radio or otherwise, they would need help. In April 1943, Marshall addressed this "lack of efficiency" in the Guild's operations due to the many hats both Helburn and Langner necessarily had to don. Marshall believed that "you both, LL and Terry, do not function to the fullest of your efficiency because you attempt to perform too many details yourselves." Her solution to this situation which "seems to me to be hurting the Guild," was to let Marshall handle some of the "routine details" and release Helburn and Langner to do what they did best, "fermenting ideas and creating productions and plays." In a seven-page letter Marshall described the ways in which she could help streamline the Guild's day-to-day business. She devoted the final three pages to a discussion of "Expansion" outside of customary Guild activities. Marshall proposed that Langner and Helburn allow her to work on the "promotion and administration of a Radio Department

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<sup>19</sup> During her tenure at the Theatre Guild, Armina Marshall Langner generally signed her correspondence with others as "Armina Marshall." For internal memos, she used "AML." Most Guild employees addressed her by her first name or as "Miss Marshall." In this work, I will use "Armina Marshall" as her professional name unless otherwise specified.

for the Guild.”<sup>20</sup> It was an expansion that would not have been possible prior to the reorganization but had become fair game for the new Theatre Guild.

Marshall suggested two possibilities for a Guild radio program. The first would be a sustaining, or unsponsored, program.<sup>21</sup> This would allow the Guild to hold back its “most important material, either plays or stars, but have a weekly program half theatre news and half entertainment, paying actors modest salaries, since you can get actors who are less than stars to work at a modest salary if they know they are having regular work...”<sup>22</sup> Marshall envisioned this type of program as a vehicle to promote the Guild via radio without the intensity demanded by the production of fully developed radio dramas. Deferring to the public appeal and authority of Langner and Helburn, Marshall suggested that they supervise the writing and production and “[have] the program headed by LL and TH as speakers, possibly alternating on the programs...” Marshall would develop and supervise the support staff. Given sufficient “leeway on it,” Marshall believed that if she began immediately, she “would have it ready by the time we open in

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<sup>20</sup> Armina Marshall, Letter to Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, 12 April 1943, 1-2. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 90–Marshall Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>21</sup> The unsponsored program worked to the advantage of both the producer and the radio network. It allowed the network to fulfill the terms of its licensure by broadcasting continuously. It also gave the network “a laboratory for the developing of new talent, possibly for future sponsorship.” See Erik Barnouw, *Handbook of Radio Writing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), 300.

<sup>22</sup> Armina Marshall, Letter to Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, 12 April 1943, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 90–Marshall Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 5.

the Fall.”<sup>23</sup> What Marshall was suggesting was similar to the radio fundraiser in which Helburn had participated in 1940, but would not display what the Guild had promoted as its distinctive brand of theatre. Her other suggestion addressed this concern.

The second possibility “would be a much more ambitious one, similar to the programs which have been discussed before which would be truly remunerative and would take in stars and plays.” Marshall recognized the complexity of a program of this type with its dependence on first-tier talent, both in writing and performing. However, this could play to the Guild’s strength since its foremost assets were the actors and playwrights with whom it had formed close relationships. Consequently, one of the Guild’s tasks in producing a commercially-sponsored and financially-lucrative program would be to bring “certain stars such as the Lunts, Judith [Anderson], Helen [Hayes], etc.” on board. She did not see this as a difficult assignment, at least as far as actors were concerned. In the 1940s, radio was a lucrative profession for star actors of, both of screen and stage. Marshall recalled a conversation she had with Alfred Lunt who told her that he could not turn down doing a radio program without his wife because “one makes so much money out of it.” Marshall believed Lunt’s fee was in the neighborhood of \$1,000 “which of course is not out of the question in case we set this up.”

Marshall had put forward two options. Whichever version Langner and Helburn chose made little difference to her, as long as they selected one. Although the second and more elaborate incarnation would come closer to propagating Theatre Guild plays, either one was of “extreme importance” in promoting the Guild both “during and after the war.”

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<sup>23</sup> Armina Marshall, Letter to Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, 12 April 1943, 6.

A radio series would “give the Guild universal publicity and help to make our productions as widely known as if they were done in pictures.”<sup>24</sup> The thrust of Marshall’s argument for radio, and most probably the reasoning behind the inclusion of the “outside activities” clause in the new management agreement, was that expanding the Guild’s reach was paramount. The Theatre Guild had begun as an organization dedicated to producing plays of artistic merit and promoting experimentation in the New York theatre community. In his 1939 response to a disgruntled subscriber, Lee Simonson argued for a continuation of experimentation even at the expense of a Broadway hit. By 1943 Simonson was gone and the new Guild had changed direction. Marshall’s rationale for entering radio ignored experimentation. It ignored artistic merit. Instead, it extolled the virtues of radio as a promotional tool, comparing future Guild productions with motion pictures. There was more than a little irony in Marshall’s allusion. In an article for the *North American Review* in 1937 entitled “The Theatre, Bloody but Unbowed,” Helburn acknowledged that first silent pictures and then talkies had robbed theatre of its audiences and practitioners. “As a business [theater] fell to second place, and, with the rise of radio, to third,” she wrote. Theater had become a “bad business and an increasingly difficult one,” leading Helburn to the conclusion that theatre’s “only hope is an art.”<sup>25</sup> Six years later Marshall argued for another path to success and Helburn appeared ready to convert.

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<sup>24</sup> Armina Marshall, Letter to Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, 12 April 1943, 6-7. It seems clear from this reference to past discussions, that the Guild directors had considered anthology programs of the sort previously mentioned as a way to distribute more widely the Guild product.

<sup>25</sup> Theresa Helburn, “The Theatre, Bloody but Unbowed,” *North American Review*, 243 no. 2 (Summer 1937), 231.

Langner and Helburn agreed with Marshall's suggestion that she take over some of their duties and by 24 June 1943 she had become the third member of the triumvirate that would guide the Guild through its broadcasting career. Although not a Guild director, Marshall would nonetheless act "in an executive capacity and not as a mere employee." She would be free to use her own "discretion" in carrying out her "duties and responsibilities although I will naturally check carefully with you both to be sure I am acting in accordance with your wishes." One of Marshall's major responsibilities would be "Creating and promoting a Radio Department for the Guild over which I would have the supervision for the Guild afterwards, along the lines set forth in my letter of April 12<sup>th</sup>." <sup>26</sup> The Guild had yet to decide upon the format the program would take, but through Marshall's initiative, Langner and Helburn had set the wheels in motion. They had taken the first step in expanding the scope of the Guild as granted in the 1941 management agreement.

Throughout the latter half of 1943 the Guild investigated possibilities for the proposed venture, but with little sense of urgency.<sup>27</sup> A windfall even larger than *The*

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<sup>26</sup> Armina Marshall, Letter to Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, 1 July 1943, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 90–Marshall Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 1-3. In the letter Marshall refers to a meeting with Helburn that took place the Thursday before. The agreement allowed Marshall to assist in all aspects of the Guild including casting, public relations, out-of-town subscription plans, contract negotiations and miscellaneous production duties. The radio department, however, was the only area over which she had control. It appears that Langner and Helburn finalized the position in the Guild Board meeting on 29 July 1943. See Notes on Conference between Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn, 29 July 1943. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 162-1943 Business Memos Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>27</sup> Memo to Theresa Helburn, 2 September 1943. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 62–Therese Helburn Correspondence Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. The unsigned memo, most probably from

*Philadelphia Story*, the Guild's production of *Oklahoma!* was in the midst of its first year on Broadway and Helburn and Langner were understandably preoccupied with both the production and the financial resources it brought to the Guild.<sup>28</sup> By early 1944, however, the broadcasting question had become slightly more urgent. The Guild had hoped to create a unique broadcast venue with which to promote itself by essentially transferring its stage productions to radio. Although other programs had used stage adaptations, none had promoted itself as a *theatre* company. As Marshall had explained, disseminating the Theatre Guild name to a broader public was all-important. However, in April 1944, Broadway producer Arthur Hopkins launched his radio series *Arthur Hopkins Presents* over the NBC radio network originating from station WAAF in New York City.<sup>29</sup> The Theatre Guild would not be the first Broadway producer on radio.

Hopkins' entry into radio placed the Guild on notice that unless it accelerated its radio endeavors it was in danger of being overshadowed. Hopkins was more than a mere rival. A Broadway practitioner of the first rank, both commercially and artistically, he had been active in New York theatre since 1912 and had his first success with *The Poor*

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Marshall, discusses the possibility of a radio department indicating that nothing had taken place since July.

<sup>28</sup> *Oklahoma!* opened at the St. James theater on 31 March 1943. It would run until 29 May 1948 for a then record of 2,212 performances. See Richard Norton, *A Chronology of American Musical Theater, Volume 2: 1912-1952* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 862. It is not within the scope of this work to comment on the Guild's success with *Oklahoma!* except to note that it allowed Langner and Helburn to experiment in other areas. For a brief summary of the consequences to the Guild of *Oklahoma!* see Waldau, 384-389; Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 368-383; Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*, 281-295.

<sup>29</sup> Notice of this production is in Jack Gould, "One Thing and Another Along Radio Row," *New York Times*, 16 April 1944, X5.

*Little Rich Girl* in 1913. In 1930 *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson characterized Hopkins's offerings as "plays with a gleam of originality in them, good casts, volatile settings and thoughtful direction." According to Atkinson, "When Mr. Hopkins 'presents' that hackneyed old verb musters up a dignity. His goods are worth looking at."<sup>30</sup> By 1944 Hopkins' reputation for theatrical quality was on a par with the Guild's and he had broken into radio first. It must have appeared to Marshall, Langner, and Helburn that Hopkins was getting the advance notice meant for the Guild. Jack Gould of the *New York Times* anticipated that Hopkins would do for radio what he had done for the stage. "Arthur Hopkins, one of Broadway's senior producers, is going to indulge in a bit of radio via NBC," wrote Gould in March 1944 when NBC announced the upcoming series. This indulgence would provide "One-hour dramatizations of some of his past hits," eventually including "*Holiday, What Price Glory, Paris Bound* and *Anna Christie*"<sup>31</sup> In short, it appeared as though Hopkins wanted to accomplish precisely what Marshall had outlined in her second proposal. After a week's delay, his program opened on 19 April with an adaptation of *Our Town*, featuring several members of the original Broadway production including Frank Craven as the Stage Manager.<sup>32</sup>

Over the next nine months, Hopkins produced thirty-five radio adaptations of stage plays ranging from fairly recent successes such as Thurber's and Nugent's *The*

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<sup>30</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "Hymn of Mild Thanksgiving, Arthur Hopkins Opening for the Adult Drama—Kenyon Nicholson's 'Torch Sing' for Local Color and Character," *New York Times*, 7 September 1930, X1.

<sup>31</sup> Jack Gould, "Radio Row: One Thing and Another," *New York Times*, 5 March 1944, X7.

<sup>32</sup> For a recorded transcription of the broadcast see *Arthur Hopkins Presents*, "Our Town," 19 April 1944, 59 min. CD47979, Jerry Haendiges Productions.

*Male Animal* (1940) to Maeterlinck's *The Bluebird* (1907).<sup>33</sup> However unlike many radio producers, Hopkins had a purpose beyond entertaining or selling a product, a purpose remarkably similar to the Guild's. "There have, of course, been other radio series that revived the great or at least worthy works of the stage in sixty-minute productions. None that comes to mind has done it so well as this one," wrote a reviewer after the program had been on for a month.<sup>34</sup> Behind the quality of the performances lay Hopkins and his vision of "a vast people's theatre" of radio that could help to revive what Hopkins believed was a steadily declining commercial theatre.<sup>35</sup> For the past twenty-five years, the Theatre Guild had been preaching the same message.

Both Helburn and Langner became part of the publicity for Hopkins' program due both to their long association and friendship with him and their joint place as leaders in the New York theatre community.<sup>36</sup> James F. Reilly, Executive Secretary of The League of New York Theatres, asked Langner to write a letter to Hopkins congratulating him on the program that NBC could use in publicity notices. Langner complied writing, "I am very happy to know that you are presenting a new weekly radio program entitled 'Arthur Hopkins Presents'. You have always been identified with all that has been the finest in

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<sup>33</sup> A list of the broadcasts is in Grams, Jr., 31-32.

<sup>34</sup> John K. Hutchens, "'Arthur Hopkins Presents,'" *New York Times*, 21 May 1944, X5.

<sup>35</sup> Arthur Hopkins, "Looking Toward a People's Theatre," *New York Times*, 30 July 1944, SM17, SM33.

<sup>36</sup> Langner wrote admiringly of Hopkins as one of the "'uptown' managers who had been courageous enough to break ground for the production of plays of high artistic merit" in the years immediately prior to the founding of the Theatre Guild. Later, Langner, Helburn and the Guild lost out to Hopkins for the first production of *Anna Christie*. See Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 117, 229.



the theatre and I am very happy that you are going to have this program on the air.”

Later, Hopkins and Clarence L. Menser, NBC’s Vice President in Charge of Programs, invited Helburn “to be present in the studio as our guest for this broadcast.” Helburn respectfully sent her regrets, saying that “Unfortunately, I shall not be able to attend, but I will try to listen in and I’ll be wishing you all kinds of success.”<sup>37</sup> With Hopkins’ program so closely mirroring the Guild’s aspirations for radio, one could imagine that publicizing it might have engendered mixed emotions in Helburn and Langner. Nevertheless, they, along with Marshall and the Guild’s attorney H. William Fitelson, began to move toward radio with a newfound sense of purpose.<sup>38</sup>

Although the Guild reorganization was common knowledge, the terms of the agreement were not. This meant that no one outside the Guild was necessarily privy to its plans for expansion. By mid-1944, Langner began to leak word to the public that the Guild was interested in areas other than theatre. At the conclusion of an interview for the Office of War Information radio program “Ten Minutes of Your Time,” broadcaster Oscar Rose asked Langner if the Guild had plans to enter “any of the other fields of

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<sup>37</sup> James F. Reilly, Letter to Lawrence Langner, 7 April 1944. Lawrence Langner, Letter to Arthur Hopkins, 12 April 1944. Langner addressed the letter to Hopkins but sent it to Edward Greif of NBC radio. Arthur Hopkins and Clarence L. Menser, Telegram to Theresa Helburn, 14 April 1944. Theresa Helburn, Letter to Clarence L. Menser, 17 April 1944. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 66–Arthur Hopkins Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>38</sup> H. William Fitelson was a noted entertainment attorney shuttling between New York and Hollywood before working for the Theatre Guild. Langner engaged him on a contingent basis to negotiate proposals with various Hollywood studios in 1944. Fitelson became the Guild’s chief counsel in 1945. See Thomas M. Pryor, “By Way of Report,” *New York Times*, 7 May 1944, X3; H. William Fitelson, Letter to Lawrence Langner, 6 September 1944. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 46–H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT; Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 428-429.

entertainment?” The answer is indicative of what he and Helburn intended for the Guild.

“About the only one we’re not contemplating invading is the circus,” Langner replied.

We have plans for an experimental Television theatre, and we’re also thinking of starting The Theatre Guild of the Air for radio. And we’d like to produce pictures. We’re negotiating the business details of all of these things right now, in addition to planning our regular program for next year.<sup>39</sup>

While Langner proclaimed the Guild’s new directions, Helburn emphasized the foundation upon which all Guild ventures rested—quality plays. Just before Rose posed his final question to Langner, he had asked Helburn to “sum up for us your ideas of the function of the theatre?”

Well, first the function of the theatre is to entertain, also to stimulate – not only to make you feel, but to make you think. Its greatest sin is to be dull; its second greatest is to be empty and superficial. The Guild intends to continue, through the medium of good plays, effectively produced, to help people to think honestly and intelligently, be the plays gay musicals, drawing-room comedies or social tragedies.<sup>40</sup>

Helburn’s public position on the nature of theatre and the Guild had not changed in the previous twenty-five years. “The medium of good plays, effectively produced,”

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<sup>39</sup> Transcript of interview for “Ten Minutes of Your Time,” n.d., Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 61–Helburn Personals Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. The broadcast’s intended audience was Australia and the South Pacific theater of operations. It most likely aired in the spring of 1944 during which the Guild was promoting its upcoming twenty-fifth anniversary. The interview includes a reference to *Jacobowsky and the Colonel* which opened in March 1944. An article on the same topic appeared in the *New York Times* in April. See H.I. Brock, “25 Years of the Guild and the Theatre,” 16 April 1944, *New York Times*, SM20. For information on the Office of War Information’s projects, see Howard Blue, *Words at War: World War II Era Radio Drama and the Postwar Broadcasting Industry Blacklist* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2002), 123-138; Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 241-244.

<sup>40</sup> Transcript of interview for “Ten Minutes of Your Time.”

would continue as a stated Theatre Guild credo. What she and Langner left unstated was a subtle but powerful change within the Guild's methods. When the Guild first started as a production company, it promoted a play based upon some inherent artistic value the play possessed. Langner was fond of pointing out the Guild was a company dedicated to playwrights. However, the move toward radio and outside activities in general, was to promote a play based upon its association with the Theatre Guild name. What had changed for Langner and Helburn was the meaning of the qualifier "good." Where once it had stood alone, it now became synonymous with "Theatre Guild."

Even though Hopkins' radio program predated any Guild effort, in retrospect it served a valuable function for the Guild. Hopkins made two critical errors that caused the program to last less than a year. First, he failed to obtain a commercial sponsor with the means to promote it actively. Second, he was unable to negotiate an acceptable day and hour for the program to air. Its abysmal time slot, 11:30 on Wednesday nights, doomed it to failure. "The fact remains," wrote one reviewer, "that it is 12:30 A.M. hereabouts when the curtain rings down and a vast number of people for who [sic] this would be one of the major radio events of the week almost certainly hear it seldom, if at all."<sup>41</sup> Throughout 1944, the Guild took steps to avoid Hopkins' mistakes.

Although the Guild showed some interest in a sustaining program at the CBS affiliate station WOR in New York, most of its interest lay in a more substantial program with a major sponsor.<sup>42</sup> In the summer of 1944, Langner gave notice that the Guild had

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<sup>41</sup> John K. Hutchens, "Radio Notebook," *New York Times*, 4 June 1944, X7.

<sup>42</sup> WOR was one of the original twelve stations in 1927 that formed what would later become the Columbia Broadcasting system. See Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 193-195. The Guild was still keeping WOR in the picture as late as the end of 1944. See Sara

moved beyond Hopkins. Sidney Lohman, in a 20 August 1944 column for the *New York Times*, passed on Langner's information that a plan was "in the talking stage, with nothing definite as yet," for "the United States Steel Company to sponsor a series of one-hour dramatizations of Guild hits of former years."<sup>43</sup> This information was not completely accurate. The Guild Board of Directors had unanimously accepted a proposal to produce a radio program under United States Steel's sponsorship at its meeting four days before.<sup>44</sup> Langner was hedging the Guild's bets against the deal falling through with his leaking of a tentative deal. During the mid-twentieth century, few corporations had deeper pockets than U.S. Steel. By announcing that the Guild and U.S. Steel were interested in one another, Langner gave the Guild immediate broadcasting credibility.

Throughout the summer and fall of 1944 the Guild negotiated possible radio scenarios. Fitelson met with both Steel (as the Guild referred to it) and the advertising firm of Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborne Inc., or BBD&O for short.<sup>45</sup> In the radio industry, advertising agencies served as not only advertisers but also program producers with nearly complete control of program content. By aligning itself with BBD&O, the

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Greenspan, Memo to Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, 30 December 1944, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 148–U.S. Steel Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>43</sup> Sidney Lohman, "One Thing and Another," *New York Times*, 20 August 1944, X5.

<sup>44</sup> Notes on Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting, 16 August 1944. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 162-1944 Business Memos Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>45</sup> H. William Fitelson, Letter to Lawrence Langner, 25 August 1944; H. William Fitelson, Letter to Lawrence Langner, 6 September 1944. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 46–H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

Guild formed another valuable partnership. BBD&O had a long history of successful radio productions and possessed an experienced staff.<sup>46</sup> On 27 November 1944, representatives of the Theatre Guild, BBD&O, and United States Steel met in Steel's New York Board Room at 71 Broadway to discuss the proposed program. Among the representatives of the prospective sponsor were Irving S. Olds, the Chairman of the Board, and J. Carlisle MacDonald, head of the firm's public relations. The advertising agency sent general partner Bruce Barton and three others. Langner, Helburn, Marshall, and Fitelson attended for the Guild. Also present were representatives of the radio networks CBS, NBC, and ABC, (formerly NBC Blue).<sup>47</sup> The purpose of the meeting was twofold. First, the three interested parties wanted to discuss proposed formats for the program. Second, the Guild and its sponsors wanted the three networks to compete with each other for an appropriate time slot, something that Hopkins had been unable to procure, the lack of which had helped doom his program.

The meeting ended successfully for the Theatre Guild, U.S. Steel, BBD&O and ABC with the parties agreeing in principle on a program. Two weeks later Langner authorized Fitelson "to advise the United States Steel Corporation and Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborne Inc. that a full hour between 6 P.M. and 11 P.M. on a Sunday

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<sup>46</sup> Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 16-17, 279. Since 1935, the agency had worked with another industrial giant, DuPont, on *Cavalcade of America*.

<sup>47</sup> Notes on attendance at meeting to discuss radio time possibilities, 27 November 1944. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 148-U.S. Steel Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. NBC's former Blue and Red networks split in October 1943 with the sale of the Blue network which became the American Broadcasting Company. In 1944 and 1945, many still called ABC the Blue Network, as did the Guild in its correspondence. For a description of the birth of ABC, see Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 188-190.

evening over the Blue Network, coast to coast is satisfactory to us.” Langner also agreed to an extension to 1 February 1945 to finalize the deal if necessary.<sup>48</sup> By the end of 1944, just days before Arthur Hopkins’ pioneering radio program faded from the airways, the Guild had secured an impressive sponsor, an experienced advertising agency, and an advantageous time slot (Sunday nights were home to some of the biggest names on radio including Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Ozzie and Harriet, and William Bendix as Chester A. Riley).<sup>49</sup> The only item left on the agenda was for the Guild to solidify the program’s format.

Although Langner and Helburn leaned toward Hopkins’ choice of full-length adaptations, as Langner had told the *New York Times* in August 1944, the devil was in the details. A hybrid of scenes and interviews would be easier to mount quickly and the Guild was running out of time. U.S. Steel wanted a program on the air by mid-March. Once again fate played a role in the Theatre Guild’s fortunes. (*John Ferguson* had succeeded in part due to the Equity strike.) If the Guild had been forced to cobble together a weekly hour-long program in the space of a few weeks, its venture into radio might have been stillborn. Fortunately for Langner, Helburn, and Marshall, an article in *Variety* on 31 January 1945 gave notice of a tiff between sponsors that worked in the Guild’s favor. “‘Riley’ Balks and Blocks Big Steel” read the headline. ABC and the Guild had agreed on a 10:00 to 11:00 Sunday night slot for the Guild’s program which

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<sup>48</sup> Lawrence Langner, Memo to H. William Fitelson, 12 December 1944. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 46–H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>49</sup> The final broadcast of *Arthur Hopkins Presents* aired on 3 January 1945 and featured Lillian Gish in an adaptation of Philip Barry’s 1934 play *The Joyous Season*. See Grams, Jr., 32. For a sample of 1945 radio programming, see “Radio Programs of the Week,” *New York Times*, 4 March 1945, X6.

would commence on 18 March 1945. The American Meat Institute, sponsor of *The Life of Riley* with William Bendix and *Stop or Go*, a quiz show with Joe E. Brown had tentatively agreed to shift those two half-hour programs that currently occupied the designated hour. At the last minute, American Meat withdrew its consent for the moves, killing the deal. *Variety*, with tongue-in-cheek, noted that “the ‘house’ shortage currently plaguing the Guild and other legit producers on Broadway doubled in radio and stymied the outfit from making its broadcasting debut.”<sup>50</sup> The delay was a both a blessing in disguise and a portent of things to come. First, it granted the Guild six months to prepare for the fall season and as a newcomer in radio, the Guild’s radio team would need every extra day. However, it also demonstrated the power of the sponsor, something with which the Guild had not had to contend. Langner, Helburn, and Marshall would soon learn that although the theatre and radio had many elements in common, their differences were numerous and there was no substitute for experience.

With the breathing space granted by American Meat’s change of heart, Marshall and her fledgling radio department went to work preparing a program. Her original idea had been to use radio to “give the Guild universal publicity and help to make our productions as widely known as if they were done in pictures.” Two possibilities came to mind: a weekly hour-long play or a hybrid program. Alfred Tamarin, the Guild’s Press Representative at the time, promoted the latter concept in a memo to Helburn, Langner, and Marshall. Tamarin felt that the radio show “can be used to solidify and extend the position of the Guild as the foremost production organization of America.” In order to achieve that goal, the Guild should do more than “presenting only radio dramatizations.”

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<sup>50</sup> “Riley’ Balks and Blocks Big Steel,” *Variety*, 31 January 1945, 17.

Instead, “the whole keynote of the show can be to search into every corner of the land to reform the fires of living Theatre, now ashes in too many places.” Radio, for Tamarin, would become a great tool which in the right hands could help bring about “the Theatre renaissance predicted (or hoped for!) after the War.” It was, he noted, a perfect time for the Theatre Guild to “assume active leadership” of theatre nationwide.<sup>51</sup> Tamarin’s words, although colored with the enthusiasm of a publicist, echoed many of Langner’s and Helburn’s earlier statements on the role of the Theatre Guild in American theatre. “The Guild’s contribution has been important in its organization of the audience for the better type of play, an audience ultimately available to all other producers of quality,” wrote Helburn in 1932.<sup>52</sup> By 1944, this “organization of the audience,” resulted in roughly 75,000 Theatre Guild subscribers in fifteen cities.<sup>53</sup> The Guild was moving toward becoming a national, if not international presence (*Oklahoma!* set records in London and played to audiences from Europe to Australia) and radio could accelerate

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<sup>51</sup> Alfred H. Tamarin, Confidential Memo to Theresa Helburn, Lawrence Langner and Armina Marshall, n.d.. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 148–U.S. Steel Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Tamarin became Press Representative while Joseph Heidt was serving in the military. In his memo, Tamarin made many of the same points as Hopkins in his 30 July piece for the *New York Times*, and he may have read it since his memo is undated. He most likely composed it between early July and mid-August 1945.

<sup>52</sup> Theresa Helburn, “Miss Helburn Expresses Some Doubts,” n.d.. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 61–Helburn Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. This a undated manuscript of an address Helburn gave to the Town Hall Club on the topic “American Drama Grows up. Notice of the address is in “Theatrical Notes,” *New York Times*, 16 February 1932, 24.

<sup>53</sup> Brock, “25 Years of the Guild and the Theatre,” SM20.



that movement.<sup>54</sup> Once again the impetus was on making the words “Theatre Guild” synonymous with American theatre. Tamarin and Marshall, at least, were of one mind.

By the end of July 1945, Langner and Helburn still had yet to decide on the format for the program, statements to the press to the contrary. On 3 June, the *New York Times* reported that the Guild had secured the 10:00 to 11:00 P.M. Sunday time slot for a thirty-nine-week run of “radio adaptations of Theatre Guild stage successes and other Broadway hits.” Helburn and Langner would be “in active charge of the program which so far as possible will enlist the services of the stars who originally created the roles in the productions offered.”<sup>55</sup> On 25 July 1945, the *Washington Post* announced that Helburn and Langner had chosen veteran radio director Homer Fickett “to take directorial charge of the forthcoming radio series ‘The Theater [sic] Guild on the Air.’” According to the *Post*, the series would consist of “dramatizations of famous Theater [sic] Guild plays.”<sup>56</sup> Yet, one day later, on 26 July, Marshall met with Arthur Arent, formerly of the Federal Theatre Project and who was to become the primary writer for the series, to plan

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<sup>54</sup> Waldau, 386.

<sup>55</sup> “Radio Row: One Thing and Another,” *New York Times*, 3 June 1945, X5

<sup>56</sup> Nelson B. Bell, “Guilding the Ether,” *Washington Post*, 23 July 1945, 9. Fickett had worked in radio for two decades and most recently was the guiding force behind DuPont’s *Cavalcade of America* for BBD&O. He left that agency on 1 February 1945 to work for J. Walter Thompson but returned for the Guild program. *Variety*, 17 January 1945, 28. One industry publication referred to him as “the patient Homer Fickett,” a needed quality for a production company new to the “ether.” See Donna Keith, “Radio Highlights,” *Stand By!*, August 1945, 2,4.

the material for the first broadcast scheduled to air in a little over six weeks.<sup>57</sup> At that late date, no one had settled on a definite script or format.

Arent's suggestions leaned toward a hybrid show that would promote the Guild without involving the production of an actual dramatic script. He envisioned a "cavalcade of Theatre Guild history" which would include a mixture of dialogue, narration, celebrity guests (primarily stars of the stage), excerpts from well-known plays, and possibly some ever popular *Oklahoma!* music. Langner would be the master of ceremonies who would introduce the program as well as a sketch for two characters. One would be "an amusing skeptic who kids the Guild and asks impertinent, amusing questions." The other would be a major star such as Frederic March or Alfred Lunt who would defend the Guild and serve as narrator. Marshall evidently listened to Arent's ideas with an open mind, but she would eventually keep only two of them. Lawrence Langner would be the program's emcee and he would talk to some celebrity guests. The bulk of the program, however, would be an adaptation of a stage play. The Guild would follow Hopkins' example. When asked by H.I. Brock of the *Times* to predict the future of the theatre, Helburn responded "That depends on the playwrights."<sup>58</sup> The future of

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<sup>57</sup> Arent had been a prominent member of the Federal Theatre Project and the author of some of its most famous productions for the Living Newspaper series including *Power* and *One Third of a Nation* which John Gassner later characterized as an American offshoot of the "so-called epic-theater developed in central Europe since the 1920s." John Gassner, "Forms of Modern Drama," *Comparative Literature* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1955), 138-139. Accessed through JSTOR, 21 May 2007. For a summary of Arent's work with the FTP, see Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Volume One 1900-1940*, 218-229. For the meeting, see Armina Marshall, Memo of meeting with Arthur Arent re: the material for the first broadcast of Theatre Guild on the Air, 26 July 1945. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 14-Arthur Arent Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>58</sup> Brock, "25 Years of the Guild and the Theatre," SM20.

*The Theatre Guild on the Air* would also depend on the playwrights, or more accurately, those who would adapt the work of the playwrights for a different medium. At the July meeting, Marshall gave Arent a list of eight possibilities for the opening program. All had been Theatre Guild productions. Three were musicals: *Porgy and Bess*, *The Garrick Gaieties*, and *Oklahoma!*. Five were straight plays: *John Ferguson*, *The Guardsman*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *Strange Interlude*, and *Heartbreak House*.<sup>59</sup> Arent had a little over a month to turn one of them, or some other play, into a finished script. By 9 September 1945 the Theatre Guild would be on the air.

In August 1945, Helburn contributed an article for the *New York Times* with the subtitle, “Miss Helburn Explains Why Theatre Group decided to Enter Radio.” In it she recalls a director asking her “Why in thunder do you and Lawrence Langner want to go into radio? Haven’t you got enough on your hands as it is?”<sup>60</sup> Part of Helburn’s lengthy answer to that question, written shortly before the first broadcast of the show, offers insight into how the Guild had changed under her and Langner’s stewardship. In her 1921 article for *Theatre Arts*, Helburn had emphasized the goal of “reaching and holding the right audience for the sort of plays we wish to produce.”<sup>61</sup> It was an elitist stance brought about by a combination of aesthetics and economics. Guild offerings in those

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<sup>59</sup> Armina Marshall, Memo of meeting with Arthur Arent re: the material for the first broadcast of *Theatre Guild on the Air*, 26 July 1945.

<sup>60</sup> Theresa Helburn, “The Guild Presents,” *New York Times*, 26 August 1945, X5. A slightly different version of this article, clearly a first draft, is in Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 61–Helburn Personals Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>61</sup> Helburn, “Art and Business,” 268.

early years did not conform to mainstream Broadway. However, by 1945 the Guild was experiencing unparalleled commercial success with *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, neither elitist and both playing to packed houses which Helburn admitted made “any added income negligible to all but the Bureau of Internal Revenue.”<sup>62</sup> Moreover, this success was the result of large, mainstream audiences rather than a select few and for the Theatre Guild that fact fundamentally altered everything.

Success can change the way one views the world and in Helburn’s case it appears to have affected both her ideas about what constituted a “good” play and her attitudes towards audiences. In 1921 she wrote that the Guild wanted to produce “good plays for their own sake,” the implication being that commercial considerations in the choice of plays should not be factors.<sup>63</sup> By November 1944, she had dramatically changed her opinion. Speaking at a gathering of the National Theatre Conference, she categorically rejected her earlier belief that commercial theatre lacked imagination.

That might have been the credo of the Theatre Guild when it was founded. It is really not true of the theatre today, thanks partly to the Guild and to Mr. Hopkins and to one or two others. The good play and the successful play are usually synonymous --- not that that mediocre plays do not succeed, but the bad ones run usually because of other reasons.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Theresa Helburn, “The Guild Presents”, X5. *Carousel* opened 19 April 1945 at the Majestic Theatre and ran for 890 performances closing on 24 May 1947. See Norton, *A Chronology of American Musical Theater, Volume 2: 1912-1952*, 896.

<sup>63</sup> Helburn, “Art and Business,” 274.

<sup>64</sup> Stanley K. Anderson, Notes on address by Theresa Helburn at luncheon for National Theatre Conference, n. d. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 98–N Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Anderson took the notes of Helburn’s address which took place on 24 November 1944. The quotations are by Helburn as transcribed by him. For an announcement of the speech see “Theatre Convention Will Open on Nov. 24,” *New York Times*, 14 November 1944. Helburn had an opportunity to correct the notes, but she failed to do so. See Dorothy-Anne Flor (Secretary of National Theatre Conference), Letter to Theresa Helburn, 21

A corollary to this shift in the relationship between quality and success was a resulting shift in the target audience for the Theatre Guild product. In its earlier years, the Guild had once courted the “right” sort of audience member. However, by equating quality with success Helburn fundamentally changed the membership rules. Virtually anyone who patronized a successful play now belonged to her “special” audience. “The moment the Guild began having successes, we stopped working for the smaller audiences and had to face the larger,” she said. This larger audience demanded a different type of theatre, one that was less interested in “depth without surface,” a common complaint against the type of experimental theatre once typical of the Guild. It would, however, “accept surface without depth,” as in her example of *The Late George Apley* (a box office hit that opened three days before her speech).<sup>65</sup> In 1925 Langner had written that the Guild was “pledged to experiment in the Theatre.”<sup>66</sup> Nineteen years later, Helburn spoke of the demands of this larger audience which would not “accept digressions.” This larger audience, i.e., more mainstream and less elite, “resent[s] being led away.” It wanted straightforward stories told simply. In Helburn’s 1944 opinion, “An audience wants to

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November 1944; Stanley K. Anderson, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 17 January 1945; Theresa Helburn, Letter to Stanley K. Anderson, 5 February 1945. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 98–N Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>65</sup> Anderson, Notes on address by Theresa Helburn at luncheon for National Theatre Conference. *The Late George Apley* opened at the Lyceum on 21 November 1944 and ran for nearly a year. See Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930-1969*, 242.

<sup>66</sup> Langner, “A Talk With Our New Members,” 4.

know where it is going, and it just does not like subplots.”<sup>67</sup> Neither, it seems, did Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner. Twenty-five years after the birth of the Theatre Guild, they had eschewed the complexities of experimental theatre for the relatively simplicity of commercial success. The chasm between taking into consideration what audiences would or would not accept and Langner’s 1925 confession that “The Guild selects artistic plays, and if these happen to be popular, then so much the better” was vast.<sup>68</sup> Once traversed it would have been difficult for Helburn or the Guild to go back. With commercial success on Broadway seemingly assured and millions of potential radio listeners beckoning, the return journey was not one either Helburn or Langner wished to take.

Recalling the Guild’s entry into radio years later, both Langner and Helburn gave the impression that the Guild was interested in broadcasting in the years before the war and that the idea did not then generate much enthusiasm. In his autobiography, written after the Guild had been on the air successfully for five years, Langner recalled an early interest in dramatizing stage plays.

Prior to the war, we had discussed with radio experts, without success, the idea of producing a radio program based entirely on theatre plays. “The name of the Theatre Guild is the kiss of death in radio,” we were told by an important executive of the National Broadcasting Company. Some years later he lived to eat his words.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Anderson, Notes on address by Theresa Helburn at luncheon for National Theatre Conference.

<sup>68</sup> Langner, “A Talk With Our New Members,” 4.

<sup>69</sup> Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 428-429.

In her autobiography, written nearly a decade after Langner's Helburn used the same words, "the Theatre Guild is the kiss of death in radio," and described those who heard the idea as reacting "with horror." To Helburn this was just a reoccurrence of a familiar pattern. "But then nobody but us," she remembered, "had believed much in the aspirations of the early Theatre Guild."<sup>70</sup> However, in her 1945 explanation, Helburn noted that "When 'Oklahoma!' first opened ... Mr. Langner and I, who were not at that time radio-minded, dreaded the very frequent playing of the songs on the air for fear it would take the edge off the production and keep prospective audiences away." It appears that what changed their minds, and later caused them to remember their radio beginnings somewhat differently, was a recognition that radio would not necessarily stall the juggernaut that *Oklahoma!* was rapidly becoming. According to the article, Helburn and Langner recognized that radio play of its music had helped the 1942 revival of *Porgy and Bess* achieve greater success than the opening production. Thus, rather than looking at radio as a competitor, they had come to believe that theatre should embrace it since "good production of good plays on the air will stimulate audience curiosity to see in three dimensions what they have enjoyed in one."<sup>71</sup> Used correctly, radio would literally become an advertisement for, as well as a sample of, the genuine article. By making the name "The Theatre Guild" known nationwide, it could simultaneously fuel box office revenue in New York and in fourteen subscription cities. A motto in business is that one

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<sup>70</sup> Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*, 317. The phrase "kiss of death" presumably relates to the Guild's reputation as highbrow when radio was lowbrow.

<sup>71</sup> Helburn, "The Guild Presents," X5. The revival of *Porgy and Bess* opened 22 January 1942. See Nadel, 283 and *The Best Plays of 1941-1942 and the Year Book of the Drama in America*, Burns Mantle, ed. (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1942; reprint 1946), 10, 433-434.

needs to continue to invest in order to prosper. Often this investment results in opening new markets. With radio, the Guild could invest its stage experience and inventory of proven plays in a new medium and simultaneously open a vast new market of consumers. Moreover, it could do this in the pursuit of its own aesthetic vision, in the post-war world, for the general “betterment” of humankind.

Helburn touched upon this final point in her printed explanation by revealing an altruistic side of the Guild. Even though she (and one must assume Langner) had deviated from the tenets upon which the Guild originally rested, she still held theatre as something sacred and fundamentally valuable in people’s lives. Invoking the imminent birth of the United Nations with its mission “to promote international interchange in the fields of science, education, the arts and social sciences,” and Archibald MacLeish’s belief that “peace can best be achieved if the peoples of the world share with one another their common inheritance of art knowledge and skill.” Helburn asserted a higher calling for the upcoming radio show than mere profit or entertainment. “If the Theatre Guild of the Air will help bring these things to our people that should be more than sufficient reason for the Guild being in radio.”<sup>72</sup>

As pretentious as that statement may sound, it was consistent with the Guild’s shift away from the few and toward the many. In 1919, the founders of the Theatre Guild possessed an idealism that drove them to try to change the face of New York theatre, largely by appealing to a select audience. By 1945 Helburn stipulated that the Guild had accomplished its original goal and that it could now channel that idealism for a patriotic

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<sup>72</sup> Helburn, “The Guild Presents,” X5. Helburn supplied the quotations concerning the United Nations and the words of MacLeish. The final quotations are her words.



and humanitarian cause by reaching out toward a nationwide audience using the power of radio. In one sense, Helburn was advocating a “trickle down” theory of success according to the following formula: Theatre Guild commercial success equaled artistic quality (since successful plays were by definition “good”), which in turn benefited the masses who experienced the plays, which enriched their lives, and ultimately led to a more peaceful world. Filled with equal parts hubris and ego, the theory collapsed if the first step was missing – Guild commercial success. It was one thing to succeed on Broadway, but radio was an entirely different matter.

The business of radio drama differed from the stage in subtle but important ways. As a theatrical producer, the Theatre Guild negotiated all aspects of the production process which included the first contact with a playwright, the hiring of directors, designers, and actors, the rental of a theatre, and finally the promotion and performing of the finished play. Through every step, the Guild directors had nominal control of the production’s fate. If they made mistakes they had only themselves to hold accountable. In radio, every broadcast was a partnership of at least three, and in the Guild’s case, four separate entities. The primary partner was the sponsor who provided the funds to produce the show. Next in importance was the advertising agency which typically provided the creative element including production crew, talent, and content. Third was the supplier of air time and broadcasting equipment, which in the case of a major program, was a national radio network. The Guild fit into the second of these categories by taking over most, but not all, of the duties of the ad agency.<sup>73</sup> Such a relationship left

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<sup>73</sup> The Guild delegated most technical duties, such as program production and direction to employees of BBD&O. For example, director Homer Fickett, story editor Charles Newton, and producer George Kondolf all worked on the first year of the series

the separate parties with discrete responsibilities that did not typically overlap. For the Theatre Guild, this meant giving up some creative control in exchange for financial security. The Guild did not have to raise, and therefore risk, funds to produce the radio program. However, that also meant, the Guild would not have total control of the production and program content.<sup>74</sup> It was precisely a situation that the founders of the Guild would most likely have avoided, but to which Langner and Helburn willingly agreed. It was a trade that would look attractive to them in the beginning, but less and less so after a few years.

The 1941 agreement giving the Guild directors the authority to expand its activities stipulated that any such activity would have to adhere to the “Guild standard.” The radio contract between U.S. Steel and the Guild touched upon this point in the clause concerning cast members for the individual broadcasts. As far as selecting and hiring actors, the Guild had a free hand as long as it adhered to a few parameters. The contract stipulated that “only the master of ceremonies, the orchestra leader, and commercial announcer engaged by the Guild shall be subject to approval by U.S. Steel.” However, at least one cast member must possess the “stature, ability and popular appeal at least equal to that of the lead in Theatre Guild stage productions,” i.e., a major star of stage or

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as joint employees of the Guild and BBD&O. Sidney Lohman, “Radio Row: One Thing and Another,” *New York Times*, 26 August 1945, X5.

<sup>74</sup> An undated draft of the contract between the Guild and U.S. Steel, but obviously written after the first abortive attempt in January 1945, lists the responsibilities of the Guild for talent and program content and the financial obligations of U.S. Steel. It identifies a start date of 9 September 1945 which was the actual beginning of the program. See H. William Fitelson, Radio Contract between the Theatre Guild and United States Steel, n.d. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 148–U.S. Steel Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

screen. Moreover, in an apparent attempt to recreate in the imagination of the audience the original production (although it is unclear how this would have applied to those listeners outside New York), the contract mandated that “wherever practicable, the same lead or leads for any radio performance used by the Guild originally for the stage production should be engaged for the radio show, if available.”<sup>75</sup> It seems clear that U.S. Steel was buying a specific product, Theatre Guild or Guild-like plays for radio, rather than a generic radio drama series.

In the matter of script approval, the contract was somewhat ambiguous. In commercial radio, sponsors commonly offered advice on how to write radio scripts. Playwrights Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee worked as radio writers in Hollywood before their stage success and satirically described their experiences in an article in *Variety* entitled “Soup to Nuts (A Memory of Radio).” “Even from the remoteness of the eastern seaboard,” they recalled, “a practiced sponsor could take pot shots at his Hollywood drudges with a long distance weapon called the ‘teletype’,” The problem with radio, as Lawrence and Lee remembered it, was that since it appealed to an audience composed of ordinary people, nearly everyone became a critic. In “Soup to Nuts” the president of the fictitious Riddell Soup Company explains to the head of the fictitious advertising agency that employed the fictitious writers (stand-ins for Lawrence and Lee):

All of us here in Trenton want to be helpful in making our radio show a hard-headed advertising success. Although I do not consider myself an expert of radio

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. Clause C, “Talent,” contains the limitations described. The clause mandating a star for each performance is ironic since the Guild was founded on the premise that the play took precedence over the player. However, by the mid-1940s even outside observers such as U.S. Steel recognized that the Guild had completely reversed course and made certain that each of its plays contained a performer with “stature, ability and popular appeal.”

production, I *am* an average radio listener, hence feel fully qualified to pass judgment on what is good or bad in radio entertainment.<sup>76</sup>

The Guild contract did not directly allow U.S. Steel authority to micromanage scripts, but it did allow the sponsor some control of program content. The clause entitled “Act of God, etc,” listed conditions in which each party could cancel the contract. Most of these concerned missed broadcasts due to unforeseen technical difficulties. However, it did allow the sponsor termination privileges “because of the Guild’s failure to submit plays satisfactory to U.S. Steel.” In other words, the Theatre Guild could select the plays but U.S. Steel had the right to judge them “satisfactory” or not.<sup>77</sup> It was a privilege that U.S. Steel would assert more than once in the coming years but did not appear to cause the Guild undue alarm in 1945.

The contract also specified both the title of the program and the lengths to which U.S. Steel controlled the use of the Guild’s name, both major concerns in the realm of commercial radio. In 1945 the names “Theatre Guild” and “United States Steel” were highly marketable items and each entity wanted protection over their use. According to the contract, each broadcast would begin with “The Theatre Guild presents (title of play) sponsored by the United States Steel Corporation.” Any change in this specific wording would need the mutual agreement of both parties. Thus, in theatrical parlance the Guild got top billing. However, the contract also stated “the name ‘Theatre Guild’ shall be exclusive to the United States Steel Corporation for the radio during the life of the

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<sup>76</sup> Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, “Soup to Nuts (A Memory of Radio),” in *The Spice of Variety*, ed. Abel Green (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1952), 137.

<sup>77</sup> H. William Fitelson, Radio Contract between the Theatre Guild and United States Steel. Clause M addresses conditions for termination of the contract.

contract.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, as far as radio was concerned, the Guild and U.S. Steel were inseparable. Each had to depend upon the other for success. The Guild had to maintain a Guild standard actors using adaptations of its own plays in order to satisfy U.S. Steel, and the latter depended on the Guild to produce a quality product. In essence, the partnership demanded an act of faith by both parties since the program was a network radio first for each.<sup>79</sup>

For its initial broadcast the Guild chose a play that had possessed limited appeal when it produced it in 1928 but which would undoubtedly resonate with audiences in September 1945. The radio play that would help the Guild to achieve Archibald MacLeish’s goal of bringing peace to a world in tatters would be an adaptation of Robert Nichols’ and Maurice Browne’s *Wings Over Europe*, the prescient play about the evils of atomic weapons.<sup>80</sup> Although not on the list of plays he received from Marshall in late July, by 25 August 1945 Arent was busy working on an adaptation, most likely because of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 August and 9 August.<sup>81</sup> To play the

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<sup>78</sup>H. William Fitelson, Radio Contract between the Theatre Guild and United States Steel. Clause D relates to the show’s title and clause K the exclusive use of the Guild name.

<sup>79</sup> Jack Gould, “The Guild’s Debut,” *New York Times*, 16 September 1945, X5. Gould noted that the program was the network debut for both.

<sup>80</sup> Nichols’ and Browne’s play opened on 10 December 1928 and ran for ninety performances, largely to subscription audiences. Gerald Bordman has characterized it as “riveting” as well as “talky and womanless.” See Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1914-1930*, 370-371.

<sup>81</sup> On 23 August, Guild subscriber, John Joseph Hagedorn from Chicago, suggested that the Guild remount the original production because it “amazingly and beautifully portrays delimita [sic] of world in which atomic bombs come suddenly.” Three days later Marshall replied that the Guild was adapting it for the first broadcast. John Joseph Hagedorn, Telegram to Theatre Guild, 23 August 1945; Armina Marshall,

brilliant British scientist Francis Lightfoot who discovers how to harness the atom's destructive power, the Guild considered a list of actors ranging from American film stars James Stewart and Tyrone Power to British actor Robert Newton. The final choice was Burgess Meredith, an actor equally comfortable behind the radio microphone, on the stage, or in front of the film camera. Meredith's versatility would be an asset to the production since he was particularly adept with varying forms of dramatic language. Unlike many actors, Meredith had appeared in both prose and verse plays.<sup>82</sup>

However, selecting a cast was only part of the equation in producing a successful radio play. In settling on the concept of adapting stage plays for radio, Marshall, Langner, and Helburn faced problems akin to those of one who translates foreign-language plays into English for American audiences. Writing in 1940, professors Winn

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Letter to John Joseph Hagedorn, 27 August 1945. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 100-Robert Nichols folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. In the interim, the *New York Times* reported the selection. See Lohman, *New York Times*, 26 August 1945, X5. In an interesting juxtaposition, a small ad for the "Gala radio premiere" featuring a "thrilling drama of the atomic bomb," ran at the bottom of the front page of the *New York Times* on 9 September 1945. Almost directly above it was a preview of an article on page 35 in which "Senator Tom Connally urged that the country retain the secret of the bomb, but that a flying task force of atomic bombers be placed at the disposal of the United Nations Security Council." *New York Times*, 9 September 1945, 1.

<sup>82</sup> The list of possible stars included "James Stewart, Alexander Knox, Bill Eythe, Van Johnson, Bill Prince, Peter Lawford, Hurd Hatfield, Burgess Meredith, Ty Power, Robert Newton (in England, but would be superb)." List of possible stars in radio *Wings Over Europe*, n.d., Box 100-Robert Nichols folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Meredith was a distinguished actor who had already earned accolades for his work on stage in Maxwell Anderson's *High Tor* (1936), on film in *Of Mice and Men* (1939), and on radio in Archibald MacLeish's verse play *The Fall of the City*. See, Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio*, 169-171; Cawkwell and Smith, editors, *The World Encyclopedia of Film*, 186; *New York Times Directory of the Theatre* (New York: Arno Press, 1973), 628. In his review of the first broadcast, Jack Gould complimented Meredith's "almost lyrical style of delivery." Jack Gould, "The Guild's Debut."

Zeller and Johann T. Reich of Ithaca College observed that “Since it is seldom that a translator, a playwright, and a director are the same person, it follows that English translations are something far different from the plays for the theater written by the great playwrights.”<sup>83</sup> For the Guild to succeed in delivering faithful reproductions of stage hits to the larger radio audience, its adaptors would have to minimize the necessary differences between the originals and the broadcast versions. This necessitated an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses as well as the similarities and dissimilarities of both dramatic forms.

Erik Barnouw, in the 1939 *Handbook of Radio Writing*, identified two primary differences between radio and the stage. First, “radio’s audience is not a crowd audience, as in the theater’s, but one of individuals.” Second, in the theater, “dramas have an actual external existence.” Thus, the theater physically “*demonstrates* stories,” while “radio only cajoles its listeners into *imagining* them.”<sup>84</sup> It was how one managed the contrast between demonstration and imagination that would make or break an adaptation. Often the most important element to consider for a play adapter was the length of the original. Most plays have a running time of about two hours on stage. A film version can often run from eighty minutes to two hours. However, a Guild radio play had only about fifty minutes in which to tell the same story. The Guild’s 1946 radio adaptation of Sidney

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<sup>83</sup> Winn Zeller and Johann T. Reich, “Emotional Interpretation-New Plays for Old,” *College English*, 2, no.2 (November 1940), 131. Accessed through APS, 16 May 2005.

<sup>84</sup> Barnouw, *Handbook of Radio Writing*, 11-12. Emphasis in original. Barnouw later wrote for the Guild on both radio and television.

Kingsley's *Dead End* illustrates this point.<sup>85</sup> Adapter Paul Peters explained his solution to this dilemma, and the ensuing difficulties, in his introduction to the published version of the script.

So you start by stripping the story to the bone. Sometimes, alas, when you take off the verbal flesh, you find great segments of skeletal void—three vertebrae missing, the pelvis dislodged, or a femur going nowhere and supporting nothing—and frantically you shore it up with baling wire and lath.<sup>86</sup>

In 1939, Barnouw addressed this problem in a discussion of three radio writing techniques: the “rapid getaway,” “faster rhythm,” and “elimination of non-plot action.” Unlike live theatre, where a playwright can gradually bring the audience into the plot,

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<sup>85</sup> On 24 February 1946, *Dead End* became the twenty-fifth Theatre Guild radio program. A list of Guild radio productions is in Nadel, 287-294. For dates of programs see Grams, Jr., 506-513 but which is missing the broadcast of *John Ferguson* on 23 September 1945. For a recorded transcription see *Theatre Guild on the Air*, “Dead End,” 24 February 1946, 59 min. CD94183, Jerry Haendiges Productions. Although the Guild never directly produced Sidney Kingsley on the stage, he was their “type” of playwright. Kingsley intelligently dealt with contemporary social issues and, although occasionally drifting into melodrama, created believable characters. *Dead End* also fit the Guild’s concept of good theatre. Opening on Broadway on 28 October 1935 and framed by Norman Bel Geddes’ impressive set depicting the juxtaposition of a luxury high-rise apartment building and a slum tenement, the play ran for 687 performances. The Group Theatre, an offshoot of the Guild, produced Kingsley’s *Men in White*, the 1934 Pulitzer recipient. For details, see Clurman, *The Fervent Years*, 126-129. Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930-1969*, 124. The play had a successful film incarnation in 1937 when United Artists released a version featuring a Lillian Hellman screenplay with William Wyler directing. By 1946, Kingsley’s work was a critical and popular success and one that would have appealed to a radio audience. Ellen Baskin and Mandy Hicken, ed., *Enser’s Filmed Books and Plays, 1928-1991* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 1993), 77. The film introduced the popular Dead End Kids who starred, under various names, in dozens of movies for the next twenty years. For a complete listing, see Leonard Maltin, ed., *Leonard Maltin’s 1999 Movie & Video Guide* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 159-161.

<sup>86</sup> Paul Peters, “Dead End: a radio adaptation,” in Fitelson, ed., *Theatre Guild on the Air*, 279. The quotation is from the introduction. For the complete script, see 281-316.



radio did not have the time. According to Barnouw, “In radio drama, the intriguing or arresting start, the quick plunge into essential conflict, have forever supplanted the two maids with the dusters.” Similarly, while members of the theatre audience find themselves physically and socially tied to their seats and could “weather quite lengthy stretches of dull dialogue without revolt,” the radio listener was free simply to turn off the set - and find some other form of entertainment. To counter this, radio aimed for a “faster pace and more continuous tension.” Finally, stage business and other visual techniques that keep the theatre audience interested but rarely advance the plot, had little place on radio. Instead, radio demanded “severe concentration on essential plot matters.”<sup>87</sup>

Not all theatrical techniques were impractical on the stage. Barnouw’s adaptation of *I Remember Mama* serves as an example of stage conventions that worked equally well on radio.<sup>88</sup> Barnouw had earlier enumerated the “special skills,” radio possessed and the “characteristic methods and devices of radio writing.”<sup>89</sup> One of these devices was the art of dramatic narration. In the earliest days of radio, writers used narration as “an evil makeshift.” However, in time they began to see the possibilities of narration as “a valuable and flexible tool.” Barnouw credited Orson Welles, through his use of dramatic narration, as one who “took radio drama far away from the forms of stage and

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<sup>87</sup> Barnouw, *Handbook of Radio Writing*, 13-18.

<sup>88</sup> *I Remember Mama* aired on 24 March 1946 as the twenty-ninth broadcast in the series. Grams, Jr., 506. Erik Barnouw, “I Remember Mama: a radio adaptation,” in Fitelson, ed., *Theatre Guild on the Air*, 361-394. For a recorded transcription see *Theatre Guild on the Air*, “I Remember Mama,” 24 March 1946, 59 min. CD51919, Jerry Haendiges Productions.

<sup>89</sup> Barnouw, *Handbook of Radio Writing*, 11.

screen drama and made it resemble much more closely the forms of the novel.”<sup>90</sup> Welles brought to radio “dramatic storytelling: drama in the first person singular, told from the point of view of one of its protagonists.”<sup>91</sup>

Another important difference between mounting a stage production and producing a radio broadcast was the amount of time available for preparation. In the commercial theatre of the 1940s, a director often used a standard four-week rehearsal period beginning with a read-through by the cast and finishing with a dress rehearsal and out-of-town tryout.<sup>92</sup> For *Wings Over Europe* and subsequent Theatre Guild radio broadcasts the rehearsal period was less than a week. For a Sunday broadcast, the first rehearsal on microphone for the cast would be on the preceding Wednesday for two hours. On the Thursday prior the orchestra would rehearse for two hours and the master of ceremonies for an hour with professional actors standing in for any celebrity guests. Friday would have a three-hour rehearsal for cast, emcee, and announcer. Saturday would be a day of rest leaving Sunday for a lengthy orchestra rehearsal and a full dress rehearsal with cast and invited guests in the afternoon. The final call at 7:00 Sunday night would leave at least an hour and a half for last minute fixes before the 10:00 broadcast. After that, the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 22. Welles’ famous *Mercury Theater on the Air* had the original title *First Person Singular* when it debuted on 11 July 1938. See Grams, Jr., 322.

<sup>92</sup> Worthington Miner, “Directing the Play: The Complete Procedure,” in John Gassner, *Producing the Play* incorporating *New Scene Technician’s Handbook* by Philip Barber (New York: The Dryden Press, 1941), 260-273. Miner was a Guild director during the 1930s and later became head of CBS’ television division. For Miner’s career, see Worthington Miner, *Worthington Miner: A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, interviewed by Franklin J. Schaffner (Metuchen, NJ: The Directors Guild of America and Scarecrow Press, 1985).

next sixty minutes was live with no breaks until the end of the program.<sup>93</sup> Compared to the relatively laid back pace of the stage, radio production was a fast-moving blur.

Fitelson addressed this issue in a personal letter to Langner, Helburn, and Marshall after the program had been on the air for three weeks. “One of our greatest difficulties in connection with the radio program,” he wrote, “is the problem of preparation. This will cause us serious trouble shortly.” As an example, Fitelson cited problems with the upcoming broadcast of *Sing Out, Sweet Land!*. Script editor George Kondolf felt the script had problems but the Guild producers had failed to give him their input even though he had given them copies of it some time before. In a somewhat chiding fashion, Fitelson warned them that radio demanded immediate attention to all details.

It is urgent to submit your comments in writing immediately after reading the script. It is urgent to read the script as soon as you get them. It only takes an hour to read a radio script. As there is also a great deal of music to clear, etcetera, your decisions have to be made long in advance. I mention this because this is what I mean by preparation and this is what I mean by preparation long in advance. I wish it were possible to have a dozen or twenty scripts ready; fully approved; assigned to writers; revised and ready for broadcast. Then we can cast long in advance and avoid many of the problems we have now. This business of leaving things to the last minute, regardless of whose fault it is, will be costly to us, and we will create the kind of a situation that takes the fun out of the program and makes it a great deal of work. You will notice that this letter is personal. The program is really yours and you have to make these decisions about preparation even if they are not entirely acceptable to everyone that works on the show.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Homer Fickett, Final Rehearsal Schedule “Wings Over Europe,” 9 September 1945. Box 100-Robert Nichols folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>94</sup> H. William Fitelson, Personal Letter to Lawrence Langner, Theresa Helburn, Armina Marshall, 25 September 1945. To emphasize the personal nature of the letter, Fitelson opened with “Dear Armina, Terry and Lawrence.” Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 46–H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

It appears that Fitelson's admonition brought results. *Sing Out, Sweet Land!* aired on 21 October 1945 as scheduled.<sup>95</sup>

The premiere of *The Theatre Guild on the Air* featured not only a timely drama, but a demonstration of how the Guild wanted to utilize radio as a promotional tool. Arent had suggested using celebrity guests in conversation with Langner as a way to emphasize the Theatre Guild's preeminent place in American Theatre. Marshall agreed and the list of invited guests included prominent people either currently or formerly associated with the Guild. Langner and Helburn, as co-directors of the Theatre Guild, acted as hosts for the event which the *Washington Post* reported included both the "stage and screen personalities attending the premiere broadcast," as well as "several listening-in 'first-nighters' in Hollywood." The list of those taking "an invisible bow at Mr. Langner's behest" included the actress Annabella, Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers, Philip Barry, Elia Kazan, Rouben Mamoulian, William Bendix, Edward G. Robinson, Helen Mencken, and Rosalind Russell.<sup>96</sup> Rather than just presenting a radio program, the Theatre Guild offered listeners a glimpse into the world of the talented and famous, a realm in which both Langner and Helburn felt at ease.

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<sup>95</sup> "Radio Programs of the Week," *New York Times*, 21 October 1945, X6.

<sup>96</sup> Nelson B. Bell, "Notes of the Theater," *Washington Post*, 6 September 1945, 9. Most of the actors had appeared in Guild productions. For example, Annabella starred in *Jacobowsky and the Colonel* and William Bendix in *The Time of Your Life*. See *New York Times Directory of the Theatre*, 25,71. One of the names on the list was Helen Mencken, or Menken. On the stage from the age of five, she appeared in *Mary of Scotland*, Helburn's directorial debut in 1933. She later was head of the American Theatre Wing, the organization that began the Tony Awards, until her death in 1966. See the entry in Bordman and Hirsch, 253 and Richard L. Coe, "Tony Night: Pomp and Distinction," *Washington Post*, 6 June 1982, G4; and also Isabelle Stevenson and Roy A. Somlyo, ed., *The Tony Award* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001) ix, xiv.

By placing themselves at the center of the event, Helburn and Langner implied that they too were celebrities, although it is doubtful that outside of the New York theatre community many listeners would have readily recognized their names. Moreover, in emphasizing their status and their guests, they diverted attention from the product they ostensibly wished to present — the play. In his review of the broadcast, Jack Gould of the *New York Times* remarked that although one could expect a few introductory comments, the “omnipresent trait of stage folk who take to the air” to engage in “protracted chitchat ... consumed time that could profitably have been devoted to the drama.” According to Gould, the “chitchat which is de rigueur at luncheon in Sardi’s can be pretty grim on the kilocycles.”<sup>97</sup>

Gould based his comments on a critical view of what made compelling radio drama, which comprised only a part of what the various members of the Guild intended for the program. Alfred Tamarin had stressed using the program to solidify the Guild’s position as the nation’s foremost theatrical producer. Marshall recommended the program for its promise of universal publicity. Helburn wanted to use it to promote the cause of peace by sharing “our common inheritance of art” among the country’s citizens. Langner looked upon it as a first step in transforming the Theatre Guild into an entertainment giant operating in theatre, film radio and eventually television. However, for the realization of any of these aspirations, the program would have to succeed as one that attracted listeners as well as favorable critical response. Without the former, U.S. Steel would have no reason to continue sponsoring it; without the latter, Helburn and

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<sup>97</sup> Gould, “The Guild’s Debut.” “Kilocycles” refers to the radio frequencies used by AM radio stations which carried the broadcasts.

Langner could not be confident that they were adhering to the Guild standard, (Helburn's comments on the nature of a successful play notwithstanding). Fortunately for the Guild, the program attracted a sizeable if not spectacular audience and it was an overall critical success.<sup>98</sup>

Jack Gould explained the premise behind the Guild's program as "the belief that there are listeners .. receptive to genuinely provocative drama rooted in sound theatrical values" in opposition to the "notion so prevalent in Radio Row that drama preferably be boy-meets-girl fare emanating from Hollywood studios or self-conscious documentary epics camouflaged as art." Gould believed that, despite the distracting opening chit chat, the opening broadcast succeeded on all levels. "As a backward prophecy, its presentation was sound showmanship," he observed, and "as a challenge to the mind at this time, it was eminently constructive broadcasting."<sup>99</sup> Encouraged by responses such as these, the Guild continued presenting plays that stretched the boundaries of contemporary radio programs. The rewards were nearly immediate. In November, the industry magazine *Tune-In* in its feature "Listening Post" had this description for the program:

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<sup>98</sup> As an example of the program's growing popularity, the Secretary's Report for the 7 November 1946 Board Meeting reported that the ratings had increased by two points to 8.3 on the Hooper rating system, the industry benchmark. That translated to an increase in two million listeners "which is regarded as phenomenal." Theresa Helburn, Secretary's Report for Board of Directors Meeting, 7 November 1946. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 162-1946 Board of Directors Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. By 1949, listeners consistently ranked the Guild's program as the second most popular dramatic program behind *Lux Radio Theatre's* adaptations of Hollywood films. See *Radio & Television Best*, May 1949, 28; *Radio & Television Best*, June 1949, 36.

<sup>99</sup> Gould, "The Guild's Debut."

10:00 p.m. THEATER GUILD OF THE AIR (A)

Some of the hits of the Theater Guild condensed to an hour's time for radio. One of the important new shows of the fall and winter season. ▼▼▼

Three tabs (▼▼▼) indicates an unusually good show.<sup>100</sup>

The show had slipped somewhat in the opinion of *Tune-In* after January 1946 slipping to “Two tabs (▼▼) a better program than most.” With comments like “An ambitious show that in its first few sessions never quite came off. This series of condensations of outstanding radio plays should please the more serious radio listeners, however,” and “An ambitious show that never seems to come off as it should. This series of condensations of outstanding Broadway hits should please the intelligentsia, however,” it was clear that the critical/popular scale was tilting toward the critical side. By October, *Tune-In* had the program back up to “Three tabs (▼▼▼).”<sup>101</sup> Other members of the industry were also taking notice. In December *Broadcasting*, a leading advertising industry periodical, announced that the *Theatre Guild of the Air* would receive a plaque awarded by the Association for the Promotion of International Understanding for the program’s “distinct contribution to the general excellence of radio fare.” Importantly for the Guild’s public image, the award ceremony was part of the 16 December 1945 broadcast.<sup>102</sup> By the end of the 1945-1946 radio season, the Theatre

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<sup>100</sup> “*Tune-In*’s Listening Post,” *Tune In*, November 1945, 3-4.

<sup>101</sup> “*Tune-In*’s Listening Post,” *Tune In*, January 1946, 7-8; “*Tune-In*’s Listening Post,” *Tune In*, February 1946, 7-8; “*Tune-In*’s Listening Post,” *Tune In*, June 1946, 7-8; “*Tune-In*’s Listening Post,” *Tune In*, October 1946, 7-8.

<sup>102</sup> *Broadcasting*, 10 December 1945, 85. The Association for the Promotion of International Understanding, founded in Canada near the beginning of 1945, was active during the post-war period. In March 1945 it began publishing a “a pocket-size

Guild had attained nearly all of its stated goals. Its leaders and staff were learning how to operate within a new medium with few major setbacks. The problems it did encounter, however, would continue throughout its radio career and would foreshadow ones it would later encounter in television.

The question of source material became an ever-present problem both in the difficulty of condensing plays for radio and the selection of those plays. By the spring of 1946, after roughly thirty weeks on the air, Langner and Helburn gave a newspaper interview in which they expounded on their distinct brand of radio and implied that their theatrical experience was a benefit rather than a hindrance. “Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn, owners and operators of Theater Guild, Inc. [sic], had 27 years experience in producing eye-filling spectacles,” the article began, However, “They discovered radio dramas must be produced as if their audience were blind.” This was the distinction between demonstrated and imagined action that Barnouw had discussed in 1939. In discussing the necessity of condensing a play text, Langner echoed Barnouw.

A lot of time in the theater is used in gradual exposition of character and story. In radio you can cut 20 minutes by doing it with narration and bang right into the story. We start right off on the main story line and use dramatic interest and suspense to build scene after scene until you finally have that terrific thing that is the theater.”<sup>103</sup>

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magazine,” entitled *This Month*. The *New York Times* listed Pearl Buck and Norman Angell among the contributing editors. “Books-Authors,” *New York Times*, 30 January 1945, 17.

<sup>103</sup> Jean Megan, “Guild Faces Tough Job Cutting Plays for Air,” unknown newspaper, 20 April 1946. Theresa Helburn Papers, Box 2-1942-1948 Clipping File. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. The clipping carries the notation “New York (AP).” It is in a folder labeled 1945, but is obviously from 1946 since it references broadcasts from the fall of 1945.



As to the actual details of editing a script, Helburn departed from Barnouw's advice, as well as that of the various writers who worked on the program, primarily because she believed theatrical experience trumped that of broadcasting. According to the interviewer, although "the six adapters used by the Guild each have separate notions on how to boil down a full-grown stage show, Miss Helburn tipped them off to many short cuts." The key element in editing was not Peters' skeletal framework, at least not to Helburn. It was more subtle than that. She and Langner, "know every inflection, every emotion, every laugh line of these plays. After all, we spent months on something that the radio director has only three days to do." Peters' skeleton metaphor became for Helburn more of a connect-the-dots with the emotions, inflections, and laugh lines contained in the theatrical original being the key ingredients.

Langner and Helburn also believed that casting a radio program became easier and more efficient if one relied on theatrical experience and used stage actors rather than those who primarily worked in radio. Since radio essentially entertained a sightless audience, acting in radio was a process that depended entirely on sounds produced by the human voice. Performers attempted to define different characters through inflection, tone, accents and other vocal techniques. By altering one's voice, an actor could play many parts in the same broadcast, although after the formation of the American Federation of Radio Artists (AFRA) in 1937 the limit became two roles per show. With rehearsal time at a minimum, many "slick and facile" radio actors became adept at superficially developing characters.<sup>104</sup> The reliance on the human voice caused problems for the

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<sup>104</sup> Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 108; Earle McGill, "Directing the Radio Play," in Gassner, *Producing the Play*, 509. McGill was casting director for CBS radio. The quotation is his.

listener. “In the mind world in which radio drama has its only real existence,” Barnouw explained, “the listener cannot possibly keep track of as many characters as he can in the visible media.”<sup>105</sup> This led to elimination of some of the characters in *Dead End* since, according to Peters, “one discerning script critic said that ‘on the radio, you can’t tell the kids apart’.”<sup>106</sup> To alleviate some of these problems, the Guild relied on theatrical models and specifically on actors who had previously performed in stage versions of the Guild’s radio plays. Accordingly, Marshall “urged using stage actors in the radio show, reasoning that ‘a stage actor who has played a part has a much more rounded characterization than anyone who walks in cold’.” According to the article, although the results were mixed, “sometimes Miss Marshall rang the bell with her casting and sometimes not,” the head of the Guild’s radio department “still contends ‘radio actors get results—but not the [optimal] results’.”<sup>107</sup> The problem lay with the paucity of actors primarily acting for the stage who were available for weekly radio work.

Since by early 1946 Langner and Helburn believed the Guild had overcome most challenges in script production and casting by using theatrical models, the future seemed bright. Certainly with the abundance of plays from which to choose, both those controlled by the Guild and those from other producers, *The Theatre Guild on the Air* seemed destined to have a continuous supply of source material. For the most part, that remained the case. However, if one recalls Helburn’s conflation of “good” plays and

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<sup>105</sup> Barnouw, *Handbook of Radio Writing*, 15-16.

<sup>106</sup> Fitelson, ed., *Theatre Guild on the Air*, 280.

<sup>107</sup> Jean Megan, “Guild Faces Tough Job Cutting Plays for Air.”

“successful” plays it becomes clear that the supply was more limited than might have seemed at the time. By the beginning of the program’s second season in the fall of 1946, Jack Gould was beginning to rethink the Guild’s premise of providing provocative drama. When the Guild opened with Patrick Hamilton’s *Angel Street*, Gould was puzzled. “This literally was the ‘n’th time that ‘Angel Street’ or ‘Gaslight,’ the title under which the play was produced as a film, has been done on the air.”

It appeared to Gould that the Guild was rapidly falling into a rut. The next offerings would be *You Can’t Take It with You* and *Craig’s Wife*, causing Gould to opine “Evidently, the Guild has not heard that the summer stock season has closed.”<sup>108</sup> By the end of 1946, he was bemoaning the lack of substantial radio drama during the past twelve months, a pattern that extended even to the “Theatre Guild, which on Broadway at least has shown a healthy unwillingness to follow the crowd, [but] succumbed in its second season on the air to routine and not very inspired revivals.”<sup>109</sup>

This trend in play selection that Gould identified became symptomatic of problems the Guild would face throughout its career in radio and first attempt in television. In reviewing the arc of the Theatre Guild’s lifespan from 1919 until 1946, one encounters the recurring tension between stated objectives and actual results, often around play selection. It was at the heart of the breakup of the Board in 1939 with those who came to favor popular commercial success overcoming those who, as Lee Simonson did, believed in the unconventional drama of a William Saroyan. By the mid-1940s,

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<sup>108</sup> Jack Gould, “Radio Comedy Shows,” *New York Times*, 15 September 1946, 20.

<sup>109</sup> Jack Gould, “Backward Glance,” *New York Times*, 29 December 1946, 47.

ostensibly the tension should have relaxed and ultimately faded from the scene for the simple reason that Langner and Helburn no longer had any internal opposition.

Externally, however, there were those who continued to hold the Theatre Guild to past standards of performance. When the Guild entered radio with Helburn and Langner still asserting the same lofty goals, critics like Jack Gould took them to task by pointing out the disconnect between what the Guild said and what it did. Simply stated, although Helburn, Langner, and now Marshall espoused the original Guild goals of “bringing better plays to the attention of the American public,”<sup>110</sup> they often relied on previously successful, but dated plays. Thus, the tension remained and it would continue to hound the Guild when it branched out into television.

Since Helburn publicly announced in November 1944 the Guild’s renunciation of its earlier credo that commercial theatre lacked imagination and enunciated its determination to serve a larger audience, the Guild had been attempting to avoid a trap of its own making. Helburn referred to this trap when she acknowledged that, “The larger audience is not kindly disposed. It will stand for no chinks in armor. . . . The larger audience demands complete assurance in acting, writing and production.”<sup>111</sup> (She might have added that it also demanded results, for without it there could be no commercial success and therefore no larger audience.) For the most part, the Guild avoided the trap in its radio endeavors. However, the Guild’s radio experience had been deceptive. The similarities in writing and acting techniques between the stage and radio were sufficient

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<sup>110</sup> Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn, Foreword, in Fitelson, ed., *Theatre Guild on the Air*, vii.

<sup>111</sup> Stanley K. Anderson, Notes on address by Theresa Helburn at luncheon for National Theatre Conference. The quotations are Helburn’s.

enough to seduce the Guild into a false sense of security and an inflated view of its ability to recreate stage plays in other media. Critics might complain that the Guild's plays lacked originality but they were generally still superior to radio drama's "unrelieved diet of escapism and detective thrillers."<sup>112</sup> Some of the Guild's professions of competence in radio, all of these based upon its theatrical experience, were misguided; the two competences did not exactly equate. Still, the Guild's position seems to have been one where it appealed to the public to trust it to know best when in matters of artistic considerations, e.g., play selection, casting, and overall aesthetics. As 1947 approached, and the Guild contemplated an attempt at television, the trap loomed larger. The Guild would learn that television was a medium unforgiving of those practitioners who took it at face value. Critics would look closely at programs that promised something and failed to deliver on their promises. In television, more than radio, "chinks in armor" would be easier to discern and harder to conceal.

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<sup>112</sup> Jack Gould, "Backward Glance."

### **Chapter 3: “To Elevate Television from the Saloon to the Living Room.”<sup>1</sup> – The Theatre Guild Enters Television.**

In a 1945 article explaining why the Guild chose to enter radio, Theresa Helburn gave as the primary reason, “the fact that radio is the precursor of television which looms large on the theatre horizon...”<sup>2</sup> With the Second World War coming to an end, television was what one might refer to today as the “eight-hundred pound gorilla” of the entertainment industry.<sup>3</sup> Everyone wanted to control it (and the bountiful profits it promised) without suffering immediate financial disaster in the process.<sup>4</sup> The Guild had been considering television for several years and with the radio program in place the time seemed right for the Guild to take on a new medium that appeared similar to the stage. As it had with radio, the Guild would attempt to impose a theatrical framework that did not always fit the new medium and the ensuing lessons it learned would often be painful to the Guild’s intricately-crafted self image. The Guild triumvirate of Helburn, Langner, and Marshall agreed that the next step in the progression of the Theatre Guild from a theatrical icon into a national force in broadcasting would be television. After World War II, the medium seemed ripe for exploitation by a creative organization such as the Theatre Guild.

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<sup>1</sup>Langner explaining their motives for entering television after the decision to partner with NBC. *Time*, 17 November 1947, 78.

<sup>2</sup> Theresa Helburn, “The Guild Presents,” *New York Times*, 26 August 1945, X5.

<sup>3</sup> John Royal, vice president of television for NBC predicted that television will “be the biggest thing the entertainment world has ever known.” Anita Grannis, “The Outlook for Television: An Interview with John Royal,” *Stand By!*, January 1945, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. In 1945, NBC Vice President John Royal estimated that the network had invested \$1 million with revenues of only \$50-100,000.

By 1946 when the Theatre Guild resolved to add television to its repertoire, the television industry was on the threshold of an immense expansion that had been building for nearly fifteen years. Although United States television pioneers conducted experimental broadcasts as early as the late 1920s and early 1930s, semi-regular programming did not begin until just prior to World War II. Both CBS and NBC, the leading radio networks, developed television branches and throughout the 1930s both broadcast programs in New York City.<sup>5</sup> Most of this early fare consisted of short mysteries, crime plays, and light comedies. Even at this very early juncture, the public responded enthusiastically. In August 1928, Agnes Smith wrote that she knew “some optimists who are looking forward to seeing this fall’s football games right in their own living-rooms, without risking life and limb on the Boston Post Road.”<sup>6</sup> In 1936 NBC began producing experimental programs featuring short plays. A breakthrough in programming came on 7 June 1938 with the NBC broadcast of a scene from Rachel Crothers’ play *Susan and God*, then on Broadway at the Plymouth Theatre. Gertrude Lawrence (in the title role) became one of the first major theatrical stars to appear on

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<sup>5</sup> Hawes, *American Television Drama: The Experimental Years* 21-47. The first television drama was a forty-minute broadcast of *The Queen’s Messenger*, a one-act play by J. Hartley Manners over WGY in Schenectady, New York on 11 September 1928. The espionage melodrama, a favorite with amateur theatre groups, had its premiere in London in 1899.

<sup>6</sup> Agnes Smith, “Television, In Case You’re Interested,” *Life*, 23 August 1928, 7-8. Accessed through APS Online, 20 June 2007. Actually, the first college football broadcast came on 30 September 1939 with Fordham taking on Waynesburg. See Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr., *Dunlap’s Radio & Television Almanac* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), 125.

television.<sup>7</sup> Later that year, Gilbert Seldes looked upon the infant steps of the medium as the beginnings of an entertainment form that would complement radio and film without replacing them. In his view, “like radio and the movies, television will have to create something of its own if it wants to become interesting and significant. I think it will.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1939, NBC switched to a series of lengthier broadcasts, some lasting ninety minutes. Mimicking radio, early television turned to theatrical plays for source material. Over the next two years, NBC broadcast nearly one hundred programs of varying subject matter, many of them adaptations of stage plays. Besides productions of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, other early broadcasts featured works by George S. Kaufman, Edna Ferber, Ring Lardner, A.A. Milne, J.B. Priestly, and Thornton Wilder.<sup>9</sup> Although not always achieving critical success, NBC persevered.<sup>10</sup> These largely experimental

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<sup>7</sup> Hawes, *American Television Drama: The Experimental Years*, 60-72. Although Lawrence concentrated on stage work, she appeared in several films released in the United States during the 1930s. See *The New York Times Directory of the Film*, with an introduction by Arthur Knight (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 538.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert Seldes, “Hollywood’s Greatest Enigma – Television,” *Photoplay*, October 1938, 36, 94-95; reprinted in *Selected Radio and Television Criticism*, ed. Anthony Slide (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987), 104-110. One has to gauge Seldes’ optimism in light of his position as the director of CBS’s television division from 1937 until 1945 when he left to work at Paramount Studios as a writer. See Stanley Kempner, ed., *Television Encyclopedia* (New York: Fairchild Pub. Co., 1948), 119; “Television Plans Advanced by CBS; Seldes in Charge,” *Washington Post*, 5 September 1937, A11; “Fox Realigns Cast for ‘3 Little Girls,’” *New York Times*, 8 December 1945, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Hawes, *American Television Drama: The Experimental Years*, 79-85 and 192-215.

<sup>10</sup> A reviewer for *The Billboard*, lauded NBC for its technical work on a 1939 broadcast but chided it for its choice of “The Unexpected” by Aaron Hoffman. “There was no need for doing the piece, and the newness of television is no excuse. It was badly written, badly staged and badly played ...” Jerry Franken, “Review of RCA-NBC



broadcasts, using relatively crude technology and primarily featuring minor actors, reached a miniscule audience. By the beginning of 1941, only an estimated 90,000 out of the more than eight million residents of greater New York City had access to television sets.<sup>11</sup>

Theresa Helburn had both first-hand experience with and strong opinions on television in this early stage. In an article for the *North American Review* in 1937 entitled “The Theatre, Bloody but Unbowed,” she envisioned television as a possible threat to theatre in the future.

[T]he great monied interests, realizing they can broadcast plays direct from actors on the stage at far lower production cost than the making of a motion picture demands, will pour infinite wealth back into the theatre again, and every trained working unit will be of value. And when that happens, I have no doubt that television will be the new Goliath, guilty of the same evils of mass appeal [as in movies], censorship and what-have-you, against which the young artist rebels will band themselves together in the sacred name of the “legitimate.”<sup>12</sup>

This passage suggests Helburn recognized television’s potential to alter the face of theatre. On the one hand, one could use television to broadcast “plays” more cheaply than one could either stage or film them. It takes only a short imaginative leap to replace “plays” with “Guild plays,” since the 1930s were a time during which the Guild suffered many financial setbacks. On the other hand, television could provide one more obstacle

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Inaugural Program (NBC May 10, 1939),” *The Billboard*, 13 May 1939, 8-9; reprinted in Slide, ed., *Selected Radio and Television Criticism*, 111-112.

<sup>11</sup> Hawes, *American Television Drama: The Experimental Years*, 91. Estimates place the number of television sets in public use at 10,000. Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 127-128.

<sup>12</sup> Theresa Helburn, “The Theatre, Bloody but Unbowed,” *North American Review*, 243 no. 2 (Summer 1937), 243. Helburn also betrays an elitist bias by equating “mass appeal” with “evils.”

in the way of promoting the “legitimate theatre,” a concept in which Helburn still believed. In hindsight, it is possible to imagine that Helburn began to view television as more of a help than a hindrance after an invitation by the president of NBC to attend a “luncheon and television demonstration” on 7 September 1938.<sup>13</sup> It seems reasonable to assume that NBC wanted the “opportunity to show [Helburn] the progress which has been made in this new medium to date,” in order to build a bridge to New York’s leading theatrical producer, especially since NBC later asked to have some of its actors audition for Guild shows.<sup>14</sup> What is apparent is that NBC viewed theatre as an ally in a highly experimental endeavor.

Whatever plans the Guild or others might have had for expanding television went on hold after September 1939 and Germany’s invasion of Poland. In the next few months, most experimental stations ceased broadcasting due to a shortage of electronic parts. Manufacturers of television sets and broadcast equipment stopped production and through a combination of circumstances television in the United States essentially went into hibernation after 1942.<sup>15</sup> As I noted earlier, the 1941 reorganization gave Langner

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<sup>13</sup> Helburn accepted the invitation from Lenox Lohr the week prior to the demonstration. Theresa Helburn, Letter to Franklyn Robertson (NBC Artists Service), 2 September 1938. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 98- N Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Lohr served as president and director of NBC from 1936-1940. See Kempner, 102.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Tuthill (Assistant Managing Director NBC Artists Service). Letter to Theresa Helburn, 14 September 1938; Franklyn Robertson, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 17 October 1938. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 98- N Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>15</sup> NBC’s WNBT became the first commercially licensed station on 1 July 1941 and five other U.S. stations remained active for four to five hours daily until April 1942 when the Defense Communication Board recommended curtailing construction of new sets and broadcast stations. See Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 127-128; Kempner, 34-35.

and Helburn the authority to experiment with television but they were unable to do so until after the financial success of *Oklahoma!* in 1943. By 1944, many Americans believed the end of the war, if not in sight, was at least not far off. When it ended, television would surely return and Langner wanted the Guild in position to make its move. With financial security at hand, and plans for a radio program underway, the Guild turned its attention toward harnessing Helburn's new "Goliath."

In April 1944, Langner proposed that the Guild retain John Haggott as an Assistant Producer with duties that included assisting "on television, radio, or any other work."<sup>16</sup> Haggott had worked for the Guild in many capacities over the years including managing the Langners' Westport Country Playhouse and serving as producer, stage manager, and technical director for Guild shows.<sup>17</sup> At about the same time Langner made internal suggestions to move forward with television, he used the press to both promote his entrepreneurial aspirations and express his opinions on the new medium. The 6 May 1944 issue of *New Yorker* magazine, reported that Langner had plans of producing a yearly "motion-picture version of Guild hit" as well as a "television stock company of its

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For a discussion of what programming did continue, see Hawes, *American Television Drama: The Experimental Years*, 91-115.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Langner, Memo to Theresa Helburn, 12 April 1944. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 57- John Haggott Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. I have found no evidence that the Guild took any action on Langner's proposal.

<sup>17</sup> Haggott also produced the Guild's production of *Othello* in 1943. Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 309, 479; Gassner, *Producing the Play*, 186-199. Langner and Marshall began the Westport theatre in 1931. See Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 251-252 ( he incorrectly lists the year as 1932); Martha Schmoyer LoMonaco, *Summer Stock!: An American Theatrical Phenomenon* with a foreword by Marian Seldes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 73, 112; "Melodrama in Westport," *New York Times*, 6 June 1931, 15.

own, which will begin in a couple of weeks to have rehearsal periods.” Recognizing that acting for television was not exactly the same as for the stage, Langner believed that popular actors might have trouble making the transition. As Langner told the *New Yorker*, “It’s one thing to sit in the theatre and watch people run around for a couple of hours, but it’s a great actor whom you can stand for a couple of hours in your own living room.” According to the article, Langner predicted that “younger actors who haven’t been raised in the tradition of over-emphasis will weather the change best,” hence his mention of a specially trained cadre of Guild television actors.<sup>18</sup>

The same day that the *New Yorker* hit the newsstands, the *New York Times* ran a similar item announcing that Langner envisioned the day when the entire country would witness the televised opening of a play. Consequently, “Mr. Langner acknowledged that the Guild had already started negotiations for commercial sponsorship of an experimental program which will be supervised by Armina Marshall, actress and author.” Langner and Helburn would assist in the project. Langner’s reason for entering television in the somewhat moribund days of World War II was elementary. “We’re going into television and we’re going to experiment now,” the article quoted him, “because when it reaches the commercial stage we want to know what it’s all about.”<sup>19</sup> A week later, Jack Gould of the *New York Times* offered more insight into Langner’s idea. Rather than try to develop television as a separate medium, as Seldes suggested in 1938, Langner wanted to

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<sup>18</sup> “Guild Buildup,” 6 May 1944, *New Yorker*, 22-23. Only the specified quotation is Langner’s. The others are from the unnamed author. The stock company did not materialize and rehearsals did not begin. This clipping is in Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 57- John Haggott Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>19</sup> “Guild To Try Television,” *New York Times*, 6 May 1944, 11.

counteract Helburn's fear of the new "Goliath." According to Gould, "Mr. Langner said the Guild wanted to be ready for any future developments and not be caught napping if the day arrives when a party, instead of taking a cab to the Rialto, merely sits down at home and sees the new play." Gould also reported that Marshall, now actively in charge of the "Theatre Guild 'division of television,'" thought that live television shows "would be akin to the theatre, since actors would have to give a sustained performance from memory, a little requirement not needed in either films or present-day radio..."<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Guild found itself in a unique position to capitalize on television precisely because it knew the ins and outs of theatre.

Langner viewed the differences between live television and theatre as negligible, a belief others in the Guild shared. Although several observers, both inside and outside the industry, had commented on television's unique place in the entertainment world, no one in the Guild appears to have been listening.<sup>21</sup> While Langner's comment on the differences between acting for television and other forms seems insightful, Marshall's equation of theatre and live television is more revealing of the attitude that pervaded the Guild at the time. In 1944 the Guild viewed television as essentially theatre on a small screen. Thus, its interest in television seems more of a concern for a new way to

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<sup>20</sup> Jack Gould, "Radio Row: One Thing and Another Along Radio Row," *New York Times*, 14 May 1944, X5.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Seldes in his 1938 article discussed such qualities as acting: "Neither stage nor movie acting seems to be exactly what's needed;" and the presentation of drama: "Merely to take a stage play or even a vaudeville bill or a circus will not make good television." Seldes, "Hollywood's Greatest Enigma – Television," in *Slide*, 109-110. Others spoke of the need to develop unique presentation methods. See "Miner (CBS Cautions on False Hopes; Paul Knight more enthused," *Variety*, 15 December 1943, 38.

distribute a proven product, i.e. theatre, than the development of a new art form. In any case, the newspapers reports were premature. Langner, ever the showman, had been overly optimistic. In 1944 the Guild had no resources to staff a “television stock company” and would not for at least four years. Most probably, the negotiations for commercial sponsorship Langner mentioned were taking place in the Guild’s pursuit of a radio sponsor. A portion of the Guild’s 1945 radio contract with U.S. Steel included a lengthy clause concerning experimental television broadcasts, which would become material when the Guild actually produced television programs.<sup>22</sup> Importantly however, the Guild was making its intentions known and others took notice. For example, in a letter to Helburn in June 1944, J. Howard Reber, Philadelphia attorney and theatre enthusiast, mentioned in passing that he had “noted in several writings in the papers that the Theatre Guild is likely to expand its activities in the motion picture and television world.”<sup>23</sup> One attribute of a good promoter was to keep the product’s name in front of the public and with more than a quarter century in show business, Langner was an experienced promoter.

With the apparent resolution of the radio situation in late 1944, the Guild tabled most plans for television for 1945. Evidently there had been some talk of “an experimental television program for Coca Cola,” in mid-1944 and the topic arose again

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<sup>22</sup> H. William Fitelson, Radio Contract between the Theatre Guild and United States Steel. Clause N addresses television.

<sup>23</sup> J. Howard Reber, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 29 June 1944. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 91 Folder Mas-Maz, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Reber was one of the founders of the American National Theatre and Academy, or ANTA, and actively participated in theatre since World War I. See the obituary in *New York Times*, 6 April 1949, 29.

just after the radio program debuted in September 1945.<sup>24</sup> However, nothing came of it and for the remainder of 1945 and the first half of 1946 Marshall and her staff labored under the burden of producing the weekly program. In April, she wrote her mother “As usual we are frantically busy. Radio has certainly done us in this winter and it isn’t over yet.”<sup>25</sup> On 2 June 1946 the broadcast of “Call it a Day” with Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne ended the season and on 20 July U.S. Steel renewed the option for the next season.<sup>26</sup>

Regardless of what Helburn had said about the Guild not needing the income, the first season of *Theatre Guild on the Air* had been profitable. Not including the weekly salary of \$1,000 paid to Langner and Helburn, the Guild cleared \$40,000. For the upcoming 1946-1947 season, U.S. Steel mandated some slight changes. Langner would no longer serve as emcee and the Guild would have to hire one for the next season. Also,

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<sup>24</sup> H. William Fitelson, Letter to Lawrence Langner, Theresa Helburn, Armina Marshall, 12 September 1945. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 148–U.S. Steel Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Fitelson describes the proposal as “over a year ago,” when he was working on a contract basis for the Guild. The MCA talent agency had been representing the Guild and Langner had asked Fitelson for advice.

<sup>25</sup> Armina Marshall, Letter to Mrs. C.C. Marshall, 23 April 1946. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 90–M Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>26</sup> For the broadcast see “Radio Programs of the Week,” *New York Times*, 2 June 1946, X8. For the remainder of the summer, U.S. Steel sponsored *The Hour of Mystery* in the same time period. The first broadcast featured Laurence Olivier in “Journey into Fear.” See “Radio Programs of the Week,” *New York Times*, 9 June 1946, X6; Dunning, 332-333.” Announcement of the renewal is in Theresa Helburn, Secretary’s Report for Board of Directors Meeting, 20 July 1946. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 162-1946 Board of Directors Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Clause I, “Options,” of the original contract called for U.S. Steel to mail a renewal by 10 July 1946. Fitelson, Radio Contract between the Theatre Guild and United States Steel.

the Guild needed to spend more on musicians and “certain actors’ salaries will be more expensive.” Still, with U.S. Steel increasing its payments to the Guild by \$1,000 per a broadcast for a weekly cost to it of \$14,000 (Langner and Helburn would take a reduced salary as determined by the Board), the program was in excellent financial shape.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the Guild had located another source of income with which to fill its coffers. Langner finally realized some success in motion pictures when in early 1946 the Guild “sponsored” the distribution of Laurence Olivier’s filmed version of *Henry V* which opened in Boston in April. In exchange for sharing a portion of the film’s profits with J. Arthur Rank and United Artists, producer and distributor, the Guild agreed to use its “familiar program line, ‘The Theater [sic] Guild presents,’” in the twenty cities where it had subscription lists.<sup>28</sup>

It seems probable that the presence of Laurence Olivier gave the project cachet, however no one forced the Guild into the association which, in essence, allowed Langner and Helburn to sell the Guild name to a film distributor for advertising purposes and its subscriber lists for potential customers. Granted, the Guild was attempting to create demand for the “right” kind of film, but it was a long way from the idealistic days of the

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<sup>27</sup> Helburn, Secretary’s Report for Board of Directors Meeting, 20 July 1946; Fitelson, Radio Contract between the Theatre Guild and United States Steel. U.S. Steel’s payment to the Guild fell in the mid-range for popular radio programs of the period. For example, by 1948-1949 the program cost \$15,000 per broadcast as compared to \$25,000 for *The Jack Benny Show* and \$10,000 for *Helen Hayes’ Electric Theatre*. See “Breakdown of Sunday Talent Nut,” *Variety*, 27 October 1948, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Nelson B. Bell, “Theater [sic] Guild Lends Its Illustrious Name to a Mere Pick-chuh,” *Washington Post*, 6 April 1946, 10; A.H. Weiler, “Ties That Bind the Big Top and Movies – Theatre Guild Aids ‘Henry V,’” *New York Times*, 7 April 1946, X3. Subscribers could purchase discounted tickets at the two-a-day, reserved-seating showings.



Washington Square veterans. However, it was an illustration of the new Theatre Guild, one that operated more as a business and less as an artistic concern. Additionally, the Guild's film deal continued two trends that surfaced after the 1941 reorganization. The first was the promotion of the Theatre Guild "brand" ahead of the Theatre Guild "product," one of the leading arguments for entering radio. The second was the attempt to promote the Theatre Guild nationally rather than regionally, also accomplished with the radio program. Consequently, after a year's experience in commercial radio broadcasting and a budding career in film in the wings, the Guild began to look at television with renewed interest.

In October 1946, the Guild Board proposed a new organizational structure to reflect its expanded endeavors.<sup>29</sup> Outside of theatrical production, the preeminent division in the new makeup was the "Radio Committee" headed by Marshall and including executive producer Fitelson, director Homer Fickett and production executive Carol Irwin among others.<sup>30</sup> It met weekly in Langner's office. With the second radio

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<sup>29</sup> Strictly Confidential: Theatre Guild Organization as of 30 October 1946, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 162-1946 Board of Directors Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. All of the details about the personnel that follow originate with this document.

<sup>30</sup> Irwin holds an interesting position in both radio and television history. Born in 1907, she worked in advertising for the agency of Young & Rubicomb in the early 1940s where she supervised daytime programming. In February 1945 she moved to the former Blue Network, now ABC, where she continued in daytime radio. Through the Guild's connection with the network, she became a production executive on *Theatre Guild on the Air*, a position she held until the end of the 1948-1949 season. Irwin controlled the broadcast rights to John van Druten's *I Remember Mama* and formed a production company to capitalize on them. For six years she produced the television version, *Mama*, making her one of the first successful female television executives. Irwin was married to Paul Hollister, who at various times had been an advertising executive with BBD&O and the R.H. Macy company, a vice president of CBS radio, an publicity director for RKO films. Irwin died in 1962. *Variety*, 28 February 1945, 25; *New York Times*, 9 June 1949,

season in full swing, the weekly frequency of the meetings was imperative. The revised structure included, for the first time, a "Television Committee." In charge of this new unit was Warren Caro, a lawyer by trade and cousin of scenic artist Jo Mielziner who had joined the Guild as executive secretary in 1946 after serving in the Navy.<sup>31</sup> His new responsibility would be to oversee all aspects of Guild television. Included on the rosters of both committees was Paul Crabtree, a twenty-eight-year-old jack-of-all trades who had been with the Guild for about a year. In that short time, Crabtree had succeeded Lee Dixon as Will Parker in *Oklahoma!* and appeared in the Guild's production of *The Iceman Cometh*. He would later be an instrumental part of the Guild's television aspirations.<sup>32</sup> The new television branch would meet every two weeks with its members

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54; *New York Times*, 15 January 1949, 54; Joan Walker, "Women in Television," *Washington Post*, 20 November 1960, TV13-14, TV19; "Carol Hollister Dead at 55; Producer for Radio and TV," *New York Times*, 12 December 1962, 14; "Hollister Gets RKO Post," *New York Times*, 8 February 1946, 28; *New York Times*, 9 September, 1948, 32.

<sup>31</sup> In early 1947, Caro helped found the American Television Society. At the request of the U.S. Department of State, Caro chaired the U.S. delegation of the first Congress of the International Theatre Institute sponsored by UNESCO at Prague in 1948. He participated in the formation of a charter and by-laws for the exchange of theatrical productions worldwide. See Raymond D. McGill, ed., *Notable Names in the American Theatre* (Clifton, NJ: James D. White & Co., 1976), 614. The American Television Society was a non-profit group to "foster the study, understanding and appreciation of television as a cultural, educational, entertainment, and advertising medium," with headquarters in New York. See Jack Allicoate, ed., *1948 Radio Annual* (New York: Radio Daily, 1948), 996, 1067.

<sup>32</sup> Ironically, Crabtree wrote the Guild asking for non-acting employment in November 1945. He earned a B.A. from Syracuse and had worked in both college and commercial radio in the Syracuse area before moving to Boston. Helburn liked him and after an interview on 6 December 1945 she and Langner hired him. Interestingly, Crabtree's employee agreement dated 30 September 1946 listed as possible duties assisting in "radio or television." Paul Crabtree, Letter to Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, 16 November 1945; Theresa Helburn, Memo to Lawrence Langner, 27 November 1945; Paul Crabtree Employee Agreement with The Theatre Guild, Inc., 30

on call in case Caro needed them in between scheduled meetings. Unlike the Guild's television announcements in 1944, this attempt was more circumspect. Only four members of the Guild received copies of the organizational chart, originally marked "Strictly Confidential"—Langner, Helburn, Fitelson and Caro—and Langner reminded them that it was "not to be given general circulation."<sup>33</sup> At the 5 December Board meeting, the Guild directors made official what the 1941 agreement had given them permission to do. The Theatre Guild would expand its activities according to the following resolution:

Resolved: That the Administrative Directors of the Corporation be, and hereby are authorized, to cause to be organized a television department for the purpose of formulating plans for the participation of the Corporation in the field of television.<sup>34</sup>

Langner was justified in keeping the Guild's plans under wraps simply because the business of television had changed dramatically in the previous two years. In 1944, few broadcasting outlets existed over which the Guild could ply its television wares, if it had any. However, with the end of the war the opportunities were more numerous and the Guild needed to think carefully about choosing a television broadcast partner. In its

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September 1946. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 36-Paul Crabtree Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Also see entry in McGill, 648.

<sup>33</sup> Lawrence Langner, Memo to Warren Caro, 4 December 1946. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 162-1946 Board of Directors Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Although Marshall was not on the distribution list, for all practical purposes, she and Langner were a single entity.

<sup>34</sup> Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting, 5 December 1946. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 162-1946 Board of Directors Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

radio search the Guild could have assumed any potential broadcaster would have possessed both technical prowess and years of experience since network radio had been in vigorous operation for over fifteen years. Television was another case entirely. Almost by definition, all broadcasts were experimental and all broadcasters were learning on the job. The Guild needed to play its cards relatively close to its vest and forge a partnership wisely. By the end of 1945, it had three realistic possibilities, all located in New York.

After the stoppage due to World War II, television programming began to return by the beginning of 1945 and the industry primed itself for a dynamic rebirth. From its New York affiliate WNBT, NBC took the lead in producing live drama. Continuing a trend it had established before the war, it broadcast adaptations of *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* by Robert E. Sherwood, *Winterset* by Maxwell Anderson, and *Men in White* by Sidney S. Kingsley among others.<sup>35</sup> With no great increase in the availability of technology during the war, very few viewers saw these broadcasts. NBC estimated that only 6,500 television sets were in use in the New York area in March 1946, a slight increase from an estimated 5,000 in 1941.<sup>36</sup> The network, however, believed it could create demand for television by increasing the distribution of programming. In 1944, NBC president Niles Trammel had announced a four-step plan to develop a nationwide network which “will not spring up overnight but must proceed as an orderly, logical development.” The first step was an eastern network that included major cities such as Boston, New York,

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<sup>35</sup> Hawes, *American Television Drama: The Experimental Years*, 220-223. During 1945, NBC aired nearly forty broadcasts.

<sup>36</sup> *Variety*, 29 October 1947, 29. See also William Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2001), 18.

Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. as well as minor cities such as Schenectady and Rochester. Three later steps would fill in the country with a Midwest network (Chicago as hub), a Pacific network (“the great talent center of Hollywood” as hub), and regional networks emanating from Denver, Atlanta and Dallas. Trammel predicted an end date of 1947 for the eastern portion and 1950 for the entire project.<sup>37</sup> It was an ambitious undertaking, but early television promised such immense financial rewards that unbridled ambition coupled with buoyant optimism became standard industry attributes.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to NBC, CBS also increased its television activity as the war wound down. In May 1944 WCBW, the CBS New York station, resumed two hours weekly of live productions and increased that to three days and four hours per week by May 1945.<sup>39</sup> Under the tutelage of Gilbert Seldes and Worthington Miner, the network concentrated on developing quality programming. One of these experiments was Miner’s adaptation of a short war-bond play “The Favor” by Lawrence M. Klee which aired twice, on 30 June and 13 July 1944. In praising the program, a trade magazine said that “video proved it was old enough to go to war, vital enough to make a contribution.”<sup>40</sup> CBS also delved

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<sup>37</sup> “Niles Trammel, NBC President, Outlines Postwar Outlook for Television,” *Stand By!*, April 1944, 2,8. Trammel’s quotes came from an internal document sent to NBC affiliates.

<sup>38</sup> In 1945, NBC Vice President John Royal estimated that the network had invested \$1 million with revenues of only \$50-100,000. “But,” he remarked, “rest assured that when television is successful there’ll be substantial returns—and for everyone.” Anita Grannis, “The Outlook for Television: An Interview with John Royal.”

<sup>39</sup> Donna Keith, “Radio Highlights,” *Stand By!*, May 1944, 2,4; Donna Keith, “Radio Highlights,” *Stand By!*, May 1945, 2,4.

<sup>40</sup> “The Favor,” *Tune In*, April 1945, 16-17; Hawes, *American Television Drama: The Experimental Years*, 51-52.

in the fields of music and dance. By the end of 1946, CBS television director of “music-dramatic productions” Paul Belanger theorized that “the dance will be to television what music is to radio.”<sup>41</sup>

Also active during the war was Allen DuMont, an electrical engineer who eventually made a fortune manufacturing television sets based upon his own design. DuMont owned station W2XWV, later WABD, in New York and from 1942 until the end of the war was the only station to maintain semi-regular broadcasting.<sup>42</sup> On 28 September, 1944 DuMont broadcast a full-length musical comedy especially written for television, *The Boys from Boise* which one industry magazine called the “biggest news in the campaign to improve television quality.”<sup>43</sup> Jack Gould applauded the show “As a valuable and important step toward television’s own self-sufficiency,” but added that it was not “any great shakes as a musical comedy.”<sup>44</sup> By April 1946, DuMont had opened the largest broadcast studio in the country, the John Wanamaker Studio, in the Wanamaker Department Store in New York. Comprising 500,000 cubic feet of space and a fifty-foot by sixty-foot stage with a fifty-foot ceiling, the studio could operate four

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<sup>41</sup> Heading the music department of CBS television, Paul Belanger received an award from the Television Broadcasters Association in 1946 for excellence in “artistic programming.” See “Television Parley Attended by 1,200,” *New York Times*, 11 October 1946, 34; “Carolyn Beebe Honored,” *New York Times*, 15 November 1945, 24. “Dance to Gain by Television,” *Washington Post*, 24 November 1946, S3.

<sup>42</sup> In 1949, the trade publication *Television Daily* estimated that DuMont “telecast from five to ten hours per week—the only television station in the U.S. to maintain a regular program schedule.” *Television Daily*, 12 April 1949, 23; quoted in Hawes, *American Television Drama: The Experimental Years*, 114.

<sup>43</sup> “‘The Boys from Boise’ – a Pioneer Video Achievement,” *Tune In*, February 1945, 48.

<sup>44</sup> Jack Gould, “‘The Boys from Boise,’” *New York Times*, 8 October, 1944, X5.

cameras at once. “With the opening tonight in New York of DuMont’s John Wanamaker Studios, Commercial Television becomes a full-fledged [sic] reality,” boasted DuMont’s ad in the *Washington Post*.<sup>45</sup> DuMont also expressed an interest in Broadway when John Wildberg, producer of *Anna Lucasta*, *Porgy and Bess*, and *One Touch of Venus*, formed John Wildberg television Production in December 1946. A press release referring to Wildberg as the “first big Broadway producer to turn interests to TV,” listed DuMont as the “firm’s first client as advisor on production, scripts, casting.”<sup>46</sup>

Each of these possible suitors had strengths and weaknesses. NBC held the lead in building a substantial network and had the largest and most experienced production team. CBS had innovative ideas and, in Worthington Miner, a director of television operations who had once worked for the Guild as a director. DuMont had the technical expertise of its founder Allen DuMont coupled with state-of-the-art facilities. However unlike NBC and CBS it had no national radio network and little name recognition, an important point to the Guild. Its radio marriage with U.S. Steel paired two of the most recognizable names in business and theatre, conveying status on each. There seems little chance that the Guild ever seriously considered DuMont, even in 1944. A little more

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<sup>45</sup> DuMont began advertising the facility in October 1945 and predicted an opening date of “about December 1, 1945.” See display ad in *Broadcasting*, 22 October 1945, 61. DuMont ran ads in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* heralding the studio. See *Washington Post*, 15 April 1946, 14; *New York Times Magazine*, 21 April 1946, 6. Ben Pulitzer Creations, “maker of men’s fine neckwear,” also used the studio in ad for “A NEW TELEVISION SHOW” it was sponsoring, although the ad does not identify the program, only the studio. *New York Times*, 19 April 1946, 14.

<sup>46</sup> “Sight and Sound,” *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 28 December, 1946, 4. The identification of Wildberg as a “big Broadway producer,” was another example of publicity getting in the way of the facts. Compared to the Guild’s production record, Wildberg was a novice. For a list of his Broadway credits see *New York Times Directory of the Theatre*, 977.

than a week after the Board passed the television resolution, Langner was urging Fitelson, "Please close the deal with Mr. Royal for the Guild to do six television shows, etc. We are most anxious to move this along."<sup>47</sup> As it had with radio, the Guild appreciated status and resources; NBC had both.

The year 1947 dawned with the Guild's television aspirations proceeding as planned. Fitelson was hammering out a deal with NBC that seemed only to need the approval of Langner and Helburn, currently in London to attend the opening of the Guild's co-production of S.N. Behrman's *Jane*, an adaptation of the W. Somerset Maugham story.<sup>48</sup> On January 4, Marshall wrote them that "Bill asks me to tell you that he is in practical agreement with NBC on all matters concerning television. Agreements are now being prepared subject to your approval on your return."<sup>49</sup> Sometime after Langner and Helburn returned in mid-January, another player had entered the game. The Guild now had CBS as a suitor and could afford to play it off against NBC.<sup>50</sup> Like NBC,

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<sup>47</sup> Lawrence Langner, Memo to H. William Fitelson, 13 December 1946. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 46–H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>48</sup> They sailed for London on 14 December 1946 and returned on 17 January 1947. Lewis Funke, "News and Gossip of the Rialto," *New York Times*, 15 December 1946, X3; Louis Calta, "New Shaw Script Near Completion," *New York Times*, 18 January 1947, 10; Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 414.

<sup>49</sup> Armina Marshall, Letter to Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn, 4 January 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 62–Therese Helburn Correspondence Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Most of the letter pertained to radio matters, especially concerning stars which included Martha Scott, Paul Douglas, Basil Rathbone, Paulette Goddard, Burgess Meredith and Dorothy McGuire.

<sup>50</sup> Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting, 14 February 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 162-1947 Board of Directors Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.



CBS also offered prestige and network affiliates in New York and Philadelphia. The Guild had a choice of two attractive options. What differed between the Guild's television negotiations of 1947 and its radio negotiations of 1944 was the absence of a sponsor. However, this was not a pressing concern for there was little commercial sponsorship for dramatic programs at that time.

John Royal, vice president of television for NBC, had addressed the sponsorship issue in an interview he gave in early 1945. Although he believed that dramatic shows would eventually be a television staple, Royal recognized that it would take at least a year after the end of the war to replace outmoded equipment and market enough television sets to build a sustainable audience. Thus, he realized that it would also take time to convince commercial sponsors to come on board.<sup>51</sup> When it came to sponsorship, it was a case of the chicken or the egg. Without television sets, and viewers to watch them, sponsors would not risk the investment. However, in order to induce viewers to watch the broadcaster needed a product, which typically meant a sponsor to provide the backing. In order to break the cycle, broadcasters generally accepted the loss and paid for programming themselves. If the broadcaster had the resources of a lucrative radio business, as NBC and CBS had, it could afford to sustain losses for some time. As an example of this reasoning, by September 1948 NBC estimated it had lost \$1.5 million in the preceding year and would lose another \$3 million in the coming year. It did not expect to break even until 1952.<sup>52</sup> It took deep pockets to broadcast in 1947 and NBC

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<sup>51</sup> Grannis, "The Outlook for Television: An Interview with John Royal."

<sup>52</sup> Television Digest and FM Reports, 25 September 1948, 1-2

and CBS had them. Both were willing to risk money on a Guild program, most likely for the cachet and potential sponsorship the Theatre Guild name could provide.

The Guild's discussions with both NBC and CBS centered on an initial sustaining period of six months with the Guild providing one play per month; the assumption being that those six broadcasts would serve as an audition for potential sponsors. Since "the initial work would be of an experimental nature with NBC or CBS financing the actual direct cost of the experiment," the Guild would not have to contribute any of its own funds.<sup>53</sup> Because of the wording of the Guild's radio contract with U.S. Steel, the key word was "experiment." The 1945 radio contract gave the Guild the right "to televise for experimental purposes," as long as the Guild sent Steel written notice "setting out the estimated costs in connection therewith." Steel then had four weeks to either commit to sponsor the broadcasts or opt out at which time the Guild could proceed "without association with Steel." If Steel chose sponsorship then the broadcasts would carry Steel's banner as did the radio program. In the case of Steel opting out, if a third party offered the Guild a sponsorship or if the Guild and Steel jointly decided that "television broadcasting is commercial," rather than experimental, the clock started again. The Guild then had to provide cost estimates and Steel had four weeks to decide to take the television plunge or not. If it did, then once again the Theatre Guild name would become the exclusive possession of U.S. Steel television.<sup>54</sup> It was a complicated dance arranged by two parties who, in 1945, were not quite certain they wanted to leave their chairs and

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<sup>53</sup> Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting, 14 February 1947.

<sup>54</sup> H. William Fitelson, Radio Contract between the Theatre Guild and United States Steel. Clause N addresses television.

participate. But if they did, Steel wanted sufficient protection against an outsider cutting in without its approval. By the end of 1946 the industrial icon fell into Royal's category of sponsors waiting to be convinced of television's commercial viability. That freed the Guild to experiment.

For the next few weeks the Guild weighed its options. Both NBC and CBS had offers on the table and Helburn and Langner worked in concert with Fitelson and Peter Davis, the Guild's business manager, to come to a decision.<sup>55</sup> On 9 April, Langner and Marshall left for London to attend the opening of *Oklahoma!* later that month.<sup>56</sup> The evidence suggests that before the departure, the Guild had begun to lean toward CBS and Worthington Miner. At that time in its television career, CBS had not approached NBC in terms of quantity of dramatic programming, but in Miner it possessed a true television pioneer and visionary. During World War II, Miner experimented with directing techniques and developed principles that transformed live television productions. For example, by 1941 television could broadcast proscenium-type plays reasonably well, principally due to the physical limitations of early cameras which were clumsy, with a depth of field of only three feet. According to Miner, in 1941 NBC still "continued to present dramatic programs with characters maintaining a straight, horizontal line at a

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<sup>55</sup> Fitelson authored a "comparative memo on the two television offers" that he sent to Langner and Davis. Helburn later asked for a copy of it. Theresa Helburn, Memo to H. William Fitelson, 3 March 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 46-H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>56</sup> The Langners sailed on the Queen Elizabeth on 9 April. *Oklahoma!* played two weeks in Manchester before opening to an enthusiastic crowd at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane on 30 April. "Reports of Marine and Aviation Schedules," *New York Times*, 8 April 1947, 55; "'Oklahoma!' Wins Hearts of London," *New York Times*, 1 May 1947, 35; Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 380-383.

three-foot remove from the back wall of the set.” It was more difficult to move the cameras between the performers, hence the proscenium set-up for most programs. As cameras became more mobile, Miner tackled the staging problem by using his background as a theatre director. As he recalled in an oral history many years later, “In the theatre I’d prided myself on my ability to ‘people’ the stage in a consistently interesting way.” A stage director can easily have “two characters confront each other at a distance of thirty feet,” and to great dramatic effect. Unfortunately, on a television stage that was impossible. Separate two characters “at only half that distance ... and the stature of a man is automatically reduced to that of a horsefly.” Miner’s solution was vertical, rather than horizontal, composition. In order to overcome the problem of allowing the viewer to be able to discern the reactions of four or five characters at one time, Miner concluded that “vertical composition, arrangements in depth, offered the only solution.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, in group shots, Miner would arrange the actors from upstage, away from the camera, to downstage, toward the camera, in order for the viewer to be able to see several actors at once.

This innovative, theatre-based approach would have appealed to the Guild and Miner seemed an ideal match, especially in light of a Guild proposal to CBS that dwarfed typical television programs. A document entitled “Proposal Regarding ‘Hook Up’ between Theatre Guild, Columbia Broadcasting Company and Columbia Concerts, Inc.” is representative of Langner’s penchant for large projects. Its scope surpassed anything in the television business and was a reincarnation of Langner’s 1944 plan. It called for

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<sup>57</sup> Worthington Miner, *Worthington Miner: A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 160-161

the Guild to create a “Theatre Guild-Columbia Broadcasting Stock Company,” supervised by Langner and Helburn, which would “produce a series of popular plays for television during the forthcoming season.” The company, “with visiting stars,” would operate in the manner of a summer stock theatre, much like Langner’s Westport Country Playhouse. Moreover, the Guild Directors’ experience with summer theatre would enable them “to produce plays with relative rapidity, selecting actors who are quick studies and used to giving good performances under so-called ‘stock conditions’, thereby greatly reducing the rehearsal period.” Thus their theatrical proficiency would offset their lack of television expertise. During the time in which the television program was developing, the Guild would also collaborate with Columbia Concerts, Inc., then the world’s largest concert bureau, in the formation of “five or six theatrical touring companies” that would visit “200 cities.”<sup>58</sup>

All of this—the five or six touring companies, the two hundred cities, the television stock companies—comprised only the first phase of the Guild’s proposal. Phase two would eliminate the touring companies and replace them with movie screens on which CBS could project television images, thus substituting television programs for

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<sup>58</sup> Proposal Regarding “Hook Up’ between Theatre Guild, Columbia Broadcasting Company and Columbia Concerts, Inc, n. d. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 34–CBS Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. A reference in the proposal regarding “Recent information from England,” dates it to either February or May 1947. Since CBS was not a factor after Langner’s return in May, the most probable date is late January or early February 1947. Columbia Concerts, Inc. began in 1928 with Arthur Judson as manager and William S. Paley as chairman of the Board. Paley was also Chairman of CBS. For a description of the company at the time of the proposal, see “Portrait of a Concert Manager,” *New York Times*, 9 February 1947, X7. The document also references “Mr. French,” who was most likely Ward French, president of Community Concert Service an affiliate of Columbia Concerts, Inc. See “Rodzinski Assailed,” *New York Times*, 25 February 1947, 27.

films. By the Guild's reasoning, the cost of an average film lay between \$300,000 and \$2,000,000 and most films only played an individual city for two weeks at the most. The Guild proposed projecting a televised play "throughout the whole country for a fraction of the cost." Providing the actors, directors and designers for these television productions would be multiple offshoots of the original stock company. It could be enlarged into specialty companies that could not only produce Broadway successes, but also "popular plays; musical plays and entertainments, such as reviews [sic], etc.; classical plays, including the works of Shakespeare, etc." specifically for television.<sup>59</sup> In order to ensure their full attention to the project, Langner and Helburn agreed to limit their theatrical productions to three per season.

The document is a remarkable blend of naiveté and hubris and I can find no evidence that CBS ever saw it let alone took it seriously. It does, however, provide a glimpse into the ambitions of the Guild leadership, particularly Langner. He often proposed ambitious business ventures concerning outside projects and this proposal is typical in its scope and optimism.<sup>60</sup> Regardless of CBS's opinion of this type of

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<sup>59</sup> Proposal Regarding "Hook Up" between Theatre Guild, Columbia Broadcasting Company and Columbia Concerts, Inc.

<sup>60</sup> In 1943 Langner engaged Fitelson in an attempt to form a film corporation to produce movies of Guild stage properties using Hollywood film companies as financial backers. John Gassner contributed a list of possible names including "Atlantis Pictures," "Minerva Pictures," "Cyclops Films," and "Centaur Films," among others. In May 1947, at the beginning of the final negotiations with NBC, Langner had altered the plan to include a production studio "45 minutes from New York," in order to use theatre personnel to create the films. John Gassner, Memo to Lawrence Langner, 26 September 1943. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 52 –Folder John Gassner Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. H. W. Fitelson, Memo on Picture Deals, 1 December 1943; Lawrence Langner, Confidential Letter to H. William Fitelson, 20 May 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 46–H. William

proposal, it did contain the germ of a working relationship between the broadcaster and the Guild and set forth the usual terms of six trial broadcasts. By the beginning of May, the Guild was prepared to place its faith in CBS instead of NBC. However, events beyond the Guild's control ultimately made that impossible.

The primary cause of tension among the various broadcasters in the post-war period was the lack of a standard for color television. Peter Goldmark developed a mechanical color system for CBS which first demonstrated it in August 1940.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, the system was not compatible with black and white television sets. According to one observer, "CBS color is a blur when received on an ordinary black and white TV set."<sup>62</sup> The war tabled the issue, but by 1945 it was on the minds of both broadcasters and consumers. The former wanted to protect their investment in broadcast technology, and the latter wanted assurance that they would not invest in television sets that would quickly become obsolete. As an example of this, Allen DuMont used an advertisement for the opening of his new studio as a forum to extol the virtues of black and white television and to counteract "clever propaganda" which had "spread the word that there are two television camps: one for and one against color." Although no one in the industry was opposed to color television, "practical color television for the public is not yet in sight," and "was still in the far distant future."<sup>63</sup>

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Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>61</sup> Kempner, 33, 81; Dunlap, Jr., 131.

<sup>62</sup> Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., *From Vaude to Video* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1951), 556.

<sup>63</sup> *Washington Post*, 15 April 1946.

Allen DuMont wanted the public to purchase DuMont black and white television sets. RCA, which owned NBC and was developing its own color system, wanted the industry to wait until a compatible electronic color was available, preferably one incorporating its technology. CBS was of another mind and in December 1946 it petitioned the Federal Communications Commission for a broadcasting permit to construct a nationwide color system that would exist in parallel with the current black and white system. CBS argued that the public should have the opportunity to decide if it wanted color immediately. NBC disagreed and in March 1947 the FCC ruled in favor of NBC and further development. CBS's investment of approximately \$2 million had been for naught.<sup>64</sup>

The fallout from the decision directly affected Miner and, indirectly, the Guild. In early May CBS announced it was cancelling all live programming. Although Miner retained his job, most of the other television employees, including Paul Belanger, did not.<sup>65</sup> For the immediate future, CBS would be out of the live television business. When the announcement from CBS reached the Guild, Langner and Marshall were still in London. On the day they returned to New York, Fitelson informed them:

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<sup>64</sup> "Network asks Wave Length Now for Color Television," *Washington Post*, 10 December 1946, 2; "FCC Decision Bars Color Television," *New York Times*, 19 March 1947, 27.

<sup>65</sup> "CBS Live Programming Ban Stirs up Trade Queries," *Variety*, 7 May 1947, 46; Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, 13; Worthington Miner, *Worthington Miner: A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 182-183.



A radical decision has been made at CBS to close its studio. This means for the time being our television program at CBS is off. We can resume negotiations with NBC or wait.<sup>66</sup>

Langner was in no mood to wait; a program on NBC was as attractive an option as one on CBS, perhaps even more so. Fitelson resumed talks with John Royal and by the beginning of June NBC was waiting for a decision.<sup>67</sup> The situation seemed opportune for the Guild. U.S. Steel had renewed the radio program for a third season. NBC was ready to begin the television project and the press was aware of the negotiations; both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* reported the possibility in early June.<sup>68</sup> However, for the remainder of the summer and with the fall television season approaching, the Guild refused to commit. A possible cause for the delay could have been the two recent trips to London by Langner during which he had an opportunity to

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<sup>66</sup> “Reports of Marine and Aviation Schedules,” *New York Times*, 8 May 1947, 51; “Guild Will Offer Two of Shaw’s Plays,” *New York Times*, 10 May 1947, 9; H. William Fitelson, Memo to Lawrence Langner, Armina Marshall, and Theresa Helburn, 9 May 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 46–H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>67</sup> In a letter to Langner requesting tickets for *Oklahoma!* for August 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup>, Royal added, “Hope to hear from you soon regarding our television plans.” John Royal, Letter to Lawrence Langner, 2 June 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 127–John F. Royal Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Fitelson was also involved in radio contract negotiations with U.S. Steel, not all of which were going smoothly. H. William Fitelson. Letter to Theresa Helburn, Lawrence Langner, and Armina Marshall, 27 May 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 46–H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>68</sup> The *New York Times* reported that the radio program would probably move to 9:30, thirty minutes earlier and that the television “idea is not yet beyond the talking stage.” See Jack Gould, “The News of the Radio,” *New York Times*, 6 June 1947, 44; Leonard Lyons, “Television to Capture Even the Bridal Blush,” *Washington Post*, 5 June 1947, B11.

sample the BBC version of television and to meet with an old acquaintance, Denis Johnston.<sup>69</sup>

Johnston was a former Guild playwright (the Guild produced his *The Moon in the Yellow River* in 1932) who was currently working in television for the BBC.<sup>70</sup> Unlike U.S. television networks, the BBC enjoyed a government-supported monopoly leaving it free from the pressures of the marketplace. As such, from its inception in 1936, BBC television carried on the tradition of its radio precursor as a tool for “education and moral improvement” by utilizing “carefully selected entertainment.”<sup>71</sup> Television in Great Britain ceased with the start of hostilities in 1939 and did not resume until June 1946.<sup>72</sup> When it did, the BBC cultural tradition was once again evident. The inaugural ninety-minute afternoon program included “music, ballet, variety, films, and drama.” Later that evening was a production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. By the time Langner had

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<sup>69</sup> On 23 April Langner arranged a lunch date with Johnston for Saturday, 26 April. Marshall also informed Helburn of this on the same day. Lawrence Langner, Letter to Denis Johnston, 23 April 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 71–Denis Johnston Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Armina Marshall, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 23 April 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 90–Marshall Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>70</sup> Often compared to Shaw as a playwright, Johnston served with the BBC from 1938 to 1939 and again from 1945 to 1947. Beginning in 1946, he supervised the overall quality of BBC television. See Kempner, 94, and Mark Hawkins-Dady, ed., *International Directory of Theatre*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: St. James Press, 1994), 525-526.

<sup>71</sup> Anthony Smith, “Television as a Public Service Medium,” in *Television: An International History*, ed. Anthony Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 80-84.

<sup>72</sup> “BBC Resuming Television,” *New York Times*, 9 April 1946, 14. The April 7 announcement put the start date as 7 June, nearly two years to the day after D-Day.

finished his second visit to Britain, the BBC had aired plays by Shakespeare, O'Neill, Shaw, Chekhov, and Priestly among others.<sup>73</sup>

The content alone would have impressed Langner, but he also came away with an appreciation of televised drama, British style.<sup>74</sup> Unlike American television drama in which the broadcasts originated from a studio, the BBC often televised directly from a theatrical stage. According to Maurice Gorham, the head of BBC television in 1947, "In 1939 ... we did a dozen direct telecasts from theatres, and since we reopened in June, 1946 we have dozen nine direct transmissions from theatres including straight plays, musical comedies and variety bills."<sup>75</sup> The evidence of Langner's partiality toward the BBC model lay in a single sentence contained in the proposal to CBS, evidently written after Langner's trip in January: "Recent information from England indicates that the most popular form of television entertainment is a theatrical play televised from a theatre."<sup>76</sup> It may have been popular in England but it was not in the United States, principally for the reason that American directors found it very difficult to do well and retain what they believed was the creative element in television. Miner had addressed the problem in the

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<sup>73</sup> Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, 165-166. It seems likely that Johnston mentioned the works by Shaw and O'Neill, since they were particular favorites of Langner.

<sup>74</sup> Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 434-435.

<sup>75</sup> "Letter from Maurice Gorham, Head of BBC Television," *Weekly Newsletter on Television*, 19 June 1947, 1. Gorham was responding to an earlier article in the same publication that suggested that an upcoming broadcast of *Night without End* from the Eighth Street Theatre in Chicago by station WBKB was something the BBC had done "several years before." "WBKB Will Televisе Play from Theatre," *Weekly Newsletter on Television*, 24 April 1947, 1.

<sup>76</sup> Proposal Regarding "Hook Up" between Theatre Guild, Columbia Broadcasting Company and Columbia Concerts, Inc.

mid-1940s while developing vertical composition. Paul Belanger, formerly of CBS and later program chief for ABC's WATV, described the creative difficulties in a 1948 article for *Variety*. "Taking a television camera into a theatre," he wrote, "puts the camera in the role of reporter, rather than an interpreter. This limits wonderful resources of the camera tremendously, since the action is planned for an entirely different medium." Belanger believed that in television "the cameras must be made to participate in the action, which isn't possible while working on a stage instead of a studio." Although the opinion of American television directors on the subject was not unanimous, Belanger represented the majority.<sup>77</sup> Langner, however, had no experience in television. Much as the fictional soup company president created by Lawrence and Lee claimed radio expertise because he was an average listener, Langner evidently believed that if he thought a particular variety of television was popular, then it was. Therefore, since Langner enjoyed British television (or any particular style of theatre) so would the rest of America.

Langner later wrote that his experiences that spring affected his view of television as an instrument for disseminating theatre. He also wrote that although realizing that television was "still technically imperfect," Langner came away believing that "the medium would ultimately be capable of bringing the finest works of the theatre into the homes of people."<sup>78</sup> In other words, the Guild would do precisely as the BBC had done. It seems likely that the visit with Johnston in April 1947 served to reinforce Langner's

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<sup>77</sup> "TV Pickup from Theatre Dubious," *Variety*, 21 April 1948. Of the three veteran directors polled by *Variety*, two voted no and one, Worthington Miner, voted yes. Miner had changed his earlier opinion most likely because he had recently directed the broadcast of scenes from the stage of *Mister Roberts* for the CBS program *Tonight on Broadway*.

<sup>78</sup> Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 435.

predisposition to use television to distribute stage plays rather than develop television as a separate art form. It might also have given him an idea on how to make the Theatre Guild television program stand out against the competition. He could merge British television with its American cousin and capitalize on the strengths of each. The connection would be Denis Johnston of the BBC if Langner could persuade him to come to New York., and if Langner could convince NBC to acquiesce.

While NBC was waiting on the Guild to reach a decision on the television program, Johnston wrote Langner in answer to an earlier query on casting possibilities for O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten* which had recently finished a Midwest tryout in St. Louis.<sup>79</sup> While in London, Langner had mentioned the scarcity of good directors in New York and Johnston wanted him to know of his availability for theatre or radio if Langner was interested.<sup>80</sup> Langner was and he replied that he and Helburn "are constantly talking about you and saying if we could find a play for you to do over here, or even to work on radio." Johnston was anxious to come to New York. He had left the BBC in hopes of finding a way "to do some serious writing and production, neither of which I have had time for in the past ten years." He would take any kind of work "for the stage or for radio, or indeed to work in your script department." There had been no

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<sup>79</sup> The Guild produced the play in several cities including Columbus, Detroit and St. Louis. It began its run in Columbus on 27 February 1947 and ended in St. Louis on 29 March 1947. Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 406-409; Jack O'Brien, "Another Abbott Gets Mitt in Broadway Pie," *Washington Post*, 29 March 1947, S5.

<sup>80</sup> Denis Johnston, Letter to Lawrence Langner, 28 May 1947; Lawrence Langner, Letter to Denis Johnston, 17 June 1947; Denis Johnston, Letter to Lawrence Langner, 16 July 1947; Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 71-Denis Johnston Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

mention of television in the correspondence, most likely because the Guild did not yet have an agreement with NBC and Langner did not want to tip his hand.

By late summer, with the negotiations NBC drawing to a close and a deal seemingly imminent, Langner hired Johnston who arrived in New York in mid-September.<sup>81</sup> At the Friday, 26 September board meeting, the Guild Directors approved and agreement with NBC that stipulated a six-month trial period to commence “on or about October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1947.” The Guild would produce one play per month and NBC could exercise an option to renew for an additional six months. By Monday, the contract was in NBC’s hands and Langner believed the network would sign it “shortly.”<sup>82</sup> By Friday, 3 October 1947 NBC signed the agreement and the final stage of the Guild’s expansion as foreshadowed by the 1941 reorganization became a reality.<sup>83</sup> In the previous six years, Langner and Helburn had taken the Guild into radio and then film. Its scope would now include television. As the *New York Times* reported on 7 October, 1947:

The Theatre Guild and the National Broadcasting Company completed arrangements yesterday for the joint presentation of a series of plays over television. No starting date for the series has been set, but the première is expected before Jan. 1.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Johnston left England on the night of 13 September 1947 and arrived in New York a few days later. Denis Johnston, Telegram to Lawrence Langner, 10 September 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 71–Denis Johnston Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>82</sup> Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting, 26 September 1947; Warren Caro, Letter to Ben Askin, 29 September 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 162-1947 Board of Directors Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>83</sup> Warren Caro, Letter to Paul Crabtree, 3 October 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 36-Paul Crabtree Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>84</sup> Jack Gould, “News of the Radio,” *New York Times*, 7 October 1947, 54.

It appears that in the four-month summer negotiation period the Guild had achieved all of its goals. It would adapt stage plays rather than produce original scripts, allowing NBC to bring “many of Broadway’s top plays” to its affiliates in New York, Philadelphia, Schenectady, and Washington, D.C.<sup>85</sup> Or as one trade headline proclaimed, “Theatre Guild to Present Six Plays on NBC Television During Coming Winter Season. Many of Broadway’s Greatest Plays Will Be Aired on Network; Noted Stars to Perform.”<sup>86</sup> An influx of Guild “productions of the past now ... available to the video field,” was important news to an industry with hours of airtime and not much product to deliver.<sup>87</sup> It would also have a Sunday night time slot, something both NBC and the Guild coveted. NBC entertained lofty plans for the series as a promotional tool for television. In 1947, before the advent of videotape, the only way to record a live television program was to film the image on the television screen. NBC contemplated employing the experimental Eastman Teletranscription process to record Theatre Guild plays for delivery to stations in Detroit and St. Louis for rebroadcast. The network also considered airmailing the films to London for broadcast on the BBC.<sup>88</sup> In 1947, WNBT

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<sup>85</sup> *Radio Daily*, 7 October 1947, 7.

<sup>86</sup> *Weekly Newsletter on Television*, 9 October 1947, 2.

<sup>87</sup> Gould, “News of the Radio,” *New York Times*, 7 October 1947.

<sup>88</sup> *Variety*, 29 October 1947, 29. Frank Mullen of NBC announced the process at an affiliate’s convention in September. See *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 20 September 1947, 5. NBC would not begin to use the process until late 1948. See *Variety*, 8 December 1948, 27-28.

broadcast only about twenty hours a week.<sup>89</sup> As a highlight to this meager schedule, NBC gave the Theatre Guild program a premier time slot, eight-thirty to nine-thirty on Sunday night, most likely beginning in November or December. The scheduling benefited both parties. NBC needed something electrifying to promote its Sunday nights, then populated by such pedestrian fare as *Author Meets the Critics* and the *NBC Newsreel*.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, by acquiring Sunday, the Guild would be able to make use of Broadway actors in the plays since most commercial theatres were dark on Sundays, permitting actors a chance to moonlight in other venues.<sup>91</sup>

Langner had once extolled the value of a play broadcast from a theatre. This was not to be with the Guild's program. However, the studio-produced plays would have a distinctive BBC flavor. Denis Johnston, whom the press variously described as: "noted Irish playwright, formerly in charge of the program division of the BBC," "author of *The Moon in the Yellow River*," "Irish playwright and former director of BBC programming division," and "in charge of the television division of the BBC," would be one of the

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<sup>89</sup> Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory of Prime Time Network TV Shows 1946-Present*, 5th ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 1011. This volume deals only with shows beginning after seven P.M. For information on other WNBT broadcasts, see WNBT Master Program Logs, November 1947. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC.

<sup>90</sup> "WNBT Master Program Log," 2 November 1947. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC.

<sup>91</sup> Writing a decade later, Helburn felt that one could use Sunday nights for experimental theatre, since there would be no competition from commercial theatre. She was speaking of theatre, but the same reasoning applied to television. See Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*.



program's producers.<sup>92</sup> The announcement of Johnston's participation is important for two reasons. First, it associated the Guild program with the BBC rather than American television and second, it shed possible light on the length of the negotiations. Denis Johnston had directed BBC broadcasts, a responsibility that NBC usually reserved for its own employees. In live television, the director had complete control of what the audience saw since it was the director who chose which of the three cameras would be on-air at any time. The director thus became both a director and an editor. It was the preeminent production position.<sup>93</sup> (The television producer was more akin to a theatrical or film producer, in charge of casting, selection of material and financial considerations.<sup>94</sup>) Consequently, if the Guild insisted that Johnston take directorial charge of its programs, NBC might have balked. At the time of the announcement, press reports listed Johnston as both a producer and a director.<sup>95</sup> The question of who would direct the broadcasts would remain open for the time being.

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<sup>92</sup> The notice of the use of NBC's studio is in *Radio Daily*, 7 October 1947, 7. For the characterizations of Johnston, see *Weekly Newsletter on Television*, 9 October 1947, 2; Gould, "News of the Radio," *New York Times*, 7 October 1947; *Variety* 8 October 1947, 27; Bert McCord, "News of the Theatre," *New York Herald Tribune*, 7 October 1947, 19.

<sup>93</sup> For information on the television director's duties, see Leo Hurwitz, "The Television Director's Job," *Televiser*, January-February 1946, 20-22. Hurwitz was a director for CBS-TV. The article is a reprint of an address he gave to the Television Institute as part of the "Production Panel" on 15 October 1945.

<sup>94</sup> For information on the television producer's duties, see Bob Emery, "The Television Producer's Job," *Televiser*, January-February 1946, 23. Emery was a producer for WOR television in New York. The article is a reprint of an address he gave to the Television Institute as part of the "Production Panel" on 15 October 1945.

<sup>95</sup> *Variety* listed Johnston as a director; most others listed him as a producer. For examples see *Variety*, 8 October 1947, 27; Gould, "News of the Radio," *New York Times*, 7 October 1947.

The comparison to British television and its emphasis on improving culture was something that Langner and Helburn made central in their public statements about the Guild's reasons for entering television. Without a great deal of dramatic product American television had been concentrating on easily broadcast entertainment such as sporting events. Consequently, bars and taverns installed sets to draw customers who wanted to watch baseball, football, wrestling and boxing. Helburn and Langner used this phenomenon in an explanation of why the Guild wanted to go on television. Langner later told *Time* that the Guild wanted to "communicate culture, not nonsense, to elevate television from the saloon to the living room."<sup>96</sup> This echoed Maurice Gorham of the BBC who charged that sports and variety shows were "lousing up" United States television compared to the theatrical dramas offered by the BBC.<sup>97</sup> Gorham's point struck a chord with American television critics. *Variety* agreed, characterizing U.S. television as appealing to "tavern audiences." In some ways, comparisons between British and American television was like comparing apples and oranges. Unlike its American counterparts, the British network did not have to deal with questions of sponsorship. As a government-funded entity, the BBC could choose its programming

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<sup>96</sup> *Time*, 17 November 1947, 78. Langner became the spokesman for the Guild's television venture. He often gave interviews and wrote articles on television during the period 1947-1948 while Helburn did not. She also wrote little about the project in her autobiography published in 1960. She limits references to the 1947-1948 programs to one sentence, and that contains a factual error. Her involvement in the program appears to be peripheral as will be seen in further discussion of the program. See Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*, 318.

<sup>97</sup> Gorham quoted in *Variety*, 8 October 1947, 27.

without regard to marketplace competition.<sup>98</sup> In the United States, television was a commercial product operating under the model developed by radio. U.S. broadcasters saw this as an advantage. In late 1945, the FCC chairman James L. Fly commented that “with all deference to the BBC,” the U.S. system fueled by advertisers was the only one that could deliver “a nation-wide broadcasting system of the quality to which we look forward.”<sup>99</sup>

Some of the comparisons between the two systems were disingenuous. Even Harold Hobson, BBC’s own television critic, complained that British programming too often consisted of “outside events” such as public ceremonies and sports.<sup>100</sup> The point is not that there existed more similarities between the two broadcasting models than either would admit, but that Langner believed the British model was superior and would allow the Guild to seize the high ground in any discussion of cultural superiority. Welsh by birth, Langner, perhaps mirrored American tendencies towards Anglophilia. Also, the prominent mention of Johnston’s connection with the BBC conferred further status on the Guild project implying that it had brought together the best television experts from both sides of the Atlantic. Status had been, and continued to be, paramount to the Guild. A demonstration of this occurred when NBC sent a teletype to the offices of the *New York Times* at 12:17 one afternoon that read in part, “The arrangements with the Guild for the

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<sup>98</sup> For information on the state of post-war British television, see Grace Wynham Goldie, “Television,” in *Made For Millions: A Critical Study of the New Media of Information and Entertainment*, ed. Frederick Laws (London: Contact Publications Limited, 1947), 56-62.

<sup>99</sup> “Television Proposal,” *New York Times*, 16 October 1945, 20.

<sup>100</sup> Sidney Lohman, “One Thing and Another,” *New York Times*, 1 June 1947, X9. Hobson wrote for BBC’s publication *The Listener*.

series were made by John F. Royal, NBC vice-president.” Seven minutes later an addendum came: “Please insert: Arrangements with the Guild for the series were made between Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn, directors of the Guild, and John F. Royal, NBC vice-president.” Sidney Lohman of the *New York Times* commented, “The NBC network is learning – it would seem – that the theatre world does not take its billing problems lightly.”<sup>101</sup>

The joint announcement of the program on 6 October described some of the division of responsibilities between the Theatre Guild and NBC. Representing the Guild as executive director of its television division would be Warren Caro, recently elected president of the American Television Society. In addition to Johnston as producer and or director, the Guild provided Paul Crabtree, described by one reporter as the Guild’s “white-haired boy.” At the time of the announcement, Crabtree was preparing to direct the Guild’s forthcoming Broadway production of *This Time Tomorrow* scheduled to open on 28 October. Johnston would work on the opening show and Crabtree would handle some future broadcasts.<sup>102</sup> In addition to providing studio space, NBC handled the technical aspects of the partnership. By 1947, many members of the staff at WNBT had several years of television experience. John F. Royal, a vice president in the network’s television division since October 1940, joined NBC in 1929 and became a program director for radio in 1931.<sup>103</sup> Edward Sobol, the primary television producer and

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<sup>101</sup> Sidney Lohman, “Radio Row,” *New York Times*, 2 November 1947, X11.

<sup>102</sup> Bert McCord, “News of the Theatre,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 7 October 1947, 19.

<sup>103</sup> John Royal, ed., *Television Production Problems* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1948), vii. See also Kempner, 116. *Variety* reported that Royal negotiated the agreement

director, joined NBC in 1939 after working in both vaudeville and the legitimate stage. After serving in World War II, he returned to NBC in 1944. By 1947, the industry recognized Sobol as a leading television director.<sup>104</sup> Also on staff was Fred Coe. Only thirty-two years old, Coe began directing programs for NBC in 1945. He would later become a legend producing, directing and writing for live television and winning both Peabody and Emmy awards.<sup>105</sup> The scenic designer, Robert Wade, joined NBC in 1944 after several years in the summer-theatre movement.<sup>106</sup> NBC owned more than adequate facilities at studio 3H in New York and planned to open a new larger studio, 8G, early in 1948.<sup>107</sup> NBC and the Theatre Guild had the talent and the resources; all that remained was to choose a play and cast it. Once again, current events, and fate, played a hand in the decision. Whatever program the Guild chose, it would not be a musical.

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even though Frank Mullen had recently joined WNBT and technically outranked Royal. See *Variety* 8 October 1947, 27. For the 1947 hierarchy at 30 Rockefeller Plaza see "TV Directory Number," *Television Digest and FM Reports*. Special Issue, 1 December 1947, 1-4.

<sup>104</sup>Hawes, *American Television Drama: The Experimental Years*, 75-76. See also Kempner, 121. For information on Sobol's return to NBC see NBC memo 11-47-013 dated 11 Nov 1944, folder 606 in National Broadcasting Company, History Files, 1922-1986. Library of Congress Recorded Sound Division, Washington, D.C.

<sup>105</sup> Jon Krampner, *The Man in the Shadows: Fred Coe and the Golden Age of Television* (New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 183-187. Coe eventually moved into both Broadway and film, winning a Tony award for producing *The Miracle Worker* and an Oscar nomination for directing *A Thousand Clowns*.

<sup>106</sup> Royal, ix-x. Wade's later book on television design includes details of his work on the Guild program. See Robert J. Wade, *Designing for TV: The Arts and Crafts in Television Production* (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1952).

<sup>107</sup> NBC initially thought the program would launch the new facility, but delays kept the Guild from using it until May 1948. See *Radio Daily*, 7 October 1947, 7; and *Variety* 5 May 1948, 40.

When the Guild considered plays for the opening of the radio program, three were musicals. When the Guild signed the contract with NBC, *Oklahoma!* was still playing at the St. James, *Carousel* was on tour and Rodgers and Hammerstein's latest musical for the Guild, *Allegro*, would open at the Majestic theatre in a week.<sup>108</sup> For the past four seasons on Broadway, the Theatre Guild had been synonymous with the Broadway musical. Moreover, an upcoming *Theatre Guild on the Air* would present Gertrude Lawrence recreating her role in the musical *Lady in the Dark* from the Boston Opera House.<sup>109</sup> Unfortunately, television broadcasters were dealing with the American Federation of Musicians which, through its president James Petrillo, had banned not only live music on television, but also any film shown on television that had a background music track. Petrillo did want to repeat the lessons learned in radio where pay scales had been set before the medium became financially lucrative. The union eventually lifted the ban in 1948, but for the Theatre Guild it meant it could not use one of its musicals.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Sam Zolotow, "'Allegro' to Make Its Debut Tonight," *New York Times*, 10 October 1947, 31; See Norton, *A Chronology of American Musical Theater, Volume 2: 1912-1952*, 935.

<sup>109</sup> Appearing in the program with Lawrence was John Conte, currently starring in *Allegro*. In a letter to a relative, Helburn confessed of Conte that besides being excellent in the Broadway show, he was a ladies' man. "I think Miss Lawrence likes him too. The ladies seem to find him irresistible." Theresa Helburn, Letter to Peggy and Eric Kocher, 14 October 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 62–Therese Helburn Correspondence Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. According to Helburn, "US Steel is doing a big splurge on the broadcast of 'Lady in the Dark' with Gertrude Lawrence in the Boston Opera House with a big cocktail party beforehand at the Copley-Plaza." The *New York Times* noticed it. See Jack Gould, "News of the Radio," *New York Times*, 11 October 1947, 28.

<sup>110</sup> For information on the AFM ban, see Jon Krampner, *The Man in the Shadows: Fred Coe and the Golden Age of Television* (New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 38. For a contemporary description of Petrillo, see Jack Gould, "Portrait of the Unpredictable Petrillo," *New York Times*, 28 December 1947, SM11.

For the first broadcast, the Guild would have to choose a straight play. It had many choices and Warren Caro wanted to get to work immediately. He wrote Crabtree, then in the Midwest on Guild business, that even though no date had been set for the opening, “we naturally want to get on the air as soon as possible.” Caro and the others in the television division of the Guild were “anxious to sit down right away and consider actual selection of the plays, adaptations, casting, etc.”<sup>111</sup>

Two years before, Fitelson had taken the Guild to task for procrastination concerning the radio program and it had learned its lesson. The radio program ran smoothly. Television, however, was another matter. The weeks before the television opening in 1947 mirrored those in radio two years before. More than two weeks after the contract signing, Crabtree was still pondering his choices for a second program, on which he was to work. He had spoken to several members of the Guild and come up with a list of nine possibilities. Crabtree wanted a decision as soon as possible so that he could “get to work on the script and casting with everyone concerned.” Crabtree assumed the first program would air on 16 November and his on or about 14 December, four weeks later.<sup>112</sup> Crabtree was unaware that there had been no decision on the first play, let alone the second. The decision finally came on 24 October and was surprising on two counts. First, the play would be *John Ferguson*, the Guild’s first successful play in 1919. Second, the start date was earlier than Crabtree, and one must assume others in the Guild,

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<sup>111</sup> Warren Caro, Letter to Paul Crabtree, 3 October 1947.

<sup>112</sup> Paul Crabtree, Letter to Lawrence Langner, Theresa Helburn, and Armina Marshall, 20 October 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 36-Paul Crabtree Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Crabtree’s first choice was *Ah Wilderness!*

had expected. The Guild would open on television in sixteen days, on 9 November.<sup>113</sup>

Langner and Helburn had once boasted that they could produce a program on short notice. NBC gave them an opportunity to prove it.

After the selection of *John Ferguson*, the Guild turned to other pressing concerns. First, it needed a cast. Second, it needed a director. Third, it needed a play adapter. For the cast, the Guild had always proclaimed its fondness for stage actors in television, and with television now a reality it did not change that attitude. When the Guild announced the selection of *John Ferguson*, it also announced the male and female leads. For the title role the choice was Thomas Mitchell. A well-known supporting actor in films who had won an Academy Award for *Stagecoach* in 1939, Mitchell was currently starring in *An Inspector Calls* at the Booth Theatre in New York.<sup>114</sup> Available for the role of Ferguson's daughter was Irish stage actor Joyce Redman. In New York since 1946 with the Old Vic Company, which primarily produced classical plays, Redman had just finished a role as the female lead in the English horror play, *A Duet for Two Hands*.<sup>115</sup> Four days later, the Guild cast Lawrence Fletcher, then appearing in its production of *Allegro*; Barry McCollum, reprising the role of Clutie John which he had played in the

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<sup>113</sup> Jack Gould, "News of the Radio," *New York Times*, 25 October 1947, 30.

<sup>114</sup> Gould, 25 October 1947, 30. Mitchell had returned to the stage after an absence of twelve years. He previously directed and acted in *Stick-In-The-Mud* in 1935. For biographical information on Mitchell, see Alfred E. Twomey and Arthur F. McClure, *The Versatiles: Supporting Character Actors in the Cinema 1930-1955* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1969) 161; Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930-1969*, 127-128 and 269.

<sup>115</sup> McGill, 1071-1072. Redman had appeared on the British stage since 1935. Her latest play opened on 7 October 1947 at the Booth and closed after a short run to make way for Mitchell's. See Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930-1969*, 268.



original production twenty-eight years earlier; Grace Mills, a theatre veteran currently appearing in *Medea*; and Ralph Cullinan, another theatre veteran who had appeared in a revival of *John Ferguson* in 1928.<sup>116</sup> Still, there was one role yet to cast and it was pivotal. The following day the Guild announced the selection of Vaughn Taylor to play James Caesar, the grocer who finds himself accused of murder.<sup>117</sup> Taylor was one of the first stars of live television (*Variety* called him a “telestar”) and had been a frequent face in live dramas since 1945. During the previous two years viewers could have watched Taylor on a different program nearly every week.<sup>118</sup>

For the second and third items, the program director and adapter, the Guild had a simple solution – Denis Johnston. He had written and directed for the BBC so seemed a natural choice. Unfortunately, NBC had a policy of using only its own directors, something that had come about in reaction to the takeover of radio by the advertising agencies. The battle for directorial supremacy had begun in 1945 when both NBC and CBS asserted their control. The agencies argued that since they controlled the funding,

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<sup>116</sup> For information on Fletcher, see Tharp, 6. and the *New York Times Directory of the Theatre*, 303. For Mills see *New York Times Directory of the Theatre*, 640. For Cullinan, see *New York Times Directory of the Theatre*, 207. A complete cast list is contained in NBC Program Listings, Theatre Guild Plays contained in National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC.

<sup>117</sup> “The News of Radio,” *New York Times*, 30 October 1947, 50.

<sup>118</sup> *Variety*, 5 November, 1947, 29. By 1950, Taylor estimated that he had appeared in one hundred fifty live television programs, a total that rose to four hundred by 1957. Twomey and Arthur F. McClure, 220. Also see Paul L. Ross, ed., *Players Guide*, 9th ed. (N.P., 1951), 443. Coincidentally, Dudley Digges, the long-time Guild actor who originated the role on Broadway, passed away on 24 October 1947, sixteen days before the television production. See the obituary listing in *Variety*, 29 October 1947, 62.

they should also control the production.<sup>119</sup> In 1945, however, the question was moot. There were no television sponsors. NBC had a free hand until May 1947 began it began producing the first regularly scheduled dramatic anthology, *Kraft Television Theatre*.<sup>120</sup> John Reber of the J. Walter Thompson agency represented Kraft and he wanted no part of NBC's policy. By the fall of 1947, Reber convinced the network to turn control of the show over to the agency. With *Kraft Television Theatre* an enormous draw, NBC relented.<sup>121</sup> In late October 1947 NBC's Sales Manager for Television Advertising Reynold R. Kraft announced a change in network policy. Henceforth, as it did in radio, NBC, "subject to approval by the company," would allow an agency director to control a television show during the live broadcast. The network would provide a "program director, a technical director and the necessary staff to assist the agency director."<sup>122</sup> The situation was somewhat ambiguous in case of the Theatre Guild which had no commercial sponsor. For *John Ferguson*, the Guild and NBC each provided directors, Denis Johnston for the Guild and Edward Sobol for NBC.<sup>123</sup> However due to Kraft's announcement, it appears that NBC decided to treat the Guild as a sponsor because when

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<sup>119</sup> "Agencies, NBC-CBS Gird for Battle over control of Tele Programming," *Variety*, 28 February 1945, 29.

<sup>120</sup> Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, 10-40.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 42; Ira Skutch, ed., *The Days of Live: Television's Golden Age as Seen by 21 Directors Guild of America Members* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1998), 65-66.

<sup>122</sup> "NBC's Free Range to Agencies," *Variety*, 29 October 1947, 29. For details on the director's job see Frederick Coe, "Problems in the Studio," in Royal, ed., *Television Production Problems*, 113-123.

<sup>123</sup> "The News of Radio," *New York Times*, 30 October 1947. The announcement came the same day as the finalization of the cast.

*John Ferguson* aired, Denis Johnston controlled the cameras. Moreover, since at the time directors handled most script adaptations, the task of adapting *John Ferguson* for television fell to Johnston as well.

The cast and crew were in rehearsal and the advertising campaign was underway. The Theatre Guild was about to have an opening night like no other in its twenty-eight year history. Langner and Helburn still spouted the standard line. They felt that the Guild could “bring to television the same standards which it has raised in the theater and which have proved successful with the public.”<sup>124</sup> This contrasted with an interview Caro gave to NBC radio. Recorded on the morning of the joint announcement by NBC and the Guild for broadcast later that evening, Caro spoke proudly of the Guild’s having “has its hand in every form of – motion pictures, radio and television.” Moreover, since the United States had not subsidized national theatre, Caro admitted that “the Theatre Guild has tried to fill the function of a national theatre in this country by bringing good entertainment to as many people as possible.” (Interestingly, the words “thoughtful drama” before “good entertainment” in the original script do not appear in the final.)<sup>125</sup>

If one observed and listened carefully, the disconnect between what the Guild said it represented and what it produced was becoming more noticeable. Caro portrayed the Guild as an entertainment magnate providing a product for a mass audience. Helburn and Langner spoke as if it were still 1919. In hindsight, the choice of *John Ferguson* to open

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<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Saul Carson, “Radio: Theater on the Air,” *The New Republic*, 24 November 1947, 37.

<sup>125</sup> Warren Caro and Judith Morley, Radio Script for “Theatre News”, recorded Monday 6 October 1947 and broadcast at 9.45 PM on WCBN and five other short wave channels. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 30-Warren Caro Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

the series seems bizarre. It did not qualify as high art as the Guild often defined it and, being over thirty years old, it lacked immediacy in the public imagination. Its author, at most a minor playwright, had not enjoyed any recent successes in New York.<sup>126</sup> Yet, the Guild enthusiastically promoted the play as a worthy choice. More importantly, NBC acquiesced in the decision, deferring to the Guild's theatrical acumen. However, on one level Langner and Helburn seemed to believe the Guild was truly the same organization it had been when *John Ferguson* saved them from financial ruin. The old good luck piece might still hold a special charm and what worked once might work again. One never knew in show business. Then again, one could always go to the well one time too often.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Coincidentally, a revival of Ervine's 1929 hit play *The First Mrs. Fraser* opened at the Shubert Theatre on 5 November 1947. It failed to receive either critical or popular success and closed after thirty-eight performances. Ervine had New York productions of four plays in the decade before the television series, none of which gained great success. For information on *The First Mrs. Fraser*, see Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930-1969*, 269. For a listing of Ervine's New York productions since 1920, see *New York Times Directory of the Theatre*, 280.

<sup>127</sup> Another strange twist in the broadcast career of *John Ferguson* occurred in July 1945 when the Guild was deciding which plays to do on radio. Langner told Fitelson "Armina and I think *John Ferguson* is dull for second play." Nonetheless, it aired on the third week. Lawrence Langner, Memo to H. William Fitelson, 10 July 1945. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 148-U.S. Steel Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

## Chapter 4: “The First Full-Scale Merger of Television and Theatre Arts”<sup>1</sup> – The Great Television Experiment

While the cast and crew labored to prepare *John Ferguson* for broadcast, NBC and the Guild began the promotional campaign. A week before airtime, an advertisement in the *New York Herald Tribune* Sunday theatre section proclaimed:

“A hit then” – Alexander Woollcott, *Times, NY World*. A hit now. One Performance only. St. John Ervine’s 1919 success, *John Ferguson*. Thomas Mitchell, Joyce Redman. First in a series of Theatre Guild Classics offered on television. Theatre Guild Television in collaboration with the National Broadcasting Company. WNBT channel 4, November 9 8:30.”

This advertisement, which appeared among others promoting new stage plays, noted that Mitchell was currently appearing in *An Inspector Calls*.<sup>2</sup> That same Sunday evening on WNBT, an NBC announcer read a promotion for the broadcast that included the current Broadway roles of three cast members: Mitchell in *An Inspector Calls*, Grace Mills in *Medea*, and Lawrence Fletcher in *Allegro*.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, both the network and the Guild coveted a traditional, theatre-going audience. In emphasizing the “theatre” in “Theatre Guild Television” and glossing over the “television” aspect of it, the advertising campaign mirrored the Guild’s apparent attitude toward television production. Even

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<sup>1</sup>This was the phrase NBC used on the air to promote its partnership with the Theatre Guild.

<sup>2</sup>*New York Herald Tribune*, 2 November 1947, V2. The same advertisement appeared in other local papers. See *New York Times*, 2 November 1947, X6.

<sup>3</sup>WNBT Master Program Logs, script for 2 November 1947. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC.

though the name of the program was “Theatre Guild Television,” both the Guild and NBC promised viewers great theatre.

On the night of the performance, the Guild and NBC continued their attempts to create the appearance of a Broadway opening. Not only did they continue the theatrical metaphor, but they even attempted to mimic a Broadway opening night. For example, in 1947 television studios were not large enough to accommodate a stage play’s audience. To approximate a live audience, NBC and the Guild invited approximately two hundred fifty guests, including drama, radio and television critics, to watch the program on ten fifteen-inch by twenty-one-inch television sets in one large room in the RCA building. With the viewing room at no more than half capacity and televisions which had about six times the viewing area as a typical household set, the evening’s entertainment would be measurably different from that of ordinary viewers. In much the same way that theatrical producers provided favored guests with premium seats, NBC and the Guild did their best to maximize the effect the broadcast had on their VIP guests.<sup>4</sup>

With the invitees taking their places and the performers ready to go, at a few minutes before 8:00 P.M. the WNBT announcer began the promotion for *John Ferguson*, “the first in a series of Theatre Guild productions” presented by the National Broadcasting Company. He mentioned the 12 May 1919 opening at New York’s Garrick’s Theatre and the fact that the Guild had been nearly bankrupt. “It was the second play produced by the Guild and on its reception depended the success or failure of what was a highly controversial experiment in the American Theatre.” *John Ferguson*

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<sup>4</sup> Joe Pihodna, “Theatre News: Guild in Television Tonight,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 November 1947, V1. The room could hold five hundred and NBC held space for two hundred fifty.

had been a success and paved the way to the Guild's financial independence which led to the Theatre Guild becoming "one of the most important influences in American Drama." Clearly this constituted an advertisement for the Theatre Guild as well as reinforcing the pseudo-theatrical nature of the event.

At 8:31 P.M. WNBT broadcast a slide of a Theatre Guild Invitation and began the presentation of what NBC characterized as the first "full-scale merger of television and theatre arts."<sup>5</sup> But first came another word from the nominal sponsors, in this case NBC and the Theatre Guild. In another attempt to heighten the importance of the broadcast, NBC radio and now television announcer Ben Grauer interviewed Langner, Frank Mullen, the NBC executive Vice President in charge of television programming, and other members of the Theatre Guild and NBC families. NBC also boasted that viewers in New York, Philadelphia, Washington and Schenectady would be simultaneously witnessing this moment in television history.

For some observers, the interviews were problematic. Jack Gould had earlier complained about the chatty stage folk who interrupted the first broadcast of the Guild's radio program. It appears that the Guild had either not been listening or chose to ignore his comments. The moments before the television broadcast were reminiscent of those two years earlier. A feeling of self-importance can often overcome good sense and both the Guild and NBC had a large measure of the former. With a jaundiced eye, *Variety* complained that the self-congratulatory affair held up the start of the show and was "a

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<sup>5</sup> The announcer's script is in WNBT Master Program Logs, 9 November 1947. The capitalization is in the script, most probably for emphasis. The characterization is in "NBC Program Listings, Theatre Guild Plays. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC.

needless ten minutes.”<sup>6</sup> The *Washington Post* described it as “one of those horribly embarrassing things into which television stumbles with unerring aim.” There was just something disconcerting about the image of Grauer who “managed to sound 100 percent charming to one woman while he was propelling her off the stage, all mindful that the camera was catching the contradictions between his words and acts.”<sup>7</sup> It was an inauspicious prelude before the audience heard a single line of dialogue.

At last the momentous time was at hand. *John Ferguson* was about to make the transition from the stage to television and NBC had a final opportunity to emphasize its imagined theatricality of the program. At about 8:40, with the “Guild Signature Tune,” a recording of Wagner’s *Siegfried’s Rhine Journey (Die Gotterdammerung)* playing in the background, the announcer continued, “In a moment the curtain will go up on our play. We hope you have enjoyed meeting some of the guests who are here to watch this premiere performance.”<sup>8</sup> Even though this version of *John Ferguson* was not a stage play, the network continued to represent it as though it were. Studio 3H literally had no curtain and the guests could have easily watched the broadcast at home, but it was

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<sup>6</sup> *Variety*, 12 November 1947, 34. See also *New York Times*, 10 November 1947, 19.

<sup>7</sup> “Television Takes Two Big Steps: One Forward, One Backward,” *Washington Post*, 16 November 1947, L4.

<sup>8</sup> Announcer Script in WNBT Master Program Logs, 9 November 1947. The notation of the Guild music is on a typed version of the script, dated 28 October 1947, and complete with camera directions exists in WNBT Master Program Logs, 9 November 1947. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC. The music was probably the same theme that opened Guild radio shows.



apparently important to both NBC and the Guild to maintain the illusion of presenting a Broadway play.

No film of the broadcast exists, but through an examination of the script Johnston directed, and some remarkable images published five months later in a trade magazine, one can recreate the sequence of images viewers saw on tiny six-inch television screens.<sup>9</sup> At 8:41 the announcer finished his introduction, after reminding the viewers that the story was set in Ireland. As *Die Gotterdammerung* played through the studio speakers, viewers saw a series of caption cards introducing:

Thomas Mitchell

in

John Ferguson

by

St. John Ervine

with

Joyce Redman<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *John Ferguson* script in WNBT Master Program Logs, 9 November 1947. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC. A series of fifteen still images most probably taken during a dress rehearsal is in “*Radio Best* Shoots Theatre Guild’s Video Debut,” *Radio & Television Best*, April 1948, 44-46.

<sup>10</sup> With the lack of live music due to the boycott by the American Federation of Musicians, these early Guild programs had to use recorded music for which NBC could obtain clearances. NBC used Wagner for the opening and closings and E. J. Moeran’s *Symphony in G. Minor* for the musical interludes. See WNBT Master Program Routine, 9 November 1947. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC.

The music continued and the television screen came alive with stock film footage of an Irish countryside. *John Ferguson* was officially on the air. While the filmed opening continued, a narrator described the scene as “County Down – a land of soft green hills and of hard working farmers.”<sup>11</sup> NBC used studio 5F, with Sobol in charge, to broadcast the slides and film while the actors performed under Johnston’s direction in studio 3H. *John Ferguson* was a four-act play lasting well over two hours on the stage. For this presentation, the Guild had only a little over an hour. Schedules were fluid in 1947, but nonetheless, Johnston had to cut an hour out of the script. After the filmed establishing shot, viewers saw the interior set Bob Wade designed for the broadcast through the lenses of the cameras Johnston controlled.<sup>12</sup> Johnston kept the original four-act structure and during scene changes and between acts he used fade-outs, fade-ins, musical bridges and filmed interludes. Act one faded out followed by act two fading in.<sup>13</sup> Between acts two and three, NBC showed another filmed countryside. It repeated this between the abridged version of acts three and four. To show the passage of time, Johnston inserted caption cards announcing, “The Following Day,” and “A Fortnight Later,” after acts two

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<sup>11</sup> *John Ferguson* script, Act I, 1. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC.

<sup>12</sup> For other still photographs of the broadcast, see Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, 22 and Robert J. Wade, *Designing for TV: The Arts and Crafts in Television Production* (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1952), 48-49. Wade’s publisher used a shot of Mitchell and Redman for the book’s dust jacket.

<sup>13</sup> Fades, whereby electronically the television image either gradually disappeared or appeared, were standard techniques for indicating change in time or location. Fading an image served the purpose in television that musical bridges did on radio and both attempted to emulate the curtain in theatre. See Frederick Coe, “Problems in the Studio,” in Royal, ed., *Television Production Problems*, 118-119; John Gassner, *Producing the Play*, 504.

and three, respectively.<sup>14</sup> In the middle of act four, Johnston used a combination of recorded voices, close-ups and silent footage of a barking dog in order to portray story elements for the audience that theatregoers had only heard described. The plot of *John Ferguson* involves a murder and a subsequent confession. Johnston recorded the confession so that the actors could silently recreate the murder while the audience heard the recording. Into this sequence, Johnston intercut the filmed dog footage, since a barking dog was an important plot point. It was a complicated technical sequence and represented the greatest risk Johnston took during the production and the only attempt to allow the play to transcend the limits of Studio 3H.<sup>15</sup> At 9:53 act four concluded and NBC showed a final slide, again accompanied by the music of Wagner.<sup>16</sup> In 1919, the stage version of *John Ferguson* lasted over two hours and ended, according to Langner, with “an ovation to the cast, all of who performed magnificently.”<sup>17</sup> That production rescued the Theatre Guild from theatrical oblivion. Twenty-eight years later, another version of *John Ferguson*, lasting only seventy-two minutes, received no ovation because

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<sup>14</sup> *John Ferguson* script, Act II, 42; Act IV, 1. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC.

<sup>15</sup> Notations in the shooting script detail the entire sequence which took, perhaps three to four minutes. *John Ferguson* script, Act II, 42; Act IV, 12-14. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC.

<sup>16</sup> *John Ferguson* script, Act IV, 25, and Master Program routine for 9 November 1947. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC.

<sup>17</sup> Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 123.

it had no studio audience.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the Theatre Guild-NBC partnership depended heavily on critical reaction to that broadcast, primarily because with so minuscule numbers of television viewers, critics provided most of the word-of-mouth publicity. As a result of the latter, the Guild's television experiment got off to a rocky start.

One of the problems the Guild had encountered in the first few weeks of its radio program was the enormous pressure resulting from the abbreviated time the medium allowed for planning and rehearsal. Television, with its added visual dimension, increased this pressure exponentially. For example, since the Guild had selected a play fewer than three weeks before airtime, there was a lot to do, especially for Denis Johnston who would not only adapt the play but also direct it. The nature of the performance space in television required the director to consider cameras, microphones, electrical cables, lights, and sight lines in very different ways than in either film or live theatre. Speaking in October 1945, CBS-TV director Leo Hurwitz described television as a medium of "photographic fluidity," compelling the director to solve many problems simultaneously. Unlike the film director who could view lighting, camera angles, acting and editing as separate problems to solve, the television director encountered these in what today one refers to as "real time."<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the director had to anticipate and solve any problems with the show during the rehearsal period.<sup>20</sup> Presumably, Sobol,

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<sup>18</sup> The only live audience the program had was the television production crew. Most television dramas were broadcast from production studios not theatre stages. For a discussion of the various television sets and performance spaces see Robert J. Wade, *Designing for TV*, 19-26.

<sup>19</sup> Hurwitz, "The Television Director's Job," 21-23.

<sup>20</sup> For other production considerations, see Edward Sobol, "Production of Dramatic and *Variety* Programs," in *Television Production Problems*, ed. John F. Royal (New York: McGraw Hill, 1948), 95-104.

as NBC's producer, and Johnston, representing the Theatre Guild, coordinated the rehearsals for *John Ferguson* which encompassed forty hours over ten days, about average for a live, hour-long production.<sup>21</sup> Rehearsals for live television programs of the time had two distinct phases. In the first phase, or dry rehearsals, the director did not use television cameras. This occupied about twenty-eight hours of rehearsal time. In the second phase, the director incorporated cameras and all other technical equipment. The more difficult of the two phases, this lasted two days and about twelve hours. For Sunday night programs like *John Ferguson*, these final rehearsals would take place Saturday and Sunday right up until broadcast time, thus making the final weekend a hectic and stressful time for both the performers and the technical crew. Previously, the Guild had theorized that theatrical experience would allow those involved to weather this conveyor-belt production model. It quickly found that reality differed greatly from theory.

NBC and the Guild initially agreed on six programs airing once a month. Once again, the Guild suffered a misstep in preparing for the future. On the evening its production of *John Ferguson* aired, the Guild had yet to decide on a second play in the series, although one rumor had Elmer Rice's *Counsellor-at-Law* with Paul Muni as a

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<sup>21</sup> The rehearsal time is noted in Joe Pihodna, "Theatre News: Guild in Television Tonight," *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 November 1947, V1. Sobol felt that ten to twelve days was optimal for a full-length play. See Sobol, "Production of Dramatic and *Variety* Programs," 101.

possibility.<sup>22</sup> It was not until three days after *John Ferguson* aired that the Guild announced Leo G. Carroll would recreate his role as *The Late George Apley* on 7 December for the second broadcast.<sup>23</sup> That gave it about three and a half weeks to mount another production from scratch, including adapting the script. A constant Guild complaint would be that television did not allow enough time to adequately prepare a polished production. It appears, however, that part of the problem lay with the Guild.

By the time the Guild settled on *George Apley*, the reviews of *John Ferguson* began to appear. *Variety* called it an “Auspicious Tele Bow, Despite Decrepit Script.” The reviewer peppered the account with accolades laced with qualifiers. For example, although the “production, direction, acting,” were “as near-perfect as anything yet seen in this still-new medium,” nonetheless, the “extremely heavy drama,” would “draw snickers from any Broadway audience today.” The reviewer also thought that NBC and the Guild had “exercised meticulous care” with the film bridges, even though the stock film used was “not too wisely selected.” The reviewer loved the cast and called special attention to Joyce Redman’s “hysterical scene” as a highlight of the production.<sup>24</sup> *Variety* was mostly upbeat about the program but the weekly show business bible had always been a trade publication and trades were particularly kind to television in its early

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<sup>22</sup> Pihodna, “Theatre News: Guild in Television Tonight,” VI. Muni had performed the play in its first run in 1931 and again in a successful revival in 1942. See Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930-1969*, 38, 218.

<sup>23</sup> Jack Gould, “News of the Radio,” *New York Times*, 13 November 1947, 34.

<sup>24</sup> “Theatre Guild Makes Auspicious Tele Bow, Despite Decrepit Script,” *Variety*, 12 November 1947, 34.

stages.<sup>25</sup> It was a simple case of not biting the hand that fed you. As such, even abysmal productions often received positive reviews, and by most measures, *John Ferguson* had been an abysmal production.

One week after the show, Jack Gould of the *New York Times* took no prisoners in a scathing review for the *New York Times*. According to Gould, the “Theatre Guild, venerable doyen of the Broadway stage, ventured out into the strange new world of television last Sunday night and promptly fell on its art.” Rather than a play, it served up a “pretentious truncation” of *John Ferguson*. The ten-minute commercial the Guild presented before the curtain reminded viewers of the play’s success in 1919, but did nothing to mitigate the fact that St. John Ervine, the “daddy of the soap-opera writers,” came a cropper. No one escaped Gould’s criticism. Under the “appalling direction” of Denis Johnston, not an overblown stage trick went unused. As Gould described it:

There was breast-beating, grieving, crying, shrieking, foot-stomping, hand-waving, sneering, leering, sympathizing, feuding, fighting and fussing. Marconi sure wrought something last Sunday night.

Gould ascribed the above excess to Johnston’s obvious unfamiliarity with the medium which resulted in such conservative use of the camera that action was non-existent. His poor adaptation of the script allowed little or no characterization, resulting in one emotional peak after another evolving into an “unrelieved succession of hysterical

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<sup>25</sup> One trade called it a “wonderfully acted performance,” but mostly quoted from the *Variety* review. See *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 15 November 1947, 2. Another, printed much later but most probably written at the time, claimed that the day after the broadcast, “It was learned that once more the Theatre Guild had scored a hit.” See “Radio Best Shoots Theatre Guild’s Video Debut,” *Radio & Television Best*, April 1948, 45. Judy Dupuy of *Televiser* called it “a thrilling performance and production” and echoed the advertisements by stating that “here was *theatre* brought to television for the first time by the Theatre Guild...” See Judy Dupuy “Reviews of Tele-Shows, *Televiser*, November-December 1947, 29.

outbursts,” and, “an invitation to scenery-chewing.” Gould felt the basic problem lay with the actors and director who seemed “unaware that the television camera magnifies a thousand fold even the slightest tendency to overplay.” There was little use of background music and the technical aspects of the recorded sound were poor. Gould took particular exception to Johnston’s experimentation in Act IV. Because of the need to hear the recorded narration, the mimed murder sequence resulted in the television audience watching an actor discharge a shotgun with no resulting smoke or sound. The strangely silent barking dog also left him feeling baffled. For Gould, *John Ferguson* reinforced his contention that television was a unique medium. “Nobody in television, not even the Theatre Guild, is ready to ride with no hands.”<sup>26</sup>

Other non-trade publications agreed with Gould. The *Washington Post* called the Guild’s choice of *John Ferguson* “the thudding mistake of the year.” According to the reviewer, “Even Niles Trammell, NBC president, admitted dimly after it was over that perfection was not yet evident.”<sup>27</sup> Saul Carson of the *New Republic* took a gentler tone than Gould, but still blamed Langner and Helburn, those “sentimental show folk,” who dug *John Ferguson* out of the proverbial trunk. Carson chided them for not remembering that “yesterday’s realism has a way of becoming today’s corn.”<sup>28</sup> Although not all as caustic as Gould’s, other reviews were generally uncomplimentary to the Guild. In fact,

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<sup>26</sup> Jack Gould, “Television Debut: Theatre Guild Makes Video Bow on NBC With Production of ‘John Ferguson,’” *New York Times*, 16 November 1947, II-1.

<sup>27</sup> “Television Takes Two Big Steps: One Forward, One Backward,” *Washington Post*, 16 November 1947, L4.

<sup>28</sup> Saul Carson, “Radio: Theater on the Air,” *The New Republic*, 24 November 1947, 37.



John Crosby writing in the *Washington Post* later commented that although he had not seen the show, “those who did and even those involved in it agreed fairly unanimously that it was pretty bad.”<sup>29</sup> Langner later acknowledged as much in his autobiography and “had no quarrel with the appraisal, for we had to do our experiments in public.”<sup>30</sup> Gould and Carson were representative voices of the time. Neither reviewed theatre or film. Each began as radio critics, drifting to television as it grew in importance. They observed television with insights honed by reviewing the first mass medium, radio, and appear to have judged television on its own merits. Rather than being set upon by a hostile press, the Theatre Guild and NBC had a relatively friendly body of critics. Observers, even those involved with the business end of the industry, wanted quality programming that would draw viewers to the medium and spur its economic development. When producers came up short, critics held them accountable.

The errors the Guild and NBC committed in launching their television series are interesting because most prior broadcasters had already experienced similar missteps and the literature of the time was full of how-to-not-do tips. Consider the problems they experienced with the source material. Since the Guild’s stated purpose was to bring stage plays to television, it chose to present *John Ferguson* rather than commission an original script. The adaptation of stage plays had become *pro forma* on television and generally worked well if one acknowledged the hazards. Speaking before the Television Institute in October 1945, John Reich, a playwright and director both for the stage and television,

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<sup>29</sup> John Crosby, “Tele-Drama Challenges the Actors,” *Washington Post*, 14 April 1948, 1C, 16C. Crosby’s columns also appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune*.

<sup>30</sup> Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 435.

delineated these hazards and offered possible solutions. Because few observers in 1945 thought that viewers would be able to gaze at a television screen for longer than thirty to sixty minutes, and since most stage plays since Shakespeare lasted at least two hours, adaptations would require immense cutting. This put the emphasis on play selection since certain types of plays were more appropriate for television with its inherent characteristics of, according to Reich, “*immediacy, fluidity and emphasis on objects.*” Consequently, plays that dealt with comedy, mystery and character studies should adapt well. Reich particularly favored “tense psychological plays, mysteries and melodramas,” as long as they did not contain too many characters.<sup>31</sup>

On the surface, *John Ferguson* would seem to have fit Reich’s criteria. It was a melodrama with psychological issues.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, Johnston’s adaptation eliminated most psychological aspects of the play and overemphasized the melodrama. For example, the stage version contains the implication of a rape and a murder but has the action occur offstage and concentrates on the psychological effects these events have on the play’s characters. Johnston chose to write a new scene showing the action leading up to the presumed rape, although stopping short of the act which, as in the original, the characters allude to but never explicitly identify. His script reads like a comic

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<sup>31</sup> John Reich, “Stage Plays for Television,” *Televiser*, January-February 1946, 11-13. Reich, born in Austria, was an assistant to Max Reinhardt and came to the United States in 1938. He worked for CBS-TV from 1944-1945 and later became head of the Goodman Memorial Theatre and School of Drama in 1957. See Richard Schechner, “Stanislavski at School,” *Tulane Drama Review* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1964), 203.

<sup>32</sup> For a complete text of the play, with comment by the Board of Directors of the Guild, see St. John G. Ervine, “John Ferguson,” in *The Theatre Guild Anthology*, with an introduction by the Board of Directors of the Theatre Guild (New York: Random House, 1936.) ix-62.

melodrama with a laughing villain taunting his hysterical victim into slapping him repeatedly. The scene ends with the stage direction: “She screams violently as he laughs. Fade in agitated music bridge. Fade out music and fade out video.”<sup>33</sup> Johnston’s adaptation violated what Max Fleischer, the veteran animator, called the cardinal rule of showmanship on television. Fleischer believed the television artist should apply his tools “in a manner in which they serve most effectively, even to the point of idealization *but never beyond the point*—to exaggeration. Exaggeration is not good showmanship.”<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately for the Guild and NBC, the error of exaggeration plagued not only the script, but also the acting. As with the script adaptation, one could trace this to a decision by the Guild.

The Guild’s television team based every decision they jointly made in planning and executing the television project on theatrical models. For example, the choice of Denis Johnston as director and writer came from his past theatrical involvement with the Guild. When in 1944 Langner first publicly broached the idea of using television to produce stage plays, both he and Marshall spoke of using stage actors because of their ability to sustain a live performance. Consequently, in 1947 when the dream became reality, there was no chance that the Guild would suddenly change and look for other casting possibilities. However, in this case the Guild was also following accepted television practice. In 1944, Worthington Miner of CBS-TV told the *New York Times*,

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<sup>33</sup> *John Ferguson* script, Act II, 1-4. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC.

<sup>34</sup> Max Fleischer, “Picture Showmanship - Part II: The Seven Languages of Showmanship,” *Televiser*, March-April 1947, 24, 32. Emphasis is in the original.

“An actor who hasn’t gained that freedom of movement and expression but economy of emotion that the theatre teaches is handicapped in broadcasting. Television should take a lesson from this fact.”<sup>35</sup> Television did, and by the time the Guild linked up with NBC, the network had already accepted Miner’s principle. Edward Sobol explained that he preferred actors who had worked on the stage over radio or film because they were accustomed to memorizing lines quickly and working without constant cuts, as in film. They also were able to “sustain the mood of a play and [knew] how to build situations from beginning to climax to end.”<sup>36</sup> Owen Davis, Jr., NBC’s head of program production and casting, concurred. Davis hired actors from “stage, radio, and the screen in that order.” He usually avoided radio actors because they concentrated too much on voice. Film actors were a possibility, but geography made it impractical since most resided in California.<sup>37</sup>

However, stage acting was not precisely synonymous with acting before a live television camera. There was one distinct hazard in translating stage acting to the small screen that the Guild and Johnston evidently overlooked, but was one that directors and

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<sup>35</sup> T.R. Kennedy, Jr., “Tomorrow’s Talent,” *New York Times*, 10 September 1944, X5.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Sobol, “Production of Dramatic and *Variety* Programs,” 100-101; Edward Sobol, “A Director’s Headaches,” *New York Times*, 13 June 1948, sec. X, 11.

<sup>37</sup> For Davis’ appointment to the position which included script procurement, see NBC memo 11-44-034, 11 November 1947 in folder 606 in National Broadcasting Company, History Files, 1922-1986. Library of Congress Recorded Sound Division, Washington, D.C. He was the son of Owen Davis, a playwright who won a Pulitzer for *Icebound* (1923) and became the first president of the Dramatists Guild. See entry in Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, ed., *The Facts on File Companion to American Drama* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2004), 108-109. Quotation is from Owen Davis, Jr., “Actors Like Television,” *Variety*, 28 July 1948, 33.

producers had battled since the advent of television drama – overacting. After watching DuMont’s WABD-TV for three years, in early 1945 Ted Collins of *Variety* summed up the problem. “Big gestures look phony here,” he observed. “Overdone facial expressions shriek, ‘Lookee. I’m acting!’” It was not necessary to play to the balcony.<sup>38</sup> After working on some experimental television shows for WOR in 1946 (later to become New York’s channel 9), Sara Jane Troy remarked that if a director told an actor “‘Cut—you’re not giving me a true character,’ nine times out of ten the performer is overacting.”<sup>39</sup> NBC’s production group was in agreement. Sobol recognized that tendencies towards “mugging and broad gestures,” and a habit of “projecting their voice[s] across the footlights,” created problems.<sup>40</sup> It appears that many in the industry recognized the problem overacting posed. Why, then, did the acting in *John Ferguson* turn out the way it did? The probable answer comes from the Guild’s specific choice of actors, primarily Thomas Mitchell in the leading role of John Ferguson.

“With Thomas Mitchell wheezing into the mike and acting for the gallery in a medium that is strictly front row center, the play emerged quite ludicrous in spite of the sometimes excellent acting, and the technical proficiency of the whole production.”<sup>41</sup> Such was the opinion of the *Washington Post* reviewer. Gould of the *New York Times* noted that Mitchell “had a fine and frenzied time,” and “never seeming even to get

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<sup>38</sup> Ted Collins, “Stuff That Wows ‘Em on Stage Not Always Good Television,” *Variety*, 3 January 1945, 74.

<sup>39</sup> Sara Jane Troy, “Cues for the Tele-Actor and the Director Too,” *Televiser*, January-February 1946, 19, 24.

<sup>40</sup> Sobol, “Production of Dramatic and *Variety* Programs,” 100.

<sup>41</sup> *Washington Post*, 16 November 1947, L4.

headed in the direction of a characterization of Ferguson” and settled on a “caricature.” Mitchell was not the only one reviewers singled out. Gould felt that the English stage actress Joyce Redman attempted to hold herself in check playing the abused daughter, “but finally succumbed to the undisciplined mood that prevailed.”<sup>42</sup> Fleischer had preached the evils of exaggeration in presentation while others had cautioned against playing to non-existent balcony. Yet presumably the Guild ignored this advice with an attitude of, “it won’t happen here.” Nonetheless it had, and critics of the *John Ferguson* broadcast pointed out these shortcomings. The Guild, to its credit, took responsibility for the errors. Almost immediately following the airing of *John Ferguson*, Langner addressed the acting problems. Acknowledging that “television is a medium of intimate expression which can be very delicate and subtle on a small screen,” he agreed that overacting was always a problem.<sup>43</sup> He later wrote, “Hamming is much worse on television than on the stage.”<sup>44</sup> Significantly, the cast of *John Ferguson* contained only one actor with substantial television experience. For the pivotal role of Jimmy Caesar, the grocer who finds himself accused of murder, one could reasonably assume that NBC suggested Vaughn Taylor. Taylor had been in several productions for NBC in 1947 and as recently as 8 October on *Kraft Television Theatre*<sup>45</sup> Although later Guild broadcasts

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<sup>42</sup> Jack Gould, “Television Debut: Theatre Guild Makes Video Bow on NBC With Production of ‘John Ferguson,’” II-1.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in *Variety*, 12 November 1947, 55.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Bob Stahl, “Legiters, Not Filmers or Radioites Should Inherit TV, Sez Langner,” *Variety*, 28 April 1948, 31-34.

<sup>45</sup> As previously noted *Variety* called Taylor a “telegstar.” *Variety*, 5 November, 1947, 29. William Hawes has documented eight appearances by Taylor on live dramatic programs between March and October 1947. Seven of those were for NBC. See Hawes,

continued to rely almost exclusively upon stage actors, critics no longer had problems with the acting, revealing that both NBC and the Guild found solutions to the problems encountered in the first broadcast.<sup>46</sup> The problems with the program's director were more difficult to correct since the Guild had made it clear that Denis Johnston would be in control of its television experiments and had, for better or worse, used his experience in British television to legitimize the Guild's efforts. Insisting on Johnston remaining would produce a standoff.

Both the Guild and NBC quickly acknowledged the error in allowing Johnston complete control of the broadcast. On the Tuesday following the airing of *John Ferguson*, Langner reported that the Theatre Guild had arranged to have several top Guild employees receive training in television, ostensibly to close the gap in experience between the Guild television division and the network. Although mentioning Warren Caro, Paul Crabtree, and Armina Marshall among others, Langner neglected to include Denis Johnston. For the time being, the Guild television staff would still report to Johnston, who was rapidly becoming a topic of interest with numerous outside requests for information on him coming in to the Guild offices.<sup>47</sup> However, a week later *Variety*

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*Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, 176, 237-239. By the following April, Taylor had earned "a sort of dubious immortality," as the only actor to specialize in television. See John Crosby, "Kraft Show Is Cramped Work," *Washington Post*, 14 April, 1948, 5C.

<sup>46</sup> A survey of reviews shows no problems due to overacting, although some with characterization. See *Variety*, 28 January 1948, 38, for a review of *Angel Street*.

<sup>47</sup> *Variety*, 12 November 1947, 55. One of the staff members was Martin Manulis, at the time the manager of Langner's Westport Theatre. In the 1950s, Manulis became an influential television producer of such live dramas as *Suspense*, *Climax*, *Studio One*, and *Playhouse 90* for CBS. See Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 312-313; Martin Manulis, "Why A Long Playhouse," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 9 September 1956, G12; Tracy Stevens, ed., *2000 International Motion Picture Almanac*,

reported that the Guild had changed its mind and would let NBC take a greater role in future broadcasts, apparently in response to those critics who cited the Guild's apparent "lack of know-how" in television. On the *John Ferguson* broadcast, Sobol was to have been a "consultant director," but the Guild had shunted him aside and allowed Johnston to run the show. For future broadcasts, NBC and the Guild would cooperate on casting and rehearsals with NBC directors handling the live broadcast in the studio.<sup>48</sup> In the space of a week, Johnston went from being the Guild's television director in the control booth to a passenger returning to London.<sup>49</sup> On the important matter of direct control of the broadcasts, the Guild had backed down. NBC's experience on the Guild broadcast apparently affected its relationship with ANTA, the American National Theatre and Academy, with whom in mid-November 1947 it agreed to co-produce another sustaining program. Unlike the *John Ferguson* episode, NBC staff director Fred Coe directed the

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*71<sup>st</sup> Edition* (La Jolla, CA: Quigley Publishing Company, 2000), 280-281. On the Monday after the broadcast, Caro asked the Guild's publicity department to provide him with information on Johnston because of the numerous questions he had been getting and "Since it is probable that [Johnston] will direct shows later in our series." Warren Caro, Memo to Jo Heidt and Peggy Phillips, 10 November 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 71-Denis Johnston Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>48</sup> *Variety*, 19 November 1947, 29.

<sup>49</sup> It appears that the Guild anticipated this development and that its earlier support for Johnston was not substantial since Johnston returned to London on 11 November and remained there for the rest of the television season. He collected \$500 as payment for directing *John Ferguson*. See Warren Caro, Memo to Jo Heidt and Peggy Phillips, 10 November 1947, for his departure and Lawrence Langner, Memo to Jack Koritzer, 4 November 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 71-Denis Johnston Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.



ANTA series premiere, a presentation of Tennessee Williams's play *The Last of My Solid Gold Watches* on 4 December 1947.<sup>50</sup>

Putting the initial broadcast behind them, the Guild and NBC began work on the second program, scheduled to air on Sunday, 7 December. In selecting *The Late George Apley*, the Guild varied the approach it had taken with *John Ferguson*. First, *George Apley* was a comedy of manners and characters which should transfer to television more easily than *John Ferguson*. Second, it had not been a Theatre Guild production. Third, and most importantly, it was a recent Broadway hit, barely three years old and thus fresh in the memories of east coast audiences.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately for NBC and the Guild, this last point became problematic and foreshadowed a problem that would continue to plague television drama for the next few years. In the first half of the twentieth century, recent Broadway plays were an important source for film producers who routinely purchased the film rights to box office hits. In the case of *George Apley*, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox not only owned those rights, but a film version starring Ronald Coleman was currently in movie theaters.<sup>52</sup> The film producers' stance was that a live television broadcast constituted a

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<sup>50</sup> For details on the ANTA agreement, see Jack Gould, "News of Radio: ANTA and NBC to give Joint Presentation of Drama Series on Video Network," *New York Times*, 15 November 1947, 28; *Variety*, 26 November 1947, 26; and 3 March 1948, 26. For a review of the first broadcast, see *Variety*, 10 December 1947, 30. Scheduled for 30 November 1947, the broadcast had to wait four days after a camera malfunctioned. Williams' television play appeared the day after *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened on Broadway. See *Variety*, 3 December 1947, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Max Gordon produced the 1944 production. See *New York Times*, 22 November 1944, 26.

<sup>52</sup> The film opened in New York on 20 March 1947. See *New York Times*, 16 March 1947, X5. On 13 November 1947, the day after NBC's announcement, one could see the film at the Greenbelt Theatre in Greenbelt, MD. See ad in *Washington Post*, 13 November 1947, 19.

filmed version of the play, especially since the television industry was in the process of developing a method to film the television image for later broadcast.<sup>53</sup> More importantly, why would audience pay to see a movie when they could watch the same material for free? Television producers disagreed, but legal battles over the issue would preclude the timely use of contested scripts.<sup>54</sup> NBC and the Guild announced *George Apley* as the second program in the series on 12 November. A week later, the television network still had no clearance from 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox to air the play.

While NBC negotiated with Hollywood, the Guild's television team worked with the network to assemble the cast and adapt the script. According to Warren Caro, "In an effort to have the whole operation run more smoothly than we were able to do on the first show, I have agreed with Warren Wade, the executive producer at NBC, for two regular

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<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, three days after the 7 December 1947 live broadcast, Paramount Pictures Vice-President Paul Raibourn, "presented a reel of motion pictures taken, sight and sound, off a 10-inch tube television receiver, developed in 66 seconds and ready for immediate presentation." Featuring scenes from *The Late George Apley* and three rounds of the recent Louis-Walcott fight, both broadcast over NBC's WNBT, the presentation "created a stir among the 300 guests present and was hailed as a remarkable new step in video progress." Quotes taken from "Paramount Unveils Large Screen Video development at TBA Clinic Awards Luncheon," *Weekly Newsletter on Television*, 11 December 1947, 1. Also see "Movie Shot, Shown in 66-Second Span," *New York Times*, 11 December 1947, 16. That same evening, NBC broadcast the film clips on the NBC Newsreel hosted by Ben Grauer. See "WNBT Master Program Log," 10 December 1947. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC. Television had its own problems over rebroadcasts and issues of ownership. For a discussion of the legal ramifications surrounding these issues during the time period of the Theatre Guild program see David M. Solinger, "Unauthorized Uses of Television Broadcasts," *Columbia Law Review* 48, no. 6 (September 1948): 848-875. Accessed through JSTOR, 26 December 2007.

<sup>54</sup> For a discussion of the effect this had on the industry, see Max Wilk, *The Golden Age of Television: Notes from the Survivors* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976), 125-128.

weekly meetings: a production meeting for those concerned with the immediate play and a press meeting to lay out publicity plans for the week.”<sup>55</sup> On *George Apley*, the Guild was moving away from a position of dominance to one of collaboration. One area in which it still maintained control was casting and the choice of *George Apley* provided Langner and Helburn with an opportunity that had been lacking with *John Ferguson*: the recreation of a Broadway play using its original cast. Since the play was recent, it was possible to use many of the actors who created the stage roles. By 21 November when NBC finally obtained clearance, due largely to the efforts of the network’s president Niles Trammel, the Guild had hired six principals from either the stage production or its first tour – Leo G. Carroll, Byron Russell, Reynolds Evans, Catherine Proctor, Margaret Phillips, and John Conway – with Janet Beecher as Mrs. Apley and Archie Smith as the son both probable additions. For the remainder of the cast, NBC and the Guild each proffered possible actors. The final cast list seems balanced as to stage and television actors suggesting a level of cooperation between the two parties and that neither had a noticeable advantage in the casting process.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Warren Caro, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 22 November 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 30-Warren Caro Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. As an example of the cooperation on casting, NBC suggested Ellen Cobb Hill for the daughter and the Guild offered Anne Sargent. Hill had worked in television and she got the part. For the role of Roger Newcombe, played on stage and in the film by Percy Waram, evidently unavailable, Eddie Sobol suggested Robert Burton. See Warren Caro, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 22 November 1947. The final choice was William David, a veteran stage actor and currently appearing in *High Button Shoes*. Of the fourteen actors in the final cast, nine came from the original production or tour. For a discussion of the various versions of the play, see William Torbert Leonard, *Theatre: Stage to Screen to Television*, Vol. 1, A-L (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981) 859-862. For William David’s career on Broadway, see *New York Times Directory of the Theatre*, 219

When Denis Johnston adapted *John Ferguson* for the Guild critics noted the various problems with the script. For the second program it is likely that the task of adapting *The Late George Apley* fell to Edward Sobol and Paul Crabtree, the directors representing NBC and the Theatre Guild respectively. NBC gave no on-screen credit for the script and there is no notation in the Master Program Log for the program. However, television directors often served as adapters and Sobol had performed this task for NBC many times in 1946 and 1947. For example, he adapted a portion of Robert E. Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* for a 9 February 1947 broadcast.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Paul Crabtree considered "work on the script" to be part of his duties as a television director.<sup>58</sup> The delay over clearance of the broadcast rights cost the Guild a week in preparation time and work on the script did not begin until the weekend of 22-23 November, two weeks before the scheduled broadcast. Monitoring the progress, Caro reported that the script should be finished by the middle of the week of 24 November, leaving roughly ten days until airtime.<sup>59</sup> One might infer that the process to bring the second program to full realization was as stressful as the first if not for Armina Marshall's observation to Helburn that "It all seems to be going smoothly because there has been more preparation

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<sup>57</sup> William Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, 237. For Sobol's, adaptations in 1946 which included Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*, see William Hawes, *American Television Drama: The Experimental Years*, 228.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Crabtree, Letter to Lawrence Langner, Theresa Helburn, and Armina Marshall, 20 October 1947.

<sup>59</sup> Warren Caro, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 22 November 1947

and planning in advance—this should help. . . . All has been arranged harmoniously, rehearsals start here Friday.”<sup>60</sup>

Six weeks into their television partnership, the Theatre Guild and NBC had begun modifying their working relationship in the general direction of granting more responsibility to the network and less to the Guild. However, one aspect remained constant with both parties: the characterization of the television series as a theatrical event and the individual broadcasts as stage plays. In the context of television programming in late 1947, the reasons behind these inherent falsehoods – television was not theatre and a broadcast was certainly not a stage play – become apparent. Since the end of World War II, television had a reputation for being an interesting novelty but not entertainment thus giving prospective viewers little reason to purchase sets. In the May/June 1946 issue of the industry periodical *Televiser*, the editors complained that “All recent examples of program offerings, including those produced by advertising agencies, demonstrated apparent lack of understanding of what is termed ‘entertainment’, and how such entertainment should be televised.”<sup>61</sup> Nine months later the situation had not measurably improved, at least in the opinion of Jack Gould of the *New York Times*. “While in public pronouncements television broadcasters envision underwater ballets of breathtaking beauty and panorama,” he wrote, “on the air for the most part they are

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<sup>60</sup> Armina Marshall, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 24 November 1947. Box 78 – Lawrence Langer Folders, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. During the production period for *The Late George Apley*, Helburn was traveling to California on Guild business. At the time of Marshall’s letter, Helburn was in Beverly Hills.

<sup>61</sup> “Depth of Focus: Views of Television by the Editors,” *Televiser*, May/June 1946, 40.

providing second-rate vaudeville and ancient ‘B’ pictures.’<sup>62</sup> Broadcasters needed programs that viewers already perceived as both valuable and entertaining. Successful Broadway plays satisfied both criteria.

Three days into rehearsals for *The Late George Apley*, NBC’s Executive Vice-President Frank Mullen described the symbiotic relationship between television and the theatre while appearing as a guest on the WNBC daytime radio interview show *Hi! Jinx* hosted by Tex McCrary and Jinx Falkenburg. The following exchange is from that program.

Jinx: I know that NBC and the Theatre Guild have teamed up to televise a series of fine plays. But what about the future? What will television do to the theatre on Broadway?

Mullen: If you expose people to good things, they want good things. That’s what advertising is. As they learn about good clothes, they want better clothes. As they learn about plays, they want to go to plays. If you put plays into the home, more people will want to see plays on Broadway. It’s just an inevitable consequence. Television will sell the whole idea of drama to the American public, more effectively than it’s been sold before.

Tex: I think the mere fact that the Theatre Guild has teamed up with NBC means that the right people on Broadway are not afraid of what television will do to the theatre.

Mullen: Yes, I believe that the really important people in any of these fields see the advantages.<sup>63</sup>

Mullen echoed many of the standard Guild pronouncements of the past twenty-eight years. Not only would the public be encouraged to attend plays merely by being exposed

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<sup>62</sup> Jack Gould, “The Paradoxical State of Television,” *New York Times*, 30 March 1947, SM14.

<sup>63</sup> “Progress in Television,” *NBC Digest*, January 1948, 27-31. Transcript of interview of Frank E. Mullen by Tex McCrary and Jinx Falkenburg on 30 November 1947 broadcast of *Hi! Jinx* on WNBC.

to them – in this case Broadway plays which, since November 1944, Helburn equated with quality plays – but “the really important people” in theatre and television would agree. *Hi! Jinx* was an NBC program, explaining the characterization by the co-host of Langner and Helburn as “the right people on Broadway,” as opposed, one supposes, to the wrong sort of show folk who so far had failed to jump to television. Mullen’s strategy was a simple one aimed at both the public and theatrical artists and producers. Embrace television and join the “right people” who appreciate “good things,” or risk being left behind.

However, it was a strategy supported by the promise of quality entertainment. In order to make it succeed, both NBC and the Guild had to keep the promise. They had to provide “fine plays.” Langner and Helburn, even after the somewhat “uneven production”<sup>64</sup> of *John Ferguson*, in the words of one supportive reviewer, continued to assert the benefits the Guild could provide television. They told Saul Carson of the *New Republic* that by utilizing television, the Theatre Guild could produce the “first mature theater,”<sup>65</sup> one supposes in contrast to the perceived immaturity of television in 1947. In an issue dated a week before *George Apley* would air, *Life* magazine proclaimed of television that “It is a commercial reality but not yet an art.”<sup>66</sup> NBC and the Guild hoped to reveal the inaccuracy of that description.

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<sup>64</sup> “Video’s New Pace-Maker,” *Kirkeby Hotels Magazine*, May 1948, np. Theresa Helburn Papers, Box 2-1942-1948 Clipping File. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>65</sup> Saul Carson, “Radio: Theater on the Air,” *The New Republic*, 24 November 1947.

<sup>66</sup> *Life*, 1 December 1947, 117-126.

Possibly the less than enthusiastic response by critics to *John Ferguson* caused NBC to take a low-key approach to the second program. The advertising campaign for the first Guild broadcast began a week before the airdate and featured several newspaper ads in addition to promotional spots on NBC's stations. Curiously, the network did little to promote the second program other than a few news announcements. A survey of the major New York papers and the *Washington Post* revealed no promotional advertisements. Consequently, it was not until the Friday night before the Sunday broadcast, NBC's television audience heard an announcer advise them that "At about eight-thirty Sunday evening, we'll have another of NBC's outstanding television attractions. It's the Theatre Guild production of *The Late George Apley*, a sterling performance of one of your favorite plays." As an added highlight, the broadcast would contain most of the original cast.<sup>67</sup> The use of the phrase "television attractions" is revealing in that it suggests NBC was emphasizing the novelty of the medium rather than a more conventional phrase such as "television presentations." Using Mullen's advertising analogy in which one encourages consumption by exposing audiences to products, NBC was using the Theatre Guild program to attract viewers to the new medium and, hopefully, keep them as loyal customers. The Guild, in effect, became an advertisement for NBC television.

Just after 8:30 on the evening of 7 December, the second NBC/Theatre Guild program became a reality. In this instance, there were no invited guests and no celebrity interviews. Instead, as a prelude to the program the television audience saw an image

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<sup>67</sup> "WNBT Master Program Log," 5 December 1947. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC.



with a Christmas scene and heard a gentle reminder to get their Christmas shopping done before it became too late and to mail their packages early. Rather than the excitement of a Broadway opening, NBC was offering viewers a relaxed domestic atmosphere. “And now in just a few moments, you’ll see the Theatre Guild Presentation *The Late George Apley*,” the voice promised them. “So get comfortable and sit back to enjoy with us this fine play.” At 8:34 P.M. NBC played Wagner’s *Die Gotterdammerung* and the title credits began. Edward Sobol for NBC and Paul Crabtree for the Theatre Guild were the directors, although Sobol controlled the broadcast cameras, with A.W. Protzman and Otis Riggs as Technical Director and Art Director respectively. An acknowledgement that the play was being “presented through the courtesy of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox” and that the film was currently in theatres solved the clearance issue. Just before the opening filmed sequence of Boston that would establish the story’s location, the audience saw one final title card. Before *John Ferguson*, NBC gave the names of the leading actors and the play’s author. However, before *The Late George Apley*, audiences saw the following:

Theatre Guild Television

Is under the supervision

of

Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner

and is

produced in collaboration with

The National Broadcasting Corporation.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> “WNBT Master Program Log,” 7 December 1947. Crabtree received \$250, or half of what Johnston earned, for his part in the production. J.C. Koritzer, Memo to Lawrence Langner, 29 December 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 36-Paul

The change in emphasis is subtle but important. The producers were now the face of the program supplanting the actors and authors. In his radio interview, Mullen had referred to the “really important people” in theatre and television. For the viewers who tuned in the second Theatre Guild program, NBC identified them.

Based upon John P. Marquand’s 1938 Pulitzer-Prize winning novel of the same name and dramatized by Marquand and George S. Kaufman, *The Late George Apley* is a gentle satire of a true blue Boston Brahmin of 1912. It is a comedy of characterizations, manners, and wit with minimal jokes and caricatures, and contained within a three-act structure with a brief epilogue. Even more importantly, unlike *John Ferguson*, its plot was secondary to its characters. Each of these attributes made the play well suited to editing for television.<sup>69</sup> The script by Sobol and Crabtree retained the act structure and included twelve different musical interludes, not including the opening and closing Wagner sequences. Since television schedules had not yet fallen into the rigidity of radio, program length could be variable thus allowing adapters some flexibility. Perhaps because of the lessons of *John Ferguson*, as well as the absence of the celebrity interviews, *George Apley* was a bit lengthier than its predecessor. The metaphoric curtain came down at 10:03 P.M. totaling a running time of eighty-nine minutes.<sup>70</sup>

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Crabtree Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. The assistant art director was Ellwell.

<sup>69</sup> John P. Marquand and George S. Kaufman, *The Late George Apley* in *Twentieth Century Plays: American*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Richard A. Cordell (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1947), 301-329.

<sup>70</sup> “WNBT Master Program Log,” 7 December 1947. Among the recorded music was Percy Fletcher’s *Vanity Fair* and Lionel Monckton’s “Come to the Ball,” the latter

In contrast to the maelstrom of critical comments that followed the *John Ferguson* broadcast, the second program glided by almost unnoticed. Neither the *New York Times* nor the *Washington Post* mentioned it. *Variety* noted that the Guild came back after its “fiasco” with a show that was generally good but unsuited for television largely due to the lack of movement and an abundance of dialogue. The reviewer advised the Theatre Guild “to appreciate that television is a unique medium from the stage and requires a different approach to staging.”<sup>71</sup> This type of advice would become a familiar refrain that both the Guild and NBC seemingly ignored. On the day the *Variety* review appeared, Minutes from the Guild’s Board of Director’s meeting boasted that the “Late George Apley was very successful and has been claimed by some critics to be the finest television program to date.”<sup>72</sup>

Building upon the ideas expressed in *Variety*, as well as the earlier comments of Jack Gould and others, Joan Aucourt used the Guild’s television production of *The Late George Apley* not only as an example of the possibilities that the medium held but also of the limitations inherent in NBC’s and the Guild’s resolution to reproduce stage plays. Prefacing her remarks with a nod to the Theatre Guild’s stature and the notable fact that it had “officially recognized the industry’s age of consent, if not of reason, with a series of

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from the 1911 musical *The Quaker Girl* and used as a plot element in the stage production of *The Late George Apley*. For information on the original production of *The Quaker Girl*, see Richard Norton, *A Chronology of American Musical Theater, Volume 1: 1750-1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 975-976.

<sup>71</sup> *Variety*, 10 December 1947, 48.

<sup>72</sup> Notes on Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting, 10 December 1947. Box 162-1947 Board of Director Meetings. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

three broadcasts produced under the Guild's own august auspices," Aucourt complimented Langner for choosing the "delicate and not to say intimate, virtues of Marquand" for the second program. What Aucourt found appealing about the television production was its ability to use close-ups to reveal the little details of domestic life that were often missing from film and theatre due to the "commercial requirements" of the former and the "visual and dramatic requirements" of the latter. The intimacy of television allowed it to capture these "minute and precious jewels." However, for Aucourt *The Late George Apley* also illustrated, if not a shortcoming, than at least a missed opportunity. For her, Marquand's eye for detail so well realized in the original novel could have benefited the television program even more than the stage play. There were moments in the novel missing in the stage play that may have played very well on television. "It is just another example," she concluded, "of the fact that television *is* a medium in its own right, and therefore its scripts cannot be lifted whole, or even in part, from stage and screen adaptations: they must be written and selected with an eye to the unique qualities and limitations of the video production."<sup>73</sup>

With two programs finished, the Guild and NBC forged ahead. At some point in late December or early January, the Guild chose Patrick Hamilton's moody psychological play *Angel Street* for the third installment.<sup>74</sup> First playing on Broadway in 1941 and with

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<sup>73</sup> Emphasis in original. Joan Aucourt, "Television: A Double-Take," *Hollywood Quarterly* 3, no.3 (Spring 1948), 258-261. Accessed through JSTOR on 10 October 2004. In 1948, Aucourt was a free-lance writer and had previously worked in both film and print. By 1950 she was an associate editor for *Collier's* magazine. See "Mrs. Joan Aucourt, R.S. Schafer Wed," *New York Times*, 19 March 1950, 89.

<sup>74</sup> *Variety* carried an announcement of the selection on 14 January. See *Variety*, 14 January 1948, 42.

numerous touring productions and revivals as well as two filmed versions under its British title *Gaslight*, the selection ensured audience recognition. The Guild had also done a radio version and, perhaps not so coincidentally, a revival of the play was set to open a two-week run at the City Center in New York on 22 January starring José Ferrer and Uta Hagen, a husband and wife team who had starred in the Guild's wartime production of *Othello*.<sup>75</sup> It is possible that NBC may have contributed to the programming choice. The network had produced a television version of *Angel Street* two years earlier on 20 January 1946 to generally positive reviews.<sup>76</sup> As with *The Late George Apley*, Sobol would direct and presumably adapt the script. There would be no Guild director because Johnston remained in London and Paul Crabtree was moving from the Guild's television division to run the Theatre Guild Workshop, a training program for young actors who were current or past chorus members of *Oklahoma!*, *Allegro*, or *Annie Get Your Gun*.<sup>77</sup> A review of *John Ferguson* had quoted the Theatre

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<sup>75</sup> Ferrer played Iago and Hagen was Desdemona to Paul Robeson's Othello in a version of the play directed and adapted by Margaret Webster. After playing to audiences in Princeton and Cambridge in 1942, the Guild brought the controversial production to Broadway twice, in 1943 and 1945. See "Robeson Selected for 'Othello' Role," *New York Times*, 12 June 1942, 17; Norman Nadel, *A Pictorial History of the Theatre Guild*, 184-186.

<sup>76</sup> For a listing of the various versions of the play see William Torbert Leonard, *Theatre: Stage to Screen to Television*, Vol. 1, A-L, 598-603. Jack Gould's review of the 1946 television production called it "well above the general norm in video just now." Jack Gould, "Television: Angel Street," *New York Times*, 26 January 1946, X5.

<sup>77</sup> Langner laid out the plan for the program on 20 January and by early February Crabtree had taken over. Lawrence Langner, Memo to Paul Crabtree, 20 January 1948. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 36-Paul Crabtree Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. The *New York Times* mentioned Crabtree's position three weeks later. Sam Zolotow, "New Stages to Give Two Plays Tonight," *New York Times*, 9 February 1948. Scheduled to direct a BBC television show on 6 January 1948, Johnston was in London throughout November and December 1947.

Guild as characterizing that production as “hasty” due to the lack of preparation time.<sup>78</sup> The same handicap burdened *The Late George Apley* however different the final result. With the holiday season in full swing, the Guild and NBC decided to delay the third program in the series until 25 January 1948, seven weeks after the second show and providing an extra three weeks to work on *Angel Street*.<sup>79</sup>

NBC had grand aspirations for 1948 in the field of television. A full-page ad in the 5 January 1948 edition of the *New York Times* promised that in the coming year NBC would fulfill a twenty year dream by bringing to “the public the greatest medium of mass communication in the world – Network Television.” In January 1948 that network consisted of four stations linked by co-axial cable on the east coast with an estimated 120,000 sets in use. NBC planned to add stations in Boston and Baltimore by late spring and eventually connect these to the three current and three planned stations in the Midwest and California. By the 1948 fall television season, NBC hoped to have a true national network linked by either co-axial cable or the distribution of photographic kinescopes of live shows. It was an optimistic proposal and at the center of it was “The Theatre Guild series [which] brings the greatest art of the New York theatre to viewers

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Denis Johnston, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 21 November 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 71–Denis Johnston Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>78</sup> Judy Dupuy “Reviews of Tele-Shows, *Televiser*, November-December 1947.

<sup>79</sup> Unlike the first two programs, Theresa Helburn evidently took an interest in the third and attended the final rehearsal for *Angel Street*, most likely as the Theatre Guild representative. She had no experience in directing for television. Theresa Helburn, Diary Entry for 25 January 1948. Theresa Helburn Papers, Box 1-1948 Diary. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

distant from Broadway.”<sup>80</sup> With the initial misstep of *John Ferguson* behind it, NBC worked toward making its vision a reality.

Besides the longer time between programs, the scheduling of *Angel Street* differed in two other respects. First, it would air at 8:00 P.M., a half hour earlier. Second, it would have only a sixty-minute time slot instead of the usual seventy-five to ninety minutes allotted for the first two shows. On the face of it, the shortened time must not have seemed a problem. The 1946 version ran about seventy minutes with no noticeable script problems. Moreover, one of the great fears in television at the time was that viewers could not watch the small screens for long periods of time. *Kraft Television Theatre* had been airing hour-long programs since May 1947 with success and had become the model for live television. Finally, in order to have consistent schedules for advertisers, as in the radio industry, NBC needed to move toward fixed program lengths.

The Guild retained control of casting and once again attempted to use the Broadway cast. The 1946 television version featured Judith Evelyn repeating the role of Mrs. Manningham, the woman in peril whose husband is a killer. The Guild was unable to engage Evelyn but did manage to bring back Leo G. Carroll as Inspector Rough and Florence Edney as her maid, both from the original New York production. Betty Field played Mrs. Manningham with Walter Abel as the husband who tries to convince his

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<sup>80</sup> The quotations and description of the NBC network are from the *New York Times*, 5 January 1948, 40. The estimate of the number of television sets in use is from *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 20 December 1947, 2. NBC repeated the ad in other publications. See *Variety*, 14 January 1948, 31. “Kinescope” was the name RCA trademarked for its cathode-ray tube for television sets. The common name became “picture tube.” When various processes for filming images of live programs directly from the television screen became common, most sources referred to them as “kinescope recordings.” Later the word “kinescope” became synonymous with the filmed recording and not the picture tube. See Stanley Kempner, ed., *Television Encyclopedia*, 241-242; Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr., *Dunlap’s Radio & Television Almanac*, 175.

young wife that she is going insane. As with *George Apley*, NBC eschewed print ads and only advertised the program over its stations. On Sunday, 25 January 1948, roughly 500,000 potential viewers had the opportunity to watch this latest version of *Angel Street*. Although no one knew it at the time, an estimated 59% of those with television sets did watch setting a record that would last until October 1948 when Milton Berle and the *Texaco Star Theatre* phenomenon hit its stride.<sup>81</sup> Of course, *Angel Street* had little or no competition on television, only WCBS in New York was on the air, but it did have to go up against Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy as well as Fred Allen on radio.<sup>82</sup> It stands as an amazing statistic and pointed out the desire television set owners had to watch *something*. Unfortunately, *Angel Street* left some viewers and most critics nonplussed. However, this time it appeared that the blame lay with NBC and not with the Guild.

Although Edward J. Kiernan of Newark, New Jersey enjoyed *Angel Street* and compared it “most admirably,” to the original production which he saw, another viewer disagreed. Fellow audience member Robert Appel noted “careless, although small, errors draw back from the respect due to such a powerful and promising medium. For example,” he observed, “in the recent Theatre Guild production of ‘Angel Street,’ noise could be heard from off stage as well as the reflection of what seemed to be a non-

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<sup>81</sup> Prior to the familiar Nielsen ratings, the radio and later television industry used the Hooper Ratings. Ted Mack’s *Original Amateur Hour* which debuted a week earlier over WABD and the DuMont stations on 18 January 1948 held second place with 46.8%. See “Toscanini Seen by 370,000,” *Television World*, 26 April 1948, 5. Berle’s rating of 63.2% with an audience share of 92.4% for the 19 October 1948 broadcast broke the record. “Berle’s 63.2 Rating Sets New Record,” *Variety*, 27 October 1948, 23, 33.

<sup>82</sup> See radio and television logs in *New York Times*, 25 January 1948, X10.



participating actor could be seen through the mirror.”<sup>83</sup> The reviewer in *Variety*, perhaps expecting more from the NBC/Guild team, complained that the “trimming of the play turned a first-rate blood-tingler into a curiously anemic idyll of murder and madness.” As with its criticism of *George Apley*, *Variety* admonished both NBC and the Guild to consider ways to stage plays that took advantage of television’s strengths. For example, even though the production contained skilled actors, cleverly designed sets and adequate camera work, there were little suspense or shocking developments. The problem, the review opined, is the “dearth of talent versed in the unique demands of the new medium.” In the case of *Angel Street*, “video must learn to generate its own chills.”<sup>84</sup>

Joan Arcourt differed with *Variety* on the adaptation, she thought the script “was an intelligent condensation of this popular melodrama, and in its more violent moments packed an undeniable punch.” Still, she felt, “it missed the boat on several climactic occasions,” particularly because “in the small area of the television set, the act of selection is up to the television camera, not to the individual spectator.”<sup>85</sup> A television set is not a stage and cumulative actions, movements, and nuances that a theatre audience can experience on the stage may not translate when a director has to choose which of these to show the viewer. The shortcoming, Arcourt felt, was not in the mechanics or technology of the medium, but in the imagination of those who utilized it. Although the

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<sup>83</sup> These comments were in letters to the editor of a trade periodical. The first is in *Phillipps Television Weekly*, 2 February 1948, 2; the second in *Phillipps Television Weekly*, 16 February 1948, 2.

<sup>84</sup> *Variety*, 28 January 1948, 38.

<sup>85</sup> Joan Arcourt, 260.

execution of the program was the responsibility of the network, one can argue that the Theatre Guild needed to provide the imagination. In the partnership with NBC, the Guild was the newcomer. On the one hand, it had little experience upon which to draw. However, the same lack of experience meant that it also had few bad habits and ineffective procedures to unlearn. It was in the perfect position to take on the role of innovator. That it chose not to do so is most likely due to Langner and Helburn and their intransigence in refusing to budge from their mission to only present stage plays, no matter the resulting performance. What is clear is that by the end of the first three programs in the series, NBC and the Guild had shown improvement by nearly any measurement. Acting had improved. Technically the shows were better – certainly there were no more silent barking-dogs. However, the imagination factor was still lacking and the fault lay primarily with the Guild. Furthermore, NBC acquiesced chiefly because of the legitimacy that the Broadway association provided. It was a pattern that continued for the rest of the season.

For the fourth program, the Guild selected Paul Osborn's *Morning's at Seven*, a play it had produced on Broadway in 1939. Brooks Atkinson called the gentle comedy of small-town life and filled with characters past retirement age, "original, simple, generally pleasant and sometimes heartily amusing."<sup>86</sup> On several levels, the play seems unsuited to what NBC and the Guild stated as the purpose of the series: to bring great plays to the public. It was not either a famous play or a Broadway hit; the original production lasted

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<sup>86</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "Review of *Morning's at Seven*," *New York Times*, 1 December 1939, 26.

only forty-four performances.<sup>87</sup> There had been no revivals and no filmed version. Furthermore, it featured no recognizable star performers. Still, it had been a Guild production and that may have been enough for NBC to agree and the network scheduled it for 22 February 1948, four weeks after *Angel Street*.<sup>88</sup>

With the play nearly a decade old, the Guild had problems retaining the original performers. It did manage to hire Russell Collins and Enid Markey to reprise their roles, a fact noted by the NBC announcer in the introduction. For this program, Fred Coe would direct and adapt the script, taking over from Sobol. Even with four weeks between programs, the rehearsal process remained the same. The cast received the script approximately ten days before the broadcast and began rehearsing on the second Friday before. For *Morning's at Seven*, Coe ran eight days of rehearsal with six days without cameras and two days with for a total of a little more than thirty-eight hours.<sup>89</sup> It was a process that became the norm in television but ran counter to the Guild's theatre experience. For Langner, the process always seemed rushed.

If *Morning's at Seven* seemed a curious choice for a script, it did offer some novel design opportunities. The challenge for the television director was how to manage

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<sup>87</sup> Gerald Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930-1969*, 186.

<sup>88</sup> *New York Times*, 22 February 1948, X10. It occupied the 8:00-9:15 timeslot following ten minutes of news and preceding *Author Meets the Critics*.

<sup>89</sup> "WNBT Master Program Log," 22 February 1948. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC. Rehearsals would typically run on Friday and Saturday, skip Sunday, and then continue on until the next Sunday and the performance. On this production, the first six days had twenty-six hours of rehearsal and the final weekend twelve and a quarter. Armina Marshall gets credit as co-director, but this appears to be a symbolic position. There is no evidence that she took an active role in the process.

physical space so that the television viewer would be able to focus attention on a six-to-seven-inch screen and make some sense of what the writer intended. Early screens were oval with the image displayed having an aspect ratio nearly square, about four to three, width to height. Directors needed to find a way to work with this difference in order to maintain audience interest and attention. Each of the first three broadcasts had featured simple interior sets and limited action: the Ferguson farmhouse, the Apley dining room and parlor, and the Manningham drawing room. *Morning's at Seven* offered a change of pace. In it, the action plays out in the adjacent backyards of two houses with set becoming almost another character. In fact, the printed cast of characters in the published version identifies the principal characters as “In the house at the left” and “In the house at the right.”<sup>90</sup> Jo Mielziner designed the original production, eliciting a comment from Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* that “[Mielziner] has set the piece perfectly by filling the stage with rear porches and façades of two McKinley period houses after the pungent style of Burchfield.”<sup>91</sup> For the Theatre Guild television version, designer Robert Wade had the task of constructing a set that would serve the plot and characters of the play, fit within the confines of the television studio, and hold the interest of the audience viewing the program on the tiny television screen.

In the stage production, the actors were free to roam around the expansive set. The television studio was not as accommodating. Worthington Miner noted that in film, “actors for the most part moved in and out of a fixed frame,” something that theatre

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<sup>90</sup> Paul Osborn, *Morning's at Seven*, in *Cavalcade of Comedy*, ed. Louis Kronenberger (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), 588-618.

<sup>91</sup> Quote and photograph from Mary C. Henderson, *Mielziner, Master of Modern Stage Design*, Foreword by Frank Rich (New York: Backstage Books, 2001), 124.

actors did as well. In television, the reverse was true: “television actors often remained still while the frame around them moved.”<sup>92</sup> The reason for this was twofold. First, the space requirements of the set, which had to accommodate not only the actors but also all of the technical requirements, i.e., lights, cables, cameras, technical personnel, often hindered movement. Second, television cameras did not have telephoto lenses allowing the director the option of enlarging the space by moving the cameras away from the action. The set for *Morning’s at Seven* would be deep rather than wide, leaving the side spaces empty for the crew and equipment. This followed Miner’s theory of vertical composition. However, the danger was in having a claustrophobic set.

In his 1952 book on designing for television, Wade described two methods of overcoming the problem he faced on *Morning’s at Seven*. The first was with the use of scale models for establishing shots. Although recognizing that the use of “miniature sets and dioramas ... in television inscenation ... in live studio programming is limited by cost, difficulties in lighting small-scale objects and by the lack of preparation time,” Wade believed the designer could use them for exteriors. Although difficult for interior shots because of the need for realism, miniatures worked as exteriors because “the viewer cannot so easily compare the relative size of the details.”<sup>93</sup> The second method involved rear-screen projection, once again as a way to give the illusion of space since “in dramatic and other realistically staged programs rear-projected images of course are most valuable in suggesting vista which seem to extend beyond the physical limitations of the

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<sup>92</sup> Worthington Miner, *Worthington Miner: A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 167.

<sup>93</sup> Robert J. Wade, *Designing for TV*, 118.

sound stages.”<sup>94</sup> Used in combination, miniatures worked well for setting the scene and projection supplemented the existing three-dimensional set.

No filmed version of the program exists, but still photographs probably taken during the rehearsal process illustrate Wade’s finished project. One photograph shows the miniature set, juxtaposed with the full-size set. Wade’s set becomes more pastoral than Mielziner’s with the open space of the two backyards resting vertically between the houses rather than horizontally downstage from them. Thus, Wade was able to allow Coe, in his adaptation, to keep with Osborn’s intention of the houses and the yards assuming a leading role in the play. A second photograph illustrates the use of the “new 3-dimensional photo mural,” according to the caption. In this case, rear-screen projection creates the illusion of the orchard in what would be the upstage area of the set. The photograph also illustrates the close proximity of the actors and the closeness of the camera, both constraints on the set designer.<sup>95</sup>

*Morning’s at Seven* aired from 8:00 P.M. until 9:11 on Sunday, 22 February 1948. Once again, reviewers were disappointed. *Variety*, usually so supportive was brief but to the point with its criticism: “excellent acting—fine sets—poor entertainment.” Questioning the Guild for selecting a play without any past success, *Variety* expressed hope that the Guild would eventually find a play “entertaining enough to keep the attention of viewers focused on the screen for a full hour.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>95</sup> *Radio and Television Mirror*, July 1948, 55; *Radio & Television Best*, June 1948, 50.

<sup>96</sup> *Variety*, 25 February 1948, 26. The review singled out for praise Wade’s set which included two interiors and one exterior.

Langner had yet to realize, and it is reasonable to assume he took a leading role in the play selection, that television audiences wanted something different than what the Guild identified as stimulating theatre.<sup>97</sup> NBC continued to cooperate and had increased its promotion of the series in advertisements for television as had others in the industry. In an article published the day after *Angel Street* aired announcing that Phil Silvers would be moving to television, one trade publication proclaimed: “The Phil Silvers show is a step in the right direction! The Kraft Theater, The Theatre Guild, they are all steps in the right direction.”<sup>98</sup> So far, the right direction for NBC and the Guild had included less than exciting plays. With the selection of the twelve-year-old *Stage Door* for the next broadcast, the pattern continued. Although, it was much more popular and well known than *Morning’s at Seven*, it also had its limitations.

The original production of the Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman play opened on Broadway on 22 October 1936 and ran for over five months. Although critics generally expressed disappointment in the script, audiences and some reviewers thought otherwise. Brooks Atkinson experienced “an impression of emptiness which the expert dialogue and direction do not wholly conceal,” and felt that Margaret Sullavan excelled

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<sup>97</sup> During the production and rehearsal phase of *Morning’s at Seven*, Helburn was on a cross-country trip that would take her to Arizona. Throughout most of the first four months of the series, she was either away from New York or working on other projects. Her personal correspondence during this time contains few if any references to the television program, even during times of importance such as the days directly before and after broadcasts. On the evening *Morning’s at Seven* aired, she was watching Cary Grant in *The Bishop’s Wife* in Chicago. See Theresa Helburn, Diary Entry for 22 February 1948. Theresa Helburn Papers, Box 1-1948 Diary. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>98</sup> “Phil Silvers Signing for \$9,000; Televiewers May Expect Big Budget Shows,” *Phillipps Television Weekly*, 26 January 1948, 3.

as the aspiring actress.<sup>99</sup> Unfortunately, the Guild would not have Sullavan or anyone else from the Broadway cast. Whatever impact the broadcast would have on the audience would have to come from the NBC-Guild television team. In this respect, *Stage Door* would be a suitable test for the theory that television could present new versions of Broadway hits that would satisfy viewers without having to resort to weak copies of the original. For this production, NBC and the Guild diverged from past policies and commissioned a professional writer to adapt the script. Arthur Arent, the leading adapter for the Guild radio program would adapt and Edward Sobol would direct.<sup>100</sup> At this stage in the development of television programming, it was probably as experienced a pairing that one could find and with an airdate of 29 March 1948, the production team would have an additional week.

The Guild was still nominally in charge of casting and *Stage Door* presented a problem because, unlike the other broadcasts, there were no available members of the original cast. To play the leading role, the Guild engaged Louisa Horton, a former Chevy Chase debutante who had appeared on Broadway as a replacement in John van Druten's *The Voice of the Turtle* and would make her film debut with Edward G. Robinson and

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<sup>99</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "Review of *Stage Door*," *New York Times*, 23 October 1936, 26. John Anderson of the *New York Journal* called the play "mechanical and stodgy stuff, lifeless in its efforts to be sharp and clever, and dreary in the soggy sentiment it sluices up." Quoted in Gerald Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930-1969*, 143.

<sup>100</sup> Theresa Helburn received co-directing credit and her diary places her at the final rehearsal. As with the previous broadcast, it is likely that the credit was perfunctory. See *Variety*, 31 March 1948, 38; Theresa Helburn, Diary Entry for 28 March 1948. Theresa Helburn Papers, Box 1-1948 Diary. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.



Burt Lancaster in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*.<sup>101</sup> The other members of the cast included minor Broadway actors, some who, like Horton, were near the beginning of their careers.<sup>102</sup> Arent delivered his script to NBC on 19 March 1948 and the rehearsals began immediately. After ten days and forty-five and one-half hours of rehearsal, the large cast – the shooting script lists twenty-one characters– was ready to go. At 7:35 P.M. on 28 March 1948 the NBC announcer reminded viewers to stay tuned for “another outstanding Theatre Guild play ... *Stage Door*, that beloved Kaufman-Ferber hit” coming up at 8:00. (NBC's program log contains a notation warning that the broadcast might be twelve minutes shorter than the seventy-four minutes allotted for it, perhaps giving a clue as to how the final rehearsal went.) When the end titles finally came on at 9:07 PM, just seven minutes short, the fifth of six planned broadcasts was over. With the end of the partnership in sight, NBC needed to come to a decision. Should it exercise its option and renew for an additional six months or move in another direction?

Three events ensued in the days just after the broadcast. First, the critical response to *Stage Door* was more uniformly positive than any of the previous broadcasts. Second, the Guild announced that it would have the honor of being the first to produce a play by Bernard Shaw on American television. And third, NBC extended the series for another

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<sup>101</sup> The film version of *All My Sons* opened in New York on the Saturday before the *Stage Door* Broadcast. *New York Times*, 22 March 1948, 18. For Horton's social background see “Louisa Horton to Speak,” *Washington Post*, 28 June, 1948, B3.

<sup>102</sup> John Forsythe played the radical playwright Keith Burgess, although *Variety* called him “miscast.” He would attain notoriety eight years later in *The Teahouse of the August Moon*. The cast of the television program is in William Torbert Leonard, *Theatre: Stage to Screen to Television*, Vol. 2, M-Z (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981) 1471; the review is in *Variety*, 31 March 1948, 38. For Forsythe's New York stage credits see *New York Times Directory of the Theatre*, 309-310.

six months. Although on the surface the first two of these appear to have caused the third, they probably did not. Most likely NBC had not considered terminating the partnership. For one thing, the Guild series, even with all of its starts and stops, was no worse than similar shows and still showed promise of becoming much better than the norm. Moreover, the Theatre Guild brand had lost none of its luster. The current Broadway season found it producing the third Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Allegro* even as *Oklahoma!* played to enthusiastic audiences and *Carousel* toured<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, NBC had to fill its broadcast hours with something and it had nothing else in the works. The Guild show was expensive, but NBC was used to investing in the present with the promise of a profitable future and the losses would not last forever. Prospective sponsors had been inquiring about the Guild program and there was reason to believe that shortly NBC could shift much of the cost of the broadcasts to one of these interested groups.<sup>104</sup> In the last analysis, extending the series was a logical conclusion regardless of the response to *Stage Door*. Consequently, two days after the broadcast, *Variety* announced that NBC had extended the option date with the Theatre Guild until 1 October 1948 and that the two parties had planned an additional six broadcasts. Moreover Shaw, who had

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<sup>103</sup> *Oklahoma!* continued at the St, James Theatre until 29 May 1948. *Carousel* closed at the Majestic Theatre on 24 May 1947 and was replaced by *Allegro* on 10 October 1947. *Allegro* closed on 10 July 1948. For much of the 1947-1948 television season, the Theatre Guild had two musicals on Broadway. See Richard Norton, *A Chronology of American Musical Theater, Volume 2: 1912-1952*, 862, 896, 935.

<sup>104</sup> NBC began actively recruiting sponsors after the second broadcast and the Guild began fielding offers after the third broadcast. See *Variety*, 17 December 1947, 29; Warren Caro, Confidential Memo to Lawrence Langner, Theresa Helburn, and William Fitelson, 14 February 1948. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 30-Warren Caro Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. The issue of sponsorship will be an important topic in the next chapter.

resisted allowing the Guild to edit his plays (thus precluding any radio adaptations) agreed to let them produce *Great Catherine* for the next television broadcast. The change of heart came in part due to Shaw's personal friendship with Langner and Helburn coupled with the fact that *Great Catherine* was a one-act play and would need no editing for time.<sup>105</sup> Everything seemed to be going NBC's and the Guild's way and the positive reviews of *Stage Door* were icing on the cake.

As usual, the *Variety* review was a combination of negatives and positives, although in this instance the latter outweighed the former. *Stage Door* was the best yet in "an otherwise mediocre list of Theatre Guild television shows presented thus far," wrote the reviewer. The welcome addition of "more life and movement than any previous Theatre Guild offering," gave hope that the next six shows would continue the improvement. Even though editing the script to a little more than an hour made it difficult for any characterization other than the leads, *Variety* thought it a worthy effort.<sup>106</sup> John Crosby in the *Washington Post* was even more enthusiastic in his praise. In his opinion, *Stage Door* was "the first televised drama I've seen that provided anything like the sustained interest of the theater; it was, in fact, the first televised drama in my experience that had more than curiosity value; it was good enough to scare the pants off motion picture and theater interests, if they were paying attention, and to furnish food for thought for everyone else." The only negative side to the broadcast felt Crosby was the play itself. The idealism of an actor who "sticks her tongue at Hollywood's filthy money

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<sup>105</sup> *Variety*, 31 March 1948, 31.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

to enrich her soul if not her purse,” seemed “pompous and more than a little phony.”<sup>107</sup> After the dark days of November and the aftermath of *John Ferguson*, reviews like these must have given both NBC and the Theatre Guild great hope for the future. Of course, some still questioned the Guild’s play selection, but the promise of a Shaw play should quiet even the most pessimistic observers. The tentative date for *Great Catherine* was 25 April 1948 leaving little time for congratulations. Since the Guild would do the play intact, the script was no longer a problem. The first order of business was assembling a cast equal in stature to the distinguished author. Fortunately for the Theatre Guild, Gertrude Lawrence, an old friend of both Langner and Helburn, was available having just closed *Tonight at 8:30*.<sup>108</sup> The prospect of a combination of Lawrence, Shaw, and the Theatre Guild seemed a perfect match, and it might have been on the stage. However, in a little more than a month, the Theatre Guild and NBC would learn yet another lesson in television production.

NBC assigned Fred Coe to direct with Otis Riggs and Ellwell as Art Director and Assistant Art Director respectively. By the second week of April, Lawrence came on board and the rest of the massive cast (the script called for thirty-two characters and two

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<sup>107</sup> John Crosby, “No Relaxing: Tele-Drama Challenges the Actors,” *Washington Post*, 14 April 1948, 1C.

<sup>108</sup> The play closed on Saturday, 13 March 1948 and Helburn returned from her vacation on the following Monday. Louis Calta, “Play by H. Welles Opens Tomorrow,” *New York Times*, 13 March 1948, 12. Lawrence had a long association with the Guild and had performed on their radio program as recently as the previous October. Both Langner and Helburn addressed her affectionately as “Gertie.” See Theresa Helburn, Letter to Peggy and Eric Kocher, 14 October 1947. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 61–Helburn Personals Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

extras) was in place.<sup>109</sup> Among the more prominent actors in the project were David Wayne, of *Finian's Rainbow* fame and currently in *Mister Roberts*, and Micheál MacLiammóir, co-founder of the Dublin Gate Theatre in 1928 and most recently seen in Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* which opened in New York the preceding February.<sup>110</sup> The significance of the playwright, the stature of the leading players, and the large cast made NBC's studio 3H inadequate for the production. Consequently, NBC elected to delay the broadcast until 2 May 1948 in order to utilize its newest and largest facility, Studio 8G which would be operational on 22 April.<sup>111</sup> Both NBC and the Theatre Guild wanted *Great Catherine* to be a television event: the network in order to display its new production capabilities and facilities, and the Guild to impress television viewers with the power of great theatre.<sup>112</sup> One method of accomplishing both goals was through

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<sup>109</sup> Lawrence made the columns when a group of children, who didn't recognize her, saw her unable to get into the rehearsal studio and thought she had not gotten the part. Richard Coe, "Video Drawing 'Em Like Flies," *Washington Post*, 14 April 1948, 1C.

<sup>110</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "Review of Mister Roberts," *New York Times*, 19 February 1948, 27; Brooks Atkinson, "Review of John Bull's Other Island," *New York Times*, 11 February 1948, 33.

<sup>111</sup> NBC announced the change on 15 April. See "The News of Radio," *New York Times*, 16 April 1948, 46.

<sup>112</sup> An unidentified Guild employee wrote to Theresa Helburn, who was then in Paris, "Everyone seems to be busy – but just what all the shoutin's [sic] for is not too clear. The Gertrude Lawrence show has contributed to the flurry." Letter to Theresa Helburn from Theatre Guild Office (unsigned), 23 April 1948. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 62–Therese Helburn Correspondence Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

spectacle. Studio 8G had three times the space of 3H and made an ideal setting for the expansive set Otis Riggs planned for *Great Catherine*.<sup>113</sup>

In article that appeared in October 1948, Robert Wade described the enormous effort that went into designing and constructing the set for *Great Catherine*. Because the change in studios came fairly late in the process and allowed for a more extensive set, Otis Riggs and his staff had to research, design, construct, and transport the nearly ten-ton set in the space of four and a half days. Incorporating six complicated settings, the entire project “was designed on a Tuesday, approved on Wednesday, and information rushed to the carpenter Wednesday afternoon; it was built, painted and propped by 9:30 Saturday morning.” According to Wade, far from being unusual, this process had become the norm causing television producers to “accept such miracles with nonchalance.”<sup>114</sup> It was by far the most expansive set for any Guild television production allowing Coe the opportunity to experiment with staging methods that could take advantage of the increased room. On the evening of 2 May 1948, NBC and the Guild once again prepared to make television history, this time by introducing the five cities connected to NBC’s east coast network to Bernard Shaw.

The on-air promotions for the broadcast began at 6:00 P.M., two and one-half hours before the show’s scheduled time. The announcer informed viewers that they would see “the Theatre Guild production of Bernard Shaw’s play ‘The Great Catherine

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<sup>113</sup> For a description of Studio 8G, see “New Television Studio,” *Televiser*, May 1948, 17.

<sup>114</sup> Robert J. Wade, “Staging a TV Dramatic Program,” *Televiser*, October 1948, 15-18. The final set consisted of eight loads of furniture and fourteen loads of scenery transported on 4 X 6 dollies and weighed approximately 19,600 pounds.

[sic]’ starring that First Lady of the Stage, Miss Gertrude Lawrence and David Wayne, currently appearing in a great Broadway hit.”<sup>115</sup> Thirty minutes before the broadcast, the announcer reminded viewers that “At 8:30 we present one of the events of the season, an NBC presentation of the Theatre Guild production of George Bernard Shaw’s play ‘The Great Catherine.’” By this, the sixth program in the series, NBC had begun to shift from attracting viewers to watch a novelty, to inviting them to experience “a great theatrical event.”<sup>116</sup> The comfortable domestic tranquility of *George Apley* had given way to the excitement of Broadway. After a nod to the historical nature of the program as “the first time one of Shaw’s plays will have been televised in America,” and a listing of seven of the leading players, the announcer once again reminded viewers that “Curtain time for ‘The Great Catherine’ is 8:30.”<sup>117</sup> Six months after the beginning of the project, NBC and the Theatre Guild were on the verge of fulfilling the network’s advertising promise of bringing “the greatest art of the New York theatre to viewers distant from Broadway.”

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<sup>115</sup> Although NBC used Shaw’s play text of *Great Catherine*, it invariably, added “The” to the title. “WNBT Master Program Log,” 2 May 1948. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Division, Washington, DC. For a copy of the play including Shaw’s “Apology”, see Bernard Shaw, *Great Catherine* in *Bernard Shaw, Selected Short Plays*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 187-227.

<sup>116</sup> This was the announcer’s final description of the play before the opening title cards. “WNBT Master Program Log,” 2 May 1948.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* Neither mention of Wayne included the name of his current Broadway hit, *Mister Roberts*. Possibly this was due to the fact that the CBS television show *Tonight on Broadway* broadcast excerpts of the play, including some with Wayne as Ensign Pulver, from the stage of the Alvin Theatre on its 6 April 1948 debut program. It is conceivable that NBC would not want to call attention to a rival network’s programming. For a review of that broadcast, see Jack Gould, “A Good Try Gone Awry,” *New York Times*, 8 April 1948, X9.

Unlike the situation with *John Ferguson*, the broadcast of *Great Catherine* began smoothly with minimal digressions. Following very brief live interviews that began just prior to the 8:30 “curtain,” viewers saw slides of the leading actors which segued into a slide of St. Petersburg to set the scene. The program began on time and for the next fifty-three minutes, viewers watched as NBC took them into the world of the Imperial Russian Winter Court at the Palace in St. Petersburg in 1776. At 9:23, the “curtain” came down on the shortest, but most elaborate of the Theatre Guild television productions. Using the process developed by Eastman Kodak that Paramount demonstrated the previous December, NBC filmed the performance for possible redistribution and as a gift for Shaw.<sup>118</sup> The evening should have a triumph for all concerned, however when the reviews began to arrive, such was not the case.

Although not scathing in their criticism, observers expressed disappointment in the production, possibly due to the expectations NBC and the Guild had encouraged them to have. *Variety* repeated the refrain that the Guild had chosen a mediocre play and criticized *Great Catherine* as an “awkward attempt which fumbles under the little it’s supposed to say.” Although acknowledging the lavish production and elaborate costumes, the reviewer came back to the weakness of the “dated jape” of a script.

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<sup>118</sup> Gossip Columnist Leonard Lyons reported the Shaw item. See *Washington Post*, 22 April 1948, B14. On 21 May 1948, Niles Trammel announced that NBC would begin distributing kinescope recordings of NBC programs to all affiliate stations. It is likely that the filming of *Great Catherine* served as a test of this process. See *Heinel Radio News Service*, 26 May 1948, 11. NBC planned to debut the new distribution system that could connect stations “not inter-connected by co-axial cable or microwave relay,” later in June when “Life Magazine presents highlights of the national political conventions on the NBC Television network.” See *Chimes*, June 1948, 1, 7.



“Despite all the actors and the director could do,” he offered, “it was a trying 60 minutes.”<sup>119</sup>

Jack Gould of the *New York Times* took a more upbeat approach to the broadcast though he considered the play to be only “an item of trivia,” from the pen of Shaw. Gould praised the production facilities which “vividly illustrated how the addition of more stage space is going to help video.” Unfortunately, Gould felt that the director “succumbed to the old temptation merely to photograph a stage play rather than to plan his production in video terms,” and settled for panoramic long shots rather than close-ups. Thus, he sacrificed television’s strength, intimacy, in an effort to achieve the spectacle of film or theatre. “Television,” according to Gould, “sometimes can get too ambitious for its own good.”<sup>120</sup>

While not all reviews panned the broadcast, one praised Coe for his direction and NBC and the Guild for “bringing outstanding dramatics and comedy to the television screen,” the consensus was less than positive.<sup>121</sup> The pattern of the complaints was all too clear: the Guild chose unappealing plays. It had reached such a point that Langner felt compelled to defend the Guild’s play selection to Gertrude Lawrence in a congratulatory letter he wrote on the day the *Variety* review appeared.

Dear Gertie:

It was a great pleasure to work with you on television, and we have been literally inundated with praise for your performance and the production as a whole. Some

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<sup>119</sup> *Variety*, 5 May 1948, 40.

<sup>120</sup> Jack Gould, “Programs in Review,” *New York Times*, 9 May 1948, X9,

<sup>121</sup> Sandy Howard, “Review of *Great Catherine*,” *Television World*, 24 May 1948, 13

people have professed to dislike the play, but we get this kind of criticism all the time, no matter what we do. The fact remains, that it is generally thought to be a high-water mark in television, and that you were wonderful in the part.<sup>122</sup>

In referencing past criticism of the Guild's play selections Langner probably had in mind the Guild's theatrical history. *Great Catherine*, however, was a different matter. It was the Guild's the sixth television production, each of which reviewers had criticized for its choice of plays. Importantly, critics had not accused the original plays as being deficient dramatically. The recurrent point critics made, and which Langner obviously either did not hear or with which he disagreed, was that the plays had been deficient as vehicles for television. Worthington Miner distilled the criticism aimed at the Guild and others.

[Television] continues to produce a top-heavy percentage of cut versions of theatrical and radio successes and seems curiously bewildered, almost hurt, to find that even comparatively lavish productions fail to produce satisfying results. There is a constant sense of compromise with the other media rather than an assertive exploring of new forms of expression.<sup>123</sup>

Miner's words appeared two weeks before *Great Catherine*, yet he could have been describing the effect criticism of it had on Langner. In Langner's defense, unlike others in the television industry he had not been attempting to compromise. Rather, he sincerely believed that one could transform television into theatre. "One of our main purposes in entering the field of television," he explained in the summer of 1948, "is that we were anxious to demonstrate the correctness of our opinion that television belonged to

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<sup>122</sup> Lawrence Langner, Letter to Gertrude Lawrence, 5 May 1948. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 80 – Gertrude Lawrence Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>123</sup> Worthington Miner, "Technique of Its Own Is Video's Great Need," *Washington Post*, 14 April 1948, 14C.

the theatre ...” Adherence to this purpose would have precluded the Guild from compromise in any form, unless such compromise involved another theatrical entity with the same mindset as the Guild’s. What Langner wanted was ownership of the medium in order to subsume it within the larger medium of theatre. The way to achieve this ownership was through the active involvement of “dramatists and actors with stage experience” performing stage plays for “in television as with the theatre, ‘the play’s the thing’.”<sup>124</sup> Langner discounted critics such as Miner who disparaged the cutting of plays for television, since he felt it possible if one took pains to preserve the original. “We feel very strongly,” he wrote after *Stage Door*, “that each play must be adapted for the medium unless, of course, it’s a one-acter, which is a complete work in itself.” To that end, Langner admitted that only after the first three broadcasts did the Guild concentrate on adapting rather than merely cutting a play. In his opinion, *Morning’s at Seven* and *Stage Door* were the best of the first five shows because “these were the first two for which we had special versions written.”<sup>125</sup>

Langner’s single-mindedness was unwavering. He, and subsequently the Guild, had the ability to remain focused on a goal despite outside criticism or distractions. Single-mindedness in pursuit of a goal can be an asset or a handicap; the determining factor is often the goal itself. If it is both attainable and worthwhile, then the quality is an asset. However, if the goal is either unattainable or not worthwhile, then Langner’s form of tunnel vision can be a liability since it can restrict one to a single course of action and

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<sup>124</sup> Lawrence Langner, “Guild’s Langner Gilds the TV Lily; Foresees Medium’s Impact Toward Elevating Public Taste,” *Variety*, 28 July 1948, 32.

<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Bob Stahl, “Legiters, Not Filmers or Radioites Should Inherit TV, Sez Langner,” *Variety*, 28 April 1948, 31-34.

inhibit flexibility. In May 1948, Langner and the others in the Theatre Guild believed their perception of television was accurate and that it was possible for theatre to first co-opt and eventually absorb the medium. Before taking a summer hiatus, the Theatre Guild would have one more opportunity to test its theory. The seventh broadcast in the series would be on Sunday, 6 June 1948 with a production of Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer-Prize winning *Our Town*, a universally acclaimed play that should satisfy both critics and viewers. Furthermore, both the Guild and NBC intended to use everything they had learned so far – an adapted script, intelligent acting, appropriate sets, interesting direction – to make the final episode a memorable one.

In 1947 British critic Grace Wyndham Goldie noted “Movement, which dominates the film, is less important in television than speech.”<sup>126</sup> Hers was an opinion born of the technical limitations of early television studios which did not have the technical means to emulate film's capacity for action in expansive settings. Thus, live television drama circa 1947 was similar to theatre where a playwright tells the story through dialogue and characters. Goldie observed that in television “it is possible to have both narration and monologue,” two forms of communication that were rare on the Broadway stage with its reliance on realism. In television, Goldie felt, “a character in close-up can explain his feelings and thoughts directly to the audience and then slip back into his place in the drama ...” Although Goldie's analogy was the novel, for American theatre audiences in 1948 a more immediate example of personal narrative would have

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<sup>126</sup> Grace Wyndham Goldie, “Television,” in *Made For Millions: A Critical Study of the New Media of Information and Entertainment*, ed. Frederick Laws (London: Contact Publications Limited, 1947), 60-61. Her opinions were based upon BBC programs and not U.S. versions.

been *Our Town*. One of the common complaints against the Guild during its early years was that it tended to produce European authors at the expense of Americans. It is possible that after the backlash against the Shaw play, the Guild turned to the quintessential American play in an effort to demonstrate its strong connections to its domestic audience. Certainly it was a play with which the Guild was familiar, having produced a radio version in September 1946 with Thornton Wilder playing the part of the Stage Manager. Moreover, the Guild would have the services of Erik Barnouw who had written the radio adaptation.<sup>127</sup> The Guild's radio production of *Our Town* took Wilder's basic themes, which he later described as "an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life," and presented them to the audience in a straightforward, personal way.<sup>128</sup> The simplicity of the story, the universality of the sentiment, and the emphasis upon dialogue rather than physical action fit Goldie's criteria and appeared to make the play excellent source material for live television.

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<sup>127</sup> Homer Fickett, the Guild's radio director suggested Wilder for the novelty value since others had previously produced radio versions of the play. See H. W. Fitelson, Memo to Theatre Guild Radio Staff, 28 August 1946. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 156- Thornton Wilder Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. The WNBT Master Program Log for 6 June 1948 lists the play as "adapted by Eric Barner." However, Barnouw had earlier adapted it for the Guild's radio program and a comparison of the television script, which is included in the program logs, and an audio recording of the radio show reveals them to be nearly identical. The NBC listing appears to be a phonetic spelling of Barnouw's name. Audio recording *Theatre Guild on the Air*, "Our Town," 29 September 1946, 59 min, CD47445, Jerry Haendiges Productions. The closing credits include Barnouw as the writer. The recording, including introduction and end music, runs 59:30. The play, excluding commercials, runs 47:07.

<sup>128</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Three Plays by Thornton Wilder* (New York: Bantam Books, 1958), xi.

For the television production, Fred Coe would again direct with Robert Wade as scenic designer. Leading the cast would be Raymond Massey, a familiar voice and face to audiences in radio, film and theatre and a veteran Stage Manager having played the role for soldiers in Europe while on a World War II U.S.O. tour.<sup>129</sup> Also in the cast as George Gibbs was Billy Redfield, a veteran of the original production when he played Si Crowell as a nine-year-old, and Helen Carew repeating her role as Mrs. Webb.<sup>130</sup> Unlike *Great Catherine* with its elaborate settings, *Our Town* was the epitome of simplicity. Wilder emphasized the allegorical and non-illusionary aspect of the play in his opening stage direction which reads, “No curtain. No scenery. The audience arriving sees an empty stage in half-light.”<sup>131</sup> In the 1958 publication of the play, he explained the lack of traditional scenic convention by noting that in this play, “Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind — not in things, not in ‘scenery’.”<sup>132</sup> However, it would have been impractical for Wade to follow either these instructions or Wilder’s observations published in an acting edition of the script: “It has already been proven that the absence of scenery does not constitute a difficulty and that the cooperative imagination of the

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<sup>129</sup> Raymond Massey discusses his history with the play in an interview with Radie Harris, “Tele-Views of Raymond Massey,” *Radio & Television Best*, January 1949, 15.

<sup>130</sup> Redfield writes about his experiences as a child actor in William Redfield, *Letters from an Actor* (New York: Viking Press, 1966).

<sup>131</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Three Plays by Thornton Wilder* (New York: Bantam Books, 1958), 5.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

audience is stimulated by that absence.”<sup>133</sup> It is not clear if that approach would have worked for an audience composed of three to five sitting in a darkened room gazing at a glass television picture tube slightly smaller than a dinner plate; television demanded more visual stimulation.

Once again, no film version of the production exists, but there is evidence that Wade designed a more realistic setting. From an interview with Raymond Massey, notations in the television script, and a single photograph of a kitchen, it is possible deduce some details. Commenting on his experience in *Our Town* and another live show in which he had acted, Massey noted that distances on the set became both a blessing and a curse. Although the “scope of the camera lenses seems in television to give the player more range than is found in screen acting,” and he noted that there were typically three or four on any production, “the multiple cameras make the task of the sound-room men most difficult and they are constantly forced to request the actors to speak up in order to compensate for mike distance—an added hazard of the acting problem.” The larger sets also created problems in costuming. “Wardrobe changes inevitable in almost every play are almost insurmountable,” he believed, largely because “movement from one scene to the next often necessitated running breathlessly a distance of a hundred feet or more.”<sup>134</sup>

Studio 8-G measured forty-eight by eighty-seven feet, making the distances Massey

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<sup>133</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (New York: Samuel French, 1938, reprint, 1965), iv. The quote is from “Some suggestions for the director.”

<sup>134</sup> Radie Harris, “Tele-Views of Raymond Massey,” *Radio & Television Best*. The other television show was an adaptation of Ruth Gordon’s play *Years Ago*, which aired on CBS as the first entry in *The Ford Television Theatre* on 17 October 1948. See William Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, 79, 177.

mentioned reasonable if one takes into account the circuitous routes around scenery.<sup>135</sup> Massey's descriptions suggest that Wade used several small sets to represent the different settings in Grover's Corners. This would allow Coe to tell Wilder's story of "smallest events in our daily life" through a series of snapshots of Grover's Corners. Wade's set then functioned as an adaptation of Wilder's intentions rather than a facsimile or enhanced replica. To add realism to the story, which differed from Wilder's vision but would have aided television audiences in understanding the rhythm and fluidity of the narrative, Wade most probably used small, realistic settings as shown in a photograph ostensibly taken either during a rehearsal or the broadcast of a scene in the Webb family kitchen.<sup>136</sup>

Wade incorporated Wilder's intentions into his scenic design for television and Barnouw did the same with the script, which serves as an example of an adaptation rather than a truncated version of the play. In it, he repeated the technique he employed in the earlier radio version by having Wilder's Stage Manager address the audience using broadcast references. Barnouw places the narrator in a television studio, rather than a theatre, and has him refer to the NBC network which then had stations in Schenectady, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C.

The first part of the play will show a day in our town – the day is May 7, 1901. You know, a television broadcast like this, would seem mighty strange to the folks of Grover's Corners, just those few years back. But think: you folks here, in New York City, and up state – up in Connecticut – Pennsylvania – down in Washington and Maryland – you'll see and hear it.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> See *Radio Age*, July 1948, 14 for an article and photograph of Studio 8G. The dimensions are in *Televiser*, May 1948, 17.

<sup>136</sup> *Radio & Television Best*, January 1949, 34.

<sup>137</sup> *Our Town* script, 2. "WNBT Master Program Log," 6 June 1948. National Broadcasting Company History Files, 1922-1986, Library of Congress Motion Picture



Barnouw had used the same technique on radio, having the narrator observe that the broadcast would be “heard in our forty-eight states and also overseas,” and that “Peoples of other countries will hear it.”<sup>138</sup> By deleting some scenes and rearranging bits of dialogue, Barnouw attempted to follow Wilder’s design and tell his story in a little over and hour.<sup>139</sup>

At 8:40 P.M. on 6 June 1948 NBC broadcast a filmed slide of a blank curtain, the theatrical imagery remained constant, and the audience heard the familiar strains of Wagner’s *Die Gotterdammerung*. The curtain faded out and title cards faded in, superimposed over a stylized map that the script identifies as an “‘art view’ of small New England town.” The map dissolved and the audience saw a solitary man winding a pocket watch. At about 8:41 Raymond Massey, shown only from the waist up and lighted only by a spot, looked up at the camera and said “\_\_\_\_\_ minutes after eight o’clock. Time to begin our play for this Sunday evening.”<sup>140</sup> The Theater Guild’s television production of *Our Town* had begun. Three acts and two station breaks later, Raymond Massey told the audience, “Tomorrow’s going to be another day. You get a good rest too. Good

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and Television Division, Washington, DC. Although Wilder’s character is “Stage Manager,” in the television script Barnouw lists him as “Narrator,” probably because the television character makes no reference to a stage.

<sup>138</sup> Audio recording of “Our Town,” on *The Theatre Guild on the Air*, 29 September 1946, track one, 2:53-3:17.

<sup>139</sup> The television production, including station breaks ran seventy-six minutes, twenty-nine minutes longer than Barnouw’s radio play. “WNBT Master Program Log,” 6 June 1948.

<sup>140</sup> *Our Town* script, 1-2. “WNBT Master Program Log,” 6 June 1948. Presumably he filled the blank with “forty-one.”

night.” With the sound of a train whistle in the distance, the narrator’s image faded out and the closing credits faded in. At 9:46 P.M., the broadcast ended.<sup>141</sup>

For the Theatre Guild, the coming summer would be a time of preparation for the next television season to begin in the fall. For NBC it was simply business as usual. The network still had hours of air time to fill for the thousands of households that were purchasing television sets.<sup>142</sup> After the tumult surrounding *Great Catherine*, the media response to *Our Town* was strangely quiet. None of the major critics reviewed it, not even *Variety*. The usually supportive *Televiser* reported that “Thornton Wilder’s Pulitzer-prize winning play, ‘Our Town,’ with Raymond Massey in the lead, proved to be another Theatre Guild television dud. The fault was in the slow, talky script. Good actors and good scenic effects are not enough.”<sup>143</sup> At this stage in their television career, Langner and the other members of the Theatre Guild were immune to such criticism. They were more likely to agree with John Gassner, the Guild’s former play reader who wrote a glowing review of the program that Langner later included in his autobiography. Gassner believed that the Guild’s *Our Town*, “while suffering from the as yet unsolved

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 74. Helburn had dinner at the Langner apartment in New York City and later watched the broadcast there. Theresa Helburn, Diary Entry for 6 June 1948. Theresa Helburn Papers, Box 1-1948 Diary. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>142</sup> By August 1948 there were and estimated 394,000 sets in use in NBC’s east coast network area and over 484,000 nationwide. *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 28 August 1948, 3.

<sup>143</sup> *Televiser*, June 1948, 11.

technical problems, accomplished what every art does; it turned the limitations of the medium into an advantage.”<sup>144</sup>

Gassner’s history with the Guild may have colored his opinion, but he was a respected theatre critic and in this case, his point was probably valid. *Our Town* appears to have been a perfect vehicle for live television and the production was most likely well done. However, the television world that Goldie described in 1947 had changed enormously. Audiences wanted more than thoughtful entertainment. They wanted television to thrill and excite them. On the Tuesday after *Our Town*, NBC began broadcasting a weekly variety show starring Milton Berle that gave viewers the excitement they craved raising the stakes for everyone involved in television programming.<sup>145</sup> If the Theatre Guild hoped to remain on television, it would have to begin considering the audience as part of its grand design for the medium which also meant considering, and cultivating, sponsorship.

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<sup>144</sup> John Gassner, Review of *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder as presented on “Theatre Guild Television,” *Forum*, August 1948, 91-92. Also see Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 435-436.

<sup>145</sup> NBC planned a weekly \$5,000 budget for Texaco Star Theatre that one trade magazine hailed as “definitely a step in the right direction to bring the best in entertainment to viewers.” See “Top Comedy on Way. Milton Berle Heads New Texaco Variety Show,” *Television World* 31 May 1948, 3.

**Chapter 5: “Too Bad About Our T.V. Situation,  
But We Will Work Another Out”<sup>1</sup> –  
The Theatre Guild in Limbo**

After ending the first series of broadcasts in June 1948, both the Theatre Guild and NBC began promoting the upcoming season. NBC, primarily because of the promotional value of its association with the Theatre Guild, appeared satisfied with the Guild’s artistic choices, even though usually supportive trade magazines such as *Variety* had panned most of the broadcasts. As noted in Chapter 4, comments ranged from a “mediocre list of Theatre Guild telecasts,”<sup>2</sup> to “excellent acting—fine sets—poor entertainment,”<sup>3</sup> and “Despite all the actors and the director could do, it was a trying 60 minutes.”<sup>4</sup> None of these deterred NBC which not only backed the Guild’s choices, but married its advertising campaign to the concept that theatre and television were one and the same. “Vision – 1948” read one ad, “NBC television is Theater.” Promising viewers “Theater – without aisles, but with all seats on seventh row center,” NBC portrayed its product as a combination of the “brilliant immediacy of the legitimate stage” combined with the “visual scope of motion pictures.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Fitelson expressed this opinion to Armina Marshall Langner in July 1951. The Guild had been off the air for three years and would not return until October 1953. H. William Fitelson, Letter to Armina Marshall, 30 July 1951. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 45–H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT

<sup>2</sup> *Variety*, 31 March 1948, 38.

<sup>3</sup> *Variety*, 25 February 1948, 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Variety*, 5 May 1948, 40.

<sup>5</sup> *Radio Age*, July 1948, 33. The ad featured favorable critical quotes for several of NBC’s television productions including *The Late George Apley*.

Much of NBC's insistence on equating television with the stage derives from an industry-wide prejudice towards theatre as a "mature" form of entertainment and broadcasting as "immature." For example, *Variety* quoted unnamed "trade observers" on the possibility of six dramatic programs for the 1948 fall season "as evidence that tele [sic] has matured much more rapidly than radio did." Whereas it took commercial radio more than a decade to air *Lux Radio Theatre*, "generally considered the first big AM legit series," television was accomplishing even more that after only three years.<sup>6</sup> NBC's resolve to keep the Guild program as a cornerstone of its programming schedule reflected the industry as a whole; it was ahead of the curve and determined to stay there. Consequently, throughout the spring and summer of 1948, when both NBC and the Guild assumed that the series would resume in the fall, the network spared no opportunity to use its association with the Guild for advertising purposes. A promotional campaign for NBC in January of that year read, "The Theatre Guild brings the greatest art of the New York Theatre to viewers distant from Broadway."<sup>7</sup> In July, the network captioned its full-page ad in *Variety*: "Great drama comes to television in NBC telecasts of Theatre Guild presentations."<sup>8</sup> Even RCA, the parent company of NBC and a leading manufacturer of television sets, jumped on the theater bandwagon with a series of ads conspicuously linking the Guild broadcasts with great television and including an artist's

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<sup>6</sup> "Six Major Dramatic Shows on TV; Seen Boom for Legit in General," *Variety*, 15 September 1948, 29.

<sup>7</sup> *Variety*, 14 January 1948, 31.

<sup>8</sup> *Variety*, 28 July 1948, 45.

rendition of the Theatre Guild broadcast of *Angel Street*.<sup>9</sup> The campaign by the network to promote the program remained consistent. The Theatre Guild presented great stage plays; NBC televised these great stage plays. Still, neither party seemed willing to acknowledge that stage plays might be the wrong choice for television.

With no sponsor on board at the program's inception, NBC had agreed to air the first six broadcasts on a sustaining basis. As such, the network shared expenses with the Guild, although NBC bore most of the financial burden.<sup>10</sup> Even though NBC (and the television industry in general) operated at a loss in order to draw audiences for future programming, the network could not continue funding shows such as the Theatre Guild indefinitely.<sup>11</sup> In order to continue, the Theatre Guild would have to find a sponsor. One of the difficulties facing the Guild in its search for sponsors for its television venture was

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<sup>9</sup> RCA, the parent company of NBC, used this ad to sell television receivers. The full-page ad showed a scene from *Angel Street* and read in part: "How wide is 'Broadway?' To all the world, 'Broadway' means the theatre. So when NBC, in October 1947, introduced regular telecast performances of Theatre Guild productions, an expansion of 'Broadway' began—and someday it will be nation-wide." The ad ran in many publications. One example comes from *The Science News-Letter*, 3 July 1948, 2. Accessed through JSTOR, 15 May 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 435. See also Bert McCord, "News of the Theatre," *New York Herald Tribune*, 7 October 1947, 19, and *Time*, 17 November 1947, 78. See Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, 19-21. In late 1947, typical costs ran \$2000 to \$5000 per hour on television, not counting payments to performers. Radio was much more expensive because the audience was so much larger. See Jack Gould, "Television Builds for a Future of Boundless Promise," *New York Times*, 13 June 1948, sec. X, 1. for information on television program costs. United States Steel, which sponsored the Guild's radio program, paid \$15,000 per week. See *Variety*, 12 November 1947, 44.

<sup>11</sup> A report in the Fall of 1948 from NBC reported that the television network had had sold 12½ of 28 broadcast hours. The network reported losses of \$1.5 million in the past year and expected to lose \$3 million on \$3 million in advertising revenue. At that time, NBC expected to break even in two to four years. See *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 25 September 1948, 1-2

the ongoing radio program with U.S. Steel. The terms of the original 1945 agreement allowed the Guild the right to televise for “experimental purposes,” providing it notified U.S. Steel in advance and gave the company four weeks to decide on sponsorship. The same clause addressed the possibility of a third party offering to sponsor a Guild television program. In that instance, U.S. Steel held the right of first refusal.<sup>12</sup> That was the case in early 1948. U.S. Steel had declined to sponsor the Guild’s initial broadcasts and after the third program (*Angel Street*) the Guild was receiving overtures from a variety of sources, one of which was RCA. After the owner of NBC contacted the Guild to inquire about a possible deal, Warren Caro penned a confidential memo to Langner, Helburn, and Marshall reporting the offer and calling attention to the contractual stipulation. The urgency of Caro’s memo and his insistence that the Guild contact U.S. Steel immediately suggest a concern within the Guild that its radio sponsor could present problems in any negotiations with potential television sponsors.<sup>13</sup>

It seems likely that by February 1948, NBC and the Guild were beginning to seriously consider their options concerning the economics of producing the broadcasts. The RCA offer may have been a trial balloon or bargaining ploy; it seems unlikely that it would pay for what had been relatively free advertising to that point. After all, NBC was a subsidiary and RCA paying for the Guild broadcasts would be nothing more than moving funds from one pocket to another. Significantly, however, four days after Caro’s

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<sup>12</sup> H. William Fitelson, *Radio Contract between the Theatre Guild and United States Steel*, n.d. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 148–U.S. Steel Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>13</sup> Warren Caro, Confidential Memo from to Langner, Helburn and Marshall, 14 February 1948. Box 30, Warren Caro Folder, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

memo *Variety* reported that “several sponsors” had been “angling” for a Guild sponsorship for the past few weeks. The reported asking price was about \$7500 per broadcast, significantly higher than the \$3875 industry average cost per hour back in December 1947, but only slightly costlier than NBC’s price tag of \$7000 to sponsor a Guild show at that time. *Variety* told its insider audience that neither the network or the Guild would say what would happen to the program if a sponsorship deal fell through.<sup>14</sup>

In March 1948, as the Guild prepared for the fifth broadcast (*Stage Door*), speculation on who would sponsor the programs became widespread.<sup>15</sup> *Televiser* told its readers that month that NBC and the Guild were then asking for a figure “in excess of \$10,000 per show” in order to “produce high quality shows in keeping with the Guild’s twenty-eight year policy of advancing American Theater.” Langner and Helburn’s constant dedication to equating television with theatre held sway with NBC, consequently raising the stakes. The Guild’s penchant for hiring Equity actors over other less costly performers caused NBC to pay substantially higher fees for talent (higher enough that the network refused to disclose the cost to *Time* and *Life* magazines) and made the program expensive to produce.<sup>16</sup> However, it also ensured that the program would attract the right

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<sup>14</sup> *Variety*, 18 February 1948. *Sponsor* magazine had surveyed costs in December 1947 and found the Guild show to have the highest asking price. The range for an hour of broadcast time was \$495-\$7000. See “TV Costs,” *Sponsor*, December 1947, 18-19, 39, 47. This was also a step down for the \$9000 NBC had wanted a month before. See “NBC Shows Highest Priced,” *Phillipps Television Weekly*, 26 January 1948, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Most trade publications assumed that a sponsorship deal was inevitable. “You can look for the Theater [sic] Guild’s Productions to be sponsored very shortly. And the Sunday evening viewers can expect these fine productions to continue at their present rate of approximately one a month.” See Bob Phillipps, “Tele-Types,” *Television Weekly*, 1 March 1948, 4.

<sup>16</sup> “Theater Guild Preps for Encore – with Sponsor?” *Televiser*, March 1948, 25.



type of sponsor, one to whom quality – and status – were of paramount importance. In other words, by raising the asking price and tying that price to both quality and a higher calling (the advancement of theatre), NBC and the Guild were casting their nets for someone with the stature of U.S. Steel.<sup>17</sup> Fortunately for NBC and the Guild, prospective sponsors of that breed were available and interested. The status derived from association with a popular program (either critically or in terms of audience numbers) was tangible. For example, display ads for the Guild radio program, in addition to listing the time, radio station, play title, and cast, also featured the phrase “sponsored by U.S. Steel.”<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, sponsors with sufficient stature also wanted the same creative control they enjoyed in radio.

By the beginning of 1948, commercial television was just beginning to become a viable proposition. Sponsors had initially shied away from the medium for two primary reasons. First, the cost per potential viewer was inordinately high compared to that of radio, due to an audience of thousands for television and millions for radio. Second, until the end of 1947, most broadcasters controlled the production of the programs, leaving sponsors and advertising agencies to watch from the metaphoric wings. As one trade publication noted in January 1948, “Although the agency’s importance on TV is increasing, in only a few cases is an agency TV director in actual charge of his program

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<sup>17</sup> By comparison, U.S. Steel was paying \$15,000 per week for the Guild’s radio program in late 1947. See *Variety*, 12 November 1947, 44.

<sup>18</sup> For the 18 November 1945 radio show, readers could symbolically connect *Pride and Prejudice*, Joan Fontaine, the Theatre Guild, and U.S. Steel. See display ad in *Washington Post*, 18 November 1945, S18.

once it goes on the air.”<sup>19</sup> In radio, sponsors bought not only advertising but creative control with their dollars. However, the first reason began to somewhat diminish as the number of viewers multiplied leaving the second as a bone of contention.<sup>20</sup> Subsequently, with the potential profitability becoming closer to reality, companies began to test the television market hoping to gain as much control over content as they could.

What potential advertisers (and potential sponsors of the Guild program) wanted was a quality product with which to associate and, if possible, control. General Foods with a \$13 million annual ad budget (sixty-five percent of which went to broadcasting - the largest food advertising budget in the country), was one such company.<sup>21</sup> According to *Sponsor* magazine,

Most sponsors feel responsibility towards television—as entertainment or as broadcast advertising. A few, like General Foods, feel that the advertiser has a tripartite responsibility along with the broadcast industry (the stations) and the advertising agencies. They have arrived at this conclusion because since they will eventually present the cream of the air’s visual entertainment, they feel they should direct the growth of the baby medium—for their own protection.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “Who Is Responsible for What in TV?” *Sponsor*, January 1948, 52-54. The article noted that CBS and DuMont were more open-minded than NBC in letting former radio directors control television broadcasts. Interestingly, DuMont had always let “agency radio men who wanted to learn the visual ropes,” handle the shows. Because of that tendency, the article confessed, “DuMont’s program quality has suffered during the formative years of TV ... but the advertising medium has profited.”

<sup>20</sup> In September 1947, Frank Mullen of NBC predicted a nationwide increase of 600,000 television sets in use by the end of 1948, or four times the number in use in December 1947. He was not far off. The number of sets in the New York City market jumped from 80,000 to 243,000 in the first eight months of 1948. See *Television Digest and FM Reports*. 20 September 1947, 5; *Television Digest and FM Report*, (20 December 1947, 2; *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 28 August 1948, 3.

<sup>21</sup> “Mr. Sponsor: Howard M. Chapin,” *Sponsor*, May 1948, 10. Chapin was Director of Advertising for General Foods, and had been with them since 1929. He committed General Foods to more television advertising in 1948 and beyond.

<sup>22</sup> “Who Is Responsible for What in TV?” *Sponsor*, January 1948, 53.

This paternalistic attitude toward television attributed to General Foods was not unusual; Kraft Foods had wrested control of its dramatic series on NBC in the fall of 1947. Clearly, if the Guild were to solicit funds from any major corporation, it would have to consider sharing production control. Companies such as General Foods, major players in the world of commercial radio and television, wanted to “buy and produce their own programs,” as one trade put it, and for a simple reason: they wanted to be a part of “show business.” As such, they wanted a substantial role in the entire process, from producing the programs to marketing them. For example, according to *Sponsor* General Foods’ approach was,

When you’re in show business, you merchandise as well as advertise what you have. And when they use broadcast advertising—standard as well as FM or sight-and-sound—General Foods recognizes that it’s in show business.<sup>23</sup>

Sponsorship had its pitfalls, but the Theatre Guild had successfully negotiated these same issues with U.S. Steel in radio and there was no reason for it to believe it could not obtain the same results in television.<sup>24</sup>

After NBC extended the agreement in March 1948 for an additional six programs, Langner and others in the Guild believed that they could adequately orchestrate, financially and otherwise, the continuation of the program in the fall. After the final

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<sup>23</sup> “Who Is Responsible for What in TV?” *Sponsor*, January 1948, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, In March 1948 Armina Marshall conceded that “U.S. Steel is complaining bitterly about doing too many old plays,” a criticism the Guild often heard about its television broadcasts, but without the authority of a sponsor’s voice behind it. Armina Marshall, Memo to Theresa Helburn, 8 March 1948. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 52 –Folder John Gassner Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

broadcast in June, the push was on to finalize a deal with someone. U.S. Steel was still out of the question; the radio show was both profitable and a critical success (it had recently won a Peabody Award for “Outstanding Entertainment in Drama”) and Steel saw no reason to switch to television, still quite expensive by comparison.<sup>25</sup> Certainly there was interest in sponsoring the Guild, but in the summer of 1948, production costs for its program were on the high end of the television spectrum. Jack Gould of the *New York Times* summed up the barriers to television producers in an article published two days after the Guild’s final broadcast of the season. The paradox, Gould acknowledged, was that economics forced TV shows to sell advertising time, but costs were still very high per viewer as compared to radio. At that time, a television producer needed approximately \$700-\$800 per hour to air a program with about another \$1000 per hour in production costs, which included rehearsals. Although a radio show cost about double, it had an audience thirty-five times as large. Moreover, compared to radio, television rehearsal time was three times as long and television settings were expensive. A cost of \$2000-\$5000 per week was not unusual, and that was with moderately priced talent. To top it off, Hollywood viewed television as competition, unlike it did with radio. As such, movie studios refused to release film stars or recent pictures for television appearances.<sup>26</sup> (Little wonder that Langner, in advocating a \$25 per week raise in salary for Warren Caro that summer, would tell Helburn “I don’t think we ought to wait for the television

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<sup>25</sup> Sidney Lohman, “Concerning Radio Row,” *New York Times*, 18 April 1948, X9.

<sup>26</sup> Jack Gould, “Television Builds for a Future of Boundless Promise,” *New York Times*, 13 June 1948, sec. X, 1. Even a program as successful as the *Texaco Star Theater* with Milton Berle was forced to cut rehearsals to a minimum to make its \$11,000 weekly budget. See “TV Costs: High price of live programs turns sponsors towards film for multi-market coverage,” *Sponsor*, July 1948, 85.

[contract]. The television may kill us all, and I would rather give him the increase for next season.”)<sup>27</sup>

Another sticking point for advertisers in signing on with the Guild was the intermittent schedule of its program, with seven plays airing in seven months but with irregular intervals between broadcasts.<sup>28</sup> Langner was adamant that no company, not even the Guild could produce a weekly play without the performance suffering. Unlike radio, television had numerous production complications that, in Langner’s opinion, made the process involve about “four times as much work” to produce a television play as one on radio. Hence his belief in a minimum time period of four weeks between plays. Of course, Langner meant adaptations of stage plays, rather than original scripts. He still clung to the belief that television viewers wanted to see stage plays in their living rooms and that the arrival of each new broadcast should be an event.<sup>29</sup> Sponsors however wanted more exposure for their money than the sort of schedule Langner proposed.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, in early 1948 the Guild began to float a plan that would allow them to keep the once-a-month schedule for stage plays on television and still satisfy a sponsor’s

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<sup>27</sup> Lawrence Langner, Memo to Theresa Helburn, 15 June 1948, Box 30, Warren Caro Folder, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>28</sup> The intervals between programs beginning with *John Ferguson* on 9 November 1947 and ending with *Our Town* on 6 June 1948 were 4 weeks, seven weeks, 4 weeks, five weeks, five weeks, and five weeks.

<sup>29</sup> Langner expressed his views in Wayne Oliver, “It’s Harder to Produce a Play by Television,” *Washington Post*, 14 April 1948, C19; and in Bob Stahl, “Legiters, Not Filmmakers or Radioites Should Inherit TV, Sez Langner,” *Variety*, 28 April 1948, 31-34. The quotation is taken from the Oliver interview and is Oliver’s paraphrase of Langner.

<sup>30</sup> NBC reportedly had several interested parties but not for a program that aired only once a month. See “Guild Setup is Sponsor Hitch,” *Variety*, 7 April 1948, 29.

need for weekly exposure. It was a way to split the difference and, with the right organizational support, it might have been plausible. However, once again the Guild's opinion of its broadcasting ability and judgment was not in harmony with reality.

Warren Caro first broached the subject in February when he told *Televiser* that as soon as the Guild found a sponsor and money was no longer a problem, it could move to a weekly schedule rotating a monthly stage play with musicals and variety programming.<sup>31</sup> Langner echoed the plan in April 1948 when he told Bob Stahl of *Variety* that beginning in the fall the Guild would “probably do every month one drama, one musical, one studio-type (artistic vaudeville) and an hour of one-acters.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, the way to solve the Guild's problem of having sufficient time to produce a quality stage play was to commit to producing three or four other programs in the intervening weeks. To say the plan was overly ambitious is an understatement given the Guild's broadcasting track record. Langner, however, was most probably counting on a secret weapon to pull it off – the Theatre Guild Workshop.<sup>33</sup>

“Despite creaks and groans in the cultural edifice, the Theatre Guild is still the most solid structure in the professional theatre and, in many respects, the most progressive in design.” Such was the opinion of Douglas Watt writing in the *New York Daily News* in March 1948 and referring to the Guild's Studio Workshop, the training

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<sup>31</sup> “Theater Guild Preps for Encore – with Sponsor?” *Televiser*, March 1948, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Stahl, “Legiters, Not Filmers or Radioites Should Inherit TV, Sez Langner,” *Variety*, 28 April 1948, 33.

<sup>33</sup> *Variety* reported that the Guild refused to commit to more than one play per month due to its other projects in radio, on Broadway, and in film. It was still “mulling over” using workshop talent. “Guild Setup is Sponsor Hitch,” *Variety*, 7 April 1948, 29.

program Paul Crabtree had been running since February 1948. Included among the skills covered in the two-day-a week classes were “the techniques of the stage, screen, television and radio,” with the seventy-odd participants preparing projects that included a one hour television program. Although the brainchild of Langner, ever the entrepreneur, the workshop had the full support of Helburn.<sup>34</sup> Langner and Caro most likely believed the Guild could use the workshop to appease sponsors who wanted more than a monthly stage play. Its students were professional actors – chorus members from *Allegro*, *Oklahoma!*, and *Annie Get Your Gun* – it had a variety of dramatic and musical material, and it carried the Theatre Guild name.

Paul Crabtree outlined ways to use the workshop performers in a memo to Helburn that reads much like a modern pitch for a combination educational and reality program. Crabtree wanted to fill the hour with snippets from the classroom combining audition scenes, *commedia del arte* performances, demonstration lectures on the art of acting, and musical numbers. In the manner of other talent programs of the era,<sup>35</sup> the

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<sup>34</sup> Douglas Watt, “Theatre Guild Looks Ahead; Some Angels Tuck in Their Wings,” *New York Daily News*, 17 March 1948, np. Watts relays Helburn’s belief “that the stage, screen, television and radio stimulate interest in each other and feels, contrary to a lot of professional opinion that television won’t kill off either the films or the radio.” The quote is his. She also believed that television would “create a new theater audience; among people who never attended a live show, just as radio has done.” See Harry Harris, “More Women Should Be Play Producers Says Theresa Helburn,” *Philadelphia Bulletin*, 4 July 1948. Both articles are in Theresa Helburn Papers, Box 2-1942-1948 Clipping File. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>35</sup> DuMont translated the popular radio program *Major Bowes Original Amateur Hour* for television. It debuted on 18 January 1948 with Ted Mack as master of ceremonies to enthusiastic reviews. One trade proclaimed, “Film may have killed vaudeville, but the video medium, through program séances such as this, may yet bring its spirit back.” See *Phillipps Television Weekly*, 23 February 1948, 13. On 15 April 1948, the new ABC network borrowed the DuMont station to begin its programming with *Hollywood Screen Test*, an audition-style program featuring young actors trying to be

proposed program would show the workshop students simply being themselves and give them the opportunity to reveal individual “ambitions and desire to become an actor or a star,” and then “show [them] working in that direction.” The key element for Crabtree was to remove from the program “any similarity to the Theater [sic] Guild on Television.”<sup>36</sup> One supposes it would also have had little similarity to entertainment on television which by the summer of 1948 was awash in well received vaudeville-type variety shows such as Melton Berle on *Texaco Star Theatre* and Ted Mack’s *Original Amateur Hour*. The former used seasoned professionals and the latter conducted nationwide talent searches.<sup>37</sup> Crabtree’s workshop had a considerably more limited talent pool.<sup>38</sup>

The notion of variety on television, although new to the Theatre Guild, had been a key component of television’s development. In fact, the vaudeville model had been a

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discovered. For notice of the first program, see “The News of the Radio,” *New York Times* 16 April 1948, 46.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Crabtree, Memo to Theresa Helburn, Theater Guild Workshop on Television, n.d. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 36-Paul Crabtree Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Internal evidence dates this to either February or March 1948.

<sup>37</sup> The first *Texaco Star Theatre* hosted by Milton Berle featured tumblers, dancers, Senor Wences and his puppet Johnnie and singer Pearl Bailey among others. See review in *Television World*, 21 June 1948, 8. The Original Amateur Hour continued the radio tradition of holding auditions at theatres around the country. See “Major Bows [sic] Troupe Revives Vaude,” *Phillipps Television Weekly*, 26 January 1948, 3.

<sup>38</sup> The *New York Times* reported as late as 13 June 1948 that the Guild would definitely produce a weekly show “in which drama will be space with musicals and a television workshop.” The workshop would be once a month, thus making half the Guild shows musicals. Moreover, the workshop would “afford an opportunity for professional performers with dramatic aspirations but in other phases of entertainment to play in drama.” *New York Times*, 13 June 1948, XX27.



mainstay of both experimental and commercial television from the mid-1940s with varying degrees of success. A picture of veteran comic Joe Fields appeared in a television trade periodical as early as October 1944 with the caption “Never too old to try something new.”<sup>39</sup> In 1945, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson danced for the NBC’s WNBT-TV in New York.<sup>40</sup> The movement toward variety acts was not confined to the East Coast. In November 1945 a trade publication announced that a group of “old-time vaudeville players, headed by Trixie Freganza, had appeared on the variety show “‘We Played the Palace,’ telecast recently on ... W6XAO in Hollywood.”<sup>41</sup> By the time of Crabtree’s proposal, television stations across the country were actively seeking vaudeville performers for variety shows.<sup>42</sup> The switch to producing variety entertainment two or three weeks a month would have been a monumental shift in philosophy for the Guild, but it represented a competitive edge the Guild felt it needed in its quest for sponsors if it were to maintain its monthly schedule for television stage plays.

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<sup>39</sup> *Tune In*, October 1944, 48. Fields had been performing for over forty years. A notice in 1903 referred to him as “Joe Fields who is always funny, lived up to his reputation when it was his turn to show what he could do.” See “Moonlight Maids Furnish Plenty of Fun at Kernan’s,” *Washington Post*, 22 September 1903, pg. 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Tune In*, October 1944, 48

<sup>41</sup> “Old-Time Vaude Show on W6XAO,” *Weekly Newsletter on Television*, 1 November 1945, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Vaudeville shows were broadcast at stations from Cincinnati to Richmond in 1947 and 1948. See “Vaudeville Revived,” *Weekly Newsletter on Television*, 24 December 1947, 2 for the former and “Vaudeville Varieties is a thrice-weekly feature on WTVR, Havens & Martin video station in Richmond, Va,” *Weekly Newsletter on Television*, 29 April 1948, 2 for the latter.

Competition for sponsors was not the only sort the Theatre Guild had to consider. Even though programming was sparse, the Guild needed to distance itself from other programs in order to establish a unique television identity. As an example, before the Theatre Guild had launched its radio program, Arthur Hopkins had beaten them to the airwaves with a similar concept but without a sponsor. Short-lived, *Arthur Hopkins Presents* posed no competition to the Guild which found itself with a clear niche in radio that it then exploited with success. Timing, however, can be crucial in both the artistic and commercial worlds and it is fair to say that the Guild dodged a bullet in the matter of Hopkins and radio. If Hopkins had secured a sponsor and a favorable time slot, the Guild radio venture might have had a different outcome.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, when the Guild entered television it also found itself with a competitor. Shortly after the broadcast of *John Ferguson*, NBC had agreed to co-produce another sustaining program, this time in collaboration with ANTA, the American National Theatre and Academy. The premiere of the NBC-ANTA Television Playhouse was a presentation of Tennessee Williams' short play *The Last of My Solid Gold Watches* which aired on 4 December 1947.<sup>44</sup> Except for the initial broadcast, the ANTA program alternated with the Guild program on Sunday nights, with a frequency of about one broadcast every two to three weeks. ANTA also presented plays, but unlike most Guild productions, they were one-act plays in no need of editing. As a result, most critics believed that the ANTA plays worked

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<sup>43</sup> See above 71-75.

<sup>44</sup> For details on the ANTA agreement, see *Variety*, 26 November 1947, 26; and 3 March 1948, 26. For a review of the first broadcast, see *Variety*, 10 December 1947, 30. Scheduled for 30 November 1947, the broadcast had to wait four days after a camera malfunctioned. Williams' television play appeared the day after *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened on Broadway. See *Variety*, 3 December 1947, 34.

better on television than longer plays, such as the ones the Guild presented.<sup>45</sup> However, ANTA could not find a sponsor and after thirteen half-hour programs, NBC did not extend the agreement.<sup>46</sup> By June 1948, the Guild found itself alone as a producer of stage plays for television.

ANTA had complemented rather than supplanted the Guild in NBC's television strategy; its advertising featured allusions to both programs as part of NBC's overall programming.<sup>47</sup> However, two other threats to the Guild's television identity cropped up in the spring of 1948 and both involved Actor's Equity, potentially a much more formidable rival than ANTA. The first was a program entitled *Tonight on Broadway*, which debuted on 6 April 1948 (with excerpts from *Mister Roberts* at the Alvin Theatre) and ran for seven consecutive weeks.<sup>48</sup> The half-hour CBS program, (sponsored by the

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<sup>45</sup> Jack Gould of the *New York Times* praised ANTA and NBC for "the application of sound common sense to the needs of television" by avoiding "the persistent error and outrageous conceit of radio in willy-nilly attempts to compress full-length dramas into abbreviated form—regardless of the inevitable damage to the artistic merits of the works—because it happened to suit the convenience of the medium." Jack Gould, "Purple Doorknob: One-Act Play Provides Television Hit," *New York Times*, 21 December 1947, X13.

<sup>46</sup> The final broadcast was on 25 April 1948. See Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, 240-242 for a list of broadcasts. ANTA did receive payment from NBC amounting to \$1783.48. Vincent Freedley, President's Report to ANTA Annual Meeting 10 May 1948, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 5 – ANTA Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. In January 1948, NBC was asking \$5000 per week to sponsor the show. See "NBC Shows Highest Priced," *Phillipps Television Weekly*, 26 January 1948, 5.

<sup>47</sup> As a clue to the more favorable reviews ANTA received, one NBC ad listed two blurbs for the ANTA show and only one for the Theatre Guild. *Radio Age*, July 1948, 33.

<sup>48</sup> The final broadcast was of *For Love or Money* from the Henry Miller Theatre on 18 May 1948. See Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, 176-177 for a list of broadcasts.

American Tobacco Company) aired scenes of current Broadway hits directly from the stages of Broadway theatres. Envisioned by its producer Martin Gosch as an advertisement for Broadway, the various programs suffered from the limitations of the television camera in wide shots and the emphasis placed upon promoting the individual stage productions at the expense of entertaining television. Significantly, however, the unions involved in theatre and television agreed to cooperate in the joint venture. That included Actor's Equity which accepted existing television rates, then lower than theatre rates.<sup>49</sup> Although ultimately not successful for several reasons—clearance issues, lack of enough entertainment to sustain a half-hour program among others—*Tonight on Broadway* probably played a part in stimulating the acting union's interest in television as a viable creative outlet for its membership.<sup>50</sup> Significantly, fewer than three weeks after the announcement of *Tonight on Broadway*, a news release signaled the intention of Actor's Equity, in concert with the Music Corporation of America, to develop a "Television Theatre of the Air." The proposed program, which would run for thirty-nine consecutive weeks with a weekly budget of \$12,000, would televise "major hit vehicles"

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<sup>49</sup> Clarence Derwent, president of Actor's Equity negotiated the arrangement for the union. For notice of the program's debut see Jack Gould, "Radio News," *New York Times*, 12 March 1948, 46. For a review of the first broadcast see Jack Gould, "A Good Try Gone Awry: Video Series Proves a Disappointment," *New York Times*, 11 April 1948, X9.

<sup>50</sup> As an example of the clearance problems each program presented to the producer, the initial program showing scenes from *Mister Roberts* required clearance from Actors' Equity, The International Alliance of Theater and Stage Employees, the International Brotherhood of Electrical workers, the Teamsters Union, the Association of Theatrical Agents and Managers, the Scenic Designers Guild, the Costumers Guild, the publishers of the original book which served as source material for the play, and the film studios which held the actors' contracts. See Richard Coe, "Video Drawing 'Em Like Flies," *Washington Post*, 14 April 1948, 1C.

from New York and other cities. Although unclear as to the nature of the program, i.e., adaptations similar to the Guild's or of the *Tonight on Broadway* ilk, and still an aspiration rather than a reality, the news should have put Langner and Helburn on notice.<sup>51</sup> The Theatre Guild had once lost its leading playwrights to a competing producing organization and it was now in danger of losing its television actors in much the same way.

The summer of 1948 came to a close with the Theatre Guild television situation still in limbo. No one at the Guild had taken the lead in solving any of the problems that surrounded the show when it NBC broadcast *Our Town* in early June. The Guild had yet to broker a deal with a sponsor. It had addressed the scheduling problems by promising some sort of variety programming but failed to offer specific details. Importantly, Langner and Helburn still clung to the idea of adapting full-length stage plays in spite of evidence that other forms could be more successful artistically. The only certainty was that the Theatre Guild still had a network commitment; NBC remained a stalwart partner.

The 1948 fall television season began with major changes for NBC and the rest of the television industry. The Guild may have been sitting still over the summer but none of its possible partners or competitors had been. Over the summer of 1948 NBC had expanded its network to a total of fifteen cities. Telephone cable linked east-coast NBC cities from Richmond to Boston and kinescope recordings provided NBC programming to the Midwest and beyond. By the end of 1948 NBC projected a nationwide network of

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<sup>51</sup> For the length of run and projected budget see *Variety*, 31 March 1948, 1, 63; the quotations are from Jack Gould, "The News of Radio," *New York Times*, 31 March 1948, 50.

thirty cities.<sup>52</sup> CBS rebounded from its loss in the battle over color television with new stations and creative personnel. After first wooing Norman Bel Geddes, it hired Jo Mielziner as a consultant and adviser on design problems, particularly lighting.<sup>53</sup> It also expanded its stations on the east coast to five by September 1948 with aspirations of eighty by 1951.<sup>54</sup> ABC, a late-comer in the television world, officially opened its New York affiliate WJZ-TV with a splash on 10 August 1948 broadcasting a four-hour program featuring an all-star vaudeville show from New York's Palace Theatre.<sup>55</sup> By September 1948 ABC had three eastern affiliates and was prepared to take immediate advantage of the Bell System's linking of seven mid-west cities by cable with the east

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<sup>52</sup> By late-summer 1948, NBC had stations in Schenectady, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond, New York and Washington, D.C. on the east coast. Its Midwest region included Buffalo, Cincinnati, Detroit, Milwaukee, St. Paul, St. Louis, Salt Lake City, and Toledo. Stations in Chicago and Cleveland were set to open by October 1948 and affiliates in San Francisco and Los Angeles by the end of the year. See *Variety*, 28 July 1948, 53.

<sup>53</sup> For news of Mielziner's hiring see *Radio Daily*, 19 May 1948, 6; *New York Times*, 20 May 1948, 58. For CBS's attempt to hire Bel Geddes see *Variety*, 7 April 1948, 30.

<sup>54</sup> ABC did not begin broadcasting until 5 April 1948 at WFIL-TV in Philadelphia. See "ABC to Inaugurate Television Network, *Washington Post*, 23 March 1948, B1. For information on ABC's expansion see Akerberg, Herbert V., "CBS-TV Aiming at 80 Cities," *Washington Post*, 19 September 1948, TV8. CBS' east coast network included New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. Akerberg was a CBS Vice President in charge of station relations.

<sup>55</sup> ABC's programming included a parade, a two-hour variety program hosted by Ray Bolger and the television debut of *Candid Microphone*, Alan Funt's popular radio program which would become *Candid Camera*. For details on the programming and reviews see "ABC to Unveil Its New Television Station on Aug. 10 With Elaborate Program," *New York Times*, 30 July 1948, 36; Jack Gould, "Nostalgic Evening," *New York Times*, 15 August 1948, X7. For a photographic essay of the evening see "WJZ-TV Lights Up," *Radio and Television Mirror*, November 1948, 48-49.

coast later that month.<sup>56</sup> The television universe that the Guild had entered in the Fall of 1947 was expanding exponentially. Still, the question remained as to what place the Guild would occupy in the expansion.

The increase in television stations necessarily translated to an increase in audience members. By 1 August 1948, various estimates had nearly 500,000 television sets in use nationwide. By nature of having the most affiliate stations, NBC could tap into most of these, 394,000 with its east coast stations alone.<sup>57</sup> More viewers translated to a demand for more and varied programming and the television networks had begun to address that demand even before the traditional beginning of the fall season. NBC launched the *Texaco Star* variety show on 8 June 1948 and CBS followed suit with *Toast of the Town*, hosted by Ed Sullivan, on 20 June 1948.<sup>58</sup> Both programs were immediate audience favorites. Dramas, however, were still popular and the networks began planning several for the fall. NBC had holdovers in the Theatre Guild program and *The Kraft Television Theatre*. It had room for others, especially if a sponsor was on board. In July 1948 a prominent sponsor did show interest in a dramatic television program having a theatrical connection. It just was not interested in the Theatre Guild. The sponsor was Philco, one

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<sup>56</sup> Only NBC and ABC had affiliates in the connected cities which included St. Louis, Chicago, Milwaukee, Toledo, Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo. See Wayne Oliver, "Bell's Midwest Network to Go Into Operation September 20," *Washington Post*, 5 September 1948, S6.

<sup>57</sup> *Variety* reported 465,000 sets in use while *Television Digest and FM Reports* estimated 484,350. Both publications credited NBC's east-coast network with 394,000 sets, with over 60% of them in New York City. See *Variety*, 25 August 1948, 37; *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 28 August 1948, 3.

<sup>58</sup> The original proposed title of the program was *You're the Top*. *New York Times*, 22 May 1948, 28.

of the leading manufacturers of television sets. The theatrical connection was Actors Equity. Regardless of whether or not Langner and Helburn viewed the partnership as competition, come the fall the Theatre Guild might not be the only organization adapting stage plays for television.

The first announcement of the proposed Philco-Actors Equity Association program characterized it as a weekly, hour-long series of “video versions of past Broadway successes, employing the services of the players within Equity’s ranks.” The budget would be approximately \$7,500 a week.<sup>59</sup> Although Philco had not yet purchased air time with any network that July, by August it had. The network was NBC. For the Theatre Guild, it must have seemed as though all news was bad news. Not only had another theatrical organization challenged the Guild’s monopoly on “video versions of past Broadway successes,” not only was the same organization planning on using stage actors, and not only was it on the same network as the Guild, but it would also be on the same night. NBC scheduled the Philco show for Sunday nights from 9:00 to 10:00, presumably following whatever program the Guild produced.<sup>60</sup> Most likely Philco and Actors’ Equity wanted Sundays for the same reason as the Guild, Broadway was dark that night. For NBC it was a case of a bird in the hand. There was no chance that the network would hold Sundays for the as the unsponsored Guild program. Consequently, by the beginning of September, the Theatre Guild faced a multitude of potential threats – and it still had no sponsor.

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<sup>59</sup> *New York Times*, 2 July 1948, 40.

<sup>60</sup> *Variety* announced the scheduling on 4 August 1948. The *New York Times* followed suit a week later. See *Variety*, 4 August 1948, 25; *New York Times*, 11 August 1948, 44.



The immediate problem for the Guild appeared to be the fact that both it and Philco would occupy Sunday time slots. With so little programming available, a network did not savor the prospect of placing two similar programs adjacent to one another on its schedule. Speculation by industry watchers was that NBC would most likely separate the two programs and thus entice viewers to tune in on more than one night. *Variety* thought so and predicted that NBC would probably move Philco to another night to avoid “back-to-back legit dramatic fare,” since “the Guild on the other hand, definitely wants to continue with the program.”<sup>61</sup> However, the *New York Times* took the opposite view believing that “booking of the production of the AFL actors’ union is expected to result in the displacement of the Theatre Guild’s dramatic program from the Sunday night niche which it enjoyed last season.” Bluntly, the *Times* opined that the Guild would “probably be shunted to another evening on the NBC schedule.”<sup>62</sup>

Sunday night was an important night for the Theatre Guild. Langner and Helburn had chosen it for both the radio program and the initial television broadcasts. They did not relish the prospect of giving it up but in early September they had little with which to bargain. Equity had a sponsor and NBC was quickly making the Philco show the showcase in the network’s fall schedule. NBC had already announced that the *Philco Television Playhouse*, debuting on 3 October, would be seen in over twenty cities, thus becoming, in the network’s words, “the first such production of Broadway plays to be televised nationally.”<sup>63</sup> Technically that was correct since NBC planned to reach the

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<sup>61</sup> *Variety*, 4 August 1948, 25.

<sup>62</sup> *New York Times*, 11 August 1948, 44.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in *New York Times*, 23 August 1948, 34.

extended audience by distributing kinescopes of the program to its budding Midwest network, something not available during the time period of the Guild programs. The lag time for repeat broadcasts of the new Philco program would be two weeks.<sup>64</sup> However, the announcement reflected a major change in NBC's advertising strategy: where once it had touted the Theatre Guild now it was shifting to Philco. This was the kind of publicity that the Guild program would have merited, if it had had a fixed format and a sponsor. The Equity program had both with the latter the most important element. Weekly costs for Philco would come to \$17,000 – \$10,000 for talent and \$7,000 for production – making it the most expensive television program to that point.<sup>65</sup> By no stretch of the imagination was the Theatre Guild out of NBC's equation for success. The network would have been happy to have both programs on the air. However, for the Guild to compete it needed to find a sponsor as soon as possible. With sponsors such as Philco and Kraft in line, NBC had little interest in repeating its financial agreement with the Theatre Guild and sustaining it for another season.<sup>66</sup>

By early September, the Guild was making headway on finding a sponsor with the

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<sup>64</sup> Stations in St. Louis (KSD) and Detroit (WWJ) would originate the telecasts and relay them to Milwaukee (WTMT), Toledo (WSPD), and Buffalo (WBEN). Chicago would be testing WNBQ on 18 September and Cleveland (WNBC) on 1 October. They would become program originators when ready. *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 18 September 1948, 1.

<sup>65</sup> The talent costs made the program comparable to expensive radio programs and the production costs reflected the expense of filming and distributing the kinescopes. "Philco's 17G Nut for 'Playhouse' a New High in TV," *Variety*, 22 September 1948, 25.

<sup>66</sup> Kraft was spending \$220,000 per year on television advertising. Its television program cost \$4,000 per week. See *Variety* 22 October 1948, 19; *Variety*, 10 November 1948, 34.

clout of a Philco or a U.S. Steel. The company in question was General Foods, currently the sponsor of Bob Emery's *Small Fry Club*, a daily children's program on DuMont's WABD-TV in New York as well as *Author Meets the Critics* and *Meet the Press* on NBC.<sup>67</sup> The positive negotiations could not have come at a better time for the Guild which was going through some financial difficulty. During its business meeting on 10 September 1948 it cut nearly \$13,000 for its operating costs, \$7,900 of which came from Langner's and Helburn's budget that had been charged to television costs.<sup>68</sup> However, by 20 September a deal with General Foods was imminent and the Board of Directors prepared to ratify a television agreement at its next meeting.<sup>69</sup>

The Guild television brain trust (and this included Langner, Helburn, Fitelson and Caro) may have felt pressured to close the deal with General Foods in order to keep the television venture alive, largely since Broadway was looking less profitable. Certainly the road productions of *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* were still profitable but the 1948 season marked the end of the dominance of Theatre Guild musicals. Both *Oklahoma!* and

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<sup>67</sup> General Foods signed a fifty-two-week contract to sponsor the children's show which debuted on 24 June 1948. For notice of the agreement see *New York Times*, 8 June 1948, 50. The program cost \$750 a week. *Variety*, 10 November 1948, 34. General Foods also picked up *Author Meets the Critics* for thirteen weeks beginning 13 June 1948 for \$2,500 a week. See "New and Renew", *Sponsor*, July 1948, 17. Sometime before the fall it signed to sponsor *Meet the Press* which appears on the sponsorship list in "Estimated Weekly TV Program Costs," *Variety*, 10 November 1948, 34.

<sup>68</sup> Present at the meeting were Langner, Helburn, Sara Greenspan, J.C. Koritzer, and Peter Davis. The cut costs by \$12,911. Minutes of Business Meeting to Reduce Operating Costs, 10 September 1948. Box 162, 1948-1949 Board of Directors Folder, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>69</sup> Warren Caro, Memo to Theresa Helburn, Lawrence Langner, and H.W. Fitelson, 20 September 1948. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 30-Warren Caro Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

*Allegro* had closed in the spring and the fall season for the Guild looked more like the relatively pedestrian days of the 1930s than the past few seasons.<sup>70</sup>

However, the television industry at large seemed confident that there would be a place for the Theatre Guild on the upcoming television schedule. A 15 September 1948 article in *Variety* hyped the fact that six “major dramatic shows” would be on television in the coming months and listed the Guild show as one of them. Significantly, four of the other five had sponsors but *Variety* assumed a “resumption of Theatre Guild series, date for which hasn’t been set.”<sup>71</sup> Writing that same week in the *Washington Post*, Richard Coe had the same thought. He assumed the Guild’s second season would be “announced shortly.”<sup>72</sup> However, not even the commitment of a sponsorship agreement between General Foods and the Theatre Guild would prove industry observers correct. Such a commitment became a reality and yet no start date for a Guild program was forthcoming. The Guild now had a sponsor, network backing, and something of a plan to produce a

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<sup>70</sup> *South Pacific*, which opened in September 1949, marked the beginning of the Rodgers and Hammerstein producing company and a break from their relationship with the Guild. See Richard Norton, *A Chronology of American Musical Theater, Volume 2: 1912-1952*, 959. The Theatre Guild season for 1948-1949 consisted of *Set My People Free* by Dorothy Heyward, *The Silver Whistle* by Robert McEnroe, *Make Way for Lucia* by John van Druten, and *My Name is Aquilon* by Jean Pierre Aumont adapted by Philip Barry. Only the second was a hit with audiences. For the season’s listing see Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 480. Notes on the critical and popular appeal of the shows are in Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930-1969*, 277-281.

<sup>71</sup> Besides the Theatre Guild program, NBC had the Kraft and Philco shows as well as a new show sponsored by Chevrolet set to begin on 27 September. CBS planned a television version of its radio drama sponsored by Ford to begin on 17 October. ABC had the only sustaining program, *Actors Studio*, which would debut on Sunday, 26 September. “Six Major Dramatic Shows on TV; Seen Boom for Legit in General,” *Variety*, 15 September 1948, 29.

<sup>72</sup> Richard L. Coe, “Teledrama Adapters Deserve Some Credit,” *Washington Post*, 19 September 1948, 1, 16.

weekly television series. However, it had not secured what to Langner and Helburn seemed essential – a Sunday night time slot. The question of what night the Guild program would inhabit became more important than any other aspect of the Guild’s television life. Certainly part of the reason for wanting Sunday was the availability of stage actors on that night, the rationale for the Guild wanting Sunday nights for the radio program. Additionally there was status incumbent with Sunday nights, as important for television as it remained on radio.<sup>73</sup> However, I suggest the importance of Sunday night had to do more with pride than either of the other possibilities. Both Langner and Helburn placed great value on the Theatre Guild name as the preeminent example of theatre, whether on the stage, on radio, or on television. They did not appreciate interlopers and I doubt that either would have gracefully stepped aside to allow Philco to supplant them. If they allowed Philco to control Sunday nights that is precisely what would have happened, at least on television.

Word of an impending agreement for General Foods to sponsor the Guild on television began to appear near the end of September. *Variety* reported it in the 29 September issue and the *New York Times* a day later. Significantly, neither news outlet specified either a day of the week or a network for the program.<sup>74</sup> NBC was balking at giving the Guild its old Sunday time slot. The problem, of course, was the Philco show

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<sup>73</sup> In the fall of 1948, Sunday nights were home to some of radio’s iconic figures including Jack Benny, Fred Allen, Amos and Andy, Ozzie and Harriet, and Walter Winchell. Sponsors paid a great deal for the privilege of sponsoring one of these programs, as much as \$25,000 per week for the first three names on the above list. “Breakdown of Sunday Talent Nut,” *Variety*, 27 October 1948, 19.

<sup>74</sup> “GF Buys Guild; May Go To ABC,” *Variety*, 29 September 1948, 50; *New York Times*, 30 September 1948. Also see notice in *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 2 October 1948, 4.

which was ready to make its debut on Sunday, 3 October 1948. Neither NBC nor Philco wanted anything to detract from what they hoped would be a major television event. The same issue of *Variety* that carried news of the Theatre Guild sponsorship by General Foods featured a two-page ad for the *Philco Television Playhouse* using language that could have come from the pen of Lawrence Langner. “Television strides forward,” the ad proclaimed. The new program would bring “to television receivers the all-time dramatic and musical hits of Broadway, with the leading stars and featured players of the Broadway stage.” For the Guild, the sense of déjà vu must have been powerful. One year before, the Guild had touted itself in the same manner. “With the ‘Philco Television Playhouse’, television comes of age,” the ad continued, “fulfilling the promise of this new and vital medium of entertainment.”<sup>75</sup> Clearly in NBC’s opinion, Sunday nights would belong to Philco. The point could not have been lost on those in the Theatre Guild, although I suspect it would not have caused them to cease their plans. After all, they had faced competition from others in the theatre for more than a quarter of a century, some of whom had espoused the same goals as the Guild, and they had both survived and prospered. Perhaps if it had been unable to secure a sponsor, NBC’s shift to Philco would have been a concern, but now with General Foods on board the lack of funding was a thing of the past. However, even with General Foods in the fold, Langner and Helburn had two problems. First, they had to convince NBC to let them retain the 8:00-9:00 Sunday night slot or switch networks. Second, they had to convince U.S. Steel to withdraw from the competition, because the radio contract gave it the right of first refusal

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<sup>75</sup> *Variety*, 29 September 1948, 48-49. Half of the ad was devoted to cast and credits for the first two programs, *Dinner at Eight* on 3 October and *Rebecca* on 10 October.

regarding any Guild television show. Practically speaking, the Guild had only six to eight weeks to accomplish both tasks.

Initial speculation was that the Guild would move to another network. *Variety* thought there was a “strong possibility” that the program would move to ABC. That network currently had the Actors’ Theatre scheduled from 8:30-9:00 but had not “yet snagged a sponsor so that ABC might consider switching [it] to another night in order to get the GF business.”<sup>76</sup> However, two days after *Variety*’s conjecture, Warren Caro wrote Langner (in Boston for an out-of-town tryout for *The Silver Whistle*) that NBC had “withdrawn any objections to our show on the 8:00-9:00 spot,” and that Niles Trammel of NBC is “going ahead with Philco and hopes to clear the hour [for the Guild] in the next few days.” NBC had recanted its position that Philco and the Theatre Guild should be on different nights. That cleared the way for the Guild and General Foods to “go forward with the details of the contract,” which they did on Monday, 4 October 1948 in a meeting attended by each party’s attorneys as well as representatives of Young and Rubicam, the advertising agency representing the sponsor.<sup>77</sup> With the network objection

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<sup>76</sup> “GF Buys Guild; May Go To ABC,” *Variety*, 29 September 1948, 50

<sup>77</sup> Warren Caro, Letter to Lawrence Langner, 1 October 1948, Box 30, Warren Caro Folder, Theatre Guild Correspondence, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Caro passed on an invitation from NBC to watch the Philco premiere at Boston’s NBC station if no television was available at Langner’s hotel. Langner’s trip to Boston, coming at a time when one assumes he would want to be in New York, was necessitated by difficulties between Jose Ferrer, star of *The Silver Whistle*, and Paul Crabtree, the show’s director. Crabtree delineated the problems after he returned to New York in a lengthy letter to Langner and Helburn. See Paul Crabtree, Letter to Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn, 8 October 1948. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 36-Paul Crabtree Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. For Ferrer’s comments on his performance in the play, see Lewis Funke and John E. Booth, ed., *Actors Talk About Acting* (Avon Books: New York, 1961), 47-85. Caro attributed most NBC’s reluctance to

out of the way, the next step was to approach U.S. Steel for either its consent or a counteroffer.

After the meeting on Monday, 4 October 1948, Fitelson drafted a letter to J. Carlisle MacDonald, President of U.S. Steel for Langner's signature. In it the Guild disclosed the substance of the offer by General Foods. The Guild would produce weekly programs consisting of a monthly drama by the Guild proper, and "three of different varieties to be produced by the Theatre Guild Workshop." The "selection of the properties and the format of the programs" would be "in the sole discretion and control of the Guild. Additionally, the Guild would "have full responsibility for the production and direction of the programs," which would begin "the last week of December 1948." Although "the time and network is not exact, ... Sunday evenings from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. from NBC is the first objective." The programs would cost a maximum of \$14,000 for the drama and \$10,000 for the workshop shows netting the Guild \$2,000 and \$1,500 respectively. To allay any fears about interference with the radio show, which aired from 9:30 to 10:30 EST on Sunday nights, the letter reminded MacDonald that "[the Guild] refused to consider time which interfered with our radio program. We hope in some way to have the opportunity to announce our radio program on the television show."<sup>78</sup>

The document is revealing on three levels. First, it underscores the Guild's

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having both programs on Sunday nights to Sid Strotz, NBC's Vice President in charge of Television, a position he assumed on 1 June 1948. For details on Strotz's appointment see *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 15 May 1948, 3-4.

<sup>78</sup> H. William Fitelson, Memo to Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner and Draft of Letter to J. Carlisle MacDonald, U.S. Steel to be written by Lawrence Langner, 4 October 1948. Box 87-J. Carlisle MacDonald Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.



intention to retain complete artistic control of the series, thus denying a creative role for either Young and Rubicam or the television network, presumably NBC. Philco, on the other hand, left its program in the hands of NBC's Fred Coe, who had directed episodes of the Guild show. The *Chevrolet-Tele Theatre*, also on NBC, used the network's Owen Davis, Jr. as producer.<sup>79</sup> Even after the somewhat uneven nature of its first season in television, the Guild appeared not to have learned from the experience. Or, perhaps, it felt that it had learned enough and was ready to reassume complete control of its television branch, control it had partially relinquished after the fiasco of *John Ferguson*.<sup>80</sup> Second, it reveals both the enormous faith the Guild had in the workshop as a television property and the extent to which the Guild was able to convince a major sponsor such as General Foods of the viability of the proposal. Essentially, the Guild planned to produce four programs monthly: one professional stage adaptation and three largely amateur productions. The cost for the stage play would be less than the most

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<sup>79</sup> For Coe's role on the Philco show see Jon Krampner, *The Man in the Shadows: Fred Coe and the Golden Age of Television*, 37-55. For Davis and the Chevrolet show see Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, 24-26 and "Estimated Weekly TV Program Costs," *Variety*, 10 November 1948, 34.

<sup>80</sup> Besides turning over directorial control to NBC, the Guild also allowed the network script approval. Caro related this in some detail regarding a script entitled "Best of Care." According to Caro: "Owen Davis returned the script this morning. He is not very keen on it for television. Applying a critique suggested to him years ago by Sam Harris, Owen says he cannot answer the question, 'Whom do you root for?' to his satisfaction. I think this is the same point that we recognized in the script, that there is confusion between the mother and the daughter as the focal character. Moreover he thinks the whole mood of the play too heavy for a first try on television. I pointed out to him that we all feel that the script could be vastly improved by cutting it to an hour and doing a good re-write job. If you wish, I can let Warren Wade read the script, but I don't think this would help much. He'll probably be guided by Owen Davis' reaction. Will discuss this with you further." See Warren Caro, Confidential memo to Theresa Helburn, 12 May 1948. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 30-Warren Caro Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

expensive show but more than three times as costly either the Kraft or Chevrolet programs. Moreover, the three workshop productions would cost two and one-half times as much as either of those programs.<sup>81</sup> Considering the fact the three-quarters of the Guild's proposed programming was untried, that General Foods considered spending such sums seems a testament to Fitelson's and Caro's powers of persuasion.

Finally, the document reveals the Guild's consistent pattern of being one step behind the broadcasting competition. A starting date during "the last week of December 1948" would leave the Guild off the television schedule for half of the broadcasting year. Unfortunately for the Guild, in the fall of 1948 every network with regular broadcasts had a Sunday night dramatic program. ABC, which had only just begun broadcasting using borrowed studios, began the half-hour program the *Actor's Studio* (produced by its namesake acting school in New York) on 26 September 1948 and aired from 8:30-9:00 pm. By the end of its first season, the program had earned a Peabody Award. NBC of course, had the *Philco Television Playhouse* from 9:00-10:00.<sup>82</sup> Also, on 7 November 1948, CBS began *Studio One* airing from 7:30 to 8:30 pm. Produced by Worthington Miner, the program soon became a hallmark of television quality. Even in the early days of television, viewers tended to form habits and broadcasters fought for audience

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<sup>81</sup> The Kraft show cost \$4,000 a week and the Chevrolet show cost \$4,500. See "Estimated Weekly TV Program Costs," *Variety*, 10 November 1948, 34.

<sup>82</sup> For the nightly schedule, see Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory of Prime Time Network TV Shows 1946-Present*, 5th ed., 1012. Profiles of *Studio One* and the *Actor's Studio* are in Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-1951*, 87-109 and 34-39.

members using every advantage they could find.<sup>83</sup> In the fall of 1948, the field was crowded and once again the Guild had been slow to break from the gate.

U.S. Steel, through J. Carlisle MacDonald, responded to the Guild on 7 October. Steel had no desire to compete with General Foods (“Of course we are not going to offer any objection to your plan at this time.”) but would wait until the end of the season to see what effect, if any, the Guild television program would have on the Guild radio show. MacDonald was frankly uncomfortable sharing Sunday night with a television show. The fear was that “a Theatre Guild television show on Sunday night might have an influence on our rating.” Although MacDonald was only “speaking for [himself],” he assured Langner, he would “be much happier if your television show were on an evening in the week other than Sunday. I think it is reasonable to assume that if a television audience has just viewed an hour’s performance by the Theatre Guild, it is highly unlikely that it will then tune in to a Theatre Guild production on the radio.” Irving S. Olds, chairman of the board of U.S. Steel agreed. The implication was clear; pick another night or risk the radio contract with U.S. Steel.<sup>84</sup> The blind insistence on Sunday night, for whatever reason, complicated the situation. It seems likely that without Sunday night, the Guild would find itself somehow separated from the theatre, which, in

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<sup>83</sup> To illustrate the growth in the television audience, New York City gained 23,000 sets or roughly 115,000 viewers in the month of September 1948. Nationwide there were 612,000 sets, an increase of 72,000 in one month. See “U.S. Tele Sets Hits 612,000 Mark,” *Variety*, 27 October 1948, 23. For statistics on the number of viewers per set, see “5 Viewers Watch 3 Hours as Video’s Home Audience,” *Variety*, 3 November 1948, 34. The actual average was 5.2.

<sup>84</sup> J. Carlisle MacDonald, Letter to Lawrence Langner, 7 October 1948. Box 87-J. Carlisle MacDonald Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

Helburn's words, was "our first and I am sure our last love."<sup>85</sup> Regardless of the overt and implied disapproval by U.S. Steel, Langner and Helburn made a Sunday night time slot their line in the sand. They were willing to risk their radio sponsorship by insisting on it. Fortunately for the Guild, NBC was supportive. The Philco program was a substantial, if unproven, acquisition. Retaining the Theatre Guild program could only strengthen the network's position.

Negotiations with NBC and the other networks continued through October with no resolution in sight. NBC agreed in principle to a Sunday night show but there was no announcement of a starting date. With the protracted discussions there was always the danger that General Foods would tire of waiting and back out. Late in the month, General Foods seemed ready to rescind its offer, most likely falling back on the position taken by its advertising director Howard Chapin at the Television session of the Association of National Advertisers in New York on 26 October. Chapin told the audience that television was not as efficient at reaching a mass audience of potential buyers and that even if the market expanded to 4.5 million sets by the end of 1950, General Foods still had dozens of products it could sell more economically elsewhere than on television. Offering a clue as to why General Foods courted the Guild in the first place, Chapin offered his opinion that television's saving grace was that its audience was weighted toward upper incomes, providing a selectivity not offered by radio.<sup>86</sup> Chapin echoed Langner's earlier comment about elevating "television from the saloon to the

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<sup>85</sup> "Draft of radio address by Theresa Helburn promoting Theatre Guild on the Air," n.d

<sup>86</sup> *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 30 October 1948, 3.

living room.”<sup>87</sup> Chapin’s words evidently had no effect on the agreement with the Guild; November 1948 dawned with no end to the apparent impasse. Most observers assumed a revival of the show – “The *Theatre Guild of the Air* is in its fourth season and a second *Theatre Guild Television* series is about to begin,” proclaimed *Cue* magazine in the 30 October 1948 issue.<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, the Guild continued to plan for upcoming television activity and it still had a willing sponsor.<sup>89</sup> However, it did not have a place on any network’s schedule.

November would prove to be a turning point for the Guild in its attempt to resurrect its television program. Once again, the challenge came from Philco. By the middle of the month NBC found itself caught in the middle of a battle between the Theatre Guild and its newly successful rival resulting from the network’s decision to grant the Guild the hour before Philco on Sundays.<sup>90</sup> The Philco show had been receiving uniformly positive reviews such as *Variety*’s opinion that “Philco Television Playhouse’s (NBC) revival of Elmer Rice’s ‘Counselor-at-Law’ Sunday (17) night was

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<sup>87</sup> Chapin was incorrect in assuming that only “prosperous, upper-middle class families owned the bulk of television sets. A Pulse Survey taken in metropolitan Philadelphia found that 52% of those who owned sets were either “just getting by” or “poor.” See “40% TV Owners ‘Just Getting By’,” *Variety*, 20 October 1948, 27.

<sup>88</sup> “Theatre Guild Completes Third Decade,” *Cue*, 30 October 1948, 13. The article praised the Guild for its many ventures in theatre, film, television and radio suggesting that “even a glance at its multiple schemes for the season of 1948-1949 must dispel any suspicion of senility.”

<sup>89</sup> Paul Crabtree’s schedule for November devoted time for him to work on television from 16 November on. Marion Hubbell, Memo to Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn, 4 November 1948. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 36-Paul Crabtree Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Hubbell was Langner’s personal secretary.

<sup>90</sup> “Philco Stance on GF-Theatre Guild Pacting Poses Problem for NBC,” *Variety*, 17 November 1948, 27.

video drama with every letter capitalized.”<sup>91</sup> Consequently, Philco was “far from happy over the fact that the Guild is going into the preceding hour with another dramatic stanza.” Earlier, Philco had threatened to “yank its top-budgeted 60-minute show off the NBC tele web,” but *Variety* held out hope for a compromise brokered by the embattled network: the Theatre Guild and Philco could cooperate by presenting contrasting programs, one drama and the other comedy for example. *Variety* reported no answer from Philco.<sup>92</sup> Other news outlets reported essentially the same proposal. NBC would replace “Author Meets the Critics” and “Meet the Press,” currently occupying the disputed slot (and both sponsored by General Foods) with the Guild program providing a lead-in for Philco. To mitigate any overlap between the programs, the Guild would “offer a varied format, alternating between straight drama, musical-comedy revues and one-act plays.”<sup>93</sup>

One wonders if NBC actually believed in the possibility of compromise. With every passing day, the stakes grew larger. Philco had invested a great deal of money and status into its program which was both a critical and ratings success.<sup>94</sup> The Theatre Guild and General Foods were running out of time if they were to launch their program before

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<sup>91</sup> *Variety*, 20 October 1948, 26.

<sup>92</sup> “Philco Stance on GF-Theatre Guild Pacting Poses Problem for NBC,” *Variety*, 17 November 1948, 27.

<sup>93</sup> “Video Version of Theatre Guild of the Air May Return to NBC Next Month,” *New York Times*, 18 November 1948, 54. Also see *Television Digest and FM Reports*, 20 November 1948, 4.

<sup>94</sup> Hooper Ratings taken after the first two Philco shows, showed it earning a respectable audience even though it was up against the hugely popular Ed Sullivan show on CBS. *Variety* opined that Philco was “attracting a new set of viewers who hitherto hadn’t tuned in their sets in the 9 to 10 slot Sunday nights.” “TV Lures Two Audience Types,” *Variety*, 20 October 1948, 27.

year's end. Matters came to a head in the week before Thanksgiving with two announcements by NBC. The first was that producer Mike Todd would be bringing yet another program to the network on Sunday nights. Beginning on 16 January 1949, Todd would broadcast an hour-long extravaganza from his Winter Garden Theatre reviving "the erstwhile 'Sunday Night at the Winter Garden' celebrity-audience show," which *Variety* described as "one of the unique, distinctive attractions of a halcyon Broadway era." The price tag for the series would be \$15,000, not including network costs. The reported time slot would be from 10:00-11:00. However that was up in the air because of NBC's second announcement. Philco was cancelling its program.<sup>95</sup>

It all came down to scheduling and Philco claimed a broadcasting version of squatter's rights. Philco had been on the air first, it had brought prestige and income to NBC, and therefore it should have been allowed a measure of influence over the Sunday night schedule. Philco's only request was that NBC not put the Guild on directly before its program since the "Theatre Guild show could, by virtue of its earlier slotting, take the edge off its own presentation."<sup>96</sup> One solution would have been to place the Guild program after Philco's but that was impossible. The Guild radio program aired from 9:30-10:30 and U.S. Steel would never permit a Guild television program to overlap the radio show. The Philco television show and the Theatre Guild radio program were already rivals for similar audiences and often ran competing newspaper ads.<sup>97</sup> Steel did

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<sup>95</sup> "Todd's Bigtime 15G Winter Garden Show for TV; Sunday's Video Snarl," *Variety*, 24 November 1948, 1, 55.

<sup>96</sup> *Variety*, 24 November 1948, 55. The quote is *Variety's* and not Philco's

<sup>97</sup> The *New York Times* ran competing ads on Sunday, 5 December 1948 with the Theatre Guild radio ad appearing directly below the Philco television spot. *New York Times*, 5 December 1948, X15.

not need another competitor. Sometime between 16 November and 23 November 1948 Philco presented NBC with an ultimatum. According to *Variety* “the final Philco edict was: Either the Theatre Guild time gets a nix or we go off.” NBC apparently thought the threat was a bluff and was willing to call it. However Philco raised the stakes with its next announcement; it was “cancelling the dramatic show and cutting down to a half-hour with a complete change of format.”<sup>98</sup>

Philco may have been bluffing the network or it may have been serious. It was a high-stakes game and NBC had few winning moves. In order to keep the Guild on Sundays, the network had offered to move Philco to Tuesday nights preceding Milton Berle.<sup>99</sup> But from a business standpoint that meant little sense. NBC already owned Tuesday nights due to Berle’s phenomenal popularity and the Philco program was primarily an asset on Sundays.<sup>100</sup> It would have poor business policy for NBC to have not believed the threat and in the end, the network blinked. As a consequence General Foods finally dropped out. On 8 December 1948, General Foods and the Theatre Guild issued a joint statement to the press that plans to air the Guild program were off. Although the partners were “in agreement on the essentials,” read the press release, “unanticipated costs and related problems have caused the two companies to postpone projected plans at this time.” The nominal cause for the indefinite suspension of the

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<sup>98</sup> *Variety*, 24 November 1948, 55. All quotes are *Variety*’s.

<sup>99</sup> For notice of the dropping of the plan for Philco to move, see Bob Phillipps, “Tele-Types,” *Television World*, 20 December 1948, 11.

<sup>100</sup> Berle’s Texaco Star Theatre achieved a rating of 86.7 and an audience share of 94.3 for the show on 9 November 1948. This meant that over 94% of those watching television and nearly 87% of set owners tuned in to his show. *Variety*, 17 November 1948, 29.



program was monetary. That was what the *New York Times* reported noting the “boom in dramatic TV shows” had brought about intense competition for scripts, both original and adaptations, causing inflated prices. Reportedly, one script sought a royalty of \$1,750 not counting a possible adaptation. Budgets for dramas were averaging between \$10,000 and \$20,000 per week.<sup>101</sup> Langner cited the same reason plus the additional one of a lower profit margin for the Guild in a letter to John Haggott on the state of the Guild’s recent activities. Langner wrote:

We were on the point of signing a substantial contract with General Foods, but it fell through on account of the rapidly rising costs. I did not feel like knocking myself out for nothing which I would have had to do under the contemplated contract. No doubt another one will come along later.<sup>102</sup>

Certainly money is always a factor in commercial broadcasting, but the potential cost of the Guild program was not the entire story. *Variety*, with its inherent ability to ferret out show business gossip, reported that Philco was not the only party upset with NBC. Philco’s ad agency, the Hutchins Advertising Company, had threatened to pull all of its accounts out of the network unless NBC dropped the Guild from the offending time slot. NBC could ill afford to lose future revenue and a profitable and popular program to take a chance on the Theatre Guild. 1948 was not 1947. This season, NBC had

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<sup>101</sup> “Program Costs Rise Causes Theatre Guild and General Foods to Drop Video Show,” *New York Times*, 8 December 1948, 62. The Theatre Guild had earlier addressed this problem. Marshall suggested buying licenses to plays before presenting them on television noting that two of Philco’s first three programs had been Guild radio plays. See H. William Fitelson, Memo to Lawrence Langner, Theresa Helburn and Warren Caro, 4 October 1948. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 45–H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT

<sup>102</sup> Lawrence Langner, Letter to John Haggott, 16 December 1948. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 57- John Haggott Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

alternatives. The Guild may have lost out, but General Foods still had the hour of television time and much less expensive options. It quickly took out a thirteen-week option to sponsor *Author Meets the Critics* and *Meet the Press* effective 26 December 1948.<sup>103</sup>

Two days after the General Foods cancellation, the Guild's legal advisor H. William Fitelson asked Langner, Helburn and Marshall, "do you not think we should use several hours of [the upcoming board meeting] for the purpose of reviewing our television situation?"<sup>104</sup> The truth of the matter was, at that moment, the Guild had no "television situation." General Foods, however, moved forward quickly by agreeing to sponsor *Lambs Gambol* in NBC's *Meet the Press* time slot (that show moved to Wednesday nights at 10:00) and later *The Goldbergs* on CBS.<sup>105</sup> The Theatre Guild, having dropped the idea of producing anything other than a once-a-month stage adaptation, was still actively seeking supporters for the idea, provided the price was right. However, it found no takers and the plan to revive the Theatre Guild television program

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<sup>103</sup> *Variety*, 8 December 1948, 27.

<sup>104</sup> H. William Fitelson, Memo to Lawrence Langner, Theresa Helburn, and Armina Marshall, 10 December 1948. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 46–H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Fitelson wanted Caro and Crabtree to attend that portion of the meeting but Langner declined. A handwritten attachment to the memo reads "LL has sent back his memo [from] HWF saying he doesn't think WC & PC should be present, Marion." Marion is "Marion Hubbell," Langner's secretary.

<sup>105</sup> *New York Times*, 4 January 1949, 39; *New York Times*, 4 February 1949, 50. *Lambs Gambol* was produced by the Lambs Club and featured musical variety. It debuted on 27 February 1949.

for the 1948-1949 season ended.<sup>106</sup> It would be five years before the Theatre Guild returned to television, but under markedly different circumstances.

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<sup>106</sup> H. William Fitelson, Memo to Lawrence Langner, Theresa Helburn, Armina Marshall, 14 January 1949. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 46–H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Fitelson mentioned a conference on the proposal that he was attending that day and that he had “suggested a cost plus basis. The plus, however, should be very substantial.”

**Epilogue:**  
**“... the new program seems certain to be one of the year’s major treats”<sup>1</sup>—**  
***The United States Steel Hour***

The abortive events of late 1948 did not quash the Theatre Guild’s dream of having a television program of its choosing. Throughout 1949 it continued to explore possibilities without success.<sup>2</sup> Although U.S. Steel expressed some interest in sponsoring a Guild television program, an ideal situation for the Guild, nothing came of it. Ever supportive and anxious to keep the Guild in its programming mix if possible, NBC even offered to let the Guild use its facilities “in productions experimental or otherwise” during the summer while Philco was off the air. Although NBC preferred a drama, Warren Caro thought the network would allow the Guild to “try its hand at some of the shows such as the Workshop productions which we would like to see on the cameras” with Paul Crabtree as director.<sup>3</sup> The Guild declined the offer and NBC filled out the Philco’s time slot for summer with a sustaining dramatic program produced by the network.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Gould, “Television in Review,” *New York Times*, 1 November 1953, X15. From his review of the first broadcast of the *U.S. Steel Hour*.

<sup>2</sup> Notations on agendas for board meetings on 14 February 1949, 2 March 1949, 4 May 1949, 8 June 1949, and 26 Aug 1949 contain items related to television. See Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 162, 1948-1949 Board of Directors Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>3</sup> One of the possibilities was a show for Standard Oil. Warren Caro, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 13 April 1949. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 30-Warren Caro Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>4</sup> *Philco* went on hiatus after the 10 April 1949 program and NBC filled in with the *NBC Repertory Theatre* which debuted on 17 April 1949. For notice of *Philco*’s final program see Sidney Lohman, “Radio and TV News,” *New York Times*, 3 April 1949, X9.

By the end of 1949, the situation had not changed. A speculative offer concerning ATT&T as a possible sponsor came and went. The Guild was holding out for U.S. Steel to sponsor it on television but Steel seemed content to continue with the radio program.<sup>5</sup> The summer of 1950 found the Guild entertaining a serious offer from Cannon Mills through its agency N.W. Ayer & Son to produce a series of three or four musical specials during the 1950-1951 television season. The first offers came in late May and negotiations continued through August. The proposal was for programs built around theatrical musical shows and composers with *Carousel*, *Of Thee I Sing* and Richard Rodgers prominently mentioned. The cost of producing a television show had increased greatly in the past two years and the ad agency recognized this. Ayer was willing to go as high as \$50,000 to \$60,000 in talent fees for each of the programs.<sup>6</sup> More importantly, the agency wanted the Guild for its “matchless experience and know-how in production,

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The announcement of the summer replacement is in Sidney Lohman, “The Field of Television: News and Notes,” *New York Times*, 17 April 1949, X9.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Souvaine, who acted as the Guild’s negotiator during the 1948 talks with General Foods was still attempting to secure a sponsor. H. William Fitelson, the Guild’s attorney was the proponent of waiting on a deal with U.S. Steel even though he had been in talks with “ABC about a number of sponsors including AT&T concerning the Guild’s television situation,” and that “an offer is supposed to be made to us.” See Warren Caro, Confidential Memo to Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, 22 December 1949. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 141, Henry and Gerri Souvaine Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT; H. William Fitelson, Memo to Warren Caro, cc Lawrence Langner, Theresa Helburn, Armina Marshall, 29 December 1949. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 45–H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>6</sup> Details on the initial negotiations are in Henry Souvaine, Letter to Warren Caro, 26 May 1950 and Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, Letter to Henry Souvaine, 12 July 1950. The financial aspects are in Henry Souvaine, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 17 August 1950. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 141, Henry and Gerri Souvaine Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

plus unquestioned good taste in showmanship.” Perhaps remembering the difficulties the Guild had previously experience in television, the agency assured the Guild that it was willing to provide “such help as you may need on the television side.” An entreaty from James Hanna, an agency vice president, implored Helburn, “Please do not force us to search for a second-best. We want the best. You’re it!”<sup>7</sup>

The offer was substantial, the praise effusive, but in the end the Guild declined. Ostensibly the reason the Guild fell back on was the one Helburn and Langner had given in July 1950 (before reconsidering a month later), the Guild did not wish to produce “exclusively elaborate musical shows.”<sup>8</sup> However, the actual reason was most probably a combination of two factors. First, the Guild still held hope that it could produce adaptations of stage plays.<sup>9</sup> Second, after declining the offer Helburn reminded the Guild’s negotiator Henry Souvaine that the Guild’s first loyalty was to U.S. Steel “aside from any contractual obligations we have” with them.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>James Hanna, Letter to Theresa Helburn, 2 August 1950. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 57, HAA-HAP Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>8</sup>Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, Letter to Henry Souvaine, 12 July 1950.

<sup>9</sup>For example, in September 1951 Langner asked the Guild’s play reader Phyllis Anderson to report on each play “as to what is thought of its values for television.” Interestingly, Langner was more interested in discards than plays suitable for the stage. Perhaps a weak three-act play “would nevertheless make a good one-hour or one-half hour television show.” Lawrence Langner, Memo to Phyllis Anderson, 11 September 1951. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 12, Phyllis Anderson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>10</sup>Possibly in an effort to keep up Souvaine’s spirits since he had worked so hard on the negotiations with N.W. Ayer & Son, Helburn added, “As you may have heard in the past few days we have also declined several other exciting television invitations.” Theresa Helburn, Letter to Henry Souvaine, 24 August 1950. Theatre Guild

The relationship with U.S. Steel influenced all of the Guild's broadcasting plans, either directly as in the case of the radio program, or indirectly as in the case of television. For example, during the May negotiations with U.S. Steel to renegotiate the radio contract, Fitelson wrote Caro that he would put television on the Executive Board Meeting agenda, "However in view of the U.S. Steel renewal, it is unlikely that we can discuss television with anyone else until we get our contract signed and determine U.S. Steel's policy on television."<sup>11</sup> In effect, the Theatre Guild, because of its radio program, gave U.S. Steel veto power over any television plans it may have had. It was a power that U.S. Steel continue to wield during the time the Guild was absent from television. In negotiations for the radio contract renewal in 1952, Fitelson reported that U.S. Steel insisted that if the Guild produced "a commercially sponsored television program under our name or a similar name, then they shall have the right, unless they consent thereto in writing, to cancel the radio program after the first television broadcast." Fitelson recognized that the clause was "a very serious and severe provision" and that he had been unable to convince U.S. Steel to relent.<sup>12</sup>

The result of the Guild's wanderings in the television wilderness could have only

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Correspondence, Box 141, Henry and Gerri Souvaine Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>11</sup> Although Fitelson was generally quite astute in his predictions, when it came to television and U.S. Steel he had a blind spot. He ended his note to Caro with the prediction, "It is quite safe to say, however, that we will be in television next season. There is no way out of it." H. William Fitelson, Memo to Warren Caro, 2 May 1950. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 46-H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>12</sup> H. William Fitelson, Letter to Lawrence Langner and Armina Marshall, 3 June 1952. Box 46-H. William Fitelson Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

one of two endings, provided it remained on radio with U.S. Steel's sponsorship. Either it dropped its television aspirations or it waited for Steel to make up its mind. In the end, the second possibility won out and the Theatre Guild did return to television with a long successful run as producer of one of the great live dramas in television history. In October 1953, the Theatre Guild returned to television under the sponsorship of U.S. Steel, which closed down its radio program after an eight-year-run and shifted to television. In all aspects, this second series was a success both artistically and commercially. It was not, however, groundbreaking. Importantly for any discussion of the Theatre Guild on television, the 1953 program was quite different from the original Guild television venture in several meaningful ways.

First, neither the Theatre Guild name nor the word "theatre" appeared in the title of the program. In fact, in a print ad for the 27 October 1953 debut broadcast, "The United States Steel Hour" appears in large type at the top of the ad while "Produced by the Theatre Guild" appears below a list of five cast members in type smaller than either the program title or the actors' names.<sup>13</sup> Second, the program was neither on Sunday nights nor monthly. It aired every other Tuesday night on ABC alternating with the *Motorola TV Theatre*.<sup>14</sup> Third, and most importantly, the program did not pretend to consist of stage adaptations. The initial play, "P.O.W.", was an original script by the novelist David Davidson that Jack Gould of the *New York Times* praised as "one of the season's noble achievements."<sup>15</sup> The emphasis on original scripts over adaptations came

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<sup>13</sup> *New York Times*, 27 October 1953, 36.

<sup>14</sup> For the 1953 weekly television schedule for see Brooks and Marsh, 1017.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Gould, "Television in Review," *New York Times*, 1 November 1953, X15.



from U.S Steel rather than the Guild, a fact revealed by a company spokesman in a speech to stockholders during which he assured them that the new television show would be “employing as many original plays as possible.”<sup>16</sup> There was really only one way the new Guild venture kept the faith, artistically speaking. For its ten-year career with over two hundred performances, the *United States Steel Hour* did not succumb to the temptation to revert to a filmed performance. Its final broadcast on 12 June 1963 was the same as that of *John Ferguson* back on the November evening in 1947 and every other *U.S. Steel Hour* program: it was live television.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin Fairless, Speech delivered to stockholders, 23 February 1954, U.S. Steel Annual Report for 1953, 20-21. Theatre Guild Correspondence, Box 148, U.S. Steel Folder, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

<sup>17</sup> For a synopsis of the *United States Steel Hour* see William Hawes, *Filmed Television Drama, 1952-1958* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2002), 54-56. For a listing of the plays see Nadel, 296-303. In keeping with the Theatre Guild connection, the final program was a adaptation of James Barrie’s play *The Lady Shows Her Medals* and starred Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne.

## Conclusion

I suggest that the Theatre Guild's abortive effort to become a pioneer in television failed for several reasons, all of them connected to its self-image as perceived by members of the Guild, specifically Langner, Helburn, and Marshall. They represented "Theatre," an art form that they believed the masses desperately needed, even though unaware of that need. Thus, they viewed the medium of television as inferior to theatre and treated it both paternalistically and condescendingly. The former attitude is revealed in the many times the Guild characterized itself as the entity best positioned to elevate television to a higher plane. The latter attitude becomes apparent in the cavalier manner in which the Guild leaders approached the artistic and technical requirements of television. As the initial proposal with General Foods implies, even after a year in the industry the Guild refused to acknowledge fully that expertise in theatre and on the stage did not translate to the same level of competence in television. Although surrounded by knowledgeable television practitioners, the Guild seldom sought advice willingly.

Even with its inability to look at television with a "fresh and courageous eye," as Jo Mielziner encouraged, I believe the Theatre Guild could have competed with the other live television dramas if not for its complete unwillingness to compromise on something as simple as on what day of the week the program would air. If at the beginning of October 1948, the Guild had agreed to Tuesday, Thursday, or Friday – all nights on NBC without a dramatic program – the resulting financial issues might not have been a factor. There is always the possibility that the workshop productions would have proved inadequate, but Langner and Helburn were enormously resourceful and persuasive producers. They had survived, and prospered, amidst the vagaries of commercial theatre

for nearly thirty years, which makes their subsequent failure in television so surprising. They might have been able to have found a way. However, for that to have happened, they would have needed the same passion for television that they felt for theatre. In the end, I believe it was a lack of passion for the medium that was their undoing.

Lawrence Langner had a great capacity for seeking new pastures. He had dreams of the Theatre Guild influencing other media that way it had the theatre. Theresa Helburn did not appear to share his dreams, but was content to support him. But Langner never fully committed himself to anything but the theatre, where his energy was unflagging. In film, radio, and television he was no more than a dilettante, sampling each but never fully devoting himself to any of them. In his autobiography, (written between 1949 and 1950 and published in 1951) Langner devotes two pages to the Theatre Guild's television career in the years 1947 and 1948. He gives little detail about the process and admits few mistakes or errors in judgment. After erroneously noting that the Guild's "seven plays were the first to be presented after the war and made television history," Langner attributes the demise of the program thus:

Having started a trend in television toward the best works of the theatre, we had no great urge to continue on a commercial basis under which we were allowed only a single week to produce each play. We felt that each television play should be an event, with enough time for rehearsals to produce works of art ....<sup>1</sup>

However, I believe the true reason for the show's failure, or at least its inability to achieve a lengthy run, lies in the next paragraph which Langner begins with the sentence "I often ask myself, after television, what?" Langner then recounts memorable moments in his career as a patent attorney and some of his clients who became part of the technological iconography of the twentieth century. He had as a client the American

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<sup>1</sup> Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 436.

Biograph Company, an early producer of motion pictures. Later he worked for the Marconi Company, which later became the Radio Corporation of America, parent company of NBC. Still later he worked with Warner Brothers during its development of talking pictures. For a half-century Langner found himself in the company of corporations who, through their inventions, helped to fundamentally alter civilization. Perhaps these associations prodded him into his own experimentations with broadcasting and film, but I believe he was never fully committed and perpetually ill at ease. Consider his summation of this technological revolution, written about two years after the end of the first Guild television program.

I pray that with the perfection of television, the cycle of invention may come to an end. There are many who say these inventions have helped the living theatre. They have greatly increased the reproduction and transmission of theatrical entertainment, but despite the advantage the living theatre has received, these inventions have, up to now, taken far more from the theatre than they have returned to it.<sup>2</sup>

In a perfect world, Lawrence Langner, Theresa Helburn, and the other members of the Theatre Guild would have turned their talent and energy toward helping to unlock television's seemingly boundless potential. In 1948, Jack Gould of the *New York Times* felt that television's future should not lie in "supine acceptance of the belief that it is destined to be merely a transmission belt for Hollywood or Broadway." Rather, television's "moments of greatness come when it projects old things in a new form."<sup>3</sup> I contend that in 1947 and 1948 Theatre Guild did not fully embrace that philosophy and that became both the Guild's and television's loss.

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<sup>2</sup> Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, 436-437.

<sup>3</sup> Jack Gould, "Matter of Form," *New York Times*, 31 October 1948, X11

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