

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: STAGING THE PEOPLE: REVISING AND
REENVISIONING COMMUNITY IN THE
FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

Elizabeth Ann Osborne, Doctor of Philosophy, 2007

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The Federal Theatre Project (FTP, 1935-1939) stands alone as the only real attempt to create a national theatre in the United States. In the midst of one of the greatest economic and social disasters the country has experienced, and between two devastating wars, the FTP emerged from the ashes of adversity. One of the frequently lampooned Arts Projects created under the aegis of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, the FTP lived for four short, turbulent, and exhilarating years. Under the leadership of National Director Hallie Flanagan, the FTP employed more than 13,000 unemployed theatre professionals, brought some much needed emotional support to an audience of more than 30 million, and fought to provide locally relevant theatre for the people of the United States.

Yet, how does a national organization create locally relevant theatre in cities and towns throughout this diverse country? Each chapter addresses the same overarching question: How did the FTP develop a relationship with its surrounding

communities, and what were the dynamics of that relationship? The regions all dealt with the question in a manner that was unique to their experiences, and which was dependent upon the political, social, cultural, and economic issues that made the communities themselves distinct. Recognizing these differences is vital in understanding both the FTP and the concept of a national theatre in America.

This dissertation considers the perceived successes and failures of specific case studies in both urban and rural locations in four of the five major regions, the Midwest, South, East, and West. The integration of a wide breadth of material, from scripts and playbills to inquiries into the government structure, institutional power formations, and dominant discourse, shape this study into a rich cultural history. Points of entry include the Chicago FTP's productions of *O Say Can You Sing?* and *Spirochete*, Boston's *Created Equal* and *Lucy Stone*, Atlanta's *Altars of Steel* and "Georgia Experiment," and the pageants developed in Portland, Oregon. This collection of case studies suggests that the FTP served to both continue and inspire a "people's theatre," ultimately becoming one of the most successful failures of American theatre history.

STAGING THE PEOPLE:
REVISING AND REENVISIONING COMMUNITY IN THE FEDERAL
THEATRE PROJECT

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2007

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To

My parents, Jack and Mary Ann,

My son, Connor

and

Hallie Flanagan and all those who fought for the Federal Theatre Project

Acknowledgements

Like all large projects, this dissertation would not have been possible without the help of numerous individuals. My thanks to all, and my apologies to anyone I inadvertently leave out.

I am grateful for the friendship, advice and support of many people – Meg Coyle, Sandy Jackson, Lindsey Snyder, Wendy Clupper, Rick Tharpe, Kristen Williams, Nadja Masura, Korey Rothman, and Stacey Stewart. Tim Osborne copied many, many things for me, carried books, attacked the microfilm at the library, and provided support during my Masters and Doctoral processes. Mary Karen Dahl, Cameron Jackson and Lynn Hogan held back the tide so that I could finish. Special thanks to Natalya Baldyga for her ever-present cheerleading, support, and help with titles – even when she was as exhausted and busy as I was.

Many archivists generously gave of their time and wisdom at the National Archives and Records Administration, Library of Congress, George Mason University's Special Collections & Archives, and the many other archives, universities, public libraries, and historical societies throughout the country that became a part of this study. Their knowledge and willingness to share it repeatedly astounded me.

Susan Kattwinkel edited the volume in which my article appeared, *Theatre Symposium: Tours of the South*; her advice helped me to step up my scholarship for the real world. I also presented many parts of this dissertation in various forms at Theatre Symposium, the International Federation for Theatre Research, the International Conference on Arts and Humanities, and the American Comparative

Literature Association; thank you to all who asked great questions and talked to me about the Federal Theatre Project. John Bush Jones, my thesis advisor, allowed me to change my topic at the last minute so I could look into a national theatre and get hooked on the Federal Theatre Project.

I am grateful for the challenges and training provided by my graduate mentors. I wrote my first paper on the Federal Theatre Project in one of Catherine Schuler's classes; her comments have stayed with me and helped to make this coherent. Jackson Bryer's love of American Theatre helped sustain me when it seemed everyone else wanted to work on the Europeans. Susan Haedicke's patience is also greatly appreciated. Frank Hildy's enthusiasm for history inspired me to question and continue in my quest. Barry Witham's research on the Federal Theatre Project inspired much of my own interest and provided a model for my own work. Brian Richardson stepped in at the last moment, generously giving his time and energy. And special thanks to Heather Nathans, who seemed to sense when I needed to be pushed, left alone, or sent out into the world. Her energy, love of the archives, and unflagging confidence drove my project forward; without her, I doubt I would have made it this far.

Special thanks to my parents, Jack and Mary Ann Stees. My father earned a Ph.D. in Microbiology, worked for twenty-five years and retired, only to become my research assistant. My mother picked up where I could not, caring for my son when I attended conferences, dashed off to the archives, or was in the depths of writing. Finally, my son Connor consistently asked how "mommy's thing" was going and made me take time out to laugh and experience life.

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List of Abbreviations

CCC Civilian Conservation Corps

CIO Congress of Industrial Organizations

CWA Civil Works Administration

FERA Federal Emergency Relief Association

FTP Federal Theatre Project

GMU George Mason University

LOC Library of Congress

NARA National Archives and Records Administration

NEA National Endowment for the Arts

SWOC Steel Workers' Organizing Committee

WPA Works Progress Administration/Works Projects Administration

*When quoting, I have retained the capitalizations, underlines, and spellings. Many of the FTP documents underline play titles, while others use quotation marks or all capital letters.

Introduction

A National Theatre?

[In the Federal Theatre Project] the American artist and the American audience were brought face to face and the result was an astonishment needled with excitement such as neither the American artist nor the American audience had ever felt before.¹

~Anonymous

I am convinced that all these theatres, group and Federal stages in which the feeling of community is alive will lay the ground for an American national theatre, a real people's theatre, which is devoted to the cultural development of this great country.²

~Ernst Toller

Six years ago, as I was writing my Masters Thesis on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), I found myself wondering why the United States had no national theatre and if, in a country as diverse as this one, it was possible to have a truly national theatre. My interest quickly shifted from the problematic NEA to the equally problematic Federal Theatre Project (FTP). The FTP, so full of optimism and fraught with trouble, reminded me of King Kong or Godzilla; it possessed great strength and power when left to its own devices, but was destroyed once it was perceived as a danger, by one tiny bullet at a time. The FTP, a gigantic theatrical enterprise if ever there was one, battled vainly against its local, regional, and national opponents, retreated to the safety of traditionally successful productions and topics when threatened, and eventually stumbled and fell in a barrage of political fire that

¹ "Unemployed Arts," *Fortune* (May 1937), 112.

² "200,000 New Words Credited to U.S.," *New York Times*, 10 November 1936, 23.

questioned its politics and – more importantly perhaps – its relevance to American culture.

The FTP stands alone as the only real attempt at creating a national theatre in the United States. In the midst of one of the greatest economic and social disasters the country has ever experienced, and between two devastating wars, the FTP emerged from the ashes of adversity. One of the frequently lampooned Arts Projects created under the aegis of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, the FTP was established in 1935 and lived for four short, turbulent, and exhilarating years. Under the leadership of National Director Hallie Flanagan, the FTP employed more than 13,000 unemployed theatre professionals throughout the country, brought theatre to an audience of more than 30 million, and fought to provide locally relevant theatre for the people of the United States.³

In addition to putting thousands of unemployed theatre professionals back to work, Flanagan and her FTP struggled to provide some much needed emotional and moral support for a struggling nation. The project established five regional centers: New York (New York), Boston (Northeast), Chicago (Midwest), Los Angeles (West), and New Orleans (South).⁴ Each center was designed to develop locally relevant theatre, and to serve as a resource for the rural areas surrounding it. According to Flanagan, the dual objectives of the FTP focused on both the actor and audience, both

³ Though this dissertation will not focus on the life of Hallie Flanagan, she is a fascinating woman. Further information can be found in: Hallie Flanagan, *Arena* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1940); Jane DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967); and Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988).

⁴ Jane De Hart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 30-31.

sorely in need of physical, psychological, or emotional relief. When preparing to testify before Representative Martin Dies and the House Committee on Un-American Activities about the FTP in 1938-1939, Flanagan defended her tenure as National Director, saying her goal had been to:

Give employment to needy theatre professionals in socially useful projects which will rehabilitate them, conserve their skills, and at the same time, bring to thousands of American citizens not hitherto able to afford theatre going, a planned theatrical program, national in scope, regional in emphasis, and American in democratic attitude.⁵

This telling comment thinly concealed the battle-scars of nearly four years of political strife and scuffles between the FTP and the United States government.

Though the FTP was lampooned by theatre professionals, political activists, and congressmen throughout its existence for alleged indiscretions ranging from communism to homosexuality, Flanagan and the FTP accomplished some monumental feats. The FTP opened the door to the professional stage for actors, directors, playwrights, and designers, offering a steady paycheck, training with established professionals, and performance opportunities to African Americans, Jews, Hispanics, and many other ethnic and religious groups. The FTP nurtured such talents as Orson Welles, John Houseman, Rose McClendon, Theodore Ward, Arthur Miller, Studs Terkel, and Marc Blitzstein, and employed the talents of theatre notables including Elmer Rice, Edith Isaacs, Eugene O'Neill, Clifford Odets, Philip Barber, Hiram Motherwell, Eddie Dowling, Thomas Wood Stevens, J. Howard

⁵ Hallie Flanagan, "Excerpts from National Director's Report, January, 1939," *Federal Theatre*, NARA, Entry 920, Regional Publications Describing Federal Theatre Activities, 1936-39, Box 357, "The Prompter," 1.

Miller, John McGee, and Rosamund Gilder.⁶ The American version of the Russian Living Newspaper first appeared on FTP stages, and genres ranging from magical realism to children's theatre, vaudeville to modern dance lived again in the poorly funded homes of the FTP.

In addition, the FTP reached millions of audience members who had never before seen live theatre by taking it into communities across the country.⁷ This accomplishment is even more impressive in light of the constraints the FTP faced in New York City and other major urban centers. In New York, the FTP was to refrain from infringing on the Broadway audiences by restricting its activities to specific locations north of 52nd Street and south of 42nd Street. The FTP violated this "gentlemen's agreement" on numerous occasions, often earning petitions and complaints from Broadway's producers and theatre managers. In a terse reply to one of these petitions, *Sunday Worker* theatre critic John Cambridge described the typical FTP audience member:

Anybody who frequents the shows produced by the WPA must realize that the audiences attending them are, in fact, different in quality from those normally to be seen on the floor of a Broadway theatre. Most obviously, they are less prosperous in appearance. They look more like the people seen in the subways, and in the poorer residential streets, and for the very good reason that the Federal Theatre audiences are drawn from these people - in other words, the masses of New York, who have neither the money nor the time to

⁶ Hallie Flanagan, *Arena* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1940), 42-44.

⁷ Nationally, it would appear that the goal of locating and playing to a new audience was successfully met; of the thirty million audience members that the FTP reached, 60-65% were attending a play for the first time, and nearly 75% of first-timers listed the prohibitive expense as the reason. "Pinocchio Dies in New York as Federal Theatre Drops Curtain," *Life*, 17 July 1939, 20; John O'Connor, "The Federal Theatre Project's Search for an Audience," in *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980*, ed. by Bruce A. McConachie and Daniel Friedman (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), 171-172.

waste on what the 22 managers modestly describe as “the bulk of the product of the American theatre,” which they (!) “create.”⁸

The FTP audience, described here in opposition to the commercial theatre audience, was often referred to by Flanagan and other FTP officials. Also referred to as the “people’s theatre,” the FTP catered to this working class audience, ultimately drawing the vast majority of its audience members from this group.

In spite of these monumental achievements, the FTP was consistently berated by critics for lack of quality and professionalism, by theatre professionals for infringing on their audiences and jobs, and by anti-New Deal politicians searching for a clear and obvious target in the Roosevelt administration. Though it died after four short years, the FTP was, I would argue, one of the most “successful failures” in the history of American theatre, leaving behind hundreds of thousands of people and communities who clamored for the return of the FTP and strove to continue their own local theatre movements. Unfortunately, the FTP was also the most visible of the Arts Projects, and as such, became the scapegoat for anyone hoping to make a name for him or herself by taking a shot at Roosevelt’s New Deal.

As I investigated the FTP over the past few years, my interest shifted away from the question of commercial viability and success, and from the prominent New York-based productions that have received so much scholarly attention, and toward the relationship that developed between the FTP and the small communities throughout the nation that housed the various regional theatre units. I began to wonder how the FTP, a national organization operating under the (self-imposed) directive to find and/or create locally relevant drama, went about this challenging

⁸ John Cambridge, “Federal Theatre Draws the Fire of Some Defenders of Commercial Drama,” *Sunday Worker*, 29 May 1938, 12.

proposition. Specifically, what strategies did the different units employ to locate their audiences, determine what constituted regionally and locally relevant drama, create that relevant drama, and bring in both veteran audiences and those that had never attended professional theatre before? Why and how did the FTP integrate itself so successfully into some communities, while failing miserably in others? How did the communities that hosted FTP units affect and alter the FTP on both local and national levels, and how did the regional impact of the project affect those communities? The strategies developed by the FTP and the varied reactions of the communities – both the official leadership and the “people” – remain the heart of my study.

Review of the Literature

This was an attempt, really, to engage the whole population in the theatre.⁹
~Arthur Miller

The theatre wasn't just for people who spent money at the box office . . .¹⁰
~ William Farnsworth

Certainly, the FTP does not suffer from a lack of scholarly attention. From the respected work of Barry Witham, Jane de Hart Mathews, and Lorraine Brown to Tim Robbins' film version of *The Cradle Will Rock*, the FTP has served as an exhilarating example of the potential of an American national theatre. Most FTP scholars would agree that the initial foray into any study on the FTP should begin with Hallie Flanagan's *Arena*; this memoir of the project, written by the National

⁹ Arthur Miller, interview, *Who Killed the Federal Theatre?*, prod. Ira H. Klugerman and Bonnie Nelson Schwartz, dir. Stephen L. Rabin, 90 min., Educational Film Center, 2002, DVD.

¹⁰ William Farnsworth, Interview by John O'Connor, 16 March 1977, Pompano Beach, Florida, WPA Oral Histories Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 6.

Director in the year immediately following the project's demise, provides a detailed, personal, and intense account of the achievements and failings of the FTP. Numerous other contemporary accounts of the FTP exist as well, many of which are predominantly biographical in nature.¹¹ This focus on the individual artist (or director, technician, writer, designer, stagehand, actor, playreader, etc.) continued with the rediscovery of FTP documents in a deserted airplane hangar in 1974.¹² Lorraine Brown and John O'Connor, the two George Mason University scholars credited with discovering the lost Library of Congress documents, continued the privileging of the individual with an extensive oral history project in which they interviewed all of the FTP personnel they could find.¹³ The recent *Voices from the Federal Theatre*, by Bonnie Nelson Schwartz, and the accompanying film *Who Killed the Federal Theatre?* follow this tradition as well.

General overviews of the FTP on a national level include Jane de Hart Mathews' *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics*, a doctoral dissertation which emerged prior to the discovery of the missing FTP documents, but completed with the assistance of Flanagan's personal papers and numerous personal interviews with Flanagan and other FTP personnel. Loren Kruger also includes a chapter on the FTP in the context of a national theatre in *The National Stage: Theatre*

¹¹ See John Houseman's *Run-Through*, Tony Buttita's (with Barry Witham) *Uncle Sam Presents: A Memoir of the Federal Theatre*, Elmer Rice's *The Living Theatre*, and Willson Whitman's *Bread and Circuses* as examples of the many biographical approaches to the FTP.

¹² A detailed discussion of the fate of these documents between their hasty packing in 1939 and their discovery in 1974 can be found in John Y. Cole, "Amassing American Stuff: the Library of Congress and the Federal Arts Projects on the 1930s," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* (Fall 1983).

¹³ Brown and O'Connor's book, *Free, Adult, Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project*, includes pictures and original documents available for the first time as well as the beginnings of what would become a far-reaching oral history endeavor.

and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America. Reginald Bain's dissertation, "The Federal Government and Theatre: A History of Federal Involvement in Theatre from the End of the Federal Theatre Project in 1939 to the Establishment of the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities in 1965," likewise discusses the FTP in a broad sense. These overviews provide general information on the FTP as a whole, including a breakdown of the extensive bureaucratic structure of the organization, details of the major people involved, obstacles the FTP struggled to overcome in the different regions, and often include specific information on a few key productions. The FTP is also touched on in many studies of the New Deal and the Arts Projects during Great Depression, including William McDonald's *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, Broadus Mitchell's *Depression Decade: From New Era through New Deal, 1929-1941*, and Casper Nannes' *Politics in the American Drama*.¹⁴

Due to the extraordinary breadth of the FTP, primary materials abound and are located throughout the United States. Many of the towns and cities that hosted

¹⁴ Subsequent work on the FTP encompasses a wide range of approaches and subject matter. Barry Witham's article entitled "The Economic Structure of the Federal Theatre Project" details the often convoluted, always extensively documented, financial dealings of the project, while Rena Fraden's *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, Glenda Gill's *White Grease Paint on Black Performers: A Study of the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, and E. Quita Craig's *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era* focus on the contributions made and obstacles faced by various Negro Units, performers, playwrights, and directors. Other studies, such as John O'Connor's "The Federal Theatre Project's Search for an Audience" (in *Theatre for Working Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980*) document the FTP efforts to seek out a new, working class audience that would allow the creation of a truly national theatre. Much attention has also been focused on censorship within the FTP, as is evidenced by dissertations such as Judith Brussell's "Government Investigations of Federal Theatre Project Personnel in the Works Progress Administration, 1935-1939 (The Show Must Not Go On)" and Michael McCandless' "The Last Dress Rehearsal: A Critical Study of the Production and Censorship of the Federal Theatre Project's, *Ethiopia* (1936)." Finally, the recent trajectory of FTP research appears to be moving in the direction of addressing specific productions and locations; Barry Witham's *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study*, which focuses on FTP activities in Seattle, is a good example of this new focus.

FTP Units retain a small archive somewhere in the public library or state archives; for the most part, these collections contain information specific to the local FTP, and include information on the productions, prominent staff members, and legal scuffles with local authorities. The Birmingham Public Library, for example, has a clippings file related specifically to the Birmingham Unit of the FTP. Likewise, the Special Collections & Rare Books Department at the University of Georgia, Athens, contains a small selection of documents relating to a local Atlantan who acted in the Atlanta Unit productions.

The majority of FTP documents, however, are split between the Library of Congress and the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, MD. These collections contain well over a million documents related to the production and administrative records of the FTP. George Mason University's extensive oral history project features the stories of several hundred WPA workers, and GMU has become the heir apparent to many of the (largely unprocessed) personal collections of FTP personnel, including scripts, programs, photographs and scrapbooks. For the purposes of this study, I focused on the multiple versions of the scripts and production information, as well as the vast amounts of administrative information that corresponded to specific people and productions of interest. Thus, both the Library of Congress and National Archives are vital sources, as is the collection at George Mason University. Hallie Flanagan's personal papers are located at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection in the New York Public Library; when I could locate relevant information, these papers provided an entirely different, unofficial perspective to the events unfolding in the FTP.

Methods

Each chapter of this study focuses on one region, often on a specific FTP unit located in a single city within that region. I have created a series of case studies centered on specific scripts or activities that will, I hope, reveal some of the numerous challenges the FTP encountered in trying to create locally relevant theatre in diverse regions across the nation. To this end, I have chosen plays and topics based on three factors. First, Flanagan or a local high-ranking FTP official points to a specific play as vitally important to the success of the FTP in that region. Second, the play's subject matter or execution has local relevance, either in an early draft or in the produced version; the majority of the plays featured in these pages saw their first production on FTP stages, and many were written explicitly for the FTP. Finally, on a practical level, the materials required for this type of study are available.

This study is historical in nature, and involves extensive use of archival and other primary materials. My methodology parallels highly regarded cultural historians such as Robert Darnton, Lynn Hunt, and Natalie Zemon Davis. Concerned with integrating a given object of study in the context of its entire surrounding culture, Darnton explains that cultural history:

[B]egins from the premise that individual expression takes place within a general idiom, that we learn to classify sensations and make sense of things by thinking within a framework provided by our culture. It therefore should be possible for the historian to discover the social dimension of thought and to tease meaning from documents by relating them to the surrounding world of significance, passing from text to context and back again until he has cleared a way through a foreign mental world.¹⁵

¹⁵ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999), 6.

Darnton advocates a focus on not only the dominant, but also the so-called “low” culture, advising that the historian use confusion as a point of entry: “When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning. The thread might even lead into a strange and wonderful world view.”¹⁶

My investigations have been influenced not only by the standard print resources such as newspapers, diaries, scrapbooks, scripts, memos, and letters, but also by what Davis refers to as “associational life and collective behavior,” evidence that Davis points to as “cultural artifacts.”¹⁷ Richard Johnson identifies this branch of cultural studies as the “culturalist” line, noting debts to E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, as well as anthropology, sociology, and social history. He writes that this approach “regards culture as a complete way of life that is accessible through the details that are left behind by that culture” and attempts to represent the “cultural experience.”¹⁸ Thus, when delving into the history of groups of people that did not sustain a written record of their histories, I have made use of storytelling, informal

¹⁶ Ibid, 5.

¹⁷ While I do not contend that the working class (or the unemployed) of the Great Depression comprise an “alien” system per se, it is reasonable to assume that they inhabited a socially, economically, and culturally different world; a man who had previously worked hard to remain independent, lost his job without warning, and was forced to take his family to live in a shanty town or Hooverville, would have a different world view than the modern day working class – in spite of the economic downturn of recent years. As L. P. Hartley wrote in his 1953 novel, *The Go-Between*, “The past is another country. They do things differently there.” Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1965), xvi; L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: H. Hamilton, 1953), 1.

¹⁸ Richard Johnson, “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?,” *Social Text* 16 (1986-1987, Winter), 50.

oral histories, notable disturbances, riots, and other cultural or social events that illuminate the relationship between the community and its local FTP; as Davis argues, “a book or a proverb not only could speak for its author or reader, but could be a clue to relationships among groups of people and among cultural traditions.”¹⁹

While these examples presented in this study may seem to have little in common, I would argue that they each provide a point of entry to a study dedicated to discovering the ways in which “cultures shape ways of thinking, even for the greatest thinkers.”²⁰ In this case, however, I would suggest that culture shapes ways of thinking, but that ways of thinking also shape that culture; that is to say, the power of shaping and altering the worldview is at least a two-way street, and likely considerably more complex. Each chapter addresses the same overarching question: How did the FTP develop a relationship with its surrounding community, and what were the dynamics of that relationship? Each region deals with the question in a manner that is unique to its specific FTP units and experiences, and which is dependent upon the political, social, cultural, and economic issues that make the communities themselves distinct. These differences provide insight into both the local FTP and the communities themselves. In some cases, the FTP’s methods reveal an organization that is ill-equipped to deal with decentralization while others have difficulty with the national administration and the FTP as one single, national entity. The disconnect between the non-New York City units and the perception of FTP as a

¹⁹ Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, xvii.

²⁰ Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, 6.

whole is seen clearly enough in an exchange Flanagan recounts after the closing of the FTP:

Ten days after an Act of Congress ended the Federal Theatre a congressman telephoned my Washington office. I expected condolences, but that was not the intent of the call.

“I’ve always been very much interested in the Federal Theatre and its work in our State, and a few weeks ago I suggested that a certain fine professional actor of my acquaintance be considered for your rolls. I’ve heard nothing, and my friend, who is very much in need of work, is getting impatient.”

I told the Congressman that I would look up the particular case and inform him, and then I added, “Of course, you know, however, that the Federal Theatre is no longer in existence.”

There was a stunned silence and then an ear-shattering, “WHAT!”

“Surely you know, Congressman, that the Federal Theatre was abolished on June 30 by Act of Congress?”

Again a loud silence. Then a shocked and heavy voice said, “Was that the Federal Theatre?”²¹

That this member of Congress failed to link the FTP with the smaller units in the cities and towns of his own state demonstrates both the strength and weakness of the FTP; some local units acted as miniature New York City units while others separated themselves from the national organization almost entirely. Newspaper clippings regarding units across the country suggest that this distinct separation was not confined to members of Congress. In town after town, newspaper critics comment on whatever FTP is opening and fail to mention that the FTP (including their own unit) will soon be a relic of the past.

²¹ Hallie Flanagan, “Congress Takes the Stage,” *New York Times*, 20 August 1939, sec. 9, p. 1.

Chapter Breakdown

If Federal Theatre had ever wanted to produce a cycle of plays epitomizing its own projects, New York would have been staged as a living newspaper, Los Angeles as a musical comedy, the South as a folk play, and Chicago as melodrama.²²

~ Hallie Flanagan

This dissertation, like the FTP itself, is divided into regions. In this way, I hope to clarify the relationship between the FTP and specific communities in the Midwest, South, East, and West, both urban and rural. The integration of a wide breadth of material, from play texts and playbills to inquiries into the government structure, institutional power formations, and dominant discourse, shape this study into a detailed cultural history of the FTP and its surrounding communities. While the chapters focus on the same overarching questions about the FTP's relationships with specific communities, the unique needs of each region dictate the particulars of the chapters.

Chapter One, "Darkness in the White City," traces the evolution of two groundbreaking productions in Chicago. *O Say Can You Sing* (1936-7) and *Spirochete* (1938) represent two very different agendas that characterized the division between the administration and the workers, and their understandings of success. Administrators like George Kondolf and Harry Minturn led Chicago with an eye toward commercial box office success, while many of the writers, actors, and designers employed in Chicago looked to artistic innovation and experimentation as the contribution the FTP could make to American theatre. *O Say Can You Sing* began as a wicked parody of Chicago's infamous democratic machine, gangsters, immigrant

²² Flanagan, *Arena*, 134.

populations, and even Mrs. Roosevelt; yet by the time the show opened an innocuous revue replaced the parody. In contrast, *Spirochete*, a public health play on the syphilis epidemic strongly supported by Susan Glaspell of the Midwest Play Bureau and many of the people working on the play, received mixed support from the FTP administration, saw relatively poor box office receipts, yet was designated by numerous critics as the single justification for all money spent on the FTP.

In Chapter Two, “Demythologizing American Ideology: Collisions of Past and Present in the East,” I analyze two pieces written exclusively for Massachusetts audiences, *Created Equal* (1937) and *Lucy Stone* (1938/9). According to Flanagan, the FTP found its niche in Boston with John Hunter Booth’s *Created Equal*. Tracing the themes of freedom and equality, as well as the struggles of the working class against the landowners, *Created Equal* was praised by critics as “the stuff that makes history a vivid study for those unmoved by textbooks” and criticized for romanticizing the role of the masses.²³ *Created Equal* inverts the traditional story of American History in a city famous for its role in nation formation. In sharp contrast, Maud Wood Park’s *Lucy Stone* portrays the Massachusetts suffragette’s efforts to bring about racial and sexual equality. Written by a former president of the League of Women Voters and based on a biography of Lucy Stone, the FTP’s revision of *Lucy Stone* told a traditional history in a way that would make Bostonians proud; Lucy Stone was a proud, independent woman whose forward-thinking ideas and perseverance ultimately led to social change. The two productions illustrate an underlying struggle that the Boston FTP (and much of the Eastern Region) faced

²³ From *The Salem News*, qtd. in Flanagan, *Arena*, 228.

throughout its lifetime; constantly overshadowed by the exciting, ground-breaking activities of New York City, the Boston FTP fought for legitimacy in the eyes of Bostonians.²⁴

The third chapter, “‘The Great Theatrical Desert:’ Federal Theatre in the South,” focuses on FTP activities in the South. The FTP never “caught on” in the Southern Region with the intensity seen in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, or any number of smaller cities or towns in these other areas, a fact many scholars ascribe to both the southern audience’s inability to relate to popular Broadway-style productions and the lackluster regional drama available during the period. However, this assessment skims the surface of the FTP’s efforts in the South. *Altars of Steel* (1937) is an example of a production that was actually dangerously relevant, powerful theatre; described by Flanagan as the Federal Theatre’s “most important southern production,”²⁵ this southern social-labor drama premiered in Atlanta to hot debate, critical acclaim, and sold-out houses. In Chapter Three I will explore the ways in which *Altars of Steel* both reflected and challenged the social, political, and economic hegemony of the South. Similarly, the so-called “Georgia Experiment” serves as an example of the grassroots form of “folk theatre” that was believed to be so relevant to the people the FTP hoped to serve. This glimpse outside of the urban centers is vital to the understanding of the idealized, decentralized FTP that Flanagan privileged.

Chapter Four, “The Difficulties of Documenting Success: Disappearing Frontiers in the West,” studies the FTP in Portland and Mt. Hood, Oregon. The

²⁴ Flanagan, *Arena*, 226-7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

Portland FTP was a small unit with a primarily conservative program, but unlike the majority of the FTP units in the country, the Portland companies created theatre that capitalized on the strengths of the company members and the region. In many ways, the Portland FTP is an example of a FTP success story; it employed the relief workers in Portland (and grew as the relief population increased), created and performed locally relevant drama, and recruited new audience members by offering entertainment that they enjoyed for little or no admission fee. Yet comparatively few documents relating to Portland remain in the archival record. In this chapter, I investigate the practices of the Portland FTP as possible, suggest potential reasons for the lack of data, and theorize ways of dealing with absences in the archive.

Flanagan's expectations for the FTP were high; she knew that great difficulty lay ahead and faced it with relentless optimism and seemingly boundless energy. She knew that her audience would not come easily; this "is a hard audience to get because if you can only pay 25 cents or 55 cents for an evening's entertainment, you are going to think a long time about it."²⁶ Yet, under Flanagan's leadership, the FTP grew from a relief agency into an organization that had the potential to become a national theatre:

Our most urgent task is to make our theatre worthy of its audience. It is of no value whatsoever to stimulate theatre-going unless, once inside our doors, our audience sees something which has some vital connection with their own lives and their own immediate problems.²⁷

²⁶ "W.P.A. Lures Mass to Theater, Says Director," *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 May 1936, Works Progress Administration Clippings Files, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

²⁷ Hallie Flanagan, "The People's Theatre Grows Stronger," *Federal Theatre*, I, no. 6 (May 1936), 6.

Flanagan's task – to create a theatre that was “worthy of its audience” in quality and devoted to their lives and “immediate problems” – demanded a decentralized program that would capitalize on local talents and themes. Hampered by a litany of problems, Flanagan's FTP struggled valiantly through its four years to do exactly that. The case studies that follow show some of the most important successes and the failures; often, the productions discussed on the following pages were deemed turning points for the FTP, and they invariably represent the few pieces that were created specifically for the FTP.

The major plays of the FTP – *The Cradle Will Rock*, *The Swing Mikado*, and “*Voodoo*” *MacBeth*, to name a few – the colorful and experimental New York City projects, and the pitched battles with Congress and the Dies Committee have absorbed much of the attention directed toward the FTP. It is the thousands of plays that happened in cities and towns throughout the country that truly address Flanagan's intentions for the FTP though. Just as Barry Witham's recent *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* paints a detailed portrait of the personalities, administrative issues, obstacles, and successes in Seattle, this study begins to address this gap in Chicago, Boston, Birmingham, Atlanta, and Portland, looking at new plays and projects developed by and for the FTP, and placing them within their cultural moments.

Throughout its lifetime, the FTP served a nation in desperate need of entertainment and expression. The case studies included here provide a unique lens through which to view the FTP on its own terms. By applying Flanagan's ideals for the FTP to these specific projects, we can begin to unravel what actually happened in

a few of the many FTP units outside of New York City. I have tried to provide both detailed readings of key plays and events within the complexities of their surrounding cultures, and a larger look at the differences inherent in the regional projects throughout the nation. I suggest that this type of study gives a fairer overall picture of the FTP's aspirations, actions, successes, and failures by considering it as a truly national theatre.

Chapter 1: Darkness in the White City – Unearthing Shadows in Chicago

The theatre's too safe now. It used to be quite a dangerous pastime in Chicago – you never knew when you'd get mixed up with a first-class shooting.¹

~ Harry Minturn

Harry Minturn's quote has a strange nostalgic quality about it. As he described it, theatre in Chicago used to be physically dangerous. In the 1920s, when Minturn ran his own stock company in Chicago, Al Capone was one of his chief subscribers. Capone always purchased sixteen tickets, two for himself and fourteen strategically placed throughout the theatre for his bodyguards. Capone's 1929 arrest preceded a change in the theatre as well; by the early 1930s, the theatre in Chicago was stripped of its political and social "danger"; experimental or controversial works slipped away, sometimes quietly and sometimes with a bang. And so, in spite of the many benefits that an otherwise thriving theatre town offered, the FTP faced a series of difficulties as it struggled to establish its identity and local relevance in the Windy City. Many of these problems could be attributed to leadership, within both the structure of the city and the local FTP. In Chicago, the Democratic machine ruled. When the FTP's goals were in harmony with those of Mayor Edward Kelly, political support seemed limitless; on those occasions when their goals conflicted, however, the FTP inevitably lost.

¹ Harry Minturn was the third and final director of the Chicago FTP. Qtd. in Flanagan, *Arena*, 134.

Flanagan described Chicago as a melodrama, which “started like a detective thriller with farcical elements, worked up through a series of what Mr. Webster’s dictionary calls ‘sensational incidents and startling situations,’ and reached magnificent heights of absurdity”² As Flanagan explained, the FTP would have to earn the respect of its audience with a theatrical success of some kind in order to gain admittance to this thrilling, sensational and magnificently absurd city. The nature of what would constitute success in Chicago remained hotly debated by members of the FTP from the project’s outset until it closed its doors in the summer of 1939. The series of local project heads focused on popular, commercial work that would bring in large audiences and receive at least lukewarm reviews from the generally hostile press. In contrast, the Midwestern Play Bureau (led by Susan Glaspell), its developing playwrights, and many of the actors, sought an avant-garde, experimental program that would push the boundaries of the theatre. A clash between these two forces was to be expected.

While the conflict between commercial and experimental works infiltrated nearly every unit of the FTP, the disparity was particularly strong in Chicago. The strong theatre community already in place laid the foundation for a FTP that had the potential to produce exciting, professional theatre from the beginning with little retraining. The Chicago units received a large share of FTP funds and were intended to supply the region with training opportunities, equipment, designs and designers, and the many other resources that most of the units could not afford.³ Susan Glaspell

² Flanagan, *Arena*, 134.

³ Chicago received the majority of the FTP resources in the Midwest because it housed the majority of workers eligible for relief. The WPA setup dictated that funding be directed toward salary,

actively recruited young playwrights for the Midwest Play Bureau, and her own penchant was for experimental work. Finally, the Chicago FTP enjoyed one of the most effective business administration arrangements in the country. However, the local administration focused on commercial success. Worse, they struggled to make a splash in the city, while avoiding attracting the attention of city censors. The resulting tension between commercial and artistic success plagued the Chicago FTP. In many ways, the Chicago FTP could have learned a valuable lesson from Aesop's fable entitled "The Man, The Boy, and the Donkey." As the wise old man explains to the man and the boy, "That will teach you . . . Please all, and you will please none."⁴

In this chapter, I will examine two major Chicago productions, *O Say Can You Sing* (1936) and *Spirochete* (1938). Both of these pieces were deemed "worth analysis" by Flanagan because they were "Made in Chicago."⁵ Chicago FTP workers wrote these productions expressly for performance by the FTP in Chicago. In these plays it is particularly revealing to discuss the revisions (and the impetus behind these revisions) to the texts. In order to do so, I will set the stage by providing background into Chicago's political and social situation with an emphasis on information that is particularly relevant to the productions in question. Specifically, *O Say Can You Sing* deals largely with political and social humor, while *Spirochete* focuses on Chicago's

and that only 10% of the total expenditure go toward other-than-labor costs, including scenery, costumes, publicity, theatre rentals, royalties, and the salaries of anyone hired outside of the WPA guidelines. Effectively, this meant that the larger the number of workers a project employed, the more money it would have to spend on these other needs; projects with only a few workers relied on shared resources with larger projects or community donations.

⁴ Aesop, "The Man, the Boy, and the Donkey," *Aesop's Fables*, Advantage Version, Project Gutenberg, Online e-text, <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext92/aesopa10.txt>, Accessed 8 March 2007.

⁵ Flanagan, *Arena*, 138.

battle with syphilis. Both plays illustrate the friction in the Chicago project due to the questions of commercial or artistic advancement.

The Federal Theatre Project in Chicago

Unstable Leadership

Like the projects in New York and Los Angeles, the Chicago Federal Theatre offered a variety of different venues, both to lure potential audience members into the theatre and to employ the variety of performance professionals that were on relief. In addition to the Americana unit established by Thomas Wood Stevens, the first head of the Chicago FTP, the Vaudeville and Negro Units became popular with audiences. The most famous production of the Chicago project is probably the 1938 *Swing Mikado*, stylized by Chicago project director Harry Minturn and performed by the Negro Company to great acclaim. The production eventually moved to Broadway in the midst of an FTP scandal that led to the firing of Regional Director John McGee.⁶ While a fascinating study, *The Swing Mikado* has been amply covered in scholarship and is an example of the adaptation of a production as opposed to the creation of a piece of theatre for a local audience; thus, it will not be a part of this study.

From its beginnings in late 1935 through the summer of 1936, the Chicago FTP produced revivals of safe, commercially successful shows, vaudeville, and the

⁶ John McGee was an integral member of the FTP national administration and a close friend of Hallie Flanagan. The story surrounding *The Swing Mikado* was fraught with turmoil and documented closely. The report cited here was labeled "Personal and Confidential," and only declassified by the National Archives in 1999. "Narrative Report of Events Leading to Dismissal of John McGee as Regional and State Director of the Federal Theatre Project," NARA, E839, General Correspondence of the National Office, Box 15, "Mikado" – Rpt. RE: Dismissal of John McGee & "Mikado" - Investigations.

occasional dance piece. Flanagan remained unimpressed by this conservative approach, and repeatedly noted the lack of a real “hit” in the city. She attributed this to Stevens’ administrative failures.⁷ When Stevens resigned, citing ill health and an overcommitted schedule, Flanagan did not protest and quickly went to work locating a suitable replacement. Her answer to the Chicago unit’s need for leadership was George Kondolf, a young, moderately well-known Broadway producer who would begin his rise to fame within the FTP as head of the Chicago Unit. Flanagan described Kondolf as a man who would get shows up and going quickly in a city that desperately needed a popular hit. Meyer Levin, whose *Model Tenement* would fall prey to the Chicago censors, described Kondolf as a “troubleshooter” who “tried to please everyone.”⁸ When Kondolf arrived, the Great Northern unit had produced three shows; the company’s publicity man explained, “two were revivals and the ‘Enemy of the People’ was a stop-gap.”⁹

One of the major problems the Chicago FTP faced was its public image as presented by the local newspapers. The internal struggles of the three major local units regarding the type of theatre they wanted to present – commercial or experimental – only exacerbated the problem. In a pivotal meeting on May 2, 1936,

⁷ Stevens ran Old Globe Theatre for several years prior to taking on the leadership position for the FTP in Chicago. Originally, the agreement between Stevens and Flanagan saw him continuing to lead both the Old Globe and the Chicago FTP. Within less than a year, it was obvious to all that the combined duties were too much for Stevens. In April 1936, he wrote to Flanagan to ask that she locate a replacement as quickly as possible. Thomas Wood Stevens, to Hallie Flanagan, 20 April 1936, NARA, E850, Correspondence with Regional Offices, Box 65, Thomas Wood Stevens.

⁸ Meyer Levin, Interview by Ellen Vanas, 4 January 1978, Herzlia, Israel, index of tape recording (no transcription available), WPA Oral Histories Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 3.

⁹ “Meeting in Chicago minutes: Publicity and Promotional activities, Great Northern Theatre, Blackstone Theatre and Negro Theatre,” 2 May 1936, NARA, E839, General Correspondence of the National Office, Box 15, Midwestern Region, 4

Flanagan introduced George Kondolf to the Chicago FTP publicity and promotional staff as the new local administrator of the FTP. The minutes of this meeting illustrate Chicago's split identity in the eyes of its administrators and staff.

The meeting began with Flanagan asking for a status update on all of the FTP publicity activities in the city. Papers owned by William Randolph Hearst, including the *Chicago American* and the *Chicago Herald-Examiner*, were "friendly but . . . governed by [anti-New Deal] policy." The *Chicago Times* was "helpful."¹⁰ The *Chicago Daily News* was the most anti-New Deal paper in the city. On May 6, 1938, it ran a front-page story titled "Plain Intolerable Intimidation," which focused on two specific instances in the previous year that "reflected in a dramatic, understandable way the steady trend of New Deal strategy toward an authoritarian state – a political state in which the executive power is supreme." It referred to Roosevelt as "power-drunk" and compared his administration to Hitler and the Nazi takeover of the German press.¹¹ In contrast, *The Defender*, one of the most widely circulated African American papers of the time, had its own agenda, but typically supported efforts of the Negro Units since they employed the paper's readers. The democratic *Chicago Tribune* was pro-New Deal and often supported the efforts of the WPA and FTP.

The minutes of this meeting also reveal a frank discussion about the merits of Chicago theatre and the preferences of Chicago audiences. When the question of reduced-price and free tickets arose, Kondolf weighed in strongly:

¹⁰ "Meeting in Chicago minutes: Publicity and Promotional activities, Great Northern Theatre, Blackstone Theatre and Negro Theatre," 2 May 1936, NARA, E839, General Correspondence of the National Office, Box 15, Midwestern Region.

¹¹ "Plain Intolerable Intimidation," *Chicago Daily News*, 6 May 1938, 1.

If the show does not get over, it should be closed. I realize you have to [reduce prices], but I think it hurts the theatre terribly and has in every other large city. I do not want to upset what you are doing now, but in the future I would like to have an established price.¹²

Flanagan agreed, noting that New York fought the same battle and came out ahead.

Discussion continued on the “temperament of the city,” and Flanagan concluded that the FTP should “cash in on the fact that Chicago likes entertainment.” She went on:

If you prefer to have no experimental theatre – very well, but I would like to stress again that the only chance the theatre has to make a success is to do something exciting. I would hate to see in any city a complete barring of experimental plays because of box office, although we need it to some extent. But unless we do some of these experimental plays, what is the use.¹³

This statement, and Flanagan’s apparently contradictory statements about needing a popular hit in Chicago, illustrates one of her strategies for expanding the FTP.

Flanagan planned to draw new audiences into the theatre with exciting, accessible work. For Flanagan, the initial challenge was to bring new audiences physically away from the movies and other forms of entertainment, and into the theatres. Once the FTP established an audience in a given location, Flanagan planned to shift the emphasis to engaging that audience in the creation of locally and socially relevant theatre. In this way the FTP would become a national theatre with the potential for a life beyond the WPA and relief.

Though Flanagan supported the use of experimental pieces, she conceded the importance of box office receipts as proof of the popularity of the FTP for the newspapers and governmental bodies that required progress reports on the impact of the FTP. She also gave mixed messages, referring to the importance of experimental

¹² Ibid, 3.

¹³ Ibid, 4.

forms on one side, while pointing to Chicago's "temperament" as one that enjoys entertainment. While experimental pieces can be entertaining, that is rarely the primary description of the avant-garde.

On the trip to Chicago to begin his new position, Kondolf planned his strategy. Flanagan wrote:

The first thing he wanted to do was to review all the vaudeville talent, get hold of composers and choreographers, and write and stage a Chicago review. The Federal Theatre Project itself seemed to afford thematic possibilities; by the time we got to Chicago, Mr. Kondolf had a plan for *O Say Can You Sing*, the first big original show which was to make history by running for seven months.¹⁴

Clearly, Kondolf's own leanings were toward the commercially successful productions. When asked about his intentions regarding the FTP as a whole, he replied, "I hoped that it might eventually become a national theatre. I thought it was a good opportunity for that. And I think my interest in it was primarily to make it as good as I could, to create shows that people would want to see." He specifically noted that he found political overtones un-theatrical and harmful to the production quality, and that he wanted his productions to be theatrically (as opposed to politically) successful.¹⁵ For Kondolf, the FTP would gain respect as a national theatre through well-produced, commercially successful programs.

Kondolf pursued openings enthusiastically. Through the summer and fall of 1936, Kondolf opened a series of plays in quick succession, including *Broken Dishes*, *Burning the Mortgage*, *A Cry for Life*, *End of the Row*, *Everyman*, *No Angels Singing*,

¹⁴ Flanagan, *Arena*, 138.

¹⁵ George Kondolf, Interview by Lorraine Brown, 21 February 1976, Rumson, New Jersey, tape recording, WPA Oral Histories Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 4.

Quagmire, *The Royal Family*, and *Youth Through the Ages*. In October he supervised *It Can't Happen Here*, part of the FTP simultaneous nation-wide opening.¹⁶ Kondolf eventually graduated to a leadership position in the New York City FTP, and was replaced by local stock company expert Harry Minturn as head of the Chicago FTP. Minturn was like-minded in his approach to commercially successful productions; his brainchild, *The Swing Mikado*, would prove so popular that it moved to Broadway in spite of extensive FTP efforts to prevent it.

Federal Theatre Project Audiences in Chicago

While current reception theory could delve into the ways that FTP productions created meaning for their audiences, the national administration did not seem overly concerned with the idea. Flanagan merely wanted to know who attended FTP performances. In an attempt to determine the composition of FTP audiences, the national administration had created a branch dedicated to audience analysis. The Audience Survey division of the National Play Bureau served the FTP throughout the country from its beginnings in 1935 until it was discontinued in 1937. The Audience Survey Department completed only one survey for Chicago, based on the audience members for the stage adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's anti-fascist novel, *It Can't Happen Here*.¹⁷ *It Can't Happen Here* opened "simultaneously in twenty-one

¹⁶ "Farm Policies of Two Decades Told in Drama," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 10 July 1938, 24.

¹⁷ Though the FTP planned to establish regional Audience Survey Departments, this goal was never realized; the only region able to fund its own department was the West. For samples of the opening announcement and an audience survey, see Appendix III. Bruce A. McConachie and Daniel Friedman, ed., *Theatre for working-class audiences in the United States, 1830-1980*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), 173.

theatres in seventeen states on the night of October 27, 1936,” and played to hundreds of thousands of audience members nation-wide.¹⁸ Because it was the first of many planned nation-wide openings, Flanagan wanted information about the audiences country-wide.¹⁹

The Audience Report for the Chicago production of *It Can't Happen Here* paints a broad picture of the audience the Chicago FTP drew the evening of the performance. Nearly half of the 959 audience members who completed the survey were new to the FTP and many were unable to attend commercial theatre because of the expense. The majority of the audience (712 of the 854 who answered the question) preferred “plays that dealt with current issues.”²⁰

The report goes on to cite both positive and negative comments on the quality of the script, direction, acting, and technical aspects. A number disliked the language or violence portrayed in the play, writing comments such as, “Too much swearing for the young people and respectable folk,” “Not so many bombs . . . it’s petrifying,” and “My women friends did not care for the play at all because of its brutal frankness. However, I concede that is the charm of the play.”²¹ Others wanted to lighten the

¹⁸ Flanagan, *Arena*, 115.

¹⁹ One of the goals of the audience reports was to show that the FTP was not pilfering audience members from the commercial theatre with its significantly lower admissions charges. The stealing of patrons from an already struggling commercial theatre had been an issue from the start of the Federal Theatre Project, and the national administration was vigilant about any method that would show that this was indeed not the case. The survey addressed this issue by asking if audience members regularly attended commercial theatre and/or the FTP, and the reason behind their choices. “Audience Survey,” NARA, Entry 907, National Play Bureau Audience Survey Reports, Box 254; Marian Nathan, Untitled document, NARA, Entry 907, National Play Bureau Audience Survey Reports, Box 254.

²⁰ Dana Rush, “Audience Survey Report: It Can’t Happen Here, Blackstone Theatre, Chicago,” NARA, E907, National Play Bureau Audience Survey Reports, Box 254, *It Can’t Happen Here – Chicago*.

²¹ *Ibid*, 3-4.

subject matter or portrayal in some way: “I like a play more entertaining . . . with plenty of comedy,” “I think there’s a little too much emphasis on the gruesome . . . perhaps a little more pleasantness could be injected,” and “Pep up the picnic.”²² Some were negative, “The parties who insisted upon this play being presented should be deported,” and “Take it out and burn it . . . it is a filthy insult to the U.S.” There are also a number of nuanced comments on the script itself and the message that it sends, including “The woman’s personal plight is relatively insignificant as she is not built as a personification of American women. Lewis has not presented a true analysis of Fascism.”²³ These comments reveal an audience so diverse that a single FTP production could never satisfy all of them, particularly if that production were controversial in any way. Faced with the prospect of dealing with so much diverse feedback, as well as the local leaders’ preference for commercial success, it was perhaps understandable that the FTP should wish to skirt the issue altogether and appeal to the public with an innocuous musical revue.

The reviewers also commented on their fellow audience members. “The play is perfect but the audience reactions are of low mentality,” “Keep the stupid, giggling high school kids out by fixing an age limit. The play is excellent . . . the audience disturbing,” and “Throw out the noisy and ignorant audience who are too narrow minded to visualize the true meaning of such a momentous performance.”²⁴ These comments speak to the composition of the audience that night. This performance of

²² Ibid, 3-4.

²³ Ibid, 3.

²⁴ Ibid, 4-6.

It Can't Happen Here was attended by people of varying ages and education levels. This makeup, in contrast to that of the commercial theatre, probably resulted from the removal of the price constraints that often bar younger audience members from the theatre; FTP admissions typically cost about the same as a movie theatre ticket. This made it possible for working class people to attend theatre, an event that was often reserved for the middle or upper classes. While there are no comments listed that attest to a variety of economic and social classes in attendance, this may be reflected in the comments regarding unruly or confused audience members. According to a number of irritated audience members, a significant portion of the FTP audience did not behave “properly” in a theatre. It is likely that class lines served as at least a part of this division.

Finally, the audience strongly supported a permanent Federal Theatre: 881 of the 899 answers advocated a national and permanent Federal Theatre. Most telling of audience support for the Federal Theatre, 889 of the 899 answers also supported the continuation of the FTP in Chicago. Very few of the comments regarding the extension of the Federal Theatre Project, either nationally or in Chicago, characterized the Project as simply a relief measure; instead, the endorsements cite the quality and breadth of the productions, stating, “So we can see plays as fine as this;” “It’s a splendid effort to keep living theatre alive;” and “To be able to attend socially minded plays at popular prices.”²⁵ Dana Rush, the analyst compiling the results of the Chicago surveys, confirmed the standing of the theatre in Chicago with her summary:

²⁵ Ibid, 8-10.

As in New York, the play elicited a remarkable number of critical comments, reflecting the vitality of the play and importance of the theme to the audience [. . .]. The wholehearted endorsement of a permanent Federal Theatre by these patrons indicates that the project is filling a real need in Chicago and that its patrons are vitally interested in its continuation [. . . . The survey] shows a remarkable feeling of responsibility on the part of the audience for its theatre.²⁶

It is unfortunate that this audience survey project was the only one to be completed in the city of Chicago, and that reports were never generated for such productions as *Spirochete*, *The Swing Mikado*, *Big White Fog*, or *O Say Can You Sing*. Because of this lack of survey data it is impossible to determine whether or not the Chicago project was able to maintain its established audience while bringing in a new audience over its four-year lifetime. This audience survey is useful, however, as an initial means of cataloging the characteristics of FTP audiences in Chicago.

Setting the Scene for the Chicago FTP

*"I can stop anything in this town I want to . . . "*²⁷

~ Mayor Edward J. Kelly

The Mayor of Chicago had exclusive rights to censor theatre. Mayor Kelly exercised this right numerous times in the 1930s, often to the detriment of the FTP. Initially, the FTP planned to follow the April 1936 production of *Chalk Dust* with

²⁶ It is important to note that this audience analysis is based on the surveys of only 900 audience members (who were willing to fill out surveys based on a single performance of a single production). This number was certainly not enough to support a grassroots movement in favor of the FTP. In addition, *It Can't Happen Here* was unique in that it was the only national opening that the FTP engineered; for this reason, there was great interest in it nationally, in the press, audiences, and for the FTP. However, this report is the only record of the Chicago audiences in this form. Ibid, 13.

²⁷ Hallie Flanagan, Qtd. in "Visit with Mayor Kelly of Chicago . . . ," undated, NARA, General Correspondence of the National Office, Box 15, Midwestern Region, 1-3.

Meyer Levin's *Model Tenement*, a play about the housing problem.²⁸ However, in late April, the FTP had "not yet secured direct permission from the Mayor," and was not likely to do so since the mayor was out of town.²⁹ The dispute over *Model Tenement* raged for months, and the implication was that the Mayor's office was avoiding the act of an official pronouncement either way. Father Giles and Father James, supposedly representatives of the mayor and the Chancellery Office, read the script, met with Levin, and required specific minor changes that Levin made and resubmitted. According to Stevens, "Father Giles expressed himself as very well pleased with the play," and he looked forward to a relatively quick resolution.³⁰ Approval for the play was not forthcoming. The issue was one of the last things that Stevens dealt with in his role as head of the Chicago FTP, and was passed on to Kondolf when he arrived. Kondolf updated Flanagan in mid-May, writing that he and his assistant had "run into the most beautiful stalling and shifting I have encountered in some time." Neither Kondolf nor his secretary could get an appointment with the

²⁸ *Model Tenement*, much like *One Third of a Nation*, dealt with the nation's housing problems by presenting both sides – tenant and landlord – sympathetically. It ultimately supported Roosevelt's federal housing projects. Based on the novel *The New Bridge*, *Model Tenement* shows the problems that resulted when a landlord decided to build model tenements on the New Jersey side of the George Washington bridge. One of the tenants cannot find a job and the landlord, who is going bankrupt, evicts him. A protest ensues and a young boy is killed. The landlord is torn apart by his guilt; he runs to the bridge to commit suicide, but is saved by the man he evicted. It is interesting to note that the novel entered the market on the day that the banks closed in 1929. The content was particularly relevant to Chicago because of the number of people displaced from their homes by the Great Depression. This idea appeared again in an early version of *O Say Can You Sing* (one of the plays dealt with in this chapter), but was removed from the final production.

²⁹ Thomas Wood Stevens, to Hallie Flanagan, 23 April 1926, NARA, E850, Correspondence with Regional Offices, Box 65, "Thomas Wood Stevens."

³⁰ Thomas Wood Stevens, to Hallie Flanagan, 23 April 1926, NARA, E850, Correspondence with Regional Offices, Box 65, Thomas Wood Stevens; Thomas Wood Stevens, to Hallie Flanagan, 20 April 1926, NARA, E850, Correspondence with Regional Offices, Box 65, "Thomas Wood Stevens."

mayor or learn anything from his secretary; the mayor never returned phone calls, and the secretary would be mysteriously “out” each time they called. Kondolf noted:

If I, personally, had a real enthusiasm for “Model Tenement” I feel I could somehow get to see the Mayor and get his reaction. Unfortunately, however, I feel (I believe as you do) that the play isn’t worth the fight and struggle that would be necessary to get the Mayor to make his decision, and then have it out with him.³¹

Kondolf clearly picked his battles. This choice reflects his predisposition to commercial programs as opposed to experimental, as Levin’s piece was of the latter variety. Nearly a year later, Flanagan met with the mayor and broached the subject of *Model Tenement*. Baffled by his response (and threatened with a lawsuit by playwright Meyer Levin), Flanagan wrote a detailed account of their conversation. According to this account, Mayor Kelly said that he had neither heard of nor stopped the play, and that no one in his office would have done so without his express consent:

Mayor Kelly seemed quite exercised about this whole situation. He said that he was tired of being made a fool of on this subject of censorship – that he had closed Tobacco Road because it was an obscene play and because of the fact that during its run in Chicago attacks on women by morons increased sixty per cent. He said that unless we did a play of this nature, he would certainly have no interest in even commenting upon it, to say nothing of stopping it, and said that if anyone in the W.P.A. quoted him as being opposed to Model Tenement he wanted it traced down at once as to who made such an accusation.³²

Flanagan pursued the matter further in a meeting with Robert Dunham, president of the WPA Parks Board. He told her that the play was “a lot of stuff

³¹ George Kondolf, to Hallie Flanagan, 18 May 1936, NARA, E839, General Correspondence of the National Office, Box 13, George Kondolf.

³² Meyer Levin was the president of the Free Speech Association of the Midwest and on the editorial board of *Esquire* magazine. *Esquire* offered to finance a lawsuit against the WPA if evidence that the WPA stopped *Model Tenement* came to light. Flanagan’s investigations into the matter were inconclusive. Hallie Flanagan, “Visit with Mayor Kelly of Chicago . . .,” undated, NARA, General Correspondence of the National Office, Box 15, Midwestern Region, 1-3.

written by a communist agitator,” and said Mayor Kelly had stopped the play personally. When Flanagan replied that she had asked the Mayor about the matter, he said:

- Dunham: Well, come to think of it, I don't believe it was the Mayor himself who gave the order.
- Flanagan: The Mayor insists that no one in his office has a right to speak for him on such a matter. He had all the records examined, and he claims that he had nothing whatever to do with the case. [. . .]
- Dunham: Well, I remember that there was a telephone call from somebody in the Mayor's office, saying that this play was communistic and ought to be suppressed.
- Flanagan: Washington was notified that it was much stronger than that; that there was an actual order from the Mayor to stop the play.³³

The question of responsibility remained unanswered. However, Mayor Kelly did close several other productions in Chicago, and it is not far fetched to suggest that his office had something to do with the *Model Tenement* problem. As he explained above, Kelly closed the 1935 commercial production of *Tobacco Road* because of indecency, and launched an investigation into all stage productions in the city of Chicago. Quoted in the *Chicago Tribune*, Mayor Kelly declared:

We are going to see whether any [plays] have added improper lines since they were passed by the city inspector, Lieut. Harry Costello.

I understand that this practice has been followed to some extent, so that a play which is only somewhat racy when it opens is downright obscene several weeks later.

We are not trying to make a church out of the city, but some things pass the bounds of being entertaining. I suspect that the so-called intelligentsia, trying to claim credit for ability to understand beyond that of ordinary folks, are the chief supporters of such trash.³⁴

³³ Ibid, 2-3.

³⁴ “Mayor Starts Decency Test of All Plays,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 October 1935, 13.

In a city famous for crime and corruption, Mayor Kelly's attempt to earn political points by linking public shows of immorality with the "so-called intelligentsia" is particularly revealing. Kelly's Democratic machine thrived because of the revenue and votes gained through support of the New Deal, Chicago's working class, and organized crime. The intelligentsia, a relatively small number of educated elite, were not a major part of his constituency, nor were they a group with which Kelly himself identified.³⁵ His remark distanced him from the intellectually elite and realigned him with the everyday, working class people that ensured his continued political success.

In a surprising turn of events, the producers of *Tobacco Road* sued Kelly in federal court over the injunction; the court issued a restraining order against any further interference by the mayor, the Chicago police department, and the city.³⁶ Even with the support of the federal courts, however, *Tobacco Road* did not open. While Corporation Counsel Barnett Hodes, attorney for the city, solidified the official appeal, the city refused to issue licenses to any theatre willing to house the production.³⁷

Mayor Kelly's censoring power even became the subject of a grassroots movement led by several Chicago religious leaders and the Chicago Council on Freedom from Censorship. In May of 1936, the council proposed amendments to two

³⁵ Kelly was born in the Irish neighborhood of Bridgeport and began working for the Chicago Sanitary District at the age of 18. Eventually he rose to the position of Chief Engineer and was named the successor of Anton Cermak after he was assassinated in 1932. Roger Biles, "Edward J. Kelly: New Deal Machine Builder," *The Mayors: The Chicago Political Tradition*, Ed. Paul M. Green and Melvin G. Holli (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 111-6.

³⁶ "Decision Today on Reopening of Tobacco Road," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 24 October 1935, 5.

³⁷ "Appeal Keeps Ban on Tobacco Road: Public Morals at Stake, Says Federal Court," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 31 October 1935, 1.

city ordinances that gave the mayor power to close theatre; the amendments required that the morally questionable performers or productions be convicted in court before the mayor could close them.³⁸ The organization circulated petitions and “expected to enlist support in the suburbs and throughout Chicagoland.”³⁹ Though the precise reasons are not known, the campaign quietly disappeared a mere two weeks after it began.

In October 1936, the Chicago FTP experienced another censorship setback; *Hymn to the Rising Sun*, a play that dealt with “‘the brutality of the chain-gang’ and [was] ‘a powerful indictment of this anti-democratic institution,’” was mysteriously halted. On the evening of the opening, patrons who had gathered in the lobby were sent home, the cast did not seem to know anything, and Kondolf off-handedly responded to queries by citing “technical reasons.”⁴⁰ Inquiries by local newspapers led to a confession by WPA State Administrator Robert Dunham, who said that he ordered the postponement because of the play’s immoral subject matter and presentation. One of the first productions of the Chicago Negro Unit, *Hymn to the Rising Sun* was certainly not for the faint-hearted; Paul Green’s play assaults the cruelty and racism of an institution that would see an African American man beaten nearly to death and then force him to sing “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.”⁴¹ The *Chicago Tribune* reported that Fritz Blocki, Chicago theatre critic and liaison to the

³⁸ “Campaign Begun to Curb Mayor as Stage Censor,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 3 May 1936, p32.

³⁹ “Propose Law Giving Mayor’s Censorship Powers to Citizens,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 14 May 1936, p15.

⁴⁰ “Halts Opening of WPA Show Over Morals,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 10 October 1936, p1.

⁴¹ Qtd. in Flanagan, *Arena*, 200.

FTP, resigned his post because “he did not want to represent ‘anything as vile as *Hymn to the Rising Sun*’.” Blocki was convinced, the paper commented, that the play would alienate people from the cause of legitimate theatre by its portrayal of nauseating brutality.⁴² The production was postponed indefinitely.

These instances of censorship hampered the FTP’s ability to operate in Chicago and altered the types of theatre it produced. The grassroots campaign against the mayor’s stranglehold on Chicago theatre and the lawsuit brought by the producers of *Tobacco Road* show the volatility of the issue; Chicagoans were aware of the mayor’s censorship powers and testing the boundaries of local tolerance. With *Model Tenement* and *Hymn to the Rising Sun*, FTP productions were either in the rehearsal process or about to open when political forces halted them. The on-going saga surrounding *Model Tenement*’s approvals and disapprovals characterizes a city with uncertain expectations regarding censorship, particularly in relation to its new FTP. *Hymn to the Rising Sun*, one of the first productions of the Chicago Negro Unit, closed on the day it was scheduled to open as audience members milled about in the lobby. These events force the FTP to reconsider its place in Chicago, particularly with respect to risky or controversial work. I suggest that these actions led to a timid FTP that struggled for a unique identity while attempting to minimize political fallout; in direct opposition to Flanagan’s ideals for the FTP as a decentralized entity, light, commercially successful pieces took precedence over artistic, experimental, and locally relevant productions.

⁴² “WPA Puts Off Play’s Opening a Second Time,” *Chicago Tribune*, 15 October 1936, 10.

Stage Directions: Cultural Context for 'O Say Can You Sing'

We got to put on shows that'll make the democrats howl, the socialists laugh, the communists grin. And if we can get a snicker out of the republicans – we're set!⁴³

~ Augustus Q. Hamfield, in *O Say Can You Sing*

Both the desire for the Chicago FTP to produce works of social relevance and that of the civic authorities to control the content of theatrical productions can be linked to economic and social conditions in Chicago that heightened political tension in the city. The original version of *O Say Can You Sing* capitalized on these tensions. The musical revue alternated between catchy songs like “Fugitive From Rhythm,” “A Pretty Girl to Love Me,” and “The Show Must Go On,” and scenes featuring the wise-cracking humor of the Secretary of Entertainment (also known as the Director of the FTP), Augustus Q. Hamfield. Hamfield is pitted against the cheap, antagonistic Secretary of the Budget, Robert J. Ratcliffe. Hamfield’s adventures entertain the masses while he tries to keep the fictional FTP in business in spite of Ratcliffe’s attempts to have Hamfield jailed for communist sympathies and the FTP declared unconstitutional. These highly topical political and social references to the state of Chicago abound in *O Say Can You Sing*; many are so specific to the state of Chicago at this moment in time that they become apparent only after a thorough grounding in Chicago’s politics, culture, economy, and social stratifications.

When the Great Depression struck the United States, Chicago faced total collapse. Already in a far worse state than many of the nation’s cities, the economic disaster hit as Chicago already teetered on the edge of bankruptcy because of accusations of political corruption and skimming in Mayor ‘Big Bill’ Thompson’s

⁴³ Sid Kuller, Ray Golden, and Phil Charig, *O Say Can You Sing*, Original Script, NARA, E914, Playscripts, Box 309, “*O Say Can You Sing*,” 21.

office.⁴⁴ While the national unemployment average hovered around twenty-five percent, in May of 1932, more than forty percent of Chicago's workforce was unemployed. Relief rolls in Chicago swelled exponentially, but people continued to arrive in the city searching for work. In 1932, the city spent a total of \$35 million in public funds and several million dollars in private donations; by the end of 1932 Chicago was bankrupt.⁴⁵ Worse, the prospect of income for the city was bleak; the city was in the midst of a tax reassessment and collections were frozen until it was completed.⁴⁶ Chicago survived from the sale of tax anticipation warrants during the freeze, but the reassessment reduced the city's income by over \$400 million.

Mayor Anton Cermak took office in 1932, as Chicago's coffers remained empty. The city owed \$40 million in back wages to municipal employees. The hardest hit group, Chicago's teachers, received wages for only three months in 1932. Despite massive budget cuts, pleas to both the state and national government, and

⁴⁴ Mayor 'Big Bill' Thompson, leader of Chicago from 1915-23 and 1927-31, has the dubious distinction of being designated by scholars the worst big-city mayor of all time. His corruption led to many of the problems Chicago faced during the Depression; he received campaign funds from Al Capone, supported the Germans during World War I, led a campaign to censor school books, and threatened to punch King George "in the snoot." Melvin G. Holli. *The American Mayor: The Best & the Worst Big-City Leaders* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 12-3; Curt Johnson and R. Craig Sautter, "Wicked City Chicago: From Kenna to Capone," *December Magazine* (special issue) 37, no. 1 (1994), 269.

⁴⁵ Broadus Mitchell, *Depression Decade* (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1947), 105; Irving Bernstein, *The Lean years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1966), 297-298; Mark I. Gelfand, *A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); George E. Mowry, *The Urban Nation, 1920-1960* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965); Roger Biles, *Big City Boss in Depression and War: Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago* (DeKalb, IL: Northern University Press, 1984), 21-23.

⁴⁶ Property taxes in Chicago peaked in 1926 at 45 cents for every \$100 of assessed property value (compared to 35 cents/\$100 in 1925). In 1928, the Illinois State Tax Commission ordered the complete reassessment of 1927 real estate taxes due to a *Chicago Tribune* lawsuit on behalf of the people of Chicago charging Mayor William 'Big Bill' Thompson with conspiracy to defraud the city through excessive real estate taxes and many of the property owners banded together to conduct a tax strike. The reassessment took two years to complete, and all tax collections were frozen in the meantime. "Citizens Demand \$14,000,000 Cut in State Taxes," *The Chicago Tribune*, 12 December 1926, 5; "'Cut Your Tax' Card Stirs Up State Inquiry," *The Chicago Tribune*, 6 September 1928.

Cermak's personal phone calls to tax strikers in which he threatened to divulge their names to unpaid municipal employees, the city continued its downward spiral. An unsigned memo from a Chicago Park District employee described the state of public opinion in Chicago:

The public has learned by experience that local taxes spent for relief give money to consumers only by taking money from consumers. [. . .] Having observed the so-called local self help was not restoring prosperity, the public has hastily concluded that spending tax money of any kind is the road to ruin.⁴⁷

Evidence of the deterioration of living conditions appeared in newspapers as reporters discussed the thousands of starving men living beneath the Michigan Avenue Bridge through the winter.⁴⁸ Left-Wing American writers Meridel Le Sueur and Albert Halper described living conditions in Chicago and the Midwest in national articles and books. Halper wrote of his experience traveling throughout the poor areas of the city with a Chicago doctor who had gone unpaid for nine months, but continued to work:

We went from home to home, giving the toxoids. We cut down side streets and over carlines. Such unrelieved poverty I had never seen before, even in Manhattan's East Side tenements... It was horrifying. We saw families living together, four or five pads and soiled mattresses lying on the floor, kids with that plump, humid, indoor look on their faces, their mouths slightly opened as if to suck in some air, a few scratches of firewood piled up in the corner, wrapping paper tacked up for window shades.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Unsigned memo, probably V.K. Brown of the Chicago Park District, 5 September 1935, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence, Box 15, Midwestern Region.

⁴⁸ Figures reported by the Chicago Urban League in 1931, and quoted in Curt Johnson and R. Craig Sautter, "Wicked City Chicago: From Kenna to Capone," *December Magazine* (special issue) 37, no. 1 (1994), 330.

⁴⁹ Albert Halper, "A Morning with the Doc," in Joseph North, Ed., *New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Thirties* (NY: International Publishers, 1969), 99.

Le Sueur described the plight of jobless women sleeping in Grant and Lincoln parks, abandoned pregnant women, and the dangers of living on the streets of Chicago as a young, unemployed woman.⁵⁰

State assistance, which had cared for over 600,000 destitute Chicagoans with Illinois state funding and private donations, was exhausted.⁵¹ Federal funds were slow to arrive as the newly elected President Roosevelt reevaluated the distribution of federal relief funds for 1933.⁵² Mayor Cermak's 1933 assassination left a city grimly facing the hard facts – the funding of last resort was completely drained and it had no leader.

After a brief period while city officials determined appropriate leadership, Democratic leader Pat Nash appointed Edward Kelly mayor of Chicago. In his first month as mayor, fourteen thousand unpaid schoolteachers rioted, storming banks and picketing in the financial district. Even after police used tear gas to break up the teachers, twenty thousand high school students struck in support of the educators. Other municipal employees called for action as well. Kelly did not disappoint; his first act as mayor was to sign \$1.7 million in tax warrants which provided the funds to

⁵⁰ Meridel Le Sueur, a writer of "imaginative nonfiction" and prominent female member of the Communist party in the United States, moved to Chicago after dropping out of high school. Short articles such as "'Women On the Breadlines" (1932), "Women Are Hungry" (1934), "They Follow Us Girls" (1935), and "Salvation Home" (1939) depict both both the radical struggle and the horrors of urban living. James M. Boehnlein, "Meridel Le Sueur, Reportage, and the Cultural Situatedness of her Rhetoric," in Ann C. Hall, ed., *Delights, Desires, and Dilemmas Essays on Women and the Media* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 89-92; Anthony Dawahare, "Modernity and "Village Communism" in Depression-Era America: The Utopian Literature of Meridel le Sueur," *Criticism* 39, no. 3 (1997) [database on-line]; available from Questia, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5000536770>; Internet; accessed 15 January 2007; Curt Johnson and R. Craig Sautter, "Wicked City Chicago: From Kenna to Capone," *December Magazine* (special issue) 37, no. 1 (1994), 329-330.

⁵¹ Broadus Mitchell, *Depression Decade* (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1947), 106.

⁵² *Ibid*, 316.

pay thousands of municipal employees. Kelly drastically cut the city's budget, secured legislation that would allow forced tax collection, wiped out much of the city's debt, and created good relations with the recently elected Roosevelt, thereby obtaining additional emergency federal funds.

In 1933, Kelly presided over the extraordinarily lucrative Century of Progress Exposition on Chicago's lakefront. The Exposition was so successful that Kelly chose to extend it a second year. By the time it closed in October of 1934 more than thirty-nine million people had attended the fair; admissions prices repaid the city's debt, given a 6 percent return on all city bonds, and accumulated a \$160,000 surplus for Chicago's coffers.⁵³ Kelly had stabilized Chicago's financial situation, improving living and working conditions for hundreds of thousands of citizens. In addition to these financial gains, Kelly received the support of many minority groups and labor unions, and led the Democratic Party. With these groups behind him, Kelly became the most powerful politician in the state of Illinois, and controlled one of the most powerful political machines in the country.⁵⁴ This strength in leadership helped to raise the importance of the city of Chicago on both state and national levels. By the mid-1930s, the Kelly-Nash political machine was the key to the Illinois election. Even President Roosevelt supported Kelly's projects, a policy that paid off

⁵³ Roger Biles, *Big City Boss in Depression and War: Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago* (DeKalb, IL: Northern University Press, 1984), 31-32.

⁵⁴ Roger Biles, "Edward J. Kelly: New Deal Machine Builder," In *The Mayors: The Chicago Political Tradition*, Revised ed., ed. Paul M. Green and Melvin G. Holli (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 113-115.

handsomely for Roosevelt in the 1936 presidential election; Roosevelt's victory in Chicago was carried by more than 500,000 votes.⁵⁵

While Kelly managed to nurse Chicago through the struggle of bankruptcy, he certainly did not preside over a "clean" city. Mayor Kelly – like "Big Bill" Thompson who had won elections through the efforts of organized crime – used the funds of such notables as Al Capone as both campaign money and as a major source of income for the city. This arrangement provided legal protection for Capone, and Chicago law enforcement often looked the other way as organized crime operated in the city. During the 1920s, Capone virtually ruled Chicago and its more than three million people through a complex system of bribes and kickbacks. Crimes such as bank robbery, burglary, pickpocketing, and even gem theft increased dramatically during this period. In the words of Herbert Asbury, "Chicago seemed to be filled with gangsters."⁵⁶ The people of Chicago did not necessarily see their gangsters as terrible however. Capone distributed enough paychecks and public aid that his persona was perceived romantically – a strong, smart, gentlemanly criminal – or at least tolerated, by many Chicagoans. It was Capone, for example, who instituted and paid for Chicago's first soup kitchen in 1930, distributing 20,000 meals a week through the early years of the Depression.⁵⁷ Until federal investigators stepped in, Chicago law enforcement rarely inhibited the actions of Capone, since as many as half of the city's officials were on Capone's payroll. Even Mayor Kelly was

⁵⁵ Ibid, 120.

⁵⁶ Curt Johnson and R. Craig Sautter, "Wicked City Chicago: From Kenna to Capone," *December Magazine* (special issue) 37, no. 1 (1994), 223.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 325, 330.

ultimately implicated in a series of illegal schemes as well, including tax evasion, illegal campaign contributions, and “payroll padding” while head of the Sanitary District.⁵⁸ The regular presence of flourishing organized crime, gambling, and graft in Chicago during this period led to the wide-open, hard-boiled reputation that Chicago enjoyed for much of the early twentieth century.⁵⁹

By the mid-1930s, much of Chicago’s criminal past was safe enough to taunt on stage. This heritage would appear in a number of pieces created by the FTP, including *O Say Can You Sing* discussed below; it was important for the theatre, however, to maintain the balance between amusement and danger. Chicago’s structure and organization were extremely insular; city leaders, elected or criminal, did not like to rely on outsiders (a habit that caused trouble in the early part of the Great Depression). This independence gave Chicago’s leaders the ability to effectively make up their own rules; the FTP was not a part of this system, and so it struggled to comment on the goings-on with an outsider’s sense of morality. Chicago politics repeatedly halted the FTP’s moral agenda, either by censoring plays like *Model Tenement* or *Hymn to the Rising Sun*, or by causing administrative difficulties at the local or state levels. Only when the Chicago FTP learned to operate within the series of systems that organized the city did its productions become producible, popular, and socially relevant.

Mayor Kelly’s democratic machine gained strength from many of the ethnic groups in Chicago. White ethnics made up sixty-four percent of the city’s

⁵⁸ Roger Biles, *Big City Boss in Depression and War: Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago* (DeKalb, IL: Northern University Press, 1984), 9, 28-30.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 4-5.

population.⁶⁰ According to the U.S. Census of 1930, less than 30 percent of the population had lived in the United States for more than one generation.⁶¹ As the large majority, white ethnics were a powerful presence influencing local government. Their work made the city function, and they brought many of the traditions from home countries to the city. Many immigrant populations moved away from the downtown area during the 1920s, establishing a number of areas that could be characterized by the religion or ethnicity of the majority of inhabitants. The Southwest Side, for example, was predominantly Irish, Czechoslovakian, Polish, and German while the South Side was highly populated with African Americans.⁶² The white ethnic populations learned how to make their voices heard in Chicago, particularly once Mayor Kelly took office. The immigrant populations also ensured the continued success of the Democratic Party, both in Chicago and the state of Illinois, as witnessed by the steadily increasing Democratic vote in the majority of immigrant populations.⁶³

⁶⁰ Within the context of the census, white ethnics consist of foreign-born and second-generation immigrants, typically from Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Yugoslavia, the Netherlands, or Norway. Native-born Americans are white people born in the United States of parents living in the United States. For a breakdown of the percentages of each ethnic group listed, see Appendix 1.

⁶¹ John M. Allswang, *A House for All Peoples: Ethnic Politics in Chicago, 1890-1936* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 19; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Volume 1, Population, Number and Distribution of Inhabitants* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 23.

⁶² Dominic A. Pacyga, "Chicago's Ethnic Neighborhoods: The Myth of Stability and the Reality of Chicago," In *Ethnic Chicago: A Multicultural Portrait*, 4th ed., ed. By Melvin G. Holli and Peter d'A. Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 613-614

⁶³ John M. Allswang, *A House for All Peoples: Ethnic Politics in Chicago, 1890-1936* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 42-46.

By the time the FTP arrived in Chicago, the systems that supported organized crime, abject poverty, rampant class stratification, and crooked politicians were firmly established; it was only when the FTP acknowledged and faced these issues that it was able to negotiate any sort of relationship with local audiences. *O Say Can You Sing* stands out as the first real attempt – sometimes successful, sometimes not – by the Chicago FTP to deal with Chicago’s issues and systems on stage.

‘O Say Can You Sing:’ Magic, Mayhem, and a Dash of Nudity

A fictional Federal Theatre Project troupe is dispatched to the local nudist colony. They are unable to sell a single ticket to their show, in spite of the apparent skill of their star performer – a stripper. Upon realizing that they have been sent to perform a striptease before an unappreciative crowd, the members of the company bemoan their fate, worrying that the failure of their burlesque performance at the nudist colony will somehow jeopardize their future within the FTP. They call the FTP director in desperation, and an idea is born: Miss Tillie Take-Off will change her striptease to the dress-tease of Miss Clarabelle Clotheshorse. Her performance, which climaxes with the donning of earmuffs, mittens, and a large hat, garners rave reviews from the nudists – even attracting enough attention to elicit a nudist police raid – and saves the FTP from certain disaster.⁶⁴

This sketch is from a musical revue by Sid Kuller and Ray Golden entitled *O Say Can You Sing*. As is the case with many FTP scripts, several versions of this

⁶⁴ Sid Kuller and Ray Golden, “*O Say Can You Sing*,” NARA, Entry 914, Playscripts: 1935-1939, Box 309, Burlesque - 5.

piece – created by and for the FTP – exist. The curious thing about this script, and the reason that it offers such a rich piece of cultural history, is that the revisions illustrate attention to far more than simple artistic integrity. The deletions, additions, and rewrites suggest a volatile political and social situation in which certain FTP activities were inexplicably halted. It also shows a number of ways in which the FTP adapted creatively to its environment in Chicago, a skill which was vital to its success in the city, whether that success was to be artistically or commercially based.

Created by Chicago project Director George Kondolf, *O Say Can You Sing* made history as the first large, original Federal Theatre production to run for seven months. Replete with stunning dances, catchy musical numbers, spectacular sets, and more than 4,000 ornate costumes, the production was phenomenally popular with “young men and their best girls,”⁶⁵ and cost an estimated \$80,000.⁶⁶ *O Say Can You Sing* was not a critical success. The critic for the *Chicago Daily News* described the show as “strong on dancing, long on gaiety and short on humor,” the *Chicago Evening American* referred to many of the protagonist’s lines as those that “cried out, or, I should say, stank out for immediate burial” and the reviewer from *Time* magazine pointed to the audience’s tendency to “wince whenever [the protagonist] opens his mouth.” The *Time* review continued, “when it was good it was very good,

⁶⁵ Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, 140.

⁶⁶ McGee noted that the revue would most likely fail to recoup anywhere near this sum. He estimated that, if the show were a smash hit and ran for three months after opening, it would gross no more than one-sixth of the cost. The show ran for more than twice that time. A *Chicago Tribune* article put the price tag of *O Say Can You Sing* at only \$55,042 in January 1937 (including salaries for the 250 people employed on the production), but noted that it had grossed a mere \$3,794 in the three weeks that it had been open. John McGee, “The Brutal Dope on Chicago,” to Hallie Flanagan, 10 November 1936, NARA, E839, General Correspondence of the National Office, Box 14, John McGee, 2; “Spend Million on WPA Theater Units,” 3 January 1937, *Chicago Tribune*, NARA, E981, Federal Theatre Project Press Clippings, Box 25, Chicago.

when it was bad it was awful.”⁶⁷ *The Chicago Tribune* referred to the quick pace and overall mood of the production, finally concluding, “altogether, when the scarcity of such entertainments on the contemporary Chicago stage is considered, ‘O, Say Can You Sing?’ will serve fairly well for an evening’s playgoing, whether one is a regular customer or merely a stooge of the bureaucracy.”⁶⁸ *The Daily Times* review, the most positive overall, described the show as “not an amateurish hash, but a reasonably competent revue which far exceeds any hopes many of us might have had, heretofore, for the *musical* department of the WPA” [my emphasis].⁶⁹ This review did not acknowledge the role of the FTP at all, crediting only the music division. The Federal Music Project, with its focus on classical training and performance, received few criticisms when compared to the FTP.⁷⁰

When asked how this production differed from previous FTP fare, Kondolf replied:

I think they had, and probably correctly, repeated plays, rather simple plays, and plays that had become kind of stock favorites. So that seemed to work certainly pretty well in providing employment, but I don’t believe it had generated any particular local excitement.⁷¹

⁶⁷ “The New Deal Stage: Selections from the Federal Theatre Project, 1935-1939,” American Memory Special Collections, Library of Congress Performing Arts Reading Room, Washington, D.C., Box 1048, *O Say Can You Sing* Production Book; “Federal Flier,” *Time* (December 21, 1936), online <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/archive/preview/0,10987,757227,00.html>.

⁶⁸ “Federal Revue Has Snap Its Type Requires,” *Chicago Tribune*, 12 December 1936, 21.

⁶⁹ “The New Deal Stage: Selections from the Federal Theatre Project, 1935-1939,” American Memory Special Collections, Library of Congress Performing Arts Reading Room, Washington, D.C., Box 1048, *O Say Can You Sing* Production Book.

⁷⁰ William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1969), 608-12.

⁷¹ George Kondolf, Interview by Lorraine Brown, 21 February 1976, Rumson, New Jersey, tape recording, WPA Oral Histories Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 3.

Kondolf's comment implies that *O Say Can You Sing* not only generated local excitement, but also marked a change in the direction of FTP productions in Chicago. However, he did not specify the form upcoming FTP productions would take, leaving the question of a popular commercial success or an enterprising artistic venture unanswered.

“A Revue With Snap:” ‘*O Say Can You Sing*’

O Say Can You Sing certainly generated interest among audiences. Though it did not teem with fresh humor, *O Say Can You Sing* poked fun at the practices of the federal government, the Federal Theatre Project, and Chicago itself. As Flanagan stated in *Arena*, “The best thing about *O Say Can You Sing* was that it was as Chicago as Chicago. No anti-administration paper could laugh more at Federal Theatre than did Federal Theatre itself.”⁷² And *O Say Can You Sing* strove to bring out the laughter in its audiences in any number of different ways, pinpointing Democrats, Communists, and Republicans alike. The popular appeal of the show was due, in large part, to the ability of the production to laugh at the characteristics that made Chicago unique – organized crime, political corruption, and incredibly high numbers of unemployed immigrants.

At least two versions of *O Say Can You Sing* bear signs of production work in Chicago.⁷³ The earlier version, located at the National Archives, is biting, fresh, and

⁷² Ibid, 138.

⁷³ None of the scripts for this production were dated; I based my determinations on the condition of the script itself (with hand-written revisions), the production book, and the list of scenes found in the program. Curiously, this production geared so very much toward the city of Chicago was

witty. This version contains numerous handwritten comments on the production details of the play including the different stage drops that would be used for scene transitions, props, and extensive stage directions. The produced version is a bound copy housed at the Library of Congress and accompanied by a detailed production book featuring pages of director's notes, electric diagrams, and many original production photos. When compared to the original version, the production script lacks intensity; its jokes are corny, the characters wacky but stereotyped, and the caustic bite has become little more than a nibble. Consider this comparison of the opening scenes, for example:

The original version of the play opens as newsboys announce that Uncle Sam has entered show business. A series of blackouts and quick transitions between scenes show the impact of this announcement on the lives of various individuals. A magician is contacted by his agent with the news that the FTP wants to see the act in which the magician pulls the rabbit out of his hat; he replies, "This is a fine time to tell me! [. . .] We had the rabbit for dinner last night!" The script then cuts to a scene in which a German family of acrobats struggles to rehearse while lamenting their lot in life; news of the FTP arrives and the Father hollers, "Hooray for Uncle Sam! I knew he wouldn't forget uns [sic] 100% Amerrrrrrrrricans!" The third flash is conveyed entirely through movement. A young actress, evicted from her home, despairs; she wanders across the stage until she meets a "hard-boiled, wise-guy type, smoking a cigarette. He gives the girl the eye and the desperation of her position

translated into Spanish and adapted for the immigrant population in Tampa; according to reviews, the Tampa production went over well for the Spanish-speaking audiences. Even more curious, Hedley Gordan Graham, director of the Chicago version, also directed the Tampa version; he did not speak Spanish. Translators were brought in for rehearsals.



Figure 1: Set for the Chicago FTP production of *O Say Can You Sing*. Federal Theatre Project Photographs, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University.

gives her an idea. She passes him cautiously, dropping her handkerchief. He picks it up and follows her rapidly, then touches her shoulders [and] pulls out a bill” Just as the young actress is about to accept the money a newsboy arrives with news of the FTP. Her face “lights up with joy” and when “the man taps her on the shoulder,” she “motions him away without even looking at him and walks off” while he is “left holding the bill.”⁷⁴

This opening mirrors and parodies the situations of several specific populations in Chicago. The occupation of the first man, that of a juggler and magician, can be seen as a metaphor for the millions of struggling people forced to juggle bills, the needs of their families, their self-respect, and their relief checks, hoping against hope that they will have enough money and luck to pay for food and shelter. At this point in Chicago the ability to balance these needs was, in fact, an act of magic; even people who had jobs (particularly for the city government) were rarely paid. Ironically, this man had to eat the means of his livelihood; like many in the immigrant population, he is trapped in an unending downward spiral of poverty.

If the magician represents the thousands of frightfully poor Chicagoans, the German acrobats remind the audience of the heightened challenges faced by the immigrant population – a population that had steadily increased until white ethnics composed the majority of the city.⁷⁵ The white ethnic groups were a powerful

⁷⁴ Sid Kuller, Ray Golden, and Phil Charig, *O Say Can You Sing*, Original Script, NARA, E914, Playscripts, Box 309, “*O Say Can You Sing*,” 1-7 (hereafter Original Script).

⁷⁵ Of the 3,376,438 people in the city of Chicago, 233,903 (6.9%) were black while 2,174,430 (64.3%) were white ethnics and 27.9 percent were white Native American. Within the context of the census, white ethnics consist of foreign-born and second-generation immigrants, typically from Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Yugoslavia, the Netherlands, or Norway. Native Americans are white people born in the United States of parents living in the United States. For a breakdown of the percentages of each ethnic group listed, see

presence in the government united by their shared histories and geographic proximity to one another. These immigrant groups were the workers who allowed the city to function and ensured the continuation of the Democratic machine that ruled the city with an iron grip.⁷⁶

The most striking of these opening scenes though – that of the young actress driven to contemplate selling her body to a man who appears to be linked with the area’s infamous organized crime – graphically illustrates the effects of the Great Depression on the unemployed people of Chicago. It also references a serious problem – Chicago was plagued by one of “the most notorious red-light district[s] in the country.” Even after Al Capone’s 1931 tax fraud conviction, his network of prostitutes, “dope peddlers, and backroom bookies” was simply divided between his former competitors.⁷⁷ Perhaps most vital to establishing the role of the FTP in Chicago, these scenes portray an organization that employs Chicagoans. The people in these scenes, while amusing, are all desperate – the FTP arrives in town and saves each from either metaphorical or literal prostitution.

Appendix 1; John M. Allswang, *A House for All Peoples: Ethnic Politics in Chicago, 1890-1936* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 19; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Volume 1, Population, Number and Distribution of Inhabitants* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 23.

⁷⁶ Many immigrant populations had moved out of the center of the city during the 1920s; this migration established a number of areas that could be characterized by the religion or ethnicity of the majority of inhabitants. The Southwest Side, for example, was predominantly Irish, Czechoslovakian, Polish, and German while the South Side was highly populated with African Americans. The immigrant populations also ensured the continued success of the Democratic Party, both in Chicago and the state of Illinois, as witnessed by the steadily increasing Democratic vote in the majority of immigrant populations. Dominic A. Pacyga, “Chicago’s Ethnic Neighborhoods: The Myth of Stability and the Reality of Chicago,” In *Ethnic Chicago: A Multicultural Portrait*, 4th ed., ed. by Melvin G. Holli and Peter d’A. Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 613-614; John M. Allswang, *A House for All Peoples: Ethnic Politics in Chicago, 1890-1936* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 42-46.

⁷⁷ Richard C. Lindberg, *To Serve and Collect: Chicago Politics and Police Corruption from the Lager Beer Riot to the Summerdale Scandal* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), 260.

This opening series of brief scenes would likely have occurred within the first five minutes of the production, setting the tone for the rest of the show. It is interesting to note that these scenes also use a variety of theatrical performers to represent the various situations seen in Chicago's populace. This draws a parallel between the working class, immigrant population that the FTP hoped to attract and the theatre itself. In a way, the FTP and its struggling theatre artists become one with the people in the audience. In the actual production, however, all of these scenes and many of these similarities disappeared. Instead of a series of desperate and representative individuals learning of the FTP, the production opened with nothing more than a brief scene in which three newsboys holler "Extra! . . . Extra! . . . Uncle Sam going into show business! [. . .] Uncle Sam wants actors, dancers, singers."⁷⁸ This one page scene is followed by the revue's first musical number "*O Say Can You Sing*." The number is described in the production book:

Through this scrim come the men and women dressed in Beaux Art costumes, as Elizabethans, 19th Century, in evening dress, etc. The women [. . .] go through a routine of the first verse. On the second verse of the song spotlights light up behind the scrim revealing four girls on a six-foot platform in military costume, one specialty dancer, and four negro tap dancers. The scrim flies up, as they begin their dance. On the third verse, a contour gold curtain rises on a twelve-foot platform behind the first, revealing singers dressed in either red, white, or blue choir robes. The colors formed by the robes are, successively, the colors of the American flag.⁷⁹

This modified beginning illustrates a dramatic shift in the tone and apparent intent of this production. While the early version referred to real people and problems in the city, the revised production focuses on spectacle, pretty dancing girls, and the

⁷⁸ Sid Kuller and Ray Golden, *O Say Can You Sing*, Playscripts File, 1936-39, Box 725, Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection, 2, (hereafter Produced Version).

⁷⁹ Ibid, 3.

Robert J. Ratcliffe. Ratcliffe (who attempts to have federal theatre declared unconstitutional), often becomes the butt of jokes featuring both Communists and Republicans. Political humor is prevalent in the original script, and no form of corruption in the city of Chicago is safe in the original version of the play. As prospective theatre professionals arrive in search of jobs, for example, they are introduced to the director of the fictional FTP:

Miss Flipcrack: . . . there's a magician outside to see you. He wants to get on the government payroll.
Mr. Hamfield: He doesn't need to be a magician to do that. All he has to do is vote democrat. Shoot him in.⁸²

Mr. Hamfield's remark refers to an all-too-common situation Chicagoans faced. The so-called Democratic Machine, led by Mayor Kelly, used the relief rolls to political advantage. As far as most citizens were concerned, relief checks and public employment arrived via the City of Chicago or Cook County, both of which served as vehicles for the Chicago Democratic party. As John Allswang states:

When a Chicagoan asked his or her congressman for a WPA or other job, it was not unusual to be told that one needed a note from one's ward committeeman in order to get the job. There was only so much relief available, and the machine felt it was only reasonable that it go to Democrats.⁸³

Another scene from the original version addresses the influence of the immigrant population. A Russian Director, Mr. Stankovitch arrives with an idea for the "most sensational, marvillious, gorgeous and colosy production in de history of de teaaaater. It will haf 1000 stage hands, 2000 actors, 3000 costumes and at least 4000

⁸² Sid Kuller and Ray Golden, *O Say Can You Sing*, Original Version, 38-9.

⁸³ John M. Allswang, *The New Deal and American Politics: A Study in Political Change*, Robert A. Divine, ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), 86.

creation of a representative American flag via music, movement, and costumes. The initially pertinent themes were replaced by peppy patriotism.

The changes are not confined to the opening scenes. Throughout the play topical jabs are replaced with innocuous one-liners, and many scenes are cut completely. The aforementioned burlesqued-burlesque scene at the nudist camp, for example, disappeared from the production. While the scene itself sounds quite amusing, it is likely that Mayor Kelly did not approve. During the World's Fair just a few years earlier, Kelly was said to have turned "bashful pink" at seeing women dancers scantily clad." Much to the dismay of the managers, Kelly promptly ordered that all performers wear clothes at the fair; while many doubted that the mayor was a "reliable weather vane when it came to art and morality,"⁸⁰ the implication is clear. The finale of the burlesque scene features the donning of earmuffs, mittens, and a large hat, an extreme interpretation of Mayor Kelly's earlier order.⁸¹ Certainly, this mocking portrayal of a "scantily clad" female sexily dressing herself displeased the Mayor. In a political environment that had already seen the banning of several FTP shows (not to mention the commercial productions that experienced similar difficulties), the removal of this reference would not be surprising.

In the original version, the protagonist, Mr. Augustus Q. Hamfield, is portrayed as a fast-talking, wisecracking pickpocket who occasionally works in the theatre as an actor and director. He leads the fictitious Federal Theatre Project in a crusade against the stereotypically pompous and overfed Secretary of the Budget, Mr.

⁸⁰ Qtd. in Roger Biles, *Big City Boss in Depression and War: Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago* (DeKalb, IL: Northern University Press, 1984), 31.

⁸¹ Sid Kuller and Ray Golden, *O Say Can You Sing*, Original Version, 72-6.



Figure 2: Scene from the Chicago FTP production of *O Say Can You Sing*. Note the variety shown in this image – a southern belle, gentlemen in tuxedos, leg dancers, a choir, and what looks to be characters from the Elizabethan and Restoration periods. Federal Theatre Project Photographs, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University.

pieces scenery.” When told that this idea – which will cost only a million dollars – is a bit pricey for the FTP, Stankovitch suggests a minimalist production of the quintessential American play, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The Russian proposes a production costing a mere 79 cents, and requiring only a few adaptations; the title of the new version will be *Uncle Tomashevsky’s Cabin* and it features the *absences* of both Uncle Tomashevsky and the cabin.⁸⁴ Instead the play features the death of Little Eva, a sexy, blonde Russian woman who is able to foretell the winners of horse races until she dies of a fever that apparently could have been cured if only some good vodka were available.

This parody of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, directed and adapted by a Russian director who has been fired from every commercial theatre avenue in Russia and the United States, contains a number of potentially troubling elements. Most obvious is the removal of the elements that make the play a piece of American history. The loss of Uncle Tom and the cabin (as well as any mention of slavery) negate the themes and historical implications of the play, as do the shifts in Little Eva’s character. No longer is she the angelic child, representative of all that is good and Christian in the United States; instead, she becomes a blonde Russian woman with unbridled sexuality. Unlike the Little Eva from the novel (or Aiken’s version of the play), this character supports gambling and bootleg alcohol.⁸⁵ While this character may have

⁸⁴ Golden, Kuller, and Charig, *O Say Can You Sing*, Original Version, 26.

⁸⁵ Widely seen by many immigrants as “a way of establishing the hegemony of traditional American values, and traditional Americans, over new values and new people,” nearly 90% of Chicago’s immigrant populations voted against Prohibition.⁸⁵ In four opinion referenda regarding Prohibition occurring between 1919 and 1930, 73-83% of Chicagoans voted against Prohibition. Immigrant populations demonstrated an even clearer dislike of Prohibition: Southern and eastern European groups voted 88% anti-Prohibition and Germans voted 90% anti-Prohibition,⁸⁵ numbers that were high enough to swing the vote in their favor. John M. Allswang, *The New Deal and American*

appealed to audiences with her sexuality and support of alcohol, she is a part of the perversion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in this play.

This scene was problematic for the FTP as a national entity as well. For an organization that was consistently accused of communist leanings and un-American activities, plays that gave the appearance of communist sympathies were anathema. The hiring of a poor quality Russian director, the replacement of an icon of American innocence and Christianity with a sexually appealing Russian, and the appropriation of this important historical work for a comic theatrical piece would send the wrong message to critics of the FTP. As the FTP drew additional fire, Flanagan regularly encountered problems because of her interest in Russian theatre. She had received a Guggenheim Award in 1926 and spent time studying experimental forms of theatre abroad, emphasizing Russia because of the exciting techniques of Meyerhold and the avant-garde.⁸⁶ In 1936, when *O Say Can You Sing* opened, Flanagan's affinity for Russian theatre was only starting to cause problems for the FTP. Because of this, Hamfield, the fictional head of the FTP in the play, could not entertain thoughts of hiring a Russian in Chicago.

Another potentially ill-advised scene in the original version features a parody of Mrs. Roosevelt going about her daily activities. Mrs. Roosevelt's apparently obsessive interest in receiving coalminer delegations is the topic, and she carefully notes that she shook hands with each miner; in the scene, an air-headed Mrs. Roosevelt mixes weeding the presidential garden, answering fan mail, and attending

Politics: A Study in Political Change, Robert A. Divine, ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), 4.

⁸⁶ Flanagan, *Arena*, 4.

girl scout ballets with visits to the Civilian Conservation Corps camps. The scene opens with a description of Mrs. Roosevelt attending a FTP production the night before:

Although she claimed she was traveling incognito, the audience recognized her the minute she got up on her seat in the middle of a number and started making a speech on the plight of our coal miners [. . .] As you all know, Mrs. Roosevelt writes a day by day account of her activities for the newspapers . . .⁸⁷

The scene consists of Mrs. Roosevelt dictating the day's activities to her secretary.

An example of her dictation reads:

Let's begin! Put down yesterday's date . . . Now then! At 7:30 A.M. – Arose . . . 7:31 – Bathed . . . 7:32 – Breakfasted . . . 7:33 – Received a delegation of coal miners from Scranton and shook hands with each one personally . . . 7:34 – Took another bath . . . 7:35 – Received a long distance call from the senior class president at Vassar, inviting me to lead the annual daisy chain . . . 7:36 – Received miners from Albuquerque and shook hands with each miner . . . 7:37 – Took another bath . . .⁸⁸

The scene continues in this way. Mrs. Roosevelt putters in the white house garden, where she “disposed of some weeds that [she] believe[s] were planted by republican propagandists.” She flies to Alaska, takes a rocket back to the White House, catapults to a CCC Camp, and is shot from a cannon back to Washington again. She receives an offer from the Olympic Committee to “represent America in the hop, skip and jump,” takes “Wa-hoo” lessons from a Texan Senator, and teaches a group of girl scouts how to start a fire. All of her activities are followed by a bath or dry cleaning (because of the drought). Her favorite activity though, is to shake hands with and give speeches to the miners (always followed by a bath). At the end of the scene, the

⁸⁷ Ibid, 48.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 48-9.



Figure 3: Dance number from the Chicago FTP production of *O Say Can You Sing*. This is “The Gambolero,” choreographed by Grace and Kurt Graff. Federal Theatre Project Photographs, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University.

President asks if she will accompany him to a film titled *Dead End*; she refuses until her secretary informs her that the play focuses on children who are under the age of fourteen – “Minors!” Mrs. Roosevelt perks up, saying “Miners?...Did you say miners?...Of course I’ll go!....Reserve the whole front row!....I feel a speech coming on!”⁸⁹ Mrs. Roosevelt is portrayed as a high-class, ditzy snob who spends the majority of her time dirtying herself – either through her association with the coalminers or the garden weeds – and engaging in a cleansing activity of some kind immediately after.

Very little of the scenes described above remain in the produced version of *O Say Can You Sing*. All mention of Mrs. Roosevelt disappears, as do the topical references to Chicago’s Democratic Machine directing relief money and jobs to its Democratic supporters; the burlesque company’s strip-tease and dress-tease are also removed entirely. *Uncle Tomashevsky’s Cabin* remains, but sustains major revisions, and is reduced to little more than random physical humor augmented by a cute blond. Altogether, the produced version is significantly tamer than the original. Scenes and lines that could be read as politically troubling are deleted and replaced by tired one-liners.

The revisions in *O Say Can You Sing* show attention to two specific factors. First, the play is cleaned up politically. In light of the influence of Chicago politics, particularly the power repeatedly exercised by Mayor Kelly to close theatrical productions for any reason he saw fit, it is not surprising that unflattering references would be removed. As *Model Tenement* and Mayor Kelly’s campaign against immorality on stage demonstrate, city censors regularly worked in concert with the

⁸⁹ Ibid, 49-52.

playwright to ensure that the performed product would adhere to the unspoken code of morality required by influential leaders in Chicago. Though I have located no specific evidence that documents this interaction on this specific play, the chain of events is suggestive. Kondolf replaced Thomas Wood Stevens as head of the Chicago FTP. In one of his last official actions, Stevens attempted to produce *Model Tenement*, a play about the housing problem and social ills. When Kondolf arrived, he dropped *Model Tenement* without hesitation, closed the controversial *Hymn to the Rising Sun* (on the day it was to open) without comment, and shifted the focus of the Chicago FTP to commercial successes. *O Say Can You Sing* was the first original production produced by Kondolf in Chicago. A fun, popular hit, it likely went far to mitigate any previously incurred ill will between Mayor Kelly and the FTP.

The second major shift demonstrated by the revisions shows a movement from a wickedly pointed parody to a nationalistic revue. The produced version of *O Say Can You Sing* emphasized pride in the American flag and in all who showed loyalty to that flag. The image of the flag was laced throughout the play, repeatedly reminding audience members that Chicago was a great part of the nation and that patronage of the FTP (both as a whole and in Chicago) improved the general well-being of the country. The underlying political and social pressures that led to these radical revisions would continue to haunt the FTP in Chicago. The production of *Spirochete* the following year drove this point home for Chicago audiences.

Spirochete: Whispering Out Loud

. . . for I The Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love Me and keep My Commandments.

~ Exodus 20:5-6 RSV

In the fall of 1937, Susan Glaspell, director of the Midwestern Play Bureau, asked Arnold Sundgaard to write a play about syphilis for the Chicago FTP. Sundgaard came to the FTP from graduate studies at Yale University, where he held a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. He began as a playreader for the Midwest Play Bureau, and was required to read and report on two new plays per day. Glaspell had plans for Sundgaard; in order to allow him more time for playwrighting, she began giving him “bad plays” to read so as to “keep [his] burdens as light as possible.” Sundgaard was a self-professed “expert on bad plays,” noting that he could complete his daily quota in the morning and have the rest of the day to write, research, or explore Chicago theatre.⁹⁰ Glaspell wanted the FTP to respond to the massive anti-syphilis movement that was being mounted in Chicago, and encouraged Sundgaard to write a living newspaper about the disease. Sundgaard wrote *Spirochete* in six weeks.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Arnold Sundgaard, Interview by John O'Connor, 5 September 1976, Boston, Massachusetts, tape recording, WPA Oral Histories Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 4-5.

⁹¹ It is interesting to note that a number of the plays discussed here served as precedents for determining the rights of writers on the FTP. Like *Created Equal*, written by John Hunter Booth for the Massachusetts FTP, *Spirochete* became the subject of a pitched battle between the national administration and the writers. The pivotal piece of information in both cases was whether the writer wrote the play while on the federal government's payroll or in his/her spare time. In the case of *Spirochete* (written almost entirely on Sundgaard's own time), Glaspell was a strong advocate for Sundgaard's rights; she wrote several letters of support, eventually involving the Dramatists Guild and

Glaspell's request for a play dealing with syphilis followed in the footsteps of the national opening of another play dealing with a contemporary social problem, *It Can't Happen Here*.⁹² This play would focus on a problem that was not only national, but that was of special interest in Chicago because of its anti-syphilis campaign. *Spirochete* would prove to be highly relevant not only in Chicago, but also in towns and cities throughout the country when the movement picked up momentum nationally.

In the style of the living newspapers, *Spirochete* documented the development of syphilis from the period of Columbus to modern times. *Spirochete* is "Chicago's own living newspaper . . . the story of syphilis, what it has done to man and what man has done to it."⁹³ The prologue opens as a young couple, Peter and Frieda, apply for a Cook County marriage license and are told they must provide medical certificates showing that they have been screened for venereal disease. Peter and Frieda respond indignantly, arguing that they are decent folks and will not be humiliated by submitting to a blood test for diseases that are "disgusting." The Clerk explains that the blood test has nothing to do with decency, and the Announcer notes, "a minute ago you two kids sounded pretty sensible to me. How come you're so prudish about this?" Frieda's reply addresses the general public attitude toward venereal disease,

threatening to leave her position as head of the Midwestern Play Bureau altogether. She, and Sundgaard, ultimately prevailed, but her relationship with the FTP was irreparably tarnished; Glaspell left the project not long after the resolution. Ironically, the victory ultimately cost Sundgaard his job with the FTP; the royalties that he earned for the numerous FTP productions of *Spirochete* made his income (briefly) high enough that he was no longer eligible for relief.

⁹² *It Can't Happen Here*, the play based on Sinclair Lewis' popular anti-fascist novel, opened simultaneously in 21 theatres in 17 states on October 27, 1936. The play is frequently cited as one of the best examples of the FTP's success as a national theatre. Flanagan, *Arena*, 115.

⁹³ Flanagan, *Arena*, 144.

“We’re not prudish. We’d rather not think about it.” The Announcer decides that an education is in order, and takes Peter and Frieda on a journey through the history of syphilis, how it began, how it spreads, and how lucky modern society is to have the opportunity of a cure.⁹⁴

Spirochete would prove to be vital to establishing the FTP’s reputation as a theatre that could produce serious work in Chicago, as well as in the rest of the country. In fact, *Variety* reviewed Chicago’s production of *Spirochete*; Irwin Rubinstein, Manager of the National Service Bureau, touted the play’s Chicago reception in a letter to Flanagan: “I have just seen a good review in VARIETY. Of course, you see VARIETY, but I want to quote this sentence: ‘In SPIROCHETE the Federal Theatre finds its best argument for its existence, delivering a play of real social importance.’”⁹⁵

Forgiving the Sins of the Father

Spirochete appeared on the national scene at a crucial time. The “conspiracy of silence” that had hung over the unseemly topic of venereal disease since World War I was gradually breaking apart. By the early 1930s, the commonly accepted figures placed 1 in every 10 Americans as syphilitics.⁹⁶ The American Social

⁹⁴ Arnold Sundgaard, *Spirochete*, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University Libraries, 8-14.

⁹⁵ Irwin Rubinstein, to Emmet Lavery, 5 May 1938, NARA, Entry 878, General Subject File of the National Service Bureau, Box 164, Illinois.

⁹⁶ R. A. Vonderlehr, “Are We Checking the Great Plague?,” *Survey Graphic* (1 April 1940); Thomas Parran, “Public Health Control of Syphilis,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 10 (July 1936), 65; Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 129.

Hygiene Association (ASHA) attributed a litany of social ills (including the spread of syphilis) to the familial disruptions caused by the Great Depression; ASHA argued that, as mothers went to work, children's risk of delinquency and immorality increased. As the American family's finances declined, the Association suspected that prostitution would increase and, with it, the spread of venereal disease – syphilis, according to ASHA, was merely the consequence of the decay of the American family values and social controls.⁹⁷

The situation was intensified by the prohibitive expense and duration of the treatments and the stigma within the medical practice itself; many of those infected discontinued the regimen early, risking relapse and increasing the likelihood of spreading the disease further.⁹⁸ In 1934, Dr. Thomas Parran, New York State's Commissioner of Health and a champion of venereal disease control, prepared to give a fifteen-minute radio speech to 60 stations in the Columbia Broadcasting System. When he arrived, CBS demanded that he refrain from discussing syphilis; he refused, the station played piano music instead, and a vigorous campaign against radio

⁹⁷ The American Social Hygiene Administration, known for its rather liberal use of statistics and generalities, nonetheless serves as an example of popular opinion regarding venereal diseases. It is this view that Dr. Thomas Parran and his associates battled throughout the Great Depression as they cited study after study in an effort to excite interest, discussion, and funding of the anti-syphilis movement. Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 131.

⁹⁸ One of the ways in which the stigma exacerbated the problem was seen in the public's resistance to seeking professional medical treatment. In lieu of doctors and hospitals, people sought over-the-counter remedies. One ASHA study found that 63 percent of the drug stores in Chicago offered a variety of "cures" for syphilis and other venereal diseases. Many people turned to the supposedly confidential practices of quacks, who rarely succeeded in curing the disease and often blackmailed their patients. Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 133.

ensorship began.⁹⁹ Less than 18 months later, President Roosevelt appointed Parran Surgeon General of the United States. Upon his appointment, *Time* described Parran's "medical hobby" as the desire to "remove the U. S. taboo from public discussions of venereal diseases, to make syphilis as rare in the U. S. as it is in the Scandinavian countries."¹⁰⁰ Parran made the control of syphilis a priority on a national level through his efforts as Surgeon General and President of the American Public Health Association.¹⁰¹

Books and articles focusing on the dangers and treatments of syphilis appeared in medical journals and popular magazines nationwide. The *Illinois Medical Journal* published a variety of articles regarding the control of syphilis and venereal disease; even the *Ladies Home Journal* and *Survey Graphic* featured the taboo topic. *Reader's Digest* published Parran's 1936 article, "Stamp Out Syphilis"; editors of the widely read magazine bragged that "more than 1,500 organizations and individuals had ordered 276,021 reprints of the article for distribution."¹⁰² In 1937, the March and April editions of *Reader's Digest* included articles on syphilis:

Syphilis, the wrecker and disabler, ranks high if not actually *first* among the causes of death. Untreated or insufficiently treated, it invades heart and brain, may ravage the nervous system and lay waste the mechanisms of sight and

⁹⁹ "Syphilis and Radio," *Time*, 3 December 1934, online, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,929999,00.html>

¹⁰⁰ "New Surgeon General," *Time*, 4 April 1936, online, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,848454,00.html>.

¹⁰¹ "Great Pox," *Time*, 26 October 1936, online, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,788606-2,00.html>

¹⁰² "Great Pox," *Time*, 26 October 1936, online, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,788606-2,00.html>

locomotion. It is the great ventriloquist among diseases; in its final stages it may speak from any organ of tissue of the body.¹⁰³

Parran continued to speak and publish articles widely. His book, *Shadow on the Land*, joined half a dozen others including Morris Fishbein's *Syphilis: The Next Great Plague To Go*, S. William Becker's *Ten Million Americans Have It, S.* Funkhouser's *The Great American Taboo*, and Winfield Scott Pugh's *Lingering Death*.

Chicago waged its own war against syphilis, and soon became the flagship city in the national campaign. A series of full-page articles (with accompanying pictures) in the *Chicago Tribune* touted a scientific approach to syphilis through 1935 and 1936. More than 800 articles dealing with syphilis graced the pages of the *Tribune* between 1935 and 1939. The *Chicago Tribune* proclaimed the movement throughout the summer of 1937, as headlines kept Chicagoans updated on the latest events: "All Chicagoans Urged to Take Syphilis Tests"; "Presbyterian Church Joins War on Syphilis"; "Syphilis Tests Taken by 65 Percent of *Tribune* Staff"; "Council Votes \$50,000 in War to End Syphilis"; and "Health Service Hails Chicago's Syphilis Battle".¹⁰⁴ Local groups from the Lions to the Medical and Dental Societies, as well as young women, food handlers, the Cook County Council of Legion, and many

¹⁰³ John H. Stokes, "Combatting [sic] Early Syphilis," *Reader's Digest* 30, no. 179 (March 1937): 9.

¹⁰⁴ William O'Neil, "Asks for Added Health Powers in Syphilis War," *Chicago Tribune*, 9 July 1937, 13; Stanley Armstrong, "All Chicagoans Urged to Take Syphilis Tests," *Chicago Tribune*, 14 June 1937, 1; "Presbyterian Church Joins War on Syphilis," *Chicago Tribune*, 20 June 1937, sec. 3-1; "Health Service Hails Chicago's Syphilis Battle," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 July 1937, 4; Arthur Evans, "Launch City-Wide Poll on Syphilis Tests," *Chicago Tribune*, 24 July 1937, 1, 10; "Lions Members Urged to Aid War on Syphilis," *Chicago Tribune*, 24 July 1937, 10; "Syphilis Tests Taken by 65 Percent of the *Tribune* Staff," *Chicago Tribune*, 2 April 1938, 6; "Council Votes \$50,000 in War to End Syphilis," *Chicago Tribune*, 31 August 1937, 11. In addition to those listed here, many other stories regarding the war on syphilis were printed in the *Chicago Tribune* between 1937 and 1940.

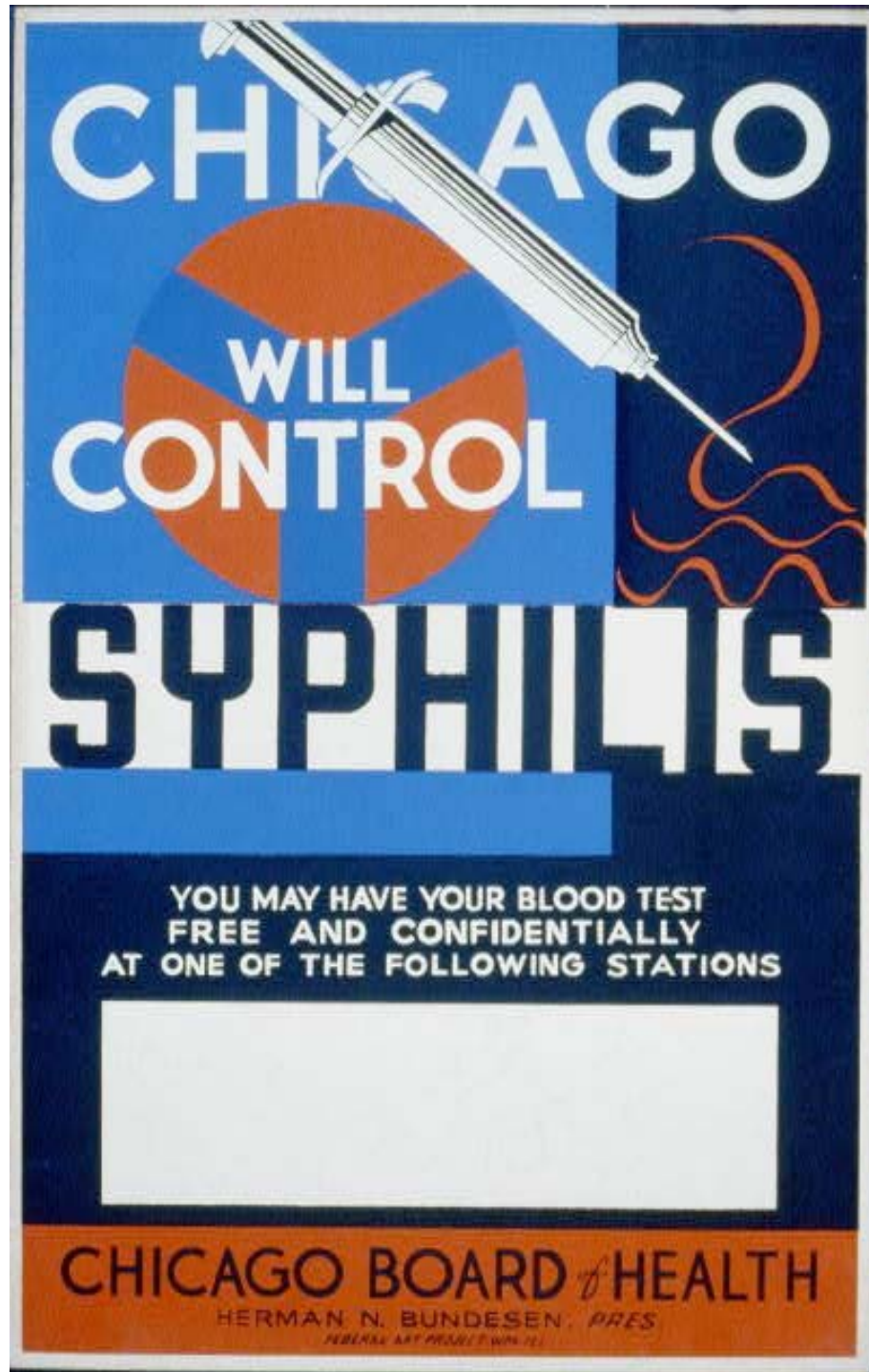


Figure 4: WPA Poster showing Chicago's efforts to quell the spread of syphilis. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, LC-USZC2-1655 DLC.

others appeared in the headlines supporting the city's massive efforts to contain the disease.¹⁰⁵

While the other local newspapers did not match the *Tribune's* intensity, syphilis was nevertheless a hot topic. The *Chicago Defender*, with widespread readership in the African American communities on the South Side of Chicago, identified the problem for its readers in 1935 (a year earlier than the *Tribune's* barrage of articles):

Recent studies have revealed this as the most prevalent of social diseases with a million more cases than either typhoid fever or tuberculosis. Fifteen per cent of all blindness and ten per cent of all stillbirths have been attributed to this subtle and devastating plague which is relatively easy to cure in its early stages.¹⁰⁶

That the *Defender* did not conceal the mention of venereal disease illustrates a different perception of syphilis on the South Side at this point. Health issues became major problems on the South Side because of the high rates of poverty, and low rates of acceptable housing; much of the population lived in squalor and had little medical recourse for any degree of illness or injury.¹⁰⁷ An editorial in 1937 elucidated the conundrum that journalists and public figures in the African American communities faced:

The natural instinct of group loyalty and pride make us desire the concealment of our diseases and disabilities, especially when high rates of disease and disability are held up as reflections upon the sick and disabled themselves . . . The Southside already bears the stigma of high rates of disease, delinquency

¹⁰⁵ Suzanne Poirier, *Chicago's War on Syphilis, 1937-1940: The Times, the 'Trib,' and the Clap Doctor, with an epilogue on issues and attitudes in the time of AIDS* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 20-22.

¹⁰⁶ "Be Examined' Urged to Stem Social Plague," *Chicago Defender*, 4 May 1935, 24.

¹⁰⁷ "Survey Shows High Syphilis Rate in Slums," *Chicago Tribune*, 23 October 1938, B12.

and dependency. A few years ago a municipal study of the area was made and deplorable conditions discovered and presented to the public.¹⁰⁸

The syphilis problem on the South Side soon became more desperate than the social need to hide it. Several universities and public health organizations began studying the presence of syphilis in specific geographical areas and racial populations throughout the city. Their studies illustrated what many *Chicago Defender* writers already knew; syphilis was present in much greater proportions in the South Side African Americans than in the wealthier parts of the city. The *Tribune* noted that “the top ten community areas contain 60 per cent of the syphilitics under treatment in Chicago clinics and only 14 per cent of the population. [. . .] The ten areas constituting the slum belt circling the city demonstrate this fully.”¹⁰⁹ *Chicago Defender* writers highlighted these economic and racial disparities, and called for the Health Center that had been promised to the South Side several years before:

About 250 out of every 100,000 persons in the more depressed areas of the city are found to be victims of syphilis, according to a study of public hospitals covering the years 1922 to 1931, inclusive. In sharp contrast is the rate of only 70 victims in every 100,000 residents to the city’s residential districts.¹¹⁰

The article noted that general paralysis and insanity were among the potential outcomes for untreated syphilitics. The *Defender* continued writing about syphilis between 1936 and 1938, featuring new cures such as fever therapy, information on clinics and testing, and pleas for an open, enlightened approach – “to take it from

¹⁰⁸ “Syphilis and the Southside,” *Chicago Defender*, 30 January 1937, 19.

¹⁰⁹ “Survey Shows High Syphilis Rate in Slums,” *Chicago Tribune*, 23 October 1938, B12.

¹¹⁰ “Syphilis Causes 350 a Year Here to Become Crazy,” *The Chicago Defender*, 16 January 1937, 3. This article was based on a study conducted by scientists at the University of Chicago.

behind the cloud of secrecy which now veils it and fight it in the open . . . so sufferers will consult reputable men for treatment, rather than rely on quack medicine.”¹¹¹

Many different populations in the city of Chicago called for action in the fight against syphilis; the disease was simply too widespread and too devastating to continue unfettered. This sentiment soon led to political action in the form of a new law. Though it had been shouted down in the Illinois state legislature just three years earlier, on July 1, 1937, the Salties Hygienic Marriage Law went into effect, requiring that all couples successfully complete a blood test for venereal disease before being issued a marriage license in the state. June 30th broke all records at the Cook County Marriage License Bureau; the office issued 1407 licenses in a special, eleven-hour day.¹¹² After the law took effect, many couples avoided it by traveling to Crown Point, Indiana (where blood tests were not yet required) to marry.¹¹³

In late July, Chicago officials began a massive poll on the question of Chicagoan’s willingness to submit to free and secret blood tests for syphilis. The city mailed secret ballots to every family in the city. Religious, civic, and scientific communities were asked to encourage everyone to take the blood tests, and sponsors

¹¹¹ “Free Medicine Asked of State in Syphilis War,” *Chicago Defender*, 19 December 1936, 16.

¹¹² This total is nearly 300 above the previous record in Cook County, when 1,124 couple obtained licenses on April 9, 1917, the day before the World War I army draft went into effect. 1153 licenses were issued on June 29th, 1937. Virginia Gardner, “Jam Marriage Bureau to Beat Test Deadline,” *Chicago Tribune*, 1 July 1937, 1; “Cupid’s Busiest Day,” *Chicago Tribune*, 30 June 1937, 11.

¹¹³ At this point, multiple lawsuits alleging that couples married in Crown Point were evading the Salties hygienic marriage law had been filed. Otto Kerner, Illinois Attorney General, stated that he saw no violation and that he thought the Illinois legislature left the loophole on purpose. A *Reader’s Digest* article also notes that the *Tribune* attempted to discourage this practice and appeal to public sentiment by printing the names of couples who married in Indiana. “Crown Point Weddings Held Valid in Illinois: Health Law Evasions are Legal, Says Kerner,” *Chicago Tribune*, 29 September 1937, 3; “A Compulsory Test for Syphilis Before Marriage?,” *Reader’s Digest* 31, No. 187 (November 1937), 129-130.

included the U.S. Public Health Service, the U.S. Department of Health, the WPA, the Chicago Board of Health, and local doctors and universities. Officials on both a local and national level hoped that the ballots would provide the first accurate figures regarding the rate of syphilis infections in Chicago. National public health officials pointed to Chicago's as "the first American city to attack the problem of syphilis in a realistic way."¹¹⁴ Because of the combination of the survey and the Salties hygienic law, Chicago's head of the Committee for the Control of Venereal Disease, Dr. Louis Schmidt, declared that "the problem in Chicago had been divorced from superstition, ignorance, and false modesty and hence it was 'the logical city for the first popular referendum and actual abatement of syphilis.'"¹¹⁵

Within a few months, the *Chicago Tribune* announced that it would require blood tests of all 2,700 employees. Dr. Herman N. Bundesen, president of the board of health, described the effort as a "great step forward because of the realization that it is good business to control syphilis" and noted that the *Tribune* was the first business in the city to begin such a program.¹¹⁶ Other associations and companies joined the march; soon Sears, Roebuck & Co., Carson Pirie Scott, Montgomery Ward, Bowman Dairy Company and Charles A. Stevens & Co. required blood tests as

¹¹⁴ "Fight On Syphilis Put Up To Doctors," *New York Times*, 26 July 1937, 21.

¹¹⁵ The free blood tests proved so popular that the state changed from the Wassermann to the Kahn method because it could be completed so much faster. The Wassermann Test was developed in 1906, and had an incubation period of two days with a 95 percent successful diagnosis rate. The cheaper Kahn Test evolved from the Wassermann Test and showed results in two hours, but accuracy was more debated. Even into the 1940s, most other large cities used the Kahn test as a backup test on samples that received a positive from the Wassermann Test. "New Tests Supplant Wassermann in City," *New York Times*, 4 January 1947, 30; "Chicago Speeds Blood Tests," *New York Times*, 2 August 1937, 21; "Adopt Kahn Test For Use in City's War on Syphilis," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 3 September 1937, 13; "Polls Chicagoans on Syphilis Tests," *New York Times*, 25 July 1937, 10.

¹¹⁶ "Tribune Staf [sic] Asked to Take Syphilis Tests," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 March 1938, 5.

well, and promised that infected employees would not be adversely affected so long as they continued treatment. The Illinois Manufacturers' Association and the Chicago Association of Commerce also agreed to encourage private industry to use the blood test.¹¹⁷

It was in the midst of this heightened interest – in the city that appeared to be the national focal point of that interest – that Glaspell asked Sundgaard to write a play about syphilis.¹¹⁸ *Spirochete* premiered in the Blackstone Theatre on April 29, 1938.¹¹⁹

Responding to the Plague

Inspired by U.S. Surgeon General Thomas Parran's 1937 public health book, *Shadow on the Land: Syphilis, Spirochete* described the disease, the discovery that the organism that causes syphilis appears in the form of the spirochete (a spiral shaped organism that can only be seen under a dark-field microscope), and the progress that had been made in diagnosis and treatment, concluding with a call to action.¹²⁰ As Flanagan later wrote, "it is a hazardous undertaking to trace the history

¹¹⁷ "War on Syphilis in 2,800 Illinois Factories Urged," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 26 June 1938, 6; "Safeguard Jobs in Syphilis War, Physicians Urge," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 June 1938, 14; "Concerns Hiring 15,000 Support Syphilis Tests," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 17 March 1938, 5.

¹¹⁸ Arnold Sundgaard, Interview by John O'Connor, 5 September 1976, Boston, Massachusetts, tape recording, WPA Oral Histories Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 9.

¹¹⁹ "Play Depicting Tragic History of Syphilis Will Open Tonight," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 29, April 1938, 15; Flanagan, *Arena*, 390.

¹²⁰ Dr. Rueben Kahn (discoverer of the Kahn test for syphilis), Dr. O.C. Wenger (Assistant Surgeon General of the United States) and Dr. Louis Schmidt (Chicago Board of Health) took part in the rehearsal process of *Spirochete*, and advised Sundgaard on the suitability of material. Arnold Sundgaard, letter to anonymous recipient [probably Hallie Flanagan], 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence, Box 13, *Spirochete*.

of the most deadly of social diseases, to show its insatiable spread over the earth, and to recount the unremitting battles of scientists to isolate the germ and effect the cure.”¹²¹ In spite of the public health campaign launched by the city and *The Chicago Tribune*, venereal disease and syphilis remained political landmines. The response of the FTP national administration reflected their recognition of the hazards involved in presenting a play on syphilis.

One of the ways in which the FTP planned to circumvent the political and social problems inherent in a government play about venereal disease was to present the play in the style of the living newspaper. Facts, surrounding a specific problem and shaped around the dramatic presentation of its effects, characterized the living newspaper as a genre. The intention with the living newspaper form was to create a “theatrical counterpart of the newspaper.”¹²² Flanagan was well aware that the living newspapers would still be picked apart by the FTP’s critics; in her response to *Spirochete*, she asked for Sundgaard’s bibliography, noting that “we have to answer searching criticisms, line by line, of every Living Newspaper . . . we must have documentation for every single fact given.”¹²³ The FTP created a pamphlet that explained how to write a living newspaper:

The source of information is of paramount importance in the approach to the preparation of the script. Few bravura scenes have the convincing impact of

¹²¹ Flanagan, *Arena*, 144.

¹²² Douglas McDermott, “The Living Newspaper as a Dramatic Form,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1963, 20-1.

¹²³ Hallie Flanagan, to Harry Minturn, 24 February 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence, Box 13, Living Newspaper – Syphilis (Chicago), 2.

an adroitly presented fact. Authenticity should be the guiding principle in Living Newspaper production.¹²⁴

In light of the many attempts by scholars and FTP administration to characterize *Spirochete* as either a living newspaper or the natural evolution of the living newspaper form, it is curious to note that Sundgaard's experiences with the genre were limited. In an interview, Sundgaard stated that at the time he wrote *Spirochete*, "I had seen a script of Power. But I hadn't seen a [living newspaper] and as a matter of fact, I never did see another one. To this day I never saw – I never saw Triple A or any of the others."¹²⁵

Though described by the national Play Bureau as "remarkably interesting," "vital," and recommended for production wherever possible since it constituted a "tremendous weapon in the fight against syphilis," *Spirochete*'s beginnings were tenuous.¹²⁶ Public health officials on both local and national levels took part in the creation of the FTP syphilis play and greeted the production eagerly, but national FTP officials were not pleased. Flanagan's response to the first draft of the play was unenthusiastic; she began, "You know how interested I have been in the development

¹²⁴ The living newspapers may have been less likely to garner criticism in many ways. However, these productions became a source of great criticism for the FTP because of the "truth" that was presented. Since they purported to contain fact, the often-slanted perspective in the play (usually to the benefit of the "people") was more dangerous to the establishment than was a fictional piece. In the midst of the many battles that were fought over living newspaper content, the FTP regularly argued that the content could be supported by extensive research, and that the plays were merely presenting the facts. Probably Herbert Halpert, "Writing the Living Newspaper," NARA, E839, General Correspondence of the National Office, Box 13, Living Newspaper – Writing the Paper.

¹²⁵ *Power* was one of the later living newspapers. Unlike many of the almost entirely factual earlier pieces, it contained some fictionalized scenes. Sundgaard later states that he used *Power* in some ways when writing; however, having never seen a living newspaper, many of the conventions did not carry over into *Spirochete*. Arnold Sundgaard, Interview by John O'Connor, 5 September 1976, Boston, Massachusetts, tape recording, WPA Oral Histories Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 19.

¹²⁶ "*Spirochete*: A Living Newspaper in Two Acts," American Memory Special Collections, Library of Congress Performing Arts Reading Room, Washington, D.C., Box 315, Playreader Reports.

of this Living Newspaper, particularly because Mr. Howard Hunter favors such a script for Chicago. Therefore, you will understand my regret when I tell you that I have grave doubts about it.” She noted that “humanized,” emotion-based love affairs should be avoided in favor of detached, “scientific exactitude,” criticized the comic portrayal of the character afflicted with syphilis, and wondered what documentation Sundgaard had compiled to support his assertions.¹²⁷ Clearly, Flanagan perceived *Spirochete* as a “classic” living newspaper rather than an evolution of the form.

Glaspell and Minturn quickly compiled a detailed response to Flanagan’s criticism. Included with Glaspell’s letter supporting the play and Minturn’s explanation of its social relevance was Sundgaard’s biography, a bibliography of source materials, and a two-page explanation of the choices he made in writing the play. He documented the collaborations with numerous medical luminaries regarding the accuracy of the content, citing Dr. O. C. Wenger, Assistant Surgeon General for the United States, Dr. Louis Schmidt, of the Chicago Board of Health, Dr. Reuben Kahn, creator of the Kahn test for syphilis, Dr. Hermen N. Bundesen, President of the Chicago Board of Health, and Paul de Kruif, novelist and microbiologist. According to Sundgaard, all of these men read the play, attended rehearsals, and made any factual corrections that they saw necessary. He explained that Dr. Wenger:

Escorted [Sundgaard] through the various municipal clinics, and has explained the methods used and the nature of the problem. [Wenger] has attended rehearsals of the play, along with Dr. Kahn, and both men have spoken to the cast, explaining the historical importance of their work in bringing the story of syphilis to the people.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Hallie Flanagan, to Harry Minturn, 24 February 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence, Box 13, Living Newspaper – Syphilis (Chicago).

¹²⁸ Arnold Sundgaard, undated, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence, Box 13, “Living Newspaper – Syphilis (Chicago).”

Sundgaard supported his choice of “humanized” love affairs with case histories from Dr. Alfred Fournier’s lecture series, “Marriage and Syphilis,” and noted that both Kahn and Wenger knew of nearly identical situations from their own experiences.

Glaspell’s letter commented on the “humanized” content as well. Her letter demonstrates that she suggested much of the content in the hopes that it would better move the audience. Unlike the original Living Newspapers, which focused on conveying history, current events, and statistics, Glaspell’s impression of *Spirochete* was that it should not be a “scientific document:”

I do not think entirely in that form it would hold the interest of our audience. It seemed to me that Mr. Sundgaard had done an exceedingly fine job in presenting the facts and also making them dramatically interesting. I have felt that this was perhaps going to be the high point of our season and was very proud that it came out of our Play Bureau.¹²⁹

Unlike Flanagan, Glaspell was in favor of a more dramatic presentation in *Spirochete*. In light of these many criticisms from major FTP figures, it is surprising that *Spirochete* underwent relatively few revisions.

In a letter to Flanagan, Harry Minturn, Director of the Chicago FTP, took a different approach than Glaspell. He reiterated the series of events that made *Spirochete* so relevant to the city:

The law requiring a physical examination prior to issuance of a marriage certificate has but recently been passed in the State of Illinois, and the matter is therefore a very timely subject. [. . .] The Chicago Health Commissioner, Dr. Bundesen, is very much interested in the fight against syphilis, and the newspapers are giving the subject a great deal of space and public support. In addition, Dr. Bundesen has the full support of Mayor Kelly, all of which lends strength to our belief that a Living Newspaper on syphilis within the near

¹²⁹ Susan Glaspell, to Harry Minturn, 28 February 1938, NARA General Correspondence, Box 26, “*Spirochete*.”

future, in Chicago, would tend to promote local good feeling toward, and support for, the Federal Theatre here.¹³⁰

Minturn's argument focuses on both the relevance of the piece and on local public relations. In light of the many problems the FTP (and Chicago theatre in general) experienced with Mayor Kelly and censorship, this was an equally important point. The FTP needed something that would both engender good will with Mayor Kelly and local community members and capitalize on a relevant issue. Minturn pointed out that the Chicago FTP was in dire need of a production with a large cast, and that he hoped to get the show into production as quickly as possible. In particular, Minturn was "very anxious to produce a Living Newspaper in Chicago," but would do so only with Flanagan's specific approval.¹³¹

Florence Kerr, Regional Director of the Women's and Professional Division, lent further support to *Spirochete*. In a letter to Flanagan, she described a recent script meeting with regional WPA Supervisor Howard Hunter, Paul de Kruif, and Assistant Surgeon General Oscar Wenger. De Kruif:

Fairly bounced in his chair with enthusiasm and stated to the whole group that, in his opinion, the Federal Theatre had been and was now "knocking the spots off Broadway". Mr. DeKruiff's [sic] own conviction was that week by week, syphilis was getting to be hotter box-office, that the Federal Government should have complete control of this play, and that, furthermore, it should make plans to produce the picture which will certainly grow out of the play. [. . .] More interest has been marshalled on this particular effort of the Illinois Federal Theatre Project than ever before. [. . .] I am sure that with the powerful backing already evidenced the Chicago Production of this LIVING NEWSPAPER should go over.¹³²

¹³⁰ Harry Minturn, to Hallie Flanagan, 1 March 1938, NARA, General Correspondence, Box 26, "*Spirochete*."

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Florence S. Kerr, to Hallie Flanagan, 12 March 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence, Box 13, "Living Newspaper – Syphilis (Chicago)."

Yet Flanagan remained unconvinced. In a series of letters prior to the opening, Flanagan stated that, “On the basis of the first act, even in the face of such glowing praise as that given by Mr. de Kruif, I should absolutely not be willing to risk the production. My opinion is confirmed by Mr. McGee and by a number of other trustworthy critics.”¹³³ Despite these reservations, Flanagan approved the start of rehearsals with the understanding that the script would be revised. Her decision was ultimately rewarded by the public response to the play.

As the play rehearsed local sponsors emerged. On opening night, the audience consisted of such locally and nationally prominent personages such as Paul de Kruif, Dr. Louis E. Schmidt (chairman of Chicago’s anti-syphilis committee), Dr. O. C. Wenger (Asst. Surgeon General for the U.S.A.), and State Representative Edward P. Saltiel (sponsor of the hygienic marriage law). Audience members entering the theatre walked through the Chicago Board of Health free syphilis testing station, which was set up in the lobby. The guest of Dr. Herman Bundeson’s daughter was one of the individuals tested on opening night, and more than a dozen others submitted to blood tests as well.¹³⁴ The remainder of the audience consisted of a number of health professionals; one review noted, “If someone had called out ‘Is there a doctor in the house?’ the audience would have risen as a man.”¹³⁵ The

¹³³ Hallie Flanagan, to Harry Minturn, 18 March 1938, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 69, Federal Theatre Project, Entry 839, General Correspondence, Box 13, “*Spirochete*.”

¹³⁴ Charles Collins, “Syphilis Story Well Told in a Good Drama,” *Chicago Tribune*, 30 April 1938, 15.

¹³⁵ “*Spirochete*,” *Time*, 9 May 1938, Online, <http://time-proxy.yaga.com/time/archive/printout/0.23657.759611.00.html>.

production eventually attracted audience members outside of the medical profession as well, though it was never popular in the same way as *O Say Can You Sing*.

First night audience members appreciated the production, and the trend continued. In a letter to Flanagan, Minturn wrote, “The audience reaction to the play is very gratifying, and the second and third nights were even better than the opening night.”¹³⁶ In fact, the national critical response was so positive that a series of letters and memos traveled between Chicago and Flanagan’s New York office. An undated memo from Emmet Lavery confirmed Minturn’s observation:

To show the sweeping national potency of Federal Theatre shouldn’t we launch a nation wide series of productions of *Spirochete* in conjunction with U.S. Health Service. It might mean the wiping out of syphilis – and would that justify the Federal Theatre! The reason I send you this memo is I wonder if we don’t take the success of *Spirochete* too calmly. Isn’t this the biggest thing nationally that we have at the moment?¹³⁷

In many ways, Lavery was correct in his assessment, and the FTP capitalized on the goodwill that the production produced. Flanagan eventually approved of *Spirochete*, and frequently used it as an example of a FTP success story. Two weeks after the Chicago production opened, and before *Spirochete* opened in any other city, Flanagan described the play in glowing terms. Her 1938 introduction to an anthology of FTP Living Newspapers published by Random House read:

In *Spirochete*, Arnold Sundgaard, a writer of the Chicago Federal Theatre, tells in Living Newspaper form the story of the fight against syphilis, tells it with such effect that the daily press, *Variety*, and *Billboard*, report it as sensational entertainment, while Paul de Kruif and the Assistant Surgeon General of the United States enlist its service in the nationwide struggle

¹³⁶ Harry Minturn, to Hallie Flanagan, 3 May, 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence, Box 13, “Living Newspaper – Syphilis (Chicago).”

¹³⁷ Emmet G. Lavery, to Hallie Flanagan, 1938, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 69, Federal Theatre Project, Entry 839, General Correspondence, Box 13, “*Spirochete*.”

against the disease, even the nameless mention of which once put Ibsen in the pillory. [This] seems to indicate that the truth is not only stranger but often more entertaining and more dramatically effective than fiction. In fact, this conclusion might be said to apply to the entire history of the Federal Theatre.¹³⁸

For many reasons – the support of the public health community nation-wide, the timeliness of the topic, the quality of the play as experimental theatre – *Spirochete* became the second most-frequently produced Living Newspaper in the country, after the hugely popular *One-Third of a Nation*. *Spirochete* was produced in Boston, Cincinnati, Portland and Seattle, and was scheduled for production in several other cities when the FTP was shut down by Congress.¹³⁹ The critical popularity and social importance of this play demonstrates that the Chicago FTP possessed the ability to create highly relevant theatre, both on a local and national level.

Shadow to Microscope . . . to the Stage: Locating 'Spirochete'

Several versions of *Spirochete* are extant. The earliest is located in the Library of Congress, and includes the original title of the play, *Dark Harvest*. An unknown hand has crossed out *Dark Harvest* on the cover and written *Spirochete* above the old title and “Old Version” beneath Sundgaard’s name. The produced version of the play is available in both the Library of Congress and George Mason University collections, and was published by Random House in *Federal Theatre Plays with Power and Triple-A Plowed Under*. A comparison of the published

¹³⁸ Hallie Flanagan, Introduction to *Federal Theatre Plays*, edited by Pierre De Rohan (NY: Random House, 1938), xii.

¹³⁹ John O’Connor, “*Spirochete* and the War on Syphilis,” *The Drama Review* 21, no. 1 (March 1977), 92-93; Flanagan, *Arena*, 172, 250-1, 301, 309.

version with the Chicago production's program shows that it is the version that was produced at the Blackstone Theatre in Chicago beginning April 29, 1938.

The majority of the plot points and characters remain consistent between the original and produced versions. Peter and Frieda, the young couple hoping to marry in *Spirochete*, become the foils for audience members who have been too embarrassed to ask questions about syphilis. As the announcer explains, the story of syphilis begins in 1493 with the diseased sailors of Christopher Columbus. Apparently the men's arrival in Spain was greeted with fear; the people fled and sent the town doctor to heal the sailors. The doctor is baffled, and Columbus explains that he and his men were "welcomed" by "native women with full warm bodies" in Española. Many of the stigmas against syphilis and venereal disease are aired in this scene. The doctor regards the illness as "a just penalty for sins," an unlucky alignment of the stars and "the sign of the devil," and has little advice to offer short of washing the sores, letting blood, and sending the men home to their wives.

The play continues to trace the growth of syphilis throughout Europe, largely a result of conquering soldiers and their experiences with enticing (and infected) local young women. As Scene II ends, a series of countries are represented by ill men blaming their neighbors; the Italian complains of the Spanish disease, the Frenchman of the Italian disease, the Englishman of the French disease, the Turk of the Christian disease, and the Chinese simply says, "I'm velly [sic] sick and I was never sick before." Lenny, the Announcer, closes the scene:

Thus in twelve years the disease had circled the globe and wherever white men went this new pox was his most adhesive companion. The doctors were appalled at first and were at a loss as to how to study the problems it

presented. But they were surprisingly good scholars and learned many new things about their bewildered patient . . . ¹⁴⁰

A series of scientists enter the play to follow the illness of a single, representative syphilitic patient, offering advice of varying types. The first assistance comes when Dr. Fracastoro suggests that the patient rub mercury over the sores; while this soothed the symptoms, it did not offer a cure and overuse nearly kills the patient. Sundgaard also features the stories of several couples, all affected by the ravages of syphilis in some way. Dr. Fournier, who is treating Jean Louis for syphilis, blocks the wedding of Collette and her wealthy fiancé, Jean Louis; in spite of Collette's forgiveness for Jean Louis's behavior and illness, he loses his mind and kills himself in a fit of despair on the day they were to marry.

For the remainder of *Spirochete*, Sundgaard alternates between scientific advancements and personal tragedies. The first act finale consists of Dr. Fritz Schaudinn's discovery of the corkscrew-shaped spirochete, the indicator of syphilis. Following scenes describe the series of medicinal advances related to the disease; first an ointment that will prevent syphilis if applied soon after exposure, then the development of the Wasserman Blood Test, and finally the arsenic/chloride compound that became the foundation for the long-term treatment of syphilis.¹⁴¹ The scientists are portrayed as kind, well-meaning men who are dedicated to ridding the

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 31.

¹⁴¹ The right combination of arsenic and chloride was administered to patients by hypodermic needle, usually weekly for a year or longer, in order to cure 60-80% of those who had been infected for a lengthy period. The cure rate was 80-90% for those who were diagnosed soon after contracting the disease. Penicillin would replace this method in the early 1940s; by 1944 it was mass-produced and widely available for the treatment of venereal diseases.

world of this plague; some are considerably more successful than others, but the “doctors never rest” in *Spirochete*.¹⁴²

Sundgaard also takes care to demystify syphilis in his play, repeatedly referring to the costly errors of public perception. In Act II, Scene I, the same scene in which the ointment is developed, a reformer arrives in the scientist’s office and demands that the ointment be withheld from the public:

Reformer: Syphilis is the penalty for sin! You are about to remove that penalty and plunge the world into an orgy of sinful living. Man will be free to pursue his lustful impulses with no thought of any physical wrath being cast down on him. Think, Dr. Metchnikoff, what that will mean.

Metchnikoff: You are a citizen, you say?

Reformer: Indeed I am.

Metchnikoff: And you say that syphilis is the penalty for sin?

Reformer: Indeed it is.

Metchnikoff: And it’s a horrible ghastly penalty, you’ll admit. A more horrible one could never be devised, could it?

Reformer: I could think of none worse.

Metchnikoff: Then why in God’s name hasn’t it put an end to sin? [. . .] When all your moral prophylactics have failed to prevent the spread of this disease you wish to suppress a chemical one. [. . .] Telling people it’s sinful hasn’t stopped it from striking one out of every ten persons you meet on the street!¹⁴³

Here, science responds to the moral argument against treating syphilis. When the Reformer asks Metchnikoff to think of the future of American morals, he shouts, “Morals be damned! You think of their morals and I’ll think of their illnesses. Now get out of here.” After she departs, Dr. Metchnikoff refers to the reformer as a “prudish old witch” and a “fool, a stupid fool.” Sundgaard’s public health statement parallels those that had been published widely by Parran, de Kruif, and Chicago

¹⁴² Sundgaard, *Spirochete*, Original Version, 86.

¹⁴³ Arnold Sundgaard, *Spirochete*, in *Federal Theatre Plays*, ed. Pierre de Rohan (NY: Random House, 1938), 62.

Board of Health Director, Dr. Bundesen. For these men, the moral imperative did not revolve around absolving sin; their efforts focused on healing physical ailments and public perception.

The remainder of the play deals with the slow progress of legislation requiring a blood test for venereal disease and the story of a man who loses his job because of his illness. It is at this point, the end of Act II, Scene I, that the textual changes between the early and produced versions begin in earnest. Sundgaard derived the majority of the revisions from the comments of Paul de Kruif. Emmet Lavery described the revision process to Flanagan in late March:

The new version still has one or two lines, the taste of which you question but I think that in many places he has strengthened his script. He followed the suggestion of Paul de Kruief [sic] for the end of the play so that the problem becomes the community's problem instead of merely the individual's. [. . .] I still think that the script will be a great triumph for Federal Theatre.¹⁴⁴

Flanagan did not approve the script until well into the rehearsal process.

Spirochete opened in Chicago at the end of April in 1938. Lavery's letter responded to Flanagan's misgivings, which she wired in a provisional approval on March 18th. In a letter to Chicago FTP Director Harry Minturn, Flanagan wrote, "I hope you will interpret at face value my wire to you today that the script, which I hope has already been modified in light of earlier suggestions, can go into rehearsal with the distinct understanding that necessary changes will have to be made."¹⁴⁵ While Flanagan's comments were based on a reading of the first act only, and she later noted that she

¹⁴⁴ Emmet Lavery, to Hallie Flanagan, 22 March 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence, Box 13, "Living Newspaper – Syphilis (Chicago)."

¹⁴⁵ Hallie Flanagan, to Harry Minturn, 18 March 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence, Box 13, "Living Newspaper – Syphilis (Chicago)."

felt the second act was much better than the first, Flanagan's hesitant endorsement of the play only a month prior to the opening is curious – particularly in conjunction with such widespread local support, and in a city in which censorship had been an enormous obstacle. Flanagan implied that both the content and treatment were suspect, “even in the face of such glowing praise as that given by Mr. de Kruif, I should absolutely not be willing to risk the production.” Her repeated references to the “personal love affairs” and lack of “scientific exactitude and detachment,” as well as the “comic little” syphilitic patient imply numerous reservations about the text.¹⁴⁶

In contrast, Paul de Kruif was excited about the script:

You have caught the poetry of the fight against death, and there is little I would suggest in modification, excepting one thing . . . The fight against syphilis is a mass fight, or it is nothing. Finding one patient and curing him, finding six or twelve or a hundred, is like chasing the blue-tailed rabbit . . . To begin the eradication of the sickness, you have to find all those infected, and to find all those infected, all people in a community, from all levels in that community, must be tested by the blood test. All must know about it, and all must cooperate not only in offering themselves up for the test, but in being conscientious in taking the treatment that will make them safe for others.¹⁴⁷

De Kruif's concern focused on the widespread nature of syphilis. Regardless of race, class, education, politics, morality, age, and gender, syphilis attacked indiscriminately. In spite of studies and statistics that pointed to high concentrations of syphilis in specific populations, de Kruif and public health officials argued that anyone could contract the disease, and that eradication meant everyone had to be a part of the cure. Sundgaard integrated this concern into the play, particularly in the second act.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Paul de Kruif, to Arnold Sundgaard, 10 March 1938, , NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence, Box 26, “*Spirochete*.”

In the original version of *Spirochete*, then titled *Dark Harvest*, Sundgaard's focus remained on Peter and Frieda, the young couple who applied for the marriage license at the beginning of the play. In the original version, the first scene of the second act ends as Lenny, the announcer, recaps the medical progress for Peter and Frieda. He states that syphilis could have been wiped out "if people really wanted it to be. But making them see that something can and should be done has been a long slow struggle. Because of the secrecy surrounding the disease we've resisted the progress of the medical men." Lenny continues, bemoaning the slow response of the Illinois politicians. "Even in the state legislatures opposition has not been lacking."¹⁴⁸

The conversation between Lenny, Peter, and Frieda is cut from the produced version. Instead, a series of short scenes are played in quick succession in tight spotlights. These four exchanges again highlight the public perception of syphilis, this time from the woman's perspective. They complain about the scientists, "respectable educated people" who print "silly articles in the medical journals," and indignantly defend the honor of young women:

Fourth Woman:	What made me mad was, he asked for blood for a Kahn blood test. And I was gonna do it, too, till I learned it was a new test for syphilis.
Third Woman:	I would have walked right out of his office.
Fourth Woman:	That's exactly what I did. I was never so insulted in my life. ¹⁴⁹

In the final monologue, a woman condemns the indecent politicians who consider legislating venereal disease. She explains, "just the other day someone was tellin' me

¹⁴⁸ Sundgaard, *Spirochete*, Original Version, 86-7.

¹⁴⁹ Sundgaard, *Spirochete*, Produced Version, 73.

that a guy names Saltiel was going to discuss syphilis right on the floor of the state legislature . . . My God, what the world comin' to?"¹⁵⁰

This revision, from an intimate conversation with Peter and Frieda to a series of anonymous women who express the common stigma against syphilis, achieves multiple goals. First, Sundgaard reiterates the public perception, making it sound progressively more absurd each time it is spoken. The criticism is particularly pointed since these exchanges closely follow the extremist reformer's defeat in the scientists' office. The addition of this scene also widens the play's scope. Sundgaard is no longer teaching only Peter and Frieda; the audience at large has become the pupil as its objections to a frank discussion on syphilis are systematically destroyed. As de Kruif suggests, Sundgaard extends the problem from the isolated population to the community as a whole.

Scene Four illustrates another type of change entirely; no longer the responsibility of the working class people alone, Sundgaard makes the business and manufacturing communities accountable for the eradication of syphilis as well. The original version focuses on the consequences of governmental and corporate failures for the individual working-class family. John, a recently laid-off industrial worker, approaches his employer, Mr. Thomas. John argues that he has devoted all of his working life to the company, that he is never late, works hard, and has a great attitude. Thomas explains that he was fired because he consistently fell behind the other workers:

It isn't a question of trying, John. We can't pay a man on the basis of effort, however. We can only afford to pay on results. And from the code on this

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 73-4.



Figure 5: Chicago WPA Poster addressing the employer's responsibility for preventing the spread of syphilis. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, LC-USZC2-5184 DLC.



Figure 6: Chicago WPA Poster equating syphilis to an enemy of industry. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, LC-USZC2-5197 DLC.



Figure 7: Chicago WPA Poster telling people to see their doctors. Note the use of gambling, one of Capone's favorite pastimes. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection. LC-USZC2-5170 DLC.

slip it seems you aren't as accurate as you once were, that you made a costly mistake now and then and hold up the work for the others.¹⁵¹

Thomas asks John's age, and is surprised when he learns that John is only thirty-five years old. He says, "occasionally we have to lay off men when they reach fifty, cruel as it seems, because the system is too fast for them. But you're not old, John, and yet we're firing you because you seem that old." John leaves Thomas's office defeated; he has a pregnant wife, a blind young son, and no means to earn a living.

The scene continues in John's home. His wife, Martha, reads a story to her blind son, Tony, in a skewed portrait of domesticity. When John arrives, Martha sends Tony to bed then returns for her husband's disturbing news. In addition to losing his job, John has learned that his chronic tiredness is a symptom of a terrible illness:

John: Martha, I found out why Tony's blind!
Martha: You . . . you found out why Tony's blind. Why?
John: Because of us. [. . . The doctor] said I've been sick for a long time, and most likely you've been sick, too.
Martha: What kind of sickness?
John: The doctor said it's . . . it's syphilis. (*She stifles a scream while John continues.*) I didn't know I had it. I still don't know how I got it. I used to see those stories in the papers but I never dreamed it was me . . . me who might have it. He said it doesn't pain you at all . . . it just comes quietly.¹⁵²

The cruel reality of their situation is chilling. John and Martha discuss terminating her pregnancy, and reveal that she has already miscarried twice; she says that they "couldn't have another Tony. Like Tony, he'd never have a chance." John replies despondently, "None of us had a chance, Martha, none of us had a chance!" and falls

¹⁵¹ Sundgaard, *Spirochete*, Original Version, 94.

¹⁵² Sundgaard, *Spirochete*, Original Version, 101.



Figure 8: Poster used in the publicity for the Chicago production of *Spirochete*. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

into her lap weeping.¹⁵³ While John and Martha go to the doctor and learn that treatment can give good odds to the unborn baby, irreparable damage has already been done; Tony is blind and John joins the masses of jobless in the Depression's relief lines. The scene ends with a transparent appeal for support of the Salties Hygiene Act; the doctor agrees with John that Tony probably could have had his sight if his mother had been treated during her pregnancy, then says, "If you had been examined at the time of marriage you would have known this. That was the time when this should have been discovered."¹⁵⁴

The produced version of *Spirochete* follows the majority of the points presented in the original version, but lays a greater responsibility for the family's tragedy on the employer who could have prevented these events by requiring blood tests of its employees. First, Sundgaard is careful to note the reasons for John's dismissal. It is not simply that he is falling behind the other workers. In the revision, Thomas explains the problem as one of liability:

The insurance company through Mr. Morrison seem to think you're a risk they can't very well carry. [. . .] from the code on this [dismissal] slip it seems that you're not as careful as you once were, that you get into little accidents which they believe avoidable. The insurance company will overlook one accident – like cutting your finger there – but when it happens three times they begin to wonder. [. . .] It all comes under the head of general inefficiency.¹⁵⁵

In the revision, the employer emphasizes the welfare of the workers at large (and the company) while explaining the inadequacies of this particular worker; John is not

¹⁵³ Ibid, 102.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 103.

¹⁵⁵ Sundgaard, *Spirochete*, Produced Version, 78.

only falling behind, but his lack of attention and focus has become a danger to his co-workers and an insurance problem for the company. And so, when Thomas fires John, he is acting based on a mandate from the corporation at large. Inefficiency remains a part of his argument, but it is no longer the sole justification.

After leaving the office, John returns to his pregnant wife and blind son, again with the stunning news of his illness. This time though, the scene does not end with the imminent abortion of the baby. Instead, a new section is added to the scene. Several months pass between the utterly hopeless scene between John and his wife and the sub-scene that follows. Here, John's doctor visits his former employer to argue on his behalf. The doctor explains that John was inefficient because of his illness, which provides another opportunity to dispel the popular sentiments:

Thomas: I don't believe it. He's not the type.
Doctor: The disease doesn't confine itself to types, Mr. Thomas. It's liable to strike anybody. John, in a rather unusual case, had gotten it innocently years ago. Because of ignorance of the symptoms he never even knew he had it.
Thomas: He must have.
Doctor: No, he didn't.
Thomas: Well, I'm glad he's gone. We don't want any such men around this plant.¹⁵⁶

Here, the doctor reminds both the audience and the employer that syphilis does not discriminate, and that the stigma against its victims is unfounded. In light of this, it is curious to note the doctor's specific statement regarding the "unusual" and "innocent" manner in which John contracted the disease; if Sundgaard was trying to remove the stigma, the implication that normal syphilis cases are contracted under guilty circumstances negates that effort. Regardless, the doctor continues to argue in John's

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 85.

favor, stating that the company could have cured John long ago if they had only required a blood test for venereal disease. Thomas responds as one might expect, stating, “Well I’m glad he’s gone. We don’t want any such man around this plant.” The doctor points out that it is good business practice to keep good employees, and that businesses could save money by testing for syphilis as a way to screen for “potential inefficiency.” He specifies that the process would only work if employees could be assured that their jobs were in jeopardy only if they were diagnosed and failed to continue the treatments. Thomas hesitantly agrees to take the idea to the board of directors, and John enters, “looking very strong and healthy.” Thomas gives John his job back, and the scene ends with a last-minute discussion of the baby that John and Martha had discussed aborting in the previous scene:

Thomas: But there’s one thing I’m a bit curious about. Maybe I seem a bit sentimental, but what about the baby you said your wife was going to have. Won’t that be rather dangerous?

The Doctor: Even the unborn are not beyond our reach. The baby will be all right. We can begin treatments as late as the fifth month and in ten cases out of eleven the child will be normal. The main thing is to test by the Kahn or Wassermann and find out where this disease is lurking. If John had been tested at the time of first employment he would have known this. If he had been tested at the time of marriage it could have been prevented. Industry must do its part. The people and the State must do theirs . . . ¹⁵⁷

Here, the doctor not only informs the audience about the possibilities for saving unborn children a lifetime of pain, he places responsibility for this action in the hands of the entire community. Employers, government, and the individual must all cooperate to stop the spread of syphilis and to cripple its far-reaching effects on the population. If any one of these community members had taken steps to test or

¹⁵⁷ Sundgaard, *Spirochete*, Revised Version, 84-87.



Figure 9: Dramatization of the spread of syphilis throughout Europe. From the Chicago production of *Spirochete*. Federal Theatre Project Photographs, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University.

treat those infected, John's illness would have been found early; he would not have lost his job, infected his wife, lost two unborn children, or caused his son's blindness. Notably, hope is restored in the revised version. John's health returns, his job is reinstated, his wife undergoes treatment, and the unborn child's future is significantly brighter than it was in the original version.

The final scene of the original version features the Illinois State Legislature and the passing of the Salties Hygiene Act. The "People" play an active role in the scene, physically stopping the corrupt politician who attempts to kill the act and shouting down the dissent of others in the legislature. The scene contains much of the same discussion as the earlier legislature scene, though this time there is more widespread support for the act. Numerous legislators from throughout the state support the act. Of particular importance are the sentiments of the most vocal opponent from the previous scene, the Second Legislator:

But the feeling of the people has changed. Look! (*HE points to the side and rear where many people are gathering. THEY come closer to the legislators*) They demand that this amendment be heard. [. . .] I admit my own former blindness to facts which ought to have been obvious to all of us. During the past four years I have learned many things. My eyes have been opened to the flagrant weakness of any system that allows its people to suffer year after year. Let's be truthful with ourselves. [. . .] Nice people do get syphilis. And I say the difference between those who do and those who don't is misfortune and nothing else. The syphilis carrier is a potential murderer and must be stopped whether he likes it or not.¹⁵⁸

Throughout his speech the people shout their support while both verbally and physically overruling anyone who attempts to interrupt. The vote is unanimous and, as the Speaker announces that it has become a law, the people "rise up" and erupt in a "great chorus." As the crowd comes together to celebrate the people's victory, the

¹⁵⁸ Sundgaard, *Spirochete*, Original Version, 105-6.

lights rise on the upper stage and a “death-fighter” scientist. He speaks to everyone – the people, legislators, and audience:

Our fight has just begun! We have here the weapons to end this war. Blood tests to find the enemy lurking in our midst, chemicals to wipe him out. First we’ve found the cause, then we found the cure. We have here the life that science can give you, life for the rich and life for the poor. We have here the means to free you from this plague.¹⁵⁹

The doctor concludes his speech by citing science’s victories over typhoid and smallpox, and asking if syphilis will meet the same fate. The people shout, “Yes!” in a “great chorus,” and “surge forward as the curtain falls.”

The revisions in the final scene again show Sundgaard’s attention to making syphilis a community problem as de Kruif suggests. The revisions begin with a brief attempt at bribery as several clerks and a politician plot against the Salties Hygiene Act. The Second Clerk takes it upon himself to swing the vote against the proposed act: “It’s up to you and me to see it don’t get passed, see.” He moves from one legislator to another, offering cigars and compliments as he blatantly attempts to influence the vote. Another clerk follows suit, approaching two more legislators, tucking cigars into their pockets:

Good morning, gentlemen. Lovely morning, isn’t it? Wish we’d have more mornings like this, don’t you? It makes a person feel peppy, doesn’t it? Here, have a cigar. (They accept and look at each other questioningly.) Nothing so good for a person as feeling peppy, is there? It sort of makes you feel like voting the right way, doesn’t it?¹⁶⁰

This crossover scene is nonexistent in the original version. The clerk and an unnamed politician enter at this point in the play, but they merely bemoan the likely

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 107.

¹⁶⁰ Sundgaard, *Spirochete*, Revised Version, 88.



Figure 10: Scientists gather around as the spirochete (the spiral-shaped indicator of syphilis) is identified for the first time in the Chicago production of *Spirochete*. Federal Theatre Project Photographs, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University.

passage of the law. The politician refers to a vague attempt to prevent the vote itself from happening, but in view of the popular support it garners, he seems to be simply venting his frustration in the face of a radically different public opinion; his efforts are above-board and entirely ineffective. In contrast, the politician in the revision seems to have an underhanded power as well as bodyguard-like minions in the clerks.

The discussion on the legislative floor differs as well. The original version relies on rhetoric about truth and the “flagrant weakness of any system that allows its people to suffer year and year.” The revised version contains these ideas, but adds the statistics that are the hallmark of the living newspaper genre. Speakers cite Sweden and Denmark as shining examples of the success that comes when a community works together to ensure the welfare of all; unlike the United States, Sweden “faced the facts and didn’t try to hide them.” Denmark likewise dealt with syphilis so successfully that only five babies will be born stricken with symptoms annually, compared to sixty thousand born in America. The legislators appeal to American – or at least Illinois – pride then, “And I say that even if this isn’t Sweden, even if this isn’t Denmark, the things they can do, we too can do!”¹⁶¹ The Speaker calls for a vote and “everyone shouts aye in a great chorus which is taken up by the people. The Speaker bangs for attention and his request for “nay” votes is drowned out.”¹⁶² Where the doctor took the focus of the final moments in the original version, the Speaker does so here. In the midst of great applause, he announces that the amendment is adopted. He continues in the final words of the play:

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 88-9.

¹⁶² Ibid, 90.

Victory for this amendment is a battle just begun. Votes for a measure mean nothing unless translated into action by the people. This fight must go on until syphilis has been banished from the face of the earth. It can be done and will be done if you and you and you wish it so. The time has come to stop whispering about it and begin talking about it . . . and talking out loud!¹⁶³

Again, Sundgaard focuses the responsibility on the community as a whole. It is not hard to imagine this final monologue as the actor points to audience members throughout the theatre, shouting “you and you and you . . .” Just like the disease, Sundgaard involves all levels of society, regardless of class, education, morality, or age; no one is free from the possibility of infection or the responsibility to contain and destroy that infection.

While many of the revisions in *Spirochete* appear minor, in reality Sundgaard shifted the responsibility for the eradication of syphilis from a few “death-fighting” doctors to the community at large. This choice increased the relevance of the piece for the Chicago audiences.

Conclusions

The revisions in *O Say Can You Sing* point to a shift from pointed political satire to innocuous comedy. Similarly, the revisions in *Spirochete* reflect the concerns of the national administration for a socially acceptable, documented play about the control of a widespread disease. Both productions were considered successful by the FTP, though on different scales. *O Say Can You Sing*, a conventional commercial success, broke box office records with the length of its run, if not with the amount that it earned based on ticket prices. It employed 250 actors,

¹⁶³ Ibid, 90.

dozens of stagehands, writers, composers, designers, and many more for months during rehearsal and helped the Chicago FTP to locate an audience in a city that had remained more or less indifferent to its efforts.

Spirochete, on the other hand, was not necessarily a box office success, though it did play for more than thirty performances and inspired a number of other productions throughout the country. Instead, *Spirochete*'s success lay in its ability to gain a base of political and popular support; with *Spirochete*, the Surgeon General, the Chicago Public Health Commissioner, public health author Paul de Kruif, Mayor Kelly's Venereal Disease Control specialist, and even Illinois state legislators saw the importance and potential of the FTP. Newspapers and magazines on both a local and national level lauded *Spirochete* not for its theatrical prowess (though some did reference that), but for its ability to educate the public on a troubling, widespread social and health epidemic. Finally, *Spirochete* "justified" the existence of the FTP, not only in Chicago, but also in the United States. In spite of the admittedly commercial leanings of the Chicago FTP's administration, the project found itself in the midst of a work that pushed the artistic envelope . . . topically. The ability of these productions to entrench themselves in Chicago revolves around their topical nature and presentation. Both capitalized on the mood and needs of the FTP audience, focusing on the major topics of concern.

O Say Can You Sing and *Spirochete* are case studies in the problems the FTP faced outside of New York City. The revisions processes, placed within their cultural contexts, show two plays that were timely and highly relevant to their target audiences. The revisions demonstrate that the Chicago FTP had the potential to

become a vibrant part of the local theatre community; it was aware of problems specific to the city of Chicago, willing to adapt to the issues, and able to adhere to the restrictions the city imposed on its theatre. In some ways, the controversy between commercial and artistic success served the Chicago FTP well; the project earned audiences through the commercial successes. These commercial successes enabled the project to take risks on a few smaller productions, and eventually allowed the calculated risk seen in *Spirochete*.

Chapter 2: Demythologizing American Ideology – Collisions of Past and Present in the East

Though Hallie Flanagan devotes strikingly little attention to the activities of the Northeastern FTP, she does continually mention the touring New York productions that captured audiences in Boston and Hartford, and throughout New Hampshire, Maine, New York State, and New Jersey. For example, Flanagan wrote in glowing terms of the New York production of *Haiti*, stating that it held Boston audiences that arrived for the first time with *Created Equal*; similarly, Yasha Frank's adaptation of *Pinocchio* – another New York production – became “compulsory education for every child in Boston.”¹

Constantly overshadowed by the activities of the exciting New York City units, the Boston FTP struggled to overcome the cynicism and derision with which the typical New Englander regarded it. The problems the FTP faced in Boston were due to a number of different factors including racial, religious, ethnic, and class disparities that repeatedly threatened to erupt into violence. In addition, Boston's elite fought President Roosevelt and the New Deal programs (with their colossal expenditures) throughout its existence. Further, those who supported the WPA in Massachusetts did not have a clear picture of what they hoped their FTP would accomplish. Massachusetts WPA officials simultaneously worried that the local FTP was not earning the critical acclaim that it enjoyed in New York City, even as they

¹ Flanagan, *Arena*, 229-30.

condemned ambitious new work in their FTP. State WPA officials also monitored the Boston FTP closely for any hint of political agitation. The Acting State Administrator of the WPA, Paul Edwards, stated in the *Boston Evening Globe*, “The people of Massachusetts are going to have the type of plays they want – not the plays a small group wishes to promote. If there is any scandal on the federal drama project, I intend to get to the bottom of it and clean it up.”²

In this chapter I will investigate the reasons that the FTP failed to gain popularity in Boston and record the treacherous paths of two major Massachusetts productions, *Created Equal* and *Lucy Stone*. These productions illustrate the wide-ranging efforts of the Boston FTP and its struggle for legitimacy, in the eyes of both the national FTP and the audiences of Boston. *Created Equal* documents the promise of the Declaration of Independence and dramatizes the founding of the United States of America, while subverting the traditional approach to that history. *Lucy Stone* chronicles the life of one of the first suffragettes; it begins in her childhood, and continues with her role as both abolitionist and women’s rights advocate, her marriage to Henry Blackwell, the birth of her child, and the many struggles that characterized the early period of the women’s rights movement.

As it is impossible to separate these two productions from the activities of the FTP as a whole, I will also explore the place that the Boston FTP occupied within the state, region, and nation. Finally, since the Massachusetts project, more than any other in the country, concerned itself with the retelling of American history, I will

² Qtd. In Flanagan, *Arena*, 225.

explore the ways in which that reappraisal of history both solidified and toppled the Boston FTP.

The Federal Theatre Project in Boston, Massachusetts

We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.³
~ Abraham Lincoln

Prologue: Censorship

According to Flanagan, Paul Edwards jumped on the proverbial bandwagon of vocal officials wary of the FTP penchant for productions that challenged political, racial, and social norms. Yet Boston also had a strong local tradition of censorship. The Watch and Ward Society, founded as the New England Society of the Suppression of Vice in 1873, had institutionalized censorship in Boston.⁴ In 1927, Cardinal William O'Connor, one of the most powerful men in the city, launched a campaign against immorality in literature and the arts; this crusade saw works by Ernest Hemingway, Upton Sinclair, Voltaire, Henrik Ibsen, and dozens of others “Banned in Boston.”⁵ One of the most infamous cases of Boston censorship occurred in 1929 when Mayor Malcolm Nichols invoked his state-given right to revoke theatre

³ Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), n.pag.

⁴ Paul S. Boyer, *Purity in Print: The Vice-Society Movement and Book Censorship in America* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 5.

⁵ Though public support for the Watch and Ward Society waned in the late twenties, censorship controls simply passed into the hands of the Catholic clergy. A series of federal censorship cases reversed the tide of public opinion, and the 1930s saw a radical decline in the power of local and federal vice committees. However, the difficult financial times of the Great Depression led to a generally conservative outlook in order to appeal to a mass market that sought escapist literature and art; during the Depression, most of the companies that fell prey to the censors simply went out of business because of a lack of widespread popular appeal. *Ibid*, 249-65.

licenses for any reason he saw fit; the target was Eugene O'Neill's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Strange Interlude*.⁶ As this reputation for prudery spread, newspaper critics worried that Boston would become the "subject of national and international contempt and ridicule" and noted that "Banned in Boston" was quickly becoming a national joke.⁷

Edwards' warning followed complaints about an upcoming FTP production, Maxwell Anderson's *Valley Forge* (1934). *Valley Forge*, a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize, documents General George Washington's frustration with Congress's lack of support as his troops starved over the long, bitterly cold winter at Valley Forge. Flanagan hoped to send the play on a tour of New England "with a band in colonial costume playing colonial tunes in front of the theatre before curtain times, 'just as the old touring companies . . . used to do.'"⁸ As Hiram Motherwell, Regional Director of the Eastern FTP, described in his regional report:

Don't think I've forgotten that we're going heavy on history and classics as well as straight entertainment. No experiments for New England! [. . .] We're going to tour [*Valley Forge*] all through the state – Worcester, Springfield, Pittsfield, Lowell, Fall River . . . and audiences that haven't seen a drama in flesh and blood for ten years will rise to the challenge of [George] Washington's "This liberty will look easy bye and bye [sic] / when nobody dies to get it."⁹

⁶ John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 111-2.

⁷ "Strange Interlude," *Boston Herald*, 18 September 1929, 18.

⁸ Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre*, 216-7.

⁹ Flanagan, *Arena*, 223-4. Washington's quote, printed in *Arena*, is from Maxwell Anderson, *Valley Forge, Representative Modern Plays American* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company: 1952), in *Twentieth Century North American Drama* [database on-line], Alexander Street Press, accessed November 15, 2006, 150.

Motherwell's appraisal notwithstanding, Edwards' initial response dealt only with the aforementioned complaints about the proposed production of *Valley Forge*; he appointed a board of censors to monitor the content of FTP plays so that the people of Massachusetts would not see plays that would offend their patriotic sensibilities. While Edwards recanted after hearing the evidence, the public's reaction to his initial stance was swift and severe. The rumors of scandal alienated the public and caused potential audiences to lose confidence in the Boston FTP. Two years later, when planning the production of a new play that would similarly question the political history of the nation, Blanding Sloan, Director of the FTP's Eastern Region, would write:

Please bear in mind the VALLEY FORGE production, and the sad effects it had on the Boston public's attitude toward Federal Theatre Productions. The reaction in the public mind is bitter and very antagonistic. [. . .] We hope to a great extent to overcome this attitude and antagonistic feeling toward Federal Theatre.¹⁰

After gaining approval from Edwards and the state WPA, the FTP produced *Valley Forge*. Though the Women's Club sponsored a local production and audiences in Leominster and Fitchburg applauded the work of the FTP, the controversy surrounding the play introduced the FTP to its audiences in the Boston area. Potential audience members made their decisions about the FTP based on the misinformation presented in Edwards' initial response to the play. Because of this, the *Valley Forge* experience had long-term effects on the FTP in Boston. Flanagan maintained that this

¹⁰ Blanding Sloan to Hallie Flanagan, TD, 9 June 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "*Created Equal* #2."

episode – which occurred so near the birth of the Massachusetts FTP – permanently scarred the project.

While *Valley Forge* was written by a Pulitzer Prize-winning American playwright and dealt with a topic that was of special interest to the people of Massachusetts, it must be noted that inaugurating the new Boston FTP unit with this particular play was a questionable choice. Flanagan and Motherwell described *Valley Forge* as a reputable play by one of America's great playwrights, but even a cursory reading of the play illustrates the inflammatory nature of the piece. While ultimately complimentary of George Washington's stoic nature and ability to inspire loyalty in his troops, it portrays a grim and ugly side of the American Revolution. In the play, the members of the Continental Congress are vilified as ineffective fools, incapable of running an army. Washington's few remaining soldiers are forced to live on the cavalry's horsemeat and wear rags for clothing since the Congress refuses to requisition shoes, socks, or even pants to the men. The soldiers are even punished with 75 lashes if they attempt to leave the army to return home to feed their families while activities are suspended for the winter.¹¹ *Valley Forge* (particularly when the specific events are taken out of the context of the play's thematic message) does not portray the leaders of the American Revolution as intelligent, pioneering men concerned with the greater good of a country and its people. Thus, it is not at all surprising that the people of Boston, ensconced within a city famous for – and fiercely proud of – its role in the Revolution, responded in a less than supportive

¹¹ Maxwell Anderson, *Valley Forge, Representative Modern Plays American* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company: 1952), in *Twentieth Century North American Drama* [database online], Alexander Street Press, accessed November 15, 2006.

manner.¹² And so, even though Edwards recanted, the production of *Valley Forge* set the tone for the Boston FTP; the unit was damaged in both reputation and in its ability and desire to take creative risks.

“Not One Thing to Show . . . :” Troubled Beginnings in Boston

The lack of support implied by the appointment of a censorship committee in Massachusetts (particularly since this committee was created by the Acting Head of the State WPA) was seen consistently throughout the tenure of the Boston FTP. In the summer of 1936, Flanagan formally requested the discontinuation of federal funds for the Boston FTP, suggesting that all personnel be transferred out of theatre and into recreation projects. She worried that the FTP would suffer further censorship and that audiences would never arrive:

I have not forgotten your suggestion that I send you plays which I thought particularly appropriate for Boston, but every time I remember the absolutely absurd censoring of Valley Forge I realize the impossibility of trying to meet so jaundiced a taste.¹³

In this letter, Flanagan asks Leonard Gallagher (State Director of the WPA) whether he thought the FTP had a chance to become anything beyond amateur in Boston. She could not quell this despair:

We have not one thing to show for a quarter of a million spent in Massachusetts . . . not a decent show, no equipment, no shop, no morale, no press, no research. The state director, under orders to keep peace, has been flabby and afraid.”¹⁴

¹² Flanagan, *Arena*, 224.

¹³ Hallie Flanagan to Leonard Gallagher, 29 May 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-39, Box 56, “MA – Project Reports.”

¹⁴ Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre*, 229.

This admission by the ever-persistent Flanagan, that the Boston FTP was in such dismal shape that it would be more fruitful to abandon it entirely, speaks volumes about the severity of the obstacles faced in the city. Though her request to disband the Boston FTP was met with resistance on both the state and national levels, the project remained problematic.¹⁵

By 1938 the FTP had all but ceased to exist in Boston. Most participants attributed this failure to the stigma that many of the Works Projects faced in the Northeast – the humiliation associated with the WPA was so powerful that many of those who could have gained employment refused to have any part of it. As of 1932, Boston city policy required anyone seeking relief to work for their unemployment checks in the city’s Charity Building – nicknamed the “House of Horrors on Hawkins Street” – as frequently as four days a week, making it all but impossible to find jobs.¹⁶ The city council, collaborating with the Massachusetts Tax Association and the Boston Finance Commission, began an investigation into the recipients of Boston’s welfare funds. By order of Mayor Curley, the Boston Police launched a special probe that would look into relievers’ bank accounts and pay surprise visits to families, effectively branding those on relief as “dishonest, parasitical, and without legitimate claim on public funds.”¹⁷ Jon B. Mack, FTP State Director of Massachusetts and a theatre professional who had worked throughout New England, explained this issue

¹⁵ Flanagan, *Arena*, 226-7.

¹⁶ *Proceedings of the City Council of Boston*, April 13, 1931, 162; Susan Traverso, *Welfare Politics in Boston, 1910-1940* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 94-5.

¹⁷ Charles H. Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), 87.

with respect to the FTP, saying that it “would never overcome the political stigma of the W.P.A.” in Boston.¹⁸

At the same time, the FTP units were often (erroneously) associated with high culture in the Northeast. In Hartford, Connecticut, for example, the Avery Theatre was used for initial (and unsuccessful) FTP productions. According to Flanagan, regional and state directors George Gerwing and Charles LaRue:

Felt that the Avery theatre was associated in the public mind with an atmosphere more rarefied than that of Federal Theatre; the fashionable first-night crowds led the public to believe that the plays were social, not theatre, events. ‘The average person in Hartford has no idea that he would be welcome at the Avery . . . He thinks Federal Theatre is some kind of a club.’¹⁹

The struggle to locate its audience – somewhere between the perceptions of social stigma and high culture – plagued the New England projects. Simply overcoming the dishonor of relief work and producing theatre in places in which working class audiences would feel comfortable attending became a monumental task.

In addition to public perception, the FTP faced another problem in the Northeast, and particularly in Boston. Newspaper critic Philip Hale had noted, nearly a decade earlier, a curious and distressing absence in the city of Boston:

Boston is without an established theatre peculiarly its own. Those interested in the drama are dependent on visiting companies and are often disappointed when a play that has prospered in New York comes here with only one or two members of the company that brought success; too often without the leading man and woman. The hope of our playgoers is in the Theatre Guild and the Boston Professional Players.²⁰

¹⁸ Qtd. in Flanagan, *Arena*, 227.

¹⁹ Ibid, 235.

²⁰ Philip Hale, “The Theatre” (*Boston Herald*, November 23, 1930), Harvard Theatre Collection, Boston – Copley Theatre, clippings file.

If this statement accurately reflects 1920s Boston, it is hardly surprising that the FTP found scant local support for its productions. Regardless, Hale's statement deserves attention because it suggests that the goals of the FTP may have been incompatible both with the goals of Boston's local audiences and with the city's understanding of the ways theatre could or should function in its community. Further evidence of this trend of privileging touring productions over local offerings was seen in 1936; the Boston Playhouse Association, a newly founded organization dedicated to improving the quality of Boston theatre offerings, began its search for "more and better shows" featuring star actors from New York and Hollywood.²¹ Ironically, the trend that Flanagan introduces in her own writing on the production history of the FTP in Boston – that of traveling New York productions that were relevant to the people of Boston – may not, in fact, have been all that far from what Boston had seen in its own theatre in the decades prior to the Great Depression and the arrival of the FTP.²²

²¹ "Boston Playhouse Association Fund," *Boston Herald*, April 12, 1936, O, 3. By the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Boston audiences saw a variety of both traditional and more controversial theatre. During this experimental time, Boston saw the premiere of James Hearne's inflammatory *Margaret Fleming* in 1890, occasional avant-garde work of the Provincetown Players during the 1910s, tours of the Group Theatre, pre-Broadway tryouts, and the requisite dime museum, vaudeville, and burlesque shows; George Pierce Baker's famous "47 Workshop" also began at Harvard University in the early twentieth century. Though Boston had several resident companies, by the 1910s much of the local Boston theatre had deteriorated into stripteases and movie houses that were supplemented by tours of New York productions. By the time Philip Hale lamented the lack of local theatre in Boston, much of the city's unique, local theatre had disappeared, particularly for the middle or working class members of the city.

²² While it is Boston Theatre Critic Philip Hale who notes this deficiency in Boston theatre, it is important to note that Boston had a number of theatres regularly producing work during both this time and much of the past. With the illegal founding of a variety company in late 1792, and the founding of what would become the Federal Street Theatre in 1794, Boston Theatre was born; it quickly grew into a vital part of Boston's cultural life, but remained somewhat troubled. In 1904, for example, censorship had apparently become such an arduous process for the Massachusetts State Legislature that it was determined that steps were required to streamline the process. The Legislature then created a law that gave instant censorship power to city mayors, allowing them to "revoke theatre licenses for any reason whatsoever."

The project faced further difficulties in Boston as well; the press was anti-New Deal, WPA state administration engaged in continual battles with the FTP, and audiences remained uninterested in spite of all the controversy that surrounded early productions such as *Valley Forge*. New England's regional director explained, "The newspapers down Boston way don't like us. One office has a sign on the reporters' call board, *Soak the Raw Deal*."²³ When the *Boston Daily Globe* covered a 1937 union picket of the WPA, it noted:

The demonstrators yesterday were mostly members of the Federal arts projects: artists, writers, musicians and actors. These projects suffered a cut of 832 workers on Dec. 15, but those dismissed were not thrown out of work because Col. McDonough placed them on regular state projects. They were reduced in pay and were not given the kind of work they like to do.

The action yesterday was but a beginning of the program planned by W.P.A. unions banded together throughout the country to enforce their belief that the Government must provide them with a means of support.²⁴

While not openly hostile, this article paints relief workers as malcontents out for a government paycheck.

At least initially, the press would not disabuse potential audience members of their preconceived ideas concerning the FTP. While Flanagan refrained from referring to the issue in so many words, the problem in Boston (and much of New England) boiled down to a double-edged dilemma. The FTP was caught in the middle of a long-standing ethnic and class conflict that had challenged Boston for several decades prior to the creation of President Roosevelt's New Deal. The clash between the working class Irish Catholics and the wealthy Protestant Brahmins extended to Boston's religious communities and political parties, and culminated in a

²³ Qtd. in Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in Art*, 229.

²⁴ "Union Pickets W.P.A. Office," *Boston Sunday Globe*, 10 January 1937, 1, 14.

struggle for control of economic power in the city. These conflicts left the political leadership of Boston at odds with that of the state of Massachusetts during much of the Great Depression.²⁵

Moreover, those who stood to benefit from the WPA were apparently under the impression that the theatre – including the FTP – was either for the intellectual and cultural elite or of such low quality that those who qualified as relief workers would prefer starvation to participation. Effectively, both elite and working class audiences shunned the Boston FTP because they felt that it had been created for the other. Since the FTP depended on the working class for audiences, the perception that the FTP was exclusively for the elite was particularly harmful to its ability to locate loyal audience members. Boston’s elite, aside from offering the occasional endorsement or radio spot, could not be depended on as the support network that the local FTP needed. FTP productions appealed to the “people” who would otherwise not be able to afford theatre, yet that group already felt themselves alienated from the Boston elite and unwelcome in the playhouse.

While information regarding the composition of Boston audiences is sparse, comments of several period newspaper columnists remain. The *Boston Post* review of *Chalk Dust* provides some insight:

Apparently, many of the audience had never seen a stage show before. The prices charged by the government – best seats 55 cents – are such as to encourage this belief. The audience was thrilled and highly entertained.

If the Federal Theatre is to become a sort of theatre of education, to bring stage plays within the financial reach of these people, then ‘Chalk Dust’ is a good start.²⁶

²⁵ This was a condition that had much in common with several earlier periods of strife in Boston, and a situation that is seen in the play *Created Equal*.

The *Record* shows a similar opinion, stating that the “flesh-and-blood drama offered at very popular prices, appeal[s] to the old stock company crowd.”²⁷ Finally, an undated and unsigned memo addressed to J. Baker (Assistant Administrator of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration) describes the unprofessional nature of the actors remaining in Boston and the audience reaction to the performances s/he saw:

I watched the audiences carefully (both children and adults) but in no instance did I see a performance that could hold their interest for even a few minutes. If we remember that most of the audiences consisted of very unsophisticated people who had come early to the performance to get a good seat and were obviously anxious to be entertained, it is easy to know without even looking at the stage what they are being offered.²⁸

Further complicating this situation was the fact that, as I have noted, Roosevelt and the New Deal were never popular in Boston. In a city wary of additional taxes (already one of the highest taxed populations in the country), New Deal projects nearly always came in behind the desire for lower taxes.²⁹ Nor did the Boston City Council, the mayor, the governor, or the ward representatives support the New Deal projects:

The City Council, for instance, scuttled PWA projects when the ward representatives decided they did not want to match federal funds. On other

²⁶ Elliot Norton, “Chalk Dust,” *Boston Post*, 1 September 1936, Qtd. in “Comments from the Press,” *Federal Theatre Project: Semi-Monthly News Letter*, Works Progress Administration, Division of Women’s and Professional Projects 1, no. 8 (15 September 1936), Harvard Theatre Collection, Works Progress Administration, 3.

²⁷ E. F. Harkins, *Record*, 4 September 1936, Qtd. in “Comments from the Press,” *Federal Theatre Project: Semi-Monthly News Letter*, Works Progress Administration, Division of Women’s and Professional Projects 1, no. 8 (15 September 1936), Harvard Theatre Collection, Works Progress Administration, 4.

²⁸ Unsigned to J. Baker, “Drama Projects in Massachusetts,” undated, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-39, Box 56, “MA – Project Proposals #2.”

²⁹ Constance K. Burns and Ronald P. Formisano, Eds., *Boston, 1700-1980: The Evolution of Urban Politics* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 188.

occasions, CWA, FERA, and WPA projects were aborted because the city council would not appropriate money for equipment and supplies.”³⁰

In this charged social and political atmosphere the Boston FTP struggled to establish a working relationship with the community. But in Boston in particular, the FTP inadvertently sent mixed messages to its would-be audience members, thus causing even greater problems for itself.

One of these mixed messages is seen in the choice of theatre spaces in Boston.

An article in the *Boston Globe* described the custom makeover of Boston’s Copley Theatre in preparation for the arrival of the FTP:

The wall paneling has been done entirely by Paul Puggioni, internationally known decorator from New York. Bales of carpet are being laid, the entire lobby is filled with matting and materials which have gone into the reupholstering. Brilliantly new modernistic electrical fixtures will grace the theatre, inside and out. Carefully rearranged and comfortable seats have been installed throughout.

Mr. Shubert has not neglected “back-stage” for each dressing room is spacious and well equipped. An army of men has installed new grids, new ropes and platforms for back-stage use and the switchboard has been rebuilt and equipped to meet all demands of Broadway attractions that are to be presented at this theatre.³¹

The unnamed journalist goes on to note that the Copley Theatre was specifically “built for the elite of Boston.”³² According to this article, the theatre was remodeled for the incoming “Broadway attractions” of the FTP, attractions which sound like anything but those of the financially struggling, newly formed company dependent on long out-of-work theatre professionals in a town with little professional theatre to begin with; this is not typical FTP fare geared toward the typical FTP audience

³⁰ Ibid, 187.

³¹ *Boston Globe*, 26 September 1937, “Remodeled Copley Nearing Completion,” Harvard Theatre Collection, Boston – Copley Theatre (1) clippings file.

³² Ibid.

member. Yet, the perception of the Copley Theatre as an elite venue did not originate with its remodeling campaign. Between 1917 and 1923, when Mr. Henry Jewett directed the theatre and his own resident acting company, longtime Boston theatre critic Philip Hale notes that:

The Copley Theatre is supposed to draw a special audience, one interested in unfamiliar plays, plays that do not appeal to what are loosely known as “commercial producers.” (As if any theatre could live if there were no thoughts of box-office receipts!)³³

For nearly two decades prior to the arrival of the FTP, the Copley Theatre had been home to non-commercial plays. The description suggests that the theatre catered to Boston’s intellectual elite – those who had the means, desire, and daring – to attend avant-garde, complex drama. Around this time, in 1917, George Bernard Shaw made an exclusive deal that guaranteed many of his never-before-seen plays would appear at the Copley Theatre in Boston.³⁴ While it is certainly possible that some working class Irish attended these productions, they were clearly not the target audience for this blend of avant-garde, non-commercial, intellectual plays, and had not been for decades prior to the arrival of the FTP in Boston. However, it may have been the Copley Theatre’s reputation for daring theatre that attracted the FTP.

The Copley Theatre was located on Stuart Street between Huntington Avenue and Dartmouth Avenue. This location was on the edge of the elite Back Bay, on the southwest side of Copley Square and across the street from the Boston Public

³³ Philip Hale, “As the World Wags,” undated, Harvard Theatre Collection, Boston – Copley Theatre (1), clippings file.

³⁴ “Copley Theatre to be Shavian Playhouse,” 27 May 1917, Harvard Theatre Collection, Boston – Copley Theatre (1), clippings file.

Library.³⁵ Since its development between 1857 and 1894, the Back Bay had been home to Boston's Brahmins, the "elite members of Boston's mid-nineteenth century social aristocracy."³⁶ This geographic segregation continued during the Great Depression. The Brahmins inhabited the Back Bay and Beacon Hill while the Irish strongholds operated out of South Boston and Charlestown's Bunker Hill, the Italians dominated the North End and East Boston, and African Americans populated the South End and lower Roxbury. Thousands of Jews shared the North End with the Italians, while others populated Roxbury and Dorchester. Each area in Boston was clearly defined, and as the ethnic tensions heightened with the pressures of the Great Depression, xenophobia swept through the city.³⁷

Even today, Copley Square retains this elevated place in Boston society; a number of the most expensive shops in the city are located either within the immediate area or a few blocks north on Newbury and Boylston Streets. Yet the FTP audiences were unlikely to frequent the pricey boutiques or upscale restaurants that characterized the Back Bay. Why would the local FTP administrators, who claimed to know the area so well, choose this particular playhouse for FTP activities? FTP officials were clearly aware of the stigmas they would need to overcome; yet, they

³⁵ The history of the old Copley Theatre, originally the second Toy Theatre, is a fascinating tale of the theatre reflecting the needs of its audiences. The second Toy Theatre was built in 1914, became the Copley Theatre in 1916 and moved to its final location on Stuart Street between Huntington Avenue and Dartmouth Avenue in 1922, near what is now the Prudential Center. At this point, the theatre was actually cut in half and turned ninety degrees so that its entrance and marquee faced Stuart Street. It became the Capri Moviehouse in 1957, and was destroyed to make room for an on-ramp to I-90 (the Massachusetts Turnpike) in the early 1960s. Donald C. King, *The Theatres of Boston: A Stage and Screen History* (NY: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004), 176, 204, 207, 244.

³⁶ Thomas H. O'Connor, *Boston: A to Z* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 57.

³⁷ John F. Stack, *International Conflict in an American City: Boston's Irish, Italians, and Jews, 1935-1944*, Contributions in Political Science, No. 26 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 29-30.

chose to move the Boston FTP to the Copley Theatre in 1937, just in time for a production billed as one of the most important in the history of the Boston FTP.

Created Equal, a play about the founding of the United States, the promise of the Declaration of Independence, the failures of the Constitution, and the renewed possibility in the Bill of Rights and the Amendments was scheduled to be the inaugural production in this elite theatre. Perhaps this choice of venue was an effort to legitimize the FTP in the eyes of local elites; perhaps it was an effort to capitalize on the Copley's reputation for intellectual rather than "popular" entertainment. It is even possible that the Copley Theatre was simply the one theatre that was available and cheap enough for the FTP to rent for the spring and summer of 1938. Regardless, local FTP administrators chose to bring the production of *Created Equal* to the Copley Theatre for its grand Boston opening.

All men are 'Created Equal:.' Spotlight on Equality

John Hunter Booth's 1937 play, *Created Equal*, tells the history of the United States of America, with an emphasis on the early period of nation formation. From the arrival of the Mayflower, through the colonies' struggle against the tyranny of King George III and the English Parliament, to Shay's Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion, slavery and the Dred Scot Case, and ending with a visit to the Roaring Twenties and the decline of the Depression, *Created Equal* provides a rapid review of nearly 200 years of history. However, the history presented in the play is not the glossy history that one reads about in high school textbooks; instead, Booth

emphasizes the dramatic, passionate tale of the common man. Booth's rewriting of American history offers an interesting contrast to popular accounts of Boston's involvement in the creation of the new nation.³⁸

In many ways, *Created Equal* marks the beginning of the FTP's effort to create locally relevant theatre in Boston. Prior to the debut of *Created Equal*, FTP productions in Boston were either censored, created such a negative stir that they drove audiences away, or provoked no discussion whatsoever due to the entirely uncontroversial nature of the content. With this production, the FTP took a chance by appropriating the history that was so ingrained in Boston's own identity. This process used and destabilized that history to appeal to specific working-class audience members, while attempting to find that balance between pure entertainment and legitimate, locally relevant theatre. Referring to the Springfield production, Flanagan described this attempt in a letter on June 10, 1938, just three days before the Boston opening:

I have read all the reviews of the production with great interest. I think the comments indicate a forceful and imaginative treatment, and I want to congratulate all who had a share in it I realize how much easier it would be to do routine plays. It takes real courage to do a play with any social content . . .³⁹

³⁸ Booth's revisions depart from the traditional histories of the time, instead becoming what modern historians refer to as a "history from below." While he does take artistic license, he claims to have verified the vast majority of the events represented in *Created Equal*. See Appendix I for a timeline of relevant events in American history.

³⁹ Hallie Flanagan, New York, to Blanding Sloan, New York, 10 June 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "*Created Equal* #2."

The Preamble

According to Flanagan, the FTP finally found its niche in Boston with Booth's *Created Equal*. Tracing the themes of freedom and equality, as well as the struggles of the working class against the landowners, *Created Equal* premiered in Salem, Massachusetts, approximately 15 miles north of Boston, then moved to Springfield for a brief run from May 24-28, 1938, and finally arrived in Boston on June 13, 1938. In one of the many pieces of the publicity blitz that accompanied *Created Equal*, representatives described the play as:

A historical cavalcade of the Birth and Growth of the American spirit – not only of 1776, but of 1938. It blends historical incident with popular reaction to the issues of the times, with all the humor, pathos, through which is interwoven a love story. This intense drama, is a crowning achievement in stage annals, embodying an intensely dramatic flesh and blood parade of major events, which has colored the entire pattern of the Birth – the Growth – the America of Today.⁴⁰

The speaker goes on to explain the title of the play. He states that the title, *Created Equal*, aside from the obvious reference to the famous phrase in the Declaration of Independence, alludes to “the new world’s challenge to the old in 1776, [and that] it is to-day’s [sic] dominant problem.”⁴¹ This question of relative equality and of the promise of the Founding Fathers of the United States surfaces repeatedly both in the dramatic text and in the rhetoric surrounding the production of *Created Equal*. The issue for both the audience and the scholar revolves around the ways in which *Created Equal* defines equality. What traits are prized and vilified by

⁴⁰ “Radio Talk,” Jon B. Mack, Boston, National Archives and Records Administration, Works Progress Administration, FTP, RG 69 [hereafter NARA], Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “*Created Equal* #1.”

⁴¹ Ibid.

those who are promised equality? Finally, what comment is this play, and by extension the FTP, really making on both the historical figures and the contemporaneous government of 1938?

I have located three extant versions of *Created Equal*. The first, and to the best of my knowledge, earliest, is widely available (when compared to many FTP playtexts). This version is available not only at the National Archives, Library of Congress, and George Mason University, but also through an FTP publication located in several major libraries throughout the country. However, this version does not appear to be the one that was produced in Salem, Springfield, or Boston, Massachusetts. Instead, a comparison of the programs for the three productions shows that the Revised Edition, located at George Mason University and the Library of Congress, is substantially closer to the produced version in both scene and character breakdown. The Revised Edition also features stage directions that describe stage locations, specific lighting elements, and a floor plan that coincides with both production photos and critics' descriptions. The third version of *Created Equal*, available only at the National Archives, is a marked copy of the abbreviated radio version. This production was the third in the "Federal Theatre of the Air" Series, and was broadcast on Station WEVD, New York, December 22, 1938, from 10:00 – 10:45 p.m. EST. The Boston production will be the focus of the following analysis; however, as vital or interesting bits of information regarding the Salem and Springfield productions are applicable, they will appear as well.

The FTP administration thoroughly documented the publicity blitz that accompanied the debut of *Created Equal*, using it as a model example of a solid

promotional campaign. Robert Johnston, the publicity man for the Springfield Unit of the FTP in Massachusetts, wrote copious descriptions of his efforts on behalf of the local FTP. He referred to standard promotional activity, such as advertising in the local paper and on radio stations, but he also described efforts above and beyond the traditional duties of the publicity man. Johnston pursued the endorsements of various local VIPs, including the Mayor, local ministers and the Superintendent of Schools, and contacted every member of the city government to offer a personal invitation over the telephone. He sent Eugene Keenan, a faculty member at Staley College and consultant for the Boston FTP, on a speaking tour of Springfield junior and senior high schools, women's groups, service clubs and local colleges, as well as several radio stations. Most exciting, though, was the street parade that he coordinated:

The night before the performance, we had been able to assemble for a street parade, eight drum corps, but due to the deluge of rain that morning, four of these called off their appearance, due to their fear of ruining some of their instruments. At six o'clock on the evening of the show, two more of these corps notified their members not to appear, due to another terrible rainstorm, which began at six o'clock and continued on to 7:30. However two corps did put in an appearance, and were both very neat and snappy, about 125 in all, and led by a squad of motorcycle police, which the Police Department furnished and with a good sprinkling of placards and banners advertising the play, they did make a very creditable appearance. They paraded up our Main Street for about one mile and back again to the auditorium where they marched in formation into the building playing and proceeding to their section of seats which had been reserved for them.⁴²

Perhaps the most notable part of this extensive campaign is that Johnston and his team managed to do all of these promotional activities while spending absolutely no FTP money.

⁴² One wonders about the public spectacle that could have occurred that evening in Springfield had all eight drum corps arrived the night of the performance. Robert V. Johnston, "Report by Publicity Man on Promotion Work For Production 'Created Equal,'" NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "*Created Equal* #2."

While similar records are unavailable for the Boston production of *Created Equal*, it is likely that many of the same types of promotional activities preceded the production. The Boston FTP did, for example, solicit the endorsements and attendance of various local VIPs, including the mayor of Boston and well-known professors from Harvard University. An invitation to this effect from State Director Jon Mack to Harvard Professor H.W.L. Dana can be found in the Harvard Theatre Collection:

This dynamic cavalcade of the birth, growth, the America of today, is being presented in twenty-seven scenes, moving with the rapidity of a motion picture with daring new technique, assuring the audience of witnessing the major events which have colored our entire hisotry [sic] in less than three hours of gripping entertainment. [. . .] We sincerely trust you will join other prominent people and be with us as we return to Boston in a play which draws its theme from Thomas Jefferson's famous phrase "All men are created equal," and ends with the immortal message, "A Government of the people, for the people, and by the people shall not perish from the earth."⁴³

The letter goes on to explain that the local FTP would enjoy nothing more than the attendance of important local people such as the recipient, and provides the details for endorsing and attending the production.

In spite of the confidence that this letter suggests, it is clear that Massachusetts FTP Director Blanding Sloan was wary of Boston's reaction to this particular show. A memorandum to Flanagan, dated the same day as Mack's invitation to Professor Dana, illustrates his anxiety:

In reference to the question as to whether or not *CREATED EQUAL* proves to be a success in Boston, as to attendance, please bear in mind the *VALLEY FORGE* production, and the sad effects it had on the Boston public's attitude toward Federal Theatre Productions. The reaction in the public mind is bitter and very antagonistic. No historical society will touch *CREATED EQUAL*

⁴³ Jon B. Mack to H.W.L. Dana, TL, 9 June 1938, Harvard Theatre Collection, Boston – Copley Theatre, clippings file.

because of this angle, and many organizations as well as people prominent in public life, some facetiously, and others in all seriousness ask “Is this another Valley Forge?”⁴⁴

Sloan requests that Flanagan make arrangements to see *Created Equal* as quickly as possible since he fears that audience reaction will force the production to close by the end of the first week. From Sloan’s letter, one infers that the backlash from the Boston FTP’s production of *Valley Forge* was considerably greater than Flanagan was willing to admit in her subsequent writing. Sloan clearly recognizes the thematic similarities between *Valley Forge* and *Created Equal*. Both plays attempt to revise the generally accepted view of history. *Valley Forge* shows a disheartened and disgusted George Washington contemplating surrender as he watches his men – farmers, not soldiers – starve and freeze during the frigid winter spent at Valley Forge, while *Created Equal* portrays soldiers returning from war disfigured and mutilated, only to find that their jobs, homes, and families have been stolen by the men who remained behind. This portrayal is a clear analogy to the “forgotten man” syndrome that followed World War I; much of the New Deal rhetoric celebrated the suffering of these men, grouping them with the masses of poor and underprivileged. Both plays portray the giants of history as human men with weaknesses and desires, not as the selfless monuments of American spirit. Moreover, *Created Equal* was written by a man employed by the FTP and featured an ending that was universally dubbed weak and thematically confused.

⁴⁴ Blanding Sloan to Hallie Flanagan, TD, 9 June 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “*Created Equal* #2.”

Mocking Democracy

In spite of all Sloan's fears and all the play's flaws, *Created Equal* was praised by critics as "the stuff that makes history a vivid study for those unmoved by textbooks" and "better than twenty-five years of dull history courses."⁴⁵ In Boston, the production was greeted by a generally positive press, though many critics pointed to lackluster acting and set design, and the incoherent philosophical message of the play was mentioned more than once. Several critics noted that the production was "one of the most ambitious undertakings of the Federal Theatre of Massachusetts" and "deserve[d] to rank as one of the most . . . successful enterprise[s] of the Massachusetts branch."⁴⁶ *Created Equal* was recognized by critics as something different from the normal Federal Theatre fare. In addition to the improved acting, critics pointed to the themes of the production – if not always clear – is at least worthy of additional development. The theatre critic from the *Christian Science Monitor*, for example, writes:

Many spectators will doubtless get a new notion of history, for the telling differs materially from that of the school textbooks. It contains less of illusion and whitewashing, more of realism. For that, it should be welcomed [. . .]. The American revolution [sic] was a bourgeois revolution. Not only the Tories but many of the influential rebels were convinced that property rights were more important than human rights. Consequently the soldiers returning from the war found themselves in much the same position as those who

⁴⁵ From *The Salem News* and *The Billboard*, qtd. in Flanagan, *Arena*, 228.

⁴⁶ Mordaunt Hall, "Federal Theatre Presents Cavalcade of U.S. History," *Boston Transcript*, 14 June 1938 and Elinor Hughes, "'Created Equal' is presented at the Shubert-Copley Theatre," *Boston Herald*, 14 June 1938, NARA, Entry 937, Bound Federal Theatre Project Production Bulletins, 1936-39, Box 441, "*Created Equal* Production Book, Boston."

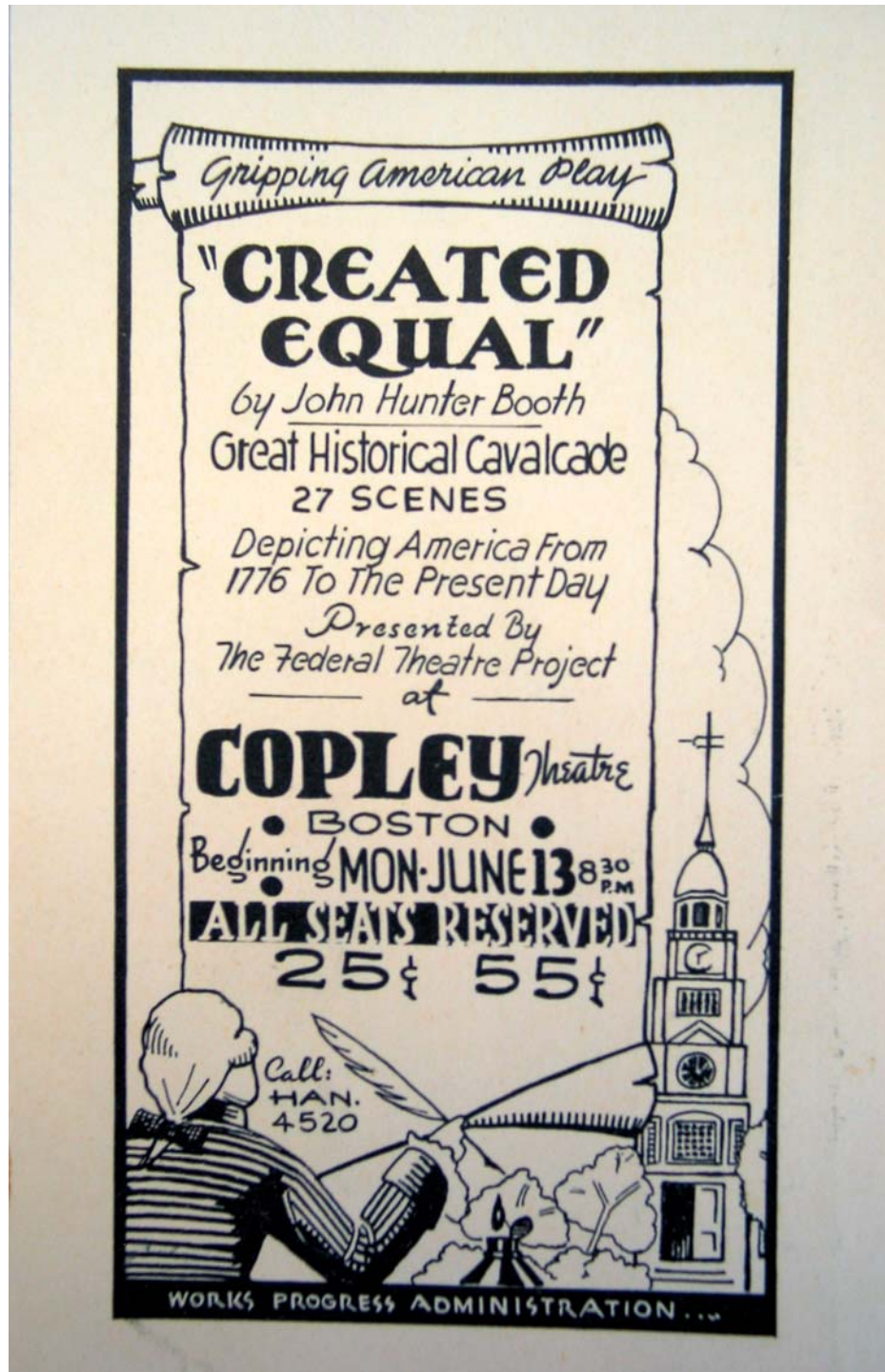


Figure 11: Advertisement for the Boston production of *Created Equal*. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

returned from the World War. The play makes it clear that the battle for democracy has not been won yet.⁴⁷

The majority of the critics noted the altered point of view from which Booth presented his historical drama. According to one critic, Booth interprets the history of the United States as a:

Struggle between the haves and the have-nots; between the reprehensible possessors of wealth, specifically the Federalists with Alexander Hamilton at their head, and the democracy of common men under the devoted leadership of Thomas Jefferson.⁴⁸

The play was criticized for romanticizing the role of the masses while minimizing or altogether ignoring the contributions of the great minds of history such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, and Abraham Lincoln. Booth's strategy, however, was deliberate; as he notes in the introduction:

In addition to speaking "bits" listed are mobs and crowds with important omnes exclamations – soldiers, Supreme Court Justices, unseen members of the Constitutional (or Federal) Convention.

It may be said that *the mobs and crowds are the most important members of the cast* [my emphasis].⁴⁹

The produced version of the script draws attention to the mobs and crowds – the working class people – and the ways in which they are portrayed in the play. The addition of working class people to the script emphasizes the direct conflict between

⁴⁷ "History Dramatized," *Boston Christian Science Monitor*, 14 June 1938, NARA, Entry 937, Bound Federal Theatre Project Production Bulletins, 1936-39, Box 441, "*Created Equal* Production Book, Boston."

⁴⁸ "Created Equal," *Boston Globe*, 14 June 1938, NARA, Entry 937, Bound Federal Theatre Project Production Bulletins, 1936-39, Box 441, "*Created Equal* Production Book, Boston."

⁴⁹ John Hunter Booth, *Created Equal* (Revised Version), Federal Theatre Project Collection, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University Libraries, introductory material.

the landowners and the landless; *Created Equal* thus becomes a play about economic and social divisions in a country that was supposed to have neither. And so, contrary to earlier editions, the revised version focuses not on the historical figure who writes or ratifies the Constitution, the President who unifies the newly formed country with the Bill of Rights, or the President who abolishes slavery, but on unnamed soldiers, villagers, and the proud, headstrong symbol of the American frontier spirit, a fictional everyman named Phillip Schuyler (and his descendants, also named Phillip Schuyler). The trials and tribulations of the nameless common man are the heart of the play, exemplified by the efforts of several generations of Schuylers, all attempting to make lives for themselves in a country that (theoretically) accepts the weak, poor, and uneducated on equal footing with the powerful, wealthy, and educated leaders. Even the “Radio Talk” script of potential answers to standard interview questions (written as a part of the publicity campaign that accompanied *Created Equal’s* opening in Springfield, Massachusetts) reflected the populist spirit of the play. When asked, “Who are the principals?” the speaker is to respond:

Out of the past will emerge for the moment such figures as: Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, Franklin, Lincoln, Grant, Roosevelt – *Yet the author has made them secondary to the people who are actually the leading figures in this creation of a nation* [my emphasis].⁵⁰

The shift in emphasis – from the major historical figures to the “people” – was both clearly intentional. Likely this modification led to the ultimate title of the play.

Originally titled *The American Constitution*, the play was renamed *Created Equal* sometime after it was accepted for production (but prior to much of the debate over

⁵⁰ “Radio Talk,” Jon B. Mack, Boston, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “*Created Equal* #1.”

the ending).⁵¹ Perhaps not coincidentally, the title was changed at approximately the same time that the thematic shift occurred. “Created Equal” is, of course, a direct reference to the opening of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness -- That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.⁵²

This passage, which describes the reasons the Declaration was necessary, shows that Booth borrowed considerably more than the title. It also describes Booth’s intentions with *Created Equal*; like the Founding Fathers, Booth argues that government ruling the United States is “destructive” and challenges the abilities of many of its citizens to pursue their inalienable rights. His plays expresses this to the “People,” who have the right to “alter or to abolish it.” In the words of Boston critic Mordaunt Hall:

Apparently, Mr. Booth is of the opinion that [the promise of the Constitution] has not been lived up to, for he emphasizes many instances, including one about discontented soldiers who anticipated personal results from the Declaration of Independence, but who discovered that those who stayed at home got all the plums. It is a tirade against capitalists.⁵³

⁵¹ Jon B. Mack to George G. Gerwig, TL, 20 October 1937, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “*Created Equal* #1.”

⁵² “In Congress, July 4, 1776. A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, In General Congress Assembled,” *The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1979), 1.

⁵³ Mordaunt Hall, “Federal Theatre Presents Cavalcade of U.S. History,” *Boston Transcript*, 14 June 1938, NARA, Entry 937, Bound Federal Theatre Project Production Bulletins, 1936-39, Box 441, “*Created Equal* Production Book, Boston.”

Though it began as a traditional story of American History, replete with the major leaders and events, *Created Equal* became a deviant drama that emphasized the contributions, exertions, failures, and successes of the common people while challenging the rights of those in power:

Boss: Chief, it's happened. They've jammed through the Seventeenth Amendment.

1st Plutocrat: You mean – no more hand picked United States Senators?

Boss: That's it. From now on the people elect their own senators – the people! (*He shakes his head sadly*) What's America coming to anyhow?

1st Plutocrat: The people are getting too damn'd officious.

2nd Plutocrat: Yes. They'll soon be running their own country. Something ought to be done about it.⁵⁴

Unlike the traditional mythologizing of the past, featuring a few individuals – often “great” white men – who bring about societal change through their intelligence, foresight, physical and moral strength, and perseverance, *Created Equal* portrays events and people in a way that simultaneously honors and challenges the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the ability of the American way of life to adhere to those founding ideals. This challenge is particularly illuminating because it can be traced through the original and revised scripts, as well as through the notes of the playwright and director, and the communications with other members of the local FTP.

How did *Created Equal* mythologize the past of both Boston and the country while incorporating the lessons of the present? *Created Equal* persistently highlights the mistakes of many of the so-called Founding Fathers, drawing attention to the personal shortcomings that caused continued strife in much of the American

⁵⁴ John Hunter Booth, *Created Equal* (Revised Version), Federal Theatre Project Collection, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University Libraries, 2.9.5.

population following the Revolutionary War. One wonders what the FTP's official and unofficial stance on the play may have been; did Flanagan and the other administrative officials of both the FTP and WPA approve of this play? If so, what reaction did the national administration hope to elicit in Boston?

At first glance, it would appear that *Created Equal* endured the same vetting process as all plays proposed for FTP production. John Hunter Booth, a director in the Massachusetts FTP and a professional playwright in the years prior to the Depression, wrote the play. Massachusetts FTP Director Jon B. Mack proposed *Created Equal* for production. The script passed muster with George Gerwig, Acting Assistant Director of the Eastern region, and was sent to John McGee. McGee commented that the script lacked “the punch of the Living Newspaper, and resemble[d] a ‘high school pageant.’”⁵⁵ The script was nevertheless approved for production with the caveat that the ending could stand improvement. This comment prompted a series of communications between playwright John Hunter Booth and various administrative personnel on local, state, and national levels, as well as the occasional WPA supervisor. In mid-January Jon Mack received the official approval for the original version of the play, which states:

It is the conclusion of the National Office that the ending is weak. Without dragging in any Democratic Partisanship, is it possible to make it stronger for the greater benefit of the production? Mr. Lavery suggests something on a Supreme Court decision or some other national popular victory.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Robert Russell to Mr. Jon B. Mack, TL, 10 November 1937, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “*Created Equal* #1.”

⁵⁶ Robert Russell to Mr. Jon B. Mack, TL, 12 January 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “*Created Equal* #1.”

This ending did not align with the playwright's vision. In a letter written the following day, Booth explains his intentions in the final scene, noting that he will be happy to "set the old brain to work again and see if I cannot improve on the present finish." He writes:

The final scene, as it stands, is an attempt to sum up in the character of the American pioneer all that has gone before and all that is to come. He has been shown as escaping from civilization to the wilderness and finding freedom there, but now that there are no more wildernesses, now that he is face to face with government from which there is no escape, he must pioneer in government, - attempt to fashion it so that under it he may enjoy the freedom in cities that he had gone west before to find. This is the new pioneering we as a people must do, and to speed us in our work another amendment is proposed by the pioneer - an amendment, it seems to me, which definitely protests against the power of the Supreme Court to decide what shall be the law of our land. I closed on this note, feeling it was the one to leave in the minds of an audience, - the point they should take out with them to think about... [I trust] the production will prove of benefit to our group in appealing to a wide audience who will feel the play is a sincere attempt to dramatize the constitutional history of our country.⁵⁷

Booth soon received another negative commentary on the play. On January 21, 1938, he wrote a second letter to Jon Mack, this time in response to the now lost criticism based on Converse Tyler's (a leader in the National Play Bureau playreading area) playreader report.⁵⁸ Again, Booth defends the ideological basis of the play. Exposing a deeper motivation this time, he writes that the play is:

Less a discussion of economic problems than an effort to present dramatically the perpetual struggle of Man against a tyranny of his own creation. Forever compromising with his selfish instincts, he yet continues to grope towards the ideal of equality for all . . . The catastrophe we are feeling is the result of past compromises. The text book histories have been less than truthful about those

⁵⁷ John H. Booth to Jon B. Mack, TL, 13 January 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "Created Equal #1."

⁵⁸ The criticisms that Booth responds to in this letter are all noted in Tyler's playreader report and accompanying correspondence. Converse Tyler, "Created Equal Playreader Report," Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., container 171.

earlier days. They might even be accused of purposefully covering up the factual happenings and substituting a convenient fictional account.⁵⁹

Booth responds to two additional accusations in this letter. To the first, that there are “errors in the choice of material and of emphasis,” he reiterates his premise for the play:

1. The Declaration of Independence promised equality.
2. The Constitution established a propertied class.
3. Amendments to the Constitution are slowly fulfilling the promise of the Declaration.⁶⁰

Booth restated this list constantly in communications with the national administration.

In response to the accusation of “errors” in the text, Booth claimed that he had documentary proof for the vast majority of the lines spoken by major historical figures, and that he had engaged in several years worth of research in preparation for writing this play.

The second criticism alleges that Booth engages in “‘oriental flattery’ of the present Administration.” To this charge, Booth confesses surprise:

I was not conscious of bestowing bouquets. Happening to be a firm believer in our President’s policies, I have merely set down the promise they appear to hold for a fairer future. Lacking omniscience I cannot proclaim the cure for our ills, but if the play succeeds in throwing some light on the cause of them, it will have achieved its purpose.⁶¹

In spite of Booth’s belief regarding the clarity of the script’s thematic intent, similar confusions about the play abound in the correspondence between other FTP administrative offices. Tyler’s complaint was joined by a second, this time regarding

⁵⁹ John Hunter Booth to Jon B. Mack, TL, 21 January 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “*Created Equal* #1.”

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

the ending. Robert Russell, FTP Service Director of the East, wrote officially to approve the ending of the play, saying:

I have discussed a new ending for *CREATED EQUAL* with Mr. Lavery of the National Service Bureau. He approves of the end, although reserving the opinion that it is too weak to do justice to the rest of the play We still feel that Mr. Booth could improve the ending, but that is up to him.⁶²

These comments do not speak of the play in glowing terms. In fact, the final sentence seems to illustrate that the National Service Bureau remained unconvinced by Booth's defense, but did not wish to pursue the matter further.

In what may have been a last attempt to produce a more satisfactory ending, Flanagan herself weighed in on the clarity of the thematic message and the relative strength of the play's conclusion. In a memorandum dated approximately six weeks after the previous flurry of exchanges, Flanagan writes:

I found the first part of it absorbing but I felt from the time the author plunged into the modern scene the play fell completely to pieces. I should emphatically protest the scenes having to do with the Government work program since I think it casts a decided slur on all of our projects. [The script] lacks all the way through a line of direction; that is, I do not really know what the author is trying to say. Is it just a history or has it some specific theme? I do not suggest that you cancel the production of the play but I should like to think that Mr. Booth will rewrite the last part.⁶³

For Flanagan, then, the obscure thematic message was tied to the weak ending. It is certainly possible that, at several points during the initially (almost daily) series of letters and memoranda criticizing the ending and thematic intent of *Created Equal*, Booth grew weary of politely and repeatedly defending his play. After receiving

⁶² Robert Russell to Mr. Jon B. Mack, TL, 1 February 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "*Created Equal* #1."

⁶³ Hallie Flanagan to Mr. Robert Russell, TD, 23 March 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "*Created Equal* #1."

Flanagan's criticism, Booth responded in a rather heated letter to Jon Mack, the FTP State Director of Massachusetts:

I can only infer that Mrs. Flanagan did not read [sic] the later version of the play, which has a revised last act. I doubt if she will now find anything to criticize in the way the Government work program is handled.

As to what I am trying to say, I can only reply that I have attempted a blending of history and imagination to portray the American mass spirit struggling to achieve an equality promised by the Declaration, denied by the Constitution, approaching attainment with each Amendment that enlarges human rights. It seems to me the manuscript hews rather closely to this line, permitting an audience to draw such a general conclusion from the dramatised [sic] episodes.⁶⁴

Booth's response to Flanagan marks the end of any correspondence between the national administration and Booth regarding revisions to the ending; the dissatisfaction did not simply evaporate though. Instead, the national response changes to something more indirect. No longer was John Hunter Booth contacted about revising the ending; instead, the tentative plans for regional simultaneous openings of *Created Equal* were quietly halted. Two days after Booth sent his final response to Flanagan, Blanding Sloan sent a letter to Robert Russell, Director of the Eastern Service Bureau, reporting that he had spoken to the state directors of Pennsylvania and Connecticut, and that he felt a "regional wide production very doubtful and simultaneous production for May 24th impossible."⁶⁵ In addition, from this point on, requests for technical assistance in the form of electrical equipment, projection materials, and music rights were approved only after a series of letters and

⁶⁴ John H. Booth to Jon B. Mack, TL, 26 March 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "*Created Equal* #1."

⁶⁵ Blanding Sloan to Robert Russell, TL, 28 March 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "*Created Equal* #1."

requisitions traveled between the local and state offices. Most notable, however, is the correspondence regarding the apparent lack of a director for the production.

With *Created Equal* opening in Springfield on May 24th and in Boston on June 13th, Massachusetts State Director Blanding Sloan wrote that, as of April 25, 1938, he was still trying to find a director for the Boston production. According to a memorandum from Jon Mack, however, Booth was the director of his own play. Rehearsals for the production began April 18, and Booth had cast the production, engaged in initial design meetings with the set and costume designers, and performed the many other duties that fall upon the director early in the rehearsal process.⁶⁶ Booth remained the director of the Boston production throughout May, and received many comments and notes from visiting FTP dignitaries. Rehearsal notes from Blanding Sloan, visiting actor and director Sala Staw, and Jon Mack – all addressed to John Hunter Booth – survive from this period. The only extant comment from the National FTP during this period comes in the form of hearsay; according to a memorandum sent by Jo Kaufman to Blanding Sloan, Flanagan was said to feel that “the end is weak, [but] that it will work out alright during rehearsals.”⁶⁷ Yet, even with the Boston debut finally scheduled, the National Administration attempted to remove Booth as the director of the production a mere ten days prior to opening. In a letter dated June 2, 1938, J. Howard Miller, the Deputy Director of the FTP and Flanagan’s trusted assistant, writes to Blanding Sloan:

⁶⁶ Jon B. Mack to Blanding Sloan, TD, 27 April 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “*Created Equal* #1.”

⁶⁷ Jo Kaufman to Blanding Sloan, TD, 3 May 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “*Created Equal* #1.”

In conversation with Mrs. Flanagan she stressed the fact that she has always been opposed to authors directing their own plays on Federal Theatre Project[s].

In such cases, the author's familiarity with the script oftentimes prevents his doing the best work.

As so much depends upon the proper reception of *CREATED EQUAL* in Boston, she has suggested that you, beginning June 3rd, take complete charge of rehearsals for the Boston opening.

Will you please do so. I believe this step will greatly enhance the possibilities of Mr. Booth's fine script having a successful premiere in Boston.⁶⁸

While government bureaucracy regularly plagued the FTP with production problems, *Created Equal* suffered more than its fair share. Between the lengthy correspondence debating the ending of the play, the repeated demands for revisions, the difficulty procuring supplies and effects, and the question of replacing the director a mere ten days prior to the Boston opening, it is fair to say that the production of *Created Equal* suffered intense national scrutiny.⁶⁹ In spite of all of these problems, talk of additional productions (including a proposed nation-wide simultaneous opening in February of 1939) continued until the FTP's demise in June of 1939.

⁶⁸ J. Howard Miller to Blanding Sloan, TL, 2 June 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "*Created Equal* #2."

⁶⁹ *Created Equal* also became the precedent for a problem that would continue through the life of the FTP. In the letter in which Jon Mack, Massachusetts State Director, proposed the play as a possible FTP production, he stated that the play was written on project time and is therefore, royalty-free. Booth argued that, while he had written much of the play while employed by the FTP, he researched and wrote the piece on his own time; moreover, since he had reworked it for the FTP, it was worthless as a commercial venture and he should be compensated accordingly. This dilemma raged for nearly five months, making *Created Equal* the catalyst for an official determination on the rights of FTP writers. Jon B. Mack to George C. Gerwing (20 October 1937) & John H. Booth to Jon B. Mack (21 December 1937), TL, 20 October 1937, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "*Created Equal* #1."

“A Cavalcade of History:” Analysis of ‘Created Equal’

God preserve the yokel. Spare him for our sakes, kind heaven. May his blood win us our land and his sweat enrich it for us.⁷⁰

~ Citizen in *Created Equal*

The extensive debate regarding the ending of *Created Equal* reveals the different intentions of playwright John Hunter Booth and the national administration. However, the much-derided ending was simply the most public target of revisions. Booth was also attacked for the lack of a “specific theme,” and he rewrote the text extensively in an effort to clarify his thematic intent. The revised “cavalcade of history” focused on the various ways in which the poor, working-class people were affected by the political and economic maneuverings of the propertied class. As I have noted, this enhanced focus on the common man illustrated Booth’s concept, which idealized the promise of the Declaration of Independence, vilified the Constitution, and saw the Amendments and Bill of Rights as steps toward that ultimate promise of equality seen in the Declaration of Independence.

Both the original and revised (produced) versions of John Hunter Booth’s *Created Equal* begin with an abstract prologue in which a group of tattered, underfed peasants gape at the “seat of Power.” A voice emanates from behind the throne, mocking the people for “Endowing with divinity / [their] own creation,” while declaring that “the Many, / [are] trespassers on land that gave [them] birth.”⁷¹ Both

⁷⁰ John Hunter Booth, *Created Equal* (Revised Edition), Federal Theatre Project Playscript and Radioscript Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 1.4.3.

⁷¹ John Hunter Booth, *Created Equal*, NARA, Entry 914, Playscripts, 1936-1939, Box 277, “Created Equal,” P.2; John Hunter Booth, *Created Equal* (Revised Edition), Federal Theatre Project Playscript and Radioscript Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 1.1.2.

versions of the play portray the peasants as witless automatons – “Fools and slaves!” – who arbitrarily advance certain people to positions of power in society; the people endow the chosen ones with both symbolic and actual power based on birth, the divine right of kings, and/or their own ability to take and maintain that power. The Seat of Power sits in front of a “voluminous canopy of royal purple sprinkled with stars, crescent moons, bees, fleur-de-lis, swastikas, etc.,” symbols of royalty and power over thousands of years. The sides of the great, empty throne are graced by an enormous executioner, dressed in scarlet and leaning on a headsman’s axe, and a soldier in full battle armor, who leans “idly on his sheathed sword.”⁷² These visions of power enforced by physical violence and intellectual oppression adorn both versions of the play. The revised version, however, adds another class to the mix. In addition to the Seat of Power and the peasant subjects, a group of Beaux, Belles and Substantial Citizens stand on a platform near the throne. They remain separate from the villagers, who are herded together on the lowest level of the stage. At the end of this scene in the revised version Booth also brings in the audience as a part of the cast of peasants. This inclusion of both the landholding class and the audience members as participants in the drama is consistent throughout the revised version, and will be returned to in this analysis. This scene, entitled “The seat of Power,” leads to one of the major thematic threads in *Created Equal* – the distribution and balance of power. Who controls the government? Is it the property-owners who control the shape of the society? Is it the men who are physically strong and able to defend themselves? What about the other groups in America, and specifically, in Boston – women, slaves,

⁷² John Hunter Booth, *Created Equal* (Revised Edition), Federal Theatre Project Playscript and Radioscript Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 1.1.1.



Figure 12: Design sketch of the “seat of Power.” From the production book for the Boston production of *Created Equal*. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

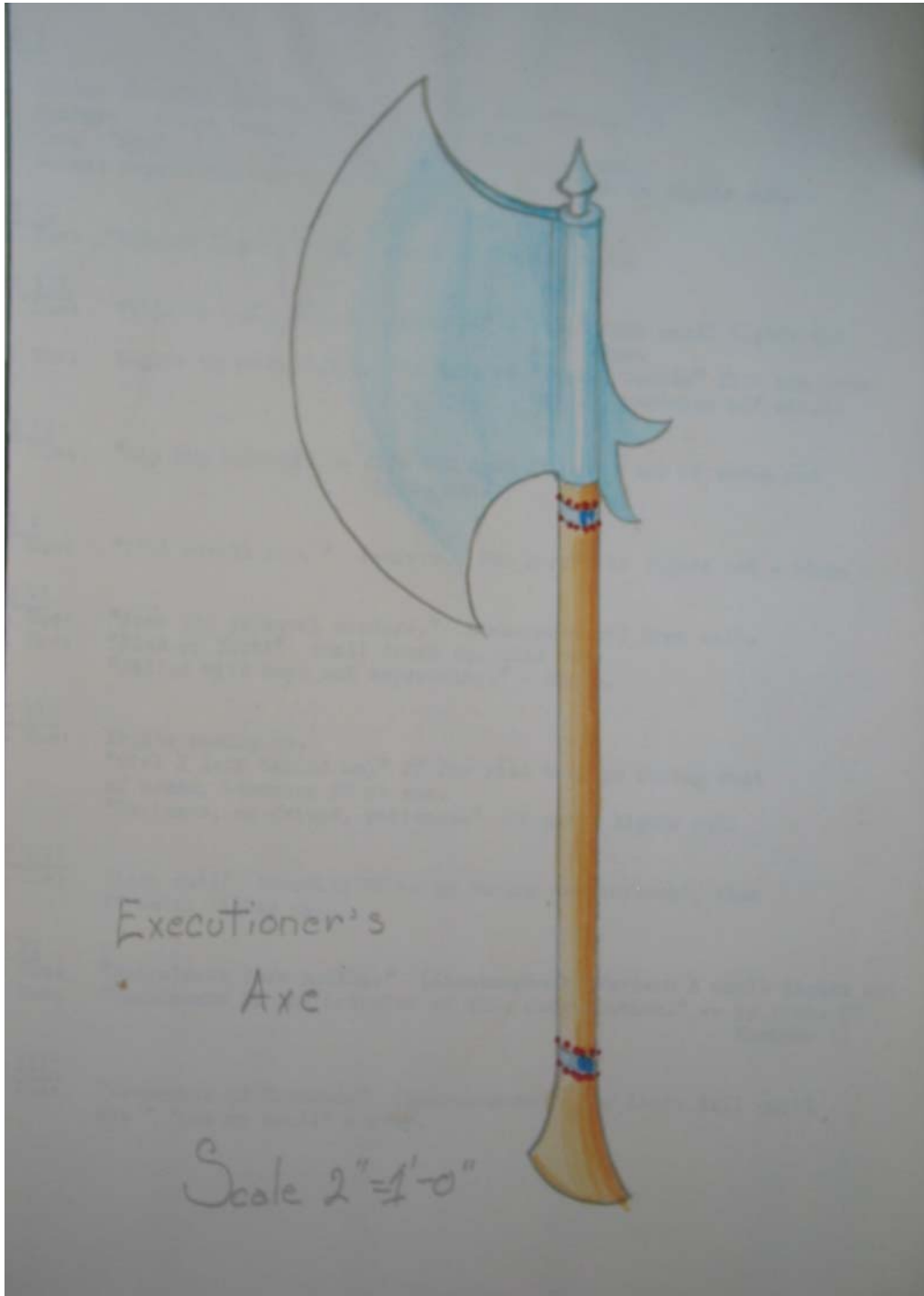


Figure 13: Design sketch of the executioner's axe. From the production book for the Boston production of *Created Equal*. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Irish Catholics, African Americans, Jews, and Protestants (the majority of which incidentally make no public appearance in *Created Equal*)?

While nearly every scene revolves around this idea of power in some way, it is perhaps most apparent in the character of Phillip Schuyler. The difference in the two versions is readily illustrated by a comparison of the way in which Phillip is introduced to the audience. In the original version of the play, Phillip is first seen in the upper class home of the Hammersley's; a young slave passes tea throughout the sitting room in a silver tea set as Phillip and Upton Hammersley, a wealthy Tory, discuss the political ideas of the newly formed United States of America. Upton presents the Tory perspective in a clear and concise manner, citing the sizeable amount of money that Jefferson and his fellow patriots owed the crown, and arguing that the rebellion was little more than a way for the debtors to default on their loans. Phillip's retort – that of the classic Stage Yankee – lacks the sophistication of Hammersley's, but demonstrates an almost naïve belief in his ideals; he replies, “There's somewhat in the air of America that won't let a man acknowledge anyone his superior, - except it be a better man.”⁷³ In spite of Hammersley's ridicule and disdain, Phillip remains unruffled. As he departs, Upton takes a sip of his now cold tea, thrusts his teacup in the direction of his slave, and yells, “Here, you black symbol of American equality, - get me a fresh cup.”⁷⁴

The revised version also sees Phillip in the company of the Hammersleys. This time, though, the Hammersley family appears walking with Phillip down a street

⁷³ Original version, 1.4.3.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 1.4.4.

in Boston. Phillip remains a handsome young captain in the Continental Army, madly in love with both freedom and the young Anne Hammersley. In this scene the slave has been entirely removed, and Upton's wife, Cornelia, and daughter, Anne, have considerably more agency. Where Upton was well-spoken and almost frightening before, here he is a patriarch in name only. When he accuses Cornelia of allowing the American Everyman to seduce their daughter, she tells him to declare a truce with Phillip. Anne agrees, and Upton is soon "spluttering":

Upton: God's blood, young man! If you've seduced my women folk –

Cornelia: Upton!

Anne: Father!

Upton: You'll not seduce me. I'm a loyal subject of my king and a subject I'll remain. [*Three anonymous male slaves and their overseer file across the back of the stage.*] I'll not be turned into a sovereign by Mr. Jefferson's phrases. (*Scornfully.*) 'All men are created equal!' (*He snorts angrily.*) Equal! And thousands of blacks in slavery to you Americans.⁷⁵

In this exchange Upton cannot even finish his sentence before his wife and daughter cut in to reprimand him; Phillip, in contrast, has the pleasure of watching the women quiet Upton so that he can discuss the American idea of equality with them. When Upton indicts American equality by referring to the plight of the slaves, Phillip evenly replies, "Jefferson would free all slaves." Phillip clearly has the upper hand in this argument, and he demonstrates intelligence, patience, and loyalty in the face of each argument Upton throws out. Upton surrenders as Anne leaves with Phillip and Cornelia quiets her husband; when he continues to spout complaints, Cornelia sternly says, "Silence, sir! Not another word. If you so much as open your lips again I'll

⁷⁵ Revised, 1.5.2.



Figure 14: “Spirit of 1776,” a scene from Boston’s production of *Created Equal*. Photos of the Great Depression and the New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library.



Figure 15: Theatre-goers attending *Created Equal* in Boston. Photos of the Great Depression and the New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library.

follow the colonies. I'll revolt too!"⁷⁶ This Upton has little power over the women in his life, who have become well-spoken and strong in their own right, while Phillip has gained stature, intelligence, and a girlfriend as the loyal, young representative of American idealism.

The conflict shown between Upton Hammersley, a wealthy, property-holding Tory, and Phillip Schuyler, a young soldier loyal to the newly founded America and all that it stands for, parallels a contemporary Boston struggle between the influx of largely uneducated Irish Catholics and the entrenched Protestant "aristocracy," the Brahmins. The population composition of Boston shifted radically between 1900 and 1929 with an enormous influx of immigrants, drawn to Boston's then-booming economy. In 1920, recent immigrants and their children made up more than two thirds of the population of Massachusetts and 73 percent of Boston's population; many of these people were drawn to the cosmopolitan metropolis with its promise of employment in manufacturing and industrial work since Massachusetts was, at that point, ranked third in manufacturing employment in the country.⁷⁷ This demographic shift, which remained during the 1930s, caused an escalation in tensions over the control of Boston's political and financial future throughout the twenties and thirties.

The major players in the battle for political control of Boston comprised the entrenched "aristocracy" (Brahmins), a large population of predominantly poor, working class Irish immigrants (32 percent), a number of recent Jewish immigrants from Russia and Poland (16 percent), working class Italians (14 percent), and a

⁷⁶ Revised, 1.5.4.

⁷⁷ Jack Tager, *Boston Riots: Three Centuries of Social Violence* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 144-5.

variety of other groups including a limited number of African Americans.⁷⁸ The division among the white ethnic groups was marked not only by country of origin, but also by religion; the Protestant Brahmins battled the Irish and Italian Catholics and the European Jews. Though tensions were farther from the surface than they had been in the nineteenth century when mob mentality led to riots in the South End and the destruction of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, they continued to lurk; in the twentieth century, verbal harassment and minor altercations revealed the bitterness of unresolved conflict.⁷⁹ The friction between the Protestant Brahmins and the various groups of Catholic and Jewish immigrants ignited both political and social trouble throughout the early twentieth century.

The largely segregated ethnic neighborhoods of Boston bore the brunt of the hardships associated with the Great Depression. By 1934, South Boston's Irish population saw an unemployment rate of 32.5 percent, a figure that was well above the city's average of 26.1 percent. The Italian-dominated North End claimed the highest level of juvenile delinquency as well as an unemployment rate of over 40 percent, a staggeringly high number; unemployment rates in East Boston, again populated by the Italians, were 38 percent. Similarly, the small African American population in the South End and Roxbury suffered an unemployment rate of 34 percent.⁸⁰ A 1937 article in the *Boston Daily Globe* describes the South End:

⁷⁸ Ibid, 145; J. Brian Sheehan, *The Boston School Integration Dispute: Social Change and Legal Maneuvers*, (NY: Columbia University Press, 1984), 24.

⁷⁹ William H. Peace, *Ladies, Women & Wenches: Choice & Constraint in Antebellum Charleston & Boston* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 150; Charles H. Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), 14-6.

⁸⁰ One of the reasons for this high crime is likely due to the control of the police force; for several decades, the Boston police were almost entirely Irish. A newspaper article illustrates this – and

Long a hotbed of crime, vice and rackets, the shabby South End of Boston will be purged by a six weeks' drive against all forms of outlawry. [. . .] Federal officials have pointed out the South End as a center of New England's narcotic traffic, and hospital reports and police journals carry terse tales of the injuries suffered by victims of footpads on the territory of Division 4.⁸¹

The *Boston Globe* contains similar articles regarding the low-income Irish and Italian neighborhoods, regularly vilifying alcohol and the crime that it leads to.

The *Mid-town Journal*, a widely read newspaper and scandal sheet that spanned Irish, African American, and Italian readers, regularly contained topics the *Boston Globe* disdained. Police were viciously attacked, G-Men searched for counterfeit money believed to have come from the racetrack, the consumption of alcohol was staunchly defended, and nearly every page featured a violent crime of some kind. Many stories were highly sensationalized: "Seek to End Terror of Death in Bottles" described the dangers of wood alcohol while an increased police presence was the topic in "South End 'Hellholes' Object of Drive to Smash Vice Ring."⁸²

In contrast, the Brahmin strongholds in the Back Bay and Beacon Hill enjoyed the lowest rate of juvenile delinquency and an unemployment rate of only 12 percent.⁸³ *The Back Bay Leader*, a newspaper catering to the Brahmins, featured articles on improvements in law enforcement, the national and local Republican

the ways in which recent changes have improved the effectiveness of the police – in a story about a woman who explained a murder, complete with gruesome details, motivation, and the murderer's name, to a friend while she stood next to a police officer. As the author explains, the woman "thought all uniformed policemen were Irish, as most of them were in those days," and assumed that the police officers could not understand Italian. Ralph Harbor, "They Now Propose Scientific Training in a 'College for Cops' . . ." (*The Boston Herald*, April 12, 1936, magazine, section D), 1; Charles H. Trout, *Boston, the Great Depression, and the New Deal*, 175-9.

⁸¹ "Purge Planned for South End," *Boston Daily Globe*, 1 March 1937, 1. In addition to the national news, shootings, gambling, breaking and entering, and other crimes are regularly attributed to South Enders in the *Boston Daily Globe*.

⁸² *Mid-Town Journal*, 30 July 1936, 1.

⁸³ Stack, 29-31.

scene, the importance of insurance, the burden of property taxes, and debates over the new subway extension to Huntington Avenue. Crime stories consisted of automobile accidents, the notorious “Briefcase Bandit,” and unfortunate Back Bay citizens who traveled to other parts of the city and were attacked by ruffians.⁸⁴ Many of these concerns were echoed in the *Boston Herald*, as seen by the two political cartoons (located at the end; Figures 1 & 2). The *Boston Herald*, like the *Back Bay Leader*, was Anti-Roosevelt and New Deal; when Kansas Governor Alfred Landon announced that he would oppose Roosevelt in the 1936 presidential election, the *Boston Herald* devoted the front page to Landon, titling the article “Hatred for New Deal Led to the Organization of First ‘Landon for President’ Club in Massachusetts.”⁸⁵

In addition to these issues of class, *Created Equal* addresses racial inequalities. The radically altered representation of slavery in the two versions of the prologue is significant. Though African Americans comprised only three percent of Boston’s population, they were one of the hardest hit ethnic groups during the Depression. Because of this, a number of African American relief workers were a part of the Boston FTP, and the group was generally supportive of the New Deal.

⁸⁴ *The Back Bay Leader*, 1936-9. Articles of interest include “Police Horses Have Xmas Tree” (24 December 1936, 4), “Opinions Vary on Rejected Subway,” (12 November 1936, 1), “Back Bay Police Mounts Exercise in New Corral,” (29 October 1936, 1), “‘Canada’ House Planned; New Block in Copley Square; Boston U. Campus is Moved,” (20 October 1938, 1), “Back Bay Real Estate Over-Assessed, Worst in City – Kelly Declares,” (26 January 1939, 1), and “Trains Pass By – Trailing Soot!” (9 March 1939, 1).

⁸⁵ Carl Warton, “Talked Themselves into Booming ‘Governor Alf’ in Bay State: Hatred for New Deal Led to the Organization of First ‘Landon for President’ Club in Massachusetts,” *Boston Herald*, 12 April 1936, 1.

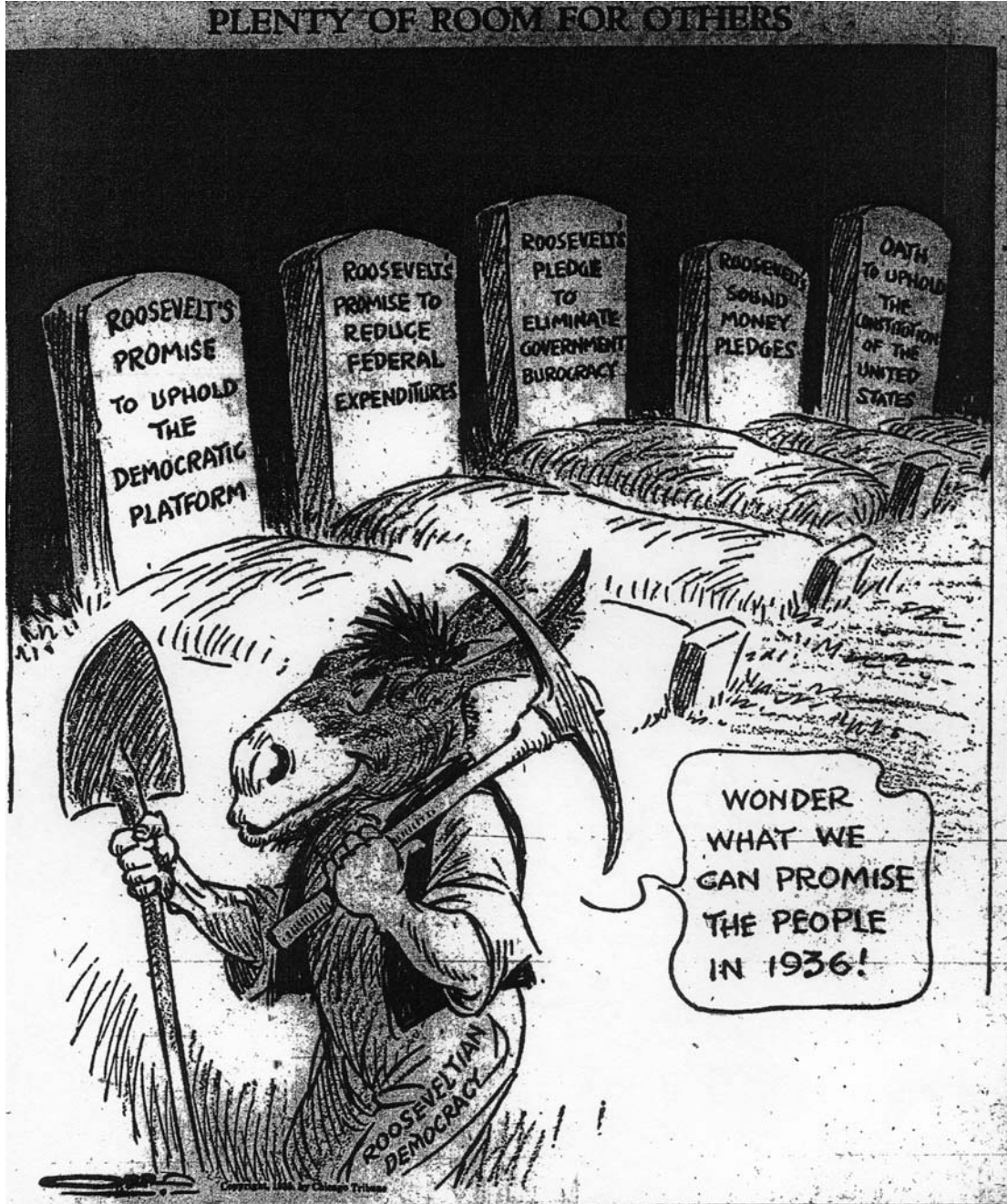


Figure 16: *The Boston Herald* was anti-New Deal, and particularly anti-WPA. Printed in the *Boston Herald*, June 12, 1935.

A COMMENT OF INTEREST

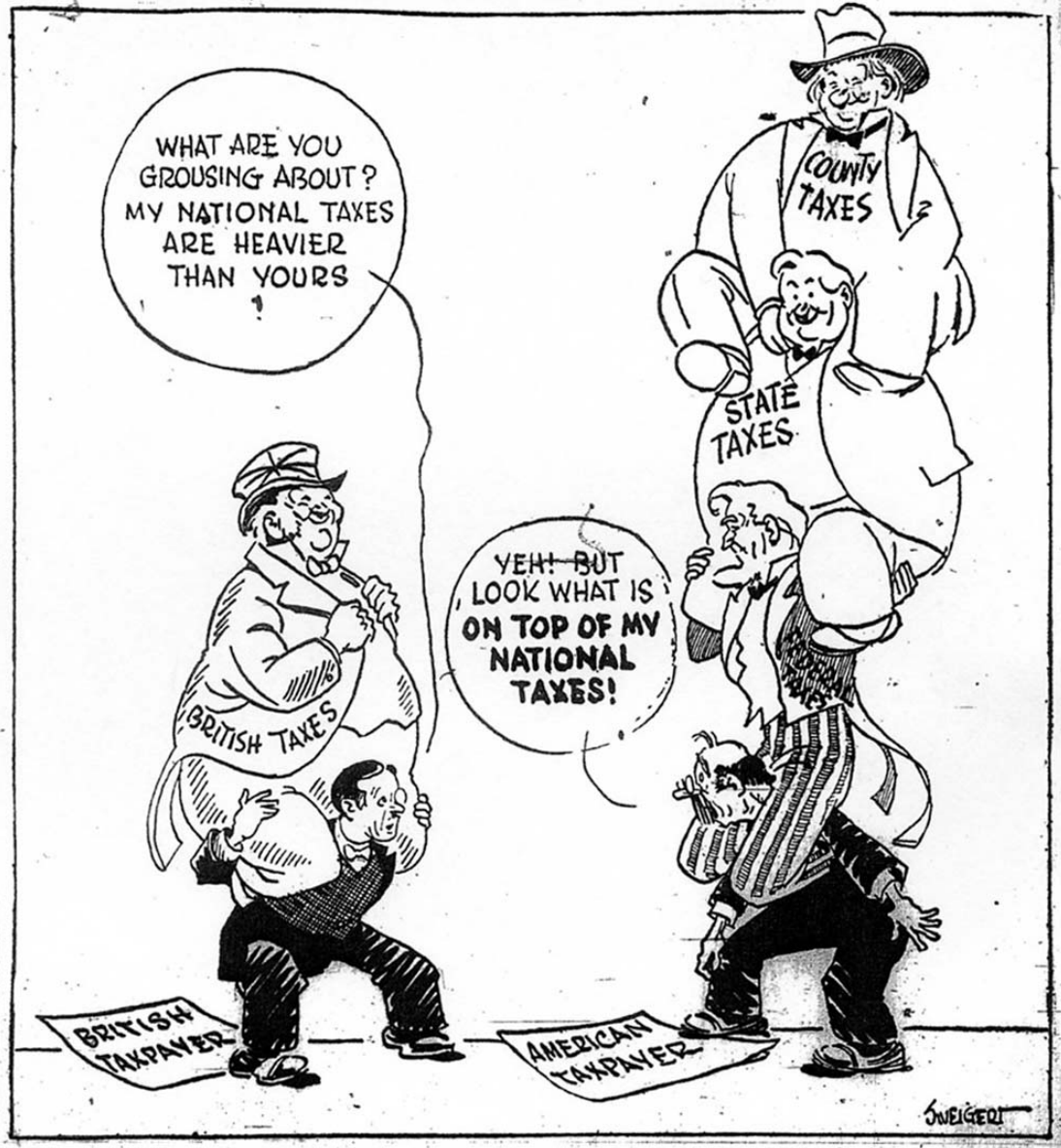


Figure 17: This “Comment of Interest” is indicative of the Brahmin outlook on taxes in Massachusetts. Printed in the *Boston Herald*, July 10, 1935.

The special interest newspaper, *The Boston Chronicle*, featured a number of articles supporting the WPA and protesting efforts to undermine any of the local projects:

The politicians have hurled their challenge: “Human misery? So What?” It is up to YOU to tell them that their callous regard for the welfare of the people who elected them is not a part of the American scheme of things. The question is simple: will we let them get away with it?⁸⁶

Articles from January through April urge readers to organize and offered specific actions that could be taken to help the cause. The Boston Negro Unit, unlike much of the Boston FTP, was well-supported by its community; the decision to represent slavery and, with it, the African American population, in a more respectful manner is, if nothing else, politically savvy.

The political system, both on a union and city-wide basis, was equally skewed. Moreover, the tensions between the individual ethnic groups were intense; the Irish stood apart from the Italian and Eastern European immigrants, having largely commandeered the city government and institutions. Ethnic, class, and religious tensions led to a series of riots and attacks upon free speech in the decades prior to the Great Depression. The Police Strike of 1919, a moment in which the religious, economic, and political strife reached a boiling point, is an example of the violence of class and ethnic dissension in Boston. The police, composed of and controlled by the Irish, became trapped in a stalemate with the Yankee-dominated Massachusetts government.⁸⁷ A devastating working class battle fought on ethnic

⁸⁶ “Human Misery? So What?,” *The Boston Chronicle*, 14 January, 1939, 6.

⁸⁷ The Boston police, having suffered nearly a decade with no increase in salary and repeated funding cuts were trapped in abysmal work conditions for little pay. These ethnic divisions would prove to play a major role in the anarchy that followed. After negotiations at the city and state levels failed, the majority of the Boston Police force went on strike. Three days of rioting, property destruction, looting, violence, and general lawbreaking followed, perpetrated primarily by 14 to 20 year-old Irish males in immigrant, working class neighborhoods. In spite of the volunteer police force

grounds, the 1919 Police Strike was not easily forgotten in Boston, and served as an object lesson on the power of ethnic divisions in the city. Additional strikes organized by both unions and outside organizations appeared through the twenties and into the early thirties.

These ethnic and class divisions are repeatedly dramatized in *Created Equal*; every scene in which the Citizens, Belles, Beaux, and Villagers are shown they are divided by relative levels of wealth and power – the same stratifications that identified the ethnic groups in Boston. Booth’s correspondence shows that these additions were intentional. As rehearsals and revisions continued, Booth added lines and stage directions to reinforce the humanity of the lower classes; specifically, he did not want them to become a mindless mob.

In addition to the Citizens, Belles, Beaux, and Lesser Citizens that Booth adds to the first scene, he includes the audience as a character in the play. At the end of the first scene, when the actors are chanting “Long live the King!” and the Voice representing Power laughs mockingly, Booth suggests that “the audience be made a part of the above scene by placing loud speakers in back of theatre auditorium, so that the chants and murmurs of the actors on the stage are reproduced out front, as if

gathered from the Brahmin communities and Harvard University (including Harvard’s entire football team), the rioters proved impossible to quell until the mayor called in more than 7,000 State and National Guardsmen.⁸⁷ To reaffirm control after the riots had ceased, the Brahmins imposed strict punishments on all those associated with the riot in any way. Every one of the 1,147 striking police officers was fired, accused of deserting their duties and conspiring with the rioters. Arrested rioters were sentenced to months in jail for such petty crimes as stealing a pair of shoes, pieces of gum, or wagon wheel spokes. Public opinion, both locally and nationally, condemned the striking police officers and applauded the harsh response of the Brahmins. Jack Tager, *Boston Riots: Three Centuries of Social Violence* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 160-9.

coming from the auditorium.”⁸⁸ According the cues in the revised script, the audience – like the poor, property-less Villagers – is located in darkness while all the other levels of society are illuminated by some degree of light. The audience becomes poor, working class Villagers with no property in the opening scene (and will hopefully identify with them throughout the rest of the play). For example, in a later scene in which Upton Hammersley brings the news of the newly written *Constitution of 1787* to his town he speaks to the theatre audience in a “gruffly condescending manner,” addressing them “as if they were the villagers at a town meeting.” Phillip Schuyler enters from the audience to question Hammersley.⁸⁹ Indeed, throughout the play, stage directions dictate that Schuyler enters from the audience while the Citizens, Belles, and Beaux remain on the stage, thereby reinforcing the audience’s identification with Phillip Schuyler and the working class villagers. These textual choices, unlike the choice of the renovated Copley Theatre building, speak to a knowledge of the Boston audience; the FTP audience in Boston would likely be made up of the Depression-equivalent of the poor, landless Villagers – predominantly working class, uneducated Irish Catholics who had little political or economic clout until James Michael Curley’s election established Boston as “an Irish domain, a protected fortress against outsiders unsympathetic to an ethnic, working class community.”⁹⁰ The Irish had effectively turned Boston into the Dublin of

⁸⁸ Revision, 1.1.3.

⁸⁹ Revision, 1.12.1.

⁹⁰ Jack Tager, *Boston Riots: Three Centuries of Social Violence* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 170.

America. Yet, the relative power of the Irish did not extend to the other ethnic groups in Boston.

The second scene again illustrates the importance of Booth's main character – the people. In this brief scene from the original version, Thomas Jefferson sits at a rough wooden table writing the Declaration of Independence, illuminated by a flickering candle. He reads his words aloud, “as if uttering a prayer.”⁹¹ In the first version, Jefferson is the only person present on the stage; his words and actions are the center of attention and the only light onstage is directed at his face. This is not the case in the revised version; here, Jefferson is accompanied by “the vague, shadowy shapes of the Villagers kneeling about him, while the Citizens and Beaux and Belles stand on steps and platforms behind him.”⁹² Again, light and shadow create meaning; Jefferson remains illuminated, as do the property holders standing behind him. As in the first scene, the Villagers remain kneeling, without movement or comment, in the shadows around him. This image – Jefferson surrounded by those who would feel the effects of the Declaration – points to certain individuals in society as receiving more attention and power than others; the landowners are illuminated while the villagers (and audience members) remain in shadows. The Villagers do not always remain in the dark, however. In fact, the use of metaphoric light and shadow, and the question of whether or not the Villagers will be seen in the light, is a thematic thread in the revised version of the play.

⁹¹ John Hunter Booth, *Created Equal*, NARA, Entry 914, Playscripts, 1936-1939, Box 277, “Created Equal,” 1.1.1.

⁹² John Hunter Booth, *Created Equal* (Revised Edition), Federal Theatre Project Playscript and Radioscript Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 1.2.1.

In Scene III, Booth complicates “the mobs and crowds.” After the audience watches Thomas Jefferson struggling over the wording of the Declaration of Independence, the members of a New England village gather to hear the announcements of the town crier. As before, the people are divided by economic class; the substantial Citizens, Belles and Beaux retain their distance from the villagers. Boston audiences would have been aware of the class distinctions in their city; often the lower classes struggle to gain recognition from the upper classes. *Created Equal* subverts this expectation when a town crier reads the Declaration of Independence to a group of villagers:

1st Villager: He says we’re all equal.

Drunk: Equal?

1st Villager: (*Above the low murmur of the others*) Aye.

Drunk: Who?

1st Villager: You and me – everybody.

Drunk: He’s crazy. (*With a sweep of his arm he violently pushes Villager to one side.*) There ain’t a man here who’s my equal.⁹³

The villagers denounce the drunk and call for his physical removal from the discussion immediately following this exchange. As two villagers grab the protesting drunk and hustle him off the stage, another villager comments, “That’ll teach him equality” while others call for the town crier to continue reading the Declaration of Independence. While the drunk is unproductive and fails in his civic duty, he is nevertheless a member of society, and thus worthy of equality. The irony of this exchange – a clear example of a *lack* of equality among the villagers – sets the stage for a play in which Booth asks his audience to look beyond their preconceived notions of equality as an abstract concept, and instead interrogate the role of equality in American society.

⁹³ John Hunter Booth, *Created Equal* (Revised Version), 1.3.1-2.

Booth also introduces the question of property in this scene. As the villagers listen, the town crier reaches the portion of the Declaration that lists the unalienable rights of men – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The villagers respond, this time questioning the meaning of “the pursuit of happiness.” They debate whether Jefferson intended the phrase to be “the pursuit of property,” considering the nature of property as either social product or civil right. The issue produces much head-shaking and confusion:

Villager: ‘Tis a mistake, I’m certain. (*Shaking his head*) Are you sure it doesn’t read “Pursuit of Property?”

3rd Villager: (*As Town Crier shakes his head – laughing heartily*) ‘Twill yet read so my practical friend. Be of good cheer! Who’ll pursue a dream when one can grasp a fact – and property is a most tangible fact. Mr. Jefferson’s finely fashioned phrase – meaty with significance, will remain, I fear – a phrase.⁹⁴

As the 3rd Villager points out, property is a “tangible fact” and equality is an abstract idea. Tangible property and ownership was highly relevant to Boston working class audiences. Even before the Great Depression, Boston’s middle and lower classes rarely owned property. In a ratio bested only by New York, four out of every five Bostonians rented their homes. Most homeowners lived in the clean, safe, and well-kept Brahmin neighborhoods or in the suburbs, while the rest of Boston lived in varying degrees of squalor. Housing in the Italian North End consisted almost exclusively of brick tenements, which lacked refrigeration, tubs and showers. Irish Charlestown featured the nineteenth century balloon frame buildings, prefabricated wood structures that contributed to Boston’s record fire damage in 1928

⁹⁴ Ibid, 1.3.3.

and 1929.⁹⁵ Similarly, the African American South End homes were repeatedly referred to in the local newspaper as “firetraps.”⁹⁶ South Enders were involved in a long-standing feud with the local Housing Authority over the inclusion of an African American on the board; this ultimately ended in eviction and rent gouging for much of the city’s black population.⁹⁷

As the play progresses, Phillip Schuyler becomes a symbol of American idealism and the physical representation of the American spirit – in many ways embodying the characteristics of an intelligent stage Yankee.⁹⁸ In the search for unfettered freedom, he forsakes his role as a gentleman and captain in the Continental Army to move west and become a farmer in Pennsylvania. In a discussion with Anne Hammersley, he explains his reasons for leaving the city and his disappointment in the new form of government:

⁹⁵ Charles H. Trout, *Boston, the Great Depression, and the New Deal* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), 12-14.

⁹⁶ “Firetraps Menacing South End,” *The Boston Chronicle*, 18 February 1939, 1.

⁹⁷ “Citizens Peeved at Housing Officials,” *The Boston Chronicle*, 27 May, 1939, 1.

⁹⁸ It is interesting to note the complex historical implications of choosing Philip Schuyler as representative of the American ideal. The real Philip Schuyler was an English gentleman and soldier who came to the colonies, was elected to the First Continental Congress, served as a Major General in the Continental Army, and remained active in politics until his death in 1804. His daughter, Elizabeth, married Alexander Hamilton in 1780, in a marriage that Hamilton’s friends referred to as absolutely perfect, since Elizabeth’s family possessed money, land and political clout, and Hamilton loved her as well. Effectively, this marriage ushered Hamilton into the truly powerful political circles. And so, it is ironic that Philip Schuyler – a young gentleman-turned-frontiersman – turns to Hamilton (his son-in-law at this point in history) for assistance regarding unfair taxes on whiskey. Hamilton describes the young Elizabeth (Betsy) Schuyler as a “refreshing outdoor type: in climbing a hill, ‘she disdained all assistance . . . and made herself merry at the distress of the other ladies” (Miller 64). This type certainly parallels the Philip Schuyler character that is presented in the play; however, while it is hard to believe that Booth could have so thoroughly researched these events and somehow chosen Schuyler’s name at random, it seems that the similarities in character types end with Betsy. It is certainly possible that there is more to this choice, but I have found no evidence to support this idea. For more information on Hamilton’s relationship with the real Philip Schuyler, see John C. Miller, *Alexander Hamilton: Portrait in Paradox* (Harper & Brothers: New York, 1959), 62-80.

And this government is to be “the rule of gentlemen”. I know. All I’ve heard since I’ve been here [in the city] is talk of “courts”, “Aristocracy”, “upper and lower classes”. I saw this coming when they gave us a new Constitution. That’s why I went West. I was sick of the old world system. I wanted to escape from it – from this sort of thing. (*He waves his hand at the gay passers-by.*) Vanity fair on Wall Street! (*He sighs.*) And we had such an opportunity to do away with privilege and distinction.⁹⁹

Following his discussion with Anne, Phillip Schuyler pursues his political purpose for returning to the city; the Pennsylvania farmers elected Schuyler to speak for their rights in the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. Phillip finds Upton Hammersley, who is now involved in the government, and asks for assistance in obtaining an audience with either Congress or Alexander Hamilton, the Secretary of the Treasury. In the original and revised versions, Hammersley is unwilling or unable to help and Schuyler returns home unheard; the military eventually arrives, arrests all the Pennsylvania farmers associated with the rebellion, and jails them in Boston for nearly six months with no trial. In a last-minute revision, dated May 26, 1938, Booth replaced a scene in which a Colonel and General debate whether or not force should be used on the men since they have done nothing but refuse to pay the tax, with a confrontation between Phillip Schuyler and Alexander Hamilton. In the replacement scene, Phillip sees Hamilton and attempts to convince him that the farmers are simply protesting against a tax that seems unjust; he expresses the farmers’ regret that the rebellion has gone this far, and explains that, since they have only a small trail through the mountains, they are forced to reduce the grain into whiskey so that the horses can carry it. However, the tax on whiskey is so high that they cannot afford to pay it and feed their families. Schuyler’s argument falls on deaf ears. Hamilton coldly states, “Such is the law, fellow. You Western farmers will do well to obey it, -

⁹⁹ Revised, 1.14.9.

and without delay . . . If the tax is not paid immediately, it will be collected at the point of the bayonet. That is my last word.”¹⁰⁰ Hamilton, a Federalist Elite, personifies the shortcomings of the Declaration of Independence and the land-holding class.

This scene, of a reasonable, hard-working man speaking for a community of people who feel that they are being exploited by a government that does not understand their way of life, bears a striking resemblance to the debates over taxes in Boston both prior to and during the Great Depression. Since the late nineteenth century, Boston’s politicians had taken pride in the city’s appearance – so much pride, in fact, that the citizens of Boston paid the highest taxes in the country.¹⁰¹ During the Great Depression, the tax rates remained high, earning the state the nickname “Taxachusetts.” One of the reasons that taxes remained high during the Depression is because of the state-mandated Department of Public Welfare. This department helped to support the poor and indigent people in the city; its existence

¹⁰⁰ The altered replacement scene, while absent from both the original and revised versions of the script, is represented in the Boston performance’s program. The original scene is a discussion between an unnamed General and Colonel, which takes place in Washington County, Pennsylvania immediately before the arrest of Philip Schuyler, one of the offending Whiskey Boys. The replacement scene shows Philip pleading the case of the Whiskey Boys before the aloof Secretary of Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. While the scene as written takes place in Philadelphia during the fall of 1794, the program, while listing Hamilton and Schuyler as characters, names the location as New York City and the date as June of 1789. And so, while I cannot be certain, I suspect that the replacement scene – or one that was quite similar – was part of the Boston production of *Created Equal*. This scene exists only as a part of the letter cited here. John Hunter Booth, Scene attached to letter, Blanding Sloan to Emmett Lavery, TL, 26 May 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “*Created Equal* #2.”

¹⁰¹ Constance K. Burns and Ronald P. Formisano, Eds., *Boston, 1700-1980: The Evolution of Urban Politics* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984) 135.

and ties to the many charities in Boston eased the arrival of the Depression to some extent.¹⁰²

Yet, even if the presence of Public Welfare streamlined the bureaucracy involved in setting up large-scale relief efforts, the system was not fast enough. Mayor James Michael Curley, who dominated Boston politics for nearly two decades, billed himself as “Mayor of the Poor” as he shifted away from elitist politics. He focused municipal funds on developing Boston’s infrastructure, building hospitals, playgrounds, developing beaches, and otherwise funneling money and jobs into a depressed economy.¹⁰³ Yet, Curley’s record with the unemployed was tarnished by his reaction to the disturbances that appeared early in the Depression. For example, in 1930, when 4000 people converged on Boston Commons for a rally and march, the police charged.

The “unemployment riots” intensified as the year wore on, breaking out in violence with the police numerous times. In October 1930, when the American Federation of Labor met for its national convention in Boston, the mayor ordered 200 police (with machine guns, bulletproof vests, and tear gas) to the site of the demonstration. Buoyed by the support of the Brahmins and many Roman Catholics, and believing that the riots were Communist-inspired, Curley’s police assault was brutal. Afterwards, Curley “demanded that the demonstrators, all of whom he

¹⁰² Massachusetts had an extensive welfare system in place, which gave Bostonians a better chance of receiving aid (in higher amounts) than many of their counterparts in cities like Chicago, Detroit, or New York. However, the system could not handle the volume generated by the Depression, and so many of Boston’s unemployed went without government aid of any kind. Charles Trout, *Boston, the Great Depression, and the New Deal*, 28-31.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 53.

erroneously branded as aliens, be deported to Russia.”¹⁰⁴ While the unemployed grew more and more desperate, Curley’s response had taken its toll. Most Bostonians feared demonstrating more than they feared starvation; much of the working class looked on as the few brave citizens marched or demonstrated. When asked why he was observing (not participating in) an “indignation meeting,” one African American veteran replied, “We may need the bonus, but we’re not crazy.”¹⁰⁵

The parallels between Phillip Schuyler’s complaints about the tax on whiskey and those of the Boston working class – particularly those who saw little in the way of government relief – are striking. In his argument with Hamilton, Schuyler complains that taxes are “a heavy burden for us,” finally noting that “many of us lack funds. If we could be given more time”¹⁰⁶ Nearly half of the working class families in Boston lacked funds due to either unemployment or underemployment. Those who managed to keep their jobs saw their pay cut repeatedly as the Depression deepened and employers cut back on expenses.¹⁰⁷ It is not hard to believe that a large portion of the audience would have shared Philip Schuyler’s desperation. With this choice, writer/director John Hunter Booth appealed to a suppressed need in his audience, thus bridging the gap between an audience that was largely working class or unemployed, and the Boston FTP.

¹⁰⁴ Qtd. in Trout, *Boston, the Great Depression, and the New Deal*, 55-7.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 84.

¹⁰⁶ John Hunter Booth, Scene attached to letter, Blanding Sloan to Emmett Lavery, TL, 26 May 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “*Created Equal #2.*”

¹⁰⁷ Charles Trout, *Boston, the Great Depression, and the New Deal*, 81-2.

Finally, Booth takes pains to link the working class people to the land itself, as if the land is a source of happiness and freedom in and of itself. The dramatization of Shays' Rebellion illustrates an example of post-Revolution class conflict. The former soldiers-turned-farmers complain that the landowners broke their promises, and that they are now in danger of losing their homes and freedom due to debt. In both versions of the scene, an unnamed soldier speaks calmly and evenly to a mob, rationally citing the lies of the wealthy:

Why did I enlist in Washington's army? Why did I risk my life in battle?
[. . .] Because I believed the promise that had been made. I was ready to
fight for equality[,] to die for equality! [. . .] Well, we won the war. WE –
you an' me – all o' us. An' what happened? Was the land we won in
common divided evenly among us? [. . .] Because our leaders, the men we
trusted, - have betrayed us, that is no reason for us to mock the Declaration.
Rather is it for us to draw inspiration from it's [sic] noble sentiments, - to
assert with all our manhood what it asserts, - our equality with "the wise, the
rich, and the good."¹⁰⁸

Following this speech, the angry mob marches off to meet General Daniel Shays, the man who will right the wrongs of "the wise, the rich, and the good."

Scene IX, teeming with mob mentality, is followed by the angry, confused, and frightened exchange between a wealthy couple, waiting in their home for Shays' army to arrive. This scene, between the husband, wife, and a male friend, saw extensive revisions. In the original version, they bicker about the inability of the government to put down this rebellion, and the wife refers to the rabble as "beasts" and "creatures," wondering why they are "permitted to live" and demanding that they be hanged. The men realize that the mob is marching on the armory, and that they will soon be armed, yet the friend points out that "All are equal, - or they're supposed

¹⁰⁸ Original, 1.8.1-2.

to be, under our form of government.” The husband responds that the government must be changed because, “Our lives aren’t safe, or our properties.” The scene ends with the husband demanding that the Constitution protect “us,” the wealthy landowners, from the angry working class.¹⁰⁹

The revised version of this scene differs markedly. The trio again complains about the government’s ineffectiveness and the wife refers to the rabble as “beasts” that “should be hanged.” The revision, however, allows one of the wealthy landowners to understand the plight of the workers:

Man Friend: ’Tis said their only purpose is to close the courts so they may prevent their arrest for debt.

Husband: Their purpose is to seize our property. That’s why they’re marching on the Armory. Once they get muskets in their hands, even our lives won’t be safe. This sort of thing has got to stop. If mob rule can’t be prevented under the Articles of Confederation, then we’ll tear up the Articles. We’ll draw up a new Constitution – a Constitution that will protect us.¹¹⁰

Whereas the characters in the original scene made no attempt to sympathize with the plight of the worker, the characters in the revision care for more than their own needs. The friend explains the reason for the rebellion, and while he does not defend the mob’s choice, neither do his words seem angry or threatening. Similarly, the husband remains upset, but he does not set up an all-or-nothing scenario. Instead, he states that if the government is powerless to protect any citizen in such circumstances, then a new government should be created so that *all* its citizens can be protected.

The second act consists primarily of similar revisions designed to appeal to a working-class audience. The much-debated final scene is, however, worthy of

¹⁰⁹ Original, 1.9.2.

¹¹⁰ Revision, 1.10.2.

discussion because of its blatant call-to-arms directed at the working-class audience members. Apparently, the play ended originally in a now-lost scene in which the descendants of the Schuyler family take part in a “rather cut-and-dried and childish radio interview, in which the present administration is treated with almost oriental flattery.”¹¹¹ Both extant versions of the play end in “Any American city, 1938,” and feature a veritable army of workers, each of whom has a job and a paycheck because of Roosevelt’s New Deal. This, however, is where the similarities end. The original version is chanted, as the workers hammer, saw, and dig in a rhythm that mirrors the forced cadence of the voices. Written in verse, the scene reads as if the workers are part of an assembly line, the individual voices unimportant:

1st Laborer: Rich man!
2nd Laborer: Poor man!
3rd Laborer: Beggar man!
4th Laborer: Thief!
1st Carpenter: Doctor!
2nd Carpenter: Lawyer!¹¹²

Unlike the grateful WPA workers usually memorialized in FTP dramas, these people are not pleased to simply have jobs. They are “Depression’s victims” – a “warning” to all who would attempt to elevate themselves above their proper place in society. Before the Depression they were doctors and lawyers, the “fat” and “sleek” who regarded the “lowly bum” or “hungry beggar” with contempt. Now that they too have fallen victims to the whims of the Great Depression, they know “the bitterness / of poverty’s despair.”; their perspectives have changed. These characters believe that

¹¹¹ Converse Tyler, “Created Equal Playreader Report,” Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., container 171.

¹¹² Created Equal, NARA, 2.11.2.

the problem is with the system of government itself – a system that compromises the original ideals of the Founding Fathers. Because of these concessions, the “army of the unemployed,” together with the audience, must “solve . . . the problem of our national life.”¹¹³

Even the person with a single voice, named the 1st Workman, speaks in this stilted poetry as he attempts to stir both actors and audience to action during his three page monologue. But his battle cry, that American leaders prior to 1938 compromised the workers’ rights away in the endless quest for more land and wealth, lacks drive:

Democracy in name, -
Plutocracy in fact.
Such cannot be
and men be free . . .
Will our loved land,
our common home,
remain the pawn of wealth?
Shall our sons know
our want, - our wretchedness?¹¹⁴

As the final scene concludes, stage directions stipulate that the “ushers and others at back of theatre reply strongly.” The speaker then begins his final monologue, which is broken up into sections while he pauses to wait for an audience response. Each pause is followed by further cajoling, as if Booth does not expect the audience to react:

In this dark hour of peril,
lift high our banner of democracy.
Rally – one and all -,
to its defense.

¹¹³ Ibid, 2.11.3-4.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 2.11.4.

(a momentary silence)

Why do you hesitate?
 Is it that you fear
 government of the people,
 by the people,
 for the people?

(another pause – then)

Did Jefferson fear it?
 Jackson, Lincoln, - Roosevelt?
 No!
 Then what have you to fear
 from yourselves, -
 For you are the People,
 and the people you!
 Come! Say it with me –

(He points to audience, to groups at back)

You and You and You.
(He repeats measuredly, while the Groups and ushers repeat with him)
 I am the People and the People Me!¹¹⁵

While there are certainly stirring ideas here, the scene lacks closure; in a Brechtian moment, there is no decisive victory or loss – only work to be done by members of the audience. Yet Booth does not lay out a specific course of action for the audience. Agitprop theatre builds to a climax when it describes the needs in a population's existence, and then outlines a course of action (striking, rioting, and rebellion are often included as responses). This ending shows unification of the working class, but also demands that people think of themselves as individuals within a larger movement. Most importantly, the original scene lacks an overall sense of hope that the country can be repaired without another Revolutionary War, this time fought as a Civil War. This ending, in its bitter condemnation of both the Founding Fathers and the current administration, and in its call-to-arms, is reminiscent of the grievances that brought the colonies to revolution to begin with; this time though, if the most vocal rabble-rouser succeeds, the war will end in nothing short of a Socialist Utopia.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 2.11.5.

The revised scene also garnered complaints from the FTP playreaders, but Booth held firm in his belief that the workers should end the play. The revised version, however, consciously begins with the workers “erecting a scaffolding on the spot where the Throne of the First Scene stood, and near it laborers are building a roadway with picks and shovels”; here, the working class is literally building a different power structure, which at this point exists in skeletal form only, atop of the old.¹¹⁶ While the workers remain nameless, they do not chant as in the original. They also seem happy to be working and see a collective goal in their shoveling, picking, and sawing; these workers are clearing slums, building homes, and pioneering a new form of government scathingly referred to by the single malcontent as “The United States of Utopia [sic].” The 1st Workman remains the leader of the men, but in this scene his actions are in response to the anti-New Deal rabble-rouser. The 1st Workman compliments Roosevelt’s efforts on behalf of the working man, claiming that the great government clean-up is already in progress as an “army of shovellers” clear away the broken profit system, uproot injustice, cut down special privileges, and weed out class consciousness. Even the argument that the government only provided jobs to prevent a worker revolution is met with an immediate defense of President Roosevelt, the New Deal projects, and the ever-practical, “We’ve been given jobs – which is more than the jobless got in other depressions.”¹¹⁷ The workers go back to work, harder than before, talking as they do so:

1st Group: With pick, with shovel – Hi yah!
2nd Group: With hammer, with saw – Hi yah!

¹¹⁶ Revision, 2.14.1.

¹¹⁷ Revision, 2.14.3.

1st Group: We'll build a Commonwealth
of true Democracy.
2nd Group: Where men shall live in peace,
thrive and know rich content
as brothers.
1st Workman: That was the original idea, brother, and we're sticking to it.
Yes, sir, we'll get there yet.¹¹⁸

The 1st Workman, the primary speaker in both the original and revised versions, shows the idealism and faith of the symbolic Phillip Schuyler with these words. He closes the play with an exchange that has the potential to excite the audience:

1st Workman: ...Like our fathers before us, like their fathers before them, we're still compromising with Toryism, evading, side-stepping the inevitable readjustment, giving dictatorship excuse to jeer at democracy, to call it a "filthy thing", to declare our liberty a "putrefying corpse." Is dictatorship right? Is democracy dead in America?
Both Groups: No!
1st Workman: Does the vision of equality still persist?
Both Groups: Yes!
1st Workman: Is the American spirit the slave of gold?
Both Groups: Never!
1st Workman: Then prove it! Now – before it is too late! Let us reaffirm to a world turning back to tyranny: "—that government of the people, (*Both groups join their voices to his*) by the people, (*Loud Speaker in back of theatre auditorium takes up the chant*) and for the people, shall not perish from the earth."¹¹⁹

The words and rhythm of this scene are powerful, building to a climactic point in which the audience would likely find itself again taking on the role of the working class characters in the play by joining the actors.

Yet the question of whether this revision is somehow more relevant to the workers of Boston remains. Certainly, the revision is easier to understand than the original ending and more emotionally charged. Perhaps in this case, the question

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 2.14.4.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 2.14.5.

should focus on the way in which the 1st Workman relates to the audience. He stands before the FTP audience, calling for a people's rule in a city in which many people were no better off than the carpenters or shovellers who shout in unison for a more equitable government. They were part of a city that was still embroiled in political battles between wealthy and working class, Protestant and Catholic, Brahmin and immigrant. Their lives remained plagued by alcoholism, underage crime, and disease, conditions that were closely related to their economic status. Booth seems to be calling for action that would combat these problems.

Only a few years earlier, freshly reelected after his stint in jail, Mayor James Michael Curley began an era of social reform that would favor the Irish working-class. Curley based his philosophy on the removal of class-bias in Boston:

If the environment were altered, a number of social problems would disappear. If men were paid decent wages, if they were given time off on Saturdays, a milestone would be reached along the line of progress, along the line of humanity, along the line of right living.¹²⁰

This movement toward “humanity” and “right living” coincided with school reform and new opportunities for Boston women. By the late 1930s, Boston was – at long last – coming to terms with its immigrant population. The original ending of *Created Equal* pointed to a distinct and persistent dissatisfaction within the working class. In contrast, the revised ending is more hopeful. Instead of mindlessly chanting in a way that is so reminiscent of the Prologue's peasants that it implies an inescapable cycle, the people in the revised version have something – potentially within reach – to fight for. The audience, like the characters in the play, recognizes that social reform in Boston has a long way to go (most notably with anyone not white, working class, and

¹²⁰ Constance K. Burns and Ronald P. Formisano, Eds., *Boston, 1700-1980: The Evolution of Urban Politics* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 178-9.

Irish Catholic), but they are included in a cry that includes all people, regardless of race, religion, sex, or class.

Created Equal remains the most important production in the Boston FTP's history. During the revision process, John Hunter Booth found a way to view American history through a new lens – that of the working class. This shift, from a traditional American history play to a production that not only valued the everyday, working-class person, but also raised the worker to an iconic stature, likely connected with the targeted local FTP audience. Booth's process in writing and producing this play shows the progress of his historical revision; he carefully reconstructs the events of American history by altering the perspective. The result was a production that demythologized the generally accepted "great man" theory of history in favor of the common man. Yet, the ultimately produced version of *Created Equal* advocated the current administration as the means through which to ensure a people's government.

While the idea of a people's government may not have been new to the FTP, it was a potential minefield in Boston. As I have noted, the Boston FTP had already alienated its audiences with *Valley Forge* and was struggling to build a relationship with a long-term audience. Booth's treatment of American history – and with it, the mythology surrounding the great leaders who nobly founded the country with high-minded ideals – reveals the strengths and weaknesses of the American government during the Great Depression, and gives voice to the multitudes who are often forgotten in the process of creating a new nation. Yet, the controversy over the content of *Created Equal* illuminates the extent to which the FTP was willing to challenge the mythology of American History within the confines of Boston.

Another notable Boston production would approach this question from the opposite extreme, reinforcing the established history of women's suffrage.

Can't Get Blood from a Stone: Boston's production of 'Lucy Stone'

According to several newspaper articles, including one written by Flanagan herself, the success of *Created Equal* was to be followed with an entirely new type of drama. Because of the apparent regional interest, Boston and much of New England's FTP would focus on American historical drama. The rich historical tapestry of Boston itself provided the impetus for the FTP's next dramatic innovation, one similar in many ways to that of the medieval pageant wagons; the FTP proposed:

A progressive historical play in which the audience moves from Boston Commons to Faneuil Hall to Old South Church and in which the company plays against the original backgrounds rather than against paint and canvas imitations.¹²¹

While there is no record of this type of historical pageant progressing beyond the planning stages, the Boston FTP continued to create viable work for its audiences. Yet the national atmosphere was changing in 1938-39; as the United States was drawn inexorably into World War II and the Depression showed signs of dissipating, the right-wing sensed weakness in Roosevelt's New Deal. Flanagan testified before the Dies Committee on December 6, 1938. In spite of her testimony and assertions that the FTP was a success, the veneer that protected the FTP had been pierced.

¹²¹ Hallie Flanagan, "Design for the Federal Theatre Season" (September 9, 1938), Harvard Theatre Collection, Boston – Copley Theatre, clippings file.

The Aftermath of the Great Success

While Flanagan testified in Washington, the Boston FTP was in the process of choosing a spring production. Maud Wood Park's *Lucy Stone*, an episodic play that dramatized the life of the great suffragette, emerged as a strong possibility. *Lucy Stone* received nine different evaluations from the Playwriting Department of the National Bureau.¹²² Converse Tyler wrote that the play was "an uninspired account of Lucy Stone's life," and that the character of Lucy, "that vigorous lady," was entirely "colorless" in the play.¹²³ He recommended extensive rewrites, as did several of the other playreaders. The majority also noted that the production would have limited interest because of the subject matter and treatment. Ben Russak, national overseer of new play development, thought the script had potential and sent it to several colleagues for detailed outside opinions and rewrite possibilities. Robert Finch, the man who would eventually revise *Lucy Stone* for the FTP, was one of these people. The revised version was billed as a:

Dramatization of episodes in the life of Lucy Stone, Pioneer of Women's Rights. The episodes contain many historical facts of the events attending the long struggle for women's rights, and though the Play [sic] would be much too long if given in its entirety, the construction has been purposely arranged so that one or more episodes may be used to advantage. It is an interesting vehicle for Schools, Colleges, and Women's Organizations.¹²⁴

This innocuous description appealed to the Boston FTP. The FTP produced the premiere of Park's play, but the FTP revisions lack the proverbial punch of Park's

¹²² The majority of the FTP plays received 2-3 playreader reports, unless a reader recommended another reading. New plays that were seriously considered for production often received 4-5 reports.

¹²³ Converse Tyler, "Lucy Stone Playreader Report," Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., container 247.

¹²⁴ "Lucy Stone: Chronicle Play in Nine Episodes Summary," Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., container 247.

piece. In fact, National Play Bureau writer Robert Finch's revision of *Lucy Stone* shows little more than a contentious, stubborn, and occasionally forward-thinking woman who is repeatedly reminded that her successes in the women's rights arena fail to prepare her for life as a woman. This Lucy Stone quails in the face of opposition while Park's original characterization takes the world's antagonism in stride. Notably, Flanagan refrains from commenting on the quality of the FTP revision, merely mentioning it alongside the adaptation of *One-Third of a Nation* as an accomplishment of the National Service Bureau.¹²⁵

The FTP's production of *Lucy Stone* (as revised by Robert Finch) opened in Boston on May 9, 1939, as the FTP – both nationally and locally – was facing its most difficult and, as many suspected, final battle with Congress. Though there was some discussion of additional productions outside of the state, the viability of *Lucy Stone*'s story is unique to Massachusetts. The suffragist was born the sixth child of a poor farming family outside of Brookfield, Massachusetts, on August 13, 1818.¹²⁶ She grew up on the family farm and began teaching classes at the local school. As a teenager, she discovered a passage in the Bible that shook her to the core; it read “Thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee.”¹²⁷ The young Stone could not believe that women were created simply to serve their husband's desires. Deeply resentful of the biased legal system that used this religious idea as the foundation for its blatant inequities toward women, Stone left Massachusetts to attend

¹²⁵ Flanagan, *Arena*, 266.

¹²⁶ Andrea Moore Kerr, *Lucy Stone: Speaking out for Equality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 8.

¹²⁷ Genesis 3:16, *Bible*, New International Version.



Figure 18: Maud Wood Park. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Votes for Women Collection, LC-USZ62-93551 DLC.



Figure 19: Lucy Stone. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Votes for Women Collection, LC-USZ62-29701 DLC.

Oberlin College (at that point the only college in the country which admitted both men and women).¹²⁸ Recruited there by a young William Lloyd Garrison, Stone soon became a noted public speaker for the abolitionist movement. She spoke before audiences of mixed race and gender in spite of the apparent lack of decorum that such an act demonstrated, and soon expanded the content of her speeches to include her passion, women's rights. Alice Stone Blackwell observes:

Lucy Stone was noteworthy for many things. She was the first Massachusetts woman to take a college degree. She was the "morning star of the woman's rights movement", lecturing for it, in the ten years from 1847 to 1857, to immense audiences all up and down the country. She headed the call for the first National Woman's Rights Convention. She converted Susan B. Anthony and Julia Ward Howe. She was the first married woman to keep her own name. She organized a nation-wide association in which those suffragists could work who did not wish to have equal suffrage mixed up with free love and other extraneous questions. She founded and edited the *Woman's Journal* of Boston, which was the principal woman suffrage newspaper of the United States for almost half a century. She was a striking example of single-hearted and lifelong devotion to a great idea.¹²⁹

While this description was written by her daughter, it nonetheless serves as a fair list of Stone's accomplishments. In Park's play, Stone was touched from birth, destined to be a woman who would lead others in the battle for equal rights. Park's script portrays a strong, fearless woman, able to consider the long-term consequences of her actions, convert countless numbers to her cause, and put her ideology into action in spite of personal hardship. This Lucy Stone, once a poor, uneducated farmer's daughter, has risen to a place of influence and respect in the tradition of the true American underdog and hero.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 8-12.

¹²⁹ Alice Stone Blackwell, *Lucy Stone, Pioneer of Woman's Rights* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1930), vii.

It is not surprising that the FTP would choose to perform a play about the great suffragette in her home state. Stone's work on women's rights had been ratified to the Constitution in 1920, and so the subject matter would seem to be a safe and logical choice for a federal project desperately hoping to maintain its public support. Flanagan refers to the Boston production of *Lucy Stone* as one of the three "big productions [which] climaxed the success of a project which, by judicious suiting of play to community, and by expert direction, succeeded in triumphing over as strong political opposition as we met anywhere in the country."¹³⁰

While there is little extant correspondence regarding the Boston production of *Lucy Stone*, Flanagan's reference to the "judicious suiting of play to community" and the triumph of the FTP over some of the strongest "political opposition we met anywhere in the country" warrants exploration.¹³¹ The fact that *Lucy Stone*'s premiere occurred immediately prior to the climax of the FTP's fight for continued funding suggests that this production was designed to provide more than simple entertainment for the local FTP audience members. Instead, I would argue that *Lucy Stone* was calculated to both solidify and improve the link between Boston and its FTP; after all, if the FTP could convince skeptical Boston audiences to support its work, it could serve as a strong example of the popularity of the FTP.

Notably, while Flanagan observes that both Park and Alice Stone Blackwell (Lucy Stone's daughter) attended the Boston premiere, she refrains from any

¹³⁰ The other two productions Flanagan refers to are *Created Equal*, discussed at length earlier, and the Yasha Frank adaptation of *Pinocchio*, a New York production on loan to the Boston FTP. Flanagan, *Arena*, 230.

¹³¹ Correspondence between Park and various FTP administrators abounds, but it rarely relates directly to the production itself.

discussion of their reactions. Compared to the detail Flanagan uses when describing the reactions of other notables who attend FTP productions, the lack of commentary on these two women suggests that they may have had misgivings about the production.

The Battle for Preserving Rights

Maud Wood Park describes *Lucy Stone* as a chronicle dedicated to preserving the memory of the women's rights struggle.¹³² It is a long play, and one that the playwright believed would never be played in a single sitting or by a single group of actors. In her introduction she writes:

More scenes than can well be given at a single performance have been provided in order that those which are best suited to the available players and stage may be chosen, without serious loss of sequence. Several of the scenes can be presented separately as one-act plays.¹³³

Park suggested that the large number of characters be reduced by double or triple casting smaller roles. Alternatively, she proposed that the individual scenes be played by entirely different players with the single thread of continuity being that the roles of Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell be played by the same actors throughout. Park based her play on *Lucy Stone, Pioneer* (a biography written by Alice Stone Blackwell). She also knew Lucy Stone and remained friends with Stone's daughter. Since Park also had access to much of Lucy Stone's materials, many of Stone's words

¹³² Maud Wood Park, *Lucy Stone: A Chronicle Play based on Lucy Stone, Pioneer*, by Alice Stone Blackwell (Boston, MA: Walter H. Baker Co., 1938), National American Suffrage Association Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

¹³³ Ibid, 8.

in the play are taken directly from her speeches and writings. Park's chronicle was published with a brief introduction by Alice Stone Blackwell, who endorsed the play's "wit and ingenuity," as well as its ability to combine information about a vital struggle in history "with fun."¹³⁴

Many of the FTP revisions to Park's play consist of little more than juggling sequences and rewording lines. Park's play, for example, opens as Lucy and her mother work side-by-side, Lucy sewing shoes and Mrs. Stone spinning thread. They discuss the heavy workload of women, consider the ways in which Lucy could spend the money she makes from the shoes, and prepare the evening meal while finishing their chores. Mr. Stone arrives to announce that his former schoolmate Jim has drunk himself into a stupor again and that he must be cared for; Mrs. Stone protests that Jim's behavior is not likely to change while people take care of his needs, that he is a bad example for the children, and that he is taking advantage of Mr. Stone's sense of duty, but she fixes a bed for him with relatively little fuss and continues her work. In contrast, the FTP version begins with the entrance of the drunken Jim. Mrs. Stone's protests, concerning the same issues as in Park's version, receive a sharp rebuke from her husband. In addition, Mrs. Stone is repeatedly humiliated by the incoherent drunk; his utter inadequacy forces her to help him take off his filthy clothing, remove his boots when he cannot figure out how, wash his clothing and personal items, and even darn the holes in his repugnant socks. Moreover, these responsibilities are piled atop of an already heavy workload that seems far from complete as the end of the day

¹³⁴ Alice Stone Blackwell, Introduction to Maud Wood Park, *Lucy Stone: A Chronicle Play* based on *Lucy Stone, Pioneer*, by Alice Stone Blackwell (Boston, MA: Walter H. Baker Co., 1938), National American Suffrage Association Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, 3.

draws near and Mrs. Stone shows signs of exhaustion. Finch's revision focuses on showing man at his worst at the expense of the women around him.

Similar changes pepper the script. Finch repeatedly shifts the order of discussions and events – without altering the content. In a similar vein, Finch rewords many of the lines, again without varying the meaning. Consider the following exchange from Park's version:

Lucy: Mother, what's that bright star I saw this morning, just before the sun came up?
Mrs. Stone: The morning star, I guess.
Lucy: Do they call it morning star because it's up ahead of the sun?
Mrs. Stone: Prob'ly that's the reason. It sorter begins the day.
Lucy: (*Reflectively.*) As though it was leading in the light. Then the darkness goes away.¹³⁵

Compare this exchange to the parallel in Finch's revision:

Lucy: Mother, there's the evening star . . . as bright as anything.
Mrs. Stone: (*Not stopping her work.*) Pretty, isn't it?
Lucy: Awful pretty. (*She reflects a moment*) But I like the morning star even better. I see it every morning . . . (*Reflectively*) . . . it's so bright . . . and brave . . . coming before the sun, as though it was showing it the way. As if it was leading in the light. And then the darkness goes away.¹³⁶

These changes are all but inconsequential, though they shift the dialect written into Park's script to a more neutral tone. Similar revisions occur throughout the play, rarely changing much, if anything, more than a few words. Though the reasons behind these minor changes are unclear, it is the grander additions and deletions that have a greater bearing on the piece as a whole.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 13-14.

¹³⁶ Maud Wood Park, *Lucy Stone*, revised by Robert Finch, Federal Theatre Project Playscript and Radioscript Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 4-5.

While the more overt revisions are numerous, several are of particular interest in light of this discussion. The first of these changes, seen throughout the FTP version, is the quality of the romantic relationship between Lucy Stone and the man who would eventually become her husband, Henry Blackwell. Park's original version portrays a Lucy Stone who is essentially married to her work; Lucy is in her late 30s when she eventually agrees to marry Henry, and has reservations about her ability to be a good wife while maintaining her active advocacy for women's rights, a career that she has no intention of abandoning for love. This is most obvious in the first scene in which Lucy and Henry are physically present on stage at the same time. In Park's play, this occurs in Scene IV, entitled "Courtship and Cooking, 1853." At this point, Lucy is at her family's home in West Brookfield in the process of whitewashing the kitchen ceiling. Henry, having walked the three miles from the train depot, appears unexpectedly at the door and the two discuss Lucy's recent speaking engagement, mutual friends, and the progress of the women's rights movement in general. The pair has been corresponding for some time, and has met on numerous occasions due to their mutual interest in abolition and the women's rights movement. During their conversation it becomes clear that Henry has traveled a long distance to convince Lucy that she should marry him, yet Lucy repeatedly steers the conversation away from the subject of marriage:

Lucy: I try to teach women's rights by pointing out their wrongs.

Blackwell: It's one of the reasons why you are so successful--that and your sweet voice.

Lucy: Thank you, Mr. Blackwell.

Blackwell: But that wasn't what I came to talk about...

Lucy: Is this your first visit to Massachusetts.

Blackwell: Yes, it is. I made up my mind I wanted to see you again. But I didn't know I was going to have the good fortune of hearing you speak

until I saw the notice of the hearing in the Boston paper. Miss Lucy, I--
I--(*Hesitating.*)

Lucy: (*In a second effort to get off the subject ahead.*) Was it about woman's rights you wanted to see me or about anti-slavery work?¹³⁷

While it is difficult to tell precisely how unsettled Lucy is by Blackwell's wooing, there are several points in which she takes control. While the topic is her recent speech, Lucy is able to speak intelligently about her goals, and the methods she used to attain them. She accepts Henry's compliment, and easily shifts from the more personal topic Henry hopes to address to a discussion of his journey instead. When Henry returns to his personal wishes, Lucy again turns the conversation back to her profession, asking which of her causes Henry wished to speak to her about. As the visit continues, Henry doggedly pursues his objective, and Lucy resolutely changes the subject each time. It is only when he finally blurts out, "I want to share work with you all the rest of our lives, dear. [. . .] I want our lives to be shared. I want you to be my wife," that the power balance begins to shift in his direction. In spite of this, Lucy remains her driven self. She responds, "I have made up my mind never to marry. I want to devote my life to the work I have undertaken. [. . .] A married woman can't possibly be so free to give her time as a spinster is."¹³⁸ Lucy remains steadfast in this scene. Despite Henry's assertions that he believes as she does in women's rights and would dedicate his life to helping her cause, Lucy refuses his proposal. Lucy's mother later reveals that Henry pursued Lucy for more than two years before she agreed to marry him; even then, she consented only after he arranged

¹³⁷ Maud Wood Park, *Lucy Stone: A Chronicle Play* based on *Lucy Stone, Pioneer*, by Alice Stone Blackwell (Boston, MA: Walter H. Baker Co., 1938), National American Suffrage Association Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, 75.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 79.

a lecture tour of the West Coast for her, thus proving his dedication to her cause. Park's Lucy is confident in her agenda; she has chosen her path and lives her life according to that choice.

The parallel scene in the FTP revision offers a stark contrast. The first meeting of Lucy and Henry occurs in an added scene much earlier in the play; in it, Lucy enters pursued by young ruffians who are mocking her bloomers and Henry rescues her by bringing her into his hardware store. He is "struck by her beauty," chivalrously gives her his supper and only umbrella, and follows her the rest of the way to her speaking engagement (in a torrential downpour) to ensure her safety.¹³⁹ In the next scene in which Lucy and Henry appear together, he arrives at her home. This time though, Henry plays the part of a confident playboy. As Lucy whitewashes the ceiling, Henry stands, dressed "neatly for visiting," and silently watches her work. He smiles, leans casually against the doorframe, and waits for her to reach as high as she possibly can before he says "May I help you?" He surprises her so that she nearly falls and he "rushes forward to help her" regain her footing; again, Henry is put in a position to rescue Lucy. Here, Lucy begins the scene literally thrown off balance, and her level of control continues to deteriorate:

Lucy: You must have enjoyed the convention. Mr. Phillips and Mr. Higginson spoke so beautifully . . .

Henry: (*Gazing at her*) Oh . . . did they speak too?

Lucy: (*Embarrassed*) Of course! But . . . how did you get here from the depot?

Henry: I walked. It is such a lovely morning . . .

Lucy: (*Trying to put on a company manner.*) Well! Father will be pleased to see you. Mother has gone to visit friends, but she will be back soon.

Henry: I came to see you, Lucy.

¹³⁹ Maud Wood Park, *Lucy Stone*, revised by Robert Finch, Federal Theatre Project Playscript and Radioscript Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 52-57.

Lucy: (*Self-conscious*) Oh!...well, I'm delighted . . . we have so little company here. Let us go into the parlor where Father is . . . ¹⁴⁰

In this exchange Henry openly woos Lucy. For her part, Lucy responds with embarrassment when he focuses on her speech and self-consciously when Henry proclaims his intention to see her personally. By the end of this brief exchange Lucy's one thought is to flee to the parlor because her father is there and could rescue her from this confusing conversation. Lucy's attempts to change the course of the discussion are weak, and her sentences trail off. When Henry begins to speak of marriage, Lucy offers a response that seems as if she is grasping for a reason to reject the idea. She says, "Why . . . why . . . since wives are as subjected to rule by their husbands, by law and custom . . . I don't think of [marriage]. If the laws placed you, as a man, in such a position, would you?"¹⁴¹

Finch's Lucy seems much less secure about her position on marriage, and she asks Henry what he would do in her situation. She does not mention her dedication to her work; instead, she claims that the institution of marriage is so fraught with arbitrary laws and inequities that she cannot consider it. This argument is one that Henry can easily deflect; he replies that women who are subject to the rule of their husbands really need only ensure that the men they marry will treat them with consideration and kindness, an answer that the Lucy Stone in Park's play would likely respond to by tossing Henry unceremoniously out the door. Here, however, Lucy seems as insecure as a teenager with her first boyfriend. She is openly befuddled by the confident and controlled Henry, and agrees to an engagement before he leaves her

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 71-2.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 76.

home that evening. The power dynamics and priorities of this relationship are nearly opposites of the driven, career-oriented couple in Park's version.

The second major change in the FTP's version of *Lucy Stone* centers around the seriousness of Lucy's mission as an advocate for women's rights and the abolitionist movement. This becomes particularly clear in the scene in which Lucy and Henry prepare for their wedding. One of the most important things that the couple prepares is their marriage agreement. In Park's play, it is clear that the minister, Reverend Higginson, is well-versed and supportive not only of the couple's plan for their marriage but also of Lucy's work in women's rights. He refers to Lucy as the "morning star of the [women's rights] movement," saying that she "is different from most young women and she ought to have a new type of husband."¹⁴² Reverend Higginson describes Lucy's work as akin to a call from God, equating her to a missionary: "She's preaching the gospel of justice for all, women as well as men, black as well as white. And there are plenty of heathen right here in the United States."¹⁴³ Higginson and Lucy seem like long-time friends in this scene; they discuss mutual friends and Lucy's distant family and each has extensive knowledge of the other's past work; the reverend wants the best for her and refuses to perform the marriage ceremony if he thinks the groom will not encourage her work. The Reverend allows the couple to read their "manifesto" regarding the inequities of marriage during the ceremony. He even offers to personally deliver a copy to the

¹⁴² Maud Wood Park, *Lucy Stone: A Chronicle Play* based on *Lucy Stone, Pioneer*, by Alice Stone Blackwell (Boston, MA: Walter H. Baker Co., 1938), National American Suffrage Association Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, 87.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 93.

local newspaper for publication. Clearly, Reverend Higginson supports and values Lucy's work. This is the type of minister that one would expect to marry Lucy Stone and her fiancé.

In contrast, the Reverend Higginson in the FTP version appears to be little more than a kind, doddering, and conservative old man. Lucy's announcement of the marriage contract comes as a complete surprise to him:

Lucy: [The marriage contract] is all written. We've even memorized it.

Now we're making a lot of copies to send out to the newspapers.

Higginson: To the papers! It must be something very important. May I read it?

Lucy: We shall read it for you, Rev. Higginson. At the ceremony tomorrow. *(Higginson puts his cup down in great surprise.)*¹⁴⁴

Here, the Reverend is apparently unaware of the concessions he will soon be asked to make with respect to the wedding ceremony. He also assumes that Lucy will be forced to give up her lecturing and campaigning for women's rights. When Mrs. Stone corrects him, pointing out Henry's dedication to Lucy's work, Reverend Higginson replies doubtfully:

Well . . . that's before the wedding. A man says so many things before he's married. Afterwards . . . well, I remember I told Mrs. Higginson that after we were married I'd never let her soil her little hands in dish-water ever again . . . *(He chuckles at the memory.)* A wife would have to be pretty strong to change the way things have always been.¹⁴⁵

Reverend Higginson exemplifies the kind of man Lucy abhors. His unquestioned assumption that a wife will put aside her own needs and desires to serve her husband's does not acknowledge the possibility that his ideas could be anything but

¹⁴⁴ Maud Wood Park, *Lucy Stone*, revised by Robert Finch, Federal Theatre Project Playscript and Radioscript Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 83.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

ordained by God. In contrast to Park's portrayal of the Reverend, Finch's version seems to have little understanding of Lucy's work, and even less appreciation of it.

This shift from a career-oriented woman comfortable in the public sphere to a more docile, emotional, and genteel female reflects a shift in Boston politics which began in the late 1920s. When the nineteenth amendment was passed in 1920 and Boston's women officially entered the political arena, the public face of the female political candidate in Boston was not all that different from that of a man. Women publicized their roles in labor movements, women's rights controversies, social organizations, and anything else that might give the impression of a tough political candidate. Mrs. Chipman, candidate for city council, used the slogan: "Fair and consistent recognition of the right of women to participate in the affairs of government."¹⁴⁶ While the novelty of the situation initially garnered women candidates public attention and space in the newspapers, very few women made it past the stage of candidacy.¹⁴⁷

During the late 1920s, women began to alter their public persona in an attempt to gain votes. Gone were the vocal advocates of social equality, to be replaced by the proper and refined housewife. The first woman elected to the Governor's Council, Mrs. Esther Andrews, may have been a successful businesswoman, an advocate of equal pay and rights for women in the workforce, and a supporter of numerous public appointments, but "within minutes after learning of her appointment, Esther Andrews

¹⁴⁶ "Woman Candidate to Open Her Campaign," *Boston Herald*, 5 December 1921, 16.

¹⁴⁷ "Most of Council Candidates Unknown," *Boston Herald*, 5 December 1921, 3; "Mrs. Chipman opens her campaign," *Boston Globe*, 7 December 1921, 8; "Boston Women Making Their Political Bow--Is It a Debut or a Fight?", *Boston Globe*, 4 December 1921, 2.

declared, ‘No married woman has any right to go into politics, public service or the professions, if it means giving up her home.’”¹⁴⁸ Women who succeeded in Boston politics during the 1930s cultivated this image – of genteel homemakers, excellent cooks, and compassionate wives with lovely children, clean homes, content husbands, and a matron-like beauty. In 1931, Mrs. Eleanor L’Ecuyer ran for city council, comparing the city government to “municipal housekeeping.” It would seem that Boston was willing to support women in politics only as long as they performed their gender roles.¹⁴⁹

By the early 1930s women had great difficulty gaining even low-tier positions. One of the few women who did, Mildred Gleason Harris, won a special election and replaced her brother when he passed away while holding a position on the Boston City Council. In spite of Mrs. Harris’s repeated attempts to bill herself as a serious, experienced politician, the majority of the pictures published in the *Boston Globe* presented her as a homemaker, wife, and mother with “brilliant blue eyes,” “thick bobbed hair,” and a “ready smile on her small mouth.”¹⁵⁰ Mrs. Harris was elected in 1937.

By the time *Lucy Stone* premiered in Boston the city was past the novelty of outspoken women in politics. Politically active women were no longer attractive characters. Finch’s revision of the play recognizes and incorporates this idea. He

¹⁴⁸ Ironically, Mrs. Andrews came in second place in the campaign. She was appointed, however, when the winner inexplicably died just before taking office. "Woman Rejoices," *Boston Globe*, 3 November 1927, 1.

¹⁴⁹ "Is Fifth Woman to Seek Council Post," *Boston Globe*, 26 October 1931, 5.

¹⁵⁰ Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2000) 259.

feminizes Lucy, giving her some of the same matronly qualities used by the women who succeeded in Boston politics. In this political and cultural environment, it is not surprising that the FTP – at a critical point in its brief lifetime and desperately in need of support – would choose to portray the character of Lucy Stone in a more traditionally feminine manner.

The critical response to the show demonstrates an appreciation of these qualities in Lucy's character. Elinor Hughes, writing for the *Boston Herald*, critiques the chronicle play as a genre, discusses Maud Wood Park and Lucy Stone's activities, and talks very little of the performance. However, Hughes mentions Lucy's marriage twice in the short article. She explains that Stone's "happy marriage to Henry Blackwell was signaled by the omission of the word 'obey' from the service and the mutual declaration of bride and groom on behalf of a woman's right not to be her husband's slave." The play, which has "frequent moments of humor," shows the "devotion of Lucy Stone and her husband" admirably, and portrays Lucy as a woman who is "human and admirable, not cold and remote."¹⁵¹

A second review in the *Christian Science Monitor* compliments Lillian Merchal's ability to portray Lucy Stone with "an unaffected cheerfulness mingled with sufficient degree of dignity to keep the character on the believable side. [. . . Lucy] dominates the stage – quietly and pleasantly but firmly."¹⁵² These descriptions of Lucy's character emphasize a woman who is quiet, pleasant and devoted to her husband. They bear a striking resemblance to the ways in which the female

¹⁵¹ Elinor Hughes, "Lucy Stone," *Boston Herald*, 10 May 1939, Harvard Theatre Collection, Clippings File – "Lucy Stone."

¹⁵² Edwin F. Melvin, "'Lucy Stone' in Premiere," *Christian Science Monitor*, 10 May 1939, Harvard Theatre Collection, Clippings File – "Lucy Stone."

politicians were treated in the newspaper. As further evidence of the link between *Lucy Stone* and the roles of wife and mother, the review of the production in the *Boston Herald* is printed beside a list of Southern Recipes, including Sweet Potato Pone, String Beans Brittany, and Beaten Biscuits. The biscuit recipe even includes directions for treating one's mother on the upcoming Mother's Day.

Surviving Public Relations

A curious mixture of Boston Brahmins and farmers, high-class politicians and working-class laborers attended Lucy Stone's funeral in 1893. In many ways her life epitomizes the American Dream; she began as the daughter of a poor farmer, struggled to overcome barriers against women attending college, and became a public speaker advocating equality for the races and the sexes. Her efforts, in concert with the other suffragettes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, changed the role of women in the United States. Maud Wood Park, like Lucy Stone, was a suffragette; she was also a friend of Lucy's daughter and made every effort to portray Stone in an accurate and complimentary light so as to preserve the fading memory of an American icon and the early history of the women's rights movement.

The FTP production had a very different goal; nearly forty years after Stone's death and almost twenty after the ratification of the nineteenth amendment, the FTP was in desperate need of an uncontroversial, uplifting, and relevant drama for its Boston project. The revision of *Lucy Stone* provided just that. It pushed no boundaries, ruffled few feathers, gained the sponsorship of the Boston University

Women's Council, and had "local and historic rather than theatre interest."¹⁵³ In a final act of generosity and good politics, the last Friday performance was a benefit for the Morgan Memorial, an organization that gave summer outings to needy children and their mothers; the Morgan Memorial was housed in the Lucy Stone Home in Dorchester.¹⁵⁴ It was an ideal production for Boston's FTP during the fateful summer of 1939.

"This liberty will look easy by and by when nobody dies to get it."

The final words in *Valley Forge*, "This liberty will look easy by and by when nobody dies to get it," cross the boundaries of both *Created Equal* and *Lucy Stone*. In *Created Equal*, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are fundamental to the development of the plot and theme. The play revolves around the repercussions of the quest for liberty in the United States; historically, consequences like poverty, family strife, and death are biased toward the groups that do not hold power. *Created Equal* shows the American Revolution from the perspective of the powerless. For them, liberty is a costly proposition. The FTP production of *Created Equal* found new Boston audiences by using situations and characters with which the audience could identify. As demonstrated by the archival documents, the playwright and director intentionally appealed to the audience in this way.

¹⁵³ Flanagan, *Arena*, 230; "B.U. Women to Sponsor 'Lucy Stone' Premiere," *Christian Science Monitor*, 25 April 1939, 9.

¹⁵⁴ "Lucy Stone Benefit Performance Friday," Harvard Theatre Collection, Boston – Copley Theatre, clippings file.

Like the powerless masses in *Created Equal*, Lucy Stone spent her lifetime fighting for the freedom of the powerless. For Stone, women sacrificed their lives daily, either literally or metaphorically, because of the bonds society placed upon them. As the play shows, women were subordinate to their husbands, without the right to vote or own property. The revisions in Maud Wood Park's *Lucy Stone* softened and feminized the character in a way that paralleled the public images that women contrived in the 1930s; the FTP revision, produced as it was during a crucial time for the national organization, catered to the audience's preconceived notions of the woman as public figure. For Stone, the casualties of the battle for liberty were metaphorical or psychological. And, as Maxwell's quote argues, her battle appeared to be much more palatable when looking back from a time in which women's rights were assured.

Liberty was also a metaphor for the Boston FTP as it struggled to escape from the bonds of censorship and stigma; for the Boston unit, liberty was legitimacy. The case studies in this chapter show two very different paths that the Boston FTP traveled as it battled for legitimacy in the Northeast. *Created Equal* appropriates history in a radical way, shifting the emphasis from the wealthy, propertied class to the poor, landless working class. *Lucy Stone* takes what was once a radical campaign for women's rights and softens it into a gentle historical drama. Both plays are tied inextricably to the Boston landscape itself; Boston's rich history – and the pride in that history – provided a backdrop that both influenced and reflected the meaning of the plays, and of its FTP.

Chapter 3: “The Great American Theatrical Desert.” Federal Theatre in the South

The South has sometimes been called “the great American theatrical desert.” Even a casual survey of American theatre history shows relatively little organized professional theatre south of the Mason-Dixon line.¹

~ John McGee

In 1937 John McGee, head of the FTP’s Southern Region, and the workers of the region compiled a multi-volume scrapbook as a gift for Flanagan. Entitled *A Brief History of the Federal Theatre in the South*, the opening pages featured a dedication:

To: Hallie Flanagan
In appreciation of her devoted efforts for the workers on Federal Theatre
From: Workers of the Federal Theatre in the South²

Ten pages of hand-written signatures from eight different FTP units accompanied the dedication, including pages from Atlanta, Birmingham, Jacksonville, Miami, Tampa, New Orleans, North Carolina and Oklahoma City. John McGee’s foreword provided an overview of regional activities. After referring to the “paucity of talent” in the region, McGee explained that the South offered “a considerable demand for the development of indigenous theatre along professional lines and a considerable

¹ Foreword to *A Brief History of the Federal Theatre in the South*, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series V - Scrapbooks, “Federal Theatre in the South Scrapbook,” Box 35.

² *A Brief History of the Federal Theatre in the South*, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series V - Scrapbooks, “Federal Theatre in the South Scrapbook,” Box 35.

assurance of community interest support.” He recommended gathering theatre professionals in major areas and using traveling talent to reach the smaller cities and towns, noting that “this policy seemed to be [. . .] quite in line with the desire of the Administration to decentralize the over-crowded theatrical centers, chiefly New York City, and to serve as wide an area as possible.”³

However, this decentralization was more complex than first imagined, as McGee quickly realized. The lack of leadership and local infrastructure in the South combined with the suspicion of outsiders left McGee in a dismal position. Indeed, I would suggest that many of the difficulties the Federal Theatre encountered in the Southern Region were due to a fundamental incompatibility between the Federal Theatre’s stated goal of producing local dramas relevant to local communities, and the administrative structure of the Federal Theatre, an organization that was based solidly in New York and Washington, D.C. This central location was necessary and a critical factor in the numerous local successes of the project, both in New York and urban production centers nationally. However, the structural deficiencies created an intricate web of tensions and “disconnects” in Federal Theatre communities throughout the country. In the Southern Region, where Federal Theatre struggled for even a grudging acceptance, issues that were little more than nuisances in other regions expanded to become nearly insurmountable obstacles. Memos, wires, and letters from Southern administrators to the National center are peppered with frustrations related to everything from administrative mix-ups and difficulties with

³ Ibid.

state WPA officials, to the ever-present complaints over personnel squabbles and untalented talent.⁴

Aside from the typical, yet exacerbated, administrative difficulties present in the South, the greater problem centered on the lack of theatre professionals qualified for relief. According to Flanagan, “we had in the South, due to the fact that for decades it had witnessed no professional theatre activity except an occasional stock company, or third-rate road show, fewer theatre professionals in need than elsewhere.”⁵ To compensate for the lack of native theatre professionals, Federal Theatre instituted the “flying squadron” method, which allocated directors, designers, actors, and theatre staff to whichever location was in need, regardless of their personal histories or knowledge of the region. This often made it impossible for directors to meet the people of the region, let alone create inspired drama that would reflect their lives.

McGee’s comments in the *Brief History of Federal Theatre in the South* (1937) come to mind when considering the “flying squadron” approach. He explained that difficulties such as the touring regulations of the WPA administrative structure and “hesitancy on the part of State Administrations, and sometimes the public, in accepting relief personnel drawn from the metropolitan centers” created a

⁴ The Federal Theatre Project records at the National Archives include numerous examples of this. See NARA, Entry 850, National Office Correspondence with Regional Offices.

⁵ Flanagan, *Arena*, 81. While Flanagan’s statement could be read as condescending, the context of her comment shows that she is referring only to those workers designated by the W.P.A. as theatre professionals qualified to receive relief. However, this statement does point to a disparity in the understanding of the types of performance that constitute professional theatre, placing legitimate stage drama above regional tent shows, oral traditions, or other forms of performance.

drag on the progress of the FTP in the South.⁶ McGee admitted that both he and the national administration had misread the audiences and potential of the Southern

Region:

A stronger program must be evolved and aimed more consistently toward the likes and desires of the several communities, in which we operate. The past year has demonstrated many failures of our organization to analyze properly the public which we have set out to serve, and a careful study of these errors must be made to shape the future program.⁷

In this chapter I will concentrate on two theatrical excursions in the South, which exemplify the challenges and disconnects that McGee describes. First, I will delve into the infamous *Altars of Steel* (1937), which Flanagan referred to as the “most important Southern production” and critics described as dangerous, inflammatory, communist propaganda. *Altars of Steel* portrays a steel mill in Birmingham, Alabama, during the Depression. When it begins, the kind Southern gentleman who owned the mill is being forced out of the business by United Steel, the large Northern company. When United Steel assumes control of the mill, their representative abuses the workers, eventually causing an accident in which 19 men die. The repercussions of this accident reverberate throughout the town, riot ensues, and the play ends in unresolved chaos. The latter half of this chapter focuses on the so-called “Georgia experiment” in which five FTP personnel were sent into rural Georgia to bring theatre to the masses. *Altars of Steel* and the Georgia experiment share a vital role in the formation of the FTP; both endeavored to create locally

⁶ Foreword to *A Brief History of the Federal Theatre in the South*, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series V - Scrapbooks, “Federal Theatre in the South Scrapbook,” Box 35.

⁷ Ibid.

relevant drama, and both succeeded. In this way, they are models for the potential of the FTP. Both also failed, for entirely different reasons, to create an ongoing connection with their audiences; these failures serve as case studies for the shortcomings of the Southern FTP on a regional and national level.

*Yankee Consternation in the Deep South: Worshipping at the 'Altars of Steel'*⁸

Social Context – Spellbound in the “Magic City”

Birmingham earned the dubious distinction of being pinpointed by the federal government as “the city in America hardest hit by the Depression.” Residence of the newly founded southern branch of the Communist party, Birmingham was home to extreme poverty, starvation, medieval conditions for sharecroppers, and the nation’s single largest industrial conflict. Oppression was widespread, corrupt political and legal systems permitted lynching and mob rule, and violent terrorism was commonplace. Some Northerners compared Alabama to the fascist state of Hitler. As one scholar asserts, Alabama “had the worst record of any state in the country on human and civil liberties and certainly one of the most wretched records in the annals of Western democracy.”⁹

Worker organization in Alabama had all but collapsed during the 1920s. As Neal R. Pierce explains, “It was a hard society of the survival of the fittest, in which

⁸ Much of the *Altars of Steel* portion of this chapter is from my article. Elizabeth A. Osborne, “Yankee Consternation in the Deep South: Worshipping at the *Altars of Steel*,” *Theatre Symposium: Tours of the South* 13, (2005): 51-67.

⁹ Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society and the Klan in Alabama*, 219-20; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1990), 14.

money and power overshadowed all else.”¹⁰ U.S. Steel, widely known as “Big Steel,” ruled the Birmingham region. As the single largest employer in the region, the giant company could alter the city’s economy, and with it the daily lives of the people, with a medieval-like “feudal sway.” David Kennedy describes the power relationship in steel towns throughout the country, writing that “Big Steel and the other, so-called Little Steel companies [. . .] defied labor organizers and federal authorities with impunity.”¹¹ Unions, an obvious threat to employers, were never encouraged by large conglomerates such as U.S. Steel. In the particularly difficult economic period of the Great Depression, the efforts of union officials hoping to force employers to accept worker demands was regarded even less kindly.

However, legislation designed to protect worker rights between 1933 and 1938 gradually loosened the stranglehold the steel mills had on their workers. The National Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act) of 1935 outlawed many of the traditional methods used by corporations to put down worker protest. In early January 1937, during the period *Altars of Steel* was to have opened in Birmingham, Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) chairman John L. Lewis and U.S. Steel board chairman Myron Taylor began a series of talks that would end several months later in a surprising agreement between U.S. Steel and labor; the largest steel company in the world agreed to officially recognize the Steel Workers’ Organizing

¹⁰ Neal R. Pierce, *The Deep South States of America: People, Politics, and Power in the Seven Deep South States* (New York: Norton, 1974), 282.

¹¹ While it may be difficult to believe that a single company could wield so much power, it is important to understand the mammoth amount of money and steel that was produced by U.S. Steel. U.S. Steel’s mills in Pittsburgh, Birmingham, and Chicago produced more steel than all of Germany, the second largest steel-producing country in the world. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 303.

Committee (SWOC) as a tool for collective bargaining on behalf of the workers.¹²

Prior to this landmark agreement and in the wake of the laws instituted by the federal government, Birmingham enacted the anti-sedition law (1935); under the guise of rooting out communists and radicals, police and the “red-squad” could raid homes, harass suspected leftists, and would be guaranteed significant protection if violence such as kidnapping, beating, or shooting into a crowd of radicals were to erupt. Naturally, those in the crosshairs of the “red-squad” were often unrelated to the Communist party.¹³

In addition to the decades of labor strife that plagued Birmingham, the ubiquitous Ku Klux Klan and the pervasive racism associated with that organization wielded considerable power during the 1930s. The city was known as “‘bad, bad Birmingham, the murder capital of the world,’ . . . a place where brutality had soaked into the fabric of the culture.”¹⁴ The infamous Scottsboro case (1931) is an example of the power of racism in Alabama during this period. Nine young African-American men were arrested and charged with raping two white women. While the evidence exonerated the Scottsboro boys, they were indicted and prosecuted within six days; the all-white jury found eight of the boys guilty and they were sentenced to a mass

¹² The steel industry seemed to be rising out of the Depression in early 1937; orders were finally increasing and U.S. Steel did not want to upset the delicate balance. Myron Taylor, appointed by U.S. Steel to deal with the problem of unions in 1937, noted the increased public sympathy for the workers due to unionizing, strikebreaking, and the New Deal, and suggested that a compromise would be better for business. These discussions took place between January and March of 1937. Walter Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 92; Kenneth Warren, *Big Steel: The First Century of the United States Steel Corporation, 1901-2001* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 164-6.

¹³ William Warren Rogers, Robert David Ward, Leah Rawls Atkins, and Wayne Flint, *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 480-5.

¹⁴ Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 243.

execution that July. Northern activist groups including the NAACP and the International Labor Defense Fund saw the case as an opportunity to make a statement to a national forum. The case quickly rose to monumental stature; it pitted Northern Jewish Communist lawyers against Alabama's hatred of outside influence (particularly hailing from the North), the KKK, and the perceived desecration of the South's most sacred institution – the sexual violation of a white woman by black men.

The Alabama KKK particularly despised the Communist leanings of the Northern lawyers brought in to defend the Scottsboro Boys, as Communism threatened the racial and economic hegemony of the state by implying that class (and race) should be leveled in a modern society. The choice of Communist recruiters to focus on unionizing African American workers also did little to endear them to the KKK. Communism, particularly unionization of the working class, became a focal point for KKK activities in Birmingham. The Klan littered the city with leaflets proclaiming: "Communism will not be tolerated. Ku Klux Klan Rides Again."¹⁵ These intimidation techniques were directed particularly toward African American laborers. The following flyer is an example of the type of literature distributed by the KKK in Birmingham during the 1930s:

NEGROES BEWARE
DO NOT ATTEND
COMMUNIST MEETINGS

Paid organizers for the communists are only trying to get negroes in trouble. Alabama is a good place for good negroes to live in, but it is a bad place for negroes who believe in SOCIAL EQUALITY.
The Ku Klux Klan Is Watching You.
TAKE HEED

¹⁵ Ibid, 274.

Tell the communist leaders to leave. Report all communist meetings to the
Ku Klux Klan
Post office Box 651, Birmingham, Alabama¹⁶

Those who attended union rallies were either attacked themselves or their family members were assaulted. Klan members shot one man's wife because he attended a union meeting. In 1935, the Klan conspired with police and vigilantes to violently end a solidarity march of Communists and union miners. TCI (Tennessee Coal & Iron) joined forces with the KKK and police when demands for unemployment insurance appeared; a series of beatings followed, each focusing on union and Communist leadership. The notorious Downs Ordinance (1935), which allowed police to seek out, fine, and imprison anyone with more than one "radical publication," provided an excuse for widespread terrorism. Protected by the law, police (often accompanied by Klan members) entered homes with impunity. In another instance of flagrant abuse, police invaded a man's home, claiming to be searching for Communist literature, and flogged his daughters. In a violent show of power, the Klan nailed an African American man's thumbs to his front door for a similar crime. Unions, Communism, and racial equality were linked in the minds of Alabama KKK members; they were steps along the road to social and ideological disaster. The struggle for power would continue for nearly a decade; unfortunately, the Federal Theatre production of *Altars of Steel* portrayed the working class struggle against the dominant hegemony, directly challenging the power of United Steel on

¹⁶ "Negroes Beware" Poster, 1933, Birmingham Alabama, Guy Benton Johnson Papers #3826, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Research Projects 1922-1977 and undated, Ku Klux Klan Study, Folder 990.

**NEGROES
BEWARE
DO NOT ATTEND
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MEETINGS**

Paid organizers for the communists are only trying to get negroes in trouble. Alabama is a good place for good negroes to live in, but it is a bad place for negroes who believe in SOCIAL EQUALITY.

**The Ku Klux Klan
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Post Office Box 651, Birmingham, Alabama.

Figure 20: Ku Klux Klan isolationist circular regarding Communist organization in Alabama (1933). Guy Benton Johnson Papers (3826), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

social, racial, political, and economic grounds.¹⁷ It is hard to believe that the Birmingham leaders of U.S. Steel would have been blind to this obvious parallel, and harder to believe that they would have made no move to preserve the hierarchy of power already in place.¹⁸

“As Dangerous as ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’”

“The great questions of the times will not be decided by speeches and resolutions of majorities, but by blood and iron.”¹⁹

~ Bismarck

These words, foretelling a period of violence, coercion, and physical battle for supremacy, introduce *Altars of Steel* (1937), a southern social-labor drama that would prove to be a crisis point for the Southern FTP. *Altars of Steel* premiered in Atlanta to hot debate, critical acclaim, and sold-out houses--even though its performances ran

¹⁷ United Steel is a thinly disguised reference to U. S. Steel, the enormous conglomerate that had purchased TCI in a forced buy-out in 1907. United Steel eventually became the abbreviated name for the national steel workers union, United Steelworkers of America. The major call-to-arms in the formation of this union was the 1937 Memorial Day Massacre when Chicago police shot into a mass of striking workers outside of Republic Steel, killing 10 and wounding more than 100. However, the forces that led to the national union were well in place by mid-1936. By the end of 1936, less than a month before the Birmingham production of *Altars of Steel* was to open, the massive organizing campaign of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee had recruited more than 125,000 steel workers and the steel companies were taking more desperate and violent measures to quell the workers. While *Altars of Steel* was ultimately performed outside of any of the “steel towns,” it premiered amidst the heightening tensions that would result in the Memorial Day Massacre in Chicago only a month later, as well as the numerous “Little Steel” strikes throughout the country. It is of little surprise that a steel company would strive to remove this social drama from the tense environment already in place. Henry P. Guzda, “United Steelworkers of America: 26th Convention,” *Monthly Labor Review* 115, no. 12 (1992), 46-7; Maeva Marcus, *Truman and the Steel Seizure Case: The Limits of Presidential Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 51; Kenneth Warren, *Big Steel: The First Century of the United States Steel Corporation, 1901-2001*, 164-6.

¹⁸ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 223-227; Feldman, *Politics, Society and the Klan in Alabama*, 243-246.

¹⁹ Thomas Hall-Rogers, *Altars of Steel*, NARA, Entry 850, National Office Correspondence with Regional Offices, Region 3 – FL, Box 62, “AL – Southern Play Bureau,” *Altars of Steel* #1-3, title page.

against auditions for *Gone With the Wind* and the opening of Frank Capra's new movie, *Lost Horizon*. In spite of this competition, the Atlanta production of *Altars of Steel* quickly became one of the most discussed southern plays of the 1930s. Two major city newspapers, *The Atlanta Constitution* and *The Atlanta Georgian*, ran a series of articles evaluating the merits and deficiencies of the play's political ideas. *Altars of Steel* was variously described as "beyond question the most impressive stage offering ever seen in Atlanta . . . as great a play as was ever written," "about as Communistic – as a health talk," and "infested with germs of hate and war." Hallie Flanagan describes the play's reception as prophetic:

Audiences crowded the theatre for *Altars of Steel*. They praised the play. They blamed the play. They fought over the play. They wrote to the papers: "Dangerous propaganda!" . . . Columnists fought over it. Mildred Seydell of the *Atlanta Georgian*, while calling it "magnificent, gripping, perfectly cast," found it as "dangerous as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."²⁰

This quote begs the question – was *Altars of Steel* really as "dangerous as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" to the people of the South? The flurry of debate surrounding the Atlanta production and the suspicious activity revolving around a cancelled production in Birmingham some three months earlier point to a play with great potential for social and political upheaval. While the FTP as a whole never caught on

²⁰ Ralph T. Jones, "Altars of Steel Highly Praised as Best Drama Ever Presented Here," *Atlanta Constitution*, 2 April 1937, 11; Tarleton Collier, "Behind the Headlines," *Atlanta Georgian*, 6 April 1937, 3; Mildred Seydell, "Altars of Steel Aids Communism with Tax Money," *Atlanta Georgian*, 4 April 1937, 4D; Flanagan, *Arena*, 89. In an amusing rebuttal to Seydell's commentary, *The Emory Wheel* referred to her as "Mildred (Self-Love) Seydell," writing that her complaints about the production gave it a "four star rating." For a detailed discussion of the newspaper coverage of *Altars of Steel* in Atlanta, see Susan Duffy, *American Labor on Stage: Dramatic Interpretations of the Steel and Textile Industries in the 1930s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 96-101 and John Russell Poole, *The Federal Theatre Project in Georgia and Alabama: An Historical Analysis of Government Theatre in the Deep South* (Diss., University of Georgia, Athens, 1995), 80-88; *A Brief History of the Federal Theatre in the South*, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series V - Scrapbooks, "Federal Theatre in the South Scrapbook," Box 35, Georgia – 12.



Figure 21: Section of the program for the Atlanta production of *Altars of Steel*. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

in the Southern Region with the intensity seen in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, or any number of smaller cities or towns in these regions, *Altars of Steel's* powerful regional themes, innovative style of production tailored to the show and its audience, and knowledge of the region that could only be gained by years of life experience demonstrate together just how relevant and timely regional productions could be.²¹

In fact, of all the plays, musicals, circuses, variety shows, and other performances Federal Theatre produced in the Southern Region, *Altars of Steel* stands out as the one that should have laid a solid foundation for Federal Theatre in the South. Yet, even as it drew its inspiration from regional sources and talent, *Altars of Steel* also challenged the social, political, and economic hegemony of the South. I suggest that the implicit and explicit attacks on the South's extant political and economic structure helped prevent *Altars of Steel* from laying that foundation for Federal Theatre in the South. Unlike the projects in New York and California, which seemed able to absorb or ignore theatrical challenges to their political systems, the Southern Region seems to have regarded it as an unwelcome and dangerous intrusion (perhaps not surprising in a region occupied by Federal troops during Radical Reconstruction only 60 years earlier).

It is curious that in *Arena*, her memoir of the Federal Theatre, Hallie Flanagan discusses *Altars of Steel* only briefly, first touting the media response, then focusing

²¹ The review of *Altars of Steel* printed in *The Emory Wheel* commented on the opening night audience. The reviewer stated that s/he saw "a nice little lesson of leveling off of the 'masses.' Overalls seat by seat with formals." *A Brief History of the Federal Theatre in the South*, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series V - Scrapbooks, "Federal Theatre in the South Scrapbook," Box 35, Georgia – 12.

on an innocuous discussion of the monumental set used in the show. Jane de Hart Mathews (who wrote her landmark study of the Federal Theatre Project with substantial assistance from Flanagan), likewise skims over the show in *Plays, Relief, and Politics*, referring to it only once in passing:

Although the production of *Altars of Steel* a year earlier by the small Atlanta group had prompted *Variety* to proclaim that the ‘spirit of Hallie Flanagan waves over Dixieland,’ neither strong theatre nor strong public support had developed in this fast growing metropolis of the New South.²²

The distinct lack of commentary regarding *Altars of Steel* in the Flanagan and Mathews’ accounts is noteworthy. The Atlanta production created such a stir that newspapers and magazines throughout the country wrote about it. It is uncharacteristic of the politically savvy Flanagan to avoid capitalizing on the proverbial publicity goldmine that the production created both in the struggling south and nationally. While it is possible that Flanagan simply disliked the production for some reason, it is more likely that her uncharacteristic response was related to the overall message that *Altars of Steel* conveyed to the city of Birmingham, the Southern Region, and the country. How, then, did the combination of *Altars of Steel* and the city of Birmingham both promote and contradict the mission of the Federal Theatre Project as a whole?

Inception and Response – The Federal Theatre Project Contradiction

Altars of Steel was written by Thomas Hall-Rogers, a mystery man with close ties to the city of Birmingham and the southern steel industry. Several

²² Jane de Hart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 181.



Figure 22: Scene from the Atlanta production of *Altars of Steel*. Note the expressionistic set (designed by Josef Lentz) that Flanagan describes in *Arena*. Federal Theatre Project Photographs, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University.

contemporaneous newspaper accounts pointed to the use of a pseudonym, citing the playwright's fear of violent repercussions to the play:

The only information obtainable was that he prefers to be known only as Thomas Hall-Rogers, although many believe him to be connected with a steel mill in Birmingham, Ala. "We have instructions to keep the identity of the author an absolute secret. [. . .] I don't think anyone in Atlanta and very few persons anywhere know who he is."²³

The playwright's identity remained a closely guarded secret for decades.

In her comprehensive chapter on the reception of *Altars of Steel*, Susan Duffy suggests that Thomas Hall-Rogers is, in reality, the Birmingham lawyer and newspaperman John Temple Graves, II. Though my recent discovery of new evidence proves this hypothesis untrue, Duffy's explanation of the genesis of the "steel play" demonstrates that the subject had gained great interest in the South. Duffy cites the subject matter of Graves' keynote speech before the directors of Federal Theatre's Southern Region, in which he proposes that the FTP attack social issues that speak to the southern condition; specifically, Graves discusses the abject poverty of the tenant farmers and their land, the place of African Americans in southern institutions, and the new political economy dictated by cotton and steel.²⁴ *Altars of Steel* was submitted to the New York Play Bureau for evaluation a mere six weeks after Graves' speech, and the Atlanta production opened less than six months

²³ "Problem Play Author's Name is Kept Secret," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 18 April 1937, in *A Brief History of the Federal Theatre in the South*, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series V - Scrapbooks, "Federal Theatre in the South Scrapbook," Box 35, Georgia - 17.

²⁴ Qtd. in John McGee, *Federal Theatre of the South: A Supplement to the Federal Theatre National Bulletin*, Quarterly Bulletin 1, 2 (October 1936), NARA, Entry 920, Regional Publications Describing Federal Theatre Activities, 1936-1939, Box 357, n. pag.

later.²⁵ In addition, the Birmingham Federal Theatre unit produced a staged reading of *Altars of Steel* for the participants in the conference the very day that Graves called for “a play about steel.” It was, in fact, in response to Graves’ call and the “profound impression [*Altars of Steel* made] on the assembly” of Southern officials,²⁶ that the Southern branch of the play bureau submitted *Altars of Steel* to the New York office for reading and approval.

In my archival research, I have identified a series of previously unknown letters that identify the playwright of *Altars of Steel* as J. W. Bancroft. Josiah (Joe) Bancroft was a physiotherapist at the TCI Hospital in Fairfield, Alabama, in 1930, and received at least one letter from John McGee at TCI Hospital in 1936.²⁷ In his role as a physiotherapist at the local hospital, owned and run by the local steel mill, Bancroft would have come into repeated contact with mill workers who had been injured or maimed on the job; everyday he saw the repercussions of steel mill accidents and the often futile struggles of the workers to regain pieces of their former lives. He worked for TCI, a steel company that had been forced out by U.S. Steel in 1907 (but which the local people refused to refer to as anything other than TCI). Even into the 1980s locals maintained this fierce pride and ownership of the *local*

²⁵ Duffy, *American Labor on Stage*, 83-85.

²⁶ John McGee, *Federal Theatre of the South*, n. pag.

²⁷ Fairfield is approximately 8 miles southwest of Birmingham, and was the occasional home of TCI and many of the steelworkers. Fairfield was founded by (or due to the influence of) TCI in 1909 in order to attract skilled workers to the mill. The hospital in which Bancroft was employed was owned and run by TCI, and likely dealt with any injuries incurred by steelworkers.

steel mill. As one manager explained in a 1988 interview, they “did not need U.S. Steel to tell us how to run our business.”²⁸

Bancroft impressed McGee with his writing and his dedication to theatre. He had worked and been in communication with McGee in that capacity for several years. In fact, when Flanagan asked McGee to propose a plan for the South, his plan included two supervisors that would have “intimate knowledge of the creative workers in the state and [. . .] have made important strides toward the establishment of an indigenous theatre.” McGee suggested two individuals for these positions, Frances Nimmo Green (who would become the director of the Southern Play Bureau) and J. W. Bancroft. In this recommendation, McGee noted specifically that Green, “whose courageous struggle to develop a serious expression of Alabama life in terms of the theatre [was] without parallel in the south,” would likely receive a warm reception from the Alabama WPA and theatre groups. In contrast, Bancroft had made some enemies:

His selection may not be universally popular, but with nine-tenths of the people who are sincerely concerned for the development of real theatre in Alabama, his name should be welcome. Any who oppose [sic] are likely to do so from purely personal interests.²⁹

Despite McGee’s recommendation, the FTP passed over Bancroft when it hired southern professionals for its ranks.

Bancroft next appeared within the FTP as the writer of the great “steel play,” *Altars of Steel*. Yet, he adamantly refused any public association with *Altars of Steel*,

²⁸ Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 41.

²⁹ John McGee to Mary Weber, 14 January 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 62, “AL – Correspondence #1.”

and can only be connected to the play by name in three previously unknown letters that I have located. In the first (and only) letter addressed to J. W. Bancroft, McGee mentions, but does not name, the play:

I hope you were not too much upset by all the suggestions I made about the play. It seemed to me that the opportunity is too great for us to miss. Cameron, our director in Indianapolis is absolutely crazy about the script as we rearranged it and would like very much to do a production in Indianapolis.³⁰

The only specific mention of the play in this letter occurs when McGee notes that he has located the ideal actor for one of the lead roles in the play, Mr. Worth.

Francis Nimmo Green and the Southern Play Bureau filtered the rest of Bancroft's FTP communications so that he received no personal mail regarding the play (or showing any connection to the FTP). In response to what must have been a specific request, McGee wrote:

Tell Joe Bancroft that the rental cont[r]acts will have to be entered into through the New York Bureau, and that there is no reason why the correspondence cannot be carried on strictly under his pen name. In fact, the New York Bureau does not know him under any other name.³¹

McGee's enthusiasm for the project notwithstanding, *Altars of Steel's* development would remain troubled. In a fit of frustration, McGee wrote to Nimmo Green regarding the most recent version of the play:

³⁰ It is interesting to note that McGee's letter to Bancroft also included the promise of a FTP operation in Fairfield, Alabama, the location of TCI Hospital and the town in which many of the steel mill workers lived. The letter implies that McGee was open to Bancroft directing the project, and that he planned to discuss the matter with Mary Weber of the Alabama WPA. The only other direct correspondence I have located is a telegram to Bancroft, which noted an "excellent," unnamed script. John McGee to J. W. Bancroft, 24 September 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 62, "Correspondence #2;" John McGee to J. W. Bancroft, 9 September 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 62, "AL – Correspondence # 1."

³¹ John McGee to Frances Nimmo Green, 11 November 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 62, "AL – Southern Play Bureau."

I am also very discouraged about Joe's new version of *Altars of Steel*. He has deliberately gone back to some of the earlier scenes and has thrown away much that we already gave him. [. . .] To be truthful with you, the thing quite distresses me because here is one of our great chances, and certainly a great chance for Joe, but he seems to be frittering it away. Maybe he just hasn't got it in him – I don't know. [. . .] The stubbornness [sic] of the fellow and his ambitions get the best of me sometimes, and, while I don't want to discourage him unnecessarily, I think he should be given to understand he has much to learn about the art of playwriting. If he could ever get that through his head, he would have a chance.³²

Even before the FTP production of *Altars of Steel*, McGee realized its potential importance. In this letter he asks Nimmo Green to locate a copy of the version read at the conference earlier in the fall and send it to him so that he could work out some revisions on his own. In spite of some damning criticism from the National Play Bureau, McGee refused to give up on *Altars of Steel*.

Altars of Steel did not fare well in the play vetting process of the New York Play Policy Board. In a letter to Hiram Motherwell, the director of the program,³³ playreader and professional playwright John Wexley writes of *Altars of Steel*:

My most serious criticism of the play is . . . that it is hardly a play [. . .] It lacks genuine suspense, contains a minimum of humor, if any, and fails completely to project any convincing characters. [. . .] I would venture that Federal Theatre audiences would find the play in its present state, very uninteresting and in many places ludicrously unreal, in view of the general, common knowledge of contemporary actualities in the steel industry.³⁴

Another play reader, Louis Solomon, commented that *Altars of Steel* showed an “Improbable simplification of a complex problem [and was] too naïve to merit

³² John McGee to Frances Nimmo Green, 3 November 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 62, “AL – Southern Play Bureau.”

³³ A relatively short-lived board, the Play Policy Board was responsible for play reading and approval on a national basis for the Federal Theatre.

³⁴ Letter, John Wexley to Hiram Motherwell, 27 March 1937, LOC, Playreader Reports File, 1935-39, Box 138, “*Altars of Steel*.”

consideration.”³⁵ John Rimassa, the final playreader, also rejected the play, writing that it is “Very bad! [. . .] The conclusion rammed at the audience is: benevolent corporations with assets up to \$25,000,000 make for a happy humanity while very large corporations spell disaster for mankind.”³⁶

Regardless of the opinions of the playreaders, *Altars of Steel* is agitprop theatre; it paints a cruel (if occasionally distorted) picture of the lives of the people who would be watching the play, assigns blame, and calls for action. While it may be a “simplification of a complex problem,” it is also a highly effective piece of theatre. The play moves quickly from one scene to another, an effect that was improved by the versatile, representative set used in the show. The characters have some level of psychological depth but are not too complex; there are clear heroes and villains. Moreover, the play deals with a highly relevant topic for the people of Birmingham. It was an ideal play for the Birmingham FTP.

It is curious that the unanimous decision to strike *Altars of Steel* from the list of potential Federal Theatre productions was made in New York only a few days before the production opened in Atlanta, and months after it was scheduled to open in Birmingham.³⁷ While it is easy to dismiss this apparent inconsistency in approval and

³⁵ Louis Solomon, “Playreader Report: *Altars of Steel*,” LOC, Playreader Reports File, 1935-39, Box 138, “*Altars of Steel*.”

³⁶ John Rimassa, “Playreader Report: *Altars of Steel*,” LOC, Playreader Reports File, 1935-39, Box 138, “*Altars of Steel*.”

³⁷ Just as *Altars of Steel* slipped through the numerous rejections of the various playreaders, Hallie Flanagan was in the process of instituting a new policy for play approval. During the fall of 1936, buoyed by the promise of WPA Administrator Harry Hopkins that he would support any Federal Theatre play that had Flanagan’s personal approval, Flanagan insisted that all Federal Theatre production plans must be made at least three months in advance, pass through the Play Policy Board, and then gain Flanagan’s approval prior to production. This process was based on the system already in place in Birmingham, in which the local Play Bureau collected regional material and sent the most promising to the national Bureau for approval. While this procedure was still in the process of being

production as symptomatic of a large federal organization plagued by bureaucratic administrative procedures and poor communications, correspondence between Hallie Flanagan, Deputy Director John McGee, and Regional Director Josef Lentz makes it clear that all three knew and approved of the production, and McGee and Lentz both helped mount the production. A letter dated March 16, 1937, from McGee to Flanagan details the production's process:

The Atlanta production of *Altars of Steel* will open March 29 and promises to be an exciting production. Gordon Graham is doing a swell job and the production should break all records in the South. [Josef Lentz's] design is particularly startling. Most of the action will take place upon a large cog wheel, width 18 feet in diameter flanked by various other cog wheels of various sizes and heights, all of them moving in relation to each other. The background will consist of rows of huge blast furnaces which fade into the distance in forced perspective, so that there appears to be literally miles of them. Instead of a curtain there will be huge, thick steel doors which roll in and out.³⁸

In deference to the playwright's wishes and because it was written and performed under his penname, I will refer to the playwright of *Altars of Steel*, J. W. Bancroft, as Thomas Hall-Rogers for the remainder of the discussion. Thomas Hall-Rogers' dynamic sixteen-scene play is set in Birmingham, and was intended for the Birmingham Federal Theatre. Initially, it seemed like a match made in Federal Theatre heaven; a play about Birmingham, for Birmingham. *Altars of Steel* went through an extensive workshopping process in Birmingham, received several public

implemented when *Altars of Steel* began rehearsals, it is clear that the intended January production was subject to this system, as is evidenced by Verner Haldene's proposal for the first quarter of 1937, in which he places the opening of *Altars of Steel* in late January. Jane de Hart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 96-7; Poole, 56-59; Verner Haldene, "Production Bulletin for three-month period beginning January 1, 1937," 29 December 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 62, "Southern Play Bureau."

³⁸ Memorandum, John McGee to Hallie Flanagan, 16 March 1937, NARA, E839, General Correspondence with the National Office, Box 25, Southern Trip, 2-3.

readings, and despite some concerns about the script, Southern FTP administrators touted it as a shining example of the possibilities of indigenous drama.³⁹ Early October saw the Birmingham Unit – not the Southern Regional center of New Orleans – hosting the Southern Conference for the Federal Theatre and performing numerous pieces for the many visiting theatre dignitaries. The Birmingham FTP appeared poised for breakthroughs with both the national organization and its local audience. On October 27, 1936, Birmingham participated in the national opening of Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*; the Audience Survey Report completed for the production notes public support for the continuation of the project as a community theatre.⁴⁰ Both critics and the FTP administration recorded the opening as a major success for the Birmingham Project. While the local reviews are not stellar, they are supportive and encouraging. Yet as 1936 drew to a close, the future of the Birmingham unit appeared surprisingly uncertain.

In a brief November article in *The Birmingham Post*, Verner Haldene, the director of the Birmingham Unit, told reporters that:

The Jefferson Theatre, home of Birmingham's Federal Theatre unit, will be dark this week and probably until after Christmas [. . .] Waiting on final orders from the regional office, the theatre may take its success, "It Can't Happen Here," on tour through the state. [. . . T]he unit from Tampa may arrive in Birmingham from Florida successes to take its stand before the local footlights for a stay of a month or more.⁴¹

³⁹ Poole, 51.

⁴⁰ It is also important to note that the Birmingham audience submitted only 22 surveys, which serve as the basis for this report. Dana Rush, "Audience Survey Report for *It Can't Happen Here*" (23 November 1936), NARA, E907, National Play Bureau Audience Survey Reports, Box 254.

⁴¹ Clipping File, Birmingham Federal Theatre, Birmingham Public Library, "Federal Unit Drops Curtain" (25 November 1936), *The Birmingham Post*.

The announcement that the theatre would remain dark for at least six weeks is ominous, particularly considering the unplanned alternatives for the period that would follow. The unnamed author of this article goes on to note that the Birmingham Federal Theatre will “begin work on *Altars of Steel*, a play of the development of steel in Birmingham, for January production.”⁴² Haldene’s tentative program for the first quarter of 1937 confirms these plans: “The first production, ‘Altars of Steel,’ by Thomas-Hall Rogers [sic], to be prepared as quickly as possible and staged during the month of January.”⁴³ From McGee’s correspondence regarding royalties for the play, it is clear that he also planned to produce *Altars of Steel* in Birmingham in early 1937. In a letter to Frances Nimmo Green, head of the Southern Play Bureau, McGee agreed to pay royalties for two weeks of performances in Birmingham; he went on to note that he felt that it would run longer and that a number of other projects would compete for further productions throughout the country, thus increasing royalties for Bancroft.⁴⁴ This January production never materialized.

Part of the explanation may lie in a series of letters between John McGee, Josef Lentz, and Blanche Ralston, Regional Director of the Women’s and Professional Division in the South, which discussed an unspecified “situation” in Birmingham. The problem was related to Haldene, and the implication is that McGee, Lentz, and Ralston had been in a conversation over the viability of Haldene’s

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Verner Haldene, “Production Bulletin for three-month period beginning January 1, 1937,” 29 December 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 62, “Southern Play Bureau.”

⁴⁴ John McGee to Frances Nimmo Green, 11 November 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 62, “AL – Southern Play Bureau.”

continued employment with the FTP for some time. As early as November 5, 1936, three weeks before Haldene's statement to the press about the upcoming season, John McGee wrote an apologetic letter to Harriett Adams, Amusement Supervisor of the City of Birmingham. In this letter McGee noted that he had already canceled one of the productions she did not approve of, Ayn Rand's *The Night of January 16th*, and reassured her:

For your private information, however, the entire responsibility for the Federal Theatre program in Birmingham is now vested in Mr. J. L. Lentz. [. . .] I have asked him to come and discuss the entire matter of program with you. Please rest assured that we wish to do everything possible to conform to the official regulations governing amusements in the City of Birmingham.⁴⁵

McGee's letter implied that the choice of FTP program violated the Birmingham city code, and that Haldene was responsible for the infraction. While Haldene's impropriety is not named in the archives, he was accused of flaws from homosexuality to communism. However, it is clear that Haldene was about to be replaced as director of the FTP in Birmingham. In a December letter to Blanche Ralston, McGee explained why Haldene was still employed by the Birmingham FTP:

My only reason for not removing him from the Birmingham situation long before this was that I have been absolutely unable to find a proper director to take his place. Now, however, I think that the situation is solved and that he should be out of there before the first of the year.⁴⁶

McGee was en route to an interview with a potential replacement for Haldene when this letter was written. He also updated Josef Lentz, and explained that he planned to give Haldene another chance on the FTP, but that it would be in "an entirely different

⁴⁵ John McGee to Harriett B. Adams, 5 November 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 62, "AL – Correspondence #2."

⁴⁶ John McGee to Blanche W. Ralston, 15 December 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 62, "AL – Correspondence #2."

situation from that which prevails in Birmingham,” and that he would be “under continuous surveillance, and hence, [could] do no particular damage.”⁴⁷

While McGee noted the importance of containing Haldene and the “situation,” he seemed to feel that the change in leadership would avert any immediate danger from the Birmingham unit. Verner Haldene was quietly transferred to Detroit in early 1937 (a move that coincided with major upheaval in the Birmingham FTP); yet the damage had been done. The disapproval of city and state officials increased, and when Congress cut the Federal Theatre budget that January, the Birmingham Federal Theatre Unit was shut down altogether; *Altars of Steel* disappeared from the city of Birmingham until it opened in Atlanta less than three months later.

The timing of these events in conjunction with the silence of prominent Federal Theatre personnel is suspicious. Though the documented explanation for the play’s physical removal from Birmingham is that the Atlanta Little Theatre Guild invited the Federal Theatre to join a cooperative community unit, the cancellation of a Federal Theatre production for political or social reasons happened more often than one might imagine in a “free, adult, and uncensored” theatre; *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Sing for Your Supper* and *Ethiopia* are glaring examples of this practice. Is *Altars of Steel* an example of a text so riddled with social and political commentary and revolutionary ideas that it was a legitimate threat to the social, political, and economic order of the Deep South? If so, why would Hallie Flanagan – who had a history of refusing to allow production of politically seditious plays such as this – allow the play to be produced by Federal Theatre, particularly in a region in which the project was

⁴⁷ John McGee to Josef Lentz, 15 December 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 62, “AL – Correspondence #2.”

already struggling? On the other hand, it is certainly possible that Flanagan and the other Federal Theatre personnel saw *Altars of Steel* as highly relevant indigenous drama for the people of Birmingham, and not necessarily as a radical attempt to subvert the southern hegemony. Regardless, it is noteworthy that the troubled rehearsal and production experience of *Altars of Steel* bears a striking similarity to that of Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* (which would occur in New York only a few months later); perhaps the ideology inherent in a labor-play revolving around worker rights, unions, the threat of company violence, and ultimately the uprising of a mixed-race working class was, in point of fact, so disturbing to the social and economic hegemony of the city that both the play and the Birmingham Federal Theatre Unit needed to be eliminated; it was, quite simply, *too* relevant to the people of Birmingham.

*'Altars of Steel' – Benevolent Southern Gentlemen & Greedy Northern
Conglomerates*

Altars of Steel dramatizes the story of the local Birmingham steel mill that is bought out by a national company from the North, United Steel. A Communist worker, Draper, attempts to incite discontent amongst the workers, and the new northern conglomerate owner, Karl Jung, alienates the workers by demanding a work speed-up, reducing wages, paying the workers in money that can only be used at the company store, prohibiting worker meetings and unions, and disbanding the safety

department.⁴⁸ He refuses to upgrade the worn-out equipment, and confides in the management team that he plans to replace the old furnaces and machinery only when they break; at that time, he plans to drastically reduce the number of workers as well. In stark contrast to the benevolent reign of the previous owner, Mr. Worth, Jung clearly cares for neither the working men nor the community. In spite of repeated warnings by the former management – warnings that become so forceful that the entire team resigns instead of ordering the laborers to continue working on the unsafe hearth – Jung demands increased production. Nineteen workers die brutal deaths in the accident that follows. Urged on by the Communist upstart, the survivors riot and begin tearing the mill apart in their efforts to find and kill Jung. Trapped as he waits for the United Steel strikebreakers to arrive and deserted by the corrupt civil authorities, Jung begs Worth to reason with the men. Worth agrees, on the condition that Jung admits responsibility for the men’s deaths and reinstate Worth’s company majority. Jung agrees (though later destroys the evidence of his guilt); Worth endeavors to reason with the men but tempers flare and the Communist fires a shot at

⁴⁸ In another parallel, the character Karl Jung arrives in the play as the representative of United Steel. In 1936, U.S. Steel appointed Arthur H. Young as the first vice president of industrial relations. Charged with negotiating a compromise between the company and the workers, Young’s time at U.S. Steel ended in early 1937. His employment history is a model of safety and worker advocacy; he was a safety expert for the U.S. Employees Compensations Commission, chief safety expert of arsenals and Navy yards during World War I, consultant to the Secretary of War during World War II, and served in a variety of labor organizations. A clear advocate of the company union, I suspect that Jung is used in the play as a sardonic reminder of Arthur Young’s (limited) time at U.S. Steel, a time that was punctuated by his own attempts to ease management-labor relations safely. In 1935, Young’s response to the Wagner Bill was quoted in *Time*; he said he would “rather ‘go to jail or be convicted as a felon’ than obey the provisions of the Wagner Bill. ‘I would never accept or submit to any formula for the conduct of human relationships in industry which is an unpalatable and unrighteous and unjust technique imposed on us by demagogues.’” “Oysters, Junk, Perfume, Steel,” *Time*, 3 June 1935, Online, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,883430-1,00.html>; Henry M. McKiven, Jr., *Iron and Steel: Class, Race, and Community in Birmingham, Alabama, 1875-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), Sanford M. Jacoby, *Employing Bureaucracy: Managers, Unions, and the Transformation of Work in the 20th Century* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 169.

Worth, killing him. Many die in the ensuing bloodbath, and the play closes with the following announcement reported over a loudspeaker:

The Special grand jury investigating the tragic death of nineteen men in the fatal explosion of Number Four open hearth at the plant of the United Steel, Iron, and Coal Company has returned a verdict absolving any individual from criminal guilt. The verdict recites that while the men were killed in the firing of a defective furnace, there is no evidence to prove definitely who gave the order to fire the furnace. There are charges and counter charges of political pressure and bribery to influence the verdict of NOT GUILTY.⁴⁹

On the surface, the play appears simply to replay a series of events that actually occurred when Judge Elbert Gary (U.S. Steel's paternalistic chief executive in Birmingham) passed away and new management arrived. As the play portrays, the new management was unconcerned with worker safety, took advantage of the workers, forced a company union on the men, and conspired with local police and government officials to prevent worker organization.⁵⁰ During the early years of the Depression, steel production in Birmingham reached its all-time low, mills operated at between 40 and 60 percent of capacity, and the blast furnaces that once lit the nighttime sky with a continuous scarlet glow burned only sporadically.⁵¹ While these conditions are certainly reflected in the play, it is also important to note the similarity to the events of 1907. Prior to the financial panic of 1907, TCI was one of the major employers in the city of Birmingham as well as a leading producer of pig iron for the United States. The economic crisis caught TCI in the midst of expansion and associated debt, and the dramatic decrease in product demand left the company

⁴⁹ Hall-Rogers, *Altars of Steel*, 16.1.

⁵⁰ Rogers, et al., 470.

⁵¹ Marjorie Longenecker White, *The Birmingham District: An Industrial History and Guide* (Birmingham: Birmingham Historical Society at the Birmingham Publishing Company, 1981), 65.

financially vulnerable. With Moore and Schley, a New York brokering firm heavily invested in TCI, close to collapse and amidst widespread fear of the repercussions of such a failure in the stock market, the executive board of U.S. Steel debated the purchase of TCI. After numerous conferences, the board sent an envoy to President Theodore Roosevelt to determine his position regarding the major problem associated with the purchase; the combined interests of U.S. Steel and TCI would constitute 60 percent of the iron and steel market, thereby creating a monopoly.⁵² Roosevelt's tacit approval focused on the benevolent gesture proposed by U.S. Steel. He noted that the representatives of U.S. Steel:

Feel that it is immensely to their interest, as to the interest of every responsible business man, to try and prevent a panic and general industrial smash up at this time . . . of course I could not advise them to take the action proposed [but] I felt it no public duty of mine to interpose any objection.⁵³

Buoyed by Roosevelt's support, U.S. Steel purchased TCI for approximately one-third of its market value.

U.S. Steel's "munificent" purchase of TCI is replayed in the early scenes of *Altars of Steel* with an almost alarming realism. As the play unfolds, the audience learns that Mr. Worth is heavily in debt due largely to his attempts to take care of his workers during the Depression. In spite of extraordinary efforts, United Steel

⁵² This description of the events preceding U.S. Steel's acquisition of TCI is a result of the compilation of several studies. See Marjorie Longenecker White, *The Birmingham District: An Industrial History and Guide*, 91-97; Rogers, et al., *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State*, 284-286; Kenneth Warren, *Big Steel: The First Century of the United States Steel Corporation, 1901-2001* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 77-83; Ethel Armes, *The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama* (Birmingham, Alabama: Chamber of Commerce, 1910), Joseph Bishop Bucklin, *Theodore Roosevelt and His Time Shown in His Own Letters*, Vol. 2 (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), 54-63.

⁵³ T. R. Roosevelt to Attorney General Bonaparte (4 November 1907), qtd. in *Bulletin of the American Iron and Steel Institute* 43, no. 2 (1 February 1909), 1.

purchases every bank in the state of Alabama so as to call Worth's loans and foreclose when he is unable to pay. Worth appeals to the federal government: "With the acquisition of this property they will control over sixty percent [of America's steel business, but] the government does not feel called upon to intervene."⁵⁴ In *Altars of Steel*, United Steel acquires the Southern Steel Company for one quarter of its value.

While the parallels to the U.S. Steel procurement of TCI in 1907 and United Steel's hostile takeover of the Southern Steel Company in *Altars of Steel* are striking,⁵⁵ the play goes on to reflect and challenge the social and cultural hegemony of contemporaneous Birmingham. At this point, TCI (owned and run by U.S. Steel) was struggling along with Birmingham and Alabama. U.S. Steel's profits and productivity plummeted in the 1930s, dropping from profits of two hundred million dollars in 1929 to a loss of over seventy million in 1932. The Docena coal mine (just outside of Birmingham) saw its payroll drop from \$113,261 in 1930 to \$3,183 just three years later. One miner explained that he worked three days in approximately fourteen months, and that nearly everyone he had worked with was laid off.⁵⁶ Times were desperate in Birmingham.

One of the first scenes of *Altars of Steel* introduces the concept of unionization as well as a Communist worker, who immediately sets out to inflame tensions among the other working men:

⁵⁴ Hall-Rogers, *Altars of Steel*, 4.2-4.

⁵⁵ See Atkins, Flynt, Rogers, and Ward, *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State*, 285.

⁵⁶ Marlene Hunt Rikard, "An Experiment in Welfare Capitalism: The Health Care Services of the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company" (Ph.D. diss., University of Alabama, 1983), 274-5.

Bill: Then stand by the company. That's where you get your pay from. The more money the company makes the more time you'll work.

1st Worker: Ain't nobody going to talk me into joinin' no union.

Checker: Maybe not – but you ought to hear the talk that passes this window every day. Somebody ought to tell Old Man Worth.

Draper: (*who until now has been in the background*) Turn informer, would you? Don't you know enough to stick by your class? (*There is a sudden silence*)

Bill: Who the hell are you buddie?⁵⁷

This scene shows several facets of the Southern struggle for power during this period.

First, the seasoned working men in this scene feel no need to join a union because their current employer, Mr. Worth, is a reasonable, caring, and genteel man in their eyes.⁵⁸ As is seen in the following scene, when one of the seasoned workers makes known Draper's Communist beliefs, Mr. Worth calls Draper to his office to discuss the matter. In the face of Draper's incendiary accusations and refusal to discuss his position rationally, Mr. Worth gives him an advance on his paycheck, allows the man to take both his Communist leaflets and his pistol back to work in the mill, and says simply, "He's so young . . . and he's a sick man – sick in his mind."⁵⁹ Mr. Worth's words not only show his kind practicality, but demonstrate a paternal concern and pity for the poor, mentally-ill Communists that populate the city causing trouble. He does not take Draper seriously, in spite of his loaded pistol and inflammatory ideas;

⁵⁷ Hall-Rogers, *Altars of Steel*, 8.

⁵⁸ By 1917, officials at TCI came to believe that increased productivity (and decreased labor unrest) could be gleaned from the workers if they provided better work conditions. In 1921, John Eagan, chairman of the American Cast Iron Pipe Company, revealed his "Golden Rule" approach to big business. By following a Christian model, Eagan argued that the employers could be "fathers" with a "divinely sanctioned responsibility" for the children, or employees. While Worth is not referred to as a "father" in the script, he clearly performs the role in the way that he cares for his employees; he cares for their welfare, allows them to make their own decisions, and counsels good behavior and responsibility. Henry M. McKiven, Jr., *Iron and Steel: Class, Race, and Community in Birmingham, Alabama, 1875-1920*, 115-7.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 15.



Figure 23: Scene from Atlanta production of *Altars of Steel*. Early in the play, this scene shows the men working and the mill running as it should. Federal Theatre Project Photographs, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University.

this treatment effectively robs Draper of his political virility in the eyes of both the working men and the audience. Dennis Jerz, in his analysis of *Altars of Steel* within the context of machinery and technology, argues that Draper is “a drifter, a newcomer, [. . .] a murderer [and a] rhetorically effective agitator . . . not a sympathetic character.”⁶⁰ While it is certainly true that Draper, the man who ultimately shoots and kills Mr. Worth, is dangerous, it is vital to realize his role within the context of the social and cultural hegemony. Draper’s communistic beliefs in conjunction with his outspoken, irrational, and blasphemous remarks place him in a position in which he is seen as one who capitalizes on the tragic deaths of fellow workers in order to create chaos, not as a leader who will better the situation of the workers.

It is also interesting to note that, while the play makes no mention of the KKK, the men react with a careful vigilance once they learn that he is a Communist with an eye toward unionizing. Even Mr. Worth asks his foreman to “keep an eye on Draper.”⁶¹ While it is certainly possible that this reaction is due to a distrust of outsiders or anxiety related to unionizing and strikes, it is also possible that this reaction carries an undercurrent of fear with respect to a Klan backlash. The Klan’s response to Communism and unionization in Birmingham was both documented and violent for men and women of all races; serious repercussions including beatings, murder, and attacks upon one’s family befell those who took part in such affairs during this period. The lack of Klan presence is conspicuous in the play, particularly

⁶⁰ Dennis G Jerz, *Technology in American Drama, 1920-1950: Soul and Society in the Age of the Machine* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003), 88.

⁶¹ Hall-Rogers, 15.

when one considers that the play was written during a “wave of anti-Communist police repression” that reached its height with the beating of Joseph Gelders, an educated Jewish Birmingham native who had become the political liaison for the Communist party.⁶²

Finally, *Altars of Steel* calls attention to Southern pride and nationalism. In the play, Southerners are characterized by well-mannered, courteous men like Mr. Worth and honorable, hard-working laborers. As long as Mr. Worth controls the steel mill, the men are safe and basically content; it is only when the Northern steel company purchases the company that trouble begins. Their reign ushers in a time of strikes, riots, and murder, a period that is capitalized on by Draper, the Communist from the North. Again, the workers shun Draper until the Northern management treats them poorly, thereby inciting the ensuing problems. It is also fitting that it is the Southerners who suffer at the end of the play. After raising the mob of angry workers to a fever pitch, Draper shoots at Mr. Worth, who has returned from his resignation on the condition that he will regain his power over the mill and reinstate the previous working conditions for the men; Draper’s shot kills him, leaving his son to follow in his footsteps.⁶³ Here, the Communist murders the beloved Southern gentleman while the Yankee Industrialists greedily cause nineteen workers to burn to death. The play ends with Jung escaping entirely, the fate of the southern mill uncertain, and the workers in a state of anger and frustration that would make any

⁶² Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 130-1.

⁶³ Several different versions of the play exist, each of which is structured slightly differently and sports a different ending. In the version on file at the National Archives Mr. Worth’s son is killed at the end of the play as his father tries to diffuse the angry mob of workers. The version discussed in this chapter was produced for Atlanta and Miami audiences.



Figure 24: Riot scene from Atlanta production of *Altars of Steel*. Note the three men positioned between the owners and workers, pointing weapons at the rioters and, with them, the audience. Federal Theatre Project Photographs, Special Collections & Archives. George Mason University.

steel mill owner wish to sneak quietly out of the theatre before anyone realizes his identity. This unsettled and provocative ending leaves one appalled at the outright injustice of the situation, and it is not difficult to imagine the agitated state of mind that would engulf a Birmingham audience. The lesson in the abuse of power ends in a call for the South to rise from the ashes of the steel mill and regain its resources, people, and pride. In this way, *Altars of Steel* plays on southern pride, nationalism, and the potential power of the proportionally enormous working class in a way that clearly challenges the social, political, and cultural hegemony of Birmingham.

Conclusions

Vital to the study of the Federal Theatre Project as both national theatre and as a reflection of the constantly evolving relationship between Federal Theatre and its surrounding communities, *Altars of Steel* serves as a case study for that troubled region – the South. The production – and lack of production – of *Altars of Steel* provides fertile ground for the study of Federal Theatre and its ability to inspire indigenous drama that is truly by and about the people of a given region. In this particular case, it appears that the production reflected the people of Birmingham so closely that it was deemed dangerous, particularly in light of the contemporaneous issues surrounding U.S. Steel and the American Federation of Labor. In its ability to incite change, *Altars of Steel* provides a glimpse into at least a portion of the working class minds in Birmingham during the tumultuous Great Depression, illustrating the

fears of the dominant hegemony and the potential power of the working class in Birmingham, Alabama.⁶⁴

And so, was *Altars of Steel* as “dangerous as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” to the hierarchy of power in place in the South? In Birmingham – quite possibly. Certainly, the play both reflects and challenges the political, social, and economic hegemony prevalent in Birmingham during the Great Depression. A product of a troubled time, *Altars of Steel* follows in the tradition of agitprop plays like *Waiting for Lefty* and *The Cradle Will Rock*. It offers no simple solution, refrains from glossing over tough issues, and forces the audience to contemplate the chaos of the powerless worker. While it may not have led to a riot in Birmingham, it is likely that it would at the very least have provided the impetus for future discussion among the workers. Unfortunately, the Birmingham Federal Theatre Project was a promise left unfulfilled; *Altars of Steel* is evidence that the people of Birmingham were in dire need of an organization that would provide a forum for the issues of the working class. The Federal Theatre response to the pressures upon the Birmingham unit, and to the play as a whole, is another intriguing question that merits further exploration.

⁶⁴ *A Brief History of Federal Theatre in the South* includes a section that outlines the productions of each city as an overview; one of the features is a short statement about the Audience reaction to the show. In the Atlanta section, the majority of the productions are described as “excellent,” “fair,” or “very good.” *Altars of Steel* is the only production that stands out in this regard; its audience reaction is labeled “very interesting.” A clipping from *The Leader* in the March of Progress shows a similar reaction; critic Dudley Glass wrote, “Whether ‘Altars of Steel,’ given its first performance anywhere at the Atlanta Theatre Thursday night, is a great drama, I don’t know. [. . .] I’ve never seen anything like it. This can be said with conviction: It is intensely interesting.” *A Brief History of the Federal Theatre in the South*, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Hallie Flanagan Papers, Series V - Scrapbooks, “Federal Theatre in the South Scrapbook,” Box 35, Georgia – 2, 10.

Storytelling, Chiggers, and the Bible Belt: The Georgia Experiment

Georgians On Stage – Developing the Citizen Artist in the Rural South

And the other thing that we could have done with a little longer run of the Federal Theatre is gotten into experimental regional things that actually grew out of the region itself, rather than being controlled and sent down to us from New York.⁶⁵

~Josef Lentz

A study of the FTP's goals in creating locally relevant theatre is incomplete without discussion of its rural efforts. After all, one of Flanagan's expressed intentions was to create a theatre that was national in scope; for Flanagan, this meant that the FTP had to go beyond the nation's urban centers. More than any other, the decentralized FTP's provided fertile ground for a grassroots, community-based theatre. The FTP chose one man, Herbert Stratton Price, to lead the FTP's efforts to serve the needs of poor Southern cities and surrounding communities; in 1936-37 he and Mary Dirnberger set up community theatres throughout the Black Ankle Belt in rural Georgia, Alabama, and West Virginia.⁶⁶

Consider the story of Herbert Price, a New York actor, director, and stage manager with a background in sociology and an interest in rural community drama. Flanagan paraphrased one of Price's experiences in *Arena* in an often-repeated anecdote:

In many places in Georgia the children were taught to make puppet theatres and puppets, and one day Herbert Price made a discovery. A little

⁶⁵ Josef Lentz, interview by John O'Connor, 7 April 1977, New Orleans, LA, WPA Oral Histories Collection, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University Libraries, 21.

⁶⁶ The Black Ankle Belt designation derives from the bites of chiggers, which tend to congregate around the ankles.

girl tried to smuggle the puppet she had been making home under her ragged dress, and when it was discovered she refused to give it up.

“Hit’s mine. Hit’s the onliest thing I ever had what was mine.”

The theatre changed its activity temporarily, and for the first time every child in the vicinity had a doll – a corncob doll dressed in gay clothes made of old sugar sacking dyed with the berries of the region.⁶⁷

That FTP personnel from New York were able to integrate themselves into this rural southern community to such a degree is testament both to the power of theatre as a transformative and universal device and the power of the communities that embraced the project. This simple example shows the needs of a single child altering – if only temporarily – the activities of the local FTP; she stole a doll, refused to give it back, explained her reasoning, and soon all the local children had their own dolls courtesy of the FTP. The veracity of this story notwithstanding, it is a charming tale of the FTP’s effect on the small rural communities in Georgia, and an example of the mythology that surrounded the FTP’s rural efforts.

The story of this young puppet-thief appears repeatedly in the FTP literature. It epitomizes the goals of the FTP on national, regional and local scales. In this section, I will discuss the Georgia experiment in terms of its goals, achievements, and the mythology that came to surround it. These three distinct threads become tangled before, during, and after the experiment ended, resulting in an example of slippage between stated goals, reality, and the public face of the FTP.

⁶⁷

Flanagan, *Arena*, 92.

“Give me something hard to do . . . :”

“Vital as it is in New York, the Federal Theatre has an even bigger role outside of New York, in districts like the South where only an occasional road company from New York visits the largest cities and a few stock companies and semi-professional theatres fill in the gap. There are small towns, rural communities hundred of miles from a theatre where no one has ever laid eyes on a living actor! [. . .] The Federal Theatre should be expanding right now to fill these needs, reaching out into backward and underprivileged regions, instead of undergoing drastic cuts in scope and personnel.”⁶⁸

~ Lillian Hellman

In the summer of 1936, an Englishman by the name of Herbert Price appeared in Flanagan’s Washington office and asked for “something hard to do.” Flanagan’s description of Price showed a man of ideal interests and experience for the Georgia experiment: “Actor, director, stage manager. His background also included sociology and he was particularly interested in rural community drama.” Flanagan went on to explain that Price, who had been working in the New York City community drama program, and Mary Dirnberger, a FTP worker in North Carolina, would be sent to the South to “serve the recreation needs of the poor quarters of southern cities and the surrounding areas.”⁶⁹

While this description may accurately characterize the ultimate decision to send Price south, archival documents point to a different story. Initially, Flanagan worried that the relief numbers in the South were too small to justify the expenditure of FTP funds. The temptation of theatre that would capitalize on local themes and

⁶⁸ Eleanor Flexner, “Danger in the South: Lillian Hellman interviewed by Eleanor Flexner,” *TAC Magazine* 1, no. 7 (February 1939), 13; 1938 interview qtd. in Hallie Flanagan, “Plan for Future Federal Theatre,” Hallie Flanagan Papers, *T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Series II: General Files of the Federal Theatre Project, Sub-Series 2: Administrative Files, Box 9, “Proposals for a Permanent Federal Theatre.”

⁶⁹ Flanagan, *Arena*, 91.

talents beckoned though. Once Price submitted a workable proposal and located FTP workers who were willing and able to execute the plan, Flanagan supported the idea vigorously. Price began arguing for the recreation project in a letter to William Farnsworth no later than September of 1936, noting that interest in theatre as a form of recreation was increasing in the South, as well as making several suggestions for capitalizing on this interest:

Experience indicates that when the Arts as purely amateur undertakings for immediate enjoyments, have been introduced, there is constant tendency toward low plane quality, due to lack of professional guidance. [. . .] From a Recreation point of view the desire for a Theatre need have no greater or better reason than the need of play and recreation.

On the other hand under professional Theatre leadership Recreational Drama groups could be given a set of standards, distinct from those of the professional Theatre, but using the background of the established Theatre. [. . .] With organized recreation commanding such wide spread public participation, these professional Theatre leaders might well give to the parent generation and the youth of the country a knowledge of what is good in the Theatre and to demand it in their communities.⁷⁰

Price was not the only one to address the need for a rural, community-based drama program. Price found support in the WPA with Georgia state director Gay Shepperson; early in the process, Shepperson expressed interest in a loose partnership between the FTP and the recreation program. Atlanta theatre director Eugene Bergmann also advocated for an increase in FTP activity in Georgia. While Bergmann's efforts were probably not entirely without agenda (he worked for the FTP in Georgia), he provided early prompting for rural theatre.⁷¹

⁷⁰ All emphasis is included in the original memorandum. Herbert Price to William Farnsworth, 2 September 1936, NARA, Entry 952, Correspondence of Herbert S. Price – Coordinator for Community Drama, Box 523, “Price File – Community Drama, General.”

⁷¹ Bergman was assigned to Atlanta before the Georgia experiment began and continued work there after it ended, and so he was not considered one of the experimental drama consultants. However, he used the same ideas in his projects. Because of this, he is sometimes referred to as the 6th member of the team.

Bergman's actions reflected his desire for the FTP involvement in rural theatre and pageantry. Adding fuel to the growing fire in support of the Georgia experiment, D. G. Nichols District Director of Savannah's Women's, Service and Professional Projects wrote an endorsement of Eugene Bergman's activities in Savannah at the Slash Pine Festival:

Mr. Bergman helped with the staging of all of the programs and was so cooperative and ingenuous [sic] and willing that everybody down there commented on it. I think he did more for us in putting over the value of the recreation program to a large group of representative people from all over the state than anything we have done so far.⁷²

Once Price convinced the national administration that the project would satisfy a local need, employ theatre artists, and help to secure the FTP's position in Georgia and the South, he received approval for a 90-day experimental partnership with the recreation program. Price chose five people from the New York community drama program with the assistance of the program supervisor, Madalyn O'Shea. The FTP sent these five people – Mary Dirnberger (Savannah), Charles Carey (Columbus), Howard Gauntier (Atlanta), Joseph Fetsch (Augusta), and Edward Hayes (Rome) – into small Georgia communities as Drama Consultants. Their mission was “to organize and develop Community Drama Groups in five districts.”⁷³ More specifically, these five people had three months to travel into the rural towns of Georgia, incite or capitalize on local interest in theatre, and create drama that the

⁷² D. G. Nichols to Gay Shepperson, 17 November 1936, NARA, Entry 952, Correspondence of Herbert S. Price – Coordinator for Community Drama, Box 523, “Price File – Community Drama, General.”

⁷³ Herbert S. Price, “Federal Theatre Community Drama Program in Georgia (Rome to be included),” NARA, Entry 952, Correspondence of Herbert S. Price – Coordinator for Community Drama, New York City, “Herbert S. Price, Correspondence,” Box 523.

people of the community would somehow pay to maintain once the three-month experiment ended. As Price explained, “the ultimate aim was to have the various communities support their own Drama activities without Federal aid.”⁷⁴

Many interested parties followed the Georgia Experiment. In addition to Flanagan and the national FTP administration, Frances Nimmo Green of the Southern Play Bureau, Madalyn O’Shea of the community drama unit in New York City, and numerous WPA officials requested repeated updates on the project. In a letter to Price, Gay Shepperson, Administrator in the Division of Recreation Projects, wrote:

Thank you very much for keeping me informed and abreast of events. I want to make a special trip to see the effects of this work personally, which I plan to do before long.

On my recent trip North I stopped in the Washington office and found the entire office intensely interested in this Georgia experiment and are [sic] very anxious to get first hand information of the progress of the experiment. From the evidence of publicity in your letters there seems to be no question about its ultimate success.⁷⁵

Though the Georgia experiment varied based on location, the basic outline of the projects was consistent. Consider, for example, the experiment in Rome, probably the least successful of the five. Located in northwest Georgia, just a few miles from the Alabama state line, Rome was the leading industrial city of northwest Georgia and boasted a population of approximately 21,843 people.⁷⁶ Edward J. Hayes arrived on February 22, 1937 – like the other four Drama Consultants sent

⁷⁴ Herbert Price to Dorothy Braley, undated memo, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “Community Drama – Herbert Price.”

⁷⁵ Gay B. Shepperson to Herbert Price, 26 January 1937, NARA, Entry 952, Correspondence of Herbert S. Price – Coordinator for Community Drama, Box 523, “Price File – Community Drama, General.”

⁷⁶ *Georgia: A Guide to its Towns and Countryside*, Compiled and Written by Workers of the Writers’ Program of the Work Progress Administration in the State of Georgia, American Guide Series (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1940), 443.

from New York – with nowhere to stay, whatever belongings he couldn't carry trapped in storage, and waiting on reimbursement for travel and his first paycheck. He stayed with the local Recreation Developer for a week, seeking affordable accommodations and attempting to establish a rapport with the locals. Unfortunately, Edward Hayes was a New York theatre worker on relief, thrust into a moderately sized southern town with a single, decidedly anti-administration newspaper; this situation was a recipe for disaster – particularly when one considers the three-month limit on the experiment. Compounding Hayes' many obstacles was the complete absence of his supervisor, the charming and experienced Herbert Price, who was off in the Mississippi Valley bringing theatre to the thousands of flood refugees.

Hayes' early reports to Price listed numerous problems. Upon arrival he found the Community Drama Committee of Rome poorly organized and little overall interest in the project. His invitations in newspapers went unanswered, so he was forced to “go out into the highways and byways to secure members and arouse some enthusiasm.” At the first meeting of the local drama organization he:

Explained the nature of the Project, the meaning of Community Drama, Creative Drama, etc. and just what it meant to the community in the way of educational, cultural and recreational benefits and advantages and delivered a brief dissertation on Creative drama.⁷⁷

While Hayes likely intended this explanation to excite interest in something he found immensely exciting, the tone of this written explanation could be interpreted as somewhat condescending. In light of the suspicions many smaller southern towns already harbored against upon northerners who arrive in their midst, tact and a

⁷⁷ Edward J. Hayes to Charlotte Holt, Received March 23, 1937, NARA, Entry 952, Correspondence of Herbert S. Price – Coordinator for Community Drama, Box 523, “Price File – Rome, Georgia.”

willingness to listen to the needs of the community are vital traits. A strange New Yorker who called a meeting to explain how important his new project would be to the cultural and educational development of the town could very well be viewed less than hospitably.

It is interesting to note the contrast in Hayes' perceptions and those of the "poorly organized" Community Drama Committee. Assistant Recreation Supervisor R. H. Elliott reported that the "first week's work by Mr. Hayes in Rome has produced much interest and much organization progress." According to Elliott, the Community Drama Committee built up Hayes' arrival in the newspapers, arranged for office and auditorium space and secured initial funding for the program. Elliott had personally introduced Hayes to members of the Drama Committee, radio stations and newspapers, and as I have noted, he even arranged for Hayes to stay in his home until Hayes could arrange suitable (and affordable) accommodations at the local hotel.⁷⁸

This disparity is striking; Hayes insisted that the community's apathy jeopardized the project while Elliott optimistically reported that the project was proceeding well. In fact, one of the surprising features of Edward Hayes' visit to Rome, Georgia, was his (admittedly limited) success. In three short months, he managed to gain the trust of enough townspeople to put together a production of Channing Pollock's *The Fool*, spoke at a number of local schools and churches, created a radio broadcast that went out over the local radio station every other Sunday, and spearheaded a sister community drama program in Marietta, Georgia, about 50 miles outside of Rome. According to Hayes:

⁷⁸ R. H. Elliott to Herbert Price, 1 March 1937, NARA, Correspondence of Herbert S. Price – Coordinator for Community Drama, Box 523, "Price File – Rome, GA."

The principal obstacle or difficulty to the Drama movement in Rome, as I see it . . . is not the lack of interest, but the CLASS barrier[. T]here is a very distinct social strata in this town and it's going to be a hard job to hurdle it[. I] consider this the real problem, but I really believe that I [am] making some headway . . . and altho [sic] the results are not what I should like them to be, I think that I will eventually succeed in leveling the barrier to some extent.⁷⁹

Written about a month after Hayes' arrival in Rome, this statement points to several issues of interest. Hayes was clearly actively interested in getting his project off the ground, and spent some time analyzing the obstacles before him. He highlighted the issue of class – leaving out all mention of race, which was also a highly charged issue in Rome (if not significantly more intense than any issues of class). Douglas Fleming discusses the strict segregation in Rome during the Great Depression, writing that the divisions between the “linthead” cotton mill workers and the “Uptown boys” were as iron-clad as those between the mill workers and the “poor white trash” they looked down upon so fervently or the tiny community of African Americans, for all intents and purposes exiled to a tiny community known simply as “Negro Hollow”.⁸⁰

Considering the tradition of the Southern aristocracy and the associated class hierarchy in the Deep South, it is not necessarily surprising that these class delineations – based on family, employment, income, race, and geography – remained powerful social forces during this period. With respect to the Federal Theatre's experiment in Rome, though, the question that must be asked is – did the FTP begin to address these issues in any way other than simply deriding their influence on

⁷⁹ Edward J. Hayes to Charlotte Holt, Received March 23, 1937, NARA, Correspondence of Herbert S. Price – Coordinator for Community Drama, Box 523, “Price File – Columbus, GA.”

⁸⁰ Douglas Fleming, *Creating the Modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884-1994* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 164.

potential program participants? In a town that was so fundamentally divided, theatre would seem to be uniquely suited to providing ways to deal with this split.

One of the ways in which the FTP explored this division was in the choice of plays. Channing Pollock's *The Fool* is a melodrama focused on a class conflict in New York's Church of the Nativity; the new assistant rector, Daniel Gilchrist, condemns the "ill-gotten gains" of the wealthy and welcomes the poor into the upper-class church. Gilchrist ultimately heals a paralyzed woman who refuses to lose faith, but he is expelled from the upper-class church and assailed by the poor that he so fervently wishes to help. The two major issues in this play – religion and class – are linked intimately to the controversies present in Rome and much of Georgia. Importantly, *The Fool* does not deal with these issues aggressively; instead religion and class are placed within the easily defined world of the melodrama. In this way, Hayes gently approached the issue of class divisions through the use of the theatre project.

Listening to the People . . .

Their feet are still in the mud. They live in indescribable want, want of food, want of houses, want of any kind of life Their one entertainment is an occasional revival meeting, so when I get excited, tear around and gesticulate, they think it's the Holy Ghost descending upon me. It isn't. It's a combination of rage that such conditions should exist in our country, and chiggers, which I share with my audience.⁸¹

~ Herbert Price

Several of the Georgia experiments met initial resistance. Though Price knew it would become a problem, he was forced to send New York directors and organizers

⁸¹ Flanagan, *Arena*, 91-92.

to lead four of the five rural projects;⁸² he simply could not find any Georgians qualified in professional theatre, on relief, and willing to lead the projects in these small towns. Not surprisingly, the New Yorkers did not initially mesh with the personalities of the towns. This lack of rapport, compounded by Price's absence because of the ill-timed flooding of the Mississippi River, stymied several of the projects during the crucial formative weeks.⁸³ Since the experiment only lasted for three months, the drama consultants did not have time to develop leisurely relationships with members of the community. Price felt that this compromised the effectiveness of the experiment as a whole.

In spite of these problems, Price argued that the project was successful in many ways. Mary Dirnberger's work in Savannah was greeted particularly well, and she noted that she only needed to capitalize on the city's intense interest in theatre to make the program a success. This situation contrasted with the majority of the projects where it was necessary to build interest. As Price explained, some

⁸² Mary Dirnberger, consultant to the successful Savannah unit, was on loan from North Carolina's FTP. Her background likely enhanced her abilities to connect with the people of Savannah.

⁸³ Just as the Georgia experiment began, a massive flood struck a number of states along the Mississippi River. The FTP appointed Price the leader of a company that traveled throughout the flood zone, offering entertainment in the form of emotional and mental release. The company performed in three states and before more than 12,000 refugees in less than a month. Though Price applauded the concept, he abhorred the quality of the production and the administrative nightmare that came with it. In a report to Flanagan, he wrote, "despite the low plane quality of the show and the caliber of personnel, the refugees, white and negro, were lifted and taken away from themselves for a brief interval If I had seen the show in rehearsal in New York, it would never have left for the flood area. It is my belief that although we were playing to refugees, they were deserving of the best we had. [. . .] If this Company represents the Federal Theatre Project and tours the CCC Camps, reaching the youth of the country, the sooner the project supporters learn something about standards and appreciation, the better it will be for all concerned." Herbert Price to Hallie Flanagan, "Report on Flood Area Unit," 6 April 1937, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "Community Drama – Herbert Price;" Herbert Price to Dorothy Braley, undated memo, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "Community Drama – Herbert Price."

communities required a “completely pioneering job.”⁸⁴ Another example of a positive local response is seen in an exchange between Price and Edwina Wood, Superintendent for the Columbus Department of Recreation. Wood cited her own inexperience, stating that she relied on the knowledge of Charles Carey, the FTP drama consultant in Columbus. Due to his efforts, she said, the “play was excellently done [. . . E]verything about it was pleasing”⁸⁵ In his reply, Price thanked Supervisor Edwina Wood for her positive analysis of the project and emphasized his own optimism:

I am fully convinced that the experiment has justified itself during the short period it has been in operation, and I will do everything in my power to see that you are given some assistance in the fall if not from Federal Theatre from another WPA division.⁸⁶

The project was certainly not without problems. In a detailed memo to Flanagan summarizing the Georgia experiment near the end of the three-month trial period, Price addressed the major obstacles he faced and suggested solutions for future community projects. First, Price attended to his own biases. A native of Liverpool, England, he questioned his ability to judge the ultimate impact of his program as “it is obviously difficult, if not impossible, to competently judge any

⁸⁴ Herbert Price to Hallie Flanagan, “The Georgia Experiment in Community Drama,” 5 April 1937, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “Community Drama – Herbert Price.”

⁸⁵ Edwina Wood to Herbert Price, 31 March 1937, NARA, Entry 952, Correspondence of Herbert S. Price – Coordinator for Community Drama, Box 523, “Price File – Columbus, GA.”

⁸⁶ Herbert Price to Edwina Wood, 6 April 1937, NARA, Entry 952, Correspondence of Herbert S. Price – Coordinator for Community Drama, Box 523, “Price File – Columbus, GA.”

experiment or project without personal knowledge of community problems, attitudes, and resources.”⁸⁷

In his report to Flanagan, Price noted “the ideal achievement is for the plays produced by the community drama groups to draw color and background from the life, desires, and ambitions of the community itself.”⁸⁸ In this, Price’s goals for the local community theatre coincided with Flanagan’s goals for FTP as a whole. The practice of importing New Yorkers to lead the various projects compounded this problem:

In programs of this kind it is desirable to secure supervisory personnel from the same state or nearby states, as far as it is possible without sacrificing technical competence or community organization ability. At the start of this present experiment, workers were not available in the state itself. It must be remembered in this connection that it was necessary to select personnel from the Works Progress Administration rolls. One of the most valuable outcomes

⁸⁷ Price immigrated to the United States at the age of 18 in 1920, passing through Ellis Island on his way to Philadelphia. Within a few years he returned to New York and became a broker. At the onset of the Depression he shifted his focus onto community entertainments and recreation, serving as the entertainment coordinator for his CCC group before joining the FTP in 1935. Like John Houseman (an immigrant from Romania), Price experienced a series of firings and hirings by the FTP because he was not a full citizen of the United States; Flanagan and numerous others repeatedly requested special consideration for Price because of his expertise in the area of community drama. Herbert Stratton Price, “Personal History Statement,” 20 November 1935, NARA, Entry 840, Correspondence of the National Office with FTP Personnel and Individuals Concerned with the FTP Programs, Box 39, “Price, Herbert Stratton – Personnel;” Herbert Price to Hallie Flanagan, “The Georgia Experiment in Community Drama,” 5 April 1937, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “Community Drama – Herbert Price;” “Herbert Stratton Price,” 17 July 1920, Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc., Original Ship Manifest, The Celtic, 1093-4, online, http://www.ellisland.org/search/shipManifest.asp?MID=02805731590164062144&FNM=HERBERT&LNM=PRICE&PLNM=PRICE&CGD=M&bSYR=1901&bEYR=1903&first_kind=1&last_kind=0&RF=2&pID=103837020095&lookup=103837020095&show=%5C%5C192%2E168%2E4%2E227%5Cimages%5C715%2D2800%5C715%2D28001094%2ETIF&origFN=%5C%5C192%2E168%2E4%2E227%5CIMAGES%5C715%2D2800%5C715%2D28001093%2ETIF, accessed 10 February 2007.

⁸⁸ Herbert Price to Hallie Flanagan, “Federal Theatre Community Service Division,” 25 July 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, “Community Drama – Herbert Price.”

of this experiment should be the development and training of local personnel.⁸⁹

Price clearly recognized one of the main shortcomings in his project. In this letter he also highlighted the training of local personnel, an act that would ultimately successfully resolve the problem of importing drama and recreation leaders.

Finally, Price emphasized the importance of flexibility in theatre recreation projects:

One thing which this experiment has revealed is the desirability of using more than one method of approach and more than one method of organization. There should be freedom to adopt that method of approach and organization which would appear to be the most effective in a community in light of local conditions.⁹⁰

With this comment, Price advocated a definitive decentralization of the FTP. His practices required personnel in each location to get to know members of the community so that they could tailor a recreational drama program to its needs.

Price's ideas were so successful that they excited interested in Pennsylvania and North Carolina. WPA administrators from both states watched the progress of the Georgia experiment with interest and approached Price regarding the possibility of a recreational program in their states. With the approval of the national administration, Price began preliminary work in both states. Applying the principles learned in the Georgia experiment, Price sought professional FTP personnel native to

⁸⁹ Herbert Price to Hallie Flanagan, "The Georgia Experiment in Community Drama," 5 April 1937, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "Community Drama – Herbert Price."

⁹⁰ Ibid.

each state to spearhead the movement.⁹¹ It was only when Price's job was threatened (repeatedly) by WPA cutbacks that the expansions stalled.

The Mythology of the Georgia Experiment

The previous sections on the Georgia experiment discuss the program's goals, execution, and achievements; what of the mythology that has grown up around the program? In a 1938 letter to Flanagan, Price described the success of his recent trip to North Carolina and broaches a dilemma; the International Grenfell Association offered Price a position in community organization in northern Newfoundland. His reluctance to leave the FTP shone through: "As you well know I have pioneered in the field that now appears to be on the brink of real development. I should, of course, like to remain with you if you feel there is a spot for me in this new and broader program."⁹² Two months later, Price did not hesitate to chastise Flanagan for her assessment of the Georgia experiment:

If we had followed through on our original plan in community drama in other sections of the country – servicing key communities outside of the larger cities – these centers would today be our outposts in the field and our touring companies would have representatives strategically placed.⁹³

A hand-written note in the margin, presumably by Flanagan, stated only, "True."

⁹¹ Charlotte Holt to Mary McFarland, 29 April 1937, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "Community Drama – Herbert Price."

⁹² Herbert Price to Hallie Flanagan, 4 May 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "Community Drama – Herbert Price."

⁹³ Herbert Price to Hallie Flanagan, 15 July 1938, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 5, "Community Drama – Herbert Price," 4.

From these letters it is clear that Price took credit for the work he completed in Georgia and, eventually, North Carolina. It is surprising then, that he denies knowledge of one story in particular, that of the young puppet-thief. This apocryphal story became representative of the Georgia experiment and, with it, FTP efforts outside of the large urban centers. He explained:

A long-standing friend and co-worker named Bob Baker [. . .] passed on to me a copy of a page from the October 1976 issue of *Federal One*, on which was printed a story about a program in Georgia where someone with my name, Herbert Price, had helped little “hill” people to make good dolls, as a side issue of puppetry, for their first possession of that type.⁹⁴

Price went on, stating that he was “never in Georgia” as a part of his duties on the WPA payroll.⁹⁵ The letter is two densely-packed pages long, and includes several anecdotes about Price’s experiences with the FTP, including an extended story about Orson Welles’ extravagant profanity on *Faustus*.⁹⁶ Instead of working in Georgia, Price claims that he traveled the country briefly with a Spanish dancing teacher, writing, producing and staging shows before moving on to the next location. He also staged a production of Chekhov’s *The Bear* with a collection of “real people trying to better themselves,” not actors:

Even though I told her it would be a disaster, [my boss] said go ahead It not only stank, but the scenery fell down in the middle of the final scene. The

⁹⁴ Herbert Price to Lorraine Brown and Laraine Carroll, 31 July 1980, WPA Oral Histories Collection, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University Libraries, “Price, Herbert.”

⁹⁵ The statement that Price was never in Georgia is not accurate. Hundreds of documents in the National Archives and Library of Congress collections (including a number written by him) discuss his presence there.

⁹⁶ Price was asked to design and run the lights for *Faustus*. He arrived in New York to find 32 pieces of lighting equipment for the production. As he told the story, on his second day a “big-headed” person (Welles) arrived and began shouting extensive directions laced with some of the most profane language he had ever heard. Price asked Welles to control his language, and, when Welles failed to do so, dropped a light from the grid (which Welles caught), climbed down to the stage, and told Welles to “shove it.” Price put in his transfer papers that day. *Ibid.*

debacle caused a two-day statewide conference on the actual aims and objectives of the drama program, and my principles and procedures became the rule.⁹⁷

Price's procedures did indeed become the rule for the recreational drama programs connected with the FTP, and so the content of at least part of his letter can be verified.

Yet the problem of the anecdote about the poor little girl who changed the face of the Georgia FTP remains. It is easy to see why this story is repeated; it demonstrates the versatility and power of the FTP without a doubt. If true, this story suggests that the FTP was in the process of integrating itself into the community in a physical and ideological way. The corncob dolls, distributed to every child in the area (and as the single object any of the children owned), would serve as visual reminders of the FTP's presence and interest to the local population. The appeal cannot be ignored. In a recent article, Thomas Postlewait debates the place of anecdotes in theatre history:

Even the most diligent scholars have recognized that the distinction between facts and anecdotes (or records and legends) is impossible to maintain consistently in any examination of historical documents; many records are not factual; many anecdotes not only contain a kernel of factuality but also express representative truths.⁹⁸

Having verified many other parts of Price's letter, it would seem that the anecdote must be designated as false. Yet it is possible that the story contains a "kernel of factuality" or a "representative truth." What truth might this reveal?

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Thomas Postlewait, "The Criteria for Evidence: Anecdotes in Shakespearean Biography, 1709-2000," in *Theorizing Practice, Redefining Theatre History*, ed. W. B. Worthen and Peter Holland (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 65.

It is clear that the denial of the oft-repeated story from rural Georgia was of primary concern to Price; it was the first thing that he mentioned in his letter and, unlike his other stories, was written in response to an article he read in *Federal One*.⁹⁹ If this story was fabricated, what does Flanagan's inclusion of it in *Arena* say about the role she wanted the FTP to play in rural and national theatre? I suggest that the story of the FTP adapting to the needs of a poor, young girl was chosen (or designed) to show a specific relationship between the FTP and the nation. The child was poor, clearly a member of the "people" who made up much of the FTP's audience. In this story, the FTP not only listened to her needs, but adapted its own function to serve them. The FTP put aside its own plans in favor of serving the community; no mention is made of the bureaucratic approvals needed to change its activities, the loss in box office revenue, or the additional expenditure involved in making dolls that would then be given to the community (as opposed to being maintained in the service of the government). The mythological FTP, free from the constraints it was forced to operate under throughout its existence, was able to become the people's theatre without concern for the consequences. This image, coveted by Flanagan during her time as national administrator, emerges from this story. Hence, if this story is fabricated, it is easy to see why this slippage between the achievements and mythology of the FTP was so appealing.

⁹⁹ *Federal One* is the periodical produced by the Institute for the Federal Theatre Project at George Mason University. Initiated with the arrival of the lost Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project collection, *Federal One* featured articles about the progress of GMU's oral history collection as well as current studies on the Federal Theatre Project. The article Price responded to was a brief excerpt of the story told by Flanagan in *Arena*, and was printed following the "Curator's Column" in the October, 1976 volume (1, no. 4, page 16) of *Federal One*.

Conclusions

Vital to the study of the Federal Theatre Project as both national theatre and as a reflection of the constantly evolving relationship between the FTP and its surrounding communities, *Altars of Steel* and the Georgia experiment provide entrance points into study of the FTP's adventures in the South. This play and this program, very different in content and execution, ultimately characterized similar ideals; both displayed the decentralization and local relevance that Flanagan idealized. As I argue above, *Altars of Steel* is an example of a play that was so relevant to its community that it threatened the dominant power and was forcefully ejected. The Georgia experiment was equally relevant and comparatively safe. Together, they represent the best of the FTP, employing relief workers, entertaining the masses, and provided locally relevant theatre for specific communities (both urban and rural) throughout the country.

At the same time, both projects failed to create a lasting impression. *Altars of Steel* was never produced in Birmingham, the city for which it was intended. While it sparked debate at the time of its performance and was known for its innovative design, soundtrack, and style, Flanagan certainly did not emphasize it in her memoirs and the world of theatre has not immortalized the production or play in any way. Similarly, the Georgia experiment initially capitalized on local interests but was never realized as a long-term project. At the same time, a tradition of performance continues in many parts of the South, either in spite or because of FTP activities. Flanagan wrote, "while the Atlanta project closed on May 31, 1939, plays are still

going on in unexpected places in the Black Ankle Belt.”¹⁰⁰ According to Price, the energy of the Georgia experiment fizzled when the drama consultants left and FTP support disappeared. It is certainly possible that the FTP’s legacy lives on in rural areas of Georgia, but if it does, it is not remembered as the inspiration. Neither *Altars of Steel* nor the Georgia experiment ultimately excited support for the FTP in its time of need.

¹⁰⁰ Flanagan, *Arena*, 92.

Chapter 4: The Difficulties of Documenting Success – Disappearing Frontiers and the West

While in New York we were always moving heaven and earth to get shows open, in the West we urged restraint.¹

~ Hallie Flanagan

According to Hallie Flanagan, the Western Region of the FTP was different from the others; it was “flamboyant,” “free and easy,” and “exuberant and gusty.” In the East, workers on the project saw themselves as diametrically opposed to the administration while disagreements over production issues in the West seemed more like “family squabbles.” The Western FTP also seemed uncharacteristically optimistic about its chances for success and about the venture in general. She explained:

Perhaps the western attitude may be symbolized by a Christmas scroll six feet long containing the individually inscribed names of every member of a company of over five hundred people. I unrolled this from the bottom up, and so inured had I become, at that point in project history, to the slings and arrows of attack, that it was a surprise when I reached the top and saw, instead of a demand for my instant resignation, the Star of Bethlehem and the hope that it would guide my destiny and that of Federal Theatre.²

Following the logical progression of the previous chapters in this dissertation, the topic of this chapter should be the FTP of either Los Angeles or San Francisco. Chicago and Boston were regional centers, and the activities of the Atlanta FTP certainly revolved around a major urban center. With the exception of the Georgia

¹ Flanagan, *Arena*, 272.

² Flanagan, *Arena*, 271-3.

experiment, I have worked thus far with productions that occurred in large cities. FTP employment figures placed the Illinois and Massachusetts FTP's at almost identical points, both employing just over one thousand people per state at the height of the FTP in May 1936; and both decreased to approximately fifty percent of their former capacity by the time of the FTP's demise in June 1939.

Compared to these two regions, the Oregon FTP unit housed in Portland was minute; the state employment figures began at 34 in 1936 and grew to 53 people in 1939. However, the Portland FTP, like the Georgia experiment, serves as an example of the FTP capitalizing on local themes and regional styles to create theatre that worked for the people of Portland. The Portland project also provides a case study for the FTP outside of the major urban centers like New York, Chicago, and Boston. In this way, the Portland FTP offers a more realistic view of the impact of the FTP on the rest of the country. Flanagan's original vision for the FTP was a decentralized, national theatre designed to serve the needs of a new audience made up of people who were not regular theatre goers. The Portland FTP did just that. When the FTP ended in 1939, about 200,000 people had seen the productions of the Portland FTP and just over \$5,000 had been collected at the box office (this averages out to about two and a half cents per admission).

According to Flanagan's summary of FTP activities on a national level, the Oregon FTP was one of the smallest in terms of total output, budget, and staff. Yet, of the thirty-three states included in the FTP, only five grew in size from the May 1936 figures (designating the high point of FTP employment numbers) to those of June 1939 when the project ended. FTP units in Maine grew by approximately thirty

percent, Colorado and Oregon by fifty percent, and Louisiana by more than one hundred percent.³ The projects in states with large urban centers like New York, Illinois, California, and Massachusetts dropped drastically in size; many lost at least half of their employees. This growth among the regional units suggests that Flanagan's goal of creating a decentralized national theatre had the potential to come to fruition.

I had originally planned to focus on one of these potential regional success stories in the hopes of uncovering some of the characteristics that made Portland's FTP unique. While I have been able to accomplish this to a certain extent, my efforts were hampered by the fact that information for the Portland project was scarce when compared to the volumes available for many of the other projects. The documents that do remain are scattered and incomplete. The National Archives contains correspondence regarding project proposals and early funding problems between late 1935 and early 1936, a few documents from late 1937 centering on a local political conflict, and some information from the spring of 1939 on a proposed radio show and the Paul Bunyan festival. NARA also has one Audience Survey Report and a few regional reports related to the Portland FTP. The Library of Congress houses several production books with varying degrees of information, including some reviews, directors' reports, programs, and production photos, as well as publicity information, playreader reports and a script of E. P. Conkle's *Paul Bunyan and the Blue Ox* (the

³ The figures for four of the five named states follow: Maine (36-46), Colorado (26 to 44), Oregon (34 to 53), and Louisiana (50 to 114). The figures for the fifth state, Georgia (0 to 13), are misleading because the FTP did not begin in Georgia until January 1937; the beginning of the Georgia FTP coincided with the ending of the Birmingham FTP and the transfer of *Altars of Steel* (and all personnel) to Atlanta. Flanagan, *Arena*, 434-5.

script proposed for the Paul Bunyan festival).⁴ Finally, George Mason University possesses one complete oral history and brief notes from another untaped interview. While it is certainly possible that more information regarding the Portland FTP is available, it is not easily located in the archival collections connected to the FTP, nor do contemporary histories cite other personal or private archives where additional sources might be located.

Initially, I thought this comparatively small amount of information not surprising, given the size and productivity of the Portland FTP. However, the wide gaps in correspondence and lack of scripts are notable in the records of the FTP. It seemed as if a minimum of paperwork existed overall. Ironically, it may have been the very success of the Portland FTP that resulted in this paucity of paperwork. Unlike the Chicago and Boston units, which generated controversy so continuously, the Portland unit seldom required FTP officials to mediate or intervene in its activities. Moreover, the more I looked into the Portland FTP, the more it seemed to exemplify the goals of the FTP on a national, regional and local level. This made the decision to discuss the Portland FTP part of a natural progression for this study. However, it left the obstacle of discussing a FTP unit that lacks the same archival base as its fellows. In a government system that was organized to track all activity of each project, and that required forms often in triplicate or more, what had happened to these records? Why were they not saved? Were they generated at all, or did the Portland FTP manage to elude the often invasive oversight of the central FTP

⁴ It is worth noting that many of the Portland FTP productions were centered around dance and movement, a characteristic that makes these scripts less telling than dramas or musicals. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that so many of the scripts are missing from the collection.

authorities and use its comparative freedom to establish a more genuinely local and relevant theatre? While I can only guess at the answers to these questions, I can analyze the information that is available. I can also theorize about the reasons for the absence of additional records, and suggest why the Portland project proved such a successful model, compared to the ones in Boston, Atlanta, and Chicago.

The FTP in Portland

In *Oregon: End of the Trail*, Federal Writers' Program authors described a friendly, non-controversial FTP that staged a few living newspapers and the popular children's theatre of Yasha Frank. They emphasized the regional appeal of the Oregon FTP; "dance skits given at Timberline Lodge in 1937, depicting flax culture, Indian life, and other regional folk activities, were followed in 1938 by *Timberline Tintypes*, sketches portraying Oregon logger life."⁵ This description was repeated in *Arena* and in Jane De Hart Mathews' *The Federal Theatre: Plays, Relief and Politics*; even today, common knowledge about the Portland FTP's activities seems to consist almost exclusively of the three living newspapers, *Flax*, *Pinocchio*, and a few other pieces of "local" color.

The Portland FTP maintained a low profile for much of its existence. Part of this was likely due to the political leanings of the Director of the Oregon FTP. Bess Whitcomb, former director of the Portland Civic Theatre, directed many of the Portland productions. Nick Chaivoe, an actor and stage manager on the Portland

⁵ Workers of the Writers' Program of the Works Projects Administration, *Oregon: End of the Trail* (Portland: Binfords & Mort, 1940; reprint Portland: Binfords & Mort, 1972), 122-3.

FTP, described her as “a small woman, as I remember, with grey hair, very meticulously dressed and groomed, very precise in her speech, and a little skeptical of people, domineering, very conservative in her outlook.”⁶ Her approach to theatre was conservative and she had little patience for unions or worker causes. Chaivoe described her response to his efforts to form the Federal Cultural Workers’ Union, “she tried to put on the appearance of the iron hand in the silk glove. I mean, I think that’s the best description I can give her attitudes, threats behind a conciliatory tone, but the threat was there.”⁷ Whitcomb’s approach worked; the majority of her actors refused to link themselves with the union.

Like its fellow units in Boston and Chicago, the Portland unit experienced a number of early setbacks. Initially, the Northwest had difficulty procuring funds to begin a FTP program. When WPA Project Director R. G. Dieck, asked for FTP support in Portland, Glenn Hughes (FTP Director of the Western Region) responded that there was “no indication on the forms that a special personnel needed for this type of artistic production [was] available on relief in Portland.” Hughes complained that the proposal listed no sponsor contribution, that the Portland Civic Theatre offered no indication that they would assume any responsibility for the project, and

⁶ Nick Chaivoe, Interview by Shirley Tanzer, 18 January 1978, Portland, Oregon, transcript, WPA Oral Histories Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, 43.

⁷ The Federal Culture Workers’ Union consisted of workers from the the Arts Projects, including the artists, writers, musicians, actors, and those on the Historical Records Project. Chaivoe was one of the union leaders in Portland. He was involved in negotiations with Whitcomb when the actors threatened a strike, which Chaivoe later admitted was a bluff. Whitcomb informed him that she thought he would make a better labor leader than actor. The union took hold only as a lobbying organization in Portland, geared toward exciting public support for the arts projects. Ibid, 45-8.

that other forms of entertainment seemed “much better adapted to the needs of Oregon communities.”⁸

Many of Portland’s problems revolved around skill ranks, wage classifications, and forms. As Assistant Regional Director Guy Williams explained, Hughes “heartily approve[d] of the project [proposing] plays of the Oregon scene by Oregon playwrights.” However, many of the Oregon actors were not considered “professionals” by WPA standards and did not qualify for skilled wages.⁹ In spite of this, Williams wrote to Flanagan requesting an exception because the project itself was “so completely meritorious and feasible.”¹⁰ The proposal consisted of two separate units operating out of Portland. One unit would produce two original plays by Oregon-native and Broadway playwright Frederick Schlick; the other would tour Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps throughout the state with vaudeville shows.¹¹ Though the CCC tours would prove logistically difficult, WPA officials and the national FTP administration supported the idea wholeheartedly.

Like the traveling unit, the Portland FTP also struggled to find local support. In one of the few pieces of surviving correspondence from 1937, Bess Whitcomb explained that the production of *Pinocchio* had run into problems because a local

⁸ Glenn Hughes to R. G. Dieck, 9 December 1935, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 69, “OR – Project Proposals #1.”

⁹ The actors generally hailed from vaudeville, tab show, and circus, but many had not worked professionally for years because so much of the Portland theatre had disappeared. The remnants were almost exclusively amateur and community theatre. Guy Williams to N. G. Dieck, 6 January 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 69, “OR – Project Proposals #1;” Flanagan, *Arena*, 297.

¹⁰ Guy Williams to Hallie Flanagan, 13 January 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 69, “OR – Project Proposals #1.”

¹¹ Guy Williams to Hallie Flanagan, 15 January 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 69, “OR – Project Proposals #1.”

theatrical group, the Junior League-Civic Theatre, already planned to produce it over the same time period. Whitcomb offered generous terms in her negotiations, proposing that the FTP supply costumes, scenery, props, use all actors that the Civic Theatre provided, and give them the proceeds from the first performance.¹² The Civic Theatre rejected this arrangement and lodged a formal protest with the Junior League, Public Schools, PTA, and the University of Oregon. Whitcomb capitulated and delayed the FTP production. A displeased Ole Ness (Acting Assistant Director of the Western Region) wrote to J. Howard Miller (Deputy Director of the FTP), stating that Whitcomb's decision was in direct contradiction to his wishes and requesting action by the national administration. Yet, Whitcomb's letter credited E. J. Griffith (WPA State Director) with the final verdict to move the production, and referred to a meeting in which she and Griffith met with representatives of the protesting organizations. The meeting resulted in a delay of the production, the formation of a joint advisory committee between the FTP and the public organizations, and an agreeable parting; she claimed "the action [grew] entirely out of public relations."¹³

Back in May 1936 (months before the *Pinnocchio* incident), J. Howard Miller (then Assistant Director of the Western Region) had expressed delight in Bess Whitcomb's appointment: "Guy Williams' choice of a State Director for Oregon is splendid. Although Miss Whitcomb has had very little experience with vaudevillians

¹² Bess Whitcomb to Hallie Flanagan, 17 November 1937, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 29, "Western Region #1."

¹³ Flanagan promoted J. Howard Miller, former actor and stage manager for Max Reinhardt, to the Deputy Director position in June 1937. He administered the FTP from Washington, D.C., and traveled as needed to emergency situations throughout the country. Bess Whitcomb to Ole Ness, 1 December 1937, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 29, "Western Region #1;" Ole Ness to J. Howard Miller, 3 December 1937, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 29, "Western Region #1."

she knows what the theatre is all about and should do a good job.”¹⁴ Yet as with so many FTP units, the relationship between the local director and the administration quickly grew contentious. By mid-1937, Ness struggled with Whitcomb over schedules and creative approach. In early 1939, a group of actors banded together and wrote to Miller asking if they had the right to “request removal of a state director for cause.”¹⁵ However, despite these occasional upsets, Whitcomb stayed on until the FTP ended in 1939. When asked about the Portland FTP’s relationship with the national administration in a 1959 interview Whitcomb stated, “I was in full accord with the Washington vision.”¹⁶

Despite the popularity of the Portland FTP, many audience members and central FTP officials noted the amateurish quality of the acting in the productions. Mathews referred to the “one-time vaudeville, stock, and circus people” who participated in the “woefully bad rehearsal of *The Taming of the Shrew*.”¹⁷ In a letter to Evan Roberts, Managing Director of the National Radio Division, Griffith explained:

The project here was originally principally dumb-acts, and while legitimate personnel has been added in the last year we have to face the fact that only a small percentage of our acting group has educational background. While they have showmanship, they lack artistic background. We have found that they seem to be once removed from folkly [sic] environment in their own lives, and

¹⁴ J. Howard Miller, qtd. in Mary McFarland to Mr. O’Brien and Mr. Krimont, 21 May 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 69, “OR – Project Proposals #1.”

¹⁵ Frank Flora and the Federal Cultural and Professional Workers Union Workers Alliance, 16 February 1939, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 29, “Western Region #1”

¹⁶ Qtd. in Lester Lorenzo Schilling, Jr., “The History of the Theatre in Portland Oregon,” Ph.D. diss, University of Wisconsin, 1961, 460.

¹⁷ Jane de Hart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre Project: Plays, Relief, and Politics*, 155.

consequently they bloom in a folk type of script. [. . .] This is not to belittle the project but to make it clear that folk drama is the thing that they do with authority.¹⁸

In spite of Griffith's assertion that his assessment was not intended to belittle the project, it is hard to interpret this quote as anything but a pejorative comment on the Oregon FTP. Interestingly, even though the project's larger goal was to develop organic theatre productions within communities, regardless of their level of education and culture, Griffith still clearly sees education and formal actor training as prerequisites for artistic success and aesthetic merit. His obvious disdain for the "folky" may help explain why it was so hard for the FTP to establish itself in regions with less access to or interest in Broadway-derived theatre.

Despite some initial problems with the performers and their levels of professional training, the acting improved markedly in relatively little time. Flanagan's comments in early 1939 addressed the issue; "I have just written to Mr. Griffith, telling him how impressed I am by the great improvement of the Theatre Project under your direction and under Mr. Griffith's administrative control."¹⁹

The Portland FTP overcame many of the obstacles that had threatened other regional units: conflicts with directors, lack of initial support, and uneven acting quality. Paperwork eventually progressed through the WPA bureaucracy and the actors received enough training and rehearsals that their efforts were applauded. Local administrators identified and addressed most of the political and civic issues

¹⁸ E. J. Griffith to Evan Roberts, 20 April 1939, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 17, "Oregon."

¹⁹ Hallie Flanagan to Bess Whitcomb, 6 March 1939, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 29, "Western Region #1."

that would arise before they could cause serious problems. In fact, Flanagan referred to the arrangement between the FTP and state WPA administration in Oregon as *ideal*:

Of all the states in the country Federal Theatre had its most perfect working conditions in Oregon, under Mr. Griffith. He ran the business and administration end completely but he left program and artistic personnel entirely to us. Under this arrangement it is noticeable that there was no censorship in Oregon in spite of the fact that we did a strong program, including three living newspapers.²⁰

While this may ultimately have been an example of the epitome of FTP/WPA organization, it did not begin that way. Perhaps an exploration of the unit's initial difficulties in Oregon may suggest both how other regions might have addressed similar issues and how the Portland unit ultimately triumphed over the problems that it encountered.

Initially, FTP unit leaders chafed under Griffith's close supervision. Miller, a close friend of Flanagan, complained:

The director of professional projects, who is also state director of art projects, is an older man, very congenial but quite dictatorial. His authority includes censorship of all mail to or from the project. The State Administrator also reads all project correspondence. I am glad that we have a small and not a large program there or I would fear the consequences.²¹

It is worth noting that Miller specifically mentions Griffith's tendency to censor correspondence, since it may suggest a reason that many of the records of the Oregon FTP could have disappeared. If Griffith were interested in controlling the image of the Oregon unit, he would certainly have taken pains to censor or eliminate any

²⁰ Flanagan, *Arena*, 301.

²¹ Miller sent his letter to Mary McFarland initially. She sent an extended quotation from the letter to the named recipients, which is the source of this quote. Mary McFarland to Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Krimont, 21 May 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 69, "OR - Project Proposals."

evidence that might reflect badly on his tenure as regional leader. Despite his somewhat dictatorial approach, Griffith's interest ultimately saved the FTP in Oregon, as he found ways to negotiate the many difficulties that plagued units elsewhere. For example, many state WPA administrators blocked FTP companies when they attempted to bring personnel or equipment across state lines. Complaints about the bureaucratic efforts involved in taking companies on tour bombarded Flanagan's office throughout the lifetime of the FTP. In contrast, Griffith created a flexible working environment for his company members, regularly allowing personnel and equipment to come to Portland from Los Angeles and Seattle.²² He was also instrumental in securing the Elks' Temple for FTP use. Ole Ness described Griffith's contribution:

Mr. Griffith took over five floors of the building, in the name of WPA [. . .] and then concentrated most of the funds available for alterations to the whole building to the one floor occupied by the Theatre Project. [. . .] I doubt that there is another State Administrator who would be willing to go to such lengths to assist in establishing a theatre location.²³

However, Griffith's support came at a certain cost. He felt justified in calling upon "his" performers with little notice and, regardless of their production schedule, requesting performances at Timberline Lodge or other special events. For Griffith, the FTP was a part of a personal domain that he could call on at will. The FTP dealt

²² Normally the WPA administrators blocked the transfer of personnel because curious and distressing things happened to the government payroll when employees requisitioned for a specific state traveled outside of that state. Regulations often led to situation in which personnel touring in another state were to be paid by the WPA in that state. Travel was certainly possible, but involved numerous forms for individuals; that the system was flawed is made clear in the numerous complaints lodged by those with specific permission to travel. Equipment requests met resistance because administrators did not want their state to pay for an item when another state would use it. The administrative records at the National Archives contain one particularly amusing exchange regarding a missing wig and the headaches that it caused throughout the Midwestern Region.

²³ Ole Ness, Qtd. in Karen Wickre, *An Informal History of Oregon's WPA Federal Theatre Project, 1936-1939* (Unpublished, 1981), 45. This source was written by one of the archivists of the FTP Collection that began at George Mason University and is now located at the Library of Congress.

with the problem by preparing a few versatile pageants that would fit many of Griffith's requests. And unlike the directors of FTP units in Boston or Chicago who often had difficulty in identifying and cultivating audiences, Whitcomb, Williams, and Griffith also thought of a plan to bring the FTP to larger audiences in Oregon.

Timberline Lodge & the "Theatre Upon Olympus"

"In facing the east and its white mountain wedged into the roseate sky, [visitors] gaze toward Timberline Lodge, a recreational project which is a concrete manifestation of faith and of the triumph of intelligence over economic distress."²⁴

~ Writers' Project of Oregon

Widespread interest in recreational winter sports emerged in Oregon around 1930, and the southern slopes of Mount Hood, located about an hour outside of Portland, became a prime tourist attraction for the state. For years, Griffith and a number of other Portland businessmen had eyed the slopes above a tiny village called Government Cam. The site was ideally positioned to avoid the worst of the winter storms while still maintaining a dozen feet or so of snow during the tourist season.²⁵ When the WPA appeared, Griffith saw an opportunity. He identified local business support and petitioned the Forest Services for permission to build a commercial hotel on federal land. In late 1935, the United States Forestry Service formally requested WPA funds for a hotel on the slopes of Mount Hood. Griffith completed the project

²⁴ Workers of the Writers' Program of the Works Projects Administration, *The Builders of Timberline Lodge*, (Portland: Willamette Printing Company, 1937), 1.

²⁵ Jean Burwell Weir, "Timberline Lodge: A WPA Experiment in Architecture and Crafts, Volume One," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1977, 37.

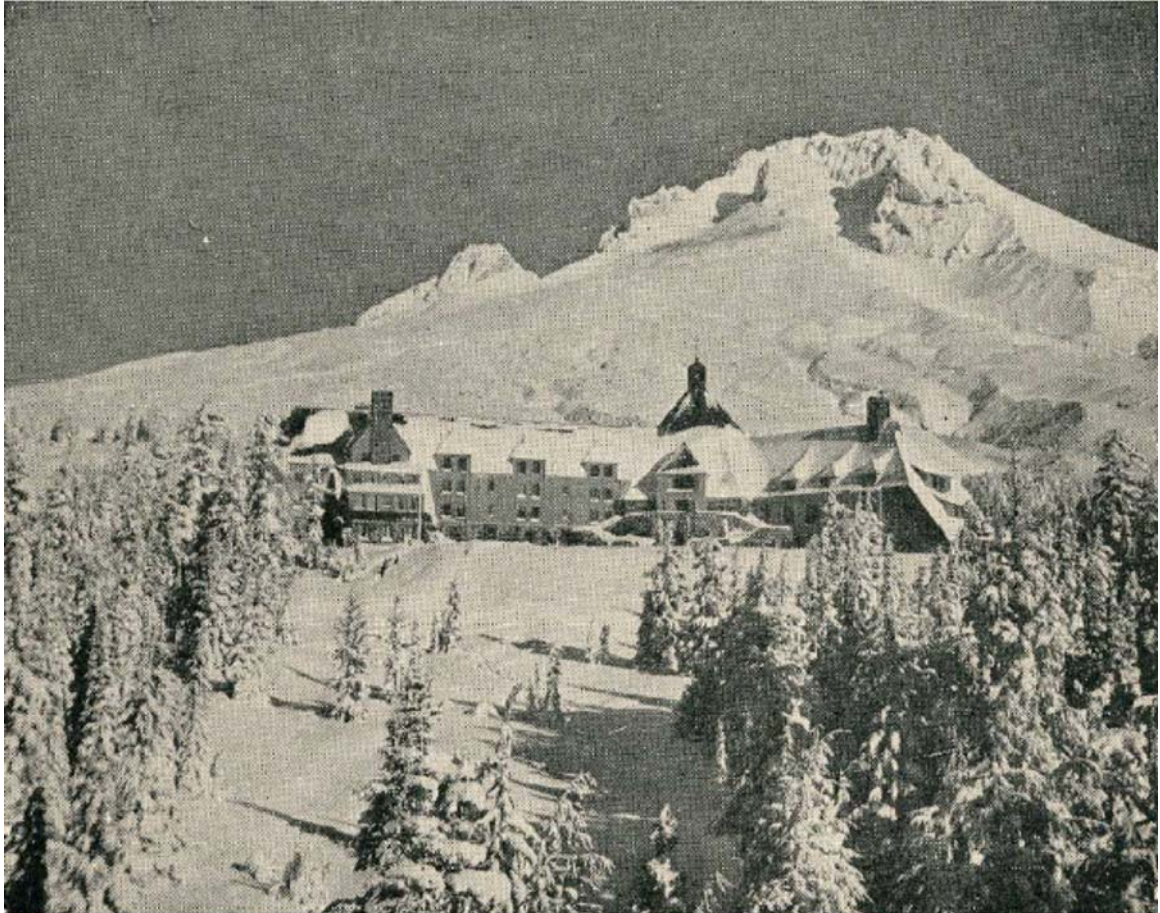


Figure 25: Timberline Lodge on Mt. Hood during mid-winter. Printed in "Timberline Lodge: A Year-Around Resort," Compiled by Workers of the Writers' Program of the Works Projects Administration in the State of Oregon, American Guide Series, Pamphlet, 1940.

application, which had an estimated cost to the WPA of \$246,893.²⁶ Timberline Lodge eventually cost nearly one million dollars.²⁷

The first mention of FTP involvement with the opening of Timberline Lodge arrived in a request for initial project funding in January 1936. At this point, the lodge was slated to open on May 15, 1936. Williams wrote that the Portland FTP should create “a Pioneer Life Pageant to be staged on Mt. Hood.” He justified this activity with numerous extenuating circumstances:

The pageant will celebrate the opening of a huge new Mountain Lodge Hotel by the Forestry Service; that the site of this pageant will be alongside the old Pioneer route of the Oregon Trail; that Portland civic leaders are naturally keen on having it put on; that it would probably play to as many as 75,000 people; that vital script employing the Paul Bunyan theme is being prepared by Mr. Schlick; and finally that the first period of WPA theatricals with the other projects gauged so that the full FTP personnel will be assigned to the Mt. Hood pageant.²⁸

Practical and also politically savvy, Williams’ advice would put the Portland FTP in the enviable position of having already prepared the show Griffith would require when the lodge finally opened in late 1937. While 75,000 audience members traveling the 6,000 feet up the mountain to Timberline Lodge in the middle of an Oregon winter seemed unlikely, Williams’ perception of audience interest in local pageants and his insight into pleasing Portland’s civic leaders was noteworthy. Once

²⁶ Griffith’s report estimated local contributions of \$28,620, placing the total cost of the project at \$275,513. Weir, “Timberline Lodge,” 68-71.

²⁷ The final cost of the Lodge is unavailable. When President Roosevelt decided to dedicate the building in 1937, last-minute rush funding poured in to the project; apparently there is no record of exactly how much money arrived and how it was spent. While an investigation was launched, no determination was made. Ibid, 292.

²⁸ Guy Williams to Hallie Flanagan, 15 January 1936, NARA, Entry 850, Correspondence with Regional Offices I-V, 1935-1939, Box 69, “OR – Project Proposals #1.”

established, this spirit of cooperation and engagement with local interests would characterize the Portland FTP's relationship with political and civic leaders.

Outdoor pageants proved popular in Oregon and they also satisfied the goals of the FTP laid down by Flanagan. Celebrated outdoors before large local audiences without admission charges, they employed large numbers of people, located new and underserved audiences, and performed local and American history. When Griffith requested a pageant about the flax industry for the opening of a new flax plant in Mt. Angel, the FTP created *Yellow Harvest*, a pageant/living newspaper.²⁹

President Roosevelt dedicated Timberline Lodge as a part of a trip to the West coast in September 1937.³⁰ As a part of the celebration, the FTP produced a series of dances that reflected regional themes and ideas, including *The Indian Celebration Dance*, *Dance of the Flax Scutching Machine*, *American Negro Interlude*, and *Dance of the W.P.A. Workers*. Little record remains of these dance pieces. *The Oregonian* printed an editorial that described the FTP as “a WPA by-product.” The description of the *Dance of the W.P.A. Workers* further conveyed the attitude of the writer toward the FTP:

²⁹ During the Depression, flax was one of Oregon's primary crops and vital to the economy. The opening of a new plant was cause for celebration.

³⁰ At the time that President Roosevelt dedicated Timberline Lodge work was only completed on the fourteen rooms in which he and his entourage stayed. Tales of last-minute emergencies abound, including one in which one of the main interior designers for the Timberline Lodge realized that the president needed a chair with sturdy arms so that he could stand, and that they had no chairs with arms. One of the carpenters made the chair specifically for him. The night before the dedication it gleamed from hand-rubbed oil and wax. A new worker saw it that evening and mistakenly varnished it. Designer Margery Smith and several of the carpenters spent half the night sanding the varnish off and refinishing the chair. Margery Hoffman Smith, Interview by Lewis Ferbrache, 10 April 1964, San Francisco, California, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 8; Jean Burwell Weir, “Timberline Lodge: A WPA Experiment in Architecture and Crafts, Volume One,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 285.

There on the balcony, about where the president was to speak a little later, appeared the shameless men-about-town and girls with low-necked evening gowns who quite obviously were supposed to represent outworn bourgeois and capitalist civilization. [. . .] Then the sophisticates withdrew and onto the balcony came the WPA dancers, with the boys in regulation Heil-Hitler brown shirts. All intelligent viewers were supposed, of course, to draw the obvious moral of the bankrupt bourgeois age which is passing and the sterling WPA paradise to come.³¹

The FTP also produced *Bonneville Dam*, a piece described as a dance-drama, pageant, dance, musical, and living newspaper. Unfortunately the script is now lost.

Flanagan visited Timberline Lodge several times during the lifetime of the FTP. According to Joanne Bentley, Hallie's stepdaughter, Flanagan enjoyed the trips immensely:

At Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood, Hallie got the "most complete rest, interspersed with sledding," that she had had for three years. Most people who knew Hallie would have found it difficult to imagine her on a sled. She was not in the least athletic, but sledding was the order of the day. She participated whenever she was not meeting supervisors to plan a Paul Bunyan festival at the lodge for the coming summer.³²

Griffith was as optimistic as Flanagan about a long-term relationship between Timberline Lodge and the FTP. Returning from a trip to New York where he saw several FTP plays, he wrote a poem describing the amphitheatre at Timberline Lodge for Flanagan:

I built a theatre upon Olympus
Domed to the very heavens
Colored azure rose and silver
Figured with beams of sun and moon

I built a theatre of magnificence
Where buskined giants might declaim

³¹ 'Dance of the Sophisticates,' *Oregonian*, 4 October 1937, 10.

³² Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 332.

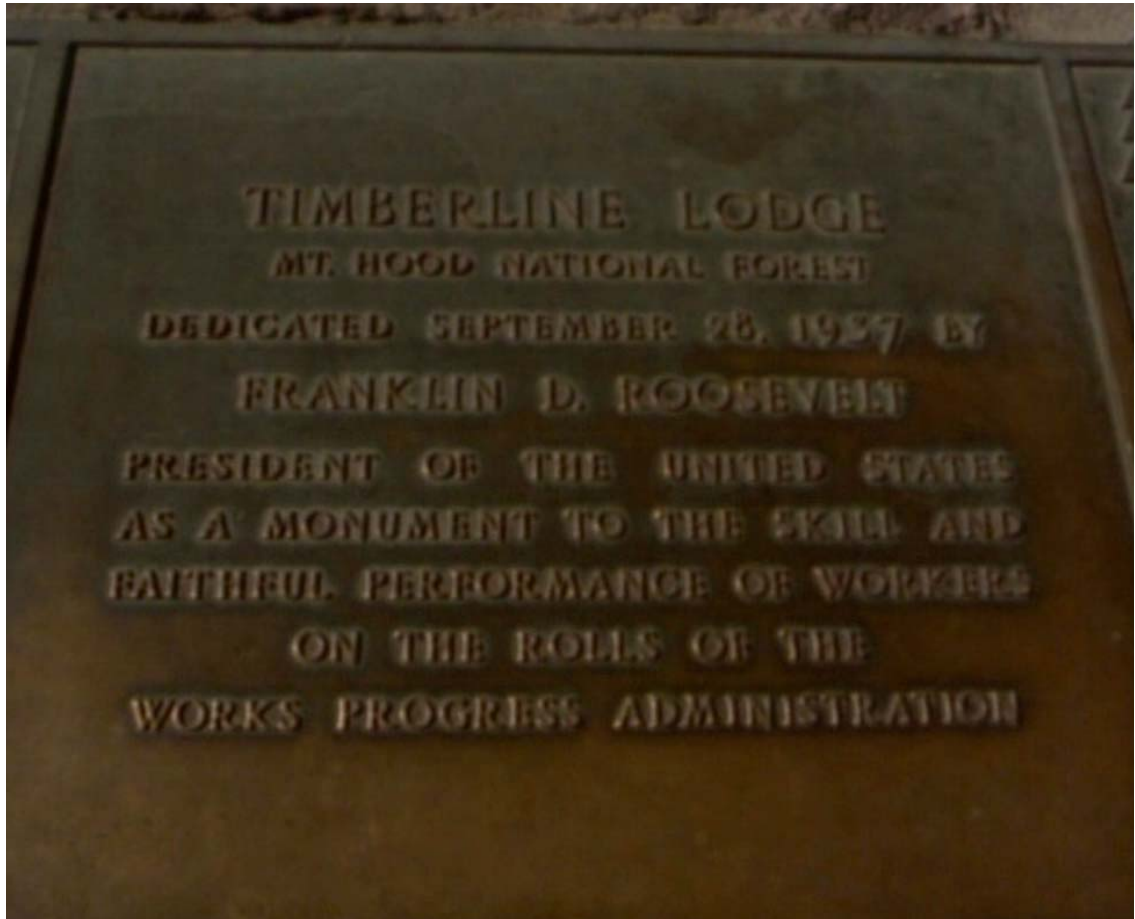


Figure 26: Dedication Plaque at Timberline Lodge. Personal Photograph.

Before a back drop of lofty Atlas
Majestic in its glistening mantle

I built a theatre for Apollo
Walled with Alpine fir and hemlock
A rainbow for proscenium arch
Ringed with bright stars for footlights

I built a theatre fashioned from mountain peaks
With foyer fountained with glacial cataracts
And stage where man might dare to tread
And feel the inspiration of the gods³³

Perhaps what is most interesting and touching about Griffith's poem is his use of the word "I" which implies a deep sense of personal investment. His references to Apollo also suggest that he imagined the theatre could play a unique role in ennobling and uplifting its audience. While his vision may have differed from Flanagan's, Griffith also clearly envisioned theatre as central to American spiritual and cultural life. Griffith also clearly wanted a theatre company to be performing in the amphitheatre, which he likened to one of the huge outdoor theatres created in ancient Greece. This comparison surely appealed to Flanagan in her quest for large audiences and a democratic theatre that catered to no specific social class. Pleased with Griffith's new vision for the Oregon FTP, Flanagan wrote a letter to her husband while traveling from Portland to Los Angeles:

Mr. Griffith, the State Administrator here is a very quiet wise man – he is devoted to the arts and the theatre up Mt. Hood is only part of his plan which includes a civic art center, playgrounds, nursery schools, parks. [. . .] Now, in three days I've seen an exciting SPIROCHETE, a beautiful version of PROLOGUE TO GLORY and a very funny & lovely ALICE IN WONDERLAND so today when Mr. Griffith who once didn't even want a

³³ E. J. Griffith was the head of the Oregon state WPA. Poem attached to letter from E. J. Griffith to Hallie Flanagan, 4 December 1937, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 29, "Western Region #2."



Figure 27: The Amphitheatre at Timberline Lodge. Several parts of the FTP dedication performances were performed in the Amphitheatre. Printed in "Timberline Lodge: A Year-Around Resort," Compiled by Workers of the Writers' Program of the Works Projects Administration in the State of Oregon, American Guide Series, Pamphlet, 1940.

project, said “Expand! – we’d like a whole new F.T. company so that one could tour and one could play” – I felt that you can change human nature.³⁴

Buoyed by Griffith’s excitement, Flanagan raised her expectations for the project. She told Griffith that she would pursue an additional company, and encouraged Whitcomb to locate plays of local relevance and to capitalize on the skills of the actors in the project.

Flanagan’s aspirations for the expanded FTP specifically included Timberline Lodge. In her 1938 “plans for the Federal Theatre,” printed in the *New York Times*, Flanagan used Timberline as an example of the FTP’s success in creating locally relevant theatre:

This study of the local and regional aspects of American history and contemporary life as material for drama has reached the point where we are setting up in each region one large dramatic festival center. For the Northwest this center will be Timberline Lodge, built by the Works Progress Administration, part way up Mount Hood in Oregon. Here our Oregon project has already produced two plays dealing with regional material, a living newspaper on “Flax,” and a dance drama “Bonneville Dam.” Now we are planning a Paul Bunyan festival, to be produced in conjunction with the opening of a museum of logging and lumberjack antiquities and to become the yearly center of a series of plays . . .³⁵

From all appearances Timberline continued to be a success story for the FTP. In June of 1939, less than three weeks before Congress suspended FTP funding, Flanagan again cited Timberline as an FTP triumph in a *New York Times* article. The

³⁴ Flanagan’s letters to her husband show an open, driven, and intelligent woman. Flanagan made no attempt to act in a politically advantageous way or to put on a falsely optimistic front in these letters. Instead, they revealed her boundless enthusiasm, goals, and fears regarding the FTP and the future of American Theatre. Hallie Flanagan to Philip Davis, probably February 1939, Hallie Flanagan Papers, *T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Series I: General Files, Sub-Series 2, Personal Papers, Box 4, “Excerpts from Flanagan’s letters (1935-39).”

³⁵ Hallie Flanagan, “Design for the Federal Theatre’s Season,” 4 September 1938, *New York Times*, 99.

Paul Bunyan festival remained on the schedule for the summer and the article described Timberline Lodge as the “center for the Northwest.”³⁶ Arrangements for the festival occupied the attention of many FTP members for months before its anticipated summer performance. On the first of March, Flanagan joined the Paul Bunyan Celebration Committee for an extended discussion; others present at the meeting included Bess Whitcomb, Guy Williams, Thomas Laman (Executive Assistant, Federal Art Project), F. W. Goodrich (State Director, Federal Music Project), T. J. Edmonds (State Director, Federal Writers’ Project), Aline Howell (Assistant Director, Women’s and Professional Projects) and W. H. Marsh (Administrative Assistant in charge of Public Relations). Clearly, by this time the festival planning was sufficiently advanced to warrant the presence of the State Directors of all four of the arts projects in the state of Oregon as well as Flanagan herself.

The meeting determined the feasibility of the festival and delineated responsibilities amongst the various projects. A single festival would occur, taking “the form of a rededication of the American tradition,” and would run on weekends at Timberline Lodge for four to six weeks, depending on both the length of the season and the interest of the audience.³⁷ The theatrical portion of the celebration would consist of two plays, *Prologue to Glory* and *Paul Bunyan*, as well as the Myra Kinch dancers in *American Exodus*. Federal Music Project concerts would supplement the

³⁶ This article subdivided the Western Region into the north and south; Los Angeles was the center for the Southwest. “Summer Plans Set for WPA Theatre,” 11 June 1939, *New York Times*, 47.

³⁷ “Minutes of Meeting of Paul Bunyan Celebration Committee,” recorded by Bernadine Whitfield, 1 March 1939, NARA, Entry 839, General Correspondence of the National Office, 1935-1939, Box 17, “Oregon.”

theatrical program. Flanagan later explained that the festival would include locales outside of Timberline Lodge as well:

Mrs. Whitcomb and Guy Williams, both ardent westerners, had involved the entire state. There were to be wrestling matches and horseshoe throwings at the foot of the mountain, while up at the lodge the Portland and Seattle companies were to unite in E. P. Conkle's *Paul Bunyan and the Blue Ox*.³⁸

Both Flanagan and Griffith had high expectations for the Paul Bunyan festival that summer:

"I want it to be a production that will say for the West dramatically what Timberline says for the West architecturally," [Flanagan] told Mr. Griffith, and he said:

"The Federal Theatre can do it. To tell you the truth I thought the company was hopeless at first, but now I go to everything they put on; I take all my friends, I'm amazed at the whole thing. After the Paul Bunyan festival we're going ahead building our civic center – and that's going to include a theatre to house the federal company, their dramas, children's plays, and living newspapers. The Paul Bunyan festival will celebrate this summer the coming of age of Portland's Federal Theatre."³⁹

This festival was to be the crowning glory of the Portland FTP. It would use the talents of the FTP actors, engage with an extensive FTP audience, and capitalize on local themes. Unfortunately the Paul Bunyan festival never opened; the FTP ended on June 30, 1939, before the festival was scheduled to take place.

Conclusions

The Portland FTP was an example of a decentralized, yet cooperative unit. While it worked with companies in California and Washington, it retained its individual character. Thanks to the close working relationship of Griffith and

³⁸ Flanagan, *Arena*, 302.

³⁹ Flanagan, *Arena*, 302.

Whitcomb, it remained essentially clear from any of the political debate that infected the other FTP units. Even though descriptions of some of the pageants presented at the Timberline Lodge dedication hint at an indictment of capitalism, the Oregon unit did not arouse the same controversy as other regional units. Perhaps the populations it played to were less politically sensitive, or perhaps the unit seemed so organic to the state, that whatever politics it espoused seemed like part of a local discussion, rather than an external agenda being foisted on an unwelcoming population.

Whatever the reasons for its local appeal, it is unlikely that many Oregonians linked their FTP with the national FTP that was targeted by Congress and the Dies Committee as an organization of communists requiring eradication. Even Burns Mantle, New York theatre critic and FTP supporter, noted the separation between the national FTP and the Portland project. He said, "You appear to be completely detached," a comment interpreted as a response to the unique, local nature of the Portland FTP program.⁴⁰

Oregon had not yet experienced the same level of union agitation as Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, Alabama, and Georgia.⁴¹ Nor were the local FTP members as politically radical as some of the unit leaders in other regions. Even Nick Chaivoe, an alert, socially conscious FTP employee in Portland, had no idea that the FTP was under investigation, or that other units were closed because of controversy:

⁴⁰ Burns Mantle, *The Oregon Journal*, 16 March 1939, 21.

⁴¹ The Portland FTP was not immune to union issues. The Theatrical Stage Employees Local 28 expressed displeasure when union workers on relief did not receive preference over non-union stagehands. In December 1936, the union refused to allow FTP stagehands to work the show; since no WPA funds were available for non-relief workers, they worked the "free" and "terrible" show gratis. Lester Lorenzo Schilling, Jr., "The History of the Theatre in Portland Oregon," 1961, 459.

We were in the hinterlands, after all. [. . .] We were completely insulated from what was going on in any other state. We just didn't hear about things in other states, at least those of us who were directly in the cast and working in the cast. Bess Whitcomb might have known⁴²

Perhaps this insulation worked both for and against the Portland FTP.

The company was able to conduct its business with little interference from both the FTP national administration and the WPA. Because of this, the leaders of the city, state, and region were able to create a theatre that was locally relevant and appealed to large numbers of audience members. They integrated themselves into the community, playing original productions at festivals, uniting efforts with the other arts projects and government organizations, and codifying relationships with civic organizations.

However, the insular nature of the Portland FTP also left it vulnerable to interference of state and local agencies that were often neutralized by the national FTP. Many of the disagreements and difficulties took place within the unit and state. Interference by the national administration was not necessary in a system that worked well independently. Much of the FTP correspondence that remains in the archives revolves around specific, large-scale situations like the Timberline Lodge dedication and the Paul Bunyan festival; these events would require external efforts, either on a regional or national level. The day-to-day running of the Oregon units seems to have been handled "in house" and thus it lacks the kind of rigorous documentation that some of the other units received. On those occasions when the national administration was involved, they realized the importance of the events in Portland.

⁴² After the WPA ended, Chaivoe went to Northwestern University where he earned a law degree. He practiced law in Portland into the 1990s, even arguing a case before the Oregon Supreme Court. Chaivoe, interview, 61.

As I have suggested, Flanagan repeatedly referred to the Oregon FTP's events as national success stories. Yet I suspect that the very success of the Portland FTP may be the reason that it is difficult to study today. When its administration worked well, it worked invisibly; the scholar is left to wonder at how it might have served as a model for all the other more conflicted units across the nation.

Epilogue: The Successful Failure

The Federal Theatre did not fail. It was stopped.¹

~ Barry Witham

The difference between failing and stopping is, as Witham notes, an important distinction. The studies of the regional units here demonstrate that the FTP was beginning to mature when Congress ended its funding. By that time a number of companies had closed down, the urban centers were accepted or in the process of being accepted, and the smaller regional units that nurtured their relationships with their audiences seemed to be taking hold. Too often, scholars focus on the commercial viability of theatre as a measure of its success; with the FTP it was simply not the priority.

As I researched and wrote this study, one of the threads that constantly reappeared was the malleable concept of success. There are so many different ways that the FTP administration (and scholarship today) gauged success: commercial, artistic, experimental, critical, popular, etc. One of the reasons for this is that Flanagan had multiple goals for the FTP. Funded primarily as a relief organization, Flanagan imagined the creation of locally relevant theatre and drawing a new audience to the theatre as other attainable goals for the project. In addition, different FTP regions and companies often operated based on different priorities. Finally, the

¹ Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study*, Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4

expectations layered onto the project by outsiders with their own agendas (Harry Hopkins, WPA, the Dies Committee, Critics, etc.) led to a project that was variously called upon in dozens of different ways to serve dozens of different functions, many of which conflicted. Consider the question of admission fees as an example of this clash; the FTP was not designed to be a commercial venture and was intended to offer cheap or free admission to people so they could attend theatre, but criticism over the FTP's inability to support itself with box office sales surfaced repeatedly. Even Flanagan touted the news when a specific company or production became self-supporting, implying a relationship between self-sufficiency and success (in spite of the fact that the FTP's organization specifically avoided this equation). Further difficulties arose when productions or personnel became professionally viable and left the FTP. Another example of a catch-22 – one of the FTP's responsibilities was to train theatre professionals to produce better productions; however, the more adept these "trainees" became and the more interesting their productions grew, the more the project's best people and work were hired away by private industry.

While I tried to remain flexible about my own definitions of success, the litmus test that I regularly applied depended on the quality of the relationship between the FTP company and its audience. In some areas, this relationship was clearly established. For example, in Portland the FTP closely observed its audiences and catered to their needs and interests. In other areas, like Boston, the FTP misunderstood or alienated its audience early in the life of the project and spent much of its time fighting for recognition as a legitimate enterprise. These relationships are particularly illuminating when discussing the relative success of the FTP.

Due to its nature and specificity, a number of FTP companies and their work fell outside of the parameters of my study. The wide range of FTP companies represented here provide different means of entry to the further study of this idea. It was interesting to note that some of the companies that seem naturally suited to this project have already been discussed in articles, books and dissertations; Roanoke Island, featuring Paul Green's *The Lost Colony*, is an example of a company and well-covered production of potential interest. However, the FTPs in Denver and Oklahoma are potential topics for the future; both of these locations struggled to create the locally relevant theatre that Flanagan espoused. Federal Theatre activities in Florida also showed an interesting connection with their audiences, and are worthy of additional scrutiny as well.

The decentralization of the FTP was both its blessing and its curse. It allowed some individual units to perform at their peaks while others were left without training, supplies and leadership. Those FTP companies that performed well would inspire theatre for years to come. Even after the death of the FTP, the idea remained very much alive:

The Federal Theatre Project had provided a people's theatre that was a focal point for liberal ideas and a sounding board for opinions. We need a people's theatre to express the things we want to express . . . This is to announce a substitute for the Federal Theatre is being planned. Shortly, I hope, we will call a conference of your organizations and many more to send delegates to a meeting to lay before them this plan for a people's theatre.²

By inspiring its successors to envision a "people's theatre," the FTP ultimately became one of the most "successful failures" in the history of American Theatre.

² "Trade Union Plans 'People's Theatre,'" *New York Times*, 30 July 1939, 28.

Appendix I: Highlights in Boston History

- 1620 The Mayflower arrives in Cape Cod and the Mayflower Compact establishes a form of local government.
- 1764 Parliament passes the Sugar Act to offset the costs of the colonies.
- 1765 Parliament passes the Stamp Act (the first direct tax on the colonies) and the Quartering Act (requiring colonists to feed and house British troops).
- 1767 The Townshend Acts include additional taxation and revive the Quartering Act.
- 1768-9 Boston is under military rule.
- 1770 The Boston Massacre leads to a temporary withdrawal of British troops.
- 1773 Parliament passes the Tea Act, giving the East India Trade Company a monopoly on the sale of tea in the colonies, and leading to the Boston Tea Party.
- 1774 Military Rule is reinstated with the Coercive/Intolerable Acts, leading to the First Continental Congress.
- 1775 Paul Revere and William Dawes warn of the coming British in a prelude to the Battles of Lexington and Concord.
- 1775-6 British occupation continues in Boston; the Second Continental Congress mobilizes an army of colonists that surrounds the city in the year-long Boston Siege. The Battle of Bunker Hill is the first major clash between colonial and British forces.
- 1776 Thomas Jefferson writes The Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams revise it, and most of the Continental Congress signs it.

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