

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE PURPOSE OF A LABOR THEATRE:
INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY AND THE
UNION THEATRE OF DETROIT, 1946-1949

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In 1946, the Union Theatre of Detroit was established as a project to broadcast “labor’s” aims and achievements. Sponsored by the Educational and Recreational Departments of the UAW, the Union Theatre quickly became part of the UAW’s educational programming to help educate and politicize workers on social issues like racial discrimination. This thesis seeks to investigate the ways in which the Union Theatre labored on behalf of an industrial democratic political program that emphasized deploying both economic and political action to achieve the goals of “labor.” In addition to providing a brief history of the Union Theatre, I use methods from performance studies and theatre studies to analyze archival material and decipher the ways in which plays functioned as both recreational activities and educational opportunities for union members to rehearse the tactics and strategies of labor organizing. I argue that, post-WWII, theatre and theatricality (loosely defined as the conventions of theatre) were deployed as an organizing tool to agitate and educate

union members during a period of theatre history that is characterized in theatre historiography as “politically apathetic.” In this thesis, I ask “What was the social link between the Union Theatre and institutions like the UAW?” and seek to uncover how cultural work labors in broader social and political movements like the American labor movement.

THE PURPOSE OF A LABOR THEATRE: INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY AND
THE UNION THEATRE OF DETROIT, 1946-1949

by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Abbreviations	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Anticommunism in the Early Years.....	15
Chapter 2: “Discrimination Costs YOU Money”	31
Conclusion	51
Bibliography	61

List of Abbreviations

ADA	Americans for Democratic Action
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CWA	Communication Workers of America
GM	General Motors
NLWB	National Labor War Board
PCA	Progressive Citizens of America
UAW	United Automobile Workers
WES	Workers Education Service

Introduction

On July 6, 1935, *The New York Times* reported that President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Wagner Act into law, characterizing the bill as “an important step toward the achievement of just and peaceful labor relations in industry.”¹ The Wagner Act marked a turning point in the relationship between the federal government and unionized workers, its passage transforming labor relations for industrial workers.² The Wagner Act (more commonly known as the National Labor Relations Act) was a part of a larger New Deal legislation that enabled the federal government to take on new and important roles in workers’ lives by providing welfare services, insuring home and life savings, offering them new employment, and helping to reform labor relations.³ The Wagner Act, in particular, expanded the “battleground for labor’s struggles” to include “the apparatus of state policy formulation and administration...”.⁴ Previously located solely on the picket line and street battles between law enforcement and workers, the Wagner Act was the first legitimate effort by the federal government to exercise state power in defense of union organization and collective bargaining. Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein argues that the passage of the Wagner Act, and its subsequent upholding in the Supreme Court, had immense consequences for unions and organized workers, allowing industrial unions to access and wield state power when direct action tactics like striking were no longer effective.⁵

¹ “Roosevelt Signs the Wagner Bill as ‘Just to Labor,’” *The New York Times*, July 6, 1935, The New York Times Articles Archive, 1.

² The Wagner Act only guaranteed the right to collective bargaining, unionization, and “freedom of association” to “private sector” employees, which meant that government employees and other “public sector” workers were excluded from the Wagner Act. Farmworkers and domestic workers were also excluded at the insistence of politicians in the South, who were trying to prevent the unionization of black workers. See: Erik Loomis, *A History of America in Ten Strikes* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2018), 119-120.

³ Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 267-268.

⁴ Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World War II*, 2nd Edition, Labor in Crisis (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2003), 33.

⁵ Ibid.

The unprecedented action by the federal government, exemplified by the Wagner Act, shifted the relationship between workers and government “actors,” changing the relationship from one of antagonism to mediation and facilitation. The shift emboldened workers to continue engaging in militant action against their employers, the most famous of which were the Flint Sit Down Strikes of 1936-1937 organized by the United Autoworkers (UAW). The sit-down strike was a major victory against General Motors (GM), partly because, keeping with their new obligations under the Wagner Act, the federal and state government sent the National Guard to keep the peace between workers and police, rather than break up the strike.⁶

The city at the center of the sit-down strikes was Flint, MI, located in Genesee County northwest of Detroit, where autoworkers occupied a Fisher body plant on December 30th, 1936, in protest of the firing of three inspectors.⁷ The strike quickly spread to other Fisher plants in Flint and Cadillac plants in Detroit with the UAW vowing that the strike would end only when GM recognized the union as the sole bargaining representative of the autoworkers.⁸ Characterized by continual clashes between workers and police forces, the sit down strike was part of the worker militancy that distinguished the American labor movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the sit down strike, between September 1936 and May 1937, became a common tactic among workers and unions to win demands against employers.⁹ Two years later, in 1939, the sit down strike was made illegal by the Supreme Court because, historian Eric Loomis argues, “the disruptive action...would be subsumed by the Roosevelt administration’s need to integrate unions into Democratic Party governance.”¹⁰ In other words, the sit down

⁶ Loomis, *A History of America in Ten Strikes*, 124-125.

⁷ Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995), 76.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 128.

¹⁰ Ibid., 133.

strikes of 1937, including the strikes in Flint and Detroit, and their subsequent classification as “illegal action” laid the foundations for the “industrial peace”¹¹ that would later come during World War II as trade unions and processes of collective bargaining were further integrated into mechanisms of Democratic governance under Franklin D. Roosevelt and later Harry S. Truman.

Although the events of the Flint Sit-Down Strike are outside the periodization of the bulk of the following study, which focuses primarily on events in the latter half of the 1940s, the strike in Flint, and its ending where GM signed a collective bargaining agreement with the UAW, are instructive to the new paradigm begin constructed in the wake of the New Deal and the passage of the Wagner Act. First, the newly elected governor of Michigan, Frank Murphy (who had just returned from the Philippines), denied GM the normal recourse for breaking up the strike. Rather than send the National Guard to force the workers out of the auto plants, Murphy sent the National Guard to keep the peace between the workers and the police. Even at the beginning of the strike, workers and UAW organizers expected Murphy to be an ally during his term; UAW leadership wanted to delay the strike until January, rather than starting the action in December, so Murphy would be in office when the strike began.¹² As the sit-down strike progressed, Murphy facilitated negotiations between representatives from GM and UAW in Lansing.¹³ Other union leaders attempted to involve representatives of the federal government. In January of 1937, John L. Lewis, with the United Mine Workers of America, solicited Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins and President Roosevelt to pressure GM to negotiate and come to terms with the workers and the UAW.¹⁴

What may seem like “normal” behavior from representatives from the state government,

¹¹ Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home*, xi.

¹² Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 76.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

behavior like facilitating between employee and employer, was rarely the order of the day prior to the mid-1930s. Instead, the actions of Governor Murphy and UAW leadership's expectation of support were the beginnings of a compact between trade union, employer, and government that began with the Wagner Act and would be solidified at the end of the 1940s. The United States' entrance into the Second World War further entrenched the changing relationship between government policy, unions, and employers and the federal government's role as "mediator." To support the war effort, the federal government mobilized "private" citizens to bolster economic production, including union members, and military enlistment. Despite the large-scale public relations campaign instituted by the federal government and friendlier relationships between union leaders and government officials, workers continued to engage in direct action tactics, like striking, in the beginning of the 1940s, still using the leverage of their labor to win wage increases and other victories; in 1941, approximately 2.4 million workers organized with the CIO went on strike, but the striking soon came to an end when union leaders in the CIO agreed to suspend striking during the war in exchange for "mandatory arbitration of all labor disputes..."¹⁵ Many union leaders accepted the agreement, apart from John L. Lewis (who had previously appealed to Roosevelt and Secretary Perkins during the Flint Sit-Down Strikes) and Montgomery Ward.¹⁶ Roosevelt set up the National Labor War Board (NLWB) to mediate between workers and employers, further institutionalizing "industrial peace."

The pact between government, trade union, and employer also didn't deter workers from organizing unauthorized work stoppages, often for reasons that may have been at odds with union leadership. In 1943, twenty-five thousand white workers walked off the shop floor at Detroit Packard auto plants, part of a series of events now labelled "the hate strikes," to protest

¹⁵ Loomis, *A History of America in Ten Strikes*, 136-137.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

the promotion or hiring of black workers.¹⁷ The work stoppage at Detroit Packard happened in the context of the race riots of Detroit, and highlighted the tension between rank-and-file workers and union leadership regarding racial discrimination and racial equality. Leaders of the UAW in Detroit, like Walter Reuther, believed that platforming social issues around racial equality were crucial to the continued growth of unions and the labor movement, advocating that enacting policy around racial equality could “counteract what he regarded as the long-standing monopoly capital model in the United States,”¹⁸ thus bringing workers further into mechanisms of governance in the workplace and in the larger political arena. Part of what was required to bring more workers on board with policies surrounding racial equality was recreational and educational programming, which took on a variety of practices ranging from traditional classroom settings to theatre productions.

UAW leadership and allies had used theatre in the past on the picket lines, most notably during the Flint Sit-Down Strikes when a living newspaper was created to boost morale on the picket line; the living newspaper, titled *The Strike Marches On*, ended up being performed the day the strike ended, February 11th, 1937.¹⁹ The living newspaper, and later the theatre productions performed in the late 1940s as a part of the UAW’s recreational and educational campaigns, were part of an emerging cultural apparatus that labored alongside trade unions and increasingly took as its subject and object workers and their lives. American Studies scholar Michael Denning identifies the emerging cultural apparatus as a “cultural front,” where “a new generation of plebian artists and intellectuals who had grown up in the immigrant and black

¹⁷ Chrystyna Dail, “Driving Race Work: The UAW, Detroit, and *Discrimination for Everybody!*,” in *Working in the Wings: New Perspectives on Theatre History and Labor*, ed. Elizabeth A. Osbourne and Christine Woodworth (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015), 25.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Paul Sporn, “Working-Class Theatre on the Auto Picket Line,” in *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980*, ed. Bruce A. McConachie and Daniel H. Friedman (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 160.

working-class neighborhoods of the modernist metropolis” acted as the beating heart.²⁰ Situated within the cultural front was the workers theatre movement of the 1930s, which ballooned and shifted along with other political, social, and cultural institutions. Denning, along with other scholars like Colette Hyman, assert that theatre was mobilized with the aim of challenging dominant cultural institutions and broadening the participants and spectators of theatre to include the diverse workforce reflected in the industrial economy. Denning asserts that the laboring of the cultural front in the 1930s made a “significant imprint” on dominant cultural institutions, but in the narrative of theatre history the workers theatre movement tapers off and disappears by the time the United States enters the Second World War—all the while, the federal government continues to grow as population and industry are mobilized to support a war effort on both the European and Pacific fronts.

One such theatre that was mobilized in the American labor movement and institutions of labor was the Union Theatre of Detroit (hereafter referred to as the Union Theatre), which was founded in 1946 and sponsored by the UAW, the Communications Workers of America (CWA), and the Workers Education Service of the University of Michigan (WES). Stationed in and around a metropolis that was crucial to the development of American capitalism, the Union Theatre aimed to “present the problems, aims, and ideals of union people to the community in dramatic form...and to become a useful tool toward the end of a fuller and more secure way of life for all people.”²¹ I estimate, based on archival records found at the Walter P. Reuther Library in Detroit, MI, that the Union Theatre performed at least eighteen plays in their three year history, plays which varied in genre and authorship. The aims of the Union Theatre are

²⁰ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Verso, 1997), xv.

²¹ Joanne Stern, “Progress Report on Union Theatre of Detroit,” April 1948, UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

decipherable in the collection of scripts found at the Reuther Library, and my thesis will focus on their analysis. Using methods of dramatic analysis and performance analysis, I argue that, during their three years of activity, the Union Theatre of Detroit was laboring on behalf of trade unions and their members, helping to grow the UAW's citizenship building project of industrial democracy, where secure economic circumstances and standards of living enabled industrial workers to participate in the act of governance, both within the union and the country.

The scope of this study spans the postwar years of the 1940s, focusing specifically on the years 1946-1949 when the Union Theatre was active in Detroit, MI, and its surrounding counties. Through examination of archival material using methods of theatre studies and performance studies, this thesis seeks to answer questions like "What was the social link between the Union Theatre and institutions like the UAW and CWA?" in order to understand a period of social, political, and economic transition in the 1940s. The link between the Union Theatre and the UAW propelled the cultural work (or labor) being done by the Union Theatre on behalf of their sponsors and had larger political consequences relating to the CIO's citizenship building project. Central to the scope of the study are scripts that were performed by the Union Theatre and stored in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University, central because their content signals the confluence of theatre and organized labor; the scripts take as their subjects the educational and recreational programming of the UAW, dramatizing subjects like anti-discrimination and fair practice, striking, negotiations and collective bargaining, and time study.

Among theatre historians, the 1940s is known as a period of decline or disappearance for workers theatre in the United States; scholars like Morgan Y. Himmelstein, Collette Hyman, Bruce McConachie, and Paul Sporn end their histories regarding social activist and workers theatre by the time the United States enters the Second World War. Daniel H. Friedman, at the end of a

collection of essays edited with Bruce McConachie, asserts that workers theatre all but ceased to exist in the 1940s.²² Thus, the activities of social activist theatres or workers theatres goes unresearched.

However, recent scholarship by Chrystyna Dail, in her book *Stage For Action: U.S. Social Activist Theatre in the 1940s*, recoups the 1940s as a crucial decade for social activist and workers theatre, identifying the 1940s (and the 1950s) as a period of transition between the political theatre of the 1930s and the political theatre of the 1960s. Dail's study of Stage For Action (SFA) challenges the belief that the 1940s was lacking in significant social activist theatre. Taking the activities and practice of SFA as her object of analysis, Dail provides specific context about how SFA was "weaponizing" live performances to facilitate social change, filling a gap left by scholars like Hyman and McConachie who spend little to no time studying social activist and workers theatre in the 1940s; she argues that SFA was a crucial organization for the dissemination of "Progressivism and a pro-labor theatrical aesthetic during the 1940s."²³ Crucial to her argument is the assertion that the study of social activist theatre in the 1940s is deeply significant to building a bridge between the social activist theatre of the 1930s and the social activist theatre of the 1960s.²⁴ Leaving the 1940s neglected enables the disappearance of cultural workers from theatre history and assesses other cultural workers out of context. This study follows the path laid out by Dail, "attempting a 'return to memory,'"²⁵ but ultimately departs from Dail's scholarship by paying close attention to the significance of social activist and workers theatre to the American labor movement and the citizenship building project enacted by

²² Daniel H. Friedman, "Contemporary Theatre for Working-Class Audiences," in *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980*, ed. Bruce A. McConachie and Daniel H. Friedman (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), <http://www.gbv.de/dms/bowker/toc/9780313246296.pdf>, 197.

²³ Chrystyna Dail, *Stage For Action: U.S. Social Activist Theatre in the 1940s* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

the CIO and their member, the UAW. However, while I am not attempting to place the social activist theatre of the 1960s within context, my study does share the goal of *Stage For Action* by attempting to make the cultural work of a workers theatre in the 1940s—the Union Theatre—visible in theatre history.

Additionally, Dail argues that SFA departed from previous social activist theatres of the 1930s because of their high level of professionalism and commitment to aesthetics, comprising mostly of theatre artists who used their skills and craft knowledge to create live performances which demanded change from its audience.²⁶ I depart further from Dail's study by focusing on workers theatre which was decidedly non-professional and deeply embedded in the UAW and the politics of the CIO. While SFA was closely linked to the American labor movement, their relationship was structurally different than the Union Theatre. For example, in an anonymous document (titled *The Purpose of a Labor Theatre*) found in archival materials of the Union Theatre, a writer connected to the Union Theatre stated that aesthetic concerns were secondary to the “stated democratic aim of the social and creative development of the people it serves,”²⁷ “the people it serves” being the people of the labor movement and of the community of Detroit. What was more crucial to the development of a “labor theatre for Detroit” was a strong foundation in democratic (potentially industrial-democratic) principles and control of its development left in the hands of organized labor. While the writer doesn't reject professionalization outright, they emphasize that the development of “labor theatre” shouldn't fall to theatre professionals who “may have an interest in it only as an artistic vehicle to enhance their own professional ends.”²⁸ I raise this distinction between the SFA and the Union Theatre not to imply that SFA privileged

²⁶ Dail, *Stage For Action*, 8-9.

²⁷ “Purposes of a Labor Theatre,” February 3, 1947, UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

²⁸ Ibid.

professionalization and subordinated social concerns, but to provide an example of a workers theatre in the 1940s who viewed the participation of theatre professionals as optional or non-essential, opting instead to focus on what the process of theatre-making activated for its participants and viewers and how that process furthered (industrial) democratic aims through educational and recreational programming.

What can be classified as industrial democratic aims is explored in Nelson Lichtenstein's scholarship, most notably in his monograph, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*. *State of the Union* recounts the activities of trade unions in the 20th century and their relationship and solutions to the "labor question" posed by Woodrow Wilson in 1919: "...how are the men and women who do the daily labor of the world to obtain progressive improvement in the conditions of their labor...and to be served better by the communities and industries which their labor sustains and advances...".²⁹ Lichtenstein argues that, in the 1930s and 40s, trade unions found their answer in what was called "industrial democracy" which stressed the development of "the brotherhood already recognized in politics and religion" among industrial workers.³⁰

Industrial democracy went beyond an emphasis on collective bargaining, instead championing a solution to the inequality in industry through a reorganization and democratization of the workplace. The investment in industrial democracy was a departure from the organizing practice of craft unions like the American Federation of Labor (AFL), who stressed the importance of collective bargaining, and instead signaled a turn towards a growing desire to participate in the governance of the union, the workplace, and the country.³¹ For trade unions like the UAW, the project of industrial democracy—and industrial unionism—meant continuing the citizenship building project started in the 1930s with the New Deal. Additionally,

²⁹ Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Lichtenstein argues that the development of industrial unionism and its implementation through collective bargaining and the equalization of wages provided an “economic bedrock” for unionists and their allies to campaign for racial equality in the workplace.³²

Lichtenstein’s scholarship, with its emphasis on the political, social, and economic goals of the trade union, provides essential context for the activities of the Union Theatre, as evidenced by his argument surrounding the connection between industrial unionism and racial equality in the workplace. A notable feature of the Union Theatre’s repertory was their anti-discrimination plays, which detailed the negative effects of discrimination in the workplace and the positive effects of racial equality; with the assistance of Lichtenstein’s scholarship, connections can be made between the Union Theatre’s practice and the political, social, and economic policy of the UAW.

Further connections can be made when introducing Michael Denning’s monograph *The Cultural Front*, where he investigates institutionality and ways a cultural front populated by diverse ethnical and racial groups labored to rework American cultural institutions.³³ He uses the interrelated phrases “laboring” and “the cultural front” to extrapolate how workers and their allies on the left had an impact on culture and cultural institutions in the United States. Additionally, Denning deploys his understanding of “laboring” and “the cultural front” in a method that is not only part of cultural studies, but part of performance studies as well. “Laboring” refers not only to the overwrought use of the word “labor” within the Popular Front, but to the painstaking and difficult birth (or process) of a new, “proletarianized” American culture which valued and institutionalized the principals of industrial democracy.³⁴ Using the “laboring” of the cultural front as an organizing idea, argues Denning, makes visible the labor of

³² Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 59.

³³ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xv.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xvii.

cultural production and illuminates an “incomplete and unfinished struggle to rework American culture...”.³⁵ In other words, the “laboring” of the cultural front enables Denning to make visible the exertion, the performance, of American culture in the 1930s, as well as uncover the site of struggle and the networks of artist-workers which coalesced to make up the body of the cultural front.³⁶ Denning’s intervention in the historiography of culture and institutions is also a crucial intervention in theatre historiography, linking the laboring of American culture, and thus workers theatre, in the 1930s to consequences felt in the 1940s; he is able to build a bridge between the histories of the 1930s and the 1940s, a discursive move that is difficult, but not impossible, to find in theatre history, as evidenced by Dail’s monograph, *Stage For Action*.

Examining the confluence of the workers theatre of the 1940s and industrial unionism of the UAW and CIO enables me to conceptualize theatre as an organizing tool and, therefore, as a process—an exertion or intervention (or a labor). The American labor movement, too, is an ongoing process, and, by studying workers theatre as process, I seek to challenge the theatre histories that position workers theatre, and therefore the American labor movement, as an “art-object” with an identifiable beginning and end. Theatre transcends “art-object;” theatre is a process and theatricality is a tool. By attempting to answer questions surrounding the cultural work of the Union Theatre, I seek to uncover what theatricality is “doing” for institutions like the UAW.

To uncover what the Union Theatre and theatricality are “doing,” action-based methodologies are needed, namely dramatic analysis and performance analysis, two methodologies undergirded by “action.” Dramatic analysis, a product of theatre studies, enables scholars to see action/consequence, trigger/heap, in scripts. David Ball, in his manual for reading

³⁵ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xvii.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, xix.

plays called *Backwards & Forwards*, provides a model for dramatic analysis where scripts are broken down into a series of actions, comprised of a trigger and a heap; for Ball, a play is not about action or describing action, a play *is* action.³⁷ Dissecting a series of actions enables Ball to discern how the play *works*.³⁸ While many of the scripts that I found in the archive are not “traditional” three act plays—many are short skits—they, nonetheless, follow the Aristotelian conventions described by Ball, allowing me to use Ball’s methods of dramatic analysis to decipher the inner workings of the scripts.

Additionally, performance analysis, coupled together with dramatic analysis, will enable me to understand the performances—the labor, the exertion—being done by the Union Theatre. Diana Taylor, in her article “Scenes of Cognition: Performance and Conquest,” provides a model of performance analysis, where understanding an event as performance assists to uncover said event as networks of relations and social arrangements between groups or individuals,³⁹ like the social arrangements between the Union Theatre and their sponsors, union member and union staffer, and worker and manager. Understanding the social arrangements within the Union Theatre and the UAW will enable me to make visible the network in which people labored to produce cultural work. Using performance analysis to uncover the social arrangements within the Union Theatre and UAW permits me to examine how those social arrangements deployed theatre and theatricality to achieve organizing goals surrounding industrial democracy and American citizenship.

Additionally, Taylor argues in “Scenes of Cognition” that the lens through which the object of analysis is viewed constructs the object of analysis—the how (the lens) constructs the

³⁷ David Ball, *Backwards & Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁹ Diana Taylor, “Scenes of Cognition: Performance and Conquest,” *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 3 (October 2004): 365-366.

what (the object of analysis).⁴⁰ Viewing the relationship between the Union Theatre and the UAW as performance enables me to view the relationship as process, exertion, and labor, and focus on how the Union Theatre and their sponsors labored together to achieve political goals. However, my evidence limits how I can use performance analysis as a methodology to understand how theatricality was used as a tool by the Union Theatre and the UAW. Much of the evidence found in the archive is results-based evidence rather than process-based evidence. What was left behind in the archive were scripts, programs, leaflets, brochures, correspondence, meeting reports, the ephemera of a process. Because of the limitations of my evidence, much of the dramatic analysis and performance analysis I will be undertaking is discursive, meaning part of my analysis of results-based evidence will be an analysis of the discourse circulated by the Union Theatre and the UAW. Such discursive analysis, however, will elucidate how both the Union Theatre and the UAW responded to the social and political debates of the late 1940s and decipher the methods, strategies, and tactics they offered to rank-and-file union members to begin tackling vital issues like anti-discrimination, civil rights, and racial equality in the workplace.

⁴⁰ Taylor, "Scenes of Cognition," 356.

Chapter 1: Anticommunism in the Early Years

“The newly-proposed all-union play-producing group, seeks talent...” states a paper flyer labelled “Wanted Actors & Actresses Union Stage Productions.”⁴¹ The appeal is printed on slightly delicate, pink tinted paper with no obvious signs of how the flyer was distributed; there is a small hole close to the edge of the paper in the top left hand corner that suggests maybe it was tacked up on a wall or corkboard. Maybe the flyer was handed out to workers between shifts at auto plants or other unionized workplaces. Either way, the flyer is calling workers to participate in a “dynamic, creative, union-minded theatre group...” whose purpose is to stage “plays and musical comedies of significance, value, and interest to union members.”⁴² The final graphic on the flyer states, “A union must speak for itself. A theatre will give it greater voice.”⁴³

There is no indication on the flyer of an author—like many other archive documents about the Union Theatre, the author is anonymous, but the labor behind the flyer’s creation indicates that there was at least one other person who sought out other “dynamic, creative, union-minded” participants. There is also little on the flyer to indicate when it was written apart from the day of the initial meeting: Wednesday, November 6, 1946, at Rackham Memorial, 60 Farnsworth, Detroit, Michigan, where interested participants were to meet at Rackham Memorial at 7:30pm.

Rackham Memorial, known as the Horace H. Rackham Educational Memorial Building, still stands at 60 Farnsworth Street in Detroit; it’s located one and a half blocks away from where I viewed the “wanted” flyer in the Walter P. Reuther Library Reading Room. The building is

⁴¹ “Wanted Actors & Actresses Union Stage Productions,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

named after Horace H. Rackham, one of the original investors in Ford Motor Company, and neighbor to Henry Ford growing up. Above the entrance of the Rackham Memorial are relief sculptures designed by Marshall Fredericks, the sculptor who designed “The Spirit of Detroit” that sits on the banks of the Detroit River.

The flyer is the earliest mention of the Union Theatre of Detroit in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs on the campus of Wayne State University (WSU). The meeting was set to take place the day after Election Day in 1946, where the 80th Congress was elected, overturning the Democratic majority in Congress in favor of a Republican majority. The change in the House of Representatives alarmed recently elected President of the UAW, Walter P. Reuther, who wrote in *The United Automobile Worker* that a GOP Congress would “hasten and intensify” an economic depression, implying that the 80th Congress would attempt to rollback New Deal policies.⁴⁴ “The people did not vote against the New Deal,” Reuther wrote. “They voted the Democrats out because the Democratic Party, as the party in power, was held responsible for the disgraceful legislative record of a Congress controlled by anti-New Deal Democrats and Republicans.”⁴⁵ Reuther blamed the Democratic Party for allowing more conservative (Southern) Democrats and Republican politicians to attack the New Deal and control the 79th Congress; for Reuther, the results of the 1946 election indicated that “the people” were dissatisfied with Democratic leadership, not the New Deal itself, and politicians who “championed the cause of social and economic progress” had to pay the price. The path forward to “lasting peace, plenty, security and freedom” was to build a political program that can be understood by the people—the deployment of economic “instruments” was not enough to protect wage gains and economic mechanisms like price control, and the CIO must develop a political program and mobilize workers for political

⁴⁴ Walter P. Reuther, “Election of GOP Congress Confirms Need for Labor Political Action,” *United Automobile Worker*, November 1946, sec. President’s Column, Chronicling America, The Library of Congress.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

action in order to protect “the American people” from cycles of boom and bust.⁴⁶

The political program that Reuther envisioned began to take shape in various educational and recreational undertakings, one of which was the Union Theatre. Educational material found in the records of the UAW Education Department indicates that union staffers, teachers, and organizers saw a particular path of development for union members that would lead to political action. In a packet handed out by the Educational Department in the UAW to workers in Ford Local 600 (who were mostly Black workers), union members are encouraged to “...organize the unorganized, unionize the organized, educate the unionized and galvanize the educated union men and women into political action.”⁴⁷ The first phase of development is an organized worker “who seem[s] to think that their obligation to the union ceases when their dues dollar is paid” and who has yet to learn that one gets out of the union what they put into the union.⁴⁸ The organized stage is followed by the unionized stage, where a worker only participates in union affairs, but then the educated stage, where a worker acquires knowledge about the “aims, achievements, and limitations of unionism.” The final stage is the politicized union member, one who engages in political action to “safeguard and promote laws favorable to labor.”⁴⁹ The politicized unionist is educated, the politicized unionist votes, and the politicized unionist galvanizes other union members. A more detailed plan for Local 600 typed up by the Education Department includes classes on subjects like “Parliamentary Law,” “Labor History,” and “Grievance Procedures” and time set aside in meetings for activities like quizzes, debates, skits,

⁴⁶ Walter P. Reuther, “Election of GOP Congress Confirms Need for Labor Political Action,” *United Automobile Worker*, November 1946, sec. President’s Column, Chronicling America, The Library of Congress.

⁴⁷ “Ford Local #600: UAW-CIO Educational Dept” (Education Department, n.d.), UAW Education Department Records, Box 8, Ford Local 600 - Materials, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

and plays.⁵⁰

What is unclear about the initial flyer for the Union Theatre is whether workers were tasked by the UAW to recruit others or if the meeting was an initiative undertaken by the workers and union members themselves. However, the author(s) of the flyer do set out clear aims for the theatre group, one of which aligns with the aims of the Education Department post-WWII: the creation of a theatre group “speaking with the voice of labor, dramatizing for the general public labor’s opinions, labor’s aims, labor’s achievements.”⁵¹ The Union Theatre’s first correspondence with union members outlines a group that partially functions as a broadcaster for “labor”—a classification or group that the flyer doesn’t define, but one might be able to assume means “union members”—and offers itself as a pathway to being what UAW leaderships defines as an “educated” union member, someone who understands acquires knowledge about the aims and achievements through participation and attendance in programs sponsored by the UAW.

What was said or decided in the meeting on November 6, 1946 doesn’t appear in the archive, but whoever met presumably decided that the establishment of “union-minded” theatre group should move forward. The group hired a professional theatre director by the name of Arne Boesen⁵², making good on a promise included in the initial flyer for “professional direction to be brought to the group.”⁵³ An article that appeared in *The United Automobile Worker* in 1948 marks the Union Theatre’s one year anniversary as March 1947, around four to five months after

⁵⁰ “Recommended Educational Program for Local 600,” n.d., UAW Education Department Records, Box 8, Ford Local 600: Violation of Contract, Section 40, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁵¹ “Wanted Actors & Actresses Union Stage Productions,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁵² “Union Theatre Passes First Birthday--It’s a Big Hit,” *United Automobile Worker*, August 1948, United Automobile Worker, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁵³ “Wanted Actors & Actresses Union Stage Productions,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

the meeting in November of the previous year. The Union Theatre of Detroit performed their first play in June of 1947, called *The Pot Boiler* and written by Alice Gerstenberg, for the Steel Workers Institute in Ann Arbor, MI.⁵⁴ *The Pot Boiler* was performed several more times during the year 1947, including at a CIO camp being held in Port Huron, MI.⁵⁵ Although the script for *The Pot Boiler* no longer seems to be extant in the archive, an adaptation was written in 1983. Based on the later adaptation, Gerstenberg's play appears to be about a "great playwright," Mr. Sud, who teaches a character named Wouldby about how to construct a drama.⁵⁶

The United Automobile Worker article commemorating the anniversary of the Union Theatre mentions that other plays were performed during the summer of 1947.⁵⁷ While the article doesn't mention the titles, a list compiled by a participant in the Union Theatre names two other plays performed by the theatre group during 1947—an excerpt of *Swan Song* by Anton Chekhov and *Discrimination Costs You Money*, which will be discussed in a later chapter. The group's last performance of the year 1947 was an adaptation of *The Christmas Carol*, performed for Local 212. Given that children of UAW members often participated in the recreational programs of the UAW, including musical recitals, movies, games, and Junior CIO summer camps,⁵⁸ there is a chance that the performance of *The Christmas Carol* was a family event and union members were encouraged to attend the recreational performance with their families, especially since one

⁵⁴ "Performances of Union Theatre Since July 1st 1947," n.d., UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁵⁵ "Union Theatre Productions June 1947-May 1949," n.d., UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI; Port Huron is a city north of Detroit that borders Canada and situated on the shores of Lake Huron and the St. Clair River.

⁵⁶ Alice Gerstenberg, *The Pot Boiler*, New Edition (Woodstock, IL: Family Plays, 1983), https://www.dramaticpublishing.com/media/pdf/excerpts/IEC_exPotBoilerPJ6.pdf, 3.

⁵⁷ "Union Theatre Productions June 1947-May 1949," n.d., UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁵⁸ "Kids Enjoying UAW-CIO Recreation Program," *United Automobile Worker*, June 1947, *United Automobile Worker*, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

of the public goals of the Union Theatre listed on the initial flyer from 1946 was the participation of not just union members, but the families of members.⁵⁹

The Union Theatre's most prolific year was 1948, the year of a presidential election where Harry S. Truman was running for re-election against Republican Thomas E. Dewey, Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond, and Progressive Henry A. Wallace. For Reuther, and other labor leaders, the election of 1948 was a test for his platform of "political action" among union members and other workers. Reuther publicly lauded the re-election of Truman as a great victory for all those who valued the "goals of peace, abundance, and brotherhood—those noble ideals for which we fought a bloody and costly war."⁶⁰ He credited part of the victory to Truman and his "courageous and forthright fight," but Reuther also credited the political power "of those who work in the factories, on the farm and in the schools and offices," stating that the victory for Truman was a direct result of union members and working class people pulling together and voting as a bloc on social, political, and economic issues.⁶¹ Reuther encouraged "labor" to keep fighting to ensure that their victory in the election is carried over into specific legislation, namely legislation that supported price control, low-cost housing, protection of civil rights, the repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act (otherwise known as the Labor Management Relations Act), and the adoption of national health and hospital programs.

One of the political issues Reuther desired rank-and-file members to unite behind was anticommunism. The Union Theatre's shared aversion to anticommunism is demonstrated by their performance of *Lowell Thomashevsky*, a short skit written by Gene Brook from Buffalo,

⁵⁹ "Wanted Actors & Actresses Union Stage Productions," n.d., UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁶⁰ Walter P. Reuther, "The Fight Is Not Over... We Must Work to Make Our Victory Secure," *United Automobile Worker*, November 1948, sec. President's Column, Chronicling America, The Library of Congress.

⁶¹ Ibid.

NY. The first performance of *Lowell Thomashevsky* was at the CIO camp in Port Huron, MI, during the summer of 1948. A compiled list of Union Theatre productions from the year 1947 to 1949 implies that *Lowell Thomashevsky* was performed twice for attendees with musical acts and other plays.⁶² The play, using a spoof of American newscaster Lowell Thomas, illustrates satirical attitudes towards Communism and the Soviet Union by staging a brief broadcast from Russian radio presenter Lowell Thomashevsky, who—by the end of the play—is detained by the mysterious “GPU.”⁶³

An announcer first introduces Lowell as “that crack Moscow radio reporter” who has been allowed to broadcast to the American people to further Russian-American relations.⁶⁴ The “act” is meant to be an exact replication of a Russian newscast. Whether *Lowell Thomashevsky* is supposed to be accompanied by other “acts” is unclear by just reading the script, although other records seem to indicate that it was performed with other plays or skits, but the announcer’s first line—“For our first act we are indeed fortunate to be able to present...”⁶⁵—does place the announcer in the role of Emcee, as if they were performing at a vaudeville show. If the announcer is the Emcee in the vaudevillian act, then Lowell is the comedian, the trained animal, or the ventriloquist meant to entertain the audience—first thanking the omnipotent Stalin who is “the father of the sun, and the moon, provider of the night and the day, protector of all time recording devices, discoverer of the eclipse, and inventor of the solar system.”⁶⁶ The exaggerated praise of Stalin leads into the newscast, which was put together by an agency called Tass

⁶² “Union Theatre Productions June 1947-May 1949,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI

⁶³ The State Political Directorate (GPU) was a Soviet security agency from the years 1922-1923 and was later formed into the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU)—an agency which later became the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). It’s possible that inclusion of the GPU, rather than the NKVD, is an error.

⁶⁴ Gene Brook, “Lowell Thomashevsky,” 1948, UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 1.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Newsgathering, an agency that is “under the benign protection and divine inspirational guidance of our beloved Stalin.”⁶⁷ Lowell explains that the “dialectical expression of bourgeois” method of spelling “Tass” as “Ssat” illustrates their approach to newscasting—totally backwards.⁶⁸

The absurdity continues throughout the skit as Lowell reads news from across the globe, from New York to Shanghai to Moscow, all the while the perceived absurdity of life in the Soviet Union is laced with casual mentions of cruelty and violence from the Communist regime. Some of the acts of cruelty are explicit, while others are implied. For example, in a report that Lowell reads out from New York, a “young, poor, blind boy” was beaten to death by “Reuther mobsters” for singing a Soviet tune. As a consequence for the actions of the “Reuther mobsters,” Lowell states matter-of-factly that three Ukrainian peasants will be arrested and killed.⁶⁹ During one story from Moscow, Lowell announces that “father Stalin” will set forth the progress of the next five year plan and will praise other administrators and directors over others. For the administrators and directors who are not praised by Stalin, Lowell (not so subtly) implies that those administrators and directors will be subject to whatever fate Stalin has planned;⁷⁰ based on the premise the skit has established, their fate could range anywhere from the confiscation of possessions to disappearance to killing.

The skit ends with Lowell being led away by “GPU men,” who are described as “wearing overcoats, collars turned up, and hats, brims turned down...[t]heir faces are completely concealed.”⁷¹ The “GPU men” are the specters of the secret police, operating from a position of concealment. Lowell is clearly afraid of the GPU men—in the only piece of stage direction in the

⁶⁷ Gene Brook, “Lowell Thomashevsky,” 1948, UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 1.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁷¹ Ibid.

skit, as the final newscast progresses, Lowell becomes more and more “quakey [sic], frightened and shakey [sic],” trembling by the end of the speech.⁷² In the final newscast, as the GPU men approach, Lowell announces that a new traitor has been discovered by Stalin himself. The traitor is, in fact, Lowell Thomashevsky, who in 1906 referred to Stalin merely as “Stalin” and not “Russia’s shining star Stalin.” Lowell tells the audience that his possessions, his friends, family, debtors, creditors, classmates, and acquaintances are all in custody. He wishes the audience “a long, deep goodnight” and is escorted off the stage by the GPU men.⁷³

The absurdity of Lowell’s newscasts, the stories he tells about the Soviet government discovering that the “American movie star,” Lassie, is leading a dog’s life, parodies living conditions in the Soviet Union and the rhetoric that circulates about Stalin. Scenarios like Soviet citizens believing that the Marshall Plan and Marshall Timoshenko⁷⁴ are related are meant to illicit a laugh from American union members who witness the spectacle and unfortunate fate of the Soviet newscaster. Lowell’s detainment at the end of the skit may have also evoked sympathy or pity from the union members who watched the skit at the CIO camp in Port Huron.

Anticommunist sentiment was high after the conclusion of the Second World War, to the point where one of the Union Theatre’s sponsors—the Workers Education Service (WES) at the University of Michigan—was accused of teaching Marxist literature in one of their classes during a meeting of the House Labor Committee.⁷⁵ Several participants in the Union Theatre sent letters to representatives sitting on the House Labor Committee a few days after an initial article about the accusation appeared in *The Detroit Times*. Most notably, the members of the Union

⁷² Gene Brook, “Lowell Thomashevsky,” 1948, UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 2.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Marshall Timoshenko refers to Semyon Konstantinovich Timoshenko, who was a Marshal of the Soviet Union and military commander during the Second World War.

⁷⁵ Hugh Daly, “Marxist Ideas Taught a ‘M,’ Says GM Aide,” *Detroit Times*, May 19, 1948, Arthur Elder Papers, Box 19, UofM - WES May 1948, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

Theatre who sent letters of support for WES were Joanne Stern, Chairman of the Union Theatre, and Helen Bertholet, the Secretary-Treasurer of Michigan Division 44 of the CWA. The presence of communists in craft and trade unions and left-leaning political movements, indeed in the American labor movement as a whole, contributed to growing factionalism within trade unions, affecting the ability of union leaders across the CIO to form a Liberal-Progressive coalition.⁷⁶ The fracturing between progressive and liberal viewpoints in the CIO and UAW began in the aftermath of the 1946 Congressional election, where Progressives and Liberals founded rival organizations—the Progressive Citizens of America (PCA) and the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA).⁷⁷ Although not himself a member, former Vice-President Henry Wallace was a major public figure associated with the PCA, while Reuther was firmly situated in the ADA, an organization that rejected any association with communist organizations or sympathizers. The leaders of the ADA believed that a strong liberal movement was only possible if Communists were excluded.⁷⁸

Although *Lowell Thomashevsky* was written and performed in 1948, its performance demonstrates a specific point of view regarding the Communist regime in the Soviet Union, one that might be slightly sympathetic to the circumstances of Lowell himself but may be not so generous to leaders like Stalin—a perspective that seems to be in line with Reuther and his allies in the ADA. Lowell’s newscast is framed as an “attraction,” a spectacle of the modern times for whom the Iron Curtain has been lifted to bring American audiences the “exact reproduction of a Russian newscast.”⁷⁹ Thus, the newscast is framed for the audience—in this case the American

⁷⁶ Martin Halpern, *UAW Politics in the Cold War Era*, SUNY Series in American Labor History (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 134-135.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 138.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Gene Brook, “Lowell Thomashevsky,” 1948, UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 1.

people—as an oddity, something outside the scope of American life. Additionally, the text makes clear at the beginning of the skit that the newscast comes straight from Stalin, with Lowell stating, “...now for the news, as compiled, edited and conceived by our Tass newsgathering agency—which is also, of course, under the benign protection and divine inspiration guidance of our beloved Stalin.”⁸⁰ Crediting the news to Stalin turns Lowell into a ventriloquist, simply parroting the script that has been given to him by a (known) repressive state apparatus; Lowell’s ventriloquism is emphasized when he reads to the audience his own detainment and confiscation of property.

The newscast also spans several countries, highlighting the reach of the Soviet Union beyond their own borders and into other sovereign states; stories from both former Yugoslavia and former Czechoslovakia are read to the audience. In Belgrade, Lowell reports, the workers gifted Josip Tito, Marshal and leader of Yugoslavia, “[in] a genuine expression of love and esteem,” “a...bullet-proof automobile.”⁸¹ The ellipses between the “a” and the “bullet-proof automobile” is written in the text, indicating a pause is to be said between the words “a” and “bullet-proof.” Lowell’s pause implies confusion or hesitation about the gift of a bullet-proof automobile—after all, what kind of workers would gift their leader a bullet-proof vehicle if he was, indeed, beloved and held in high esteem or safe from danger. What specifically is disconcerting about the gift is unclear, but there is the possibility that Lowell hesitates because Tito needs to be protected from Stalin because of Tito’s decision to break away from the economic planning of the Soviet Union.

The implication that Stalin may have Tito assassinated is reinforced by the next newscast from Prague about an official of the “Szechoslovakian [sic] Social Democratic Party”

⁸⁰ Gene Brook, “Lowell Thomashevsky,” 1948, UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 1.

⁸¹ Ibid.

committing suicide by stepping in front of a speeding bicycle at eleven o'clock in the morning. Lowell tells the audience succinctly that the body was cremated at eleven-fifteen and a post-mortem will be held the next day.⁸² The report, compared to the rest of the skit, is relatively normal, which puts the newscast out of place; the tone doesn't fit the absurdity of the rest of the newscasts. Further, the reported time of cremation is a short fifteen minutes after the reported time of death; unless the official stepped into traffic right in front of the morgue, it's unlikely his body would be cremated in fifteen minutes or less after dying. The placement of the newscast, immediately after the news of Tito's bullet-proof automobile, along with the "normal" tone of the news from Belgrade and quick time between time of death and time of cremation, suggests that the death of the Czechoslovakian official was under suspicious circumstances, possibly by Stalin himself.

Despite the absurd and humorous spirit of the skit, the specter of Stalin hangs over Lowell's newscasts, depicting Stalin as a character who is just off stage and always looking over one's shoulder. The skit also depicts Stalin and Communist Party apparatuses as far-reaching, influencing behavior in cities like Belgrade, Shanghai, and Prague. As tensions rose between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II, Truman instituted his "get tough" policies in domestic and foreign affairs, including the Truman Doctrine, which provided economic and military aid to democratic countries facing authoritarian threats.⁸³ The first countries to receive aid after the declaration of the Truman Doctrine were Greece and Turkey, both of whom were struggling against Communist revolution and Soviet expansion. The Truman Doctrine, and later the Marshall Plan, was the beginning of Truman's attempts at "containment" and stemming "the specter of Stalin" into other countries in Europe and beyond. Different

⁸² Gene Brook, "Lowell Thomashevsky," 1948, UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 1.

⁸³ Halpern, *UAW Politics in the Cold War Era*, 141.

factions of left-leaning workers organizations had varying responses to Truman's foreign policies. The PCA denounced it outright and the ADA endorsed actions like the Truman Doctrine. The ADA also endorsed Truman's efforts to begin a loyalty program for all federal employees, where federal employees would be investigated for any ties or sympathies to any organizations deemed to be "totalitarian, fascist, communist or subversive."⁸⁴

The characterization of the Soviet Union and Communist influence in *Lowell Thomashevsky* is, in some ways, in line with the foreign policies instituted by the Truman administration. Although *Lowell Thomashevsky* portrays one of the darker aspects of Stalin's regime, namely the mass detainment and suspicious deaths of (potential) political enemies, the long arm of Stalin reaches into other sovereign nations, influencing events in Europe and the Soviet Union. Part of Truman's logic for issuing policies like the Truman Doctrine was to contain the spread of Communism into other countries after World War II. *Lowell Thomashevsky* dramatizes, albeit in a humorous way, life under a Communist government, perhaps even dramatizing what Brooks thought would happen to American citizens if Communism ever came into power in the United States. Stalin and Communist ideology, in *Lowell Thomashevsky*, is a threat to everyday citizens and to abstract concepts like rationality. The mention of Walter Reuther by name indicates that Reuther's anticommunist and anti-Soviet remarks had caused a stir among Progressive and American Communist. According to historian Michael Halpern, Reuther readily attacked Communists, but refrained from both supporting and criticizing Truman in public, choosing instead to sponsor the ADA for tactical reasons.⁸⁵ By criticizing Communism, and even leading red-baiting efforts himself, Reuther could secure his leadership position within the UAW from rivals and protect the labor movement from antilabor forces in the

⁸⁴ Halpern, *UAW Politics in the Cold War Era*, 141.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

Republican and Democratic Parties. Other members of UAW leadership, like George Addes, Richard Leonard, and Roland Thomas, and allies of the PCA, like Henry Wallace, also came under attack from Reuther. After Truman was re-elected in 1948, Reuther wrote in his president's column that the re-election of Truman could only mean that American voters had rejected "the mainstream of Republican reaction but also effectively repudiated the efforts of the Dixiecrats to exploit racial prejudices and the Wallacites to exploit our hope for peace while serving the interests of the Cominform."⁸⁶ Reuther's somewhat subtle characterization of "Wallacites," referring to the supporters of Henry Wallace as serving the interests of the Cominform, implies that their allegiance is not to the "American people," who Reuther mentions several times in his column, and instead are more interested in running interference on behalf of a foreign entity.

Halpern makes clear that one of Reuther opposed Communist interference in the UAW and the CIO, using moments of attack to restate the CIO's objection to Communist influence within the trade union organization.⁸⁷ As the UAW begins to build a political platform, one where workers can enact through political and economic action, the perceived threat of Communist participation in a labor movement pushing for progressive politics must have seemed an immediate threat, especially since antilabor politicians were seeking to use Communist participation to dismantle the organized labor movement. As leaders like Reuther deny Communist interference and support red-baiting efforts, the performance of *Lowell Thomashevsky* becomes a crucial focal point to glimpse how anticommunist attitudes and perspectives persisted into the recreational and educational programming of the UAW and CIO.

Lowell Thomashevsky was first performed at a CIO summer camp sponsored by the

⁸⁶ Walter P. Reuther, "The Fight Is Not Over... We Must Work to Make Our Victory Secure," *United Automobile Worker*, November 1948, sec. President's Column, Chronicling America, The Library of Congress.

⁸⁷ Halpern, *UAW Politics in the Cold War Era*, 143.

UAW Education Department. In 1947, the summer camp was advertised as a “leadership training institute.”⁸⁸ A pamphlet for the training camp from the summer of 1947 promises the opportunity to earn experience and training immediately valuable to them as union members; courses were taught over the span of a week and include courses on labor economics, union stewardship, and political action.⁸⁹ While *Lowell Thomashevsky* wasn’t performed in 1947—the skit was performed in 1948—the Union Theatre was performing for the attendees of the CIO summer camp. A list of productions performed by the Union Theatre mentions performances at the summer camp,⁹⁰ and the pamphlet from 1947 states that one course will cover “Recreational Leadership Methods,” which includes training regarding “crafts, dramatics, sports, plays, skits, and social recreation.”⁹¹ The purpose of the summer camp was to train leaders in the UAW who would be able to implement what they had learned in the workplace, designed to attract union members who were interested in acquiring knowledge about unionism and its limits and becoming what the UAW Education Department called “educated” union members.⁹²

Whether *Lowell Thomashevsky* was performed as part of the course programming or as entertainment after the course was done for the day, the skit dramatized a perspective common among the leadership in the UAW and common in liberal Democrat political programs. The opportunity to present anticommunist perspectives was baked into recreational and educational activities and the Union Theatre was the vehicle to present “labor’s opinions” to other union

⁸⁸ “Your Summer Will Pay Off Next Winter,” 1947, UAW Education Department Records, Box 11, Summer School 1947, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “Union Theatre Productions June 1947-May 1949,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI

⁹¹ “Your Summer Will Pay Off Next Winter,” 1947, UAW Education Department Records, Box 11, Summer School 1947, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁹² “Ford Local #600: UAW-CIO Educational Dept” (Education Department, n.d.), UAW Education Department Records, Box 8, Ford Local 600 - Materials, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

members. There did not seem to be any classes about anticommunism during the summer camp, although there were classes about economics, but including a skit into the camp's programming engineers the opportunity to broadcast a sentiment shared by many liberal Democrats. In this way, *Lowell Thomashevsky* becomes a tool for the Union Theatre's sponsors to advertise a particular political program, laboring during the year of a presidential election to enact a certain perspective that is similar to one presidential candidate over another. However, I do not mean to suggest that anticommunism was solely the political viewpoint of union leadership; member of the Union Theatre protesting accusations of Marxist influence in one of the sponsors of the Union Theatre indicates that the workers participating agreed, to some degree, with Reuther's impulse to shield the UAW from accusations of Communist or Marxist influence. In her letter to Representative Edward McCowen, Stern—the chairman of the Union Theatre—refuted the accusation of Marxist idea being taught in a WES class on economics, stating that the class “at no time contained propaganda or un-American ideas.”⁹³ Thus, the performance of *Lowell Thomashevsky* can be viewed as an endorsement of an anticommunist perspective adopted by both leadership in the UAW and the Union Theatre, as well as an example of the perspectives of union leadership and rank-and-file workers aligning on a particular political debate.

⁹³ Joanne Stern, “Letter to Representative Edward McCowen,” May 21, 1948, Arthur Elder Papers, Box 19, UofM - WES May 1948, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

Chapter 2: “Discrimination Costs YOU Money”

On July 26, 1948, Truman signed Executive Order 9981, ending discrimination in the United States military; the next day, at 10:39am, the National Archives made the executive order available for public viewing.⁹⁴ The executive order declared that “there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.”⁹⁵ Truman signed the order a week and a half after the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia where he was named the Democratic candidate for the Presidential Election of 1948. *The Detroit Tribune*, a Black and African American weekly, reported that Northern and Western liberals were able to add a “strong civil rights declaration” to the platform of the Democratic Party, blocking attempts from Southern Democrats to include a declaration about the centrality and importance of states’ rights.⁹⁶ Truman’s commitment to placing a civil rights platform in the Democratic Party caused the party to splinter, with some Southern Democrats forming their own States’ Rights Democratic Party (hereafter referred to as Dixiecrats) and nominating staunch segregationist Strom Thurmond as their presidential candidate.

Racial equality and civil rights were a central political issue during the Presidential Election of 1948—all four political parties that ran a candidate included something about civil rights in their political party platform. The Republicans, Democrats, and Progressives all asserted, in some manner, the right to equal opportunity, although language and specific policy

⁹⁴ Executive Order 9981, 7/26/48 [Executive Orders Series]; General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11; National Archives at Washington, D.C. [online version available through Archival Research Catalog (NAID 300009) at www.archives.gov; March 8, 2024].

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ “Democrats Adopt Strong Platform On Race Issue,” *The Detroit Tribune*, July 24, 1948, Vol. XXV, No. 27 edition, Chronicling America, Library of Congress.

varied across the political parties. The centrality to racial equality and civil rights could also be found in the labor movement after World War II and, much like the politicians running for President, opinions regarding racial equality, civil rights, and anti-discrimination varied across participants in the labor movement. Labor historian Kevin Boyle points out that race relations within trade unions were complex, involving both institutional, structural roadblocks and the personal prejudices of union leaders and white rank-and-file workers. He asserts that, throughout the 1940s and 50s, both white and Black workers used union structure as a weapon for “defending, defining, or breaking the shop floor color line.”⁹⁷ Despite the UAW’s reputation as an advocate for racial equality, the color line that existed at the founding of the UAW was maintained after the end of World War II; according to Boyle, it wasn’t until the 1960s that the UAW started to, slowly, break down the color divide on the shop floor.⁹⁸

A crucial segment of the Union Theatre’s repertoire was anti-discrimination plays; they performed at least three anti-discrimination plays between 1947-1949. Of all the subject matters covered by the Union Theatre, racial equality and anti-discrimination on the shop floor was the most cohesive group of plays in their short history. Correspondence between Stern and William H. Oliver, the director of the UAW Fair Practices Department, indicates that the Union Theatre was invited by the Fair Practices Department to perform at the CIO summer camp as part of a fair practices program and that the performance was received well by the audience members.⁹⁹ The presence, albeit small presence, of an effort to consistently produce anti-discrimination plays further complicates the history of civil rights advocacy in the UAW. White workers often aggressively defended the color line and the related privileges associated with discrimination in

⁹⁷ Kevin Boyle, “‘There Are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can’t Heal’: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Automobile Workers, 1940-1960,” *Labor History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 8.

⁹⁹ Joanne Stern, “Letter to William H. Oliver,” August 25, 1948, UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 27, Folder 4, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

the workplace, using local autonomy to maintain said color line by engaging tactics like work stoppages and gerrymandering elections in the union local. Boyle, in his discussion about the struggle for racial equality in the UAW, connects the structural changes within the union to the continued defending and defining of the color line; the increasingly centralized structure of the UAW enabled union officers at the top of the food chain (who were often more progressive than the rank-and-file) to wield institutional power, using their newfound authority to, for example, break up the wildcat strikes and work stoppages enacted by white workers.¹⁰⁰ The Union Theatre became part of the UAW's restructuring, laboring as part of the more centralized International to help enforce and encourage the union's policy of anti-discrimination in what was, perhaps, part of the last investments from the UAW in policies of racial equality and anti-discrimination.

Further, the staging of both anticommunist and anti-discrimination plays, underscores a tension between both political positions put forth by the Union Theatre, particularly during the year of 1948 when both *Lowell Thomashevsky* and the anti-discrimination play *You Can't Tell Me* were performed. The tension, however, might help partially explain the disappearance of anti-discrimination and racial equality policies from the UAW by the end of the 1940s. As anticommunist sentiment increased after World War II and civil rights organizing became linked with communism, the progressive leadership in trade unions were pushed out, and the chief mechanism that was used was the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which curbed the political power of trade unions like the UAW significantly, banning many of the tactics the UAW and CIO had used in the past to win victories. The Act also required union leaders to pledge that they were not members of the Communist Party. Repealing the Taft-Hartley Act was a priority of the UAW and CIO, but anticommunist leaders in both organizations used the opportunity to purge their

¹⁰⁰ Boyle, "There Are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can't Heal," 18; wildcat strikes are "unauthorized" or "illegal" strikes, where workers enact a strike without notifying union leadership and/or receiving the approval of union leadership.

ranks of Communists and other progressives, potentially closing the door to meaningful organizing around anti-discrimination, civil rights, and racial equality.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, the anti-discrimination plays of the Union Theatre constitute an effort from both rank-and-file union members and union staffers to push against the color line that was often ardently defended by white workers and less progressive white union staffers, an effort that eventually fizzled out when the Union Theatre ran into financial trouble and the UAW became more invested in Cold War politics.

Discrimination Costs You Money was the first anti-discrimination performance produced by the Union Theatre. Directed by the Union Theatre's chairman, Joanne Stern, the performance was a staging of an illustrated pamphlet with the same title created and distributed by an organization called the National Labor Service based in New York City; the text was written by a woman named Sonya Kaufer and the illustrations were drawn by a man named Lee Levy.¹⁰² The Union Theatre performed the pamphlet at the CIO summer camp during the summer of 1947 to a recorded audience of approximately 200.¹⁰³ The front cover of the pamphlet shows a worker in overalls, a blue shirt, and a cap dumping change into his open hand with "Director's Copy Joanne Stern" scribbled in the bottom margins.¹⁰⁴ The director's copy has notes written in the margins throughout the pamphlet, detailing things like props, characters, and a singular stage

¹⁰¹ Loomis, *A History of America in Ten Strikes*, 151-152.

¹⁰² Sonya Kaufer, "Discrimination Costs You Money" (National Labor Service, n.d.), UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 23.

¹⁰³ "Performances of Union Theatre Since July 1st 1947," n.d., UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI. The exact accuracy of 200 is unknown; it's entirely possible that there was little under 200 audience members or little over 200 audience members.

¹⁰⁴ Sonya Kaufer, "Discrimination Costs You Money" (National Labor Service, n.d.), UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 1.

direction at the end—"Solidarity Forever-with audience."¹⁰⁵ Handwritten notes at the end of the director's copy count list at least eight characters including a narrator, a boss, and two characters named Joe and Al.¹⁰⁶ Further, the illustrations provide some clues about what the staging looked like for the performance in 1947. Each page includes a different tableau, images that move the story along; the first tableau is one of Joe, our main character, arriving to work at "a union shop," lunch pail in hand.¹⁰⁷ The marginalia on the first page lists props, corroborating that Stern's staging falls in line with the tableaux that are seen throughout the pamphlet. For example, Stern lists Joe's lunch pail and overalls and a badge for the union steward, Al, who explains to Joe how discrimination harms more than helps workers. Stern also lists a series of placards needed for a few of the tableaux, with phrases written on them like "Phony Promises," "Low Wages," and "Contract."¹⁰⁸

Discrimination Costs You Money follows Joe as he arrives at his union shop working an unnamed job; the main didactic point of the pamphlet is that discrimination, which the pamphlet defines as treating someone with scorn because of the place of their birth, color of their skin, or "the church he worships in...", "isn't very funny, / And what's more, it costs YOU money."¹⁰⁹ Joe is dressed in the same outfit as the rest of the workers the audience encounters in the performance, wearing a cap, a collared long sleeve shirt, overalls, and black shoes. The only worker in the performance that has a variation in their costume is the woman worker who covers her hair with a polka dot kerchief like the one worn by Rosie the Riveter in the infamous public relations campaign poster from the Second World War. Either way, and despite the kerchief to

¹⁰⁵ Sonya Kaufer, "Discrimination Costs You Money" (National Labor Service, n.d.), UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 21.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 1.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

distinguish the woman worker, the costume (which functions more like a uniform) ties all the workers together, regardless of “the place he was born, / Or the color of his skin, / Or the church he worships in...”.¹¹⁰

Upon arriving inside (presumably) the factory, Joe discovered he is working on the assembly line with a Black man, a Jewish man, and an Italian man, which Joe protests by saying that he doesn’t mind a union shop but won’t work with anyone else on the line. As Joe throws his cap on the ground, Al the union steward intervenes and points out that discrimination in the workplace harms Joe and helps the boss. Joe is disbelief, asking, “I’d like to know / How is this gonna cost *me* dough?”, and Al responds by saying, “Its [sic] quite a simple thing to see— / Just look at union history.”¹¹¹ Al points to union battles in the past where workers, instead of helping one another, fought one another to protect their slice of the pie. The lack of unity among the workers didn’t lead to victory and only benefitted the boss—in the pamphlet Al’s line “There was no chance for victory, / Because there was no unity...” was accompanied by a tableau of a boss tearing up a contract.¹¹² Only by sticking together could battles against the boss be won; adhering to discriminatory practices within the union and the workplace, Al tells Joe, will only result in low wages and phony promises from the boss. After going home to contemplate what Al has told him, Joe comes around and rushes to work the next day to declare to his fellow workers that he understands—“...I need you and you need me, / And that’s what makes democracy!”¹¹³

Discrimination Costs You Money constitutes the Union’s Theatres early attempts to produce an anti-discrimination play. Similar to *Lowell Thomashevsky*, which was performed the

¹¹⁰ Sonya Kaufer, “Discrimination Costs You Money” (National Labor Service, n.d.), UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 1.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 6.

¹¹² Ibid., 9.

¹¹³ Ibid., 21.

following year, *Discrimination Costs You Money* was performed at the CIO summer camp specifically marketed as a leadership training institute.¹¹⁴ One of the classes featured at the summer camp was a course on “Stewards and Committeemen Techniques” intended to teach workers about the various responsibilities of being a union steward. In the description of the course, the responsibilities of a union steward include bargaining with management, writing up grievances, and general record keeping.¹¹⁵ The performance of *Discrimination Costs You Money* adds an additional responsibility to the union steward—resolving anti-discriminatory conduct among workers. Al takes on the responsibility of teaching Joe about labor history and how discrimination has prevented union victories in the past. In this sense, *Discrimination Costs You Money* is not only a cautionary tale about how discriminatory attitudes affect all union members but is also a staging of the effects of the UAW’s educational programming.

Al demonstrates to the audience the role of an educated union member. He tells Joe stories of past union struggles and how they were able to achieve victory, stating, “We had our battle—fought it hard— / But all of us had a union card. Petrone and Green and Cohen and me. / We worked it all together. See?”¹¹⁶ Al’s statement is accompanied by a scene of himself, Green, Petrone, Cohen, and the (unnamed) woman worker picketing and holding placards with slogans like “We Win Together” and “No Discrimination.”¹¹⁷ Al continually stresses to Joe that all that matters is that his co-workers have union cards, which is reason enough to fight for his fellow worker. By focusing on their shared experience as union labor, picketing workers were able to resist offers to accept lower pay and poorer benefits and, instead, “We battled on with belts

¹¹⁴ “Your Summer Will Pay Off Next Winter,” 1947, UAW Education Department Records, Box 11, Summer School 1947, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Sonya Kaufer, “Discrimination Costs You Money” (National Labor Service, n.d.), UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 15.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

pulled tight— / But sticking together, we won our fight. / Wages went up; hours went down. / We made this place a union town.”¹¹⁸ What Al is explaining to Joe are the foundations of solidarity—by focusing on what binds them together, instead of what divides them, the workers were able to achieve such demands as higher pay and lower hours. The performance showcases Al’s ability as a union steward to mitigate conflict between workers and help Joe understand the importance of anti-discrimination. By understanding labor’s achievements from the past, Al is able to effectively communicate and change Joe’s attitude towards his coworkers.

Discrimination Costs You Money stages an idyllic understanding of anti-discrimination advocacy on the shop floor. The equation is simple—when union members hold discriminatory attitudes toward other union members, leaders on the shop floor need to remind workers that discrimination against other union members only helps the boss and the workers will come to their senses. The expectation for a short performance similar in form to an agit-prop to provide a nuanced explanation of anti-discrimination in the workplace is, perhaps, unfair, but *Discrimination Costs You Money* does contrast sharply with the account given by Boyle in his article “‘There Are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can’t Heal’.” First, Joe’s protest at the beginning of the performance, where he insists he won’t work with a Black man, a Jewish man, or an Italian man, is similar to the protests from white rank-and-file workers that Boyle documents in his article. Boyle states that “white rank-and-filers insisted that they had the right to determine beside whom they worked” and would protect that right through actions in the workplace like work stoppages and gerrymandered elections.¹¹⁹ While Al is able to intervene before Joe potentially gathers allies among other prejudiced white workers, intervention from

¹¹⁸ Sonya Kaufer, “Discrimination Costs You Money” (National Labor Service, n.d.), UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 17.

¹¹⁹ Boyle, “‘There Are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can’t Heal’,” 15.

union stewards didn't seem to always be the case among UAW locals. Boyle points out that often it was the union staffers above union stewards and regional directors who were intervening in locals to enforce racial policy, often filling regional positions with staffers who "identified strongly with the Reuther machine's liberal social vision," which resulted in unprecedented access to local unions and the shop floor.¹²⁰ Framed in the context of structural changes within the UAW, *Discrimination Costs You Money* is a performance that is part of the "Reuther machine's" campaign to pressure locals into adhering to racial equality and anti-discrimination policies, pressure that was often inconsistent and guided by politics rather than principle.¹²¹

Union staffers like William H. Oliver, Director of the Fair Practices Departments, were consistent about staging anti-discrimination plays during the CIO summer camps in Port Huron. The following summer, in 1948 and during the same camp as the performance of *Lowell Thomashevsky*, the Union Theatre performed *You Can't Tell Me* written by Orville F. Linck, an English professor at Wayne State University. *You Can't Tell Me* is a short one-act play about two friends who "try to show their families that racial prejudice has no place in the new world they're trying to build."¹²² The first performance of *You Can't Tell Me* was on June 10, 1948 at River Rouge High School in the city of River Rouge, directly southeast of Detroit, for the Michigan Federation of Teachers. The play was performed along with two comedies, *Wrong Numbers* and *The Flattering Word*.¹²³ The Michigan Federation of Teachers had requested a performance from the Union Theatre once before. On March 5th, 1948, the Union Theatre performed *The Flattering*

¹²⁰ Boyle, "There Are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can't Heal," 17.

¹²¹ Ibid., 18.

¹²² "Backstage with the Union Theatre" (The Union Theatre of Detroit, March 25, 1948), UAW Recreation Department Records, Series I, Box 2, Theatre Groups, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 2.

¹²³ "The Union Theatre of Detroit Presents 'Wrong Numbers,' 'You Can't Tell Me,' and 'The Flattering Word'" (The Union Theatre of Detroit, June 10, 1948), UAW Recreation Department Records, Series I, Box 2, Theatre Groups, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

Word at a fundraiser for Local 964 of the Michigan Federation of Teachers.¹²⁴

You Can't Tell Me was commissioned by the Union Theatre after attendees of the CIO summer camp responded positively to the staging of *Discrimination Costs You Money*; in an update about their activities, a member of the Union Theatre stated that “in spite of our relatively poor presentation of this particular skit,” the audience showed interest in the subject of racial discrimination in the workplace.¹²⁵ Subsequently, the Union Theatre was invited back the next summer to present *You Can't Tell Me* in the month of August. In a correspondence between Oliver and Stern during the month of July, Oliver states that he has arranged for *You Can't Tell Me* to be performed on Wednesday, August 18, and he expresses the desire to advertise the play in the summer camp's newspaper, as well as create mimeographed advertisements.¹²⁶ The play was presented to the students of that week's session, and the program for the performance makes clear that the presentation of *You Can't Tell Me* is part of the Fair Practices Department's efforts to advance a better understanding of discrimination in the workplace and in everyday life. The connection between the play and the Fair Practice Department's program is further solidified by the short paragraph included in the performance program detailing other resources for union members to tackle discrimination in the workplace.¹²⁷

The play follows two friends and veterans, Dave and Ellis, who attend Labor History and Labor Law classes together and must navigate the personal prejudices of their family members. Dave lives with his wife and son, Jean and Dave Jr., and his parents, Duncan and Martha. *You*

¹²⁴ “Backstage with the Union Theatre” (The Union Theatre of Detroit, March 25, 1948), UAW Recreation Department Records, Series I, Box 2, Theatre Groups, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 2.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹²⁶ William H. Oliver, “Letter to Miss Joanne Stern, Chairman,” July 26, 1948, UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 27, Folder 4, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

¹²⁷ “The UAW-CIO Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department Presents The Union Theatre of Detroit in a One Act Play ‘You Can't Tell Me,’” August 18, 1948, UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 27, Folder 4, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 2.

Can't Tell Me begins in the home of Duncan and Martha immediately following supper; Dave settles in for a “hard evening of study” while Duncan settles into a post-supper smoke.¹²⁸ Dave and Duncan’s opening conversation sets up the initial conflict—Dave’s mother, Martha, disapproves Dave’s friendship with Ellis, a Black worker. Duncan first brings up Ellis to his son and in response, Dave starts (over)explaining why he and Ellis make a good team, stating, “...he gets what I have to miss—and I get what he has to miss—I couldn’t get any union work done and make the grades in school without him.”¹²⁹ Duncan reassures his son that he doesn’t need convincing and wishes that Martha thought the same as himself and Dave. Martha, instead, worries about what the neighbors think about her son being friends with a Black worker—Duncan speculates that Martha might be inclined to agree with the neighbors. At the very least, he can tell that Martha is bothered that Ellis comes over to study.¹³⁰ Duncan’s speculation prompts Dave to get on his “soapbox” and states that “if we can’t have Ellis in his house as a matter of course...then we can’t win anywhere else. We’ve to start right here.”¹³¹ Dave is adamant that the fight against discrimination needs to start at home, a sentiment that seems to be shared by Duncan and Jean, Dave’s wife, and expressed by Dave several times before.

Duncan, Dave, and Jean continue to debate until Ellis arrives at the house. The audience discovers that Dave and Ellis have similar lives. Both are married and live with their parents; Dave and Jean have a young son and Ellis and his wife, Kit, are expecting a baby. The audience also discovers that Ellis is in the running for the steward position at this local union, and we discover that Ellis’s mother also doesn’t like him coming over to the Maxwell’s home.¹³² Ellis

¹²⁸ Orville F. Linck, “You Can’t Tell Me: A Play in One Act,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, You Can’t Tell Me, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 1.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 5-6.

explains to the Maxwells that “she’s quite old-fashioned. Never trusts white people...” and overheard the neighbors talking about Ellis, calling him “a regular Uncle Tom.”¹³³ Ellis suggests that she finds his friendship with Dave and the neighbors’ gossip to be a form of condescension, like being patted on the head, something that she “had enough [sic] of that while she was a maid.”¹³⁴ He explains further that his mother thinks that Ellis’ visits to Dave’s house is “trouble all around.”¹³⁵ Ellis is about to side with his mother when Dave devises a plan to bring Mrs. Talbot over to the house so she can meet the Maxwells and hopefully dispel the prejudices of both Martha and Mrs. Talbot.¹³⁶

Their planning is interrupted by Clay Henderson, Dave’s old friend who lives in the same neighborhood. After a terse introduction with Ellis and after Ellis leaves, Clay makes it known to the Maxwell that he, too, disapproves of Ellis coming over to the house, but his racist attitudes are more explicit than Martha. While Martha couches her biases in concern about what the neighbors think, Clay is clear that he finds Ellis to be “uppity” and resents the fact that Dave has been spending more time with Ellis, stating, “You’ve only known him a couple of months—and I’ve known you for ten years—seems to me you’d have some consideration for your old friends.”¹³⁷ Clay’s resentment of Ellis seems to be part of a larger resentment towards Black workers. When Dave points out that if the boss takes advantage of Black workers then white workers “will get the business next,” Clay becomes indignant: “I don’t want him working for me—you can’t tell me my pay depends on what happens to a bunch of...Negroes.”¹³⁸ Duncan backs up Dave in his argument with Clay, telling Clay about his own experiences on the

¹³³ Orville F. Linck, “You Can’t Tell Me: A Play in One Act,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, You Can’t Tell Me, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 6.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 7.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 10.

assembly line, where his employer hired Black workers in an attempt “to cut wages with cheap labor” and pit the white workers against the Black workers. According to Duncan, “the Big Boys” strategy backfired and the union was able to put a stop to the discriminatory when they made it clear that the Black workers “could join up just like anybody else...”¹³⁹ Clay protests, accusing Black workers of “[taking] the bread out of the white man’s mouth,” but Duncan hits back by arguing that negotiating against GM is much more difficult “by yourself.” “Clay, this prejudice stuff costs money,” Duncan retorts, “it makes you feel big, but ‘tain’t worth it in my book.”¹⁴⁰

Duncan’s line “this prejudice stuff costs money” links *You Can’t Tell Me* with *Discrimination Costs You Money*, the performance from the previous summer. The argument that discrimination costs workers seemed to be a reoccurring tagline for the Union Theatre and the UAW. The slogan “discrimination costs you money” appears in an issue of *The United Automobile Worker* in 1947 when a portion of the pamphlet by Sonya Kaufer and Levy Lee (the pamphlet that was the basis for the performance of *Discrimination Costs You Money*) was published before either performance, but its appearance in the newspaper and the performances implies that both those involved in the Union Theatre and *The United Automobile Worker* found “discrimination costs you money” to be a persuasive talking point.¹⁴¹ The slogan “discrimination costs you money” (emphasis added) appeals to workers on a personal level, rather than a collective one, implying that Union Theatre leadership found an appeal to personal or individual working conditions to be more effective or successful. The slogan argues that discrimination harms white workers personally and would bar them from the economic security and political

¹³⁹ Orville F. Linck, “You Can’t Tell Me: A Play in One Act,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, You Can’t Tell Me, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 10.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴¹ “Discrimination Costs You Money,” *United Automobile Worker*, April 1947, United Automobile Worker, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 6.

power union members had fought for in the past. For Dave and Duncan, engaging in discriminatory practices costs more than its worth; allowing discrimination to exist in both the home and in the workplace furthers a pervasive behavior that, in the end, prevents white workers and Black workers from accessing security in the workplace, whether that's the security of a better wage or workplace policies like seniority. Not only does discrimination cost one money, in terms of the wages one earns, but it costs workers the job security that workers fought for in the 1920s and 1930s. Allowing discrimination—allowing workers to be divided by discrimination—has the potential to wipe away the gains made in hard fought battles of the past, or at least prevent the continued economic security of workers.

The argument between Dave, Duncan, and Clay is perhaps one that organizers have heard before from white workers. Boyle, in his article about the struggle for racial equality in the UAW, documents several shop floor actions where white workers used direct action tactics, like wildcat strikes and work stoppages, that in the past had been successful in winning the demands that Duncan lists, like higher wages and seniority. Instead, the tactics were used by white workers to protest racial equality in the workplace. In September of 1937, a group of white workers walked off the shop floor in Detroit's Motor Products plant when a Black worker was promoted to the maintenance department, justifying the action with the rationale that they had the right to choose who they worked with on the shop floor.¹⁴² While Clay does not explicitly state that he believes locals should be segregated, his complaints about Ellis make clear that he doesn't view Ellis as an equal, as someone worth fighting for, or as someone who should be socializing in a white neighborhood. Clay's attitudes and behaviors are indicative of many white

¹⁴² Boyle, "There Are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can't Heal," 18; The Fair Practices Department did not support the action of the white workers and notified the striking workers that the UAW wouldn't shield them from any disciplinary action from their employer, nor would they demote the Black worker. The striking workers returned to work the next day.

workers in the UAW who, at the time, were not interested in anti-discrimination and racial equality policies of union leadership, attitudes that led white workers and union members to take workplace action against the UAW. He continually calls Ellis racial slurs (despite trying not too for the sake of Dave), ridicules Ellis for going to school, and rebukes his friend when Dave says, “[Ellis] is working for you too.”¹⁴³ Clay’s response to Dave is the closest he gets to admitting he has a right to choose who he works alongside: “I don’t want him working for me...”.¹⁴⁴

Another tactic white workers would use to “defend the color line” would be union local elections. In addition to documenting the times white workers walked off the floor, Boyle documents local union elections where white workers “gerrymandered” the elections to make electing Black workers more difficult; in 1945 and 1946, workers at the Dodge Main local structured steward elections so Black workers would be less likely to be elected, and workers at a Chrysler plant scheduled an election two hours before the janitors, the only Black workers in the plant, ended their shift.¹⁴⁵ Granted, the examples he cites are from 1945 and 1946, but—coupled with direct action tactics—they demonstrate a pattern of white workers wielding control over both rank-and-file positions on the shop floor and leadership positions in the union.

I introduce the manipulation of elections because Ellis mentions that he is running for the position of steward in his local. When he arrives to the Maxwells’ house, Dave and Ellis have a brief interaction about the steward elections, which is as follows:

DAVE:...How’d your meeting go?

ELLIS: Not bad. We set up the steward election.

DAVE: Think you’ll get elected?

ELLIS: Fair chance—the boys like Jim, but he doesn’t know the score—they’re

¹⁴³ Orville F. Linck, “You Can’t Tell Me: A Play in One Act,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, You Can’t Tell Me, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 10.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Boyle, “There Are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can’t Heal,” 16.

beginning to catch on.¹⁴⁶

Ellis has a competitor, another worker by the name of Jim, who he states is favored by the other workers. However, by Ellis' own account, the other workers are beginning to "catch on" that Jim "doesn't know the score." "Knowing the score" is a colloquialism that means "understanding what is happening" or "being familiar with 'the situation.'" Ellis' opponent in the steward election, based on his characterization, is a union member who only takes part in union affairs or doesn't understand "the importance of carrying union interests into the political field."¹⁴⁷ By comparison, Ellis does "know the score" and he is set up within the world of the play to demonstrate that he embodies the "educated" and "politicized" union member. Ellis is introduced as a good student and a hard worker by Dave at the beginning of the play. Shortly after Dave and Ellis' conversation about the steward elections, Ellis hands over his notes on a lecture about the Taft-Hartley Act and a piece of legislation called the "Norris-LaGuardia Anti-Injunction Bill." Ellis even wrote his congressman for a copy of the Taft-Hartley Act, which he received quickly, and managed to mention in the same breath that he wrote to his congressman about the Office of Price Administration.¹⁴⁸ Throughout the play, Ellis models the behavior of a union steward and of an educated and politicized union member. When viewed in this way, *You Can't Tell Me* is another attempt from the Union Theatre to stage the UAW's expectations for its members and stages how educated, politicized union members can be advocates for racial equality both at work and in the home.

You Can't Tell Me also stages a positive outcome when the characters (and perhaps the

¹⁴⁶ Orville F. Linck, "You Can't Tell Me: A Play in One Act," n.d., UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, *You Can't Tell Me*, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 5.

¹⁴⁷ "Ford Local #600: UAW-CIO Educational Dept" (Education Department, n.d.), UAW Education Department Records, Box 8, Ford Local 600 - Materials, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 4.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.; The Office of Price Administration was dissolved in May of 1947, a few months before *You Can't Tell Me* is set.

audience members) focus on what they have in common rather than focusing on their differences.¹⁴⁹ After Clay departs, Ellis returns with his mother under the guise of forgetting some of his notes at the Maxwells' home, an excuse Ellis gives his mother to get her to meet Martha. The ruse works—Mrs. Talbot comes inside and meets the Maxwell family.¹⁵⁰ Ellis was picking her up from a PTA meeting where her and the other parents were discussing how to keep the school lunch program, which is in danger of being defunded by Congressmen in Washington D.C. Upon receiving the news, Martha expresses frustration at “those dirty politicians” and states that she would “like to give ‘em a piece of my mind,” to which Mrs. Talbot agrees and informs Martha that they plan to send some of the members of the PTA to Washington.¹⁵¹ Martha seems satisfied with Mrs. Talbot's answer and the group moves on to chatting about the bread Martha has cooking in the kitchen. Jean convinces Mrs. Talbot to look at Martha's bread and how its cooking—its Martha's first time “baking in years.” Mrs. Talbot agrees to assuage Martha's worry about the cooking time.¹⁵² Once Martha, Jean, and Mrs. Talbot leave the room, Dave and Duncan assure Ellis that everything is going well, with Duncan stating, “It'll be all right, Ellis. Get a couple of women talking about cooking, next thing they're trading recipes...”¹⁵³

Regardless of Duncan's shoehorn statement, the interactions between Martha and Mrs. Talbot helps set up their cooperation when Ellis' sister calls to tell Ellis that Kit has gone into labor. The sudden news and slight crisis unites all the characters together, including Clay. The group encounters obstacle after obstacle. When Ellis receives the news that Kit has gone into

¹⁴⁹ Duncan also presents a tactic for changing Clay's mind: a “little missionary work” at a social event, namely a hockey game the next night. Dave labels his father's willingness to spend time with Clay as “appeasement,” but Duncan and Jean shut down Dave's protest by pointing out that they won't change Clay's attitude by dismissing him; Orville F. Linck, “You Can't Tell Me: A Play in One Act,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, You Can't Tell Me, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 13.

¹⁵⁰ Mrs. Talbot is the only character to appear on stage that isn't referred to or called by her first name.

¹⁵¹ Orville F. Linck, “You Can't Tell Me: A Play in One Act,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, You Can't Tell Me, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 14-15.

¹⁵² Ibid., 15.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

labor, Jean calls the neighborhood doctor only to find that the doctor isn't at home and his wife doesn't know how to reach him. Jean suggests that they call to the city hospital, but Mrs. Talbot declines, stating, "the City takes it's [sic] own sweet time in answering calls from Little Harlem—and the others just ain't interested in colored folks."¹⁵⁴ Mrs. Talbot, instead, resolves to find another doctor and do the birth at home if need be and it's this suggestion, that Mrs. Talbot would perform the birth at home, which springs Martha in to action, causes her to order Duncan to call "Doc Parish," and tell him to report to the Talbots' home on Pine Street.¹⁵⁵

The crisis mobilizes both Martha and Clay to help both Ellis and Mrs. Talbot in a way that they were unwilling to do at the beginning of the play. Martha makes clear that Duncan shouldn't take no for an answer from Dr. Parish and, if he says no or takes his time, "I'll know the reason why," implying that she'll know Dr. Parish is refusing because he's being asked to go to Little Harlem and help a Black family.¹⁵⁶ Clay re-enters the Maxwells home to inform Martha that some boys in the neighborhood let out all the air in their car tires—"...they was goin' to slash 'em up too, but I stopped 'em..."¹⁵⁷—the same boys who, earlier in the play, told Clay that they would intimidate or threaten Ellis the next time he came to the neighborhood.¹⁵⁸ After an outburst of frustration, Martha asks Clay if he's willing to drive her, Mrs. Talbot, Ellis, and Dave to Pine Street, to which he agrees, and Duncan gets a hold of Dr. Parish who promises to head over to Pine Street after a stern "talking to" from Duncan. The play ends with everyone heading out the door and Duncan getting the last word as he goes out to refill the tires: "Don't worry, Kiddo. *You can't tell me* anything in the world can lick Martha and Mrs. Talbot together"

¹⁵⁴ Orville F. Linck, "You Can't Tell Me: A Play in One Act," n.d., UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, You Can't Tell Me, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 16.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 11.

(emphasis added).¹⁵⁹ Meaning, when they work together, Duncan is sure nothing “in the world” can defeat Martha and Mrs. Talbot.

Compared to *Discrimination Costs You Money*, where the setting is the workplace, *You Can't Tell Me* focuses more on what action can be taken at home to advocate and enact the anti-discrimination policies that (might be) part of the union to which the characters belong. In the case of the audience members at the CIO summer camp in Port Huron, they were watching on stage the efforts of workers attempting to make change in their homes in order to desegregate their personal lives, their lives at work, and, hopefully, their lives in the CIO and UAW. Although *You Can't Tell Me* doesn't plot tactics and talking points in the same manner as *Discrimination Costs You Money*, the play does offer methods to combat discriminatory attitudes and behavior from friends and family, the most potent being leveraging close relationships.

For example, despite Martha agreeing that Ellis visiting only causes trouble, she manages to leverage her family's relationship with Clay to get him to speak with “the boys on the corner” who have threatened Ellis and see if they can “cool off;” Clay agrees to talk with the boys not out of a sense of goodness towards Ellis, but because, in his own words, “...you've been so good to me, and Dave and me have been pals, I wouldn't want anything to happen to you.”¹⁶⁰ Martha expresses a similar sentiment when she's arguing with Clay about his involvement with “the boys on the corner,” rebuking Clay's efforts to get Dave to disinvite Ellis and instead reiterating several times that, while she might not like Ellis coming over, he is her son's friend, he attends school, and he works hard at his job.¹⁶¹ Again, Dave's personal relationship with Ellis, and Ellis' commitment to work and education (something that Martha seems to value), seems to sway

¹⁵⁹ Orville F. Linck, “You Can't Tell Me: A Play in One Act,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, You Can't Tell Me, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 17.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 12-13.

Martha against more public forms of discrimination, like barring Ellis from entering the neighborhood. From Martha's perspective, the issue of Ellis visiting the Maxwell's house is a private, family matter that should be resolved among the family members and not resolved through neighborhood interference. In other words, "nobody on Hemlock Avenue" can make decisions on who can or cannot visit the Maxwell home.¹⁶²

The formation of a personal relationship, again, seems to change Martha's attitude toward the Talbots when Martha finally meets Mrs. Talbot. At the beginning of the play, Dave and Duncan seem to think that Martha meeting Mrs. Talbot—and Mrs. Talbot meeting Martha—will convince the two women to let go of their prejudices. Through their brief conversations about the PTA and baking, Martha and Mrs. Talbot find common ground in a personal friendship that springs Martha into action when faced with a crisis and dilemmas that exacerbate the crisis, like the possibilities of doctors refusing to help a Black family. In this sense, *You Can't Tell Me* stages how personal relationships can be leverages to change the behavior of friends and family and stages the possibilities of what could be achieved when workers (and their family members) set aside their differences and work together to problem solve when crises occur.

¹⁶² Orville F. Linck, "You Can't Tell Me: A Play in One Act," n.d., UAW Union Theatre Playscripts, unprocessed collection, *You Can't Tell Me*, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 12.

Conclusion

In the short time they were active, the Union Theatre performed around eighteen plays for union members—some plays were performed multiple times. Their audiences were often from unions outside of the UAW, including locals from the Michigan Federation of Teachers, CWA, and the United Steelworkers, but their largest audience were UAW locals in Detroit, MI, and the surrounding counties. I have only discussed four of the plays the Union Theatre performed, the largest group of which are anti-discrimination plays, but there are at least fourteen plays, ranging from a comedy about negotiating with bosses, a skit about co-ops, and a melodrama about the dangers of drinking, which still need to be investigated.¹⁶³ There are, too, a handful of plays that are stored in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs that suggest the Union Theatre may have intended to perform them or distribute them to other theatre groups or trade unions, but may not have been performed by the Union Theatre. In a one of the Union Theatre's *Backstage With the Union Theatre* flyers, plays "produced" by the Union Theatre were being advertised for distribution, two of which it's ambiguous whether or not they were staged by the Union Theatre.¹⁶⁴ For another play, there is the exact opposite problem—a program for the play *Walk Into My Parlor*, dated around February, was stored with other records from the Union Theatre from 1948, indicating that it was performed, but *Walk Into My Parlor* doesn't appear on other production lists.¹⁶⁵

Other union members from outside the state of Michigan wrote Stern and Olga Madar,

¹⁶³ Ironically, a liquor license was obtained by the Union Theatre to serve beer at the performance of *The Drunkard*.

¹⁶⁴ "Backstage With the Union Theatre," October 1948, UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 27, Folder 4, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

¹⁶⁵ "Union Theatre Presents...Walk Into My Parlor" (The Union Theatre of Detroit, 1948), UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

the director of the Recreation Department, asking for guidance about setting up recreation departments and activities involving theatre. A few letters from other union representatives indicates, at the very least, that other workers invested in the labor movement were interested in how recreation and, more specifically, how theatre and drama could further the aims of “labor.” In one exchange between Madar, Stern, and worker from New Jersey, Nicholas Vizdock, Stern gives specific advice for Vizdock to follow when setting up his own theatre group, advice like contacting local community theatre groups and high schools to find an experienced director, publicizing the theatre using newspapers and bulletin boards, and elect officers if workers are serious about setting up a theatre group, which could help with the longevity of the project.¹⁶⁶ Other correspondences between Madar and Stern indicate that the Union Theatre travelled outside of the state of Michigan to perform at other conventions, union institutes, and summer camps. In October of 1948, Madar forwarded a request to Stern from May Schoenfeld who belonged to a local in Ohio and watched the Union Theatre’s skit on time study, *A Time Study Man at Home*, at an “Ohio Summer School.”¹⁶⁷

Additionally, reports from the year 1948 also indicate that the officers of the Union Theatre—namely the Chairman, Vice Chairman, and the Secretary-Treasurer—were making long term plans for the expansion of the Union Theatre’s operations. In a progress report authored in April of 1948, Stern recommended that an Advisory Committee be established to steer a “general direct policy” to “generally increase the potentialities of such an activity as the

¹⁶⁶ Joanne Stern, “Letter to Mr. Nicholas Vizdock,” March 18, 1947, UAW Recreation Department Records, Series I, Box 2, Theatre Groups, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI. It’s likely that Stern dated the letter wrong. The exchanges between Vizdock and Madar prior to Stern’s letter were dated “1948,” not “1947.”

¹⁶⁷ Olga M. Madar, “Letter to Joann Stern,” October 6, 1948, UAW Recreation Department Records, Series I, Box 2, Theatre Groups, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

Union Theatre.”¹⁶⁸ One of their strategies to expanding their operations was recruiting specific locals to sponsor the activities of the Union Theatre. The sponsoring locals would name a delegate to the Advisory Committee and be offered one performance a year presented without charge. The effort to find sponsoring union locals also seemed to solve the problem of little to no funding. Stern also reported that, if the Union Theatre wanted to retain their own equipment, props, costumes, and pay for additional public relations expenses, the group would need to find more sponsors.¹⁶⁹

Additional sponsors didn’t seem to come until the fall. In September of 1948, Edgar J. Lee, one of the regional directors in the Education Department, sent a letter to multiple local unions notifying them that Stern would be reaching out to discuss the possibility of the local becoming a sponsor of the Union Theatre.¹⁷⁰ By October, Locals 7, 49, 306, and 600 of the UAW had begun sponsoring the Union Theater; three of the four union locals that became sponsoring members were sent Lee’s letter in September. Other new sponsors included the Michigan Labor Committee to Combat Intolerance and a CWA local called Michigan Division 44.¹⁷¹ The Union Theatre also requested increased financial assistance from the Education and Recreation Departments with the understanding that the Union Theatre would “increasingly become both a recreational an educational service for UAW members.”¹⁷²

The Union Theatre was poised to continue its operations well into 1949 and, based on the

¹⁶⁸ Joanne Stern, “Progress Report on Union Theatre of Detroit,” April 1948, UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 2.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷⁰ Edgar J. Lee, “To All Education Chairmen and Local Union Presidents of Local Unions 600, 174, 49, 157, 163, 212, 3, 7, 154, 155, 490, and 400,” September 13, 1948, UAW Education Department Records, Box 8, General Correspondence - G, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 1.

¹⁷¹ “Backstage With the Union Theatre,” October 1948, UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 27, Folder 4, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

¹⁷² Joanne Stern, “Progress Report on Union Theatre of Detroit,” April 1948, UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 3.

archival material throughout 1948, the officers of the Union Theatre expected to continue performing well into 1949 and maybe into the 1950s. The minutes from the Union Theatre's first meeting in 1949 reveal some of the logistical problems facing the group as they planned for the year ahead, the first of which was finances. At the time of their meeting, the financial assets of the Union Theatre totaled around \$240.¹⁷³ In the previous year, Stern estimated that \$120 would be needed to retain the services of the director and an additional \$450 would be needed to acquire and maintain the equipment necessary to stage plays.¹⁷⁴ There was still a need for additional sponsoring members, despite acquiring the sponsorship of two individuals and several union locals. A handful of ideas were proposed during the meeting, like setting up a state-wide one-act play competition, additional promotional material, and the recruitment of members from an organization called the "Workmen's Circle."¹⁷⁵

Another setback was Joanne Stern, who for the better part of two years, had been the chairman and chief administrator keeping the Union Theatre afloat. Stern announced during the meeting that she expected to be leaving Detroit in the near future, meaning the theatre group would have to find a replacement. In addition to losing a key administrator, actor, and organizer, the Union Theatre would also lose a significant connection to the effort to combat discrimination in the city of the Detroit—Stern had, at one point, worked for the Interracial Committee of the City of Detroit,¹⁷⁶ which meant that her departure was a blow to the theatre group's organizing work around anti-discrimination and civil rights. The meeting minutes reflect that there was as

¹⁷³ "Minutes of First Meeting of Members of Union Theatre," February 3, 1949, UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 1.

¹⁷⁴ Joanne Stern, "Progress Report on Union Theatre of Detroit," April 1948, UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 3.

¹⁷⁵ "Minutes of First Meeting of Members of Union Theatre," February 3, 1949, UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 1.

¹⁷⁶ Dail, "Driving Race Work," 30-31.

much discussion about Stern leaving her position as the financial difficulties encountered by the Union Theatre. The discussion among the meeting attendees revolved around how to keep Stern on the payroll for at least three months, even offering to hire her as a full-time employee, paying her a salary comparable to the one she received at her current job.¹⁷⁷ Other attendees suggested that she could be kept on through the UAW Recreation Department or the Wayne County CIO Council, but the discussion was tabled for the next meeting, when “Mrs. Stern can give a more definite answer as to when she expects to be leaving Detroit.”¹⁷⁸ The last note from the meeting minutes states that “[t]hose present expressed a desire...for the Union Theatre to continue as an important cultural and recreational adjunct of the labor movement.” A few words in the final line of the meeting minutes were crossed out by the typewriter, to the point that the words are nearly indecipherable; the words “and to expand” were written above in handwriting.¹⁷⁹ Below the typed-out meeting minutes was a handwritten list of about a dozen people who should be sent the report. Next to their names were their address and the trade union or local with which they were affiliated; most of the people on the written mailing list were from UAW locals, including locals that sponsored the Union Theatre, but other organizations represented were the CWA, the Detroit Federation of Teachers, and the Michigan Labor Committee to Combat Intolerance.¹⁸⁰

Crossed out in the final note in the meeting minutes were the words “concern” and “however.” The words “[t]hose present” was also a handwritten edit, replacing the word “members” at the beginning of the sentence. Whoever authored the meeting minutes rearranged the statement to reflect a more positive sentiment, perhaps to project to their sponsors and

¹⁷⁷ “Minutes of First Meeting of Members of Union Theatre,” February 3, 1949, UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 1-2.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

mailing list recipients an upbeat outlook on the state of the Union Theatre. Regardless, as the document exists in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, the meeting minutes project an uncertain future, performing both an expression of desire and concern from the sponsoring members present at the meeting. What “those present” agreed on was the importance of the Union Theatre to further the “cultural and recreational” aims of “labor” and the labor movement. As such, the sponsoring members continued to lay plans for future productions; the agenda attached to the meeting minutes indicates that they discussed at least three upcoming productions, one of which was *Discrimination for Everybody!*.¹⁸¹

However, even the best laid plans sometimes don’t come to fruition. The last performance listed in the records for the Union Theatre is a production of *Discrimination for Everybody!*, organized—it appears—in conjunction with B’nai B’rith, a non-profit Jewish service organization. Based on one of the two lists of Union Theatre productions, the Union Theatre had a strong start to the year 1949. Over the course of the months of February, March, and April, there were ten performances of six plays; three of the plays performed were produced in the year before, becoming part of what seemed to be an established repertoire, and three plays were new to the Union Theatre.¹⁸² What is even more curious is the list that details the Union Theatre’s productions doesn’t list a production past the month of April, but is labelled “June 1947 – May 1949.” Either the list is incomplete or, in reality, the Union Theatre didn’t reach May 1949. Either way, the lack of records past April 1949 indicates that the Union Theatre was dissolved or disbanded by mid-1949. The reason is not clear but given the sponsoring members’

¹⁸¹ “Minutes of First Meeting of Members of Union Theatre,” February 3, 1949, UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 3.

¹⁸² “Union Theatre Productions June 1947-May 1949,” n.d., UAW Union Theatre - Catalogues of Plays, Songs, Records, Union Theatre - Organization, Business, etc., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

concern about the Union Theatre's financial situation, it's possible that the group floundered due to insufficient funds.

Another possibility is that the Union Theatre became a political liability as a theatre group that openly advocated for anti-discrimination and racial equality. Facing increased anticommunist attack and “the prevalent political linking of communism with civil rights,”¹⁸³ any appearance of the “adjuncts” of the UAW being supportive of civil rights policy or laboring on behalf of civil rights policy could draw unwanted criticism of the UAW and its efforts to build a labor movement based on industrial democratic principles. As discussed in Chapter 1, Reuther was adept at maneuvering around anticommunist criticism of the UAW and the labor movement, allying himself with liberal organizations like the ADA, who believed that building a strong liberal, progressive political movement required excluding Communist and communist sympathizers. The passage of the Taft-Hartley Act didn't help the advancement of a civil rights political program either, as progressives and Communist who advocated for racial equality were pushed out as the anticommunist fervor in trade unions began “mirror[ing] Capitol Hill politicking.”¹⁸⁴ In her chapter on the Union Theatre, Dail—whose scholarship on social activist theatre is discussed in the introduction—argues that the theatre group became “collateral damage following Reuther's retreat from activist race work...”¹⁸⁵ While Dail notes that the theatre group dissolved following Stern's departure from Detroit, she asserts that, in the political climate of the late 40s and early 50s, the Union Theatre wouldn't have survived for long.¹⁸⁶ Truman's civil rights plans failed in Congress after he was elected in 1948 and Southern Democrats took over

¹⁸³ Dail, “Driving Race Work,” 32.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

committee chairmanships.¹⁸⁷ “[A] conservative haze” settled over the 81st Congress and red-baiting and anticommunist rhetoric only accelerated after the election of 1948.¹⁸⁸ The undue attention towards WES, when a GM aide accused instructors hired by WES of teaching “Marxist ideas” in an economics class, perhaps didn’t help the Union Theatre either—many students of WES were also involved in the Union Theatre, and WES was one of the first sponsors of the Union Theatre.¹⁸⁹

However, there is little evidence that the UAW deliberately shut down the Union Theatre because of their advocacy for anti-discrimination and racial equality policies, but I concur with Dail’s point that, as the Cold War began in earnest at the beginning of the 1950s, the Union Theatre’s support of an anti-discrimination, racial equality, and civil rights political program would have doomed the theatre group. Despite the production of *Lowell Thomashevsky* and poking fun at Russian Communists, the anti-discrimination plays proved to be more popular among their audience and among the union staffers helping fund the Union Theatre. Their continued commitment to political organizing around anti-discrimination may have drawn criticism or accusations like the ones WES received in 1948. The Union Theatre disbanded before they could begin to receive criticism like the criticism faced by WES, if they received any criticism at all.

Additionally, the politics of Reuther shifted at the end of the 1940s, shifting the politics of the UAW with him. An event referred to as the Treaty of Detroit was Reuther’s break from his socialist past—Nelson Lichtenstein refers to the Treaty of Detroit as “the end of an era in which Reuther...could hope for a serious transformation in the governing structures of American

¹⁸⁷ Andrew E. Busch, *Truman’s Triumphs: The 1948 Election and the Making of Postwar America* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 186.

¹⁸⁸ Dail, “Driving Race Work,” 32.

¹⁸⁹ A portion of the archival materials concerning the Union Theatre are found in the personal collection of Arthur Elder, the director of the Workers Education Service at the University of Michigan.

industry.”¹⁹⁰ The Treaty of Detroit was a five year contract negotiated between the UAW and GM where both parties agreed to a 20% cost-of-living increase over the course of five years, an annual improvement factor formula, a pension of \$125 a month, and the subsidization of a new health insurance plan.¹⁹¹ The contract was compared to Ford’s five-dollar-a-day wage in terms of its “industrial innovation,” but the agreement undercut the direct action tactics like striking and work stoppages, even undercutting the “long and bitter strikes” of the previous year, and accepted certain “objective economic facts—cost of living and productivity—as determining wages,” moving on from and throwing out Marxist theories of wages determined by political value and surplus power.¹⁹² The Treaty of Detroit, then, paved the way for the UAW’s “private welfare state,” where employers were incentivized to fold specific benefits into their product prices and build company-specific initiatives that would attract employee loyalty, thus bolstering rank-and-file support for the “private welfare state” instead of programs championed by Reuther like national health insurance and greater unemployment benefits.¹⁹³

I add Reuther’s shift in politics and the consequences of the Treaty of Detroit because both helped to prop up the color line that the Union Theatre disputed heavily in their performances during their three years of activities. The private welfare system created by the UAW and automobile corporations chiefly benefitted white men workers, leaving Black male workers on the margins of the benefit system due to their disproportionate employment at “marginal firms,” instead of the “Big Three”—Ford, GM, and Chrysler (now known as Stellantis). White women workers were also negatively affected by the private welfare system because of their “episodic” employment, hampering them from accumulating the continuous

¹⁹⁰ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 280.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid., 280-281.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 297.

work time necessary to acquire benefits like a pension or vacation time.¹⁹⁴ Labor historians like Boyle and Lichtenstein make no mention of the effects of the private welfare system on Black women workers—neither does the Union Theatre in their anti-discrimination plays—but I’m hesitant to take the absence of Black women in archival material and written historical record as the absence of Black women from the workforce, especially since Black women worked in tobacco factories in the South and were crucial to union organizing efforts in the 1930s and 40s.

If the Union Theatre had remained intact in the 1950s, there is the possibility that the theatre group would have performed and dramatized the changing political debates, producing plays about cost-of-living adjustments and subsidized health insurance plans or more plays about anticommunism. There is equally the possibility that they would have continued to produce plays about anti-discrimination and racial equality, but the chilling effects of Cold War politics, the purging of progressive leaders from trade unions, and the “private welfare state” may have shifted the Union Theatre’s attention from the activism against discrimination. What remains in the archive, however, is that the Union Theatre labored to help produce the educated and, hopefully, politicized union member, a union member that would be motivated to respond to vital political issues, such as civil rights and racial equality. Using theatre as a tool, the participants in the Union Theatre endeavored to perform the strategies and tactics, as well as the perspectives of “labor” as an entity with the goal of activating previously “inactivated” union members, attempting to transform the governing structure of the workplace to provide political and economic opportunity to all workers.

¹⁹⁴ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 297.

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