"Propaganda for Democracy": The Vexed History of the Federal Theatre Project

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“PROPAGANDA FOR DEMOCRACY”:
THE VEXED HISTORY OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

by

KAREN GELLEN

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Karen Gellen

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

“Propaganda for Democracy”: The Vexed History of the Federal Theatre Project

by

Karen Gellen

Advisor: Professor David T. Humphries

My thesis explores and analyzes the Federal Theater Project’s cultural and political impact during the Depression, as well as the contested legacy of this unique experiment in government-sponsored, broadly accessible cultural expression. Part of the New Deal’s Works Projects Administration, the FTP aimed to provide jobs for playwrights, actors, designers, stagehands, and other theater professionals on relief in the stark period from 1935 to 1939. But the project became a nationwide political and artistic flashpoint, spurring fierce debate over the leadership, politics and impact of this “people’s theater.” The FTP gave professional theater an unprecedented reach into working-class and black communities. The project was marked by the participation of many prominent leftist and Communist writers, performers, and technicians, but its productions did, nonetheless, reflected a broadly rebellious, economically desperate, culturally inclusive popular spirit sparked by the Depression. Refuting charges that the FTP was a thinly veiled, subversive propaganda tool, the project’s leaders countered that its work was educational “propaganda for democracy.” As in today’s political and artistic conflicts, the dispute centered on which principles and ideals actually constitute core American values. I examine the FTP’s achievements and controversies, which centered on the purported mutually exclusive contradiction between education and entertainment, and the boundaries of acceptable political discourse in publicly funded arts. I include two case studies that exemplify
these artistic and political conflicts: the Negro Theater Project and the Children’s Theater Project, through, respectively, the *Big White Fog* and *Revolt of the Beavers*. During its short lifespan, the FTP was derided as discredited, dogmatic propaganda with scant artistic merit. But it left an honorable legacy grounded in democratic American principles and values. Perhaps such a grassroots cultural phenomenon that celebrated ordinary, struggling people, and explicitly confronted racism and economic deprivation could only flourish under extreme circumstances like the Depression. But the Federal Theater Project, with its subsidized, high-quality, innovative and widely accessible performances, stands as a compelling reminder of a unique moment in our country’s cultural history.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................ iv

List of Figures ............................................................................................... vii

1 “Free, Adult and Uncensored”:
    Defining and Inventing a “People’s Theatre” ........................................ 1

2 Big White Fog: Unprecedented Opportunity,
    Creative Surge and “Problem Plays” ................................................... 15

3 The Revolt of the Beavers: Didactic Fantasy or
    Subversive Brainwashing? ................................................................. 30

4 Un-American Activities
    Congress Hunts Propaganda, “Race-Mixing,” and Bolshevism .......... 41

5 Looking Back:
    Vexed Legacy of an Audacious Cultural Initiative ............................. 51

Bibliography ................................................................................................... 57
List of Figures

Figure 1 …………………………………………………………………………………………. 6
   Image Source: *It Can’t Happen Here*, Federal Theater Project Poster, 1936
   http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98513193

Figure 2 ………………………………………………………………………………………. 9
   Image Source: *Spirochete* Poster, George Mason University Federal Theatre Project Collection
   http://hdl.handle.net/1920/4092

Figure 3 ………………………………………………………………………………………… 12
   Image Source: *Macbeth* Photo, Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection

Figure 4 ………………………………………………………………………………………… 18
   Image Source: *Big White Fog* Poster, Library of Congress,
   http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3f05590

Figure 5 ………………………………………………………………………………………… 33
   Image Source: *The Revolt of the Beavers* Poster, Music Division, Library of Congress

Figure 6 ………………………………………………………………………………………… 39
   Image Source: *The Emperor’s New Clothes* Poster, Library of Congress,
   http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3f05302

Figure 7 ………………………………………………………………………………………… 43
   Image Source: Eleanor Roosevelt attends Federal Theatre Project Play, Photo,
   Music Division, Library of Congress, flp0002

Figure 8 ………………………………………………………………………………………… 45
   Image Source: *Prologue to Glory* Poster, Library of Congress,
   http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3f05319

Figure 9 ………………………………………………………………………………………… 53
   Image Source: Picketing to Save the Federal Theatre Project, 1939,
   New York Public Library Digital Gallery
Chapter 1  Defining and Inventing a “People’s Theatre”:  
“Free, Adult and Uncensored”

Creating for our citizens a medium for free expression ... and offering the people access to the arts and tools of a civilization which they themselves are helping to make, such a theatre is at once an illustration and a bulwark of the democratic form of government.

-- Hallie Flanagan  
Director, Federal Theatre Project

I am asked whether a theater subsidized by the government can be kept free of censorship, and I say yes, it’s going to be free from censorship.

-- Harry Hopkins  
Director, Works Progress Administration

The Federal Theater Project, a Depression-era employment initiative, was a remarkable experiment in government-funded promotion of the arts. Part of the New Deal’s Works Projects Administration, the FTP aimed to provide jobs for playwrights, actors, designers, stagehands, and other theater professionals on relief in the stark period from 1935 to 1939. But the project became a nationwide political and artistic flashpoint, spurring fierce debate over the leadership, politics and impact of this “people’s theater,” and detractors derided the project during its short lifespan as subversive propaganda with scant artistic merit. This thesis will argue, however, that the FTP left an honorable artistic and cultural legacy grounded in democratic American principles and values. Perhaps such a grassroots cultural phenomenon that celebrated ordinary, struggling people, and explicitly confronted racism and economic deprivation could only flourish under extreme circumstances like the Depression. But the Federal Theater Project, with its subsidized, high-quality, innovative and widely accessible performances, stands as a compelling reminder of a unique, exhilarating moment in our country’s cultural history.
The project’s Negro Theater Unit and Children’s Theater Unit embodied the FTP’s greatest successes, as well as the bitterest controversies that surrounded and ultimately engulfed the project. I will discuss these groundbreaking initiatives in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively, by examining two representative plays: *Big White Fog* and *Revolt of the Beavers*. In Chapter 4, I will analyze the “red scare” congressional Dies Committee hearings that terminated the FTP; in Chapter 5, I will discuss the project’s contested legacy.

The FTP, which ultimately employed some 9,000 people, gave professional theater – largely an elite pastime -- an unprecedented reach into working-class and black communities. It staged more than “1,200 productions in 35 states with an overall audience of at least 25 million people … an eighth of the U.S. population” (Rubinstein 313). Radio broadcasts between 1936 and 1939 brought 2,000 FTP plays each year to “an estimated audience of 10 million a week” (Osborne 187).

This cultural experiment unfolded as the U.S. confronted an immense national crisis, an economic collapse that left a third of the country’s workforce unemployed. During the Depression, Americans saw

80 percent of the nation's steel mills shut down, the collapse of the banking system, millions of homeless men and women living in Hoovervilles and riding the rails and millions more living in conditions of almost unbelievable poverty and hardship, Americans had a widespread sense that the center could no longer hold, that the nation was teetering on the brink of failure. Ecological crisis exacerbated economic catastrophe: The dust storms that swept through the Midwest devastated millions of acres of farmland and forced countless farm families on a westward migration (Browder 1).
Under these dire conditions, President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched unprecedented public projects to provide jobs and spur economic development; WPA initiatives ranged from the massive Tennessee Valley Authority power project to a multifaceted arts initiative dubbed Federal Project Number One. The latter included the Federal Art Project, Federal Music Project, Federal Writers Project, as well as the FTP. Number One’s primary priority was job creation, but the architects of the New Deal also aimed to spur education and hope, while providing Americans with some aesthetic respite from soul-crushing hardship. According to literary critic and cultural historian Morris Dickstein,

The mood of the Depression was defined not only by hard times and a coming world crisis but by many extraordinary attempts to cheer people up – or else to sober them up into facing what was happening. Though poor economically, the decade created a vibrant culture rich in the production of popular fantasy and trenchant social criticism (4).

As cultural expression in the 1930s veered between escapism and a thirst to understand and combat the roots of the economic disaster, the FTP strived to address both needs. But efforts to achieve a viable balance of entertainment and socially conscious content often confounded FTP directors and sparked disputes within the project. The FTP’s fiercest opponents, meanwhile, decried the project’s many pointed, poignant, and outraged depictions of the devastating social reality as subversive, and dismissed its means for making people laugh as a wasteful, government-funded luxury.

FTP productions ranged widely, often wildly, from Macbeth and The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus to raucous vaudeville, musical comedy, inspirational union stories, and searing dramas depicting poverty and racial oppression. Harry Hopkins, architect of President
Roosevelt’s New Deal, championed the FTP with a mandate to create “free, adult and uncensored” theater (Bentley 193). Hopkins was a forceful, powerful advocate of unprecedented, daring, and often controversial measures to combat the enormity of the Depression. Journalist Marquis Childs described Hopkins’ crafting of the New Deal as “a furious improvisation; he was playing by ear with all the stops pulled out … improvisation at the center of a tornado” (Quinn 17). His choice to head the project was Hallie Flanagan, a relatively unknown Theater Professor at Vassar who had traveled widely, writing enthusiastically about experimental theater in Europe and the Soviet Union. Flanagan shared Hopkins’ hope that the FTP would help create “a national culture by and for the working class in America” by “laying the groundwork for a national federation of theatres that would continue to function even if the federal subsidy was later withdrawn” (315, 190). FTP playwright Ernst Toller expressed this early optimism, saying, “I am convinced that all these theatres, groups, and Federal stages in which the feeling of community is alive will lay the ground for an American national theatre, which is devoted to the cultural development of this great country” (Osborne Staging 1).

The U.S. has, to this day, been unique among developed countries, and even many less-developed nations, in its lack of a national, government-subsidized theater. National theaters exist in Austria, Croatia, England, France, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and Wales; outside Europe, national companies operate in, among other countries, Algeria, Australia, Egypt, Israel, Senegal, and South Korea (Carson 22). The FTP initiative pushed squarely against a longstanding conservative American tradition of keeping the federal government at bay in the arts, relying instead on private enterprise and the profit motive to sustain the theater. This
approach, however, largely limited the opportunity to view high-quality live performances to wealthy urban audiences. We can see in our current political discourse, for example, that even modest federal subsidies to nonprofit and community theater remain a fiercely contested issue. The FTP worked to increase accessibility by mounting plays in venues such as “tents, on make-shift stages in school cafeterias, in Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) dining rooms, in Broadway theaters, on the radio and in outdoor theaters” (Witham 2). And the FTP “pioneered a community drama training program, ran a circus in and around New York City nearly continually, and produced shows in German, Yiddish, Spanish, and a host of other languages” (Osborne Staging 151). The project gave youths working in CCC camps the opportunity to compete in playwriting contests and perform their works in traveling companies (Yates 9).

Defining her target audience, Flanagan declared, “We prefer the four million to the four hundred with their jewels, furs, and town cars” (Bentley 120). And, in defending the politically besieged project in 1938, she asserted, “We have played, I think I am safe in saying, the widest variety of American audiences that any theatre has ever played” (Osborne Staging 181).

The FTP pursued its mandate to bring theatre into the life of communities hardest hit by the Depression by establishing a presence in the rural South. The director of the FTP’s Georgia Experiment said of his target audience, “Their feet are still in the mud. They live in indescribable want, want of food, want of houses, want of any kind of life, … their one entertainment is an occasional revival meeting” (Osborne “Storytelling” 9). In her FTP memoir Arena, Flanagan recalled,

The object was not to put on plays but to get plays out of the people themselves. Anyone who wanted to could come in and join the club, and at first the performances weren’t plays, but ballads, recitations, folk songs, or dances. Old
people would start chanting sagas of their own experience, which would be resumed week after week. In a West Virginia coal camp, for example, the object was to get coal-diggers to do a play about themselves. The director would get some miner started on a story. Other people would chime in, add details, fight over what happened next. Then the director would have them tell the story in parts (91-2).

The West Virginia director told Flanagan that this collective effort and achievement had instilled a sense of self-respect and dignity in local participants: “I have never seen one of these plays where there was not a tremendous strengthening of human values. Believe it or not,” he reported, “people begin to look differently, talk differently, think differently As soon as one play is over they want to start on the next” (92).

The FTP’s most ambitious effort was its 1936 version of Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*, which opened simultaneously in 18 cities. “Its multiple productions constituting the equivalent of a five-year Broadway run” convinced many skeptics that the FTP could operate with a high degree of professionalism (3). But this broad reach also alarmed critics, with the *Indianapolis News* warning, “If [Federal Theatre] can produce a play simultaneously in 18 cities, it can be regarded as one of the nation’s most powerful agencies for the dissemination of propaganda” (Flanagan 155). Indeed, when the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), investigated and pilloried the FTP in 1938, members cited the broad dissemination of the antifascist *It Can’t Happen Here* as a prime example of Communist

![Figure 1: This 1936 FTP play warned Americans about fascism’s threat to democracy.](image-url)
subversion. (As HUAC roared through the postwar McCarthy period, this conclusion hardened into the retrospective charge that such works had promoted “premature antifascism.”)

For Hallie Flanagan, conversely, the Lewis play’s content and reach embodied the FTP’s essentially patriotic mission. In *Arena*, she argues:

> Above all it was significant that hundreds of thousands of people all over America crowded in to see a play which says that when dictatorship threatens a country it does not necessarily come by way of military invasion, that it may arrive in the form of a sudden silencing of free voices. In producing that play the first government-sponsored theatre of the United States was doing what it could to keep alive “the free, inquiring, critical spirit” which is the center and core of a democracy (129).

In an ominous current trend, Lewis’ dystopian novel is sparking renewed interest. A January 2017 article in *The New York Times*, titled, “Reading the Classic Novel That Predicted Trump,” reports that “Today, Lewis’s novel is making a comeback as an analogy for the Age of Trump. Within a week of the 2016 election, the book was reportedly sold out on Amazon.com” (Gage BR15).

The FTP’s Living Newspaper plays, an innovation that underscored an effort to reach working-class audiences unaccustomed to live theater, utilized brief, fast-moving, accessible scenes addressing current events such as the Depression’s harsh living conditions. The radical roots and topical content of these FTP productions became a focal point of right-wing opposition to the project. The term “living newspaper” emerged in post-World War I Germany and Russia to describe cabaret-style depictions of current news, “animated by and commented on by the actors. In Europe, the Living Newspaper was a Communist propaganda vehicle, calculated to stir
up the working classes” (Quinn 62). Flanagan had experimented with this format during her pre-FTP time at Vassar, after viewing numerous productions in Europe and the Soviet Union. The FTP’s Living Newspapers focused on volatile topics such as labor rights, taking on the judicial suppression of strikes in Injunction Granted, and on advocacy for New Deal priority issues. One Third of a Nation, for example, portrayed crowded, decrepit housing and challenged the government to provide solutions; although the production took its title from President Roosevelt’s 1937 declaration, “I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished,” the hugely popular work became the centerpiece in a concerted attack claiming the FTP was a deeply subversive, thinly veiled vehicle for Communist propaganda.

Arthur Miller, who worked with the FTP’s Playwriting Division, recalled in 2002 that the Living Newspaper had been “the one big invention of the theatre in our time … there’s been nothing like that that I know of since” (Schwartz 140). Miller notes that these productions used blown-up photographs, popular music, dance and vaudeville to portray rural and urban issues:

It could be the Triple-A program of the Agriculture Department, which was to plow under crops to keep the prices up while people were starving in the cities. It could be about the absence of medical care in the cities … It was a documentary kind of thing, basically. One of the subjects was the electrification of the farms. Until 1932 only a small fraction of American farms had electricity (140).

Audience response to these timely plays was robust and vocal: according to FTP actor Norman Lloyd, many people who saw Triple-A Plowed Under “had never been to the theatre before. And they would talk back to the people up there. Most of all they would talk back to the Supreme Court justices … And if a justice got up to speak and someone in the audience didn’t agree with
him, that somebody would shout him down … People felt very partisan in those days, they really participated” (Bentley 220).

In 1938, the FTP deployed the Living Newspaper as part of a national public health program to combat syphilis. The Chicago unit developed a satirical production titled *Spirochete*, after the undulating spiral bacteria that cause the disease; the play was a hit, replicated in five major cities. The focus was on prevention (penicillin was not accessible as a cure until the early 1940s), at a time when puritanical attitudes sharply limited educational drives against this deadly, sexually transmitted disease: “A culture of shame surrounded it … many still assumed the disease was a punishment for sin … or that it was only contracted by the lower classes, ‘perverts,’ or African Americans” (Guthu). The FTP poster for the play looks startlingly similar to the “Silence = Death” materials activists created decades later for the fight against AIDS. During the hugely successful Seattle run, the project distributed 35,000 educational flyers and broadcast multiple 15-minute radio spots featuring scenes from the play. In Chicago, the federal blood test campaign “was conducted in the lobby of the Blackstone Theatre where *Spirochete* was being performed. The campaign also included parades … and an official ‘unlucky day for syphilis,’” held on a Friday the 13th (Witham 113). The conservative medical establishment viewed the federal “War on Syphilis” as yet another New Deal overreach, infringing on private medicine and attacking public decency, but the FTP publicity drive spurred many local associations to support the campaign (Guthu).

But the Living Newspapers tackled some issues in ways that its government sponsors insisted went too far: despite Hopkins’s no-censorship pledge, a New York production, *Ethiopia,*
which starkly depicted Mussolini’s aggression against that African state, was shut down by the WPA on opening night. Defense of Ethiopia was at that time a leftist-led rallying cry that mobilized Harlem and other African American communities nationwide. Elmer Rice, the FTP’s New York director, resigned in protest after inviting critics to view a final dress rehearsal (Rubinstein 316). New York Times critic Brooks Atkinson termed the doomed production a “sobering and impressive – even frightening” account” of a “breach of peace that is happening under our nose,” concluding that “the results amply justify the hard work that has gone into it “ (Quinn 69). And he argued that such censorship was inevitable in a project like the FTP: “What we all know now is that a free theatre cannot be a government enterprise” (69).

The FTP’s Children’s Theater Project, led in New York by leftist actor and director Jules Dassin, also stirred outrage with its production of Revolt of the Beavers, where worker beavers unite to protest their exploitation by a fat, lazy beaver boss. In his review, New York Times critic Atkinson, who had earlier praised Ethiopia and other controversial FTP productions, said, sardonically, “Mother Goose is no longer a rhymed escapist. She has been studying Marx; Jack and Jill lead the class revolution” (Schwartz 17-18). FTP opponents sent copies of this review to every member of Congress, bolstering the outcry (Buttitta 145).

Hallie Flanagan insisted, however, that the FTP plays realistically addressed the most pressing concerns of ordinary Americans, thereby constituting educational, entertaining “propaganda for democracy” (315). She termed One Third of the Nation “propaganda for better housing,” and the Living Newspaper Power as “propaganda for a better understanding of the derivation and scientific meaning of power and for its wide use” (316). Her opponents claimed, meanwhile, that Power was Communist-inspired propaganda for public ownership of the nation’s utilities.
Prominent left-wing writers -- many of whom were Communist Party members or sympathizers -- did create works for the FTP that reflected both the hardship and radically rebellious spirit of the times. With capitalism in crisis at home and fascism looming abroad, leftist political views became virtually mainstream in 1930s America. The Communist Party experienced the peak of its acceptance and influence in this period, bolstered by its adoption in 1934 of a new line: the call for a Popular Front. In a departure from its isolating dogmatism, the party now advocated the building of a broad coalition of leftists, liberals, and other progressive forces to confront the Depression, defend democratic rights, and oppose fascism. In the arts, “Communists and their sympathizers opened the door to what they called progressive and democratic bourgeois work” (Sporn 330). With this strategy, the Popular Front became a radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists around laborist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching ....The moment of the Popular Front stands as a central instance of radical insurgency in modern US history” (Denning 4).

During the Depression, as Children’s Theatre Project Director Jay Williams put it, “it didn’t require orders from Moscow to compel American playwrights to write against poverty, injustice, or war; they did so because they felt a deep resentment against these things” (Williams 33).

The project’s Negro Units broke racial barriers by employing black writers and actors, and creating content that explored black culture, history and oppression. Nominal ticket prices widened accessibility, and “the increased degree of artistic freedom practiced by the Theatre made it possible for black playwrights to project a new and recognizable image” for black audiences (Craig 9). In the congressional hearings that doomed the FTP, the project’s antiracist
projects and practices, including an insistence on integrated casts, audiences and social gatherings, drew particular fire: HUAC Committee Chairman Martin Dies of Texas detailed the FTP’s stand on race, concluding that “racial equality forms a vital part of the Communist teachings and practices” (Hill 237). The hearings led Congress to defund the FTP in 1939.

The FTP also drew upon material developed by the Federal Writers Project, a parallel WPA arts program that developed an unprecedented archive of slave narratives and other oral histories through interviews with elderly black survivors of the antebellum South (Sporn 276). The archive, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938* includes more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves.

In the early years of the twentieth century black playwrights had produced serious plays about the black experience, but before the New Deal few were actually staged because “commercial producers had little or no interest in producing them since white audiences expected to see black actors only in comic or subservient roles” (Craig 8).

The FTP’s commitment to building black theater and reaching African American communities was evident in its establishment by October 1936 of 17 Negro Units, with three in the South. These initiatives included drama, choral, youth, operetta, marionette, vaudeville, African dance, and teaching programs (Fraden *Blueprints* 3). The FTP also enabled black actors to perform in racially mixed casts, often playing traditionally white roles.
roles in classical drama. Two of the FTP’s biggest hits were a *Macbeth* set in Haiti and performed in Harlem with a black cast and crew, and *Swing Mikado*, a Chicago Negro Theatre Unit adaptation of Gilbert and Sullivan. These accessible, innovative renderings of classic drama had a striking impact in black communities; The Library of Congress magazine *Civilization* recalls this excitement in “The Play That Electrified Harlem”:

For days, Harlem residents strolling anywhere between Lexington Avenue and Broadway from 125th to 140th Streets had seen the word "MACBETH" stenciled in glowing paint at every corner. New York's African-American community had been discussing the new production by the Federal Theater Project's Negro Unit with mingled pride and anxiety for months, and by opening night on April 14, 1936, anticipation had reached a fever pitch. At 6:30 p.m., 10,000 people stood as close as they could come to the Lafayette Theatre on Seventh Avenue near 131st Street, jamming the avenue for 10 blocks and halting northbound traffic for more than an hour. [The audience] was enthusiastic and noisy; they vocally encouraged Macbeth's soliloquies … After the curtain fell cheers and applause filled the auditorium for 15 minutes (Smith Part One).

Echoing many black FTP participants, playwright Theodore Ward said, “It was the Federal Theatre that proved the Open Sesame, providing at once a laboratory and the wherewithal for creative enterprise” (8).

In the South, however, these racial and creative breakthroughs confronted the entrenched Jim Crow system. An account of the FTP’s work in Atlanta, “Oppressed, Stereotyped, and Silenced,” says that in many Southern communities, “The white superiority myths that had dictated the inferior roles to be played by blacks in real life had also established the stage images.
When there were honest dramatic depictions of blacks as oppressed, such plays were considered communist propaganda” (Hurt 75). In promoting the Negro Theatre Unit, Flanagan termed its reception in the South “deplorable,” noting ruefully, “Anyone who thinks a state boundary line is an imaginary affair, or states’ rights an expression out of a history book, should have tried to move companies, or even individuals across the former in the former or to make plans which seemed, in the minds of state administrators, to conflict with the latter” (76).

The FTP’s antiracist stand exacerbated already fierce right-wing political resistance to the New Deal. In Georgia, for example, where the project was only able to mount one Atlanta Negro Unit production in four years – a gospel morality play that traded in existing stereotypes – white supremacist Gov. Eugene Talmadge was an implacable New Deal foe. Talmadge “bitterly resented Federal control over the administration in Georgia of federally financed relief, welfare, and public works,” and stymied legislation enabling the state to fully participate in the New Deal initiatives. (This toxic Southern amalgam of white supremacy and hatred of the New Deal fueled the HUAC hearings that ultimately doomed the FTP – see Chapter 4.)

With racism as a constant backdrop, Negro Unit productions sparked controversy on both left and right over the needs and desires of black audiences. While being redbaited for frankly depicting racism’s poisonous impact, the Negro Units reflected a split in the FTP and the black community over the value of “problem plays” that explored contentious social issues (see Chapter 2). This debate over pure entertainment versus socially relevant productions raged within the FTP and among friends and foes throughout the life of the project.
Chapter 2  *Big White Fog*: Unprecedented Opportunity, Creative Surge and “Problem Plays”

*In America, it’s time we had a theatre with courage enough to present on the stage the life issues and realities which confront the twelve million Negroes in this country everywhere. We’ve never had such a theatre in America. Not until very recently, when the working-class theatre emerged and shot up into full flower, was there even the faintest glimmer of it.*

-- George Sklar

Playwright, Federal Theatre Project, 1935

In 1938, the FTP’s Negro Unit in Chicago produced Theodore Ward’s groundbreaking play, *Big White Fog*, which drew attacks for its horrific depictions of racism, while enraging and embarrassing mainstream black leaders by revealing the humiliation, shame and distortion of humanity wielded by white supremacy. In the play’s content, as well as in the bitter fight over whether to allow the production to proceed, “we can see in microcosm the competing ideals and impediments of a people’s theater” (Fraden *Cloudy* 94).

In *Big White Fog*, Ward, a prominent black Communist writer, employs the family drama genre to provide a stark account of the complex political challenges and options confronting African Americans in the 1920s and during the Depression. Each character embodies an identifiable political ideology and consciousness. But rather than creating the fixed cardboard stereotypes favored by some proletarian writers, Ward complicates the extended Mason family’s political views by grounding these convictions firmly within the characters’ experiences in a deeply racist, exploitative society. And along with depicting clearly defined political paths – Garveyism, faith in the “American Dream,” and Communism – Ward uses family dynamics to explore the very painful, vexed issue of skin color within the black community. This conflict is most graphic and disturbing when played out through the destructive attitude of a wife toward her husband, and a grandmother’s hateful rejection of her dark-skinned son-in-law and grandson.
*Big White Fog* is set in 1922, with the final act revisiting the Mason family a decade later at the height of the Depression. The play explores extremely harsh, cruel years for African Americans: in the early decades of the 20th century the defeat of Reconstruction was consolidated with the triumph of Jim Crow rule; lynchings and racist riots erupted in many cities; and white supremacy was a brutally enforced norm in both North and South. Major mob attacks on black communities in East St. Louis and Houston in 1917 were followed by the Red Summer of 1919, when racist riots erupted in at least three dozen cities, including Chicago. A 1921 riot in Tulsa left 10,000 blacks homeless, as 35 city blocks were burned to the ground in a direct effort to destroy the community’s economic base and drive its residents from the city.

Ward also references the rage of African Americans who returned home from World War I service, where they experienced a wider, sometimes more tolerant world, to a more jarring and intolerable resumption of Jim Crow subordination. For African Americans, the vast discrepancy between their ongoing oppression and the war’s purported aims was thrown into especially sharp relief in the postwar years. President Woodrow Wilson, a virulent racist who purged blacks from federal jobs, had promulgated a stirring U.S. commitment to worldwide democracy and self-determination – a pledge many blacks and colonized peoples attempted to take seriously. Washington acknowledged the explosive potential of expectations unleashed by Wilson’s hypocrisy: Secretary of State Robert Lansing lamented in 1918 that

“The phrase [self-determination] is simply loaded with dynamite. It will raise hopes which can never be realized … In the end it is bound to be discredited, to be called the dream of an idealist who failed to realize the danger until too late to check those who attempt to put the principle into force. What a calamity that the phrase was
ever uttered! What misery it will cause!” (98).

By explicitly addressing this stark political and economic landscape, Ward takes sides in a debate that emerged within the Harlem Renaissance over the appropriate message and goal of African American literary and artist works. Communist, progressive nationalist and many other left-wing cultural figures, including Ward, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Richard Wright, believed art should serve a progressive social purpose and depict racist conditions realistically. Wright asserted:

The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility … a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary; a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and moulds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today … the Negro writer … is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die (Robinson 422).

Zora Neale Hurston expressed the counterargument: “There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt by it … My country right or wrong” (541).

The production planning for Big White Fog was disrupted by fears that the FTP would be redbaited and that blacks would shun Ward’s raw, harsh depiction of their lives. One opponent was Shirley Graham, the FTP’s Chicago director (later the wife of W. E. B. Du Bois), who argued that, “This play does tear open old sores and leaves them uncovered and bleeding … its production at this time will do immeasurable harm to the very people it is attempting to help”
(Fraden 14). The Chicago NAACP, meanwhile, objected to Ward’s “communist propaganda” portraying “the worst phases of Negro life” (17).

Graham asked Ward to lighten up, claiming, “The average colored audience, even more than the average white audience wants to be entertained,” rather than watch “problem plays” (18). Even Hughes, who called *Big White Fog* “the greatest encompassing play on negro life that has ever been written,” said its popularity might be limited because many blacks “were not ready for it” (23). Ward ultimately prevailed, but the play only ran in Chicago for 37 performances.

Ralph Ellison praised *Big White Fog* when it opened in 1940 for a limited run at Harlem’s Lincoln Theater for Ward’s nuanced depiction of a committed Garvey supporter, separating struggling Garvey followers from the man himself: “The author takes a movement which has been passed off as a ludicrous effort by Negroes to ape British royalty and reveals in it that dignity of human groping which is characteristic of all oppressed people” (Shine 284). Through stage directions and dialogue, Ward portrays two widely disparate aspects of Garveyism. The Mason family father, Vic – initially a fervent supporter of Marcus Garvey’s goal of establishing a Black Republic of Africa on that continent – is introduced as “a tall, very black man, dressed in an old suit, his hands stained with mortar – but his dignified bearing and keen eyes show him to be a man of considerable intelligence and character” (Ward 290). Vic’s strong intellect, self-respect, and sense of injustice are augmented with a keen, outraged understanding of institutionalized racial oppression and his own bitter experience with American white supremacy. For him, Garveyism offers an escape from subjugation and a source of dignity, pride and communal solidarity; he strongly identifies with
the movement’s celebration of African historical accomplishment, self-reliance and nobility. He uses graphic imagery to express his assessment of American opportunity, telling his accommodationist brother-in-law Dan, “Your education is like a pair of kneepads, which enables you to crawl through the slime of white prejudice without the least sense of pain or dishonor!” (294). For Vic, Garveyism, with its grandiose uniforms and titles, utopian visions, discipline and mass base, represents, conversely:

getting out of this rut and on our way to Africa. I can see her now, like a mother weeping for her long lost children, calling to us, ‘Come home.’ Soon, and it won’t be long now. You’re going to see the Black man come out of the darkness of failure into the light of achievement and with the cloak of human greatness about his shoulders … And our enemies shall tremble when he stretches forth his might hand to gather in his share of the God-given stars of glory! (291).

Vic combines this sense of destiny with seemingly practical, well-studied plans for black-owned agrarian coops in Africa, enabling him to use a Tuskegee education in farming that is rendered useless – in the South and in Chicago – for a landless black man. The Garvey movement rewards him for this diligence (and for investing his life savings in the doomed emigration scheme) by bestowing upon him, with great ceremony, the title of future Lord of Agriculture. But Vic’s experience with Garveyism is complicated by his growing comprehension of the movement’s endemic corruption and failure to create any viable alternative to poverty and oppression. Ward’s stage directions stress the venture’s delusional nature with vivid descriptions of the Garveyites’ “regalia – black uniforms trimmed with red and white plumed helmets” and with Les’ criticism of his father – after his own political transformation – “for thinking the
Garvey Movement anything more than an impractical, chauvinistic dream” (314). Ward symbolizes the failure of Vic’s dream, and of Garveyism itself, most poignantly in the “faded and bedraggled” uniform Vic is forced to wear to housing court, after a decade of harsh struggle and disappointment, because he has no other clothing “but [his] ragged drawers” (317). The once-splendid uniform now represents failed expectations and dire poverty.

Through the early 1920s, Marcus Garvey had mobilized millions of African Americans to join his Universal Negro Improvement Association, organizing 700 branches across 38 states under the banner of mass emigration to Africa and black capitalism. Ultimately, the UNIA collapsed under the weight of massive corruption, mismanagement and its illusory “back to Africa” schemes. But Garvey had tapped into and exploited deep disillusionment with racist U.S. society and the longing for dignity and pride in a black identity. His views were antithetical both to the left and to radical nationalists: “For Garvey, the biological determinist, races are inherently antagonistic to each other. In Social Darwinist terms, he maintains that the white race would never cede any of its power or privilege to the black race … he openly viewed capitalism as ‘necessary for the progress of the world’” (Dawahare 24-25).

In *Big White Fog*, Dan is portrayed as Vic’s nemesis and mirror image, proclaiming despite all evidence to the contrary, “There’s chance enough for anybody in this country if he’s got get-up enough to take it.” Ward makes Dan a seeming villain, wearing a “vulturous smirk,” flaunting his Cadillac and profiting as a slumlord (308). He revels in his capitalist illusions, constantly lecturing the Masons about the importance of ambition, entrepreneurship and becoming a “big man,” while evicting a single mother who is less than a month behind in her rent. Vic observes that his brother-in-law “has no more conscience than a bedbug” and Les affirms, “Uncle Dan is just as dirty as he can be” (294). Only Dan internalizes American anti-
Semitism: he argues that a used-furniture trader’s hard bargaining is “no more than you can expect from a Jew,” while Les retorts, “That’s prejudice … the white man says the same thing about us” (313). And Wanda calls the shifty dealer “a disgrace to [his] race,” rather than exemplifying a typical Jew. (312).

But Ward complicates our view of Dan by underscoring that he, too, suffers severe blows from racism and capitalism, making his faith in the American Dream more pathetic than evil. Most significantly, Dan, an honors graduate, works for years as a Pullman porter, a job that is simultaneously demeaning and a rare good opportunity for black men in the North. The black porters’ requisite smiling, servile demeanor is one of the railroad’s chief selling points to white passengers. Dan’s trajectory serves as a lesson in cynicism and constrained aspirations for his niece Wanda: “Uncle Dan, Butler’s Black Pride, wearing a Kappa Key on a Pullman car! I’ve heard him say himself, they must’ve given it to him to open the berths with!” (289) And for all his advocacy of black capitalism – “A man can do business with his own people … If the race gave Negro business half a chance, we’d soon get somewhere” – Dan ends up essentially running a bankrupt brothel, on the verge of eviction himself (294, 317-318).

Like Dan, many Pullman porters were well-educated professionals with no other job prospects. The company’s publicity extolled them as “happy simple men who got no greater pleasure in life than waiting on rich white people, and who wanted only a pat on the head and perhaps a shiny quarter for their efforts” (Santino 116). But in 1925, led by A. Philip Randolph, porters formed the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters with the slogan, “Fight or be Slaves.” In their ranks were many politically sophisticated, committed activists like E. D. Nixon, later the leader of the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, who embodied the links extending from the early
black labor movement to the civil rights era. This was the real-life counterexample to Dan, although Ward’s script doesn’t refer to the Pullman porters’ powerful organizing drive.

Ward does, nonetheless, complicate Dan’s benighted political stance by allowing him to make some telling points about Vic’s politics. Citing a Garveyite train passenger “calling himself the Duke of Niger” and shouting “Africa for the Africans,” Dan says, “I doubt if it ever occurred to him he was playing right into the white man’s hands … by telling them just what they want to hear … advocating segregation” (293). Although he comes to a drastically wrong conclusion, Dan rightly asserts the African American claim to share in the bounty of a country they’ve been crucial in building: “My heritage is right here in America,” he says (293). But Dan’s insight is inseparable from his false consciousness: to Vic’s rejoinder that this heritage is a “lynchrope,” Dan blithely argues that only “those chumps down South [who] haven’t got sense enough to get out …” are subject to horrific violence (293). When Vic recalls that another relative, Percy, now a broken man, has his army uniform viciously torn from him when he returns to Chicago from fighting for the U.S. in the First World War, Dan’s answer is, “Adjust yourself, I say. Outwit the white man. Get something in your pocket and stop expecting the millennium” (293). Dan’s years as a Pullman porter, disastrous economic miscalculations and unrequited love for the American Dream decisively expose capitalism – like Garveyism – as a tainted path to liberation.

Ward further complicates the Masons’ ongoing, grueling political debate by providing an unsparing focus on racialized strife unfolding within the family. The stage directions specify in detail the characters’ gradations of skin color, and the conflict is carried forward by Vic and Dan’s mother-in-law, Martha Brooks, a “wizened mulatto” who is unrelenting in her insistence on the superiority of her ancestral white “Dupree blood” (287). She views Vic, a proud black man, as a manifestly unsuitable partner for her light-skinned daughter Ella, her disappointment
compounded by his humble earnings as a hod-carrier and Garvey movement politics. Unlike Dan, Martha bases her right to full American citizenship on the white portion of her heritage: “I ain’t no Affkin,” she says, “I’m a Dupree” (287) Brooks centers her deep-seated rage on Vic’s black skin, poisoning every encounter by using “black” as an epithet. (Ward describes Dan as a “stocky brown man,” apparently light enough for Brooks’ approval, especially given his capitalist creed and aspirations.) Brooks chastens her “copper-colored” granddaughter Caroline for playing with a black doll, leaving the child to comfort the toy, “Poor lil Black Judy. Grandma treats that honey-child like an orphan …” (307). But the self-hatred she imparts to Caroline is mild compared to her open disdain for her grandson Philip, a “little black boy” of ten; Philip regularly hears his grandmother crudely cursing his father’s (and by extension, his) blackness (287). When Martha calls Philip a “Black scamp,” Ella cautions, “Mama, I’ve asked you not to call that boy Black where he can hear you!” and Martha replies, “Yes he’s Black. Black like his cranky Daddy!” (309). As the family’s hardships deepen, she creates a rupture over color that is never healed.

After Martha unleashes a stream of degrading, stereotypical racist insults aimed at Vic’s color, he says, “So I’m an evil, Black, good for nothing nigger! … [She’s] calling me the dirtiest thing she can think of,” black (310). Ward’s stage directions stress the enormity and pain of Martha’s outburst: “She has committed the unpardonable sin in inner-racial relations,” he writes (310). When Martha affirms Vic’s accusation that he’s “too Black for [her] Dupree blood,” the dam breaks and he lashes out with the bitter, previously unmentionable truth about the origin of that bloodline:

You don’t hate me. You envy me. You envy my Black skin because
in your heart, you know yours is nothing but a badge of shame …
[You’re] like the rest of your kind, who let the color of their skin
drive them to think Black people are some kind of dirt beneath their
feet, when nothing could be more idiotic than the pride [you] take in
the blood of [your] raping ancestors! (310).

Vic’s searing comment pushes Ella over the line. Despite the growing economic
pressures, she had initially tried to temper her mother’s verbal assaults against him: “I’m sick of
your flaunting Vic’s color in my face!” (288). Now, however, with their life savings appropriated
by the Garvey movement, she calls Vic “an evil Black fool” who should “go on to Africa. Maybe
you’ll find the company of your own kind in the jungle!” (311). Ward describes Vic as
“wounded grievously and crying aloud” at his wife’s betrayal; Vic laments, “Prejudice!
Prejudice! Everywhere you turn, nothing but prejudice! A Black man can’t even get away from it
in his own house! And like a fool I dreamed of getting away from it in Africa!” In the stage
directions, Ward describes Vic’s “onslaught of pain, as he recognizes the very essence of his
oppression, his voice reverberates with agony” (311). Ward shows that race hatred internalized
and expressed within the intimate family
unit can cut deeper than assaults from the outside
world. This breach in family ties is never healed; in Act Three, a full decade after the incident,
Ward describes Vic as “avoiding any direct contact with Ella, with whom there has been no
reconciliation and to whom he never speaks directly” (317).

This intraracial prejudice and strife was a common theme in African American literature
of the period, with a genre ranging from lurid tales of the supposed “tragic mulatto” to the
Charles Wardell Chesnutt’s sardonic, poignant “blue vein” stories and Nella Larsen’s complex,
nuanced Passing. Ward’s Martha evokes Jean Toomer’s John Kabnis in the 1929 Cane: in
response to his shame at his black roots and rage at the conditions that produced his mixed racial
identity, Kabnis opts to identify with the slave-owning class, asserting that his “ancestors were Southern blue-bloods” (Toomer 106). The ever-present threat of lynching further pushes Kabnis to flee any black identity. In this he resembles the protagonist in James Weldon Johnson’s 1927 *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, who decides to “pass” permanently after seeing a black man burned alive by a white mob; like Kabnis, he feels “shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals” (Johnson 188). The soul-wrenching nature of this issue is evident as Johnson’s character concludes that despite his success, “he “cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage” (211). The Mason family’s explosive confrontations over skin color were an element in Shirley Graham’s fear that Ward’s FTP play would touch an exposed nerve in the black community and be rejected (Fraden 16).

*Big White Fog*’s brutalizing political and familial dead ends give rise to another ideological and practical option, the fruit of Les’ growing adherence to Communism. As the Depression takes hold in the 1930s, the Masons are sinking into raw destitution; they are one step from homelessness in a squalid Hooverville, a move only forestalled by Wanda’s sad, desperate venture into prostitution. With his illusions shattered, Vic is mired in hopelessness and dread at the family’s imminent eviction. Dan, too, is facing utter ruin, 10 years after promoting reliance on “the white man’s method – the process of individual achievement” (299).

In his youth, Les admires, respects and seeks to assist in his father’s Garvey movement activities; when he wins a scholarship only to have it cruelly snatched away when the school discovers his race, he’s sent reeling. In Ward’s stage directions, he’s “bewildered, [staring] upon the world with an inward eye” (297). He despairingly tells Vic, “Seems like the world ain’t nothing but a big white fog, and we can’t see no light nowhere!” (297). But through his
friendship with Nathan Piszer, a Jewish Communist, Les begins to see a way forward. First meeting Vic in the early 1920s, Piszer politely injects skepticism into the discussion of Garveyism, while Les initially retains his conviction that “there’s no hope for my race in this country, and any program that offers escape is all right with me” (305). Piszer then poses the key political question: “What’s there to prevent all the underprivileged from getting together on problems in which they have a common interest?” (306). Les answers, “bitterly” according to Ward, “The same thing that makes them call you ‘Sheeny’ and me ‘Nigger’!” (306). And the abused veteran Percy interjects, basing himself on hurtful experience, “All this inter-racial conciliation is nothing but a trap to catch the Negro in!” (306). Piszer suggests socialism as a possible remedy and recommends the family read State and Revolution; this line of thought is cut off, ironically, by Vic’s Lord of Agriculture ceremony.

But a decade later, Les is a full-scale Communist activist, helping build a mass movement to resist the tide of Depression-era evictions. He and Piszer urge Vic to join the movement in wielding militant inter-racial solidarity to beat back the Bailiffs and police, including the ones on the way to evict the Mason family: “You have a duty to yourself and the thousands who are facing eviction this morning,” says Les (320). He argues that their “only hope is in resistance,” confronting the law and preventing them from putting the family and its possessions out on the street. But, again, Ward complicates this political stand by presenting Les and Piszer as naïve about the power of the state and the likelihood of terrible retaliatory consequences. When Les says, “The dispossessed will never come to power without bloodshed!” the stage directions say he’s being “immature” and speaking “recklessly” (316). As the confrontation looms, Ward has Piszer, “sophomorically, but earnest,” offer a blast of stilted rhetoric, to which Vic replies, “I
can’t blind myself to the facts. A poor Negro like me can only get it in the neck if he bucks the law” (320).

But when Vic learns that Wanda has prostituted herself to stave off the eviction, his rage and horror at the outcome of the system’s years-long oppression of his family explodes. He tells Les and Piszer to summon the Communist forces so they can fight back: “I’ve got to stand my ground,” he says, “I’ve got a taste for trouble now” (322). As police sirens drown out the singing Communists, Vic moves to take his furniture back inside, and the police shoot him down. As he’s dying he says his fate is “no more than life’s taught me a Black man’s got to expect … like Les said, ‘This world ain’t nothing but a big white fog, and nobody can’t see no light anywhere!’” (324). Les tries to counter his father’s resignation and despair by pointing out his black and white comrades standing together in the doorway; this means, he says, that “there is a light” (324).

Ward’s ending is ambiguous: Vic dies without seeing this light, saying “my sight is gone,” and, as the play ends, “in the distance an ambulance siren is heard, and slowly the curtain descends,” leaving a tragic tableau of utter defeat (324). But there’s also a small spark of hope: resistance is said to be building throughout the city and white workers are joining blacks in the fight. As he traces the life and struggles of the Mason family, Ward depicts Communism as the only political ideology that isn’t hopelessly flawed, delusional, corrupt or mired in false consciousness. Richard Wright, writing in 1944 after his break with the Communists, recalled why the party’s vision of solidarity and internationalism had once resonated so deeply with him and other African Americans:

It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my
attention was caught by the similarity of the experience of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred people into a whole … here at last, in the realm of evolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role (Robinson 423).

As the play ends, however, Les and his comrades are still facing the daunting, seemingly hopeless challenges of confronting both implacable racism and the armed power of the state. Ward’s grim ending suggests that the Communists might be right, but they probably can’t win.

The power of Ward’s play stems in large part from his empathetic, nuanced portrayal of all his characters, even the vicious, color-obsessed Martha and the sleazy aspiring capitalist Dan. He shows that their deep character flaws are rooted in racist oppression and capitalist exploitation, but his complex characters and situations, and his gruesome ending defy the Communist Party’s socialist realist prescriptions. Communist writer Mike Gold famously laid down rules for the appropriate approach to literature in his 1930 New Masses essay “Proletarian Realism.” His view of realism requires heroic characters that rebel and ultimately triumph over adversity:

Away with drabness, the bourgeoisie notion that the Worker’s life is sordid, the slummer’s disgust and feeling of futility. There is horror and drabness in the Worker’s life; and we will portray it; but we know this is not the last word; we know that this manure heap is the hope of the future; we know that not pessimism, but revolutionary elan will sweep this mess out of the world forever (Gold 5).

Most of the Mason family in Big White Fog is beaten down by extreme hardship, false consciousness and violence, without the intervention of “revolutionary elan.” Ward’s
Communists are bold and principled, but also adventurous and naïve as they’re mowed down by the state. There might be some hope on the horizon, but the fog prevails as the curtain goes down.

From start to finish, the play is unsparing in depicting the harshness and straitened circumstances of urban black life in the 1920s and ‘30s. Ward addressed the black community’s reluctance and shame in having its distress laid bare on the stage, and the resulting impulse to look for escapist entertainment. In a 1940 speech he referenced both the controversy over black audiences’ “readiness” for his play’s painful realism, and the redbaiting charge that *Big White Fog* is subversive:

> Perhaps, as among all oppressed peoples, large sections of our group are given to looking upon the theatre primarily as a mean of escape. But the theatre was not a means of escape in its inception and has never been such, as far as we are aware, at any highpoint in its history. The idea that it was designed to give light amusement is but one of the current falsehoods which have been concocted by those who are contemptuous of the intelligence of the common man, and who would have others believe that he lacks the wit to understand what is serious, or the vision to determine for himself what is entertaining and good. It is the product of those who wish to keep the people in ignorance, so they may be more easily exploited. It is the lie of those who label everything as propaganda that does not conform to their own interests and opinions. (qtd. in Ward, *Big xi*).

Ward’s response, which goes to the heart of the contested issue of what, ultimately, defines a “people’s theatre,” can be applied to the Federal Theater Project’s mission as a whole.
Chapter 3  *The Revolt of the Beavers*: Didactic Fantasy or Subversive Brainwashing?

*Many children unschooled in the technique of revolution now have an opportunity, at government expense, to improve their tender minds.*


*The response was an almost hysterical one. This had been written by people who had been reading Marx. But it was not really in any important aspects Marxist. It was a primitive and basic story of good and bad – the good guy, bad guy, the suffering poor, the oppressive rich – which is classic ... the essence of it was very old and very familiar.*

--Lou Lanz, co-author
*The Revolt of the Beavers*

*We should have called it Rumpelstiltskin.*
Jack Rennick, Director
Children’s Theatre Unit

A 1937 Children’s Theatre Unit (CTU) production, *The Revolt of the Beavers*, earned an ironic distinction as “the play that killed the Federal Theatre Project.” This was a rueful exaggeration that, nonetheless, contained a large grain of truth. *The Revolt of the Beavers*, a musical fairy tale with talking animals on roller skates, became a prime exhibit in the 1938 Special House Committee on Un-American Activities hearings that investigated alleged Communist control of the FTP. The investigation, known as the Dies Committee hearings, led Congress to eliminate the project the following year.

The FTP invested a large amount of research and resources in founding its Children’s Unit, seeking advice from leading educators and child psychologists, while conducting extensive surveys of parents and children:
To plan an appropriate repertory for young audiences, the New York CTU “sent questionnaires to 220 centers including parochial and public schools, churches and settlement houses which together represented approximately 200,000 children” (Swortzell 10). The unit also formed a group of consultants that included Columbia and NYU professors, the educational director of the Boy Scouts of America, and the New York City’s Schools Superintendent (Swortzell 10).

This level of care reflects Hallie Flanagan’s vision of the FTP as precursor to the development of an American national theater, with the CTU as an integral part of the process. “With government subsidies helping to pay the costs,” she argued, “Federal children’s theaters could be established all over the country and could provide low-cost admissions for thousands of children who otherwise would not have the opportunity to see live theater” (Heard 55). The FTP documented this lack of access to children’s theatre by surveying “the financial condition of children in 220 centers with a total attendance of 200,000 children. The survey found that 10 percent of the children were unable to pay any admission, 15 percent were able to pay five cents or less, 43 percent were able to pay 10 cents or less, and 32 percent were able to pay 15 cents or less” (Frost 25). The FTP’s children’s productions, which utilized large casts including musicians and dancers, and featured fast action and acrobatic antics, proved a good source of employment for theater people on the relief rolls. This sector boosted the WPA’s job-creation mission, even providing work for many retired vaudevillians.

From the start, the CTU was explicit in its didactic aims; that is, to provide education and moral instruction along with pure entertainment. The term “didactic” is often used as a pejorative, connoting rigid, moralistic, tedious lessons, but the FTP embraced its pedagogic and
social mission: According to Rennick, “In the selection of plays for all age groups, entertainment value must be taken into consideration, but each script must contain some educational value” (Frost 25). He said the CTU would produce two types of plays to further this purpose:

The first includes plays which are imaginative, humorous or fantastical in nature.

The second and more important type (neglected by children’s theatres in the past) is the play with a heightened sense of realism which will help the child to an awareness of himself and his place in the world about him. In all plays there must be an educational and cultural value, and above everything else, the play must be presented to attract and retain the interest of the child (25).

According to Beavers author Louis Lanz, however, “The one play that most closely met the criteria established by unit directors by being both fantastic in its setting and realistic in its aims, ironically enough, also turned out to be the most problematic” (Swortzell 12).

Children’s literature throughout history, including the most fantastical fairy tales, has played an important role in educating and socializing children. As children’s literature scholar Jack Zipes argues, fairy tales have long been “a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners so that children would become civilized according to the social code of that time” (3). Classic fairy tales have also often had a subversive quality as well. A good example is Hans Christian Andersen’s The Emperor’s New Clothes, which was a highly successful CTU production: “Over a quarter of a million people saw the show during its one-and-a-half-year run, many of them children in schools, hospitals, and orphanages” (O’Connor 23). The story clearly “dramatizes the foolish vanity of authorities, the power of conformity, and the force of common sense – even if it comes from a child” (ibid). These fairy tale traditions became the crux of the
FTP’s defense when *The Revolt of the Beavers* became a key piece of evidence for the Dies Committee.

*The Revolt of the Beavers* begins as Paul and Mary, two poor children in ragged clothes, gather firewood in a vacant lot next to a tenement building. They argue about whether to believe in fairy tales because, according to Mary’s teacher, “Some real stories are so full of lies that they’re fairy tales and some fairy tales are so full of truth that they’re just like real stories” (Swortzell 128). This insight is a thread running through the play. The children also express their deepest wishes, if they magically had a wishing stone. Mary says, “First I would wish my father got a job, and then I would wish for a big piece of chocolate,” while Paul wants “a blue sweater and a pair of skates … and that everybody in the world was nine years old” (ibid). They fall asleep and wind up in Beaverland, where a beaver in a blue sweater skates past them.

This forest seems to be a wonderland, but Paul and Mary quickly learn about the beavers’ tense labor situation. Their new beaver friend tells them: “You better get out right away … because the there’s a lot of trouble in Beaverland. And you might get right in the middle of the trouble” (136). And Paul empathizes: “We’re sad – and we come to Beaverland and we see a sad beaver. It looks like everybody in the whole world is sad” (137). The children meet up with Oakleaf, an organizer who wants the fellow beavers to form a “club” so they won’t be sad anymore. All the worker-beavers agree, but the chief, who owns and runs Beaverland, charges that Oakleaf is destructive and has the beaver police, depicted as a kind of Keystone Cops, chase him away.

![FTP Children’s play that sparked furor over leftist propaganda.](image)
One reason the beavers are so sad, Oakleaf tells Paul and Mary, is inequality: “Y’know not a single beaver has a blue sweater and a pair of skates, except the chief and his gang” (141). Soon, the children come upon what the stage notes call “the industrial center of beaver life,” a complex dam-building factory with a giant wheel powered by a moving belt with levers, dials, meters, axels and pipes. Burly guards and generals -- known as the Scaly Brothers, a name akin to the labor epithet “scab” -- wear blue sweaters and skates as they stand watch. The play is explicit in defining class relations; the singing worker-beavers know that the boss is getting the fruit of their arduous labor:

Busy, busy busy, busy,/ strip strip strip, strip
busy busy, busy busy/ clip, clip, clip clip

If you ask us why we’re giving/ our attention to the bark
That’s how beavers make their living/ since the day they left the Ark …
But the Chief of all the beavers/ he gets all the bark we make.
All he does is pull the levers/ while we work until we ache …
So we’re poor unhappy beavers,
Working busy as the bees,
While he sits and pulls the levers
And gets richer if you please (142-143).

The play references wide economic disparities amid Depression-era hardship. As the Chief enjoys a lavish meal, a worker-beaver recites a poem he has written about hunger:

I used to love my lunchtime/ I used to sit and munch
a piece of bark at lunchtime/ I’d crunch and crunch and crunch
But now I don’t like lunchtime/ I have no bark to crunch
and what’s the good of lunchtime/ If you haven’t got no lunch? (144).

The children also encounter an anthropomorphic wind, named Windy, and Paul asks whether he can ever be free as the wind. Windy, played by a veteran vaudevillian, cautions that the powers that be would surely prevent that level of freedom: “You can’t do that! You know what would happen if you did whatever you wanted? They might lock you up in jail – and then could you fly away, like me? No! And why? Because you ain’t the wind” (Frost 59).

When the worker-beavers go on strike, the Chief threatens violence. He enlists the Scaly Brothers to lock out the workers, and vows to imprison and even kill them, along with their human allies, Paul and Mary:

> From now on, a new rule! Any beaver that gets wise, I’m gonna lock him in a cave for a long time –maybe forever! And you human beings, I’m gonna teach you the biggest lesson there is! And the lesson is – for a hundred years –you’re gonna get killed every day starting tomorrow! (Frost 65).

The worker-beavers fight back with zippo guns, slingshots and bean shooters, overwhelming the Scaly Brothers as Oakleaf wrestles with and overcomes the Chief. In a triumphant ending to the play, the beavers declare that all the workers will have blue sweaters and roller skate and sing their “Victory Song”: To all the beavers now belong

> All of Beaverland …
> There’s bark for every beaver
> Who swings a cleaver
> Or pulls a lever …
> We’ll be building every day,
> Each one helps in his own way.
Every beaver has his say
In building our new land …
So hear our voices singing
With joy they’re ringing
This message bringing
To all the world we’re singing
About our beavers’ Beaverland (Swortzell 172).

As one scholar describes the conclusion:

The song ends with all beavers holding hands together, equally spaced in a line on the stage. As all are equal, all share in the dignity of communal work that generates benefits for all in a Beaverland without a controlling Chief. But this joyous situation is not for Beaverland alone. The beavers bring their message to the world (Frost 66).

The May 1937 opening of The Revolt of the Beavers came at a particularly inopportune time for the FTP. With its funding up for congressional renewal, the project drew increased hostile scrutiny in a fraught political environment that inflamed forces on the left and right:

The war in Spain had mobilized Popular Front support. A sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan in February had rallied labor. During the run of Revolt, workers at the “Little Steel: plants of the Midwest went on strike. At Republic Steel, workers trying to set up a picket line under the Steel Workers Organizing Committee were fired on by the Chicago police. Ten people were killed, seven shot in the back, as police fired on, beat up, and teargassed the crowd (Frost 47).
The Dies Committee, for its part, focused on the charge that Communists had deliberately crafted *Beavers* to evoke “class consciousness” and provoke “class warfare.” And it is surely difficult to separate the play’s content from the current events. It is hard to overstate the impact of the *New York Times* review by Brooks Atkinson in fomenting official outrage. The influential critic wrote that the Federal Theatre has produced “a revolutionary bedtime story … in the form of a Mother Goose fantasy it is a primer lesson in class struggle” (Heard 193). He added,

> The first lesson in labor warfare is staged against some whimsical settings and in imaginative costumes … The style is playful; the mood is gravely gay and simple-minded. Many children now unschooled in the technique of revolution now have an opportunity, at government expense, to improve their tender minds. Mother Goose is no longer a rhymed escapist. She has been studying Marx; Jack and Jill lead the class revolution (46).

The Atkinson review, which FTP opponents mailed to every member of Congress, drew a swift reaction in New York, where a deputy police commissioner refused 1,400 free tickets for children “on the grounds that members of the Police Athletic League would be persuaded towards Marxism as Atkinson predicted” and to write to the *New York Times* demanding that action be taken to “suppress or at least censor” the play. Without attempting to change the script to make *The Revolt of the Beavers* palatable to its critics, the FTP closed it down. Jack and Jill would not be leading the revolution on Uncle Sam’s dime (Frost 46).

In the face of the storm, the FTP argued, nonetheless, that the play’s young audiences had received a different, very positive and healthy message. From its inception, the CTU had
conducted extensive surveys to predict and gauge children’s understanding of its productions, and this method was pressed into service to defend *The Revolt of the Beavers*. The survey was directed by Dr. Frances Holden of the New York University Psychology Department, with the aid of honor students trained in analyzing the reactions of children (Heard 197). In detailed questionnaires that explored what lessons the children had learned from the play, the most common responses were “Don’t be selfish,” “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” “Not to boss someone else,” “To show that if you are unkind you will always regret it,” and the charming observation that “Beavers really talk!”

The FTP augmented the survey findings in a brief prepared for the Dies Committee that quoted an editor of the mainstream publication *Story Parade: A Magazine for Boys and Girls* who defended the play:

> The play is, in my opinion, no more Communistic than Christian. Does anyone want to teach children that entrenched greed is desirable: The moral of this play is just that … entrenched greed and cruelty are not desirable. That is theme of many of the old, classical, accepted fairly tales for children (Frost 53).

Many scholars of children’s literature argue, in fact, that fairy tales have always been political and often implicitly class conscious. “One is tempted to ask,” writes Jack Zipes in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*, “what all those enchanting, loveable tales about fairies, elves, giants, kings, queens, princes, princesses, dwarfs, witches, peasants, soldiers, beasts and dragons have to do with politics” (116). He answers,

> One is tempted by the magic spell of the tales, so it would seem, to obliterate their real historical and social basis and to abandon oneself to a wondrous realm where
class conflict does not exist and where harmony reigns supreme. Yet, if we reread some of the tales with history in mind, and if we reflect for a moment about the issues at stake, it becomes apparent that these enchanting, loveable tales are filled with all sorts of power struggles over kingdoms, rightful rule, money, women, children and land, and that their real "enchantment" emanates from these dramatic conflicts whose resolutions allow us to glean the possibility of making the world, that is, shaping the world in accord with our needs and desires (116).

In her 1940 FTP memoir Arena, Flanagan makes a similar point to stress that The Revolt of the Beavers was not a Communist-inspired propaganda tool, employing instead a classic storytelling meme:

> It almost all fairy tales the poor child, the Cinderella, the Jack-and-the-Beanstalk, is abused by the selfish stepmother or the bad giant; always the hero or heroine triumphs in the end. It seemed to me natural that in the fairy-tale pattern brought up to date the beavers had a bad beaver king whom they drove out so that all the beavers could eat ice cream, play, and be nine years old (Arena 54).

It is true that the CTU’s popular version of Andersen’s The Emperor’s New Clothes did not spark any right-wing outrage, given that play’s lesson of exposing and resisting illegitimate authority. And it would be fair to argue that Andersen’s “The Little Match Girl” depicts a far more direct and brutal class divide, as a starving child freezes to death beneath the

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Figure 6: Classic children’s fairy tales like this one often conveyed subversive messages about challenging authority.
windows of an oblivious rich family enjoying a lavish feast.

It was *Beavers* depiction of management’s unjust suppression of workers’ rights and triumphant labor victory, while in the streets, real-life, murderous steel industry violence was unfolding, that struck an exposed nerve. While the Dies Committee hearings were a shambolic, thoroughly undemocratic exercise, it would be disingenuous to deny that leftist sympathies with besieged strikers stoked *Beavers* specific plot points. But, as Mary’s teacher told her, “Some fairy tales are so full of truth that they’re just like real stories” (Swortzell 128). The real issue, as with the entire FTP experiment, was whether the fierce, public defense of democratic rights is intrinsically un-American or an exposition of true American values.
Chapter 4  Un-American Activities:  
Congress Hunts Propaganda, “Race-Mixing,” and Bolshevism

Notorious for its anti-communism, media manipulation, and irregular procedures, the House Un-American Activities Committee is often assumed to be a product of the Cold War. But the House of Representatives created the Committee in 1938 not 1948.

-- Nancy Lopez, Historian
“Allowing Fears To Overwhelm Us”

Rep Joseph Starnes: You are quoting from this Marlowe, is he a Communist?
Hallie Flanagan: I was quoting from Christopher Marlowe.
Rep. Starnes: Tell us who Marlowe is, so we can get the proper reference.
Flanagan: Put in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period immediately preceding Shakespeare.

Dies Committee Hearings, 1938

Reds Urged “Mixed Date,” Blonde Tells Dies Committee Probers
Headline, New York Journal American, 1938

The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) sounded the death knell for the Federal Theatre Project in 1938 by holding sensationalist hearings aimed at confirming charges that the project’s motives and impact were fundamentally subversive. Operating as the Dies Committee, chaired by Rep. Martin Dies of Texas, the hearings aired explosive, largely uncorroborated and unchallenged testimony meant to demonstrate that the FTP promoted Communism, fostered immorality and wasted public funds. The hearings led Congress to defund the FTP on June 30, 1939.

Although the Dies Committee was established to investigate both Nazi and Communist subversion, its most prominent initial foray was the “red scare”-style probe into the FTP.
Committee members acknowledged, however, that their ultimate target was the Roosevelt administration, with investigators pointedly conflating Communism and the New Deal. During the hearings, Rep. J. Parnell Thomas stated, “It is apparent from the startling evidence received thus far that the Federal Theatre Project not only is serving as a branch of the Communistic organization but is also one more link in the vast and unparalleled New Deal propaganda machine” (Ogden 48).

The Dies Committee grounded its drive against the FTP in a blatant attack on the project’s antiracist principles and practices. Challenging racism was un-American on its face, the committee charged, given its centrality in Communist ideology. The intense focus on race reflected the inordinate power Southern Democrats exercised in U.S. politics, forming a bloc that constrained many New Deal initiatives. The Southern legislators held the line on one overriding principle: New Deal measures must refrain from tampering with Jim Crow social and economic relations in the region. In Fear Itself, The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time, historian Ira Katznelson documented the Faustian bargain Roosevelt made with the arch segregationists. As a New York Times reviewer described these findings:

To push their legislative programs through Congress, the New Dealers sold their souls to the segregated South. The calculation was simple enough. Thanks to the disfranchisement of blacks and the reign of terror that accompanied it, the South had become solidly Democratic by the beginning of the 20th century, the Deep South exclusively so. One-party rule translated into outsize power on Capitol Hill: when Roosevelt took office, Southerners held almost half the Democrats’ Congressional seats and many of the key committee chairmanships. So whatever Roosevelt wanted to put into law had to have Southern approval. And he wouldn’t
get it if he dared to challenge the region’s racial order (Boyle BR10).

For these Democrats and their conservative Republican allies, the FTP was both a thorn in their sides and an easy target. The Roosevelt administration was championing a project with well-known leftist participants, racially mixed casts, and an insistence on integrated audiences and social events. Committee members concurred with witnesses who claimed the FTP openly encouraged immorality in the form of interracial dating and, inevitably, miscegenation. The hearings also aired charges that the FTP’s Negro Theatre Unit wasted taxpayer money on nonprofessional, untalented, hopelessly unrefined black artists and technicians, while promoting black culture.

A Dies Committee star witness, Hazel Huffman, who worked in an FTP mailroom, testified to FTP subversion. The committee granted Huffman and all friendly witnesses immunity and allowed them to make unsupported claims and draw dubious conclusions:

> At the heart of [Huffman’s] testimony was the charge that Flanagan and her associates were sympathetic to communists, if not actually communists. Lacking substantive evidence, the case seemed to rest instead on Huffman’s presentation of a list of twenty-six un-American plays which she claimed were propaganda for the communist cause. The list contained a significant proportion of Negro Unit productions, and evidence of a play’s communist propaganda included “extreme anti-fascism,” “sympathetic portrayal of the workers,” and the use of “Negro songs of protest” (Dosset 999).
Huffman also claimed the FTP was squandering tax dollars by appealing only to a limited Communist audience. When the Committee belatedly granted Flanagan an opportunity to testify in the closing days of the hearings, the FTP director directly contested this charge:

I want to quote from her allegation. Miss Huffman says, “They couldn’t get any audiences for anything except Communistic plays.” Now, gentlemen, I have here the proof that that is an absolutely false statement. We have, as sponsoring bodies for the Federal Theater, lists of organizations covering twenty pages of this brief, which I intend to write into the record; and I will summarize them for you. Two hundred and sixty-three social clubs and organizations, two hundred and sixty-four welfare and civic organizations, two hundred and seventy-one educational organizations, ninety-five religious organizations, ninety-one organizations from business industries, sixteen mass organizations, sixty-six trade-unions, sixty-two professional unions, seventeen consumers' unions, twenty-five fraternal unions, and fifteen political organizations. Note, gentlemen, that every religious shade is covered and every political affiliation and every type of educational and civic body in the support of our theater. It is the widest and most American base that any theater has ever built upon, and I request you not only to write that into the record but to read the list of public schools and universities and churches and the civic and social groups that are supporting this Federal Theater (Bentley Thirty 25).

The committee entertained sensationalist testimony from FTP actress Sally Saunders, the “blonde” referenced in the headline epigraph quoted above. She testified that during rehearsals for the musical Sing for Your Supper a black actor had asked her for a date. Adding insult to
injury, director Harold Hecht, to whom she complained, said, “Sally, I’m surprised at you. He has as much right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness as you have” (Quinn 247). (In a postscript to her testimony, Saunders was fired by the FTP two months later for refusing to tour with the Negro Unit production Haiti. In an affidavit questioning her dismissal, Saunders explained, “I could not work with Negros because of odor, which seems part of their race” (247).

It seems incredible that the committee legitimized Saunders’ “evidence” by citing it in its final report to Congress. This promotion of the “un-American concepts of race-merging and social equality,” the committee wrote, proved that the FTP espoused “Communist principles” (Yates 33). Immorality, specifically tied to race, was a prominent theme throughout the hearings. As such, “Many of the objections pertaining to immorality did not stem from fears that the activity was Communistic; rather, the objections stemmed from fears among conservatives that the nation was moving toward racial and class tolerance” (66).

The committee’s intellectual heft was evident in its probe of the FTP’s 1936 play Prologue to Glory, which depicted President Abraham Lincoln’s early years. In a four-star review, the drama critic for the "notoriously anti-New Deal" New York Daily News wrote, “If the Federal Theatre had produced no other single drama, Prologue to Glory would doubly justify its history and all its struggles … No citizen of these United States, native or in the making, should be permitted to miss it” (Buttitta 181). The Dies Committee regarded the production as Communist propaganda: in a syndicated interview headlined “Rep. Thomas Bares Red Grip on WPA’s Federal Theatre,” this committee member stated that the play “deals with Lincoln in his
youth and portrays him battling with politicians. This is simply a propaganda play to prove all politicians are crooked” (183).

Flanagan took issue with the committee’s definition and pejorative use of the term “propaganda.” When the committee charged that the FTP’s plays of “social significance” were disseminating propaganda that fostered “class consciousness” at the taxpayers’ expense, Flanagan replied that such works did indeed contain propaganda, and justifiably so. She argued, as she had since the project’s inception, that the FTP’s plays that referenced topical social issues promoted “propaganda for democracy”:

Propaganda, after all, is education. It is education focused on certain things. For example, some of you gentlemen have doubtless seen One-Third of a Nation; and I certainly would not sit here and say that that was not a propaganda play…. I should like to say very truthfully that to the best of my knowledge we have never done a play which was propaganda for communism, but we have done play which were propaganda for democracy, propaganda for better housing …” (Mathews 220).

Flanagan added that the Living Newspaper production Injunction Granted, for example, was “‘propaganda for fair labor relation and for fairness to labor in the courts’; but, she insisted, ‘I do not believe it fosters class hatred’” (ibid).

When Flanagan used the term “Marlowesque madness” to describe European workers’ theatre efforts to “remake a social structure without the help of money,” she generated the infamous “is this Marlowe a Communist” questioning quoted above in the second epigraph. The exchange has been widely cited to underscore the committee’s cultural ignorance and buffoonery, but Flanagan disagreed with the mockery. “It was the fashion at that time, in the
WPA and out, to laugh at the Dies Committee,” she recalled in *Arena*, “but it never seemed funny to me; I did not laugh. Eight thousand people might lose their jobs because a Congressional Committee had so prejudged us that even the classics were ‘communistic’” (67).

While incidents like the Saunders or Marlowe testimony justifiably evoked ridicule, most historians view the Dies Committee as a serious assault on democracy and model for its Cold War successor, the McCarthy investigations. In 1939, after the committee’s FTP hearings concluded, Rep. Joseph M. Coffee, a former New Deal administrator, made this harsh assessment:

> Persecution of whole groups of people, based solely upon disapproval of the beliefs they hold and express, is wholly un-American. If the aim of the Dies Committee is to preserve this Nation from the curse of dictatorship, that aim cannot be achieved by introducing the methods and standards of dictators here (Bird 175).

Although there was much contemporaneous criticism of the Dies Committee’s motives and methods, the FTP hearings succeeded in several very important ways. First, the committee achieved the total elimination of the project; it was defunded by Congress and closed down on June 30, 1939. Second, Congress renewed the committee’s mandate in 1939 and quadrupled its funding. And third, the committee served as a prototype for the Cold War “red scare,” which culminated in the notorious 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings.

The FTP marked its shutdown in a typically theatrical manner. On the last night, the cast and crew of the project’s hugely successful Children’s Theatre Unit production of *Pinocchio* altered the script and staged a public funeral in the streets of New York for the wooden puppet. As Flanagan recounts in *Arena,*

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Pinocchio, having conquered selfishness and greed, did not become a living boy. Instead he was turned back into a puppet. “So let the bells proclaim our grief,” intone the company at the finish, “that his small life was all too brief.” The stagehands knocked down the sets in full view of the audience and the company laid Pinocchio away in a pine box which bore the legend: BORN DECEMBER 23, 1938; KILLED BY AN ACT OF CONGRESS, JUNE 30, 1939 (364-65).

After this sad finale, most of the audience “followed the cast and crew out of the theatre on an improvised march along 49th Street. This hastily assembled funeral procession bore hand-lettered signs announcing the MURDER OF PINOCCHIO and the DEATH OF FEDERAL THEATRE and attracted sympathizers along the way” (Buttitta 227).

The committee had, meanwhile, marshaled public opinion with a skewed interpretation of congressional rules that allowed any person named in a hearing to refute the charges; as the word “immediately” was not included in this provision,

Often the aggrieved party had to wait months … before their appearance. In the interim, the charges usually appeared in the papers without refutation. Nor did the Committee feel obligated to wait to hear both sides before publishing its conclusions. In 1938, the Committee would publish its annual report in which most of the organizations labeled as Communist fronts had not yet proffered their side of the story (Bird 117).

As indicated by the press headlines cited above, the news coverage over the four months of the hearings was largely sensationalistic, lurid, and racist. And Flanagan was only given one morning for her testimony on the last day of the hearings; she was told the session would resume after lunch, but it never did (Mathews 224). Fearing that vocal defense of the FTP would hinder
efforts to preserve other New Deal programs, the WPA did not permit Flanagan to publicly respond to committee charges until the day of her own testimony (ibid). And public opinion was duly swayed in the committee’s favor. A 1939 study in *The Public Opinion Quarterly* analyzed the press coverage and concluded that it was a key factor in the committee’s success:

The House voted in February 1939 by a ten to one majority to continue the Dies Committee, and on a scale four times as costly as before. Last year the Dies Committee was granted $25,000 for its work, which dragged out over a period of several months. This year the House voted $100,000 to the Committee without even a record vote. Perhaps the Congressmen were impressed by the results of the Gallup poll of December 11, 1938, which indicated that 74 percent of people who had heard of the Committee wished to see Mr. Martin Dies’ show continued (Britt 449).

This ugly spectacle was repeated in a new, augmented and far more damaging form in the postwar “red scare.” During the McCarthy hearings, many actors, directors, writers, and others in the arts were forced to recant their Depression-era activism and artistic output -- including FTP affiliation -- or face long years of ostracism and unemployment. As with the Dies Committee, the McCarthy investigations did profound damage to democracy. In a 1945 study of the Dies Committee, historian August Raymond Ogden assessed the harm inflicted on American society:

The democratic way of life can be preserved only to the extent to which democratic processes of government are preserved. As an instrumentality of the democratic process, the investigating committee has become increasingly important in the last few years. The immense power for good or evil found in it has perhaps hot been fully realized by the general public. …The anomalous use of
undemocratic means, even in the slightest degree, in order to preserve democracy, constitutes, in effect, a threat to democracy itself. … If the country ever reaches a stage where democratic means are found inadequate to preserve its liberties, then democracy will have become a hollow shell (v).

It is sadly telling that this prescient warning was issued shortly before the McCarthy onslaught was unleashed on the country with momentous and lasting consequences.
Chapter 5  Looking Back  
Vexed Legacy for an Audacious Cultural Initiative

*The theatre can quicken, start things, make things happen. Don’t be afraid when people tell you this is a play of protest. Of course it’s a play of protest. Of course it’s protest, protest against dirt, disease, human misery. If, in giving great plays of the past as greatly as we can give them, and if, in making people laugh which we certainly want to do, we can’t also protest – as Harry Hopkins is protesting and as President Roosevelt is protesting – against some of the evils of this country of ours, than we don’t deserve the chance put in our hands.*  
-- Hallie Flanagan, 1937

An assessment of the Federal Theatre Project’s impact and legacy must be squarely situated within the political and economic circumstances that enabled the project to thrive. It is difficult today to imagine an America engulfed in fear that the capitalist system itself was experiencing an existential crisis, but this was the context in which the Roosevelt administration created and nurtured the FTP. As one historian put it, “The WPA arts projects were the children of catastrophe, the Saturday’s children of the massive relief program the federal government enacted in 1935. The program was a response composed of hope and desperation to an … economic breakdown unlike any other in the history of capitalism” (Sporn 31).

The WPA launched the FTP with the bold promise that its government-funded productions would be “free, adult and uncensored,” an unprecedented opportunity in a country with no tradition of a national theatre. But such a pledge would not be absolute; there is an inherent contradiction when a play’s funders and targets become one and the same. Most of the FTP’s radically leftist productions were in general accord with New Deal priorities, but the WPA did step in to ban works, such as *Ethiopia* and the militantly pro-labor *The Cradle Will Rock*, that it deemed too far out of bounds. Nonetheless, the FTP seized the remarkable opening it had been
given and took audacious artistic initiatives to reach, entertain, and inspire beleaguered, dispirited and neglected audiences. The Living Newspapers, for example, were a lively, participatory artistic innovation that depicted pressing everyday issues such as housing and racism. The rousing response included audience members talking back to the actors about their lives and demanding action to alleviate hardship.

Hallie Flanagan infused the project with a mission of social change; she believed that theatre could be a weapon for progress as well as a source of jobs and cultural enrichment. In a 1937 project newsletter, she told the staff:

Our Federal Theatre, born of an economic need, built by and for people who have faced terrific privation, cannot content itself with easy, pretty or insignificant plays. We are not being given millions of dollars to repeat, however expertly, the type of plays which landed 10,000 theatre people on relief rolls. By a stroke of fortune unprecedented in dramatic history, we have been given a chance to help change America at a time when twenty million unemployed Americans proved it needed changing. And the theatre, when it is any good, can change things (Flanagan “Theatre).

The FTP’s achieved an incredibly broad reach into distressed communities, using a multiplicity of languages and theatrical forms, from classical drama to circuses and musical comedy; its Children’s Theatre went to parks, schools and hospitals, while the Negro Unit provided unprecedented opportunity and access. When Macbeth opened in Harlem, the community celebrations stopped traffic to mark important cultural and political moment. The Dies Committee charged that the FTP was instilling “class consciousness” in a drive to undermine American democracy. The project did consciously aim to foster working-class pride and dignity,
a New Deal value promoted to lift the national mood of defeat and despair; Flanagan viewed this as a patriotic approach. Many FTP participants described observing a palpable rise in hope and self-respect as audiences viewed their productions, whether stark dramas or light-hearted vaudeville. As Philip Barber, regional director of the New York City FTP wrote:

The circus opened in an armory up in the Bronx to an absolutely full house; I will never forget seeing those dispirited, beaten people in their grand march of entry. God, now every one of them owned the world! It was heartening and exciting. One of the most dramatic happenings I’ve seen in my life was those people transformed and their pride restored (O’Connor 25).

The leftist promotion of class identity and agency resonated so strongly during the Depression because it lifted a desperate population “out of the nameless, faceless obscurity … and gave them, for the first time in their lives, a sense of rights as well as of obligations. They had rights because they now knew who and what they were. They were not simply the disinherited of the earth, they were proletarians” (Gorenick 7).

Overall, it is fair to argue that the FTP “became a medium for the transmission of daily news, entertainment, and important social issues that captured the cultural essence of the United States in the 1930s” (Osborne Staging 183).

But the FTP’s history was, for decades to come, largely dismissed, ridiculed or disavowed. A scholar writing in 1968 noted that a significant portion of 1930s literature that had fallen out of print had become readily available, but was drawing scant regard:
It would appear, from the vast primary and secondary literature now in print, that we have all the materials necessary for a balanced and judicious reappraisal of this extraordinary literary decade. Unfortunately, such is not the case. As Maxwell Geismar has summed up the problem, the decade of the 1930s “has been systematically falsified and distorted.” Put simply, we have rediscovered and reevaluated the period with a critical- and at times moral and political- point of view which is basically antipathetic to many of the literary ideas and movements of the decade and which contains an \textit{a priori} condemnation of much of its literature and literary activity (Peck 372).

One factor in this dismissal was the emergence and rapid academic dominance of New Criticism, an essentially conservative literary theory that views literature as a self-contained aesthetic object that stands outside of any social, economic or political context. This critical approach complemented the main reason for retrospective disdain: the postwar “red scare” and McCarthy inquisitions. Much of the leftist and progressive cultural output of the 1930s became a Cold War target, as artists and writers were denounced as Communists, fellow travelers, or given the oxymoronic label, “premature antifascists.” Many prominent FTP actors, directors, and playwrights who refused to cooperate with HUAC were blacklisted and unable to work until well after the fever of McCarthyism broke. It is ironic, but oddly amusing to realize, for example, that renowned director Jules Dassin, who was blacklisted in 1950s Hollywood, had played the part of the activist beaver Oakleaf in the FTP’s notorious children’s play \textit{The Revolt of the Beavers}.

Hallie Flanagan always insisted, however, that the FTP, at its best, had functioned as an expression and guarantor of democracy. She told the Dies Committee,
I am an American and I believe in American democracy. I believe the Works Progress Administration is one great bulwark of that democracy. I believe the Federal Theatre, which is one small part of that large pattern, is honestly trying in every possible way to interpret the best interests of the people of this democracy. I am not in sympathy with any other form of government (Arena 343).

Theodore Ward, director of the Negro Unit’s Big White Fog, also defended this view, comparing virulent opponents and censors such as the Dies Committee to the then-rising forces of fascism. These opponents, he said, utilize a “technique which has culminated in the current attacks upon civil liberties here, and the burnings abroad of books; the hounding of the Jewish people, the flagrant dissemination of the lies of racism and the destruction of democracy” (xi). But he refutes Mike Gold’s mandate for simplistic, didactic socialist realism, expressing hope that black communities could someday

“possess a theater that reflects all the grace, beauty and historic truth of our daily life, a theater that gives voice to the best that men have thought and believed; that boldly and honestly deals with the major problems of the world, and that depends on the deepest interests and aspirations of the race for its dignity and inspiration. Surely there can be no drama more compelling, more vital, more exciting, more interesting, more all-engrossing than that which manifests a coming to grips with life without evasion and affirms with candor the warm aspirations of a people who have come of age and demand their immediate freedom (xi, xii).

In a letter to Flanagan expressing regret at the FTP’s closing, President Roosevelt referred to the project as a “pioneering job” (Arena 373). She cited this description in her eulogy for this unprecedented experiment:
This it was, gutsy, lusty, bad and good, sad and funny, superbly worth more wit, wisdom and imagination than we could give it. Its significance lies in its pointing to the future. The ten thousand anonymous men and women – the et ceteras and the so-forths who did the work, the nobodies who were everybody, the somebodies who believed it – their dreams and deeds were not the end. They were the beginning of a people’s theatre in a country whose greatest plays are still to come (ibid).

The hopes that the FTP experience would, despite its powerful enemies, plant seeds for the future establishment of a popular, accessible American national theater have still not come to fruition. But we are fortunate to have this honorable, wildly creative model to build upon, as the struggle over the content, funding and audience for an “art for the people” unfolds today.
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