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The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study (review)

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BARRY B. WITHAM. *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. xiii + 190, illustrated. \$60.00 (Hb).

Reviewed by Kurt Eisen, Tennessee Technological University

This carefully researched chronicle of the Federal Theatre Project's brief but significant run in the later 1930s is a kind of a labor of professional genealogy for author Barry Witham, as well as a testimonial to the axiom that all history, like politics, is local. Its title does not specify that the book's predominant focus is the Project's work in Seattle and elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest. Even the inside jacket summary, though it mentions the Seattle Negro unit, avoids making this regional focus plain. Near the end of his own introduction, however, Witham asks the question that drives his own inquiry into this short-lived dream of a national theatre made up of distinctly homegrown companies: "How did Federal Theatre operate in the hundreds of communities that were not New York, Chicago or Los Angeles?" (5). By focusing on the relatively provincial operation in Seattle, Witham explores how Federal Theatre tried to reconcile its large national ambitions with its desire to take root within each community's own culture.

Because his account of Depression-era theatre in Seattle includes extensive discussion of the history of the School of Drama at the University of Washington, where he teaches, and of its imposing founder Glenn Hughes, Witham must have felt something like a family genealogist while recreating this seminal cultural period for Northwest theatre. Witham also aims some pointed remarks at his own university for its neglect of museum-quality scale model theatres that were crafted by artisans during these years, now stored, virtually forgotten, in an off-campus warehouse. He portrays Hughes as an ambitious visionary who was also a self-serving, empire-building bureaucrat, and Hughes' eventual falling out with Flanagan is one of the book's own most crucial dramas.

Witham succeeds in his presentation of the Seattle operation as typical of the entire Federal Theatre Project, because he consistently places its artistic choices and managerial conflicts within the larger context of New Deal politics. He draws heavily on archival resources housed outside his own region, including those at George Mason University, the National Archives, and the Library of Congress, as well as those housed in the University of Washington's own special collections. His detailed reconstruction of communications between Flanagan's national office and the Northwest Region, along with correspondence among regional staff members, vividly reveals the turbulent political drama behind the scenes of the Federal Theatre Project, as well as the tension between national and local cultural agendas.

In his opening chapter Witham discusses the dream of artistic director Edwin O'Connor to build a showboat out of an old Puget Sound ferry that would travel the extensive coastal and inland waterways of Washington state and bring a wide range of entertainments to its people. This unrealized plan, endorsed by Flanagan herself, becomes emblematic of the conflicts that would ultimately lead to the demise of the Federal Theatre Project and its goals of establishing a truly national theatre by bringing theatre to towns and villages that had little access to it previously. The fact that Glenn Hughes had already obtained federal money to build a Showboat Theatre docked permanently near the university (it operated into the 1980s), thus making O'Connor's plan seem redundant to some, further underscores his dual roles as local hero and blocking figure in this saga.

The author pays special attention to the issue of race and how the Seattle Negro Repertory Company emerged as a success within a city known as progressive, despite the quietly entrenched racism often faced by its black population of only about 4000 in the 1930s. The Negro Company's stirring production of *Stevedore* proved as popular as it was controversial, while its *Lysistrata*, closed for alleged indecency after just one performance, becomes for Witham the center of an administrative clash between the Federal Theatre and its parent organization, the Works Progress Administration. One of the book's more tantalizing implications is that if the Federal Theatre Project had been allowed to continue and grow, the development of African American theatre in the United States might have been far more robust and rapid.

Other chapters examine the last-ditch efforts to save Federal Theatre by making it more deeply rooted in regional history and themes. Witham presents the adaptations of Living Newspaper plays such as *Power* and *Spirochete* to local circumstances, as well as the historical pageant about Catholic missionaries, *Flotilla of Faith*, as glimpses of the Project's potential. His almost poignant account of how English professor George Milton Savage tried and failed to get a New York production of his play about organized labor, *See How They Run*, likewise suggests how dreams of success on Broadway could not be entirely displaced by the Project's regional ideal.

Though perhaps an inevitable choice for Witham, the focus on Seattle is useful because it represents a kind of middle ground between the more cosmopolitan theatre centers and those areas, including much of the South, where the Federal Theatre Project had more limited operations. It also affirms the Project's continued legacy in the university's highly regarded theatre department and the city's thriving performing arts scene, suggesting that Hallie Flanagan's dream, though snuffed out by anti-New-Deal Congressmen, never entirely died.