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Dreaming America

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CHILDREN'S THEATRE OF A PEOPLE'S THEATRE

The 1999 film *Cradle Will Rock* celebrates the triumph of the eponymous 1937 Federal Theatre Project production over government censorship. But director Tim Robbins offers no illusion that the triumph is larger than one night's heroism in an unused theatre. Crosscuts juxtapose shots of Rockefeller's workmen swinging axes to destroy Diego Rivera's mural *Man at the Crossroads* with shots of actors on WPA relief standing up in the audience to defiantly sing Marc Blitzstein's labor opera. Both play and mural were grounded in artistic support of newly emerging labor solidarity and strength. Blitzstein's opera, under the direction of Orson Welles, allegorizes labor relations as it chronicles the efforts of Larry Foreman to unionize the corrupt steel mill of the powerful Mr. Mister. Similarly, Rivera's mural depicts labor facing a crossroads of socialism and capitalism. The contrapuntal rhythm of soaring voices and swinging axe scores a scathing indictment of capitalist power's ruthless suppression of both the American working class and leftist artistic expression.

The allegorical opposition of the people to power underscores the Popular Front political ideals and working-class affiliation of both play and film. To quibble with the film's historical inaccuracies—most obviously, Rivera's mural, with its prominent placement of Lenin's face, was destroyed by Rockefeller Center workmen two years before the advent of the Federal Theatre Project—is to miss the significance of the mural as a metaphor for the scope and vision of America's one experiment in national theatre. The Federal Theatre Project (1935–39) was dreamed as and designed to be a people's theatre

for a people's century. One of four Federal One arts projects of the Works Progress (later Works Projects) Administration, it was envisioned as the national theatre that would develop a distinctly American stage growing out of native artistic traditions and attentive to regional pluralistic voices. To this end, its administration structured a federal organization of loosely confederated regional offices. Its staff documented everything: reader responses to scripts, audience and critical responses to productions, detailed production books, internal memos, letters, reports. The infrastructural groundwork was laid for a permanent American national theatre.

Project Director Hallie Flanagan dreamed that an arts project designed to put the unemployed back to work could develop into a federated national theatre responsive to pluralistic American society:

To set up theatres which have possibilities of growing into social institutions in the communities in which they are located . . . and to lay the foundation for the development of a truly creative theatre in the United States with outstanding producing centers in each of those regions which have common interests as a result of geography, language, origins, history, tradition, custom, occupations of the people.¹

A people's theatre! Taking Kenneth Burke's inclusive symbol of the American worker as its ideal core and its constituency, the Federal Theatre Project aimed to revolutionize art in America. For the FTP's newsletter *Federal Theatre* Flanagan reported that

From Maine to Texas, the story is the same. From North Carolina to California, the same public recognition of our work is being bestowed. "The People's Theatre!"—we did not call it that because only the people can make the name appropriate. But where and as the people make it appropriate, we welcome it as describing what the Federal Theatre should be.²

This intoxicating vision of a stalwart people sustained by a correspondingly vigorous theatre would remain an ideal for which Flanagan struggled for four years. It was not to be. Although it produced more than 42,000 performances, the total audience of about 40 million for Federal Theatre productions over the course of those four years was slightly more than half the average weekly audience that flocked to see Hollywood films during the 1930s. Its difficulties were legion and its enemies numerous, including members of the Martin Dies, Jr.-led House Committee on Un-American Activities, which was established in 1938. The FTP struggled to put on plays in the midst of government

investigations, political censorship and audience outrage, budget cuts, union strikes, and WPA/FTP disputes. It was shut down unceremoniously when Congress failed to renew its funding.

And yet by many measures, not least in its dramatic narrative, the Federal Theatre performed admirably as a people's theatre. At its height, the FTP employed more than 12,700 people, and over the duration of its existence it gave work to more than 30,000—in an enterprise in which all but 10 percent of costs were mandated to be labor costs. Nine of ten workers came from the relief rolls. Federal Theatre shows were cheap for many and free for “the underprivileged.” The FTP produced new plays, classical plays, children's plays, African American plays, marionette shows, vaudeville shows, and caravan theatre performances in America's parks.³ Its units produced religious theatre and foreign-language theatre. Hundreds of thousands of New York children went to the FTP circus. Companies toured the Civilian Conservation Corps camps across the country where men worked on infrastructure building relief projects. Successful urban productions toured other parts of the country, so although concentrated in the largest cities, Federal Theatre came to small towns and isolated regions. It played to churches, prisons, hospitals, and orphanages.⁴

Government theatre gave work to actors, writers, and technicians during desperate times; upon its demise, these individuals then fanned out across universities, theatres, and the movie industry. Famous and infamous names such as Orson Welles, John Houseman, Jules Dassin, Elia Kazan, John Randolph, Karl Malden, and Joseph Cotton crossed from its stages to Hollywood's sets, along with thousands of writers, costume designers, lighting technicians, makeup artists, and others who left Federal Theatre to work across America in film and theatre. Government theatre brought the youthful radicals of urban agitprop troupes together with the old vaudevillians displaced by the new movie palaces together with the summer theatre actor or stagehand together with rising theatre stars. Federal plays collapsed theatrical histories and divisions of race, class, and aesthetics in frugally staged productions often celebrated by critics. Federal Theatre yoked the commercial producer with the university administrator; it rippled the smooth surface of establishment taste in New York, Chicago, and Seattle; it housed radicals, liberals, and conservatives in a mishmash of plays, paperwork, and people. To use C. Wright Mills's term descriptive of the set of institutions through which artistic, intellectual and scientific work is carried and distributed, Federal Theatre was an important part of the *cultural apparatus* of the New Deal, the American Popular Front, and, indeed, the twentieth century. It was one hell of a big mural.

While often broadly traditional in its production choices, the Federal Theatre Project also took chances that commercial theatre did not. Its playwrights and production schedule also reflected the broadly Popular Front ethos of its administration and its New York-centered operations. The WPA arts projects in general and the Federal Theatre Project in particular explored the conditions of the disenfranchised and the working class. Its Negro Units made possible plays that explored racism and African American life, although many of its Negro Unit productions were traditional entertainment fare that included minstrel shows. Not only did Flanagan choose an adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's antifascist *It Can't Happen Here* for a dramatic opening simultaneously in 18 cities, but also the FTP collected and distributed the lists of antiwar plays, while antifascist themes influenced major productions.

As its self-proclamation as a "people's theatre" reveals, the FTP was firmly centered in a Popular Front-influenced artistic movement. The American Popular Front movement's pro-labor, antiracism, and antifascism sentiments connected artists and intellectuals with the working class, African Americans, and second-generation immigrants of a broad labor movement, and émigrés fleeing European fascism. It joined together labor and the liberal New Deal. At the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1935, communists were directed to work with antifascist movements, and thus with Popular Front organizations. As Michael Denning has shown, this broad social movement came together in the "cultural apparatus during the age of the CIO" that produced a Popular Front-influenced mass culture, what Denning termed "a laboring of American culture."⁵

With its goal of permanence and its mandate of relief, Federal Theatre turned to children's theatre as a neglected site that could be developed in order to build support for the theatre and for the FTP. Developing a people's theatre, after all, necessitates building its audience. From her work in American theatre and her observations of European and Soviet national theatres, FTP director Hallie Flanagan theorized that a truly national theatre would need to build a broad-based American audience. Socializing and educating children to appreciate the theatre as a site of civic engagement constituted a critical aspect of her overall vision. Traveling in Europe and the Soviet Union, Flanagan had seen European theatre directed toward children, and she early emphasized the need for a vibrant children's theatre within the FTP. Children's Unit director Jack Rennick wrote in 1936, "If America is ever to have a great theatre, she cannot begin too soon to train and establish an audience that will appreciate, demand, and support the best."⁶ Separate children's theatre companies were formed and adult units regularly performed children's plays. In addition, FTP marionette companies and amateur groups performed extensively for children.

The stories of its children's units are the tales of the FTP in miniature. Generally well accepted and often wildly popular, the children's plays these theatres performed nonetheless took on controversial cultural issues that not surprisingly mired the plays in controversy. Relying often on traditional fairy- and folktale narratives, writers updated scripts to reflect contemporary concerns. Children's units were targeted by political opponents of the New Deal. Budget cuts and project strife affected every aspect of their runs. But if the children's units broadly form a symbol of the FTP, the children's productions, with their simple narratives and didactic missions, offer federally funded representations of children and of childhood that richly enhance our understanding of the anxieties about nationhood and identity that broadly focused the activities of a Popular Front culture that would have a lasting effect on the twentieth century.

Dreaming America centers on this particular corner of the sprawling mural that was the Federal Theatre Project. Representations of the child and childhood in the FTP children's plays stage the hopes and anxieties of a nation destabilized by both economic collapse and technological advance. For while the relation of the child to the American ideologies of self and nation had always been important in American public discourse, the chaotic Depression years made fears about nationhood, cultural identity, and economic and technological progress particularly acute, while children were viewed as the inheritors of an uncertain future.⁷ A declining economy and the first stagnant birthrate in three centuries yoked the national economy to the individual family. Profound disagreements over appropriate models of education and parenting, as well as over issues of ethnicity and class, constituted fundamental arguments over democratic values and social norms. The very newness of fascism and communism, particularly in the face of capitalism's seeming collapse, raised fears about the viability of the American political and economic system and the potential of the American future. As the focus of Depression-era adult anxieties and hopes and as the embodiment of vigor, dynamism, and growth, children carried great symbolic value both as the future of America and as the America of the future. Nursery and nation were inextricably linked.⁸

The Depression and the Popular Front

The seeds of Federal Theatre's political roots and the beginning of its end lie in a rhetorical moment of leftist unification. In August 1935, the Soviet Union adopted a stance of accommodation toward the liberal democracies of the West at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International. The

move came in recognition of growing fascist aggression in Europe; it set aside international class revolution as the primary Soviet objective in the face of threats from Germany, Italy, and Japan. Calling for a united opposition to fascism, this “Popular Front” no longer heralded fascism as the last gasp of a dying capitalist order; rather, it attempted to ideologically unite the liberal bourgeoisie to the cause of fighting it. Communist rhetoric ceased to imagine liberal democracies and their institutions as enemies to be destroyed, and treated them instead as allies to safeguard. All communist parties of all nations, including the United States, were ordered to adapt themselves to the international new line.

This change mandated radical leftist support of the New Deal and its policies. The American Communist Party’s support of the New Deal is evident in the 1936 presidential election, in which Earl Browder characterized the Democratic and Republican candidates as a choice between democracy and fascism. Talking about, writing about, and dramatizing revolution was replaced by the celebration of democratic traditions; the workers were replaced by the people.

Popular Front activities united on three major planks: antifascism, anti-racism, and pro-labor. Émigrés from Europe brought antifascist politics to working-class jobs and to the arts. A broad emphasis on a new ethnic Americanism and civil liberties created new articulations of African American social, artistic, and political identities. As the broad political temper turned toward the left, during periods of both sectarian revolutionary fervor and Popular Front solidarity, labor made enormous gains. Strikes in various industries politicized workers early in the decade, and with the passage of the Wagner Act in 1937, which secured the right to collective bargaining, and the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1938, labor gained the strength to negotiate with industry on a much more equal footing than had been previously possible.

By the end of the decade, art, culture, and politics would be polarized, and irrevocably marked, by the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities (Dies Committee) investigations into subversive activities. Purportedly to examine right-wing groups as well as left, the Dies Committee hearings were a systematic effort not only to link Communism with un-Americanism and thus to discredit it, but also to discredit labor, leftist politics in general, and the New Deal in particular.⁹

The Dies Committee hearings would mobilize right-wing hostility to the left around the fear of Communism. They were held from 1938 to 1944; in 1945 the Dies Committee became a standing Congressional committee—the House Committee on Un-American Activities, or HUAC.¹⁰ In *Naming Names*,

his study of the HUAC Hollywood hearings of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Victor S. Navasky pinpoints the ideological position of most in the 1930s who would be called to testify a decade or two later. He writes that they

believed (rightly or wrongly) that those they were asked to name had, like themselves and [Larry] Parks, originally joined the Communist Party out of motives of social conscience at a time when it was in the business of fighting racism and depression at home and fascism abroad, and if there were Soviet espionage agents, which these people doubted, they operated outside the Party apparatus; that although they had supported the Soviet experiment and believed Lincoln Steffens that it represented the future, "and it works," they were patriotic Americans. . . .¹¹

In its assault on the left, the Dies Committee targeted labor leaders, organizations committed to peace and racial equality, and artists and intellectuals. The Dies Committee was publicly committed to discovering communism leading and directing all leftist activity.

The Dies Committee hearings raised questions about the political tenor of the FTP. Accused of Communist influence, FTP administrators were unable to persuade Congress to renew funding and the project was summarily shut down in 1939. The Dies Committee investigation ended the Federal Theatre Project and encouraged a kind of national amnesia about its existence for more than thirty years. But this amnesia would have been impossible without a similar assessment of thirties leftism in general. For more than forty years, American analyses of thirties Popular Front culture presumed that international and American Communism dominated the intellectual and organizational activities of the Popular Front. The failure of Communism, then, was synecdochic of the failure of leftist culture, art, and politics in the thirties.

The difference between two seminal works that study the period, Richard Pells's *Radical Visions and American Dreams* and Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front*, illustrates how readings shaped by changed scholarly, political, and cultural interests in turn shape intellectual understandings of the decade's political currents. Examining different facets of the era's leftism, the two texts perceive different patterns and pronounce different evaluations. One consigns it to failure; one asserts its long-lasting cultural impact.

Pells's 1973 study analyzes the Popular Front through its intellectual cultural production, particularly in written works, documentary photography, and film. Envisioning the left as being driven by its intellectual component, he argues that its politics served as a metaphor for psychological and spiritual renewal:

This persistent evocation of death and rebirth, the messianic feeling of being present at the dawn of a revolutionary age, served to compensate emotionally for the confusion and terror of the depression. But such apocalyptic sentiments did not lend themselves easily to logical plans or rational thinking. Instead, they led to an analysis of American problems that was primarily moral, psychological, and cultural. . . .¹²

Pells argues that writers and philosophers attempting to conceptualize and represent the conditions of the Great Depression took recourse in creating unifying metaphorical relationships for the problems they wished to depict and change: the relationship of self to society, of the human to the machine, of the nation to its people were ultimately depoliticized by this process. In other words, intellectual commitment to leftist political change remained cut off from the realities of social conditions and ultimately ineffective. Reading texts such as *Axel's Castle* and *The Exile's Return*, he argues that Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley, among other writers, saw economic catastrophe as an opportunity not only for a shift in aesthetic values but for the moral and spiritual rebirth of the American intellectual.¹³

Yet the notion of a collapse beyond human control, of an end to everything men had known or anticipated, did not lead only to hopelessness. In the midst of tragedy there was for some a kind of euphoria—a mood of utopian optimism that was as unideological as the opposite sense of impending doom. If the old order was dying, the new was being born.¹⁴

With his emphasis on intellectual idealism, Pells reads Depression leftism through the arc of its idealistic fervor, and sees the early years of the thirties as a time of great promise and excitement, and the later years as a crumbling of united purpose as the reality of the Soviet pact with the Nazis pierced a willfully blind ivory-tower vision.

Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front* shifts the focus from intellectual idealism to what he calls the "laboring of culture"—the influence of labor gains and the rise of the CIO on cultural production. Beginning "with the question that has long dominated the cultural history of the Depression: Why did the left have a powerful, indeed an unprecedented impact on US culture in the 1930s?" Denning analyzes artistic engagements with leftist issues in light of second-generation ethnic populations, material practices, and social realities.¹⁵ He writes that "for most critics and historians, the answer is embodied in the image of the 'fellow traveler,' the individual artist or intellectual attracted to the Communist Party and the Soviet Union in the face

of a collapsing economy and rising fascism.”¹⁶ But Denning argues that the center/periphery model of Communist / fellow traveler is inadequate:

The broad social movement known as the Popular Front was the ground on which the workers theaters, proletarian literary magazines, and film industry unions stood: it was, I will argue, a radical social-democratic movement forged around anti-fascism, anti-lynching, and the industrial unionism of the CIO.¹⁷

It was, he further notes, “the result of the encounter between a powerful democratic social movement—the Popular Front—and the modern cultural apparatuses of mass entertainment and education.”¹⁸

Denning’s “laboring of culture” acknowledges the intertwining of mass entertainment and social movements and thus loosens the cultural production of the thirties from the charge of being driven either by an elite band of acknowledged intellectual leaders following a failed idealistic political vision or by Soviet communism. He traces the influence of its artistic and intellectual texts on later works and redefines the thirties as seminal to a movement, rather than anomalous and negated by the post-World War II political climate. He furthermore asserts the importance of changes in the economic and social makeup of America’s working populations and the increased visibility of working-class African American and ethnic Americans. Pells’s moment of disenchantment and fall corresponds to Denning’s moment of success—the latter half of the decade and the birth of the CIO.

Denning’s model is useful to my study of Federal Theatre Project plays for three reasons. First, it locates these productions in a culture of affiliations and loyalties that are embedded in and yet simultaneously escape the binary of political left and right. This positioning liberates a reading of the plays from the narrow left-wing/right-wing political binary that views the project as simply politically out of step with the political orientation of the congressmen who would, in the end, kill its funding. Second, it describes the late thirties, when these productions were performed, as a time of vigorous artistic engagement with leftist issues, and not, as would accounts such as Pells’s, as a hangover from the ideologically fervent early Depression years. Thus the plays’ commentary is more relevant to their times. And third, it provides for a theatre audience of ordinary Americans who were interested in the issues driving leftist politics even if they were not committed to a particular political party.

This model explains that the American Communist Party’s shift from sectarianism toward coalition building brings communists into a mass social

and cultural movement united by the causes of antifascism, antiracism, and pro-unionism or labor—and not driving that movement. It further comments on the cultural movement's broad interest in discovering an American essence underlying domestic and international political, social, and economic changes that historians Warren Susman and Alan Trachtenberg have both pointed out. This underlying concern with national identity mobilized cultural production, Trachtenberg writes:

There was consensus among a broad range of Americans, regardless of political association, right, left, or center, that the “American Way of Life” (the phrase itself first came into popular use in these years) was endangered by economic failures at home and Fascism abroad. The Depression indicated that the nation had strayed from its true path. . . . At the turn of the century, Progressive reformers had argued for new institutions, a rethinking of the concept of democracy. . . . In the 1930s, however, the cry was not so much for change as for “recovery,” a return to basic values, to fundamental Americanism. What is special about the American people? What are their characteristic beliefs, their folk history, their heroes, their work patterns, and their leisure? More than ideological politics or the pragmatic social theories of Dewey, the keynote of the 1930s was the idea of Culture, a search in the everyday life and memories of “the people” for what was distinctively American.¹⁹

If this search for Americanism was fundamentally conservative, it was also created by the destabilizing population shifts and social changes that Denning charts. It was as much a focus of those seeking to become “American” and learn “the American Way of Life” as of those bemoaning its attenuation and seeking to revitalize it. The search for Americanism is thus allied to and deeply embedded within the leftist tilt of the era. It helps explain not only Flanagan's focus on developing regional theatre and dramatizing matters of social concern, but also the focus of projects across Federal One—from the slave narrative collections of the Federal Writers Project to the post office murals of the Federal Art Project to the folk music collections of the Federal Music Project. Equally, it animated opposition to federal art and its ability to control the rhetoric of national identity. Therefore, the consensus that there was an endangered “American Way of Life” that needed to be simultaneously discovered and preserved only intensified the struggle over whose “American” would be enshrined.

Enter the Dies Committee.²⁰

The Depression and the Federal Theatre Project

Almost exactly six years after the stock market crash of October 29, 1929, the Federal Theatre Project produced *It Can't Happen Here*. By 1932, the far-reaching economic crisis that would become America's Great Depression had become apparent in the precipitous drop in the gross national product, the millions of unemployed, the shutting down of banks; that crisis would become imaged in "Hooverville" shantytowns, long lines for bread, and dapper apple sellers.

The brainchild of Harry Hopkins, then Roosevelt's head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Federal Theatre Project originated in 1935 as part of the New Deal's vast public employment program—the Works Progress Administration (later the Works Projects Administration).²¹ The FTP was one of four parts of Federal One, as the arts projects were collectively known. Federal One also included the Federal Art Project, the Federal Writers Project, and the Federal Music Project. Hopkins tapped his Grinnell College classmate, longtime friend, and then director of the Vassar College Experimental Theatre, Hallie Flanagan, to direct the government's venture into theatre.

Flanagan's work to that point suggests that she was an odd choice for the position: she had little large-scale administrative experience and was not familiar with Washington and its political maneuverings. The first woman to receive a Guggenheim fellowship in 1926, she had used it to travel extensively in the Soviet Union and Europe, studying contemporary productions and theory; the book that resulted from this experience, *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre*, was published in 1928.²² As director of the Vassar Experimental Theatre, she produced drama that showcased her cutting-edge theatrical interests. Drawing on staging concepts developed by Erwin Piscator and agitprop theatre, *Can You Hear Their Voices*, her 1931 dramatization of the plight of farmers in Arkansas, foreshadowed the Living Newspapers that would be the FTP's most original contribution to American theatre.²³ According to a *New York Times* reviewer, the production was a

series of black and white vignettes . . . capped by small blackouts and interwoven argumentatively with the stark facts of Congress's inaction thrown at you from printed slides on a huge white screen. Dominating the picture was the barbed lampoon of the quarter million dollar debutante party which startled Washington at the height of the drought.²⁴

As Jane Mathews notes, the final screen comes down “as the prison-bound father sent his sons to Communist headquarters in the hope that they could ‘make a better world.’” The play was performed across the country as audience members in Poughkeepsie, New York, collected clothes and money for the farmers.

Flanagan was interested in social theatre, and from the beginning of her tenure as FTP director, she envisioned a decentered national theatre responsive to regional particularities as well as political and social realities. “Our most urgent task is to make our theatre worthy of its audience,” she wrote in 1936. “It is of no value whatever to stimulate theatre-going unless, once inside our doors, our audience sees something which has some vital connection with their own lives and their own immediate problems.”²⁵

Flanagan envisioned an American theatre that would invigorate what she perceived as a moribund institution. As Mathews notes:

As she studied conditions in the commercial theatre contributing to unemployment, Hallie Flanagan rediscovered an ailing, frequently irrelevant institution that seemingly had come of age artistically and socially too late. Like most enterprises at the turn of the century, the commercial theatre had succumbed to the monopolistic, profit-making devices which were a part of the economic revolution transforming America. The list of such practices was long: gambling in theatres as real estate; syndicates fostering a cross-country touring system; a monopoly booking system; the “star” system; long-run shows that destroyed repertory; type casting that stifled an actor’s development; the staging of the “tried and true” rather than the work of a new playwright with ideas. The result was predictable—an art stumbling toward maturity had been transformed into a primarily commercial enterprise.²⁶

Flanagan envisioned the FTP as permanent, and set in place institutional practices and administrative divisions that would provide a central clearing-house for the distribution of plays, encourage young writers, develop new theatre, and educate a new generation of theatre-goers. She imagined a theatre of many different forms, writing in *Federal Theatre* (and in the final line, alluding to *Dr. Faustus*):

The trapeze performer hanging by her heels in the circus, the toe dancer describing an airy arc, the vaudevillian whose inspired ineptitudes console us for our own—all of these are necessary in the many-colored pattern of Federal Theatre. It need not always be Lenin’s blood streaming from the firmament.²⁷

Although Flanagan believed in social theatre, she intended to provide a national theatre that reflected diverse American tastes.

The FTP was organized as a series of decentered units answerable to the national director in Washington. Five assistant directors were responsible for theatre units in their territories, which were composed of a number of states. As Flanagan noted in her "Report of the First Six Months" in the FTP periodical *Federal Theatre*, "All Federal Theatre projects are responsible, through the director of the Federal Theatre in Washington, to the director of Professional and Service Projects, of which the four arts project make up one unit under the Works Progress Administration."²⁸ Because of this organization, each unit director had to be not only answerable to Flanagan but also sensitive to the WPA administrators responsible for the same or similar geographical locations.

Following auditions to determine the number of unemployed theatre personnel, units were set up in the 31 states where unemployment of theatre people was deemed sufficiently high to make productions possible. Most activity was in major cities: New York City began with more than 5,000 on the payroll and 49 producing groups; Boston began with 33 producing groups, Los Angeles with 32, Chicago with 14, and Seattle with 5.

There are two primary narratives of the Federal Theatre Project history. The first declares the project a failure from the beginning and details the manner in which units were hampered by staff and budget cuts and WPA meddling.²⁹ Because the project was mandated to spend 90 percent of its budget on labor and only 10 percent on productions, any cut in funding created serious problems for the productions. Funding cuts were often long-rumored, generating unease among casts. Particularly in New York, unions struggled against both funding cuts and government control. As Flanagan noted, the FTP was tied to Actors Equity, the American Federation of Actors, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, with its many locals, the Union of Wardrobe Mistresses, the Union of Electrical Engineers, the Union of Scenic Designers, and others. Although Flanagan claimed, "A series of conferences extending over many months has resulted in friendly co-operation from these unions," such was never the case. The New York City project had nearly as many difficulties from the unions as it did from its right-wing critics.³⁰

The amount of bureaucratic effort required to put on a play was often daunting. For salaries and other funds, state directors had to submit forms in sextuplicate—and each copy had a color of its own. Resigning in August 1937, Walter Hart, assistant to the head of the production board in New York, wrote, "Every time a play is produced by the Federal Theatre, a major miracle has been passed. After passing 95 miracles, one begins to tire."³¹ By that

time the list of people who had resigned supervisory positions was long and included not only Elmer Rice, but Joseph Losey, Rosamond Gilder, Jaspar Deeter, Thomas Wood Stevens, Gilmore Brown, and Frederick McConnell.³²

Across the country, censorship marred the FTP's attempts to bring a diverse theatre to the stage. In New York, the first Living Newspaper, *Ethiopia*, was ordered shut down by the White House before it opened; regional director Elmer Rice resigned in protest. George Sklar's *Stevedore* was barred from Boston, though it had been staged in Seattle. The wife of the WPA director for the Seattle area supposedly thought the Negro Unit production of *Lysistrata* was obscene, and the play was closed after a sold-out opening night. In Chicago, both Meyer Levinson's *Model Tenement* and Paul Green's *Hymn to the Rising Sun* were closed by the city and state WPA directors, respectively.³³

This first narrative has been complicated by Judith Brussell's remarkable dissertation detailing the scope of investigation of FTP personnel.³⁴ According to Brussell's research, Division of Investigation agents were investigating, at the direction of the Department of Justice, supervisors of all the federal arts projects to find people for potential criminal prosecution. She describes how people's names entered the intelligence community via often unsubstantiated charges—hearsay, informers' accusations, and anonymous accusations—and thereafter circulated among the DOI, the Justice Department, and the House Committee on Un-American Activities. A chilling document, her dissertation charts how the DOI

was converted within five years [1936–41] from an agency established to investigate economic fraud to an intelligence agency which hunted alleged Communists and Nazis on the federal payroll. The first nation-wide organized campaign against suspected “Red” artists in 1935–1939 helped to fuel the long-standing persecution of persons in the arts and show business in America.³⁵

But Brussell writes that her dissertation is “a tribute to the thousands of people who made the Federal Theatre Project the richest outpouring of diverse theatre that the United States has ever witnessed.”³⁶

Contrasting with this first narrative of crippling adversity is one that tells of the project's enormously successful outreach. Federal Theatre shows entertained thousands in affordable performances. Circuses and vaudeville, marionette shows, religious theatre, and foreign-language theatre productions were mounted on all types of stages. For example, in Oklahoma, productions played to those dispossessed by agricultural crisis living in squatter camps;

the project also operated a theatre at the School for the Blind in Oklahoma, where blind actors performed under a blind director for sighted audiences. Not including radio shows, which averaged 3,000 a year, the Federal Theatre offered about 1,200 productions.³⁷

Much of its fare was classic, comfortable, and familiar. Units across the country performed Shakespeare, Molière, and Gilbert and Sullivan. Units also performed the contemporary drama of Susan Glaspell, Maxwell Anderson, Elmer Rice, Paul Green, and George Sklar and Paul Peters. George Bernard Shaw gave his plays to the project and Eugene O'Neill provided his at reduced prices. The FTP was of course too broad a coalition to come to consensus about what types of plays it would stage; though in *Federal Theatre*, an article attributed to Michael Garnett insists:

Born out of the sternest of all realities—necessity—our theatre should be an instrument for disseminating knowledge of reality. We should not waste time and opportunity writing or producing plays that have already been done, or plays paralleling in form and content the usual products of Broadway and Hollywood, no matter how good. We should have no time or temper for passive contemplation or passive reflection. Neither should we become “arty” or high-browish. There should evolve an absolute and organic union of our art talents with the life of the nation, with the interests and aspirations of the people. And this unity should be reflected in every word written and every scene acted by Federal Theatre workers.³⁸

Garnett's argument reflects more the idealism invested in the idea of Federal Theatre as a new national theatre than the difficult reality of its administration.

FTP scholar Lorraine Brown writes that nine of every ten workers came from the relief rolls; she further notes that about fifty percent of the labor was actors, and the rest were writers, designers, directors, musicians, dancers, support staff, booking agents, and research workers. According to Brown, in Federal Theatre's first two years, its funds amounted to about 25 million dollars,

half the cost of one battleship—for which the Federal Theatre Project presented over 42,000 performances of drama, comedy, vaudeville, marionette, and musical reviews, and circuses to an audience in excess of 25 million people. This audience was located in cities and hamlets, and in villages and remote crossroads, and gathered in leased theatres in many selected major cities. Only a small portion of this audience was ever called upon to pay admission charges at the box office.³⁹

Though the FTP did bring theatre to the hamlets and villages and remote crossroads, it was by and large concentrated in the largest cities, particularly New York City, with its large, established theatre community. Not surprisingly, it was the New York Project that would focus the controversies that would bring the project—puppet shows in Oklahoma for squatter camps and all—down.⁴⁰

Robbins uses Rivera's sixty-three-foot mural to symbolize the outsized canvas of thirties politics and art. The mural is also a trope organizing the sprawling narrative of his film. This study of FTP children's plays takes a similarly expansive view. Rather than situating the plays in the narrow context of Federal Theatre, I examine their connections to other media, culture, and politics to situate their singular histories in the big, busy, complicated mural of Popular Front culture.

Chapter One

FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT DREAMS

Raising an Educated Audience for a Permanent American National Theatre

Children's theatre was central to the Federal Theatre Project not only in terms of productions, but also in terms of research and administrative organizing to bring together current educational, psychological theories to its work building a system of national productions for children. My first chapter examines the apparatus of federal children's theatre, tracing twentieth-century developments in children's theatre. It then locates the development of a theatre for children in the context of an emerging child increasingly understood to be deserving of the rights and benefits of middle-class childhood regardless of class or ethnic status. Examining key linguistic and visual representations of the child and childhood in labor movement history, the chapter concludes with the realization that the working-class child held a position of heightened rhetorical power as Federal Theatre prepared to stage what would become the most controversial of its productions for children.

Chapter Two

"WE SHOULD HAVE CALLED IT *RUMPELSTILTSKIN*"

A Labor Fairy Tale Gets Real in *The Revolt of the Beavers*⁴¹

My second chapter examines arguably the second-most famous FTP controversy—the first being the censoring of the Orson Welles–John Houseman

labor opera *The Cradle Will Rock*—though it is probable that the second-most famous controversy helped to ignite the first. On May 20, 1937, the New York City Children's Unit opened its spring play *The Revolt of the Beavers*. With Group Theatre member Elia Kazan as director in initial rehearsals, the play was written by two FTP playwrights, Oscar Saul and Lou Lantz, who had been part of the Workers Laboratory Theatre (WLT), which had been incorporated wholesale into the FTP as the One-Act Experimental Theatre.⁴² A number of cast members also came from the WLT. Kazan would bow out, and the play opened with Peter Hyun, also of the WLT, and Lewis Leverett of the Group Theatre as co-directors.

The play provoked a public discussion over its Mother Goose Marxism, as *New York Times* reviewer Brooks Atkinson characterized it—and police deputy chief Byrnes MacDonald castigated it. With Atkinson's review and a letter to the editor from MacDonald calling for censorship, other papers gleefully picked up the controversy: "Police Gnaw at W.P.A. over Beavers Play" reads the headline to one newspaper article.⁴³

The New York and then Congressional uproar over *The Revolt of the Beavers* raises two interesting questions that seem oddly divergent. Given the temper of the times, why was there such an uproar over a pro-labor, and even pro-Marxist, children's play?⁴⁴ Equally interesting is another issue: the Federal Theatre Project was not considered to be a wildly venturesome dramatic enterprise, yet the play was not deemed sufficiently controversial prior to its opening to cause undue concern among FTP officials.⁴⁵ Why not?

Using materials archived at the Library of Congress and the National Archives, I examine the controversy that surrounded the play. Using a series of press releases that bear in their editing process the signs of the conflict between a leftist New York FTP and Washington's WPA, I follow the production through its opening as well as the controversy that opening generated in the press. Noting that the play was not only criticized in the New York press but was also a point of focus for the Dies Committee investigation of the FTP, I examine its political implications in light of the symbolic value of the child. I then examine the manner in which FTP officials attempted to depoliticize the play's politics through an appeal to genre. Finally, I look at particular moments within the play in light of other stories of urban childhood, such as Sidney Kingsley's play *Dead End*, and Michael Gold's novel *Jews Without Money*.

Because the New York City Children's Unit was designed to serve as the model for other children's units and to lay the groundwork for a permanent national children's theatre, *The Revolt of the Beavers* had a wide-ranging impact, particularly since the unit's productions had begun splendidly.

Capacity crowds saw its first production, Charlotte Chorpenning's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, which was in turn taken to orphanages and hospitals. In the late summer of 1936, Dorothy Hailparn's *Horse Play* played five times a week in city parks. *Flight*, a Living Newspaper–styled play about the history of flight, fulfilled the unit's stated goal of educating its audience.

The unit had received rhapsodic letters from teachers and local business and education leaders who had been given complimentary tickets, as well as from parents and children who had seen the shows. In a city unit plagued with production problems ranging from union strife to casting difficulties, the children's theatre initially seemed like the one unqualified success. This overall success perhaps made its one moment of real notoriety that much more memorable.

Chapter Three

"I LOOKED HIM RIGHT SQUARE IN THE EYE"

Being African American in *The Story of Little Black Sambo*

Versions of the 1899 Helen Bannerman picture book *The Story of Little Black Sambo* were produced in Seattle, Philadelphia, Miami, Newark, Cincinnati, and Chicago. Some of the productions were for puppet theatre and some for children's theatre, with adaptations credited to various playwrights. Playscripts for the productions remain, though in the case of the Seattle Children's Theatre and the Newark puppet theatre, playscripts are all that remain in the Library of Congress FTP collection.⁴⁶

I examine productions to argue that Federal Theatre produced a radical representation of the Sambo character in Chicago against the backdrop of established racist minstrel characterizations and forms of plantation mythology within other versions of the story. By using accepted minstrel characterizations and forms, some federal versions of *The Story of Little Black Sambo* subvert the family security that provided one of the real pleasures of the book's plot. I argue that these plays provide a parable of white-on-black violence faced by American blacks; through their use of minstrelsy, they stage African American family ignorance and neglect as its cause. A Charlotte Chorpenning—Shirley Graham production in Chicago, on the other hand, creates a primitivist modernist aesthetic that introduces a brave and clever Sambo liberated from traditional racist caricature.

I briefly analyze the use of the black mammy stereotype in *Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby* to examine how the mammy character's differing relationships with white children and black children suggest lack of intrafamilial

maternal concern. By changing the Uncle Remus figure of the book to a black mammy figure who plays the dual role of storyteller and mother to the Brer Rabbit children, the play overtly contrasts her delighted embrace of white children with her violence toward her own. This minor detail of plot and character informs the staging of planned violence to the Brer Rabbit children by Brer Fox and suggests that violence is an expected and natural aspect of black family life.

I situate the plays within the framework of the FTP's often contradictory positions on race by looking briefly at *Turpentine*, a black–white collaboration between J. Augustus Smith and Peter Morrell that examines the plight of African Americans working in Southern turpentine camps, and at archived minstrel show scripts of the project.

The racial justice broadly imagined by the left in the 1930s was one of political, social, and economic equality mobilized against the spectacle of oppression personified by the lynch mob. Particularly in the urban north where, as Denning notes, the left was a constellation of “young plebians, the radical moderns, and the anti-fascist émigrés,” both the modernist co-opting of black aesthetics and culture in the previous decade and the massive African American migration to the unionized north positioned African American social and artistic concerns to take rhetorical prominence in a leftist movement organized around the “brotherhood” of class and racial equality.⁴⁷ With a unionism that championed the cause of the black worker, the anti-lynching movement galvanized the left.

The FTP provides remarkable documentation of both the triumphs and the failures of leftist rhetoric of racial equality. The FTP's commitment to building a black theatre was unprecedented. The project developed African American theatre units in major cities and in smaller places such as Hartford, Connecticut, and Durham, North Carolina. Taking the suggestion of actress, theatre organizer, and Communist Rose McClendon, who would co-direct the Harlem-based Negro Unit in New York, the Federal Theatre Project organized along racial lines with separate Negro Units in major cities that had African American theatre populations.⁴⁸

The units to a large extent segregated black and white performers and audiences, but provided productions for African Americans to stage, perform, and watch that were cheap and—more unusual—paid the performers every time.⁴⁹ For the first and only time in American history, African American audiences in cities with Negro Units had steady access to professional theatre acted by African American performers. Though plays were sometimes shut down, boundaries between what was acceptable theatre for black performers and what was not were crossed with productions of *Lysistrata*,

Macbeth, and the social protest plays *Stevedore* and *Big White Fog*. Social and economic issues facing black Americans were dramatized, though often as imagined and written by whites. Numerous produced and collected FTP plays focused attention on America's oppressive racial politics and the need for collective action across racial lines to redress injustice. In practical terms for black performers and audiences and projects, the FTP's commitment to African American performers changed the trajectory of their presence on the American stage.

Chapter Four

"SHADOWS OF YOUR THOUGHTS ARE MARCHING"

Anti-Fascism and Home-front Patriotism in Federal Theatre's
A Letter to Santa Claus and Hollywood's *The Little Princess*

The Federal Theatre's strongest antifascist statement would be in the liberal voice of Sinclair Lewis's adaptation of his novel *It Can't Happen Here*. The book had been bought by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, but the film studio dropped it after a script was produced. Lewis, with the help of Paramount screenwriter John C. Moffit, turned it into a play at the request of the FTP's play bureau, which also suggested its Federal Theatre multicounty openings.

Of much briefer duration, and staged only in Chicago, was the children's theatre's most imaginative theatrical engagement with antiwar and antifascism issues. In December 1938, the Chicago unit produced a two-week holiday series of free matinees of *A Letter to Santa Claus*, a one-act play written for Federal Theatre by Charlotte Chorpenning. Chorpenning, a number of whose plays were produced by the FTP, planned the play for a stadium production; although it had to be scaled back, *A Letter to Santa Claus* had a full orchestra and a cast of seventy-five.

But *A Letter to Santa Claus* is no lighthearted Christmas pageant. Antiwar sentiments and the bewilderment of a nation's people on the brink of entering a terrible, global conflict infuse its story.

As the shadows of war stalk the children on stage, *A Letter to Santa Claus* pleads for a united effort to stand against and thus avert coming war. Yet, as the link between domestic and military strife suggests, in *A Letter to Santa Claus* the causes of war are not outside the boundaries of home or nation. Although much more obliquely than *It Can't Happen Here*, Chorpenning's play raises the spectre of a fascistic domination at home. Lowell Swortzell, whose collection *Six Plays for Young People* reprinted the play, wrote in its introduction:

A Letter to Santa Claus is of interest not simply because Chorpenning wrote it . . . but mostly because of the anti-war sentiments that permeate almost every scene. References to hunger, poverty, and the “shadows” that cross the land (these appeared literally on a large screen as armed soldiers on the march) convey a sense of national disillusionment. . . . If her compassion results in impressive propaganda more than drama, it also makes the play a chilling social document, and unlike any of her other works. The “shadows” Chorpenning projects here are borne of personal fears; no antics of performing vaudevillians nor an attempted happy ending can erase their meaning, then or now. Surely there has never been a Santa Claus play for “Children Only” written with such a deeply felt and disturbing subtext.⁵⁰

Although antiwar and antifascist messages were perhaps embedded in other children's plays, and certainly in *The Revolt of the Beavers*, *A Letter to Santa Claus* and the Philadelphia production of *Bunk, Bullets, and Babies* were the only two plays that explicitly criticized fascism and war as threatening to children and families.

It Can't Happen Here was staged by the FTP because the major Hollywood studio that had the option dropped the project. This chapter explores differences between the antifascist/antiwar statements of *A Letter to Santa Claus* and the frankly jingoistic Hollywood approach to fascist aggression and coming war in its 1939 Shirley Temple vehicle *The Little Princess*. In both play and film, though to very different ends, children make an explicit connection between a child's unerring sense of morality and the home-front response to a war that unifies a nation. Children trope an ideal citizenry who actively work to resolve the conflicts that lead to war.

Chapter Five

WISHING ON A STAR

Pinocchio's Journey from the Federal Stage to Disney's World

Pinocchio was Federal Theatre's most popular children's production, and perhaps its most popular production overall. Yasha Frank's follow-up to his popular *Hansel and Gretel* was a rhyming play in which dialogue was kept to a minimum and the scary parts of the book excised or lightened. *Pinocchio* drew standing-room-only crowds and moved from city to city in the last two years of the project. While not a Popular Front play, *Pinocchio* became a symbol of the Federal Theatre Project itself when the Project lost its funding. Thus, more than any other play, *Pinocchio* demonstrates the importance

both of federal children's plays and of the representational power of the child. This chapter, then, bookends this study with an examination of Frank's *Pinocchio* and Disney's within the context of popular culture magazines with articles on parenting and advertisements that sold products by playing on parenting anxieties. It explores ways in which the family was imaged within the community and held as an ideal to be kept separate from a larger community. It also describes the visions of parenting that animated parent-child relationships. Positing that the parent-child relationship became the locus for diffuse adult economic and social anxieties, this chapter examines *Pinocchio's* narrative of Gepetto's redemption as a resolution of those anxieties.

Conclusion

DEATH OF A DREAM

Summarizing the major themes of this project, I return to compare the final staging of *Pinocchio* with the film version of Federal Theatre's end in *Cradle Will Rock*. I examine how the film transforms the dead puppet figure from the hero of the children's play to the ventriloquist's dummy in order to illustrate the collusion between ordinary Americans and business and political interests that brought about the end of the Federal Theatre Project. While this shift in symbolic focus creates a stirring historical resonance and makes a strong political statement, the fact that the dead figure was the protagonist of a children's play highlights the relationship between children and politics, a relationship that the film's obscurity makes equally resonant for today.