



PROJECT MUSE®

Dreaming America

Frost, Leslie Elaine

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Frost, Elaine.

Dreaming America: Popular Front Ideals and Aesthetics in Children's Plays of the Federal Theatre Project.

Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book
<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/23950>

“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*

By 1938, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (Dies Committee) had expanded its search for communists outward from the Federal Theatre to Hollywood. Uncritical press had given its investigations influence, but in its first turn to Hollywood the committee invited ridicule. The *Washington Post* later reported: “One of the most highly publicized charges aired before the Dies committee was that the Communists had captured Shirley Temple and made that charmer of the screen if not quite a dues-paying Red at least into an unwitting ‘fellow traveler.’”¹ The *Post* article continues:

But now the police chief of Los Angeles has confused the picture, painted in such frightening colors at a Dies committee hearing, by giving Shirley a resplendent police badge. That makes her a member of the auxiliary police force of the city and subject, like the 7,842 other badge holders, to call in emergencies. Since the Los Angeles police has often been accused by liberals and radicals of being enamored of Hitlerite and Mussolinian tactics, the little lady now faces the accusation that she is a Fascist as well as a Communist.²

Temple’s name appeared before the Dies Committee because she was one of a number of Hollywood celebrities who had sent greetings to a French communist newspaper. And while other than this brief foray into the Dies Committee’s purview, Temple remained famous for her curly mop rather than her radical politics, in 1939’s *The Little Princess* she starred in a film that exam-

ines the role of war on the family, a film that arguably engages with fascist aggression in Europe and mobilization for war at home.

This chapter examines two productions for children—the Federal Theatre Project’s 1938 *A Letter to Santa Claus* and 20th Century Fox’s Temple film *The Little Princess*—that dramatize the difference between the leftist liberal FTP and a conservative Hollywood system. As will be argued, they enact very different moral responses to the looming threat of fascism and war. Drawing on a deeply felt investment in the child, the American play and the film reveal fundamental national concerns about democratic values, national character, and citizenship, and deeply divided ideas about the relation of family to the larger national/social body. Like Shirley Temple’s screen persona, *A Letter to Santa Claus*’s companionate siblings Joe and Mary embody innocence and goodness, but the play’s characterization and narrative suture very different connections between home and nation and, thus, portray very different responses to citizen involvement in a threatening global conflict.

Comparing the film and play brings together two prominent and often contradictory discourses of childhood: the sentimental Victorian fantasy of the idealized child and the Popular Front utopian longing for the radicalized future citizen. Joe and Mary subordinate the domestic sphere to the public one and nationalistic values to cosmopolitan ones. This inverts the relationship of the domestic to the public articulated by *The Little Princess*, an inversion that foregrounds the issues of home-front patriotism I explore. In both productions, however, the figure of the child is deployed to assert America’s democratic ideals and citizen resolve, thus allaying anxieties about both fascist might and America’s role as a global power in the production of war.

Children simultaneously provided rich symbolic material for artistic production in Germany that celebrated Nazi power and for American entertainment that warned of the rising fascist threat. In her 1988 autobiography, Shirley Temple Black remembers that her stunningly successful 1934 *Baby, Take a Bow* was banned in Berlin because of the opinion that “gangsterism and gunplay were excessively portrayed.” At the same time, she notes, “Germany was then awash in pride over the epic *Triumph of the Will*.”³ If not partaking of the child-centered erotics of a Temple film, Riefenstahl’s depiction of the 1934 Nuremberg rally builds much of its celebratory message on children’s symbolic potential. Children figure consistently in the early crowd scenes in *Triumph of the Will*.⁴ They are lifted on shoulders and pushed to the front of crowds lining the streets to see the Führer drive by; they gaze at his passing figure with wide, excited eyes as the camera isolates their faces. Riefenstahl’s children enact an appropriate emotional response to the Führer’s

presence and particularize the future of the German Reich. Their presence attests to an ordered social body wherein a united family forms a synecdochic signifier of political, economic, and cultural order. In *Triumph of the Will* children gaze at their redeemer, the father/führer, whose patriarchal control assures their future as their static, subordinate position emphasizes the vigor of his progress.

Thus, as in *Triumph of the Will*, children's symbolic plenitude is harnessed in these pieces in order to enact national values and model citizen behavior for vaguely defined political ends. *Triumph of the Will* is an explicitly political document, but it celebrates a militaristic culture and imperial rhetoric while masking very explicit plans for war. War in both children's productions is removed from explicit cultural touchstones; in *A Letter to Santa Claus* war is one manifestation of economic strife, and in *The Little Princess* it is historicized. If in genre and culture of origin the German film fits uneasily in comparison to the two American productions for children, its presence here nonetheless highlights the manner in which Nazi discourse draws on the symbolic value of children's dynamism, growth, and vigor in service to the state. This relation to power provides an interesting comparison to the lack of legitimizing authority in the two American productions for children. It furthermore draws attention to how representations of children implicitly promise a better future, a promise particularly meaningful in the economically depressed cultures of both Germany and the United States.⁵

Planned for a two-week run in December 1938, the one-act *A Letter to Santa Claus* tells the story of two children who are frightened and confused by the "shadows" that disturb their family and community.⁶ Trying to deliver a note to Santa Claus, they see the shadow of a soldier before they fall asleep on the rooftop. When they awaken, Santa is on the rooftop to deliver gifts, but the house is now surrounded by more shadows of war and social conflict. Disliking this strife-ridden world, Santa decides to leave. The children hear his call to the wind and repeat it so that they are whirled to the North Pole, where they undergo a series of character tests as Santa is traveling the world delivering gifts. When they pass the tests, Santa gives them a chant to take back to America to make the shadows go away. The play ends as audience and children chant together.

Based on the Frances Hodgson Burnett story, *The Little Princess* was released in March 1939 as Hitler was seizing Czechoslovakia. The film's Sara Crewe is the daughter of a soldier who has traveled from her home in India to a London boarding school, where she will remain while her father fights in the Boer War.⁷ Temple's Sara is left destitute when her father is listed among the missing at Mafeking and his fortune is seized. As in the book, the head-

mistress forces her to live in the attic and work for the school. But Temple's Crewe never believes that her father is dead, and in the end she finds him in a hospital, where they are reunited under the benevolent gaze of Queen Victoria, trundling through in her wheelchair visiting the wounded. The film ends as all sing "God Save the Queen" together.⁸

Triumph of the Will provides an entry point to a discussion of the two American productions because it offers fascism's most idealized vision of the role of children in the state both symbolically and literally. From the boys playing games that prepare them for the soldier's life ahead to the children standing along the parade route as Hitler's motorcade enters Nuremberg, children figure as the ideal German citizen. This citizen is submissive to authority yet vigorous in enactment of rituals that symbolize national allegiance; this citizen's energies are marshaled by the state's call to action and organized by participation in state-sponsored societies.

In Germany, as in America, difficult economic times manifested themselves in a heightened rhetoric centered on children. The fascist celebration of purity, rebirth through submission, primitivism, and feeling over intellect found its corollary in the figure of a child. Hitler's leadership was represented as a potent tonic for a national crisis of faith. As Hans Schem, head of the National Socialist Teachers Federation, writes:

National Socialism is the awakening of the youthful strength of the German Volk, regardless of the age of the individual. . . . All of us, spiritually viewed, were rejuvenated through Adolf Hitler and his work. . . . Adolf Hitler returned Germans to their childhood. Every event in our present economic, political, cultural and governmental life finds its parallels in youthful life-affirmations.⁹

The Nazi political order mythologized, and its spectacles often visually represented, a mysticism that characterized nature as the signifier of *blut und boden*, a spiritual connection to a national heritage born of blood's connection to the land.¹⁰ As bodily development is imagined as a socializing process, Schem's metaphor depicts a revitalized political and economic life that connects the socialized adult to the natural child. The metaphor yokes civilization and nature, technology and primitivism, the real circumstances of the individual to a dramatic narrative of national history. Children thus symbolize not only nature but a mythologized past, even as they stand for the future citizens of the fascist state.¹¹

In *Triumph of the Will* fascism's invocation of a collective will and memory is visualized to connect citizen and state in a pageant of national unity.

The film juxtaposes shots of the parade of flags and symbolic elements such as the eagle with shots of the solitary, impassioned leader and adoring crowds in order to create an expressive identification on the part of the viewer with the camera and its immersion in the orgiastic pageantry of National Socialism. The individual finds expression as part of the disciplined mass.¹² Technique and characterization thus combine to make the viewer feel as though she is a part of a present moment that proceeds, like a history, from past moments unrecorded. *Triumph of the Will* evokes a history and a historical forgetting by substituting symbol and seamless editing for historical memory and events. Like its parade of torches and flags, the film's repetition of its beautiful blond children (both in silent homage and boisterous Hitler Youth games) strips the children of individuality and orders them as aesthetic signifiers of Nazi ideology. Children in *Triumph of the Will* embody the *volk's* perfect submission to Hitler and testify to the vigor of his power. The replication of that perfect submission renders childhood itself as abstraction, as symbol, in service of the political order. Children in the Nazi film participate in a symbolic structure wherein national identity is analogous to traditional family roles of authoritarian father and submissive, obedient children.

European fascism provoked widespread opposition in America, particularly among Popular Front artists and intellectuals. The New York theatre world and Hollywood were both centers of antifascist émigré culture. Although neither progressive nor overtly antifascist, *The Little Princess's* engagement with the rising threat of war signaled a growing Hollywood engagement with fascist aggression. To that point, the studio system had largely avoided commentary on the rising fascist threat in order to maintain lucrative overseas markets and avoid problems with the American regulatory system. The American film industry capitulated to domestic pressure from pro-fascist groups, the Hays Office, and the Production Code Administration. Additionally, in 1933 Germany decreed that it would pull the distribution rights of any film deemed anti-Nazi. The threat was significant: Hollywood studios received 30 to 40 percent of their gross revenues from foreign markets. In 1939, 150 million Europeans were watching American films each week. Although Warner Brothers pulled out of Germany in 1934, other American studios, including 20th Century Fox, did not; it was one of three studios that exported films to Germany until September 1940.¹³

Domestic fascism and American attraction to European fascism lost popularity when Hitler consolidated power in the early 1930s and Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1936. But though leftists and leftist liberals almost uniformly supported the antifascist cause following Mussolini's takeover of Italy in 1923, the pragmatic, experimental nature of Mussolini's

regime appealed not only to certain U.S. business leaders and proponents of authoritarian governance but also to some liberals who viewed Mussolini's revolution as a new social experiment offering a redistribution of wealth and insisting on the primacy of the values of private property. To these liberals, fascism—at least initially—seemed like Americanism. Historian Charles Beard wrote of Italy in the *New Republic*:

This is far from the frozen dictatorship of the Russian Tsardom; it is more like the American check and balance system; and it may work out in a new democratic direction. . . . Beyond question, an amazing experiment is being made here, an experiment in reconciling individualism and socialism, politics and technology. It would be a mistake to allow feelings aroused by contemplating the harsh deeds and extravagant assertions that have accompanied the Fascist process (as all other immense historical changes) to obscure the potentialities and the lessons.¹⁴

While such liberal assessments had all but disappeared by the time of the rise of Hitler, fascism's authoritarian politics and racist ideology appealed to the disenfranchised and the violent and the anxious at home. Fascist Italian American newspapers and organizations operated with far more support than antifascist ones. The pro-Hitler German American Bund printed a magazine for young people and published four newspapers; it held rallies that numbered participants in the thousands. The pro-fascist Silver Legion was founded in 1933 in Asheville, North Carolina, by former Hollywood screenwriter William Dudley Pelley; members of Detroit's Black Legion murdered the secretary for the United Auto Workers that same year. For these Americans, fascism's authoritarian control, supreme nationalism, and articulation of mythic destiny were deeply appealing.¹⁵ In the pro-fascism magazine the *American Review*, Ross J. S. Hoffman, professor at New York University and self-described member of the Catholic Right, wrote:

Obviously there is no solution but a revolutionary solution, for the tottering American political system of today is perhaps the best demonstration of those anti-authoritarian principles which have brought about the wreckage of modern society. There must be a revolution—a constructive revolution in behalf of authority, order, and justice; and there is no dodging that fact.¹⁶

Against the tired Enlightenment values of liberalism and the new class consciousness of communism, both of which appealed to internationalism, fas-

cism seemed to offer a potent Americanism—a return to a mythologized America whose destiny was manifest.

Three-quarters of a century later, the resonance of *A Letter to Santa Claus* and *The Little Princess* stems in part from the poignant uncertainty of the power each upholds to ward off the shadows of war. In *Triumph of the Will* children are visually connected to power, their outstretched fingers twinned by Hitler's at the most basic level of the fascist salute. But in the two American productions the children are dangerously on their own. And the worlds of *A Letter to Santa Claus* and *The Little Princess* are dangerous. In the first, threats are manifest as shadows; moral authority and action are invested in the wisdom of Santa Claus. In the second, a fatherless child is turned out of her room and made to go hungry in an attic garret. In neither world does a parental figure offer reassurance or an authority figure offer security.

Thus, Charlotte Chorpensing staged a very different federal pageant for the Chicago Federal Theatre Project than the paean to power conceived by Hitler and Riefenstahl. Primarily known for her fairy-tale adaptations, Chorpensing wrote *A Letter to Santa Claus* for a series of special matinees staged just before Christmas in 1938; children were admitted for free to these showings. The play was planned for a stadium production but had to be scaled back for the Blackstone Theatre. For *A Letter to Santa Claus* the federal theatre ignored its mandate to use only adult actors and used two children to play the leads. According to the production book, the play was originally intended to draw on the resources of all the Chicago units—the vaudeville, ballet, white, and Negro units, and with choruses and the orchestra from the Federal Music Project. Scaled back, it still had a full orchestra and a cast of seventy-five, including acrobats, a snow ballet with thirty dancers, and the entire Chicago vaudeville unit. Almost all of its music was original. Lighting notes by Duncan Whiteside in the production book describe effects intended to emphasize color. “Whatever the scene or the particular demands of the scene, the result was the quality of a Maxfield Parrish canvas.”¹⁷ The play also featured dancing penguins and polar bears in a production that was timed to last exactly one hour.¹⁸ It was a Federal Theatre Project extravaganza.

An elegaic meditation on the value of liberalism to animate civic, economic, and political justice, *A Letter to Santa Claus* stands alone among the FTP children's plays. Positioning its child protagonists as seekers of peace, *A Letter to Santa Claus* expresses a liberal response to international and domestic aggression that links global strife to people's daily interactions and international fascism to domestic fascism. Understanding that the strife within their home is emblematic of larger conflicts, Joe and Mary seek to rid their world of threats that they only dimly understand as shadows. No other FTP

children’s play asked so much of its contemporary protagonists outside of a distancing dream narrative or framework of comedy. No other FTP children’s play broached the topic of war and the Depression realities of hunger and strife outside the framework of comedy.¹⁹ Lowell Swortzell, whose collection *Six Plays for Young People* reprinted the play, wrote in his 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 . . . convey a sense of national disillusionment. . . . Surely there has never been a Santa Claus play for “Children Only” written with such a deeply felt and disturbing subtext.²⁰

These fears were also singular in federal children’s theatre.²¹

In its themes and staging, Chorpenning’s play exemplifies what Julia Mickenberg has cogently analyzed as a Popular Front rhetoric that “linked the playful, nonsectarian, and antiauthoritarian consciousness characteristic of the Lyrical Left . . . to the strongly prolabor, antiracist, and anti-imperialist views of the revolutionary Old Left.”²² Popular Front cultural production for children combined the progressive emphasis on the child as a socially animating site of hope with the communist program of socializing children for a transformed society. As Mickenberg notes, this common emphasis on socializing the child “rejected an authoritarian model of adult-child relations and emphasized freedom, democracy, and cooperation as desirable traits.”²³

Chorpenning’s productions for Federal Theatre, from *The Story of Little Black Sambo* to *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, emphasize these values and valorize the child’s potential. Her fairy-tale adaptations exemplify modernist reimaginations of traditional narratives, though they do not exemplify the radical work that would be done in proletarian and leftist children’s theatre. If Popular Front cultural production for children eschewed the traditional fairy-tale narrative, with the rise of Nazism in Germany gone too was the Weimar Republic’s freewheeling, often overtly political, experimentation with children’s theatre.²⁴ Paradoxically, the authoritarian Third Reich and the democratic United States largely agreed that the most appropriate theatre for children was traditional, if not necessarily overtly didactic, and apolitical; by the twentieth century the traditional fairy tale’s inherited symbols, gender roles, and narratives placed it comfortably in the delimited space of cultural production for children in both countries. Although the first New York Children’s Unit director Abel Plenn dismissed “the outdated” fairy-tale plays as “harbor[ing] very few illusions for that stern realist, the post-war child,” in

fact the FTP children's theatre repertory was always heavily drawn from fairy tales and folktales.²⁵ The social realism of adult plays produced by the Federal Theatre Project was largely rejected in favor of fairy-tale adaptations for children.²⁶ But the cultural politics of mythologies and traditional fairy tales central to the construction of the German *volk* was obviously quite different from that of the traditionalism implied by the same tales in an ethnically diverse, immigrant America. Adaptations by Chorpenning and Los Angeles Children's Unit director Yasha Frank articulate a leftist vision of childhood, although they did not adhere to an overtly Popular Front politics or aesthetics.

A Letter to Santa Claus begins as Joe and Mary have sneaked to the rooftop on Christmas Eve to give Santa Claus a letter Joe has been writing for "weeks and weeks. . . . I couldn't get the letter to sound right. It's about the shadows," he says. Stage directions call for a shadow to appear "of a soldier (not nationalized), a little larger than life, and not too black."²⁷ Shadows presage strife both within their own family and outside of it and thus connect the domestic and the public:

It isn't just us. You think it's Mother crying, and it's lots of people crying. You think it's just the milkman quarreling with the man that pays him, and it's lots of people quarreling. You think you're hungry, and it's lots and lots of people hungry. They're what you hear when the shadows go by.²⁸

The soldier introduces and outlasts all other forms of conflict in the play, suggesting the primacy of aggression and military domination among all other conflicts. And yet, the first cause following the soldier is shown to be "children quarreling," with "shadows of children snatching from each other, food, etc and voices 'It's mine,' 'I want the most!' and 'I don't like you.'" Voices escalate to include industrial and class conflict, and the sound that resonates beyond the weeping and quarreling voices is the little child crying "I'm hungry."²⁹

Against the fear, hatred, and aggression bound up with the appearance of the shadows is the majesty of the morally and materially bountiful Santa Claus who wants no part of the shadow-led strife. He calls out:

Christmas music on the air
And so I came.
Other things are on the air.
What you think is on the air.
What you feel is on the air.

Shadows of your thoughts are marching,
 Shadows of the things you feel, go by.
 I don't like those shadows,
 I don't like the world you're making with the things you think and feel
 So I go away.³⁰

Santa's action clarifies that the sociopolitical problems enumerated by the people's voices feed and strengthen one another and that a solution cannot be imposed from on high. Equally, his departure negates the possibility that as a moral authority he exists in some affective relationship with the people. As a beneficent figure whose actions of goodwill are not constrained by national boundaries, and as the locus of a moral authority disconnected from the exigencies of responsibility for economic, political, or social justice, Santa Claus figures as an intangible being who explicitly belongs to no one. Instead of glorifying militarism, he refuses to participate in an order that supports it: like universal values, he is transcendent.

The central trait of the play's Santa Claus is, in fact, his absent presence. Having heard Santa's call to the Christmas winds that help him lift his sleigh, Joe and Mary echo his words in order to follow him and deliver the letter he has not taken.³¹ From a distance, Santa Claus puts the children through a series of tests; he listens on the radio to determine whether or not they have responded appropriately. The lessons taught by these tests range from learning to share with polar bears to learning to work together. They enact in simple, didactic terms the complicated way in which childhood innocence is both assumed as inherent to children and assumed to be the result of the process of education. Joe and Mary learn sharing as a civic virtue; they initially do want all of the gifts offered. But in seeing that the polar bears want them too, they gradually learn to accept only what they need.

The tests also point to the rejuvenating possibilities of a childlike faith in the rules of society. At the South Pole Joe and Mary want to hunt for Santa, but the playful penguins assure them they will only find him if they have fun. Joe is encouraged to slide, but he almost runs through a red flashing light. "Oh! I almost didn't see it! How would I be punished if I hadn't?" The penguins are mystified by the idea of punishment:

NOEL: No one is ever punished here.
 NOELITA: We just all agreed together to stop when the red came on.
 JOE: What if some one doesn't stop?
 NOEL: Doesn't stop? . . . Everybody does.
 NOELITA: (With finality): We agreed on it.³²

In a just society, penguins are rationally good.³³

Joe and Mary enact a simple representation of childhood that enables audience members to equate civic action with innocence and moral purity. The children experience each lesson as if they had no complicating social or familial contexts. In this they are innocent. Free of hate and greed and fear, they confront adult problems with a self-reliant bravery stemming from a certainty about what is right and wrong. In this, they are good. When Santa Claus explains that he cannot banish the shadows and that the light that will destroy those shadows must come from someone else, the children go alone to rid the world of shadows. Childhood innocence becomes the basis for a goodness that will produce a just and equitable society.

Thus, the child's innocence tropes a nation's. *A Letter to Santa Claus* deploys the figure of the child to explore the role between the American citizen and social transformation. It makes explicit the link between a child's innocence and corresponding morally correct action, and the shift in political consciousness necessary for America to produce a response to European war commensurate with its self-image as a moral leader. While both the cause and effect of conflict are rooted in quarreling situated in familial, domestic terms—father, mother, children—the children appeal to the international moral authority of Santa Claus to end the strife. The children provide the link between family, nation, and the world. America, the play suggests, cannot defeat the shadows of war until it addresses the problems of economic inequality. Situating effective idealistic action in such childhood values as unselfishness and kindness, the play produces a child who stands in for the resolute problem-solving American who is in turn the metonymic mascot for the nation.

But if Joe and Mary enact a simplistic representation of childhood, the manner in which childhood innocence tropes American identity is not simple at all. Many critics have noted that representations of childhood innocence create a condition that is outside of history and knowledge, and therefore outside of accountability.³⁴ As a longstanding trope of Americanness, innocence is not innocent at all. Rather, it is a thematic that divorces national identity from the social and juridical injustices and inequities the nation has imposed upon individuals. It absolves a nation of accountability. But childhood innocence would not be such a powerfully animating thematic for Americanness if it just served as a deceptive cover for American participation in unjust practices and histories. Childhood innocence also emphasizes America's self-image as a nation united by ideals rather than shared history or blood. As Todd Gitlin puts it snappily, "In principle Americanness is a matter of principle."³⁵ Innocence is the condition of being for the ideally

principled person who is never compromised by the messy context of lived experience. So while a childlike innocence will mask, for example, America's complicity in the production of arms for war and its low quotas that kept Jews from reaching safety, Joe and Mary's innocence makes operational the values of tolerance and cooperation and thus makes paramount the ideals of liberal democracy.

Contextualizing the children's actions, Chorpenning uses the opposition of light and dark imagery to suggest a dichotomy between unconscious, psychological fears and rational action. The play most vividly externalizes inner subjectivity by its use of shadows that symbolically enact the unconscious fears of the American populace. They were produced by projecting actions and tableaux onto a screen behind the stage and were accompanied by sounds: guns popping, martial music, voices raised in argument, children and adults crying. The shadows are an externalization of those primitive and irrational forces against which Joe and Mary and Santa Claus are allied. But unlike the unconscious as projected, for example, in *Emperor Jones*, the shadows in this play have become threatening to a multitude, awaiting only the hypnotizing wizard to harness their power. The light that Joe and Mary bring back from the North Pole is not the light of the cross, and their banishment of the shadows and transformation of people is not an exorcism. Rather, it is the light of the analyst, the wielder of human truth in the modern science of psychoanalysis, the light that can harness, contain, and so banish the primitive of the unconscious.

Light imagery is also used to suggest Enlightenment values as opposed to the dark psychological savagery of war. The opening scene, for example, reflects a conception of an ordered and harmonious universe. The stage directions state: "In spite of its being night, the first effect of the stage on the children must not be sombre—but mysterious, very beautiful but not depressing nor 'creepy.' A shooting star across the silver screen would be a good first thing to happen. Faint radio, Christmas music, in some house."³⁶ The universe is harmoniously connected by the aural and visual display of Christmas music and a shooting star, which are echoed and amplified in a later scene at the South Pole in "spires, gleaming shafts, arches, lacework, every sort of carving by wind and water in the ice, all breaking the sunlight into the prismatic colors by their facets and throwing strong shadows."³⁷ The South Pole is staged as a utopian space of light and form, a place brought back with the children.

Of the shadows, Santa says, "Nothing will blot them out but the Christmas light. And it can't come from me. It must come from the same place as the shadows do." He then teaches them a chant:

Open your heart
 And shut your eyes
 And I'll give you something
 To make you wise
 Your heart shall be
 The heart of a friend
 Your eyes shall see
 How love should end.
 And now I have made you wise.³⁸

When Santa asks, "How should love end?" both children respond, "In doing things, of course." They return to the city with its shadows of the "down and out," whom Joe recognizes as "the shadows of what you think and feel." Mary begins the chant and Joe joins in. As Mary speaks, the tableau changes and the huddled figures "undergo a change, lifting their heads, their faces light up . . . the MAN gets to his feet, the WOMEN stand strong and radiant. A slender pencil of light shoots across the shadows."³⁹

As the first group is transformed, however, new groups enter the stage. The stage becomes filled with people chanting, but the drums and sounds of grief rise, even as more light shoots across the stage. Joe and Mary start the chant again, until there is only the shadow "of a great soldier and two figures with uplifted fists." At this point, Joe lifts his hands for the audience to come in, and as the entire theatre chants "Your heart shall be the heart of a friend / Your eyes shall see where love should end," "the last SHADOW is blotted out in streaming Auroras" and the sound of bells is heard.⁴⁰ The crowd forms a tableau: "some on their knees, some arms entwined, some lifting others to see." On cue, Santa appears, and the play ends with a chorused "Merry Christmas . . . and laughter."⁴¹ In this theatrical mash-up, Chorpenning brings together expressionist lighting, leftist tableau, and Main Street holiday bathos in an aurally and visually spectacular finale.

As the character Santa Claus articulates, both light and shadows (essentially good and evil) come from the same place. Within this moral dichotomy, fear, class hatred, and violence threaten to undo the order of the play's world. Consequently, Joe and Mary are tasked with rebuilding social morality. And as they bring the values of rationality, pluralism, and the rule of law to the world to save it from war, they further reinforce the adherence to those same values that they have demonstrated in the polar bear and penguin games. Yet the moral authority from which salvation stems is Santa Claus, a figure with an alliance to the history of Christian religious doctrine and practice of giving. Santa's fairly contemporary role in advertising Christmas connects the character to a distinctly secular practice of giving, punctuating a Chris-

tian theology of good versus evil without reference to sin. A Christmas pageant without reference to figures of Christian theology, the play thus asserts a moral binary and overtly positions a secular Santa Claus as its supreme authority. The dialogue forces the audience to remember Santa’s role as judge, thereby reinforcing a moral binary. Yet there is no messiah and no messianic return to assert both authority and judgment within Santa’s role. Salvation is conceived as an international and secular project dependent upon ethical behavior, wisdom, and the rule of law. And while the names Joe and Mary connote the ordinary Jewish couple who will give birth to Christ, such naming challenges the Christian sexual taboo as the text covertly assails Christian norms of “good” and “evil.”

Although she too faces a fearful world, Shirley Temple’s indomitable little Sara Crewe stands in sharp contrast to the FTP children in the face of imminent war. If the FTP play deploys the child as a force of effective idealism in a public social space, Shirley Temple’s screen child in *The Little Princess* enacts the code of “the little soldier” to retain her father’s protective love and the sanctity of her domestic space. As in her other films, *The Little Princess* details an excruciatingly cruel reversal of fortune that Temple must overcome in order to return to her status of petted center of the household. If the children in the FTP play create a relationship of identification and otherness that tropes social change, Temple’s screen girlhood constructs the child as an inaccessible force of innocence that works on adults to restore a pre-existing order.

Burnett’s *A Little Princess* is not an obvious template for an antifascist film. It is structured on the theme of parental loss. As in her other children’s classic, *The Secret Garden*, the restoration of order and home does not ever make up for the loss of the parent. Sara is the daughter of a wealthy young widower who brings her from India to a select London boarding school. Her father later invests all of his money in an old school friend’s scheme to buy diamond mines and dies believing he is bankrupt when the scheme fails. After much misery, Sara is returned to her former splendor when the gentleman who has moved next door to the school turns out to be the old school friend who has not after all bankrupted her but rather increased her fortune and has been searching for her to give her a home. In a pivotal scene retained in the Temple film, he instructs his Indian servant, and Sara’s friend, to transform the poor little servant girl’s room while she is sleeping. Sara awakens to a fire, food, and sumptuous decorations. She touches everything and then steals next door to the maid’s room and brings her back.

“It’s true! It’s true!” she cried. “I’ve touched them all. They are as real as we are. The Magic has come and done it, Becky, while we were asleep—the magic that won’t let those worst things *ever* quite happen.”⁴²

But the worst thing has already happened. The book is both an exploration of how to survive intact from such an intense loss and a description of the material relations upon which Sara's return to her appropriate class position depends.⁴³ Both a critique of and an apology for English imperialism and class relations, *A Little Princess* celebrates its heroine's self-reliant triumph against selfish materialism (coalesced in the grasping virginity of Miss Minchin) that nonetheless rests upon the dynamics of lower-class and other-nation servitude exemplified by Becky and Ram Dass.⁴⁴ Sara, whose wealth made her easily kind, remains loyal to her friends and thoughtful to those less fortunate than she, whether she is actually fortunate or not. Her largesse is the vehicle by which she maintains appropriate class relations with her lower-class intimates.⁴⁵

Changes to the central character and historical context refocus central themes for the Temple version. Temple's celebrity Americanizes the Sara Crewe who grew up in India as efficiently as her outsider status (and flat accent). The film opens to a kaleidoscopic survey of major sites of British national identity, history, and pride—Buckingham Palace, Winchester Cathedral, a portrait of the Queen—before the sound of martial music introduces Sara and her father watching a parade of soldiers preparing to leave for the Boer War. War and nation frame every domestic scene. The appearance on the screen of "England 1899" in white block print locates the temporal setting of the film and provides the historical and national otherness that allows the film to function as a sufficiently distant metaphor for the United States in 1939.⁴⁶ Three settings map the spaces of home-front patriotism: the domestic space of the school, where goodbyes are bravely borne and letters anxiously read; the street, where parades and a joyous celebration on the relief of Mafeking are held; and the hospital, where injured soldiers are succored.

Like the FTP children, Temple's character must leave her domestic space in order to set the world aright. Unlike the FTP's Joe and Mary, and in some distinction to her literary forebear, Hollywood's Sara Crewe is modeled on the sentimentalized child who figured so prominently in nineteenth-century sentimental and reform fiction. As the *New York Times* review of the film notes:

That infantile ornament of the Victorian age, Mistress Shirley Temple, enjoys what is undoubtedly her greatest role to date (since Mr. Zanuck has admitted as much in signed advertisements). . . . The late Mrs. Siddons might well envy her these scenes of tears and heartbreak, of riches and squalor, of oversentimental tenderness and melodramatic abuse. . . . [We have] a baby Bernhardt from whom tears run as from a tap.⁴⁷

Like her nineteenth-century predecessor, Temple's Sara is the child whose love enables reform and redemption of the father, but she does not fundamentally challenge the patriarchal order that has left her open to its abuses in the first place.⁴⁸ A weak vessel, she has the strongest love of all, a love that recalls the father to the lure of domesticity while empowering him to assert his rightful place within its social order.

Thus, at the beginning of the film, when Captain Crewe deposits Sara in Miss Minchin's Seminary with little time before he leaves, tears attest to the moral, domestic space that Captain Crewe's soldiering protects. While Burnett's Sara Crewe became a stoic soldier as one of her imaginative subject positions, Temple's Sara can only let her father go by calling on the code of the soldier. Preparing to leave, her father says, "We're going to be brave, aren't we? We've fought this kind of battle before and you've never cried when I went away." Temple's character is supposed to recite a little verse, but instead she breaks down into tears. She looks at her father and sees that he is crying, too. As she and her father are crying together he says tenderly, "I'm afraid we're not such good soldiers as we thought." At this, Temple's Sara stiffens her shoulders and marches to the window, saying, "Oh yes we are. I can do it now," and recites the verse with chin lifted while her father leaves quietly. A daughter's tears and her loving embraces can unman Captain Crewe to tears of his own, but her soft resolve to go through with the goodbye ritual can gird his loins for battle.

Thus, redemption is brought to the service of nation. Not only does the domestic space of Sara's world provide a sanctified space of love and dependency, but its inviolability is intimately tied to the production of men who will preserve the nation from defeat and disintegration.⁴⁹ The domestic project of creating and preserving a feminine space serves the project of preserving nation and empire, which in turn is in service to the domestic ideal of home. This connection is made by Temple's Sara in her description of her father's reason for going to war. Captain Crewe, she tells everyone, is "making the Boers behave." Sara's feelings provide the moral impetus to action. When her father's name appears on the list of the dead, the familiar reversal occurs: the old tightwad of a school headmistress turns Sara out of her rooms and makes her work as a scullery maid to pay off the money she had advanced to the captain's account. Whereas in the book Sara accepts the reality of her situation and continues to imagine she is a princess in order to find the strength to behave as she believes she ought to, in the film Temple's Sara refuses to believe her father is dead. "Something inside tells me so," she tells Becky. "And sometimes I hear him calling for me."

Thus, when Captain Crewe has been lying sick and amnesiac in the hos-

pital, there is nothing the doctors can do for him. Only the demonstration of his daughter's faithful love can restore him to health. Sara falls on him with kisses and tears, and although he does not recognize her and says that his little soldier would never cry and she must not either, within moments he blinks several times and shakes his head and sees his daughter crying over him. Sara's loving embrace is so restorative that Captain Crewe is able to stand and salute Queen Victoria, who happens to be at the hospital, moments later.⁵⁰ The film ends at this moment, with a close-up of a beaming Sara saluting into the camera as "God Save the Queen" ignites the soundtrack. Temple's Sara has brought her father back to life and redeemed a subject of the Queen to service. The only name Captain Crewe murmurs is Sara's, but with her tears, he becomes not only father but also loyal subject of the British Crown.

Sara's restoration of (and to) her father makes possible the ordered familial relationship disrupted by his presumed death and, though not resolved in the film's narrative, presumably rewards those who have believed in her position within her domestic community. Not only is the potential destruction of the family averted under the ordering force that is Sara, but her allegiance to an overtly patriarchal order, the code of the soldier, expands Sara's personal, familial crisis into a larger, social one.

Temple's Sara Crewe draws on the ideology of the sentimentalized child to mobilize home-front patriotism. She embodies perfect service to her father, who is not an authority figure so much as a public projection of her unswerving service to the social order. Thus, when she is strong and recites the code, he can leave to fight; and when her devotion brings her to his room in the hospital, he recovers by her tears. Furthermore, she represents the sanctified space of home/nation the war will be fought to protect. In one of the film's most affecting scenes, Temple's Sara is contrasted with a wounded soldier in the hospital. She draws close because he said he saw her father, but it becomes clear that the soldier is psychologically traumatized when he proceeds to hold up a series of paper dolls he says are brave soldiers he is making for the war. In the juxtaposition of child and soldier the viewer is shown the cost of war; in the moment between his seeming normality and psychotic actuality is shown the quickness with which war can destroy a young man. This melancholy scene is framed between Sara tap-dancing in the hospital room and her joyous reunion with her father. While it undercuts the airy optimism of both happier moments, the framing ultimately suggests that such sacrifices must be borne.

The film makes its strongest antifascist statement through the opposition of the mean authoritarianism of Miss Minchin with the generous egalitarianism of Sara. Within the boarding school's society, Temple's Sara is a triumph

of democratic individualism. Her enactment of an idealized noblesse oblige of character and democratic class unconsciousness frames her relationships with Becky, Ram Dass, and three characters added for the film—Miss Minchin's vaudevillian brother, her beautiful and kind teacher, and the teacher's fiancé. No one provides a role model for this Sara Crewe. Her favorite teacher does not stand up to Miss Minchin, just as the fiancé fails to protect his lady love from the headmistress's wrath. All the adults are either weak or, as in the case of her father, absent and injured. The girls of the school are divided between admirers and enemies. Temple's Sara stands in stark contrast to everyone both in her sense of personal autonomy and in her ability to act. Miss Minchin, on the other hand, enacts the rule of a tyrant, policing the personal lives of students and employees with ruthless control. Obsessed with power wielded through money and class, she makes all the rules to suit her needs. When she needs to, she draws on the police to enforce her self-interested dictates.

The political dimensions of the personal differences are emphasized in a dream sequence in which the power relations are reversed. Sara really is a princess. As a citizen in this dream utopia, Ms. Minchin is a snitch who informs Sara that the riding master has stolen a kiss from the teacher. Sara's judicious and benevolent interpretation of their actions saves them, but the dream scene strongly highlights the film's emphasis on empathy and moral action.

In both the framing and the solution of disorder, Temple's screen child functions much differently than the FTP children. Because the disorder casts her into the role of the outsider, she is identified with people outside of her domestic space. But such points of identification do not result in a systemic change, which would be represented by her movement from the bounds of the family to the community and her recognition of her father's training of her as preparation for a communal role. Rather, scenes outside of the boarding school serve to exemplify Sara's single-minded devotion to her father. Temple's winsome child radiates an impermeable innocence that protects her from the corruption of national conflict and adult greed. If the FTP play suggests that family is always situated in the community, *The Little Princess* insists that community must be ordered on the model of the family; if Joe and Mary's movement into the adult public space of conflict rewards the community with peace, Temple's allegiance to her father and her insistence upon his fulfillment of his patriarchal role rewards her character with preserved stability.

Temple's Sara is ever the child whose triumph offers consolation for that which has been lost to the adult. Predicated upon the symbolic shift of

father to national leader, and inhabitants of the nursery to national citizenry, her actions model an unquestioning allegiance to patriarchal authority and home-front support. She keeps the home safe for domesticity. As we have seen, Joe and Mary exist in a play where there is no such sanctified place. Importantly, both productions advocate for a kind of cosmopolitanism that makes room for patriotism but not nationalism. England had not yet declared war on Germany when *The Little Princess* was released, but the film's overt emphasis on war marked an unusually political moment by a 20th Century Fox studio that had long attempted to accommodate fascist Germany and Italy. There was also Popular Front sentiment to counter international and domestic fascism with the power of the movies. In 1938 a group calling itself Films for Democracy formed to make, produce, and direct films that would "safeguard and extend American democracy." Director Fritz Lang and author Thomas Mann sent letters of support; producer Walter F. Wanger joined author Sherwood Anderson, entertainer Will Rogers Jr., Rex Ingram, and labor leader Heywood Broun on the thirty-seven-member advisory board. On November 15, 1938, in the *New York Times*, the group clarified its progressive goal: "The motion-picture screen, with its daily audience of many millions, must now be used to reaffirm and popularize in dramatic form the principles of democratic government and thereby to combat the sinister spread of intolerance and reaction."⁵¹

Responding to the announcement of its formation, the *New York World Telegram* lauded Films for Democracy, opining:

It is a laudable undertaking, one which merits respect and attention, because it must be evident to anyone and everyone who pretends to have any feeling for his fellowmen that now more than ever the power and influence of the motion picture should be used to reaffirm certain fundamental principles of humanity and decency. For make no mistake about it, we are in the midst of a wave of intolerance and bigotry right here which, if it is not nipped in the bud, may very easily become as ruthless and horrible as it is now in certain Fascist countries. Already certain demagogues are fanning the spark of racial hatred on the radio and other misguided bigots are slandering radio entertainers because of their faith.⁵²

Noting that Films for Democracy had already garnered some famous names, the same column ended with the hope that major actors would publicly support the project to get it off to a "rousing start" and concluded by suggesting one in particular. "Maybe Films for Democracy should try to get ahold of little Shirley Temple, too. After all, she's regarded in some quarters as a pretty dangerous radical, isn't she?"

The call for a child to galvanize public sentiment around a political cause is answered quite differently by *The Little Princess*, *A Letter to Santa Claus*, and *Triumph of the Will*. *A Letter to Santa Claus* uses its children to symbolize the responsibility of each citizen to work toward peace and to resist the defeatism of conflict, a clear opposition to the visual synecdochic relation, and subordination, of family to nation in *Triumph of the Will* and *The Little Princess*. It makes no appeal—implicit or explicit—to nationhood or to patriotism. Indeed, by imposing its childlike vision, the play forces the audience to view conflict through its children’s vision of the family, a family that extends through social relationships and is not bounded by national borders. Here, too, is an inversion of the family–nation relationship visualized in *Triumph of the Will*, in which familial relationships and loyalties are subsumed under the sign of the Nazi salute. The play’s uncompromising antiwar stance makes the case for old-fashioned cosmopolitan internationalism and liberal ideology. But in its resolutely antipolitical presentation, it rejects the terms by which international conflict is being defined and insists upon a return to the fundamental moral values of unselfishness and kindness.