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Dreaming America

Frost, Leslie Elaine

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WISHING ON A STAR

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

Federal Theatre's most popular children's play was written in doggerel verse and was a production in which "everything is sacrificed to simplicity and hilarity."¹ That the newly flesh-and-blood Pinocchio would become the symbol of the Federal Theatre Project upon its demise underscores the manner in which children's plays performed work analogical to that of children in its productions—to convey an innocence outside of politics. Thus, while Federal Theatre's story of the puppet who became a real boy is outside of the Popular Front sensibility that informs other plays here, his representational power within the history of the project places him within its scope. As the changing social value of the child was introduced through a study of the visual and linguistic rhetoric centered on labor and laboring children, the FTP's *Pinocchio* provides an important bookend clarifying the power of the emotionally priceless child, and thus the representational power of children in the service of Popular Front ideals.

Pinocchio is best known in the twentieth century through Walt Disney's 1940 animated film. In the Disney version, Pinocchio may tell a few lies and play a little pool, but he is in the depths of his little wooden heart a very, very good boy. The gleeful, willful, spiteful, cricket-killing activities that made Carlo Collodi's puppet so very good at being bad are erased in the full-length animation movie. Critics lamenting the oversanitized cuteness of Disney's *Pinocchio* reference Collodi's 1883 story to emphasize representational and values shifts that Disney effected.² But few note that in 1937 the Federal Theatre Project mounted an extraordinarily popular stage adaptation of *Pinoc-*

chio.³ A letter from Walt Disney to FTP adaptor, writer, lyricist, and director Yasha Frank praises the play and predicts that many successes will follow. This letter documents at least one of the eight times Disney and/or his technical staff reportedly viewed the Los Angeles production before announcing that Disney's next full-length cartoon adaptation would be, indeed, *Pinocchio*.⁴ Disney's version differs in key ways from the FTP's production, but profound changes to lighten and sentimentalize the puppet boy and his father were begun by Frank and carried through to the Disney production. "While Frank's storyline bears no resemblance to Disney's film plot, Frank's character revisions could well have offered Disney the key he needed to unlock and revamp the novel," writes Richard Wunderlich.⁵ Certainly both productions radically revised Collodi's amoral wooden boy.

Frank's federal *Pinocchio* premiered at the Beaux Arts in Los Angeles in June 1937. According to the 1939 Boston Production Book:

Presented at the height of the Bank Night craze in California, *Pinocchio* nevertheless managed to lure the same customers back to the Mayan Theatre time and again. It was quite normal for adults to see the show four or five times. Children often returned seven or eight times. The record for repeat performances was shared by two youngsters who paid thirteen return visits to the theatre.⁶

In New York, the show was standing room only for seven weeks, during which more than 80,000 people saw the play. By May crowds had dwindled to "Sold Out" only and more than 100,000 people had seen it over 125 performances.⁷ A note in the National Archives collection reveals that "Although this production was offered primarily as a children's show, box office reports indicate that adults have outnumbered youngsters five to one."⁸ As one reviewer wrote approvingly, "Grownups too will enjoy the smoothly told rhyme which would even be a bit of a spiritual treat for those who feel that their sophistication and cynicism have removed them from the boundaries of dream-tempoed fantasy. . . . Yes, the Federal theatre, once again, has justified its support by [. . .] Uncle Sam."⁹

Los Angeles was one of six California cities that originally had Federal Theatre units. According to Robert Holcomb's seminal "The Federal Theatre in Los Angeles," the Los Angeles units were able to begin production very quickly, with a vaudeville show opening December 31, 1935, two months after administrators began interviewing actors.¹⁰ Holcomb characterized lighthearted theatre as the specialty of the Los Angeles units, "a combination of music and drama that was neither true musical nor true vaudeville,"



FIGURE 10. Gepetto leads Pinocchio from the mouth of the Whale. (New York City, New York): George Mason University, Fenwick Library, Special Collections and Archives

he drily notes.¹¹ Vaudeville performers were integral to the circus scenes in *Pinocchio*. Children's drama was divided into "live" and "marionette" and extremely popular. More than 100,000 people attended marionette performances in the summer of 1937 at the Greek Theatre. When federal theatre was ended in 1939, more than 1,150 people in the Los Angeles unit lost their jobs.¹²

Though many have seen the Disney version, and some may have seen Frank's televised version of the FTP play in 1957 with Mickey Rooney, relatively few scholars have read the Federal Theatre Project playscript.¹³ Frank regularized Collodi's episodic, bildungsromanesque narrative structure into a three-act play, with three scenes to each act. He lightened the tone, introducing the figure of the kindly woodcutter through opening comedic interplay between Gepetto and his cat, and provided not only song and dance but a spectacular full circus performance—the cause of much praise for the play. Robert Rice of the *Morning Telegraph* explicitly compared the FTP *Pinocchio* to Disney animation:

In it there are sequences which approach more closely the classic works of Walt Disney than anything I have seen the stage produce. There is a beautiful undersea fantasy, there is a charming marionette sequence, there is, in fact, that kind of simple, imaginative fancy running through the production that not only delights a child's heart, but touches responsive chords in the minds of an older and ostensibly wiser generation.¹⁴

Dialogue is in rhyming verse.¹⁵ The play ends with a birthday celebration for Pinocchio attended by all the characters; in this scene the audience learns that even the ones who had led him astray were only working to help him overcome greed to become a real boy.

The Disney version does draw much from the FTP *Pinocchio*. Both simplify and sentimentalize Collodi's wooden boy. Both lighten the tone of Collodi's text. Both shift its characterization of the child from amoral to good, and the tale from one of bourgeois socialization to one of the triumph of impervious innocence. And both produce a child who serves as anodyne to anxieties concerning child-raising that were circulating in Depression America. The puppet boy's federal stage and silver-screen debut showcases cultural anxieties centered on the intersection of childhood, the family, and social responsibility in the late 1930s, even as it reflects ideological differences driving productions of the Federal Theatre Project and the Disney studio.

These anxieties reflected in the stage and screen productions also circulate in mass-media representations of appropriate parent-child relations

and responsibilities that reflect highly unsettled cultural territory. As Stephen Kline writes:

. . . Anxiety pervades much of the advertising of the 1930s, which overtly recognized the significance of a child's changing status within the family. Much of the anxiety concerned parents' ways of relating to children, of controlling and directing their abundant energies, imagination and creativity. Sometimes mothers fretted over their lack of control of their children's well-being; sometimes experts intruded into the scene to help resolve this sense of insecurity; and sometimes parents disputed the appropriate ways to deal with the troubled moments of childrearing. These scenes seem to speak of a more fundamental unsettledness that went beyond the disputes over childrearing practice.¹⁶

In their portraits of the child who will, with the warmth of flesh and blood, care for an aging father, both the FTP and the Disney studio index cultural concerns about family solvency and parent-child relationships in a rapidly changing and economically destabilized society. Stacking up the Pinocchios against the little children of parenting periodicals whose endless needs must be met by particular brands, or whose "modern" problems must be solved with "modern" parenting techniques devolved from behavioral sciences studies, reveals shifting valuations and conceptualizations of the child. On stage and screen, Pinocchio triumphantly resolves his family's problems. In popular magazines, children are the helpless victims of their parents' lack of knowledge or the victorious inheritors of their parents' careful stewardship. In both, the family was the site of catastrophic potential failure.

The FTP and the Disney *Pinocchio* each offer an alternative fantasy of the parent-child relationship, situating the child as a force whose animation—literally—can create a community, as in the case of the Federal Theatre Project, or redeem a failure in the case of the Disney version. Born of paternal desire rather than woman, both of these Pinocchios verbally contract to be good in almost their first speech act. Responsibility for success is thus resituated with the child whose very physical impermeability signals psychological and developmental plenitude. Having given life to the wood, parents pretty much complete their responsibilities, except for an epic journey to the belly of the whale begun as a search through the night for a lost wooden boy.

The Italian version of *Pinocchio* was first serialized in a newspaper in 1881–1882 and then published to much acclaim in 1883. It was translated into English in 1891 and first appeared in the United States in 1892.¹⁷ The book offers a tale of bourgeois socialization in which the little puppet learns

to be a proper boy as each of his misadventures brings him suffering. Colodi's wooden boy is an amoral brat who learns throughout the novel to do the right thing in a tale designed to instruct those like him to do the same. Colodi makes no concession to the idealized, sentimentalized child (who would become the Disney and FTP Pinocchio) who inhabited the opposite pole on the representational scale and to whom tales were told to delight. Rather he draws on a literary tradition of the child as morally unfixed by nature.

Nineteenth-century popular representations of the morally unfixed child and the sentimentalized child had to yield some ground as the twentieth century ushered in a new representation born of child psychology and advertising. As historian Harvey Graff has noted, a particular constellation of changes brought about a rise of interest in the child overall, including:

... "new" psychologies and concerns about social order and progress for a nation confronting unprecedented levels of immigration and other forms of growth and transformation. Children and juveniles, at once the hope of tomorrow and the fear of today, symbolize the resurgence of reform. Movements to educate and assist mothers and families, to compel and extend schooling, to promote proper play and peer groups, to restrict work and enhance health all portrayed the young as victims to be "saved."¹⁸

But the nineteenth-century sentimentalized child, with its capability for redemption, its purity, and its lack of sexuality, still had enormous popular appeal, as the conditions that brought it into widespread circulation, increasing urbanization, a mechanized and increasingly dehumanized workplace, continued to shape people's lives.¹⁹

The widespread economic displacements and uncertainties of the 1930s created enormous pressure on American families, and these pressures were increasingly reflected and created by twentieth-century sociological, psychological, and educational theories that brought a new child into being, one whose needs and drives were the focus of new periodicals dealing with parental treatment of children. Child psychologists wrote influential articles in the popular press that explained children's educational and social process as highly determined by parental actions. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, psychology was increasingly envisioned as a science, and its results as predictive and experimental. The animal experiments at the turn of the century that were used to theorize the "learning curve," or length of time it takes to learn patterned behavior, were being complicated and questioned by the behaviorism of John B. Watson that focused on the observation of outward behavior. Behaviorism was an important strand of psychological thought in

the 1930s—Watson’s experiments led to the behaviorism of most importantly B. F. Skinner, but also to a number of men who published studies throughout the 1930s. Fundamentally Darwinian in his understanding of the importance of adaptive reflexes, Watson came to claim that proper training could produce anything. His best known statement boasts:

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors.²⁰

Of a tenor with its times is an advertisement in *Parents Magazine* for *The New Generation: The Intimate Problems of Modern Parents and Children* that quotes Watson as saying, “Once a child’s character has been spoiled by bad handling, which can be done in a few days, who can say that the damage is ever repaired?”²¹ Psychology-driven articles and advertisements described children at the mercy of their parents’ child-rearing techniques.

As blocked mobility caused by a scarcity of jobs and economic uncertainty caused parents increasingly to displace aspirations onto their children, advertisers raised the specter of a stagnant social mobility that poor parenting might make permanent. And increasingly, as Roland Marchand has shown in *Advertising the American Dream*, ads deployed children to prod parents to buy. The child envisioned by General Electric whose school performance is poor because he studies by dim light struggles for the bottom rung of the academic ladder against the skinny child whose mother isn’t giving her Postum. Advertisers pointed the accusing finger directly at guilty parents not only for failing to ensure their own economic success, but for endangering that of their children and future generations also. Because parents’ job situations were too often perceived as precarious, these increasingly child-centered ads explicitly linked ability to care for children with long-term economic security and reflected an increasingly overt emphasis on the importance of the parental role in the minutiae of the child’s life. Ignorance of the cause of poor performance was no excuse (“Many a bright child is unjustly blamed for dullness”—Metropolitan Life Insurance Company warned); parents had to be diligent in discovering which product would give their child the edge in a cutthroat struggle for success.

Concomitantly, parents were warned that theirs was a uniquely historical, and uniquely isolated, position in new thirties periodicals on parenting such

as *Parents*, which grew out of *Child* in 1930, and *National Parent Teacher*. Laments a *National Parent Teacher* article:

Even if we wished to bring up our children without thinking much about it, as our great-grandmothers did, we no longer have the excellent, if accidental, educational plant of the old home, complete with limitless space of field and brook and orchard, and a small army of hired help and unhired aunts, resident grandmothers, great-uncles and spinster cousins all engaged in simple, understandable, material tasks interesting to boys and girls.²²

Much as did advertisements, articles in popular-culture parenting manuals took a personal, familial tone that denied their participation in a system of mass production and distribution; in a society perceived as increasingly technologized where the communal ties are increasingly replaced by impersonal networks, ads and these periodical articles insinuated themselves as the voices of personal guidance to fulfill unmet needs that the very system that projected them produced.

But if the tone proffered empathy, in article after article, the magazines emphasized the scope of parental control and concern. Vigilant parents, these articles suggest, must be literate in modern child-rearing techniques and up-to-date on the latest scientific information concerning children's social, psychological, and developmental needs in order to safeguard each step of their children's development—information no old-fashioned familial or community member could give. Advertisements and articles correspondingly construct the child as the inheritor of an uncertain future whose very uncertainty the child might manifest in signs the parent is unable to read. Inarticulate about its needs, displaying them on the body and through bodily behavior, the child imaged as a process of growing, as child development, became the locus of parental anxiety. The child was subject to an increasingly wide array of psychological and sociological forces threatening the boundaries of the adult-child relation. To stabilize this structure, and to counter the increasingly destabilized child, periodicals and magazines presented a stable parent figure. But the parent, separated from mythologized American community both characterized as ideal and dispensed with as inadequate to the modern child's needs, was increasingly stranded.

Thus the parent-child relationship became the locus for diffuse anxieties due to the combined circumstances of economic instability, a perceived increasingly mass-produced social community, and the popularization of "new" twentieth-century social theories centered on the child. While the Fed-

eral Theatre and Disney versions of *Pinocchio* deploy the image of the child in different ways, both *Pinocchios* envision a harmony of social order predicated on a cohesive innocence so powerful that it charms experience. Frank's stage adaptation and the Disney version transform Collodi's nineteenth-century tale about the education and the development of the bourgeois self into a narrative about the redemptive power of the parent-child relationship.

That *Pinocchio* is a tale told about a puppet had a particular resonance in the late 1930s. Psychoanalysts experimented with using puppet shows as therapy for disturbed children, a treatment predicated on the idea that puppets provide an unmediated access to the "hidden" of the subconscious; the puppet thus began to function within psychoanalytic treatment then as it often does in children's therapy today, as the object of psychic transference. At the same time, by the 1930s, puppets and puppet theatre were regarded as almost exclusively the province of children. The puppet figure, then, stood as figural representation of both the child's subconscious and body. If Collodi's puppet drew on the dreaming of the inanimate for the animate to figure both educational progression and biological growth of child to adult, by the 1930s, the space of that dream had become crowded with additional systems of meaning and representation.

Federal theatre's *Pinocchio* deploys the wooden puppet as a force of purity and idealism capable of creating within the production's comic world a cohesive family unit located in a larger social order. Stability within the family unit and social order is predicated on a shared responsibility for identity formation born of the intersection between paternal desire and a childhood innocence that informs that desire. Toasting a new father, Gepetto says, "Well, I've made cradles by the score. / I wish I might have made one more / That would have been a pretty one / That I'd have made for my own son / Ah, me! I envy you the joy / Of watching o'er a growing boy."²³ Even as these lines articulate Gepetto's desire, they proclaim the universal joy of fatherhood in its position of "watching o'er a growing boy." Gepetto then creates the puppet out of inanimate wood pieces after wondering aloud, "Children are not made of wood? / Good heavens I wonder if I could?"²⁴

The original *Pinocchio's* insatiable hunger and gleeful flight from Gepetto set the tone for the problematic father-son relationship that *Pinocchio's* lessons throughout the serial will resolve. The FTP production removes the threat of the willfully disobedient son and the novel's grinding poverty, even as it emphasizes kindly Gepetto's paternal desire through dialogue centered on food. "A bit of cheese, a slice of veal / Now we shall have our morning meal," Gepetto says, and as *Pinocchio* sniffs at the chop, Gepetto cries out,

“It wouldn’t do you any good / Alas! You’re only made of wood.” Pinocchio replies:

Please do not despair, Gepetto / Just you wait and see / I shall be most dutiful / And good as I can be! / I’m sure that if I’m very good / We’ll some day know the joy / Of actually seeing me / Become a proper boy / With flesh and blood and meat and bones / And with a stomach, too, / And so I pledge myself to try / To be a son to you.²⁵

As Wunderlich notes of Frank’s Pinocchio, “Pinocchio, as a child, is lovable and vulnerable, precious and to be protected. The child never gives his parent, or anyone else, grounds for provocation.”²⁶ Pinocchio’s determination is to gratify his father’s paternal desires, and by this determination signals his fundamental goodness.

But Pinocchio’s behavior falls far short of his intentions. When he fails to give money to those in need, the Blue-Haired Fairy Queen must come to emphasize the plenitude in the raw material of boyhood and to warn against abusing its potential. She tells Pinocchio:

When a puppet first is made, / He is brave and unafraid / He is kind and good. / He’s so obedient and sweet; / He is gentle, clean and neat, / But he’s made of wood / If he is never mean or mad, / If he is never bold or bad, / If he’s never wild, / If he maintains a perfect score / For the whole year and one day more / He then becomes a child. / But if he commits one human sin / Then his troubles will begin; / He will have no rest. / He is tempted twice again, / And if he fails three times—why then / He has failed the test.²⁷

Because Pinocchio has withheld his money, she says, “And you have sinned a sin indeed. / You stand condemned of HUMAN GREED!” The Fairy warns that she can triumph over “his evil spirits” two more times:

Let me once more sum up your case / This is the problem that you face / You will see me twice again / Remember! Only twice! And then / If you have not, by word or deed / Conquered all trace of Human Greed / You’ll never, never know the joy / Of being a living, breathing boy / A wooden puppet’s all you’ll be / From then throughout eternity.²⁸

The FTP’s Pinocchio certainly hasn’t conquered anything the moment he is thrown from a cliff into the sea and the whale’s belly. Gepetto saves the

two when he lulls the whale asleep to the lullaby he sings to Pinocchio. But when Gepetto gives the puppet four pennies, Pinocchio gives them to a beggar, thus fulfilling the Blue-Haired Fairy's promise. She appears to tell him: "Before night ends, / I shall have gathered all your friends / Who helped you to become a boy. / They'll come to share your father's joy."²⁹ And on the next day, Pinocchio becomes a boy to the Fairy's words "You've learned the lesson of the penny; / Some have too few—and some too many / But give to those who haven't any, / So let the bells proclaim our joy / While you become a human boy."³⁰ The play ends with a birthday celebration that integrates father and son into the community. Everyone comes together to celebrate the puppet and he is rewarded by becoming a real boy. If Gepetto's kindness provides a model for Pinocchio, the feminized community, personified by the Blue-Haired Fairy who orchestrates his lessons and presides over its gathering, is his teacher and the beneficiary of his transformation.

The Disney version keeps the kindly Gepetto figure and the cat, adds a goldfish, and reserves the rhymed speech for a glamorous Blue Fairy. It further brings back the cricket Pinocchio kills in the Collodi story as the winsome, hapless conscience Jiminy Cricket. Jiminy's failures are steadfastly impressive. From the moment the Blue Fairy dubs him "Lord High Keeper of the Knowledge of Right and Wrong, Counsellor in Moments of Temptation, and Guide Along the Straight and Narrow" and changes his rags into spiffy new clothes, Jiminy lets Pinocchio down. He begins a lecture on temptations and becomes mixed up in his own complications. He oversleeps, and Pinocchio falls into the hands of the Fox and Cat. Seeing Pinocchio's successful performance at the puppet show, he leaves in a daze of self-pity. He ducks away from the Blue Fairy, answering Pinocchio's frantic question about what to do with an ambiguous "You might try telling the truth." Pinocchio lies and his nose grows, but Jiminy tells him to lie about the cricket's involvement in the Cat and Fox episode. Jiminy is a spectacular failure as guide, counselor, or in loco parentis role of any kind.

When the Fairy says, "A boy that won't be good / might just as well be made of wood," both cricket and boy promise to be better. As both narrator and authoritative—if ineffective—moral guide, Jiminy individualizes a communal role and allows Gepetto to remain free of responsibilities—for writing his son's tale and supervising his moral development. The fact that Jiminy continually fails in discharging these responsibilities emphasizes Pinocchio's innate goodness and the power of that goodness to transform experience. Gepetto exists within the Disney story to go out in the night, get lost, get swallowed by a whale, and saved by his son. Thus Gepetto is absolved from parental responsibility even as he is the primary beneficiary of Pinocchio's

ultimate success. As the story's figurative creator, Jiminy is the one who has his faith tested and who ultimately affirms the movie's message, that "when you wish upon a star, your dreams come true." He is the itinerant witness of Pinocchio's self-sacrificing rescue of his father.

If the FTP's Pinocchio promises to be both food and stomach, consumed and consumer, Disney's becomes Christ and mankind, redeemed by his own act of self-sacrifice. If communal harmony results from the puppet's successful transition in the FTP play, a spectacular reinscription of the male-centered family results from Pinocchio's transformation in the Disney version. The movie ends with Gepetto and Pinocchio dancing to the discordant tunes of the puppet-maker's many clocks, while outside the window and excluded from the celebration Jiminy Cricket receives his badge of good conscience. While the FTP's play affirms family as embedded in community, the Disney version commits to a more traditional narration of the individualistic American family. But both base restoration of the ideal on the innocent child who shoulders responsibility for his ethical/moral development. Situated in the thirties rhetoric of child-rearing, both productions ultimately affirm the value of parenthood even as they construct an adult-child relationship that absolves parents of the awesome responsibilities popular discourse insisted were theirs.