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Dreaming America

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DEATH OF A DREAM

This book began with my delighted reading of *The Revolt of the Beavers* playscript before any film showcasing roller-skating beavers had been made. Fascinated by the relationship the play presumed between children's theatre, political action, and social change, I turned to other children's plays in the Federal Theatre Project collection. Though few FTP children's plays overtly comment on political issues at all—particularly after *The Revolt of the Beavers*—they are situated in a chaotic cultural era when economic uncertainty, rising fascism, and changing ethnic and racial demographics created the new social and political formations these plays reflect. And so my initial delight became the scholarly inquiry that produced this first substantial critical treatment of these plays, an inquiry that will perhaps open archived materials to further inquiries into federal children's theatre. When I began this project, scripts were largely unavailable outside of major university libraries or the Federal Theatre Project Collection at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Now, some major scripts are available online, part of 13,000 images reproduced from the Library of Congress collection.¹ Children's plays are increasingly mentioned in scholarly texts on the Federal Theatre Project, and *The Revolt of the Beavers* has even been staged in the wake of the 1999 film about the Federal Theatre, *Cradle Will Rock*.

Together, the chapters of this book demonstrate how particular children's plays of Federal Theatre participate in the Popular Front politics of pro-labor, antiracism, and antifascism. This study argues that *The Revolt of the Beavers* controversy highlights the manner in which issues of labor justice and anti-

fascism were subsumed by charges of Communism, and thus anti-Americanism. It examines how the changing social value of children made the play's Popular Front motifs particularly explosive. While FTP officials attempted to defuse the negative ramifications of having produced a Marxist children's play by characterizing *Revolt* as a fairy tale, the play's simple politics aimed at children made it very easy for public officials against the project to use childhood innocence and Americanness as qualities that needed to be safeguarded from the play's ideology.

The Story of Little Black Sambo, by Helen Bannerman, provided a template for federal children's productions that both challenged and reaffirmed America's racial politics. If public reactions were the measure of political and social engagement, productions of *Little Black Sambo* would be characterized as resolutely apolitical. Yet my examination of the plays reveals contradictory rhetorics of race that comment on the deeply divided racial culture and politics of the United States that produced the anti-lynching activism of the Popular Front. In an obscure Newark puppet production and in a three-act Chicago version scripted by Charlotte Chorpenning and directed and scored by Shirley Graham, the story of the little black child facing danger in the jungle is transformed from a parable of white-on-black violence to a tale in which narrative empowerment leads to family security. The Chorpenning-Graham production creates a protagonist who learns to channel his love of beauty and song into productive, responsible actions and who learns the value of family economy and social responsibility. The production yoked this narrative to African motifs designed by Graham that visually and aurally emphasize a dual African American heritage and to critique American racial attitudes that foreclosed African American opportunities. The Newark script presents an intriguing and subversive examination of such racial politics, presenting minstrel caricature as an imposed masquerade that obscures a world limited by poverty and marked with physical danger, realities dismissed by a public invested in the racism that created them. Other scripts and productions, meanwhile, deployed minstrel characterizations and forms to construct familial relationships that locate family irresponsibility as the root cause of danger to the young male black body.

Children's plays in large part stayed away from themes connected to rising fascist power in Europe. However, one play developed as a children's pageant in 1938 took looming war as its topic. *A Letter to Santa Claus* articulates deep cultural anxieties about the threat of war in Europe and the breakdown of civic, economic, and political order it portends. This study's examination of the play compares it to fascist imagery of children in *Triumph of the Will* and *The Little Princess* in order to analyze how the American theatre and film

present childhood innocence and morality as powerful antidotes to fascist aggression and the forces of war. Though its planned spectacular effects and circus antics visually connoted the lighthearted pageantry associated with Christmas productions for children, *A Letter to Santa Claus* articulates a very adult sense of bewilderment about the threat of fascism to liberal values and ideals.

My study of these children's plays is bookended by chapters examining the culture centered on children's theatre and the changing social value of the child. Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of the structure of federal children's theatre in the context of children's theatre history. The first chapter also traces key moments in labor rhetoric centered on children and childhood to argue that the FTP's emphasis on children's theatre articulates an increased social investment in the child. The final chapter examines the very popular *Pinocchio* as an articulation of children's centrality to Depression-era popular culture. I argue that the puppet boy produced by both Federal Theatre and Walt Disney studios functions as an anodyne to Depression-era child-raising anxieties showcased in parenting magazine discourse.

The plays of this study were produced in an FTP children's theatre that was designed to introduce children to live theatre. It was also designed to reach out to all audiences, and perhaps in this goal was more successful than any other part of the Federal Theatre. Hoping to raise a new generation of theatre-goers and asserting the importance of theatre for children, children's productions went to parks, schools, orphanages, and Broadway. They hosted theatre parties for large groups of children at extraordinarily low prices. They created fabulous spectacle and the occasionally didactic dramatic moment. Never in America had so much attention been paid to artistic production for children. If the broad scope of the project made it difficult for a coherent set of clear goals to be attained, nonetheless the children's units were remarkably successful in pleasing their audiences across the nation.

During the time these plays were produced, children's theatre was a protean venture. It had been primarily in the hands of service organizations and settlement houses and had never received widespread professional theatre attention. Theatre itself was in flux; the nascent "little theatre" movement in the early years of the new century had widened the scope of performances and produced new scripts even as the advent of the Depression and the rise of movie popularity took audiences and closed theatres. The FTP children's plays helped to shape new audiences and focus attention on the educational aspects of popular entertainment.

With the close of the fiscal year on June 30, 1939, America's experiment with national theatre ended. After years of investigation, the U.S. Congress

passed a bill signed by Roosevelt that defunded the Federal Theatre Project immediately. In a final performance of *Pinocchio* at the Ritz Theatre in New York, Yasha Frank responded dramatically. Instead of the usual birthday-celebration ending for the transformed Pinocchio, a gunshot suddenly rang out. A voice cried, "Pinocchio is dead!" The curtain rose to reveal a dead puppet lying on the stage. "So let the bells proclaim our grief," chanted the company, "That this small life was all too brief." With the puppet lying sprawled in front of them, the crew dismantled the set in front of the audience. The crew and cast members, followed by members of the audience, formed a funeral procession and carried Pinocchio's body in a coffin bearing the epitaph "Born December 23, 1938; Killed by an Act of Congress June 30, 1939" up the aisle of the Ritz Theatre and out into the streets of New York.² As *Life magazine* recounted for a national audience, "After a hysterical ovation the audience poured into Times Square chanting 'Save the Federal Theatre.'"³ According to the *New York Times*, the funeral march was led by a member of the Living Newspaper staff and chairman of the Workers Alliance dismissals committee. The *Times* reported that the march picked up about six hundred people on its way to Times Square, where "speakers were permitted to make pleas in behalf of continuing the Federal Theatre."⁴ No political transformation resulted from this demonstration, but it must have been fine theatre.

The cinematic story of the Federal Theatre, *Cradle Will Rock*, transforms this finale so that Pinocchio becomes the puppet of an aging, drunken vaudevillian. This shift gives the movie narrative coherence and historical resonance. The Federal Theatre provided new audiences for old artists of a dying form. Without the FTP, vaudevillians could not fill theatres, and without filling theatres, no vaudevillian would be hired by a for-profit theatre system. Bill Murray's Tommy Crickshaw demonstrated that aside from federally funded stages, there was no place in American theatre for the has-been, the old, the sick, the sad. As there is no place in capitalism. Or so the story goes in the agitprop political message of a thirties-styled film created from a cultural panoply as large and all-encompassing and political as the Diego Rivera mural blasted off the walls of Rockefeller's new center.

As the shuffling men and women following the empty-eyed ventriloquist's dummy round the corner into today, moviegoers are asked to imagine what has been sacrificed to capitalism. In the blank neon parade of contemporary Broadway's Disneyfied landscape, artistry has been co-opted and theatre commodified. With the death of the Federal Theatre Project and the triumph of the united business and political culture that killed it, died the joyous, open-ended theatrical possibilities of a *Cradle Will Rock* and the

opportunities for regret and reflection inspired by a sparsely attended vaudeville performance. With its death died an alternative possibility to the empty spectacle of Broadway, symbolic of American art in late capitalism.

When the funding expired that June night in 1939, the FTP materials became, instead of the foundation for a national theatre, the detritus of a huge bureaucracy. Some materials went home with participants. Some were lost. But most were quickly packed up, donated to the Library of Congress, and hastily stored away. Years passed and they lay forgotten. It was not until 1974 that Federal Theatre materials were rediscovered in an old, abandoned airplane hangar outside of Washington, DC, by George Mason University scholars Lorraine Brown and John O'Connor. Brown and O'Connor instigated the initial research and cataloguing work that has so indebted subsequent researchers into the Federal Theatre Project. The materials were housed in a new wing of George Mason University's Fenwick Library that held the entire collection until the Library of Congress took it back in 1994. Researchers at George Mason not only spearheaded research into the collected materials, but tracked down old employees of the project and conducted oral interviews with more than two hundred of them. They put out a newsletter, *Federal One*. They held Federal Theatre Project festivals that brought researchers and project personnel together in 1993, 1994, and 1995. Researchers slowly pieced together a forgotten history. The removal of these materials from their home at GMU's library and from its research program is a second tale of missed opportunities and foreclosed possibilities for Federal Theatre, a story outside the scope of this project, but one worthy of reflection.

Research work at GMU, combined with the initial federal effort to analyze, catalog, and prepare for distribution a vast compilation of children's plays, left a wealth of materials for analysis. There are many plays lying forgotten in the FTP archives that may be studied to discover more about the FTP, children's theatre, and the cultural conditions of America during the Great Depression and the New Deal.

The story of the Federal Theatre Project was not so brave and apolitical as *Cradle Will Rock* would have it. But it would have been beautiful to think so. And in truth, what is so moving about it is the degree to which Federal Theatre really must have been an extraordinary, idealistic vision, one which, fully articulated, might have shaped new possibilities for a vital American theatre. Three words recirculate as description of the Federal Theatre Project's intent: "free, adult, and uncensored."⁵ The words with which the Project was introduced were those picked by scholars Lorraine Brown and John O'Connor to title their 1978 book reintroducing the FTP to a community

that had forgotten it. With their stirring syllabic progression, Harry Hopkins's adjectives describe a theatre committed to an "adult" population, the nebulous qualities of the adjective both opened and contained by its position between "free" and "uncensored." This descriptor has been widely recirculated as academic works draw on the pioneering scholarship of Brown and O'Conner, and narratives about the FTP's history and the significance of its productions have wrestled with whether the description is accurate or not. It was a theatre born of the need for jobs during the Great Depression, dreamed into being by people who believed that an American national theatre could function as a gadfly to the government that signed its paychecks, and killed by a congressional investigation that slandered it as a hotbed of communism. It was a theatre that was never free and certainly never uncensored. Yet in the grandeur of its vision, the largeness of its struggles, and the irony of its eventual defeat, it has certainly seemed an apt metaphor for all that is hoped may be imagined by "adult."

And yet its symbol at the end was a child. The sigh of what might have been infuses the symbolic connection between the murder of *Pinocchio* and the death of federal theatre. When *Pinocchio* played at the Ritz Theatre on Broadway under the auspices of the FTP, standing room only signs were posted for six months.⁶ Hallie Flanagan invited the members of the Dies Committee to see the production, writing:

I feel that you might be especially interested in this production, not only because it represents one of our major efforts in the field of children's theatre, but because it is a visualization of what we have been able to do by way of rehabilitating professional theatre people and retraining them in new techniques.

In *Pinocchio* we use 50 vaudeville people who were at one time headliners in their profession and who, due to no fault of their own, suddenly found themselves without a market. Now they are artists in a great new field and I feel certain you will find that this creation of fine new theatre personalities is no less exciting than the presentation of the play itself.⁷

Pinocchio was already being used as a symbol of the FTP before Frank staged his dramatic coda to its demise. If *Pinocchio*'s end provides an intriguing glimpse of the high-drama politics and federal art provided in 1939, it also shows how representations of the child demonstrate complex adult political and social realities in simple dramatic configurations and how the child, located in relationships of identification and otherness, serves as metaphor and didactic model. *Pinocchio*'s violent superimposition of adult allegorical

fantasies upon the fairy-tale ending of a children's play throws into relief the manner in which adult anxieties shaded the narratives and characterizations of children in FTP plays written and adapted for children. Theatre written for children by adults is always a product of adult visions projected toward the figure of the child. The form of these visions, their texture, their color, their narrative coding, takes shape from their particular historical location—and dream a history yet to come.

Postscript

A Letter to Santa Claus is a mostly forgotten play, but its sentiments are firmly located in the Popular Front despair at the militarization of Germany, the outrages of Stalinism, and domestic impulses toward authoritarianism and racism. It is on the same spectrum of Popular Front feeling as Philip Rahv's well-known essay on the Moscow show trials of the Bolsheviks, which first appeared in the *Partisan Review*. Written in the same year that *A Letter to Santa Claus* was produced, "Trials of the Mind" catalogues the psychological effect of cataclysmic world events. Rahv writes:

Our days are ceasing to be. We are beginning to live from hour to hour, awaiting the change of headlines. History has seized time in a brutal embrace. We dread the Apocalypse.

The newspapers recite their tidings: AUSTRALIANS KNEEL BEFORE HITLER; NAZIS FLOG LABORERS INTO LINE. And in Moscow, the State continues to massacre the firstborn of October. What an inexhaustible repertoire of shame and catastrophe! . . .

We were not prepared for defeat. The future had our confidence, which we granted freely, sustained by Marxism. In that tradition, we saw the marriage of science and humanism. But now, amidst all these ferocious surprises, who has the strength to reaffirm his beliefs, to transcend the feeling that he had been duped. One is afraid of one's fear. Will it soon become so precise as to exclude hope?⁸

A pessimistic reading of *A Letter to Santa Claus* suggests that individually held liberal values construct the only defense against the greed and hatred that precipitates a social strife that culminates in war, and that those values are as ephemeral and naïve as a belief in Santa Claus. As the myth by which the world is made kind for children, Santa Claus offers little realistic hope to the adults who collude to perpetuate his fiction. As an indication of the help-

lessness of liberalism against fascist power, Santa's role in the play questions the belief in a cosmopolitan rationality. And as a metaphor for the manner in which the world is made bright and shiny by deception, Santa Claus is savage mockery of the very innocence privileged in the play.

But this is pessimism. If Chorpenning was afraid of her fears, her fear had not become so precise as to exclude hope. Her story ends not with Santa Claus but with children and adults together reciting the words that banish the shadows of their fears. If J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan asks his audience to clap together if they believe in fairies so that Tinkerbell might live, the FTP children ask the audience to learn together that which will banish shadows from the world of the stage.⁹ Jack Zipes writes in his discussion of Walter Benjamin's storyteller, "There are storytellers who are first and foremost listeners, who listen to the crises and struggles in our societies and try through listening to the temper of our times to extrapolate wisdom and hope in creative ways."¹⁰ In her federal departure from the wildly popular fairy-tale adaptations, Chorpenning brought the temper of her times to children's theatre in order to turn her audience into listeners as well. "Now I have made you wise," chant the children.

A Letter to Santa Claus was a story told for only two weeks in late 1938. There are no funny flickering images of its existence, no scenes that we can watch over and over, as we can watch Shirley Temple's Sara Crewe coming into her transformed attic to marvel at her lovely new things ("It's true! I've touched them all and they're as real as we are") and kiss her father out of his amnesia. *A Letter to Santa Claus* exists as web traces pointing to an absent production, one of six playscripts in Lowell Swortzell's *Six Plays for Young People from the Federal Theatre Project*, and as a manuscript in a box in the Library of Congress. And yet the story speaks to our times. If Rahv catalogued his fears by reciting the headlines of the day, in our time the shadows have sometimes seemed to lie in the absence of images: American soldiers coming home at night in flag-shrouded coffins; empty factories in the upper Midwest; horrors in the villages of Darfur and in the cities of Syria; torture in secret prisons. Images we do see strike us as the shadows of broad narratives whose logic eludes us: bodies floating in New Orleans; beheadings in featureless rooms; starvation in Zimbabwe; a hooded prisoner with arms outstretched in aching, awful mimicry of the Christ pose.

Meanwhile, elections are waged by spectacle and sound bite as the news loops endless stories of celebrity trials (and tribulations) and private agonies writ large. Todd Gitlin writes that media culture saturates our lives because it answers our need to feel, and that while various media experiences may generate different kinds of feelings,

Deep emotion would incapacitate you for feeling the next frisson. . . . The kinds of feelings and sensations we have from television, popular music, video games, the Internet . . . these feelings are transitory and they are in a sense each a preparation for the next. If we were deeply satisfied, we wouldn't need the next. But we do need the next—or we feel we do.¹¹

This is the series of sensations Benjamin ascribed to watching film, and that were harnessed by fascist Germany to connect the individual to the state. It is the feeling evoked by the innocent child whose presence still consoles us in the loss of our own innocence and reassures us of the innocence of our nation. It is, ultimately, a preparation for feeling that can never be—the constant tease of desire. Unabashedly unironic, *A Letter to Santa Claus*, like other plays in this study, speaks to our times with an earnestness our media culture ascribes to the realm of childhood.

What will make us wise, indeed?