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978-0-521-82259-6 - The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study

Barry B. Witham

Excerpt

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Introduction

Imagine a new play on Broadway in 1985 subsidized by the United States Congress urging support for the Contra movement in Nicaragua. Imagine the outcry and the storm of controversy. Imagine a similar production in 1999, funded by the Democratic Administration, exposing the sins of the Microsoft Corporation and demanding that the company be broken up for the benefit of the American economy, especially for those companies competing with Microsoft. Imagine the furor. Now recall *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937) with its pro-union agenda as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) sought to organize “Little Steel.” Or *Power*, the same year, propagandizing for government control of public utilities and direct competition with private enterprise. Recall *Big White Fog* (1938) peopled with African Americans advocating communism as the only alternative to racism and a bankrupt capitalist system.

The Federal Theatre Project, which mounted these three latter works, was a unique and influential experiment in American theatre; not just for its outspoken politics, but because it reimagined the very way that theatre was produced in the United States. For the first time in the history of the country theatre was subsidized by the federal government, a practice with widespread precedents in Europe and Asia, but one that was totally out of step with free enterprise business practice and a culture which had banned plays in its Second Continental Congress. Between 1935 and 1939 the United States provided more than 45 million dollars to pay the salaries of actors, directors, designers, technicians and others so they could produce plays. Classics, new works, marionette shows, dance programs, even circuses were performed under the banner of Federal Theatre. And while it would be remembered most for some of its “leftist” productions, they actually made up only a small sampling of the total repertoire: a repertoire that was performed in tents, on make-shift stages in school cafeterias, in CCC

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[More information](#)

(Civilian Conservation Corps) dining rooms, in Broadway theatres and on the radio. From high school auditoriums in Florida to outdoor theatres on the banks of the Columbia River in Oregon, millions of Americans saw thousands of productions.

The Federal Theatre Project was established by an Act of Congress in 1935 as part of a comprehensive welfare program administered by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Along with similar programs in art, music and writing, the theatre unit was designated as Federal One in the WPA hierarchy. The specific goal of Federal Theatre was to reemploy theatre artists who were victims of the economic crisis precipitated by the Great Depression. The philosophy guiding the program – as with all WPA endeavors – was work-relief. That is, participants were paid a specific monthly wage by the Federal government for working in the professions in which they were trained. Wages were targeted specifically for labor, however, and thus other costs of producing theatre such as materials for scenery, costumes and lighting – as well as advertising and publicity – were passed along to the private sector.

The director of the project was Hallie Flanagan Davis, Head of the Theatre program at Vassar College and former Grinnell classmate of Roosevelt's WPA chief, Harry Hopkins. Flanagan had attended George Pierce Baker's famous Workshop 47 at Harvard and had won a Guggenheim grant in 1926 which allowed her to tour Europe seeing contemporary theatre. She had gained considerable prominence in the college-art theatre scene because of her work at Vassar and because of the popularity of her original play, *Can You Hear Their Voices?* (written with Margaret Ellen Clifford) which had been produced at several regional American theatres. While Flanagan was not a product of America's highly visible commercial theatre, she was widely respected, and at the time of her appointment she had been offered a prestigious position in Dartington, England, which she declined in order to work for Harry Hopkins. Flanagan was energetic, dynamic and ambitious. Like many of her contemporaries, she was also idealistic about the power of the arts to compel and humanize. She believed in the *idea* of a Federal Theatre and was excited about its potential to entertain and to instruct. It had the power in her imagination to transform both the kind of the theatre for which Americans yearned and the audience who would benefit from that transformation.

The plan was flawed, of course, because the government money came with significant complications. In order to be eligible for the theatre payroll, people had to qualify for unemployment: that is, the real test of their theatrical talent was often their relief status. There were exceptions.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

3

Individual units could “exempt” up to 10 percent of their employees from this relief qualification in order to address specific requirements of production and to insure a degree of “professionalism.” But Federal Theatre would always host a struggle between those who were “right for the part” and those who qualified for relief. In addition, production costs for essential items such as paint and canvas had to be raised at the local level. The hope was that, like other WPA projects, local businesses or communities would “sponsor” individual projects and help to defray production expenses. That too was a stumbling block, especially for units outside large metropolitan areas. Eventually box office receipts – which were supposed to go back to the government – were approved for essential nonlabor expenses.

Flanagan insisted that the theatre be professional. She wanted it to reflect the highest quality of American talent and did not want to settle for amateur theatrics. And she wanted it to be truly national. Actors, for example, were discouraged from crossing state lines to apply for welfare because Flanagan wanted to decentralize the project. Good actors were needed in every state, not just New York or Los Angeles. On the other hand, scripts, lighting instruments and other materials could be widely borrowed back and forth among the units in order to reach as “professional” a look as possible. Many scoffed at the very notion of a government-run theatre, supervised by an “amateur” college professor and peopled with unemployed “actors,” who might or might not qualify for welfare.

But in 1936, when Flanagan was able to accomplish her simultaneous openings of Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* in eighteen cities across the country, notice was served that the project might just work in spite of all its inherent problems and demands. Lewis’s best-selling novel – adapted for the stage by the author – was a Federal Theatre hit, and its multiple productions constituted the equivalent of a five-year Broadway run. Flanagan was instrumental in organizing, supervising and insisting that the production open on time and as advertised. She was talented, tenacious and absolutely masterful at losing battles so that she could win the war. Harry Hopkins had promised her a hands-off stance by the government in terms of play choice and production values, for example, but she struggled with censorship from the very first moments on the job. The government canceled her initial Living Newspaper, *Ethiopia*, because they did not want current heads of foreign governments (such as Mussolini or Haile Salassie) represented on the stage. Elmer Rice, her regional director in New York, resigned in protest of such blatant interference, but Flanagan bided her time and within two years the Living Newspapers were hailed even by her critics.¹ She fought the Stagehands and the other powerful theatrical unions and accommodated

their demands. She battled the radicals and communists who wanted to hijack the project for their own ideological aims and made them back down.

The Federal Theatre did not fail. It was stopped. And that's an important distinction. By many criteria it succeeded beyond expectations, perhaps even beyond Hallie Flanagan's. In a depressed economy the Federal One (the Arts Projects) programs provided jobs for the workers in the arts just as its parent organization, WPA, provided jobs for workers on the roads and in the forests. In dozens of cities across the United States actors, directors, designers and stage hands were paid a weekly wage by the federal government to produce plays. And thousands of those plays were shown *free* to their audiences. Other productions had modest admission fees, fees that were eventually funneled into production costs. For a program that was routinely characterized in the press and public media as "boondoggling," it is instructive to remember that federal theatres earned \$2,018,775 at their box offices.²

It was a national theatre not only because it was located in many states but because it aspired to reach out to a wider audience and to represent their experiences on the stage. Children, workers, Jews, Hispanics and African Americans were all part of the vision and the demographics of the Federal Theatre. In an audience survey conducted in Seattle during the run of *Help Yourself* in 1937 nearly 70 percent of the respondents characterized themselves as "Office or Trades and Manual laborers" and specified their jobs as laundryman, cigarmaker, maid, barber, gardener, etc.³ The Negro units, in spite of the controversy surrounding their leadership and control, were ground-breaking institutions in the American theatre whose influence and accomplishments are still being evaluated.

The Federal Theatre was dangerous and an affront to many. Perhaps that is why some of its critics were so hostile and its reviews so vitriolic. Here is George Jean Nathan in 1938:

at least three-quarters of the younger people who have been living off it are spongers and grafters and no more deserving of charity from this particular source than they are deserving of Civil War pensions or Congressional dispensations of *pate de foie gras*. They have clearly demonstrated that they have nothing to give to the theatre – whether in the way of playwriting, producing, acting or scene painting – beyond a puissant and understandable itch to shine in easy and romantic jobs. With no faintest competence whatsoever, and infinitely better suited to humbler and more prosaic work, they are simply stagestruck and theatre struck loafers, and the Federal Theatre Project recklessly affords them opportunity to pleasure their fatuous whim.⁴

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

For the Broadway crowd they were amateurs. For the unions they were scabbers and a threat to their closed shops. For many of their WPA colleagues they were lazy bums. And for many politicians – at both the federal and local level – they were a visible threat to America, especially American capitalism.

So, when the inevitable congressional attacks came, and the enemies of the project marshaled their forces, there was an impassioned public performance. From Martin Dies, the head of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, to Representative Rush Holt or Senator Everett Dirksen, no charge was too absurd, no analysis too grotesque. In fact, almost as much has been written about the *auto-da-fé* of the project's final days as the productions themselves. And this has unfortunately obscured appraisals of the very genuine accomplishments of Federal Theatre – especially outside New York City. The “A” list of their alumni and accomplishments has been well rehearsed: Orson Welles, John Houseman, Marc Blitzstein, Abe Feder, etc.; *Murder in the Cathedral*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *One-Third of a Nation*. But what of the *thousands* of other productions from Portland, Maine to San Diego? From Miami to San Francisco? How did Federal Theatre operate in the hundreds of communities that were not New York, Chicago or Los Angeles?⁵

I began this inquiry with those questions, and over the course of a decade and a half my research journey took me to Washington, DC several times, to the Library of Congress and the National Archives, to the FDR Library at Hyde Park and to George Mason University in Virginia, as well as state and local historical societies. I eventually decided to use the Seattle unit as a focal point for this study because I was fortunate enough to turn up a great deal of information in Seattle, as well as to interview people who had worked on the project there. Seattle was important because it survived to the final days and thus illuminated all of the tensions and contradictions that were played out across the country. It was by no means the most “successful” or largest unit, but it did embody nearly all the programs which characterized the whole enterprise and provides a vivid snapshot of the work. In addition to producing FTP plays, it developed a thriving CCC touring group, successfully completed the research programs which Flanagan prized, developed a theatre for children and had one of the most acclaimed Negro companies.

Although remote from the power struggles in Washington DC and New York City, Seattle was an active participant in the day-by-day operation of the project: the ongoing requests to raise the exemption quotas so that actors who were not on welfare could be cast in pivotal roles, the constant struggle with the state and local WPA personnel who were both part of the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

project and exempt from some of its chain of command, the never-ending search for local sponsorship to help cover the costs for advertising and other expenses. Operating within the framework of the WPA agenda and struggling constantly to accommodate regional and local interest and impulses, Seattle is a unique lens for examining the complex character of Federal Theatre and for illuminating its multiple dreams and disappointments.

Imagine, then, *Stevedore* in 1936 with its sweeping and passionate call for black and white dock workers to unite against corruption and capitalist exploitation. Imagine its production in Seattle in the aftermath of a waterfront strike when the aroused longshoremen came out of the audience to help the actors build the barricades for the play's climactic struggle. There, thousands of miles from Washington, DC and New York City, was the embodiment of Flanagan's dream of a national theatre. As the *idea* of racism was contested and then submerged in the power of the Sklar and Peter's script, the actual representation of black and white unity was enacted on the stage with such fervor that the lines between audience and actor were blurred. "Dangerous theatre," Flanagan was fond of saying. And here it was dangerous and *alive*. Alive with the possibilities of forging a new national audience, in Loren Kruger's phrase, "out of diverse and divided regions, classes and ethnicities," and invigorated by a "promiscuous mixing of art and politics, uplift and agitation."⁶

I

A showboat for the people

Edwin O'Connor was convinced that a showboat could save Federal Theatre in Seattle. Since his appointment as acting director in 1937, O'Connor had become increasingly frustrated with the problems of finding sufficient performing spaces and now, in late November 1938, the small movie house that the WPA had allotted them was due for demolition by the highway department. With it would go their already cramped shop and storage spaces.

They had performed, like so many of the units that had survived the economic purge of June 1937, in rented halls, gymnasiums, parks, CCC camps and legitimate road houses. But even those were becoming problematic. The big downtown Seattle houses such as the Metropolitan and the Moore were happy to have Federal Theatre for two or three weeks but would not make space available on a regular schedule. Moreover, high school principals were refusing auditoriums to O'Connor because they were anxious about the WPA affiliation and "therefore administration propaganda."¹

O'Connor was energetic and persuasive. He would turn 42 in December, and he spent many hours in rehearsals and completing Federal Theatre paperwork. He had been transferred to Seattle from Los Angeles, and while at first uncomfortable with the unit, he wanted Seattle theatre to be respected and his title to be permanent. He had done his homework and was now preparing a proposal which would call for the WPA to build his theatre a permanent floating home.

Throughout the fall of 1938 O'Connor visited the Seattle docks and marine shops talking to engineers, sailors and salvage operators. At first he posed as an entrepreneur interested in acquiring a ship for his own theatricals, but gradually he befriended a group of workers who seemed sympathetic to his mission, and he was able to use his WPA connections to speak to labor leaders and sympathetic union personnel. He studied maritime regulations and abandoned the idea of a power-driven ship since

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this would require three daily shifts of crew. A boat that was towed by a tug would be immensely cheaper, especially if he could convince the Coast Guard, as a sponsoring government agency, to pull them around for free.

At the urging of several maritime officers, he began looking for a hull rather than a working boat, because it would be much less expensive to begin from scratch rather than pay for the disemboweling of the engine, tanks and decks. He discovered that wood was cheaper than metal because steel hulls were required to be drydocked for scraping every year, while comparable wooden ones were scraped every five years. He trudged from dock to dock seeking an appropriate vessel. "Who says hulls can't be found," he wrote to Ole Ness. "I found seven of them and one of them ideal for our purpose. These seven are old, but seaworthy, and the gentleman who owns them has stripped them of all iron, which incidentally is going to Japan."²

O'Connor had worked as a lighting designer and stage manager during his apprentice years with the Rachel Crothers and Leon De Casta companies in New York, and he was confident of his drawing and design skills. Again, to save money he prepared elaborate designs and drawings of his proposed showboat which he planned to present to Federal Theatre officials. He envisioned a boat that would seat up to approximately 600 people. The lower deck would house the stage and auditorium, and the upper deck would be partitioned into approximately forty small sleeping rooms which could also double as make-up and dressing spaces. In this arrangement O'Connor was convinced that they could troupe fifty people, taking out everything from musical reviews to Living Newspapers such as *Power* and *One-Third of a Nation*.

He envisioned a route which would take advantage of Seattle's lakes and canals as well as the vast expanse of Puget Sound. Moving from town to town in short hops and playing mostly one-night stands, O'Connor was confident that he would be able to fill the seats for a seventy-three-night season. His itinerary was ambitious, moving from the comfortable calms of Lake Washington through the Straits of Juan Difuca and down the Pacific coast to the treacherous inlet of the Columbia river. His enthusiasm is evident in the letters that he wrote to his supervisors. "I would like to see it done in real show boat fashion. That is not to be too dignified to ballyhoo. A real gaudy show boat painted in WPA colors, covered with colorful WPA and Federal Theatre flags and colored lights, and on docking the old calliope as an attraction."³

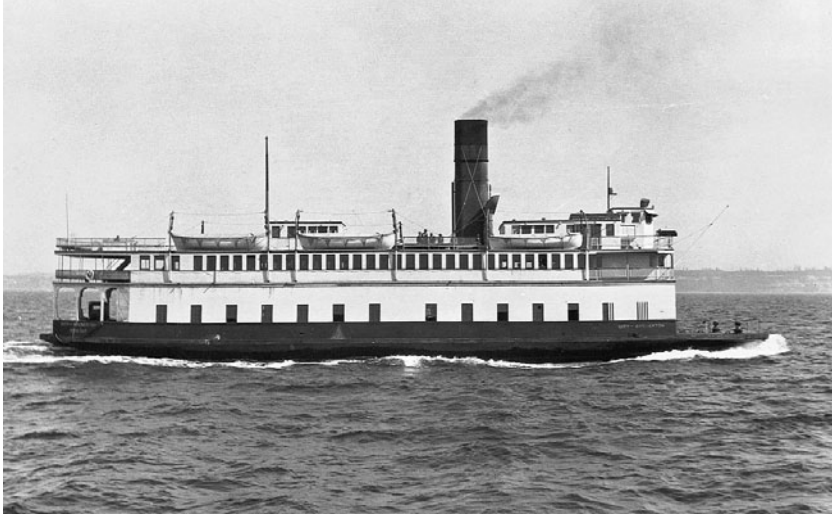
As for funding, O'Connor also thought it could be done at a bargain. He had no reservation about finding local sponsorship, and because of the sleeping accommodations provided by the boat, he estimated that the regular

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[More information](#)

1 The ferry *City of Bremerton*. This was Edwin O'Connor's choice to convert into a Federal Theatre showboat.

\$3 per diem could easily be cut in half and passed on to local sponsors. That, along with towing charges (if he could not enlist the Coast Guard), would make them an extremely attractive and affordable package. Moreover, he believed that they might be able to go out without sponsorship, if necessary, and keep all the receipts for themselves, thus making the project self-supporting.

Of course, the boat and the remodeling were certain to be costly, but O'Connor believed that they would be able to negotiate for the hull and use WPA labor for the refitting. His first choice was a former ferry, *The City of Bremerton*, for which he had been quoted \$1,000, but which he thought he could acquire for half that. His estimate for the remodel was approximately \$5,000, with lumber and heavy equipment acquired through government discount and using WPA architects and engineers. In addition, he requested that WPA construct on an appropriate Seattle dock a frame building which would be large enough for shops, rehearsal and offices. It need not be anything elaborate, O'Connor reasoned. "A sort of barrack effect . . . a Pacific coast Provincetown Playhouse."⁴ Even if his figures were high, he wrote, it would still be cheaper than playing in an uptown theatre and acquiring comparable headquarters and facilities for another year.

O'Connor's proposal was greeted enthusiastically in Washington, DC. Hallie Flanagan was committed to saving as many of the regional units

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

of the enterprise as she could. By 1938 the South was gone. In spite of heroic efforts by many now obscure workers in Birmingham, Atlanta and Tallahassee, Federal Theatre had not been able to overcome the bureaucracy of overlapping WPA agencies and the deeply rooted apartheid system. In the North and West almost all the projects outside of New York, Chicago and Los Angeles were struggling to stay afloat because the rigid spending restrictions created barricades to advertisement, nonrelief casting and quality productions. Flanagan's hope was that increased emphasis on plays about regional concerns as well as projects which would endear Federal Theatre to local sponsorships would be a stimulant to saving the national character of the whole venture. A year earlier she had written to George Kondolf in Chicago that the Federal Theatre had to be a national program and not two or three big metropolitan shows. She encouraged imaginative thinking, touring and satellite programs such as puppetry and dance.⁵ She hoped that touring would give the project a public relations boost as well as combat the perception that Federal Theatre was not carrying its message to rural America. WPA officials had approved a national touring plan in April 1938, and Flanagan envisioned a production of *Prologue to Glory* – E.P. Conkle's dramatization of the life of young Abe Lincoln – on a grand tour co-sponsored by the Shubert organization. But the theatrical unions protested, and touring plans bogged down in red tape and labor squabbles. By September 1938 regional touring, however, was still seen as a way of building an audience for Federal Theatre, and Flanagan was anxious to implement it. But even these plans grew contentious. John McGee, for example, had developed an ambitious Midwest plan using Chicago as a hub, but he was confounded by the number of permissions he had to obtain and eventually abandoned the idea. Jane Mathews describes his frustration:

According to procedure worked out in July, companies would be permitted to tour, provided that permission had been obtained from the regional director of the Federal Theatre, the state administrator in whose state the touring company originated, the state administrator in whose state the company wished to play, and the regional administrator of the Women's and Professional Division. Now Ellen Woodward further insisted that each state administrator also be consulted about each specific playing date within his state and that his approval be telephoned or telegraphed to Washington. To McGee it was utter nonsense. Furious over this "idiotic duplication of approvals," he notified Howard Miller that he would not move a single company out of Chicago until someone had enough "common sense" to cut through this crippling mass of red tape.⁶