



# *Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)*

contexte & enjeux / context & issues



Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

II. The First Federal Summer Theatre: Training Ground for “a New, Imaginative Theatre” · Michael Farrell

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Le *Federal Theatre Project (FTP)* constitue une aventure singulière dans l'histoire du théâtre américain, inédite à l'époque et jamais réitérée sous cette forme. Dirigé pendant ses quatre années d'existence, de 1935 à 1939, par l'autrice, dramaturge et metteuse en scène Hallie Flanagan, il s'inscrit dans l'ensemble des mesures mises en place par l'administration Roosevelt dans le cadre du programme du *New Deal*, au sein de la *Work Progress Administration (WPA)* dirigée par Harry Hopkins. *Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939): contexte et enjeux* constitue la première étude française d'envergure sur cette période essentielle de l'histoire du théâtre américain. En mêlant approches transversales et études de cas, ce volume rassemblant les contributions de chercheuses, chercheurs et artistes se propose de mettre en lumière les angles morts et les figures oubliées de cette période de l'histoire théâtrale américaine, faisant le pari que ces oublis eux-mêmes racontent quelque chose de l'historiographie de cette période et, en retour, des regards contemporains que nous pouvons porter sur elle. L'ouvrage s'inscrit dans une perspective résolument transdisciplinaire, à l'image de ce que fut le *FTP*, en proposant des articles sur le théâtre à proprement parler mais aussi la musique et le cinéma.

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) is a singular adventure in the history of American theater, unprecedented at the time and never repeated at such. Headed during its four years of existence, from 1935 to 1939, by the author, playwright and director Hallie Flanagan, it is part of the program set by the Roosevelt administration as part of the New Deal, within the Work Progress Administration (WPA) directed by Harry Hopkins. *Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939): Context and Issues* is the first French volume on this essential period in the history of American theater. By combining cross-disciplinary approaches and case studies, this volume, which brings together contributions from researchers and artists, aims to shed light on the blind spots and forgotten figures of this period of American theatrical history, considering that these omissions themselves tell us something about the historiography of this period and, in turn, about the contemporary views we can take on it. The book is resolutely transdisciplinary, as was the FTP, with articles on theater itself, but also on music and film.

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DEUXIÈME PARTIE

**Le théâtre de la crise :  
croiser les échelles et les esthétiques**



THE FIRST FEDERAL SUMMER THEATRE:  
TRAINING GROUND FOR “A NEW, IMAGINATIVE THEATRE”

*Herman Farrell*  
*University of Kentucky*

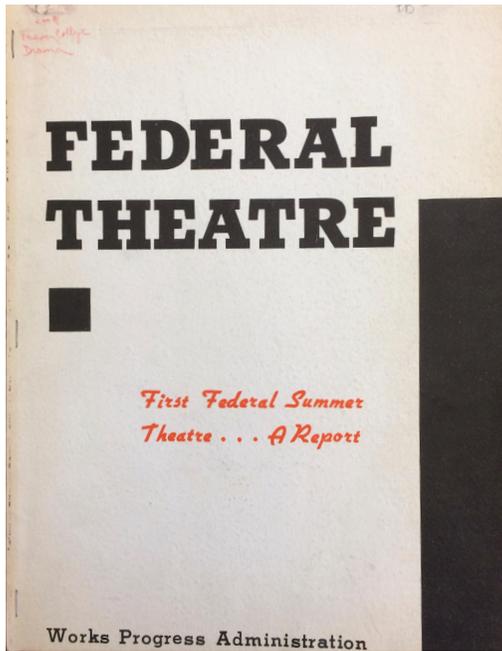
In the summer of 1937, the First Federal Summer Theatre was convened at Vassar College by Hallie Flanagan, Director of the Federal Theatre Project. The conference was titled “The First” in anticipation of its continuation in future summers. Unfortunately, it was also the last federal summer theatre training institute of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). Two years later, the entire relief program for theatre artists was suddenly shut down by the US Congress, due to conservative political backlash against the perceived leftist leanings of the Federal Theater Project.

At its inception in 1937, Flanagan’s initial stated purpose was to provide a retraining institute for theater artists and technicians from FTP units across America and to produce a Living Newspaper production at the end of the 6-week session. But as the summer conference unfolded, it became more apparent that she was also intent on using the conference as an opportunity to raise the quality of the shows that were being presented on the FTP stages, by introducing the 45 conference participants to emerging modern methodologies and theories, challenging them to step out of their comfort zones and embrace aesthetic innovation, and, encouraging them to consider treating a theatrical production as a laboratory for experimentation, with the ultimate and cumulative objective of fostering the development of “a new, imaginative theater” in America.<sup>1</sup>

This article retraces well-trod terrain. Multiple primary and secondary sources, historical accounts, biographies, and critical studies have treated the 1937 summer conference, providing similar brief descriptions of its purpose (retraining) and outcome (the Living Newspaper workshop production), without further elaboration.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Lorraine A. Brown, “Introduction: The Federal Theatre Project and Research Collection,” in *The Federal Theatre Project: A Catalog-Calendar*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1986, p. xix.
- 2 Jane DeHart Matthews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1967; Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage*, New York, Oxford UP, 1974; Tony Buttita and Barry Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents*, Philadelphia, U of Pennsylvania P, 1982; John O’Connor and Lorraine Brown (eds.), *The Federal Theatre Project “Free, Adult,*

A few accounts provide more detail. The first, and most extensive rendering of the event, “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre... A Report,”<sup>3</sup> is a formal, 40-page booklet that was produced by the official chroniclers of the FTP within a few months of the end of the summer session (fig. 1). In 1940, a year after the FTP was eliminated by Congress, the Director Hallie Flanagan wrote her own historical account of the national theater organization in her book *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre*,<sup>4</sup> that included a lengthy section on the summer conference. And in 1988, the biography *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre*, by Joanne Bentley,<sup>5</sup> provided further insight into the day-to-day activities and interpersonal drama of the events at Vassar in the summer of 1937.



1. First Federal Summer Theatre Report, Cover Page,  
Works Progress Administration, Federal Theatre National Publications, 1937.

*Uncensored*,” London, Eyre Methuen, 1980; C.W.E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century Drama, 1900-1940*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1982; Barry B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003; Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, New York, Walker, 2008.

3 “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre... A Report,” Works Progress Administration, Federal Theatre National Publications, 1937.

4 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Benjamin Blom, 1940.

5 Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, New York, Knopf, 1988.

This article, however, breaks new ground, by bringing forth archival research from the [Hallie Flanagan Papers](#) of the Special Collections Library of Vassar College,<sup>6</sup> but more importantly, the “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation on The Federal Summer Theatre,”<sup>7</sup> a 120-page comprehensive treatment of the activities of the summer conference that was completed in December of 1937 by a theater professor who was commissioned to evaluate the conference by the Rockefeller Foundation, a key sponsor of the summer institute. The report, housed at the [Rockefeller Archive Center](#), has not been mentioned by scholars, until now.

This article, drawing on all of these sources, sheds new light on the process, conflicts, and accomplishments of the Federal Summer Theater Conference of 1937, and most significantly, it provides a clearer understanding of Hallie Flanagan’s evolving objectives in convening the summer retreat. As we examine this particular moment in the history of the Federal Theatre Project, that lands dead center in the chronological middle of its short four-year life span, we will gain more insight as to the critical and pivotal role that the summer conference played in the ensuing two years of the FTP’s existence, and, perhaps, come to appreciate the long-lasting impact of the First Federal Summer Theatre at Vassar.

## NEW DEAL PROGRAMS: WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION AND FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was sworn in as President of the United States on March 4, 1933, and immediately went to work enacting his New Deal program of legislative initiatives in order to address the devastating consequences of the Great Depression that had begun in 1929, when the Stock Market crashed. In the first 100 days of his administration, the Democratic-controlled Congress passed, and the President signed into law, banking and securities regulations that helped stabilize the financial industry and the U.S. economy and they also created the Public Works Administration that infused the nation with monetary support for infrastructure improvements, and more importantly, provided millions of jobs for out of work construction industry workers.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Hallie Flanagan Papers, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.

7 Virginia Heinlein, “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation on the Federal Summer Theatre,” Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Tarrytown, New York, Rockefeller Archive Center, 1937.

8 Jonathan Alter, *The Defining Moment*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2006.

Two years later, after a strong showing among Democrats in the 1934 mid-term elections, Roosevelt expanded his New Deal program to include the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in order to widen the scope and reach of back-to-work efforts across the nation.<sup>9</sup> In early 1935, Roosevelt's confidante, Harry Hopkins, was appointed Director of the WPA, and within a few months of taking office, Hopkins drafted plans to create work opportunities for unemployed artists and writers, via the four, newly-created Arts Projects in writing, music, art and theatre. Hopkins immediately tapped Henry Alsberg, a journalist, to run the Writers Project; Nikolai Sokoloff, a symphony orchestra conductor, to head the Music Project; and Holger Cahill, a folk art expert, to head the Art Project. He then turned to the Theater Project. In the spring of 1935, Hopkins invited Hallie Flanagan to Washington, D.C., to consider running the Theatre Project.<sup>10</sup>

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Hallie Flanagan was, at that point, a professor of theater at Vassar College and the founder and artistic director of the Vassar Experimental Theater. Hopkins had heard of her because of her nationally recognized record of theatrical achievements at the prestigious women's college, her education at Harvard, her participation in the National Theater Conference, her book *Shifting Scenes*, but also, notably, their shared alma mater, Grinnell College in Iowa.<sup>11</sup>

On her 45th birthday, Flanagan met with Hopkins in his office and was provided with key information about the objectives and parameters of the FTP. Notably, she was informed that work-relief was to be the main, if not the only, priority of the FTP.<sup>12</sup> She was told to spend most of her budget on artists not administrators, production costs or advertisements. The majority of the government funds dedicated to the FTP were to be dedicated to employing theater artists and technicians. Flanagan was informed that, "90% of the money allotted to FTP had to be spent on salaries." The remaining 10% would be dedicated to the other necessities of theatrical production, including administration, materials and marketing.<sup>13</sup>

She then went to the White House to meet with the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. Prior to his election as President, Franklin Roosevelt had served as Governor of the State of New York and the Roosevelts lived most of their lives in New Hyde Park, only a few miles away from Vassar in Poughkeepsie, and he had previously served on the

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9 S. Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, *op. cit.*, p.42.

10 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.188-89.

11 *Ibid.*, pp.185-86.

12 *Ibid.*, pp.188-89.

13 J. O'Connor and L. Brown, *The Federal Theatre Project*, *op. cit.*, p.7; B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, *op. cit.*, p.2.

Board of Trustees of the college. So, they were aware of Flanagan's work with the Vassar Experimental Theater, where she introduced her students and audiences to modern-era theatrical trends in expressionism, surrealism and constructivism that were emerging on the European continent.<sup>14</sup>

In *Arena*, Flanagan recounted the White House encounter where Mrs. Roosevelt spoke about the work at Vassar which led to a question from the First Lady: "Your ambitious productions [...] weren't they staged with little expense? Wouldn't it be possible to do similar productions which would look well without spending much money?" Flanagan responded that, indeed, her budgets were small, did not involve expensive sets, "relying scenically chiefly upon light," and the costs of labor were minimal because of student actors and crew.<sup>15</sup>

Flanagan also recalled that Roosevelt "asked a number of questions about my observations of government theatres abroad."<sup>16</sup> Back in 1926, not long after she began working at Vassar in the English Department, Flanagan was given a prestigious Guggenheim Foundation grant to explore the burgeoning field of modern dramatists in Europe. As a result, Vassar gave her a one-year leave to visit the theaters of London, Dublin, Rome, Dresden, and Moscow.<sup>17</sup> Upon her return, she wrote and eventually published, in 1928, her "dramatic diary of a year spent in European theatres," entitled *Shifting Scenes*<sup>18</sup> where she, among other things, described the national theaters of Europe and the governmental support for the arts. In the book, Flanagan noted an encounter with the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello, who suggested that a national theater for Italy would have to be regional and not centralized. Pirandello stated: "What I hope to do is to establish three national theatres, at Milan, Rome, and Turin, and possible a fourth at Naples," in order to "raise the entire dramatic tone of Italy."<sup>19</sup>

Two days after the White House visit, Flanagan accepted the job and immediately went to work hiring staff and creating various units of the Federal Theatre Project that included regional companies across the country. Flanagan later recalled, "in the central conception what was immediately needed was a knowledge of the United States. I was glad at this point that I knew my country," noting that she was born in South Dakota, educated in Iowa and Massachusetts, and had traveled throughout the country to big

14 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan, op. cit.*, p.188.

15 H. Flanagan, *Arena, op. cit.*, pp.11-12.

16 *Ibid.*, p.12; J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan, op. cit.*, p.188.

17 *Ibid.*, pp.48-50.

18 Hallie Flanagan, *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre*, New York, Coward-McCann, 1928.

19 *Ibid.*, pp.256-57.

cities and small ones. Flanagan continued: “I studied the map and the plan developed: five great regional theatres—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, possibly Boston, possibly New Orleans, each one a production center for a professional company.”<sup>20</sup>

Flanagan was mirroring Pirandello’s idea of a decentralized, region-based, theater that was federal in its organization but national in its mission. Jane DeHart Matthews, author of the first major history of the Federal Theater Project, described it as a “regionally centered national theatre.”<sup>21</sup> But Flanagan did not give Pirandello sole credit for the idea. In *Arena*, she noted that “[t]he idea of a regional theatre in some form had been in the minds of many people for many years,” identifying several fellow American academics, and the acclaimed theater director Kenneth Macgowan, who had written about the national regional idea in his 1929 book *Footlights Across America: Towards a National Theatre*.<sup>22</sup>

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Beyond the regional companies, Flanagan also established organizational divisions: the living newspaper; the popular-price theatre, presenting new plays by new authors; the experimental theatre; the commercial try-out theatre; and ethnic and race-based units, including, for example, the Yiddish, Cuban, and Black theatre units.<sup>23</sup> Those various FTP units went immediately to work in hiring theater and performance artists, back-stage crew and front of house staff, 11,000 in total, by the end of 1936, who went on to produce numerous plays, revues, vaudeville shows, marionette and children’s performances to 15 million viewers by the close of that first year of the Federal Theatre Project.<sup>24</sup>

Early 1937 in America was marked by Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s second inauguration that signified the peak of his political power. Roosevelt had successfully staved off conservative opposition in the 1936 election providing him and his administration with a vote of confidence in his New Deal programs, including the WPA, and, tacitly, the FTP.<sup>25</sup>

Public support for the administration, and its agenda, though, soon waned, when President Roosevelt introduced legislation in Congress to increase the number of justices on the United States Supreme Court. During the previous four-year term, the

20 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.21-22.

21 Jane DeHart Matthews, *The Federal Theatre 1935-1939*, *op. cit.*, p.40.

22 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.22; Kenneth Macgowan, *Footlights Across America*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1929.

23 C.W.E. Bigsby, *Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*, *op. cit.*, p.212.

24 1937 Memorandum, “Scope of the Project’s Activities in Nation-Wide Bases,” Rockefeller Foundation Records, Record Group 56.1, Series 200R, FA#386A, Box 289, Folder 3462, Tarrytown, New York, Rockefeller Archives Center.

25 S. Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, *op. cit.*, p.42.

Supreme Court had overturned several key New Deal legislative initiatives, holding that they were unconstitutional. In order to combat these decisions that stood in the way of his New Deal program, Roosevelt sought, early in his second term, to alter the composition of the court of last resort by increasing the number of justices within it. This so-called “court-packing scheme” faced fierce opposition in Congress and, more importantly, in the right-wing press of the period, that led to Roosevelt’s loss of support among the people and, more importantly, a decision by Congress to punish Roosevelt by calling for deep cuts in his proposed 1937 budget.<sup>26</sup>

The impact of all of this on the WPA and the FTP, unfortunately, was immediate. As Bentley notes, by mid-1937, “[a] greatly strengthened anti-New Deal coalition [in Congress] proposed to cut the WPA spending by 25 percent.”<sup>27</sup>

## PLANNING FOR THE CONFERENCE AT VASSAR

Despite the turmoil in Washington, Flanagan, from her headquarters in New York City, moved forward with her plans to convene key FTP personnel from across the country at a summer session in Poughkeepsie. The site was chosen, obviously, because of Flanagan’s connection to Vassar. She first reached out to the President of Vassar, Henry Noble McCracken, and by April was given permission by him and the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees to stage the conference at Vassar.<sup>28</sup> McCracken and Flanagan had a long history of collaboration and mutual admiration. The college president had hired Flanagan back in 1925, not long after the Grinnell College graduate had completed a post-graduate course in playwriting at Harvard, under the tutelage of George Pierce Baker.<sup>29</sup> She was brought to Vassar to teach playwriting and dramatic production in the English Department and it was McCracken who enthusiastically supported her one-year sabbatical in Europe, only after one year of employment. McCracken also endorsed her idea of founding the Vassar Experimental Theater, upon her return, so that she could put into practice many of the innovative theories that she was exposed to during her time in Europe.<sup>30</sup>

Flanagan also put together a formal proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation. The federal government would pay the salaries of the FTP personnel who attended the

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.156-57.

<sup>27</sup> J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.256.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Henry Noble McCracken to David H. Stevens, April 15, 1937, Rockefeller Foundation Records, *loc. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.37-45.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.91-112.

conference, and Vassar would provide the facilities and the conference faculty and staff support, but money was needed to cover the production costs, travel to and from the conference, by all of the 45 participants, from as far away as Oregon and California, and support for additional hires and invited lecturers and speakers. Within six weeks of her application, the Rockefeller Foundation reported that they would provide \$10,500 for the Federal Summer Theatre at Vassar. Without this support, that was substantial in those days, the conference would not have been national in scope.<sup>31</sup>

174 In her pitch to Vassar and the Rockefeller Foundation, Flanagan emphasized the educational aspect of the conference. It was clearly going to be a “re-training” institute for the conference participants. The retraining, Flanagan asserted, would be focused on technological innovations. Interestingly, there was no mention, in her funding application, of notions of art or artistry. This was cautious work on her part. Over the preceding two years she had received pushback from conservative and leftist forces when she publicly discussed the possibility of broadening the limited scope of the FTP, that Congress determined, in its budget allocation, was for the sole function of putting unemployed theater artists back to work. As Bentley recounts:

When Hallie made a public statement early in 1937 that the “Federal Theatre had been established to provide a high type of theatrical entertainment for the people of America,” WPA officials jumped on her. No, they said, Federal Theatre had been established to “provide employment for needy theatrical people.” Interestingly, the WPA and the militant leaders of the Workers’ Alliance, so far apart on most issues, were in agreement on this one point: Federal Theatre should concentrate on providing relief.<sup>32</sup>

All of that said, by early June of 1937, when the official press statement regarding the summer conference was sent out, Flanagan, with the approval of McCracken and Stevens, let her true ambitions for the conference be known, remarking that the participants “will be brought together *for six weeks of experimentation in the field of theatre*, such work to be focused on a public production.”<sup>33</sup>

Flanagan was a true believer in experimentation and an advocate for the incorporation of new forms and new theories into American theatre-making. In her book *Shifting Scenes* she decried the old school drawing-room dramas of the London stage, while praising the call for new indigenous theaters, by Lady Gregory of Ireland,

31 Letter from Hallie Flanagan to David S. Stevens, March 27, 1937, Rockefeller Foundation Records, *loc. cit.*; see also S. Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, *op. cit.*, pp.226-227.

32 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.247.

33 Draft of Press Release, April 14, 1937, Rockefeller Foundation Records, *loc. cit.* (emphasis added).

and celebrating the challenging of notions of reality, by Pirandello in Italy.<sup>34</sup> She concurred with Edward Gordon Craig in his call for the rejection of well-lit painted scenery and box sets and embraced his innovative and stylized stage settings.<sup>35</sup> She championed the teachings of Stanislavsky's method training for actors, cheered the constructivism of Meyerhold and applauded the expressionistic techniques flourishing on German stages.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, in one of her most celebrated productions on the Vassar stage, soon after her return from Europe, she produced three versions of *The Marriage Proposal* by Anton Chekhov, in three distinct "manners"—realism, expressionism, constructivism.<sup>37</sup> In her presentation of these three distinct theatrical idioms, Flanagan was not necessarily advocating for any one particular stylistic choice, but challenging her audience, and other theater artists, to expand their aesthetic horizons. In her book *Dynamo*, the 1943 chronicle of her work in the Vassar Experimental Theatre, Flanagan, remarking on the Chekhov triptych, stated: "Any value of this experiment...is implicit less in the production itself than in the possibilities it suggests."<sup>38</sup>

In 1930s America, even with the innovations of O'Neill and Treadwell, Glaspell and Rice, of the previous decade, Flanagan's call for aesthetic change was a cry in the wilderness. So many theater practitioners were still steeped in their old-fashioned 19th-century ways. It was Hallie Flanagan's deep-seated desire to shift that paradigm. In a speech to her office staff, on the day she took office, she stated, emphatically:

We live in a changing world. Man is whispering through space, soaring to the stars, flinging miles of steel and glass into the air. Shall the theatre continue to huddle in the confines of a painted box set? The movies, in their kaleidoscopic speed and juxtaposition of external objects and internal emotions are seeking to find visible and audible expression for the tempo and the psychology of our time. *The stage too must experiment* with ideas, with the psychological relationship of men and women, with speech and rhythm forms, with dance and movement, with color and light—or it must and should become a museum product.<sup>39</sup>

34 H. Flanagan, *Shifting Scenes*, *op. cit.*, pp.19-43 and pp.250-259.

35 *Ibid.*, pp.64-80.

36 *Ibid.*, pp.137-202.

37 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.95-97.

38 Hallie Flanagan, *Dynamo*, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943, p.30.

39 Lorraine Brown, "Federal Theatre: Melodrama, Social Protest and Genius," *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, vol.36, no.1, Winter 1979, p.23 (emphasis added).

We can glean an intent from this statement. As she takes on her role as agency head of the Federal Theater Project, even though her formal title is “Director,” Flanagan intends to be the “Artistic Director” of this national arts agency of the federal government. Furthermore, she is telegraphing here, at least to her staff, that she intends to not only focus on the major work-relief obligation of the FTP, but also to use the opportunity to return theater to its place in the contemporary cultural conversation, by incorporating into theater-making, experimentation, and new ideas and forms from various arts and science disciplines.

## FTP AT THE MID POINT OF 1937: THE END OF THE HONEYMOON

176 As the summer approached, Flanagan and the FTP weathered some triumphs and trials. The Living Newspaper unit’s production of the play *Power*, based on the energy crisis in the country, turned out to be a critical and box-office success,<sup>40</sup> demonstrating the possibility of addressing a civic and social problem in a documentary drama form and doing so in a manner that was engaging and not overbearing or decidedly didactic. This had been an ongoing debate within the halls of the FTP offices, the tension between art and propaganda when charged plays, about volatile social and political issues, are developed and presented. During the summer of 1936, the Living Newspaper unit had created a highly controversial play, *Injunction Granted*, that focused on the Supreme Court’s rejection of many of the New Deal labor-related programs of the Roosevelt Administration. Flanagan was appalled by the rendering, for its heavy-handed treatment of the political material, and its derogatory characterization of the members of the Supreme Court. She let it be known to the authors that she considered such party-line agit-prop efforts to be potentially damaging to the long-term goals and life of the FTP. She wrote to the supervisors of the Living Newspaper unit: “I cannot, as custodian of federal funds, have such funds used as a party tool. That goes for the Communist Party as well as for the Democratic Party.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, she found the play to be “bad journalism and hysterical theatre.”<sup>42</sup>

A year later, however, a production that addressed the contentious political issues of capitalism and unionization in America was received by Flanagan with open arms. Marc Blitzstein’s opera, *The Cradle Will Rock*, directed by Orson Welles and produced by John Houseman, passed muster with the Director of the FTP, because, as Bentley

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40 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.184-185.

41 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.236.

42 L. Brown, *Federal Theatre*, *op. cit.*, p.28.

noted, “Hallie recognized the superb theatrical qualities of the work the first time she heard it.”<sup>43</sup>

But the production, slated to open on June 17, faced budgetary and political obstacles. On June 10, 1937, due to Congressional budget cuts of the WPA, fallout from Roosevelt’s doomed court-packing plan, the FTP was given the order to cut its budget by 25% for the following fiscal year.<sup>44</sup> Then on June 12, the WPA ordered the FTP to postpone all upcoming productions, including *The Cradle Will Rock*. Houseman and Welles suspected that this was political censorship veiled as fiscal prudence. Flanagan noted that the production was merely being delayed, not canceled. But everyone knew that a delay of several months of a play might very well turn out to be a cancellation because many of the artists in the production might not be available in a few months because of other opportunities. The company planned to go forward with a private presentation of the play, but once word of this plan made its way to WPA officials in Washington, they were met with armed WPA guards who prohibited them from entering the main FTP venue in Manhattan, the Maxine Elliott Theater. This show of force by WPA administrators in Washington (not Flanagan or her FTP staff in New York), broadcast to many that the show was not just being shut down for fiscal reasons. Welles and Housemen, on the scheduled night of the opening, June 16, 1937, acquired access to another theater, the Venice, about 20 blocks north of the Maxine Elliott and there staged an improvised performance of the politically-charged opera.<sup>45</sup>

For decades, this defiant act was considered by those on the Left to be a triumph against government censorship.<sup>46</sup> But other more moderate individuals sensed the danger that the ad-hoc production posed to the continuation of the Federal Theater Project as a taxpayer-supported endeavor. Bentley described the aftermath:

The play [Flanagan] had succeeded, but for the Federal Theatre itself the evening signaled a defeat. Although she did not know it at the time, the confrontation about *The Cradle Will Rock* marked a turning point for government-sponsored theatre. In Houseman’s words, the “honeymoon of the New Deal and the Theatre was over.”<sup>47</sup>

But Hallie Flanagan, in mid-June of 1937, did not stop to ponder the long-term consequences of that notorious production. She plowed forward with the final

43 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan, op. cit.*, p.260.

44 *Ibid.*, p.257.

45 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan, op. cit.*, pp.260-264.

46 The moment and the events leading up to it were faithfully captured in the 1999 film, *The Cradle Will Rock*, directed by Tim Robbins.

47 Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan, op. cit.*, p.264.

pre-planning efforts for the summer conference at Vassar. Unfortunately, that work included sending messages to the participants in the upcoming training sessions, many of whom were state directors and company leaders of Federal Theatre Project units across the country, informing them that they would need to substantially cut their artistic and production staffs because of the impending budget cuts. That is, many of those folks who were readying themselves to travel to Poughkeepsie, had to, in their last act before leaving their offices, send out pink slips to employees in their FTP units.<sup>48</sup>

## THE FIRST FEDERAL SUMMER CONFERENCE BEGINS

**178** The Federal Theatre Project Summer Conference began, on Sunday, June 20, 1937, when the 45 participants, plus a staff and faculty of 20 individuals, Vassar President McCracken, and FTP Director Flanagan, opened the six-week conference in Josselyn Hall, a dormitory on the Vassar campus, with a supper and brief remarks.<sup>49</sup>

Of the 45 attendees, 20 were from New York City, while the rest were from across the country, representing both coasts and all of the regions and cities in between. According to the Rockefeller Foundation report of the summer conference, the individuals convening at Vassar were professionals in not only traditional theater, but also in different types of performance, ranging from children's theater to circus acts, and they were involved in various forms of companies, from vaudeville to stock, all of whom presented their work in a wide-ranging array of venues, from asylums to public parks to homes for the aged.<sup>50</sup>

Included in the group of conference participants, was Mary Virginia Heinlein, a 1925 graduate of Vassar and an instructor of theatre at Sarah Lawrence College, who was hired by the Rockefeller Foundation to provide a report of the conference. It was known by all, including Hallie Flanagan, that she was there for that purpose.

The following morning, in the greenroom of Avery Hall, Hallie Flanagan gave the first of many, inspiring lectures to the conferees. She began by reciting the brief history of the FTP and its parent agency, the WPA, and then turned to the real reason why they were there:

The theatre, which should be the most dynamically concerned with human life has remained, of all the arts, perhaps the least aware of the changing world. In an age of exciting group movements, in an age of mass miseries and mass celebrations, theater has

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48 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.205.

49 "Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre..." art. cit., p.7.

50 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., pp.10-12 and pp.19-21.

remained for the most part engrossed with individual problems. [...] Great social forces interpenetrate our theater, and our theater to be worth its salt, must interpenetrate the social and economic scene. The Federal Theatre can become an art force only as it fulfills its function as a life force.<sup>51</sup>

This speech aligns with the remarks she gave to her staff on her first day as Director of the FTP. To this larger group, representing the broad swath of American regions and cities, Flanagan was alerting them to the true goals of the conference. Many had been informed that the summer conference would involve retraining that focused mostly on technological innovations. But now they were being introduced to the lofty objectives of the summer conference: encouraging theatrical experimentation and producing relevant theater for the American public.

In the afternoon, the conference members reconvened in the Avery Theater to hear about plans for a socially-relevant production about the housing crisis in America. In addition to the re-training that would take place in classroom settings, taught by Vassar faculty members, with specializations in music, costume design, lighting design, set design, and dance/movement, the conference also included a practical application component, the development of a new play, where the lessons learned in the class sessions would be put into practice in rehearsal rooms, scene and costume shops, and on the stage. Arthur Arent, the head of the Living Newspaper unit and the author of the recent Broadway hit *Power*, described the, at that point, untitled play. He began by noting that the play was a work in progress and that they would only be presenting the first act of what would be a three-act play, to an audience on two nights, at the tail end of the conference.<sup>52</sup> He then described the sources for the production, that, when the play was published, amounted to an 8-page [bibliography](#) of source material.

Arent then proceeded to describe the production style that he, as playwright of the piece, felt was critical to the proper rendering of this documentary drama: realism. Apparently, he had neglected to inform his boss about this stylistic choice and was swiftly countermanded by Flanagan who announced that she would be looking to members of the conference to present design ideas for the production. Clearly, old-fashioned realism was not something she intended to present as the culminating artistic product of the Federal Theater Summer.<sup>53</sup>

51 "Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre..." art. cit., p.12.

52 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., p.99.

53 See "Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre..." art. cit., p.12; V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., p.99.

The next day, the entire conference boarded busses and drove 125 miles north to Bennington College to see a production of *Electra* by Sophocles, directed by Frances Ferguson. This stylized and movement-based piece was just the kind of avant-garde theatre that Flanagan was hoping to have presented at the end of the Vassar conference. The long bus ride home that night sparked furious conversations among the conferees about the performance they had just seen. Many expressed confusion about its meaning and questioned its artistic merit. Some were downright resistant to the modern rendering of the Greek classic. Meanwhile, in the midst of all that clamor, there was also talk about the Living Newspaper project. Someone on one of the busses, in the dead of night, came up with the title for the housing play: *One-Third of a Nation*. It was drawn from a quote by President Roosevelt during his second inaugural address: “We find one-third of the nation ill-housed, ill-clothed, ill-fed.”<sup>54</sup>

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The conferees were up bright and early the next day for their first training session with Helen Tamiris, the dance and movement instructor of the conference. Other retraining sessions in music, acting, design and technology would also begin that week.<sup>55</sup> Folded into those days, during that first week of the conference, there were conversations, formal and informal, about the Bennington performance. Flanagan made an effort, in lecture and discussion sessions, to convey the ideas of the piece and to encourage an appreciation of the production’s movement away from realism.<sup>56</sup>

The resistance to new ways of thinking and learning continued through the end of the week, culminating in a late-night drunken revelry by several male participants out in “Joss Beach,” in front of the dormitory for the conferees. Around about midnight on Friday, the inebriated men proceeded to play a game of “Balloon” improvisation, replicating an exercise they learned in Tamiris’s class, wherein they batted around an imaginary balloon, all of this done in a mocking tone, and all of it being witnessed by the other members of the conference from windows surrounding the U-shaped courtyard, who were trying to get some sleep. According to Bentley, who retells this story based on interviews, Flanagan called in the drunken revelers the next day for a dressing down regarding their sarcastic, and as she noted, as their boss, insubordinate antics.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond re-establishing a proper sense of decorum and respect, Flanagan was interested in breaking through to these men. Many of them were from the western contingent—California, Oregon, Colorado—and were older, more set in their ways,

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54 “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre...,” art. cit., p. 14.

55 *Ibid.*

56 V. Heinlein, “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation...,” art. cit., p. 46.

57 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, op. cit., pp. 265-266.

and considered to be of the “old school” variety of theater practitioners who approached theater-making from a purely practical perspective: where do you put the flats and furniture, how do you hang the wash of lights, and when do we break for lunch?<sup>58</sup> Flanagan was hoping to get them to think of themselves not only as technicians, but as artists, too. And while doing so, she hoped that they would also embrace the new ideas that were swirling around the world at that moment, which included, Tamiris’s class on imaginative play and movement. So, for all of those reasons, Flanagan needed to address this resistance to change that was exhibited by these men. And that is why, on the following Monday, Flanagan hauled them into her office.

## THE WORK OF THE CONFERENCE: RE-TRAINING

As the conference headed into its second week, details with regard to the production emerged. As Heinlein noted in her report, Flanagan never did solicit design ideas from the attendees and instead appointed Howard Bay, a Broadway designer, to design the production. Bay’s design concept was far removed from realism, and indeed, was tethered to the emerging idiom known as *surrealism*. Bay had a keen interest in exploring this modern form and, of course, was supported by Flanagan.<sup>59</sup>

Bay was also appointed director of the production. Many found this surprising and alarming since he had little to no experience as a director. John Houseman had been floated as a potential director but that did not come to pass, perhaps because of the *Cradle Will Rock* controversy. In any case, the production style was laid out to the conference, in a meeting on Monday of the second week, by Bay. It was acknowledged that when considering a visual notion of housing, the tenements of New York, the façade of those old buildings often come to mind. Bay noted that there had been shows in New York that presented that image on stage, notably the play *Street Scene* by Elmer Rice. But it was felt that such exteriors did not reveal to the audience “the most ghastly part of the tenement.”<sup>60</sup>

The authors of the official report on the summer conference wrote:

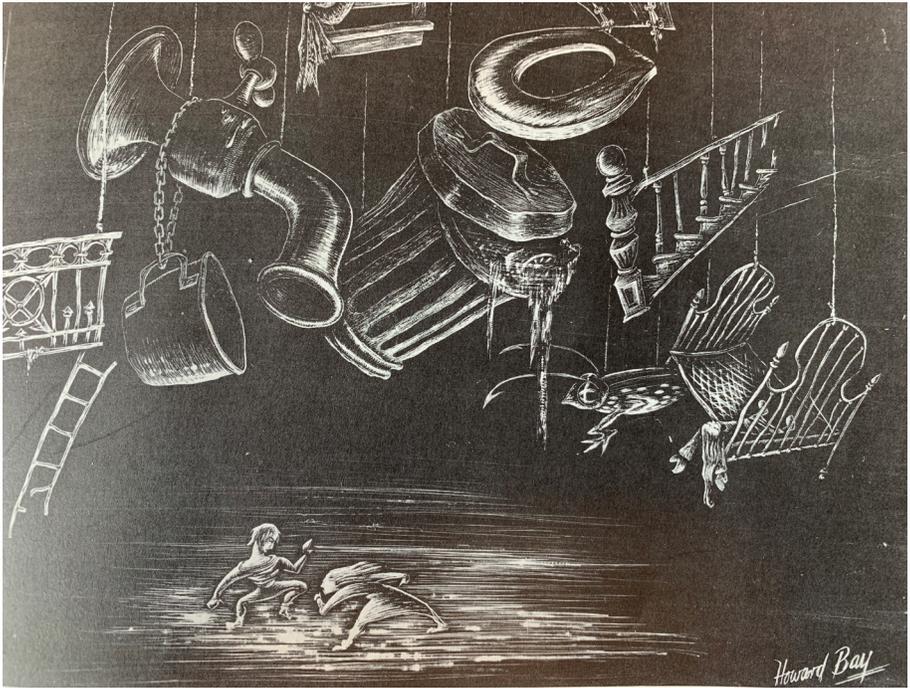
[I]t became apparent to directors and actors alike that the people of the tenements never talked about their house. They talked about the leaky faucets, the soggy beds, the crumbling walls, the broken stair-rail, the roach-infested sinks, the fire escape down which no one could escape. Howard Bay, therefore, conceived the idea of a setting

58 V. Heinlein, “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation...,” art. cit., pp.23-25.

59 *Ibid.*, pp.79-81.

60 “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre...,” art. cit., p.12.

in which the audience would see people actually living under the shadow of those horrible objects.<sup>61</sup> [fig. 2]



2. *One Third of a Nation* premiere at Vassar College, July 1937,  
Works Progress Administration, Federal Theatre National Publications, 1937.

While Bay's design for the production was clearly favored by Flanagan, his lack of qualifications to direct the show quickly became glaringly apparent. Within a day of taking the helm, he was removed as director and replaced by Harold Bolton.<sup>62</sup>

The various retraining sessions continued apace over the rest of the six-week conference. The Vassar faculty included Clair Leonard, Professor of Music and instructor Mary Merrill who taught Costume Design and supervised the costume construction. The professionals included: Howard Bay, who lectured on scenic design, Feder, the celebrated light designer who instructed on lighting and ran the lighting crew, and Madelyn O'Shea, a professional actor, who had been trained by Maria

61 *Ibid.*

62 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation....," art. cit., pp.99-100.

Ouspenskaya, a disciple of the famous Moscow Art Theatre, who did her best to engage the attendees in the modern methods and practices of Stanislavsky.<sup>63</sup>

In Heinlein's critique of the quality of the pedagogy, she noted that Leonard tried unsuccessfully to cram an entire semester's course, in music and music theory, into eight sessions. He also, according to Heinlein, just lectured and played music and put people to sleep. Similar issues were raised about Merrill's merits as a costume designer teacher.<sup>64</sup> Heinlein, in her report, reserved her harshest remarks for Howard Bay's, apparently, deficient skills as a teacher. She noted that he was dogmatic about surrealism and he pushed back against his students who questioned the efficacy of the form and he shunned those who, simply, had questions about how to render the ideas on the stage. Indeed, no questions were welcomed during his first session with the conferees. It had already been established that each conferee was given the option to decide which particular training session to attend. At Bay's second session, only a few showed up. Flanagan stepped forward to remedy this problem, by attending the third session, which apparently helped boost attendance for the design classes over the next few weeks.<sup>65</sup> Since these retraining classes were at the core of the stated purpose for the summer institute, it was critical that Flanagan encourage and foster engagement in all of the offered courses.

Feder and O'Shea were more successful with the students. Feder was popular because of his enthusiasm for the possibilities of lighting technique. He was teaching at a time when direction, control, color and movement of light were possible thanks to electricity, innovations in lenses and lighting instruments, dimmer controls, gels and mobile, or follow-spots, and shutters and lenses that could isolate and sharpen the focus of light. He believed that lighting was the wave of the future—and like Edward Gordon Craig and Adolph Appia in Europe, and Robert Edmond Jones in the United States, he was in favor of using light as the primary design element of stage productions, thus, reducing down or eliminating the need for elaborate sets.<sup>66</sup> Feder boisterously bellowed at the participants during his sessions: "Don't buy flats, paint, or costumes. Buy lights!"<sup>67</sup>

O'Shea's appeal was based on her experience as an effective pedagogue, and she too, like Feder, was teaching an innovative theatrical technique, Stanislavsky's method, that was all the rage at the time, and, therefore, her class sessions were well attended by the conference participants.<sup>68</sup>

63 *Ibid.*, pp.57-81; see also, T. Buttitta and B. Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents*, *op. cit.*, p.161.

64 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., pp.57-81.

65 *Ibid.*, pp.61-64 and pp.82-85.

66 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., pp.65-69.

67 T. Buttitta and B. Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents*, *op. cit.*, p.161.

68 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., pp.75-78.

## CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES: SESSIONS WITH FLANAGAN & DANCE PERFORMANCE

As classes continued, and the production work proceeded, Hallie Flanagan, made frequent trips to New York and Washington to keep the entire FTP afloat during turbulent times of potential budget cuts and increasing political scrutiny. When she was in attendance at the conference, she continued to give lectures in the greenroom, that were, by all accounts, enthusiastically received.<sup>69</sup>

184 Midway through the conference, *How Long Brethren*, a dance production choreographed by Tamiris, that had premiered in New York, was brought up to Poughkeepsie and performed on the Avery Stage at Vassar.<sup>70</sup> By that point in the summer, as the notions of movement-based art had become more accessible to the conferees, in part because of their attendance at the Bennington production of *Electra*, as well as their movement training sessions with Tamiris, according to Heinlein's observation, there was more openness, to dance and innovative art forms, by the conference participants.<sup>71</sup>

The production, though, raised issues of race and racism. The work was based on traditional "Negro spirituals" and sought to tell of the historical story of the African-American experience in America. In this dance piece about Black history and experience, white dancers were employed to interpret Black lives. Fortunately, the performance was not in black face. Black voices were represented in the work, in a chorus. But they were positioned off to the side, not center stage. Viewing these events, from a 21st-century perspective, the issues of cultural and racial appropriation and Black life/white performance, are glaringly apparent.<sup>72</sup> But no one at the time raised these issues. What was raised, though, was a charge of segregation that came forward to Flanagan. It was noted that the African-American members of the troupe were required to use separate housing and bathroom facilities during their stay on the Vassar campus. Flanagan investigated the incident and concluded that there was no attempt to segregate the African-American performers.<sup>73</sup> Whether this was a case of racial denialism or a fair assessment of what occurred cannot be determined from the scant evidence available. But all of that said, issues of race and racism, notably, the

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69 *Ibid.*, p.33 and pp.46-47; "Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre..." art. cit., pp.22-24.

70 *Ibid.*, p.21; H. Flanagan, *Arena*, op. cit., p.199 and p.213.

71 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., p.47.

72 See James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, Malden (MA), Blackwell, 2008.

73 Virginia Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., p.47.

performance of Black stereotypes, including minstrel shows, and instances of white authors and directors writing and creating Black stories, did arise throughout the four-year tenure of the Federal Theater Project and were brought to the attention of Flanagan and the FTP administration by Black playwrights and performers.<sup>74</sup>

In another session, one that was apparently requested by some of the conferees, Flanagan provided a more detailed presentation of the stylistic innovations that were on the rise in Europe and that were overtaking notions of realism. She began by discussing the relatively new nature of realism, it being a 19th-century phenomenon, while noting that the Greek tragedians, Noh Drama dramatists, and Elizabethan playwrights were far from realistic in their portrayal of life. All of this led to a robust and in-depth discussion of modern drama and its new forms.<sup>75</sup>

Flanagan must have been buoyed by this breakthrough with the conference participants. Their willingness to step out of their traditional comfort zones and to consider, appreciate, and, perhaps even, adopt modern trends was important to Flanagan's own notions of a successful retraining effort.

But that spiritual uplift was most probably tempered by other setbacks and conflicts that had been brewing among and within the group. Some of it had roots going back to that drunken mocking revelry on Joss Beach at the end of the first week. Many of those men had subsequently distanced themselves from other members of the conference by eating separately in the dining hall. Perhaps their desire for isolation was brought on by the bold and brash attitudes of the New York City contingent of theater artists. Many of those "upstart crows" were less experienced than the veteran stage workers, but that did not stop them from being overly opinionated about theater making. Heinlein described this East coast/West coast dichotomy, as breaking down along political lines: liberals from the east, and conservatives of the west. It did not help that many of these Easterners, who were seen as snobs, were also on the staff and faculty of the summer conference. The West coasters took particular aim at the lighting technique teacher and light designer of the production, Feder, for boasting of his use of numerous modern lighting instruments and other technological advances while neglecting to teach them how to work with the few archaic instruments that they had at their disposal in their theaters back home.<sup>76</sup>

74 See, E. Quita Craig, *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era*, Amherst, U of Massachusetts P, 1980, pp.8-30; Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1994, pp.168-95.

75 "Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre..." art. cit., pp.22-24.

76 V. Heinlein, "Report to the Rockefeller Foundation..." art. cit., pp.23-25.

By the final weeks of the conference, many participants began to not show up to classes, claiming that they were either bored by the teachers or not being taught anything that was relevant to the essential needs of their theaters and companies. And that critique was not limited to the westerners. Many of the participants chimed in with that complaint.<sup>77</sup> Although this suggests that the retraining was not successful; to the contrary, despite these setbacks in the formal training sessions, as we will see below, the lessons learned in those classrooms would be put into practice in the culminating production, leading to other important achievements.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF *ONE-THIRD OF A NATION*

186 In addition to all the concerns about the teaching sessions, the production, that all conference participants were required to work on, also came in for some heavy criticism from the conferees, and from Heinlein, who summarized, and agreed with, the critique.

First, Heinlein noted that *One-Third of a Nation* took up two-thirds of the conference work-time. And all this effort, for one act, or one-third, of a full-length play.<sup>78</sup> Each member of the summer conference was tasked with rehearsing and performing in the production, or working in the scene or costume shop, or hanging lights, or being on a running crew. There was expressed concern about the way they were treated in these roles and in the manner in which the work was organized and delegated over the course of the summer conference. Whereas the production was meant to be an experiment in collaboration among the 45 conference participants and the creative staff of the production, it turned out to be nothing of the kind. All artistic decisions were made from the very top by Flanagan, the producer; Arent, the playwright; Bay, the designer, Tamiris, the choreographer; and Bolton, the director. The participants, many of whom were skilled directors, designers, actors, writers and seasoned crew members in their own right, were, essentially, relegated to the task of worker bees with no input solicited from them as to the artistry of the endeavor, and, indeed, no welcoming of advice that might be derived from their production experience. Heinlein was extremely critical of this top-down system that ran the show, as it were, during the six-week production process.<sup>79</sup>

Without knowing the word for it, or even the system for making it happen, Heinlein was imagining a process that we now call *devising*—wherein theater artists

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77 *Ibid.*, pp.57-62.

78 *Ibid.*, p.109.

79 *Ibid.*, pp.99-110.

work together on a project in a de-centered and communal effort in collaboration and decision-making.<sup>80</sup>

She was also especially critical of the director—Harold Bolton. She minced no words in her report, noting, essentially, that he was inexperienced, inept, inadequate, incoherent and incompetent. She provided detailed accounts of his bad directing choices, including blaming the actors for his own incompetence.<sup>81</sup>

In sum, Heinlein, in her 120-page assessment of the conference, cites all of these problems: the lack of integration of training sessions and practice; the poor pedagogy of the teachers; the miscasting of Bolton as director; the overworking, maltreatment and misuse of the conference participants during the production—while laying little blame on Hallie Flanagan. Heinlein noted that Flanagan was required to leave the conference on numerous occasions in order to go to New York and Washington, DC, which left a vacuum of leadership while she was gone. As Heinlein noted, upon her return, Flanagan did her best to put out fires and settle disputes.<sup>82</sup> Flanagan met with participants, individually, to give them an opportunity to air grievances. And when that did not prove effective, according to Heinlein, near the end of the summer conference, Flanagan did have a session with the conference participants where she “let them have it,” demanding that they respect the faculty. And then she held a meeting with the faculty where she “let them have it”—demanding that they respect the conferees who help run and maintain the Federal Theatre Project across the country.<sup>83</sup>

While Flanagan was away from the campus, during the penultimate week of the conference, as a way of airing the problems associated with Bolton’s deficiencies as director, a collaboration workshop, between the actors of the show and the director, was convened. But it did not help, because Bolton ran it and lectured the group and did not allow for much discussion. Heinlein noted that it might have gone better if Flanagan had attended and mediated the discussion.<sup>84</sup>

One other impromptu session was convened, to go beyond the issues of the production and to discuss many of the problems of the conference. Flanagan’s deputy attended and chronicled the list of complaints from the participants. But growing tired of the mounting criticism, he finally blew up, stating, in Flanagan’s defense, that she was off fighting the fight to keep all of them employed. He then left the room.

80 Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson and Katie Normington, *Making a Performance*, New York, Routledge, 2007.

81 *Ibid.*, pp.106-109.

82 V. Heinlein, “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation...,” art. cit., pp.1-7 and pp.54-55.

83 *Ibid.*, p.52.

84 *Ibid.*, pp.54-55.

If the conferees had walked out, too, that could have been the end of the discussion. The participants, however, stayed. And they continued to hash out their grievances, creating a list of major issues of concern. They could have stopped there and handed the record of complaints up the line to the FTP powers that be. But instead, they remained together even longer, and began discussing possible solutions to the problems. They subsequently formed a planning committee to address the issues about the conference but more importantly, to take on issues of concern to their FTP units back in their regions. By the end of this impromptu session, the conference members in attendance had shifted their aim from criticizing the summer conference to developing a plan of action for saving and reinvigorating the FTP nationwide.<sup>85</sup>

## THE PERFORMANCE AND VALEDICTORY SESSION

With all this *sturm und drang* that went into the production and the entire summer conference, nevertheless, the show did go on. And it all worked out for the best in the end. The old adage, “bad dress, great opening night,” held true, and the two performances of *One-Third of a Nation* were roundly applauded by audience members. Critics were prohibited from attending this, essentially, workshop production, but nevertheless one reporter did provide a news report that came off as a review. The *Variety* reporter praised the production, noting, “it is all frankly non-realistic and tremendously effective,” and also reporting that the summer conference was focused on “study and experimentation.”<sup>86</sup> Flanagan was, no doubt, buoyed by the praise of the non-realism and the acknowledgement of the aim of the summer institute experimentation.

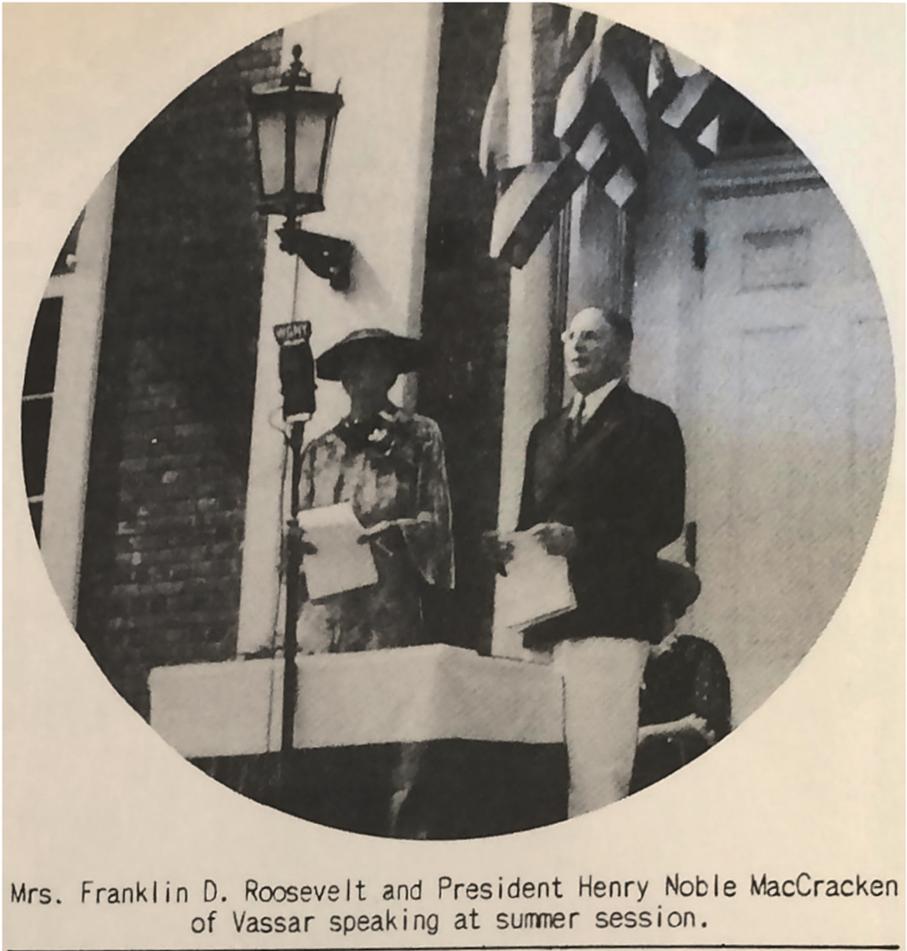
The celebrated playwright Paul Green attended the final dress and praised the production. The New York City Commissioner of Housing, one of the sources of the Living Newspaper play, attended and proclaimed: “You will convert more people with this play than I have converted in three years of shouting my lungs out.”<sup>87</sup> And on Saturday night, Eleanor Roosevelt attended the production and echoed the commissioner’s remarks, by telling Flanagan that the play, “achieved something which will mean a tremendous amount in the future, socially, and in the education and growing up of America...far more than...I, or even the President, might make”<sup>88</sup> (fig. 3)

85 V. Heinlein, “Report to the Rockefeller Foundation...,” art. cit., pp.54-55.

86 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, op. cit., p.214 (quoting review in *Variety*).

87 “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre...,” art. cit., p.32.

88 Quoted in J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, op. cit., p.268.



3. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Vassar College President Henry Noble MacCracken, July 1937, Works Progress Administration, Federal Theatre National Publications, 1937.

A closing session of the conference was held on Saturday morning, before the afternoon's pre-show preparations for the final performance that night. The newly-formed Planning Committee presented its set of recommendations to Flanagan and the entire conference, that included: the creation of national service bureaus in writing, costume design, set design, lighting design, and marketing, in order to coordinate efforts and share personnel across the nation; the development of more nationally produced plays; and, the convening of more conferences like the Vassar Summer Theater Conference that would meet in regional and national sessions. And last, but most definitely not least, these words were included in the recommendations by the

planning committee: “That workers who fail to keep abreast of the times have no place in the Federal Theatre.”<sup>89</sup>

This had to be an exceptionally proud moment for Hallie Flanagan. In that notion of keeping “abreast of the times” the conference participants were not only talking about remaining up-to-date with technological advances but they were acknowledging the duty of contemporary theater artists to remain relevant by addressing issues of concern to the audience and also to remain aware of current artistic trends, new theories and new forms. The committee’s recommendations were *unanimously* supported by the conference attendees, the faculty and staff. Flanagan could rest well, in knowing that she had achieved her over-all objective of breaking through to the vast majority of the conferees by challenging them, to step out of their comfort zones, to be willing to learn about new methods and practices, and to treat the theater as an experimental laboratory. Furthermore, it became clear at this closing session that the participants had learned vital lessons during the conference, and that they intended to take those lessons with them and apply them in their future work in their individual FTP units.

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## FEDERAL SUMMER THEATRE CONFERENCE: AFTERMATH AND LEGACY

What was the impact of the 1937 Federal Summer Theater Conference at Vassar College? The immediate effect was that the play *One-Third of a Nation*, after this workshop production of its first act, was produced several months later, in its entirety, on Broadway at the Adelphi Theater, and was a critical and box-office success (fig. 4). The play was subsequently produced in FTP productions across the country.<sup>90</sup> Because of pressures from commercial producers, the Broadway production involved a set design that was steeped in realism. But Flanagan was, in the end non-plussed by the shift away from the more abstract design of the Vassar production. In *Arena*, she stated: “Although the method of production differed from the earlier one, the emphasis on integration of music, movement and theme remained; and the six weeks of experimentation at the summer session made this play the most mature living newspaper we had done,” while also noting that the critics agreed with that assessment.<sup>91</sup>

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89 “Federal Theatre: First Federal Summer Theatre...,” art. cit., pp.32-34.

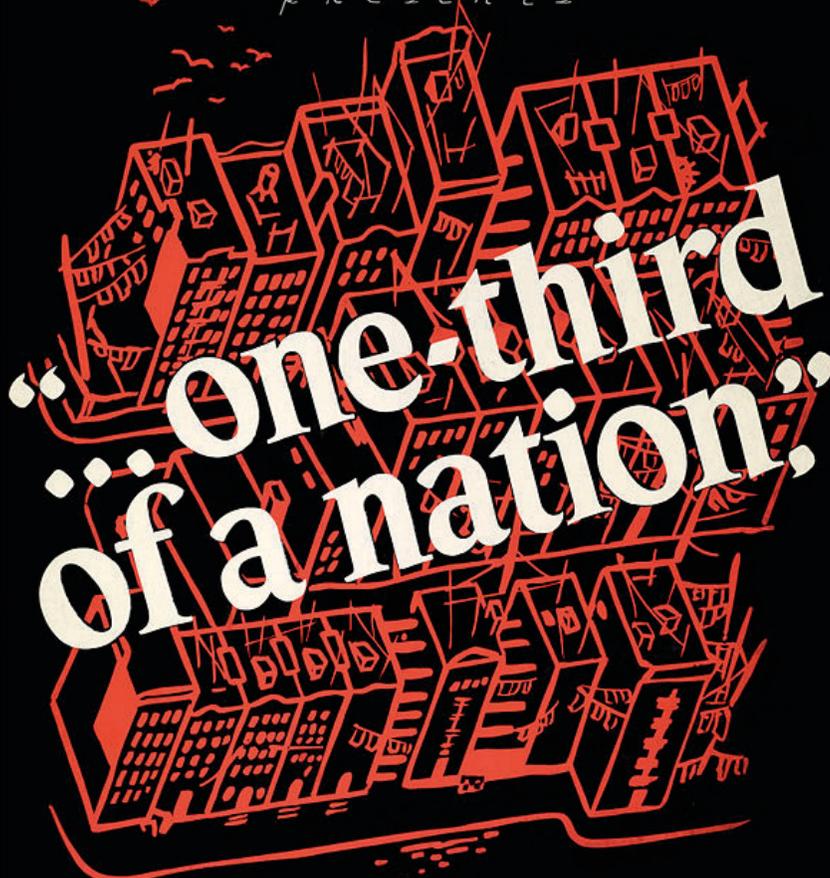
90 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan, op. cit.*, pp.268-272.

91 H. Flanagan, *Arena, op. cit.*, pp.217-218.

FEDERAL THEATRE



*p r e s e n t s*



**A LIVING NEWSPAPER  
ABOUT HOUSING**

**ADELPHI THEATRE**

**54TH STREET EAST OF 7TH AVENUE**

MADE BY W.P.A. FEDERAL ART PROJECT N.Y.C.

4. *One Third of a Nation* poster for Broadway production, October 1937, Wikimedia Commons

That play, however, “made enemies” in Congress, because of the portrayal of members of Congress in the narrative. And churches around the country, took umbrage because the play pointed out that most of the landlords or “slumlords” in most cities were religious institutions.<sup>92</sup> Flanagan would barnstorm around the country, in the fall of 1937, building support for the FTP and doing her best to respond to the political, censorship and budgetary storms that were brewing in the press, and most notably, in Congress, in the Dies Committee, later re-named the House Un-American Activities Committee, that had set its sights on the Federal Theatre Project ever since the notorious production of *The Cradle Will Rock*.<sup>93</sup>

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By the spring of 1939, Flanagan was called to testify before Congress in order to defend the Federal Theatre Project—and her own record. Her admiration of Russian theater and her trips to the Soviet Union in 1926, during her Guggenheim Fellowship, came under intense scrutiny during the hearings. She did her best to defend herself and the FTP against these scurrilous attacks.<sup>94</sup> After the hearing, in a published article entitled “Papa’s Got a Job,” Flanagan pleaded with the public to help save the FTP, noting its fiscal prudence, and for that matter, its financial genius: “The bare statistics of Federal Theatre are in themselves a drama: some nine thousand theater workers employed in forty theaters in twenty states, playing within three years before audiences totaling more than twenty-five million.”<sup>95</sup> But the defiant and heroic testimony before Congress was a mere pyrrhic victory and her plea to the public fell on deaf ears. Within a short time of her testimony before Congress, Flanagan would bear witness to the swift and decisive end of the Federal Theatre Project, with the mere stroke of a pen, in a late-night conference committee session that eliminated the entire FTP budget. Whereas the other Arts Projects of the WPA continued until 1943, the Federal Theatre Project was shut down on June 30, 1939.<sup>96</sup>

But when considering the resonance of the Federal Theater Summer Conference, its impact reverberated soon thereafter, and for years to come. As noted in 1939 by Pierre de Rohan in a report on the Federal Theatre Summer Conference, most of the participants in the conference returned to their cities, towns, states and regions,

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92 *Ibid.*, pp.220-22.

93 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.269-272.

94 See S. Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, *op. cit.*, pp.238-262; Jane DeHart Matthews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, *op. cit.*, pp.198-235.

95 Hallie Flanagan, “Papa’s Got a Job,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol.15, no.2, Spring 1939, p.250.

96 *Ead.*, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, pp.220-222; J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, pp.334-348.

and re-invigorated the theater scene with experimental, imaginative works. Flanagan summarized Rohan's study:

A report made two years later shows that the majority of people from the summer session returned to their various projects to do work of such caliber that they either were picked up for jobs in private industry...or else they won recognition [Guggenheim Fellowships], or else they became leaders in Federal Theatre activity.<sup>97</sup>

One participant wrote in a letter to de Rohan and Flanagan: "The Federal Summer Theatre gave me a much broader view of the theatre than I had had before: it impressed me with the need for music and dance in the theatre."<sup>98</sup>

The legacy of the entire Federal Theatre Project was profound and redounds to this day, in the National Endowment for the Arts, the Not-for-Profit sector of American theatre, the regional theaters, and the Off and Off-Off Broadway movements. And the spirit of the Vassar conference resonates in numerous summer conferences, notably, the [Eugene O'Neill Theater Center National Playwrights Conference](#), the [Sundance Institute Theatre Program](#), [Seven Devils New Play Foundry](#), the [Ojai Playwrights Conference](#) and [New York Stage and Film Powerhouse Season](#) that is held each summer in the Hallie Flanagan Davis Powerhouse Theater on the Vassar College campus.

We conclude with the words of Hallie Flanagan, that she delivered in her valedictory speech to the members of the conference, on that Saturday morning, in late July of 1937, just hours before the last performance, the last act, of the Federal Theater Summer at Vassar:

There will be other such meetings, other such summer theatres, but to you, the pioneers, will always go the credit of having been the first to take the risk, first to encounter the difficulties in this new reaching out to a stronger theater. From it we shall all learn. Through it we shall mutually create a theater which need not just be the frosting on the cake. It may be the yeast which makes the bread rise.<sup>99</sup>

97 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.215.

98 *Ibid.*, p.216, n4 *Report on the Results of the First Federal Summer Theatre*, by Pierre de Rohan, May 8, 1938 (W.P.A. Federal Theatre Records, Washington, DC).

99 "Federal Theatre; First Federal Summer Theatre... A Report," *art. cit.*, p.36.

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HERMAN FARRELL  
The First Federal Summer Theatre

## ABSTRACT

In the summer of 1937, the First Federal Summer Theatre was convened at Vassar College by Hallie Flanagan, Director of the Federal Theatre Project. This article, relying on well-known sources, as well as newly uncovered archival records, examines the immediate impact and long-lasting legacy of this particular moment in the history of the Federal Theatre Project. And it sheds new light on the far-reaching objectives of Director Flanagan, who hoped to use the summer retreat, attended by theater artists and practitioners from across the country, as an opportunity to raise the quality of the shows that were being presented on Federal Theater Project throughout the nation, and more importantly, to challenge the theater professionals of the conference to consider new forms and methodologies and to dare to treat their future artistic endeavors as laboratories of experimentation.

## KEYWORDS

Federal Theatre Project, Federal Summer Theatre Conference, Hallie Flanagan, Vassar College, Rockefeller Foundation

## RÉSUMÉ

À l'été 1937, le premier *Federal Summer Theatre* fut organisé au Collège Vassar par Hallie Flanagan, directrice du Federal Theatre Project. Cet article, s'appuyant sur des sources bien connues, ainsi que sur des documents d'archives récemment découverts, examine l'impact immédiat et l'héritage durable de ce moment particulier de l'histoire du *Federal Theatre Project*. Il apporte ainsi un nouvel éclairage sur les objectifs ambitieux de Flanagan, qui espérait faire de ce théâtre d'été, auquel ont participé des praticiens de tout le pays, une occasion d'améliorer la qualité des spectacles du *Federal Theatre Project*. Plus important encore, cette session met au défi les professionnels du théâtre qui y participent afin d'envisager de nouvelles formes et méthodologies et d'oser penser leurs futurs efforts artistiques comme des laboratoires d'expérimentation.

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## MOTS-CLÉS

*Federal Theatre Project, Federal Summer Theatre Conference, Hallie Flanagan, Vassar College, Rockefeller Foundation*

## CRÉDITS PHOTO

### VISUELS DE COUVERTURE (TOUS DANS LE DOMAINE PUBLIC)

1. Hallie Flanagan, director of the WPA Federal Theatre Project. Created *ca* 1939. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress.
2. Windrip addresses the crowd in a rally in the San Francisco Federal Theatre Project production of *It Can't Happen Here*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
3. Photograph of the New York production of *One-Third of a Nation*, a Living Newspaper play by the Federal Theatre Project, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
4. « Continue WPA ! », Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. « Federal Theatre Project » The New York Public Library Digital Collections.
5. Crowd outside Lafayette Theatre on opening night, Classical Theatre, « *Voodoo* » *Macbeth*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
6. Scene from the Federal Theatre Project production of O'Neill's *One-Act Plays of the Sea* at the Lafayette Theatre (Oct. 1937-Jan. 1938), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, New York Public Library, « Mr. Neil's Barn » The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

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