

Program for WPA: Public Art in a Time of Crisis

May 5, 2006

7:00 pm

Keynote Lecture by Barry Witham (Drama, UW)

Kane Hall, Room 110

"Modeling History: Federal Theatre and the Popular Front"

Reception and viewing of exhibition to follow in Suzzallo Library

May 6, 2006

Symposium Panels

Communications Building, Room 226

Evaluating the WPA 10:30 am -12:00 pm

Panel Chair: Odai Johnson, Associate Professor of Drama, UW

"The WPA Federal Theatre Project: Legacies, Lessons Learned and Lingering Suspicions"

Susan Duffy, Professor of Liberal Arts Studies, California Polytechnic State University.

August 29, 1935-June 30, 1939, the birth and death dates of the Federal Theatre Project, define a period of robust social reflection, unprecedented governmental assistance, exuberant creativity that crossed economic and racial divides, and a public arts program that touched millions of Americans, and that continues to linger as a spectral presence in the American arts today. This paper addresses the lessons provided by the FTP, its legacy that continues to influence the role of the arts in US culture, and finally, my own lingering suspicions about governmental support and use of the arts and how this was shaped by the FTP. Like the ghost of Hamlet's father, the FTP periodically appears on the American landscape to provide critical information and, more importantly, to admonish the players: "Remember me..."

"The WPA Federal Dance Project: High Art for the Masses"

Betsy Cooper, Associate Professor and Director, University of Washington Dance Program

The brief life of the WPA's Federal Dance Project (1936-1939) was concurrent with the burgeoning artistic and social endeavors of the second generation of American modern dance pioneers, most notably, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Hanya Holm, and Helen Tamiris. These artists and their peers sought to forge

an American dance based on self-expression and in response to the rapidly changing social landscape of the early 20th century. With the onset of the great depression, modern dancers faced numerous obstacles: accusations of esotericism, audience expectations, and most of all, the need for financial resources and organizational clout to produce work for an extended period of time. This presentation will explore how the Federal Dance Project units in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles impacted the arena of American modern dance in the decades of the 1930s and beyond. In particular, I will address how these Federal Dance Project units successfully brought dance “out of the realm of the esoteric and introduced it to a wide mass of people as an expressive medium for presenting living ideas.”

“Creating Community: Federal Art in the Northwest”

Jochen Wierich, Ph.D., Curator of Art, Cheekwood Museum of Art

A complete survey of New Deal art in the Northwest would reveal a strong and diverse legacy of arts and crafts that is still evident in post office murals, architectural monuments such as Timberline Lodge, and many easel paintings, prints, and photographs in museum collections. This diversity also speaks through a range of material that has barely survived, such as children’s drawings, theater models, and stage design. While my talk will touch on some of these achievements, I will focus on a less tangible federal arts initiative in the region: the effort to boost participation in the arts through community art centers. With federal art centers in Spokane, Washington, and Salem, La Grande, and Gold Beach, Oregon, the Northwest was well equipped to bring the arts to people throughout the region. The total number of art centers across the nation was well over a hundred and only a few survived the end of the New Deal. The focus of my discussion will be on the Spokane Art Center (1938-1942) which was considered one of the most successful of its kind in the nation.

Interrogating the WPA 1:30 - 3:00 pm

Panel Chair: Sarah Bryant-Bertail, Associate Professor of Drama, UW

“Finding Ourselves at the Same Crossroads: How to Complicate About, By, For, and Near”

Rena Fraden, Associate Dean of the College and Professor of English, Pomona College

In light of the greatest aspirations of the WPA Arts Projects—on the one hand, to transform the expected responsibility of government such that they feel obliged to fund art commensurate with national ambitions and on the other, to transform American audiences to become eager consumers of a high minded educationally and socially conscious art—can we chart success? Either we look at the transformations of expectations (government, audience), or we look at the artifacts produced as transformative, creating canons, ways of seeing, thinking. Framed in this way, the projects failed. Our government does not feel obliged to support the arts in the style to which we in the arts (educational arts) think they ought to be supported, and “the people,” a mass audience, is not any more attracted to art as education today than they were seventy years ago. The same ambitions and categorical divisions frame our cultural expectations now and thus we may be trapped in the same trajectory, the same impasses and sense of failure. I will briefly look back to the Negro Units of the Federal Theater Project and then to what Anna Deavere Smith and Suzan-Lori Parks say about “black theater” as possible ways for thinking our way forward into different configurations of audience, theater, and social responsibility.

“Race and the Collective in New Deal Narratives of the Sunshine State”

Sonnet Retman, Assistant Professor of American Ethnic Studies, UW

In this presentation, I explore the complex process of racial and regional representation in two distinct Florida guidebooks produced within the Federal Writer’s Project’s Guidebook Series (1935-43). I contend that the series figuratively repopulated a nation in crisis through an expansive imagining of stable American racial and ethnic “types” and a thorough reiteration of its regions. I locate the official *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State* (1939) as a paradigmatic book in the larger series, arguing that it uses the lure of ethnography to promote the state’s tourist appeal and the nation’s economy. It catalogues cultural difference according to an epistemology of “authentic” types, both reassuringly familiar and enticingly exotic to its anticipated white, monied, male visitors. In spite of this unifying strategy, the guidebook was a collectively authored endeavor, like all of the others in the series. As such, it raises important questions about the relationship between multi-vocal authorship, narration, audience and the politics of race and representation.

These concerns powerfully refract through a second guidebook, *The Florida Negro*, a project conducted by an “all-Negro unit” overseen at one point by Zora Neale Hurston under the auspices of the Federal Writer’s Project’s Guidebook Series in the late 1930s. Written during the time of Jim Crow, *The Florida Negro* occupies a tenuous

position as a regional “racial history,” documenting the often vexed inter-racial and inter-ethnic encounters that comprise Florida’s and the nation’s history.

“Hallie, History, and Her Halo”

Mark Fearnow, Professor of Theatre, Hanover College

Few figures in 20th century American theatre history have been treated with greater respect than has Hallie Flanagan, a Vassar theatre professor recruited by Harry Hopkins to head the Federal Theatre Project in August 1935. Flanagan has emerged as a heroic figure in theatre history circles, and even in the wider popular culture, as a character in Tim Robbins’s 1999 film, *The Cradle Will Rock*. “She was a woman like Eleanor Roosevelt,” the actor Marcella Cisney is quoted as saying in O’Connor and Brown’s *Free, Adult, Uncensored*. “She was that kind of person...the spirit, the soul, and the dedication, and the drive. It was very much how you felt when you met Eleanor Roosevelt.” In her biography of Flanagan, Joanne Bentley quotes an unnamed elderly actor who had appeared in an FTP production. Speaking of Flanagan, the old man says, “Now *there* was a leader. We’d have followed Hallie Flanagan to the ends of the earth.”

This paper is essentially an historiographic inquiry into the construction of Hallie Flanagan as a character in history. Though the paper must by necessity be brief and so more suggestive than conclusive, it seeks to ask the following questions:

- (1) What are alternative and under-explored views of Flanagan’s leadership of the FTP?
- (2) What are the leading tropes in the story of Flanagan-in-history?
- (3) Finally, how may Flanagan’s unusual position as a theatre professor being written into history by, in most cases, professors and, in some cases, theatre professors, have affected her position in the telling of this history?

The purpose of the paper is not to criticize or reduce Hallie Flanagan in the hearer’s estimation. Rather, the purpose is to use her present position in our consciousness as a viewing point into the myth-making processes of the present time.

Celebrating the WPA 4:00 - 5:30 pm

Chair: Roger Van Oosten, Critic and Scholar

“An American People’s Theatre: The Federal Theatre and the Popular Front”

Ira Levine, Professor and Dean, Ryerson College

In his book, *The Trojan Horse in America*, published in 1940, Martin Dies, then Chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, described the WPA in the following ominous terms: “W.P.A. was the greatest financial boon which ever came to the Communists in the United States. Stalin could not have done better by his American friends and agents. Relief projects swarmed with Communists—Communists who were not only the recipients of needed relief but who were entrusted by New Deal officials with high administrative positions in the projects.” Addressing more specifically the ideological sympathies of the Federal Theatre Project, he wrote, “All over the United States, the Federal Theatre Project produced plays which were nothing but straight Communist propaganda.” These accusations contrasted sharply with the conclusions appearing in another book published that same year—*Arena* by Hallie Flanagan. In this more familiar memoir, the former National Director of the Federal Theatre Project repeated her declaration made before the Dies Committee the previous year: “To the best of my knowledge... we have never done a play which was propaganda for communism; but we have done plays which were propaganda for democracy.” This paper will endeavor to provide some insight into these antithetical views, as expressed by the central protagonist and antagonist of the gripping political drama that was the rise and fall of the Federal Theatre, and thereby to illuminate the Project’s political character.

“Past, Present, and Future Tensions: Re-telling Federal Theatre History in the Present”

Tina Redd, Assistant Professor, Portland Community College

Time is a complex narrative component. Telling the past is history; telling the future is science fiction. For the Federal Theatre, telling the present became evidence and excuse for eliminating the Project’s funding. It is not coincidental that Hughes Allison, a successful Negro Unit playwright, and August Wilson, America’s foremost black playwright, wrote self-proclaimed dramas about black experience in the past tense. History is a compelling but relatively passive muse. As we re-examine the Federal Theatre, we have an opportunity to explore the impact and relevance of time as this concept was used by playwrights, politicians, and administrators engaged in building or dismantling the Project. In this paper I hope to complicate the notion that understanding the past clarifies the future and suggest, instead, that we should—like Hallie Flanagan, Theodore Ward, and John Silvera—make art and politics dangerously present.

“Celebrating the Yiddish Plays of the Federal Theatre Project and Benson Inge”
Joel Schechter, Professor of Theatre, San Francisco State University

During the 1930s, Yiddish theatre artists in America who faced economic depression and unemployment found their job opportunities particularly limited if they could not speak English. Even if they could learn English and assimilate, some of these Eastern European immigrants preferred not to abandon their native language and its literary and theatrical traditions, from which the Jewish American community continued to draw inspiration in hard times.

The Federal Theatre Project offered unassimilated Yiddish artists employment and funding to present new, innovative plays to audiences in Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, and New York. A number of new Yiddish plays responded to crises of the era with lively humor, song, dance, and political conscience, thanks to WPA and Federal Theatre Project support. Some remarkable stage events followed, notably productions of writing by David Pinski, Moishe Nadir, and Yiddish translations of plays by Clifford Odets and Sinclair Lewis.

Yiddish theatre within the Federal Theatre Project benefited from the contributions of Benson Inge, who deserves to be celebrated for his advancement of socially progressive theatre in a time of crisis. Almost forgotten today, Inge co-translated *It Can't Happen Here* into Yiddish (with Benjamin Ressler), and through his supervision of the Anglo-Jewish Play Department and the National Service Bureau's Translation Department (both part of the FTP), led Yiddish American theatre toward a renaissance late in the Thirties. Inge's government-funded encouragement of anti-fascist Yiddish plays and advocacy of plays written in a variety of languages, provide a model which still might be followed today, to insure that multiple cultures and progressive viewpoints are seen on American stages.

Dinner Break 5:30-7:15

Staged Reading 7:30

Playhouse Theatre

(4045 University Way NE.)

***Relevant, Adult, Uncensored* by Amy Boyce**

A play about the life of FTP Director Hallie Flanagan, featuring UW Acting Professor Robyn Hunt.

Participants

Amy Boyce (Assistant Project Lead), a recent graduate of the UW's MFA Directing program, Amy has written and directed a new play about the life of Hallie Flanagan *Relevant, Adult, Uncensored*.

Elizabeth Bonjean (Co-Project Lead). A recent graduate of the UW's PhD program in Theatre History and Dramatic Criticism, Elizabeth is happy to have administered, organized, and overseen the restoration and exhibition of the Federal Theatre Project theatre models. She will be teaching at Grinnell College in the Fall.

Sarah Bryant-Bertail (Associate Professor of Theory Dramatic Criticism UW) her book *Space and Time in Epic Theatre: The Brechtian Legacy*, was published in 2000. She is currently working on a book about the picaresque tradition, entitled *Women on the Road*.

Sydney Cheek O'Donnell (Assistant Project Lead), a recent graduate of the UW's PhD program in Theatre History and Dramatic Criticism, currently teaches at the University of Utah and was instrumental in securing community support for the theatre models.

Betsy Cooper (Associate Professor of Dance, UW) is chair of the Dance Department, and has published articles on dance in *Dance Research Journal* and *The International Dictionary of Modern Dance*.

Susan Duffy (Professor of Liberal Studies, California Polytechnic State University) has published four books, including *American Labor on Stage: Dramatic Interpretations of the Steel and Textile Industries in the 1930s* and *The Political Left in the American Theatre of the 1930s: A Bibliographic Sourcebook*. She has also edited an edition of *The Plays of Langston Hughes*.

Mark Fearnow (Professor of Theatre, Hanover College). An American Theatre scholar, Mark is the author of numerous articles and a fascinating book on the "Grotesque" in thirties theatre: *The American Stage and the Great Depression*.

Rena Fraden (Associate Dean of the College and Professor of English, Pomona College) has been central to a discussion of African-American involvement in the Federal Theatre Project. In particular, her text *Blue Prints for a Black Federal Theater, 1935-1939* has inspired scholarly debate on the "Negro Units" of the Project.

Ira Levine (Dean, Faculty of Communication and Design, Ryerson University). A scholar with nearly 20 years of experience as an arts and university administrator, Dr. Levine's text *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre* is central to discussion of the role of politics in the WPA.

Odai Johnson (Associate Professor and Head of the PhD program, UW) His books include *Rehearsing the Revolution* (University of Delaware 1999), *The Colonial American Stage: A Documentary Calendar* (AUP: 2001) and *Absence and*

Memory on the Colonial American Stage (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005). He is currently serving as resident researcher for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's reconstruction of the Douglass Theatre.

Tina Redd (Assistant Professor of English, Portland Community College) has done extensive research on the Negro Units of the Federal Theatre Project, which resulted in her dissertation *The Struggle for Administrative and Artistic Control of the Federal Theatre Negro Units*. She is currently researching the work of the African-American playwright Hughes Allison.

Kara Reilly (Co-Project Lead). A Ph.D. candidate in Theatre History and Dramatic Criticism at UW, Kara is thrilled to have organized and administrated this symposium.

Sonnet Retman (Assistant Professor of African-American Studies, UW) is currently working on a manuscript entitled "*How Was It We Were Caught?": Race, Nation and the Real in 1930s Documentary and Satire*", which includes a case study chapter on the taxonomies of race and region in the Federal Writers' Project's Florida guidebooks.

Joel Schechter (Professor of Theatre Arts, San Francisco State University) has written several books on circus and political satire, and co-created a comic strip series on Yiddish culture for the journal *Jewish Currents*. Currently he is completing a book about American Yiddish theatre in the 1930s.

Roger Van Oosten is an art historian and author who has written exhibit catalogs, labels, and magazine articles on art and is a frequent lector and guest curator at museums in Seattle and throughout the country. He is a noted authority on American mural art of the 1930s.

Jochen Wierich (Curator, Cheekwood Botanical Garden and Museum of Art) is an expert on the Federal Arts Projects, with a particular interest in the work of the painters of the Federal Art Project. He is currently assembling a catalogue of WPA art in the Northwest.

Barry Witham (Professor, School of Drama, UW). has published numerous books and articles on the FTP, including *The Federal Theatre Project, A Case Study* (2003) and *Uncle Sam Presents: A Memoir of the Federal Theatre* (1982), written with Tony Buttitta. His keynote speech will address the "history" of the model theatres created by the Seattle project.