



Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)

contexte & enjeux / context & issues



Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

II. Federal Theatre Project in Cincinnati, Ohio: A Case Study in Local Relevance · Nancy Jones

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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**

FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT IN CINCINNATI, OHIO: A CASE STUDY IN LOCAL RELEVANCE

Nancy Jones
University of Kentucky

Hallie Flanagan, the National Director of the Federal Theatre Project, had an ambitious goal at the heart of her mission: to create jobs for artists and present relevant theatre. Cincinnati, Ohio was home to one of the most impactful FTP units in the country due to their deliberate and consistent application of Flanagan’s notion of relevancy. This case study will illuminate the key creative, cultural, and collaborative choices made by the leaders of the Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project that fueled its artistic success, and, more importantly, captured the broad support of the community.

CINCINNATI, OHIO: HISTORY

A brief overview of Cincinnati’s historical timeline and geography will serve to contextualize the city’s cultural landscape, which influenced the Federal Theatre Project’s relevance in the 1930s. Cincinnati, Ohio is situated at a crossroads of the Midwest region of the United States on the Ohio River, with Kentucky to the South and Lake Erie to its north. When Europeans arrived in the region after the Revolutionary War, there were predictable tensions resulting in violence between Native Americans and white colonizers. The US government stepped in to provide troops and built Fort Washington, aiding in the confiscation of this valuable land and locale. The place now known as Cincinnati was an ill-gotten and valuable gain for colonizers but a tragic blow to the Native American tribes of the area.¹

At the turn of—and well into—the 19th century, Cincinnati’s location on the Ohio River allowed for numerous economic opportunities. Its major industries were shipping (first by boat and later by rail) and pork processing, earning the city its nickname: “Porkopolis.” Cincinnati was an American boomtown, listed as one of the ten largest cities in the country throughout the century. Journalist Horace Greeley called it “one of the most industrious places in the world,” and predicted that it was destined to become

1 Jeff Suess, *Lost Cincinnati*, Charleston (SC), History Press, 2015, p.9.

“the focus and mart for the grandest circles of manufacturing thrift on this continent.”² Citizens of the region were passionate in their social and political views and had an economic interest in maintaining the *status quo*.

During the *antebellum* period, Cincinnati was a first stop on the Underground Railroad, as slaves made their way across the Ohio River, the great natural barrier that separated slave states from free states. Though it was the birthplace of Harriet Beecher Stowe, this was not an idyllic abolitionist mecca. The city was filled with volatile racial tensions that arose from xenophobic citizens. As a result of its location as a border between slave and free states, economic power was at play: Cincinnati conducted much of its trade with the South and was home to powerful groups more interested in “bills of lading and accounts-due than in humanitarian reform.”³

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In this fledgling city filled with industry and ambition, the early citizens of Cincinnati also valued entertainment and amusement and theatre played an important role in the city’s enthusiasm for pleasure.⁴ The first play to be presented in the state, *Peeping Tom of Coventry*, was performed in Cincinnati at Fort Washington in 1801. *The Mock Doctor* and *She Stoops to Conquer* quickly followed; they were organized by a troupe of actors comprised of citizens and soldiers called the Thespian Corps.⁵ As the century progressed, theatre and various performing events began to occur regularly, and by the second half of the 19th century, elaborate theatres were built to supply audience’s demand for entertainment. They were beautiful palatial structures, featuring a wide menu of theatrical events for every taste: highbrow entertainment with opera and plays, but also popular offerings like vaudeville, wild-west shows, and burlesque.⁶ With its German and Irish immigrant population, influenced by a conservative Protestant work ethic and theology, Cincinnati society did not entirely welcome entertainers with open arms, though many actors held celebrity status and were featured prominently in advertisements that drew large crowds to the theatre. The great Sarah Bernhardt played *Camille* and *Hernani* at Cincinnati’s Pike Opera House in 1881 for four nights to wildly appreciative crowds.⁷

2 *The WPA Guide to Cincinnati* (prepared by the Federal Writers’ Project in Cincinnati with a new introduction by Zane L. Miller), Cincinnati, Cincinnati Historical Society, 1987, p.50.

3 *Ibid.*, p.30.

4 *Ibid.*, p.105. During the 19th century, Cincinnati was reputed to be the “wettest” city between New York and Chicago, with bistros, beer gardens, and saloons on nearly every corner.

5 William Osborne, *Music in Ohio*, Ohio, Kent State UP, 2004, p.257.

6 Steven J. Rolfes, Douglas R. Weise, and Phil Lind, *Cincinnati Theatres*, Charleston (SC), Arcadia, 2016, pp.25-29.

7 Marion M. Miller and Phyllis J. Heckathorn, “Sarah Bernhardt in Ohio,” *The French Review*, vol.26, no.1, 1952, p.34.

The National Theatre was one of the city's leading playhouses, featuring melodramas and popular entertainments with titles like *The Stage-Struck Yankee*⁸ (fig. 1).

This was the era of the *Stage-Door Johnny* and the *Floradora Girl*,⁹ and the line between the merriment on and off stage was sometimes obscured.¹⁰ John Wilkes Booth performed Shakespeare in the 1860s at the National Theatre, and his brother Junius Booth was finishing a two-week run of the play *The Three Guardsmen* at the Pike Opera House the night President Lincoln was assassinated.¹¹ In 1865, James O'Neill (the father of the great American playwright, Eugene O'Neill) launched his stage career at the National Theatre in Cincinnati at age twenty.¹² During the last three decades of the 19th century, Cincinnati promoted itself as the "Paris of America" to emphasize the

- 8 Ethan Schuh, *Historical Theatre in Cincinnati: Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: The People, The Places*, Cincinnati, Xavier University, 2018.
- 9 *Stage-Door Johnny* was a term for a man who lingered at the stage door to meet and court actresses. The *Floradora Girl* was a pretty, female, chorus dancer who drew the attention of many male admirers.
- 10 *The WPA Guide to Cincinnati*, op. cit., p. 109.
- 11 Jeff Suess, "150 years ago Lincoln was shot and *The Enquirer* missed it," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 11, 2015.
- 12 Robert M. Dowling, *Eugene O'Neill: A Life in Four Acts*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2014, p. 29.

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BENEFIT OF MR. MURDOCH,
And most positively his last appearance, on which occasion he will appear in the characters of
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FIRST NIGHT OF THE STERLING PLAY OF
THE DEFORMED!
OR, WOMAN'S TRIAL!
Written by Richard Penn Smith, Esq. of Philadelphia, and performed in Boston and Philadelphia with the most distinguished success.

SECOND NIGHT OF
HONOR,
A domestic Tragic Drama, in 4 parts, translated by Mrs. Ellet, the celebrated Authoress, from the German Play of "The Phantom Hour" by Franz Dingelstedt, and altered and adapted to the English Stage expressly for Mr. Murdoch.

On THIS, MONDAY EVENING, JULY 19th, 1847,
Will be acted the sterling Play in 3 acts, called
THE DEFORMED!
OR, WOMAN'S TRIAL!

BERALDO, (a Profligate,) - - - MR. MURDOCH.
Duke of Florence, Mr. Adams.
Adorni, (the Deformed), Morris.
Trelatzo, (a Nobleman), Green.
Caldico, C. T. Smith.
Lodovico, Edwards.
Pedro, Drake.

Astrabel, (Daughter to Trelatzo) - - Miss E. Logan.
Orsina, (Duchess of Florence), Walters.
Eugenia, (Wife of Adorni), Mrs. Johnston.
Viola, Adams.

After which A PAS DE DEUX! by
SIGNORINA FANNY MANTIN AND MR. G. W. SMITH.

The performance will conclude with this Drama in 4 parts, called
HONOR!
OR
THE MERCHANT & THE NOBLE!

WISSMUTH, a Merchant, - - - MR. MURDOCH.
Neus, (his Book-keeper), C. T. Smith.
David, (his Head Clerk), Green.
Count Von Piesten, Adams.
Amadeus Wolf, (his Son), Rodgers.
Reise, (the Count's Servant), Drake.
Franz, (a follower of the young Count Wolf), Miss Logan.
Matilde, (Wife to Wissmuth), Mrs. Adams.
Babet, (her Maid), Adams.

MRS. H. LEWIS,
The Celebrated Melo-Dramatic Actress,
MR. H. LEWIS & MISS BERTHA LEWIS,
Have been engaged for a few nights, and will shortly appear

67 Doors open at half past 7 o'clock, and the Curtain will rise at 8, precisely.
65 Box Office open daily from 10 o'clock A. M. till 1 P. M. and from 3 P. M. till 5 P. M., where seats may be secured by application to Mr. T. A. LOGAN, Treasurer.

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city's sophistication and international appeal.¹³ It drew an illustrious crowd. According to *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, during a lecture tour through the Midwest in 1882, Oscar Wilde stayed the night in Cincinnati, where he visited the world-renowned Rookwood Pottery, the first pottery company owned and established by a woman artist. Wilde also attended the opera to hear the great Adelina Patti sing in the new Cincinnati Music Hall.¹⁴ The event must have made a strong impression on Wilde, as he mentioned the evening and meeting Ms. Patti in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.¹⁵

84 Cincinnati was an ideal stop for the popular Showboat Theatres during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Betty Bryant, a young actress from *Bryant's Showboat*, enthusiastically describes her time spent in Cincinnati, where the company played to standing room only crowds for thirteen consecutive summers. Bryant, the youngest child, and company member in her family's successful entertainment business, remembers Cincinnati audiences as being "magnificent" and fielding requests for favorite standard melodramas like *Ten Nights in a Barroom* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.¹⁶ The Showboat was a longstanding and popular tradition in this river town.

At the turn of the 20th century, Cincinnati added spectacular movie palaces like the Albee Theatre to satisfy the growing cultural appetite for silent film, but live theatre and vaudeville continued to hold audience interest.¹⁷ The Marx Brothers made their Cincinnati debut at the popular B.F. Keith's Theatre in December 1914, performing their musical comedy *Home Again*. A review in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* praised the piano playing of Leonard (Chico) and harp solos by Arthur (Harpo), using their given names instead of their soon-to-be-famous stage names.¹⁸ Theatre owners were willing to renovate and cater to the public desire for new forms of entertainment. B.F. Keith's Theatre succumbed to changing tastes when the vaudeville venue closed on February 4, 1928 but reopened three weeks later with an organ and a modern projection booth to show photoplays, premiering with Charlie Chaplin's *The Circus*.¹⁹

13 Kevin LeMaster, "When Cincinnati was 'The Paris of America,'" *Building Cincinnati*, April 19, 2010.

14 John R. McClean, "Oscar Wilde: The Great Aesthete in the City," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 21, 1882.

15 John Cooper, "Patti in Cincinnati, February 20, 1882," *Oscar Wilde in America*, 2021.

16 Betty Bryant, *Here Comes the Showboat*, Lexington, Kentucky, U of Kentucky P, 1994, p.143.

17 J. Suess, *Lost Cincinnati*, *op. cit.*, p.67.

18 *Id.*, "Rise, fall of Keith's spotlights life, death of Downtown theaters," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 18, 2016.

19 *Ibid.*

During the first quarter of the 20th century, Cincinnati came to be known as a city with a vibrant cultural life and rich tapestry of live performance. Tom Wise, one of the great traveling stock and Broadway actors was quoted saying there were only three streets in America: “Broadway in New York, Market Street in San Francisco, and Vine Street in Cincinnati.”²⁰ For its average, working-class citizen, theatre represented an exciting form of entertainment that allowed the imagination to wander from the hardships of everyday life.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

The Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed had a profound impact on Ohio. By 1933, more than 40% of factory workers and 67% of construction workers were unemployed and many families faced unprecedented economic hardship.²¹ President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal responded to the need for relief, reform, and recovery from the Great Depression. Congress passed the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act in 1935, which allocated five billion dollars to create jobs for the unemployed, and President Roosevelt assigned Harry Hopkins to serve as the federal relief administrator. As supervisor of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Hopkins started the Federal One Programs that created jobs for artists and writers. He convinced Hallie Flanagan, a theatre professor at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, to run the Federal Theatre Project, a branch of Federal One.²²

The New Deal programs signaled a Democratic power shift in Washington. Although many of these New Deal policies were controversial and triggered criticism among representatives of business, politics, and labor, most felt that immediate action to correct the economy was necessary when Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office in 1933. However, even in its first year of existence, there was fervent criticism of these social programs in conservative circles, heightening the ideological divide that led to tensions and political disputes. The Federal Theatre Project launched, in 1935, as this disapproval smoldered.²³

²⁰ *The WPA Guide to Cincinnati*, *op. cit.*, p.104.

²¹ “Great Depression,” *Ohio History Central*, n.d.

²² Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, New York, Knopf, 1988, pp.185-187.

²³ Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Benjamin Blom, 1940, pp.333-335.

Hallie Flanagan was aware of the political tensions brewing, though she was seen by some in the WPA as naïve to the pressure. Flanagan understood that it was smart politics to expand the Federal Theatre Project beyond the artistic center of New York City, where Federal One was housed, to cities and towns across the country. Having a branch of the WPA in their hometowns gave politicians in Washington a point of local pride and a reason to vote across political lines in favor of funding this initiative. As the Federal Theatre Project expanded across the country, Ohio employed 187 workers and hosted projects in Cleveland, Dayton, Toledo, and Cincinnati.²⁴ Each city featured units that drew on their artistic strengths, including vaudeville, drama, children's theatre, marionettes, and African American units. By July 1936, Ohio couldn't maintain the number of artists or audience support needed to remain viable in all four cities. The rationale for consolidation was described in the *Federal One Progress Report*:

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The talent and facilities of the Toledo project will be absorbed by the larger and more flexible Cleveland units; and the Dayton unit will become a part of the Federal Theater in Cincinnati. This combination of personnel and facilities will centralize the Federal Theater efforts in Ohio's two largest cities and will undoubtedly result in stronger and more effective producing units.²⁵

The Cincinnati FTP officially opened on December 19, 1935, and actively produced shows from April 1936 through May 1939.²⁶ During its three-year existence, it produced thirty-four plays and musicals, just over one production per month for three years, at various performance venues throughout the city. Four of these productions—*HMS Pinafore* (September 1936), *It Can't Happen Here* (January-March 1937), *Macbeth* (October 1938), and *Prologue to Glory* (May 1938)—help to illuminate how the unit established and fostered relevance in the larger community that led to its longevity and popular success.²⁷

24 Ohio Federal Writers' Project, *Federal Project One in Ohio*, Columbus, OH, s.n., 1936, p.25.

25 *Ibid.*, p.31.

26 *Ibid.*, pp.33-35.

27 Compiled by the staff of the Fenwick Library (George Mason University), *The Federal Theatre Project: A Catalog-Calendar of Productions*, Westport (CT), Greenwood Press, 1986, p.224.

HMS PINAFORE: COLLABORATION AND COST

In a collaboration between the Federal Theatre and Music Projects in Cincinnati, the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *HMS Pinafore* was directed by Theodore Hahn and staged in the bucolic natural environment of the Burnet Woods Park. Hahn was a widely known and respected Cincinnati musician, who was put in charge of the FTP in Cincinnati after the Ohio reorganization. Since he was also the Supervisor of the Federal Music Project in Cincinnati, his joint appointment was a rare opportunity for collaboration between the two units. Theodore Hahn had been a director of theatre orchestras, and it was thanks to his relationship with local professional musicians that the alliances between theatre and music projects had a significant level of professional artistry.²⁸ Hahn's background in music and theatre led to his interest in producing light operas like *HMS Pinafore*, a straightforward form of entertainment that was palatable and familiar to Cincinnatians. Hahn's concept for the production was ambitious. For this extraordinary show, the company built a realistic HMS Pinafore ship to serve as its stage on the Burnet Woods Lake (fig. 2). This setting might now be called "site-specific performance," a form of theatre designed to be staged in a unique, specifically adapted location other than a standard theatre.²⁹ Accomplishing this enormous task required community involvement: local lumber companies donated 49,000 feet of wood, the power company donated electrical current and equipment, and WPA units loaned carpenters. When it was finished, the "Pinafore" was 75 feet long and 40 feet wide with a mast 18 feet high and was equipped with a drum battery that provided the character Sir Joseph with a gun salute when he jumped aboard for his entrance. Actors arrived on stage conveyed by a small boat that rowed dramatically across the lake. The three-story structure included dressing rooms for actors and an orchestra pit that seated 30 musicians, borrowed from the Federal Music Project. Performances began at dusk and were dramatically illuminated by footlights as the evening and plot progressed.³⁰

28 OFWP, *Federal Project One in Ohio*, *op. cit.*, pp.30-31.

29 Joanne Tompkins, "The 'Place' and Practice of Site-Specific Theatre and Performance", in Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (eds.), *Performing Site-Specific Theatre*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p.1-17.

30 Hallie Flanagan, "Gilbert and Sullivan al Fresco," *Federal Theatre Magazine*, 1937, vol.2, no.2, p.23.



2. HMS Pinafore (Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection)

Burnet Woods Park, the stage setting for *HMS Pinafore*, was located north of the city center and might have been accessed either by streetcar or a very long walk for most audience members. Despite the geographic challenge, 10,000 hopeful spectators arrived on opening night, and 5,000 had to be turned away. The performance started at 8.30pm with every seat taken. Spectators who didn't manage to procure a ticket blanketed the surrounding trees and hillsides, hoping to glimpse the action. Providing free or very inexpensive theatre tickets was one of Hallie Flanagan's top priorities for the Federal Theatre Project, and during the two-week run of *Pinafore* over 75,000 people saw the show free of charge.³¹ In that troubled economic time, providing complimentary

31 Ead., *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.29.

tickets was a significant factor in building an appreciative audience and enhancing this unit's local relevance.

The production garnered community support, and, for the first time since the FTP had launched in Cincinnati, the company received attention from local newspapers. *The Cincinnati Post* heralded the news of the upcoming show and the visit by Hallie Flanagan in an editorial with the lengthy headline: “*Stage for HMS Pinafore to Be Built on Pontoons in Lake, While Audience Will Be Seated on Hillside; Rehearsal Is Held for National Director, Visiting in City.*”³² Flanagan saw a final rehearsal for the show while on a tour of the Midwest, and applauded the production and collaborative efforts of the group in the *Federal Theatre Project Newsletter*. She praised the community spirit of the project, which garnered enthusiastic devotion from the local citizens, and the teamwork that brought together workers from various branches of the WPA and Federal One. In her article titled “Gilbert and Sullivan Al Fresco,” Flanagan wrote enthusiastically about the collaborative nature of the process and production:

With a fine exhibition of real troupers' spirit, actors from the vaudeville and dramatic units took off their coats and turned to the task of building the superstructure. They hammered and sawed, they built, they took turns acting as night watchmen, guarding the precious building materials. Meanwhile the cast was recruited from the vaudeville and dramatic units of the Theatre Project and from the choral unit of the Music Project. The symphonic unit of the Music Project furnished the orchestral accompaniment for the production. The Art Project made the posters, and the Writers Project took care of newspaper publicity.³³

Flanagan recognized the relevance that this unit was beginning to engender, and applauded the collaboration and clever casting of performers in a letter to the editor of the newsletter:

The Cincinnati Federal Theatre Production of *HMS Pinafore* is unusually exciting due to three things: the remarkable way in which Theodore Hahn has utilized the dramatic talent of a number of professionals who formerly starred in opera; the unusual chorus, which is composed not of pretty ciphers, looking just alike, but of a rich variety of men and women from vaudeville, stock companies and other dramatic experience;

32 “WPA Thespians to Offer Operetta in Burnet Woods,” *The Cincinnati Post*, September 4, 1936, p.9.

33 “National Director Sees Ohio's Pinafore,” *Federal Theatre Project Newsletter*, vol.2, no.2, 1937, p.25.

and the remarkable cooperation, not only of the Four Arts, but of many civic bodies in Cincinnati.³⁴

The *Cincinnati Times Star* sent a female journalist, George Elliston, to embed herself in the *HMS Pinafore*'s chorus for "behind the scenes" reporting. What Elliston assumed to be a lark and trivial assignment that none of her male colleagues would accept, took a serious turn as she prepared for her performance in the dressing room backstage. While applying her stage make-up, Elliston realized that she knew the woman sitting next to her:

I remember her when she and her bridegroom started out. Their acquiring a home of their own, an automobile. That he died very suddenly. "I tried everything to support the kiddies," she tells me, "I am a musician as you know—you remember I sang for eight years in the May Festival Chorus, belonged to the Mothersingers—now this. And believe me I am glad to get it." She hums a happy tune.³⁵

In this brief interaction, Elliston acknowledged to herself and her readers that the Federal Theatre Project was impacting lives both on and off the stage. Hers is the first published review of an FTP production by a Cincinnati newspaper and Elliston described the experience as that of a fairy tale. Like those around her, she was transformed through her participation:

The thing that impresses this new chorine most is the lighthearted joy of this thing. Whatever the troubles of those who take part, they are forgotten here, there is no mistaking the happiness all around. This is one of the few things Mr. Roosevelt has okayed that has my hearty approval. I shall petition our incoming President, Mr. Landon, to continue the Federal Theatre.³⁶

As implied in the final line of Elliston's newspaper review, Alf Landon, the Republican nominee challenging Roosevelt in 1936, was assumed by her, a conservative journalist, to be the unambiguous successor to the presidency. The tensions between policies of the right and left were evident in her benign closing. Elliston saw first-hand the benefits of this social program, despite her overall skepticism of its politics. Through her personal experience, she discovered the FTP's relevance and communicated it to the readership of the *Cincinnati Times Star*. The FTP's ability to bridge "party lines"

34 *Ibid.*, p.23.

35 George Elliston, "Ship out of Fairy Tales Sails Star-Kissed Burnet Woods Lake," *Cincinnati Times Star*, September 16, 1936, p.23.

36 *Ibid.*

was a major factor in the success of this show, thanks to the artistic collaboration between various units of the WPA, community involvement in the creative process, and its free admission that welcomed a wide audience.

IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE: CALAMITY AND COMMUNITY

Initial successes like *HMS Pinafore* allowed the Cincinnati FTP to make bolder artistic choices. Going beyond pure entertainment like musical comedy and operettas, they began to select plays that challenged audience members to question their social and political principles and normative ideals. To start the year, in January 1937 the unit planned to produce the controversial script, *It Can't Happen Here*, based on the novel of the same name, by Sinclair Lewis. The story is a warning against rising fascism in Europe that imagined the terrors of a dystopian America with a demagogue as a President. This divisive play was highly criticized before it was even adapted to its final script, and, for some, confirmed their beliefs about communist and subversive ideology in the Federal Theatre Project.³⁷ Lewis' script was considered to be propaganda by many, but unequivocally praised by others. In support of the FTP, *Theatre Arts Monthly* stated editorially: "There is no other theatre in America that would have the courage to announce a dramatization of Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*."³⁸ Hallie Flanagan, acknowledging the controversy, recalled that by opening night newspapers had written "78,000 lines of pro and con commentary."³⁹ One of Flanagan's most ambitious initiatives, the adaptation was produced at twenty-seven different Federal Theatre Project units across the country, including the Cleveland unit in Ohio. The Cincinnati production of *It Can't Happen Here* was scheduled to open on January 28, 1937, at the 2,200-seat Emery Theatre. Unfortunately, Mother Nature delayed the opening.

The 1937 Great Ohio Flood was a debilitating natural event affecting numerous cities and communities along the Ohio River, including Cincinnati (fig. 3). From January 5th, when waters began to rise, until February 5th, when they finally fell to below flood stage, it left at least 100,000 people homeless in Cincinnati alone. With their fragile hold on subsistence, many of those affected by the flood lost their meager belongings. Submerged in floodwaters, the city and its inhabitants were without potable water and left in darkness with no electricity for almost twenty days.⁴⁰

37 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 Greg Noble, "From the Vault: Great Ohio River Flood of 1937 was biggest event in Tri-State History," Channel WCPO Cincinnati, January 21, 2016.

The scheduled play by the Federal Theatre Project was not a priority, rather, mere physical survival was the day-to-day objective of Cincinnatians.



3. 1937 Ohio Flood (Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection)

In *Arena*, Hallie Flanagan’s book that details the history of the Federal Theatre, she spoke with unwavering pride about the FTP artists’ response to this crisis: “In the midst of this devastation the actors and artists of the Federal Theatre Project went to work to aid the community, meeting the emergency by bolstering the spirits of those hit hardest by the flood.”⁴¹ The vaudeville units in particular, with performers who were accustomed to a mobile system of touring, were first responders to the needs of citizens desperate for a diversion from their suffering. Performers rowed on boats to groups of stranded citizens, providing transitory amusement that alleviated their distress for a few hours. Flanagan describes the devastating situation and her pride in the artists’ selfless response:

41 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.166.

In fourteen days, Federal Theatre played forty engagements to 14,660 flood sufferers. Some of the actors lost in this flood what little they owned; some saw their own houses submerged; but they went on playing. Traveling by car, joining the team of trucks carrying food and medical aid to the victims, Federal Theatre actors played wherever they were needed. They were rowed across to a marooned colony, they were driven sixty-nine miles to beleaguered Mount Washington; they played in emergency shacks and in the open, on overturned tables, by the light of lanterns, candles, or flashlights. They were part of the community, working with and for the community.⁴²

This episode was a defining moment for the Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project: in a moment of hopelessness, the FTP found a way to bring joy, laughter, and relief to the community. Hallie Flanagan reports in the *Federal Theatre Newsletter* that performers “clowned and sang; they danced; they performed marvelous feats of legerdemain.”⁴³ Adding to their relevance in the community, the artists of the FTP “quieted crying children, they soothed the nightmare memories of grief-crazed adults, they bolstered sanity undermined by desolating loss.”⁴⁴ First employed by circus performers in the late 19th century, the mantra “the show must go on” defined the idea that, despite any unfortunate event, the performance would continue on, and performers must keep the audience calm and reassured. By the time *It Can't Happen Here* finally opened on February 17, 1937 (fig. 4), the national government-funded organization had done just that. Edward Carberry, the official theatre reviewer from *The Cincinnati Post* (who had never before reviewed or attended an FTP play), described the production dramatically “as scene follows scene, terror, like fog slowly and imperceptibly fills the shabby elegance of the Emery [theatre]. Yes, you smile when the lights fail to work at the proper moment, when the gunshots come 10 seconds late...but it HAS gotten under your skin.”⁴⁵ Carberry, despite his criticism of the production’s professionalism, had been moved by its message and goes on to reflect:

Afterwards, you sit comfortably at a café table and enumerate the glaring flaws of the play over a warming drink. This and that so obviously wrong, amateurish...but you do not mention that you have carried away a small, stubborn fear that will not be banished. However crudely, the play has done this thing: brought Fascism home to you, put it in

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ead.*, “Entertaining Flood Sufferers,” *Federal Theatre Newsletter*, vol.2, no.4, 1937, p.13.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Edward Carberry, “What America Might be Like Under the Blight of Fascism,” *The Cincinnati Post*, February 18, 1937, p.20.

your house, your town, your country. And your imagination has corrected the mistakes of the play. For you know this has happened elsewhere.⁴⁶

Carberry admired the dramatic power and imagination of the production and ended his review by giving the show his stamp of approval, stating: “I recommend seeing it.”⁴⁷ *It Can't Happen Here* played for ten days and, due to popular demand, was revived for one additional week on March 15, 1937. Hallie Flanagan described the great Ohio Flood of 1937 as the turning point for the Cincinnati unit of the Federal Theatre Project, in terms of its popular approval and artistic success. Flanagan believed that their work during the flood cemented the company as part of the artistic and social fabric of the region. The public attitude toward the FTP changed noticeably and Flanagan stated that “the two periods might be called B.F. and A.F.”⁴⁸ This was a turning point in relevance for the Federal Theatre Project in Cincinnati.

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MACBETH: CREATIVE CHANGE-MAKING

October 17, 1938, marked the opening of *Macbeth*, directed by Franklin Raymond, who had risen from assistant director to state director of the Ohio Project. It was the unit's first attempt at producing Shakespeare. Prior to being hired by the FTP, Raymond had been the artistic director of the Springfield Civic Theatre. His background as a New York actor with professional touring experience set the stage for his work on the FTP in Ohio.⁴⁹ With roots in the Little Theatre Movement,⁵⁰ prior to his involvement with the Federal Theatre Project, Raymond was no stranger to creating dynamic and community-grounded theatre for a midwestern audience. Raymond was one of the regional directors handpicked by Hallie Flanagan to participate in the FTP's

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*

48 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.166.

49 Brett Turner, “Theater Group Marks 85 years in Springfield,” *Springfield News-Sun*, October 8, 2016.

50 See Constance D'Arcy Mackay, *The Little Theatre in the United States*, New York, Henry Holt, 1917, pp.1-2; Clarence Arthur Perry, *The Work of the Little Theatres*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1933, pp.9-11; Dorothy Chansky, *Composing Ourselves*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois Press, 2004, pp.2-4. The Little Movement in the United States was influenced by its European predecessors and emerged as a reaction to commercial theatre. Its mission was to create theatre in an intimate setting, that would serve to improve society, and involve experimental artistic techniques. Mackay grounds its defining principles: “[E]xperimentation is the Little Theatre's *raison d'être*.” (C. Mackay, *The Little Theatre in the United States*, *op. cit.*, p.1.)

RETURNED BY
POPULAR DEMAND
CINCINNATI FEDERAL THEATRE

**"IT CAN'T
HAPPEN HERE"**

By **JOHN C. MOFFITT** and **SINCLAIR LEWIS**

From the Novel by **Sinclair Lewis**

EMERY AUDITORIUM

MARCH 15^{TO} 21 Incl.

8:15 p. m.

Sat. Matinee 2:15 p. m.

Summer Workshop at Vassar College in 1937, where he was influenced by her artistic ideas and encouraged to experiment with a variety of new, innovative, artistic methods for creating theatre.⁵¹ Taking the directorial helm for *Macbeth*, Franklin Raymond hoped to implement the techniques that were the foundation of Flanagan's aesthetic, particularly the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold and his experimentation with symbolism, expressionism and constructivism. Those revolutionary ways of approaching theatre would make their way into Cincinnati's *Macbeth*.

Prior to this production, the Cincinnati unit had presented their dramatic plays, including *It Can't Happen Here*, in the Emery Auditorium, a performing space funded by philanthropist Mary Emery for the Ohio Mechanics Institute in 1912. Located in the heart of the Cincinnati theatre district, the Emery was intended for use as a music and lecture hall for the trade school. The massive structure on Central Parkway seated 2,200, with acoustics that were compared to those of Carnegie Hall. In 1936, the Emery Auditorium housed no permanent artists or company, and was made available to the Federal Theatre Project.⁵²

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As Raymond prepared to work on *Macbeth*, he determined that the Emery, where the FTP had been housed up to this point, served neither the audience nor the players well. It had never been intended for staging theatre and, although it was acceptable for musicals and light opera, the effect of realistic plays was lost on the enormous stage. Although beautiful and conveniently located, the immense stage and cavernous audience space didn't suit the experimental theatrical techniques that director Franklin Raymond hoped to employ in *Macbeth*. He found a more intimate and flexible environment several blocks away, in a space that he would transform into the Playbox Theatre. Located at 807 Race Street, the building had formerly housed a refrigerator store, whose owner agreed to remodel it to accommodate the theatre's specifications. Under Raymond's leadership, the company constructed a proscenium stage that was 26.5 feet wide and 28 feet deep, using recycled wood from *HMS Pinafore*. Raymond enthusiastically described to *The Cincinnati Enquirer* the scenic effects he could create with "lights and platforms draped in black."⁵³ The new space would also save the FTP money, as the rent was lower than the Emery's, so economically and artistically the move made good sense. Seating an audience of 250, the capacity was

51 Pierre de Rohan, "The First Federal Summer Theatre...a Report," Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection, George Mason University Libraries, Fairfax, VA, 1937.

52 "Race Street Picked for New Federal Theater," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 29, 1938, p.6.

53 *Ibid.*

ideal for Raymond's artistic vision. It was christened as the Cincinnati FTP Theatre with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

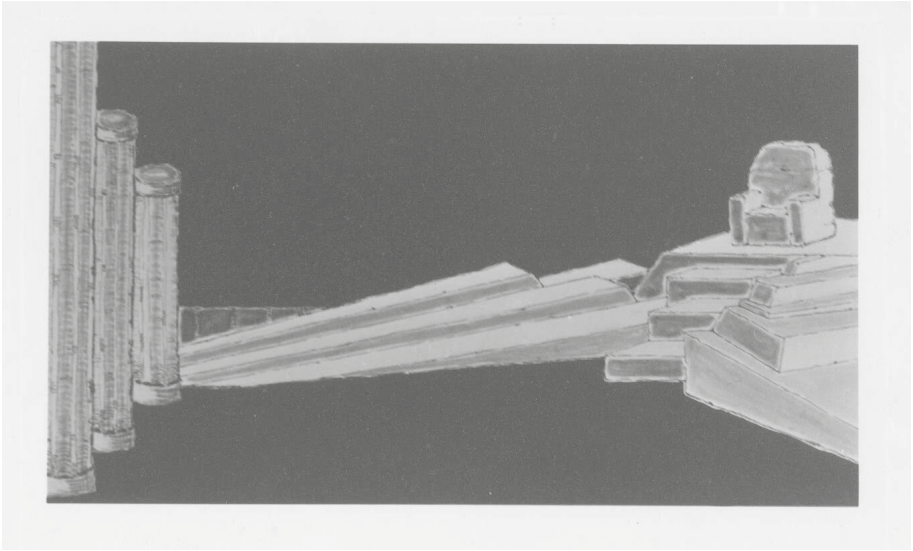
The Library of Congress has digitized Raymond's Production Book and FTP Report for *Macbeth*. It is a gold mine of information that documents the highs and lows of the rehearsal process and production. In the Director's Report, Raymond described his savvy approach to the script and his rationale for various artistic choices. This was the third year of the FTP's existence, and Raymond based his decisions on a clear understanding of his Cincinnati audience. He wanted to make Shakespeare relevant to his ticket buyers, and planned to introduce this popular tragedy in a way that they would find stimulating and wouldn't drastically tax their attention span explaining: "In rearranging the original script of *Macbeth* for our purpose, I kept one thing in mind, to make the script as exciting as possible and to keep it moving with speed."⁵⁴ Contrary to its original five acts, and with no apologies to the Bard, Raymond also made judicious cuts and divided the performance into three parts: "1) Macbeth's Rise to the Throne; 2) Macbeth's Reign as King; and 3) Macbeth's Downfall."⁵⁵ Raymond also recognized the theatrical limitations of his company members: "Realizing we did not have any exceptional Shakespearean actors, [I wanted] to invest the performance with a novelty in staging and business that would not point up the individual performances too much." His solution was a vaudevillian sleight-of-hand, a distraction he explained as: "I built up the witches and the super-natural elements," to focus the audience's attention on spectacle rather than dialogue.⁵⁶

Raymond emphasized that the stage setting and impressionistic lighting had no connection to or attempt at realism (fig. 5). The production's lights used color to heighten the emotional impact of the scenes so the entire stage was painted grey, providing an empty palette for producing color changes with light. The single unit set consisted of three stone pillars that were moved to various configurations to create different locations, which encouraged the audience to use their imagination to conjure the environment. *The Cincinnati Enquirer* spoke favorably of Raymond's work, stating that "the handling of the players in this small area is little short of miraculous and speaks well for a resourceful director," and went on to applaud the scenic changes, remarking that "the manner in which this setting appears to change from a forest to

54 "Production Notebook from Cincinnati production of *Macbeth*," Library of Congress, Finding Aid Box 1035.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*



5. *Macbeth* Set Design (Rights: Library of Congress, Music Division, Federal Theatre Project Collection)

a castle banquet hall, to castle ramparts is another tribute to the technical skill of the Federal group.”⁵⁷

Raymond’s report highlights his resourcefulness and continued dedication to local workers and artisans’ involvement in FTP productions. He noted his efforts with pride, “using the talents and resources at hand, props and costumes were all locally made.” Raymond boasted of his thrift in procuring materials for costumes, as “they were able to acquire skins from a local tannery at one dollar for a whole skin”⁵⁸ (fig. 6). In what had become an established tradition of collaboration for the Cincinnati FTP, Raymond worked with a musician from the Cleveland Federal Music Project who composed an original score for the production to heighten the emotional impact of the scenes and transitions. Unfortunately, the director’s best-laid plans for the music ran amuck during the final days of rehearsal. Raymond describes the pre-opening stumbling blocks in the report to the National Office: “The score was written for an electric organ, trumpet, and tympani. At the last moment, we were unable to get the organ promised us, so we had to use a piano. Much of the effect of the music was lost, due to this, especially the parts written to cover the witches’ scenes.”⁵⁹

57 E.B. Radcliffe, “Here’s a Macbeth with Lots of Action,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 18, 1938, p.5.

58 “Production Book from Cincinnati production of *Macbeth*,” art. cit.

59 *Ibid.*



Act III.

Scene V.

Robert White as Macduff

Act II.

Scene IV.

The Witches



6. *Macbeth* Costumes (Rights: Library of Congress, Music Division, Federal Theatre Project Collection)

Raymond's vision was challenged by actors, resources, and unforeseen circumstances but his creativity triumphed. *The Cincinnati Post* gave *Macbeth* a rave review, stating in its headline that the "Production Displays Imagination and Craftsmanship," and heartily approved of the company's venue change to the Playbox Theatre:

It may be that the absence of most of the machinery of a professional theatre is precisely what the FTP needed, necessity being the mother, etc. etc. Whatever the cause, this admirably staged *Macbeth* is not only good entertainment, but it raises high hopes for the future. If the FTP continues to apply the ingenuity displayed in *Macbeth* it will make an invaluable contribution to the community.⁶⁰

100 *The Cincinnati Enquirer* chimed in and described the production as having boldness and sincerity.⁶¹ Both the *Enquirer* and *Post* praised the acting, especially that of Lady Macbeth played by Ruth Auerbach and Lyn Ranous in the titular role. Lyn Ranous was, in fact, a stage name used by director Franklin Raymond. Although he doesn't mention that detail in his report for the national office, perhaps the acting pool was weaker than he originally thought, for it seems that Raymond needed to pinch hit in the lead role himself. One can only imagine Raymond's anxiety: a brand-new, artistically risky theatre space; a complicated Shakespeare play with many technical requirements; both directing and acting in the lead role; and the critics and community watching the FTP's every move. Nonetheless, critics approved of Ranous/Raymond's performance stating that the roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth were particularly well done. *The Cincinnati Post* also applauded Raymond's direction as having a firmer hand than had been customary in FTP productions. Ultimately, the reviewers encouraged their Cincinnati audience to attend not just this play, but implied there were bound to be other successes in the future:

If the FTP continues in its present course, applying the craftsmanship and ingenuity displayed in *Macbeth* to plays which the commercial theater cannot or will not do, it should make an invaluable contribution to the community. In the meantime, *Macbeth* amply justifies your patronage. With a few screens and lights and handsome costuming, magic has been wrought and the verbal pageantry of Shakespeare given a setting wherein it can work its wizardry on your mind.⁶²

60 Edward Carberry, "Federal Theater Opens Playbox with *Macbeth*: Production Displays Imagination and Craftsmanship," *The Cincinnati Post*, October 1938, p.12.

61 E.B. Radcliffe, "Here's a *Macbeth* with Lots of Action," art. cit., p.5.

62 E. Carberry, "Federal Theatre opens Playbox with *Macbeth*," art. cit., p.12.

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7. *Ohio Doom* Poster (Rights: Library of Congress,
Music Division, Federal Theatre Project Collection)

Raymond was in his artistic element and found his *oeuvre* was well showcased in the new Playbox Theatre. With positive reviews, solid audience support, and an established company of collaborators, the Cincinnati FTP was enjoying a period of artistic success and an increasing level of relevance in the community.

PROLOGUE TO GLORY: CONFUSION AND CONCLUSION

The success of Raymond's experimental *Macbeth* allowed the FTP to take additional artistic chances in the remaining seven months of its existence in its new playing space. A few weeks after *Macbeth* closed, the unit produced *Ohio Doom*, a play by local writer Harold Igo (fig.7). The geographically relevant script illustrated the economic hardships of farmers in the region who found a solution to their struggles through community spirit and neighborly cooperation.

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A Living Newspapers play titled *Spirochete* followed soon after and was the penultimate production for the Cincinnati FTP in February 1939. Living Newspapers served Hallie Flanagan's desire to create theatre that could both entertain and instruct; they focused on issues of national, social, political, and economic importance. *Spirochete*, a play by Arnold Sungaard about the history and virulent spread of syphilis, brought to life the cultural shame and taboos that surrounded this, still prevalent, disease. *Spirochete* was an attempt by the FTP to improve public health and illuminated the silence that thwarted the spread of accurate information about treatment and prevention.⁶³ Adding to the list of accolades for the Cincinnati FTP, *Spirochete* was given a positive review by the *Enquirer's* E.B. Radcliffe, who explained that: "Frank and rational treatment of the subject material has resulted in a two-act panorama that includes many incidents that appeal to the hearts and minds of the audience."⁶⁴ Radcliffe gave a nod to the company's artistic progress and confirmed that: "The Federal Theater players surpass their past performances and staging, lighting, directing, and material are the best on record in the annals of Federal Theatre here."⁶⁵

The Cincinnati FTP was riding the wave of this artistic success and in rehearsal for its next show, *Prologue to Glory*, when they received a fateful visitor from Washington, DC. In May of 1939, George J. Shillito, an investigator from the House Committee on Appropriations, which had been set up to investigate the Works Progress

63 Sara Guthu, "Living Newspapers: Spirochete," *The Great Depression in Washington State Project*, 2009.

64 E.B. Radcliffe, "Federal Theater Turns out Good Drama," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 22, 1939, p.10.

65 *Ibid.*

Administration, travelled to Ohio and attended a rehearsal of *Prologue to Glory*. Shillito arrived around 9.00pm and stayed to ask a few questions after watching only twenty minutes of the company's rehearsal. Based on his brief visit, Shillito returned to Washington and gave his disparaging report to the Committee, condemning the financial and artistic operations of the unit. He maintained that rent on the Playbox Theatre was much too high, its actors were inadequate, and box office receipts were being mishandled. Fighting for the company's artistic life and reputation, Franklin Raymond responded in an extensive letter rebutting every accusation made by Shillito. He explained in a written Statement to the Committee that, in June 1938, he had cut operating expenses for the FTP unit by moving to their new location in the Playbox Theatre on Race Street and managed to negotiate a monthly rental cost of \$225 per month, \$50 per month less than the former tenant had paid and a significant reduction from their former home in the Emery Auditorium. Shillito alleged that "he asked Raymond what the box office receipts were, and that Raymond had no information and seemed very vague about it."⁶⁶ Raymond countered by asserting that Shillito had asked no questions concerning the receipts from the box office during his brief visit. Raymond responded to Shillito's allegations, defending himself in *The Cincinnati Enquirer*:

It is my business to know, at all times, the financial condition of the operation. There is no possibility of being "vague" on this matter as there is only so much money to be expended and the project must operate withing this set sum. The entire production costs of the Federal Theater productions must be met by the box office intake. As State Director of the Federal Theatre Projects in Ohio I have no voice in the using of Federal Funds nor box office funds. This is entirely in the hands of the Treasury Department.⁶⁷

Shillito was also dismissive of the actors' talent and professionalism: "I found that 95 percent of the actors presently employed on that project are of amateurish standing and that only 5 percent are known as professional who had prior experience in the legitimate theater on the legitimate stage prior to being employed by the WPA."⁶⁸ Raymond contradicted that argument and published his rebuttal in a statement to the *Cincinnati Post* on May 17, 1939: "Signed applications are on file to show that all our actors have had professional experience of from one to forty years and they

66 Investigation and Study of the Works Progress Administration: [Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations House of Representatives](#), July 17, 1939, p.1320-1323.

67 "Denial Made of Washington Data on Federal Theater Project in Cincinnati," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 17, 1939, p.14.

68 *Investigation and Study of the Works Progress Administration*, art. cit., pp.1320-1323.

come from all categories of the theatre.”⁶⁹ The Federal Theatre Project in Cincinnati did not withstand this calculated attack on its viability or integrity and *Prologue to Glory: A Play in Eight Scenes Based on the New Salem Years of Abraham Lincoln* by Ellsworth Prouty Conkle was its final production. Produced in eight FTP units across the country, *Prologue to Glory* was an inspiring play about Lincoln’s early life and an overture to his later success as a politician. The *New York Daily News* described it as “an event inspiring national rejoicing.”⁷⁰ Yet it was regarded as radical by the Committee members who, without having seen or read the script, accused it of being filled with Communist Talk.

104 Powerful political forces led to the demise of the Federal Theatre Project. Congress was influenced and misinformed by the House Committee on Appropriations, and although the more radical and public controversies involving the New York unit were at the heart of the issue, according to Hallie Flanagan in *Arena*: “Ohio was one of the few projects outside of New York in which there was any attempt at an investigation of the Federal Theatre Project by the sub-committee of the Committee on Appropriations investigating the WPA.”⁷¹ Despite its record of prolific artistic accomplishment, and successful job creation that helped to fuel the economic engine of the community, the FTP was ended by an Act of Congress on June 30, 1939.⁷² It marked the end of an era, and the Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project was finished.

LOCAL AND CULTURAL RELEVANCE

Ultimately, the success of the Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project was linked to its local and cultural relevance in the community. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *relevant* as “bearing upon, connected with, pertinent to, the matter in hand;” it is derived from the Latin word *relevare*, which means “to raise up” or “relieve.”⁷³ To be relevant, an action, a person, or, for the FTP, an artistic endeavor, must be connected to the larger purpose, the “matter at hand” that is pertinent to the daily lives of both the participants and audience. Relevance was at the heart of Hallie Flanagan’s mission for the Federal Theatre Project. As accusations mounted against the organization in its final year, Flanagan’s daughter, Joanne Bentley, reflected that: “Hallie had been all too

69 “State WPA Director Denies Theater Here Mismanaged,” *The Cincinnati Post*, May 17, 1939, p.5.

70 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, p.323.

71 *Ibid.*, p.335.

72 *Ibid.*, p.334.

73 *Oxford English Dictionary*, Compact Edition, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1971, p.2479.

successful in developing the kind of theatre she believed in, a *relevant* theatre.”⁷⁴ When Hallie appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) on December 6, 1939, she defended the ideologies of the Federal Theatre Project and her own hopes and dreams for it. Alabama Congressman Joe Starnes questioned Hallie and asked her if she believed that theatre was a weapon. Flanagan revealed her deep passion for what theatre can and should be in her response, avowing: “I believe that the theatre is a great educational force. I think it is an entertainment. I think it is excitement. I think it may be all things to all men.”⁷⁵ Near the end of her questioning by the HUAC, Hallie took “the same position she always had: a government-sponsored theatre should present ‘relevant theatre.’”⁷⁶

Relevance for the Federal Theatre Project was determined by geographic region, economic necessity, and the quotidian realities of each unit. Decisions regarding which plays to produce were made on a case-by-case and locale-by-locale basis: scripts that were culturally relevant in New York or San Francisco may not have been interesting to an Ohio audience and vice versa. To wit, *Ohio Doom* never played outside of its one-week run at the Playbox Theatre. The Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project achieved relevance through a consistent and continuous application of collaboration, community engagement and creativity. With *HMS Pinafore*, the company involved the community in a massive construction event that had a magical quality, including its dream-like appearance on a lake. Through a collaborative spirit and generosity of resources, this colossal undertaking led to community support and pride. The production of the play *It Can't Happen Here* could have been the nail in the coffin for the Cincinnati FTP, the flood making a difficult artistic situation untenable. Yet, the result of this disaster was unflinching commiseration and gratitude from the community. In a moment of civic calamity, when the city was enduring an unimaginable tragedy, the FTP allowed citizens to escape from the harsh reality of the flood and provided solace. In this action of service, the FTP built a bridge of meaningfulness between artists and citizens that provided an opportunity to expand beyond pure entertainment. Moving forward, they were able to produce plays that educated the audience about social, political, and economic issues. The production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* combined established practices of creativity, collaboration, and community engagement in a new and innovative setting. The company never allowed themselves to rest on their artistic laurels: they were innovators and entrepreneurs of their artistic

74 J. Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan*, *op. cit.*, p.285.

75 *Ibid.*, p.315.

76 *Ibid.*, p.320.

form, always concerned with increasing relevance and viability in the community. The company administrators adjusted overall costs, including monthly rents, so they could continue to provide dynamic theatre at an affordable cost to audience members. By the time *Prologue to Glory* was produced as its final show, the FTP was a beloved part of the community.

Though relatively short-lived, the Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project left a legacy of dynamic, vibrant, and relevant theatre in its wake. The traditions that the FTP established in the city continue to thrive to this day. Currently residing within a stone's throw of the Emery Auditorium (now sadly abandoned, and due to be gutted and converted into condominiums) and the Playbox Theatre (recently a photography studio, and now an international shipping company), are numerous theatre companies who carry on the mission of relevance that the FTP set in motion. The Know Theatre of Cincinnati defines itself as “an artistic playground where artists and audiences can come together to produce and experience work that could not be done anywhere else.”⁷⁷ Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati is dedicated to “producing world and regional premieres of works that often explore compelling social issues...hoping to enlighten, enliven, enrich and inspire” audiences.⁷⁸ The Tony Award winning Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, which opened in 1959, is known for “its excellence and commitment to new works and as an artistic home for America’s best actors, directors and designers.”⁷⁹ Cincinnati Shakespeare Company brings Shakespeare and Classics to life for audiences of all ages and “ignites the classics to create fresh, thought-provoking productions.”⁸⁰ The fully-restored Showboat Majestic, built in 1923, remains a Cincinnati institution, featuring light melodrama and musicals each summer on the Ohio River.⁸¹ The Federal Theatre Project was a government funded program that supplied relief and employment for artists. Now, the [Ohio Arts Council](#) provides state funding to each of these theatres, in addition to numerous corporate and individual donations that keep them in operation. These theatre companies bring a wide range of dynamic performance to the regional audience that continues to demand and expect first-rate entertainment. There is a community insistence for a continuation of the art form that is creative, collaborative, and community engaged. Cincinnati is a city that demands culturally relevant theatre as sustenance: a need that was filled by the mission of the Federal Theatre Project, and a legacy that endures.

77 The Know Theatre of Cincinnati, “[About Us](#),” *KnowTheatre*, 2020.

78 Ensemble Theatre, “[About Us](#),” *Ensemble Cincinnati*.

79 Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, “[About the Playhouse](#),” *Cincyplay*, 2017.

80 Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, “[About Us](#),” *CincyShakes*.

81 Showboat Majestic, “[Showboat Majestic official page](#),” *Facebook*.

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NOTICE

Nancy Jones is a Professor at the University of Kentucky. Her work as a professional theatre director has been featured at the Lincoln Center Directors Lab, NY International Fringe Festival, La MaMa Experimental Theatre, American Living Room Festival at HERE, Immigrant’s Theatre Project, New Dramatists, Actors Theatre of Louisville and with her company, Théâtre Farouche. She has translated/directed works by Ionesco, Genet, and Marivaux and her play Moliere’s Women premiered at the Mae West Festival in Seattle and in Paris at Salle Adyar for the International Humanities Conference. Nancy served as Chair of the UK Department of Theatre for 12 years and teaches a Study Abroad Program in Paris each summer.

ABSTRACT

Hallie Flanagan, the National Director of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), had an ambitious goal at the heart of her mission: to create jobs for artists and present relevant theatre. Cincinnati, Ohio, was home to one of the most impactful FTP units in the country due to their deliberate and consistent application of Flanagan’s notion of relevancy. Producing thirty-four shows during their three-year existence, the Cincinnati unit played a vital role in the Federal Theatre Project, fulfilling one of the principal mandates of its program: to create locally relevant theatre across the country and expand its reach beyond traditional theatre centers like New York City. This case study illuminates the key creative, cultural, and collaborative choices made by the leaders of the Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project that fueled its artistic success, and, more importantly, captured the broad support of the community.

KEYWORDS

Cincinnati, Federal Theatre Project, Hallie Flanagan, Works Progress Administration Ohio, *HMS Pinafore*, *Macbeth*, *It Can't Happen Here*

RÉSUMÉ

Hallie Flanagan, directrice du *Federal Theatre Project*, avait l'ambitieux objectif, propre à sa mission, de créer des emplois pour les artistes et présenter des pièces de théâtre pertinentes. Cincinnati, Ohio, abritait l'une des unités FTP les plus emblématiques en raison de la mise en application délibérée et cohérente de la vision de Flanagan. Produisant trente-quatre spectacles au cours de ses trois années d'existence, l'unité de Cincinnati a joué un rôle essentiel dans le *Federal Theatre Project*, remplissant l'un des principaux mandats de son programme: créer un théâtre localement pertinent à travers le pays et étendre sa portée au-delà des centres de théâtre traditionnels – comme New York. Cette étude de cas met en lumière les principaux choix créatifs, culturels et collaboratifs des dirigeants du *Cincinnati Federal Theatre Project*: ces choix furent à l'origine du succès artistique du projet, qui recueillit un large soutien de la communauté.

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MOTS-CLÉS

Cincinnati, Federal Theatre Project, Hallie Flanagan, WPA Ohio, *HMS Pinafore*, *Macbeth*, *It Can't Happen Here*

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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E-THEATRUM MUNDI

Collection dirigée par Julie Vatain-Corfdir & Sophie Marchand

La collection « e-Theatrum Mundi » considère le théâtre sous tous ses angles et dans tous ses états. Dans la continuité de la collection papier à laquelle elle est adossée, elle se veut un lieu de réflexion sur les diverses manifestations d'expression théâtrale à travers le monde, et rassemble des travaux de recherche sur l'écriture, le jeu, les pratiques et les formes scéniques, la mise en scène et le spectateur. Sa particularité est de proposer uniquement des volumes interdisciplinaires, en lien avec le Programme de recherches interdisciplinaires sur le théâtre et les pratiques scéniques de Sorbonne Université (PRITEPS), dont elle reflète les activités. En croisant les angles d'approche, la collection vise à provoquer des confrontations fructueuses entre les scènes, les langues et les méthodologies, dans le domaine des études théâtrales.

DÉJÀ PARUS

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un théâtre de l'expérimentation dramatique au xviii^e siècle*
Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

American Dramaturgies for the 21st Century
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La Scène en version originale
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