Recollections of the Federal Theatre

DON FARRAN

“Gentlemen, the total cost of Federal Theatre projects since their inception is approximately the cost of one battleship.” So Hallie Flanagan, National Director of Federal Theatre, was explaining to a Senate committee in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1939. A senator and a congressman had set out to eliminate Federal Theatre and all it stood for, and they were about to succeed. It was, they said, a luxury the depression-ridden country could not afford. America could not afford to support such lazy loafers as hungry actors and actresses. Let them build roads and parks, especially in the home states of those on the committee. And so Federal Theatre died.

Federal Theatre had been born in conflict, nourished in political rancour, treated with contempt and neglect, and destined to an early death in many states. “These vines have tender grapes,” an old actor once quoted to me, and it seemed to me a vintage statement. Only in the largest cities could theatre survive, and even there more than ninety percent of the legitimate theatres were dark during the 1930s. Broadway struggled along, but few plays took to the road to tour. It was the lowest point since World War I, when the chautauqua and the small circuses were beginning to disappear.

Those had been the days of the small medicine shows and the black-face minstrels aboard the river-boats bound for New Orleans on the Ohio and the Mississippi. “Occasional” was the word for them, no doubt, but they were woven into the fabric of American life across the entire country and they constituted a part of our “culture.” There may be little great or enduring literature about them, but traveling companies were still on the road, offering Esmeralda, Rip Van Winkle, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Romeo and Juliet, The Count of Monte Cristo, Damon and Pythias, The Three Guardsmen, East Lynn, and dozens of others in tent or opera house above the Masonic or Elks halls in county-seat towns. Showbills appeared in empty store front-windows and covered the sides of barns and fences. Those things
may have been the original national theatre of America. Other nations supported their national operas and theatres from government funds—France for a hundred years, Germany and Austria and Italy for almost as long, England for fifty years, and even impoverished Mexico for ten years through its magnificent Palace of Fine Arts. Our federal government had endowed nothing, provided nothing, and gained nothing from the experiences of other nations.

In the 1920s a popular writer, Ellis Parker Butler, had summed it up with a reference to Iowa and the Midwest: “A million dollars for manure, but not one cent for literature!” In the mid-1930s, deep in the Depression, a change took place. Millions were hungry and out of work when President Roosevelt began the federal-help programs, one of them culminating in the federal Works Progress Administration, with an Iowan, Harry Hopkins, in charge. Under Hopkins the federal “white-collar” projects were born—Federal Writers, Federal Arts, Federal Music, Federal Theatre, Historical Records Survey, American Imprints Inventory—with Ellen Woodward and her very capable assistant Florence Kerr (from Iowa) directly in charge of them at the national level. Most of these projects operated in all of the states at one time or another; and many of them at the state level, under male State Administrators, were in charge of women who supervised the “white-collar” responsibilities and personnel. In Iowa, Jessie Hanthorn was supervisor for the greater part of their existence.

In the mid-thirties a group from the American theatre met in early spring, prepared to set up for the first time a truly national theatre in America. Many had come down from New York City to aid in the planning started by Hallie Flanagan and Emmet Lavery, a lawyer, critic and Broadway playwright: Orson Welles, Elmer Rice, Paul Green, Virgil Geddes, famous actors, playwrights, critics. John McGee, one-time head of the Drama Department at Purdue University, who was to become Regional Director of Federal Theatre for Chicago and thirteen middlewestern states, was there, intent on the planning. The days grew hotter and so did the arguments and differences. Government procedures set up for other “white-collar” projects often would not fit the requirements of Federal Theatre, and their amendment often involved time and red tape. But out of it all there finally emerged a pattern for this first truly “national theatre,” inadequate as it was. Administrative personnel were to be paid a little more than the $64.00 to $96.00 set for the actors and the actresses, many of whom had been on Broadway. As a steal, it ranked next to today’s six cents for mailing a penny postcard!

That summer the first play to be produced by Federal Theatre, in
Washington, D.C., never got its curtain up, even with the house filled to standing room only. The Senate of the United States killed it. The last play of Federal Theatre, in Chicago, called Pie in the Sky, also never was produced. It too was killed by the Senate in Washington, D.C. In the years between, there were some hectic times, some moments of pure unadulterated success and the praise of national critics, and a great deal of lean living. But there were great audiences, and someone has said, “to have great plays there must be great audiences.”

On March 4, 1933, the loneliest man in the world was buying an evening paper at the newsstand in Grand Central Station. He was recognized by Emmet Lavery, who went over to talk with that lone figure, Herbert Hoover. Out of their brief conversation came a fine three-act play, Ex-President, by Lavery. And out of that play came chaos, almost a state of national emergency. Federal Theatre had selected it as their first presentation, and in the nation’s capital. Not since Daniel Webster had fought the Devil in the halls of Congress had feelings run higher, not even during the Teapot Dome scandal.

One of those Senate committees that get caught in the horse latitudes of a summer in Washington was sitting up on the Hill. Among its most literate members was one who got wind of the play selection by Federal Theatre and asked for a copy of it. Harry Hopkins, who had read the play, slammed the door on the senator, but a bootlegged copy reached him. The cast of the play, directed by Orson Welles, continued rehearsals and even set an opening date. The public, looking to Caesar for a new circus maximus for the dull summer nights, bought out the house, and there was standing room only. The Senate committee, meanwhile, was slowly digesting the various scenes of the play script. And that fatal evening, as the curtain was about to go up on some 2,500 or more people in the audience, another great tradition of the theatre was shattered. “The play must go on!” “Not so,” said the two messengers from the Senate committee, armed with all necessary papers to stop it, as they arrived backstage. The curtain never went up. The crowd finally dispersed, sullenly, urged on in their vocal protests by local news reporters. And thus ended the first lesson.¹ There would be other plays, some of them controversial or experimental such as The Cradle Will Rock, Living-Newspaper type plays or the later Swing Mikado in Chicago. But they did not feel the

¹Author’s note: I later had the pleasure of bootlegging a copy of Lavery’s excellent play to a friend of mine in Mexico City who was the Director of Cultural Affairs for Mexico, Dr. Fernando Wagner. He gave it an excellent production in their National Theatre, with high Mexican government officials filling the red plush seats.
jolt of that first impact of censorship of the theatre by a Senate com-
mmittee.

In those early years of Federal Theatre I was missing out on its fun
and games, and headaches. I had been down in Brazil and Argentina
with testy old Richard Bennett, the famous actor, helping him write
his memoirs for a national magazine and enjoying a few fun-and-games
myself, along with some revolutions he started and I had stamped out
behind him. When I returned to New York in 1936, Alec Buckingham
Simson, a friend who was then the state director of the Federal Music
project in Boston, invited me over for the winter. He and Isaac Van
Grove, former director of the Chicago Civic Opera, were streamlining
grand opera for the first time in America, using the Boston Opera-
house for the experiment.

The project was large, state-wide, and excellent, having among its
talent such persons as the young and beautiful Eleanor Steber. Isaac
Van Grove, who was directing The Eternal Road for Max Reinhardt
on Broadway, came over to spend three days and nights weekly in
Boston with us. And the operas, streamlined, cut in time but losing
nothing, all members acting on-stage instead of merely standing there,
cught the top praises of the Boston music critics. This federal "white-
collar" program was "getting to me" and to the public that filled the
Opera house for every performance. It couldn't last, of course, and
when winter ended so did the grand opera experiment. The senators
in Washington had discovered it and decided too much federal money
was being spent in renting the Boston Opera house. So Isaac returned
to New York, Alec returned to giving Boston simple vanilla music,
and I returned to Iowa to work on the Iowa Guidebook for the Fed-
eral Writers' Project.

When the project had been set up in Iowa a year or two before, Jay
duVon had been its state director. He had then gone on to become
the regional director, and my old friend Raymond Kresensky had
moved up to take Jay's place. It was a letter from Kresensky to me
in Boston that had brought me to the project's editorial offices. Pro-
fessor George Keller, of The University of Iowa's College of Engineer-
ing, was state administrator of all the federal projects in Iowa. Jes-
sie Hanthorn was state director of the "white-collar" projects, includ-
ing the Federal Writers, where I tarried a few months during the

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2 One day in January, 1937, walking down Commonwealth Avenue in Boston
with Eleanor, I bet her she would be in the Metropolitan Opera in New York
within five years. She was then nineteen years old. She took the bet of five
dollars, and still owes it to me. She signed with the Met within three years.
summer and made a few waves that distracted the folks in Washington, D.C.

Federal Theatre in Iowa, with Herbert Ashton, a former Broadway actor and director, was trying to continue the fine traditions of the Bellamy Players, Ralph and Dick, in their Des Moines company of the 1920s, and the excellent Community Theatre of John Winnie a little later. But the federal funds were inadequate, and there were not a great many actors and actresses within Iowa, working or not working.

By autumn, 1937, I had been moved from the Federal Writers to become state director of another federal "white-collar" project, the Historical Records Survey, with my office in the mahogany-lined Speaker's office in the state capitol on the hill. A year later, in October 1938, I was kicked upstairs once more, to the regional office of the Federal Theatre project in Chicago, as successor to Susan Glasspell, Pulitzer Prize winner and director of the Midwest Play Bureau of Federal Theatre, who was resigning because of illness and overwork. My new position included the Midwest Play Bureau and Public Services for Chicago, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and Kentucky. The state administrators in some states where there were few actors or actresses out of work exercised their own judgment as to the use of federal funds, often withholding them or placing the individuals on other projects and making Federal Theatre inoperative at times as state-wide projects. Generally, however, projects were operating in most of the larger cities.

From the State Capitol Building in Iowa I moved to the penthouse of the largest office building in the world, the Merchandise Mart in Chicago, where the regional offices of Federal Theatre were housed in comfortable splendor. There would be no repetition of the Boston opera venture, for Marshall Field III—or was it II?—charged the federal government only one dollar a year for the use of the penthouse. The view from the encircling windows was worth a million dollars at least, but in the disorderly files were 1,400 playscripts awaiting my perusal. A dozen or so playwrights assigned to me drifted in during my first week. Since desk space for all of them was not available in the penthouse, they were allowed to do their playwriting else-

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3 Another Iowan, Professor Marcus Bach, had held that position prior to Miss Glasspell. In fact, Iowans seemed to be everywhere in the administrative positions. John McGee, of Council Bluffs, was the regional director of Federal Theatre in Chicago and thirteen midwestern states. Ken Davis, a young lawyer, also from Iowa, was administrative officer. With Harry Minturn, Broadway actor and director well-known in Chicago, they constituted the triumvirate for the entire region.
where, but they were quickly told that even their $94.00 monthly checks would have to be earned, and they had better be near a phone during office hours.

Most of the Loop theatres in Chicago had been dark for years during the 1930s. But two of them, the Great Northern and the Blackstone, among the larger ones in the Loop, had been rented by Federal Theatre and kept alive with productions. One such production was an experimental all-black Swing Mikado, so successful that the public lined up daily eight-wide for a solid block or two to get advance tickets. Time magazine called it “the finest musical in all of America.” The joint effort of John McGee and Harry Minturn, it “swung” the Great Northern Theatre six nights a week, and even the local critics like Ashton Stevens of the Chicago Tribune (a local sheet that hated FDR and all of his works) admitted that we really had a big hit going.

There were many other shows that were successful, including one called Sand in Her Shoes. It concerned a Florida “cracker,” a poor girl and her Everglades family, and her love problems. Minturn had dreamed up a real “show-stopper” for that one. You may recall that during the Depression, Gold Medal flour sacks, of cotton, were used for various household purposes, including dish towels and excellent if inexpensive panties for young ladies. So with the heroine of our Florida play. And when she leaned over at one spot in the play, the audience had a clear view, in large black print, of the Gold Medal logo: EVENTUALLY, WHY NOT NOW? across the seat of her panties. One of the newspaper critics accused Minturn of frequenting the burlesque houses on South State Street and stealing the gag from there.

But Federal Theatre was more, much more, than hit shows at $1.25 top for tickets, running downtown in Chicago. The theatres also often housed our ballet units, seventy youngsters strong, directed by Ruth Page and Bentley Stone, stars of the Chicago Opera ballet. A production of Carmen, choreographed by Page and Stone and starred in by them, was called by the New York critics “the greatest innovation in Carmen production ever seen.” It was also one of the finest and most exciting performances. Our Yiddish Theatre, directed by Paul Muni and Adolph Gartner, produced sensitive, beautiful Broadway plays from the past, since there were few new ones being written for that theatre. Ian Keith, famous Broadway and Hollywood star, directed and played leads in our Shakespearean Theatre, his Hamlet being called greater than any ever done by John Barrymore. He also did The Copperhead, a Civil War play, with Audrey Totter, a young-

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ster from downstate Illinois, playing his granddaughter. Fred Morrow, another Iowan, ran the Federal Theatre circuses and traveling companies playing in the parks of Chicago. Eloise Moore, a fine talent herself, directed the modern dance units and later the Children's Theatre of that fine director Kay Ewing, taking it into the public schools of Chicago after the demise of Federal Theatre.

Among my own scattered playwrights there was diversified talent. Henry Rosendahl, known as a "play-doctor" on Broadway and sometime author of novels, was working on a revision of a play sent to us by Arthur Strawn. It was called *No Angels Singing*, and though we never got it into production, Hollywood was later to do several versions of it, one particularly resembling our version and starring Paul Muni. Another playwright was Peter Koessler, unmarried, working at home in Chicago, always available on the phone. When he showed up for his monthly paycheck he usually brought reams of hand-written, scrawled pages for the girls in the typist pool to turn into legible pages for my desk. But Pete never seemed to get any one play completed, working on a half-dozen at one time, and so we never got them produced. It was sad, for his *François Villon* in three magnificent acts was the finest Villon play I had ever read. And his eight-hour series of four plays in three acts each on the entire life of Shakespeare was at a later date to be considered seriously by the Lunts. There were others, among them young Aaron Ruben, and he just might be the present author-producer of Hollywood television shows, including *Sanford & Son*.

But probably my favorites were a team of George Murray and Dave Peltz, a sort of 1930s version of Ben Hecht and Charlie MacArthur of the Chicago scene, and potentially great. They were the two who could never be reached by phone, and for that reason my greatest headaches. But they did pop into the office two or three times a month, and always with their pockets loaded with rewrites, revisions, original portions of new plays they were working on. One play they were making progress on had been sent to us by a lawyer in Louisville, a one-act play with a beautiful idea that had failed to be developed: the life of one Huey Long, senator, and his sudden and perhaps untimely death by gunshot. The play began to emerge with every visit by George and Dave, until it was a full three-act drama played in the broadest of comedy with superb lines for any actor or actress. I was enchanted by it and had given a lot of my time to guidance in writing it, tossing it back to them time after time after time for revisions. Finally it was sent off to the national office in New York for what we hoped would be approval for our production. Emmet Lavery, Hallie Flana-
gan's assistant national director, returned it to us with, I'm sure, tears in his eyes. The play was beautiful, but it couldn't be cleared with the authorities in Washington; it was another *Ex-President*, politically filled with dynamite, and the Senate committee watchdogs had sputtered and said NO!\(^4\)

John McGee, as regional director, had had words with both Washington and Illinois state officials regarding funding our projects. As a result, he resigned, with Harry Minturn taking his place. Minturn felt that some radio programs for publicity purposes might help our projects in the various states, and so he tossed that suggestion onto my Public Services desk. Local Chicago radio stations were happy to cooperate if we would provide the scripts and the commentators. George Murray had been a cub reporter on the local Hearst paper, so he and Dave Peltz worked with me on writing the programs, which were then sent out to the various regional radio stations. It meant night work for all of us, with Emily Brennan happily staying on to take notes and type scripts. I had been slowly digesting those 1,400 playscripts already in our files, plus hundreds more that had come in steadily from the field. My salary was $200.00 a month, twice that of the others, and I would happily have done it for nothing. That had been the pattern with four out of five of the federal "white-collar" projects I had been associated with. And I knew a lot of others who felt the same way. Leaving something for posterity, I believe we called it in those days. We remembered the national survey conducted by Hallie Flanagan near the beginning of Federal Theatre, in which it was learned that ninety percent of the school children in twenty five of our largest cities had never seen a live actor.

An Associated Press item datelined Long Beach, California, caught my attention one winter day. After a Chicago winter, anything from California was welcome. It concerned a Dr. Townsend and a plan he had devised to give everyone over sixty-five years of age $200.00 a month from the government. The money must be spent each thirty days before additional money could be had. The doctor hailed from Belle Fourche, South Dakota, where he had practiced for many

\(^4\) After the death of Federal Theatre, and with a little more work by us, the play was produced by John Shubert at the National Theatre in Washington, D.C. in 1940, ran for the allotted two-week period to SRO, and moved on to Philadelphia. There the star of the play, Bruce Cabot, had to leave it for a prior commitment in Hollywood. Mary Astor and two other Hollywood stars were also in the cast. The play was called *Off the Record*, and the Shuberts tossed it into the hands of Charlie MacArthur for a rewrite before taking it to Broadway. Our fast-moving seven-character play became a typical Shubert production, with everything in it except a girl on a white horse on stage. It went on to a Broadway opening, lasted ten days, and then went to Cain's warehouse.
years. I called in Murray and Peltz and threw the Townsend Plan at them, suggesting that they compare it with the new Social Security plan and see if it could come up as a play. It was like tossing a juicy quarter of beef to two hungry wolves. They were back in my office within a week with an outline for a three-act play, filled with old folks wandering around or sitting on park benches talking too much. I told them to get down to see a certain famous economist at the University of Chicago and ask him to compare some figures on the Townsend Plan versus Social Security. With that conflict added, we sent the play to the national office for comment and permission to continue writing on it, with our title: *Pie in the Sky—Townsend Goes to Town*.

Lavery and others in New York recognized the political implications of such a play; it would have to be cleared by Washington. And this time Washington kept it, and kept it, while their own economists checked it against Social Security. No matter how they checked it, Social Security lost against the Townsend Plan's possibilities. Lavery returned it to us with the word that we had better lose it in our files before we all got fired. We had planned to open our *Pie in the Sky* within a couple of months, perhaps in both Chicago and New York. Within two months, however, Federal Theatre was dead, buried forever as a national theatre. When the final word came in June from the national office, the closing date was set for the end of July, 1939. The national economy of the country was improving, and more people were regaining their jobs. But not actors and not in the theatre.

During June and July of 1939 theatres over the country were again going dark, winding down Federal Theatre projects in city after city. On the final night of the Children's Theatre in New York City, when the last performance of *Pinocchio* ended, the children and parents in the audience swarmed on stage to help take down the sets with loving hands. There was not a dry eye in the house. In Chicago, on the last day of July, 1939, we were a little tougher breed. We closed the Penthouse office, thereby saving the senators the dollar-a-year rent being paid Marshall Field, and announced a farewell party would be held at the Pierre Nuyttens Studios at 1819 Lincoln Park West, and everybody welcome. Pierre, a famous Chicago artist, had done costume designing for a number of our shows, including the *Swing Mikado* and the Shakespearean plays. By noon that day we had hundreds of Federal Theatre people arriving and departing; by mid-afternoon we had the Little German Band from North Avenue with their brass and two kegs of beer they had brought along; by evening we had half of the people in the block joining us, and the party did not break

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up until the early morning hours. It was the proper end to an era that may not come again, a time when there actually was a national theatre in this broad land, and children and even older children as parents could see and enjoy live actors in live theatres, and the players could eat with regularity and believe in make-believe.

PLAYSCRIPTS, W.P.A. FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

Arent, Arthur. POWER. Produced at the Ritz Theatre, New York City, February, 1937. Staged by Brett Warren, music by Lee Wainer, entire production under supervision of Morris Watson. (Complete working script.)

Chorpenning, Charlotte. THE EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES. Opened at the Adelphi Theatre, New York City, June 2, 1936. Staged by Turner Bullock, music by A. Lehman Engel, dance-mime by Sylvia Manning, setting and costumes by Andrei Hudia-koff. (Complete script.)

Conkle, E. P. PROLOGUE TO GLORY. Opened at Maxine Elliott’s Theatre, New York City, on March 17, 1938. Staged by Leo Bulgakov. (Complete working script.)

Denby, Edwin, and Orson Welles. HORSE EATS HAT. Opened at Maxine Elliott’s Theatre, New York City, on September 26, 1936. Based on a play by Labiche. Entire production under supervision of Orson Welles. (Complete working script.)


Geddes, Virgil. NATIVE GROUND. Opened at the Venice Theatre, New York City, on March 20, 1937. (Complete working script.)

Green, Paul. HYMN TO THE RISING SUN. Opened at the Ritz Theatre, New York City, on May 6, 1937. (Working script.)

Green, Paul. UNTO SUCH GLORY. Opened at the Ritz Theatre, New York City, on May 6, 1937. (Working script.)

Hailpam, Dorothy. HORSE PLAY. Opened at the Children’s Theatre, New York City, on May 6, 1937. (Working script.)

Helburn, Theresa. A HERO IS BORN; an extravaganza in two acts,

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These scripts were presented to The University of Iowa Libraries by Don Farran, who served as Director of the Regional Midwest Play Bureau, Chicago, 1938-1939.

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based on a story by Andrew Lang. Opened at the Adelphi Theatre, New York City, February 26, 1937. (Complete working script.)

[Homer & Euripides] TROJAN INCIDENT, based on Homer and Euripides. Opened at the St. James Theatre, New York City, April 21, 1938. (Complete working script.)

Lawson, John Howard. PROCESSIONAL. Opened at Maxine Elliott's Theatre, New York City, October 13, 1937. (Complete working script.)

Marlowe, Christopher. THE TRAGICAL HISTORY OF DOCTOR FAUSTUS, revised by Federal Theatre. Production by Orson Welles, music by Paul Bowles, lighting by Feder. Opened at Maxine Elliott’s Theatre, January 8, 1937. (Complete working script.)


Shakespeare, William. CORIOLANUS, streamlined version by M. Manisoff. Opened at Theatre of the Four Seasons, Long Island, October 9, 1937. (Complete working script.)

Shakespeare, William. MACBETH, arranged and staged by Orson Welles. Opened at the Lafayette Theatre, New York City, April 14, 1936. (Complete working script.)


Stavis, Barrie and Leona. THE SUN AND I. Opened at the Adelphi Theater, New York City, February 26, 1937. (Complete working script.)

Wolf, Friedrich. PROFESSOR MAMLOCK, translated by Anne Bromberger. Directed by Harold Bolton. Opened at Daly's Theatre, New York City, April 13, 1937. (Complete working script.)
Two WPA Federal Theatre photos from working scripts presented to the Library by Don Farran. Upper: an actor costumed for appearance in the play Haiti by William DuBois. Lower: a publicity shot for Horse Eats Hat adapted by Edwin Denby and Orson Welles from the comedy Un Chapeau de Paille D'Italie by Eugene Labiche.

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