

TECHNIQUES FOR CHANGING THE WORLD:  
THE LEAGUE OF WORKERS THEATRES/NEW THEATRE LEAGUE

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## CHAPTER ONE

### ROOTS AND SOURCES

“First, [workers theatre] must awaken to class consciousness leading to organization; second, it must go to the masses rather than wait for the masses to come to it; and third, it must have mass appeal.”<sup>1</sup>

#### Beginnings

A small but fierce readership of theatre artists and activists read these imperatives in the pages of a new magazine, titled Workers Theatre Magazine, in May of 1931<sup>2</sup>. With these bold words, the League of Workers Theatres announced its intent to change the world through theatre performance. The idea struck a chord for while the first run of Workers Theatre was 200 mimeographed 10-cent copies produced for only \$11.00, by 1932, a thousand copies were printed each month and by 1935 it claimed to match the circulation of Theatre Arts Monthly, then the leading national theatre magazine.<sup>3</sup> The above declaration marked the beginning of a tenacious 10-year run of the League of Workers Theatres (later called the New Theatre League), an ambitious and quixotic effort to transform the “cut throat capitalist system” to one of economic justice through revolutionary theatre. Along the way, League members created new theatrical forms and new ways of delivering political performance, struggled against personal ruin and organizational bankruptcy, and clashed with one another politically and aesthetically.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Prentiss. "Basic Principles." 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Literature of the time usually uses the plural form of ‘workers’ rather than the possessive. This book will follow suit.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Williams. *Stage Left*. 46.

Political activists and theatre artists who found common cause in the crucible of the Great Depression of the 1930s and who formed the League set as its goal nothing less than radical economic and political change in the United States, replacing the free-market economy and its attendant individualistic values with a Soviet-style workers' state. This radical goal was a double-edged sword, however; it proved to be the iron strength of the League's dogged 10-year history while it simultaneously hobbled its ability to survive and grow.

### **Political and theatrical context**

The League was part of a small community of theatre artists who used theatre for political change; some branches of politicized theatre went back to the late 1800s and organized workers; others developed later and closer to the arts world. The Left theatre movement in the 1930s grew against a background of economic disaster. The stock market crash of 1929 meant devastation for the U.S. economy and for millions of people. During the first three years after the crash, 1929-1931, money spent on industrial construction dropped from \$949 million to \$74 million. By 1932, 13 million people were unemployed. Shantytowns sprang up across the country, built by people who had been evicted from housing they could no longer afford. The collections of shacks were named "Hoovervilles" after then-President Herbert Hoover.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, Left political theatre grew alongside broader Leftist ideas. Roosevelt's record four-term presidency attested to wide-spread support for a reformist, left-leaning leadership. For the Communist connected League core, however, the Democrats were no better than the Republicans - both were capitalists and therefore class

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<sup>4</sup> William Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932 - 1940*. 1.

enemies. Support for the radical wing of Left politics increased during those years. Although they were never serious contenders, both the Socialist and the Communist candidates for President received significantly more votes in 1932 than they had in 1928. The Communist ticket of Foster and Ford, for example, doubled its vote, totaling around 48,000 in 1932, and Socialist Norman Thomson received about 448,000 votes.<sup>5</sup> The increase reflects disillusionment, perhaps, with the system that had made, and failed to deliver, the great promise of the American Dream.

People organized the workplace in larger numbers, as the union movement grew exponentially during the decade, assisted by federal legislation that supported union organizing that was signed into law during the Roosevelt Administration. For example, in 1937, the United Auto Workers' membership was more than 400,000, up from 30,000 just the previous year. The May Day Parade in New York was "so big," wrote Malcolm Cowley, "that it had to be divided into two sections." One section marched from Battery Park north to Union Square; the other from the north. There were 19,000 New York City Police on duty to quell an expected riot, but the day was peaceful.<sup>6</sup>

A general increase in support for the Left translated to a shift in the arts. Social issues became more central to arts events, which included more and more 'socially significant' subject matter. Dance, art, literature, music, photography, and film artists developed similar political sections and later in the 1930s some of those became

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<sup>5</sup> Harvey Klehr. *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade*. 67.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Michael Denning. *The Cultural Front*. 54.

participants in the magazine published by the League<sup>7</sup>. The League found fertile soil to plant the seeds of radical theatre in the political climate of the Depression years.

The urge to do something to change economic conditions bred the convergence of theatre art and political activism. Among the most radical forms of the activism involved, and the one that fueled the organization of the League of Workers Theatres, was revolutionary Communism. The Communist Party of the United States (the C.P.U.S.A.) had strong links to the Party in the U.S.S.R. The Party in Moscow theorized sequential stages in the development of world communism in order to develop policy and plan the work towards a worldwide “workers state.” International Communist policy in the early thirties was termed “Third Period Communism” and it predicted the imminent collapse of capitalism, leading to chaos from which the workers state would naturally arise. The C.P.U.S.A. based its union organizing strategy on the anticipated collapse and the arts were perceived as one of the tools to help it come about. “Art is a weapon,” claimed the Party, in carrying out class warfare. The League of Workers Theatres arose from the ardent conviction that theatre performance could create revolutionary change.

The League developed from a pre-existing theatre group, the Workers Laboratory Theatre (W.L.T.). According to Jay Williams, a participant who wrote a lively memoir of his time with radical Left theatre in the Depression era<sup>8</sup>, a rather unlikely group of people established the W.L.T. in 1929. They followed the example of the Prolet-Buehne, the premier political theatre in New York at the time. John Bonn, a German immigrant and founding member of the C.P.U.S.A., headed the Prolet-Buehne, which performed

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<sup>7</sup> See Herbert Kline’s *New Theatre and Film: 1934-1937* for background and information on the magazine itself; and Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front*, which discusses several key developments in U.S. culture in a broad context of politicized art.

<sup>8</sup> Jay Williams’ given name was Harold Jacobsen. It was as Jacobsen that he acted in W.L.T. productions.

innovative political sketches in German.<sup>9</sup> W.L.T. members wanted to offer similar performances in English. Surprisingly, the founders of the W.L.T. had little experience in theatre, but they were intensely interested in working with the Prolet-Buehne's new type of performance as a positive force for change. Among W.L.T. founding members were the brothers Jack and Hyam Shapiro, who were by trade metal casters; Alfred Saxe, from Illinois by way of the University of Wisconsin Experimental School and its drama programs; Harry Elion, an economics graduate from City College of New York; Al Prentiss, an engineer; and Bernard Reines, a would-be playwright.<sup>10</sup> W.L.T. aspirations paralleled the Prolet-Buehne's goals of generating change from within the working class. All members of the W.L.T. subscribed to Leftist political positions, and by connecting with John Bonn's Prolet-Buehne, they associated directly with the Communist movement.

The mix of backgrounds distinctly lacked focused preparation in theatre. Saxe had encountered avant-garde forms of theatre when he was a student at the University in Madison, Wisconsin, and Reines had an interest in playwriting, but none came from strong theatrical roots. Perhaps they saw theatre as a skill anyone could learn, like the ability to wield a hammer or run a machine. The group certainly created an organization that used theatre as a tool for shaping the political and economic world, and it welcomed participants based upon their dedication to the cause first and foremost; artistic talent, although certainly desired, was secondary. The members met to discuss politics and labor, and to develop theatrical weapons for change. According to Williams, the W.L.T.

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<sup>9</sup> On the Prolet-Buehne, see Daniel J. Friedman's extensive history, "The Prolet-Buehne: America's First Agit-Prop Theatre," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Reines also went by the name Ben Blake – the name under which he edited the League's magazine.

soon attracted a dozen regulars who attended the meetings and rehearsals, and with a few successful performances to its credit, the organization decided to reach out to other theatres. The best method, they determined, was a magazine, which began in 1931.<sup>11</sup> The first issue of the magazine claims affiliation with the International Relief Cultural Activities Department. The address for the magazine is given as 131 West 28<sup>th</sup> St., New York, the same address as the Workers Laboratory Theatre's space, apparently loaned to the nascent League of Workers Theatres by the Workers International Relief. That organization, based in Berlin, sent aid to workers affected by widespread famine in the Soviet Union. Its activities declined with Nazi seizure of power. Yet for its brief existence, it provided a much needed home to the W.L.T.

Encouraged by a positive reception, the W.L.T. organized a conference of like-minded theatre artists and companies held in June 1931. Sponsored by the John Reed Club in New York, the conference was surprisingly successful, considering the newness of the W.L.T.<sup>12</sup> One hundred thirty organizations sent delegates, including 19 theatre companies. Hallie Flanagan, then the director of the Experimental Theatre at Vassar College, also attended, and found inspiration in this new organization's ideals. Her article in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, a mainstream, national theatre publication, reached thousands of readers and described in glowing terms the birth of a new theatre, a 'theatre

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<sup>11</sup> This account of the origin of the League of Workers Theatres is drawn largely from Jay Williams' book *Stage Left*, his personal memoir. I have corroborated when possible with other sources, which are cited whenever they are used.

<sup>12</sup> There are various opinions on the make up of the John Reed Clubs, but they were sprinkled across the nation by 1932. There was a national convention in May 1932, and by the second national convention in 1934 there were 30 clubs with 1200 members. For more on John Reed Clubs see Denning 205-211; Foley 89-91.

which wants to make a new social order”s.<sup>13</sup> The W.L.T.’s idea had struck a spark. Building on a resurgence of Left politics based in economic woe, it drew upon ideas of arts for social reform that were only fifty-odd years old. The combination of the successful 1931 conference and positive attention from a range of interested artists and organizations provided the springboard for the next steps in the W.L.T.’s transition to the League of Workers Theatres.

Ambitious people participated in running the W.L.T, and later the League of Workers Theatres. They saw themselves front-and-center in the movement to educate working people about class issues, motivating them to take action. W.L.T. and League leaders seemed certain that if working people understood the true nature of capitalism, they would quite naturally join unions and work toward overthrowing the capitalist system. The new theatre that Flanagan described so enthusiastically would use performance to radically change the world; an idealistic venture to be sure, but driven by political passion. The early participants in League activities were, first and foremost, activists; none of their professions before joining W.L.T. activities was theatrical. They came from many walks of life and found a way to work toward their political goals. Although clearly they were also passionate about theatre – nobody could put in the amount of work they did in rehearsal and performance without passion -- the founding commitment was to radical political change. So it was -- as outsiders to the theatre world -- that they began their endeavors. The W.L.T.’s chosen path to assist with this change was through renovating theatrical arts. Their theatre was to have a purpose; to be a weapon for class warfare. The W.L.T. and later League of Workers Theatres leaders

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<sup>13</sup> Hallie Flanagan. *Arena*. 15.



expressed both directly and indirectly that they and they alone had the insights and abilities to create this change.

Contemporary theatre practice held a few models for the W.L.T. Important were the workers schools that included drama programs, and the ‘social problem’ plays of Ibsen and Shaw beginning in the 1880s through World War I. Their central role model, however, was John Bonn, leader of the German-language radical theatre, the Prolet-Buehne in New York. Bonn was well educated in theatre, its history and practice, and one can speculate that just as they learned political theatre craft from him, they also shared an opinion of contemporary theatre practice: League members repeatedly criticized contemporary mainstream theatre as empty bourgeois escapism. Popular at the time were light comedies and Ziegfield’s Follies, which consisted principally of showgirls and vaudeville acts. The movies mirrored much of Broadway’s offerings with Busby Berkley’s extravaganzas and dance movies such as those featuring Fred Astaire. Movie magazines, which found widespread popularity, were focused on starlets and romance. Politically active theatre-makers criticized these entertainments as morally bankrupt and empty. The criticism provided a point of contrast for their purposeful creativity.

The prevalent form in straight theatre (non-musicals) was realism, although some experimentation with abstract settings and symbolism had seeped into the art theatre scene from European theatres. Socially conscious theatre began in the 1880s as the ‘social problem play’ developed in Henrik Ibsen’s work, and continued through George

Bernard Shaw and others.<sup>14</sup> Their work was grounded in the idea that theatre could and should contain social critique. Ibsen's plays took on such subjects as gender relations (*A Doll House*), venereal disease (*Ghosts*), and environmental concerns (*An Enemy of the People*). Shaw expressed anti-war sentiments (*Arms and the Man*), and critiqued hypocrisy (*Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Major Barbara*).

Realism is a style in which theatre artists attempted to present everyday life onstage in all its mundane detail, in contrast to the more romantic or melodramatic styles of theatrical production previously popular. Realism and its more stringent branch, naturalism, purported to present a 'slice of life' (*tranche de vie*) onstage for observation by the audience. Both realism and naturalism spring from a desire to expose social problems by staging them. Productions in these modes attempt to minimize the artist's hand, as they claimed to transfer "real life" directly to the stage (in the case of naturalism) or to represent "real life" (in the case of realism) with as little alteration or apparent artifice as possible. Therefore, playwrights attempted to write dialogue that sounded like un-retouched everyday speech. Settings and costume choices also focused upon depicting actual environments and clothing, accurately showing specific class, age, locale, etc. The hallmarks of realism are events and speech that mimic everyday life; settings, costumes, sound, and lights that look like, sound like, and attempt to replicate everyday life with all its details. Naturalists went so far in a few cases as to purchase, carefully disassemble then reconstruct actual locations onstage, such as a tenement apartment or restaurant.<sup>15</sup> The audience was to observe life itself through the imaginary

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<sup>14</sup> Other playwrights within the realistic camp were Anton Chekhov in Russia, and Eugene O'Neil in the U.S.

<sup>15</sup> David Belasco, a Broadway producer, replicated New York's Childs Restaurant and a flophouse room onstage. He and others, like Andre Antoine in Paris, were known to

‘fourth wall’ of the room onstage. Characterization -- techniques used by playwrights and actors to reflect a character’s personality onstage -- utilized the new sciences of psychology and sociology and strove to depict each character as a complex human being with highly individualized, specific hopes, dreams, fears, and backgrounds.

The aesthetics of realism meant that the dramaturgy (or ‘structure’) of this style of plays worked through the actions of highly individuated persons, each pursuing discrete goals. The plays, of necessity, utilized unique characters as devices to carry the plot and the ideas of the play. Plot and ideas were intricately woven into the behavior and social position of the individual characters. Of course, these realistic social problem plays also spoke volumes about social conditions, group behavior, etc., but realistic plays are grounded in individualism and rely upon creating empathy between the audience and the characters onstage. Realistic style in theatre caught on, and has since been the baseline against which all forms of theatre are measured, in terms of style.<sup>16</sup> Without question, by the early thirties, realism had found a central place on the American stage, although for the most part the form’s use became limited to the settings, costumes, lighting, sound, and characterization.<sup>17</sup> Playwrights used the form of ‘realism’ for a wide range of subject matter, not just social issues. The social problem plays’ content, central to realism’s

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copy actual wallpaper, hang real sides of beef in a stage butcher shops, and to include other ‘realistic’ environmental details, including actual running water onstage (thus ‘kitchen sink’ realism), in order to create a sense of reality.

<sup>16</sup> The centrality of realism is revealed in theatre terminology for form. For example, the term “convention” is defined as onstage behaviors or events during a theatrical performance that are not realistic; that signal something else or are interpreted automatically by the audience. Examples are dimming the house lights when the performance is to start or the “aside” in which a character is understood to be audible only to the audience, not the other characters. The fact that these ‘non-realistic’ moments are defined as a group because they interrupt the ‘realism’ demonstrates how pervasive the concept of realism is in contemporary theatre.

<sup>17</sup> It was the Group Theatre, working through the decade of the thirties, who famously found ways to apply Stanislavsky’s acting techniques to the American theatre scene, transforming American acting.

development, only remained in some cases. Social consciousness was divorced from the form, while the conventions of realism -- everyday detail in setting and costumes, individually complex characters, and everyday speech -- were utilized in all kinds of plays.

In its early days, the W.L.T. and the League severely criticized realism, citing a lack of focus upon systemic causes of economic woes. It censured the focus upon individuals as reactionary and bourgeois and preferred non-realistic forms because they could more effectively express ideas about intangibles such as class systems and economic theory. The W.L.T. and the League did not invent the stylized forms they used to express their political ideas, although they and their members did develop innovations in existing forms for their own purposes. The ideas for the new, non-realistic forms were already there, rooted in the same period as realism itself.

In broader theatre history, the move toward realism was countered almost immediately by the development of strongly non-realistic forms, known collectively as the 'isms' to theatre historians. They include symbolism, expressionism, surrealism, and later, absurdism. Several well-known non-realistic productions take a political point of view, such as *Ubu Roi* in 1896, and social concerns drove a handful of formally experimental theatre artists. World War I brought greater political focus to these experiments, and after the war, German theatre artists depicted the devastating effects of the Great War and the resultant economic chaos through expressionist techniques. From this root, Bertolt Brecht and Irwin Piscator developed non-realistic theatre pieces that critically depicted the plight of people in capitalist society. Brecht's "epic theatre" used techniques to distance the audience's emotions during the performance. He sought to

develop a thinking audience rather than an emoting one. In his plays, characters deliberately “broke the fourth wall,” using direct address -- or characters talking to the audience – and, rather than seeking to create empathy, he sought techniques that could ‘demonstrate’ a character’s position vis-a-vis an event, circumstance, or institution. Brecht wanted to encourage the audience to think about how that circumstance, event or institution came about. The audience was not to empathize, but rather to think and judge the actions of the characters onstage so that the audience would see the need for change in the social structure. Brecht helped to loosen the ties of realistic forms, and the W.L.T. and the League adapted several of Brecht’s theories and techniques in their search for efficacious theatrical means.<sup>18</sup>

Others in Germany and the U.S.S.R. developed the agitational-propaganda form known in shorthand as agit-prop, and also staged “newspapers,” in which news or information was dramatized for largely illiterate peasants, or to present news with a point-of-view and emotional impact. Agit-prop theatre pieces are short, simple and memorable in order to teach their lessons effectively. These performances used non-realistic characters that symbolized social or economic roles, such as workers or bosses, instead of individual, psychologically motivated individuals. They employed slogans and rhymed chants, and usually finished with a ‘call to action’ urging audience members to join a union, or boycott a company, or vote a certain way. The agit-prop sought to agitate the audience about an issue by presenting propaganda about it: one-sided information in simple, memorable terms, and to motivate the audience to act. Combining Brecht’s idea of distancing audience members from their emotions so that they could think, with the

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<sup>18</sup> For more on Brecht read John Willett’s *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*.

simple memorable style of the agit-prop, the W.L.T. members developed political sketches intended to carry out their mission: awakening the workers to the realities of capitalism and urging them to take action. The W.L.T. and later the League viewed the agit-prop as a very useful theatrical tool.<sup>19</sup>

There were models of theater for workers in the U.S.A. too. In the 1920s the labor movement reacted to a post-World War I anti-labor climate by developing programs to educate adult workers. One wing of the progressive education movement denounced public schools as capitalist-influenced, claiming they were used simply to instill values and behaviors in children that would best serve industry; that schools valued punctuality and obedience over independent thinking, property rights over human rights, and efficiency over democracy. As the well-known Socialist Victor Berger put it, capitalists wanted to make "the schools into efficient, card-catalogued, time clocked, well bossed factories for the manufacture of standardized wage slaves".<sup>20</sup> Like the broader progressive education movement, workers education programs acted to counter these perceived effects of public education. The workers schools took several forms: some offered evening classes in urban areas; others created summer schools or weekend workshops. By the early 1920s, some 10,000 worker-students attended more than 300 workers' education organizations in the United States, including well-known organizations like Brookwood Labor College, Commonwealth College in Mena, Arkansas, and the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers.<sup>21</sup> Courses in

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<sup>19</sup> For more on League agit-props, see section three, "Theatrical Means."

<sup>20</sup> Victor Berger quoted in Reese, William J. *Power & Promise of School Reform: Grass-roots Movement during the Progressive Era*. xix.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Altenbaugh. *Education for Struggle*. 25.

Marxism, history, economics, public speaking and the relatively new field of sociology were supplemented by courses in literature, music and the other arts, including dramatics.

Drama programs were added to the workers school curricula in three principal ways: 1. Reading and discussing plays in terms of working class issues; 2. Researching, writing, and performing plays about labor issues; 3. Performing labor drama publicly, whether for audiences of workers, or to educate a wider public about the issues. Workers education organizations used various pieces of this three-fold plan as each organization saw fit. The workers schools with established drama programs, such as Commonwealth College, Bryn Mawr Summer School, and the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, became connected to the League; Commonwealth College even became the site of the League's planned school for Leftist theatre artists, although that plan never bore fruit.<sup>22</sup>

Participants and teachers in workers schools dramatics programs thought theatre was an especially effective means to develop workers' understanding about labor problems, and useful both in recruiting and retaining students in labor education programs. The students were workers themselves, so they had a vested interest in developing accurate and effective dramatic tools to aid the cause. Repeatedly, schools noted the empowering effects that writing, performing, and seeing plays based on their own experiences had on students. Students expressed pride in seeing that their life stories were important enough to be depicted on the stage. For example, Jean Carter, a teacher at Bryn Mawr, and Hilda Smith, director of the Bryn Mawr Summer School, described the process of playmaking and its benefits. When a group of women at the school

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<sup>22</sup> For more on Commonwealth College, see William H. Cobb, *Radical Education in the Rural South: Commonwealth College 1922-1940*. Richard Altenbaugh discusses workers education in *Education for Struggle*. The plan for the theatre school is discussed in Chapter Eight.

expressed an interest in drama, students felt that their own lives were far too dull for dramatization, Carter noted. This view prompted a discussion of what made a play interesting. As they named various reasons for interest such as intrigue, humor, similarity to real life, identification with characters or situations, and interesting but unfamiliar locales, the participants began to name the elements of effective drama. As Carter wrote:

for the first time these experiences in the theatre were translated into terms these workers understood. From a silent, diffident crowd [of students], more and more voices claimed attention, until the group bubbled with excitement.<sup>23</sup>

From that point, the instructor suggested that since the worker's everyday life was seldom represented accurately onstage, it would be instructive to try to dramatize some scenes from their own experiences. The women broke into small groups to prepare scenes from their own lives, and then performed them for the group. The subjects included a picket line; an unemployed girl in a rooming house; a day in a union shop; an unexpected guest for dinner when there is not enough food; and a scene in a subway.

The students began to see their own lives as filled with dramatic moments and situations. Jean Carter described this as a way of developing a new "mode of thinking, feeling, and acting," necessary for empowering the working class. As Antonio Gramsci and other leftist thinkers of the time proposed, development of working class culture meant new awareness of the possibility for better lives. The students, like the workers whom the League needed for its ranks, had to understand the causes of conflict, and

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<sup>23</sup> Jean Carter. "Labor Drama." 56.



needed to know how to shape a presentation of the issues for the stage in order to communicate that conflict effectively to an audience.

Workers schools highly valued the organizing skills students gained in the process of making theatre; it was a potent means for developing effective labor leaders. League leaders knew that developing, rehearsing, and performing plays required both leadership and teamwork. It taught responsibility to the group, and strengthened commitment to the project at hand.

The League articulated similar benefits in its plans for theatre by and for workers. League leaders expected that workers involved in League theatres would speak from an insider's viewpoint and have a stake in the ideas expressed. League members thought skills and experience gained from working together in theatre programs would translate to other kinds of organizing for the cause. And the participants, they were certain, would educate themselves by developing performance pieces about the economic and political issues that were at the heart of the League agenda. The strategy of using theatre would hold significant benefits for the League and for the cause, in addition to the obvious benefit of educating an audience.

There already were theatres with explicit Leftist political objectives in New York and elsewhere when the W.L.T. organized its theatre. Some shared the same goals and means with the W.L.T.; some did not. The premiere political theatre organizations in New York were the German language Prolet-Buehne and the Artef.<sup>24</sup> Both were organized in 1925, but the Prolet-Buehne focused exclusively on political theatre

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<sup>24</sup> The Artef is an abbreviation for "Arbeiter Theatre Ferband," which is Yiddish for "Workers' Theatrical Alliance." The group was established in 1928 and produced plays prolifically throughout the decade.

borrowing heavily from German political theatre and performing agit-prop pieces in German, while the Artef performed a broader repertoire in Yiddish. The W.L.T. sought to surpass these two theatres and modeled its early work on them.

The W.L.T. began by staging agit-prop skits for events sponsored by the Communist Party-affiliated Workers International Relief organization.<sup>25</sup> The group developed the ability to create theatre pieces very quickly in response to immediate needs, such as strikes or rallies. These timely pieces were performed by a division within the W.L.T. called the “Shock Troupe,” which was a smaller group of actors who were ready to perform at a moment’s notice in any location. The highly mobile Shock Troupe could take theatre pieces anywhere, and the group expanded its venues to include strike and demonstration sites.

The Workers Laboratory Theatre and the Prolet-Buehne organized a Dramatic Bureau after the successful 1931 convention from which developed the national network of workers theatres originally called the League of Workers Theatres. The League’s vision was to develop theatres of and for workers that could depict the experiences of its audience of working class people, educate them politically, then organize and motivate them to join the radical struggle. League leaders believed theatre was the most effective tool for organizing workers, because it could go to the workers with a strong political message. Indeed, theatre groups associated with the League continued to perform mobile theatre at strike sites, outside factory gates, and on sidewalks where evictions were taking place throughout its ten-year history. These short mobile forms were always part of League offerings, although some of the League’s theatres also produced more

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<sup>25</sup> Colette Hyman. *Staging Strikes: Workers Theatre and the American Labor Movement*. 29.

conventional theatre performance in traditional theatre spaces; These they termed “stationary theatre.” These forms and the arguments over them are discussed in Part Three, “Theatrical Means.”

League leaders held a powerful vision of a changed society and drew upon the models of socially active theatre available to them: Brecht’s work, Soviet agit-props, workers education programs, and social problem plays. They infused these forms with the cultural and economic lives of the American working class, seeking to empower it just as the workers education programs had done; they drew organizational models for the national organization from unions and from Soviet workers clubs to build an inclusive and wide-ranging plan to work toward achieving their goals; they envisioned themselves at the center of a widespread movement to instigate radical change in the U.S.; they felt their wisdom about the capitalist system and how it worked against the workers gave them direct insight into effective means of change; that if their plays and skits effectively opened the workers’ eyes to the realities of capitalism the rest would follow inevitably: the collapse of capitalism and the birth of the workers’ paradise. This was the dream.

### **The Plan for Action**

W.L.T. and, later, League leaders felt themselves to be a part of an international movement for creating radical change. That first summer, 1931, when the magazine and first conference found success League founding member Bernard Reines traveled to the U.S.S.R. to seek structural and artistic guidance, attending a June meeting of the International Workers Dramatic Union (I.W.D.U.) held in Moscow.<sup>26</sup> Representatives

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<sup>26</sup> Bernard Reines' real name was Ben Blake, a name under which he wrote some plays, reviews, and articles.

from seven countries met to discuss the goals of workers theatre worldwide, and to confirm a constitution for the I.W.D.U.

Reines' article in the December 1931 issue of Workers Theatre Magazine summarizes the "theses" of the Constitution.<sup>27</sup> The principles and recommended action outlined in the article proved to be a roadmap for the L.O.W.T. in the early years of its existence and throughout much of its history. League leaders likely spent the months between the June meeting and the December article formulating details of their own plans. There are no extant records of meetings or discussions for that time period, so this assumption is open to question.<sup>28</sup> It seems logical, however, that the members deliberated with John Bonn, the C.P.U.S.A., and others committed to the goals of the League.

The League laid plans on a grand scale in 1931, envisioning a long-term, very broad leadership role in the revolutionary arts. The plans were directly reflective of the June I.W.D.U. meetings, led by Diamant, the general secretary of the I.W.D.U.<sup>29</sup> The League's plans closely follow Diamant's 'theses,' as Reines termed them, which may have caused some of the League's problems, for the arts were state supported in the U.S.S.R. and not in the U.S., and of course in the U.S. they would be working against the government, not with it. The League planned to be self-supporting, and was most definitely not supported by the government. The plan imagined a membership structure in which dues from member theatre groups across the nation provided a significant

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<sup>27</sup> The article can be found in Workers Theatre Magazine, Dec. 1931, pages 1-4.

<sup>28</sup> The magazine itself provides the primary evidence for League activities until 1934. For later years, more complete documentation exists, in particular the "Report" of 1934 in which past accomplishments are described, along with meeting minutes and financial records record activities from these years. This evidence is examined later, in chapters 2 through 4.

<sup>29</sup> Reines gave no first name or other information about Diamant, only that he was reporting the conclusions of the Presidium meeting of the I.W.D.U. to the plenary session that Reines attended.

portion of the funding. Early plans were ambitious, but speak to the passion and commitment sustaining the participants.

The December article that Bernard Reines wrote demonstrates the W.L.T.'s initial direct connection with Moscow policy. The League adopted much of the Soviet plan for accomplishing political work through cultural work, even though conditions in the U.S. were completely different from conditions in the U.S.S.R. Reines' plan is ambitious and thorough. National in scope, it addresses multiple aspects of the League's future. He begins with criticism of bourgeois theatre and the benefits of unleashing workers' creative energy; next he addresses the form that the performances should take, which must be easily comprehensible and pragmatic; leaders and artists of the theatrical movement must be correctly educated in politics; the combination of correct education and correct form would naturally engage the masses in the movement; Finally, Reines condensed the June 1931 meeting in Moscow into several goals, which guided the efforts of League leaders for the next years.

Reines' article begins by outlining Diamant's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the international workers theatre movement. He quotes Diamant on the non-Communist West: "decaying bourgeois culture [is] part of a general ongoing crisis in the capitalist system." Reines wrote that, in contrast to Western capitalism, the Soviet system had released tremendous pent-up artistic energy in the masses – peasants, farmers, and workers alike – who were participating by the "hundreds of thousands" in a great outpouring of creativity. The Soviet revolution had freed oppressed workers' and the lower classes' artistic potential. Reines suggested the workers theatre in the U.S. also

should strive to free workers, to tap their creative energy. Theatre activities would then feed “the soul of the working class.”

Theatre for workers had to be “vital, simple, and comprehensible.”<sup>30</sup> To Reines and Diamant, this meant using agit-prop forms, and abandoning, for a time, the stationary theatre. Stationary theatre used forms too difficult for the resources of a workers theatre to produce, and its plays contained the wrong messages. It had “lost the confidence” of the working class, since it was geared towards pleasing the bourgeoisie and the upper classes. Through agit-prop the W.L.T. could present frank, simple theatre pieces about issues in lives of the workers. They could bring these pieces to locations where the masses gathered rather than expecting them to come to a theatre. Eventually, when the confidence of the working class was won, the stationary theatre could be resurrected.

The most serious fault in the present workers theatre, Diamant proclaimed and Reines wrote, was theatre leaders’ faulty or sketchy political education in Marxist-Leninist theory. Political education formed the “center of gravity of the whole of this work . . . .” “Workers theatre leaders must be educated so they could present the “correct” ideas to workers. Diamant’s use of the term “correct” is repeated regularly in League publications and correspondence. It meant “correct” in political terms, meaning that it (the play, the interpretation of the play, the article, speech, character, or whatever other medium) must deliver the Party’s message. The term was used time after time by the League in publications and meant the approved political analysis, including the cause and the solutions for social injustices. League leaders found it impossible, however, to keep member theatres ‘on message,’ because many workers and theatre artists were also

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<sup>30</sup> All quotes are drawn from the article in the December 1931 issue.

Left leaning, but did not toe the line ideologically. Always needing more members and more royalty or dues payments, the League was forced to choose between alienating groups and condoning an incompatible message. League records are replete with strategies to recommit to the goal of political education, and with instances of chastisement or “comradely criticism.”

Diamant seemed to assume, as the League did, that massive groups of people could be inculcated with the same political ideology, for he asserted, through Reines, that once the theatre artists were on message, the second task was the transition to mobile, agit-prop work, which must be carried out rapidly, as this was the means to reach the workers with the message. Workers theatres were instructed to “Face towards the factories,” while also encouraging “farm youth” to participate in agitational theatre, and simultaneously draw in “Sympathetic petit-bourgeois artists and intellectuals . . . .”

These directives from Diamant set the course to a great degree for the leaders of the League of Workers Theatres. They did work hard at evolving the political message and finding the correct form in which to deliver it. They ‘faced the factories’ by attempting to cultivate relationships with labor organizations and other gatherings of workers, and they anticipated Popular Front tactics by nurturing relationships with liberal theatre professionals such as Group Theatre members and with non-theatre cultural groups like the Young Men’s Christian or Hebrew Associations (Y.M.C.A. and Y.M.H.A.).<sup>31</sup>

League leaders used Diamant’s outline as the springboard for their own extensive plans. Diamant’s ideas pushed the League toward a broad and far reaching vision for politically effective radical theatre. The League embraced this vision of a multi-faceted,

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<sup>31</sup> The Popular Front was an attempt at coalition politics across progressive, anti-war and anti-fascist organizations in the U.S.

national organization that would be an artistic producing organization, an agent for playwrights, an adviser to novice theatre artists, a political tutor to all, and a point-of-connection for pragmatic and polemic information. The League clearly envisioned its future as a potent force in both the theatrical and political worlds. The historic moment seemed ripe for a transformation of society. Passion, confidence, and vision they did not lack. Resources, however, for carrying out this ambitious plan and its multiple goals were always scarce.

Reines wrote a summary of the Moscow meeting that delineated six central goals for the workers theatre in the U.S. These goals align with the steps and initiatives actually undertaken by the L.O.W.T. during the early years of the organization. Reines' article set the agenda and mapped the plan. Reines wrote urging them:

1. To adopt the short forms of theatrical performance, which can easily "go to the masses" [emphasis in original]. To perform at strikes and to assist in raising strike funds whenever possible.
2. To focus on the specific issues in the struggle in the U.S., with the broader Soviet struggle as background.
3. To establish a Workers' Dramatic Union in the U.S.
4. To draw in writers and artists, and collaborate with other cultural organizations of workers, such as workers choruses.
5. To establish systematic political and artistic education focused on Marxist literature.



6. To send reports in to Workers Theatre Magazine.<sup>32</sup>

Reines' article established the League's immediate work, and at first articles in the magazine repeat these foci. Yet conditions in the U.S. were considerably different from the U.S.S.R.; therefore, the 'background' of the Soviet model became more and more removed from the everyday reality of League's struggle. The short, agit-prop form was heavily favored for nearly a year and was part of League theatres' repertoire throughout League history, but it did not supplant realism; and while there were regular articles in the magazine about Soviet theatre, League theatres followed their own courses of action in response to immediate situations.

The magazine's first printed issue (as distinct from the earlier, mimeographed method of duplication) appeared in May 1932 and contained the Constitution of the League of Workers Theatres. The Constitution set out the structure for the organization, and the structure dictated how resources would be used. The aim of the organization was "to make the workers theatre movement an efficient cultural weapon for the toiling masses in the class struggle."<sup>33</sup> The methods to reach its aim closely parallel Reines' summary. The Constitution created six departments; each was responsible for a segment of the work. These six departments remained the structural framework of the League for most of the decade. The structure reveals some of the League's thinking. In one department it parallels the arrangement of play services like Samuel French or Dramatist's Service, companies that act as liaisons between playwrights and theatre

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<sup>32</sup> Bernard Reines. "The Experience of the International Workers' Theatre as Reported at the First Enlarged Plenum of the I.W.D.U." This last item on the list is of course directed at the readers of the magazine, who were participants in workers theatre organizations. Workers Theatre Magazine included a column called "News and Notes" which described activities of League theatres, and which was based upon their letters.

<sup>33</sup> n.a. "Constitution." 14.

companies by handling rights and royalties for plays. It adds to that arrangement outreach divisions, with a membership structure, educational services, and print material. And they created a separate management department in the structure, which neatly divided labor, at least on paper.

The Repertory Department's task was to develop plays for League theatres to use. It handled royalties for playwrights, developed a library and a lending system for plays, and published worthy scripts. The department was envisioned as a means to generate material for member theatres, as well as a revenue source, as theatres would pay royalties to produce the plays. The department's work was complex, involving solicitation of scripts, editing and publishing them; maintaining a library, sending review copies to potential producers; tracking productions in order to bill and collect royalties; and paying playwrights and composers. The work was further complicated by the need for plays that were current with political and labor situations. While a few properties remained viable for several years, others were needed that addressed new or changed issues in the struggle.

The Bookings Department was also called "Production." It staged productions of the plays, performing them at events and for organizations such as unions, mostly in and around New York City. It was intended to be an educational unit as well as a revenue-producing department, since fees were charged for performances or admission was charged whenever pieces were performed in a more formal theatre space or at an "affair" – a fund-raising private party.

The department that solicited and managed individual and group memberships was named the Affiliates Department. Members paid dues that entitled them to discounts

on royalties, subscriptions to publications, and other League services, as well as a vote on matters referred to the League membership. Because the League envisioned itself as a membership organization with member theatres' dues supporting the national office, the Affiliates Department was often pressured to expand memberships.

Print materials were created by the Publications Department. Central among those was the magazine, Workers Theatre Magazine, which was in the black, financially, most of the time. The Publications Department held very successful fund-raisers, and apparently benefited from savvy management. The magazine created its own financial structure somewhat separate from the League itself. Therefore, the revenues that the magazine generated were not directly accessible to the League. This situation became a bone of contention after 1934, when League leadership changed. The monthly magazine was fairly regular until that time, but when the crisis broke over the separation of finances, the League dismantled its most successful operation, and replaced the monthly magazine with other kinds of publications. After that the Publications Department was no longer financially self-supporting,

The Management Department handled business matters for the League: The League initially created several layers of hierarchy, first within the New York office and then across the country, which it divided into several regions, or sections. The Management Department was restructured several times, particularly after 1934, and faced the enormous task of managing and prioritizing the work itself, providing leadership, and responding to change, all with very limited resources.

For the historian, details about the structure emerge only from the magazine and records of later reorganizations, which, in describing proposed changes, also outline

previous methods and structures. Virtually no written records of the very early years exist. It is clear that the League reorganized its management department three times: once in 1934-1935, when there were also significant personnel changes and a move toward “more business-like methods;” again in late 1938, and early 1940. Both of these later efforts attempted to decentralize, as headquarters tried to shift some of the organizational burden to affiliates, and to regional centers.

The Constitution also created a School: The League offered classes from its beginning years as the W.L.T., and formally organized a New Theatre School in 1935. The School seemed to have been successful on all fronts except management – developing new, trained performers and directors for League endeavors; helping to develop scripts; producing high quality performances, and energizing a core of young theatre artists. It was successful financially in the beginning, but soon failed, apparently due to unfortunate management choices. Several affiliates also offered classes more or less regularly, and the Philadelphia New Theatre created an ongoing school. Schools were envisioned for regional centers when the push for decentralization began, but those plans never came to fruition.

Through these departments, the League attempted to address all the key functions outlined by Reines in his December 1931 article. The goals were to establish a national revolutionary theatre network, to supply practical, theoretical, and artistic support to those theatres, and to continue as a production company in New York, showcasing artistic revolutionary theatre. The organizational structure suggests that the League’s vision focused on outreach to politically engaged people already interested in using theatre for revolutionary work. It was a top-down organizational plan that was intended

to stimulate and support activity, but also to control its output, both artistically and politically. The League constantly walked a fine line, caught in the tension between using the energy of others across the country to do political theatre, and needing to contain the message the theatre communicated.

League headquarters poured massive amounts of energy into communications through the magazine but also through direct one-to-one contact. The League had an open door policy at the office and used extensive direct correspondence. Direct contact amounted to hundreds of letters or walk-ins each month requesting information, plays, or directors and other artistic help. The organization's commitment to responsiveness soaked up hours of staff time. Yet correspondence, conversation, and the magazine all served to help focus the means and the message – to educate the leaders or potential leaders, as Diamant had instructed – to the correct political line. The hope was that the effort would guide theatrical activities, and that once educated, theatre leaders would be able to operate more autonomously and be able to give more back to the League.

The League's strategy included regular national meetings for everyone interested in political theatre. National meetings were modeled on the 1931 conference of theatre organizations that gave birth to the League of Workers Theatres. The Constitution required regular national meetings for decisions delegated to the membership. Despite this rule, the League did not find it possible to do so every year. Some years saw only smaller meetings on the east coast. National Conferences complete with performances, workshops, and sessions dealing with the practical problems of member theatres were held in 1931, 1932, 1934, 1938, and 1940, while smaller meetings of administrators were held during the other years.

The national meetings, when they included performances and workshops, were clearly intended to be showcases for workers theatre. The meetings always seemed to be a peculiar mixture of shared glory and mutual recriminations, just as the League's history was also a mix of wild success, slogging hard work, and outright failures. Events at the meetings were structured to showcase the best quality performances, to inspire members and potential members, and to invigorate the work that was occurring around the country. Yet members spent a significant portion of the time censuring the League for its failures, while League officials chastised the members for failing to contribute enough to the League through dues, royalties, or through providing information for the magazine. The penchant within League circles for 'self-criticism' eroded some of the good will and enthusiasm it generated, because the criticism sometimes created rifts or hard feelings between members and leaders. Still, records of conference proceedings reflect useful workshops and discussions, and document enthusiastic responses to performances.

Records provide a two-sided picture of League activities. New York staffers in the League office describe frantically busy days with numerous member demands they met promptly, but members complained frequently and consistently about a number of failings: slow response times, lack of scripts and unfair practices in granting rights to plays. The New York office was consistently understaffed and underpaid. Although the organization was formally divided into functional departments, as outlined in the Constitution and described in meeting minutes, the reality was the staff was much too small and the workload too heavy to devote unique staff to each department. Staffers had responsibility for more than one area, and each area demanded full-time attention. Staffers worked long hours for very little pay and in physically uncomfortable conditions.

Their first offices were not heated in winter, and were without much ventilation during steamy New York summers. Equipment was donated and supplies were limited. The League's vision was of a far-reaching umbrella organization that centralized information and provided supportive outreach to large numbers of workers theatre organizations spread across all fifty states, while maintaining ties with other radical theatre organizations around the world. The funding was supposed to come from member theatres in the form of dues and royalties. But there were fundamental problems with this vision: the plans were too ambitious to be carried out by small numbers of staff and limited resources; and dues had to be kept very low, since member theatres were even poorer than the national office, and royalty payments depended upon those theatres attracting paying audiences. Theatre groups throughout the nation had little to give and what they did give was consumed nearly whole by their own theatrical endeavors and battles with local politics.

The office in New York, in trying to provide services in every possible area of need to its theatres, was overburdened continually. In theory, each distinct department in the League's headquarters worked side-by-side, each responsible for a segment of the work. In practice, however, each member of the small staff worked in several areas, and there was a lot of overlap. For example, Alice Evans headed the Repertory Department for several years, but also wrote most of the outgoing correspondence to affiliates and was deeply involved in the Production Department. All staff members seem to have had multiple responsibilities. Still, internal communication problems existed, since minutes often noted that, "there must be more communication among the forces, since one segment did not know what another was doing."

As the work to develop a national network of affiliated theatres began, the League established multiple priorities. High among them was the desire to coordinate the work of theatre groups on joint projects. The League wanted to be the center of these activities, and so endeavored to coordinate groups, starting in New York. The projects included raising strike funds, developing mass events to educate and motivate workers, and helping to publicize each other's events. Workers Theatre Magazine sought to spread the idea of workers theatre to workers not yet engaged in theatrical, cultural work by "exposing the class character of the bourgeois theatre."<sup>34</sup> The magazine criticized Broadway and Hollywood as escapist, and described Leftist theatre productions as exciting and crucial to the working class.

The Constitution prioritized creation of new groups and encouraged contact with all "sympathetic elements of bourgeois theatre," to "draw them in."<sup>35</sup> Staff in the Affiliates Department contacted individuals and theatre groups that seemed supportive to the cause. They wooed playwrights, pursued directors and actors, and sought sponsorship from sympathetic non-theatre groups, like the Y.M.C.A's or Y.M.H.A's. The work was sometimes fruitful and sometimes frustrating. While they found support, it was often limited; either the politics didn't measure up to League ideals, or the ability and commitment required to produce radical theatre were not present. League staff members poured energy into their work, keeping the goal of economic justice set by the Constitution in sight.

The structure established by the Constitution reflects the priorities of the nascent organization: To establish national connections and communications through regular

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<sup>34</sup> "ibid., 14"

<sup>35</sup> "ibid., 15"



conferences, to facilitate communication through publications, to develop a supply of scripts for performance, and over all else, to educate both the theatre workers creating performances, and the audiences attending them. The correct education, in the League's view, would inevitably lead to revolution as capitalism collapsed and the workers naturally filled the void with collectivism and justice -- the goal of the whole project.

### **Ongoing struggles**

Parallels are very clear among Reines' report of the Moscow meeting, the League's Constitution, and evidence of the League's actual structure and operating principles. The League struggled unceasingly with two constant deficits: money and good scripts. Its financial structure placed reliance on dues-paying affiliates supplemented by royalties for plays it controlled, on fundraising benefits, and on bookings through the Production Department for most of its income. Theatre is a rather expensive endeavor, difficult to maintain financially, and so the financial structure of the League was shaky from the beginning. Resources were always scarce. So, the amateur theatres that wished to produce League-style political theatre could barely afford to keep the lights on, let alone pay affiliation fees. Royalties also were often not forthcoming, and bookings were irregular, which forced headquarters in New York to desperately seek donations from successful leftists, mostly artists like writer Clifford Odets, when times became particularly tough.

The League's fortunes rose to astounding heights ever so briefly once during the decade. That moment, in 1935, was enough to keep the fires stoked and the struggle alive. The pinnacle of the League's success followed the opening of Clifford Odet's play, *Waiting for Lefty*. This one-act play, whose premiere was produced by the League,

won the hitherto unknown playwright fame. The play became the League's most popular offering during the next year, gaining hundreds of performances by League-associated theatres. The wildly enthusiastic reception seemed to portend a brighter future for workers theatre and the movement it represented, and resulted in a significant surge of support and increased affiliation.

It might be logical to assume that The Daily Worker, the principal publication of the C.P.U.S.A., would feature such a successful radical production with enthusiasm, but it did not. The review of the play appeared on January 12, 1935, six days after the performance, on the 7th page. Nathaniel Buchwald, who was a director at the Artef, wrote the review. Titled *Cheers Greet New Revolutionary Play*, the review praised the effort and described the enthused audience response, but much of the article criticized the "woeful looseness of play structure and ...strident overtones which all but vitiate his [Odets'] message." Despite the poignant drama, which holds "something compelling and fascinating in the fervor and driving sincerity of the play . . . . Odets will learn . . . . Technique and sober reasoning will come with practice".<sup>36</sup> Artef was, of course, a New York Leftist theatre that had received similarly disagreeable reviews from the League's publications. Perhaps this rivalry contributed to the lack of thorough-going support for the League in the Communist press.

During that year the numbers of dues-paying affiliates reached its peak of approximately 35, and informal associates — theatres that used League plays and subscribed to League publications but did not officially affiliate -- numbered 300-400.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Nathaniel Buchwald. "'Cheers Greet New Revolutionary Play by Group Theatre.'" 7.

<sup>37</sup> Exact numbers are very difficult to ascertain, since League publications wished to present the strongest possible picture of their organization and were not entirely forthcoming in representing membership figures. The League often used the number of

The success of *Waiting for Lefty* sparked expansion hopes at League headquarters, and theatre schools sponsored by the League or its affiliated theatres were proposed, and some were developed. The success was not sustainable, however, for although some League plays found a degree of success afterward, never again would the workers theatre find a play or a moment in which unmitigated, infectious enthusiasm caught fire and spread. Never again did public acclaim or numbers of affiliated theatres reach the levels that Lefty brought with it.

The League continued the struggle, however, and from the first sought sustaining connections within the labor movement. Since the working class was the focus for League endeavors, the League and its affiliates thought unions could be a reliable starting place for financial sponsorship and performance venues. But it found little success except in isolated instances. Unions tended to give the cold shoulder to the League.

Correspondence and meeting notes suggest the Communist taint meant mainstream organizations kept their distance from the League, even after the Popular Front brought a softening of the party line in the League's policies. Communist-affiliated unions, which might have been loyal to League goals and efforts, did not attain wide-spread success in U.S. industries, and mainstream unions, for the most part, did not form connections of a lasting nature with the League. American workers did not readily join Communist, or even Socialist, organizations. League leaders were aware of this reluctance, as they often couched their outreach in coded language after the first few years in order to 'draw in' sympathizers from Leftists of a more general stripe. While early articles and plays are

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theatres using their materials or subscribing to the publications as the number of affiliates. This is a misrepresentation, since League records demonstrate that the League never had anywhere near 300-400 dues paying members. The peak seems to be about 35 formal member theatres.

rife with militant, easily identifiable “Red” imagery, by 1933 or 1934, League language reflected the softer line of Popular Front ideology. The prime examples are the changes in names; Workers Theatre Magazine became New Theatre Magazine, and the fundraiser performances changed from *Red Riot Nights* to *New Theatre Nights*. The League’s inability to tap into the huge and vital constituency of mainstream workers crippled its capacity to attain the broad support it needed to be effective. With broad union support, the League may have developed sound finances and achieved more of its goals. That was not to be, however, as the majority of workers organizations never supported the League.

Over the course of the Depression decade, the League changed in character, sometimes adapting to changes in the external political landscape; Sometimes due to internal changes, such as financial crisis or new leadership; Sometimes attempting to appear to change, when no real change was intended, as name changes noted above suggest. The League’s leaders also modified the organizational structure and policies several times for more efficiency and effectiveness. The policies, political theory, and means to revolution articulated in Workers Theatre Magazine help reveal the intent of the League’s leadership. An investigation of correspondence and internal documents, such as meeting minutes and correspondence, develops a more complete picture of what the League attempted, what it failed, and what successes it enjoyed.

### **This study**

Studies of labor-related theatre activities have appeared, but no book length history of the League of Workers Theatres or the New Theatre League exists. The League has been mentioned in much of the literature on 1930s leftist and cultural activity. Several books discuss radical theatre during this period in terms of Communist

influences, such as Morgan Himelstein's *Theater was a Weapon*, or in terms of Aristotle's aesthetics as in Sam Smiley's *The Drama of Attack*. Gerald Rabkin's *Drama and Commitment* provides some context and analysis also. These books mention the League, and discuss some of the plays and organizational tactics of Leftist theatre.

There are several Master's theses and Doctoral dissertations that examine aspects of radical theatre. Notable and very useful are Daniel Friedman's extensive and thorough history of the Prolet-Beuhne, and Mark Weisstuch's work on the Theatre Union. Esther Brown, Deborah Caskey, Felicia Nina Liss Frank and others provide background and detail on particular aspects of the League's work or specific affiliates. Two personal memoirs, Jay Williams' *Stage Left*, and Sis Cunningham and Gordon Friesen's *Red Dust and BroadSides* provide some specific information and a sense of the times and the political work they carried out through theatre, as does Herbert Kline's reflection on his editorship of the League's magazine, *New Theatre and Film: 1934 to 1937*.

Some of the League's history has been obscured because of fear. For example, Herb Kline mentions that Harold Clurman cut an entire chapter from his history of the Group Theatre, *The Fervent Years*, because it detailed Clurman's work with the League. Clurman's editors discouraged him from opening himself up to "red-baiting," wrote Kline, and Clurman deleted the section.<sup>38</sup> The Red Scare of the 1950s had a significant impact on participants' willingness to talk about their involvement in Communist influenced theatre, even after the end of McCarthyism – Clurman's book was published in 1961. Since the 1960s many excellent books examining Left culture and politics in the 1930s have appeared: too many to mention individually here, although I have found

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<sup>38</sup> Herbert Kline. *New Theatre and Film: 1934 to 1937; an Anthology*. 45.

Michael Denning's massive *The Cultural Front* to be very helpful. Some of these works mention theatrical activities, but few examine theatrics in much depth. Colette Hyman's *Staging Strikes* describes and assesses union-related theatre from this period and its legacy in today's labor movement, but no study focuses on a thorough history of the League itself, its tactics and adaptations to events and circumstances. This book seeks to follow several threads of League activities in order to trace the multiple paths the League and its adherents followed to their goal of social change.

## **HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED**

The first section of this book follows a chronological organization, tracing major changes in League operations. The second section examines three affiliates as case studies of how League theatres functioned in the field. The third section analyzes theatrical practices: plays, playing spaces, and artistic processes pursued by League theatres.

### **SECTION ONE: PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS**

Chapter Two outlines the organization's path up until about 1934. Since little primary documentation exists from these years, League activities must be teased out mostly from the magazine, *Workers Theatre*, and from a document called "Report of 1934," in which past accomplishments and failures are enumerated and evaluated for the purposes of setting a new course under new leadership. During the years 1934-1935, explored in Chapter Three, the League underwent significant changes based upon the "Report's" analysis. The organization's leadership and methods changed, it moved to new offices, it saw its greatest success in the premiere of *Waiting for Lefty*, and the range

of issues the League tackled in the plays expanded. About that time, the League began to be more businesslike in its methods, which means there are more regular meeting minutes, and more preserved correspondence and financial records, although none of these document categories is complete. League activities after 1935 until about 1940 are defined by a dogged search for another stellar labor play like Waiting for Lefty and several structural maneuvers with the goal of financial solvency. This period and the League's eventual demise are discussed in Chapter Four.

## SECTION TWO: JOIN OUR STRUGGLE: THREE AFFILIATES EXAMINED

In the second section of the book, three affiliate theatres are discussed in some depth. The Chicago Repertory Group, the Red Dust Players in Oklahoma, and the New Theatre of Philadelphia were among the strongest in the League, and are also most accessible to the historian since documentation about these three is fairly rich. They provide pictures of three quite different circumstances for radical performance.

## SECTION THREE: THEATRICAL MEANS: STAGE TECHNIQUES FOR CHANGE

The third section of the book examines in detail several plays and performances League theatres produced, the venues in which they performed, and their own assessments of the successes and failures of those presentations. The section divides into a part on the short agit-prop form, some theories that assist in analyzing aspects of performance venues and contexts, and, last, the most successful League plays that were 'stationary' plays: musicals, dramas, comedies, and melodramas.

The book concludes with an assessment of the goals, tactics, successes and failures of the League. The League's story has been lost to all but the specialist in radical

left culture of the 1930s. This book attempts to restore that history, and to assess its place within theatrical and political history.





## **Chapter Two**

### **Launching the Revolution**

The League of Workers Theatre developed in early 1932 from the Workers Laboratory Theatre. W.L.T. members put into practice the directives outlined in Reines' article. They organized the first conference, wrote most of the articles for and published the magazine, and drafted the Constitution. They developed theatre classes in New York, and used Workers Theatre Magazine and direct correspondence to reach out across the country. The focus of the magazine suggests that the goals of the outreach remained the same throughout these first years: to educate Left-leaning theatre groups, helping them develop into politically effective theatres, and to build a national network of workers theatres that would help each other and grow into an arm of the revolution that League leaders believed was sure to sweep the country as capitalism fell. The magazine had several regular features, including a "News and Notes" column filled with reports on the activities of theatre groups around the country, even around the world. It printed reviews of both Leftist and mainstream theatre, instructional articles to help beginners develop skills in acting, technical theatre and other practical matters, and analysis of politics and aesthetics.

Because extant organizational records for the first few years are virtually non-existent, it is difficult to tell how the original League structure, outlined in the Constitution of 1932, was actually established. The magazine and the "Report of 1935," an internal document that assessed progress and set new directions, show that the group

continued giving performances and organizing with other theatres in New York.<sup>39</sup> The magazine makes clear that many of the functions outlined in those early plans were carried out. For example, it reports that productions were performed and plays were offered to interested theatre groups; National meetings were held, and administrative services were carried out, although not always to the satisfaction of those they were intended to serve. It is not clear whether the Workers Laboratory Theatre members were, in effect, the Production Department, or whether there was a separate or linked set of staff that ran the department, but since W.L.T. activities were featured in the magazine, and with little to no criticism, a close relationship was probably still the case. And it was W.L.T.'s well-developed performance program that served as an early model for League theatrical efforts.

Three activities were central to the League's early efforts: performance, the magazine, and national conferences. Theatrical performance formed the core of the means by which the League sought change. Their own productions, at first a product of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, and later of the League "Production Department," provided a testing ground, a role model and connections to sister organizations in the New York area. The magazine, Workers Theatre Magazine, disseminated information about theatre practice, and served to connect theatre practitioners, linking groups across the country to the national organization. Conferences and festivals gathered participants in one place where live performances could be shared, and the leadership could address issues and hear from constituents. These three activities were the foundation of the League's work, and are discussed in turn below.

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<sup>39</sup> The document, titled "Report of 1935" is examined in depth in chapter Three. It was written to be part of national conference presentations.

## **Workers Laboratory Theatre and the Shock Troupe: Performance at the Core**

The W.L.T. performed in a variety of settings and with different kinds of performances specific to each situation. The W.L.T. also performed with other radical theatres, as for example in the first “Red Riot Night” in fall of 1932 at the Coney Island Workers Center. This performance was an evening of short political sketches, and included performances by the Prolet-Buehne, W.L.T., and the New Dance group, among several others. The affair “went over with a bang” and the proceeds bolstered W.L.T. finances.<sup>40</sup> Benefit performances such as this one demonstrate that area groups were willing to help support the new organization and its efforts, and also point to benefits as a source of income that the League and its affiliated theatres relied upon rather heavily.

W.L.T. members also developed the highly mobile Shock Troupe, which was established in spring 1933. The Shock Troupe was an elite sub-group of the W.L.T. whose purpose was to create and deliver immediate, relevant, short performances for crisis situations such as rallies, evictions, and strikes. Workers Theatre Magazine reported on W.L.T. and, later, Shock Troupe activities in nearly every issue.<sup>41</sup> Short articles enumerated performances and the organizations for which they performed. For example, in November of 1931, the W.L.T. performed five times: for a Workers Sports Club, the Needles Trades Union, the Workers International Relief (W.I.R.)<sup>42</sup>, and at their

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<sup>40</sup> n.a. “Red Riot Night.” 21.

<sup>41</sup> Deborah Caskey describes the development of the “Shock Troupe,” a small group that lived communally hand-to-mouth on donations, so that they could devote all their time to developing their theatre into a sharp and effective political weapon (73-76). Caskey’s thesis and Jay Williams salty memoir *Stage Left* provide most of this history.

<sup>42</sup> The Workers International Relief was a Communist affiliated organization with strong connections to the international labor movement.

own Saturday night series that featured a speaker, a play and a discussion.<sup>43</sup> Longer articles in Workers Theatre Magazine described theatrical techniques in more detail.<sup>44</sup>

The Shock Troupe kept busy creating new material, rehearsing, and developing bookings. The primary focus was of course on the mobile form, and in accordance with Reines' report from the Moscow meeting, the group gave a high priority to performances at strikes and to raising funds for strikers.<sup>45</sup> For example, they appeared at fundraisers for the Anti-Imperialist League's "Colonial Night," at fund raisers for Kentucky miners and striking dressmakers, and to aid unemployed immigrants from China.<sup>46</sup>

When the Shock Troupe was first established, its members lived communally in a railroad flat in "Alphabet City" (the Lower East Side of New York) with one room for married couples, one for single men, and one for single women. The Troupe was funded, according to Jay Williams, by half of the \$25 per week salary of the W.L.T.'s secretary Lucy Kaye.<sup>47</sup> She donated the money, which was the only steady cash income to support about twelve Shock Troupe members.<sup>48</sup> The working methods of the Shock Troupe provided a role model for other mobile theatres, although in reality no other group on record lived a life so committed to radical performance as it did. The Troupe followed a disciplined daily schedule, rising at eight to breakfast and clean the apartment. The morning was spent in acting or dancing classes or in reading and discussing political

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<sup>43</sup> n.a. "W.L.T. Schedule of Performances." 27.

<sup>44</sup> These articles are discussed in Section Three of this book: Theatrical Means.

<sup>45</sup> Not all were ready to adopt the short forms. Arguments over the correct form for effective radical theatre are analyzed in the section on Theatrical Means.

<sup>46</sup> Morgan Himelstein. *Drama Was a Weapon: The Left-Wing Theatre in New York, 1929-1941*. 14.

<sup>47</sup> Williams: 79-80.

<sup>48</sup> A loose organization called the Friends of the Shock Troupe formed after a time, and donated food, blankets, carfare and other necessities. It's not clear how long this association lasted.

news and theory. Jay Williams describes sessions of ‘self-criticism’ in which members said, “exactly what they thought of each other.” These sessions were, according to Williams, necessary and although sometimes explosive resulted in deeper interdependence and affection.<sup>49</sup> Rehearsals took up the afternoon unless there was a booking. Evenings were spent in more rehearsal. The members of the Shock Troupe dedicated their lives to their work: developing and performing theatre for workers about workers issues. They were acknowledged the best at agit-prop, so the time and energy they devoted to the craft surely paid off.

Extant documents that record the transformation of the W.L.T. and the Shock Troupe into the institution called the League of Workers Theatres are lacking. However, some events are clear from the record. The W.L.T. moved from its original location at 131 West 28<sup>th</sup> Street downtown to 799 Broadway (near 10<sup>th</sup> Street) where they shared space with Workers International Relief. From available information, it seems that the W.I.R. paid for the space and allowed the W.L.T. to use it for a time. Perhaps with this move, the League took shape, for the location it shared with the W.I.R. is the first address for the magazine as well. Williams describes a complete break with the W.I.R. and several moves, ending with a fairly long residence in a loft at 42 East 12 Street, where the W.L.T. occupied an entire floor.<sup>50</sup>

### **The Practical Propagandist: The Role of Workers Theatre Magazine**

The W.L.T.’s members spent significant energy helping to educate new workers theatre groups. The magazine is full of articles discussing how to develop and present political theatre. They organized classes in theatre skills by early winter 1932 to help

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<sup>49</sup> Williams, *Stage Left*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 78-79.

connect with like-minded theatres. Yet there is early evidence of the tension created by the League's inherently conflicting goals. The League worked towards developing large numbers of theatres for its network, while at the same time insisting upon consistent politics and aesthetics. Despite common goals, there was often harsh conflict because of disagreement among Leftists about both means and ends, as well as competition for political supremacy. The League's rhetoric often struck a chord of righteousness. The magazine, and, one might surmise, the people behind it, could be rather pugnacious in their opinions, and often sounded more than a little arrogant or patronizing.

For example, the magazine delivered some harsh criticism of the Jewish Workers Clubs including the Artef. This critique, found in the December 1931 issue, focused on aesthetics, and was no doubt intended as a lesson for other producers of workers theatres. The issue under debate was "correct" form for workers theatre. Reines had declared that short, non-realistic pieces were the correct form for radical theatre, and called for a retreat from bourgeois realism. The style of theatre that the League touted early on was to be direct, simple, and educational. The December 1931 article described a lively discussion among radical theatre workers<sup>51</sup> that concluded by proclaiming agreement that "there is no more room in the Workers Theatres for complicated stage settings, costumes, make-up and other relics from the professional stage."<sup>52</sup> In other words, they rejected the paraphernalia of realism.

This conclusion was, of course, in line with the pronouncement of Diamant at the Moscow meeting rejecting 'bourgeois' theatre. The emerging League, toeing this line and jockeying for a leadership position within the Left, sought to have the final word on

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<sup>51</sup> The article doesn't give a setting for the discussion or clarify who precisely was there.

<sup>52</sup> n.a. "News and Notes." December 1931. 25.

form. It argued for the simpler agit-prop form over realism but the Artef did not adhere to these ideas. The article rather sarcastically attacked the Artef, with a report that the Jewish Workers Clubs had announced lectures in realistic theatrical techniques: classes in realistic “acting, directing, stage painting, costume designing – (don’t faint) – make-up. . . . Artef should know better.”<sup>53</sup> This announcement, the article breathlessly reported, resulted in “a storm of excitement and protest” at the meeting of Workers Theatres, and a vote to sponsor a Workers Theatre School that would teach the correct aesthetics for a workers theatre. The January 1932 issue announced a course in Workers Theatre Training, to be offered in six sessions, and taught by Bernard Reines.<sup>54</sup>

The article suggests some key features of the League’s self-image and strategies. It saw itself entering into a field of competing artistic and political positions, and as newcomers to the Left cultural world (Artef and Prolet-Buehne had both been functioning for about six years), the League needed to assert itself and gain a position of authority. The direction set by Diamant’s directives meant developing a hard line, politically, with little flexibility.<sup>55</sup> The League chose to denigrate opponents, scoffing at their ideas and efforts in order to discredit them so that the League would be seen as the authority. For example, it criticized bourgeois theatre because:

The ultimate aim of bourgeois theatre is to . . . give the audience what it wants – escape from reality. . . . To the sex-starved spinsters – love, to the sexually repressed husband – hot sex, to the drudging wife – mysteries

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>55</sup> It is extremely difficult to ascertain how much control Moscow exerted over League activities, and is outside the parameters of this book. Articles in League publications do refer to policy in the U.S.S.R., but records do not reflect direct control or financial contributions although of course both possibly occurred.



and love and racketeer thrills, to the poor – riches.<sup>56</sup>

The workers theatre audience should “face reality, get acquainted with it onstage, and train itself to cope with it in actual life.”<sup>57</sup>

It used a rather sarcastic tone in criticizing Hallie Flanagan’s production of *Can You Hear Their Voices*, a play sympathetic to the working class, for its reliance upon a “charming liberal college girl” instead of a radical working class hero. The play, Saxe wrote, erred in warning farmers and workers against communists instead of urging them to rally around the class cause.<sup>58</sup>

The League’s relationships, even with sympathizers, were always contentious, in part because the League conveyed a rather arrogant sense of always knowing best. League leaders projected an image of righteous political virtue, which apparently was a strategy to secure followers. In the example above, the article’s strategy is to divide the Artef worker/artists from the League based on their chosen theatre techniques. The article is sarcastic about the Artef’s use of bourgeois theatrical arts such as costumes and “(don’t faint) – make-up,” followed with a scolding for their older sibling theatre: “Artef should know better.” League worker/artists, according to the article, react by protesting and developing classes to correct the wrongs done by Artef. The proclamation announcing a new League workers theatre school is based upon a certain horror that the Artef was offering the wrong kind of ‘political’ education and that the League must, out of good political conscience, offer ‘correct’ training.

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<sup>56</sup> Albert Prentiss. "Technique in Workers Theatre." 5.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>58</sup> Al Saxe. "Can You Hear Their Voices?" 2.

The classes served two purposes: they could instill correct political views tied to the preferred aesthetic forms, and they could develop theatre artists to fuel the national network envisioned by the League. The workers theatre school consistently offered a selection of classes by February 1933. The article “Workers Theatre School Established” in the March 1933 Workers Theatre Magazine declared that classes in Acting, Stage Management, Voice, and the Social Basis of Theatre had been ongoing for two months.<sup>59</sup> A separate notice in the same issue invited students to attend a new Wednesday evening class for directors, taught by Hyam Shapiro. Attendance records for these early classes do not exist, but classes were mentioned regularly in the magazine, and in later years theatre professionals well known to mainstream theatre taught many of them.<sup>60</sup>

Instilling correct form and content was a difficult task, but the League attacked it with fervor. Criticism was a major feature in the magazine and was focused both internally, on the League’s own people, policy and performances, and externally on other theatres, agencies, and individuals. The W.L.T. also solicited criticism of the magazine from its readers, a practice that the organization continued throughout its history.<sup>61</sup> The idea of ‘self criticism’ appears repeatedly in League documents. League leaders used it in many ways: to pinpoint problems to be solved; to air grievances; to change practices; to make a point about ‘correct’ political or aesthetic practices; and sometimes as a weapon against people or groups, both within and outside of the organization.

Plays written or produced by W.L.T and other Left theatres suffered stringent criticism by League writers. For example, Sydney Ball analyzed a production of the play

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<sup>59</sup> n.a., “Workers Theatre School Established.” 16.

<sup>60</sup> A discussion of the school and its teachers, finances, and offerings can be found in Chapter Three.

<sup>61</sup> n.a. “Correspondence.” 1b.

Precedent, by I. J. Golden, offered by the Dramatic Bureau and performed by many League theatres, in a 1931 article.<sup>62</sup> The play, which shows a labor leader railroaded into life imprisonment on a trumped up bombing charge, is based on the Tom Mooney case. Ball's criticism supported the effort to promote non-realistic plays. He critiqued *Precedent*, a realistic play, first on formal grounds disapproving its complicated plot and the necessity for trained actors to perform it effectively. Realistic characters require the actor to achieve a nuanced representation of recognizable everyday behavior combined with the emotional changes inherent to any realistic character. It requires talent and skill to perform well. It also tends to focus on individual characters, rather than economic, social, or political systems. The League promoted agit-prop, in which characters tended to be symbolic representing a function in society, such as boss or worker, and which were simpler to perform. Agit-prop also focused on social structure or systems, which, League leaders felt, educated the audience of workers more clearly.

Ball then focused on *Precedent's* failure to mention the A.F.L.'s complicity in framing Tom Mooney. The play, declared Ball, didn't channel the workers' resentment the right way. It should have criticized mainstream labor's lack of militancy. Many plays in the League repertoire picture mainstream unions and their leaders as traitors, milquetoasts, or buffoons, with A.F.L. leaders often either the butt of jokes or targets for blame. League leaders saw mainstream labor as an arm of reactionary forces, placating workers while in reality working hand in hand with the bosses. The League supported the ironically named Trade Union Unity League, part of a Communist Party labor-organizing strategy called "dual unionism." The C.P. created competing unions in

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<sup>62</sup> Sydney Ball. "Review of *Precedent*." 4-b.

industries or companies that already had union representation, and urge members to change to the T.U.U.L. union, thus undermining existing unions.<sup>63</sup> The C.P. unions were appropriately radical and had the correct view of the labor situation, in the League's view. Anger in *Precedent*, claimed Ball, should have been directed toward the reactionary A.F.L.

Tom Mooney, the play's protagonist, was a member of the Socialist Party, a fact that does not figure explicitly in Ball's criticism, yet which demonstrates one of the League's quandaries, for as a Communist-connected organization it needed to separate itself from all non-Communists; yet it included this play in its offerings. In many instances the League fought with Socialists and other non-Communist Lefties, but clearly, the need for plays that demonized anti-labor actions outweighed the ideological problems presented by the Socialist at this play's center.

Reviews like Ball's attempted to instill "correct" political and aesthetic practices in workers theatres, thus carrying out Diament and Reines' first priority: to educate the theatre workers to express the right ideas using the right theatrical forms. The early issues of the magazine are nearly always committed to the agit-prop and other short forms, such as adaptations of vaudeville or musical revue formats.<sup>64</sup> Ball's critique of *Precedent* continues to beat the drum of anti-realism, following Diament's call for "simple" theatrical presentations. The short forms were greatly preferred by theorists,

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<sup>63</sup> For more in dual unions, see Klehr 14, 15, *passim*

<sup>64</sup> For more on adaptation of popular theatre forms, see Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, especially Chapter Six, and Caskey, 73. Ironically, one of the first whole scripts printed in the magazine is one that relies on traditional theatrical techniques such as empathy and a realistic, emotional climactic scene. It appeared in the May 1931 issue. This play, *It's Funny as Hell*, is discussed at length in Theatrical Means in this book.

and by the W.L.T. itself, which focused on performances at work sites, in the streets, and in union halls.

Workers Theatre Magazine also reviewed Broadway and other productions. The review of *The Miracle at Verdun*, titled “The Mess at Verdun” described the production through the lens of ‘theatre utilitarianism.’<sup>65</sup> The review found the play lacking because it presented ‘incorrect social thinking.’ At fault were its sentimentality, defeatism, and lack of a clear central idea. The review found the acting melodramatic, and the directing a misguided attempt to ‘make pretty’ the machinations of war. The real goals of the production, the review charged, were to satisfy customers in the theatre so the director could get “a fat check.” The review sought to expose the character of bourgeois theatre as a shallow, bankrupt form. It focused the audience on “sentimental love affairs” rather than economic situations.<sup>66</sup> Workers theatre would replace it with vital theatre that presented a clear picture of capitalist society to educate the workers to organize and fight.

Articles repeatedly censured even those who were friends of the workers theatre. Hallie Flanagan’s article in the 1931 issue of Theatre Arts Monthly, “A Theatre is Born,” expressed excitement over the nascent workers theatre movement and must have given a tremendous boost to its visibility, yet she took some heavy hits in a critique written by Al Prentiss in the December 1931 Workers Theatre. Prentiss attacked Flanagan because, he wrote, she didn’t understand that the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. were in different “stages of development,” and that therefore the theatre in the States had different tasks than in the

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<sup>65</sup> This review is found in Workers Theatre Magazine May 1931 6-b – 8b. *The Miracle at Verdun*, by Hans Chlumberg and translated into English by Julian Leigh, was produced at the Martin Beck Theatre in March 1931. It depicts the disillusionment of a young, idealistic soldier in World War I.

<sup>66</sup> Albert Prentiss. “Paul Sifton’s *The Belt*.” 10.

Soviet Union. Flanagan had traveled quite extensively in the Soviet Union to study the theatre there and compared what she had seen with developments in the U.S. Prentiss wrote that what Flanagan described as “childish, repetitious, violent and lack[ing] art. . . ., “ were effective ways to educate workers: performance techniques such as simplicity and repetition that made ideas clear.” Prentiss wrote that those ideas included the violence of capitalism towards the workers and that was the reason to include brutality.<sup>67</sup> Flanagan was among the first to take notice of workers theatre in a mainstream publication, yet the League’s magazine, while thanking her for her sympathetic article, did not hesitate to deliver rather harsh criticism in return.<sup>68</sup> The criticism was doubtless meant to teach the worker-readers some C.P. theory, but the League repeated this rather sectarian and critical response time and time again. It could not have helped the workers theatre gain friends, and again illustrates the constant tension between maintaining a hard line political stance and reaching out to sympathetic Leftists, or to theatre groups to share in the work.

An analysis of typical content of the magazine demonstrates that education and outreach were central to its purpose. The early years of the Workers Theatre Magazine were marked by efforts to create contacts with other left leaning theatre groups across the country. The goal was to develop a national network that could work together through exchange of ideas and scripts. The magazine’s early issues are full of news from theatre groups and cultural organizations in the form of letters and notices about activities, and of practical information in articles geared to help these groups learn techniques of theatrical production. These groups wrote in from cities across the U.S., and from Japan, Australia,

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<sup>67</sup> Flanagan is quoted in Prentiss’s article.

<sup>68</sup> Albert Prentiss. “Our Theatre is Born.” 5.

France, Germany, Canada, and elsewhere around the world. As a typical example, the May 1933 issue contained news from Moline Illinois, Los Angeles California, Madrid Spain, Kansas City Missouri, Chicago, New York City, upstate New York, and Philadelphia. Yet formal ties, which would be evidenced by large numbers of dues-paying affiliates, never materialized. A few strong groups developed, and passionate participants continued their work through the decade, but a large national network did not develop. Instead, a fairly large number of short-lived groups participated irregularly in the League and a handful of theatres developed into longer-term, active organizations with recurring contact with the League.

National headquarters continually urged theatre groups to send in news of their activities, and also copies of any new plays they developed. By the June-July 1932 issue the magazine published a list of 35 plays in their holdings.<sup>69</sup> Each issue also contained numerous short pieces that described the theatres' doings or asked questions of the League. Sometimes they included requests for extra bundles of Workers Theatre Magazine to sell. Often, the magazine published accounts of individual performances, or of a performance schedule for a particular group. In the February 1932 issue for example, the Rebel Arts Players of Los Angeles reported performances of *Can You Hear their Voices?*, and *The Big Stiff* and of the formation of their "Blue Blouse" group which planned to develop mobile theatre. They reported three performances scheduled for February, and one each planned for March and April, all for left wing organizations such as a T.U.U.L. union, the I.W.O., and the Western Workers Bazaar, a community event.<sup>70</sup> All of these magazine articles helped to set an example for the other groups, and to create

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<sup>69</sup> na.a "List of Available Plays." 2.

<sup>70</sup> n.a. "The Groups in Action." 31-32.

a sense community with other comrades in the struggle. These short pieces are in the “News and Notes” section.<sup>71</sup>

Articles announcing events, a complete play script, descriptions of theatrical production techniques, and opinion pieces on aesthetics or politics filled the rest of a typical issue. For example in the July 1931 issue there is a lengthy article on “Training the Actor for the Proletarian Theatre,” a description of a ‘purge’ of personnel at the Film and Photo League, a lengthy description of the W.L.T. and its work that includes enough detail to provide a model for other theatres, an exposé called “Crisis in the Bourgeois Theatre,” and a description of the W.L.T. and Prolet-Buehne’s joint performance in the May Day parade which featured political slogans that “came off very well.” This budget of page space is typical of the magazine’s early issues.

The magazine’s editors focused on beginners in theatre arts and neophyte activists during these early years of the thirties, providing role models for political views and inspiration for theatrical techniques; They provided examples from other struggling and small theatres whenever those groups sent in material; and they worked hard to become the central point in a connection among theatre groups in the effort to build a national movement.

### **A National Profile: Conferences and Festivals**

Both the magazine and national conferences, required by the League’s constitution, reveal the League’s image of itself as a very broad organization. The magazine was national, even international in scope, and the conferences express the

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<sup>71</sup> The magazine’s staff edited letters for use in the magazine. Much of this correspondence, marked with the editor’s slashes and arrows, can be found in the New Theatre League archives at the New York Public Library.



ambition for widespread influence. The League's self-image was quite clearly as the central lynchpin of cultural revolutionary activity; a point of convergence for labor organizing and art-as-activism across the nation. League leadership perceived national conferences as a necessary tool in building and strengthening that network of artistic educators: the workers theatres.

Technically the League's Constitution called for a national meeting every year to carry out League business. While there were national meetings each year, only about four times in the decade of the League's existence did these include a full range of performances, speakers, and workshops. The other national gatherings were principally business meetings and they did not attract broad representation even from all of the affiliated theatres. In some cases, the national gatherings inadvertently served to undermine the League, as when for example new members from Dallas, Texas enthusiastically attended in 1938 only to find that there were far fewer theatre groups in attendance than they were led to expect, and far more conflict among the leaders of the League.

The first conference in League records predates the formation of the L.O.W.T. It was the Workers Cultural Federation Conference, called by the John Reed Club of New York and held June 14, 1931. It was not limited to theatre, but included any workers cultural organizations. It drew 265 delegates from 130 cultural organizations, 19 of which were theatres, all from the eastern seaboard, in or near New York. The gathering chose an Executive Committee of 35 members, which was divided into 11 commissions, each one to handle a different part of the cultural activities for radical Left organizations. The commission dealing with theatre was the Workers Dramatic Council.

By November 1931, the Workers Dramatic Council of New York was meeting every other Monday to discuss organizational and artistic issues, and to plan events. Workers Theatre reported that the November 30 meeting included several ‘old’ groups: the W.L.T., the Prolet-Buehne, the Hungarian Federation, the Jack London Club of Newark, the Jewish Central Committee, and the ProletCult; and several new groups: the Ukrainian Dram circle, the Jugoslavian Workers Club, the Williamsburg workers club, and Naturefriends. At the meeting members again determined, in an often-repeated refrain, that the Workers Cultural Organizations had no room for the old arts and entertainment format, by which they meant bourgeois forms like realism, which should be replaced with more “efficient and artistic methods.” Pure entertainment and recreation were also wasted time, for cultural activities should first and foremost serve the cause. The Council discussed how they might help the forces already out there to develop into effective political theatres that focused upon agit-prop mobile theatre. The Council determined that they could best achieve these goals through a theatre conference with performances, lectures, and discussions, and they began planning that event.<sup>72</sup>

This conference took place in April 1932. It was called the First National Workers Theatre Conference and Spartakiade, and it was at this event that the League of Workers Theatres was formed. The announcement for the conference was banner headlined on page one of the March 1932 issue of Workers Theatre: “Geneneral Mobilisation [sic] of all Workers Theatre Groups in this Country.” The notice directed all groups to discuss several key questions before coming to the conference: what were the immediate tasks of the workers theatre movement?; how might the work be carried

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<sup>72</sup> n.a. "News and Notes." 25.

out?; what problems and shortcomings did the groups experience?; how could they improve the work?; and how could they improve contact among the groups? Each group was to elect a representative to attend the conference, and the magazine set out selection processes for the first 'Revolutionary competition' for best performance. Fourteen theatres from New York, Newark, Philadelphia, and Chicago competed in the Spartakiade, and the Constitution of the L.O.W.T. came into being at that event.

The event also received a ten-inch column in The Daily Worker, the main newspaper for the C.P.U.S.A.<sup>73</sup> The Daily Worker printed some news about the League, but radical theatrics did not receive vivid, prominent, or frequent coverage in the paper. For example, What's On and Stage and Screen, both regular columns that listed events of interest, sometimes listed League productions, including some outside of New York. It printed brief notices for some events, such as "L.O.W.T. of Chicago to Hold First New Theatre Night Jan. 12" or "Prolet Beuhne Wants English Section."<sup>74</sup> There were reviews of revolutionary plays, but remarkably little coverage of the numerous performances the League records show at strikes, meeting halls and even performances in theatres. Most of the performance went unremarked in The Daily Worker. And while it did review some League-associated productions, like a benefit performance for striking coal miners, or a show at a Camp Unity reunion, it also reviewed and listed many mainstream plays.<sup>75</sup> For example, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* produced at the Player's Club received a

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<sup>73</sup> n.a. "Workers' Theatres Plan Conference and Spartakiade." 2.

<sup>74</sup> n.a. "LOWT to Hold First Theatre Night Jan 12" Daily Worker National edition. January 7, 1935: 5. and n.a. "Prolet Buehne wants and English Section" The Daily Worker. June 7, 1932: 2, respectively.

<sup>75</sup> n.a. "New Plays Presented For the Benefit of Striking KY Miners." The Dailey Worker. New York. February 2, 1932: 2. and "Show to be Main Feature at Camp Unity Reunion." January 17, 1935: 5, respectively.

three-inch article June 2, 1932.<sup>76</sup> The play is not at all discussed in political terms, and is one of many notices for plays or movies not connected to any political ideas. Stage and Screen often included events unaffiliated with politics, such as the Philharmonic debut of a French pianist.<sup>77</sup> The landmark moments in League history are not covered in prominent ways or in particularly glowing terms so the relationship between the main news organ of the C.P. and the League may not have been close. The article and a small ad the day before the event -- an ad much smaller than and running right next to an ad for the send-off for International Workers Order return of delegates to the Soviet Union -- for the Spartakiade of 1932 are exceptional coverage for League events.

This lack of coverage perhaps indicates a negative relationship between the League and the Daily Worker. While there were some articles and reviews of productions, the League and its work towards bringing a Soviet-style state to the U.S. were not addressed in the principal C.P. news organ. A letter from Alice Evans to Mike Gold, the editor of the paper, may shed light. In it, Alice responds to a review of *Plant in the Sun*, a play that is discussed at length in part three of this book. She agrees with the Daily Worker's positive review, then complains about its "total ignoring of the organized movement which has nourished and nurtured this plant in the sun," in fairly rigorous words. "It is only the existence," she wrote, "of such an organization" that made it possible. "How about some recognition?."<sup>78</sup> This letter combined with comparatively sparse coverage of the League, leads towards the conclusion that the relationship was not strong.

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<sup>76</sup> n.a. "Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* opens next Monday" Daily Worker June 2, 1932: 2.

<sup>77</sup> "Stage and Screen." The Daily Worker. National Edition. January 17, 1935: 4.

<sup>78</sup> Evans to Gold. May 26, 1938.

The conference and Spartakiade succeeded in launching the national network, the League of Workers Theatres, and set the stage for the next nine years of activities in the struggle to develop theatre as a weapon in the class struggle. Subsequent conferences offered moments for the League to look back at its achievements and failures, and to plan for its future. Those views, fortunately for the historian, are often documented in the League's records.

During the year that followed this first national conference of the League in spring of 1932, the magazine published several articles urging and instructing theatres to develop regional centers, to hold regional or city-wide conferences and performance competitions, and to build support systems for one another through regional organization. For example, the January-February 1933<sup>79</sup> issue contains two articles calling for regional centers and two articles describing League theatres' attempts to do so. In Spring 1933, the New York council organized a Spartakiade for the city and surrounding area. Chicago organized the Workers Theatre Council, but it was short lived. The Cleveland group held a competition that drew about 225 spectators, with six groups competing. The article claimed "resounding success," which could have been much greater, declared the writer, had the groups cooperated better about ticket distribution and believed more in the potential for success. The Cleveland competition had to compete with four other major "affairs," given by area leftist organizations and therefore activist groups in the area competed against one another for the same audience, the same day. Naturally, attendance suffered.

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<sup>79</sup> This issue has "Jan. – Feb. 1933" printed on the cover, although page one, which includes the Table of Contents, says "Fall 1932." Items within the magazine indicate that the cover date is correct.

The notion of regional centers resurfaced throughout the League's history, although it did not succeed in any significant or ongoing way. There are no documents about a Cleveland regional center developing. The League made serious attempts to decentralize organizational work three more times during its ten year history, but those efforts never bore fruit.

The magazine reflects another shift in strategy, one that reveals some political foresight, following the national conference of spring 1932. The organization softened its hard-line political stance, probably for pragmatic reasons. The League continually lacked good, politically effective scripts, and broadening the pool of Left playwrights who could be welcomed into the fold seemed a useful way to increase the repertory. Previously, League rhetoric rebuked all other political groups, even those that could also be considered radical such as Socialists, rejecting them wholesale and cleaving tightly to the party line. In 1932, the League consciously and deliberately changed this stance. The theatres were encouraged to "draw in 'semi-radical' groups, especially Negro groups," in order to increase the numbers of playwrights writing for workers theatres, and ultimately to improve repertory holdings.<sup>80</sup> The League needed to build the ranks, and to find ways to generate a larger number of viable plays for member theatres; sufficient numbers were not found among those in the Communist Left.<sup>81</sup>

Significantly, the expansion of acceptable political views predated official "popular front" or "united front" politics by a full year. As Michael Denning describes in

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<sup>80</sup> n.a. "With the National Executive Committee of the L.O.W.T." Workers Theater Magazine. March 1933: 12. and n.a. "On Every Important Sector of the Theatre Front: Workers Theatre Takes on New Tasks." Workers Theatre Magazine. March 1933: 13, respectively.

<sup>81</sup> Unfortunately, organizational records for these early years do not exist, so it is not possible to know if there was a change in leadership personnel or other internal factors that influenced this change, which is so clearly reflected in the magazine.

*The Cultural Front*, the Popular Front grew from the radicalism of 1934's labor strife, giving birth to the C.I.O.<sup>82</sup> It was a bloc of numerous groups on the left – Communists, industrial unionists, socialists, anti-fascists, anti-war activists, and civil rights activists. The League adopted the outlook of the Popular Front in 1933, welcoming leftists of every stripe. Given the confrontational, sectarian nature of Workers Theatre Magazine articles such a change must have been bitterly fought within League circles, although no record exists to substantiate such discussions. The League solicited playwrights and theatres to affiliate who had any Left-leaning sensibilities, which revealed the seriousness of their dearth of good scripts, and their need for larger numbers of members. The magazine tactically projected self-assurance at this point of change, claiming that professional theatre people drawn into working with League theatres are being “rapidly radicalized” in significant numbers.

The shift from hard line to what was soon to be called United Front politics found expression in a name change for the magazine. Sept.-Oct. 1933 saw the first issue under the new name, New Theatre Magazine. The name change is explained in the magazine as part of this effort to reach out to a wider range of people who were sympathetic to Left viewpoints. At the same time and for similar reasons, the “Red Riot Nights,” benefit performances of radical theatre in New York City, were re-named “New Theatre Nights.” The term “red” like the terms “workers” and “masses” were ‘red’ flags, so to speak, signifying Communist presence.

This new call to welcome a broader array of participants was matched by less of the sharp criticism that characterized early magazine articles. There was less insistence

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<sup>82</sup> Denning, 4.

that performances or opinions strictly follow the League's published views and there was also more room for a variety of theatrical forms, including those once castigated as bourgeois. For example, by 1933 articles called for "new efforts to develop stationary theatre" to help draw in non-radical theatre people, and a need to study the theatre of the past to turn it to revolutionary use.<sup>83</sup>

The first three years of workers theatre activities were marked by efforts to form a structure that would foster development of individual theatres, and of a national network of radical theatres. The W.L.T., instrumental in those beginning efforts, banded together with other workers theatres already in existence, to create a magazine that offered information to educate radicals wishing to use theatre as a weapon. The editors sought to control the political outlook and the aesthetic output of those theatres through criticism and through articles on technique for radical performance. As need for more scripts and a wider membership arose, those hard political lines softened. Conferences were seen as a tool for engaging groups and individuals in the League's project, and as a tool for solidifying connections among the participants.

The project was an uphill task. However, by the end of 1933, the League could boast two and a half years of mostly regular publication of a magazine with national readership, the interest of a few dozen theatres across the nation as well as connections with theatres in Europe and elsewhere, and an inventory of a few dozen plays. The 1934 National Festival held in Chicago provided the moment and occasion for the League to examine its status and it found hope for the future, as well as to acknowledge that there was still much work to do.

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<sup>83</sup> n.a. "New Theatre" New Theatre Magazine. September-October 1933: 1-2.



## 1934 - A Pivotal Year

The 1934 conference took place as labor issues were heating up across the nation. The summer of 1934 was a critical year for the labor movement. It was the summer of massive strikes in major cities, many led by radicals. The city of San Francisco underwent a General Strike led by the Communist Harry Bridges, with numerous violent encounters and the deaths of two strikers. In Minneapolis, the Wobbly, Raymond Dunne led a citywide strike, marked by open warfare in the city's market district between strikers and an armed "Citizen's League." That strike broke Minneapolis's open shop stronghold during the governorship of the radical Floyd B. Olson.<sup>84</sup> Labor Day marked the start of a massive textile workers strike in the Northeast, and in Milwaukee and Philadelphia streetcar workers and cabbies engaged in separate radical actions, both winning victory.<sup>85</sup> The mood among the working classes seemed to support a turn to radical tactics to win workplace battles. In view of those events, an increase in interest in a radical cultural movement such as the League of Workers Theatres makes sense.

At the time of the 1934 League conference, New Theatre Magazine sang two songs about the status of the workers theatre in the United States. On one hand tremendous progress had been made. Articles reported that audiences demanded workers theatre and responded to it strongly and enthusiastically. The quality of performances had improved since the first National Conference in 1932. Attendance at the conference, according to the June 1 issue of New Theatre, included 120 delegates representing 5,000

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<sup>84</sup> Olson was elected in 1931, a member of the Minnesota Farmer Labor Party, and served until his death from cancer in 1936. He proudly declared himself a radical, not a liberal. When he brought in police or military power during a strike, he claimed he would arrest and lock up the corporate chiefs, not labor.

<sup>85</sup> For more on the summer of 1934, see Leuchtenberg 95-96, 113-114.

individual members of theatre groups and 30 independent theatre groups. Audiences at the Festival performances numbered nearly 3,000. Thirty-five Jewish Workers clubs had affiliated, and there were “New sections. . . organized in New Jersey, Chicago, and on the West coast. . . . We have actually carried out our plan laid down in August, 1933, something that quite a few of our members considerable [sic] impossible,” rejoiced Anne Howe.<sup>86</sup> Preferred theatrical forms also shifted markedly from the agit-prop towards realism. “The death knell of agit-prop” had been sounded when three realistic plays won the pre-conference competition in New.<sup>87</sup> All of this news was good.

On the other hand, however, both the National Office and local groups lacked strong organization, money, and scripts. These impediments curbed efforts to build upon the success that the conference demonstrated, and to further develop the national movement and the individual theatres within it. There were gains after the conference but not as significant as one might expect, given increased militancy in the broader labor movement. That kind of growth would not occur until the debut of Waiting for Lefty the following year.

The 1934 conference had been intended to help growth of the League through disseminating information and enabling communication between the national office and theatre groups, and among the groups themselves. In a conference setting the national office could set the agenda and mediate discussions, thereby controlling them at least to some degree. They also could showcase the best in political theatre, offering examples to

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<sup>86</sup> Anne Howe. “The Stage Was Not Set.” New Theatre Magazine. June 1934: 14-15. Anne Howe was a member of the Prolet-Beuhne, worked on organizing the 1934 Chicago Conference, and was the first full-time League employee by 1935.

<sup>87</sup> n.a. “National Theatre Festival – Preparations Near final Stage.” New Theatre Magazine. March 1934: 12-13.

attendants, and garner publicity to improve their standing as central to the political theatre movement. The show of quality and strength, it was hoped, would encourage more membership.

The League had set a goal of developing more and stronger theatres outside of New York. As part of this effort, the 1934 conference was planned for Chicago rather than the East coast. Chicago had one of the most active factions of workers theatres, having formed the “Chicago Workers Theatre Council,” announced in the March 1933 magazine.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the Chicago Repertory Group (C.R.G.) was the longest-lived active group outside the New York area.<sup>89</sup> Key to their strength was a woman named Alice Evans, who was central in the early years of the C.R.G. and later, a major strength of the national office.<sup>90</sup> The conference planners had two main tactics in mind. One was to feature the best performances by groups from all over the country that would serve as inspiration and example for others and would attract large audiences to the conference. The other was to stimulate discussions of the goals and problems of the workers theatre, thereby inspiring groups to work at their own development and to contribute to the national effort.

To select the best performances, the National office created “International Theatre Week” which was held February 15-25. Each region was to hold a preliminary

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<sup>88</sup> “On Every Important Sector of the Theatre Front: Workers Theatre Takes on New Tasks.” Workers Theatre Magazine. March 1933: 13.

<sup>89</sup> The Chicago Repertory Group is discussed at length in Section Two.

<sup>90</sup> “Alice Evans” was a pseudonym. Her real name was Alice Hamburger. She married V.J. Jerome in 1937, a Party functionary working in cultural affairs. Blacklisted during the Macarthy era, Evans turned to school teaching and died in Chicago in the 1970s. This information is from a letter in the author’s possession from researcher Stephen Smith. Herb Kline termed Jerome a “cultural commissar” (Kline 29). Jerome had some theatrical ambition; in fact, he penned the poem “Newsboy” which became a mainstay of League productions.

competition to select the best performances to send to the National Festival. Tours of winning groups' performances were planned, the magazine reported, that would arrive at Chicago for the Festival.<sup>91</sup> Competitions were held in three locations: New York, Chicago, and Cleveland. It is unclear whether the West coast actually held a competition with more than one theatre performing, although the magazine reports that three sections of the national movement had been organized there: one each in Portland, San Francisco, and Seattle.<sup>92</sup>

The magazine worked hard to develop enthusiasm for the competitions and the conference itself. As the depression stretched on, the need for workers theatre grew, reported New Theatre, offering proof of high demand across the country. It described, for example, the demand for tickets at the Cleveland section festival that was so great that they had to perform a second evening; the W.L.T. packed a 1500 seat house in New York, sold 100 standing room only tickets, and turned many away; and the Rebel Arts Players in Los Angeles ran *Squaring the Circle* ten nights in a row.<sup>93</sup> Shortly after the conference, the magazine also reported that its circulation had more than doubled in the "last six months."<sup>94</sup>

The magazine also reported an increase in numbers of dues-paying affiliates. In March before the conference, the "Red List and Black List" published in the "News and Notes" section counted only ten theatres in the Red List as dues paying members in good standing. After the conference, Anne Howe's June article counted 30 independent

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<sup>91</sup> n.a. "National Theatre Festival – Workers Theatres Astir from Coast to Coast." New Theatre Magazine. February 1934: 7.

<sup>92</sup> n.a. "National Theatre Festival – Chicago, April 13, 14, 15, 1932 [sic]." New Theatre Magazine. April 1934: 10-11.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> n.a., n.t. New Theatre Magazine. June 1934: 3.

theatres, and 35 Jewish Workers Clubs, which apparently had theatre units within them. Unfortunately official records from League headquarters are not extant to verify these numbers, but even when public relations needs are accounted for, the numbers of dues paying affiliates had clearly gone up.

Even with this increase in numbers, the League itself came in for sharp criticism from within. Anne Howe, the League's first full-time employee, did not mince words in her article "The Stage Was Not Set." She censured the C.R.G. for its total lack of preparation for the Festival. Three weeks before the event, she stated, no arrangements had been made for housing, for tickets, posters or advertising. Howe attributed this to the youth and inexperience of the members of the C.R.G., but also connected it to a wider failing of League theatres: "failure of local functionaries to develop initiative, to plan their work, and to carry it through."<sup>95</sup> In addition, she continued, lack of cooperation and of confidence in local leadership prevented the work's development. Although the mistake of the C.R.G. was "nearly fatal," the national office was able, within three weeks, to quickly organize the Festival because of planning and division of the work.<sup>96</sup>

National headquarters came in for criticism, too. Howe presented a laundry list of shortcomings, including lack of repertory service and of inadequate supply of teachers, directors and other support personnel for member theatres. Contact with groups was lacking, and too many demands had been made on the groups for money, articles, and cooperation, without much given in return. The focus at headquarters had been purely on

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<sup>95</sup> Anne Howe. "The Stage Was Not Set." 15.

<sup>96</sup> Unfortunately, extant correspondence in the New York Public Library archives starts in 1938, and C.R.G. archives at Regenstein Library do not include any primary documents relating to the 1934 Festival. Howe's opinions cannot be corroborated nor compared with others.

organizational matters, not on offering much-demanded services. Changes were planned and already being executed, she promised. For example, the National Executive committee had been expanded to include more representation from outside New York, and there were functioning regional repertory centers in New York and L.A. Future articles, Howe assured her readers, would discuss other changes to increase services to the groups and to improve communications.

Her promise of better contact with groups and stronger repertory services sounded the same bells that had been sounded before; these problems, thorny ones to be sure, had not been solved, and the organization never was able to correct them satisfactorily. Training presented another perennial problem. Although classes had been offered for several years by the League, Howe critiqued a lack of training and announced the start of training in the summer of 1934. Her approach demonstrated the League's use of self-criticism as a tool; in this instance, Howe criticized an aspect of League practice, in order not only to correct the problem but, it seems, gain momentum for a reinvigorated system of classes, and trust of the readers. Readers could point to the article and be confident that the League knew its short-comings and would take action. The magazine, operating as a public relations tool, could then paint an optimistic picture of future plans for improvement. There is no doubt that these efforts were sincere in working towards the goal, but it is significant that a League employee and staunch long time participant positioned herself as the lead critic of the League's work.

The summer of 1934's labor unrest seems a natural connecting point between workers theatre and organized labor, yet the League did not experience its strongest growth at that point. Indirect evidence suggests that the League was not able to capitalize

on an energized labor movement because it lacked the organization and resources to follow through, and its position as a Communist connected organization discouraged broad participation in its programs. It did not help that the League had made a practice of ridiculing mainstream labor in its plays and publications.

Although the magazine did include writing about the strike wave, and play contests from that time period solicited ‘union plays,’ surprisingly no extant documents explicitly discuss the possibility of a response to labor events at the national level, or even an exhortation to local League theatres to connect directly with the unions driving the strikes.<sup>97</sup> It seems probable that the ‘Red’ reputation of the League, combined with the League’s own embrace of dual unionism was enough to keep the two movements separate in the main. Perhaps the hope that capitalism, along with ‘reactionary’ unions, would collapse on their own, clearing the way for a worker state, overruled any impulse toward catching the coattails of a non-Communist-led union drive, however militant. Local theatres that were connected to the New Theatre League presented labor plays, and turned out to support strikes on an individual local basis, but a strong connection between labor and workers theatre failed to develop during this most radical summer of U.S. labor history.

1934’s Festival marked another point at which self-criticism produced a drive for improvement, and the period following the conference saw significant organizational change for the League. Several factors encouraged League leaders to new efforts. Increased numbers of interested theatres at the Festival, a beginning attempt at regional enters for leadership and reports of enthusiastic audiences response to productions told

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<sup>97</sup> See for example, Al Saxe, “Take Theatre to the Workers,” in the April 1934 issue.

the League's organizers that people wanted workers theatre. It is quite clear, due to the variety and number of published information, that articles reporting high numbers of enthusiastic spectators at workers theatre performances were not just public relations claims. Responses were most enthusiastic when the crowds were heavily union or made up of people who saw little if any theatre, and if the performance took place during an active labor crisis<sup>98</sup>. When the conditions were ripe the audience's energetic response was no doubt gratifying and heartening for the theatre groups. The League leaders' belief in their project, buoyed in this way, encouraged them to strengthen the services offered, which in turn would strengthen the revolutionary workers movement.

Anne Howe's criticism helped to stimulate and focus the next set of changes in the League. And, between the 1934 Festival and the next biennial national conference of the League, the League experienced a major hit play, Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*, that resulted in a huge growth spurt and in new personnel and direction at the top. A censorship battle with rapidly moving front lines and increasing fears of fascism and war fed the impulse to open membership to a wider, more generally Left constituency. The League's new leaders attempted to reconfigure the structure of the organization, creating new layers of hierarchy and attempting to decentralize the work by a renewed attempt to establish regional centers. They attempted to put the League on a more business-like footing, instituting a monthly reporting system for its various departments. They pressured member theatres to commit to regular attendance at Section meetings. These changes garnered some success, particularly for the school and magazine, but the League itself still struggled with problems that had plagued it from the beginning: lack of money

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<sup>98</sup> These responses are discussed in Section Two of this book, which deals with three specific League theatres.



and lack of scripts. Support might have come from other Left or progressive organizations, such as unions, but mainstream organizers did not respond to League theatres in a consistent way, and the League's own polemics and rhetoric, combined with the organizational difficulties it never ironed out, may have discouraged strong connections.



**Resetting the Stage: Adapting and Growth**

The middle years of the decade were marked by significant changes in the League of Workers Theatres. Leadership changed, structure changed, and the name and political tactics changed. Fortunately, several key documents that provide overview to these changes exist, along with abundant meeting minutes, pages of financial records, and speech texts from national League meetings. The increased number of extant documents shed light upon the League's effectiveness in following through on directives in Reines' 1931 article and the Constitution, written in 1932. A report written by Mark Marvin in 1935, for example, clearly indicates the League leadership's desire to improve the organization's effectiveness. Marvin had become the National Executive Secretary of the League by this time, and the advent of his leadership marked a period of organizational change. His report describes "establishment" of departments or procedures that had been called for years earlier by the League's Constitution.<sup>99</sup> The functions delegated to those departments, such as the Bookings Department, were certainly carried out to some degree in the intervening years, evidenced by complaints made by affiliated theatres in correspondence and at national meetings about League's services. So Marvin's declaration of their 'establishment' in 1935 was probably partly public relations and partly a real effort to, as he put it, 'put them on a more business-like footing.'

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<sup>99</sup> "Mark Marvin" was a stage name. He was a brother to Herbert Kline, who edited New Theatre Magazine. Mark became National Executive Secretary for the League. No record of a vote or meeting at which Marvin became National Executive Secretary could be found and it is unclear by what means or when this happened. I have not found information on Marvin's real first name, or what happened to him after the League folded. He was still working for the League in 1939, but that is the last mention of him that exists in League records.

In any case, Mark Marvin's "New York Section Report" dated July 1935 sheds much light on progress and changes made after the 1934 Festival. His Section Report, along with other documents such as Ben Irwin's "Report," which was prepared for a national meeting in 1936, provide a snapshot of the League and a look back at its recent past. Most of the information in this chapter is based upon these two documents corroborated with meeting minutes whenever possible, which are noted when they are used.<sup>100</sup>

The League had moved offices in fall 1934 to 55 West 45<sup>th</sup> Street. The New Theatre Magazine also had new offices at 156 West 44<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>101</sup> These new digs were just blocks from the professional theatre scene, much nearer to the theatre district than previous locations on 28<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, or downtown off 10<sup>th</sup> St.. Considering the League's vision of its place at the center of the "new revolutionary theatre," the move may well have carried psychological importance, although documents do not articulate that sense. The new offices were larger and more comfortable than previous spaces, measuring 1800 square feet and housing nine full time employees. The magazine boasted an additional five employees. Ben Irwin admitted that the salaries paid were only \$5.00 weekly for long hours, with the magazine paying a little higher, but the setup was a significant advance over the conditions they had endured in their unheated loft downtown.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ben Irwin worked in the New York office. Much correspondence bears his signature. He was Executive Director for some time, and often traveled to League theatres to discuss problems or see productions. Apparently his style was less sympathetic than Alice Evans' as numerous letters express relief when Alice begins to answer correspondence. Irwin later married Toby Cole, who worked for the League until its demise in 1941. It was she who turned the League's papers over to the New York Public Library.

<sup>101</sup> "Backstage." New Theatre Magazine. October 1935: 31.

<sup>102</sup> Ben Irwin. "Report." n.d. NYPL Box 28, folder 4.

The League also changed its name, from the League of Workers Theatres to the “New Theatre League” (N.T.L.) in January 1935. The magazine, formerly Workers Theatre Magazine, had already changed its name to New Theatre and would soon become New Theatre and Film. The League’s vision of its place at the center of the movement was intact, as Marvin explained that the change would facilitate League leadership of a broader Left movement against war and fascism as well as toward economic reform. The League’s radical strategy had shifted, though, and Marvin’s choice of the term ‘reform’ rather than ‘revolution’ is significant. By this time, terms like “the workers” and “the masses” had become strongly and broadly identified with radicalism and/or communism, and in dropping “workers” from its name, the League attempted to soften its image. By this time, the Popular Front idea had spread throughout much of Left politics, and League changes were in step with a broader Left-coalition shift to a more inclusive policy.

The League made a parallel shift in rhetoric in its publications and dramatic offerings. Before this moment, League plays depicted the Soviet model as the ideal model and revolution as the goal. Plays and articles urged the overturn of capitalism for a communist economic structure, idealizing Soviet theatre and the Soviet system. The League’s 1935 change in strategy was made manifest in Marvin’s “Prospects for the New Theatre,” evidently a speech for the 1935 Mid Western conference in Chicago and later reworked into an article in New Theatre Magazine. In the extant text pages, the original speech contains a section pointing to the Soviet Union as the artistic model for League performance. That section is crossed out and marked “cut,” and the next section tellingly encourages New Theatres to look back historically to the art theatre movement: Théâtre Libré in Paris, the Independent Theatre in London, the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, the

Moscow Art Theatre, and Freie-Buehne in Berlin as models.<sup>103</sup> These theatres were innovative artistically over the decades roughly of 1880 to the 1930s. They championed new aesthetic forms, such as naturalism and symbolism. Sometimes these aesthetically oriented theatres also had a political purpose. For example, the Abbey Theatre contributed to a broader movement in Ireland to throw off British rule, and the Freie-Buehne presented Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, which depicted the horrific conditions of the poor, but none of them were primarily political theatres.<sup>104</sup> The reference to them as models indicates a move away from radical militancy, at least in terms of public image, which might then open the door to Leftists of a milder stripe than hard core Communists. The League needed to bolster its membership numbers, and one way was to loosen rigid ideological principles that held limited numbers of adherents. The idea was to welcome a broader section of generally Left-thinking groups or individuals who could then be radicalized.

### **Bookings: control, conflict and cash**

Documents from the middle years articulated a two-pronged approach to growth: the first followed Popular Front ideas to expand membership; the second attempted to solve organizational problems with renewed focus and energy. Marvin's July 1935 "New York Section Report" addressed both of these efforts. The report began by summarizing accomplishments over the previous two years, beginning with the establishment of

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<sup>103</sup> Mark Marvin. "Prospects for the New Theatre." Notes for lecture. NYPL Box 28 folder 1.

<sup>104</sup> The art theatre movement of this period is examined at length, as are the individual theatres mentioned, in several works, including standard theatre histories such as Oscar Brockett's *The History of the Theatre*.

several departments to better carry out services.<sup>105</sup> A Bookings Department, handled by Ben Irwin, had been set up in late 1934, yet Marvin touted the establishment of such a department. The League had survived from its Workers Lab beginnings in part on income from bookings, so perhaps the previous structure needed an overhaul, and calling it a new department helped both the process and the perception of better service. Further, he wrote, the newly organized department's job was to "centralize and stabilize" bookings. The intent was for the N.T.L.'s Bookings Department to handle all workers theatre performances in the New York area. This was a tall order, and demonstrates once again the League's goal of controlling all political theatre, as there were numerous political theatres in the area, many of which did not subscribe to N.T.L. ideas.

Records substantiate in the main that bookings were numerous. Marvin reported that from January to June 1935 bookings averaged 30 per month, with a six-month total of 186. Figures for audience numbers are not complete, he wrote, but the low was 2,000 per month and the high 22,000 in May, when a large-scale pageant was performed.<sup>106</sup> He

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<sup>105</sup> The number of extant records increases dramatically starting in spring 1935 and so my supposition that the departments within the League were more business-like and more systematic in recording their activities may be influenced by this increase in available documentation. My argument, however, rests in the main on the documents' content, which includes multiple direct references to reorganization, and to the establishment of departments and procedures. Yet there is some room for uncertainty since in some other instances documents or articles state that something new is being offered, such as training classes, when such activities had most certainly taken place earlier.

<sup>106</sup> Here again these figures must be considered very carefully, since without doubt, speeches and articles were intended to present the best image possible of the League and the movement, as part of the League's public relations machine. Some scholars have scoffed at these audience numbers for another reason, criticizing them because they do not represent paying spectators, but instead attendance at free or very inexpensive performances (see Himelstein and Caskey). This argument is off target, in my view, since it does not take the League's own goals into account, which were to educate the largest possible number of workers. Himelstein's and Caskey's arguments are based upon a business model of theatre, as they suggest that if the audience members did not pay or did not pay much, their attendance at a performance was of less significance than

noted that in addition some theatres within the movement handled their own bookings, such as the Theatre of Action (formerly the Workers Laboratory Theatre).

A representative list of the groups for which they performed includes some C.P. affiliated groups; for instance, the Unemployed Councils, Friends of the Soviet Union, and International Labor Defense; specific unions or union social branches, like the Seamen's Club and the Painter's Union; and strikes, for example the Orbach strike, the Majestic Metal strike and a few others. The list of performers or performing groups breaks down into five individual groups with between 6 and 28 performances each, 15 bookings for 'miscellaneous groups,' and 68 performances by 'individual performers.'<sup>107</sup> The N.T.L.'s in-house theatre group, the "Theatre of the Workers School – New School Players," accounted for 28 bookings, the most for any group.

Fees for bookings varied depending upon the venue for the performance, what was required (length of program, for example), and the finances of the group requesting the performance. Marvin reported that the Booking Department "generally gets about 15% of the booking fee."<sup>108</sup> The weekly income peaked at about \$10 in the spring, but dropped significantly in the summer, when things always slowed down for the theatre movement. Accordingly, performance fees averaged about \$2.00 per booking.<sup>109</sup>

Publicity work to promote bookings consisted of mass mailings, visits to key

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if they had paid more substantial admission charges. This criticism is irrelevant in my opinion, since most workers theatre performance did not hold box office income to be very important, but rather valued a goal of reaching the largest possible intended audience. Therefore, box office income, calculated by numbers of people paying for tickets, is not a valid measure of success. Rather, simple numbers of attendees are more relevant.

<sup>107</sup> n.a., n.t. n.d. list of affiliated theatres, NYPL Box 29 folder 8.

<sup>108</sup> Marvin. "Report." 4.

<sup>109</sup> According to U.S. government inflation calculators, \$2.00 in 1935 bought the same as about \$30.00 in 2008.



organizations, articles in their own magazine and other Leftist organs, and press releases. It is not clear how or whether the Booking Department and the groups doing the performances shared the costs and work of publicity.

Internally, League leadership disagreed over whether they should focus on sending performances out to neighborhoods and to the meeting places of organizations, or try to bring audiences in to League performance spaces. Standards of performance quality presented an additional difficulty. Questions arose regarding which groups to accept into the Booking Department's activities: Should the League vet performances of groups wishing to be booked to assure that they maintained a certain standard of performance? How should the League judge political positions of groups in considering who should get performance rights to plays or bookings? The League struggled with these issues. Sometimes their decisions created bad feelings between the League and its theatres, and crystallized the constant tension between quantity and quality. The League needed to reach as many audience members as possible to build the movement, and yet needed to develop their theatres to a higher degree of artistry and clarity of message. Repeatedly, discussions revolved around whether to focus on drawing in additional theatre groups or on assisting the existing theatres to improve their quality.

Questions over performance rights further troubled the League. Should they award the performance rights to scripts on a first come first served basis, or should they reserve rights to their best plays for the most skilled theatre groups? In an area like New York City where there were relatively large numbers of political theatre companies, this issue created animosity among groups and also against the League itself, which could not help but be seen as partial to certain groups. In fact, this particular difficulty became

interwoven in the ongoing conflict between the League and its own magazine, as we shall see. Creating fair systems that could also ensure quality performances proved a Gordian's Knot, which the League never successfully untied.

Fundraising also became a divisive issue. The N.T.L. itself and many of the larger theatres associated with the League, like the Chicago Repertory Group, the Philadelphia New Theatre and others all held fund-raising events such as dances, suppers, and rent parties. These were generally referred to as "affairs." The N.T.L.'s annual New Year's Frolic in New York was one of the best attended and most profitable of these affairs for the organization as a whole. However, the Sunday night performances called New Theatre Nights (formerly "Red Riot Nights") in New York City were produced by the magazine, which kept all of the income. This was one of several sources of irritation between the League and its own magazine, which by this time had separate offices and separate staff.<sup>110</sup> The magazine's profitable New Theatre Nights became a contentious issue after the January 6, 1935, New Theatre Night at which *Waiting for Lefty* debuted. *Waiting for Lefty* was, of course a smash hit, and no doubt the League wanted, needed, and probably felt it deserved a cut of the funds. New Theatre Night benefits, the expenses the magazine claimed, and its content all became matters for conflict. League officers devoted more than one Executive Committee meeting entirely to problems with the magazine.

In fact, Mark Marvin reclaimed benefit performances for the League as a whole, rather than allowing the magazine to hold them independently. He declared that the New

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<sup>110</sup> Records do not exist that describe the division between the national office and the magazine operations. It seems likely that since a magazine has a well-defined pattern of operations, the staff that handled it quite naturally developed separate and distinct ways of doing things, but no documentation has been found to support that idea.

Theatre Nights would be a “consolidation of production departments of the New Theatre League and New Theatre Magazine. . . .”<sup>111</sup> His report clarifies why this was such a bone of contention at that particular time. League-sponsored benefit performances and "affairs" during fall of 1934 netted about \$200 in September, \$100 in October, \$150 in November, over \$350 in December, and \$150 on New Year’s Eve. These were significant amounts of income for the League. Then, the January 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday night benefit became the first that failed to make a profit. Significantly, Marvin did not include in his list of League affairs the January 6 benefit, at which *Waiting for Lefty* premiered in his list, so it must be concluded that the magazine sponsored it, not the League itself. Since *Waiting for Lefty* was such a resounding success and the League’s first failure followed close on its heels, it seems logical that the conflict over control of benefit performances would flare immediately afterwards. Of course, the League held the rights to the play itself for amateur performance. That was not in question. But the magazine’s separate finances were repeatedly a bone of contention over the next year or so.<sup>112</sup> Marvin’s attempt to subsume the magazine’s finances was not successful, as records of ongoing problems demonstrate.

For example, there was a special joint meeting of the League and the magazine’s Editorial Board in September 1935, whose meeting minutes reflect adoption of several proposals to solve these internal conflicts. Thrice-monthly meetings with “all three

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<sup>111</sup> Marvin. "Report." 1a.

<sup>112</sup> Mark Marvin and Herb Kline, who edited the magazine during this period were brothers. Kline’s memoir from the period, *New Theatre and Film 1934-1937* does not mention the contentious relationship between the two sections of the organization, so it is not possible to assess how their personal and family relationships affected League operations, tantalizing as those questions may be.

Leagues” and the magazine’s editor, Herbert Kline,<sup>113</sup> were planned, as well as League power to approve the current issue and future plans for New Theatre.<sup>114</sup> The magazine was instructed not to hold ‘affairs’ or any kind of fundraiser without express permission of the League’s Bureau in advance. Troubles with the magazine’s editor continued, however, for in November of the same year, yet another Executive Board meeting’s minutes report that Kline was censured for his dealings with the Theatre of Action (formerly the Workers Laboratory Theatre). Will Lee, a Theatre of Action member, had apparently complained about Kline’s “attitude” and submitted a resolution from the Theatre of Action to the Exec regarding Kline.<sup>115</sup> At the same meeting, the board discussed a second dispute involving Kline, this one pitting the Theatre of Action against the Theatre Collective, another New York area political theatre, over rights to the play *Private Hicks*.<sup>116</sup> Meeting minutes reflect that Kline had given Lee privileged information about which group had rights to the play. Lee’s irritation arose from Kline’s talking out of turn and creating bad feelings among League theatres in a turf battle over performance rights. The personal aspect of a dispute like this one rarely became a subject

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<sup>113</sup> Herbert Kline moved from Davenport Iowa, where he was born, to New York in 1931. Mark Marvin was his bother. Herb edited the League’s magazine from 1934 to 1937, then left after conflict over magazine content to become a radio correspondent in Spain during the Civil War. He went on to film-making and died in 1999 in Los Angeles. Herb wrote New Theatre and Film 1934 to 1937 a documentary memoir of his time at the magazine.

<sup>114</sup> The ‘three leagues” were the New Dance League, the Film and Photo League and the New Theatre League, all of which were covered by New Theatre and Film Magazine by this time.

<sup>115</sup> The complaint itself is not extant. Will Lee was a member of the Group Theater, the Theatre of Action, and had a long career in film and television. He was black listed for a time, but returned in acting in the 1960s. Will Lee continued to teach in various acting schools. He died in 1982.

<sup>116</sup> *Private Hicks* is discussed in section three of this book.

for meeting minutes, so it seems notable, and it illustrates the kind of discord that existed among groups vying for rights to preferred scripts.

There were other problems with the magazine. Content repeatedly stirred up complaints from subscribers. For example, theatre groups wanted more articles dealing with the practicalities of theatre production, while magazine content under Kline's leadership had become more sophisticated, focusing more on theory or developments in European theatre. Affiliates expressed a need for 'how to' articles on everything from acting to creating lighting instruments from coffee cans. Exacerbating this problem, when Kline assumed editorship in September 1934, content expanded to include the other two Leftist cultural leagues, New Dance, and Film and Photo, which necessitated articles reviewing films, photo exhibits, and dance performances. These subjects used space that formerly had been devoted to theatre practice. Kline preferred articles on aesthetic theory or on Soviet artists, such as Vsevolod Meyerhold or Sergei Eisenstein.<sup>117</sup> The magazine, under his lead, moved away from its former focus on helping beginning theatre groups to learn their craft. Such articles did still appear, but not in the numbers that they had in the past. The content shift was a disservice to the League's core goals of educating rank and file cultural workers for the cause. Emerging theatres needed practical information, which the magazine had formerly provided.

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<sup>117</sup> Meyerhold was one of the most innovative of theatre directors in the U.S.S.R. He was noted for 're-theatricalizing the theatre' moving away from his mentor, Constantin Stanislavski's, penchant for psychological realism on the stage. Meyerhold was a darling of the Soviet Union until Stalin's Socialist Realism became the preferred form. Meyerhold was then accused of 'formalism' and arrested. It is assumed he died in prison. Eisenstein was an equally revered innovator in film. Famous for the film Potemkin among others, he too, re-introduced a symbolic element to film, as well as adapting the techniques of collage to film.

In December 1935, yet another meeting focused on problems with the magazine. Referring to a May agreement, Marvin accused the magazine of failure to pay the League 20% of all of its donations. Dave Crystal of the magazine disputed this claim, but the League's leaderships resolved to bring in an accountant, and to set up a committee to hammer out a financial agreement between the two branches of the League.<sup>118</sup> Problems with the magazine were not resolved this time either, for later that December the magazine again received strong criticism of its content. The National Executive Board fired 17 specific criticisms at the magazine, most focused on a need for stronger political theory in reviews of plays and movies and in critiques of the Hayes Committee (which censored film), the Federal Theatre Project, and George M. Cohan, seen as a 'flag waver.'<sup>119</sup> The magazine should write "interestingly" about theatre craft, relying on the "masters of theatre craft" who were accessible to the League, and it should write about the trade union movement in a way that was engaging to those outside of the movement.

Molly Day Thatcher and George Redfield, who were both on the magazine staff, responded, defending the magazine with direct, coherent answers. For example, when criticized for a lack of news from the theatres in the West, Thatcher explained that the West Coast had not sent in any news, therefore they should not complain, but should send in news, as requested.

To some degree, the League's leaders spoke out of both sides of their mouths. They complained that articles were not focused enough on usable theatre craft, and then suggested articles on the origins of the chorus and the origins of burlesques, which they

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<sup>118</sup> Information on who Dave Crystal was is not extant.

<sup>119</sup> n.a. "National Executive Board Meeting Minutes." December 11 or 12, 1935. NYPL Box 28, Folder 2. The date is unclear.

said, ‘would be of utmost interest to our readers.’<sup>120</sup> The whole discussion appears to be a mix of antagonism, frustration, and genuine lack of clear purpose on the League’s part. The tone may be partially explained by the “Finances” section of the meeting, which followed immediately in the minutes, where it was recorded that the “New Theatre League now owes the Magazine \$640.00” a fact that begs the question to what degree was the criticism driven by this financial pressure.<sup>121</sup> There is not enough evidence to support any conclusion, and other departments came in for sharp criticism as well, but it is easy to imagine that the magazine’s stronger financial condition combined with the independence of its editor made for a contentious relationship.

### **Effective scripts: The Repertory Department gets to work**

The League’s Repertory Department was charged with finding or developing scripts and making them available to League theatre groups. The department was subjected to rather severe criticism, possibly because the lack of quality scripts was such a crucial problem for the League. Reports dated mid April 1935 summarized the department’s holdings, categorized by subject as Trade Union Plays, Anti-War and Anti-Fascist Plays, Negro Plays, and General plays. The April reports listed a total of 35 plays on hand, with another 28 pending or ‘being written.’<sup>122</sup> By August 1935 reports counted 21 plays added since February 1935, with 18 withdrawn as being ‘unfit for distribution’ leaving 64, including those published by other organizations but handled through the

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<sup>120</sup> Here, they are referring to the chorus in ancient Greek dramas and to contemporary, bawdy entertainment. And indeed, an article on the chorus does appear in later issue of New Theatre and Film.

<sup>121</sup> n.a. "National Executive Board Meeting Minutes." December 11 or 12, 1935. 7.

<sup>122</sup> n.a. Summary on Plays. April 17 1935. New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

League.<sup>123</sup> The increase in numbers reflected that tactics the Repertory Department had put into place had some positive effect.

Repertory Department set up a submission and development process for much needed plays. It recruited volunteers to read and criticize plays who also wrote rejection letters with, according to their report, careful criticism aimed at improving the playwright in question's work.<sup>124</sup> The volunteers also carried out office functions, filing and card cataloguing, and some wrote plays themselves. The April report listed the names of some of those volunteers, and of several staff members who also served as play readers.

The April 1935 reports from the Repertory Department outlined strategies for adding to the holdings, including two play writing contests: one for anti-war and anti-fascist plays, and one for Negro plays. It also set out a plan for creating connections with individual playwrights. In step with Popular Front politics, the League reached out to a broader Left contingent through new activist efforts towards pacifism, and to new audiences and participants by attempting to develop plays dealing with issues faced by African-Americans. They appealed to the American League for Peace and Democracy to supply the cash prize necessary for the first contest.<sup>125</sup> Repertory Department staff also planned to meet with individual established playwrights to try to stimulate new trade union plays, attempting to capitalize on the success of Waiting for Lefty.

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<sup>123</sup> These organizations included Vassar College, where Hallie Flanagan was a drama instructor, Commonwealth College in Arkansas, and Brookwood Labor College. The New Theatre League worked closely with or was in contact with these and other labor-related organizations.

<sup>124</sup> None of the rejection letters is extant, so whether or not they included careful criticism cannot be ascertained.

<sup>125</sup> The American League for Peace and Democracy existed from 1933 to about 1939, disbanding after the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. It was a coalition of liberal and Left-wing organizations, and mounted irregular rallies, distributed pamphlets, and was built on pacifist ideals.



Later in 1935, August reports submitted by the Repertory Department indicated strong success from these methods – the 21 additional plays noted above; however, the department still came under fire, this time for not being self critical enough. National Buro meeting minutes use strong language to charge the department with a lack of true analysis and to suggest that the play reading committee should be limited to those ‘capable of worthwhile judgments.’ Harry Elion suggested that they ‘make serious efforts to improve the quality of the plays offered. . . .’<sup>126</sup> Of course, the Repertory Department staffers had been working on this problem all year, so it may have been frustrating to hear the Buro’s criticism. They were instructed to write a new report containing an accurate analysis of their efforts, including issues of quality. They were also advised to focus on developing playwrights already engaged with the League, rather than soliciting new playwrights through contests. Despite this criticism, the Repertory Department holdings had increased by more than thirty per cent and the department was set to announce six new plays. The department had indeed found ways to work toward part of the League’s vision: to supply plays to the revolutionary theatres; yet the quantity of plays outmatched the quality and only one of those six new plays found success, as measured by frequent subsequent productions by League theatres.

The Repertory Department developed a separate report on Negro theatre in April 1935 which described eight plays that dealt “specifically with problems of the Negro people.”<sup>127</sup> The League viewed “Negro work,” as they termed theatre that dealt with

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<sup>126</sup> Elion was the first editor of the magazine, a member of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, and frequent contributor to the magazine. His background was in economics, but by this time, he had several years’ practical experience in theatre.

<sup>127</sup> n.a. "Report on Negro Work" April 1935. 1 New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

issues faced by African-Americans, as a responsibility and an opportunity. In April's report, the Repertory Department began to gather information on this issue, and listed a few theatre companies and several playwrights doing "Negro work", including Langston Hughes. Some of the playwrights listed are not African American, but white, such as Herb Kline, editor of New Theatre Magazine. The list is actually very short, but its existence suggests that the League saw opportunities for growth in that direction.

The League's central focus, though, was on plays for union and peace activism. Analysis focused on the numbers: the August 1935 six months' report specified which plays sold the most copies: Arthur Kreymborg's *America, America*, which was a mass recitation, sold 39 copies in six months.<sup>128</sup> *Exhibit A*, a trade union play, sold 73. *Newsboy*, the prize winning agit-prop, sold the most copies, at 96, with *Union Label*, a close second with 81. The report analyzed play contests and other means of soliciting or developing plays. The contests offered cash prizes and drew many submissions, although most submissions were not usable. Their first play contest, which was won by *Waiting for Lefty*, brought them 300 play scripts, of which 4 were eventually chosen for publication. The Repertory Department publicized these contests through ads in Leftist publications including the trade union press, the Negro press, and New Masses, as well as Theatre Arts Monthly and Stage. They mailed notices to their list of 'over one hundred playwrights' and to the Writers Union and Dramatists Guild. Conferences and meetings with playwrights were held, and the Department also cited playwriting classes held through the New Theatre League School that averaged 25 playwrights per class. The classes had not yet yielded any usable plays, but those in the classes were working on

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<sup>128</sup> A mass recitation is a choral reading, usually with little in the way of staging or individual characters, and often with little plot.

‘promising material.’ The report does not analyze which of these methods yielded the most results, but staff had clearly put energetic effort into soliciting new scripts.

The plays that came in also needed to be read and analyzed. The Repertory Department’s own procedures called for written criticism of each and every piece submitted, with tactful comments given to the playwright. Each portion of this task involved hours of volunteer work and oversight by staff. The Playreading Committee, which had come in for such criticism, had been meeting weekly with an average of twenty persons attending. Most of the readers were new to left wing organizing and to the social theatre movement, and most were currently working on plays themselves, according to the committee’s report. This suggests, of course, that self-interest formed a major component in motivating the readers to work with the League. Within this larger committee of volunteer readers was a subcommittee that re-read and re-evaluated plays that the larger group recommended.<sup>129</sup> All plays, they claimed, received careful written criticisms intended to improve the offerings. According to the August 1935 report, about 300 plays had been submitted to the League over the previous six months. All had been read by at least three people. During the eight meetings that had been held since the inception of the Reading Committee, 25 plays of 80 culled from the 300 submissions had been seriously discussed, with seven forwarded to the smaller committee for consideration. Most of those were returned to their playwrights for revisions. One was chosen for publication.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Membership of the smaller committee is not specified, but it seems likely that League staff and trusted, experienced colleagues would have vetted the more likely prospects.

<sup>130</sup> n.a. "Repertory Department New Theatre League – 6 Months Report February to August, 1935" Box 28 folder 1.

In addition to soliciting plays through contests and meetings, the Repertory Department tried writing plays according to need by assigning a subject to a playwright. *Union Label* was one such play, and it became one of the best selling plays of that six-month period.<sup>131</sup> The play arose from a meeting that the Playwright's Section of the New Art Group of Paterson, New Jersey held with several A.F.L. unions, including the Federation of Silk Workers, the Federation of Dyers, and the Typographical Union. Union delegates outlined their members' particular experiences and struggles for the playwrights, and talked about how a play might be helpful to them. The playwrights then attempted plays based upon this information. This method proved successful in a few cases, not only in the New York area but also in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Oklahoma. In another experiment a play showing promise but needing revision was given to a second playwright for rewriting, with the original playwright's permission, of course. This method had resulted in two plays that were published, *Son of a Scab*, and *Symposium*. These particular plays are not noted as plays frequently chosen by theatres for productions, however, so it is doubtful that member theatres found them appealing.

The Repertory Department published catalogues listing complete holdings and announcements of new plays. Direct mail to theatre groups and press releases, sent to mainstream and Leftist serials, also publicized new offerings. According to the August 1935 report, the groups that purchased the most plays were by far New Theatre League groups and individual members. Second were "miscellaneous groups," followed by

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<sup>131</sup> *Union Label* is discussed in Section Three of this book.

American League and national Student League sales. These last two organizations were peace activist groups.<sup>132</sup>

Department staff did create a variety of methods for developing scripts but ineradicable problems plagued them. Because of their identity as a Communist group, some playwrights would not become involved with them. A political analysis of the playwrights working with them noted that “several” were communists, but the majority were Leftists of various stripes, including the once despised Socialists. Some were willing to work with the League despite its red taint.<sup>133</sup> A more basic problem may have been money. The theatres that used New Theatre League plays were, for the most part, exceptionally poor. They could hardly keep the doors open. Royalty payments were slow in coming from most groups, and many theatres did not last long. Only a few were able to survive for any length of time, and even the strongest, like the Chicago Repertory Group, were only a failure or two from closing permanently.

League plays were meant to relate to current political situations, which were always in flux. This, of course, compounded the difficulty of writing for League Theatres because the subject matter was a moving target as issues changed, the status of individual unions shifted, and needs varied across the country. All of these difficulties meant that the New York office lacked good, relevant plays to offer, and many theatres took matters into their own hands, as we shall see in Section Two.

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<sup>132</sup> Most of this information was included in a document called “Repertory Department New Theatre League – 6 Months Report February to August, 1935” found in the NYPL Box 28, folder 1.

<sup>133</sup> The information about the political identity of playwrights is included in the report; however, there is no information on how that identity was ascertained by the Repertory Department. No documents exist that contain, for example, a survey of playwrights. Therefore, the information is somewhat suspect, although there is no reason apparent to me for any falsehood in an internal report on this issue.

### **Training political artists: The New Theatre School**

The New Theatre School had been established with two classes in January of 1935. The classes, Principles of Directing and Practical Problems of Productions, were intended to train directors and leaders for theatre groups, and were taught by already famous Group Theatre leaders, Elia Kazan and Lee Strasberg.<sup>134</sup> Such renowned teachers surely gained the League's school notice, for both men were prominent in theatre circles. Yet the League's relationship with the Group Theatre was ambivalent. The Group Theatre was celebrated for creating a vivid, natural acting style based on the work of Constantin Stanislavski, and was considered a liberal theatre. League leadership admired the Group members' artistic work and actively sought their attention, inviting Group members to visit classes and rehearsals, to attend productions and fundraisers, and then, quite naturally, generated press about the League's connections to such famous artists. The Group's position as high quality artistic innovators, who were clearly of the New York mainstream theatre scene, lent artistic legitimacy to the League. Yet the League roundly criticized many Group productions for their bourgeois, reformist positions concerning the crucial political and economic crises of the decade.

No doubt the famous teaching staff helped enrollment, for about forty students enrolled in one or the other of these offerings in the first session. A second session of

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<sup>134</sup> This information appears in Mark Marvin's "Report" dated July 1935, page 4. Both of these men later denied any affiliation with Communist organizations or activities. Almost certainly they were afraid of being blacklisted, as so many people were after the 1930s. Herb Kline, in his book *New Theatre and Film 1934-1937*, discusses a lunch he had with Harold Clurman, also of Group Theatre fame (44-45). Kline reports that Clurman admitted having been advised by his editor to leave out a chapter of his well-known history of the Group Theatre, *The Fervent Years*. The chapter dealt with his association with the New Theatre League, and discussed Cheryl Crawford, Elia Kazan, Lee Strasberg, and Sanford Meisner's contributions to and association with the League, especially the school. Clurman, Kline said, wished to avoid any 'red-baiting.'

classes took place from March to May, with ten different classes offered, and about 150 students enrolled. There were three acting classes, one Directing, and one each in Make up, Stage Techniques, Voice, Body, Management, and Children's Theatre. Harry Elion taught The Social Basis of the Theatre. The School charged \$3.00 per class, and offered discounts to League members, scholarships, and sometimes paid carfare for individual students, particularly African Americans whom they wished to draw into the movement. About half of the students were from outside the movement, mostly, Marvin reported, professionals with Broadway experience.<sup>135</sup> Well-known teachers such as Cheryl Crawford, Edward Bromberg, Elia Kazan, and Lee Strasberg no doubt drew hopefuls wishing to connect with professionals who could offer them paid work on the Broadway stage. Marvin stressed in his report that many of the students, including professionals without previous Leftist connections, went on to become involved in League theatres.<sup>136</sup>

The School's finances roller-coastered the next few years. A look at an expense report shows that in 1935 the School was in the black by \$38.24, with income listed as \$267.39 and expenses as \$229.15. The school quickly grew, with income for 1935-1936 at \$5,586.20 and expenses at \$4,558.24 resulting in a profit of over \$1,000.00, then \$6,832.60 and \$6,678.65 respectively for 1936-1937, resulting in only about \$150.00 profit. The school was very successful for one year, but then raised pay rates for instructors, reducing profits. Non-payment of tuition posed another problem for the School's books. Apparently the students were enthusiastic – they organized their own student union and published a newsletter – but strapped for cash. The bad debts incurred

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<sup>135</sup> Registration lists for these classes are not extant, so it is not possible to verify Marvin's claim.

<sup>136</sup> Again, this must be viewed as primarily a public relations statement. There is no extant evidence that this was the case.

by the School weighed upon its success, along with students who dropped out of class. Despite these problems, the School must be considered one of the League's success stories. It employed many excellent teachers, and operated a slate of classes almost every term until the demise of the League as a whole in 1941.

### **Growing Pains**

The League had experienced significant growth in 1934-1935, but this growth resulted in some major problems. Some of the projects within the League had potential and some enjoyed success, but League staffers grappled with mismanagement, daunting finances, overwork, and internal disagreement. The magazine, the repertory department, and the school, all of which experienced degrees of improvement or outright success, also struggled with errors in judgment and with the many difficulties inherent to their work. The Production Department, responsible for mounting revenue-generating productions of League plays, suffered financial failure in some of its fund raising efforts.

As it did with many of its units, the League responded to failure with strong criticism, tighter control, and more bureaucracy. December 4, 1935 meeting minutes reflect plans for three major fund raising events, although only two are then described: a benefit at the Group Theatre's production of *Paradise Lost*, and a New Year's affair.<sup>137</sup> The *Paradise Lost* benefit failed because of a lack of advance ticket sales, and all tickets had to be returned. In addition, about \$30 had been spent on advertising.<sup>138</sup> The

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<sup>137</sup> n.a. "Buro Meeting Minutes." December 4, 1935. New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

<sup>138</sup> n.a. "National Executive Board minutes." December 27, 1935. New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.



projected budget for the New Year's affair anticipated a profit of over \$900.00, but minutes afterwards show only \$150 in profit.

After each of these failed events, the Buro increased its control. The Production Department was moved into League offices from its previous location in the magazine's headquarters where, presumably, League leaders could keep closer control. The Buro put in place a new Production Department committee with directives to undertake affairs "outside the field of the drama" only on a commission basis, so that the League did not have to risk any cash. The League set up a new joint checking account for Production, and empowered the new committee to determine budgets and distribution of profits. The committee planned four consecutive New Theatre Nights starting in February.<sup>139</sup> Records of the success or failure of these benefit performances do not exist, unfortunately. But the organization's mid-decade trend of increased top-down control continued, and efforts to set up structures and procedures that would forestall failures continued to the national meeting of 1936, which focused on organizational problems.

### **Solving Internal Problems: The National Conference of 1936**

In April of 1936 the third annual conference of the League took place in Philadelphia.<sup>140</sup> The major speeches on the agenda focused on the past two years' work, inner organizational problems, and the function and policies of the League. Several of those talks are well documented. They reveal that the League still struggled with many of

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<sup>139</sup> n.a. "National Executive Board minutes." January 22, 1936.. New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

<sup>140</sup> The conference was originally planned for Cleveland, according to minutes of a meeting on January 29, 1936, yet it seems clear that Philadelphia was the host. Lem Ward, who gave a keynote on practical problems, refers to his own theatre in terms that unmistakably place the conference in Philadelphia, and notes for a talk by a Mr. Marshall of the Scenic Artists Union are on stationery from the Hotel Walton in Philadelphia. Extant documents on the reasons for the change in venue were not uncovered.

the same issues that had plagued it all along. Some new problems were posed, for instance attendees heard a lengthy complaint from the scenic artists union about League theatres that did not use union labor.

The purpose of this conference was not, as in the previous year, to show off League theatres' artistic abilities or to inspire groups to rededicate themselves. The purpose this time was to clean up internal problems so that League work could go forward and grow. Mark Marvin's introductory talk explained that the numbers of conference delegates were deliberately kept small so that "real work" could be accomplished, and the agenda shows that lengthy discussion periods were planned to allow time for serious dialogue. For example, Saturday's program had four talks, each an hour long, with two full hours of discussion following three of them. The last talk was scheduled to start at 9:00 p.m., and had only one hours' discussion scheduled after it. The conference structure indicates a serious attempt at problem resolution.

The extant record of discussions at the conference is quite detailed, including the text of the main speeches, records of questions asked of the speakers, who asked them, and how the speakers responded. Although suppositions based upon a written record of this kind must be made with care, the content of interactions indicates that when the League itself took criticism, its response was somewhat defensive. For example, when attendees complained that "We get plays months later or not at all. . . . We write most of our own material" because of a lack of good plays, and that despite assurances from national headquarters they often received nothing, Ben Irwin replied that he could not understand how this could be, since his office carried out a 'tremendous correspondence'

all over the country.<sup>141</sup> This particular complaint can be found echoed in much of that same correspondence, which suggests that the League had not mastered this problem. Ben Irwin himself may have been part of this problem. The picture that emerges of his personal style shows a man with little tact or patience. For example, correspondence from affiliates more than once expresses thankfulness that Alice Evans is answering letters again. Apparently she was more sympathetic than Irwin, who often dealt rather harshly with affiliates that were behind on dues, or were otherwise not living up to expectations.

Conference attendees complained that it was hard to convince people to affiliate when they could not clearly show concrete benefits that arose from affiliation. Here the League found itself in a quandary, for they wished to keep affiliation, royalties, and magazine subscription costs low, and kept the last two available with or without affiliation. Subscriptions to the magazine were just \$1.00 per year, and affiliation, which carried only discounts for purchasing plays or taking classes, cost \$1.00 for an individual or \$15.00 per year for an organization. Non-affiliated theatres and individuals could still buy plays, pay for royalties and produce the plays. Non-members had no say in League policy matters, but few members were involved enough to help with the League's structure. They were no doubt busy enough trying to keep their own theatres afloat. Add to those obstacles an organization that scolded its affiliates regularly for failing to contribute information for articles in the magazine, for failing to produce quality plays, and for failing to live up to the League's expectations, and there seemed to be little actual

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<sup>141</sup> n.a. n.d. "The Third Annual Conference meeting minutes." Box 28 folder 4. New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

incentive to join for all but the most politically motivated of groups. League leaders seem to have been blinded by their own zeal, for they expected theatre people in significant numbers to become infected with the enthusiasm and dogged tenaciousness that possessed a few true believers. This pitch of enthusiasm never developed broadly.

Political theatre groups dealt with many problems, both internal and external, and they frequently implored the national League office for help, especially with effective organizational methods. At the 1936 conference Lem Ward, of the Philadelphia New Theatre, spoke about effective structures for new theatre groups or for existing groups that needed to reorganize.<sup>142</sup> After cautioning his audience against simply copying any other theatre's structure, he outlined a method of analyzing the community and situation in which the theatre intended to operate, and then detailed three different basic structural modes suited to different communities and situations. His report included detailed examples from three existing theatre groups. Ward advised assessment of the surrounding community, asking questions in three areas: audience, industry, and other theatres.

Ward suggested:

The group should first obtain a cross-section of the industries in the community – the number of workers, the development of the union organization, the cultural level of the unions, and their sympathy toward the theatre as a form of education and as an institution worthy of their support both as audience and as direct contributors. The next step is the

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<sup>142</sup> This information is in "Report to National New Theatre League conference, April 11, 1936. Inner Organizational Problems," which can be found in Box 28, folder 4-A in the NYPL. Lem Ward is listed as the speaker for this session in the "Agenda" found in box 28, folder 2.

exploration of the actual theatre-going population – its general tastes; the plays which have been successful, the number of theatres which the community supports during a theatre season; the number and type of amateur and semi-professional groups; the development and organization of the intellectuals and professionals in the trade unions and organizations; the caliber and the type of community centers, their educational facilities, and their function; the caliber and type of the many liberal organizations of pacifist, cultural and recreational nature. In other words, a complete analysis of the potential audience, its present stage of theatrical development, and the possibilities of direct support for the theatre.<sup>143</sup>

Depending upon the answers to these questions, Ward proposed that there were three basic types of theatres that should be considered, and that could be successful in a given situation. The “Labor Theatre” should do well in a town with a large, fairly well unionized industrial center; the “People’s Community Center” in a town without much industry or well-organized unions; and a “dramatic unit” as part of a mass organization where very large, well-organized institutions such as unions, churches, peace leagues, or community centers already exist. The purposes and methods of each of these theatre types would necessarily differ, and further questions needed analysis before the theatres began their work. Ward used three existing theatres as examples to illustrate his advice.

His own New Theatre of Philadelphia exemplified a theatre that stumbled its way through several incarnations towards the kind of group that could survive in an industrial

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<sup>143</sup> Lem Ward. Report to National New Theatre League conference, April 11, 1936. “Inner Organizational Problems.” New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection. Box 28, folder 4-A.

center. It began with ten or twelve people who formed a loosely based “social theatre.” They dove into fundraising, setting up an organizational structure based directly upon a Soviet model, rented a performance space. Members wrote a play, signed up 250 members, and booked benefit performances. The play they wrote drew censorship fire and the group had to rewrite the play. When this initial effort was completed they were broke and tired, with no ongoing prospects to sustain them. They regrouped and overhauled their structure, which was very cumbersome, requiring too many people in too many positions. The membership demanded a studio with acting classes, so they set one up, but it exacted so much energy they could not develop new plays to perform. They again overhauled their own structure, and set up three departments: business, studio, and production. Membership was limited to those who could and would actively carry out work in one of those departments.

They analyzed the city’s industry and determined that a labor theatre would be viable because of the broad industrial base. The existing unions were, as Ward put it, in “various stages of development in their militancy and in their sympathy for our work.”<sup>144</sup> The unions were not wealthy, but three had educational units that were quite active. The working population was not attuned to the theatre, however, preferring the movies. In fact, they did not even support their own union theatre groups. Philadelphia, on the other hand, was a theatrically strong environment, boasting Hedgerow Theatre, an art theatre that was well supported by middle- and upper-class residents, and many other small dramatic clubs, but the New Theatre would have to cultivate the support of the working class. These bourgeois dramatic groups could help provide the ‘forces’ for New Theatre

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 12.

work, because there would be many actors, technicians, and directors with experience who could be drawn into the labor theatre.

They found numerous possible spaces with auditoriums or large halls that could be converted into theatres in the city. Ward recommended gathering enough cash to operate for a year, obtained through a drive for direct donations, subscriptions to a season, memberships, and ‘affairs.’ A small production unit should be formed at the outset of highly committed volunteers, which would prepare short pieces for benefits to earn the money. He advised securing a long-term lease on a space suitable for rehearsals, and perhaps a studio. Ward does not delineate methods for audience development in his talk. He does not say that his own theatre accomplished the goal of a year’s worth of operating funds, which seems like a tall order, in fact, Ward’s advice seems somewhat breezy, considering all the obstacles that can impede such complex work and decision-making. However, the New Theatre of Philadelphia was one of the more successful of the League theatres. It is discussed in some detail in the next section of this book.

Ward used the New Theatre in Boston, a theatre that struggled and failed, as an example of a situation in which a People’s Community Center with a theatre might have worked. The Boston group started with producing short mobile plays at meetings and other gatherings. They did not have their own space, but performed in various locations. When they produced Waiting for Lefty they gained much publicity because of censorship of the play, and because the play itself was such an appealing one.<sup>145</sup> After that successful effort, they produced Stevedore, a full length play in a realistic style, with

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<sup>145</sup> *Waiting for Lefty* was the most produced Leftist play in the 1930s bar none. The New Theatre League premiered the play at its January 6, 1935 New Theatre Night, and held the rights for amateur production. The play triggered several censorship battles and maneuvers by various authorities to close productions. These instances are discussed below.

some actors from New York. However, the production failed financially and the group was strapped with large debts. Ward analyzed this trajectory as ‘hot-house growth’ that was unsustainable. He concluded that the Boston group misread the community in which they were working. Had the people operating the theatre applied his methods of analysis, they would have seen clearly that Boston lacked several components necessary for a successful stationary theatre. There was no audience of the numbers necessary to support full-length leftist plays. They did not have an accomplished, committed acting company. There was no organizational structure staffed with administrative workers needed for a stationary theatre. The theatre did not have a track record, or a loyal core audience, or the volunteers that could have helped it to succeed. Ward suggested that since Boston was the site of try-outs for Broadway productions, and since there was a core group of Leftists and enough industry to support a large working class, a community center approach might have worked well.

Ward’s idea of the community center is an interesting one, and is one for which there are no records of success among League theatres. He suggested developing a larger structure that would supply cultural and social activities for working class and “liberal” citizens, and then build a theatre as a part it.<sup>146</sup> The broader range of activities would produce committed volunteers and allow for the slow development of a theatre, starting with small performance pieces, developed as the organization's resources allowed, without pushing for large, semi-professional productions. Smaller productions involve less financial risk and allow time for actors, technicians, and directors to develop their skills, while simultaneously developing an audience. Ward suggested that the

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<sup>146</sup> Ward uses the term ‘liberal’ rather than Leftist or progressive or radical.



community center model might work in a small or medium sized city, or in a very large one such as New York because the neighborhood would operate in similar ways to provide a cohesive context to develop a theatre program specific to the setting.

The third type of theatre that Ward discusses, the dramatic unit within a mass organization, had been effectively used in several instances. In New York City, for example, several Y.M.C.A. and Y.M.H.A.s (Young Men's Christian Association and Young Men's Hebrew Association) included theatre groups; a few unions, notably the I.L.G.W.U.<sup>147</sup> developed theatre groups; and some Leftist organizations such as the Young Pioneers and the labor colleges also used theatre. Ward does not go into great detail discussing this third type of structure.

A question and answer session followed Ward's presentation. The written record of this discussion is marked for selections to be used in the magazine, and in several cases lists the name of the person asking the question. Initial questions were about the organization of Ward's theatre, the New Theatre of Philadelphia. He described more thoroughly how the studio was used – as both the unit for educating new actors, technicians, and directors, and as a production unit that developed mobile pieces. One questioner complained that non-active members of his theatre were beginning to try to make policy changes for the theatre, without daily knowledge of problems facing the theatre. Ward's response was that all members must be kept informed of the theatre's doings in a highly detailed and frequent fashion, and that further, each member must be actively engaged in some part of the theatre's work. For example, he said, the

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<sup>147</sup> The International Ladies Garment Workers Union was a highly organized union with a strong cultural arm. The ILGWU produced the successful Broadway revue, *Pins and Needles*, a political satire, in 1938.

Philadelphia theatre had sent out 6,000 to 8,000 pieces of mail to its membership within the previous months, to ensure that they were fully aware of theatre policy and undertakings. The mailing was possible only because of active volunteers who assisted. Ways must be found, he said, to make sure each member knows what his or her active role in the theatre is, so that the members are truly engaged in the work.

An unnamed member of the Chicago Repertory Group (C.R.G.) reported that for them, the best method of organization was a small core of people who were dedicated to both the theatre itself, and to the social issues to be addressed. When they opened it up to a wider group, divergent views became a hindrance, especially politically. Further, similar to the New Theatre of Philadelphia's structure, core members each had responsibility for a particular part of the work, such as heading the studio, or the business side. The small size of the collective – she never stated a number in her discussion – meant that each person could be aware of the work each of the others was doing. The size and closeness of the group helped minimize miscommunications, duplication of work, or working at cross-purposes. She further stated that everyone was unpaid and worked long hours. They would have run a large deficit had they tried to pay staff. The C.R.G. was the longest running, and arguably most successful of the League's theatre, so this model worked well for them. The C.R.G. is discussed in the next section of this book.

The last major piece of Ward's discussion was audience organization. Many League theatres engaged heavily in organizing their audiences. They went far beyond using advertising to publicize their productions, since most of their working class audiences were unaccustomed to attending theatre, and had to be enticed. The New

Theatre of Philadelphia, for example, contracted with several progressive organizations to sell tickets to their members. Unions were offered blocks of tickets at discounted prices, or encouraged to buy a house, that is, buy all the seats in the theatre for a particular performance. Other groups held parties in their theatres at which scenes of a production were played in order to interest potential ticket buyers. Speakers went to meetings of progressive groups and described the plays, soliciting individual and group ticket sales. Attempts focused on developing loyal audiences that would come to see the League theater as ‘their’ theatre, one which spoke to their concerns, and about their lives.<sup>148</sup>

Ward’s report and the discussions that followed reveal that League theatres had worked hard and imaginatively to overcome the ongoing problems of running a viable political theatre. Those that found ways to survive sacrificed blood, sweat, personal lives, and long hours to the work. They also remained dedicated to the original idea: to serve the working class and to focus on the message. Theatres that attempted to ‘go professional’ or that had too many star-struck, artistically ambitious members, did not survive. The lively exchange of ideas that took place at the 1936 Convention suggests that different solutions worked in different circumstances; that League theatres needed to avoid the pull of “professional” theatre and full-length plays for the most part, because stationary theatre for a broad audience required artistry and finances not available to them; The theatres needed to remain close to the grass roots that fed their work. As it turned out, only theatres that remained focused on political work, rather than the glory of big productions had any success over the long term.

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<sup>148</sup> Section Three of this book, “Theatrical Means,” contains a discussion of this idea of ownership of the theatre, both its physical space, and its productions.

The lesson from the 1936 Conference for League headquarters in New York seemed to be that their member theatres really did need advice on ‘close to the ground’ issues, such as how to plan a publicity campaign, how to construct scenic elements without much cost, and how to connect with both audiences and artists that would support the work. The theatres needed either access to scripts or training in how to develop scripts themselves. Yet the magazine, which had been so strong, did not find its way back to providing such basic information. The League staff spent much of its time hounding theatres for dues and royalties, neither of which meant much actual cash, instead of developing reliable prompt responses to pleas for scripts. Perhaps the membership structure did not serve their purposes well, or their attempts to base finances on impecunious groups was too flawed. Their vision of education and motivation could have been fulfilled in many ways, but League leadership still attempted to refine the structure they had, rather than radically rethinking it. It was not until the last two years of the League’s existence that an attempt to decentralize both the work and the control began, but by then it was too late.

### **The “Negro Problem”**

The 1936 Conference ended with a plenary on Sunday morning. Only one of the speech texts is extant, a report by Tom Richardson, an African American who was involved, he said, in two different League theatres. He was apparently asked to speak without much preparation time. He begins, “I should like to offer at this time an understanding but merited criticism to the New Theatre League for asking me to speak on short notice. I feel because of lack of notice and time for preparation that my report will

suffer to some extent."<sup>149</sup> This report is sixteen typewritten pages, and it analyzed the 'negro theatre' or lack thereof in the United States, and within the New Theatre League.

If Richardson was indeed asked at the last moment to speak, his mention of 'afterthought' may go far in explaining why the League had not developed any strong Negro theatres. To be sure, in both the magazine and correspondence are found many discussions of how to include the problems of African Americans in the plays, and of developing theatres made up of African American artists. The magazine had devoted one entire issue to this subject. The League had attempted to encourage African American attendance at the New Theatre School in New York by visiting theatre groups and community centers with Black constituencies, and by paying carfare to midtown to attend classes. League theatres outside New York wrote the occasional article or letter describing the astonished and enthusiastic audience reaction when casts were integrated or when African American characters were portrayed. Indeed, *Hymn to the Rising Sun*, with its vivid and moving scenes of brutalization of African Americans on chain gangs, was one of the League's best plays. *Stevedore*, which depicted a union that triumphed after it integrated white and black members, was another League success story. Yet few strong Negro theatres developed.<sup>150</sup>

Richardson enumerated several of the reasons he saw for this lack. A principal problem was the lack of scripts that focused on African Americans. The few mentioned above were the exception. Although many African Americans were interested in acting,

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<sup>149</sup> Tom Richardson. n.t. Speech to National Convention April 1936. NYPL Box 28 folder 2.

<sup>150</sup> The Harlem Suitcase Theatre existed for some time, lead for a time by Langston Hughes. Two delegates from that group reported on its activities at a December 1938 national League meeting in New York. See chapter four for more details.

“There are no Negro technical men [in theatre circles] capable of handling definite technical jobs; and there has been no attempt to train such men.”<sup>151</sup> This surely was an exaggeration, for there were African American theatres in many communities including New York so people were certainly experienced in technical theatre. The problem was more likely one of inclusion not the lack of interested or experienced African Americans. Enrollment documents for the New Theatre School show only a handful of African Americans enrolled in any League training courses at all.

Richardson reported that the two theatres he had been involved with did not take the time to talk with him about the issues from an African American point of view. He felt they were too busy to investigate his “particular problems and help [him] solve them.” Richardson made a strong case that an American labor theatre that did not consider the problems of the Negro worker was not fully treating labor problems.

Both the Detroit New Theatre and the Chicago Repertory Group described their attempts to encourage African American participation. In Detroit the theatre presented part of *They Shall Not Die* for the N.A.A.C.P., the Michigan section of the Negro Congress, and some African American ministers.<sup>152</sup> This performance effectively aroused interest. Three churches requested performances, and they performed other plays, *Mighty Wind A Blowin’* and *Hymn to the Rising Sun*, at the Negro Y.M.C.A.s. As a result, several African Americans were joining their classes. The Detroit New Theatre had offered to fund a production of *Stevedore* the following year.

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<sup>151</sup> Richardson, 3.

<sup>152</sup> This play, by John Wexley, was a protest against the trial of the Scottsboro boys, four young black men accused of raping a white woman.

The Chicago Repertory Group (C.R.G.) experienced a strong start that fizzled. One of the theatre members worked with a Negro chorus, developing a few short pieces (she does not say what they were), which resulted in the theatre paying carfare so that some African Americans could come to classes for training. Kutchins continued that there were no ‘trained artistic forces’ in Chicago.<sup>153</sup> This is hard to believe, as many African American clubs, such as N.A.A.C.P. chapters across the country had dramatic groups within them. The C.R.G. then decided that rather than drawing African Americans into their theatre, they should allow them to develop their own theatre, which was a mistake. The Chicago Group reported that African Americans were unable to sustain or develop their own workers theatre without stronger support. The group should have continued trying to draw them in, Kutchins said, in order to support their efforts.

Anne Howe of the national office summed up the problem as one of commitment. The League theatres had to be committed in every phase of their work to include the experience of African Americans. The playwrights had to include it in the scripts, or scripts should be rewritten. There was no reason, she said, that the doctor scene in *Waiting for Lefty* could not be rewritten, as Negro doctors are routinely discriminated against. Other plays may be cast with some parts played by Negroes with “no incongruity.” White theatre members could not just “superficially try to be friendly” and expect that Negroes will join and continue as working members of a theatre. Roy Atley concluded that, “Many people in the New Theatre movement do not know anything about the Negro, and do not realize he is human and has normal reactions.”<sup>154</sup> Most African

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<sup>153</sup> Kutchins apparently was part of the Chicago contingent at the Conference, but no information further could be found on this person's identity.

<sup>154</sup> There is no further information on Roy Atley.

Americans with an interest in the arts go to Harlem, he said, to become part of that community. He himself would not have become involved had he not been personally invited. The W.P.A's *Macbeth* served as a hopeful signal that there might be a place for African Americans in legitimate mainstream theatre, so people gravitated toward that venue, he said, instead of the radical theatre.<sup>155</sup>

Despite this discussion, there is no evidence that the League ever assisted in development of any successful theatres in the African American community. There are a few instances in which a League theatre integrated its company, such as the Suitcase Theatre of Nashville, or of a theatre that performed a few successful plays with an African American focus, but this problem was never solved. One suspects that because African Americans were already the last hired and first fired, radical connections were doubly dangerous. Add to that the racial divide so deeply entrenched in American culture and the already difficult work of maintaining militancy on labor issues, and the thorny challenge of effectively including African Americans in the work became easier to discuss and abandon, than to fully engage and solve.

The middle years of League operations formed a zenith for radical theatre in the 1930s. The wildly successful *Waiting for Lefty* generated press, acclaim, new affiliates, and continued energy for the League's ambitious goals. It came during a year with new leadership that attempted to restructure the organization and change procedures, in order to become, in their own words, 'more business-like.' League staffers applied significant energy towards solving chronic problems, and to self-criticism. They endeavored to tap

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<sup>155</sup> The Works Progress Administration funded the Federal Theatre Project. It had a unit in Harlem, led by John Houston and Orson Welles, who cast African Americans in a storied production of Shakespeare's *MacBeth*, set in the jungle. For more on this production, or the Federal Theatre Project, see Hallie Flanagan's *Arena*.



the energy and talents of member theatres to come up with creative solutions to the difficulties that plagued them. The organization's structure was fairly consistent after this point, and the League continued to work to develop plays, to connect with other progressive organizations, to develop theatres and to conquer the constant financial problems they faced. Records of affiliated theatres show that in the first half of 1936 the League drew the most affiliations of its entire existence. From January to June 1936, eighteen theatres affiliated as new members. The record shows a total of 36 affiliated theatres, mostly in the Eastern U.S.<sup>156</sup> Although the League's public information claims several hundred affiliated theatres, that number actually reflects the number of different theatres that requested information or plays, that subscribed to the magazine, and otherwise connected with the League, not bona-fide dues-paying members. Actual dues paying affiliates appear never to have exceeded the 36 recorded in the 1936-1938.

Still, it seemed that the increase in control from the top and the League's automatic defensive response to each failure, drove away potential supporters – descriptions of the rigidity of Communist Party ideologues are commonplace in comments from the time – and the inability to undertake effective reform of their own structures or to revolutionize the League's organizational pattern hobbled its ability to build on the successes and the energy of 1934 and 1935. The last part of the decade saw a continuation of perennial struggles, and some new challenges: the Federal Theatre Project drew in many theatre artists who might have worked for the League; success of

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<sup>156</sup> The document has no title or date, but the latest date of affiliation listed on it is March 1938, the earliest January 1936. There are several theatres with no date of affiliation listed, including the Chicago Repertory Group, the Brooklyn Labor Theatre and the Detroit Theatre Union, all of which are included in earlier lists of affiliated theatres. The document appears to list all currently affiliated theatres, with several owing money. It is found in NYPL Box 29 folder 8.

New Deal measures diminished radicalism; and people grew tired and drifted away from the struggle.

## **Chapter four: 1936 to 1941**

### **Expanding the Front: Ringing Down the Curtain**

Perry Bruskin, a member of the Workers Laboratory Theatre at the young age of nineteen, commented that when Pearl Harbor was attacked, of course the radical Left dissolved as all Americans got in line behind FDR supporting the war effort.<sup>157</sup> Indeed, that year was the final one for the League's national organization. The last years of the decade were plagued by continued struggles, yet also marked by a retrenchment of passionate commitment, so that it's impossible to know whether or not the members might have struggled on or even overcome its many problems, given more time or a different context.

During the last years of its labors, the League continued to both name and approach its problems in ways consistent with previous years. At national meetings, in correspondence, published articles, and in minutes of Executive Board meetings, the central problems articulated were still the lack of scripts, trained forces, and money. The League strove to stimulate theatre that appealed more broadly, yet remained timely and focused; it struggled to adapt to changing union landscapes and to cope with changes brought about by successful New Deal programs. League members fought each other and also tried collective solutions; they welcomed Leftists of all stripes and then endeavored to control them politically and organizationally. They strained under huge workloads and idealistic expectations. Many factors mitigated against the League's efforts to grow and to overcome its perennial problems, and in 1941, Toby Cole, the last

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<sup>157</sup> Interview with author.

staffer for the League, brought the League's papers to the New York Public Library and closed the New Theatre League's doors.

During the years of 1936 to 1941, several financial crises arose within the organization, and League staff appealed repeatedly to successful theatre and film folk with Left sympathies. Herb Kline, editor of New Theatre from 1934 to its demise, reported generous contributions from the Lunts, from Burgess Meredith, from Clifford Odets and others.<sup>158</sup> It seems that this source of funds dried up toward the end of the decade. John Howard Lawson, a writer who had been very successful in Hollywood, withheld life-giving money over political differences he had with Kline, contributing to the demise of the publication. Others stopped contributions because the League was too far left or too rigid. Still others simply stopped giving; perhaps they had tired of donating to a group that did not solve basic problems, or perhaps their interests or sympathies changed.

The League and its theatres continued attempts to connect with other Left-leaning organizations, including the peace movement, a movement that was inhabited in complicated ways by both Leftists and conservative isolationists.<sup>159</sup> The League was adamantly anti-war and anti-fascist, positions that were increasingly difficult to maintain simultaneously, since the fascist threats in Europe and Japan seemed to demand a military response. The anti-war movement was a highly factionalized movement, difficult to navigate. The League worked with peace organizations, notably the American League

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<sup>158</sup> Herbert Kline. *New Theatre and Film: 1934 to 1937; an Anthology*. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich: 1985. 8-9.

<sup>159</sup> For more on the anti-war movement of the 1930s, see Robert Alan Kleidman's dissertation, "Organization and Mobilization in the Modern American Peace Campaign." (University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1990), or "Peace as a Women's Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights" in Radical History Review, Number 70, 1998, by Harriet Hyman Alonso and Robert Shaffer.

for Peace and Democracy and New Theatre Magazine published the well-known anti-war play, *Bury the Dead* by Irwin Shaw in April 1936.<sup>160</sup> A work that takes a humanist approach to its anti-war message, the play helped the League argue that war used workers as cannon-fodder to advance the interests of the owning classes. By staying with fairly generalized, emotionally based criticism of war's horrors and its effects on individualized sufferers, the play appealed to many stripes of anti-war activists without offence to most.

The national political landscape had shifted by the mid-thirties. New Deal measures had provided very real assistance to thousands and confidence in the government rose, depleting the numbers who supported radical change. Unionism continued to grow, and some more militant organizations, such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (C.I.O.) and the Steel Workers Organizing Committee, made gains, as did unions that pursued change more moderately. Yet the League's theatre groups, with a few significant exceptions, failed to make permanent or strong connections with unions.<sup>161</sup> The League had adopted Popular Front strategies, but its well-deserved reputation as an organization with Communist roots remained, discouraging many Leftists from participation.

In 1936 the newly created Federal Theatre Project negatively impacted the League. It was a branch of the Works Project Administration (W.P.A.), a federal agency that was organized to create wage-earning work for the unemployed at government

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<sup>160</sup> The play was written by Irwin Shaw as an entry in one of the play contests run by the New Theatre League. Shaw did not complete it in time for the contest, but it was recognized by the League as a powerful drama and produced in March of 1936.

<sup>161</sup> See Hyman's *Staging Strikes* for a discussion of connections between theatre activists and unions.

expense.<sup>162</sup> The Federal Theatre Project's (F.T.P.) charge was to put as many unemployed theatre professionals back to work as possible. W.P.A. rules meant that the F.T.P. could only hire bona fide theatre professionals, and that 80% of the budgets had to be spent on wages. This left only 10% of the budgets for administration, and 10% for theatrical production costs. Although most people working in New Theatre League theatres were not professionals, many aspired to that status, and so sought 'apprentice' positions in professional theatres that led to union membership, instead of continuing at the unpaid or marginally paid League theatres. Those who were theatre professionals were naturally tempted, and many left League theatres to earn actual, though minimal, wages in F.T.P. theatres.

The League fought the F.T.P. on more than one front. The loss of personnel was the major issue. Here tactics were limited to inducing guilt for abandoning a cause, and castigating those who did leave. Second was a loss of audience. The F.T.P. kept ticket prices low, because their performances were seen as a service to the public. League theatres already had low prices, and so could only compete by virtue of the content: most F.T.P. theatres avoided plays that were explicitly political.<sup>163</sup> Therefore, League theatres continued active attempts to connect directly with audiences for politically charged, Leftist, pro-union theatre – they tied this content to particular groups of audience members. Their audience development programs did distinguish them from F.T.P.

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<sup>162</sup> For more on the WPA, see Leuchtenberg, who addresses the WPA from several angles. On the Federal Theatre Project, Hallie Flanagan's *Arena* is a key resource. Flanagan was director of the F.T.P..

<sup>163</sup> The Federal Theatre Project was vulnerable to politically based attacks by those who opposed W.P.A. funding. The F.T.P. and its theatres were repeatedly charged with political bias, or even with promoting Communism. By 1938 Congress de-funded the F.T.P. in a series of moves that were driven by conservatives and those who feared Communism or used the fear of Communism to political advantage.

theatres, but audience development is very labor-intensive work that requires excellent organization and commitment, and proved difficult for most League theatres to sustain.

Last but not least, the New Deal's successes spelled less support for radicalism. As mentioned previously, the League had difficulty recruiting large numbers of radicals from the American public, even among those who saw a need for a more just economic system. The League found it necessary to soften its public image in order to attract more members, hoping then to 'radicalize' them. By the later thirties, the Roosevelt administration's programs provided enough assistance to give hope to the American people, who historically have been extremely reluctant to give up on the American dream. The improvements in the economic and political landscape undermined arguments of radical groups like the League, who were working for revolutionary change. The League fought back by warning that the W.P.A. and its theatre wing, the F.T.P., were fascist attempts to silence political speech and crumbs tossed to suffering workers, intended to appease them without actually solving the problems inherent in capitalism.

The League faced continuous financial struggles, while simultaneously developing new ventures, such as a year-round theatre training school. Archival documents from 1937 show that among all the branches of the New Theatre League --- the National Office, the Production Department, Theatre Workshop (the new publication replacing New Theatre Magazine), the School, and the Bookings Department -- only the school was in the black. All four of the other departments showed deficits that grew over the next year. In September 1937, the total deficit of those four units was \$726.00. By September of 1938 the deficit had climbed to \$2211.00 The school posted earnings of \$1271 over expenses in October 1937, and although dollar figures are not listed, a May

1938 report analyzing the League's finances lists the school as the only department still in the black. Yet a year later the school was also losing money. Documents show that a major problem was tuition receivables of \$653 for one term and that another was an increase in instructor fees without any increase in school income to cover it.<sup>164</sup>

Impecunious students drove the high receivables, but the increase in instructor fees is harder to understand and documentation is lacking to shed light. It is possible that the League hired instructors with name recognition, but records with instructors' names are not extant.

The League ended publication of the monthly New Theatre and Film Magazine with its April 1937 issue. Herbert Kline, editor since 1934, blamed the magazine's demise on political pressure from V.I. Jerome, a C.P. functionary in New York.<sup>165</sup> According to Kline, Jerome influenced John Howard Lawson, a well-known Leftist author of plays and screenplays, and a drama critic and theorist, to pressure Kline to move the magazine's content further left, politically, and in line with C.P. policy. Lawson was influential within the League because he contributed generously to the League's coffers when it experienced financial crises. Yet, according to his own account, Kline refused to change editorial policy. Kline was more inclined to a broader Left perspective. Kline later wrote that he was given an ultimatum of toeing the party line in the magazine, or resigning as editor. He quit, giving as a reason his desire to 'do his part' for the Republicans in Spain, and did indeed serve there as a correspondent. The

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<sup>164</sup> n.a., n.t. Financial report. 1939. New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection. Box 23, folder 5.

<sup>165</sup> Jerome was married to Alice Evans, one of three mainstays of League headquarters in New York. No documentation exists that clarifies whether Jerome had influence on League activities through Evans. However, one is tempted to assume that their political views were compatible, and so that Evans was one of the more radical of the League's leaders. Evans was blacklisted, became a teacher, and died in the seventies from cancer.



friendship between Kline and Lawson languished for over twenty years because of Lawson's siding with Jerome, according to Kline.<sup>166</sup>

The magazine was replaced with a series of craft pamphlets on theatre techniques, and a quarterly called Theatre Workshop. Neither of these replacements, however, was published on a regular basis as promised, and at about the same time, another magazine that focused on Popular Front theater, TAC, published by the Theatre Arts Committee, took its place among theatre magazines.<sup>167</sup> The League did not successfully re-establish the national publication, which had served it so well in forming a public identity in theatre circles, and as a communication tool across the country.

The loss of the magazine is a telling one. It illustrates the rigid policy that League leaders could impose upon members of the organization. Complaints about rigid ideology abound in 1930s memoirs; League theatres were often taken to task for lapses; Leftist theatre both within and outside the circle of League influence felt the sharp bite of sectarian criticism. The people at the center of League activities held high and unyielding standards for political drama, and were not hesitant to express their opinions. This tenacious hold on a point of view and set of tactics was both the bedrock foundation that kept the organization focused and operating and the hobble that limited its membership. Few wished to adhere to the ideals that held the center of the League together. These frustrations over commitment to the cause came to a head towards the end of the decade.

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<sup>166</sup> Lawson was later blacklisted as one of the "Hollywood Ten." He and Kline reconciled years later, in 1979, a year before Lawson's death, according to Kline's account.

<sup>167</sup> Kline. *New Theatre and Film*, 3.

In December of 1938, the League held a National Council Meeting in New York City. Fourteen affiliated theatres sent delegates, seven of those from outside New York City. There were guests from four additional theatres. The reports from various theatres are lively and optimistic, and showed some innovative and visionary problem solving. Several had attempted to put into action the advice of Lem Ward from the 1936 national meeting, or adjusted their operations in response to Ben Irwin and John Bonn's tour of League theatres in spring of 1938. For example, the Philadelphia New Theatre set up a separate committee to deal with classes. The Minneapolis Theatre Union, which had its first success with a production of *Waiting for Lefty*, found that when they charged for bookings of short skits instead of offering them for free they actually increased the number of bookings. They also reported doing successful campaign work for the Farmer-Labor party, and attempting to find other Left cultural groups to share their headquarter space, with a goal of creating a community center. They had fought a censorship battle, and started a play reading class, which, they reported, regularly turned into a social issues discussion session since so many of the attendees needed political education in order to understand the plays they read.

The John Lenthier Troupe from New York found a niche for itself touring Northeastern states, performing in small towns and for organizations in towns and cities.<sup>168</sup> Their membership numbers fluctuated, but they found that with a core group of 5-7, they could send an organizer ahead by two weeks to develop contacts, book performances, and do advance publicity, and the troupe could then follow and do the shows. The Dallas

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<sup>168</sup> The group had been known as the "Let Freedom Ring" theatre, named for a League-developed play of that name. The group changed its name in honor of a member actor who went to Spain to fight for the Republicans and died there (Trumbull 327).

New Theatre capitalized on a bad housing situation in the city, developing support from the housing authority and the city fathers, as well as a bank president who had written a book on bad housing policy some 20 years earlier. They wrote a living newspaper, based upon the Federal Theatre Project's *One Third of a Nation*, which dealt with local housing issues. The theatre was building upon that to develop additional personnel, finances, and ideas. Despite these innovative solutions and successes, all of the theatres reported serious problems as well, in line with perennial League problems of money, trained personnel and scripts.

Ben Irwin spoke at the 1938 meeting, in a rather defensive fashion, outlining all the methods by which the League attempted to find or develop more quality plays for League theatres. The tenor of his talk, which began: "We know from every Conference and meeting we have ever had that the big need of all our theatres is for plays. WHAT DOES THE NATIONAL OFFICE DO TO GET PLAYS?" [emphasis in original]. He then listed all the methods they employed, from play contests to writing to order for particular unions. He finished with a nod to the important development of theatre groups writing their own material. His list and the tone of his talk indicate that the problem had not been solved, and suggests that he was tired of hearing about it.<sup>169</sup>

Alice Evans reported on the organization itself. She emphasized the goals set at the previous national meeting: development of existing affiliated theatres, and outreach to other organizations with the potential to develop sympathetic theatre forces such as churches, trade unions, little theatres and universities. She blamed 'too arty' a focus for the collapse of the New Orleans New Theatre, and stressed that the League national

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<sup>169</sup> n.a. Minutes of the National Council Meeting of the New Theatre League. December 30, 1938. NYPL Box 28 folder 2.

office was working with numerous groups – she mentioned by name two dozen such groups – to develop affiliates. She declared that the regional executive council, an organizational structure that the membership had requested in order to broaden leadership, had been established. However, the monthly council meetings, which included New York and relatively close metropolitan areas such as Washington D.C. and Philadelphia, were not attended regularly, she cautioned. Likewise, she continued, quarterly meetings of the national executive had not yet convened because representatives could not get time off from work or afford the travel expenses.

This was a fairly new problem for the League and it must have been a frustrating developments. The League had attempted, in response to criticism, to include more input from outside New York in its operations and decisions, and so developed the council and regular meetings, intended to include representation from a broader region. However, people simply did not attend the meetings. Letters from the New York Buro to these representatives became progressively more irritated. For example, a letter dated October 4, 1939 announced the date and place of a meeting on October 9, stressing that a move to new office space was to be discussed, so “it is important that you attend.” Apparently the letters did not have the intended effect, as a subsequent letter, dated October 10, said “The scheduled meeting. . . was not held due to insufficient attendance. . . . It is absolutely imperative that we have complete attendance [at the rescheduled meeting] because of the urgency of many of our problems.”<sup>170</sup> Another letter dated December 11, 1939 began:

We put it up to you: WHAT is the New Theatre League going to do about

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<sup>170</sup> New Theatre League to Executive Board Members. October 10, 1939. NYPL Box 28 folder 2.

its National Executive Board? Our last two meetings just weren't held; too few members of our Board showed up. Not only that but only a very few troubled themselves to notify us that they couldn't attend.

The letter went on to describe some of the new developments and projects, such as a national tour of performances under I.W.O. auspices, a conference of union drama groups, and Ben Irwin's planned tour to visit theatre groups, then asked that the recipient verify his or her interest in remaining on the board. The letter declared that the League would have a board and would reconstitute it "yes – once again" with a meeting "Monday evening, December 18<sup>th</sup> at 8 P.M. SHARP! . . . this is the time for all good Executive Board members to come to the aid of the League" [emphases in original].<sup>171</sup> Clearly the national office in New York was frustrated by this problem.

Conditions for League staffers had not improved either. In other, internal correspondence, office staff describe the long hours, delayed pay, and daily struggles they underwent in keeping the League going. No doubt the lack of effort by Board members was aggravating.

The national office was throughout this time attempting to become more business-like; their wording was to "put the office on a thoroughly business-like footing." The files hold numbers of financial reports, self-analyses, and comparisons of one year to another or one quarter to the last.<sup>172</sup> Some long-time stalwarts, like Mark Marvin and Herbert Kline, departed, some under pressure, some not. No doubt some people were

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<sup>171</sup> New Theatre League to Executive Board Members. December 11, 1939. NYPL Box 28 folder 2.

<sup>172</sup> These files are incomplete, however, with many pieces lacking dates or years, or containing different elements of otherwise comparable information, so a picture can be pieced together only partially.

burned out, and in some cases people moved on to other activities. A few people continued; Alice Evans and Ben Irwin are the most noticeable of those who did not leave the organization during this time of retrenchment. It is easy to imagine that the drive to ensure that League workers all toed the correct line politically also drove some potential participants away.

The League took a serious look at its own structure at this point, as evidenced by efforts to decentralize. There were two major aspects to this attempt. One was to develop a full-time residential theatre school; the other was to develop regional centers in Chicago and Los Angeles. This plan required direct, personal contact, so in spring of 1940 Ben Irwin toured League theatres. His purpose was to see what conditions were like for theatres outside New York, and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the League. The first attempt at the trip was aborted, as Irwin was slightly injured in a car accident. He set off again, however, in April, and visited eighteen cities in the Eastern half of the U.S. and as far West as Kansas and Arkansas. The accident and delay may seem minor, but plans for such a trip were very complicated. He tried to organize his itinerary so that he could see as many productions as possible, and many of the groups operated irregularly. Many times he reported no-shows for meetings that had been scheduled with group leaders. Some groups struggled with internal divisions, which also complicated matters; for example, one faction might agree to meet with Ben and another refuse, or he would find that theatre work was ham-strung by internal politics.

Despite the difficulties, Irwin's reports on the condition of theatres outside New York are enlightening. Irwin visited Albany, New York, where he reported on two different theatre groups, one affiliated with the S.C. & M.W.A. Union, and a Peace

Council Group that sponsored *Bury the Dead*. In Syracuse, New York, Ed Mann led a very active group that premiered many new pieces. Irwin wrote that the Cleveland Contemporary Theatre, established by John Bonn was really ‘a middle class theatre – no evidence of a labor theatre.’ The relationship between the League and Bonn, once the penultimate radical theatre director and role model, had disintegrated to such a degree that Bonn did not attend the 1940 conference. Correspondence between Bonn and Irwin, in which Bonn mentions an accusation by three students that apparently turned nasty – Bonn describes it as an ‘inquisition’ – points to the seriousness of this decline.<sup>173</sup> In a four-page letter Bonn quite frankly describes this and several other incidents in which people at League headquarters did not treat him like a human being with feelings but rather like a “discarded machine.” Bonn also said that the 1940 Convention report hewed to far more narrow and sectarian lines than the League ever had before and that he “cannot accept a policy which . . . will do only harm to the aims and objectives of the N.T.L.”<sup>s174</sup>

During this summer, Bonn began working for the Works Progress Administration, and reported having little time left for the Contemporary Theatre. He resigned from the board that year. Others echoed Bonn’s complaints about callous or thoughtless treatment from New York. At the same time it is clear that Irwin, Evans, Cole and others who worked in the New York office felt overburdened and unappreciated. They may well have lacked the skills to develop an efficient office, but the sheer volume of work was

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<sup>173</sup> John Bonn to Ben Irwin June 25, 1940. New Theatre league Records, New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts. Box 3 folder 1. The accusation itself or a report of its nature was not found in documents.

<sup>174</sup> John Bonn to Ben Irwin August 1940. New Theatre league Records, New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts. Box 3 folder 1.

crushing. Irwin's response to Bonn's letter described weeks when finances were so slim the staff went unpaid, and that Bonn's complaints of poor treatment were in many instances based upon false reports of conversations in the office. No doubt some of the bad feelings were caused by ordinary miscommunication and misunderstanding, but complaints about Irwin's style abound in correspondence. Whatever the combination of reasons, John Bonn was thoroughly disassociated from the New Theatre League by August of 1940. Irwin's report from the previous spring, noting the Cleveland theatre as a bourgeois enterprise, clearly indicates that the disconnect lived on both sides.

Irwin also visited Chicago during that spring trip, where only a few members of the highly successful Chicago Repertory Group were willing to meet with him because of 'friction with the National office.'<sup>175</sup> In St. Louis the I.L.G.W.U. was interested in a dramatic group; Kansas City had a League affiliate within the United Packing House Workers Union, and there was interest from another union, the Loose Wilkes Biscuit Union, and from both the Y.M.H.A. and the Y.W.C.A.

In Oklahoma City, he met with the Red Dust Players, and spoke to the university drama department and the Post Carriers Union. Commonwealth College in Mena, Arkansas was next on the list, followed by Nashville, TN, where he visited the Negro theatre (probably the Suitcase Theatre) and a Y.M.H.A. group. He visited the drama department of Negro University, Mac Ross at Fiske University, and the I.L.G.W.U. which were all interested in New Theatre work. In Indianapolis, Irwin spoke with the Progressive Arts League, which was a subscriber to League publications, and in Cincinnati, he visited with the Public Recreation Commission and did a fifteen minute

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<sup>175</sup> The C.R.G. is discussed in depth in Section Two of this book.



radio interview. He spoke to a Union leader in Columbus, Ohio. Pittsburgh had no theatre, but he met with two very interested leaders who had worked with the Toronto New Theatre. In Washington D.C., he met with the Federal Workers Union, and League affiliate The Washington Bookshop, who stocked League publications. In Baltimore and Philadelphia he spoke with three groups but did not find much interest. Budget for the tour was estimated at \$135, a considerable cost, considering League finances, and letters are filled with car breakdowns, missed meetings, and bad meals or beds. Irwin packed many visits into this trip, however, visits that made a strong impression upon him. And the impression reported in articles and official reports is quite different from what he reported in private letters to his friends and colleagues in the New York office.

Irwin's official reports stressed strong support for a Southwest Theatre School (to New York-based League people, Arkansas was the 'south west'). His official reports read like articles for publications. He was impressed, he wrote, with the fervor that he found west of Manhattan, and criticized New York theatre people for their insularity, isolation, and ignorance of the 'real world' beyond 42<sup>nd</sup> street. He wrote, in a segment intended for publication:

Here in the throbbing and teeming centers of America, in St. Louis, Nashville, Kansas City. . . . the people necessary to make such theatre grow and most important the audiences who desperately need this theatre are present everywhere and their demands are a challenge to the ingenuity and artistry of any theatre worker."<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Ben Irwin, Ben to Alice Evans. n.d. New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

Irwin's mission included creating enthusiasm for the 1940 convention planned for New York City later that year, and measuring interest in a school the League was considering developing at Commonwealth College. In contrast to the vivid prose above, his letters addressed to various office staff delineated what a struggle the tour itself was, along with a much less glowing description of the groups, their struggle to continue doing work, and conflicts with the national office.

Privately, Irwin asked Alice Evans to write letters of apology to several theatres he did not get to along the way. For example, he did not go to Detroit as planned, because of the time it would take to make the drive. As it was, he wrote, it took eleven hours to drive 160 miles due to a snowstorm and four breakdowns. Anyway, he said, they weren't going to pay his lecture fee, so he did not feel too badly about missing Detroit. Later, in Oklahoma, he asked for \$20 extra dollars, as he needed to buy yet another spare tire. He missed his contacts in Milwaukee because both women were not home, and he spent over an hour trying to find them, as they lived at opposite ends of the city, and did not have telephones. He also had a fever, and was delirious most of the night. He missed a visit to Rock Island as well, because the drive took nine hours of steady travel.

His stop in Chicago focused on responding to the Chicago Repertory Theatre staff's complaints about the national office. Apparently they were very angry about royalties due them for scripts locally written and taken up for distribution by the New York office, and for the League's forceful demands for late royalty payments from Chicago, when the League knew how broke they were. Irwin was dealing with Jane Swanhuyser, who had written angry letters to the national office on these matters and

others, but who ultimately was a loyal and fairly seasoned theatre activist. She was trying to lead a relatively new group of theatre aficionados through the difficult waters of leftist, activist theatre. In the end, Irwin and Swanhuysen were able to iron out enough of their difficulties and animosities for Chicago to continue affiliation, to attend the convention, to subscribe to a 'bundle' of 12 copies of New Theatre News to resell every month, and to provide regular correspondence with the publication. Despite this relatively satisfactory outcome, relations with the C.R.G. remained somewhat prickly, as Section Two will discuss.

Irwin also writes "I'll certainly do my best to clinch the Commonwealth project." a comment that is significant to League aspirations for decentralizing operations. The League hoped to develop a school outside New York for training theatre personnel and had set its sights on Commonwealth College outside of Mena, Arkansas. Commonwealth was a labor school established in the 1920s that trained leaders for the labor movement. It lasted for nearly two decades in an exquisite rural setting, and uniquely combined a working farm commune with education for working class activists. It featured various cultural activities, including folk songs, poetry and prose, and significantly for the League, labor drama. Debsian Socialists had started the College, but in its last few years, Communists had much more influence.<sup>177</sup> Several people involved in the League had also attended or worked at the College. Lee Hayes, later a founding member of the folk singing group, The Weavers, participated in theatre activities at Commonwealth and in New York, writing and directing social issue plays; Agnes Cunningham, better known as

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<sup>177</sup> Eugene Debs was a leader of the U.S. Socialist party, and ran multiple times for the presidency. For more on Commonwealth College, see William H. Cobb's fascinating and thorough *Radical Education in the Rural South: Commonwealth College 1922-1940*.

Sis Cunningham, created music and performed with the Red Dust Players in Oklahoma, a League affiliate, and was a "Commoner."<sup>178</sup> The College had connected with the League for scripts and advice, and when the College lost most of its non-militant Leftist friends, it sought to revitalize itself, in part by becoming a southern branch of the New Theatre League. Plans were laid to sign over the College's assets to the League, which would incur all the College's outstanding debts. The date set for the transfer was September 24, 1940.

The League planned to use the College as a training ground for theatre activists. As a response to repeated calls for additional trained forces, and for geographically broader leadership, a school in the Southern mid-west region seemed to be a terrific solution. Commonwealth had a well-deserved reputation as an inspiring and effective center for training labor leaders and it had a fairly well developed drama program, most recently led by Lee Hayes.

This plan was announced and discussed at the 1940 National Convention in June in Philadelphia. Once more the conference host, Philadelphia New Theatre's Lem Ward reported on "Production and Training" on the first morning on the conference, Saturday, June 15. In his report Ward referred to the New Theatre School of the South as a full time residential school and mentioned that Ruth Deacon, Alice Evans, Dorothy [Rosenbaum] Schmidt (of the Red Dust Players) were in charge of planning for faculty, curriculum, and fund raising necessary for "a new period [to] begin in the theatre history of the south."<sup>179</sup> Schmidt also voiced high hopes for the school, explaining to conference

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<sup>178</sup> For Sis Cunningham's story, see *Red Dust and Broadsides: A Joint Autobiography*, written with Gordon Friesen, her husband and fellow activist.

<sup>179</sup> Lem Ward. "Production and Training." June 1940. NYPL Box 28 folder 6.

attendees that the work of the Dusters, as the Red Dust Players were called, demonstrated the need for dramatic work focused on rural and local issues as well as industry in the South. She praised the New York office for the planned move, so that “the drive in the South is going to have leadership and organization.” She concluded her talk: “One thing is very important. Whatever we do about it, we can supply the forces, the training. The audience is there. The audience is there and waiting for us to come and play for them.”<sup>180</sup>

Unquestionably, there was strong support for the Southern New Theatre School within the League. Irwin found that on his tour, and it was echoed in the June convention reports. Led by re-invigorated hope for the future, League leaders began to tackle these new challenges. The League was seemingly blind to the financial reality, however, as minutes from meetings at this time show. August 7, 1940 minutes report that \$1000 was immediately needed to meet the bank note on the school and to cover promotion to solicit the 25-30 students required for the proposed budget. Various fund raising ideas were proposed. The same week, a financial analysis of their own school in New York revealed that for the Spring term of 1940, with enrollment of 165 students, the school generated a deficit of \$798.45, and for summer of 1940, typically a slower time for theatre activities, the deficit was \$220.00.<sup>181</sup>

Enthusiasm and idealistic tenacity must have kept these discouraging facts from influencing their plans. The creative new alliance with Commonwealth College must have seemed a breath of fresh air. Keen interest in the school expressed by affiliates, and the League’s belief that it would serve the needs of the workers for socially relevant

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<sup>180</sup> Dorothy Schmidt. “Oklahoma Red Dust Players” Speech at the June 1940 Convention. NYPL Box 28 folder 6.

<sup>181</sup> n.a. “New Theatre School Financial Analysis as of August 9, 1940.” NYPL Box 31 folder 4.

theatre drove their campaign to take over an institution that was already bankrupt, beset by powerful enemies, and without many friends. Cobb reports in his book on Commonwealth College that nearby Arkansas residents, hearing that a radical group from New York with even stronger Communist ties intended to take over the College, began actions to eliminate it. The school was charged with anarchy, with displaying an outlawed Communist symbol (the hammer and sickle of the U.S.S.R.), and with failing to fly the U.S. flag when school was in session. Charges were heard on September 24, and a trial ensued that day. Fines of over \$2500 were assessed against the College. Commonwealth attempted to transfer its property to the League on the 25<sup>th</sup> in order to avoid the fines, and Ruth Deacon did go to Arkansas to open the school, but it was charged on October 12 for operating without a permit. She was served with the closing order for the school. The school's holdings were sold at auction.<sup>182</sup>

The loss of the Southern School plan was a heavy blow to League hopes and dreams. After this event, League documents more frequently and insistently depicted a struggle to change course, to figure out what went wrong and how to reorganize so that the work could continue. A 1940 document described the June 1940 convention as a high point, with representation from new groups and a broader sector of the working class community. On the strength of that meeting, the League had forged ahead with anti-war plans, and the plan to expand into Arkansas.<sup>183</sup> The document depicted the League as a

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<sup>182</sup> For an account of these events, see Cobb's book.

<sup>183</sup> The document from which this information is gathered is undated with no author named, but is clearly one that follows the June 1940 convention, since it mentions plans for Commonwealth College, and the troubles the Red Dusters encountered. The document is written like a speech, and has a significant number of hand written notes on it. It appears to be a draft of remarks prepared for a meeting, probably the National Council Meeting, held December 28-29, 1940. It is untitled, and is to be found in NYPL

targeted organization, expressed in the legal attack against the Commonwealth plan, in renewed censorship battles, in vigilantism against New Theatres across the country, and in attacks by the House Un-American Activities Committee. For example, windows at the New Theatre in Philadelphia had been repeatedly broken out, government officials had raided homes of members of the Red Dusters in Oklahoma and Dorothy Rosenbaum Schmidt had fled out of the state, to Minnesota. Citing the growth of the American Peace Movement (“a year ago unborn [and] today represents over 10 million peace mongering Americans”) as an example of the power of the anti-war message, the League framed these attacks as signs that its work had become threatening to reactionary forces in the government and in the general public. The document presented attacks on the League’s theatres as evidence of effectiveness, and a reason to adopt a new plan to move forward.

The League argued for a radical change in its own structure. It proposed becoming simply a service organization; to let go of attempts to develop a strong affiliation foundation, and to focus on supplying and developing scripts and directors. This change would relieve the League of the burden of being a parent organization and allow time to do quality work on a simplified list of tasks. The proposal featured a plan to create regional centers in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. These centers would become ‘parent’ organizations for theatres in their areas, with local leadership and with a network of connections among the centers.

Extant records for the year 1941 are scarce and do not reveal much about League activities. There is no evidence that the regional centers ever got off the ground, although the Chicago Repertory Group did increase the number of plays for which it handled

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Box 28 folder 7. There are no extant papers from that meeting, only registration slips for attendees, who numbered 32.

rights, and some correspondence indicates that people there attempted to establish the C.R.G. as a center. The fervor that had sustained people at the center of League operations could not surmount the difficulties they faced; could not find solutions that worked. Time had run out for the League's leaders to find a way to develop an ongoing, working national organization.

The fire that had kept them going for a decade had sparked passionate, but somewhat erratic, theatre work across the country. A few of the more deeply rooted, and perhaps better organized, progressive theatres operated for longer periods of time, such as the Chicago Repertory Group; And some flared briefly but hotly, as did the Oklahoma Red Dust Players. The League's vision was broad and idealistic and it scored some remarkable successes with little financial support or other resources. The sheer longevity of the endeavor, given the pioneering nature of its vision, the breadth of its goals, and the reach to which League leaders aspired, is remarkable. The League ran mostly on political passion and long hours with not much pay. That the organization continued as long as it did speaks volumes about the commitment of those at the center and the ability they possessed to inspire others to join with their ideals, even if as in many cases it was only for a short period of time. How three affiliated theatres achieved success and faced their problems is the subject of the next section in which case studies of specific theatres are found. The last section of the book examines several of the plays that League theatres found effective, and analyzes other performance factors, such as playing spaces. These sections expand upon efforts to achieve the lofty goals League leaders set for themselves, dissecting specifics in order to illuminate the daily, ongoing work that consumed them.





## SECTION TWO: CASE STUDIES

The League worked hard encourage theatres across the United States to affiliate, and at peak enrolled 36 theatres as dues-paying affiliates, while working with about 400 theatres in all by supplying scripts, subscribing them to the magazine, corresponding, sending trained directors or organizers, or in other ways. Archives at the New York Public Library contain plentiful correspondence from several affiliated theatres, which helps develop a picture of conditions outside New York for socially committed, radical theatre work. Three of these affiliates are discussed in some detail below: the New Theatre of Philadelphia, which was strong and reliable enough to twice host the National Convention; the Red Dust Players of Oklahoma, which developed methods for taking radical theatre to extremely rural folk under tremendously adverse circumstances; and the Chicago Repertory Group, something of a jewel in the crown of socially committed theatre outside New York City. We start with the Chicago group, for which there exists an archive of papers in the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library that provides a broader look at a League affiliate.

### The Chicago Repertory Group

The Chicago Repertory Group (C.R.G.) was perhaps the strongest, most financially sound, and longest lasting of the radical amateur theatres in the national League network. It developed as an offshoot of a John Reed Club in Chicago, and like the

New York Workers Laboratory Theatre, its roots were in hard line radical politics.<sup>184</sup>

The manifesto of the Chicago Workers Theatre, from which the C.R.G. grew, attests to its revolutionary aspirations, outlining its project to "...expose capitalism in all its manifestations," and to replace the capitalist system with "a collective state, dictated by the proletariat."<sup>185</sup> This group traversed the rocky road of shifting politics, weathered the United Front period and tenuous relations with unions, and ended its career in the unlikely position of producing sketches for the Navy in the early 1940s. The C.R.G.'s longevity points to effective problem solving, yet like other League theatres, the group struggled with crippling financial limitations, internal and external disputes, and a dearth of good scripts.

In the following pages, I will discuss several aspects of the C.R.G.'s work, in order to paint a picture of the aspirations, successes, and failings the group experienced. Sections include an outline of the group's history and its organizational strengths; repertory and modes of performance; publicity and audience development; finances, staff, and relations with New York headquarters; and the struggle to stage a national conference of League theatres.

### **C.R.G. History and organization**

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<sup>184</sup> Esther Brown. "A History of the Chicago Repertory Group." M.A. Thesis. Roosevelt University, 1967. 1.

<sup>185</sup> "Manifesto" in Workers Theatre. Brochure produced by the Chicago Workers Theatre. in Scrapbook Volume 1 1933-1936. Regenstein Library Special Collection at the University of Chicago.

Six amateur actors<sup>186</sup> founded the Chicago Repertory Group (C.R.G.) in 1934 with an aim to create a theatre that focused on relevant social issues.<sup>187</sup> Because economic injustice was the centerpiece of this non-profit organization, the C.R.G. kept ticket prices very low. The intended audience was workers and unemployed working class people. Therefore the audience was to form both the subject matter of the performances and the consumers of the theatre produced by the C.R.G.. This strategy was fairly successful in bringing in the target audience but also created financial struggles, as box office income was limited despite the C.R.G.'s considerable skills at audience development, which are discussed below and which served as a model for other League theatres.

The short-lived predecessor to the C.R.G., the Chicago Workers Theater, was active from 1933 to 1934, announcing its existence and purpose in a brochure, "Workers Theatre," published for the April 1933 opening of its first production of Precedent by I. J. Golden. The brochure expanded upon the ideas presented in the "Manifesto" and described the theatre as "an independent organization of actors, directors, scene designers, technicians, and writers." It listed four goals for the theater. First it was 'to crystallize in drama the unformed but pressing problems of our time.' Second, "to present these problems in the most entertaining, stimulating, and artistic manner." Third, "To mobilize talent and skill in all phases of dramatic activity, which cannot find

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<sup>186</sup> According to a draft of an article intended for "Pic Magazine" the original members were Louis Gilbert, Ann Halperin, Gertrude Gunter, who deposited the C.R.G.'s papers at the University of Chicago Library Special Collection Archives at Harper Library (they are now in the Regenstein Library) in 1958, Leo Genin, Al Peters, and Charles De Sheim. Typescript history, C.R.G..

<sup>187</sup> I have relied upon the Finding Aid for the Chicago Repertory Group Collection in the University of Chicago Library Special Collection Research Center Archival holdings and Esther Brown's M.A. Thesis for much of the general history of the Chicago Repertory Group.

expression in the ideologically bankrupt commercial theater.” Fourth, “To build a permanent theater, technically expert and artistically sound, infused with the vitality and power of the historic movement of the masses.”<sup>188</sup> The goals mirrored the purposes outlined in the 1931 Workers Theatre Magazine and reveal close ideological ties with the national League’s goals at the time of the C.R.G.’s origins. Sponsors of the theatre listed in this first brochure include Sherwood Anderson, Malcolm Cowley, Waldo Frank, and several University of Chicago professors.

The play *Precedent* depicted the arrest and conviction of California labor leader Tom Mooney, and was performed at the Goodman Theatre for two nights in April 1933. The three-act play presents the case against Mooney as a frame up intended to benefit the utility companies. The program for the production is subtitled “The play that strikes with sledge hammer blows on Tom Mooney’s chains.” The program also reprinted the “Manifesto of the Workers Theatre of Chicago,” and it declares directly and forcefully that the theatre is “a class weapon of the American toiling masses in their struggle against capitalism.” It goes on to list eighteen points, ending with “We will point the revolutionary way out of capitalist decay.”<sup>189</sup> The program also mentions an epilogue to the play that was added by the C.R.G.. Esther Brown, in her Master’s Thesis, “A History of the Chicago Repertory Group,” describes the epilogue as ‘impressionistic’ with an offstage voice that described the sixteen-year battle for Mooney’s freedom.<sup>190</sup> The

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<sup>188</sup> “Workers Theatre.” Brochure produced by the Chicago Workers Theatre. in Scrapbook Volume 1 1933-1936. Regenstein Library special Collection at the University of Chicago.

<sup>189</sup> “Precedent” program. Regenstein Library Special Collection at the University of Chicago.

<sup>190</sup> Brown, 17. Unfortunately the C.R.G.’s version of *Precedent* is not extant.

C.R.G. often wrote its own material, or altered scripts to fit the specifics of the Chicago scene. Its playwriting group was one of the more successful among League theatres.

The program invited audience members to purchase \$5.00 memberships in the Friends of the Workers Theatre. The price included tickets to two productions, free admittance to symposia after each Workers Theatre presentation, symposia and lectures on theater and playwriting, and private showings of Soviet films. The program also demonstrates connections to several leftist organizations and events, including the Proletarian Arts Costume Ball, Workers Theater Magazine, The Workers' Voice (a Chicago paper), the Chicago John Reed Club, and the Workers Bookstore.<sup>191</sup>

The Chicago Repertory Group was arguably the most successful League theatre anywhere in the country. It lasted for a decade, produced box office successes, developed a theater school, obtained a theatre space of its own, and maintained a 'mobile theatre' for most of its existence. The C.R.G. sought, according to Gertrude Gunter, to provide "an evening of good entertainment with an educational value."<sup>192</sup>

C.R.G. members were no strangers to hard work or long hours, and none except the janitor drew a living wage from the C.R.G.; all earned their livings elsewhere. According to responses to a survey Esther Brown conducted as part of her 1967 thesis, Jane Swanhuyser, for some time the executive director of the C.R.G., remembered putting in 50 – 100 hours weekly on average at the C.R.G.. Katherine Wood, who served

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<sup>191</sup> The brochure and program are the only extant primary documents from the early organization, the Workers Theater of Chicago that I was able to uncover. Gertrude Gunter mentioned the group in the history she supplied to the University of Chicago library when she deposited the Chicago Repertory Group's paper, and indeed several people's names carry over from the first enterprise to its next incarnation. The organization's name was changed briefly to the Group Theater, but group members were asked to change it out of courtesy to the more famous Group Theater in New York.

<sup>192</sup> Gertrude Gunter Soltker, quoted in Finding Aid, 1.

in several capacities in the C.R.G. offices, remembered spending “practically all my waking hours!” every week, and other respondents to Brown’s survey reported 20 – 50 hours weekly. Most did not draw any pay because the C.R.G. could not afford to pay them, reporting at the League’s 1940 conference that salaried employees would have broken the back of the theatre. A few drew \$10 per week, and they paid the janitor \$25 per week.<sup>193</sup> C.R.G. staff included nine theatre workers who were gainfully employed by the Federal Theatre Project during its active years; three were Federal Writer’s Project employees; several were radio professionals. The energy of those committed volunteers who devoted so many of their waking hours to social issue theatre fueled the C.R.G.’s considerable longevity.

The C.R.G.’s ‘stationary theater’ became a well known entity on the Chicago theatre scene, scoring press notice in mainstream and union or other Leftist papers and gaining supporters among well known and well-positioned people, including lawyer Clarence Darrow and John Fitzpatrick, president of the Chicago Federation of Labor. The C.R.G.’s association with organized labor was problematic, yet key in its survival, as we shall see. The stationary theater was also known for its focus on “method acting,” then a new, exciting and innovative acting technique developed from Stanislavski’s work and famously practiced by the Group Theater in New York.<sup>194</sup>

The C.R.G. became one of the most stable affiliates of the League. In part this was due to strong, organized leadership that focused on creative yet practical solutions to

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<sup>193</sup> Brown, 4-5.

<sup>194</sup> For more on Stanislavski, see his own works, *An Actor Prepares*, *Creating a Character*, or *My Life in Art*. For an account of Stanislavski’s techniques as practiced in the thirties by the Group Theatre in the U.S., see Wendy Smith’s *Real Life Drama*, or Harold Clurman’s *The Fervent Years*.

problems. The climate in Chicago for labor-related cultural activities seems also to have been more nurturing than in many other locations, such as Oklahoma City or Hollywood where energetic attempts at workers theater thrived briefly, then collapsed. In fact, in 1937 Stage Magazine awarded the “Palm” to the C.R.G. for “being the only theater west of Broadway that is carrying out a policy devoted only to plays of social significance.”<sup>195</sup>

The C.R.G.’s relationship with League headquarters in New York was complex, as the group relied upon, supported, and also rebelled against its leadership. The relationship was distinctively warm because of personal connections between members of both offices, and contentious because of differences in political and theatrical opinion, in practicalities, and sometimes because of organizational failures on both sides that undermined trust. Alice Evans, for example, who ran the New York office for many years, had first been part of the Chicago group. She was tapped for the national office, no doubt, because her organizational talent and her fervent devotion to the cause attracted attention. She knew the women who ran the C.R.G. quite well – and it was mostly run by women – and kept in close contact on a personal level with them. For example, both she and Jane Swanhuyser, who ran the C.R.G. in its later years, became pregnant at about the same time, and their correspondence is peppered with numerous inquiries and comments about pregnancy and later, the rearing of young children.<sup>196</sup>

Despite these personal connections, C.R.G. leaders struck off in directions that they felt worked best for their situation, sometimes to a chorus of protest from New York. The C.R.G. appears to have been more organized as a group than many League theatres,

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<sup>195</sup> Quoted in Finding Aid, 1.

<sup>196</sup> At the end of a letter from Esther Hoffman to Alice Evans dated Jan. 29, 1939, “Gigi” handwrote, “Hello Alice Sweet: - When’s the blessed event Drop me a line will you?” In the body of that letter, Esther wrote, “By the way, how is little Lenin coming along?”



and even, in many cases, than New York. They were, for the most part, able to follow through on plans that they made. New York, by contrast, often seemed to propose impressive plans and then fail to follow through. This failure to match ambition with reality cost headquarters the trust of its membership time and again.

Collection of funds that the C.R.G. owed New York became a frequent sore point, with New York often insisting on immediate payment and Chicago protesting that they needed more time, expressing less-than-comradely feelings of anger and frustration because New York “should understand our problems.” When Kay Wood took over as Executive Secretary in summer of 1938, she explained why the C.R.G. was behind on royalties: “We are from five to seven hundred dollars in debt; our income is erratic. . . . So you see why we haven’t sent you royalties or contributions. . . .”<sup>197</sup> Later that summer, Esther Hoffman, who also worked in the C.R.G. offices, wrote to Ben Irwin:

I wrote Alice and told her previously about our situation financially here at the Group, I wasn’t kidding. And I’m damned angry at this point in fact I’m pounding these few lines out. That certainly isn’t the attitude for a Labor organization to take. After all you can’t live without us and we without you so please show a little curtesy [sic]. . . . As soon as we have the money to pay on the royalties we will pay you, I cant [sic] make this too emphatic. . . .

So with love in my heart, really, and best wishes for bigger and better labor plays, etc.

Love, Esther

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<sup>197</sup> Katharine Wood to N.T.L., December 19, 1938. New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

Sounds rather trite and commonplace, that last paragraph, doesn't it  
[emphases in original].<sup>198</sup>

The correspondence became especially negative when Ben Irwin was managing League business instead of Alice Evans. Apparently his manner of writing was much more brusque than Alice's. Alice Evans may also have had more sympathy for the affiliate's difficulties because of her early years working with the Chicago Repertory Group.

When the C.R.G. did make payments the response was warm: "Dear Kay, That was certainly a fine payment you sent in -- and helped us no end." When they were behind they were likely to get letters such as this one from Alice. This section appears on the last page of a rather long letter addressed to C.R.G. member Charles De Sheim, after a discussion of a play that had been submitted by another C.R.G. member:

I'm pretty upset about not hearing from them [the C.R.G. offices] but don't know just what to do about it except keep banging them with letters (There's 30 bucks owing here too, which we need like all hell -- I know the financial situation there is bad, but irresponsibility doesn't help it any).  
I'm writing in the dark as to recent developments, but . . . [the C.R.G. is needed] to build a strong labor theatre for which the foundations were laid.s<sup>199</sup>

In spring of 1939, the monetary crunch in New York became quite severe. Ben Irwin sent letters via Special Delivery to pressure theatre groups into paying their royalties and dues. Kay Wood and Ben Irwin snapped at each other in a volley of sharp

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<sup>198</sup> Kay wood to Alice Evans. July 26, 1938. Letter to Ben Irwin from Esther Hoffman. Sept. 9, 1938. The letter Esther is responding to is not extant.

<sup>199</sup> Alice Evans to Charles De Sheim. July 9, 1938. New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library's Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

missives that demonstrate the financial pressure's effects and a breach of trust, which was temporary but recurring. Wood wrote:

Your special delivery letters of the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 22<sup>nd</sup> have occasioned me much concern. Believe me, the royalties will receive our first and promptest attention, the moment we feel ourselves safe from bankruptcy. . . . Perhaps, also, you may be able to subsist momentarily by collecting royalties as yet unpaid, on material submitted for distribution by the Chicago Repertory Group.

She handwrote at the bottom of the page, "P.S. Please note that any feeling or opinion expressed herein is not personal but the consensus of the exec. Kate." Irwin responded in kind with:

I am sorry that my letters of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> caused you so much concern. I was extremely disappointed that you didn't find it possible to answer them a little more promptly. Your remark [regarding lax distribution schedules has] absolutely no basis and [sic] fact. You will forgive me if I sound [sic] righteous, but all orders received at this office are filled within forty-eight hours. . . . "

At the bottom, he typed, "All the opinions expressed in here are the opinions of the bureau and not personal" to which Wood shot back, "sorry I have evidence to indicate you are mistaken about the forty-eight hour service. However" she conceded, "I understand that lack of personnel can create tremendous problems." Perhaps Katherine Wood felt able to soften her tone since the letter included a royalty check for \$150.00 to cover the balance due on a successful run of *The Cradle Will Rock*. She went on,

Please do not make those of us in charge now, bear the sins of our predecessors. . . . The Repertory Group has made great strides, and I can assure you that our Repertory Department now is a miracle of efficiency. . . . If you feel that we can be of any assistance to you in the matter of disposition of scripts, please do not hesitate. . . . What we propose to do is not to help ourselves, but to help you.”

The letters demonstrate the changeable relationship between the affiliated theatres and headquarters in New York. The tone changes due to circumstances and the personalities. It also suggests that these comrades in the struggle for working class justice felt rather personal connections, which made for some painful exchanges when things were not going well. The necessities of running both the theatre and the national office like businesses forged relationships but they strained under the load. The C.R.G. was one group that weathered those storms through multiple personnel changes, and rough financial seas.

The list of major C.R.G. productions is very respectable, especially for a volunteer organization. In a publicity article written in spring of 1941, the C.R.G. claimed 15<sup>200</sup> major productions between 1935 and 1941.<sup>201</sup> The major successes were plays that League theatres all over the country also tended to produce, along with a few that the group developed itself. The first major success was *Waiting for Lefty*, adapted for the Chicago labor scene, followed by a version of *The Young Go First*, which the

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<sup>200</sup> Brown lists 19 stationary productions. The difference may lie in a definition of ‘major’ production.

<sup>201</sup> The article is undated, but is publicizing *Man of Monticello* a play about Thomas Jefferson which the C.R.G. was rehearsing in March of 1941, according to correspondence from Leah Solor to Toby Cole dated 12 March 1941.

C.R.G. reduced from a 'weak three act versions . . . into a powerful one-act play. . . .'<sup>202</sup>

*The Black Pit* was the first full-length play they produced.<sup>203</sup> A very successful production of *Bury the Dead* followed in 1937, followed in turn by *The Cradle Will Rock* in fall of 1938, a production that the author and composer, Marc Blitzstein, attended. After that, the C.R.G. adapted *One Third of a Nation* to the Chicago housing situation. Members of the C.R.G.'s Playwriting Workshop wrote the next full length play themselves, a musical "travesty of the Horatio Alger legend" called *The Lady is Right*, in 1940. The production was quite successful, and encouraged them to write or adapt material for their own use and to offer it to the League for publication.<sup>204</sup>

The C.R.G. performed stationary theatre in several different locations. Some of their productions took place in the Goodman Theatre, which then was at 1016 N. Dearborn St. Some took place in the Forester Theatre, some at Hull House, some at International House at the University of Chicago, and some in their own space at 29 E. Balbo Street.

During its entire existence, the C.R.G. maintained a very active mobile theatre section through connections with area unions and other progressive organizations. Although mobile theatre programs had their own problems, such as unions' reluctance to use theatre at all and especially Communist-tainted theatre, lack of glamour compared to stationary theatre, and the grueling schedules associated with numerous short

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<sup>202</sup> *The Young go First* criticized the youth camps of the Civilian conservation Corps as a site of inculcating fascist attitudes.

<sup>203</sup> *The Black Pit* was a highly effective rather melodramatic play with a realistic style. It showed the pressures felt by ordinary coal workers attempting to organize.

<sup>204</sup> Quotations are taken from an undated article in *Pic Magazine*, found in a press scrapbook in the Regenstein Library Special Collection at the University of Chicago. The date can be estimated by the plays that are mentioned.

performances, C.R.G. representatives frequently advised other League theatres to develop and use mobile theatre as a central activity. The mobile theatre helped develop a name and reputation for the organization, generated income, and advanced the goals of social change.

Once the U.S. entered World War II in 1941, the C.R.G. abandoned the anti-war position held by New York headquarters and joined the war effort. The Chicago Office of Civilian Defense made the C.R.G. its official theater, and the C.R.G. performed at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station and at U.S.O. parties.<sup>205</sup>

The C.R.G. celebrated its tenth anniversary in 1943, boasting 50 members, but records of its activity end at about the same time. Some skits survive in the archive that relate to events that occurred after 1943, such as the Taft-Hartley bill and the development of the hydrogen bomb, showing that the group continued in some form after 1943, but the 1943 celebration was planned as a finale, according to Esther Brown. The last performance was titled *And We Believe it Now*, whose playbill was a proud statement of the C.R.G.'s accomplishments, and, significantly, placed C.R.G. activities in the past tense:

We are proud that by producing these plays we were able to play a small part in the making of this history. We are proud that we spoke out for the right of people to live with dignity, that we sang for Spain, and that we were pretty rough with Benito, Hirohito, and Adolph when an axis was still considered to be something on which the earth revolves. We are

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<sup>205</sup> Brown, 64-65.

proud that now, with thirty-two of our actors in the armed forces. . . we  
still sing of Democracy in every community hall in Chicago.<sup>206</sup>

As Brown states, the C.R.G. had written its own obituary, considering the C.R.G. closed.

### **Repertory and performance modes**

The C.R.G. struggled with balancing major stationary productions, like *Waiting for Lefty* or *The Cradle Will Rock*, with building a mobile theatre program that served a range of left causes and organizations. The C.R.G. could benefit from either type of production, and also used each effectively to communicate social issue messages. Larger shows incurred much greater financial risk, yet lent the C.R.G. a higher profile, and therefore stronger potential both for attracting new members and for communicating with a wider audience. The C.R.G. struggled to fund larger shows and whenever those failed to draw sufficient audiences to pay the bills, the group felt the financial crunch painfully. Whenever the group experienced successful large-scale shows, it was able to pay debts and sometimes make improvements to its facilities. Mobile theatre could not bring in a financial bonanza the way a successful stationary show could.

Mobile theatre involved minimal financial risk but by definition preached only to the choir. Its main beneficial effect on audiences, and this was not insignificant, was to reinforce political attitudes among union members and other leftists.<sup>207</sup> In addition to energizing the target audience, CGR mobile theatre pieces could help explain and clarify specific issues, serving a direct function and purpose in the cause. The other chief benefit of the mobile pieces was financial. The C.R.G. charged left organizations a fee for

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>207</sup> Colette Hyman discusses this benefit at length in *Staging Strikes*.

performances. The fees varied according to the size of the piece, the distance to be traveled, and the royalties charged by League headquarters for each performance. A steady program of mobile performances helped to stabilize the group's finances.

The C.R.G., like the New Theatre of Philadelphia and the Red Dust Players discussed below, believed in the efficacy of mobile theatre, and urged New York to encourage all New Theatres to develop strong mobile theatre programs to reap the benefits of both income and stronger relations with left organizations. In December of 1940, Jane Swanhuyser wrote to New York "...we believe mobile work of tremendous importance and have felt it the only way of reaching the audience we should reach."<sup>208</sup> Swanhuyser strongly felt that the focus for League theatres should be on finding and serving an audience. She reported that the C.R.G. "kids passed a resolution to go mobile" by April of 1940. She was happy about that decision, because the unions seemed anxious to have dramatizations of union issues, such as clarifying for the workers "why [they should] join a union, foreman steward relationships, etc."<sup>209</sup> Swanhuyser's enthusiasm was echoed by Ruth Deacon's insights about the New Theatre of Philadelphia's most effective audience development tactics and also the Red Dust Players' highly positive experience with their small rural audiences and with union sponsored performances.

Despite the resolution supporting mobile theatre there was dissent among C.R.G. members. The desire to produce major stationary shows split the focus of the group. About the time Swanhuyser wrote to Ben Irwin about the value of mobile theatre, the

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<sup>208</sup> Jane Swanhuyser to Toby Cole. n.d. Stamped "Received 26 Dec. 1940." Regenstein Library Special Collection at the University of Chicago.

<sup>209</sup> Swanhuyser to Irwin. April 26, 1940. Regenstein Library Special Collection at the University of Chicago



C.R.G. was preoccupied with two major stationary productions, *The Lady is Right*, and *Not on My Life*. C.R.G. members may well have been in disagreement about the value of stationary vs mobile work because those major shows, Swanhuysen reported, had tied up all the publicity forces the C.R.G. could call upon. The mobile theatre was suffering because of the tremendous amount of energy it took to produce a major play.

Despite her strongly expressed beliefs, however, it proved difficult to maintain an ongoing mobile theatre. Swanhuysen confessed, perhaps in context of the tremendous amount of time spent by C.R.G. volunteers on audience development that "...the unions and other organizations aren't a lot more anxious to have us perform at their own halls than they were to come down here [to the C.R.G.'s permanent theatre]. . . ."210 Unions, of course, as Deacon had also discovered, were concerned primarily with union problems, and hosting a theatre performance more than likely was not at the top of the union's list of priorities. In addition, most unions took a moderate stance in contrast to the more radical political stance of League theatres. In a letter to Alice Evans in May 1939 discussing the development of a regional center for the League in Chicago, Kay Wood wrote:

In our own territory we know how difficult it is to establish contact even with liberal cultural groups or labor organizations . . . . As an example, may I cite our endorsement by the Chicago Federation of Labor . . . . The endorsement is of a very tenuous nature. It may be broken at any time for

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210 Swanhuysen to Cole. n.d.

very slight cause. It consists of a minimum of support, and it brings us practically nothing in positive financial return.<sup>211</sup>

One of the major goals of League theatres was to speak for and to working people. In the 1930s, these workers were represented by unions in greater numbers than any other time in U.S. history. Yet hardworking, dedicated theatre people, even in exemplary groups like the C.R.G., could not make a solid connection with mainstream, or any other unions.

Unions of course, are fraught with their own political struggles, both internal and external. In this time period, they were walking a line between effecting change and avoiding 'radical' labels. Union movements in the U.S. fought – and still fight -- a long, hard battle against the individualism that underlies the American Dream.<sup>212</sup> Because of the pervasiveness of individualism, there was already resistance against groups of workers organizing in opposition to management. Group efforts were associated with Communism and Socialism, and were seen as a menace not only to the government but more broadly to the American dream, marked so strongly by individual rewards or upward mobility, luxury, and leisure. Pervasive individualism worked against union efforts, and unions could not afford to be associated with Communism, whose perceived erasure of individuality fed anti-union sentiment. The League, with its Communist taint, felt little welcome by organized labor.

### **Publicity and audience development**

The C.R.G. leaders did not take the need for publicity lightly and they were skilled at getting numerous notices in the papers about their activities. Their press

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<sup>211</sup> Katherine Wood to Evans. May 22, 1939. Regenstein Library Special Collection at the University of Chicago.

<sup>212</sup> My dissertation, "The Individual Within the Mass: Workers Theatre in Depression America," discusses the idea of individualism in League plays at length.

scrapbooks are full of a variety of articles, short and long, that appeared preceding each major production. Publicity started with season announcements, followed by articles announcing auditions. Casting and director selection might merit separate notices focusing on interesting personal angles. Another press release went out at the start of rehearsal. Unique features of the C.R.G.'s modes of operation were featured in additional articles, which of course also mentioned the upcoming production. Once a show opened, pieces might focus on related items, such as the theater's annual New Year's Eve party, or the theater's stand on the boycott of Japanese silk, or a visit from a well known actor, as happened when Jules Garfield (known as John Garfield in the movies) dropped in at the C.R.G.. Each event or aspect of C.R.G. activities that could be construed as newsworthy was apparently written up and submitted to the newspapers. Every article called attention to the C.R.G.'s productions.

For example, for the 1937 production of *Bury the Dead*, the scrapbook contains eleven different articles and listings publicizing the show. One was a photo essay that focused on the women in the C.R.G.. Photos show actors Lucille Colbert and Babette Block listening to tips on stage makeup from Ruth Deacon, who was one of the C.R.G. office's administrative mainstays before going to work at the New Theatre of Philadelphia. The article describes Deacon as "strikingly dressed in a coat from Paris which has fox lapels dyed cerise."<sup>213</sup> The next page of this article shows the 'girls' in the C.R.G. working in the theatre wiring a light board, adjusting details on costumes, and

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<sup>213</sup> This is of course quite interesting since it seemed to capitalize on high end consumerism in order to publicize a theatre company that featured working class issues of economic justice.

fixing a spotlight.<sup>214</sup> The photo essay depicts the women at C.R.G. as interested in make-up and fox fur, but also capable of using tools and wiring electric equipment. This no doubt made rather intriguing reading.

Other print publicity folded prominent references to the play into articles about related items. For example, one began, “Want to be an actor?” and went on to explain that since the play, *Bury the Dead* was now ‘on the boards’ the actors had time to teach acting classes, so it was time to enroll.<sup>215</sup> In what might have otherwise been a simple audition notice, an article dated September of 1937 announced, “Theater Group Starts Work.” It featured an explanation of method acting, and included detailed information about the form that auditions would take. The same month saw a piece that highlighted the democratic nature of the C.R.G.’s consensus-style working methods, and included a paragraph about the current show. There was also a small notice declaring that the record number of unions that took blocks of tickets for *Bury the Dead* demonstrated widening support of the “labor movement’s own theatre.”<sup>216</sup> There are also four reviews of the production in the scrapbook. All of these articles served to get repeated mention of the play, *Bury the Dead* in front of the reading public. Each article had its own focus, yet also helped remind people that there was a production going on; and these were only the print items.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> It is unclear which newspaper ran this article. The scrapbook is found in the Regenstein Library Special Collection at the University of Chicago.

<sup>215</sup> “Repertory Group Issues Call.” December 7, 1937. Regenstein Library Special Collection at the University of Chicago.

<sup>216</sup> n.a. “Own theater.” September 1937. Regenstein Library Special Collection at the University of Chicago.

<sup>217</sup> And I might add, only those saved and included in this scrapbook.

Members of the C.R.G. also placed spots on the radio, leafleted meetings and other events, hung posters, placed ads in the programs for other left organizations' meetings, and sold blocks of seats to groups. Speakers from the C.R.G. visited a tremendous number of organizations to sell tickets. For example, for eight months, Alice Evans and a band of volunteer speakers "visited an average of three union meetings per night five nights a week."<sup>218</sup> As a result, Evans wrote, 18,000 people saw the three major C.R.G. productions in 1936-1937.<sup>219</sup> During the season ending June 1937, C.R.G. representatives visited 289 locals and sold 109 blocks of tickets to 82 of those locals. Brown also reports that C.I.O. unions tended to buy more tickets than AFL unions.<sup>220</sup> The Chicago Tribune reported that 10,000 of the 12,500 seats available for the run of *Help Yourself*, produced at the Goodman theatre in 1937 were sold before opening night, a testament to the effectiveness of this time-intensive public relations effort.<sup>221</sup> In addition, each company member took tickets to sell personally, and in 1936 the C.R.G. launched a membership drive, seeking 2,000 individual memberships of \$1 annually. This amount would buy the member a 10% reduction on the cost of two tickets for every production of the season. The C.R.G. devoted much time and energy to building an audience for each production, following a thorough, well organized plan that depended upon active contributions of time and effort from volunteers, and on relationships with leftist groups whose members might be interested in the C.R.G.'s kind of theater. Despite all this work, the C.R.G. continually struggled with making back expenses through the box office.

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<sup>218</sup> Brown, 10.

<sup>219</sup> Alice Evans. "Two on the Aisle." *Theatre Workshop*. April - June 1938: 84.

<sup>220</sup> Brown, 10.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

The C.R.G. obtained a significant amount of free publicity through these methods, which required time and effort at little expense. The Group was also connected to a multitude of other Chicago area organizations – theatres, churches, the University of Chicago and Northwestern University, area Y.M.C.A.’s, Y.W.C.A.’s, and Y.M.H.A.’s. They had a working relationship with the Chicago Federal Theatre and Writer’s Projects, some of whose employees also worked on C.R.G. productions, and which sometimes collaborated with the C.R.G. on other events. The organization got a boost and often free publicity when celebrities came to town and visited them, as did the famed Group Theatre of New York. In May of 1936, the C.R.G. threw the first of several cast parties for Group touring shows. At one of these gatherings, the C.R.G. performed a satire of *Waiting for Lefty* called *Waiting for Odets*.<sup>222</sup> The performance impressed the Group Theatre members, and for the three weeks of their Chicago run, Group Theatre members Jules Garfield, Morris Carnovsky, and Luther Adler taught acting in the afternoons to C.R.G. actors.<sup>223</sup> A personal and professional connection seems to have developed between the C.R.G. and Group Theatre members. Group Theatre member Art Smith came to Chicago to perform in the C.R.G.’s revival of *Waiting for Lefty*, and in 1938, Jules Garfield explained in the Daily Record, “I have a soft spot in my heart for the Rep Group, which is the leading social theatre in the country outside of New York . . . each time I am more amazed at the rapid strides and development of this organization.”<sup>224</sup>

The Chicago mainstream press was often condescending to the C.R.G., but at times reviews expressed admiration for the Rep Group’s productions. The Chicago Daily

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<sup>222</sup> Of course, the Group Theatre produced the professional premiere of *Waiting for Lefty* and its author, Clifford Odets, was a member of the Group Theatre.

<sup>223</sup> Brown, 13-14.

<sup>224</sup> Brown, 14.

News praised their “professional skill,” the Herald-Examiner mentioned that it had “slowly progressed from an amateur to a semi-professional theater,” and the Chicago Times predicted that the C.R.G. “can and should go far.”<sup>225</sup> In the C.R.G.’s final moments, Ashton Stevens, a vitriolic critic who regularly had harsh words for them, wrote, “I congratulate the Group for most of the plays they have tackled throughout their first decade. . . .” and Robert Pollak of the Chicago Times referred to their “unquenched vitality” and “theatrical versatility.”<sup>226</sup>

The aspiration towards professionalism was a double-edged sword, however, as mentioned earlier. It drew focus and energy away from the initial purpose of the theatre: the cause of radical change. It is easy to imagine the gratification felt by C.R.G. members when reading performance reviews in major papers like those quoted above, and visits by theatrical and film luminaries certainly fed aspirations to professional success on Broadway or in Hollywood. The drawing power of that kind of success must have been great, especially when contrasted with the lack of tangible reward in the social theatre. Yet the C.R.G. seems to have been grounded enough in its initial mission to hold the course for the most part during its entire existence. All of its major productions had a strong central social message, and most were quite far left, politically. The mobile productions were by definition socially relevant. The C.R.G., although distracted by potential professional success, kept focus on the main goal of the organization.

## NEW THEATRE OF PHILADELPHIA

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<sup>225</sup> Brown, 15.

<sup>226</sup> Brown, 16.

The New Theatre of Philadelphia (N.T.P.) had the good fortune to be steered by Ruth Deacon for most of its existence. Deacon was a dynamo, and was the chief correspondent with League headquarters in New York. Her letters, along with reports drafted by other N.T.P. members, convey a picture of a theatre that was among the most successful in the League -- in fact, League headquarters asked it to become one of the Regional Centers when that plan materialized in late 1940. The N.T.P. struggled against official repression and continual financial problems with spirit and commitment. Despite its continual poverty the N.T.P. was a role model in the organization and operation of an activist theatre in the 1930s.

Records available about the New Theatre of Philadelphia are moderately rich. Much correspondence between League headquarters and the N.T.P. from June 1938 to May 1941 is extant. Most of the letters are from or to Ruth Deacon, who served as Executive Secretary for N.T.P., and also acted in many productions.<sup>227</sup> The letters in particular offer a depiction of the challenges faced by League theatres, and strategies for coping.

The N.T.P. began offering productions in September 1934 in an old church that the members refitted for theatre productions.<sup>228</sup> The theatre owned its own drapes, lighting instruments, switchboard (for lights), cyclorama, and turntable. Members made their own costumes. The theatre did not own a truck. These possessions made it one of the better-equipped theatres in the League, along with the Chicago Repertory Group. The

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<sup>227</sup> Correspondence is found in New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection. Box 1, folder 5, and Box 17, folders 1 – 4.

<sup>228</sup> Information about the general history of the N.T.P. is taken from the Audience Report, probably written in Spring of 1938, and the Saul W. Paul article in Arts in Philadelphia, which provides an overview history of the group on the eve of the opening of *We Beg to Differ*. Other sources are cited when used.



N.T.P. also developed a working organizational system and enough will power and passion to weather several years of mistakes in production and public relations, and to last until at least 1941.

The theatre's members struggled to determine their mission and to accomplish it given very limited resources. The document "Audience Report," probably written in spring of 1938, details the first three years' attempts to develop a theatre that served the causes of labor and the working class. Wryly describing themselves as "Political infants" the Report acknowledged that their initial project, simply to be a 'social' theatre, was far too vague. The desired audience was too undefined to be an effective target.

The group set out first to sell the idea of a social theatre by obtaining subscribers who would become members and fund the first productions. They secured an astonishing number of memberships: 800, touting a rather vague production plan. Due to the unfocused nature of their initial plans the audience was made up of people with widely varying expectations, and they could please no-one. As a result, radicals spurned them as a waste of time, unions avoided them as "Reds," and the middle class found them artistically inadequate.

The N.T.P. confronted a common problem of League theatres: the necessity of defining a political path, an agenda, and the most appropriate and fruitful audience. The New Theatre of Philadelphia did eventually resolve this problem, although the solution did not guarantee long-term financial security. Staff at N.T.P. learned that to succeed they needed to be very specific about their purpose and their audience, and to stick very closely to their mission. This they learned through trial and error, stumbling toward clarity. Early on, they clung to the idea that theatre, to be viable, really should look like

the traditional form: a purpose-built proscenium space, with polished, sophisticated performances, and an attentive audience. In reality, it was a much rougher form that brought them success.

At a booking with the striking Shipyard Workers Union the N.T.P. performers played a skit they wrote themselves. The play attempted to clarify specific strike issues for the membership, and it was a great success. This, the “Audience Report” chronicled, was “a hint” at what would work for them. However, the N.T.P. then attempted a full, stationary production of *Black Pit*, a play that had been presented with modest success on Broadway.<sup>229</sup>

*Black Pit* focused on coal miners. In the course of the play the mining company puts pressure on one worker to betray his comrades in the rank and file. It presented union problems effectively and had played successfully elsewhere. The mistake the N.T.P. made was to count on a large audience turnout to pay production costs. N.T.P. members overestimated their standing in the community rented a larger theatre, with more seats than their own 200 seat space. The theatre they rented was \$1000 a week; in hindsight, an extravagant amount of money. Knowing that they had to fill seats, group members worked hard to develop an audience. They attempted to go to union meetings to speak. They also “begged, pleaded, and commanded” the Communist Party’s support. These two tactics were in conflict, however, as non-Communist unions were reluctant to support what they viewed as a ‘Red’ organization. Any support from the CP or its unions meant avoidance by other organizations. N.T.P. members did not yet understand

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<sup>229</sup> *Black Pit* by Albert Maltz, ran for 85 performances in New York. (Himmelstein 65).

their audience and how to negotiate these political divides. While the production had “artistic promise” it left them deep in the red, financially.

Just after this failed attempt, a little skit called Union Label, “woefully inadequate both artistically and in its simple content,” according to the “Audience Report,” proved tremendously successful when played for a union audience. It was booked enthusiastically for 22 performances after its initial showing, “being received with real enjoyment by workers who had never been in a theatre, who had never heard of ‘labor skits.’” From this experience the N.T.P. began to shrug off its attachment to full productions of stationary, traditional theatre, and to see its central mission as “to contribute to the solution of immediate problems” of labor [emphasis in original]. After struggling past the idea that the unions “should” support the theatre, and that the CP and the working class were somehow obligated to make sure the theatre succeeded, N.T.P. members realized that the problems of labor and of working people were the important thing, not theatre productions per se. As the “Audience Report” articulated, the organization recognized that “our approach should be: comrades, what problem is facing your union that needs clarification and support? . . . and not, Comrades, as communists it is your duty to see that the New Theatre is backed by your unions at once!”

As obvious as this might seem, it was a major adjustment, necessary to the success that the N.T.P. did achieve. It focused their efforts on connecting to a very specific audience, and to a method of audience development that helped fill their 200 seats often enough to allow them to exist for at least six years.

The N.T.P. seems to have evolved workable methods, both artistically and organizationally. The theatre was a membership organization, with 80-100 dues-paying,

participating members at the peak of their operations in 1938-1940.<sup>230</sup> Members were accepted on a probationary basis for three months. At the end of that time, the entire membership voted on permanency accepting new members. Members were all expected to be active – there were no ‘honorary’ members who only contributed dues. All members helped with ongoing work, whether in administration or production or both, and paid annual dues of \$0.25 for employed and \$0.10 for unemployed. Members could be dropped by vote of the entire membership as well, and the 1938 Theatre Survey reported a “small” turnover in membership annually.

The membership annually elected two committees that were responsible for operations: an Executive Committee and Production Council, each made up of three members. The Executive Committee was responsible for business operations and the Production Council for theatrical productions. Membership at large voted on the choice of plays for full productions and on major policy or program decisions, but the Executive and Production branches were empowered to act on daily decisions and smaller productions such as one-act plays. The Production Council oversaw several subcommittees, such as a Technical Department, the Acting Company, Wardrobe and Costume Departments, Playwrites Group [sic], and Directors. These subcommittees worked directly with the Production Council on each production. The structure mirrors operations in many professional, university, or community theatres in the U.S.

The Executive also supervised subgroups, each focused on a different organizational aspect. There were committees on office work, finances, audience and

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<sup>230</sup> Letters from Ruth Deacon to League headquarters mention 100 members. The 'Theatre Survey, distributed by New York League headquarters and filled out by the theatres themselves, listed 80 members.

booking departments, publicity committee, membership and the children's school committee. The Executive Committee oversaw all aspects of the N.T.P., including the production work. Yet in theory at least, the membership itself was the body with the highest authority, entrusting the Executive to carry out day-to-day functions and to turn over major decisions to the membership for a vote.<sup>231</sup>

Once arrived at, this method seems to have been quite successful since the form of organization lasted for several years, and there exists in the records no account of major changes in it or of conflicts that strained the organization's fabric. There are no extant meeting minutes or internal correspondence, however, so this assumption of a fairly cooperative membership is based primarily on indirect evidence.

The N.T.P. was a dues-paying, fully affiliated theatre in the League, and it hosted the national conference twice with Lem Ward, a long time member of N.T.P., giving key talks at each meeting. Deacon made regular and full reports to the League about N.T.P. activities, contributed articles for League publications, and was as prompt as possible in paying royalties for League-owned scripts. Most of the correspondence between Deacon the League headquarters has a rather casual, friendly tone. For example, Deacon wrote to Alice Evans at New York headquarters:

Glad to hear from you again. Dan Wayne was in last weekend and explained how busy you've been reorganizing, etc. Sorry to hear we haven't filled the \$200 quota for Spain yet. Better get some other groups busy, \$200 isn't much. We'll be doing more later. Right now we're in an

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<sup>231</sup> Organizational details are taken from Aaron Spiegel's report to the National convention in 1940.

awful hole ourselves and we've got to work fast to yank ourselves out of it.<sup>232</sup>

The letters reflect an easy mix of friendly relations, political commitment, and dedication to working out the real problems of the serious work at hand. Alice Evans tended to take a friendly cooperative tone, no matter how desperately the League offices needed affiliates to pay royalties or contribute in other ways. Not all personnel at League headquarters used that style, however.

In April 1939, one of many times when the New York offices were really desperate financially, Deacon indignantly replied to a letter from Ben Irwin, which was apparently rather 'scolding' in tone.<sup>233</sup> She wrote:

Look – you know we understand the terrific financial problems of the League and the fact that we have never neglected royalties, that we are most conscientious about keeping you posted on all our activities, plans, and whatnot, that we were as prompt as possible in paying our affiliations, etc., -- all this should be kept in mind, I think, when we strike a serious crisis. I don't think it is fair of you to 'threaten' us by withholding new material. . . .<sup>234</sup>

She wrote, two weeks later, to Alice Evans: "I'm really overjoyed that you're getting back on the job again, because I missed your letters very much! . . . I was angry at Ben's letter, because "threatening" us by withholding scripts does not help matters. It presumes

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<sup>232</sup> Ruth Deacon to Evans. September 21, 1938. New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts.

<sup>233</sup> Irwin's letter is not extant.

<sup>234</sup> Deacon to Irwin, April 7, 1938. New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts.

that we could pay if we would . . . . “ This is not the only evidence that Ben Irwin’s style created friction, and it suggests that a cooperative style worked better with League theatres.

In this letter, Deacon explained that they had only \$6.00 on hand, including the bank balance, the electric company had sent someone to turn off the power, and the oil company refused to deliver any more oil. Meanwhile, various unions owed them a total of about \$40.00 for bookings. This sort of crisis is documented regularly in Deacon’s letters.

Equally regularly the N.T.P. pleaded for discounts on royalties for performances. For example, in January 1939, in asking for a discount on *The Cradle Will Rock*, Deacon submitted this budget to Margaret Larkin at League headquarters:

200 seats @ 55¢		110.0 GROSS	110.00 Gross
			<u>51.47</u> Expenses
			58.53 <u>Net</u>
Expenses:	10.00	Federal Tax	
	7.00	Pianist	
	12.50	Royalty	
	20.00	Electricity, janitor, heat, etc.	
	<u>2.47</u>	To Philadelphia Music Center (5% of net)	
	51.47		

The budget shows that for each performance the N.T.P. netted only \$58.53, and that much only if they sold every seat for every performance. Furthermore, the expenses listed here do not include advertising costs or overhead for offices, salaries, and other ongoing expenses. Deacon explained that never did they have a ‘full house’ because about one third of the house was usually “guests” – probably union officials or others for whom they felt they could not charge admission for public relations reasons. The complimentary seats reduced their net to about \$37.00. Virtually all of the theatre’s

income came from box office, except for a few minor donations, the miniscule membership fees, and some funds raised through special events.

Because of this tight budget and the theatre's dependence on box office, the group worked very hard to develop an audience for each production and even for each performance. They attempted to speak or present a scene from a production at every union meeting or meeting of other sympathetic organizations. They mimeographed flyers and sought free publicity through 'affairs' (house parties, dances, etc.), and gave discounts to members of various organizations. They sold 'block seats' to organizations such as unions, which then re-sold them and kept a small profit for themselves. The audience development program of this group was a major part of the effort they put out, as it was with the Chicago group. As they had learned in their early years, the audience was not automatically going to support labor plays. They needed to find ways to go out to their audience and to demonstrate, with each production, that they were addressing issues of direct concern to that audience.

The N.T.P. found a synergy between mobile work and stationary work, as the more mobile work they did, the larger their audiences for more traditional performances in their own theatre space became. They did not use separate acting companies for each, for they also found that playing under adverse and varying conditions demanded by mobile work improved the actors' ease on the stage, making for stronger performances overall. The business part of the organization began its promotional work as soon as a play for the stationary theatre was selected, lining up eight or nine benefit performances well before the play opened. Shortly after opening, the theatre presented a performance for union leaders, inviting all unions in the area to see the show. After



curtain, a member of the theatre would speak to the audience, stressing the importance of union attendance at the show, to help educate and unite unions in the Philadelphia area. The N.T.P. found this tactic very successful in developing additional benefit performances, purchase of houses, or of blocks of tickets for resale. Aaron Spiegel's 1940 Report asserted that as a result, there "is not a Trade Union Leader in Philadelphia who has not heard of the New Theatre and the work that it does."

In the N.T.P.'s report, given at the 1940 national meeting, plans for the future are outlined. Spiegel stressed that the N.T.P. intended to apply renewed energy to connecting with groups in the Philadelphia area through mobile theatre. The N.T.P. members felt that the increase in dramatics groups within unions in the area was a direct result of their efforts to play to unions. They intended to reach out to peace organizations like the Youth Council Peace Committee, and to devote more energy to the peace effort. The N.T.P. was laying plans for a full time school, but found plans could not be completed while in production for the full length play, Medicine, an expose of the medical industry. Spiegel also mentioned an increase in red-baiting in the Philadelphia area. He wrote with a combination of alarm and irony:

The Police department in Phila., this week has started registering all places at which public meetings are held, or at which people gather. It is strange to note that the only places at which people meet are progressive places such as trade union halls, the New Theatre, and others where the call for peace is continually put forth."<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Aaron Spiegel. "New Theatre of Philadelphia" Report to the National Convention, June 1940. NYPL Box 28 folder 6.

Spiegel's observations parallel the summary written for the December 1940 meeting at which increased repression of progressive activities was outlined.<sup>236</sup>

The N.T.P. survived a rollercoaster of successes and failures. Documentation about its demise does not exist, but the record demonstrates a successful struggle to organize a theatre that lasted for several years, always combating a deficit and striving to serve the population of working class people.

### **RED DUST PLAYERS OF OKLAHOMA**

The Red Dust Players was formed in Oklahoma City in the fall of 1939. Although the company only existed for about a year, correspondence from the "Dusters," as they called themselves, reveals intense, joyful, and highly radical activity. The organization's demise was the direct result of Red Scare tactics when freshly invoked criminal syndicalism laws were applied to Communists and suspected Communists in Oklahoma, including the members of the Red Dust Players. The F.B.I. raided their meager headquarters and repeatedly interrogated their members. These actions, combined with vigilante red baiting and legal action against many leftists in Oklahoma intimidated the Dusters and they quit. Despite the short duration of its existence the "Dusters" history provides clear insight into the heady excitement that an impoverished yet inspired activist theatre could experience.

We are very fortunate in the fact that the Duster's principle organizer, Dorothy Rosenbaum (later Rosenbaum Schmidt) wrote lengthy, detailed and uninhibited letters to N.T.L. headquarters in New York. She detailed their work,

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<sup>236</sup> See Chapter Four for more details.

their problems, and their aspirations.<sup>237</sup> She also illuminates N.T.L. failings by complaining about unmet expectations and unfulfilled League promises, and relays at length the frustrations and disillusionment of a nascent New Theatre in Dallas, Texas that relied upon Dorothy for advice.

The Dusters were working in a part of the country that combined agricultural with the oil industry, the latter providing the largest source of employment for wage earners. The South was particularly difficult to organize, and the Dusters connected with the Oklahoma Tenant Farmer's Union (OTFU), a branch of the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union (STFU), to develop an audience to play to and for.<sup>238</sup> They also performed for the Oil Workers Union and the Meat Packers. Oklahoma had been the sight of the 1917 "Green Corn Rebellion" arguably the last armed revolt by White people against the government,<sup>239</sup> and had recorded the largest percentage of support of any state in the union for the

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<sup>237</sup> I quote Dorothy at length because her descriptions are so vivid. She writes in a very compelling manner, and gives a real taste of her personality, the struggles, and the rewards of League theatre work.

<sup>238</sup> See H.L. Mitchell's books, *Mean Things Happening in this Land*, Montclair, NJ:Allenheld, Osmun and Company, published in 1979, and *Roll the Union On*, a pictorial version of the same story, published by Charles H. Kerr Publishing in Chicago in 1987, for autobiographical versions of the formation and history of the S.T.F.U. For a broader view of the tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the 1930s, see *The Forgotten Farmers* by David Eugene Conrad, published by the University of Illinois Press in 1965. Mitchell's books do not mention the Red Dust Players, or much of any of the cultural activities surrounding the organization drive in the region. The connection with the S.T.F.U. was perhaps a bigger event in the Duster's eyes than in Mitchell's. It is certain that Mitchell's clearly anti-Communist Socialist position would have made him unenthusiastic about any connection with the Red Dust Players. The Dusters carried literature for the Agricultural and Cannery union (UCAPAWA) a union that Mitchell declared CP affiliated, and with which the S.T.F.U. had engaged a 'life and death' struggle (*Roll* 140). It is also possible he did not know of this activity. He reports in his book that new locals of S.T.F.U. were in existence for months before the central S.T.F.U. organization knew about them.

<sup>239</sup> I'm thinking of armed resistance during the Civil Rights era and by Native Americans, during the 1960s and 1970s.

Socialist candidate for President, Norman Thomas – 30% -- in 1912.<sup>240</sup> When the Rebellion was crushed, it left pockets of radicals and other dissenters in the region.<sup>241</sup>

Dusters aimed to serve both industrial workers, mostly in the oil and meat packing businesses, and rural farmers. Oklahoma did not have many industrial centers where workers gathered and that the Dusters could visit with labor theatre, although there was an occasional larger audience in an indoor space in a town. The farmers could only be found at a distance from urban areas, and so the Dusters found themselves traveling miles of country roads to play for mostly small, localized audiences. However, the rural audiences were, by Duster report, very enthusiastic audiences. Dorothy writes:

I wish every one of you could have been with us on our last Tuesday's booking for the OTFU up in Creek County. It's sharecroppers [sic] part of the state, rolling hills covered with red sand. What hasn't been bled out by the oil wells has been blown away by the wind. We were off the highway, some 10 miles from the nearest town, in a little Negro church, playing by light of five oil lanterns that the audience had brought with them. Our audience came from twenty miles away in all directions; some of them we had to fetch in ourselves. The admission was 10¢, children under six, free—but we felt we

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<sup>240</sup> H. L. Mitchell. *Roll the Union On*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing, 1987. 41.

<sup>241</sup> The S.T.F.U. was present in Oklahoma by the mid thirties, led by Odis L. Sweeden, a Cherokee man. By 1936 there were 75 S.T.F.U. units in Oklahoma, with 8500 members (Mitchell *Roll* 42). Two years later, a split developed among factions in the union, which led to its demise (Cunningham 170).

should have paid them for the pleasure of performing. One old man toted a sack of flour into town and sold it to raise the admission for himself and kids, and one family mortgaged their old sow. One woman said she would've staid [sic] up all night seeing it over and over, and one woman said it'd been 10 years – maybe longer – she'd forgot just when – since she'd "clupped her hands together" last. But they clupped, and they laughed way down deep, Negro and white together, and scraped their feet on the floor, and said Yes sir, that's the truth; that's the way it is, and sang We shall not be moved. . . ."242

The group played all over Oklahoma, driving in rickety cars or hitching rides with their props and costume pieces to present its message of economic equality and unity in the fight for a better life. Audiences like this one were the reward.

The price the Dusters paid for this work was exacted in exhaustion and in contentious in-fighting. The Dusters' struggle exemplified Lem Ward's description of the process of figuring out what combination of organization, personnel, resources, and audience worked in any particular situation. The group was eventually pared down to nine members who worked well together and, most importantly, agreed politically about who the audience was and what the message should be. Until that whittling down had taken place, there was trouble, as Dorothy writes:

. . . . the Morrisses – Dr Hayes – and several other members of the group (who had been rehearsing LEFTY) decided they 'weren't

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<sup>242</sup> Dorothy Schmidt to Bass. April 5, 1940. New Theatre League Records. New Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

in favor of strikes' – bla, bla – wouldn't go on tour – got out of group. They've returned to the Municipal Drama Assn. And are putting on *The Importance of Being Earnest* (So Let all of our Enemies Perish, oh Jehovah!) – and have developed into unbelievably viC.I.O.us red-baiters – calling up people and telling them Moscow controls our theatre group etc. . . . but now we have a small but very healthy, solid core – enough to take care of the bookings. . . ."<sup>243</sup>

This change in the group's make up came just as the Dusters made contact with the Diamond X Oil Workers, which booked them on a tour of twelve to fifteen towns where workers were striking. For this tour, Dan Garrison, a Commonwealth College veteran and beginning playwright, adapted *Tillie the Toiler* by William Titus for the local situation, and added a clown figure to be the master of ceremonies. Dan, a child of well to do parents, had chucked his privileged roots and worked the oil fields for five years, becoming an oil workers union member. Dorothy described the performance of *Tillie the Toiler* in detail.<sup>244</sup>

It opened when "Sis" Cunningham<sup>245</sup> entered in a 'ridiculous' Gay Nineties costume with her accordion and sang and played a rousing number. Then the lights went down and she switched to piano, playing an overture of familiar tunes and workers songs. In the middle of this section, Dan, dressed as

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<sup>243</sup> Rosenbaum Schmidt to Irwin. February 2, 1940. New Theatre League Records. New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

<sup>244</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all descriptions are from a letter Dorothy wrote to Ben Irwin at League headquarters on 14 Feb. 1940.

<sup>245</sup> As mentioned in Chapter Four, Sis's given name was Agnes. She later married Gordon Fraser and the two were both leftist folk singers, working in New York with Pete Seeger and others after things in Oklahoma went sour. For more on Sis, see *Red Dust and Broadsides*.

Bozo the Clown, stumbled through the curtains and tried to interrupt Sis without success. He started his opening speech with “Will all drunks, scabs, strike-breakers, and supporters of Governor Phillips please leave the hall now. We’ve got you spotted” to a roar of laughter from the crowd. Then he introduced the cast, Sis played “Home Sweet Home,” and the play proper began. *Tillie the Toiler* is based upon “mellerdrammer” conventions, and tells how a poor family loses its farm to the Mortgage Company, and how only with the help of the Union can it get its farm back.<sup>246</sup> A moustache twirling allegorical character named “Mortgage Company” pursues Tillie, the beautiful farmer’s daughter.<sup>247</sup>

The Dusters inserted a clown character into this piece, and as Dorothy reported, “Dan...makes the show – in his clown costume acts as prompter, prop man, plant, and general kibtzer [sic].” His Bozo character provided props when needed. For example, since the “set” consisted only of two window shades with furniture painted on them, he held up a piece of board with the word “door” painted on it when a character needed to knock on the farmer’s door. He demanded response from the audience, in a clown-like, amiable way, and contributed much to the audience’s enjoyment.<sup>248</sup> The group inserted songs appropriate to the oil workers’ situation, such as a production number for the characters of “Ma” and “Pa” called “You Can’t Live on Love.” They altered lines of the song to get some quick laughs and to connect with local villains, for

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<sup>246</sup> A mellerdrammer is a spoof of nineteenth century melodrama. In mellerdrammer exaggerated overacting of simplified villain and hero, or in this case, heroine, mark the playing style. Audiences are encouraged to boo the villain and cheer the heroine.

<sup>247</sup> Agnes Cunningham and Gordon Friesen. *Red Dust and Broadsides: a Joint Autobiography*. 184.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

example inserting the company name and creating puns: "Oil is not well in the Toiler cottage."<sup>249</sup>

Rosenbaum describes the set for the show in some detail. One of the group's members painted a backdrop with oils on three rolls of construction paper. It showed the furniture of the Toiler household and cost them \$5.00 in materials. All that was needed in addition was a pair of chairs and a potted plant to represent the forest. In addition she glowingly describes the "Magnificent Grand Drape" made of a reddish rough cloth to which they planned to add their logo as soon as they decided on one. The Dusters had also constructed flood lights out of bread-boxes and hoped to create a portable cyclorama. Rosenbaum half-jokingly requested pamphlets on "The Art and Technique of Preventing laryngitis" and "Six easy ways of constructing Portable Medicine Kits."

The Dusters' schedule could be very hectic. Dorothy reported that "The past weekend nearly did us in: we were gone from Saturday noon till Sunday midnite [sic], with two performances and three meetings, driving 500 miles."<sup>250</sup> Many of the Dusters were employed or were farmers themselves and so midnight rehearsals were frequently the rule. The small group developed or adapted scripts, rehearsed and directed themselves, found or made props, costumes and the \$6 'Grand Drape' that could be hung up between columns on farm house porches. They scared up bookings, kept in communication with New

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<sup>249</sup> Unfortunately, papers of the Dusters are not extant. No script copies exist to my knowledge. It is possible, due to the nature of their working conditions that the Dusters experienced, that they did not actually write in changes they made, but simply rehearsed and played them.

<sup>250</sup> Rosenbaum to Irwin. March 20, 1940. New Theatre League Records. New Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.



York better than most affiliated theatres, and performed frequently and energetically throughout the area surrounding Oklahoma City. Their energy, drive, and courage were extraordinary.

Dorothy outlined some things they learned from their rural bookings in a September 1940 letter. She stated that the scripts had to be refined to fit the audience quite precisely. Despite their re-writing of plays, it took them several performances and revisions to get the scripts just right. Second, she found that an amateur group without funding, and with most of the members working regular jobs, could not carry out a rural tour without more help. She felt the need for an 'advance man' to handle road details. She felt that the Southern New School<sup>251</sup> could handle it, with a permanent base and more support structure. At the time she wrote this letter, the group had been very active for several months and some of the group's members were taking up other activities. One was hitching to D.C. to lobby against anti-union legislation. Another was going to California to look for work. Another one's father had died, so she was attending to family needs. These kinds of distractions hindered the ability of a volunteer group tremendously.<sup>252</sup>

Dorothy took under her wing a budding New Theatre forming in Dallas, Texas. The Dallas group was idealistic and energetic, according to Dorothy's letters, but became disillusioned with the New York League office. Dorothy's interventions on their behalf via correspondence shed light on perceptions of the

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<sup>251</sup> See Chapter four for more information on the planned Southern School.

<sup>252</sup> Schmidt to Bass. September 22, 1940. New Theatre League Records. New Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

New York office, and on some of the ongoing problems that affected relationships with theatre groups outside New York.

For example, Dorothy wrote that the Dallas group was disillusioned when it attended the national convention of the New Theatre League in Chicago in 1939. The Dallas group, as she described it, was “a handful of less than a half dozen very earnest and pretty talented kids” who endured “pretty severe red-baiting” and infighting to keep producing leftist theatre for a year and a half. They were “starry-eyed” about the mission of social theatres, and about the New Theatre League itself. They paid their dues and attended the Chicago Conference at great sacrifice, where they found that very few theatres actually were paid up on their dues. The group, Dorothy reported, was “terribly disillusioned.” In addition, they had applied to the Dallas American Legion to co-sponsor a production of *Bury the Dead*. The Legion refused such ‘a radical organization,’ and then turned around and produced the play themselves. Of course, the New Theatre League held the rights to the play, and so when they granted production rights to the American Legion, they undercut their own struggling affiliated theatre. Dorothy wrote that NY League officers were probably not aware of this history, and she informed them in order to help the national office understand what is going on in the small theatres. Her goal was to help devise some solutions for this kind of problem. “The importance of keeping the group alive,” she wrote, “is that it is one of very few progressive organizations of any kind in the city. . . .”<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Rosenbaum to Irwin. January 24, 1940. New Theatre League Records. New Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

Rosenbaum's description of Dallas's problems highlights the League's ongoing problems with public image. The Dallas group, upon seeing such a small turnout at the Chicago Convention, felt that the League's claim of hundreds of affiliates was an outright lie. The League felt it necessary to present the strongest image possible, and so it included in those numbers all theatres that were doing leftist theatre and using League scripts, rather than strictly those theatres that were actually dues paying members. Their approach is understandable, but one can also see why a group like the Dallas theatre might be put off, particularly in light of the struggle over *Bury the Dead*.

The Dusters had their own problems. In November of 1940 the environment for leftist activism in Oklahoma became more hostile. In response a group of citizens – liberal ministers, progressives and other like-minded individuals -- formed the "Committee for Constitutional Rights." A letter from Norman O'Connor, a member of the Red Dust Players, to Toby Cole at the New York office recounted that the Dusters' had all been called or visited by the F.B.I. The Dusters no longer had any material to perform since the F.B.I. took all they could find in their raid on Dorothy's place. This letter from O'Connor marked the end of "Red Dusters" letterhead – all correspondence in the NYPL archives from that date on is on plain unlined paper. O'Connor reported that the Oil Workers Union representative, who attended the Civil Liberties meeting "turned out to be the biggest reactionary I have yet seen" so the Dusters experienced not just a loss of support from one of the few unions in their area, but became the subject of attack by a former ally. O'Connor also mentioned in a post script that they were dropping the name "Red Dust Players" for "various reasons" and

asked that the League not use it anymore.<sup>254</sup> The Dusters were all interrogated and the F.B.I., reported Virginia Wheeler, had photos of all of them.<sup>255</sup> Rosenbaum left for Chicago then New York, also staying in Minneapolis for a time –the sequence is unclear -- and Sis Cunningham also went to New York, where, despite being blacklisted, she later became well known on the folk music scene.

The Dusters were out of business by early 1941, victims of an Oklahoma Red Scare. Their story, however, shows how a very small but dedicated and energetic group found an appreciative audience and brought a message in theatrical form to them in very difficult circumstances.

These three affiliates help us to understand the day-to-day problems and successes of League theatres. Correspondence demonstrates the nature of personal connections and professional relationships. Group members express the same fervor found in materials created by people in the central office in New York. There was also similar frustration with lack of resources, but the affiliates seemed to find strength in problem-solving, and in the reaction of their audiences. It is clear that the sense of purpose was renewed with each successful performance, and that the connection with their target audience was key for continuing the struggle.

In the next section, the plays themselves and the theatrical techniques used to deliver performances are discussed at length. Through this discussion,

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<sup>254</sup> Norman O'Connor to Cole. November 18, 1940. New Theatre League Records. New Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

<sup>255</sup> Virginia Wheeler to Cole. January 26, 1941. New Theatre League Records. New Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

we can see how these theatres approached performance, and how content, form and venue interacted in the work to advance the cause.

### Section Three: Theatrical Means

League members argued over institutional structure, struggled with finances and policy, fought and scraped to keep going, worked long and hard hours, and endured red-baiting and vigilantes. They suffered all of these difficulties in order to present plays that might help to change the world. This chapter analyzes scripts and the ideas contained in them, their style and structure. The League's members chose performance techniques for their political or aesthetic effectiveness, and in relation to financial or contextual realities. The ideas in each play center on social change of course, but the issues addressed varied, and League playwrights found many ways to embody their arguments. These elements are examined below.

Analysis of the plays will also illuminate the League's perceptions of its audience, its ability to understand and willingness to get involved. League performance techniques created new audience-performer relationships, partly necessitated by performance venues, partly due to aesthetic or political choices.

The League's conscious and proclaimed goal was to "educate the workers, leading to change." Through its origins in the Workers Laboratory Theatre the League had strong roots in "Shock Troupe" performance with quick, simple, and, hopefully, impactful street performances at picket lines, meetings, and rallies. Using models borrowed from the Blue Blouses in Germany and the 'living newspapers' in post-revolutionary Russia, the W.L.T. put lots of energy into developing short, easily transportable, and highly topical performances.<sup>256</sup>

The League theatres continued this branch of theatrical technique, termed “mobile theatre,” but there were pros and cons to this form, and arguments over correct form persisted through the decade. In fact, arguments over form were central to discussions of political theatre in the League. Although political efficacy was their *raison d’être*, and arguments were primarily framed around which form or forms were most effective, economics, political theory, and, to a lesser degree, aesthetics also entered into the debate, as we will see.

The League’s strong desire was to unify workers through development of class-consciousness. Class-consciousness, for League leaders, meant like-minded support of radical unionism, commitment to revolutionary change in the economic and political system, and war against the owning classes. The League’s vision of class unity simplified or erased differences between urban and rural workers, whites and people of color, and across gender lines and industry boundaries. It made women workers far less visible than men, and often viewed the workers as capable of understanding only the simplest of economic arguments. League plays and publications urged rejection of American ‘individualism’ and a move to collectivism. Collectivism was to be presented in the content of plays, and utilized in their creation. Several aspects of this move away from individualism were articulated at length in Workers Theatre Magazine and internal documents, but some aspects were most probably not consciously analyzed, although they are discernible upon analysis after the fact.

League visions of class unity were curbed by reality: Its own participants

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<sup>256</sup> For more information on the Blue Blouses, see David Bradby and John McCormick's 1978 *People's Theatre or Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety 1917-1933* by John Willett. For the living newspapers, intended to educate illiterate peasants across the new U.S.S.R, see Daniel Friedman's dissertation.

held diverse aspirations. In fact, most theatres connected with the League operated within a web of ideas that were in constant tension. One thread stretched between politically committed participants and those more interested in theatre itself and their personal theatrical careers. Politically committed members also struggled with one another over differing degrees of radicalism, and over tactics; that is, what degree of radicalism or militancy was effective to express. Many participants were more interested in reform than revolution, and some feared putting off audiences by presenting too radical a point of view. They argued for milder politics in order to draw more people into the struggle. As we have seen, the League's leaders could not afford to limit its members to radical revolutionaries, and they constantly struggled to balance numbers of members with acceptable political expression.

And of course, there were disagreements and varied preferences based on aesthetic grounds. Both contributing artists and audience members naturally held their own opinions of the work. Add to these tensions the burden of the incredible amount of work that is required to produce theatre – nearly all of it done by volunteers -- and the continual dearth of funds, and it begins to become clear just what a difficult and complicated project the League and its theatres had set for themselves.

In examining the theatre produced over the course of the decade by the League, it seems clear that the central goals remained relatively constant: to educate members of the working class and motivate them to take political action. As the decade progressed, however, the particular issues addressed in the plays expanded and shifted, and theatrical modes other than agit-prop, such as



realistic plays, vaudevilles and musical forms were explored and added, although roots in agit-prop ran deep, and this genre was always present. Some of the key elements in League strategies are outlined below, followed by more extended analyses of some plays that exemplify those techniques.

### **Individualism**

In both the process of creating theatre and in the presentation of it, the League attempted to replace focus on the 'individual' and her/his importance with a focus on systems, on class membership, and on loyalty to class. The dual notions of collectivism and of class membership provided a foundation for many tactics deployed in League theatre. In its own theatrical processes, the League attempted to replace the concept of the individual artist with the proletarian artist and collective methods. Collective methods were proposed and tried out in order to supplant solo playwriting and directing, and to replace the elite artist/actor with the worker/actor.

The League perceived its audience and its members as a unified, class-based whole made up of worker-spectators and worker-artists who were collectively working towards change. League organizers spoke of developing a sense of class membership and a sense of pride in and "ownership" of productions, characters, and issues. Many League productions attempted to reconfigure the performance and the performance space so that both became 'owned' by the worker-audience, and so that the audience members became active participants rather than passive spectators and therefore, the League hoped, more likely to participate in active politics.

The League struggled to shift the focus in dramatic pieces from the

individual human being's problems to the systemic problems that they saw as integral to late capitalism. The Communist influence in the League is apparent in the rhetoric of class warfare found in the plays and magazine, especially early in the decade. The first issue of Workers Theatre Magazine, for example, sets this tone with its cry, "Workers of the World Unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains! You Have a World to Win!"<sup>257</sup> Workers Theatre Magazine stressed the necessity of placing the class struggle itself at the center of leftist plays rather than focusing on a tormented individual, as realistic plays and the bourgeois theatre tended to do. Alfred Saxe criticized contemporary theatre, writing in 1932:

The entire trend of American drama has generally developed this narrow individualist outlook. The problem of the individual has always been considered [in American drama] without a look at the larger world around him . . . it is very bad propaganda fostering a spirit of individualism which . . . becomes the psychology of the cut-throat capitalist, the Nietzschean dogma. Me first and you never. . . .<sup>258</sup>

By framing issues as class struggles rather than problems of an individual character, the League sought to show that the root of individual struggles in late capitalism was the capitalist system itself. The plays showed the potential strength of massed numbers of workers unified for political action, and the

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<sup>257</sup> The cover of the first issue of Workers Theatre Magazine features a hammer and sickle, the battle cry quoted above on page 1-7, and on page 5 there is a full page graphic of a male figure holding the world in one hand raised above his head, with the legend "Workers Forge your own Soviet!" These are all indications of the strong ties to Communist thinking that informed early League activities.

<sup>258</sup> Al Saxe. "Play with Propaganda." Workers Theatre Magazine. Aug. 1932: 7-8.

possibility for creating social change in the system. Of course, this is also the strategy of union organizing: to get workers to see themselves as a unified group rather than individual employees. League dramaturgical strategies paralleled that organizing tactic.

Saxe linked the “spirit of individualism” with bourgeois theater, which he warned inevitably led to “cut-throat capitalis[m]” and self-involvement rather than social consciousness. For this reason, agit-props often avoided individualized characters, preferring to rely upon allegorically named characters, such as ‘boss’ or ‘police’ or ‘worker,’ who represented a social or economic function. Selected agit-prop plays are discussed below.

### **Collective methods of play production**

"The revolutionary theatre cannot depend on the irregular writings of a few individuals." Bernard Reines 1931.

In his article, "Collective Methods" printed in the first number of Workers Theatre Magazine, Bernard Reines<sup>259</sup> set the stage for the development of the ‘correct’ method of producing radical theatre. His article defines the principles and techniques by which the L.O.W.T. sought to replace individualism with collective methods in the processes of theatrical production. Indeed, articles in the early issues of the Workers Theatre Magazine assumed that a collective production method was in place. Techniques for collective playwriting were repeatedly featured, partly because securing good scripts was such a problem for

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<sup>259</sup> Bernard Reines also used the name “Ben Blake.” He served the League in many different positions. He was editor of Workers Theatre Magazine from April 1933 to some time in 1934.

the L.O.W.T. Playwriting is also the first step in most theatrical processes, so it was a logical place to start.

Reines and others suggested that first a playwriting committee should generate ideas for plays. One comrade was to be entrusted with the writing, which the committee then criticized. The writer re-worked it according to the collective's assessments and discussions. The advantages, as described in Workers Theatre, were an ability to respond quickly to current events, since each committee member could potentially be working on a different play; many comrades could be empowered to contribute ideas; and it helped them "develop that sense of discipline in accepting the collective will. . . ." <sup>260</sup> These methods were strongly touted for a while, and in a few instances successful plays were created through these methods. Commonwealth College used these methods to develop pieces for performance at the school, and a few plays were developed for the League's catalogue, but ongoing success with collective playwriting eluded them, and the League turned to playwriting contests and other methods to encourage playwriting.

Workers theatres attempted to handle direction of plays in a similar manner. According to Al Saxe, a directing committee should discuss the script and possibilities for staging. They then would develop a general plan for the production. One person, however, would be in charge during each rehearsal. <sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Bernard Reines. "The Collective Method in the Workers Theatre." Workers Theatre Magazine. May 1931: 3.

<sup>261</sup> These views of 'politically correct' production means were not shared by all radical theatres. By way of contrast, the Prolet-Buehne, the premiere radical, collectivist theatre of the time, and one that much radical theatre emulated, was led by John Bonn, a singular, influential artist and activist. He was the undisputed director of the Prolet-Buehne, despite some collectivism within the company. The League was attempting to forge new methods.

The directing committee would watch rehearsals and critique them afterwards privately with the director in charge.<sup>262</sup> The role of the group critique appears to be in line with the practice of self-criticism, as it was with the playwriting technique. Collective directing apparently met with less success than collective playwriting, as articles about it disappeared from the magazine within a year.

Collectivist principles meant that duty to community overshadowed private desires. The leftists defined "community" by class boundaries, not geography, gender, or ethnicity. Following the Prolet-Buehne's example, "all proletarians were considered to share the same basic reality and to have the same basic political (and hence, cultural) interests."<sup>263</sup> Since the workers involved in producing theatre were assumed to be members of the proletariat, both "worker-artists" and audience members were considered to share the same values and needs.<sup>264</sup> The assumption, then, was that decisions made by these 'right-minded' members of the collective would accurately reflect class spirit and desires, and could not be wrong. This view of the working class as homogenous would prove to be one of the mistakes the League made, as differences of all kinds surfaced and divided League members.

Collective production methods themselves proved problematic. While the rhetoric of the L.O.W.T. and many other workers theatre groups' supported the

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<sup>262</sup> Al Saxe. "Directing an Agit-Prop Play." *Workers Theatre Magazine*. May-June 1933: 7-8. Saxe's discussion of the director's text preparation (analyzing structure and so on) assumes an individual director, however, who does this work in private, rather than as a committee process.

<sup>263</sup> Daniel Friedman. "The Prolet-Buehne: America's First Agit-Prop Theatre." Ph.D. Diss. U of Wisconsin, 1979. 408.

<sup>264</sup> Although the members of the workers theatre companies were ideally to be proletarians themselves, many were intellectuals or artists, who joined workers theatres for a number of reasons, including more readily available opportunities to perform than on the professional stage.

homogeneity of the proletariat, in practice they could not escape a need for a single, strong director and writer to make decisions for each production. Discussions of collective methods in Workers Theatre do not last beyond 1933. Although over the years some scripts were developed through group processes, these were virtually all developed and performed by a single theatre, addressed local conditions or issues, and did not transfer well to other theaters. The League's endeavor to develop a library of collectively written scripts for all member groups to draw upon did not work.

Attempts to develop collective writing and direction collapsed under the pressures of divergent opinions, ego needs and the time limits inherent in theatrical production. Theatres made repeated and numerous pleas to League headquarters for skilled directors to lead their organizations, demonstrating both the need for strong leadership, and the inexperienced status of many earnest politically motivated theatre groups.

### **Creating class unity in the audience - Mobile vs. Stationary Theatres**

League plays attempted to bring about a strong sense of class, and of class loyalty, not only through the plays' content, but also in terms of the performance space itself. The League's productions belonged to one of two categories. "Stationary theatre" was more traditional, in that the audience came to a designated 'theater' to see a play, whether that theater was a proscenium with drapes and lights, or one end of a loft or warehouse space.<sup>265</sup> The second category of performance was called 'mobile theatre' and was designed to adapt

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<sup>265</sup> A 'proscenium' theatre is probably most familiar to the reader. In it the audience members all view the stage from the same point of view through an arch, known as the proscenium arch, that frames the playing space.

to any space: the street, a park, a union hall, or a demonstration. The range of production choices for each space was distinct in that the stationary type could rely upon technical equipment such as theatrical lighting, scenery and costume changes, and a relatively quiet and focused audience, while mobile theatre had to contend with many distractions and noise. These included passersby, interference by police, no lights to help focus the audience's attention, the added logistical problem of transporting props, costumes, and actors to the performance site, and variable kinds of space onstage and "backstage."

The stationary theater could charge admission, a mixed blessing, since that also entailed advertising to gather an audience. Mobile theatre could pass the hat to collect funds, or might be paid a fee by a sponsor such as a union. The permanent theatre space used in stationary theatre could come to be known as a 'home' for the working class audience; as 'theirs,' so to speak, provided the theatre company itself was perceived in similar terms. The stationary theatre could mount more lavish productions, although League theatres were very poor and usually used homemade equipment and scavenged props and costumes. Stationary theatre could involve more complex plays that delivered perhaps a more familiar form of entertainment along with political content. Stationary productions also had potential to perform for larger audiences since they could have a run of several performances, although occasionally agit props performed to massive audiences, as in rallies at Madison Square Garden or as part of Labor Day festivities.

The mobile theatre had the potential for a stronger feel of 'immediacy' to its performances, since the backdrop was often a union meeting, a strike, or even

the dispossession of somebody's home. The performance directly connected in a physical way to the issue it addressed; surrounded by and situated directly within conflict. The sense of urgency that could come from such performance was one of the strengths of the League and performers remarked upon the power that the immediate presence of the issues provided.

Jane Swanhuyser of the affiliated Chicago Repertory Group (C.R.G.) wrote to League headquarters "...we believe mobile work is of tremendous importance and have felt it the only way of reaching the audience we should reach" and that although it "is less personally rewarding for actors" it is necessary for "it's the personal contact that really advances the work."<sup>266</sup> Swanhuyser's remark highlights an ongoing problem experienced by League theatres: many theatre artists who worked with League theatres were more interested in their own careers than in leftist causes. "Mobile [work]" wrote Leah Solor, "has a tendency to instill that 'how long can it last?' feeling."<sup>267</sup> While it is safe to say that people involved in League theatres were sympathetic to Left politics, it is also logical that it would be unlikely that people work for long for such theatres if they were not dedicated. Swanhuyser and Solor feared that mobile work would not sustain many actors' need for ongoing artistic growth. Groups or subgroups that focused solely on mobile theatre were a way to fight that; actors who signed on to such groups were more likely to be committed to the cause rather than career. The Chicago Repertory Group organized their mobile groups in teams of six to

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<sup>266</sup> Swanhuyser to Irwin. April 26, 1940. Regenstein Library Special Collection at the University of Chicago.

<sup>267</sup> Leah Solor to Cole. May 3, 1941. Regenstein Library Special Collection at the University of Chicago.



eight people plus a director and a playwright in order to create a sense of continuity.

Economic factors also affected relative value of mobile and stationary theater. Mobile shows were inexpensive, simply mounted, and could be replayed for a fee at numerous venues. The C.R.G. made an effort to increase bookings for its mobile theatre unit through direct contact with unions. For the New York headquarters, too, mobile theatre was a source of income, as their own troupe of mobile players was booked quite solidly for many months of the year.<sup>268</sup>

League members continued to debate which type of theatre was more effective politically, but it was clear by mid-decade that the consensus found stationary theatre more artistically satisfying. Agit-prop scripts lack traditional literary merit and subtlety, nuance, or ambiguity. Theatres also reported that many actors found full-length, traditional plays in a realistic mode more rewarding to perform; and since most theatres made many decisions communally, their opinions did matter. Theatres also often found that audiences were more comfortable with the familiar forms of theatre and were sometimes put off by the sectarian politics commonly found in the agit-prop plays.

The agit-prop was certainly considered political effective in suitable settings since it was part of the repertoire throughout the decade. The rewards of performing pointed political pieces to highly responsive crowds were touted in reports to the magazine from the field, alongside praise for the longer forms. And as we saw in the case studies, the very foundations for successful League

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<sup>268</sup> See Chapter Two for information on revenue from bookings.

theatres were in agit-prop, mobile theatre.

League theatres attempted to create a sense of worker 'ownership' of the plays and the performance spaces. Seen from a working class perspective, most traditional theatre is created for and about the middle or upper classes. Multiple aspects of theater attendance in commercial or artistic theatres reflect this orientation: the ticket prices are too expensive for the working class; the location requires travel to arts venues; the theatre building and performance space produce what Baz Kershaw calls a 'coercive' space, in which middle- and upper-class standards of decorum in dress, manner, and attitude are expected. These standards are implicit in the luxurious decor of the theatre space itself with velvet drapes and ornate decoration, carpeted lobbies, and uniformed staff. The social codes implicit in such spaces lend a certain elite quality to the space suggesting that people attending events there must fit a matching social code of etiquette, dress, and so on, in order to belong. As John McGrath and others have pointed out, these implied codes mark the spaces as belonging to middle or upper class theatre events, and the League needed to re-coded them so that they were inviting to the working classes.

Furthermore, the theatre presented in bourgeois spaces is usually intended to be absorbed by quiet spectators, who sit in a darkened auditorium, allowing the performance to wash over them. In this construction, the expert artists onstage present polished representations for consumption by spectators who evaluate the performance according to aesthetic and fashion standards. The distinction between performers and audience, and the designated roles for each

are clear: expert artists on one hand, and well-groomed attentive consumers on the other.

Theaters that produced radical plays about social issues struggled to find ways to disrupt the boundaries between actions onstage and the audience. League theatres attempted to change passive audience members to active participants, who would perhaps then take action on the street, on the picket line, and in union membership drives.

This goal was pursued in several ways: by breaching the imaginary "fourth wall" boundary between the stage and auditorium; by re-conceiving actor/artists as worker/actors; by shifting the site of performances to the worker-audience's territory; and by creating theatre events for an "insider" community. Each of these tactics is examined below.

Social issue plays transgressed the conventional fourth wall through a variety of techniques and conventions. Early in the 'thirties, the non-realistic agit-prop was the more prevalent of styles in the radical theatre's repertoire. This form frequently uses direct address, and uses it in several ways.<sup>269</sup> For example, in the first moment of John Bonn's sketch *15 Minute Red Review*, actors march onstage and speak directly to the audience. They shout: "Comrades, workers, listen, stop/ Prolet-Buehne agit- prop."<sup>270</sup> Both the form of the speech--direct address--and the content, which instantly assumed a connection by identifying audience members as comrades of the actors onstage, work to bridge the gulf between producers and consumers of art. The onstage actors have

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<sup>269</sup> "Direct address" means simply that the actor(s) speak to the audience rather than to other characters onstage.

<sup>270</sup> Reprinted in Friedman, 780.

identified themselves as 'comrades' with the audience, conflating both audience and performer into one class.

In other plays, like *It's Funny as Hell*, discussed at length below, actors are planted in the auditorium to lead audience participation in onstage events. This technique, famously repeated much later in *Waiting for Lefty*, encourages the audience members to actively become part of the play's events.

Both stationary, and especially, mobile theater performance either significantly modified or eliminated the trappings of the purpose-built theatre space. Through necessity, stationary theatres used by League theatres were plain – the theatres could not afford to rent or own lavishly appointed spaces. Stationary theatre was often performed in a large room that had been adapted through very simple means for use as a theatre. For example, a platform might have been added at one end of the room, with light instruments that were made from coffee cans. In many cases, this room would also be used for meetings and other events held in the community by like-minded organizations. Through these circumstances, the theatre spaces used for stationary theatre did not have the elitist feel of commercial or bourgeois theater. They were poor theatres, without the trappings that could code them for middle and upper class uses, and therefore they held greater potential for a sense of ownership by the working classes they were meant to serve. This does not mean that the League's theatres were glad of their poor surroundings. Many aspired to the means for renting nicer theatres, and occasionally they were able to do so. There is no discussion to be found in articles or other League documents about the advantages of these 'poor' spaces, and so it appears that this advantage -- the lack of elitist 'coding' -- is a factor that becomes apparent after the fact.

Mobile theatre performance created a sense of community in a very different way. Mobile theatre 'went where the people were' and played directly to them in the very conditions that formed the subject of the plays. This was an advantage and a strength. Urban theatres found it difficult to motivate audiences to travel to the theatre to see a play; they complained that workers preferred the movies. People in rural areas were described as so excited to see what workers theatres had to offer that they walked, rode on mules or wagons for miles to gather in a neighbor's yard to watch a performance given on the front porch. And the company sometimes collected people and brought them to the performance site. Dorothy Rosenbaum, leader of the Red Dust Players in Oklahoma, wrote:

Another place it was a country church; we had to go around and collect the audience; they had no transportation. We'd bring one batch and they'd sit and wait while we went for another car load . . . . Most of them had never seen a movie, let alone a play. . . . some of the people came up and wanted to touch Tilly to see if she were real or a doll.<sup>271</sup>

In urban areas, mobile performances took place where people were already gathering, such as union meetings or rallies. In all of mobile theatre, the space in which the performance took place had none of the markers of the elite; it was a borrowed space belonging to a working class organization or family. It was a space that the audience could 'own' since it belonged to one of their own. The

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<sup>271</sup> Rosenbaum to N.T.L., June 21, 1940. New Theatre League Records. New Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

use of such space strengthened the message by embedding the art within the community.

League theatre productions used dialogue that was coded with familiar terminology and attitudes, and that quickly showed the audience that the onstage performers knew and were part of their own culture. The “insider” status of the audience, who would understand the coded language, helped create a sense of identification with and trust in the performers. This language was often satiric, as in the Red Dusters’ reference to Governor Phillips described in Section Two. Insider language is one reason why performances created by one group of workers would not adapt to other groups: the insider coding did not translate. The Chicago Repertory Group solved this problem at times by adapting a play to local conditions, inserting local names and locales, local slang and specifics of issues. These choices all contributed to the ‘insider’ status of the performance.

All of these techniques: breaching the fourth wall, self-identifying explicitly as a ‘worker’ or ‘comrade,’ creating or using a performance space that was ‘owned’ by the audience, and using ‘insider’ speech and behavior worked together to help create the sense of a unified community made up of the performers and the audience.

### **Theatrical Form – the Plays**

Many working in League theatres opposed realism, a form that focused upon psychologically based individual characters and their problems. They opposed it on the grounds that it encouraged self-involvement rather than solidarity with the working class, and also because it elicited an emotional response based on empathy, rather than presenting information for audience

members to think about. Realism's focus on individual problems, they felt, obscured the causes of economic injustice, and many League members argued that agit-prop could better represent the systemic problems that needed revolutionary change. For example, in 1931 Hyam Shapiro argued strongly in favor of the agit-prop form. His argument assumed homogeneity among members of the working class:

It is to be remembered that it is not necessary to portray a particular character, but rather a class angle or conception of that character, which should not be difficult for a class-conscious worker.<sup>272</sup>

Shapiro's remark assumed that conscious membership in the working class automatically created an accurate knowledge of class issues, class sensibility, and class-based responses. His remark also implied that consciousness-raising among working class people was not only taking place but that it resulted in workers who saw the issues and their solutions in similar ways.

His assumption of unity among class-conscious workers is mirrored in many of the plays produced by the League. They seem to say that all the workers need is for someone to "give it to 'em straight" – that is, to give them the facts about capitalism, and the solution (Communist revolution) will be clear. Simplified conceptions of class-consciousness paralleled simplified pictures of complex problems in League plays. Both illustrate the League's impression of its audience as a mass entity with little time or propensity for involved discussions.

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<sup>272</sup> Hyam Shapiro. "Training the Actor in the Proletarian Theatre." Workers Theatre Magazine. June 1931: 2-3.

The plays, especially the agit-props, clearly are targeted towards such an audience.

The agit-prop form is by nature rather simple, featuring chanted slogans and abstract depictions of workers, such as actors miming the mechanical movements of assembly line workers or strutting about in top hats representing bosses. The purpose of these short plays was not to present a nuanced, artfully evocative contemplation of ideas, but rather a rapid-fire, inspiring and informational piece that contained easily repeatable catch phrases that summarized complex issues. And all indications are that they were quite effective in reaching a crowd of workers. Curiously, articles in League publications and elsewhere claim that the agit-prop was not emotional but rather intellectual in its appeal; yet it seems clear that there was actually strong emotional appeal. The workers in the audience witnessed down-trodden, dispirited, worn-out workers onstage, being abused by the 'Boss.' The physical exhaustion and poor treatment by management seen onstage were certainly familiar to the audience, thus providing a point of empathy and emotional engagement. When the hero, often a Communist organizer, appears on the scene to tell the truth about the Capitalist system of exploitation, or to confront the Boss, the workers onstage become energized and victorious. It is hard to imagine a reaction other than an emotional one, despite the sometimes ponderous dialogue that is replete with facts. The agit-props often followed a quick trajectory from defeat to victory, and, if skillfully staged, probably served as effective 'pep talks' for the audience of workers.

In the early years of the Depression, the L.O.W.T. repertory preferred short agit-prop plays because many League members equated realism's focus on



individual psychology with bourgeois values. By contrast, the agit-prop plays depicted systemic problems and proposed systemic changes, which would be obtained through mass action. Staging techniques and dramaturgical tactics in the non-realistic agit-props relied upon mass effects rather than individual psychology.<sup>273</sup> In most agit-props characters spoke largely in unison, in slogans, or in recitation form. Characters were allegorical, symbolizing their roles in the economic and political system. Plays focused directly on the capitalist economic system as the cause of the Depression, and the Soviet system as the ideal replacement. Details about how the changes would actually take place were not included in these plays. Rather, they presented simple inducements to join the mass workers' movement. The arguments for using these plays were their proclaimed reliance upon reason rather than emotion, their focus on systemic problems rather than individuals, and their easy stage-ability.

The other side of the debate is articulated by Al Prentiss when, six months after Hyam Shapiro's article, he called for adaptations of the bourgeois realistic form for treating political subjects, with its familiar story-driven introduction, build, and climax:

we therefore, we also aim at illusion, we may subscribe to all the unities that the bourgeois theatre subscribes to - unities of action, time and place, subject matter, language and situation.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> "Dramaturgy" describes the structure and structural devices used in constructing a play on the page. It includes such elements as characterization, plot structure and sequencing of events, and other devices that determine how a play works on the stage.

<sup>274</sup> Al Prentiss. "Technique in Workers Theatre." Workers Theatre Magazine. January 1932: 5-7. Prentiss referred to the 'unities' described in Aristotle's treatise on tragedy; the unities are of time, place, and action within the structure of a play.

Prentiss argued against mass chants and for emotional appeal, which he felt was the most effective. While mass recitations have "a definite value in Agitprop work . . . it is the same as a number of public speakers speaking to the audience simultaneously."<sup>275</sup> Prentiss felt that the agit-prop was a rather dry form of theatre.

Although early on the agit-prop was touted as the most effective form, in actual practice early plays in the League repertoire included a broad range of dramatic forms, both innovative and familiar. Agit-props and realistic plays, vaudeville sketch formats, and even musicals or melodramas were all used by League theatres. An analysis of several plays, choosing from those that were most often performed by League theatres, is found below. It helps reveal techniques used in the plays, and helps us understand why the plays might have been theatrically effective, as well as allowing us to measure the plays against the theories advanced in the magazine articles.

The plays under discussion here demonstrate the variety of forms utilized by the L.O.W.T. in the first years of the decade, theoretical arguments favoring one type or another notwithstanding. The first play under analysis, *Liberty in the U.S.A.*, was adapted from a vaudeville form. *Tempo, Tempo*, and *Mr. Box, Mr. Fox, and Mr. Nox* were agit-props, filled with non-realistic staging techniques such as stylized, rhythmic movement and chanting. *It's Funny as Hell* relies upon realism, and in fact is an early example of the kind of 'super-realism' later used to great effect in *Waiting for Lefty*. Later in the decade, anti-fascism is represented in the one-act *Private Hicks*, and the ordinary individual who becomes a hero in

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<sup>275</sup> Al Prentiss. "The Lessons of a Cultural Evening." Workers Theatre Magazine. January 1932: 28-31.

*Plant in the Sun* both realistic in form. League theatres with larger production capacity successfully produced *The Cradle Will Rock*, the musical set in Steeltown, U.S.A.,<sup>276</sup> and *Bury the Dead* was a League favorite in the last years of the Depression. These plays were all frequently performed by League theatres, and represent a range of styles the League adapted to its purposes, and subject matter.

**Vaudeville adaptation: Liberty in the U.S.A.**

One of the most frequently performed League plays of the early years of the Depression, *Liberty in the U.S.A.*, used time-honored bourgeois entertainment techniques, although it carried a clear political message.<sup>277</sup> It borrowed heavily from vaudeville's comic style of dialogue, presenting a conversation between a police officer and the Statue of Liberty. Liberty is out walking with her five children, who are named little Republican, Democrat, Socialist, Labor-Faker, and the "Red," a worker. Dolls in a baby carriage represented the "children." Stage directions note, "If there is no carriage available, Mrs. Liberty can carry the dolls on her arm and place them on a chair on the stage."<sup>278</sup> In satiric exchanges with a police officer, the Statue of Liberty neatly frames the L.O.W.T. view of the political landscape. For example, the L.O.W.T. saw no difference between the two major political parties in the U.S. Therefore, Liberty's Democrat and Republican children were twins. About the Socialist baby she says, "That's the

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<sup>276</sup> The premiere of *The Cradle Will Rock* was famously shut down when Congress defunded of the Federal Theatre Project. For more on this see Hallie Flanagan's *Arena*.

<sup>277</sup> The frequency of performance was determined by a combination of comparing lists of royalties paid and from articles and correspondence that enumerated the favorite, and in some cases, over-performed, pieces.

<sup>278</sup> na. "Liberty in the U.S.A." *Workers Theatre Magazine*. January 1932: 14-17. All quotes are taken from this source.

little socialist. His pants are wet again. He's always doing that." This is an insider joke. Any knowledgeable Leftist of the time would have known that as a Communist influenced group, the L.O.W.T. deplored Socialists for what the C.P. called their conciliatory, soft responses to the capitalist system. In another insider dig, this time at mainstream unions, Liberty describes the Labor-Faker, who represents the AFL, to the Police Officer: "The child is cross-eyed. When he seems to be looking to the Left, he is really looking to the right." This skit is an accessible, entertaining form of political performance. It mixes some bourgeois elements, notably humor in a 'rim-shot' style, with propaganda. It is also ideal for a mobile piece, as it is very simple to perform.

The sketch carried the message in a humorous format, easily digestible and simple to follow for an insider audience. The characters relied upon caricature, particularly in the case of the police officer, which allowed a broad, rather exaggerated comic playing style. The play's devices invited laughter at the enemy, which deflated the power of the police, and opened opponents of all political stripes to ridicule. The play doesn't ever propose a positive action, such as support for the Communist Party; rather it works by deflating its opponents. Since it was simple to stage and required only two actors it saw many productions among League theatres.

***Agit-prop: Tempo, Tempo and Mr. Box, Mr. Fox and Mr. Nox***

*Tempo, Tempo* was a frequently performed League agit-prop. The main thrust of its argument was that capitalism, with its inherent focus on profits, created inhumane working conditions. *Tempo, Tempo* avoided realistic characters, dialogue, plot, and movement, using symbolic devices instead. Rhythmic drumbeats accompanied the text, which was written in rhymed

couplets. The characters were allegorical, such as "Capitalist," "Worker," "Woman Worker," and "Policeman." Stage directions at the beginning of the play called for seven to ten workers to march on from stage right.<sup>279</sup> They "come and go on the stage doing different kinds of work movements" on a bare stage.<sup>280</sup> The use of pantomime and rhythmic actions move this play far from the bourgeois trappings of realism. The play included no obvious humor. Its purpose was limited to the direct delivery of propaganda.<sup>281</sup>

In *Tempo, Tempo* conditions in the workplace are central. The title refers to the speed-up, and the first section of the play features a character called "Capitalist" who treats workers like parts of an industrial machine rather than individual humans.<sup>282</sup> Factory work is represented onstage by mechanical, repetitive physical motions to the rapid, insistent beat of a drum, which presents the work as dehumanizing, with its repetitious tasks performed exactly the same by scores of human beings. The Boss's lines urge the workers to work faster:

Move your hands and bend your body

Without end and not so shoddy.

Faster, faster, shake it up.

No one idles in this shop.

The image is one of machine parts, an image reinforced aurally by the drum. The Capitalist chants:

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<sup>279</sup> In theatre parlance, 'stage right' is on the audience's left. It is 'right' from the actors' point of view.

<sup>280</sup> n.a. "Tempo, Tempo." *Workers Theatre Magazine*. Jan. 1932: 18-21. All quotes are taken from this source.

<sup>281</sup> I use the term 'propaganda' in a non-judgmental way, simply meaning the delivery of one-sided information intending to persuade.

Time is money, money's power.

Profits come in every hour.

Can't stop profits for your sake.

Tempo, Tempo, keep awake.

In response, a worker stops and pleads for rest. The Capitalist fires him and he leaves. A woman faints, saying, "My head, my head, o help, help me." She is fired. The human needs of the workers count for nothing in this workplace.

In *Tempo, Tempo*, the boss attempts to decrease staff while keeping production at the same level. He fires two workers, replacing them with one younger man, while chanting

To do more work for much less pay,

That's the problem of the day. . .

Speed them up and cut their pay,

Tempo, tempo, that's the way.

The "speed-up," simply an increase in the speed of the assembly line, was a common labor practice intended to create greater production without increasing the manufacturing costs. It benefited the owner and exhausted the worker, who was required, literally, to speed-up and increase output. A worker in *Tempo, Tempo* protested it as inhumane:

We are humans, not machines.

Boss: You don't like this fast routine?

Get your pay and get out quick.

You speak like a bolshevik.

*Tempo, Tempo* focused on bread and butter workplace issues like speed-ups, long hours, lay-offs, and decreased pay. Many in workers theatre audiences

experienced these conditions personally and could connect with them. The play worked through empathy in part, as audience members presumably felt sorry for the workers onstage and knew how they felt. *Tempo, Tempo* and plays like it articulated and criticized the worker's place in capitalist society. There was no room in the workplace for the individual's well-being, who, this play insisted, deserved both humane working conditions and a secure means of financial support. Without any feasible alternatives, the workers in this capitalist system either conformed to the boss's demands or were crushed.

Toward the end, the play shifts instantaneously and completely to praise of the Soviet system. The chant goes directly from "Tempo, tempo, tempo, tempo, / Tempo is the cry today," spoken in unison by downtrodden mechanical workers, to one single worker who steps forward and chants in a strong voice: "Soviet tempo - tempest's might / Onward without parasite." Stage directions describe this worker's actions as "Crossing the stage (left to right) pushing the capitalist about the stage." The shift is abrupt in both the dialogue and the stage business. One moment the workers cower before the Boss. In the next, the Boss shrinks from a powerful, Soviet-inspired worker. The Soviet worker's strength is both physical and vocal, and is also instantly contagious, as other workers join in his call for change.

In *Tempo, Tempo*, as in many workers plays of the era, change is effected by one individual leader who rises from the ranks of workers.<sup>283</sup> This feature, the individual worker-leader, will develop throughout the rest of the decade,

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<sup>283</sup> See Kathleen Malin Trainor's "The Dissident Character in American Drama in the 1930s" for a discussion of dramaturgical uses of this character.

gaining in depth, focus, and importance. In these early plays, the worker-leader is merely a mouthpiece for the message.

It is also significant that in *Tempo, Tempo* the mass of workers quickly joins in with the worker-leader, ready in an instant to follow him to Soviet-style workers' freedom. In this play and many others, the audience of workers is shown how to behave when a Soviet-style organizer appears in their workplace.<sup>284</sup> Like the workers in *Tempo, Tempo*, they are to fall into rank and join the struggle with him for the worker-state.<sup>285</sup>

The transformational moment in *Tempo, Tempo* serves to illustrate the positive results of a radical shift in workplace systems. Stage directions following the introduction of the Soviet system read, "Rhythm is stronger and the appearance of the workers militant and victorious." The shift to a "Soviet tempo" is enough to change the workers' position in society from downtrodden, oppressed, and exploited to powerful and proud. The play shows the workers taking control of the workplace by disposing of the Capitalist "parasite."

Curiously, this shift does not alleviate the pace of work, rather it changes the beneficiaries of successful industrial production from the capitalists and priests "who do not work but always feast," to the workers. In the Soviet system, they will work just as hard, but they will work for themselves.

In reading this play, it's clear that the theatrical appeal is in its potential for sharp, dynamic staging. The visual contrast between the dehumanized,

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<sup>284</sup> In *Tempo, Tempo* the organizer is a T.U.U.L. leader. The T.U.U.L. was the C.P.U.S.A.'s attempt to develop its own unions in competition with AFL-C.I.O. unions. For more on this see Klehr's *The Heyday of American Communism*.

<sup>285</sup> Although there were women in the plays, and some women provide leadership, they are usually on the sidelines of the action. The union organizer is male in most cases.



oppressed workers under the Boss's control and the workers marching in formation, shouting triumphantly at the end of the play, provides a simple, clear depiction of the changes that will occur once capitalism is overthrown. Details regarding how this revolution is to be accomplished are completely absent from *Tempo, Tempo*. In fact, the play's chanting and physical actions seem simple-minded, even naïve, because of the lack of complexity. Its popularity seems to indicate the level of sophistication that producers expected in their audiences, and that level was quite low. In terms of effect, despite what Bonn and others said about agit-prop's intellectual appeal, it seems in this play to be not intellectual, but emotional.

Several early agit-prop plays compared the U.S. system directly and explicitly with the apparently successful Soviet system. The Soviet System was a planned economy, and although widely divergent opinions about its success were voiced in contemporary publications all along the political spectrum, many leftists believed that the Five Year Plans were enormously successful.<sup>286</sup> The Soviet Union was reputed among many to have full employment, free medical and child care, paid vacations, shorter hours, and better pay.<sup>287</sup> By comparison, workers in the U.S. suffered long hours, dangerous conditions, and escalating unemployment.

The movement for a planned economy had support in many quarters in the United States, but, as today, with government bailouts and buy-outs of troubled industries, there was significant disagreement within that movement

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<sup>286</sup> See *American Views of Soviet Russia, 1917-1965*, pages 78-92, for contrasting, contemporary views of the success of the Soviet planned economy.

<sup>287</sup> Perry Brusk. Interview. June 1994. Leuchtenburg notes that in fall of 1931 more than 100,000 U.S. citizens applied for jobs in the Soviet Union (28).

about what form a planned economy should take. How much control government should have, at what level of government that control should be seated, and which industries should be controlled were all hotly debated questions. The underlying idea, however, was similar for all proponents: that the laissez-faire system no longer worked, and that some control over business was needed.

This idea flew in the face of the vaunted "natural" status of open market competition. Thus, it faced tremendous opposition from business, which foresaw loss of control over revenue, and also from much of the public, whose belief in individual competition as the basis of the American way ran deep.

The leftists involved in the L.O.W.T. supported government intervention and planning, albeit from a worker-controlled government. The plays attempted to overcome ingrained beliefs about the dangers of a planned economy in several ways. Plays explicitly described the shortcomings of the capitalist system, whether or not they suggested the Soviet Union as the ideal alternative. Many showed how a planned economy would benefit workers. Plays concisely depicted injustices resulting from unequal distribution of wealth and power, and often dramatized the devastating personal effects of financial ruin due to industry's failure.

*Mr. Box, Mr. Fox and Mr. Nox*, which appeared in Workers Theatre in 1931, emphasized the benefits of a planned economy. The play is an agit-prop, structured in three distinct sections. First, three workers with red megaphones describe the U.S. economic system, stressing the fact that the working class majority built the country for the enjoyment and use of the small percentage of wealthy people. Second, the free market is shown self-destructing through

uncontrolled competition. Third, the Soviet planned system is proposed as a solution.

In the opening section, the U.S. is described as a country where "45 million work for / 10 million who possess all / the wealth." The Crash resulted in:

1st Worker: Crises

2nd Worker: Speed up

3rd Worker: Long hours

1st Worker: Wage cuts

2nd Worker: Unemployment . . .

1st Worker: Why?

While thousands of gallons of milk  
are poured  
into the rivers and creeks of Illinois.

2nd Worker: In western states grain is burned instead of fuel

. . . . .

1st Worker: While workers are starving.

2nd Worker: While workers strike for shorter hours.

3rd Worker: While workers strike for living wage.

. . . . .

1st, 2nd and 3rd Worker: Who profit[s] by it?<sup>288</sup>

The sequence uses well-known events to voice bitter irony over starvation amidst plenty, a theme that was repeated in other plays. By contrasting the images of America, the "highest industrialized country," its "sixty story buildings / and

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<sup>288</sup> Will Lee. *Mr. Box, Mr. Fox, and Mr. Nox*, adapted from the "New Russia's Primer." *Workers Theatre Magazine*. Nov. 1931: 14-20. All quotes are taken from this source.

miles of concrete highways" with the effects of the crash, the play questions the effectiveness and justice of the economic system, blaming the profit motive for destruction of crops and other products needed by workers on starvation wages. Successful entrepreneurs, who had been revered in the 1920s as role models for achieving individual material success, were exposed in *Mr. Box, Mr. Fox, and Mr. Nox* as the cause of destructive production solely for profit.

*Mr. Box, Mr. Fox, and Mr. Nox* explicitly pointed to capitalism's foundation in individualistic competition. As the three businessmen set up shop, an off-stage voice shouted, "The ruggedness of individual competition is the backbone of our present society." The play centers on individualism from the start. The ironic statement, occurring just as the capitalists set up their privately-owned means to personal wealth, throws into sharp focus the systemic problem to be exposed in the play: business's lack of responsibility to the community.

*Mr. Box, Mr. Fox, and Mr. Nox* portrayed unemployment as a natural and negative consequence of the capitalist economic system. The play's opening recitation stressed the statistics of unemployment: "12 million workers out of a job. 28 million workers on starvation wages." Then it showed how the race for profits flooded the market with certain goods, driving prices down. With decreased profit, the bosses first lowered wages, then replaced skilled workers with inexperienced laborers who were cheaper, then laid off workers altogether. The play did not show the effects of unemployment on individual workers. It simply explained economic systems and the ill effects of capitalism in broadly painted outlines.

Each of the three title characters is a capitalist with \$50,000 to invest. They all chose to manufacture hats because "Hats, everybody wears a hat." The play

then shows the market flooded with hats, driving prices down and causing the lay-off of workers. Mr. Fox says:

The public be damned. What the hell do you think I built a factory for, to feed workers? No. I built a factory for profits and if I can't make profits, shut the factory. Sell it for wreckage.

The L.O.W.T. condemned business for its lack of social responsibility.

Supporters of a planned economy argued that planning would eliminate or at least minimize unemployment caused by layoffs in over-supplied industries. Furthermore, through planning, products needed by some regions would be supplied from areas that had excess product, rather than destroyed. Cooperation, not competition, was the foundation of the planned economy.

The play ended with a recitation by the cast in which the Soviet Union's planned economy was compared directly with the U.S. system. It is quoted here at length to demonstrate the structure, presentation of ideas, and distribution of dialogue among several actors (The numbers designate which actor, numbered 1 through 6, speaks.):

4 In America  
 5 The capitalists  
 6 Are without a plan  
 1 In the Soviet Union  
 2 The workers  
 3 Have a seeding campaign  
 .....  
 1 In the Soviet Union  
 2 They make

3 What is essential

.....

3 In the Soviet Union

4 The workers

5 Are building

All: Socialism

1 Under

2 The

All: Five Year Plan

3 Which means

1,2 Increased production

3,4 Increased consumption

5,6 Better education

.....

1 Individually

2 Your voice

3 Is a whisper

All: Collectively

As one class

Our power is victory.

.....

All: UNITE AND FIGHT

CLASS AGAINST CLASS [sic].

The message is clear that the system must change to one modeled on the Soviet Union's Five Year Plans.

The agit-prop form relied upon crisp representations of conditions and systems, along with clear, easily remembered information to educate and motivate the audience of workers. It is easy to see how the simple presentation of complex economic problems made the lessons easier to learn and remember. The play defines a clear enemy and delivers a rousing, uncomplicated condemnation. The classic call to action at the end seeks to stimulate the audience to participate in opposing capitalism. Agit-prop's formula of short, sharp, simple and to the point proved effective under the right circumstances.

**Transitional Realism: *It's Funny as Hell*, *God's in his Heaven*, and *Waiting for Lefty***

League plays also used more familiar, traditional techniques in attempts to motivate audiences. Many plays, such as *It's Funny as Hell*, combined aspects of different theatrical forms to that end. This play, by Jack and Hyam Shapiro was published in the May 1931 edition of Workers Theatre. It is an early example of the kind of "super-realism" found later in *Waiting for Lefty*. It was not an agit-prop, but rather combined realism with some elements of the agit-prop. It focused on anger, fear, and frustration rather than on presentation of factual information. *It's Funny as Hell* was set in a meeting hall where an audience of the unemployed had assembled to hear four speakers: a society woman who does charity work, a businessman-philanthropist, a politician, and a clergyman.

There was no make-believe audience, made up of actors, onstage for these speakers. Instead, the four speakers in the play directly addressed the audience of workers attending the performance of the play. In this way, *It's Funny as Hell* blurred the line between the audience and the performance, involving the

audience in the play's action as participants, since they were 'cast' as the audience of unemployed people in the play.

The action began with "Jack" and two other characters, posing as audience members, entering from the back of the auditorium to a position in front of the stage, talking about the upcoming program of speakers. Thus the opening of the play presented actors as though they were ordinary audience members, arriving to listen to the speeches. Later in the play, actors planted in the audience responded to the speakers as though they were unemployed also, in order to draw other (non-actor) audience members into the action with them.

The play erased the line between theatre audience and performers in order to intensify the empathy-driven, emotional climax of the play. The staging choices invited direct involvement of audience members, who were likely to be struggling with problems similar to those presented in the play. These techniques attempted a kind of super-realism, extending the play's action into the audience, and were repeated and built upon in other workers theatre plays, most notably in *Waiting for Lefty*.

*Its Funny as Hell* framed the issue of unemployment in terms of human rights; that is, the play proclaimed that every human being had a right to food, clothing, and shelter, whether or not he or she had the means to pay for them. League plays argued that at the very least, the business owners had a responsibility to the workers who depended on income from the factory for their livelihoods. Sometimes they argued further that since the workers actually produced the goods, they held a moral ownership in the property, and thus had a right to a voice in its operations. The L.O.W.T. arguments were rooted in a professed belief in the intrinsic worth of each individual human being, a view



that was in direct opposition to the boss's argument based in his right to self-direction or economic freedom.

*It's Funny as Hell* criticized an inadequate and humiliating social welfare system by presenting several characters involved in that system. A social worker named Miss Stewart has organized the meeting, and she introduces the four speakers. They are Mr. Browning, who is a philanthropist-businessman, a clergyman called the Reverend Dribble, Mr. McCarthy who is a local politician, and Miss Caulkins, a well-to-do charity volunteer.

The Reverend's assistance for the unemployed is limited to prayer. He rejoices that the suffering brought on by "the wisdom and goodness of God" has increased attendance at church.<sup>289</sup> Miss Caulkins calls upon the wealthy citizens to hire the unemployed to "remodel their sunken gardens, to build their new yachts, to add a new wing to their residence . . . ." She goes on to say that: "not only will you be doing your duty by your community, but you will also strike a bargain, for these people are willing to work for very little. . . ."

Mr. McCarthy defends the city's inability to provide adequate assistance since their funds are dwindling. He suggests that increasing taxes on real estate and business would be a bad thing, and recommends repealing prohibition or lifting the tariff. "Better still" he says, "that the employers [should] stop laying off their men."

The next speaker is the business-man, Mr. Browning. Responding to McCarthy's pointed suggestions, he articulates the "naturalness" of the economic order, defending his lay-offs by referring to "the economic law of supply and

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<sup>289</sup> All quotes are taken from the play as printed in *Workers Theatre Magazine* May 1931 pages a1-a7.

demand a law that no one dare trifle with unless he wished to court disaster." In other words, the system is not at fault, and those who complain should look elsewhere to find solutions; solutions that will not interfere with the businessman's profits.

Browning justifies lay-offs in two other ways. First, he says, "if we keep these men, we will pamper them and this will eventually break down their self-respect." Browning uses the fear of dependency to prop up his arguments.

Browning adds:

at no time is a working man so efficient as when he sees a line of applicants trying to get his job . . . . Therefore. . . . we must keep our workers' morale at maximum efficiency, and lay them off whenever possible."

This speech works in multiple ways. First, it is comic, using overstatement to create absurdity. Next, it describes the "divide and conquer" strategy. By playing workers against each other in competition for scarce jobs, factory owners benefit through highly motivated workers and lower wages. Supply and demand works in their favor.

Third, it makes it clear that the workers do not have any power in determining work rules or conditions for hiring and firing. This point reflects the issue of ownership, touched on above. The questions of what should confer ownership and what responsibility ownership entailed were recurring ones in the workers theatre. In *It's Funny as Hell*, the boss, Browning, holds all the power, and uses it to his sole advantage, while mouthing concern for the community.

The last section of the play veers far from agit-prop's simple didacticism, employing an emotionally charged demand for justice. Here, *It's Funny as Hell* relies upon empathy, that tool of bourgeois realism, to make an impact. At the end of the play, the speakers' patronizing attitudes are met with anger by Jack, the leader of the three characters from the beginning of the play. He serves as a mouthpiece for the unemployed, voicing their anger and frustration. He repeatedly declares that the relief workers onstage who have "just had a good beefsteak dinner" can't possibly know what the unemployed are suffering. They respond, he accuses, to those demanding assistance by calling "the cops [to] beat us up, just because we too want to have a home to sleep in, we too want to eat, [sic] do you think it right people?"

At this point in the play, actors planted in the theatre audience began vocally supporting Jack with shouts of "That's right!" and "Give it to him, bo!." As the speakers leave the platform in fear and indignation, Jack turns to the audience to speak. He describes a man starving on the street outside a posh New York restaurant, drawing a bitter comparison between people with nothing and those of comfortable means. He describes his own experience, having been evicted for non-payment of rent and harassed by police when trying to live in Battery and Central Parks with other unemployed homeless.

His stories are intended to elicit sympathy and identification with the unemployed people he describes. The speech functions to emphasize the suffering that audience members themselves had endured, had been close to, or feared for themselves. The intention was to connect the audience members in their common experience and common cause. Staging choices assist in closing the gap between audience and performance. Jack's entrance through the

audience with two other 'unemployed,' and the actors planted in the house serve to erase the imaginary 'fourth wall' that traditionally separated the audience from the performance. Through these techniques the audience is conflated with the action in the play, and is encouraged to become active participants in the drama, just as they are invited to participate in political activities.

Empathy is the engine that fuels this tactic. Jack describes a starving man, delirious with hunger, trying to sell his shirt to get something to eat. He was:

an old gink, just skin and bones, and everybody thought he was crazy. And he was – crazy with hunger. Well, he was taken to a lunatic asylum for observation where he died the next day. But when he was on Broadway, people were laughing at him. . . . and the thing was funny, funny as hell;. All around you saw restaurants and right here you had a man dyin of starvation right in front of you. Now, wasn't that funny?

Sympathy for the starving man is mixed, in Jack's long final speech, with resentment at his treatment. The audience is intended to feel the fire of outrage at the social conditions that caused the incident. The play ends with Jack's impassioned plea for class war:

We know they'll call out the cops and the National Guard and the Militia, but we aint [sic] got much to lose and everything to gain, friends. They can beat up a hundred or a thousand but not millions, and these millions will fight, I tell you. And when they'll be through fightin, everybody'll eat, everybody'll have a home – or we the poor, unfortunate unemployed, will know the reason why.

*It's Funny as Hell* drew the battle line on the grounds of individual worth. Jack questions why the wealthy, who, he says, do not actively produce anything useful, are privileged to a life of comfort, while the honest working class, from whom "their damn system took away our chance of makin a livin" starves in the street. Jack declares that all people have a right to food, shelter, and work so they can earn their way.

*It's Funny as Hell*, which ended with an angry call to arms, was driven by emotional appeal. It never articulated specific solutions to the problems of unemployment relief. Alternate economic systems were not described or proposed. Rather, the play criticized the ineffectiveness of the current system. The description of the starving man was clearly intended to win sympathy from the audience. Jack's depiction of his own struggles played upon fear that each audience member might also soon find him or herself in the same situation.

*It's Funny as Hell* was written in the early part of the decade and was successful, despite article after article in Workers Theatre preferring the agit-prop form. The number of performances it received by League theatres measures success here. *It's Funny as Hell* is counted among the most-often performed of League plays. It used realism and empathy to get its message across, unlike the style touted by the League.

Plays recommended by the League early on were highly stylized pieces based on rhythmic movement and recitation. However, after the election of Roosevelt and the first 100 days of his administration, there was a noticeable change in the form of the L.O.W.T. plays. The League began to recommend a realistic style much more frequently. The focus in the plays shifted to individual workers, using their problems as a microcosm of the problems of the whole

working class. Emotional, empathetic appeal replaced the factual base of some of the earlier agit-props. The range of issues dealt with in the plays expanded. In addition to unemployment, economic systems, and working conditions, the plays began to articulate anti-war and anti-fascist issues.

A prime example of realistic setting and characterization, *God's in His Heaven*, by Phillip Stevenson, debuted in July of 1933 at the Santa Fe, New Mexico L.O.W.T. affiliate. Later that year it won an L.O.W.T.-sponsored one-act play contest, and was presented in New York on the same program as the premiere of *Waiting for Lefty*.<sup>290</sup> This play is remarkable among 1930s leftist plays in that it did not offer any positive solutions to the economic crisis. There was no call to action, no hopeful beginning of insurgent activism. Rather, it showed how a son's return home from "the road," where he had been an unemployed transient, devastated his struggling family's already shaky sense of security. The lesson for the audience was to wake up to reality.

The working class American family pictured in the play is struggling but hopeful, believing in the basic soundness of the American system. Bill Clark, who is employed, and his wife Ella share their small home with Bill's brother Frank who has lost his job, his wife Ruby, and their daughter. The home that they share is described as shabby, but "crammed with things."<sup>291</sup> In the opening scene Bill seconds the comments of a businessman who claims that mere confidence in business will suffice to turn around the economy, and Bill adds that the "right dictator" would quickly solve the country's problems. He holds

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<sup>290</sup> Daniel Freidman 243n. Jay Williams disagrees, or at least does not include *God's in His Heaven* in the program listed in his book *Stage Left* (144-145).

<sup>291</sup> Phillip Stevenson. *God's in His Heaven*. New York: The Script Library of the Theatre Union. 1934. All quotes are taken from this source.

up Mussolini as a positive model, and Frank agrees. "Yeah, ill [sic] Deuce has done wonders for the wops, all right." Bill suggests that they need only look for the man with the biggest bank account. "How does a man get rich, I ask you? By bein' smarter 'n the rest of us -- ain't that so?" The workers in the audience no doubt, greeted Bill's words with cynicism. Yet, by delineating Bill's thought so clearly, the play set up a position that could then be exposed as false.

Using the same technique, the play sets up another false belief, later to be undercut. Frank asks where a rich man can still be found since the rich have "lost a whole lot more than the rest of us" to which Bill responds that people only need charity because they are lazy. This statement flies in the face of the evidence before him; his own brother cannot find work despite diligent effort. In addition, Bill says the neighbor's daughter, who is doing "night work" (prostitution), has failed due to her personal character; she is ornery and a tomboy. There is no recognition that the scarcity of jobs may have forced her into prostitution to survive.

The wives' conversation about movie stars reiterates sympathy for the rich, and lack of it for the poor, as they discuss the personal troubles of screen actors. Ruby and Ella identify with the rich and famous more than with their own class. Ruby's dream of winning the lottery illustrates their wish for wealth. She admits it is silly, but goes on to say that if she wins, she will send her daughter for dancing lessons so that she can become a movie star. This exchange, in the context of a play for a workers audience, indirectly suggests that their attention and energy should be focused on themselves, their class, and their own struggles rather than on fantasies about the wealthy.

When the son Jimmy walks in, he brings a first-hand account of conditions across the nation. He has been absent from the family for some time and his experiences and perceptions of economic reality directly contradict those expressed by his elders. The fact that he "rode in the blind from the city" that is, hopped a freight train, shocks his family. Ella says, "You mean you stole a ride? Like a hobo?" He blandly explains that he's been in jail for "stemmin' for a meal" several times, but has tried to pick off all the lice he acquired in jail before coming to the house. He has also worked on Salvation Army woodpiles in exchange for a "bowl of stinkin' soup and a slice of bread."

Jimmy's function in the play is to serve as foil for his father's mistaken ideas by describing the things he has seen:

Bill: No one's starved yet, and no one's gonna ---. . . . .  
 . . . . .

Jimmy: It depends what you call it. Up in Duluth I was with an old guy, dingin' for a meal, and we wasn't havin' any luck. All of a sudden the old bozo drops on the sidewalk. . . . Well, they take him to the hospital, and next day he's dead. . . . They didn't call it that [starvation]. The doctors gave it some long name and said undernourishment had brought it on, is all. That's the way this fool country is. If you don't call it starvation, then it isn't.

Because the character Jimmy was speaking from experience, his stories provided a direct, irrefutable contradiction of Bill's misinformed ideas. Jimmy affirmed that there were no jobs, and that all classes of people were affected; that individual effort made no difference in success or failure.



*God's in His Heaven* is an example of the marked change from the abstract agit-prop style that flourished during the earliest years of Depression-era leftist plays. It is highly realistic in style, beginning with the detailed description of the "sitting room-dining room-bedroom. . . . In its cluttered tawdriness," continuing with the individualized characters and the everyday ordinariness of the dialogue. The play offers neither a cause to join, nor a model of an economically stable society. Rather, the play is a warning of what is to come for families like Bill Clark's. Jimmy's warning, "Lissen Pa. Suppose you lose your job tomorrow - that might happen, huh?" is meant for audience members in similar situations. At the end of the play, after Jimmy goes back on the road, Ella asks Bill, "Is there any danger of you losin' your job?" and Bill replies, "What did you bring it up for? I can't stand it either. Besides, I don't believe it! Nobody's starvin' and they ain't gonna starve - you hear me? Nobody!" The palpable fear of the Clark family is the final image in this play.

*God's in His Heaven* paints a careful, detailed picture of a working class family that still has some income, shelter, and food, but is struggling to survive. The evidence offered by Jimmy, who predicts a harrowing future for them, inspires fear in the family, and by extension in the audience whose members face similar possibilities. This play, unlike the agit-props, did not strive to arouse anger and a vision of massed power; instead, the play's driving emotion was fear. The ordinary, recognizable characters seen in the familiar setting of a living room invited empathy with the Clarks' fears of losing even their meager comforts. The stage directions preceding Bill Clark's last line describe how the actor is to play the lines: "a little wildly - backing away from the window and

covering his eyes." Clearly, Bill feared an unknown future that encroached upon the tiny haven of his shabby living room.

The move toward realism was further encouraged by several successful, realistic productions of reformist (rather than revolutionary) plays on Broadway. *Peace on Earth* was one of the early successes, produced by the Theatre Union. It opened on November 29, 1933 and ran on Broadway for 144 performances, a moderate success.<sup>292</sup> In the spring of the same season, the Theatre Union produced *Stevedore*<sup>293</sup>, another realistic strike play, which ran for 111 performances.<sup>294</sup> It seems likely that the more traditional form, with its recognizable characters, narrative plot line, and familiar use of empathy had more potential for larger houses than did agit-prop. Some League theatres mounted productions of these plays, although the large-scale project of undertaking a full-length realistic play was beyond many of them. The L.O.W.T. offered *Dimitroff*, and a number of other plays considered transitional between agit-prop and realism, combining stylized with realistic scenes.<sup>295</sup>

*Waiting for Lefty* also combined styles. Like many of the workers theatre plays of the middle of the decade, it focused on individuals' problems, not the system per se, and made its appeal through empathy for realistic, recognizable characters.<sup>296</sup> Agit-prop technique is evident in the call to action at the end of the play, when Agate calls upon the audience in the theatre to join forces with the

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<sup>292</sup> For a history of the Theatre Union, see Mark W. Weisstuch's Ph.D. dissertation, "The Theatre Union; 1933-1937: A History." CUNY, 1982. For a discussion of the company in context of CP attempts to subvert legitimate drama to its cause, see Himelstein's *Drama was a Weapon*, ch. 4.

<sup>293</sup> For an interesting discussion of *Stevedore*, see Hyman's *Staging Strikes*.

<sup>294</sup> Himelstein, 61.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 27' Friedman, 621.

<sup>296</sup> *Waiting for Lefty* premiered on January 6, 1936.

taxi cab drivers onstage, and the play uses allegorical names for the corrupt union boss, "Fatt," and of course for "Lefty." *Waiting for Lefty* repeated the technique (found in *It's Funny as Hell*) of using the theatre's audience--complete with actors planted in its midst--as though it was the audience of workers addressed by the speakers at the onstage union meeting.<sup>297</sup>

The emotional appeal of the play comes from the scenes between pairs of realistically drawn characters. These scenes build sympathy for, and encourage identification with the characters and their plight. In this aspect, *Waiting for Lefty*, by Clifford Odets, operates in a fashion similar to *God's in His Heaven* by showing ordinary, recognizable people in straits similar to those faced by audience members. Each pair of characters reveals a different aspect of the troubles that millions of Americans were weathering during those years.

In the first scene of *Waiting for Lefty*, Edna pressures her husband to stand up for himself and demand a better life. In her view, their troubles have come to a crisis point: their furniture has been repossessed, the children have had no supper and need shoes, and "a second month's rent is due tomorrow."<sup>298</sup> Edna encourages Joe to "do something. Maybe get your buddies together, maybe go on strike for better money." She says, "I don't say one man! I say a hundred, a thousand, a whole million, I say. . . . Stand up like men and fight for the crying kids and wives." She recognizes the need for mass action, but more importantly to her, union victory will result in tangible improvements in her household.

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<sup>297</sup> Many writers have described the reception of this play. See Harold Clurman's book *The Fervent Years* for an account of the overwhelmingly positive audience response to *Waiting for Lefty*. Sam Smiley also gives an account in *The Drama of Attack*, as does Himmelstein in *Drama Was a Weapon*, and Jay Williams in his anecdotal *Stage Left*. All agree that the play was a success with the audience and critics alike.

<sup>298</sup> Clifford Odets. *Waiting for Lefty. Six Plays by Clifford Odets*. New York: Grove Press, 1979. 1-27. All quotes are taken from this source.

The next paired scene involves a lab assistant named Miller who is transferred to a lab that develops poison gas for warfare. He is asked to spy on a senior researcher in that lab. In resisting this demand, Miller asks, "But sneaking--and making poison gas--that's for Americans?" It is at this point that the play begins to include explicit rhetoric about "Americanism," an element that continues through the other scenes. By this time, the League had softened its party line to the more inclusive Popular Front stance; the play, with its rhetoric about America rather than the U.S.S.R., fits the less radical line. Expressions of these sentiments about the U.S. represent a strong turn-around from the early League plays when the Soviet Union was the ideal model.

The third episode shows "a young hack and his girl," who cannot marry because he does not make enough money to support them, and her meager income is needed to help support her family. They've been engaged for three years. They indulge in bourgeois fantasies that would have found no place in radical plays before Popular Front policy was in place:

Sid: If this was the movies I'd bring a big bunch of roses.

Flor: How big?

Sid: Fifty or sixty dozen - the kind with long, long stems - big as that. . .

Flor: You dope. . .

Sid: Your Paris gown is beautiful.

Flor: (acting grandly): Yes, Percy, velvet panels are coming back again.

The dreams of wealth in this scene recall the women in *God's in His Heaven* and their dream of lottery winnings and movie stars. However, the structure of

*Waiting for Lefty* leaves no doubt that the audience is to sympathize with Sid and Florrie, unlike Ruby and Ella in *God's in His Heaven*. Sid and Florrie's scene ends with a tender, despairing embrace, as the young couple recognizes that they cannot surmount their difficulties. By contrast, the characters in *God's in His Heaven* are represented as unthinking, uninformed people who cannot see the truth of their situation.

The sympathetic representation of bourgeois dreams represented a strong change from earlier, revolutionary rejection of material aspirations. In acknowledging the hopelessness of the situation, Sid does protest against the unfairness inherent in capitalist society. However, his outburst reflects his own personal desire to succeed, rather than to tear the system down. He voices a number of leftist tenets in his impassioned and bitter speech.

The money-man dealing himself a hot royal flush. Then giving you and me a phony hand like a pair of tens or something. Then [you] keep on losing the pots 'cause the cards is stacked against you.

Then he says, what's the matter you can't win--no stuff on the ball.

Sid recognizes that the economic system does not assist those on the bottom to better themselves. Still, unlike earlier, more revolutionary plays, getting ahead rather than joining a massed revolt is his desire.

The scene between Sid and Florrie is a tender one, in which two earnest and upright young people cannot find happiness because of economic conditions. The personal problems and warmth of this young couple are devices to engender sympathy. It is a scene calculated to move the audience members emotionally by the anguished and tender embrace that concludes it.

Episode five shows class inequities and ethnic bias in a hospital where poor patients are assigned to an incompetent doctor. Meanwhile, Dr. Benjamin, a highly skilled surgeon, is to be fired, despite his senior status, because he is Jewish. The action of the scene brings Dr. Benjamin into the older Dr. Barnes' office to complain about the endangerment of charity patients. Dr. Barnes reluctantly tells Benjamin of the impending firing. The older doctor sympathizes with Benjamin, and bitterly acknowledges the unfairness. Dr. Barnes goes much further, though, in a vehement speech about the failure of the American Revolution of 1776, declaring:

I've seen medicine change - plenty - anesthesia, sterilization - but not because of rich men-in spite of them! In a rich man's country your true self's buried deep . . . . Spirit of '76! Ancestors froze at Valley Forge! What's it all mean! Slops! The honest workers were sold out then, in '76. The Constitution's for rich men then and now.

At first, Benjamin echoes Barnes' anti-American feeling, confessing that he has considered moving to Russia, "to do good work in their socialized medicine." Barnes encourages him to leave, but ultimately Benjamin remains committed to the U.S. Despite the injustice in this country, and the opportunity to work and live in the ideal Socialist state, he'll remain here. "No! Our work's here - America! I'm scared. . . What future's ahead, I don't know. . . Maybe get killed, but goddamn! We'll go ahead!"

This scene departs in a significant way from the earlier radical L.O.W.T. plays. Dr. Barnes describes the revolutionary American past as morally bankrupt from the start. The workers fought then for the rich, just as they do now. Earlier L.O.W.T. plays might well have echoed similar sentiments. But

Benjamin, unlike the massed workers in earlier plays, is not willing to turn his back on his country, despite the fact that it rejects him as a Jew. He decides to stay and fight for justice, standing "with clenched fist raised high" in the final moment of the scene. Of course this salute suggests Communist affiliation, but the telling factor differentiating this scene from earlier propaganda plays is the attitude of loyalty toward the U.S. The Soviet Union provides a model, but it will be realized here in the United States by new, young believers committed to the fight for justice here.

In the call to action at the end of the play, Agate declares war on the ruling class. He cries, "Fight with us for right! It's war! Working class, unite and fight! . . . Let freedom really ring!" Although they fight the same class enemy they are not fighting for the Soviet system anymore, and although changes to the system are demanded, both the driving force for, and the benefits of change, are personal. They will buy shoes for Ella, allow Sid and Florrie to marry, ensure fair employment for Jews, and keep manufacturers from building tools for war.

In these plays of the middle years of the Depression, workers fight not in rank and file behind the C.P. organizer, but for their rights and so that freedom can "really ring." These ideas resound with traditional American rhetoric. True, Agate embraces the Communists, describing how people who helped him "called me comrade." However, his description of the Communist salute as a "good old uppercut to the chin" recalls Rupert Wilkinson's study American Tough, which characterizes American heroes as highly independent, self-reliant "tough guys" in strong contrast to the agit-prop image of Communists as a powerful, but

undifferentiated mass of comrades marching in unison.<sup>299</sup> The shift in focus to the suffering of highly individualized characters is a marked change from the chanting, unified groups in *Tempo, Tempo*. The later plays are rooted in realism that reflects traditional American individualism.<sup>300</sup>

The increased focus on individuals played a part in the New Theatre League's struggle against fascism within the U.S. and introduced a new dynamic into the League's plays. The New Deal's social legislation offered renewed hope to many for individual success and access to the American Dream of material wealth, but leftists feared that increased government control over business and labor foreshadowed an increase in fascism in this country. The CPUSA castigated FDR's increased federal control of banking and business as the beginning of an openly fascist government in the United States. Developments in Italy and Germany served as warnings that democratic, capitalist countries were ripe for takeover by fascist dictators. Those following this line of argument had to combat a widespread faith in FDR's ability to bring about positive change.

### **The Brechtian influence: *The Cradle Will Rock***

By the late 1930s, the breadth of issues that League theatres were fighting had swelled significantly. Having begun their work fighting for their vision of a just Soviet style economy, the plays were now also focusing on anti-fascist and anti-war messages, on exposing the Civilian Conservation Corps as neo-fascist,

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<sup>299</sup> Rupert Wilkinson. *American Tough*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984. 7.

<sup>300</sup> See John Gassner "Federal Theatre Plays" for a discussion of how the "American hero" could and should be re-worked in social issue drama, "for there is a hero's tradition in American life which the authors have plumbed and called attention to." Gassner was referring to a leftist play by Michael Gold and Michael Blankfort called *Battle Hymn*.



and on erasing racial boundaries in unions. League plays added these subjects, but did not turn away from economic justice and union organizing.

In the middle years of the '30s unions moved to organize the steel industry, and Marc Blitzstein wrote the musical *The Cradle will Rock*. He modeled it on some of Bertolt Brecht's theatrical techniques. The structure of the play, which is episodic, educates the audience about relationships between industries and other institutions, and how those relationships work to disenfranchise labor.<sup>301</sup> The central character, Larry Foreman, is drawn with heavy doses of confidence and courage, a wry sense of humor and wit. It is a characterization that, in a play with many allegorical characters, firmly fits a human face on the figure of the heroic labor organizer. The play's storied premiere was scheduled for June 16, 1937, the summer when steel workers unions focused on organizing Little Steel. The cancellation of the opening, through an injunction, and the march of audience and performers to the Venice Theatre to perform that same night are theatre legends.<sup>302</sup>

There can be no doubt that the state of the struggle between the C.I.O. and the steel industry influenced the injunction affecting *Cradle's* opening.<sup>303</sup> The steel industry had proven most difficult to organize, but in the post-Wagner Act climate, the "Big Steel" corporations, lead by the gigantic U.S. Steel, had signed a collective bargaining agreement with the C.I.O.'s Steel Workers Organizing

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<sup>301</sup> An episodic structure is one in which the plot does not move directly towards a crisis point. Instead, the play consists of episodes that illustrate or expand upon the main ideas in the play before moving to a climax.

<sup>302</sup> For versions of this story, see Hallie Flanagan's *Arena*, or Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front*. The film version also illustrates the events.

<sup>303</sup> The Congress of Industrial Unions was formed on the principal that organizing workers by industry made more sense than organizing by craft.

Committee (S.W.O.C.) in March of 1937.<sup>304</sup> The S.W.O.C. then began an organizing struggle among the "little" steel companies, which were even more violently anti-union than Big Steel.<sup>305</sup>

*The Cradle Will Rock* depicted a specific set of industry anti-union tactics used in resistance to the C.I.O. organizing drive, a set of tactics that became known as the Mohawk Valley Formula. In spring 1937, just before *Cradle's* premiere, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) described the illegal Mohawk Valley Formula as central to Remington Rand's defeat of the Office Equipment Workers Union in 1936. The formula advised businesses facing a strike to initiate a massive public relations campaign against the striking workers with the following components: to describe labor organizers as outside agitators with outrageous demands; to represent strikers as a minority and to create a puppet association of "loyal" workers; to stridently call for "law and order" whether or not there was any real disorder; to stage mass meetings of citizens, headed by a formal citizens' committee of business leaders, clergy, and other prominent citizens; to gather an armed force of police, special deputies, vigilantes, and, if the governor was on business's side, state police.<sup>306</sup> Although *The Cradle Will Rock* was written in 1936, before the NLRB published its findings, those tactics were in use and the play explicitly depicted most of these weapons against labor organization.

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<sup>304</sup> The Wagner Act, actually the National Labor Relations Act, gave a tremendous boost to labor's power. It set up a permanent independent agency that ran elections to determine bargaining units; restrained business from firing workers for participating in union activities, and from organizing 'company unions'; and it made refusing to bargain with unions an unfair labor practice. For more, see Leuchtenberg 150-152.

<sup>305</sup> For discussions of the struggle to organize little steel, see Leuchtenburg 241-242, and Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, Chapter Ten.

<sup>306</sup> Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 478-9.

The Mohawk Valley Formula tactics were effective against organizing drives, and, through defamation of labor organizers, served to fuel beliefs that all labor unions were Communistic or anarchistic and were led by foreign agitators. Thus, in N.T.L. plays it became increasingly important to create characterizations that were non-threatening and familiarly American.

In his account of *Cradle's* opening night, John Houseman pointed out that labor's drive to organize Little Steel was at a particularly violent pitch in spring of 1937. His view is similar to that of historian Irving Bernstein, who describes in detail the force with which Little Steel resisted the Steel Worker's Organizing Committee (S.W.O.C.). Bernstein describes Chicago on Memorial Day, 1937, for example, as "the most important incident of the Little Steel strike and one of the great events of American labor history."<sup>307</sup> On that day, a gathering of between 1000 and 2500 strikers at Republic Steel, insisting upon their legal right to peacefully picket the struck plant, were met by an armed force of Chicago police that fired point-blank at the unarmed strikers, and threw tear-gas bombs directly into the crowd. When the workers attempted to run, police pursued them and continued to fire on them, beat those who had fallen, and even interfered with a doctor who attempted to help the wounded. In the end, scores were wounded, and ten strikers were killed, seven of them shot in the back. They were given a massive funeral on June 2, 1937.<sup>308</sup>

These events preceded the planned opening of *The Cradle Will Rock* by 17 days. During those days, the battle to organize Little Steel did not let up. It continued to rage in many cities in which the steel operations were located. In

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 485.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 486-490.

this climate, *The Cradle Will Rock* and its indictment of anti-union capitalism were doubtless perceived as particularly dangerous.

The play was set in the imaginary Steeltown, U.S.A. Its episodic structure develops through the use of flashbacks. In the early action of the play, a cop who is under orders to arrest any assembled groups, mistakenly arrests the Liberty Committee.<sup>309</sup> The Committee is an arm of Mr. Mister's power – he owns everything in town, from the newspapers and the steel mills to the judge and the church's minister. In the second scene of the play, the Committee members are called one by one to the Court Clerk's desk to state their identity for booking purposes. In doing so, each tells a story through flashback that allows the play to educate the audience about Mr. Mister's control over the community. For example, the artists, violinist Yasha and the painter, Dauber, reveal through a witty rumba number how they rely upon wealthy but ignorant patrons like Mrs. Mister. Since they are dependent upon the support of the wealthy, they either avoid politics and create "Art for Art's Sake," or they willingly join with the wealthy, for example by joining the Liberty Committee.

Likewise, the Reverend's story is one of following the Mister's orders by first opposing the war (in this number, they refer to the Great War), preaching "Thou Shalt Not Kill." When Mrs. Mister mentions that the markets for steel need to include belligerent nations, the preacher's tune changes. He says, "When I said peace, I meant inner peace." At last, she requests that he preach against the ungodly Huns, and he does, in exchange for a nice 'offering' at church.

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<sup>309</sup> Marc Blitstein. *The Cradle Will Rock*. Best Short Plays of the Social Theatre. ed. William Kozlenko. New York: Random House, 1939, 113-167. All quotes are taken from this source.

These scenes demonstrate Mr. Mister's long reach and significant control over Steeltown. Dialogue furthers the education of the audience by demonstrating Mohawk Valley Formula tactics in action. The hero, organizer Larry Foreman, is described by his enemies as an outside agitator although his family has been in the area for 60 years. The Dr. is pressured into declaring that a worker injured on the job was drunk although he was not. The cops are called out to quell a possible riot, when in actuality the strikers held a peaceful meeting.

The playwright draws upon Brechtian techniques.<sup>310</sup> Blitzstein admired the work of composer Kurt Weill who worked with Brecht in Germany. Like Weill, Blitzstein used jazz and swing idioms, sometimes pairing sweet or hot tunes with scathing, bitter lyrics. In *Cradle*, a woman driven to "night work" because of economic conditions, sings "Nickle Under the Foot," a plaintive discourse about hard times and financial uncertainty. She sings,

. . . . Then I looked on the floor,  
 And I see a nickel shinin' there. Gee! (steps on it)  
 . . . .  
 Mister, you don't know what it felt like,  
 Thinkin' that was a nickel under my foot . . . .  
 Go stand on someone's neck while you're takin';  
 Cut into somebody's throat as you put –  
 For every dream and scheme's  
 Depending on whether, all through the storm,

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<sup>310</sup> Bertolt Brecht developed what he called 'epic theatre' which was designed to present situations of oppression within capitalist society for a thinking audience. He is considered one of the great theatrical innovators of the twentieth century. For more on Brecht see John Willet's *Brecht on Theatre*.

You've kept it warm . . .

The nickel under your foot.

Her song 'swings' but her tale does not. The bitterness she expresses over a system that demands cutthroat attitudes strikes a note similar to that of *God's in his Heaven* – that economic reality makes kindness or humane behavior impossible.

*The Cradle Will Rock* was counted one of the premier holdings of the New Theatre League, which held the amateur rights. The musical was a big undertaking for the League's theatres, and many groups produced selected scenes from it. A few theatres did tackle the whole play, and the Chicago Repertory Group achieved a very successful production. The play is a strong one, with sharp characters and issues, a fast pace, and opportunities for entertaining, satiric dance numbers. It combined the purposefulness of the agit-prop's direct message with the entertaining features of a Broadway musical to great effect.

#### **Anti-fascism in realistic form: *Private Hicks***

Another League hit, the play *Private Hicks*, combined a social message with the realistic form. One of the L.O.W.T.'s favorite plays, it brought the question of fascism in government onto the stage. *Private Hicks*, by Albert Maltz, was published in 1935 in New Theatre Magazine, and premiered on January 12, 1936 as part of a "Let Freedom Ring" program in New York.<sup>311</sup> *Private Hicks* was called "the new *Waiting for Lefty*" by Herb Kline in New Theatre Magazine, who described it as an "anti-fascist play."<sup>312</sup> The play won a one-act play contest

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<sup>311</sup> Malcolm Goldstein. . *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression*. New York: Oxford UP, 1974. 183.

<sup>312</sup> Kline, Herbert. "Shifting Scenes." New Theatre Magazine. Jan. 1936: 32-33.

sponsored by the CPUSA front organization, the American League Against War and Fascism, in 1935.<sup>313</sup>

When the play begins, the National Guard, of which Private Hicks is a member, has taken possession of a Midwestern factory and is defending it from striking factory workers. The audience hears gunfire, shrieks, and the "roar of gas guns firing vomit gas."<sup>314</sup> Private Hicks enters under guard. He has refused to fire on unarmed strikers. The commanding officers attempt to persuade Hicks to recant and fall in line with his comrades in arms. Although he is clearly afraid, by the end of the play Hicks refuses, choosing solidarity with the workers despite high personal cost to himself.

The use of a branch of the military against citizens was defined a fascist act by many on the left. The Communists' analysis predicted that fascist actions would serve as the last resort of capitalism against the coming proletariat revolution. Therefore, the use of the military to protect property rights against striking workers was a proof of their analysis, and evidence that the government existed primarily for the benefit of the owning classes.<sup>315</sup>

*Private Hicks* showed the personal struggle of one thinking individual when he was ordered to betray his class. It reversed the motivational logic used in *Tempo, Tempo*, in which suffering but unquestioning workers benefited from falling in line with collective action. Private Hicks had no T.U.U.L. leader to follow. He was alone, and had to discern for himself the right course of action.

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<sup>313</sup> n.a. "New Theatre" *New Theatre Magazine*, Nov. 1935: 20-25.

<sup>314</sup> Albert Maltz. *Private Hicks*. *Best Short Plays of the Social Theater*, ed. William Kozlenko. New York: Random House, 1939, 169-194. All quotes are taken from this source.

<sup>315</sup> For a description of CP policy on fascism in the U.S., see Ottanelli, 69, 88, 92; Klehr, 15, 94-95.

The character of the Major feared that Hicks' action would disaffect other troops. The implication was that if the soldiers stopped to think, rather than blindly obeying orders, they would agree with Hicks. The Major appealed to Hicks' self-interest, saying, "You're not going to be a hero. . . . You'll be a Federal convict for three years. . . . Your record'll follow you. . . No job. . . What for, Hicks, what for?" Hicks decided that whatever the cost he must be loyal to his own, the working class; he must put the good of his class members above his own immediate welfare. Hicks' conclusion was the same as the one reached by the radicalized mass of workers in earlier agit-props, but this play showed a single individual working through the dilemma on his own. In this play, the individualized character realized that the common good was more important than his personal suffering. Hicks, with whom the audience was to identify, demonstrated the path to collective solidarity.

As in *God's in His Heaven*, and *Waiting for Lefty*, the conflict was expressed through a recognizable individual with whom the audience could identify. His loyalties were personalized, and explained in terms of human psychology: he refused to fire because his father was a union member who had himself been on strike. Significantly, in the earlier plays, only the massed workers had power. In *Private Hicks*, one singular individual could create change. Hicks' guard, another youth, confided just before Hicks was led away, "Jesus Christ, if I get my hands on those leaflets, I'm gonna pass 'em around. I'll get every guy in the company t' learn 'em by heart." Hicks' action has not been in vain, because resistance to fascist government actions will be carried on after Hicks is imprisoned.



*Private Hicks* presented an individual with dual membership in the National Guard and in the working class. Thus it provided audience members who had divided loyalties a means to clarify their own positions. By situating the central character on the cusp of the dilemma the play showed audience members that the correct action was to side with the struggling workers.

In examining the shifts in form and content of the New Theatre League plays through the decade, it is difficult to measure accurately which influences affected the strong changes that followed the New Deal and Popular Front. The League was no doubt fully aware of Moscow's directives regarding Socialist Realism, but other factors may have weighed more heavily; workers theatres across the U.S. were certainly more familiar with, and so perhaps more comfortable with realism. Communal values, represented in part by undifferentiated characters and unified speech in the early plays, gained strength in the 1930s, but those values were tempered by a long tradition of belief in America as a land of opportunity where every individual can succeed, get ahead, and be somebody. For, when the federal government took steps to ease suffering, the New Theatre League plays looked to the U.S.S.R. for government models to a markedly lesser degree. Rhetoric about individual opportunities for success, and plays based upon the individual and his or her suffering gain in volume in the League's catalogs of plays.

**Ordinary Americans in class solidarity: *Plant in the Sun***

In the latter part of the decade, New Theatre Leagues plays relied less upon proletarian anger and more upon middle class fear. This shift was echoed in Federal Theatre Project plays in which the protagonist was a helpless "little

man," a consumer rather than a revolutionary.<sup>316</sup> Similarly, New Theatre League theatres presented more plays with familiar settings and recognizable characters and strove to build empathy between audience and individuals onstage.

*Plant in the Sun*, a one act realistic play by Ben Bengal,<sup>317</sup> was written in 1937, after the sit down strike became a common tactic in labor organizing.<sup>318</sup> The play takes place in the shipping room of a candy factory, among blue-collar workers who are very young and completely inexperienced in labor tactics. The playwright certainly aims to make these young men familiar, ordinary, likeable and entertaining. Their nicknames are Tubby, Izzy, and Peewee. Peewee is the leader of the group, who convinces his co-workers to strike. "All in favor, sit down!" he says.<sup>319</sup> Each segment of dialogue contains a lesson for the guys in the shop, and in turn for the audience. In some ways the audience is encouraged to feel superior to the rather simple, likeable, and naïve workers. This tactic, carried out through characterization, renders the sit-down strikers, if not harmless, at least non-threatening. It also allows any audience members to learn the lessons in the play without the play talking down to them. Instead, the co-workers on the stage talk down to their even more ignorant co-workers onstage, for comic effect.

The nascent strikers learn discipline. When one asks whether they can eat the candy, Peewee says, "We can't afford to harm company property." To which

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<sup>316</sup> See Friedman, 593 for a discussion of this phenomenon.

<sup>317</sup> "Ben Bengal" was a pseudonym.

<sup>318</sup> A sitdown strike is one in which the workers occupy the struck plant, rather than picketing outside of it. The tactic, if successful, shuts down production, putting more pressure on the business, which otherwise might bring in scabs to continue work.

<sup>319</sup> Ben Bengal. *Plant in the Sun*. *Best Short Plays of the Social Theatre*. ed. William Kozlenko. 1939, 195-228. all quotes are taken from this source. a

Mike replies, "Whoever heard of harmin' candy by eatin' it?" A few moments later, Mike makes lewd comments when one of the "girls" from the front office rushes in, excited about the strike, asking what the "girls" can do to help.

Peewee stops his sexist comments with, "We ain't lettin' 'at pass at a time like this, Mike." The leader demonstrates solidarity across gender lines, and creates a picture of discipline among strikers, countering media depictions of strikers as anarchistic, rude, and even savage.

The play reiterates the idea of solidarity several times. When Tony, who works in another part of the plant, brings them lunch, there is a piece of baloney in the sack. He says that when the lunch counter clerk found out the lunch was for sit down strikers, he added the baloney no charge, when the boss wasn't looking and "... tells me he's a union man hisself 'n says, 'Good luck, brudder – shake!'" The strikers are amazed. Later on the office "girls" and the packers donate all their spare change to help with the sit-down. One man even offers to bring in his ping-pong table so they have something to do in the evening. Near the end of the play, the boss's hired thugs beat up the strikers. When the rest of the plant finds out, they all sit down. The mass action demonstrates solidarity and, perhaps more importantly, the value of industrial unionism. The play's characters and structure allow these lessons to be easily taught to the audience, as the bumbling characters in the play also need to learn them. The ethnic and personal eccentricities of the characters present appealing, familiar people who are flawed, human, and endowed only with ordinary courage. They are people to whom an audience of workers can relate.

In the end of this play, the strikers have galvanized the entire candy factory to sit down. The action, sparked by small injustices, has grown into a

significant recognition of the larger picture: how one individual's leadership can unify an industry and create positive change.

The League's history of play development began with the radical, militant agit-prop, quickly augmented by effective, deeply felt realistic plays. *Art is a Weapon* and *Tempo, Tempo*, with their slogans and unified massed effects, were followed almost immediately by well-crafted realistic plays such as *God's in his Heaven*. The League's playwrights took advantage of familiar forms such as vaudeville and the revue, and brought forth ground-breakers like *Waiting for Lefty* and *The Cradle will Rock*. The League's successes were just enough to keep the network of theatres in operation for a decade.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Commitment: A Double Edged Sword**

The League of Workers Theaters/New Theatre League leaders envisioned and partially accomplished a project like no other theatre organization in the U.S.: establishment of a national network of politically aligned theatres. Recovery of the League's story reveals a concerted and comparatively long-term effort with very complex goals that are themselves worthy of study. No other U.S. arts organization has attempted to weld art and politics together over such a geographically broad yet ideologically narrow way as did the leaders of the League.

The League's project and its context raises these dual questions: Why did they succeed as much and as long as they did, facing such daunting obstacles? Conversely, why were they unable to spread their political gospel further, given the political and economic crisis the country faced at the very instant they initiated their work?

This recovered history also inspires a search for connections with later theatrical practice. Did their innovations in form, content, or use of venue have lasting effects? Were there other political groups that used theatre in similar ways, or organizations that wedded performance to activism as had the League?

#### **The Double-Edged Sword: Commitment grows from historical roots**

The League existed in a unique historical moment when several important factors came together to create conditions in which the political and economic status quo came under fierce scrutiny. Things were bad enough that movements for change gained significant momentum, from the grass-roots level to the

Federal Government. The League was on the far Left edge of grassroots movements for social change, and it built on a foundation laid by the previous fifty years' populist and political movements, a foundation that combined powerfully with changes in theatre's purpose and aesthetics over roughly the same period. The League's work carried forward a political project rooted in the Progressive period and resonates aesthetically with other theatre lineages, across aesthetic and political lines.

Before the 1880s, the theatre's purpose was largely entertainment although it often contained a moral to teach the audience. Before the advent of realism and naturalism, theatre that working class people could attend was intended to either entertain or to improve the audience culturally. Reading and performing Shakespeare in workmen's clubs, for example, would result in a higher level of culture in the participants; it would "take off the rough edges." Melodrama, a very popular form in the 19th century, often expressed power relationships between the working class and the wealthy (picture the evil banker in top hat and cape, with a mortgage in one hand and the delicate wrist of a helpless heroine in the other), but it did not urge action, or explain economics with a view to questioning the existing system. That idea came together when Russian and German living newspapers and agitational theatre blended with the discontent of Bertolt Brecht's generation over the Great War, which caused so much suffering in Germany. German immigrants brought the ideas to the U.S. where, in the Depression era, they combined with unrest over economic conditions and reinvigorated activism. Discontent here sparked a re-purposing of the art of theatre, a project that has continued to develop, change, and spread ever since.

The League's founding members pursued change through the theatrical techniques they saw in John Bonn's Prolet Buehne in New York. League founders were not, for the most part, well-schooled in theatre arts. They copied Bonn's innovative theatre, which was based on short agit-prop forms, and combined it with a vision of wide-ranging political change. While the Prolet-Buehne performed mostly in German, the League of Worker's Theatres targeted English-speaking working class people. And while John Bonn worked with the League extensively until a falling out in the latter part of the decade, his group did not lead a broad expansion of the radical political front.

The leaders of the League possessed the vision for such an endeavor. They had strong connections outside of theatre with Communist affiliated social aid organizations such as the Worker's International Relief. The early League leaders fused the political purpose of the Communist Party with the aesthetics of Bonn's Prolet-Buehne. League leadership through much of the decade included Party members such as Alice Evans, whose husband, V. J. Jerome, was a Party cultural functionary.

Without doubt, Communist Party members influenced League functions. In fact, it is doubtful that the organization would have lasted as long as it did without the iron will of staunch Party members who held fast to the political focus and with it, the purpose for the organization's long-term project. League publications articulated a position of leadership on the radical Left, yet strong connections with the Party itself are not expressed: nor is there evidence that the Communist party saw the League as a leader in the struggle. Yet the iron will served its purpose: it kept the central group in New York strong and focused, despite disagreements of every kind. All of the League's strongest theatres: the

Chicago Repertory Group, the Oklahoma Red Dust Players, The New Theatres of Cleveland and of Philadelphia, remained very focused on the League's original goals for economic change. It was these theatres that participated most reliably in conferences, in contributing articles, and in producing plays.

There are clear connections to International C.P. ideology. The Party's Third Period rhetoric about class warfare and the end of capitalism is clear in the early issues of the magazine and in the early plays themselves. The Soviet Union is depicted as the model society and a workers' paradise in the early plays. The push toward agit-prop parallels the 'formalism' prevalent in Soviet theatre before Stalin's "Socialist realism" took hold. However, it is also clear that the C.P. connection, while strong in New York headquarters and among some particular theatres, was not strong across all of the affiliates and non-affiliated theatres that used League services; and legendary "Moscow Gold" certainly did not fund the League to any great extent. It was too broke all the time for that to have been any source of real financial support.

The strength of the League was the political commitment at its core. That was the fuel that fed a near decade-long run. Theatres that maintained the political focus with a smart, committed leadership survived for a time and created viable political theatre. That radical theatres did not thrive in numbers attests to the strength of capitalism's hold on the country, the economy, and people's aspirations, and on widespread resistance in the U.S. to anyone or anything connected to Communism. U.S. unions would not, in any numbers or with consistency, link themselves with C.P. connected organizations. While progressive theatres, in contrast to the few really radical theatres, might share some political views with the League and use some of their plays, they were



disinclined to join and support the national organization. In some cases, as in the nascent Dallas theatre that was so disillusioned by sectarianism at the national conference, the political rigidity of the League's leaders discouraged wholehearted support. The League also struggled to provide real benefits for members. It failed to create a membership package that would have made membership in the League worthwhile. Political narrowness and lack of viable services limited League growth.

Despite C.P. connections at the center of the League, its activities did not doggedly follow Soviet dictates. When the style called "Socialist Realism" became the official style for art in the Soviet Union in 1932, the League's productions also included more realistic plays. These were an American brand of realism, however. Heroes in the League's realistic plays were often highly individualized 'tough guys' fighting the system and encouraging independent thinking - along Party lines, of course - for other workers in order to gain economic control. The image is based in notions of individualism and the potential for any citizen to rise. Plays from the middle period of the decade featured either the exceptional individual leading the massed workers, or presented highly individualized stories to evoke empathy in the audience, as in *Waiting for Lefty*.

It becomes apparent that here was a parting of ways from the International Communist Party. The League was already moving towards Popular Front politics by about 1933, well before other segments of the politicized Left began to soften ideological edges in order to band together against war and fascism. The League maintained its ultimate goal of radical change through revolution, but was forced to accommodate political conditions

particular to the U.S., as well as American aesthetic preferences. League leaders seem to have found that few people were ideologically committed enough to toe the hard line that the L.O.W.T. had set.

The League continued its colossal efforts to organize nationally, letting the hard line soften in order to increase membership and participation. They had to, in order to survive. If nobody bought the magazines, paid royalties or memberships, the League would wither and die. The League was saved financially several times by donations from successful supporters. For example, Clifford Odets, the playwright famous for Waiting for Lefty, found success in Hollywood and bailed out the League more than once. These avenues for life-sustaining funds dried up, however, as the decade drew towards a close. The foundation for the League, based as it was on the rock of political conviction, did not find a strong ongoing financial base. Its contribution to theatre and political history here seems to be the lesson that an ongoing organization must find either broad-based support and connections, or a few deep pockets with longevity.

Aesthetically, the League furthered a history of social-issue theatre, expanding the range of forms, venues, and purposes for theatrical endeavors. The League built on German and Russian examples of instructive theatre for the proletariat. Those forms were influenced by the work of Brecht and Piscator, who worked to focus theatre on facts. Piscator used projections during performances to present factual information along with emotionally charged visuals to express the meaning of those facts (massed workers in breadlines for example), and Brecht attempting to emphasize political ideas and social ills within the structure of his plays.

Others, some predating Piscator and Brecht's work in the 1920s, and some their contemporaries, had widened the subject matter and content of theatre. The "social problem play," a category name invented to describe Shaw's, Ibsen's and some of Strindberg's plays, used realism as a style, itself a new idea in the 1880s. Based upon notions from science and photography, realism attempts to place human behavior directly upon the stage, with little observable artistic shaping. This form and the idea of depicting social ills on the stage were utilized on Broadway and by amateur groups, including politically oriented theatre groups. Many chapters of the N.A.A.C.P., for example, wrote and performed plays depicting racism, its effects, and resistance to it. The Women's Suffrage movement also used plays to educate audiences and Broadway produced some plays about social ills. To be sure, some were quite sensational and melodramatic, but social issues had found their way into theatrical content in numerous venues.

These plays and concern about social ills were products of the Progressive era, as were the workers education programs. These programs and schools such as Commonwealth College and the Bryn Mawr summer program for working women had similar ideas about helping improve workers' lives. The schools used drama regularly as an educational tool, and when the League was up and running, the schools used League scripts and contributed articles at times. However, with the exception of Commonwealth College, no markedly close relationship is discernible from the evidence between workers schools and the League. This is remarkable in some ways, since the League was always hunting for means to develop more directors who could go into the field and develop nascent theatres. The schools and other established worker education programs

might have been a useful resource. Once again, Communist affiliations might have meant that some schools maintained some distance from the League, and the League may have recognized that it could not control the school's political ideology. The lack of a developed relationship with workers' schools suggests a tantalizing possible avenue for League success.

The League's leaders took giant steps forward, though, in envisioning and creating a network of theatres unified in their political outlook. And the network, with its ups and downs, lasted ten years. More than any other arts or cultural group, they put into place the practical means for utilizing the notion, widely touted in Communist circles, that art could be an effective weapon in creating change, or, in the rhetoric of the early days of the League, "in class warfare." The founders and staunchest leaders in the League adhered to this principle throughout the League's ten-year history.

Theatre created by and performed for working class people about issues that affect their economic and political well-being has continued. The self-empowerment that teachers in the workers schools valued so much has been a strong component in later theatre. In the 1950s and 1960s communities historically excluded from center stage began to create serious theatre work that dealt with identity and identity politics. The Civil Rights era saw a big leap forward for theatre created by communities of color, by second wave feminists, and by the LGBT community.

The practice of using theatre for political purposes broadened and has become a familiar occurrence. Performances of many kinds have been used to object to wars over the years, to protest sexism, and to call attention to greed. Realistic Broadway hits, like *A Raisin in the Sun*, addressed racism directly, and

plays like *The Normal Heart* criticized government neglect of the AIDS crisis. By the 1970s, protest had become much more prominent in cultural expressions of all kinds, including theatre. Later, the LAPD (Los Angeles Poverty Department), a program that began in 1985, creates theatre with homeless people in Los Angeles, and numerous 'theatre in prison' programs all use theatre to express political discontent and/or to empower both participants and audience members.<sup>320</sup> These programs are rooted philosophically in both the Progressive Era, when proactive ideas about improving social conditions flourished, and in the idea that the arts should also voice social concerns.

Many techniques that the League used have continued in use to today in both political performance and the mainstream. It is common to see direct address and presentation of information directly to the audience, satires that use familiar forms such as the vaudeville skit and melodrama for political purposes, and use of alternative performance venues. Although League members did not invent all of these techniques they used them widely. Direct communication of background information is now a familiar tool. A technique developed famously by Bertolt Brecht, it takes the form of projections, placards held by actors, and announcements made directly to the audience. Although Brecht and League theatres strove to provide the audience with facts so that they could understand the issue at hand, the technique has been used for other purposes. For example, Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* calls for projections that define the main idea or other key element of each scene. There the technique tends to be used to support the audience's emotional understanding of the play. The direct

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<sup>320</sup> See *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, ed. Michael Balfur, for an overview of theatre programs in prisons.

presentation of information has spread beyond non-realistic political action plays to mainstream theatre.

Educational and political performance commonly adopts familiar forms to its own purposes. There are uncountable programs in school, industry, and traveling companies that use theatrical sketches to educate. Political sketches abound on television and in comedy clubs. The San Francisco Mime Troupe uses vaudeville and parody to question the political structure. Their programs in parks in the city are based on many of the same principles as League productions: to make performance accessible to ordinary working people, and to teach politics to those people through an entertaining performance.<sup>321</sup>

The Mime Troupe also creates site specific performances. For example, a play about city political decisions may be performed on the steps of city hall. Many theatre artists produce performances in 'found spaces' or create plays that are 'site specific' commonly today. The Frank Theatre in Minneapolis sometimes chooses a location for its potential to enhance the environment for the play. For example, their production of *Puntila and His Hired Man Matti*, by Bertolt Brecht was performed at the City of Minneapolis Public Works yard. The play's political content examines power relationships at the workplace, and the venue for presentation enhanced that content. This practice has spread to theatres without an overt or central political agenda, transforming into an aesthetic principle. Although the League cannot take credit for inventing the idea, it and other theatre practitioners certainly use the technique for both aesthetic and political impact.

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<sup>321</sup> Claudia Orenstein's book, *Festive Revolutions: The Politics of Popular Theatre and the San Francisco Mime Troupe*, provides a thorough and interesting examination of contemporary radical theatre practice in an ongoing and successful company.

Teatro Campesino's work, which followed many of the same practices as the League techniques, brought brief educational/agitational pieces to farm workers in the Southwest. The company, founded by Luis Valdez in 1959, often performed on the back of flatbed trucks or at workers meetings. The Teatro Campesino took performances to the workers rather than using a stationary theatre; it adapted popular forms, such as vaudevilles and melodrama, to political purposes. The Teatro acknowledges roots in the actos of Spanish tradition, but the methods the company used were very similar to 1930s U.S. radical plays.<sup>322</sup>

Some unions today have dramatic wings, and the Labor Heritage Foundation, a national organization, cultivates the arts, including theatre, as part of union organizing efforts. Augusto Boal's techniques for 'rehearsing the revolution' use many of the same methods the League had used: creation of theatre by those most directly affected by the issues contained within it, to empower the participants to take action towards change.<sup>323</sup> These techniques are used in thousands of workshops, theatre education programs in schools, and in social action organizations. The notion of 'taking it to the streets' has an 80 year history in the U.S. While these practitioners may not trace their roots directly to the League because League history has been nearly lost, the League developed and maintained a network based upon them.

### **An Awkward Position**

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<sup>322</sup> See *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement*, by Yolanda Broyles-González, for a history of this influential and long-lived company.

<sup>323</sup> Boal's own books are the best guide to his work. See *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

Political performance occupies an awkward position in theatre history. While theorists and practitioners agree that theatre performance must create meaning, and theatre with a serious focus takes a more central position in theatre history and dramatic criticism, theatre that is direct in its message, as political theatre tends to be, is sometimes regarded as simplistic. If the meaning a performance makes is too direct or too clear, the work is sometimes perceived as "not art" or "not artful." A graduate school professor once said to me that since there is no ambiguity in political theatre, it is not art.

Arguments over "What is Art?" aside, it is clear that the League played a strong role in the history of performance for political ends. It established lofty, ambitious goals: to help create a revolution in the U.S. economic system through theatrical performance; to do that by creating a national network of radical political theatres that bonded together around a central political ideology, thus generating a mass of educated, active workers who would destroy the old system and develop a new, economically fair nation.

It found itself to be powerful because of its strong central notions, yet undermined by responses to the Communist basis of those notions. It garnered ideological support from numerous theatres across the country, but those connections failed to bear the financial fruit necessary for the survival of the organization. Dedicated staff who worked long hours for very little monetary recompense, kept headquarters running from 1932 to 1941. This in itself is remarkable. Hundreds of theatres across the country and some in Canada found both inspiration and practical guidance from League events, publications and personnel. Some of those theatres lasted as long as the League itself; most were much more short-lived. Neither League headquarters nor its theatre groups



could survive the political shift that came with World War II. Although certainly there was a viable anti-war movement in the U.S., the energy that gathered behind the government after the attack on Pearl Harbor swept away much of the political drive for economic reform. As Perry Bruskin, a member of the Shock Troupe in the 30s put it, once Pearl Harbor was bombed everybody got on the band-wagon and the radical Left was decimated.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Perry Bruskin. Interview.

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