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PRECARIOUS DEMOCRACY: *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE* AS THE FEDERAL  
THEATRE'S SITE OF MASS RESISTANCE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Theatre

by

Macy Donyce Jones  
B.A., Arkansas Tech University, 2003  
M.A., Louisiana Tech University, 2005  
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## Abstract

The scholarly consensus of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) is that it was a massive undertaking set to employ theatre professionals during the Great Depression. That undertaking resulted in vibrant, relevant theatre that helped to build a theatre audience across the nation. Outside of the overview-style scholarship, specialized studies have delved into the FTP as a community-building enterprise, a site of racial/ethnic study, and an essential new play creator.

My scholarship fills a hole that previous FTP scholarship has left open. The FTP was a political machine engaged in producing pro-American propaganda. That aspect of production has been largely left unexamined, as has the FTP's realpolitik strategies in advancing their political messages. I want to highlight the propaganda and the demurring, specifically in reference to *It Can't Happen Here*, bringing these elements to the front of the conversation to argue for the FTP's position as a mass demonstration against political and economic instability. In this dissertation, I argue the FTP was more than a relief agency, more than an artistic producer: it was a frontline defense against precarity. The discourse of the FTP would benefit by using precarity as a lens to view its productions and its administration. The previous conversation about the FTP has influenced my investigation by giving me a consensus narrative to compare instances that don't fit. Throughout this study, I bring the politics of the FTP front and center to uncover how the FTP intervened against precarity in 1930s America.

## Introduction

*Of course, it is dangerous today to talk about social and economic forces: to do plays which advocate a better life for more people is, in certain quarters, considered subversive. Well, if that be treason, make the most of it.*

– Hallie Flanagan<sup>1</sup>

In a 1939 speech before the National Theatre Conference, given shortly after the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was shut down, Hallie Flanagan (former FTP National Director) gave an impassioned call about the need for public theatres in the United States, calling the period between the FTP what would come next a “forced intermission.”<sup>2</sup> Struck down by what Flanagan termed “red-baiting” on the part of Congress, the FTP holds a position in the changing times of the 1930s as both a response to and victim of the precarity of the era. The time period was marked by mass unemployment, home and farm foreclosures, racial unrest, and labor conflicts. President Franklin Roosevelt met this instability with a host of federal spending initiatives meant to counter the crisis by providing relief, employment, and infrastructure. The FTP was one of those programs, and through it the first national theatre of the United States was born.

Hallie Flanagan was sworn in as National Director in August 1935, and the FTP was ready to begin its mission. Flanagan set up her national offices in Washington, D.C. and started building the only national theatre the U.S. would ever see. In its four-year existence (1935-1939) the Federal Theatre Project employed 10,000 people annually. It produced 12,000 performances, 850 of which were considered “major works”; 309 of those works were new plays. In total, the

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<sup>1</sup> Hallie Flanagan, “Theatre Intermission” National Theatre Conference Speech, November 25, 1939, box 24, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>2</sup> Flanagan, “Theatre Intermission.”

FTP reached an audience of over 25 million people in 40 states. The final cost to the federal government was \$42 million. Rather than creating one theatre which would symbolically represent the entire country, Flanagan envisioned the FTP as a federation of theatres.<sup>3</sup> Flanagan imagined the FTP working similarly to government itself; policies and procedures would be devised at the national office, and their execution would be handled by the states.<sup>4</sup>

The FTP productions spanned from classical works (Orson Welles' *Faustus* in 1937), to circuses (acting legend Burt Lancaster got his start in the Circus Unit), to children's theatre (*Revolt of the Beavers* in 1937), to social justice plays (*One Third of the Nation* in 1938). Ultimately, it would be the social justice plays, pro-union musicals, and racially integrated theatre companies which attracted critics who feared the influence of socialism in this government-run agency. As a result, the newly formed House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began investigating the FTP in 1938. Archived testimonies reveal that under the direction of Congressman Martin Dies (D-TX) the committee accused the FTP of lewdness, waste, and using theatre to disseminate Communist propaganda.<sup>5</sup> HUAC cut all FTP funding on June 30, 1939.

The formation of the FTP was a reaction to the economic precarity of the 1930s, and within its structure it produced work which responded to that insecurity both in operations and content. In this dissertation, I focus on one of the FTP's most significant responses to economic instability: the mass staging of *It Can't Happen Here* (1936). The play was an adaptation of the popular novel by Sinclair Lewis about the fascist takeover of the U.S. It opened simultaneously

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<sup>3</sup> Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre*, (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940) 23.

<sup>4</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> For testimonies see U.S. Congress Dies Committee, Testimony of Hallie Flanagan, *Investigation of un-American propaganda activities in the United States: Hearings before a Special Committee on Un-American Activities*, 75<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1938), 2866, <https://archive.org/details/investigationofu193804unit>.



in eighteen cities across the nation, making it the largest theatrical project ever produced by the FTP. Always cognizant of the agency's purpose to serve the American people, Flanagan's directive was to produce plays that were socially relevant and reflected American culture. *It Can't Happen Here* tapped into fears of simmering fascism from Europe, totalitarianism at home, and the collapsing of general economic security. I argue this play serves as a case study for the FTP's response to all three threats. Producing the play was a logistical nightmare. The scope alone—eighteen cities opening simultaneously—was a massive undertaking for any producing agency. The fact that the FTP was just out of its first year, and still figuring out how to produce singular productions within the federal government's bureaucracy, meant building the structure for such an enterprise as they went along. This, in addition to the play coming out only months after the FTP's first public failure, made the endeavor seem foolhardy at best. At worst, *It Can't Happen* could fail at its message—that of pro-American propaganda—and be labeled subversive.

The FTP was uniquely placed to address the precarity of American conditions during the Great Depression. As the theatrical arm of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—and by extension, the New Deal—the FTP operated as both a public and a government theatre; these two identities would be at odds with each other throughout the FTP's history. Flanagan believed a public theatre should produce plays which represent the lives of the public. In the 1930s this meant to live and struggle against precarity. However, as a government entity, the FTP was subject to both censorship and partisan fighting over artistic content. The FTP and its leadership learned the hard way that it would not be allowed to produce plays as it saw fit; it would at one point bring down the hammer of censorship, leading to a public resignation and protest within its ranks. The FTP could have avoided many of its problems if had shied away from politically

controversial plays--so, why didn't it? Why did Flanagan court danger with political plays such as *It Can't Happen Here*?

*It Can't Happen Here* focuses on liberal everyman Doremus Jessup as he navigates the rise of Buzz Windrip, a populist demagogue who leads the country from democracy to fascist dictatorship. Its production combined responses to the threats of rising fascism and economic collapse by its overtly anti-fascist message and by employing actors, designers, and production crews across the nation. I argue that *It Can't Happen Here* serves as an ideal case study of Hallie Flanagan's goals for the national theatre.

As I will demonstrate, *It Can't Happen Here* was a part of a series of productions aimed at battling national instability. I focus on this play because of its mass staging in particular and because it was produced only months after the FTP was forced to close another anti-fascist play. I use *It Can't Happen Here* as my lens into the FTP's response to precarity because its multiple simultaneous openings presented a unified statement of that response across the nation.

### **Situating *It Can't Happen Here***

From its creation to today, the Federal Theatre Project has been the subject of both scholarly research and popular narrative. Perhaps the most famous example of the latter is *Cradle Will Rock* (1999), a film by Tim Robbins, which synthesizes the entire history of the FTP into a truncated timeline centered around the troubled production of a pro-union musical *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937).<sup>6</sup> The film reflects the consensus view of the FTP: a scrappy theatre agency beset by government bureaucracy and a hostile Congress.

The main plot centers on the conception and production of *The Cradle Will Rock*. Mark Blitzstein (Hank Azaria), composer and Bertolt Brecht collaborator, has written a musical about

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<sup>6</sup>*Cradle Will Rock*, directed by Tim Robbins, (Touchtone Pictures, 1999), DVD.

the corruption of society by the industrialists. That corruption trickled down to infect the press, religious institutions, youth, and the arts. Blitzstein pitches the show to Hallie Flanagan (Cherry Jones), Orson Welles (Angus MacFadyen), and John Houseman (Cary Elwes), who decide to produce it as part of Welles' Project 891. The night before the opening, the government places a moratorium on all new productions, and sends armed guards to prevent any personnel into the theatre. Houseman, Welles, Blitzstein and other cast members break into the theatre to remove as many costumes, set pieces and musical instruments as they can in order to perform the musical ten blocks away in a dark theatre. However, just when the renegade production seems to have been saved, the actors' and musicians' union forbid their members from performing. The only solution was for Blitzstein, who was not a union member, to perform all the parts at a piano. It wasn't going to be good, but it was going to happen. After the lights dim and Blitzstein starts to sing the opening lines, Olive Stanton (Emily Watson) stands up in the audience, and performs her role. One by one, other actors join her in front of the stage apron, and *The Cradle Will Rock* begins in defiance against the shutdown.

The film generally follows the story of the FTP. Blitzstein's musical was forbidden, and the cast went rogue to ensure it was performed. Though the timeline is compressed, the individual events mostly happened as presented. One of the most dramatic elements in the film is Hallie Flanagan's HUAC testimony. Though shortened, the scene represents verbatim exchanges between Flanagan and the Congressmen questioning her. This scene in particular reinforces the story of the FTP. *Cradle Will Rock* gives us the narrative of the martyred theatre. It pulls no punches in the depictions of its villains and heroes. It frames the FTP's opponents as clueless red-baiting philistines who killed something beautiful. The story is dramatic, and engrossing, but deserves further scrutiny to find out if the FTP had more agency in its existence and demise.

This film was my first introduction to the FTP. I watched it as a theatre undergraduate student and was immediately enthralled by the story of the first, and only, national theatre in the United States. The fight to preserve it, to perform that which was forbidden, hooked me at a time when I was beginning to look for my place in academia. Over the years, I have come back to that moment when I first realized there was so much more to theatre, so many more stories to tell. The film started me on the path to investigate the very narrative that first hooked me.

On the surface, the story of *It Can't Happen Here* fits the heroic-martyrdom narrative of the FTP as a whole. The play came together amid a mad dash to address growing instability, suffered setbacks as it faced wary press, hostile government officials, and difficult artists, but persevered to become a major success. My research indicates there is a more nuanced story to be read here. When I pull back the curtain of *It Can't Happen Here*, the FTP's realpolitik is revealed, and shows us the martyred theatre had agency in how it navigated its challenges. As I situate *It Can't Happen Here* in the FTP's narrative, I track the birth and rise of that narrative.

The first iteration of FTP history comes from those who lived it. These first-hand accounts, written by Flanagan and others who worked for the FTP, are primarily responsible for the heroic narrative. This group of theatre professionals and government workers recorded their personal histories of the FTP, which gives scholars valuable insights into the workings of the period. The first generation is scholarship and archival reporting. Lorraine Brown is one of the leading scholars in this generation. She compiled the archival documents to create the Federal Theatre Project Collection housed at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA. Her work, as well as the work of Marjorie Korn, Jane De Hart Matthews, and John O'Conner, are major sources of archival studies of this period. The second generation of scholarship expands and deepens these archival studies by finding that which is left out, that which does not fit, and responding to those

incongruities. Elizabeth Osborne, E. Quinta Craig, Barry Witham, Joel Schechter, and Kenya Dworkin-Mendez engage the archive of the FTP in ways that respond to its meta-myth.

Willson Whitman's *Bread and Circuses: A Study of Federal Theatre* (1937) was the first published work about the FTP, but was it written while the agency was still in operation.<sup>7</sup>

Whitman calls the FTP one of the most important theatrical events of the time. She situates the FTP not just as a place for unemployed actors to wait for Broadway to call, but as the new lifeblood of the American theatre. Whitman's study of the FTP reflects the same excitement and sense of urgency seen in the works based on personal experience studies. She also previews the FTP's troubles: commercial theatre's snobbish rejection of relief theatre, the press's condemnation of amateurish productions, and the censorship from national and local governments. One chapter, "They Don't Like It," presents this opposition in great detail.

Whitman writes "It is true that, instead of a censorship imposed by the government, the Federal Theatre has functioned under a continual barrage from people who, from the first, didn't want any part of it and wouldn't like it if it was good." Whitman's book, published in the middle of the FTP's life, presents both triumphs and struggles, many of which would be echoed by Flanagan three years later.

Hallie Flanagan wrote the first post-mortem of the FTP in *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre* (1940). Flanagan frames her story as this: the FTP was formed during a time of immense political and economic strife and as such was often the punching bag for Roosevelt's opposition. During her time as the FTP national director, she worked hard to bring affordable, relevant theatre to the nation while providing a living wage to theatre artists and craftspeople. Flanagan received inquiries to write the FTP's story within months of its abortive run. As the

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<sup>7</sup> Willson Whitman, *Bread and Circuses: A Study of Federal Theatre*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937).

FTP's national director, her first-hand account of the working of the agency reveals a sense of loss, of 'might had been,' if the project had not run afoul of Roosevelt's opposition.

Flanagan organizes her history of the FTP around the concept of working, placing emphasis on the labor of the theatre. She divides her memoir into three parts: "Danger: Men Not Working," "Men at Work," and "Blasting: Work Suspended." These first two parts bookend the "work" of the FTP with danger and threat. Flanagan frames the FTP as a misunderstood, and at times bullied, agency which persevered to the best of its ability. This is especially evident in the chapter "Blasting: Work Suspended." This part is devoted to the demise of the FTP, and it is clear Flanagan's wounds were still fresh. She writes, "In June of 1939 forces of the theatre world from New York to Hollywood united in a spectacular campaign to save an organization which four years earlier many of them had ignored or attacked."<sup>8</sup> She damns with faint praise the too-late efforts to save the FTP. In the Hallie Flanagan Papers at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts there are several letters from elected officials lamenting that the FTP could not be saved. The sense from the quote above is that she did agree with these sentiments. Flanagan recounts the questioning she faced before the Dies Committee, the lack of support she received from her allies in the Roosevelt Administration, and she laments the lost potential of the FTP.

I quote from this book many times in this project, but not without looking to how Flanagan worked to shape her legacy and the legacy of the FTP against the (at the time) fresh criticism and wounding by her detractors. Flanagan's personal reminiscences are useful for framing research into the FTP and how she, in her position as national director, met the challenges of agency. However, the work is just that: personal reflections. Too much weight given to her words can cloud an objective view of the FTP. The FTP, as I will demonstrate in

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<sup>8</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 333.

this project, existed in a state of precarity to the extent that it was forced to engage with a certain amount of dissembling in order to operate. That same dissembling, or PR spin, is present in *Arena*, so I take Flanagan's assessment of the FTP's rise and fall with a degree of skepticism.

Despite her bias, Flanagan's perspective is invaluable for me as I research *It Can't Happen Here*. She devotes a chapter to the play early in "Men at Work," situating it between her chapters on the Southern and Midwest regions. "States United: *It Can't Happen Here*" is only one of two chapters devoted to a single play. The other, "States United: *One Third of the Nation*," is about another multi-site production, but one which did not have simultaneous openings and was only performed in ten cities. In the former chapter, she frames *It Can't Happen Here* as not only a proving ground for the FTP's capabilities as a national theatre, but as a tool for a unified national identity. In the chapter, she narrates the journey from idea, to creation, to opening, to lessons learned. Flanagan presents *It Can't Happen Here* as being produced by "polygenesis" in a whirlwind effort to adapt the script, build sets, and promote the show in under two months. She delves into the early opposition to the show; she cites newspaper editorials accusing the production of communist propaganda, others that it wasn't anti-fascist enough. She also expresses frustration over the behavior of those involved in the New York production; they wanted to postpone the opening, and treat the regional productions as out-of-town tryouts. Flanagan also states that despite the problems of producing the play, it was worth doing because it would prove the FTP was capable of running a national theatre.

Other essential first-hand accounts written by or collected from FTP associates also support the consensus story of the project as a whole. Tony Buttitta and Barry Witham's (1982) *Uncle Sam Presents: A Memoir of the Federal Theatre 1935-1939* similarly covers the inception

to closure of the project.<sup>9</sup> Buttitta served as the editor of *Federal Theatre Monthly*, the FTP's magazine. As the editor, he worked closely with Flanagan to promote the FTP's message and productions. Buttitta and Witham tell the story of the FTP's rise and fall through a fly-on-the-wall perspective. Like *Arena*, *Uncle Sam Presents* is another memoir of the federal theatre colored by remembrances, but that doesn't detract from the history recorded in it. This personal account of the FTP supports the narrative that the agency was much maligned. When reflecting on the end of the FTP, Buttitta said "The Federal Theatre died because Hallie [Flanagan] would not play it safe. It was not her style. Nor was it the style of a lot of people during those troubled and exhilarating times."<sup>10</sup>

*Voices from the Federal Theatre* (2003) is a collection of first-hand narratives as told by the actors, directors, and producers of the FTP.<sup>11</sup> Edited by Bonnie Swartz Nelson, this collection of "survivor" stories present the FTP from the perspective of those who worked within its ranks. The book resulted in a 2003 National Endowment of the Humanities documentary titled *Who Killed the Federal Theatre*. Both the book and the documentary make heavy use of the terms "survivors" and "murder" when referring to both working in the FTP and its end. The collection is full of passionate remembrances from actors, producers, and writers. Part eulogy and part oral history, *Voices from the Federal Theatre* is invaluable to anyone working in FTP scholarship. For my project, the few mentions of *It Can't Happen Here* provide insight into how important it was to the project overall and how quickly it was positioned as an "FTP success." In one testimonial, playwright Arthur Miller credits *It Can't Happen Here* as the reason the FTP was seen as a propaganda machine: "Probably because they had a dozen companies doing [*It Can't*

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<sup>9</sup> Tony Buttitta and Barry Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents: A Memoir of the Federal Theatre 1935-1939*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Buttitta and Witham, *Uncle Sam*, 234.

<sup>11</sup> Bonnie Swartz Nelson, *Voices from the Federal Theatre*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).



*Happen Here*] all over the United States, that may have done more than anything else to turn on that light that this was basically a propaganda tool. You know, one man's truth is another man's propaganda."<sup>12</sup> The stories in *Voices* are nostalgic, and are presented to reiterate the great loss of the FTP.<sup>13</sup>

There have been a number of works published, both scholarly and popular, beyond the first-hand accounts which also reiterate the consensus view of the FTP. These accounts are largely archive studies and biographical in nature. Jane De Hart Mathews' *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (1967) frames the story of the FTP around Flanagan's appointment, the challenges of making "relevant" theatre, the Dies committee response to this, and the dramatic end to the theatre project.<sup>14</sup> Her chapter "Politics Verses Theatre: Congress Kills Pinocchio" details the conditions the FTP operated under after the Dies Committee adjourned. Though the future of the agency was uncertain, they continued to produce plays, including the hit children's play *Pinocchio* (1939). During the final performance of this play, Pinocchio died instead of becoming a real boy, and the cast held a funeral for him. The stage hands struck the set as part of the performance, and the cast told the audience the puppet was killed by Act of Congress.<sup>15</sup>

*The Federal Theatre Project: Free, Adult, and Uncensored* is an edited archival study of the FTP.<sup>16</sup> Editors John O'Conner and Lorraine Brown dedicate the book to the people who build the FTP. They divide the book into two sections. The first reflects the same heroic-martyr narrative. "The FTP: Triumphs and Troubles" is an historical overview of the FTP's rise and fall.

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<sup>12</sup> Arthur Miller, "Subsidized Theatre," in *Voices from the Federal Theatre*, ed. Bonnie Nelson and Robert Bernstein, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 145.

<sup>14</sup> Jane De Hart Mathews, *1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

<sup>15</sup> De Hart Mathews, *1935-1939*, 294-295.

<sup>16</sup> John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, ed., *The Federal Theatre Project: Free, Adult, and Uncensored*, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980).

Where this text stands out against similar archival work is the section devoted to productions. Here, eighteen productions are detailed with cast photos and promotional materials to give a visual anchor to the time period. *It Can't Happen Here* is one of the eighteen; O'Connor and Brown present it with the consensus story.

Susan Quinn's *Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and Cast of Thousands Made High Art out of Desperate Times* is the most colorful of the overview works on the FTP.<sup>17</sup> Quinn is a biographer; her other works include *Marie Curie: A Life* (1996) and *Eleanor and Hick: The Love Affair that Shaped a First Lady* (2016). Despite being a popular work, Quinn goes into great detail about the period. Her work is full of anecdotes that flesh out the history of the 1930s. For example, she dedicates two chapters to the personal histories of Flanagan and WPA Director Harry Hopkins to trace their rise in Roosevelt's administration.

The narrative accounts of Whitman, Flanagan, Buttitta, and those collected by Nelson, are the main source of the FTP consensus story in the overview works. It's from these collections we see the excitement of its inception, the frustration of its hurdles, and the mourning in its passing. Here is where historians find nuggets of story that need expanding in order to give the FTP a deeper reading. For me specifically, their treatment of *It Can't Happen Here*, and their perception of its place in the FTP's response to the national crisis of the Great Depression, gave me something to build upon. The archival studies have been useful for me as I situate *It Can't Happen Here* in the narrative of the FTP. Each one discusses the play to varying degrees of detail, with Quinn devoting the most time to the subject. The largest take-away from these sources, however, is how they re-enforce the heroic-martyr narrative of the FTP through their approach and arrangement of the archive.

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and Cast of Thousands Made High Art out of Desperate Times*, (New York: Walker Publishing, 2008).

Beyond these first-hand accounts and overview studies of the FTP, there is also a thriving field of scholarly investigations into the FTP. Barry Witham's *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* (2003) is a meticulously researched monograph about the FTP in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>18</sup> Witham's study is unique because it is exclusively a regional study of the FTP. His work is emblematic of the second generation of FTP scholarship; he locates and unearths places that have been ignored by the larger consensus narrative. His work is also notable for his investigation into race in the FTP. The only fully integrated FTP unit was in Seattle, and Witham pays particular attention to how black and white actors subverted racist systems in 1930s America. This intervention influences my own interpretation of *It Can't Happen Here* as a production-based, rather than location-based, case study.

Elizabeth Osborne's *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project* (2011) also looks at the FTP as it operated on the regional level, privileging the smaller projects in the hubs and their impact on their communities.<sup>19</sup> The book is a treasure trove of stories from the often-ignored projects of the South, Midwest, Pacific Northwest and Northeast. Her approach to the FTP expands the discourse to move past reportage into critical analysis of the effects of the project as a whole. Osborne takes the archive material and constructs not one narrative of inception to demise, but multiple stories of small stages and shoe-string budget performances in the fly-over states to present an image of the FTP as community builder and a creator of identity during a time when both were as scarce as theatre itself. Osborne's work is crucial to expanding the study of the FTP to include the entire nation as the FTP's stage.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Osborne, *Staging the People Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> For other regional-specific studies see Damond G. Morris, "Presenting Oregon: Formative Forces of the Oregon Unit of the Federal Theatre Project," PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2013; Cecelia Moore, *The Federal Theatre Project in the American South*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016); Elizabeth Osborne. "Storytelling, Chiggers, and

In addition to regional studies of the FTP, a number of issue-specific research works have emerged in recent years. For instance, George Kazacoff's *Dangerous Theatre: The Federal Theatre Project as a Forum for New Plays* (2011) positions the Federal Theatre as a verdant producer of new American drama which had been largely ignored until his intervention.<sup>21</sup> Kazacoff worked exhaustively to track the process of how new plays were workshopped in the project, focusing on plays both controversial and not. Kazacoff's work is useful for me as look at how the script process for *It Can't Happen Here* worked, and how unique it was in the overall structure of the FTP. Particularly useful is Kazacoff's take on the demise of the FTP. While much of the consensus narrative paints the shut down as a shocking turn of event, Kazacoff calls it inevitable.<sup>22</sup>

As the archival work is being done, other research is emerging to uncover the impact the FTP had on the theatre and regional communities. Angela Swiegart-Gallager's 2008 dissertation, "Performing the Promise of Democracy: The Federal Theatre Project's (Re)imaginings of American National Community," does this by using specific productions as an inquiry point into how the FTP created communities across the different regions.<sup>23</sup> Using specific FTP productions, Swiegart-Gallager's research expands the ideas behind Osborne's monograph that the Federal Theatre Project was not just the controversy and not just New York. She looks at *It Can't Happen Here* (1936), *The Lost Colony* (1937), *Created Equal* (1938), *Immortal Americans* (1938), and

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the Bible Belt: The Georgia Experiment as the Public Face of the Federal Theatre Project." *Theatre History Studies* 31, no. 1 (2011): 9-26. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed January 5, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> George Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre: The Federal Theatre Project as a Forum for New Plays*, (New York: Peter Land, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> For more on new plays produced by the FTP including the Living Newspapers, see Lorraine Brown, ed., *Liberty Deferred and Other Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project*, (Fairfax: George Mason University, 1989); Jordana Cox, "'Propaganda for Democracy:' Dialogue and Dissemination in the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers, 1936-1939," (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Angela Sweigart-Gallager, "Performing the Promise of Democracy: The Federal Theatre Project's (Re)imaginings of American National Community," (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008).

*Letters to Santa Claus* (1938) to demonstrate how a national theatre could simultaneously stand for one ideal and many interpretations of that ideal. She uses Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) to show the value of the FTP as a tool for rebuilding national and regional cohesion during a time of division and uncertainty.<sup>24</sup>

There have been a number of studies on ethnic and racial specific units in the FTP. E. Qunita Craig's *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre: Beyond Formal Horizons* (1980) focuses on the Negro Units and the unique opportunities the FTP provided to African American actors.<sup>25</sup> In this study, Craig uncovered the original play scripts written for and by African Americans in the FTP.<sup>26</sup> Her take on this body of work is that these scripts were sophisticated works tackling segregation in the theatre world and the racism of white audiences. She singles out *Liberty Deferred* (unperformed play) as an example, an Afro-centric history of America which was cancelled. Craig argues the cancellation was discrimination-based. This particular work on the Negro Units is vital to FTP scholarship because it troubles the notion that FTP was a panacea of racial equality ahead of its time.<sup>27</sup>

Joel Schechter details the Yiddish Units in New York and Los Angeles in *Messiahs of 1933* (2008).<sup>28</sup> Schechter's work is a comparative study of Soviet, England, and American Yiddish theatre. This study of the Yiddish theatre in the US during this period covers satirical

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<sup>24</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>25</sup> E. Qunita Craig, *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre: Beyond Formal Horizons*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

<sup>26</sup> "Negro Unit" is FTP's official designation for the African American units through the nation. I use this term only when referring specifically to such a unit.

<sup>27</sup> For more on the Negro Units in the FTP, see Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Paul Nadler, "Liberty Censored: Black Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project," *African American Review*, no 4: 615, 1995.

<sup>28</sup> Joel Schechter, *Messiahs of 1933*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

works like *Messiah in America* (1928) and leftist drama like *Awake and Sing* (1937), the latter of which was produced by the FTP's Yiddish Theatre Unit. Schechter devotes two chapters to the FTP, drawing lines between the American government-sponsored Yiddish theatre and those of the nations listed above. Of specific interest to me is his chapter on *It Can't Happen Here*; this section details the concentration camp scene I discuss in chapter three. Schechter's work responds to the consensus narrative of the FTP by bringing back a largely-ignored chapter in the history of America theatre.

Kenya Dworkin-Mendez is the leading scholar on the FTP's Latin Units. Her article "When a 'New Deal' Became a Raw Deal: Depression-Era, 'Latin' Federal Theatre" (2011) changed how I looked at the FTP's narrative-shaping.<sup>29</sup> Here, Dworkin-Mendez echoes Craig's troubling of the FTP narrative by calling into question the FTP's commitment to the Cuban theatre, particularly in Tampa's Ybor City. This source demonstrates the FTP's indifference to some of its more far-flung regional theatres.<sup>30</sup>

The scholarship surrounding *It Can't Happen Here* specifically is not as plentiful as that of the FTP as a whole. It is just one of 1,200 plays produced by the FTP. Still, the play has found its way into the discourse. Many of the sources listed above devote space to *It Can't Happen Here* mostly to cite the marvel of such a larger undertaking and to tout its success. Dworkin-Mendez and Schechter both call the praise into question by citing sources within the FTP and the press to trouble the consensus narrative of the play.

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<sup>29</sup> Kenya C. Dworkin-Mendez, "When a 'New Deal' Became a Raw Deal: Depression-Era, 'Latin' Federal Theatre," *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1(1), 2011.

<sup>30</sup> For more on the theatrical history of Tampa, see Nicolás Kanellos, *A History of Hispanic Theatre in the United States: Origins to 1940*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Robert Mardis, "Federal Theatre in Florida," (PhD. diss., University of Florida, 1972).

The one work that focuses exclusively on *It Can't Happen Here* is Marjorie Korn's 1978 dissertation "It Can't Happen Here: Federal Theatre's Bold Adventure," an exhaustive study of each of the productions of *It Can't Happen Here*.<sup>31</sup> Korn's archival study is the kind of deep work needed to build on the facts of the event. Her dissertation is valuable to my own work, but it is not the kind of meta-study I am doing. Through meticulous archival research, Korn documents the casting, design, and reception of the play across the nation. Korn takes the position that *It Can't Happen Here* was a significant part of the FTP's history, and deserves careful archiving. Korn takes the same position as Flanagan: *It Can't Happen Here* may not have been a critical success or a marvel of artistic staging, but it showed the capabilities of the FTP far greater than any other production. Korn singles out the play as a unique instance within the FTP that is worthy of deep scholarly study. I build upon her argument, and extend it to situate *It Can't Happen Here* within the context of the struggle to define and defend American democracy.

Any study into the FTP requires extensive archive research, and I am fortunate that such archives exist and have been carefully curated. The largest archive collections of the FTP are housed at the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts in New York (NYPL), George Mason University in Fairfax, VA, the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the National Archives II in College Park, MD. I visited each of these archives in the Fall of 2015. The ephemera contained in these archives range from personal correspondence, internal FTP memo and reports, news articles, and production information about many of the FTP productions.

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<sup>31</sup> Marjorie Korn, "It Can't Happen Here: Federal Theatre's Bold Adventure," (PhD diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 1978). For more on *It Can't Happen Here* as mass media, see Philip Auslander, "Against Ontology: Making Distinctions between the Live and the Mediatized," *Performance Research*, 2 no.3, 1997.

The sources I investigate for this dissertation fall into three categories: first-hand remembrances, first-generation scholarship and archival studies, a second-generation meta-commentary and narrative response. I position my research in this second generation of FTP scholarship. My intervention in the FTP's consensus heroic-martyr narrative requires investigating how the FTP responded to various threats

## **Argument**

The scholarly consensus of the FTP is that it was a massive undertaking set to employ theatre professionals during the Great Depression. That undertaking resulted in vibrant, relevant theatre that helped to build a theatre audience across the nation. Outside of the overview-style scholarship, specialized studies have delved into the FTP as a community-building enterprise, a site of racial/ethnic study, and an essential new play creator.

My scholarship fills a hole that previous FTP scholarship has left open: the FTP was a political machine engaged in producing pro-American propaganda. That aspect of production has been largely left unexamined, as has the FTP's realpolitik strategies in advancing their political messages. I want to highlight the propaganda and the demurring, specifically in reference to *It Can't Happen Here*, bringing these elements to the front of the conversation to argue for the FTP's position as a mass demonstration against political and economic instability. In this dissertation, I argue the FTP was more than a relief agency, more than an artistic producer. It was a frontline defense against precarity. The discourse of the FTP would benefit by using precarity as a lens to view its productions and its administration. The previous conversation about the FTP has influenced my investigation by giving me a consensus narrative to compare instances that don't fit. Throughout this study, I bring the politics of the FTP front and center to uncover how the FTP intervened against precarity in 1930s America. I use *It Can't Happen Here* as a case



study for that intervention. Throughout this project, I ask the question: How did *It Can't Happen Here* fit into Roosevelt's new vision for America? To answer that, I place the FTP in the context of the political forces at play during the Great Depression. I also bring three new perspectives into this study. First, I use Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) to argue the FTP's position as performed, embodied resistance to the precarity.<sup>32</sup> Butler defines precarity as the destruction of the conditions of livability. She explores the coming together of bodies, even across long distances, to enact resistance against political and economic precarity in the public sphere. Butler's view on the potential of assembly against oppressive political forces to create radical, livable solidarity allows me to view the FTP, and *It Can't Happen Here*, as an active participant in its own precarity. Second, I use Brian Stipelman's *That Broader Definition of Liberty: Theory and Practice of the New Deal* (2012).<sup>33</sup> In this study, Stipelman situates the New Deal response to the Great Depression as more than series of reactions; he states the New Deal was a new political theory aimed at eliminating social scarcity. Lastly, I bring Benjamin Alpers' *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy 1920s-1940* (2003) to the conversation. Alpers argues that there was an ambiguous line between American democracy and dictatorship in the 1930s. I use his work to argue the FTP responded to that ambiguity with the mass staging of *It Can't Happen Here* to react against and away from dictatorial potentials.<sup>34</sup> As I will demonstrate, these sources open my investigation into *It Can't Happen Here*'s mass staging as a site of mass demonstration and resistance against national precarity.

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<sup>32</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes on a Performative Theory of Assembly*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Brian Stipelman, *That Broader Definition of Liberty: The Theory and Practice of the New Deal*, (Plymouth: Lexington Books 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy 1920s-1940*, (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2003).

## Chapters

In chapter one, “Naming the Threat,” I situate the Great Depression era as a period defined by precarity. Here I use Butler’s definition of precarity as a system of policies which create severe consequences for the masses. I use this as a framing device in order to view the FTP as an embodied demonstration against the precarity of the American way of life. In this chapter I introduce three major political movements (progressivism, populism, and the Popular Front) vying to remove precarity during the 1920s and 1930s. In this context, Roosevelt’s New Deal emerges as a pointed response to precarity even as it synthesized these disparate political moods.

In chapter two, “Threat of Failure,” I bring the FTP’s operation into the discussion. Here, I present one of its early productions, *Ethiopia*, as a lesson in how the FTP’s mission could be derailed. *Ethiopia* (1936) was the first FTP attempt to produce a play about the international threat of fascism. It never received an opening because the subject matter was censored by the WPA. I bring *Ethiopia* into the discourse of *It Can’t Happen Here* to give context for the risk the FTP took in producing political plays. Here, I set up the link between *Ethiopia*’s failure and *It Can’t Happen Here*’s success.

In chapter three, “Concealing the Threat,” I demonstrate course-correcting on the part of the FTP. Here, I present the blowback from *Ethiopia*, and how it tarnished the FTP’s reputation. I use archival evidence to demonstrate the FTP was capable of course-correcting to the point it engaged in dissembling. By instituting a clearing-house office for all promotional activity, the FTP was able to present a unified message ahead of the planned opening: the play was non-political. Here, I trace the prevaricating methods utilized by the FTP across its visual and print

publicity campaigns to demonstrate the political acumen of Flanagan and her staff of civil servants.

In chapter four, “Staging the Threat,” I explore the precarity and risk inherent in a show like *It Can't Happen Here*. I examine the production and reception of the New York and Los Angeles production as case studies. I also identify three alternative productions to explore how the FTP addressed precarity in minority communities. Next, I look at how the FTP organized their own reporting to craft the right kind of narrative. Lastly, I discuss whether *It Can't Happen Here* was even a success at all.

In my conclusion, I situate *It Can't Happen Here* within the consensus narrative of the FTP—that of the brave theatre organization eliminated out of fear—to give the history of the FTP a richer and more nuanced reading. Here, I synthesize my argument that the FTP became a politically savvy organization capable of confronting precarity head-on. I trace my development as a scholar of this period and how this research has informed my understanding of political theatre, precarity, and the new wave populist rhetoric/authoritarianism.

My inquiry into the FTP's biggest response to precarity comes at a time of major upheaval in the United States. Like the 1930s, the latter half of the 2010s has brought a shakeup into how Americans view themselves, their government, and their place in the global community. My investigation of *It Can't Happen Here* comes a time when precarity, and socialized scarcity, is on display again.

## Chapter One: Naming the Threat

Reframing *It Can't Happen Here* requires contextualizing the productions in relation to the political and economic forces of the 1930s. From its inception, the FTP was beset by partisanship and geopolitical crises while also driven to produce provocative, relevant theatre. I argue the play was a response to all of these forces. In this chapter, I lay out the primary events and players that created a state of precarity under which the FTP operated, resulting in both struggles and successes.

For this dissertation, I introduce precarity into the FTP's discourse to present the agency, and *It Can't Happen Here*, as part of a coordinated response to the economic and political volatility of the 1930s. I take my definition of precarity from Judith Butler: the destruction of the conditions of livability. In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler lays out the notion of *precaritization*; where populations are intentionally acclimated to states of insecurity, temporary labor, and non-existent social systems.<sup>35</sup> I apply this concept of precaritization to the conditions under which the FTP operated. Butler asserts that public assembly formed by bodies come together to assert demands against that which threatens their livability, those bodies create a resistance to precaritization; the forces which accumulate a population to insecurity and hopelessness.<sup>36</sup>

I identify three flashpoints of precarity challenging the security of American lives which influenced the FTP and its mass staging of *It Can't Happen Here* - the Great Depression, the rise of fascism in Europe, and political ideologies formed in response to dictatorial potentials in the United States.

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<sup>35</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes on a Performative Theory of Assembly*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 15.

<sup>36</sup> Butler, *Notes*, 15.

## **Precarity at Home: The Great Depression**

An exhaustive recounting of the causes and effects of the Great Depression is outside the parameters of my dissertation. My research goals for this project are to examine those forces that shaped the cultural environment in which the FTP both thrived and faltered. My argument is that the FTP's favor rested in how it was perceived: was it American or anti-American? The Great Depression shifted the self-image of the nation and created an opening for a new kind of American to emerge, one that cared about the collective as much as the individual and saw that living in a free nation did not mean an obligation-free life. It could also mean the nation was developing an authoritarian dictatorship under the guise of democracy.

The Great Depression holds a mythic position in American History, as renowned for its cultural contributions as it is infamous for its bleak losses. The popular narrative of the Great Depression follows as such: the country was experiencing a period of great prosperity built on an unstable foundation, and then the stock market crash of 1929 caused mass unemployment. On October 29, 1929, billions of dollars were lost in the New York Stock Exchange. This created a chain reaction which led to bank failures, home foreclosures, and private business bankruptcies.<sup>37</sup> We are left with the indelible images from those early days after the crash: runs on banks, brokers jumping from buildings, and long bread lines for those who lost everything. These images craft the narrative but only tell a fraction of the story. Ecological disasters also left rural America in dire straits. The 1927 Mississippi Flood displaced hundreds of thousands of people and inundated 27,000 square miles of land, leaving mass property damage and crop destruction. In 1934, the first of three droughts left much of the agrarian South and Midwest

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<sup>37</sup> For a comprehensive study on the 1929 crash, see John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash of 1929*, (1954; repr., New York: Mariner, 2009).

primed for the ecological disaster known as the Dust Bowl.<sup>38</sup> In the aftermath of WWI, the high demand for US crops led farmers in the region to plow record numbers of acres of their top soil and erosion-preventing prairie grasses. When drought hit, the exposed soil quickly dried up and blew away, creating masses of dust storms. Over 150,000 square miles of farmland were rendered useless, and many family farmers were left with no other option than to walk away from dried-up land. The Dust Bowl coincided with the economic collapse and helped form a central focus for the first New Deal remedies.

Although the crash of 1929 is considered the beginning of the Great Depression, it took almost a year for the ripples of that event to become waves. After the crash, President Herbert Hoover denied that there was a mass crisis looming. Publications like *The New Republic* and *The Nation* agreed, stating that the sizable dip in the market would be better for the nation's economy in the long run by correcting speculation and freeing up more credit.<sup>39</sup> Democratic challenger Franklin Roosevelt's 1932 campaign relied on accusing Hoover of not doing enough to end the crisis. This tactic succeeded, leaving the blame for the Depression at Hoover's feet in popular memory. However, the facts are more complicated. Hoover tried to rally private funds for relief, and brokered gentlemen's agreements with industry titans to increase wages and extend lines of the credit. The agreements did not stand, and it was lack of consumer buying power, not lack of credit, that was at the heart of the problem. Months after the crash, the effects began to take hold. Unemployment grew exponentially. Factories cut hours, and then completely closed. Farmers

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<sup>38</sup> Crop prices fell drastically in the 1920s, so farmers countered this by sowing more crops. The over-planting helped create the ecological conditions of the Dust Bowl. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration was formed in part to pay farmers to not grow crops in order to increase demand.

<sup>39</sup> Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dream: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*, (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1973), 44.

walked away from their family plots and travelled west to find work picking fruit for someone else. Credit, savings, and opportunity dried up.<sup>40</sup>

After Roosevelt's inauguration, his administration pushed forward sweeping changes in domestic policy, creating agencies and passing reform acts at a level never seen in U.S. history. These reforms were the beginning of Roosevelt's New Deal, which touted the four goals of economic recovery, job creation, public works, and civic engagement. Signature New Deal programs included the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which opened the door to collective bargaining for workers; the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), which reduced crop supply, stabilized prices, and created subsidies for farmers; the Emergency Bank Relief Act (ERA), which gave Roosevelt emergency power over the banking system; the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which funded state and local public works project; and Federal One, which employed artists, writers, and historians for cultural and artistic projects. The FTP was organized under Federal One, and was allowed \$6.7 million of Federal One's \$27 million annual budget.<sup>41</sup>

Political scientist Brian Stipelman argues these policies were more than a reaction to the crisis of the Great Depression; they formed a foundation for a new approach to American Democracy which found a place for individualism within the broader framework of government interventions. The New Deal programs were the means through which the federal government would provide security for Americans to exercise their rights.<sup>42</sup> Stipelman further argues the worst effects of Great Depression were not due to a scarcity of resources but to a socialized

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<sup>40</sup> In this section I am synthesizing accounts from Donald Ritchie, *Electing FDR: The New Deal Campaign of 1932*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), chapter 1 and Stipelman, *Broader Definition*, chapter 3.

<sup>41</sup> Works Progress Administration, The Work Program: Federal Theatre, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage>, accessed October 1, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Stipelman, *Broader Definition*, 25.

scarcity stemming from fear-inspired competition. The economic collapse in 1929 was made worse because Americans were conditioned to believe their lot in life was struggle, and those who were poor were destined to be so. This conditioning left large portions of the nation without the means to exercise their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness because they were never free from economic precarity. I bring this take on the social problems of the New Deal era to my examination because even though Stipelman and Butler operate in different discourses, their concepts of socialized scarcity and precaritization overlap. By looking at the responses of Roosevelt's programs through these lenses, I argue the New Deal countered this by providing a framework of cooperation under which Americans could be free from precarious forces.<sup>43</sup> New Deal theory challenged the regnant system of laissez faire capitalism to assert that citizens had a right and duty to limit any type of power, private as well as public.<sup>44</sup> Stipelman characterizes the switch from laissez-faire individualism to New Deal individualism as a new type of American democracy, one that used "the state as a democratic tool, to promote liberty and happiness by filling in the gaps left by the manifest failures of private (economic) government to protect and empower the citizens in its care."<sup>45</sup>

I fold the FTP into Stipelman's New Deal intervention to argue it was more than a jobs project and more than an arts producer. As part of Roosevelt's New Deal, the FTP was a part of a contract with America to strike against economic precarity, both in its operation and messaging. The gaps of private, commercial theatre left professionals without work, and left large portions of the country without a voice. In addition to providing work for theatre artists, Federal Theatre-sponsored productions would serve to present the issues which were at the heart of the

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<sup>43</sup> Stipelman, *Broader Definition*, 80-81.

<sup>44</sup> Stipelman, *Broader Definition*, 105.

<sup>45</sup> Stipelman, *Broader Definition*, 99-100.



dispossessed American people. The artistic aim of the FTP would help to further the New Deal's contract with America by staging not only the new American Democracy but also a new concept of Americanness.

The narrative of the Great Depression and the New Deal have become part of the folklore of the American story. It the part of the nation's collective past where we supposedly learned something about ourselves: our big dreams, our ability to help our neighbor, and our endurance in hard times. The definition of an America, through this lens, is one who can weather the storm. How Americans were to weather the storm of economic precarity, however, formed a major point of contention in domestic arguments over the meaning of the "real American." Historian Angela Sweigart-Gallager argues the FTP created a national identity by connecting the nation through a series of plays, including the *It Can't Happen Here*, which performed the promise of America as a political democracy. I argue this collective identity was threatened by the unlivability of the socialized scarcity. The Great Depression was one force that affected the security of both the American way of life and American identity. Another force was growing across the Atlantic Ocean.

### **Precarity Abroad: Fascism in Europe**

The rise of fascism in Europe is generally viewed in the context of the political changes in two nations: Italy and Germany.<sup>46</sup> Though there are differences between how these nations developed into totalitarian fascist rule, they share some similarities, such as opposition to socialism, adherence to nationalist ideologies, and dedication to a one-party state.<sup>47</sup> Fascism as

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<sup>46</sup> A complete history of the rise of fascism is beyond the scope of my project. For more on this subject, see Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-45* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), and Kevin Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Brief Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

<sup>47</sup> I exclude the Spanish Civil War from this discussion because Francisco Franco's revolution was not an influence on *It Can't Happen Here*. As I discuss in chapter three, this would prove harmful to the Tampa, FL production of the play.

political ideology is a difficult movement to define. As historian Stanley Payne notes, the term is now almost always used by fascist opponents rather than its adherents.<sup>48</sup>

Originally, Benito Mussolini coined the term to describe his political vision, after the *fascio littorio*, a bundle of rods bound around an ax to represent the strength of a nation united around a strong ruler. Mussolini's vision became reality on March 23, 1919 when he founded *Fasci il Combattimento* (bundle of combat), which would become the National Fascist Party. The party itself was a consolidation of various nationalist and anti-Communist parties brought together by Mussolini's political maneuvering and militant oppression of dissent. In January of 1925 Mussolini took the title of *Il Duce* (the Leader). By 1929, he had been named Prime Minister by King Victor Emanuel III and was for all intents and purposes he was Italy's undisputed ruler. Historian Benjamin Alpers attributes Mussolini's appeal to his countenance and the way he carried himself. His ability as a leader, at least in perception, was tied to his machismo and paternalistic image.<sup>49</sup>

In 1923, Mussolini briefly occupied Corfu. In 1925, Albania was taken as an Italian protectorate. In 1935, Mussolini's troops invaded the nation of Ethiopia. This act of aggression led to an official condemnation of Italy from the League of Nations. Subsequently, Italy withdrew from the League in 1937.<sup>50</sup> Throughout Mussolini's rise to power, the international community noted with growing alarm just what an Italian fascist foreign policy aimed for: a new Roman empire with Il Duce on the throne. During this time, another fascist power was rising in the North.

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<sup>48</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-45* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995) Kindle ebook.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy 1920s-1950s*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 17-19.

<sup>50</sup> Italy's invasion of Ethiopia would play a major role in the mission and operations of the FTP, which I will discuss in Chapter 2.

In Germany, the rise of fascism was marked by militant nationalism, antisemitism, and occultism. By the time Germany became a threat on the global scale, Adolf Hitler had already proven himself a gifted orator with a talent for tapping into German post-WWI defeat resentment. Once Hitler rose through the ranks to become the leader of National Socialist German Worker Party (NSDAP) in 1925, most commonly known as the Nazi Party, the American press began to pay attention to his political aims. One member of the American press, Dorothy Thompson, was granted an audience with Hitler in 1931. Thompson left her interview with Hitler unimpressed by his rhetoric and demeanor, believing there was no way the German people would ever put their trust in him. She wrote a book in 1932 about the meeting, titled *I Saw Hitler*, and described him as a weak man with little charisma:

When finally I walked into Adolf Hitler's salon in the Kaisehoff Hotel, I was convinced that I was meeting the future dictator of Germany. In something less than fifty seconds, I was quite sure I was not. It took about that time to measure the startling insignificance of this man who has set world agog. He is formless, almost faceless, a man whose countenance is a caricature, a man whose framework seems cartilaginous, without bone. He is inconsequent and voluble, ill-poised, insecure. He is the very prototype of the Little Man.<sup>51</sup>

Thompson's prose concerning Hitler's appearance is worth unpacking here. Unlike the machismo Mussolini, this new dictator was not the concerned and stern father-figure that Italians accepted and Americans admired. Thompson described for her audience a man whose face revealed that he is not to be trusted. She deliberately feminized Hitler while at the same time calling into question his convictions and ability to lead a nation. She wrote "Mr. Hitler, you may get, in the next election, the fifteen million votes you expect. But fifteen million Germans can be wrong."<sup>52</sup> Further in the book, she goes into detail about Hitler's lack of political vision. In thirty-six pages, Thompson painted the future German dictator as one unfit to lead by his lack of

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<sup>51</sup> Dorothy Thompson, *I Saw Hitler*, (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1932), 13.

<sup>52</sup> Thompson, *I Saw Hitler*, 16.

physical and mental preparedness. For her publication, Thompson's visa was revoked, winning her the honor of being the first American journalist to be expelled from Germany by Hitler. When she returned to the States, her book became a best seller, and made her a darling of literary circles. Her reporting on Hitler's countenance and methods proved to be a major windfall for another American writer, who also happened to be her husband: Sinclair Lewis. His wife's experiences in Hitler's Germany and her writings about it would become a major influence in Lewis's novel, *It Can't Happen Here*.

These international threats to democracy were, for most in the US, mainly theoretical. While Europe was dealing with the fascism spreading across sovereign borders, the interwar period in the US was mainly a fight for ideals rather than land. Though both Italy and Germany had set their sights on reclaiming the Roman and Bavarian territory respectively, the United States was decidedly outside that physical threat. Their prospective vacillated between admiration (for Mussolini) and nervous mocking (for Hitler). As I'll relate below, various threads of American politics diverged sharply in their responses to European fascism. While the Popular Front directly addressed the danger fascism posed to democracy, the populist movement saw in Mussolini just the kind of paternalistic leader need to fix the Great Depression.

### **American Democracy Defined: Progressivism**

Just as political parties vied for control of the government, there were political movements vying to control the definition of "American." Each proposed a distinct mode of enduring and defeating the Great Depression.

In many ways Roosevelt's New Deal version of American identity revived some of the tenets of a prior movement, progressivism. The Progressive movement began in the 1890s (eponymously termed "the Progressive Era", a time marked by major social reforms aimed at

combating the effects of industrialization and urban growth.) Key goals of the movement included limiting the influence of the privileged on political operations, promoting women's suffrage, establishing railroad regulations, and ending child labor.<sup>53</sup>

Those who called themselves “progressives” espoused a wide range of political views. For example, both Teddy Roosevelt (Republican) and Woodrow Wilson (Democrat) were members of the progressive movement.<sup>54</sup> Progressives saw danger in the deification of the individual over the individual's responsibility to the social whole. Progressives advocated for more directed control over the government by the American people and purification of the government of the corrupting influence of special interests. On the national level, progressives helped enact the sixteenth and seventeenth amendments, which established the federal income tax and the direct election of senators, respectively. Both of these reforms highlighted the two central tenets of progressivism: the need for public overview of private enterprise and the idea that American citizens can understand and master the structures of their government.<sup>55</sup> Progressives held that a better society could be built with the eradication of partisan politics and the establishment of a government ruled by scientific principles. ‘Scientific’ was defined as a process of governing without ideology and special interests. Historian Maureen Flanagan argues these “corrupting” influences were viewed as a product of unchecked individualism the prioritized greed and elitism over social good.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For more information on progressivism in the early 20th century, see John Buenkner, *Progressivism*. Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing, 1986, and Maureen A. Flanagan, *American Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms 1890s – 1920s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Flanagan, *American Reformed*, 116, 138.

<sup>55</sup> Stipelman, *Broader Definition*, 41.

<sup>56</sup> Flanagan, *America Reformed*, 98.

The movement lost its momentum in the wake of the challenges of the WWI.<sup>57</sup> In 1921 President Warren Harding announced that America needed a return to “normalcy.” This normalcy included ending the social experiments of the previous decades.<sup>58</sup> The economic success of the 1920s temporarily quieted most of the grassroots organizations until crisis hit in 1929. While the increase of individual wealth in the urban areas alleviated much of the call for social reform, the next decade would prove that social reform was still needed.

The lasting memory of the progressive movement had a huge influence the New Dealers in their efforts to set up a welfare state. The notion of a government that is responsible to all of its citizens began with this movement to redefine what America’s purpose should be. Progressivism championed the notion of collective individualism, the idea that only by working together could society secure liberties for the individual. This same tenet is central to the New Deal’s political ideology. In Roosevelt’s vision, the federal government works collectively on behalf of the citizens to protect their individual rights.

### **American Democracy Defined: Populism**

The New Deal’s progressive tendencies ran counter to another major political current from the nineteenth century: populism. Like progressivism, American populism worked to unite common people. Instead of uniting the people against societal ills, however, populism rallied the people against a personified evil, which it usually identified as some other body of people. While the progressive movement grew out of urban and political arenas, populism grew out of the disenfranchised (white) agrarian societies in the United States. Both political movements rose in

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<sup>57</sup> Stipelman, *Broader Definition*, 49.

<sup>58</sup> The Progressive Era came to a close after the end of World War I. The human cost of the global conflict shook the foundations of progressivism. Science, though a bastion of progressive thinking, was responsible for death and destruction on scale never before seen. Even though progressives rejected much of the laissez faire form of governance, it still held to a type of Social Darwinism. Instead of following the “survival of the fittest” mentality, however, progressives felt that humanity was progressing towards a mastery of itself for the betterment of society.

prominence at the end of nineteenth century as their adherents organized to form a collective voice in old power structures.

Populism's political content can be nebulous to define, and it is rarely solely owned by one political leader, or party, or place on the left-right spectrum. Political scientists Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey argue the solution to defining populism lies with identifying it as a political style rather than an ideology, discourse, or organization. They assert that as a political style, populism is identified through its performative elements rather than its place within the political spectrum.<sup>59</sup> Populists identify and name an enemy to rally "the people" using polarizing rhetoric.

When viewed as a political style, populism becomes both a response to crisis and a creator of crisis. Like progressivism, populism attracted people from across the spectrum. In 1891 the Prohibition Party, the Free Silver Party, Knights of Labor, the Old Greenback Party, and the Farmer's Alliance met in Cincinnati, OH to form the People's Party. Its stated aim was to combat the amassing of wealth and power in the hands of a few prominent individuals; its members were similarly against the individual over the collective.<sup>60</sup> In fact, since the formal organization of the People's Party predates Teddy Roosevelt's Progressive Party, we can see the influences of the former on the latter; such as the direct election of U.S. Senators.<sup>61</sup> Originally a party organized by farmers, this People's Party evolved into an advocacy group aimed at the working class. The organization as it existed during the 1896 presidential election was a combination of several farmers' alliances and other grassroots organizations that had trouble

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<sup>59</sup> Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey, "Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatization and Political Style," *Political Studies*, vol. 62, accessed July 7, 2017, doi: 10.1111/1467-9248.12032

<sup>60</sup> William A. Pfeffer, *Populism, Its Rise and Fall*. Peter Argersinger, editor. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press 1992), 3-7.

<sup>61</sup> Rebecca Edwards, "The Populist Party," Vassar College, 2000, <http://projects.vassar.edu/1896/populists.html>, accessed October 1, 2017.

aligning themselves with either the Democratic and Republican parties. Their concern was that power held by companies (such as U.S. Steel) was so great that closing a plant or cutting wages could devastate entire communities. Party members argued that these companies were as powerful as governments but lacked the electoral oversight to check their power.<sup>62</sup> To combat this abuse of power and circumvention of the democratic process, the People's Party proposed a number of economic reforms, including the Subtreasury Land and Loan System.<sup>63</sup>

After developing a platform based on providing small farmers with protection against larger farms and corporations, the People's Party merged with the Democratic Party and threw its support behind William Jennings Bryan's bid for the White House in 1896. Bryan's loss to McKinley, as well as the diluting of the party platform when it merged, resulted in the People's Party fading from prominence. However, this populist movement set the tone of "the people" versus "the interests" which would later propel challengers to Roosevelt's New Deal. The people, meant to represent the good in American society as the worker and the farmer, were supposed to be in conflict against the interests, which stood for the side of greed and elitism.<sup>64</sup> By the time of mass unemployment in the 1930s, populist rhetoric had found new voices; this time advocating not just for farmers, but all those who saw the titans of industry as predatory. The platform of populist leaders argued individual freedom was dependent on public power regulating private industry. The People's Party gave rise to the notion that individuals could demand their government to intervene on their behalf, and called into question the policies of a self-correcting

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<sup>62</sup> Stipelman, *Broader Definition*, 39.

<sup>63</sup> Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 299-300. The Subtreasury Land and Loan System was aimed at protecting farmers from profit-seeking sellers who were, according to members in the party, responsible for keeping crop prices low. The subtreasury would allow farmers to store non-perishable crops in lean times, and sell perishable crops to the US government for market prices. Parts of this plan would eventually be reintroduced by Roosevelt with the Agricultural Adjustment Act

<sup>64</sup> Stipelman, *Broader Definition*, 39.



economic system.<sup>65</sup> The party was the first to manifest “that only through collective strength can there be individual agency.”<sup>66</sup> Populists can be observed as using perceived and real danger as a powerful political tool.

For populism to exist, there must be a danger to the “common man.” When that danger is vanquished, the populists become the machine, and there is no need for the movement. A constant state of emergency is needed for a populist leader to maintain control. Moffitt and Tormey argue populism identifies a dangerous other using the signifiers of “establishment” or “the elites” to create a dichotomy of an amorphous power bloc that must be taken down by “the people.” A crisis is created when these opposing sets of signifiers are placed at odds by the performative actions of a populist ideologue.<sup>67</sup> While many of the platforms of the People’s Party aimed at making the existing government work for them, the successors to this movement used the anger and disillusionment of those whose lives were most affected by the Great Depression to seize power in their name. This is seen in the political campaigns of Huey Long in the 1930s.

During his bid for the White House, Senator Huey Long (1893 - 1935) ran on a wealth redistribution platform. Long was a one-man democratic populist political powerhouse in Louisiana in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>68</sup> His short but influential life in both Louisiana and American politics was marked by fiery speeches meant to enfranchise the poor and crafting policies meant to redistribute the wealth of the nation. Complete with its own theme song, (“Every man a king, every girl a queen...”), Long’s “Share Our Wealth” plan first aimed to close the gap between the wealthy and the impoverished in the largely agrarian state of Louisiana. The “share” in the Share

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<sup>65</sup> Goodwyn, *The Populist Movement*, 25.

<sup>66</sup> Stipelman, *Broader Definition*, 41.

<sup>67</sup> Moffitt and Tormey, “Rethinking Populism.”

<sup>68</sup> For more on the political life of Huey Long see Richard D. White *Kingfish: The Reign of Huey P. Long*, (New York: Random House, 2006).

Our Wealth realized itself as a cap on individual wealth; personal wealth over \$5 million would be distributed to social welfare programs.<sup>69</sup> The plan was a national form of the economic policies Long implemented when he was governor of Louisiana. By the summer of 1935, the Share Our Wealth Society had 7.5 million members.<sup>70</sup> Long's populism was marked by the ability to shift the populists to which he spoke. Historian Mike Lee argues Long was able to move his rhetoric from the agrarian Louisiana to the national stage by switching his focus from farmers versus corporations to a more general working class versus the abstract evil of wealth. Lee also argues Long's brand of populism was so popular because of his all-encompassing definition of "the people." For Long, the definition of "the people" meant anyone who had ever felt taken advantage of, or forgotten, by those in positions of power.<sup>71</sup>

Huey Long became many things to many people. To Louisiana natives, and to people who felt the early rollout of FDR's New Deal was not helping fast enough to counter the devastating effects of the Great Depression, he became the ideal champion to the people, to Americans. However, to his critics (including one Sinclair Lewis), Long was dangerous. In addition to his populist rhetoric, he was a strongman politician; he did not shy from using political muscle (and sometimes actual muscle) to push his agendas. Legends of cronyism, civil liberty violations, and rampant corruption swirled around Long as his popularity threatened to split the Democratic vote.<sup>72</sup> Roosevelt himself believed Long to be one of the most dangerous

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<sup>69</sup> This figure was given when Long first unveiled the plan. He later amended the individual wealth cap at \$5 million.

<sup>70</sup> Long Legacy Project, "Huey Long's Programs: Share Our Wealth," accessed 12 February 2016, <http://www.hueylong.com/programs/share-our-wealth.php>, accessed September 5, 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Lee, Michael J. "The Populist Chameleon: The People's Party, Huey Long, George Wallace, and the Populist Argumentative Frame." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 no. 4 (November 2006): 355-378, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00335630601080385>.

<sup>72</sup> Long Legacy Project, "Huey Long's Life and Times: Presidential Candidate," accessed 12 February 2016, <http://www.hueylong.com/life-times/presidential-candidate.php>

men in America due to Long's potential to be a spoiler.<sup>73</sup> Long's political threat to Roosevelt reveals how quickly new solutions to America's economic collapse could sway the disenfranchised. When we think about America's two-party system, it is easy to forget that the Republican and Democrat parties have had to fight to hold ideological control during times of political crisis. Just like the Republican party saw its base shift to the Tea Party after the 2008 election, both parties dealt with fringe groups fighting for visibility on the national stage in the 1930s. These were not always fully formed parties but more loosely-organized movements aligned around existing political ideologies.

In his speeches, Long often used the verbal image of the poor farmer or the out-of-work miller to foster distrust and hatred for bankers, executives, and old-money landowners. By making these groups the scapegoat for the suffering of the poor of Louisiana, Long was able to take hold of unprecedented power. For example, while serving as Louisiana's Senator, he still held the office of Governor until he was allowed to appoint his own successor. He also commissioned the Louisiana National Guard as his personal police force.<sup>74</sup> Whereas the first American populists rejected politics as inherently corrupting, decades after entering the political arena their message was being used to amass political power. The exploitation of individual and social distress to create an enemy of those of wealth and means goes beyond the earlier platforms of the People's Party to hold big business accountable. Huey Long's new brand of populism campaigned on wealth redistribution. Long's strategy for political power was to create a solution his followers could grasp onto; something tangible to mark the success or failure of his

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<sup>73</sup> Robert E. Snyder, "Huey Long and the Presidential Election of 1936," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, 16, num.2, (Spring 1965), 117, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231456>, accessed October 1, 2017.

<sup>74</sup> The exploits of Huey Long when we held political office are as numerous as they are fantastical. For a comprehensive history of Huey Long's political life see Harry T Williams, *Huey Long*, (New York: Knopf, 1969) and Richard White, *Kingfish: The Reign of Huey P. Long*, (New York: Random House, 2006).

movement. Ultimately, Long's plans were never realized. He was assassinated September 10, 1935 in Baton Rouge, LA. Roosevelt faced no real challengers from the left in the 1936 election, and won in a landslide. Long's political style faded from major dominance.

Long and Roosevelt were political allies in the early years of the Great Depression. Long campaigned vigorously for Roosevelt during the 1932 election, and he was a proponent of many of Roosevelt's New Deal programs. In fact, before the signature New Deal programs were implemented by Roosevelt, they were already in use in Louisiana. Long instituted massive public works, public education, and public health initiatives across the state. However, by 1933 Long's frustration with the slow pace of the recovery, as well as his own political ambitions, caused a rift between him and the President. Long's major political push was wealth redistribution through taxation; he favored providing land and a guaranteed income over the New Deal's jobs and services goals. Long's Americanism was based on the populist call to identify an enemy and unite around it, and his many speeches on the Senate floor called for an end to cash-hoarding business elites. Long's populism differs from Roosevelt's progressivism by focusing on creating this division around a crisis. To Long's followers, populism represented a common-sense, down-to-earth solution to the problems of the Great Depression. To his detractors, however, Long bore a striking resemblance to European figures. This was a different kind of precarity that was growing from within the American political landscape.

### **Dictators at Home and Abroad**

Alpers argues America has a complicated historical relationship with dictators and totalitarianism. Today the terms conjure images of Adolph Hitler, violent oppression, starvation, and cold-war era arms races. "Dictator" is a political taboo, an accusation one can hurl at an enemy. According to Alpers, this has not always been the case. In 1922, Benito Mussolini led his

march to Rome; the mass demonstration of fascist power and support prompted King Victor Emmanuel III to hand power over to Mussolini. After the coup, Mussolini's success was lauded in the American press. Alice Rohe of the *New York Times* wrote, "Mussolini has brought into the Italian situation that which it has lacked, and his achievements are proof of what discipline and organization, guided by an indomitable will, personal fearlessness, powerful intellect, profound learning, straight thinking, and direct action can do."<sup>75</sup> Less than a decade later, the *Times* was still praising his leadership. In the editorial "Mussolini and Peace," the newspaper hailed the leader as having a less aggressive foreign policy than his speeches, and even brushed off any worry about Mussolini moving to war as a lack of a "refined interpretation" of his motives.<sup>76</sup> Alpers underlines the American perception of Mussolini in the 1920s as a man who brought order to chaos in Italy, something that was enticing to Americans in the uncertain times of the early twentieth century. After the crash of 1929, the desire for a strong central power grew in the U.S. to the point where the press was calling for an American dictator to set things right. Alpers argues most Americans viewed dictatorship as a temporary solution to momentary crisis; much like the temporary crisis of war when the President is given extra powers and relinquishes them after peace is declared; the crisis of the economic crash similarly called for a temporarily stronger executive. The need for action was intense, granting Roosevelt's campaign a mandate to realize his promise to do more with presidential power.<sup>77</sup> Roosevelt played a different strongman than Long: a progressive one who only wanted broader power for the immediate response. This perceived permission was acknowledged in FDR's first inaugural address, in which he asked that Congress work with him to meet the coming crisis with broad changes:

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<sup>75</sup> Alice Rohe, "Mussolini: Hope of Youth, Italy's 'Man of Tomorrow,'" *New York Times*, November 5, 1922.

<sup>76</sup> Editorial, "Mussolini and Peace," *New York Times*, January 3, 1931.

<sup>77</sup> Alpers, *Dictators*, 3, 24-25.

But in the event that the Congress shall fail to take one of these two courses, and in the event that the national emergency is still critical, I shall not evade the clear course of duty that will then confront me. I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis—broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.<sup>78</sup>

This particular section of the address should be noted in that it highlights the need for strong, decisive action in the face of a state of emergency, and its emphasis of the Great Depression as an external hostile foe. Just like an armed conflict, Roosevelt called to be given the same temporary powers he would have if war were declared. Also like armed conflict, the Great Depression was seen as a temporary state of emergency; power would be given and then returned after the crisis was dealt with and stasis was restored. This type of flirtation with Mussolinian rhetoric—the consolidation of power, the abstract emergency, the use of war as a metaphor—would not last in Roosevelt’s administration. While the American public initially favored Mussolini as an answer to the chaos in Italy, after his invasion of a foreign nation his designs on seizing more power and brutal tactics could not be ignored. Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, and his indebtedness to Mussolini’s totalitarian philosophy, further pushed the idea that the dictator was to be feared rather than lauded.<sup>79</sup> I detect a shift in the tone of Roosevelt’s call for power in his April 14, 1938 Fireside Chat:

Democracy has disappeared in several other great nations-not because the people of those nations disliked democracy, but because they had grown tired of unemployment and insecurity, of seeing their children hungry while they sat helpless in the face of government confusion and government weakness through lack of leadership in government...History proves that dictatorships do not grow out of strong and successful governments, but out of weak and helpless ones.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, “First Inaugural Address (March 4, 1933),” Miller Center, University of Virginia, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://millercenter.org/president/fdroosevelt/speeches/speech-3280>. Accessed February 15, 2015.

<sup>79</sup> Alpers, *Dictators*, 77-78.

<sup>80</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt: "Fireside Chat.," April 14, 1938. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15628>.

In between Roosevelt's first inaugural address and his later fireside chats, his rhetoric moved from dictatorial calls for power to reiteration of the superiority of democracy. Alpers attributes Roosevelt's walking back to both Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia and Hitler's rise to power. I focus on these two addresses, and Alpers's interpretation of them, to point out how precarity works in the realm of public perception. In the years following Roosevelt's inaugural address, the perception of the dictator morphed from one of a necessary stopgap to one of a threat. Between FDR's first and second election American democracy was in a state of precarity. The granting for emergency powers for the executive branch would be usually undone after the emergency has passed, but in 1938 the Great Depression was still in full swing. In the fireside chat, Roosevelt defends government spending and privatizing of industries in order to make the democracy strong enough to resist the lure of fascism. He speaks of a collective form of liberalism—the collective government working to empower the individual. After proposing millions of dollars in public works projects to both employ Americans and to shore up infrastructure, the President stated, "In recommending this program I am thinking not only of the immediate economic needs of the people of the Nation, but also of their personal liberties—the most precious possession of all Americans. I am thinking of our democracy and of the recent trend in other parts of the world away from the democratic ideal." In a sense, Roosevelt argued for the continued practice of buying the nation out of its precarity. Jobs, food, and infrastructure could be promised by any number of political methods, but the New Deal method was to deliver on those promises under the existing framework of American liberal democracy in order to demonstrate its effectiveness and prevent its fall.

The New Deal was a new agreement with America and its citizens; it promised when private enterprise failed, the government would step in to ensure citizens had the means necessary to continue their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As Stipelman argues, the culture of scarcity had kept the American people in a permanent state of precarity, unable to enjoy a life free from the threat of personal financial disaster. The New Deal programs sought to correct the failures of laissez-faire democracy by intervening on the behalf of those powerless against it. The WPA specifically addressed this by combatting joblessness. By putting the unemployed to work, Roosevelt's program allowed those on its rolls to earn a living while also improving the nation by building up its infrastructure. By extension, the theatre wing of the WPA was also part of this new contract; it put theatre professionals to work by building up the nation's artistic infrastructure.

### **American Democracy Defined: The Popular Front**

After the economic collapse in 1929 a new political movement called the Popular Front emerged out of the upheaval in American society. Alpers traces the coming together of the left under the umbrella of the Popular Front.<sup>81</sup> The Communist Party operating in the US formed that "umbrella" in part to distance itself from a growing concern regarding Stalin and his regime. By accepting leftist groups like pro-Roosevelt Democrats and Socialists into its ideological fold, the Communist Party-sponsored Popular Front was able to adopt a broad mission: overcoming fascism. Both the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe are responsible for the rapid growth of the Popular Front in American politics and culture.<sup>82</sup> The previous respite from economic strife during the 1920s brought with it a national upswing in emotional enjoyment,

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<sup>81</sup> Benjamin Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy 1920s-1940*, (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2003), 81-80.

<sup>82</sup> For a more in-depth history of The Popular Front, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso. 1996).



which had lessened the need for powerful movements of change. The vacuum left by the fading of prior populist and progressive movements allowed the party to gain power. Formed by industrial unionists, Communists, socialists, refugee anti-fascists, and labor activists, the Popular Front in America was both a social movement and a political voting bloc. And while anti-Communist campaigns in following years have recorded the history of the Popular Front as solidly pro-Communism, the actual organization was more diverse, bringing together non-aligned leftists and those who felt that the two-party system was not sufficient for the needs of the country.<sup>83</sup>

The Popular Front was first formed out of the labor movement and the labor strikes of the early 1930s. The impetus to form the Congress of Industrial Workers out of various industrial and craft unions and the need for group representation created an uptick in militant rhetoric and mass demonstration.<sup>84</sup> The striking workers and unrest of the era gave rise to a renewed interest in class-consciousness. After the boom years of the 1920s, more people identified themselves as working-class than in previous eras, mainly due to the creation of that cohort in combination with the “trauma of the Depression,” which influenced solidarity in those who were left without protection against the special interests.<sup>85</sup> The Popular Front worked on three political avenues: the electoral process, anti-fascist and anti-imperialist ideology, and campaigning on civil liberties. The latter two of these marks a change from the earlier populist and progressive movements. Neither of those parties were particularly interested in issues of imperialism, and neither were successful in divorcing themselves from segregationist Southern members. The strategy of early Popular Front members to achieve the first of their goals was to begin a true

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<sup>83</sup> Denning, *Cultural Front*, 4

<sup>84</sup> Pells, *Radical Visions*, 302-303

<sup>85</sup> Denning, *Cultural Front*, 8

third party of a farm-labor alliance and to infiltrate Roosevelt's New Dealers. They were not successful in either attempt, unable to elect Popular Front candidates beyond the state levels. Roosevelt's political power was so great that his administration steered most of the policies. That is not to say they had no influence; many of Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives started with the Popular Front's call for the establishment of a welfare state.<sup>86</sup>

The second of the Popular Front's ambitions involved crafting rhetoric which promoted international solidarity against fascism. Many of the members of the Popular Front included refugees from Germany and Italy, as well as immigrants who opposed Franco's fascist takeover of Spain. This position proved more successful, since after America entered the Second World War public sentiment turned decidedly anti-fascist.<sup>87</sup> The Popular Front helped to establish fascism as a counter to American principles. Again, we see the attempt to define the greater danger to American identity. As I will show in later chapters, the aims of the Popular front were often manifested in cultural productions, including the Federal Theatre's productions.

The third aim of the Popular Front, promoting civil liberties, proved the most successful and it marks the biggest break with the movement's predecessors. The Popular Front sought to mobilize its members to bring an end to lynching and persecution of immigrants and unionists. By this time the pro-civil liberties progressives joined the ranks of the Popular Front, populism had taken on racist overtones as a way of offering scapegoats for the white middle classes.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, the Popular Front organized campaigns to bring an end to labor repressions and to promote federal anti-lynching legislation.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Denning, *Cultural Front*, 10

<sup>87</sup> Denning, *Cultural Front*, 11

<sup>88</sup> William A. Pfeffer, *Populism, Its Rise and Fall*. Peter Argersinger, editor. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press 1992), 5.

<sup>89</sup> Denning, *Cultural Front*, 14

The ethos of the Popular Front was closely aligned with the aims of the FTP. Many of the program's social justice plays reflected the Popular Front's commitment to the labor movement (*Injunction Granted* 1936), social justice (*One Third of the Nation* 1938), and public health (*Spirochete* 1938). Prior to her work with the FTP, Flanagan reported on the workers' theatre groups in the US and in Russia, the latter of which heavily inspired some of the FTP's plays both in content and style. The FTP responded to the economic strife of the 1930s and the anti-democratic forces at home and abroad. In my next three chapters, I detail the response to anti-democratic precarity with *Ethiopia* (1936) and *It Can't Happen Here* (1936) that went beyond, and at times ran counter to, Roosevelt's New Deal vision.

These emerging political movements reveal a shift in the public sphere concerning social responsibility and government oversight into the daily lives of Americans. They also reveal a disagreement over who and what can be trusted with the welfare of the American people. Progressivism, populism, and the Popular Front all share a focus on American-made solutions for American-made problems. The years immediately following the collapse of 1929 were a time of precarity stemming from both economic collapse and ecological devastation. A common theme in these movements can be traced back to that question: What, or who, is dangerous? Each had its own answer. For progressives, the great danger was unchecked corruption of an indifferent government. For populists like Huey Long, danger lay in unequal distribution of wealth and power to the elite. These groups claimed to be the best defenders against danger and to represent the most people. In their claims of representation, they also claimed to represent the most American of ideals. The goals of these political movements, in part, were aimed at increasing the number of people who could participate in American democracy. While a noble goal in the

ideological sense, it also translated into more power for the leaders. After all, if you can find an ignored voting bloc, you can claim those votes for yourself by promising to give them a voice.

Giving voice to the voiceless can be a powerful incentive. It is what that voice says, however, that changes the meaning of essentially contested concepts like liberty, tyrant, and American. While the United States sought a “return to normalcy” and focused on its own problems, that did not mean the American people didn't look to Europe for inspiration to protect themselves from total societal collapse.

## **Summary**

The focus of the project is how precarity leads to new interpretations of institutions and how they behave, primarily in the case of the FTP and how it produced the mass staging of *It Can't Happen Here*. Precarity as a state of flux without security defined the interwar period of the 1930s in the United States. The lives of American citizens were precarious because nothing, not even the definition of "American," could be secure. Existing in a state of emergency, one likened to a hostile invasion, could have been the impetus to creating an authoritarian rule. Even though that broad executive power might have been trusted in the hands of someone like Roosevelt, the same power wielded by a populist like Huey Long was enough to inspire Sinclair Lewis to pen what he saw as its inevitable conclusion in *It Can't Happen Here*.

## Chapter Two: Threat of Failure

In the greater context of precarity, there were numerous factors influencing the FTP and its theatrical output. While the agency produced many plays and other theatricals that had little-to-no political or social commentary, it still engaged its audience in timely, socially motivated plays. In this chapter, I examine the FTP's first attempt to produce a play dealing with the threats of fascism in order to give *It Can't Happen Here* a greater context. In the first section, I detail how the FTP operated. In the second section, I highlight the work the FTP did in the United States to create a functioning national theatre. In the third section, I detail a successful FTP production as a case study for what the agency was capable of. Finally, I bring *Ethiopia* into the narrative of the FTP to make a case for its failure setting the stage for the eventual production of *It Can't Happen Here*. The purpose of the chapter is to demonstrate the precarious position the FTP occupied as both a branch of Roosevelt's New Deal mechanism and a public theatre.

### Creation of the Federal Theatre Project

During its operation, the FTP produced hundreds of plays, employed thousands of theatre professionals and amateurs, and was responsible for creating a new kind of national theatre. Built into its foundation was the precarity of the theatre, and the precarity of the United State's identity of democracy and liberalism. The FTP was created to first employ those theatre artists whose skills would be left to atrophy on the relief rolls if they could not find employment under their specialization. The life of American theatre was also threatened by a lack of audience. If there were no theatres open to attend, or the only theatres open cost too much, the audience pool would eventually dry up. The FTP responded to this precarity by employing those artists and providing low-cost, and sometimes free, entertainment to a cash-strapped audience base. The

FTP also responded to the instability of democracy and liberalism by its artistic output which challenged the enforcement of precaritization.

With a quarter of the American workforce facing unemployment, it was preferable to pay people to work instead of providing relief pay. The unifying principle behind the Federal One units was to employ professional artists in order to take them off of the relief rolls. This would cultivate their skills and provide much needed leisure activities for those who would become their audience. Under the WPA, thousands of people were paid to build up the nation's infrastructure. While the majority of work was in the form of literal infrastructure (bridges, roads, municipal and educational buildings), the work performed by employees of Federal One was artistic infrastructure whose purpose was to shore up the livability of artists and writers. Besides the FTP, there were three other projects under Federal One. The Federal Musicians Project (FMP) performed symphonies, light operas, ballets, and other musical events for the public.<sup>90</sup> The Federal Arts Project (FAP) produced art open for public viewing; these included oil paintings, stained-glass ornaments for other public works buildings, posters for public awareness campaigns, etc.<sup>91</sup> The Federal Writers Project (FWP) produced books (fiction and non-fiction), magazine articles, plays (used by the FTP), and local/oral histories.<sup>92</sup> The type of infrastructure these projects provided was central to the New Deal vision of the arts projects; it would create enrichment opportunities for the American public, many of whom had little disposable income for leisure activities.<sup>93</sup> These projects served to not only combat the precarity of artists and

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<sup>90</sup> Federal Works Agency, Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-43, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946, 63-64, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/gdc/scd0001/2008/20080212001fi/20080212001fi.pdf>, accessed October 2, 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Federal Works Agency, Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-43, 64, accessed October 2, 2017.

<sup>92</sup> Federal Works Agency, Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-43, 65, accessed October 2, 2017.

<sup>93</sup> "Federal Project Number One," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project*, George Washington University, <https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teaching/glossary/federal-project-number1.cfm>, accessed October 3, 2017.

writers during the Great Depression, but they also ensured the creation of new artistic/literary discoveries during the crisis.

The FTP was organized as a network of theatres across the nation. They set up in existing theatres, some of which had been closed due to the Great Depression, as well as in churches, schools, club meeting halls, and in open-air spaces.<sup>94</sup> The WPA also built and restored 138 outdoor theatres for the FTP's use.<sup>95</sup> One of those theatres, in Roanoke VA, was built to house the historical drama *The Lost Colony* (1937), which is still running.<sup>96</sup> Timberline Lodge near Portland, OR was built out of a slope adjacent to Mount Hood and served as multipurpose stage for the FTP.<sup>97</sup> Since the FTP chose its theatres based on the availability of theatre professionals, not all states had FTP representation.<sup>98</sup>

WPA director Harry Hopkins tapped Hallie Flanagan to serve as the FTP national director. She was not the obvious choice; she had no professional theatre experience or federal government appointments.<sup>99</sup> Prior to her appointment to the FTP, Flanagan started the theatre program at Vassar College (1925). Before she arrived, all theatre classes there were taught by the department of English as literature studies. She drew up plans to create a degree in drama, but they were rejected. In 1926, Flanagan received the Guggenheim Fellowship, which she used to study theatre in Europe. During this trip Flanagan studied the theatre of Konstantine Stanislavsky and Luigi Pirandello. When she returned to Vassar, she began the Experimental Theatre with

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<sup>94</sup> Ronald Ross, "The Role of Black in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939," *The Journal of Negro History* Vol. 59, No. 1 (January, 1974), 38-50, doi: 10.2307/2717139, accessed October 1, 2017.

<sup>95</sup> Federal Works Agency, Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-43, 131, accessed October 2, 2017.

<sup>96</sup> John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, ed., *The Federal Theatre Project: Free, Adult, Uncensored*, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1980), 178. *Lost Colony* examines the mystery of the lost colony of Roanoke VA, where it is still performed every Summer.

<sup>97</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 291.

<sup>98</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 436.

<sup>99</sup> John Houseman, "Negro Theatre Unit, Project 891, New York," in *Voices from the Federal Theatre*, ed. Bonnie Nelson and Robert Bernstein, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 101.

Anton Chekhov's *A Marriage Proposal* (1890) utilizing three different staging techniques for the three acts. While Flanagan was experimenting with new theatre techniques, Hopkins was looking for someone to head the FTP. He wanted someone who would look at the FTP as a whole, rather than secure support for a personal project. After Hopkins rejected director and playwright Elmer Rice for the project (his vision primarily focused on shoring up the New York theatres), Rice suggested Flanagan to fit the role of theatre public servant.<sup>100</sup> Her experimental theatre program at Vassar College reflected the type of non-commercial theatre Hopkins envisioned.<sup>101</sup> He approached Flanagan about the position, which she initially declined because she was newly re-married and wanted to start her new life with her husband, Phillip Davis. It wasn't until First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt directly intervened at a White House dinner party that Flanagan agreed to serve. Mrs. Roosevelt appealed to Flanagan's sense of duty and public service, and Flanagan used that directive as her mission.<sup>102</sup> Hallie Flanagan served as the national director, and under her office she set up thirteen regional units: New York City, New York State, New England, New Jersey-Pennsylvania, Ohio Region, Virginia-Carolinas, Southern Region, Central Region, Mid-West Region, Northwest Region, Southwest Region, Pacific Southwest, and the District of Columbia-Maryland. These hubs were created to provide employment for theatre artists away from Broadway, and to cultivate theatre audiences in far-flung places.<sup>103</sup> Each region was run by a regional director, and some regions also had state directors. While the states and regions enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy, major projects required coordination and approval of the national office.

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<sup>100</sup> Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, 43.

<sup>101</sup> O'Conner and Brown, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 2.

<sup>102</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 10.

<sup>103</sup> "WPA to Spend \$3,000,00 for Revival of Drama," New York Times, August 18, 1935.



Since the FTP was organized as a relief agency, 90% of its workers had to come from relief rolls. This meant prior to seeking an FTP position, a theatre professional had to register for relief from the federal government indicating they were unemployed theatre workers. Additionally, only 10% of the FTP's annual budget (\$6.7 million) could be spent on administration and production costs, meaning the overwhelming majority of the budget had to go towards paying their workers.<sup>104</sup>

In addition to plays, the FTP produced vaudeville revues, circuses, pageants, and murder mystery performances. For example, the FTP produced the pageant *America Sings* (1936) in Arkansas to coincide with Roosevelt's tour of the state. Sixteen hundred cast members performed the history of the United States for an audience of 5,000.<sup>105</sup> The *CCC Murder Mystery* (1936-1939) also expanded the FTP's production genre. It was a traveling improv/audience participation comedy performed in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCCs were groups of young men who were employed for conservation projects, staying in camps outside of the cities they were working in. Their room and board was covered by the government, and their paychecks were sent home to help their families.<sup>106</sup> The play utilized the young men in the camps to enact a farcical courtroom drama.<sup>107</sup> In terms of more traditional plays, the FTP produced new works as well as classics: T.S. Elliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1936), Arthur Miller's *They Too Rise* (1937), Clifford Odet's *Awake and Sing* (1938), and Rudolph Fischer's *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1936).<sup>108</sup> The breadth of the FTP's productions indicated it was committed to being a theatre for all Americans by providing something for everyone.

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<sup>104</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 29

<sup>105</sup> Elizabeth Osborne, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 1.

<sup>106</sup> For more on the *CCC Camp Murder Mystery*, see Osborne, *Staging the People*.

## The Living Newspapers

The FTP also produced political plays aimed at dramatizing the forces affecting its nationwide audience. Within the FTP a special unit was devised to dramatize real-world events. These Living Newspapers were a significant subproject within the FTP, and an exhaustive study of this unit is beyond the scope of my project. As I discussed in my introduction, a number of studies have been published about them, but I want to pause here to highlight some of the features of the form, as well as discuss some of the more well-known productions. Flanagan first encountered the form during her travels to Russia in 1926.<sup>109</sup> The Living Newspapers, as they existed in Russia during the 1920s, were a form of agit-prop theatre intended to spread the ideals of Communism.<sup>110</sup> When the FTP developed them for U.S. production they took on more social justice, rather than overt Communist, subjects. As a theatrical form, the plays were sparsely designed, utilizing mainly projections and lighting to convey time and place. They had large casts and were produced quickly in order to capitalize on current events.<sup>111</sup> This style made them an attractive solution to the FTP's budget constraints.

Flanagan thought they could be developed in the U.S. based on journalistic-style feature stories.<sup>112</sup> Flanagan recalls in her memoir, *Arena*, that when she was trying to convince Elmer Rice to join them as director of the New York Unit, he did not want to take the position because he didn't think he could produce plays cheaply enough with large casts to find work for the

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<sup>109</sup> Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, 66.

<sup>110</sup> Agit-prop stands for "agitation and propaganda." It is a style of art meant to disseminate didactic information, usually for a political purpose.

<sup>111</sup> For authoritative studies on the Living Newspapers, see Ann Folio White, *Plowed Under: Food Policy Protests and Performance in New Deal America*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and Jordana Cox, "'Propaganda for Democracy.' Dialogue and Dissemination in the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers, 1936-1939," (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2016).

<sup>112</sup> Jordana Cox, "The Phantom Public, The Living Newspaper: Reanimating the Public in the Federal Theatre Project's 1935," *Theatre Survey* 58, no. 3, (September 2017), 302.

hundreds of theatre professionals now on the FTP payroll. Flanagan convinced Rice to take the position after explaining the Living Newspaper form.<sup>113</sup>

Rice seized on the idea of the Living Newspapers being living recreations of news. He appointed Morris Watson, who was the vice president of the American Newspaper Guild, to serve as the Managing Director of the unit. Watson staffed the unit like a newsroom, utilizing journalists and playwrights to create newsreel-style plays.<sup>114</sup> The Living Newspaper production *Spirochete* (1938) focused on the syphilis epidemic and stands out as a success for both its reception and the service it provided. The play detailed the history of syphilis, from its first spread in Europe to the discovery of effective medical treatment for the disease. The play challenged moral taboos of speaking about the sexually transmitted ailment in public, while highlighting that the same taboo was to blame for its spread. The play used quotations from medical experts to advocate for mandatory blood testing before couples could obtain a marriage license. The Living Newspaper Unit was organized to write plays which dramatized current newspaper headlines, and *Spirochete* was written in a way that mirrored journalistic vigor in the terms of facts. Historian Elizabeth Osborne argues the reasoning for such adherence to the facts was to fend off criticisms of propaganda. She notes the Living Newspaper Unit was often the target of accusations of partisanship; producing a play about venereal disease needed a neutral position in order to secure its support of the Chicago medical community and local government.<sup>115</sup> While the play did not see a large audience turnout, it did earn the support of state and federal government<sup>116</sup> and ran for 30 performances in Chicago, later opening in Boston,

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<sup>113</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 64-65.

<sup>114</sup> Cox, "The Phantom Public," 306.

<sup>115</sup> Osborne, *Staging the People*, 36-37.

<sup>116</sup> Osborne, *Staging the People*, 47-48.

Cincinnati, Portland, Philadelphia, and Seattle.<sup>117</sup> *Spirochete* stands as one of the best examples of what the Living Newspapers could do: present relevant theatre with a didactic message to serve the public. However, the Living Newspapers didn't start out that way. The first Living Newspaper brought with it the FTP's first public failure.

### **Mussolini verses Selassie: On the Battlefield and the Stage**

Despite the narrative of a successful FTP that I discuss in the introduction to this dissertation, the agency was not without its missteps. In what was supposed to be the very first Living Newspaper production, the FTP experienced its first public failure. As the Living Newspapers were envisioned to be dramatizations of current events, the inspiration for the first attempt of this type of drama, *Ethiopia*, came from the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.

The war between Italy and Ethiopia began October 3, 1935 and ended May 5, 1936 with the Italian military's occupation of Ethiopia. Italy's forces would hold Ethiopia until 1941, when Mussolini was forced to release the occupied state during the East African Campaign in World War II. Hostilities began when Italy built a garrison in Ethiopia, violating the Italo-Ethiopia Treaty of 1928. The two sides clashed, leaving 110 Ethiopians and 50 Italians dead. After that, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie (who was called King of Kings by his people) mobilized the Ethiopian army to repel Mussolini's forces<sup>118</sup>

Italy's aggression towards Ethiopia came with strong opposition from the League of Nations, who saw Mussolini's invasion as part of a slippery slope which could lead to further advancement of both the Italian Fascist and the Nazi Germany border.<sup>119</sup> To enforce their condemnation of Italy's action, the League of Nations enacted strong economic sanctions,

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<sup>117</sup> Osborne, *Staging the People*, 38, 47.

<sup>118</sup> For a detailed history of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, see Anthony Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

<sup>119</sup> Edwin L. James, "Mussolini Suspects Abyssinian Schemes," *New York Times*, May 12, 1935.

including a freeze of all credit lines for Italy.<sup>120</sup> Historian Benjamin Alpers agrees this invasion was the turning point in America against the perception of Mussolini.<sup>121</sup>

For the first Living Newspaper, Rice and Watson wanted to produce a 15-minute “feature story” about the conflict in Ethiopia similar to the newsreel films *The March of Time*.<sup>122</sup> *The March of Time* was a short film documentary series, produced by Time, Inc., broadcast in movie theatres from 1935 - 1951. It was a monthly series of didactic news stories which included reenactments of news events and on-location reports. The series ran in over 500 theatres and boasted an audience of 25 million people per month.<sup>123</sup> Playwright Arthur Arent was assigned to turn the headlines about Ethiopia into a live version of *The March of Time*. Arent was employed by the FTP’s Playwright Bureau, the unit responsible for creating and curating new plays for FTP staging. Rice, who stepped into the role of *Ethiopia*’s director, loved Arent’s first draft but wanted to expand it to a full-length play.<sup>124</sup> The expanded piece was a full-length referendum on the Italian occupation of the eponymous nation. Part history lesson and part current event primer, the final script of *Ethiopia* was a condemnation of both fascism and American non-interventionism.<sup>125</sup> The script utilized projections and sparse sets to economically jump from military encampments, to the League of Nations, to Rome, and to Addis Abba. Each scene opened with “teletype” projections of real news headlines such as “GERLOGUBI BOMBED—WOMEN AND CHILDREN SLAIN, CHARGED KING OF KINGS,” and “MUSSOLINI

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<sup>120</sup> “League Cuts Off All Loans,” New York Times, October 15, 1935.

<sup>121</sup> Alpers, *Dictators*, 78.

<sup>122</sup> Dan Isaacs, “*Ethiopia*, The First Living Newspaper” *Education Theatre Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (March 1968): 15-31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3204873>, accessed March 14, 2016.

<sup>123</sup> For more on *The March of Time*, see Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935 - 1951*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>124</sup> Isaacs, “*Ethiopia*,” 16.

<sup>125</sup> Isaacs, “*Ethiopia*,” 17.

CALLS TO ARMS EVERY MAN, WOMAN, AND CHILD.”<sup>126</sup> The actors playing Hallie Selassie, Benito Mussolini, and other heads of state performed speeches given by their real-world counterparts. The intended effect was to bring *The March of Time* films to life on stage.<sup>127</sup>

On paper, *Ethiopia* was a great choice for the FTP’s first Living Newspaper, and Elmer Rice a smart pick to direct it. By 1936 Rice was a well-established playwright known for his presentational style. The bare bones production style of the Living Newspaper, similar to the Expressionist style Rice helped to pioneer in America, were a good match. The play’s dramatization of current events and subject matter of the Italian fascist government were also appealing for Rice to take on. His works are noted for their detailed exploration of justice, the law, and the exploitation of common people by economic forces.<sup>128</sup> For example, Rice’s courtroom drama *Judgement Day* (1934) stands out in his catalogue for its depiction of how a totalitarian regime uses misinformation and nationalism to persecute dissenters.<sup>129</sup> The play centers around a socialist activist’s trial in a fascist court, where the protagonist is not allowed to mount a defense. The play takes place in a southern or eastern European nation, with baroque adornments and heavy use of Christian iconography. The court officials are costumed with heavy velvet robes, to the point of over-adornment.<sup>130</sup> The play is didactic, and highlights the corruption of the court system under a fascist government.

From this we see Rice held negative opinions of fascist governments. This is the same position Rice and Arent take in *Ethiopia*, and the same position the League of Nations and Roosevelt took—that Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia was morally reprehensible and represented a

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<sup>126</sup> Arthur Arent, *Ethiopia*, in Dan Isaacs, "Ethiopia, The First Living Newspaper" *Education Theatre Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (March 1968): 15-31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3204873>, accessed March 14, 2016.

<sup>127</sup> Isaacs, "Ethiopia," 17.

<sup>128</sup> Randolph N. Jonakait, "Law in the Plays of Elmer Rice," *Law and Literature*, 19, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 401-434

<sup>129</sup> *Judgement Day* was not without its own controversy in the FTP - it was censored by the California director Colonel Connolly in 1938.

<sup>130</sup> Elmer Rice, *Judgement Day*, (New York: Coward-McMann, 1934), xi-xii.

form of fascist aggression and expansion by force. The play would be an example of both the commitment of the FTP to shine a light on a nation in precarity, as well as showcase the new dramatic form of the Living Newspapers.

However, *Ethiopia* never received an opening.<sup>131</sup> The play could have been produced if it had not landed on the White House's radar. The script called for the use of one of Roosevelt's speeches about the occupation, specifically condemning it. Two weeks before the scheduled opening the Play Bureau contacted Stephen Early, Assistant Secretary to the President, to acquire an audio recording of the speech wherein Roosevelt warned against "aggressor nations."<sup>132</sup> This request raised concerns about the president's voice being used in the theatrical production, and a request for a script was issued.<sup>133</sup> Roosevelt's staff objected to the use of the president's speech in the play, and objected on a larger scale to the concept of the federal government producing a play which weighed in on international politics.<sup>134</sup>

*Ethiopia* was planned to open on January 22, 1935, but the day before the opening Rice announced it would be postponed. The reason, he told *New York Times*, was the lack of released funds to purchase props and lighting equipment. He reported the opening would be moved back to January 29, and offered to donate his own equipment if the WPA did not move fast enough to purchase the needed items.<sup>135</sup> This particular report is a puzzling piece of the *Ethiopia* story, mainly because there is little evidence to support it. There is no report of a delay in purchasing approval. Instead all archival evidence suggests Rice and Flanagan were already embattled to

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<sup>131</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "Ethiopia, The First Issue of The Living Newspapers, Which the Federal Theatre Cannot Publish, *The New York Times*, January 1935.

<sup>132</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt "Armistice Day Address" November 11 1935, accessed June 12, 2017, [http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/\\_resources/images/msf/msf00838](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/_resources/images/msf/msf00838).

<sup>133</sup> Stephen Early, memorandum to Works Progress Administrator, January 11, 1936, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>134</sup> Early, memorandum to Works Progress Administrator, January 11, 1936.

<sup>135</sup> "WPA Play Put Off to Jan. 29," *New York Times*, January 21, 1936.

save *Ethiopia* from censorship.<sup>136</sup> The same day the purchasing issue article appeared in the New York Times, Rice also sent a telegram to Harry Hopkins stating that changing the script would not be possible if the play was to open on January 22. He also told Hopkins he took the position as New York director under the assurances he would have a free hand, and if he was forced to censor *Ethiopia* he would resign.<sup>137</sup> When Rice and Flanagan traveled to Washington D.C. on January 23, 1936, to discuss the issue with Jacob Baker (WPA deputy director), his threat was accepted. Baker had a typed acceptance of Rice's resignation ready, and signed it in Rice's and Flanagan's presence. Rice contends he was forced to resign from the Federal Theatre.<sup>138</sup>

*Ethiopia's* cancellation was a blow to both the public image of the FTP and the morale of those in its employ. Living Newspaper writer Erwin Klaus sent to a telegram to President Roosevelt "emphatically protesting" Baker's steps to remove Rice from his position.<sup>139</sup> In a *New York Times* article announcing Rice would be replaced by New York Unit deputy director Phillip Barber, it was also reported WPA workers were organizing to protest Rice's forced resignation.<sup>140</sup> The January 25 protest took the form of a meeting with over 500 FTP actors and writers in attendance. Rice addressed the crowd and called for the parties involved in the decision to cancel *Ethiopia* to answer for the censorship. Adding to the protest, over 100 FTP employees sent a letter to Harry Hopkins, asking him to disavow the actions of Baker, and to immediately rescind Rice's resignation.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Hallie Flanagan, memo to Harry Hopkins, January 15, 1936, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>137</sup> Elmer Rice to Harry Hopkins, January 21, 1936, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>138</sup> "Rice Quits Row Over WPA Drama" *New York Times*, January 24, 1936.

<sup>139</sup> Erwin Klaus, telegram to Franklin Roosevelt, January 24, 1936, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>140</sup> "WPA Post Goes the Rice's Aide," *New York Times*, January 26, 1936.

<sup>141</sup> Federal Theatre Project Personnel, Letter to Harry Hopkins, January 24, 1936, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.



*Ethiopia* did receive one performance, of a sort.<sup>142</sup> On January 24, 1936, *Ethiopia* opened to a small, invitation-only crowd of FTP personnel and Brooks Atkinson, *New York Times* theatre critic. Atkinson's review focused primarily on the message of the play, writing "*Ethiopia* is no masterpiece. But as a Living Newspaper account of the breach of peace that is happening under our nose it is sobering and impressive - even frightening."<sup>143</sup> This is where we start to see the martyr narrative of the FTP begin to take shape. It was the first inkling that FTP would be courting trouble if it engaged in political discourse.

What I find most puzzling about this first free speech fight in the FTP is that Rice insisted he was not expressing a side; he claimed the play was merely presenting the facts. However, Atkinson's assessment that the play presented a frightening "breach of peace" suggests the FTP did take a side in the play's subject matter. The play sets up Ethiopia, and its ruler Haile Selassie, as defending its borders against a hostile and superior military nation. Scenes in which Selassie and his generals appear include their calls for the Ethiopian people to defend their nation to their last breath:

Selassie: I saw it is far better to die on the field of battle, a free man, than to live as a slave!<sup>144</sup>

At the same time, Mussolini's goals are presented as furthering a fascist expansion in the form of taking back what was once the Roman Empire. Other scenes depicting the interests of Britain, France, the United States, and the League of Nations weakly plead for peace in the region. The sanctions against Italy are depicted as toothless, and in the final scene the conflict in Ethiopia has

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<sup>142</sup> "Politics Charged to WPA by Rice", *New York Times*, January 25, 1936.

<sup>143</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "*Ethiopia*."

<sup>144</sup> Arthur Arent, *Ethiopia*, in Dan Isaacs, "*Ethiopia*, The First Living Newspaper" *Education Theatre Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (March 1968): 15-31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3204873>, accessed March 14, 2016.

led the entire world to war. Even though most of the dialogue and speeches in the play were direct quotes, the claim of neutrality of the production does not hold. The play clearly presents Mussolini as a tyrant and his regime as dangerous. It also presents the international community's response to Ethiopia's plight as weak.

Why was *Ethiopia* cancelled? What about it was so dangerous? I argue by creating a performative organization within its own government, the United States had formed a powerful machine to manifest the positions of the Roosevelt Administration into a more potent public statement against international threats. A presidential address is politics. Speeches by foreign nations at war are there to antagonize their enemies and energize their nations; people outside of that audience are removed from the rhetoric. However, the FTP took those speeches and combined them into a cohesive performance to create a concrete context out of an abstraction. This was the danger from performing Ethiopia's plight; it carried more weight than Roosevelt's own accusations against anonymous aggressor nations. *Ethiopia* named names, and the FTP demonstrated the power of performance to create a reality out of an utterance. The FTP produced propaganda. However, the FTP learned very quickly they were not allowed to use that power. The controversy surrounding *Ethiopia* went beyond a mere cancellation; it was also taken up as a fight for free speech, and the freedom of the FTP to decide its own artistic direction. When Elmer Rice resigned from the FTP, he did so under claims the federal government was violating his free speech. However, the question that hangs in the controversy is whose speech was being silenced. Was it Rice's and Arent's? As individual theatre artists, they were afforded this First Amendment protection against government intervention, so Rice had a legitimate claim against the WPA. However, since this production was completely funded by the federal government, including writers, actors, director, and all production materials, was the United States government serving

as the “speaker” and thus was in its rights to demand amendments be made to the production? In either case, this first major new work by the FTP would prove that the latter would win out.

The fallout from *Ethiopia* led to a blanket ban on all future productions using real political figures, foreign or domestic, in any Federal Theatre production.<sup>145</sup> As a result, the Living Newspapers from that point forward focused on domestic issues directly relating to social problems caused by the Great Depression - housing, public health, union-busting, and public utilities. Though Flanagan would defend these plays as social and economic in focus, but not political, they would prove to be effective ammunition against the FTP. The denial of their political material reads as hollow, since the subject matter is decidedly on the side of the Democratic party. After the end of the FTP, Flanagan reflected on the direction the Living Newspapers took, saying they "dramatized a new kind of struggle... to turn the great natural and economic and social forces of our time toward a better life for more people."<sup>146</sup> Most of the political and social issue plays produced by the FTP focused on farming, housing equality, and the right to assemble. In order to wade into the waters of larger issues of political ideologies and totalitarianism, the FTP would need to move away from dramatizing real world events, and instead cloak them in fictional allegories.

In order to continue Flanagan's vision for the Federal Theatre of social engagement, the FTP would need a play like *It Can't Happen Here*. Instead of using real fascism and fascist leaders, the FTP could stage a play about “Corporatism” and “Corpo” leaders.<sup>147</sup> It was a play that would give the FTP plausible deniability if accused of partisan propaganda. Considering *It*

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<sup>145</sup> Jacob Baker to Hallie Flanagan, January 18, 1936, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>146</sup> Hallie Flanagan, "Theatre Intermission."

<sup>147</sup> “Corpo” is the term used in *It Can't Happen Here* to Windrip and his followers. It is a shortening of “Corporative,” Windrip’s political party

*Can't Happen Here* opened less than a year after the *Ethiopia* controversy, I argue the lessons learned with the failure of *Ethiopia* were put into action to ensure another closure, and another free speech fight, would not happen.

Some of the questions which arise when looking back at *Ethiopia* are central to my investigation of *It Can't Happen Here* and its place in the narrative of FTP history. What are the larger issues presented in *Ethiopia*, and how did they shape the FTP in its early months? How could an American theatre, acting on behalf of the American government, be faulted for performing the words and positions of that same government? How could the FTP continue to operate as both a relief agency and a public theatre? For one, Hallie Flanagan learned that the FTP could not hope to remain fully free, adult, and uncensored. Whether or not a play was a good play was not enough to get it produced, despite what she testified to before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Public theatre, when produced by the Federal government, would always have to walk the line between relevance and political safety. *Ethiopia* revealed what conservatives in Congress feared--that the FTP was less of a relief agency and more of a propaganda machine for Roosevelt's New Deal. This fear was spot on, something that research on FTP tends to ignore. Yes, Federal Theatre was an innovative, successful, national theatre. However, it was also a means through which Roosevelt's New Dealers could shape the America into a nation which would allow such a theatre to exist. And now that those aims had been made public, even implicitly, certain policies had to be put in place to walk back that exposure. In spite of all this, the threat of fascism, of totalitarianism, was always looming. To ignore that threat completely would have been out of place for such an engaged theatre agency. Therefore, in order to take part in the global discourse, to allow "the search of the average

American today for knowledge about his country and his world," the FTP needed a play of fiction based on facts.<sup>148</sup>

## Summary

The public collapse of *Ethiopia* highlights the precarious nature of the FTP's artistic freedom to present plays dealing with current events. In *Furious Improvisation* Susan Quinn argues Hallie Flanagan was at the mercy of political trading and peacemaking at the highest levels. At one point Flanagan called First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to get support for *Ethiopia* to be staged as it was written, and asked her to stave off government interference in the FTP's productions.<sup>149</sup> Despite Mrs. Roosevelt's assurance that both she and the President felt cancelling *Ethiopia* would be "deplorable," the show did not go on, and the FTP was given their new guidelines.

I see *Ethiopia's* cancellation, Rice's resignation, and the guidelines set up for new FTP productions as evidence the FTP did not enjoy a free hand in its operations. As it received its funding from the federal government, said government could act as the producer and make decisions for casting and season selections. If the FTP ran counter to the wishes of the producer, its output would be censored without recourse. Even if individuals within the government supported a production, the collective body of the government-producer had spoken, and the edict was issued. *Ethiopia* was a play about the precarity of the other forms of government in the face of fascist expansion, and then itself became an example of the precarity of artistic expression in the age of the New Deal.

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<sup>148</sup> Flanagan, "Theatre Intermission."

<sup>149</sup> Phone conversation transcript between Hallie Flanagan and Eleanor Roosevelt, January 21, 1936, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Rice's response to this state of existence was an ultimatum: he would express his right to form the direction of the Living Newspapers or he would not participate. Jacob Baker, the Deputy Director of the WPA, was ready for this and presented Rice with a prepared acceptance of resignation letter.<sup>150</sup> The letter referenced a "dramatization that may affect our international relations" and a previous statement Rice made to resign if such a problem arose concerning that dramatization.<sup>151</sup> *Ethiopia* was not named in the letter. With this omission, Baker set a precedent that any production which entangled the FTP in international issues would receive the same treatment. The timing of the letter also sent a direct message to Flanagan about the precarity of FTP administration. The implication from Baker's heavy-handed tactics was clear: Flanagan could not hope to protect her job, or the jobs of those under her, if any of them made statements to the press alleging censorship. There was no security for the FTP - neither for its workers nor for its artistic output. It would always be subject to the decisions of the government-producer body.

The failure of *Ethiopia* revealed more than the precarity of the FTP. As I mentioned earlier, the script itself was a dramatization of a nation under peril. Even though that nation was not the United States, I argue the never-to-be production was a warning about the spread of fascism. Rice's bias against fascism, as seen in his earlier work *Judgement Day*, is revisited in the text of *Ethiopia*. The anti-fascist bias is given more weight because it uses the real-life text of those for and against Italy's war with Ethiopia. In my first chapter, I highlighted America's flirtation with the paternalistic leader. Alpers argues in *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture* that in the wake of the Great Depression having one strong voice to steer the

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<sup>150</sup> Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, 69.

<sup>151</sup> Jacob Baker, letter to Elmer Rice, January 23, 1936, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

nation out of economic tragedy was an attractive one. If America was founded on individualism, perhaps one individual could be the answer to their prayers. Instead of trying to solve their problems collectively, they could do it singularly. The rhetoric surrounding Roosevelt's 1932 election reflected this. A dictator, however, was only as good as his dictates, and what would happen if instead of a benevolent, servant-minded father-figure, they instead hand over unprecedented power to a despot? This was the message at the heart of *Ethiopia*, but it did not receive an official staging, so its warning was not received by the masses. A course correction was needed if the FTP hoped to bypass the precaritization of its existence and hope to produce theatre relevant to international and native issues.

The aftershocks of the *Ethiopia* cancellation would lead to changes in the FTP in terms of content and how that content was managed. At the end of the FTP Flanagan stated her only litmus test for a worthwhile Federal Theatre production whether or not it was a good play, but "good" was a nebulous concept which allowed the FTP to defend or abandon productions as needed. It also set up the "us versus them" dynamic, where "us" was the United States and the FTP was standing up for the best possible combination of liberalism and collectivism that was the core of the New Deal – where individuals were afforded freedom and dignity not just by right, but also with the means to make it so. Also, when reflecting on the productions of the FTP, Hallie Flanagan told the Dies Committee the FTP was a producer of pro-American propaganda. What kind of play was she referring to? Which production filled that role?

When looking back on the FTP's body of work, the answer is *It Can't Happen Here*. Sinclair Lewis, using his wife's experiences in Germany as part of his research, wrote a narrative which fictionalized the real political figures in Germany, Italy, and Louisiana that the FTP could

adapt for its own stages. It was a return to anti-fascism, but this time Flanagan took the lessons learned from the *Ethiopia* scandal to ensure its successful production.



## Chapter Three: Concealing the Threat

The FTP's first public failure came in January of 1936, only five months into its operation. *Ethiopia* was supposed to be the first Living Newspaper, a new theatrical form of documentary-style presentations of current events. This proto-docudrama never received an opening because it dared to tread into international conflict and political affairs. Its cancellation left a stain on the FTP, and the agency needed to remove it if it wanted to continue its mission of producing relevant, socially engaging theatre.

In this chapter I draw a line between *Ethiopia's* failure and the promotional campaign for *It Can't Happen Here*. I argue the FTP course-corrected in their approach to promoting and producing the play in order to ensure its successful opening. To prove this, I use archival evidence detailing both the growing opposition to the FTP's political leanings and the FTP's response to that opposition.

After *Ethiopia's* failure to launch, the FTP was able to move on with its Living Newspaper Unit by producing plays about domestic issues. *Triple-A Plowed Under* was scheduled to begin rehearsals in the space occupied by *Ethiopia* and was rushed to production to fill the vacuum left by Rice's play.<sup>152</sup> Rice's successor, Phillip Barber, quieted the FTP workers' fears about censorship by insisting during a press conference, reported by the *New York Times*, that the interference from WPA Deputy Director Jacob Baker was a one-time incident.<sup>153</sup> He also noted Baker's edict which forbade depicting heads of state did not include the American president or other American government officials.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> "WPA to Give Play in Farm Problem," *New York Times*, January 28, 1936.

<sup>153</sup> Philip Barber was Elmer Rice's deputy director of the New York Unit. He was appointed to director after Rice's resignation.

<sup>154</sup> "WPA to Give Play in Farm Problem," *New York Times*, January 28, 1936.

The FTP needed a large-scale, big-name project to remove *Ethiopia's* stain on its reputation. It also needed to prove its worth as a national theatre producer. The Living Newspapers were up and running at this point, but they were localized to the larger theatre centers and hampered by the fallout of *Ethiopia*. In order for the FTP to engage in the type of grand political statement of anti-fascism like *Ethiopia*, they would need to do so with a drama, rather than a docudrama. Enter Sinclair Lewis and *It Can't Happen Here*, which differed from *Ethiopia* in that it was not a Living Newspaper, meaning it was not bound by journalistic storytelling. It was speculative fiction depicting what may happen if Americans were seduced by an authoritarian dictator. The process of turning *It Can't Happen Here* from a best-selling novel into an FTP production involved a flurry of telegrams, translations, and tantrums. When recounting the episode, Hallie Flanagan could not recall exactly whose idea it was to turn the anti-fascist play into a national production.<sup>155</sup> In *Arena*, she implies the production came together so fast that many of the details were lost in the excitement. This does not hold true, however, when I look at the careful planning of the promotional material for the play.

### **The Doom-Boggle**

Ultimately, *Ethiopia* opened the FTP to criticism of both its organizational capabilities and its use of current events to make political statements. Months after the cancellation the *New York Daily News* continued to report on it, writing that the State Department opposed its performance because it would have been embarrassing to the United States.<sup>156</sup> The conservative press was quick to call the FTP both wasteful and degenerate. One year after the creation of the FTP, Harrison Grey Fiske published an editorial in the *Saturday Evening Post* accusing the FTP

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<sup>155</sup> *Arena*, 116.

<sup>156</sup> "WPA Play Embarrassing, Dropped," *New York Daily News*, May 14, 1936, Box 32, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The article is a response to Harvard University producing a play which would feature Selassie and Mussolini.

of waste, mismanagement, and dubious artistic merit. Biographer Susan Quinn blames Fiske's position on his background in the New York commercial theatre, which would position him in opposition of to the FTP's public theatre.<sup>157</sup> Fiske was a playwright, dramatic critic, and theatre producer. Fiske blasted the organization as unnecessary and Hallie Flanagan as unfit to lead a national relief agency. Fiske's exposé of the agency's early organizational woes highlighted the scramble to make its employment quota, alleging the employment roles were filled with "singing waiters from Village Joints, miscellaneous Harlem Negroes, idle Welfare Workers and plumbers" and noted that "an especially hospitable welcome was extended to Communists and those with radical leanings, both black and white." The article goes on to accuse those in charge of choosing plays for the project of Communist sympathies and less-than-discerning artistic sensibilities.<sup>158</sup> Fiske's criticism of the FTP included Rice's appointment; it mentioned his spending to create sub-units with the New York project, but not his dismissal after *Ethiopia*. Fiske quotes Rice as stating the era of the commercial theatre had ended, as had individualism, and the FTP replaced it with a new emphasis on cultural importance rather than box office receipts. Fiske also argued Rice's direction would lower the artistic standards of theatre as a whole. His take that the FTP was mismanaged, corrupt, and artistically inferior, stung enough that Barber refuted the charges in the New York Times. He accused those who did not understand the FTP as having "simple minds" and reiterated the organization's model of federation which allowed for freedom to produce as the regionals saw fit.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> The struggle between the FTP and Broadway is beyond the scope of my project. For more on this see Flanagan, Quinn, and Buttitta.

<sup>158</sup> Harrison Grey Fiske, "The Federal Theatre Doom-Boggle," *Saturday Evening Post*, August 1, 1936, Box 32, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>159</sup> Phillip Barber, "Report on the Federal Theatre," *New York Times*, August 2, 1936.

The FTP was in a precarious position after *Ethiopia*. Its replacement, the Living Newspaper play *Triple-A Plowed Under* (March, 1936), followed the letter of the law when it came to depicting political figures, using only Communist Party USA leader Earl Browder as a character.<sup>160</sup> The play, written by the Living Newspapers staff under Arthur Arent's supervision, was an indictment of the Agriculture Adjustment Act and advocated for farmers and laborers to unionize in order to cut out industrialists who profited off the precaritization of the two groups.<sup>161</sup> The use of Browder as a heroic figure in the play, and the content itself, opened the FTP to criticism that they were producing communist propaganda. Bernarr McFadden, owner and editor-in-chief of the conservative *Liberty Magazine*, accused the FTP of inciting a riot with *Triple-A* and called for a congressional inquiry to find and fire the Communist elements in the federal government which allowed the play to be produced in the first place.<sup>162</sup> In April that same year, Senator James Davis (R-PA) accused the FTP of mismanagement, stating that the agency employed amateurs over theatre professionals. In an address to the Senate, he also made public accusations of Communist activities within the FTP, including the allegation that the administration was holding Communist meetings during regular business hours.<sup>163</sup> These charges were brought by the Federal Theatre Veterans League, a group of ex-servicemen working for the WPA whose aim was to remove Communists from the FTP.<sup>164</sup> For her part, Flanagan denied these charges, and argued the plays produced by the FTP—American plays about Americans -

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<sup>160</sup> Earl Browder was the chairman of the Communist Party USA 1934-1945.

<sup>161</sup> A White, *Plowed Under*, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2014), 198-199. The Agricultural Adjustment Act was one Roosevelt's New Programs. The AAA ended the falling prices of crops by paying farmers to stop producing on their land in order to drive the market price up.

<sup>162</sup> Bernarr McFadden, "Inciting a Riot," *Liberty Magazine*, May 23, 1936, Federal Theatre Project Collection, C0002, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University.

<sup>163</sup> "Insists WPA Cash Aids Communism," *New York Times*, April 28, 1936.

<sup>164</sup> Fisk, "Doom Boggle."

would be answer enough to the accusations. She denied any attempt to “Russianize” the FTP, insisting she was dedicated to producing only American theatre.<sup>165</sup>

The FTP was under a great deal of pressure to prove itself. In addition to the failure of *Ethiopia* and Rice’s resignation, Flanagan was facing accusations that the organization was a poorly run boondoggle with its “hair full of communists.”<sup>166</sup> To fulfill its mission to confront the dangers facing Americans—both creeping authoritarianism and inactivity—the FTP needed to produce plays about those dangers. Flanagan pushed for its nationwide production because it was an American play, by a celebrated American author, based on the “burning belief in American democracy.”<sup>167</sup> She also cited Lewis’s confidence the FTP would give the play a “non-partisan” treatment as a reason; it would quiet the accusations of communism in the FTP’s ranks.<sup>168</sup>

### ***It Can’t Happen Here Happens***

*It Can't Happen Here* began as a novel by Sinclair Lewis. After it was published in October 1935, it quickly became a national bestseller. Lewis initially sold the film rights to MGM, but the project was shelved due to concerns it would not be well received by audiences in Germany and Italy. Lewis still maintained the rights to stage the production, so he gave them to the FTP. In August of 1936, Flanagan decided to open the show in as many theatres as possible simultaneously. Lewis was paired with John Moffitt, an FTP playwright, to adapt his novel. In September that year a workable draft was finished and sent out to all the regional theatres which opted to participate--22 in total. On October 27, 1936, the shows opened and ran for a combined 260 weeks.

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<sup>165</sup> “WPA Stage Leader Denies Red Charge,” New York Times, April 28, 1936.

<sup>166</sup> Fiske, “Doom Boggle.”

<sup>167</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 120.

<sup>168</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 121.

*It Can't Happen Here* (as both novel and play) tells the story of America under a dictatorship. The play opens with everyman Doremus Jessup, a liberal small-town newspaper editor, hosting a picnic with his family and friends, all of whom are discussing the possibility of Senator Buzz Windrip securing a key endorsement in the upcoming presidential election. Jessup is, at this point, favorable towards Windrip—a plain-speaking populist who promises to restore economic prosperity by taking extraordinary powers to set things right. Jessup brushes off predictions that Windrip would lead the country into fascism. Jessup is wrong, however: soon after Windrip is elected he dissolves Congress, has the Supreme Court arrested, and takes control of private industry. Windrip conscripts many of the nation's jobless men into military service, and tasks them with silencing dissent. Jessup, though disapproving of the direction Windrip takes, does not join the resistance until after one of Windrip's right-hand-men murders Jessup's son-in-law. After getting caught printing subversion pamphlets, Jessup is arrested and sent to a concentration camp. He escapes and flees to Canada where he becomes a symbol for the resistance. Even though Buzz Windrip is the villain of *It Can't Happen Here*, he is only on stage for two scenes. The play uses Windrip as a boogeyman, an amalgamation of the worst aspects of America left unchecked. Jessup's journey is the most important aspect of the play; his reaction to the forces emboldened by Windrip's election, rather than Windrip himself, is what drives the plot.

After the opening picnic scene the location shifts to a small grocery store, where we are given our first look at how brutal the coming regime will be: Clarence Little is beaten to death for displaying an anti-Windrip sign in his store. The attack at the hands of Windrip's "Corpo" army goes unpunished. To highlight how wrong Jessup is in his "wait and see" attitude about Windrip's ascension, the very next scene shows Jessup admiring the discipline of the young men

conscripted into Windrip's private army, and he is shocked to hear about the old grocer's murder. Jessup refuses to believe the Corps are responsible, and even accepts a position in the organization to produce propaganda for them. It isn't until the end of the act, after Windrip is elected, that Jessup learns the truth of Clarence's murder. By this point it is too late, and he has a hand in helping to get Windrip elected. Act II begins with Jessup keeping his head down and trying to stay off the local Corps Party's radar. This changes when his son-in-law is murdered by the Corps army and Jessup joins the resistance, publishing resistance material on his printing press. He is caught and arrested at the end of Act II, and is being taken to a concentration camp at the beginning of Act III—a camp he eventually escapes from. The play ends with Jessup's widowed daughter Mary and grandson trying to cross the border to Canada to join him. Mary recognizes the border agent as the man who killed her husband; she holds him at gunpoint until her son flees to find Jessup.

As I discuss in chapter one, Dorothy Thompson's experience in Germany was a major influence on Lewis's work, as were Huey Long's homespun populism and dictatorial methods. Windrip's quick consolidation of power and his brutal methods put Lewis's and the FTP's position on fascism on display. It was, like *Ethiopia*, a political play aimed at denouncing fascism. Where it differed from *Ethiopia*—hopefully enough to inoculate it against censorship and cancellation—is that it was fiction and overtly patriotic. It also had the benefit of name recognition, which the FTP would use to its full advantage when promoting the play.

### **Lessons from *Ethiopia***

The hardest lesson learned from *Ethiopia* was too much freedom on the part of project directors could blow up in the FTP's collective face. Elmer Rice's established history of anti-fascist sentiments in his work was viewed as a boon for his direction of the New York City and

Living Newspaper Units.<sup>169</sup> Left to his own devices, he developed *Ethiopia* as an ambitious and potentially flagship-worthy production for the FTP. However, in the vacuum of an aggressive and disciplined promotional plan, as well as a lack of oversight by the FTP administration, government opposition to the play grew. The same mistakes would not be repeated for *It Can't Happen Here*, a play too important to the continued success of the FTP. In the wake of the *Ethiopia* controversy the FTP was given an unambiguous directive: no references to, or depictions of, foreign political figures.<sup>170</sup> The FTP took this a step further and removed all references to actual American politicians from their adaptation of *It Can't Happen Here* as well, specifically removing mentions of President Roosevelt from the text. Though this substitution was not part of the edict from Early, it also allowed the FTP to explicitly state their assessment of which political party spoke for the American people.<sup>171</sup>

Flanagan also learned a valuable lesson from bad press surrounding *Ethiopia*. The fallout from the play's cancellation, as well as the Rice's resignation, prompted protest from FTP workers against perceived censorship.<sup>172</sup> *Ethiopia*, which would have otherwise garnered typical reviews and reporting, instead became a flashpoint for the FTP in their mission to bring "free, adult, and uncensored" theatre to the American public. In the fall of the same year, with such an important play ready to be presented to the entire country, Flanagan needed similar unity without the sting of cancellation and censorship.

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<sup>169</sup> Hallie Flanagan, letter to the City Projects Council, January 28, 1936, Box 7, Folder 1, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>170</sup> William Farnsworth to Hallie Flanagan, January 18, 1936, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>171</sup> The People's Party was once a populist political party in the US. See chapter 1.

<sup>172</sup> "WPA Fights Drama Censorship" *The New York Times*, January 27, 1936.



Opposition is a powerful unifying force, and finding opposition to a play that was so solidly “American” would be a boon to both getting the word out about the play and to painting those who would deride it as pro-fascist. In September of 1936, the *New York Herald-Tribune* published a report, citing the American Civil Liberties Union and the American League Against War and Fascism, which claimed the play would be cancelled before its opening. In the same article, Flanagan is quoted to say she had no knowledge of any opposition. Likewise, Alexander Williams (director of information for Federal One) attributed the rumors of the opposition to a “goofy Communist writer” in the WPA to stir up excitement about the anti-fascist play. The FTP denied reports of attempts to shut down *It Can't Happen Here* and even attributed such rumblings to internal attempts to drum up outrage to a fake opposition.

Opposition to the performance did exist, however. In October, the *World Telegram* also reported on opposition to the play, but without including the FTP denials. Instead, it detailed the fall of liberalism in the United Kingdom after World War I, and provided a timeline for the rise of radicalism in Europe. By blaming the foreign intervention involved in the shelving of the film adaption by those same radicalized countries, the article draws a clear connection between the opposition to the play and fascist forces trying to destroy democracy.<sup>173</sup> Flanagan contradicts herself in *Arena*, devoting time to detailing the opposition from both the media’s opposition and from media writing about the media’s opposition. She cites hand-wringing from the *Hollywood Citizen-News* over activating domestic fascists, bold claims that *It Can't Happen Here* was “naked and unconcealed” government propaganda from the *Examiner*’s Harold Varney, and reports from *The Nation* that the detractors were secret fascists.<sup>174</sup> The opposition was present,

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<sup>173</sup> “Fascism is Held U.S Possibility; Liberalism, Reform Face Extremely Difficult Situation,” *World Telegram*, October 7, 1936, Box 32, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>174</sup> *Arena*, 117.

and Flanagan was aware of it. This would be a strategy which would carry over to the official promotional strategy for *It Can't Happen Here*.

### **Preparing to Open - Reorganizing**

*It Can't Happen Here* came with elevated stakes. The public comments reported by the *Herald-Tribune* where the first inkling that the play might in trouble. On September 4, 1936, E.E. McCleish, Analytical Unit Supervisor, was placed in charge of all national publicity concerning *It Can't Happen Here*.<sup>175</sup> In addition to the special appointment announcement, Farnsworth also issued an edict that left no room for individual choice of press strategy:

It is desired that all information suitable for release to the press relating to *It Can't Happen Here* be sent first to this office for immediate review as to the policy, additional suggestions, and for approval before release through the regular public information channels in each State or region. The contacts you now have with local papers will be your responsibility heretofore.<sup>176</sup>

This placed McCleish in a position over T.A. Mautz, who was at the time Director of Information for the FTP, for this one project.<sup>177</sup> Mautz was directed to work with McCleish to make sure “the right story is told for *It Can't Happen Here*.”<sup>178</sup> Within a week McCleish found fault in the way Mautz was running publicity, seeing danger in the free hand given to the regional directors. In a letter sent to both Mautz and Senior Project Supervisor Francis Bosworth, McCleish lamented the out-of-control stories surrounding the play: “I think it’s damned senseless to have the type of publicity notices you’ve been getting in the New York papers the last three of

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<sup>175</sup> William Farnsworth to Federal Theatre State Directors and Project Supervisors, September 4, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>176</sup> Farnsworth to Federal Theatre State Directors and Project Supervisors, September 4 1936, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>177</sup> The Director of Information position for the FTP (Mautz) and Federal One (Williams) were parallel. Mautz did not report to Williams, but to Hallie Flanagan. Williams reported to Harry Hopkins.

<sup>178</sup> William Farnsworth to T.A. Mautz, September 4, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

four days... If we don't watch out, the entire show will be left in the rehearsal room."<sup>179</sup> After this change, McCleish's correspondences suggest polite but forceful reiterations of avoiding courting controversy in the press. At times Deputy Director William Farnsworth was called in to support McCleish's power over promotions, and in at least one situation Flanagan lent her weight to bring people in line when promotional material from the Living Newspapers Unit was not submitted in a timely manner.<sup>180</sup>

McCleish was tasked with corralling the unit directors into a unified message about *It Can't Happen Here*. This consolidation of press releases, as well the forceful use of power from the national office, troubles the often-repeated line (even in this dissertation) that *It Can't Happen Here* was an expression of regional identity over national. This discordant chapter in the history of this production reveals much about the FTP's precarious position: it was under pressure to deliver relief, good theatre, and nonpartisan productions. In order to fulfill its mission, it needed a new approach to get *It Can't Happen Here* off of the page and on to the stage.

### **McCleish's Plan**

Under McCleish's leadership a clear direction emerged concerning the promotional strategy for *It Can't Happen Here*. This play, which was inspired by fascism home and abroad, would not use the word *fascism* in any press releases, interviews, or visual materials. He issued a nine-page promotion guideline document which explicitly forbade any reference to fascism, American political figures, foreign governments or figures. These guidelines addressed poster

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<sup>179</sup> E.E. McCleish, letter to T.A. Mautz and Francis Bosworth, September 11, 1936, Box 116, Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>180</sup> Hallie Flanagan to W. E. Watts, December 1, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

design, press releases, community outreach, and front of house design. The overarching theme for the guidelines is expressed in the following points:

All advertising should therefore have no thought beyond a factual presentation of the fact that Federal Theatre is producing a dramatization of a contemporary work of art – IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE – from the most widely known and discussed American writers, Sinclair Lewis.

In no advertising are we to use the phrase used by the book publishers in advertising the novel, such as “What Will Happen When America has a Dictator.” That is forbidden. Also forbidden in most positive terms are any reference to any foreign power, any policy of any foreign power, the personalities of any foreign power or government; any comparison between the United States and any foreign power, personality, system, etc., etc. Our business is wholly with a play of our time and country by a great writer of our time and country and our job is wholly a job of theatre.<sup>181</sup>

McCleish also formed strict guidelines for all press releases. These directed the regional productions to release factual statements about the play: location and times only. The regional units were supposed to write their press releases the same way they would if they were producing Shakespeare - allowing the public to know only the basic facts regarding casting and admission. The play was to be regarded as a piece of “significant theatre” and any discussion of plot was unnecessary. Other notable, and repetitious, points include:

We are not engaging in reading meanings into the play.  
Toss your purple passages into the waste basket  
There must be no references in news release of...Dictatorships, pro or con  
There can be no political discussions, comment, or speculation. This is wholly outside of the Theatre  
The description of the play is not needed in your publicity  
Follow the sound general rule: news is its own excuse for being. Publicity is manufactured. Never force it. It is there if the newspapers wish to use it.<sup>182</sup>

Here we can see the FTP was depending on the popularity of Lewis's novel to fill in their purposefully-left gaps, noting that descriptions of the play were not needed. Any description of

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<sup>181</sup> E. E. McCleish, Instructions Governing Exploitation Concerning “It Can't Happen Here,” October 27, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>182</sup> E. E. McCleish, Instructions, October 27, 1936, NACP.

the play would include the struggle between political ideologies, which would then violate the edict of political discussions, were “wholly outside of the Theatre.” These publicity points reveal a tightly-controlled message to omit any hint of the actual, explicitly anti-fascist message of the play. *It Can't Happen Here* was undeniably political, but due to pressure to remain apolitical the FTP had to insist it wasn't.

While the individual production directors were limited to the bare minimum in public relations about *It Can't Happen Here*, the national office issued long form press releases. One such release directly addresses the politics of the play. FTP had already drawn the ire of Congress and the press with their politically-charged plays. Lewis denied the timing of the play, which would open a week before the 1936 presidential election, had anything to do with ensuring Roosevelt's re-election.<sup>183</sup> An official press release issued two weeks before the curtains rose on *It Can't Happen Here* fought this accusation. Here both Flanagan and Lewis were adamant on the neutrality of the play:

Mr. Lewis...was asked what effect upon the election night might result from producing the show one week before. 'None whatever' he replied. 'The play is non-partisan. The purpose of your question is: is the play propaganda for any party? No. It is not. It is propaganda for an American style of democracy. Very definitely propaganda for that. Mrs. Flanagan said on this point: 'It is a perfect vehicle for the Federal Theatre, too, because what Mr. Lewis says of the play goes for the Federal Theatre, too.'<sup>184</sup>

Lewis states his work is not pro- or anti-Roosevelt, New Dealism, or anything other than American values. This leaves little room for criticism of content, since doing so would mean the critic would side against pro-American democracy. However, since the villains of Lewis's play

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<sup>183</sup> “Lewis Says Play is Non-Political,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1936.

<sup>184</sup> Press Release, September 14, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

were in part inspired by real figures in American politics, the play does take a position on which political parties it deems un-American.

The closely controlled messaging of *It Can't Happen Here* extended to elements concerning the front of house design and decorations. In the distributed promotional plan, McCleish included several forbidden items:

1. Limit that to simple placards.
2. No cannons.
3. No stacks or arms with bayonets.
4. No lurid effects.
5. No effigies of political figures.
6. Maintain the non-partisan and non-political dignity of the Federal Theatre.
7. Photos of the cast may be used, of course.
8. The main purpose of these instructions is to keep the theatre a theatre and not a circus nor a reproach to the political or other sensibilities of our audience - the entire citizenry of your town.
9. Ushers are not be attired as members of Corporative or other military body. The suggestion has been several times advanced. It cannot be entertained.
10. In brief, let your play live and breathe on the stage. That calls for nothing spectacular. Don't try to outdo the double feature movie house.
11. Permit no banners or other incitements to be brought into the house by groups reserving seats.<sup>185</sup>

Carefully controlling the press message is somewhat understandable, but this list of forbidden front-of-house items seems like an overabundance of caution. While from a safety standpoint banning bayonet blades from the lobby makes a certain amount of sense, and effigies of political figures would have been beneath the “dignity of the Federal Theatre,” some of these items are puzzling. The directive concerning the ushers is especially perplexing. From Noel Kennedy’s costume designs for the Adelphi production, we know characters were dressed in military uniform.

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<sup>185</sup> E. E. McCleish, Instructions, October 27, 1936, NACP.



Figure 3.1 Costume design for David Greenhill, *It Can't Happen Here*. Design by Noel Kennedy, 1936.

David, above, is Doremus Jessup's grandson. He dresses like the Corpo militia members, much like a young boy might play dress-up soldiers. The exact number of theatres wanting to use these costumes for their ushers is not known, but it was enough for McCleish to both forbid it and insert a bit of frustration at the suggestions. When taken in context with the warning to avoid turning the theatre into a circus, to maintain non-political dignity, and leave lobby theatrics to the movie houses (movie houses which rejected this same script) suggest that this costume was too controversial for the lobby, but not for the stage.

Another controversial promotion which was planned but scrapped was the distribution of hand bills detailing both Buzz Windrip's political message and "scare bills" warning the

<sup>186</sup> Noel Kennedy, "It Can't Happen Here, Box 21 Folder 1, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

audience, in the role of electorate, against Windrip and his ilk.<sup>187</sup> These handbills were meant to be part of the front-of-house materials, despite their controversy. The scare bill was meant to be from the Trowbridge resistance.

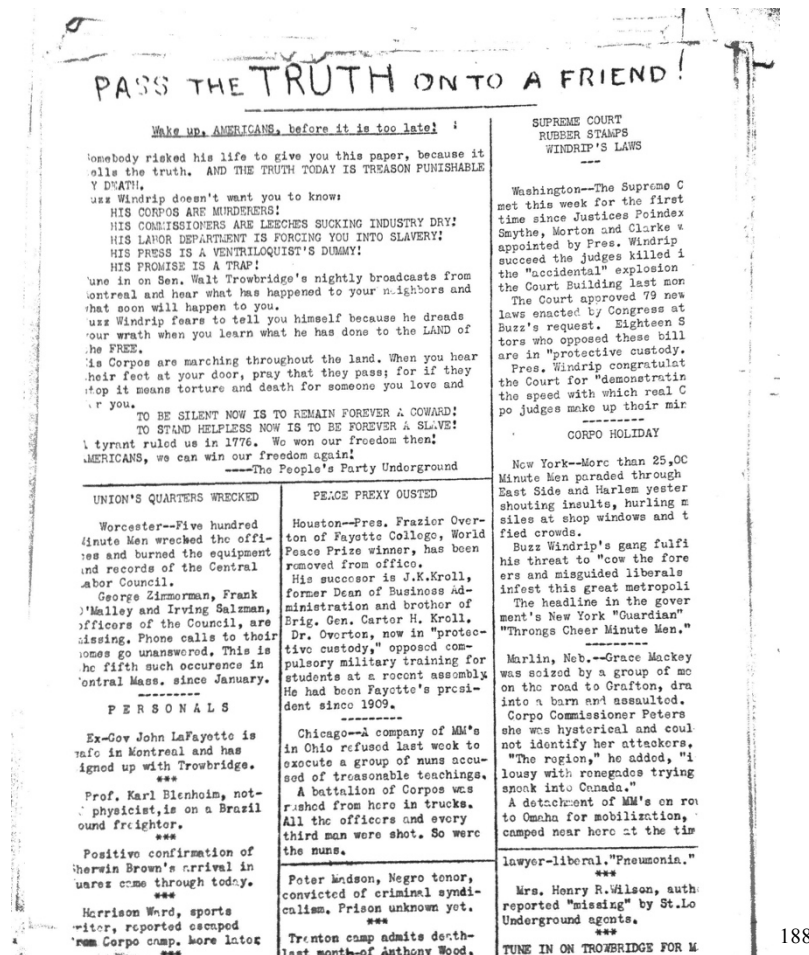


Figure 3.2. Underground Newspaper, It Can't Happen Here, Living Newspaper Unit, 1936. In the play Trowbridge, leader of the People's Party, is exiled to Canada and organizes the Windrip resistance. It is this handbill which ultimately leads to Jessup's arrest. It serves as a

<sup>187</sup> "Scare bills" was the praise used by the FTP to describe a paper to be distributed before the show. It was written from the perspective of the resistance.

<sup>188</sup> Underground Newspaper, Box 308 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.



MacGuffin for Jessup, and lays out the evil nature of Windrip's administration.<sup>189</sup> In addition to an opposition newsletter, a proposed handout of Windrip's "Fifteen Points" was also printed.

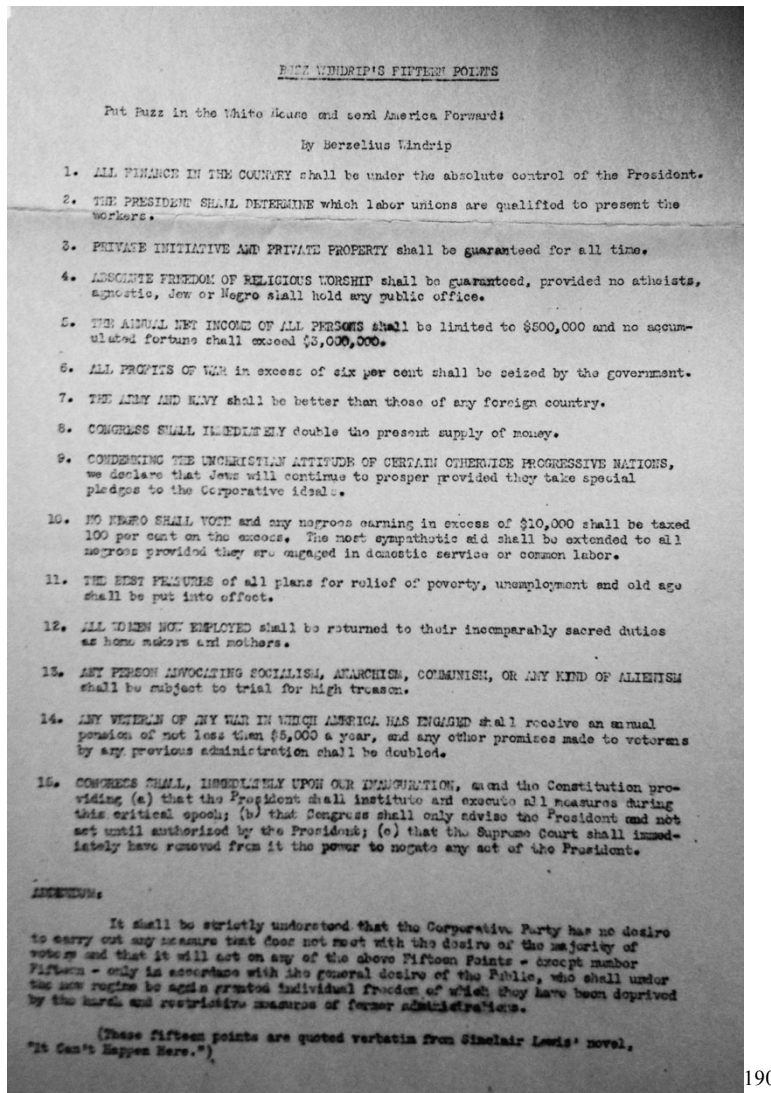


Figure 3.3 Buzz Windrip's "Fifteen Points," *It Can't Happen Here*, Living Newspaper Unit, 1936.

These fifteen points place the control of the country's economy completely under the office of the President, caps income, removes the civil liberties of African Americans, and enacts a

<sup>189</sup> A MacGuffin is a physical object which drives the plot and serves forward the arch of the protagonist.

<sup>190</sup> Buzz Windrip's Fifteen Points, Box 308 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

religious litmus test for public office. The actual timing of distributing the “Fifteen Points” handbill is not known, but when taken into account with the script, it would be best timed with the opening of the play, perhaps even including them with the programs. The resistance newspaper bill would be distributed at intermission between the second third acts. These handbills were printed by the Living Newspaper Unit, and after they were reviewed by Flanagan she decided to kill them for the New York performances and urged other units to avoid using them. Flanagan did not give her reasoning for stopping this element from going forward. However, she did send a strongly worded letter to Morris Watson (Living Newspaper Director) on October 20, 1936, stating that she was “very disturbed” that she had not seen a draft of either bills.<sup>191</sup>

One of the aspects of distributing these handbills it that it would cast the audience as characters in the play and ask them to be a part of a contemporary electorate responsible for both the election of Buzz Windrip (and the carnage that came after) and the fight to restore democracy in the United States. Casting the audience moves them from mere observers to possible activists in a fight for the soul of America - something which could have opened the Federal Theatre to accusations of propaganda and political partisanship. It would have made *It Can't Happen Here* into a call to action when the FTP insisted it was just a play.

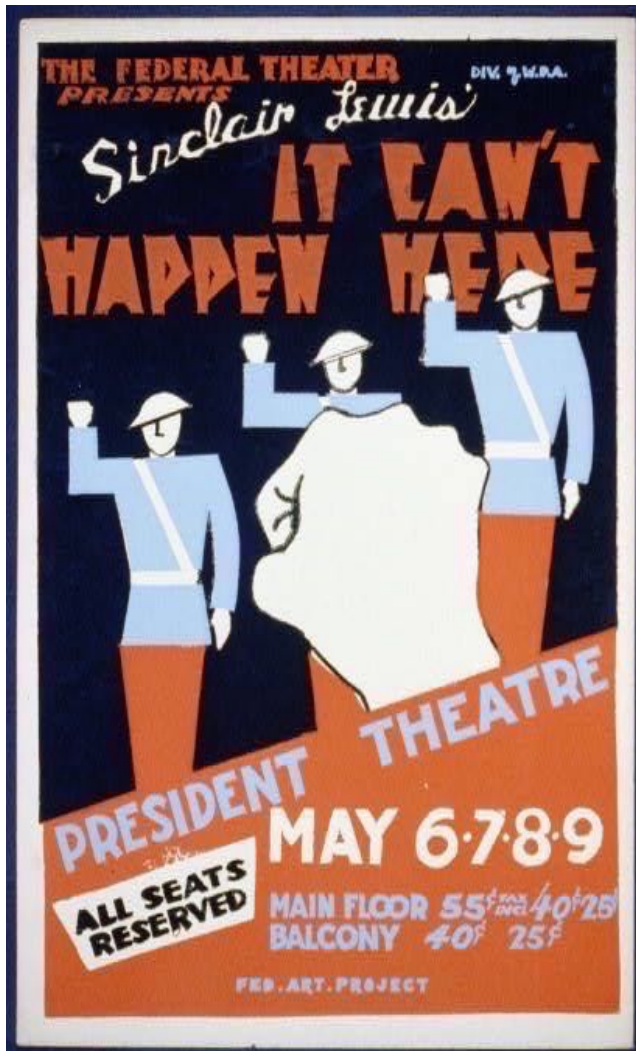
### **Problems and Prohibitions**

A few problem sites required McCleish to take a strong position against the promotional campaigns of individual productions. This is evident in the poster designs of some productions. The instruction that posters fall “in the range of good taste and good sense” was given to inspire the regional theatre to move beyond the obvious, and forbidden, allusions.

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<sup>191</sup> Hallie Flanagan to Morris Watson, October 20, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

The poster campaign for *It Can't Happen Here* was designed to alert the public of the play, and while they used visual cues to link the play to the events happening in Germany, they could not do so explicitly. The poster from the Iowa production is particularly telling, since it used soldiers drawn with a raised fist salute - which is just dissimilar enough from the Nazi salute to allow for less-than-plausible deniability.



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Figure 3.4 Poster, *It Can't Happen Here*, Iowa FTP, 1936.

<sup>192</sup> Lewis, Sinclair, and U.S Federal Theatre Project. *[The Federal Theater Div. of W.P.A. presents "It can't happen here" by Sinclair Lewis]*. Iowa, 1936. [Iowa: Fed. Art Project, or 1937] Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/98510365/>. (Accessed July 13, 2017.)

The use of these symbols allowed the FTP to give a bit of winking acknowledgment to the link between the Lewis's work and the growing disaster of the Nazi Regime, while distancing itself from an overt connection. That distancing was not just a suggestion; it was enforced. In contrast to the Iowa poster, McCleish did not approve the Detroit FTP submission. The poster in dispute takes the borderline acceptably of the President Theatre's design and blatantly draws a link to Hitler:



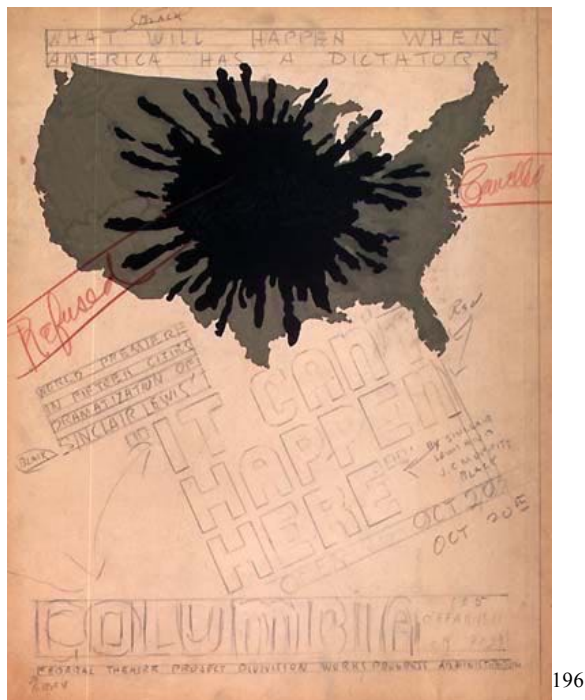
Figure 3.5. Poster, *It Can't Happen Here*, Michigan FTP, 1936.

<sup>193</sup> Federal Theatre Project. *Detroit Federal Theatre Unit of Michigan Works Progress Administration presents "It can't happen here" by Sinclair Lewis*. Detroit Michigan, 1936. [Michigan: Federal Art Project, or 1937] Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/98513193/>. (Accessed July 13, 2017.)

The additions of Hitler's easily-recognized mustache and front lock, as well the open hand salute, is a clear statement of the play's larger villain in spirit if not in name. McCleish was adamant in his disapproval:

HAVE JUST SEEN POSTER IT CANT HAPPEN HERE. DETROIT FEDERAL THEATRE IN COMPLETE VIOLATION OF ALL INSTRUCTIONS WITH FIGURE OF CORPO REPRESENTING NOTHING WHATEVER EXCEPT THE LEADER OF A FOREIGN GOVERNMENT. IT IS NECESSARY TO DESTROY THESE POSTERS TO RECALL ALL THAT ARE OUT. PLEASE WIRE THAT THIS HAS BEEN DONE.<sup>194</sup>

In another reject design for the San Francisco production, McCleish vetoed the design for suggesting a "blot of fascism spending over America."<sup>195</sup>



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Figure 3.6 Poster, *It Can't Happen Here*, San Francisco FTP, 1936.

<sup>194</sup> E. E. McCleish to William Beyer, October 25, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>195</sup> E. E. McCleish to W. E. Watts, October 19, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>196</sup> Design for poster for *It Can't Happen Here*, National Archives, Records of the Works Progress Administration. (69-TSR-132(3))

This poster asked the main question of the play “What will happen when America has a dictator?” It crossed the line of explicitly telling the public what they were being asked to watch. In contrast, the flagship production in the New York Adelphi Theatre skirted this line with a poster that is ambiguous about the anti-fascist theme of the play itself, but was decidedly unambiguous about its pro-American message:

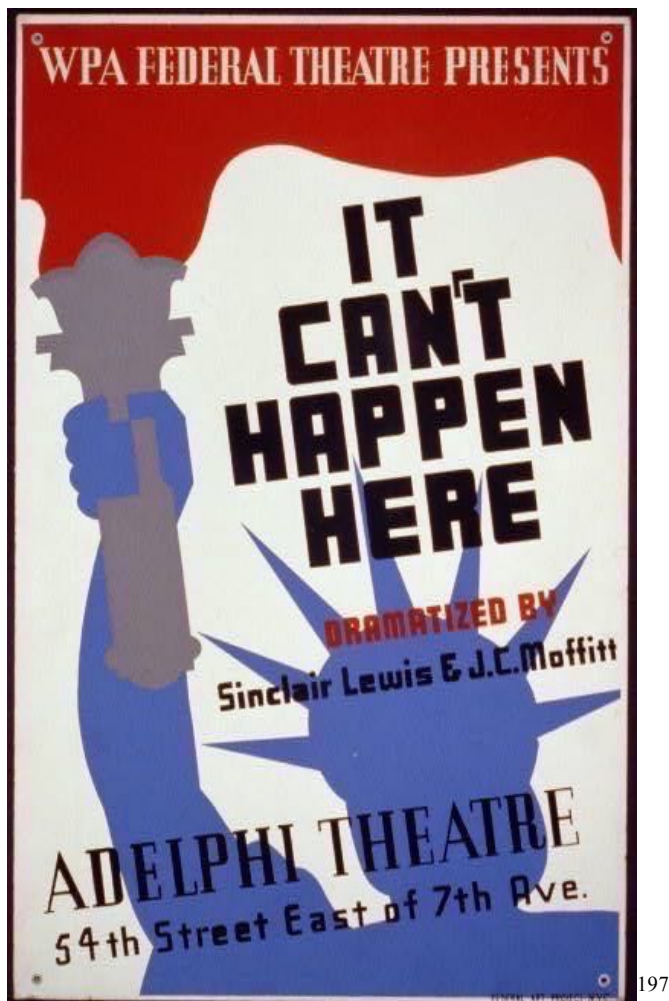


Figure 3.7 Poster, It Can't Happen Here, New York FTP, 1936.

<sup>197</sup> Richard Halls, Artist, Sinclair Lewis, and Sponsor Federal Theatre Project. *WPA Federal Theatre presents "It can't happen here" dramatized by Sinclair Lewis & J.C. Moffitt: Adelphi Theatre, 54th Street East of 7th Ave., 1936.* [N.Y.C.: Federal Art Project, or 1937] Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/92516051/>. (Accessed July 13, 2017.)



The line between what was acceptable and what constituted violations of the promotional plan is thin. Some facial hair added here, a word there is all that moved *It Can't Happen Here* from a pro-American celebration to a dire warning of creeping fascism on our soil. It is also worth noting the rejected posters each contain an image of the physical America. The Iowa poster contains no allusion to America other than color scheme. The Adelphi poster, however, uses another easily recognized American image, the Statue of Liberty. It's puzzling that a map was deemed more provocative than an enduring symbol of liberty. These slight changes in art again point to the distancing of the FTP from the controversial nature of the play. A symbol of democracy is easier to support than a symbol of a physical place. The place of the people, the physical home of the Americans who are most threatened by fascism, points to a direct warning and thus a direct position of the FTP. The Statue of Liberty, on the other hand, represents an idea --something harder to threaten directly. By removing the direct threat, the FTP was also removing another point of attack for opposition to the play.

The puzzling thing here is the play was about what would happen if a dictator was elected president. It was about the death of the American way if Roosevelt lost the election. The poster campaigns are a bait and switch operation, but to what end? *It Can't Happen Here* was a known entity - its central message was clear, and was already reported on by the press. The FTP didn't want a repeat of *Ethiopia*. That would certainly explain the rejecting of the Detroit poster, but not the rejection of the San Francisco poster. It depicts no foreign or American political figure. It commits the crime of suggesting the same thing the play is arguing - dictatorship can come to America. These posters, both approved and rejected, reveal a greater promotional strategy of

misinformation. The obscured message of *It Can't Happen Here* extended beyond the poster campaign and into more direct denials of a political agenda.

The poster designs were one fire McCleish fought. He fought another in Cleveland—not just of posters but the entire promotional plan. Martin Chicoine, Publicity Director for the Cleveland FTP, sent McCleish a detailed plan for promoting *It Can't Happen Here* before the official guidelines were issued. The plan included reaching out to labor unions, religious groups, special anti-fascist articles in Italian and German language newspapers, and using scare bills that emphasized the rise of American fascism.<sup>198</sup> When responding to Chicoine's plan McCleish asked Chicoine to hold off on its implementation until the other directors handed in their plans.<sup>199</sup> McCleish praised some of the choices, and warned against others. He praised Chicoine's public insistence that *It Can't Happen Here* was non-partisan. McCleish admits that if the play were a commercial production, Chicoine's plan would be appropriate, but as it stood it directly contradicted any claim that the play was apolitical.<sup>200</sup>

There were specific prohibitions that were addressed in McCleish's guidelines, including rules regarding solicitation letters to special groups. He warned the regional directors to use caution when reaching out them. From this section, McCleish writes: "Use no propaganda. No groups or class appeals...Do not write special letters to special groups, such as labor unions, school teachers, members of the clergy, peace groups etc. ... The one simple letter will do for all Americans."<sup>201</sup> McCleish also warned against meeting with political or controversial groups to secure ticket sales. If such a meeting was held, speeches were always to be avoided. This entire

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<sup>198</sup> Martin Chicoine, "Exploitation and prospectus for *It Can't Happen Here*," October, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>199</sup> E. E. McCleish to Martin Chicoine, September 29, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>200</sup> E. E. McCleish to Martin Chicoine, September 29, 1936, NACP.

<sup>201</sup> E. E. McCleish, Instructions, October 15, 1936, NACP.



line of promotional direction runs counter to the proposed Cleveland plans. Chicoine proposed all of the above forbidden meetings and special letters. Of special note is a proposed luncheon meeting with labor leaders, anti-fascist civic leaders, rabbis, ministers, and peace advocates. Special attention would also be paid to Max Hays. In 1936, Max Hays served as the editor to the *Cleveland Citizen*, a socialist newspaper. Hays was also a pro-labor politician, and held positions in the People's Party, the Socialist Labor Party, the American Federation of Labor, and the Socialist Democrat Party. He was the exact kind of controversial figure McCleish wished to avoid in conjunction with *It Can't Happen Here* and the FTP in general. The one point in the Cleveland promotional plan which McCleish was in favor of was the selling of block seats to labor unions, stating "Labor is not politics." Labor is not politics - yet another seemingly impossible statement regarding *It Can't Happen Here*.

The FTP's support of labor unions would be a major line of questioning during the Dies Committee hearings, and labor's connection to various communist organizations would be used to paint the FTP as a Communist organization. The once-removed connection to these organizations, and Flanagan's instance that support of workers was simply a support of everyday Americans would not be successful. Before the end of public theatre in America, labor was a part of the promotional campaign for *It Can't Happen Here*. After McCleish was appointed to steer the messaging surrounding the play, a long-form story highlighting the behind-the-scenes labor involved in the mass production was approved for an October press release. The press release credits "a small army of craftsmen and technicians" for bringing the play to life in the "largest theatre workshop in the world."<sup>202</sup> Highlighting the work of carpenters, scenic designers, costumer technicians, and drafters, this press release is, on the surface, an advertisement of the

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<sup>202</sup> Press Release, October 19, 1936, Box 537 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

infrastructure dedicated to this one project. In her memoir, Flanagan would later organize the story of the FTP as a story about labor. She opens the book by arguing in the preface that the real danger in American is that people were not able to find work worth doing. She portrays theatre as an art of physical labor, and reminding her readers that even though the FTP was not in the business of building permanent infrastructure like the CCC or the TVA, it was very much a part of the physical labor movement employed by the federal government.

Examining McCleish's plan as a whole, a pattern emerges revealing a tightly controlled message aimed at keeping the true meaning of the play hidden until the curtain rose. Despite all the press releases, memos, and interviews distributed by Flanagan, McCleish, and Farnsworth, once the curtain opened on *It Can't Happen Here* the actual message of the play would be free for all to interpret. Even though Lewis claimed the reason he gave the rights to the FTP was because he had faith in their non-partisan treatment of his work, the play itself is partisan.<sup>203</sup> Lewis's novel contains the verbatim fifteen points of Windrip's campaign, which included major tenants of Hitler's Nazi Party, and one from Huey Long's Share Our Wealth Party.<sup>204</sup> American secret police, religious corruption, concentration camps, the promise of pay for allegiance to the tyrant - these all courted the type of controversy the FTP rejected. That controversy was similar to the one depicted in *Ethiopia* with an added danger. While *Ethiopia* depicted the dangers of fascism if abroad, *It Can't Happen Here* brought that danger home in a much more direct warning.

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<sup>203</sup> Press Release, September 14, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>204</sup> Distribution of wealth.

## A Different Approach to Precarity

*It Can't Happen Here* was a different animal from the Living Newspapers. *Injunction Granted*, *Triple A Plowed Under*, *Power*, and *Spirochete* were also controversial (at least according to the Dies Committee), but Flanagan could defend them with a call to current events. They dramatized major economic, judicial, and medical events affecting the audience of the FTP. *It Can't Happen Here* had no such defense. It served as a warning of how American democracy could die. Great lengths were taken to distance the FTP from the message of the play they put so many resources and so much power into. If that much dissembling was necessary, why even produce this play? If the need existed for a nationwide mass spectacle, there could have been other plays which would not have required such careful anti-messaging. After *It Can't Happen Here* opened, Flanagan felt the infrastructure was in place for a repeat. Flanagan laid out a plan for a future staging of a mass anti-war production.<sup>205</sup> The FTP had found a way to produce engaging, topical, and even controversial, material without falling victim to an *Ethiopia*-type disaster.

This press strategy was designed to starve the press of gossip and keep an air of mystery surrounding the play.<sup>206</sup> Too much information released about *Ethiopia*, and too little oversight on communications, led to that play's cancellation. The opposition to *Ethiopia* took the FTP by surprise. For this new play about fascism, the threat of censorship was always at the forefront. The dissembling surrounding the play was aimed at prolonging any criticism to the play itself. Again, the content of the play was well known; the FTP was not hiding that fact, it was merely refusing to repeat an already well-known line of publicity.

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<sup>205</sup> Hallie Flanagan to W.E. Watts, December 1, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>206</sup> E.E. McCleish to T.A. Mautz, September 11, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

In a note to Mautz in September, 1936, McCleish expressed his belief that if news stories focused on the political nature of the play, then purple prose about FTP partisanship would drown out publicity for the production. By the time the shows opened, he feared, the public might have grown tired of hearing about the play. Those opposed to the anti-fascist message would have already made up their minds to not attend, and those with lofty expectations for the FTP's leftist position might have been disappointed if the play did not push back as hard as the press suggested.<sup>207</sup>

McCleish was the front line of defense against the precarity of cancellation and failure. His position was created to manage the messaging of *It Can't Happen Here* and to stave off early opposition by removing any openings for criticism. His preserved correspondence proves the task was difficult. Despite the problem sites of resistance against him, he persisted. The curtains rose on October 27, 1936. After that moment, it was up to the cast to carry the message.

## Summary

The fight for control of *It Can't Happen Here*'s messaging has been up to this point excluded from the literature concerning this chapter in the Federal Theatre's history. The first history of the FTP was written by Flanagan herself. *Arena* is a compelling love letter to her labor filled with triumphs as well as bitter disappointments. The shape and feel of the Hallie Flanagan Papers held at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts reveal her desire to preserve its legacy. She is an unreliable narrator to her own story. The many publications about the FTP which followed the next decades reflect the awe of creating such a prolific national theatre, and the sorrow at its demise. The story of the FTP is impressive, and it deserves all the accolades it has received. However, skipping over these memos in the archive does a disservice to the FTP

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<sup>207</sup> E.E. McCleish to T.A. Mautz, September 11, 1936, NACP.

and its leaders. These memos show conscious dissembling, yes, but also reveal Flanagan's deftness at navigating a political field filled with traps. The assertion that the FTP was non-partisan and non-political was a lie propagated by Flanagan and her staff, but it was a lie made necessary by the oversight of both Roosevelt's administration and a hostile Congress. It is a lie that has been acknowledged, but with the caveat that *if* the FTP was political, it was so only tangentially and the focus of this aspect of the FTP was overblown by the Dies Committee. Even this, though, ignores the denial of political leanings against all evidence to contrary. To take Flanagan at her word, that the only propaganda the FTP engaged in was pro-American propaganda, ignores her unspoken belief that pro-American meant taking a partisan position. It ignores that for Flanagan, pro-American meant pro-labor, pro-public utilities, pro-liberalism, and pro-welfare state. These positions are inherently partisan, and *It Can't Happen Here* served as an early assertion of the positions as well as the way the FTP will defend itself against criticisms of these positions.

If we view the narrative of the FTP only as a doomed and bullied national theatre, we lose a major factor in its relevance as a political entity. Likewise, if we accept the assertion that there was no opposition to *It Can't Happen Here* we lose the much more compelling story of driven and politically savvy public servants. The fact the FTP was restricted by shifting policies concerning how loud a voice they could offer to these issues necessitated the dissembling. The line between what was allowed and forbidden was vaguely defined, despite the pages of promotional directives written by McCleish. Including these documents in the FTP discourse not only sheds light on the deep story of the FTP but also provides a more nuanced take on *It Can't Happen Here* other than its impressive national staging. From Flanagan's own writing there is a sense of excitement about the undertaking of such a massive project, but the internal documents

also reveal a fear of how quickly things could go sideways - like they did with *Ethiopia*. That doomed production never saw the light of day, and the FTP could not afford another cancellation, especially a nationwide one.

## Chapter Four: Staging the Threat

On October 27, 1936, the curtains rose for *It Can't Happen Here*. In eighteen cities this supposedly non-political play was finally seen by the American people. This chapter focuses on the productions and how they were adapted, reviewed, and received. First, I introduce the Los Angeles English-language production and the New York Adelphi production as representative case studies. Next, I examine three alternative productions to highlight how the FTP addressed regional, religious, and ethnic variations within its structure. Third, I look at the internal survey reports compiled by the FTP to uncover how the agency organized its own archive in order to present a specific narrative. Lastly, I discuss how success was determined for *It Can't Happen Here*, both in its own time and in the current discourse of the FTP. The focus of this chapter is how specific communities utilized *It Can't Happen Here* and how the play began to take shape within the FTP's larger narrative.

### Precarity in the Gap Between Political and Non-Political

In the months between *Ethiopia's* January cancellation and *It Can't Happen Here's* October opening, the FTP calibrated its response to its unstable environment. Rice's dramatic exit and the government's direct intervention into the FTP proved there was risk involved in producing politically partisan plays. Rather than folding under the pressure, Flanagan continued to develop plays which addressed social and political issues. As I argued in chapter three, this did not mean Flanagan continued on the same path which led to *Ethiopia's* cancellation. Instead, she and her administrative staff managed their precarity by strategic disingenuity. The FTP sought to prevent opposition to the play by deliberately cloaking the political message of *It Can't Happen Here*. The promotion plan, as well as public statements made by both Flanagan and Lewis, explicitly denied any political agenda other than that of pro-American democracy. Prior to the

opening, *It Can't Happen Here* fell into a gap between the political and the non-political. The text itself directly contradicts McCleish's directive "Use no propaganda. No group or class appeals—no politics."<sup>208</sup> By Lewis's own statements, the play was propaganda: "It is propaganda for an American system of democracy. Very definitely propaganda for that."<sup>209</sup> During the interim between conception and birth, the play dodged potential interference and cancellation. This gap closed the moment the play opened, and the message would be open to audience interpretation. Delaying the interpretation allowed the FTP space to address the logistical challenges of mounting a nationwide production. It also provided cover to prevent any interference by the federal government. There was risk involved in continuing to produce political plays, and the FTP operated within that risk while keeping the worst outcome at bay. With the crises of *Ethiopia* averted, the FTP opened *It Can't Happen Here*. All that was left to do was wait for the signs of failure or success.

## **Evidence**

There are three types of responses I investigate to assess the mass-staging's success or failure: press reviews of the play, audience surveys, and internal FTP assessments. The press reviews I cite focus on the Los Angeles and New York productions. The audience surveys were compiled by the FTP information office to gauge the audience demographics, their reception to *It Can't Happen Here* specifically, and their openness to future politically-oriented plays. These surveys are included here to both present the response to play and the methodology the FTP used gauge success. The surveys were handed out to audience members in the theatre lobbies during the first weeks of performance and compiled in the month after. The internal FTP assessments

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<sup>208</sup> McCleish, "Instructions governing exploitation," October 27, 1936, NACP.

<sup>209</sup> Lewis, Press release, September 14, 1936, NACP.



include critics' scoreboards, ticket sales, and summaries of the audience surveys. They are included to reveal the FTP's attempt to craft the narrative of *It Can't Happen Here*.

### **The Press Responds**

There were twenty-two simultaneous productions in eighteen cities of *It Can't Happen Here*. A detailed report on each of these is beyond the scope of my project, so I chose two productions to examine as case studies: the Los Angeles English version and the New York Adelphi production. These sites represent the two most populous cities hosting the production. Additionally, both cities included distinct English- and Yiddish-language productions.

John Langdon directed the Los Angeles version of *It Can't Happen Here*. He wrote in his show post-mortem, "This is a play the chief values of which lie in its political and social implications."<sup>210</sup> Frederick Stover's sets were made from two stationary jack-knife stages which served as the Jessup home, the grocery store, the newspaper office, the hotel balcony, and the immigration office. Wagons were utilized for additional scenes. The set design was inspired by California locales to give the play a more direct connection with the audience.<sup>211</sup>

The Los Angeles press was not kind to *It Can't Happen Here*. Frank Mittaur of the *L.A. Evening News* stated, "[I]f there is play in *It Can't Happen Here* no one had gotten around to writing it yet."<sup>212</sup> He criticized the slow pace of both the script and the staging; he was especially irritated by the long set changes. Mittaur also lamented the play did not live up to the novel, and noted the audience's initial excitement was dragged down by the pacing of the show. His only praise was reserved for Ian McLaren as a credible Jessup. W.E. Oliver of the *Los*

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<sup>210</sup> John Langdon, "Director's Report *It Can't Happen Here* (English Version)," Box 452 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>211</sup> Langdon, "Director's Report," NACP.

<sup>212</sup> Frank Mittaur, "Unconvincing Propaganda," *L.A. Evening News*, October 28, 1936, J. Howard Miller Papers, C0228, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University.

*Angeles Herald* was more measured in his critique, calling the production “adequate” and the acting “in some cases capable. In other cases downright bad.”<sup>213</sup> Both reviews of *It Can’t Happen Here* noted the houses were packed. The FTP internal reporting shows the play ran for eight weeks, indicating it was at least a commercial success.

The New York Adelphi Theatre was the home of the flagship production.<sup>214</sup> This production was the most reviewed, and the site where revisions were tried out. Vincent Sherman, who previously directed the FTP’s *Battle Hymn* (1936), was tapped to direct the project.<sup>215</sup> Sinclair Lewis attended many rehearsals, and helped with casting the show. By having Lewis on site, Sherman was the first to deal with edits and re-writes of the text. According to a phone conversation between Sherman and Flanagan on October 13, Sherman was working on a fourth version of the script, a version that could not be sent out to the other directors in time for the opening. Lewis and Sherman were making drastic cuts to the text, shortening some scenes and cutting other scenes altogether. Sherman expressed frustration in Tom Adrian Carcraft’s sets; they were cumbersome, and the scene changes took too long.<sup>216</sup> He commissioned special music from Hans Bruno Meyer (at the time he was employed with the Federal Music Project) to cover the long changes (something that would have helped the Los Angeles production).<sup>217</sup>

The Adelphi production was not received well by the press either. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* was generous with his praise when it came to the stakes of the play, mostly based on his admiration of the book, but felt the production was a poor adaptation. He criticized

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<sup>213</sup> W.E. Oliver, “American Dictatorship is Envisioned in Melodrama,” *Herald*, October 28, 1936, J. Howard Miller Papers, C0228, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University.

<sup>214</sup> The Adelphi was one of the dark theatres rented by the FTP for their productions.

<sup>215</sup> Vincent Sherman (1906-2006) was an actor and director who worked in the theatre and film. *It Can’t Happen Here* was his last New York directing credit, because he started his film career shortly after.

<sup>216</sup> Tom Adrian Carcraft (1905 – 1968) was a Broadway scene designer in the 1930s and 40s; he designed six shows for the FTP between 1936-1938. He also served as the head of Columbia Pictures’ scenic arts department.

<sup>217</sup> Telephone conversation between Mrs. Flanagan and Vincent Sherman, transcript, October 13, 1936, Box 452, Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

it, and Federal Theatre as a whole: “Like most Federal Theatre productions, the Sinclair Lewis and John C. Moffit stage version of *It Can’t Happen Here* is not well done; it is careless, slipshod theatre work, according to Broadway standards.” He also lamented the depiction of the characters as not realistic enough to properly scare in the audience about the reality of fascism. Overall, he felt the play necessary, but lacking in impact.<sup>218</sup> Likewise, Douglas Gilbert of the *World-Telegram* described the play as poorly staged, proclaiming the play unnecessary and unconvincing. Gilbert admitted the play was dramatic, but he thought the drama was dragged down by the dialogue. He also wrote the play suffered by only including Buzz Windrip in one scene, and wished the American dictator was given a larger role.<sup>219</sup> Another reviewer from the *World Telegram*, Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, had a different assessment. She focused mainly on what she saw as the importance of the message and merely hinted at any real critique of the performance:

While large hunks of the play seemed to me extravagant melodrama, it was credible enough to wish with all my heart that I had not been born to live in a time when Fascism is spreading over the world like a deadly epidemic...With all its imperfections *It Can’t Happen Here* has more than a little prophetic impact for those who read their newspapers. By presenting to audiences all over the country, the Federal Theatre Project is doing its best to see that it won’t happen here.<sup>220</sup>

The Adelphi production, like the Los Angeles production, enjoyed a long run. It was at the Adelphi for 12 weeks before it was moved to a smaller theatre to make room for the next

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<sup>218</sup> Brooks Atkinson, “It Can’t Happen,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1936.

<sup>219</sup> Douglas Gilbert, “Lewis Play Given at Adelphi Theatre,” *New York World Telegram*, October 28, 1936, Box 32, Folder X, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>220</sup> Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, “Lewis’ Play Warning Vital to Every Home,” *New York World Telegram*, October 30, 1936, Adams T. Rice Papers, C0238, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University.

FTP production.<sup>221</sup> Internal FTP records show it opened at capacity.<sup>222</sup> On December 29, it was still selling out.<sup>223</sup>

### **Alternative Productions**

In addition to the representative productions discussed above, I want to bring attention to three alternative productions of *It Can't Happen Here*. The Seattle, New York Yiddish, and Tampa productions addressed the precarity facing ethnic communities in America. The FTP was formed on the idea that instead of amassing the entirety of the artistic community into one city, it would become a federation of theatres—to bring theatre to all the people. To achieve this, it was necessary for the majority of the regional communities to be masters of their own art, and direct how they achieved the FTP's aims.<sup>224</sup> Each regional production of *It Can't Happen Here* would be part of a large whole, and would ideally reflect on the sensibilities of said region while still enforcing the notion that the entire country faced an incredible threat. For many of the productions, directors were allowed to change the names of places to make the threat of fascism more immediate for the audience. Altering the text was no small feat; as I related in the last chapter, delays in script revisions plagued the regional production. The delays were especially difficult for non-English language productions.

The result of this were scripts more tailored to highlight local sites of resistance. The most important of these sites are the New York Yiddish production, the Tampa Unit production,

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<sup>221</sup> Pierre De Rohan, "It is Happening Here - And Everywhere," Federal Theatre Magazine, Vol. 2, Number 2, Dorothea Lynch Thomas Papers, C0242, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University.

<sup>222</sup> Department of Information Report, October 28, 1936, Francis Bosworth Papers, C0220, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University.

<sup>223</sup> Hallie Flanagan, letter to Barrie Stavis, December 29, 1936, Box 10, Folder 1, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>224</sup> Most of the writing about the Federal Theatre centers around the flagship productions and the New York units. For a comprehensive account of the regional output of the FTP see Osborne, *Staging the People*.

and the Seattle Unit production. Each of these productions attempted to speak to specific threats within their communities and reveal *It Can't Happen Here*'s undeniable political messaging.

### **Regional Variations on The Threat: The Yiddish Theatre's Concentration Camp**

The Federal Theater's opening of a Yiddish Theatre Unit in 1935 helped provide a major boon to Yiddish theatre in New York, both in funding and institutional support. Historian Joel Schechter notes in *Messiahs of 1933* this federally-funded theatre group had the clearest connection to the Soviet government in Russia, as it was the only other nation to fully fund Yiddish drama.<sup>225</sup>

The New York Yiddish Theatre production of *It Can't Happen Here* was staged at the Biltmore Theatre. The play was originally planned to open at the Heckscher Theatre, but interest in the show prompted a last-minute move to the Biltmore.<sup>226</sup> Flanagan saw both productions on opening night, catching the second act of the Jewish production.<sup>227</sup> Of note for this production was the inclusion of the concentration camp scene. In Lewis's novel, and in the full script of the play, Doremus Jessup is arrested for sedition and held at a camp for political prisoners. The scene in the novel is brutal, and the stage script shows a man dying from his injuries at the hands of violent prison guards. At some point in early October, the concentration camp scene was cut from the nationally-distributed script, though individual directors could choose to make their own cuts.<sup>228</sup> Many of the productions, including the one at the Adelphi Theatre, cut this scene. The New York and Los Angeles Yiddish Units kept this scene, which Flanagan applauded for its impact.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Joel Schechter, *Messiahs of 1933*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 73.

<sup>226</sup> "Letter to Patron", October 27, 1936, Box 116 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>227</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 124.

<sup>228</sup> Telephone conversation between Mrs. Flanagan and Vincent Sherman, transcript, October 13, 1936, Box 452, Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>229</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 124.

I bring the concentration camp scene into the conversation because of its poignancy after-the-fact. The first Nazi concentration camp, Dachau, opened in March 1933. In the beginning, this camp housed those accused of being enemies of the state: Communists, Roma, Socialists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Schechter argues that while the mass incarceration of German and Austrian Jews did not begin in force until 1938, the practice of marking groups for imprisonment weighed heavily on the Yiddish theatre scene in New York, which had a long history of advocating for socialist causes.<sup>230</sup> The inclusion of this scene by the Yiddish Theatre Unit, a group which represented American Jews, has more weight than if it had been included by the flagship production.

When looking back on this play, cutting this scene from the flagship production is a case of art imitating life. The Adelphi production, by eliminating the scene, lessens the warning of the play, and hides the most essential threat to the imagined fascist takeover; the silencing and mass incarceration of the resistance. Schechter points out the importance of the Biltmore audience hearing this play, which is about the fall of society to fascism, in their “language of exile.”<sup>231</sup> At the time, the threat of opening prison camps on United States soil to hold its own citizens would have seemed far-fetched. That couldn't happen here—until it did in 1942, when people of Japanese descent were forcibly moved into internment camps. Sixty percent of them were citizens of the United States.<sup>232</sup> It is striking that well before this dark period of American history, this scene from *It Can't Happen Here* drove home the warning of “it *can* happen here

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<sup>230</sup> A full study of the Yiddish Theatre is beyond the scope of this dissertation. For a comprehensive history of the Yiddish Theatre in America, see Edna Nahshon ed., *New York's Yiddish Theatre: From the Bowery to Broadway*, (New York, Colombia Press, 2016). For a more on the New York and Los Angeles Yiddish FTP theatres see Joel Schechter *The Messiahs of 1933*, (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2008).

<sup>231</sup> Schechter, *Messiahs of 1933*, 110.

<sup>232</sup> Executive Order 9066. For further reading, see Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) and Erica Harth, *Last Witnesses: Reflections on the Wartime Internment of Japanese Americans*, (New York: St. Martin Press Griffin, 2001).

because it is happening there.” Its omission by some and inclusion by others, specifically the Yiddish theatre, is ripe for interpretation as a result.

As a researcher of these productions, and as someone living in a post-Auschwitz world, it is difficult to approach this regional, or at the least community, variant of the *It Can't Happen Here* script with a generous reading of the omission. Time, casting, and plot flow are all legitimate reasons for cutting the script for production, and these types of cuttings were certainly allowed, even encouraged, by the Federal Theatre head office.<sup>233</sup> The concentration camp omission seems ill-advised, when viewed through the lens of atrocities committed by the Nazis and the injustices they enacted.<sup>234</sup> The Yiddish Theatre's commitment to performing the realities of an internment camp seems remarkable now. Reading the scene from a contemporary lens shows how many of the predictions of *It Can't Happen Here* could, perhaps, happen.

The production itself received lackluster reviews from the press. Yiddish theatre critic Moishe Olgin of the *Morgn Frayhayt* took issue with the lack of realism of the camp scene, noting that only the beds were shown.<sup>235</sup> Likewise, the *New York Times* critic William Schack called it a “mere skeleton of play, its good intentions as bare as its ribs...” after it had moved to a smaller theatre.<sup>236</sup> In spite of these criticisms, the Yiddish audience in New York turned out for this production. The Biltmore Theatre was at capacity (2500) for its run at that location.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Telephone conversation between Hallie Flanagan and Vincent Sherman, NACP.

<sup>234</sup> Telephone conversation between Hallie Flanagan and Vincent Sherman, NACP.

<sup>235</sup> Schechter, *Messiahs of 1933*, 116.

<sup>236</sup> William Schack, “Three Now Resident Off the Avenue,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 1936.

<sup>237</sup> Marjorie Korn, “*It Can't Happen Here*: Federal Theatre's Bold Adventure,” (PhD diss., University of Missouri, 1978), 114

## Regional Variations on The Threat: Tampa's Ybor City and Translation Woes

In addition to Yiddish, *It Can't Happen Here* was also translated into Spanish for the Cuban-American community of south Florida. The Tampa, FL, FTP unit performed Spanish-language theatre for its largely Cuban-American audience. In addition to its translation, the only production of the play produced in Spanish, this particular offering of *It Can't Happen Here* is noted for its lack of popularity.<sup>238</sup> In *Arena*, Hallie Flanagan dedicated a chapter to the story of the play, and the warm reception it received from the nationwide audience. According to a review of the production, the audience seemed receptive. The (Tampa) *Saturday Evening News* stated "The audience enjoyed it. Our Latin audiences take their drama very seriously... On opening night they ran the scale of emotions, and weren't ashamed to demonstrate their pleasure or displeasure."<sup>239</sup> However, according to FTP Florida state director Dorothea Lynch, both the production and its reception fell short of the promise imagined by Federal One.<sup>240</sup> The Tampa production failed to fill the house at any point in its one weekend run.

Reconciling these two conflicting assessments of the Tampa performance of *It Can't Happen Here* is difficult because most the archival material pertaining to this production, as well as most of what has written about it, focuses mainly on mere the fact it happened at all. There is a sense here the existence of a Spanish-language production of *It Can't Happen Here* was something to help solidify the narrative of the FTP's commitment to theatre for all the people. However, historian Kenya Dworkin-Mendez argues the xenophobic rewording of the 1937 Emergency Relief Act ran counter to the propertied aims of the Federal Theatre, which wanted to

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<sup>238</sup> Kenya C. Dworkin-Mendez, "When a 'New Deal' Became a Raw Deal: Depression-Era, 'Latin' Federal Theatre," *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1(1), 2011.

<sup>239</sup> Collected reviews "It Can't Happen Here", Box 8, Folder 8, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>240</sup> Interview with Dorothea Lynch. 14 March 1977. By John O'Connor. O'Connor, John. Dorothea Lynch Collection. Research Center for the Federal Theatre Project. George Mason University. Fairfax, VA. (Unpublished). Quoted by Dworkin-Mendez.



include as many voices as possible.<sup>241</sup> Lynch blamed the lackluster performance and reception on the fact that the actors were forced to memorize lines (the Tampa unit frequently used prompters) and that the content was more political than the Tampa audience was used to. Dworkin-Mendez, however, calls these excuses into question. She argues the Federal Theatre grossly misunderstood the community in Tampa and the company was not given enough time or freedom to adjust the script that other units were given. The script had been delayed in getting to the Tampa troupe because its translation was done in New York. As such, the Tampa unit received a literal, badly translated script two weeks before the scheduled opening.<sup>242</sup> The Lynch interview points to a possible cultural misunderstanding between Lynch and the leadership of the Tampa unit (director Manuel Aparicio). Though Lynch believed that the Tampa Cuban audience would not connect with the political message of the play, the theatre community had a long history of politically relevant plays beginning in the 1880s.<sup>243</sup> In contrast to other southern cities, the FTP did not create a theatre in Tampa, it provided financial support for an already strong part of the community.

Until 1936, commercial theatre in Tampa had been underwritten by the cigar industry. After automation, and the decline in popularity of cigars, the Tampa patron base had less income for the theatre; the injection of funds by the US government was welcome. For the FTP, there were obvious benefits to the union. Instead of building a theatre from scratch – which would have included finding a theatre space, recruiting actors, and relocating administration – the elements for a theatre were already present. Because of this, the lack of measurable positive

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<sup>241</sup> The 1937 Emergency Relief Act banned all non-citizens from relief and federal employment eligibility. This decimated the Tampa Federal Theatre.

<sup>242</sup> Dworkin-Mendez, "Raw Deal."

<sup>243</sup> For more on the theatrical history of Tampa, see Nicolás Kanellos, *A History of Hispanic Theatre in the United States: Origins to 1940*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

response from the Tampa production of *It Can't Happen Here* obscures the possible impact this production could have had, and shows how detrimental it can be for the aims of the FTP's mass staging to become lost in translation. The message of *It Can't Happen Here* and its presentation of a fascist takeover would have absolutely been relevant to the Cuban community of Tampa. The Spanish Civil War began July 17, 1936 when a military uprising split the nation into a Republican Spain led by the Second Spanish Republic and a Nationalist Spain led by Francisco Franco. As the fighting began, hundreds of Cubans traveled to Spain to support the Second Spanish Republic. Many disparate groups formed around the cause of fighting the advancement of fascism, seeing its spread as evidence that it could cross oceans to infect other nations.<sup>244</sup> The Cuban diaspora had a reason to be engaged in a drama depicting the fascist takeover of their new homeland. Why, then, was *It Can't Happen Here* seen as a failure?

Dworkin-Mendez argues that the production failed to resonate with the Cuban audience not because of the foreignness of its theme, but because of the foreignness of names and places. Rather than allowing the Tampa unit to translate the play themselves, a privilege afforded to the Yiddish production, the National Play Bureau delivered a literal translation with no changes in the Anglo-sounding names or New England locations. Perhaps changes could have been made to truly reflect the identity of that region had the Tampa unit the time to translate not only the language, but the milieu of the play to reflect the struggle of Cuba against the rising threat of fascism in Spain. Perhaps then this particular production could have been a much more interesting chapter in the history of *It Can't Happen Here*.

These missed opportunities are important to the history of *It Can't Happen Here* because they reveal not only the strengths of the FTP, but its weaknesses. These weaknesses are often

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<sup>244</sup> Ariel Marie Lambe, "Cuban Antifascism and the Spanish Civil War: Transnational Activism, Networks, and Solidarity in the 1930s," (PhD. diss., Colombia University, 2014).

ignored because they mar the romance of the brave, lefty David to Congressman Dies's Goliath. Admitting that perhaps Flanagan and her appointed underlings lacked the cultural awareness and sensitivity concerning groups like the Tampa Unit allows FTP scholars to move past nostalgia and into real assessment of the impact of the FTP. Whether the FTP's approach to the Tampa production was marred by ignorance or malice is not my focus here, and I am assuming good faith on the part of Lynch. Instead, I assert that just as in the difference between the Adelphi and Yiddish productions, the difference (or perhaps indifference) of the Tampa unit reflects life imitating art. Doremus Jessup, and the type of liberal he represents, failed to fully comprehend how a nation as large and disparate as the United States could so willingly hand over its democratic soul to a totalitarian figure. In addition to accusations of Communist influence, the FTP fought the perception that it was a boondoggle of federal funds. While the largely successful mass performance of *It Can't Happen Here* was supposed to counter these claims, it cannot be ignored that even this demonstration of logistical competency had its own weaknesses. While the Tampa production might not have marred the reputation of the FTP in the national press, students of its history would be well advised to note that not everything touched by Hallie Flanagan turned to gold, and examining the missteps reveals as much as triumphs.

### **Regional Variations on The Threat: Seattle's Integrated Production**

The Seattle production of *It Can't Happen Here* was noteworthy not because of its language or its choices in scene inclusion/omissions, but because of the racial makeup of its cast. Seattle's production of *It Can't Happen Here* was the only one of the openings to feature an integrated cast of white and African American actors. The Seattle Unit was organized into two subunits, one white and one black. For *It Can't Happen Here*, both companies were combined to create the large cast. Perhaps the most interesting of this casting is that, contrary to what I

initially assumed, color-blind casting was not utilized. Instead, black actors were cast as the characters who stood in defiance of the totalitarian regime; white company actors were cast in the roles of the fascist leaders.<sup>245</sup> This casting choice highlights that the play warns not merely of the threat of fascism in the Europe—such as in the Yiddish and Tampa productions—but also cautions how totalitarianism could impact vulnerable minorities in the United States. It also provided a scenario where a crisis created by white Americans could be resisted by African American communities.

A racial reading of this performance opens a number of opportunities for scholars of *It Can't Happen Here*. Using the lens of precarity to view both the dramaturgical role of cross-racial casting and the implications of racial equality in the organizational logistics of the Seattle units allows me to unpack this particular production in a way which reveals a greater understanding of the FTP and this ambitious undertaking as a whole. First, let me address the role of Doremus Jessup. As discussed earlier, Jessup spends the first act of the play in denial of his own precarious situation. He feels secure in his place as an American journalist. He feels secure in his assessment of the American electorate as one which would not so blindly give itself over to a tyrant. Jessup denies the coming storm, and even tries to convince the others Buzz Windrip would make for a good president. It should be noted that in the text, even Jessup admits that fascism is a threat, but he sees it as an existential one. His assertion is that America is too big to lose itself:

Look at it! God's own free, open American country! And this is just one little New England valley. Think of all that's beyond-- Arizona deserts. The Mississippi delta--richest land on earth--The Oregon forests. Do you know how big Texas is? Big as any three European countries put together. This isn't any one-horse European country that a dictator could get hold of. No sir! It's too big! Dictatorship--it can't happen here!<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art Out of Desperate Times*, (New York: Walker, 2007), 127.

<sup>246</sup> *It Can't Happen Here* Act 1, Scene 1.

A white Jessup can believe that no real harm will befall him because he enjoys the benefits of a coveted demographic. A white Jessup sees nothing but hope and opportunity in Roosevelt's America. How does that switch when Jessup is played by a non-white actor? When Jessup is played by a black actor in an integrated cast, where the wolf at the door wears a white face, it throws the precarity of African Americans into sharp relief on the Federal Theatre stage. While African Americans largely supported Roosevelt, many New Deal programs continued the tradition of racial discrimination. The most egregious of these is the FHA's policy of refusing housing loans to African Americans who wanted to settle into white neighborhoods.<sup>247</sup> A black Doremus Jessup, at first confident that a nation run by white people would reject policies that creates a class of criminals out of the black dissidents in the cast, becomes the symbol of the resistance by the end of the play. When Mary Jessup tries to flee to Canada and is detained by her husband's killer, she sends her young son away as she prepares to kill the face of white oppression, Commissioner Swan:

Swan: I knew I should have killed Jessup.

Mary: You couldn't! Doremus Jessup can never die.<sup>248</sup>

While the play ends before the final shot, this last scene of a young black man escaping a fascist white regime while his mother sacrifices herself for vengeance and justice suggests that should fascism ever take hold, violent resistance on the part of oppressed minorities will be necessary. While the violent act is consistent across all the productions of *It Can't Happen Here*, the racial interpretation here invokes revenge against centuries of violence committed against African Americans by white Americans. The integrated casting was a condemnation of white fascism.

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<sup>247</sup> Amy E. Hiller, "Redlining and the Homeowners Corporation," *Journal of Urban History*, Volume 29, Issue 4, 2003, 394-420.

<sup>248</sup> *It Can't Happen Here* Act III, Scene 3.

Situating white actors as fascist villains marks whiteness as the totalitarian threat. This threat was not the speculative fiction of the other productions, but a reality to African Americans.

It is important to note here that the fascism presented in Lewis's script did not have a strong racial component against African Americans. The only real mention of racial violence or targeting was in the “Fifteen Points” and the People’s Party handbill: “10. NO NEGRO SHALL VOTE and any negroes earning in excess of \$10,000 shall be taxed 100 per cent on the excesses. The most sympathetic aid will be extended to all negroes provided they are engaged in domestic service or common labor.”<sup>249</sup> This handbill was cut for some of the units, and no evidence exists that it was distributed for the Seattle unit. There is another reason for not including race in the actual text of Windrip’s tirades—it was not in keeping with one of Lewis’s real-world inspirations for Windrip. Huey Long broke with most Louisiana Democrats during his rise to power in that he did not play to the racism of white Louisiana voters to win elections. Long's populism was based entirely on economic inequality, uniting impoverished black and white voters against the wealthy. His Share Our Wealth party did not aim to separate the sharing among racial lines, and his building up of the Louisiana infrastructure included new schools and hospitals for African Americans in the state. He was no champion of civil rights, to be sure, since he made no attempts toward integration of state institutions. The fascism presented in *It Can't Happen Here*, influenced by Hitler's Germany, was not yet associated in the minds of the world with racial purity.<sup>250</sup> The precarity the African American community existed under could be ignored by Lewis, a white liberal whose fear under a fascist regime was largely abstract. The daily lives of this community, however, were worse off during the Great Depression. While the

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<sup>249</sup> Buzz Windrip’s Fifteen Points, Box 308 Series 29, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>250</sup> This statement is not to lessen the genocide of the Holocaust—only to give the lack of racial rhetoric in the play some context.

unemployment rate hit its peak at 25% overall, half of all black Americans were unemployed<sup>251</sup>.

In addition to job discrimination, in 1933 lynching incidents (especially in the South) began to rise. In 1929 there were only ten reported lynchings in the United States: by the end of 1930 there were twenty-one reported lynchings. The symbol of a racially-united cast depicting a racially-divided country provided a symbol of progressive racial justice, and highlighted the precarity of the African American community under a fascist regime.<sup>252</sup>

The integrated *It Can't Happen Here* cast was more than an attack on a hypothetical fascist takeover. It was an attack on the very real white supremacist society under which the black actors lived. The integrated Seattle unit, as well as the many Negro Units funded by the FTP, reveals inconsistencies in FDR's New Deal programs. In contrast to the FHA, the FTP was more lax in its approach to segregation. As historian E. Quinta Craig notes, many segregated units occupied the same space, and occasionally desegregated its casts, though the audiences were still segregated.<sup>253</sup> This, of course, was another weapon in the arsenal for the opponents of Roosevelt's programs. The Communist Party was one of the first to take on the cause of racial equality in the U.S. The Party believed that capitalist systems, like that of the United States, benefited from racial divisions, and that those divisions served split the working classes to prevent them from organizing.<sup>254</sup> An integrated theatre unit serving as a propaganda agency of the federal government further served to paint the FTP as a pro-Communist organization. Despite this, the Seattle production received praise equal to that of Adelphi production, and was mentioned in Flanagan's memoir as significant.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/depwwii/race/>

<sup>252</sup> Liann E. Tsoukas, *Uneasy alliances: Interracial Efforts to End Lynching in the 1930s*, (PhD. diss., Indiana University, 1998, 110.

<sup>253</sup> Craig, *Black Drama*, 10.

<sup>254</sup> Shelley Pinckney, "Race and Civil Rights: The 30s and 40s, *Communism in Washington State: History and Memory*, accessed July 15, 2017, <http://depts.washington.edu/labhist/cpproject/pinckney.shtml>

<sup>255</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 125-127.

## FTP Survey Data

After the collective curtain rose on *It Can't Happen Here*, the FTP set to collecting audience responses. In a series of post-performances questions, the FTP aimed to collect the people's opinion on three fronts: the plays itself, political plays in general, and the establishment of the permanent national theatre. Many of these audience surveys have been collected and stored in the National Archives. Not all the surveys for each of the productions are readily available, but those that are give us, at the very least, a cross section of how audiences across the nation felt about *It Can't Happen Here* and the Federal Theatre's output in its first year of operation. Though the questions vary, each available report contains demographic questions, reactions to the play, attitude toward a permanent theatre, general suggestions and comments, and a summary of the findings.<sup>256</sup>

The above summary of the available audience surveys come from the following productions: New York—Adelphi, Philadelphia, Birmingham, Chicago, Indianapolis, and Montclair—Newark. These surveys are a cross section of several of the Federal Theatre regions, though they are missing the West Coast units. This small sampling of the audience, small because of both the availability of records and the number of people who stayed after a performance to respond, gave the FTP a cross section of the people they wanted to reach. The New York Adelphi production saw a total of 820 audience respondents, the majority of whom were professionals. Half of the respondents indicated *It Can't Happen Here* was their first theatre performance and half of those cited the high cost of tickets for their non-attendance. When summarizing the results, the FTP reported the play was a success, with the majority of audience respondents being in favor of the play itself, and desiring more plays about social issues.

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<sup>256</sup> Performance Research, *It Can't Happen Here*, Box 452, Series 254, Subgroup 867, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.



Philadelphia was another favorable survey. The employment demographic breakdown for this production was eighty professional workers, seventeen artists, five tradespeople, fifteen businesspeople, fifty-seven office workers, and seventy-two whose work was labeled “miscellaneous.” The majority of those polled attended fewer than five non-federal Theatre plays a year, and the most given reasons for this low attendance was ticket price and poor quality of plays. An overwhelming majority of respondents (175 in total) preferred plays similar in content as *It Can't Happen Here*. The audience also responded favorably to the script, with 288 patrons in favor of the play itself.

Of note are two comments included in the survey report, both alluding to negative reviews published in Philadelphia press. There was some criticism of the stage adaptation, calling it amateurish propaganda. Montclair and Newark also had a favorable survey for the play. Similar to New York and Philadelphia, these productions saw a majority professional occupation audience with and affirmative responses to seeing more plays about social issues. Birmingham survey reveals more miscellaneous professions who were not familiar with live theatre. Twelve people stated they attend the theatre frequently, but other responses suggest they equated theatre with the movies. One response read “So many pictures have nothing in them” while another revealed there had been no theatre operating in Birmingham in the seven years before the FTP set up its hub in the city. In Chicago, the occupation question was omitted, but a full third of those surveyed stated *It Can't Happen Here* was their first live theatre experience. When asked if they preferred social commentary plays like *It Can't Happen Here*, 722 patrons answered ‘yes.’

Not all audience members praised the play. Indianapolis and Chicago stand out as cities with less-than-glowing audience reception. The survey report for Indianapolis does not include any demographic statistics (those pages were missing), but it does include a summary for the

audience reaction compared with the Denver production. The summary suggests the Indianapolis audience was not impressed by the play. The research notes that the audience seemed less sophisticated than the Denver audience. The reason for this assessment came from comments in survey, including complaints the play was “too deep” and an overall lack of constructive criticism to improve the script. The Chicago report suggests a mixed reception. Again, no demographic information was included, but this report included information about the attendance habits of the audience. Half of the respondents noted *It Can't Happen Here* as their first play, and took from this that the production was a “great drawing card” for new audiences. Also, with 712 people preferring social issue plays, the summarized report concluded Chicago was ripe for other productions like *It Can't Happen Here*. However, the play itself was not as welcomed. Many patrons commented on the opening scene, stating it was too slow, and the last scene of the play was too abrupt. There were also comments reflecting dissatisfaction with the content of the play, with some critiques that the play danced around the issue at hand. One patron questioned “Why not call the danger by name...Fascism.” Others seemed to lean the other way, with many comments lamenting both the vulgarity and gruesomeness of the play. The summary closes with surprise on the part of the unnamed research; they believed the “hardboiled” reputation of Chicago would create a favorable reception of the plays “harrowing nature.” This was not the case, and seemed to be conflict with the responses that wished to see more plays like *It Can't Happen Here*, though perhaps with less cursing, gore, and explosions.

The reports declare the mass staging was a success. Even in cities where the reception of *It Can't Happen Here* was lukewarm at best, like Indianapolis and Chicago, the cities were all receptive to the establishment of a permanent national theatre. Korn's dissertation presents the audience responses in most of the productions, and even in places where the audience was

critical of the script, they were able to find praise for the acting, the technical aspects, or the direction.<sup>257</sup>

The FTP also compiled several press reviews. These reviews are not presented here as primary evidence of critical reception, but as evidence of the FTP's own record keeping. After the reviews were in, the FTP compiled them into a Critic's Scoreboard report. The scoreboard was a rubric with the city, paper, and reviews listed next to a 'most favorable' and 'most negative' quote. It paints a different picture than the reviews I discussed earlier. While they do include negative statements, the report gives an overall positive spin on the critical response.<sup>258</sup> The FTP also included longer-form reviews in their semi-monthly newsletter, most which are printed in their entirety, giving a more balanced view of the press response.<sup>259</sup>

This archived data, both the audience surveys and critical response recording, reveal the FTP had eye towards documenting the story of *It Can't Happen Here*. Much of this data would make its way into Flanagan's memoir. Flanagan did not think the play itself was particularly well done, and that the performance failed to elevated the story. She did think the message of the play overcame its artistic shortcomings, and stated the significance of hundreds of thousands of people attending a play about the creeping nature of fascism was enough to justify the performance.<sup>260</sup>

## **Grading Success**

In 1936, the FTP needed a success. Criticism of the agency was mounting, both about its management and its content. *It Can't Happen Here* could have been the answer if it was a hit.

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<sup>257</sup> Even though I was only able to access a small number of survey reports, there is evidence the play was received well in most cities.

<sup>258</sup> Critic's Scoreboard, *It Can't Happen Here*, Box 12 Series 29, Subgroup 839, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>259</sup> Federal Theatre Project, Semi-monthly newsletter, Vol. 1, number 7, Box 8, Folder 8, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>260</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 124, 129.

But how do we measure the success of this play? Do we look at the critical reception? Do we look at the ticket sales? Does the mere fact that it happened at all make it a success? Also, does its success matter more in the longer view of American history than it did for Flanagan and the FTP at that moment in time?

According to the FTP the show was a success, at least in the short term. Internal documents show positive audience reception and large ticket sales. Through the entire run 316,421 people saw *It Can't Happen Here*. There were 710 performances, and it made \$64,392 in sales.<sup>261</sup> Adjusted for inflation, the play made \$1,212,299—the equivalent of a week's revenue for a successful Broadway production in 2017.<sup>262</sup> After the opening, many people sent Flanagan congratulatory telegrams, praising the show and also reporting on packed houses.<sup>263</sup>

In the long term, *It Can't Happen Here* was not enough to silence critics of the FTP. The play ran for weeks in larger cities, and more cities added productions after October 27. The Living Newspapers continued to churn out topical, exciting docudramas. *The Cradle Will Rock* opened despite the government's armed guards. It was four years of exciting theatre. The beginning of the end for FTP came on May 26, 1938, when a special sub-committee of the House Un-American Activity Committee (HUAC) was formed to investigate communist activity in the WPA. The Dies Committee was chaired by Congressman Martin Dies (D-TX). The committee condemned the agency as a propaganda machine for Communists and Communist sympathizers hiding in the United States government payroll.<sup>264</sup> The Committee framed many FTP productions as advocating the end of American life as it was known. Plays such as *Injunction Granted*

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<sup>261</sup> Pierre De Rohan, Sales Report, undated, Box 12 Series 29, Subgroup 839, Record group 69, NACP, College Park, MD.

<sup>262</sup> CPI Inflation Calculator, <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=64391&year1=193610&year2=201708>, accessed September, 30, 2017.

<sup>263</sup> Collected memos, Box 10, Folder 1, Hallie Flanagan Papers, \*T-Mss 1964-002, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

<sup>264</sup> "WPA Theatre Head Scoffs at Charges," *New York Times*, June 12, 1939.

(1936), *The Revolt of the Beavers* (1937), and *Triple-A Plowed Under* (1936) were singled out as examples of dangerous theatre. *Revolt of the Beavers* stands out because it, unlike the most of the contentious plays, was a children's play. Instead of denying these claims, Flanagan challenged the Committee's definition of *dangerous*:

[I]t seems to me that we could be on a very dangerous ground if we denominated and denounced as subversive any play in which any character opposing our own political faith appeared... You might as well say the *March of Time*, since it quotes from Stalin is communistic, or because it quotes from Hitler is Fascist. I do not think that is a tenable position.

Throughout her testimony, Flanagan defended the FTP productions regardless of their content or message.<sup>265</sup> For her, the alternative (censorship of the FTP) was the greater danger to the American way of life. Flanagan argued her agency existed by the will of the people and was a vital part of American democracy.<sup>266</sup> Its position as both a New Deal relief agency and public national theatre required the FTP to create jobs and to reflect the triumphs and tribulations of the American populous—all on the government's dime. Her defense of the FTP did not protect it from political influence or attacks.<sup>267</sup> Like many of Roosevelt's New Deal programs, the FTP was a target for the Executive's critics.<sup>268</sup> To some it represented a radical movement within the country which aimed to remake the very definition of America; in a way, they weren't wrong. Under Hallie Flanagan's leadership, the FTP was dedicated to putting the hardships of Americans most affected by the Great Depression on the literal national stage.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> U.S. Congress Dies Committee, Testimony of Hallie Flanagan, *Investigation of un-American propaganda activities in the United States: Hearings before a Special Committee on Un-American Activities*, 75<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1938), 2866, <https://archive.org/details/investigationofu193804unit>, accessed June 5, 2016.

<sup>266</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 372.

<sup>267</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 335.

<sup>268</sup> Roosevelt's New Deal was both a political practice and theory. In practice, it was a set of policies and interventions aimed at ending the Great Depression. As a political theory, it advocated for the need for public accountability of the private economic sector. For more on the New Deal as political theory.

<sup>269</sup> The causes of the Great Depression, how it affected the lives of Americans, and the Roosevelt Administration's has been exhaustively recounted in numerous monographs – too many to recount here. For a concise and often cited

Five months after the Federal Theatre Project was shut down by Congress, Hallie Flanagan addressed the National Theatre Conference. The topic: her hope for the possibility of resurrecting the FTP, as well as some lessons she had learned as the FTP National Director. Among those lessons was how to handle “dangerous” subjects on the national, publicly funded stage. She stated: “Of course, it is dangerous today to talk about social and economic forces: to do plays which advocate a better life for more people is, in certain quarters, considered subversive. Well, if that be treason, make the most of it.”<sup>270</sup>

The Federal Theatre Project was officially defunded in 1939. *It Can't Happen Here* was not successful in preventing the charges of anti-Americanism. However, the play itself continues to be a part of Federal Theatre discourse. It proved the FTP was capable of producing national productions tackling political and social issues. Even in its missteps, like the Tampa production, the play opens new avenues to trouble the FTP's approach to minority communities. When seen as a case study for the FTP's artistic sensibilities, the play stands out as an early example of how the FTP would navigate the precarity of the political climate of the 1930s. With *It Can't Happen Here*, the FTP became politically non-political. It demonstrated a method of producing plays with a political agenda, while maintaining a public position of neutrality. Logistically, the play revealed the agency's methods of maintaining artistic standards across all of its regional units. Despite the artistic shortcomings of the play, the place it holds in the history of the FTP is significant. Were the play cancelled, it would have been another cautionary tale about the FTP's failure to produce socially relevant work.

## Summary

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history of this period, see William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

<sup>270</sup> Hallie Flanagan, “Theatre Intermission.”

When *It Can't Happen Here* opened, it did so under unusual circumstances. By producing the play in eighteen different cities simultaneously, the FTP demonstrated its ability to act as a national theatre. While the play received a tepid critical reception, the audience came out in droves to see it. The FTP was conscious of its place within its own narrative, and used their internal reporting to highlight the positive audience responses. The success or failure of the show is measured against the critics, the audience, and the place it holds in American Theatre History.

## Conclusion

The Federal Theatre Project ended on June 30, 1936 by Act of Congress. All projects were shut down, and the physical materials such as costumes, lighting equipment, props, and sets were warehoused, unable to be utilized by private theatres. Hallie Flanagan wrote an impassioned eulogy for the FTP on August 30, 1939. In it she accused the Dies Committee of fearing the FTP because it (a) educated the everyday Americans about how their government works, (b) gave black and white actors equal consideration, and (c) epitomized the New Deal belief that people capable of doing work should be given work and be paid fairly.<sup>271</sup> These fears were embodied by the mass staging of *It Can't Happen Here*.

The project has forced me to question my idols. That heroic-martyr narrative first hooked me, but as I explored the physical archive I discovered a more interesting, and potent, line of inquiry into the FTP's operation and organization. I initially intended this project to track the regional variations in the many productions of *It Can't Happen Here* in order to uncover how the FTP tackled the national and federation aspects of its mission simultaneously. This changed during my visit to the National Archives in October of 2014 when I opened a declassified folder containing E.E. McCleish's promotional plan. I did not discover why the file had ever been classified to begin with, but its big red stamp caught my attention. Reading that one file completely changed my perception of the FTP and how I viewed its role in American theatre history. As I discussed in chapter three, the file contained explicit instructions to avoid utilizing the play's obvious anti-fascist message. McCleish's detailed process of strategic dissembling, of delaying the truth of *It Can't Happen Here*, was the first time I encountered any real evidence

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<sup>271</sup> Hallie Flanagan, "Congress Takes the Stage," *New York Times*, August 30, 1939.



the FTP demurred when it came to producing, and marketing, controversial productions. That moment in the archive allowed me to see the FTP as more than a martyr to a cause.

The popular narrative of the FTP, famously depicted in *Cradle Will Rock* (1999), has been one of a brave and embattled federal agency doing its best to produce theatre under an oppressive and hostile Congress. For years, I was enthralled by the story—that of the small lefty theatre organization out of its depth in the arena of American politics. It was a story that had long led me to imagine the FTP as this forthright, transparent, earnest arts agency. That story does not tell the whole picture. In my dissertation, I challenge the narrative to uncover the FTP’s deeper political purpose. The Federal Theatre’s leaders engaged in sophisticated, partisan propaganda for American democracy, and did so knowing they could be accused of the opposite. This isn’t so much a reversal of the FTP’s narrative as a new window into the agency’s realpolitik. My research into *It Can’t Happen Here* suggests the way that Federal Theatre’s history is taught, particularly in undergraduate Theatre History courses, needs to change. While the heroic-martyr myth is compelling, only presenting that narrative sells the FTP short. As this case study proves, the FTP leadership was aware of its precarious position, and actively worked to counter it by utilizing strategic disingenuity. The FTP’s political savvy deserves to be a part of its legacy, which is enhanced and strengthened because it shows the agency as active participants, rather than passive victims, in the changing culture of the 1930s.

I am finishing this project after another major shift in American politics. The aftermath of the 2016 presidential election has been both a blessing and curse for me. On the one hand, my personal politics and identity—a lefty-feminist theatre academic—has been shaken by both the results of the election and the policy initiatives put forth by the Trump Administration. On the other hand, the rise of Trumpism has been a bit of windfall for me as I looked for a new line of

inquiry into the FTP. There was a definite feeling of incredulity after the election was called. Trump's victory seemed unprecedented to many. For me, however, it felt as though I had conjured the election results myself out of my research of one play, which predicted this reality in which we find ourselves. They say those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it, and those who do study history are doomed to watch everyone else repeat it. In between the past battle over authoritarianism and current resistance movements against the forty-fifth President rests a play, one of many I'm sure, which I am trying to unpack. The play's importance to the mission of the Federal Theatre Project, as well as what it reveals about the way the FTP operated under hostile Congressional opposition, has been the focus of my work. I did not anticipate that it would become relevant again. When Trump descended his golden escalator on June 16, 2015, it marked the beginning of new relevance. The story of Doremus Jessup's journey from detached journalist, to revolutionary, to symbol of the undying spirit of the resistance is a lesson we can all learn from.

Those lessons are still being taught. In September 2016, the Berkeley Rep opened its season with *It Can't Happen Here*. Tony Taccone and Bennet Cohen's new adaptation of the script leans into the contemporary political climate more overtly than the 1936 version. Not being bound by the same threats as the FTP, the Taccone/Cohen script uses some of Lewis's more obvious references to fascism, Roosevelt, and the race-baiting policies of Windrip to drive an anti-fascist, and ultimately anti-Trump, message. I was consulted by the dramaturgical team in the months leading up the opening, and I provided them with some of the archive materials to help give context to the historical moment of the play. In addition to premiering this new adaptation, the Berkeley Rep also sponsored a nationwide staged reading of the play on the

eightieth anniversary of the original opening. Fifty organizations participated in resurrecting the spirit of the FTP.

My experience as both a progressive in 2017 and a researcher of the FTP during the 1930s is defined, I feel, by precarity. Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* has been the entry point of my examination of *It Can't Happen Here* as a mass-staging of both a definition of "American" and defiance against the critics of the FTP. By assembling en masse across the nation for this one performance project, the FTP embodied both its position as a public theatre and its commitment to democracy. The performances are my case study of the aims and methods of the FTP in a hostile political sphere and an uncertain public future. The FTP struggled to balance its dual roles as an entity of the federal government and as a potent artistic producer. As I look to its eventual defunding and death, it is not that far of a leap to see the connections to our own precarious positions, our assemblies as acts of performative resistance. From the Ghost Light projects to this dissertation, I engage in the same type of resistance against the forces which threaten my livability as an artist and a historian of performed philosophy.<sup>272</sup> When I take part in this written demonstration of resistance in the present, I feel myself connected, bodily, to performances eighty years gone.

In this project, I approached the FTP from the position of precarity. Judith Butler has applied precarity to the coming together of people to demonstrate against stark economic consequences against the people. I've taken her assertion about the right of bodies to come together against un-livability and applied it to the FTP's mass staging of *It Can't Happen Here*. My goal is to use this play as a case study on embodied action within the New Deal structure. As

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<sup>272</sup> On January 19, 2017, the eve of President Donald Trump's Inauguration, artists across the United States gathered to perform their commitment to the values of inclusion, participation, and compassion. Hundreds of theatres participated. I attended the Baton Rouge, LA Ghost Light demonstration at the Swine Palace Theatre on Louisiana State University campus. For more on this movement, see <https://theghostlightproject.com>.

Brian Stipelman argued, the New Deal was a course-correction for the United States against socialized scarcity. By using Butler's assertion that demonstrations against precarity are embodied demands for the same rights—shelters, food, a sense of future, institutional support—I argue the FTP was a mass demonstration against the precarity of American democracy. Stipelman argues the New Deal was more than a response to a temporary economic crisis, it instituted a new political ideology that allowed for collective individualism. From this standpoint, the FTP was more than a relief agency, more than an arts producer: it was the mechanism by which this new political ideology was enacted and embodied on the stage.

In chapter one, I introduced my focus: how precarity leads to new interpretations of institutions and how they behave, primarily in the case of the FTP and how it produced the mass staging of *It Can't Happen Here*. Precarity as a state of flux without security identified the interwar period of the 1930s in the United States. The lives of American citizens as they encountered the work force, the government, the press, the public sphere were precarious in that nothing, not even the definition of "American," could be secure. The nation existed in a state of emergency, one likened to a hostile invasion by FDR. Such an emergency could have been the impetus to creating an authoritarian rule. Even though that broad executive power might have been trusted in the hands of someone like FDR, the same power in a populist like Huey Long was enough to inspire Sinclair Lewis to write *It Can't Happen Here*.

The FTP was organized as a network of theatres stretching across the nation, each with its own governing body to decide its artistic direction. Within that structure there were units, such as the Living Newspaper Unit, which produced plays about timely social issues. The first planned Living Newspaper, *Ethiopia*, was cancelled by the WPA because it commented on international issues which the federal government deemed off-limits. The fallout from this cancellation lead to

accusations of censorship and the high-profile dismissal of Elmer Rice. In order to tread back into this arena, the FTP would have to closely monitor content and promotional strategy for any play dealing with political issues.

If we view the narrative of the FTP only as a doomed and bullied national theatre, we lose a major factor in its relevancy as a political entity. Likewise, if we accept the assertion that there was no opposition to *It Can't Happen Here* we lose the much more compelling story of driven and politically savvy public servants. The evidence of Flanagan, McCleish, and Farnsworth shaping a carefully controlled story reveals the FTP was adept at realpolitik and understood the play had the potential to be both a major boon to the FTP's reputation as a producer and a relevant voice in American issues. The fact that the FTP was restricted by shifting policies concerning how loud a voice they could offer to these issues necessitated the dissembling. The line between what was allowed and was forbidden was vaguely defined, despite the pages of promotional directives written by McCleish. Including these documents in the FTP discourse not only sheds light on the deep story of the FTP but also provides a more nuanced take of *It Can't Happen Here* beyond the already impressive national staging. From Flanagan's own writing there is a sense of excitement about the undertaking of such a massive project, but the internal documents also reveal a fear of how quickly things could go sideways, as they did with *Ethiopia*. That doomed production never saw the light of day, and the FTP could not afford another cancellation, especially a nationwide one.

As I've mentioned, my first introduction to the Federal Theatre Project was the Tim Robbins's film *Cradle Will Rock*. It was my entry point to the world of Hallie Flanagan and her grand national experiment. Since that time, my investigation of the FTP has deepened to move beyond the heroic-martyr narrative. I have just scratched the surface with this dissertation, and

discovered three new lines of inquiry I want to investigate further. The first is FTP cancellations: *Ethiopia* was not the only play the FTP cancelled. Craig's study of the Negro Units revealed that *Liberty Deferred* met with the same fate, though it came from the FTP itself, not the Roosevelt administration. I want to find other sites of "failed" performances and compare them to the consensus narrative. Second, I want to bring my study of *It Can't Happen Here* into 2017 to solidify some of my above observations about Trumpism and the anti-democratic forces to which the play was responding. Something is happening here, and Lewis's play may hold answer as to how I can respond.

The most promising question that I found, and still need to answer, is whether *It Can't Happen Here* was an exception to the way the FTP tackled precarity or if it was part of a greater plan. I want to expand the precarity lens and apply it to other FTP productions, primarily those plays and projects which do not typically fall under the term "political." The political plays are often the focus of the FTP scholarship, and each of them address precarity in one form or another. I suspect an investigation of those works would support my hypothesis that FTP was addressing precarity across all of its Living Newspapers. What I really want to uncover is if other scripted productions, like children's plays, mass pageants, and even the production concepts of classic works, underlined the precarity of the American way of life, and the precarity of the FTP. I believe this pattern exists. One of the first sites I want to investigate next is the mass pageant *American Sings* (1936), which I mentioned in chapter two. I want to investigate this pageant, and its promotional campaign, to see if "America" is depicted as an inevitability or as a fragile thing to be defended. I also want to investigate *The Lost Colony* (1937) because it depicts the literal un-livability of the first American colony. More archive work is needed to find other sites to

investigate using this lens, but I hope the work I began with *It Can't Happen Here* as a case study for precarity can be extended to provide an argument for a unified Federal Theatre Project theory.

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Macy's research interests include post-progressive era performance, nationalism, cultural studies, performance and medicine, docudrama, and Victorian performance of spiritualism. She has presented her research at the American Society for Theatre Research, the Mid-America Theatre Conference, and the Southeast Theatre Conference.