

ALL PLAY AND NO WORK: THE PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC AND THE COMIC  
PLAYS OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Given the massive unemployment of the era, the subject of work dominated the politics and culture of the Great Depression. In particular, most government programs of the New Deal sought to provide jobs or reinforce long-standing American views of working. These aims were reflected by the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), which was charged with providing jobs of unemployed theatre workers and uplifting the spirits of audiences. But the FTP also strove to challenge its audiences by staging overtly political theatre. In this context, many comic plays –which have long been ignored by scholars of the FTP – actually challenged work norms of the 1930s. Backstage comedies, which focus on the lives of theatre workers, show characters who argue for the stage – and by extension the FTP – to be more concerned with providing entertainment than making political statements. In hedonistic work comedies, the belief that work and pleasure could coexist for the middle class is disputed, while hedonistic work is promoted for laborers of the working class as a way to escape the rigors of work. In confidence artist plays, not only is swindling show to be a form of work, but also that conning could serve as a model for workers to escape the rigors of what Max Weber called the iron cage of capitalism.

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## **Introduction**

In *Freedom from Fear: the American People in Depression and War*, the historian David M. Kennedy offers perhaps the most succinct observation about American culture during the Great Depression. Describing Harry Hopkins' Civil Works Administration, one of the first relief agencies of Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, Kennedy argues that the prevailing principle of the program could be summarized in one word: "The operative word was work" (176). Indeed, Kennedy's statement can be applied to much of the politics, history, and culture of the 1930s. From roughly the time of the 1929 Stock Market Crash to the United States' entry into the Second World War, work themes touched nearly every aspect of American society. Culturally, American novelists and filmmakers portrayed unemployment and the search for work in many texts, ranging from novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* to films like *Gold Diggers of 1933*. Politically, conservatives, communists, and centrists promoted the importance of work, and much of what historians have labeled the New Deal focused on procuring employment for the millions of unemployed workers. In programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Roosevelt administration not only provided jobs for American workers, but also sought to restore the sense of self-worth in those workers by restoring their own work ethics.

Yet the intersection of work and government was not always clearly about the restoration of traditional work norms. In 1937 and 1938, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), a government agency charged with providing work to unemployed actors by producing plays across the country, staged the farce *Help Yourself*. One of the most popular plays performed by the Depression-era agency, the play centers on an

unemployed man named Chris Stringer who decides to work at the bank of one of his college friends. However, Stringer is not actually employed by the bank. Like a confidence man who adopts a false persona, Stringer performs the role of a banker, even writing up a false memo regarding a defunct brick factory project. By a coincidence, Stringer's memo leads to a meeting between his bank and a competing bank. While no one can remember the specifics of the proposal, Stringer convinces the trustees of the banks to move ahead with the project. In the play's conclusion, the bank president promotes Stringer to vice president of the bank—even though Stringer was never actually employed there in the first place. While the banking industry was not overly popular during the 1930s, the existence of *Help Yourself* presents a conundrum: why during a decade when the average yearly unemployment rate was 17 percent and when so much of the culture was fixated on work did the government stage a play featuring a con artist who pretends to work? (Kennedy 166).

This dissertation seeks to answer five major questions about the comic work plays produced by the FTP during the 1930s. First, why were plays like *Help Yourself*, *Ah, Wilderness!*, and *Mississippi Rainbow* so popular with audiences? Second, why during the Great Depression would the federal government produce comic plays that offer complicated portrayals of work? Third, given the New Deal's promotion of traditional work values, what does it mean that so many plays undermined traditional work norms? Finally, how did these plays fit into the goals of the FTP and how do they compare and contrast with other scholarly readings of the plays and the agency?

I argue in this dissertation that the work comedies were some of the most dynamic plays produced by the FTP. Given that the FTP promoted plays that challenged American

audiences and uplifted the spirits of displaced workers, the work comedies not only reinvigorated their audiences, but also challenged the work norms in Depression-era America. In the backstage comedies, the idea that theatrical labor was political in nature—a view espoused by the head of the FTP, Hallie Flanagan—is contradicted by the portrayals of theatrical work in commercially-minded plays like *Room Service* and *A Moral Entertainment*. Hedonistic work comedies show the problematic nature of pleasurable work for middle-class workers, but promote hedonistic work as a form of agency for the working classes. And in confidence artist plays like *Help Yourself*, swindling is presented as a form of work and as a way for laborers to escape the repressive elements of work at the height of the Depression. This project also explores texts that have been garnered little or no critical attention from scholars of the program. By examining these plays, this dissertation also seeks to expand the scholarship on the FTP and the larger critical history of the New Deal.

### **Historical Background**

In considering how the comic work plays of the FTP challenged the work norms of the 1930s, this dissertation illustrates how these plays intersect with three major historical constructs: the Protestant work ethic around the time of the Great Depression, the work of the New Deal, and the ideology of the FTP. In analyzing work during the Great Depression, this project primarily utilizes the efforts of labor historians like Daniel Rodgers and the sociologist Max Weber. In particular, this project examines the impact that the variations of the Protestant work ethic had on labor during the early to mid-twentieth century. Weber describes the Protestant work ethic as the belief that labor

systematically done through one's calling was a sign of divine grace (*Protestant Ethic* 108, 114). This ethos of hard-work, dedication to craft, and abstention from leisure became prevalent in the United States during the Industrial Revolution as factory workers and other laborers saw the Protestant work ethic as the pathway to economic independence. But by the beginning of the twentieth century, the Protestant ethic had evolved. As Weber detailed in 1905, work no longer carried any hallmarks of morality; instead, the calling and work were repressive to workers, containing them in the iron cage of capitalism. As Taylorism and Fordism influenced production norms, workers found themselves performing highly-specific yet semi-skilled tasks and burdened by higher production expectations from management. As Daniel Rodgers argues, many workers no longer felt as though their work could uplift either their social rank or their sense of community.

Alleviating the working conditions for workers became the goal for many reformers of the 1920s and 1930s, especially with the onset of the Great Depression. However, the majority of reformers around the time of the Depression preached a rededication to traditional norms of work. Social conservatives advocated for workers to work harder, while proponents of hedonistic work in the 1920s promoted the idea that one should find pleasure in one's labor rather than in leisure. In several respects, restoring the value of work was a guiding principle for the work-relief programs of what historians term the First and Second New Deals. Throughout his presidency, Franklin Roosevelt espoused rhetoric about work that drew upon traditional norms of labor and disavowed the relationship of his work programs to charity. In a 1935 message to Congress, Roosevelt voiced concern that relief would have a detrimental effect on the American

workforce as workers would be “sapped by the giving of cash.” Instead, relief work would restore the body and spirit of laborers. As he notes, “We must preserve not only the bodies of the unemployed from destitution but also their self-respect, their reliance and courage and determination” (Roosevelt “Annual Message to Congress”). This belief in the restorative power of work would be reflected in federal work relief projects like the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Civil Works Administration (CWA). These programs provided jobs to unemployed workers in various contexts and aimed to reinvigorate workers by having them do work that aided the greater good. In the Second New Deal in 1935, Roosevelt and his trusted assistant, Harry Hopkins, created a more specialized works program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). This program would cater work-relief to the skills of the unemployed from a variety of fields, including displaced workers in the arts and theatre.

Perhaps the most controversial program of the new WPA was the FTP. The FTP provided work to unemployed actors, directors, and other theater workers by staging free or low-cost plays across the country in a variety of genres and forms, such as Vaudeville, musicals, Shakespeare, children’s plays, and contemporary drama. To oversee the program, WPA head Harry Hopkins selected Hallie Flanagan, a professor of Theatre at Vassar who had extensive experience with modernist and political theatre. Flanagan also understood the many challenges her program was facing. In particular, the idea that the federal government would be funding a theatre program during the Depression was rather controversial. Many considered the agency a boondoggle, and theatre had never been considered work by many Americans. While all the arts projects of the WPA garnered

criticism from congressional opponents and a hostile press, the FTP seems to have drawn the most vocal criticism from those who viewed theatre as the antithesis of work.

In order to convince the American people that her program was worth their expenditure, Flanagan promoted the FTP as an agency that would give theatre to the people and revolutionize the art form. Throughout her tenure, Flanagan promoted her vision that the agency should not just entertain audiences, but also create theatrical communities in which actors and directors could “identify enemies,” challenge their audiences, and “stimulate others to celebrate culture and analyze its failings” (Fraden 3). And many of the agency’s most celebrated productions reflected these ideals. In places like New York, Los Angeles, and Seattle, audiences saw Living Newspaper plays which, through a combination of non-naturalistic acting and mixed-media sets, promoted social action. In Harlem, Orson Welles staged his famous “Voodoo” *Macbeth* which featured an all African American cast. And, on October 27, 1936 at theaters across the nation, the FTP staged an adaptation of Sinclair Lewis’ novel *It Can’t Happen Here* that drew national acclaim.

However, the agency also garnered a great deal of criticism for the leftist themes in its productions. As John Frick notes, “from practically its first day of operation, conservative critics challenged its collectivist approach to social issues, scrutinized its productions, and attempted to exercise social controls over its offerings” (230). Indeed, many conservative critics of the FTP, such as Texas senator Martin Dies, chairperson of the House Un-American Activities Commission (HUAC), charged that the FTP was nothing more than a communistic organization and “one more link in the vast and unparalleled New Deal propaganda machine” (qtd. in Quinn 245). Just four years after

the program was passed, the FTP was cut from the 1940 federal budget and the experiment in federally-subsidized theatre ended.

This study of the prevailing perspectives of work during the 1930s, the aims of the work programs of the New Deal, and the ideological positions of the FTP serves two primary purposes. First, illustrating these perspectives historicizes work during the New Deal era. Second, detailing work in its various forms during the 1930s and the politics of the FTP provides a template to interpret the work comedies of the FTP. With a few exceptions, these plays counter the dominant views of work of the era, including the theatrical work promoted by Flanagan. In asserting such perspectives, this project in turn counters much of the prevailing scholarship on the FTP.

## **Rationale**

In examining comic plays, this dissertation positions itself in opposition to much FTP scholarship, which focuses on the overtly political and modernist productions of the agency. In the decades since its demise, many academic studies of the FTP have centered on its radical, leftist productions. For example, in her analysis of the FTP in comparison to national theatres in Europe, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America*, Loren Kruger argues that the FTP went further than similar programs in England and France in “articulating a popular theatre that might be ‘national’ in scope and ‘democratic in attitude’” (184). For her, the productions that exemplified this “national” theatre were “canonical” Living Newspaper plays like *Triple A Plowed Under*, *One Third a Nation*, and *Injunction Granted* (168). Similarly, in his treatment of the Seattle FTP Unit, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study*, Barry

Witham focuses on avant-garde and political plays produced by that unit, including Living Newspaper plays like *Power*, which promoted the Tennessee Valley Authority, and *Spirochete*, which was performed in coordination with Roosevelt's attempt to pass the Wagner National Health Act (114).

In the midst of this emphasis on the modernist and political theatre of the FTP, scholars have rarely discussed comic plays. This dismissal of comic plays can partially be traced back to the FTP itself. The agency never seemed overly concerned with promoting such plays and often gave little guidance to individual theaters over how to stage comic plays or what parameters theater managers should use in selecting comic plays to stage.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Flanagan seemed lukewarm to comic plays. While she never outright dismissed them as director, she often spoke of eliminating tired productions, such as older comedies, from her agency's repertoire. In addition, in her memoir of the FTP, *Arena*, Flanagan rarely mentions comedy save for the work of such playwrights as William Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw, and Eugene O'Neill. Scholarly treatments of the FTP, such as the works of Kruger and Witham, also tend to neglect the role of comic plays in the agency. Comedy is even deemphasized in scholarly texts that do not focus on the radical or high-modernist plays of the agency studied in other analyses. For instance, in her study of the Negro Units of the FTP, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre*, Rena Fraden examines lesser-known productions of that unit, such as the social-problem drama *Big White Fog* and the musical *Run, Little Chillun*. While Fraden does examine the Negro Unit's adaptation of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*—entitled the *Swing Mikado*—she generally discounts the role of comic plays, such as *Mississippi Rainbow* or *The Show-Off*. In addition, recent studies such as Elizabeth Osborne's *Staging the People:*

*Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project* and Leslie Elaine Frost's *Dreaming America: Popular Front Ideals and Aesthetics in Children's Plays of the Federal Theatre Project* have contributed to FTP scholarship by examining how under-analyzed plays fit into the agency's complicated history, but on the whole, comic plays are deemphasized in these works.

While comic plays have generally been ignored by scholars, there is an even greater dearth of analysis on the comic work plays analyzed in this project. While Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!* has garnered critical attention, the other comic work plays only appear sporadically in scholarly treatments of the FTP. For example, *Help Yourself* is dismissed as "a very mild comedy" by Malcolm Goldstein in his *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression* (268) while Witham mentions the audience reports of the Seattle Unit's *Help Yourself* as a way to gauge the socio-economic make-up of that theater's audience (4). A significant reason why these plays have received such little attention from scholars is that, with a few exceptions, these playwrights and plays are relatively unknown to contemporary readers.<sup>2</sup> In addition, most of the plays examined in this dissertation represent models of comedy and theatre that some viewed as out-of-date or too-commercial in the 1930s. As Michael North says, comedy in the 1930s existed between "Old Humor" and "New Humor." Old Humor grew out of the Victorian era and "emphasized the necessity of...formal balance and...a strong sense of realism" (6). In many respects, much of commercial theatre's comedy reflected this more realistic, organic narrative style. However, by the 1920s and 1930s, New Humor threatened both genteel critics and proponents of Old Humor. A combination of mass-market publications, ethnic humor, and Vaudeville, New Humor emphasized the

gag and the incongruous moment over realism. Proponents of New Humor favored “nonsensical routines” that amused “because of their inconsequence” and “bits of shtick” (North 9). This anachronistic comic style, seen in the work of such troupes as the Marx Brothers and the Three Stooges, has drawn the attention of writers such as Henry Jenkins and North, while older forms of comedy, such as the plays examined in this project, have received much less attention from scholars.

While much of this project counters the scholarly tradition of the FTP, this dissertation does align with other aspects of FTP scholarship. For instance, in Chapter One, I detail how the organizational structure of the agency often complicated its mission. As scholars like Jane De Hart Matthews and Loren Kruger detail, local FTP theaters often staged productions that contradicted the aims of the agency at large. Similarly, regional directors often rejected the wishes of Flanagan and other leaders in Washington. By extension, this project draws heavily from the work of scholars like Rena Fraden, who notes in her analysis of the Negro Unit that many productions in Chicago and New York like the *Swing Mikado* or the “Voodoo” *Macbeth* presented themes that complicated both WPA hiring practices and American views of race. Additionally, this project also follows the lead of scholars such as Barry Witham and Elizabeth Osborne who illustrate how the themes of many FTP plays actually coincided with the politics of figures like Roosevelt or Hopkins or the goals of many New Deal programs like the Tennessee Valley Authority or the FTP itself.

In addition, this project builds on the work of several cultural historians who evaluate how the programs of the First and Second New Deals altered the social contract between not only government and American citizens, but also between relief programs

and artists. As Michael Szalay argues in *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State*, the establishment of New Deal programs like Social Security provided citizens with security that had not existed before. As he argues in his analysis of the various work programs of the WPA, especially the Federal Writers Project, writers sought protection from the rigors of the marketplace by working collectively and anonymously in producing texts like the *Guidebooks* series.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, many cultural historians have questioned the effectiveness of New Deal legislation in aiding women and African Americans. For example, Alan Brinkley shows how programs like the Agricultural Adjustment Association failed to alleviate the struggles of African-American farmers in the South (64). At the same time, Lauren Rebecca Skarloff argues that while the New Deal was fundamentally flawed and unable to correct the social conditions for many workers, programs like the FTP and WPA provided some level of economic and artistic security for African Americans as they were allowed to produce plays that promoted black causes and undermined or subtly showed how inequitable other federal programs were.

### **Methodology**

Given that there is so little scholarly analysis of FTP work comedies, one of the major obstacles to developing this project was finding plays to analyze and organizing those texts into genres. To this end, I am indebted to the editors of George Mason University's *Federal Theatre Project: A Catalog-Calendar of Productions*, which details the production dates of every play staged by the FTP during its four-year history. However, this resource does not note the genre of the majority of plays, which

necessitated a great deal of cross-checking play titles with resources like *The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*. In order to answer some of the larger social and cultural implications of the performances of these work comedies, I focus on those productions that were most frequently produced by the agency. While I do analyze specific productions of certain plays, such as the Yiddish Unit's staging of *The Show-Off*, for the most part, the analysis in this project considers the implications of the production of these plays on a national scale. I also classified and named the three genres of plays examined in this dissertation through this research.

Given my training in literary studies, my general approach to analyzing these plays is through a literary lens, as I focus on the content of their scripts to construct new readings of these works. In addition, I also connect these plays to the larger social and cultural issues of work, the New Deal, and the FTP. I also draw parallels between the content of these plays and larger literary trends in the United States during the Great Depression, such as the modernist fiction of authors like Nathanael West and the writings of figures like Kenneth Burke. Additionally, I also link certain plays to historical and cultural development. For example, I connect a play like *Mississippi Rainbow* to the growth of speculation as detailed by Jackson Lears in *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*. In addition, the various con artist plays examined in Chapter Four are related to the archetypal con man character from the nineteenth century. While I follow the approaches of several scholars as a framework to analyzing the comic work plays, I particularly use Sean McCann's *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of the New Deal* as a model for evaluating literary texts through a historicist

lens, and as a way of incorporating larger social, political, and cultural trends into my readings of these plays.

In addition to engaging in literary analysis, this project also attempts to evaluate the reception of the work comedies through press and audience reviews. However, one of the problems I encountered in researching the reception of the plays is the relatively limited press coverage. Unlike high-profile plays like Orson Welles' "Voodoo" *Macbeth* or *It Can't Happen Here*, the comic plays of the FTP generally garnered comparatively little attention from the press. In many reviews, especially for those plays performed in New York City, there were only brief mentions in outlets like *The New York Times* and *The New York Daily News*. Other reviews, such as those for Los Angeles productions of *To the Ladies*, mainly focus on the attractiveness of the actors. There are likely three major reasons for this general dearth of press reviews. First, several plays were staged not long after their Broadway premieres, such as *Accent on Youth*, or 1930s revivals, such as *The Show-Off*. Second, most of the plays examined in this project competed for press coverage with film adaptations during the decade. In particular, *The Torchbearers*, *Room Service*, and *Ah, Wilderness!* were overshadowed by film versions that starred, respectively, Will Rodgers, the Marx Brothers, and Lionel Barrymore. Third, most of the plays lacked outwardly political elements that would have attracted press attention. While *Help Yourself*, *A Moral Entertainment*, and *O Say Can You Sing* all had political content, the plays did not have the same overt political themes seen in plays like *One Third of a Nation* or *Waiting for Lefty*. Generally speaking, the media coverage of the FTP (as well as of the New Deal on the whole) was highly critical, especially when that coverage examined the radical plays staged in New York or Chicago by the agency.

Given that many newspapers were eager to condemn the FTP, the fact that there is so little press coverage of these plays suggests that editors did not treat comic plays as seriously as overtly political drama.

While the availability of press reports about work comedies is inconsistent, I do utilize individual play reports in this project. Located in the Federal Theatre Project Archive at the Library of Congress, these play reports were submitted to the Play Policy Board (PPB) of the FTP at the conclusion of an individual production's run. Generally, each play report consists of press clippings from local newspaper reviews, copies of playbills, triplicate carbon copies of the play script (often with directorial changes to lines or staging notes), photographs of the production, reports of audience surveys, and reviews and notes from the director of the play. Despite these general parameters, the content of the play reports varies widely, especially in terms of audience reports. For instance a report from the Des Moines, Iowa production of *Ah, Wilderness!* includes dozens of audience reports, while the file for the production of *Help Yourself* in Omaha, Nebraska simply states that the audience reaction was "very favorable" (Omaha *Help Yourself*). While it is prudent to be skeptical of the accuracy of many reports, as it is plausible that many directors would include only the best reviews of their work, there are a surprising number of negative surveys and reviews in several play reports.

### **Overview of Chapters**

The first chapter of this dissertation, "The Politics of Work, Relief, and the FTP," examines the work ethic in the first half of the twentieth century. Focusing on Max Weber's analysis of the of the work calling in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of*

*Capitalism*, this chapter shows not only how pervasive the Protestant work ethic was in the first decades of the 1900s, but also how the call to work became repressive for many laborers. In many of his subsequent writings, Weber considered how to free workers from “the iron cage of capitalism,” positing that small communities of workers and bureaucrats would be able to counter the increasing power of the modern capitalist state. For New Deal administrators, the solution to the problem of work was the restoration of the moral component of the work ethic. For many New Dealers, including Franklin Roosevelt, this meant emphasizing the connections between work and relief. For other New Dealers, such as Hopkins and Flanagan, the New Deal was an opportunity to revolutionize the relationship between workers and their work and government. In several respects, Flanagan sought to construct the FTP as a model of Weberian values by decentralizing power from the agency’s central office to regional theaters. Flanagan also promoted a revolutionary vision for her agency as the FTP would produce plays that would challenge the status quo of theatre and American society. However, despite her attempts to decentralize her agency, Flanagan soon realized that a hands-off approach to running a national organization was creating a host of problems, including regional directors who defied her authority and plays that did not adhere to her vision for the agency.

Chapter Two of this project, entitled “Backstage Comedies: The Labor of the Stage, and the Reforming of the FTP,” examines the internal battle in the FTP over the definition of theatrical work. For FTP director Flanagan, the meaning of theatrical work was based on her experiences with amateur, collegiate, and avant-garde theatres—which I collectively refer to as non-commercial theatre—during the 1920s and 1930s. While each of those communities promoted a slightly different vision of theatre work, they

shared a belief that ideal theatrical labor should be aware of social issues and advance leftist political priorities. In contrast, for workers trained in professional theatre, the purpose of theatrical work was to please their audience. For many of these workers, the FTP should reject non-commercial theatre and embrace the tenets of commercial theatre. By rejecting commercial theatre, the FTP was endangering its long-term feasibility by emphasizing plays that presented radical solutions to social problems rather than reinforcing traditional American work norms. The embrace of commercial theatre is seen in plays like Samuel Raphaelson's *Accent on Youth* in which a playwright embraces security through his commercial work and John Murray and Alan Boretz's *Room Service* in which a theatrical manager tailors his play to the demands of his backers. Other plays downplay the role of politics in the FTP. The musical revue *O Say Can You Sing* rejects the FTP's interest in Marxism and reminds audiences that work-relief is only temporary. In addition, Richard Maibaum's satirical play *A Moral Entertainment*, rejects overtly political theatre and also reminds audiences that one of the purposes of the FTP was the job security of its actors.

Chapter Three, entitled "Hedonistic Work Comedies," focuses on plays that examine whether or not work and pleasure could be combined. During the 1920s, many work reformers and intellectuals promoted a merging of pleasure and labor for workers of the middle class who were alienated from their work. However, by the onset of the Depression, hedonistic work was viewed as a luxury by many workers. In a play like Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!*, pleasurable work is negatively portrayed as a threat to the stability of middle-class life. The dangers of too much pleasure in work are also seen in Marc Connelly and George Kaufman's *To the Ladies*, in which a young husband

ismore content with consuming products than with actually working. Instead, it is his wife who finds pleasure in work and undermines the male authority of work culture. Other hedonistic work plays show characters gaining agency through their embrace of new work ethics. For instance in the performances of George Kelly's *The Show-Off* by the Yiddish Unit of the FTP, a braggart character is able to secure financial security for his family not through work, but through chance. In John Brownell's *Mississippi Rainbow*, an African American character who is presented as an idler actually secures the financial security of his family by out-thinking the white owner of a riverboat company in a daring speculation.

Chapter Four, "Confidence Artist Plays: The Work of the Con," considers some of the most popular plays performed by the FTP and their relationship to the goals of Flanagan's agency. By the post-World War I era, the confidence artist—a figure often celebrated in the literature of the nineteenth century—had been transformed into a stock figure that was hardly heroic. Yet by frequently staging plays that featured confidence artists, the FTP actively sought to restore the character to its more heroic status from the nineteenth century. In addition, the confidence artist plays also illustrate how the lines between supposedly reputable capitalism and disreputable swindling are hardly stable. Moreover, these plays show how many Americans tolerated swindling, and how conning could provide some agency for workers who felt overwhelmed by the capitalist superstructure. In *Room Service*, Gordon Miller becomes a heroic figure when he swindles a hotel manager in order to protect his acting troupe. Similarly, in John Brownell's *The Nut Farm*, an aspiring director is forced to out-swindle a nefarious Hollywood producer in order to save his family. In Lynn Root and Harry Clork's *The Milky Way*, audiences

embrace a scrawny milkman who participates in a series of staged boxing matches and is promoted as the middleweight champion of the world. By actively engaging in the extended con, audiences are swindling the system that has long swindled them. Finally, Paul Vulpius' play *Help Yourself*, which features Chris Stringer pretending to work in a bank, satirizes the banking industry and illustrates how performance was becoming increasingly relevant in various industries. By showing a character who is able to convince workers that he is a real employee, the play provides a way for workers to alleviate the rigors of work: simply pretend to work hard.

The title of this dissertation is not just a pun of the proverb "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." The title certainly contradicts the long-standing view of many Americans that theatre was devoid of work, but also alludes to the complicated relationship between work and play. While many have drawn a sharp distinction between the two ideas, in actuality, the lines between work and play are far from clear. As this dissertation argues, even during a time when work dominated the cultural landscape, play in all forms manifested itself in work and as work. For the actors who staged backstage comedies, their work was providing entertainment to audiences, overtly challenging the idea that there was no work on the stage. Similarly, the idea that workers of all backgrounds—not just from the middle class—could find pleasure in one's work can be seen in several hedonistic work comedies. Additionally, the con artist characters demonstrate that playing, performing, and swindling all are far more important to the contemporary workplace than most proponents of traditional work would ever admit. Through their serious discussions of work, these comic plays challenged audiences in ways that were unmatched in the FTP.

## Notes Introduction

1. In my research conducted thus far in the archives of George Mason University and the Library of Congress, I have found only a few agency memos that relate directly to comedy, but far more documents that detail the agency's guidelines for staging Living Newspaper plays, regionally-themed performances, and the works of Shaw and O'Neill.

2. With the exception of figures like Eugene O'Neill, writer of *Ah, Wilderness!*, and Marc Connelly and George Kaufman, who co-wrote *To the Ladies*, the playwrights and plays examined in this project are largely unknown even to theatrical scholars. I was reminded of this during my participation in a roundtable on the FTP held at the 2013 Northeast Modern Language Association Conference in Boston. After presenting an overview of the work comedies, my colleagues participating in the roundtable confessed to having never heard of most of the playwrights and texts I mentioned in my presentation.

## **Chapter One: The Politics of Work, Relief, and the FTP**

According to her memoir *Arena*, Hallie Flanagan's first serious discussions about the FTP were on a train ride with her fellow Grinnell College alum Harry Hopkins, the soon-to-be head of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) (27-28). As they traversed the Midwest to campaign on behalf of Roosevelt's Second New Deal, Hopkins laid out his vision for the FTP, and eventually convinced Flanagan to take the reins of the program. The memory of one of these campaign stops in particular would resonate with Flanagan. As Hopkins told the assembled crowd at Iowa State University about the nature of the WPA, and specifically about the humanities programs of what would be termed Federal One, he heard vocal dissent from the assembled crowd as one of the farmers yelled, "Who's going to pay for all that?" As Flanagan recalls, Hopkins calmly responded to the objection by admitting that the taxpayers would be paying for it as the program would benefit all Americans:

He [Hopkins] looked out over the crowd. He took off his coat, unfastened his tie and took it off, rolled up his sleeves. The crowd got perfectly still. Then he said, 'You are'. His voice took on urgency. 'And who better? Who can better afford to pay for it? Look at this great university. Look at these fields, these forests and rivers. This is America, the richest country in the world. We can afford to pay for anything we want. And we want a decent life for all the people in this country. And we are going to pay for it. (Flanagan, *Arena* 28)

Hopkins' whistle-stop campaign was part of a concerted effort by the Roosevelt administration to persuade the American public that its work programs would restore the virtues of the Protestant work ethic. As this chapter argues, the work programs of the New Deal drew on not only German models of work-relief, but also on the perspectives of Max Weber, who hypothesized ways for individuals to combat modern life. The New Deal sought to reinvigorate work by temporarily providing relief for the unemployed. In turn, Hopkins and Flanagan believed that their agencies could restore Americans' faith in themselves and enrich the lives of Americans by bringing art to citizens. Flanagan also believed that the art of her agency should challenge the beliefs of audiences not only by embracing new theatrical styles, but also by promoting leftist visions of work and theatrical labor. As she and others sought to maintain this vision of her agency, the FTP ended up suppressing the very anti-bureaucratic Weberian perspective that it had intended to promote.

### **The Iron Cage, Rationalization, and Bureaucracy**

When Max Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1905, he sought to explain how market capitalism came to dominate Western societies and economies. Weber argues that the various doctrines of Protestantism—especially Calvinism—encouraged workers to seek their fortunes through their own enterprises. In turn, those workers began to look for signs in their work that signaled divine grace. In time, the calling of work would come to dominate nearly every facet of life in places like Germany and America. However, from Weber's perspective, the work ethic had come to repress individuality and spirituality. As he famously commented: "The Puritan wanted to work in calling; we are forced to do so" (*Protestant Ethic* 123). This exploration of work

and the relationship between the individual and the liberal state became the focus of much of Weber's intellectual labors. But such issues also concerned the planners of the New Deal. While Weber is not often associated with liberal reform or New Deal ideology like John Dewey or John Maynard Keynes, his desire to see individuals and society freed from the iron cage was adopted by many New Dealers.

While Calvinist doctrine was based on predestination, Weber notes that Calvinists often struggled with being locked into damnation or salvation and instead looked for earthly signs of divine grace. This was especially true for those gifts bestowed through one's adherence to the asceticism of work achieved through the labor of a calling (*Protestant Ethic* 115). The calling was the idea that one would find a career, apply oneself systematically in it, and reap the rewards of that labor (Weber, *Protestant Ethic* 108). The calling gave all aspects of one's "every-day worldly" life—including work—religious significance (Weber, *Protestant Ethic* 40). While they were skeptical about the pursuit of money, Puritans still accepted the ethos of capitalism as long as there was no "enjoyment" or the "irrational use of wealth." This view that work should not be enjoyable helped cement the idea that sport, leisure, and theatre were antithetical to work, a view that would remain influential for future generations (Weber, *Protestant Ethic* 115). But the Puritans also condemned dishonesty, impulsive avarice, and the accumulation of wealth for wealth's sake. However, if wealth was attained "as a fruit of labour in a calling" then it "was a sign of God's blessing" (Weber, *Protestant Ethic* 114). This desire for divine grace not only focused the energy of a Calvinist on himself or herself, but also did not permit for any empathy for the "sins of neighbors" (Weber,

*Protestant Ethic* 74-77). In this worldview, charity and laziness were conditions that society should condemn.

By the time that Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic*, however, the work ethic less often carried this spiritual overtone. The concept that hard work would equate success became, in Weber's mind, devoid of any ethical or spiritual connotation. The calling had become so entrenched in Western societies that many workers no longer questioned whether or not it held any moral value:

But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when, on the other hand, it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. (124)

For Weber, the compulsion to work without a spiritual calling was best illustrated in the United States. While Americans promoted many Puritan work ideals, American work was stripped of any semblance of religious or ethical meaning. In effect, work had become a "mundane" passion, with "the character of sport" (*Protestant Ethic* 124). Weber's critique of the American view of labor is echoed by Daniel Rodgers in his history of work ethic in the United States. Mid-nineteenth century artisans and small-scale farmers dreamt "of success" and the "faith in work as a creative act." These beliefs were spurred on by literature that "ingrained the idea" in laborers that "hard work, self-

control, and dogged persistence” would lead them up “the highroad to independence, wealth, and status” (Rodgers 10). But by the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century, the rise of industrialization and scientific management had helped create an alienated class of workers who had fewer connections to their work and who had fewer opportunities for social advancement from their work.

Weber’s decriing of the demise of the work ethic was an outgrowth of his larger criticism of the modern nation state. In many of his writings, Weber condemned rationalization—the elimination of traditional values and emotions—in education, bureaucracy, and government as antithetical to both democratic ideals and the classical liberal individual. Writing in *Economy and Society*, Weber critiques the rise of professional bureaucracy in both business and government as nothing more than a new model of status in modern society, more akin to the system of titles in old Europe than to any democratic paradigm (*Economy and Society* 242). Despite the democratic pronouncements of office holders, such “cultivated men” of rational society actively sought to exclude the public from their ranks, thereby securing their positions in the social structure. Weber was even more concerned by the influence of the social sciences in government, especially the usage of empirical analysis. In his mind, the examination of issues “by the numbers” could compromise the ethical and moral force of government. A government therefore could inflict laws upon its populace without adhering to due process. For Weber, government officials had no real stake in enacting change since their primary motivation for action was the maintenance of the status quo. In the age of rationalization, any attempt to challenge the status quo could be downplayed as irrational by the cultivated men of the ruling bureaucracy.

Weber's concerns over work and modern bureaucracy extended to his ruminations on the welfare state. This is not to say that Weber was against some federalized intervention in society or the economy. Writing on the conflict between a pure market economy and a centrally directed economic model, Weber acknowledged the necessity of some form of a welfare system to provide assistance for workers struggling to sell their labor on the open market. While he seems to have preferred the competitive marketplace, Weber did not believe that any market economy would survive if it did not provide a degree of social welfare that allowed the working classes political and economic agency. But Weber did express, as J. Wolfgang Mommsen notes, a concern that institutional welfare systems might undermine personal responsibility and unduly influence both labor and capital (Mommsen 118-19). In a frequently repeated quote, Weber forecasts the dominance of modernity's iron cage:

In America, "benevolent feudalism," in Germany's so-called "welfare institutions," in the Russian factory constitution—everywhere the iron cage of future serfdom is ready. We just have to wait until the slowing down of technological and economic 'progress' and the triumph of "rents" over "profits," associated with the exhaustion of remaining 'free' soil and remaining "free" markets, finally makes the masses ready to accommodate themselves in it. (qtd. in Mommsen 119)

While Weber maintained, as James Kloppenberg notes, a generally "gloomy" view of modernity, Weber did theorize several ways in which society could escape the iron cage (408). Weber suggests that "entirely new prophets will arise" and "there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals" ("Politics as Vocation" 89). In part, Weber

forecast that a model leader could eliminate or ease the iron cage's repression of workers. In "Politics as Vocation," Weber hypothesized a leader who, with "passion and perspective," could help society:

Certainly all historical experience confirms the truth—that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible. But to do that a man must be a leader, and not only a leader but a hero as well, in a very sober sense of the word...Only he has the calling for politics who is sure that he shall not crumble when the world from his point of view is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer. Only he who in the face of all of this can say 'In spite of all!' has the calling for politics. (85)

In Weber's description of the ideal political leader, he emphasizes someone who will willingly stand up to the ineffectual solutions proposed by the citizenry. For Weber, these attributes are only found in those who have a calling for politics. For him, these were leaders who would provide strong leadership and who would approach their jobs in a moral fashion. Such leaders, Weber argues, could help alleviate the struggles of alienated workers in society.

Weber also saw the anti-bureaucratic group as a model for how people could operate more freely in modern society. While he was critical of the American view of work, Weber also saw potential in the United States. In fact, America was a continual source of fascination to Weber throughout his life. As Lawrence Scaff notes, one of the few trips Weber took outside of Germany was a tour of the United States in 1904. His visit—especially Weber's observations of revivalist faith services in the Southwest and

Appalachia and his meeting with William James (the exact nature of their conversation is unknown)—strongly influenced elements of not only *The Protestant Ethic*, but also some of Weber's later works on bureaucracy. In particular, Weber believed that small groups of highly ethical and educated citizens (whom he termed *Berufsmensch*) could operate in opposition to the modern state (Kim 93). It was Weber's guarded hope, especially after the First World War, that these new citizen groups would spur a "competition and struggle among various voluntarily organized associations, economic interest groups, and political parties" that would culminate "in a national, democratically constituted parliament that would counterbalance administrative democracy" (Kim 169). His answer to what might free workers from the iron cage of modern capitalism, bureaucracy, and work was the construction of a society of small-scale, moral, ethical and pluralistic groups that would work against the dominance of both government and capitalism.

Historically, Weber's observations about work and bureaucracy have not been connected to discussions of the New Deal or neoprogressivism. However, many of the philosophers and social scientists that influenced the policies of the Roosevelt administration actually have more in common with Weber than many historians have observed. As James Kloppenberg summarizes, many liberal thinkers of the 1910s and 1920s promoted incremental social changes that were led by a combination of skilled technicians and educated bureaucrats. But they also advocated the importance of incorporating ethical overtones to their collected visions. According to Kloppenberg, "They understood that unless the reorientation of values they sought manifested itself in the reorganization of politics and the redistribution of power, change would remain a chimera. In that case, the preservation of freedom for some would mean only the more

effective subordination of others” (410). For these reformers, such as John Dewey, there was a legitimate fear over how the bureaucratic system would repress the rights of the individual. In contrast to Weber, many of these reformers still believed that the solution to the social and economic ills of the era lay with a functioning class of educated individuals. For New Deal planners, the central challenge of restoring American society was balancing the need to reinvigorate the individual’s faith in work with a bureaucratic system that did not repress the rights of the individual. To accomplish this, the New Deal would rely on charismatic leaders who would, in theory, implement parts of Weber’s philosophy.

### **The New Deal Work Ethic**

There are few commonalities between the various programs of what is loosely termed the New Deal. Some programs sought dramatic reforms of the economic landscape, such as the National Recovery Act (NRA), while other agencies, like the Public Works Administration (PWA), functioned, in essence, as a stimulus program for private enterprise. And for many commentators during the 1930s, the New Deal was hardly a radical series of programs. For instance, American communists saw the New Deal as nothing more than the Roosevelt administration maintaining the economic status quo. And as many historians and cultural theorists note, such critics were correct, especially in regard to the New Deal perspective on work. The programs enacted by the Roosevelt administration and Congress often promoted traditional work values that were familiar to adherents of the Protestant work ethic: zealous labor, dedication to craft, admonishment of laziness, and contempt for “the dole.”

Yet the rhetoric of work in the New Deal was not purely reactionary. Indeed, many of the work programs of the 1930s appear to have been influenced by progressive programs that were, in a Weberian sense, concerned with restoring workers' faith in capitalism. Working against long-standing American attitudes toward relief, Roosevelt promoted the idea that temporary work-relief could benefit the American worker. Additionally, other New Dealers saw the work of their programs as having more revolutionary benefits. WPA chief Harry Hopkins claimed that the programs of his agency, including those of Federal One, could uplift the spirits of all Americans. For both Roosevelt and Hopkins, government and bureaucracy could restore the spiritual values of work for workers during the Depression.

One of the challenges faced by New Deal planners was promoting work programs to the American people. Historically, Americans, influenced in part by Puritan and Protestant views of charity, have long had a problematic relationship with relief to the unemployed, viewing governmental aid as either "earned" or "unearned" and recipients of aid as "deserving" or "undeserving" (Wagner 49). The deserving poor were comprised of the sick, the widowed, and the weak, while the undeserving poor were comprised of women who bore children out of wedlock and any able-bodied men. In nineteenth-century workhouses and farms, there was little distinction between poverty and criminality. Many overseers subjected dole recipients to routine floggings as a means of building "proper" work habits in the workers (Wagner 49). Moreover, the only way for the "undeserving poor" to receive relief was through public and "clearly useless" work such as "digging ditches and filling them up again, or moving piles of stones from one side of a workyard to the other and back" (Rose 18). Such a provision for relief was

intentional, as many believed that such public demonstrations would discourage “anyone who could possibly work for wages from going on relief” (Rose 18). These views of relief as earned or unearned have become a hallmark of American social policy, ranging from the “earned” Civil War veterans pensions to the “unearned” welfare associated with the Child and Welfare Dependent Acts.

These American views of relief certainly influenced Franklin Roosevelt when he and other New Dealers began to develop their work programs. As Cass Sunstein notes, Roosevelt “despised the dole” (195). But Roosevelt’s rhetoric about relief parallels Weber’s call for the moral element to be restored to work. In addition, Roosevelt’s rhetoric also aligns with Weber’s view that relief could undermine the independence of a worker from the state. In laying out his plans for the New Deal, Roosevelt noted that he had “no intention or desire to force either upon the country or the unemployed themselves a system of relief which is repugnant to American ideals of self-reliance” (qtd. in Sunstein 195). He also declared that he “was not willing that the vitality of our people be further sapped by the giving of cash... We must preserve not only the bodies of the unemployed from destitution but also their self-respect, their reliance and courage and determination” (“Annual Message to Congress”). And throughout his presidency, Roosevelt was consistent about his anti-dole stance. In 1938, Roosevelt stressed that relief should be “given to every able-bodied person who was able to work” (“Excerpts from Press Conference”). The dole only provided the bare minimum to keep “body and soul together” (Roosevelt, “Excerpts from Press Conference”). By consistently including imagery of body, mind, and soul throughout his speeches on relief, Roosevelt connects

the concept of work relief with the spiritual overtones of Weber's description of the Protestant ethic.

The model of work relief adopted by the federal government during the Great Depression was, in part, modeled on the German Elberfield system of socialized aid. As George Steinmetz says, this system was "the cornerstone of an overall strategy of increased discipline of the poor, intended to force an orientation to the labor market and to combat welfare dependency" (160). Aid was not permanent, only a short-term reprieve. By stressing the temporary nature of this aid, proponents of this model believed that workers would develop a stronger sense of self-reliance and would be encouraged to seek employment. While the German system was not devoid of the moralizing that often plagues relief organizations, adherents of the Elberfield System sought to buoy the spirits of displaced workers. In some cities, the local relief boards even gave more generous support to out-of-work laborers (but not the destitute poor) believing that treating workers with respect would bolster their self-esteem and make them feel as if they were not receiving a hand-out (Steinmetz 159-60). But like the New Deal work programs, the Elberfield System's ultimate goal was to prepare its aid recipients to return to the free market labor system (McDonald 5). By borrowing many ideas from German relief models, as well as similar aid programs from American urban centers of the late-nineteenth century, New Deal work programs convinced many Americans that work relief was a viable solution to economic deprivation. These programs, as Edwin Amenta argues, demonstrated that work relief could function as social welfare without the stigma of the traditional Protestant and Anglican "dole" (74). While work had been a component in some capacity throughout the history of relief, the promotion of temporary relief and

relief that was only obtainable through work eased the concerns over relief for both the public at large and the unemployed.

Part of the challenge of restoring the value of work in New Deal America was providing work-relief that met the needs of a variety of workforces. The Roosevelt administration's first attempt of work relief was the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), a rebranding of the Emergency Relief Administration (ERA) created by Herbert Hoover in 1932. Headed by Hopkins, FERA distributed federal aid to individual state relief agencies just as the ERA had to states like New York, where then-Governor Franklin Roosevelt was incredibly proactive in setting up various works programs for the unemployed. FERA was increasingly concerned with not only eliminating direct-relief and replacing the dole with work relief programs, but also diversifying the type of work offered by the government. After studies commissioned by Hopkins revealed a high percentage of unemployed white-collar workers on relief-rolls, FERA began to promote education agencies, domestic projects, and other work programs for women and middle-class workers. But like the ERA, FERA could not control how states spent federal aid. In 1933, Roosevelt persuaded Congress to fund the more centralized Civil Works Administration (CWA). The CWA provided labor-intensive projects that did not utilize the useless "made work" of older work relief models. Instead, CWA work consisted of projects "falling somewhere between constructing sewage systems and the collection of garbage" (Amenta 75). By the time of the passage of what many historians have called the Second New Deal in 1935, Roosevelt and Hopkins understood the need for a form of work relief that was not simply about the "made work" of the CWA or the park projects of the Civilian Conservation Corps. Their new Works

Progress Administration would professionalize relief, “rigorously distinguishing between made work and work that fit the specialized capacities of each worker” (Szalay 61). As Michael Szalay notes, the WPA would ensure that a worker’s windfall would be connected to his or her training: “Whereas dole or programs of direct relief provided the worker with either a gratuity or undifferentiated work....the WPA...imagined that each worker’s unique skill was an extension of his or her ‘only true capital’ and that he or she could earn money only by tapping into that particular skill” (61).

The New Dealers’ emphasis on “true capital” alludes to the importance of professionalizing relief and also signals a connection to the work calling. Government programs would now provide workers with jobs in their professions, including those who felt their calling was in the professional arts. The notion that the arts would be part of relief programs was first experimented in the CWA, as bands and chamber ensembles performed free concerts, artists assisted teachers in public schools, and actors gave plays in public parks (McDonald 59). But these were amateur performances and after increased pressure from professional organizations, Hopkins oversaw the formation of what would be called Federal Project Number One (often shortened to Federal One). Federal One consisted of five programs: the Federal Writers Project (FWP), the Federal Art Project (FAP), the Historical Records Survey (HRS), the Federal Music Project (FMP), and the FTP.

While the American public generally came to support the efforts of the WPA, Federal One, especially the FTP, would dominate discussions of Hopkins’ program. The idea that relief money was given to workers in the arts was (and still is) controversial to many Americans. To combat the controversy around the work relief of Federal One,

Hopkins, along with Eleanor Roosevelt, began to actively campaign for the WPA and Federal One during 1936. In addition to touring the country speaking on behalf of the WPA, Hopkins also penned a treatise on the benefits of the Second New Deal entitled *Spending to Save: The True Story of Relief*. In that book, Hopkins stresses the importance of New Deal legislation and the idea that the work of the WPA could, in Weberian fashion, uplift the spirits of Americans from the rigors of the Depression. In the chapter dedicated to the WPA, Hopkins adamantly argues that people who demonstrate talent and skill have the right to earn a wage for their labor. And just as farmers or factory workers have the right to procure living wages, so do the skilled professionals of the arts and humanities. Hopkins argues that it was the labor of teachers, historians, artists, and performers that provide the “greatest contributions” to American society, even if those contributions are less tangible than the public works projects of other agencies (174). Hopkins also connects these workers’ dedication to their craft with the calling of the Protestant work ethic:

If it is more ironical for one person to be on relief than another it is seen in the fact that scientists, writers, musicians and all the rest of those persons, who by the virtue of gifts and discipline have arrived in that upper fraction of the people....should find themselves without recognition, livelihood, or any means to continue the benefits which only they can bestow. (174)

By emphasizing their virtues and gifts, Hopkins argues that these workers can transform American society. While manual laborers can produce creature comforts in a modern society, the artist can improve the quality of life of the American populace. Art can envelop the senses and offer beauty to the people and writers can assist the government in

creating educated men and women or, as Hopkins terms them, “thousands of new literates” (174). For Hopkins and many other New Dealers, the value of programs like those in Federal One lay in how the work of those on relief benefited the whole of society.

While Roosevelt often promoted the benefits of relief through work, Hopkins went further than Roosevelt by suggesting that the work of the WPA could initiate a new paradigm of labor. In his mind, the workers employed by the WPA in Federal One programs would not only create more literate and well-rounded citizens, but also assist in an “upward movement of labor.” For Hopkins, this new movement would alleviate the suffering of workers in the iron cage by filling their lives with “something more than the competitive struggle for existence.” Hopkins concludes his chapter on the arts programs of the WPA by envisioning a new work paradigm:

If leisure, once the privilege only of the rich, is now to belong to everybody, one objective of any move to share the world’s wealth has already been accomplished. It would be curious if we found that the mastering and enjoyment of this leisure, which was forced upon us under such economic stress, would be the means of easing that same stress. Often in the past we have turned to blood-letting for unemployment. Besides famine and disease war has been our handiest depopulator. We have thought of less rather than more life as a way out of the conundrums which mechanical progress keeps always on the desk of government. We have tried colonial expansion in every direction but upward; sideward for

new land, downward by decimation. A mass impetus may prove to be more than an equivalent for war. (174)

Hopkins' vision of a new, more leisurely life reads like a combination of Marxist idealism and Revivalist moralizing, but contained within this passage is his argument for beneficial government. Leisure, which includes the products of the arts programs of the WPA, will free workers from the iron cage of modern society. But while Weber is skeptical about government's capacity to provide a solution to economic modernity, Hopkins argues that government could establish a new way to ease unemployment. Rather than rely on wars to "depopulate populations" and technology which controls workers, Hopkins argues that government programs like the WPA could not only provide jobs to Americans, but also could promote the idea that government's duty in economic calamity was not to wage war, but provide employment.

For New Dealers, the solutions to the Depression and, by extension, the repression of workers, were the federal attempts to restore Americans' faith in work. As Roosevelt often noted, the temporary work given to the unemployed during the 1930s was as much about restoring the self-worth of workers as it was about reinvigorating the economy. At the same time, figures like Hopkins believed that the ultimate benefit of specialized work programs would be a dramatic shift in the work experiences of all Americans. While Hopkins' belief in the more radical possibilities of New Deal programs was very likely not shared by Roosevelt, many of the heads of Federal One programs felt that their work could contribute to a great shift in the American experience. And perhaps no leader felt as strongly about the capacity of a program to accomplish Hopkins' aims than Hallie Flanagan.

## **The Work of the Federal Theatre Project**

In several respects, Hallie Flanagan was the ideal leader that Weber described in his writings. As histories of the FTP have long noted, Flanagan was a dynamic personality who fought against many in Washington who thought the FTP was wholly unnecessary. Famous for wearing opulent hats and a red-lined cape she bought while in traveling in the Soviet Union, Flanagan battled against rivals in other New Deal programs, like Harold Ickes of the Public Works Administration (PWA), as well as a skeptical public and a hostile Republican Party. Her testimony in front of Senator Martin Dies and his committee has become legendary to the point that nearly every history of the agency includes a detailed account of her defense of the program. Flanagan also believed wholeheartedly in the charge of her agency, as well as in the capabilities of the FTP and other programs of Federal One. Flanagan actively tried to share her art with the American people, and believed that the work of her agency could uplift the audiences who attended her productions. For her, the FTP would restore the stage to its democratic roots and cement the idea of a national theatre in the minds of Americans.

At first glance, one of her major obstacles to a successful federally-funded national theatre project was the longstanding view in the United States that theatre is devoid of work. This sentiment has its roots in a number of contexts, but mainly descends from Puritan views of theatre. As Jonas Barish shows, the Puritans saw the stage as symbolizing “a whole complex of attitudes anathema to the sober burgesses” of proper Londoners. For the Puritan, the stage “stood for pleasure, for idleness, for the rejection of hard work and thrift as the roads to salvation. Its siren song held prentices from work and

fickle parishioners from the church pew”(165). In the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber offers the same observations:

The theatre was obnoxious to the Puritans, and with the strict exclusion of the erotic and of nudity from the realm of toleration, a radical view of either literature or art could not exist. The conceptions of idle talk, of superfluities, and of vain ostentation, all designations of an irrational attitude without objective purpose, thus not ascetic, and especially not serving the glory of God, but of man, were always at hand to serve in deciding in favour of sober utility as against any artistic tendencies. This was especially true in the case of decoration of the person, for instance clothing. That powerful tendency toward uniformity of life, which today so immensely aids the capitalistic interest in the standardization of production, had its ideal foundations in the repudiation of all idolatry of the flesh. (*Protestant Ethic* 113-14)

The Puritan antitheatrical prejudice, in its various forms, still held sway over both Britain and the United States well into the nineteenth century. While there was (and still remains) skepticism in America about theatrical labor as a mode of work, by the onset of the Great Depression many Americans appear to have accepted, or at the least tolerated, theatre as a form of labor. This changing view of theatrical labor can be explained, in part, by how theatre functioned on a micro level as a representation of democratic participation. Around the time of the Civil War, the theatrical realm was a leisurely communal space where a motley collection of artisanal republicans and members of the middle and upper classes engaged in “directing actors on stage, demanding encores...or

booing people off stage” (Fraden 31). With the advent of touring companies and large commercial theaters in urban areas of the country and the rise of the motion picture industry in the 1910s, theatrical labor was increasingly seen by even conservative critics as an avenue in which actors could entertain and, at times, inspire the masses. As Robert Maland claims, one of the ways actors and film stars like Charlie Chaplin achieved cultural acceptance was by promoting their dedication to craft, as well as their aims to create more high-brow art. In a film like *The Tramp*, Maland argues that Chaplin was able to broaden his personal appeal to a variety of audiences and legitimize comic acting:

Charlie’s reticence and complete devotion once he falls in love project tenderness at the start of the relationship but prove heartrending when he realizes he must renounce his love. Although in later films Chaplin handles his romantic relationships and pathos more effectively, it is important to reiterate here that Chaplin’s romances increased his appeal to men who had been rejected in love because of inadequate wealth, prestige, or power; to women who admired his tender and nurturing spirit; and to viewers with genteel sensibilities for whom the romance helped to negate the ‘vulgarity’ that worried them. (23)

Additionally, the rise of community and college theatre programs in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries had altered the perception of theatre as the antithesis of work for many Americans. Considered part of the Little Theatre Movement, both community and college theatre promoted the idea that the stage could be benefit society-at-large. Many local theaters staged plays that upheld various tenets of Progressive Era genteel values, while college theatre programs helped train young

women actors for future non-theatrical professions. As Dorothy Chansky argues, the rise of higher education theatre programs helped convince Americans that women could earn a respectable living as educators with theatre training. While theatre studies students constituted a small percentage of the overall college population, Chansky asserts that there was a surge in the employment opportunities for unmarried women in high schools for teaching theatre courses. In the minds of many reformers of the era, trained professional women who could teach theatre would “persuade insiders and outsiders that theatre...could serve America’s needs”:

Just as women teachers in the nineteenth century had been valued as beacons of spirituality and morality whose main task was to produce citizens with a work ethic, those of the early twentieth century were supposed to impart the building blocks of citizenship within an industrialized world characterized by systematized schemas for nearly everything from the production of goods to ideas of personal hygiene.

(165)

This belief that the teaching of theatre, with its emphasis on acting, set-design, and cooperation, would help students adjust to a new work environment was part of a larger cultural movement that sought to manage the “practical” and the “creative” in education. By the mid1920s, this model of teaching theatre had helped to give theatre and other creative arts an increased cultural legitimacy.

While college theatre was changing the perspectives of Americans toward theatrical work, there was increasingly a conflict over how “taste” and tradition determined what specifically constituted theatrical work. After the Civil War, middle-

class and upper-class patrons began to flock to different modes of entertainment than their lower-class counterparts: “mannered” audiences went to see productions of opera or Shakespeare, while the working classes sought bawdier entertainment. Eventually, middle and upper-class audiences began to conceive of actors or dancers who performed high-cultural forms—such as Shakespeare and ballet—as serious professionals while those who acted in “lower” forms—such as some melodrama or politically motivated avant-garde performances—as amateurs. Additionally, for audiences of the upper and middle classes, if an actor was involved in commercial theatre, then his or her labor was more respectable. As Mark Franko argues in his analysis of the politics of the Federal Dance Project, the precision of a chorus line in a large scale Broadway show evoked the ideology of Taylorism; as such, conservative commentators were more accepting of such performances as labor because they represented a connection to certain social and cultural norms. Similarly, many commentators praised comic texts—like the sentimental work of Chaplin or many of the comic work plays examined in this project—that represented the values and ideological perspectives of the upper and middle class. In contrast, the more anachronistic New Comedy favored by immigrants was deemed unacceptable by many genteel patrons.

For Flanagan, one of the challenges of her job was how to mold her agency to meet the changing understanding of theatre in the United States. And for her, the FTP should produce work that reflected the progressive mentality of community and college theatre, and bring high art to the masses. As Flanagan would recount in *Arena*, which was written in 1940 after the demise of the agency, the democratic duty of her agency was to provide access to theatre for all Americans:

Was it not true, however, that for the worker in the theatre as well as for the painter, sculptor, or musician, connection with a much wider audience must be established? Was it not our function to extend the boundaries of theatre-going, to create a vigorous new audience, to make the theatre of value to more people? Over the past decade free concerts and free musical instruction in the schools, not to mention radio and recordings, had made it possible for everyone to hear music...But theatre instruction in schools was limited, and aside from a few community theatres throughout the country, there was no way in which people could go to the theatre. (43-44).

Flanagan wanted to give quality theatre to the masses, but perhaps more importantly she also wanted to eliminate the notion that one would have to pay for access to good art. As we will see, Flanagan strove to provide theatre that did not just serve upper-class patrons. Flanagan's belief in democratizing theatre contradicts Weber's observations on how bureaucracy normally functions. The cultivated bureaucrat, in this case Flanagan, is not guarding her knowledge but is instead offering it to the American populace.

While the FTP would provide theatre to audiences that had no access to quality productions, Flanagan also envisioned a new model of theatre. For her, the FTP should be "socially and politically, aware of the new frontier in America, a frontier not narrowly political or sectional, but universal, a frontier along which tremendous battles are being fought against ignorance, disease, unemployment, poverty and injustice" (*Arena* 372). She envisioned a national theatre that was both listening to the needs of the American people and remaking the work and art of the stage. In her mind, the work of the FTP was

not to satisfy the tastes of the “first ten rows” of theatre patrons on Broadway, but to engage new audiences across the country. This impulse grew from her initial conversations about the program with Hopkins. As Hopkins would advise Flanagan after she accepted the job: “It’s got to be run by a person who isn’t interested just in the commercial type of show. I know something about the plays you’ve been doing for ten years, plays about American life. This is an American job, not just a New York one” (Flanagan, *Arena* 20). Indeed, Hopkins’ dictate encouraged Flanagan to emphasize theatrical work that sought to both change the minds of audiences and to create a new relationship between audiences and the stage. For her, theatre must move away from the commercial and traditional. In an editorial for the journal *Theatre Monthly*, Flanagan attempted to summarize her beliefs about the need for theatre to modernize:

Architects today shatter facades and let the steel show, musicians shatter melody and experiment with dissonance, painters turn away from sentimentality...but the theatre still clings to melody, to the façade, to sentimentality...

We must see the relationship between the man at work on Boulder Dam and the Greek chorus, we must study Pavlov as well as Pavlowa...In short, the American theatre must wake up and grow up—wake up to an age of expanding social consciousness, and age in which men are whispering through space....We cannot be too proud to study our medium. (qtd. in Fraden 37)

Echoing Hopkins and Roosevelt’s belief that the work of the WPA could be as significant as public works projects like the Boulder Dam, Flanagan believed the FTP could strive to

change the lives of the “men...whispering through space.” Yet to do that required a new model of theatrical work. As Rena Fraden notes, Flanagan’s insistence on a new work ideal for theatre was based on the belief that the stage should connect to the lives of its audience and democratize the art. Flanagan also saw that the movies and radio had superseded the stage as the art of the people. In order to restore theatre to the cultural prominence it had during the nineteenth century, Flanagan believed that the FTP must uplift the spirits of its audience by providing them an experience “which they cannot get in any other form of entertainment; and give it at a price which they can afford to pay” (qtd. in Fraden 38).

The theatrical experience that Flanagan promoted, especially during the first two years of the FTP, was a type of experimental, non-commercial theatre that she had studied throughout her academic career. Indeed, it was her experience in the non-commercial theatre that helped convince Hopkins to hire her in the first place. After instructing theatre at Grinnell College, Flanagan was accepted to the 47 Workshop taught by George Pierce Baker at Harvard, after which she began to run Vassar’s theatre program. She later would win a Guggenheim Scholarship and use her winnings to travel across Europe to study the work of many directors and theaters, especially those in the Soviet Union “which combined artistic and social vision” that “would always shape her work” (Fraden 30). This impulse to combine the artistic and social coalesced into *Can You Hear Their Voices?*, a play written and produced by Flanagan and her former Vassar student Margaret Ellen Clifford. Their play was based on a short story by Whittaker Chambers that appeared in *New Masses*, the American Marxist magazine, in March of 1931. The play centers on a group of poor Arkansas farmers who are struggling with the

effects of the Dust Bowl. Frustrated by a lack of relief, the farmers attack a Red Cross station and demand supplies. While Flanagan and Clifford kept much of Chamber's story intact, they also added characters, scenes of an apathetic Washington, DC, and changed the ending. While Chambers' story called for a communist solution to the farmers' plight, Flanagan and Chambers ended the play with a Brechtian direct address to the audience: "Can you hear what the farmers are saying and what will you do about it?" (Bentley 121).

*Can You Hear Their Voices?* served as the template for the type of theatrical art that Flanagan believed would best represent her vision of the FTP: theatre that was overtly political and addressed the social issues of the Depression. And like many 1930s American novels and films, many FTP plays selected for production addressed the working conditions of laborers during the decade. One famous example of New Deal theatre embracing political art was the agency's performances of Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing*. Flanagan was especially fond of Living Newspaper plays, which were based on the avant-garde aesthetics of her own work on *Can You Hear Their Voices?* Living Newspaper plays employed limited scenery, non-naturalistic acting, and special effects. Actors would portray scenes from then-current events which were supported by images, music, and light. The scenes, or episodes, of the play would be drawn from newspaper stories, testimonials, and committee research and then formulated into a narrative by an editor (Witham 78). And many of these plays echoed themes and presented situations that were sympathetic toward leftist groups. The play *One Third of a Nation* showed vignettes of the living conditions of workers and immigrants in the tenements of New York City. The first Living Newspaper play, *Ethiopia*, outwardly condemned the invasion of that country by Italy and featured a less-than-flattering

portrayal of Mussolini (Quinn 68). And perhaps the most famous Living Newspaper play, *Triple-A Plowed Under*, portrayed stories about farmers and the agricultural industry, including declining grain prices, civil strife, and the poverty faced by tenant farmers. In addition, many Living Newspaper plays also only promoted New Deal programs. Many in the administration believed that the creative arts programs of the WPA, including the FTP, could not only employ workers who were not allowed equal employment in other WPA agencies—such as African Americans and women—but could also contradict the legitimate complaints of those groups by presenting “administration friendly” narratives. Despite the repeated objections of Flanagan to critics that the agency was not engaged in New Deal propaganda, many FTP plays promoted New Deal ideological positions. For instance, the play *Power*, which shows characters who argue for the public ownership of utilities and portrays how access to electricity is controlled by trusts and capitalists, was performed at the height of the debate over the Tennessee Valley Authority; as Barry Witham notes, “even a cursory reading of the play” is startling to “the degree to which the private sector is hounded and vilified” (80).

As Flanagan envisioned, the work of the FTP was centered on providing theatre to the American public that attempted to uplift the spirits of the audiences by “listening to the voices” of the oppressed. Yet while much of Flanagan’s perspective was influenced by changing American attitudes toward the stage, she perhaps erred in estimating the public’s taste for political theatre. Increasingly, the aesthetic and ideological goals of Flanagan and her colleagues in Washington, D.C. would become the focus of the national debate over the FTP. Moreover, as will be examined in the next section, this ideological

vision conflicted with Flanagan's bureaucratic vision for the governance of the agency and ultimately signaled the doom of the FTP.

### **The Rise and Fall of the FTP**

Despite Flanagan's larger-than-life persona, she was not able to save the program from being eliminated in the 1940 Federal budget. Part of the agency's failure can be attributed to a number of external factors, including cuts to the program during 1937 and Republican victories in the 1938 midterm elections that eliminated much of the program's congressional support. However, the overriding cause of the agency's downfall was the inability of Flanagan to reconcile the conflicting goals of the program. From a Weberian perspective, the FTP could not maintain its goals of being both a decentralized agency that stressed democratic involvement from regional theaters and a centralized bureaucratic program that promoted certain ideological and aesthetic perspectives.

Part of the FTP's problem with administration connects to a larger shift in the New Deal away from a more centralized power structure. Just as Weber was concerned about the role of bureaucracy, many American intellectuals worried about the impact the increasing size and power the federal government had on the people. As Sean McCann argues, the "commitment to planning and expertise demanded a high price in alienation and in the weakening of political association" (151). As such, many "New Deal policy makers, critics, and political theorists in the later thirties voiced hostility toward the centralized bureaucracy of federal programs and began to "search for ways to reinvigorate political participation and popular community" (McCann 151). One such theorist was John Dewey who during the New Deal era began to more consistently echo

Weber's hostility toward the corruption of monopoly capitalism and bureaucratic government. For Dewey, like Weber, liberalism was not suited to addressing the issues of twentieth-century capitalism, as "power rests finally in the hands of finance capital, no matter what claims are made for government of, by, and for all the people" ("The Challenge of Democracy to Education" 239). Moreover, he felt that "political democracy" created individuals who were "externally controlled and subjected to arbitrary power" from the family, church, business, and school (Dewey, "The Challenge of Democracy to Education" 219). To combat the intersection of finance capital and bureaucracy, Dewey proposed political and social reform in which every member of society would have "the chance and opportunity to contribute whatever he is capable of contributing" in a system where "the value of his contribution be decided by its place and function in the organized total of similar contributions" ("The Challenge of Democracy to Education" 220). Dewey's belief in such a system parallels Weber's own promotion of anti-bureaucratic groups in which people could contribute equally not only to preserve the individual, but also society in turn.

This anti-bureaucratic belief was actually echoed by the leaders of the programs that comprised Federal One, especially Flanagan. Initially, Flanagan promoted a decentralized vision of her agency that was based on the outline of the FTP given to her by Harry Hopkins. In their initial conversations, Hopkins stressed to Flanagan the notion of an uncensored theatre that also represented a democratic view of America; a program that would present diverse plays that represented all of America and functioned as a grassroots supported agency. To enact this vision, Flanagan and her fellow administrators broke the agency into a series of geographic units that would oversee everything from

play selection to employment.<sup>1</sup> It was the hope of Flanagan that such a decentralized approach to governance would give the agency a more democratic tone, but also encourage the production of plays that represented differing views and locales and would demonstrate, in a Weberian sense, uniqueness and diversity in the agency. For example, the New York City FTP would stage plays that were tailored toward that audience, while the Southern FTP would produce plays that represented the culture of the Deep South.

However, the agency's struggles with such an approach began at its inception. As William McDonald notes, the FTP was charged with three major purposes that, at times, contradicted one another and caused confusion among administrators and regional directors. On October 8, 1935, the recently appointed regional directors met with Flanagan and WPA staff in Washington, DC. In this meeting, Flanagan "proceeded to contrast the passing of individual patronage [commercial theatre] with the new emphasis upon the theater as an agency of democratic education," and then representatives from the Treasury and the WPA explained governmental procedure. At the end of these meetings, one regional director immediately resigned and "others were dissuaded with difficulty from following his example" (McDonald 526). What these regional managers saw, according to McDonald, was the promotion of a regional, democratic, and avant-garde theatre that required "something more than actors whose background was exclusively professional" (526-27). Indeed, when the directors listened to Flanagan, "they were persuaded to think in terms of a new art theatre"; when they read *Instructions* (a guidebook published by the agency outlining protocol) "they were persuaded that a permanent community theater was the aim"; and when they interacted with WPA

officials, regional directors “concluded that the sole purpose of the project was the employment of professional actors” (McDonald 509).

Second, there were many employees, especially actors trained on the New York and Chicago stages and theatre directors who had been successful in regional and stock theaters, who resisted Flanagan’s aesthetic vision. As Jane De Hart Matthews notes, the FTP was dominated by a “New Deal cultural elite” whose tastes favored experimental theatre and conflicted with not only the tastes of the audiences, but also the theatrical professionals performing the plays (329). While Flanagan and many of her colleagues advocated for the performance of experimental and avant-garde plays to liven up the dead horse of professional theatre, many of the very people Flanagan was to hire—theatrical professionals—were incredibly hesitant to engage in overly political theatre. Many actors were opposed to performing such plays and many theater managers did not want to stage such plays in the first place. This was especially true in cities where community and little theatre companies had succeeded by producing mainstream plays (Fraden 39-40).

Throughout the agency’s run, there remained a strong disconnect between the ideological vision of Flanagan and the commercial and professional goals of her employees. And it is difficult not to sympathize with the theatrical professionals on this point: it seemed more practical to produce plays that would ensure the financial and commercial viability of these theaters—and the agency on the whole—rather than engage in political art that could threaten the FTP. This conflict between professionally trained actors and Flanagan will be explored in more detail in Chapter Two, but in short, these differing views over the nature of theatrical work would create a host of problems for the agency.

Yet perhaps the biggest problem of the decentralized approach that Flanagan promoted was in the choice of plays performed by the FTP. Initially, the FTP maintained a looser control over which plays were produced by its regional theaters. In a memo from May, 1936 directed to individual theater managers, the agency noted that no play could be produced without “consulting and obtaining the approval of his State Director,” but there is no mention, aside from procuring the correct copyright information, of getting permission from the national office in order to stage a play (“Instructions for Play Rentals”). In addition, the FTP told its regional managers that a play should be selected for production for the “intrinsic value of the script,” the opportunity the play would give “actors, directors, and designers to do distinguished work,” the “entertainment value” of the play “to the community,” and the play’s “relationship to the general theatre programs or to the work of sponsoring educational or civic bodies” (“Instructions for Play Rentals” 3).

This democratic and decentralized approach to play selection created several significant problems. Many regional and local theatre directors took the ethos of “free, adult, and uncensored” theatre to heart and endangered the stability of the program by staging plays that did not attract local audiences. Poor play selection by local theaters seems to have been rampant in the Midwest outside of Chicago. Recounting the failure of the Milwaukee FTP, for instance, Flanagan notes that the Cream City had a plethora of talented actors who had trained at prestigious theaters like “the London Gate Theatre, the Moscow Art Company, [and] the Dublin Abbey” (*Arena* 158). Yet, the plays chosen by director Laura Sherry were “too special for the wide diversity of people our company, if it wished to succeed, must attract” (*Arena* 158-59). Plays like *The Mask and the Face*,

*Old Heidelberg*, and *Three-Cornered Moon* were not “appropriate to Milwaukee” and were “reminiscent of a Little Theatre season” (*Arena* 159). She offered a similar critique of the unit in Omaha. While the Nebraska Federal Theatre was cut after the agency’s overall budget was slashed in 1937, it garnered critical support from the press and a massive letter writing campaign from locals who were determined to save it. But even with the relative success of the unit, Flanagan bemoaned that such theatres were not challenging their audiences. In reference to Omaha and the excitement generated locally by the Nebraska Federal Theatre, Flanagan wrote that “we did no classics, no originals, and none of the ‘interpretations of the political and social trend of the times’” (*Arena* 178).

Additionally, the FTP suffered from the decision of local theaters, especially in New York, to stage overtly political plays. While Flanagan promoted political theatre throughout her tenure, the controversy over many political productions forced censorship of plays from either the federal government or state WPA officials. Two New York City FTP plays in particular stand out in this regard. The first Living Newspaper production of that agency, *Ethiopia*, centered on the Italian invasion of that African country and featured caricatures of political figures like Benito Mussolini. However, the play was only performed in dress rehearsal as the US State Department protested its production, fearing the repercussions of a government-produced play that openly mocked a foreign head of state. The suppression of the play, which became something of a rallying cry for anti-censorship advocates, almost forced Flanagan to tender her resignation. Instead, the head of the New York FTP, Elmer Rice, protested the play’s cancellation by resigning. The second production to be censored was John Houseman and Orson Welles’ production

of Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* in 1937. While the play was officially shut down due to a combination of union issues and cost, many felt (and many critics still assert) that the play was canceled due its strong pro-union message. Additionally, many local WPA administrators interfered with or restricted productions. Perhaps the most notorious instance of this was in California where Donald "Colonel" Connelly, the local WPA administrator, was found to be editing content out of a number of plays or closing productions that he felt were too controversial for his state. For instance, Connelly shut down a production of Odon von Horvath's critique of fascist Germany, *Judgment Day*, because he believed the play to be communist in nature.

In addition, many Living Newspaper plays exhibited skepticism toward the capacity of New Deal programs to adequately address the struggles of workers. *One Third of a Nation* concludes with the argument that New Deal legislation would help America in fighting its slums (Witham 107), yet the play mentions that the stripped down Wagner-Steagall Act will only provide limited resources for the poor. *Triple A Plowed Under* documents the struggles of the agricultural industry, but also openly critiques the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), especially that organization's treatment of African American sharecroppers and the high prices of meat and other goods as a result of the AAA's strategy of supply reduction. And while many other plays, including many of the Living Newspaper plays, represented a very Marxist perspective toward labor and working conditions, one of the agency's most famous productions—a 1936 adaptation of Sinclair Lewis' novel *It Can't Happen Here*—featured a less than favorable perspective toward a number of political groups, including communists, centrists, and conservatives.

Due to increasingly poor play choices by regional offices, political pressure, charges from the press, and other WPA agents who accused the FTP of only staging overtly leftist productions, Flanagan understood that she needed to exert control over what plays were being performed by her agency. In 1937, she established the National Service Bureau (NSB). This “umbrella” organization was charged with duties ranging from streamlining costs to transferring costumes and scenery from unit to unit. In addition, the Bureau would be “the sole negotiating agency” for the entire project, drawing up contracts with playwrights to produce their plays and ensuring the Play Policy Board, one of the NSB’s sub-agencies, would have greater control over play selection (Matthews 148-49). The more streamlined agency still accepted requests for plays coming in from the field, but as Flanagan noted in *Memoir*, “the director in the field could not compel the approval of a play; such approval was vested in the head of the bureau” (158). One of the first documents from the PPB was an extensive list of plays that Flanagan and her colleagues felt well represented the vision of the FTP. While the document still encouraged local directors to suggest titles for production, it is clear that the FTP’s new direction was to cement control from the top down. Not only were directors frequently reminded that no play could be performed without permission from both the regional and national office, but also they were reminded of what plays should be performed by the FTP:

The list is not meant to place a limitation on the selection of plays. While many good plays have been deliberately omitted from it [the list] because they are hackneyed, or associated in the public mind with amateur

production, doubtless others have been omitted inadvertently. (“Play Policy Board Meeting 3.14) <sup>2</sup>

The memo further notes that “the making of a constructive and challenging program is not a problem of picking one play title instead of another” but “of bringing fresh imagination” to the play selection process so that “the audience will feel that Federal Theatre is a positive force in the community” (“Play Policy Board Meeting 2.14). And among the “few reminders of the creative ingenuity of which Federal Theatre is capable” are the following plays: The Living Newspaper, the “Negro” *Macbeth*, “multiple productions of *It Can’t Happen Here*,” and proposed productions of *Emperor Jones*.

In the program’s final days, Flanagan even went to the lengths of envisioning a revised FTP that would function more effectively. At the height of the attacks on her program, Flanagan sent a ten-page proposal to Eleanor Roosevelt that outlined her plans for a reorganized Federal theatre agency. Entitled “Plan for a Government Supported Theatre,” Flanagan’s proposal sought to keep the dream of New Deal theatre alive, as well as improve upon the FTP by addressing many of the issues that had plagued the agency. As Barry Witham says, she was keenly aware of the issues raised about her program by Congress and her employees, and sought to transform this new FTP into a more democratic agency:

The centerpiece of the new proposal is a tax on admissions to plays and films. This tax...would then be used to employ theatre professionals, up to 75 percent of whom could qualify for welfare relief. Major theatre centers would be established in New York, Chicago and San Francisco to serve as artistic hubs and to coordinate activities in smaller cities....The proposed

repertory would also be substantially retained, reflecting Flanagan's concern for children's and ethnic theatres, classical and contemporary works, Living Newspapers, religious plays and pageants. Her vision was that permanent theatres in twenty to thirty American cities would each perform a thirty-six week season at affordable prices...The ultimate goal would be for each theatre to raise enough local support so that it could become a permanent member of the community with active local sponsorship. (Witham 149-50)

Despite her ambitious plan, Flanagan's last argument for a national theatre fell on deaf ears. As Witham notes, the First Lady did pass along the proposal to her husband sometime during the congressional debate over ending the FTP. Franklin Roosevelt's response was curt: "No use doing anything about this until the Relief Bill finally passes" (qtd. in Witham 150). Despite these reforms and attempts to streamline and better control the content of its productions, the FTP could not overcome the disorganization of its first two years.

Certainly, there were a number of external factors that affected the stability of the FTP. The Roosevelt Recession of 1937 forced massive cuts throughout the federal government, including the FTP, which saw many of its smaller and underperforming theaters in the West and the South close. In addition, the wins by the Republican Party in the 1938 mid-term elections eliminated much of the Congressional support the FTP had. Yet, the FTP also struggled with a great number of internal problems. Jane De Hart Matthews argues that the FTP could never become an agency that balanced democratic decentralization and bureaucracy. Matthews notes that in addition to being larger and

more expensive than the other projects of Federal One, one of the major problems for FTP was it was unable to cultivate grass-roots support and live up to its democratic ambitions. While the FTP had strong support in California, Illinois, and New York, the agency did not garner widespread local support in other parts of the country. In contrast, the Federal Arts Project developed a more democratic set-up. As Matthews argues:

During the fall of 1935, an Art Project representative, Thomas Parker, had traveled throughout the artistically barren South exploring possibilities for WPA projects. Undeterred by the sparsity of good painters, Parker had formed advisory committees of artistically knowledgeable citizens in major towns and cities and, with the wholehearted backing of the particularly local group, set up his one, two, or three qualified artists as directors of Community Art Centers....By 1939 four hundred and twenty-five Art Project workers staffed eighty-three Community Art Centers in twenty-one states. Their activities, along with those of mural painters and project workers preparing the Index of American Design, so expanded services that the Project's director, Holger Cahill, could boast of operations in forty-one states and the District of Columbia. (311-12)

The FTP could not develop the grassroots organization that the FAP and other agencies did, nor could it shake the sense that the labor of the group was overtly political. In spite of Flanagan's efforts to determine what plays were staged, actors were still able to project political arguments in their performances. As Matthews asserts, "Henry Alsberg [head of the Federal Writers' Project] could edit or rewrite an offending passage in a guidebook before publication, and at Hallie Flanagan's insistence, Federal Theatre

directors could make comparable revisions in a script, but in actual performance, the inflection conveyed the original bias” (311). As many historians have noted, numerous critics of the agency in the Republican Party and the national press condemned productions like the Living Newspaper plays as nothing more than propaganda for communism or the New Deal. These interpretations of the plays were often accurate, and led to the FTP not only losing congressional support but also forcing many members of the agency, including Flanagan, to testify in the first round of the HUAC trials in 1939.

From a Weberian perspective, the FTP represented both the best and the worst bureaucratic solutions to 1930s work. In one sense, the agency succeeded in democratizing theatre and providing it to people who did not have access to it. The agency staged plays in places like Omaha, Des Moines, Raleigh, and Memphis that had not, historically, been venues of commercial or high quality amateur theatre. And for a time, each of those places produced plays that garnered the interest of local audiences and gave those locales a sense of community that Weber observed in smaller communities during his tours of the United States. In addition, the agency, at least initially, helped to promote a national program that addressed the desires of local communities. In addition, Flanagan believed that by promoting plays with her theatrical aesthetic to audiences, she could uplift the spirits of workers who felt overly oppressed by the iron cage of contemporary capitalism. While she never used that specific language, it is clear that the types of plays that Flanagan preferred were thematically tied to leftist causes and promoted ideological viewpoints that critiqued capitalism. In this sense, the work of the FTP echoed Roosevelt’s preaching of the value of work as theatrical labor could uplift the spirits of the workers. Additionally, Flanagan and Hopkins believed that the work of

their agencies could alleviate the social suffering of workers who were, as Weber noted, compelled to work in the immoral iron cage.

Yet despite these goals, the FTP struggled to reconcile its aims of a decentralized bureau while functioning as a national agency. As detailed in this chapter, the desire to operate with quasi-autonomous theaters backfired on the national FTP as those units staged plays that did not suit their local audiences or made the larger agency look bad. In addition, there was hostility toward the national organization and Flanagan when she attempted to promote certain goals within her program. Certainly many commentators rejected the ideological stances of many FTP plays as too radical for Depression era America. Indeed, while many plays actively promoted New Deal causes, the themes of other plays contrasted with the more conservative norms of work promoted by many other New Deal programs. As we will examine in the next chapter, by promoting her theatrical work ideals, Flanagan created an iron cage within her own agency that many actors and directors began to challenge directly or indirectly in their productions.

### **Conclusion:**

While the FTP would have invariably dealt with a litany of problems such as budget cuts, Republican opposition, and competition from other WPA programs, and the problematic relationship between theatre and the American populace, it is tempting to contemplate what the agency could have done differently to survive. Judging by her proposals to change the structure of the FTP, Flanagan appears to have contemplated the same question. If the agency had dispensed with its democratic ideals from the onset and more proactively controlled the content of its plays or agreed to a uniform vision of what work it would do, the FTP might have avoided a lot of the problems it encountered.

Conversely, if the FTP had fully decentralized itself and encouraged its regional theatres to produce the plays they felt would be successful or a better representation of local interests, then the agency might have been more appealing to a broader range of audiences. Whatever one hypothesizes, the legacy of the agency is that of a governmental body that could have done more at least temporarily to relieve its audience of the burdens of contemporary capitalism and to uplift American workers from the rigors of the Depression.

While the problems with drama and Living Newspaper plays are well documented, there remains the question of how comic plays fit into the bureaucratic struggles of the agency. In the Play Policy Board review, the writers of the FTP directive appear to condemn the impulse by many directors to stage older comic plays, a sentiment noted by Flanagan as she noted a desire to “bar out inferior or outworn plays, which in the early days were one of our greatest problems” (*Arena* 263). But finding suitable plays that adhered to the FTP’s new ideal appears to have been difficult, as evidenced by a note typed at the top of a FTP memo regarding comic plays: “This list is all too brief, and reveals one of Federal Theatre’s most difficult problems.” The list of comic plays includes *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, described as “life on the old Erie Canal,” a “pleasant comedy with many easy...parts,” Maureen Watkins’ *Chicago*, Moss Hart and George Kaufman’s *Once in a Lifetime*, and Eugene O’Neil’s *Ah, Wilderness!* (“Play Policy Board Meeting”).

Yet one of the grand ironies of the FTP was that while it appears the agency’s national office felt that its comic plays were not up to its standards, many of the agency’s comic plays centering on work upheld the FTP and Flanagan’s goals for the agency in

that they represented the ideal of free, adult, and uncensored drama. Despite views that comedy is not as serious as tragedy, these plays often examined the complex issues of work and labor in complicated ways, and, at times, addressed issues of labor more fully than more “serious” texts. Moreover, these plays portrayed issues that were complimentary or critical of many New Deal and FTP policies. At times, these plays would act as de facto propaganda for New Deal policies; other times they would challenge the vision of the FTP, especially the Flanagan’s view of non-commercial theatre.

## **Chapter One Notes**

1. The regional FTP units were New York State, New York City, New England, New Jersey-Pennsylvania, Ohio, Middle West, Central, Southern, California, Pacific Northwest, and Pacific Southwest.

2. This document divided according to section and page number.

## **Chapter Two: Backstage Comedies: The Labor of the Stage and Reform of the FTP**

In his speech “Revolutionary Symbolism in America,” Kenneth Burke argues that the duty of the propagandist was to avoid the signs of one’s own political persuasion. In order to persuade an audience, the propagandist must include in his or her work the signs of the larger culture:

If he shows a keen interest in every manifestation of our cultural development, and at the same time gives a clear indication as to where his sympathies lie, this seems to me the most effective long-pull contribution to propaganda he can make. For he thus indirectly links his cause with the kinds of intellectual and emotional engrossment that are generally admired. Reduced to a precept, the formula would run: Let one encompass as many desirable features of our cultural heritage as possible—and let him make sure that his political alignment figures prominently among them...And I am suggesting that an approach based upon the positive symbol of “the people” rather than upon the negative symbol of “the worker,” makes more naturally for this kind of identification whereby one’s political alignment is fused with broader cultural elements.

Burke’s vision that artists should embrace the symbols of the people was accepted by many theatrical professionals employed by the FTP. While Hallie Flanagan and others promoted non-commercial theatre, professional actors and workers believed that the better path for the agency was to adopt the tenets of commercial theatre. Reforming the FTP is a key idea in many of the backstage comedies performed on the federal stage. The *Torchbearers* (despite that play’s conservative pedigree) shows that patriarchal society is

to not just theatre, but also the FTP. *Accent on Youth* and *Room Service* assert that job security for artists can only be found by staging successful plays and accepting the more moderate politics of the New Deal. The musical revue *O Say Can You Sing* suggests that the FTP should downplay the overtly political labor occurring on its stage.. And *A Moral Entertainment* demonstrates skepticism about the ability of the FTP to protect workers from the marketplace. These backstage comic plays asserted that in order to survive, the FTP needed to disavow overtly political theatre.

### **Hallie Flanagan, Commercial Labor and Commercial Theatre**

Generally speaking, Hallie Flanagan was not particularly fond of commercial theatre. While she often praised her professionally-trained actors and allowed many comedies and other Broadway staples to be presented by her agency, she was often critical of many aspects of the commercial theatre. She frequently bemoaned the play selection of units like the Nebraska FTP, and also decried the excesses of the commercial stage in her essay, “A Theatre is Born.” In that essay, Flanagan dismissed the vast “investment” and “capital” of the commercial stage. She would further assert that the professional stage should cast off the music, the violins, the excess, and present the work of the stage as simply and as carefully as possible and embrace the art, rather than the money (qtd. in Kruger 178). Flanagan’s promotion of movements like amateur and agitprop theatre aggravated the commercially-trained actors of her agency and disavowed that group’s interest in securing employment and stability for its workforce.

The theatrical labor that Hallie Flanagan promoted was a combination of two loosely-defined schools of theatrical work: amateur theatre and agitprop. Amateur theatre

was a broad coalition of community theaters, small-scale professional theaters, and university theatre departments and stages, many of which grew out of the Little Theatre Movement in the early twentieth century. Little Theatre promoted various Progressive Era causes and was concerned with the creation of a theatrical “community” that could uplift audiences. This desire to educate audiences led to the development of college acting programs, and by the 1930s, many actors had graduated to the professional stage via amateur theatre (actors who Kruger terms amateur-professionals). Additionally, Flanagan was influenced by the agitprop movement, “a spectacular vision of shifting circumstances and interchangeable roles,” characterized by “economy of gesture and motion...to permit any worker to take any part with a minimum of rehearsal” (Franko 24). Agitprop adopted Taylorist principles for the stage, especially the concept of simplified and economic movements, giving it the aura of the assembly line floor. This theatrical form of labor also promoted leftist ideology and propaganda.

While these two theatrical movements were rivals of one another, both agitprop and amateur theatre positioned themselves in opposition to the commercial theatre.<sup>1</sup> Non-commercial theatre condemned the excesses of the commercial stage, especially the latter’s concern with making money and tailoring its productions to the marketplace. While commercial theatre sought to attract audiences through entertaining and polished productions, proponents of non-commercial theatre condemned attempts to please the wealthy and upper middle class patrons, or, in Flanagan’s words, “the first ten rows” of patrons. Proponents of non-commercial theatre claimed commercial theatre was guilty of “artistic dilettantism” and that it was unqualified to claim theatrical legitimacy. Instead, unlike their colleagues in the commercial theatre who treated their work as a job, actors

of the non-commercial theatre were distinguished in their own right by a calling to the vocation of theatre. In addition, non-commercial actors often viewed commercial theatre as “bad theatre” in which actors were expected to perform their specialized roles to near perfection without any political connotation to their acting (Krueger 144).

In addition to promoting the non-commercial plays, Flanagan also attempted to blur the lines between amateur and commercial theatre workers. As Mark Franko argues, Flanagan resisted the idea that the best theatrical work could be done by professional actors. In particular, she frequently utilized the more Marxist label “worker” when referring to her FTP actors (148). For Flanagan, the less-skilled worker could fulfill the aims of her program more effectively than the trained theatrical professional. Franko argues that throughout her time as director, Flanagan often invoked Marxist imagery in her speeches about the program, such as in her inaugural address to the agency:

The Theatre Project is not primarily an art form, but a life force. It is born, not of some vague theorizing about art, but of economic necessity. In that fact lies its strength. Do you think the FTP is less potent because there is remembrance of hunger in the pit of its stomach? (qtd. in Franko 149)

Franko argues that Flanagan’s position “does more than characterize unskilled labor: it generates theatrical power.” He writes, “By recognizing the power of performance to inhere in experience as much as training, her statements turned professionalism on its head...the transference of working-class body as a theatrical vehicle devoid of skills but demonstrating something perhaps as important as skills” (149). Because of her language in which she emphasized “hunger” and “power,” many critics of the program not only seized upon the Marxist language of her statements, but also accused her program, and

most of the programs of Federal One, of hiring non-professional actors and untrained workers.<sup>2</sup> But for Flanagan, the power in performance came not from professional training, but from dedicating oneself to new models of theatrical labor.

While Flanagan, at times, disavowed skills, she also dismissed the importance of the product produced by her agency. While she never rejected the importance of employment to her agency, she and the other heads of Federal One programs shared a similar aesthetic philosophy. As Michael Szalay argues, this de-emphasis on the artistic product was introduced to Federal One by Holger Cahill, the head of the Federal Arts Project (FAP), and a protégé of the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. As a student of Dewey, Cahill's artistic philosophy was strongly influenced by his mentor's *Art as Experience*. In this text, Dewey argues that art should not simply replicate the dominant modes of production, and suggests that the "liberty of choice allowed to the craftsman who worked by hand" is now subservient to the general use of the machine. Dewey advocates for viewing the work of aesthetics in terms of the labor committed to the project by the artist, not by the finished product. He writes:

The product of art—temple, painting, statue, poem—is not the work of art. The fundamental mistake is the confusion of the physical product with the aesthetic object, which is that which is perceived. Physically, a statue is a block of marble, nothing more...But to identify the physical lump with the statue that is a work of art and to identify pigments on a canvas with a picture is absurd" (*Art as Experience* 222-23).

This Dewey-inspired view of artistic labor extended to perceptions of what Federal One artists produced. Agencies like the Federal Writer's Project (FWP) and

Federal Art Project (FAP) were more concerned with providing employment than quality products or merchandizing the sale of products. For example, the FWP was forbidden from receiving any profits from its *The American Guide* travel books. In other instances, the work of the FAP became literally disposable. In 1944, the FAP threw away a roll of painting canvas that contained works by Jackson Pollack, Mark Rothko, and Alolph Gottlieb. In the words of Michael Szalay, while “workers punched clocks while working on canvases that remained property of the United States, the government never made an effort to capitalize on the work” (163).

While Flanagan did want to capitalize on FTP labor as a way to promote her agency, she disavowed any semblance of economic value in her program. Flanagan not only echoed Dewey’s emphasis on process over product, but she also condemned the relationship between the commercial product and its intended audience. As Franko argues, “Flanagan’s most radical rhetoric differentiated between the ethical and economic meanings of the term ‘value’”(150). For Franko, Flanagan attempted to conflate the human and the aesthetic by considering the work of the stage as commodification free. He writes, “She defined value outside the system of exchange....a performative economy in which values are implicit not in the product but in the process, not in work done by labor itself.” For Flanagan (and indeed for many other members of the WPA) value depended on energy expended, not on productivity (Franko 150). When combined with her embrace of non-commercial theatrical labor, Flanagan’s dismissal of the role of commodity in the value exchange of artistic labor helped to cement the political aesthetic in the FTP. As she declared in 1935:

Here is a theatre that can afford to be supremely unconcerned with what we think of it. It does not ask our advice, our interest...our money. We need not deplore the lack of art in the workers' theatre for we shall not be invited to witness its performances. It is only in the event of the success of its herculean aim—the reorganization of our social order—that we shall become its involuntary audience” (qtd in Kruger 146).

Flanagan's proclamations about the professional worker, about agitprop, her dismissal of commercial work, and her radical aims for the program certainly aggravated many actors and directors who came from the commercial stage. Just as Flanagan did not hold a positive view of the commercial stage, many commercial theater workers did not, at least initially, support the FTP. Playwrights, directors, and actors from the theatre hubs of the country (New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia) often mocked or condemned the purpose and quality of the FTP. As Sidney Howard wrote in a letter to Flanagan: “I do feel...that by far the greater part of our unemployed actors should be hurried out of acting a [sic] quickly as possible...and relieved of the constant misery of encouragement in a profession for which they are not qualified” (qtd. in McDonald 422). More importantly, the theatrical work that Flanagan promoted angered many commercial theatre workers who had no desire to change their approach to acting (Fraden 40). As Rena Fraden shows, this conflict only served to fracture the program on multiple levels:

Some of the actors resisted the retraining necessary to produce more experimental plays, and Flanagan constantly complained about the old-fashioned, stock plays that FTP units continually produced; for by and large, the professional actors who were to be the mainstay of the FTP had

not been involved in community theatres or in the little theatres. Yet these were the people Flanagan was supposed to hire. The first goal of the FTP, to give relief to professionals in the theatre, came into conflict with its second goal, to make new kinds of theatre that would respond to the problems of the present. (40)

Despite the clear divide between the theatrical philosophies of Flanagan and of commercial actors, many professional theatrical workers came to support the basic premise of the FTP, especially the concept of stable employment. The cultural climate and economy of the 1910s and 1920s had not been kind to the professional stage. The costs “of materials used in productions between 1913 and 1928 rose 200 percent,” while “ticket prices weren’t raised for over twenty years because producers worried that higher prices would alienate more of their audience” (Fraden 33). As Fraden notes, even as ticket prices stagnated, theatre began to lose its audience to cinema:

There were more flops, fewer hits, and fewer moderate successes as people became less willing to take a chance on a play that would cost them six times as much as a ticket to a movie. Once the talkies arrived in 1930, the theatre was doomed as an everyday form of leisure (even without the Depression to contend with)” (33).

When people did go to professional stage productions in major cities like Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, they considered it a “night at the theatre as an extraordinary event” not an everyday occurrence (Fraden 34).

But while the FTP offered security to actors, the economic conditions of the 1930s and earlier decades had convinced commercial actors that staging entertaining

plays was more important than ever before. If the play-going public now saw attending live theatre as an extraordinary event, then the purpose of theatrical labor was to entertain audiences by performing quality work. As the director Jonathan Coleman notes, there was a need to “set out to please as many people as he could” and he and his colleagues “thought of the theatre as popular entertainment.” He continues, “There was a deep appreciation away from Broadway and in the community for theatre and the arts. Say we go back to maybe ’38, ’39, ’40, I mean in those days people went to the theatre for entertainment. It was their only means of getting out of the house” (Fraden 162).

Many FTP workers not only adopted the entertainment ethos of the professional stage, but also appreciated the lofty ideals of the WPA and its specific vision of affording leisure to the dislocated worker. Ironically, the commercial emphasis on crowd-pleasing plays echoes some of the rhetoric of Harry Hopkins. While Hopkins did promote some radical visions of the WPA, he ultimately viewed the significance of the Federal One programs as filling life with something more than the basic struggle for existence. In addition, Hopkins believed that Federal One could show that the enjoyment of leisure is something that can be shared by all workers and function as a way to ease the stress of economic struggle. It may seem to be a reactionary perspective, but it appears that the labor of many stage professionals was influenced by the idea that providing leisure to audiences was the purpose of their labor. As John Sullivan reasons at the end of Preston Sturges’ film *Sullivan’s Travels*, to entertain the weary and downtrodden was indeed a noble action.

Additionally, many theatrical professionals saw the overtly political work of agitprop as antithetical to the FTP’s mission to provide employment security. In

particular, many performers believed that non-commercial theatre undermined the concept of theatrical entertainment by its reliance on, as C.D. Innes notes, their “simplicity of language, gesture and action which promoted caricature instead of characterization.” In addition, the “plays were restricted in practice to the representation of familiar material by the audience’s narrow range of interests”—namely for audiences who shared the radical politics of the plays (Inness 79). Moreover, many avant-garde or high-modernist theatrical groups of the era were financial failures. While such groups as the Theatre Guild and the Group Theatre found varying levels of success with less-commercially viable works, groups like the New Playwright’s Theatre or the Theatre Union struggled financially (Goldstein 336).

With their director advocating for politically-aware, non-commercial theatre productions, the commercially-trained actors who made up most of the FTP workforce staged commercial plays. Judging by the backstage comic plays examined in this chapter, those associated with the commercial stage in the FTP did not seek completely to undermine the agency, but feared that the promotion of radical theatrical labor would threaten the entire enterprise. These backstage comedies advocated for the agency to adopt the norms of commercial theatre and focus more on finding work for unemployed actors than promoting radical ideology.

### ***The Torchbearers: Protecting the Work***

At first glance, it appears the FTP performances of *The Torchbearers* were staged by professional actors to further satirize amateur theatre and the agency itself. Indeed, playwright George Kelly (Grace Kelly's uncle) was a staunch conservative who despised Franklin Roosevelt, social legislation, and the amateur stage (Lynch, "*The Torchbearers*" 15). Like many theatrical professionals, Kelly thought amateur theatre—especially the Little Theatre Movement—was merely an occasion for bored housewives to play at acting for an evening and was a repository for poor productions. But the irony of *The Torchbearers* was that it became a staple of not just professional theatre, but also many amateur stages. As Dorothy Chansky explains, the play was frequently produced by Little Theatres—the very object of Kelly's disdain—because they offered a significant number of women's roles (154-55). And given that by the 1930s, many professional actors had initially trained or been exposed to the stage through community productions, the FTP productions of Kelly's play would have reflected the more complex relationship between the amateur and professional stage. While the play does satirize elements of amateur performance, it also defends theatre on the whole. In particular, the FTP productions of *The Torchbearers* touch on the gender politics of the WPA and the New Deal by showing that theatre provided women the opportunity to undermine male-dominated society.

*The Torchbearers* centers on Mr. and Mrs. Ritter, a businessman and his wife who live in an affluent suburb. While their domestic life is generally peaceful, the Ritters disagree on Mrs. Ritter's involvement in the local community theater. While his wife asserts that she is a good amateur actor, Mr. Ritter believes that she should stay in her home and leave the acting to professionals. Mrs. Ritter is encouraged by the theatre's

director, Mrs. Pampinelli, an overwrought and pretentious woman who wholeheartedly believes in her own brilliance. The performance of Mrs. Pampinelli's play, entitled "The Torch-Bearers," is terrible, yet Mrs. Pampinelli encourages Mrs. Ritter to move to New York and work on Broadway. Mr. Ritter decries this idea, arguing that such a move would destroy his home, robbing him of his stable life. Despite the encouragement from her fellow actors, Mrs. Ritter cannot bring herself to leave her home. In the play's last moments, Mr. Ritter and Mrs. Ritter reconcile their differences, agreeing that her one night of fame was more than enough acting for both of them.

First performed in 1922, Kelly's play was a popular hit on Broadway and, later, in summer-stock companies and regional theatres. The play was so popular that Will Rogers would star in a film adaptation entitled *Doubting Thomas*. On the FTP stage, the play's popularity may have deterred many directors from staging it as it was only produced three times by the agency: New York (1936), Atlanta (1937), and Raleigh, North Carolina (1936) (George Mason 161). While the New York and Atlanta productions did not seem to garner much attention from the press, the production of the play in North Carolina's capital attracted a considerable amount of media coverage and, in several respects, represented Flanagan's views a decentralized agency. The FTP in North Carolina was a joint venture of the Raleigh Little Theatre company and the WPA, in which professionally trained actors would stage productions under the observation of the directors of the Little Theatre. Unlike many FTP units, the Raleigh Unit actively sought community involvement in its productions. One way the Raleigh Unit did this was to ask editors of local newspapers for their advice on what plays would best represent the efforts of the Little Theatre (Munger). Remarking on its production of *The Torchbearers*, the

*News and Observer* notes that the FTP had “another smash hit on its hands” and “The Little Theatre definitely has come to occupy a fixed place in the cultural as well as the entertainment phase of Raleigh life” (qtd. in Munger).

Outwardly, *The Torchbearers*, through its portrayal of non-commercial theatre, appears to equate federal theatre with the community stage. First, there is something of a parallel between Mrs. Pampinelli, the academically-inclined leader of the troupe, and Hallie Flanagan (at least a vision of Flanagan that was portrayed by her critics). Pampinelli is pretentious, dictatorial, emotional, and dramatic. She describes reading an article that reminds her of Emerson that has her “own thoughts returning to me from an alienated majesty” (37). In addition, *The Torchbearers* satirizes the quality of the work of the actors of the FTP by equating amateurism with relief acting. Kelly describes the single performance of Pampinelli’s play as inept, as the untrained amateurs fail in every regard: a stagehand forgets to ring a telephone, a scenery door fails to open (95), Mrs. Ritter trips over a door strip (98), the stagehands forget to include a cane and a fountain pen for a scene (100), actors forget their lines and walk off-stage in the middle of scenes (103), and actor continually loses his false mustache (113). While Kelly’s play originally mocked the quality of non-commercial theatre, it is not difficult to draw a parallel between the lack of refinement in Pampinelli’s production and the accusations from some professional theatre circles (and many politicians) that FTP productions were amateurish.

Yet despite the outward comparisons between Mrs. Pampinelli and Flanagan and the inferior amateur production within the play and the work of the agency, the FTP productions of *The Torchbearers* also defend New Deal theatre, especially against those critics who equated the work of professional actors in the FTP with the amateurism of

non-commercial theatre. In one of her frequent debates with Mr. Ritter, Mrs. Pampinelli defends the integrity of her troupe's acting. By extension, the character defends the work of the FTP from staunch professional critics who, like Mr. Ritter, find such "unqualified" laborers as offensive to theatre. When Ritter decries the production of "The Torchbearers" as inferior, Pampinelli responds by challenging his expectations: "What did you expect to see, Mr. Ritter—a finished performance from a group of amateurs?" (152). In one respect, Pampinelli's usage of the word amateur satirizes the view of figures like Mr. Ritter who decried the agency for staging productions by amateur actors. In an instance of meta-commentary, the play's FTP performances acknowledge and then undercut the criticism of the agency as amateurish by having Pampinelli's line read by a professional actor. In addition, by having Mrs. Pampinelli utter these words after the first performance of her play, *The Torchbearers* also reminds audiences that the FTP was still new. Expecting perfectly polished productions—even from professionals—in a new theatrical organization was unrealistic.

The larger concerns of the productions of the play are the threats to theatrical labor from social conservatives like Mr. Ritter. Mrs. Ritter's desire to become a professional actor is, in her husband's mind, a direct threat to the sanctity of his home and to all social norms. Indeed, many of Ritter's lines to his wife show his contempt for her desire to work outside of the home. When Mrs. Ritter declares to her husband that she "ought to go on with the work" (139), Mr. Ritter retorts that she should go on with "the housework" (140). In the play's conclusion, Mr. Ritter convinces Mrs. Ritter to stay by, in part, cynically claiming a willingness on his part to let his wife become the head of the household. He declares, "I've concluded that it's more important that the world should

see you act, than that I should have a home to come to,” he says (159-160). Mr. Ritter’s manipulation of his wife signals that the real motivation for his hostility toward the theatre is not an overriding concern for quality theatrical work. Instead, Mr. Ritter is only concerned with reestablishing social gender norms.

Additionally, the FTP performances of *The Torchbearers* operate against the tendency of many government programs to enforce conservative labor norms. Ritter’s attempts to reestablish dominance over the domestic realm parallels the attitudes about women’s labor in much of the New Deal, including the WPA. As Susan Edmunds notes, the majority of work programs passed under the auspices of the New Deal “inscribed gender and race-inflected norms of domestic labor and consumption in the general plan for national recovery” (23). While the WPA was the first agency to hire single women, widows, and those with absent husbands, the majority of the jobs provided these women were sewing projects, canning, and school lunch preparation (labor for women that Mr. Ritter would likely approve of). Moreover, the stated purpose of most New Deal programs was to reestablish the male breadwinner in each household, and many programs refused to hire married women. Ritter’s condemnation of his wife’s acting in the FTP performances aligns with the promotion of domestic labor with those of much of the rest of the New Deal.

In the FTP performances of *The Torchbearers*, Ritter is the embodiment of a proponent of traditional gender work norms and one who views FTP work as a threat to social stability. By the end of the play, Ritter is able to resolve this disruption to the status quo by sarcastically praising his wife’s involvement in “The Torchbearers” which, by extension, condemns the agency given to women actors by the FTP. When he

convinces Mrs. Ritter to fondly recall the accolades she heard on her one night on the stage, he opposes her desire to work outside the home through acting. For Ritter, his wife's acting is now just a momentary fracture in gender relations. Ritter represents a critic of the FTP who views the work of women actors as a temporary disruption of the status quo. Once the FTP is over, then women can return to domestic work. From the perspective of the women actors staging this play, Ritter represents a threat to the agency and their work. These performances suggest that if the FTP fails, any long-term chance for women to challenge gendered work norms may also fade with it.

The FTP performances of *The Torchbearers* erase the strict delineations between the professional stage and amateur theatre. The larger issue facing theatre was outside figures who would prevent actors from performing their craft. The threats to the stage are those—as represented by Mr. Ritter—who prefer to keep their genteel lifestyles intact. And it is the FTP itself that needs to remember that the profession on the whole was more important than fights between competing groups. But while productions of *The Torchbearers* advocated for a unified-front against the threats to the stage, other backstage comedies produced by the agency showed that the solution to the economic crisis was for actors and playwrights to embrace American ideals.

### ***Accent on Youth and Room Service: The Play's The Thing***

As Michael Szalay shows, many prominent writers of the era found the new paradigm of government sponsorship of the arts not only akin to communism, but also a threat to the sanctity of authorship and aesthetic quality. A writer like Ayn Rand declared that the New Deal was concerned with creating a collective brain, but this fear over

collectivity was also voiced by authors like Ernest Hemingway who was concerned that government sponsorship of the arts would force writers into an era of collaboration. Szalay argues that Hemingway's vision of an iconoclastic artist was represented, most notably, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, in which Robert Jordan disdains any cooperation (Szalay 77-85). The apprehension of writers about consumption and collaboration are reflected in the FTP productions of Samuel Raphaelson's *Accent on Youth*. While the play features a main character who wishes to ignore the desires of his audience, ultimately *Accent on Youth* rebukes the FTP by asserting that security for an artist is only obtainable through a direct embrace of the marketplace. Similarly, John Murray and Allen Boretz's farce *Room Service*, which centers on a nefarious Broadway producer, promotes Kenneth Burke's vision that overtly political signs contained within art would alienate the very audiences propagandists were attempting to reach. Both plays suggest that the FTP should embrace the needs of its audiences in order to provide security for its actors.

*Accent on Youth* centers on Stephen Gaye, a very successful playwright who voices some dissatisfaction with his profession. Set to premiere his nineteenth Broadway production, Gaye decides to leave the theatrical profession and run off with an ex-lover. Upon hearing this news, Gaye's younger secretary, Linda, declares that she loves him and the two decide to begin a relationship. When the struggling actor Dickie approaches Gaye for help in talking to a woman, Gaye agrees (in a nod to *Cyrano De Bergerac*) and gives Dickie some tailor-made lines. However, unbeknownst to Gaye, Dickie desires Linda. In Act Three, Dickie and Linda marry, but soon divorce. At the play's conclusion, Gaye hints at writing a new play, with Linda at his side.

During its initial New York run in the 1934-35 season, the play garnered some positive reviews from outlets like *The New York Times*. Brooks Atkinson declared that while “Mr. Raphaelson is not the man to squeeze the most” out of his stories, “he is light-hearted enough to keep the amusement sly and ingratiating”. The play, Atkinson concludes, is “lightly good-humored and pleasantly insane” and on “the verge of becoming a genuinely captivating play” (L 19). The play was so successful in the greater New York region that it spawned productions in suburban locales like White Plains and Jersey City, and was also adapted for the screen in 1935. On the FTP stage, however, the play did not generate much excitement among the press. Raphaelson’s play was performed five times by the FTP: Hartford (1936), San Diego (1937), Los Angeles (1938) Salem, Massachusetts (1938), and Manchester, New York (1938) (George Mason 3-4). In reviews of the Salem and Los Angeles productions, reviewers offer little commentary, save for some brief mentions on the aesthetic or the quality of the performances. A typical response is a press clipping from the *LA Daily News* from March 17, 1938. The author writes, “The diction was surprisingly good, the lighting was adequate and the settings were well designed.”<sup>3</sup>

In *Accent on Youth*, Stephen Gaye’s view of his work as a playwright vacillates between an embrace of his status as a commercial artist and a desire to escape the drudgery of his symbiotic relationship with the audience. In Act I, Gaye admonishes his secretary for declaring that audiences are dumb, and lectures her on the importance and beauty of the audiences of commercial theatre productions. However, within Gaye’s speech is a complicated view of the role of audience in the creative process. He says:

People are drab, they're petty, they spend their days serving each other and loathing each other. But in the evening, after they have dined, when they get into street cars, subways, and taxis and come together in the theatre, when the lights go out and the footlights go on—in other words, when they become an audience—they cease being human: they become divine. I am a playwright—life is nothing to me. It belongs to the workman, to the poet, to the politician. I worship at one shrine, the theatre. I must be true to one God—my audience. (21-22)

Impressed with his impromptu speech, Linda furiously transcribes her boss' words, but he interrupts her writing: "I'm afraid it's no good. A little too smooth and superficial—and besides, I really don't mean it". As she crosses out the notes, Gaye, again, changes his mind. He says, "You might as well type it. I may write about a smooth, superficial playwright someday"(22). Gaye's evaluation that his impromptu speech is too smooth and superficial illustrates how his craft is tied to considerations of the theatre market. While he subtly voices contempt for the paying customers, Gaye also rejects his speech based on how he thinks it will be accepted or dismissed by the audience. If his words are too superficial in the drafting stage, then he understands they will not resonate with his audience. The audience is, even in his sarcastic phrasing, Gaye's one true God.

Despite his understanding of the importance of the audience, Gaye still harbors a passive-aggressive resistance toward the commercial marketplace. Gaye is so dismayed with his role as a commercial artist that he happily spurns his profession for a life of leisure. In part, Gaye's resistance to his profession comes from his equation of labor to manual toil, paralleling Elaine Scarry's observation about writing work. Scarry argues

that more than any other state, work approximates pain and imagination since it embodies a physical act and an object that had not existed prior—whether that object is “a fishing net or a piece of lace where there had been none... or a sentence or paragraph or poem where there had been silence... [in short], it hurts to work” (170). Yet work is also part of a process that projects pain and the imagination from the writer’s body to the body as expressed in the outside world. For Scarry, the physical effects of work and imagination are invisible to anyone outside of the boundaries of the person’s body, but this private experience of pain becomes more visible once the worker has produced an artifact to share with the public. Gaye echoes Scarry’s idea of the public pain of his writing when he off-handedly tells an actor he is “a battered and bruised veteran of theatre” from having suffered at the comments of audiences and critics. He also shows private and bodily pain, as he has also suffered for his craft by isolating himself from his friends and colleagues and by sacrificing relationships in order to pen polished comedies. His invocation of physical pain and emotional stress from writing makes his desire to escape his suffering by abandoning his writing seem logical. As he declares his freedom, Gaye evokes imagery of the joy he will experience once he is no longer laboring as a writer:

I’m quitting! I’m going to live! For the first time in my life I’ve stopped being a playwright—I’m a man, that’s what I am, and I don’t mean maybe...

I’m going to do all the things I was always about to do... I’ll learn golf. It keeps you out in the open air. Then there’s all those books I was going to read some day...I don’t give a damn about that first-act love scene. I don’t

give a damn about any scene. I never have to worry about audiences... To hell with audiences! I've retired! (34)

Gaye seeks to reestablish his independence that he feels has been erased from him through his writing. While he envisions a world of leisure, he also disavows his job as a playwright by casting off both his commitment to the product and his relationship to the audience as producer. Gaye not only invigorates his body by casting off the pain of work, but also frees himself from the labor of writing by rejecting the audience. In addition, by retiring, he eliminates the bodily pain of working, and the additional suffering he endures when his private pain is exposed to the public.

By rejecting his work, at least temporarily, Gaye appears to undermine the concept of commercial theatre. However, his embrace of leisure is actually another commentary on the relationship between work, security, and commercialism. Gaye's desire to travel abroad or to learn golf and read books is not necessarily laziness, but a sign of his economic independence and financial security. Indeed, Gaye has attained that security through penning polished and commercially viable comedies. As Gaye comments, no "matter how much the people in the play may suffer," the audiences for those comedies always enjoyed them (11). Even his least successful play, *Old Love*, still manages to be presentable (94). And it is those nineteen successful comedies that earn Gaye a life of considerable security and luxury: he has a personal secretary and a butler, he is able to buy his lover expensive gifts, and he enjoys the confines of his civilized New York apartment. And in a direct rebuke of Flanagan's disavowal of the "first ten rows," Gaye has achieved his financial stability through embracing the commercial theatre. In this sense, Gaye embodies the ethos of more conservative views of work and the work

ethic: Gaye is a hard worker and he has earned his time away from his work because of his skill and talent and drive in creating products that are consumed on the open market.

Gaye's ability to leave behind his labor is both an indictment of the New Deal and FTP views of labor security and a call for the FTP to embrace the mercurial marketplace. Gaye's character represents a view that financial security cannot be guaranteed without work or commitment to product. His security—the freedom to ride horses, travel, and learn golf—is earned off the fruits of his labor and to achieve that security, he suffered the pains of writing and the consideration of the marketplace. Thus, *Accent on Youth* shows that the security sought by the workers of the FTP could only be obtained by giving the audience it wants.

The idea that theatrical workers should tailor their worker for their audiences is echoed in Allen Boretz and John Murray's *Room Service*. A Broadway hit and the basis for a Marx Brothers' film of the same name, *Room Service* centers on a Broadway producer, Gordon Miller and his attempts to stage a play while avoiding paying unpaid bills at the hotel where he and his theatrical company are staying. When he learns of the possibility of a theatrical backer financing his production, Miller and his cohorts do everything in their power to thwart the efforts of Wagner, the hotel's auditor, to evict Miller and his company. When Wagner learns that Miller's play, *Godspeed*, will be produced in his hotel's theater, he allows the troupe to stay. When the backer stops payment, Miller and company are forced to take drastic action to make sure their play is staged, including using Wagner as a de facto employee and later staging a suicide to distract the hotel manager long enough for the play to continue.

Despite competing with a major Hollywood film adaptation, *Room Service* was popular on the FTP stage, having been produced seven times in three years: Wilmington, North Carolina (1938), San Francisco (1938), San Diego (1938), New Orleans (1939), Denver (1936 & 1939), and Miami, Florida (1939) (George Mason 135). Yet while it was frequently produced, many newspapers appear to have ignored the play or given it scant mention because it was competing with a major film studio version. However, as evidenced by play reports, audiences and managers found the play to be entertaining. Writing in his report of the 1936 Denver production, director Andrew Slane notes that the play is an “ideal commercial farce” and has “no great meaning” and the emphasis of any subsequent production “should be on its entertainment” factors (“Director’s Report”). Additionally, an audience member of the same production notes in his or her review that the play is so likable she or he would like to stage the play with the drama department of his or her high school.

*Room Service* echoes Burke’s commentary about propaganda adopting universal tendencies, especially in the play’s presentation of the play-within-the-play, *Godspeed*. As readers, we only receive scant information about the content of that play, but it appears to be a combination of a social realist polemic and a historical narrative—a merging of forms favored by many political FTP productions, including Sherwood Anderson’s *Valley Forge*, which was a combination of agitprop and historical drama. We get a glimpse of *Godspeed*’s content when Sasha, a Russian actor working as a waiter in the hotel, auditions for the play in front of Miller. *Godspeed* centers on a Polish immigrant miner, who bemoans his social status like many characters in proletarian literature and theatre. Indeed, the lines of Sasha’s character parody many leftist plays

such as *Waiting for Lefty* and most of the Living Newspaper plays. Sasha says, “All my life I dig coal. Go to sleep couple hours—get up—dig coal again, and what I got? Three children no good—not worth a two-cent piece. Tomorrow, I dig coal again....dig....dig...dig” (35). At the same moment, the play also delves into the realm of fantasy when Sasha, after an argument with his family, falls asleep and dreams about “all the great figures in American history...and every man turns out to be [his] son” (35). Sasha then declares, ““Konrad, I work hard. Make you something. I think some day you be great man. Like Washington, Lincoln” (35). In this respect, *Godspeed* promotes themes that would have resonated with commercial audiences, especially those who did not approve of radical elements in theatre. For Burke, an author who incorporates shared cultural signs into his or her work would also broaden the appeal of his or her text. By invoking Lincoln and Washington, the play within a play of *Room Service* appeals to a broad range of ideologies.

While *Godspeed*'s messages are tailored to different audiences, Miller demonstrates that he is willing to make whatever changes are necessary to his play based on the desires of his audiences—to “sell out” in other words. Miller's persuasive abilities parallel Burke's comparison of the propagandist and the advertiser. Burke writes, “He [the propagandist] speaks in behalf of his cause, not in the ways, of a lawyer's brief, but by the sort of things he associates with it” (Burke 271). While he downplays the connection, Burke, in effect, argues that for both the propagandist and the advertiser, the goal of the art is to elicit positive emotions and sensations in subject. Similarly, Miller functions as a propagandist as he tailors his production to the visions of his backers. In one instance, Miller flatters the artistic taste of a backer. When Mr. Jenkins meets Miller,

the producer slyly plays to Jenkins' bourgeois sensibilities by noting that he obviously exudes "taste and discrimination," but also can appreciate the originality of the text as Miller then subtly admits it is an idea that "the average producer might think that *Godspeed* too artistic" (35). Miller also demonstrates a willingness to appease to downplay any political elements his backers see, such as when he encounters Senator Blake, a Southern politician who owns the theater. After the initial performance of *Godspeed*, the senator enters Miller's hotel suite and declares *Godspeed* such a great play that "it will be here two years, if I'm any judge" (70). But the Senator does offer some constructive criticism of Davis' play: "I'd like to change the name of the hero in the play...I don't like Konrad, it sounds too much like *comrade*" (70-71). Of course, Miller is happy to oblige the Senator's request: his acquiescence is not simply one of politeness since he understands that his production must appeal to the broadest audience possible. Miller makes no pretense of artistic standards or aesthetic philosophy; instead, he gladly offers to change the character's name because he understands that this is good for business. Miller's acquiescence also contrasts the theatrical ideals of the FTP with those of the professional stage. Unlike many radical members of the FTP who bemoaned changes to their plays, there is no such concern with Miller's production of Davis' play. Unlike Burke, who promotes the revolutionary capacity of signs, Miller is not concerned with any political message, but is only concerned with getting the production staged.

Gaye and Miller's success at staging plays echoes the critiques from commercial actors concerning Flanagan's view of theatre. Admittedly, there were times when Flanagan's rhetoric surrounding the FTP mimicked Burke's language as she promoted the goals of the FTP with the signs of her intended audience. Indeed, as early as 1935,

Flanagan was promoting the FTP as an employment organization to both conservative New Dealers and Republicans (McDonald 522). But it was Flanagan's promotion of non-commercial art and labor that would define the agency as radical in the minds of many FTP critics. In contrast, the characters in plays like *Accent on Youth* and *Room Service* embrace the whims of their audiences and stage their productions without any political effect (Burke 271). As *Room Service* illustrates, Miller achieves his goal of staging *Godspeed* by demonstrating that he is willing to bend to their desires; it is this model of theatrical work—embracing the values of the audience in order to promote one's vision, product, or ideal—that Hallie Flanagan rejected. Whereas Miller plays to the values of his financiers and Gaye to his audiences, Flanagan's rhetorical stances threatened the stability of the agency. In this sense, there is foreshadowing in *Room Service* in regards to the dangers of hyper-political speech. Miller's play would not exist. Never in Gaye's declarations of leisure does he mention political ideals or agitprop, nor the relationship between worker and text; instead, he has produced and written plays that have embraced the commercial theatre, despite his own personal distaste for the process of having to write for an audience. The performances of these plays suggest that to provide security for its agency, the FTP should give the audience what it wants.

### ***O Say Can You Sing: Out of the Red***

While *Accent on Youth* and *Room Service* illustrate the importance of the audience to theatre, such a perspective in those texts is not surprising given that they both first premiered on Broadway. However, under the auspices of the FTP, these plays were repurposed by commercial theatre workers to resist Flanagan's preference for non-

commercial theatre. But even some of the plays written and produced for the FTP downplay overt aspects of non-commercial theatre, especially political sentiments. This Burkeian embrace of traditional American signs can be seen in the musical *O Say Can You Sing*. Produced for the FTP, the Vaudeville-style musical and variety show went through a series of authorized changes by its producers, writers, and directors to tone down radical elements in the production. In turn, *O Say Can You Sing* embraces propaganda for “the people” rather than “the worker,” and also promotes traditional work ideals.

The brainchild of producer George Kondolf, *O Say Can You Sing* is a combination musical and variety show that was one of the largest productions staged by the agency. Written by Phillip Charig, Ray Golden, and Sid Kuller, one of the unique aspects of *O Say Can You Sing* is its portrayal of a great number of theatrical professions. While other plays examined in this chapter focus strictly on the work of the traditional stage, *O Say Can You Sing* featured performances by actors, acrobats, magicians, singers, tap dancers, and jugglers, while incorporating “stunning dances, catchy musical numbers, spectacular sets, and more than 600 costumes.” In addition, the play included vignettes of nudist colonies, government investigations of theatre, ill-conceived plans for theatrical adaptations, and, in its Chicago production, depictions of “organized crime, political corruption, and incredibly high numbers of immigrants” (Osborne 21-22).

The grandness of the production may explain why it was one of the most popular plays performed by the Chicago Unit of the FTP. It also was produced in Seattle and Tampa (where there were plans for an adaptation of the play in Spanish for the Latin-American population of the area). Yet many reviewers, especially of the Chicago

production, felt that that play was a failure. In his cutting review for the *Chicago Daily News*, Lloyd Lewis thought the production “short on humor” and questioned the FTP’s ability to find talented performers. Lewis writes, “As to how many of the cast are from the relief rolls and how many from the ranks of the well-heeled, no spectator can say since talent and solvency were never interdependent even in the heyday of the theater, let alone in its doldrums” (Chicago *O Say Can You Sing*). Additionally, in her review of the play for the *Journal of Commerce*, Claudia Cassidy condemned the entertainment value of the play and argues that the FTP should aim for higher artistic goals. According to Cassidy, “If the federal theater really wants to help the theater as an institution, and it can help, it must first realize that theater today is not an outmoded idiom in the vernacular of entertainment. It is a living, vital force of expression, learning from the camera, expanding it in the ballet” (Chicago *O Say Can You Sing*).

In contrast to many of the other plays examined in this project, the producers of the play, in conjunction with the Play Policy Bureau, were highly cognizant of the messages portrayed in *O Say Can You Sing*. As Elizabeth Osborne details at length, a litany of changes were made to the production from its first script to its production script, including the toning down of a nefarious theatrical producer who bore some resemblance to Flanagan, and a Russian director character who wants to stage a modern adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.<sup>4</sup> In addressing the changes made from first to second draft, Osborne critiques the aesthetic quality of the revised scripts, but ignores the Burkeian propagandist elements behind the changes. In the original script, the revue opens with newsboys broadcasting Uncle Sam’s entrance into show business, followed by a series of transitions showing “the impact of this announcement on the lives of various

individuals,” including a magician who laments his poverty, a family of German immigrants who struggle to rehearse because of their poverty, and a desperate young actress evicted from her home. In direct contrast to these original scenes, the revised play opens with a brief scene in which three newsboys yell, “Extra!...Extra!...Uncle Sam is going into show business! Uncle Sam wants actors, dancers, singers,” followed by a musical number, “O Say Can You Sing.” In their playscript for the revue, the authors describe the number as follows:

Through this scrim come the men and women dressed in Beaux Art costumes as Elizabethans, 19<sup>th</sup> Century, in evening dress, etc. There women [...] go through a routine of the first verse. On the second verse of the song spotlights light up behind the scrim revealing four girls on a six-foot platform in military costume, one specialty dancer, and four negro tap dancers. On the third verse, a contour gold curtain rises on a twelve-foot platform behind the first, revealing singers dressed in either red, white, or blue choir robes. (Charig, Kuller, Golden)

Osborne decries the revised version of “O Say Can You Sing” for its dramatic shift in tone and its “peppy patriotism,” especially in the opening number (27). However, the workers who are portrayed in this number actually represent elements of commercial work. In addition, the professional performers portrayed throughout the revue represent forms of theatrical labor that were accepted by more conservative groups as legitimate theatrical labor. For example, the opening number illustrates theatre workers that would have been accepted by high-brow and middle-brow audiences, including dancing girls, African American tap dancers, a chorus of singers, and performers dressed actors in

Restoration or Elizabethan costumes. In addition, performers trained in different fields unite on stage in order to incorporate their specializations to move the machinery of the performance: they dance, stomp, and sing together and give the appearance of an assembly line. While the opening number may have lacked any overt references to agitprop or progressive ideals, “O Say Can You Sing” portrays respectable labor and alludes to models of work that would have paralleled the ideologies of many audience members.

While the revisions of certain scenes in *O Say Can You Sing* show awareness of the politics of the FTP, the play also addressed the work the actors were doing as government employees. In the musical’s finale, entitled “Out of the Red and Into the Blue,” actors sing about their status as workers and communicate pro-American sentiments. In the finale, the actors are not leftists or dole-hungry workers; instead they echo conservative notions of labor and the work ethic while preaching the temporariness of federal work programs. Here, relief is merely a stepping-stone for laborers to return to their accepted roles in the economy:

Wake up America!

Awake and sing and show the world that we can take it!

It’s time, America—

To climb, America

Into the Blue—this land is what we make it!

Everybody will rejoice—

As a nation lifts its voice –

And we’ll sing the praise of better days in view –

There'll be no more grief –

We'll forget relief—

When we're out of the red and into the blue! (Charig, Golden, Keller)

The closing number connects the actors' work to traditional norms of work and also rejects both relief and Marxist ideals. Given that one of the central ideas of John Maynard Keynes' economic policies is the justification of significant federal deficits, 'getting out of the red' suggests that these performances noted that once the economy was restored, such spending would end. In turn, these particular lyrics allude to the perception that the New Deal—and the FTP—was full of left-leaning workers and actors. The play subtly acknowledges such influences, but like the play's portrayal of Keynesian economics as a temporary solution, the attraction of workers to radical political ideals will disappear once employment comes to all. In regard to the divide over professional and FTP standards of theatrical work, the closing number disavows not just the actual jobs provided by the government and the FTP, but the "red" elements of non-commercial theatre. Once they can escape the red—in all its forms—the actors can return to their professional lives and get back to entertaining their audiences.

As evidenced by the revisions to its scripts and its closing number, *O Say Can You Sing* represented a proactive attempt by the FTP to stage a production that was better suited to the ideological perspectives of audiences. In particular, the closing number's disavowal of "the red" signals that the FTP was willing to stage productions that contrasted the prevailing cultural view of the agency as a hotbed of radical politics. This rejection of the political tendencies of the FTP is also seen in *A Moral Entertainment*, a satirical portrayal of theatre in a Puritan colonial town. Not only does the play critique the

overtly political non-commercial theatre of the FTP, but *A Moral Entertainment* also suggests that the agency might not be able to provide actors the economic security they need.

### ***A Moral Entertainment: Acting Is Too Hard***

In one sense, Richard Maibaum's farce *A Moral Entertainment* follows the example of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and satirizes the Puritans. Similar to how Shakespeare portrays Malvolio as a character who despises fun and games, Maibaum presents his Puritans as figures who detest the stage and actors. And like Arthur Miller, Maibaum also describes the Puritans in his play as paranoid figures who threaten those who challenge their authority. But while Miller criticizes the American government in the 1950s in *The Crucible*, Maibaum critiques the FTP in *A Moral Entertainment*.

*A Moral Entertainment* offers the most complex analysis of the intersection between theatre and the government. In one sense, the play embraces the security provided by the FTP while it promotes the non-commercial ideals espoused by Flanagan: the traveling band of players is in desperate need of some labor security and the play's heroine, a Shakespearean actor named Roslinda, challenges the status quo of the Puritan village in which she performs. Yet the performances of the play reveal apprehensions about the impact of government intervention in theatrical labor and the problematic nature of political performance. In addition, the play also portrays a fear that a reliance on non-commercial theatre would endanger not only the FTP, but also theatre on the whole.

Written by Richard Maibaum, a graduate of the University of Iowa who penned several politically themed plays and would later produce many James Bond films, *A*

*Moral Entertainment* centers on the Puritan colonists of a small Massachusetts town named Maundy (*Papers of Richard Maibaum*).<sup>5</sup> Like the infamous residents of Salem, the villagers of Maundy are superstitious and religious, especially the town's magistrate, doctor, and minister Peregrine Pillputt. When word comes to the townspeople that a group of actors will stage a production in town, Pillputt throws the actors into jail for daring to stage such immoral acts. Despite the condemnations of the actors by Pillputt, the residents of Maundy warm to the actors, especially Pillputt's nephew Deodate Wayne who falls for the actor Roslinda, daughter of the lead actor. Despite the growing acceptance of the actors in the community, the elders of Maundy charge the actors with corrupting the town and put them on trial for their crimes. Yet a representative from the colony offers them some leniency: the actors can avoid punishment if they agree to give up their ungodly professions and marry the many unmarried or widowed women in the town. Most of the actors agree to this proposition, but two members of the acting troupe refuse Pillputt's proposal. Those two actors condemned to the stocks, but are freed by sympathetic Puritans. The play ends with Deodate and Roslinda eloping.

Staged five times in 1938 (Roslyn, New York; Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania; San Francisco, Hartford, and Boston) *A Moral Entertainment* received a range of reviews (George Mason 106). Reviewing the Roslyn production, William Kennedy declares that there is "nothing important about the play," perhaps "a few moral lessons, but don't try to dig them out" (Roslyn *A Moral Entertainment*). Meanwhile, a reviewer for the Bryn Mawr production writing for the *Philadelphia Bulletin* declared the play "brisk, manly fare" and thoroughly entertaining (Bryn Mawr *A Moral Entertainment*). The play received rather negative reviews in Boston where the mostly anti-New Deal press often

resented the mocking of historic New England in the play. Writing in the *Boston Herald*, Elinor Hughes found the play “hardly humorous,” and condemned it for its “heavy-handedness.” In particular, she found no humor in the play’s portrayal of Puritan punishments, including “slitting tongues, cutting-off ears and putting people in stocks, not to mention hanging and burning for witchcraft.” Hughes also questioned the intention of the play overall. She wrote, “Was it really farce or a covert, serious treatment of Puritanism? The result was confusion in the writing and overall mood” (qtd. in Kazacoff 196).<sup>6</sup> Other Boston-area newspaper reviewers echoed Hughes’ sentiment. According to one writer from the *American*, “there are times when it seems he [Maibaum] is on the point of saying something significant and pertinent to us, but he never does” (qtd. in Kazacoff 197).<sup>7</sup>

In part, these mixed reviews of the play can be attributed to the complexities of *A Moral Entertainment*. Outwardly, *A Moral Entertainment* embraces the notion that the FTP is necessary in order to protect theatre workers from an incredibly hostile labor environment. In a direct reference to the economic conditions for theatrical workers at the time of the FTP, the play shows how difficult the working-conditions are for Sir Toby’s troupe as they attempt to procure work. Like the suffering actors in *Room Service* (which will also be discussed in Chapter Four), *A Moral Entertainment* presents actors desperately struggling to maintain their livelihood. The players of the troupe have endured lengthy traveling, which has gone on for so long that the soles of their shoes have given out. They are also so hungry and poor that they had to eat their horse and “dragged the cart like a collier’s dray” (II-4). In addition, the play shows the need for a safety-net for actors by its portrayal of the public-at-large in the play, the Puritans. Like

many who condemned the FTP, Pillputt and many of his parishioners decry the work of the troupe, echoing the anti-theatrical and anti-leisure perspectives of Calvinism. Pillputt invokes Calvinist doctrine by condemning the leisurely theatre for luring “the mind from the contemplation of misery...of our woeful state in this vale of tears, this citadel of pain and gloom in which we live” and for presenting “scenes of love, carnal love, and often with such a masterful touch as to trick the mind into similar lust” (I-10). And just as many conservatives and members of the Roosevelt administration declared the FTP to be a boondoggle, Pillputt and other citizens of the town decry the expenditure of money to fund the work of the stage. The man named Experience bemoans that actors “steal the honest wages of the poor” and the citizens of Maundy have better “things to do with hard won pennies than buy *their* wares” (I-12).<sup>8</sup>

Despite its portrayal of Puritan hostility toward theatrical labor and the suffering the players endure for their art, *A Moral Entertainment* remains uneasy about the relationship between government and theatre. In several respects, the play connects the absolutism of Pillputt with Flanagan’s promotion of non-commercial theatrical labor. Indeed, much of Flanagan’s prose in her speeches carries an overtly moral component that is not that dissimilar from the language of Pillputt, especially when the two condemn the commercial theatre. Moreover, both figures are determined to change the nature of the work done by actors. Frustrated that the actors have not used their imprisonment for meditative prayer, Pillputt declares that the prisoners shall be escorted to the wood-pile yard. He declares, “You’ll fatten no more on our good nature—You’ll *work* for your bread!” (III-10). Hearing this, the actors scream in unison “WORK?” and begin to protest. The actor Willie even declares he’d prefer to be hanged rather than chop wood

(III-11). Outwardly, the emphasis of the humor in these lines is the incongruity between Pillputt's declaration of work and the players' repulsion at the idea, but this exchange also signals an apprehension over the nature of work expected of actors by government. Pillputt's anger is born, in part, from the players' refusal to pray according to his expectations, a sentiment not dissimilar from the contempt voiced by many leaders in the FTP, like Flanagan, for productions that did not adhere to prescribed political ideals. As such, Pillputt punishes the players with labor that is foreign to them. While we expect the emphasis of the joke to be on the players' revulsion at work, the play demonstrates that the actors are perfectly willing to suffer for their work, but not for work forced upon them. This representation parallels how many professional performers resented the FTP's attempts to promote non-commercial theatre.

This rebuttal of Flanagan's promotion of political theatre is echoed in the play's trial scene when Roslinda defends theatre to Pillputt. Roslinda's performance is not a reaffirmation of Flanagan's political ideals, but a promotion of commercial theatre. She claims that the work of her troupe will bring "joy and honest pleasure to anyone" (IV-20). In this moment, the play begins to merge political non-commercial and commercial theatrical labor into one idea. For Pillputt, performing a play constitutes a direct threat to the sanctity and stability of the political space. In this sense, Roslinda's defense of acting becomes her own political statement. Laughing off Pillputt's accusation that the Players are troublesome, Roslinda turns to the townspeople and asks them, "What have you let him do to you? Laughter and song, where are you fled?...The spirit of joy and true delight! He's [Pillputt] robbed it of you...and given you...what?" (IV-20). She then asks the citizens of Maundy to witness a performance of her odes to love, and to choose for

themselves if they want to live under the repression of their souls or to enjoy life. The citizens choose to enjoy themselves, as their joyous singing and dancing forces Pillputt to end the trial and convict the players (IV 21-23). Roslinda represents the professional stage, providing joy and pleasure to her audience. Her performance also undermines the claims of proponents of non-commercial theatre that the commercial stage was the antithesis of theatre. While providing pleasure and joy to one's audience is not necessarily a political action, within the context of the battles over the stage occurring within the FTP, certainly is a political statement. Roslianda's performance reminds people like Flanagan of the power that professionally-produced performances could have on the populace.

While the play rebukes Flanagan, *A Moral Entertainment* is also fearful of the impact economic and labor security will have on the acting profession. Just as *The Torchbearers* presents Mr. Ritter as a threat to the theatrical community, *A Moral Entertainment* posits that the lure of security may endanger participation in theatrical labor. In one respect, the play echoes the worries of the authors on both the left and right who voiced concern about how government security would affect the quality of the work done under the "authorship" of "Uncle Sam." After their conviction, the players enjoy the duck, yams, and pies given to them by the lonely widows of Maundy and, like Chaplin's Tramp in *Modern Times*, are more satisfied as prisoners than as workers.

More importantly, the play demonstrates a fear over how government security might impact theatre. When the Dean of the Commonwealth—a moderate political figure who acts as a buffer against Pillputt's radicalism—offers the men of the company a deal, two of the four actors readily agree to the terms. The Dean proposes suspending the male

actors' sentence if they agree to certain conditions. He says, "That you renounce your profession, make admission the [e]rror [sic] of your ways, make public declaration of your entrance into our faith, become law abiding industrious members of the Commonwealth." In return they will receive "an acre of land, a horse, a goat, a pig, a cow, and....a wife" (IV-25). To four of the actors, the offer is too good to pass up: one actor exclaims, "I've always wanted a tailor's shop; I'll open one here!" Another actor declares, that "acting's no life. The work's too hard. I'd rather fight redskins" (IV-26). To the actors who reject the deal, those who leave the profession are traitors, and in a sense the play suggests that only those who are truly dedicated to the craft of acting will be willing to endure the struggles of acting. However, the government's offer also represents a fear of how the political battles within the FTP would impact actors. The actors who give up acting have not only endured fights over whether or not their work has any merit, but have also struggled against a figure who demanded they adopt certain work norms. In turn, the Dean represents an alternative path to economic and job security, one by which an actor embraces labor that is not acting. In one respect, the Dean becomes the embodiment of work programs of the First New Deal, in which work was given to the unemployed not according to their respective training or skill but according to the need of the larger community. Rather than suffer through acting work and the political battles surrounding the FTP, the actors here gladly give up their profession for security in other fields. By showing actors leaving their profession for the greener pastures of other work, the play warns that the government might impact the acting profession, as many workers who do not necessarily subscribe to the radical notions of theatrical labor promoted by

the FTP would be forced out of the agency, thereby robbing the profession of some of its best workers.

*A Moral Entertainment* is skeptical about the government's long-term ability to provide economic security for workers. Despite the best intentions of the characters who are sympathetic to the stage, by the play's conclusion, actors are fleeing for their lives or have accepted positions within the town. Like *The Torchbearers*, the power structure present in *A Moral Entertainment*—while shaken by the performances contained within the narrative—remains intact. As such, the liberation from the marketplace that Flanagan and Hopkins envisioned for the workers of their programs does not exist in Maundy as most of the actors are enticed into accepting traditional jobs or are forced to flee the town. But more importantly, while the play aligns with Roslinda's defense of the stage, it is her words that ultimately bring down her troupe. On one level, this acknowledgement of the dangers of political performance questions the long-term effects on the performer who engages in political performance as, rather tellingly, Roslinda is labeled as a witch by her detractors. But while Roslinda's performance is inherently political in nature, *A Moral Entertainment* posits that all performances—no matter how inane or enjoyable—can be interpreted as radical by audiences. In this respect, the play points to the limits of Burke's notion that a propagandist should embrace the shared signs of his or her audience, asserting instead that if an audience decides to label the content of a text or performance as hostile to its values, then the actor's performance will be read as political.

Perhaps more importantly, the play asserts that audiences will not differentiate between the work of commercial actors and the labor of non-commercial actors in FTP. No matter how much pleasure and joy a performance brings to an audience, it would be

labeled as politically-skewed by association. And when this apprehension about audience is combined with the anti-theatrical sentiments in then-contemporary culture, the play forecasts a symbolic and literal witch-hunt for the FTP as a whole, and, perhaps for all other commercial and non-commercial theatre. By the end of the decade, Hallie Flanagan was being questioned by the Dies Commission about her agency's promotion of communist ideals in plays that actively voiced such positions and in plays that did not. Despite its best intentions, the FTP was not able to protect its laborers from the audience, and by 1940, its employees were subjected to blacklists.

### **Conclusion**

If there is any consensus about the FTP, it is that the agency became the focal point of anti-New Deal sentiment from Republicans and a critical press. Hallie Flanagan certainly understood this, noting "perhaps the triumph as well as the tragedy of our actors is that they became indeed the abstract and brief chronicle of the time" (*Arena* 347). While there were a number of external factors that eventually led to the agency's elimination, the promotion of overtly political theatre did not help its cause. As represented in the backstage comic plays produced by the agency, there was a great deal of apprehension about the nature of the work being produced by the agency and a fear that overt political art would endanger the FTP. A play like *O Say Can You Sing* accepted traditional norms of work by adopting the ethos of Kenneth Burke, while in *A Moral Entertainment*, the very act of political art endangers the entire enterprise. Similarly, *Accent on Youth* and *Room Service* illustrate that an embrace of traditional economic models of theatre ensure security for the agency's workers, while *The Torchbearers*

posits that debates over professional and amateur work ignored the conservative threats to the agency. Yet, as evidenced by the conclusion of *A Moral Entertainment*, acting for Uncle Sam was likely never a viable, long-term solution for actors seeking refuge from the economic uncertainty of the marketplace.

## Chapter Two Notes

1. In the rest of this chapter, I use the term non-commercial theatre to refer to the competing, yet similar, philosophies of agitprop, university, and Little Theatre.

2. The charge that the agencies of Federal One were hiring unqualified (amateur) workers was a common refrain throughout their histories. In particular, the Federal Dance Project (a sub-agency of the FTP) was accused of hiring amateur dancers by the professional National Dance League (Franko 151). Most histories of the WPA acknowledge that during the first year to two years of the programs, unqualified workers were hired by individual agencies either by accident or because workers lied about their qualifications. In addition, both Hopkins and Flanagan (especially during her testimony in front of HUAC) frequently downplayed the role of amateur workers in Federal One.

3. The FTP play reports of the plays examined in this project that are warehoused at the Library of Congress are incredibly inconsistent in terms of page numbers and organization. More often than not, individual sections of play reports do not match their respective table of contents and many reports are simply missing a number of components. As such, I include page numbers of specific documents whenever possible, but for the most part, I simply cite the folder and box number of the play report.

4. The musical comedy is also unique in that the play was heavily edited, especially by its Chicago production team, to present a more palatable vision of the FTP and government labor. In her analysis of the play, Elizabeth Osborne details several of the significant changes made between the first and second drafts of the play, and many of these edits attempted to present a positive vision of the FTP. In the first draft of *O Say*

*Can You Sing*, there is a character named Augustus Hamfield, the newly appointed secretary of entertainment who oversees the various plays within the play, who bears a striking resemblance to Hallie Flanagan in terms of not only his position, but the former's lack of experience in commercial theatre (28). In addition, the original version of the play features a Russian director who wants to restage Uncle Tom's Cabin with an attractive blonde lead. Osborne suggests that this element was cut to downplay the communist connections to the FTP. (30-31).

5. Like Boertz and Kelly, Maibaum did not shy away from political discussions in his work. Maibaum, who would later find a great deal of success in the film and television industry, penned his first political play, *The Tree*, while attending the University of Iowa. *The Tree* was the first white-written, anti-lynching play produced in the United States and after first being staged in Iowa City, the play premiered on Broadway in 1932 to mixed reviews. Maibaum would also pen what is believed to be the first anti-Nazi play performed in the United States, *Birthright*. *Papers of Richard Maibaum*.

6. Hughes, Elinor. "A Moral Entertainment." *Boston Herald*. 28 Dec. 1938.

7. Rev. of *A Moral Entertainment*. *Boston American*. 28 Dec. 1938.

8. Special note: the playscript of the play does not have sequential page numbers, but is broken up by acts. In citing the play, I have noted the act and the page number of that act.

### **Chapter Three: Hedonistic Work Comedies: The Pleasures of Work**

When Harry Hopkins declared in *Spending to Save* that leisure, once accessible only to the rich, was to be provided to the common worker through the efforts of his WPA programs, he was oversimplifying the relationship between leisure and class. While the view that the wealthy do nothing was entrenched in many working-class outlets, leisure and idleness were not strictly upper-class experiences. Indeed, much of the political debate over work in the nineteenth century concerned how much time should be afforded to factory workers or laborers to engage in pleasurable or leisurely activities. However, when he condemned the leisure of the rich, Hopkins also unintentionally alluded to shifts in cultural views of pleasure and work that took place in the decades prior to the 1930s. Before the 1930s, work, especially for workers of the middle class, had been redefined by many critics according to the principles of hedonistic work: work was pleasurable, deemphasized the product of one's labor, and promoted the process of working. But with the onset of the Depression, the desire to find pleasure in one's work was superseded by the need to find any job at all.

However, as evidenced by the plays examined in this chapter, hedonistic work did not fully die away during the 1930s. Outwardly about characters who avoid work, the plays discussed in this chapter actually address the problematic compatibility of work and pleasure. For instance, a play like Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness* demonstrates the incompatibility of pleasure and work, as one of its central characters, Sid, drinks rather than works. However, despite its condemnation of hedonistic work, the play is also critical of traditional work. Additionally, in Marc Connelly and George Kaufmann's *To the Ladies*, the only person who demonstrates any work ethic is a homemaker who saves

her household finances from her easily distracted husband. While plays about middle-class characters question aspects of hedonistic work, the plays featuring working-class characters suggest that treating work like pleasure is a form of agency. By embracing the joy in the process of work, a worker could alleviate the struggles of labor. In George Kelly's *The Show-Off*, a braggart character helps secure his family's financial future by treating negotiations like a game. For Jewish audiences who saw the play performed in Yiddish, this reinforced the sense that newer models of work could coexist with more traditional forms of labor. And in *Mississippi Rainbow*, an African-American husband outwits a riverboat company by playing the speculative games of business. In all these plays, traditional norms of work challenged and characters find that security can be found by enjoying work in ways that would be new to many Americans.

### **Hedonistic Work**

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Charles William Eliot, the president of Harvard, began to write about issues of work. While many of his essays and lectures condemned union workers, he also critiqued laborers who viewed work as something to be avoided. In particular, Eliot believed that for a worker to seek his or her happiness not in his or her work but in pleasurable activities “was to give up all chance for happiness whatsoever” (Rodgers 236). Eliot believed that not only should the laboring class “recognize that only unstinted, loyal work made a sure foundation for joy,” but also the middle class should recognize the importance of pleasure in work. As Rodgers notes:

Eliot was for the most part profoundly unsympathetic to the shorter-hours drive that agitated the industrial plants of his day. ‘The notion that if one

could only cut down or stop work one would be happy, is fit only for a lazy savage,' he insisted. What made people civilized was their capacity for hard, steady work...He preached the same message as readily to his faculty as to workingmen, reminding them that 'the common amusements of society have no charm for scholars' and that an evening at the theater was simply wasted. In his own persona Eliot exemplified the tremendous energies middle-class Americans could still invest in their vocations, regularly working twelve-hour days during the school term. (238)

While Rodgers criticizes Eliot's view of leisure, he also notes that the Harvard president's view of work would be very influential for the middle class in subsequent decades. Prior to the onset of the Great Depression, many commentators promoted the combination of pleasure and work to many professionals of the middle class. But as this section will show, hedonistic work, which was popular during the 1920s, would be rejected by many middle-class workers during the 1930s.

The promotion of working over pleasure or leisure was quite familiar to working-class laborers during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. While many of the political fights of this period focused on questions of decreased working hours for laborers, workers who won the right to non-working time also became accustomed to increasing debates over how they should spend their non-working hours. During this era, many intellectuals and politicians began to understand that workers who were allowed respites from labor were more productive workers. In addition, mandatory leisure simply created a better quality of life for workers and their families. Yet, while many reformers understood the need for allowing workers some idle

time, there remained concern among intellectuals that too much leisure would give workers no incentive to return to their jobs (Rodgers 120-22). The solution for many reformers was to regulate a worker's idle time with elements of work. As Rodgers notes, cultural critics who promoted recreation often utilized language found in discussions of working, often advertising play "as an intensely serious endeavor," one that "was not idleness"(123). In promoting "serious play," work reformers began to privilege certain types of leisure activities over other types of idleness or amusement. These progressive reformers often promoted serious activities to workers such as dedicated study, high-brow entertainments, or self-improvement rather than the attractions of baseball games or nickelodeons. In response to these reform efforts, many in the working classes strove to "maintain control over a less instrumental view of leisure," thereby "resisting attempts of reformers to frame all after-work activities as 'Sweat or Die'" (Lutz, "Sweat or Die" 264).

While reformers promoted to the working classes the concept of working-leisure time, they also introduced to the middle classes of the 1910s and 1920s the idea that the ultimate form of leisure was work, or as Tom Lutz has termed it, "hedonistic work." In part, this new mentality toward working grew out of changing attitudes toward middle-class leisure. For many members of the middle class during the nineteenth century, the ideal life was not based on work, but one based on leisure. However, as many members of the middle class began to enter various white-collar professions, many middle-class commentators began to promote the virtues of work to white-collar workers (Rodgers75). But with this new dedication to work, middle-class workers began to experience intellectual alienation and physical exhaustion from their labor, a disease doctors termed

“neurasthenia.”<sup>1</sup> The solution for this disease was the merging of older models of leisure and the regulation of working-class leisure:

The middle-class leisure ethic had been overlaid with a discourse of instrumentality in the decades before the 1920s, as evidenced, for instance, by the notions that football built character and fighting spirit and that both resting in bed and walking in the mountains were medically therapeutic...A leisure ethic thus managed the relation of the working class to their work, while a refurbished work ethic now managed the relation of professionals to their work, and to their mental health and leisure as well. At the center of that discursive trick was the idea that for the middle class, especially those in professions formerly associated with the leisure class -- medicine, law, finance, art, scholarship -- that work was a fundamental source of pleasure. (Lutz, “Sweat or Die” 264)

In order to alleviate the stresses of work, proponents of hedonistic work preached the idea that working was, in essence, the solution to the ills of work. In hedonistic work, not only would one’s health be improved, but also the process of working would supersede the value of one’s production, in contrast to the labor theory of value. One writer for *The Saturday Evening Post* suggested “that leisure and work, in the best of all possible worlds, should be indistinguishable: ‘When you get yourself properly trained, and conditioned for success in your work, your work itself will become your favorite play’” (qtd. in Lutz, “Sweat or Die” 280).

This promotion of work as a source of pleasure contradicted the traditional view of work as moral. As Lutz argues, 1920s work was a reaffirmation of the work ethic, “not

in its Weberian mode, as an iron cage, but in a spruced-up, boosterish, commonsense, fun-filled vein in cultural forums as diverse as ‘success’ pamphlets, industrial engineering journals, slick monthlies, and literary fiction” (“Sweat or Die” 274). Weber condemned this embrace of work as sport at the conclusion of *The Protestant Ethic*, bemoaning the fact that Americans now viewed their work as sport. But whereas Weber emphasized how the religious overtones of the work ethic encouraged Puritans to dedicate themselves more fully to their work, the 1920s hedonistic work ethic removed the overly religious elements from the traditional Protestant work ethic. Americans during the 1920s saw this as the evolution of the work ethic from one based on asceticism to one based on pleasure.

The idea that pleasurable work is the solution to the ills of work was manifested in much of the literature of the Jazz Age. Despite that era’s reputation for partying, drinking, and general debauchery, many writers like Ernest Hemingway and Edna Ferber publicly extolled their own dedication to work. Yet while much of the fiction and popular culture of the era promoted work as pleasure, there were skeptics of hedonistic work. Lutz argues that one of the preeminent celebrations of hedonistic work is Sinclair Lewis’ *Arrowsmith*, in which the eponymously named character is so obsessed with working that he leaves his family for the seclusion of a New England laboratory so that he can work without distraction. In short, Arrowsmith can only find happiness when he realizes that working is his true love. However, like many of his other characters, Lewis constructs Arrowsmith as helplessly self-involved and perhaps too dedicated to his profession (Lutz, “Sweat or Die 273). In addition, many 1920s magazine articles that promote hedonistic work also demonstrate the problematic nature of blurring work and leisure. One writer claimed that he “was a work addict” and that he could only find pleasure in additional

labor. Commenting on the work addiction of the article, Lutz argues that work was now considered as something like an addiction. He says, “The point, ostensibly, is that work is as desirable and addictive as a drug and that one needs to moderate a desire that would otherwise take complete control of one’s life” (Lutz, “Sweat or Die” 274).

The onset of the Great Depression, however, signaled the end of the promotion of hedonistic work. As Lutz argues, the reduction of the number of middle-class jobs after 1929 eliminated the easy distinctions between the middle class and the working class. Moreover, employment itself became far more important than treating work as sport. In addition, Lutz argues that Americans could no longer choose their own work, which fractured their confidence in making “their own choices” (*Doing Nothing* 206). These shifting views of pleasurable and hedonistic work were reflected in much of the art and literature from the era. Artists of the mid-to-late 1930s portrayed laborers, especially those faced with no choice over their employment, as sympathetic figures, while characters who professed a leisurely approach toward work were critiqued as unethical or untrustworthy. Dispossessed, yet noble, figures can be found in the photographs of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange and throughout the social realist literature of such figures as John Steinbeck. In contrast, in James Cain’s *Mildred Pierce*, Monty is an unsympathetic character who praises his own loafing as a science (111).

While much of American culture disavowed pleasurable work in the Depression, the idea that work should be enjoyable remained in some segments of 1930s culture. Perhaps the best representation of this continued interest in hedonistic work is George Kaufman and Moss Hart’s 1936 play, *You Can’t Take it With You*. The play focuses on a home overseen by an eccentric grandfather, who allows a number of non-traditional

workers to live in his home, such as his grandson who dabbles with explosives and pens anti-government pamphlets, or several other house members who are aspiring actors. Whatever their interests, the guiding principle of the home is “do what you please” and if one is not having any fun in his or her job, then he or she should quit. For Lutz, the dominant theme of the play—the rejection of wage labor—foreshadows the rise of anti-labor beliefs, especially after World War II, and critiques dominant work belief of the 1920s:

The 1920s hedonistic defense of work is here used to argue against having a job. If it isn't enjoyable, just don't do it. The result is a house full of people making art, and inventing ingenious products. Doing nothing was not an option, but the rejection of work for hire was nearly total. Jack Kerouac was sixteen when *Holiday* and *You Can't Take it With You* came out, and William Burroughs was already twenty-four. The stage was clearly set for the Beat Generation....a group of countercultural types dedicated to art instead of work, to ideas instead of material comforts, to a principled hedonism rather than conventional success. (*Doing Nothing* 213)

Kaufman and Hart's play not only foreshadows post-war views of work, but their play also signals a renewed interest in the sense that work could be pleasurable and enjoyable. For the characters of the play, required work becomes something of a taboo; instead, they prefer to dedicate their time to their own projects that provide them the fulfillment that wage labor cannot. As Lutz notes, these characters do not do nothing, but instead work in the fields that they find pleasurable, a modification of the hedonistic work ethic.

This debate over pleasurable work extended to federal responses to unemployment. In some cases, federal solutions to the Depression mirrored the larger cultural rejection of pleasurable work. For instance, many of the early governmental programs aimed at alleviating the Depression, such as the Federal Emergency Management Relief Association and the Civil Works Administration, eased unemployment by providing very low-level tasks and jobs to workers regardless of their training. And while many of the programs of the Second New Deal catered more to groups with more specific work requirements than those of the CCC or the FERA, the WPA and many of its affiliate organizations still operated under the premise that work—regardless of specific training—was more important than one’s selected profession or than one’s enjoyment. This was especially true for programs that would only hire women for work that adhered to gender norms, regardless of skill or training. Conversely, the programs of Federal One, especially the FTP, operated, at least in part, under some hedonistic work parameters. As was detailed in the previous chapter, many of the heads of Federal One programs subscribed the work ideals of John Dewey, who emphasized the process of work over the final product. As Lutz argues, this sentiment was a key aspect of hedonistic work. He writes, “professionals embraced a work ethic based not on duty nor on their product’s value but on the pleasures they associated with the process” (“Sweat or Die 280). In addition, the overriding principle of these organizations—that the labor of skilled workers in the humanities could benefit American society—suggests that many within Federal One at least partially adopted the belief in the restorative power of pleasurable work for society at large. Unlike other federal agencies that hired workers for jobs outside of their areas of expertise, the agencies of Federal One employed workers

who were trained specifically for the fields of writing, history, and art, and who would, at the very least, have viewed their crafts as pleasurable.

In their portrayals of hedonistic work, the comedies examined in this chapter show hedonistic work as an affront to traditional work, especially in the plays that portray middle-class workers. Additionally, hedonistic work ultimately discourages work, as men, especially, focus too much on the pleasurable elements of their jobs and ignore hard work. In these ways, the plays echo the diminishing appeal of pleasurable work in American culture. But the plays that show working-class workers, women, or African Americans, pleasurable work provides, in part, greater control over their own lives. In these plays, the characters find aspects of hedonistic work far more fulfilling than the work they were accustomed to.

### ***Ah, Wilderness!:* The Stability and Instability of the Middle Class**

In *White Collar*, C. Wright Mills describes the rise of the white-collar worker class and the subsequent increase of social alienation for those workers. In particular, Mills is drawn to a phenomenon in middle-class life that he labels as the “status panic.” Borrowing from Thomas Veblen’s work on leisure from the early 1900s, Mills describes how the “leisure of many middle-class people is entirely taken up by attempts to gratify their status claims” (256). For Mills, one of the key aspects of middle-class work and leisure was the cycle by which workers would engage in consumption through their leisure in order to create the illusion that they were in control of their economic situation. He writes, “status cycles provide, for brief periods of time, a holiday image of self, which contrasts sharply with the self-image of everyday reality. They provide a temporary

satisfaction of the person's prized image of self, thus permitting him to cling to a false consciousness of his status position" (258). He concludes his thoughts on status panic by declaring that middle-class workers permanently exist in this state of consciousness, noting "The machinery of amusement and the status cycle sustain the illusionary world in which many white-collar people now live" (Mills 258). For Mills, every aspect of white collar life, especially work and leisure, perpetuates in those workers the belief that middle-class life is stable.

When Flanagan received permission from Eugene O'Neill for the FTP to stage his plays for minimal compensation, it was a huge coup for her agency. The FTP could perform *The Hairy Ape* and *The Iceman Cometh*, thereby increasing the legitimacy of the program. However, the O'Neill play most often selected for performance on the federal stage was not one of his modernist dramas, but the comedy *Ah, Wilderness!* The play, one of the few comic works written by O'Neill, was often described by critics as a simple and nostalgic view of small-town life at the turn of the twentieth century and in several respects, the play promotes a vision of middle-class work and life that is incredibly conventional. Indeed, part of the play's popularity can be connected to its portrayal of the angst-ridden teenager Richard who promotes—and eventually disavows—leftist politics, as well as its illustration of a generally benevolent middle class. Yet despite themes that likely would have reassured many audiences, the play critiques aspects of middle-class life, especially reform movements and middle-class views of work. The play also shows how the allure of pleasure could lure a worker away from his or her labor, and how the hedonistic work ethic threatened the stability of traditional norms of work.

*Ah, Wilderness!* centers on the Miller family, an upper-middle-class family living in an unnamed Connecticut town in roughly 1908. The play mainly focuses on the relationship between Nat, the patriarch of the family, his brother Sid, who struggles with alcoholism, and Richard, the 16 year-old son of the Millers. Nat—who garners respect from the townspeople for his work as the local newspaper editor—often finds himself engaged in flights of fancy and nostalgia for his upbringing. In turn, while the matriarch of the family, Mrs. Miller, is a caring mother, she demonstrates a paranoid and parochial concern over what her son reads, haranguing her husband and son because she finds books by the wicked Oscar Wilde and the “vile” Bernard Shaw (O’Neill 24-25). The main plot of the play concerns Richard’s actions over an Independence Day. Richard gets into a series of spats with his on-again, off-again girlfriend, he argues with his family about whether or not he will attend Yale, and he spends the evening drinking at a local tavern and interacting with a prostitute. The secondary plot of the play focuses on Sid’s struggles with his drinking and his relationship with his girlfriend Lilly. By the end of the play, Sid and Lilly have, tenuously, recommitted to their relationship, while Richard has reunited with his girlfriend and commits to attending Yale after he graduates high school.

Next to *Help Yourself*, *Ah, Wilderness!* was the second most performed play by the FTP that is examined in this project.<sup>2</sup> While part of the play’s popularity can be attributed to the fact it was written by O’Neill, reviews by critics and audience members suggest they appreciated its portrait of middle-class stability. One critic, commenting on the New Orleans production, notes that there is a “human appeal in the play, such a time defying quality that we love it, not because of the presentment of manners and clothes, but because of the emotions which it evokes” (Dabzny). Similarly, as the director of the

Los Angeles production argues in his play report, the FTP should do more “family” plays like O’Neill’s comedy and avoid staging “problem” plays (Los Angeles *Ah, Wilderness!*). In addition, the director of the Des Moines, Iowa production notes in his play report that both swearing and sexual references in the script were toned down in order to not to offend the audience. In the same play report, there is a clipping from *The American Citizen*, a publication of the National Italian-American Civic League, in which a Catholic priest urges his parishioners to attend the play (“St. Anthony’s Sponsors Play”).

This positive reception from reviewers and audiences suggests that many of them responded to the play’s promotion of a stable middle-class life. In particular, *Ah, Wilderness!* shows Richard as ultimately rejecting radical politics and embracing his middle-class status at the conclusion of the play. Given his youth, the play presents Richard’s interest in Marxism as nothing more than the hobby of a bored teenager. In Act I, Richard projects his anti-capitalist allegiances by condemning the Fourth of July and capitalism in a rant influenced by his reading of leftist literature. He declares, “I don’t believe in this silly celebrating the Fourth of July—all this lying about liberty—when there is no liberty” (21). He continues by sarcastically commenting on American society, evoking the socialist rhetoric of the early 1900s, the historical setting of the play, and also the communist language of the mid-1930s:

The land of the free and the home of the brave! Home of the slave is what they ought to call it—the wage slave ground under the heel of the capitalist class, starving, crying for bread for his children, and all he gets is a stone. The Fourth of July is a farce! (22)

Richard's embrace of leftist ideals parallels the criticism leveled against middle class intellectuals from many affiliated with the Communist Party, such as O'Neill's friends Michael Gold and Genevieve Taggard. Gold, in particular, was blunt about his rejection of the intellectual class, preferring to promote writers who wrote about the authentic experiences of working-class life. In turn, O'Neill was, by the 1930s, beginning to voice concerns over communism in the United States, and thus portrays Richard's political stance seems to be nothing more than a passing fad (Diggins 78). Just as the closing number of *O Say Can You Sing* reminded audiences that interest in "the red" was only temporary, the FTP performances of *Ah, Wilderness*, with Richard's recommitment to his family, his girlfriend, and to college, would have suggested to its audiences that even the most boisterous of middle-class radicals would eventually re-embrace the norms of middle-class life.

Not only does the play reinforce the stability of a middle-class life threatened by radicalism, it also suggests that working to improve the lot of the working classes was ultimately a futile endeavor. Such a perspective is not unusual in discussions of O'Neill's work, as scholars have long noted the playwright's doubts about the benefits of charity to the poor. As John Patrick Diggins argues, O'Neill illustrates his complicated view about the nature of charity and reform in *The Iceman Cometh* when drunken characters "shape up and don clean clothes in order to exit the tavern—only to scurry right back in the next scene" (146). For Diggins, *Iceman* raises a fundamental issue. He asks, "how can society be reformed if its subjects cannot save themselves from themselves" (146)? Despite his sympathetic portrayals of the patrons of the Last Chance Saloon, O'Neill, Diggins asserts, presents figures who cannot see their own realities and do not seem capable of

changing their circumstances. Unlike his communist playwright peers, O'Neill "could see no revolutionary potential in the working class" (Diggins 254). This view of the working class as self-destructive is represented in *Ah, Wilderness* through an interaction between Richard and Belle, a prostitute he encounters at a bar. After Richard attempts to convince Belle to change her life, she angrily rebukes him. Richard then asks Belle, "Only you oughtn't to lead this kind of life. It isn't right—for a nice girl like you. Why don't you reform?" He even gives her five dollars out of a sense of pity. Belle angrily rejects Richard's money, as she interprets an ideological motivation behind his gift. She says, "Nix on that line of talk—Can it. You hear! You can do a lot with me for five dollars—but you can't reform me. See!" (O'Neill 73). Richard naively, perhaps condescendingly, believes he can reform Belle, but, at the same time, Belle refuses to listen to Richard's pleas and then proceeds to berate his morals and his poetry.

Yet while the play mirrors O'Neill's skepticism of the working class, *Ah, Wilderness!* is equally critical of the rationales of the middle classes toward charity and, by extension, then-contemporary attitudes of work. In particular, Richard's interactions with Belle parallel Robert and Helen Lynd's criticism of the white collar class in their 1935 work *Middletown in Transition*. In the sequel to their 1929 study of Muncie, Indiana and other similarly-sized cities, the Lynds explored how the New Deal affected the relationship between the working class and the business class of the United States. While the middle classes were initially supportive of Roosevelt's programs, their enthusiasm quickly waned as older attitudes about work and relief began to reappear in their rhetoric. Increasingly, the Lynds and their researchers found that the middle class was "coming out of the depression in a mood of anxious resentment toward those on

relief.” For many middle-class workers in Depression era America, there would be “no imagination to spare for, and [are] prepared to give no quarter to, those whose morale has been broken by long unemployment and the humiliation of relief” (Lynd and Lynd 142). In certain respects, Richards’ interactions with Belle illustrate the Lynds’ criticism. While Richard’s plea that Belle need not work as a prostitute and his offer of some money is likely benevolent, his offer also simply reflects longstanding views over charity and the concept of work relief. There is both an overtone of social reformer rhetoric in Richard’s exchange with Belle and also the expectation that a small payment, or figurative dole, will help resolve Belle’s social and economic plight. When Belle screams that his payment will not reform her, she is not just alluding to how unwilling she is to change her ways, but also to how ineffective such a small amount will be in helping her out of her situation.

The play’s portrayal of Belle also connects to the play’s illustration that work and pleasure are incompatible. In *Ah, Wilderness!*, O’Neill rejects the philosophy of hedonistic work that pleasure and work could be merged. O’Neill shows the prostitute Belle taking no pleasure in her work (even if her customers believe that she takes pleasure in her labor) and constructs Richard’s interest in Marxism as a hobby rather than a calling. But more than any other character in the play, Sid exemplifies the divide between pleasure and work as disavows labor and is addicted to the pleasure of life. Throughout the play, Sid is shown attending picnics, gambling, and drinking, embracing a life of near-total pleasure. However, O’Neill also asserts that Sid’s drinking is having an impact on his work and his relationship with his girlfriend to the point that he has been fired from another job and Lilly is again considering ending the relationship. Despite this,

Sid's family tolerates his antics and seems to view him as a comic figure. In Act III, Sid drunkenly disrupts a family dinner, and then proceeds to sing "By the Sweet Bye and Bye," a performance which sends the Miller family into hysterics. The family continues laughing until Sid's girlfriend Lilly lambastes the family for what she perceives as their encouragement of his state:

That's just it—you shouldn't—even I laughed—it does encourage—that's been his downfall—everyone always laughing, everyone always saying what a card he is, what a case, what a caution, so funny—and he's gone on—and we're all responsible—making it easy for him—and all we do is laugh. (60)

Condemning the Millers' tolerance toward Sid's actions, Lilly echoes Mills' argument that the middle class views their world as stable, even when evidence—such as a drunken uncle—contradicts their worldview. Similarly, O'Neill suggests that the middle class has long tolerated those who embrace pleasure and reject work. The Millers' treatment of Sid as a comic figure trivializes the threat he actually poses to his well-being and to the stability of middle-class work norms. O'Neill argues that a worker who embraces pleasure will only destroy his or her work ethic and treating work like pleasure only endangers work.

Yet the play also shows the limitations of traditional work as the Millers' plan to give Sid a job to cure him does not appear to be a viable solution. Lilly's critique of the family spurs Nat Miller to action, and he pledges to make Sid "stop this damn nonsense" and accept a job at his newspaper (61). The family's expectation that working will cure Sid of his issues parallels the belief of both proponents of traditional work and hedonistic

work that working could alleviate any number of physical or mental afflictions. Given that alcoholism was considered a moral failing rather than a disease in the post-Prohibition era, Miller appears to believe that employment will act as a cure to Sid's problems. Yet, O'Neill casts a skeptical eye on the belief that work can hold such restorative power. While Sid readily agrees to his brother's plan, the play reminds us that this is not the first time that Nat has procured a job for his brother, as Mrs. Miller alludes to several newspaper jobs that Nat has found for Sid (40). The implication of Nat and Sid's back-story is that in spite of his brother's assistance, Sid is unable to maintain employment and that his drinking, as well as other nefarious activities, is largely to blame. Additionally, while O'Neill resolves Richard's dalliances with Marxism by having him recommit to college at the play's conclusion, the playwright does not mention Sid's drinking after Nat offers his brother another job. That plot element is left unresolved by the end of the play, and there is certainly enough evidence within the text to suggest that Sid will not be able to hold onto this new job. By portraying Sid's drinking as a complicated and long-term problem that is incapable of being solved through a job, *Ah, Wilderness!* contradicts the arguments of many traditional proponents of work and many promoters of hedonistic work that employment could cure what ails society.

Part of the popularity of O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!* on the FTP stage can be attributed to the play's reinforcement of a stable middle class, especially the sentiment that white-collar Marxists would re-embrace traditional norms and that the working-classes were unable to help themselves. Yet, O'Neill's play equally critiques how the middle class thought of relief, and also the idea that employment cures all. Sid's drinking

problems and the Millers' response to it shows how ineffective that element of hedonistic work was, and illustrates a growing dissatisfaction with the tenets of pleasurable work. This criticism of hedonistic work the middle class will also be addressed by *To the Ladies*, wherein the only person who engages in work is the one most oppressed by the work environment.

### ***To the Ladies: The Women Run the Show***

Among the middle class, the hedonistic work ethic of the 1920s was strictly divided along gender lines. While men were encouraged by articles in boosterish magazines to invest themselves in their careers, women were supposed to enjoy the pleasure of domestic duty, a view reinforced by advertisers whose ads alleged that the solution to the monotony of domestic labor was taking pleasure in the larger goals of women's work. As Lutz asserts:

The nation's manufacturers were hard at work producing the appliances and other products that would supposedly change the housewife's task from monotony to dignity, and the magazines featured their advertisements and supporting articles. 'Bring a light touch to heavy work and the years will touch you lightly,' promised Premier-Duplex vacuum cleaners, and many appliance manufacturers insisted that women's real work was not the monotony of cleaning but the more significant, ennobling job of raising a family. Appliances could minimize the monotony and allow more pleasurable time with children and husbands, thus integrating mother's love with mother's work. Appliance advertisers

used illustrations of happy housewives reading to their children, going to the theater with their husbands, and otherwise "working" with their families while appliances sit in the basement doing the drudgery. ("Sweat or Die" 276)

The bliss through domestic work promoted to women during the 1920s reinforced the gendered work-divide for the middle class. The strict line between men's work and women's work is examined in Marc Connelly and George Kauffman's *To the Ladies*. In the satirical play, a housewife undermines the stability of these middle-class work norms by not only performing her husband's work more effectively than him, but also by embracing hedonistic work. This message is represented in the FTP performances of the play, as *To the Ladies* challenged the work norms of many New Deal programs that were, in effect, conservative reactions to the Depression.

*To the Ladies* centers on a recently married suburban New Jersey couple, Elise and Leonard Beebe. Leonard struggles with his personal finances. He has spent a good portion of the couple's savings on a piano and a grapefruit farm. Leonard is invited to give the keynote address at the luncheon of his boss, Mr. Kinkaid, but to his horror, his office rival uses the same formulaic speech that Leonard planned to use. Instead, it is Elise who comes to his rescue and delivers a speech that promotes her husband's work ethic and Kinkaid's "dedication" as a businessman. Because of his wife's performance, Leonard receives a promotion and Elise continues to give him ideas and do the work of his business proposals. At the end of the play, Kinkaid confronts Leonard over his work and the speech, and Leonard confesses that his wife has been helping him. Kinkaid decides that the bottom line is more important than who actually did the work, and invites

everyone out to a gourmet lunch on his behalf. As the play ends, Mrs. Kinkaid walks hand in hand with Elise, and Kinkaid's wife admits that most of her own husband's business proposals have come from her as well.

The Kaufman and Connelly play—one of several performed by the FTP—was not one of their major successes. Unlike *You Can't Take it With You* or some of Kaufman's plays co-written with Edna Ferber, *To the Ladies* had a short run on Broadway in 1922, despite the praise of Kaufman and Connelly's Algonquin Round Table cohort Alexander Woolcott, and has only seen limited revivals in the last eighty years (Woolcott).<sup>3</sup> In terms of its FTP production history, the play was staged three times in four years: once in San Diego, and twice in the Los Angeles area (George Mason 159-160). Much of the press coverage of these productions, as recorded in FTP Play Reports, was often superficial as many reviews of the play focused on the enjoyable aspects of the performances or the beauty of the actors playing Elise. Yet a print review from the *San Bernardino Sun Telegram* suggests that some audience members detected a more political aspect of *To the Ladies*. As the unnamed reviewer notes, the amusing play is engaging, in part, because of its “showing the ladies in control of the situation.” (San Bernardino *To the Ladies*).

In its 1920s and 1930s productions, *To the Ladies* is critical of the male dominance of the work space. Throughout the first three acts of the play, Elise is shown as the doting housewife who fulfills the image of the woman who dedicates herself to her domestic duties and to propping up her husband. But her patience is continually tested as her husband is obsessed with consumption and appears incapable of providing any security for his family. Like Sid in *Ah, Wilderness!*, who is addicted to various forms of

pleasure and idleness, Leonard does not embrace hedonistic work, but hedonistic consumption. While he maintains a job as a clerk, Leonard never seems to be fully invested in his work, preferring to stockpile consumer goods that he and Elise can barely afford, including an expensive globe and a piano to impress his boss. In addition, Leonard seems particularly susceptible to the boosterish rhetoric of magazines and advertisements, such as when he reads about a speechmaking book that promises to “electrify one and all by our eloquence, fairly swinging them off their feet by the magic of your words” (18). Like many workers of the era, Leonard invests himself in the hedonistic rhetoric of consumption that was propagated in the popular culture of the 1920s and the 1930s. As Rita Barnard illustrates, the ideology of consumerism did not dissipate with the onset of the Depression. Throughout the 1930s, mainstream American culture still promoted the importance of consumption to audiences. Fordists and capitalists sought to counter communist promotion of class identification by campaigning through advertising and celebrity culture for workers to embrace their role as consumers. While his consumerism endangers his finances, Leonard also demonstrates an interest in the “sport” of real estate that mirrors the rhetoric of the investment rage of the 1920s. To his wife’s consternation, Leonard announces that he has invested in a Florida grapefruit farm he bought, sight unseen, that will, he claims, bring in “\$350 a week” after a four-year investment (12). Like many investors in real estate and the stock market during the 1920s, Leonard adopts a sport mentality toward investing, hedging his bets on the principle that he and his wife will eventually reap the rewards of his speculation. Leonard’s character traits—while humorous in its original 1920s context—seem far more tragic given the economic struggles of the 1930s. Indeed, in the 1930s, his investment in

a grapefruit farm would have likely reminded audiences of real estate and agriculture busts in places like Florida in the late 1920s. Through its portrayal of Leonard's financial irresponsibility and consumption rather than work, the FTP productions of the play show the dangers of embracing pleasure instead of work.

While the play satirically portrays Leonard's hedonistic consumption, *To the Ladies* also offers an unflattering portrait of Mr. Kinkaid and his promotion of traditional work. The wealthy Kinkaid preaches that employees should be self-reliant and that work should be dominated by responsible men, but in the play's concluding moments, he is revealed to be far more dependent on his wife's work than he claims. As a proponent of individualism, Kinkaid represents traditional modes of work. When workers from a collection agency come to take away the couple's piano, Mr. Kinkaid, Leonard's boss, pays off the debt. However, Kinkaid decries his employee's spending habits. He declares, "Well—I'll admit I'm a little prejudiced but I don't like to see any of our young men in debt. It indicates bad management. Especially a married man....He should think of his family—his future" (40). In his admonition, Kinkaid echoes the Lynds' critique of the white middle class in their 1937 work, *Middletown in Transition*. The authors detail that in spite of the Depression, the business class of *Middletown* was unchanging in their outlook toward other workers, often seeing them as, in essence, from the proverbial "wrong side of the tracks." Like the subjects of *Middletown*, as well as proponents of male-centered hedonistic work, Kinkaid cannot quell his own hostility to giving aid to those he feels cannot help themselves. Moreover, when he discovers that Elise has been supporting her husband, he lambastes Leonard, saying "my organization must be made up of men of initiative. And for one of my personal staff to be in any sense....well—molded

or controlled by ....his wife....I can't look upon that with much favor" (89). Despite his proclamations of business being a male-only realm, the play shows that women are hardly absent from decisions within the work-space. While Elise's role in supporting and guiding Leonard's career is the focus of most of the play, Mr. Kinkaid himself (under the stern eye of Mrs. Kinkaid) eventually reveals that his wife plays an even greater role in his business decisions than he lets on. He admits, "It so happens that Mrs. Kinkaid is—ah—rather a good judge of men and women. I sometimes use—her judgment—merely to—ah—supplement my own—you understand" (97). Just as the confidence artist plays in Chapter Four undermine the morality of industries like banking by demonstrating how prevalent conning was in the financial realm, *To the Ladies* shows that the proponents of traditional work norms and the male-dominated work space were far more reliant on the labor of women than they would admit.

While Leonard consumes material goods and Mr. Kinkaid brags about his dedication to work, it is Mrs. Kinkaid and Elise who actually embrace pleasurable work. Not only do the women demonstrate more knowledge about working than their husbands do, but also Elise seems capable of engaging in pleasurable work while her husband and his colleagues can only work in the most mundane ways possible. By giving a speech in place of Leonard, Elise undermines middle-class work norms and delights in the performance of her speech. In the play's central scene, she and Leonard attend a banquet thrown in the honor of Mr. Kinkaid. In Act Two, Elise offers constructive speech ideas to her husband, but Leonard dismisses her ideas by declaring that giving a speech is something that "a man knows best about" (47). Rather than work on crafting an original piece, Leonard decides to give a speech from his speeches-for-all-occasions manual he

recently purchased. However, at the banquet, Leonard's rival Baker gives the exact same speech that Leonard planned to give. With her husband turning as "white as a ghost" (68), Elise stands, declares that her husband is suffering from laryngitis, and delivers an impromptu speech. Like an actor doing a successful improvisational routine, Elise demonstrates considerable rhetorical skill as a speaker and wins over the assembled businessmen. Not only does she delight in her performance, but Elise also seems to take pleasure in the fact that she subversively critiques the male view of work in her speech:

It seems to me that about everybody in the world has written a book or designed a chart or advertised some kind of a university course in the magazines that will show you how to strengthen character by mathematics, get a personality by mail...He (Leonard) has been able to observe something, and that is a business man, a big business man—can be just as simple and human in the way he runs his business and selects his employees as anybody, and doesn't need to lose anything by it. The trouble with most business men today is that they're so busy looking for some kind of a—machine that will attend to business for them, that they're either too bored or too busy or too tired to attend to life. Now John Kinkaid has shown you how to get away from all that. You may not realize it, but he has. He's shown you that there are still things as—understanding in business and—that simple, maybe old-fashioned ways of doing things—are just as efficient—and maybe a little more so—than all your psychology and Applied—Moreale—what do-you-call-it, and things like that. Now why don't you follow his example? Go in for business and

go in for it just as much as you want to. But for God's sake do try to be a little bit human. (69-70).

Because of her performance, Elise earns her husband the promotion he has been wanting, but embedded in her speech are a number of criticisms of the male work environment that the assembled businessmen miss. In particular, Elise critiques how many businessmen do not have the passion for their work that men like Mr. Kinkaid still have. Indeed, she offers a not-so-subtle jab at her husband and his rival—neither of whom can bother to write their own speeches—when she critiques the preponderance of corporate literature available to businessmen. At the same time, she flatters the assembled crowd by propping up Kinkaid as a proponent of older forms of work, when he is hardly the model worker that he claims to be. If the ideal for white-collar workers was a hedonistic approach to work, then the only figure who actually treats his or her work like pleasure in the banquet hall is Elise. And after spending the entire play encouraging Leonard, and thereby performing the duties of the middle-class wife, Elise realizes that she must become her own “champion” by outworking her husband and demonstrating how to throw oneself into one’s work. When she concludes her speech, one cannot help but read a sense of pride and pleasure in her voice when she turns to Leonard and asks “That’s about what you wanted me to say, wasn’t it dear?” (71)

While the play references many attributes of 1920s work, its performances on the FTP stage use Elise’s success to comment upon the gendered work and hiring practices of New Deal agencies, including the WPA itself. As was outlined in Chapter Two’s discussion of *The Torchbearers*, many New Deal programs reinforced the gendered work norms of earlier decades. Broadly speaking, men were given priority employment status

as they were expected to hold purchasing power for their families. In turn, many programs of the First and Second New Deal strictly forbade women from receiving any sort of work relief and the majority of WPA projects only offered relief to women through jobs like lunch service and sewing projects. Yet while many Americans supported the reinforcement of the male-as-breadwinner ideal, performances of a play like *To the Ladies* resist this conservative policy. For an agency like the FTP, which along with other Federal One programs was far more liberal about hiring women for projects, to stage a play featuring a woman who outsmarts and outworks her husband and his employers was a political statement. Not only do the productions suggest that men can be ineffective at work, but also that agencies like the FTP could provide women more power than they would receive in traditional work settings.

In *To the Ladies*, middle-class male workers are illustrated as mundane figures who neither represent the virtues of traditional or hedonistic work. While Mr. Kinkaid espouses empty rhetoric about hard work, his employee Leonard prefers to engage in hedonistic consumption that ultimately could threaten the stability of his home. But while *To the Ladies* and *Ah, Wilderness!* decry pleasurable work for many workers, Kaufman and Connelly's play shows that hedonistic work could uplift the self-worth of marginalized workers, such as Elise. In the remaining plays of this chapter, hedonistic work is not something that is viewed as dangerous, but rather is something that alleviates some of the repressive elements of work.

### ***The Show-Off: Bragging About Morality***

In his examination of Yiddish theatre in the 1930s, Joel Schechter argues that the satirical plays written and performed by Jewish-American playwrights and actors during the era often promoted ideological positions that were not out of place in the often radical FTP. Several plays of the era featured “a rent strike celebrated by Yiddish-speaking puppets and a Hitler puppet that bared its fangs” while Menasha Skulnik “led a union of kosher chicken cutters through a strike to victory” in the musical comedy *Getzel Becomes a Bridegroom* (Schechter 25). Yet, as Schechter argues, the Yiddish stage did not always embrace the revolutionary:

Disharmony within the language and an adversarial relationship with the world that lacks a Messiah, however, do not always lead to leftist views critical of wealth and power. American Yiddish plays often show less concern for political organizations and unions than for family, with personal crises requiring adjustments to assimilation, social mobility, and the abandonment of Old World practices such as arranged marriage and orthodox religion. Despite breaking with past cultural and religious practices, Jewish life goes on in these plays; the new, younger generation finds its own way, its own romance and new professions, without radical political or satire of messianism. (28)

This portrayal of the assimilation and adaptation of Jewish-American culture in Yiddish theatre is seen in the FTP productions of George Kelly’s play, *The Show-Off*. Incredibly popular in the 1920s, *The Show-Off* features a braggart character named Aubrey Piper who does not possess a traditional work ethic. But while Piper is portrayed as something

of a nefarious character, on the Yiddish stage he represents newer approaches to working such as the hedonistic work ethic. While the play still promotes the value of traditional work norms, it reconciles old and new ideals of work by showing that both approaches could coexist and that hedonistic work could be as moral as traditional forms.

Originally a popular vaudeville sketch entitled “Poor Aubrey,” *The Show-Off* takes place in the North Philadelphia working-class row home of the Fisher family. Most of the play is dedicated to a battle between the matriarch of the Fisher family, the provincial mother Mrs. Fisher (to whom Kelly does not give a first name) and the titular braggart, Aubrey Piper, a West Philadelphia-raised blowhard who promotes himself and his grandiose business plans throughout the play. Piper is romantically involved with Clara, the eldest daughter of the Fisher family, and eventually marries her, much to the chagrin of Mrs. Fisher. When Mr. Fisher dies unexpectedly, Piper moves into the family’s home to help support the Fishers, but Mrs. Fisher ends up helping him by paying off a traffic fine of Aubrey’s from her bereavement payment from an insurance company. Yet Aubrey makes up for his failings when he secures a larger advance from a machine company that is purchasing the rights to a mining machine that Joe, the Fishers’ son, has invented.

When the play first premiered on Broadway in 1924, it was hailed as a rousing success by such many critics. Alexander Woollcott praised Kelly’s representation of their mutual hometown, noting that *The Show-Off* had “the very flow of Philadelphia all the way through” (qtd. in Lynch, “*The Show-Off*” 151). The play was so popular that it spawned the most film adaptations of any of the plays discussed in this project, having been adapted for the screen four separate times.<sup>4</sup> But after the Stock Market Crash of

1929, the public perception of the play changed as reviews of 1930s productions suggest that audiences viewed the antics of Aubrey Piper differently during the Depression. In a review of a 1933 revival, a writer for the *New York Times* noted that while the play was still “amusing” in spite of “the undoubted fact that times, especially since 1924, have changed.” Indeed, the reviewer notes, the performance, while good, was not “greeted with the same degree of hilarious rapture” as previous productions on account of “Depression, politics, prohibition” (Atkinson, “Portrait of a Talker” 10).

On the FTP stage, *The Show-Off* was produced seven times.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps because of the changing attitudes toward the play and its frequency of being filmed, *The Show-Off* did not garner much press attention with the exception of two productions: the Yiddish Unit in Chelsea (1938) and in Harlem, New York by the Negro Unit (1937) (George Mason 142-43). It appears that audiences for the Negro and Yiddish Unit productions interpreted the *The Show-Off* differently than those who saw the 1933 Broadway revival. In Harlem, the play was positively reviewed by the local black press and audiences. As a reviewer for the *New York New Amsterdam News* detailed, first-night audiences greeted the play “enthusiastically” and the entire cast “performed...excellently.” In addition, the FTP producers of the play changed the setting of *The Show-Off* to Harlem and incorporated the names of several prominent local people into the script (Jessamy). In particular, many of the reviews for the Harlem production suggest the Unit presented him as a far more confident character than many white productions. In contrast, the Holyoke production, staged by the Yiddish Boston Unit, appears to have presented Piper and the other main characters in the play in a very sympathetic fashion. Charged with performing plays for Jewish communities primarily

on the Eastern seaboard, the Yiddish Unit translated American plays from English to Yiddish. In the play report of *The Show-Off*, the director of the play reported this about the audience reaction to the performance: “The audience reaction to the Aubrey Piper, the mother, the young daughter and particularly the working man provoked a great deal of laughter and sympathetic understanding” (Chelsea *The Show-Off*). Whereas mainstream audiences had long viewed Aubrey Piper as a figure of derision, African-American media and Yiddish audiences appear to have read Piper as a more heroic or sympathetic character. Because Piper’s character shares a number of traits with Henry Washington in *Mississippi Rainbow* (which will be examined in the next section of this chapter), this section will focus on the Yiddish Unit productions of Kelly’s play.

As expressed in the play reports from the Boston-area productions of *The Show-Off*, Jewish-American audiences received the characters in the play as both comic and sympathetic figures. Yet in the history of Yiddish FTP productions, complex portrayals of various themes, including work, were not uncommon. Detailing the structure of many Yiddish productions, Joel Schechter argues that many plays both portrayed difficult working conditions and celebrated Yiddish-speaking Jews who wanted to work. For example, the sketch-revue *We Live and Laugh* features a provincial theatre troupe that sings about “hardship, about declining numbers in their band, and then fall to the ground, faint or near death” in order to convince passers-by for money to keep on performing (Schechter 92). However, the play also features Jewish characters “accepting jobs as seamstresses, minyan-maker, modern cantor, and courtroom musician” (Schechter 92). Schechter argues that the play serves as a metaphor for the FTP itself, as the characters accept the jobs they are offered, just as actors took the work of the New Deal program.

He says, “Their jobs are to portray characters with jobs, jobs they dislike, jobs that bore them, new jobs” (92).

Similarly, the Yiddish productions of *The Show-Off* privilege those who are working and invested to traditional norms of work. The characters in the play who serve as the representatives of traditional work are the Fisher family, featuring Mr. Fisher who works in a factory and Mrs. Fisher who preaches dedication to work and labor (and also condemns the frivolous life of her eventual son-in-law). In addition, the couple’s son Joe embraces a traditional work ethic. Joe spends hours developing his various inventions, and declares that he is dedicated to his craft. When he informs his mother of his advance, Mrs. Fishers asks Joe if he’ll stop working and Joe answers that he’s already working on his new project. He says, “No, of course not, I’m not going to stop working” (269).

While the Fisher family represents the hard-working traditional laborer, their son-in-law, Aubrey Piper, is the antithesis of a worker. Like other braggart characters, Piper maintains an inflated self-worth and continually promotes this persona to other characters. In particular, Piper has a penchant for bragging about his standing at the Pennsylvania Railroad, asserting early in the play that he is the head of the “freight department”; however, this is contradicted by several characters who note that he is simply a clerk (7). And much to Mrs. Miller’s dismay, Piper lives beyond his means. Like Leonard in *To the Ladies*, Piper is entranced by the allure of consumerism: buying expensive clothes, searching for a luxury home in Philadelphia, and looking to purchase an expensive car. Additionally, to afford these status symbols, Piper buys nearly everything on credit, noting “that there are least fifteen first-class establishments right here in this city that will furnish a man’s house...and give him the rest of his life to pay

for it” (212). While Piper’s obsession with conspicuous consumption and purchasing items on credit colors cements his character in the 1920s, Kelly also appears to overlay some aspects of hedonistic work on his character. In particular, Piper often pontificates on the meaning of work and the importance of the dedication to work in his speeches to the Fisher family. In one speech, Piper details how his ideology of work is informed by an advice columnist’s essay that he reads in a boosterish magazine:

He said, ‘I would say, to that innumerable host of young men, standing on threshold of life, uncertain, and mayhap, dismayed—as they contemplate the stress of modern industrial competition, ‘Rome was not built in a day’. Those were his very words, I wouldn’t kid you, and I think the old boy’s got it right, if you ask me. (212-13)

While Piper gladly declares how he adheres to the author’s creed of dedication and certainty, he does not actually, within the context of the play, dedicate himself to working. Ironically, Piper is entranced by working hard, but cannot even recognize that he does not demonstrate any of the traits of a hard worker.

Yet while the play promotes traditional ideals of work, the climax of the play shows Piper securing a financial windfall for the Fisher family by getting his brother-in-law a larger advance from a machine company. In bluffing his way through the negotiations, Piper not only resembles some of the con artists examined in the following chapter, but also treats this negotiation like a sport, embracing hedonistic speculation. As Joe prepares to sign a contract with the machine company, Piper, unbeknownst to the Fishers, meets with the company’s executives, claiming that he is the “head of the house” and “connected with the Pennsylvania Railroad” (128). As such, Piper demands that the

company advance Joe and the Fishers one-hundred thousand dollars, and to his surprise, the company agrees. Describing his actions to the rest of the Fisher family, Piper notes that he stretched the “truth” of his involvement in the project and played the company:

I simply told them that your Father was dead—and that I was acting in the capacity of business-adviser to you; and that, if this discovery of yours was as important as you had led me to believe it was, they were simply taking advantage of your youth by offering you fifty thousand dollars for it. And that I refused to allow you to negotiate further—unless they doubled the advance, market it at their expense, and one half the net—*sign* on the dotted line! (125-26)

In his notes about the play, Kelly describes his character of Piper as “stumbling into a fortune,” suggesting that Piper’s successful procuring of an extra \$50,000 for his brother-in-law is merely through chance and not through any discernible skill (qtd. in Lynch, “*The Show-Off*” 117). In some respects, Kelly’s analysis of his character is accurate, given that there is no guarantee that his bluff to the machine company would work. Yet by taking such a risk, Piper embraces the idea that one should approach his or her labor like sport, even though the only work he does is perform the role of a businessman. Like the investors who gambled in the stock market or hedonistic workers who embraced the element of the game in their work, Piper seems thrilled by the game that he plays.

For the Yiddish productions of *The Show-Off*, the conflicting views of work in the play coalesce into a unified statement about the relationship of work and working.

Audiences who saw the Boston-area productions discerned pathos in the Fisher family and in Aubrey Piper. In some respects, this can be attributed to how, as evidenced by the

*New York Times* review of the play, the onset of the Depression had altered the relationship of the play to its audience. In particular, a character like Piper, would have likely been interpreted by many audiences as a tragic figure in a post-stock market crash context. Yet the apparently positive receptions of the play can also be explained by how Yiddish theatre dealt with social conflict during the Depression. Like other Yiddish FTP productions, the play's conclusion resolves the inherent conflict between traditional work of the Fisher family and the hedonism of Aubrey Piper. For audiences of these productions that would have likely been unnerved by the changes in work in the 1920s and 1930s—especially immigrant populations that had long been told that the adoption of American models of work were the key to assimilation and financial success—the idea that traditional work could coexist with modern work would have been very reassuring.

### ***Mississippi Rainbow: Signifying Speculation***

In his study of gambling culture and luck throughout American history, Jackson Lears observes that Americans of all backgrounds have continually bet their fortunes and future happiness in games of chance. In many respects, gambling occurs in a number of different contexts, ranging from aspects of work to play and legitimate and illegitimate speculation. Describing how these games were impacted by the Depression, Lears argues that there was little distinction between numbers-running and investment. He asserts, “During the bull market of the late 1920s, even symbolic association with the formal economy was a source of legitimacy, but the Crash of 1929 revealed that there was not much difference between playing the numbers and speculating in stocks” (261). While this sentiment can be seen in texts like *To the Ladies* and *The Show-Off*, Lears argues that

in the African-American community, there remained a celebration of risk and chance that was not seen in white America:

Respect for chance remained woven into the fabric of black people's everyday life. This outlook reflected the centrality of play in African American cultural traditions. Conjuring was a ritual performance that depended on the playful assemblage of apparent junk. The conjurer's worldview was a syncretist agglomeration of hoodoo, Christianity, and numerology—another version of spiritual bricolage. Gambling reinforced this playful “science of the concrete,” and vice versa; the result was a symbiosis between betting and believing. Other pastimes also encouraged respect for risk and chance. The game of escalating insult called “the Dozens” was a form of improvised verbal play that placed a premium on maintaining poker-faced composure while taking outrageous social risks. (262)

Despite their deprivation, play and risk-taking remained an important element of African American culture. Even playing the Dozens, with that game's emphasis on a player's appearance or family situation, represents the embrace and celebration of risk through play. But perhaps more importantly, the intersection of risk and play signals a need for the creation of an abstract space in which the social and political issues repressing African Americans could be, at least temporarily, ignored:

Universal feelings of abandonment and isolation acquired an especially sharp significance for black people living under the American version of apartheid. Playing the blues was a way of exorcising the specter of random

force, turning cosmic uncertainty into a song. Jazz musicians sought escape from the controlled linearity of classical Western modes into a realm of pure play, beyond time....The aim was not a rejection but a loosening of cosmic order, the creation of a place of grace. (Lears 262-63)

Speculation is found throughout John C. Brownell's *Mississippi Rainbow*. A tale of a former laborer who speculates on a land-deal, the play was popular among audiences, especially in Chicago, and shows a connection between African American views of speculation and views of white labor. By featuring a character who outwits a white-owned riverboat company, the play shows the success an African American worker could have by signifying white-work norms. In addition, FTP productions of *Mississippi Rainbow* assert that speculation and play could create a safe space for black workers in Depression-era America.

Originally performed on Broadway under the title *Brain Sweat* (and copyrighted in 1932 under the title *Nothing But Trouble*), *Mississippi Rainbow* centers on Henry Washington, a laborer who is unceremoniously fired from his job working for a riverboat company two years before the play begins. Inspired, in part, by a book he finds on a floor, Washington declares that he will never again work with his hands. Instead, he begins a new job: thinking every day on a rocking chair by the river about a "big idea" that will lead to wealth and fame. While Henry's wife Carrie is initially supportive of her husband, the community at large and Washington's family condemn his thinking and perceived lack of work. Eventually, Carrie becomes too frustrated with her husband and throws Henry out of the house during a storm. When the storm clears, Carrie sends her son and brother-in-law to find Henry, but they only find his hat. Presuming the worst,

Carrie holds a funeral service for her husband. But Henry returns soon after, dressed in an expensive suit, and declares that he has found the solution to the family's money woes. Henry reveals that after borrowing some money from his friend, he has claimed riverside land that is coveted by a riverboat company and that the organization is willing to pay him a sizable amount of money for the rights to the estate. Henry's family is skeptical but when the owner of the riverboat company pays Henry a visit, Carrie and her family are shocked. However, the riverboat company representative tries to get Henry give up his claim, but Henry and his family force the representative to give Henry his asking price. The play ends with Henry handing out money to his in-laws and plotting his next big project.

Like other programs of Federal One, the FTP agency actually hired and recruited African American workers when other programs of the Second New Deal refused to. Indeed, one of Flanagan's proudest achievements was the establishment of the Negro Unit of the FTP (often termed the Race Unit by African American newspapers). The Negro Unit performed several of the unit's most famous plays, including the *Swing Mikado* and "Voodoo" *Macbeth*. But as many scholars of the FTP have noted, the plays performed by the Negro Unit were often highly problematic, especially in terms of reinforcing stereotypes. As Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff argues, several members of the Play Policy Bureau, which oversaw play selection for the agency after 1937, declared that they would not select plays for the Negro Unit that were "too militant" or "unproducible" and would avoid staging plays that eschewed racial stereotypes. But while care was taken to stage plays with the "the least problematic depiction of race relations," (Sklaroff 53),

other staged or planned productions drew the ire of the NAACP for the racial caricatures embedded in the plays (Sklarloff 60).<sup>6</sup>

In this context, the play *Mississippi Rainbow*, one of the most performed plays produced by the FTP, appears, at first glance, to be a play that only reinforces stereotypes of African Americans. As Jennifer Myers Visscher notes, the play incorporates dialect and characterizations which “figured [black characters] as idle, stupid, irrational, and naïve, all of which were stereotypes of black performers dating back to nineteenth-century minstrel theatre traditions that were recycled throughout early twentieth-century commercial and black musical theatre” (Myers Visscher 136). And while the play’s narrative is “an optimistic tale about racial uplift through intellectual means and self-determination,” the play is “also completely unbelievable” (Myers Visscher 135).

Yet, it is perhaps the play’s lack of realism that endeared it to black audiences in places like Chicago, where the play was performed in 1937.<sup>7</sup> Despite in-fighting within the Chicago Negro Theatre Unit, the play was received warmly in the black press.<sup>8</sup> Langston Hughes, when interviewed by *The Chicago Defender*, praised the production, noting that the cast was exceptionally good and the Chicago production was far superior to “the same drama played by New York artists” (10). In press reports, *The Defender* often praised the play, including the acting of Gladys Williams (who is mentioned in several news stories during 1937), and readers of *The Defender* praised the play as well, including the writer of a letter to the editor of the newspaper:

It was a pleasure to witness *Mississippi Rainbow* at the Princess theatre which had its formal opening last Sunday night. The play, though not entirely free from criticism is wholly without that offensive tinge which

we always find in plays written by white authors. This comedy truly gives one an evening full of entertainment. It is worth more than the price asked. Everyone should avail himself of the opportunity to see a play in which your Race does not exit at the little end of the horn. (Grant 17)

Henry's rejection of manual labor and embrace speculative work is greeted with hostility from several townspeople, but the play shows that these figures ignore the lack of distinction between reputable and immoral speculation. As Jackson Lears observes, American cultural history is, in part, a story of speculation and gambling countered by efforts from religious and political leaders to curtail such endeavors. Broadly speaking, while gambling and economy are inexorably intertwined, one of the major themes in American history has been the differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate speculation, such as the difference between "reputable" stock-trading and "disreputable" gambling or games of chance. In addition, critics who condemn disreputable speculation have often labeled the purveyors of such speculation, like Henry's land-grab, as lazy and as an affront to the will of God. In *Mississippi Rainbow*, Henry is primarily criticized by his sister-in-law Angie, who condemns his laziness and implores Carrie to leave him and marry someone else throughout the play. Henry is also condemned by the town's black minister, Reverend Tatum. Evoking language reminiscent of the Protestant work ethic, Tatum condemns not only Henry's view of work, but also as both a failure of a husband and a father and as an affront to God. Tatum says, "De good book say you gotta work six days a week but de only one in dis house dat works six days a week is yoh good wife— an' yoh son... You ought to be ashamed of yohself!" (23). Not only is Henry defying God, but he is also reaffirming the racist views of African Americans in the white middle

and working classes. At one point, Henry's son fights a white coworker who taunts the son by saying "I hear your father won the prize...For bein' the laziest nigger in town" (41). For these characters, Henry's actions only reinforce the stereotypes of African Americans.

However, *Mississippi Rainbow* shows that such proponents of traditional work are rather hypocritical figures. While they condemn Henry, two of the guardians of such work norms—Reverend Tatum and Angie—are hardly moral stalwarts. Part of Reverend Tatum's rationale for decrying Henry is that he desires Carrie and frequently implores her to leave her husband. Meanwhile, Angie lives off the activities of her husband who earns money by bootlegging, gambling, and playing pool, activities that are not that dissimilar from Henry's speculation. In addition to undermining the moral authority of proponents of work, the play also critiques those of the black working class who believe that they can obtain financial stability through traditional means. In particular, Henry's friend Flatfoot places his faith in the work of a white banker. Flatfoot says, "Mr. Burnham in de bank he say 'Mr. Mobly—you leave dat money here wid me 'til you cain't work no mo'. You jus' fohgit 'bout it,' he say, 'til de time come when nobody wants yoh 'roun' wid no money in yoh pants" (29). Henry laughs at this line of thinking, saying, "Ah'm sorry foh yuh. You jes' go on breakin' yoh back 'til de time come when you cain't enjoy nuffen—'til you is so ole an' crippled up dat yoh ready for de grave. Den dat money will give you a *nice funeral!*" (29). Not only does Henry object to the notion that manual labor pays rewards the worker but he also, by extension, critiques his friend's trust in the white-banking system.

While many of his antagonists embrace aspects of traditional labor, Henry views speculation as a form of empowerment. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues, African American language “Signifies” dominant discourse by applying double-meanings and irony so that the community can achieve some form of agency. Moreover, this signifying can function as satirical commentary on the dominant discourse. Drawing on Bakhtin’s notion of the hidden polemic, Gates asserts that authors like Ishmael Reed utilize parody as a form of satire that seeks to break through the stereotypes in society (110-112). Henry signifies the discourse of white work culture through his language, such as in his assessment of the “work” of the heroes of the Gilded Age, the Robber Barons. He says, “John D. Rock’feller or Peepont Mogun, dey puff on they cigars an’ think—keepin’ dey minds wide open” (20). As Henry describes them, the major figures of American capitalism “don’t do nuthin’ but think” and when the opportunity arises, they “hop” on it and “make big money” (49). And, in essence, Henry literally does the same thing when he simply sits by the riverbank, awaiting his big idea or opportunity. However, the difference lies in the fact that Henry’s actions get him labeled as “lazy” by his peers whereas the white businessmen are praised for their business acumen.

Not only does Henry’s signifying satirize white work norms, but he also helps create a space of play in which his family can have power in the face of white oppression. This is especially crucial in the play’s conclusion when Mr. Covington, the representative of the steamboat company, visits Henry’s home to discuss Henry’s land claim. While Henry expects Covington to pay him for the land adjacent to the river, Covington instead tries to coerce Henry into giving up his claim by noting that the riverboat company “may not need that land for twenty years” and that Flatfoot’s down-payment on the land is

basically worthless (106). Despite Covington's pressure, Henry refuses to waver from his demand of a ten-thousand dollar payment for the rights to the land. Henry's stance infuriates Covington, who has already successfully convinced Henry's friend he will lose his money because Henry secured it under "false pretenses"(109). But Henry, Carrie, and Lucy—their soon to be daughter-in-law—do not succumb to Covington's demands, in part, because of Henry's example. His speculative work has created a space in which he and his family can challenge white work norms. As Carrie demands that Covington pay up and agree to the land transfer, she declares that his tactics are feeble:

Yoh cain't tell me nuffen Ah don' know already. Even dat girl got yoh number. Yoh'd nevah come to dis house if what yoh ben tryin' to make us b'lieve wuz true. Yoh'd a sit tight in yoh office 'til mah husban' come crawlin' to yoh. Yoh ben tryin' to pull yoh own fat out'n de fiah cause he got up too early in de mawnin' foh yuh. Now yoh's gwine to do some fancy crawlin' Mistah Slave Drivah, 'cause yoh's flat's a pancake. (111-12)

Carrie's speech shows Covington that his manipulation is useless, and that he is now powerless. In particular, her invoking the term "Slave Drivah" signals a subversion of white power structures. Moreover, Henry and his family have beaten Covington at his own game. The riverboat representative is in the rare position where his company's former employee has outwitted him and, by extension, the company. In turn, Henry's signifying has also demonstrated to his family how to resist Covington's demands, even though other family and friends bend to his pressure. Washington and his family not only

turn the tables on Covington, but also undermine the oppression of white society by playing by the rules of white businessmen.

As Henry declares his victory at the play's conclusion and begins to think about his next big idea, we are left to ponder the significance of his victory. There is some legitimacy to Myers Visscher's assertion that the play's ending is unbelievable, as there was always the chance that Henry's plan would have failed or that he would have never noticed the potential for the land. Yet, while the productions of *Mississippi Rainbow* and the text are problematic in a number of regards, based on the audience reaction in Chicago, black theatergoers found something in the play that resonated with them. While much of that enjoyment could have arisen from audiences seeing an African American outwit a white business rival by signifying the language and attitudes of the white class, the FTP productions of the play show a character who was celebrated in 1930s African American culture, one who was willing to gamble in order to escape the his working life. By embracing the play of speculation and by emulating business tactics of white bankers and industrialists, Henry and his family prosper in spite of the limitations placed on them by white society. In this respect, *Mississippi Rainbow* fulfills one of the major goals of the FTP: by celebrating Henry as someone who is able to outwit white society, the play likely uplifted its audience.

## **Conclusion**

In the conclusion of his essay, "Sweat or Die," Lutz argues that the hedonistic work ethic has continued to find resonance with contemporary workers. He writes, "As in the case of Weber's prematurity... analysts ...may have been too quick to cite the demise

of an ethic, a hedonistic work ethic, that still suggests to many middle-class workers, especially professionals, that their “species beings,” in Marx’s terms, find fullest expression in the pleasures of work” (281). Even today, the call to “do what you love” remains strong in the rhetoric surrounding work, especially for workers in the middle class. However, the recession of 2008 and long-term underemployment for younger workers has forced many people to question the feasibility of hedonistic work.

As detailed in this chapter, the 1930s saw a similar debate over the guiding work principle of the 1920s. *Ah, Wilderness!*, challenges hedonistic work through its portrayal of the incompatibility of pleasure and work. For other plays, however, hedonistic work held promise for workers who were disenfranchised from society. *The Show-Off*, reassures Yiddish audiences that workers who embrace aspects of pleasurable work could coexist with traditional workers and uphold the moral tenets of older forms of labor. In *To the Ladies*, men are shown to be incapable of adhering to any form of work, hedonistic or ascetic, but women could outperform their husbands if given the opportunity to do so. Finally, the productions of *Mississippi Rainbow* celebrate a character who is able to outwit white society by signifying white speculation and free himself from the oppression of white work and social norms. In several respects, the plays examined in this chapter in which the characters discover agency through pleasurable work come to better represent the tenets of hedonistic work than the middle class workers portrayed in these texts. Indeed, for Elise, Aubrey, and Henry, success is found not through back-breaking labor, but through hedonistic work.

### Chapter Three Notes

1. Lutz describes that different prominent doctors prescribed different treatment for the mental alienation and physical fatigue of neurasthenia. S. Weir Mitchell advised patients to rest while George Beard utilized electric therapy to reinvigorate the body (Doing Nothing 141-42).

2. In total, *Ah, Wilderness!* was performed eleven times by the FTP: Des Moines, Iowa (1937), Cincinnati (1937), Peoria, Illinois (1937), Miami, Florida (1937), Los Angeles (1938), Salem, Massachusetts (1938), San Diego (1938), Newark, New Jersey (1938), New Orleans (1938), Holyoke, Massachusetts (1938), and Seattle (1938) (George Mason 5-6).

3. In his review, Woolcott praises the play as an “uncommonly refreshing entertainment” but “incongruous” and settles on a “B” grade for the play.

4. *The Show-Off* has been filmed four times. There is a 1926 version starring Louise Brooks, a 1930 film entitled *Men Are Like That*, a 1934 version with Spencer Tracy as Piper, and a 1946 with Red Skelton as the main character.

5. In addition to the productions by the Harlem Unit and the Yiddish Unit in Chelsea, *The Show-Off* was also produced in Miami (1936); Cambridge and Holyoke, Massachusetts (1936); Detroit (1938), and Sterling, Illinois (1938) (George Mason 142-43).

6. In particular, the NAACP was angered by the Newark Unit’s plan to stage Octavus Roy Cohen’s play *Come Seven*.

7. In addition to its Chicago productions, *Mississippi Rainbow* was also

performed in Cleveland (1936), New York (1938), Seattle (1938), Hartford (1938), Newark, New Jersey (1938), Harlem (1938), and Cedar Grove, NJ (1938) (George Mason 104).

8. As Rena Fraden shows, the Chicago Negro Unit was beset by internal problems, especially a battle between professionally-trained actors and the creative team, including unit director Charles DeSheim and author Richard Wright who was working for the unit as its publicity director. (112-114)

#### **Chapter 4: Confidence Artist Comedies: The Work of the Con**

In 1845, Edgar Allan Poe wrote an essay, “Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences,” that describes the con artist (diddler in nineteenth-century parlance) as a master of originality, audacity, and perseverance who utilizes these attributes in small-scale activity. Poe asserts there is a fine line between the con artist and the businessman. “Should he ever be tempted into magnificent speculation, he then, at once, loses his distinctive features, and becomes what we term ‘financier,’” he says (607). However, unlike the businessman who is publicly lauded by American culture, the con artist must celebrate his victories in private:

Your true diddler winds up all with a grin. But this nobody sees but himself. He grins when his daily work is done -- when his allotted labors are accomplished -- at night in his own closet, and altogether for his own private entertainment. He goes home. He locks his door. He divests himself of his clothes. He puts out his candle. He gets into bed. He places his head upon the pillow. All this done, and your diddler grins. This is no hypothesis. It is a matter of course. I reason a priori, and a diddle would be no diddle without a grin. (Poe 607)

Poe’s description of the confidence artist is hardly unique. The con artist or swindler is one of the most ubiquitous characters in American cultural history. In many texts, the con artist character complicates the supposedly stable concepts of work. While swindling has long been condemned by many moralists, especially those who considered it antithetical to work, the con requires a commitment to labor like other more reputable forms of work. In many of these stories, the con man is not a nefarious figure, but a cultural hero who is

able to outwit his or her contemporaries. Poe's diddler not only needs to rest from his labor, but is also celebrated as a figure who outwits even more nefarious figures in society.

This ubiquity of the con artist in American culture is also seen on the FTP stage. In fact, some of the most performed plays in the agency's history feature confidence artists. While many of these plays were considered farces and cheap entertainments by then-contemporary reviewers, the con plays of the FTP were some of the most complex texts produced by the agency. In John Murray and Alan Boretz's *Room Service*, the lines between conning and investing and swindling and capitalism are blurred, and the play reminds audiences that the con artist is, under the right circumstances, a heroic figure. The heroic con artist is also portrayed in John Brownell's *The Nut Farm* when an aspiring director out-swindles his rival to save his family. However, the play is also critical of marks, arguing that the work of a heroic con artist is wasted if a mark has not learned from being grifted. In Lynn Root and Harry Clork's *The Milky Way*, a promoter fixes a series of boxing matches, which should anger fans. However, the fans are complicit in the swindle, and the play's performances show that men and women can swindle the institutions that have long swindled them. Additionally, Paul Vulpius' *Help Yourself* not only shows the increasing acceptance of swindling in the business world, but also suggests that one's work is no longer simply judged by the product of that work, but more so by the performance of the worker. Finally, the con plays of the FTP fulfilled what Hopkins and Flanagan believed their program could do: uplift the spirits of their audiences. By demonstrating how even a confidence scheme required dedication and craft, the con plays restored faith in the power of work. In addition, the plays promoted a

vision of the common man as able to outsmart repressive institutions and find success through the con.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Meaning and the Work of the Con**

As this project has noted, one of the key ideological tenets of the New Deal was the idea that restoring the value of work for laborers was important to reinvigorating the Depression-era United States. Given this promotion of traditional work norms, it does not seem plausible that the New Deal stage would embrace plays such as the confidence artist texts examined in this chapter. Indeed, throughout history, Americans have long viewed the con as antithetical to traditional values of work. Since colonial times, commentators such as Cotton Mather have decried the dishonesty of the swindle and its purveyors as immoral actors (Halttuen 43). When contrasted with ideals of the Protestant work ethic, the con appears to bear none of the traditional hallmarks of work since swindling does not mirror the ideals of craft, diligence in labor, frugality, and visibility of one's prosperity. In contrast, the hallmarks of the swindle are duplicity, fraud, deception, and contempt for "noble labor," which was for many the biggest sin perpetuated by swindlers. As John Alcott noted, the sin of the con was twofold: first "nothing is actually made, or produced" and, second, the confidence man comes to "regard the moderate but constant and certain rewards of industrious exertion as insipid" (qtd. in Halttunen 17). Dishonesty in the con was particularly disreputable to many observers. Many nineteenth-century Americans, viewed insincerity an expression of moral decay. As Karen Halttunen observes, pre-Civil War antebellum culture idealized values that contrasted with those of the painted women and confidence men that were ruining society in the minds of many

Americans. Yet the role of the confidence artist was changing during the Depression. The stories of swindling during this era demonstrated how swindling and work shared far more connections than many observers would admit, and one of the important tasks of the FTP con plays was to restore the status of the con artist as a cultural hero.

While the swindler has long drawn the ire of Americans, Gary Lindberg asserts that “the confidence man is a covert cultural hero for Americans,” occupying “a central place in our popular mythology” (3). For Lindberg, the appeal of the confidence artist in American culture is, in part, predicated on two key situations: first, the con artist “*makes* belief” as “everyone around him believes in some larger promise.” A good con artist is able to skillfully employ his tools to successfully run a swindle, and by doing so, “creates an inner effect, an impression, an experiences of confidence” in those he or she is swindling (Lindberg 7). Whether the con man is a professional criminal, a booster, a gamesman, or a healer, the appeal of the con for marks (as well as readers of con artist narratives) is the creation of an idea that they can hold onto, even if the idea is without substance. Second, Lindberg argues that the con artist suggests that “the boundaries [of the social structure] are already fluid, [and] that there is ample space between society’s official rules and its actual tolerances” (9). Building on Lindberg’s analysis, William E. Lenz notes that Simon Suggs, the main character of Johnson Jones Hooper’s 1845 novel *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs*, became a cultural hero to mid nineteenth-century readers who were keenly aware of the “conflict between the increasing powers of the federal government and states’ rights, and of the sectional, economic, and social tensions caused by slavery.” Lenz says:

Captain Simon Suggs gives shape to these anxieties; Johnson J. Hooper imposes the order of comedy upon the chaos of these cultural fears, temporarily resolving them for the reader...In the humorous successes and failures of the confidence man, the reader perceives a fictional model of boom and bust, one that allows him to reconcile antithetical attitudes of hope and fear, confidence and suspicion, and optimism and pessimism...The novelty of this position dulls the reader's judgment of the confidence man and momentarily encourages the reader to laugh at the fleecing of self-serving of self-righteous gulls. To participate imaginatively in such humorous confidence games allows the reader to envision the worst image of Americans within the safe confines of comic fiction and to discharge the anxieties this image creates...Like a tall tale of a backwoods hero lassoing and riding a cyclone, a confidence man story images and domesticates the reader's real fears. (Lenz 21-22)

For Lindberg and Lenz, the importance of the con artist in American culture is how the figure not only provides a safe space for readers to work through their respective contemporary problems, but how the character promotes its own mythology and meaning. Lenz says, "Like the new country, the confidence man seems to offer wealth, comfort, and success" and represents for readers "the possibility of realizing the dream of success in the new country" (20).

This nineteenth-century view of the con artists as heroic was transformed with the onset of the twentieth century. As Lenz argues, the swindler—a product of the young country—was no longer considered to be a figure of innocence by the American public.

He asserts that a number of factors influenced this cultural shift: the closing of the frontier, the entrance of the United States onto the international political scene, and the rise of urban society. For Lenz, the most significant historical factors in the demise of the con artist were the effects of the World War I and the Depression. As such, the confidence artists that appear in American literature after 1920, like Jay Gatsby, Miss Lonelyhearts, and Elmer Gantry, are “painful victims betrayed by a vision of the new country that retains only the power to delude rather than to fulfill” (Lenz 199). Lenz notes, these “manipulators share little of the form and function of conventional nineteenth-century” confidence artists:

When twentieth-century versions of the confidence man appear (for other than nostalgic or purely historical purposes), they usually don one of three often-overlapping guises: they may be secondary characters whose main function is to reveal the helplessness and alienation of the protagonist as victim. Alternatively, they may appear as self-deluded manipulators who fall prey either to the social forms they initially juggle or to their unfounded confidence in their control over their own destinies. Last, shifty characters may act as symbols of the forces of universal disorder, victimization, and betrayal that seem representative of the modern age.

(200)

Lenz argues the confidence artist that is seen in the Yankee or Frontiersman archetypes of the nineteenth century has been reduced to an agent that simply manipulates another character or is representative of the alienating elements of twentieth-century society. In his assessment, and for many con artist scholars, the heroic and larger-than-life character

that populated the literature and mythology of the 1800s was irrevocably altered by the forces of both modernity and by such events as the First World War and the Great Depression (Lenz 200).

While cultural and social issues altered the meaning of the con artist in much of the literature of the 1920s and 1930s, presenting con artists on the federal stage was not simply about restoring the heroic elements of the con artist. These plays also utilized the character to comment on work issues of the era. While scholars of the confidence artist have frequently focused on the character's role in allaying the fears of mid nineteenth-century readers about the issues that would lead to the Civil War, they tend to under-analyze how conning reconciled fears about the changing role of work by illustrating the similarities between the con and traditional norms of work. While the Civil War-era con artist was not as prevalent in 1920s and 1930s literature, these decades saw a number of first-person narratives written by con artists themselves. In particular, these reports of conning in the 1920s often show the comparisons between con artist labor, and the work of the stage, and highlight the overlap to virtues of the Protestant work ethic. As many of these narratives suggest, even the smallest swindle, often termed a "short con," require an extensive amount of preparation to execute properly. For example, a con such as the shell game requires the swindler to practice his or her slight-of-hand performance and necessitates the need for several "shills" that work with the swindler to act as innocent bystanders. Additionally, as Joseph Maurer says, many confidence artists find they must be versed in "business and financial matters, have a glib knowledge of society gossip, and enough of an acquaintance with art, literature, and music to give an illusion of culture." As such, many con artists work by reading "ten to a dozen newspapers daily" in order to

keep up to date on news (158). The narrator of a *Collier's Illustrated Weekly* article from 1921, entitled "Fool's Gold: How I Sold You On Your Fake Mining Stock," argues the perfect con is like a play complete with preparation and act. The narrator writes, "A perfect con game is made up of five or six consecutive and closely knit parts, stages or acts, absolutely like a play in a theatre. Each must be put forward and carefully worked out or acted out in proper sequence, or there is no game" (7). In the *Collier's* article, the unnamed swindler details how much staging is needed in order to convince his marks to agree to invest in his fraudulent company. In order to fully convince a mark of a mining con, the author argues that a swindler must procure an actual piece of land that is the mine "or what purports to be a mine," form a company, issue stock certificates, and prepare the literature and letters. Additionally, a con man must take care to make sure that the promises of his correspondence and literature must be so ambiguous as to not legally guarantee the mark anything(8). For the mining scam, the con artist must then get an "engineer" to issue a false report on the mine's reputability, while constructing work buildings and installing antiquated machinery near the mine to make it seem as if work is in progress ("Fool's Gold" 19).

By connecting the con with traditional labor, these testimonials and narratives undercut the systemic conning that was present in nineteenth and twentieth century America. For the actual con artists themselves, there is little or no difference between their labor and the work of "the self-made man" that is praised in American rhetoric. As the famous 1940s con man Yellow Kid Weil argues, discussions of the con ignore the unethical practices of the mark. While most marks are "supposedly honest and respectable," Weil notes that moralists ignore the fact that marks are completely

entranced with the “opportunity to get rich quick” (18). When the mark turns the con man into the police, he is upheld as a hero, but society conveniently forgets that he is a “would-be fleecer” who has been outsmarted by a swindler (Weil 11). Critiquing this double standard, Weil concludes that it is not simply the con man who is dishonest but everyone as “all have larceny in their hearts” (12). As Weil was aware, American history is littered with swindles perpetuated by both criminals and reputable businessmen. Many of the key panics and financial crises of American history have been, at least in part, precipitated by widespread swindling. For example, the 1843 Panic was partly the result of massive counterfeiting by both petty criminals and bankers. Moreover, many of the most celebrated figures in American business were de facto con men. In the years after the Civil War, the Robber Barons engaged in a war of one-upmanship, with figures like Vanderbilt and Gould trying to outwit one another for control of the Erie Railroad (Lindberg 206). In his analysis of nineteenth-century finance, Stephen Mihm asserts that conning and finance are “to a certain extent,” interlocked as “the story of one is the story of the other”(13). He argues that it is a testament to the mythology of the work ethic that it has persisted in American society when dishonest swindling has been rampant throughout history. Noting the preponderance of counterfeiting in nineteenth-century America, Mihm argues this history does not resemble to Weber’s spirit of capitalism, as finance and conning do not bear the attributes of “plodding, methodical, gradual pursuit of wealth.” Instead, Mihm argues, the true American financial ethos “captures the get-rich-quick scheme, the confidence game, and the mania for speculation” that obsessed not just antebellum America, but that continues to grip American society into the present day (13).

While the confidence artist in twentieth-century culture does not, broadly speaking, appear to have the mythological aura of the swindler in the nineteenth century, the confidence plays of the FTP strove to restore some of the heroic qualities to the character and provide audiences with a model of resistance to the repressive elements of capitalism. Lenz and other scholars of the con seem dismissive of the swindler in post nineteenth-century literature and theatre. In particular, Lenz's assertion that portrayals of the confidence artist in American culture post-1900 are different is not without merit. In fact, the con artist of the 1920s and 1930s is not the jovial swindler of Twain's novels or the industrious Yankee of 1840s stories. Instead, the FTP confidence artist is often forced into swindling as a last recourse by economic or social factors or when protecting his or her community or family. The confidence artists of these plays are, at times, deluded by their own inflated senses of self-worth. But this delusion is spurred on by desperation and these characters use the tools and techniques of capitalism for self-preservation. Additionally, the con plays of the FTP sought to promote a new class of hero for their audiences. On one level, these plays portray confidence artists as figures that could outsmart their opponents, thereby scoring a victory for their families and communities and for the audiences as well. Part of the popular response to a play like *Help Yourself* can be attributed to that play's portrayal of a banking industry being outwitted by the "little guy." Moreover, these plays presented conning as an activity that undermined traditional norms of work. While the characters of these plays act heroically against oppressive figures, the con plays also demonstrate that the solution to repressive labor was the performance of work, which as Chris Stringer declares in *Help Yourself*, is the "illusion of work"—not real work itself.

### ***Room Service: The Privileged Confidence Scheme***

Chapter Two examined *Room Service* in comparison to Kenneth Burke's "Address to the Third International Congress." As a backstage comedy, the performances *Room Service* suggests that the FTP needed to be more proactive in limiting the content of its leftist productions given that many of the agency's most vocal critics focused their criticism on the political content of the plays. In this context, the performances of *Room Service* showed that the long-term survival of the FTP was dependent on producing plays that adhered the beliefs and tastes of its audiences. But while the text certainly is critical of overtly leftist theatre, *Room Service* also functions as a tale of confidence men and women. *Room Service* shows how embedded the con artist is in a number of fields and industries and also strives to restore the archetype of the heroic confidence artist by privileging the swindler characters, such as Gordon Miller, who cons out of self-preservation.

Throughout the play, *Room Service* demonstrates how embedded the con is in America. Indeed, nearly every aspect of the play is predicated on swindling. In particular, the play makes direct connections between swindling in the theatrical realm and in the larger business world. In portraying the stage as a place of confidence schemes, *Room Service* draws on a long tradition of the intertwining of theatre and swindling in American culture. Puritan criticisms of the stage often focused on the falsity of the stage and the dishonesty of its actors in language that directly paralleled the condemnations of the con. In the nineteenth century, the rise of traveling medicine shows across the Midwest furthered connected the stage with the con in the minds of many Americans. As James Harvey Young notes, medicine shows featured either solo performers, such as

William Avery Rockefeller who “used his talents as marksman, ventriloquist, and hypnotist” to sell his “patented” herbal remedies, or featured sprawling entertainments that combined a number of theatrical elements:

Here full evenings of drama, vaudeville, musical comedy, Wild West shows, minstrels, magic, burlesque, dog and pony circuses, not to mention Punch and Judy, pantomime, movies, menageries, bands, parades and pie-eating contests, have been thrown in with Ho-Ang-Nan, the great Chinese herb remedy, and med shows have played in opera houses, halls, storerooms, ball parks, show boats and tents, large and small, as well as doorways, street corners and fairs. (189)

The similarities between the con and theatre are represented throughout *Room Service*. Not only is Gordon Miller constantly thinking of scams and excuses to tell to hotel management, but also one of Miller’s right-hand men is allegorically named “Faker” and specializes in portraying a medical doctor named England. In addition, most of Miller’s actors pretend to be maids or waiters in order to avoid grab a lunch from the hotel’s kitchen. The play suggests that in order to survive on the stage, an aspiring actor or playwright has to learn how to swindle, such as the writer of *Godspeed*, Leo Davis. Davis, who has come to the Great White Way to seek his fortune, transforms from a naïve amateur to a professional when he becomes a con man. When the hotel auditor Wagner threatens to throw the company out of the hotel during the first performance of *Godspeed*, Davis suggests to Miller that if he is “dead,” the company cannot be thrown out of the hotel. As such, when Wagner reenters the hotel room, Davis pretends to drink a bottle of iodine and fake his death. When Wagner runs from the room to begin to search

for help after finding Davis' body, Davis and Miller agree to keep the stunt up until the end of the initial performance of the play. Delighted with this particular con, Davis exclaims, "You wouldn't think I came from Oswego five days ago!" (63).

Like most of the confidence plays detailed in this chapter, *Room Service* also shows that the con is prevalent in the business world and that even the most ardent proponent of traditional work norms will tolerate swindling. The character who represents the intersection of the con and capitalism is the hotel auditor Wagner. While Wagner is the antagonist of Miller, he is, in contrast to the clueless bankers in *Help Yourself*, not an incompetent or unethical businessman. Wagner's attempt to throw out Miller and his cohorts represent one of the few instances in the con plays in which a businessman actually seeks to act as a legitimate businessman. As he comments on how badly Miller maintains his paperwork, Wagner differentiates himself from swindling by contrasting his business ethics with Miller's. He says, "No files....no records...any normal business man would have waited for the cash to come through instead of charging all this junk!" (54). Not only does Wagner show some business ethics, but he also is trying to do his job: Miller's company owes the hotel a considerable amount of money, and Wagner's duty is to recoup those losses. Despite his condemnations of Miller's nefarious record keeping and other swindles, Wagner ultimately tolerates the con games because they end up benefiting the hotel and his career. While Wagner spends much of Act Three attempting to stop production of *Godspeed* when he discovers that Miller is using hotel funds to stage the play, his protests die away when the owner of the hotel declares the play to be a success and promises Wagner a promotion for his hard work. Yet Wagner's reluctant tolerance of the swindling around him suggests that the

performances of *Room Service* acknowledged that even the most ardent proponents of traditional work norms could be swayed by the allure of swindling.

Despite the ubiquity of swindling in *Room Service*, the play privileges a certain type of swindling. In this sense, the cons of Miller and, to a lesser extent, his actors, signal the play's attempts to reinvigorate the heroic con artist by demonstrating that there are times when swindling becomes necessary. While there has been, at times, little distinction between the con and theatre, *Room Service* shows that the reason for the actors' swindling is based more on hardship than greed. Like the acting community as a whole during the Depression, the actors under Miller's employ are living in poor economic conditions. Miller and his fellow actors attempt to outwit hotel management because they live in dire circumstances. A typical day for Miller's actors consists not of rehearsals but of thinking about food and worrying about pay. Even Miller declares, "I've gone without eating for days" (31). In addition, the actors are so poor they cannot even afford the most basic of services. When Binion is thrown out of his apartment, he cannot even afford cab fare to travel to his former hotel to gather his belongings. Miller's actors are so desperate, they even consider selling various items in their hotel rooms, going so far as to attempt to pawn Davis' typewriter on the black market when he falls asleep.

Given this depravation, Miller's swindling serves to protect his community of actors. As Gerald Weales argues in his overview of the stage in the Great Depression, many of the plays performed on the 1930s stage focused on characters who were forced into fighting institutional forces for the protection of their communities, and in this light, *Room Service* is no exception. While Miller certainly seems to enjoy the thrill of the con or the performance of duplicity, he is far more concerned with putting on *Godspeed* for

the professional and financial good of his theatrical company and the actors he employs. In this sense, Miller's swindling actually compares to Wagner's tolerance of the conning. Both men are complicit in the big con of *Room Service* in order to protect their respective communities: Miller's acting troupe and his actors and Wagner's hotel and his employees. In addition, Miller's dreams about his life post-*Godspeed* not only signal a further connection to his acting troupe, but also suggest another series of critiques about how the FTP should be concerned with the security of actors rather than leftist agitprop. Miller uses the collective pronoun "we" as he describes a dream of financial success driven by ticket sales. He says "that dough will come rolling in so fast we won't be able to count it." In the same passage, he fantasizes about building a theater, a permanent place for him and his acting company (59). Even if these comments are not in direct reference to the FTP, Miller's protection of his actors configures him as a heroic confidence artist. In this sense, Miller's cons become an almost noble activity.

In the context of its FTP performances, *Room Service* restores the status of the swindler as cultural hero by portraying Miller's conning as justified and necessary to protect his community of actors. By extension, the swindling components of the play build upon the play's critique of the FTP by reminding audiences and the FTP itself that the primary charge of the agency was providing theater workers with a professional safety net during the Depression. Beyond the stage, *Room Service* shows that even the most supposedly upstanding businessmen are susceptible to the allure of the confidence game or are perfectly happy to promote the rhetoric of hard work while engaging in their schemes. In these ways, *Room Service* restores the role of the con man to its audiences by presenting the swindler as someone who blurs the lines between societal norms of work.

### ***The Nut Farm: Problematic Marks***

In her historical analysis of female confidence artists of the nineteenth century, Kathleen De Grave celebrates certain historical confidence women, like those women who dressed as soldiers and fought for the Union in the Civil War, but also reminds her readers of the problematic nature of swindlers. While De Grave appreciates the confidence artist as “some nineteenth-century observers did,” she also acknowledges that her admiration for these figures “is heavily tintured by...repugnance for what many of the confidence women actually did.” For her, the “myth of the confidence artist typically glosses over the pain caused by deception” and “the deleterious psychological effects on the victims” (15).

The portrayal of the con artists and marks in John Brownell’s *The Nut Farm* parallels De Grave’s observations. The play features the con artist as both the conniving manipulator present in 1920s literature, and the more heroic figure from novels from earlier decades. The villain of the play, a nefarious Hollywood producer, attempts to defraud a family, but an aspiring director, Willie Barton, manages to save his family’s savings by counter-swindling the producer. Yet the play also offers audiences a complicated portrayal of the marks involved in a confidence scheme. In one sense, Brownell’s play presents the Barton family as victims of an unethical con, paralleling portrayals of the underclass in several prominent 1930s novels such as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Day of the Locust*. However, at the play’s conclusion, the Bartons, aside from Willie, do not appear to have learned anything from their experiences. If the con artist is to function as a hero, the play indicates that those who he or she protects must not succumb to the same impulses that endangered them in the first place.

*The Nut Farm* centers on the Barton family, who are recent transplants to Los Angeles, California. Helen, the Barton daughter, encounters the film producer Harold Von Holland, who promises to make Helen a star in a film using the investment of Helen's husband, Bob, who originally planned to invest the money in a nut farm. Willie, Helen's brother and an aspiring director looking for his big-break, is not taken-in by Holland's swindle. To recoup his family's money, Willie volunteers to direct Holland's film, which by design, is a terribly written melodrama that Holland knows will tank at the box office. Flattering Holland and his family, Willie proclaims that the script is great and then directs the actors to overact during filming. Willie reedits the film into an over-the-top comedy which infuriates Holland. The con man signs the film's rights over to Willie. After a showing of the film, several legitimate Hollywood studios fight over the rights to the film, while the filmmaker Mack Sennett offers Willie a position as a director with a salary of "seven hundred and fifty dollars a week" (100). Having taken ownership of the film from Holland, Willie restores his brother-in-law's savings and Helen's husband buys a nut farm.

Unlike Brownell's other play that was performed by the FTP, *Mississippi Rainbow*, *The Nut Farm* did not garner much attention from the press, the public, or even from the FTP itself. While the play was apparently popular with regional acting troupes during the 1930s, the original run of the play was short-lived, perhaps as a result of its premier in the same month as the 1929 Stock Market Crash. On the FTP stage, the play was only performed twice by acting troupes in Manchester, New Hampshire, and Springfield, Illinois (neither of which appears to have attracted much, if any, press coverage) (George Mason 113). Additionally, the play was adapted into a 1935 film that,

aside from the presence of the actor Wallace Ford, *The New York Times* dismissed with this summation: “There is not much else for it to boast about” (“*The Nut Farm: At the Criterion*”).

*The Nut Farm* portrays its main subject—the film industry—as rife with conning. As playwright, Brownell had an intimate knowledge of the inner-workings of Hollywood in the 1920s that certainly influenced his script. An actor who appeared on stage and in short films during the 1910s and 1920s, Brownell eventually began to write “scenarios” for the Eastern Film Corporation. By the end of the 1920s, Brownell had relocated to California and was working full-time as a scenario editor for Universal when he was not writing his own playscripts and screenplays (“John C. Brownell”). His experiences in Hollywood almost certainly influenced the portrayals of directors and writers in *The Nut Farm* as de facto con artists.

While the play privileges Willie’s con over Holland’s swindling, Brownell also demonstrates how much work both men put into their respective con jobs. To perpetuate his swindles, Holland has built, like the unnamed con artist in the *Collier’s* piece, an entire façade corporation that gives the Bartons a false sense of trust in him. He holds auditions in a rented studio, has a “leading man,” and employs a director and a screenwriter, J. Clarence Biddleford, so adept at writing bad treatments that he is delighted when one of his accomplices calls his screenplay the damndest, rottenest piece of junk (56). Moreover, Holland is skilled at manipulating his marks. To convince Helen and Bob that Helen is a star-in-the-making, Holland uses touched-up photographs to convince them that Helen has the face for the big screen. As one of Holland’s associates notes, Holland’s “soft-focus tests” of Helen “convinced the suckers” (56). These

attributes of an immoral con artist are contrasted by Willie's attributes in his counter-swindling of Holland. To be fair, Willie incorporates many of the same techniques of swindling that his rival uses. For instance, Willie is adept at false flattery, such as when he praises his sister's acting, and when he dedicates himself to either the performance or the work of the con, including toiling to finish his version of the film by locking himself in a room for four days without sleep (98).

Holland's swindling suggests an intersection between the immorality of the contemporary swindle and capitalism as represented by Hollywood. The play indicates that those affected by swindling are victims who suffer from not only the con, but also from contemporary society. Throughout the play, the rest of the Barton family struggles to comprehend the fact that swindling is a norm in both California and American society. As such, they represent the gullible people which are also seen in Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust*. In that novel, Hollywood is, as Morris Dickstein notes, "peopled not with stars or powerful producers but with set designers who pull down thirty dollars a week, would-be starlets who turn tricks to make ends meet...and cowboys looking for work as extras in horse operas" (310). Dickstein argues that these people in West's novel are the "bit players and hangers-on" who had "nowhere to go" and for whom "California was a dead end" (Dickstein 339). In this spirit, West focuses "on the madness of the crowd, the rabid violence of the cheated, the bored, the disappointed," Dickstein says (339). The Bartons are not just affected by the allure of Hollywood, but also represent those affected by the Depression itself. As Act Three begins, we learn that Bob, Helen, and Mrs. Barton, after learning they have been conned, are close to destitution. Bob is attempting to pawn whatever he can and remit his rented furniture to the rental company. Mrs. Barton

struggles to picture her future, lamenting that the family's only choice is to head back to New Jersey. Helen has been crying herself to sleep at night, which prevents her husband and mother from getting their rest. In particular, Helen is despondent since she fears being ridiculed by former friends and neighbors once they return to New Jersey, and she has come to blame the entire situation on her own stupidity. Although Willie will eventually turn the tables on Holland, for a time, *The Nut Farm* appears to align more with more serious literary treatments of the effects of cons on their marks during the era. For example, the destitution of the Barton family recalls the desperation of the Joad family after they realize they have been duped with the promise of work in California. California, Hollywood, and America are for the Bartons, like the Joads, a place of hollow dreams. The play suggests such connections in its opening lines when Mrs. Barton reminds Willie that his promises about California were not true. Commenting on a thunderstorm, Mrs. Barton lashes out at her son and his claims that California would be nothing but fame, fortune, and "eternal sunshine"(11). Just as the Joads discover that California is not the same place promoted in the ads for orange pickers, the Bartons find that Hollywood is not the same place that Willie described in his letters home.

Despite the play's portrayal of the Bartons as an underclass, the play also critiques their desires for fame and fortune, which permitted them to be conned. At the conclusion of the play, both Bob and Helen apparently have not recognized that the desires that nearly cost them their security still control them. By extension, the play suggests that the heroic work of a con artist to protect his community could be spoiled if the marks still believe in the fantasies that endangered them in the first place. In the early parts of the play, Brownell portrays Bob and Helen as prototypical marks overeager to believe

Holland's claims of fame and fortune. In this sense, the play echoes the con man Yellow Kid Weil's criticism of marks as "having larceny in their hearts." Throughout the play, Willie's sister Helen is portrayed as the star-struck ingénue, believing the promises of Holland and Biddleford; she tells her husband how the studio believes she has "*divine fire*" and that she will be a star, making a small fortune in the process (22). Likewise, Helen's husband Bob, who purports to be a hard-working man who is wise with money, also throws himself wholeheartedly into Holland's scheme. When Bob sees the screen-tests of his wife acting, he becomes fully convinced of her potential and agrees to fund fifty percent of the film, arguing that he has the business sense to know a potential windfall when he sees it (40). Yet despite their being conned, at the conclusion of the play, Helen and Bob are still devoted to the fantasy of fame and fortune that nearly cost them their security. Even though it was Willie who redirected her poor dramatic acting talents into comedy, Helen still believes in her abilities as a professional actor. As she declares at the conclusion of the play, much to the chagrin of the other characters, "So I was a success after all!—Now for my next picture"(100). In addition, Bob still believes that the nut farm, which he can now purchase since Willie has recouped his investment from Holland, will be a financial windfall despite his lack of an agricultural background and, as the play suggests, the poor quality of the land. In Act One, Willie looks at a picture of Bob's land and notes, "What's with all this desert around here?" (15). While Bob remarks that the picture only hints at how remote the plot of land is, there is no suggestion in the play that Bob will be able to turn a profit from this investment. While both Holland and Willie's coning illustrate how embedded the con is in Hollywood and, by extension, America, the Bartons' continue to engage in activities that will, ultimately,

endanger their security again. Helen cannot rely on her acting and there is little evidence that Bob's land investment will yield any return. Even after their own financial struggles, the marks of the play adhere to their delusions about their abilities to succeed in a marketplace ruled by con artists. Helen and Bob believe in their abilities as workers and the play concludes with audiences wondering whether Willie's counter-swindling will be nullified by the marks of the play.

Brownell's play shows the contemporary con artist as both a byproduct of modernity and a figure who could act as a heroic figure. In contrast to a play like *Room Service*, the play also questions the marks of a con and the community that a con artist is attempting to protect. In *The Nut Farm*, the Bartons are certainly worthy of being protected by their brother and his swindling, but the play also suggests the characters still cling to their dreams of fame and fortune. The performances of this play by the FTP also suggest that the heroic con is wasted if the community members who were protected by the swindle succumb to the same allure that allowed them to be conned in the first place. In contrast, the FTP performances of *The Milky Way* presented the marks of a con as willing participants who, like the con artists themselves, relished the opportunity to outwit the established order.

### ***The Milky Way: The Show Is Good***

While its popularity has fluctuated since its inception in the late nineteenth-century, professional wrestling in the United States (and elsewhere) remains one of the most popular confidence games. As Susan Maurer explains in her analysis of wrestling, professional wrestlers relish their participation as members of an elaborate confidence

game, selling audiences their roles, personas, and the narratives in an environment that generally preaches the concept of “kaybabe” (the illusion that the performances and actions in and around the ring are real). As Roland Barthes writes in his seminal essay on professional wrestling, the spectator of a wrestling match must attach meaning to the outcome of a match not based on the science of who won or lost, but on the match’s moment within a grander narrative. Barthes writes, “The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, this is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees” (Barthes 15). Barthes’ interpretation of the wrestling performance—and the audience’s embrace of said performance—is echoed by Sharon Mazar in her treatment of the spectacle of professional wrestling. For Mazar, the success of a performance is based on the audience’s embrace of the act:

More than a staged fight between representatives of good and evil, at its heart is a Rabelaisian carnival, an invitation to every participant to share in expressions of excess and to celebrate the desire for, if not the acting upon, transgression against whatever cultural values are perceived as dominant and /or oppressive in everyday life. More than an elaborate con game in which spectators are seduced into accepting the illusion of ‘real’ violence, wrestling activates and authorizes its audiences through a series of specific strategies. Instead of leaving passive onlookers in the dark, wrestlers, through their physical and theatrical play, make their spectators complicit in performance. (19)

The idea that wrestling audiences are more concerned with a wrestling match's narrative than its authenticity helps explain the confidence scheme of *The Milky Way*. One of the more frequently performed FTP texts, the play centers on an inherently unbelievable swindle in the world of professional boxing. This con is so incredible that the play suggests that everyone is implicitly aware of the fact that they are being conned. Unlike many other cons, the audiences for the staged fights of *The Milky Way* do not seem to care that they are being swindled. Instead, like professional wrestling audiences, the fictional and real audiences of *The Milky Way* found the mythologies of performance a form of relief and empowerment during the Depression.

Lynn Root and Harry Clork's *The Milky Way* centers on a massive con in the boxing world. At the beginning of the play, a middleweight boxer, Speed McFarland, is accidentally knocked out by his drunken trainer during an argument. However, newspapers report that McFarland is knocked out by a meek and mild-mannered milkman named Burleigh Sullivan who happened to be near McFarland and his trainer. In order to protect his boxer's reputation, McFarland's manager, Gabby Sloan, decides to send Sullivan on a whirlwind tour of the United States where the milkman will appear in a series of staged fights—even Sullivan is unaware the fights are fake—in which he “knocks out” his opponents in the first round. With each succeeding fight, Sullivan's fame grows, and Sloan decides to have McFarland and Sullivan fight in a staged bout in which Sloan and his cronies can bet heavily in favor of McFarland. However, Sullivan accidentally knocks-out McFarland with an elbow to the head during the match. Having bet their life savings on the fight, the manager and his cohorts believe they will end up destitute, until Sullivan

announces that he bet on himself and will buy a milk dairy with his winnings and happily give his friends jobs.

Originally staged on Broadway in 1936, Root and Clork's play was performed nine times by the FTP in 1938: Holyoke and Salem, Massachusetts; New York City, Los Angeles, Portland, Oregon; San Diego, Denver, and two separate productions in Manchester, New Hampshire (George Mason 103). While the play was staged rather frequently, press coverage of these productions is limited. In many respects, the FTP productions of *The Milky Way* appear to have suffered from the competition of a major Hollywood adaptation. Like *Room Service* and *Ah, Wilderness!*, *The Milky Way* was adapted for the screen by Paramount in 1936. Directed by Leo McCarey, the film starred the famous silent comedian Harold Lloyd. According to a review from the *Los Angeles Evening News*, the film was far superior to any stage production. The reviewer writes, "At best, the Lynn Root and Harry Clork comedy, which made a choice film vehicle for Harold Lloyd, would seem pretty flat in any stage production" (Los Angeles *The Milky Way*). In places like Manchester and Salem, productions garnered little attention from the press while reviewers of other productions found the play to be not worthy of serious attention. A member of the audience for the Portland production found the play to be trivial. The unnamed reviewer believed that "regular audiences, accustomed to serious theatre, were apathetic to this show" and some "individuals were critical of our doing a 'trivial' show, contrasted the bill unfavorably with *Prologue to Glory*, *One Third a Nation*, etc" ("Audience Survey" Portland). Meanwhile, an unnamed reviewer for the *San Diego Union* noted in his or her 1938 review that the play's authors had written a text that, while humorous and representative of the boxing world, was simply entertainment.

The reviewer notes, “We are ready to believe the funniest possible stories about the fighting ring promoters, champions and their trainers, but Lynn Root and Harry Clork have written a three act play that...is merely something to be enjoyed” (San Diego *The Milky Way*).

This question of the play’s believability, as alluded to in the San Diego review, is a problem for the play. Unlike the other confidence plays explored in this chapter, the con in *The Milky Way* is complicated by the size and scope of the swindle, and by the problematic performances of the key perpetrator of the con. Yet, in one respect, the scope of Sloan’s conning is very plausible. Just as the theatre, film, and banking industries were inundated with swindling, the boxing realm has long been a hotbed of swindling and fixed matches. Indeed, some of the most infamous moments in the sport’s history have centered on boxers taking dives or pre-determined matches. However, Sloan’s con is complicated by the fact that the key member of his scheme, Burleigh Sullivan is a terrible skill for the majority of the play, especially in terms of his performances. In his autobiography, the famous boxer Jake LaMotta, the inspiration for the film *Raging Bull*, explains that the most important aspect of throwing a fight was selling it in the ring. Recounting his infamous thrown fight with Billy Fox in 1947, LaMotta explains a successful fixed fight must, like other cons, be predicated on solid work:

I’ll also tell you something else about throwing a fight. The guy you’re throwing to has to be at least moderately good...I thought the air from my punches was affecting him, but we made it to the fourth round. By then if there was anybody in the Garden who didn’t know what was happening he must have been dead drunk. There were yells and boos all over the place.

Dan Parker, the *Mirror* guy, said the next day that my performance was so bad he was surprised the actors Equity didn't picket the joint. (162)

While Sloan is an experienced con man who is skilled at flattering boxers, promoters, and fans, Sullivan is depicted as too naïve and honest to be fully in on the con. Not only does Sullivan consistently bemoan the dishonesty of the scheme, but also he is woefully underprepared for his role. When Sullivan is asked by a reporter about his possible connection to the famous boxer John L. Sullivan, Sullivan responds that he's never heard of the man, which makes Sloan claim that the milkman is just joking. He exclaims, "That's a good one! Quote that—'The contender, with a sardonic smile and a twinkle in his eye' ...He'll clown like that with you all day" (84). Additionally, Sullivan is portrayed throughout the play as someone who does not even resemble a professional boxer in either appearance or performance. In his character description in the play and in FTP performance stills, Sullivan is constructed as a wiry, un-toned, and bespectacled figure who does not look like a professional athlete. In particular, the Los Angeles production of the play frequently dressed the actor in Sullivan's role in loose sleeveless t-shirts that emphasized the character's lack of muscle mass.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Sullivan's in-ring performances are even weaker. During his first fight, Sullivan begins the bout with his bathrobe on. Later, in his fight with McFarland, Sullivan needs to be "boosted into the ring" like a child because he has trouble with the ropes and becomes entangled in them and his boxing style consists of incredibly awkward jabs and ducking of punches (98).

Yet while LaMotta's fight was condemned by both fans and the press covering the fights, the obviously staged fights in *The Milky Way* do not garner such criticism from fans or media, a fact made all that more complicated given Sullivan's lack of strength and

ability. In particular, the media covering Sullivan's fights seem to be fully deceived by the bouts. As one of Sloan's associates, Anne, reads a Milwaukee newspaper's account of the fight, she declares, "I knew it was a funny town but this is the first time it got me hysterical" (60). With a headline declaring, "Gabby Sloan's Middleweight Sensation Outsmarts Kelly!" the article notes that the milkman was born for the role: "Sullivan's a natural. A born fighter. Cheered as he left the stadium" (60). Nor is it just the press that is taken by the act. As Sloan notes, boxing patrons are completely taken with Sullivan's performance. Audiences seem especially enamored with Sullivan's ability to hop and duck around the ring and his knockout punch, which is a "right you can see comin' from the dollar seats" (64). Even during Sullivan's title bout with McFarland (which ends in roughly sixteen seconds after McFarland knocks himself out by falling into Sullivan's elbow) the radio announcers describe a crowd that does not boo or jeer the sudden outcome. Such a reaction seems muted in contrast to typical reactions to real boxing dives from journalists and fans. As noted earlier in this section, many of the fans, reporters, referees, and officials in attendance at some of boxing's most infamous thrown fights were aware that they were seeing a fix, including Jake La Motta's fight, during which calls of "fix" and "scam" rained down from the angry crowd at Madison Square Garden.

Yet if the reactions of the boxing fans in *The Milky Way* are read in terms of the performances of professional wrestling, the fans' embrace of Sullivan speaks to their need to find meaning in his bouts. The fans' embrace of the obvious swindling in front of them signals that they read these performances not as an athletic competition, but as a staged narrative with mythological implications. Echoing Barthes' commentary on the

significance of the myth, the narrative surrounding Sullivan represents the belief that even the most common of workers can achieve fame and fortune. His story parallels stock rags to riches stories, such as Horatio Alger's. Yet more importantly, Sullivan's narrative would have resonated with the fictional Depression audiences within the play and the real audiences watching the play on the FTP stage. Not only does Sullivan succeed beyond his station, but he does so at a time when such success seemed impossible. Sullivan grabs the opportunity to escape his own station in life, even if the economic context of the age dimmed such aspirations.

However, there is a broader implication of Sullivan's performances and of the audience's acceptance of them. In particular, *The Milky Way* shows a con perpetrated on institutions. The con artists of the play symbolically subvert the power structures of the era. Not only does the complicit audience of Sullivan's fights read his bouts as a triumph over adversity, but also as counter-con of the boxing establishment. After having been treated to a litany of fixed matches, the audiences (and perhaps even the press) within the play are celebrating their own complicity in a con that subverts the boxing industry. Like the professional wrestling performances and the boxing fixes within the play, the FTP productions of *The Milky Way* asked its audiences to fall for the narrative of a group of people subverting the dominance of a particular institution. While the believability of the play might be suspect, the theme of a fictional audience performing and participating in a confidence scheme against an institution likely would have resonated with Depression audiences. For workers and audience members used to the swindles of capitalism, the staged narrative of workers flaunting their own cons to an industry that had been conning them for ages must have been a pleasurable experience.

In *The Milky Way*, the swindling of the boxing community is tolerated by those fans because they welcome and are invested in the narrative of a man-off-the-street winning the middle-weight championship, and in the mythology of a common man succeeding at the heights of the Depression. Additionally, like wrestling fans, the boxing fans enjoy the fact that they are not necessarily marks, but skills who assist the con artists in perpetuating a con on the seemingly complacent boxing industry. This intersection of performance and subversion of industry can also be seen in the popular play *Help Yourself*. When a man fakes his way into success at a bank, not only is this unpopular industry satirized by the play, but traditional notions of work are challenged by the play in dynamic ways.

### ***Help Yourself: The Illusion of Work***

Con artists were not the only Americans who demonstrated the fluid relationship between work and swindling. Even figures like Benjamin Franklin, whose work is cited extensively by Max Weber, advocated for more playful approaches to work. According to Lindberg, Franklin promotes several work ideals in his autobiography, including the celebration of the accumulation of his wealth and the ability of a man to retire from business. But Lindberg also suggests that the founding father wanted work to be treated as pleasurable because while gaining wealth has its perks, for Franklin, the greater joy is the *game* of business. Lindberg explains:

The model self feels exhilarated less by final rewards than by the immediate sense of competition and play... living for and in the amusement of the present performance...The skillful player can move

easily from one game to another, say from business to politics, as he senses more invigorating play or more interesting or satisfying competition. (88)

While Lindberg's analysis calls to mind some of the language of hedonistic work, Lindberg attempts to connect Franklin's philosophy of work to the confidence artist. While Lindberg makes clear that Franklin does not openly advocate diddling or conning, he hypothesizes that Franklin would have understood the thrill of swindling. In particular, Lindberg argues Franklin believes one should only adopt new roles in business or in life once "the game" has lost its appeal – just as many con artists felt the need to change their roles when their work was done.

The play *Help Yourself* shows a kind of Franklin-esque hero who manages to play at work and business. In the play, a man named Chris Stringer walks into a bank and adopts the role of a bank clerk, even though he is not actually employed there. The play promotes a vision of work that was partially espoused by Franklin, who believed in the game of business. In order to achieve success in life, one must be willing to wear "different hats" and enjoy playing the game of work. Yet this play (one of the most performed by the FTP of any genre) is not simply about workers adopting a more playful approach to their labor. In the context of the 1930s, the play is both a satirical examination of the banking industry and an attempt to reinvigorate the myth of the self-made man. Moreover, the play also draws attention to the importance of performance in contemporary work and suggests that the traditional work ethic can be undermined by good acting.

*Help Yourself* centers on an unemployed man named Chris Stringer who wanders into a bank where his college friend Frank is a clerk. Much to Fred's chagrin, Stringer sits at a desk and begins to work without actually holding a position in the company. When Fred accurately asserts that Stringer has no business training, Stringer writes up a false business memo regarding a defunct brick factory project. By coincidence, Stringer's memo leads to a meeting between his bank and a competing bank. While no one can remember the specifics of the proposal, Stringer convinces the trustees of the banks to move ahead with the project. As the project progresses, Stringer endears himself to the other employees of the bank by telling jokes, going to lunches, and dating the boss' daughter, even though they cannot remember actually working with him. As the new brick factory nears completion, Stringer panics when he realizes that he has no employment record and will be fired, but a last-minute forgery by Fred and his girlfriend permits Stringer to stay on at the bank. At the play's conclusion, Stringer earns a promotion to the vice presidency of the bank.<sup>3</sup>

*Help Yourself* left an extensive record of audience reception.<sup>4</sup> In its report to the FTP, the Omaha production stated the audience reaction was "very favorable," (Omaha *Help Yourself*) while the Des Moines report notes that many audience members left the theater saying "up she goes!" (Des Moines *Help Yourself*). Meanwhile, a writer for the *Boston Herald* declares *Help Yourself* a "featherweight variation of the fairy tale about the Emperor's new clothes" and "that only the most reactionary of audiences would see the political element in a harmless farce" (Boston *Help Yourself*). Similarly, audience members of the Los Angeles production found the play to have provided some relief from the economic climate of the Depression, but demonstrated the limitations of theatre. As

one reviewer noted, “This is an amusing way of presenting a social problem. But I don’t see the trials of the new generation being solved in this way except in the theatre” (Los Angeles *Help Yourself*). Commenting on the production of the play of by FTP Seattle, a writer for the University of Washington newspaper finds the play to be highly enjoyable, but imbued with a very serious message. She writes, “The spirit of 1929 is on the way back. The catch line of the play is “up she goes”....The play was not produced in the same era was *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing*. A new spirit is on the march” (Sayler).

The reception of *Help Yourself* can be explained by the play’s complicated portrayal of work and banking. While *Help Yourself* critiques the falsity of the banking industry, it also complicates the concept of the heroic confidence man by having Stringer work for free and act as his own agent. In this sense, the play appears to outwardly embrace traditional perspectives of work. Stringer is willing to work for the bank without any wages, which undermines the normal labor contract. In his mind, Stringer sees that this is the perfect solution to the question of unemployment. When his friend asks him why he’s engaging in this performance, Stringer retorts that if he is not on the payroll, then he cannot get fired. If they try to cut his job, he will “keep right on working” (22). In many respects, Stringer becomes the symbol of the perfect worker, one who is willing to work for free. Additionally, Stringer espouses a hyper-individualistic attitude toward work throughout the play. Stringer declares that he “changed from the unemployed to the employed not because I asked for work, but because I took it” (18). Taking work, he reasons, was preferable to sitting idly by and waiting for work to come to him. At such moments, Stringer embodies the mythology of the self-made man. Stringer echoes these

traditional views of work when he implores the bankers to proceed with the Kublinski account. “We must go on working, as life goes on working. Not figure and ponder, but work. You must pick up the first packing-case you see with a shout of *up she goes!*” he says (63). Such a proactive view about work not only echoes traditional views of labor, but also parallels the views of many anti-New Deal commentators. While New Deal work programs were not a refuge for the idle, the perception that workers were becoming reliant on the government to provide work was becoming increasingly prevalent in American society. As evidenced by the play’s title, Stringer’s solution to the labor crisis would be for workers to just help themselves in whatever way possible.

While the play does portray individualism, *Help Yourself* is critical of the banking system, especially through its portrayal of the bankers who fall for Stringer’s deceptions. In particular, the bankers are swayed by Stringer’s rhetoric about work, and in these moments, the play satirizes the promotion of traditional work norms by nineteenth and twentieth-century capitalists. In the meeting between banks to discuss his business proposal, the bankers struggle to comprehend (or remember) the details of Stringer’s plan. Since he is able to detail some vague references about the fictional proposal, Stringer wins over the bankers by urging them to approve the plan through a speech that arouses the interests of the assembled businessmen. He says:

Yes, gentlemen, that’s how we must begin today—“Up she goes.” This happy cry of the simple workman should be our slogan. Workers and employers, bakers and carpenters—“Up she goes!” Statesmen and politicians—Europe and America—“Up she goes!” In the mountains where the coal lies buried, in the ground where the treasures are hidden—

up she goes—Out there, machines lying cold—“Up she goes.” Rusty shovels lie in the engine rooms—“Up she goes!” Damn it gentlemen, bang on the table—Forget about your positions—put aside your official expressions. (63)

Stringer’s speech to the businessmen, while short on details, consistently make use of the phrase “up she goes,” which he had heard while watching movers attempting to hoist a piano through a window. The phrase in Stringer’s speech serves to critique the intersection between the bankers and the rhetoric of work. As he noted earlier in the play, Stringer felt a physical reaction to watching the movers, “with much spirit my muscles began to itch to work” and he decided to just pick up a suitcase and help them carry items upstairs in the townhouse (12). While the sight and sound of the laborers compels Stringer to work, his evoking of the phrase “up she goes” compels the bankers to do the same. As the scene ends, the bankers dance out of the conference room shouting “up she goes” in unison. There is an irony to both a con artist and bankers being compelled to action by the echoes of manual laborers, but the play critiques how easily the bankers are convinced to take action by empty rhetoric. In this sense, the play satirizes how proponents of traditional work ethics promoted the idea that work could provide workers with upward mobility when, ultimately, many workers would never achieve such aims. In the play the bankers, are convinced to work by a man who uses the language that proponents of traditional work used on workers for decades. Seeing bankers mindlessly adopt the language that proponents of work norms used to convince workers to work harder must have been quite satisfying for some Depression audiences who were not enamored with the banking industry.

*Help Yourself* also critiques the business culture in industries such as banking during the 1920s and 1930s. Throughout the play, Stringer is able to convince his colleagues of his legitimacy as a banker through a series of superficial gestures that were promoted by business insiders. While the line between the business realm and the con realm were often vague, the publication of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in 1935 signaled a new emphasis on the performance of business. Karen Hatthunen argues that Carnegie's manual, which has not gone out of print since its initial publication, is a de facto guidebook to swindling one's professional colleagues. According to Halttunen, "Carnegie's purpose was to train men in a very special type of corporate salesmanship, 'the salesmanship of the system selling itself to itself'" (185). While Carnegie's manual demonstrated how businessmen should perform to other businessmen, it also taught its readers how to convince themselves that they were performing their roles properly. In other words, Carnegie was also selling to his readers the spectacle of selling themselves to themselves, as if a reader were both the mark and the confidence man. Hatthunen argues that the business world of the early twentieth century was modeled on business performance, but there was not an element of sincerity to those roles.

This insincere performance is essential to Stringer's con of the bank. By studying the "bank inside and out," he has learned how to manipulate his coworkers by evoking workplace rhetoric that persuades the other worker to react according to the norms of the business world (19). When someone asks Stringer if he is a new employee, Stringer replies that he has been at the bank for years, but had been working in another department. Stringer also provides vague details about himself, such as "I was the guy in

the corner” or “I always ate ham and cheese sandwiches” (16). Invariably, the other bank employees, after a brief pause, acknowledge that they remember Stringer. At points, Stringer is even able to tell “inside jokes” that his colleagues laugh at not because they understand, but because they are supposed to laugh at such jokes according to the performance norms of the business world. In addition, Stringer sells the “system” to itself by writing a business proposal so ensconced in vague rhetoric that the bankers reading the proposal are inclined to accept it as is. He says, “Our negotiations at the time came to nothing, which was surprising considering your original enthusiasm for the proposition. Now that the matter has come up again, I beg you not to drop it, but to give it your personal attention, as I feel that a quick disposal of the problem will be to our mutual interest” (24). By performing the mannerisms of the banking system, Stringer depicts the industry as insincere and susceptible to the work of a con man.

While *Help Yourself* critiques banking culture, it also suggests that these performative elements in work extend beyond the banking industry. In stating part of his rationale for engaging in his con, Stringer claims that adopting a false persona is a game that everyone plays at. When his friend asks him why he is undertaking this scam, Stringer explains, “Just the illusion of working does something for you. Everyone plays at something—children play at being policemen—politicians at being statesmen... Why shouldn't I play at working?” (22-23). His statement not only reinforces how prevalent the con is in society, but also Stringer's actions also demonstrate how work in all forms can be only performance. In his rationale, Stringer connects work not just with the games and play of children, which echoes Franklin's thoughts on gamesmanship, but also with acting. For him, children playing as police officers are comparable to adults pretending to

work in different roles. Additionally for Stringer, adopting the role of a banker is perfectly acceptable and also provides him with a purpose that regular work has not given him. Stringer escapes the cycle of unemployment and repressing work and the personal labor fulfillment he has been searching for through playing at work.

This sense that “everyone plays at something” voiced by the play’s hero undermines the supposed stability of traditional work norms, and suggests that part of the solution to the repression of the iron cage that Weber outlined was simply to perform the part. The bankers’ faith in Stringer’s performances suggests that the key to successful work is not in dedicating oneself to traditional norms of laboring, but in committing oneself to the theatrical elements of work. As this chapter demonstrates, there is a connection between the con and the labor of performance arts, and the “illusion of work” that Stringer espouses in his con. But one of the primary differences between Stringer’s con and other swindles is that his audience believes in the legitimacy of his false performance. While the audiences who watch Burleigh Sullivan “box” are aware that the fights are staged but prefer to believe the symbolism presented, the bankers who fall for Stringer’s performance are never aware that his work is simply an act. Instead, they prefer to believe in the legitimacy of his actions. After he attempts to confess that he was never employed at the bank, only to be stopped by Fred producing a false employment record, Stringer condemns the bankers for not having “faith in me” (76). To Stringer’s accusation, the bankers declare in unison “We do!” (76). Of course, the bankers’ faith in Stringer is based only on the role he performs for them, and, in effect, their trust in the con man is based on an illusion.

Because of Stringer's success, *Help Yourself* suggests that the key to successful work is not toiling at one's job. Instead, a worker can become as, if not more, celebrated at his or her job by adopting some tools of the con artist. While Stringer does real work for the bank by chancing upon a project, the bulk of his labor is the preparation for and performance of his role which is the basis for how his worth as an "employee" is evaluated by the bankers. In contrast to his friend Fred and other employees of the bank, Stringer only "works" by performing the role of a worker. The play's lesson to audiences is to embrace the Carnegie model of insincere performance and play the game of selling oneself to others. Like other con artist characters, Stringer performs the role of worker so convincingly that no employee of the bank questions his employment status or his work ethic. The play does not discount the importance of the result or product of one's work, since Stringer does deliver a financial windfall for the bank. Yet *Help Yourself* showed audiences that just as a con man understands the role that allows him to integrate into an environment, a worker could learn the performance expectations of his or her workplace and reduce the stress and rigor of the job by simply performing the role of a hard worker.

While it shows some conservative views of work, *Help Yourself* features many elements that undermined traditional norms of the work ethic. Not only did the play critique the banking industry and its culture, but also its FTP performances demonstrated that the lines between play and work were hardly stable. In addition, *Help Yourself* showed audiences that by adopting several tools of the con artist they could alleviate some of the rigors of the workplace. If Chris Stringer could succeed by playing at work, then a worker could benefit from performing the role of a hard worker. Becoming a con artist at work, the play suggests, could be far more beneficial than just toiling at the job.

## Conclusion

For Poe, the con artist always ended up with a smile, celebrating his victory in the comfort of his home after a day's labor of swindling. On federally-funded stages, the FTP confidence plays paralleled Poe's observations about swindling by presenting con artists who succeed in their labor. Taken together, the confidence plays neatly parallel the observations of con men and women who asserted their profession was work. By extension, the con artist plays showed that work was indeed valuable, but was not strictly defined by the tenets of the Protestant work ethic. While many moralists preached about the necessity of total dedication to work, and New Dealers posited that physical labor was the solution to economic ills, these plays asserted that con work required a great deal of research and dedication. In addition, the plays reinvigorate the archetypical con man as a heroic figure. As evidenced by *Room Service* and *The Nut Farm*, the con artist could serve as the protector of a community or his or her family when pressed into service; swindling could be beneficial to a group or a family in trouble, and society at large actually was accepting of those kinds of cons. Moreover, the confidence plays demonstrate how a committed performance could achieve the same results as regular work. Indeed, as plays like *The Milky Way* and *Help Yourself* suggest, the "game" of capitalism deserves to be undermined by another game, but the benefits from playing at work were potentially greater than those from toiling at a job. At a time when many workers were frustrated with the lack of economic security, the idea that one could secure financial and economic safety through the illusion of work was a radical and, likely, attractive concept.

Perhaps more importantly, the confidence artist plays represented two of Flanagan's tenets for the FTP. In presenting, at times, heroic con artists who either save their communities or outwit institutions, the con artist plays very likely would have uplifted the spirits of many audiences – just as hedonistic work comedies celebrated audiences' rejection or embrace of pleasurable work or the backstage comedies reassured audiences about the importance of entertainment. In addition, a play like *Help Yourself*, dismissed by many as a farce, illustrated the type of daring theatre that Flanagan believed her agency should have been doing. While the story of a man pretending to work at a bank is not as radical as the overt calls for revolution in other FTP productions, the play, and many of the plays examined in this project, suggest that even during a time of economic depression, the tenets of work could be challenged – even in comedies.

## Chapter Four Notes

1. I use the terms “swindler,” “con artist,” “confidence artist,” and “grifter” interchangeably throughout this chapter. Rather than “con man,” I mainly rely on the gender-neutral term confidence artist in these pages.

2. As evidenced by photos from rehearsals, The Los Angeles Production of *The Milky Way* even appears to dress the actor portraying Sullivan like Harold Lloyd in the film version of the film (Los Angeles *The Milky Way*).

3. *Help Yourself* was originally written after the First World War by the Austrian playwright Paul Vulpius. Vulpius was a somewhat popular playwright in Germany and Austria during the inter-war period, and was responsible for a popular play entitled *Hau-rack (Heave Ho!)*. According to Anselm Heinrich, a theatre group sympathetic to the Nazi Party wrote the Prussian Theatre Council in 1933 and inquired as to whether or not Vulpius was Jewish. Initially, the Theatre Council informed the group that Vulpius’ lawyer had informed them that Vulpius was Aryan. However, in 1934, the Prussian Theatre Council declared Vulpius to be a “non-Aryan” (121-22). Vulpius appears to have relocated to England at some point during the 1930s where his play *Youth at the Helm* was adapted into a 1936 British film entitled *Jack of All Trades* which centers on a con man who fakes his way through a series of jobs in order to help his sick mother. Vulpius is credited as a writer on a 1950 BBC version of *Youth at the Helm* which, according to the BFI, is nearly identical to the plot of *Help Yourself*.

4. *Help Yourself* was performed twenty-one times by the FTP: New York City, Syracuse, and White Plains, New York (1936); San Bernardino, California (1936); Peoria, Illinois (1936); Los Angeles (1937); Springfield, Massachusetts (1937); Denver

(1937); Omaha, Nebraska (1937); Cincinnati (1937); San Francisco (1937), Wilmington, Delaware (1937); Des Moines, Iowa (1937); New York City (1937); Salem, Massachusetts (1937); Boston (1937), Bridgeport, Connecticut (1937); Philadelphia (1937); Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania (1937); Seattle (1937), and Atlanta (1938) (George Mason 71-72).

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