Federal Theatre Project (FTP)

Initiated in 1935, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs that provided federal money to the theater arts. Part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the FTP put unemployed theater professionals to work during the Great Depression and validated the need for professional theater programs in U.S. communities. It met with controversy in 1939 and federal funding was withdrawn, but not before bringing theater to ordinary Americans.

The New Deal's WPA, which ran from 1935 to 1943 and whose name changed to Work Projects Administration in 1939, established many initiatives, including Federal Project Number One, a wide-ranging program focusing on the arts. One facet, the FTP, employed an average of 10,000 people a year in 31 states and New York City. The FTP offered dance and acting classes at many of its sites and performed plays, not only in professional theaters, but in churches, convents, circus tents, university halls, showboats, community centers, and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC, 1933–1942) camps—any place willing to sponsor its shows. Despite accumulating an impressive record of successes, the FTP became one of the most controversial of the Federal One projects, accused of supporting subversive communist ideas and wasting money, even though all these projects together spent less than three-quarters of 1% of the total WPA budget.

Well before the stock market crash of 1929, which precipitated the Great Depression, live theater experienced competition from movies and radio. Recorded music in talking pictures replaced the silent film orchestra; large numbers of stagehands and technicians found themselves without jobs; and Hollywood's star system overshadowed most stage performers. For its part, radio satisfied changes in public taste by bringing a variety of entertainment into people's homes.

The Depression amplified these problems by putting an additional 20,000 theatrical workers out of work when attendance dropped sharply and playhouses closed. Harry Hopkins, a key architect of many New Deal programs, became head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA, 1933–1935), and later served as the administrator of WPA. Hopkins believed that society had a responsibility to save the talents of the men and women in the arts, as well as those laboring in America's factories.

He appointed Vassar College professor Hallie Flanagan as director of the FTP. She led the organization in establishing two major goals: (1) hiring experienced actors, directors, playwrights, designers, vaudeville artists, and stage technicians then on relief rolls, and (2) making theater a vital part of community life so it could continue to function when the federal program ended. Flanagan's plan stressed administrative decentralization; it identified five regions of the country, and each area had to decide on theatrical projects that would offer plays of social and political relevance for local audiences. Her emphasis on this kind of experimental theater discomfited many politicians, a situation that steadily escalated and contributed to the program's eventual demise.

During the course of its existence, however, the FTP presented over 1,000 productions, with most performed free. New York City, the home for most U.S. live theater, served as the center for the bulk of the program's activities. Playwright Elmer Rice had responsibility for a wide range of the city's FTP events, including classical plays, new and experimental productions, children's theater, puppet shows, a Yiddish vaudeville unit, the Anglo-Jewish Theater, the Negro Theatre Project, and a German theatrical group.

In an effort to make drama relevant and engaging, Flanagan and Rice oversaw the creation of the "Living Newspaper," one of the project's more controversial endeavors. It served as a theatrical documentary and applied techniques developed for radio and screen by the March of Time (radio: 1928–1945; film: 1934–1951). The Living Newspaper format used a common man as a unifying character and included a mix of news, drama, fact,
fiction, editorializing, and satire, all of which informed the audience of the aspects of a problem and then called for specific actions to solve it. This component of the FTP had a rough start. Outside censorship prohibited the opening of its first production, Ethiopia. Politicians feared that this dramatization of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's ongoing invasion of Ethiopia would offend Italians.

Bowing to the edict of not depicting heads of state, the playwrights turned to contemporary headlines about social issues instead. The Living Newspaper commented on topics such as flawed government bureaucracy in Triple-A Plowed Under (1936) and deplorable housing conditions in America's largest city with One-Third of a Nation (1938), which cast 67 actors who took on 195 roles. In New York, 60,000 bought tickets for Power (1937), a Living Newspaper on the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a government energy agency created by Congress in 1933 to aid and modernize that hard-hit region, clearly a sign of public interest in these topical plays.

By 1936, some congressmen who originally supported the New Deal became active critics of the program. Among them, Martin Dies Jr. served as chair of the newly created House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), nicknamed the Dies Committee. Charged with identifying disloyal and subversive organizations, the committee began investigating, among other things, the appropriateness of government-financed theater.

Flanagan responded to this pressure by moving from a focus on the accomplishments of each region to a national exchange of plays, directors, and ideas. For example, the Negro Theatre Project put on William Shakespeare's Macbeth. Directed by Orson Welles and produced by John Houseman, the group moved the setting of the 1606 tragedy to contemporary Haiti and it toured Federal Theatre houses all over the country. On October 27, 1936, the FTP tried an even more daring venture by simultaneously presenting in 21 theaters in 17 states a dramatic version of Sinclair Lewis's It Can't Happen Here. This adaptation of his 1935 novel emphasized its antifascist themes and enjoyed great audience appeal; over 500,000 people saw the show during its run of 260 weeks.

Even with these successes, the FTP's 1937 productions took place amid rumors of impending cuts in funding. The Cradle Will Rock, a musical written by Marc Blitzstein, and another Welles and Houseman production, opened after a couple of false starts in June of that year. The clearly leftist leanings in this production's protest songs prompted conservative congressional groups, such as the Dies Committee and the House Committee on Appropriations, to block its opening at its originally intended theater. The cast and crew, however, secured the small Venice Theatre in New York City to stage the production. But they encountered a new obstacle: The musician's union forbade its members to perform because of a disagreement about pay. Displaying great ingenuity, the show finally opened with Blitzstein playing a piano on stage and the actors scattered about in the theater seats speaking their lines as a single spot searched them out. The Cradle Will Rock played at the Venice for two weeks, moved to the larger Windsor Theatre in early 1938, and ended its run after 108 performances.

Another controversial musical, Pins and Needles, followed The Cradle Will Rock. Sponsored by the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), the plot revolves around labor unions versus "the Bosses" and contains what surely must be the most noteworthy song title of the Depression—Harold J. Rome's "Sing Me a Song with Social Significance" (1937). Premiering in November 1937, its overwhelming success forced a move from its initial small home, the Labor Stage, to the larger Windsor Theatre, the same house that had earlier presented The Cradle Will Rock. Pins and Needles continued its run into 1940 and set a record for 1930s musicals with 1,108 performances.
Not all the FTP offerings dealt with controversy. In 1937, in an attempt to reach out to more diverse audiences, Paul Green's historical drama *The Lost Colony* opened in a WPA-built outdoor theater on Roanoke Island, off the coast of North Carolina. A success then, this story of Sir Walter Raleigh's doomed colony has continued to play each summer in its island setting. Earlier that spring, Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, along with his American counterpart Eugene O'Neill, had released their plays, nine from Shaw and 14 from O'Neill, to the FTP for nationwide production at a low rental rate.

In another daring move, the FTP in 1938 crossed racial barriers by producing *The Swing Mikado* in Chicago. Seen by 250,000 in that city alone, this jazzy interpretation of William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's 1885 operetta featured an African American cast. After a five-month Chicago run, it traveled to New York City for 86 performances on Broadway. The opening night in New York saw First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a long-time supporter of the Federal Theatre Project, as well as Hopkins and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, in attendance. Its success inspired impresario Mike Todd to mount a similar production, *The Hot Mikado*, which contained even more jazz, swing, and blues. Dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson headed its African American cast, and timely jokes about the political situation of 1939 abounded. Eventually, *The Hot Mikado* ended up at the New York World's Fair, where individual tickets cost under a dollar.

As the decade drew to an end, the Federal Theatre Project, encouraged by its successes, planned to expand its offerings, but controversies and politics had created powerful critics. Some objected to the idea of subsidized theater; others challenged what they considered radical messages in many of the plays. With pressure from several sides, and the strongest objections revolving around political issues, the WPA withdrew federal funding and America's first great attempt at endowing the dramatic arts and developing a federation of theaters across the country came to an end. For a brief moment, despite myriad problems, American theater boasted a strong supporter in the federal government, and the FTP certainly reached out to people who had not normally participated in any way with dramatic activities. On June 30, 1939, the curtain fell for the last time, not only on *Sing for Your Supper*, a topical revue, but also on the Federal Theatre Project.