

**Happy Days Are Here Again: Vaudeville and the Federal Theater Project**

by

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*“Our whole emphasis in the theatre enterprises which we are about to undertake should be on rethinking rather than on remembering. The good old days may have been very good days indeed, but they are gone. New days are upon us and the plays that we do and the ways that we do them should be informed by our consciousness of the art and economics of 1935...The theatre must become conscious of the implications of the changing social order, or the changing social order will ignore, and rightly, the implications of the theatre.”*

*— Hallie Flanagan, Director of the Federal Theater Project from 1935-1939*

## **Introduction**

In the years following the 1929 stock market crash, the United States was faced with an unprecedented economic crisis. By 1933, 25% of the nation's total work force, nearly 13,000,000 people, were unemployed. Those workers who retained their jobs saw a wage drop of 43%, consequently consumer spending fell 40% between 1929 and 1933 (“Great Depression Facts”). Despite the bleak economy with joblessness and increased free time, there was more need for entertainment than ever as people attempted to pass the hours with a bit of lightheartedness to counteract the demoralizing seriousness of their dire circumstances. With the overall health of the American people and economy in mind, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s progressive administration passed 15 laws that were crucial to reviving the economy, many of which were government sponsored public works projects. This paper will focus on the Federal Theater Project (FTP), specifically on the sponsorship of vaudeville entertainment, and how the FTP prolonged the art form’s life.

## **The New Deal and the Works Progress Administration**

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was a New Deal agency created by in 1935 as part of the initiative to regrow the American economy in the wake of the Great Depression. Roosevelt created dozens of government sponsored infrastructure programs to provide employment for millions of unemployed Americans, such as the Civil Works Administration, Farm Security Administration, and the Civilian Conservation Corps. The Works Progress Administration was one of the largest and most ambitious government programs in American

history, employing more than 8.5 million people between 1935 and 1943 (“Today in history - April 8”).

The WPA's main objective was to create jobs for unemployed workers in a variety of public works projects, including building roads, bridges, airports, schools, and public buildings. Fortunately for artists, the creative trades were not forgotten in the vision for a working America. The Works Progress Administration also created jobs in the arts, under the umbrella of Federal Project Number One.

### **Federal Project Number One**

Also known as Federal One, Federal Project Number One included five separate programs: the Federal Art Project (FAP), the Federal Music Project (FMP), the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), and the Historical Records Survey (originally part of the Federal Writers' Project).



*Harry "Hell, they've got to eat, too" Hopkins*

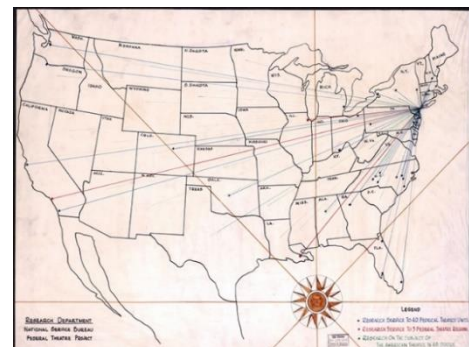
The brainchild of Secretary of Commerce Harry Hopkins, the central goal of Federal One was to provide work relief for unemployed artists, musicians, actors, writers, and other cultural workers who, like millions of other American, were left jobless in the wake of the Great Depression, “while entertaining and inspiring the larger population by creating a hopeful view of life amidst the economic turmoil.” (“Works Progress Administration: WPA & New Deal – History”)

Under Federal One, artists were employed to create public art, murals, sculptures, and other works for public buildings and spaces. Musicians were employed to perform concerts and provide music for radio programs. Actors, directors, designers, and technical crew were employed to produce and perform plays, while writers were employed to document and collect stories, folklore, and histories of various regions across the country. (“1934: The Art of the New Deal.”)

The program faced criticism from conservatives who objected to government funding for the arts (Flanagan), but it also had its advocates who saw it as a way to support American culture during a time of economic crisis. The guiding principles of the program were that artists deserved government sponsored work just as much as manual laborers, and the “establishment of theaters so vital to community life that they will continue to function after the program of the Federal Theater Project is completed” (*Manual for Federal Theatre Projects, October 1935*). To those who questioned whether artists deserved federal work Hopkins replied “Hell, they’ve got to eat just like other people!” (“1934: The Art of the New Deal.”)

### **The Federal Theater Project**

The Federal Theater Project (FTP) was established in 1935 and aimed to create affordable and accessible theater for all Americans and to re-employ theater professionals nationwide. Secretary of Commerce Harry Hopkins appointed former classmate and friend Hallie



Map showing research service to forty Federal Theatre Project units

Flanagan to administer the project. Flanagan was born in South Dakota and attended Grinnell College in Iowa, where she met Harry Hopkins.



Hallie Flanagan

When Flanagan was appointed the National Director of the Federal Theater Project, she quickly became a champion of the project's mission to bring theater to working-class audiences and provide employment opportunities for theater professionals. Under her leadership, the FTP

### **Flanagan Facts**

- Born in South Dakota in 1890
- Met Harry Hopkins at Grinnell College
- Master's Degree in Drama from Cornell
- 1923 Appointed Director of English Speech at Vassar College
- In 1926 she was the first woman to win the Guggenheim Fellowship
- Went to Europe to study new, innovative staging techniques, technology, and experimental theater
- Studied under Brecht, Shaw, Piscator, and Stanislavski
- 1927 founded Vassar's Experimental Theater
- 1928 published *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre*
- Her studies in Europe inspired her to promote work with themes of inequality and social justice.

produced a wide range of plays and performances, including experimental works, classics, and productions that explored social and political issues of the day. Flanagan also worked to address issues of censorship and government interference in the arts. She fought against efforts to censor the FTP's productions and advocated for artistic freedom and creative expression.

Under Flanagan's direction, the FTP was organized into several divisions, all centrally managed and administered. Over the lifespan of the project, there were several reorganizations expanding and condensing divisions. Primarily I will be examining the Variety Unit and other divisions that were instrumental in the re-employment of vaudeville performers.

## Vaudeville and the Variety Arts in the Federal Theatre Project

The Federal Theater Project Variety Division was a unit of the FTP that focused on producing and promoting vaudeville-style variety shows. The Variety Division was created in 1935 as part of the FTP's effort to provide employment opportunities for artists and performers during the Great Depression. The Variety Unit contained the Vaudeville and Circus divisions.

### Something for Everyone

**Vaudeville** was a popular form of entertainment in the US from the late 19th to the early 20th century. It was characterized by a variety of short, self-contained acts, each lasting between 5 and 20 minutes, with performers ranging from singers and comedians to acrobats, magicians, burlesque, and animal acts. Vaudeville was inexpensive to produce and aimed at a broad audience. It also launched the careers famous entertainers, including Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and the Marx Brothers. However, as cinema became more popular, vaudeville began to decline, and by the 1930s, it had largely disappeared.

Vaudeville was a significant programmatic focus of the Federal Theater Project. The FTP's Variety division was responsible for organizing and producing shows that combined comedy, music, dance, juggling, physical comedy, magic, contortion, animal tricks, puppetry, singing, and other forms of specialized entertainment. These shows were performed in public parks, theaters, schools, community centers, and even jails throughout the country, and they were often free or low-cost to attend. Additionally, the FTP's vaudeville division served an important social function during the Great Depression: it provided a form of entertainment and escapism for audiences who were struggling to make ends meet and facing



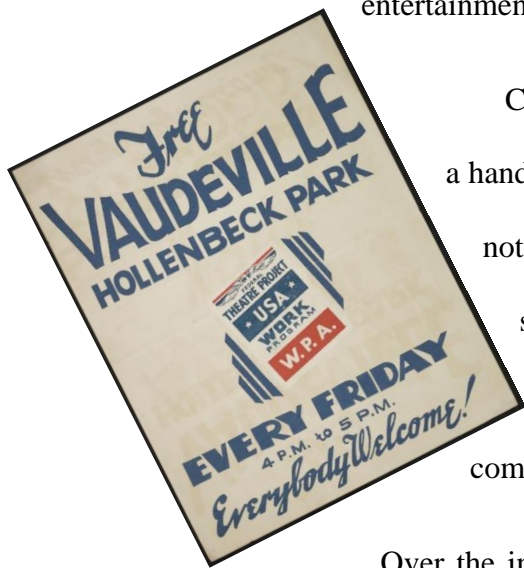
economic hardship. The shows also helped to foster a sense of community and brought people together during a difficult time.

The Variety Division produced a wide range of shows, including musical revues, comedy sketches, and circus performances. Many of these shows were performed around the country, often in communities that had little other access to live



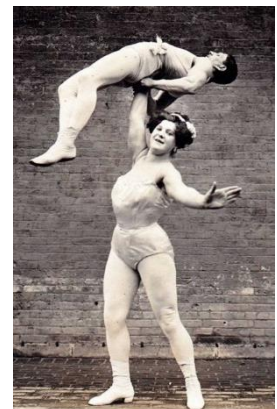
*San Francisco vaudeville performers, 1936*

entertainment. I will spotlight some regions of particular note later.



Counter to many of the early protests of the FTP program as being a handout, the Federal Theatre Variety Unit was not a charity and did not provide jobs for those who were unqualified. All entertainers still had to audition and be hired by the show or tour producers, and WPA rules mandated that 9 out of 10 employees must come directly from the relief (unemployment) rolls.

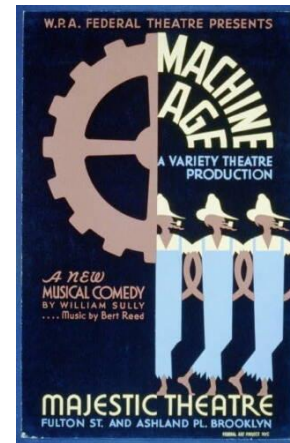
Over the initial fifteen months of the Federal Theater Project, approximately a quarter of the program's activities consisted of vaudeville performances. Some of these FTP vaudeville shows, including productions like *"Ready! Aim! Fire!"* – “a musical satire on dictatorships” (Buttitta et. al.125) - diverged from the traditional or classical vaudeville format, which consisted of individual sequential acts. Instead, they resembled musical revues that incorporated a series of related acts or sequences with connecting themes.



*Katie Sandwina, "The Lady Hercules"*

## Vaudeville Broadway

As with all new bureaucracies, there were delays, confusion, and setbacks associated with the rollout and implementation of the Federal Theater Project. No one really knew quite what to do with the Variety division. The old booking system that had paved the way for vaudevillians to tour for the goals of fortune (rarely) and fame (a little) had already been disbanded with vaudeville's decline and was not compatible with a new centralized performing arts bureaucracy. The rate of retention was poor amongst regional directors, as Flanagan said of her second director of the Variety unit in New York, Frank Merlin: "His resignations were frequent. They



were also more ingenious than most, often being done in verse. I ignored them, a practice I had to follow with resignations pretty consistently."

(Flanagan 195)

The early attempts to put vaudevillians back to work in New York were in "specialized" theaters units. The Variety Theater Unit in N.Y. was set up specifically to utilize the talents of



*Old vaudeville nightclubs like the Lafayette Theater in Harlem were kept open thanks to FTP productions*

vaudevillians in musical comedies. These productions would employ dozens of actors, and as many as "100 workers in the various artistic and technical categories." (Kazacoff 149) The first of these was presented at the Majestic Theater in Brooklyn. *Machine Age* was touted as a "fantastic comedy on the foibles of big business, labor, the courts, the press, and hill-billies." However, a

*Times Union* critic put it differently, describing it as “a number of venerable vaudeville acts frightened together by the ghost of a story.” *Sing for Your Supper*, another Federal Theater musical, demonstrated some creative “meta” thinking by creating a musical “about vaudevillians or other unemployed actors, singers, and dancers put to work.” (Kazacoff 162)



*Singers Margaret Culligan and Elsie Murray, Syracuse 1936*

### **Midwest Theater Projects: Major Vaudeville Successes**

Already struggling economically, the Midwest was hit especially hard during the Depression. During World War I, the federal government pushed farmers to maximize production, with a government guarantee of high prices to feed the U.S. army and allies in Europe (“Great Depression and the Dust Bowl”). But in 1920 the federal government ended those price subsidies, which left farms with a surplus of produce, causing prices to be cut in half (*Federal Reserve Bulletin*). When the market crashed in 1929, Midwesterners were already in a bad economic situation. Droughts and harsh winters in the early 1930s caused land damage, so by 1936 farm losses had been so severe that “more than 2 million farmers were drawing relief checks” (Worster 12).



*Patrons in Oklahoma line up for circus tickets*

I draw the conclusion that as a happy consequence to a horrible situation, the Federal Variety unit flourished. Widespread unemployment and excess leisure time made audiences particularly receptive to free and casual entertainments. In Indiana, Flanagan writes, “Between

December 16, 1935 and July 15, 1937, 423 performances had been given before 149,304 persons 35 vaudeville free shows had played in hospitals, parks, and camps before 8190 people. Small admissions had brought in \$20,938 which was \$3000 more than enough to cover all expenses for theater, rental costume, scenery, and advertising, all other than labor costs” (Flanagan 156).



*Travelling caravan unit in Iowa, 1937*

Nebraska was similarly successful.

Interestingly, during their performances in Omaha and the surrounding suburbs, actors discovered that 90% of the audience had never witnessed a live play before and thought the actors onstage were moving pictures.

Following each performance, these viewers would linger in the doorway to see “whether the people are

real” (Flanagan 177).

The Variety unit was wildly popular in Chicago. In 18 months, “Chicago- based vaudeville units played to over two million people,” drawing crowds rain or shine, so popular that even “theater operators have been pressed for the return of vaude” (Billboard, June 19, 1937). Flanagan described her tour of vaudeville playing in Chicago parks with Commissioner Walter Roy. Every performance stage or tent was full of citizens of all ages, watching dancers, singers, and magicians. Mr. Roy said, “These audiences are having a good time; people are off the streets and that’s what we want. Nine companies are playing every night, and for us as many more as you can send the park boards will pay rent, light, heat, scenery, and costumes.” (Flanagan 134-135)



*'Melodies on Parade' in Chicago*

In addition to vaudeville shows, Chicago also employed variety performers in featured play by a young Meyer Levin. Adapted from his earlier novel, *Model Tenement* tells the story of diverse residents of an apartment building banding together to block the eviction of another tenant, informed by Levin's own childhood as the son of a small landlord on Chicago's south side.

The production demanded a sizable ensemble and a three-level stage design that may have deterred business-oriented producers, but it was a perfect fit for the Federal Theater Project. Auditions included everyone from "broken down ex-vaudevillians to



*Set of 'O Say Can You Sing'*

adolescent little theater girls" Levin recalled. (Quinn 198) This actually made easy casting for *Model Tenement*, whose diverse characters were an odd assortment of people themselves, as could be expected in an urban tenement building. Sadly, the production was actually shut down because Chicago's mayor found it "objectionable." (Quinn 198)

Regional Director George Kondolf expressed his desire to Flanagan to assess all the available vaudeville talent, collaborate with composers and choreographers, and create a Chicago revue. Together, they developed a concept for *O Say Can You Sing*, "the first big original show which was to make history by running for seven months." (Flanagan 138)

Written by Sid Kuller, Ray Golden and Phil Charig, rehearsed and developed over nine months, with a cast of 250, *O Say Can You Sing* provided the comedy and spectacle craved by mainstream audiences. It was a full production musical, yet it featured several different variety acts that were woven into the storyline. Tap dancers, acrobats, jugglers, clowns, and more were featured in this WPA satire; at the start of the play, a loudspeaker blared, declaring the arrival of

thousands of performers to their hometowns in search of jobs for the burgeoning theatrical industry. Among the crowd of performers, a page boy appeared and announced the new Secretary of Entertainment, the Honorable Augustus Q. Hamfield. Classic slapstick banter follows:

RATCLIFFE: I'm Robert J. Ratcliffe, Secretary of the Budget, and I'm astounded.

HAMFIELD: I'm Augustus Q. Hamfield, Secretary of Entertainment, and I'm terrific.

RATCLIFFE. Take care how you address me, sir - I handle the money you're going to spend.

HAMFIELD: Oh you do, eh? Well, you got two bucks on you?



*O Say Can You Sing*

“The show, like the (Federal Theater) project, was best when it remained itself, tracing the florid adventures of the hammy Hamfield- starting a circus project to get rid of an elephant he won in a craps game, or being brought, tied hand and foot with

red tape, before a committee, investigating him for subversive activity, because one of his actors used the Moscow Art method....No anti-administration paper could laugh more at Federal Theater than did Federal Theater itself.” (Flanagan 138)

Though *O Say Can You Sing* was extremely successful with audiences in Chicago, “the press, somewhat scandalized at the ability of the government to put on a song-and-dance show, gave it a good deal of space, though the reviews were fair to



*O Say Can You Sing*

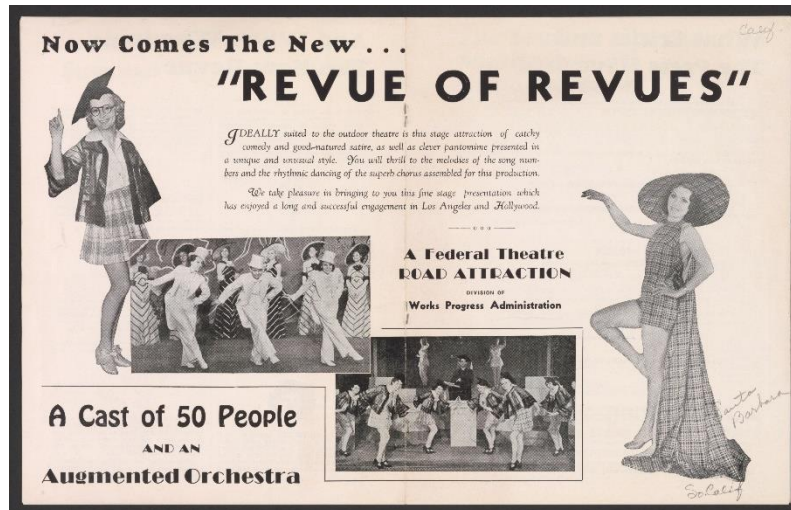
adverse.” (Flanagan 140) The FTP directors believed that it was too contextual and unsophisticated for a New York audience. Subsequent productions were attempted in Tampa, Florida and Seattle, Washington, to poor reception. (Kazacoff 342) But it was considered the “most prominent example of what Chicago does best: vaudeville.” (Quinn 201)

### Hollywood Vaudeville?

The Los Angeles Variety Unit was arguably the single most prolific project for vaudeville productions. Many observed “the irony of the fact that vaudeville was having a ‘come-back’ in Hollywood, the town responsible for killing it.” (Kazacoff 271)

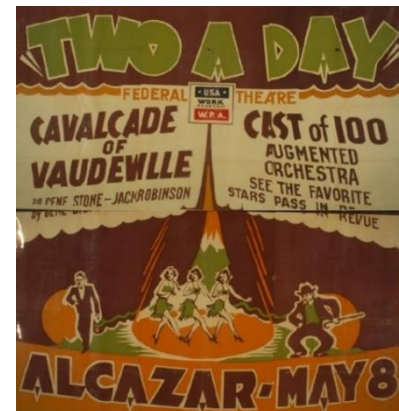
In 1936, the show *Follow the Parade* by Gene Stone and Jack Robinson was a musical revue designed specifically to utilize the talents of unemployed vaudeville artists. Hallie Flanagan and director Eda Edison hoped to “work out new ways to use vaudeville techniques” with a storyline about an enthusiastic young stage director planning a new show with a bunch of down-and-out vaudevillians (Kazacoff 264). Said *Variety* magazine: “This is the biggest 50c worth of entertainment ever doled out in these precincts. Two and a half hours of music, hoofing, and specialties, with all else thrown in to give it the stature of a Broadway revue...In that cast can be singled out names that meant something in the halcyon days of vaude....Let the cinematics try to match that for 50c.” (qtd. in Flanagan 279) The show was warmly received and had a 14-week run in L.A.





The success of *Follow the Parade* inspired Stone & Robinson to write a series of original revues. *The Revue of Revues*, a satire of popular magazines of the day, and *Ready, Aim, Fire!* an anti-war satire, built on the quality and success of the previous

productions, and along came the greatest success: *Two A Day*, “with a cast of 100, the show covered the period of vaudeville’s history from 1890 to 1938.” (Kazacoff 269) It played to sold-out audiences, and inspired what was a strong “endorsement of the federal support of the arts, and specifically with regard to its role in reviving a dying theatrical form...” (Kazacoff 271) from the *Hollywood Citizen News*: “Art, and for that matter, artifice, flourish best under a system of patronage....In the present age the American government is acting as patron of the arts, for private capital cannot do it. Private capital’s resources are not broad enough to gamble on a renaissance of vaudeville.” (qtd. in Kazacoff 272)



### Vaudeville and the CCC Camps

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) is considered by many to be one of the New Deal’s “most successful undertakings, both as a conservation measure and as an alternative, for many young men, to joblessness and despair.” (Quinn 84) The CCC’s mission was to “conserve



Civilian Conservation Corps in Yosemite National Park

the natural resources of the United States while providing relief to the poor and encouraging the recovery of the economy” (Neatrou). Young men recruited to the CCC worked in national parks and forests, completing infrastructure projects such as building roads and campgrounds to encourage recreation, and also conservation

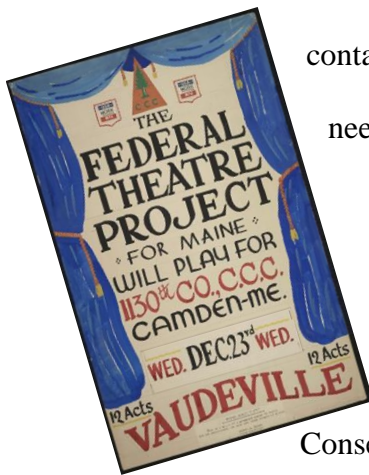
projects such as wildlife protection, forestry maintenance, and wildfire prevention. (Neatrou)

CCC men were housed and fed in “camps” at their worksite. These were barracks-style shelters, with large dormitories and only the basic necessities. Given the nature of the conditions at most CCC camps, full-scale theatrical productions were impractical and infrequent (Osborne 155-56). The agile and self-



CCC camp, Prince George's County, Maryland. 1935

contained travelling vaudeville groups were ideal to fit the entertainment needs of the young men of the camps.



Some of the most prolific records of vaudeville performance under the Federal Theater Project can be found in *Happy Days*, the semi-official “authorized” weekly newspaper of the Civilian

Conservation Corps. “Written by the CCC for the CCC,” the *Happy Days* newspaper was a compilation of stories, features, editorial, happenings at various camps, advice, inventions, sports (both professional and intramural) general Corps news, advertisements, entertainment, and even





By cracky, here we have the Homestead Four, singing hill-billy ditties for Co. 1185, Severy, Mass. According to Jules, the quartet had the audience rolling in the aisles.

**Fifteen Vaudeville Acts Feature Company's Smoker**

The most eventful affair in the history of Co. 128, No. Adams, Mass., took place recently, with Chief of Police Michael W. Conlin, Mrs. Conlin, Mr. and Mrs. John McKey, all of No. Adams, and Capt. Fenelon of Co. 1185 as guests of the evening. The occasion was the monthly smoker. It was on the first anniversary of the camp newspaper, "The Tan-nyery Eagle," and souvenir copies were passed around. After the customary cigarettes had been passed around, the program opened with a huge vaudeville program, with 15 acts. The units of vaudeville were sent to the camp thru the courtesy of Thomas D. Seena, state FERA vaudeville administrator. A hill-billy band rendered an over-ture, and variety acts commenced: Rural musical skit, exotomas, singing and dancing, novelty juggling, violin, accordion, comic team, Yankee fiddler, tumbling. Capt. Stanfield spoke briefly but pointedly. Chief Conlin made a big hit with his comic stories. Some singing filled in while the movie projector was set up. On the screen the company viewed a Yale-West Point game, with 15 acts. The units of

classifieds. It was “an exercise in participatory journalism.”

Provoked by the poor quality of entertainment available at the CCC camps under FERA, Hallie Flanagan put out a call to directors from around the country for relevant, quality content that would capture “in dramatic form, the spirit which makes *Happy Days*, the camp newspaper, so exciting...clearly, the young men in the CCC camps excelled at amusing one another.” (Quinn 86)

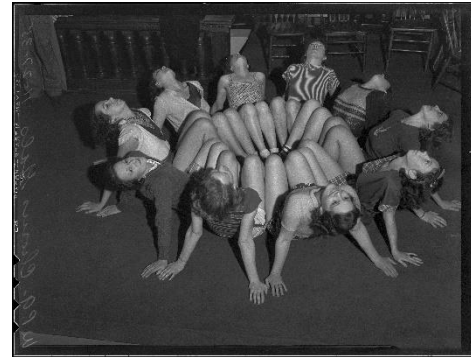
The “Dramatics”

section of *Happy Days*

'Happy Days' excerpt

included reviews of entertainments provided at camps.

The silliness of the vaudeville spirit was contagious and proved itself so attractive that some camps started their own “amateur night” shows, and even drag pageants.



Chorus girls in rehearsal for California CCC

**The Circus Comes to Town**

Part of the Variety Unit, the Federal Circus was a popular form of entertainment during the Great Depression, especially in small towns and rural areas where access to other forms of entertainment was limited. Circuses of this era were known for their elaborate shows featuring a variety of acts, including acrobats, clowns, animal trainers, and aerialists.



Circus in NYC. Sign reads: 'The Federal Theatre presents the world's greatest! circus: 200 sawdust stars, 60 acts, 30 clowns, 50-piece band, trained



One of the truck units leaving the ground for big free night parade.

One of the unique features of the Federal Circus was its traveling nature. Circuses would move from town to town, often setting up their tents in fields or vacant lots on the outskirts of town. As part of the Federal Theater Project, several traveling circuses were formed to tour the country and bring entertainment to small towns and rural communities, and more permanent circuses

were established in more populous places, like New York City.

### Clowning Around

Nothing is sadder than a sad clown. Thankfully, the FTP put these talented characters back in makeup and back to work. Clowns were a popular form of entertainment during the 1930s. As part of the FTP, a number of clown troupes were formed, and they performed in various productions and circuses across the country. They were known for their colorful costumes, exaggerated makeup, and physical comedy.



### Controversy

Government support for the arts was as much of a provocative topic then as it is today. Specifically, there was a tremendous amount of controversy surrounding the Federal Theater Project. One of the primary sources of contention was the perceived political nature of many of the productions. Some conservative politicians and members of the public accused the project of being a tool to promote left-wing ideologies, an “unparalleled New Deal propaganda machine” (Ogden 48). I will discuss some of the lesser controversies in Federal Theater’s Variety Unit that were, naturally, of a vaudevillian nature.

In Minnesota, a news photographer visited an audition where former nightclub dancer Miss Ruby Bae was auditioning for a singing role in Project #1762, a vaudeville unit preparing a show for the Minnesota CCC camps. On December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1935 *Minneapolis Journal* published a spread featuring an old photo of her, captioned, *Federal Fan Dancer No. 1*, stating that this was the “kind of entertainment which the WPA was furnishing the CCC camps.” Despite vehement denials from Ruby Bae and the FTP, the story was re-printed in papers all over the country, and it was determined that the FTP would discontinue operations in the state. “The brief history of the Minnesota Federal Theater epitomizes the truth of

## **EXTRA EXTRA! THE REVIEWS ARE IN!**

“The Federal Theater with its ambitious attempts, it’s sincerity of effort, its societal approach, has won all our good will and best wishes.”

–Douglass Gilbert, *NY World Telegram* 1937

“A repeat performance of federal vaudeville...at a previous presentation the attendance was so large that many who came to the auditorium could not get in.”

Concord, NH, *Monitor*, 4/18/36

“Several days last week all four of the WPA theater enterprises sold out and the WPA circus (the one in NY, not Washington) was performed in one of the Brooklyn armories to an overflowing crowd...the WPA theater has in fact, turned the theatre back to people to whom it rightfully belongs and taken it away from a monied aristocracy that has for some years been able to dictate its course and definitely influence its production.”

–Burns Mantle, *New York Daily News* 5/3/36

the adage that you can never catch up with a lie once it is printed.” (Flanagan 157)

Back east in New Jersey, strong man “Ivan the Great,” was arrested by detectives during the height of his chain-tearing act. In a truly vaudevillian demonstration of the saying “the show must go on,” Ivan managed to rip open the bars of his jail cell in Sussex County, emerging apparently unscathed and still dressed in his Roman toga. According to the *Newark Morning Ledger* of April 23rd, 1938, the "Mightiest Man in This or Any Other Age" then rejoined the Federal Theater circus troupe. Upon his triumphant return, both the company and the audience stood and cheered. This incident was emblematic of the New Jersey project, which “wore out more directors than any other state.” (Flanagan 252)

During “Know Omaha Week” in Nebraska, crowds gathered to see Federal Theater Variety Players do their part: roping and whip-snapping acts, acrobatics, fire dancing and more. However, “disappointment was expressed,” said the *Omaha Bee News*, “because Dakota Bob Hoyt was forbidden to present his knife-throwing act...canceled in the interest of public safety.” Even so, 20,000 people enjoyed “the best attraction offered in Omaha in years.” (Flanagan 176)

### **Federal Theater Pays**

When we consider theatrical employment, we typically think of the visible company of actors, directors, perhaps ushers and front-of-house staff. But for every visible employee, there can be dozens of invisible staff. Stagehands, costume and scenic designers, lighting designers, electricians, audio engineers, makeup artists, writers, and



*FTP Flymen operating line*

assistants. These were all beneficiaries of the Federal Theater Project programs, employed directly in a production.

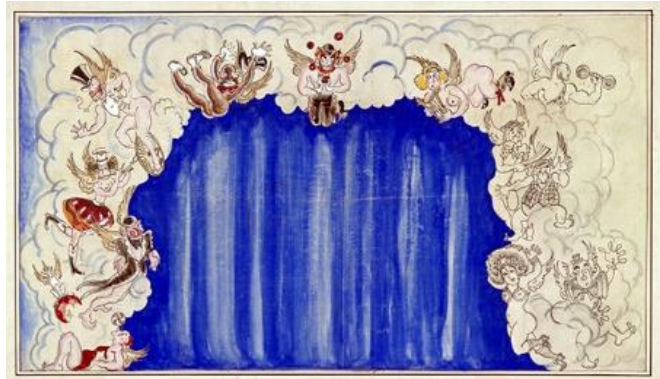


*FTP stage manager calling cues*

The progressive Democrat administration had an awareness of not only the importance of keeping theaters open and creative professionals employed, but also the loss of all economic benefits to related businesses if theaters were to close entirely. In the Manual for the Federal Theater Project of the WPA the describes the purpose of the program is the

“reemployment of theater workers now on the relief rolls, actors, directors, playwrights, designers, vaudeville artist, stage technicians, and other workers in the theater field.”

James Stewart Morcom, a scenic designer, was gratefully re-employed by the FTP: “I was so enthused because here I was getting \$23.86 a week... half of what my wife was making at the moment selling cosmetics in the beauty business. And at least I could hold my head up. As she said, ‘Well, it’ll help pay the telephone.’” Morcom left the FTP after 8 months when he was offered a job in a large production in London. “But if anything went wrong, we could come back.... It was the feeling it was there and that somebody was interested and somebody cared and you were doing the kind of work that you had been trained to do and you knew the other people in it. There was kind of a camaraderie” (Morcom). He had a hugely successful



*Set design by John Stewart Morcom (1906–1988) for an unidentified vaudeville production*

later career, he designed for the New York City Ballet and was art director for the Radio City Music Hall from 1950 to 1973.

Lighting and Technical Director Duncan Whiteside felt it was about more than money, it was about respect. He said in a 1978 interview that what meant most to him was “the acceptance of Federal Theatre shows as professional shows and treated just as if we were a professional hit show coming in from New York... And to be accepted on that basis and criticized on that basis, even though we might be criticized, we respected it because they were criticizing us as professionals, not as people starving to death and trying to make a buck.”



Vaudeville costume by FTP  
designer Emile Stoner

Costume designer Jack Birchenhall appreciated the inventiveness that working in the Federal theater required: “The thirties started to innovate, largely because there was no money. Talent took precedence...a new sense of color and style and so forth, started to infiltrate into the theater. And by the end of the thirties, that had completely taken the place of all that junk that we had seen for all those years and years.” He felt strongly that working with limited resources actually caused a total shift in theatrical costuming that put quality first.

### **Farewell Federal Theater**

*"Nationally, the Theatre Project's record was extraordinary... In the project's fourth year, Congress killed it... Its demise was perhaps the most tragic occurrence in the cultural history of the United States. Had funds been provided for continuance, upon an artistic basis divorced from*

*unemployment relief, of those units that had clearly demonstrated their worth, the foundation would have been laid for a nationwide theatrical structure that would have brought enlightenment and enjoyment to millions, and stimulation to artistic creation. The cost, compared to the billions expended annually upon weapons of destruction, would have been infinitesimal."*

- *Elmer Rice, New York Federal Theater Project Director*

The House Un-American Activities Committee was created on May 26, 1938, as a specialized investigative committee - its primary objective was to probe accusations of disloyalty and subversive actions by private individuals, government workers, and organizations suspected of being linked to "communism or fascism." But in actuality, the committee primarily focused on investigating left-wing organizations, with a specific interest in examining whether the American Communist Party had infiltrated New Deal projects such as the WPA. J. Parnell Thomas, a member of the committee, voiced his disapproval of certain plays that contained radical messaging and asserted that nearly all productions put on by the Federal Theatre Project were blatant propaganda for either communism or the New Deal. Despite all arguments to the contrary, the end of the New Deal was in sight and the FTP was the first to go. (Ogden)

The Federal Theater Project came to an end on June 30, 1939 when its funding was terminated. In the course of its existence, the FTP was responsible for hundreds of stage productions, both of classics and new plays written for the FTP, mounted in cities across the nation. The FTP is the only instance in which the Federal government was directly responsible for the production and administration of stage work on a large scale.

## Viva la Vaudeville

*“Such street shows, whatever the period, without written dialogue, although full of give-and take, performer to performer, and performer to audience, pit the strength and skill of the performer against the restlessness of the crowd. Such shows demand - and I saw this demand met on Federal Theater stages throughout the country - professionalism, indomitable will, virtuosity.*

*- Hallie Flanagan, Arena*

The revitalization of vaudeville through the Variety division of the Federal Theater Project from 1935-1939 delayed its imminent death, providing re-employment for variety professionals in the form of federally funded vaudeville shows and variety entertainment’s inclusion in large musical productions. “Vaudeville’s ‘re-birth’ was seen by many as due to a great extent to WPA patronage.” (Kazacoff 271)

Elements of vaudeville continued to influence American entertainment throughout the 20th century and into the present. Radio variety shows like the mid-century *Major Bowes Amateur Hour* and *The Orson Welles Almanac* featured sketch comedy, music, and other vaudeville-style entertainments. The format of television talent shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, and late-night shows like *The Tonight Show* and *Saturday Night Live* draws heavily on classic vaudeville shows.

Despite the mainstream popularity of the style, vaudeville itself no longer has a home in the theaters of America. Intermittent gigs still exist within large cities at bars and nightclubs. With few exceptions, options for steady employment are limited to touring with larger established companies like Cirque du Soleil and Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. But today’s

vaudevillians, being ever adaptable, have found work in unlikely places, such as operating giant puppets in the Metropolitan Opera, or clowning in children's hospitals. Yet between gigs, vaudevillians and circus performers alike can be found back they started, touring in caravans and busking for change on street corners in the big cities of the world.

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