

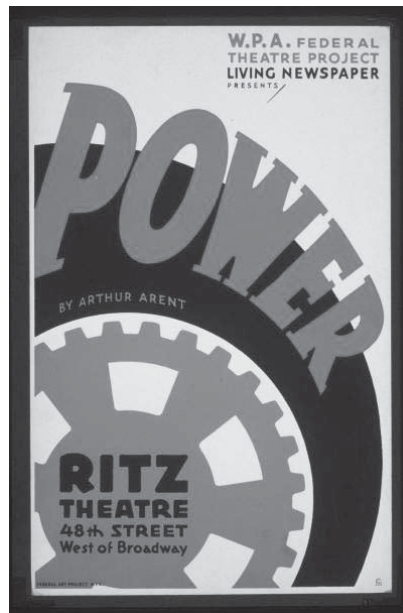
The
**Carl Beck
Papers**

in Russian &
East European Studies

Number 1903

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of the Soviet Living
Newspaper**



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No. 1903, February 2008

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ISSN 0889-275X

Image from cover: A poster from an American living newspaper, taken from the Federal Theatre project, Library of Congress. These images are in the public domain.

The Carl Beck Papers

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Abstract

This article examines the migration of a Soviet agitational theatrical form from Russia to the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. The Soviet living newspaper, or *zhivaia gazeta*, began during the Russian Civil War as a method to act out a pro-Soviet version of the news for mainly illiterate Red Army soldiers. During the 1920s, it evolved into an experimental form of agitprop theater that attracted the interest of foreigners, who hoped to develop new methods of political theater in their own countries. In the United States, the living newspaper format was first adopted by American communist circles. Eventually, the depression-era arts program, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), incorporated an expanded and altered version as part of its many offerings. Living newspapers eventually became one of the FTP's most celebrated and criticized performance genres. The political content of American living newspapers was a major factor in the government's elimination of the FTP in 1939.

When the United States' only federally supported theater program opened in 1935, it incorporated a novel kind of theatrical event called a living newspaper. Composed in part by newsmen and designed as a topical exposé, the living newspaper was the most controversial part of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), one of the Depression-era programs to fund the arts. The director of the project, Hallie Flanagan, underscored the native American pedigree of this genre: "Although it has occasional reference to the Volksbühne and Blue Blouses, to Bragaglia and Meyerhold and Eisenstein, it's as American as Walt Disney, the March of Time, and the *Congressional Record*."¹ Many American historians have concurred with this judgment, deeming the living newspaper an original American art form.²

However as Flanagan herself knew, the name and the inspiration for this theatrical style came from the Soviet Union. In her list of references, three were Soviet—the Blue Blouses, the theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, and the theater and film director Sergei Eisenstein. On trips she took to the Soviet Union in 1926 and 1930, Flanagan had encountered the Blue Blouse Theater, the best-known performer of Soviet living newspapers.³ The Soviet heritage of living newspapers haunted this form and contributed to the demise of the Federal Theatre Project in 1939.⁴

Flanagan was one of many American travelers to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s who were inspired by what they saw as novel solutions to economic problems and the government's generous support for the arts. Two other innovators in the Federal Theatre Project, Elmer Rice, the head of the Northeastern Division, and Joseph Losey, one of the first directors of living newspapers in New York, had also been to the Soviet Union.⁵ Western travelers' often naïve and misguided impressions of Soviet life has been the subject of considerable scholarship.⁶ Nonetheless, as Michael David-Fox has argued, their trips "must be regarded as one of the most consequential cross-cultural encounters of the twentieth century" with important consequences for both the Soviet Union and the United States.⁷

Although living newspapers changed significantly once they migrated to America, they shared crucial elements with their Soviet predecessors: they addressed vital contemporary events; they integrated filmic techniques, including slide shows, music, and sometimes film clips; and they employed a disjointed, episodic style of presentation. In addition, they avoided the conventions of the traditional proscenium stage and made use of stereotyped characters instead of figures with psychological depth. Both the American and Soviet versions delivered explicitly political messages through modernist forms. They also claimed a direct relationship to state power, in the Soviet case usually as an advocate and in the United States sometimes as a critic.

It might be argued that the Federal Theatre Project's embrace of living newspapers serves as yet another example of the fealty of American leftists to the Soviet Union during what Harvey Klehr has called the "heyday of American Communism."⁸ The opening of Soviet archives in recent years has renewed discussions about the American Communist Party's relationship to Moscow.⁹ Several key leaders of the living newspaper division, including the director, Morris Watson, were either Communist Party members or very close fellow travelers. Initial proposals for living newspaper topics, developed under Elmer Rice, included issues close to the heart of the American party, including sharecropping and segregation in the South.¹⁰ Yet such an interpretation overlooks a crucial problem in timing: living newspapers were only integrated into the Federal Theatre Project after this genre had fallen into disgrace in its homeland. By the early 1930s, living newspapers came under attack in the Soviet Union as conduits for decadent foreign ideas. American instigators could hardly have been following orders from Moscow.

I argue that the attraction of Soviet living newspapers stemmed not from their communist origins, at least not for all who adopted this form. Instead it was the broader appeal of early Soviet artistic experiments, the promise of cultural products that were inventive, popular, widely available, and politically relevant. To use a slogan of Soviet constructivists, artists under the new communist regime attempted to bring "art into life," questioning standard theatrical techniques, the function of visual art, the conventions of architecture, and the narrative film genre.¹¹ These experiments drew attention far beyond the communist left, appealing to artists from around the world who were struggling to find a new relevance for artistic creation in the postwar and Depression eras.¹²

Now that the Cold War is over and the Soviet Union no longer exists, we have an opportunity to reconsider Soviet influence in the United States. Following the lead of scholars like David Engerman, I use both Russian and American sources to examine how Americans understood—and misunderstood—Soviet achievements.¹³ This article examines the trans-Atlantic journey of living newspapers from Soviet venues, through the American Communist Party (CPUSA), and onto Broadway stages. They are an excellent example of an "Atlantic crossing," to use Daniel Rodgers's phrase.¹⁴ "Perception, misperception, translation, transformation, cooptation, preemption, and contestation were all intrinsic to [this process]."¹⁵ For American practitioners, living newspapers were tools to bring politically engaged theater to new audiences. Their didacticism was one of their strengths; their use of inventive staging techniques was an important method to confront the challenge of new media in a world where film was usurping all kinds of staged performances, from theater

to vaudeville. Tracing their evolution in the United States shows not only Soviet artistic influence in depression America, an influence that reached far beyond narrow communist circles; it also reveals how Americans altered foreign models, imbuing them with unique formal elements and new political content.

Despite the considerable changes Americans made to living newspapers, this genre was hounded by the charge of communist influence. In 1938, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), which would gain great renown in the late 1940s and early 1950s, opened hearings on the Federal Theatre Project. Along with complaints of fiscal malfeasance, conservative congressmen who controlled HUAC insisted that this program favored communist employees and promoted communist ideas. In an eerie foreshadowing of the late twentieth century debates around the National Endowment for the Arts, congressmen in the 1930s questioned if the government should pay for artists to criticize American institutions and customs. Living newspapers were easy targets. Not only did they address controversial issues—slum housing, unionization, public ownership of utilities—they were also extremely dependent on government financing. Once federal support ended, the American living newspaper ended as well. The rapid demise of this experimental political theater reveals both the promise and the limitations of America’s first central effort to support the arts.

The Soviet Living Newspaper

What were the origins of this theatrical form that inspired such controversy? The Soviet living newspaper (*zhivaia gazeta*) was an eclectic mix, part broadsheet, part music hall, and part political rally. It took shape during the Russian Civil War, fought between the Bolsheviks and a broad coalition of opponents of the new regime. Along with mock trials, pageants, and puppet shows, it was one of many forms of agitprop theater that the government used to present political messages in the context of staged performances.¹⁶ Front-line traveling theatrical troupes on the Bolshevik side began acting out the news for their largely illiterate soldier audiences. They composed short sketches that roughly followed the structure of a newspaper, incorporating local, national, and international news. The method continued after the Bolshevik victory when the Soviet government accepted a mixed economic system called the New Economic Policy. State-sponsored entertainment had to compete with imported films, nightclubs, and a thriving industry of lowbrow literature. Proregime artists saw living newspapers, in an expanded and revised form, as a way to combat these remnants of capitalist culture.¹⁷

In the early 1920s, the Moscow School of Journalism began its own living newspaper troupe called Blue Blouse (*Siniaia bluza*), named after the simple workers' shirts that performers wore. Blue Blouse developed a basic format for performances that was widely copied around the country, presenting the news of the day in a mix of satirical songs, skits, dances, and pantomimes. Typically performances began with a parade of the "headlines," followed by from eight to fifteen short sketches on a wide variety of topics ranging from international affairs to complaints about local factory management.¹⁸ The actors carried exaggerated props to identify the role they were performing—a top hat for a capitalist or a large red pencil for a bureaucrat. Since the troupe did not need sophisticated stages or lighting, it could perform almost anywhere, including cafeterias, clubs, and outdoor settings. A carnival-style barker, often called a "loud speaker" (*rupor*), tied the separate performance pieces together.

The Soviets did not invent the idea of acting out the news. We can find this kind of mocking investigation of political life in British music halls, American vaudeville, and the skits incorporated into central European cabaret. The Italian futurist Marinetti espoused dramatizing nontheatrical events, using the methods of variety theater.¹⁹ Left-leaning dramatic innovators in the 1920s came up with their own approaches to political theater, which included short sketches focusing on world historical events. The Viennese director Jacob Moreno had developed what he called a Theater of Spontaneity (*Stegreiftheater*) already in 1922, before the Soviet Blue Blouse troupe took shape. He encouraged actors to improvise on the day's news as a starting point for any performance.²⁰ The German communist director, Erwin Piscator, put together what he called a Red Theater Review to mark the German elections in 1924.²¹ Still, none of these efforts used the name living newspaper, which was tied to Soviet-style political theater until the 1930s. They also did not use a format that tried to re-create the structural format of a newspaper, with headlines, international news, local news, and letters to the editor all acted out onstage. Perhaps most important, these similar efforts were not directly supported by the central state.

In the mid-1920s, the Moscow Blue Blouse was incorporated into the cultural division of the central Moscow trade union organization. From this point on it functioned as a professional performance troupe, giving participants full-time work as cultural agitators. With funds from the trade union bureaucracy, it started its own journal, *Blue Blouse*, which published scripts, musical scores, and advice about staging. The success of this highly visible, professional, living newspaper troupe sparked emulation among local clubs and factories. Soon there were amateur groups throughout Moscow and eventually throughout the Soviet Union. Their

homemade sketches, often adapted from published scripts, not only commented on international and national news; they also poked fun at local factory administrators and bureaucrats.²²

Like printed newspapers, the theatricalized version focused on contemporary life. “Our task,” read one Blue Blouse manifesto, “is to transform the dry language of newspaper articles, resolutions, and Party directives into clear, vivid language understandable to the broad masses.”²³ Their overtly didactic purpose is apparent even in the titles of Blue Blouse sketches: “Don’t Be Stupid, Go to the Club,” “Women Workers and the New Life Style,” and “An Evening on Monetary Reform.”²⁴ They presented a world neatly divided between the old and the new, the capitalist and communist, the good and the bad. Evil foreigners, fascists, and home-grown capitalist sympathizers always lost in a battle of wits against the heroes and heroines of the new state.²⁵

With their episodic structure and non-naturalistic staging, living newspapers had clear links to the modernist theatrical experiments underway in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. The best-known practitioner was Vsevolod Meyerhold, who criticized the realistic methods of his former teacher, Konstantin Stanislavskii. Meyerhold rejected traditional sets, costumes, and psychologically rich characters who allowed the audience to empathize with the events on stage. Many directors of amateur living newspaper groups attended one of Meyerhold’s workshops specifically designed to train directors for club theaters.²⁶ The journal *Blue Blouse* published aesthetic manifestos that strongly evoke Meyerhold’s critique of illusionist theater: “Blue Blouse categorically rejects any decorative and realistic set designs. There will be no birch trees or little brooks . . . [Blue Blouse] is not a photograph, but rather a construction site.”²⁷ Like Meyerhold and his famous student, Eisenstein, the creators of living newspapers integrated a variety of formal techniques and media, from circus routines to slide shows.

Unlike conventional theatrical performances, most living newspapers were staged without a constructed set. At most, performers had tables and chairs at their disposal. To get their messages across to audiences, they used exaggerated props, very simple costumes, and a variety of posters, flags, and slides. A photograph illustrating the skit “Don’t Be Stupid, Go to the Club,” for example, contrasted a vital young worker in his cap and work shirt with a variety of club enemies, including dissolute-looking drunkards and priests, recognizable by large bottles and crosses. Performers also employed acrobatic skills—somersaults, cartwheels, and pyramids—to hold audience interest and demonstrate the physical prowess of the new, young Soviet citizenry.²⁸

The professional Blue Blouse troupe in Moscow attracted the writing skills of some of the country's best-known avant-garde authors, including Sergei Tretiakov and Vladimir Maiakovskii. The genre's integration of actual documents, such as official proclamations and newspaper texts, won the interest of a segment of the leftist avant-garde called "factographers," who advocated the use of concrete details from daily life as the basis for a new and utilitarian artistic form that they called a "literature of fact."²⁹ Although the factographers were primarily interested in literature, their journal, *New Left (Novyi lef)*, explicitly endorsed the methods of living newspapers.³⁰

Living newspapers tried to reach audiences through satirical humor. Actors made the enemies of the new regime ridiculous by portraying them as buffoons. Even when scripts addressed very serious topics, such as the celebration of the October Revolution, they included benighted characters made foolish by their skewed interpretations of political events.³¹ The living newspaper's reliance on satire made this form a focus of criticism in the aesthetic debates that rocked the Soviet cultural world during the 1920s. Some proletarian audience members charged that living newspapers made light of the revolution. "Does anything remain in workers' heads but laughter after a Blue Blouse performance," asked one trade union leader in a censorious tone.³² Living newspapers were not really a new form, charged another critic, but rather a renamed cabaret that appealed mainly to the new Soviet bourgeoisie.³³ Others objected to their repeated use of stereotypes, such as the Komsomol girl, the capitalist, and the bureaucrat, at the expense of identifiable individuals. They called for more complicated characters, and especially for more persuasive heroes.³⁴ Such criticisms reflected the views of the politicians and critics who were beginning to lay the groundwork for the simpler, more celebratory story lines that would eventually evolve into the Stalinist aesthetic of socialist realism.

The Soviet living newspaper was a strange combination of political and artistic forms. It combined modernist experimentation with elements from the fairground, and official political speech with satirical limericks. Although they always presented simple, uncompromising messages from the single-party state, these segments could be undercut by other skits where state officials were figures of fun, or humorous songs where official language was openly ridiculed. Viewers were left to make their own meaning from the fragments. The contradictory nature of Blue Blouse skits, their ability to praise and mock simultaneously, made them potentially dangerous.

Because of their inventive form and openly political messages, the living newspapers offered visitors to the Soviet Union a fascinating example of new Soviet art. For American communists, especially those who knew Russian, they were an

attractive technique to deliver political messages in a palatable form. Joseph Freeman, founder of the communist cultural journal, *New Masses*, was fascinated by their ability to make national and international news appealing to a proletarian audience. Another commentator writing from Moscow in 1932 enthused about the Blue Blouse theater's ability "to dramatize current events with little scenery or decoration and to produce short skits with plenty of political humor."³⁵

By contrast, theater experts were most impressed by the inventive staging techniques employed in living newspapers. In a short feature published in 1926 in the premier American theater journal, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, an unnamed author found elements of medieval guild plays, Italian commedia dell'arte, and a music-hall style revue in Blue Blouse performances.³⁶ On her two trips to the Soviet Union, Hallie Flanagan singled out living newspapers as a particularly vibrant and innovative method to do away with unneeded artifice and make do with less:

The Blue Blouses, powerful, lithe, vibrant, acting with the precision of machines and the zeal of those who spread a faith, are ready for a new art form as well as for a new life form. . . . They need no curtain to separate them from the audience for they have no illusion to maintain. They never pretend to be imagined characters, they remain members of the society which they illustrate upon the stage. They need no painted background and no decoration, for prettiness does not count here, nor is beauty something added on. Beauty is the idea expressed clearly and boldly in the rigging, a battalion of soldiers, a commonwealth of farm and factory hands all linked in a comradeship of work.³⁷

When Flanagan published this enthusiastic review in early 1930, living newspapers were already losing their place as the most common form of agitprop theater in the Soviet Union. In the years of the Stalinist industrialization drive from 1928 to 1932, when the country went through the social upheaval of rapid industrialization and the forced collectivization of agriculture, a simpler form of political theater emerged called the "agitprop brigade." Abandoning a multistructured format, scripts addressed a single issue. Performances were designed to provoke direct action from the audience, not to provide viewing pleasure. During the course of the performance, actors challenged viewers to give money for industrialization or vote to form a collective farm. They might not be allowed to leave until they had complied.³⁸ The practitioners of this militant style denounced Blue Blouse practices as frivolous because of their emphasis on humor, slow because of the need for rehearsals, and "bourgeois" because of their modernist style.

All official support for living newspapers ended in 1932, when the Soviet government summarily shut down most cultural organizations that claimed special ties to the proletariat. Instead, state cultural agencies began to foster art forms that would appeal beyond the urban working class. In addition, the Stalinist cultural bureaucracy turned against forms of cultural expression that it considered to be modernist or avant-garde. Cultural officials painted these forms with the brush of Western influence, charging that they appealed only to the decadent tastes of the dying bourgeois class. Instead, the government began to formulate the principles of socialist realism, art that would have recognizable heroes, simpler story lines, and clear communist values. Living newspapers, with their stereotypical characters, their disjointed form, and their emphasis on satire, did not fit the emerging aesthetic standards. By the conclusion of the Stalinist industrialization drive in 1932, Soviet critics were using the term “Blue Blouseism” as an insult.³⁹ In the following year, the Moscow Blue Blouse Theater was shut down. Although it took more time to get the news to communist theater circles abroad, the cultural agencies of the Communist International, responsible for exporting Soviet-style communism, began to spread the message that living newspapers were politically and culturally passé.⁴⁰

American Blue Blouses

Just as living newspapers were coming under greater political scrutiny in the Soviet Union, they began to gain a small following in the United States. The kind of cultural work that was so typical of the Soviet Communist Party and the Soviet state in general—using the graphic arts, theater, music, and film to educate the population in communist ideas—initially had little place in the CPUSA’s work. This narrow political focus began to change with the arrival of the journal *New Masses*, first published in 1926. It became the cultural voice of the American Communist Party. On the eve of the stock market crash, *New Masses* helped to launch a new kind of institution affiliated with the Communist Party called John Reed clubs, named after the American communist writer and activist.⁴¹ These cultural centers were inspired by both Soviet and American models. On the one hand, they were the CPUSA’s version of Soviet workers’ clubs, which aimed to nurture new artistic talent from the lower classes and offer politically correct forms of entertainment. On the other hand, they continued efforts by American Settlement Houses and community organizations to provide meaningful cultural activities for poor and working-class neighborhoods.⁴²

When drama groups took shape in John Reed clubs, they usually abandoned the standard repertoire of workers' theaters and Settlement House stages, which offered amateur versions of the theatrical classics.⁴³ Instead, they produced skits and short plays designed to inform and activate viewers, taking their performances to meetings and demonstrations. In New York, for example, a John Reed club sponsored a political pageant in honor of Lenin. A Chicago club quickly opened a mobile theater group that performed original work. In Detroit the John Reed Club sponsored the city's first English-language workers' theater.⁴⁴

Another separate but related pathway for communist cultural work was through the American branch of the Communist International, or Comintern. In the mid 1920s, a sector of the Comintern known as Workers' International Relief (WIR) began making inroads in the United States. This was the U.S. branch of the Comintern's cultural agency, Mezhrabpom (*Mezhdunarodnaia rabochaia pomoshch'*).⁴⁵ Founded to alleviate devastating economic conditions in the Soviet Union after the Russian Civil War, it quickly expanded to support a wide range of magazines, cultural societies, and outreach programs that tried to solicit support for the new nation outside the narrow sphere of the political left.⁴⁶ As in other countries, WIR advocates in the United States underscored the centrality of cultural activities as a method to attract Americans to communism. "Our cultural groups actively serve the class war," read one WIR announcement.⁴⁷

As WIR moved into the arts, members became interested in theater as a method of outreach and education. The Workers' Laboratory Theatre (WLT) was one of the first of these new stages. It was affiliated with New York's WIR, which provided the new group rehearsal space and found bookings at strike sites and labor organization events. The WLT adopted forms of agitprop theater then popular in the Soviet Union. Like their Soviet prototypes, WLT members devised their own scripts advocating social activism. They performed on the streets, often in the midst of conflict, for example blocking efforts to evict impoverished workers from their apartments.⁴⁸

In 1931, the Workers' Laboratory Theatre began to publish a mimeographed bulletin called *Worker's Theatre*, which soon incorporated John Reed club theaters as well. This journal became a conduit for theatrical ideas coming from the Soviet Union. The Moscow Blue Blouse organization sent guidelines for American groups interested in its techniques. The aim of a Blue Blouse performance, wrote the Moscow leaders, was "to give to the worker-spectator in a convincing, entertaining theatrical performance, a clear-cut political show, picturing the need of the present day, organizing for the struggle, and picturing the structure of our socialist society. To meet this requirement we developed the method of starting a newspaper, i.e.,

‘the Living Newspaper.’” The Moscow group stressed the need for simple props, costumes, and makeup, so that performers could easily move from place to place. They also underscored the multimedia elements of a typical Blue Blouse performance, integrating poetry, skits, songs, and dances.⁴⁹

As American workers’ theaters began to spread, a number of groups began calling themselves “Blue Blouse troupes.” While making claim to a Soviet heritage, American circles were already alterations of the Soviet original. For Soviet practitioners, Blue Blouse was synonymous with the living newspaper, a multimedia, multipart event that offered commentary on international, national, and local events. For American leftists, Blue Blouse was one of many names given to agitprop theater in general—a flexible, mobile theatrical form that was intended as a teaching tool to educate and organize audiences. Very few American Blue Blouse or agitprop circles described their work as “living newspapers.”⁵⁰ Instead they produced short skits on a single issue, akin to the methods of the Soviet agitprop brigade.

American Blue Blouse groups were first and foremost mobile, taking their performances to strike sites and meetings. As one member of the WLT chided a critic, “He does not know the difference between a traveling blue blouse theatre and a permanent theatre.”⁵¹ To facilitate movement, and to distinguish their work from conventional “bourgeois” theater, they rejected fixed sets and elaborate costumes. The Los Angeles Blue Blouse group took their name quite literally and adopted blue jeans and blue work shirts as their distinguishing mark; simple props, like a top hat for the capitalist and a cloak for the Salvation Army maid, were all they used to distinguish their characters.⁵² “There is no more room in Workers Theatres for complicated stage settings, costumes, make-up and other relics from the professional stage,” determined the Workers’ Dramatic Council of New York in 1931.⁵³ Some conventional workers’ stages, which had formerly focused on staged plays, followed this advice and transformed their performance style. The drama circle of the Hungarian club Elore, for example, formed what they called a theatrical “shock brigade” that performed in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Maryland to raise money for the Hungarian-language communist newspaper.⁵⁴

Like their Soviet namesakes, American agitprop troupes focused on contemporary events, using their works as political commentary. They composed works on the Harlan County miners’ strike of 1931–32 and the achievements of the First Five Year Plan in the Soviet Union. The Chicago Blue Blouses, started at the beginning of 1931, devoted themselves to skits and mass recitations at political meetings and celebrations. At a Fourth of July celebration in 1931 they performed a short piece on the Scottsboro case, a cause célèbre among American communists.⁵⁵ During the 1932

election campaign, the CPUSA called directly to agitprop groups to elucidate the party platform, which included support to the unemployed and easing tensions with the Soviet Union. “This invitation represents a great task and a great opportunity,” wrote the editors of *Workers Theatre*. “We have a chance now to reach hundreds of thousands of workers who have never heard of our work, and to demonstrate the real value of agitprop groups in rallying new masses of workers behind the program of workers’ struggle.”⁵⁶

Communist agitational theater groups also endorsed the nonrealistic acting styles popular in the Soviet Blue Blouse and other agitprop circles. The editors of *Workers Theatre* were passionate advocates of a pared-down, mobile theater. John Bonn, the leader of the German-language Prolet-Buehne (Proletarian Stage) in New York and leader of a coalition of communist theater groups, wanted all leftist theater circles in the United States to abandon conventional repertoire and acting techniques. “The problem of the American Workers Theatre is not the working out of the relationship between content and form, not the handling of style and technique of play-directing, but: how to best obtain the political education and activation [sic] of the groups. This is the only basis for our style and technique. That means: a decided and rapid turn to the Agitprop method.”⁵⁷

For American communists, agitprop theater was a smart political choice. Worker actors did not have time to learn the speech and gestures of those in other social groups, wrote Sidney Bell of the Workers’ Laboratory Theatre. Moreover, the time needed to develop realistic details could detract from the political message of the work. A realistic strike drama, he continued, would set the scene by showing workers telling jokes and swapping stories. “But in all this dialogue there is very little propaganda. . . . If we had thrown realism out of the window we could have had one of the workers tell the rest the necessity for the strike and the position of the union.”⁵⁸

American advocates of agitprop saw it as an effective and inexpensive way to inspire audiences to action. This was a “technique of poverty,” asserted the left-wing playwright Michael Blankfort in *New Masses*.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, it had a unique ability to energize viewers. “When the . . . Agitprop players appeared, a wave of revolutionary enthusiasm, of militant spirit, of proletarian discipline swept over us,” one director bragged. “We experienced an act of class struggle—and not a theatre act.”⁶⁰ Another agitprop circle claimed a measurable success from their performance; as a result of a skit on the condition of veterans, twenty-six new members signed up for the Ex-Servicemen’s League.⁶¹

Looking for ways to attract a broader audience, American agitprop groups turned to popular culture for inspiration. The Solidarity Players of Roxbury Massachusetts said their aim was to create a “synthesis of the American vaudeville and Soviet Blue Blouse technique.”⁶² The Workers Laboratory Theatre developed a method called “the political side show,” where players used methods honed by carnival barkers and circus showmen to attract viewers to a performance. At one outdoor celebration in the summer of 1932, viewers were invited into a tent to see a variety of “freaks,” including the world’s fattest man—a spoof on Herbert Hoover—and the Bearded Ladies—a caricature of the Daughters of the American Revolution.⁶³

When the cultural agencies of the Comintern began to spread the message that living newspapers were politically and culturally passé, American Blue Blouse groups went into a decline. Members of the CPUSA became aware of the shift toward socialist realism taking place in the Soviet Union and began to emphasize the need for higher quality, more sophisticated acting techniques, and the development of professional drama groups. Once the Comintern adopted its new political strategy of the Popular Front, simple agitprop forms suffered another blow. National communist parties were now expected to reach out beyond their traditional bases of support, attracting new blood to a broad coalition of antifascist forces.⁶⁴ Agitprop theater, which was best at activating a like-thinking audience, was not a good medium for this new message.

However, the final nail in the coffin of American Blue Blouse groups came with the formation of the Federal Theatre Project in 1935. This experiment in publicly funded theater at a time of great economic hardship drew off many former activists from worker theater circles. It also attracted broad audiences, many new to the theater, with its high quality, inexpensive performances. This caused a sharp decline in all theater groups that aimed their work at the lower classes.⁶⁵ But while the FTP helped to kill off one offspring of the Soviet living newspaper, it gave birth to another.

Living Newspapers in the Federal Theatre Project

Hallie Flanagan was a direct link between communist-style agitprop theatre and the Federal Theatre Project. Her trips to the Soviet Union inspired her to attempt politically charged theatrical works back home. After seeing plays on Soviet collectivization at a Moscow festival in 1930, she confided to her diary: “Imagine any actors in America being passionately interested in tractors! Imagine a play on

farm relief! An audience listening!”⁶⁶ In this enthusiastic outburst, it is tempting to see the origins of *Triple-A Plowed Under*, the Federal Theatre Project’s living newspaper on farm relief that first premiered in 1936.

Because of her interest in new theatrical forms, especially those addressing contemporary themes, she avidly followed the development of American workers’ theater. While researching an article for *Theatre Arts Monthly*, Flanagan viewed a presentation of American agitprop theater while attending the first meeting of the New-York-based Workers’ Cultural League in 1931. She found the performance “rather childish,” but still discovered traces of the performance style that had fascinated her in the Soviet Union:

The only example of workers’ drama given at the conference was a skit which seemed a combination of American vaudeville and Russian Blue Blouse technique. A score of workers marched up the aisle singing, and argued with another worker whose silk topper and over-refined accent proclaimed him to be a capitalist. Their conflict was over the purpose of drama, the capitalist insisting that art was an expression of man’s craving for beauty, while the workers insisted that art was a weapon in man’s struggle for justice; to the apparent delight of the audience, the workers overcame the capitalist, argumentatively and physically.⁶⁷

As head of the Vassar Experimental Theatre, which she turned into a nationally known site for theatrical innovation, Flanagan had considerable freedom to try new methods. In 1931, she and a former Vassar student, Margaret Clifford, wrote an experimental play called *Can You Hear Their Voices*, based on a short story by then communist, Whittaker Chambers.⁶⁸ It examined the devastating drought then sweeping the southern United States from several different points of view. The Vassar production used projected slides at intervals in the play to present statistics on the drought. One of the opening slides served as a kind of bibliography, informing the audience that they were about to see “A Play of our time, based on a story by Whittaker Chambers . . . also on material appearing in the *Congressional Record*, *Time*, *The Literary Digest*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *The Christian Century*, and *The New York Times*. Every episode in the play is factual.”⁶⁹ In parts of the play, radio announcements served as a narrative element, moving the action along. Flanagan later claimed this work as a direct precursor of the Federal Theatre’s living newspapers.⁷⁰

A 1933 work written by Flanagan and another Vassar student, Mary St. John, also shows traces of the living newspaper style. Divided into twenty-five brief scenes,

The American Plan contrasted the effects of the Depression on a wealthy industrialist and a number of his workers. “[It] takes place on a construction which suggests now the various aspects of the city itself; now the office or penthouse of Mr. Black, head of Black and White Foodstuffs, Incorporated; now certain less pretentious homes of people whose fortunes are interwoven with that of the B&W company,” read the stage instructions. The work divided Depression America into two camps of rich and poor. To underscore the contrast, the play ended with alternating segments of “The Star-Spangled Banner” and the “International.”⁷¹

In the summer of 1935, Flanagan was named director of the newly organized Federal Theatre Project. Designed as an effort to give employment to all theater workers hard hit by the Depression, from actors to costume designers, it became an ambitious national program intent on bringing live theater to almost all parts of the country. It built on preexisting relief programs in areas where there were significant numbers of unemployed theater workers and dark theaters, primarily New York. Then it expanded to New England, the South, the Midwest, the Northwest, and parts of the Southwest. At its highpoint, the project sponsored theaters in twenty-two states and sent touring troupes and supplies all over the country.⁷² The Federal Theatre even played in Peoria. It sponsored low cost or free performances of conventional plays, experimental works, children’s theater, musicals, vaudeville, and the circus. It encouraged foreign-language plays in urban centers and was also an important backer of African American stages.⁷³

From the outset, Flanagan was determined to have at least part of the program dedicated to dramatizing current events.⁷⁴ Playwrights were deeply interested in writing about economic and social life, she claimed; moreover, “since the Federal Theatre is itself the result of an economic situation, it is an appropriate producing agency for plays of contemporary life.”⁷⁵ Although the FTP did put on conventionally structured works about social problems, including a simultaneous national run of Upton Sinclair’s *It Can’t Happen Here*, Flanagan’s preferred method of social investigation was the American living newspaper.

Flanagan was drawn to living newspapers because of their incorporation of facts and documents, elements she believed made them more relevant to viewers. She saw the attraction of documents everywhere during the Depression—in the increase of newspaper circulation, the appeal of newsreels, the attraction of the *March of Time*.⁷⁶ For Flanagan, living newspapers were cut from the same cloth as documentary films, photo essay collections, WPA travel guides, and novels like John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. The cultural historian William Stott has credited

Flanagan with being one of the first people to write about the documentary impulse in American art during the 1930s.⁷⁷

The program got off to a rocky start in early 1936 with *Ethiopia*, which examined the Italian invasion of that African nation. The performance was cut up into fourteen short scenes alternating between Addis Ababa and various world capitals where diplomats struggled to explain and interpret the Italian invasion. The dialogue consisted of excerpts from actual speeches by world leaders, from the king of Ethiopia, Hailie Selassie, to the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini.⁷⁸ But this fact-laden performance did not get past its final dress rehearsal. Worried that the portrayal of foreign leaders by a government-sponsored theater could interfere with international diplomacy, State Department officials ruled that no living newspaper could portray a sitting foreign leader or cabinet member.⁷⁹

After this direct intervention by the government, living newspapers stuck to domestic themes. *Triple-A Plowed Under* examined the rural agricultural crisis and the battle between the Roosevelt administration and the Supreme Court over possible solutions. *Injunction Granted* traced the evolution of unionization, including the newly passed Wagner Act that protected collective bargaining rights. *Power* examined public ownership of utilities and the disputed legality of one of the biggest New Deal employment projects, the Tennessee Valley Authority. The only nationally distributed work to emerge outside of New York was a drama on syphilis, *Spirochete*, which endorsed state-mandated blood tests as a way to screen for the disease. *One Third of a Nation*, the title taken directly from a Roosevelt speech, investigated the housing crisis and chronicled debates over federal housing aid.

Flanagan's decision to institute living newspapers in the FTP was in part a practical one; they posed no direct competition to commercial theaters and had the capacity to put large numbers of actors and stage-hands back to work, the main purpose of government art programs. Moreover, they did not depend on big-name stars, who were less likely to be unemployed than lesser-known character actors. However, Flanagan's support had an aesthetic component as well. She saw living newspapers as way to facilitate innovation on the stage, and she consistently singled out this form as the FTP's most original contribution. As her correspondence indicates, she was more directly involved in the writing, staging, and performance of living newspapers than in any other aspect of the project, fighting with the writers and directors over subject matter, wording, and staging techniques.⁸⁰ It was her preferred method to bring art into life.

The Living Newspaper Division of the Federal Theatre Project was located in New York City, the theater capital of the United States. Unique to this genre was its

large staff of writers and researchers. At its high point, the Living Newspaper Division engaged some sixty-five people.⁸¹ They assembled clipping files and literature summaries on a wide range of topics, including war, insurance, health care, housing, youth, and race relations. After the first experiments in collective writing, one author, Arthur Arent, took responsibility for the final product.

When a specific theme was chosen as the focus of a performance, the team did additional research. The division even submitted drafts of the scripts to lawyers, who guarded against potential charges of libel.⁸² It was an extremely labor intensive process. One example, documented in the division's "how-to" primer, examined work on *Triple-A*. How would the devastating drought best be brought to the stage? Researchers compiled clipping files from newspapers and government records. But instead of plying the audience with masses of information, the writers chose a simpler solution: "The result was a scene in which the travelers parted and a farmer, scooping up dried soil from the ground, uttered the one tragic and pregnant word: 'Dust!'"⁸³

Regional theaters were at a disadvantage compared to the New York office because they did not have the same extensive research staff. Still, many plans were made for regional living newspapers that would reveal the nation's geographic diversity. In the Southwest, directors prepared a script on land rights called *Spanish Grant*. In the Northwest, *Flax* examined the unique agriculture conditions of the Willamette Valley. *Dirt* documented the loss of topsoil in Iowa. *Sugar* looked at agricultural practices in Colorado. The Seattle project prepared *Timber*, on the destruction of old-growth forests.⁸⁴ All these works were in the spirit of WPA guidebooks, celebrating the peculiarities of local history.⁸⁵ However, only a handful reached the stage before the project was shut down in 1939.

Using a wide range of sources, living newspapers offered audiences conflicting perspectives, theoretically giving viewers a chance to make up their own minds. The farmer opposed the banker; the consumer went head to head with the producer. Their utterances on stage were often direct quotations from daily newspapers, checked and rechecked for their accuracy. "Authenticity should be the guiding principle in Living Newspaper production," according to guidelines from the New York office. "Let it be kept in mind that some of the most fascinating and also dramatic statements are to be found in the daily columns of the press. Assemble a wide, firm foundation of factual material and upon this can best be built the architecture of good theatre."⁸⁶

Although they offered space to counterarguments, American living newspapers nonetheless offered a distinct point of view. *Triple-A* argued against the Supreme Court's intervention into agricultural aid programs; *Power* made a case for public

ownership of utilities; *Spirochete* championed blood tests as a way to control syphilis. *One Third of a Nation* made a passionate case for more public housing, quoting directly from the congressional debates that limited the scope of a new housing bill. Lest anyone miss the message of the performance, it concluded with the impassioned cry from the common man, in this case a woman named Mrs. Buttonkooper: “We want a decent place to live in! I want a place that’s clean and fit for a man and woman and kid! *Can you hear me—you in Washington or Albany or wherever you are! Give me a decent place to live in! Give me a home! A home!*”⁸⁷

In the public comments that some theaters gathered, it was clear that audience members understood that they had been party to an educational campaign. Reactions to *Power* in San Francisco were typical. Some viewers were excited by the performance: “Every consumer of electricity should see it,” wrote one. However, there were also many negative comments: “More comedy please”; “Seemed like a lecture or a class in evening school”; “Over simplified presentation of facts”; “Savored too much of a communistic agitation.” The longest comment read: “FTP should not put on plays that make the people discontented, especially when the majority will do nothing about it anyway.”⁸⁸

While living newspapers comprised a very small part of the Federal Theatre Project’s offerings, they were by far the most visible. Theater critics were interested in their innovative style. Liberal and conservative newspapers paid careful attention because the performances took on controversial issues. Audiences were fascinated by presentations that spoke to some of their problems. As a result, living newspapers proved to be one of the project’s most popular offerings. In New York, *Triple-A Plowed Under* played to capacity crowds with two performances a night. It proved so popular that its run was extended.⁸⁹ One viewer commented, “The play, as short as it is, moves swiftly, and is so convincing that some of the scenes might just as well be a television projection [!] of an incident occurring somewhere in America the very moment you are sitting in the theatre. . . . There is no ‘acting’ on the part of the individuals on the stage. Everything moves collectively, and instead of ‘acting’ you witness a vivid accounting of historical facts by groups of performers.”⁹⁰

The Old and the New

What traces of the Soviet living newspapers can we see in their American namesakes? Both were modernist forms. They dealt with issues in fragments, requiring that the audience take some responsibility to put the fragments together. Promoters

were fascinated by new technologies, especially film. Flanagan called American living newspapers “a terse, cinematic, hard-hitting dramatic form.”⁹¹ Press reports often referred to American living newspapers as “dramatized newsreels.”⁹² On the Soviet side, Blue Blouse advocates insisted that their work be performed at a fast tempo, so that the audience would view it like they would a film.⁹³ Creators rejected realistic staging techniques and played with more abstract forms—from oversized, simple props (pencils, stars, milk bottles) to documentary photographs projected onto screens.

In the Soviet Union, these experiments in staging had emerged in part from poverty; most living newspaper troupes did not have the resources for elaborate costumes or sets. In the United States, Flanagan felt that scenic experimentation was part of the mission of living newspapers. In a general statement on how to construct a living newspaper, members of the New York office stressed that the form was more suitable for stylization than realism.⁹⁴ Flanagan vehemently protested against the realistic set designs for the living newspaper *Power*, reminding the New York director that “we decided to use nothing except projections in an attempt to make a real contribution in stage craft. I felt that whether projection succeeded or failed, it was worth our while to try it.” She was angry when the production took a more conventional turn. “The vistas of great machines have disappeared. Instead of starting with a waterfall, we start with a stage completely jammed with realistic properties.”⁹⁵

To bolster their persuasive power, Soviet and American scripts were heavily weighted with facts and figures. This kind of documentary evidence was usually presented in posters or projections behind the actors, but performers were sometimes required to spout statistics for the audience.⁹⁶ While Soviet scripts rarely provided sources for their information, American living newspapers included bibliographies and even footnotes! Theater programs sometimes included bibliographies as well.⁹⁷ Flanagan maintained that the American form gave evidence to what she called “the entertainment value of fact” a phrase that evokes the sentiments of Soviet factographers.⁹⁸

In both the American and the Soviet versions, individuals were less important than types. American living newspapers were peppered with characters called “the farmer,” “the housewife,” and “the banker,” just as Soviet scripts had their “Komsomol girl,” “young worker,” and “priest.” Players sometimes wore masks or performed behind scrims to further efface their individuality. Thus no “stars” emerged from living newspaper performances, an intended consequence of their structure. In Russia,

there were rarely printed programs, so the actors' names were not officially known. In the American version, living newspapers often had hundreds of different parts, requiring actors to play many different characters in the course of one performance. Samuel Bonnell, a character actor employed in many Federal Theatre Project ventures, played five different roles in the New York version of *One Third of a Nation*.⁹⁹ Some of the participating actors were alienated by this approach, complaining that living newspapers had no plot, story line, or character development.¹⁰⁰

Scripts in both the United States and the Soviet Union were considered rough drafts that could be changed to meet local circumstances. Soviet authors called their published texts "skeletons"—literally, the bare bones of a story intended to be altered by the performers. Moreover, local groups had to write their own material when they examined the problems or accomplishments of their local factory, union, or club. "The living newspaper is a local organ, designed to nourish local appetites," read one Blue Blouse manifesto.¹⁰¹

The American version was not as flexible, but here too there was no "final script." *One Third of a Nation*, an exposé on slum housing, traveled from New York around the country. In each new locale, the script was altered to reflect local housing problems. In Detroit, for example, the director inserted pictures of local slums and boulevards as well as excerpts from speeches by the mayor and the Michigan governor.¹⁰² The living newspaper *Power* dramatized the national debate over the public ownership of utilities. Since the legality of the Tennessee Valley Authority was still being debated in the courts, the conclusion was changed to keep up with the legal controversy. When this work was staged in Seattle, the mayor used it to help fight for the city to assume control of the electrical lines. The production took place during what the mayor heralded as "Power Week" in the city. The local directors cooperated with the city-owned power company, which was involved in a battle with a private concern.¹⁰³ The Seattle Federal Theatre even sent out publicity for the performances that looked like a power bill, further underscoring its ties to local politics.¹⁰⁴

The most obvious formal similarity to Soviet living newspapers was the role of the narrator, a character that initially even bore the same name: loud speaker. Eventually this figure came to be called the Voice of the Living Newspaper in American scripts and had the task of tying disparate sections of the performance together. In the Soviet Union, this role was usually improvised, since Blue-Blouse-style performances could vary considerably from one venue to the next. By contrast, the narrator's part was carefully scripted in the Federal Theatre Project, sometimes

becoming the focal point of the performance. Sometimes the Voice of the Living Newspaper functioned as an outside observer commenting on the events depicted on stage; in other scripts it appeared as yet another character who assumed no special knowledge of the work as a whole. Since many American living newspapers examined a broad historical sweep, moving backward and forward in time, the narrator provided useful cues to alert the audience to the changes.¹⁰⁵

Despite these many similarities, American living newspapers developed distinctive characteristics that set them apart from their Soviet predecessors. What had made the genre popular in the Soviet Union was its embrace by amateur theater circles, which used Blue Blouse scripts as a starting point for their own local versions. By contrast, the Federal Theatre Project was designed to support professional theater. In the United States, this genre did not inspire wide emulation among amateurs. One famous exception was a living newspaper staged at Flint Auto Plant during the sit-down strike of 1935, but this effort was overseen by FTP workers, including the head of the Living Newspaper Division, Morris Watson.¹⁰⁶ The left-leaning New Theatre League reported a few of its local affiliates using the living newspaper technique after the FTP disbanded.¹⁰⁷ However, these spin-offs were modest, especially considering that Flanagan sent out fliers and instruction sheets to many colleges and community theaters across the country, hoping that the form would become the basis for a new, civic-minded local theater.¹⁰⁸

Another striking difference was that the most successful American living newspapers abandoned any attempt to reproduce the structure of the newspaper itself. There were no marching headlines, no letters to the editor, and no treatment of a wide range of topics plucked directly from the front page. This stylistic variation is in large part explained by the unique political pressures brought to bear on the Federal Theatre Project. While newspaper reporters on the project continually lobbied to make living newspapers more like print newspapers, with full coverage of the news, Flanagan refused. "Since we are unable, because of the relationship of the United States with other nations, to show upon any of our stages any dignity of any foreign country, we have never felt that we could make anything like a comprehensive dramatization of current events."¹⁰⁹

Instead of offering a wide range of issues, American living newspapers turned toward a panoramic, historical presentation of a single theme. In the words of chief writer Arthur Arent, they were the dramatization of a problem, not of a news event.¹¹⁰ *Injunction Granted* opened with the Luddites in seventeenth-century England; *One Third of a Nation* started with conflicts over land acquisition in colonial New York;

Power traced the first experiments to capture electricity; and *Spirochete* delved into the spread of syphilis from Europe to the Americas through colonialism. Numerous manuscripts of living newspapers that never reached the stage follow the same format; for example, an investigation of American race relations went back to the African slave trade.¹¹¹

The massive documentation apparatus of the American living newspaper was also quite distinct from the Soviet version. By providing extensive documentation, American writers hoped that they would avoid the charge of partisanship. So read one theater program: “More thorough than a lawyer preparing a brief, research workers of the Federal Writers’ Project, gathering facts and figures for the Philadelphia version of ‘One Third of a Nation’ left little to the imagination of the script writers.”¹¹² In her defense of living newspapers, Flanagan continually underscored that the accuracy of the material. “I think it is rather a remarkable fact,” she asserted before congressional investigators, “that in the three years of the existence of the Living Newspaper not one allegation has been made that the news were [sic] untrue. Nobody has ever proved that we have ever misquoted a person.”¹¹³

The portability of the Soviet version, light on costumes and staging, disappeared in the United States. The costumes in *Injunction Granted* included accurate representations of clothing in seventeenth-century England, continuing with period clothing up to the 1930s. Sets could be very elaborate. In New York, the set of *One Third of a Nation* re-created the cross-section of a tenement building. This reflects the contrasting purpose of the two national forms. In the Soviet Union, living newspapers were designed to inform audiences about current events as cheaply and quickly as possible; in the United States they aimed to put all theater people—including scenarists, carpenters, and costume designers—back to work. Flanagan realized that the elaborate costumes and sets limited the potential popularity of the living newspaper, and she lobbied the New York staff to find ways to make the U.S. version more portable by coming up with shorter scripts and simpler props.¹¹⁴ Indeed, just before the FTP shut down, the New York bureau had begun work on a traveling living newspaper unit.

Yet these major differences did not conceal the fact that both the American and Soviet living newspapers had similar didactic goals. Both were designed to educate audiences about how to behave as citizens, even if their models of citizenship were not the same. The Soviet version instructed viewers to be loyal, punctual, sober, clean, and energetic. They presented the most recent permutations of official policy, informing audiences about their responsibilities to help the government

and to oppose those who tried to stand in the way. Viewers were advised to heed government directives and to recognize their enemies, both domestic and foreign. Ideally, audiences were being educated while they were also entertained. Despite the sometimes satirical content of performances, writers and actors intended their work to be viewed as advocacy statements for the new Soviet state. Soviet creators proudly called their works an innovative form of political propaganda.

Since political power in the United States was fragmented, American living newspapers had a more complicated relationship to the state. They sometimes took the part of local governments against central authority or championed the principles of one arm of the federal government over another. One consistent theme, however, was that ordinary citizens needed to become involved in government and learn how to protect their rights. Flanagan contended that living newspapers were tools to foster political participation within the democratic system. In reference to *Power*, for example, she insisted that its dramatic tension involved “the struggle of the average citizen to understand the natural, social and economic forces around him, and to achieve through these forces, a better life for more people.”¹¹⁵ All the living newspapers encouraged citizen involvement in political life. The characters, both real and imaginary, asked questions, wrote their congressmen, appeared before government agencies, and made their complaints public.

The overt political and didactic goals of American living newspapers sparked outrage from those who did not agree with their conclusions. No other offering from the Federal Theatre Project was followed so closely in the press. Political reporters evaluated them carefully, and conservative newspapers were particularly upset with their content. When *Triple-A Plowed Under* premiered, for example, it caused a huge uproar because it included a very small part for a character playing Earl Browder, the current head of the CPUSA. The character spoke lines taken from actual speeches Browder had given criticizing the Supreme Court’s decision to declare the agriculture aid bill unconstitutional.¹¹⁶ This sparked loud protests: “A Thrilling Drama (You Pay for It) Starring Earl Browder of Moscow” ran one highly exaggerated New York headline.¹¹⁷ Other critics believed that living newspapers were nothing but propaganda for the Roosevelt administration. “Is a Federally endowed enterprise within its rights in propagandizing for the Administration in power? . . . Has it the right to champion the AAA and oppose the Supreme Court and argue for the curtailment of court power?” This author concluded, “One wonders if it should not be called a ‘Living Editorial’ for the Administration (with some Communism thrown in).”¹¹⁸

The High Cost of Borrowing

The charge of communist influence hounded American living newspapers, undermining the viability of the Federal Theatre Project. In the summer of 1938, the newly formed House Committee on Un-American Activities turned its attention to government-funded arts programs. Even before the hearings began, one key member of the committee, J. Parnell Thomas of New Jersey, announced to the press that he believed the theater project promulgated communist propaganda.¹¹⁹ The hearings provided an eerie foreshadowing of the more serious interrogations that were to come after World War Two. Hardly balanced in their approach, committee members called in a large number of critics, all of whom purported to show that the project was dominated from top—beginning with Flanagan—to bottom with communists. Flanagan and her superior, Ellen Woodward, were the only defenders. In the course of the hearings, hostile witnesses questioned every aspect of the project, from its staffing to its repertoire.

The most lengthy and damning testimony came from a low-level mail clerk and anticommunist named Hazel Huffman, who had done extensive research purporting to show that the Federal Theatre Project operated as a branch of the Communist Party. She produced a detailed account of Flanagan's career, giving her trips to Russia and her publications about Russian theater a sinister spin. "I can prove Mrs. Flanagan was an active participant in Communistic activity, and that her Communistic sympathies, tendencies, and methods of organization are being used in the Federal Theater Project at the present time."¹²⁰ Among her charges was that Flanagan had chosen to call the fictitious radio station in her college play, *Can You Hear Their Voices*, "WGPU" in homage to the Soviet secret police, the OGPU.¹²¹

Although they were not the only villains, living newspapers had a starring role in these hearings as a particularly evil example of propagandistic theater. The Soviet heritage of living newspapers was never explicitly discussed, but they were nonetheless implicated as a communist form. When asked if the Living Newspaper Division put on propaganda plays for the Communist Party or the Soviet Union, one Federal Theatre supervisor replied: "That is the only thing they look for." For this witness, the experimental nature of the project made it suspect. "They do not try to put on a drama; they do not try to put on a comic; they do not try to put on a classic; they simply look for plays that are propaganda, and that is why they have such a large force of research workers."¹²² Other witnesses and committee members condemned the genre for undermining democratic principles and showing disrespect for elected government officials. Even their flexible form was suspect because, as

Huffman warned, scripts could be changed in nefarious ways right up until the last minute.¹²³

When Flanagan appeared before the committee, she had already been widely denounced in the conservative press as a “WPA Red.”¹²⁴ Although she tried to turn the conversation toward the accomplishments of the Federal Theatre Project as a whole, she was quickly drawn into a defensive stance. Congressmen asked about her trips to the Soviet Union and her publications on workers’ theater. When they turned to the repertoire of the FTP, the congressmen directed their ire against living newspapers in particular. The chosen topics for living newspapers showed leftist leanings, they claimed, by advocating increased government influence at all levels of national activity. The performances mocked the ideas and achievements of individual government leaders; even worse, they accomplished this with taxpayers’ dollars.

Flanagan brushed aside charges about her political beliefs, flatly denying being a communist or facilitating communist activity in the project.¹²⁵ Although the charges against her were certainly exaggerated, her public arguments were not completely honest. She drew a sharp line between herself and the Soviet Union. Choosing her words carefully, she offered the congressmen an aesthetic interpretation of her interest in Russia. The dynamism of Russian theater, she argued, was a function of the Russian temperament, not the Soviet regime. “There are many more theaters in Russia than there are in other countries. . . . The Russians, if we are to go into this discourse here, are a very gifted people. They are temperamentally equipped for the stage. They have had a long and an exciting history of theatrical development. And I found a great variety of Russian productions extremely interesting.”¹²⁶

In other words, Flanagan insisted on her legitimate interest in the Soviet Union as a theatrical expert and artist, not a political advocate. When Starnes asked if she had found Russian theater more interesting than that in other countries, she replied: “Yes, I did find that. And I think that opinion would be borne out by any dramatic critic that you cared to call to this chair.”¹²⁷ Nonetheless, she insisted that professional interest in Russia in no way compromised her work in the United States. “I have maintained consistently that we are starting an American theatre, which must be founded on American principles, which has nothing to do with the Russian theater.”¹²⁸

When she turned to living newspapers, Flanagan presented the genre as a unique method to tackle the most pressing issues of the day: “I think that plays dealing with real problems facing all of us as Americans today may be one phase of the work that the Federal Theatre should do.”¹²⁹ She repeated a claim made by many living newspaper advocates across the country that the inclusion of accurate facts

in performances somehow precluded political bias. Many voices were represented in the productions, she claimed, and moreover the individuals portrayed actually had uttered the words spoken on stage. By presenting many different points of view, the performances rose above advocacy statements for a single argument. When one congressman complained about the depiction of the New Jersey legislature in *Injunction Granted*, she responded that had he sent in a letter of complaint at the time, they would have included it in the script.¹³⁰

Flanagan's interrogators rejected the core of this argument. While the works might contain different voices, they were nonetheless pro-leftist propaganda. They believed that the purpose of living newspapers was self-evident: to make a case for government ownership of utilities, state intervention in the housing market, union rights, and other controversial topics on the New Deal agenda. When faced with this challenge, Flanagan tried another tack. If living newspapers were to be branded as some kind of "propaganda," then they argued for issues that everyone should support: "I should say very truthfully that to the best of my knowledge we have never done a play which was propaganda for communism, but we have done plays which were propaganda for democracy." When questioned further, she called *One Third of a Nation* propaganda for fair housing, *Power* propaganda for a better understanding of the scientific meaning of electricity and its fair use, and *Injunction Granted* as propaganda for fair labor relations.¹³¹ In her written statements, which she was not allowed to present before the committee, Flanagan amplified this approach. "Not one of the Living Newspapers in any way advocates the overthrow of the United States Government or any of its agencies. Every one is based on a passionate belief in democracy, on the desire to keep this county a democracy and to make it a better place for more people."¹³²

Despite Flanagan's spirited defense, she did not change any minds. The congressmen were not interested in her appeals to expert opinion, nor in the lengthy document her office had prepared to refute charges made against the program. They were not at all persuaded by her efforts to equate the accuracy of living newspapers with impartiality. For HUAC members, the issue was simple. The Federal Theatre Project should not be using state funds to criticize state officials, argue for partisan causes, or offend the audience. "Do you not also think that since the Federal Theatre Project is an agency of the Government and that all of our people support it through their tax money," asked Dies rhetorically, ". . . that no play should ever be produced which undertakes to portray the interests of one class to the disadvantage of another class, even though that might be accurate?"¹³³ For him the factual basis of living newspapers was beside the point.

The HUAC hearings marked the beginning of the end for the Federal Theatre Project. In congressional debates a year later, it was targeted both for its political irregularity and its poor management of government funds.¹³⁴ The project finally closed its doors in 1939. In the course of a few years, the living newspaper died as well. Flanagan never lost interest in the genre, and her correspondence shows scattered attempts to revive it over the years, including one wartime script from the Treasury Department designed to promote public interest in war bonds. However, hers was an increasingly solitary pursuit.¹³⁵

Why did the living newspaper die together with the Federal Theatre? The interesting case of *Medicine Show*, written by the Living Newspaper Division but opening on a Broadway stage, can offer one answer to this question. When the project shut its doors, the script for *Medicine Show* had been in the works for over a year and a half, occupying researchers, fact checkers, newspaper writers, and playwrights.¹³⁶ No single theater, let alone an individual playwright, could muster similar resources. When it opened as a privately funded venture at the New Yorker Theatre, New York critics gave the work excellent reviews. Although it had been pared down considerably from the massive production originally envisioned, the (still) large cast and elaborate set were expensive and required consistently large audiences to generate revenue. Without the low-priced tickets offered by the Federal Theatre Project, it could not draw in large crowds. After only a few weeks the play closed, unable to pay the bills.¹³⁷

The genre also did not catch on in independent regional theaters, where actors sometimes worked for free. The left-leaning stages affiliated with the New Theatre League, an outgrowth of the workers' theater movement, made some attempts to follow the FTP's living newspaper format. After the Federal Theatre closed, the league actively encouraged its local affiliates to perform excerpts from Federal Theatre scripts, and some complied. The Dallas New Theatre, for example, wrote its own version of *One Third of a Nation*, called *Sticks and Stones*, to contribute to a local debate on housing conditions.¹³⁸ The national offices in New York, which sponsored a theater school, generated many plans for new scripts, but none of these proposals ever came to fruition.¹³⁹ Once the United States went to war the New Theatre League dissolved, and with it any focused effort to continue the American living newspaper.¹⁴⁰

But perhaps we ask the wrong question when we consider why the American living newspaper did not survive the 1930s. Flanagan and the living newspaper staff designed this form to fit the crisis of the Great Depression. All the WPA arts projects were first and foremost methods to generate employment, although the directors and

participants had broader goals. The living newspaper, with its teams of researchers, fact checkers, reporters, and playwrights—not to mention actors, stagehands, and designers—was an employment engine par excellence. The FTP could offer cheap seats and cheap advertising; controversial coverage in the press generated even more interest. All these advantages disappeared with the end of government funding. Like their Soviet namesakes, American living newspapers lived—and died—at the pleasure of their state sponsor.

During the 1930s those who borrowed from Moscow paid a high price for their inspiration, becoming easy targets for opponents of the New Deal. In essence, HUAC members and their allies contended that Soviet imports, however “arty” or innovative, could not be Americanized. By their very origins, they threatened American democracy. Although Flanagan offered an eloquent defense of the Federal Theatre Project, her trips to Russia served as damning evidence against the program. Proponents for socialized medicine and public housing faced similar objections, their proposals immediately tarred as “un-American.”¹⁴¹

In all its many manifestations, the living newspaper was a didactic form. Practitioners hoped to address new audiences and use their performances to change viewers’ hearts, minds, and actions. The activist agenda of the living newspaper exposed it to criticism at all stages of its development. Who got to decide how to best to shape political behavior? What models of citizenship did performances avow? In the United States, these were explosive questions since taxpayers were paying the bills. Flanagan might have sidestepped controversy by refusing to deal with contemporary problems. Instead, she insisted that part of a Federal Theatre’s responsibility was to address problems no one else had the will or funding to address. For this reason, many regional project directors blamed her for undermining the Federal Theatre Project as a whole.¹⁴²

For all the differences between American and Soviet living newspapers, there are striking parallels in their demise. Both ended under a political cloud, tainted by charges of suspect loyalties and foreign influence. By the 1930s, Soviet government agencies found improvised forms too difficult to control. Satire itself became suspect, since the Stalinist regime felt that enemies were so ubiquitous and dangerous they could not be undermined through laughter alone. As a product of avant-garde experimentation in the age of socialist realism, living newspapers were vulnerable to the charge of Western-inspired “formalism.”

In a similar fashion, American living newspapers could not shake off their radical reputation. Despite the fact that they had departed significantly from their

Soviet roots, Americanized by the unique circumstances of their transplanting, they still gained the label of a foreign import, this time as a conduit for un-American (read Soviet) ideas. Designed to facilitate political and social change, living newspapers in both countries offended their political overseers. Both ended when their sponsoring governments decided to cut support for this inventive—and potentially subversive—theatrical experiment.

Notes

1. Hallie Flanagan, *Arena* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 70. The Volksbühne, or People's Stage, opened in Berlin in 1914 and produced very innovative work in the 1920s. It grew out of a subscription theater movement in Germany that was backed by the Social Democratic Party. Anton Giulio Bragaglia was an Italian futurist theater producer, photographer, and film maker.

2. See Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1991), 7. See also Arthur Arent, "The Technique of the Living Newspaper," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 22, no. 11 (1938): 820.

3. Hallie Flanagan, *Shifting Scenes: The Theatre of Modern Europe* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1928), 108–09; idem, "Blood and Oil," *Theatre Guild Magazine* 8, no. 1 (1930), 29; idem, "Ivan as Critic," *Theatre Guild Magazine* 8, no. 4 (1930), 41.

4. Some contemporary critics were well aware of the Soviet inspiration for living newspapers. See for example John Mason Brown, "The Living Newspaper Acted at the Biltmore," *New York Post*, March 16, 1936, Library of Congress, Federal Theatre Project Collection (henceforth cited as LCFTP), box 1083. For scholarly works that address this theme, see Marjorie Louise Platt Dycke, "The Living Newspaper: A Study of the Nature of the Form and Its Place in Modern Social Drama," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1947, 54–61; Arnold Goldman, "The Life and Death of a Living Newspaper Unit," *Theatre Quarterly* 3, no. 9 (1973): 69–83; Stuart Cosgrove, "Living Newspaper: History, Production, Form," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hull, 1982, 5–17; and Margaret Browder, *Rousing the Nation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 117–20. This article examines the similarities of these two ventures from the perspective of a Soviet cultural historian.

5. Elmer Rice, *Minority Report* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 315–22; David Caute, *Joseph Losey: A Revenge on Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 43–51.

6. See David C. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), esp. 160–86; Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), esp. 238–39; Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002); Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society*, 4th ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1998), chapter 4; David Caute, *The Fellow-Travelers: Intellectual Friends of Communism*, rev. ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), chapter 2; Sylvia Margulies, *The Pilgrimage to Russia: The Soviet Union and the Treatment of Foreigners, 1924–1937* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968); Peter G. Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment, 1917–1933* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); Lewis S. Feuer, "American Travelers to

the Soviet Union, 1917–32: The Formation of a Component of New Deal Ideology,” *American Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1962): 119–49.

7. Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited: The ‘Cultured West’ through Soviet Eyes,” *Journal of Modern History* 75 (June 2003), 300. David-Fox is primarily interested in the impact of these encounters on the Soviet Union, as is Julie Hessler in her work on the Soviet movement for “cultured trade.” See Julie Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policies, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917–1953* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 197–215.

8. Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). For his views on the Federal Arts Projects, see 137, 347.

9. New archivally based works on the American Communist Party include John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *In Denial: Historian, Communism and Espionage* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and F. I. Firsov, eds., *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995); and Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne, 1992).

10. Cosgrove, “The Living Newspaper,” 51.

11. For a sampling of the vast literature on this topic, see Christine Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983); Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, trans. Roxane Permar (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988); *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914–1932* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990); *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932* (New York: Guggenheim Foundation, 1992); John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich, eds., *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996); and Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Soviet Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

12. This point is made boldly by Steven G. Marks, *How Russia Shaped the Modern World: From Art to Anti-Semitism, from Ballet to Bolshevism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), chapters 6 and 7.

13. See Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore*, esp. 160–86.

14. Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), esp. 5.

15. Daniel T. Rodgers, “An Age of Social Politics,” in Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 260.

16. For Soviet understandings of propaganda, see Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), esp. 1–17. On Soviet theatrical performance as an agitational tool, see Catriona Kelly, *Petrushka: The Russian Carnival Puppet Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1920* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Julie Cassiday, *The Enemy on Trial: Early Soviet Courts on Stage and Screen* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the State, 1917–1938* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000); Elizabeth A. Wood, *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

17. On Soviet living newspapers in the 1920s, see M. Veprinskii, *Zhivaia gazeta* (Moscow: Doloï Negramotnost', 1927); I. Vakhonin and E. Permiak, eds., *Teoriia i praktika zhivoi teatralizovannoi gazety* (Perm, 1929); František Deak, "Blue Blouse, 1923–1928," *Drama Review* 17, no. 1 (1973): 35–46; Claudine Amiard-Chevel, "La Blouse Blue," in *Le Théâtre d'agit-prop de 1917 à 1932*, v. 1 (Lausanne: La Cité—L'âge d'homme, 1977); E. Uvarova, *Estradnyi teatr: miniatyury, obozreniia, miuzik-kholly, 1917–1945* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1983), 95–104; Richard Stourac and Kathleen McCreery, *Theatre as a Weapon: Workers' Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany, and Britain, 1917–1934* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 30–73; and Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, 65–73.

18. On the ideal structure of a living newspaper, see "Zhivaia gazeta tipa 'Sinei Bluzy'—ne polit-cabare," *Siniaia bluza* 12 (1925): 5.

19. John W. Casson, "Living Newspaper: Theatre and Therapy," *The Drama Review* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 107.

20. *Ibid.*, 109–10.

21. Hans-Jörg Grell, "Erwin Piscator 1893–1966," in Ulrich Amlung, ed., *Leben ist immer ein Angang!* *Erwin Piscator, 1893–1966* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1993), 11–14.

22. G., "Godovshchina kluba," *Rabochii klub* 5 (1924): 49.

23. "Na sinebluzom fronte," *Siniaia bluza* 23/24 (1925): 84.

24. See, for example, "Tot rabochii ne glup, kto poseshchaet svoi klub," *Siniaia bluza* 16 (1925): 40–45. For a partial list of the titles of Blue Blouse sketches, see Stourac and McCreery, *Theatre as Weapon*, 293–99.

25. "Tekhnika dramaturgii v zhivoi gazete," *Siniaia bluza* 10 (1925): 3–4.

26. See Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, 73–78. The archival records for this studio are housed in the Russian National Archive for Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 963, op. 1, dd. 1088–1141.

27. "Prostye sovery uchastnikov sinebluznoi gazety," *Siniaia bluza* 18 (1925): 4–5.
28. "Tot rabochii ne glup," 40; V. Liubin, "Dva goda raboty zhivoi gazety 'Siniaia bluza,'" *Siniaia bluza* 23/24 (1925): 23.
29. On the factographers, see Natasha Kolchevska, "Toward a 'Hybrid' Literature: Theory and Praxis of the *Faktoviki*," *Slavic and East European Journal* 27, no. 4 (1983): 452–64.
30. Vit[aly] Zhemchuzhnyi, "Preemstvennost' v teatre," *Novyi lef* 4 (1927): 18–22.
31. For example, the skit "Seven Octobers" included a wide range of Soviet enemies, from petit-bourgeois citizens to members of political parties who opposed the Bolsheviks. They were all bested by the figures representing the new regime. See "Sem' Oktiabrei," a widely performed piece, in the collection *Oktiabr' v klube* (Moscow: Trud i kniga, 1924), 137–49.
32. "Zhivaia gazeta v klubakh," *Privyz* 6 (1924): 106–07.
33. "Na dispute o 'Sinei Bluze,'" *Rabochii zritel'* 23 (1924): 16.
34. D. Shcheglov, *Teatral'no-khudozhestvennaia rabota v klubakh* (Leningrad, 1926), 7.
35. Joseph Freeman, *An American Testament* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1936), 612; Harry Jaffe, "More on Soviet Blue Blouses," *New Masses*, December 1930, 20.
36. "Four Scenes from Russian 'Living Newspapers,'" *Theatre Arts Monthly* 10, no. 1 (January 1926): 53–56. See also Velona Pilcher, "The Theatre of the Revolution," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 11, no. 4 (April 1927): 259.
37. Flanagan, "Ivan as Critic," 41; see also idem, *Shifting Scenes*, 109.
38. On the emergence of agitprop brigades, see Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, 146–80.
39. See for example A. Kasatkina, "Iskusstvo millionov," *Pravda*, August 22, 1932.
40. For a discussion of the Communist International's efforts to spread Soviet culture programs, see Lynn Mally, "Exporting Soviet Culture: The Case of Agitprop Theater," *Slavic Review* 62, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 324–42.
41. On John Reed clubs, see A. B. Magil, "Revolutionary Writers and Artists Join in Working Class Fight," *Daily Worker*, October 11, 1930. For secondary sources, see Eric Homberger, "Proletarian Literature and the John Reed Clubs, 1929–1935," *American Studies* 13, no. 2 (1979): 221–44; Laurie Ann Alexandre, "The John Reed Clubs: A Historical Reclamation of the Role of Revolutionary Writers in the Depression," M.A. thesis, California State University–Northridge, 1977.

42. Lee Strasberg, founder of the Group Theatre and collaborator with workers' theaters in the 1930s, got his start as a director for the Chrystie Street Settlement Players. Jay Williams, *Stage Left* (New York: Scribners, 1973), 52.
43. Daniel Friedman, "A Brief Description of Workers' Theatre in the 1930s," in Bruce MacConachie and Daniel Friedman, eds., *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830–1980* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 111–20.
44. Walt Carmon, "John Reed Club," *New Masses*, March 1930, 21; "Chicago," *New Masses*, April 1931, 22; Magil, "Revolutionary Writers and Artists." See also Alexandre, "The John Reed Clubs," 135; Paul Sporn, *Against Itself: The Federal Theater and Writers' Projects in the Midwest* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 157.
45. Dobrin Michev, *Mezhrabpom—Organizatsiia proletarskoi solidarnosti* (Moscow: Mysl', 1971), 125.
46. For an overview of Mezhrabpom activities, see Willi Münzenberg, *Solidarität: Zehn Jahre Internationale Arbeiterhilfe, 1921–1931* (Berlin: Neuer Deutscher Verlag, 1931). On the broader history of the organization, see Babette Gross, *Willi Münzenberg: A Political Biography*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974).
47. *WIR Organizational Bulletin*, New York District, July 1931, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 515 (CPUSA), op. 1, d. 2578, l. 38. See also "Otchet o rabote WIR na period 1930 do leta 1931 g.," ll. 75–84. I used the microfilmed archival collection at the Library of Congress for American Communist Party files. For Comintern cultural agencies, I consulted the records in Moscow.
48. Williams, *Stage Left*, 42–43.
49. "Letter from the Blue Blouses of Russia to the Workers Laboratory Theatre," *Workers Theatre* 1, no. 1 (April 1931): 6–8, quotation, 6.
50. For a rare exception, see William Weinberg, "New York—First Shock Brigade," *New Masses*, December 1931, 26.
51. Alfred Saks, "Workers Theatre Strides Forward: An Answer to an Attack," *Workers Theatre* 1, no. 11 (February 1932): 14b.
52. "Comrades," *Workers Theatre* 2, no. 5 (August 1932): 21; "The Los Angeles Blue Blouses," *Workers Theatre* 2, no. 6 (September–October 1932): 20.
53. "News and Notes," *Workers Theatre* 1, no. 9 (1931): 25.
54. Ruth Weinberg, "Report of the 'Elore' Dramatic Club's Shock Brigade," *Workers Theatre* 1, no. 9 (1931): 23.

55. "Chicago John Reed Club," *New Masses*, August 1931, 21; "Chicago Blue Blouses," *New Masses*, October 1931, 20; "Blue Blouse Dramatic Studio," *Workers Theatre* 1, no. 5 (August 1931): 21.
56. "An Invitation," *Workers Theatre* 2, no. 3 (June–July 1932): 3; "We Answer the Call," *ibid.*, 3–4.
57. John E. Bonn, "Two Groups and an Agit-Prop Group," *Workers Theatre* 1, no. 8 (October 1931): 33.
58. Sidney Bell, "Wanted: A Technique for the Workers Theatres in America," *Workers Theatre* 1, no. 3 (June 1931): 4.
59. Michael Blankfort, "The Theatre," *New Masses*, October 2, 1934, 45.
60. Bonn, "Two Groups and an Agitprop Group," 33.
61. "The Bonus," *Workers Theatre* 1, no. 10 (January 1932): 31.
62. Samuel Poczner, "Dear Comrades," *Workers Theatre* 1, no. 3 (June 1931): lb.
63. "Look! Look! Look!" *Workers Theatre* 2, no. 5 (August 1932): 5. See also Harry Elion, "The Problem of Repertory," *Workers Theatre* 3, no. 3 (1933): 3.
64. On the international ramifications of this shift, see Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 120–57; on this shift in the United States, see Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 83–196.
65. Colette A. Hyman, *Staging Strikes: Workers' Theater and the American Labor Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 127–28.
66. Hallie Flanagan, diary entry, May 28, 1930, Hallie Flanagan Davis Archive, box 19, folder 152, Vassar College Library.
67. Hallie Flanagan, "A Theatre Is Born," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 15, no. 11 (1931): 910.
68. Hallie Flanagan, *Dynamo* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943), 107–10.
69. Hallie Flanagan and Margaret Ellen Clifford, *Can You Hear Their Voices?* (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Experimental Theater of Vassar College, 1931), esp. 1–2.
70. Flanagan, *Arena*, 107.

71. Hallie Flanagan and Mary C. St. John, "American Plan," playscripts of the Vassar Experimental Theatre, National Office General Correspondence, Records of the Federal Theatre Project, Works Projects Administration (RG 69), National Archives at College Park (henceforth cited as WPA), box 357; Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 141–42.

72. "A Brief Delivered by Hallie Flanagan, Director, Federal Theatre Project, Works Progress Administration before the Committee on Patents, House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., February 8, 1938," 2, WPA, box 25.

73. The most comprehensive work on the Federal Theatre Project is Jane Dehart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935–1939* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967). There are a number of excellent works that focus on specific regions, audiences, and performances. See Browder, *Rousing the Nation*; Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, eds., *Free, Adult, Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project* (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books, 1978); Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Sporn, *Against Itself*; Barry B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

74. Flanagan, *Arena*, 20.

75. Hallie Flanagan, "Design for a Season: Federal Theatre," correspondence of Hallie Flanagan, 1937–1939, July–December 1938, WPA, box 42.

76. Flanagan, *Arena*, 70.

77. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 4. Stott gives only brief attention to living newspapers, but he is indebted to Flanagan's own description of documentary art in the 1930s; see 3, 105–09.

78. Arthur Arent, "Ethiopia: The First 'Living Newspaper,'" *Educational Theatre Journal*, 20, no. 1 (March 1968): 19–31.

79. Flanagan, *Arena*, 65–66; letter from Hallie Flanagan to Mr. Hopkins, January 15 1936, Hallie Flanagan Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, box 6.

80. See, for example, a letter from Hallie Flanagan to Mr. Kondolf, October 21, 1938, WPA, box 32; memorandum of Hallie Flanagan to Walter Hart, February 17, 1937, WPA, box 13.

81. Memorandum from Morris Watson to Hallie Flanagan, February 4, 1936, WPA, box 13.

82. See the statement of Irwin Rhodes, general counsel for the FTP, in O'Connor and Brown, *Free Adult, Uncensored*, 169.
83. "Writing the Living Newspaper," 5, LCFTP, box 133.
84. Flanagan, *Arena*, 164, 297, 298, 300, 310, 344; Cosgrove, 115.
85. See Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999).
86. "Writing the Living Newspaper."
87. Arthur Arent, "One-Third of a Nation: A Living Newspaper," in Pierre de Rohan, ed., *Federal Theatre Plays: Prologue to Glory; One-Third of a Nation; Haiti* (New York: Random House, 1938), 120. Italics in the original.
88. "Audience Reaction," production report for the San Francisco production of *Power*, LCFTP, box 1056. This is a single page of comments, with no information on how these opinions were collected.
89. *New York Herald Tribune*, April 8, 1936, LCFTP, box 90, folder 4.
90. John Mullen, "A Worker Looks at Broadway," *New Theatre* 3, no. 5 (May 1936): 27.
91. "Brief Containing Detailed Answers to Charges Made by Witnesses who Appeared Before the Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities," 9, WPA, box 4.
92. See, for example, Henry Sember, "Uncle Sam's B'way Bow," *New York Telegraph*, January 19, 1936, LCFTP, box 1006.
93. "Kak rabotaet 'Siniiaia Bluza,'" *Siniiaia bluza* 6 (1925): 4.
94. "Writing the Living Newspaper."
95. Memorandum from Hallie Flanagan to Walter Hart, February 17, 1937, WPA, box 13.
96. For an example of statistics in Soviet dialogue, see "Kriknem khorom—blizhe k delu, konets razgovorom!" *Siniiaia bluza* 17 (1925): 24. For statistics in an American living newspaper, see *Triple-A Plowed Under*, in de Rohan, *Federal Theatre Plays*, 1.
97. For bibliographies in programs, see the Detroit and Philadelphia programs for *One Third of a Nation*, LCFTP, box 1051.
98. Flanagan, *Arena*, 70.

99. Program for *One Third of a Nation*, staged at the Adelphi Theatre, private collection of Victoria Bonnell.
100. Flanagan, *Arena*, 71; Tony Buttitta and Barry Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents: A Memoir of the Federal Theatre Project, 1935–1939* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 42.
101. G. Serebrennikov, “Zhivaia gazeta v rabochem klube,” *Siniaia bluza* 1 (1924): 5.
102. LCFTP, box 1051; Flanagan, *Arena*, 309.
103. For a riveting analysis of the production of *Power* in Seattle, see Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 80–90.
104. LCFTP, box 1058.
105. “Writing the Living Newspaper,” 17–18.
106. On this effort, see Morris Watson, “Sit Down Strike,” *New Theatre and Film* 4, no. 2 (April 1937): 5–6 and Kirk Fuoss, *Striking Performances /Performing Strikes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997).
107. *New Theatre News* 1, no. 2 (1939): 5.
108. A list of colleges and small theaters that were sent information on living newspapers is in WPA, box 549.
109. Hallie Flanagan to Carl Randau, November 8, 1938, WPA, box 13.
110. Arent, “Technique,” 821.
111. Many of the research materials for these never-performed works are housed in the Federal Theatre Collection at the National Archives. See, for example, the records on a project investigating African Americans in Special Research Materials, WPA, boxes 574–76.
112. “The Living Newspaper, No. 1. Walnut St. Theatre, Oct. 1938,” LCFTP, box 1051. See also “Editing the Living Newspaper,” *Federal Theatre* 1, no. 5 (April 1936): 16–17.
113. United States House of Representatives, Special Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938) v. 2, 2861.
114. Letter of Hallie Flanagan to Carl Randau, November 3, 1938, WPA, box 42.

115. Hallie Flanagan, "Introduction," *Federal Theatre Plays: Triple-A*, xii.
116. *Triple-A Plowed Under*, in de Rohan, *Federal Theatre Plays*, 46.
117. "The Raw Deal Presents: A Thrilling Drama (You Pay for It) Starring Mr. Earl Browder of Moscow," *New York Evening Journal*, 16 March 1936, LCFTP, box 1083.
118. Brown, "The 'Living Newspaper' Acted at the Biltmore."
119. Mathews, *The Federal Theatre*, 199.
120. For criticisms of the project, see *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda*, v. 1, 777–931; for Huffman's attack on Flanagan, see 780.
121. *Ibid.*, 792.
122. *Ibid.*, 867.
123. *Ibid.*, 785.
124. Mathews, *The Federal Theatre*, 205.
125. Flanagan's oral defense is contained in *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda*, vol. 2, 2838–85; for her written defense, which she was not allowed to present to the committee, see "Brief Containing Detailed Answers," 1–188.
126. *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda*, vol. 2, 2844.
127. *Ibid.*, 2844. For a more detailed response, see "Brief Containing Detailed Answers," 18.
128. *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda*, v. 2, 2842–44; quotation, 2844.
129. *Ibid.*, 2862.
130. *Ibid.*, 2861.
131. *Ibid.*, 2850–51; quotation, 2850.
132. Flanagan, "Brief Containing Detailed Answers," 18.
133. *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda*, v. 2, 2873.
134. See Mathews, *The Federal Theatre*, 236–95.

135. See the Hallie Flanagan Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, box 7, folder 1, for an undated report by Flanagan on the long-term influence of the living newspaper; Flanagan even wrote her own script, *E = mc², a living newspaper about the Atomic Age* (North Hampton, Mass.: Smith College, 1947).
136. “The Medicine Show,” Living Newspaper Research Materials, 1936–1939, WPA, box 590.
137. Cosgrove, “Living Newspaper,” 142–43.
138. “Headlines,” *New Theatre News* 1, no. 5 (December 1939): 5; Alice Evans, “A Challenge,” *New Theatre News* 1, no. 5 (December 1939): 7.
139. See, for example, the minutes of the National Executive Board of the New Theatre League, October 31, 1939, New Theatre League Archive, New York Public Library.
140. Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 216–17.
141. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 479–80; idem, “An Age of Social Politics,” 267.
142. Buttitta and Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents*, 235.

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