

No Security in Acting: *A Moral Entertainment* and the Conflict Over Theatrical Labor in the Federal Theatre Project

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Essay

Histories of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) often focus on the battles fought by Hallie Flanagan – the program’s only leader and a dynamic personality who fought against many in Washington who thought the FTP was wholly unnecessary. Famous for wearing opulent hats and a red-lined cape she bought while in traveling in the Soviet Union, Flanagan battled against rivals in other New Deal programs, like Harold Ickes of the Public Works Administration (PWA), as well as a skeptical public and a hostile Republican Party. Her testimony in front of Senator Martin Dies and his committee has become legendary to the point that nearly every analysis of the agency includes a detailed account of her defense of the program.

However, the battle between Flanagan and the press and conservatives was not the only major struggle the FTP endured. Indeed, one of the most problematic fights was within the agency itself between Flanagan and many of the professional theatre workers that were under her employ. At the root of the conflict were differing views over what the FTP would become: was the agency to be, as Flanagan often noted, a new political, art theatre or was it to provide work for unemployed actors and directors who were versed in the commercial theatre? With their director advocating for politically-aware, non-commercial theatre productions, a number of popular and commercially-minded productions were staged by FTP employees, suggesting these theatre workers resisted the dominant discourse espoused by Flanagan. Judging by the backstage comic plays examined in this essay, those associated with the commercial stage in the FTP did not seek completely to undermine the agency, but feared that the promotion of radical theatrical labor would threaten the entire enterprise. This conflict can especially be seen in *A Moral Entertainment*. In one sense, the play embraces the security provided by the FTP while it promotes the non-commercial ideals espoused by Flanagan: the traveling band of players is in desperate need of some labor security and the play’s heroine, a Shakespearean actor named Roslinda, challenges the status quo of the Puritan village in which she performs. Yet the performances of the play reveal apprehensions about the impact of

government intervention in theatrical labor and the problematic nature of political performance. In addition, the play also portrays a fear that a reliance on non-commercial theatre would endanger not only the FTP, but also theatre on the whole.

During the Second New Deal, Franklin Roosevelt picked Harry Hopkins to oversee the massive jobs program the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Charged with providing public works projects for unemployed manual laborers throughout the country, Hopkins' agency also sought to provide work for out-of-work workers in white-collar or artistic fields. Of special concern to the Roosevelt administration was the sub-agency entitled Federal Project Number One (often shortened to Federal One), which housed work programs for unemployed workers in the arts and humanities. Consisting of the Historical Records Survey, the Federal Writers Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Arts Project, and the FTP, Federal One tried to promote itself as the gatekeeper for not only American civilization, but also as a necessity to preserve the rights of the artistic class to meaningful employment. As Hopkins would argue in 1937, it was labor of teachers, historians, artists, and performers that provide the "greatest contributions" to American society, even if those contributions are less tangible than the public works projects of other agencies. For him, it was "more ironical for one person to be on relief than another it is seen in the fact that scientists, writers, musicians and all the rest of those persons, who by the virtue of gifts and discipline have arrived in that upper fraction of the people....should find themselves without recognition, livelihood, or any means to continue the benefits which only they can bestow" (174). For Hopkins and many other New Dealers, the value of work programs lay in how the work of those on relief benefited the whole of society. In the case of a program like Federal One, the benefits from the labor of artists, musicians, and actors would be to provide the American populace with "something more than the competitive struggle for existence" by entertaining audiences (Hopkins 174).

Flanagan took Hopkins' belief to heart. For her, not only should the FTP provide work to unemployed actors, directors, and other theater workers by staging free or low-cost plays across in a number of genres and forms such as Vaudeville, musicals, Shakespeare, children's plays, and modern drama, the agency should also offer its audiences radical messages and challenge the social and political status quo in the United States. In places like New York, Los Angeles, and Seattle, audiences saw Living Newspaper plays which, through a combination of non-naturalistic acting and mixed-media sets, promoted social action. In Harlem, Orson Welles staged his famous "Voodoo" *Macbeth* which featured an all African American cast. And, on October 27, 1936 at theaters across the nation, the FTP staged an adaptation of Sinclair Lewis' novel *It Can't Happen Here* that drew national acclaim.

However, not only did the program encounter resistance from Americans who objected to funding the arts during the Depression, but the FTP also drew a great deal of criticism from Republican congressional opponents and the national media, both of whom condemned the FTP for the leftists themes in many of its productions. As John Frick notes, “from practically its first day of operation, conservative critics challenged its collectivist approach to social issues, scrutinized its productions, and attempted to exercise social controls over its offerings” (230). Indeed, many conservative critics of the FTP, such as Texas senator Martin Dies, chairperson of the House Un-American Activities Commission (HUAC), charged that the FTP was nothing more than a communistic organization and “one more link in the vast and unparalleled New Deal propaganda machine” (qtd. in Quinn 245). Just four years after the program was passed, the FTP was cut from the 1940 federal budget and the experiment in federally-subsidized theatre ended.

While much of the FTP’s struggles were external in nature, there were a significant number of internal problems for the program, not the least of which was the conflict between Flanagan and commercially-trained actors. Ironically, by selecting Flanagan to be the head of the program, Hopkins believed he found someone who would be removed from the politics of commercial stage in New York and Chicago. But while Flanagan, a professor of theatre at Vassar, was not associated with any theatrical union or commercial theatre, she was heavily invested in a style of theatre that only served to further aggravate commercial theatre workers. Not only was Flanagan a product of university-theatre programs, but she had also studied modern drama in Europe through a Guggenheim Fellowship and was especially drawn to theatre from the Soviet Union “which combined artistic and social vision” that “would always shape her work” (Fraden 30). Through her research, she began to combine the artistic and social into her work, most notably into the play *Can You Hear Their Voices?*, co-written and produced by Flanagan and her former Vassar student Margaret Ellen Clifford. The play, based on a short story that appeared in the Marxist magazine, *New Masses*, centers on a group of poor Arkansas farmers who are struggling with the effects of the Dust Bowl. Frustrated by a lack of relief, the farmers attack a Red Cross station and demand supplies. At the play’s conclusion, characters offer a direct address to the audience: “Can you hear what the farmers are saying and what will you do about it?” (Bentley 211). And throughout her tenure at the FTP, Flanagan promoted her vision that the agency should not just entertain audiences, but also create theatrical communities in which actors and directors could “identify enemies,” challenge their audiences, and “stimulate others to celebrate culture and analyze its failings” (Fraden 3).

While Flanagan understood that the FTP should provide relief for unemployed actors and give Americans access to quality theatrical productions, she also believed that the agency could

revolutionize the art form. For her, the FTP should be “socially and politically, aware of the new frontier in America, a frontier not narrowly political or sectional, but universal, a frontier along which tremendous battles are being fought against ignorance, disease, unemployment, poverty and injustice” (*Arena* 372). She envisioned a national theatre that was both listening to the needs of the American people and remaking the work and art of the stage. In her mind, the work of the FTP was not to satisfy the tastes of the “first ten rows” of theatre patrons on Broadway, but to engage new audiences across the country. For Flanagan, theatre must move away from the commercial mentality. In an editorial for the journal *Theatre Monthly*, she attempted to summarize her beliefs about the need for theatre to modernize:

Architects today shatter facades and let the steel show, musicians shatter melody and experiment with dissonance, painters turn away from sentimentality...but the theatre still clings to melody, to the façade, to sentimentality . . . We must see the relationship between the man at work on Boulder Dam and the Greek chorus, we must study Pavlov as well as Pavlowa...In short, the American theatre must wake up and grow up—wake up to an age of expanding social consciousness, and age in which men are whispering through space....We cannot be too proud to study our medium. (qtd. in Fraden 37)

By promoting this vision of the FTP, especially through many of the productions like the *Living Newspaper* plays that she championed, Flanagan often disavowed the commercial theatre and its workers. While she often praised her professionally-trained actors and allowed many comedies and other Broadway staples to be presented by her agency, she was often critical of many aspects of the commercial theatre. In her essay, “A Theatre is Born,” Flanagan dismissed the vast “investment” and “capital” of the commercial stage, asserting that the professional stage should cast off the music, the violins, the excess, and present the work of the stage as simply and as carefully as possible and embrace the art, rather than the money(qtd. in Kruger 178). In addition, Flanagan believed that the work of the FTP should be concerned with the process of theatre and not the final product. While she never rejected the importance of employment to her agency, she and the other heads of Federal One programs shared a similar aesthetic philosophy. As Michael Szalay argues, this de-emphasis on the artistic product was introduced to Federal One by Holger Cahill, the head of the Federal Arts Project (FAP), and a protégé of the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. As a student of Dewey, Cahill’s artistic philosophy was strongly influenced by his mentor’s *Art as Experience*. In this text, Dewey argues that art should not simply replicate the dominant modes of production, and suggests that the “liberty of choice allowed to the craftsman who worked by hand” is now subservient to the general

use of the machine (223).. Dewey advocates for viewing the work of aesthetics in terms of the labor committed to the project by the artist, not by the finished product.

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

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

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

Flanagan's proclamations about the professional worker, her dismissal of commercial work, and her radical aims for the program certainly aggravated many actors and directors who came from the commercial stage. Just as Flanagan did not hold a positive view of the commercial stage, many commercial theater workers did not, at least initially, support the FTP. Playwrights, directors, and actors from the theatre hubs of the country (New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia) often mocked or

condemned the purpose and quality of the FTP. As Sidney Howard wrote in a letter to Flanagan: "I do feel...that by far the greater part of our unemployed actors should be hurried out of acting a [sic] quickly as possible...and relieved of the constant misery of encouragement in a profession for which they are not qualified"(qtd. in McDonald 422). More importantly, the theatrical work that Flanagan promoted angered many commercial theatre workers who had no desire to change their approach to acting (Fraden 40). As Rena Fraden shows, this conflict only served to fracture the program on multiple levels:

Some of the actors resisted the retraining necessary to produce more experimental plays, and Flanagan constantly complained about the old-fashioned, stock plays that FTP units continually produced; for by and large, the professional actors who were to be the mainstay of the FTP had not been involved in community theatres or in the little theatres. Yet these were the people Flanagan was supposed to hire. The first goal of the FTP, to give relief to professionals in the theatre, came into conflict with its second goal, to make new kinds of theatre that would respond to the problems of the present. (40)

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

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

When people did go to professional stage productions in major cities like Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, they considered it a "night at the theatre as an extraordinary event" not an everyday occurrence (Fraden 34). Indeed, by the onset of the Depression, many theatre workers were looking for some sort of economic security that they could increasingly not find in the commercial theatre world.

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

ever before. If the play-going public now saw attending live theatre as an extraordinary event, then the purpose of theatrical labor was to entertain audiences by performing quality work. As the director Jonathan Coleman notes, there was a need to “set out to please as many people as he could” and he and his colleagues “thought of the theatre as popular entertainment.” He continues, “There was a deep appreciation away from Broadway and in the community for theatre and the arts. Say we go back to maybe ’38, ’39, ’40, I mean in those days people went to the theatre for entertainment. It was their only means of getting out of the house” (Fraden 162). Conversely, many FTP workers not only adopted the entertainment ethos of the professional stage, but also appreciated the lofty ideals of the WPA and its specific vision of affording leisure to the dislocated worker. Ironically, the commercial emphasis on crowd-pleasing plays echoes some of the rhetoric of Harry Hopkins. While Hopkins did promote some radical visions of the WPA, he ultimately viewed the significance of the Federal One programs as filling life with something more than the basic struggle for existence. In addition, Hopkins believed that Federal One could show that the enjoyment of leisure is something that can be shared by all workers and function as a way to ease the stress of economic struggle. It may seem to be a reactionary perspective, but it appears that the labor of many stage professionals was influenced by the idea that providing leisure to audiences was the purpose of their labor. As John Sullivan reasons at the end of Preston Sturges’ film *Sullivan’s Travels*, to entertain the weary and downtrodden was indeed a noble action.

The conflict between commercial actors and Flanagan would manifest itself in a number of backstage comedies, but portrayals of FTP and WPA strife were not uncommon in the plays performed by the agency. Indeed, there is precedence for FTP productions that openly criticized or subverted both the wishes of Flanagan or WPA or New Deal policies. In particular, one of the significant problems faced by the FTP throughout its run was the control over the plays produced by local agencies. Initially, the FTP central office left play selection up to local and regional theaters which led to many theaters to produce plays – which often included popular comic plays – that Flanagan condemned as outdated. Even after the FTP began to exert more control over play choice, regional theaters still staged plays that not only countered Flanagan’s ideal but also challenged New Deal policies. Even many Living Newspaper plays exhibited skepticism toward the capacity of New Deal programs to adequately address the struggles of workers. *One Third of a Nation* concludes with the argument that New Deal legislation would help America in fighting its slums, yet the play mentions that the stripped down Wagner-Steagall Act will only provide limited resources for the poor (Witham 107). *Triple A Plowed Under* documents the struggles of the agricultural industry, but also openly critiques the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), especially that

organization's treatment of African American sharecroppers and the high prices of meat and other goods as a result of the AAA's strategy of supply reduction. And while many other plays, including many of the Living Newspaper plays, represented a very Marxist perspective toward labor and working conditions, one of the agency's most famous productions—a 1936 adaptation of Sinclair Lewis' novel *It Can't Happen Here*—featured a less than favorable perspective toward a number of political groups, including communists, centrists, and conservatives.

Similarly, the fractured views over the purpose of the FTP are seen in a number of FTP plays.¹ In Alan Boertz and John Murray's *Room Service*, which would also be a film vehicle for the Marx Brothers in 1936, a Broadway producer named Gordon Miller attempts to not only outwit the hotel manager of the hotel that his theatre troupe is staying but also demonstrates a commitment to removing any political content from his play. When a financial backer suggests that Miller change a character's name because it sounds too much like comrade, the producer is more than happy to comply to the changes because it will ensure the production will go on. Similarly, in Samuel Raphaelson's *Accent on Youth*, a middle-aged playwright named Stephen Gaye. While Gaye laments having to write plays and wishes to dedicate his life to leisure, his character nevertheless promotes how financial security can only be achieved by producing plays that appeal to audiences. This movement to appease the political tastes of audiences is also reflected in the musical *O Say Can You Sing*. A popular production in Chicago, Seattle, and Tampa, the musical features a number of vignettes about life in theatre, and concludes with a final number that suggests not only the temporary nature of federal relief, but also downplays the leftist elements of theatrical work:

Wake up America!

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

¹ In much of my research, I utilize individual play reports in this project. Located in the Federal Theatre Project Archive at the Library of Congress, these play reports were submitted to the Play Policy Board (PPB) of the FTP at the conclusion of an individual production's run. Generally, each play report consists of press clippings from local newspaper reviews, copies of playbills, triplicate carbon copies of the play script (often with directorial changes to lines or staging notes), photographs of the production, reports of audience surveys, and reviews and notes from the director of the play. Despite these general parameters, the content of the play reports varies widely, especially in terms of audience reports. For instance a report from the Des Moines, Iowa production of *Ah, Wilderness!* includes dozens of audience reports, while the file for the production of *Help Yourself* in Omaha, Nebraska simply states that the audience reaction was "very favorable" (Omaha *Help Yourself*). While it is prudent to be skeptical of the accuracy of many reports, as it is plausible that many directors would include only the best reviews of their work, there are a surprising number of negative surveys and reviews in several play reports.

It's time, America—
To climb, America
Into the Blue—this land is what we make it!
Everybody will rejoice—
As a nation lifts its voice –
And we'll sing the praise of better days in view –
There'll be no more grief –
We'll forget relief—

When we're out of the red and into the blue! (Charig, Golden, Keller)²

In regard to the divide over professional and FTP standards of theatrical work, the closing number disavows not just the actual jobs provided by the government and the FTP, but the “red” elements of non-commercial theatre. Once they can escape the red—in all its forms—the actors can return to their professional lives and get back to entertaining their audiences.

However, no backstage comedy dealt with the struggle over the purpose of the FTP more directly than *A Moral Entertainment*. Written by Richard Maibaum, a graduate of the University of Iowa who penned several politically themed plays and would later produce many James Bond films, *A Moral Entertainment* centers on the Puritan colonists of a small Massachusetts town named Maundy (*Papers of Richard Maibaum*). Like the infamous residents of Salem, the villagers of Maundy are superstitious and religious, especially the town's magistrate, doctor, and minister Peregrine Pillputt. When word comes to the townspeople that a group of actors will stage a production in town, Pillputt throws the actors into jail for daring to stage such immoral acts. Despite the condemnations of the actors by Pillputt, the residents of Maundy warm to the actors, especially Pillputt's nephew Deodate Wayne who falls for the actor Roslinda, daughter of the lead actor. Despite the growing acceptance of the actors in the community, the elders of Maundy charge the actors with corrupting the town and put them on trial for their crimes. Yet a representative from the colony offers them some leniency: the actors can avoid punishment if they agree to give up their ungodly professions and marry the many unmarried or widowed women in the town. Most of the actors agree to this

² The FTP play reports of the plays examined in this project that are warehoused at the Library of Congress are incredibly inconsistent in terms of page numbers and organization. More often than not, individual sections of play reports do not match their respective table of contents and many reports are simply missing a number of components. Or, as in the case of *O Say Can You Sing*, there are no page numbers in the document. As such, I include page numbers of specific documents whenever possible, but for the most part, I simply cite the folder and box number of the play report in the end citation in this paper.

proposition, but two members of the acting troupe refuse Pillputt's proposal. Those two actors condemned to the stocks, but are freed by sympathetic Puritans. The play ends with Deodate and Roslinda eloping.

Staged five times in 1938 (Roslyn, New York; Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania; San Francisco, Hartford, and Boston) *A Moral Entertainment* received a range of reviews. Reviewing the Roslyn production, William Kennedy declares that there is "nothing important about the play," perhaps "a few moral lessons, but don't try to dig them out" (Roslyn *A Moral Entertainment*). Meanwhile, a reviewer for the *Philadelphia Bulletin* declared the play "brisk, manly fare" and thoroughly entertaining (Bryn Mawr *A Moral Entertainment*). The play received rather negative reviews in Boston where the mostly anti-New Deal press often resented the mocking of historic New England in the play. Writing in the *Boston Herald*, Elinor Hughes found the play "hardly humorous," and condemned it for its "heavy-handedness." In particular, she found no humor in the play's portrayal of Puritan punishments, including "slitting tongues, cutting-off ears and putting people in stocks, not to mention hanging and burning for witchcraft." Hughes also questioned the intention of the play overall. She wrote, "Was it really farce or a covert, serious treatment of Puritanism? The result was confusion in the writing and overall mood"(qtd. in Kazacoff 197). Other Boston-area newspaper reviewers echoed Hughes' sentiment. According to one writer from the *American*, "there are times when it seems he [Maibaum] is on the point of saying something significant and pertinent to us, but he never does" (qtd. in Kazacoff 197).

In part, these mixed reviews of the play can be attributed to the complexities of *A Moral Entertainment*. Outwardly, *A Moral Entertainment* embraces the notion that the FTP is necessary in order to protect theatre workers from an incredibly hostile labor environment. In a direct reference to the economic conditions for theatrical workers at the time of the FTP, the play shows how difficult the working-conditions are for Sir Toby's troupe as they attempt to procure work. *A Moral Entertainment* presents actors desperately struggling to maintain their livelihood. The players of the troupe have endured lengthy traveling, which has gone on for so long that the soles of their shoes have given out. They are also so hungry and poor that they had to eat their horse and "dragged the cart like a collier's dray"(II-4).³ In addition, the play shows the need for a safety-net for actors by its portrayal of the public-at-large in the play, the Puritans. Like many who condemned the FTP, Pillputt and many of his parishioners decry the work of the troupe, echoing the anti-theatrical and anti-

³ Special note: the playscript of the play does not have sequential page numbers, but is broken up by acts. In citing the play, I have noted the act and the page number of that act.

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

Despite its portrayal of Puritan hostility toward theatrical labor and the suffering the players endure for their art, *A Moral Entertainment* remains uneasy about the relationship between government and theatre. In several respects, the play connects the absolutism of Pillputt with Flanagan’s promotion of non-commercial theatrical labor. Indeed, much of Flanagan’s prose in her speeches carries an overtly moral component that is not that dissimilar from the language of Pillputt, especially when the two condemn the commercial theatre. Moreover, both figures are determined to change the nature of the work done by actors. Frustrated that the actors have not used their imprisonment for meditative prayer, Pillputt declares that the prisoners shall be escorted to the wood-pile yard. He declares, “You’ll fatten no more on our good nature—You’ll *work* for your bread!”(III-10). Hearing this, the actors scream in unison “WORK?” and begin to protest. The actor Willie even declares he would prefer to be hanged rather than chop wood (III-11). Outwardly, the emphasis of the humor in these lines is the incongruity between Pillputt’s declaration of work and the players’ repulsion at the idea, but this exchange also signals an apprehension over the nature of work expected of actors by government. Pillputt’s anger is born, in part, from the players’ refusal to pray according to his expectations, a sentiment not dissimilar from the contempt voiced by many leaders in the FTP, like Flanagan, for productions that did not adhere to prescribed political ideals. As such, Pillputt punishes the players with labor that is foreign to them. While we expect the emphasis of the joke to be on the players’ revulsion at work, the play demonstrates that the actors are perfectly willing to suffer for their work, but not for work forced upon them. This representation parallels how many professional performers resented the FTP’s attempts to promote non-commercial theatre.

This rebuttal of Flanagan’s promotion of political theatre is echoed in the play’s trial scene when Roslinda defends theatre to Pillputt. Roslinda’s performance is not a reaffirmation of Flanagan’s political ideals, but a promotion of commercial theatre. She claims that the work of her troupe will bring “joy and honest pleasure to anyone”(IV-20). In this moment, the play begins to

merge political non-commercial and commercial theatrical labor into one idea. For Pillputt, performing a play constitutes a direct threat to the sanctity and stability of the political space. In this sense, Roslinda's defense of acting becomes her own political statement. Laughing off Pillputt's accusation that the Players are troublesome, Roslinda turns to the townspeople and asks them, "What have you let him do to you? Laughter and song, where are you fled?...The spirit of joy and true delight! He's [Pillputt] robbed it of you...and given you...what?" (IV-20). She then asks the citizens of Maundy to witness a performance of her odes to love, and to choose for themselves if they want to live under the repression of their souls or to enjoy life. The citizens choose to enjoy themselves, as their joyous singing and dancing forces Pillputt to end the trial and convict the players (IV 21-23). Roslinda represents the professional stage, providing joy and pleasure to her audience. Her performance also undermines the claims of proponents of non-commercial theatre that the commercial stage was the antithesis of theatre. While providing pleasure and joy to one's audience is not necessarily a political action, within the context of the battles over the stage occurring within the FTP, certainly is a political statement. Roslianda's performance reminds people like Flanagan of the power that professionally-produced performances could have on the populace.

While the play rebukes Flanagan, *A Moral Entertainment* is also fearful of the impact economic and labor security will have on the acting profession.⁴ In one respect, the play echoes the worries of the authors on both the left and right who voiced concern about how government security would affect the quality of the work done under the "authorship" of "Uncle Sam." After their conviction, the players enjoy the duck, yams, and pies given to them by the lonely widows of Maundy and, like Chaplin's Tramp in *Modern Times*, are more satisfied as prisoners than as workers. More importantly, the play demonstrates a fear over how government security might impact theatre. When the Dean of the Commonwealth—a moderate political figure who acts as a buffer against Pillputt's radicalism—offers the men of the company a deal, two of the four actors readily agree to the terms. The Dean proposes suspending the male actors' sentence if they agree to certain conditions. He says, "That you renounce your profession, make admission the [e]rror [sic] of your ways, make public declaration of your entrance into our faith, become law abiding industrious members of the Commonwealth." In return they will receive "an acre of land, a horse, a goat, a pig, a cow, and....a wife" (IV-25). To four of the actors, the offer is too good to pass up: one actor exclaims, "I've always wanted a tailor's shop; I'll open one here!" Another actor declares, that "acting's no life. The work's too hard. I'd rather fight

⁴ While the play seems to critique Flanagan, it does not appear as if she was aware of the play's commentary. In her memoir of the FTP, *Arena*, Flanagan does not mention the play, nor do there appear to be contemporary letters or speeches by her addressing *A Moral Entertainment*.

redskins”(IV-26). To the actors who reject the deal, those who leave the profession are traitors, and in a sense the play suggests that only those who are truly dedicated to the craft of acting will be willing to endure the struggles of acting. However, the government’s offer also represents a fear of how the political battles within the FTP would impact actors. The actors who give up acting have not only endured fights over whether or not their work has any merit, but have also struggled against a figure who demanded they adopt certain work norms. In turn, the Dean represents an alternative path to economic and job security, one by which an actor embraces labor that is not acting. In one respect, the Dean becomes the embodiment of work programs of the First New Deal, in which work was given to the unemployed not according to their respective training or skill but according to the need of the larger community. Rather than suffer through acting work and the political battles surrounding the FTP, the actors here gladly give up their profession for security in other fields. By showing actors leaving their profession for the greener pastures of other work, the play warns that the government might impact the acting profession, as many workers who do not necessarily subscribe to the radical notions of theatrical labor promoted by the FTP would be forced out of the agency, thereby robbing the profession of some of its best workers.

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

Perhaps more importantly, the play asserts that audiences will not differentiate between the work of commercial actors and the labor of non-commercial actors in FTP. No matter how much

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

If there is any consensus about the FTP, it is that the agency became the focal point of anti-New Deal sentiment from Republicans and a critical press. Hallie Flanagan certainly understood this, noting "perhaps the triumph as well as the tragedy of our actors is that they became indeed the abstract and brief chronicle of the time." While there were a number of external factors that eventually led to the agency's elimination, the promotion of overtly political theatre did not help its cause. As represented in the backstage comic plays produced by the agency, there was a great deal of apprehension about the nature of the work being produced by the agency and a fear that overt political art would endanger the FTP. A play like *A Moral Entertainment*, the very act of political art endangers the entire enterprise and illustrates that an embrace of traditional economic models of theatre ensure security for the agency's workers. Yet, as evidenced by the conclusion of *A Moral Entertainment*, acting for Uncle Sam was likely never a viable, long-term solution for actors seeking refuge from the economic uncertainty of the marketplace.

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