Manipulating the Stage

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Amy L. Midthun

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A Comparison of the Government-Sponsored Theaters of the United States and Nazi Germany

By Amy L. Midthun

Has been approved for

The School of Theater
And the College of Fine Arts by

Ame Wilson
Assistant Professor of Theater

Raymond Tymas-Jones
Dean, of the College of Fine Arts

A Comparison of the Government-Sponsored Theaters of the United States and Nazi Germany (86 pp.)

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This thesis is a study of two government-sponsored theaters, the Federal Theatre Project in the United States (1935-1939) and the national theater in Nazi Germany. By analyzing the regulation of the theater, the performances produced, and the goals of the government in each country, one can see that the Federal Theatre Project and the national theater in Germany produced more similarities than differences.

The study begins with an overview of existing opinions from respected theater historians as well as through the words of individuals who worked in each of the theaters during the time period in question. This is followed by additional arguments of my own. The results are then compared to show where the two countries overlapped.

My results show that the two different forms of government produced theater that was much the same, despite the differing philosophies of the United States and Nazi Germany at the time.

Approved: Ame Wilson

Professor of Theater
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Chapter 1

The Introduction

The theater is an art that combines the talents and ideas of a great number of artists. It combines the director’s vision of the theater, the designer’s keen eye for expression, and an actor’s vocalization of words, among others. The combination of these various talents results in one indisputable fact: theater can rarely, if ever, be objective. Theater always expresses an opinion or idea of a person or group of people. Often this opinion is little more than an impression of the world expressed on stage, or an effort to entertain an audience for two hours. Theater, however, has the potential to be used in a much more powerful and possibly subversive way.

Throughout history, theater has been used as a weapon of propaganda and psychological warfare. Many powerful leaders have used the theater in attempts to control or persuade the people they govern to understand and support their policies. By the same token individuals employed in government-sponsored theaters have often used those theaters to heighten public awareness of issues which are socially relevant to them.

The creative nature of the theater and the fact that it is performed in front of an audience make it an ideal platform for the delivery of propaganda. Theater can touch and arouse an audience member physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Playwrights can express their philosophies through the text of their works. The simple power of words can give a playwright the ability to manipulate the emotions of an audience even without their knowledge. The power of the words, however, does not stop on the written page. Ideas of other individuals can be superimposed on the words of a writer. Other theater personnel have the ability to enhance and strengthen a playwright’s words with color,
sound, and even smell. Designers can create costumes or sets that destroy an audience’s illusion of reality and replace it with the reality of the theater. Technicians can awaken the imagination with music and special effects. The talents of these designers, actors, and technicians are unified through the director’s vision. If executed well, the playwright’s words are brought to life in a manner that cannot be ignored or forgotten by the audience. In short, theater can be used to express any idea, in any manner. An audience may walk away from a performance with a new understanding of the artificially created reality, which will likely influence their understanding of their actual reality. Moreover, the audience may likely feel they have come to this understanding all under their own power, without the suggestion of the staff who has worked so diligently to encourage their thought process. Many individuals, including people in power, have known this for years and have utilized the theater to its full potential.

The theater can be a very powerful weapon. It can be used to spread ideas of peace and respect, or it can be used to encourage hate and destruction. Theater has an ability to manipulate people in a way few other media can duplicate because it can make such a powerful and deep impression on a person. In the 1930s and 1940s, two of the world’s most powerful governments, the United States and Germany, used theater to pursue their interests.

At first glance it is easy to assume that these two countries, one a democracy and the other a fascist state, would produce two entirely different theaters: the theater of the United States would be free and expressive, while Germany would, no doubt, produce a theater that was incapable of producing anti-Nazi sentiments. Instead, a closer
examination of each theater shows that the two countries may have had more similarities than one would expect to find.

This thesis will look at the theaters of Germany and the United States each individually to provide an overview of the theatrical output of each of the nations’ government-sponsored theaters in the 1930s and 1940s. Then the thesis will compare and contrast the rules, goals, and outcomes of each of the theaters in relationship to one another.

Nations throughout the world including Germany, Italy, France, and Russia have had long-standing, national, government-funded theaters. Conversely, the United States government only sponsored a national theater for a short period of time in the 1930s. The Federal Theatre Project was created in 1935 as part of the Works Progress Administration, under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, and ended in 1939 after an inquiry by the House of Un-American Activities. As stated by Gerald Rabkin in his book *Drama and Commitment: Politics in the American Theatre of the Thirties*, the Federal Theatre Project “arose from economic necessity, not esthetic theory; the noble experiment was based upon the fact of unemployment” (97). Hallie Flanagan, the national director of the Federal Theatre Project, however, had a broader vision of what the theater could accomplish in the United States. Flanagan set out to create a theater that would speak to the population of the entire United States. She wanted to incorporate many varied forms of theater such as vaudeville, musicals, and children’s theaters. Furthermore, she wanted theaters to exist in every region of the United States so that any individual who wished to experience the theater would have the opportunity to do so.
Flanagan and the Federal Theatre Project, there was a great deal more at stake than simply providing work for unemployed theater practitioners.

The Federal Theatre Project made loud social and political statements not only in many of its productions, but also in its very existence. Some plays performed under the support of the Federal Theatre Project directly confronted pertinent social concerns of the 1930s, such as poor economic conditions, the threat of world war, and race issues. These revolutionary performances were seen in a variety of genres and most were written during the turbulent existence of the Federal Theatre Project. The plays ranged from children’s theater with *Revolt of the Beavers* (1937) by Oscar Saul and Lou Lantz, to plays such as *It Can’t Happen Here* (1936) by Sinclair Lewis and John C. Moffitt, to musical theater with *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937) by Marc Blitzstein.

Perhaps most vividly, however, the turbulence of the Federal Theatre Project can be noted in the Living Newspapers. For instance, *Ethiopia* (1936) by Elmer Rice, the first Living Newspaper scheduled to open under the sponsorship of the Federal Theatre Project, is concerned with Italy’s invasion of the African nation. Likewise, *One Third of a Nation* (1938) by Arthur Arent, directly addresses the issues of the New York housing slums and recommends that action be taken to improve the lives of the tenants. *Triple-A Plowed Under* (1936) also by Arthur Arent, tackles concerns over farm prices and conditions. Each of these plays follows the typical structure of the Living Newspaper by confronting a pertinent issue, placing it in a historical context and finally proposing solutions to the social issue.

The plays that the Federal Theatre Project elected to perform were not the only socially conscious ideas of the Project. The very structure of the Federal Theatre Project
can be considered relevant to the social awareness of the Project. The Federal Theatre Project contained many units, such as a Yiddish unit and a Negro unit. Negro units gave more equality to many actors of color in a time when mainstream American theater was still very segregated. Additionally, the Federal Theatre Project often provided seating that was not segregated by race, making a radical statement for 1930s America. Even the touring companies of the Federal Theatre Project prohibited segregated accommodations for the traveling company members, which was the norm for actors at the time.

When the Federal Theatre Project was eliminated in 1939, critics pointed to these radical ideas of social change, in theory and in practice, as the reason for the government’s decision. Representative J. Parell Thomas, “a Republican member of the [Dies] committee, stated publicly, ‘practically every play…is sheer propaganda for Communism or the New Deal’” (qtd. in Williams 242). To Thomas, the Federal Theatre Project’s supposed support of communism and leftist New Deal policies meant that it had to be shut down. The question remains: Was the Federal Theatre Project attempting to undermine the very government, or at least the dominant voice in the government, that supported it?

Chapter Two of this thesis will analyze the works produced by the Federal Theatre Project as well as the rules regulating the treatment of its workers and audience. The criticism by members of the government of the FTP’s works will be compared to the rules and expectations set up by the United States government to manage the Federal Theatre Project. Many members of Congress who worked to eradicate the Federal Theatre Project, such as those who served on the Dies Committee of the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), argued that the Federal Theatre Project was
attempting to undermine the government by producing works that were either communist or decidedly undemocratic. In contrast to those beliefs, I will argue that the Federal Theatre Project attempted, to the best of its ability, to directly follow the rules as laid out by the WPA, and ultimately the government that sponsored it. Indeed, over its short existence, the Federal Theatre Project did not alter its goals. Instead, it was the United States government that shifted its focus away from the ideals that existed at the formation of the Federal Theatre Project. The government began to move its attention away from issues of domestic relief into the realm of preparing for war. The dominant voice of government which in 1935 had been anti-Capitalist and had pushed for social reforms was replaced by a new opinion which supported the business class and United States involvement in World War II. It was this change in attitude that brought about the demise of the Federal Theatre Project as the decade of the 1930s came to a close.

Chapter Three of the thesis will change the focus to Germany, which has a long-standing national theater. When Adolf Hitler took power in 1933 the objectives of Germany’s national theater were altered dramatically from the ideals which had existed in the Weimar Republic. The Nazi theater offers a look at a national theater in a fascist state as opposed to America’s “democratic” theater. When the Nazi Party took control of Germany in 1933, Adolf Hitler wanted so desperately to control the theater that he appointed Dr. Joseph Goebbels, a great propagandist during the Nazi regime, to take charge of the German stage in addition to his other propaganda duties. Under Goebbels’ control the theater was to support Nazi Party ideals, and no others. The Nazi Party maintained a dictatorial approach, which on occasion included explicit instructions on
plays that should and should not be produced as well as how those plays were to be staged.

The methods of controlling theater used by Goebbels and the Nazi Party officials were far different in Germany than were those used by their counterparts in the United States. For example, in the United States, theater practitioners who did not receive the support they desired from the government were free to pursue their artistic endeavors in other theaters. Elmer Rice, for instance, left the Federal Theatre Project after the government banned his play, *Ethiopia*, but Rice faced no personal or life-threatening persecution from the government. This was not always the case in Germany. Often, theater artists were taking far greater risks of life and limb when they produced politically charged theater that did not support current conditions. Overall, the Nazis took a much more dictatorial approach to governing their theater, but came to the same results. Much of the theater in Germany came out in support of the government.

The official stances of each of these governments were very different. Germany’s leaders wanted to create a racially pure society dominated by the Nazi Party. Conversely, the United States government maintained, or, at least, expressed a desire to help all members of society in need of relief and to improve the standard of living for all. As mentioned above, the method by which each elected to run their theater was also very different, however, in each country, the theater created attempted to support the views of the government in most cases. In Germany, this was accomplished by force and fear of death. In the United States, the support stemmed from a desire to keep the arts, especially theater, at the center of the national ethos as part of an effort to increase the overall morale of the nation.
The question then remains: Is a nationally funded theater required to be supportive of the government? The elimination of the Federal Theatre Project leads one to reason that the United States believed that this should be a requirement. Germany’s national theater lives on, however, even though the Nazi Party does not. The 1930s and 1940s mark a turbulent time in world history. Governments were afraid of losing the support of the nation they governed. Theater played a role in that fear and, as the fear increased, so did the attempts at control. The resulting performances in each of these differing national theaters serves as the focal point for the discussion that follows in the remaining chapters of this thesis.

Scholarly interest in the theater of the United States during the 1930s, particularly the Federal Theatre Project, has grown as more resources become available. The Federal Theatre Project in the United States was the first, and only, national theater in the country’s history and, therefore, brings a great deal of fascination. Similarly, the theater of Nazi Germany has been well documented by scholars such as John London and Glen Gadberry. The Nazi domination of the theater, as well as all other facets of German culture, education, and politics, has intrigued individuals since the rise of the Third Reich. Although these two countries have been studied frequently, I believe that a comparison of the two government-sponsored theaters provides insight into the nature of a state funded theater. To my knowledge, this type of comparison has not been done up to this point.

According to my research, scholars have primarily focused their exploration in one of two ways. The first type of inquiry concentrates on one country and discusses not only what type of theater was produced, but also what impact that theater had on the
people of that country. The second explores the theaters of multiple countries with a similar form of government. This research has been done without drawing attention to government-funded theaters from the same time period that were under a different form of government. For instance, much of Gerwin Strobl’s research, including his articles *Shakespeare and the Nazis* and *The Bard of Eugenics: Shakespeare and Racial Activism in the Third Reich*, concentrates on the significance that William Shakespeare’s works played in the theaters of Nazi Germany. Likewise, Rebecca Rovit’s research addresses the impact that Nazi rule had on the Jewish theater that was produced during Hitler’s reign. In essays contained in the Gunter Berghaus edited book *Fascism and Theatre* issues primarily involving Italy and Germany are analyzed in detail. Some authors focus directly on one aspect of one country’s theater such as Barbara Panse’s essay *Censorship in Nazi Germany: The Influence of the Reich’s Ministry of Propaganda on German Theatre and Drama, 1933-1945* which focuses on the effects of censorship in the German fascist state. Conversely, other authors such as Reinhard Kuhnl, in his article *The Cultural Politics of Fascist Governments*, compare the differences and similarities among the fascist countries.

The research I have found regarding the theater of the United States in the Great Depression follows a similar pattern. There is a great deal of attention paid to the Federal Theatre Project and the historical significance of the nation’s only national theater and the reasons for its demise. John O’Connor and Lorraine Brown’s history of the Federal Theatre Project *Free, Adult and Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project* addresses only issues that are self-contained within the Project. The editors discuss in detail the shows produced, the problems encountered, and the people involved,
but they do not compare America’s government-sponsored theater with those that existed in other countries at the same time. Other histories that discuss the Federal Theatre Project, such as Malcolm Goldstein’s *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theater of the Great Depression*, often compare the Federal Theatre Project to other socially conscious theaters in the Depression era United States, such as the Group Theatre. Still other scholars focus on specific groups of people functioning within the larger spectrum of American theater. Susan Ware’s book, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s*, centers a portion of its information on the part played by women in theater, including the Federal Theatre Project, as a factor of the overall role women played in the Great Depression. The impact that the Federal Theatre Project had on the careers of African Americans in theater becomes the topic of discussion in Ronald Ross’s article *The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939*.

Overall, the common threads in the research that I discovered were that many historians have delved deeply into the impact of government-sponsored theaters on various groups of people, on the specific plays produced, or on the relationship between similarly governed countries. No one, however, has yet explored the relationship between the theaters produced in two countries considered to be as dissimilar as possible. Seemingly, two fascist governments, such as Germany and Italy, would likely produce theaters with frequent similarities. Similarly, the assumption could then be made that two countries with opposing views would produce two radically different theaters. That study, however, has not yet been produced.

Selecting two countries that are well known to theater historians allows me to address the similarities and differences between the two in a more complete fashion. Due
to the popularity of studying these two particular countries there exists, in the academic world, a wide range of research on each of the countries. This research allows me to access information that will more clearly emphasize my thesis and take existing research in a new and exciting direction. Certainly, other state theaters were also in existence during this period in history in countries such as Russia, France, Italy, and England. America and Germany, however, present a concise dichotomy of ideas and government policies. In theory, America is a democracy and will present opportunities for all of its citizens to express themselves freely. Conversely, the characterization of Nazi Germany presents a far more confining dictatorship. In addition, my belief that the theater of a democracy and that of a fascist state, while having many differences, may have more similarities than one would like to admit, presents an argument not frequently seen in scholarly work.

The limitations to the scope of this thesis come naturally because, although there is a great deal of academic research available on Nazi Germany, few plays written by Germans writing in Germany exist from the Nazi era. If these plays do exist, they are extremely difficult to find. The reason for this is two-fold. First, many talented German playwrights of the time, such as Bertolt Brecht, were forced by the Nazis to flee their homelands and write in other countries. Others were executed or sent to concentration camps. Those writers who did remain in Germany were constantly under the watchful eye of the Nazis, which inhibited many, if not all, writers from freely expressing themselves completely. Secondly, the plays that were written in Germany were generally attempted by members of the Nazi Party (this way they could ensure that the plays produced would support Nazi ideology). These Nazi propaganda plays were generally
fairly poor in quality, therefore, very few, if any, are currently in circulation and
translated into English. My inability to speak or read the German language is then a
limitation to an expanded study of this subject matter. The ability to read German plays
would alter the format of the paper.

Consequently, while much of my discussion about the Federal Theatre Project in
Chapter Two will focus on specific plays written and performed during the existence of
the Project, my research regarding Germany in Chapter Three will highlight
performances of the plays that were produced during the reign of the Third Reich even if
they were not necessarily written during the time period in question. These performances
will include the works of William Shakespeare, Eberhard Wolfgang Moller, as well as
other staples of the Nazi controlled theater. I will discuss plays performed in each of the
countries, but in the United States, due to the larger quantity of new plays available under
the Federal Theatre Project, new works will be discussed, while observations on the
German theater will primarily originate from the performances.

The plays and performances selected focus on themes or ideas that were prevalent
in government dialogue of the time. For example, in the United States, I selected The
Cradle Will Rock by Marc Blitzstein, because it addresses issues surrounding unions and
strikes, which were important social matters for citizens and the government of the
1930s. Additionally, another major concern in the United States, as the decade
progressed, was the rise of fascism, as seen in Germany and Italy. This concern is
addressed in Sinclair Lewis and John C. Moffitt’s It Can’t Happen Here. By selecting
these two plays, major social and cultural issues of the period can be discussed through
their representation on stage. The third play discussed in this thesis, One Third of a
Nation by Arthur Arent, represents not only relevant subject matter, but also the importance of the Living Newspapers, a new form of drama in the United States, during the 1930s. This form of drama was of great concern to the United States government, as evidenced by the HUAC’s hatred of the form.

In Germany, a look at some of the performances of Shakespeare’s works alerts the reader to the social concerns of the German people. For instance, the production of The Merchant of Venice provides insight into the German concern over its Jewish population. The large number of productions of the classics also exemplifies the glaring absence of original contemporary work by German playwrights. An examination of one of Germany’s propaganda playwrights, Eberhard Wolfgang Moller, allows the thesis to analyze exactly what Goebbels and the Nazi leaders were attempting to accomplish in the reorganization of the German national theater. The exceptions to the Nazi rules such as the hiring of Gustaf Grudgens by Hermann Goring and the existence of the Jewish Kulturbund provide proof of the power the Nazis believed existed in the theater.

The United States and Germany in the 1930s and 1940s provide valuable insight into the role a government plays in the development of a national theater. In an effort to delve into each country’s role, this thesis is divided into four chapters. This introduction functions as the first chapter. Chapter Two documents the rise and fall of the Federal Theatre Project in the democratic 1930s United States giving the reader an understanding of the unique circumstances that Hallie Flanagan faced in her effort to give theater to the people. The control over the theater exercised by the Nazis is the topic of Chapter Three. The chapter’s main goal is to outline the role theater played in a powerful fascist state.
Finally, Chapter Four concludes the thesis by highlighting the similarities and differences that were created by these two distinct forms of government.
While many countries throughout the world have long histories of national theaters, the United States does not. In fact, the years 1935-1939 mark the only time in the history of the United States in which there was a federally funded theater. The most commonly held belief by critics of the Federal Theatre Project, particularly during the existence and immediately following the closure of the Federal Theatre, was that the plays produced by the government’s theater experiment were decidedly against the government from the start, thus, producing the conclusion that a government-sponsored theater in a democracy would tend to produce theater that did not support the aims of that government. In the case of the United States in the 1930s, a closer look at the social and economic conditions that marked the formation of the Federal Theatre Project show that members of the controversial project were, indeed, attempting to support the fundamental goals of the 1930s government.

On a side note, it is important to mention that the goals of a democratic government are difficult to identify. The problem arises because, unlike a dictatorship, many conflicting opinions are expressed in a democracy. Republicans and Democrats rarely, if ever, agree on topics concerning the governance of the nation. In the 1930s, President Roosevelt expressed many socialist sentiments as well as anti-big business opinions. The impact of the Great Depression led Roosevelt to many of these opinions. Many Republicans in the government, however, likely did not agree with Roosevelt’s opinions or his policies. This means that although opinions are expressed to be “the
government’s”, it is likely that not all members of the 1930s United States government would have agreed with the statements.

Many of the plays produced by the Federal Theatre Project, critics of the FTP complained, were communist and leftist. According to these critics, the plays were supporting a shift from America’s current democracy to a more Soviet style of government. The more accurate truth of the matter was that many of these “communist” plays were simply anti-capitalist and anti-greed. The writers of the plays were not searching for a new government to replace the failing democracy, they were simply expressing a need for leadership from that democracy. A closer look at three major plays of the Federal Theatre Project will provide insight into the confusion that existed during this period in history.

As the United States entered the decade of the 1930s, the country was only at the beginning of a downward spiral that began on October 24, 1929. The stock market crash of 1929 sent the country reeling. Much of the American population was scared and searching for hope and comfort as the claws of the Great Depression sunk themselves deeper and deeper into the heart of the America. According to theater historian Richard Scharine, the losses of Black Thursday’s day of trading “amounted to almost as much as America [had] spent to fight World War I” (2). As the decade progressed, the damaging effects of the Great Depression only increased.

The theater was hit especially hard by the Depression because, unlike many other facets of American life, the theater was in a decline before the stock market crashed. Other forms of entertainment were rising in popularity and beginning to challenge the traditional theater. Film and radio became popular alternatives. Haskins notes “it was
difficult to get people on extremely tight budgets to go to a play with tickets averaging around $2.25 per person when the cost of attending a movie was only 25 cents a head” (84). For those individuals who still attended the theater, a ticket to a theater was considered a luxury item and was often one of the first things to be cut from an increasingly tight budget.

Actors were not the only theater employees to be hurt by the cheaper forms of entertainment. In her book *Arena*, Hallie Flanagan, national director of the FTP from 1935-1939 (its entire lifetime), describes the relatively new use of machines over people as “technological unemployment,” a movement that eliminated many positions. Flanagan points out that, “sound films abolished the orchestra; mechanical music displaced 30,000 musicians; stagehands and technicians were no longer needed” (13). Thus, the impact of the Depression was doubly hard on theater personnel.

Prior to the 1930s, the American theater was almost exclusively based in New York. While the quality of productions there may have equaled the quality of any of the rest of the world’s finest productions, few Americans could afford to get to New York on a regular basis (a number that no doubt declined dramatically in the 1930s). As the efforts to assist the nation in its recovery from the Great Depression got underway, it would not take government officials long to become aware that something had to be done to assist those who had been employed by the theater world. The first attempts at recovery, however, were much broader.

In an effort to increase the morale of the country and aid the financial recovery of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt instituted the New Deal. Roosevelt had taken power in March of 1933, only about two months after Adolf Hitler rose to power in
Germany. Almost immediately, Roosevelt began to institute policies to help the country recover. Historian Susan Ware notes in her book, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s*, that, at his inauguration, Roosevelt made his greatest political contribution: “the instillation of hope and courage in the people” (xiv). Indeed, Roosevelt had his work cut out for him, but in his first “100 days” he instituted many of the organizations of the New Deal, created to help the American public, including the National Recovery Administration, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, and the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Roosevelt wanted to work quickly to fight unemployment. In his first inaugural address on March 4, 1933, Roosevelt asserted, “our greatest primary task is to put people to work” (*First Inaugural Address* 41). This sentiment is echoed by Hallie Flanagan who when commenting on the formation of the FTP stated, “immediacy was also the dominant note in the first government aid to the theatre profession…” (15).

In an effort to put Roosevelt’s words into action, Congress organized the Works Progress Administration (WPA) on April 8, 1935. The WPA was designed to employ individuals in need of relief. Under the WPA, many programs were created in the arts, including the Federal Theatre Project. Harry Hopkins, the WPA relief administrator “insisted that workers in the arts…were as deserving of support as workers with other skills” (O’Connor 2). The arts projects of the WPA differed from earlier attempts at relief because officials now believed that artists should be able to utilize the skills they were trained in instead of attempting to compete for unskilled labor positions. Not only were these individuals better suited for their theater careers, but preserving their skills also allowed them to preserve their self-respect. In the words of Jacob Baker, Assistant
Administrator of the Civil Works Administration, “the government has become a patron of the arts, officially and quite unashamed” (qtd. in Goldstein 243).

The theater and the rest of the arts “were all part of a program for restoring not only the economy but the morale of America” (Williams 220). The road would not be an easy one for the Federal Theatre Project. Not everyone in the government agreed with the creation of the WPA, saying that it was paying people money for doing little to no work. This opinion was particularly strong against the arts. In addition, the FTP did not initially receive endorsements or approval from those in the commercial theater. Many individuals working in the commercial theater felt a government-sponsored theater would provide unfair competition in an already tight market. Furthermore, at the beginning of the FTP’s existence, many theater professionals believed that actors on relief were not talented enough to perform, or if a show was ever organized no one would attend. In Arena, Hallie Flanagan quotes Mr. John Goldon as stating that the FTP productions “may not conform to professional standards and so do more harm than good to the theatre as an institution” (qtd. in Flanagan 40). Conversely, when the FTP proved that, indeed, their productions were popular and could provide audiences with excellent performances, those in the commercial theater again voiced their fears regarding the competition from the government-sponsored theater.

Despite the complaints from internal and external sources, the WPA and its projects were created. The government laid down only a few rules at the creation of the WPA in April of 1935. These included the following:

1. Only *employables* were to be taken from the relief rolls of the states.
2. To these employables, work was to be offered within their own skills and trades.

3. Unemployables were to be returned to the care of the states.

(Flanagan 16)

Employables were classified as those people who were not physically or mentally disabled in any way.

In addition to these three rules, Harry Hopkins told Flanagan that the FTP was to be a non-commercial theater. Their goal was not financial gain. Instead, the plays were an effort to employ the largest number of unemployed theater personnel across the United States. Hopkins said, “This is an American job, not just a New York job. I want someone who knows and cares about other parts of the country” (qtd. in O’Connor 2).

Congress also stated that 90-95% of the FTP budget was intended to pay for wages. This left only a small percentage available for costumes, sets, and other theater necessities. These few simple rules were the basic regulations imposed by officials in Washington D.C. in regards to purpose of the Federal Theatre Project.

The WPA also had guidelines for labor. While the WPA had a policy of supporting unions, there was to be no “discrimination against the non-union worker on relief. Other forms of discrimination – race, creed, color, political activities, or party affiliation – had been specifically forbidden in the Relief Act itself” (Matthews 36). This policy came greatly into play late in the lifetime of the FTP.

The government’s general feeling toward the FTP was summed up by Senator Josiah W. Bailey of North Carolina who stated at the formation of the WPA that, “the object of the WPA is to relieve distress and prevent suffering by providing work. The
purpose is not the culture of the population” (qtd. in O’Connor 4). Flanagan believed that the project, however, would be a perfect way to give theater to a population who had never before seen live performances of plays. This was one of the many things that Flanagan was able to accomplish during the short existence of the national theater, and the challenges Flanagan faced in accomplishing these goals, only makes the results achieved by the FTP more impressive.

Other than these few basic principles dictated by government officials, the design and function of the FTP was left largely up to Flanagan and her staff. Flanagan set up additional policies, separate from those requested by government officials, by which to run the FTP. In October 1935, she “announced that hiring would be restricted to professional theatre people who had hitherto made their living in theatrical professions and who would be skilled enough to be able to make a living in the theatre at a later time” (O’ Connor 3). In addition, Flanagan made every attempt to broaden the horizons of the FTP to include all types of theater, from vaudeville and variety acts, to companies that would tour to CCC camps and rural areas where no theater was available.

After establishing rules for the FTP, the first thing for Flanagan to decide was how to set up the program on a national scale. With the assistance of E.C. Mabie, Flanagan worked on a plan to create theater units throughout the country. The directors of these regional theater units would be responsible for deciding on material for performance and then reporting back to the national office. The regional units would insure that the theater was tailored to the specific needs and concerns of each area of the nation, not just New York. The FTP was not set up as a national theater which served as the government’s mouthpiece of information or propaganda. Instead, the FTP was set up
as a federation of theaters working together to improve the conditions of artists across the nation. In this manner, Flanagan hoped that the FTP would bring theater to the nation. The government did not state that the theater should be representative, or even supportive, of the government. The programs for performances even contained the message: “The Federal Theatre Project is part of the WPA program. However, the viewpoint expressed in its productions is not necessarily that of the WPA or any other agency of the government” (Goldstein 253).

The officials designated for each of the regional theater unit leadership positions were not always cooperative with the theater personnel of the Federal Theatre Project. Many WPA appointees were not sympathetic to the theater and this created a great deal of conflict with workers of the FTP. When the Federal Theatre Project was shut down in 1939, few of the original FTP leaders were still in place due to these conflicts. The WPA leadership frequently made each production an uphill battle for those in the FTP. For instance, specific productions were thought to be too sensitive for certain regions of the country, as in the case of *It Can’t Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis and John C. Moffit, which is discussed later in this thesis.

Although national examples of censorship, as will be discussed in the instances of *It Can’t Happen Here, Ethiopia*, and *The Cradle Will Rock*, are more well-known and discussed, it was local censorship that occurred most frequently, largely due to the selected unit leaders in each of the regions. The most outrageous example of local censorship took place in California, under the WPA leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Donald Connolly:
[Connolly] insisted upon approving everything, from materials (even five kilowatt bulbs), to play selection. He cancelled scheduled productions of Paul Peters’ and George Sklar’s *Stevedore*, a play about race and union conflicts, and Elmer Rice’s *Judgment Day*, a play about fascism. He fired Gilmor Brown, forced the resignation of his successor George Gerwing, and his successor James R. Ullmann. (O’Connor 28-29)

Officials in Washington D.C. never dictated what plays could or could not be performed. The regulations of the WPA left this in the hands of the FTP. In his speech announcing the formation of the FTP, Harry Hopkins spoke the following words, “I am asked whether a theatre subsidized by the government can be kept free from censorship, and I say, yes, it is going to be kept free from censorship. What we want is a free, adult, uncensored theatre” (qtd. in Flanagan 28).

Under the simple, vague conditions laid out by the WPA, it is easy to see that the FTP was not created as an attempt to undermine the government. If anything, the problems arising between the FTP and the government were an issue of miscommunication. Many of the initial minor problems which arose came about because theater professionals did not understand the bureaucracy of the government and the government did not understand why the arts, in general, needed to be treated any differently than other WPA programs. In *Arena*, Flanagan recalls that particularly in regards to spending the government’s money there is:

very rightfully, a labyrinth of protective devices. In the early days none of us working on Federal Theatre fully realized this fact; and our impatience with the delays, the checks and rechecks, the changes and counterchanges
must have been maddening to the WPA administration in Washington... On the other hand, these officials knew nothing of the exigencies of theatre business... (53)

Flanagan points to a specific example of this misunderstanding in regards to the ordering of theatrical supplies. For an unmentioned show, the director needed one loaf of bread a night for a month’s worth of shows. Instead of the FTP being able to have a fund to purchase the bread, the WPA had “thirty loaves delivered on opening night” (Flanagan 34). Problems such as these did not improve the relationship between individuals in the FTP and those in the government and may have made the content problems which arose later seem more severe.

As stated earlier, the FTP was told to follow certain regulations, such as putting people to work who were on relief, employing all types of individuals (no discrimination), and following certain procedures for the allotment of money. The FTP abided by each of the rules laid out, but instead of receiving continued financial and vocal support from the government, the FTP began to face false claims of communism and anti-American sentiments.

In general, the plays of the Federal Theatre Project were not political in nature. In fact, “only about 10 percent of the plays produced were concerned with social or political topics” (O’Connor 26). Flanagan “repeatedly pointed out to her subordinates on the project that she would not tolerate the use of the Federal Theatre for the promulgation of any specific political platform” (Rabkin 102). The Project did classic plays from Shakespeare and Moliere, vaudeville acts, new works, and marionette shows, to name just a few genres. George Bernard Shaw, generally very strict with regard to royalties,
gave his plays to the FTP at a discounted rate of only $50 a week. Shaw stated that the low-ticket prices offered by the FTP would increase the audience sizes at performances of his work. Playwright Eugene O’Neill made a similar deal with the FTP.

Despite the efforts of the FTP to be well rounded, it is the social dramas that are most remembered and most frequently discussed because they were controversial. The FTP was willing and able to take chances, both artistically and on socially charged subject matter, which the commercial theater was not, because the FTP was not tied to profits for survival. In addition, the FTP’s freedom from the need for profits gave the Project the ability to hold longer rehearsal periods and the fact the many of the most talented theater professionals could still find work in the commercial theater meant that the FTP had a different pool of professionals with which to work. The production of socially relevant dramas is pointed to as an example of the anti-American quality of the Federal Theatre Project, when, indeed, revolution against America was not the intention of the Project. Instead, the FTP was trying to address the concerns of the widely varied audience in a manner in which the existing American government might be able to provide those individuals with assistance and hope.

The issues and concerns of the world in the 1930s were difficult to avoid. Newspapers were reporting daily on the changing world. Domestically, this meant the press reported on the harsh economic conditions faced by many Americans. The number of unemployed people was increasing. Memories of the Dust Bowl of 1932 were still fresh in the minds of the American people. Conditions were not improving as quickly as Americans hoped. Globally, newsworthy events included the Spanish Civil War, the rise of the Third Reich, and the developing Soviet Union. The FTP wanted to provide drama
that involved its audiences and the FTP believed that addressing these important domestic and foreign issues was exactly what needed to be done. The FTP may have been perceived as producing plays which were anti-democratic or anti-government, but a closer look at some of the controversial works does not necessarily agree with this perception.

The attempt to produce Sinclair Lewis’ *It Can’t Happen Here* (1936) on a national scale was a daring attempt to prove the national scope of the FTP. The productions of the FTP, because of delays in adjusting to government regulations and rules regarding the process of releasing funds, were often unable to open on schedule. The FTP, to this point, had often had a difficult time confidently asserting when one play would open in one city. As one *Variety* reporter stated, “WPA shows have very seldom opened on time, generally going through a number of postponements” (*21 WPA Troupes of ‘Can’t Happen’ Start in 18 Cities* 55). The FTP’s goal with *It Can’t Happen Here* was to open the production in as many regional units as possible on the exact same night. With some difficulty, the production came off with twenty-one productions in eighteen cities, opening simultaneously on October 27, 1936. An opening on such a grand scale is quite a feat for any theater to pull off. Despite the often poor reviews of the acting or dialogue such as critic Brooks Atkinson’s comments “the characters are meagerly defined, the dialogue is undistinguished and many of the scenes dawdle on one foot,” the national scale of opening night made a statement of success for the FTP (30).

The opening of *It Can’t Happen Here* also offered a successful example of Flanagan’s desire to tailor theater productions to the unit in which the play was being performed. One reviewer of Lewis’ play states “out in Denver, dictatorship came to a
small Colorado town, and in Detroit it captured a factory district. Each company staged
it in accordance with personal ideas or the locality and there was no specified design for
the settings” (‘It Can’t Happen Here’ Opens on 27: WPA Theatre Project Presents
Lewis-Moffit Dramatization from Coast to Coast 30).

Lewis selected the FTP to perform *It Can’t Happen Here* despite offers from
commercial theaters: “as he told the press on August 21, 1936, ‘I prefer to give it to the
Federal Theatre for two reasons: first, because of my tremendous enthusiasm for its work
and, second, because I know I can depend on the Federal Theatre for a non-partisan point
of view’” (qtd. in Flanagan 120-121). Flanagan, on the other hand, thought the play was
important because it was not only written by one of America’s most distinguished writers
(the first American novelist to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1930), but it also
reflected a “burning belief in democracy” (Flanagan 120).

The play suggests what would happen if America, like Germany and Italy, gave
up on democracy. According to the play, a fascist state may come in disguise of a
peaceful election and not necessarily in a violent overthrow of the existing government.
Thus, Americans must be ever vigilant against such an attack. Flanagan thought the play
encouraged the “free, enquiring, critical spirit” essential to keeping democracy alive
(Flanagan 129).

In *It Can’t Happen Here*, only one of the characters, Lorinda Pike, anticipates
Senator “Buzz” Windrip’s eventual metamorphosis into a dictator. In the first scene she
expresses her concern to Doremus Jessup saying:

LORINDA. Let’s hope they never nominate him!
DOREMUS. Rats! I keep asking you: What’s the matter with Windrip?

You’re always so vague. He may not be any Dan’l Webster, but he’s a real man of the people.

LORINDA. Yes, I know – I am vague. So is the whole country.

Unemployment. Drought. Fear of getting dragged into another world war. Fear everywhere. Millions tired of disciplining themselves. And along comes a medicine man with the loudest voice in the whole world, and he shouts that if we’ll just put ourselves in his hands – our souls and bodies, our little trades and the education of our children – then he’ll do a miracle. No! There’s only one class that’ll hand over responsibility – slaves! (Lewis Act 1 Scene 1)

The character Francis Tasbrough, a rich industrialist, makes a comment that more accurately reflects the view of the most of the characters: “Lorinda, you’re a regular communist! …Senator Windrip doesn’t aim to be any dictator” (Lewis Act 1 Scene 1). Ironically, this is exactly what happens. The fruition of Lorinda’s fears, however, does not make her a communist as Tasbrough asserts. Instead, she is simply vigilant of the threat against the democracy in which she lives.

Senator Windrip gets into power utilizing the financial assistance of big business people, like Tasbrough, and by exacting help from the press, in the form of Doremus Jessup, the newspaper editor. Once in power, Windrip changes dramatically and the Corpos (a reference to the Nazis) maintain a military-style control over the population. The American people must then fight back against the dictatorship. Jessup begins an underground newspaper condemning the dictator and, when he is caught, is taken into
custody by the Corpos. Jessup’s interrogation which follows bears a distinct resemblance to the Purges of Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union.

The Americans in this play are able to overcome the dictatorship, but only at great cost. The moral of the production is that democracy may have faltered in the 1930s in America, but the system did not fail. Alternatives to democracy, and therefore, the American government, are not viable options in Lewis’ play. It is the questioning of policies and candidates in a democracy that enables the system to work. Overall, the play is a support of the current governmental system in place. Unfortunately for the Federal Theatre Project, that was not the way that *It Can’t Happen Here* was always received.

Many individuals in the government questioned the message of the production. The production opened just weeks before the upcoming presidential election. Therefore, many made the connection that *It Can’t Happen Here* was about that election, however, no one agreed on what message was being sent. Some individuals “thought the play was designed to re-elect Mr. Roosevelt; others thought it was planned to defeat him. Some thought it proved Federal Theatre was communistic; others that it was New Deal, others that it was subconsciously fascist” (Flanagan 117). No censorship of the production took place on a national scale, but local administrators of the FTP did take action.

As was most often the case with questionable productions in the FTP regional units, censorship came from the local level. In the case of *It Can’t Happen Here*, officials in New Orleans, Louisiana and St. Louis, Missouri, did not allow their units to participate in the national showing of the play. Although there was no official censorship of the production from Washington D.C., the FTP was faced with a sizeable budget cut
shortly after the performance. Perhaps the cut was a coincidence. Perhaps it was a message of warning to the FTP.

The most notable form of controversial social drama in the Federal Theatre Project was a form of drama new to the United States, the Living Newspaper. This new form of drama addressed a problem, such as slum housing (*One Third of a Nation*), drought conditions and aid to farmers (*Triple-A Plowed Under*), or big business control over resources (*Power*), in its historical context and then ended with proposed solutions. By combining the use of projections, spotlights, loudspeakers, factual information, and statistics about relevant issues of the time, the plays offered a style of drama not seen in America before. The Living Newspapers were a successful way of solving two of the major challenges faced by the FTP. First, the typically large casts allowed the Project to employ the maximum number of actors. Second, the Living Newspapers frequently called for large crowd scenes and small bit parts which allowed directors to cast performers of limited talent. This made the Living Newspapers supportive of the government goal to employ as many individuals as possible.

In 1936 *Ethiopia*, the first Living Newspaper scheduled to be presented by the FTP, was also the first case of censorship coming out of Washington D.C. The play was “judged too controversial by Steve Early, Roosevelt’s secretary, and WPA officials in Washington, and was not shown” (Goldstein 278). The play, which centered on Mussolini’s invasion of the African nation, greatly concerned the government. The fear of foreign complications, as a result of the play being sponsored by the government, led first to a memorandum from Jacob Baker stating that no foreign leader could be represented on stage unless approved by the State Department. Days later, the memo was
revised to say, “no one impersonating a ruler or cabinet officer shall actually appear on
the stage” (qtd. in Flanagan 66). While Flanagan believed that the restriction over
representations of dignitaries was reasonable because of possible political implications,
Elmer Rice, the writer, was infuriated by the censorship, saying that it was absurd to
assume that a factual presentation would alter foreign relations. Rice quickly resigned his
post as head of the New York unit of the FTP. The press conference Rice gave after his
resignation created a great deal of excitement and controversy due to the condemning
nature of his remarks. Those remarks ensured that *Ethiopia* would never be performed
under the sponsorship of the Federal Theatre Project. Rice stated “I cannot
conscientiously remain the servant of a government which plays the shabby game of
partisan politics at the expense of freedom and the principles of democracy” (Rice 103).

*One-Third of a Nation* (1938) is argued by some critics to be the best of the
Living Newspapers. In this play, Arthur Arent, the chief writer on the production,
addresses the horrible living conditions in the housing slums of New York City. The play
and its title are taken directly from Roosevelt’s second inaugural address in which he
states, “I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished” (*Second Inaugural
Address* NP). The historical context of the play begins in the eighteenth century with a
landowner investing in a piece of property “Way uptown – Broadway and Canal Street.”
as Landowner, the character’s only name, describes it (Arent Act 1 Scene 3B). As the
play progresses, many years go by and individuals come to Landowner requesting a place
to rest. Soon, Landowner’s plot of land is tightly packed with tenants and Landowner is
rich, having done nothing to earn it. Loudspeaker, the narrator character, questions
Landowner:
LOUDSPEAKER. How much is your property worth now, mister?

LANDOWNER. Oh, about forty thousand dollars.

LOUDSPEAKER. That’s a lot of money! To what do you attribute your success?

LANDOWNER. Well, I had faith in the development and growth of the city.

LOUDSPEAKER. I see. Tell me, Mister: who developed it? Who made it grow?

LANDOWNER. The people. Everybody. Me, too.

LOUDSPEAKER. No, not you. You just sat. Remember? That city was developed through the industry of 696,000 people. Look at them!

They built the city! What did you do? (Arent Act 1 Scene 3B)

This meant, according to Loudspeaker, that some of the profits made by Landowner belonged to the people. If the people had not come to work in the city, the population would not have expanded and neither would the size of the city, and therefore the land would not have increased in value. Therefore, the play is asserting that the fault lies with the extreme greed of the capitalist, or the landowner in this specific case, not necessarily with the government. Thus, despite complaints by members of the government, “the play fit well within Roosevelt’s New Deal policies” (O’Connor 161).

Some critics of One Third of a Nation, such as New Jersey Republican, Senator J. Parnell Thomas, claimed that the text of the play contained “communist leanings” such as the call for a rent strike (Matthews 199). Although the play calls for support of the Wagner-Steagall Housing Bill, it is not an attempt to undermine the institution that is the
American government. Instead it is a search for reform as initiated by the president’s own words and promises in his second inaugural address. Likewise, the rent strike is an effort to make the landlords bring their buildings up to code, not to change the democratic society into a communist one. It is true that *One Third of a Nation* and some of the other living newspapers “all shared a strong reformist bias, all were sharply critical of the practices of private enterprise, all cited the need for specific governmental action, all criticized to a greater or lesser degree certain aspects of the administration’s social programs, but none advocated any revolutionary alternative” (Rabkin 117-118). Indeed, *One Third of a Nation* is an attempt to have the voices of the people heard. Those voices are, by definition, the voices of democracy. The play is not even against capitalism (although that is pointed out to be the cause of the slums). *One Third of a Nation* is simply asserting that the government needs to intervene because there is not a profit motive available for private ownership to take the initiative.

Michael Saward defines democracy as “necessary correspondence between acts of governance and the equally weighted felt interests of citizens with respect to those acts” (51). The public’s questioning of the specific policies regarding the governance of the slums in the United States, as is the case in *One Third of a Nation*, is, therefore, completely democratic. Critics of *One Third of a Nation* complained that the play was a call for the United States to become a communist nation, but this is not the sentiment expressed in the play. *One Third of a Nation* is a plea for government assistance in response to the thoughtlessness of big business, which had fallen out of favor during the Great Depression. The play simply asserts that the government has a responsibility to act
on behalf of its people because there is not profit motive for the capitalist to do it.

Therefore, *One Third of a Nation* is not communist as its critics proclaimed.

*One Third of a Nation* was altered by the FTP to reflect the specific conditions in the different locales in which it was produced, as was customary with the Living Newspapers. The play was very popular with the public and was seen by over 200,000 people in New York City alone. Flanagan notes in *Arena*, “Works Progress Administration officials, so far as I was informed at the time, were enthusiastic about the production, except for Mr. Aubrey Williams who called me into his office…and asked me what the project meant by ‘insulting Senators’” (220). Officially, the WPA made no direct protest to *One Third of a Nation*, however, a small article in the New York Times asserted that “the Federal Theatre Project’s local office denied yesterday that ‘One-Third of a Nation,’ its show about housing, contained any deliberate satire on United States Senators Byrd, Andres, and Tydings. Dispatches from Washington had said that friends of the three Senators were upset over their representation on stage” (*Denies Slurs on Senators* 17)

Another controversial production, *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), by Marc Blitzstein, was designed and readied for the FTP, but never performed under government sponsorship. Instead, government officials shut down the production before it ever had a chance to open. Blitzstein’s musical was scheduled to open on June 16, 1937, at the Maxine Elliot Theatre. With 14,000 advance tickets sold, it looked as if the play would mark a great success for the FTP, but it was not to be.

The characters in *The Cradle Will Rock* are archetypes of society. “Joe Worker” is representative of the working class. The play encourages the formation of unions for
worker’s rights, a feeling that was supported by the WPA, at least in theory. In the play, the character Harry Druggist attempts to stand up to Mr. Mister, the representation of big business, which is keeping the population at a low standard of living. Harry Druggist fails in his attempt and his son dies as a result. This shows that in order to improve conditions, as was desired in the 1930s, people would have to band together.

*The Cradle Will Rock* is again a positive comment on the need for unions. Mr. Mister owns the steel business in Steeltown, USA. According to the play, Mr. Mister represents what people should be joining forces to fight against. Therefore, the target is big business, not America or its government. A call for reform is not necessarily an attempt to undermine the government. Today we have regulations on big businesses and laws against certain practices such as monopolies. Attempts to control market practices and prices to create safe working conditions for employees and reasonable pay are democratic and were supported by Roosevelt’s pro-union government policies. Much like *One Third of a Nation*, *The Cradle Will Rock* is all call for the existing democratic government to take action.

*The Cradle Will Rock* was produced at a very crucial time. *The Cradle Will Rock* takes place in the fictitious town of “Steeltown USA on the night of a union drive.” It could have easily transpired in real locations in the United States. The 1930s marked a time of a war between management and organized labor. Unions and labor strikes were very common in many fields from oil and gas to meat packing to farming. In specific relation to steel, the Memorial Day Massacre of 1937 left ten dead and many more wounded in Chicago after an argument between Republic Steel, a Little Steel company, and labor unions. By 1937, “the steelworkers had unionized and U.S. Steel had signed a
collective bargaining agreement. In response to this new movement, antilabor organizations were springing up all over America, with patriotic names that hid their real agendas, names like the Liberty League” (Miller 7). The Little Steel companies still refused to bargain with unions. Clearly, *The Cradle Will Rock* was touching on newsworthy and topical subject matter. It was partly these conflicts between unions and businesses that made the government nervous about the production being performed under their sponsorship. Flanagan, however, thought that the theater, which was born out of economic necessity, should reflect that necessity in its work. Likewise, the political issues surrounding *The Cradle Will Rock*, and other controversial productions, were bound to come up because politics and economics inundated every aspect of American life in the 1930s. A timely theater, like the national theater Hallie Flanagan wanted, could not avoid such issues.

On June 12, 1937, officials in Washington D.C. issued a memorandum stating that no FTP plays of any kind were to be produced until the new fiscal year, July 1. *Variety* writer Wolfe Kaufman stated that FTP’s new play *The Cradle Will Rock* was about a strike and “maybe that is why the government called it off. Government officials say no, not at all, no such thing as censorship…” (62). Those involved felt very differently about censorship. Although economic reasons were given for the order, Flanagan felt “this was obviously censorship under a different guise” (Flanagan 202-203). After failed attempts by both Flanagan and Orson Welles to reverse the decision, Welles and John Houseman, the directors, invited an audience to a rehearsal of the performance on June 14. Although “such a performance was not forbidden under the terms of the memorandum received on the 12th, since it could be described as merely a rehearsal, it brought down the wrath of
the WPA” (Goldstein 263). The theater was locked and the staff was not allowed access to props, costumes, or sets.

On the day of the scheduled opening, armed WPA guards were posted at the doors of the Maxine Elliot Theatre. Houseman recalls that guards were also placed in the box office, in the house, backstage, and in the dressing rooms to ensure that nothing was removed from the theater. Anything that was paid for by FTP, and therefore, the government, was off limits to Houseman and Welles. Only one room in the theater, a pink powder room, was left to the staff of The Cradle Will Rock. Government authorities had called all the patrons with tickets for that night’s performance, telling them that they play had been officially cancelled. Houseman remembers in his book, Entertainers and the Entertained, “we called them back and urged them to show up that night in full force; we gave them our personal assurance that The Cradle would be performed as announced” (22).

Once the audience had been notified, Houseman and his staff still had to find a theater in which the play could be performed. The unions involved, however, were not going to make it that simple. Actors’ Equity asserted that actors who were employed by the FTP could not appear on stage unless they were paid for their rehearsal and performance time as union members. In addition, the musicians were told that they could not perform unless they were paid their regular wages. The FTP had special consideration and was able to pay performers less than union wages. This was not a financial possibility for Houseman and Welles who were now faced with a performance with no space, no props, no costumes, no music, no actors, and no money.
Miraculously, Houseman and his staff began to pull off the impossible. Jean Rosenthal, a technical apprentice just out of Yale at the time, was given five dollars and sent out to find a piano for the performance. The piano was beat up and un-tuned, but Rosenthal was successful. Next, Houseman learned that the Venice Theatre, 21 blocks away, was available for the price of one hundred dollars. The press, sensing the excitement of the coming performance, had gathered in the powder room of the Maxine Elliot Theatre. It was the press who loaned Houseman the money to rent the newly acquired theater space.

The crowd that had gathered outside of the Maxine Elliot Theatre was being entertained by a few of the actors from *The Cradle Will Rock* as they waited for news of the location of the performance. When the location was announced, people left in throngs to the Venice Theatre. They were told to invite their friends so that the theater would make a good showing. Houseman recalls, “There were no ticket-takers that night, no ushers and no programs. But, by 8:50, there was not an empty seat in the house; standees were beginning to clog the back of the theatre and the side-aisles” (Houseman 25). The Venice Theatre was three times bigger than the original house for the show, but it made no difference. The house was packed.

Kaufman recalls the amazing circumstances which separated the performance from any other. At the Venice Theatre *The Cradle Will Rock*:

managed to open almost on time. Scenery? That was dispensed with. Lights? Those were rigged up in a fashion. Music? Someone found a miniature piano and dragged it into center stage for Mr. Blitzstein to play. Actors? A few of them had the courage to skip Mr. Gillmore’s ultimatum,
but the prudence to do it from their orchestra seats rather than on stage” (62).

Thus, *The Cradle Will Rock* opened with only Marc Blitzstein on stage behind an old, un-tuned piano. Many members of the cast participated in the performance from their seats. Some of the actors and even Marc Blitzstein, himself, played multiple roles in order to cover for those who had decided not to risk the loss of their jobs with the FTP. The performance contained frequent improvisation as the actors acted within the audience and as they attempted to find the other actors in their scenes scattered throughout the house of the theater. In the end the production was “an interesting- and curiously moving- performance” (Kaufman 62).

The production of *The Cradle Will Rock* marked the end of both Houseman and Welles’ association with the FTP. In addition, *The Cradle Will Rock* shows that individuals were willing to stand up to government censorship. Although disobeying the direct order of the government forbidding the performance of *The Cradle Will Rock* may be viewed as undermining the strength of the government, much of the original message, including the support of unions and the ability of individuals to improve their own situation, can be seen as extremely democratic. In the 1930s, the United States government claimed to be in support of unions much like the message of the *The Cradle Will Rock*.

The government censorship of *The Cradle Will Rock* and *Ethiopia* no doubt fueled the flames of criticism from those who were against the Federal Theatre Project. Otherwise, what reason did the government have to censor them? The situation can be analyzed in a much simpler context. The government was the owner and financial backer
of a specific chain of theaters and government officials felt that some topical issues were too controversial to be staged in light of current situations. Many private theaters were not producing any socially relevant dramas. Some officials, therefore, thought that the socially conscious or political plays of the FTP, because they were produced under the financial support of the government, would be assumed by the public or by foreign governments to express the opinions of the United States government. If any other theater company had decided not to produce either of the plays, fewer questions would have been asked simply because the government is subject to greater national scrutiny.

While the banning of *The Cradle Will Rock* marked another instance of government censorship, it also, according to Flanagan “marked a changing point of view in Washington” (203). The budget cuts in June of 1937, coupled with budget cuts that followed in December of 1938, “did not reflect an opinion on the part of anyone in the government that the economy had improved in favor of the arts, but rather, the waning of President Roosevelt’s prestige with and power over Congress” (Goldstein 246). The sentiment in Washington was changing. Less attention was being focused domestically. Opponents of the WPA were becoming more and more vocal. Thoughts were turning to a global scope as the threat of a World War grew stronger and stronger. Out of the many branches of the WPA, the FTP had become a target for government cutbacks.

Throughout its existence, the FTP was plagued by cutbacks. In 1938, the voices of dissent against the WPA and the FTP became much louder. Complaints against the Federal Theatre Project began to mount. Those in the government who were against the WPA thought that the average WPA worker “was nothing but an idler who took the government’s money for leaning on a shovel” (Williams 227). Opponents of the WPA,
however, could not argue against the fact that bridges were being built, roads were being repaired, and tasks were being accomplished. The FTP was an easy target for those who were opposed to the WPA. Instead of supporting the WPA’s efforts, these critics turned to efforts of the arts because no tangible products were being produced. The wages paid to artists were seen as a waste of government funds. The belief that artists were not assisting American society was supported by the longstanding bias against the stage.

As the decade of the 1930s reached an end, Congress no longer gave full financial support to the relief programs of the New Deal. Historian Richard Polenberg remarks that in the later half of the decade “Congress repealed the tax on undistributed corporate profits, killed a request to increase expenditures for public housing, and rejected a $3.86 billion appropriation for self-liquidating public works projects” (23). This proves the government’s focus was beginning to shift. The “other” voice of the democratic government (the voice that had always been against Roosevelt and his reforms) was gaining power, while the voice which had pushed for reform when the New Deal was first issued fell into the background. Polenberg also notes “as the president became preoccupied with issues of national defense and foreign policy, he became more reluctant to press for reform” (23). For example, in January of 1939, Roosevelt met with members of the Senate Military Affairs Committee to discuss the policy of selling airplanes to France. In March of the same year, the Roosevelt administration issued a statement condemning Germany’s takeover of Czechoslovakia. Clearly, the United States government felt they could no longer maintain their isolationist attitude. The United States was taking a greater interest in world affairs which left less time for Roosevelt to concern himself with domestic issues of reform. When Germany invaded Poland on
September 1, 1939, shortly after the final demise of the FTP, the shift from domestic concerns to global concerns was complete.

Congress members who were against the WPA had another complaint against the FTP. These members of Congress asserted that the FTP was controlled by and employed communists. Upon hearing this accusation, Hallie Flanagan issued a denial to the press, however, she was told that issuing a statement on behalf of the FTP was against government policy. All information about the FTP was to be disseminated by the government. In light of a governmental attack, the FTP had no manner by which to defend itself. Flanagan recalls in Arena, “I was told by WPA officials that on no account was I to respond to these charges” (335). Although no concrete statistics exist to identify the people in the FTP who were Communist or who may have felt Communist leanings, the fact of the matter is that it should not have made a difference. According to government policy, as stated by The Relief Act:

> It shall be unlawful for any person to deprive, attempt to deprive, or threaten to deprive, by any means, any person of any employment, position, work, compensation, or other benefit, provided for or made possible by the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1938 or this joint resolution, on account of race, creed, color, or any political activity, support of, or opposition to any candidate or any political party in any election. (qtd. in Flanagan 36)

Thereby, the laws laid down by the government asserted that no one should be discriminated against for being Communist. The FTP would have been breaking the law if it had fired someone for his or her Communist leanings or if they had even asked for an
employee’s political affiliations. The 1936 presidential election had a Communist
candidate in Earl Browder and support of this candidate could not legally have been held
against anyone. The statement that the FTP was anti-American or Anti-government
because of including people who associated with the Communist Party is, therefore,
absolutely absurd.

The FTP also engaged in activities that made the organization more progressive
than anything else that was going on at the time. As stated above, it was illegal to
discriminate against race in the United States, but the country was still extremely
segregated. Although the FTP presented segregated Negro units, these units allowed
African American actors, directors, and technicians experiences that they were not
allowed in mainstream society. First, the separate Negro units, as well as the ethnic units,
allowed these individuals to present plays based on their own life experiences. On the
stages of Broadway, black actors were often relegated to roles of butlers, prostitutes, or
thieves. In the FTP, they were playing great roles, including Macbeth.

Likewise, the FTP “decided that there would be no segregated seating in any
theater that was part of the FTP, nor would any FTP traveling company have segregated
traveling accommodations” (Haskins 92). This type of desegregation was unheard of in
the 1930s. Creating racially equal conditions was a radical move for the FTP, but it was
also in full support of government stated policies. Ronald Ross, in his article The Role of
Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939, reveals that despite the government’s assertion
that discrimination was illegal, the racial integration of the FTP was to some members of
the government “evidence of subversive activity because, in the words of Chairman
Martin Dies of Texas ‘racial equality forms a vital part of the Communistic teachings and
practices’” (39). This statement proves that what the government said and what they really wanted were completely different ideas.

The Federal Theatre Project was brought before the House of Un-American Activities in 1939. After months of being bashed in the press with no recourse, the FTP was finally heard, but only briefly and not completely. Flanagan, when finally called to testify, was not even allowed to deliver her final statement.

The FTP was berated for spending money, which it was told to do in the beginning. In the initial guidelines for the FTP, the FTP was not required, or even encouraged, to charge for its productions. Conversely, it was the action of Flanagan that created a price structure for the performances of FTP shows. Despite this fact, the FTP was condemned for not bringing in money to the government. In Arena, Flanagan sums up the final word of the government:

Thus it came about that during the year from June, 1938 to its end on June 30, 1939, a project, in which 90 per cent came from relief rolls, the vast majority of which showed membership in theatrical unions (American Federation of Labor affiliates), was accused of being made up largely of non-relief amateurs; a project which had brought in cash to the government approximating $2,000,000, a record which so far as I know has never been equaled by any WPA project, was accused of being inefficient; and a project which from first to last had stood on American principles of freedom, justice, and truth, was accused of being through its plays, its audiences, and its personnel, subversive, communistic, and indecent. (338)
Many unqualified witnesses were brought up to testify against the FTP. Flanagan recalls one such witness who was brought before the Dies Committee. This witness stated that the FTP produced “a play which she referred to as *It Cannot Happen Here* three weeks before it was written. This was presumably offered as proof that we were a subversive organization devoted to overthrowing such American institutions as the prompt book” (Flanagan 115). The ridiculous nature of this comment shows how futile any comments or arguments from Flanagan would have been in an effort to save the Federal Theatre Project. Despite all her best efforts, the decision had already been made to disband the Project. Many of the remarks, such as the one above, against the FTP were not well founded. Officials in the government against the WPA and the FTP were simply looking for a way to destroy the Project. Those against the WPA were happy to see any part of it go. Those in support of the WPA saw the removal of the FTP, a small but extremely visible portion of the WPA, as a small step to take in the preservation of the rest of the program. The short-lived government-supported theater was over.

The Federal Theatre Project clearly set out to fit within government regulations. All attempts were made to be supportive of the government which funded the theater. There is no doubt that some individuals, such as Elmer Rice, were unhappy with the government-sponsored theater and left to pursue other endeavors. Ideas that can be seen as communist are present in some of the plays produced by FTP, but never does *One Third of a Nation*, for example, recommend that a new government should be instituted. The government did not state that the FTP should be the mouthpiece of the government, which was reiterated in every program that, as quoted earlier, stated that the views expressed were not necessarily those of the government. The Federal Theatre Project was
not attempting to undermine the government. The United States government, on the other hand, was instead undermining the attempts of Hallie Flanagan and the FTP. The United States government was not ready to stand behind their comments of racial and ethnic equality, nor was it ready to have its policies criticized.

Despite its short life, the FTP experiment has improved the state of American theater. For years, American theater was New York theater. The FTP proved that there was a bigger audience out there and a more varied expression in theater could be articulated and explored. The Project also took major steps in creating equality among its members and exposing the American population to ideas and cultures that had previously been ignored. These efforts make the FTP experiment one that dramatically changed the face of the American theater forever.
Chapter 3

Das Volk

The national theater in Germany has a long history. In 1933, with Hitler’s rise to power, the theater began to walk down a new path. Hitler’s fascination with the arts and his hatred of the arts under the former Weimar Republic were the forces behind this new direction. The poor quality of new works from this era may lead one to believe that the theater of Nazi Germany had very little power or authority over the Germany people, however, a closer assessment of what the Nazis were able to accomplish shows the power of government-sponsored theater in a fascist state.

Germany, much like the United States and the rest of the world, was recovering from a severe economic depression when Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists took power in January of 1933. Germany was facing unmatched levels of hyperinflation. The country’s unemployment rate skyrocketed. The former Weimar government had failed and the people of Germany were searching for leadership, which Hitler was more than happy to provide.

Hitler took the reins over a struggling nation to create a new world order. Hitler’s National Socialist Party was to be the only party. All other political parties were officially banned. The trick to assuring the success of Hitler’s rule was to give the country the illusion that the lives of the German people were improving, when indeed the Nazis were slowly stealing personal freedom away from individuals. This would not be an easy task for the German leadership. The manner in which the Nazis attempted to accomplish this goal was to create das Volk. The Volk meant that the German people
were to be thought of “as not a collection of individuals divided among class and political lines, but as a unified Volk tied together by traditions sanctified by blood” (Pois 18).

Nazi propaganda became essential for the success of the nation, convincing Germans, as well as the rest of the world, that the situation in Germany was improving. Propaganda minister Dr. Joseph Goebbels believed that “propaganda should be omnipresent and that public opinion should be manufactured and streamlined” (Bramstedt 49). The Nazis were anxious to tell the German Volk what they should be feeling. Hitler’s first task was to convince the German people that a new and better Germany would rise from the ashes. The Nazis wanted to convince the world that Nazi Germany was superior in all realms: social, political, and cultural. Culturally, Hitler was extremely engrossed with the arts. Thus, the “National Socialist leadership was vitally interested in the arts” (Gadberry, *Introduction: The Year of Power - 1933* 1). To help convince not only the German people, but also the rest of the world of Germany’s attention to the arts, Goebbels used many tactics, not the least of which was the manipulation of the theater.

Hitler, Goebbels, and Alfred Rosenberg, a cultural rival of Goebbels, all “agreed that the arts were vital to the health of the nation and that under the Weimar Republic the arts – and particularly theatre – had abused and lost the support of Germany’s racially unified people (das Volk)” (Gadberry, *The First National Socialist Theatre Festival – Dresden 1934122*). Thus, the first step of the Nazis was to “cleanse” the theater of any unwanted influences. As with most topics Hitler had strong opinions on what was wrong with the theater under the Weimar Republic. The theater of the Weimar Republic, according to Hitler, had been controlled by “cultural Bolsheviks” and the Jews. The decline in art, according to Hitler, was because “German art had been dominated by racial
aliens, by Jews” (Gadberry, *Introduction: The Year of Power - 1933 4). Under this influence Hitler asserts in *Mein Kampf* that:

> The saddest thing about the state of our whole culture of the pre-War period was not only the total impotence of artistic and cultural creative power in general, but the hatred with which the memory of the greater past was besmirched and effaced. In nearly all fields of art, especially theater and literature, we began around the turn of the century to produce less that was new and significant, but to disparage the best of the old work and represent it as inferior and surpassed; as though this epoch of the most humiliating inferiority could surpass anything at all. (261-262)

Thus, in Hitler’s mind, Germany must be racially pure for culture to thrive again in Germany. It became one of Hitler’s many rationalizations for the eugenic experiment. Overall, the arts under the Weimar Republic were far too avant-garde and degenerate for Hitler’s taste. Instead, the Nazis began to push for a more traditional theater. Robert Pois asserts that the Nazi theater was “informed by middle-class values” (18). These included traditional roles for women, as well as traditional art forms, and nationalistic themes that emphasized the Volk over the individual. Goebbels thought that “German art of the next decade will be heroic, steely romantic, factual without sentimentality, and mindful of its communal duty, or it won’t exist” (qtd. in Grange 78).

Historian Wilhelm Hortmann asserts, “Goebbels needed the theatre for cultural propaganda” (113). Goebbels knew that he had to have control of the theaters in order to use them to push the Nazi ideology. Quite obviously, then, he took control. Werner Habicht commented that “political and ideological pressure in a totalitarian State are
likely to affect a public forum such as theatre” (110). Generally, the greater the power of
the fascist state the more likely the state will be able to influence a medium such as
theater. Under the Nazis, the theater was certainly affected.

The idea for the new theater was two-fold. First, the Nazis wanted to remove all
Jewish, Communist, and leftist ideals. Secondly, the Nazis wanted to replace those ideals
with the ideals of the new Germany. According to Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen, “Nazism is
mainly known for its aggressive banning of all forms of artistic impression that deviated
from the Third Reich doctrines” (NP).

To assist in this conversion of the German theater, almost immediately after Hitler
attained power, organizations were set up to change the face of the German theater. On
March 13, 1933 the Reich’s Ministry for Enlightenment of the People and for Propaganda
(Reichministerium fur Propaganda und Volksaufklarung) was created by Hitler with Dr.
Joseph Goebbels named the Reichminister. Shortly after, in April, Rainer Schlosser was
appointed to the position of Reichsdramaturg for the Theater Section of the Department
of Propaganda. The organizations to control the theater did not stop there.

Also in April of 1933, the Nazis issued the Civil Service Law. The law was
designed with an Aryan paragraph that legalized the dismissal of Jews. The Civil Service
Law “marked the beginning of a more systematic and orderly purge of Jews from the art
professions, providing a solid legal foundations for the removal of numerous Jews
employed by cultural institutions supported by state and local governments” (Steinweis
106).

In September of 1933 the Reich Chamber of Culture (Reichskulturkammer) was
created under the initiative of Goebbels. There were chambers governing most of the arts
including music, theater, the visual arts, literature, film, radio, and the press. Under the leadership of Goebbels the Reich Chamber of Culture was, in Goebbels’ owns words, designed to “promote German culture on behalf of the German Volk and Reich...[and to]... “regulate the economic and social affairs of the culture professions” (qtd. in Steinweis 1). Some of the guidelines laid down earlier in 1933 by the Fuhrer’s Council of United German Culture and Art Organizations (Fuhrerrat der Vereinigten Deutsche Kultur und Kunst Verbande) were taken up by the chambers. These guidelines encouraged art that was informed by “a philosophy drawn from a passionate national and state consciousness anchored in the realities of blood and history! Art shall serve the growth and strengthening of this folkish community” (qtd. in Pois 20). The chambers also allowed the Nazis to keep closer tabs on who was working in the theaters, as to get a job in the theater you had to be a member of the chamber. This allowed high officials to screen all potential applicants and issue work permits only to those deemed acceptable.

Initially, the Theater Chamber employed both Nazi Party Members and those who were not affiliated directly with the Party. Goebbels did this in an attempt to convince outsiders that Germany was a fair and open-minded nation. In addition, it was an attempt to convince artists that they had the freedom to be creative in their art. By mid- 1935, however, Goebbels grew tired of his open system because he felt that the theaters in Germany were not producing a high enough quality of work. To combat this problem Goebbels “launched a thorough-going purge of chamber leaderships, combined with a fundamental reorganization of the entire chamber system” (Steinweis 51). In this purge moderate officials and Jewish chamber members were expelled. In addition, Goebbels cracked down much harder on “degenerate art.” In this, Schlosser became the Theater
Chamber’s President. Steinweis comments, “if Goebbels intended to signal that he would tolerate no further insubordination in the chamber, he could not have made a more appropriate choice” (55). Goebbels thought that the freedom he had given theaters to create good theater was not being reciprocated with the outpouring of good (Nazi) theater. Hans Hinkel, one of the three Reichskulturwalters in the Kulturkammer, “somberly lectured a group of theater officials that the regime had shown great ‘humanity’ in granting members of the theater profession ‘every chance’ to demonstrate that their conduct was conducive to a National Socialist culture. After two years, however, the conduct of many had proved unsatisfactory” (Steinweis 55). Thus, after initial clashes of power within the Nazi regime in the first two years of the reign of the Third Reich, now “Goebbels’ supremacy was unchallenged” (Panse 141).

The passing of the Reich’s National Theater Law (Reichstheatergestz) in 1934 gave the Reich Ministry for Enlightenment of the People and for Propaganda “control over private theatres, the right to confirm all major appointments in public theatres, and the right to ban individual pieces” (Balfour 45). In addition, the Law “formed the legal basis for [Schlosser’s] work as Chief Inspector and Censor. It was Goebbels, however, who assumed ultimate responsibility for all the German theatres…” (Panse 140). The National Theater Law also made theater a national concern and not a local one. This meant that there would be less discrepancy in what was performed in various locations within Germany.

Once the Nazis had made everything they were going to do legal, they began the cleansing process. It was necessary for producers, directors, and managers to tread the fine line of producing work that was artistically viable without offending the Nazi ideals.
Such offenses could mean the end of careers or worse. The Nazis and the specific organizations created to govern the theater did generate new policies in regards to the theater, but much was accomplished through fear alone. Without lifting a finger or speaking a word, Goebbels was able to change the theater community (as well as many others). The outlawing of the Communist Party “brought with it the suppression of agitprop theatre” (Steinweis 133). In addition, many individuals with Communist beliefs attempted to escape Germany. In general, many people associated with the theater, particularly Jewish individuals, fled Germany. Some estimates of the number of emigrants are as high as 500,000 according to Gerhard Hirschfelds’ overview of emigration from Nazi Germany. Approximately “4000 people connected with theatre fled from the dictatorship” (London 1). These people included actors such as Fritz Kortner and Alexander Moissi, critics including Alfred Kerr and Alfred Polgar, directors Leopold Jessner and Max Reinhardt, and approximately 2000 writers including Bertolt Brecht, Ernest Toller, and Carl Zuckmayer (London 1). Many who stayed in Germany were not as fortunate. With respect to just the Jewish community “between 20,000 and 25,000, or less than 5 percent of the original population of 525,000 German Jews, managed to survive the Holocaust within the reach of Nazi barbarism” (Hirschfeld 3). Overall, “the majority of Germany’s critical intelligentsia and creative artist community went into exile” (Berghaus, *Producing Art in Exile* 15).

It is imperative to mention that despite the mass exodus of theater artists, Goebbels and the Nazis understood the importance of certain theater professionals. The Nazis wanted “to prevent a cultural famine following their takeover” (Berghaus, *Producing Art in Exile* 15). Hence, exceptions were made to the rules. Gunter Berghaus
asserts in his article *Producing Art in Exile* that many theater professionals received generous offers to ensure that they would cooperate with the Nazis, but at the same time get audiences into the theaters. Some artists had little choice other than to take the option. A few specific instances of these exceptions will be discussed with the specific plays and performances under the Nazi regime.

The initial exodus of theater artists, which had eliminated a great deal of the Jewish, Communist, and leftist ideas, pushed the Nazis towards the accomplishment of the first part of their rebirth of the theater. Censorship, however, would dominate in Nazi Germany. Now, the Nazis still had to establish rules for how their new nationalist theater would function. The new theater would emphasize the national good over the individual and it would also show great sacrifice for the success of the German State. Perhaps the first and most important rule was “allegiance to the Minister was more important than art or fiscal responsibility” (Gadberry, *The First National Socialist Theatre Festival – Dresden 1934* 124). This meant that control would never leave the hands of the Nazi Party.

Under Hitler’s control “the Third Reich would discredit contributions of Jews to German theater history and purge the living stage. The Nazis tried to rewrite the past and discredit memory” (Gadberry, *Introduction: The Year of Power – 1933* 4). After Jewish artists either fled for their lives or were removed from their positions by the Nazis, the Party was ready to move on to the next step in achieving their goals. The Nazis next wanted to eliminate the works left behind by the non-Aryans. Any plays that were critical of the Third Reich in any way or that were written by Jewish authors were banned. In addition, all “dramatic styles associated with naturalism, individualism, or
intellectualism” were banned (Habicht 110). Overall, “the theatre pieces rejected by
Hitler and his supporters were mostly late nineteenth and twentieth century ones” (Pois
21). Hitler also wanted to ban the plays that in the early part of the century had made the
theater sink “manifestly lower” (Hitler 259). It became the goal of the Nazi Party to
destroy leftist and liberal drama. They wanted to “expel these contemporary authors
from Germany or to silence them, to ban their plays at once and for all. Within a few
months, this goal was achieved; barring a few exceptions, the German speaking drama of
the 1920s and early 1930s had been eradicated from the German stage” (Panse 144).
This drama was expelled specifically because it “told the violence of war, the horror of
battles, and the heroic courage of individual soldiers faced with death” (Panse 146).
Germany was moving towards war; thus, Hitler wanted plays that would glorify the war
as well as the community involved in fighting it.

Instead of the plays that had dominated in the German theater of the 1920s, the
Nazi reign brought with it a change in the repertoire. The 1930s marked a return to the
classics combined with an influx of new nationalistic Nazi plays. Historian Barbara
Panse notes, “in several theatres, approximately half of the plays that had had a firm
place in the repertoire prior to 1933 were banned” (143). The directions that came from
Goebbels were seemingly simple commands. “Theatre operators were expected to
conduct themselves ‘according to the best artistic and moral convictions’ and with a
‘consciousness of national responsibility’” (qtd. in Steinweis133). The Reichsdramaturg
Schlosser asserted that he wanted more German works and fewer plays by foreign
dramatists. In addition, “the Theatre Section also banned or censored all plays which
referred to the immediate present, in which Adolf Hitler or other well-known leaders in
the NSDAP …were mentioned by name or made an appearance as dramatis personae” (Panse 147). Uniforms of the SS and SA, as well as others, were also regulated. Of course, a positive attitude towards National Socialism was a must for every production.

Later, “after the outbreak of the war, dramas by authors from the so-called Enemy Countries were also forbidden” (Panse 144) During the war, the Nazis enjoyed performing plays “which illustrated such topics as British decadence, Bolshevik baseness (only after June, 1941), Prussian heroism, the supreme duty of procreation and the need for unquestioning obedience” (Bramsted 70). Goebbels, however, always left himself with the control. He stated that “the power to prohibit or to demand performance of specific pieces reside[s] ‘singly and alone with me’” (qtd. in Steinweis 135). As the Nazi regime progressed more limitations would be instituted.

The Nazis were able to produce extremely powerful propaganda. It is true that they issued many direct orders, however, it is interesting to observe that even though this censorship increased as time passed, “the artists’ own self-imposed ideological discipline remained the key to the system” (Steinweis 133). Panse notes “all theatre managers bowed to the pressure from above and followed, without showing open resistance the directives of the NSDAP’s local leading figures, thanks to whom their posts had been confirmed” (141). Most plays that may have been construed as being potentially anti-Nazi were removed by theater managers before it became a question for open discussion. In their effort to keep control over the theater, Nazi officials required each theater to submit its potential season to Berlin for assessment and approval. The records of potential seasons submitted show that the Nazis did not typically need to censor the theaters more than they were already censoring themselves. Panse notes that, “the extant
programme lists provide no indication that a theatre ever attempted to include a work in its submitted plan by an author known to be banned” (142). The theaters did not want to push their luck.

Likewise, the writers did not want to push their luck. If a piece was deemed unworthy to be performed by a government theater, but could be worked with, Schlosser and other officials might make suggestions for the improvement of the piece. All records of such requests show “that there is no indication of an author refus[ing] to comply with the ‘requests’ of the censorship authorities in Berlin” (Panse 143). The writers rewrote their texts because they knew that if they didn’t the Nazis would assure that the text never entered the market. Thus, “many of the plays by new authors that were admitted into the repertoire after 1933 gave expression to the political objectives of the Nazis. Excessive nationalism, glorification of war and military death, rejection of democracy and a declaration of belief in the Fuhrer State were characteristic…” (Panse 147).

The Nazi government, “convinced that cultural trends during the Weimar era had alienated the German public from theater, [found] it was not only culturally but also financially urgent to win the loyalty of German theatergoers and to make attendance at the theater affordable to all” (Steinweis 75). Goebbels wanted people to attend the theater because it was the only way for it to be effective propaganda. In order to assist the theaters in making theater affordable to all, the government generously subsidized the theaters. Steinweis estimated that “appropriations by the Reich government for theater alone climbed from just under RM 10 million in 1934 to almost RM 45 million in 1942” (75). The increase in money from the government meant longer seasons and more performances for the theaters as well as more jobs for actors and other theater
practitioners. For audiences it meant that the theater was no longer targeting strictly middle-class audiences. According to Yvonne Shafer’s article *Nazi Berlin and the Groes Schauspielhaus*, the opening performance of the Theater des Volkes in Berlin had free admission for workers and democratic seating (109). With the exception of loges built for Goebbels, Hitler, and other important party officials, the traditional theater set up of “class-oriented separation into orchestra seats, loges, and lower-priced balcony seats” did not exist. (Shafer 104). Instead the audience was seated as one classless, democratic, and unified group.

Goebbels had other reasons for wanting everyone to attend the theater. It is true that he wanted to use the theater to strengthen the sense of community among the people. In addition, if people were attending Nazi sponsored theater, they were not planning plots against the government. It was a simple way for Goebbels to control the leisure time of the citizens. Theater is, at its root, entertainment. Goebbels believed that “‘a good mood’ was an ‘instrument of war’ which ‘under certain conditions could not only be important to war, but even be a factor determining the outcome of war […] It is therefore essential to keep the people in a good mood’” (qtd. in Kuhnl 30).

Financially speaking, these measures encouraged an audience to attend the theater, however, in addition to this, the plays had to be well done and enjoyable to keep the seats filled. This was a fine line because no matter how wonderful a play was, it was only acceptable if it fell within Party lines.

The first attempt to create a Nazi theater was the propaganda play. The Nazi propaganda plays found two homes. The first was in a mass spectacle setting, while the second was in the traditional theater setting. The Nazis instituted many special events and
ceremonies that were based on National Socialist holidays. These events took on an extremely theatrical flavor. Goebbels wanted such events to invoke in the audience a feeling similar to a Nazi Party rally. Shafer describes the effect of the large theater space in the Grobes Schauspielhaus: “the audience could be excited yet controlled, and individuals lost their sense of loneliness and alienation by becoming part of a unified mass with shared goals and beliefs” (Shafer 108). Although Shafer is describing an indoor production, the same effect would apply to a mass outdoor performance as well. Goebbels believed that a person could lose his individuality under a performance and become connected with his fellow German. Theater performances had the ability to do this because, as Gunter Berghaus points out, the “theatre because of its immediacy, touches a deeply irrational core that no other form of propaganda can reach” (Introduction 5). Goebbels wanted to access that irrational core and manipulate it to create a connection between the German people and the Nazi Party.

The mass spectacles had several goals. The primary goal was to create a national community or Volk. Secondly, the theater was to accomplish Goebbels’ goal of keeping the audience in a good mood. Furthermore, under the Nazi regime, “people were to be placed under control, but at the same time to be motivated to take part in the public life of their country” (Kuhn 31). Thus, they had to be motivated to follow the mandates of a country that was slowly stealing their individual freedoms. To do this the audience had to be aware of the importance of the national good. This bonding, which was designed to take place during mass theater experiences, was an attempt to create the national community for which the Nazis felt they were fighting.
One example of a Nazi propaganda playwright can be found in Eberhard Wolfgang Moller, who was appointed by Goebbels to work in the Theater Division of the Propaganda Ministry in 1934. Moller’s works fit in directly with the ideals of the Third Reich. His plays are consistently anti-capitalist as well as extremely anti-Semitic. Moller’s first play under the Nazi regime *Rothschild Wins at Waterloo* (*Rothschild siegt bei Waterloo*) in 1934, makes an “implication [which] would be obvious to the audience: Everyone has a price, and unless the Jews are separated from the rest of Germany, the Volk will become infected with their materialistic values, their ‘racial’ characteristics” (Cadigan 67). Moller’s works supported the one-sided Nazi view of the Jews and “helped develop the popularity or at least the public acceptance of government policies that foreclosed Jewish businesses and allowed gangs of roaming soldiers to raze Jewish stores on *Kristallnacht* (the night of broken glass) in 1938” (Cadigan 67-68). Moller’s work, as well as other Nazi propaganda plays, were simply that – propaganda. The works encouraged the racially pure German people to turn away from the violence that was committed against their fellow Germans, which was exactly what the Nazis wanted to accomplish.

In the traditional theater settings “propaganda plays usually had their premieres at the beginning of the season and often were performed concurrently at many theatres throughout Germany” (Engle 39). These plays were often, if not always, artistically inferior pieces of drama. They were staged simply because they blatantly supported the Nazi Party. From early on in the Third Reich “hundreds [of Nazi propaganda scripts] were being written and published” (Gadberry, *The First National Socialist Theatre*).
They are, however, often difficult to locate today because of their dubious quality.

The lack of popularity of the Nazi Propaganda plays showed immediately. For instance, “attendance figures for the 1933/1934 season dropped by around thirty percent” (Schultke 165). Part of this decline was attributed to the fact that the Jewish community was no longer allowed to attend the theater, but the low quality of the plays being performed did not help matters. In Frankfurt, “two-thirds of the plays which were premiered…from 1933 to 1944 were never staged again” (Schultke 165). The quality was simply not there. Despite the money that was being pumped into the theaters, the regime simply “lacked worthwhile pieces to put at the receiving end of its considerable promotional resources” (Balfour 46).

As stated above, the major problem with the Nazi propaganda plays was that they were unsuccessful as theater, although their success as propaganda would be another topic. Balfour comments that the “lack of talent, as much as the climate, explains also the fiasco of the Thingstatte, those outdoor theatres…” (46). These justice plays “were promoted by the Propaganda Ministry in the early 1930s to become the national drama of the Third Reich” (Cadigan 69). Overall, however, they were ineffective. Much of Germany’s contemporary writing talent had been exiled, leaving no one left to write the plays of the Nazi period. Historian Gerwin Strobl seems to agree with Balfour when he states that, “the new genre of the…open air medleys…proved unviable even though vast amounts of money had been lavished on it; and the historical dramas churned out by Party members were…playing to empty houses” (Shakespeare and the Nazis NP).
Perhaps the most telling example of the failure of the Nazi propaganda play is the program of the Dresden Theatre Festival, the first Nazi theater festival, which took place between May 27 and June 3 of 1934. This outdoor festival presents an interesting example not because of the large number of propaganda plays involved, but because of the lack of Nazi plays. The plays performed were far more representative of the Weimar Republic than they were of the new Nazi regime:

Eight of the eleven had been written prior to 1870: Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* (1607-1608), Goethe’s *Gotz von Berlichingen* (1773, replaced by Erler), Schiller’s *Kabale und Liebe* (1784), Goethe’s *Iphigenie auf Taurus* (1787, added as a matinee), Schiller’s *Wilhelm Tell* (1804), Kleist’s *Prinz von Homburg* (1821), Eichendorff’s *Die Freier* (1833), and Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* (1867)…The remaining three plays were written in the twentieth century, none during the Third Reich. (Gadberry, *The First National Socialist Theatre Festival – Dresden 1934* 129-130).

None of the plays performed were new Nazi plays that were to become the “national drama of the Third Reich.” Gadberry addressed the question of why by stating, “no new plays were produced, presumably because Goebbels thought them all the ‘most tedious kitsch’” (qtd. in Gadberry, *The First National Socialist Theatre Festival – Dresden* 130).

Despite this failure, Goebbels was determined to have Nazi theater succeed. If Nazi propaganda plays were not the answer, Goebbels would try something else. Exceptions were made to the Nazi rules. Goebbels and his rival in Berlin, Hermann Goring, “were fully prepared to make compromises needed to retain a director whose services would reflect positively on their respective domains” (Grange 80). The two men
were in direct competition in Berlin, Goring at the Staatstheater and Goebbels at the Deutsches Theater. Both men wanted to prove that the theater under his control was the better of the two. The two men shared no love and quickly built up a fierce competition. This competition allowed the theaters in Berlin much more freedom than their counterparts in the provinces.

Both Goring and Goebbels saw the power that individual actors and directors were able to assert over the public. Thus, they were very interested in getting these individuals into their theaters. Gustaf Grudgens was a well-known and extremely successful actor in Germany and “Nazi critics acknowledged the enormous popularity of Grudgens’ productions” (Grange 85). Goebbels disliked Grudgens because he was a homosexual and his wife was Jewish, a combination that did not sit well with the Nazis. Goring granted Grudgens immunity from the Nazis despite his homosexuality if, in turn, Grudgens would hire the biggest German theater stars to work at Goring’s theater. Grudgens succeeded and hired well-known names such as Werner Kraus, Emil Jannings, Kather Dorsch, Kathe Gold, Maria Koppenhofer, as well as “the most talented, unpredictable, and temperamental of any German director: Jurgen Fehling” (Grange 82).

When Goebbels set out to hire someone to head his theater who could compete with Grudgens, his search led him to hire Heinz Hilpert. Hilpert had a strong reputation within the theater community, and frequently pleased Goebbels with his productions. Hilpert, however, like Grudgens, was an exception to the Nazi ideal. Hilpert was romantically involved with a Jewish woman and even used theater resources to disguise her and assist her in crossing the Swiss border. Goebbels was aware of the relationship, but did not make any attempts to interfere with the relationship or to report either Hilpert
or the woman with which he was involved. Professionally, despite the push from
Schlosser for a Volkish theatre, Hilpert “concentrated mostly on Goethe, Schiller,
Shakespeare, and Shaw” (Grange 83).

The feud between Goring and Goebbels allowed events to transpire in Berlin that
otherwise may have been unheard of under different circumstances. One such example is
Jurgen Fehling’s 1937 production of Richard III. Fehling’s production was a daring
comment on the Nazi leadership in Germany. Throughout his career, Fehling had never
allowed himself or his directorial decisions to be influenced by outside sources and “it
looked as if he was not going to make an exception for the Nazis either” (Hortmann 137).
On March 2, 1937, Fehling’s production opened and the result was nothing less than a
theatrical scandal which infuriated Goebbels. Grange states that ‘Fehling conceived the
production in terms diametrically opposed to those set forth by Goebbels…and to those
of Hitler’ (Grange 85-86). Fehling began by hiring Hans Neumark, an unemployed
Jewish musician, to arrange and play the music. Audience members of the time would
certainly have been aware that “to have Aryan soldiers marching to the tune of a Jewish
pianist was a deliberate affront” (Hortmann 138). Although the music was suppressed as
soon as the truth was discovered, Fehling had made his point. Neumark was only the
beginning though. Actor Werner Kraus, as Gloucester, “hobbled around with a clubfoot,
‘an apparent Goebbels take-off’” (qtd. in Grange 86). Kraus also made his character a
womanizer, another comment of Goebbels’ character (Strobl, Shakespeare and the Nazis
NP). In addition:

The villain’s accomplices had more literal contemporary analogies; the
murderers of Clarence came on in brown shirts and jackboots, bearing a
distinct similarity to Nazi Storm Troopers. When Gloucester became king, a phalanx of eight men in black uniforms accented with silver bijouterie accompanied him; their resemblance to Hitler’s SS was both immediate and frightening… (Grange 86)

The representation of Nazi uniforms on stage was, as mentioned earlier, forbidden by the Nazis. Goring was not impressed with the performance (although Goebbels was probably more upset) and demanded that Grudgens fire Fehling. After Grudgens apparently threatened to leave the theater if he was forced to fire Fehling, Goring backed down. No further action was taken and Richard III remained for the rest of the season. Goring’s desire to have a better theater than Goebbels had saved Fehling’s position.

The employment of two individuals who were not well liked by traditional Nazi standards in high-ranking positions within the Nazi theater was certainly an exception to the general rule. Despite the example provided in Fehling’s Richard III, revolt against the Nazi control was not the norm. Grudgens and Hilpert may have “enjoyed the favor of their masters, [but] neither director was at liberty to make artistic choices wholly independent of political pressures” (Grange 85). While the men may not have suffered as many of their fellow Germans did, the kindness from Goring and Goebbels was based solely on the need for talent in the Nazi propaganda machine.

In addition to the exceptions made in personnel, the failure of the Nazi propaganda play forced Goebbels to turn to other sources for text. Generally, this included a return to the classics. The first place to start was, obviously, with classic German writers. The Nazis wanted to ensure that “the German theatre did not neglect the great German authors of the past, but it tired to give their works a nationalist slant, and, in
the case of Goethe and Schiller, to ignore their universal and humanist values” (Bramsted 70). The Nazis wanted to include works by Goethe and Schiller because it was important to show that Germany was capable of producing quality playwrights. It was, however, critical that even the great writers of Germany’s past conform to Nazi standards. Once altered slightly to fit the specific needs of the Nazi Party, these classic German plays provided an excellent source of material for the German national theaters.

Perhaps more remarkable is the Nazi use of the English writer William Shakespeare. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler categorizes Shakespeare among the greats of German theater including Goethe and Schiller. The Nazis frequently attempted to claim Shakespeare as one of their own. In September of 1939, Schlosser “ruled that Shakespeare in German translation was to be seen as a German classic…” (Steinweis 164). The Nazis classified Shakespeare not as an English writer, but as a classic writer, such as Sophocles. Hitler and his Nazi ministers knew “the greater the stature of the writer the more valuable his work becomes in propaganda” (Strobl, *The Bard of Eugenics* 332). Fueled by Goebbels’ lead, many propagandists “showed few scholarly qualms when they set out to claim Shakespeare for the Germanic heritage…” (Hortmann 121). In addition, the dramatist Gerhart Hauptmann had a simple way of explaining why Shakespeare could be performed in Germany when he stated, “although Shakespeare was born and buried in England, Germany is the country where he truly lives” (Habicht 113). Such bold statements were accepted as truths in the Third Reich. The Nazis felt they could lay claim to Shakespeare because he was a universal writer and they had taken it upon themselves to produce his plays more than any other country. The Nazis pointed to this fact to prove their cultural superiority to the rest of the world, as well as showing
their open mindedness. Thus, according to Goebbels, Germany was “the motherland of world theatre” (London 26).

The Nazi Party was convinced that Shakespeare was truly representative of Nazi culture. First, the Party “proved conclusively that the bard had been an early proponent of eugenics” (Strobl, *Shakespeare and the Nazis* NP). After a production of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1933, the critic Ernst Heirs “pointed out that Shakespeare had a definite feeling for ‘racial purity’” (Engle 37). The Nazis pointed to research done by Hans F.K. Gunther whose paper “Maidens and Matrons in Shakespeare: A Practical Perspective,” “foreshadowed and facilitated Germany’s eugenic experiment” (Strobl, *The Bard of Eugenics* 323). In his paper, Gunther began his argument using one of Shakespeare’s sonnets which says, “from fairest creatures we desire increase” (Strobl, *The Bard of Eugenics* 328). Strobl goes on to explain that Gunther asserted this meant that genetically approved men should select an appropriate mate in order to increase the size of the population. In the 6th Sonnet, Gunther points out the lines, “to breed another thee” and “ten times happier, be it 10 for 1” (qtd. in Strobl, *The Bard of Eugenics* 328). This takes procreation out of the personal lives of the German people and puts it directly into the hands of the Nazis by making reproduction a government mandate instead of a personal decision. Thus, the Nazis argued that Shakespeare had a full and supportive understanding of the eugenic ideal. They saw Shakespeare as “a manual for the selection of a good mate” (Strobl, *The Bard of Eugenics* 333). As a result, Goebbels was able to utilize the works of Shakespeare to further the Nazi ideal. Secondly, the Nazis returned to the previously written work *Staat und Drama* by Gustav Steinbomer, which pointed
out that Shakespeare’s plays were examples of public life and concerns being placed far above those of the private sphere (Habicht 114).

The Nazis were also quick to point out characters in Shakespeare’s works that fit into the Nazi ideal. Hamlet was a favorite because of his Nordic background. Party members were also quick to “eulogize the heroic qualities of Richard III and Macbeth” (Hortmann 121). Leadership was another quality the Nazis were looking for, and they turned to Henry V and Julius Caesar. In contrast, the Nazis highlighted the downfall of Brutus as a result of individualist behavior.

Male characters were not the only ones given attention. Women in Shakespeare were praised for “choosing efficient lovers and valuable husbands” (Habicht 112). They were to value “marriage and motherhood as their essential calling” (Strobl, The Bard of Eugenics 335). All other activities outside of procreation were unnecessary and even harmful to the Volk. After all, a strong birth rate was essential to the Nazi effort to create a racially pure Germany.

Although the Nazis had problems with some of Shakespeare’s plays, such as The Merchant of Venice, Othello, or the very English History plays, modifications to the text could be created. For example, in The Merchant of Venice, Shylock could be portrayed as the Nazi stereotype of a Jew. Jessica and Lorenzo’s marriage could be eliminated from the text or Jessica could be portrayed as an adopted child, so that she would not actually be of Jewish origin. Likewise, Othello could be made into a light-skinned Moor. Furthermore, the Nazis often provided program notes to guide the audience member’s thought about the production. If the text could not be adjusted enough, as is the case with
the Histories, those texts were simply banned. Thus, Shakespeare became one of the favorites of the Nazi Party.

Before the rise of the Third Reich, Jewish performers had shared the stage with their fellow Germans. After Hitler’s ascent to power, this was no longer a possibility. Many fled, but what was left for those who did not? Jews were no longer allowed to perform, as their performances were deemed “harmful to the national sentiment” (qtd. in Rovit 5). This statement makes the existence of the Cultural Union of German Jewry (Kulterbund Deutscher Juden) in Nazi Germany, which later was forced to change its name to Judischer Kulterbund (so as not to have the word German in the title), a very interesting portion of Nazi theater history. This state-approved Jewish theater was founded by Dr. Kurt Singer and Kurt Baumann in an attempt to provide employment for Jewish theater artists who were unable or unwilling to emigrate and to provide entertainment for the Jewish population still living in Germany. This “nation-wide network of theaters was more or less organized, sponsored, encouraged, and even protected (until 1941) by the Nazis” (Rovit 6).

Despite the laws against Jews in Germany, the Jewish theater believed the Judischer Kulterbund’s purpose was “to serve social, ethical, and instructive purposes for Jews; to provide work and the will to live, to promote pride and unity among the Jews and to teach and to learn through art” (qtd. in Rovit 6). The Nazis set up several laws to govern the Jewish theaters. First, only Jews could be employed, attend, publicize, and/or review the theater. In addition, no criticism of National Socialism was allowed. The theater was encouraged to produce Jewish plays that focused on issues of Jewish culture. In particular, Hinkel “encouraged the Jews to perform pieces by Jewish authors”
Of course, this only applied if they were not politically critical. Finding a storyline which was decidedly Jewish in nature, yet did not criticize the Third Reich in any manner was a difficult task in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. The Nazis nearly imposed Jewish works on the theater because “from the very beginning, the repertoire available to the Jewish cultural associations excluded the works of German romantics such as Wagner…With the passage of time, Hinkel’s office steadily constricted the range of possibilities” (Steinweis 122). Soon the German classics such as Goethe were also forbidden.

The existence of a Jewish theater in Nazi Germany at first seems counterintuitive, however, a Jewish theater accomplished several of the Nazi Party’s primary goals. Hinkel asserted that the Nazis wanted to “protect our culture from the Jewish infection” (qtd. in Steinweis 111). By separating all the Jewish theater practitioners, the racially pure Germans would be safe from any influence they may otherwise inflict on the Volk. In addition “it encouraged Jews who had been dismissed from state cultural institutions to seek employment with the new Kulturbund rather than with other private theatres or orchestras, which were not covered by the Civil Service Law and therefore had not yet been legally closed off to Jews” (Steinweis 120-121). This only served to strengthen the separation of Jewish culture from the rest of German culture. Finally, the existence of the Jewish theater in Germany provided evidence that could be used in international propaganda which would diffuse charges that the Nazis were treating their Jewish population cruelly.

Eventually, the battle waged by the Nazis to control the theater ended. In September of 1944, Goebbels closed all the theaters in Germany and they remained
closed until the end of the war (Hortmann 155). Goebbels felt that all attention had to be focused on winning the battle at the front instead of the battle on the stage. Strobl concludes, “the Third Reich had lost the ideological war on stage even before the tide had turned decisively on the battlefields (Strobl, Shakespeare and the Nazis NP). Even with the powerful Nazi propaganda machine, the truth about the Third Reich was exposed.

In his Introduction to the book Fascism and Theatre, Gunter Berghaus notes “it appears to be a typical trait of fascist regimes that they sought to translate their political creeds into a theatrical language…” (4) This is exactly what the Nazis attempted to do. Theater has the potential to touch an audience member deeply. Theater can also present propaganda in a manner in which the recipient may not even realize he is viewing propaganda. This was an excellent tool for the Nazis.

The theater under Nazi Germany was largely based on producing positive propaganda both domestically and internationally. Existing documents from the time period “reveal the highly successful effort to make the theatre a part of a gigantic propaganda effort that utilitized and controlled all of the arts” (Shafer 116). The theater, for a time, provided the Nazis with a method to disseminate information as well as a medium through which to attempt to control the minds of the German people. Much like the era of the FTP in the United States, the Nazi regime presents an era of history that has not since been duplicated and likely never will.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

The government-sponsored theaters of the United States and Germany in the 1930s and 1940s clearly had distinct differences. For instance, the artists working under the Nazis were facing extremely dangerous consequences for their opposition to Nazi mandates, while although artists in the United States faced losing much-needed employment, their lives were not threatened by disobeying government regulations. Likewise, the dictatorial nature of the Nazi government meant that the government had only one opinion, only once voice: Hitler’s. Conversely, in the United States the democratic character of the government meant that multiple opinions would be voiced. The voice of the government would always be split. Thus, the dominant opinion can change even under the same individual leadership. A democracy, by nature, will never produce a single, unquestionable voice. It is this changing opinion that allowed the Federal Theatre Project to initially be supportive of government policies and, without changing its message, suddenly become subversive to other objectives of the government.

It would be foolish to assume that the two countries produced an identical theater, however, the similarities that exist between the national theater created in the American democracy and the national theater that grew out of the Nazi dictatorship present many similarities that simply cannot be ignored.

Each country knew that the theater was extremely important. Thus, both the United States and Germany invested money into the existence of a government-sponsored theater despite the fact that each county was struggling financially. Both theaters grew out of economic hardship. Each country was instituting measures to
encourage not only the economic standards in each of the countries, but also to improve the morale of its citizens. This meant first, that theater practitioners had to be employed. Employing theater practitioners meant that these individuals could be employed in the field in which they were trained. This gave each of these individuals greater satisfaction than employment in a different, unskilled field. Furthermore, once these individuals were employed they could, in turn, provide entertainment to increase the morale of their fellow citizens.

The number of people employed in the theater in each country increased after the instatement of the national theaters. Both countries frequently produced large-scale productions, which called for large casts. In the United States, the most common example was the Living Newspaper productions, while performances of Shakespeare’s works brought about some of the largest casts in Germany. In both countries, a greater number of theater workers were employed than had been previously employed under the existing theater structures.

The manner in which potential employees were to be hired required a similar process in each country as well. In the United States, the WPA imposed a law that required that all but ten percent of the individuals employed by the Federal Theatre Project be on relief. This was stated in the first rule of employment, “only employables were to be taken from the relief rolls of the states” (Flanagan 16). Thus, employables had to be able to work and, for the most part, had to be on relief already. This process allowed the United States government to monitor who was receiving the benefits from the government funds they were supplying.
Likewise, in Nazi Germany, chambers were created to monitor the arts. In the theater, a person had to apply to the government to earn the right to receive employment in a national theater. The difference is that the Nazis were often trying to eliminate Jews from the workforce, while the United States was attempting to eliminate those who could receive employment elsewhere. The bottom line, however, is that in each of the countries, the government reserved the right to regulate and control each and every person who was allowed an employment opportunity. In addition, the governments reserved the right to fire any individuals as they saw fit.

Each national theater also attempted to attract a new and more varied audience to its performances. In the United States, Flanagan wanted to bring theater to a segment of the population that had never had the opportunity to attend the theater. It was a goal that under Flanagan’s leadership the FTP was able to achieve. Germany, too, was able to access a wider audience by design.

Each country made attempts to move away from the strictly middle-class audiences which had dominated up to this point. Subject matter was altered and ticket prices were lowered or eliminated completely in an effort to attract audiences from all financial backgrounds. Hallie Flanagan had to fight to receive permission to charge even a small admission price to the FTP’s productions and Germany provided open festivals and occasional free performances.

The selection of material for specific theaters under the government’s control was governed by the same process in each of the countries. In the United States, the WPA left the play selection up to the FTP. Flanagan, in turn, gave the responsibility to the individual regional theater units. These units selected their seasons and then reported
back to the national FTP level. The process in Germany, despite the level of censorship was much the same. Each individual theater selected a potential season and then sent the information to Berlin for approval.

The plays that were produced were often similar in nature as well. Both countries did a large number of the classics. Plays from both Germany and the United States were often anti-capitalist, as was the case with the Nazi propaganda plays as well as the Living Newspapers in the United States. The plays often discussed the power of the group. In Germany, the Nazis wanted to emphasize the importance of the nation over the individual in much of its propaganda. In the United States, plays such as One Third of a Nation, emphasized that efforts to improve the quality of life would only be effective if the group pushed for the reform. Thus, each country’s theater had an emphasis on the importance of the group.

The plays produced under each government were also closely controlled through a system of censorship. In the United States, the democratic government dictated that certain plays could not be performed, such as Elmer Rice’s Ethiopia and Marc Blitzstein’s The Cradle Will Rock. The same direct censorship occurred under the fascist regime in Germany with the banning of Jewish and non-Aryan works, as well as the required reinterpretation of existing texts such as Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice. In addition, each of the nations partook in a far more subversive form of censorship. In the United States, the Federal Theatre Project was faced with multiple budget cuts and uncorroborated accusations of communism and anti-governmental sentiments. The artists in Germany, fearing for their lives, were often unwilling to take the tremendous risks
entailed in undermining the Nazi Party. As a result, the Nazis had to make few adjustments to season selections as reported by German theaters.

Another similarity came in efforts to show the national scope of the government-sponsored theater. Often, Nazi propaganda plays opened at the same time across Germany. The same was true of the United States effort with *It Can’t Happen Here*. Although this happened much less frequently in the United States, the effort to show the union of the regional theaters under one government is evident.

Both governments also issued out-of-the-ordinary rules regarding the function of their theaters. One such example of this is Hitler’s rule that no leaders were to appear on stage either in person or dramatic personae. The same order was issued in the United States after the controversy surrounding the censorship of *Ethiopia*. No foreign dignitaries could be represented on stage at any time. This is an interesting decision which only supports the opinion that each of the governments understood the vast power of the theater to shape and manipulate public opinion, both domestic and international.

In summary, these two government-sponsored theaters, one democratic and one fascist, seemed to understand that the theater can be a very powerful weapon; a weapon that can be used against a government just as easily as it can be used for it. Leaders in the United States and Germany were unwilling to let the control of the theater slip out of their hands completely, leading one to believe that a government-sponsored theater cannot exist “free, adult, and uncensored” as Harry Hopkins asserted it could. Both countries controlled who was employed in their theaters as well as what was performed. Both censored works without justification and without remorse. Both attempted to create a theater which supported only government sanctioned sentiments. Democracy did not
provide a more encouraging creative environment for theater artists as one might suspect.

The democracy of the United States only prohibited government officials from condemning sometimes serious and sometimes trifling revolutionary acts to the sentences which existed under the authoritative rule of the Nazi Party.

The powerful influence of the theater cannot be denied. Its ability to affect individuals and groups in a manner that no other art form can duplicate means that people will always fight to control the content expressed in performance. It is clear that the leaders in the governments of the United States and Germany felt this to be true. This should remind each and every person to be a vigilant audience member. In the end, neither the Federal Theatre Project nor the Nazi national theater survived the 1930s and 1940s. The legacy they have left behind, however, reminds us of the power of the theater as propaganda and a government’s desire to control that power in a time of national crisis.


